The Return of Religion in Europe?
The Postmodern Christianity of Gianni Vattimo

With the onslaught of recent books extolling atheism, speaking of the contemporary “return to religion” sounds a bit naive, akin to nervous whistling in the dark rather than to the rigors of critical analysis. Yet there is such a movement afoot, often linked to the rise of postmodernism. One of its most acute practitioners is the Italian thinker Gianteresio (Gianni) Vattimo, a philosopher well known throughout Continental Europe and rapidly becoming known in English-speaking lands as well thanks to the impressive translation project of his numerous works undertaken by Columbia University Press. Not that Vattimo has gone entirely unnoticed in the United States. The American philosopher Richard Rorty has said that Vattimo’s “writings are among the most imaginative contributions to the tradition of philosophical thought that flows from Nietzsche and Heidegger.”

In this article, I would like to introduce the reader to the fundamental themes that characterize Vattimo’s philosophical work—particularly his reading of Christianity’s contributions to contemporary culture—and then offer an evaluation of his thought. Despite its patent opposition to anything resembling historic Christian
orthodoxy, Vattimo’s interpretation of Christianity constitutes an influential achievement that has proven, either explicitly or implicitly, to be attractive to large segments of contemporary society.

Gianni Vattimo was born in Turin, Italy, in 1936. After graduating from the university there, he went on to Heidelberg, studying with K. Löwith and Hans-Georg Gadamer. From the early 1960s until 2008, he was a professor at the University of Turin—with specialties in hermeneutics, Nietzsche, and Heidegger—as well as a visiting professor at several American universities, including Stanford and Yale. Vattimo has amassed an impressive array of publications, with scores of volumes and hundreds of articles both in professional journals as well as in general-interest newspapers and magazines. He has continued to engage the thought of Heidegger and Nietzsche (with his work on the latter sustained and even groundbreaking) and is the Italian translator of Gadamer’s magnum opus on hermeneutics, Truth and Method. More recently, the Torinese’s work has centered on the role of religion in contemporary life and thought as well as the possible convergences of postmodernity with the Christian faith. He has been a member of the European parliament for several years and continues to be involved with reform political movements in Italy. Vattimo delivered the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Glasgow in 2010.

Given Vattimo’s contemporary influence, it is worth examining the fundamental linchpins of his philosophy and his recent reinterpretation of Christianity.

Postmodernism

A phrase frequently heard recently is the “postmodern return of religion ‘after religion.’” This enigmatic expression wishes to say that postmodernity has shattered and transgressed the constricting canons of modern rationalism, allowing religion to reappear in the process, albeit in a changed form, differing from prior understandings of its societal role. Of course, contemporary definitions
of postmodernism are legion and even conflicting, so one is wary of invoking the term. Nonetheless, one may outline some broad contours of this movement.

In general, the term “postmodernism” refers to the continually growing critique of Enlightenment construals of rationality. Modern rationality is understood as attempting to pin down reason to the limited canons of empiricism, positivism, or some equally narrow form of thinking and knowing. Modernity is equated with a reductive attempt to reduce truth to methodology, particularly those methods and canons associated with scientific inquiry, leading inexorably to the detriment of philosophical wonder, to the rise of rationalism, and to the equation of thinking with mere techné. Postmodernity’s contemporary ascent, then, is fueled by its opposition to modernity’s simplistic trust in scientism, its devaluation of the truth mediated by the arts and by tradition, and its marginalization of religion under the banner of the Enlightenment claim that science has unmasked faith as little more than superstitious mythology. Postmodernity argues, in fact, that modern forms of rationality are now in deep retreat. The rationalization thesis itself, that God would eventually disappear in the face of continuing education, has been entirely discredited. And rationalist approaches have hardly solved the intractable problems of human suffering or global warfare. In general, then, modernity’s colonization of the world by a luminous, scientific reason now seems a misguided and constricting utopian dream.

Deeply entwined with postmodernity’s reproach of modernity is its critique of the banishment of religion from the public square. It is precisely here that one sees the meaning of the contemporary phrase, “the postmodern return of religion.” The Enlightenment dispelled religion from the agora on the grounds that it fomented the passions of men and women, was not grounded by empirical science, and inexorably led to obscurantist dogmatism, loathsome intolerance, and anarchic violence. Modernity argued that religion’s explosive potency could be domesticated and neutered only
by reducing it to an entirely private affair, shorn of any public role in everyday societal intercourse. Vattimo and postmodernism argue, however, that this imperious attitude of modern rationalism has itself been exposed as defective. Modernity’s colonization of the world by scientism, its exclusion of “hot religion” in the name of “cool reason,” now seems a cramped and insular project. And so with the unmasking of modernity’s unfounded pretensions, religion must once again be accorded a central role in society. Religion has now returned, and robustly so, to the public square.

But there’s the rub. For if religion has, indeed, returned to a public role and been allowed back into the societal drawing room, by what manners must it now abide? It is precisely here that we shall see how Vattimo conceives “postmodern religion” and so the kind of Christianity that is welcome in the contemporary world. But to bring Vattimo’s religious understanding into clearer focus, we need first to explain his signature philosophical idea, the triumph of “weak thought” (pensiero debole).

Weak Thought

It is perhaps best to understand Vattimo’s weak thought as an attempt to reconstruct rationality in a postmodern way. By this I mean that the Torinese intends to move contemporary construals of rationality away from modern notions of reason, with their aggressive assertions about the “certainly true,” the “really real” and “absolute objectivity,” and with their insinuations that evidence and warrants are unproblematic concepts, readily available to settle questions of interpretative adequacy. Weak thought, on the contrary, holds that the world is not simply given to us as pure, uninterpreted, unmediated reality.

If contemporary philosophy has taught us anything, it is that the world is known by men and women who are already deeply enmeshed in history and tradition, who are themselves entirely theory-laden. Vattimo is convinced, then, that the world is “given” to
us as an always-already interpreted reality. And precisely because of this, we must avoid “strong thought” with its blinkered claims to truth, finality, and objectivity and with its concomitant avoidance of historical contingency. No ultimate, normative foundations exist that are available to us outside of interpretation. There exists no “evidence” that is not already deeply implicated in determinate sociocultural forms of life and in already elaborated interpretative structures. Consequently, we have no clearly available archai or Gründe, undisputed first principles or warrants, that could settle matters finally, that could offer definitive notions of truth that would escape perpetual provisionality (PD, 18; DDWT, 155).

The Internet serves as a good example of what Vattimo is driving at. As any casual user of the Web can attest, the Internet displays to us a profligate interpretative bazaar, since it provides access to a vast collection of machine-readable texts indexed by powerful search engines. We might pose to this bazaar a range of questions about the meaning of anything: What is the nature of humanity? What is the good we should pursue? Which values are ultimate? Is there a God? Do we know anything about him? In the answers proffered to these questions, we have the multivalent, infinitely interpretable world on full view. The Internet, with its inexhaustible explanations of reality, makes patently clear that we reside in a world of competing and proliferating interpretations without a defined center. And precisely this is Vattimo’s point. Our world is without Archimedean levers that offer us evidence to decide these fundamental questions. In fact, it is just on the fundamentals that we see an array of highly variable answers. Strong thought insists on its objectivity and final truth; it contends that it has irrefutable proof to buttress its case, to make final decisions, to offer clear answers. As such it tends toward positivism, aggression, and intolerance. Weak thought, on the contrary, recognizes that all claims to adduce definitive evidence and indisputable warrants are themselves riddled with theoretical commitments and prior suppositions. No final or uncomplicated “givenness” is to be found in evidence itself. Weak thought, in other
words, recognizes the deeply interpretative nature of human life and discourse. And such recognition ineluctably weakens and lightens our sense of the finality of being and truth.

Vattimo, of course, is not the only thinker to insist on the primacy of interpretation or on the hermeneutical nature of human experience. One hears with growing frequency these days the pithy claim that “it’s interpretation all the way down.” This maxim, cited by several recent authors, finds its source in Nietzsche’s assertion: there are no facts, only interpretations. And this, too, is an interpretation! This passage, cited frequently by Vattimo (NE, 155; DN, 74), is meant to remind us that we are embedded and conditioned observers, that we “perform” within different language games, that there exist no universal or unambiguous warrants for knowledge. All warrants for truth, rather, are deeply embedded in specific forms of life, in contingent cultural circumstances. This claim—that all knowledge is, necessarily and without exception, rooted in interpretation—helps us to see more clearly what “weak thought” actually means. It signifies that there exists a multiplicity of interpretations, none of which is self-justifying by virtue of appeals to universally available first principles or evidence. We should understand, rather, that evidence and criteria are not unproblematic concepts. Evidence varies from community to community, from person to person. For example, while the believer may see the world as attesting to God’s goodness and wisdom, a nonbeliever may see only a variety of biological, chemical, and material causes. This is something of what Nietzsche meant by the phrase “God is dead.” God can no longer serve as an unproblematic first principle for objectivity and meaningfulness because “God” is also an interpretation. Nietzsche’s point about the inextricable interweaving of facts and interpretations constitutes one reason why Vattimo resists lumping him together with Marx and Freud. It is true that they were all “masters of suspicion.” But Nietzsche was no subscriber to the claim that the idea of God will inevitably decline as education advances. Unlike Marx and Freud, Nietzsche mocked scientific pos-
itivism as a hopelessly utopian imposter; science gives us no more access to truth and objectivity than does religion.

A good example of Nietzsche’s philosophy is his parable “How the World Became a Fable” from The Twilight of the Idols, a story often repeated by Vattimo. In this parable, the “true world,” the truth, was first available to the wise and virtuous man, the follower of Plato. But, gradually, the true world or the “really real” became successively more unattainable. It was promised to the Christian who committed himself to living an ascetical and virtuous life; later, the true world became entirely unknowable and unattainable in Kantian philosophy, wherein the noumenal world (reality itself) escaped humanity’s cognitive grasp. Finally, the idea of the true world no longer even served a purpose. It became a superfluous notion, best abolished. The true world in fact, no longer even exists! Vattimo is deeply attracted to this passage. Nietzsche’s point (reaffirmed by Vattimo) is not only that we have no universal, self-justifying warrants that give us access to reality but that, in fact, reality itself is constituted by the interpretations we offer. The world is, in fact, simply a play of interpretations (BYI, 7; WP, 402). Weak thought, with its profound doubts about objective reality and absolute certainty, serves, for Vattimo, as a way of liberating human freedom from those who would stifle emancipation and creativity with bellicose claims to certitude and finality. Weak thought allows the human being to seize fully his or her own life, to mold and shape it in new ways, apart from predetermined structures and assertive claims about truth or “unchanging human nature.”

For Vattimo, this difficulty of knowing the truth or reality itself necessarily grants some opening to religion. There is little room for religion in the man of the Enlightenment, the Aufklärer. In modernity, if religion is admitted into the societal drawing room, it is consigned to an obscure corner, considered as belonging to the realm of the affective but cognitively empty, and, often enough, regarded as suffocatingly repressive and authoritarian. As Vattimo says, the modern West was increasingly founded “on
the self-assurance of scientific and historicist reason that saw no limit to increasingly total domination” (BE, 56). And, of course, a spate of recently popular books claiming to defend atheism on the grounds of scientific discoveries shows that this trend is not altogether moribund. Some still long for a recrudescence of a modern spirit that occludes religion. Vattimo, however, regards this kind of militant atheism to be as much a phenomenon of strong thought as is religious fundamentalism, noting that the end of modernity is also the end of positivist science and Marxist historicism with their aggressive claims to have mastered the deep, underlying structure of the universe and to have destroyed religion in the process. Vattimo is convinced that faith in the progress of reason (and even faith in objective truth) has now broken down. Atheist manifestos, then, even with all their Sturm und Drang, their antireligious huffing and puffing, are arriving at the scene in need of an oxygen tank, badly out of theoretical breath.

Vattimo and Religion

But what kind of religion does Vattimo now allow?

Of course, Vattimo is writing in Europe where Christian practice is on the wane but where European intellectuals are besieged by an assertive Islam, with large mosques sprouting in every major city. What happens to secularized, “laicist” Europe in the face of this confident expression of religion? Just here Vattimo gives an indication of the kind of religion that is acceptable to contemporary Western society. If scientific and rationalist modernity can no longer be presumptuous and self-assured about its strong claims to truth, then neither can religion. Consequently, while Vattimo thinks postmodernity and weak thought make room for religion, it is always religion of a certain type and shape. We cannot simply “return” to religion, as if our eyes have not been opened by further reflection, particularly the contributions of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Both of these philosophers have shown us that truth is deeply historicized
and evanescent rather than solid and unchanging. Any contemporary rediscovery of religion (and of Christianity in particular), then, necessarily entails the theoretical overcoming of objectivistic-dogmatic philosophies. As such, Vattimo insists that “dogmatic and disciplinary Christianity . . . has nothing to do with what I and my contemporaries ‘rediscover’” when speaking of faith (BE, 61).

Indicating his chosen path between the Aufklärer and the fundamentalist, Vattimo argues that neither modern scientism (with its positivistic methods) nor premodern dogmatism (with its precipitous enclosing of truth’s boundaries) duplicates contemporary retrievals of faith. The return of religion demands the concomitant acknowledgment that religion can rely on no strong body of doctrine, or on claims to absolute and definitive knowledge. Dogmatic assertions, with their claim to know reality, the *ontos on*, with certainty and finality, represent precisely the kind of objectifying, metaphysical thought that has been discredited by the historical and hermeneutical character of existence. Christian faith must now be understood in light of the profound provisionality and contingency that inexorably distinguish contemporary thought and life. And this leads Vattimo to his own interpretation of the essence of Christianity.

Absent any strong claims, any belief or doctrine that can adequately mediate the world, any revelation that can tell us final and objective truth, then what is the cognitive yield of the Christian faith? For Vattimo, the theoretical resolution of Christianity is found not in doctrine, but only in the notion of *caritas*, charity (understood now as tolerance of plurality). As he says, “The Christian inheritance that ‘returns’ in weak thought is primarily the Christian precept of charity and its rejection of violence” (BE, 44). Precisely here we see, Vattimo insists, the happy convergence between the weak thought of contemporary philosophy and the fundamental teaching (*caritas*) of Christian faith. Both faith (theology) and reason (philosophy) now renounce and repudiate all strong, dogmatic assertions that allegedly offer access to the *logos*-structure of reality, the *ontos on*. Both faith and reason willingly embrace the “twilight of
Being,” that lightening of the solidity of reality that is the necessary residue of the dilution of objectivity.

This helps to explain why Vattimo is fond of citing the well-known dictum rooted in Aristotle’s *Ethics: Amicus Plato sed magis amica veritas* (DR, 218; BYI, 40), a noble sentiment indicating that truth must take priority over friendship, even an intimate one. But he uses this phrase with a purpose, showing how, in our day, it has been contravened. He observes, for example, that when one sees large crowds coming out to cheer the pope, this is not an instance of “amicus Plato,” that is, of love for some assertive dogmatic or moral truth represented by the pope. No one is claiming that the huge throngs of well-wishers that usually greet the pope’s arrival agree with him on many disputed matters; no one is affirming that this man speaks the truth on controversial issues. Rather, one is applauding his universal call to charity, to friendship, to common understanding among all peoples. What is at stake here is *caritas*, charity, tolerance toward others, not some determinate principle of moral or dogmatic truth.

*Kenosis*

Given his claim that the retrievable part of Christianity is its accent on *caritas*, it is no surprise that Vattimo is deeply taken with the biblical notion of kenosis (the self-emptying that occurs in the Incarnation), an image that figures prominently in his thought. For the kenosis of God, the Incarnation, helps us to see why charity (tolerance toward interpretative plurality) is the living fruit of Christian faith. A central passage of the New Testament attesting to the self-emptying of the Son is Philippians 2:6–8: “Though he was in the form of God, Christ did not consider equality with God something to be grasped at; rather, he took the form of a slave, being made in the likeness of men. He humbled himself becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” This passage, one of the few biblical citations adduced by Vattimo, indicates a “weakening” of God,
a renunciation of power and authority, a self-abasement that is the “dissolution of divine transcendence” (AC, 27). In the story of the Son of God become man, Vattimo sees a self-emptying of divine sovereignty, a vulnerability now unexpectedly convergent with the weak thought of Heidegger who teaches the end of objectifying metaphysics and of Nietzsche who argues for the death of the moral-metaphysical God.

In the kenosis of the Son, God renounces power and authority—just as contemporary philosophy has renounced its claims to finality and truth. Both theology and philosophy, then, harbor deep currents tending in the same direction: both are concerned with overcoming strong claims, whether philosophical (e.g., “I now have certitude about the stable structure, the final system, the *ontos on*”) or theological (e.g., “determinate biblical, doctrinal, and moral teachings are absolutely and universally true”). This is why Vattimo says, in a truly revelatory statement, that “Christianity is a stimulus, a message that sets in motion a tradition of thought that will eventually realize its freedom from metaphysics” (ADG, 35). In other words, the kenotic action of God preached by the Christian faith has come to fruition in philosophy’s renunciation of strong, objective claims to truth; contemporary thought thereby confirms the fundamental message of the Gospel: what is endurably important is charity, *caritas*, rather than any determinate claims to truth. The end of metaphysics as proclaimed by Nietzsche and Heidegger is simply a philosophical transcription of the New Testament’s message of charity and love. Rather than being sworn enemies, weak thought and the beating heart of Christian faith are deeply and inextricably related. The divine kenosis revealed in Jesus of Nazareth teaches us that God manifests himself as the vulnerable one who willingly renounces authority, as the one who undermines assertive declarations of truth. It is precisely in the weakness of kenotic Christianity that Vattimo discerns the root and paradigm of secularization.
Secularization

Secularization is a word that, in a religious context, usually carries pejorative overtones. But Vattimo’s contention is just the opposite: Christianity should see secularization not as a development to be decried and reversed, but as a triumph of Christian belief, as a beneficent and propitious impulse given life by Christianity itself. In fact, when we come to understand that the real fruit of religion is charity (tolerance) and that charity is rooted in God’s kenosis (which is itself a parable of the renunciation of power and ascendancy), we gradually come to see that secularization is not the opponent of religion, but one of its most vibrant fruits. Secularization is, in fact, the gradual realization in history of the kenotic self-abasement of God; it is the result of caritas working its way through history. Rather than an adversary of the Christian message, secularization is, on the contrary, an essential component of it. According to Vattimo, “Christianity’s vocation consists in deepening its own physiognomy as source and condition for the possibility of secularity” (AC, 98).

But why, we may ask, is continuing secularization the happy issue and not the deadly foe of fervent Christian belief and practice? One reason is because secularization, properly understood, means that there is room for everyone, no matter his or her belief (or lack of belief), in the public square; no one is excluded from equal participation in the realm of public life and discourse. Secularization is, in fact, the dynamic consequence of Christian caritas because it opens society to every point of view, thereby rejecting an aggressive religiosity that degenerates into fundamentalist ideology, seeking to exclude those viewpoints not conforming to the prevailing wisdom. On the Vattimian reading, secularization is the recognition that the world is a festival of interpretative plurality with no one claiming privileged access to the ontos on. After all, Vattimo asks, in this era of global cultural and religious conflict, does it make sense for Christianity to insist on strong doctrinal claims, on the truth of its own positions?

And this view, with its marked epistemological and ontological
humility, is entirely convergent, Vattimo insists, with the Christian understanding of kenosis, the self-renunciation of power and authority by God. This is why Christianity’s actual achievement does not consist in its strong claims, in its creeds or its system of dogma or doctrine; its stunning achievement, in fact, is the secularized truth of caritas (tolerance) that has led to the modern understanding of rights, to the humanization of social relations, to the dissolution of class structures. These achievements exemplify Christianity’s historical and societal triumph. It is precisely these secularized accomplishments that represent the positive way in which modern civilization has responded to the announcement of the Christian tradition (AC, 26). Indeed, the West acknowledges its proper self-identity when recognizing that it is nothing other than secularized Christianity (kenotic caritas—tolerance—unfurled in history). Vattimo concludes, therefore, that secularization must always be viewed positively by the Christian faith, must be considered as one of its greatest successes. Indeed, the contemporary missionary task of Christianity is not to strengthen its own doctrinal, moral, and disciplinary specificity and concreteness (for this would be a return to a discredited objectivism and would make little sense in a world deeply riven with religious strife), but to accent its unique contribution to world culture that consists in the opening of the secular sphere to wide interpretative plurality, an opening rarely found in other cultures or religions. In Vattimo’s interpretation, Christianity’s new and apposite mission to the world is the spreading of the gospel of tolerance (charity), thereby introducing other cultures to the wisdom of secularization.

The parable of the Incarnation, then, the divine self-emptying, leads straight to a welcoming of secularization. As Vattimo revealingly states: “If I have a vocation to recover Christianity, it will consist in the task of rethinking revelation in secularized terms in order to ‘live in accord with one’s age’, therefore in ways that do not offend my culture . . . as a man who belongs to his age” (BE, 75). A helpful clue to Vattimo’s notion of secularization may be seen in
his comments on the symbols of the crucifix and the chador (the full-length garment worn by many Muslim women). The Torinese’s observations on religious imagery are revelatory insofar as they illustrate just how devitalized and denuded of strong and specific religious assertions the public square must be. He does not object, for example, to the large crucifixes that are often displayed in the classrooms, courtrooms, and public buildings of countries with a Catholic heritage. He does, however, object to the wearing of the chador by Muslim women. Is this a patent case of anti-Muslim prejudice? Not at all. Vattimo makes clear that the crucifix is acceptable precisely because it has lost its assertive power. It now serves simply as a cultural accoutrement, hardly noticeable anymore to the passerby, blending meekly into the background. The crucifix, in other words, the central image of Christianity, has grown weak and attenuated by its acculturation to secular Western society. The chador, however, is a powerfully aggressive symbol of strong thought, of an exclusionary and dogmatic truth claim. As such, it should be banned from the secular sphere in order to allow and encourage tolerance and interpretative plurality (AC, 95–97; 101–2).

The “Natural Sacred”

Vattimo tells us that one reason that Christians should beneficially welcome secularization is because the drifting away from an apparently “sacral core” is the way in which God’s kenosis continues to realize itself in history, overcoming, in the process, the originary violence associated with the “natural sacred” (BE, 48). What precisely does this statement mean? Why is a central part of Vattimo’s eulogistic analysis of secularization rooted in a polemic against the natural sacred?

The Torinese relies heavily here on the thought of René Girard who, in a plethora of studies, has argued that Christ’s death and resurrection fully unveils the “scapegoat mechanism” that is part and parcel of the naturally sacred. A cultural anthropologist as well as a philoso-
pher, Girard observes that, throughout the whole of human history, societies have retained their unity and social cohesion by identifying various persons, groups, or classes as “evil ones,” that is, as causes of social and cultural dissonance. Only when violent action is taken against the malefactors, when they are wounded or killed, is society cleansed and healed, with cohesive social unity now fully restored. It is Girard’s brief that the violence against Christ, leading to his ultimate death, finally unmasked this scapegoat mechanism as belonging to the naturally sacred. But this ritual cycle of violence and cleansing has now been exposed by the New Testament (and, indeed, by aspects of the Old Testament as well) as illegitimate and antihuman.6

Vattimo is deeply taken with Girard’s point that the death of Christ discloses and lays bare the violence of natural, sacrificial religion. He says, in fact, that his reading of Girard led him to thinking about secularization (the drift away from natural religion) as a positive development. For secularization necessarily entails the corrosion of the naturally sacred core of societies, particularly those repugnant exclusionary actions committed in the name of religion. Secularization is a Christian triumph precisely because it moves societies away from the crippling discriminatory tendencies of natural religion and toward the essence and core of true biblical religion that is charity and fraternity. For if, in the Christian parable, God did not hesitate to humble himself, if God willingly took the form of a slave, then how much more should men and women be willing to renounce not only strong thought (with its assertive insistence on certitude) but also natural religion, with its skewed understanding of God’s identity and action in history?

The self-emptying of God, then, bespeaks a divine weakening and charity that enfeebles and destabilizes primitive conceptions of religion. Here, Vattimo goes beyond Girard (as he admits) offering a list of exclusionary (and therefore violent) characteristics that are manifestations of the primitive, natural religion that needs to be unmasked. He says, for example, that the great scandal of Christian revelation, the kenosis, occasions “the removal of all the transcen-
dent, incomprehensible, mysterious and even bizarre features” traditionally assigned to God (BE, 55). Other elements of the natural sacred not yet purified by Christian caritas include the refusal to ordain women to the priesthood in Catholicism (AC, 47; FR, 15); the Church’s opposition to the distribution of condoms during the AIDS crisis in order to avoid “the impression that Christian morality and doctrine may be weakening” (BE, 57; FR, 79); and the condemnation of homosexual activity, on the grounds that this is sick or disordered behavior (BE, 73).

All of these instances, Vattimo insists, smack of a primitive notion of God, rooted in precepts of exclusionary violence, far from the kenotic charity in which God has manifested himself as weak, as friend, and as love. Such positions try to pass off historically contingent judgments (such as the nature of human sexuality or various gender roles) as inescapably identical with a universal human nature or a generalized metaphysical anthropology. But these judgments, Vattimo is convinced, have not been properly cleansed by the Gospel’s central message of caritas and so remain deeply corroded by the violent, constricted sense of primitive religion. Such elements, Vattimo contends, represent the sacred as read through the lens of nature, rather than accenting the God revealed in the kenotic message of the gospels, the God who appears “after metaphysics.” Thus, the Torinese can assert that he has rediscovered “salvation as the dissolution of the sacred as natural-violent” (BE, 61). Vattimo’s attack on the natural sacred here echoes (and supersedes) Heidegger’s well-known comment about overcoming the God of metaphysics, the causa sui before whom one can neither dance nor pray, the god of natural religion who does not reflect the biblical God of the Old and New Covenants.8

Conclusions

This article offers just a glimpse at Vattimo’s provocative thought, briefly outlining a few pillars of his philosophy, particularly his under-
standing of the postmodern return to religion “after religion.” How may Christian theology evaluate his rethinking of religious belief?

While Vattimo’s weak thought appears to be at antipodes to anything resembling historic Christian orthodoxy, we do well to remember the classic principle, with deep roots in the third-century theologian Origen, of “taking spoils from Egypt,” that is, of utilizing truth wherever it is found, even in those who ardently oppose the Christian faith. In the 1998 encyclical *Fides et ratio*, Pope John Paul II gave contemporary force to this position by citing Aquinas’s axiom: “Truth, whatever its source, is from the Holy Spirit.”

And, indeed, there are several elements in Vattimo’s philosophy that have something important to contribute. Is it not the case that, at least in his general diagnosis, Vattimo has his finger on the pulse of contemporary society? Is not everyone exasperated by aggressive claims to truth no matter the quarter from which they emerge? Are not people tired to the point of exhaustion by the brutal paroxysms of violence born of clashing ethnic and religious identities? Does not Vattimo’s thought legitimately seek to respond to the rise in extremism, in fundamentalism, in global animosity? Is this not the basis for the Torinese’s attraction: the contemporary desire to avoid hectoring fundamentalisms of every stripe, to elude the kind of passion that fosters an intolerant crusade for truth apart from human dignity and freedom? Is this not the reason that men and women find a certain resonance with the call for weak thought?

And does not Vattimo’s philosophy have the ring of authenticity when it contends that in a world of competing interpretations, we should allow one fundamental contribution of religion to shine forth: a strong sense of fraternity and solidarity among all peoples, thereby fostering tolerance (*caritas*) toward a wide variety of beliefs? After all, is not one goal of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue to promote bonds of fellowship and common humanity despite differences in terms of strong doctrinal assertions? It is true, of course, that Vattimo’s understanding of charity is not at all equivalent to that of Christianity, which understands *caritas* as supernatu-
ral love poured into human hearts through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, the Torinese’s accent on fraternity and nonviolence surely allows glimpses of a bolder, transcendent charity that supersedes mere tolerance and that insists that fraternal love is a living proof that God abides in us (cf. 1 John 4:12). Moreover, in Vattimo’s attraction to the kenosis one finds a clear affinity for the vulnerable and loving God revealed in Jesus Christ, even if he does not allow himself, because of his philosophical allegiances, to make any ontological commitment to the full reality of the Incarnation or even to the existence of God.

Lastly, even if one cannot sanction Vattimo’s rereading of Christianity, who cannot concur with his evenhanded critique of the naively rationalist modernity of the Enlightenment which, in the name of reason, shunted religion from the public square, desperately trying to reduce the most comprehensive and foundational of realities to a private, cognitively empty affair? Here, too, Vattimo’s thought is to be welcomed for unmasking the colonization of life sought by imperious and suffocating secular reason trading under the banner of enlightened rationality.11

Of course, even an appreciative reading of Vattimo’s thought cannot disguise those elements of his work worthy of criticism. Vattimo has often described his philosophy as “optimistic nihilism”—and nihilism is, indeed, the key word.12 For Vattimo, nihilism (the end of belief in fixed, stable structures or truths) is emancipation. This is the case precisely because nihilism recognizes the world for what it is: a multicultural Babel, an irreducible web of vast interpretative plurality. As Nietzsche observes in the Will to Power, humanity is entirely deracinated, “rolling from the center toward ‘X’.”13 Like Nietzsche, Vattimo also has a strong sense of the triumph of the sovereign, autonomous will. This means, in essence, that the world possesses no logos-structure, no fundamental architecture that itself bestows meaning and wisdom. “Nature,” taken in the sense of the comprehensible and preexisting contours of reality, necessarily becomes here the irremediable and menacing enemy of human lib-
erty. Only if *kosmos* and *physis* are stripped of their pretensions to provide a rule and measure for human being and acting is existence entirely pliant and malleable—and, therefore, free. Any attempt to establish an ontological norm or canon, to assert a constraining *ontos on*, is to illegitimately insist on strong thought, on fixed, stable, metaphysical structures, thereby limiting personal independence. This complete plasticity of nature is essential if promethean human freedom is to be fully unfurled. And this accounts for Vattimo’s profound voluntarism and his insistence on tolerance (named *caritas*) toward virtually any (nonviolent) point of view.  

The historical roots of Vattimo’s thought are not difficult to identify. As Louis Dupré has argued, the ancients were constructivists only to the extent that culture represented a further molding of a given nature. With Descartes and Kant, the form-giving principle of the subject is intensified. There is a gradual loss of cosmic intelligibility, of the truth mediated by nature, of the link between God and creatures. By the time one reaches Nietzsche, as the aforementioned parable from *The Twilight of the Idols* makes clear, meaning is entirely bestowed by human subjectivity. This is why Vattimo insists that Nietzsche and Heidegger complete the turn toward subjectivity and interiority that began with Christianity. It is the Nietzsche of the “death of God” and the Heidegger of the epiphanic and evanescent notion of being that bring to fruition the allegedly antimetaphysical philosophy initiated by Christianity’s interest in the soul rather than in the cosmos. This is why Vattimo insists that “postmodern nihilism constitutes the actual truth of Christianity” (*FR*, 47).

Needless to say, this kind of promethean nihilism regards traditional Christian teachings and beliefs as entirely outdated. The uniqueness of the Jewish law and prophets, of Christ’s historical Incarnation and Resurrection, are swallowed by Vattimo’s weak thought, by the claim that there are no finalities, no enduring, objective truths. On the contrary, the Torinese’s philosophy sublates the concrete and determinately historical dimensions of Christianity into the philosophical idea of an overarching weak thought,
with religion now emptied of its authentic specificity for the sake of the secularized philosophy of nihilism. Christianity here is a parable that only reaches its zenith (now stripped of mythology) in the insights of Heidegger and Nietzsche. But this dissolution of historical Christianity into a philosophical universality is, ironically, the quintessential strategy of modernity, leading one to wonder to what extent the overcoming of the modern attitude toward religion (even in the highly nuanced Vattimian understanding of “overcoming”) has been accomplished. The fundamental narrative of modernity remains the same; only the philosophers invoked (Nietzsche and Heidegger rather than Kant and Hegel) have exchanged places. Christian faith is aufgehoben (sublimated) by a nihilism that alone allows true freedom. No less than modernity, Vattimo wants to defang religion by dissolving it into an inoffensive charity (tolerance) without any truth-claims, thereby (once again) allowing the public square to be entirely secular, absent any strong religious claims.

As is clear, then, Vattimo refuses to commit himself to the kind of definitive and specific claims that Christ and the Christian message inexorably make. These assertions seem to him to replicate a Platonic escape to a reified, ahistorical fable—far from the incessant and enveloping tides of contingency and provisionality, of the dialectic of lēthē and aλήtheia, of hiddenness and truth. His religious identity, therefore, despite his continuing fascination with Christianity, is entirely reconceived according to his own philosophical faith, a faith that cannot see the unconditioned revealed in the historically concrete. The scandalum particularitatis, the shorthand term referring to the scandal of the Incarnation, is indeed, an obstacle for Vattimo’s deeply historicized notion of truth. The Torinese certainly wishes to give Christianity a hearing, even to reintroduce its lexicon into the public square, but it must now be deeply reconceived and reinterpreted, indeed, betrayed in its fundamental instincts.

At the same time, one must nonetheless call attention to the desire for God that animates much of Vattimo’s recent writing. Like a moth drawn to a flame, he returns again and again to the
God-question and to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. To be sure, Vattimo is no paradigm of Christian orthodoxy—as he willingly admits—offering interpretations deeply incongruous with the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus Christ preached by historical Christianity. But his work represents a desire for God, a desire making it difficult for him simply to walk away from religion entirely. In the last analysis, we may see in Vattimo’s provocative work something of St. Augustine’s uneasy heart: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Notes


2. In the sections that follow, I rely on material found in Thomas G. Guarino, Vattimo and Theology (London and New York: T. and T. Clark, 2009).

3. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), no. 481. Several recent comments echo Nietzsche’s point. For example, Brice Wachterhauser avers, “We seem to be in the uneasy position of having to admit that interpretation goes, as it were, ‘all the way


7. As Vattimo says to René Girard in one of their dialogues: “If the orthodox Catholic declares that one is unable to abort, or to divorce or to experiment with embryos and so on, does there not persist here a certain violence of natural religion?” (VFD, 9).


9. So, Origen could say regarding Celsus’s unrelenting attack on Christianity, “We are careful not to raise objections to any good teachings, even if their authors are outside the faith . . . nor to find a way of overthrowing statements which are sound” (*Contra Celsum*, VII, 46).


11. I note, however, that Vattimo’s evaluation of the Enlightenment is mixed. An alteration/healing (Verwindung) of modernity is certainly required, but it cannot simply be “overcome” (Überwindung). See Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology*, 8–10. Pope Benedict XVI provides his own careful evaluation of Enlightenment modernity, including Vatican II’s guarded appropriation of it, in his “Christmas Address to the Roman Curia” of December 22, 2005.

12. Anthony Sciglitano (when speaking of Kant) uses the apt term “urbane Prometheusanism,” a phrase that may be properly applied to Vattimo as well, although the Torinese, while surely an urbane nihilist, can also be quite aggressive about religion’s societal role. See Anthony Sciglitano, “Prometheus and Kant: Neutralizing Theological Discourse and Doxology,” in *Modern Theology* 25 (2009), 387–414.


14. One may contrast Vattimo’s position with Benedict XVI’s recent encyclical (June 29, 2009) on caritas wherein the proper exercise of charity is necessarily linked with enduring truth: Only the truth sets us free (Jn 8:32) while charity itself “ rejoices in the truth” (1 Cor 13:6). See *Caritas in veritate*, §1.