

Gianni Vattimo and Thomas J. J. Altizer on the Incarnation and the Death of God: a Comparison

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Abstract

Gianni Vattimo, the Italian Postmodern philosopher, has an understanding of the 'Death of God' that has drawn comparisons with the 'death of God' theological movement from the 1960s, particularly the work of Thomas J. J. Altizer on the subject. The influence of Nietzsche on both authors and their use of the Christian term '*kenosis*' (the self-emptying of God in the incarnation) invite such a comparison. However, this article draws all the points of comparison between the two authors on this subject together before showing how and in what ways Vattimo differs from Altizer's thoughts on the death of God. I will argue that Altizer's reliance on Hegelian thought marks him out as different to Vattimo, particularly due to the latter's Heideggerian influence. I will then show why it is wrong to think, as some commentators have done, that Vattimo is also a Hegelian.

Gianni Vattimo (b. 1936) is a philosopher who exercises on the Continent, 'in Italy in particular, the role that Jürgen Habermas fulfils in Germany as a public intellectual who also undertakes general cultural commentary' (Guarino, 2009, p. 1). For Vattimo's education, he studied in Turin, under Pareyson, and Heidelberg, with Gadamer supervising. Although, as a result, Vattimo's philosophy very much reflects the existentialist and proto-postmodernist influences of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Kuhn, there is a more concrete side to Vattimo. Personally, Vattimo has been active in supporting gay rights and also has had experience in significant public office as an MEP. His ideas have had a wide-ranging influence across disciplines and causes such as Feminism (Frascati-Lochhead, 1998), Theology (Guarino, 2009), Sexuality (Felski, 1996), and Globalisation (Silverman, 2007).

Vattimo aimed at a *Verwindung*, a 'twisting'/convalescence-alteration, of existing structures, whether they are religious, political, or cultural in some other respect, rather than their total destruction. Total destruction of such structures is unhelpful, as it would lead to a kind of nihilism which is inimical to life; one always needs to be rooted in some sort of cultural milieu. In this sense, Vattimo was influenced by Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* ('being there'); one exists only in relation to other things, whether they are cultural artefacts,

traditions, of things of another character. What *Verwindung* entailed in practice was not principally altering cultural content, but one's attitude towards one's own culture and those of others. The means by which cultural *Verwindung* takes place in an individual is through their coming to realise that, in Nietzschean terms, the world is a fable (Vattimo, 1992), confronting nihilism head-on. Vattimo was convinced that Nietzsche and Heidegger had shown beyond doubt that 'there are no facts, but only interpretations' (Vattimo, 1997, p. 2). Nietzsche had undermined the highest of all values in announcing the death of God (Nietzsche, 2001, pp. 119-120), whereas Heidegger annihilated Being by transforming it into value (Vattimo, 1988), an 'event' which discloses the parameters of thought in given historical era. In the era of the late-modern, Being appears in the form of irreducible plurality, as exemplified in the infinite number of voices heard through the media (Vattimo, 1992).

Recent commentators on Vattimo's thought (Scigliano, 2007; Depoortere, 2008a) have remarked that Vattimo's thought on Christianity bears a striking resemblance to that of the influential American death of God theologian, Thomas J. J. Altizer (b. 1927), particularly his *magnum opus*, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1967). Altizer has drawn heavily upon thinkers such as Nietzsche, Blake and Hegel for his nihilistic Christianity. Central to Altizer's conception of Christianity is the emptying of God through history to make himself immanent; by eliminating the transcendent realm, believers would focus on the present, the here and now. In terms of comparing both Vattimo and Altizer, both thinkers have been influenced by Nietzsche, particularly his idea of the 'death of God'. Vattimo, like Altizer, sees history as the weakening of God, Vattimo and Altizer drawing on Pauline idea the 'emptying'/'humiliation' of God in the incarnation (the technical term for which is the *kenosis* of Philippians 2:5-11), leading to the liberation of humans from the constricting violence of the transcendent. Vattimo admits that the death of God movement 'is not something I've studied intensely' (Vattimo, 2007, p. 91). This becomes apparent in his homogenising of its thought in *After Christianity*, for Vattimo suspects that the death of God theologians, including Altizer, have not 'articulated an explicit theory of secularisation and of the death of God as the positive affirmation of divinity based on the idea of incarnation' (Vattimo, 2002, p. 37). In view of this, Vattimo thinks Altizer, and the other death of God theologians, follows Bonhoeffer and Barth in affirming the 'total 'alterity' of the biblical God' (Vattimo, 2002, pp. 36-37). As with his criticism of Derrida and Lévinas, he believes

alterity leads back to ‘the same old God of metaphysics, conceived of as the ultimate inaccessible ground of religion’ (Vattimo, 2002, p. 38). Vattimo is wrong in his view of Altizer’s theology, for ‘there can be little doubt that Altizer did articulate an explicit theory of secularisation rooted in the ideas of *kenosis*, incarnation and divine death’ (Scigliano, 2007, pp. 535-536). Indeed, Altizer opposed the idea of the ‘otherness’ of God due to transcendence being a distraction away from the present for believers.

Regarding Vattimo’s thought as nothing more than a restatement of Altizer’s theology ignores his philosophical contributions and, in my opinion, overlooks the subtleties in both his methods and conclusions. In the first part of this article I will deal with the main points of comparison between Altizer and Vattimo as put forward in Anthony C. Scigliano’s article ‘Contesting the World and the Divine: Balthasar’s Trinitarian Response to Gianni Vattimo’s Secular Christianity’ (2007), and Frederiek Depoortere’s book *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard, Slavoj Žižek* (2008a). My main argument will be that Altizer’s explicit Hegelianism adds a metaphysical element to the development of history which is absent in Vattimo’s attempt to create a history of Christianity which allows for the reduction/twisting of metaphysical, ‘strong’ structures. Having dealt with these points, I will turn to the claim by Scigliano (2007) that Vattimo’s thought is Hegelian, even if Vattimo does not fully realise the debt Scigliano thinks he owes to Hegel. Before concluding I emphasise one other way, hinted at in the first part of the article, that Vattimo’s understanding of *kenosis* is important for him to explain the possibility of hermeneutics, a point which was not of interest to Altizer.

Points of similarity, aspects of difference

Vattimo and Altizer ‘share the Barthian idea that there is a clear distinction between Christianity on the one side and natural religiosity on the other.’ (Depoortere, 2008a, p. 25)

Vattimo follows Girard in regarding Christianity as unmasking the violence inherent to the natural sacred of the religious. In Girardian anthropology (Vattimo and Girard, 2010), very briefly summarised here, through mimetic desire each person covets what another has, ending up in an arms race. To protect the society, a ‘scapegoat’ is formed as a mechanism to

dispense with the violence, the sacral power imputed onto it making it powerful enough to restore the social order. By cloaking Christianity in the mythological language of the kind pertaining to the scapegoat mechanism and the natural sacred, Christianity acts 'like a Trojan horse' (Antonello, 2010, p. 8), for unlike other victims Christ was wholly innocent, a point which is made clear through his mythology as passed on through the New Testament and tradition. Vattimo links this insight from Girardian anthropology with Heidegger's weakening of 'Being'. Concerning Heidegger's notion of the weakening of 'Being', Vattimo reads Heidegger's philosophy as the conclusion of a conception of metaphysics which began with Plato's forms. The latter, like the traditional Christian ideas concerning God and heaven, pertained to an ideal realm removed from immediate experience. When metaphysics, in more recent times, has been identified with science and technology, and pertains to humans, it makes being human unthinkable insofar as all spontaneity and openness is ruled out by the laws and objects of science (Vattimo, 2002, pp. 12-13). For Vattimo, this means a rejection of the identification of Being with presence. Instead, Being should be seen as 'event', such as the event of the late-modern, namely irreducible plurality and the end of metaphysics (Vattimo, 2002).

Altizer's main claim for the uniqueness of Christianity is to see other religions as promoting a 'backward' movement away from history to Primordial Being, whereas the incarnation should be 'conceived as a progressive movement of Spirit into flesh' (Altizer, 1967, p. 46) which accepts and redeems the secular/profane world. Vattimo, too, is wary of the urge to return to Primordial Oneness, for any God which is too 'Other' is 'inaccessible' and 'is the same old God of metaphysics', which he also identifies with the gods of natural religions in reference to Girard (Vattimo, 2002, pp. 37-39). The starting point for Altizer is dynamism in history, of forwards versus backwards movements, of progressive immanence of the spirit compared to Primordial Oneness; this is all reminiscent of Hegel, a point not lost on the Vattimian commentator Scigliano (2007). Vattimo's starting point, however, is his critique of metaphysics, whether it be in his quasi-anthropological appropriations from Girard, or in his incarnation-centred repudiation of conceptualising the divine as 'the Other', whether this be in accordance with Plato, Barth, the 'death of God' theologians, Lévinas, Derrida, or natural religions.

For 'both Vattimo and Altizer, the core of Christianity is the event of the incarnation. Both authors interpret the incarnation as the end of God's transcendence, as the death of the 'God of beyond'. They both use the term '*kenosis*' and consider the incarnation as the start of a process of desacralization and secularisation.' (Depoortere, 2008a, p. 25)

For Altizer there are two *kenoses*. One is a historical, actual death of God, as, for him, Theology must come to an understanding of the 'inevitable correlation between God's self-revelation and his self-negation or *kenosis*... history becomes not simply the arena of revelation but the very incarnate Body of God' (Altizer, 1967, p. 86). Again, Altizer here owes a debt to Hegel for this understanding of the death of God. The second *kenosis* concerns the emptying of this event into common experience as atonement, an experience which is 'a negative process of reversing every alien other... of every power confining life and energy' (Altizer, 1967, p. 114). After the epiphany of the cross, the event becomes ossified into 'alien others' such as creeds formulas, what Altizer refers to as 'Satan', all of which eventually become emptied (Altizer, 1967, pp. 112-113). The two are related due to the former effecting the latter by God relinquishing his transcendence in becoming immanent to complete himself.

For Vattimo, by contrast, there is only one *kenosis*, and that is the long process of secularisation which is begun in the incarnation and is an on-going process which is never fully completed. Vattimo sees *kenosis* as the process of secularisation, a process which is indistinguishable from both interpretation and salvation. Given Vattimo's stance concerning metaphysics, arguably the best way to read what Vattimo has to say concerning *kenosis* is to interpret the event of *kenosis* as a message which is communicated and reinterpreted throughout history from the time of the New Testament onwards. Indeed, Vattimo states that salvation 'is the *announcement* that God saves us through a historical process of education' (Vattimo, 2010, p. 86; emphasis added), and that 'Christianity is a stimulus, a *message* that sets in motion a tradition of thought that will eventually realise its freedom from metaphysics' (Vattimo, 2007, p. 35; emphasis added). It is also questionable about the extent to which Altizer, unlike Vattimo, can be said to be a theologian of secularisation, for while he talks about God emptying himself into history, he maintains an at least formal distinction between the sacred and the profane, both being transformed through the process of *kenosis* as Ogletree mentions in his summary of Altizer's thought (Ogletree, 1966, p. 83).

According to both Vattimo and Altizer, 'the true meaning of the incarnation has only recently been exposed.' (Depoortere, 2008a, p. 25).

Altizer refers to 'modern historical consciousness' (Altizer, 1967, p. 4), by which he means 'for the first time historical events appeared as radically particular, as confined in their meaning and value to the actual but singular process in which they occur' (Altizer, 1967, p. 74). Backwards-reference to Primordial Being had meant events and situations were defined in advance for humanity through the 'givenness' of the present and norms in relation to this Absolute. 'Jesus and that his death', Altizer thinks, 'liberated humanity from the oppressive presence of primordial Being' (Altizer, 1967, p. 71). However, this 'modern historical consciousness' appears to be an effect, not a cause, of liberation. In Altizer's eyes, though, in this instance cause and effect are the same thing, for, as Ogletree puts it, 'The incarnate Word completes itself in a human community embodying in its own self-consciousness the same 'consciousness' which was first manifest in Jesus' (Ogletree, 1966, p. 71). Through *kenosis*, the Word moves from the particular (Jesus) to the universal ('modern historical consciousness') to reverse human dependence on backward-looking (to Primordial Oneness) to interpret the particular (the present). Historically, this modern historical consciousness first became apparent, Altizer thinks, with nineteenth century figures such as Nietzsche. The latter's nihilism not only 'foresaw' the 'one clear portal to the twentieth century' (Altizer, 1967, p. 22), but also 'disclosed God to be the very embodiment of an infinitude of man's self-hatred and guilt' (ibid.).

Insofar as a connection is made between the *kenosis* of God realising itself in modern nihilism, Altizer is close to Vattimo. Vattimo's Catholic upbringing (Vattimo, 1999) drew him to Nietzsche and Heidegger, who made him reflect back on history to the point of realising that nihilism and the end of metaphysics was a product of the message of the *kenosis* of God. That is, the possibility of hermeneutics is founded upon the message of *kenosis*. Differences between Altizer and Vattimo appear when one probes deeper to how the incarnation can take effect in the modern era. For Altizer, it is part of the larger *kenotic* process, of Spirit becoming 'incarnate in its opposite' (Altizer, 1967, p. 68), moving forward to its own self-redemption, as 'Spirit only becomes realised or historically actualised in self-

consciousness while Spirit is in a state of alienation and estrangement from itself' (Altizer, 1967, p. 66). The second *kenosis*, then, of the movement of the Word into the universal consciousness of humanity is caused by the kenotic process of God emptying himself fully into Jesus in the first *kenosis*. For Vattimo this would seem to rely too much upon the metaphysics of which he wishes to dispose; for Vattimo it is the message of *kenosis*, the focus on interpretation, which is liberating and salvific.

Vattimo does not want to prove his hermeneutics, for 'proof' would constitute a return to metaphysics which he wants to avoid; Vattimo is more interested in 'plausibility' and 'persuasiveness' (Vattimo, 2002, p. 50). Nevertheless, Vattimo wants to make his hermeneutics look the most plausible interpretation of the mind-set of the late-modern. In order to do so, he looks at how historical factors have mixed with the essence of the message of the Gospel in order to effect a gradual weakening of strong structures in the West down to the present day. The weakening essence of Christianity was hindered by the fall of the Roman Empire, Vattimo appealing to Wilhelm Dilthey's view that figures such as Augustine were adopting Greco-Roman modes of thought and societal structures because they were solely responsible for the continuation of civilisation in any form (Vattimo 2002, p. 116). Nevertheless, over time these structures were weakened by the essence of the Christian message, the Reformation being a distinctive event. Vattimo draws on the work of Max Weber (1958) and Colin Campbell (1987) to show how modern consumer-capitalist culture was based on the Protestant work ethic (Weber) and a tendency for fantasy left by a faith which had been weakened through the Reformation which found its outlet in consumerism (Campbell) (Vattimo, 2002, p. 76). Vattimo argues it was the objective world-order made possible by Christian monotheism which leant itself to the scientific-technological rationalism which made the gradual separation of faith and reason possible from the early modern period onwards in which reformed principles took shape (Vattimo, 2002, p. 75). In short, while Altizer and Vattimo see a *prima facie* circular relationship between modern historical consciousness of the death of God (and a feeling of its liberating effects) and the event of the incarnation, Altizer draws heavily on Hegelian metaphysics as an explanation of this apparent circularity, whereas Vattimo explains the relevance, and increasing presence, of the message of *kenosis* and the weakening of strong structures through a quasi-historical

account of the journey of this message from the time of Jesus to the present day as the basis for the possibility of hermeneutics, a point to which we shall return later.

Transcendence cannot but be 'violent and oppressive.'
(Depoortere, 2008a, p. 26)

On this point there is indeed superficial similarity between Altizer and Vattimo. The former refers to the 'bondage' of 'a transcendent, a sovereign, and an impassive God' (Altizer, 1967, p. 42). Indeed, redemption for Altizer can be characterised as 'man's release from an alien and distant 'Other' who in sovereign freedom dispenses the fate of men' (Ogletree, 1966, p. 73). The idea of the transcendent, 'alien' other here conjured up by Altizer is of a being removed from the world but who nevertheless decrees for it, setting up rules and commands for humans to follow. There is also the Hegelian element of Altizer's thought, which holds that a being is unfulfilled insofar as it remains wholly transcendent. By contrast, Vattimo thinks transcendence is violent because it is the perfect example of metaphysics. Violence is caused by metaphysics because it is an expression of the will to power in order to appropriate the other totally through defining them by pre-existing measurements and categories (Vattimo, 1999, pp. 30-32; Vattimo, 2010, p. 81). Vattimo is not worried about transcendence that could involve humans being on the receiving end of the arbitrary fiat of a being that has not experienced the world directly, for he thinks that this conception of God is flat-footed.

The death of God 'is not a metaphor for a change in human experience, but part of the life of the Absolute itself.'
(Depoortere, 2008a, p. 26).

In dealing with this point of comparison, the main thing to do is to refer back to 'ii' above. Depoortere is right in his judgement of Altizer, but is wrong in hastily applying it to Vattimo. It has already been shown that Vattimo did not want to construe God in terms of an 'Absolute' which has been weakened in ontic terms, that is, in terms of his nature. Rather, Vattimo was concerned with the message, the story of *kenosis* and its working-out in history as the process of secularisation, of weakening strong structures. A possible reason why Depoortere makes this judgement is because he himself is deeply influenced by more 'traditional' theology, as is evident from his book *The Death of God* (2008b) in which he states 'Should it indeed not be argued, in contrast to the often-repeated common opinion, that

the metaphysical God and the God of Christian faith have much more in common than is often supposed?’ (Depoortere, 2008b, p. 4). Admittedly, sometimes Vattimo speaks as if he was referring to a change in the nature of God, such as ‘Secularisation is the way in which *kenosis*, having begun with the incarnation of Christ ... continues to realise itself more and more clearly...’ (Vattimo, 1999, p. 48). Taken out of context, Vattimo would appear to be making a positive assertion about a state of affairs which ‘happened’ in the past. However, when one finishes the quotation one can understand what Vattimo is saying differently: ‘...by furthering the education of mankind concerning the overcoming of ordinary violence essential to the sacred and to social life itself’ (Vattimo, 1999, p. 48). Again, the term ‘education’ implies that the importance of the incarnation concerns pedagogy, as a message which is passed on, taught, and reinterpreted in accordance with the signs of the times. It is wrong, then, to attribute to Vattimo, as it would not be with Altizer, a belief in the changing nature of God/the Absolute. How Depoortere can interpret Vattimo’s conception of history of the dissolution of Being on Heideggerian lines with ‘change ... [in] the life of the Absolute itself’ (Depoortere, 2008a, p. 26) is difficult to imagine, for language of the ‘Absolute’ pertains far more readily to Hegelian, not Heideggerian, thought, which is therefore more appropriate to the theology of Altizer than the philosophy of Vattimo given the latter’s distaste for metaphysics. Moreover, *kenosis* refers to more than a ‘metaphor’ for Vattimo, for it is this message of weakening, of the revelation of the violence of the natural sacred.

Like Vattimo, Altizer is interested in neither Jesus nor in the Jesus of Church tradition, but in the incarnate Word as he will come to be known in the third epoch or Joachim’s Age of Spirit’ (Scigliano, 2007, p. 536); ‘For Altizer, Hegel, and Vattimo, if God is to be love, then God can no longer be essentially different from the world itself. (Scigliano, 2007, p. 536).

These two points of comparison made by Scigliano are to be dealt with together, for one follows on from another. At first sight, Scigliano seems to have misjudged Altizer on the issue of his neglect of the person of Jesus. Altizer goes to great lengths to show the importance of Jesus: ‘God *is* Jesus’ (Altizer, 1967, p. 68; Altizer’s emphasis). However, when one looks at what Altizer means by Jesus it is clear that he is not interested in the man Jesus except insofar as he is representative of an opposite to Absolute Spirit, abstracted from

the concrete: ‘God *is* Jesus, proclaims the radical Christian, and by this he means that the Incarnation is a total and all-consuming act: as Spirit becomes the Word that empties the Speaker of himself, the whole reality of Spirit becomes incarnate in its opposite’ (Altizer, 1967, p. 68). Therefore, Scigliano is right in saying that Altizer does not have an interest in Jesus, *a fortiori* the Jesus of the dogmas of the Church.

To an extent Scigliano is right in stating that Vattimo follows Altizer. Vattimo’s main interest in the message of the New Testament is its message of *kenosis*. Nevertheless, Vattimo’s interest in Jesus does extend slightly more than just to *kenosis*, but also to its ethical corollary, Jesus’ message of *caritas*, charity. By *caritas*, though, it is questionable about the extent to which Vattimo’s understanding of the concept has anything to do with the one held by Jesus (insofar as it is possible to know what he meant by the term), or the Church’s. Vattimo distinguished between *pensiero forte* (strong thought) and *pensiero debole* (weak thought). The former refers to holding one’s beliefs, values and traditions—and therefore, one’s culture—as objective and absolute, reducing others’ cultures to one’s own, causing exclusionary violence to the ‘other’. The latter is a way of holding one’s views in accordance with the virtue of *caritas*, that is, ‘Charity’, or ‘Love’ (Vattimo, 2007, p. 41). That which can be weakened through secularisation has no limit except *caritas*, the ethical corollary of *kenosis*. *Caritas* is a formal principle in his eyes, akin to Kant’s categorical imperative (Depoortere, 2008a, p. 14). Formally, one recognises the situatedness and provisional character of one’s own views and tolerates, and learns from, other cultures through one’s loving disposition. With nihilism, ‘The call is thus not for a society with *no* values but for a society without *supreme and exclusive* values. On this model, cultures are complex conversations among varying conceptions of the world. Such dialogue can, and must not, shift into a dogmatic clash between conflicting truths’ (Vattimo & Zabala, 2002, p. 454). *Caritas*, then, is ‘an active commitment to diminishing violence in all its forms’ (Vattimo, 2002, pp. 51-52) on the recognition of one’s own provisionality. Vattimo’s understanding of Jesus’ message of *caritas* differs greatly from, for instance, the twentieth-century Lutheran’s thinker Anders Nygren’s view of *caritas* (Nygren, 1932), which he sees as a later, Latinising distortion of *agape*, the latter meaning God’s love for humans dispensed through his grace, or from the modern Catholic view of the papal encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (2006) which sees love coming from God and not only commanding, but uniting, humanity to love Him.

Vattimo's divine love is immanent, human in origin, and is devoted to weakening. Similarly, Altizer sees love as immanent, for 'Christian love is an incarnate love, a self-giving to the fullness of the world, an immersion in the actuality of time and the flesh. Therefore our Yes-saying must give us totally to the moment before us' (Altizer, 1967, p. 156). The immanent, incarnate love mentioned by Altizer is, though, the realisation in human consciousness and experience of the kenotic Word. Once again, there is metaphysics in the background of Altizer's thought whereas there is none apparent in Vattimo's.

Like Vattimo, Altizer eliminates from Paul's narrative of *kenosis* the exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of the Father, for such an exaltation would reinstate the "primordial Creator, an eternal and unchanging Lord." (Scigliano, 2007, p. 536).

A criticism of Vattimo and Altizer is that they focus on verses five to eight of Philippians chapter two, leaving out the rest of the Pauline hymn, verses nine to eleven, which emphasise the glory of God's resurrection and exaltation through his resurrection. It is true that they both neglect to deal with this aspect of hymn, preferring to concentrate on the humiliation and emptying of God in the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Altizer goes so far to state that 'The radical Christian repudiates the Christian dogma of the resurrection of Christ and his ascension into a celestial and transcendent realm because radical faith revolves about a participation in the Christ who is fully and totally present to us' (Altizer, 1967, p. 120). Going further, Altizer even suggests reversing the resurrection and ascension by using the 'symbolic language of Christianity' to 'transpose the traditional of the descent into Hell' of the crucifixion to express how Christ does not become resurrected after death, but 'descends ever more fully into darkness and flesh' (Altizer, 1967, p. 120). Altizer thus twists the resources of the Christian tradition away from the hope of resurrection to his own 'radical Christian' conception of the *kenosis* of God in history.

Unlike Altizer, Vattimo has far less to say about the resurrection. In his introduction to Vattimo's book *Belief* (1999), Luca D'Isanto states that 'Vattimo follows René Girard's hypothesis that Christ's death and resurrection eliminates the violence of all sacrificial religion through its very unmasking' (Vattimo, 1999, p. 10). This is not strictly accurate, for Vattimo follows Joachim of Fiore, who saw history as comprised of ages representative of

the Trinity (Father: Old Testament times; Son: New Testament times; Spirit: some time during or after the thirteenth century), in making the most out of the ‘now-not yet’ eschatological tension in the New Testament to the extent that he, like Joachim, does not believe in a closed canon: ‘although salvation is essentially ‘fulfilled’ in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus, it awaits further fulfilment. Thus the Paraclete ... has been assigned the task of assisting them in this further hermeneutical project’ (Vattimo, 2002, pp. 59-60). Reading between the lines, ‘salvation’ for Vattimo has little or nothing to do with traditional Christian beliefs in ‘grace’ and ‘bodily resurrection’. Indeed, he follows Joachim in reading scripture ‘spiritually’, eliminating such literalisms (Vattimo, 2002). Scigliano is therefore right in seeing a similarity between Altizer and Vattimo on this issue of the resurrection and ascension. Nevertheless, whereas Altizer explicitly writes against the resurrection and ascension as not fitting into his largely Hegelian scheme of *kenosis*, Vattimo is not interested in this issue, at most ‘twisting’ resurrection into a longer scheme of salvation-as-hermeneutics. Insofar as Scigliano’s comparison of Altizer and Vattimo here is a criticism, it is wide of the mark. Altizer is a self-confessed ‘radical’ Christian, while Vattimo is primarily a philosopher. Neither are interested in returning to ‘traditional’ doctrines and beliefs. Indeed, Vattimo thought that the ‘return to religion’ in the West cannot be an uncritical flight back to tradition.

The strong pneumatological turn and the Trinitarian progressivism that springs from Joachim serves for Altizer and for Vattimo as a way to give theological movements a kind of contemporary authority over against the biblical canon, Church authorities, tradition, etc. (Scigliano, 2007, p. 536).

Concerning Joachim, Altizer states that ‘The radical Christian ... inherits both the ancient prophetic belief that revelation continues in history and the eschatological belief of the tradition following Joachim of Floris’ (Altizer, 1967, p. 27), that ‘we are now living in the third and final age of the Spirit’ (ibid.). *Kenosis* involves the Spirit moving into flesh, transfiguring both (Altizer, 1967, p. 47). Spirit exists for itself (*für sich*) when it exists as its own opposite or other (Altizer, 1967, p. 64). Only when Spirit knows itself in its own otherness will it fulfil its destiny as Spirit, achieving self-redemption (Altizer, 1967, p. 65). Altizer does think that the final age of the Spirit ‘effects a negation and transcendence of the dogma of the Church’ (Altizer, 1967, p. 64), for the Spirit liberates us from the memory of

transcendence and from the ossifying quality of creeds and formulas, again linking back to the dual sense of *kenosis* in his theology.

Vattimo has a similar understanding of Joachim to Altizer. However, he uses Joachim's ideas differently in his philosophy. Although, like Altizer, he sees Joachim's 'third age' prophecy, 'emphasis[ing] the openness to the future implicit in the dogma of incarnation' (Vattimo, 2002, p. 28) and that salvation history is still in progress and Trinitarian in character (Vattimo, 2002, pp. 29-32), Vattimo's main interest in Joachim is in his reading of scripture in light of this third age, that is, not literally or analogically, but spiritually. Vattimo is taken by Joachim's idea of the 'spiritual intelligence' of scripture (Vattimo, 2002, p. 28), of grasping events in the Bible as 'figures' of other historical events. For Vattimo, Joachim's exegetical method, in light of the age of the spirit, 'stresses not the letter but the spirit of revelation; no longer servants but friends; no longer awe or faith but charity' (Vattimo, 2002, p. 31). Joachim's appeal is in the immanence of salvation allowing one to reinterpret scripture in a spiritual way which sees salvation as an on-going process in progress. Vattimo is not interested in the literalistic aspects of Joachim's prophecies (Vattimo, 2002, pp. 28-39), for events cannot be symbols of another discrete historical event. Vattimo and Altizer both make use of Joachim, particularly the idea of the lack of a closed canon, Altizer construes 'Spirit' in more Hegelian terms, whereas Vattimo ties it in more closely to his hermeneutics.

Preliminary Conclusion, and the charge of Hegelianism levelled at Vattimo

There are superficial similarities between Altizer and Vattimo. Both thinkers draw upon Nietzsche, particularly his sentiment that we are living in a nihilistic age encapsulated by the phrase the 'death of God'. Vattimo, like Altizer before him, also saw history as a gradual weakening of God, using the idea of *kenosis* to refer to this weakening in conceptual terms. Where the two thinkers differ fundamentally is how this weakening took place. In appealing explicitly to Hegel, Altizer draws upon his idea of spirit in such a way to suggest strongly that he posits that there has been a metaphysical weakening over time, that there was objectively some transcendent thing which has emptied itself into history which has led up to the nihilism of the present. By contrast, Vattimo sees the *message* of kenosis as being the cause of the weakening of strong structures in all forms since the time of Christ to the present day.

Acknowledging hermeneutical plurality, this understanding of weakening is not even an objective, univocal construal of history, but an interpretation of a received, inescapable tradition from within the situatedness of being a citizen of the West in late-modernity (Vattimo, 1999; Vattimo, 2002).

All that has been said to distinguish Vattimo from Altizer could falter if Vattimo himself is a Hegelian thinker. Indeed, this is what Scigliano (2007) argues, and ‘if Hegel is his prime influence, then Vattimo’s position against metaphysical grounding or ontotheology becomes highly suspect, indeed impossible to maintain’ (Scigliano, 2007, p. 528). Scigliano also mentions that Vattimo names Hegel as an influence (Scigliano, 2007, p. 537). It is a truism to maintain that Hegelianism is not univocal in its meaning. Beyond traditional the traditional Right/Left Hegelian divides, more recent research would suggest ways in which Hegelianism could be a very positive renewing source for theology (Shanks, 2011). Nevertheless, Scigliano specifies seven points which mark Vattimo out as a Hegelian in his eyes:

(1) the Trinity is de-personalized; (2) the divine-world relation is given a modalistic and ultimately monistic reading; (3) Passibility is radical and history becomes constitutive, or stronger, determinative, of divine being; (4) Scriptural revelation is overcome by a ‘spiritual sense’ reading that envisions a reconciliation between divine being and the being of the world, thus asserting some form of identity; (5) Jesus’ historical existence becomes religiously insignificant; (6) Resurrection does not lead to exaltation and end *kenosis*, and does not apply to Jesus as an individual, but rather continues *kenosis* as a general diffusion of divine Being into the secular or as the secular; (7) Divine will, election, missions are excised from theological reflection (Scigliano, 2007, p. 538).

Expanding on these points, concerning 1-3 the de-personalisation of the Trinity is Vattimo’s modalism due to the Joachimite dividing of history into ages (Scigliano, 2007, p. 538). Concerning the third point, Vattimo’s conception of history is not of ‘divine being’, but of the message of *kenosis*. This history is not of ‘strengthening’, but of ‘weakening’. Vattimo is not interested in making objective statements about the nature of the divine, but is talking about the nature of belief in different eras. Scigliano is broadly right on points 5 and 7. For 5, Vattimo is interested in the message of *kenosis*, not whether an actual person named Jesus lived, died, and rose from the dead (Scigliano, 2007, p. 539). As for 7, divine will is a non-

issue for Vattimo as he is not interested in a being. Concerning 6, although Scigliano is right in holding that Vattimo does not regard the resurrection as exalting the divine being, his analysis is hampered because he talks about ‘diffusion of divine Being’, for once again, Vattimo is interested in the message of weakening, not of positing what has or has not happened to beings.

There are at least two more significant reasons to reject Scigliano’s classification of Vattimo as a Hegelian. Firstly, many of his seven points are derived from categories of classical theology, a term he even uses himself (Scigliano, 2007, p. 538). Vattimo is not in any shape or form a ‘classical theologian’. Indeed, Vattimo rejects what he sees as the dogmatism of classical theology. It is ironic and inappropriate to use these categories for assessing and categorising Vattimian thought, even if it is to compare him with another thinker. Superficial similarities of Vattimo’s thought to theological categories such as ‘modalism’ disappear when one considers that Vattimo is not trying to create a univocal, objective theology or philosophy of history. One of Vattimo’s premises in his own hermeneutics is interpretative plurality, extended even to history after events such as the two world wars and the end of colonialism shattered the West’s belief in a monolithic, univocal world history (Vattimo, 1992, p. 4). Vattimo goes to great pains to show how personal his interpretation of both religion and history is to him (Vattimo, 1999). The last thing he would intend to do is to smash idols of theology only to erect new ones in their place. He is keen on citing Nietzsche’s aphorism that ‘new gods’ will replace the old (Vattimo, 2002, p. 16), but the term ‘god’ is in the plural; we are living, Vattimo never tires of repeating, in a world of infinite plurality (Vattimo, 2002, p. 15). Where Vattimo thinks his particular interpretation of the current state of the world has its force is twofold; one because he thinks it matches a common experience of the West—plurality, a lack of interpretative centre, and the collapse of old, absolute values, as well as, secondly, an anchor in the tradition of the West—Christian tradition—even if it is twisted almost to the point of breaking; unlike many postmodern philosophers, Vattimo insists on the importance of history (Pireddu, 2002, p. 302). Vattimo’s emphasis on the ‘three ages’ is not an example of a univocal philosophy of history *a la* Hegel. At most—and here is the second reason to reject Scigliano’s classification of Vattimo—it is a ‘twisting’ both of Hegel and Christianity, even, perhaps, of Heidegger. There is nothing tying Vattimo, in his eyes, to use past thinkers and traditions in a ‘faithful’ way. Therefore we

see a twisted version of ‘*kenosis*’, talk which is reminiscent of Hegel in an idea gaining greater acceptance into the popular consciousness, and an ‘event’ of the late-modern which is akin to the ‘freedom’ Hegel thought had taken place in Prussia. However, scratch the surface and one finds a lack of ‘monism’ because there is no ‘objective’, ‘metaphysical’ being (with a small ‘b’) which empties itself in Vattimo’s theology, unlike both Altizer and Hegel, and no univocal history, only an anchoring in tradition to make sense of how one interprets the present.

Kenosis and the possibility of hermeneutics

Although he underestimates the similarity of his Altizer’s theology to his own thought, Vattimo’s conception of the importance of *kenosis* may differ from Altizer’s in at least one other significant respect, one which Vattimo does realise. Mentioning a number of theologians, including Altizer, he goes on to say ‘they could never have done this work without Luther or Nietzsche’ (Vattimo, 2007, p. 92). More than this, Vattimo states that ‘my use of the death of God depends very much on the history of Being as connected to the problem of ontotheology ... my notion of weak thought can actually help the death of God theologies better understand their origins in Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s philosophy’ (Vattimo, 2007, p. 92). In other words, it is Vattimo’s wedding of the idea of *kenosis* to postmodern hermeneutics and the death of metaphysics which constitutes his novelty.

To what extent is Vattimo right in his estimation? Altizer has certainly acknowledged Nietzsche’s influence concerning the idea of the death of God in his early books, as a thinking whose nihilism has helped shape the modern historical consciousness, the explanation for which ultimately being the second *kenosis* to which Altizer referred. As for Heidegger’s influence on Altizer, Ward mentions in an introductory section to Altizer’s essay in a volume which he was editing, ‘Heidegger is mentioned briefly’ by Altizer, but not dealt with at length (Ward, 2005, p. 428). However, his essay entitled ‘The Self-Saving of God’, which appeared in the *Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* under the ‘Heideggerian’ heading, constitutes arguably Altizer’s first concerted engagement with Heidegger’s thought. Nevertheless, while Altizer writes Vattimo-esque sentences such as ‘Heidegger can know that the realization that ‘God is dead’ is not atheism but rather

‘ontotheology,’ and an ontotheology in which both metaphysics and nihilism are fulfilled.’ (Altizer, 2005, p. 434), Altizer reads Heidegger through Hegel. The continuing influence of Hegel is clear when he talks about the ‘event’ (to draw on Heidegger’s terminology) of the self-saving of God through the transcendence of God becoming completely actualised in its immanence (Altizer, 2005, p. 441). Altizer is not dealing with hermeneutics when considering the death of God, even after bringing Heidegger into the equation, whereas Vattimo is.

Conclusion

Gianni Vattimo’s philosophy of Christianity does resemble Thomas J. J. Altizer’s theology at the surface level. The use of terms such as ‘*kenosis*’ and ‘death of God’, the influence of thinkers such as Nietzsche and Joachim of Fiore, and the idea of the historical unfolding of the weakening of God are all shared features of their thought. However, whereas Altizer is a radical theologian, one has to remember that Vattimo is a philosopher who is interested in hermeneutics. Unlike Altizer, Vattimo does not want to talk about a being called God, even if it is to say, like Altizer has done, that this being has been emptied into the world; to do so would be to betray his Nietzschean principle that ‘there are no facts, only interpretations’. While Altizer, too, is a self-proclaimed nihilist, his nihilism comes not from the plausibility of hermeneutics as being the only relevant philosophy in the infinite plurality of interpretations in a late-modern Western society, but from a conviction that the Absolute has emptied himself into the world effecting ‘the collapse of any meaning or reality lying beyond the newly discovered radical immanence of modern man’ (Altizer, 1967, p. 22). More than this, for Vattimo to pronounce definitively on what has happened to God would be to reach back into the modern era and create another univocal interpretation of history, something he wants to avoid. Instead, he sees the hermeneutical plurality which has opened up in late-modernity as being the result, not of the metaphysical God’s being emptying into the world, but the message of the weakening of God gradually penetrating the consciousness of the West, announcing itself to the late-modern person in the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger. All these aspects of Vattimo’s thought show that he is not a Hegelian, or at the very least not a Hegelian in the manner assumed by Scigliano.

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