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Conflict Resolved: the Amity between Postmodern Philosophy and Theology in Gianni Vattimo's *weak thought*

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Abstract: In this paper, I examine how Gianni Vattimo, in using the terms “weak thought” aims to promote *caritas* in intellectual life by converging, however paradoxically, Heideggerian *Verwindung* and Nietzschean nihilism with Pauline *kenosis*. In line with René Girard’s postulation that Christianity rejects the sacred, Vattimo classifies the idea of a transcendent divinity as Aristotelian rather than Christian, arguing that the Incarnation, as an expression of *caritas* and humility, is incompatible with the idea of divine transcendence. Based on this perception, Vattimo argues that Nietzsche’s dictum that “God is dead” carries the same philosophical meaning as the kenotic doctrine of the birth of God as man. Furthermore, Vattimo redefines the Heideggerian *Verwindung*, a subtle response rigidity in the structures of metaphysics, in terms of kenotic *caritas*. Vattimo’s hermeneutic work over several decades have enabled this improbable convergence of methodologies and worldviews, upon which he bases his argument that postmodernism, in its weakening of all transcendental axiomatic claims, may be understood to share the “desacralizing thrust of Christianity.”

Keywords: hermeneutics, *caritas*, weak thought, *kenosis*, Gianni Vattimo, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, René Girard

Postmodern philosophy and religion have historically been regarded as fierce enemies for many reasons, among which is the fact that the former advocates relativism through reason and the latter absolute truth through faith. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 1980s, the postmodern Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo introduced an unconventional philosophical methodology he referred to as *pensiero debole*, or “weak thought,” which merges central and heretofore oppositional components from both disciplines. Specifically, Vattimo sought to fuse the counter-Christian philosophy of Fredrick Nietzsche (“God is dead”) and “the end of metaphysics,” as described by Martin Heidegger, with the central Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, whereby God assumed a human nature and became a man in the form of Jesus Christ, known as *kenosis*.

Vattimo employs this unusual philosophico-religious framework in the service of *caritas*, or charity, which, as Vattimo defines it, is a commitment to self-doubt and openness to others of such totality that it seeks to weaken all objective metaphysics. Thus, rather than approaching postulations of transcendental or even stable foundations for knowledge with critique, let alone polemic, he submits them to a hermeneutic process that he terms “recuperation.” Vattimo expresses a firm belief that given the multicultural, yet polarized state of the humanity, whereby the debate between laicism, postmodernism and religion is emerging as one of the most impassioned cruxes in many parts of the globe, as noted by Pierpaolo Antonello, Vattimo’s coauthor,¹ a true pluralism and inter-subjectivity must include the right degree of agreement and disagreement with others—and that charity in philosophy is the best means to achieve this. In Vattimo’s ideal world, in which *caritas* is properly applied, the violence of metaphysics, which Vattimo equates with the silencing of questioning and dialogue,² would hopefully be mitigated, and, in a very non-transcendental sense, liberation and salvation, pluralism, dialogue and openness to others—as Vattimo defines these terms— would be attained in this world.

However, while most people may agree that Vattimo’s aim is to introduce a positive measure into the philosophical and intellectual arenas, the curious coupling of his two conflicting affinities—religion and

¹ Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity*, 5.

² Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 191.

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postmodern philosophy—raises a question that will resonate throughout this paper: To what extent can a postmodernist approach coexist with strongly held Christian beliefs? The question is a bonafide one, for its discussion would determine the stamina and success of “weak thought”, as well as its potential to beacon thinkers and philosophers from different domains in the humanities to implement his theory in their respective fields of expertise. Such a move would hopefully lead them to grapple with the crisis the world has been experiencing in the last decades, especially the alarming tension between various sectarian groups, whereby one aims to impose one’s beliefs and opinions to the point of annihilating the dissenting other, leading to problematic and, at times tragic consequences. The world has shown repeatedly that such an approach to be incapable of solving problems.

In an attempt to answer these questions above I mainly wish to deconstruct the interconnectedness of the religious and philosophical pillars of “weak thought.” My paper will be divided into two main parts, one for the former and one for the latter. Unlike most scholarship on Vattimo, which focuses mainly on this Heideggerian-Nietzschean reading, I will devote the first part to the Christian component of “weak thought”: Vattimo’s reformulation of the *Pauline kenosis* as an expression of *caritas* and humility, which is incompatible with the idea of divine transcendence. Moreover, Vattimo claims that his philosophical project is a clarification of his biographical experience,³ I will place this argument in this context, relating particularly to Vattimo’s intellectual development and the ways in which his “homecoming” to his Catholic faith were impacted by Rene Girard’s contention that Christianity rejects the sacred insofar as it is an expression of violence and, relatedly, Girard’s assertion of the importance of the Incarnation for this aim.⁴ In the second part, I will focus on Vattimo’s unconventional interpretation of Heidegger and Nietzsche, which allows him to understand their dictums as carrying the same philosophical meaning as the kenotic doctrine and to argue, shocking to so many, that “postmodern nihilism constitutes the truth of Christianity.”⁵

1 The development of Vattimo’s Christianity

Contemporary academic philosophers generally take the position that their personal lives have little—if anything—to do with the arguments they make and the views they hold. Vattimo, conversely, believes that his background and development are essential to understanding his philosophical project. He contends that over the course of his life, he gradually experienced what he describes as the “too good to be true” convergence of the pieces of his “personal religious-philosophical puzzle,”⁶ which has allowed him to simultaneously align himself with the Nietzschean-Heideggerian tradition in philosophy and define himself through a dual identity, both as a Roman Catholic and a nihilist, as crystallized in his statement, “[T]hank God, I am an atheist.”⁷

Born in Turin in 1936, Vattimo was raised in a Roman Catholic environment and received an Oratory education at a Catholic institution where prayers and worship were included in the daily routine.⁸ He absorbed the teachings of the church and, in the 1950s, played an active part in the Azione Cattolica, one of the oldest Catholic lay associations in Italy. Vattimo also assumed a leadership role in the movement while still in high school and later became its diocesan representative.⁹ Even in those early years, Vattimo felt that his political, social, and religious convictions combined to produce a valuable creed, with which he hoped to influence the public arena. He concluded that the study of philosophy would help him to achieve this goal.¹⁰

During his studies at the University of Turin, which were supervised by the existentialist philosopher Luigi Pareyson, the views that Vattimo had developed under Catholic tutelage were gradually superseded by a different set of ideas. These were, principally, the Nietzschean-Heideggerian reading of the postmodern condition and discussion of the end of metaphysics: The tendency of modern culture, according to this view, is towards ideals that are in opposition to fixed ontological foundations and transcendence. This led to “the loss of the center” which, as Vattimo cites from Nietzsche, is the very meaning of nihilism.¹¹

While for many years, Vattimo “woke up early to go to Mass, before school, before the office, before university lectures,”¹² he gradually became critical of institutionalized religion and, as a consequence of the Church’s

³ Vattimo, *Belief*, 9.

⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 5.

⁵ Rorty and Vattimo, *Future*, 47.

⁶ Vattimo, *Belief*, 4.

⁷ Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 149.

⁸ Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 42.

⁹ Vattimo, *Belief*, 21.

¹⁰ Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 3.

¹¹ Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 191.

¹² Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 20.

insistence that believers adhere to their interpretation of absolute truth. Consequently, his Catholic observance progressively diminished. In 1959, Vattimo moved to Germany to study philosophy at Heidelberg University with Hans-Georg Gadamer, a former student of Heidegger's. His philosophical work in the succeeding years would be recognizable in the German tradition, with his major publication being on Nietzsche.¹³

2 The impact of Girard: The sacred, secularization and kenosis

Since the late 1980s, however, Vattimo has seemed to reverse direction, publishing work increasingly on religious topics (often in conversation with nonreligious interlocutors, notably Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty) and again referring to himself as a Catholic. As Vattimo has himself acknowledged, he owes his return to Christianity to the influence of the French philosopher and anthropologist Rene Girard, whose influence remains largely unexplored in the scholarship on Vattimo's theories.

Girard's stance throughout his works is that the sacred gradually disappeared from the Jewish tradition and made its exit, finally, with Christianity.¹⁴ As I shall explain in the paragraphs below, Vattimo was especially persuaded by Girard's reading of the Passion narrative, which reflects Girard's contention that Christianity, despite its own claims to the contrary, is the ultimate non-sacrificial religion; the Passion, Girard avers, comes to put an end to the sacred relationship with sacrifice and violence. This argument triggered Vattimo's return to Christianity, albeit a form of Christianity that weakens strong metaphysical structures, especially through the doctrine of Incarnation, the *kenosis*, whose significance as being incompatible with divine transcendence Vattimo develops as a pillar in "weak thought".

As part of his anthropology of mimetic desire in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), Girard argues that religion, and the scapegoat mechanism that functions within it, are the means that human beings have developed to deal with human violence, but "as religions and cultures are formed and perpetuated, the violence is hidden."¹⁵ Throughout history, Girard contends, communities have used collective violence against a single individual who is unanimously identified as the source of evils. With everyone convinced of his guilt, this individual is then killed so that peace and order can be restored. This act of aggression both expresses and resolves the community's need for violence, and the violence of "all against all" is thus transformed into violence against "a sacrificial scapegoat." While the victim lives, he is regarded as evil incarnate and his punishment as inevitable, but once he has been killed and peace magically follows, he becomes "precious and fruitful." According to Girard, the scapegoat mechanism acquires at this stage religious characteristics: The interpretation arises that the community has been visited by a god, whose function was to die in order to end chaos and establish peaceful stability. The guilty victim is therefore reassessed as being sacred.¹⁶

For Girard, the "uniqueness" of the Passion narrative "lies in its dimension of revelation,"¹⁷ which is to say that the Gospels stand against the "unanimous belief in the victim's guilt" that had characterized so much of ancient mythology.¹⁸ One of Girard's fundamental arguments, and one that had a great impact on Vattimo, is his accusation that most Christians do not realize that the Passion narrative addresses, with the aim of correction, "the original murder that is found at the heart of all mythology."¹⁹ The Gospels, and above all the Passion story, Girard argues, must be read in a non-sacrificial way—in a way, then, that runs against two millennia of Christian (including Roman Catholic) hermeneutics.

Upon a close reading, it is clear that the Passion narrative follows the pattern of the scapegoat mechanism, but the righteousness of this behavior is rejected by the story's ending. Jesus is depicted in the Gospels as an innocent victim, unanimously condemned by crowds demanding collective violence against him for ambiguous reasons.²⁰ It was Jesus' excessive popularity, according to Girard, that led to his becoming a scapegoat for a Jewish society in crisis. The scapegoat mechanism was proposed as a solution by the High Priest Caiaphas, who argued "that it is better for one man to die for the people, than the whole nation to be destroyed" (John 11:53).²¹ Caiaphas, in Girard's view, accuses Jesus of blasphemy in order to avoid wider violence, and the other leaders,

¹³ In 1970, Vattimo published his translation of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* into Italian. During the 1970s Vattimo published many books, *Il soggetto e la maschera* (1974) ('The subject and the mask').

¹⁴ Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity*, 27.

¹⁵ Girard, *Scapegoat*, 94.

¹⁶ Zabala, *Gianni Vattimo*, 24.

¹⁷ Girard, *Scapegoat*, 111.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁰ Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity*, 26.

²¹ Girard, *Scapegoat*, 113.

apart from Pilate, agree with him. Pilate does not believe in Jesus' guilt ("I find no case against this man," he says in Luke 23:14) but is pressed by the crowd ("Crucify him!") to surrender to the mimetic contagion.²² Jesus was seen as a stranger from Galilee and thus somehow harmful to life in Jerusalem. Yet, Girard observes, the "crowd that gathers around Jesus [and accuses him] is the same crowd that had enthusiastically welcomed him into Jerusalem."²³ Wanting to satisfy the crowds, Pilate releases Barabbas to them, "ha[s] Jesus flogged, and hand[s] him over to be crucified" (Mark 15:15). The Passion crowd blindly accepts the accusations made against Jesus,²⁴ an argument Girard reinforces with the Fourth Gospel: "[T]hey hated me for no reason" (John 15:25).

At this stage in the Passion narrative, Girard observes, the scapegoat mechanism "becomes brilliantly apparent,"²⁵ for "the persecutors' perception of their persecution is finally defeated."²⁶ Yet Jesus on the cross is well aware of the mechanism and asks forgiveness for those who crucified him, "for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Awareness of Jesus' innocence on the part of growing numbers of followers, together with Jesus' love of his accusers and killers, opens a new phase in the history of mankind: One can, Girard writes, no longer pretend not to know that human society is based "upon the blood of innocent victims."²⁷ By means of his forgiving love, Girard contends, "Jesus unveils the unspoken innocence, the misunderstanding, hidden beneath the blood of history."²⁸

3 Kenosis and nihilism

In addition to the discussion of the reversal of the scapegoat mechanism in the New Testament, Girard makes one more interconnected point, though less expanded, regarding the Incarnation. It is a point that overlaps, as well, with Vattimo's attraction to and understanding of nihilism, as defined by Heidegger and Nietzsche: a historical event that represents the weakening of strong structures.

Girard, who depends mostly on the Passion story to show that violence is "the heart and secret soul of the sacred" (*Violence and the Sacred* 31), explains that the possibility and meaning of the narrative would not have been complete without the act of Incarnation, the Christian god humbling himself and assuming the human condition and human victimhood. Emptying himself of divinity, Girard explains, Jesus humbles himself for a face-to-face encounter with humanity, a sign of love and an act of charity that puts an end to the sacred and its intrinsic violence. But what seized Vattimo's attention was Girard's postulation that through this Incarnation, as an embodiment of humility and love, the Christian god cannot be identified with the god of metaphysics. Since Girard sees the Incarnation as belonging to theology, rather than to his own field of philosophical anthropology, he does not elaborate on this point. However, for Vattimo, it is precisely this element that brought about an epiphany in his mind and marked his "homecoming" to the Catholic faith.

For Vattimo, who diverges here from Girard, the Incarnation is the heart of the New Testament. The most significant event in Christianity, in his view, is the act of the absolute God taking the form of a man and, thus, changing reality and dissolving metaphysics. As someone who is convinced that metaphysics is the root of violence (due to its underpinning in what he depicts as "strong thought," or inflexible, exclusionary, and divisive ideology), Vattimo perceives God's intentional renunciation of power, sacredness, transcendence, and their substitution with charity, as a specifically Christian way of desacralizing violence and, hence, deconstructing strong structures of metaphysics. The Incarnation removes the fixed ontological foundations and the deep structures of Being that aim to know and describe the world in totality, leading to the silencing of questioning and any subjective interpretation.

In seeking to reinforce his own definition of *kenosis*, Vattimo limits his attention to a few verses from the letter of St. Paul to the Philippians:

Christ Jesus . . . though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death.
(Philippians 2:5-11)

²² Ibid., 7.

²³ In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict XVI argues, on the contrary, that the crowd that accompanied Jesus from Galilee wished to "enter the Holy city with him" (8) and is not the same crowd that demanded his crucifixion (186).

²⁴ Girard, *Scapegoat*, 103.

²⁵ Ibid., 108.

²⁶ Ibid., 109.

²⁷ Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity*, 26.

²⁸ Ibid., 52.

He adds to this a passage from the Fourth Gospel: “Henceforth I call you not servants ... but I have called you friends” (John 15:15).²⁹ Both of these concepts, Incarnation and divine-human friendship, are geared to rid God of transcendence and the violence of transcendence by applying to God Jesus’ ethics of weakness which is an end in itself.

In finding a means of removing “all transcendent, incomprehensible, mysterious and even bizarre features that seem to move so many theorists of the leap of faith,” Vattimo is able to successfully reconcile his dual identities.

Vattimo posits that the deflation of the absolute through *kenosis*, carrying with it Jesus’ message of *caritas*, love, and amity as the solution to enmity and violence, is the Christian equivalent of Heidegger’s reduction of the claims of objectivity and Nietzsche’s postulation of “the death of God,” the death of all transcendental values and totalism. On this basis, Vattimo closes a circle, acknowledging that his choice of Nietzsche and Heidegger—his two “patron saints,” as Thomas Guarino calls them³⁰—was always “in harmony with a specifically Christian religious substratum that has remained a living part of [himself].”³¹

4 The effect of Heidegger

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) is one of the most prominent philosophers of the twentieth century, mainly on account of his critique on “the tradition of metaphysics” which he identifies as predominant in Western philosophy, beginning with Plato. One of the core arguments of Heidegger’s project, employed in his deconstruction of the history of Western metaphysics, is what he calls “the forgetting of the question of Being,” (what Nietzsche terms “nihilism”), whereby Western thinkers rely almost exclusively on the supreme values and truths achieved by science and technology—forgetting, thereby, the meaning of human existence as it unfolds in history. Heidegger argues that these absolute truths and highest values can no longer provide an explanation for the meaning of Being in today’s world, and maintains that Western metaphysics has arrived at a point of crisis. Therefore, he suggests—in the era he calls “the end of metaphysics”—a different approach to Being, or human existence. As discussed in his most significant publication, *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger dismisses the argument that the fundamental concepts of metaphysics are immutable. Rather, he regards Being as an event which “comes to pass” in time and is, thus, of necessity manifested differently over time.

This view of Being as an event (*Ereignis*), a sudden illuminative irruption (*Lichtung*), which is always in the flux of temporality, is geared, in Vattimo’s philosophico-religious outlook, to his understanding of *Kenosis* as an event which lead to a weakening of metaphysics. In his own words, “[t]he conception of Being as an event is merely the starting point for recognizing the deep kinship between Heidegger’s philosophy and the Bible.”³² Vattimo, therefore, regards himself as a “creative Heideggerian,” whose aim—also inspired by Girard—is to “complete” Heidegger’s project appropriately,³³ given that Heidegger himself—according to Vattimo—“misunderstood the authentic meaning of his own philosophical premises,” and, thus, must be interpreted “beyond the letter of his own self-understanding.”³⁴

Heidegger’s response to the rigid structures of metaphysics is not to overcome or overthrow them; he makes a distinction between *Überwindung*, which means going beyond and overcoming, a possibility which would imply that metaphysics must evolve a new foundation to replace the previous one. What Heidegger suggests instead is *Verwindung*, a term that was first used by Nietzsche, which means convalescence, healing, and twisting, a process which requires the revival of forgotten elements in the tradition—for philosophy, according to Heidegger, cannot be totally detached from the past tradition. Being as “event,” demands interpretation, because truth or meaning, after the “end of metaphysics,” is not only made but also continually remade. Heidegger, thus, contends that the only way to dissolve the metaphysical tradition is to re-write it through hermeneutics, interpretation through contextualizing and circumscribing human rationality in order to understand its meaning in relation to the scale of temporality.

Vattimo agrees with Heidegger that rather than seeking a severe truth that does not allow for pluralism, the interpreter’s responsibility is to redescribe or recontextualize texts (as well as events and lives). But Vattimo, therefore, sees Heideggerian *Verwindung* as incomplete without converging it with the meaning of *kenosis* and especially the charity that it carries.

²⁹ See, for example, Vattimo, *Belief*, 26.

³⁰ Guarino, *Vattimo*, 42.

³¹ Vattimo, *Belief*, 33.

³² Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity*, 82.

³³ Vattimo, *Belief*, 78.

³⁴ Vattimo, *Positive Nihilism*, 39.

Vattimo, in turn, redefines the Heideggerian *Verwindung* in terms of the kenotic *caritas*. He does this by first linking his own Christian view of history with that of Heidegger's through the shared idea of nihilism as a process, whereby the "objective" solidity of truth progressively dissolves into a form of intersubjective understanding. Vattimo refers here to the fact that Being, in its mutability, is approachable hermeneutically—like the Bible—and in no other way. Vattimo's central example of his redefinition of *Verwindung* is the way in which Jesus interprets the meaning of the law and the prophets to reflect the salvific "relation of charity established between God and humanity, and consequently between human beings themselves."³⁵ In the context of hermeneutics, Jesus prefers the idea of textual fulfillment to that of textual supersessionism. As Jesus instructs his Jewish listeners: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law [Torah], or the prophets [Nevi'im]: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. / For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law [Torah], till all has been fulfilled" (Mathew 5:17-20).

Therefore, Vattimo contends that Heideggerian hermeneutics, especially through *Verwindung* as a practical tool, is connected to the "history of revelation" and the history of salvation more than Girard would like to believe. Revelation, for Heidegger, as for Christianity, is not about objective truth but about an ongoing salvation comprehensible only through hermeneutical means. Vattimo even suggests that, while Heidegger does not refer to the Bible when discussing the end of metaphysics, we cannot exclude the influence of Scripture on Heidegger's thinking. Vattimo argues that, in the early 1920s, Heidegger was deeply engaged in reading the New Testament as he mediated on themes of his own, including freedom, grace, and the need to get beyond objectivity and metaphysics.³⁶

Salvation and interpretation in Vattimo's ideal world are conjoined in the Christian tradition: "Salvation requires understanding the Word of God in scripture and its correct application to our situation today."³⁷ For Vattimo, the charity used by Jesus is what prevails in hermeneutical philosophy and in the interpretation of texts. Vattimo writes that *Verwindung* "constitutes neither the acceptance of . . . errors nor a critical surpassing which would merely continue [the] past." Hence *Verwindung*, as Vattimo understands it, involves neither indifference to injustice ("errors") nor to the desire for generational change. It may be nihilism, the process whereby the "objective" solidity of truth progressively dissolves into a form of intersubjective understanding, that makes *Verwindung* possible, but for Vattimo, it is *Verwindung* (redefined as a practical tool), rather than nihilism, that is the way to liberation, for "there is no way of escaping modernity through surpassing."³⁸

5 The effect of Nietzsche

Similar to Heidegger, who reviewed the decline of Western metaphysics, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), the German philosopher and cultural critic, criticized Western philosophical thinking and, in particular the domination of its strong structures on the individual. Nietzsche's project has been welcomed by many. However, as the philosopher of "the death of God," he has been criticized by many thinkers, theologians and institutions, including the Catholic church. How is it, then, that a philosopher as devoted to Christian charity as Vattimo became part of the "Nietzsche-Renaissance,"³⁹ as he calls it? The answer Vattimo readily provides is the same one he offers to account for the close relationship of his work to that of a thinker—Heidegger—who became affiliated to the Nazi Party during the World War II. Vattimo's aim, again, is never to overcome the past, but rather to render its dangerous components nontoxic and usable. Furthermore, Vattimo draws on Nietzsche's approach of "active nihilism"—as opposed to a passive acceptance of nihilism. In this way, the German philosopher encourages us to see in nihilism, "the general profile of our civilization,"⁴⁰ namely, the decline of Western Metaphysics, and an opportunity to dissolve these strong structures and ideologies. However, Vattimo adds to this vision one crucial value disallowed by Nietzsche—*caritas*, which mandates *Verwindung*, rather than *Überwindung*, as the basis of hermeneutics.

Vattimo reinterprets Nietzsche's philosophy with "a special particularity" and through what he terms "non-metaphysical lenses." He observes that in the midst of the ambiguities contended with while interpreting Nietzsche, others have mistakenly viewed the German thinker as a writer on culture rather than a philosopher *per se*.⁴¹ As an example, Vattimo mentions Dilthey as one who considered Nietzsche to be both a philosopher and

³⁵ Vattimo, *Belief*, 49.

³⁶ Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity*, 81.

³⁷ Vattimo, *After*, 59.

³⁸ Vattimo, "Verwindung," 8.

³⁹ Vattimo, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, 8.

⁴⁰ Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, 13.

⁴¹ Vattimo, "Contemporary Hermeneutics," 59.

a poet and, based on this perspective, read Nietzsche much as he read Emerson: as a poet with philosophical insight into life in the New World.⁴² On the other hand, Vattimo, in following Heidegger, regards Nietzsche as the last thinker and philosopher in the history of metaphysics. With this approach, Vattimo proposes to read Nietzsche's philosophy as "a philosophy of life"⁴³—one that, if adopted *by choice*, might offer a new mode of existence - free of anxiety and "imprisonment."⁴⁴ Vattimo argues therefore that scholars and critics alike have failed to understand Nietzsche as a messenger of liberation, rather than will, power, or the will to power. That doctrine does not, as it is usually said to do, promote the will to form or dominate. In Vattimo's inclusive reading of *the will to power*, he embraces the final goal of Nietzsche, which is a human being free from "the malady of chains," - one who rejects metaphysics, submission, authority and the reigning hierarchies.

Most relevant to our discussion, is that in his various works on Nietzsche, Vattimo explains the value of Nietzsche's struggle: to liberate Western thought from metaphysical constructs that are built around the oppositions between the real, which is God's realm, and the apparent or shadow world in which we live.⁴⁵ As Nietzsche firmly believes, the decline of man began when God was created and divorced from the everyday world, for God had previously existed only in a heavenly sphere. Nietzsche, however, wishes to achieve "a new way of thinking,"⁴⁶ one in which there is no divorce between God, the sacred and the real of the here and now. The God to whom Nietzsche refers in the famous phrase "God is dead" is the God of the metaphysicians, the transcendent reality on which they made all else in the cosmos depend. Nietzsche's postulation that "God is dead" means that this reality, which once and for a long time was needed to humanize the world, is no longer required.⁴⁷ Vattimo contends that "when Nietzsche teaches that God is dead, he does not mean only that there are no longer supreme values. He means that a multitude of values has taken their place at the ruined foundations."⁴⁸ With a characteristic mix of irony and earnestness, Vattimo contends that "the death of God" to which Nietzsche refers is a beneficial secularization that was made possible by the Incarnation and crucifixion of God as a mortal human being. Based on this insight, Vattimo comes to his novel perspective on Christianity, concluding that Jesus was not an absolutist but died the "death of God" in exactly a Nietzschean sense.

This is how Vattimo understands Nietzsche's active nihilism as opposed to the passive nihilism which as Vattimo defines it as "the incapability to step up from the present moment in order to create a healthy rapport with the past and future (*Dialogue with Nietzsche*, 13). However, while Nietzsche does not clarify in a practical way what the relationship with the past should be like (*Dialogue with Nietzsche* 10), he does not contribute directly to Vattimo's hermeneutic method, while Vattimo clings to Nietzsche's philosophical project as a fertile source of potential. Vattimo observes that Nietzsche's attitude is not so much violent, but rather "that of genealogical tolerance for the whole past of mankind."⁴⁹ For Nietzsche, the correct attitude to that past revolves around giving the nonhistorical elements priority over the historical ones,⁵⁰ so that the past should be used only if it helps actions occurring "now" and nourishes their creativity.

Therefore, Vattimo completes Nietzsche's project just as he does with Heidegger's. Vattimo shares with Nietzsche his distaste for strong ideals, but, unlike Nietzsche, he holds that the yearning to overcome the past (*Überwindung*) is a strong modern trait (as the usual definitions of *modern* suggest)⁵¹. However, Vattimo wishes to reconcile postmodernity with modernity by weakening the strong claims of both and to do so through an act of *Verwindung* that suggests "an authentic relationship with the past" (which is the title of a chapter in his 2008 book *Dialogue with Nietzsche*). One must aim not to overcome the past, but to free oneself of its domination by validating a multitude of charitable interpretations of every facet of the past. Only in this way may the metaphysically ordered system of cause and effect be disrupted and freedom attained. If facts, as Nietzsche asserts, are interpretations, then truth (and therefore, philosophy) might be brought to serve charity rather than objectivity.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Vattimo, *Nietzsche: An Introduction*, 4.

⁴⁴ Vattimo, "Beyond Despair" II, 45.

⁴⁵ Vattimo, *Nietzsche: An Introduction*, 108.

⁴⁶ Vattimo, *Adventure*, 1.

⁴⁷ Onfray, *Ateos o creyentes?*, 11.

⁴⁸ Vattimo, "Weak Thought," 462.

⁴⁹ Vattimo, "Nietzsche and Contemporary Hermeneutics," 63.

⁵⁰ Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, 8.

⁵¹ Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 167.

6 Conclusion

In our age of supposedly increasing secularism, it is unusual for a Christian (let alone a Roman Catholic) thinker to develop a philosophical belief based on the convergence of kenotic theology with nihilist philosophy. However, while Vattimo attacks the *pensiero forte* (strong thought) of atheism and argues as “a good Catholic”⁵² that atheism, as just one more metaphysical creed,⁵³ is no more valid than any other foundation. Vattimo’s attempt to reintroduce religion into Western academic and public arenas is full of obstacles.

While Vattimo ostensibly works hard to embrace the teachings of the Roman Catholic church, his faith takes an atypical form and his project remains a philosophical project and not a theological one. Indeed, depending as he does on the nihilist philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger, Vattimo takes the New Testament toward theological and philosophical claims so weak, non-metaphysical, and undogmatic that neither the Catholic Church nor even Girard would entertain. Though Pope Benedict XVI, for instance, in one of his homilies on the Incarnation depicts *kenosis* as the “heart of the great Christian newness . . . something that utterly defeats the imagination, that God alone could bring about and into which we can only enter with faith,”⁵⁴ he and Vattimo hardly share an understanding of what the doctrine entails. The Incarnation that Vattimo advances in *weak thought* is not bona fide from normative Christian lenses, as it is incompatible with the divine transcendence of God. However, for Vattimo, it is the lenses of “the end of metaphysics.” As I have mentioned in my conclusion, this particular understanding of Incarnation and God bears conceptual difficulties. Vattimo’s Christian faith is, after all, eclectic, in that it revolves around the Incarnation, as he perceives it, and does not relate even to the Resurrection. This is the essence of the theology of Salvation in the New Testament and which stresses the transcendental divinity of Christ, but has no significance for Vattimo. For Vattimo, Christ is a man, who has become one of us, without any traditional Christian definition of divinity. As Guarino notes, for Vattimo, the idea of a transcendent divinity is Aristotelian rather than Christian⁵⁵ Aristotle’s “unmoved mover” is unmoved in every possible sense, including in an emotional sense; Aristotle’s “god” is a pure abstraction, in affinity with his metaphysics. Conversely, synonyms for transcendence, such as omnipotence, omniscience, infallibility, perfection, eternity, and the absolute—which Christian and Catholic believers attribute to the Christian God—play no role in Vattimo’s Christianity. Paradoxically however, while Vattimo, the avowed Catholic, is frequently at pains to remind his readers that “dogmatic and disciplinary Christianity . . . has nothing to do with what I and my contemporaries ‘rediscover,’”⁵⁶ he does insist upon defining himself as a Catholic and as aligned with the church of Rome.

Throughout his works, Vattimo clearly expresses a desire for God; and, very surprisingly, as Santiago Zabala, a co-author of and a scholar on Vattimo, has reported, Pope Francis spoke on the phone with Vattimo upon the latter’s publishing his new book, *Being and its Surroundings* (2018). Yet, while the pope and Vattimo, as Zabala argues, share “a particular attitude towards religion”⁵⁷ whereby charity resides at its center, the gap between the two remains a large one. Pope Francis undoubtedly agrees with Vattimo’s aim of charity in interpretation, given how the intolerance of sectarian and partisan groups for one another has grown. But perhaps, unlike Pope Francis, Vattimo defines charity as pluralism and tolerance, a very different thing than a charity centered around faith and the omnipresent God of the gospels. It would be easier to accept that Vattimo’s faith is philosophical and post-metaphysical rather than theological.

I also must emphasize that the concept of charity in philosophy is not exclusive to Vattimo. Analytic philosophers moved, more than a half-century ago, to rid their discipline of aggressive aims and assumptions by applying to the interpretation of others’ words what they have referred to as the “principle of charity,” a term coined by Neil L. Wilson in 1958. In Simon Blackburn’s words, charity “constrains the interpreter to maximize the truth or rationality in the subject’s saying.”⁵⁸ Donald Davidson, who is among the analytic philosophers who developed this principle of charity, refers to it a “principle of rational accommodation,” which as such works to optimize agreement about what is said.⁵⁹ But as Jeffrey M. Perl writes in an essay on the early history of the term’s usage, while Vattimo’s ideas point in the same direction, they go much farther than any analytic philosopher. Indeed, Perl contends, Vattimo “has extended the principle of charity toward its outmost Catholic frontier: we

⁵² Gianni Vattimo, interview by Corriere Canadese, February 1, 2007.

⁵³ Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity*, 89.

⁵⁴ Pope Benedict, General Audience.

⁵⁵ Vercellone, *Ontology*, 337.

⁵⁶ Vattimo, *Belief*, 61.

⁵⁷ Zabala, *Aeon*, Oct. 2018

⁵⁸ Blackburn, *Oxford*, 62.

⁵⁹ Davidson, “Conceptual Scheme,” 6.

must help to save our neighbor's soul."⁶⁰

However, Vattimo is daring in making claims regarding strong Christian principles such as salvation, an endeavor that may leave readers, especially the Roman Catholics among them, skeptical. It is a common claim among both philosophers and theologians that they offer "salvation" of a sort, though of course through different media. According to Epicurus, philosophy is "medicine for the soul,"⁶¹ which is precisely how Pope Francis describes the Holy Eucharist.⁶² After all, not only do philosophers have objections to theology, but, as the philosopher Luc Ferry notes, theologians tend to be wholly hostile to philosophy:

For the dogmatic theologian, philosophy is the devil's own work, because by inciting man to turn aside from his faith, to exercise his reason and give rein to his enquiring spirit, philosophy draws imperceptibly into the realm of doubt, which is the first step beyond divine inspiration.⁶³

Vattimo, on the other hand, proceeds along this hazardous path by affiliating hermeneutics with salvation: "Salvation takes shape, takes place, gives itself, and constitutes itself through its history and thus the history of interpretation too—through a series of connections that can only with difficulty be frozen into a scheme."⁶⁴ In light of these observations, it emerges that neither laicism nor religion in the traditional sense is, in the end, definitive of Vattimo's stance.

Remarkably, Vattimo has had considerable success in persuading entirely secular philosophers to acknowledge the validity of his approach. In a published conversation with Vattimo, Richard Rorty, for example, states that "the hermeneutical or Gadamerian attitude is in the intellectual world" an appropriation "of the Christian message that love is the only law,"⁶⁵ and Vattimo indeed contends that, from the beginning, modern hermeneutics has reflected what may be called salvation. On the religious side, however, the faith of "weak thought" has not bred many disciples thus far. Still, it may be too early to judge the potential popularity of Vattimo's *Verwindung* as a practical tool in the humanities, for instance, which may be relevant to students and thinkers alike. For Vattimo's option, even if one is not fully persuaded by it, remains a plausible one in today's intellectual world as a tool through which to promote dialogue and mutual understanding between opponent sides, between past and present, modern and postmodern. The world we live in changes at a rapid pace; hermeneutical pluralism may yet prove it can coexist with strongly held beliefs.

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⁶⁰ Perl, "Postmodern," 336.

⁶¹ Quoted in Ferry, *Learning*, 6.

⁶² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 5.47

⁶³ Ferry, *Learning*, 9.

⁶⁴ Vattimo, "Storia della Salvezza," 112.

⁶⁵ Rorty and Vattimo, *Future*, 74.

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