GIANNI VATTIMO'S CONCEPT OF RELIGION

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Introduction

Secularisation is a social process gradually reducing the influence of the Christian religion on social institutions and the public sphere in the West. Over the last decades, it has shaped various modes of thought about how people view the world and their place within it. In the last few decades, there are three principal philosophical traditions (all of which rose to prominence during the last two centuries) that have enabled so-called "postmodern thinkers" to propose various projects that seek to reconcile Christianity with their philosophical ideas. Those currents are nihilism, hermeneutics, and postmodernism. In the view of several postmodern authors, their proposals did not result in atheism but rather provided a possibility of putting forward a new, secularised version of religion[2]. Gianni Vattimo is one of the thinkers

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[2]   This attempt can be seen on both philosophical and theological grounds. Philosophers worth mentioning here are: J. Derrida, *Circonfession*, trans. G. Bennington, J. Derrida, Paris 1993; J.D. Caputo, *The weakness of God. A Theology of the Event*, Bloomington 2006, J.L. Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. B. Bergo, G. Malenfant, M.B. Smith, New York 2008, E. Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis, Pittsburgh 1969. A significant philosophical volume

promoting a new approach to the Christian religion. Various interpreters of his works have described his nihilistic approach as *weak Christianity* or *Christianity in the weak version* because it is built on the foundation given by Vattimo's most famous concept of *weak thought* (*pensiero debole*). The elaboration of this concept made him one of the most broadly influential European postmodern philosophers of the late 20th century.

Vattimo began his investigation on religious matters in the 1990s, firstly as a result of the death of his loved ones[3], and secondly because of the ever-growing involvement of Christian groups (particulary of the Catholic Church) in bioethical debates and discussions on ecology[4]. Having been prompted by these factors, he proposed a modification of traditional Christianity in its message and meaning of theological categories. He writes that *postmodern nihilism is the up-to-date form of Christianity. Therefore weak thought is the only Christian philosophy on the market*. […] *Weak thought is also the only thinkable Christian philosophy*[5]. This novel, separated from the Church structure's view of Christianity is the main topic of Vattimo's several works since 1996 when his first book on Christianity entitled *Belief* (*Credere di credere*) was published.

In this article, I will seek to reconstruct Vattimo's project of nihilistic Christianity using the classical scheme of the elements of religion (origin, essence, functions, and goals) and their critical analysis. The research hypothesis is that it is impossible to reconcile Vattimo's postulate with Christianity in its classical form, as well as it is inadequate to use the term *religion* to characterise the project of nihilistic Christianity proposed by the Italian philosopher. Just like his concept of philosophy seems to be subordinated to a predetermined goal, so weak Christianity also seems to be a project aiming primarily at weakening the ethical principles which, in the form of a code of norms – the Decalogue, bind believers of traditional Christianity. In order to understand better the idea of nihilistic Christianity, some general elements of Vattimo's concept of philosophy are presented in part one of the article,

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dealing with the issue of religion in contemporary society in postmodern perspective is a joint work: J. Derrida, G. Vattimo, *Religion*, trans. D. Webb, Cambridge 1998.

[3]   G. Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. L. D'Isanto, Stanford 1999, 22.

[4]   Ibidem, 25.

[5]   G. Vattimo, P. Paterlini, *Not Being God. A Collaborative Autobiography*, trans. W. McCuaig, New York 2009, 152.

followed by a section explicating the essential elements of Christianity as understood by the Italian philosopher. Finally, the other three elements characteristic of religion – its origin, functions, and goals – are reconstructed and elaborated from Vattimo's works.

Elements of Gianni Vattimo's concept of philosophy

A correct understanding of the philosophical theory Vattimo has been proposing throughout his long academic activity is necessary in order to comprehend what he proposes to the readers as the true meaning of Christianity. Vattimo's philosophical program in an original and coherent view combining nihilism and hermeneutics (understood as philosophy of interpretation), with an addition of the *ontological difference* between beings (entities) and Being proposed by Heidegger[6].

a. The end of metaphysics

Vattimo affirms the Heideggerian theory of the end of metaphysics. He does not reject thinking in accord with metaphysical categories but speaks of its predicament linked with the crisis of humanism. Both fields share one essence, which for a long time had remained undiscovered, and at the moment of its discovery, the crisis in both fields began[7]. The Italian philosopher postulates to transcend pre-Nietzschean metaphysics in order to create a philosophy understood as hermeneutics and to reduce metaphysics as the theory of being to *ontology of actuality*. The fact of nihilism and its leading influence on contemporary thought should be taken as the starting point.

Vattimo sees metaphysics as an example of strong thought (*pensiero forte*). This type of deliberation is characterised by a tendency to perceive the world in aspects of truth and realism. Strong thought may be considered from ontological and epistemological perspectives. The former form of strong thought has been present in the whole history of Western thought – commencing

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[6]   A. Zawadzki, *Literatura a myśl słaba*, Kraków 2009, 69.
[7]   M. Potępa, *Nihilizm i hermeneutyka w filozofii G. Vattimo*, in: *Uniwersalny wymiar hermeneutyki*, ed. A. Przyłębski, Poznań 1997, 94.

with the appearance of Ancient Greek philosophy and then continuing through Descartes and into certain modern philosophical currents including those championed by Hegel or Marx, both of whom proposed novel yet still ontological descriptions of the foundations for any further philosophical deliberation. Epistemological seeking for truth has been focused more on perceiving true cognition. Vattimo does not agree with either epistemological or ontological forms of truth. He believes that metaphysical thinking must be abandoned because of the two turning points in the history of thought – the Nietzschean announcement of God's death and the Heideggerian theory of the end of metaphysics.

Vattimo's approach to nihilism is highly affirmative. At its very beginning, nihilism provides man with the lack of any ultimate foundation for metaphysical and epistemic objectivity that is capable of objective claims[8]. Until Nietzsche, God was one of the ordering values, being himself the highest value and the meaning of the existence of everything. With the solemn announcement of God's death, the ultimate goal of history and the ultimate truth lost their meaning. On the other hand, other values that once appeared to be significant lost their place in the hierarchy. At that moment, nothingness appeared in the background of the whole world. Vattimo does not accept a negative approach regarding that event. He wants to look at the ongoing process of nihilism from the point of view of a *fulfilled nihilist* to show that nihilism is not decadence but the only chance for a man of this day and age[9].

The Italian philosopher interprets Heidegger's thought within the key of nihilism. He endorses the idea of seeing the history of metaphysics as the history of Being. To him, the current moment of the history of Being is the age of hermeneutics which has been the universal method of philosophical mainstream since the 1980s[10]. Since then, thinkers have been participating in the new quality of the development of human thought[11].

Vattimo emphasises that the attitude of a contemporary philosopher towards metaphysics cannot be merely its rejection. Such an approach would create a new metanarrative, and thus would ultimately lead to a vicious

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[8]   G. Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. L. D'Isanto, New York 2002, 4.

[9]   Idem, *La fine della modernità*, Milano 1999, 27.

[10]   Idem, *Hermeneutics as Koine*, „Theory, Culture & Society" 5 (1988), 2-3, 399-408.

[11]   Idem, *La fine della modernità*, 12.

circle in which one strong statement would be replaced by another strong, though a completely different metanarrative[12]. One should look for a solution and categories within which it will be possible to present the history of Being as a process that ultimately leads to the weakening of the strong objectifying structures of reality in our times, but, on the other hand, does not lose or undermine the entire philosophical legacy, although it does no longer exploit it.

The Italian philosopher identifies Being with language. He writes that *Being eventuates in history, in historical languages, in the dialogue among humans, in the human conversation*[13]. If its essence is eventuation, it cannot be characterised as a structure or object. Moreover, its weakening has constantly been happening, and the history of this process is the content of the history of metaphysics. Unlike Heidegger, Vattimo argues that one can analyse Being.

b. The concept of weak thought

The idea of *weak thought* (*pensiero debole)* conceptualised by Vattimo in the 1980s made him recognisable in the philosophical milieu of Western Europe. Weak thought opposes strong thought, characterised primarily by its claim of objectiveness. The conceptualisation of weak thought is an attempt to positively resolve the aporia of nihilism and hermeneutics while affirming both tendencies.

Using German terms proposed earlier by Heidegger, Vattimo describes the relationship between pre-Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean philosophy. He does not think that an attempt of *Überwindung* (overcoming), meaning the complete rejection of metaphysical traditions of the past would be a correct solution. Firstly, it would mean creating a new metanarrative characterised by postulating such a rejection as veritable. Secondly, this attempt would place man beyond history through emancipation from its legacy. It cannot be achieved because there are always contexts that arise as part of polemics or other types of juxtaposition with thinkers of the past[14]. Therefore, a new

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[12]   Idem, *The End of (Hi)story*, „Chicago Review" 35 (1987), 4, 25.
[13]   Vattimo, Paterlini, *Not Being God*, 108.
[14]   G. Giorgio, *L'emancipazione della metafisica tra dialettica ed ermeneutica. Un percorso nel pensiero di Gianni Vattimo*, Roma 2006, 22.

method of thinking about Being is needed. A method that is not metaphysical would not build a strong ontological structure but create within the context of the history of Being, while not being indifferent to its origin, i.e. the philosophical past.

Vattimo's method of constructing weak thought has three characteristics. First, regarding the attitude of turning to the study of the history of metaphysics, Vattimo described this as *Andenken*, meaning *memory* or *remembrance*. In postmodern philosophy, *Andenken* is to take the place of the foundation in classical metaphysics[15]. Messages of the past are to be remembered and preserved. However, they are not characterised by an objective presence. Rather, they have reached our times only as memories or traces[16]. These traces are flashes of Being that happened in the past and are now being affirmed through the realisation of their then opening. *Andenken* requires one to *jump into the "non-ground" (Ab-Grund)*[17]. Thanks to this step, one can understand that such remembering is limited to outlining the recalled image without achieving its representation. Ultimately, remembering cannot cause recovery of Being or its presence but only a remembrance of it[18].

The second characteristic is *Verwindung*, which refers to one's attitude to the past. For Heidegger, what Vattimo affirms is a tension that those who follow hermeneutics encounter. On the one hand, the limitations of the language of metaphysics must be recognised. On the other hand, there is no other language philosophy can use. Therefore, deconstruction and distortion of the existing language are required, while keeping in mind that language

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[15] Zawadzki, *Literatura a myśl słaba*, 108.

[16] Vattimo undoubtedly draws the category of trace from another postmodern philosopher, Jacques Derrida. As part of his deconstruction project, Derrida writes about cultural traces which are the only objects to study. A trace refers to earlier traces, which makes it impossible to point to the origin of the trace unambiguously. A crucial difference between the understanding of the category of trace by both authors is the fact that Derrida limits the possibility of deliberation to language only, while Vattimo seems to understand the concept of trace including also cultural messages separate from the reality of language, though studied as they are described in language. Therefore, this category is used by the Italian philosopher both to describe the legacy of the history of Being, as well as some particular representations such as religion, understood by him as „the trace of the trace".

[17] G. Vattimo, *Le avventure della differenza*, Milano 2001, 146.

[18] Idem, *Dialogo con Nietzsche*, Milano 2000, 271.

cannot describe the essence of beings anymore[19]. Approaching philosophical tradition in the *Verwindung* way, the Italian philosopher notices that metaphysics becomes like *a trace of a disease that has been cured, or a loss that has been got over*[20]. As the main object of *Verwindung*, Vattimo identifies *Ge-Stell*, i.e. *the total organisation of the world through technology* in which metaphysics is fulfilled, and which stands in specific relation to the earlier tradition because it surmounts it[21].

Due to the ambiguity of the term *Verwindung*, Vattimo points out certain aspects that are revealed through its application. The dictionary translation of the word *Verwindung* is *twisting*. In Vattimo's explanation, it is the *recognition of presence, recovery from illness, acceptance of responsibility*[22]. It can also be understood as a *gentler relation of turning to new „purposes"*[23]. The new reading of the philosophical tradition can happen only when one *twists* certain paradigms and existing messages considered by many as facts, which should result in a reformulation of language.

To the two features described above, the Italian philosopher adds a third characteristic often mentioned by commentators of his work. Vattimo's works contain this concept, though he does not speak of it explicitly. This feature is *pietas*. The Latin word reveals a religious overtone. Indeed, the philosopher treats it as a result of the religiosity (in his understanding) of people. Unlike *Verwindung* and *Andenken*, the third quality can be described more easily. Human thought should affirm, accept or even love all the remains of the philosophical messages of metaphysical tradition brought forth to the current times as traces of past manifestations of the history of Being. *Pietas* constitutes the proper relationship between a postmodern thinker and philosophical principles. It consists in not idealising or idolising any of the earlier philosophical currents in history[24].

The concept of weak thought emerges due to the characteristics described above. Weak thought no longer claims the right to necessity or objectivity

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[19] Zawadzki, *Literatura a myśl słaba*, 99.
[20] Vattimo, *La fine della modernità*, 180.
[21] Ibidem, 188.
[22] Ibidem, 48.
[23] R. Rorty, *Being that can be understood in language*, in: *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. B. Krajewski, Berkeley, Los Angeles 2004, 21-29.
[24] F. D'Agostini, *Nihilism in Italy*, „Philosophy Today" 49 (2005), 4, 350.

and abandons any foundation on which it would be constituted as a strong thought. It begins to tell a fable about presence. The Italian philosopher not only postulates affirmation of an anti-foundationalist attitude but also recommends a new, weak nihilistic ontology. In weak thought, there is also a specific epistemic context in which cognition is not related to the direct knowledge of beings. Instead, they are given in various mediating appearances present in the contexts and messages of history, culture, and speech[25].

c. The concept of truth

Vattimo rejects the classical understanding of truth as the conformity of intellect and thing. Nevertheless, he points to conditions in which truth reveals itself, not as the adequation of cognition but as a construct separated from epistemic veracity. At the starting point, the Italian philosopher presents two premises: firstly, truth reveals itself beyond the scientifically positive method; secondly, there is no other way to discover truth than through an act of interpretation[26]. Truth is dialogic and reveals itself as a linguistic issue. *Truth is not exclusively the proposition that describes faithfully from the outside a state of affairs, but rather it is events, responses, and messages that hail from a tradition and, moreover, the interpretation of these messages as well as the coming into being of new messages communicated to other interlocutors*[27].

In the works of the Italian philosopher, one can find three different projects of replacing of the classically understood truth. The first is put forward in the book *La fine della modernità* and takes its origin in the philosophy of Hans Georg Gadamer. In this concept, truth is connected with rhetoric. Gadamer separated truth from methodical verifiability. In his view, language is the primary place of the revelation of Being. Truth is no longer a relation in which an individual who cognises plays the fundamental role but the entire community, within which truth is not perceived as transcending objectivity, but as subject to discussion, negotiation, and arrangements. Despite accepting this theory, Vattimo does not leave it without criticism. He accuses Gadamer's

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[25]   Zawadzki, *Literatura a myśl słaba*, 64.
[26]   G. Vattimo, *Poza interpretacją. Znaczenie hermeneutyki dla filozofii*, trans. K. Kasia, Kraków 2011, 14.
[27]   Idem, *Hermeneutics as Koine*, 405.

interpretation of being conservative and conformist. It also exposes herme-neutics to mere acceptance of the existing state of affairs. At the same time, weak thought cannot agree to the view of truth as a simple embracing of the assumed obviousness from a collective view by an individual[28].

In the second model, truth is based on artistic and aesthetic experience. While Gadamer's proposal was built primarily on detaching truth from extra-cultural and extra-linguistic veracity, this concept inclines towards revealing areas of being that can be presented in artistic creation. Thus, this model ultimately extracts truth from any foundation, even as questionable as communal determination. Truth is turned into an event, the two ends of which are the cognising person and the known object of culture, hidden in various types of representations. Scientific theories become here specific works of art that are not subject to verification in their correspondence with the world. The only condition that must be imposed on them is their internal consistency[29].

The last model of truth can be found in Vattimo's later works (*Belief* and *After Christianity*), in which philosophical themes merge with the emerging concept of weak Christianity. Truth is here entirely detached from the sphere of intellect and connected with the ethical responsibility for one's neighbour. Therefore, it can be expressed only in the attitude of an individual. Although it is not explicitly articulated, one can surmise that such a connection between truth and Christianity was derived from a specific interpretation of Christ's biblical words about the liberating power of truth (*You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free* – John 8:32). Importantly, this conclusion must be determined by the assumption that this liberation is not of eschatologi-cal nature. Rather, it is a release from attitudes defined by imperatives and moving towards the expression of charity in relation to others.

d. The object, goal, and method of philosophy

The object of philosophical deliberation within the hermeneutical project of weak thought is the linguistic reality in which Being manifests itself. Following Gadamer, Vattimo believes that only in language can a dialogue between man

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[28] Idem, *La fine della modernità*, 150-151.
[29] Zawadzki, *Literatura a myśl słaba*, 68.

and history take place[30]. Therefore, language should be understood as the object of philosophy. The aspect of Being investigated in philosophical reflections is its systematic weakening throughout history, called the history of Being or the history of metaphysics. In Vattimo's later writings, the weakening is identified with the process of religious secularisation. In practice, within the broadly understood object, there is a reference to various philosophical views, concepts of traditionally constituted meaning, cultural trends, and sociological processes. The object thus described should be separated as much as possible from the sensual cognition of the external world.

The goal of the hermeneutical philosophy is to gradually lead to the complete abandonment of the category of the world's domineering nature and to stop individuals from claiming beliefs or knowledge about reality, messages of culture, and in particular ethical norms. Only a man liberated from the burden of his own perfection in the area of cognition or the hindrance of imposed patterns of behaviour can become free and use no violence against others. Violence in this context should be understood as any attempt to impose one's opinion on someone else, or to convince another person of one's point of view. The only imperatives to interpret and act should be manifestations of particularly understood charity and mercy.

The method of philosophising is the hermeneutic interpretation of cultural data captured in language. Such interpretation presupposes the rejection of the claim to discover external truths and is limited only to interpreting phenomena. It appears as a language game with two basic rules in relation to modern philosophy, namely the rule of *Verwindung* and *Andenken*. In practice, hermeneutic research consists in changing paradigms, replacing rational postulates and explanations with weak ones, and adapting classical philosophical issues to postmodern reality by modifying the meaning of terms. All these elements find their application in the understanding of Christianity Vattimo articulates in his works.

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[30] G. Borradori, „*Weak Thought" and Postmodernism: The Italian Departure from Deconstruction*, „Social Text" 18 (1987–1988), 45.

The essence of the weak Christianity

The originator of the concept of weak thought, by affirmation of the modern philosophical traditions, makes them part of the Christian system in its postulated nihilistic version. In this way, Vattimo shapes new horizons of belief regarding the essential elements of religion. These new horizons cause new understandings of the content of faith and its description.

a. The concept of God

Firstly, the issue of theism must be examined, as the classical notion of the word *religion* describes it as a relationship between a human person and Transcendence (God or deity)[31]. Vattimo affirms *God's death* pronounced by Friedrich Nietzsche a century earlier. That declaration should not be understood as an existential or metaphysical statement. The death of God does not mean God does not exist. Rather, the thesis indicates a loss of the ultimate foundation typical to metaphysical thinking – the foundation of the ultimate truth, the order of the world, the exemplar of values, and the guarantor of every cognitional and moral objectivity. As much as the statement that *God is dead* can be expressed in Vattimo's philosophical theory, *God does not exist* would not be correct because of its metaphysical character[32].

It seems that Vattimo's approach to the existence of God may be classified as agnostic. The greatest difficulty in categorising his position is that, as a postmodernist, he does not recognise the existence of transcendent reality. The object of Vattimo's belief is not the God of metaphysics, the First Mover, the firm foundation of truth and morality. Another factor making classification difficult is the contradiction he often repeats in his texts: *thanks to God, I am an atheist*[33]. The end of metaphysics and God's death, being the same event, were necessary in order to provide people with freedom of be-

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[31] Z.J. Zdybicka, *Religia*, in: *Powszechna encyklopedia filozofii*, vol. 8, ed. A. Maryniarczyk, Lublin 2007, 720.

[32] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 3.

[33] G. Vattimo, R. Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith. A Dialogue*, trans. W. McCuaig, New York 2010, 33.

liefs, especially in the sphere of morals[34]. The impossibility of expressing any ontological statement causes the situation in which the Italian philosopher cannot argue for or against God's existence, so he speaks only of the weakening of the concept of Divinity.

Vattimo accepts the existence of the *God of the Bible*[35]. People should love God and their neighbour because *where there is love, there is also God*[36]. Vattimo contrasts two biblical images of God – the God of the Old Testament, full of anger and violence, and the God pronounced by Jesus Christ who does not impose on people any rules violating their freedom anymore. In fact, Jesus was to reject the image of God who establishes prohibitions and precepts while telling his Apostles that they are his friends, not servants[37]. That crucial moment of change the Italian philosopher calls *kenosis*. The Greek word taken from St Paul describes Christ's *self-emptying* as God by becoming a man. The relationship between God and people ceased to be *strong* and based on dominance because God gave people entirely his power[38]. Vattimo sees God present as a cultural message rooted in human thinking and tradition. One can also identify God as history, in which he is subjected to the historical process of secularisation through *kenosis*. One can argue that the God of Vattimo's texts is a linguistic concept of changeable meaning. If this is the case, the classical notion of religion cannot be applied to this project because Vattimo's God is not an existing transcendence but a cultural construct not having any extratextual existence.

b. The concept of revelation

Gianni Vattimo's understanding of revelation is related to the process of secularisation. This is because he is disinterested in the veracity of doctrine and associates revelation exclusively with the question of salvation[39].

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[34] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 13.
[35] Ibidem, 6.
[36] Idem, *Toward a Nonreligious Christianity*, in: J.D. Caputo, G. Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. J.W. Robbins, New York, 2007, 45.
[37] Vattimo, Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, 40.
[38] S. Zabala, *A Religion without Theists and Atheists*, in: R. Rorty, G. Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. S. Zabala, New York 2005, 3.
[39] Vattimo, *Belief*, 49.

The theoretical foundation of this concept can be found in the historio-sophical theory by Joachim of Fiore. The Cistercian monk living between the 12th and 13th centuries proposed a three-stage, Trinitarian periodisation of history. The Church rejected his theory as heterodox. The first period of history he described as the Age of the Father. At that time, everyone was subjected, uncompromisingly, to the letter of the Law. The Age of the Son brought forth freedom from the Law by Christ's preaching of grace and love. The third period, the Age of the Holy Spirit, anticipated by Joachim, was to be the final liberation of people from the regime of the text of the Bible. Men would run their lives no more according to their bodily needs, but spiritually. In the third period, there would be no need for the institutional Church, and the faithful would become a unified community possessing mystical graces. This period would be characterised by freedom – people would be liberated from being subjected to external religious rules and regulations; *where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom* (1 Cor 3:17)[40].

Vattimo identifies the process of spiritualisation described by the medieval monk as the history of the weakening of Being and, therefore, the history of the weakening of the Christian message. In the Age of the Spirit, he sees the very time we are living in now – the post-metaphysical era, in which people are entirely freed from strong thought, firm moral rules, and ordered schemes of thinking. In the age of nihilism, religiosity is capable of developing charity no longer dependent on truth[41]. In this process, Vattimo sees the history of revelation in which God has been present and reveals himself as incessantly weakening[42].

This also gives the process of revelation of God a more sociological and anthropological dimension. Vattimo affirms René Girard's theory of the scapegoat and *mimesis*. In fact, Girard was one of the major inspirations for Vattimo to take an interest in Christianity[43]. The French anthropologist proposed a theory of the formation of primordial religions. According to his concept, religious practices emerged from how primordial societies dealt with

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[40] F.J. Fortuny Bonet, *¿Crisis o nuevo espiritu? 2: Joaquin de Fiore y su trilogía trinitaria*, "Acta historica et archaeologica aediaevalia" 18 (1997), 256.

[41] G. Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, trans. W. McCuaig, New York 2011, 59.

[42] Idem, *Cristianesimo, nichilismo, kenosis*, „Bollettino Filosofico" 30 (2015), 184.

[43] Vattimo, Paterlini, *Not Being God*, 149.

the problem of communal tensions. The inclination towards *mimesis* found within primordial societies resulted in hostility and violent fights that could be defused only by choosing an innocent member of the community who became the scapegoat. Hatred and violence in those societies were focused on the person blamed for being responsible for the disorder. After choosing a communal victim, societies were able to re-establish social order. Girard presents the killing of Socrates as an example of such a social mechanism. In this way, primordial religions were generated through the process of sacrifices because scapegoats became divine exemplars as those who were in power to re-established peace. Christ's condemnation, trial, and death also followed this pattern. The difference between that trial and similar situations that follow the aforestated pattern is that Christ knew he would be victimised and killed. By subjecting himself to condemnation, he revealed the violent sacrificial pattern – *the loving message of God is the demonstration of the human source of (original) violence*[44].

Vattimo embraces Girard's idea of the loving demonstration of the violent process by Jesus. If Christ freed humanity from violence through the desacralisation of the sacrificial *sacrum*, Christianity also should gradually desacralize its own message in the continuing process of its revelation. Like Christ revealed and abolished the tradition of offering sacrifices, which resulted in weakening tension between the society and the sacrifice, the historical mission of our times is the dissolution of metaphysical Being[45]. The task of following Christ can be fulfilled, therefore, only through demonstration of what is stable, transcendent, and violates unrestricted human freedom. Those who do not want to accept Christianity in this form are ignorant of its real meaning and still remain in its sacrificial stage[46]. In response to Vattimo's application of the scapegoat to the current situation, Girard points out the former's undue optimism in claiming the elimination of any violence through weakening metaphysical or religious foundations. Indeed, *there will always be situations that will lead to conflict and many of these are unavoidable*[47].

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[44]   E. Meganck, *'Nulla in Mundo Pax Sincera…' Secularisation and violence in Vattimo and Girard*, „International Journal of Philosophy and Theology" 74 (2013), 5, 416.
[45]   Vattimo, *Belief*, 40-41.
[46]   Vattimo, Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, 29.
[47]   Ibidem, 57.

c. Horizontalization of salvation

In the classical understanding of Christianity, the religious dimension of human life has its purpose in a gradual preparation for the moment of salvation in the transcendent reality of the afterlife. Vattimo makes salvation horizontal. Therefore, salvation must be associated with the life *hic et nunc* and earthly human affairs. Human attempts to "practice" Christianity aims to change people's way of thinking in order to create a particular type of man and society. Vattimo often uses the word *salvation* (in Italian: *salvezza*) in his writings, though he never explicitly explains what he understands through this word. Nevertheless, critical analysis of his texts allows one to describe how salvation is understood in the project of nihilistic Christianity.

Firstly, salvation is universal[48]. There is no judgement or verification of those who are good and those who are evil. Everyone is subjected to salvation to the same degree. Salvation must be constant and universal. Otherwise, one would need to accept the existence of a transcendent *metareality*. There are no good or bad people. Everyone is equally called to freedom through the same *caritas* and mercy. Even though the Gospel mentions Christ's words on the Apostle judging the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel, the Vattimo believes that the passage should be read according to *aesthetic*, not juridical, key[49].

Secondly, the history of salvation is closely related to the history of interpretation. The relation between the two is not the same as between salvation and interpretation themselves. Salvation does not come automatically but requires human action, namely the proper interpretation of the biblical text. *Salvation requires understanding the Word of God in Scripture and its correct application to our condition and situation (“subtilitas applicandi”). Furthermore, it is necessary to interpret Scripture without contradicting reason, making use of our faculties to respect thoroughly the Word of God and avoiding the attribution of aberrant meanings to Scripture*[50]. Only interpretation of Holy Scripture, not its normative meaning, may lead one closer to the intended salvific reality. As a result, salvation is a hermeneutic actuality since Christ's coming itself was an interpretation of the Old Testament. Moreover, Christ also interprets

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[48] Vᴀᴛᴛɪᴍᴏ, *After Christianity*, 55.
[49] Ibidem, 55.
[50] Ibidem, 59.

the Law and the Prophets in his addresses to his followers. For this reason, Vattimo may say that the history of salvation continues as the history of interpretation[51]. Through interpretation of the biblical and cultural messages, man participates in the history of salvation and becomes gradually saved. One cannot consider himself a Christian if he does not *profess faith in the inevitability of the certain textual tradition that has been passed down*[52]. According to the Italian philosopher, the weakening of the Christian message is that tradition.

Thirdly, Vattimo associates salvation with emancipation. Through *emancipation* he understands the liberation of a human being from the slavery of superstition and strong thought patterns. The process of emancipation, intuitively comprehended as a social process of non-religious origin, is inscribed into religion in this project. The final stage of such a process is the state of historical and cultural relativism. History possesses the salvific and emancipatory power because it is the history of messages and interpretations; not *discoveries* or *real presence*[53].

Fourthly, salvation as an ongoing process is associated with revelation and the reduction of primordial sacral violence. *Salvation is the historical process through which God calls us time and again to desacralize the violence and dissolve the ultimacy and peremptoriness claimed by objectivist metaphysics*[54]. Through redemption, one is to actively enter into history instead of passively contemplating the eternal and unchangeable laws[55].

Lastly, the salvific power of Christianity should be demonstrated primarily in the liberation of man from the sense of guilt. People should be open and listen to God's and their neighbour's messages. According to Vattimo, the only sin a man may commit is not listening to those messages and not responding or even not reacting to them in life. Mercy is required to forgive that single sin – the sin of neglect[56].

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[51] Ibidem, 61.
[52] Idem, *Toward a Nonreligious Christianity*, 36.
[53] G. Vattimo, *The Trace of the Trace*, in: Derrida, Vattimo, *Religion*, 92-93.
[54] Vattimo, Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, 87.
[55] A. Kobyliński, *O możliwości zbudowania etyki nihilistycznej. Propozycja Gianniego Vattimo*, Warszawa 2014, 176.
[56] G. Vattimo, P. Sequeri, G. Ruggeri, *Interrogazioni sul cristianesimo. Cosa possiamo ancora attenderci dal Vangelo?*, Roma 2000, 96.

d. Affirmation of secularisation

Classical Christianity considers the process of secularisation as a danger to the religiousness of the faithful, as well as a loss for the society abandoning its religious roots. Vattimo presents a different view on the secularisation of society and the desacralisation of the religious sphere. He affirms this process and recognises it as valuable, necessary, and unavoidable. According to him, the Christian message is being fulfilled in its fullness in secularisation. Revelation and salvation, as described above, inevitably lead to secularisation. In fact, they are secularisation itself. Secularisation is a real process to which everyone is subjected. The human response to it should be to allow oneself to be a part of this salvific event liberating from the classical, strong attitude towards reality and religion.

Vattimo's approach to Christianity in contemporary society is inspired by Benedetto Croce's idea of cultural Christianity. In his essay *Perchè non possiamo non dirci "cristiani"* (*Why we cannot not call ourselves "Christians"*)[57], Croce argues that the greatest cultural revolution in history was brought about by Christianity, and the whole cultural heritage of the West is a result of being part of Christian reality. Christianity indicated the real value of heroic actions. Unlike all other revolutions of history, Christianity created a newness affecting primarily human spirituality. It was Christianity that endowed people with a moral consciousness. Despite the progressive shift away from the Christian religion as such, the conviction that human actions have a specific moral value – determined in relation to specific moral principles shaped by Christianity – remains.

Vattimo adopts the understanding of being a Christian as belonging to the culture of Western society. *I am convinced that my fidelity to the Gospel is also (or above all, who knows?) fidelity to a humanistic-cultural-political tradition which is the European tradition; I cannot clearly separate these two realities, as if there were a Christianity outside the West*[58]. The human way of thinking, also in this post-metaphysical period, is shaped by Christianity. Paradoxically, the fact that people have been abandoning religion in the form transmitted by religious tradition is also thoroughly Christian. Also, nihilism as a tradition of

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[57] B. Croce, *Perchè non possiamo non dirci „cristiani"*, „La Critica", 20.11.1942, 289-297.
[58] Vattimo, Sequeri, Ruggeri, *Interrogazioni sul cristianesimo*, 52.

thought inaugurated by the Nietzschean announcement of the death of God is *a truth of Christianity*[59]. Coming to realise the importance of Christianity is necessary in order that people endure in the culture when metanarratives fall, authorities become rejected, the objective truth withers, and the traditional religion is subjected to demythologisation. *Our only chance of human survival rests in the Christian commandment of charity*[60].

The most fundamental aim of secularisation is the *demythologisation* of Christianity, meaning its weakening. The term *demythologisation* was introduced in theology by Rudolf Bultmann. He intended to demythologise the message of the Bible through exegesis that would get rid of all "mythical", i.e. assuming and describing the existence of transcendent reality, elements from the narrative. Vattimo believes that secularisation is a similar process of demythologisation of the culture and the superstitious, metaphysical, and seeking-for-transcendence modes of thinking.

Demythologisation is the *kenosis* of Christian thinking. Vattimo follows the 19th-century Protestant tradition postulating that Christ's self-emptying was his forgoing of all divine attributes. Scholars emphasise two ways one can understand *kenosis* in Vattimo's writings. On the one hand, it may be understood as the fact of God leaving eternity in order to enter into time. Others postulate the priority of the idea that God rejected his position of authority over people in order to become their friend[61]. God secularised himself in *kenosis*[62]. The Christian duty is to follow him – not only in action but also in the way of thinking. Hesitancy in self-weakening by Christians would mean remaining in the situation of violence against others through claiming the possession of objective truths and willingness to spread them. Like God forwent his attributes in the Incarnation, Christians should not be driven by the desire to know anything definitively and veritably. Secularising oneself means, like the second understanding of the *kenosis* of God, to restrain the urge to be a teacher for others, particularly regarding worldviews and morality. *Kenosis* should be read in the key of the Heideggerian ontology in

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[59]   G. Vattimo, *The Age of Interpretation*, in: Rorty, G. Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, 48.
[60]   Ibidem, 54.
[61]   M.E. Harris, *Vattimo, kenosis, and St Paul*, „International Journal of Philosophy and Theology" 75 (2014), 4, 292.
[62]   Giorgio, *L'emancipazione della metafisica*, 265.

which not beings but Being matters. Therefore, *kenosis* is a linguistic event[63], and should be considered a pattern according to which the cultural notion of understanding and cognition deny their features of veracity. Language has to become weak as one can commit violence against others through its usage. Hence, the secularised *truth* of Christianity is the message of weakening that can be achieved thanks to the Christian message of *caritas*. According to Vattimo, charity is the only reality that is not subjected to secularisation. It is also the primary key to the interpretation of the Scripture, and the only and ultimate limit of secularisation[64]. Charity should take the central place in Christianity, and the rest is to be rejected[65]. Christianity is not a religion of doctrine or a code of conduct but a reality in which human goodness becomes transparent.

Through the process of kenotic secularisation, Christianity must become a *religionless Christianity*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the first theologian who conceptualised the idea of the religion understood as a theory bereft of any reference to transcendence. In the version of Christianity proposed by the German theologian, Christ would become the exemplar not only for those who are affiliated with ecclesiastical structures, but also for those outside them. Moreover, the Scripture is to be interpreted in a non-religious way, and the only obligations of the faithful would be prayer and works of righteousness. A Christian is a man living outside of the category of sin and the unnecessary hypothesis of God in its classical understanding as a transcendent being. God of the Bible is weak and suffering[66]. Bonhoeffer did not reject the essential role of the Church as the gathering of those who believe, though he renounced its institutional dimension. Moreover, he affirmed transcendent morality.

There is a difference between Vattimo's and Bonhoeffer's concepts of God. The latter believes in a transcendent God, separate from a human person. On the other hand, the former can only speak of Jesus' immanent presence

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[63] M.E. Harris, *God the Father in Vattimo's Interpretation of Christianity*, „The Heythrop Journal" 54 (2013), 5, 894.

[64] Vattimo, *Belief*, 76; Vattimo, Sequeri, Ruggeri, *Interrogazioni sul cristianesimo*, 60-61.

[65] Vattimo, *Belief*, 77.

[66] Bonhoeffer's concept of the religionless Christianity is presented in: S.N. Williams, „*Bezreligijne chrześcijaństwo" – właściwa droga czy ślepy zaułek?*, „Theologica Wratislaviensia" 5 (2010), 167-183.

in the event of conversation, when a few people are gathered in his name[67]. The Italian philosopher promotes the idea of noninstitutional Christianity suggested by the German theologian, adding that the model of a person attempting to create this kind of Christianity was Voltaire. The French anticlerical thinker is presented as the ideal of fighting for freedom from the violence of the religious system[68].

If so, can one speak of Christianity as a religion? Vattimo seems to be inconsistent in terminology. In fact, the somewhat arbitrary use of terms is characteristic of most postmodern philosophers. Thus, Christianity is a religion in a positive sense as long as it isolates itself from the teaching tradition of one's community in order to experience religion in private. The religion of Christ is unique, according to Vattimo, because it is the basis of secularisation, demythologisation and the gradual disappearance of violence.

e. Nihilistic morality

An indispensable element of religion is that it produces ideals of behaviour and moral codes binding for those who associate with that belief. Vattimo treats morality differently than classical religious groups do. Demythologisation of dogmas and the entire religious message of Christianity includes morality as well. The Italian philosopher sees morality as a requirement built on the strong conclusions of the divine or metaphysical theory and often a literal reading of the Scripture, all of which the author rejects. The core argument and foundation of the principles of behaviour in this nihilistic version of ethics is the principle of mercy – this is the only moral rule. Despite the difference in the meaning of the words *mercy* and *charity*, Vattimo equates them. In this way, *caritas* takes on a new significance of tolerance of plurality[69].

The author of weak thought embodies postulates of creating a *nonviolence ethics*. The idea of reducing social violence originated in Mahatma Gandhi's strategy of fighting for India's independence without causing violence. The Polish movement *Solidarność* was another example of the application of the

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[67]   M.E. Harris, *Vattimo and Ecclesiology*, „The Heythrop Journal" 64 (2022), 4, 666-675.
[68]   Vattimo, *Toward a Nonreligious Christianity*, 37.
[69]   T.G. Guarino, *The Return of Religion in Europe? The Postmodern Christianity of Gianni Vattimo*, „Logos" 14 (2011), 2, 23.

same idea. Protesting without causing violence aimed to show disapproval of the everyday violence in public life at those places and times. As much as the rejection of violence is the common point for both Gandhi and Vattimo, the oppression they oppose differs. The latter warns against the objective concept of reality and metaphysical explanations of the world and laws as culprits of violence. The foundation of the ethics of finitude requires a prohibition of questioning and silencing those who speak authoritatively defending the principles of strong thought[70]. In the nihilistic ethics of mercy, it is undesirable to prohibit someone from expressing his own views publicly. In practice, however, those who believe in metaphysical principles or the traditional teaching of Christianity should not be allowed to commit this kind of *act of violence* against others. Interestingly, one can see how this pattern is present currently in Western society, particularly within the so-called *cancel culture*. Postmodern ethics is not founded on any objective principles cognised and applied in life. Rather, it is a method of clarifying principles through interpersonal dialogue, where people themselves are lawgivers. Therefore, ethics should serve an interpersonal attitude of mercy, and its criterion is the validity of only those rules that help to curtail violence[71].

According to Vattimo, such ethics built entirely on a nihilistic ontology are the only truly Christian ethics. Humans must realise that God is not the one ruling anymore but a friend who calls people to lose their own soul in order to save it[72]. Ethics should be built independently from the Catholic Church because the Church does not make this world a better place. The moral teaching of the Church is devoid of openness to the individual hermeneutics of believers who should rather apply their personal interpretations of the text of the Scripture to their lives, and the only and ultimate criterion of interpretation should be charity. In various texts, the Italian philosopher speaks of several instances when the Catholic Church, in his opinion, breaks the commandment of love of God and neighbour, including the negative opinion on contraception, the exclusion of women from becoming priests, or the approach to homosexuality. He also criticises the literal reading of the Decalogue. In fact, he rejects the Ten Commandments as a collection

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[70] Kobyliński, *O możliwości zbudowania etyki nihilistycznej*, 188.
[71] G. Vattimo, *Nichilismo ed emancipazione. Etica, politica e diritto*, Milano 2003, 52.
[72] Idem, *Belief*, 44.

of norms claiming their objectivity and, as such, being a tool for violating people's freedom. Even in a critical situation, for example when someone thinks about committing suicide or euthanasia, others cannot force the person not to do it but rather accompany and converse, leaving the decision to the person who sees it as a potential option. Vattimo accepts the fact that euthanasia is homicide. However, to protect the unrestricted freedom of every person and show love to them, one cannot prohibit others to act as they wish. Freedom is more important than survival. *Violence is rather an act of imposition on the other and her liberty*[73]. For this reason, Vattimo postulates that Christians should not participate in ethical and bioethical debates because their primary interest should be to show love instead of imposing rules violating the unrestricted freedom of others.

The origin, functions, and goals of religion

After having presented the essence of religion in its weak version proposed by Vattimo, an elaboration of its other elements (origin, functions, and goals) will give a fuller view of his idea. Vattimo does not speak of those elements explicitly, yet they can be found in his texts. Weak Christianity reduces the classical content of this religion to earthly reality and rejects transcendence, replacing it with nihilism. Hence, the essential elements of religion are characterised by their naturalism and sociological approach.

a. The origin of religion

The question of the origin of religion can be understood in twofold ways. On the one hand, it may be a description of the historical process of the formation of religion expressed in cultic ceremonies and other religious practices. This approach allows Vattimo to investigate people's religiosity as historically changeable. On the other hand, one may try to describe the origin of religion in the aspect of the conditions stimulating people to be religious.

Vattimo believes that historically religion originated in a social process described by René Girard in his explanation of how *sacrum* appeared through

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[73]   Vattimo, Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, 45.

mimesis and the scapegoat. According to this theory, religion does not have its source in transcendent reality but rather in sacrificial practices helping defuse social tensions and creating as their side effect first primordial religions. In this perspective, Christianity is unique because its founder – Christ – subjected himself to the scapegoat persecution process in order to demonstrate its real abusive power. Jesus' act began the process of secularisation of *sacrum*, so it had a real influence on societies, though its effects have been appearing gradually ever since.

The Italian philosopher presents the conditions originating the religiousness of people in two dimensions – social and individual. The Girardian theory of *mimesis* is partially a response to the former conditioning. In addition, Vattimo speaks of a return of religion to the public life of current times. He points to the increasing immersion of Western culture in post-modernity and issues caused by technological development. Postmodern society emerged with mass media participation. It made society more complex, chaotic and transparent. To Vattimo, this chaos is positive as it brings forth emancipation[74]. Emancipating liberation happens through traces of religion present in the secularised culture. Religiousness is, therefore, still present in the West through cultural patterns[75]. An example of such a pattern is capitalism developed, according to Max Weber's theory, as a fruit of Calvinism. The return of religion is not caused by any particular sensitivity of people to sacred realities. Instead, it is an expression of tendencies coded in European culture at their encounter with the non-discriminatory philosophical current.

Another factor prompting the return of religion is, in Vattimo's view, postmodern philosophy. This philosophical current caused a rejection of the metanarratives postulating atheism, like positivism, Marxism, or Hegelianism. Weak thought is "more religious" than those theories because it does not go against religion and does not fight with it, even though it presents itself as anticlerical. To Vattimo, religion's return in the weaker version could happen because of the weakening of metaphysical structures, including God's transcendence, being not merely a postulate but a fact that had already happened.

One may express reasonable doubts about God's nature if God cannot be transcendent or be a person, particularly that the emancipation from the

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[74] G. Vattimo, *Społeczeństwo przejrzyste*, trans. M. Kamińska, Wrocław 2016, 18.
[75] Ibidem, 52.

transcendent authority is also typical of atheism. These facts make it disputable to speak of weak Christianity as the true message of this religion. Rather, one can see how Vattimo reduces religion to a sphere of religious experience that is individual and should not be questionable by anyone as long as it does not pass the line of taking metaphysical statements. This is the practical application of the postmodern principle of plurality to religion[76].

On the individual ground, Vattimo describes his own return to religion as a result of traumatic experiences in his life. The death of his loved ones pushed him to reflect on the last things and he found consolation in the Christian message[77]. The other reason for Vattimo being interested in Christian matters was his age which caused him to reflect on the meaning of life in the light of its approaching end. In such a way, religion originates primarily through experiential circumstances of life rather than within an imposed, dogmatic system[78]. In this, it has no bearing on philosophical debate but the sense of human fragility and weakness that makes one sensitive to religious sphere[79]. Both reasons mentioned by Vattimo should be considered as individual factors stimulating one to become religious.

b. Functions of religion

Christianity has been the most crucial background for Western culture and tradition to grow. Vattimo looks at the functions of religion from that angle. A few of these functions can be enumerated.

Firstly, Christianity is culture-forming by nature. The Italian philosopher highlights that the whole Western culture, literature, and art is understandable only in the context of biblical and Christian message. Without knowing it, it would be impossible to comprehend the contexts of literary works or art. One could see only the craftsmanship, but the message would remain hidden. The European culture of the last two millennia has been a fruit of

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[76] Idem, *After Christianity*, 5.

[77] Idem, *Belief*, 22.

[78] M. Humeniuk, *Hermeneutyka słabej myśli Gianniego Vattimo jako inspiracja dla pedagogiki religii*, „Forum Pedagogiczne" 9 (2019), 2, 125.

[79] P. Artemiuk, *„Myśl słaba" Gianniego Vattimo a chrześcijaństwo*, „Studia nad Rodziną" 16 (2012), 1-2, 454.

the interpretation of biblical message[80]. The greatest mistake that could be made is to try to read either the Bible or any other works literally. Biblical message and fruits of culture must be interpreted because they are given to be interpreted. Vattimo goes even further by saying, in accordance with his philosophical assumptions, that there is no good and right interpretation. The only sure thing is that the interpretation based on the literal reading of the text is wrong[81]. Breaking this fundamental principle is the Catholic Church's fundamental error, leading it to authoritarianism. Religion in its weak version is, therefore, the only acceptable postmodern option.

Secondly, religion is characterised by its aesthetic function. Religion creates religious rites related to worship. In fact, worship not related to transcendence remains only a kind of art and a traditional ritual in which people participate without delving into its religious meaning. Such celebrations can be funerals, baptisms, or weddings. Private prayer is also a specific aesthetic reality for Vattimo. In his autobiography, he admits that he says the prayer of Compline every night[82]. He treats it as a soothing encounter with a literary text.

The next function of weak religion is its therapeutic and consolatory nature. Since Vattimo returns to religion due to the loss of his loved ones and his advanced age, he acts in such a way as to satisfy a specific need for consolation. His understanding of the therapeutic nature of religion can be compared to listening to a concert of classical music – participating in cultural activities satisfies a particular human need, but nothing comes of it. Consolation remains limited to aesthetics, which, in itself, is supposed to give solace to existential difficulties.

In Vattimo's texts, one can also find religion in its ethical function. However, the understanding of this function is completely different from morality as classical Christianity comprehends it. Classically, the ethical function should be understood as normative because religion presents certain moral norms by submitting them to the believer. Vattimo rejects any normative form of ethics or morality. He postulates that the entire Catholic teaching on morality and biblical texts such as the Decalogue must either be rejected

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[80] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 62.
[81] Ibidem, 67.
[82] Vattimo, Paterlini, *Not Being God*, 161.

or reinterpreted in the spirit of nihilism. Nevertheless, a specific positive form of ethics is proposed by Vattimo – a nihilistic ethics based on fulfilling the only obligation that man owes to another man, i.e. *caritas*. This function is to lead to such an understanding of human liberty that would accept the unlimited freedom of human action as an inviolable factor. Therefore, it can be considered as a particular weakening of responsibility for human actions. The relativistic proposal of ethics does not enable one to talk about actions in terms of good and evil, right and wrong. Emancipation consists precisely in standing outside these schemes and taking the position of Nietzschean *Übermensch* who is beyond good and evil. At the same time, Vattimo introduces the category of respect for others, which should be emphasised and appreciated.

One more function of Christianity as a weak religion can be found, and that is precisely the function of weakening of thinking structures, philosophical methods and foundations, but also social reality. Since Christianity is nihilism, any order of thinking based on nihilism is Christian in Vattimo's view. In this way, the whole social life becomes part of the history of salvation, understood as the history of interpretation of the biblical message in the light of the commandment of love. Christianity brings a new interpretation model – while the whole culture interprets various messages (textual and oral), it is Christianity that provides the hermeneutical key of the merciful *caritas*[83]. In other words, the function of religion is to relativise views by making them weak and excluding those that bear the hallmarks of strong thought. This relativisation should primarily affect morality. According to Vattimo, the Catholic Church does not correctly read the Christian message, and for this reason, it is implemented much better by a secularised society than by the institutional Church[84].

c. The goal of religion

Classical Christianity considers the salvation of individuals and facilitating their passing to eternal life in heaven as the primary goal of religion. Vattimo horizontalizes the religious sphere by rejecting transcendent reality.

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[83]   Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 62.
[84]   G. Vattimo, *Ethics without transcendence?*, trans. S. Zabala, „Common Knowledge" 9 (2003), 3, 399-405.

By doing so, he limits religion so it ends its influence on individuals at the moment of death. The Italian philosopher still speaks of salvation, though he understands it differently, as mentioned above. In addition to that, a few comments must be made.

The horizontalization of salvation and equating it with the history of interpretation does not seem to have any precise end. It means that it is not possible to point at the final state of nihilistic salvation. One can argue that there is an unknown, ideal fullness of secularisation characterised by the pure immersion of a man in the category of *caritas*. The weakness of religion causes a situation in which one journeys towards that goal in an asymptotic way – getting closer to it, but never achieving it.

Interestingly, Vattimo does not reject the possibility of the afterlife. Salvation as liberation from sins (understood in the context of weak Christianity) is also supposed to be liberation from the fear of the finite and mortality. In this way, there is hope for the resurrection of the bodies[85]. Although the element of the resurrection of the body appears as probable in Vattimo's proposal, it cannot be equated with its Catholic meaning. These are two completely separate realities, the former of which seems to come merely from a certain fear of losing one's own existence. Resurrection can therefore be regarded as a specific non-constitutive element of weak Christianity. At the same time, salvation as desacralisation and secularisation is an essential component and the goal towards which religion, as proposed by Vattimo, leads.

The reductionist view of Christianity creates a very characteristic problem of purpose. A religion without a transcendent reference ceases to be a religion in the proper sense of the word. Goals show most clearly how a particular religious reality is to be defined. It is impossible to talk about religion by reducing it exclusively to a social process and thereby completely stripping it of the ultimate authority, which defines and gives meaning to the whole process. Classically, the basic goals of religion – regardless of the confession – are the possibility of building a relationship with the transcendent reality, which is the fulfilment of a human's natural religious need, as well as a certain horizon towards which the believer is heading in order to find the fulfilment of earthly efforts. This horizon is the border between earthly life and life after death. Therefore, it should be recognised that Christianity

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[85] Vattimo, Sequeri, Ruggeri, *Interrogazioni sul cristianesimo*, 97-98.

in Vattimo's project is limited only to playing the role of the background to the Western tradition.

The meaning of life goes hand in hand with hope for achieving the goals of faith. Weak Christianity cannot help to find such a meaning. Desacralisation may be a general goal, but in the nihilistic process in which everything constantly moves towards an ever-increasing void, it is impossible to indicate the value of human life or events experienced by man.

Conclusion

This article aimed to reconstruct and critically analyse the understanding of the Christian religion postulated by Gianni Vattimo. The project of nihilistic Christianity, as shown above, expresses only a cultural approach to this religion, and is entirely devoid of the reference to the sphere of transcendence constitutive for classically understood religion. In Vattimo's concept, both morality, included in the framework of nihilistic ethics, and the very description of religious reality seem to be only a project subordinated to a specific goal of mitigating the impact of the biblical message on man and his behaviour, producing in return the libertarian freedom guided by relativism.

The reconstruction of the philosophical concept of weak thought has shown that thinking in categories devoid of either logical or ontological veracity appears to be incoherent to the phenomenon of the Christian religion as revealed in the Scripture. The critical moment of Vattimo's intellectual proposals is the rejection of the category of truth, after which thought deprived of its truth-based foundation cannot fulfil its own desire to know veritably. Nevertheless, the concept of weak thought should not be only criticised. The convergence of such worldview commonly prevailing in Western society allows one to conclude that the concept well captures the mentality of people living in this day and age. The ontology of actuality, i.e. thinking not in categories of who one is but who one is becoming, and the ethics aiming at being good to others, also by accepting diversity, appear to be constitutive elements of the contemporary secular moral relativism and liberalism.

Looking at the essence of the nihilistic project of Christianity revealed a whole range of difficulties related to the irreligiousness of the theory. Vatti-

mo regards Christianity as a *non-religious religion*, and does not consider those who belong to a certain religious community as real Christians. Instead, he ascribes this moniker to those who have been brought up within a culture shaped by the Bible. It again shows a specific element of people's mentality in the culture of modern times. The only difference is that, although a large part of society seems to be ashamed and does not admit being Christian, Vattimo wants to say that a faithful Christian is not the one who fulfils specific religious duties, but precisely the one who does not perform them. To him, one should be proud of belonging to Christianity but only outside its institutional structure.

It is appropriate to criticise Vattimo's view for seeing Christianity more as a social project than religion as such, because it is deprived of any transcendence. One of the common features of postmodern thinkers is their rather arbitrary use of terms. Vattimo does it with the words *religion* and *Christianity*, giving them new meanings. The attempt to apply religion to the social processes of the present is puzzling. Perhaps it results from a desire to instil in the followers of the traditional form of Christianity doubts whether, in accordance with contemporary thought currents, the teaching carried out by the religious institutional structures should not be weakened. Religion without transcendence loses its purpose, even if the fulfilment of oneself becomes its goal. The ethic of *caritas* shows that another man and his freedom could be considered such a goal, which could create the appearance of a personalistic view. Nevertheless, there is no personalism without proper anthropology and human dignity. These elements are clearly lacking in the works of the Italian philosopher.

One should appreciate the pioneering philosophical attempt to combine nihilism with Christianity positively. However, it is justified to consider the identification of religion and nihilism as erroneous because such a link reduces the vision of Christianity. The attempt to reinterpret the religion of Christ clearly shows how vital ontology is for building theology. While traditional Catholic theology is largely built on classical metaphysics, Vattimo, following the ontology of actuality, builds a version of Christianity as a cultural project and a tool of consolation only. The latter project causes a separation from Christianity's most significant value, namely, its understanding of the Scriptures and its provision of a transcendent vision – a vision animated by a hope that exceeds the finite limits of this world.

Gianni Vattimo's concept of religion
L'idea della religione secondo Gianni Vattimo

Koncepcja religii według Gianniego Vattima

Streszczenie: Artykuł stanowi refleksję nad wizją chrześcijaństwa obecną w pismach Gianniego Vattima, dla którego centralną ideą, na której opiera swoje rozważania o religii chrześcijańskiej, jest idea *myśli słabej*, którą myśliciel wypracował w latach 80. XX wieku. Zasugerowana przez włoskiego filozofa koncepcja chrześcijaństwa jest próbą zaaplikowania współcześnie wiodących w myśli zachodniej prądów filozoficznych do tradycji chrześcijańskiej i dostosowania chrześcijaństwa do owych filozoficznych tradycji. Włoski filozof dokonał oryginalnego utożsamienia chrześcijaństwa z nihilizmem interpretowanym w świetle heideggerowskiej ontologii aktualności. Ponadto w jego refleksji nie brakuje odniesień do postmodernizmu, którego Vattimo jest jednym z ważniejszych europejskich przedstawicieli. Celem artykułu jest zrekonstruowanie postulatu chrześcijaństwa w wersji słabej poprzez krytyczną analizę tekstów źródłowych. Autor postara się udowodnić niemożliwość pogodzenia koncepcji religii proponowanej przez włoskiego filozofa z chrześcijaństwem tradycyjnym, a także nieadekwatność stosowania pojęcia *religia* w stosunku do chrześcijaństwa nihilistycznego.

Słowa kluczowe: Gianni Vattimo, chrześcijaństwo, sekularyzacja, nihilizm, myśl słaba

Abstract: This article concerns an understanding of Christianity postulated by Gianni Vattimo. This project is based on the philosophical concept of *weak thought* cogitated in the 1980s by Vattimo. The concept of Christianity proposed by the Italian philosopher is an attempt at the application of the main philosophical currents of the West to Christian tradition and adjustment of Christianity to these philosophical traditions. Vattimo uniquely equated Christianity with nihilism interpreted in the light of the Heideggerian ontology of actuality. To these two contemporary philosophical currents, one should also add postmodernism, of which Vattimo is one of the most

influential authors. This article aims to reconstruct the postulate of Christianity in its weak version through a critical analysis of the source texts. The research hypothesis is the impossibility of reconciling the concept of religion proposed by the Italian philosopher with traditional Christianity and the inadequacy of using the term *religion* in relation to nihilistic Christianity.

Key words: Gianni Vattimo, Christianity, secularisation, nihilism, weak thought

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