

## VATTIMO'S KENOTIC INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIANITY AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR A POSTMODERN DEMOCRACY

*Branko KLUN*

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Theology, Poljanska 4, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia  
e-mail: branko.klun@teof.uni-lj.si

### ABSTRACT

*This article deals with Vattimo's provocative interpretation of Christianity and its socio-political significance. The first part presents his view on how Christianity contributed to the process of emancipation and to the ideal of democratic society. However, for Vattimo this ideal also coincides with the original idea of communism. The second part thus focuses on Vattimo's interpretation of communism as Christianity's ally, and as an alternative to unauthentic liberal democracies. The third part of the article criticises the nihilist presuppositions of Vattimo's hermeneutics, his one-sided interpretation of Christianity, and his notion of hermeneutic democracy.*

**Keywords:** Vattimo, Christianity, communism, hermeneutics, democracy, weak thought

## L'INTERPRETAZIONE CHENOTICA DEL CRISTIANESIMO DI VATTIMO E LA SUA RILEVANZA PER UNA DEMOCRAZIA POSTMODERNA

### SINTESI

*L'articolo si occupa dell'interpretazione provocatoria del cristianesimo proposta da Vattimo e del suo significato socio-politico. La prima parte presenta la sua visione di come il cristianesimo ha contribuito al processo di emancipazione e all'ideale della società democratica. Comunque, per Vattimo questo ideale coincide anche con l'idea originale del comunismo. Per questo, la seconda parte dell'articolo è dedicata all'interpretazione di Vattimo del comunismo come alleato del cristianesimo e come alternativa alle democrazie liberali non autentiche. La terza parte dell'articolo sviluppa infine una critica dei presupposti nichilistici dell'ermeneutica di Vattimo, della sua interpretazione unilaterale del cristianesimo e della sua concezione di democrazia ermeneutica.*

**Parole chiave:** Vattimo, cristianesimo, comunismo, ermeneutica, democrazia, pensiero debole

Vattimo developed his philosophical thought particularly through a productive appropriation of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and so his book *Belief* (1999 [in Italian 1996]), in which he set himself to the question of faith and Christianity, came as a considerable surprise. Vattimo also did something unexpected with his methodical approach, which tied his treatment of these thematic topics to a personal account and a first person perspective. He later added to his interpretation of Christianity with *After Christianity* (2002), and then again with another important reference to his understanding of religion in a book co-authored by Richard Rorty called *The Future of Religion* (2005). At first glance it seems that Vattimo's interpretation of Christianity is highly sympathetic; contrary to the common view that sees an incompatibility between the absolute claims in religion and democratic political practices, Vattimo speaks in favour of the thesis that modern pluralism and the democratic model of society are a result of Christianity's internal development. For this reason Christianity – naturally, along with an appropriate “hermeneutic” self-understanding – is a positive factor within our socio-political context. However, Vattimo did not just return to Christianity, a part of his personal history, but also to another dimension of his past: his enthusiasm for communism. In 2007 he published the book *Ecce Comu* in Italian, and presented his comprehensive vision of the communist ideal and its meaning for democracy in *Hermeneutic Communism* (2011), co-authored by Santiago Zabala. Thus, Vattimo does not cease to amaze: the hermeneutics which he develops from the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger finds an ally in both Christianity and communism. And this is more than a mere alliance, since Vattimo is firmly convinced that all of these positions embody a single logic – the logic of “weak thought”, something which smashes every absolutist monopoly of or above the truth and, in opposition to the logic of power, is built upon a sensitivity for that which is powerless and weak, while also striving for the emancipation of the weak in a concrete political context.<sup>1</sup>

In this article my first aim is to present Vattimo's interpretation of Christianity and the socio-political significance which he attributes to it. The second part focuses on Vattimo's discovery of the revolutionary vocation of hermeneutics and the political ideal of hermeneutic communism. The third part deals with criticisms of Vattimo's positions: the nihilist presuppositions of his

hermeneutics, his one-sided interpretation of Christianity, and his questionable understanding of hermeneutic democracy.

#### CHRISTIANITY AS A PROTOTYPE OF BOTH WEAK THOUGHT AND EMANCIPATION

Vattimo's return to Christianity occurred after forming his philosophical position, developed through an intensive dialogue with Nietzsche and Heidegger. Though he summarises this position with the term *hermeneutics*, it is necessary to emphasise that this is a specific type of hermeneutics, one which is considerably removed from classical authorities, such as Gadamer, or Ricoeur. Grondin justifiably differentiates between metaphysical and nihilistic interpretations of hermeneutics (Grondin, 2010, 190), and in Vattimo's case we are dealing with its nihilistic variation. Furthermore, with Vattimo nihilism itself attains a positive connotation (Vattimo, 1988, 19). In accordance with Nietzsche's legacy, nihilism is the necessary process of the unmasking and destruction of metaphysics (Vattimo, 2007b, 405), a process in which seemingly absolute metaphysical values must be exposed as the mere projections of man and of his will to power. However, if Nietzsche persists in his conviction that nihilism, as the *pars destruens*, is not the final step, but that we also need the *pars construens* of a strong man (the overman), who establishes his own, strong truth – wherein Heidegger justifiably does not see an “overcoming”, but rather a “completion” of metaphysics (Heidegger, 1977, 259) – then Vattimo argues not only for the nihilistic destruction of absolute truth and values as a goal in itself, but also for this task to be carried out in perpetuity. He avoids the word *destruction* – or accepts it in the specific sense of Heidegger, who also influenced Derrida's term *deconstruction* (Trebežnik, 2013, 528) – because of that dimension of violence which can be felt in the word itself. Namely, Vattimo understands nihilistic dissolution as an eminently ethical act which is diametrically opposed to the logic of violence and power, and so he prefers the term *weakening*, which strips (annihilates) the power of one who is powerful and potentially violent. Nihilism thus attains an ethical component because it does not allow anything to usurp its power and suppress another person's different way of thinking or belief. “Weak thought” embodies an ethical ideal which Vattimo eventually connects with love or

1 The reception of Vattimo's “weak thought” in Slovenia began in the 90s with the translation of some of his articles that were published in various Slovenian journals (*Nova revija*, *Literatura*, *Tretji dan*, *FNM*). With the monograph on Vattimo by Jan Bednarik (2003), the Slovenian audience received a comprehensive survey of all major themes in Vattimo's philosophy. However, the religious aspects of Vattimo's thought and his interpretation of Christianity were underexposed in that book. The (Christian) journal *Tretji dan*, on the contrary, took up the topic, and Robert Petkovšek, who wrote an introduction to the “weak thought” (Petkovšek, 1998, 72–73), has been largely responsible for an intensified process of translating Vattimo's texts on religion and Christianity in this journal in the years to follow. In 2004, Vattimo's first book on Christianity “*Credere di credere*” (*Belief*) was translated into Slovenian (by Tone Dolgan), with an introductory study by Branko Klun (2004). In contrast to the vivid discussion about Vattimo's view on Christianity, his writings on Communism have not attracted much attention in Slovenia, even if there is a laudatory cover quote of Žižek in the English translation of “Hermeneutic Communism”...

charity (Lat. *caritas*) and which is, at its foundation, defined *per negationem* – as non-violence. Here we can see the basic characteristics of Vattimo's thought: at its beginning, rather than a positive determination, there is a negative moment (the weakening of power) which is then elevated to the highest ethical principle.

Though Vattimo's thought is inspired by Nietzsche, Nietzsche is the first whom he "weakens". Vattimo does not accept Nietzsche's glorification of power, but rather only those insights which are in the function of weakening, or nihilism. Nietzsche weakened the supposedly objective world into a fable, and declared the death of God, who represented the supreme value and ultimate foundation of reality. For Vattimo this represents a final farewell to the old "ontology of actuality" which identified Being with a firm presence; with an objective existence "out there" (Rorty & Vattimo, 2005, 57). According to Vattimo, the weakening of ontology was continued and accomplished by Heidegger, who first reduced Being to understanding (of *Dasein*), and then interpreted it as a "happening" (*Ereignis*) which is beyond man's power and domination. Being becomes an event of understanding, and thereby a language-event, losing its metaphysical basis. Since Being no longer refers to something existing out there, to an independent reality or objective facts, it is nothing but a historically conditioned, radically finite, and thus a "weak" interpretation in language. And since there are no longer any firm truths, but only weak interpretations, the importance of hermeneutics increases. Just as Heidegger spread the concept of metaphysics which, according to him, characterises a specific way of thinking in Western philosophy, for Vattimo hermeneutics is not merely a philosophical discipline of interpreting texts, but rather a way of thinking which is characteristic of our contemporary postmodern times, something we could call the age of hermeneutics. This age is characterised by a radical pluralism of interpretations, and by the fact that there are no longer any *grand narratives* (Lyotard), or a unique rationality. The world has in fact become a narrative or story, or even a stage of various stories (interpretations), and without an external metaphysical measure of truth, all that remains is the patient conversation between various narratives and interpretations.

Vattimo writes that very early on (Vattimo, 1999, 8) he became aware of the parallels between nihilism and the Christian concept of kenosis, or the "abatement" of God. The central concept of Christianity is the incarnation: God, who otherwise transcends the world and is its Creator, became man in Jesus Christ and entered into the (immanence of the) world. This act is described by St. Paul with the word kenosis, which literally means emptying-out, and in a more general sense can also be

explained as the annihilation, or radical weakening, of God's transcendent power. Hegel had already attempted to speculatively comprehend this unheard of truth of Christianity, and he sees the passage of God into negation – up to his death on Good Friday – as the prototype of dialectic logic. Vattimo, who is in many ways inspired by Hegel, but still subjects him to hermeneutical weakening, would agree that God (as a transcendence beyond the world) actually dies.<sup>2</sup> For all eternity, any transcendent and metaphysical foundation of the world dies, and there remains only the (Holy) Spirit, who lives on as the spirit of the community in the mutual conversations of its members. The death of the "metaphysical God" on Good Friday results in the resurrection of the "hermeneutic God" on Easter Sunday – and from that moment God "lives" as an event in the proclamation of the Christian community. However, while Hegel's fascination lies in the dialectic logic of God's death, Vattimo gives more importance to the message Jesus brings about God; here God is not a powerful and violent force (the powerful God of natural religion), but rather love, which has brought itself down (kenosis) to people and made them his friends. This message brings with it the freedom and emancipation of every human being, and Vattimo draws two conclusions from this idea of kenosis. First, "nihilism" (the self-annihilation of the powerful God) as an act of kenosis is nothing external or opposed to Christianity, but is part of its very essence (Vattimo, 1999, 35). Second, the kenotic descent of God into the world (Lat. *saeculum*) represents the first step of secularisation (Vattimo, 2002, 24). God does not seek to remain within the elevated and detached status of his transcendence, but instead desires his own secularisation; the secularisation of his essence, which is love, to permeate the entire world and not remain limited to religion – even if this dissemination of love comes at the cost of religion in a narrower sense (as a cult) being marginalised. According to Vattimo Christianity is a religion which is prepared to "annul" itself (Vattimo, 2010a, 152) in order to allow secular society to become more ethical and realise the logic of love. Christianity therefore unifies kenosis, nihilism, and secularisation; it abolishes the transcendent God, who rules with power, force, and violence, and proclaims God's love in addition to the Good News of non-violence, all of which make the emancipation of every person possible. For Christianity, instead of making an effort to secure a strong position in society, it is more important for its message of love to be realised in a socio-political context. Here we could also draw a parallel with Hegel, who sees the full realisation of (Christian) religion as coinciding with the substance of the state.

Vattimo finds an ally for his thought in Girard, who helps him understand the relationship between religion

2 Vattimo characterises himself as a "watered-down Hegelian" – that is to say "Hegel without the absolute spirit, without the end of history" (Vattimo, 2010a, 157; Weiss, 2003, 173). Hegel is also an important reference for other contemporary leftist thinkers and their interpretation of Christianity, especially Žižek.

and violence. According to Vattimo God, conceptualised as a supreme being by metaphysics, is directly connected with the image of God from natural religions, as described by Girard. This God is a product of human imprisonment in the cycle of mimetic violence, and a scapegoat mechanism (Petkovšek, 2014, 589; Petkovšek, 2016, 497). Vattimo believes that in metaphysics this corresponds to the construction of a transcendent God through the use of powerful ontological attributes (omnipotence, absoluteness, eternity, transcendence – Vattimo, 1999, 39). In other words, it is about establishing a God distinguished by power, and consequently also by violence. However, Vattimo draws the radical conclusion that every insistence on God's transcendence (in relation to the world, or to man) already includes violence. For Vattimo, if Christianity maintains that God as a transcendent entity truly exists "out there", this is a remnant of the legacy of metaphysics, and must be subjected to nihilistic weakening. Similarly, it is necessary to weaken any other remains of metaphysics in Christianity – especially in the Church as an institution, which fixes Christian doctrine in eternal dogmatic truth, advocates the separation of clerics (and with that a specific transcendence) from lay people, and invokes natural law as a metaphysical basis for its teachings. From Vattimo's perspective, Christianity's deepest vocation is an anti-metaphysical one, since in place of timeless essences it posits a story and history (of salvation). Indeed, according to Vattimo the criticism of metaphysics (as a phenomenon of Greek thought) has its roots in Christianity, something which Protestant thinkers pointed out when exposing the problem of the "Hellenisation" of Christianity. Vattimo appropriates Dilthey's explanation that Christianity represented a deviation from Greek metaphysics, which was directed to the cosmos and to the uncovering of (timeless) natural laws, because it (Christianity) turned to the inner man, to his history, uniqueness, and freedom. It was precisely the emergence of "historical consciousness" (Dilthey, 1990, 253) which we can say was the driving force for the transition from metaphysics (of timeless being) to hermeneutics (the historicity of understanding). If we were to simplify we could describe this transition – the overcoming of nature in the direction of freedom (of the spirit), and the transition from the universal (i.e. the natural) essence of man to the uniqueness of each individual (based in a new understanding of the will) – as an emancipation of the spirit from the shackles of natural necessity. Christianity brought with it that understanding of the person which then became the foundation for the subsequent political project of emancipation and democracy in the West. For this reason Vattimo does not agree with explanations (such as that of Hans Blumenberg (1966)), which describe how the Enlightenment project, with its political ideals, meant a break with Christianity, and that this took place despite and in opposition to Christianity – here secularisation (which derives its meaning

in the Enlightenment precisely from the political practices which limited the Church's power, influence, and property) stands for a process *against* Christianity – but rather that the development of democracy in the West was made possible precisely because of the message brought by Christianity, even though this message often had to assert itself against the structures and positions of the Church (Vattimo, 1999, 53). Here it becomes clear that Vattimo differentiates between Christianity and the Church, relinquishing the latter of its role of official bearer and interpreter of the Christian message. However, Vattimo is also critical of the Enlightenment ideal of reason which represents a new tool of universality after the end of the old realist ontology. A belief in a universal reason, which represents the domination of one unique and "strong" way of thinking (one "logos"), and does not allow for different interpretations, has yet to free itself from metaphysics and the metaphysical will to power. For that reason the rise of hermeneutics (from Schleiermacher through Dilthey, and up to Heidegger), which weakens the totality of modern rationality (something that continues to persist in science) and leads to the radical pluralism of interpretations, represents further development and a key result of the "action of the Christian message" (Vattimo, 2002, 67). The abovementioned representatives of hermeneutics were therefore not merely under the influence of Christianity. Rather, it is this historical development, from strong metaphysics to weak hermeneutics, which forms the very kenotic logic of Christianity. The development of secular history coincides with the history of salvation – the history of western civilisation *is* simultaneously the history of the Christian message at work.

At this point Vattimo's proximity to Hegel is once again apparent, but so is a "weakening" of Hegel's strong metaphysics. Like Hegel, Vattimo ascribes a key role to history: hermeneutics is a process of interpretation from its situation from within history (not from a timeless position), and also the very happening of history itself (Deibl, 2013, 78). Tradition then determines the horizon within which the interpreter finds himself: the freedom of interpretation occurs within historically conditioned possibilities of thought, but it also brings something new, and consequentially influences the future of history. However, Vattimo takes this a step further and believes that a certain logic is present within the development of history – namely the logic of weakening, which in the same way brings with it a kind of teleology of historical development (and its peak, instead of Hegel's absolute, is represented by the dissolution of every absolute claim). The logic of weakening is the logic of an ever increasing influence of the principle of love, something which, in a political sense, means a development in the direction of ever greater freedom, the emancipation of the individual, and a democratic conception of society. To support his thesis that this finality also determines Christianity, Vattimo turns to medieval theologian Joachim of Fiore,

who understood the development of Christianity as a progression through three historical ages (of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit), with the final age of Christianity – the Age of the Holy Spirit, in which authoritative (strong) thought will be overcome and the spirit of freedom will rule – commencing according to Vattimo's view in our contemporary, postmodern times (Vattimo, 2002, 25). Weak hermeneutic Christianity, which is most prevalent today, has coincided with the appearance of social pluralism, in which every individual acquires the right to participate in the democratic process, and to have his or her interpretation respected and included in the political conversation which forms the basis of a democratic state.

#### FRAMED DEMOCRACY AND HERMENEUTIC COMMUNISM

Vattimo's own history is marked by more than the experience of Christianity. It is also coloured by a proximity to leftist ideals and communism, and in his autobiography he even describes an enthusiasm for Maoism (Vattimo, 2010a, 52). For that reason, from a personal perspective, it is not surprising if, after his return to Christianity, there also follows a "reconversion to communism" (Depoortere, 2010, 210). Together with his student Santiago Zabala he conceives of a view of communism from the perspective of hermeneutics. But, why include the theme of "weak communism" (Vattimo, 2010b, 205) into this analysis of the importance of Christianity for democracy and society? The reason is simple: Vattimo identifies the ideal of postmodern hermeneutic democracy with the ideal of hermeneutic communism. In fact, it seems that the essence of Christianity, communism, and hermeneutics meet at the same point, and that all are connected by the commandment of love, which truly links them together only if and when they renounce and weaken their strong (metaphysical) presuppositions. Genuine democracy reveals itself as a regime of weakness. Additionally, Vattimo will conclude that the ideal of democracy will be a regime of *the weak* – namely of those who Marx called the proletariat, but now have different names, and have in common the fact that they are marginalised, disprivileged, and that their voice in seemingly democratic societies is stifled. It is interesting that in his studies on communism, Vattimo rarely relates it to Christianity. For biographical reasons he distances himself from Italian "catto-comunismo" in *Ecce Comu*, but in *Hermeneutic Communism* Christianity is hardly mentioned at all. The reader gets the impression that Vattimo and Zabala are aiming for a presentation of the timeless essence of communism, which also coincides with the ideal of a genuine democracy.

Vattimo justifies his return to communism with the discovery that hermeneutics embodies a "revolutionary political project" (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 76). Even though hermeneutics and its representatives are often affiliated with a conservative political option, for Vattimo hermeneutics carries within it a progressive political calling which is "opposed to the objective state of affairs" (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 6). Hermeneutics seeks to weaken everything that pretends to be firm, or is held to be true by the established social order. Vattimo differentiates between two possible readings of Heidegger (Vattimo, 2010a, 149), left and right, progressive and conservative, just as two currents have formed for Hegelianism. While it is too early to connect two readings of Heidegger with two interpretations of hermeneutics, as they are characterised by Grondin, the parallels are nevertheless visible. A metaphysical explanation of hermeneutics insists on a transcendent "thing", which gives itself through interpretation and in that way "conserves" itself. The conservative position develops as a response, and consequently as a responsibility to the thing which is giving itself. Conversely, nihilistic hermeneutics denies the thing in question as something transcendentally (objectively) given; the thing that functions as an external measure for interpretation and limits the freedom of the interpreter. For Vattimo, that which conservative hermeneutics calls the thing is none other than an uncritical construction of tradition, and something which must be subjected to nihilistic weakening. Nihilistic hermeneutics is anti-foundational and in a political sense this direction corresponds to the position of anarchism. Vattimo even goes so far as to speak of "the anarchic vein of hermeneutics" (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 79). However, anarchy should not be taken in a negative sense; its mission is in the unmasking of every apparent *arche* while also serving the project of emancipation and liberation. According to Vattimo anarchism is governed by the ideal of non-violence and love for all, especially for those who are weak and distanced from the centres and "origins" (*archai*) of power.

So, what does this mean for concrete political practices? Together with co-author Zabala, Vattimo believes that existing liberal democracies are democratic in appearance only, and that this directly calls for "weakening" and for the establishment of a real (hermeneutic-communist) democracy. Vattimo calls the model of liberal democracy which is prevalent in contemporary societies *framed* democracy, and directly connects this idea with the metaphysical way of thinking.<sup>3</sup> A *frame* is a collective name for a given firm structure or system which determines a place and order for all things. The existing democratic system is explained as the only possible (rational) way of organising society, and as an

3 Vattimo productively interprets Heidegger's "Gestell" which we can translate as "frame" (Heidegger, 1994, 23). It represents that essence of metaphysical thinking which continues to persist in our contemporary regime of technology, and which simultaneously presents the "frame" for a liberal understanding of both the state and the concept of democracy which comes as a result from it. Vattimo is therefore striving for an analysis of the metaphysical essence of existing western democracy.

expression of the objective laws of human coexistence. One thing that has been overlooked is that standing behind this “frame” are the interests of power and the logic of violence. For Vattimo and Zabala framed democracy has three essential theoretical features: “the violence of truth, the conservative nature of realism, and the winner’s history” (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 17). The first feature concerns its concept of truth. For Vattimo truth is merely one possible interpretation which, through power, attains the status of “the truth”. Truth in this sense is therefore an interpretation of the powerful (which always includes economic power) and an instrument for domination over other interpretations. For Vattimo, not only is this truth established through violence, but it also uses violence. For that reason Vattimo comes to the conclusion that only a “farewell to truth” (Vattimo, 2011) can make a path to true democracy possible: “the end of truth is the beginning of democracy” (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 23). Once again it is necessary to emphasise that the motive for this “death of truth” (Vattimo, 2010c, 100) is an ethical one – truth brings with it a determination, a concluding constriction, and that brings freedom to a stop. For Vattimo, truth is an obstacle to freedom and emancipation.

The philosophical perspective of realism, the second feature, relies on a transcendent truth of an objective reality and strives to create a faithful description of it. However, these descriptions of reality do not really mirror reality in itself (the “things in themselves”). Rather, they are *impositions* – i.e. they are the interpretations, which our thinking projects onto reality, even though there may be no awareness of this process. Vattimo sees the greatest blindness and danger precisely within the belief that realism expresses objective reality – just as the greatest danger of framed democracy is the belief that it is an objectively founded social system without “realistic” alternatives. In the language of Marxism we could say that this is why it is necessary to first develop the conscience of the proletariat, so that it becomes aware of the unjust relationships in society, and that it does not accept them as objective necessities. Vattimo goes even so far as to explain that the prevailing analytical philosophy (as a form of realism) in liberal democracy represents an ideological superstructure which is based on the real base of capitalism, and on “the metaphysical nature of economics” (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 59).

The third feature of framed democracies is that after the fall of other social models, especially communism, they present themselves as the “winners of history”.<sup>4</sup> In their interpretation “Communism is often presented as tyrannical and hermeneutics is reduced to pure nihilism” (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 2). Vattimo is speaking of the philosophy of the winners (liberal democracy and the free market), which is an imposed interpretation of

the ruling classes, and strives for conservation of the existing social order, so it discredits communism. However, there are still losers within contemporary society – the weak, and the oppressed – and they are calling for a different interpretation, and demand different rights. Vattimo would not agree with the argument that elections in liberal democracies are that guarantee which makes both political freedom and the competition of different interpretations possible. In reality, decisions are still made within a system which (by means of its power) does not allow for decisions to be made about the system itself (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 57). For that reason it is not possible to expect changes in framed democracies to arise on their own. Instead it is necessary to strive for their weakening, and for a new social ideal.

How then does Vattimo imagine a genuine (hermeneutic) democracy which must transcend our existing framed democracy? This is a society without classes and “without dominion” (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 116). Contrary to framed democracy, in this kind of society the politics of interpretation prevails, without any claims to truth or absoluteness, and in which the voices of the weak can also be heard. In hermeneutic democracy there is a constant weakening of anything and everything possible – since the tendency towards power, certainty, and firm structures is always present on both the social and personal level. On the other hand, a positive consequence of weakening is a never-ending conversation (as a basis for political life) among the members of society, who allow even the weakest members to participate equally in the interpretation and in political decision-making. Vattimo is suspicious of the concept of dialogue, because from Greek philosophy onwards it has presupposed a *logos* which, as an objective truth, represents a transcendent authority for the participants in the dialogue. For Vattimo this kind of *logos* is an unjustified metaphysical assumption. To the contrary, a conversation accepts its weakness and its historical limitations. The only principle which cannot be weakened in a political conversation is openness to a different interpretation, or non-violence (*qua* charity). According to Vattimo, violence is already present in every suspension of the interpretive process, and so a political conversation must allow for the never-ending creativity and productivity of interpretation as a realisation of freedom and emancipation (Webb, 2010, 61).

That kind of society is the goal of hermeneutic communism. Marxist communism must be weakened and purified of its metaphysical elements. It is necessary to renounce “both the ideal of development and also the general call for revolution” (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 3). Soviet communism died because it was powerful and violent. Communism can only be reborn as a weak communism, and Vattimo sees examples of such re-birth

4 Vattimo alludes to Francis Fukuyama’s book (1992) about the end of history as triumph of capitalist liberal democracy (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 116).

in Latin America (Vattimo, 2007a, 116). As paradigmatic examples of weak communism Vattimo mentions Chavez and Morales. Both came to power not with violent revolution, but through elections. However, not so long ago Chavez's successor Maduro lost the vote in Venezuela, and it would be interesting to hear Vattimo's comments on the matter.<sup>5</sup> It also appears that Vattimo's advocacy of non-violence in real political practices has its limits. Clearly, due to its powerful enemies, the establishment of a new social order cannot take place merely through conversation, and the authors of *Hermeneutic Communism* express understanding if Latin America's communism should violate the rules of parliamentary democracy (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 136). In any case, it is impossible not to feel some disappointment when Vattimo goes from a theoretical argumentation for hermeneutic democracy to practical examples of its realisation – in spite of his own assertion that we are only dealing with hints of the hermeneutic-communist ideal. In the above-mentioned Latin American countries care for the weak is certainly present, but is it being accompanied by a pluralistic society which recognises a multiplicity of interpretations and renounces the logic of power and violence? Or is the weakening of the powerful being converted into a new violence, a new "dictatorship of the proletariat", which is in reality a dictatorship of those who, after coming to positions of power, appropriated the authority to interpret, and who have now become powerful guardians of weakness?

#### CHRISTIANITY AND DEMOCRACY IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

We have already mentioned Grondin (2010), who distinguishes between nihilistic and metaphysical interpretations of hermeneutics. If hermeneutics does not merely mean the necessity of nihilistic negation (as it stands in Vattimo's explanation), but also includes the possibility of a metaphysical position (which in no way seeks to be an imposition), then a hermeneutic interpretation of both Christianity and democracy can be understood in another way. The classical idea of hermeneutics combines both elements: the hermeneutic freedom of the interpreter (*interpretans*) and the givenness of a transcendent meaning (intelligibility, understandability) of the "thing" which is being interpreted (*interpretandum*). The meaning of the thing only gives itself *through* interpretation, so this dependence of meaning on the interpretation does not mean that it (the meaning) is subject to the interpreter, and that the interpreter can create it anyway he wishes, or according to his own freedom. According to Grondin, Gadamer's hermeneutics does not give up the classical notion of truth as *adaequatio* (Grondin, 2005), even though this

*adaequatio*, or correspondence, is not to be understood in the sense of coarse realism (and a naive concept of the description), which does not take into account the hermeneutic nature of knowledge. For that reason Grondin does not accept Vattimo's explanation that Gadamer's sentence "Being that can be understood is language" (Gadamer, 1990, 478) means the reduction of Being (in)to language, that it therefore brings about a nihilistic weakening of Being, which loses its transcendent status and is merely an event within language. Grondin asks: "But what if in Gadamer's statement, one puts the emphasis on Being itself? Or to put it differently: what if it would be Being itself that would unravel *its* understandability in or through language?" (Grondin, 2007, 211). Grondin also refers to Gadamer's phrase about a "language of the things" (212). If we assume that Being possesses an "understandability" which is anterior or prior to its expression in our language, then we could speak of the metaphysical meaning of Being, which, despite its entrance into language, preserves its transcendence and remains the criterion of truth.

In Vattimo's most recent publications he emphasised that he does not completely reject the truth, and that he also does not understand interpretations with such lightness, so as to deprive Being of all its weight (Vattimo, 2010a, 153–154). However, according to him, that which is a transcendent measure or criterion for our interpretation is nothing more than history. Namely, we constantly find ourselves in a certain historically transmitted paradigm (of understanding) by means of which we interpret facts and distinguish truth from non-truth. This historical tradition has a "weight" and we must take it into account. However, that kind of truth and weight does not alter Vattimo's nihilistic interpretation, as the predominance of history and the denial of any kind of sense which would be independent of time does not allow for an exit from historicism.

The rehabilitation of metaphysics and its connection with hermeneutics, as we can see with Grondin, is of key importance for a mediation between the two mutually exclusive alternatives which form the basis of Vattimo's argument. Vattimo only recognises the metaphysics which builds upon transcendence and violence, and the hermeneutics which renounces any transcendence and accepts only radical weakening. In the case of Christianity this means giving up belief in God as an absolute transcendence. Naturally, Vattimo would say that he too believes in God; not in the kind that exists out there in reality, but rather in the "narrated" God, who is an event (of language) and a result of the Bible. He even goes so far as to say that prayer in his (hermeneutically weakened) belief has a central role; not because some kind of existent God would hear and help him, but because the very act of saying the

5 Most likely Vattimo would form his argument similarly to how he explains the causes of economic poverty in Cuba (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 136): imperialistic capitalism is to blame for everything, as it rules the world with its economic power.

text of a prayer brings comfort and solace (Vattimo et al., 2013, 239). So, is a weak faith, which renounces a powerful belief in an existing (metaphysical) God, truly a faith at all – or in reality, would it be more honest to say with Guarino that it “eviscerates Christian faith of its very meaning” (Guarino, 2009, 157)? Does such a weak faith achieve that existential disposition, without which we cannot understand biblical personalities and their way of existence? Was Jesus merely an enlightened interpreter of Jewish prophetic traditions, or did he actually believe (i.e. trust) God (and not just *in* – the existence of – God) whom he called Father, and whose “ontological” presence he experienced in his life? Christianity did not begin with kenosis, but with a belief in the resurrection. It did not begin with ethics, nor with the commandment of love, but rather with the “metaphysical” event of resurrection, which only in hindsight enabled the understanding of Jesus the man as the Word of God incarnate. Of course, the Christian faith developed into an integral interpretation of man and the world, and through its own historical influence it formed the values of Western civilisation. It cannot be denied that its fundamental message is one of love, and that this message must be “secularised”, i.e. realised in the world. However, the deepest motive of love is religious, and here it is not possible to reduce religious experience to an aesthetic one, as Vattimo subtly does. A belief in a metaphysical foundation – and in Christianity this is in no way the God of natural religions, nor a god of Greek metaphysics, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – is absolutely necessary for Christianity, and rejecting this would not only lead to a weakening, but also to a dissolution of the Christian religion. If Christianity remains merely a story which formed the narrative frame of western civilisation, and if this is even a story of the end of religion in the sense of the death of an “objectively” existing God, and along with him any kind of transcendence – which according to Vattimo falls to Christianity as its mission among all other religions, and in a paradoxical way ensures Christianity of its universal validity – then Vattimo’s optimism regarding the “return of religion” is completely unfounded. The difference between a resurgence of interest in Christianity or *Star Wars* is, in this case, merely a difference in degree, not a difference in principle. Christianity has otherwise had a greater influence on the formation of Western man’s consciousness than the narrative of *Star Wars*, but in this understanding the Christian God is no more metaphysically real than Darth Vader.

We could ask similarly critical questions – though this relates to a completely different phenomenon – concerning Vattimo’s understanding of democracy. Is it not a special kind of violence, if every metaphysical belief within a political context is considered to be potentially dangerous, and demands to be weakened? Is there not

behind this idea a totalitarian tendency for everyone in society to have a weak belief in their own convictions, and for that to be the only way they can participate in the political conversation? Vattimo’s hermeneutic democracy brands every belief in a transcendent and “objective” truth as a form of fundamentalism, and it demands the destruction of all metaphysical convictions, especially those which citizens are not even aware of in (their) apparent democracies. So, what would life be like in the realised ideal of hermeneutic democracy? Let us leave aside the leftist Latin American governments which do not easily serve as inspiration, and ask ourselves how it is even possible to come to political decisions on the basis of an amicable exchange of interpretations. How should a political conversation be carried out when a conflict of interpretations arises? Political decisions usually mean a choosing one option and excluding all others – this process creates realities which are not in accordance with the wishes of a certain portion of the citizen-interpreters. If there is no external measure or positive criteria which could judge between interpretations and allow for a social consensus, then the doors of arbitrary power, and consequently also of violence, are left wide open. The Augustinian *ama et quod vis fac*, which is followed by Vattimo’s imperative of love, cannot remain a pure form, but it also demands that its contents are determined. Kant’s categorical imperative is for just that reason merely a form, as it presupposes the universality of one rationality which serves as a suprahistorical criterion of moral and political activities. Belief in a unique – although communicative – rationality, which connects the plurality of political subjects, is also the basis of Habermas’ political idea, which in its own way continues with Kant’s Enlightenment project and understands itself as post-metaphysical thought. However, Vattimo also accuses Habermas of metaphysics, because his idea still remains tied to transcendence (qua transcendentalism) and has not taken the last step of weakening (Vattimo, 2004, 158). This last step would be none other than the renunciation of every “*arche*” and a positive appropriation of anarchism.

If Vattimo claims that Habermas and Apel’s political thought is grounded “on metaphysical ideals” (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 76), then we are not in bad company if we connect democracy with metaphysics. As a contrast and alternative to Vattimo’s nihilistic and anarchic understanding of democracy we could posit the concept of *metaphysical hermeneutic democracy*. Metaphysical claims, in this context, are always and necessarily bound to hermeneutic mediation. In the background is the belief that there exists a transcendent meaning (even a meaning of the political) – as a universal logos – which represents a super-temporal criterion, though this foundation is only given through historical (hermeneutic) mediation, i.e. through interpretation.<sup>6</sup> This prevents the

6 For a rehabilitation of metaphysics and the notion of transcendence see Grondin, 2012, 249.



usurping on power on the part of the citizen-interpreter, while also demanding of him an attitude of humility. Believing in metaphysical presuppositions within a political context means believing in the possibility of a transcendent meaning behind political coexistence, and in a transcendent meaning behind every fellow citizen – something which is expressed by the secular idea of the inalienable dignity of every human being. If Christianity believes that every person is an image of God, then this is a belief in a metaphysical foundation. Within Christianity itself this demands hermeneutic mediation; within political pluralism the demand for interpretation is even greater, and requires a special philosophical-secular translation of the religious language, or that which Habermas calls the “philosophical verbalization (Versprachlichung) of the sacred” (Habermas, 2013, 299). A hermeneutic democracy which includes metaphysical beliefs is no less hermeneutic than that which Vattimo requires from the viewpoint of the ethical ideal of non-violence. That is why it still remains tolerant to other interpretations in society. However the basic meeting between interpretations is no longer a conversation, but a dialogue. A hermeneutic democracy understood in this way believes in a transcendent *logos* as a metaphysical basis for *dia-logos*. It believes in a meaning which we cannot master; it can only be uncovered, and not by one person alone. This can only be done together with others, in a patient and possibly never-ending dialogue.

The absence of dialogue is one of the main shortcomings of Vattimo's relationship to Christianity and communism. He does not have a dialogue with them, but just subjects them to weakening. Christianity must renounce its transcendent foundation and can only keep the secular ethical fruits of its labours. A similar weakening is also experienced by communism, which has less problems giving up metaphysical demands, but struggles to identify itself with the role of guarantor of a hermeneutic democracy, which “allows other cultures to suggest different visions of the world” (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 138), accepts radical pluralism, and relinquishes the logic of power. Vattimo's weakening goes so far to level the differences between Christianity and communism that at the end both merge to form the joined phenomenon of *Christocommunism*, a reflection of Vattimo's personal experiences and his own “truth”. However, despite this simplification and a peculiar hermeneutic reductionism (Klun, 2007, 176), in the end it would be unfair if we did not also acknowledge the positive contribution of Vattimo's thought. For example, there is the fact that Vattimo devoted his philosophical attention to two phenomena, Christianity and communism, which are in many ways weakened today, subject to numerous prejudices, and, in a political context, often marginalised. For a genuine democracy in the future, it will be important to take into consideration their respective concerns.

## VATTIMOVA KENOTIČNA INTERPRETACIJA KRŠČANSTVA IN NJEGOV POMEN ZA POSTMODERNO DEMOKRACIJO

Branko KLUN

Univerza v Ljubljani, Teološka fakulteta, Poljanska 4, 1000 Ljubljana  
e-mail: branko.klun@teof.uni-lj.si

### POVZETEK

*Cilj članka je predstaviti Vattimovo interpretacijo krščanstva in družbeno-politični pomen, ki ga slednjemu pripisuje. Članek je razdeljen na tri dele. Z razliko od prevladujočih mnenj, po katerih so absolutne zahteve v religiji nezdržljive z demokratičnimi političnimi praksami, Vattimo zagovarja tezo, da sta moderni pluralizem in demokratični ideal družbe posledica notranjega razvoja krščanstva in da zato krščanstvo predstavlja pozitiven element v družbeno-političnem kontekstu (prvi del). Toda pri Vattimu ne doživi novega ovrednotenja zgolj krščanstvo, temveč tudi komunizem (drugi del). Zdi se, da se bistvo krščanstva, komunizma in hermenevtike srečujejo v skupni točki in da vse povezuje zapoved ljubezni. Vendar je njihovo srečevanje možno šele takrat, ko se odpovedo močnim metafizičnim predpostavkam in se ustrezno »ošibijo«. Pristna demokracija se razodeva kot režim šibkosti, ki ne tolerira zahtev po absolutni resnici in v katerem se slišijo tudi glasovi šibkih. Toda Vattimova nihilistična interpretacija krščanstva in hermenevtične demokracije odpira mnoga vprašanja, s katerimi se ukvarja tretji del članka. Avtor se zavzema za rehabilitacijo metafizike, ki je ne smemo podvreči Vattimovim predsodkom in ki nam omogoča spremenjeno razumevanje krščanstva ter alternativno interpretacijo hermenevtične demokracije.*

**Ključne besede:** Vattimo, krščanstvo, komunizem, hermenevtika, demokracija, šibka misel

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