

## After the Death of God: Nietzsche's Long Shadow

### A Fateful Statement

So far, we have not yet mentioned the words that, more than any other sentence ever uttered before, captures the ultimate meaning of the personal and collective event known as 'secularization'. These three words – “Gott ist tot” – became the metonymic equivalent of a fateful diagnosis of the modern age after Nietzsche put them at the centre of a highly evocative allegorical tale. The atmosphere enfolding Nietzsche's parable is reminiscent of the pathos with which classical tragedies are suffused. Something enormous has happened despite the harmless intentions of those involved, but the event can only be experienced as an act for which they are fully responsible. “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!” proclaims aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science*,

How shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers? [...] Is not the magnitude of this deed too great for us? Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it? There never was a greater event, and on account of it, all who are born after us belong to a higher history than any history hitherto!

And again, a little further on: “Lightning and thunder need time, the light of the stars needs time, deeds need time, even after they are done, to be seen and heard. This deed is as yet further away from them than the furthest stars, *and yet they have done it!*”

The meaning of this prophecy was explained by Nietzsche himself in the rumination opening book five of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, which he added in the second edition of the work, published in 1887, five years after the first. The death of God, according to his interpretation, is “the most important of more recent events”, even if few are truly able to contemplate its spectacle. The event is in fact “far too great, too remote, too much beyond most people's power of apprehension, for one to suppose that so much as the report of it could have *reached* them”. Indeed, it is a catastrophic event that far exceeds any natural cataclysm. The foundations of an entire civilization have collapsed – “for

1 Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, trans. by T. Common, Mineola (NY): Dover, 1986, p. 90 et seq.

example, our entire European morality” – and what we are now facing is “a lengthy, vast and uninterrupted process of crumbling, destruction, ruin and overthrow which is now imminent”. And although Nietzsche hastens to point out that, for those who are “posted ’twixt to-day and to-morrow”, the shadows cast by *Gottes Tod* are the prelude to a “new dawn” – the “great noontide” announced by Zarathustra – what the sentence leaves in its wake is on the whole a sense of bewilderment in the face of the enormity of the change.<sup>2</sup>

The influence of Nietzsche’s grand narrative of the “death of God” is enormous, impossible to measure. In the 1950s and 1960s, it inspired a current of theologians, mostly Protestant, whose radicalism in heralding the accomplished secularization and the need to revolutionize the vocabulary and conceptual repertoire of Christian theology aroused the curiosity of *Time* magazine, which on 8 April 1966 hit the newsstands with a red-on-black headline asking brutally its readers: “Is God Dead?”. Print runs skyrocketed.<sup>3</sup>

In his essay “Nietzsches Wort ‘Gott ist tot’, Martin Heidegger interpreted Nietzsche’s words within the non-evenemential horizon of his anonymous *History of Being*.<sup>4</sup> For him, Nietzsche’s preaching is both the fulfilment of the millennial history of Western philosophy and the unveiling of its deeper meaning: “nihilism”. The ‘nothingness’ that asserts itself in this epoch-making destination is ambiguous like any twilight phenomenon worthy of the name, but for Heidegger it has mainly to do with the oblivion of being, that is, with the impossibility of thinking through ontological difference within the coordinates established by Western metaphysics since Plato. The flattening down of Being on mere presence-at-hand, on being usable, manipulable, valorizable, is the distinctive trait of the modern world which, thanks to technology, literally ‘grasps’ and makes natural processes infinitely available. Mechanized nature, furthermore, is a nature without gods (*entgottert*), in which Christianity is

2 Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, p. 155 et seq.; see also Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. by T. Common, Ware: Wordsworth Classics 1997, p. 75.

3 Cf. Caputo, John D./Vattimo, Gianni, *After the Death of God*, edited by Jeffrey W. Robbins, New York: Columbia University Press 2007, p. 1.

4 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, “Nietzsche’s Word: ‘God is Dead’”, in Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. by J. Young/K. Haynes, pp. 157–199. See also Heidegger, Martin, *Nietzsche*, 4 vols., trans. by D.F. Krell/F.A. Capuzzi/J. Stambaugh, New York: Harper & Row 1979–1987, especially volume 4: *Nihilism*, trans. by F.A. Capuzzi, New York: Harper & Row 1982, pp. 99–101, where Heidegger engages in a ruthless deconstruction of the theorem of secularization. On Heidegger’s dismissive judgement see Monod, Jean-Claude, *La querelle de la sécularisation*, pp. 9–16.

reduced to one worldview among others and where the relation to the divine is subjectivized or, put another way, “transformed into religious experience”.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, metaphysics counts much more than religion in Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s words. For the author of *Sein und Zeit*, it is silly to claim that secularization or disenchantment are the two main traits of modern civilization. Rather, modern civilization is characterized by the affirmation of a new ideal of freedom hinged on the self-discovery and self-valorization of the subject, which now becomes *fundamentum absolutum inconcussum veritatis* – the absolute, uncontested foundation of truth. To argue otherwise is to remain at a superficial level of understanding. “Within the history of the modern age, and as the history of modern mankind”, Heidegger argues,

man universally and always independently attempts to establish himself as mid-point and measure in a position of dominance; that is, to pursue the securing of such dominance. To that end, it is necessary that he assures himself more and more of his own capacity for and means of dominance, and that he continually places these at the disposal of an absolute serviceability. The history of modern mankind (*Menschentum*), the inner workings (*Gesetzlichkeit*) of which only in the twentieth-century emerged into the full and open space of something incontrovertible and consciously comprehensible, was *mediately* prepared by Christian man, who was oriented toward the *certitude* of salvation. Thus one can interpret certain phenomena of the modern age as ‘secularization’ of Christianity (*Säkularisierung des Christentums*). In most decisive respects such talk of ‘secularization’ is a thoughtless deception; because a world toward which and in which one is made worldly already belongs to ‘secularization’ and ‘becoming worldly’ (*Verweltlichung*). The ‘*saeculum*’, the ‘world’ through which something is ‘secularized’ in the celebrated ‘secularization’, does not exist in itself or in such a way that it can be realized simply by stepping out of the Christian world.<sup>6</sup>

In brief, in order for Christianity to be secularized or the world de-Christianized, the conditions must first be created for the displacement of its values from ‘up there’ to ‘down here’, from heaven to earth, and such a quantum leap can only take place through the work of metaphysics, that is, of that “determination of the truth of beings as a whole and of the essence of such truth”, which “grounds

5 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, “The Age of the World Picture”, in Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 58.

6 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, *Nietzsche*, volume 4, p. 100; see also p. 240: “Mere renunciation (*Abkehr*) of Christianity signifies nothing if a new essence of truth has not previously been determined for that renunciation, and if being as such and as a whole is not made to appear in terms of this new truth”.

an age in that [...] it provides that age with the ground of its essential shape".<sup>7</sup> If this basic truth is not fully digested, confusion is inevitable. The effect, I mean, will be mistaken for the cause and people will come to believe, for example, that the essence or the ground of modern nihilism lies in unbelief, that is, in disaffection with Christian doctrine or symbolism. The latter, however, is on closer inspection only the philosophically dull consequence of much deeper and more ancient causes. Failure to grasp this point means surrendering to a "semblance of reflection, so long as it refrains from thinking about a settlement for man's essence and from experiencing that place in the truth of being".<sup>8</sup>

Still, Nietzsche's statement actually seems to speak of a less bombastic event, closer to the experience of ordinary people. The madman, after all, moves between the marketplace (where he meets "many people who did not believe in God") and the different churches into which he makes his way singing *Requiem aeternam Deo*. Moreover, he refers to the people who make fun of him as murderers and reminds them at every turn that "We have killed him, – you and I!". The death of God, in other words, is an episode in the history of human institutions, perhaps even a suicide of Christianity, a victim of its own inability to foresee and curb the nihilistic consequences of its reverent trust in truth. But it concerns primarily the minds, hearts, and bodies of flesh and blood people. The same faithfulness to the earth preached by Zarathustra only makes sense in the light of a principled rejection of any otherworldly destination for humanity. All-in-all, Nietzsche seems to treat the question of the eclipse of God in the modern world and its repercussions on human existence more as a practical problem than as a theoretical conundrum. For the philosopher from Meßkirch, on the other hand, the question is eminently speculative. "Thought as the effective reality (*wirksame Wirklichkeit*) of everything real (*Wirklichen*)", Heidegger points up, "the supersensory ground of the supersensory world has grown unreal (*unwirklich*). This is the metaphysical sense of the metaphysically thought word 'God is dead'".<sup>9</sup> 'I', to indulge in a questionable pun, has taken the place of 'High' in the age of Nothingness, unmasking once and for all the onto-theological nature of Christian faith. Nietzsche was quite good at sensing and following the traces of this metamorphosis. However, he "interpreted them nihilistically, thereby completely burying their essence".<sup>10</sup>

7 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, *Nietzsche*, volume 4, p. 100; Heidegger, Martin, "The Age of the World Picture", p. 57.

8 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God is Dead'", p. 166.

9 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God is Dead'", p. 189 et seq.

10 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God is Dead'", p. 197. On Heidegger's belated doubts as to whether Nietzsche really was "the last metaphysician" see Gadamer's testimony in Gadamer, Hans-Georg, "Heidegger und Nietzsche: Nietzsche hat nicht

There is a race to the top here, although the basic harmony between the two thinkers is not in question. Both Nietzsche and Heidegger see the time they happened to live in as an age of decay, decline, oblivion, and they hunt for the origin and meaning of this destiny in the long history of the Christian West. In the end, they come to different conclusions, although they start from similar assumptions. The same could be claimed for contemporary theorists of secularization and disenchantment. If we are to listen to Heidegger, they give superficial answers to a crucial question. But what, in the end, is this question?

### Figures of Accomplished Disenchantment

The idea that secularization can be interpreted, from the point of view of a myth-history punctuated by axial turning points, as the unveiling of the nihilistic essence of the West (be it the eternal *Abend-land* or modern North Atlantic civilization) is a topos of twentieth-century philosophical thought that periodically resurfaces in academic circles and continues to inspire great historical frescos that, starting from apocalyptic descriptions of contemporary society, seek to shed light on our deep past. As Heidegger himself notices in passing, despite the variety of styles and content, all these meta-narratives share an edifying intent (and tone). "And we, unprepared as all of us are together", he admits, wearing an unusually modest suit,

we must not think that we will alter the destiny [of two millennia of Western history] by a lecture of Nietzsche's statement or even learn to know it only adequately. Nonetheless, this one thing is now necessary: that out of reflection we are receptive to instruction and that on the way to instruction we learn to reflect.<sup>11</sup>

The literary genre, of which Nietzsche's aphorism is an illustrious example, is populated by books that lie somewhere on the spectrum going from apocalyptic sermon to sober spiritual testament. Works such as Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, José Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses*, Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* or Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, have provided entire generations with the words, concepts and images required

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kaputtgemacht!", in: *Aletheia* (5/1994), pp. 6–8; Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *La lezione filosofica del XX secolo. Intervista con Riccardo Dottori*, Rome: Reser 2000, p. 132.

11 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God is Dead'", p. 160.

to bring disturbing aspects of their everyday experience into focus. Joking, but not too much, this literary genre could be called the literature of “nothing is sacred anymore” or, to use a semantically vague American expression, of “losing your religion”.<sup>12</sup>

A significant subset of these popular exercises in cultural criticism are the *grands récits* on the socio-cultural consequences of disenchantment. The most recent of them usually revolve around a *Zeitdiagnose* that has now become a common feeling, even more than a shared opinion. The diagnosis goes more or less like this: the horizon of contemporary society has lost depth, it has flattened out and expanded without limits. The result is a sort of dead calm, of perfect horizontality, which does not suggest, however, the image of emptiness, but rather that of a nauseating and debilitating hyper-density. One could even speak of a lethal satiety. This double process of dilation and thickening has a *pendant* in the changes of contemporary subjectivity, which appears increasingly amorphous, centerless, compulsive, immersed in the present, dispersive, exposed to the insidiousness of the banality of evil. This oscillation between daze and bewilderment, euphoria and melancholy seem to signal the appearance in human history of a new character, better: a non-character, a sort of Eichmann of peace time.

Such peremptory ways of representing the gigantic historical transition that led to this strange form of restless helplessness, of frenetic idling, are evidently onerous from a theoretical point of view. In Italy, the just described “anthropological mutation” was anticipated in some prophetic pages by Pier Paolo Pasolini and has been recently re-proposed by the literary critic and poet Guido Mazzoni in a book, *I destini generali*, which has all it takes to serve as a vade mecum in this central section of the chapter.<sup>13</sup>

Mazzoni’s pamphlet has a direct link with the debate on secularization because he portrays today’s hegemonic way of life as the product of the dissolution of the essential tension between the worldly and the ideal planes of experience from which the titanic modern mobilizations, of which the

12 For a broader discussion of this way of framing the modern phenomenon of the receding of religion, cf. Costa, Paolo/Zordan, Davide, *In una stanza buia. Filosofia e teologia in dialogo*, Trento: FBK Press 2014, pp. 112–126.

13 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, Rome/Bari: Laterza 2015. A poetic translation of the atmosphere enveloping Mazzoni’s argument can be found in Mazzoni, Guido, *La pura superficie*, Rome: Donzelli 2017. For a review of *I destini generali* see Costa, Paolo, “Il disagio della postmodernità”, in: *La società degli individui* (18/2015), pp. 156–160. Mazzoni is also the author of an excellent account of modern poetry. Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *On Modern Poetry*, trans. by Z. Hanafi, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2022. As to Pier Paolo Pasolini, see the essays collected in *Scritti corsari*, Milan: Garzanti 2008.

consumer society is, so to speak, the ungrateful heir, also drew their momentum. At the end of this tragic story, the Western way of life emerges as the prosaic historical offspring of a kind of timequake, whose distinctive feature is the non-triumphant victory of absolute immanence, to which corresponds, on the side of subjectivity, something akin to a silent psychic metamorphosis.

What does this fateful mutation consist in? In short, it is the unexpected and paroxysmal realization of Marx's and Engels' assessment of the historically revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie. On the one hand, the founding fathers of historical materialism were not far from the truth when, at the beginning of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, they claimed that *alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft, alles Heilige wird entweiht* (all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned) in capitalist modernity.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, though, it can be said, with the benefit of hindsight, that Marx and Engels were wrong, because, contrary to what they both foresaw and hoped for, the sudden dissolution of the traditional constraints on human activism and self-interest did not ultimately lead either to alienation or emancipation, but to an unresolved and ambivalent condition of simultaneous liberation and disorientation, restlessness and discomfort, wealth and poverty. The historical dialectic, in other words, did not issue in a meaningful and recognizable synthesis.

How, then, can be described the process of "liquidation", or better still evaporation, which, according to the most radical version of the disenchantment thesis endorsed by Mazzoni, Western societies have experienced with increasing speed since the revolution of customs embodied, metonymically, by a formidable year of our recent past: '1968'? It is a multi-faceted transformation that led to the rise of a new form of life: the "Western Way of Life". What characterizes it? To begin with, it involves, on the level of subjective experience, the loosening of intrapsychic constraints. This means, in a nutshell, the primacy of the pleasure principle, the replacement of the "traditional, repressive and censorious superego with a new form of superego based on the compulsion to enjoy", and the parallel deconstruction of any substantive interpretation of personal identity as a rationalist myth.<sup>15</sup>

On the level of social dynamics, the effect of this late-modern 'meltdown' is, if possible, even more macroscopic. Faced with the unchallenged primacy of the quest for personal enjoyment, emotional, ideal and socio-political ties inevitably fade into the background. Although they remain an essential ingredient of life, they are increasingly experienced by individuals as interchangeable goods,

14 Cf. Marx, Karl/Engels, Friedrich, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. by S. Moore, New York: Bantam Books 2004, p. 17.

15 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, p. 15.

i.e. as something that does not require the assumption of unconditional commitments. The family, the groups to which ordinary people belong, the nation, loyalty to past monuments or future mirages lose their consistency once faced with the intensity and relevance of immediate pleasures. Hedonism thus ends up prevailing not in theory, but in everyday practice, that is in the wake of the sacred value that has been ascribed to the cultivation of the most ordinary aspects of life since the beginning of modernity.<sup>16</sup>

As I noted above, the world picture emerging from this global process of dissolution is profoundly ambiguous. On the one hand, a vivid sense of the “precariousness of everything, the terminal meaninglessness of things” dominates people’s experience.<sup>17</sup> This sense of fragility leads them to adopt without triumphalism a *carpe diem* philosophy, the ultimate justification for which is that nothing in life is more substantial than personal gratification, and that there is nothing deeper than this merry-go-round that has befallen us. The gist of this tacit insight, as Mazzoni observes, is that “consumption represents the extreme point of modern secularization” or, put another way, that “enjoyment modelled on the consumer form, on consumption as a relationship with the world, presupposes [...] an absolute immanence”.<sup>18</sup> The total victory of absolute immanence, however, is devoid of any triumphalism because it is not experienced by people as an existential revolt or the solution to the mystery of being. On the contrary, it is offered as a brute fact from which individuals draw a tacit lesson for navigating their world by sight. The awareness that there is no answer to the fundamental riddles of life pushes them to muddle through, to seek precarious balances that do not respond to a single logic, but whose meaning changes according to age, available energies, victories achieved and defeats suffered, in short, destiny’s merry pranks (starting with the genetic and family lottery).

Once this unspoken insight is transposed into philosophical terms, the worldview that best suits such a basic sense of absolute immanence – “a world subject to time passing without striving for a higher purpose, surrounded by death and its avatars: emptiness, boredom, transience, the need to renew pleasure to remove emptiness, boredom, transience”<sup>19</sup> – is a bland naturalism. As far as fundamental existential questions are concerned, this outlook has in

16 On the affirmation of ordinary life see Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self*, part 3.

17 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, p. 45.

18 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, p. 45. For a comparable, albeit non-dysphoric, interpretation of the relationship between consumerism and secularization, see Vattimo, Gianni, *After Christianity*, trans. by L. D’Isanto, New York: Columbia University Press 2002, pp. 76–78.

19 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, p. 60.



store only answers (Big Bang, descent of the human species from ‘apes’, etc.) that are set on such an outsized temporal, spatial and conceptual level that it deprives them of any real impact on people’s ordinary lives. On the other hand, from an ethical point of view, the main effect of this naturalistic frame of mind is the dissolution of the boundary separating strongly evaluated goods from mere subjective preferences.<sup>20</sup> Thus, even if it does not justify it in a strict sense, this disenchanting stance fosters a laid-back attitude towards the world that is well captured by familiar phrases such as “if it pleases you (or me or him or her), why not?”, or the more brutal “at the end of the day, who cares?”. In this manner, as Pasolini had already claimed, capitalism rehabilitates and allies itself with a deep current of the common wisdom of all times and “under the logic of consumption and spectacle resurfaces, like a fossil layer covered by recent soil, the bedrock of popular vitalism, with its cynical, disillusioned, nihilistic habitus”.<sup>21</sup> Together, the new spirit of capitalism and the immortal relaxed scepticism of the ‘hoi polloi’ join forces to celebrate what Milan Kundera called “the festival of insignificance” in his last novel.<sup>22</sup>

In this context, which Mazzoni, focusing on the “psychic life of the Western masses”, describes as a condition of bland schizophrenia, the experience of the sacred, although it remains one of the many possibilities disclosed by, if not actually “etched” in the human condition, loses any privileged status and becomes available for uses ranging from the most irrational episodic exaltation to its debunking through a naturalistic (today mostly neuroscientific) explanation.<sup>23</sup> In short, like art, eros and idealism, religion too can be co-opted, incorporated and in a certain sense domesticated within that sort of universal acid – neo- or turbo-capitalism – where everything is destined to evaporate or dissolve without trace, provided it can become an object of desire and consumption.<sup>24</sup>

20 For an in-depth study of the metaphilosophical meaning of contemporary naturalisms, see Costa, Paolo, *Un’idea di umanità. Etica e natura dopo Darwin*, Bologna: EDB 2007, ch. 3.

21 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, p. 37.

22 Cf. Kundera, Milan, *The Festival of Insignificance*, trans. by L. Asher, New York: Harper 2013.

23 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, pp. 9 and 62.

24 Cf. Boltanski, Luc/Chiapello, Ève, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by G. Elliott, London: Verso 2017.

### In Blame or Praise of Profanation?

The grand narrative chosen to exemplify a view of the present as an age of de-sacralization or universal profanation speaks of a world caught up in the superficiality of a shallow well-being or, to use a popular expression, in the banality of evil.<sup>25</sup> The protagonists of these stories are, without exception, lame characters, in whose lives the ‘monster’ created by modernity has saturated any fissures, however small, of reality, with the consequence that their imagination is dominated by the tacit intuition that reality is one-possibility thing. This, incidentally, does not pacify them at all. On the contrary, it makes them, if possible, even more restless and reckless, since the fact that everything is apparently available, present at hand, pushes them towards a compulsive form of consumption that leaves nothing of value in its wake.

From this point of view, secularization appears as the penultimate stage of a long historical trajectory leading to radical disenchantment – the eclipse of all that was unavailable, heteronomous, removed in principle from human endeavour – and thus to the collapse of the very distinction between sacred and profane. This curve is actually parabolic, because the final liquidation of the sacred was preceded by its simultaneous purification and exaltation, which placed it outside the world in a position of absolute apicality. Afterwards, all that was needed for the boundaries of the profane to become insurmountable was severing the ties with the supersensible, with the ‘world behind the world’. The final profanation, however, when everything enters the domain of the always-on-hand, deals the death blow to the very act of profanation and things end up losing any meaning. This is how the Immanent Frame reveals its nature as a closed world structure: a mousetrap.

It remains to be established, though, whether this despairing condition should be presented as a novelty or as an eternal and immutable truth about the *conditio humana*, which would only be obscured or camouflaged for a relatively short historical time. The verdict therefore retains a certain amount of opacity. What exactly are we claiming here? That the idea that another world, another life, is possible has always been a pious illusion, only another

25 For an illuminating analysis of what “living on the surface of everyday life” might mean today, see Zamperini, Adriano, “Attrazione o adattamento interpersonale? L’indifferenza come regola emozionale in Bret Easton Ellis”, in: *La società degli individui* (11/2008), pp. 37–50; Zamperini, Adriano, *L’indifferenza. Conformismo del sentire e dissenso emozionale*, Turin: Einaudi 2007.

hallucination caused by the “opium of the people”? Or are we suggesting that the last word in the matter has yet to be spoken?<sup>26</sup>

The same atmosphere of uncertainty pervades Giorgio Agamben’s influential essay “In Praise of Profanation”.<sup>27</sup> One possible interpretation of his gloom account of the present situation is that religion, by removing “things, places, animals, or people from common use” and, transferring them to a separate sphere, acted as a brake, a *katechon*, on the ineluctable ruin of the ages.<sup>28</sup> In other words, while the possibility of profanation, implicit in the ritual segregation of the sacred, disclosed a space of freedom in the form of play, that is of the restoration of the use value of a practice or object, or the emancipation of things and living beings from the forced means-end relationship, secularization, on the contrary, turned out to be a way of transferring the ‘petrifying’ force of the sacred into the world. In the end, what it left in its wake is only a pseudo-profanation that does not liberate, but rather imprisons people in the oppressive logic of a thick web of apparatuses, ‘Capitalism’ or ‘Neoliberalism’, which admits nothing outside itself and is therefore totalitarian by definition.

All grand narratives that belong to the Para-Nietzschean literary genre of “nothing is sacred anymore” converge in recognizing the gigantic nature of the ongoing change. Secularization is one of the faces of the Great Transformation. Where philosophical tales of secularization diverge is in the interpretation of the deeper meaning of this historical breakthrough, of its implications for today and tomorrow. What exactly does the fact that ‘nothing is sacred anymore’ mean for us? Does it mean (a) that we will no longer need the goods that religions have traditionally granted to their followers, because the needs of *homo religiosus* are not universal, i.e. they are not rooted in humans’ natural endowment? Or (b) that the true religion of the past will be replaced by pseudo-religions with increasingly catastrophic outcomes? Or, on the contrary, (c) that the end of a certain kind of devotion will simply make way for other models of religiosity, some of them comparatively superior to their predecessors, because the questions underlying the human desire for eternity have not yet been convincingly answered and probably never will be?

26 For an open-ended diagnosis of the present, against the background of a meta-narrative similar to the one just outlined, see Bell, Daniel, “The Return of the Sacred: The Argument about the Future of Religion”, in: *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (31/1978), pp. 49–55.

27 Cf. Agamben, Giorgio, “In Praise of Profanation”, in Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. by J. Fort, New York: Zone Books 2007, pp. 73–92. See also Agamben, Giorgio, *What Is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. by D. Kishik and S. Pedatella, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press 2009.

28 Cf. Agamben, Giorgio, “In Praise of Profanation”, p. 74.

In all three cases the judgement about how terrifying, disappointing, promising or perhaps even exhilarating is the world that emerged from the process of secularization remains undetermined, in spite of the radically different interpretations of the historical meaning of the modern receding of religion. An additional narrative is required to make fully sense of the fateful diagnosis. In what follows, I will try to extract the missing element from some reflections developed in his typical maximalist style by Peter Sloterdijk, who, between the lines of an unconventional reevaluation of William James's thought, suggested distinguishing between a narrow ("legal") and a broad ("philosophical") conception of secularization. The latter understands *saeculum* in a broad sense as *mundus* and the modern 'worldiness' along the lines of that "monster of energy, without beginning, without end; a firm, iron magnitude of force that does not grow bigger or smaller, that does not expend itself but only transforms itself [...] blessing itself as that which must return eternally, as a becoming which knows no satiety, no disgust, no weariness", celebrated by Nietzsche in an aphorism of 1885, significantly placed by the editors at the end of his controversial posthumous work *The Will to Power*.<sup>29</sup>

At the beginning of his argument, deploying all the literary power of his exuberant prose, Sloterdijk draws the reader's attention to the fact that, "as soon as we understand the process of becoming worldly (*Verweltlichung*) not only as an expropriation of spiritual treasures and gradual transformation of passive liabilities into active assets", a second meaning of secularization comes up: "an elevation of the world into a paragon of being without an opposite", i.e. a self-sufficient ontological totality (*gegensatzlosen Inbegriff des Seienden*). In this sense, continues Sloterdijk, mundanization amounts to the

absolutization of the *saeculum* [generation, age, world] and at the same time the elimination of the two nonsecular, transmundane, or supernatural magnitudes that were to be distinguished from and opposed to the world, on the ontological model of classical metaphysics: God and the soul. [...] Thus the classical metaphysical triangle God, world, and soul implodes and an absolute block, the "world" as such, vaguely and monolithically takes the place of the well-tempered distances between the poles of the threefold totality [...] that would not permit its being offset by anything other than itself, anything superior to itself, or anything held in reserve against itself. In this world block, everything falling under the names "God" and "soul" that was previously known and assumed joins the ranks of effects of the world. What matters now is that the world is everything that is the case (*Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*). [...] The world rolls up into a bundle in which all distinctions fall in on themselves. Under the

29 Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Will to Power*, trans. by W. Kaufmann/R.J. Hollingdale, New York: Random House 1967, § 1067, p. 550.

banner of modern secularization – perhaps “widening” would be a more correct description – the all-encompassing (*allesumgreifende*) world complex grows into an ontological monstrosity of hardly comprehensible form. Accordingly, secularization or becoming worldly would be the heading for a change in the image of the world – beyond the cultural-revolution implications of modernization. This is a change of disturbing proportions.<sup>30</sup>

Once reformulated with this intellectual pathos, the question of the historical meaning of secularization takes on an unknown significance for those who inhabit the present with at least some occasional anxiety. The doubt may well arise in the minds of these people that living in a society in which there is no longer room for the ‘elsewhere’, for a ‘tomorrow’ that is not a faded repetition of ‘today’, and where the ‘actual’ has swallowed up the ‘possible’ down to its last drops, means in its own way brushing against the depths of a religious view of the cosmos.<sup>31</sup>

### For a Postmetaphysical Christianity: The Celebration of Secularization in Gianni Vattimo

What remains to be clarified now is the influence exerted on such apocalyptic accounts of accomplished secularization by Nietzsche’s grand narrative of the advent of nihilism and its turning points: the defeat of the “nobles” and the devious victory of the “slaves”, the announcement of the “death of God” and the unmasking of the sick will to power of the “last men”, the unequal duel between the subhumans and the few superior men (man being “a rope

30 Cf. Sloterdijk, Peter, “Chances in the Monstrous. A Note on the Metamorphosis of the Religious Domain in the Modern World, with Reference to a Few Motifs in William James”, in Peter Sloterdijk, *After God*, trans. by I.A. Moore, Cambridge: Polity Press 2020, p. 210 et seq. (the original German version of the essay was the introduction to a new edition of James, William, *Die Vielfalt religiöser Erfahrung: Eine Studie über die menschliche Natur*, Frankfurt: Inselverlag 1997). See also Sloterdijk, Peter, *You Must Change Your Life*, p. 37: “The de-spiritualization of asceticisms is probably the event in the current intellectual history of mankind that is the most comprehensive and, because of its large scale, the hardest to perceive, yet at once the most palpable and atmospherically powerful”. For a discussion of Sloterdijk’s contribution to the recent secularization debate see Costa, Paolo, “Prisoners of a Metaphor: Secularization as a Deicidal Epidemic”, in: *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* (7/2021), pp. 376–397.

31 Benjamin’s celebrated annotations on capitalism are based on a similar insight. Cf. Benjamin, Walter, “Capitalism as Religion” (1921), in Marcus Bullock/Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings*, Vol. 1: 1913–1926, trans. by R. Livingstone, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 1996, pp. 288–291.

stretched between the animal and the Superman – a rope over an abyss”<sup>32</sup> – in short, the anti-fable that tickles the pride of people disgusted by the superficiality and bad taste of bourgeois society.<sup>33</sup>

There is something that makes such meta-narratives unconvincing, if not frankly incredible, despite their descriptive and polemical power. The sore point is their levelling effect. That is, they end up paying a too high price for the sharpness of their diagnostic instruments, I mean, an unbalanced reduction of complexity. In particular, their excess of pathos makes them appear suspect. Everything is over the top in their storytelling and this makes them sound unrealistic, too simplistic. In other words, they are captivating, but one-sided; mythical, in the worst sense of the term.<sup>34</sup> Such dramatic emphasis, I contend, accentuates to the point of improbability the absolute power of negation of the supposed agencies of the catastrophe (Metaphysics, Capitalism, Technology). The result is a story that is more interested in what is subtracted than in what is brought in over the centuries. To indulge in the algebraic metaphor, the accounts add up all too easily in this perspective. But if the dramatic effect is assured, the same cannot be said for the gain in understanding. What is lacking, at the end of the day, is any sense of the contingency of historical events, their uncertain nature and the role played by genuine innovation in human affairs. Conversely, those who are persuaded that the Death of God leads to the fateful choice between the Last Men and the Overman, between the Dwarf and Zarathustra, also know that these are all literary inventions and that, in reality, there is no alternative to the bitter realization that we are bound to live in a world in which the sacred, and with it the profanations that the sacred-profane dyad made possible, have definitively waned and what is left on the table is that amorphous and seductive life in which the individuals described by Mazzoni revel thoughtlessly.

But if these, at first sight, appealing myth-histories are not reliable and if, nevertheless, the explanatory power of the grand narratives cannot be cast aside, what other option do we have?

In *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*, Peter Sloterdijk blames Nietzsche – a victim, for him, of the “theomorphism of his inner life” – for not having understood

32 Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, p. 8.

33 For a persuasive account of Nietzsche's influence on postmodern nihilism, see Habermas, Jürgen, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, ch. 4 (“The Entry into Postmodernity: Nietzsche as a Turning Point”).

34 The mythical character of the doctrine of the Superman is also stressed, albeit with different intentions, by Giorgio Colli in the foreword the Italian edition of the book. Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Così parlò Zarathustra. Un libro per tutti e per nessuno*, trans. by M. Montinari, 2 vols., Milan: Adelphi 1985, vol. 1, p. XV.

that “that all ascents start from the base camp of ordinary life” and that in order to unravel the mystery of a “vertical dimension without God” we have to realize that

vitality, understood both somatically and mentally, is itself the medium that contains a gradient between more and less. It therefore contains the vertical component that guides ascents within itself, and has no need of additional external or metaphysical attractors. That God is supposedly dead is irrelevant in this context. With or without God, each person will only get as far as their form carries them.<sup>35</sup>

For the author of the *Critique of Cynical Reason*, asceticism, as a practical form of horizontal transcendence, supplies the key for defusing the bomb placed by Nietzsche in the very foundations of Western consciousness. But does this mean that the way out of the deadlock lies in weakening his apocalyptic statement? In routinizing it? In secularizing it further?

Gianni Vattimo followed the same line of argument in his later works. In keeping with the postmodern impatience with any form of despotic thought, he subjects the two specular dogmatisms of (Cartesian) foundational reason and (onto-theological) faith to the recursive logic of secularization, making room for a weakening of epistemic authoritarianism in favour of a more playful, ironic and uplifting approach to knowledge. From this perspective, secularization means first of all the profanation of metaphysics, i.e. of the *idols* of Western phallogocentrism, and the gradual extinction of patriarchal domination, the violent logic of scapegoating typical of archaic religions and, more generally, the hierarchical structure of state societies, the influence of which is also felt in the authoritarianism of the different churches and religious communities.

The conclusion of Vattimo's long argument is predictable given his Nietzschean-Heideggerian premises. Nevertheless, the arguments he puts forward to support it deserve to be made explicit and examined. The first step is a considered commitment to Nietzsche's prophecy. For him, acknowledging that “God is dead” means admitting that nihilism represents the accomplishment of modernity, which is, in turn, “the final consummation of the belief that Being and reality are ‘objective’ data which thinking ought to contemplate in order to bring itself into conformity with their laws”.<sup>36</sup> In short, the death of God is the end of metaphysics as a style of thinking in which being is conceived

35 Cf. Sloterdijk, Peter, *You Must Change Your Life*, p. 38 et seq.

36 Cf. Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. by L. D'Isanto/D. Webb, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press 1999, p. 29.

as an objective presence and the ontological consistency of things is seen as a quality independent of the action, position and will of the subjects.

Nietzsche's argument, however, can be easily misrepresented because of its rhetorical overload. The rupture with the history of Western thought must remain open. To close it by hastily endorsing a new view of the world as it is (or should be) would be betraying its spirit. "There is a general misunderstanding to the effect that Nietzsche's strong affirmation 'God is dead' is a profession of atheism", Vattimo remarked in his autobiography.

That's not it. Nietzsche does not affirm that "God does not exist". He could never affirm that, because it would amount to another absolute truth entirely equivalent to the affirmation that "God exists". It is the point of view that is different. Wherever there is an absolute there is still always metaphysics, meaning a supreme principle, exactly what Nietzsche has discovered has become superfluous. "God is dead" signifies that there is no ultimate foundation.<sup>37</sup>

To put the point concisely, the author of *The Gay Science* does not aim to carve out a prominent position for himself in the history of Western philosophy with his capital sentence. Rather, Nietzsche gestures toward the life he would like to live, or that he regards as possible and desirable *now*, provided that human beings dispose of the burden of self-imposed servitude for good. The *Übermensch* – the man who goes beyond, the human "bridge" – is precisely the individual who wishes to remove from his shoulders a burden so heavy that it has come to be confused with human nature or human destination as such. His goal is not abstract: it is to give a totally new meaning to his own actions and motives.

While Vattimo endorses the core of Heidegger's interpretation – neither nihilism nor the possible exit from nihilism involves the will, whether good or bad, because it is being itself that has a "nihilistic vocation" which manifests itself in history<sup>38</sup> – he gives it, though, an original twist. For he does not understand the end of metaphysics in a triumphalist sense, as a rising above (*Überwindung*) that is stabilized in a new foundation, if only in the form of a non-objective, purely negative opening. Rather, the historical affirmation of nihilism means the emergence of a new logic of the event, foreign to the mentality and rhetoric of fulfilment. From this point of view, the departure from metaphysics resembles a long convalescence from an illness, the indelible trace of which

37 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni/Paterlini, Piergiorgio, *Not Being God. A Collaborative Autobiography*, trans. by W. McCuaig, New York: Columbia University Press 2009, p. 18. See also Vattimo, Gianni, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, trans. by W. McCuaig, New York: Columbia University Press 2010, p. 73 et seq. ("Mythization of the World"; Italian: "Fabulizzazione del mondo").

38 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 35.



cannot be removed.<sup>39</sup> The alternative to the *Überwindung der Metaphysik* is precisely a *Verwindung*. This is both a coming to terms with a deficiency, a drift from the past and a renunciation, a lowering. The general sense of the transition is well captured by the idea of a gradual and general weakening of the violence (first of all epistemic violence, but it may be institutional violence as well) exercised by objectivism, essentialism and fundamentalism. Weak thought, the circular conception of truth typical of the hermeneutic postmetaphysical *koiné*, and the deconstructionist attitude towards tradition are different articulations of the same need for a new epistemic meekness or humility, in short, for a genuinely non-violent mode of thinking. From this point of view, the death of God appears as the symbolic sacrifice indispensable to initiate a process of escape from the prevaricating logic of superstition or metaphysical idolatry.<sup>40</sup>

The despotism of metaphysics, however, does not consist only in the deceptively non-violent coercion with which the variety of experience is levelled and brought back to its foundation, to its *Grund*, to its exclusive *raison d'être*, but above all in the dualisms it establishes by shaping reality. Conceptual pairs like soul and body, spirit and matter, essence and appearance, substance and accident, supernatural and natural, logos and myth, reason and faith are powerful ordering devices that are difficult to ignore even in informal conversations. Nonetheless, the nihilistic vocation of postmodernity manifests itself precisely in the growing perplexity, or sometimes open scepticism about the consistency

39 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, trans. by J.R. Snyder, Cambridge: Polity Press 1992, ch. 10 ("Nihilism and the Post-modern in Philosophy"); Vattimo, Gianni, "Verwindung: Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy", in: *SubStance* (16/1987), pp. 7–17; Vattimo, Gianni, "The Trace of the Trace", in Jacques Derrida/Gianni Vattimo (eds), *Religion*, trans. by D. Webb, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press 1998, p. 79; Vattimo, Gianni, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. by D. Webb, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press 1997, p. 117 et seq. (note 14).

40 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 75. For Vattimo, epistemic violence is a form of violence that is philosophically more significant than the physical violence that has afflicted the lives of human beings since immemorial time. Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 65 (note 18): "The only possible philosophical definition of violence seems to be the silencing of all questioning by the authoritative peremptoriness of the first principle". On this aspect of the question see, in particular, Vattimo, Gianni, "Metaphysics and Violence: A Question of Method", in Gianni Vattimo, *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy*, trans. by R.T. Valgenti, New York: Columbia University Press 2012, pp. 121–146. The fact that Vattimo chose this topic for the essay with which he paid tribute to the authors who contributed to the *Festschrift* published on the occasion of his seventieth birthday is a clear indication of the central role it plays in his work. Cf. Vattimo Gianni, "Conclusion: Metaphysics and Violence", in Santiago Zabala (ed.), *Weakening Philosophy. Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press 2007, pp. 400–421.

of such dichotomous portraits of the human condition. The example of myth is particularly instructive in this regard.

From the very beginning, Greek philosophy saw itself as a form of knowledge different from, and in direct competition with, the mythical mentality, i.e. with that way of narratively representing the relationship of human beings with other humans, with nature and with the gods, best exemplified by the Homeric poems. If we consider the dialogues of Plato's maturity, we notice, for example, how the distrust towards myth is most often manifested as a need to distinguish oneself from a form of pseudo-knowledge that is blamed for being dispersive (i.e. lacking in internal coherence), worthless (i.e. imprecise and vague) and incapable of offering a solid anchorage with respect to the true, the good and the beautiful. Myth can at best be reserved a lateral space in the lives of people who are lovers of Logos as the epitome of the archaic, the trace left behind by an earlier stage of human development, comparable to what the disorganized mind of children are for an adult.

After the death of God, however, "the 'true world' finally became a fable" ("die 'wahre Welt' endlich zur Fabel wurde"), as Nietzsche proclaims, tongue-in-cheek, in a section of *Twilight of the Idols* often invoked by Vattimo to clarify the meaning of the march of Western philosophy towards nihilism.<sup>41</sup> As a result, once the distinction between truth and fiction, essence and appearance, was dismantled, the very dualism between *mythos* and *logos* became useless. The way was open, then, not so much for a primitivistic return to myth, but for a further exercise in self-reflection: the demythizing of the demythizing of myth.<sup>42</sup> Myth thus ceases to be the Other of Reason. Both are, so to speak, stripped of their aura and symmetrically weakened in their claim to shape people's mind. The increase in reflexivity granted by this form of decentering, however, cannot be interpreted along the lines of the need for self-assessment typical of the Cartesian subject. Instead of strengthening the individual's capacity to dominate a reality, reduced to a manipulable object, its main effect is rather the dismantling of a module of the framework around which the final

41 Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Twilight of the Idols Or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer*, trans. by R. Polt, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing 1997, p. 23 ("fable" – German: *Fabel* – is rendered as "fiction" here).

42 This development is clearly summarized in Vattimo, Gianni, "Myth and the Destiny of Secularization", in: *Social Research* (52/1985), pp. 347–362; Vattimo Gianni, *The Transparent Society*, trans. by D. Webb, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1994, ch. 3 ("Myth Rediscovered"). Cf. also Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 29: "disenchantment has also produced a radical disenchantment with the idea of disenchantment itself [...] demythification has finally turned against itself, recognizing that even the ideal of the elimination of myth is a myth".

phase of Western metaphysics took shape. Recursive demythologization thus discloses new possibilities for the agent in her relations with herself, others and her social and natural environment. This emancipation does not liberate the agent in the sense in which modern philosophy has generally understood the autonomy of a rational subject, but it does make her more authentic, that is, more able to resonate with marginal parts of her own history and experience.

It is at this point that religion comes into play. It is no coincidence that Vattimo, well before systematically addressing the question of postmodern religious faith, chose the term 'secularization' to give a familiar name to the process of overcoming without rising beyond, of convalescence without immunization, evoked by the German word *Verwindung*. The term functions as a 'placeholder' in the absence of a concept that makes it possible to unequivocally specify how the prophecy of the death of 'God' must, on pain of losing coherence, remain in a condition of suspension. The linearity of metaphysical rationalism has to give way to different geometric forms: the circle, first of all. And the term 'secularization' has precisely the advantage of indicating a process that is both a drift and a metamorphosis, a weakening and a permanence. Moreover, if "God" stands for metaphysical foundation in Nietzsche's prophecy, shouldn't the equivalence apply in both senses? Put another way, is it not reasonable to seek the germs of the dissolution of metaphysics in religion as such? Aren't we entitled to see the truth of Christianity fulfilled in postmodern nihilism and "the development and maturation of the Christian message" achieved in hermeneutics?<sup>43</sup>

This is, after all, the intuition underlying the philosophical performance enacted by Vattimo through designing and writing an atypical text such as *Belief*. The book is atypical because it is unusual the synergy between two strands of reasoning that are generally kept separate: the level of the author's taking stock of his own existence (programmatically ushered by the book's Proustian incipit: "For a long time I woke up early to go to mass, before school, before the office, before university lectures") and that of reflection *sine ira et studio* on the Last Things.<sup>44</sup> The alleged contemporary revival of religion is discussed in a way that serves also as a practical demonstration of the validity of the hermeneutic circle. Foreground and background – story and history, life and theory – illuminate each other in a rocking motion that, from forgoing the goal of objective knowledge, draws momentum for a reflexive empowerment

43 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, "The Age of Interpretation", in Richard Rorty/Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *The Future of Religion*, edited by S. Zabala, New York: Columbia University Press 2005, p. 47; Vattimo, Gianni, *Beyond Interpretation*, pp. 53–55.

44 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 20.

that transforms the weakening of reason's claim to rigorously separate truth from fiction, rationality from faith, into an opportunity for self-knowledge.

Once the two modern idols of Science and Progress have crumbled to dust, "there are no longer strong, plausible philosophical reasons to be atheists, or at any rate to dismiss religion" and the way is cleared for the recovery of a relationship with one's own religious past that is once again appropriable personally and collectively.<sup>45</sup> In both cases, what is at stake is the recognition of a removed or forgotten origin that brings into play our finiteness as individuals and as communities of destiny. The opportunity for such rediscovery may be the head-on collision with one's own mortality or the failure of an entire civilization to cope with the present global challenges, but what is important is that, in a postmetaphysical horizon, religion comes to us not as the foundation to cling to as we drift through history, but as an ally that may help us to fully understand the nihilistic vocation of the age of the death of God and to respond to it in the most ethically appropriate way. This is the deeper sense of the "nihilistic recovery of Christianity" advocated in *Belief*.<sup>46</sup>

Seen against this background, the interpretation of the Gospel message in terms of *kenosis*, of the emptying/weakening of the violent sacred in favour of a non-victimistic and non-absolutist conception of sacredness, appears almost geometric in its establishment of a biunivocal correspondence between Heidegger's history of being and the Christian doctrine of incarnation. On the one hand, we have the natural sacred that is violent inasmuch as it "attributes to such a divinity all the predicates of omnipotence, absoluteness, eternity and 'transcendence' with respect to humanity".<sup>47</sup> But this despotic divinity, observed from a philosophical standpoint, is none other than "the God of metaphysics, what metaphysics called *ipsum esse subsistens*, the summation in pre-eminent form of all the characters of objective being as thought by metaphysics".<sup>48</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the dissolution of metaphysics represents as well "the end of this image of God, the death of God of which Nietzsche spoke".<sup>49</sup>

45 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 28; see also p. 90: "Now that Cartesian (and Hegelian) reason has completed its parabola, it no longer makes sense to oppose faith and reason so sharply"; Vattimo, Gianni, *After Christianity*, p. 86. For a discussion of the specific contribution of hermeneutics in undermining "the bases of the principal arguments that philosophy has offered in favour of atheism", see Vattimo, Gianni, *Beyond Interpretation*, ch. 4 (the quotation is taken from page 45).

46 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 38.

47 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 38 et seq.

48 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 39.

49 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 39.

Another term for the same historical-cultural phenomenon is ‘secularization’, which Vattimo himself presents as “the keystone” of his argument.<sup>50</sup> Through incarnation, the Christian God transcends himself downwards and, by becoming worldly, weakens his own ontological status and the relative claim to truth with which he offers himself to the experience of individual believers. Certainly, as a religion, Christianity also incorporates an ideal of fullness, that is, of a perfect coincidence between factual existence and “its meaning”, between the “outside” and the “inside”.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, however, the Jesus of the Gospels offers a non-majestic, non-reconciled example of the tension between meaning and event that is inherent in the experience of a hermeneutic animal such as *Homo sapiens*.

The biblical God, hence, is secularized through the second person of the Trinity and, by rising below himself into the *ici-bas*, initiates an “indefinite drift” in which “the meaning of the history salvation itself” is revealed.<sup>52</sup> This drift takes place over the centuries through the metamorphosis of that “religious substratum”, without which “our historical existence would not make sense”, and which leads to the desacralizing interpretation that modern civilization offers, without betraying the teaching of Jesus.<sup>53</sup> From the perspective of the weakening of metaphysics, the term “drift” does not have a negative connotation, though. Here, Vattimo’s understanding of secularization differs indeed from Löwith’s. For the de-substantialized religious substratum that survives in his view of western history is the tendency towards weakening as the immanent sense of Christian proclamation. From this point of view, secular modernity is by no means a decline and even less a cultural degeneration, but an opportunity that must be seized, because it may guide people’s tentative endeavours to relate to their religious heritage. “If I have a vocation to recover Christianity”, observes Vattimo in *Belief*, “it will consist in the task of rethinking revelation in secularized terms in order to ‘live in accord with one’s age’ (*conformi al secolo*), therefore in ways that do not offend my culture as, to a greater or lesser extent, a man who belongs to his age”.<sup>54</sup> In this sense, Christianity

50 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 41.

51 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 22.

52 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 66.

53 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 33; Vattimo, Gianni, “The Age of Interpretation”, p. 53.

54 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 75. From this point of view, Vattimo’s account of secularization shows affinities with Blumenberg’s idea of *menschliche Selbstbehauptung* (human self-assertion) against the theological absolutism of late medieval nominalism. Blumenberg, however, is blamed by Vattimo for falling back to a metaphysical foundationalism disguised as descriptive anthropology. Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, “Postfazione”, in Giovanni Leghissa, *Il dio mortale. Ipotesi sulla religiosità moderna*, Milan: Medusa

represents both a convalescence and a gap – a *Verwindung*, as I said above – with respect to humankind’s violent religious past. Christianity can rightly be defined, then, as the religion of the departure from metaphysics.<sup>55</sup>

Interpreting secularization as a drift means accepting that it is not accomplishable. In other words, there cannot be something like an absolute profanation because the process of secularization has its own internal limit that cannot be secularized. Such is the “formal” commandment of love: “The only truth revealed to us by Scripture, the one that can never be demythologized in the course of time – since it is not an experimental, logical, or metaphysical statement but a call to practice – is the truth of love, of charity”.<sup>56</sup> God’s love for his creatures is the “ultimate” meaning of divine *kenosis* and hence also of the dissolution of metaphysics. It is a residual rather than definitive sense: what remains of a vertical transcendence that secularization shifted to the purely horizontal plane of human finitude and historicity.<sup>57</sup>

Within the theoretical framework outlined by Vattimo, Nietzsche’s grand narrative of the death of God takes on the guise of an antitragic, philosophically anti-absolutist *métarécit*, which detects the true meaning of the present time in the transition from metaphysics to a weak ethics of friendship and love, from the logic of identity to that of difference, from the violence of institutions to the non-autarchic freedom of individuals. And “authentic” (*eigentlich*), in this context, is not to be misunderstood for a synonym of “original” or “essential”, but as that which reveals itself as such (i.e., closer to the coincidence between factual existence and its meaning) only if it ethically embraces its own event-like and contingent quality (*ereignishaft*). Here, too, the theoretical figure of a recursive circularity between historical givenness and its ideal content prevails. This is “scandalous” from a metaphysical point of view but functional to Vattimo’s discourse. For its general effect is a weakening of what is

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2004, pp. 284–286; Vattimo, Gianni, *Beyond Interpretation*, p. 51; Vattimo, Gianni, *After Christianity*, pp. 70–72.

55 On the similarities between Vattimo’s and Gauchet’s views, cf. Michel, Andreas, “The Strength of Weakness: Vattimo and Gauchet on Secularization”, in Stijn Latré/Walter Van Herck/Guido Vanheeswijck (eds.), *Radical Secularization?*, pp. 67–82.

56 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, “The Age of Interpretation”, p. 50 et seq. On the “non-objective” limit of secularization see also Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, pp. 62–65; Vattimo, Gianni, *Beyond Interpretation*, p. 51 (“Secularization has no ‘objective’ limit”).

57 On this idea of horizontal transcendence, cf. Vattimo, Gianni/Dotolo, Carmelo, *Dio: la possibilità buona. Un colloquio sulla soglia tra filosofia e teologia*, Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino 2009, pp. 17–19; Vattimo, Gianni/Girard, René, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue*, trans. W. McCuaig, New York: Columbia University Press 2010, pp. 75–77; Vattimo, Gianni/Sequeri, Pierangelo/Ruggeri, Giovanni, *Interrogazioni sul cristianesimo: cosa possiamo ancora attenderci dal Vangelo?*, Rome: Lavoro 2000, p. 31.

above, dominates and oversees, in favour of what is below, in profane time and space, and must live in a condition suspended between gratitude and grace.<sup>58</sup>

### Excesses of Weakness

With admirable frankness, Vattimo admitted in a self-interpretative digression contained in *Belief* that “the extension of the notion of secularization to phenomena that are so different borders on the arbitrary”.<sup>59</sup> To avoid the risk, it would then be better “to speak in more general terms of weakening, with secularization taken as its pre-eminent case”.<sup>60</sup> And yet, he decides to persevere in a loose use of the term because he wants to emphasize “the religious sense of all this process”.<sup>61</sup> This is what he has in mind when he claims that “weak ontology is a transcription of the Christian message”.<sup>62</sup>

The “complex and vertiginous argument” that Vattimo developed in Nietzsche’s wake condenses well the merits and defects of the category investigated in this book.<sup>63</sup> As we come to the end of it, it might be useful to recap schematically what is left of the thesis of secularization once it is recursively exploited to undermine any form of intellectual absolutism, in accordance with the Nietzschean belief that “there are no facts, only interpretations, and even this, however, is an interpretation”, unreservedly endorsed by the Italian philosopher.

What is left, then? What remains is, first of all, the “unitary perspective”, which enables us to put the present in a relationship of mutual illumination with its historical-cultural background, no matter if near or far.<sup>64</sup> The idea of the progressive mundanization or profanization of something that was formerly higher and separate, conceived of as a simultaneous process of lowering, emptying, weakening, articulation, fluidification, is an intuition that

58 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, pp. 35 and 97.

59 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 42.

60 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 42.

61 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 42.

62 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 42; see also p. 92: “If, as I believe, religious experience consists in a feeling of dependence [...], an awareness that my freedom is an initiative that has been initiated by someone else [...], then the philosophical thought of Being as event is also intrinsically oriented toward religion. [...] Conversely, it is the philosophical reading I believe I can give of Christianity, focused on the idea of secularization, that itself allows me to avoid any pretension of having completely rationalized my religious attitude”. See also Vattimo, Gianni, *After Christianity*, pp. 78–80.

63 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, p. 74.

64 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 65.

has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to bring about a synthesis of the heterogeneous.

This mainstay of the (modern) spirit usually goes together with the feeling (or something very much like a hunch) that ‘religion’ or, at any rate, what we tend to associate with religion (the sacred, worship, devotion, a sense of the numinous), is somehow the hinge of human history. Such role is not necessarily played by religion in a foundational form – as “what holds the world together”, to invoke an expression encountered in the previous chapter – but it may take place under the guise of a tenuous link with the origin (as revival, remembrance, provenance or oblique genealogy). This continuity between present and past needs not be skewed towards the origin, as it was the case, for instance, with Karl Löwith, but may lean towards a future that, while not exercising any kind of causal power over historical events, nevertheless acts as their immanent goal, much as classical works of art end up embodying a meaning that transcends the context of their genesis even in the absence of an independent external foundation.

In this light, secularization is therefore an unfinished unitary process, always in progress, open to the future. Its incessant dynamism, on which the recursive pace of demythologization depends, however, is contingent on the existence of an immaterial internal bond, which is ethical in the broadest sense of the term, and that Vattimo associates with self-giving, oblation love (Christ’s *caritas*). The latter already makes itself felt in the idea of a downward transcendence, of a weak inclination of human events towards non-violence, emptying, abandonment to the event-like quality of historical action. In this sense, the meta-narrative of secularization always has something edifying about it: a lesson, however small, to be taught in a field of knowledge where “essentially contested concepts” understandably predominate.<sup>65</sup>

The inclusive power of the classical thesis of secularization has already been stressed in the previous chapter. Just like demythologization, *Säkularisierung* is never a mere dissolution of the historical substratum that is being secularized. The secret of its inclusiveness lies in the recontextualizing appropriation

65 For an interpretation of the secularization theorem in terms of a *Geistesgeschichte*, i.e., as “a speculative history that is aimed at conveying a moral, in which essentially contested concepts play a constitutive role”, cf. Griffioen, Sjoerd, “Modernity and the Problem of its Christian Past: The *Geistesgeschichten* of Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet”, in: *History and Theory* (55/2016), pp. 185–209. René Girard has expressed doubts about the self-soothing nature of Vattimo’s grand narrative in Girard, René, “Not just Interpretations, There are Facts, too”, in Vattimo, Gianni/Girard, René, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, pp. 88–108; cf. also p. 68 et seq.



through which the possible truth content of what is incorporated is preserved in a de-powered, or at least refashioned, form within a broader horizon. A dialectic between dependence and freedom, finitude and dexterity, is at work here, which is mirrored by the image of a recursive de-centering produced by the gradual weakening of the claim to being able to know things as they are – the historical phenomenon that Vattimo calls the “nihilistic consummation of the principle of reality”.<sup>66</sup> But what inclusiveness are we talking about here? On the one hand, as we have seen in chapter 5, discourses based on an offhand use of the concept of secularization always expose themselves to the risk of relapsing into a form of unconscious ethnocentrism or cultural imperialism.<sup>67</sup> In this case, the degree of ‘weakness’ of a civilization (which, as we have just seen, can also be construed as evidence of its level of reflexivity) ends up becoming more or less surreptitiously the yardstick (if not an objective standard at least one based on the authorizing force of the history of Being) with which to judge its ‘universalizable’ value, meaning or, if we want to opt for a less onerous term, ‘allure’.<sup>68</sup>

The opposite risk is that of rendering the concept of secularization almost evanescent. Now, the fact that everything miraculously makes sense ceases to be an indication of hermeneutic fruitfulness, and becomes evidence that the notion has begun to run in circles, frictionless. The danger, therefore, is that the Neo-Nietzschean *grands récits* centred on the recursive force of the profanation of what was once sacred are reduced to little more than a self-portrait of

66 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Beyond Interpretation*, p. 42, translation modified (original: “nichilistica consumazione del principio di realtà”).

67 For a powerful articulation of this objection see Caputo, John D., “Spectral Hermeneutics. On the Weakness of God and the Theology of the Event”, in John D. Caputo/Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, pp. 77–83. Vattimo came very close to advocating an essentialist conception of the Christian identity of the West in *After Christianity*, ch. 5, especially p. 77 (“What I intend to argue is that the West is essentially Christian to the extent that the meaning of its own history appears as the ‘twilight of Being’, that is, the diminishment of reality’s solidity through all the procedures of dissolution of objectivity brought about by modernity”). Contrarywise, he defended the reasons for a “moderate ethnocentrism” (similar to that adopted by Richard Rorty) in a dialogue with Richard Kearney. See Kearney, Richard/Zimmermann, Jens (eds.), *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God with James Wood et alii*, New York: Columbia University Press 2016, p. 134 (italics mine).

68 See Vattimo’s reply to Girard in Vattimo, Gianni/Girard, René, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, p. 71. On the idea of the “universal as task or project or guiding idea (*idea regolativa*) [...] bound rigorously to a political project”, cf. Vattimo, Gianni, “The Construction of Universality is Political”, in Gianni Vattimo, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, pp. 115–117 (the quoted sentence is from p. 116 et seq.).

the narrator, disguised as historical frescos, like it happens to those painters who systematically portray themselves in the faces depicted in their paintings. Even though interpretative macrocategories have often acted as a projective test in modern history, where the ghosts of the interpreting community reappear magnified, this does not make the suspicion that the secularization thesis is ultimately nothing more than an exemplary case of theoretical self-mimesis any less unsettling.