

INCARNATION AND “DE-CARNATION” IN THE HERMENEUTICS OF GIANNI VATTIMO

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SUMMARY: 1. *The History of Christianity as a Story of Incarnation.* 2. *The Hermeneutical “De-carnation” of the Incarnation.* 3. *The Encounter between Phenomenology and Hermeneutics under the Aspect of Incarnation.*

INTRODUCTION

How to bring together two great eschatologies of modern and post-modern philosophy: Hegel’s, with his triumphant dialectical interpretation of (the course of) history, and Heidegger’s, with his radical historicity of Being, which modestly awaits its gratuitous “Geschick”? It seems that Vattimo succeeded in devising a peculiar synthesis of the two, as he also designed a specific interpretation of history – one with an inverted Hegelian telos, which substituted the strong Logos and persistent Being with the process of their inevitable dissolution; of their continuous “weakening”. Of course, this synthesis was only made possible by betraying both thinkers: Hegel’s philosophy was deprived of “its peak, of the absolute spirit”,¹ while Heidegger’s thinking of Being, in contrast, was overloaded with a teleology which is foreign to the “Ereignis” and historicity of Being. However, Vattimo believes there was good reason to bring Hegel and Heidegger together, namely their common Christian heritage. Although the idea of an essential interweaving of Western philosophy with the Christian message came late to Vattimo’s mind,² when it did, it became a powerful interpretative tool to understand both philosophy and Christianity. For him, the present state of philosophical thought has been marked by the decline of metaphysics and the rise of hermeneutics. Both the former and the latter are not considered to be disciplines of philosophy, but rather complex historical phenomena which characterise modes of thinking in a certain age. Vattimo’s central thesis concerns an intrinsic connection between Christianity and the emer-

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¹ M. G. WEISS, *Gianni Vattimo. Einführung*, Passagen, Wien 2003, p. 173.

² L. D’ISANTO, *Introduction*, in G. VATTIMO, *Belief*, trans. L. D’Isanto and D. Webb, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999, p. 8.

gence of our current hermeneutical age. He writes: “Ontological hermeneutics [...] and the end of the metaphysics of presence [...] spring from the action of the Christian message throughout the history of Western civilisation. They are interpretations that ‘secularize’ this message in the constructive, positive sense of the term”.³

What, then, is Vattimo’s understanding of Christianity, which allows him to not only draw parallels between the history of the Christian message and the ascent of hermeneutic philosophy, but also to equate both of them as virtually one single historical development? At the core of Vattimo’s interpretation of Christianity lies the message of incarnation.⁴ This means that the Christian God did not remain in the heights of his transcendence; in the splendour of his unattainable beyond, but rather that he descended into the immanence of the world. He took on flesh and became man. However, our knowledge of his incarnation is based on the message that has been transmitted in the Christian proclamation, and has become the story which has overwhelmingly influenced the history of the Western world. In the first part of this paper I will examine the role of incarnation within Vattimo’s interpretation of Christianity. In the second part I will point to the paradox that emerges in Vattimo’s hermeneutical approach – that the incarnation should not be taken literally, as it is in itself an interpretation. This leads us to the general question of how to conceive of the relation between understanding, which seems to be something spiritual, and understanding’s rootedness in the bodily experience, which is associated with materiality. Or, to put it differently, what is the status of hermeneutics and its relation to the “incarnated” experience? We can even go so far as to see the question of incarnation, understood in a wider sense, as the bone of contention between phenomenology (related to embodied experience) and hermeneutics (related to a potentially disembodied, “de-carnated” understanding). In the third part I will expand my criticism of Vattimo to include some general questions regarding the limits of hermeneutics and the need for an “incarnated” phenomenological intuition. If Vattimo initially exploits the Christian idea of incarnation to promote his version of a radically “spiritualised” hermeneutics, I intend to show the opposite: the question of incarnation in the wider sense of the word represents a serious epistemological challenge not only for Vattimo, but for every hermeneutics which relies on the methodological primacy of (the act of) understanding.

³ G. VATTIMO, *After Christianity*, trans. L. D’Isanto, Columbia University Press, New York 2002, pp. 66-67.

⁴ G. VATTIMO, *The Trace of the Trace*, in J. DERRIDA and G. VATTIMO (eds.), *Religion*, trans. D. Webb, Polity Press, Cambridge 1998, pp. 79-94, p. 92; G. VATTIMO, *Belief*, trans. L. D’Isanto and D. Webb, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999, p. 38.

1. THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY AS A STORY OF INCARNATION

For Vattimo, Christianity is a religion like no other. In fact, it is a religion that brings an end to the traditional understanding of religion itself. Traditionally, religion is bound to a divine transcendence, to an extramundane power, one with which man tries to “re-connect” (religare). Religious rituals and practices aim to bridge the gap between the transcendent sacred and the worldly profane. In Christianity, however, God himself renounces his transcendent status and enters into the immanence of the world. For Vattimo, this is the kernel of the doctrine of incarnation. The incarnation is first and foremost an act of “kenosis”, and Vattimo uses the two concepts almost synonymously. Eternal, infinite, and almighty God abnegated his power; he “emptied Himself (Greek: *ekenosen*), taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man” (Phil 2:7). The most profound meaning of this self-abasement, or self-exhaustion of God is love (or charity). Renouncing his power and strength, the Christian God once and for all dismisses what Vattimo, influenced by the writings of René Girard,⁵ calls the god of natural religion.⁶ Natural religion is based on the separation of the transcendent and sacred god from the world; his absolute power is a potential source of violence. The incarnation of the Christian God, in contrast, shows his solidarity with men, no longer calling them servants, but “friends” (John 15:15). Jesus reveals to his disciples everything that he heard from his Father, so there are no secrets left. If transcendence is associated with some unattainable knowledge or absolute mystery, the incarnated Word of God signifies the translation of this transcendent “sacramental” dimension into the language of the world and its immanence. There is no Derridean “secret of the non-secret”, just as there is no transcendence that would resist its translation into the immanence of understanding and interpretation.

In Vattimo’s interpretation, incarnation – elevated to a central interpretative key or “principle”⁷ – has two main characteristics. First, it stands for a kenotic “self-weakening” of God, and this gesture becomes the prototype of all weakening; of “weak thought”, as such. God abdicates his status of abso-

⁵ Regarding Girard, Vattimo says: «It was he who re-Christianized me (albeit in my own way), it was with him that I began to think that it might be possible to bind weakening, secularization, and Christianity closely together» (G. VATTIMO, with P. PATERLINI, *Not being God. A Collaborative Autobiography*, trans. W. McCuaig, Columbia University Press, New York 2009, p. 150). However, there are profound differences between the two thinkers, as Girard rejects Vattimo’s relativist notion of truth (G. VATTIMO and R. GIRARD, *Christianity, Truth and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue*, P. ANTONELLO (ed.), trans. W. McCuaig, Columbia University Press, New York 2010).

⁶ G. VATTIMO, *Belief*, cit., p. 34.

⁷ C. DOTOLÒ, *La teologia fondamentale davanti alle sfide del «Pensiero debole» di G. Vattimo*, LAS, Roma 1999, p. 410.

lute foundation in order to dismiss any kind of foundational thinking which would claim to be in possession of the first principle. Vattimo's notion of "weakening" is largely interchangeable with Derrida's notion of "deconstruction", and both share the same ethical criticism of strong metaphysical thinking.⁸ Incarnation is a doctrine of a deconstructed God, and therewith a deconstruction of any further attempt to attain a god-like fundament of thinking and reality. The incarnation of God can also be seen as an act of God's self-annihilation: instead of the self-complacent plenitude of his transcendent Being, he instead chose the "nothingness" of the contingent flesh. Herein lies the reason for Vattimo's positive consideration of nihilism. According to Vattimo, Nietzsche's nihilism, which is closely connected to his annihilation of metaphysics, is not really opposed to Christianity. Christianity is not "Platonism for the masses", privileging the after-world at the expense of this world. Rather, it is the Christian belief in incarnation that made the critique of metaphysics possible – and for this reason Vattimo regards Nietzsche's philosophy as a late echo of the Christian message. Vattimo also claims that he found his way back to Christianity through Nietzsche and Heidegger (and not by opposing them)⁹. According to Vattimo, the meaning of nihilism lies in its continuous efforts to weaken, as it constantly unmasks strong metaphysical pretensions, thus diminishing the potential of violence that accompanies them.¹⁰

The second characteristic of the incarnation is its relation to the world, or its "secularisation". Instead of the usual sense of this word, which emphasises an opposition between the secular and the religious, Vattimo sees secularisation as a phenomenon that belongs to the very essence of Christianity, and as its ultimate goal. The incarnation of God signifies his descent into the "saeculum" utilising both basic meanings of this Latin word: into the world and into a historical age. The act of incarnation is *ipso facto* the first act of secularisation: God "secularised" himself by entering the world and its history. But, what is the positive meaning of secularisation, the meaning of "cur

⁸ Vattimo is critical towards some aspects of Derrida's deconstruction (G. VATTIMO, *The Adventures of Difference. Philosophy after Nietzsche and Heidegger*, trans. C. P. Blamires and T. Harrison, Polity Press, Cambridge 1993, pp. 137-147). For more about the similarities and differences between Derrida's and Vattimo's approaches to religion, see G. BORRADORI, *Postmodern Salvation. Gianni Vattimo's Philosophy of Religion*, in S. BENSO and B. SCHROEDER (eds.), *Between Nihilism and Politics. The Hermeneutics of Gianni Vattimo*, SUNY Press, New York 2010, pp. 135-148, p. 146f.

⁹ G. VATTIMO, *After Christianity*, cit., p. 3.

¹⁰ G. VATTIMO, *The End of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, trans. J. R. Snyder, Polity Press, Cambridge 1988. G. VATTIMO, *Nihilism as Emancipation*, in L. CHIESA and A. TOSCANO (eds.), *The Italian Difference. Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*, Re-Press, Melbourne 2009, pp. 31-35.

Deus homo"? For Vattimo, it is the message of love, or charity.¹¹ The goal of Christianity is the incarnation of love (charity), which should become a lived reality among people; one which should permeate the whole world and thus fully "secularise" itself. Vattimo understands love in opposition to violence, and actually defines love as non-violence.¹² The powerful god of natural religion is essentially violent, and Vattimo agrees with Girard that it was the figure of Christ which ended the violent logic of scapegoating.¹³ However, Vattimo goes even further and accuses every kind of strong thinking of being potentially violent: he regards metaphysics as the philosophical counterpart of natural religion. Metaphysics not only represents an inauthentic way of existence in the "forgottenness of Being", but is also ethically questionable at a very basic level. The metaphysical understanding of Being as presence (the "ontology of actuality"¹⁴), and the notion of an absolute, unequivocal truth reveal themselves as violent in the process of social conversation between different interpreters. The belief in a metaphysical truth which matters to someone more than a respectful and friendly relationship to a fellow human (*amicus Plato, magis amica veritas* – as a paraphrase of *Nichomachean Ethics* 1096a, 15) is the very source of violence, and a negation of love.¹⁵ If metaphysics is the philosophical counterpart of natural religion, hermeneutics is the philosophical counterpart of Christianity and its message of love.

Vattimo also introduces a parallelism between the historical emergence of hermeneutics and the history of Christianity. Additionally, they should be regarded as one single course of history, unifying, in a similar vein as Hegel's, the history of the world and the history of salvation. The Christian doctrine of incarnation not only made hermeneutics possible, but also indispensable. There are no transcendent and eternal ideas which can escape their "incarnation" in the historical event of understanding within the horizon of the world. Incarnation implies the radical contingency of every understanding. Every understanding is an interpretation, and we have to reverse the tradi-

¹¹ G. VATTIMO, *Belief*, cit., p. 64.

¹² For Vattimo, love (or charity) is the only principle which cannot be deconstructed. Yet, this principle does not have a positive definition, but rather is defined "per negationem": as negation of every power (of every "principate") with inherent violence. In fact, this is a methodological necessity of Vattimo's "weakening" approach, which intends to unmask and to dissolve any metaphysical claim.

¹³ R. PETKOVŠEK, *Nasilje in etika križa v luči eksistencialne analitike in mimetične teorije (Violence and Ethics of the Cross in the Light of Existential Analytics and Mimetic Theory)*, «Bogoslovni vestnik (Theological Quarterly)», 74/4 (2014), pp. 575-592.

¹⁴ G. VATTIMO, *Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality. A Biographical-Theoretical Interview with Luca Savarino and Federico Vercellone*, «Iris», 1 (2009), pp. 311-350.

¹⁵ G. VATTIMO, *Farewell to Truth*, trans. W. McCuaig, Columbia University Press, New York 2011, p. xxxv.

tional metaphysical superiority of unconditional and immutable truth over finite and contingent interpretation. Similar to salvation, which Christianity brought about by overcoming the violence of natural religion, hermeneutics brings forth the emancipation of interpretation from the violence of strong metaphysical truth.¹⁶ The overcoming of metaphysics by its main protagonists Nietzsche and Heidegger, who paved the way for hermeneutics, is, according to Vattimo, a salvific event in history; it is a late fruit of the Christian message of love and emancipation. It is therefore of no surprise that Vattimo nourishes sympathies for Joachim of Fiore and his division of history into three stages which succeed each other in terms of teleological development. The latest stage is the age of the Holy Spirit, where there is no strong authority (of the Church) dominating over the truth of the Christian teaching, but a community of believers who are directly inspired by the Holy Spirit and interpret the Christian message by means of non-violent communication among themselves. Hermeneutics is the secular name for this last stage of the history of salvation. The weakening of every strong truth and of all centres of power which would seek to be exclusive interpreters of the truth has a liberating effect: in accepting the finitude of his own interpretation, every participant in a social discourse is open to the alternative interpretations of his fellow humans, thus making a non-violent coexistence within a pluralist society possible. Such a peaceful coexistence, or what Vattimo calls “postmodern democracy”, is nothing but secularised Christian love becoming – if we use the language of Hegel – the “substance of the state”.

Hegel also plays a decisive role in Vattimo’s interpretation of incarnation, as Hegel radicalised Luther’s reflection on the death of God on Good Friday, and gave it a new, speculative interpretation. It was not only Jesus Christ, but God himself who died on the cross, after which he was “resurrected” in the community of believers – as the Holy Spirit. There is no “ontological” God besides the one proclaimed by the community.¹⁷ However, even if Vattimo sympathises with the “hermeneutical event” of the Holy Spirit, he does not

¹⁶ G. VATTIMO, *Metaphysics, Violence, Secularization*, in G. BORRADORI (ed.), *Recoding Metaphysics. The New Italian Philosophy*, trans. B. Spackman, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1988, pp. 45-61; G. VATTIMO, *Toward a Nonreligious Christianity*, in J. CAPUTO and G. VATTIMO, *After the Death of God*, J. W. ROBBINS (ed.), Columbia University Press, New York 2007, pp. 27-46; L. D’ISANTO, *Gianni Vattimo’s Hermeneutics and the Trace of Divinity*, «Modern Theology», 10 (1994), pp. 361-364.

¹⁷ “God of the Bible” should be interpreted in the sense of *genitivus objectivus*, i.e. God who is an “effect” of the Bible and not its author (G. VATTIMO, *Abschied. Theologie, Metaphysik und die Philosophie heute*, Turia & Kant, Wien 2003, p. 106). He “is not a subject outside” (R. RORTY and G. VATTIMO, *The Future of Religion*, Columbia University Press, New York 2005, p. 77), but rather a message of the tradition; of “the story of the spirit” (G. VATTIMO, P. SEQUERI, G. RUGGERI, *Interrogazioni sul Cristianesimo. Cosa possiamo ancora attenderci dal Vangelo?*, Castelveccchi, Roma 2013, p. 80 [First edition: Edizioni Lavoro, Roma 2000]).

share Hegel’s dialectical logic, as he is suspicious of every logos which would assume a metaphysical status. Hegel’s absolute spirit should likewise be subjected to weakening or deconstruction. The meaning of history is a never-ending process of weakening, which equals the never-ending liberation and emancipation of man from every form of violence. The ideal society for Vattimo is a radically hermeneutical one: it is a community of interpreters engaged in an ongoing conversation (not to be equated with dialogue), in which they renounce any strong claims and give their attention to those who are weak and powerless.

Christianity is therefore a religion which proclaims a complete incarnation or secularisation of God’s transcendence, and leaves no metaphysical God behind. It is “a nonreligious Christianity”,¹⁸ or as Bonhoeffer would say – a “religionless Christianity”. It is for this very reason that it has a universal vocation.¹⁹ Its mission for the whole world lies in its deconstructive message, which seeks to submit all religions to the process of weakening. Christianity is a herald of the “Aufhebung” of religion as such (in the Hegelian sense of both abolition and transformed conservation), and the promoter of a hermeneutical democracy of love and non-violence.

2. THE HERMENEUTICAL “DE-CARNATION” OF THE INCARNATION

In the word “incarnation” the central notion is that of the “flesh” (Lat. caro). The Word became flesh – this central sentence of Christianity expresses the shocking paradox of God assuming the heaviness and opaqueness of a human body and its materiality. The two dimensions, the human bodily nature and the divine transcendent Logos, are inseparable in Jesus Christ, and they form the fundament of the Christological dogma. The importance of concrete human bodily existence is central to the biblical tradition, and opposed to Greek metaphysics with its tendency towards a dualism between the body and soul. Even if Vattimo considers the phenomenon of incarnation in Christianity to be of paramount importance, at the same time he regards it from his own, hermeneutical perspective. We cannot speak of the incarnation without admitting that we are always solely dealing with the *message* of the incarnation. There is no “fact” of the incarnation and our subsequent belief in it: we only have a narrated story.²⁰ Here, Vattimo seems to introduce a circular argu-

¹⁸ G. VATTIMO, *Toward a Nonreligious Christianity*, cit., p. 27.

¹⁹ G. VATTIMO, *After Christianity*, cit., p. 97-99.

²⁰ Guarino observes that, for Vattimo, “The Incarnation, then, cannot be taken as an historical event, as a dogmatic, metaphysical fact. Nonetheless, we live, intensely so, within the long shadow of its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, its effective history” (T. G. GUARINO, *Vattimo and Theology*, Continuum, London-New York 2009, p. 99). In his book *Beyond Interpretation* Vattimo even uses the phrase: “the Christian myth of the incarnation of God” (G. VATTI-

ment: Christianity has made hermeneutics possible and hermeneutics (as its historical completion) is the key to properly understanding Christianity. We could translate this logic into the context of incarnation: incarnation raises weakening to the principle of all reality, and should itself be weakened accordingly – in the sense of not being understood literally, or referring to a historical fact or real event. One of Vattimo's most quoted phrases from Nietzsche is: "There are no facts, only interpretations",²¹ which Vattimo further weakens: "And this, too, is an interpretation!" Vattimo is generally against a literal interpretation of the Holy Scripture, and demands its *spiritual* interpretation. He stresses, "the word *spirit* (*pneuma*) means etymologically breath, wind, blowing, something volatile, fleeting",²² and this resistance to any fixation (of some "strong" reality) coincides with the process of weakening. There is no one truth, no singular, objective fact (or the objectivity of letters), that could serve as the absolute reference of meaning. There is only freedom of the spirit, which blows where it will, and reveals the constitution of meaning as a free event of interpretation.

Vattimo extends the "spiritualization of the biblical text's meaning" to "the spiritualization of the sense of reality itself".²³ He understands hermeneutics as a spiritual liberation and emancipation from the yoke of any ontology founded on fixed and strong structures of Being. Ontology itself must be "spiritualised"; i.e. Being is nothing but an event in language. This is, according to Vattimo,²⁴ the meaning of Gadamer's famous sentence,²⁵ and there is even more: the meaning of any "thing" (*Seiendes*) has no transcendent, "objective" measure; there is no "language of things",²⁶ but only the spiritual production of meaning in the free event of interpretation. A spiritualisation of the entirety of reality privileges the use of metaphors. Metaphoric language, with its aesthetic creativity of meaning, dismisses the priority of a univocal meaning of reality. The ideal of univocity, still present in science and in so-called "philosophical realism", is for Vattimo – and in full accordance with Heidegger – what remains of metaphysics, and this philosophical realism is the

MO, *Beyond Interpretation. The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. D. Webb, Polity Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 54 [1994, in Italian]).

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 2; G. VATTIMO, *After Christianity*, cit., p. 49.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 52.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

²⁴ G. VATTIMO, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, edited with an introduction by F. D'Agostini, trans. W. McCuaig, Columbia University Press, New York 2010, p. 57.

²⁵ "Being that can be understood is language" (H.-G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition, trans. rev. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, Continuum, London-New York 2004, p. 470).

²⁶ J. GRONDIN, *Vattimo's Latinization of Hermeneutics. Why Did Gadamer Resist Postmodernism?*, in S. Zabala (ed.), *Weakening Philosophy. Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 2007, p. 212.

main opponent of hermeneutics today. Together with “spiritualisation”, Vattimo also uses another term to describe the hermeneutic liberation of reality: the word “lightening”.²⁷ In contrast to the “heavy” structures of metaphysical Being, hermeneutics effectuate a lightening (It. *alleggerimento*); a mitigation, or a relief, from the heavy burden of realist ontology. There is a parallelism between the oppression of the letter, “the literalism of the sacred texts (the fetish of fundamentalism of all sorts)”, and “the world’s materiality”,²⁸ both in the fundamentalism of philosophical realism and under the Marxist aspect of the ruling class having control over the interpretation of the material conditions of social life. It is clear that even materiality is not exempted from interpretation: hermeneutics carries out the important task of liberating man from the presumed objectivity of material reality and from the domination of its univocal meaning. In hermeneutics Vattimo sees a revolutionary potential which also has the ability to emancipate man in a socio-political sense, and thus can “lighten” the burden of his existence.²⁹

The term “lightening” fits well to describe the paradox of incarnation in Vattimo’s thought. Incarnation as descent into the materiality of the flesh would usually be associated with the heaviness of material embodiment; it would denote the opposite of the movement involved in spiritualisation. While the spirit floats where it will and experiences the lightness of freedom, the flesh, or lived embodiment, represents the heaviness of materiality and displays an original passivity which can never be totally overcome or fully alleviated. Incarnation in Christianity signifies this heaviness of being and wonders about its compatibility with the sovereignty of God. In Vattimo’s interpretation, the incarnation loses its heaviness, as it is in fact spiritualised: it is poeticised, receives a metaphorical meaning, and is liberated from understanding *à la lettre*. It is in this hermeneutic operation, where I see a “de-

²⁷ G. VATTIMO, *After Christianity*, cit., p. 53.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

²⁹ After finishing his book *Belief* and becoming a professional politician in 1999, Vattimo intensified his writings on the philosophical foundations of politics, “drawing the consequences of weak thought for (leftist) political action” (F. DEPOORTERE, *Christianity and Politics. A Biographical-Theoretical Reading of Gianni Vattimo and Alain Badiou*, in L. Boeve and C. Brabant (eds.), *Between Philosophy and Theology. Contemporary Interpretations of Christianity*, Ashgate, Farnham-Burlington 2010, pp. 193-212, p. 204). After *Nihilism and Emancipation* (G. VATTIMO, *Nihilism and Emancipation. Ethics, Politics, and Law*, S. Zabala (ed.), trans. W. McCuaig, Columbia University Press, New York 2004) he developed his concept and political ideal of “hermeneutic communism” (G. VATTIMO and S. ZABALA, *Hermeneutic Communism. From Heidegger to Marx*, Columbia University Press, New York 2011; G. VATTIMO, *Weak Communism?*, in C. DOUZINAS and S. ŽIŽEK (eds.), *The Idea of Communism*, Verso, London-New York 2010, pp. 205-207), which is not considered in opposition to, but rather in close alliance with the Christian message of liberation. For further details see B. Klun, *Vattimo’s Kenotic Interpretation of Christianity and Its Relevance for Postmodern Democracy*, «Annales. Series historia et sociologia», 27/2 (2017), pp. 407-416.

carnation” of what is professed to be incarnation. Vattimo’s understanding of incarnation is subjected to what I call “hermeneutical reduction”, which basically means reducing every phenomenon to its event in (or of) an understanding; to its meaning within an interpretation.³⁰ This reduction can be characterised by this inversion of the Johannine sentence: “The flesh became word.” There is nothing like the flesh, until it is understood, until it enters into language and becomes logos (word). Everything has to be brought back (reduco) to a spiritual meaning, which is at the same time the only Being – but Being without heavy structures, without pre-given determinations. This is Being as the “Ereignis” of freedom and the freedom of the “Ereignis”. Vattimo’s understanding of hermeneutics can evoke the association of an “unbearable lightness of Being”.

In Vattimo’s interpretation of Christianity there is no sensitivity for the traditional (Vattimo would add: metaphysical) belief in the incarnation.³¹ We should not forget that the message of the incarnation receives its full meaning after Christ’s death and resurrection. One could defend Vattimo by arguing that the resurrection is precisely this kind of a spiritual event; one which has nothing to do with the “objective” existence (or real appearance) of Christ. But, this is not the faith which was lived and professed by the early Christian community. Christ as God incarnate was understood in this way in accordance with the belief in his bodily resurrection. For Vattimo these events – Christ’s death and resurrection – play almost no role in his account of Christianity.³² What matters for him is the *message* which was brought by Christ, and which was spread to others after his death: the message of the loving God, who incarnated and abnegated himself in order to be “resurrected” in the secular fruits of his divine love.³³ Love (*caritas*) is in fact “divine”, since it cannot be weakened on its own. While everything can be subjected to weakening, only

³⁰ B. KLUN, *Der schwache Gott: Zu Vattimos hermeneutischer Reduktion des Christentums*, «Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie», 129/2 (2007), pp. 167-182.

³¹ Deibl admits that in Vattimo’s understanding of the incarnation the dimension of the flesh finds “no explicit consideration” (J. H. DEIBL, *Menschwerdung und Schwächung. Annäherung an ein Gespräch mit Gianni Vattimo*, Vienna University Press, V&R Unipress, Wien-Göttingen 2013, p. 184). Nevertheless, he believes that this dimension can be retrieved by considering the materiality of the *text* (of the incarnation).

³² Guarino rightly states: “The resurrection, in particular, appears to be absent from his thought and this is for good reason. For if the Incarnation/kenosis represents God’s ‘self-abasement’, the abandonment of power and transcendence, then the resurrection represents Christ’s reassertion of his transcendent divinity.” T. G. GUARINO, *Vattimo and Theology*, cit., p. 153.

³³ For further details on the role of Christ in Vattimo’s philosophy, see F. DEPOORTERE, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard, Slavoj Žižek*, T&T Clarke, London 2008. The author shows the proximity of Vattimo’s ideas to Thomas J. J. Altizer’s “God is dead” theology (*ibidem*, pp. 25-26).

love is undeconstructible. It is similar to Feuerbach, who would reverse the Johannine sentence “God is love” to the secularised version, “Love is God”.

Does Vattimo’s lightening of “heavy” Being lead to such a freedom of interpretation, that it knows no limits or determinations besides the commandment of love? Does the loss of an objective reference lead to the arbitrariness of hermeneutical meaning? No. Every interpretation, every event of meaning, is embedded in the horizon of history as a narrated story. Although Vattimo rejects “factuality” (the power of facts over interpretation), he very much accepts “facticity” in Heidegger’s sense of the word.³⁴ Our present creation of meaning takes place within a historically transmitted nexus of significance. Hermeneutical understanding is essentially historical, i.e. it is constituted within the horizon of possibilities which has been passed on by tradition. There is no way for human understanding to step out of history and assume an a-historical, a-temporal, or neutral stance. For this reason, the freedom of interpretation is finite and subjected to criteria, which impose themselves as an external measure. But, this external measure is not some external reality with brute facts. Rather, it is a history with its specific “story” (including its criteria of meaning) which we are immersed in. For Vattimo Christianity is *the* story of Western civilization and it determines our facticity. That is why “we cannot not call ourselves Christians” and why a Western atheist is still determined by the biblical God he negates. Vattimo fully accepts the hermeneutic circularity which Heidegger analyses in “Being and Time”,³⁵ and which becomes even more important in his later shift to the radical historicity of Being. Nevertheless, the finitude of our freedom does not diminish its authenticity and importance. For Vattimo, freedom is the central message of hermeneutics:³⁶ as a never-ending task of emancipation, and as a continuous process of weakening or “lightening” of heavy structures which oppress us in the form of a strong and authoritarian thinking.

Here, what I call the “de-carnation” of the Christian doctrine of incarnation,³⁷

³⁴ M. HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Harper&Row, New York 1962, p. 82.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 194-195.

³⁶ D. WEBB, *Vattimo’s Hermeneutics as a Practice of Freedom*, in S. Benso and B. Schroeder (eds.), *Between Nihilism and Politics. The Hermeneutics of Gianni Vattimo*, SUNY Press, New York 2010, pp. 47-62.

³⁷ Ulrich Engel, despite his sympathies with Vattimo’s philosophy (in the light) of kenosis, which he considers “compatible with the traditions of Christianity” (U. ENGEL, *Philosophy in Light of Incarnation: Gianni Vattimo on kenosis*, «New Blackfriars», 89 (2008), pp. 468-477, p. 477), critically admits that Vattimo, in his discourse on religion, “continuously suppresses” the dimension of the flesh and the materiality of sacramental acts (U. Engel, *Philosophie (im Licht) der Inkarnation, Zu Gianni Vattimos Religionsdiskurs im Zeitalter der Interpretation*, in G. VATTIMO, R. SCHRÖDER, U. ENGEL, *Christentum im Zeitalter der Interpretation*, T. Eggensperger (ed.), Passagen Verlag, Wien 2004, pp. 41-78, p. 68).

because of the reduction of the “flesh” (*caro*) to the “text” (message, interpretation), has a paradigmatic meaning for Vattimo’s conception of hermeneutics. I would venture the thesis that this “de-carnation”, in the broader sense of a specific hermeneutic reduction, is the main point of contention between hermeneutics and phenomenology. In the third and concluding part of this presentation, I will present some phenomenological objections to hermeneutic “de-carnation” and the need to rehabilitate the “flesh” and phenomenological “matter”. This will provide the basis for an expanded criticism not only of Vattimo’s reductive interpretation of Christian incarnation, but also of his philosophical conception of a radically de-carnated hermeneutics.

3. THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN PHENOMENOLOGY AND HERMENEUTICS UNDER THE ASPECT OF INCARNATION

Vattimo’s “spiritualisation” of hermeneutics can be traced back to Heidegger, who elevated hermeneutics from an art of understanding to an ontological status. The act of understanding is inseparable from the “act of being”. *Dasein* performs his “being” (existence) by means of *understanding this very being*, and vice versa: the way of understanding is *ipso facto* a manner of being. To “be” essentially means “understanding”, although being is also disclosed as affectivity and discourse. Early Heidegger’s phenomenological reduction introduces the “enactment sense” (*Vollzugssinn*),³⁸ which aims to overcome Husserl’s theoretical intentionality, and reveals the deepest layer of sense of every phenomenon in its lived meaning; in its “happening” or “enactment” in an individual’s factual life. Heidegger’s reduction consequently abolishes every transcendence: in order to have any meaning at all, a phenomenon must enter and “happen” (as a lived event) within the lived understanding of *Dasein*. But, even for *Dasein* there is no possibility of exiting from the flow (or historicity) of this performed identity between being and understanding. Husserl does not accept this inevitability. He is guided by the theoretical interest which sees in the reflective act of consciousness the possibility of detaching oneself from the flow of life (or of being) and to reach an understanding which does not coincide with this flow. This theoretical detachment enables Husserl to retain the traditional notion of transcendence (even if it is placed “in brackets”), while Heidegger reduces transcendence to the immanent temporal happening of Being. What is important for our argument is Heidegger’s transformation of Husserl’s phenomenology into hermeneutics; of a phenomenon into the event of understanding – and all this being interpreted by Vattimo under the influence of Nietzsche as a nihilistic weakening of transcendence. The true

³⁸ M. HEIDEGGER, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (1919/20), GA 58, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1992, p. 261.

world “has become a fable”; it has dissolved itself into a language-event, i.e. into a mere interpretation.

A question that should be raised is whether this process of “spiritualisation” is necessary for hermeneutics as such, and whether the abolishment of the transcendent referent is essential to it. These are, in fact, two separate questions – one on “spiritualisation” and the other on the question of transcendence – and I will first address the second. Jean Grondin distinguishes between nihilist and metaphysical interpretations of hermeneutics.³⁹ In his view, the classical idea of hermeneutics maintains the transcendent meaning of what is to be interpreted (*interpretandum*). Even if everything must give itself *through* interpretation and there is nothing outside of interpretation, the freedom of the interpreter (*interpretans*) is not boundless, but has to respond to some external criterion of meaning. Grondin believes that Gadamer does not give up the classical notion of truth as *adaequatio*,⁴⁰ as he is inclined to speak about the “language of the things” or the language of Being.⁴¹ Grondin thus rejects Vattimo’s nihilist interpretation of hermeneutics and criticizes Vattimo’s attempt to identify it with the process of weakening or deconstruction. However, while Grondin accuses Vattimo of excessive anti-metaphysics, John Caputo calls for a more radical hermeneutics⁴² and reproaches Vattimo for “how ‘strong’ the names of Christianity and the Incarnation remain in his thought”⁴³ and for not being deconstructive enough. Vattimo’s transposition of transcendence from ontology to history, and building up a strong narrative surrounding the history of Christianity and Western civilization – all this, he feels, leads to the reintroduction of metaphysics by means of a back door.⁴⁴ There is no room in radical hermeneutics for metaphysical transcendence, and the event – as a play on Derridean “*différance*” – has a much more subtle structure than Vattimo’s simplified appropriation of the Ereignis.

³⁹ J. GRONDIN, *Nihilistic or Metaphysical Consequences of Hermeneutics?*, in J. MALPAS and S. ZABALA (eds.), *Consequences of Hermeneutics. Fifty Years After Gadamer’s Truth and Methode*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2010, pp. 190-201.

⁴⁰ J. GRONDIN, *La fusion des horizons. La version gadamérienne de l’adaequatio rei et intellectus?*, «Archives de Philosophie», 68/3 (2005), pp. 401-418.

⁴¹ J. GRONDIN, *Vattimo’s Latinization of Hermeneutics*, cit., pp. 203-216, pp. 210-214. Another representative of contemporary hermeneutics who, contrary to Vattimo, advocates the primacy of “objectivity” (*Gegenständlichkeit*) and the need of “the hermeneutical rehabilitation of it”, is Günter Figal (G. FIGAL, *Objectivity. The Hermeneutical and Philosophy*, trans. T. D. George, SUNY Press, New York 2010, p. 107). Figal is critical towards modern philosophy precisely in the aspect which is acclaimed by Vattimo: the dissolution of objectivity or, as Figal puts it, “a large-scale enterprise of de-objectification” (*ibidem*, p. 108).

⁴² J. D. CAPUTO, *More Radical Hermeneutics. On Not Knowing Who We Are*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2000.

⁴³ J. D. CAPUTO, *Spectral Hermeneutics. On the Weakness of God and the Theology of the Event*, in J. CAPUTO and G. VATTIMO, *After the Death of God*, J. W. Robbins (ed.), Columbia University Press, New York 2007, pp. 47-85, p. 83.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 84.

What about the objection of “spiritualisation” within hermeneutics and its lack of sensitivity for carnal embodiment? The fact that this is an important issue for the debate surrounding hermeneutics is proven by Richard Kearney who advances the thesis on “carnal hermeneutics”. He seeks to reject the opposition of hermeneutic understanding to embodied sensibility, or of word to flesh. But, he goes about this through a radicalisation of interpretation, which needs to be traced back to our very carnal openness to the world. At the primordial level of our sensations and our embodied engagement in the world, we already perform interpretations.⁴⁵ There is an incarnation of understanding at the deepest level of our embodiment.

However, the act of understanding, even if it is a carnal and embodied one, still retains priority over the givenness of the flesh. At this point, a difference between hermeneutics and phenomenology becomes evident, even if this contraposition may entail a great deal of simplification. Phenomenology does not begin with understanding, but with the givenness of a phenomenon which gives itself not only through an intentional grasp, but also through intuition. There is a level of intuition which can never be suppressed or substituted by the intentional act of understanding. Even if Husserl develops his phenomenology in a transcendental way, he is still open to transcendent givenness on the intuitive level. This can be exemplified in the question of primal impression within his analysis of time-consciousness.⁴⁶ What is given in the primal impression is immediately subjected to the temporal horizon of retention and protention (and thus made available for the intentional grasp), but the very givenness of impression (beyond any causal or transcendental explanation) is still a paradoxical experience of the “flesh” before becoming the “word”. We know that Michel Henry takes up this point in his critique of Husserl and denounces the temporalisation of the primal impression as something secondary, and as the oblivion of the original givenness. The primal impression is life’s immanent auto-manifestation, which is non-horizontal, non-temporal, and non-intentional. It is an “impressional flesh”.⁴⁷ With Henry’s material phenomenology, we are on the opposite pole compared to Vattimo’s spiritualisation and “lightness” of Being. From these two thinkers the Christian doctrine of incarnation receives diametrically different interpretations. On one hand, there is only a historical message of incarnation, on the other there is a concrete and immediate experience of our own incarnatedness: everyone is a son of God in an a-historic bond with the incarnated Arch-Son

⁴⁵ R. KEARNEY, *The Wager of the Carnal Hermeneutics*, in R. KEARNEY and B. TREANOR (eds.), *Carnal Hermeneutics*, Fordham University Press, New York 2015, pp. 15-56, p. 17.

⁴⁶ E. HUSSERL, *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewußtseins (1893-1917)*, Husserliana x, Martinus Nijhoff, Den Haag 1966, p. 29.

⁴⁷ M. HENRY, *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair*, Seuil, Paris 2000, p. 83.

Jesus Christ.⁴⁸ But, Vattimo may call Derrida and his criticism of Husserl to his aid. It is known that Derrida “deconstructs” the primal impression of Husserl and, in contrast to Henry, radicalises its continuous sliding towards retention in a way which makes any presence or identity impossible.⁴⁹ Any discourse about immediate phenomenological givenness is a myth, a violent construction which should be unmasked by means of deconstruction. Vattimo would probably be sympathetic to this position, and would agree with the necessity of hermeneutic mediation for any kind of givenness, including any notion of primordial incarnation.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, phenomenological givenness cannot be done away with so easily. Jean-Luc Marion undertakes an attempt to place it in the centre of his phenomenological approach. In contrast to the hermeneutical approach, which situates every phenomenon within the already opened horizon of understanding, he looks for the possibility of the self-giving of phenomena, prior to any horizons or conditions of their understanding. It is almost by definition that we must be confronted with a givenness which surpasses our own intentions, otherwise there is no real possibility of reaching anything else but our own projections. Phenomenological reduction leads us back to givenness – not in the sense of intentionally constituted phenomena, but prior to their constitution: as what is giving itself before it is conceptually grasped by our intentionality. This is a paradoxical enterprise and requires a method (or better, a counter-method) of counter-intentionality.⁵¹ Marion shows that there are phenomena, which give themselves in such a way that they simply cannot be “contained” in the recipient’s understanding, since their givenness in intuition overflows the intention. These so-called saturated phenomena are – as Caputo rightly observes⁵² – a “heresy” for Husserl’s phenomenology, but Marion has good reasons to claim that the main vocation of phenomenology is to let phenomena to speak on their own behalf and not be subjected to any kind of transcendental conditions (including Husserl’s intentional cor-

⁴⁸ M. HENRY, *I am the Truth. Towards a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. S. Emanuel, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003, p. 112.

⁴⁹ J. DERRIDA, *La voix et le phénomène. Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, PUF, Paris 1967, pp. 71-74.

⁵⁰ For a detailed account of the discussion on the primal impression, and for an innovative solution of its paradoxes, see the contribution of Gallagher & Zahavi, in which the authors argue in favour of an *enactive* temporal structure of perceptual consciousness (S. GALLAGHER and D. ZAHAVI, *Primal Impression and Enactive Perception*, in V. Arstila and D. Lloyd (eds.), *Subjective Time. The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Temporality*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2014, pp. 83-99).

⁵¹ J.-L. MARION, *Being Given. Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. J.L. Kosky, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002, p. 7.

⁵² J. D. CAPUTO, *Jean-Luc Marion: “The Erotic Phenomenon”* (book review), «Ethics», 118/1 (2007), pp. 164-168.

relation). One of these paradoxical phenomena is our lived embodiment, our “flesh”,⁵³ but in addition to this there are three other types of these phenomena (icons, idols, and events). However, even these phenomena are dependent upon the flesh, since “[...] only the flesh reaches nonobjective phenomena. [...] The flesh exposes me to what *I* cannot constitute as an object”.⁵⁴

Why are we reaching so far out as to include Marion in our discussion of Vattimo? For the simple reason that Marion offers a phenomenological alternative to breaking out from Vattimo’s hermeneutical totality of the “unbearable lightness of being”. Givenness is able to give weight back to phenomena and their being – not in the sense of oppressive heaviness, but in the sense of “worthy, weighty”, which is the etymological sense of the Greek word “axioma”. Marion is open to hermeneutics; he recognises its important role, but he is only willing to accept hermeneutics *after* givenness.⁵⁵ Hermeneutics never comes first, but has to accept the “axiom” of givenness.⁵⁶ Givenness, however, is not a new form of metaphysics of presence, nor is it a new version of radical empiricism. Rather, it is an expression of the humility of our embodied or incarnated understanding: we are interpreters of what has been given to us “in its fleshly actuality [*in seiner leibhaften Wirklichkeit*]”,⁵⁷ and this intuitive givenness paradoxically surpasses the limits of our understanding. Because of this experience of saturated phenomena, including the flesh, it is of no surprise that Marion’s phenomenology remains open for God’s revelation, for the self-givenness of God. It is open for God’s incarnation with its own way of givenness, without being hermeneutically “de-carnated” as a historical message, or as a pure event of understanding.

We can therefore fully confront Vattimo’s interpretation of Christian in-

⁵³ J.-L. MARION, *In Excess. Studies in Saturated Phenomena*, trans. R. Horner and V. Beraud, Fordham University Press, New York 2002, p. 82.

⁵⁴ J.-L. MARION, *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. C. Gschwandtner et al., Fordham University Press, New York 2008, p. 150.

⁵⁵ J.-L. MARION, *In Excess*, cit., p. 33.

⁵⁶ In a similar vein, in his assessment of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of religion Michael Staudigl (M. STAUDIGL, *On Seizing the Source. Toward a Phenomenology of Religious Violence*, «International Journal of Philosophical Studies», 24/5 (2016), pp. 744-782) demonstrates the necessity of acknowledging “the experiential (pre-)givenness” (*ibidem*, p. 761). He shows that Ricoeur accepts instances of “an immediacy of the absolute without which there would be nothing to interpret”, and that “without it interpretation will forever be only an interpretation of interpretation” (P. RICOEUR, *The Hermeneutics of Testimony*, in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, trans. D. Stewart and C. E. Reagan, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1980, pp. 119-153, p. 144). Staudigl argues for the primacy of an embodied phenomenological experience and reproaches a purely “textual hermeneutics” with “a far-reaching dis-embodiment” (M. STAUDIGL, *On Seizing the Source*, cit., p. 762), or what I call here “de-carnation”.

⁵⁷ E. HUSSERL, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, Husserliana III/I, Martinus Nijhoff, Den Haag 1976, p. 51.

carnation, which entails a violent spiritualisation and a "de-carnation" of its original meaning, only if we take into consideration his overall philosophical stance and his radical conception of hermeneutics. For Vattimo, reality is dissolved into a play of interpretations and the Christian God incarnate is stylised into a spiritual form, a powerful metaphor, which epitomises the central idea of his weakening hermeneutics. However, it remains questionable if this hermeneutics can really achieve the hoped-for liberation of the spirit from the alleged oppression of the flesh and embodied existence. Despite Vattimo's attempt to eliminate the flesh (*caro*), not only from the notion of incarnation, but also from his spiritualised hermeneutics in general, it continues to haunt his hermeneutic philosophy by its irreducible otherness. This exposes the paradoxical nature of Vattimo's approach, which pleads for the ideal of non-violence, just to exclude, at the same time, and in a violent manner, any radical otherness or transcendence.

ABSTRACT · The idea of the incarnation as God's kenotic descent and renunciation of his transcendent status plays a central role in Gianni Vattimo's interpretation of Christianity. The self-weakening of the Christian God is intrinsically linked and structurally related to the historical emergence of (post)modern hermeneutics with its criticism of strong and of potentially violent metaphysical thinking. However, Vattimo's understanding of incarnation harbours a paradox, as the incarnation should not be taken in a literal sense, as it is itself an interpretation brought to us through the message of the Bible. Reduced to its spiritual meaning, the incarnation in Vattimo's approach undergoes a specific "de-carnation". However, this seems to be a problem not only for Vattimo's reading of Christianity, but also for his conception of hermeneutics as such. The hermeneutic spiritualisation of being as an event in language loses reference to any "fleshly" givenness, and calls for a phenomenological reconsideration of hermeneutic presuppositions.

KEYWORDS: Hermeneutics, Vattimo, Christianity, Incarnation, Kenosis, Phenomenology.