

Gianteresio Vattimo, 1936–2023: *In Memoriam*

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Over the course of fifty years, Gianni Vattimo was a friend, teacher, and adversary for me. I must resist the temptation to speak here of my own memories of him in order to provide readers of this brief essay with what I think is destined to endure after Vattimo's death, the essence of which can be found in the collection of his writings entitled *Scritti filosofici e politici* (Philosophical and Political Writings).¹

In his work Vattimo articulates, first and foremost, a philosophy of history that leads in the opposite direction of Augustine's. For the latter, the city of man, which the philosopher-saint saw as running out of time and on the verge of ruin, was preparing the way for the advent of the city of God. Vattimo, on the other hand, argues for precisely the contrary. If the city of God, with its otherworldly certainties and unshakable foundations, is in decline, it is not under the weight of particular historical circumstances or the barbarian invasions, but thanks specifically to the modern world, with its core principles of enlightenment and science.

"God is dead": such is the fundamental credo of modernity. When faced with this recognition, the most common response is that at this point we find ourselves in the realm of what is solely human. According to the secularizing philosophers of the generation prior to Vattimo, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, we have been left on our own by God, and now exist in a world in which there is only humanity. Alternately, according to Christianizing philosophers of the twentieth century such as Luigi Pareyson, who was Vattimo's teacher, we need not only to understand fully the tragedy of this death, but to restore the presence of God, who is however no longer to be thought of in terms of his triumph but rather his fall.

The singularity and uniqueness of Vattimo's choice of a third way are at the heart of his radical philosophical originality as well as of his inimitable personality, with its blend of tenderness, irony, and melancholy. God is dead, and nothing can bring him back to us, but humanity is not the only player left on the field. Accompanying us are a *memory*, a *process* and a mode of *progress*, which together offer a sense of our era and of its philosophical thought.

This memory is the fact that, although dying, God has remained on the horizon of our world. The philosophers writing in the age of Eurocentrism were mistaken to imagine globalization as the transmission of the Christian God through time and across nations. Rather, we are left with the memory of something that was and no longer is, but whose absence haunts us like a ghost; this can take many forms, first and foremost that of a sense of guilt in those members of humankind who, in the name of God, once claimed the right to dominate the world.²

This process is known as "secularization," a term that was originally employed to refer to the conversion of sacred buildings and objects to nonreligious uses. Little by little, it came to designate our collective taking leave of transcendence, which is at the heart of the philosophy of history articulated by Vattimo in the 1980s in such works as *La fine della modernità* (*The End of*

¹ Gianni Vattimo, *Scritti filosofici e politici* (Milan: La Nave di Teseo, 2021).

² See Gianni Vattimo, *Le avventure della differenza* (Milan: Garzanti, 1980) and *Al di là del soggetto* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981).

Modernity) and *La società trasparente* (*The Transparent Society*).³ The world of Christ the King was one in which everything was sacred, solid, and untouchable. The world of the dead God is instead a long farewell to the past—a process through which humankind seeks to free itself from the sacred and from the violence that the sacred requires, while acknowledging that there are no longer any absolutes. We did not kill God in order to replace him with the human, but rather in order to grasp that everything in the world is fragile, historical, and interpretable. Nothing is truly untouchable because, as Nietzsche (the philosopher that, along with Heidegger, counts most for Vattimo) contends, there are no facts but only interpretations.⁴

This mode of progress is the goal that humanity must set for itself in its attempt to cross this wasteland. Obviously enough, our recognition of the death of God is a condition that in itself is anything but euphoric. Nietzsche celebrated “the great bacchanalia of free spirits,” which may yet take place; but this does not differ from the sense of joy accompanying a shipwreck, insofar as it is very far from easy to live without foundations. It is like finding ourselves in quicksand, which from one moment to the next could swallow us up as we discover that we stand on nothing at all and are but one of the infinite possibilities of a history that has no beginning or end.

How can meaning be restored to human existence in a world without absolutes? Certainly not by creating new or alternative absolutes: this is the reason that Vattimo always opposed the cult of science, which in his eyes figures as the secular surrogate of lost transcendence. What is needed is an altogether different movement that does not substitute a new idol for the old one. Instead, we should recognize the positive dimension of freedom in our judgments, behavior, and choices—a freedom arising from the collapse of a wall much older and stronger than the Berlin Wall. Thus it is that, after the death of God, the destiny of secularized humanity has become a polytheism of values. This destiny, Vattimo contends, is not necessarily catastrophic. Unlike Nietzsche and many other thinkers, Vattimo confers a positive value to nihilism for this very reason. Nihilism is not only humanity’s advance toward nothingness, but its emancipation from a being, from a God or from a foundation that is too great a burden for us.⁵

Obviously, in order to build a new world, it is not enough to bid farewell the old one, and here Vattimo’s thought—like that of many other philosophers of his era (I am thinking in particular of Foucault and Derrida)—encounters its greatest difficulty. A deconstruction must always be a prelude to a reconstruction. Thus Foucault, for example, after declaring the death of the human and reducing truth to power, worked intensively in the final years of his scholarly life to re-found ethics and truth through the study of the ancients. Vattimo instead, after attempting to re-found hermeneutics on the basis of ethics, took a different route in returning to Catholicism as well as to communism, at precisely the moment in which the latter seemed to have vanished from the political horizon.⁶

³ Gianni Vattimo, *La fine della modernità* (Milan: Garzanti, 1985) and *La società trasparente* (Milan: Garzanti, 1989).

⁴ On the extreme positions that may be derived from the assertion “there are no facts but only interpretations,” see Gianni Vattimo, *Addio alla verità* (Milan: Meltemi, 2009) and *Della realtà* (Milan: Garzanti, 2012). On Heidegger, see *Essere, storia e linguaggio in Heidegger* (Turin: Filosofia, 1963); *Poesia e ontologia* (Milan: Mursia, 1968); *Introduzione ad Heidegger* (Rome: Laterza, 1971). On Nietzsche, see *Ipotesi su Nietzsche* (Turin: Giappichelli, 1967); *Il soggetto e la maschera* (Milan: Bompiani, 1974); *Introduzione a Nietzsche* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1985); *Dialogo con Nietzsche: saggi 1961–2000* (Milan: Garzanti, 2019).

⁵ This is one of the keys to Vattimo’s philosophy. See, among others, Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilismo ed emancipazione: etica, politica e diritto*, ed. Santiago Zabala (Milan: Garzanti, 2003) and *Essere e dintorni* (Milan: La Nave di Teseo, 2018).

⁶ I refer here to his *Etica dell’interpretazione* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1989) and *Oltre l’interpretazione* (Rome: Laterza, 1994).

Although it may appear at first glance to constitute a paradox, this is by no means the case. As is made explicit in his *Crede di credere (Belief)*, the philosopher was surely attracted to Catholicism for a number of reasons, such as its deployment of ritual without myth as well as its accommodating attitude and lack of absolutes, which only somewhat paradoxically made it the best ally of secularization.⁷ In Vattimo's interpretation, Catholicism is first and foremost a tradition and a way of life, far more so than a system of positive dogmas and absolute beliefs. In so many words, Catholicism is the historical religion par excellence, and therefore the faith most suited to re-orient humanity after the trauma of the death of God.⁸

In communism, Vattimo sought instead a doctrine of redemption and brotherhood for the marginalized and downtrodden of the modern world.⁹ He once wrote that, for him, communism was the necessary outcome in the development of "weak thought" (*il pensiero debole*), a term that served as the title of a widely read anthology that Vattimo co-edited with Pier Aldo Rovatti in 1983.¹⁰ In the evolution of Vattimo's philosophy, weak thought was to transform itself into the "thought of the weak." Nevertheless, it is important to note here that he adhered to this idealized communism only after real communism had come to the end of its historical trajectory, and essentially for the same reasons that had led to his return to Catholicism.

Indeed, in neither case—at least in Vattimo's eyes—was it a matter of a superior sort of doctrine. Rather, both were cults that seemed to him to be destined for a lengthy twilight, in whose ever-lengthening shadows humanity might find a possible pathway to follow, though this would not be obligatory for one and all. In the growing darkness there might be some clue, he thought, pointing to a path along which to advance after the sunset of all absolutes. As was the case for deconstruction, which was practiced under the sign of weakness, that is to say, through interpretation and relativization, rather than through iconoclasm and head-on confrontation, for Vattimo any possible reconstruction would take the mild and nonmythic form of recovery of these two religions that were in themselves far from triumphant.

The essential signature of Vattimo's thought and teaching is this endless flight from absolutes and from violence. It is not merely a theory, but the reflection of life as he lived it. We should keep in mind, however, that his was not a tranquil and pacific existence; on the contrary, his years were full of personal tragedies and profound grief, as well as contradictions that he lived out at great personal cost.¹¹ If Pier Paolo Pasolini (for example) chose to bear witness to, and to be the public bearer of, similarly deep wounds, Vattimo instead chose to keep these largely to himself. He built an entire edifice of thought in order to exorcise such suffering, gesturing toward various means for the human subject to co-exist peacefully with itself and with other humans.

I would like to conclude these brief remarks with an anecdote that I think captures the spirit of Gianni Vattimo's thought and life. I was a little older than twenty, and he was in his early forties, when one day another student who was a friend of mine said to the two of us: "People really should

⁷ Gianni Vattimo, *Crede di credere* (Milan: Garzanti, 1996).

⁸ See Gianni Vattimo, *Dopo la cristianità: per un cristianesimo non religioso* (Milan: Garzanti, 2002); Vattimo and Richard Rorty, *Il futuro della religione*, ed. Santiago Zabala (Milan: Garzanti, 2005); Vattimo and René Girard, *Verità o fede debole? Dialogo su cristianesimo e relativismo*, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello (Massa: Transeuropa Edizioni, 2006); and Vattimo and John D. Caputo, *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁹ See Gianni Vattimo, *Il socialismo ossia l'Europa* (Turin: Trauben, 2004); *Ecce comu: come si ri-diventa ciò che si era* (Rome: Fazi, 2007); and Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Pier Aldo Rovatti and Gianni Vattimo, eds., *Il pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983).

¹¹ See above all Gianni Vattimo and Piergiorgio Paterlini, *Non essere Dio: un'autobiografia a quattro mani* (Reggio Emilia: Aliberti Editore, 2006).

be discouraged from reading Rilke's *Duino Elegies* because they cause such pain in the reader." I had recently graduated from Catholic secondary school and wanted to display an attitude reflecting independence of mind, so I said that his words smacked of censorship, of putting Rilke's work on the Index of Forbidden Books. To which Vattimo replied only: "Sometimes one does things, not in order to censor, but to protect oneself from pain." The lightness of weak thought consists precisely in this attempt to "make us safe," as today we might speak of natural catastrophes, from the crushing burden left to us by the death of God.