Between Nihilism and Politics

The Hermeneutics of Gianni Vattimo

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SUNY
PRESS

3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 104–105.

4. Ibid., 218.

5. Ibid., 293.

6. Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 60–61.

7. Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 289.

8. Ibid., 283.

9. Ibid., 285.

10. See Costantino Esposito, "Die Geschichte des letzten Gottes in Heideggers *Beiträge zur Philosophie*," *Heidegger Studies* 11 (1995): 51–52.

11. Heidegger uses the term *Herabsetzung*, by which the theological and philosophical tradition has indicted the kenotic movement of the Christian God. It is difficult, however, to see an explicit reference to this tradition; rather, one can think of an unaware echo, or at the most a parodic intention. In any event, in this passage Heidegger thinks of an elevation, not a lowering.

12. Heidegger, *Contributions*, 286; translation modified.

13. Ibid., 39.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 40.

16. René Girard and Gianni Vattimo, *Verità o fede debole?* (Massa: Transeuropa, 2006), 65.

17. Ibid., 54.

18. Ibid., 27.

19. Luigi Pareyson, *Ontologia della libertà* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), 303.

20. Ibid., 306–307.

21. Ibid., 309.

22. Ibid., 308.

23. Ibid., 312.

24. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 70.

25. Ibid., 69.

26. Ibid., 70.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

8

Postmodern Salvation

Gianni Vattimo's Philosophy of Religion

GIOVANNA BORRADORI

To those philosophers and public intellectuals who went through the 1990s convinced that, finally, they had all earned access to a purely secular age the beginning of the millennium must have come as a shock. From the declarations of the masterminds of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which justified their motives on extremist religious grounds, to the ideological underpinning of the American response to those attacks, which also carried strong religious elements, the world must have seemed to have been reversed overnight. "Was I the same when I got up this morning?" Alice ponders shortly after being thrown into Wonderland. And yet, unlike real people in the real world, even at that moment of complete disorientation she does not lose her composure and unbiased inquisitiveness. "I almost think I can remember feeling a little different," she says. "But if I'm not the same, the next question is 'Who in the world am I?'"

In the months and years after the tragic events that came to be known as 9/11, few American voices could be heard showing as much composure and genuine wish to understand as Alice. The loudest cry on the radical left was Noam Chomsky's, who expressed no interest in investigating the question of religion and violence, limiting his critique to the United States foreign policy.[1] The neoconservative right simply closed ranks behind the staple of the first Bush administration: a shallow polarization of the world between good and evil, respectable and

rogue states, friends and enemies. This rhetoric spread panic about security, which gained absolute priority in all arenas. As a result, key theoretical issues with immense political influence lost relevance: among them, the distinction between religion and politics, the concept of secularism, the presumed secularism of liberal institutions, including democracy. Had a sustained public debate occurred on these issues, perhaps a number of reckless political decisions would have looked even more absurd than they already did.

Gianni Vattimo's work on religion is a remarkable European exception. His focus on religion testifies to his formidable philosophical and political intuition, and to his sense of obligation to the historical challenges of his time. The originality of Vattimo's philosophy of religion, which he has been expanding since the mid-1990s, applies as much to his provocative theses as to his conviction that they originate from "elsewhere" than himself. As he wrote in one of his key texts on religion:

> It seems necessary to clarify from the outset that I have resolved to speak and write on faith and religion, because I take the subject matter to be more than a concern of my own renewed personal interest in this theme; the decisive factor is that I sense a renewed interest in religion in the cultural atmosphere around me. However, by seeking to justify and document it I hope to make some progress towards the clarification of this theme. The renewed religious sensibility I "feel" around me, which appears to be imprecise and not definable with any rigor, corresponds well to the topic (to believe in belief) around which my argument revolves. (B 20–21)

What Vattimo calls "cultural climate" is not a *description* of a historical present, populated by facts that may prove or disprove the description. A cultural climate rather consists, for him, in the *interpretation* of those transformative intellectual and social forces that make the present unfold into a unique future. To state the same point from another perspective, Vattimo's "elsewhere" does not draw its validity from the neutral and safe arena of philosophical argument. His "elsewhere" is firmly anchored in an altogether different conception of the relation between philosophy and the world. This conception lies at the core of the great Italian tradition of the *intellettuale organico*, which I will roughly and insufficiently translate as "public intellectual." Launched by Antonio Gramsci and key to his unique brand of Marxism, in Italy the figure of the public intellectual has defined the Catholic leftist lineage as well the secular one. As it has been the case with many intellectuals who played

a decisive role in the Resistance against fascism, in parliamentary politics after the war, and in the public sphere, Vattimo's case represents a distinctly Italian synthesis of Marxism and leftist Catholicism.

In this chapter, I discuss some of the main tenets of Vattimo's philosophy of religion, showing how his willingness to take on religion is part and parcel of his political commitment. I claim that it is precisely Vattimo's sense of political responsibility toward the public sphere that gave him a much deeper reading than most other thinkers on the place of religion in contemporary democracy, starting from 1990s. Vattimo's work throws new light on the origin and motives of the violent eruption of religion as an actor in world politics in the new millennium.

Vattimo's proposal for a synergy between the Christian tradition and a progressive political agenda comes to full fruition in the context of his reflection on the European identity, which he developed alongside one of the orienting figures of his generation: Jacques Derrida. Both Vattimo and Derrida have played an active public role in defining the identity and goals of the European Union. From 1999 to 2004 Vattimo was elected to the European Parliament as a member of the group of the Socialist European Party. Derrida studied both the promise of the new continent-wide alliance and its contradictions, by weighing in on pivotal issues such as the European Constitution, and the stature and integration of illegal immigrants in France.[2]

The occasion of the encounter between Vattimo and Derrida on the issue of religion came in the context of a European initiative. Giuseppe Laterza, from Editori Laterza, arguably the most distinguished Italian publisher of the social sciences, offered Vattimo and Derrida to direct a yearly series of books on the state of philosophy in Europe. They both accepted and when it came to decide the topic of the first volume Vattimo from Turin and Derrida from Paris, without having talked to each other, thought that religion was the most urgent issue.

In the second half of this chapter, I juxtapose Vattimo and Derrida's philosophies of religion, both of which took off at a three-day conference on the island of Capri, in the winter of 1994, and I show how Vattimo's discussion of the relation between religion and politics represents the mirror image of Derrida's discussion of the same question.

During that first meeting in Capri, which occasioned an extensive essay entitled "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida developed one of his crucial theses on the topic: that religion is not a primitive term but a specifically Roman and Christian institution. On this basis, he called into question the universality of the Enlightenment project of separating "politics" from "religion," which revolves around the creation of a "secular" and public space for the former, and a "religious" and private space

for the latter. Derrida warns contemporary democracies against the illusion of operating in the safety of a secular political space, for the reality is that their mostly unacknowledged Christian heritage tends to regulate and limit the participation of new "others."

By contrast, in "The Trace of the Trace," which records his Capri contribution, Vattimo pursues a similar line of argument but in the reverse direction. For him, secularization is the ultimate message of Christianity. By descending on earth and taking up human pain and mortality, the Christian God inaugurated the interminable process of his own secularization. Salvation, in Vattimo's reading, thus amounts to embracing and implementing the interminable process of the secularization of the sacred that he claims is the violent kernel of the Christian faith. In defending that secularization is essential to Christianity, Vattimo redefines the criteria of the "religiosity" of a religion.

In a nutshell: whereas Derrida unearths the Christian structure underlying democratic secular space, Vattimo makes Christian faith indistinguishable from secular discourse. If Derrida asks his fellow secular thinker to reconsider her faith in democratic politics in light of its religious elements, Vattimo asks his fellow religious believer to reconsider her faith in Christianity in light of its secularizing message.

Religious Traces in Christianity

The subtlety, depth, and originality of Vattimo's theoretical project lie in his philosophical engagement with the cultural atmosphere around him, which emanates in the midst of the human world. This is a world of people with whom Vattimo is in constant contact. They read his books and his columns on the Turin daily *La Stampa*, they hear him lecture in academic and nonacademic settings, and they watch him on television discussing gay rights and female priesthood. It is Vattimo's intensive involvement with the public sphere that has allowed him to re-think the distinction between cultural atmosphere and the historicist notion of "spirit of the time," or *Zeitgeist*.

Classical nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century historicists, from Wilhelm Dilthey to Benedetto Croce, viewed philosophy as the *expression* of its time, a position that inevitably translated it into a normative validation of the status quo and conservative politics. In contrast, Vattimo sees philosophy as uniquely situated to capture the emerging, rather than prevalent or mainstream, sentiments of its time. In line with the early Heidegger of *Being and Time*, Vattimo thematizes the human subject as a being-in-the-world who cares about what happens in it. In

line with Gadamer, Vattimo relies on the presupposition that human activity becomes visible only against a "horizon" drawn by our historically determined situation. If a "context" contains the totality of the conditions that theoretically limit our understanding, a "horizon" emerges against a backdrop of prior *involvement* with those conditions. In other words, we exist within a horizon that our interests have opened for us.

Moreover Vattimo combines Gadamer's hermeneutical historicism with the later Heideggerian theory of the present time as the affirmation of an inheritance that is passed on to us by the language we speak, the books that define our formation, the religion of our childhood, our neighbors, and our friends. Heidegger calls this trajectory destiny (*Geschick*) without giving to this notion any of its traditional connotations of predetermination. As humans who are aware of our mortal condition, we have a destiny, but only to the extent that who we are is sent down to us from a past that does not belong to us. The fluidity of this historical movement does not provide stability nor does it presuppose a sharply individuated agent that can own it and control it. We are historical creatures who reconstitute ourselves constantly by producing narratives about who we are.

Unlike the late Heidegger, Vattimo's interest in the notions of destiny and inheritance remains anchored in a commitment to having philosophy act on the present. In the end, I suggest that he develops something close to Foucault's "ontology of actuality."[3] Vattimo's anchor is in the present in the two senses of actuality, a term that both in French (*actualité*) and in Italian (*attualità*) harbors the double meaning of what happens during the present time and what makes news in it. This anchor is the reason why Richard Rorty has defined Vattimo's approach as "common sense Heideggerianism."[4] Such common sense, which is testimony to Vattimo's loyalty to Heidegger's existential analytic, as pursued in *Being and Time*, recognizes the primacy of points of reference, which exceed justification but delimit the horizon in which we exist. Therefore, we are not only always already in connection with a place, at a specific time, under unique circumstances, but we are also, through this connection, in touch with others and their interests, assumptions, fulfilled and unfilled aspirations, and frustrations. This is where Vattimo's commonsense Heideggerianism converges with his progressive politics and his philosophy of religion.

"The Trace of the Trace," the very complex essay that records Vattimo's contribution at Capri, opens with two questions: *Who* speaks of religion today? And *in what language*? In this essay, as in most of Vattimo's other ones, there are many speakers, coming from the present as well as from the past, and many languages, including but not

limited to, original theoretical speculation, highly technical philosophical commentary, and political analysis. But here, two speakers and two languages dominate the stage. There is what Vattimo calls "common consciousness" that speaks the language of actuality, in the sense of what makes news and preoccupies the public sphere. And then there is philosophy, which speaks of actuality in terms of ontology of the now, and does so in the many idioms it inherits from the past. Both the social and theoretical registers, and this is one of Vattimo's central claims in the essay, share a "need for foundations," which is behind the return of religion in the public sphere of democratic nations, in philosophy, and in world politics. Vattimo examines the figure of the return from close by asking himself whether it is the essential figure of religion: "In religion something that we had thought irrevocably forgotten is made present again, a dormant trace is reawakened, a wound re-opened, the repressed returns . . . a long convalescence that has once again to come to terms with the indelible trace of its sickness" (R 79).

Vattimo wavers, however, between the ontological path and his commonsense Heideggerianism, which would render the return of religion a contingent feature of "our conditions of existence in modernity (The Christian West, secularized modernity, a *fin-de-siècle* state of anxiety over the impending threat of new and apocalyptic dangers)" (R 79). Vattimo settles on an original solution that combines both alternatives: "If we accept that it is not an external aspect accidental to the religious experience, then the actual forms taken by this return in our highly specific historical conditions will themselves be considered essential" (R 80).

Here is one of the most distinctive "Vattimo moves." On the one hand, Vattimo historicizes, and thus "weakens," the foundational role of ontology; on the other hand, he ontologizes the conditions of experience, so as to dissolve the metaphysical logic of oppositional pairs (necessary versus contingent, ontological versus historical, inside versus outside) in the fluidity of a hermeneutical horizon.

The figure of the "return" features prominently in both social consciousness and the theoretical realm, which share the need to find a stable and secure ground. Vattimo does not deny that this common longing for stability is a response to fear. Indeed, as he describes it, it is a kind of panic that begins after World War II and is "motivated above all by the sense of impending global threats that appear quite new and without precedent in the history of humanity" (R 80). In social consciousness, this panic originates from the threats of war and genetic engineering; from the lack of a comprehensive meaning of life; from the elusiveness of a recipe against the sheer boredom of consumerism. This panic is also the reason for the resistance to modernization that Vattimo

sees at the heart of the violent return of religion, and that is usually accompanied by the affirmation of ethnic and tribal identities. In philosophy, the same kind of panic exists, but it follows "the dissolution of metaphysical meta-narratives" (R 82). The breakdown of "the philosophical prohibition of religion," prohibition that had characterized the project of modernity from Kant onward, "coincides with the dissolution of the great systems that accompanied the development of science, technology and modern social organization, but thereby also with the breakdown of all fundamentalism—that is, of what, so it seems, popular consciousness is looking for in its return to religion" (R 81).

Vattimo warns, however, that philosophy cannot afford to fall prey to such panic. If philosophy were indeed to let itself be controlled by fear, it would make itself responsible for multiplying violence rather than reducing it. Two reasons motivate Vattimo's warning. First, religion would have to be philosophically understood as having a foundational essence of its own, providing the guarantee of a safe ground. But this means to validate and promote the kind of religious dogmatism of which philosophical meta-narratives are the parallel. To give in to religion as the ultimate ground of stability, safety, and authenticity, would mean for philosophy to subscribe to the most violent of all possible responses. Second, in its craving for religion, social consciousness (and unreflective metaphysical philosophy) "tends to conduct itself reactively." The notion of reactivity comes to Vattimo from Nietzsche and describes the passivity of any "nostalgic search for an ultimate and unshaken foundation" (R 83).

In the face of this spreading panic, philosophy's responsibility is to see itself as the critical consciousness of social consciousness. Vattimo's suggestion is for philosophy to conceive itself as a kind of immanent critique of society, modeled after the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Philosophy's main responsibility would thus be, "without surrendering its own theoretical motivation and indeed while establishing this motivation as the basis for a critical radicalization of popular consciousness" (R 82), to produce an alternative, nonmetaphysical conception of religion.

Besides reducing violence, this methodological posture would facilitate transforming the return to religion into an active and life-affirming force, rather than a reactive and nostalgic one. "It is (only) because metaphysical meta-narratives have been dissolved that philosophy has rediscovered the plausibility of religion and can consequently approach the religious need of common consciousness independently of the framework of Enlightenment critique" (R 84).

Philosophy should take the return of religion as an opportunity to question the (mostly unexamined and hypocritical) dualism that

Enlightenment thought posited between political and religious spheres of competence. "The critical task of thinking in relation to common consciousness consists here, and now, in showing that even for this consciousness the rediscovery of religion is *positively* qualified by the fact of presenting itself in the world of late-modern technoscience, and thus that the relation with this world cannot be conceived only in terms of flight and polemical alternatives" (R 84).

With this observation comes Vattimo's final answer to the two connected questions regarding the significance of today's "return of religion" and the nature of the experience of the "return" *in* religion.

1. The significance of today's "return of religion." The fact that religion "returns" today, in the age of technoscience, is essential and not accidental, or residual, to a nonviolent, nondogmatic, post-metaphysical conception of religion, which is both new and extremely old: as old as religion itself, Vattimo claims. Only the circumstances of this epoch, our epoch, have rendered the return of religion possible, acceptable, indeed, positive. The opportunity opened by the return of religion today will allow philosophy to play a critical role in containing common consciousness's tendency to view religion as an escape. Such escapism, which often makes despair and anger turn to religion, is also, if I may add my own alongside Vattimo's, one of the greatest facilitators in the use of religion as a political, and often violent, ideology.

2. The nature of the experience of the "return" *in* religion. By definition, religion returns to "an originary factuality" (R 81), which does not need to be dogmatically anchored in the sacred text. Such originary factuality may apply, instead, to basic spiritual needs. These needs are not subjective but intrinsic to the human condition. Luigi Pareyson, one of the closest figures to Vattimo since he was a student at the University of Turin, suggested thinking of these originary needs in terms of the need for forgiveness, the enigma of death, the reality of suffering, and the experience of prayer.

A Religion of Nonviolence

The concept of return is explored further in Vattimo's 1996 book, *Credere di Credere*, puzzlingly translated as *Belief*. Written in the first

person, it testifies to his conviction that it is impossible to speak meaningfully of religion without assuming the risk of a full engagement with it on a personal level. And yet, what constitutes religious experience is not, for Vattimo, faithful belief, or even the choice that one makes to exit the secular justificatory realm to embrace a superior, higher order. In fact, the opposite is true. For Vattimo, religious faith is a "recovery of an experience that one has somehow already had. None of us in our Western culture—and perhaps not in any culture—begins from zero with the question of religious faith" (B 21). This "recovery" of the familiar, as opposed to the leap in the unfamiliar, is "the re-presentation of the core contents of consciousness we had forgotten" (B 21). The English term "re-presentation" translates only vaguely "*ripresentarsi*," the Italian verb Vattimo uses here, which more closely means to come back or to reemerge. This specification is important because the "core contents of consciousness" are not for Vattimo mental contents, in the sense of "represented" contents, but rather experiences that come back, reemerge tectonically and spontaneously as soon as we weaken our metaphysical commitment to secularism.

Vattimo is careful to distinguish himself from those believing believers (*credenti-credenti*) who are interested in creationism and for whom the idea of return is "the search for the origin, namely, the creature's dependence on God" (B 21). Creationism and belief in the possibility of reappropriating the origin are precisely the kind of foundational metaphysical claims that Vattimo's hermeneutical project rejects wholesale. Vattimo's return is, instead, modeled after Heidegger's interpretation of the metaphysical tradition in terms of a "forgetting of Being."

In Vattimo's interpretation, Heidegger's notion of forgetting is not an exhortation to recollect "the forgotten origin by making it present again." Rather, forgetting the origin suggests that "we have always already forgotten it, and that the recollection of this forgetfulness and this distance constitutes the sole authentic religious experience" (B 22). An irreducible sense of distance, and not appropriation, a distance that prevents the return from reaching its destination, is thus Vattimo's characterization of the religious experience. Exploring that distance is what Vattimo means by secularization: "a relation of provenance from a sacred core from which one has moved away, but which nevertheless remains active even in its 'fallen,' distorted version, reduced to purely worldly terms" (B 21–22). Such relation of provenance is the only metaphysical commitment that Vattimo agrees to in redefining the religiosity of religion. No doubt, this is a staggeringly "weak" claim about what is distinctly and truly "religious" in religion. Vattimo's religiosity, however,

does not admit the dogmatic kernel of belief required not only by Christianity, but by the Abrahamic heritage, as Derrida called it "in order to bring together Judaism, the Christianities, and the Islams."[5]

Although I believe that Vattimo's Heideggerian interpretation of the religiosity of religion may apply to the Abrahamic umbrella in its entirety, I can also see how Vattimo's work on religion could lend itself to the charge of offering an apology of Christianity. This reading could stress that the Christian dogma of the Incarnation plays a paramount role in Vattimo's philosophy of religion, even though, as I am about to discuss, he interprets it as the secular dogma par excellence. If the dogma of the Incarnation holds the sole key for the desacralization of religion, Vattimo's take could come close to Kant's doctrine of the "reflective faith," in which Christianity emerges as the only moral religion.

I believe that the risk of misreading Vattimo's philosophy of religion in apologetic terms is real, but only if one misses both the Heideggerianism and the Gadamerianism of his strategy. Vattimo's Heideggerianism requires that the origin, which for Christianity is the New Testament, is not an object to be appropriated but a heritage, a *Geschick,* with which one has to come to terms and interminably negotiate. Conjointly, Vattimo's Gadamerianism requires that religion, if hermeneutically conceived, be part of the horizon that our interests have opened for us. These interests are points of reference beyond justification, which nonetheless do delimit the line of the horizon. According to these hermeneutical constraints, Vattimo's overwhelming focus on Christianity is not apologetic as Christianity belongs to his life-story and heritage.

Vattimo's nihilistic rediscovery of Christianity (see B 34) runs parallel to his interpretation of modernity as the final consummation of a nihilistic trajectory. This means that "Being has a nihilistic vocation and that diminishment, withdrawal and weakening are the traits that Being assigns to itself in the epoch of the end of metaphysics and of the becoming problematic of objectivity" (B 35).

The "nihilistic vocation" of the Western metaphysical tradition serves as the model for Vattimo's rediscovery of religion, which has deep roots in the tradition of critical thought. For Max Weber, for example, capitalism, as the defining paradigm of modernity, arises from a "transformation" of the Christian tradition rather than from its elimination. Unlike Weber, however, Vattimo believes that Christianity by its own movement unfolds into secularization. For Vattimo, "a secularized culture is not one that has simply left the religious elements of its tradition behind, but one that continues to live them as traces, as hidden and distorted models that are nonetheless profoundly present" (TS 40).

This is where Vattimo's philosophy of religion joins his theorization of "weak ontology," where a "strong," namely power-laden overcoming of metaphysics (*Überwindung*) is reformulated in terms of a twisting, distortion, or deformation (*Verwindung*) of the tradition. For Vattimo, such twisting is aimed at weakening all foundational force, which he sees as the most effective strategy to avoid reinstituting a metaphysical edifice. Both secular theoretical reason and religious belief are thus engaged in an ontology of actuality. "Philosophy might do better to think of itself as a critical listening . . . to the call that only becomes audible in the condition of inauthenticity itself" (R 84).

As it is the case with the double register of the ontology of actuality—assumed as what makes news and what is present—critical listening entails the deep political and social engagement with the here and now that Vattimo has cultivated throughout his career. The struggle against the oppression and exclusion of minority groups is not, for Vattimo, a distinctly secular value. Modern European culture, which is Vattimo's own heritage, is still linked "to its own religious past not only by a relation of overcoming and emancipation, but also, and inseparably, by a relation of conservation-distortion-evacuation" (TS 42). Conservation here refers to the notion of provenance that is part of the richness of tradition and culture. Distortion is already implied in the turning of a foundational principle or theory into a trace, namely, a marginal and contingent fragment of a complicated texture. Evacuation is an "emptying out," or *kenosis*, "the abasement of God, which undermines the natural features of divinity" (B 47). From this point of view, the object of revelation is not some kind of "truth" but rather "an ongoing salvation. . . . The history of salvation and the history of interpretation are much more tied to each other than Catholic orthodoxy concedes" (B 48–49).

What is truly incompatible with Vattimo's return to religion is violence, and violence, in his world, is intrinsic to metaphysics, which does not only name a philosophical field but taps into what René Girard called "the sacred." "Metaphysical violence is, generally, all identification between law and nature, which has dominated the traditional teaching of the Church" (AC 114). The blessed use of sexuality, embodied by the institution of heterosexual marriage, and the theory of just war are, for Vattimo, examples of metaphysical violence. The secularization he advocates is a kind of desacralization, which Vattimo reads as the true and deepest message of the Christian dogma of the Incarnation. To have faith does not permit any literalist claims regarding the sacred text or blind reliance on religious authority. To believe in salvation is "to understand the meaning of the evangelical text for me, here, now. In other words, reading the signs of the times with

no other provision than the commandment of love, which cannot be secularized" (B 66).

The Christian Roots of Politics versus the Secular Roots of Christianity: Vattimo and Derrida

As I anticipated in the beginning of this chapter, Vattimo's philosophical interest in religion arose at the same time as Derrida's. However, after their initial conversation on the island of Capri, their paths never really intersected again.[6] This fact seems all the more surprising given that, despite the difference of their philosophical orientations, each of their positions on the issue of religion appears to be the mirror image of the other. While Vattimo's desacralization of Christianity renders it almost indistinguishable from secular discourse, Derrida, through his deconstruction of the distinction between theology and politics, renders the secular space of politics, and particularly the supposed secularism of the modern nation-state, almost indistinguishable from Christianity. In conclusion, I briefly recall the main tenets of Derrida's deconstruction of the theologico-political and show its relation to Vattimo's desacralization, or secularization, of Christianity. To discuss in detail their mutual reservations, which are many, would be the subject of another chapter. Here, I limit myself to pointing out how neither one of them believes in the sharp distinction between the secular and the religious domains. This position, which makes them critical of the naïveté of a certain liberal tradition, has allowed both of them to anticipate the most pressing dilemma of our time: the eruption of religion on the geopolitical scene.

Some critics have correctly claimed that in "Derrida's texts of the past few decades, deconstruction became almost coextensive with the deconstruction of an unthought and still-operative theological heritage in Western political thought."[7] I believe, however, that the story is a bit more complicated. Derrida's program of deconstruction of the theo-logico-political should be schematized into two large categories: one is his critique of the notion of sovereignty as the indivisible core of the theologico-political. The other is Derrida's critique of the Enlightenment and more specifically of Kant. While the deconstruction of sovereignty occurs in terms of the whole "Abrahamic filiation," an expression in which Derrida groups the three religions of the book, the deconstruction of the Enlightenment and of Kant focuses more distinctly on Christianity. In his Capri address, from which "Faith and Knowledge" takes off, Derrida pursues three connected but distinct targets relevant to his juxtaposition with Vattimo:

1. A genealogy of the concept of religion. Based on Emile Benveniste's claim that there is no indo-European correlative for what we call religion, Derrida examines the double Roman and Christian origin of the concept, which demonstrates its inadequacy for use as a primitive term. This introduces "the strange phenomenon of Latinity and of its globalization,"[8] which, for this reason, Derrida renames "globalatinization."
2. A critique of the Enlightenment's separation between the secular space of politics and the religious space of faith. The subtitle of "Faith and Knowledge," which reads, "Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," subtly distorts the title of Kant's classical treatise, "Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone." In it, with the concept of "reflective faith," Kant indicated that Christianity is the only "moral" religion. From Voltaire to Kant, from Marx to Hegel, up until Heidegger, Derrida believes that "the fundamentally Christian axiomatics of Kant"[9] remains fundamentally uncontested.
3. A deep link binding religion, the (Latin) concept of community, and violence.

The Christian matrix Derrida retrieves in the concept of religion; the Christian bias that he finds in the philosophical tradition of political philosophy, from Kant onward; and finally, the unearthing of the link between religion, community, and violence all together give Derrida a toolbox with which to attack several key institutions of Western culture, politics, and society. From the nation-state to tolerance, from democracy to the juridical concept of "crimes against humanity," from cosmopolitanism to marriage, Derrida dismantles the integrity of the secular. In order to become really secular, if it were ever possible, all of these concepts and institutions would have to be reinvented.

Conversely, Vattimo believes that secularization is the constitutive trait of Christianity and that salvation ought to be understood as the history of secularization. Loyal to his hermeneutical approach, Vattimo focuses mostly on Christianity, which represents his own heritage.

Vattimo and Derrida are on the same page in claiming that not only Western political discourse and its institutions, but also the philosophical tradition harbors a steady Christian allegiance. However, while Derrida deconstructs the Christian model within the concept of religion, Vattimo hopes to open a space for a nonreligious Christianity, free of dogmatic and metaphysical violence. If Derrida's first commitment is to reveal the theological foundations of politics, Vattimo's is to discover the secular vocation of religion.

Notes

1. Chomsky correctly pointed out how the United States' declaration of war against terrorism flies in the face of the American administrations' financing of all sorts of terrorist groups in the past three decades, from the Contras in Nicaragua to the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan. See Noam Chomsky, *9–11* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001); *Power and Terror: Post 9/11 Talks and Interviews* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

2. Derrida's interest in the European Union is linked to his hope that new forms of sovereignty will arise from the impending ashes of the nineteenth-century model of the nation-state. See Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). For Derrida's contribution to the debate on illegal immigrants in France, see his essay, "On Cosmopolitanism," in *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Huges (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

3. Santiago Zabala had this intuition, too. See his "Introduction: Gianni Vattimo and Weak Philosophy," in *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Santiago Zabala (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007), 21.

4. Richard Rorty, "Heideggerianism and Leftist Politics," in *Weakening Philosophy*, 149.

5. Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness," in *Questioning God*, eds. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Mark J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 28.

6. In 2000, Vattimo participated to a conference in honor of Derrida's philosophy of religion entitled *Judéités. Questions pour Jacques Derrida*, ed. and trans. Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen, Raphel Zagury-Orly, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007). However, and surprisingly, his essay "Historicity and Difference" does not really address any issue that could be relevant here.

7. Michael Naas, "Derrida's Laïcité," *The New Centennial Review* 7, 2 (2007): 25.

8. Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," in R 29. The globalization of Latin and Christian terminology is for Derrida a hyper-imperialist phenomenon, which "imposes itself in a particularly palpable manner within the conceptual apparatus of international law and global political rhetoric" (Ibid.).

9. Ibid., 52.