

Kenotic ethics

Gianni Vattimo, reading 'the Signs of Time'

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In 1996 the Turin philosopher Gianni Vattimo surprised his audience with a small essay 'Creder di Creder'. The book is written in an autobiographical style. Avoiding technical philosophical grammar, he gives an account of his recent re-rapprochement with the religion of his youth, Roman Catholicism. In plain and simple first person language, he risks the confession: 'I believe that I believe'. (GG 67) Despite the distance that remains between, on the one hand, the Church, its doctrinal authority and its papal encyclicals, and Vattimo's hesitant reorientation towards the Christian tradition on the other, he seems to have found a way back to faith.

What makes a postmodernist philosopher, soaked in the nihilism of Nietzsche and Heidegger, return to the religious sources of his youth in such an unguarded way? Did Vattimo lose his critical rationality? Are we witnessing in this regression to the certainties of early childhood a forgivable weakness, caused by some personal crisis (Vattimo mentions the death of a good friend), which we should not give too much philosophical and theological weight? Or must we look for another explanation, one that would perhaps announce the end of Gianni Vattimo as a philosopher, but takes the event far more seriously: did Vattimo meet his Damascus? Is he on his way to be (re) converted to Christianity? He presents his essay 'as an apology for the figure of the half-believer.' (GG 67) Perhaps he will reveal himself in a sequel to this book as a full believer?

I suggest that none of the explanations above will do. A careful reading of 'I believe that I believe' shows that Vattimo's profound concern with the Christian tradition has already been explained in terms of the philosophical concept of 'weak thinking', which he has developed in his previous work. Important themes that make up this concept, 'the end of metaphysics', 'the death of God', the 'nihilistic vocation of philosophy', 'hermeneutics' and 'violence' etc. are used as a framework in which Vattimo situates his renewed concern with Christianity. The thinking of Nietzsche and Heidegger has played a decisive role in

providing the basic grammar for his earlier philosophy; in this religious essay their presence is no less dominant.

On the other hand one must admit: there really is something new in Vattimo's later work, culminating in *Credere di credere*. I will deal with later. With the emphasis Vattimo puts on the theological concept of *kenosis* (and the intrinsic secularisation grafted onto it) his thinking undergoes a remarkable shift. His initial philosophical reading of the history of Western metaphysics is now explicitly recognised as a 'transcription' of the original Christian doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God. (GG 25,29) Vattimo uses the concept of *kenosis* as the hermeneutical key to the interpretation of the Christian legacy, inextricably interwoven with the history of Western philosophy. This history can even be partially described as the history of onto-theology. But slowly and surely the story of the incarnation has weakened and eroded the hard structures of ontology of which God the Father still was the all-integrating centre. Vattimo suggests a causal relationship between the Christian narrative of *kenosis* and philosophical nihilism. In the end the history of metaphysics can only be explained in religious terms. (MVS, 103) The consequence of the gospel is nihilism .

This perspective on history opens up the possibility of a genuine *theological* perspective on contemporary philosophy and its precedents in Vattimo's work. A way of 'reading the signs of the time' *in terms of* the Christian faith. In his critical use of distinctive religious language we meet Vattimo, by definition, as a theologian. Apparently, Vattimo himself acknowledges that he is the first to be surprised. 'I believe that I believe' was born out of 'a great event', 'a kind of decisive discovery', he declares. (GG 29) A skilled theologian will presumably notice that the enthusiasm of Vattimo's 'Entdeckungsfreude' has to compensate for a lack of theological craftsmanship. The rather bold and unguarded way in which Vattimo interprets biblical tradition and the theological language of *caritas*, God and the incarnation, might reveal first rather than second naiveté. But let his simplicity be forgiven: what counts is that the Christian tradition seems to be taken seriously as a main source in hermeneutical philosophy.

One can defend - as I shall do - that 'Credere di credere' is not an alien element in Vattimo's work, but organically fits into it. Nevertheless, Vattimo's own words still seem to suggest a kind of 'paradigm shift' in the Kuhnian sense. Does his simultaneous religious and philosophical reading of Western history not force a reassessment of some of the basic assumptions underlying his work? Or is 'Christianity' just another

puzzle solved in the daily business of Vattimo's 'normal science': assisting the end of metaphysics? A careful reading of his work shows that the 'theological turn' it finally takes was already in the making for a long time. That is the first thing I want to do in this article, in which I offer a reconstruction of the conceptual structure of Vattimo's thought: to show how the foundation for his 'kenotic' theology was already laid in his previous work.^[i] Hence my task will be primarily *reconstructive*. But I'm doing this as a theologian working in the field of ethics. The question that motivates me is, whether Vattimo's plea for a kenotic ethics - in which his entire 'theology' eventually seems to concentrate itself - opens up a fruitful perspective for theological ethics. An ethics, to be sure, which accepts the conditions of (post) modernity as a point of departure, but which looks for distinctive contributions of the Christian tradition to secularised morality. Vattimo considers Nietzsche's experience of 'the death of God' to be fundamental and inescapable within our cultural horizon, and at the same time upholds the conviction that nihilism 'ends somehow in the arms of theology'. (BI X) Should theology be glad with this newcomer, or would it do better to maintain some critical distance, before embracing him too tightly? I opt for the second alternative, and shall conclude with some critical theological remarks.

The return of religion?

Vattimo's recent concern with religion could perhaps be interpreted as a fashionable flirt. Cultural trend watchers are observing a 'return of religion' among Western intellectuals. A renewed openness to the sacred, born out of disappointment with the harshness of Enlightenment rationalism. Vattimo himself acknowledges the new cultural mood in which a diffuse religiosity, together with various kinds of fundamentalism, gets its chance to develop. But this is not the 'return of religion' he would like to support. Fundamentalism must be interpreted as a reactionary flight backwards. God is pictured as the unmoveable, a-historic foundation of being, a certainty to counter all the insecurities of our risk society. In the eyes of Vattimo, this kind of 'foundational' belief in God means a return to the slavery of metaphysics. The vagueness of New Age spirituality, on the other hand, reflects the *ennui* of a saturated culture of consumption (TT 87 - 92).

However, there are also signs of a more critical openness toward religion. Post-modern philosophy rightly avows the dissolution of the great systems of thought, theism included. This acknowledgement

leaves room for forms of religious thinking other than foundationalism. Especially Heidegger - the philosopher who, according to Vattimo, has 'grasped in thoughts' ('in Gedanken erfasst') his own époque as Hegel once did his (TT 92) - offers fruitful opportunities to rethink our modern situation. This situation can be characterised both by the hegemony of science and technology, as well as by the decline of foundational metaphysics. Against this background, post-modern critical religiosity should be considered a positive factuality, an event (*Er-eignis*) of being. It should be interpreted creatively in terms of Heidegger's thinking of modernity as the end (in the twofold sense of culmination *and* closure) of metaphysics, and not as a polemical rejection of modernity.

In appealing to Heidegger for an understanding of the phenomenon of post-modern religiosity, Vattimo deliberately ignores two other possible schemes of interpretation. First, a de-historicised interpretation of religion that regards religion as an anthropological constant, as an eternal and universal human quality. From that perspective, modern secularisation is but a temporary blemish on an eternal human characteristic. Religious doctrines and institutions may come and go, religiosity - in whatever form - will remain forever. Not only Schleiermacher with his view of religion as ultimate dependency, but also Vattimo's philosophical friends E. Levinas and J. Derrida misunderstand religion in this way. Vattimo discusses Levinas in particular, for whom the religio-ethical category of the Other is synonymous with transcendence. Later we will return to Vattimo's critical view of Levinas, because it also illustrates the positive way in which Vattimo wants his theology to be historical-eschatological (and not protological like that of Levinas'). Here it suffices to say that in Vattimo's view, Levinas' perception of transcendence runs the risk of being metaphysically hypostatised, by representing the experience of the Other as the irruption of an eternal *Gegenüber*.

The second interpretation of religion Vattimo rejects is the opposite of the one mentioned above. For one could also make a plea for a radical historicisation of religiosity, in a Hegelian sense: the divine does not *have* a history, but *is* the positivity of history itself. Though it is true, as we shall see, that Vattimo defends a secularisation theory analogous to the one Hegel developed (modernity as *Verwindung*; a concept taken from Heidegger), he does not understand Hegel's concept of *Aufhebung* in a strongly reductionist sense: the absolute Spirit, who is the basic concern of religion, being *identical* with the same historical force that finally closes out the history of religion, by replacing it through art, science and philosophy. Instead, Vattimo defends a non-

reductionist view of religion that is much more reminiscent of the late Schelling than of Hegel. We have definitely not left behind mythical language. On the contrary: myth, as the locus par excellence of religion, continues to be always before us. For in myth the radical historicity of existence reveals itself, together with the contrasting experience of what transcends it. The experience of guilt, sin, the longing for forgiveness and wholeness, the mystery of suffering and death: in religion we encounter the genuine expression of the experience of the contingency of life. This experience will continue to accompany us as long as we are human beings.

An anthropological constant, then? Indeed, only if we look at religion formally and functionally. However, Vattimo stresses the historicity of all experience, also of religious experience. In terms of its structure and content our experience of religion and what we know about it in Western culture, is mediated by the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Bible. An apparently strictly philosophical analysis of the contingency of human existence as that of Heidegger, e.g., in *Sein und Zeit*, might sound like a phenomenological depiction of human life in general. But it was written as the mature fruit of a conscience that recognises that it belongs (*Zugehörigkeit*) to a specific Christian religious tradition. (TT 100)

Vattimo's concept of religion is non-reductionist: religiosity is a way of experiencing reality that cannot be described in terms of other language games such as art or science. And it is definitely historical: religion in general does not exist. In defining religion that way, Vattimo already makes a clear theological choice. He does not want to speak of the 'world', 'human existence', 'God' as abstract universals and construct a 'natural theology.' Theology cannot make metaphysical claims about the essential structure of reality. This is the recognition of a fundamental theological insight: in the Trinitarian Christian tradition God is confessed as incarnated, his 'essence' - as one radical line in the Christian tradition has defended - has become history. The dynamic of history is written in the heart of Christianity, within the doctrine of God itself. The God believed in as Father, Son and Holy Ghost cannot be seen as an eternal, immobile Ground, underlying reality. This metaphysical God is dead. In Nietzsche's calling for the end of metaphysics, the history of Trinitarian theology comes to its final destination: nihilism, as the celebration of the death of the metaphysical God.

Heidegger and Nietzsche - metaphysics, nihilism and technology

Vattimo's philosophical and theological readings of the history of Western thought seem to corroborate each other in the end. That is certainly the case in his more recent work. However, the philosophical canon of Heidegger and Nietzsche continues to provide the frame of reference for his entire work, despite his recent explicit theological language. Vattimo wrote a detailed introduction on each one of them in the 80's^[ii], and continues to return to them, using the two as the matrix for his own thinking.

I want to make a short remark on the essential role that each of them plays in Vattimo, to start with Nietzsche. Understanding the post-modern condition means, in line with Nietzsche: the acceptance of the end of metaphysics and the positive affirmation of nihilism as our destination and our historical opportunity. The history of metaphysics in the west can be defined as a way of thinking in terms of hidden, stable structures, in which reality is grounded, experience is ordered and given sense and meaning, and which sets standards for behaviour. This history finds its culmination in Nietzsche's acknowledgement that the conception of truth on which the metaphysical picture of reality relies, has to be considered an illusion. Truth as the correspondence between reality and human thinking is a deliberate construction, born out of the human will to power. It is *our* active grasp of reality, not nature mirroring itself reflectively in our passive mind that lies at the bottom of our idea of truth. 'Truth' is a cultural construct, not an objective description of the way things really are.

The narrative of the 'death of God' tells the same epistemological story, but uses, not accidentally in Vattimo's interpretation, a theological grammar. For, as Vattimo shall emphasise in his later work, the history of metaphysics can only be told and understood as the history of a theistic God, who's final destiny it is to make belief in him redundant. 'God is dead - *and we killed him*', Nietzsche wrote in his parable of the mad man who proclaims the death of God.^[iii] In his interpretation, Vattimo considers this last addition ('we killed him') essential. We raised the metaphysical God to life by believing in him. That is correct, but such a Feuerbachian way of analysing religion is only half the story of theism. The *history* of Western belief in this God, inextricably intertwined with the history of being itself, is not taken into account in this approach to religion. Feuerbach just presumed that we simply have to stop believing in God, in order to get in touch with the real truth, things as they really are. But we did not just 'stop' believing in God. The narrative of the death of God is much more complex. It tells

us that thanks to (our belief in) God we were able to live. The belief in God secured the stability and trustworthiness of reality. Within this structured reality we finally managed to live so well that, just by living our relatively secure lives, we eventually realised that we could do without the theistic God. So we 'killed' God by neglecting and abandoning him.

Retold in non-narrative terms, the story of the 'death of God' describes Western thinking since Plato as an attempt to survive and to bring order into a chaotic and threatening reality by means of stable thought structures, underlying our disparate experiences. The history of metaphysics is, using a neologism borrowed from Heidegger, the history of 'onto-theo-logy'. To the concept of being as 'first and general' the Christian tradition added the concept of God as 'highest and ultimate'. God became the grounding ground of being, *causa prima, ultima ratio*.^[iv] To Nietzsche this foundational thinking represents 'a kind of excessive reaction to a state of insecurity that is no longer ours'. (BI 31)

Why don't we respond this way any longer? Why have we lost the need for foundational thinking? Because, Vattimo points out time after time, we have structured and secured our world with science and technology. Science and technology represent a powerful ordering of reality that was born out of the same situation of contingency and insecurity that lay at the root of our belief in a providential God. But in the meantime they have turned out to be so successful, that they have made belief in this God superfluous. 'God is a too extreme hypothesis, which under the actual conditions we are living in is no longer necessary.' (EI 156) He lost his relevance in our world, precisely because of the modifications to social life, which in the beginning made the hypothesis God compelling. This death of God is an experience, broadly shared by Western culture, rather than a theoretical thesis to be defended. (MVS 86) It challenges the way we understand ourselves. The nihilism that results after we have buried the God of theism is our destiny. But it should not be undergone passively. On the contrary, the death of God should be affirmed and taken up as a positive opportunity to shape our lives freely.

The 'death of God' plunges our subjectivity into a severe crisis, by taking its ontological roots away. But at the same time it opens up the possibility of a different kind of subjectivity. The dualist metaphysical construction of a subject anchored in an objective reality was motivated by the desire to secure the human position in an uncertain world, a powerful grip on reality. In the midst of disorder the knowledge of a

structured reality at a safe, non-threatening distance makes us feel at ease. This process of objectifying the world has a specific 'subjectivation' of the subject as its counterpart. It is, as Nietzsche reveals, subjectivity marked by force, an outcome of the organising will to power. Once unmasked as ultimately driven by force, our subjectivity stands naked and defenceless. Once enlightened by Nietzsche's genealogy of metaphysics, we will have to make a choice: we either continue the grim poker game of power, or choose less violent ways of being a self. Vattimo decides for the latter. Nietzsche's 'Übermensch' should, according to Vattimo, be seen as a way of being that explores the possibilities of living one's life as creative play without exerting force, an aesthetic mode of being in which the boundaries between subject and object are no longer all that clearly defined. Once again – an *uncertain* freedom, but a promising one, beyond the prison of metaphysics.

Nietzsche wrote his visionary account more than a century ago. But in the currently prevailing situation of high technology Vattimo considers Nietzsche's prophecy to be well on its way to fulfilment. According to Vattimo, technology – only a marginal issue with Nietzsche – plays a very important role in the non-metaphysical restructuring of subjectivity in which we are now involved. Philosophy should not underestimate the impact of today's high tech revolution on the way we experience reality. Martin Heidegger – Vattimo's second canonical thinker – is in fact the only one, who, especially in his later work, recognised the *ontological* impact of modern technology. Heidegger valued modern technology negatively for the most part and did not foresee the revolutionary way in which current information and communication technology would accelerate changes in our way of being in the world. Yet he had a clear idea of how the way we technically organise the world is intrinsically related to our understanding of being.

Vattimo reads Heidegger primarily as an interpreter of Nietzsche. The Heidegger after the *Kehre* is radically thinking through the consequences of the end of metaphysics, as perceived by Nietzsche. But already in *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger, in analogy to Nietzsche, dismantles modern subjectivity by analysing the historicity and finiteness of human *Dasein*. There are no eternal, unchanging structures of being in which we participate and which guarantee our immortality. Subjectivity is no 'substance', and being is no thing among other things. There is no other being than the 'being there' (*Dasein*) which projects itself into the world. Being itself has no foundation. (EI 105, 108) The alternative for a metaphysical foundation of subjectivity that Heidegger

aims at in *Sein und Zeit*, points in the direction of a hermeneutical anthropology: a phenomenological description of authentic existence as a way of being that does not deny, but radically affirms its contingency and historicity.

Later on Heidegger focuses on the ontological question with which he started. Though *Da-sein* (anthropology) is the only access to being, being (ontology) still is the final mystery to which we have to open up ourselves. The destruction of metaphysics returns us to the question of being. Being cannot be objectified. It is not present as foundation. It is not a stable structure, a permanent essence of reality, a *fundamentum absolutum et inconcussum*. (TS 42) Being is not, but it happens. (TS 73) Therefore, a non-metaphysical anthropology does not ask for the 'appropriation', but for the 'de-propriation' of our subjectivity: the opening of existence to the event, the *Er-eignis* of being.

This change of perspective in Heidegger was reinforced by his intensive reading of Nietzsche. But it is not only Nietzsche who is responsible for Heidegger's turn. According to Vattimo there is an even more decisive experience in Heidegger's thinking: his reflective endurance of modern technology. Heidegger's rather negative and controversial account of technology in *Introduction to Metaphysics* should not be read too literally, but should be judged within the framework of the whole of his thinking. At this point, Vattimo admits that in his own interpretation of the relationship between technology and metaphysics he pursues 'a path opened, but not actually travelled by Heidegger'. (BI 24) For the Heidegger of the 1950s, technology is part of a diabolic system of global political and economical exploitation. The 'unchaining' of technology finds its culmination in the nuclear bomb. This high-tech weapon proves, according to Heidegger, the spiritual decadence of modernity and shows how far humanity has progressed in its devastating will to power, its reduction of being to 'beings', its forgetting of being itself. Thus speaks the Heidegger we are acquainted with. In the ensuing philosophical discussion he has been severely taken to task posthumously : why talk about aeroplanes, flood control dams, nuclear bombs, as he does in his essay '*Die Frage nach der Technik*' (1954), without even mentioning concentration camps? Without defending him, Vattimo proposes a more creative reading of Heidegger, 'urbanising'^[v] the visionary of the Black Forest into a philosopher of the future metropolis. He takes Heidegger's basic insights for granted, as a fruitful point of departure: indeed, in modern technology the history of metaphysics finds its fulfilment. The will to dominate reality has stood at the basis of metaphysics and has realised itself quite successfully by organising nature and society by means of

technology. Metaphysics finally reigns *as* technology: it structures and manipulates reality and makes it, to a considerable extent, manageable, if not predictable. Technology (Heidegger coins the term *Ge-stell*) makes our lives relatively secure by decreasing the risks we are subject to. In doing that, science en technology finally fulfil the metaphysical program. Once the original question of Being has been silenced, reality merely consists of 'beings', things to handle.

What shall we do then? Must we wait devoutly until the retreated Being somehow shows itself again some day,? Shall we be expecting the return of the gods, while in the meantime enduring the apocalypse of modern technology? Heidegger himself offers sufficient occasion for such a conservative, 'religious' reading of his work. Vattimo, on the other hand, prefers to read him against the grain. In order to defend a more positive ontological evaluation of technology, he takes as his starting point a few lines in Heidegger's late work that are easily overlooked. There Heidegger seems to adopt a more optimistic, even expectant attitude towards technology. 'The claim (Anspruch) to Being, which speaks in the essence of technology, is overheard', Heidegger notes in *Identität und Differenz*. There Heidegger actually talks about *Ge-stell* as 'a prelude of that which is called event [*Er-eignis*]', 'a first flicker of the event.'^[vi]

In order to understand this apparent ambivalence in Heidegger's estimation of technology we must look more closely at the complex and paradoxical entanglement, which he, according to Vattimo's interpretation in any case, observes between the history of metaphysics, science, and technology. On the one hand, modernity represents the culmination of foundational thinking. But the modern natural sciences ultimately have a grip on reality, not philosophy as such. Classical natural science claimed to unravel the structure of being once and for all, discovering and describing the way things really are by means of experimental methods. In order to continually to improve its grasp of the structure of reality, science developed a plurality of methods and differentiated into a broad spectre of disciplines, each of them claiming truth. However, this methodological pluralism, Vattimo points out, eventually undermined the very ontological pretension, with which classical science started at the outset: for Neokantians discovered that what we call reality is determined by the methodological suppositions with which we approach it. Biologists, psychologists, sociologists, cosmologists - they are all talking about 'things as they really are', all of them claiming truth. At the beginning of the 20th century, Neokantians

still held to the idea that an integration of the different methodological perspectives might be possible within an overarching philosophy of culture (Cassirer).^[viii] Today, this expectation appears to be an illusion. Contemporary science presents itself as a chaos of conflicting truth claims.

Nietzsche already drew the nihilistic consequences from this development: truth does not exist, he concluded, there are only interpretations. The history of metaphysics finally resulted in the success of science and technology. This success in turn dissolved the initial claims of metaphysics. Therefore we can speak of the 'end of metaphysics' in a double sense: metaphysics finally reaches its *telos*, but at the same time it is dissolved into an endless spectre of interpretations. We live in an era of re-presentations, or, as Heidegger called it, 'world pictures' (*Weltbilder*).

Taking the passage mentioned above in *Identität und Differenz* as a starting-point, Vattimo comes to a different, more optimistic evaluation of the historical process. The plurality of perspectives on the world, each one with as much claim to being correct as the other, without objective criteria to arrange them or decide between them, can also be regarded positively and welcomed as a liberation from the yoke of metaphysics. In his lifetime, Heidegger knew and experienced technology only as 'tools' (in *Sein und Zeit*), or, in the 1950s, as 'machines'. In the meantime we have become acquainted with a new generation of high technology which invites us to use other metaphors. The information and communication technology (ICT) revolution requires a new paradigm, and represents a qualitative shift in the history of technology. We have definitely taken leave of the epoch of the machine.

While remaining compatible with Heidegger, we might draw additional *ontological* conclusions from the technological process, which he himself could not have foreseen. A technology based on the machine-image presupposes a clear distinction and a neat distance between the managing subject and the reified object. In today's technology-based networks the human subject loses its centrality, and the world its objectivity. Subject and object get entangled, and 'reality' is only a snapshot in the dynamic, never ending process of 'oscillation' between those two. Subject and object lose their fixed spot, their definiteness in the systems of communication of which they partake. There is no objective reality existing somewhere outside this

dynamic, there are only 'world pictures'. Reality is dissolving, or, as Vattimo prefers to say, 'weakening.' We can say it with Nietzsche as well: we are losing being. There is an essentially nihilistic meaning in science, which robs us of a firm principle of reality. But we should not complain about this. On the contrary; we live in a world in which reality is experienced in a less heavy, less dogmatic, softer, more fluid way. Risks and uncertainties increase, but so do opportunities for dialogue and experiment. (EI 113) Heidegger leads Vattimo to the same hopeful conclusion as Nietzsche did: the reign of metaphysics (technology as an organising and structuring hold on reality) also offers the opportunity to experiment with new kinds of subjectivity that do not need to be defined in terms of force, power, and violence any more. Nihilism is not only our destiny, but our opportunity as well. (BI 28v.)

The concept of 'Verwindung'

Nietzsche and Heidegger both form the philosophical matrix within which Vattimo wants to deal with questions concerning the relationship between metaphysics, science and technology. Vattimo does not limit himself to a descriptive reconstruction of their legacy, but offers a creative interpretation, in which he sometimes seems to rub against them the wrong way. I mentioned his positive evaluation of technology in which he differs from Heidegger. In his depiction of our actual relationship to the history of metaphysics Vattimo also uses a concept borrowed from Heidegger, but he elaborates it in a rather original manner. The way he employs theological concepts as secularisation and *kenosis* cannot be understood without mentioning the concept of *Verwindung*. The late Heidegger only uses the word a few times, apparently in passing, to describe our relationship with metaphysics after it has been unmasked as having being violently in its grip.^[viii] How do we relate to the long period of thinking, which took place in terms of objectivation and presence, which we are leaving behind us now? We cannot just take it off as if it were an old coat, making a fresh start in thinking, as if nothing had happened. Hegel offers a more dialectical understanding of history in his concept of *Aufhebung*: reason has overcome (*Überwindung*) its former mythical and religious shapes, at the same time continuing their substance on a higher level. Hegel's concept of reason culminates in the pretension of a final, total transparency and re-appropriation of history. The *Überwindung* of reason implies a victory over the world of illusions that it has definitely left behind.

Convalescence

In coining the word *Verwindung*, Heidegger proposes a different view, in which he stresses that we inevitably belong to the metaphysical history we are trying to escape. That relationship cannot be described in terms of emancipation, as was the case with the Enlightenment. One basic connotation of *Verwindung* is entanglement. We are, in a certain sense, caught up in the history of metaphysics. But *Verwindung* has other senses as well. In the first place *Verwindung* means convalescence. The illness - health metaphor, so central in Nietzsche, can help us explain how metaphysics is still part of our philosophical identity. Nihilism makes us feel and act like a recovering patient, victim of a severe illness, but on his way back to health. Even after the patient has regained his health, he cannot act as if nothing had happened to him. From now on the illness will be on his record. The cured patient will always be an ex-patient.

Our relationship to the history of metaphysics can be described in a similar way: our subjectivity once was affected by the same will to power with which it tried to objectify being. We too were caught up in a web of violent structures in which we tried to organise our world. But we are on our way to convalescence. The sickness has been unmasked and can be conquered. There is no reason for triumphalism. It will take time to be restored. Perhaps there will be relapses into the old habits of the illness. And we will never be the same again. The sickness has made us different and we will carry it with us into the future. It has become part of our selves. The illness metaphor indicates that our attitude toward metaphysics never can be one of simple rejection or negation. We are the ones who once were metaphysicians, and we probably cannot express ourselves without falling back now and then into that ontological language we once unmasked as no longer adequate. We still talk about 'reality' and 'truth' for example, although we are aware that these notions are contaminated with foundationalism metaphysics.

Distortion

A second meaning of *Verwindung* that Vattimo discerns is that of distortion. We are entangled in metaphysics just like we can get caught up in a rope that we are trying to roll up. The 'torsion' we are involved in at the same time implies 'distortion': we are disturbing order and

structure precisely in the activity of ordering and structuring, and get entangled in the very process. Our relationship with metaphysics is similar. We are prisoners of our will to classify reality in neatly arranged, well-ordered structures. We think of reality in terms of object and presence. But once we have become aware of that, we might try to disengage ourselves from the oppressive straitjacket in which we have put being, our own 'being there' included. Though aware of the inadequacy of this illusive way of thinking, we cannot get rid of it. What does that mean in practice? Vattimo does not offer an example, but let me point out again how he deals with the notion of truth. Hermeneutic philosophers, following Gadamer, not only distinguish between the metaphysical concept of truth as correspondence, popular in the modern natural sciences, and truth as opening for the event of being (*aletheia*), as developed by Heidegger. They also want the latter to take the place of the former, the correspondence theory. The paradigm of natural sciences is simply not the right one by which to understand reality, they say; the human sciences paradigm does better. Vattimo does not share this dualistic perspective with regard to reality, which reveals a lingering adherence to the Enlightenment ideology of progress and emancipation. Its point of departure still seems to be metaphysical: as if 'reality' were an objective structure somewhere out there, which one can approach to a greater or lesser degree. The concept of truth Vattimo proposes is more complex. Though he agrees that Heidegger's notion of truth as opening is fundamental, he speaks of a '*transformation* of the notion of truth: a notion that does not explicitly deny the ideal of correspondence, but situates it on a second and lower level with respect to truth as opening.' (BI 94) The metaphysical notion of truth is maintained on a certain level, but at the same time it is subject to severe degradation. Truth as correspondence, championed by modernity under the hegemony of natural sciences, still plays its role, but has lost its monistic claim on universality. The metaphysical legacy still continues to function: in our dependence on technology we cannot do without it. But at the same time it is transformed in such a way that its original pretensions are ironically distorted.

Resigned acceptance

We cannot undo the history of metaphysics, but have to accept our roots in it. Here a third connotation of *Verwindung* comes into play. *Verwindung* also means 'resigned acceptance'. We have to say yes to the destiny of being that has expressed itself through metaphysics for such a long time. Metaphysics, with all the mistakes it has made, with

all the violence it has entailed, cannot just be regarded as one big illusion. Metaphysics, as an era of *Seinsvergessenheit*, a long history of concealment of being, has to be affirmed as an event in the destiny of being itself. This affirmation occurs in the act of re-membrance, of the re-collection (*Er-inning*) of that history by which we painstakingly acknowledge our roots in it.

These roots make contemporary philosophy necessarily and genuinely hermeneutic: our thinking relies entirely on the interpretation of the signs and symbols of our culture, onto which the history of being has been grafted. The being that has been ('ist ge-wesen') is handed over to us as tradition (*Über-lieferung*). It can no longer be thought of in terms of foundation, *Grund*, but transforms itself, is re-configured in the monuments and texts of our culture. In line with Gadamer Vattimo underscores the ontological significance of tradition. Being bears an essentially linguistic character. Language is the only medium of being accessible to human understanding. 'Being that can be understood is language', Gadamer writes in his *Truth and Method*.^[ix] In Gadamer's hermeneutical project Heidegger's fundamental intuition of the historicity, finiteness and mortality of our 'being there' is taken up and explored. History is as finite and mortal as we are.^[x] Being hides and reveals itself in the living dialogue that connects us with other mortals, as soon as one is involved in the same dialogue. So we have to be careful with tradition. It connects us with being, not in the sense that it reveals to us the eternal foundations of our existence, but in the sense that it embodies a legacy of forms of life that were once chosen and lived out. In the respectful dialogue we maintain with them, they offer themselves to us as possibilities that are still open. In this respect, our conversation with tradition has something of a devoted re-membrance, a pious 'thinking of' (*An-denken*). Our own finiteness is confronted with the finiteness of other humans, who have already explored the possibilities of their existence. The linguistic figures (symbols, texts, monuments, meanings, configurations of value) within tradition, which continue to appeal to us, should be regarded as 'classics'. They represent 'forms capable of being recognised by those who recognise themselves in them'. (EI 143) In this living dialogue with tradition the event of being occurs. Truth in this context refers to this happening in which possibilities of life are opened up, rather than to the correspondence of representations within an eternal structure of existence.

In identifying history and being so closely Vattimo wants to avoid the hypostatisation of being found in certain Heidegger interpretations. There is no other being 'behind' history than the event, which happens

and is embodied in the dialogue with tradition. We cannot make being a substitute for the theistic god of metaphysics. In setting aside such a religious interpretation of Heidegger's fundamental ontology, Vattimo chooses the side of Gadamer. He radicalises the nihilistic features in Gadamer's hermeneutical project, and in doing so does not hesitate to use the grammar of reductionism: being, he writes, that can be understood is 'nothing but' language, is 'nothing but' tradition. (FM 182, cf. EI 217) Tradition is all we can rely on in this world. In Gadamer there is a strong identification of the history of being with the cultural canon of the West. The respect we once paid to the gods, we now should pay to our textual and monumental tradition. We should re-memorise tradition by bringing it back to mind (*Wieder-holung*), by entrusting ourselves to its legacy, in an attitude of *pietas*. There is 'a kind of secular religiosity' (EI 228) in the way Gadamer deals with tradition which is reminiscent of Nietzsche's plea for a 'Gedächtnisfeier' (a pious memorial festivity). Re-written in theological language, the history of metaphysics toward nihilism undoubtedly can be interpreted as a religious event. His theological argument here is the centrality of the incarnation in the Christian tradition: just as God became human, in the same way being is incarnated in history and human language. Just as God emptied his essence entirely and unconditionally in taking on human flesh, holding back nothing, in the same way being gives itself up completely to the play of the events of history and culture. We shall come back to this intertwining of theological interpretation and philosophical evaluation. Here it suffices to draw a first, evaluative conclusion: our cultural tradition should be accepted and affirmed as constituting our roots.

But Vattimo also adds a dose of resignation to this acceptance, by using the concept of *Verwindung* for our relationship with the history of metaphysics. Had we had a choice, we might have chosen another philosophical and cultural background. Less violent, less severe, less dogmatic. The history of metaphysics unveiled itself as the history of being that withdrew under the human effort to get a grip on our objective and subjective reality. Fortunately, being has left its traces. But human thinking went along wrong paths, and wandered about in dis-orientation. We cannot hand ourselves over to an ambivalent tradition uncritically. In his evaluation of Gadamer's contribution to hermeneutics Vattimo explicitly recognises the lack of critical distance in Gadamer's notion of belonging (*Zugehörigkeit*). We do, indeed, belong to tradition in an indissoluble way; this Gadamer rightly emphasises against the Enlightenment ideal of autonomy understood as independence. This belonging should not be regarded as an obstacle to critical understanding, but rather be acknowledged as a vital condition

for it. Gadamer here draws attention to an insight common to philosophy from Aristotle to Hegel: practical reason is always embedded in the living tissue of traditions (ethos, *Sittlichkeit*). (EI 80, 183 ff, 215) Gadamer, however, stresses this embedding in such a radical way that critics like Jürgen Habermas have, not unjustly and in the name of emancipation, accused him of being an apologist for the status quo. Vattimo recognises the legitimacy of this criticism, though he remains a dedicated ally of Gadamer's ontological insights. Tradition continues to be the matrix of our understanding, but in our dialogue with tradition Vattimo stresses with much more emphasis than Gadamer ever did, the importance of critical judgement, free choice and a future-oriented projection of possible ways of living. In the eyes of Vattimo the Enlightenment handed on the torch of radical emancipation to hermeneutics. Hermeneutics should take it over, while at the same time critically revealing the illusory foundations of Enlightenment metaphysics. Therefore, our dialogue with tradition should display an attitude of active engagement as well as of reverence. (EI 42f.) If dwelling in the truth means belonging to a tradition, and belonging to a tradition can be metaphorically described as living in a library, we mustn't just be reading there, but also writing our own books. (BI 82f.) Hermeneutics should be more than the hagiography of the classical canon of Western thinking; the possibility even of a conscious break with certain strains in this tradition must remain a real option. (EI 145, 148) The *Wieder-holung* of the past can lead us to its creative re-petition, but also to its rejection. Vattimo's severe judgement regarding the implicit violence in the metaphysics of presence and objectivity, nourished among others by a close reading of Nietzsche, keeps him from an unbroken relationship with tradition. But the same hermeneutical reason that lies behind his doubts with regard to the Enlightenment project also explains his unwillingness to break with it entirely: we have to acknowledge that we belong to the very tradition that once advocated the break with all tradition.

Hermeneutics as the new koinè

It will be clear by now that for Vattimo hermeneutics is much more than just a theory of interpretation, giving rules for reading texts or interpreting linguistic structures. It is more even than a philosophical school, which continues to work along the lines of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Ricoeur. The latter would imply that hermeneutics is merely one philosophy among others. Vattimo's claim aims much higher: according to him, only hermeneutics offers the open structure of thought that corresponds to the needs of today's Western culture. It is the expression and manifestation of a cultural atmosphere,

in which the subject is losing its contours and technology weakens the structures of objective reality. Hermeneutics is a real 'paradigm' in the Kuhnian sense of the word: a fundamental way of looking at things, a theoretical framework which, in the long run, will be capable of integrating all alternative perspectives on reality, doing justice to each of them. (BI 13 ff.) Hermeneutics appears to be, as Vattimo boldly repeats time and again, the new philosophical *koinè*: the popular language in which all that really has to be said can be expressed and communicated. (EI 51 ff.) In a technical sense hermeneutics can be described as the meta-theory of the interpretation game. (BI 9) However, it should be acknowledged at the same time that this interpretation game only became possible within the historical context of modernity, liberating itself from the dogmatic pressure of the Corpus Christianum. (FM 155) Hermeneutics should not be considered a description of the universal human condition, but must be appreciated as the theoretical destiny of secularised Western culture. (EI 168 ff.) It is a significant fact that hermeneutics received its stimulus from the Reformation and the religious wars of 16th and 17th century Europe. It started when tradition was no longer a matter of course, an unbroken unity. The Reformation opened up the text of the Scriptures for free interpretation, independent of Church doctrine (*sola scriptura*). The hegemony of a monolithic metaphysics was broken down. A plurality of conflicting readings of one and the same text became possible. The belief in reality as objectivity and in truth as correspondence was increasingly put to the test, until Nietzsche finally drew the conclusion: 'there is only interpretation'. Hermeneutics introduced the 'generalisation of the notion of interpretation to the point where it coincides with the very experience of the world.' (BI 4) It demanded a different ontology. Kant already pointed to the constitutive role of the interpreting subject. Nietzsche and Heidegger subsequently undermined Kant's belief in the universality of reason that had taken over the foundational function of objective reality in the old system of rational metaphysics. They both emphasised the particularity, finiteness and mortality of the interpreting subject and showed how the concept of being as a stable, eternal structure is an illusion. To us, there is no other being than being in time, being as language. 'There are only interpretations.'

Vattimo stresses the nihilistic ontological claim, implicit in hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is nihilism in actu. (FM 166) He virulently rejects the domestication of hermeneutics as a romantic resistance movement 'back to the *Lebenswelt*,' against the hegemony of the paradigm of natural science and technology. Hermeneutics does not put 'truth' against 'method,' as a certain reading of Gadamer suggests,

but completely revolutionises our conception of truth.^[xii] Truth *is* interpretation. It cannot be thought of otherwise than as opening to the event of being, and dialogue is the only place where it occurs.

Nihilistic ethics

It might seem that in the end the nihilism of hermeneutics leaves us with nothing but the ruins of an illusory past and a blindly erring subject, that has completely lost its orientation. Technology is seen as the achievement of the metaphysical grip on reality, but without its ontological claims. We don't know what reality means any longer, and we have lost our fixed place in the scheme of things. Vattimo, however, draws a much more positive conclusion: the former structures of being are weakened, we are losing our hold on reality, all this might be true. But instead of leaving us behind in despair, the destruction of metaphysics invites us to rejoice. Here it becomes clear that Vattimo considers metaphysics from an ethical point of view, more than from an epistemological one. Metaphysics is will to power. (MVS 85, 87) The weakening of being liberates us from the inherent violence and cruelty of metaphysics. For the first time in history a friendlier, less 'heavy' and more vulnerable relationship with objective and subjective reality is possible.

Vattimo's ethical judgement with regard to metaphysics does not imply a moral rejection of its history and its adherents. Metaphysics as the thinking of being as presence and objectivity represented 'a violent response to a situation that was itself fraught with danger and violence.' (TS 7f.) In the pre-technological era human lives were constantly threatened by contingent natural and social powers. Machine technology made the impact of the natural and social forces less arbitrary. But it could only do so with brutal counter-force. Human subjectivity dominated reality by reducing it to objectivity. Subjectivity itself was defined as self-control. Under today's conditions of fine tuned technology this pressure finally loses its rationale. We do not need to impose an ultimate foundation on reality any longer. From now on, ontology can do without the language of power.

Hermeneutics is motivated by ethics. A nihilistic ethics, to be more precise. The nihilism that Vattimo defends, however, is not at all synonymous with relativism and moral abstention, but rather demanding ethical engagement. Insight in the violent features of metaphysics is not sufficient; an explicit moral choice has to be made in favour of weakening the hierarchical structures of being. We shall see

below that the Christian tradition of charity plays an increasingly decisive role in legitimising this choice. Charity, not as a strong metaphysical principle, but as an 'unfounded', defenceless taking over of a model for life offered as, apparently, a viable way of living by a particular tradition.

By undergirding his hermeneutics with an ethical motive, Vattimo places himself within the hermeneutical tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. They too were driven by an ethical ideal, though it proved unrealisable. In their opinion, the hermeneutical act of understanding should contribute to the experience of real community. Readers who identify with the subject of a text, suppress its foreignness, make it immediately present. They become part of a transparent hermeneutical communion. Vattimo considers this romantic idea of transparency, still alive in the work of Apel and Habermas, a reminiscence of the metaphysics of presence, which should be abandoned. Accordingly, his critique of Habermas' universal ethics of communication is that it represents a metaphysical construction, which betrays the hermeneutical insights of the historicity and particularity of human existence, and our belonging to tradition. (EI 168 ff.)

The fundamental ethical core of hermeneutics should be worked out differently. Hermeneutics must still fulfil an emancipatory role. It 'has a clear vocation to transform itself in ethics', he even writes. (EI 165) But instead of an 'ethics of communication,' still motivated by the ideal of transparency, Vattimo pleads for an 'ethics of continuity'. In line with Gadamer and his project of rehabilitating practical philosophy, but with greater critical distance from traditions, Vattimo advocates active participation in the public dialogue of the historical communities we are part of. A nihilistic ethic is not conservative, he maintains against Gadamer, but makes choices against tradition if necessary. A nihilistic ethic, however, should not be relativistic either. Vattimo wants to uphold an ethic with substantial moral content.

Against certain strands of postmodernism where 'anything goes,' against an ethic of re-description (Rorty) which only aims at inventing new tables of values, new life styles, new metaphors, Vattimo looks for principles, which can guide us in our moral orientation in the midst of the weakening of being. (BI 35) But where does he borrow the moral substance, when metaphysics does not provide it anymore? Why, actually, should we opt for non-violence and a preference for the weak? In his earlier work, Vattimo seems to be lacking good reasons for making that choice. He blames Habermas' ethic of communication for not having an argument against violence in the end (EI 178f.), and

claims that an ethic of interpretation of the weakening of being possesses a much stronger ethical basis. But the strength of his argument is its weakness. Exactly in the affirmation of the negativity and erosion of being, Vattimo advocates, a nihilistic ethic shows its clear orientation. The event of the weakening of being should be interpreted as a message of being itself, to which we have to open ourselves up. Hermeneutical ethics invites us to read the signs of the times.

Another passage in his *Ethics of Interpretation* shows how vulnerable this defenceless choice for a defenceless ethics is. After Vattimo has declared once more that there is an ethical motive behind unmasking metaphysics as violence and force, he has to admit that this motive does not legitimise a normative choice for non-violence. If there no longer exists an ontological and moral hierarchy, and our morality is not rooted in an order of being anymore, if we are all free and equal to create our own meaningful universe, then, Nietzsche has clearly analysed, there is only an endless play of forces left. Vattimo agrees with the analysis, but is not satisfied with it morally. He remarks that unmasking violence as violence already 'moderates' the violence itself. (EI 157) There is a hidden morality in this act of cognition. The very insight in the conflict of interpretations, the recognition of the human being as a symbolising creature, which has the capacity of transcending its survival instinct in an aesthetic abandonment of interests, already shows the possibility of symbolic constructions that do not have force as their only motive. But why be moral? Vattimo can only make a plea for a Schopenhauerian reading of Nietzsche's nihilism: a clear recognition of the will to power subsequently leads to a readiness to renounce and reject it, just as Schopenhauer did. Vattimo does not interpret this renouncement as a world-forsaking asceticism, but as a positive act of 'piety': a fundamental solidarity with the living. The notion of piety, however, is deliberately not used here in the religious sense of the word, but is presented as a proof of Nietzschean irony. For in ironising ourselves until the end, we abandon the egoistic will to live and in the end renounce ourselves. (EI 162)

As long as it can only fall back on a decision, not further explained, to withhold ourselves from the violence of self-affirmation, the moral substance of Vattimo's ethics seems to be very thin. Speaking meta-ethically, Vattimo's ethics is, in its arbitrary choice for irony, a decisionistic one.

We cannot say that Vattimo in his later work makes a stronger case for non-violence in the sense that he provides it with more rational

arguments. His non-foundationalist ('sfondamento') ethics remain non-foundationalist, his ontology weakened. But at the very moment he introduces a *theological* interpretation of the history of metaphysics, his hermeneutical ethics gain much more coherence and plausibility. By embedding it in the Christian tradition, his anti-metaphysical nihilism finally seems to find its way into the Western cultural canon. The post-modern irony no longer stands alone, once it is retold in Christian language, but is interpreted as the ultimate consequence of a long religious tradition. 'Piety' then becomes more than an irrational feeling of compassion toward the living, as Schopenhauer put it. The notion acquires its moral dynamism only when it is read in its original theological sense as *caritas*. Charity, the Christian principle of love, is not an idea. It derives its moral force from its central place in the story of Jesus Christ, as the revelation of God's original self-denying attitude toward his creation. The main moral principle in hermeneutics and the 'most decisive factor of the evangelical message' seems to be one and the same. (EI 51) The cardinal elements of Vattimo's philosophy seem to fall in place as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, once they are interpreted within this theological framework, which Vattimo outlines in his more recent work.

Secularisation

Christian dogma finally provides the meta-narrative for Vattimo's nihilism. His hermeneutics should be read, he writes, as 'the fruit of secularization', as 'the renewal, pursuit, application, and interpretation of the substance of the Christian revelation, ... the dogma of the incarnation of God'. (BI 52, 54) I want to make some remarks about this rather substantial theological claim, which revolves around the notions of secularisation and incarnation.

First of all, it must be affirmed that with this 'return of religion' in Vattimo's work he is not abandoning his prior philosophical project. He still does not interpret religion in a metaphysical sense, but in a radically hermeneutical one. The two belong together. Hermeneutics, with its stress on historicity, the mystery of death and suffering, and the contingency of existence, should itself be seen as the fruit of the historical religion that Christianity embodies. The hermeneutical notions of belonging to tradition (*Zugehörigkeit*) and 'effective history' (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) are themselves the articulation of our factual belonging to the effective history of the biblical tradition.

The relationship between Vattimo's philosophical analysis and his theological claims should not be described in terms of analogy. They are far more substantially related to one another. The theological interpretation of Heidegger's anti-metaphysics and Nietzsche's nihilism should be read as a ripening of the consciousness of our belonging to Christian history, a return to its *Wirkungsgeschichte*. (TT 100) Hermeneutics, in making us aware of this belonging, deserves a place within the history of salvation. (BI 56f.) Hermeneutics will only discover its nihilistic (meaning: anti-metaphysical ' anti-violent ' ethical) vocation if it recovers 'its substantial link, at the source, with the Judeo-Christian tradition as being the constitutive tradition of the West.' (BI 48) And as long as philosophy does not acknowledge these roots, its aporias will not be overcome.

However, Christian theology should not be practised as natural theology, taking its point of departure from some general concept of religion. It should be Trinitarian and incarnational, taking the dramatic narrative of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the dogma of God becoming human in the midst of history, as its beginning and its centre. The essence of being is not a hidden, eternal structure behind our reality, with a theistic God as its ultimate ground. Being itself is the history of the progressive erosion of that very notion of being, as a direct outcome of Christian story-telling. Theology should be the interpretation of that history, a reading of the 'signs of the times.' (BI 48) It should interpret the weakening of being as an event of being itself. Or, speaking theologically, it should read 'the death of God' as a revelation of God. Theology is hermeneutics, just as philosophy is. They only differ to the extent that theology, investigating the logic of the narrative of God's self-disclosure in history, explicitly takes its starting point in the traditional dogma of incarnation as its context of discovery. But the boundaries are not clear. Vattimo mixes up both language games without making any distinctions. 'If one discovers that hermeneutics is closely related to dogmatic Christianity, neither the meaning of hermeneutics nor that of dogmatics will be left intact', he writes. (BI 49)

Theologically, the history of nihilism as the destiny of being in modernity should be read as the history of secularisation. In Vattimo's thinking the secularisation thesis, fallen somewhat into disuse in systematic theology after its peak in the 1960s and 1970s (represented for example by P. Van Buren, Hamilton, Th. Altizer, J.T. Robinson, H. Cox, D. Sölle, A.Th. van Leeuwen and many others), undergoes a philosophical rehabilitation. It gets revalued as an essential tool in understanding today's culture and the role of Christian tradition in it. Our post-modern culture is secularised, when the concept is defined as

follows: 'A secularised culture is not one that has simply left the religious elements of tradition behind, but one that continues to live them as traces, as hidden and distorted models that are nonetheless profoundly present.' (TS 40) By stressing the continuity between Christianity and modernity so bluntly, Vattimo goes against the grain of current trends in theology and philosophy. Two severe criticisms contributed to the unpopularity of the concept of secularisation. First, non-western theologians consider it to be an ideological, Western attempt to reduce the plurality and complexity of global Christian history to its European origins. For it suggests that the way the Christian faith developed in Europe necessarily is the model for the way it will develop in other parts of the world. However, the relationship between Christian faith and modernity is a specific, contingent, and not an intrinsic one. [xii] As a defender of the genuine historical character of religion, Vattimo would not deny the latter claim. Yet he maintains that the secularisation thesis still has explanatory force within the context of continental European. Secondly, Western philosophers, Hans Blumenberg in particular, attacked the concept as a final, yet vain attempt by theologians to appropriate modernity as Christian. Even modernity bidding farewell to its Christian origins, is wonderfully described as a Christian move! In his own detailed reconstructive works Blumenberg tries to show how modernity actually *broke* with the Christian tradition. [xiii] Modern science and philosophy had to fill the vacuum that had been left behind by late medieval nominalism. Nominalism stressed the contingency of creation and the freedom of God so radically, that belief in God was no longer a secure basis for knowledge and meaning. Human subjectivity had to claim certainty and meaning in its own right.

In coining the term *Umbesetzung*, Blumenberg defends the thesis that modernity, understood that way, is no longer the continuation of Christianity by other, non-religious means, but quite the opposite, its worldly alternative. Vattimo, however, wants to remain a tenacious student of Karl Löwith, who once was his personal teacher. Löwith and Vattimo both share a more dialectical view of the relationship between modernity and Christianity, one in which there is room for dependence and discontinuity at the same time.

In his classic *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*, Löwith describes the modern philosophy of history, including the linear optimism of the Enlightenment, the dialectics of Hegel, and the circular pessimism of Nietzsche and Spengler, as a secularisation of Christian eschatology. [xiv] Löwith then analyses the work of, among others, Basset, Vice, Voltaire, Condorcet, Turgot, Comte, Hegel, Marx, and

Burckhardt. He perceives both continuity and distortion between, on the one hand, their philosophy of history and, on the other, the biblical paradigm of creation, fall, and redemption as interpreted in the Christian eschatology of Augustin and Joachim of Fiore. Modern philosophy of history has clear Christian origins, Löwith shows. But at the same time he underlines the rupture which has come about in modern historical consciousness, in the late 18th century. Providence becomes Progress. Here, Löwith emphasises, modernity betrays the substance of the Christian faith: the dualism between God and world, divine judgement and human action is lost.

In his concept of *Verwindung*, Vattimo acknowledges the dialectics of continuity-distortion in a way that is strongly reminiscent of Löwith's theory of secularisation. He considers Blumerberg's thesis untenable on historical grounds. (BI 51)^[xv] Though he also differs with him on historiographical grounds (besides Löwith he mentions Weber, Elias and Lübbe as his sources, without explicitly discussing them), he particularly advances theological reasons for his claim that modern culture should be considered the ripened fruit of the Christian faith. Vattimo's concept of secularisation is first of all based on a radically normative theological claim, rather than on a concise historiographical interpretation. It's an evaluative judgement, rather than a description.

Vattimo adopts Löwith's view that modern historical consciousness has its origins in Christian eschatology. But he does not share Löwith's rather traditional metaphysical theology. Löwith defends an Augustinian view of life as a pilgrimage, with the salvation of the individual soul as its goal. The theological preferences of teacher and student are obviously different. In stead of Augustin, Vattimo prefers Joachim of Fiore. (BI 48/50) In stead of a radical dichotomy between the city of God and the worldly city, both involved in a continuing struggle until Judgement Day, he defends an eschatological view of history in which qualitative changes already have taken place. The era of the Son and the Spirit has taken over the era of the Father. To take the narrative of the incarnation seriously means that we have to acknowledge a shift within human history. Living out of the Spirit of the Son, we no longer exist under the sovereignty of 'the totally different God' (*der ganz andere Gott*, Karl Barth).^[xvi] *Kenosis* means that in Christ God has abdicated his divine majesty. In Christ, we have become friends of God and we are no longer slaves, as Vattimo loves to quote from the fourth gospel. (John 15,15) Friendship, love and equality in stead of hierarchy, violence, duty, and obedience characterise our relationship to the divine. Our religion and ethics should change, once we acknowledge the revolution that has occurred in the history of religion.

Kenosis

Vattimo uses the concept of *kenosis* as the hermeneutical key to the interpretation of the Christian legacy. Kenosis and theism relate to one-another as nihilism relates to metaphysics. It is true; there are many things in the history of Christianity that remind one of metaphysics. That history can even be described in part as the history of onto-theology. These metaphysical elements, however, should be considered vestiges of an older age that we should leave behind now. Indeed, it took a very long time before the insight broke through that the Christian faith contains an anti-metaphysical, non-violent ethics. But slowly and surely the story of the incarnation weakened and eroded the harsh structures of ontology in which God the Father still was the all-integrating centre. In the long run, the Christian religion has had a clear philosophical impact that cannot merely be described in terms of analogy. We should say more. There is a kind of historical causality between the Christian narrative of *kenosis* and philosophical nihilism. In the end analysis the history of metaphysics can only be explained in religious terms. (MVS, 103)^[xvii] The gospel has nihilism as its consequence.

But why did it take such a long time for any insight into the errors of metaphysics to break through? Why were there twenty centuries of onto-theology between Jesus and Nietzsche? The knowledge of the self-renunciation of almighty God in the crucified Jesus Christ has been available from the beginning of the Jesus story and ever since missions have spread it all over the world. However, the long story of success and failure in the history of Christian *caritas* should be told in ethical terms. As already pointed out, Vattimo's resistance to metaphysics and his defence of nihilism are above all morally motivated. Metaphysics and onto-theology are synonymous for force and violence. Nihilism is a moral vocation, so that those who hear and obey its call have to undergo a conversion in their basic attitude toward reality and toward others. That might be the reason why the struggle between the theistic religion of the Father and the agapistic religion of the Son took such a long time. The evidence of the moral 'superiority' of charity was not at all obvious in the beginning. It was discovered with great difficulty, vanquishing the powers of violence in the end. Why prefer weakness to force? Why choose self-denial in stead of self-assertion? Even Christians were and are not always sure. Even up to our own times, violence has survived within the core of the Christian tradition.

In this context the theory of René Girard plays an important role in the structure of Vattimo's thought. In a certain sense, Girard provides him

with the missing link between his theory of nihilism, already developed, and his renewed appropriation of the Christian tradition. In Girard's theory of culture, religion is intrinsically related to violence, in the sense that the systems of the sacred that religions develop are interpreted as the ritual and mythical expression and disguise of one and the same scapegoat mechanism of sacrifice. Human violence of many against one in order to re-establish order and peace within the community, is presented and legitimised as a divine necessity in religion. The 'sacred' and the 'sacrifice' are not only etymologically related but factually as well.

In Girard's view the Christian tradition demythologises this religious violence, by unmasking its sacrificial mechanism. Jesus' death on the cross is depicted in the gospel as the public death of an innocent victim. The narrative of his resurrection points to the promising victory of Jesus' ethic of agape, in which the circle of revenge is broken and a different, loving God reveals himself.

Girard too has to answer the vexed question why sacrificial religion has dominated the core of the Christian tradition for so long, as the Anselmian doctrine of satisfaction shows. Girard does not give a well-developed answer, and Vattimo doesn't either. But the only plausible explanation would point in the following direction: the awareness of the moral evil of violence is not merely a matter of cognitive insight, but also demands an ethical conversion. And conversions take time.

Secularisation, therefore, cannot only be seen as a process of decreasing metaphysical religiosity, but must also be seen as an increasing awareness of the sacrificial character of religion. Christian faith is a religion, which takes leave of the religion of the sacred.^[xviii] Secularisation means on, and is to be regarded as the continuation and effectuation of the gospel. The gospel once and for all describes the innocence of the victim and positively puts the religious mythology of a violent and angry God behind it.

In Girard's perspective the function of mythology is not just ontological, in the sense that myth only tells you the way things really are. Myths camouflage sacrificial violence by making it 'sacred', and then persuade you that this violence forms part of the divine structures of being.^[xix]

With Girard Vattimo shares this enlightenment perspective on the priority of the ethical in the theory of religion. In his judgement, he feels a mandate coming from the core of the Christian faith. For Vattimo the narrative of God's *kenosis* in the incarnation can seal the fate of the violently dogmatic ecclesiastical authorities and hierarchies within the established forms of religion, including Christianity. In this respect, secularisation of religion means to the Church what nihilism means to metaphysics: not only the end of an illusion, but first of all the end of violence. The weakening of ontology must not be seen as an impoverishment of one's worldview but rather as a moral gain. Again, the analogy between the two language games - Christian religion and western metaphysics - is not just accidental, but necessary. (BI 48) The history of metaphysics should be read from a religious point of view as the history of *kenosis*. (BI 51)

In this context, Vattimo also pleads for a rehabilitation of the philosophy of history, despite its current unpopularity. (EI 27f; TS 43) We should not dismiss philosophy of history, as Odo Marquard does, who considers it a last, secularised attempt at theodicy in 18th century Enlightenment. (TS 40) Western history forms part of the history of being, and represents an ontological event that we should carefully analyse and evaluate. Philosophy means reading the signs of the times, weighing the different elements of history and putting them into a perspective that takes into account the *kenosis* paradigm. We should acknowledge that in this respect Hegel was right: the history of metaphysics indeed has come to an end, but it does not leave us behind with a transparent all-encompassing reason, but ironically, with a weakened principle of reality. (FM 55; TS 6, 21; EI 52, 85) But even this 'coming to an end' of the philosophy of history needs some philosophy of history to interpret it. Vattimo's theological concept of secularisation promises to do that job.

Levinas

In this context, Vattimo's critical attitude toward Emmanuel Levinas is revealing and of great theological import. In his philosophy Levinas tries to escape from the totalitarian violence which, in his perception, is structurally embedded within the history of Western ontology. In the face of the other human being, however, an infinite Otherness breaks through the closed circle of our self-structured world. The ethical appeal 'Thou shall not kill' transcends ontology. In that way a vulnerable 'more than being' reveals itself in the midst of being.

Derrida - in his famous essay on Levinas, 'Violence and Metaphysics' [xx] - agrees with Levinas, to the extent that he too observes a fundamental violence in metaphysics. But he differs with him about the possibility of escaping this violence in an ethics of the Other. For the Other is not only face, but also speech. In using language we structure our world by definition in general categories. Already in speaking we are necessarily harming the particularity of the individual. There is no escape from this primordial violence in an ethics of the Other. Vattimo agrees with Derrida's analysis, when he emphasises the violence inherent in the voice that accompanies the epiphany of the face of the Other. But his emphasis is different. He locates the violence not in speech as such, but in the - according to Levinas - asymmetrical character of the ethical relationship. The Other speaks asymmetrically, from above, he takes me hostage, forces me to answer unconditionally, deprives me of my freedom - all these elements point at an authoritarian element in Levinas' ethics, which Vattimo wants to reject. For it reminds Vattimo of the religion of the Father, whose place was taken by the religion of the Son in the Christian tradition (interpreted in a Joachimistic sense, in any case). Incarnation means that there is no irruption of the Other to wait for, to fear, or to hope for anymore. History, i.e.: the history of the Christian narrative has liberated us from an essentialist view on ethics and religion, which is still present in Levinas' philosophy. The transcendent Other, however, is incarnated in a redemptive history. The Transcendent became Being; Being became Event. In reading the signs of the times an authoritarian ethics, in which a sovereign Other forces us to make decisions, is unacceptable. Even if it is the sovereignty of the orphan and the widow.[xxi] There is no radically Other, Vattimo agrees with Heidegger against Levinas, there is only the Same Self (*Même*). But this Self has, as Vattimo asserts more strongly than anybody else, been severely weakened in the course of its history. Nihilism acknowledges the weakening of this Self, the evaporation of its being. Reading the signs of the times, one has to conclude that precisely in the poor, marginal, undistinguished modes of being, being is happening among us. Vattimo does not plead for an ethics of transcendental irruption of Otherness, but for an ethic of renouncement of Sameness: a form of being that consciously rejects the use of force to manifest itself as a presence in the world. (TT 103f.)

The theological decisions made here are far-reaching. We concentrate on them, and not on the question whether Levinas has been interpreted correctly. Vattimo himself admits that his evaluation of the history of being is only possible within the horizon of the incarnation as its context of discovery. (TT 104) This not only makes him hesitant regarding Levinas' philosophy, but with regard to his interpretation of

Judaism as well. In the sovereign Other, as presented by Levinas, Vattimo recognises the majestic God of some parts of the Old Testament, still contaminated by the violence of the sacred.

Obviously, Vattimo does not conceive of Judaism as a creative religious background for ethics anymore. In stead of Levinas' concentration on the primordial character of the transcendence of the Other, one should stress the eschatological, providential destiny that this transcendent Other has undergone as an event within the history of being. (MVS 104) Again, we should admit that Hegel was right: the history of metaphysics has come to an end. God should not only be regarded as the first author of the text of history, but also as its product, in an indissoluble way *verwindet* with it. In this sense, history itself has redemptive meaning: it reveals God in history, precisely in the process that has led to the 'death of God' (TT 103). God's being is readable in its becoming.

Conclusion

Vattimo's philosophy represents an original and stimulating contribution to theological ethics. By reading the history of philosophy from a religious perspective through the hermeneutical lens of the Christian doctrine of incarnation, in stead of the other way around, he has given new philosophical relevance to theology. The separation of secular philosophy and religion, which came about in the Enlightenment and has been consolidated since then, only leads to an 'Eclipse of religious ethics'. [xxii] Vattimo, integrating both perspectives, philosophy and religious ethics, 'weak thinking' and *kenosis*, comes to a completely different conclusion. In Christian theology, Nietzschean nihilism normally is interpreted as the repudiation of religion ('death of God') and a declaration of war on Christian ethics ('the revolution of all values'). In Vattimo's thought, however, nihilism becomes the fulfilment of the program of Christianity. The weakness of his ethics without foundation, which does not want to posit a god as the guarantor of the moral order, can at the same time be interpreted as its religious strength. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 2)

Vattimo does not want read the history of post-enlightenment philosophy in terms of emancipation anymore. A philosophy 'emancipated' from its religious origins thinks it can leave them behind. Many theological representatives of the secularisation thesis were still caught up in this emancipation model. The Heideggerian concept of *Verwindung*, however, helps Vattimo avoid this pitfall, and makes his own use of the secularisation thesis much more dialectical. Theologians

as A.Th. Van Leeuwen and H. Cox interpreted the secularisation process in optimistic terms of progress. Vattimo shares their positive evaluation of technology, and even radicalises the connection between the end of metaphysics and the ontological revolution of technology. With Heidegger, however, he considers this relationship to be highly complicated. *Verwindung* certainly means overcoming, but not in terms of linear progress. We have left behind metaphysical religion only in a restricted sense; as a simultaneous, inextricable intertwining of 'acceptance-continuation-distortion.' Tradition, therefore, is the air that we breathe. Philosophy is only possible as hermeneutics: a careful interpretation of the texts and symbols of the past, by finite humans, aware of their particularity. Vattimo's nihilistic hermeneutic represents a modest kind of thinking. It bids farewell to the modern myth of total transparency.

In using the secularisation paradigm, Vattimo does not defend the shallow, optimistic faith in historical progress, which might be associated with it. The hermeneutic awareness of the constitutive role of tradition prevents him from doing that. Following Gadamer, he calls his ethics - in distinction to Habermas' 'ethics of communication' and Rorty's 'ethics of redescription' - an 'ethics of continuity.' (BI 37f.) Our judgements and actions should be decided in dialogue with the norms and values of the historical communities, which have shaped our identity. The possibility of decisions against the grain of tradition must be left open in a nihilistic ethics that no longer accepts final foundations. Tradition can be no more than a helpful guide. The awareness of belonging to traditions, however, should keep relativism at bay as well. Most of the models of life that are available to us have been tried before and their viability has been tested by others. We don't have to re-invent them. (EI 42f; BI 91; TS 48)

Vattimo's project opens up fresh possibilities for the theological re-evaluation of post-modernity. In proposing a non-metaphysical, hermeneutical ethics he suggests a fruitful direction to a theological ethics which is ready to acknowledge its particular historical shape in today's Western culture. However, his project displays a number of theological weaknesses. These emerge not at the periphery, but at its centre: in the concept of love. The Christian principle of love finds its model in God's *kenosis*. Love means abandoning the use of force, just as God renounced his almighty divinity. (Philippians 2) Vattimo considers this *agape* to be 'the single most decisive factor of the evangelical message'. (BI 51) At the same time love - standing for 'the reduction of violence, the weakening of strong identities, the acceptance of the other, to the point of charity' (BI 73) - also represents the *terminus ad quem* of

Western philosophy, eventually resulting in a nihilistic hermeneutics. Charity, then, is the 'point of convergence between nihilistic ethics and the religious tradition of the West' (BI 51)

This is a rather bold claim, for which his arguments appear too few and insufficiently developed. A number of questions are left unanswered here. One of them is simply: what do you mean by Christian love? By interpreting Christian love christologically, Vattimo seems to identify it with the negation of self [of 'self-denial']. Following a long tradition, ethics then seems to imply an *imitatio dei* in the Augustinian sense, and can be summarised in one moral principle: *Ama et fac quod vis*, love and just do what you want to do. (BI 51) Here Vattimo needs to say more. For within the Christian tradition love is a very complex notion with different and sometimes conflicting layers of meaning. One can agree with the general observation that 'the only content of the myths of Holy Scripture, the history of spirituality and Christian theology is the love commandment', as Vattimo writes. (CC 78) But then one has to be more specific. In his conceptual analysis of the notion of agape, Gene Outka, for example, already discerns three different concepts of love within the same Christian tradition.^[xxiii] Love is either interpreted as 'equal regard', 'self-sacrifice', or 'mutuality'. Only the second concept (self-sacrifice) is explicitly asymmetrical and kenotic in Vattimo's sense; the two others are, in their emphasis on the impartiality and reciprocity, more connected with the notion of justice. They include a more symmetrical view of human relations. Outka shows how the different concepts are overlapping, and conflicting as well. Hermeneutic honesty toward the Christian tradition would at least demand an elaboration of the complexity of the notion of love.

Another fundamental question is related to Vattimo's conception of God, or being. To be more specific: of the incarnated God after the 'death of God,' or: being that weakened itself during the history of metaphysics. In Vattimo's discussion with Levinas it appears that, theologically speaking, the incarnated God has left the majestic Old Testament God behind. The Son takes leave of the Father, according to Joachim of Fiore. The loving God is no longer identical with the sovereign, sacred divinity of early Judaism. The question is: does Vattimo not too easily separate here what the tradition of the Church has kept together, since the early days of Marcion: First and Second Testament, Creation and Redemption, Law and Gospel, Justice and Love, Jewish and Christian, Israel and Jesus? I think Vattimo does not necessarily yield to the temptation of Gnosticism, so palpable in the work of Girard. For Girard confers to violence an ontological status, rooted in creation, and considers love to be a strange, miraculous gift

from heaven.^[xxiv] In my opinion, precisely the concept of *Verwindung* seems to offer Vattimo a model of thought that should make it possible for him to simultaneously think of the God of Levinas and the God of Girard, of the majestic Other and the loving, non-jealous neighbour. Don't they both belong to the same history of revelation? Is the latter not a kind of 'ironic' re-petition (*Wieder-holung*) of the former? Couldn't Christ be seen as a distortion, conservation, and evacuation of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Different, yet one and the same?

If Vattimo would answer in the affirmative, this would not only have theological, but ethical consequences as well. For the question could be asked whether force and agape are not more strongly related ('contaminated') than Vattimo suggests. Is not the dichotomy between them too simplistic? When love implies justice, and justice implies the use of force, then doesn't love imply force? The relationship between the concepts of love and force should be further elaborated here.^[xxv]

This critical evaluation of Vattimo's construction can also be elaborated in more philosophical terms by pointing to the way he deals with the question of being. Vattimo's project exemplifies a broader philosophical movement of de-ontologizing theology by means of ethics. Emmanuel Levinas in a certain sense, but also and especially Jean-Luc Marion, are trying to construct an ethics without ontology, by transferring the genuine theological focus from one to the other. As Marion puts it, God no longer should be conceived of in terms of being, but in terms of love. The first name of God is Good, not Being.^[xxvi] This process against ontology tries to work out the consequences of the Nietzschean experience of the 'death of God,' by relocating the core of the biblical narrative in a non-ontological register of gift and love. Together with Paul Ricoeur one should ask whether such a radical effort to cut the link with ontology has any chance of succeeding, without at the same time losing the substance of the biblical heritage.^[xxvii] To use his own words: how can the 'God is love' of One Testament ever be spelled out without making the detour to the 'God is One' of the Other? The biblical name of God is a genuinely ontological one, in the sense that it is rooted in the verb *being*: God reveals himself as JHWH ('ehyeh aser ehyeh', Ex. 3, 14). One can agree with Heidegger that Western ontological thinking was unable to explore the richness and dynamics of this name, even misconstrued and misused its meaning - though one must, at the same time, share Ricoeur's observation that Heidegger here focuses too much on late medieval scholastics - without drawing the conclusion that a radical break with ontology as such is warranted. Does the Hebraic 'ehyeh 'aser ehyeh' not continue to challenge and broaden the polysemic sense of the Greek *einai* and the Latin *esse*? Doesn't it invite

us to think about being differently? The project of the 'de-hellenization' of philosophy should not necessarily lead too easily to its 'de-judaization.' A complete break with ontology would, as Ricoeur suggests, perhaps open the door to irrationality. However, an extreme extension of the polysemy of the word 'being', approaching the enigma of the - apparently untranslatable - Hebrew tetragrammaton ('the One being there'), perhaps offers a more fruitful alternative for philosophically working out the experience of the weakening of ontology.

In conclusion, we can say that the Christian narrative plays a crucial and intriguing role in Vattimo. It functions as the decisive context of discovery and explanation for his notion of *kenosis*. However, theologically Vattimo's project still seems insufficiently determinate. Nihilism, Vattimo discovers to his surprise, 'somehow ends up in the arms of theology'. (BI X) But that does not mean that it can fall asleep there.

[i] I will be referring to *La Fin de la Modernité. Nihilisme et herméneutique dans la culture post-moderne*, Seuil Paris 1987 (FM); the article 'Métaphysique, violence, sécularisation', in: Gianni Vattimo (ed.), *La sécularisation de la pensée*, Seuil Paris 1988, 85 - 107 (MVS); *Ethique de l'Interprétation*, La Découverte Paris 1991 (EI); *The Transparent Society*, Polity Press Cambridge 1992 (TS); *Beyond Interpretation. The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, Polity Press 1997 (BI); 'La trace de la trace', in: Jacques Derrida/ Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *La religion*, Seuil Paris 1996, 87 - 104 (TT), *Credere di credere* (1996) (I consulted the Dutch translation: *Ik geloof dat ik geloof*, Boom Amsterdam 1998 (GG)). In the text I use the abbreviations provided here.

[ii] *Introduction à Heidegger*, Editions du Cerf Paris 1985 (Italian first edition, 1971); *Introduction à Nietzsche*, Editions du Cerf 1991.

[iii] F. Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, (fr. 125), ed. K. Schlechta, Hanser Verlag München 1977, Vol. 2, 126-128.

[iv] M. Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*, Neske Verlag Pfullingen 1957, 53 ff.

[v] An expression of Habermas, with which he characterizes the way Gadamer's hermeneutics re-interprets Heidegger's ontology.

[vi] 'Man überhört den Anspruch des Seins, der im Wesen der Technik spricht'. (*Identität und Differenz*, 26) Technology as 'Vor-spiel dessen, was Er-eignis heisst' (26/ 28) 'Ein erstes, bedrängendes Aufblitzen des Ereignisses erblicken wir im Ge-stell.' (31) '... die Möglichkeit ... dass das blosses Walten des Ge-stells in ein anfänglicheres Ereignis verwindet'. (29) (idem, 32vv.) 'Verwindung des Ge-stells aus dem Ereignis.' Cf. FM 44ff. , 165, 176; BI 31 and BI, 114, note 15); EI 175.

[vii] Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Primus Verlag Darmstadt 1997 (1923).

[viii] Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Neske Verlag Pfullingen, 1967, 64: '... die Überwindung der Metaphysik als Verwindung des Seins sich ereignet.'

[ix] H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik, Tübingen 1960, 478.

[x] Cf. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Max NiemeyerVerlag, Halle 1927, par. 74 (134, 385).

[xi] In Rorty's suggestion that hermeneutics takes over the place of epistemology Vattimo discovers the same romantic dualism. (EI 201 / 205, BI 88)

[xii] Cf. Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World*. Resurgent Religions and World Politics, Grand Rapids 1999. Berger, once a fervent defender of the secularization thesis, now stands for the opposite: 'the world today is massively religious, is *anything but* the secularized world that had been predicted (whether joyfully or despondently) by so many analysts of modernity.' However, he has to admit that there are some exceptions to this proposition. 'In Western Europe, if nowhere else, the old secularization theory would seem to hold.' (9)

[xiii] Cf. especially Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1966.

[xiv] Karl Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie*, Verlag W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart a.o. 1973⁶ (1953).

[xv] Refutations of the very idea of modernity as secularization such as Blumenberg's are untenable 'by virtue of the fact that they do not give sufficient consideration to the historical roots of modernity in the ancient and medieval tradition.' (BI 51). So, according to Vattimo, there are good reasons for a genuine theory of secularization as the authentic destiny of Christianity (and not as its abandonment and negation). The capitalist economy, democracy, humanitarianism cannot be thought of but 'as an application, albeit not literal, perhaps distorted, of the Christian legacy.' (idem) Vattimo's use of the concept of secularization appears to be mainly normative, and seems to be too concerned with historical facts. Blumenberg is dismissed here far too quickly!

[xvi] In the Postscript of *Credere di Credere* (GG, 98) Vattimo admits that his view on Barth and dialectical theology is a caricature and promises that he will come back to this later.

[xvii] Here Vattimo acknowledges his due to his teacher Luigi Pareyson, a Christian existentialist, for whom Christianity represented 'the central problem of philosophy'. (EI 60, cf. Idem, 67) Together with him, Vattimo likes to place himself in the line of Rosenzweig, Bloch, Benjamin, Arendt, all of them thinkers who put religion in the center of their philosophy. But more than they did, he feels the need of giving account of the relationship between philosophy and *historical* Christianity. Hence his rehabilitation of the concept of secularization.

[xviii] Cf. the way Marcel Gauchet refers to Christianity as 'la religion de la sortie de la religion'. See his *The Disenchantment of the World. A Political History of Religion*, Princeton University Press 1997 (transl. of: *Le Désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, Gallimard Paris 1985.)

[xix] In this respect, he continues a Kantian enlightenment tradition in which a genuine moral understanding of religion is developed. Cf. Peter Byrne, *The Moral Interpretation of Religion*, William B. Eerdmans Publ., Eerdmans Publ. House, Grand Rapids 1998. Kant, in *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, first identifies 'true' religion with morality in order to have a criterion by which to judge dogmatic, traditional religion (*Kirchenglauben*) ethically. Hegel has a similar view. Though he fundamentally disagrees with Kant on religion and ethics, in

his system too the history of religion in the end reaches its fulfillment in ethics. As he puts it, religion and reality are reconciled in the ethical (*das Sittliche*). G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, Vol. III: *Die vollendete Religion*, Felix Meiner Verlag, W. Jaeschke ed., Hamburg 1995, 265. On Hegel, cf. EI 63f.

[xx] J. Derrida, 'Violence et Métaphysique. Essai sur la pensée d' Emmanuel Levinas' in: idem, *L'écriture et la différence*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1967, 117 - 229.

[xxi] In line with this, Vattimo rejects an ethic of obligations and imperatives (Kant) and pleads for an ethic of the good according to the line of Schleiermacher. (FM181).

[xxii] Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel*. The Languages of Morals and their Discontents, James Clarke & Co., Cambridge, 1988, 109ff.

[xxiii] Gene Outka, *Agape. An Ethical Analysis*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1972, 5.

[xxiv] R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, Bernard Grasset Paris 1978, especially Book II. For the temptation of gnosticism in Girard, cf. Frits de Lange, 'Différence. Achtergronden bij René Girard' in: *Gereformeerde Theologisch Tijdschrift*, 1987/4, 192 - 225.

[xxv] Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, Harper & Row, New York 1935.

[xxvi] Jean-Luc Marion, *Dieu sans L'Être*, Fayard, Paris 1982.

[xxvii] Paul Ricoeur/ André LaCocque, *Penser la Bible*, Seuil, Paris 1998, 364 - 372.