

Weakening Otherworldliness

Vattimo, Hermeneutics, and the Question of *Contemptus Mundi*

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Abstract: The lineage of philosophical hermeneutics is indelibly marked by the discourse of asceticism and otherworldliness. This influence springs most immediately from Nietzsche but finds itself provocatively manifest in the recent and ongoing return of philosophical hermeneutics to religious patterns of thought. This work will consider the hermeneutic encounter with and appropriation of asceticism in the work of Gianni Vattimo. In one sense, this engagement would appear an unlikely one, as Vattimo (following Nietzsche) is openly suspicious of the voluntary assumption of and salvific role for suffering in the quest for human flourishing. However, upon closer inspection, we see that a reconfigured asceticism, focused on the turning of power against itself and the reconfiguration of our relationship with the world, is alive and well in Vattimo’s “weak thought.” More radically, Vattimo’s thought represents a purification—even a mortification—of asceticism by cleansing it of its untenable and burdensome metaphysical baggage and allowing for a renewed and authentic approach to religiosity.

Keywords: Gianni Vattimo, *contemptus mundi*, otherworldliness, weak thought, asceticism.

SINCE NIETZSCHE, THOSE ENGAGED IN critical reflections on otherworldliness in general and asceticism in particular have been mindful of certain internal tensions particular to those orientations. *Contemptus mundi*, in its various forms, represents a rejection of the world of lived experience in favor of some otherworldly object of focus and yet, paradoxical though it might seem, this disposition in turn produces a renewed confrontation with the rejected world of lived experience both through the establishment of discursive, ascetic practices and the gradual dissolution of the residue of this-worldliness contained within the metaphysical formulations by which

strictly orthodox, supernaturalist systems of meaning are created and sustained. The tension represented by the “return to the world” embodied in *contemptus mundi* in turn calls into question the very possibility of religious thought, forcing us to consider whether religion itself has reached a point of completion understood as self-destruction; a concern famously elaborated upon by Gauchet who, in a reversal of centuries of Christian exceptionalist narratives, argues that Christianity is the “religion of the departure from religion,” the religion embodying most fully the self-destructive internal logic of (Western) religiosity writ large.¹ The internal tensions at issue above are, in turn, made still more complex and explicit by the increasing intersection between ascetic thought and various sorts of antiessentialist philosophical, critical, and theological speculation; an intersection that raises the possibility that critical activity could, in fact, constitute an expression of, and not merely a means of interrogating, *contemptus mundi*.

Confronted with these varied concerns, it seems like the last place in which we might find insight would be Vattimo’s autobiographical/philosophical work *Belief*. What possible benefit could this text, which (directly) mentions otherworldliness only briefly and asceticism not at all, written by this author, who neither seems to engage in otherworldly practices nor to consider them at any length in his theoretical writings, have to our inquiry? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to consider generally Vattimo’s status as both a theorist of otherworldliness and as a subject constituted by a certain tradition of otherworldliness who, in fact, continues that tradition through engaging in theorizing as a kind of ascetic praxis.

If we are looking for a figure in whose person and work we might find certain insights into the tensions within and continued importance of the otherworldliness, we might be puzzled that our inquiry leads us to Gianni Vattimo. Firstly, we in the Anglophone world are accustomed to dealing with Vattimo (if, indeed, we do so at all) primarily as a theorist and secondarily as a politician and activist. Insofar as we regard Vattimo as a theorist, we tend to categorize him as separate from the models of asceticism and counter-asceticism with which inquiries into *contemptus mundi* tend to concern themselves. He might well comment upon the intertextual points of intersection (dis)embodied in figures like St. Anthony the Great, St. Kevin of Glendalough, or St. Mary of Egypt, but surely his doing so intellectualizes these figures rather than following their lived example by way of the pursuit of *askesis*. Similarly, Vattimo the politician and activist seems, if anything, to offer even bleaker prospects of providing us with a model by which to consider otherworldly orientations. If such considerations as these seem to call into question Vattimo’s utility as a model of ascetic practice, however, it is merely because they disregard the interrelatedness of Vattimo’s constitution as a subject (indeed, as an intertextual subject) with his theoretical

¹ Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, trans. Oscar Burge, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 200.

enterprises and, in turn, the interrelatedness of those enterprises with his political, ethical, and social activities. Indeed, a great part of what makes Vattimo interesting is precisely the degree to which he blends the theoretical, practical, and personal in writing, statements, and activities that, as we shall see, have profound implications for an inquiry into otherworldliness.

Having dispensed with our initial consideration of the relationship between the figure of Vattimo and his theoretical and political activities, we are now confronted with the question of how, if at all, Vattimo's philosophy engages with the orientation of otherworldliness. The intersection of Vattimo's thought with the orientation of *contemptus mundi* and the broader challenges to religious thought revealed by the tensions within that orientation is a complex one. On the surface, Vattimo does not seem terribly concerned with *contemptus mundi* as an orientation. Certainly, his writings incorporate only brief mentions of otherworldliness and ascetic practice and even these are often in the contexts of his own exegetical efforts. Minimal though these references might be, however, it is important that we consider what utility, if any, they might have in our consideration of Vattimo's encounter with otherworldliness.

Let us begin with Vattimo's brief considerations of asceticism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we find several references to this topic in Vattimo's writings on Nietzsche. While we might be tempted to dismiss these early references as merely exegetical, here already we find Vattimo's association of the asceticism criticized by Nietzsche with a metaphysical desire for stability, a focus on otherworldliness that denies not only Nietzsche's conception of the pre-Judaic order governing the relationship between strength and weakness, but also the impermanence and interrelated complexity of day to day existence.² This faith in an essentially metaphysical world-to-come keeps us from confronting (through hermeneutics) the historically-conditioned, contingent, world in which we find ourselves.³ In a similarly Nietzschean move, Vattimo observes that this metaphysical approach to asceticism is not limited to religious modes of expression but is, in fact, alive and well in approaches, both religious and secular, to psychotherapy and rehabilitation:

The standpoint of the partisans of psychoanalysis, however disguised, is always conditioned by a metaphysical ascetic prejudice: only the painful (and long and costly) process that matures in a relationship with an analyst really sets you free, goes to the root causes, promises a lasting "cure." When applied to the treatment of drug addiction, often by religiously motivated caregivers, this attitude leads to the construction of new psychological forms of dependence that do no more than

² Gianni Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press 2000), 170.

³ Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, 177.

substitute for the former dependence on drugs (and corroborate the old adage about religion and opium...)⁴

The dependence to which Vattimo alludes is not the mere production of “psychological facts”, the, so to speak, clinical efficacy of these faith-based clinicians. Rather, the dysfunction to which Vattimo refers is precisely the instantiation of an inability to confront the world, the substitution of a fundamentally metaphysical focus on either the promise of eternal salvation or a “lasting cure” (both of which, in this case, function as metaphysical Other worlds grounding the long and painful rehabilitative efforts of the therapist) for the far more difficult and nuanced project of recognizing and confronting one’s situatedness in this world (which, for Vattimo, can take the simple but distinctly this-worldly form of confronting one’s situatedness in a physical body which might benefit from substituting painful ascetic discipline for the judicious employment of the fruits of psychopharmacology).

Vattimo’s discussion of asceticism, however, owes more to Nietzsche than a modified form of his criticism of the Judeo-Christian approach to otherworldly asceticism. On the contrary, Vattimo, with Nietzsche, likewise recognizes that asceticism is so seductive and appealing precisely it contains within itself something of value. For Nietzsche, this kernel of value consisted precisely of a means of enhancing one’s own power through a sort of self-overcoming:

As [Nietzsche’s] own text shows, asceticism conjoins ideality and praxis, coupling in resistance the “beyond” with such instrumentalities as “mechanical activity” and such transgressions as “orgies of feeling.” So when Nietzsche asks near the end, “What is the meaning of the power of this ideal, the monstrous nature of its power? Why has it been allowed to flourish to this extent? Why has it not rather been resisted?”, the answer emerges without coaxing: it resists itself and thus coopts external resistance.⁵

For Nietzsche, in a certain sense, asceticism allows a turning of power inward such as to allow one to control the mechanisms of conflict and engage, as it were, in perpetual struggle. While this perpetual struggle can be wasted by being engaged in for religious ends (as Vattimo would have it, for the sake of metaphysical prejudices) or merely for the sake of reveling in the exercise of power, when it is turned towards productive ends (as, for Nietzsche, occurs in the case of truly great thinkers) it can enhance the power with which one can confront the world:

⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation* Ed. Santiago Zabala, Trans. William McCuaig, (New York: Columbia University Press 2004), 73.

⁵ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993), 218.

Asceticism provides [the philosopher] with the condition most favorable to the exercise of his intelligence. Far from denying "existence," he affirms *his* existence... It is clear, these philosophers are by no means unprejudiced witnesses and judges of the value of the ascetic ideal. They think only of themselves; what are saints to them? They think of the things they cannot do without: freedom from constraint, interference, noise, business, duties, worries... In short, theirs is the serene asceticism of a winged animal that soars above life but does not alight on it. We all know the three might slogans of the ascetic ideal: poverty, humility, chastity, and when we examine the lives of the great productive spirits closely, we are bound to find all three present in some degree. Not, to be sure, as their "virtues"- what have such men to do with virtue?-but as the most natural conditions of their optimum existence, their strongest productivity.⁶

Thus we find that, for Nietzsche, self-overcoming, understood as a reappropriated asceticism, provides a condition for the possibility of a productive intellectual cum social relationship with the world, not only by repurposing the very asceticism that once proved a barrier to such a relationship, but also as a means of preventing that relationship from becoming dysfunctional. Asceticism, understood in this way, provides us with a means of rejecting the metaphysical prejudices of an asceticism that would cut us off from the world in which we find ourselves thrown and a system of discipline by which to avoid getting drawn into social conformity or drowning in the particulars constitutive of our day-to-day experiences ("soaring above life without alighting on it").

If Vattimo shares Nietzsche's concern with repurposing asceticism as both a means of deconstructing the metaphysical asceticism to which both thinkers oppose themselves and as a means of engaging in a renewed and productive encounter with the world, it is here that these two thinkers part ways (albeit, as is often the case with Vattimo's exegetical works, not by means of an overt disagreement but rather through a sort of twisting from within).⁷ Vattimo, with Heidegger, recognizes that Nietzsche's emphasis on power has the potential to collapse into a new (and, potentially, dangerously arbitrary) metaphysics of its own and, further recognizes that even the renewed confrontation with the world offered by Nietzsche does not, in any case provide us with a means of emancipation. We are, after all, not in a world of individuals or even, of individuals interspersed with Nietzsche's "herds" but, rather, enframed (to use the language of late

⁶ Friederich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* as found in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals* trans. Francis Gollfing, (New York: Anchor Books 1957), 3: VIII.

⁷ Vattimo makes a distinction between *Überwindung*, the radical overcoming marked by discontinuity, and *Verwindung*, the overcoming marked by reappropriation, reimagination, and creativity.

Heidegger) in diffuse and (re)productive systems of power relations all too capable of turning our efforts to overthrow or undermine them back upon themselves. Indeed, as Foucault is wont to remind us, “resistance never occupies a position of exteriority in relation to power”: Even armed with a renewed ability to confront the world and the discipline to do so productively, we are not capable of overpowering power structures and, on the contrary, our efforts to do so are precisely a necessary part of how those structures function.⁸

For Vattimo, the suspicion of using power against power certainly finds itself expressed along the lines of the Foucauldian (or, perhaps, late Heideggerian) concerns outlined above. Indeed, throughout his political works Vattimo decries the status of the Left in Western democracies, where Leftist political parties, trade unions, and political platforms find themselves subsumed into the very systems of power to which they would otherwise oppose themselves. Vattimo recognizes that efforts at armed opposition to prevailing systems (for instance, Capitalist democracies) in turn serve as grounds for the most repressive excesses of those systems, facilitating their consolidation of power rather than the reverse. The omnipresent threat (real or imagined) of communist adversaries during the Cold War in fact fueled the establishment of the military-industrial complexes that now resides as the very heart of many Western economies, causing Capitalism to emerge from that period of history not only intact but so strong as to occasion dramatic outbursts of triumphalism (exemplified by Fukuyama’s claim that history ended with the close of the Cold War) which eventually ossified into the so-called “Washington Consensus” that Capitalism and Democracy are the only sane, effective organizational models open to a society. Vattimo notes that today a similar role is played by postcolonial terrorism, with the threat of terrorist attacks not only justifying state surveillance and repression of potential troublemakers within a given society but also the military suppression of difference and the enforcement of the Washington Consensus in other countries as well.⁹

Of course, we should not be too quick to ascribe to Vattimo a thoroughlygoingly Foucauldian attitude towards power and resistance. Vattimo maintains a suspicion of certain kinds of resistance as being susceptible to re-absorption into and buttressing of the networks of power being opposed, but this concern does not extend to all conceivable forms of resistance (as it seems to at least for the early Foucault). At the same time, certain prevailing power structures cannot be opposed by power simply because said structures are too powerful to be overcome in this manner. As Vattimo puts it, “It is useless to think of revolution as the

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 2001), 95-96.

⁹ Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 136.

immediate and violent taking of power-capitalism is infinitely stronger than that."¹⁰ The extant, dominant power structures that shape the world in which we live are, for Vattimo, history's victors, if only by virtue of the contingent circumstances surrounding their triumph (rather than by virtue of the inevitable movement of "progress" as described by a certain species of triumphalism), and, as a result, they are both too powerful (or, to frame the matter in more Foucauldian networks, too prominent as constituted by power) and too capable of reappropriating failed efforts at resistance to be overcome through the direct exercise of power prompted by a certain interpretation of Nietzsche's thought.

It is here that we return to Vattimo's status as a theorist and exemplar of otherworldliness as exemplified most especially in his work *Belief*. In that work, Vattimo likens the return to religion embodied in both the renewed consideration of religion by philosophers and critical theorist and the recent popularization and politicization of religious groups to the turning of one's mind to spiritual matters as one grows old:

[T]he return of religion and of the problem of faith is not unrelated to world history, and is not merely reducible to a transition between life-stages always conceived according to the same pattern (whenever people get old, they all begin to think more about the beyond, therefore, about God). Yet even the historical circumstances bringing back the problem of faith share a trait in common with the physiology of aging: in both cases the problem of God is posed in relation to the encounter of a limit as the occurrence of a defeat: we believed that we could realize justice on earth, but now reckon that it is no longer possible and turn our hopes to God. Death hovers over us as an ineluctable event, we escape from despair by turning to God and His promise to welcome us into His eternal kingdom.¹¹

The return to religion, while not reducible to the process of aging (whether literal, in the form of aging populations in Europe, or figurative, in the form of a "decline of the West") is, at least, analogous with it insofar as both concern limits. Far from treating this as a diffuse phenomenon, Vattimo regards his own renewed engagement with otherworldliness "as the decisive consequence of a historical process in which projects, dreams of renewal, hopes even for (political) redemption, to which [he] had been committed were shattered in a wholly contingent way."¹² The very futility of various

¹⁰ Gianni Vattimo, "Weak Communism" in *The Idea of Communism*, Ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, (London: Verso, 2010), 206.

¹¹ Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 24.

¹² Vattimo, *Belief*, 24.

emancipatory political projects, manifest dramatically in their historical failure, occasions our renewed confrontation with the question of faith in general and otherworldliness in particular.

It is important to note Vattimo's emphasis on the contingency associated both with the return to religion and with the particular forms that return takes. Vattimo regards the return to religion and the increasing emphasis on questions of faith and otherworldliness as produced by contingent historical circumstances. As we have seen, these circumstances can take the form of the failure of various emancipatory projects but also, lest we suppose that the confrontation with limits is a purely leftist phenomenon, of the collapse of such modernist projects as "enlightened" imperialism and the increasingly visible tensions (high unemployment, social and income inequality, spiraling debt, etc.) arising within the many societies that have adopted the capitalism/democracy doublet. Similarly important is the increasing crisis of confidence in the broader Reason narrative of which the West has long been a steward, with rationality showing an increasing inability to confront increasingly serious global problems such as genocide and ecological destruction.¹³ These various issues, taken together, offer us, by Vattimo's lights, a circumstance in which the return to religion, in its various forms, is able to arise and attain the widespread appeal and diversity of expression that seem to characterize it.

Before moving on to consider the different modes of expression which Vattimo associates with the return to religion and otherworldliness, it is necessary to take a moment to consider just how historically specific that return actually is. After all, as Karen Armstrong is wont to remind us, otherworldliness often arises in the context of great social and intellectual instability.¹⁴ It seems possible, then, that the contingent historical circumstances that Vattimo describes are, in fact, demonstrative of some necessary or essential human reaction to social and intellectual stresses. Rather than succumb to the temptation to essentialize this reaction, however, it is important that we recognize that the apparent similarities between the contemporary return to religion with which Vattimo is concerned, and the ancient examples of otherworldliness studied by many scholars of *contemptus mundi* can be accounted for precisely by the role played by said ancient examples in the constitution of our contemporary situation. If certain sorts of social and intellectual upheaval are, at present, occasioning renewed confrontations with *contemptus mundi*, then surely this is possible precisely because of the extent to which that orientation has played a central role in the continuing traditions of which those confrontations remain a part. Furthermore, any effort we might be tempted to make to regard otherworldliness as

¹³ Vattimo, *Belief*, 83-84.

¹⁴ Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation*, (New York: Random House, 2006), 35.

a universal human reaction to certain conditions is necessarily called into question by our own situatedness within particular historical, cultural, and political contexts; we lack the sort of objective “view from nowhere” necessary to identify this supposed universality.

Efforts to universalize the concept of otherworldliness are likewise hampered by the various forms that otherworldliness can take even within a broadly shared context. Vattimo observes that, in addition to his own confrontation with religiosity, there are a number of other possible reactions to the return to religion. It might seem that the most obvious such reaction would simply be a return to conventional forms of religiosity, in which one might indulge in otherworldliness in much the way that various religious groups have permitted and encouraged for centuries. This option, however, is not so unproblematic as it might first appear. Indeed, for Vattimo, the transformation of various religions into fundamentalist forms occurs precisely as a consequence of the perceived insufficiency of traditional (read: metaphysical) approaches to otherworldliness. Indeed, if the Western narrative (capital “R”) Reason has fallen into disrepute by virtue of its scandalous failure to engage productively with the world, its fall has (as we consider more fully later) likewise called into question the metaphysical principles underlying traditional approaches to religiosity. For millions of self-identified religious believers (and here we observe again the influence of Catholicism on Vattimo) particular items of dogma have become impossible to take seriously, thereby forcing religious authorities to seek refuge, not in a discredited metaphysics, but in the identitarian politics occasioned by the postmodern emphasis on difference:

In this climate, it seems that the proclamation of the Catholic Church, planted squarely in defense of a family and sexual morality that even practicing Catholics no longer take seriously, appears to seek justification less in doctrinal principles (which are often simply laughable; for example when they seem to identify masturbation with genocide) than in the need to defend the image of the “true believer.” And the latter is to be distinguished from tepid Christianity precisely through a practice of virtue that no reasonable morality demands, but which serves to strengthen the unity of the Church conceived almost like an army where soldiers who are not entirely resolute are not admitted. What I am trying to say is that [John Paul II’s] insistence on indefensible aspects of Catholic sexual morality (just think of the prohibition on using condoms in the epoch of AIDS) seems to be motivated less by fundamental principles (even if one takes up the naturalistic and essentialist metaphysics preferred by the Pope) than by the desire to avoid the impression that Christian morality and doctrine may be weakening. In

short, Christianity must beware of looking too kindly on humanity, on its passions (even those lived legitimately) and on the very demands of life on this planet (I am thinking of the prohibition on setting any limit to birth control at a time of demographic explosion).¹⁵

While Vattimo uses the example of the Catholic Church, this return to a sort of dogmatic focus on identity certainly seems to find parallel expressions in other Christian denominations and, indeed, in non-Christian religions (Vattimo explicitly mentions how this sort of thinking, combined with the experience of postcolonial life, are at least partially constitutive of Islamic fundamentalisms).¹⁶ Identity here, becomes that for which one undergoes suffering (voluntarily or otherwise) in the name of righteousness, an ascetic denial of the world that, paradoxically, manifests itself in the most coercive expressions of this-worldly power: the religious legislation and enforcement of moral and behavior norms for the alleged spiritual benefit of a subject population.

As we have already observed, otherworldliness need not take an explicitly religious form. On the contrary, metaphysical otherworldliness, having been called into question in its various religious formulations, lives on in other areas of intellectual life, if usually in a concealed manner. We are called by the secular world to discipline ourselves and endure suffering for the sake of personal betterment (however conceived) or to mortify ourselves before forces greater than ourselves (political, ideological, even scientific or intellectual). If a “metaphysical ascetic prejudice” lives on in psychoanalysis, and, for that matter, modern scientism (of the reductionist variety espoused by many of the so-called New Atheists), it is able to do so not only by virtue of being deeply ingrained in the culture through a sort of self-concealing. Metaphysics of the classical variety, where God, Nature, Platonic Forms, or some other monolithic structure serves to ground the very existence of things, certainly bears scant resemblance to psychoanalysis with its emphasis on individual psychological constitution and modern scientific fallibilism. In spite of this, both scientism and psychoanalysis are grounded on certain metaphysical presuppositions (the comprehensibility of the world or the patient’s psyche, the existence of literal or psychological “facts,” etc.) which in turn allow them to ground ascetic practice (particularly, as we have already noted, in the case of psychoanalytic psychotherapy) and function as a means of having recourse to an abstract, stable, metaphysical world that functions as a barrier to (and, perhaps, protection from) our confrontation with the world of lived experience.

For Vattimo, the process of weakening of strong structures is tied up in a certain interpretation of the Christian concept of kenosis, and the logic

¹⁵ Vattimo, *Belief*, 56-57.

¹⁶ Vattimo, *Belief*, 26.

of reversals so prevalent in the Gospels. Indeed, for Vattimo himself, his conceptualization of weak thought and his renewed concern with religion can be said to be mutually constitutive (if still possessed of utility for those theorizing within the contexts of Christianity in general and Roman Catholicism in particular): "I confess that I experience the clarification of this notion of weak ontology as the 'transcription' of the Christian message, as a great event, as a kind of decisive discovery... I believe this is because it has allowed me to establish continuity with my own personal religious origin."¹⁷ For Vattimo, kenosis expresses the truth of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, representing the end of the totalizing God of metaphysics and the dissolution of the divine in the world and in humanity: Christ's kenosis makes possible our entry into the process of actively interpreting and productively engage with the contexts in which we find ourselves. Far from leading to an empowerment of humanity as the new bestowers of some sort of absolute meaning however, kenosis functions instead as occasioning an *imitatio Dei* in which weakness becomes that to which theorists and activists can and should aspire as a means of liberation through the breaking down of oppressive structures and the corresponding creation of space for communitarian activity. Vattimo writes,

We are able to recognize that the history of being has a 'reductive,' nihilistic meaning, a tendency to assert the truth of Being by reducing the compelling nature of entities (whether they be the political authority, the threatening and bizarre God of natural religion, or the preemptory finality of the modern subject understood as the guarantor of truth), only because we have been educated by the Christian tradition to think of God not as a master but as a friend, to proclaim that essential things are revealed not to the wise but to the little ones, to believe that whoever does not lose his soul will not gain it and so on. If I say now that, in thinking of the history of Being as guided by the common guiding thread of the reduction of strong structures, I am not seeking to legitimize 'objectively' certain maxims of action on the basis of the fact that Being is structured in a certain way; I am merely reformulating, in a different way, the appeal, the call addressed to me by the tradition in which I am placed, and of which weak ontology is only a risky interpretation.¹⁸

Vattimo's is not the asceticism of traditional, metaphysical religiosity, in which suffering is endured (as an imposition) for the sake of spiritual edification. Rather, asceticism manifests as a refusal to impose (violently) upon others and functions instead as a basis for charity and hospitality.¹⁹

¹⁷ Vattimo, *Belief*, 40.

¹⁸ Vattimo, *Belief*, 44.

¹⁹ See Armstrong's discussion of the Hebrew notion of hospitality as a kenotic restraint

We restrain ourselves, turn our power inward as self-discipline, not to forestall our flourishing for the sake of some heavenly flourishing still-to-come but to allow for the flourishing of the never-entirely-Other through whom God becomes present to us.

For Vattimo, the dissolution of metaphysics occasioned by Christian thought is linked, paradoxical though it may seem, to the process of secularization. Indeed, like Gauchet, Vattimo, at times, treats secularization as the gradual bearing out of impulses that exist within Christianity itself. Unlike Gauchet, Vattimo views this bearing out as contingent and risky.²⁰ Secularism is not something to simply be observed as it proceeds towards a predetermined, historical end but rather a process in which we participate and through which, odd though it may seem, we in fact maintain a continuity with and pietas towards the Christian tradition:

We must keep in mind that it is the dissolution of metaphysics that frees us for pietas... Once we discover that all the systems of values are nothing but human, all too human productions, what is left for us to do? Do we dismiss them as lies and errors? No, we hold them even dearer because they are all we have in the world, they are the only destiny, thickness, richness of our experiences, they are the only "Being."²¹

Secularization, then, is not the end of religion but, more accurately, a particular variety of one of the forms in which religion is able to continue and, as we shall see, a form in which certain of the aspirations of the Christian tradition seemingly banished by the destruction of metaphysics might yet be resurrected.

It is important to note that the process of the dissolution of strong metaphysical structures is both an autonomous cultural and intellectual force to which institutions are called to respond (as we have already observed with the case of the Catholic Church) and an activity in which theorists can, and, by Vattimo's lights, should participate. The account of the process of weakening, and the intellectual activity by which theorists help this process along are collectively termed *pensiero debole* or "Weak thought" by Vattimo.²² Indeed, as we shall see, for Vattimo the process of weakening

of one's power. Armstrong, *The Great Transformation*, 53.

²⁰ Gauchet, for his part, regards the dissolution of the social function of religion as an accomplished fact, but cautions that a religious residue yet remains that is capable of producing discursive content (including, presumably, content with political, social, and ethical implications). See Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, trans. Oscar Burge, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 200.

²¹ Vattimo, Gianni, "Etica dell'interpretazione", Quoted in Marta Frascati-Lochhead, *Kenosis and Feminist Theology: The Challenge of Gianni Vattimo*, (Albany: State University of New York Press: 1998), 82, Translation Frascati-Lochhead's.

²² Kearney has proposed the alternate translation of "fragile thought" but, in addition to being less true to the original Italian, this translation seems less useful insofar as it locks

has a distinct ethical and political dimension which establishes it not as a fait accompli but rather a risky project concerned with opening the way to certain ethical and political possibilities. Theorists involved in this project become engaged in the tireless and recursive process of calling into question metaphysical structures wherever and whenever they arise, as “the wellsprings of metaphysical authoritarianism never run dry, so the task of secularization—that is the unmasking of the sacrality of all absolute, ultimate truths—is an ongoing one.”²³ This unmasking, of course, is inaugurated by the kenotic gesture of Christ and has a double meaning, entailing the exposure of the contingency of supposedly absolute metaphysical structures (which, in any case, has long been the concern of the antiessentialist philosophical, theological, and critical theoretical projects grouped popularly if somewhat unhelpfully under the rubric of “postmodernism”) and the revelation of the hidden, totalizing, metaphysical kernel of modes of thought that fail to live up to their antiessentialist pretensions (we have already considered scientific fallibilism and psychoanalytic thought as exemplars of this type of metaphysical crypto-essentialism).²⁴

Nor is weak thought merely content to engage in an outward-looking critique of metaphysical structures. On the contrary, weak thought entails a turning of power back upon itself that seems to be of a decidedly ascetic character: the theorist is constantly in danger of herself reconstituting metaphysical structures of an especially dangerous variety. Indeed, as we have already considered, the pretense of antiessentialism, when unrealized, provides a means by which metaphysics can conceal itself, thereby making it impossible to interact with productively. Worse still, antiessentialism itself can, in certain forms, smack of a sort of completion productive of an uncontested absolutism of its own, with the end of metaphysics serving as a foundation for the forceful “liberation” of others: “The constructive nihilism of hermeneutics certainly has to guard against the neurotic return of authoritarianism—but antifoundationalism itself is at risk of hardening into a metaphysics, and when it does it fits very nicely with the imposition of liberty and democracy by way of armed intervention against what President Bush has called ‘rogue states.’” Thus, in addition to guarding against the return of authoritarianism (which, in the aftermath of the weakening of metaphysics, becomes “neurotic” insofar as it is accomplished by an irrational leap into an identitarian acceptance of principles no longer

Vattimo into a single metaphor (that of brittleness, which, admittedly, places an appropriate emphasis on Vattimo’s affirmation of the contingency and risk associated with his project) in a manner that does a disservice to his account (Vattimo’s account of kenosis, for instance, involves employment of the weakness metaphor understood as involving diffusion, an employment that Kearney’s translation would not readily permit). See Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 190.

²³ Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, xxvii.

²⁴ Vattimo, *Belief*, 66.

defensible on purely philosophical grounds), the weak thinker must engage in a meticulous self-criticism (which need not, after all, be done in isolation but can, in fact, occur most effectively in the context of a community) and qualification of her positions, lest those positions themselves be twisted into particularly dangerous metaphysical structures.

Weak thought's emphasis on discipline as a means of combating a protean and insidious threat intersects productively with the Christian ascetic tradition and, in particular, with the early Christian ascription of an important role to the ascetic and to ascetic practice in combating demonic agency. Indeed, metaphysics might well be said to take on the role in Vattimo's discursive account of the world, that demonic agency occupied in early, Christian, supernaturalism worldviews, exploiting every lapse in concentration, changing forms, concealing itself, and, perhaps most of all, confronting the theorist with temptation: "[Metaphysics] seeks to master reality at a stroke, grasping (or so it thinks) the first principle on which all things depend (and thus giving itself an empty guarantee of power over events)."²⁵ This temptation to form, understood as power, in turn produces resistance in the form of an ascetic discipline embodied in a political productive species of criticism.²⁶ Brown's account of the omnipresent threat of demonic agency and the communitarian, ascetic response to it, could well be applied, with little modification, to the weak thinker's constant and disciplined struggle against metaphysical totality:

The good discipline sat in his cell, "twisting ropes while meditation floweth on as running water." But the Devil, too, was a master-weaver: given the loose end of one sinful or unconsidered thought, he could plait a whole rope from it. There was always a moment, then, when the thoughts of the monk could be sensed as no longer belonging wholly to the human mind, but to the demons or to the angels whose subtle presences were registered in the unaccustomed force of the flow, through the heart, of powerful trains of thought—the *logismoi*. Hence the crucial importance of the gift of discernment, of *diakrisis*, among the Desert Fathers. This meant far more than self-knowledge and good sense, though it might, in fact, often include a large measure of both. It meant the rare spiritual gift of being able to see clearly what one could no longer call one's own in one's own stream of consciousness. It was the ability to heed a warning signal to depend on others.²⁷

²⁵ Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press 1992), 8.

²⁶ Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*, 57-59.

²⁷ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 228-229.

Metaphysics, like the Devil, can exploit even minor lapses in focus to reassert itself in a new, unrecognized form or, worse still, co-opt the efforts of the weak thinker into a terrifying totalitarianism of its own. The only defense against these threats is a tireless dedication to critical and self-critical efforts and, just as importantly, a willingness (and it is here that we transcend mere intellectual discipline) to engage in such efforts in a spirit of love and humility. It is only motivated by that spirit, understood by Vattimo as composing a vital part of the cultural heritage of Christianity, that one is able to experience the contingency of one's constitution as a subject and the corresponding finitude which grounds our need for community and our dependence on and love for the neighbor "in whom God becomes present to us."²⁸ Vattimo's project, then, takes on the character of a (necessarily secularized) communitarian, ascetic struggle against diffuse, destructive intellectual, social, and political forces which, in many ways, expresses a striking level of continuity with the supernaturalist, metaphysical asceticism to which it opposes itself.

This focus on community has implications for both the originary impulse of weak thought (and, correspondingly, Vattimo's constitution as a theorist) and the political consequences of that project. Considering first the role played by community in the inauguration of Vattimo's project, we find that Vattimo's desire to dissolve weak structures stems precisely from a rejection of violence rooted in the Christian tradition:

We have sought to think Being outside the metaphysics of objectivity precisely for ethical reasons, and the latter must guide us in our elaboration of the consequences of a non-metaphysical conception of Being, such as an ontology of weakening. To be clear: the Christian inheritance that "returns" in weak thought is primarily the Christian precept of charity and its rejection of violence.²⁹

That Vattimo grants primacy to charity should not be taken to suggest that charity is unrelated to the other aspects of the Christian tradition that Vattimo appropriates. On the contrary, Vattimo describes his project elsewhere in his corpus as embodying "a passage from *veritas* to *caritas*."³⁰ Charity and the dissolution of metaphysics are related, as the former functions as the motive impulse for the latter, and the latter (in what Vattimo calls a circular gesture but that we might more productively regard, in a nod to process theology, as a relationship of mutual constitution) breaks down the barriers that inhibit the former.

The sentiment in the passage above might well leave us wondering why, after all, metaphysics is necessarily violent. It would seem that a proponent

²⁸ Vattimo, *Belief*, 90.

²⁹ Vattimo, *Belief*, 44.

³⁰ Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 35.

of a given metaphysical system would respond "It is not metaphysics per se that is violent, but rather *particular, erroneous metaphysical systems*." This sort of logic permeates the cultural conflicts so prominent in contemporary society, with the proponents of rival metaphysical systems (say, the Scientism of the New Atheists and the fundamentalism of this or that religious group) engaged in necessarily futile debates against interlocutors with whom they share few if any presuppositions in an effort to demonstrate that they, in fact, know how things *actually* are. The violence at issue in metaphysics, for Vattimo, consists precisely in its capacity to silence interlocutors: "I define [metaphysics] as the violent imposition of an order that is declared objective and natural and therefore cannot be violated and is no longer an object of discussion...If you admit there is a first principle that can be grasped and known in a definite way, you prevent anybody from ever asking again."³¹ Furthermore, the abstract violence at issue in the silencing of dialogue can, and often does, produce literal violence as frustration with an inability to convince one's interlocutor (who, after all, may well be operating under a worldview utterly different from your own) prompts the abandonment of conversation and the turn to coercion. Vattimo is intimately familiar with this tragic progression and, indeed, openly acknowledges the role played by his personal encounters with leftist revolutionary violence in constituting his commitment to non-violence and corresponding rejection of metaphysical systems.³²

It is in the mutually constitutive relationship between charity (including non-violence) and the dissolution of metaphysics that we find the point at which Vattimo's theoretical activity (which, we have already seen, can itself manifest as a form of ascetic/otherworldly praxis) becomes productive of political and ethical patterns of conduct. Firstly, we find, somewhat surprisingly, that secularism manifests itself as the very expression of the Christian aspirations to universality and hospitality, not by operating as a totalitarian intellectual movement that brings, by whatever means, the whole world under its sway but rather by way of opening up a public space in which such totalitarianism is perpetually broken up (by means of the vigilant theoretical activity described above) in favor of non-totalizing, cross-cultural dialogue undertaken in the spirit of hospitality.³³ The Christian commitment to interaction with other religions is called, by Vattimo's lights, to abandon both the metaphysical totalitarianism that has characterized in the past (in the form of efforts to universalize its particular theological positions) and the fundamentalist collapse into identitarian isolation that

³¹ Gianni Vattimo, "Dialogue with Gianni Vattimo" in *After the Death of God*, Edited by John Caputo, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 93.

³² Gianni Vattimo, "Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality: A Biographical-Theoretical Interview with Luca Savarino and Federico Vercellone", *Iris*, 1, no. 2, 327.

³³ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2002), 98-101.

increasingly characterizes its present, in favor of concerning itself with furthering the impulse of secularization that exists within it such as to allow for the possibility of interreligious and cross-cultural discourse in which, in Derridean fashion, Christianity functions as the gracious host that puts itself as the mercy of its guests (in the sense that efforts at cross-cultural dialogue are inherently risky and are rendered more so by the temptation, on the part of Westerners, to compromise the neutrality of the lay space that they create in an effort to promote Western values).³⁴ Here we find a different sense of otherworldliness, embodied in the Christian potential not just to await a “world to come” but to constitute a world in which Christianity, far from ascending to a triumphant dominance, in fact makes itself available as an appropriable resource to a multiplicity of belief systems, religious and otherwise. This approach to community seems to represent an excellent political manifestation of the principle of kenosis, with Christianity emptying itself of its metaphysical pretensions and endeavoring, thereby, to provide a welcoming climate in which new conceptual, political, and social intersections become possible.

Another prominent sense in which Vattimo’s consideration of weak thought manifests politically is through what might be termed a weak activism. The futility of violence resistance to prevailing systems of power, combined with the dissolution of metaphysics in the spirit of charity, necessitates the establishment of an activist model the efficacy of which is found not in strength but in weakness. Vattimo calls for “an undisciplined social praxis which shares with anarchism a refusal to formulate a system, a constitution, a positive ‘realistic’ political model according to traditional political methods: for example, winning elections (who believes in them any longer?).”³⁵ The rooting of political efficacy in weakness has several meanings. The critical efforts of weak thinkers cum activists can productively function as means of calling into question the metaphysical foundations grounding particular power structures, thereby prompting a crisis within those structures (as, again, in the case of the Catholic Church).³⁶ Similarly, the self-critical theoretical activity that occupies such an important part of weak thought as a project serves to reduce the risk that weak activism will assume (in spite of the best of intentions) a metaphysical and violent character or become subsumed into existing systems of power. However,

³⁴ Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 101.

³⁵ Vattimo, *Weak Communism*, 206.

³⁶ It is worth noting that, in certain of his polemical writings, at least Vattimo takes this critical capacity to apply to inter- as well as intracultural criticisms: “In the case of the clash of cultures, Vattimo seems to reject cultural relativism, and uphold the nihilism of the West as the very basis by which we may make judgments about other cultures. In simple terms, cultures and traditions which betray strong claims to metaphysical truth, may be criticized on that basis.” Ashely Woodward, “The Verwindung of Capital: On the Philosophy and Politics of Gianni Vattimo” *Symposium: The Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 13, no. 1, 97.

at first blush, it is not entirely clear as to how these principally negative benefits of weak power might translate into actual political change.

Once again, we find an instructive point of comparison between Vattimo's thought and the Christian tradition of *contemptus mundi* to which it owes so much. As Kallistos Ware observes,

When Saint Benedict hid himself in a cave near Subiaco, he wanted simply to save his own soul and had not the slightest intention of saving Western Civilization... But his solitary quest for personal salvation did in fact exercise in the long term a profoundly creative effect on European culture. Often it is the men and women of inner stillness-not the activists, but the contemplatives, fired by a consuming passion for solitude-who in practice bring about the most far-reaching alterations in the societies around them.³⁷

While the analogy between the contemplatives that Ware describes and Vattimo's activists is admittedly an imperfect one, we might nonetheless find it to be instructive. The contemplatives that Ware describes proved to be transformative social figures precisely insofar as they engaged, not in the concrete search for alternatives to existing social orders, but rather removed themselves and stood apart in silent witness to the insufficiency of existing orders and the possibility of and need for new ones. While for Ware's ascetics, these new and better orders were principally metaphysical and supernatural in character (otherworldly in a very literal, metaphysical sense), it certainly seems that Vattimo's weak activists could similarly function as embodying an otherworldliness construed as a principle of novelty. Simply by critiquing existing structures, without challenging them directly (power against power), and refusing to participate in those structures to more than a minimal degree, weak activists would stand as a symbol demanding the reopening of dialogue and the questioning of the sacrality of prevailing power structures.³⁸

³⁷ Kallistos Ware, "The Way of the Ascetic: Positive or Negative?" in *Asceticism*, Ed. Wimbush and Valantasis, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.

³⁸ We are perhaps already seeing test cases in which this sort of methodology is being applied. On the national and local levels, the Occupy Wall Street Movement's high visibility and scandalous refusal to articulate a list of demands, endorse candidates, and otherwise become overtly involved in traditional politics (after the fashion of, say, the Tea Party Movement) seems to make it a prospective candidate for a kind of ascetic activism, in which the insufficiency of the current system and the need for a new one are manifest in the very withdrawal of the protesters into their various encampments. On an international level, Vattimo and Zabala discuss the role played by certain South American Socialist experiments, notably Chavez's Venezuela, in calling into question both the necessity of Capitalism for national success, and the necessity of American dominated institutions (such as the International Monetary Fund) for regional and global economic stability. See Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 121-131.

Of course, not all of Vattimo's potential confrontations with asceticism work in favor of the internal consistency and social efficacy of his project. For some critics of Vattimo, the denial of the very possibility of a "way the world is" itself constitutes a sort of asceticism. Specifically, in reducing the world to the discursive (that is, to the shifting play of meaning and context) Vattimo is simply reiterating a literal "contempt for the world," a rejection of the material (indeed, the very possibility of the material) in favor of the spiritual (here understood as the discursive). Along these lines, Depoortere writes (grouping, perhaps unfairly, Vattimo and Altizer as "death of God" theologians³⁹), "Vattimo and Altizer remain too philosophical, too spiritual, too idealistic... Their views are not grounded on an anthropology that takes into account the human being as a physical and material creature."⁴⁰ While Depoortere's concern is that this rejection of the physical seems to prevent Vattimo from constructing a coherent Christology (understood by Depoortere in the highly conventional sense of demanding some account of physical embodiment), it likewise seems to pose a greater challenge to Vattimo's thought in that it seems to resemble the very metaphysical prejudices to which Vattimo seeks to oppose himself. In answer to this latter concern, we can only observe that if there is an apparent resemblance between Vattimo's (supposed⁴¹) rejection of the world in favor of the discursive and the metaphysical rejection of the physical in favor of the spiritual or ideal, this resemblance is born precisely of Vattimo's reversal of that classical, metaphysical formulation: If the traditional rejection of matter in favor of spirit was precisely by virtue of the impermanence of matter relative to the permanence of spirit (manifest, as we have already seen, in the relationship between limits and otherworldliness), Vattimo's account privileges impermanence, difference, flux, and relationality, placing value on the emancipatory potentials of the ever-shifting, contingent, discursive plane upon which we operate, over and against the totalizing, dangerous, and violent permanence (or, more correctly, illusory permanence) offered by materiality understood as a discernable "way the world is."

Similarly, it might be argued that Vattimo's project, rather than embodying a sort of reappropriated, post-metaphysical otherworldliness, is, in fact, merely anti-worldly, nihilistic in the most pejorative sense of the term.

³⁹ Vattimo, in a strict sense, does not share Altizer's concern with theology proper and, perhaps more importantly, regards the death of God as referring, principally, to the end of metaphysics.

⁴⁰ Frederiek Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, (London: T and T Clark, 2008), 31.

⁴¹ It is not, in any case, entirely accurate to say that Vattimo posits a purely discursive world. In certain places in his corpus, he does leave a space for "earth" in the late Heideggerian sense, which, while devoid of discursive content, solicits discursive content and, in an admittedly mysterious sense, serves as a referent for it. See Frascati-Lochhead, *Kenosis and Feminist Theology*, 100 and Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), Chp. 4.

Vattimo has no shortage of critics who claim that his reappropriation of the Christian tradition in sheds much of the theological and scriptural content of that tradition, functioning not as a productive and even pious reimagining of Christian approaches to *contemptus mundi* as a sort of intellectual self-mutilation, self-inflicted reduction brought about for its own sake. Guarino provides an excellent formulation of this concern:

One wonders whether Vattimo, in taking this position, realizes his hoped-for a *Verwindung* of Modernity. If it is true that the enlightenment excised religion from the public square, isn't it also true that Vattimo is simply replicating this excision, but invoking Nietzsche and Heidegger, rather than the positivistic rationalism of modernity? Is Vattimo, in fact, offering a laïcité of the Enlightenment, the naked public square of modernity but even more radically because, while appearing to be mildly accepting of religion's contribution, he is, in fact, emasculating religion of its specifically cognitive content? Isn't *pensiero debole* merely "privatization" and "marginalization" by other means, the French Revolution absent the guillotine? Religion here only realizes its "supernatural" potential when it is completely secularized.⁴²

For Guarino, Vattimo's approach to secularism threatens to rob religion of what he (Guarino) takes to be its essential discursive content. There is more at stake in this charge than the prospect that believers will become alienated, unable to recognize their religious traditions apart from the metaphysical systems that have accompanied them for centuries. Indeed, for Guarino, the abandonment of metaphysics robs Christianity not only of its content but also of its transhistorical and universalist impulses, its ability to make claims that apply transtemporally and cross-culturally, thereby uniting believers past, present, and future in a coherent, living community. Given Vattimo's own concern with communitarian activity, and his connection of such activity to political praxis, such charges as those leveled by Guarino are serious indeed.

Serious though Guarino's objections may be, that are not unanswerable. Indeed, we have already observed that Vattimo regards his reappropriation of the Christian tradition (and, as we have seen, perhaps especially the otherworldly elements of that tradition) as continuous with and an example of that tradition. Vattimo would surely object to Guarino's own emphasis on the need for metaphysics to ground universality by pointing out that metaphysics is violent and dangerous, both intellectually and socially. Likewise, Vattimo argues that Christianity can live up to its universalist aspirations (without the risks associated with the positing of metaphysical positions) precisely by abandoning the notion of absolute truth in favor of

⁴² Thomas G. Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology*, (New York: T and T Clark, 2009), 71.

hospitality. As far as transtemporal truths are concerned, Vattimo would surely observe that our situatedness in particular historical circumstances make the very idea of such truths incoherent, while nonetheless maintaining that said situatedness functions precisely as the means by which we might recognize our indebtedness to an initiative not our own and our connection to the past epochs that have played such a vital role in constituting us.

Unfortunately, even if Vattimo is able to provide a less dangerous means of grounding community and universality and an (admittedly minimal) sense of shared history, we are still left with perhaps the most personal and difficult question associated with Guarino's objections: Does Vattimo's reappropriation leave anything of what most believers would identify as religious? It is at this point that we confront what is perhaps Vattimo's most profound expression of otherworldliness, understood not as a risky reappropriation of the kind with which we have principally concerned ourselves throughout this work, but as the very point at which reappropriation must end:

When I pray-since I pray in the most traditional manner, mostly by reciting the psalms and the other prayers of the Roman Breviary-I am aware that I am not merely acting on the basis of a philosophical persuasion but am going a step further. Conversely, it is the philosophical reading that I believe I can give to Christianity that allows me to avoid any pretension at having totally rationalized my religious attitude: I can accept that many things I think and say when I pray might undergo a further possible secularization (for example: the idea that God is Father and not Mother, or even that God is a person like me). Then the dissolution of metaphysical reason and its claim to grasp true Being once and for all allows me to accept a measure of "myth" in my life, which need not necessarily be translated in rational terms-ultimately reason too must be secularized in the name of charity; for example in the name of the sympathy I feel towards the Christian tradition, the admiration provoked by (almost all) the virtues of the saints, as I have already mentioned, the feeling I have, in spite of everything, of belonging to the Church understood as the community of those who believe in Jesus Christ-even, perhaps especially, those who pay little attention to the Pope, to his prejudices... In the end, to believe in belief means a bit of all of this.⁴³

Vattimo, having begun *Belief* with an inquiry into the relationship between the return to religion and the concept of limits, fittingly concludes the work with an act of self-limitation, a mortification of the intellect that produces not the harsh silence of totalitarian violence, but the fecund and pious silence that both calls to us continually for novelty, improvement, experi-

⁴³ Vattimo, *Belief*, 92-93.

mentation (even as the person of the ascetic does so in the social realm) and leaves a space open for that which rationality, be it hermeneutic or metaphysical in character, is unable to grasp. It is in this space that we may yet find the components of religiosity most familiar to believers, albeit divorced from their inscrutability and correspondingly subject to novel and charitable reimaginings. While this approach may seem simply to defer the question at issue (might not those reimaginings themselves wipe out all that is recognizable in religion?) they rather relegate it to its proper space, a space that is necessarily outside of the hermeneutic project in which Vattimo is engaged. The fate of particular prayers, rituals, and metaphors is, far from being settled (through the dissolution of such trappings of particular theologies) laid open for the first time by the dissolution of metaphysical principles to evaluation and consideration mediated by the desire believers have for a more emancipated, non-violent world, and the love they have for their faith and its particular modes of expression.

In Vattimo's *Belief*, and in his broader corpus, we find oppositions to metaphysical otherworldliness coupled with an experimental and risky effort to reappropriate components of the otherworldly tradition of Christianity. However unfamiliar this reappropriation might at first seem to us, upon closer inspection we find within it many of the most provocative issues associated with *contemptus mundi* as an orientation, including the renewed confrontation with the world occasioned by viewpoints that seem (in a certain sense) to abandon it in favor a "world to come," the expression of asceticism in the form of certain sorts of theoretical activities, the role played by otherworldliness in the recent return to religion (in its various forms), and the insights offered by *contemptus mundi* into the very possibility of a non-metaphysical, non-totalizing religiosity. More fundamentally, *contemptus mundi* is concerned with limits, boundary points that call our gazes to an unimaginable beyond and prompt us thereby, to dramatic feats of intellectual, social, and spiritual productivity that, at its best, carries with it the wisdom and humility to respect the boundaries that made it possible. Understood in this way, Vattimo's thought and his constitution as an ascetic subject in his own right, represent a triumph of *contemptus mundi*, a wedding of a continuity with and *pietas* before tradition and a radical, emancipatory novelty that, taken together, show the continued vibrancy of Christian thought in our post-metaphysical age.

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