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## Weak Thought and Religion in Gianni Vattimo: Implications and Repercussions

Gianni Vattimo'da Zayıf Düşünce ve Din: Çıkarımlar ve Olası Sonuçlar

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## Weak Thought and Religion in Gianni Vattimo: Implications and Repercussions\*

### Abstract

In this paper, I focus on controversial issues in Gianni Vattimo's later philosophy concerning religion. In his later writings, Vattimo employs his idea of "weak thought" (*il pensiero debole*) to (re)interpret Christianity by claiming that as opposed to metanarratives of modernity, a weak ontology not only weakens all foundations and dominant truth claims, but also enfeebles the strong metaphysical claims of atheism such as "God does not exist." There is no reason to be an atheist, according to Vattimo, since weak thought enables emancipation from all ideological foundations, including atheism. Therefore, Vattimo offers a new definition of secularization: In contrast to modernity's claim that secularization is to banish religion from the states of reason and progress, he changes the target of secularization from religion to metaphysics. Hence, the rigid distinction between faith and reason is nothing but another foundation that needs to be weakened. That is why the aim of secularization in the West is not separate faith and reason, but to weaken metaphysics in order to make room for faith. Put it differently, secularization is "weak thought" itself. This idea is strengthened by Vattimo's interpretation of Nietzsche's announcement of God's death. However, in Vattimian perspective, the God announced as dead by Nietzsche is not the God of the biblical text but the God of metaphysics which philosophers have believed since Pascal. Hence, the statement that "God is dead" is basically the rejection of the metaphysical foundation built by modernity this time. Like Jesus the crucified, God in the postmodern time, too, becomes weak and is tolerant toward the other. Furthermore, like the birth of Christianity, the postmodern return of religion, in fact, depends on those who receive this announcement. For postmodernity as a philosophy of event considers the Christian event in the sense of *Ereignis*. That means Nietzsche never comes to "claim" that God is dead, but rather he makes an announcement of the death of God as a historical event. That is why Vattimo maintains that postmodernity is not only the overcoming of metaphysics but also now the rebirth of Christianity after the second death of God, and proposes two constituents of the postmodern return of religion: (1) the reinterpretation of *kénosis* as a diminution of all foundations, and (2) the recognition of truth as *caritas* as opposed to the metaphysical agreement over truth as an obsession with objectivity. Thus, we can conclude that Vattimo in his later writings *radicalizes* hermeneutics in terms of scrutinizing the idea of "weak thought" with Christianity. However, it also should not be unnoticed that employing his earlier thoughts to (re)interpret Christianity after Nietzsche's announcement and Heidegger's ontology, Vattimo risks the major points of his earlier consideration of hermeneutics as *koine* in the postmodern era. Though he draws a modest picture of the postmodern era, Vattimo falls into the error of reducing hermeneutics as *koine* to the Christian discourse. On the other hand, Vattimo has an idiosyncratic and outmoded understanding of what it is to be an atheist "in postmodern times". In this regard, by misapprehending the possible responses of atheistic arguments, Vattimo risks his weak thought (*il pensiero debole*) by making the religious approach "strong" in comparison not only with other religions and various traditions but also with atheism. Finally, I argue that Vattimo's rhetoric of "the return" is doomed to constitute a fundamentalist approach regarding the future of Christianity.

**Key Words:** Gianni Vattimo, Hermeneutics, Postmodernity, Weak Thought, Christianity, Catholicism, Fundamentalism.

### Gianni Vattimo'da Zayıf Düşünce ve Din: Çıkarımlar ve Olası Sonuçlar

#### Öz

Bu makalede, Gianni Vattimo'nun son dönem felsefesinde yoğunlaştığı din ile ilgili tartışmalı meselelere odaklanacağız. Geç dönemdeki yazılarında Vattimo, "zayıf düşünce" (*il pensiero debole*) fikrini, modernliğin meta-anlatılarının aksine, zayıf bir ontolojinin yalnızca tüm temelleri ve egemen hakikat iddialarını zayıflatmakla kalmayıp, aynı zamanda ateizmin "Tanrı yoktur" gibi güçlü metafizik iddialarını da güçsüzleştirdiğini öne sürerek Hristiyanlığı (yeniden) yorumlamak için kullanır. Vattimo'ya göre ateist olmak için hiçbir neden yoktur, zira zayıf düşünce ateizm de dahil olmak üzere tüm ideolojik temellerden özgürleşmeyi mümkün kılar. Bu nedenle Vattimo yeni bir sekülerleşme tanımı sunar: Buna göre sekülerleşme, modernliğin iddia ettiği gibi, akıl ve ilerleme evrelerinden dini defetmek değildir; sekülerleşmenin asıl hedefi metafiziktir. Dolayısıyla, inanç ve akıl arasındaki katı ayırım, zayıflatılması gereken bir başka temelden başka bir şey değildir. Bu nedenle Batı'da sekülerleşmenin amacı inanç ve aklı birbirinden ayırmak değil, inanca yer açmak için metafiziği zayıflatmaktır. Bir başka deyişle, sekülerleşme "zayıf düşünce"nin bizzat kendisidir. Bu fikir, Vattimo'nun Nietzsche'nin Tanrı'nın ölümünü ilan etmesini yorumlamasıyla güçlenmektedir. Ancak Vattimo'nun bakış açısına göre Nietzsche'nin öldüğünü ilan ettiği Tanrı, Incil metnindeki Tanrı değil, Pascal'dan bu yana filozofların inandığı metafiziğin Tanrısıdır. Dolayısıyla "Tanrı öldü" ifadesi, temelde modernliğin bu çağda inşa ettiği metafizik temelin reddidir. Çarmıha gerilen İsa gibi, postmodern zamanda Tanrı da zayıflar ve ötekine karşı hoşgörülü olur. Dahası, Hristiyanlığın doğuşu gibi, dinin postmodern dönüşü de aslında bu ilanın muhataplarına bağlıdır. Çünkü bir olay felsefesi olarak

\* An earlier and very short version of this article was presented on March 26, 2017, at King's University College at Western University, London, ON, Canada, for the "New Italian Thought: Challenges and Responses" conference organized by the Society for Italian Philosophy (SIP).

postmodernlik, İsa-Mesih olayını *Ereignis* anlamında ele alır. Bu da Nietzsche'nin hiçbir şekilde Tanrı'nın öldüğünü "iddia etmeye" gelmediği, aksine tarihsel bir olay olarak Tanrı'nın ölümünü ilan ettiği anlamına gelir. Bu nedenle Vattimo, postmodernliğin sadece metafiziğin aşılması değil, aynı zamanda Tanrı'nın bu ikinci ölümünden sonra Hristiyanlığın yeniden doğuşu olduğunu savunur ve dinin postmodern dönüşünün iki bileşenini öne çıkarır: (1) *kénosis*'in tüm temellerin alt üst edilmesi olarak yeniden yorumlanması ve (2) bir nesnellik saplantısı olarak "hakikat" üzerindeki metafizik mutabakatın aksine hakikatin *caritas* olarak anlaşılması. Böylece Vattimo'nun son dönem yazılarında "zayıf düşünce" fikrini Hristiyanlıkla birlikte irdelemesi bakımından hermeneutiği radikalleştirdiği sonucuna varabiliriz. Bununla birlikte, Nietzsche'nin ilanı ve Heidegger'in ontolojisinden sonra Hristiyanlığı (yeniden) yorumlamak için daha önceki düşüncelerini kullanan Vattimo'nun, postmodern çağın "ana dili" olarak gördüğü hermenötiğin *koine* oluşunu riske attığı da gözden kaçmamalıdır. Postmodern çağın mütevazı bir resmini çizmesine rağmen Vattimo, kanaatimizce, *koine* olarak hermenötiği Hristiyan söylemine indirgeme hatasına düşmektedir. Öte yandan Vattimo, "postmodern zamanlarda" ateist olmanın ne olduğuna dair kendine özgü ve günümüz şartlarına uymayan bir anlayışa sahiptir. Bu bağlamda, ateist argümanların olası yanıtlarını yanlış kavrayan Vattimo, dini yaklaşımı yalnızca diğer dinler ve çeşitli geleneklerle değil, aynı zamanda ateizmle de karşılaştırarak "güçlü" hâle getirerek zayıf düşüncesini (*il pensiero debole*) dedriske atmaktadır. Son olarak, Vattimo'nun "geri dönüş" retoriğinin Hristiyanlığın geleceğine ilişkin köktenci bir yaklaşım oluşturmaya mahkum olduğunu iddia edeceğiz.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Gianni Vattimo, Hermenötik, Postmodernlik, Zayıf Düşünce, Hristiyanlık, Katoliklik, Köktencilik.

## Introduction

The pronouncement "God is dead" means: The suprasensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life. Metaphysics, i.e., for Nietzsche Western philosophy understood as Platonist, is at an end. Nietzsche understands his own philosophy as the countermovement to metaphysics, and that means for him a movement in opposition to Platonism.

— Martin Heidegger<sup>1</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche's announcement that "God is dead" and Martin Heidegger's notion of the end of metaphysics eventuate in the idea of *il pensiero debole* (*weak thought*) in the philosophy of Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo. In this regard, first, the death of God does not claim an objective argument that God does not exist but announces there is no longer an absolute truth or any foundation.<sup>2</sup> Second, the end of metaphysics and the diminution of the authority of presence herald post-metaphysical thought in the postmodern era in which there are no facts but only interpretations.<sup>3</sup> No strong authority or institution can enforce its (truth) claims upon the other(s) since each thought loses its certainty. Each idea, each claim is now nothing but an interpretation, which is weak like any other.<sup>4</sup> Hence "weak thought", according to Vattimo, suggests a plurality of thoughts in the way that any interpretation is never able to apply its imperialism over another, and opens a possibility of the culture in which many truth claims coexist with respect to let the other live.<sup>5</sup>

It is significant to note that Vattimo, following Heidegger,<sup>6</sup> does not consider the end of metaphysics as an absolute overcoming or surpassing. He refuses an overcoming of

<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'", *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Gianni Vattimo, "Toward a Nonreligious Christianity", *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 31; Gianni Vattimo, *Not Being God: A Collaborative Autobiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 18; Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche", 57, 60.

<sup>3</sup> Gianni Vattimo, "The Trace of Trace", *Religion*, ed. J. Derrida and G. Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 93.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Carravetta, "The End(s) of Subjectivity and the Hermeneutic Task", introduction to Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond the Subject: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Hermeneutics*, tr. Peter Carravetta (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), xi.

<sup>5</sup> Gianni Vattimo, "The Truth of Hermeneutics", *Questioning Foundations: Truth, Subjectivity, and Culture*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York: Routledge, 1993), 25-26.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche", 53. Heidegger uses *Umkehrung* (overturning) in the sense of a turning upside down in lieu of *Überwindung*, which literally means an overcoming, surpassing, or conquest.

metaphysics as *Überwindung* that means going “beyond” and leaving behind the past. Instead, he employs *Verwindung* in order to explain what he means by the end of metaphysics:

First, we might say that a possible *Überwindung* of metaphysics can come about only through a long *Verwindung* of metaphysics; that is to say, it can be accomplished only as a final culmination of a process that experiences metaphysics through to the end, thereby totally and boldly accepting even the technical destiny of modern man. Or in the second place we might say that on a more radical level the *Überwindung-Verwindung* nexus may be taken as an expression of the fact that we can never overcome metaphysics, whether in this or in any other possible epoch of Being.<sup>7</sup>

In his celebrated article “Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought,” Vattimo also appeals to the notion of *Überlieferung*, which simply means the transmission of tradition into new conditions and interpretations, and claims that no thought in the postmodern era can be considered regardless of the engagement with its own tradition.<sup>8</sup> Besides, the prefix of “postmodern” indicates an awareness of being “within” an era, which is modern. Tradition comes to appear as a living organism rather than a frozen phenomenon (as proposed in historicism and historiological thinking); and accordingly, as the heir of dialectics, both dialectics and difference constitute a past for “weak thought.”<sup>9</sup> As a result, post-metaphysical thought is not any kind of defeating modernity but a transmitting of the past into new distorted and enfeebled ways of thinking.<sup>10</sup>

According to Vattimo, that each thought is weak is the main characteristic of postmodernity. Indeed, the theories pretending to be “strong” are breaking down thanks to many other postmodern philosophers and theorists: Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzschean nihilism, Weber and Girard’s secularism, Lyotard’s metanarratives, Derrida’s deconstruction, Gadamer’s ontological hermeneutics, Foucault’s genealogy, Levinas’s “the other”, Ricoeur’s hermeneutic reception of the self, Hassan’s plurality, Jencks’ hybridization, and finally Rorty and Vattimo’s weak thought.<sup>11</sup> Rather than craving for certainty or objectivity, these recent attempts mainly stand for the idea that truth is rhetorical. This panorama leads Vattimo to argue that hermeneutics—which validates all possible interpretations equally and suggests a plurality of truth—is the common language (*koine*) of postmodern theories.<sup>12</sup>

## 1. The Postmodern Return of Religion

There are no longer strong, rational reasons for being an atheist. This is a consequence of secularization, not the consequence of desecularization. This is also very important philosophically. I would say that religion can have a religious meaning only with the help of philosophy—that is, with

<sup>7</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy after Nietzsche and Heidegger*, tr. Cyprian Blamires (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 113.

<sup>8</sup> Gianni Vattimo, “The Crisis of Subjectivity from Nietzsche to Heidegger”, *Differentia* 1 (1986), 14-16.

<sup>9</sup> Gianni Vattimo, “Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought”, *Weak Thought*, ed. G. Vattimo and P.A. Rovatti (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 39.

<sup>10</sup> Vattimo, “Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought”, 46; “The Trace of the Trace”, 93; Peter Carravetta, *Prefaces to the Diaphora: Rhetorics, Allegory, and the Interpretation of Postmodernity* (Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1991), 227: “Thinking is really an up-setting, an oblique re-casting, or, to use Vattimo’s coin, a *de-grounding* (“sfondare”) of its own non-foundation in function of play, remembering and enabling discourse as it unveils itself in tradition (*Überlieferung*), responding to the call of being.”

<sup>11</sup> Carravetta, *Prefaces to the Diaphora*, 231.

<sup>12</sup> Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx* (New York: Columbia University, 2011), 6; Vattimo, “The Crisis of Subjectivity from Nietzsche to Heidegger”, 7;

the help of a theory of secularization that recognizes in many traits of the modern world the basic features of Christianity.

— Gianni Vattimo<sup>13</sup>

There are two main consequences of the weakened thought in the postmodern era. One is that even philosophy can no longer claim that it is itself the only authority on truth, nor become a universal and totalitarian discipline, nor aim at disclosing the ultimate context of human existence. The other consequence that concerns us more is the return and recovery of religion, which has been exiled from the soil of Reason by modernity, and, accordingly, the diminution of the theoretical/metaphysical arguments of atheism.<sup>14</sup> There has no longer been “strong”, or “rational” reason to be an atheist just because all kinds of rationalist and objectivist thinking are subject to be weakened thanks to the postmodern and post-metaphysical philosophies. And so, religion revives.

In his later writings, Vattimo employs his idea of “weak thought” (*il pensiero debole*) to (re)interpret Christianity by claiming that a weak ontology, as opposed to metanarratives of modernity, not only weakens all foundations and dominant truth claims but also enfeebles the strong metaphysical claims of atheism such as “God does not exist.” There is no reason to be an atheist since weak thought enables emancipation from all ideological foundations, including atheism.<sup>15</sup> Following Max Weber and René Girard, Vattimo here offers a new definition of secularization: In contrast to modernity’s claim that secularization is to banish religion from the states of reason and progress, he changes the target of secularization from religion to metaphysics. Hence, the rigid distinction between faith and reason is nothing but another foundation that needs to be weakened. That is why the aim of secularization in the West is not to separate faith and reason but to weaken metaphysics in order to make room for faith. Put differently, secularization is “weak thought” itself.<sup>16</sup>

“Weak thought” as secularization is constituted on two major Christian notions: *kenosis* (incarnation) and *caritas* (charity). *Kénosis* is the incarnation of God as Jesus. Because of the very fact that God himself descended on the earth, Vattimo maintains, Christianity is actually that which heralds the end of Platonic ideals and absolute truths. Christ, in this respect, is the one who is the agent of interpretation and accordingly the initiator of the secularization of metaphysical Truths with the capital T. The event of the incarnation of God not only makes all metaphysical foundations weak but also gives Christianity meaning.<sup>17</sup> As a result, secularization obtains a new definition as the weakening, whereas “weak thought” becomes the transcription of the Christian message in terms of the fulfillment of the history of salvation.<sup>18</sup>

The other notion reinterpreted by Vattimo, charity is both the reason and result of “weak thought” as secularization. We have mentioned philosophy no longer proposes objective and absolute truths. In addition to this, philosophy now favors consensus, dialogue, solidarity, and

<sup>13</sup> Vattimo, “A Prayer for Silence”, *After the Death of God*, 97.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Rorty, “Heideggerianism and Leftist Politics”, *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Santiago Zabala (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 151; Gianni Vattimo, “Dialogue: What Is Religion’s Future After Metaphysics?” *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 59; Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 87; John D. Caputo, “Dialogue: On the Power of the Powerless”, *After the Death of God*, 143.

<sup>15</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 86; “A Prayer for Silence”, 97.

<sup>16</sup> Vattimo, “A Prayer for Silence”, 100; *After Christianity*, 24, 26, 45, 78.

<sup>17</sup> Carmelo Dotolo, “The Hermeneutics of Christianity and Philosophical Responsibility”, *Weakening Philosophy*, 363.

<sup>18</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 24; Nancy Frankenberry, “Weakening Religious Belief: Vattimo, Rorty, and the Holism of the Mental”, *Weakening Philosophy*, 274.

tolerance to the other.<sup>19</sup> If one of the tasks of philosophy is to find a word that can reach the ear of the other,<sup>20</sup> another is to make a healthy conversation in order to fuse the horizons of parts. Based on this aim of philosophy, Vattimo purports hermeneutics is a process of healing from the disease that metaphysics has induced.<sup>21</sup> Hermeneutics is indeed a long convalescence because one can realize whether she lives in her own illusory truths only in the case of dialogue with the other. To make a dialogue means both to let the other's truth live and to get rid of all missionary aims. That is why Vattimo believes the postmodern return of religion is persuasive rather than missionary.<sup>22</sup> Jesus as the living interpretation of the law is the one who initiates love between people and replaces truth as metaphysical objectivity with truth as charity.<sup>23</sup> Since post-metaphysical- thought enfeebles the violence of metaphysics by democratizing the object, knowledge, and the knowing subject, postmodernity eventuates in plurality in thoughts and makes the truths of other religions viable.<sup>24</sup> In doing so, Vattimo argues that charity (as tolerance to the other) replaces truth so that one religion can never claim its supremacy over another.<sup>25</sup>

To sum up, the incarnation of God and charity as tolerance to other truths have brought Vattimo to enunciate the postmodern return of religion. That is to say that the God announced as dead by Nietzsche is not the God of the biblical text but the God of metaphysics in which philosophers have believed since Pascal.<sup>26</sup> Hence, the statement that "God is dead" is simply the rejection of the metaphysical foundation built by modernity this time. Like Jesus the crucified, God in the postmodern time, too, becomes weak and is tolerant toward the other. Furthermore, like the birth of Christianity, the postmodern return of religion, in fact, depends on those who receive the announcement. For postmodernity as a philosophy of event considers the Christian event in the sense of *Ereignis*. That means Nietzsche never comes to "claim" that God is dead, but rather he makes an announcement of the death of God as a historical event. That is why Vattimo maintains that postmodernity is not only the overcoming of metaphysics but also the rebirth of Christianity after the second death of God. Here proposed two constituents of the postmodern return of religion: (1) the reinterpretation of *kénosis* as a diminution of all foundations, and (2) the recognition of truth as *caritas* as opposed to the metaphysical agreement over truth as an obsession with objectivity.

## 2. Christianity and/vs. Christendom

I have a positive theory of secularization, one that originates from a reinterpretation of scripture by the church in which there is no victimhood. Ultimately, Christianity is the religion that opens the way to an existence not strictly religious, if we take "religious" to mean binding restraints, imposition, authority—and I here might refer to Joachim of Fiore, who spoke of a third age of the history of humanity and the history

<sup>19</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 82.

<sup>20</sup> Santiago Zabala, "The Pharmakons of Onto-theology", *Weakening Philosophy*, 243.

<sup>21</sup> Vattimo, "The Age of Interpretation", *The Future of Religion*, 45; "The Trace of the Trace", 79; James Risser, "On the Continuation of Philosophy: Hermeneutics as Convalescence", *Weakening Philosophy*, 190.

<sup>22</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 69-70.

<sup>23</sup> Gianni Vattimo, "Dialogue: Christianity and Modernity", *Christianity, Truth and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue*, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Here Vattimo says, "Jesus Christ came into the world in order to reveal that religiosity consists not in sacrificing but in loving God and our neighbor."

<sup>24</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 27, 49; as he puts it briefly somewhere else: "Plurality of truth grounds tolerance and dialogue." Vattimo, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Vattimo, "Toward a Nonreligious Christianity", 44; *After Christianity*, 50.

<sup>26</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 15.



of salvation, in which the “spiritual” sense of scripture increasingly emerges and charity takes the place of discipline.

— Gianni Vattimo<sup>27</sup>

As he develops secularization (or, namely the weakening) of Being as the rebirth of Christianity, Vattimo refers to the very distinction between Christianity and Christendom.<sup>28</sup> According to the Italian philosopher, apart from the foundations like the Church initiated by the culture of Christendom, Christianity emancipates people from the domination of any power, reason, or knowledge, and mainly makes room for faith by stimulating love and charity. The culture of Christendom has so far caused two significant diseases in the history of Christianity:

(1) For one thing, the metaphysical interpretations of the biblical text have given rise to the foundations based on the culture of victimhood. Inheriting paganistic anthropology, killing the innocent victim (a surrogate victim instead of the real one) becomes a sacred ritual of religion in order to fulfill an order of God. That is to say that to sacrifice in order of God means to make the deed sacred.<sup>29</sup> However, according to Vattimo who is here following Girard's theory, even if it is sacred, the act of “killing” is an act of violence; and violence can never be a subject to any religious activity in terms of God's will. This dilemma is indeed an illusion of metaphysics whose existence always naturally requires an act of violence.<sup>30</sup> Yet post-metaphysics offers to get rid of violence. The Christian God, incarnating and then sacrificing himself, breaks the circularity of being a victim and killing a victim, puts an end to the metaphysical order of sacrificial violence, and finally opens a new possibility of the culture based on *caritas*, i.e., charity and love. Therefore, as opposed to the sacrificial ethics that has so far been constituted by the culture of Christendom, Vattimo, with the very help of Girard, points out a postmodern return of religion based on secularization resulting in a nonviolent and non-sacrificial interpretation of Christianity.<sup>31</sup>

(2) Another outcome of the culture of Christendom is that the Church throughout history has monopolized the meaning of the Bible by interpreting it literally. To illustrate, from the decision of the four-formed gospel to the Crusades, from the Inquisition to Galileo's case, the literal interpretation of the biblical message dominates the believers. However, Vattimo, with the very help of the 12th-century theologian Joachim of Fiore, asserts that only one can approach the meaning of “real” Christianity through the spiritual interpretation of the biblical message. The spiritual interpretation of the Bible does not suggest that the text is composed of the commandments the believers must practice. Rather, he says, “Jesus is a living interpretation of the meaning of the law.”<sup>32</sup> That means God ascended to the earth not to dictate the divine law over people but to show how he interprets the message by living. In so doing, Christ becomes the agent and interpretation, and Christianity contributes to the philosophy of interpretation. Moreover, similarly to the fact that interpretation is an endless task, Christianity has grown with

<sup>27</sup> Vattimo, “Dialogue: Christianity and Modernity”.

<sup>28</sup> Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche”, 63.

<sup>29</sup> René Girard, “Dialogue: Christianity and Modernity”; René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 1-38.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 134-153. Vattimo says, “... Nietzsche is well aware that the violence that gives birth to metaphysics and that it represents is not completely gone, and in fact demands a ‘violent’ decision that eliminates it from everything by positing the real conditions of a world and of a thinking that are no longer metaphysical.” Gianni Vattimo, *Il Soggetto e la Maschera: Nietzsche e il Problema della Liberazione*, cited in Robert T. Valgenti, “Vattimo's Nietzsche”, *Interpreting Nietzsche: Reception and Influence*, ed. Ashley Woodward (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 149.

<sup>31</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 115; Valgenti, “Vattimo's Nietzsche”, 150.

<sup>32</sup> Vattimo. *After Christianity*, 59.



interpretation so that salvation in the Christian belief gains another meaning in terms of construing the Bible spiritually.

To conclude, the return of religion is that philosophy comes to be aware of religion (or, religious experience) as a phenomenon in one's life. There is religion, and it cannot be overcome. As is well known, in modernity, it is necessary to restrain religion and refuse the biblical message in terms of objectivity and scientific explanations. But the biblical message is not a science book.<sup>33</sup> Instead, it is a historical announcement revealing the event-like characteristic of Being just like any other event (*Ereignis*). Thus, as an interpretation of Being, the message cannot be "examined" in the sense of science searching for another kind of certainty and objective truth. That leads us to the core idea of the return of religion: In the postmodern era, to say that philosophy should rediscover religion as a living phenomenon is to bring back the messages of religion, that is also, to let religious experience and different doctrines live.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the pluralism of postmodernity allows us to hear again the voice of the biblical message since it is not the text explaining the "presence" of beings but the revealment of Being. As Vattimo states, once we stop querying what is real and what is not, these "texts" say something concerning Being. Consequently, religion transforms into a way of understanding Being and communicating with the other.<sup>35</sup>

### 3. An Aftermath of the Return of Religion: Catholicocentrism and Fundamentalism

The overcoming of metaphysics, in other words, can only take place as nihilism. The meaning of nihilism, however, if it is not in its turn to take the form of a metaphysics of the nothing —as it would if one imagined a process at the end of which Being is not and the nothing is— can only think of itself as an indefinite process of reduction, diminution, weakening. Could such a thinking be thought outside the horizon of the Incarnation? If hermeneutics really wishes to continue along the path opened by Heidegger's call to recollect Being (and thus *Ereignis*), this perhaps the decisive question to which it must seek a response today.

— Gianni Vattimo<sup>36</sup>

It is incontrovertible that the later writings of Vattimo radicalize hermeneutics in terms of scrutinizing the idea of "weak thought" with Christianity. However, it also should not be unnoticed that employing his earlier thoughts to (re)interpret Christianity after Nietzsche's announcement and Heidegger's ontology, Vattimo risks the major points of his earlier consideration of hermeneutics as *koine* in the postmodern era.

#### 3.1. The Reduction of Hermeneutics as *Koine* to the Christian Discourse

Vattimo, in his later works concerning religion and postmodernity, revises the idea of *Verwindung*. As has been covered above, the notion of *Verwindung* offers not to overcome metaphysics but to transmit (*Überlieferung*) dialectics and *difference* to the present discourse. Starting from this, Vattimo states that there is no longer non-Christian philosophy since the stream of philosophy has already been deconstructed by the event of the birth of Christianity.

<sup>33</sup> Vattimo says in "Dialogue: Faith and Relativism": "Why study chemistry? Because I can construct things that are of use to me and my neighbor. But frankly, knowing that 2 plus 2 makes 4 does nothing per se to bring me closer to God, any more than it would to believe that 2 plus 2 makes 220. Otherwise everything would be a handbook of geometry! But the Bible isn't a handbook of astronomy or cosmology, it isn't even a handbook of *theology*." (My italics)

<sup>34</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 26, 88.

<sup>35</sup> Vattimo, "The Age of Interpretation", 49; "The Trace of the Trace", 79-80, 88; "Dialogue: A Prayer for Silence", 107; *After Christianity*, 5-6, 19; Caputo, "Spectral Hermeneutics: On the Weakness of God and the Theology of the Event", *After the Death of God*, 73.

<sup>36</sup> Vattimo, "The Trace of the Trace", 95.

That is to say, one now lives in a civilization shaped by Christianity from the very beginning to modernity and postmodernity. In doing so, Vattimo acknowledges that there is no possible overcoming of the religious tradition as in the goals of the Enlightenment. Rather, it is inevitable to recognize the continuity of tradition. As a result, to say there is a philosophy in the West is to say it is indispensably a Christian philosophy.

The task of hermeneutics as the common language in the postmodern era, as Vattimo proposed earlier, is no doubt to fuse horizons regardless of excluding traditions, religions, or cultures other than the Christian, or better, the Catholic West. After all that variety and the complexity of the global market of religions, we have to question whether or not Vattimo reduces the hermeneutics as *koine* to the Christian discourse.

First of all, for Vattimo, Christianity lies at the center of the postmodern return of religion. The return per se is not to religion but to only Christianity. That means to avoid the rhetorical component of hermeneutics. To criticize the Roman Catholic Church, Vattimo addresses historical facts like the Crusades, the Inquisition, or the States; however, like Nietzsche's expression of "there are no facts but interpretations," the facts of the Roman Catholic Church are subject to different interpretations.<sup>37</sup> This may lead us to think about the role of the agent so that just as tradition forms us, we also shape our tradition not only by choosing and picking which is ours and which is not, but also by leaving out the rest. In fact, under colonialism and then globalization, other traditions and cultures have affected the West as much as the Christian modernity and the Enlightenment affected them. We have seen for a long time traditional, cultural, or religious identities have been blurred through cosmopolitanism. As Korean or Chinese Churches can be built in the US, as Kosher food is commercialized around the world, Muslims or Buddhists can do their daily prayers wherever they live. The point that needs clarification here is whether globalization is a process of enhancing tolerance toward the other (traditions, cultures, and religions), or of Westernization, i.e., Christianization utterly. If the latter is the case, does this also mean that all religious experience in the postmodern era should return only within the context of Christian faith?

Further, why Christianity is the only religion that *needs* a return? In the name of modernization, for instance, Turkey has implemented laicism over Muslim, Christian, and Jewish devotees by closing down their places of worship and education, banning headscarves and kippahs from the public sphere and even from universities, and sometimes killing or jailing people who rose against the regime. As a modernized and Westernized country, why does not Turkey deserve a "postmodern" return of religion? For over ten years, modern foundations and institutions in Turkey have been criticized and weakened. If postmodernity requires a weakening of all strong foundations in order to make room for faith, the return of religion should not be circumscribed just in favor of Christianity.

Concerning the civilization in which Vattimo lives, it may be plausible to claim that the continuity of the Western tradition covers the origins of metaphysics of presence, Christianity, modernity, and finally postmodernity. However, we should not forget that Christianity is not a single tradition in the world. Non-Western "alive" traditions such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, or ancient civilizations like Babylonia, Manicheism, Aztec, and Maya never appear

<sup>37</sup> Peter Carravetta, "Beyond Interpretation? On Some Perplexities Following upon Vattimo's Turn from Hermeneutics", *Between Nihilism and Politics: The Hermeneutics of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Silvia Benso and Brian Schroeder (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 92.

within this picture, even though those traditions have always had an interaction with one another. For instance, just as the Greek philosophy or metaphysics of presence was deconstructed when Christianity showed up, so Jewish and Islamic scholars like Maimonides, Ibn Gabirol, Avicenna, Averroes, and Avempace deconstructed this heritage throughout the Middle Ages. Is it possible, then, to consider Western philosophy without Avicenna's influence on metaphysics or Averroes' translations and interpretations of Aristotle's philosophy?

What is more, it is arguable whether Vattimo does indeed justice to other Christian churches and sects such as Orthodox, Assyrian, Ecumenical Patriarch, or Coptic. As René Girard rightly asked Vattimo in a public conference;

Leaving the Catholic Church aside, we could ponder what has happened to the Protestant world, for example, with its fragmentation into thousands of confessions and congregations, or what has happened to Orthodoxy, the Russian and Byzantine church, which, however decadent it may appear in some respects, has kept alive a tradition in a way very different and robust from the way that prevails in the West.<sup>38</sup>

We can say that Vattimo here neglects the influences of other traditions not only broadly on Christianity but also specifically on Catholicism. That is why we are to argue that while he proposes that ontological hermeneutics is nothing but the theory of Christian modernity, Vattimo may find himself in some kind of "Catholicocentrism" in the hermeneutical discourse. For the Catholic claim of Christian faith, like any other doctrine, has taken place in history and been shaped through the endless discussions with other claims about the Christian event and through the councils arranged by Christian priests and clerics. In this regard, it can be argued that Vattimo abandons his own idea that hermeneutics is the common language of the postmodern world in which many traditions are alive regardless of claiming supremacy over one another.

### 3.2. Making Catholicism "Strong"

As it can be predicted, the fact that Vattimo puts Catholic interpretation of the Christian event at the center of weak thought goes hand in hand with the ideology of making Catholic doctrine "strong". We are to keep in mind that according to Vattimo, both because the "strong" claims of metaphysical foundations are weakened and because postmodernity yields to plurality, post-metaphysical thought validates the truths of other religions. Concerning the critique of Catholicocentrism, now we have to ask what other narratives about Jesus, or the Christian event, matter to Vattimo.

The Orthodox interpretation of Jesus' life, Jehovah's Witnesses' reading of the Biblical message, or even the story of Jesus in the Qur'an have different versions than the Catholic mentality. Even some Gospels like Barnabas or Dead Sea Scrolls recite Jesus more than those agreed in the councils. Jesus, in this respect, is a pious, even a zealot among Essenes. That means he is a historical figure, not the descending or incarnation of God. Also, the Qur'an narrates that Jesus was not God, or even not crucified but ascended to Heaven. Like previous ones sent by God, he was a prophet, that is in the Islamic context, a messenger of God. Needless to say, the Qur'an draws another figure who does not allow us to consider his life as weakening since the incarnation (*kénosis*) is prohibited in the Islamic context. Are these truth claims still viable in

<sup>38</sup> René Girard, "Dialogue: Hermeneutics, Authority, Tradition", *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*; moreover, Girard continues to criticize Vattimo by saying that, "the problem hasn't ranged beyond a Heideggerian horizon," since Heidegger (and Nietzsche too) was Catholic.

Vattimo's reading of Christianity in the postmodern era when he says the post-metaphysical thought validates the truths and myths of other religions? But, approaching the Christian event from the view of Catholicism as if it is the only one, it seems Vattimo strengthens the truth claim of the Catholic doctrine. If the Christian event, in its uniqueness in history, is subject to interpretation, there is no reason not to hear the voice of other claims on this event.

Another reason why we think Vattimo makes the Catholic doctrine strong is, apart from the diminution of the authority of the Church, his allowance to other metaphysical foundations in the culture of Christendom. From the early career of his philosophy, Vattimo has emphasized the need for weakening the realm of metaphysics after Nietzsche and Heidegger. He is also wary of modernity's tricky move, which is to change the focus of philosophy from God to another metaphysical foundation, i.e., the Truth. However, while dealing with the strong structures of metaphysics, it seems Vattimo is obsessed with the authority of the Church, especially of the Roman Catholic one, probably because of its crucial influence on the West by which Vattimo was affected. What about other metaphysical foundations when he has inherited and esteemed two Catholic notions, *kénosis* and *caritas*? Take *caritas*, for instance. He is always critical of both the EU's and EU Parliament's Christian characteristics in terms of allowing some countries (like France) to ban wearing hijab or standing discreetly toward Muslim countries (like Turkey). On the other hand, he "literally" believes the consensus, which is *caritas* or the Christian charity for him. In this regard, we are to question if there is any guarantee that, in the postmodern era, the return of religion concerning the fulfillment of the history of salvation through charity will not turn itself into another grand narrative in the future. To what extent can we agree with the idea that any consensus (charity) in the EU replaces the truth? Moreover, does the idea of charity turn itself into a kind of "charity claim," as in the USA's claim bringing democracy to the Middle East? So, based on Vattimo's critical references to *kénosis* and *caritas*, we may conclude that since he "values" those Catholic concepts, Vattimo, intentionally or unintentionally, beefs up the Catholic claim.

What is more, and in conjunction with the previous point, it is easy to find the metaphysical terminology as the residual of modernity in Vattimo's later works concerning "weak thought" (philosophy) and Christianity (theology). The most notable one is the role of "meaning" in the context of Christianity. As mentioned above, *kénosis* gives meaning to Christianity. However, we know that Derrida is highly critical of the notion of "meaning", which is another name for the metaphysics of presence. Another notion is "secularization" so that Vattimo utterly changes its nature to the weakening of metaphysics and a plurality in thought. Even though he reinterprets secularization by stating that the Christian event itself is the process of secularization, this is not the unique interpretation of secularity. As we have discussed above, a Turkish version of laicism is a modern foundation — which is powerful and totalitarian. We can also add "emancipation" to the list because of the very fact that emancipation is one of three metanarratives that Jean-François Lyotard tells us.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, atheism becomes the practice area of the power of Vattimo's Catholicocentrism. There is no philosophical reason to be an atheist, according to Vattimo. For atheism establishes its arguments based on Reason, which is another metaphysical foundation. However, the case of being an atheist is not solely a result of developing a theoretical or philosophical atheism. There

<sup>39</sup> Carravetta, "Beyond Interpretation? On Some Perplexities Following Upon Vattimo's Turn from Hermeneutics", 89; Cf. Gianni Vattimo, "Nihilism as Emancipation", *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*, ed. Lorenzo Chiesa & Alberto Toscano (Melbourne: re. Press, 2009).

emerges, for instance, a different kind of atheism after World War II in terms of ceasing to hope for the future and despair of believing in God. Jews exiled for thousands of years, for the first time, have become inclined to be an atheist after the catastrophe. In a similar fashion, in some Muslim countries such as Iran, Lebanon, or Tunis, most young people seem desperate for the future and God, probably because of their messianic beliefs. Moreover, Rorty explains another kind of atheism that is political, liberal, or anticleric.<sup>40</sup> Political atheism mainly suggests countering the authority of religious institutions like churches or official authorities of fatwa, but does neither intervene in the lives of religious people nor prohibit new interpretations of religious facts and texts. This decision is political rather than philosophical.

Here emerges the significant problem: atheism is usually considered as a problem of the philosophy of religion because this discipline is actually of Christianity. Theological arguments for God's existence, the problem of theodicy, or the explanation of miracles are utterly the subjects of Catholic doctrine. Based on that, we can argue that philosophical atheism appears historically by opposing the Christian arguments about God. With the overcoming of modernity and the advent of the postmodern condition, we are to see atheism has become diversified and turned from being local (Christianity) into a global condition. That is to say that those new atheistic tendencies are now facing not Christianity but religion at large. Just because of that, the question of atheism is no longer one of the problems of the philosophy of religion. It is indeed that of religion in the postmodern era. That is why, as long as atheism is to be discussed within the philosophy of religion, it is not possible to make a meaningful dialogue with atheism.

Charity or tolerance toward the other is the case for atheism as well. However, the fact that Vattimo strengthens the claims of Christianity against atheism "at large" is to avoid the task of hermeneutics in terms of finding the word that can reach the ear of the other. What is more, to twist Girard's work on violence and the sacred into our discussion, Vattimo's argument that "there is no reason to be an atheist" is literally to place atheism at the center of the return of religion and figuratively to place the victim at the center of the Christian discourse. An atheist individual, in this context, is the one coming from outside the Catholic horizon and the one who may be sacrificable in favor of philosophical or theological purposes. Hereby Vattimo, as we may propose, remains ironically within the circularity of victimhood, and neglects the responsibility toward atheism "for the sake of *caritas*." Being reveals its truth (*Aletheia*) if and only if a dialogue occurs between theists and atheists.

### 3.3. On the Way to Fundamentalism

What we have touched on above leads us to another extreme idea: The postmodern return of religion in Vattimo's thought may ironically eventuate in fundamentalism in some ways. It should be noted that Vattimo is, in fact, aware of the danger of fundamentalistic interpretation of religion.<sup>41</sup> But, even though apart from the return of fundamentalistic interpretation of religion in popular consciousness, the postmodern "return" of religion too has its own potential inclination to fundamentalism. First of all, distinguishing the faith of Christianity from the culture of Christendom seems Platonic and metaphysical in terms of hunting for another absolute so-called "real" Christianity.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, Vattimo argues that the God who is dead is the God of

<sup>40</sup> Rorty, "Anticlericalism and Atheism", *The Future of Religion*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Vattimo, "The Trace of the Trace", 81-83. He says, "From a Heideggerian point of view, then, it is all too clear that to respond to the Babel of late-modernity by returning to God as foundation is simply to try to escape from metaphysics by setting against its final dissolution the recovery of a 'preceding' configuration; one that appears desirable just because less tightly bound—but only apparently—to the actual condition from which one wishes to escape."

<sup>42</sup> Vattimo, "A Prayer for Silence", 98.

metaphysics, of philosophers, not the God of “the Book.”<sup>43</sup> These two points can be read as fundamentalism precisely because they presuppose there is an intact message that can be reachable *through* the faith of Christianity *after* the culture of Christendom. We are historically situated human beings whose faith is shaped and colored by the culture. So, if we cannot think of faith outside culture, how are we able to differentiate “real” faith from the cultural faith?<sup>44</sup>

Hunting for the “real” or fundamental Christianity *after* the culture of Christendom also reinforces the belief in the future where the kingdom of God will be built. However, the prophecy of Vattimo entirely differs from the literal interpretation of the Bible. Rather, he favors a nihilistic and fully secularized future with the help of his earlier works on positive nihilism whose aim is to say “No” to all claims of metaphysical foundations through the transvaluation of all values.<sup>45</sup> As he says, “We haven’t yet been nihilistic enough,” Vattimo heralds a future of humanity in which a culture of consensus reigns. Moreover, if we consider the statement as a historical event like Nietzsche’s announcement “God is dead” or Heidegger’s end of metaphysics, we need to keep going further by arguing that Vattimo *may* turn himself into the harbinger of the Christian event, even into a new founder of Christianity. And yet if it is true that the kingdom of God will be built when nihilism is accepted broadly enough, then Vattimo is the one who announces the future of Christianity.

### Coda: The Beyond

A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, “to have a horizon” means not being limited to what is nearby but to being able to see beyond it.

— Hans-Georg Gadamer<sup>46</sup>

Through hermeneutics as convalescence, Vattimo’s attempt to save religion from the foundations and violence of metaphysics is indeed a crucial phenomenon in the postmodern era. However, some significant questions raised in the return of religion do need to be open to discussion. Postmodern plurality validates other truth claims in dialogue, but it must also make us aware of other “horizons.” That is why Vattimo’s step toward beyond interpretation remains ambiguous and problematic.

<sup>43</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> To explain this kind of fundamentalism, the Age of Felicity in the history of Islam is a nice example. According to both many Sunni and Shia doctrines, the period from the advent of Islam to Prophet Muhammad’s death (or, to the end of the era of first four khalifas, for some) is the sacred period since the revelation still continues. But once the revelation ceased and the Qur’an is completed, Muslims started to recite the message, to remember and discuss what Prophet Muhammad said about the verse which is sent by God (the beginning of the discipline of *hadith*), and to interpret how he practiced the Qur’an in his life (*sunnah*). After the Prophet and his companions died (that is, after the Age of Felicity), only the Qur’anic message and narratives about the life and implementations of the Prophet left to the successors of the Muslim community in order to understand “the Muslim event of Being.” Then, a thousand years later, the Wahhabi movement rose in the Arabian peninsula and claimed a return to the Age of Felicity is possible when Muslims ignore the “misinterpretations” of Qur’an (just Qur’an), which had been made by Muslim scholars for centuries. In this regard, in order to reach the “real” Islam and to be a good Muslim, the fundamental return to the text and to the event of revelation is the only requirement. This Wahhabi understanding of Islam is now being defended by many Muslims probably as a response to modernity since Islam has been surrounded, colonized, and defeated politically.

<sup>45</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 140.

<sup>46</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. tr. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 313.



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