

Introduction

After the Death of God

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In religion's perpetual agony lies its philosophical and theoretical relevance. As it dies an ever more secure and serial death, it is increasingly certain to come back to life, in its present guise or in another.

—HENT DE VRIES, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*

I

Is God Dead?

So that, in truth, Thou didst Thyself lay the foundation for the destruction of Thy kingdom, and no one is more to blame for it. Yet what was offered Thee? There are three powers, three powers alone, able to conquer and to hold captive for ever the conscience of these impotent rebels for their happiness—those forces are miracle, mystery, and authority. Thou has rejected all three and hast set the example for doing so.

—DOSTOEVSKY, "The Grand Inquisitor"

On April 8, 1966, the cover of *Time* asked, "Is God Dead?" When published, it was the best-selling issue in the magazine's history. It announced to the public a theological movement that was making its way into the mainstream—namely, radical death of God theology. This theological movement was in fact a collection of various disparate voices and perspectives. It ranged from the cultural theologians' grappling with what they termed [2] the "post-Christian era,"¹ to the largely Jewish effort at developing a "post-Holocaust theology,"² to the popular reformational efforts of the Anglican bishop John Robinson's book *Honest to God* and Harvey Cox's *Secular City*,³ and, finally, to the metaphysical death of God theology of Thomas J. J. Altizer.⁴

What they all shared in common was a collective sense that Western culture in general, and the Judeo-Christian tradition in particular, had entered a profound "ideological crisis."⁵ Either religious language had lost its meaning or, even worse, the inherited meanings had grown perverse in the wake of a long list of modern atrocities. World wars, genocides, nuclear armament, and the cold war standoff between the East and the West—together these twentieth-century realities turned the optimism associated with the modern period to a deep and lasting pessimism. As the contemporary political philosophers Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have written:

Modern negativity is located not in any transcendent realm but in the hard reality before us: the fields of patriotic battles in the First and Second World Wars, from the killing fields at Verdun to the Nazi furnaces and the swift annihilation of thousands in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the carpet bombing of Vietnam and Cambodia, the massacres from Setif and Soweto to Sabra and Shatila, and the list goes on and on. There is no Job who can sustain such suffering!⁶

Those who spoke of the death of God, therefore, were attempting to locate themselves within this "hard reality before us," and, like the ancient book Job from the Hebrew Scriptures, they were asking the age-old question of theodicy about the meaning of suffering and the reasons for God's apparent silence in the midst of it all. They were acknowledging that the old moral and theological platitudes had somehow fallen short and admitting [3] that the Bible's answer of vicarious suffering is perhaps inadequate in the face of the twentieth century's experience of genocide and potential for nuclear annihilation. To borrow a phrase from the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we can consider the death of God movement as a "coming-of-age," an effort at honoring our history by following a certain cultural and theological rite of passage.

In this sense, even though the preoccupation of contemporary theology no longer centers around the death of God, this radical theological movement still speaks to us today as it testifies to a moment of transition and crisis within Western religious consciousness and thereby helps to establish the genealogy that would develop into what we now know as postmodern theology. Indeed, two of the main theorists of postmodern theology, Carl Raschke and Mark C. Taylor, both suggested a direct link between the death of God and postmodern deconstructive philosophies. As Taylor wrote in his landmark work, *Erring*, from 1984, "Deconstruction is the 'hermeneutic' of the death of God."⁷ In addition, the death of God theologies came to be associated with a certain spirit of secularism that permeates almost all facets of contemporary Western society.

Of course, long before theologians explicitly took up this thematic of the death of God in the 1960s, philosophers, historians, novelists, and cultural observers had already made this connection between the collapse of Christendom and the birth of a new, more secular culture. Indeed, the distinction between Christendom and Christianity can be seen as one of the defining features of the Christian faith in the late modern and postmodern world and is certainly integral for establishing the cultural conditions for radical theology.⁸ This distinction between Christendom and Christianity spawns from a well-known historical narrative that refers to the imperial religion of Christianity that began in the fourth century CE when the Emperor Constantine effectively [4] established Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire. Constantine's edict of toleration in 312 CE ended nearly three centuries of sporadic, though at times quite severe, state-sanctioned Christian persecution. By the end of the fourth century, however, Christianity had become both the dominant and official religion of the Roman Empire and, with the possible exception of the few hangers-on such as the desert monks and a select group of monastics, the Christian church had fully embraced its newfound alliance with the powers that be. As the church historian Hugh McLeod explains, this alliance established a "pattern of relations between church and state and between church and society" that would prevail for at least the next fifteen hundred years as "most Christians learnt and practiced their faith in the context of 'Christendom.'" McLeod continues: "That is, they lived in a society where there were close ties between the leaders of the church and those in positions of secular power, where the laws purported to be based on Christian principles, and where, apart from certain clearly defined outsider communities, every member of society was assumed to be a Christian."⁹

By wedding the church with the Roman Empire or, more broadly, with Western culture, the Constantinian revolution successfully harnessed the three powers identified by Dostoyevsky by adding the authority of the state to that of the church's already firm grasp on miracle and mystery. In so doing, the power of the church was consolidated in the creation and spread of a distinctively Christian culture. Along the way, however, the witness of Christ—especially his suffering and death—was lost in his exaltation by the now triumphant church. It would seem, therefore, and this is something that Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor knew well: that the glory of the church was built on its rejection of Christ as the persecuted became the persecutors, and the servant the new Lord and master. From death, to resurrection, to exaltation—here we have the death of God in Christ twice over. [5]

(Religion) In the Shadow of Christendom

We are not working with Thee, but with him—that is our mystery. It's long-eight centuries—since we have been on his side and not on Thine. Just eight centuries ago, we took from him what Thou didst reject with scorn, that last gift he offered Thee, showing Thee all the kingdoms of the earth. We took from him Rome and the sword of Caesar, and proclaimed ourselves sole rulers of the earth, though hitherto we have not been able to complete our work. But whose fault is that? Oh, the work is only beginning, but it has begun. It has long to await completion and the earth has yet much to suffer, but we shall triumph and shall be Caesars, and then we shall plan the universal happiness of man.

—DOSTOEVSKY, "The Grand Inquisitor"

It is a fine line between the servant becoming the master and the exchange of one master for another. Perhaps, as Dostoyevsky suggests, the Christianization of culture was a devil's bargain from the start. Such is the argument of those like Elaine Pagels whose appreciation of the early Gnostic literature points to a time *before* the Christian community came to be defined by a specific set of authorized beliefs. As Pagels tells it and as our increasing knowledge of the Gnostic literature confirms, the first centuries of the church was a time of great diversity in terms of beliefs and practices. It was also a time during which many different Christian communities seemed to flourish, even in the face of official state persecution. But eventually this diversity came to be seen more as a threat than as a sign of the vitality of the church. In order to prevent what was called the "wild readings" of the gospel and "evil exegesis" of the scriptural tradition, a line was drawn identifying what was formerly thought of as heterodoxy now as heresy. "But," as Pagels writes, "it would take more than theological argument for [this] viewpoint to prevail. ... It [6] would take, in fact, the revolution initiated by the Roman emperor Constantine."¹⁰ A devil's bargain that gave the leaders of the church the needed authority not only to define orthodoxy but also to enforce their vision of the church's proper uniformity and homogeneity. Through this newly established framework of canon, creed, and ecclesiastical authority, the world could now be made in the image of the church, the kingdom of God would now (finally) come.

Or if not a devil's bargain then perhaps a fool's dream. To be fair, this dream or ideal of Christendom—namely, that society would be made in the image of the church and that the Christian faith would permeate all aspects of social, cultural, religious, and even political life—was never fully realized. This is the case not simply because of the external challenge that was posed by non-Christians (whether they were in the image of pagans, Jews, Muslims, or primitives) but also because of the internal debate that existed amongst Christians themselves about the proper relation between church and society and the proper understanding of the Christian identity. As McLeod writes:

At most points of Christian history there have been those who have opposed the identity between church and society or over-close links between church and state, or between the church and social elites. From the fourth century onwards there have been Christians who saw these associations as damaging to the church: "Christendom" meant that the church was subject to state interference, that it was forced to admit into membership those who were not true Christians, and that it was under pressure to condone contemporary customs and values that were unchristian.¹¹

While this characteristic tension between the faith of Christianity and the culture of Christendom has been central to the [7] history of Christianity in the West, ever since the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century there has been a steady dismantling of the old Constantinian alliance, leading to the eventual collapse of Christendom in the modern era. This collapse of Christendom (which is credited for a whole spectrum of aspects from our contemporary culture ranging from the principle of religious liberty and toleration to the extreme religious skepticism, cynicism, or even nihilism of the modern mind) becomes final or absolute in the first half of the twentieth century as supposedly civilized, and nominally Christian, nations turn against one another in total warfare. In other words, the ideal of Western civilization held together by a common Christian heritage and identity gets turned against itself in its full destructive potential. In the process, Christendom is revealed as "no more than a phase in the history of Christianity, and it represents only one out of many possible relationships between church and society. Yet in Western Europe this phase lasted for more than a thousand years, and we are still living in its shadow."¹²

Not only Christian theology, but the very practice and piety of contemporary religiosity have been greatly determined by the shadow cast by this collapse of Christendom. It is why twentieth-century Christian observers such Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, began speaking of a "religionless Christianity."¹³ Bonhoeffer posed this possibility of a religionless Christianity while living out the final days

of his life in a prison cell, before his martyrdom for his involvement in an assassination plot against Hitler. As such, his words had an added moral credibility, especially by those like the death of God theologians who were troubled by the moral ineptitude, if not outright complicity, of the church. For Bonhoeffer, this effort at purging Christianity of the comforts of religion would be a risky faith without assurances, one that severs the ties between Christ's call to discipleship and Christianity's association with the offices of [8] power and the religious identification with the cultural trappings of civilization. Bonhoeffer's words and observations came to the world as a prophetic voice from the grave and became the link between, on the one hand, a world-weary faith in shock and horror at its own moral failure and impotence and, on the other, an emergent religious and cultural sensibility that was now forced to pick up the broken pieces and to imagine, if not craft, an alternative future—a future in the wake of the death of God and after the collapse of Christendom. For many, therefore, Bonhoeffer was seen as a precursor to the death of God theologians.¹⁴

Another important precursor was the nineteenth-century existentialist Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard has always been known as a great literary stylist. His use of pseudonyms, irony, and satire had long since been a source of confusion and frustration for modern rationalists. His religious writings, on the other hand, were another matter. Unlike many Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers, Kierkegaard seemed to be genuinely appreciative of the religious sentiment. At the same time, few have written such a scathing critique of Christendom and the modern-day church as Kierkegaard accomplished in his *Attack Upon Christendom*.¹⁵ Kierkegaard, like Bonhoeffer and the death of God theologians who followed, gave voice to the new anti-institutional, individualized Christian faith that stood in opposition to the easy alliance between religion and society. It was a radical faith purged of any vestige of authoritarianism and triumphalism that was unafraid to call into question the very meaning and purpose of the church both by being willing to admit the failures of its own tradition and by seeing the great success of the state churches as their great failure. In other words, for Kierkegaard, the apparent Christianization of culture and politics made it virtually impossible to live up to the radical existential demands of a truly biblical faith.

[9] While Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard were both religious thinkers who each in his own way tried to restore the integrity of the Christian faith, there were other nonreligious, or perhaps even antireligious, thinkers who also informed the eventual shape of the radical death of God movement. It is no surprise, after all, that the death of God movement is celebrated as the embrace and culmination of the modern trend toward a fully secularized culture—or if not fully secularized, at least a culture that had become increasingly suspicious of the institution of religion. That is because, in addition to the theological critiques of Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard, there were also those such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud who were known generally for their "hermeneutics of suspicion" and more specifically for their critique, if not hostility to, religion. In the midst of this cultural milieu the death of God movement lends a sympathetic voice. It speaks of a world in which God, through the act of kenosis, has fully emptied Godself. It admits that the idea of God is often no more than a human projection. It calls for human responsibility and accountability. It points to the fact that religion has just as often been the problem as it has been the solution to human conflict throughout the ages. This radical death of God theology, therefore, represents a critical and prophetic voice in the midst of a culture and faith in crisis, one that was moving away from the old religious certainties and assurances and toward a transformed religious sensibility. Further still, it is perhaps the quintessential representative theology for a Christian faith waking up to its new cultural reality in the shadow of Christendom. The irony is that by embracing a culture that was increasingly hostile toward religion, the death of God theology not only helps to lay the groundwork for postmodernism by its early critique of the moral-metaphysical God of ontotheology but also sets the conditions for a recovery of a distinctly biblical faith that gives emphasis not to the power and glory of God but [10] to God's suffering and love—from the being of God to the story of God's being with the poor, the hungry, and the outcast.

The Postmodern Return of Religion

When the Inquisitor ceased speaking he waited some time for his Prisoner to answer him. His silence weighted down upon him. He saw the Prisoner had listened intently all the time, looking gently in his face and evidently not wishing to reply. The old man longed for Him to say something, however bitter and terrible. But He suddenly approached the old man in silence and softly kissed him on his bloodless ageless lips. That was all His answer. The old man shuddered. His lips moved. He went to the door, opened it, and said to Him: 'Go, and come no more. . . . Come not at all, never, never!' And he let Him out in to the dark alleys of the town. The Prisoner went away.

—DOSTOEVSKY, "The Grand Inquisitor"

On the one hand, there is the almost two millennia of the power, authority, and triumph of the church. On the other, there is the almost silent witness of Christ. The former bears the heavy weight of history; the latter, the weight of the cross. The genius of Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor is that we can sympathize with his plight and the plight of his church. It is true, as the Grand Inquisitor so mournfully describes, that we human beings are weak and needy. We long for a God who will deliver us to the promised land, not a God who dies and thereby unveils the structure of violence and injustice that reins supreme in this fallen world. We want someone who will save us from ourselves because, try as we might, we continue to botch our freedom. We continue to fight, kill, and hate—sometimes even in the name of God. Perhaps the Grand Inquisitor was right—we human beings [11] cannot be trusted. We must be directed and ruled. We must be fed and clothed. And if not by the church, then by whom? And even if the church has lost its way, who among us is really willing to follow the way of the cross? Therefore, when the Grand Inquisitor speaks, we hear his sadness, pathos, and even resignation. *Ecce homo*—"behold the man"—the one who betrays his true love, the one who suffers for our sakes so that in our weakness we might be saved, the one who knows the truth while the rest of us live by our illusions. Behold the man—the one who suffers the kiss of Christ and who must send Christ on his way and banish him from ever returning again. This is the sad truth and tragedy of religion as revealed by him.

Of course, the prisoner has heard these charges before. He mounts no defense. His only response is that of a kiss and thereby he embodies the essence of his teaching—to love, even one's enemies, even those who condemn him to death. This is a story beyond belief. Who could dare fathom, let alone follow? The strange and unexpected thing is how that kiss, illustrative of the love of Christ, lives on even after the death of the moral-metaphysical God. The irony of Dostoyevsky's story is that though the Grand Inquisitor intends it as an indictment against Christ, it lays bare his desperate desire for him all the same. A similar ironic reversal can be seen in our own modern history. For when examining the current state of theology, philosophy of religion, and contemporary religious thought and practice, the future as charted by the champions of secularism, death of God theologians, and deconstructive philosophers has given way to a new "postsecular" understanding of the postmodern condition in which the return of religion is more determinative than the collapse of Christendom. Indeed, in both philosophical and popular cultural circles, God now seems alive and well, and as the *New York Times* proclaimed in a feature Sunday magazine article from 1998, "religion is making a comeback."¹⁶ In the process, [12] perhaps the most fundamental assumption of the modern mind has been brought into critical relief—namely, the identification of modernization with secularism.

It had long been assumed by sociologists, philosophers, and theologians alike that the more modern we became, the less religious we would become. Our increased technological proficiency and scientific knowledge were thought to translate into a decreased dependency on outdated religious beliefs in God and supernaturalism. Indeed, the most prominent Enlightenment philosopher of them all, Immanuel Kant, defined the very project of Enlightenment by this most fundamental of all modern assumptions when he wrote that Enlightenment is the release from all forms self-incurred tutelege. What he had in mind, in addition to

various forms of political authoritarianism, was the religious authoritarianism and dogmatism that for centuries had discouraged critical scientific inquiry. According to Kant, the enlightened subject would be one who could think for himself, and one in whom religion might still play a part, but only in the private sphere of personal morality.¹⁷ This modern philosophical anticipation of an autonomous subject not constrained by determinative religious beliefs has come under increased scrutiny as contemporary theorists from various disciplines have seemingly reversed the course of modern subjectivity by demonstrating how personal and social identity is a product of social construction, how knowledge is intertwined with power, and how the presumably private and interior life of religion is always already public and political.

What we see, therefore, is a strangely disjointed history. These modern, secularist assumptions, which are now being questioned and brought into doubt more and more, certainly pervade much if not all the radical death of God theologies of the 1960s. The question, which will become the central question that this volume seeks to address, is the following: *How do we get [13] from the post-Christian, post-Holocaust, and largely secular death of God theologies of the 1960s to the postmodern return of religion?* Put otherwise, what happens when we move from the early claim that deconstruction is the hermeneutic of the death of God to the subsequent effort at deconstructing the death of God? What happens when the critical linking of the death of God with deconstruction comes full circle? And finally, how is it that this question of the return of religion is transmitted not by theologians and/or religious leaders but by and through philosophers and cultural theorists who heretofore had little or no expressed interest in religious or theological questions?

II

This transition from the death of God to postmodern faith (or, if you will, from secularism to postsecularism) is one of the defining chapters in contemporary religious thought. John Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, each in their turn, stand as representative voices of these distinct, though profoundly interrelated, modes of thinking through, and thinking about, the relation of religion to society and the continued viability of theological thinking. The dialogue between them should tell us a great deal not simply about the similarities and differences between two thinkers, the one from the United States and the other from Italy, and two religious perspectives, but even more about the broader currents of our contemporary culture, about how we have moved from religious skepticism (if not outright antagonism toward religion), which is reflective of modernity, to an apparent reembrace of religion in the postmodern world. Also, what sort of changes, alterations, distortions, or reforms were introduced into this postmodern faith as a result of its passing through the crucible of the death of God critiques? To Vattimo, Caputo will [14] submit his death of God philosophy to a deconstructive critique. To Caputo, Vattimo will offer his interpretation of the death of God and the modern processes of secularization as a faithful recovery of kenotic Christianity and a reorientation toward the very essence of the Christian faith—namely, that of *agape*.

While each may speak of the philosophical and theological significance of the death of God differently, there are at least three major overlapping areas of interest between Caputo and Vattimo. First and foremost, both Caputo and Vattimo have long been engaged in the effort to radicalize hermeneutic philosophy. For Caputo, this has meant forging a closer collaboration between hermeneutics and deconstruction as both signal a departure from, and work to overcome, the metaphysics of presence.¹⁸ While this linking of hermeneutics with Derridean deconstruction might lead to a certain unknowing, or an epistemological undecidability, for Caputo this should not be understood as an exercise in nihilism.

It is this latter point where Vattimo parts company with Caputo. Like Caputo, he has expressed great appreciation and admiration for Derrida and deconstruction, but, unlike Caputo, Vattimo has argued for the positive contribution that nihilism plays both for an understanding of contemporary hermeneutic philosophy and in the process of emancipation. The contribution nihilism makes is not in the sense that it functions as a new philosophical doctrine or a new truth as it were. On the contrary, nihilism is the name for the series of negations that contemporary thought has undergone from the strong metaphysical assumptions associated with ancient philosophy and carried forward through the Enlightenment rationalistic period to the weak, anti-

authoritarian strand of the interpretative philosophy of hermeneutics. As written by his friend and frequent collaborator Richard Rorty, and as demonstrated by his recent book of essays in political philosophy, Vattimo has shown that [15] "nihilism and emancipation do, in fact, go hand in hand."¹⁹ In Vattimo's own words, "Nihilism acquires the sense of emancipation" when we realize that "it is the dissolution of foundations... that brings freedom."²⁰ That is because, as Vattimo writes, "a weak ontology, or better an ontology of the weakening of Being, supplies philosophical reasons for preferring a liberal, tolerant, and democratic society rather than an authoritarian and totalitarian one."²¹ In addition, Vattimo also sees nihilism as synonymous with hermeneutics as both acknowledge that any argument is always historically and culturally situated and as both recognize the necessity for dialogue. In this way Vattimo identifies hermeneutics as "the thought of accomplished nihilism, thought that aims to reconstruct rationality in the wake of the death of God and opposes any current of negative nihilism, in other words the desperation of those who continue to cultivate a sense of mourning because 'religion is no more.'"²²

This leads to the second overlapping area of interest between Caputo and Vattimo—namely, that of weak thought.²³ Both Caputo and Vattimo have spoken about, and examined the consequences of, the weakening of thought. For Caputo, this interest in weak thought has accompanied his increased attention to the religious question in recent years, which was first signaled by his enormously successful and influential study of the religious dimension to the deconstructive philosophy of Derrida.²⁴ Since that first sustained philosophical turn to religion, Caputo has published a great deal about religion and postmodernism, and, largely due to the great success he has had in organizing the biannual conferences on this subject, first at Villanova and now at Syracuse University, he has helped to spearhead and define the burgeoning field of continental philosophy of religion. But when Caputo speaks about the postmodern return of religion, he almost invariably invokes the qualifier he learned from Derrida—namely, "religion without religion." In contrast to the variant of [16] contemporary religiosity that asserts itself strongly and triumphantly, Caputo offers a postcritical religion in the sense that he wants to affirm faith, though without absolute or certain knowledge, and he seeks to value religious tradition, while keeping his distance from the actual historic faith communities. In short, his is not a theology of power but a theology of weakness that connects the weakness of God with the ethical imperative to serve the poor and needy. In contrast to the historical determinacy and specificity of the strong Christian, Jewish, or Islamic theologies, Caputo offers a more open-ended theology "weakened by the flux of undecidability and translatability." According to Caputo's description, it as a "theology of the event," which we can think of ironically as a "theology without theology."²⁵

The origin of Vattimo's interest in weak thought precedes his own philosophical turn to religion. Indeed, the very phrase *weak thought* is perhaps Vattimo's primary contribution to contemporary philosophy and the means by which he has informed and shaped the contemporary reading of the legacy of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and postmodernism. The phrase *weak thought* refers to the gradual weakening of being that has transformed contemporary philosophy from its former obsession with the metaphysics of truth to its current and more limited understanding of itself strictly as an interpretative exercise. The irony is that this weak ontology also weakens the strong metaphysical reasons for atheism and the rationalist repudiation of religion. So not only does weak thought precede the philosophical turn to religion but, according to the narrative offered by Vattimo, it actually establishes the philosophical precondition for the postmodern return of the religious. Vattimo argues that in the postmetaphysical age not only is the world desacralized, and not only does faith lose its assurances, but along with this secularization of religion—which he sees as the truth of the gospel and the destiny of the West—there also occurs the breakdown or dissolution of [17] the tyranny of reason from which the modern critique, dismissal, or reduction of religion derived. In other words, as Vattimo puts it, "The end of metaphysics and the death of the moral God have liquidated the philosophical basis of atheism."²⁶ In this sense atheism is nothing but the flip side of theism, with neither understanding the true nature of belief, because both according to Vattimo's analysis still rely on absolutist claims characteristic of scientific positivism or transcendent authority.²⁷ Now that we live in the postmetaphysical age in which there are no absolute truths, only interpretations, the category of belief can again be taken seriously as constitutive of our lived traditions.

Third, Caputo and Vattimo are two of the world's chief theorists of postmodernism in general—and the possibility of postmodern religion more specifically. Regarding a general theory or praxis of postmodernism, Caputo's radical hermeneutics can be seen as an effort to update hermeneutic philosophy for what has become a vastly different cultural milieu from its origins with its altered modes of intelligibility associated with the postmodern condition. In this sense to radicalize hermeneutics is to show its continued relevancy in the postmodern world. Similarly, with his effort at "demythologizing Heidegger," Caputo shows the same knack for rejuvenation by acknowledging the greatness of Heidegger and at the same time critically examining the source for his personal flaws and political blindness. In doing so, Caputo demonstrates how postmodern deconstruction is not strictly a negative philosophy but instead an attempt to read the tradition against itself—indeed, even to read a single thinker against himself. In this way postmodern deconstruction is necessarily a twofold operation. As Caputo describes it with respect to his deconstructive reading of Heidegger:

It is not only a negative work of exposing the insinuations of the myth of Being into the question of Being, of mercilessly [18] suspecting everything, even what appears to be innocent. It is also at the same time the positive production of another Heidegger, another reading of Heidegger, of a Heidegger demythologized, of a Heidegger read against Heidegger. In this way, demythologizing and deconstructing, reading carefully and re-reading, are positive and even remythologizing operations.²⁸

Likewise with his major contribution to the field of postmodern ethics, by his attack "against ethics" (at least as it was rather being simplistically understood and employed by those well-meaning scholars seeking to fix responsibility and establish a moral guidebook for a life without blame), Caputo took a stand for the prior commitment of postmodern deconstruction—namely, that of justice.²⁹ Finally, with regard to postmodernism and religion, how is it possible that a figure such as Derrida who says of himself that he rightly passes for an atheist should be read as a *religious* thinker? For Caputo, at least, therein lies the great paradox and value of postmodern philosophy. Not that Derrida himself would claim to be either a postmodern or a religious thinker, but by reading Derrida through the lens of postmodernism it is shown how even (or perhaps especially) someone like him can help to create the open space by which a tradition can live up to its promise.

As Caputo tells us, at its most basic, religion is about the love of God, a love that is beyond human measure and that breaks free from all human constraints. The love of God is a love without category or, better, a love that exceeds all categorization—whether religious or secular, whether theist or atheist, and whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, etc. As such, postmodern deconstruction is not the world-denying, radically skeptic, and antireligious movement that its detractors made it out to be. On the contrary, it can only be understood by recognizing [19] its animating and fundamentally affirmative passion, its radical and unconditional Yes to the promise of life. This Yes holds the promise of distinctively postmodern faith and, even more, helps us to better understand the paradox of how the postmodern—by extending and radicalizing the modern critique of religion—has actually set the cultural conditions the contemporary resurgence of religion.

In this way Caputo identifies the postmodern with the postsecular wherein the death of God ironically realizes its full iconoclastic potential by actualizing what Caputo calls the "death of the death of God." His book, *On Religion*, describes this process playfully when he writes about "How the secular world became post-secular."³⁰ Here Caputo equates modernity with secularization and postmodernity with desecularization. The transitional figures in this historical transformation, the ones about whom Caputo refers as "our prophets," are Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. As Caputo writes:

In Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the world of Enlightenment Reason and Hegelian Absolute Knowledge is left far behind. They each foresee in his own way the madness of the twentieth century whose genocidal violence made a mockery of Hegel's sanguine view of

history as the autobiography of the Spirit of time. This is why the twentieth century took them as its prophets. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche sketch the lines of a world after the Enlightenment, after Hegel, after Philosophy, writ large. (55)

In this post-Enlightenment world after Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the Enlightenment critique of religion boomerangs back against itself. Whether talking about Nietzsche, Marx, or Freud, the postmodern world becomes suspicious of their hermeneutics of suspicion with the realization that their critiques were [20] "also perspectives, *also* constructions, or fictions of grammar." In Caputo's words:

Marx and Freud, along with Nietzsche himself, find themselves hoisted with Nietzsche's petard, their critiques of religion having come undone under the gun of Nietzsche's critique of the possibility of making a critique that would cut to the quick—of God, nature, or history. Enlightenment secularism, the objectivist reduction of religion to something other than itself—say, to a distorted desire for one's mommy, or to a way to keep the ruling authorities in power—is one more story told by people with historically limited imaginations, with contingent conceptions of reason and history, of economics and labor, of nature and human nature, of desire, sexuality, and women, and of God, religion, and faith. (59-60)

In short, Caputo sees postmodernity as "a more enlightened Enlightenment [that] is no longer taken in by the dream of Pure Objectivity. . . . It has a post-critical sense of critique that is critical of the idea that we can establish air-tight borders around neatly discriminated spheres or regions like knowledge, ethics, art, and religion" (61). And, finally, this "opens the doors to another way of thinking about faith and reason," which for Caputo translates not into relativism, irrationalism, or nihilism "but [into] a heightened sense of the contingency and revisability of our constructions, not the jettisoning of reason but a redescription of reason, one that is a lot more reasonable than the bill of goods about an overarching, transhistorical Rationality that the Enlightenment tried to sell us" (63).

Thus from modernity to postmodernity, from secularization to a process of desecularization through which religion has moved from being on the defensive for having to answer to reason to its [21] contemporary rebound where it has recovered its proper sense as a faith rather than some lesser form of knowledge. As Caputo writes in his conclusion to *On Religion*, "Religious truth is a truth without Knowledge" (115). And further, "Undecidability is the place in which faith takes place, the night in which faith is conceived, for night is its element. Undecidability is the reason that faith is faith and not Knowledge, and the way that faith can be true without Knowledge" (128).

Vattimo, on the other hand, has an alternative reading of postmodernism that rests on a very different, more positive, understanding of the modern processes of secularization. As he states in the interview that follows, "Real religiosity relies on secularization." By this he is referring to the modern fragmentation of religious authority that has both positive and negative consequences. Positively, it safeguards religious belief from coercion and at least provides the possibility that believers might recognize the contingency and historicity of their own beliefs. But, on the flip side, a religion severed from institutional control means that like most everything else in contemporary society it becomes just another commodity in the world of mass communication. For Vattimo, this is at least part of the explanation for the wild popularity of Pope John Paul II. As he says, "People are more interested in the religious show than they are in religious engagement." And later in the conversation, as if to underscore the point of the pope's status as a media star, "Many people watch Tv, but not so many attend church."

With this in mind, to what extent does he share Caputo's linking of the postmodern with the postsecular? And if we are living in a postsecular world, does this mean that the postmodern has inaugurated a process of desecularization? With regard to the first question, Vattimo answers in the affirmative in the sense that in the contemporary postmodern society, we are witness to a certain rebirth of religiosity. The

postmodern is postsecular in [22] the sense that secularization establishes the conditions of possibility for the religious, and, more strongly, as he argues elsewhere, secularization is the destiny of the Christian West.³¹ But Vattimo does not accept the linking of the postsecular with a process of desecularization, for this would imply a reversal that belies the actual historical tradition and a denial of how the West has rediscovered its own Christian origins. Because secularization is the destiny of the Christian West, we remain bound within that tradition, and the postmodern return of religion lives as its response.

If not desecularization, then what is the postmodern? Vattimo provides his most direct answer to this question in the opening chapter of *The Transparent Society*. In this early engagement with the meaning of the postmodern condition, Vattimo writes that if the term *postmodern* is to have any meaning at all, it must be "linked to the fact that the society in which we live is a society of generalized communication. It is the society of the mass media."³² In addition, whatever else is meant by the term *postmodern*, it at least implies, "in some essential way, that modernity is over" (1). By modernity, Vattimo is referring to the spirit of the Enlightenment, which made a "cult of the new," and most important, viewed history as a unilinear process of emancipation. "Modernity ends," Vattimo writes, "when—for a number of reasons—it no longer seems possible to regard history as unilinear" (2). Among the number of reasons why this is no longer possible is that the ideological character of this reading of history has been exposed, whether in the positing of Jesus' birth as the zero point of history or the depiction of the West as the center of civilization. In contrast to this ideological image of history that valorizes the Christian West, Vattimo writes, "There is no single history, only images of the past projected from different points of view. It is illusory to think that there exists a supreme or comprehensive viewpoint capable of unifying all others" (2). Along [23] with this crisis in the notion of a unilinear and unifying history comes the related crisis in the notion of progress. For Vattimo, this postmodern realization becomes important as a critique of the Eurocentrism that fueled the colonialism and imperialism associated with the modern period.

To return to the earlier point, though the ending of this modern sensibility with regard to history is important, the meaning of the term *postmodern* is not complete for Vattimo without an appreciation of the advent of the society of mass communication:

What I am proposing is: (a) that the mass media plays a decisive role in the birth of a postmodern society; (b) that they do not make this postmodern society more transparent, but more complex, even chaotic; and finally (c) that it is in precisely this relative "chaos" that our hopes for emancipation lie. (4)

Thus, in contrast to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who predicted that modern communication would "produce a general homogenization of society," Vattimo sees a "general explosion and proliferation of *Weltanschauungen*, of world views" (5). In later works he frequently refers to this proliferation of worldviews as the "Babel-like pluralism" of postmodernity. The point is that, with today's mass communication, its "myriad forms of reality" render any single worldview or any unilinear history impossible. In this way the postmodern produces an alternative model of emancipation. In contrast to the model of lucid consciousness as reflected in Hegel's Absolute Spirit or Marx's conception of humanity liberated from false consciousness, Vattimo's model of postmodern emancipation is "based on oscillation, plurality and, ultimately, on the erosion of the very 'principle of reality'" (7). In other words, the postmodern is postmetaphysical, wherein freedom "does not lie in having a [24] perfect knowledge of the necessary structure of reality and conforming to it," but instead is conceived as disorientation by virtue of the dissolution of reality. As Vattimo writes, "If, in the multicultural world, I set out my system of religious, aesthetic, political and ethnic values, I shall be acutely conscious of the historicity, contingency and finiteness of these systems, starting with my own" (9).

This more positive reading of the history of secularization and more hopeful, if not optimistic, reading of the postmodern as the postmetaphysical leads to Vattimo taking distance from what he calls the "tragic and apocalyptic Christianity of Dostoevsky"³³ with whom we began and about whom Caputo will

conclude our dialogue. Although Dostoevsky's tale of the Grand Inquisitor certainly employs the tragic in this most existential spiritual crisis, it also anticipates a history—namely, our history of the postmodern return of a religion based in the love of Christ. On that, both Caputo and Vattimo can agree.

In the pages of this book that follow, our quest for a new philosophy of religion will pass through the radical hermeneutics of John Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, through the movement of the death of God to the postmodern realization of the death of the death of God, from secularism to the return of religion, and beyond. In the process, and by virtue of the open form of the dialogues that follow, both Caputo and Vattimo will be given the chance to think "otherwise" by thinking in conversation with one another. To return to the epigraph from Rent de Vries: what follows represents the perpetual agony of a conversation without end as we explore the contours of the seeming impossible—a theology after the death of God and a philosophy of religion without religion.

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Robbins, Jeffrey W. "Introduction: After the Death of God." In *After the Death of God*, edited by Jeffrey W. Robbins, 1-24. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

Notes

- ¹ See Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (New York: Braziller, 1961).
- ² See Richard J. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Essays in Contemporary Judaism* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).
- ³ See John Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Knox, 1972), and Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).
- ⁴ See Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).
- ⁵ Sociologist of religion Richard Fenn describes this ideological crisis as follows: "The emergence of the radical death of God theology, therefore, is set within a cultural context of ideological crisis: in the absence of universals, of world-views and value-orientations, of sanctions for social arrangements, and of prototypes for individual motivations, the new theology acquires an empirical fit and significance far broader than in sources in academic theology would suggest." In "The Death of God: An Analysis of Ideological Crisis," *Review of Religious Research* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1968): 171.
- ⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 46.
- ⁷ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 6. In making this claim, Taylor is echoing a claim first made by Carl Raschke in *Deconstruction and Theology* (1982).
- ⁸ As the historian Hugh McLeod writes, "'Christianity' and 'Christendom' can be separated. There was Christianity for three centuries before Christendom. There are parts of the world, for instance China, where there has never been a Christendom, but where there are many millions of Christians." In Hugh McLeod, "Introduction," in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, ed. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.2.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ¹⁰ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 168.
- ¹¹ McLeod, "Introduction," p. 1.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ¹³ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

- ¹⁴. See especially William Hamilton, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer” in *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, ed. Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), pp. 113-20.
- ¹⁵. Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).
- ¹⁶. Jack Miles, “Religion is Making a Comeback (Belief to Follow),” *New York Times Magazine* (December 7, 1997).
- ¹⁷. See Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 1995).
- ¹⁸. See John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), and *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
- ¹⁹. Richard Rorty, “Foreword,” in Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. xi.
- ²⁰. Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, p. xxvi.
- ²¹. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ²². *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.
- ²³. Caputo has acknowledged his indebtedness to Vattimo on this point. See the introduction to his forthcoming *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), n. 9.
- ²⁴. See John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).
- ²⁵. For more about Caputo’s theology of the event, see *The Weakness of God*.
- ²⁶. Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 17.
- ²⁷. See Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D’Isanto and David Webb (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 28.
- ²⁸. John D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 7-8.
- ²⁹. See John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
- ³⁰. John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 37-66. Further references will appear parenthetically in the text.
- ³¹. See Vattimo, *After Christianity*, pp. 69-82.
- ³². Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. David Webb (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), p.1. Further references will appear in the text.
- ³³. See Vattimo, *Belief*, pp. 80-84.