



Secularisation and Kenosis in Gianni Vattimo's *Kehre*

Paolo Diego Bubbio¹ 

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Abstract

The article delves into two closely intertwined notions that have increasingly taken centre stage in Gianni Vattimo's thought since the mid-eighties: secularisation and kenosis. The significance of these themes in Vattimo's late work is such that, it is argued, it amounts to an actual *Kehre*, or turn. However, akin to Heidegger, Vattimo's *Kehre* is not a radical break but a shift in research and reflection towards themes that, although already present in his philosophy, have assumed more distinctly religious nuances and have progressively developed up to the point where they have formed an organic perspective. The article traces this development, commencing with the notion of secularisation to then explore its interweaving with themes of emancipation and the violence of metaphysics. It concludes with a reflection on the central role of kenosis and its significance in Vattimo's thought.

Keywords Vattimo · Secularisation · *Kenosis* · Emancipation · Violence of Metaphysics

For Gianni, in memoriam.

Gianni Vattimo's philosophy is commonly associated with the term "weak thought". This perspective primarily advocates for philosophical anti-foundationalism and proposes the rejection of metaphysics and a reinterpretation of truth as the opening of horizons. Vattimo's thought has its roots in the philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer. From Nietzsche, Vattimo adopts (and endorses) the assertion that "there are no facts, only interpretations" (Nietzsche, 1988: 7[60] 12.315), implying that nobody can legitimately claim to hold an unquestionable truth. From Heidegger, Vattimo takes the idea that Being cannot be identified with objective presence, leading Vattimo to develop the idea of a "post-metaphysical philosophy" capable of thinking the event of Being "in terms of an indefinite type of ongoing subtraction, a weakening, a taking-leave, or long farewell" (Vattimo, 2010b: 84).

✉ Paolo Diego Bubbio
paolodiego.bubbio@unito.it

¹ Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences, University of Turin, Turin, Italy

Drawing from Gadamer, Vattimo embraces the notion that “Being, which can be understood, is language [*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*]” (Gadamer, 2004: 470).¹ In interpreting Gadamer’s claim, Vattimo carefully distinguishes his position from radical relativism on one hand and from the (still metaphysical) temptation to affirm the existence of a “Being in itself” beyond linguistic comprehension (Vattimo, 1983: 14; 2010a: 57; see Harris, 2016: 109).

Over the span of six decades, Vattimo has steadfastly adhered to these fundamental “impulses” (referring to them as “principles” would unjustly overlook his fundamentally anti-metaphysical stance). Nevertheless, certain facets of his thought have shifted over time, with some receding into the background, others gaining prominence, and many undergoing more or less significant transformations. This article aims to concentrate on two closely intertwined notions that have become increasingly central in Vattimo’s thinking since the mid-1980s: the notions of *secularization* and *kenosis*. The significance that these themes have assumed in Vattimo’s recent body of work is such that, I believe, one could speak of a true “Kehre”. As in the case of Heidegger, this turn is not a radical discontinuity, but a redirection of research and reflection toward themes that, though already present in Vattimo’s philosophy, acquired more distinctively *religious* dimensions, gradually forming a coherent perspective. The intention here is to trace this development, beginning with the notion of secularization, then exploring its interconnection with themes of *emancipation* and the violence of metaphysics, and ultimately emphasising the central role of kenosis in Vattimo’s thought.

Vattimo’s initial theoretical engagement with the notion of secularization is found in *The End of Modernity* (Vattimo, 1988 [1985]; hereafter, *EM*). Drawing inspiration from the social theorist Arnold Gehlen, Vattimo conceives of modernity as the era characterized by the “abandonment of the sacred vision of existence”, indicating the process of secularization. The key aspect of this transition lies in substituting a transcendent “paradise” as the telos with “the new as the fundamental value” (*EM*, 102), namely progress. However, “by depriving progress of a final destination, secularization dissolves the very notion of progress itself” (*EM*, 9). Yet, this situation does not merely express a “dissolution”, but also a “positive opportunity”, insofar as it “enables us to distance ourselves from the mechanism of modernity” (*EM*, 105). Vattimo links this positive direction to Heidegger’s notion of “*Verwindung*”, signifying a going-beyond that does not avoid or leave behind what is surpassed but instead is its *acceptance, distortion, and over-coming*. In *The End of Modernity*, a pivotal passage connects the notion of secularization with emancipation, laying the groundwork for a philosophical trajectory that becomes central in Vattimo’s subsequent works. Vattimo writes: “The history which we recollect has itself the structure of the *Verwindung*, of recollection and distortion”. While this might seem like a generalization, Vattimo argues that it ceases to be so when we “translate *Verwindung* into a term

¹ The English translation has been modified to retain the commas from the German (which needs them because of grammatical convention). In various writings, including his Italian translation of *Truth and Method*, Vattimo retains the commas from the German, even though a translation into Italian would not require them (the same applies to the cited English translation, which, in fact, omits the commas).

which is much more familiar to the historians of Western civilization, namely the term secularization". For thinkers such as Max Weber and René Girard, the term "secularization/*Verwindung*" describes "a course of events in which emancipation is reached only by means of a radical transformation and distortion of its very contents" (EM, 180). Thus, in this work, we discern the embryonic elements that will evolve in Vattimo's subsequent reflections on secularization and kenosis, namely: history unfolding by interpreting itself; secularization as self-emptying; and emancipation in its triple sense — philosophical, political, and religious.

Two essays published in subsequent years solidify this trajectory in Vattimo's thought. In "Filosofia '86" (Vattimo, 1987), secularization is defined as the consumption of the sacred, and thus as a legitimizing aspect of a weak ontology. In this definition, one can already discern the significant influence exerted on Vattimo by the work of René Girard. Reflecting retrospectively on this process in his autobiography, Vattimo notes: "It is [Girard] who re-Christianized me (albeit in my own way), it is with him that I began to think that it might be possible to bind weakening, secularization, and Christianity closely together" (Vattimo, 2009a [hereafter NBG], 150). However, the text that, in my view, properly marks Vattimo's *Kehre* is an essay from 1992 titled "History of Salvation, History of Interpretation" (Vattimo, 2002 [hereafter AC], 57–68). In this text, in which the influence of the reading of Girard's work can be noted (though Girard is not explicitly mentioned), Vattimo reinterprets the history of interpretation through a Christian lens: "the history of salvation brings about the history of interpretation; but simultaneously: the history of salvation happens or gives itself only as the history of interpretation" (AC, 58; translation altered). Just as not every interpretation is valid, so not every secularization "is good and positive": "it must be valid for a community of interpreters", which means that "the only limit of secularization is love, that is, the possibility of communicating with a community of interpreters" (AC, 67). In line with a philosophical tradition that dates back to Kant's Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, Christ is considered the archetype of this love. "As an event both salvific and hermeneutical", Jesus' incarnation – "the kenosis, the self-lowering of God" – is, first and foremost, "an archetypal occurrence of secularization" (AC, 67). Despite this, salvation awaits "a further fulfillment", and the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth bestowed upon the faithful at Pentecost, has been precisely assigned "the task of assisting them in this further hermeneutical project" (AC, 59–60). Simultaneously, secularization represents "the weakening of the sense of reality brought about by science" (AC, 78) as well as the historical completion of love, or caritas. Thus, Vattimo also reinterprets Christianity through a hermeneutical lens. This "hermeneuticization" of Christianity aims to elucidate its intrinsic essence by placing kenosis at the centre. This process reaches its culmination and "systematization" (even though this term might only partially apply to a thinker like Vattimo, who inherently resists any totalizing systematization) in the 1996 book *Belief*.

Belief (Vattimo, 1999 [1996], hereafter BE) is characterised by the identification of secularization with the history of Christianity, which stems from the connection between the history of salvation and the history of interpretation already outlined in his 1992 essay (AC, 57–68). According to Vattimo, there is no contradiction between the return of (non-metaphysical) religion and Weber's interpretation

of secularization as “desacralizing interpretation of the biblical message” (BE, 41). Secularization, in this sense, becomes the desacralisation and demythologization of Christianity: what remains once this process is completed, or rather, increasingly emerges as the process unfolds, is the notion of charity (love as *caritas*). Thus, secularization is deemed “the constitutive trait of an authentic religious experience” (BE, 21) and “a positive effect of Jesus’ teaching” (BE, 41). However, the notion of secularization, now emerging as a realization of authentic Christianity, does not lose its *Verwindung* characteristic for Vattimo. It remains an internal transformation and distortion that leads to emancipation from metaphysics. Modern atheistic rationalism tends to assume two forms: “belief in the exclusive truth of the experimental natural sciences, and faith in history’s progress towards the full emancipation of humanity from any transcendent authority” (BE, 28). Heidegger provides a third alternative: the social transformations that seem to threaten modern subjectivity are possible “chances of emancipation from metaphysics” (BE, 51–2). In other words, the loss of the metaphysical qualities of the subject allows for the consideration of emancipation as the recognition “that Being is event”. This recognition enables to “enter actively into history, instead of passively contemplating its necessary laws” (BE, 78). Hence, secularization holds profound political implications (BE, 81). In this sense, secularization can be viewed as the pre-eminent case of the more general process of the weakening of metaphysical structures. However, Vattimo reiterates that the term “secularization” remains central because it underscores “the religious sense” of this process (BE, 42). Vattimo’s “discovery” of secularization as “the sense of the history of salvation” is not a metaphysical statement, but an *interpretation*. Yet, he adds that such interpretation “appears (the most) reasonable and the strongest precisely from our point of view in late modernity” (BE, 69). Secularisation is “the very essence of Christianity” (BE, 50) and “an indefinite drift limited only by the principle of charity” (BE, 66); or, in other words, “the way in which kenosis, having begun with the incarnation of Christ [...] continues to realize itself more and more clearly by furthering the education of mankind concerning the over-coming of originary violent essence to the sacred and to social life itself” (BE, 48).

The notion of kenosis in Vattimo’s thought is intricately linked to his conception of secularization. In the 1980s, Vattimo started to draw parallels between the Christian notion of kenosis and philosophical nihilism (BE, 8). This “nihilistic” rediscovery of Christianity, as mentioned earlier, was catalysed for Vattimo by his engagement with the works of René Girard (1987), particularly *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. According to Girard, the sacrifice of Christ is not the satisfaction of a jealous God’s need for justice as retribution for Adam’s sin, but rather the unmasking of the violence inherent in sacrificial religion (see BE, 36–7). Vattimo embraces Girard’s lesson, acknowledging that “if the natural sacred is that violent mechanism that Jesus came to unveil and undermine, it is possible that secularization [...] is precisely a positive effect of Jesus’ teaching, and not a way of moving away from it. It may be that Voltaire himself is a positive effect of the Christianization of mankind, and not a blasphemous enemy of Christ” (BE, 41). However, Vattimo moves beyond Girard’s perspective on the death of Christ as the demystification of the violence of sacrificial religion, shifting his focus to the incarnation in terms of kenotic sacrifice. An intervention by Vattimo in a dialogue with Girard,

though ten years after the publication of *Belief*, illustrates this point well: “From René Girard”, Vattimo claims, “I took the idea that God can only be a relativist – not the easiest view to defend, I know – because the desacralizing thrust of Christianity (the extreme point of which is the Pauline kenosis, in other words the incarnation and humiliation) seems to me fundamentally to point toward the idea that God is not the content of a true proposition but is actually someone incarnate in Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is an example of charity” (Vattimo & Girard, 2010, 48).

Kenotic sacrifice, as understood by Vattimo, entails charity viewed through the lens of kenosis, that is, the abandonment or relinquishment for the sake of the other. It also holds an epistemological significance, insofar as the openness to the viewpoint of the other forms the foundation of genuine hermeneutic experience. Kenotic sacrifice further signifies the “dissolution” or the “weakening of strong structures” (BE, 52). Vattimo explains: “Seen in these terms, the weakening of Being as its sole form of manifesting itself beyond metaphysical oblivion, is an analogon of the dissolution of the violence of the sacred, which, for Girard, is the meaning of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures” (Vattimo, 2010b, 85).² In this light, kenosis emerges as the most suitable term to associate the thought of Girard and that of Heidegger. It is in this sense that one can discern a “sacrificial-kenotic spirit in the Heidegger who aims at the overcoming of metaphysics” (Vattimo, 2015, 432). For Vattimo, the kenotic moment, for both Girard and Heidegger, lies in the self-exhaustion of metaphysical and religious violence. What appears to be absent in Girard’s perspective (and, one can legitimately argue, in Heidegger’s as well) is the notion of *grace*, namely, salvation intrinsically linked to the incarnation of Jesus Christ.³ In other words, Vattimo’s viewpoint diverges from Girard’s in the sense that for Vattimo, salvation is not primarily a matter of making a conscious choice (between sacrificial violence and love), but a gradual, kenotic reduction of the violence of the sacred. Secularization, understood as weakening, thus emerges as a “fuller realization” of the truth of Christianity, which is “the kenosis, the abasement of God, which undermines the ‘natural’ features of divinity” (BE, 47). Therefore, kenosis serves as the model for charity, love, and openness to the other.

The intertwining of secularization, emancipation, weakening, with kenosis at its core as a model, finds its culmination in *Belief*, maintains a prominent role throughout Vattimo’s subsequent philosophical exploration, and becomes particularly significant in *After Christianity*, published in 2002, which gathers essays from the preceding decade, some already published elsewhere (such as the aforementioned “History of Salvation, History of Interpretation”), and others unpublished. In the more recent essays, the identification of the notion of emancipation, understood as the weakening of metaphysical structures, with kenosis is even more emphatic. A philosophical

² Originally, Vattimo wrote this essay in the form of a presentation delivered during the conference held to celebrate Girard’s retirement in May 1996. Subsequently, it was published in Dieckmann (1999), and later included in Vattimo and Girard (2010).

³ “What about the notion of grace, of the salvation that is inherently related to the incarnation of Jesus Christ?” (Vattimo, 2010b, 86). The English translation faithfully reproduces the typed text of Vattimo’s intervention (of which I possess a copy, given to me by Gianni Vattimo in 1996), with the exception of “inherently” which is replaced in the typed script by “decisively”.

genealogy of the notion of emancipation is traced back to its origins in the thoughts of Hegel and Dilthey (AC, 91). However, it is important to recall that emancipation is achieved through that transformation and distortion (*Verwindung*) that is secularization, and that secularization, in its broadest sense, “comprises all the forms of dissolution of the sacred characteristic of the modern process of civilization” (AC, 24). However, given that secularization is the way in which “the weakening of Being realizes itself as the *kenosis* of God, which is the kernel of the history of salvation”, it follows – once again – that secularization is not the abandonment of Christianity but its fullest realization.⁴ Starting from here, in *After Christianity*, Vattimo traces “the implications of the idea of secularization as a constitutive aspect of the history of Being, and therefore of the history of salvation, for our way of living the return of religion” (AC, 25).⁵ The main consequence is that if one accepts Girard’s assertion that the free sacrifice of Jesus is not inspired by the “victim-based logic”, then one must “take seriously the idea that it demands to be understood as kenotic salvation” – *as* kenosis and not *through* kenosis: “kenosis is not a means of ransom but ransom itself” (AC, 120). As mentioned earlier, the centrality of kenosis is both ethical and epistemological. Traditionally, the epistemic ideal of philosophy has been equated with the “God’s eye-view”, a metaphor that, notably stripped of religious connotations, is still used in contemporary analytic metaphysics: a “Spinozian” sense of truth that ends up “identifying the blessed life with the perfect knowledge of geometry” (AC, 104). Vattimo rhetorically asks whether it was for this purpose that Christ incarnated and sacrificed Himself on the cross. The implicit answer to this question is, indeed, negative. Vattimo fundamentally regards Christ’s incarnation as an act of liberation, even in the sense of emancipating philosophy from metaphysics. In other words, truth and Gospel charity cannot be held apart. Consequently, truth assumes the form of an “accord among interpreters” (NBG, 59). It is primarily because of this conception of truth that Vattimo characterizes himself as a “watered-down Hegelian” (NBG, 157). In this sense, “emancipation actually consists in pursuing secularization” conceived as the process of desacralization, which is also the transformation from the natural to the spiritual, already addressed by Hegel (Vattimo, 2007, 40); emancipation lies “in taking secularization further, in the sense of grasping better and better the spiritual sense of Scripture” (Vattimo, 2011, 75). Emancipation thus acquires a meaning that is simultaneously epistemological, ethical-moral, and political. It is “the realm within which freedom is effectively possible” (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 41); as such, “emancipation means openness, transformation, and projected interpretation instead of what already is” (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011, 41, 94; cf. Vattimo, 2016a, 152): interpretation as a project that replaces the acceptance of the *status quo*. This is, therefore, the task of hermeneutics as a philosophy of praxis – a philosophy of kenotic praxis, cantered on sacrifice as substructions, withdrawal,

⁴ This is the main thesis of the essay “The God Who Is Dead” (AC, 11-24). Originally, this essay was presented as a lecture at the “Casa Italiana” of Columbia University in New York in 1996 (it is the first of the three “New York lectures” [*lezioni newyorkesi*]).

⁵ This is the topic of the essay “The Teachings of Joachim of Fiore” (AC, 25–40), which is the second of the “New York lectures”.

free negation, “as when Christ speaks of gaining one’s soul by losing it”; a privileging of the nothings and nobodies” (“τὰ ἀγενῆ τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τὰ ἐξουθενημένα”, “τὰ μὴ ὄντα”, I Cor 1:28), the “least of these” (Mt 25:40) (Vattimo, 2016b, 148).

The growing attention that Vattimo dedicated to these themes in the last two decades (the interplay of nihilism, overcoming of metaphysics, emancipation, rejection of violent sacredness, secularization, and kenosis) has not gone unnoticed, sparking analyses and attempts at further development. A potentially problematic issue, extensively discussed by critics, concerns how the notion of kenosis in Vattimo’s thought should be understood. According to Sciglitano (2013), divine kenotic sacrifice is for Vattimo an “event” in the history of the withdrawal of Being. According to Harris (2014), for Vattimo the divine kenotic sacrifice does not refer to an action in the life of God. This seems to find explicit confirmation where Vattimo (2009b, 4) warns against the danger of transforming kenosis into a form of metaphysical theology. For Guarino (2009) too, who advocates for an emancipatory theology embracing nihilism, the kenosis referred to by Vattimo should be understood “not as an actual historical event” but “as a metaphor or a theological ‘cipher’”: kenosis is “the outpouring and diffusion of the divine into the human” and “becomes *the very model for secularization*”. Ultimately, however, even kenosis “must be immolated on the altar of ‘secularizing thought’” and must “commit suicide” as a historical concept (Guarino, 2009, 99–100).

In *Sacrifice in the Post-Kantian Tradition* (Bubbio, 2014), I argued that post-Kantian philosophy, from its inception to its contemporary hermeneutic developments, is fundamentally characterized by a kenotic approach. As a hermeneutical thinker, Vattimo is the heir to a long tradition that, as demonstrated by his mentor Luigi Pareyson, traces its roots to German Idealism. Therefore, Vattimo’s emphasis on kenosis can be seen as a direct consequence and rediscovery of the fundamental kenotic character of that tradition. For Vattimo, hermeneutics is the philosophical practice that promotes a perspectival view modelled on kenosis. In his review of the book, Vattimo (2015) concurred that the idea of kenotic sacrifice is not only “functional in providing a coherent and productive point of view on contemporary thought” (Vattimo, 2015, 432), but also an indication of “what is alive [...] in the philosophy of today”, namely, the two elements I identified as constitutive of the (post-)Kantian legacy: “perspectivist epistemology” and “subtractive ethics – or, let us say it without hesitation, *kenotic ethics*” (Vattimo, 2015, 434). In addition to Vattimo’s words, I feel the need to provide clarification and suggest a potential direction for further development.

Vattimo identifies perspectivist epistemology as one of the two elements that are vibrant in today’s philosophy. He has sometimes been accused of being a relativist. However, Vattimo has never claimed that all interpretations are equally valid. In a dialogue with Girard on the topic of relativism, Vattimo stated:

We do not say that we reach agreement when we have discovered the truth, we say we have discovered the truth when we reach agreement. It is still possible to speak of truth [...], but only because we have realized *caritas* through agreement. In the realm of opinions, in the realm of value

choices, *caritas* becomes the truth when it is shared. (Vattimo & Girard, 2010, 51, translation altered).

Caritas “takes the place of truth” (Vattimo, 2011, 77): for Vattimo, hermeneutic perspectivism, before holding an epistemological value, carries ethical significance. This implies that I must contextualize my point of view to consider the perspectives of others. If no one has access to “objective” truth, then I must necessarily listen to the opinions of others. For Vattimo, the only normative source is *caritas*, which is based on mutual recognition and is chosen in the name of the primacy of ethics. In light of this priority of the practical over the theoretical, Vattimo’s reluctance to provide a clear and conceptual definition of kenosis becomes even more understandable, as does the ensuing debate mentioned earlier. On the other hand, contemporary philosophical hermeneutics has often emphasized the symbolic aspect of sacrifice (think of Ricoeur, for example) while tending to neglect its conceptual, normative, and regulatory aspect. This has occurred due to a weakening, typical of modernity, of the very notion of normativity. The Spinozian meaning of truth mentioned by Vattimo aligns, in traditional metaphysics, with the source of normativity, and its weakening has ultimately deprived symbols of their normative and regulatory aspects. This underlies the pervasive misunderstanding of sacrifice in contemporary culture. It is difficult to deal with a symbol that seems to have no other meaning than *being a symbol*, a sacrifice stripped of any conceptual referent. To what extent can kenosis be philosophically considered without turning it into an empty symbol, an abstract reconstruction, or even a fiction?

Perhaps the answer lies precisely in that notion of *Verwindung* from which we started. Instead of regarding concepts with suspicion, contemporary hermeneutics could subject them to a process of distortion and overcoming. To do so, hermeneutics must return to its origins, to nineteenth-century post-Kantian thought. The relationship between symbols and concepts in connection with the issue of normativity is a theme that reappears constantly after Kant, following the weakening of the very notion of truth as a source of normativity, and plays a prominent role in Hegelian idealism. As mentioned, Vattimo defines himself as a “watered-down Hegelian”, and one may wonder whether this self-definition is all the more accurate the more the role of symbols in Hegelian philosophy is considered. After all, one of the reasons Hegel defines Christianity as the “consummate [*vollendet*] religion” is the centrality of the incarnation.⁶ It is the recognition of our constitutive finitude that, in modernity, leads to the crisis of metaphysical normativity and, subsequently, scepticism and relativism. However, since in Christianity God *Godself* is affected by finitude – and this constitutes the proper sense of kenosis as the self-emptying of the divine Logos introduced by St. Paul in the Letter to the Philippians (Phil 2:7) – Christian symbolism allows for the expression of a philosophy that undermines the normative foundations upon which relativism itself is based (see Redding, 2007, 30): a genuinely post-metaphysical, perspectivist philosophy that accomplishes a further *Verwindung* by reclaiming kenosis not only symbolically but also conceptually. I

⁶ On this point, see Bubbio and Vattimo (2021).

believe this is one of the most intriguing prospects that Vattimo's late philosophy has opened.

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