

*Toward a Nonreligious Christianity*

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**Knowledge and Interpretation**

[27]

Let us start from an observation that may help us to understand what the meaning of interpretation is and the role it has to play in what we call knowledge. From a hermeneutical perspective, we must say that knowledge requires a perspective, that in knowing anything I must choose a perspective. But some may object, what about the case of scientific knowledge? Is scientific knowledge also perspectival? My answer is that because scientists have chosen not to have anything to do with their own private interest, and describe only what concerns their science, their knowledge as such is deliberately limited. They never know everything.

Those familiar with the hermeneutical tradition know that this is the point where Heidegger's objection to metaphysics begins—namely, in the decision to be objective, we cannot help but assume a definite position, de-fined, in other words, a point of view that limits, but also helps in a decisive way, our encounter with the world. While Heidegger's critique of metaphysics begins here in the critique of the metaphysical definition of truth as an objective datum, his critique also moves beyond this point [28] in its eventual focus on the ethical-political nature of metaphysics, the "rationalization" of modern society against which the vanguards during the first part of the twentieth century were fighting. Heidegger also realized that the scientific claim of objectivity (which is also what Lukacs says under a Marxist's profile) is inspired from a determined interest: for example, to describe a natural phenomenon in a way that others could also speak of it in the same way and develop this self-same knowledge. In other words, scientists are not moved by the impulse of truth. The relation between the world and the knowledge of the world does not function as a mirror. Instead, there is the world and someone who is "in the world," which means someone who orients himself in and to the world, someone who uses his own capacities of knowledge, hence someone who chooses, reorganizes, replaces, represents, etc.

*The concept of interpretation is all here: there is no experience of truth that is not interpretative. I do not know anything that does not interest me. If it does interest me, it is evident that I do not look at it in a noninterested way.*

For Heidegger, this concept of interpretation also makes its way into his reflection on the historical sciences, as one can see reading not only the first parts of *Being and Time* but also so many other essays of that period. For Heidegger, then, it comes down to the following: I am an interpreter as long as I am not someone who looks at the world from the outside. I see the external world because I am inside it. As a being-in-the-world, my interests are very complicated. I cannot say precisely how things are, but only how they are from this point of view, how they seem to me and how I think they are. If an experiment moved by one of my ideas works, it does not mean that I have exhausted the objective knowledge on that aspect of reality. Rather, as even the philosophy of science has later realized, I have made the experiment function under certain expectations and premises. When [29] I conduct an experiment, after all, I already have a whole set of criteria and instruments thanks to which I may determine—always with another someone who comes to the experiment with other interests and thus, by definition, does not think exactly as I do—whether my experiment works or not. From the beginning, the criteria and the instruments are left out of the discussion. No scientist studies all physics from scratch. Nearly all of them trust handbooks,

and, with the help of the inherited knowledge contained therein, they develop still others.

This point made by Heidegger almost a century ago is an accepted fact by now—scientists do not objectively describe the world. On the contrary, their description of the world depends on their specific usage of precise instruments and a rigorous methodology, all of which is culturally determined and historically qualified. Of course, I realize that not all scientists would accept these words. But even the very conditions of possibility for verifying a scientific proposition (or falsifying, as Popper would have it) depend on the fact that we speak the same language, we use the same instruments, we take the same measures, ect. If any of this were different, not only would we not understand each other, but we would not even have the possibility of understanding each other. And, further, these criteria and this paradigm have not been invented from scratch. On the contrary, we have inherited them.

*Again, this is interpretation: being inside a situation, facing it not as someone who comes from Mars but as someone who has a history, as someone who belongs to a community.*

There are some people who believe that to study physics is not to study the truth of physics, but to learn the secret skills and practices and to endure the various rites of initiation, like athlete getting in shape or an initiate becoming a member of a secret society. It makes sense when one considers the difficulty in getting someone to understand a scientific demonstration. In [30] order to understand the truth of the theory, one must first teach the rudiments of the discipline. These rudiments are presumed to be "natural." But, when we take a closer look, isn't it the case that the knowledge belonging to a particular science could also be different? In all this we must consider something further—namely, the emergence of structuralism as a movement within anthropological study of culture. Heidegger was not yet acquainted with the structuralism of Levi-Strauss, but what is the difference between Kant and Heidegger? Put simply, there is the nineteenth century wherein we have the scientific and/or anthropological "discovery" of other cultures.

This nineteenth-century discovery dramatically alters our understanding of how knowledge is constructed. According to Kant, in order to know the world, one needs some a priori structures that cannot be recuperated from experience and through which experience itself is organized. But what does this mean? Space, time, and the categories of understanding, these are things that constitute myself as the universal structures of reason. In other words, for Kant and many neo-Kantian philosophers, reason was thought to be always the same. Cultural anthropology, on the other hand, reveals differences by showing the various ways that societies, cultures, and diverse individuals face the world. We could say, then, that the philosophy of the twentieth century, as reflected in Heidegger's existentialism, is the result of a Kantian philosophical sensibility passing through the crucible of anthropological culture. If I am a finite human being, I will be born and die at a certain point in history. Is it possible then that I am the carrier of this absolute that I may unconditionally affirm without any doubts? Are these categories and is this structure of the mind no different than the truth that two plus two equals four? After all, there are cultures that eat their own, not to mention the many differences that exist even within European culture and thought.

The first wave of cultural anthropology acknowledged the existence of other cultures but, at the same time, emphasized their "primitive" status—that is, they were examples of an earlier or previous form of human relations. Basically, it was thought that the "primitives" did not know about mathematics; once we get there we teach them sciences and install our governments. But, today, where are these "primitives"? To whom can we teach all these things?

*The matter of interpretation is now configured in this way: interpretation is the idea that knowledge is not the pure, uninterested reflection of the real, but the interested approach to the world, which is itself historically mutable and culturally conditioned.*

### **The Advent of Christianity and the Birth of the Subject**

But what does any of this have to do with Christianity, let alone the nonreligious interpretation of Christianity I am proposing here? And what right do I as a philosopher have to declare such things?

According to other philosophers with whom Heidegger was quite similar—most notably, Wilhelm Dilthey—Christianity accomplished the first attack against metaphysics construed exclusively as objectivity. Accordingly, Kant only taught us centuries later what Christianity had already affirmed, hence the idea of Saint Augustine that *in interiore homine habitat veritas* ("truth lives in the inner human"). Christianity announces the end to the Platonic ideal of objectivity. It cannot be the eternal word of forms outside ourselves that saves us, but only the eye directed toward the interior and the searching of the deep truth inside us all. According to Dilthey's schema of history (which, even though Heidegger never said this explicitly, is the schema of history that Heidegger follows), the thing that is most decisive in the event of [32] Christianity is precisely this attention toward subjectivity, which, incidentally, also brings with it the concern for the poor, weak, and outcasts.

In other words, as Erich Auerbach demonstrates in a beautiful book, each of us is just like the other.<sup>1</sup> To be fair, the philosophies of the late antiquity are also like this: Epicureanism and stoicism are both philosophies much more oriented toward the subject. But none more so than Christianity, which consistently questions the fixation on the object in favor of its own attention on the subject. And in this way, at least according to Dilthey's schema, we arrive at Kant and at the truth, which is not in things, not outside ourselves, and which, therefore, comes forward always in an accidental way. Instead, truth is found in the reason of man, which, once it turns back on itself, once it becomes truly reflexive, shows how the mind itself actually contributes to the knowledge of truth.

The philosophers of science of today also talk about the fact that single phenomena (a kettle of water that boils at 100 degrees) are not somehow *better* known whenever science is able to generalize them in formulas. By generating formulas, science in some way transcends the single phenomenon and places it inside a complete artificial system. The thermometer is not useful because it allows me to better know the boiling of the water; it serves me only to generalize this discourse in a wider sphere. In other words, abstraction is not intended to penetrate into the phenomenon and find its true essence. The essence we reach is only the general structure of a certain world of phenomena that become truth in some way having nothing to do with individuality.<sup>2</sup> We are not always looking at the kettle, but we measure it, we link it to some system. In a certain way this is again a Kantian way of thinking. Regarding the immediacy of what I see, I construct a system made of connections, a calculus, through which knowledge is mediated. This is Kant in a nutshell. [33]

Returning to the crucible of cultural anthropology, and with the increased appreciation for the finitude of existence, perhaps now even mathematics is revealed as only *a* mathematics. This is seen in the beginning of the twentieth century with the development of alternative

mathematics, non-Euclidean geometries. I must confess that I do not know why people invent these things, but it is always about systems, about logical mathematical connections that really do work and through which it is possible to demonstrate certain truths. When it is discovered that perhaps they can be applied more adequately to some natural phenomenon than others—for instance, some suggest that certain non-Euclidean geometries apply better to cosmic space—one begins to understand that there might be different languages that deal with phenomena in different ways.

Wittgenstein, who was not a great friend of Heidegger (in fact, I do not think that Heidegger ever read him), says, for example, that if someone puts forward a mathematical formula that gives different results from mine, I may always ask myself if he is getting the calculus wrong or if he is applying a different mathematical language. This is already a way to understand the idea of interpretation. That does not imply that if we accept the idea of interpretation, then "everything goes" and anyone can say whatever he wants. Regardless, there are rules, but the rules themselves are relative to language. This is the importance of the later Wittgenstein's insight into language games, wherein every language functions like a game with its own rules. Obviously, you cannot apply to a game of basketball the rules of baseball. Otherwise, the norms of basketball would be violated. This does not mean the baseball rules are wrong, but it means that each language has its own norms.

So Christianity contributes to a philosophy of interpretation for many reasons.<sup>3</sup> One of these is that Christianity turns the mind inward and thus, say the historians of thought, makes possible the [34] Kantian subject and anticipates modern philosophies of subjectivity. Indeed, even the very possibility of theorizing this is due to the fact that we live in a Christian civilization (even if we do no longer live in the era of Christendom in the global sense). All the discourse concerning the biblical view of creation, which is put forward in mythological form, stands at odds with the compact metaphysics of Plato, Aristotle, etc. Not to mention the more extravagant, or mind-bending, episodes from the New Testament, such as the story of the virgin birth or the Holy Spirit descending onto the apostles at Pentecost. "What does all this mean? How are we to understand it? Jesus gives us some clue when he foretells the day of Pentecost when the apostles would be baptized by the Holy Spirit. Here Jesus sends to the apostles what his father had promised so that they might finally understand all that he had taught them. As Jesus anticipated the age of the spirit, he recognized and justified the later transformation of the Christian truths. The message of Christ is true even as he introduced himself as someone with the authority to interpret the inherited tradition and the sacred writings of the past (which Christians now refer to as the Old Testament). In this way Christ is seen as the agent of interpretation. As such, he is not unlike Moses, who, to be realistic, did not simply transcribe the literal words of God. Rather, the commandments brought down by Moses were also the product of interpretation.

My Jewish colleagues remind me that hermeneutics does not, and did not, begin with the New Testament. For the writings contained within the Hebrew Scriptures are nothing if they are not an example of this continual act of interpretation and reinterpretation. They are correct, of course. For example, we see in Walter Benjamin, who was a great intellectual of the philosophy of the twentieth century, that he thought about everything in Talmudic terms. That is to say, his thinking was a form of commentary reflecting on that which has been already handed down. [35]

The history of the origin of the idea of interpretation is inescapable.<sup>4</sup> Consider the New Testament gospels, none of which were written before 60 CE. In other words, as is well chronicled, the stories of Jesus as the Christ were written sufficiently *after* the time of Jesus such that it is reasonable to conclude that none are eyewitness accounts and that none preserve for us a

journalistic record of the actual happenings. One of the reasons why Heidegger chose to comment on Saint Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians, in his "The Phenomenology of Religious Life" course of 1919-1920,<sup>5</sup> is because they are the oldest writings from the New Testament and thus represent the earliest layer of Christian history we can now access. All of which is to say that even when we are referring to the canonical gospels—those texts that the church has long since established as authoritative and trustworthy—they are at best written reports based on an oral tradition.

I recognize that these are all scattered observations and premises drawn from the history of interpretation and its battle against objectivity. But what is its significance? The answer is that Christianity is a stimulus, a message that sets in motion a tradition of thought that will eventually realize its freedom from metaphysics. Does this mean that metaphysics should have never existed, that Aristotle was somehow wrong or misguided? No, because to say that would be to fall into the trap of metaphysics. It would be an example of typical metaphysical reasoning—namely, affirming that it is an eternal truth that metaphysics is a mistake. I cannot and would not say this, but, in order to say something, or anything, I must draw on particular words, and, in order for those words to make sense, they must be drawn from some particular tradition. If you were to ask me why I feel so confident as to preach this message of freedom from metaphysics without falling into the trap of metaphysics, I would offer you a litany: "Did you read this or that?" In other words, the only arguments [36] I can offer are not those that are traditionally recognized as such by those who police the rules of logic. My argument is not traditional, but one of transmission, of language, and of the culture in which we live together.

For instance, when I say that I am certain that God created me, I recognize that if I were to strip myself of the biblical world of meaning and reference, I would strip myself of meaning altogether. So to take away the Bible is to take away meaning. It would be like taking Dante away from the history of Italian literature. Dante, like Shakespeare, is written in such a way that, if you did not read the Bible, you would not understand anything. But you can read the Bible without reading Dante or Shakespeare. This means that to profess faith in Christianity is first of all to profess faith in the inevitability of a certain textual tradition that has been passed down to me. Take away the Bible and I would not be what I am. Perhaps I would be something or someone else, but it would be useless for me to think that I could just as easily be a native of the Amazon. It is true that I could be, but how does that help me to understand who I actually am? If I reflect on my existence, I must realize that without the text of the Bible I would be bereft of the very instruments I have in order to think and to talk.

The twentieth-century Italian philosopher and political figure Benedetto Croce once said, "We cannot but call ourselves Christians."<sup>6</sup> I have referred to this statement many times, pulling it in different directions, even taking it to an extreme position that Croce probably would not share. For instance, when he says that "we cannot but call ourselves Christians," I say more extremely that we cannot even speak but from a Christian point of view. That is because we are fundamentally incapable of formulating ourselves, fundamentally incapable of articulating a discourse, except by accepting certain culturally conditioned premises.

Think here of Voltaire: For many, Voltaire is considered an enemy of religion. But I say that Voltaire was a good Christian [37] precisely because he demanded freedom against authoritarianism, even if it just so happened that it was the Jesuits who were in authority at that particular time and place. By standing unconditionally for freedom and against authoritarianism, he stood for Christianity. In this way perhaps true Christianity must be non-religious. In Christianity there is a fundamental commitment to freedom. And, to add a bit of scandal, by

standing for freedom, this includes freedom from (the idea of) truth. After all, if there really is an objective truth, there will always be someone who is more in possession of it than I and thereby authorized to impose its law obligation on me.

Look around, all forms of authoritarianism are founded on some premises of a metaphysical nature, if for no other reason but the fact that authority is easier to explain and apparently more binding if it is construed metaphysically rather than a government or philosophical official trying to persuade you that a certain action, policy, or belief is in your own best interest. If you were to go and explain to President Bush, for instance, that the risks of the war in Iraq are too monumental, he will respond: "But they are terrorists." I can try to understand the sentiment that they might be terrorists, but only within a logic that Bush himself established. Even the document 1441 of the United Nations, which authorized military action in Iraq, is of the United Nations as determined by the Security Council. In other words, it reflects the will of the winners of the World War II. It is not the voice of God! So even though it is the only form of global legitimacy that we have in place, its importance must not be exaggerated to the point of being sacralized. Recognizing this helps us to recognize the illegitimacy of a preemptive war.

To offer a different example: If Christianity did not liberate us from objective truth, how could we even maintain our belief in Scripture, or how could we prevent Scripture from being logically inconsistent, if not utterly absurd? For instance, I [38] have a colleague in Turin who has written a book in which he actually calculated the height Mary would have reached when she was taken to heaven with her body. The problem, of course, with such calculations is that they generate more questions than they answer. For instance, where is Mary's body now? How do we know that she didn't just disappear? She was taken with the body, but where did she end up? Why are such calculations and questions even necessary in the first place? How can Scripture be saved from such absurdities? In short, to believe in the gospel in today's day and age, one must first understand that language does not only denote objective realities. There is also another language that says other things. Just as it is when I affirm a scientific proposition: I accept the fact that its truth rests on a certain conception of knowledge, a certain accepted code of experimentation and the use of certain instruments. In this way, I may accept the truth of science without being a scientist myself—that is, I do not have to personally recreate the conditions of an experiment to accept its findings. If not, I would be caught in an infinite regress. It is no different when we come to the discourse of values. I cannot speak outside a certain linguistic tradition without drawing on a certain encyclopedia of knowledge and a dictionary of terms. These are all the basis of my existence.

Likewise, with the language of the gospel, I can only understand it as that which is not ontic, not given in the external world, nor is it meant to be interpreted realistically. Instead, it talks of my destiny. "When you say "I love you" on Valentine's Day, this "I love you" does not describe any objective phenomenon. Perhaps you might point to the rapid beating of your pulse as objective evidence of your feeling of love, but so too might it be evidence of something else. Once again we find ourselves in this discourse of interpretation. Until Galileo it was not so easy to be Kantian in science. Only with modern science, with Bacon, but most of all from Galileo onward, has this world been seen [39] and understood from a scientific perspective in such a way that it seems perfectly suited for the philosophy of Kant. Also this seems to be confirmation of what Dilthey said of Christianity, as the Christian message eventually realizes its destiny when we become aware of our action in the world.

### **Charity and the Future of Christianity**

Where will it all end? And where are we going to end up? We are moving toward secularization, which may also be called nihilism. Hence, the idea is that objective being has gradually, little by little, consumed itself.

In a beautiful passage from *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche tells us how the real world has become a dream. It was the Platonic world of ideas that gave us the idea of the real world in the first place. Later, the real world was construed as the promised world after death (at least for the righteous). Still later, in the mind of Descartes, the thought of the real world was evidence of clear and distinct ideas (but only in my mind). With positivism the real world became the world of experimental verified truths and then a product of the experimental scientist (after all, the modern scientist is not someone so much who looks at nature as someone who stimulates it, teases it, pulls it, and wants some specific thing to come from it). At this point, the so-called real world has become a story that we tell each other. It is difficult to accept all this, but we live today in a story-world of this kind.

Living in this story-world of our creation, we do not see nature anymore. Instead, we mostly see our world, a world that has been increasingly organized through a whole series of technological entities. When we talk about our natural needs, we list such things as the elevator or the cinema—things that are in no real sense natural but have become perfectly natural and apparently [40] indispensable for us. What would become of us if we had to survive in a world in which we were left entirely alone? Our natural needs are defined by whatever it is in which we are immersed. But they are not natural at all. They are, instead, stimulated by advertising, conditioned by technology, etc. Our world has become a dream in so many ways. You see a car accident and you run home to see it on television. What is seen on television is then thought to have some heightened sense of reality. It is through television that you are able to see the accident in its full reality instead of the limited vantage point by which you saw it from the road. We live this televised reality locally and globally day after day.

That the real world becomes a dream can also be expressed in terms of Nietzsche's nihilism. As the objective world consumes itself, it gives way to a growing subjective transformation not of individuals but of communities, cultures, sciences, and languages. This is what I theorized with the notion of weak thought. If there is a possible line of emancipation in our human history, emancipation comes not through the final realization of an essence that was given at the beginning once and for all (which therefore would mean that we must somehow return to our state of original innocence before original sin). We must realize a bigger transformation as the natural gives way to the cultural or the material to the spiritual. This is what Hegel meant when he spoke about making the world into the house of man. It is not unlike the effort of making one's house into a home. When decorating a house, it is not just a matter of providing comfortable furniture or a welcoming environment. Once everything is arranged, if something is then missing or out of place you cannot help but notice its absence immediately. What makes your house a home is the artificial order you establish.

Baudelaire wrote a wonderful thing: "Where I have encountered virtue, I have always encountered against-nature."<sup>7</sup> It is exactly like this: nature is the world in which the big fish eats the [41] small one. It is not at all a place of laws. Virtue is different as it is determined not by nature but by culture. It is also something that transcends. In this sense, emancipation actually consists in pursuing secularization, which is to say, emancipation relies on the process of desacralization, in having a better understanding of the spiritual sense of Scriptures by reading them *spiritually*. Max Weber explained that the capitalist world founded itself on the basis of a certain interpretation of Protestant ethics. Thrift, self-discipline, saving, repressing one's

immediate impulses are all fundamental to the constitution of the order of capital. As such, the modern world has been formed by applying, transforming, and sometimes even mistaking the content of its tradition, which is primarily that of its own biblical heritage.

At what point does this continual process of transformation end? What are its limits? Or have we now reached a point where there are no more limits, where we may simply do whatever it is we like? No, because though the event of Christianity sets in motion the processes of secularization, we may also find in Scripture a limit to secularization, hence a guide to desacralization—namely, that of charity.<sup>8</sup> If you read the gospels or the fathers of the church carefully, at the end, the only virtue left is always that of charity. From Saint Paul we learn that the three greatest virtues are faith, hope, and love, "but the greatest of these is love." Even faith and hope will end at one point or another. As Saint Augustine instructs, "Love and do what you want."

While this is a liberating message, it is also a discomfoting one, in the sense that it suggests, in relation to love, that everything else associated with the tradition and truth of Christianity is dispensable and may rightfully be called mythology. For Instance, I do not know if God is really three persons in one, as defined by classical trinitarian theology. It might seem indispensable to think this way, but surely today we would no longer burn as a heretic someone who does not believe in the trinity. [42] Instead of applying the heavy hand of church authority to enforce doctrinal conformity, today we would invite the dissenters to think about the matter a bit more. But that being said, when one does think about these matters, instead of settling the debate, it oftentimes raises further difficulties. For example, when I think about the masculine language of God as father, I cannot help but wonder why God must be father and not mother or some other form of parenthood. The language of God as father is so obviously an allegoric language. Once you begin down this road, you do not know where you are going to end up.

The question, then, is whether one can still pray the Lord's Prayer after recognizing that even it too is culturally conditioned. My answer is Yes, because, when I pray, I know precisely that the words I am using are not intended to convey some literal truth. I pray these words more for the love of a tradition than I do for the love of some mythic reality. It is like the relationship you have with an aged relative. It is senseless to demand that your grandparents share your political ideas. Certain matters are best when left unsaid. You may have a special respect for their experience and the language they have inherited. In this sense, interpersonal relationships are much more about charity than truth.

Are scientists scientists out of their love for truth or because they love to be inside a scientific community, which allows them to develop certain discourses and in which they find certain interlocutors? Even when a philosopher such as Jürgen Habermas affirms rationality, he admits that rationality consists in introducing arguments that may be reasonably supported in dialogue with others. He does not say that rationality or truth is that which corresponds to the "thing itself."

The notion of truth has changed from Saint Augustine's understanding. But Augustine's turn inward is already a step forward with respect to the notion of objective truth, because once you turn inward you must also try to listen to others like you. [43] Today, truth is increasingly determined by agreement with others. We have said, "We do not, and perhaps cannot, agree when we have found the truth, but we may say that at least we have found some truth when we have agreed upon something." This also means that in the place of truth we have put charity. It is like what Dostoevsky wrote a century ago, that, if forced to choose between Christ and the truth, he

would choose Christ. Contrast this sentiment with what Aristotle had to say about his teacher Plato: "Amicus Plato sed magis amica veritas" (Plato is a friend, but truth is a greater friend).

Throughout the ages inquisitors have sided with Aristotle rather than Dostoyevsky on this sentiment. The result is that, although not all metaphysics have been violent, I would say that all violent people of great dimensions have been metaphysical. If Hitler only hated the Jews of his particular neighborhood, he might have burned up their homes. But how much more dangerous he was because at a certain point he theorized about the general nature of all Jews and thus felt justified in his efforts to exterminate them all. I do not think it is that difficult to understand this. Nietzsche is very explicit in this sense. According to him, metaphysics is itself an act of violence because it wants to appropriate the "most fertile regions," hence of the first principles, in order to dominate and control. The first lines from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* more or less confirm this when he says that the wise is the one who knows all. The wise knows all by knowing its first cause and is thereby thought able to control and determine all its effects. Our tradition is dominated by the idea that if we only had a stable foundation we could move and act more freely. But philosophical foundationalism does not promote freedom. Rather, it is for the purpose of obtaining some desired effect or of consolidating some authority. When someone wants to tell me the absolute truth it is because he wants to put me under his control, under his command. Is it any wonder, then, that we hear [44] the refrain "Be a man" or "Do your duty" whenever it is those who are in power send others off to war?

Where is this discourse going with regard to Christianity? Recently I participated in a debate in Turin on Gadamer, who had died only one year before. Many years ago Gadamer was my teacher. Some have said that in recent years Gadamer had developed some sort of religious hermeneutical attitude. This was seen in his frequent dialogues on religion and between religious traditions. In addition, he spoke increasingly about goodness. This religious turn in his philosophy was fundamentally a result of his hermeneutics. That is to say, if there is no objective truth given to someone once and for all, a truth around which we must all (for good or bad, willingly or unwillingly) gather, then truth happens in dialogue. The truth Christ came to teach the church is not an already accomplished truth. Its message grows with history. Similarly, you cannot read Plato without taking into consideration the whole history of interpretation of Plato. What seems natural is in fact historical. After all, is it any surprise that when a middle school student sits down to write poetry his poems sound just like those of Giovanni Pascoli?<sup>9</sup> Here is where Nietzsche's hermeneutics of suspicion is helpful: if there is anything that appears to you to be absolutely self-evident, you must distrust it. It is probably some joke that has been inserted in your brain. You can be certain of everything besides your most treasured certainties, because it was probably your aunts, grandparents, churches, authorities, and media that taught them to you and remain most invested in keeping you from second-guessing.

As I see it, Christianity is moving in a direction that cannot but lighten or weaken its moral load in favor of its practical-moral charity. And not only the weakening of its moral-metaphysical assumptions, but, by this transformation, charity will eventually replace truth. After all, are Catholics really supposed to fight, first with the Protestants because they do not accept the [45] Vatican's authority, then eventually with the Buddhist and the Hindus because they do not believe that God is three persons in one? Are we really expected to believe that when the Pope meets up with the Dalai Lama he worries that the Dalai Lama will end up in hell because he is not Catholic? No, they discuss how to mutually advance the spiritual dimension in human life, and they probably make deals on many things.

The future of Christianity, and also of the Church, is to become a religion of pure love,

always more purified. There is a church hymn that states this succinctly and that also helps us see how far off we are from realizing this promise: "Where there is love, there is also God." As this hymn shows, my reading of Christianity is really not that strange or unorthodox. As Christ states: "When two or more of you are gathered in my name" (I cannot help but wonder whether, when Christ says in "my name," he might just as well mean charity), "I am with them." Charity is the presence of God. It is difficult to imagine that at the end some will be damned because they are Buddhist and others Muslims, etc. I say, on the contrary, that we will be damned—or more precisely, we damn ourselves on earth—when we clash against one another, each believing that they have the one true god.

By saying this, I am not putting forth the usual message of tolerance. Instead, I am speaking of the ideal development of human society, hence the progressive reduction of all rigid categories that lead to opposition, including those of property, blood, family, along with the excesses of absolutism. The truth that shall set us free is true precisely because it frees us. If it does not free us, we ought to throw it away. Hence I refuse to admit that this (weak thought, with everything it means) is only a specious kind of preaching (as, in part, it is—I'm after all an interpreter) tolerance. It is much more than that, as a future project that contributes to the progressive elimination of walls (e.g., wall [46] of Berlin, natural laws configured as a wall that limits the freedom of individuals, the self-interested law of corporations that erects a wall between its success and the social good).

By recovering this message of charity, it allows for the lightening of the dogmatic burden and a new spirit of ecumenism to fill the church. Of course, this is also the message of hermeneutics, of Gadamer, and of so much of contemporary philosophy—all of which have come to be reasonably well accepted. Now it is time for Christianity to realize this nonreligious destiny, which is its own.

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Vattimo, Gianni. "Toward a Nonreligious Christianity." In *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey Robbins. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty has explained very well this issue by showing that it is the linguistic turn that has led us away not only from epistemology but also from traditional metaphysics because we never understand anything except under a description, and there are no privileged descriptions. We should interpret the phrase *understanding an object* as a slightly misleading way of describing our ability to connect old descriptions with new. "Being That Can Be Understood is Language," in *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Bruce Krajewski (University of California Press, 2004), 21-29.

<sup>3</sup> I have analyzed this problem in my *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> There are some very interesting books on the origin of interpretation available now as Kathy Eden, *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997);

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Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Gayle L. Ormiston, and Alan D. Schrift, eds. *Transfiguring the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990); and *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti (Indiana University Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Benedetto Croce, "Why We Cannot Help Calling Ourselves Christians" (1942) in *My Philosophy*, trans. E. F. Carritt (New York: Collier, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> Editor's note: By charity, the author does not mean simply the act of almsgiving or of helping the poor. The actual word he uses is that of *caritas*, which has a broader meaning than that of charity alone. It refers to grace and love or the generosity of spirit and the act of self-giving upon which genuine charity is properly founded.

<sup>9</sup> Giovanni Pascoli (1855-1912) was an Italian poet and classical scholar. He was the longtime chair of literature at the University of Bologna. He is best remembered for his experimental poetry, which incorporated his extensive knowledge of classical antiquity. He wrote in both Italian and Latin and also translated English poetry.