

Against the Capitalization of Religion and Secularism:
On Gianni Vattimo's Philosophy of Religion

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I am Christian, but unfortunately I have not attended Church in months. A colleague of mine who is training to become a pastor just had a child with her boyfriend, but she has no intention of getting married. The most pious person I know is a highly talented physicist who regularly attends claustral retreats. These examples from my personal environment are illustrative of the point I intend to argue: establishing an opposition between "Religion" and "Secularism" is not only difficult, it may even be highly problematic. In this context, the philosophy and intellectual biography of Gianni Vattimo is of special interest.

When Gianni Vattimo (*1936) was a young teenager, he considered himself a "practicing, even fervent Catholic."¹ As he grew older, he realized the authoritarian structures of the Catholic Church and started to struggle more and more with its dogmatics which, in his opinion, wouldn't allow any questioning that might challenge the authority of Church doctrine. In response, he embraced left-winged Maoism only to discover that the Maoist's approach, while different in substance, was no less authoritarian than that of the Catholic Church.

This experience of a religiously educated and politically active young scholar highlights emphatically what the philosopher John D. Caputo calls the problem of "Capitalization": the idea that there is one true Religion, one true Policy, one true

¹ Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1999), 34

Solution that answers all questions, solves all problems and makes everything fall into place. The potential conflict of this thinking is illustrated in Vattimo's experiences. The very moment one believes to have found this one true Religion, the one Policy, the one Answer to the Meaning of Life, one runs into the danger of self-contradiction by establishing a structure to protect this one Answer. For Caputo this is the structure of justification for people who, for example, try to install democracy via military intervention or even murder in the name of the right to live, as in the recent attacks on doctors providing abortions.

After his involvement with Maoism, Vattimo returned to take a closer look at Christianity. This is especially interesting because even the most subversive movement is susceptible to becoming an abusive, established power itself, armed to the teeth with arguments as to why it is unquestionably right and objectively "true."² Vattimo therefore returned to Christianity against a unique biographical backdrop that freed him from the suspicion to take a stand either for pro- or anti-ecclesiastical lobby groups. By then a well-known professor of philosophy at the University of Turin in Italy, Vattimo developed the following twofold argument about the situation of religion in the context of a secular environment:

- (1) He denies that secularization, understood in the sense of a growing loss of importance of religious thought in modern society, is a threat to Christianity.
- (2) On the contrary, secularization means first and foremost a realization of the very "essence" of the Christian religion—the so called "weak thought (*pensiero debole*)."

² Nevertheless, it has to be kept in mind that this is only true insofar as we are convinced to be in charge of the truth of our own convictions. In a mindset that considers that it can't be the subject itself that is qualifying the truth of its own convictions, the situation changes completely.

This requires some further explanation, especially concerning his understanding of “weak thought,” which is closely connected to his ontology. For Vattimo, the process of weakening undermines all objective claims and therefore overcomes the metaphysical structure of being modern thinking presupposes when it assumes an eternal, unchangeable and absolute being.

Vattimo criticizes the actual use of metaphysically founded “objectivity” (that there is an absolute being, and those who think to know about it derive an legitimization from this knowledge to enforce its eternal Truth) as a means to protect and enforce the interests of people in power. It is against this abusive understanding of being as a legitimization of personal interests that Vattimo posits the “weak thought.”

It is precisely at this point that Vattimo offers a fascinating twist in the development of his argument. For him, the process of the weakening of being, i.e. secularization, has its origin within the Christian Church itself. In Vattimo’s opinion, the weakening of being originates from the weakening of God himself, manifested in his incarnation in Jesus Christ. The process of secularization, then, is the mode of the realization of this “weak thought” through time. Thus, for Vattimo, it is the genuine core of the Christian message to question and to weaken absolute claims made in the name of an “objective truth,” which does include the Church itself. As a consequence, the current ‘secular’ situation signifies to him the application of the very message of Christianity to the institutional frame of the Church by which it has been preserved. Thereby, the contradiction is being pointed out between the powerful, authority-based frame of the institutional Church and its constitutive condition, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. For Vattimo, then, the loss of

importance of institutional structures and the weakening of the authority of the Church beats a path for the recognition of its true “essence,” the non-essential notion, the powerless power of the subversive force of the incarnation of God.

In this context, it is decisive to recognize Vattimo does not commit the mistake of assuming that, once realized, the metaphysical structures of power will be overcome forever. That would simply lead to the creation of yet another established power. Instead, he emphasizes the Heideggerian act of “*Verwindung*—distortion, acceptance, resignation”³ as a continual questioning of any absolute claim, without any hope to install a new, everlasting structure.

Vattimo offers a captivating and original approach to the question of the relation between Religion and Secularism beyond the problematic capitalized understanding mentioned above, leading beyond the traditional opposition of belief and reason. He manages to turn from a secular critique of Christianity to a challenging Christian critique of secular modernity and its “capitalizing” dichotomy of Secularism and Religion. We should take advantage of this new horizon of possibilities that he opened up by transcending the long-established prejudice of philosophy towards religious thought. At the same time, he encourages us on a more general level to search for the Capitalizations in our own thinking and to reflect on the actions we are willing to take to enforce our paradigms which, even in a universalist context, are not always that transparent.

³ Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 125

Bibliography

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