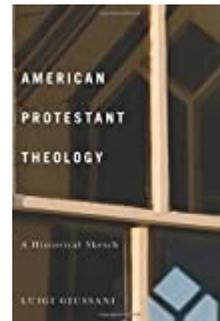


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Luigi Giussani. *American Protestant Theology: A Historical Sketch.* Translated by Damian Bacich. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013. xxxiv + 238 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-4197-9.



Reviewed by John Young (University of Alabama)

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Commissioned by Bobby L. Smiley (Vanderbilt University)

On the face of it, Monsignor Luigi Giussani's *American Protestant Theology: A Historical Sketch* is an odd book. First published in the late 1960s and originally written in Italian by a Catholic scholar for an audience of Catholic scholars, it received an English translation only within the last few years, nearly a decade after the 2005 death of its author. In the intervening period since its first release, theologians and historians have offered more comprehensive (and, of course, more up-to-date) overviews of the same terrain, and Giussani's is hardly a household name in North America. What interest, then, might those working in the English language have in Giussani's work today? Despite its long and winding path to translation, *American Protestant Theology* serves at least two important purposes for present-day readers: first, it capably pares down over three hundred years of theological development into a single, slim tome; and second, it accomplishes this task from the perspective of an outsider who nevertheless found a great deal to like about his chosen subject.

What was it about the writings of Jonathan Edwards, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and other luminaries that caught Giussani's attention? Although his sketch touches on an impressive array of theological issues, especially given its brevity, Giussani underscores most em-

phatically the intensely personal essence of the American Protestant tradition. His curiosity may not have been entirely academic, as Archibald J. Spencer persuasively contends in the introduction to this edition. Giussani had displayed a scholarly interest in American Protestantism since the beginning of his career, but his continuing leadership of the lay Catholic movement *Communione e Liberazione*, as well as his later writings on what he called the "religious sense" inherent within each individual, seems to hint that he sought a more personal understanding of faith than his Catholic communal faith perhaps allowed for or taught (p. xx). Whether or not Spencer's interpretation is correct, though, Giussani's scholarship unquestionably exhibits a profound respect for the "heart of the personal nature of religion in Protestant America" (p. xx).

Giussani begins at the Puritan origins of American Protestantism and the theological solutions which early New Englanders developed in response to the difficulties of settlement. As the colonies matured, an apparent decline in religiosity meant that fewer inhabitants could demonstrate the good works indicative of salvation and necessary for full inclusion in the church and body politic. Theologians, in turn, sought answers in the belief that the "Holy Spirit could become present and act

not only in a direct way, but also through certain *means* available to human initiativeâ (p. 17). Although they frequently disavowed having any Arminian sympathies, they nevertheless came to call for individual and communal revival through these very actions. This âGreat Awakeningâ found a powerful defender in Jonathan Edwards, whom Giussani describes as âperhaps the greatest thinker America ever producedâ (p. 19). Giussaniâs admiration stems from Edwardsâs balancing of the âabsolute nature of divine sovereigntyâ (p. 19) with the âprimacy of direct experienceâ (p. 23), and from his embodiment of the âexperiential-emotional aspectâ (p. xxvi) of American religion.

Anticipated in the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker, and in the Christocentric emphasis of Horace Bushnellâs theology, the liberal movement in American Protestantism, which ultimately supplanted the Edwardsian model and reigned until the early 1930s, sought âan interpretation of Christianity that would permit its survival in a world dominated by new philosophiesâ (p. 62) and scientific discoveries, including Darwinian evolution. Developed in the systematic expositions of William Newton Clarke and William Adams Brown, this âNew Theologyâ advanced the Christian faith as a âworking hypothesisâ (p. 62) which, if acted out, would demonstrate its continuing validity and utility in a modernist world. This distinctly American Protestant response to the German intellectual and cultural milieu also manifested a reform-oriented drive in the minds of those who, like prominent social gospeler Walter Rauschenbusch, âthought that the problem of salvation did not exhaust itself in the phenomenon of individual conferenceâ (pp. 79-80) between God and man, but in the solution of social, political, and economic woes.

The liberal social gospel was ultimately undone, Giussani writes, ânot [by] its opponents from the right or from the left, but [by] history itselfâ (p. 100). Disillusionment engendered by the Great Depression and the

two world wars surrounding it caused many to doubt the efficacy of human action. Realism, âa new and extremely varied movement of currentsâ (p. 101) rather than a unified theological approach, offered no easy solutions, but its supporters continued to search diligently for an intellectual foundation âtoo deep to be shaken by the earthquakes that shatter the dreams of idealistsâ (p. 101). Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich dominate Giussaniâs investigation of realism, and Giussani finds in the writings of each theologian important traces of his own conception of the âreligious sense.â Giussaniâs fifth and final chapter offers some observations on contemporary (at the time of writing) theological trends as well as his predictions for the future. Three appendices—one on Niebuhrâs conception of history, one on his ethics, and one on the philosophy of Edgar Sheffield Brightman—round out the volume.

Giussani assumes that his readership has a fairly strong background in theology, and he occasionally leaves terms and concepts un- or underexplained. Given that *American Protestant Theology* originally had an intended audience of theological experts, his assumption was a reasonable one, but readers from other scholarly backgrounds should be ready to fill in the gaps for themselves if need be. Stylistically, the work is a bit choppy, and transitions between the bookâs chapters and sections do not always flow as smoothly or provide as much context as one might hope for. If these criticisms seem nitpicky, it is because Giussaniâs scholarship itself is hard to criticize. Giussani jumps from movement to movement and from theologian to theologian with great ease, displaying an impressive familiarity with his source material despite the fact that his âknowledge of English extended to reading and nothing moreâ (p. xxiii). Spencerâs excellent introduction provides readers a useful primer on Giussani, and with any luck, this English-language translation will lead to greater academic and popular interest in his life and work.

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