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Philosophy in the Light of Incarnation. Gianni Vattimo on *kenosis*

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Philosophy in the light of Incarnation

Gianni Vattimo on *kenosis* *

Ulrich Engel

“Only in the light of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation of the son of God does it seem possible for philosophy to think of itself as a reading of the signs of the times without this being reduced to a purely passive record of the times. ‘In the light’ of the Incarnation is once again an expression that seeks to capture a problematic and unresolved relation that lies at the very heart of the experience of event-likeness: the incarnation of God at issue here is not simply a way of giving mythical expression to what philosophy will in the end reveal via rational enquiry. (...) If you will: it is the fact of the Incarnation that confers on history the sense of a redemptive revelation, as opposed to a confused accumulation of happenings that unsettle the pure structural quality of true Being.”¹

The person who is thinking philosophy and theology together in the way quoted here is the Italian philosopher *Gianni Vattimo*. Vattimo was born in 1936 in Turin. He studied, inter alia, under Luigi Pareyson (1918-1991)² and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002). From 1964 until 1982 Vattimo was Professor of Aesthetics at the University of Turin; since 1982 he has been teaching theoretical philosophy at the same university. In 1981 he was a visiting professor at Yale University, and also taught in New York and California. Vattimo is the editor of the “*Revista di Estetica*” (Magazine of Aesthetics). Since 1999 he has been a Member of the European Parliament for the “*Partito dei Democratici di Sinistra*” (Party of Left Democracy).

Gianni Vattimo counts as one of the leading theoreticians of the so-called “post-modern” age, alongside Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida.³ It is possible to sketch his philosophy as follows, in a short summary:

Vattimo believes that the modern, Enlightenment project of human emancipation as the unfolding of reason through the self-conscious appropriation of nature and the rational organization of society, has been undermined by the effects of new technology and the mass media upon

* Lecture in St. Stephen’s House, Oxford, UK, 24 July 2002 (Conference “Illumination: reason, revelation and science”, 23-26 July 2002).

¹ Religion, ed. by J. Derrida / G. Vattimo, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press 1998, p. 92.

² Cf. M. Weiß, Luigi Pareyson, in: Bio-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon, Vol. 14, Herzeberg: Verlag Traugott Bautz 1998, col. 1339-1353.

³ Cf. M. Weiß, Gianni Vattimo. Eine Einführung. Mit einem Interview im Anhang, Vienna: Passagen Verlag 2003 (in preparation).

contemporary societies. These developments have produced a complex and fragmented world, in which the continual elaboration of numerous heterogeneous interpretative schemata has removed the possibility of any privileged or 'objective' point of view upon which to build a unitary or progressive conception of human history. He argues that this situation produces a 'weak ontology' that demands a corresponding weakening of philosophy's traditional metaphysical aspirations in the direction of 'weak thought' (*pensiero debole*), an approach he associates with the notions of nihilism and difference elaborated by Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger.⁴

In his most recent publications, Vattimo concerns himself expressly with the Christian religion as it has been handed down. The most important of these are:

- 1996: the book *Credere di credere*⁵ (English: *Belief*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press),
- 1996: the essay *La trace de la trace*⁶ (English: *The Trace of the Trace*, in: *Religion*, ed. by J. Derrida / G. Vattimo, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press 1998, p. 79-94),
- 2002: the Berlin Lecture *Christentum im Zeitalter der Interpretation*.⁷

I have divided my lecture into three sections:

- The 'weak thought' (1).
- The 'weak thought' and Christianity (2).
- Theological appreciation (3)

(1) The 'weak thought'

Vattimo's starting point is his conviction that the belief in strong principles and fixed structures has become obsolete with the end of the modern age. The Italian philosopher Fabrizia Giacobbe OP describes this as follows: "the dissolution of the stability of being, i.e. the questioning of the concept of being as the ground and of thinking as the means of access to the ground, one of the typical themes of philosophy in the 20th century, is an important assumption (...) of 'weak

⁴ Cf. <http://www.xrefer.com/entry/553806> (15.7.2002).

⁵ G. Vattimo, *Credere di credere*, Milano: Garzanti Editore 1996.

⁶ G. Vattimo, *La trace de la trace*, in: *La religion*, ed. by J. Derrida / G. Vattimo, Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1996, p. 87-104.

⁷ A shortened version of the lecture was recently published: G. Vattimo, *Wirklichkeit, wo ist deine Wahrheit? Christentum im Zeitalter der Interpretation*, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* No. 136 (15./16.6.2002), p. 61 (International Edition) / p. 77 (Swiss Edition). The complete text will be appearing in the coming year in: G. Vattimo / R. Schröder, *Christentum im Zeitalter der Interpretation* (1st Berlin Chenu-Disputation), ed. Institut M.-Dominique Chenu – Espaces Berlin by Ch. Bauer / Th. Eggensperger / U. Engel, Vienna: Passagen Verlag 2003 (in preparation).

thinking”⁸. The distinguishing marks of the post-modern age are, looked at from an *ontological* point of view, the negation of the stable structures of being. Looked at from an *epistemological* point of view, they are the end of all “matching” truth, whereby knowledge consists of the correct matching of the subject with the object: “Veritas est adaequatio intellectus et rei” (Truth is the matching of mind and reality⁹).

Vattimo is quite fundamentally related to Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. Despite the differences between the philosophical approach of Nietzsche and Heidegger, both of them, however, fundamentally call into question the traditional Western thinking. Vattimo is convinced that the announcement of the death of God¹⁰ by Nietzsche’s fearless man can be identified with the end of metaphysics which Heidegger speaks of. Both aspects together – *the death of God* and *the end of metaphysics* – constitute, according to Vattimo, the core content of the post-modern age. “Vattimo takes over Nietzsche’s insight that belief in (objective) truth has diminished, and Heidegger’s historical-philosophical idea of a history of being [Seinsgeschichte; U.E.], which he understands as a history of dissolution”¹¹. Just as for Nietzsche, so for Vattimo also, the ‘real world’ has become a fable.¹² The ‘real world’ has been abolished; reality only continues to exist as (current personal) interpretation. The objective reality of metaphysics has had it. In place of thinking, which is orientated towards ‘strong’ principles, we now have, according to Vattimo, ‘weak thinking’, the free play of *interpretations*. This weakening tendency, which, according to Vattimo, is roaming through the whole of Western history (of metaphysics), has reached its completion in the thinking of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Vattimo characterises this “history of the collapse of being as conceived as an object”¹³ in Nietzsche’s terminology, as “the history of nihilism”¹⁴.

Following on from that, Vattimo’s ‘weak thinking’ can be characterised as philosophical *hermeneutics*: i.e. as philosophy of *interpretation*. Everything is interpretation. In this context, we

⁸ F. Giacobbe, Das „schwache Denken“ Gianni Vattimos und die Wahrheitsfrage, in: Wahrheit. Recherchen zwischen Hochscholastik und Postmoderne, ed. by Th. Eggensperger / U. Engel (WSAMA.P vol. 9), Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag 1995, p. 116-129, here 116.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Ia.16.1, quoting the medieval Jewish philosopher Isaac Ben Solomon Israeli.

¹⁰ Cf. F. Nietzsche, Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, in: Kritische Studienausgabe, ed. by G. Colli / M. Montinari, vol. 3, Munich: DTV Neuausgabe 1999, p. 343-651, here 480-482.

¹¹ M. Weiß, Die Religion der Schwäche. Gianni Vattimos Interpretation des Christentums im Kontext des Schwachen Denkens, in: Essays zu Jacques Derrida und Gianni Vattimo, „Religion“, ed. by L. Nagl, Frankfurt/M. i.a.: Peter Lang 2001, p. 145-167, here 148.

¹² Cf. F. Nietzsche, Götzen-Dämmerung, in: Kritische Studienausgabe, *ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 55-163, here 80f.

¹³ M. Weiß, Die Religion der Schwäche, *ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁴ G. Vattimo, Jenseits der Interpretation. Die Bedeutung der Hermeneutik für die Philosophie (Edition Pandora Vol. 36 / Europäische Vorlesungen Vol. 8), Frankfurt/M. – New York: Campus Verlag 1997, p. 25.

must be careful, of course, not to (mis-)understand the thesis of the hermeneutics practitioners that there are no facts but only interpretations (cf. F. Nietzsche: “there are no facts, only interpretations”¹⁵) so as to make it into an objective, metaphysical statement again. For “the statement, that there are only interpretations, is itself ‘only’ an interpretation”¹⁶.

Often, the question is asked whether such a hermeneutical conception of truth does not merely lead to relativism. To refute this suspicion, it is necessary, according to Giacobbe, “to remember that the horizon within which the world reveals itself at any particular time to historical mankind is not a stable structure but is an *event*. (...) The *historical horizon* is (...) not a foundation or a stable structure (...) It [i.e. the truth, lecturer’s note] has the appearance rather more of a chain of references, i.e. as a historical tradition already”¹⁷. So the philosophy of the post-modern age (in both senses of the genitive case) legitimises itself only through its historical continuity. Vattimo wrote the following about this:

“What the practitioner of hermeneutics offers as a ‘proof’ of his own theory is a history, not only in the sense of *res gestae* but also in the sense of *historia rerum gestarum*, and perhaps also even in the sense of a ‘fable’ or a myth, because it presents itself as an interpretation (which only claims validity until a competing interpretation refutes it), and not as an objective description of facts”¹⁸.

(2) ‘Weak thinking’ and Christianity

The history of nihilism, understood as the history of the weakening of strong principles, begins, as Vattimo is convinced, with the advent of Christianity. And it owes a lot to the Christian religion. Vattimo writes:

“Modern philosophical hermeneutics arose in Europe not only because there is a book religion here, which attracted attention towards the phenomenon of interpretation, but also because the idea of the incarnation of God lies at the heart of this religion, an idea understood as *kenosis*, as humiliation, and, as we would translate it, as weakening.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Vgl. F. Nietzsche, Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885-1887, in: Kritische Studienausgabe, *ibid.*, Vol. 12, p. 315.

¹⁶ G. Vattimo, *Wirklichkeit, wo ist deine Wahrheit?*, *ibid.*

¹⁷ F. Giacobbe, *Das „schwache Denken“ Gianni Vattimos und die Wahrheitsfrage*, *ibid.*, p. 125 (my italics).

¹⁸ G. Vattimo, *Jenseits der Interpretation*, *ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

Vattimo recognises *kenosis* as the central characteristic of Christianity (with reference to the Letter to the Philippians 2,7²⁰). For him, the “incarnation, i.e. God’s condescension, [better still: humiliation; lecturer’s note] that which the New Testament calls God’s *kenosis*”²¹, marks out “the beginning of the process of secularisation. Vattimo reads the history of religion as a history of advancing desacralization, in other words secularisation. With the end of metaphysics, the end of the metaphysical idea of God, inseparable from it, has been rung in. Accordingly, Vattimo interprets the Christian dogma of the incarnation as the outstanding moment in the process of secularisation.

On the other hand, one consequence of this is that Vattimo interprets philosophical hermeneutics as a secularised form of Christian *kenosis*. In *Jenseits der Interpretation* (Beyond Interpretation) he writes:

“*Kenosis*, which takes place in the incarnation of God and ultimately in the secularisation and in the weakening of being and its strong structures (going as far as the dissolution of the ideal of objectively understood truth) [occurs] because of a ‘law’ of religion, at least in the sense that it is not the subject who decides to surrender himself to a process of stripping himself and endless annihilation, but he is called to this surrender by the ‘thing itself’. The idea which dominates hermeneutics, that of the interpreter belonging to the thing which is to be interpreted, or, more generally, to the game of interpretation, reflects this experience of transcendence, expresses it, repeats and interprets it”²²

According to Vattimo’s thesis, the process of kenotic secularisation flows into Christian *caritas*. In his book *Creder e di credere* he writes shortly and sweetly:

“The nature of revelation [is] reduced to Christian love”²³.

Vattimo finds his thesis confirmed by the connection between *kenosis* and secularisation in “the actual ways in which the return of the religious occurs in the present day”²⁴. One of the most striking forms of this return is “the return of (the plausibility of) religion in philosophy today”²⁵. Vattimo explains this phenomenon as follows:

²⁰ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Glauben – Philosophieren*, Stuttgart 1997, p. 34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²² G. Vattimo, *Jenseits der Interpretation*, *ibid.*, p. 82f.

²³ G. Vattimo, *Glauben – Philosophieren*, *ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁴ G. Vattimo, *The Trace of the Trace*, *ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

„It is (only) because metaphysical meta-narratives have been dissolved that philosophy has rediscovered the plausibility of religion and can consequently approach the religious need of common consciousness independently of the framework of Enlightenment critique.”²⁶

The experience of the return of the religious refers us anew to the moment of historicity (already mentioned above), or, theologically speaking, to tradition. This is given to us – philosophically speaking – in “myth”. Vattimo refers to his teacher, Luigi Pareyson (already mentioned above) in his description of what he understands by “myth”. In *The Trace of the Trace* I read:

“Pareyson’s reflection on religious experience and its connection with myth (...) is of the highest importance here (...). The term *myth*, moreover, stands here as an emblem of all that is positive in both senses of the one word. It is the place in which is given a historicity that is at once radical and (precisely for this reason) irreducible to the immanence of worldly historicity.”²⁷

There is another aspect which is immanent in religion which is closely connected to myth as described above, namely “the irruption of the ‘Other’”²⁸. In this connection, however, it is certainly not the case that this “discontinuity in the horizontal course of history”²⁹ negates the historicity of becoming.

The historicity that we find in myth is – speaking theologically now – at the same time “already” as well as “not yet”, incarnated as well as transcendent, in time as well as beyond time. This doubly positive contents of historically constituted religion is also intrinsic to the Jewish-Christian belief in God. It “appears for us as a given through tradition, in whose history of influence we are always involved already”³⁰. This tradition does not, however, stand unchanged once and for all, but has been subject from time immemorial as regards its contents to a mediating exegesis, in other words, to interpretation. In this connection, I quote once again from Vattimo’s essay *The Trace of the Trace*:

We “experience the return of the religious in a world in which one cannot ignore the history of influence of every text, and of the biblical text above all. One cannot ignore the fact that the sacred texts which mark our religious experience are handed down to us by

²⁶ Ibid., p. 84.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ M. Weiß, *Die Religion der Schwäche*, *ibid.*, p. 164.

a tradition, by which I mean also that its mediation does not allow them to survive as unmodifiable objects (...). Beginning with St Augustine and his reflection on the Trinity, Christian theology is in its deepest foundations a hermeneutic theology: the interpretative structure, transmission, mediation and, perhaps, the fallenness do not concern only the enunciation, the communication of God with man; they characterize the intimate life of God itself, which therefore cannot be conceived in terms of an immutable metaphysical plenitude”³¹.

The interpretation has to orientate itself towards the “signs of the times”. By using this phrase, “signs of the times”, Vattimo falls back on the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* of the Second Vatican Council. In that, the Church has the duty of „scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (No. 4). The signs of the times form the criterion for interpretation:

„all that time, the existential temporality characteristic of man, points towards is the eternity of God (...) Only in the light of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation of the son of God does it seem possible for philosophy to think itself as a reading of the signs of the times without this being reduced to a purely passive record of the times.”³²

(3) Theological appreciation

With the last quotation, I have returned again to the starting-point of my lecture. I would not, however, like to finish without, with the required brevity (and, therefore, incompletely), adding a few words about the *theological* appreciation of Vattimo’s philosophical reflections. I have formulated seven theses about this:

1. Vattimo calls himself a “half-believer”³³. He proves to be a religious searcher – even where he follows Nietzsche by talking about “the death of God”. In this connection, I am reminded of Martin Heidegger, who ended his essay about “Nietzsche’s phrase ‘God is dead’”³⁴ with the hint that the ‘fearless man’ who announces the death of God, is searching for him – God – at the same time.

³¹ G. Vattimo, *The Trace of the Trace*, *ibid.*, p. 88.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 91f..

³³ G. Vattimo, *Glauben – Philosophieren*, *ibid.*, p. 85.

³⁴ Cf. M. Heidegger, *Nietzsches Wort „Gott ist tot“*, in: Holzwege, Frankfurt/M. 1994, p. 209-267, here 267. – I am indebted to M. Hofer, *Jenseits von Gnosis und Nihilismus*, for the reference to Heidegger. Zu Vattimos *Wiederentdeckung des christlichen Gottes*, in: *Essays zu Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo*, „Religion“, *ibid.*, p. 169-188, here 188.

2. Vattimo tries to “think the contents of [Christian; lecturer’s note] revelation anew in secular language”³⁵. In this connection, he succeeds in making basic data of the Christian tradition accessible to the post-modern discourse.
3. Vattimo respects (Christian) tradition, which can never be surmounted as the moment of our historical composition. At the same time, he protects this tradition from every sort of ossification, in understanding it as a tradition which is always open to new interpretations. In doing this, he holds a mirror of criticism in front of some Church authorities, who have become ossified on certain questions.
4. In way of thinking similar to Hans Blumenberg, Vattimo succeeds in considering the process of secularisation in both of its main aspects: as “quantitative decline”³⁶ and as the epitome of “qualitative reshaping”³⁷ – as a quantitative reduction where he indicates the declining influence of Church authority, and as qualitative transformation where he develops the idea of “‘secularisation’ as a constitutive characteristic of an authentic religious experience”³⁸.
5. Vattimo redefines the relationship between religion and philosophy. “The positive function which religion has for contemporary philosophy does not at all consist in throwing the lifebelt of eternal truth to the unfoundedness of post-modern thought, which the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* still tries to do”.³⁹ Rather, the forward-looking contribution of religion (understood as that sphere which expressly takes the radical dependence of being on events [Ereignishaftigkeit des Seins; U.E.] ‘as its theme’) consists in helping philosophy to take its own hermeneutical constitution and, along with that, its historicity seriously.⁴⁰
6. Even in some places it seems as if Vattimo is throwing out the baby – God – with the bathwater – the strong principle of metaphysics - , nevertheless, if we look closer, we see that he does distinguish between *being* on the one hand and *God* on the other hand, insofar as he thinks of *kenosis*, then, “not as an indefinite negation of God”⁴¹. The dividing line

³⁵ G. Vattimo, *Glauben – Philosophieren*, *ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁶ H. Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*. Erneuerte Ausgabe, Frankfurt/M. 62001, p. 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ G. Vattimo, *Glauben – Philosophieren*, *ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁹ M. Weiß, *Die Religion der Schwäche*, *ibid.*, p. 166. – Cf. Encyklica „Fides et ratio“ from Pope John Paul II. to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the relationship between faith and reason, Rome 1998.

⁴⁰ Cf. M. Weiß, *Die Religion der Schwäche*, *ibid.*, p. 166.

⁴¹ G. Vattimo, *Glauben – Philosophieren*, *ibid.*, p. 67.

is the “caritas”⁴² which is grounded in the Christian double commandment, it is the “kernel”⁴³ which it is not possible to get behind.

7. Vattimo’s ‘weak thinking’ is compatible with the traditions of Christianity. A (half-) believing worldview, which trusts in the incarnation of God in this world and in this age, does not need any metaphysics of the Heidegger variety. A weak ontology, which empowers us as human beings to experience ourselves as existing and, therefore, also as mortal, is fully sufficient.⁴⁴ I am convinced about that.

Translated by Bonifatius Hicks OP, Oxford / Mainz

* * *

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⁴² Ibid., p. 87.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Cf. F. Giacobbe, Das „schwache Denken“ Gianni Vattimos und die Wahrheitsfrage, *ibid.*, 129.