

EDITORIAL

Religion in postmodernity. A tribute to Gianni Vattimo

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Nihilistic hermeneutics and christianity in Gianni Vattimo

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Abstract

The objective of this text is to analytically present the relationship between nihilistic hermeneutic philosophy and Christianity, from which the Vattimian formulation of “non-religious Christianity” emerged. This objective is justified by three fundamental reasons. The first is that Gianni Vattimo elaborated a philosophical program, concentrated in his *pensiero debole*, which denoted the crisis of metaphysics and the construction of a nihilistic hermeneutical philosophy, through which he built the conception of “non-religious Christianity” and an effectively practical political philosophy. The second is that Vattimo is an author, who has become a significant subject of study for researchers in Religious Sciences and Philosophy, both internationally and nationally. The third refers to the author’s own personal identity, markedly Catholic Christian, since childhood, which has been combined, in its own way, to the nihilistic strand of hermeneutic philosophy as a basis to being reflecting on the human being and the world. To achieve this objective, the fundamental characteristics of Vattimo’s philosophy, the relevance of his nihilistic hermeneutic philosophy in relation to Christianity and the way religion is situated in post-modernity will be presented.

Keywords: Gianni Vattimo. Nihilistic hermeneutic philosophy. Non-religious Christianity. Religion.

Introduction

The aim of this text is to present the relevance of thinking about religion in postmodernity in the light of the philosopher Gianni Vattimo, considered an important thinker of the 20th and 21st centuries.

This objective is justified by three fundamental elements. The first is that this Italian thinker has developed a program of nihilistic hermeneutic philosophy, focusing on the concept of *pensiero debole* and its respective developments, among which are the conceptions of postmodernity and a philosophy of religion that enabled him to coin the concept of “non-religious Christianity”. A philosophical program that had an impact on his political praxis, since he became a member of the European Parliament, combining this militancy with philosophy, having developed a political philosophy. The second element of justification is that this thinker is a source of research in academic studies in Italy, in *Stricto Sensu* postgraduate programs in CAPES area 44, Sciences of Religion and Theology in Brazil, and to a lesser extent, in

the area of Philosophy, in addition to having repercussions internationally, including Latin American countries, specifically Argentina and Colombia. The third element is that Vattimo set out to think about religion from his own personal identity, which had been markedly Catholic Christian since his childhood, with daily attendance at Mass, praying the breviary and following the disciplinary and moral prescriptions, and Catholic Action, so encouraged by Pope Pius XI in Vattimo's youth.

In order to achieve this goal, we will present the fundamental characteristics of Vattimo's philosophy, the relevance of his nihilistic hermeneutic philosophy for thinking about Christianity and the way religion is situated in post-modernity. It is hoped that the reader will enter into the problematic that permeates the entire dossier in homage to this Italian thinker, who died on September 19, 2023, by receiving and thinking about religion in postmodernity.

Fundamental characteristics of Vattiminian philosophy

Gianni Vattimo (1936-2023) was an Italian from Turin. He had been brought up in a Catholic family and had been active in the Church since childhood, attending Mass daily and praying the Liturgy of the Hours assiduously, faithful to the Pope's teachings, even in the context of a social Catholicism that found its foundation in neo-Thomism, especially the integral humanism of Jacques Maritain. Thus, motivated by his readings of the French philosopher, Vattimo entered the philosophy course at the University of Turin, where he was taught by Luigi Pareyson, an icon of Italian hermeneutic philosophy and very close to Hans Georg Gadamer, an excellent philosopher of hermeneutics. It was his teacher who led him to the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche (1855-1900) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who, because they shared a philosophy of action or praxis, he identified with Maritainian thought, which led to a Christian humanism called integral humanism, because it was concerned with the whole human being.

Vattimo's main concern in the development of his philosophy was the crisis of metaphysics, announced by Nietzsche in the sentence of the "death of God" articulated with the Heideggerian project of "overcoming metaphysics". In this sense, the "God who died" is the God of objectivist metaphysics, who entified God and who established a process of grounding human life and the conception of the cosmos throughout the philosophical tradition. For this reason, Vattimo accepted Heidegger's observation that being was forgotten by metaphysics, as it was confused with being, and that an "ontotheology" prevailed that entified God, human beings and the universe.

By articulating the Nietzschean sentence of the "death of God" with the Heideggerian project of "overcoming metaphysics", Vattimo achieves something very original in his philosophical formulation: the *pensiero debole*. By *pensiero debole*, Vattimo understands the weakening of being in institutional structures, in conceptual formulations and in the very conception of truth. It is a way of thinking that refers philosophically to hermeneutics, which makes it possible to understand and interpret, always leaving the expression of truth open to new possibilities of expression. However, this philosophical status *spiritualis* is not in line with scientifically positivized modernity, but points to post-modernity, marked by a paradoxical spirit of rupture and continuity with modernity. In this sense, postmodernity denotes the end of grand narratives and the beginning of metaphors, linguistic openness, flexible and nomadic structures. For this reason, postmodernity is not the overcoming of modernity, but its paradox, or rather the explanation that being has been weakened. And it is in this context of a weak ontology and, consequently, a weakness of being, that Vattimo alludes to a "philosophy of the morning", which goes beyond the concepts established throughout

tradition, to highlight an “ontology of the present” and, consequently, a philosophy that is attentive to the epochality of being. It follows from this spirit that it is pertinent and relevant to build a philosophical program of a nihilistic hermeneutics, which seeks to understand and interpret being in its weakness, present in open epistemology, in aesthetics, in the recomposition of metaphysics and, consequently, in the reconfiguration of the conceptions of God, the human being and the world.

In view of the above, the question must be asked: what does a nihilistic hermeneutics mean? Hermeneutics is concerned with the meaning of being, since it comes from the history of metaphysics and its end. Heidegger’s thesis on the ontological difference between being and being is the focus of this concern: for a long time, metaphysics forgot the difference between being and being and postulated being as being. This movement gave rise to new terms for “being as being”: supreme being, first mover, reason, subjectum, principle, God, among others. Heidegger’s way out of this problem was to understand being through a process of constituting a fundamental ontology, which started with the *Faktische Lebenserfahrung*, went through existential analysis and was configured as *Ereignis*, the appropriative event. In this way, being happens in human historicity through the inheritance that human beings receive from their tradition. In this way, being is not an entity given by simple presence, but an event, a happening to be appropriated by the human being.

The consequence of this Heideggerian thesis is the development of hermeneutics as that which also speaks about the “meaning of being” (Vattimo, 1999, p. 25). However, with Vattimo, hermeneutics takes on a nihilistic tone from his readings of Nietzsche, as the philosopher defends the need to return to the oblivion of metaphysics in order to recover the forgotten being. This return is guided by nihilism. With this, we don’t want to think of being again as a simple presence, but in its action of giving itself (*es gibt*) “as suspension and subtraction” (Vattimo, 1999, p. 26). In *The Nihilistic Vocation of Hermeneutics*, Pieper (2007, p. 12) explains this movement that Vattimo makes in his hermeneutics:

O niilismo é a história do enfraquecimento do ser, de forma que, no final da metafísica do ser como tal, já não resta mais nada. Partindo de Nietzsche e Heidegger, Vattimo reconhece na história da metafísica certa tendência ao niilismo. A pergunta pelo ser, que o transformou em ente, tende à dissolução deste ser entificado nas suas formas mais sagradas e absolutas. Tudo é considerado elevado e deflacionado na história da metafísica. É neste sentido que Heidegger entende, e Vattimo concorda, que a essência da metafísica é o niilismo. Como em Vattimo o niilismo supera a metafísica, é possível conceber a história do Ocidente como direcionada para o enfraquecimento das estruturas fortes da metafísica, levando à sua superação. Em suma, no niilismo de Vattimo, o destino do ser ainda ocupa lugar importante. No entanto, já não é mais o ser metafísico, mas o ser como evento.

Nihilism as the history of the forgetting of being means that being as being was constantly forgotten by metaphysics, it was denied, it became a “nothing”. Western metaphysics, although it thought it was talking about being, was actually talking about being, and nothing was said about being, because there was nothing left of it. While for Heidegger nihilism appears as the limit of metaphysics, Vattimo thinks of overcoming it through nihilism. Thus, for Vattimo, nihilism is the chance (Vattimo, 2002) we have to jump out of metaphysical thinking and start another era that brings with it another way of thinking. After all, in an explicitly nihilistic (and anarchic) direction, Vattimo writes: “Being is not a foundation, any founding relationship always takes place within an epoch of being, but epochs as such are opened up, and not founded, by being” (Vattimo, 2002, p. 115). The opening of an epoch occurs through the way “how” - “Wie” - *Dasein* apprehends its tradition, interprets it and constructs its world from this. The epoch is not only opened up by being, but also by *Dasein* itself.

In this sense, Vattimo's nihilistic hermeneutics does not affirm any foundation, because it does not assume being as being. Starting from this point, we cannot assume any other being as being either, that is, we can no longer affirm that reason, God, the first mover, the beginning and others are foundations. Ultimately, these terms are names with which Dasein constructs its interpretation of history and on which it builds its world. In the Nietzschean sense, these terms are fables (Nietzsche, 2014). A fable is not something that doesn't exist or that tells just any story. The fable is the story in which we dwell and through which we understand the world (Vattimo, 2002, p. 3), being an opening of being, but we know that many other openings can be put in its place. We know that being is told in many fables. What this means is that the problem we are dealing with is a problem of language. Nihilistic hermeneutics makes us aware that we are constructing fables all the time and that we live in these fables, but we know that they are fables.

So, given the horizon of nihilistic hermeneutics and the acceptance of fable, how can we think about religion? This question has run through Vattimo's works, especially since the 1990s. The Italian philosopher talks about religion with Christianity in mind and identifies that there is a link between the Christian message and nihilism, which can be seen in the neo-Testamental concepts of *kénosis* and *caritas*. It is from this perspective that we will approach Christianity in the next topic.

Christianity on the horizon of nihilistic hermeneutics

Commenting on Nietzsche's work in his book *The Subject and the Mask*, Vattimo (2017) observes that what the German philosopher called "historical illness" could be overcome through art. The "historical disease" is the hallmark of the modern ratio, it is the way of conceiving history as a simple historiography of facts that have occurred and that are petrified in a certain interpretation. Thus, the "historical disease" is marked by an excess of information that modern human beings received (and that we also receive today), which makes them incapable of taking any action in the face of the world, precisely because they are unable to develop any kind of historical awareness of their time. Nietzsche advocated that art was a way out of this stage (which is also nihilistic), since it releases Dionysian creativity and is an eternalizing power, that is, a form of action of the will to power that allows finitude to be transcended. Alongside art, Vattimo also places religion: "You can only get out of this situation by recovering the ability to delimit a horizon: to do so, you have to use some eternalizing powers, such as art and religion, which take your gaze away from becoming and restore the ability to act" (Vattimo, 2017, p. 77, emphasis added). We don't have time to develop the relationship between metaphysics and historiography, although historiography is visible as the only narrative about reality that depends on a well-defined or objectivist metaphysics, which in Nietzschean terms we can call ratio. The question is: to what extent is religion a way out of metaphysics and a way of overcoming the "historical disease"? Nietzsche didn't think of religion in these terms, but Vattimo does. Religion restores the capacity to act.

Thinking about religion in this way allows us to connect religion to that Heideggerian interpretation of the "how" - "Wie", that is, the way in which Dasein lives its existence based on an understanding of religion that affects it. This "how" delimits Dasein's mode of access to beings, since, according to Heidegger himself in *Being and Time*: "Dasein is each time what it can be and how [wie] it is its possibility" (Heidegger, 2012, p. 409). In other words, the "how" is the possibility of Dasein accessing beings and understanding them within its horizon. In *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, Heidegger explains this "how" by relating it to another concept: the phatic experience of life. He states:

O importante é que a experiência fática da vida se torne acessível. Pode-se apenas caracterizar o jeito e a maneira, ou seja, o como [Wie] do experimentar de cada mundo. Isso significa que é possível perguntar pelo sentido de referência [Bezugssinn] da experiência fática da vida. É questionável se o como, a referência àquilo que é experimentado, o conteúdo, é determinado e como ele se caracteriza (Heidegger, 2014, p. 16).

By this, we mean that the phatic experience of life can only be an experience insofar as Dasein experiences the world in “its own way”; not in the sense that it is a trivialized experience, but in the sense that it is crossed by experience at the same time as it crosses it. Through the “how”, Dasein lives an experience that is the experience itself, already interpreted by it. This interpretation will lead Heidegger to develop his own reading of Augustine and the letters of the Apostle Paul and, in both cases, he anticipates the theme of temporality that will become the axiomatic point of *Being and Time*. Vattimo doesn't exactly follow the path of the Phenomenology of Religious Life to talk about religion, although the last chapter of *After Christianity*, entitled *Hos mé: Heidegger and Christianity*, provides a reading in which the philosopher interprets the question of temporality through Heidegger's interpretation of Paul's letters (Vattimo, 2004). What Vattimo draws attention to in his text is that what seems significant to him is “the theme of Sein und Zeit, and also that of the more mature Heidegger, which makes explicit the idea of metaphysics as forgetfulness of being, and which appears in its essential connection with reflection on the Christian experience” (Vattimo, 2004, p. 152). Vattimo (2018b) argues that there is a direct connection between Heidegger's interpretation of time and the Christian experience of lived faith. This theme reappears in other texts by the author alongside other more thorny themes in *Essere e dintorni*.

But to what extent does temporality relate to religion for Gianni Vattimo? When the philosopher comments on Heidegger's work, he identifies the use of the concepts of **παρουσία** (*parusia*), **ἔγένετο** (*eghéneto* - already) and **γενέσθαι** (*ghénesthai* - not yet). The Apostle Paul states in the Letter to the Thessalonians that the Christian life is marked by **θλίψη** (*thilipsis* - tribulation). This condition brings anguish to the human being who lives a life in temporality, because tribulation reveals the Christian's lack of stability in the face of life. The solution to this problem (which is, in fact, indissoluble) is the affirmation of **παρουσία** as the constant actualization of the presence of the Messiah, that is to say, it is the anticipation in the here and now of the existence of the presence of the Messiah as the one who saves the human being from this **θλίψη**. This anticipation is the experience of the **ἔγένετο**, even if it is a **γενέσθαι**. The meaning of the last chapter of *After Christendom* lies in the interweaving of these concepts with the Pauline expression of **ὡς μὴ** (*hos mé* - as if): Christian life is a phatic experience that lives in anticipation of the arrival of the Messiah in temporality (Vattimo, 2004, p. 155-157). The Christian lives as if the Messiah were present. This “as if” is also a way of experiencing facticity, as we were discussing with Heidegger earlier, and connects directly to the Vattimian affirmation inspired by Nietzsche that religion restores the capacity to act. The way religion is lived delimits human action in the world.

Vattimo articulates his pensiero debole with Christianity on the basis of the categories of *caritas* and *kénosis*. These two concepts are not directly related to the Heideggerian interpretation of the Apostle Paul's **ὡς μὴ**, but here we can present some possible ways of opening up the investigation in this direction. Vattimo interprets *kénosis* on the basis of Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:4), in which the idea of *kénosis* signifies Jesus' emptying of all his divine condition and his consequent descent from heaven to inhabit human history. For Vattimo, this passage communicates another form of divine revelation that takes place in historicity and no longer on the ethereal plane of metaphysical modalities, since *kénosis* means “the disabling of all transcendental, incomprehensible, mysterious characteristics” (Vattimo, 2018a, p. 52). With this understanding,

Vattimo also connects *kénosis* to his ontology of weakening and to the modern concept of secularization. While in the first case, *kénosis* means the Christian translation of the weakening of being in the history of metaphysics and, therefore, the nihilism present in Christianity; in the second case, it refers to a progressive dissolution of the contents of metaphysics that Christianity has been operating throughout the history of the West, since Christianity is its guiding thread (Vattimo, 2004; 2018a). In *After Christendom*, Vattimo writes: “If, however, secularization is the way in which the weakening of being, that is, the *kénosis* of God, which is at the heart of salvation history, is acted out, it should no longer be thought of as a phenomenon of the abandonment of religion, but rather as an actuation, albeit paradoxical, of its intimate vocation” (Vattimo, 2004, p. 35). In these terms, secularization appears as the other face of Christianity (Gonçalves, 2018) and, therefore, the performance and liveliness of Christianity in contemporary times. The *kénosis* evokes the relevance of the Christian religion for the West.

To what extent does *kénosis* evoke the actuality of Christianity? To the extent that it appears as the nihilistic face that acts within Christianity, undermining all metaphysical constructions (cf. Vattimo, 2018a; Pieper, 2007). The faithful Christian who lives in contemporary times and therefore awaits the Messiah through tribulation and anticipates his arrival through faith, is the one who updates the message of Christianity in a kenotic way, that is, the Christian is called to an attitude of simultaneous deconstruction and construction of the Gospel and ecclesiastical dogmas, it is an “anarchic” way of being Christian, as Vattimo himself writes in *Crer que se cré* (2018a, p. 101). And the *modus operandi* of *kénosis* is *caritas*, openness to the plurality and novelty that comes with the countless possibilities of understanding the world. If *kénosis* weakens truth as a rigid interpretation, *caritas* makes possible another paradigm of truth that is not established in metaphysics, but in dialog between the subjects who interpret the world. *Caritas* is the hermeneutic foundation, even if the same foundation - *Grund* - is the non-foundation - *Abgrund* - or rather the deepest or the abyss. Thinking in these terms allows us to broaden our understanding of Christianity and its relevance today, in order to understand the extent to which it can coexist in a plural society.

Gianni Vattimo’s contribution to the study of religion

What research possibilities does Gianni Vattimo’s philosophy raise for the Sciences of Religion? Firstly, it’s important to consider that Vattimo’s thought is more widely shared by religious studies groups in Brazil than by philosophy groups, which means that the author has “something to say” to the Sciences of Religion. Secondly, we must bear in mind that the Sciences of Religion are constituted in a hermeneutic spirit and therefore interpret religious phenomena, whether from an insider or outsider point of view, or from other possible approaches. In this way, Vattimo’s hermeneutic philosophy can help shape the epistemological framework of religious studies.

However, without a doubt, his interpretation of secularization as a process that began in the West through Christianity is one of the most central theses of his thought and one that can open up discussions about a secularized Christianity. This means that Christianity does not close itself off from institutionalism, but opens itself up to the various practices that spring from the “spiritual reading of the Gospel”, according to Vattimo’s evocation of Gioacchino di Fiore. The practical effect of this interpretation is a Christianity that does not promote any kind of intolerance or supremacy, but places itself in the plural environment of dialog and can live with other cultures. Here, it is worth asking Vattimo himself: to what extent can Christianity play a leading role in ecumenism, communitarianism and inter-religious dialogue, without this leading role sounding like haughtiness, but rather as an expression of a secularization that denotes that religion is experienced

as being in mundi, in a context of pluralism that evokes respect, freedom and the effectiveness of human dignity?

Another point to consider is that Vattimo's theses help us to build a more qualified reflection on the permanence of a non-institutional and non-denominational Christianity, even bordering on the ethical arguments of the Christian message. By understanding Christianity as the encounter between Christianity and metaphysics, Vattimo wants to emancipate the evangelical message from the bonds of the objectivist metaphysics generated in the West. What can a Christianity without metaphysics produce? What are its limits and approaches? To a certain extent, this is also a kind of Christianity free from the will to power, and therefore also free from violence. It is a Christianity that is weak and incapable of being an ally of authoritarian and imperialist political projects, as Christendom wanted, although in its weakness it can seek alternative forms of institutionality. This is where religion, and especially Christianity which is in the sphere of Vattimian philosophical analysis, is situated in post-modernity: a weak religion in function of a weakened ontology.

Final Considerations

These considerations that have emerged in this editorial are intended to show the breadth of Vattimo's thinking and to point out the ways in which we still have to develop our research into the work of such a current and thought-provoking author. With our brief introduction to Vattimo's thought and without wishing to go any further in theorizing about his concepts, we want to show the reader that the articles available in this dossier dialogue with the most pressing contemporary issues, whether when we talk about the permanence and meaning of religion, or when we talk about political practice and its relationship with religious discourse.

The contribution of Brazilian researchers shows the presence of Vattimo's ideas in the departments and *Stricto Sensu* Postgraduate Programs of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Sciences in Brazil, just as the contribution of international researchers shows us the extent to which Vattimo's thought has capillarity and develops in different perspectives around the world.

We are grateful to each author who contributes to this dossier and helps us to dialog internationally with the themes that Gianni Vattimo worked on during his lifetime and to see how they still have a bearing on our contemporary world.

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