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FROM 'SACRED' TO 'SECULAR'? THE HERMENEUTICAL FUTURE OF RELIGION IN THE THOUGHT OF GIANNI VATTIMO AND CHARLES TAYLOR

Rogi Thomas ♦

University/Institution: The University of Dundee, Scotland

Faculty/Department: Humanities/Philosophy

Supervisor of the Doctoral Dissertation: Prof. Nicholas Davey

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Introduction

This thesis entitled "From 'Sacred' to 'Secular'? The Hermeneutical Future of Religion in the Thought of Gianni Vattimo and Charles Taylor" aims at a deconstructive analysis of religion and secularism in order to explore both its postmodern and post-secular implications. It suggests that Vattimo and Taylor's philosophies of religion and secularism exemplify the key features of a defining

♦ **Rogi Thomas Narithookkil** is a Catholic Priest from Kerala, India, belonging to the religious Congregation of St Therese of Lisieux (CST). He holds an MPh from Dharmaram Vidaya Kshetram, Bangalore and an MLitt from the University of Dundee, Scotland, UK; completed his PhD research at the University of Dundee. Currently he lectures at the Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas, Rome (Angelicum), and the Pontifical Beda College, Rome. He is the Academic Tutor at the Pontifical Scots College, Rome and is a member of the staff at Little Flower Institute of Philosophy and Religion, Aluva, India. He has presented papers at International Seminars and published articles. His areas of teaching and research include Philosophical Theology, Philosophy of Religion, Philosophical Anthropology, Continental Philosophy, Ethics, and Indian Philosophy. Email: rogithomas@gmail.com

feature of the post-modern world. Their discussion of 'an emergent religious and cultural sensibility' implies a post-modern, post-secular and hermeneutical re-affirmation of religion. Vattimo's philosophy is presented as emerging from its own axiom of "weak thought" which is itself a secularising principle. By way of contrast, Taylor's reflection on the foundation of secularity is delivered in four segments: 1) an historical approach to his concept of secularism, 2) his attempt at overcoming epistemology and its implications for understanding secularism, 3) a re-appraisal of his philosophical sources of secularity, and 4) the development of the concept of secularity commensurable with embracing a non-religious notion of religion.

The thesis entails a comparative and dialogical exchange between Vattimo and Taylor concerning their understanding of a post-secular engagement with religion. The thesis proposes that their dialogical engagement with secularism and religion articulates: 1) a process of hermeneutical reflexive re-evaluation, 2) a way of re-evaluating transcendentalism, and 3) a re-worked non-metaphysical notion of transcendence. In addition, this thesis suggests that their dialectical discourse on religion exploits the inexhaustible nature of religion, and its capacity to be more than itself. I shall argue that the philosophical outcome of their hermeneutical deconstruction of both religion and modern secularism (the two are intimately allied) will be presented as: 1) the development of a non-religious conception of religion, 2) a retrieved religion of being-for-the-other, 3) the precedence of charity over truth, and 4) an understanding of the transition from sacred to secular as a hermeneutical process of both 'an exodus' and 'a transition.' This thesis offers a hermeneutical deconstruction of the 'return of religion'. In so doing, it both engages and unfolds aspects of an ongoing philosophical and hermeneutical tradition. Although located primarily in the continental tradition of thought, the thesis is also concerned with responding to articulations of secular and religious dichotomies in other traditions in order to invigorate the re-thinking of religion and problems of secularity across a wide variety of philosophical horizons.

Methodology: The principal method used in this research entails a mode of hermeneutic deconstruction which attempts to re-construct the secular and the religious. The re-evaluation of the secular and religious is not concerned with calculating any increase or decrease in the number (of believers) but with a form of hermeneutical restructuring where the secular as a category invokes the return of another category: the religious, without either being annihilated or over emphasised. This deconstructive revaluation of 'religion' differs

from conventional understanding of religious truth claims. The difference lies between epistemological claims to truth, and hermeneutical and evidential claims to truth and God. This research does not make epistemological and metaphysical claims to truth, but offers a hermeneutical re-construction of the inter-relationship between religion and secularism.

Secondly, an historical method is used to approach the possible meaning of the concepts of 'religion' and 'secularism'. The method focuses on analysing 'secular self' that evolves historically. The research invokes a post-secular culture where religion and the secular are not dichotomous divergent dichotomy. This interpretive method allows us to consider possible future outcomes of the principal questions under discussion.

Thirdly, this work is not a comparative study between Vattimo and Taylor. The comparison of their thought is used as a tool to unearth the possible post-secular implications of the secular and religious. A dialogical exchange between them is attempted to suggest how each position might develop the other. The scope of this research is mostly limited to Western and American models of religion and secularism. However, references to other secular projects are included.

Finally, the basic data source consists in the primary works of Vattimo and Taylor. Chapters Three to Six form an in-depth analytical study of their conception of the secular and religious as post-modern and post-secular categories. However, to contest and contrast the views of Vattimo and Taylor, the thinking of Rowan Williams, Richard Kearney, John Milbank, John D. Smith, with occasional references to Rajeev Bhargava, José Casanova, and Talal Asad are also introduced.

Objectives: 1) The hermeneutical, and existential objective of this research for contemporary society is the philosophical and ontological appropriation of the claim that, "True Being never is, but sets itself on the path and sends itself, it trans-mits itself." The hermeneutic of Vattimo suggests that 'Being' is an 'event' which occurs, repeats, and appropriates to itself the dynamic of language and culture. 2) Vattimo and Taylor explain the secularisation of religion as a self-critical process, not as something static but as something evolving through stages of reflective self-re-appraisal. The proposed return of religion epistemically leads the believer through a self-critical process, where one finds oneself (1) in the 'immanent frame' and experiences the possibility of conversion and (2) discovers one's own religious experience in the 'otherness' of the 'other.'

3) Taylor and Vattimo's philosophical vocabulary is used in this thesis to identify the tendency of religion to actualise transcendence in immanence. Following Nietzsche's hermeneutic of the 'will to truth' Vattimo traces the self-interpretive truth of religion, which entails an internal self-deconstruction. In contrast, Taylor, rather like a positivist, is historical. His explanation of secularism begins with myth and fairy tale followed by the Reformation, modern social imaginaries, the immanent frame, conversion and fullness. It is a re-recording of the historical evolution of religion. However, Vattimo is more concerned with the deconstructive dialectic of internal criticism. 4) Through their hermeneutic of secularism, Vattimo and Taylor help shape a vision of a world-historical progress from a deeply religious past to a secular but re-engaged religious future. Consequently, this research envisions contemporary philosophy contributing to thinking more subtly about the future of religion. This research presents religion as holistically universal and as the adaptation of cultures and languages, which goes beyond the sacred to the secular. The relative and pluralistic hermeneutic envisioned here is suggestive of a religion of being-for-the other that does not rely on metaphysical truth and vertical transcendence but on *kenosis* and *caritas*.

5) This thesis also argues that a postmodern philosophical perspective suggests that individuals practice their own post-modern version of 'free-lance' secular religion. This religion, having undergone the process of *Verwindung*/secularisation is not bound by dogmas and precepts but based on *kenosis* and *caritas*. Thus, in this post-onto-theological and post-secular epoch, it is possible to have a religious faith and experience without fixed precepts and most of all without an image of a metaphysical God. How this possibility arises is the subject of this thesis. 6) The deconstruction of religion and secularism does not lead to destruction per se but to a reconstruction and the rebuilding of religious belief (hermeneutically), and secular culture (in social imaginaries). This thesis attempts to set in motion a new interpretation of religion by taking recourse to Vattimo and Taylor. We exploit 'the possibility of inexhaustible interpretation' and 'the language turn' in continental philosophy. This sets aside and convalesces tradition (rather than abandoning it) and rethinks religion in a way that leads to its constructive re-evaluation.

Gianni Vattimo (1936)

Gianni Vattimo has facilitated the re-definition of the role of post-Enlightenment philosophy and religion beyond the boundaries of the academic community. In so doing, he has re-affirmed the political

and religious responsibility of philosophers in the post-modern world. He has attempted to improve both the reifying and constrictive thinking of Enlightenment positivism, and Hegelian-Marxist historicism. Vattimo rejects atheistic rationalism, i.e., the belief that experimental natural sciences have an exclusive claim to truth and that history is inherently progressive. This belief assigns a provisional place to religion in modernity: religion is an error destined to be dismissed by scientific rationality. Moreover, religious experience is considered a moment to be overcome by reason's self-unfolding towards a fuller and truer form of self-consciousness. However, in Vattimo and Taylor, both 'belief in the objective truth,' and 'faith in the progress of reason' are unmasked by 'the disenchantment' of disenchantment with itself. 'Demythologizing' turns against itself, acknowledging that the ideal of the elimination of myth becomes *itself* a myth. Vattimo embodied and rearticulated this post-Enlightenment *Zeitgeist* formulating his own variant of critical hermeneutical philosophy. This transformative and hermeneutical process has been described as post-secular analogous to the post-religious epoch that followed the Enlightenment.

Drawing cues from Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer, Vattimo offers a radical hermeneutical ontology. His principal contribution, the concept of 'weak thought' or 'the ontology of decline', offers a lucid and far-reaching alternative to Derridean deconstruction and Deleuzo-Guattarian post-structuralism. He observes that philosophical deliberations change with both the appearance and disappearance of different cultures, languages, and philosophical trends. Through his hermeneutical weak thought, Vattimo underscores the impossibility of seeking universal and stable principles or values in philosophy. Aided by Nietzschean 'nihilism,' he argues against the possibility of logical and epistemological justification for universal truth. Consequently, God, the most extreme hypothesis for humanity, and its foundational principle was required to die, and the world to become a fable, a game of interpretation. Both the 'death of God' and the fabulisation of the world, weakened the principle of reality which in turn yielded different images of the world and caused divergent interpretations. According to Heideggerian 'nihilism,' the world of techno-science, the *Ge-Stell*, reduces Being to a realm of calculable and manipulable beings in which human beings become mere objects of analysis. Vattimo elaborates nihilism by defining his project as a 'philosophy of actuality' and by seeking a logical thread in nihilism that provides the means for an existential analysis of post-modern society. His

hermeneutical project attempts to rescue philosophy and to re-recover religion from the nihilistic 'net' by salvaging the dimensions of positive nihilism. This transforming occurrence (*Ereigniss* or *event*) has an experiential character that is both interpretive and emancipatory.

Nietzsche's 'death of God,' Heidegger's 'end of metaphysics,' and a phenomenological re-appropriation of religious thought form the key to Vattimo's philosophical deconstruction. His re-evaluation of religion by means of philosophical deconstruction and hermeneutical *Verwindung*, utilises 'Being' as an *event* and as the kenotic dynamic in Christian thought which dissolves itself in the form of *caritas*. Christian love and truth as 'event' is characterised by the reduction of metaphysical and sacral violence: it exhibits the weakening of strong structures. This historiographical knowledge of 'weak thought' is the result of the hermeneutical and emancipatory interaction between 'Being,' language, and culture. Every act of knowledge is hermeneutical, and 'Being' is understood as language and history. Thus, Vattimo's dialogical, non-foundationalist approach to continental philosophy unmasks the structures of power by overcoming of metaphysical claims. This deconstruction of Western philosophy entails a post-modern defence of Christianity in a secularised form.

In summary, Vattimo's re-orientation of hermeneutical philosophy in the light of nihilism is founded on two axioms: (1) Weak Thought, and (2) Secularisation.

Charles Taylor (1931)

The increasing reappearance and re-evaluation of religion has led to a complex series of philosophical interventions. Along with Vattimo, Taylor initiates a radical revisiting of 'the mainstream secularisation theory.' He introduces an alternative 'reform master narrative.'

Taylor's 'reform master narrative' is the completion of and an improvement on Vattimo's 'weak thought'. Vattimo's dialogical, non-foundationalist approach to metaphysics and modernity aids understanding Taylor's secularism. Vattimo's 'weak thought' and 'secularism' cannot be articulated as a definitive philosophical position, but rather as a possible resource for further development. In Vattimo, transcendence is arguably reduced to immanence and the sacred is subjected to the violence of critique. Taylor, through his historical and genealogical analysis of 'the immanent frame,' offers a broader approach to the transcendent. Taylor improves on Vattimo's

philosophical position concerning secularisation as an event within Christianity, the hermeneutic of *Verwindung*, weak ontology, limitlessness of *kenosis* and *Caritas*, and the interminability of Nietzschean death of God.

Taylor's formation of the modern-secular-self and genealogy of secularisation in the West are the core concerns of this section of the thesis. These attempt to re-evaluate how we think and imagine 'belief' and 'religious experience.' Taylor opposes traditional secularisation theory in which the decline of religious belief is initiated by the incompatibility of modernity with religion.

Taylor's 'master narrative' too is not a return to the magnification of faith but to re-capturing the wonder of faith. His method involves "tracking back and forth between the analytical and historical." José Casanova describes Taylor's secularism as analytical, phenomenological, and genealogical. "Analytically, it explains the structural interlocking of the cosmic, social, and moral orders that constitute the self-sufficient immanent frame within which we are constrained to live and experience our lives, secular as well as religious." It is phenomenological because of his unique sense of 'secularity' and his notion of 'fullness.' It is genealogical because "Taylor unabashedly presents his account as a 'master narrative' which he defines as a 'broad framework of how history unfolds.'"¹ His secularism is about the modern transformation and deconstruction of religion as a construction of the self that gradually evolves as 'the secular self.' The anthropocentric self, aware of its capacity to reflectively disengage is responsible for Taylor's unique concept of 'secularity'.

The 'formation of the secular self' and secularity are elucidated in Part Three of this thesis. It is divided into two chapters and four segments: (1) the background to Taylor's secularism, (2) his attempt at overcoming epistemology and the epiphany of secularism, (3) a re-appraisal of the sources of secularity, and (4) the development of secularity. These are presented as strands of a unified philosophical project.

Conclusion

As was stated at the very outset of this thesis, our concern has been in some respects to the journey of 'the dark night of the soul' in Western philosophy which articulates the most problematic

¹Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, 573.

relationship between the individual self and the transcendent reality. Our exploration of Vattimo and Taylor's hermeneutics very much follows in this journey and transforms how it can be understood. Accordingly, with the help of their hermeneutics, this thesis offers a deconstructive analysis of religion and secularism. Their hermeneutics of secularism share an interest in and concern for the continued relevance of religion and transcendence. Therefore, I explored and compared a detailed analysis of both thinkers with regard to the philosophical and ethical emergence of modern secularism and how it leads to a hermeneutical re-engagement with the sacred. Their hermeneutics of *Verwindung*/secularisation/*kenosis* recover the possibility of religious experience, and at the same time, seek to reconstruct metaphysical and epistemological claims to certainty and truth. Though belonging to different schools of thought and using diverse approaches in developing their philosophy, they take seriously the significance of Christianity in shaping post-modernity. By going beyond convention, they offer an explanation of the meaning of secularity within the parameters of deconstruction, hermeneutics, and postmodernity. I employed their dialectical conception of secularity that re-evaluates the essential aspects of religion. This entails 1) a process of reflexive re-evaluation, 2) a re-evaluation of transcendentalism, and 3) a retrieval of the notion of transcendence. In addition, their dialectical discourse on religion exploits 4) the inexhaustible nature of religion, and its capacity to always be more than itself. My position derives not only from Vattimo and Taylor's re-evaluation of secularism and religion but is also based on three basic claims. (1) Vattimo and Taylor's concept of secularism opens up the possibility of a new non-metaphysical re-orientation towards transcendence and associated ethics. (2) Modern secularism emerges as incompatible with an orientation towards transcendence and religious diversity. (3) Re-engaged religion and secularism do not spell the death of conventional religion and ethics, but re-locates, re-invents, and re-forms them.