

Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, trans. William McCuaig,

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Jurgen Habermas *et al*, *An Awareness of What is Missing:*

***Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin,**

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In a back-cover comment to Gianni Vattimo's *A Farewell to Truth*, Jean Grondin states:

When a major thinker takes pains to bid farewell to a defining project of humanity, as Immanuel Kant did with metaphysics, Karl Marx did with religion, Martin Heidegger did with philosophy, and Gianni has done with truth, it is usually not to get rid of it but to reopen it and realize its promise. This is the truth of this provocative book.

Compelling as this take is, it does not adequately capture Vattimo's incisive slaying of the philosophical concept of universal truth. Certainly, as a consolation prize that invokes thoughts of Baudrillardian *simulacra*, Vattimo concedes that, in free societies, and through democratic processes, contingent truths – truths that are subjective, conditional and personal – can be arrived at. In such cases, "truth is not encountered, it is constructed with consensus and respect for the liberty of everyone, and the diverse communities that live together, without blending, in a free society" (p. xxxvi). But in profound matters – that is, those relating to the meaning of Being –

truths that can be accepted by all are so elusive as to prove utterly inaccessible, and consequently Vattimo purports, no longer worth pursuing, at least not while humanity is bound to communication via *logos* – the word. Specifically, “[a] God ‘different’ from metaphysical Being can no longer be the God of definitive and absolute truth that allows no doctrinal variation” (p. 55). Thus, it is not truth’s promise as understood by Grondin that Vattimo has revealed, but its ineluctable mystery when not constrained by the demand for rational answers.

This idea appears at first glance to render largely redundant the aim of the collection of essays presented in *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, in which four philosophers - Norbert Brieskorn, S.J., Michael Reder, Friedo Ricken, S.J. and Josef Schmidt, S.J. - respond to an opening address by Jürgen Habermas to explore the relationship between reason and faith. This collection seems at odds with Vattimo’s proposition that the only requirement one can ask of reason is to allow itself to be suspended; no relationship is required between reason and faith beyond reason accepting the possibility of God that faith is determined to assert. Yet a relationship – weak though it may be – does exist; reason and faith must accept each other as valid co-determinants of human existence. Thus, Vattimo’s idea can be tested against Habermas *et al*’s reflections in limited yet meaningful ways.

Translated by William McCuaig from the original 2009 Italian version, *Addio Alla Verità*, the 147 pages of *A Farewell to Truth* are divided into an introduction and three chapters titled “Beyond the myth of objective truth”, “The future of religion”, and “The end of philosophy”. As is to be expected of a mature philosopher, the book is wide-ranging and tangential, covering many of the world’s significant thinkers from

Aristotle and Plato to Heidegger, Habermas and Lukás. Nevertheless, it also has tendencies towards the individual and particular, especially in terms of Vattimo's critique of what is most familiar to him, including the practice and teachings of the contemporary Catholic Church and the politics of the European Union.

Given the scope of Vattimo's latest contribution to contemporary philosophical thought, this review attempts to neither cover nor summarise its contents, but rather engage with one aspect around which the book revolves: Vattimo's vision of a sustainable "new" Christian religion that breaks down confessional boundaries and can be applied as a model to any monotheistic religion. In doing so, I occasionally draw from insights provided by Habermas *et al* in their tightly focused collection of essays first published in German in 2008. These essays pull apart and debate the possibilities of the interactions between faith and reason in a post-secular, post-metaphysical, post-postmodern world. As a starting point, Habermas's essay, "An Awareness of What is Missing", warns that, for any relationship between faith and reason to be made manifest (p. 16):

the religious side must accept the authority of 'natural' reason as the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality. Conversely, secular reason may not set itself up as the judge concerning truths of faith, even though in the end it can accept as reasonable only what it can translate into its own, in principle, universally accessible discourses.

While Habermas speaks of universality here, it is only in the context of the secular and worldly, not universal truths relating to Being. Further, in going on to assert Heidegger's premise that metaphysics has been "outgrown" (p. 17), Habermas reinforces the potential validity of Vattimo's vision, which also draws on the ideas of Heidegger. It also provides evidence that Vattimo's own qualms about Habermas, as

articulated in the following statement from his second chapter, “The Future of Religion” may no longer have such strong foundations (p. 76):

Today we have a philosopher like Habermas affirming that rationality consists of presenting arguments that may decently be defended before others; he doesn't say that what's rational or possibly true is what comes from deep inside me or what corresponds to 'the thing in itself'.¹

What is limiting about Vattimo's proposal, however, is threefold. First, the positing of the universality of any idea, including the idea that universal truth cannot be found, runs counter to the very thesis that universal truth cannot be found. Second, in asserting that the form and function of God cannot be known and so should not be searched for or devised by reason, Vattimo could be accused of taking a defeatist tack – a topic which Norbert Brieskorn addresses obliquely in his response to Habermas, describing defeatism arising from “lack” as a “weakness that remains a weakness” into perpetuity (p. 29-30). In taking the easy, or, at best, pragmatic way out, Vattimo appears to be settling for a compromise that advances humanity nowhere. Third, Vattimo's focus throughout the book is almost exclusively Christian, yet, as Habermas notes, the “cosmocentric ‘intellectual religions’ of the East” have always offered methods of contemplation as a means of pursuing salvation (p. 17), and it would seem likely that these methodologies hold the same – or similar – keys to unlocking what is needed (according to Vattimo) if religion is to survive the heretofore secularising impetus of reason.

Despite these limitations, what is liberating about Vattimo – what has the potential to bring us out of the existential *ennui* that is a consequence of the overbearing alterity

¹ Vattimo does not cite any particular Habermas source at this point. His 1992 publication, translated as *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* in 1996 appears in the bibliography, but this is directly cited earlier in Vattimo's book.

of postmodern experience – is that he argues that it does not matter if we cannot access universal truths regarding ultimate Beings (or, implicitly, ultimate states of Being). We do not need universal truths to live a good life and, far from indulging in defeatism, we are empowered by our ability to let go of the search for answers we may never find, at least not in a this-worldly lifetime. Vattimo’s vision of the future of religion is enticing in its seeming simplicity and “good fit” with those who are drifting away from Christianity due to their reluctance to accept the dogma and doctrine that the Church continues to insist is “God-given” and beyond dispute.

From deploring the Catholic Church’s stance on sexuality to remonstrating against its “deep mistrust of any form of ‘modernization’” (p. 82), *A Farewell to Truth* frequently attacks the Catholic Church and provides a springboard for Vattimo’s claim for the need for change. While Vattimo may well make the ecclesiastically conservative angry, his stance is more uncompromising than vindictive, and overall his writing is substantially forward-thinking and optimistic, pointing to a new and viable direction for any religion wanting to survive in a rational post-postmodern world that has matured beyond the “death of God” philosophies of Nietzsche, including the Catholic Church. Vattimo believes a peaceful world is attainable and argues that the Christian notion of charity is the route for achieving this.

Yet, Vattimo protests, far from developing a liberalising doctrine based only on charity, the Catholic Church – “still the recognizable face of Christianity as far as most of the world is concerned” (p. 82) and, Habermas asserts, globally the most politically active (p.19) – is retreating into fundamentalism. Just as retreating into authoritarian fundamentalism led to the schism of the Reformation five hundred years ago, today it contributes to increasing secularisation. Clerics pushing dogma

and doctrine based on Biblico-historical constructs of what is “natural”, but which do not make rational, moral, or spiritual sense in a present day world that is steeped in active nihilism, are bound to fail. In fact, Vattimo argues, nihilism, whether actively bringing about a plethora of self-defined belief-systems or passively rejecting any system, is the logical culmination of Christianity (p. 59):

Jesus came into the world not to demonstrate what the ‘natural’ order was, but to demolish it in the name of charity. Loving one’s enemies is not exactly what nature prescribes, and more than that it isn’t what ‘naturally’ happens.

Vattimo believes that humanity has entered an epoch that is ready to “begin a different history” (p. 93); to begin to live by the “rules” of charity alone.

Of course, charity is not purely a Christian notion. From the moment the first human passed the first berry to another human, or held back a stem of undergrowth to assist another to pass, charity has existed. What Vattimo is calling for, indeed what he believes is the only possible sustainable future for religion, is for religions to desist from promulgating dogma and doctrine, and to instead preach only charity; that is, to promote the desirability of giving of oneself completely, motivated only by a desire to ensure the best outcome for all: charity motivated by love. Michael Reder would no doubt applaud such a view, as his response to Habermas focuses upon the need for religions to “actively shape social life at different levels and a variety of forms” (p.37). He also cautions against Kantian-inspired views that the chief role of religion in earthly matters is that of arbiter on issues of morality. It should be noted, however, that although Reder might support the notion of a religion based fundamentally on charity, the somewhat conservative tone of his essay indicates that it is unlikely that he would endorse Vattimo’s more radical idea regarding the future

of religion, perhaps, most especially, the idea of a God without history, form or function.

So where does God fit in Vattimo's proposed neo-Christian religion, and how should God be perceived? Following Heidegger, as has already been alluded to, Vattimo finds that the pursuit of metaphysical thought culminates and completes in a world – perhaps the present-day world – where “total organization [is] realized in late capitalism” and “quantifying rationality” triumphs. If total organization and rationality are facets of the present-day world, then there is no reason to attempt to understand God's form or function precisely because it cannot be known through rational thought. Accepting this allows for God to (once again) become a mystery. Accordingly, Vattimo refutes any Church's authority to speak and act on behalf of God, arguing that a monotheistic metaphysics is not, as most Christian religions maintain, “inseparable from Christianity and therefore the only possible portal to salvation” (p. 50). Rather, Vattimo argues that the implications of the (kenotic) relinquishment of Godly form for human form in the coming of Jesus Christ allows for an acceptance that the form of God is unknowable. Christ's words and actions, as reported in the New Testament, do not guarantee any thesis postulating God's omnipotence, omniscience or omnipresence, nor, Vattimo continues, do they guarantee that Christ's God was the creator of humanity: “[s]een in this light, the *kenosis* that is the original meaning of Christianity signifies that salvation lies above all in breaking the identification of God with the order of the real world” (p. 55). For Vattimo, God's taking of human form does more than merely open the gates for a new understanding of what God is, it allows believers to accept that the true form of God can be unknowable.

Yet in his response to Habermas, Friedo Ricken cautions against any modification of Christianity that removes its “awkwardness”, asserting that Christian revelation must remain “a ‘cognitively unacceptable imposition’ for secular thought” (p. 58). Certainly Vattimo does not remove all of the ‘awkwardness’ of Christianity. Yet in proposing the removal of traditional doctrine and dogma, he leaves only ritual, charitable practice, and a barely-defined God. Of these, only the barely-defined God is truly foreign to the secular, which has by now adopted the trappings of organised religion, particularly ritual, for its own purposes. Nevertheless, Ricken’s justification for wanting the “awkwardness” to remain is sketchy, with the only pointer to a transparent meaning appearing in the final line of his essay where he advocates for the “provocativeness of the biblical method” (p. 58). Perhaps Ricken believes that for a religion to appeal – for it to attract potential adherents away from a purely secular existence – it needs to be perceived as culturally thick, a potent force that fully justifies the violence of conversion. As Vattimo, himself, points out, conversion is inextricably linked with violence because it requires the converter to grapple with and ultimately choose between two conflicting, mutually exclusive potentialities.

While it is possible for Vattimo to put forward the idea of a religion that uses Christ as a role model but is silent on the nature of God – and this may well be comprehensible to philosophers and scholars interested in the future of religion – will those less inclined to deep thought accept this as a valid potentiality? Charles Taylor advises that in 1500, for the everyday man and woman living within the realms of Christendom, it was inconceivable not to believe in God, but that now the opposite is true.² In a secular world governed by rational thought, the believer must

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.; London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 25.

set aside the rational practice of his or her everyday life in order to have faith. For the everyday person, is it possible to accept that God is unknowable – or at best, understood aesthetically simply in terms of “love”? Even if this concession is permitted, is this enough? The human appetite for knowledge about an object that is passionately loved is voracious. How – and can – and should – such instincts be restrained? Is it possible for the rational believer to relinquish the desire to determine via discursive means whether his or her experience of God – achieved through prayer or other form of meditation – is true? Even before this, is it really possible for a human being to put aside reason in order to believe in a God without any substance – material or immaterial – at all? What would be the point in doing so? Why would a human being be motivated to do so? How would it improve his or her existence?

Further, if God has no reliably understood Being or function, then how can such a God be related to? For those who have built up a spiritual prayer life via the doctrines of established religions, the habits are in place for a continuance of spiritual experience in Vattimo’s proposed version of Christianity. But what of those who enter the new religion with no *a priori* experience of communing with God? As Hans Joas points out, “faith is an interpretation of experiences of self-transcendence”³ But how are new-comers to attain self-transcendence if they have no conception of the Being with which they are attempting to engage?

Or, perhaps, these are irrelevant questions; perhaps spiritual experience is superfluous to the needs of the neo-Christian religion proposed. Vattimo argues that “needs” are frequently constructed rather than natural, suggesting that the

³ Hans Joas, “Religion in the age of contingency,” in *Do we need religion? On the experience of self-transcendence* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 33.

contemporary Westerner “needs” elevators and cinemas, for example. But Vattimo is silent on the need – or lack of need – for spiritual experience. Can this be construed as his understanding spiritual experience to be irrelevant and unnecessary: perhaps only a human – not God – induced phenomenon that is purely a chemical reaction triggered by the stimulus of a certain section of the brain by reproducible actions that have nothing to do with an ultimate Being? But if this is the case – if Vattimo believed that attributions of spiritual experience are simply hallucinatory – then there would be no need for God in Vattimo’s religion, because if God is not accessible in any way, then God may as well not exist. So, in retaining God in his proposed new religion – even if only an entirely mystical God – it seems likely that Vattimo is not denying the validity of spiritual experience. This position is corroborated further in his dealing with the fact that his conception of God denies the traditional patriarchal view of God (p. 76):

For example, can someone like me still recite the Lord’s Prayer? Yes, because when I pray I know perfectly well that I am using words that I cannot use literally, words I use more out of love for the tradition in which I stand than out of love for reality.

In referring to his practice of praying, Vattimo shows that he believes God can be accessed through spiritual processes. Deducing then that Vattimo intends those who follow the new Christianity to also potentially engage in spiritual activities, the original question remains – how can a formless, unknown God be related to by those not already formed in the “old” Christian religion from which Vattimo wishes the new religion to emerge?

Perhaps Vattimo simply accepts that the spiritual relationships of those who have gone before contain some level of validity. The dogma and doctrine of the Church

may be left behind, but the recorded thoughts and ideas of Christian scholars and mystics need not all be dismissed – there need not be a burning of the books. First, because the reader of the future can disregard literal meanings in the light of new understandings, just as the Old Testament instruction of “an eye for an eye” is disregarded today but the principle of atonement is not; second, because there is much that remains applicable. For example, St Isidore of Seville’s allegorical description of the Church as a king’s four room palace in which “the door is opened by faith, the stairs climbed by hope, the dining room entered by charity, and those with disposition to seek for the sublime secrets may go into the bedroom” remains useful because it has nothing in it which is negated by thinking of God in the way Vattimo recommends.⁴ Further, faith may in fact be more easily attained because God’s attributes have been minimised and so there is less to stumble against. Thus, the task of believers to encourage others to jump the hurdle of reason and believe in something unprovable is reduced. For an applicable communicative model, Josef Schmidt’s summary of Habermas’s “presuppositions” that must exist if successful communication between faith and reason is to be achieved is also suited to the situation of religious communities passing on their spiritual knowledge. The four presuppositions are (p. 60):

The use of an understandable language (1), the reference to an in principle universally accessible and binding truth (2), one’s own truthfulness and the assumption that others are truthful (3), and the recognition of the norms posited by the reciprocity of this reasonable action (4).

⁴ Chaim T. Horowitz, *A two thousand year history of the influence of the "Song of songs" on religion, literature, music, and art* (Lewiston; Queenston; Lampeter: Edwin Meller Press, 2010), 72. This text, reviewed in Edition 13 Issue 1 of *Eras* provides a prime example of how allegory has been integral to religious tradition. Further, the “Song of Songs” itself contains no references to any deity.

Here again there is reference to the “universal”, but once again it applies to the worldly – the idea that all humans could potentially be made aware of the contingent truth being promulgated, in this case the existence of God – and not to any assertion of universal truth.

In fact, jumping a hurdle may not even be required. Conceptually, introducing a largely unknowable God contrasts only slightly with the contemporary egalitarian trend in scholarship that advocates for academically rigorous theological expositions of personal experiences of God to be accepted as truth in equal measure to truth derived through positivistic, scientific methods. Indeed, although still a matter of contestation within the Academy, this is the thrust of the Habermas collection of writings. Nevertheless, the difference between Vattimo’s Christian God and the traditional Christian God is highly potent because any personally understood truths derived from interactions with a God whose form and everyday function is unknown, are not clouded by the theological underpinnings of a God which is omnipotent. Such truths dismiss the need for theodicy. In avoiding the need to explain why God permits evil, Vattimo’s proposition has great appeal. And yet, if God is not omnipotent, why access God at all?

First, having appeal is irrelevant to Vattimo’s project. Vattimo is simply recommending a pragmatic solution that improves the chances of Christianity’s survival in modern Western societies. Societies which act autonomously with no expectation of divine intervention have no material reason for needing God. In a post-postmodern world of shifting and shiftable perceptions, a God with no attributes provides a more readily acceptable viable alternative to the otherwise unavoidable existential void of a secularized democratized world which posits neither an ultimate

Being nor an ultimate state of Being. Vattimo's God is not a God of the Gaps whose lustre diminishes with each new scientific explanation of what was once considered unknowable; rather, Vattimo's idea of God has the potential to cohabit with and complement the prevailing self-reliant humanist ideologies that mark the every-day existence of Western societies. Vattimo's God is a limitless God, a God whose desires are unknown, a God who demands nothing, and a God who gives nothing other than the potential for a personal interaction that increases the meaningfulness and value of each individual's life – a God who can produce a state of Being in the believer which can only enhance the individual's capacity to act always from charity.

Vattimo's book covers much more than has been considered here. Similarly, the content of the Habermas collection has been barely touched upon. In both cases, however, the small size of each book is irrelevant to the thickness of the content: both books are highly potent and, for the most part accessible not only to philosophers, but to any scholar who wishes to make some headway into understanding contemporary trends in the philosophy of religion.

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