Nihilism and Belief in Contemporary European Thought

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Forced Conversations

The stark differences in political sensibility might make a dialogue between Gianni Vattimo and René Girard seem even more implausible than the one between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger in 2004. There one expected an uncompromising duel between Germany's most comprehensive advocate of secularism and democratic proceduralism and its most conservative theologian and, at the time, head of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, the institution within the church that traces its roots to the Inquisition. The expectation was disappointed. Habermas, it seems, had gone a bit soft. Not from any loss of intellectual acuity or wavering of commitment to rationality and secularism. Rather, he had convinced himself that Western culture has finite moral resources that, rather like oil and gas reserves, were deposited long ago and cannot be created anew. Those deposits lie in religious traditions. Habermas's newfound reverence for the unrepeatable past exposes the weakness of his own moral-political theory by acknowledging that an ethic of undistorted communication—with the built-in norms of sincerity, transparency, fairness, dialogue on a par with others, and the supremacy of the better argument—lacks the capacity to generate moral motivations and perhaps even to stir emotional attachment to its own norms.

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Though Habermas could not put it this way, his communicative rationality ethic does not meet the test of Friedrich Nietzsche's call for a transvaluation of all values. His position is perhaps simply the rationalist's inevitable world-weariness, as it becomes so very clear that the rationalism and Kantian ethic to which I am passionately (i.e., irrationally) attached will never become the supreme value of *das Man* (though of course I would never slander my compatriots with such a label). So (out of sheer prudence and to protect universalism itself), I must now hedge my convictions just enough to affirm the incalculable value of religious moral traditions. They alone provide the West with its finite source of resistance—much like the body's limited immunity to bee stings—to consumerism, nihilism, and individualism. Only their god will save us now!

The Vattimo-Girard dialogue erects an edifice of shared conviction and philosophical rapprochement, but the underlying differences in political sensibility and intellectual principle eventually show through. The point of contact is that Vattimo apparently saw the path to connecting Christianity and Martin Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics thanks to his reading of Girard. Sometime before 1996 he encounters Girard's notion that the Christ story undid the form of sacrifice underlying the sacred in archaic religions, myth, and ritual, where the victim is blamed for whatever upheaval and disorder is rife within society. The New Testament story transvalues the archaic "victimhood mechanism." With Jesus's crucifixion, the scapegoat is revealed to be innocent. The guilty ones are the crowd and officialdom, who are unjust in the very way they exact justice; they no longer embody the renewed unity and unanimity of society, for they are opposed by a dissenting minority made up of the scapegoat's disciples, who point out where real innocence and guilt lie and then spread the scapegoat's universal message of forgiveness and loving one's neighbor as oneself. The resulting gospel not only reverses and deconstructs the archaic logic of scapegoating but also dissolves the violent knotting of justice and injustice on which the social bond was hitherto founded, a violence buried and forgotten in primitive and ancient myth and ritual.

That Habermas, Girard, and Vattimo, three of Europe's most original and ultimately irreconcilable thinkers, attempt to make explicit the relation between their philosophical projects and Christianity is undoubtedly connected to the European project and the question of European identity. The brief debate over whether a European constitution should affirm Europe's Christian origins arose against the backdrop of Turkey's potential membership in the European Union, and the flare-up of tensions in western Europe over the growing immigrant population and its Muslim origins, has been tinged with fears growing out of the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United

States. A tacit consensus among intellectuals affirms "three formative factors or themes that come together in the creation and re-creation of what we call Europe: Judeo-Christian monotheism, Greek rationalism, and Roman organization."[1] How these traditions are braided together, however, is a source of historical and contemporary conflict. Medieval theology synthesized Christian ritual with Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy and secured institutional dominance on the model and footprint of the Roman Empire. Renaissance humanism and the Reformation and then eighteenth-century Enlightenment shook the church's synthesis and dominance by rebraiding belief, reason, and politics and so bequeathed a vibrant strife to modern European thought down to the present.

The strife is not only among thinkers but *within* each one's thought. The three at issue here exemplify the multifaceted drama in which the narratives, symbols, doctrines, and convictions of Christianity reverberate, whether in dissonance or consonance, with secular reason and modern politics. European philosophy from René Descartes, Blaise Pascal, and Thomas Hobbes to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant sought to diminish the open, often violent conflict between Catholics and Protestants by arguing that the precise nature of God could not be known even as they affirmed his existence. Neither Vattimo nor Girard nor Habermas ventures into theo-logy in that sense. Vattimo and Girard turn, rather, to the interpretation of Christ as a crux of Western civilization, a key to morality and the dangers of mass society for Girard, a preparation for the relinquishing of the metaphysical need for divine authority for Vattimo. Habermas, by contrast, looks to the religious tradition for images and symbols that might translate into a secular conception of global justice and solidarity. The conflicting values in European politics—libertarian, traditionalist and socially conservative, social-democratic and cosmopolitan— can be felt in these three thinkers' reflections, along with an implicit but nagging anxiety about how European philosophy's engagement with religion might enlighten the West's interaction with Muslim societies and immigrants.

Girard diagnoses the current age as in danger of self-destruction unless the fear of annihilation is voiced as a moral-apocalyptic warning that only Christianity can properly deliver by at once invoking brotherly love and institutionally imposing moral strictures to discourage the masses from erupting into violent unanimity. Vattimo, on the other hand, affirms Christianity's death

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1. Grace Davie, "Europe: The Exception That Proves the Rule?," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 66.

of God in the humbled mortal Jesus as the very figure of a brotherly love that can do without the institutionalized moral powers of the church and fits with the postcolonial dissolution of Western culture's false belief in its possession of universal truth. Habermas, who echoes Max Weber in describing himself as "religiously tone-deaf," undertakes a philosophical reflection on religion's relation to political theory, from reproductive technologies to immigration and geopolitics. A rising Muslim population within Europe, the continent that otherwise seems the exception to the global resurgence of religion, calls for a clarification of the "public use of reason" and the "burdens of tolerance." The task that "secularized citizens" supposedly share with "believers" is "to translate relevant contributions from the religious language into a publicly accessible language."[2]

To avoid the potential clash of civilizations that threatens to polarize the West and the Muslim world, Habermas calls on Western thought to demonstrate that modernity and democracy need not have a violent and traumatic effect on faith. "Only if we realize what secularization means in our own postsecular societies can we be far-sighted in our response to the risks involved in a secularization miscarrying in other parts of the world," he warned in his acceptance speech on receiving the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade just a month after 9/11. "This self-reflection is one among several steps necessary if we want to present a different image of the West to other cultures. We do not want to be perceived as crusaders of a competing religion or as salespeople of instrumental reason and destructive secularization."[3] The overarching problem, according to Habermas, is the disparity of wealth between the global North and the global South, and the only hope for squaring globalization and justice is a cosmopolitanism that would exercise "political control over the dynamic of the global economy and global society."[4]

2. Jürgen Habermas, "Equal Treatment of Cultures and the Limits of Postmodern Liberalism," in *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 309, 310.

3. Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," trans. Hella Beister and Max Pensky, in *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 103.

4. Jürgen Habermas, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic State?," in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) and Jürgen Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006), 35. I criticize Habermas's view of the current geopolitical situation and the role of the cosmopolitan ideal in diagnosing and interpreting international relations, comparing his with other reflections on the implications of 9/11, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Democracy: Political Thought since September 11* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 137–81.

Religion is politically ambidextrous, polyvalent, plurivocal—choose your metaphor. Yet these thinkers yoke religion to their particular political concerns and passions as an indispensable support. In Habermas's case, it is a question of political faith in need of more resonant, motivating expression. His cosmopolitan vision of a globalized social democracy has taken on increasingly utopian overtones, as its differences from the American and Chinese versions of globalization become ever starker; in response, he looks to religion as a possible resource to articulate his secular political and social values more forcefully. Is this effort a mere instrumentalization of religion, a reinvigoration of secular discourse, a misapprehension of the symbolic underpinnings of politics? I return to this question after analyzing the dialogue between Vattimo and Girard, whose philosophical engagement with religion, in contrast to Habermas's, derives from their experience of Catholicism and the imprint of that experience on their respective intellectual vocations. Despite conventional references to the Judeo-Christian tradition, all three thinkers draw almost exclusively on Christian symbols, narratives, and doctrines in their probing of religion and belief.

Christ Interpretations

Vattimo appropriates Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, and *The Scapegoat* with a decisive shift in emphasis. The idea that Christ's sacrifice dissolves the violence at the core of society hitherto under the sway of natural religion is associated by Vattimo with the one moment in Paul's letters that refers to kenosis, as Christ is said to have *emptied himself* in passing from "being in the form of God" and lowering himself into mortal flesh. The Vulgate: "sed semet ipsum exinanivit."[5] Revised Standard and Douay-Rheims: "But emptied himself." New Jerusalem: "But he emptied himself." King James: "But made himself of no reputation." The full passage reads: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:5–8). In Christ, divinity emptied itself by becoming mortal. For Vattimo, Christianity's God incarnate is thus "the death of God [in the sense of]

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5. *Exinanio, exinanire*: to empty, remove the contents of, despoil, drain, pour out; weaken/exhaust.

the dissolution of the sacred," that is, the death of divine Being as *a* being, a judge and power over humankind.

Girard, according to Vattimo, is one of the authors "who most influenced my nihilistic rediscovery of Christianity."[6] Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics on the grounds that it reduces Being to a being neatly dovetails with Girard, who in Vattimo's view "has persuasively demonstrated . . . that if a 'divine' truth is given in Christianity, it is an unmasking of the violence that has given birth to the sacred of natural religion, that is, the sacred that is characteristic of the metaphysical God."[7]

The Heideggerian dovetail ruffled Girard's feathers. In *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, he argues strenuously that while Heidegger alone among philosophers recognized that the logos of Heraclitus and the Logos of the Gospel according to John are absolutely divergent, he discarded the Christian Logos and took the Greek logos as the guidepost of his entire philosophical project. What, then, do Vattimo and Girard share? The short answer, I suppose, is Christ. But just how is Christ to be understood? For are not the shared and unshared understandings of Christ precisely what give Christianity itself its complexity historically and in the world today? Are the Christ of Vattimo's postfoundational philosophy and the Christ of Girard's metaphysical anthropology the same? Or the Christ of Mel Gibson and that of liberation theology, or Benedict XVI's and Martin Luther King Jr.'s or Calvin's Christ and the Grand Inquisitor's?

The challenge is to recognize the rich, conflicting array of Christ inter- pretations that weave their way through contemporary experience, politics, and institutions. Vattimo's and Girard's differences are a significant instance of this conflict of interpretations within contemporary thought. The unwaver- ing rationalism of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens is of no help here. However forcefully they articulate one form of modern nonbelief, they are utterly incapable of shedding any light on belief itself, except to qualify it without further qualifications as unfounded and irrational. The intellectual poverty of their approach to belief leaves their profession of nonbelief as shal- low as it is forceful. The problem is to discern the different Christs that have emerged from the same textual matrix, the same weave of narratives and met- aphors. Manifestations of Christ's essence are characterized by enigma and

6. Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (Stanford, CA: Stanford Uni- versity Press, 1999), 34.

7. Gianni Vattimo, "The Teachings of Joachim of Fiore," in *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 38.

secrecy in the Gospels. Leaving aside the miracles—loaves and fishes, walking on water or turning it to wine, reviving Lazarus—three manifestations of Christ's holiness have fired the imaginations of poets and painters since the Middle Ages: transfiguration, resurrection, ascension. In each case, enigma and secrecy are accompanied by an intense disorder of the senses.

In the transfiguration, three of Jesus's followers see him light up as though illumined from within while Moses and Elijah, the lawgiver and the prophet, appear and speak to him, until a cloud sweeps down and a voice is heard to say, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him" (Matt. 17:5). Jesus then instructs the three, "Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead" (Matt. 17:9). But they do not understand: "And they kept that saying with themselves, questioning one with another what the rising from the dead should mean" (Mark 9:10).

When the resurrection does occur, and Jesus reappears alive in body, voice, and appetite, Mary Magdalene is the first to see him. Thinking that he is the gardener, she fails to recognize him until he addresses her, "Mary," but he will not let her test her sight and hearing by touching him: *Noli me tangere* (John 20:17). A bit later the two disciples whom he joins on their way to Emmaus do not recognize him by sight or by voice, even as "he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." It is not until he accepts their invitation to eat with them and breaks and blesses the bread that "their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight" (Luke 24:27, 31), as though a gesture identified him as face and voice could not and as though once recognized he must disappear.

Such dissociations of the senses of sight and hearing, of image and voice, the visual and the discursive, recall the Old Testament conundrum in which God is said to speak to Moses "face to face" (Exod. 33:11) but does not let himself be seen by Moses except from the back: "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live" (Exod. 33:20). God's invisibility is itself the condition of Jesus's mission as the Word of God: "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him" (Deum nemo vidit umquam unigenitus Filius qui est in sinu Patris ipse enarravit) (John 1:18).[8] This statement, attributed to John the Baptist by John, the only New Testament writer to refer to Jesus as the *begotten* son of God, evokes the disjunction of sight and sound, vision and word, to designate God's absence in the very mode of his being made present: God is *unseen* by man but *declared* by Jesus.

8. *Enarro, enarrare*: to narrate, explain.

The third supernatural event in Jesus's earthly sojourn is the ascension. Forty days after the resurrection he appears to his disciples for the last time, telling them to wait in Jerusalem until "ye shall receive the power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Just as the God of our fathers was never seen, so now this Son–and–Word of God will disappear for good, as suddenly as he vanished before the eyes of his two disciples in Emmaus: "And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). Ten days after Jesus ascends the Holy Spirit descends in his place. The disciples, having gathered in Jerusalem as he instructed and now numbering tenfold the original twelve, see tongues of flame fall upon them and go out into the city and, trancelike, speak and are understood in all the world's languages. Here, then, is the sort of reversal-fulfillment of Hebrew scripture that will become a hallmark of Christianity: humanity, which the jealous overpowering God had separated and dispersed into several languages when it tried to reach the heavens by building the tower of Babel, is now reunited—indeed, universalized—by the Word that is henceforth spread not by the Son–and–Word of God himself but by the inspirited followers who call him Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit closes the circle by transforming Babel and the Supreme Being into universalism and community, and it seals the disappearance of the self-emptied divinity by leaving in his place the spirit and ethic of brotherly love.

Through all these moments of transfiguration, resurrection, ascension, and, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, "pentecostal fire," the divine being is never grasped by all the senses. It is never heard, seen, and touched all at once. It is manifest in one aspect and concealed in some other. It is unseen when it speaks; when it appears, its voice is unrecognized; it announces its lasting universal presence by disappearing. The divinity is never fully present, as its every appearance misses at least one dimension of humans' Being-in-the-world and shreds the human sensorium in a cascade of wonder, vision, delirium, and trance. Since the *presence* of the god in the world is always incomplete or vanishing, the apprehension of divinity is left to interpretation by those who dwell in the world. So, too, Jesus is the Word of God insofar as he was inspired to declare, explain, narrate (*enarrare*) in parables, metaphors, and analogies to Hebrew prophecy. His worldly followers were left to interpret. In terms familiar from poststructuralism, immersion in a field where neither a perceptual plenum nor a secure knowledge nor a guaranteed meaning stops the differential play of

tropes and allusions is, quite simply, the condition of human language. What theology will call the deity's transcendence is instead, from the hermeneutical perspective, the immanence of the divine in the discourses that evoke it, or indeed that evoke its vanishing. The Christ narrative thus entrusts the divine to human Being-in-the-*world* and in effect *secularizes* it.

Vattimo and Girard

Vattimo construes this secularization differently, though also following the arc from the incarnation as kenosis to the manifestation of Holy Spirit as the spirit of human community. Kenosis marks the death of the transcendent, omnipotent, judgmental God, and it is in that sense that Vattimo speaks of his own "nihilistic rediscovery of Christianity." More than that, he returns to the close tie between modern hermeneutics and biblical hermeneutics to argue that the Gospels' account of Jesus's life sets secularization in motion within Western culture. "Jesus' incarnation (the kenosis, the self-lowering of God), as an event both salvific and hermeneutical, is already indeed an archetypal occurrence of secularization."[9] In what sense is the incarnation hermeneutical? How is Jesus interpretive? In what sense was his earthly existence a living interpretation? First and foremost because he at once interprets the prophets and fulfills their prophecy. (And, as I asserted above, his interpretations are expressed in parables and metaphors that themselves have to be interpreted by those who listen to him.) "It is true," Vattimo concedes, that

> the announcement of salvation is given once and for all—in Jesus and the prophets—but it is equally true that, having given itself, it needs interpretations that receive it, actualize it, and enrich it. The history of salvation that continues in the age of the Spirit, after the descent of the Paraclete at Pentecost, is not simply driven by the fact of the presence of ever new human generations that must be evangelized. Rather, it is history. . . . This history has a meaning and a direction, and the interpretation of Scripture that takes place in it is its constitutive dimension. . . . The history of salvation continues as the history of interpretation in the strong sense in which Jesus himself was the living, incarnate interpretation of Scripture.[10]

Here Vattimo makes his claim that the genuine legacy of Christianity lies in the fact that through the centuries it has helped prepare that weakening of

9. Gianni Vattimo, "History of Salvation, History of Interpretation," in *After Christianity*, 67.
10. Vattimo, "History of Salvation," 60–61.

Being that the postmodern age is in the process of achieving and that Hei-degger's thought began to take account of.[11]

God incarnate becomes interpretation incarnate?! For Girard, such a view smacks of relativism, naïveté, and even . . . Protestantism, since it elides the crucifixion. Girard wants his Christ visibly nailed to the cross. Without the crucifixion, how would the deceptive logic of sacrifice be exposed? Where would be the reminder that the crowd's unanimity is the very source of vio-lence and injustice? What would symbolize the dissolution of the archaic bond between victimhood and social cohesion? Even the resurrection plays a less important role for Girard than the crucifixion. He also embraces a cluster of New Testament narrative and symbol that Vattimo dismisses as mere leftover from the archaic religion of the vengeful God, namely, Jesus's talk of hell and damnation as well as the world-ending imagery of Revelation. Punishment and apocalypse are for Vattimo part and parcel of the archaic violence that kenosis and Holy Spirit dissolve. Girard disagrees and gives his own interpretive nuance to the symbolic narrative in question:

> In a world in which, as we know, we are moving in a direction that could actually lead to the end of the world as we know it, doesn't the disappear-ance of religion expose us to the risk of finding ourselves in an "apocalyp-tic" dimension? Obviously what I am saying is incompatible with the apoc-alyptic mode of fundamentalist Protestantism, which foresees the destruction of the world by the violence of God, because that mode is essentially anti-Christian. . . .
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> And yet, knowing what is at stake, we make a joke of biblical texts like the Apocalypse when we ought to be taking them seriously, seeing that in the Apocalypse the end of the world is linked specifically to Christian-ity. Because Judaism and Christianity are aware that if we do away with all the prohibitions, the limits that the archaic religions imposed, we are put-ting at risk not only ourselves but the existence of the whole world. It was from this awareness that the archaic religions arose, in fact. We today, on the other hand, conduct ourselves as though we were the masters of the world, the lords of nature, with no mediation or arbitration, as though noth-ing we are doing could have negative repercussions. But we all know per-

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11. There is an extensive debate over the meaning of secularization and "secularity" in recent English-language thought. Vattimo's work, surprisingly, fails to figure in the discussion. Cf., e.g., Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

fectly well that these archaic taboos had force and significance. Neither
human beings nor nations can live without an ethic.[12]

This passage elides two thorny questions. To say that "the apocalyptic mode
of fundamentalist Protestantism . . . is essentially anti-Christian" ignores that
the biblical text continues to give rise to many Christ interpretations, and that
what makes one more persuasive than another has nothing to do with doctri-
nal correctness. Second, to say that "neither human beings nor nations can
live without an ethic" does not, absent some extraordinary mediations and
arguments of a sort that Girard nowhere provides, at the same time mean that
"the disappearance of religion" puts the modern world "in an 'apocalyptic'
dimension." His stressing that humanity today risks destroying the very con-
ditions of life, whether through ecological or nuclear catastrophe, is an "apoc-
alyptic" warning well worth sounding, but it hardly follows that religion is
alone or primarily what can check the dangers of reasons of state and eco-
nomically driven technological prowess, let alone that its supposed "disap-
pearance" is the source of those dangers.

    These slippages should not, however, deflect attention from a perhaps
less obvious but more important problem: namely, how to account for the per-
sistence of sectarian strife, genocide, civil wars, and belligerence between
nations two thousand years after the victim mechanism was exposed and dis-
solved by the crucifixion and the gospel, which themselves have been rehearsed
in ritual and sermon through the centuries by the church. Girard answers that
as the archaic sacrificial mode of ordering society dissolves, the social bond is
threatened anew. By undoing the victim logic, Christ and his disciples deprive
society of its archaic ordering principle without supplying another. Or, more
accurately, the new principle is charity and the ethic of brotherly love, and
Girard, in sharp contrast to Vattimo, cannot imagine the human community
embracing that ethic except out of an apocalyptic awareness that, without it,
utter destruction is at hand. The danger of ecological and nuclear destruction is
called on to arouse the mortal fear without which the conscious embrace of
charity cannot happen. Fear annihilation, love thy neighbor.

    At a more mundane level, Girard's lack of faith in the spontaneous spread
of the Holy Spirit leads him to affirm the necessity of institutional authority

    12. Gianni Vattimo and René Girard, "Christianity and Modernity," in *Christianity, Truth, and
Weakening Faith: A Dialogue*, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello, trans. William McCuaig (New York:
Columbia University Press, 2010), 31–32.

and constraints. Girard remains a conservative in the mold of Europe's tradi-
tional Christian Democrats in an era where European conservatism has largely
abandoned the moral guidance of the church in political affairs and even in
much social policy (divorce, abortion, homosexuality) and become the advo-
cate of expanded individual liberties and a freer market. Cagey in his dialogues
with the leftist, openly gay Vattimo, Girard never really reveals his list of what
still ought to count as deadly sins. It is even doubtful that he believes such sins
deadly. For him, the archetype of danger is the crowd, an entity that seeks the
feeling of cohesion and community in sacrificial violence; the insufficiency of
the Holy Spirit makes the church's authority the best available curb on the
masses' many temptations to unanimity and violence. In what strikes my ear as
a contemporary echo of the Grand Inquisitor, Girard affirms that Jesus's mes-
sage of meekness and brotherly love cannot be surpassed but at the same time
doubts that spurning hierarchy and family and wealth can work. The church is
the better alternative to some spontaneous Holy Spirit among believers and
even to Jesus's walking the earth. The obvious unease in Girard's view is that
he holds brotherly love and charity to be supreme values *and* to be insufficient
and inefficacious. From Vattimo's vantage point Girard appears cynical; from
Girard's, Vattimo is naive in viewing a secularized Holy Spirit and progressive
politics as adequate means to seek a nonviolent and just society.

Kenosis or Crucifixion?

Weber addressed this conflict between modernity and the ethic of brotherly
love—without cynicism or naïveté—in his great essay "Religious Rejections of
the World and Their Directions."[13] He offers a dynamic archaeology of the
relation of religion and the distinct spheres of modern culture. Whatever view
might be taken of so-called primitive communism, Christianity introduced the
West to a powerful ethic of brotherhood in the idea of the Holy Spirit among a
community of believers. The ethic of brotherhood that organized small-scale
communities like the early Christians and the monasteries of the Middle Ages
cannot, however, attain the scope of society *tout court*. As primitive and
archaic societies dissolve, the religious character that suffused all cultural
practices and bound them together gives way to distinct cultural spheres whose
inner logics are no longer integral to religion or regulated by it. These cultural
spheres originate in religion, differentiate themselves from it and from one
another, and so come into permanent tension with it and with one another.

13. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 323–59.

The modern cultural spheres as identified by Weber are the economic, the political, the erotic, and the aesthetic. The tensions are not the same in each instance. The economic and political spheres are in ineluctable, dynamic *conflict* with the ethic of brotherhood. The individualizing motives of economic activity run counter to *caritas*, especially as the development of capitalism eliminates the symbolico-affective interdependence of feudal lord and servant. With the differentiation of the political sphere, power requires on the part of those who hold it an ethic of responsibility that is ever at odds with any ethic of ultimate ends, including brotherly love, and that also must acknowledge deception and violence as unavoidable ways to exercise and preserve power. As for the prospect of a modern society institutionalizing the ethic of brotherhood, Weber pointedly attributes this dream to the ideologies of European revolutionaries who believed that the violent overthrow of capitalism would allow the imposition of a pure ethic of brotherhood; a nonviolent ethic of ultimate ends that tries to impose itself on an actual society is destined to violence, often unconstrained violence, in pursuit of its absolutized ideal. A different sort of tension with religion characterizes the aesthetic and erotic spheres. The aesthetic and erotic spheres are in ineluctable, dynamic *competition* with the religious promise of salvation. The promised release from toil and suffering in the afterlife finds its secular counterpart and competitor in aesthetic and erotic practices that are a release from the routinized, impersonal imperatives of modern economic and bureaucratically organized life. (By the erotic sphere Weber does not mean sexuality per se but the cultivation of love and sexuality in subcultures that separate sexuality from reproduction, from Greek homosexuality to the troubadours and eighteenth-century salon culture to, we might add, gay culture of the past several decades.)

In sum, the ethic of brotherly love can rule in small-scale communities that essentially reject the world, like the monastery, or that anticipate the world's imminent destruction, as in the messianism of the early Christians. The inner dynamic of modernity, however, renders modern society incompatible with the reign of charity and brotherhood and puts religion in permanent tension with the various cultural spheres.

While Weber's sociological perspective helps reset the terms of the debate over the Christian ethic, it does not resolve the controversy between Vattimo and Girard over the philosophical interpretation of the incarnation. Swinging back to the hermeneutical perspective, we encounter one of Girard's most breathtaking insights. Consider the moment of the Passion that still resonates throughout Western culture and beyond: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). While the Christian tradition takes this

to illustrate Jesus's bottomless capacity to forgive his persecutors and Nietzsche considers it the weak's resentful valorization of abject meekness, Girard stresses the objective statement: the persecutors *knew not what they did.* Jesus recognizes the unconscious two millennia before Freud! He unlocks the victimhood mechanism: those who participate in the sacrifice do not know the meaning of their act, for they are unaware that their victim is but the symbol and substitute for the inner division and conflict of their own association. Prior to any forbearance and forgiveness, Jesus objectively names, for the first time in human history, the true nature of sacrifice and thereby rejects all its justifications, be they explicit, hidden, or duplicitous.

Girard thus insists that the crucifixion is the event that pries open the meaning of scapegoating. Kenosis does not sufficiently grasp Christ's significance. Vattimo seems to see the crucifixion as simply the completion of divinity's self-emptying (and beginning of the weakening of Being); the becoming-mortal is more significant than the way of dying. Vattimo's cross, like the Protestants', has no body hanging on it. Divine self-emptying—*he emptied himself*—is an appealing alternative to the Father's bloody sacrifice of the only begotten Son that Christian theology has frequently elaborated in interpretations of the biblical text. Again, for Vattimo there can be no *authoritative* interpretation. Girard will have none of this, however charmingly he couches his opposition. Assessing Vattimo's thought in an essay titled "Not Just Interpretations, There Are Facts, Too," Girard writes: "The second cause of the misunderstanding between Vattimo and me is our different attitudes toward interpretation. He does not realize, I feel, how old-fashioned I am on this subject compared to him." As to the first cause of their "misunderstanding"—or, less charitably, Vattimo's error—Girard just as charmingly admits that he himself is "100 percent responsible,"[14] since he did treat the crucifixion as the opposite of sacrifice in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World.* He was unequivocal at the time: "There is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that the death of Jesus is a sacrifice, whatever definition (expiation, substitution, etc.) we may give for that sacrifice. At no point in the Gospels is the death of Jesus defined as a sacrifice."[15] In the exchanges with Vattimo, Girard says that what he should have said is that the crucifixion is not *archaic* sacrifice but the sacrifice that undoes the meaning of archaic sacrifice.

14. René Girard, "Not Just Interpretations, There Are Facts, Too," in Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, 94, 92.

15. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 180.

In other words, Girard too rejects the interpretation that God the Father sacrificed his (only begotten) Son, for however widespread that interpretation has been in various doctrinal traditions, it lacks textual support. To see the Son sacrificed *by* the Father is but a variation on archaic sacrifice. Girard's revision slides toward the Gnostic belief that Jesus did not merely foresee his trial and execution and face the ordeal without resistance and with a sense of its providential significance but actually sought it and perhaps even orchestrated it: "Christ accepts being sacrificed against all blood sacrifices, and his gift of himself, paradoxical as it may seem, must ultimately be defined, I now believe, in terms of (self-)sacrifice."[16] This is no mere premonition of martyrdom but the willingness to be killed, which is difficult to distinguish from the *will-to-be-killed*. There is, however, scant biblical evidence for that, either. Why, then, does Girard drift in this direction? And does that parenthesis in "(self-) sacrifice" show precision or fudging? If Christ "accepts being sacrificed," by whom is he being sacrificed? God? the crowd? himself?

These questions do not admit of a ready or direct answer. A less direct approach can at least help us understand Girard by shifting registers from his biblical exegesis back to his anthropological theory. It is wrong, in my estimation, to charge Girard with dogmatism in matters of theology, religious conviction, or biblical interpretation. The dogmatist is Girard the anthropologist, and it is the style of his anthropological thought that holds the key to his understanding of the crucifixion and Christianity. Girard deduces from archaic ritual and myth that they are a disguised symbolic reenactment of an original sacrifice in which the frenzied killing of an arbitrary victim by a murderous mob expels the division and violence intrinsic to the social group by attributing them to the victim; the mob's unanimity affirms the group's cohesion. Girard further deduces that this configuration arises from the mimetic nature of human desire, which is the desire to have or be what another has or is.

Why do I call Girard's postulates dogmatic? Compare his approach to anthropological universals with that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who discovered through his own fieldwork and reflections on kinship structures and mythology in primitive societies that three facets of culture were clearly present in all of them: language, the taboo on incest, and regulated kinship relations and alliances. Lévi-Strauss achieved his breakthrough by asking how these three universal features of human societies related to one another. He argued that the fundamental structures of language provided the pattern for the symbols and exchanges that preside over marriage and kinship relations; kinship relations

16. Girard, "Not Just Interpretations," 93.

also require an incest taboo, which is itself inscribed in myth according to linguistic rules and, with complex variations on forbidden and favored marriages between cousins, enables or ensures a circulation or exchange of women between families and clans, thereby fostering *strict* kinship bonds while ever *widening* networks of families and clans. Lévi-Strauss's procedure begins with the empirical: language, the incest taboo, and kinship structures are documentedly universal. His account of their interrelation is an intellectual construction susceptible of refinement, rebuttal, alternative constructions, and indeed challenges to its conception of language and of exchange.

No such openness to alternatives or challenges is invited by Girard's style of theory construction. While his intellectual agility and ingenuity are striking, they tend to devolve into tautology: the universal origin of human society is sacrifice, but the original sacrifice is nowhere evident; it is not evident because it is hidden, and it is hidden because the hiding of it is also universal. Since all culture from time immemorial conspired to hide the sacrificial origin, it is the thing "hidden at the *foundation* of the world." It was unconscious—nay, the very origin of the unconscious—until Christ originally exposed it and Girard finally explained it. Here is the dovetail Girard prizes: the (self-)sacrificing Christ first revealed the victim mechanism at the core of human society, and the anthropologist Girard nearly two thousand years later is the first to explain that (self-)sacrifice and what it exposed. (A fauteuil among the Immortals in the Académie Française hardly seems reward enough.)

As "beautiful theories" go, Girard's has the requisite elegance, scope, and single-mindedness, but it comes upon a stumbling block. The original order of human society is said to be founded on a sacrifice whose victim has the double valence of criminality and sacredness,[17] and the events of Jesus's life and its retelling expose the victimhood mechanism. Yet during the ensuing two thousand years the exposure and dissolution of the archaic logic also make the world vulnerable to fratricidal violence anew. No matter how far the good news of brotherly love without scapegoats spreads, this ethic does not take hold of any society in which it is preached. Here, then, we reencounter the puzzle on which Girard's metaphysical anthropology founders: the promise of an ethic of fraternal love undoes the constraints on fratricidal violence. Christ delivers us back into the hands of Cain.

The problem lies in Girard's historical sequence: the origin of violence, the concealment of the origin, the demythification and rise of a new ethic, the

17. He is at once guilty and holy, as in the double meaning of the Latin word *sacer*, which most recently Giorgio Agamben has made central to various speculative claims.

renewal of archaic violence. The sequence is an allegory in Paul de Man's sense of the figure of speech, which represents a set of coexisting elements as though they succeeded one another chronologically. Allegory projects the simultaneous as a succession, rendering an enigmatic synchronic relation intelligible by arranging its terms diachronically. As a rendering intelligible, the allegorical narrative is an interpretation that has in turn to be interpreted. Literary language, de Man argued, understands the resulting narrative to be fiction, while nonliterary language is often unaware of its own allegories.[18] Girard's claim that his narrative is factual is suspect because the "original" sacrificial element not only cannot be documented at any origin but remains a possibility even after the Christ event has exposed it, renamed it, dissolved its hold, and established a radically different ethic. The enigma that Girard's allegory leaves concealed can be restated as follows: *the scapegoat was not there at the beginning / the scapegoat never disappears.* Scapegoating is not an *originary event* but a *permanent possibility* that can coexist, as it does in Western culture, alongside a widespread ethical ideal of charity, forgiveness, and loving one's neighbor as oneself. Deallegorized, Girard confirms Weber's insight into the fundamental incompatibility of apocalyptico-brotherly social visions with the difficult, often tragic demands of a political ethic of responsibility. The fraternal love–fratricidal hatred knot cannot be forever undone by any punctual universal event, but demands a constant vigilance and realism with respect to all manner of modern mythologies and ideologies, a vigilance that can never assume itself to be immune to such myth and ideology or to such hatred.

What is philosophically untenable in Girard stems from his anthropology, as it goes well beyond postulating an anthropological universal. In Lévi-Strauss, the incest taboo and language are the fulcrum that creates the networks of filiation, affiliation, and alliance at the core of all societies, but they do not account for any society as a whole. Unpredictable diversity follows from the universal core. Girard, by contrast, construes his anthropological universal as an ontology of social being, indeed of human being. Here, then, emerges the truly irreconcilable difference with Vattimo, who, like Heidegger, attributes to human being, to human existence or *Dasein* (Being-there), but one essential feature: finding ourselves always already in a world and with others, we are at

18. Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187–228; de Man, "Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion," in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 51–69.

once doomed and liberated to interpret the meaning of (our) Being. Girard's onto-anthropology purports to solve the puzzlement. In place of inexhaustible questioning—the activity that for Heidegger defines being human—Girard puts forward a narrative of hidden facts and revealed truth. The anthropologist's hypothesis of an origin is taken to be a fact, a deed, "things" hidden since the foundation of the world; the revelation and unmasking of this hidden origin is found in the words of Jesus (= non-Greek logos); and origin, foundation, and Logos are all disclosed in Girard's truthful interpretation. Forget the charm of old-fashioned ideas of interpretation; this is plain dogmatism.

Kantian Freedom or the Kingdom of God on Earth?

Vattimo would reject Girard's onto-anthropology by drawing on Heideggerian hermeneutics, with its deconstruction of foundations and its affirmation of the ungroundedness and relativism of all interpretation. I share this perspective. Habermas would reject Girard because the appeal to religious revelation and church authority as the ground of social cohesiveness eschews the communicative action that modern lifeworlds use to produce shared understandings and the proceduralism by which democratic polities achieve consensus and decision. That, too, is a compelling criticism. Where, then, do things stand between Vattimo and Habermas? Hermeneutics *and* proceduralism? Hermeneutics *or* proceduralism? There is no need to rehearse the many quarrels and reconciliations that Habermas and Habermasians have carried on with hermeneutics. Habermas's own reflections on religion bring the hermeneutical question back into focus in a new way: how does he propose to tease out of religious discourse, ritual, and imagery those meanings that are consistent with the "public use of reason"? Habermas himself hesitates to call this a problem of hermeneutics; it is a process of "translation."

   Habermas's project raises several questions. The first concerns the very way he casts the problematic of religion and politics by drawing on John Rawls's distinction between "comprehensive doctrines" and "public reason." Religious beliefs count as comprehensive doctrines, while public reason is constrained to the contentless procedural norms associated with Rawls's veil of ignorance or Habermas's "weak transcendentalism" according to which discourse intrinsically, though tacitly, pledges the participants to a normative horizon of mutual understanding and consensus. This series of distinctions engenders some questionable dichotomies. For example, Habermas distinguishes "religious citizens" and "secular citizens" in contemporary Europe. But is not citizenship itself secular? A citizen's religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices do not bear on the nature of his or her citizenship, however much they might

shape particular opinions and prejudices. Senator Ted Kennedy was, from everything we know, a devout and practicing Catholic, but was he in any way different, as a citizen, from those citizens who call themselves secular humanists or atheists? There is ample evidence in Europe and the United States that a vast number, probably the majority, of believers affirm the secular state. The dividing line is not between believers and "secularists" but between those who affirm the liberal democratic state and those who spurn it. In Europe today the rejection of liberal principles manifests itself in various groups, among which are an influential bloc within the Catholic Church, some undetermined fraction of the Muslim population, a mixed bag of anarcho-antiglobalization leftists, and of course racist skinheads and their respectable nationalistic counterparts throughout the European extreme Right. Religion is not the only, or even the primary, motivation for these rejections of liberalism. The situation is different in the United States, where there are disturbing signs that long-standing interpretations of the separation of church and state are being eroded by politically mobilized evangelicals and fundamentalists and powerful establishment voices among Catholics, from bishops to some members of the Supreme Court; where their convictions most forcefully threaten core values of liberalism and democracy is in the domain of sexuality. Today abortion, reproductive rights, stem cell research, homosexuality, and gay marriage arouse the political passions of illiberal religiosity.

Sadly, and to the shame of critical theory, Habermas amplifies his "dialogue" with "religion" on the terrain of sexuality and reproduction. In the guise of historical precaution toward eugenics, he attempts to furnish a philosophical and political reflection on reproductive technologies that claims to be neutral with respect to "comprehensive doctrines" and universal with respect to individual rights. He voices support, albeit lukewarm, for abortion rights. Yet when he expresses his opposition to the use of preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) during in vitro fertilization to determine which embryo or embryos to transfer to the woman's uterus, he embraces the exact terms in which those who would outlaw abortion define the debate: "If we consider the matter scrupulously, can the preference for a healthy child of one's own overrule the embryo's right-to-life?"[19] So stated, the question embraces the papal view that the right to life begins at conception. But whence comes an eight-cell in vitro embryo's right to life? Its mere existence is the product of technological procedures. Neither the pope nor Habermas would know that there is such a thing as

19. Jürgen Habermas, "The Debate on the Ethical Self-Understanding of the Species," in *Future of Human Nature*, 98.

an eight-cell embryo except that it has been incubated under the microscope outside "natural" conception. Moreover, since hormonal therapy is used to stimulate the production of several oocytes (eggs) that can be retrieved for in vitro fertilization, there are frequently more embryos than can be safely transferred—as a caution against multiple births and for the sake of the mother's health. The untransferred embryos can be saved, destroyed, or used for research. Even as Habermas seeks various nuances on the ethics of these different outcomes, the terms in which he expresses his horror at the prospect of PGD-based selection would imply that every untransferred embryo's so-called right to life is violated—violated, that is, by the very procedures that make a viable and safe pregnancy possible! Life made possible is at odds with the right to life.

Thinking through the passions and ideas entwined in Habermas's approach to reproductive rights and reproductive technologies clearly requires a fuller treatment than I can give here. I simply want to point out the troubling consequences of deriving political judgments from dubious theoretical distinctions. Consider how Habermas weighs the differences between "religious" and "secular" citizens as they confront the distinction between "comprehensive doctrine" and "public reason": "Admittedly, the burdens of tolerance are not shared equally by believers and nonbelievers, as is shown by more or less liberal abortion regimes."[20] By what measure does a Christian right-to-life advocate's "burden" in having to live in a country where abortion is legal outweigh the burden of a young woman facing an unwanted pregnancy in a country where abortion is outlawed?

Habermas's idea of translation—that is, the translation of images and narratives from the storehouse of religious tradition into the discourse of public reason, with its supposed neutrality toward comprehensive doctrines—advances a noble aim: "The mode for nondestructive secularization is translation. This is what the Western world, as the worldwide secularizing force, may learn from its own history. If it presents this complex image of itself to other cultures in a credible way, intercultural relations may find a language other than that of the military and the market alone."[21] Matched with this search for "nondestructive secularization" to avoid the clash of civilizations is the worry that the proceduralism of Western democracy and of his own political theory is in need of symbolico-affective contents that he presupposes belong exclusively to religious traditions. Habermas voices unease that Western democra-

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20. Jürgen Habermas, "Prepolitical Foundations of the Constitutional State?," in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 112.

21. Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," 114.

cies suffer from a moral depletion that undermines the prospects for a more just global society. The theory of justice that informs modern democracy and has proved effective in promoting democracy and peace throughout Europe since 1945 "no longer," he believes, adequately motivates citizens and the body politic to seek justice on a large enough scale—that is, globally—to address today's woes. In dialogue with Jesuit theologians a few years after the exchange with Cardinal Ratzinger, Habermas marks this deficiency as the new point of encounter between philosophy and religion:

> The decision to engage in action based on solidarity when faced with threats which can be averted only by collective efforts calls for more than insights into good reasons. . . . This . . . strict rational morality explains why enlightened reason unavoidably loses its grip on the images, preserved by religion, of the moral whole—of the Kingdom of God on earth—as collectively binding ideals. At the same time, practical reason fails to fulfill its own vocation when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven.[22]

This passage brings out the conundrum Habermas faces. On the one hand, he hews to the Kantian project of encompassing *religion within the limits of reason alone*. Kant states it succinctly in the opening sentence of the work with that title: "So far as morality is based upon the conception of man as a free agent who, just because he is free, binds himself through his reason to unconditioned laws, it stands in need neither of the idea of another Being over him, for him to apprehend his duty, nor of an incentive other than the law itself, for him to do his duty."[23] The Protestant origins of Kant's conception of freedom and the Christian maxim to do unto others as you would have them do unto you do not alter the profoundly secular import of this view of morality. As Habermas glosses the passage, "Neither belief in God as the creator of the world nor belief in God as the redeemer who promises eternal life is required to know the moral law and to recognize that it is categorically binding."[24]

22. Jürgen Habermas, "An Awareness of What Is Missing," in Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-secular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 19.

23. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 3.

24. Jürgen Habermas, "The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge: On the Reception and Contemporary Importance of Kant's Philosophy of Religion," in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 212.

On the other hand, Habermas now doubts the efficaciousness of the political theory that derives from this view in the face of globalization and the threatening clash of civilizations: "Pure practical reason can no longer be so confident in its ability to counteract a modernization spinning out of control armed solely with the insights of a theory of justice. The latter lacks the creativity of linguistic world-disclosure that a normative consciousness afflicted with accelerating decline requires in order to regenerate itself."[25] Is the "no longer" a statement about history or about his own thought? It is questionable that modernization is any more "out of control" today than it has ever been. Modernization is a kind of permanent process of uprooting and change, just as modernity is less an "incomplete project," as Habermas used to say, than an era of projects, of unforeseen invention and unpredictable consequence. The cosmopolitanism that he advocates to exert "political control over the dynamic of the global economy and global society" may aspire to a kind of mastery incompatible with modernity itself. That, too, suggests a crisis within Habermasian thought itself.

How, then, does Habermas assimilate the motivating, world-disclosing image of the *Kingdom of God on earth* to his Kantian framework? The term he uses in place of injustices is *violations of solidarity*; this phrase resonates with the passage's most surprising term: *the images of . . . the moral whole . . . as collectively binding ideals*. Kantian morality is *universally* binding in conforming to every individual's *capacity* for reason; the Kantian ideal, as Habermas has tirelessly argued, is regulative, not substantive. And it certainly does not imply collectivity. What Habermas now suggests is that pure practical reason must be supplemented with the affective-symbolic imagery deriving from religion to stir *collectively* binding *substantive* ideals. The imagery in question is the utopian-redemptive *Kingdom of God on earth*. The kingdom is not literally promised but rather serves as the *image* of *the moral whole*. As I read the passage, the moral whole is the necessary reference point for our capacity not simply to act justly as individuals but to experience injustices, across whatever geographic or cultural or political distance, as *violations of solidarity*, that is, of a solidarity that we feel ourselves a part of and therefore are motivated to repair to restore the moral whole. Whether the resulting *decision to engage in action based on solidarity* comes from obligation, desire, duty, empathy, or grief, Habermas does not clarify.

The figure of injustice as the felt tear in a moral whole has a complex career in Habermas's thought, going back to *Knowledge and Human Interests*,

25. Habermas, "Boundary between Faith and Knowledge," 211.

where one encounters the symbolization of the state of the world as a torn moral whole.[26] Habermas interrogates the Frankfurt School's underlying narrative, according to which Hegel supersedes Kantian formalism by capturing the dialectical movement of mind through the history of culture and then Marx supersedes Hegel by turning the dialectic upside down (or right side up) to show that the movement of history is driven not by mind but by material production, which is secondarily reflected in mind in distorted form. Habermas arrives at his earliest formulation of a norm of "uncoercive interaction on the basis of communication free from domination" by moving back through this intellectual history in reverse. He argues, quite persuasively, that Marx offers "a social theory that conceives the self-constitution of the species from the *double* perspective of synthesis through the struggle of classes and their social labor" but ultimately subordinates class struggle to the process of production, that is, the transformation of nature via social labor that divides the species into producers and exploiters. Production cannot by itself truly account for the inherent unity and reciprocality of humanity that history has sundered into class divisions. Class struggle requires a different representation from that of labor producing a surplus expropriated by owners, all the more so since the actual development of capitalism has refuted Marx's notion that this labor theory of value could explain social revolution.

Habermas finds the needed alternative representation of society as a sundered moral whole in Hegel's early theological writings, where he

> unfolds the dialectic of the moral life through the example of the punishment that befalls the one who destroys a moral totality. The "criminal" annuls the reciprocal gratification of needs [i.e., what Marx postulated as primitive communism] by putting himself as an individual in place of the totality. In so doing he sets off a process of fate that turns upon him. The struggle ignited between the conflicting parties and the hostility against the other who has been injured and oppressed render perceptible the lost complementarity and past friendship. The criminal is confronted with the negating power of his past life. He experiences his guilt. The guilty one must suffer under the violence of the repressed and sundered life, which he himself has provoked, until he experiences in the repression of the other's life the deficiency of his own, and, in turning away from the other subject, his alienation from himself. This *causality of fate* is ruled by the power of the suppressed life. The latter can only be reconciled if the experience of the negativity of the sundered life gives rise to yearning for what has been lost and compels the guilty

26. Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1971). The quotations in the following paragraphs are from pages 56–60.

> one to identify with the existence of the other, against which he is struggling,
> as that which he is denying in his own.[27]

In this last sentence, the yearning for a lost wholeness and the sense of guilt transformed into identification with the oppressed other forecast the more recent formulation of an awakened sense of others' suffering as a violation of solidarity afflicting the moral whole. In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, though, Habermas first argues that Marx "could have employed this model [of the causality of fate] and constructed the disproportional appropriation of the surplus product, which has class antagonism as its consequence, as a 'crime.' The punitive causality of fate is executed upon the rulers as class struggle coming to a head in revolutions."[28] Marx did not. Nor does Habermas, in fact. Sacrificial violence on behalf of the totality is not his end point. Instead, he takes his redescription one step farther to argue that what Marx approximates with the idea that the unequal relations of production create a distorted representation of the social whole—ideology in its strict Marxist sense—is better understood as the disrupted intersubjectivity of distorted communication.

The dialectic becomes a dialogical rather than material-productive process:

> The suppression and renewal of the dialogue situation are reconstructed as a moral relation. The grammatical relations of communication, once distorted by force, exert force themselves. Only the result of dialectical movement eradicates this force and brings about the freedom from constraint contained in the dialogic self-recognition–in–the–other: in the language of the young Hegel, love as reconciliation. Thus it is not unconstrained intersubjectivity itself that we call dialectical, but the history of its repression and re-establishment.[29]

One more redescriptive turn—the original Habermasian linguistic turn—then goes back through Marx and Hegel to Kant and proposes that the possibility for "the grammatical relations of communication, once distorted by force, [to] exert force themselves" manifests itself not in the upheaval and violence of the oppressed but in the formal-pragmatic nature of linguistic communication itself, that is, the (weakly) transcendent norm of linguistically mediated inter-

27. Ibid., 56.
28. Ibid., 57.
29. Ibid., 58–59.

subjectivity, a norm whose institutionalization is the constitution of a liberal democracy.

Through this innovative rereading of Kant-Hegel-Marx as Marx-Hegel-Kant, Habermas first redescribes class struggle as the causality of fate in a moral totality and then redescribes the moral totality as a formal-procedural norm rather than a historical or metaphysical reality. Philosophically, that is the origin of Habermas's postmetaphysical stance and demarcates his version of the linguistic turn. Politically, it is the transformation of critical theory from Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's neo-Marxism into social democracy and liberal constitutionalism. The postmetaphysical stance, the linguistic turn, and constitutional liberalism—these are the hallmarks of Habermas's contribution to social and political theory over the last five decades. It is all the more remarkable, then, that the recent writings are an effort to traverse this path once more, now back toward Hegel's moral totality. Or, to be more precise, the recent work vacillates between a claim merely to "translate" religious language into secular language and, on the other hand, an aspiration to infuse practical reason with world-disclosing religious images and symbols.

The project of a secularizing translation is evident in Habermas's effort to answer Søren Kierkegaard's challenge to Kant much as he got from Hegel back to Kant in *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Kierkegaard sees guilt not as mere wrongdoing but as the sinfulness of the inescapable weakness of human will, whose actions are thus in need of forgiveness from a "wholly Other," that is, an otherness that can be called "God" only so long as it is acknowledged that "we cannot form any consistent concept of God."[30] Habermas paraphrases Kierkegaard in a way that echoes his own early reading of the early Hegel: "As soon as we interpret guilt as sin, we know we have need of forgiveness and that we must set our hope on an absolute power that can intervene retroactively in the course of history and can *restore* the wounded order as well as the integrity of the victims."[31] However, he then reins this restorative absolute other back within the limits of reason, that is, within the "linguistic turn [that] permits a deflationary interpretation of the 'wholly Other'":

> The *logos* of language escapes our control, and yet we are the ones, the
> subjects capable of speech and action, who reach an understanding with
> one another in this medium. . . . The "right" ethical self-understanding is

30. Jürgen Habermas, "Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What Is the 'Good Life'?," in *Future of Human Nature*, 8.
    31. Ibid.

> neither revealed nor "given" in some other way. It can only be won in a
> common endeavor. From this perspective what makes our being-ourselves
> possible appears more as a transsubjective power than an absolute one.[32]

This linguistic turn has corollaries in Heidegger, Jacques Lacan, and Emmanuel Lévinas, thinkers from whom Habermas habitually, often polemically, distinguishes himself. Earlier I drew on their way of thinking in arguing that the ever-vanishing presence of the deity and the play of biblical tropes evoking it lower the transcendent god to mere immanence in language. The linguistic turn associated with this hermeneutical tradition emphasizes, as Habermas does, that language is not the private property of any individual. But it does not define language as *ultimately* the medium of mutual understanding. True, language alone enables mutual understanding, but by the same token it alone enables deception, self-deception, lies, and dissembling as well as the creative strife of differences and differing. Even what is experienced as mutual understanding can be a mutual misunderstanding. The so-called formal pragmatics of communication by which Habermas wants to define morality declares the supremacy of truth over untruth, understanding over misunderstanding, agreement over deception, but it cannot on its own *distinguish* truth *from* untruth, understanding *from* misunderstanding, agreement *from* deception.

That predicament, in my view, drives Habermas's attempts to infuse the communicative ethic with religious images and symbols. He acknowledges that his theory of justice and model of the "public use of reason" are not *in themselves* persuasive enough to motivate decision and orient action in the political realm. Pure practical reason needs a propagandist. Habermas has shied away from recognizing that. His belief in reason has been, and remains, unwavering, but he does not acknowledge that it is a *belief.* What has wavered is his belief in reason's efficacy. He has always asked too much of the weak transcendentalism of a horizon of mutual understanding. At the beginning of our tradition of political thought, Aristotle did not make the mistake of limiting persuasion to the power of the better argument but in the *Art of Rhetoric* analyzed the essential role of arousing or dampening passions in the very act of advancing an argument, passions whose shapes are inseparable from the way of life or "structure of feeling" of a particular polis. Habermas has always brushed rhetoric and passion out of his theory of the public use of reason in political discourse, as though they represent mere pathologies that distort com-

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32. Habermas, "Are There Postmetaphysical Answers," 9–11. On Kierkegaard, see also "Boundary between Faith and Knowledge," esp. 235–38.

munication. A patho-logy of the political realm, in the sense of a discourse (*logos*) on the emotions (*pathê*), deserves a more integral place in political theory than Habermas has granted it. In its absence he ends up looking for a substitute in his vacillating appropriation of symbols like *the Kingdom of God on earth*.

The appropriation does not work. Something is lost in translation. The necessity of the Kierkegaardian "wholly Other's" power to forgive the ineluctable weakness of human will is lost when recast as the human capacity to "reach an understanding with one another" in language. So, too, the image of the *Kingdom of God on earth* cannot arouse the sense that one suffers from living in a torn moral totality unless it promises one's own redemption. Forgiveness and redemption fall outside the ideal speech situation.[33] The translation of religious language into political discourse when the latter is conceived in purely proceduralist terms ends up rehearsing what was said and can be said without the religious language. But perhaps the problem is that Habermasian proceduralism is not pure enough. Vattimo, a latecomer to the hermeneutics-versus-proceduralism debate, cuts through their mere opposition in a brief lecture from 2002 titled "An Apology for Proceduralism." He disputes Habermas's theory of communicative action insofar as it postulates the "performative contradiction" of using language for purposes other than reaching mutual understanding and agreement and so embeds a moral imperative in the very pragmatics of speech. Such an attempt to give a grounding or a transcendental guarantee to politics and law is a "metaphysical residue." In that sense, Habermas's thought is not postmetaphysical from the standpoint of the Heideggerian "overcoming of metaphysics." However, that is not to reject proceduralism, Vattimo argues, but to reconceive it: "The nexus of proceduralism and modernity means essentially this: That we have become modern to the extent that we have realized that every juridical, political, or other system is 'only' procedure, or, in other words, that any truth is 'only' interpretation."[34] So understood,

33. It is striking that the redemptive, salvific promise most closely associated with Christianity—namely, the believer's individual escape from mortality and his or her attainment of eternal life—is also marginalized to the point of disappearing in both Vattimo and Girard. Neither retains Christian doctrine's reference to the afterlife. Sigmund Freud was convinced that the majority of moderns would not ultimately renounce their desire to escape mortality in exchange for the knowledge and benefits of science. Habermas, Vattimo, and Girard seem, despite all their differences, to have made that renunciation—without quite announcing it. They brush aside the religious form of the question that Jorie Graham poses in secular poetic terms: "We're spared, but are we saved?"

34. Gianni Vattimo, "An Apology for Proceduralism," in *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, ed. Santiago Zabala, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 158.

proceduralism and hermeneutics are not antagonistic; rather, each is a way to recognize the ungroundedness of culture and politics in the modern age. In hermeneutical terms, the metaphysical heritage of transcendental or grounding concepts has now to be "overcome," not in the sense of repudiating those concepts as errors but in the sense of "recognizing them in their historicity and contingency," since our own thought has no other grounding or history. "We recognize them for what they are truly worth, but in doing so we [accept] them in a weak sense that does not condemn them to oblivion but lets them stand as pure heritage, stripped of the sacral aura in which traditions were wont to cloak themselves."[35]

Habermas's claim to translate religious language into terms consistent with the public use of reason narrows the possible hermeneutic relations to religious traditions to the meager transposition of select religious expressions into abstract universal norms. Intended to enrich and motivate secularism and democracy—and model a nondestructive secularization—this procedure in effect short-circuits the interpretation of religious phenomena and belief. Moreover, Habermas's preoccupation with the clash of civilizations, reproductive technologies, and the supposed burden of liberal rights and freedoms on believers leads him to neglect what I take to be key problems in the relation of religion and politics today, namely, developments as diverse as Islamism, right-to-life activism, the propensity to violent confrontation between different religious communities along the "tenth parallel,"[36] and the oppression of women and assault on sexual freedoms common to conservatives and fundamentalists in all the Abrahamic faiths. Raymond Aron astutely defined the communist and fascist ideologies of the twentieth century as *political religions*. The twenty-first century is plagued by the *politicization of religion*. The intellectual task today, then, is not to assure believers that modernization is not destructive of traditional beliefs—it is, and always has been—or to translate selected religious images into Kantian maxims. The great seventeenth-century thinkers paved the way for the ecumenism that alone defuses religious violence by *relativizing* doctrine, ritual, and belief. In that same period the paradoxical effect of the coincidence of the Counter-Reformation and the baroque was to liberate art from the absolutism of the church even as architecture, sculpture, and painting housed and decorated it. Weber and then Adorno call this liberation aesthetic rationality, that is, the movement through which artis-

35. Vattimo, "Apology for Proceduralism," 161.
36. See Eliza Griswold, *The Tenth Parallel: Dispatches from the Fault Line between Christianity and Islam* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

tic creation becomes ever more engaged with the means of artistic expression and so relativizes the doctrines or ideologies that cohere the society in which the artist lives. The countermovement to the politicization of religion is to treat religious traditions with an attitude comparable to the one Vattimo recommends toward metaphysical concepts, namely, one "that does not condemn them to oblivion but lets them stand as pure heritage, stripped of the sacral aura in which traditions were wont to cloak themselves." It is necessary to adopt a hermeneutico-aesthetic attitude to religion. The counter to the politicization of religion is the *aestheticization of religion*.

Always aestheticize!