

The future of religion

A dialogue with Santiago Zabala

Rome, Piazza San Eustacchio, Bar del Caffè,
September 25th 2006

Jens Viggo Nielsen

JENS Viggo Nielsen (JVN): I imagine that during our conversation we will talk a lot about your book, *The future of religion*¹, which will be our point of departure today. You have already worked with Gianni Vattimo for about ten years. Back in 2003 you edited his book, *Nihilism and emancipation*², and lately you have also published other books together, as well as periodicals³. Furthermore, I understand that the next book you are doing together will be a co-authored one bearing the title *From Within. Deconstructing Capitalism through Globalization*⁴. But you have also written about topics "all your own", i.e. about the philosophy of Ernst Tugendhat. In short, how would you define your own position, as compared to the weak thought of Gianni Vattimo?

Santiago Zabala (SZ): I do not think I deal with different topics or that I have a different position from Vattimo's. The book you mention on Tugendhat⁵ was actually my MA thesis that I worked on for four years at the University of Turin under Vattimo's direction. My aim was to show how the German philosopher Tugendhat corrected his teacher Heidegger's position. It was published in Italian in 2004, and will also be available in English next year. The difference between Vattimo and myself can be found in my forthcoming book *The Remains of Being*⁶, where I develop and, in a way, wrote the book Vattimo had planned in 1994 entitled *Ontology of actuality*. He never got down to writing it, although he still talks about it as if he did. This book was supposed to explain what is left of Being after the deconstruction of metaphysics – an ontology of the current state of Being. Although I asked him to write it several times during the past

years, he kept on postponing it until he finally told me to do it myself, since he perceived I had an idea of what it should look like. Now, Vattimo has given lots of indications of what such an ontology of actuality is, not only in *Beyond Interpretation*, but also in *Nihilism and Emancipation*, but he has never systematically formulated it. This is what I've been working on for the past 5 years. I finished the book in July, and by August he had several comments to make that confirmed that I have really brought his indications to the extreme. He was very happy to see how I had developed his ideas, but he also found the book very different from the way he would have done it: I talk about an "ontology of remnants" with its "remains of Being", while he still thinks it should be called an "ontology of actuality" which investigates the "event of Being." He also believes that the "projectuality" of Dasein is missing in these remains of Being, but I think it is the only way to recognize how Being is something given that has been used up, but still remains, keeps on remaining. Thus I think to have explained in a more persuasive way what he means (perhaps as Tugendhat did with Heidegger's philosophy), and the other colleagues that read it, such as Jean Grondin, Jeff Malpas, Giacomo Marramao, and John Caputo, think I have written a very original work. It's under review at Columbia Press now and it would take up too much space to continue to explain the differences, but as you can see, our differences sum up to the different ways of naming Being after the deconstruction of metaphysics. As far as the rest is concerned – culture, politics, religion – well, there basically are no differences, and this is also why we, together, are writing *From Within. Deconstructing Capitalism through Globalization*.

JVN: If I have understood you correctly, this next book is political. It strikes me that you have been writing it together just recently, and as you surely know, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt both write political books together. Will your book perhaps discuss their concept of "Empire" and their understanding of globalization? Their book *Empire* had a lot of success, and the same goes for their following one, *Multitude*. Is yours similar?

SZ: The only similarity is that we are also two authors. As for the subject matter, well, I still did not understand (and doubt they understood

either) what their book is about. I read both volumes and simply did not get much out of it. They have played the old trick of intellectuals, which consists in explaining things that could be simple in a confusing manner. Furthermore, their categories, "empire" and "multitude", are as metaphysical as Plato's: there just is no way to identify where the empire is or who the multitude is. We might discuss their books, but we are certainly not taking them too seriously. Our book is not just another theory of permanent revolutions, but the political project of hermeneutics. The general lines of this can be found in *Nihilism and Emancipation* (which you translated so well for us, and we are very grateful) and also in some parts of the dialogue in *The Future of Religion*. The main idea is that the political problem today is capitalism, the capitalist system we are all emerged in, and the emancipation from this system taking place through globalization. It is globalization that allows all the worst consequences of capitalism to emerge. This is why the deconstruction of capitalism only can take place through globalization. This will inevitably take us all back to a genuine socialist politics, because if we check the content of all the criticism that this movement does – in relation to the G8, the OMC, the Iraq invasion, US hegemony, not to mention multinational corporations – you will find the socialist program. To return to your question on Negri and Hardt, what they indicate as the "Empire" we simply name it "capitalism." A theory that cuts through both of these theories (and a better one at that) can be found in Ellen Meiksins Wood's latest book: *The Empire of Capital*.

JVN: Ok, I think we cannot avoid getting back to the question of the political implications of weak thought, since this question is also present in *The future of religion*, our main issue today. But as for the basic assumptions of weak thought, what do you understand by a "weak thought", as seen in the works of Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty?

SZ: Weak thought is thought. It is the recognition of our capacities. This is why it is the strongest thought of weak thought because it's the only one to know it is weak. Vattimo invented it, while Rorty accepted and acquired it to qualify his own work which not only has a pragmatic nature, but is also weak, that is – in his vocabulary – contingent.

JVN: In your book's introduction you state that the future of religion

lies in a religion both without atheists and theists. But what role does religion then play within weak thought? How are we to understand this very concept of "religion", as you see it?

SZ: It is an invitation to recognize religion as weak also, as limited to certain hopes, freedoms, or even as the death of god. The concept works well in regards to religion because it helps to see, as we showed in the book, that God is not necessary for religion, that you may feel perfectly pious without such an image. After all, Christ himself was weak, died weak, and even lived in a weak (poor) way...

JVN: But why even ask the question of religion today? Do you, Vattimo and Rorty think that we do in fact still ask more questions about it, or rather that we should do so, but don't? And what role do you think that religion is going to play in tomorrow's world? Is there any danger whatsoever that religion would not have a future?

SZ: The question of the future of religion is of great actuality, because its tradition or history is essential, and by raising the question of its future, one starts to wonder if, as you point out, it *has* a future. The questions we should be asking shouldn't be about religion in itself (God exists? Truth of Christ?), which would make us fall back into metaphysics, but rather how these questions prevent us from having faith. The more you ask these questions, the less faith you will have. Questions in philosophy are always welcome as long as they invite us to "pursue the conversation".

JVN: You also decided to arrange an interview with Rorty and Vattimo in Paris back in December 2002. But where did the idea for the book come from in the first place?

SZ: Let us first agree that interviews should always be called dialogues, because the one asking the questions already has an idea of the answer he will receive, and by choosing certain questions rather than others, he is anticipating the answers and, in a way, already answering them. This is what hermeneutics is about, and perhaps also the book in itself. The idea for the book came to me on February 12th, 2000, when Erwin Teufel, Rüdiger Bubner, Michael Theunissen, Gianni Vattimo, and Richard Rorty were invited to the University of Heidelberg to give talks to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Gadamer's birth. Although since the early 1980s,

Vattimo and Rorty had written several essays and forewords for their respective English and Italian editions, Rorty's conference that day, entitled "Being that can be Understood is Language", confirmed not only that his neopragmatic philosophy had the same goals as Vattimo's hermeneutics, but also that these two philosophies were weak philosophies, that is, "weak thoughts". It was here that I decided they should collaborate and produce a book together. Rorty's conference on Gadamer was the confirmation that we are living beyond metaphysics or the traditional dichotomies such as truth vs error, science vs religion, or even, right vs left. It was a clear elucidation that we are immersed in a "fusion of horizons" which is not an outcome or a final condition, but rather a recognition of our weakness, a recognition of this condition. From the beginning, I knew the book had to be on religion, but not of religion, in other words, religion was only a good pretext to delineate their respective versions of weak thought. Perhaps science could have worked well also, but in the end I chose religion because its essential problem, as to whether god exist or not, was a good example, an example without a solution.

JVN: So we are dealing with a philosophical book on religion and on the future of religion, in which both Rorty and Vattimo represent weak thought, and where the point of departure is Gadamer's view on the fact that "Being, which can be understood, is language". Speaking of Gadamer, will you then explain to us where it is that Vattimo and weak thought depart from or disagree with his former teacher's hermeneutical elaboration of Heidegger's philosophy?

SZ: As you probably know, the first translation of *Truth and Method* was the one in Italian by Vattimo. He started it during the sixties in Heidelberg while he was writing his PhD under Gadamer. Vattimo and Gadamer had a friendly relationship, but since Vattimo was translating his major book, they had to discuss on occasion various terminological and grammatical issues, which led to real philosophical discussions. Vattimo told me that the translation into Italian of Gadamer's most known dictum – "*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache* [Being that can be understood is language]" – was tricky because if the commas are neglected as they are in English and French, then the dictum could be interpreted as identifying

too easily the sphere of beings offering themselves to comprehension within language. Instead, Vattimo opted for the second possibility, with the commas, as in German, because it emphasized that Being is language and its characteristic is the possibility of being comprehended. It was after the translation that Vattimo began to understand that Gadamer continued to be too platonic and metaphysical, protecting the human sciences against modern scientism at all costs, mainly because, as he put it, he was not "Heideggerian" enough. Gadamer, according to Vattimo, never really approved of Heidegger's critique and destruction of the history of ontology, because he never actually understood his famous dictum, according to which all "Being is language", as he should have. This is what differentiates them regarding the hermeneutical elaboration of Heidegger's philosophy. What Vattimo always approved of in Gadamer instead was his version of Hegelian idealism, which had many affinities with Benedetto Croce's philosophical interpretation of the history of the Spirit. When Vattimo now affirms that "emancipation" is "weakening" and that weakening is nothing other than transferring everything into the realm of symbolism and simulacrum, he intends this "emancipation" as a Hegelian spiritualization without the absolute Spirit or, as we can say, without the problem of the existence of God.

JVN: I have a question relating to the title, which also pertains to the relation between Rorty and Vattimo in the book: It almost seems to me that the title expresses a kind of paradox – although I'm not sure you will agree with me on this, as I perhaps take it too "seriously": According to Vattimo, who openly declares himself a "half-believing" Christian, the fundamental "Leitfaden" of weak thought is the appropriation of tradition and therefore also of the past event of incarnation. To Rorty, on the other hand, the ideas of charity and solidarity as they were propagated by the French revolution, and in the Rorty's liberal hope, belongs to the future understood as a distant utopia. Rorty also argues in the book that he is not impressed with Vattimo's distinction between before and after the birth of Jesus. In other words: Is there not, after all, an important difference between the two, precisely in their different views on religion and on the "fulfilment of time", and this in spite of the many similarities?

SZ: You raise here a fundamental question which could easily induce lots of readers to criticize this volume as opportunistic, but if such concern arises it is because there is also something that links everything together. Firstly, we should remember that this is an edited book, which means that the editor decided to produce such a book with material which was not his, that belongs to others. Having said this, let us also note, as Derrida used to say, that the author comes after the text, and not before. In other words, there is a certain understanding of religion that comes from the book regardless of its authors. Such an understanding is also that "something" I just referred to, and which links it all together. On the one hand, Vattimo and Rorty both agree that the future of religion (the understanding) may only exist without the concern regarding the existence of God, and on the other, that "solidarity, charity, and irony" (the so-called "something") represent the best possibility of what religion should be about. Those differences between Vattimo and Rorty you mention are dissolved, or better, they lose their significance, because they both reach this conclusion. It is not important that one uses Croce and the other Dewey, what is more significant is that these two different philosophical traditions, narrations, or conversations, achieve a goal that enables both to reproduce their own tradition. It is only by conversing with the other tradition that your own will acquire the proper respect and continue to live on. The paradox you mention certainly exists and is valuable, but their difference on religion depends on how to live it, not how to understand it.

JVN: But doesn't Rorty's statement on his own "non-musicality" in religious matters raise a certain justified doubt also as to the very "existence of God", or, at least, of the Christian God? Or is this question simply too metaphysical?

SZ: It's too metaphysical, but this does not mean it's not significant. Metaphysics is very significant, actually it's the most significant aspect of philosophy, but this does not mean we still have to believe in it or use it for our practices. The problem is whether we expect a metaphysical response too. Rorty's answer to this question is that he just does not feel it, but not feeling it not necessarily implies its non-existence. Also, doubt

is a constitutive part of the same category of belief, one cannot believe without doubt; the idea now, or the future of religion, is that doubt prevails over certainty, leaving an open space. This open space allows other beliefs to take part in the debate and, sometimes, transforms the debate into a conversation. Rorty would be more interested in keeping the debate of the conversation open, rather than in convincing others also to become tone-deaf regarding religious matters.

JVN: Here, I come to think of a current issue, even if you have already drawn attention to the fact that the book is not simply a book on religion but also on other issues such as the role of science: In a certain passage in the conversation of the book, Rorty states that, in his opinion, a dialogue with Islam does not make sense. Is this also your opinion and the opinion of Vattimo? And by the way, what do you think of pope Ratzinger's latest statements calling Islam an "irrational" religion, as opposed to Christianity which, according to him, is "rational"?

SZ: Rorty's statement might seem quite radical coming from a liberal, but you must also note when the dialogue took place: it was in December 2002, that is, just at the start of Bush's dictatorial war and the indoctrination campaign we were all under. Most television networks were, and still are, insisting that democracy had to be exported, that we had to take our "freedom" to them. Now, I fully agree with Rorty that there is no need of a dialogue if this means a dialogue between Bin Laden and Bush (since they are essentially the same person), or even if we consider the dialogue as a way to persuade them (as the mission "enduring freedom"). A dialogue might still be nice, but it's not useful if the goal of this dialogue is a forced, constricted and obligatory one. If they do not want our democracy, why should we impose it on them? They certainly know all about it, and if I were them, I would surely stay as far away as possible from it. In this light, Rorty's words should be understood as an invitation to moderation regarding the capacities of dialogue to produce solutions: if we do not dialogue, nothing terrible will happen. Democratic revolutions occur from within, not from the exterior. Here is where the new Pope comes in. I think Ratzinger was trying to project that victim image that his predecessor had, and he certainly was successful in creating a scandal

in a very clever way. Of course, the fact that I admire his ability to create a scandal in his own favour (most Catholics now even fear for his life) does not mean I agree with him in the slightest. On the contrary, I'm quite worried about the danger he is provoking for all the Catholics living in Muslim countries. As far as the distinction he makes between rational and irrational, well, what can I say? I believe that the scandal surrounding this distinction is a symptom of fear, insecurity, and anxiety. The Pope is much more afraid of all those half believers, as Vattimo calls himself, than of the few Islamic fundamentalists that our television networks deliberately choose to indoctrinate us with. We must remember that the Vatican is in a deep crisis of followers, not only with lay ones, but also in the priesthood; if you walk through Rome you will note the amount of priests that come from Africa or South America. This is not a bad thing, I'm happy about it, but the Vatican isn't. An example of this is the fact that they chose a German Pope. Why would they choose a South American Pope (as most newspapers thought they would) if in South America they have so many followers? It's just useless. Instead, a Pope from Germany, they thought, will help Europe's Catholics. They are much more afraid of our secularization than of the clash between civilizations, but since they think such a clash might bring back lots of followers, they go on, allying themselves with Bush, and representing themselves as victims. But the only way they can bring back those "lost" followers would be by becoming Christians again, because as Hans Küng once said, it is just impossible that God believes in the Vatican!

JVN: Earlier, you spoke of Rorty's and Vattimo's philosophies as "narrations", but if philosophy – and this means the interpretation of hermeneutics – consists of narrations, what then, in your opinion, is the difference between, for instance, philosophy and literature?

SZ: What I meant by "philosophical views as narrations" was only to distinguish these views from traditional views of philosophy as systems of truth. It seems hard to call a system of truth, as Kant tried to establish, a narration as any other, because Kant, as so many philosophers until Heidegger, always thought they were the last one writing. A narrator is something weaker. This is why Rorty once said that "philosophy books

should be, in the future, less pretentious, less professionalized, less priggish, less guarded, funnier, more poetic, and perhaps more sexier than those of the past." The difference is the same difference there is between science and literature, or philosophy and science. Is science a form of literature? In a certain way it is. Is philosophy a form of science? Sometimes it is. It is more a difference of the recognition of its own limits, than of the objects it investigates. Philosophy, at least in its traditional aspect, is ontology – that is, the investigation of Being. But such investigation is nothing more than the repetition of a question which presupposes all other questions, while science and literature live within themselves. Science, most of the time, as Heidegger says, does not think. But it does not need to think, because thought is unnecessary for the correct function of scientific procedures. The difference lies in a wider recognition of its "limits", which we may also call "presuppositions" or simply "thought."

JVN: Your answer makes me think of Dialogue with Nietzsche, where Vattimo, in an essay from 1994, launches a criticism or correction of Rorty's "aesthetic" reading of Nietzsche and, indirectly, of his theory of the redescription of the world.¹⁰ Do you think that Vattimo would still maintain, even today, that Rorty does not properly consider the question of Being?

SZ: Considering the question of Being, the fundamental problem of philosophy is not a matrix to evaluate a philosopher's significance. Some have worked on it, others have not, but what is important is whether this problem is pursued. Perhaps Rorty did not pursue this problem recently, but he certainly did in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where the criticism of Being as a mirror or essence is indirectly discussed. We could also say that Vattimo does not deal with the problem of Being in his recent works on religion or politics, but just as Rorty's works on social justice and culture, it depends on his previous analysis of Being.

JVN: But doesn't a relaxed and ironic position, such as the one of weak thought, or the fact that we, in the western world – and here I quote what Vattimo stated in a Danish newspaper interview two years ago –, who no longer believe neither in truth nor in our own ideals, always entail the risk of becoming a "Besserwisser", or even in an

indirect manner, of imposing a kind of “cultural imperialism” on the very cultures that we want to dialogue with on their own terms? Is there any way in which we can finally vaccinate ourselves against the possibility that even the principle of the weakening of strong principles can enact a kind of “violence” in relation to people who think or feel differently from ourselves?

SZ: Here you raise another essential point that is often criticized in all philosophical theories that overcome metaphysics. Overcoming some belief or foundation does not mean to forget about it. On the contrary, it means to appropriate it, to understand it in a way that will not exarcebate those issues for which you decided to overcome it in the first place. Here, irony helps. The point is that weak thought helps to overcome these ideologies or beliefs in such a way that they will continue to be with us, leaving space for other beliefs. It’s like the mechanism of Freud’s analysis: the therapy will not help the patient to forget all the problems; on the contrary, it will show him how these problems are part of his nature and how he can begin to live with them. Also, weak thought and strong thought should not be opposed as poles of two different thoughts because it would be like opposing analytical philosophy to continental philosophy, or God’s existence to his non-existence, good cultures to bad ones. Instead, weak thought is the strongest one because it knows it is weak, and this is also why ii insists on interpretation rather than description, or on Heidegger and Gadamer rather than Carnap and Quine. In your question, you also ask what assurances we have that weak thought will not create any violence. This is just as with the first part of your question: weakening dogmatic belief is like secularization – it never stops, it just continues because there will always be other principles to weaken, just as today, there are still so many things we still need to secularize.

JVN: Both Rorty and Vattimo have written in detail on irony, and in Denmark we have Søren Kierkegaard, who in 1841 wrote his doctoral thesis exactly on this subject, *On the Concept of Irony*. In this book Kierkegaard underscores – continuing on from Socrates and Hegel, but definitely also in contrast with Hegel – that irony necessarily implicates an “infinite, subjective negativity”, and also that irony always

ends up biting its own tail: In Kierkegaard's opinion, irony is just as hard to represent as "the god Mars with the armour that makes him invisible". Well, this (ironic) definition of irony seems to me to resemble the definition of weak thought – here, I am thinking of the Nietzsche-inspired statement in Vattimo, according to which (I quote by memory), "Everything is an interpretation, and also this statement, which says that everything is an interpretation, is itself in turn an interpretation!" My question here is, if irony does not necessarily include a dimension of subjectivity, and if not in a strong, then at least in a weakened sense of the word? In *Vocazione e responsabilità del filosofo*, and even before that in *Crede di credere*, Vattimo confronts the issue of the "personal" in his (re)turn towards Christianity, and as I said, it seems to me that he, at least to some degree, has approached Kierkegaard's view of and practice of irony.

SZ: This is a very difficult question. In order to attach Kierkegaard to Vattimo we would need to pass through Heidegger's existential *apparatus*, but irony does not have a place in this apparatus – that is, in the first section of *Being and Time*. I cannot comment on Kierkegaard's influences because they are just too abundant and the space we have is limited. I would like instead to comment on the subjectivity of irony. Just as metaphysics cannot be overcome completely, a remain (Vattimo would say "an event") of subjectivity would be leftover. I do not think there is any foundation in irony or any subjectivity in it. Thus, every time we use it, it's also to bring to the fore our own existence even if it's only to show how weak it is, and perhaps it's only to show its weakness. The point is, coming back to the "assistance of irony" I mentioned above, that irony is something that can help us stand the oppression of truth. Truth can only appear as an oppression, as a violence we must accept because it's the end, the truth. This is why the book insists so much on irony because a future of religion where irony plays a significant role will enable us to leave the so called "end of times" aside, even if such an end will occur.

JVN: Manfred Frank, one of the contributors of *Weakening Philosophy*¹³, has defended the view that without subjectivity, without a consciousness, which cannot be reduced to language, the social or history,

then it also becomes impossible to found human rights, and in the end we will eventually end up in totalitarianism. What do you think of this viewpoint?

SZ: Yes, Professor Frank is one of the most important European philosophers and also a good friend of mine. He very much enjoyed my book on Tugendhat and also accepted my invitation to participate in my volume for Vattimo's seventieth birthday. His opinion on consciousness comes from his adherence to the so-called "school of Heidelberg" (Dieter Henrich, Konrad Cramer, Ulrich Pothast), who have worked towards a rehabilitation of Cartesian subjectivity. I also agree that it is impossible to found human rights, but I do not see why such impossibility will automatically produce totalitarianism. We already went through totalitarianism and perhaps some administrations today, such as Bush's and Blair's, are behaving in a totalitarian way, but I see things in a different perspective. A clear subjectivity or consciousness will only assure with higher emphasis a foundation: they were so sure that Saddam had biological weapons (their own, since the US was the first supplier in the 1980s), that they had the "right" to intervene. If a doubt had prevailed, as it did in the consciousness of the majority of the population on this planet, they would have been forced not to attack. I do not think that doubt, or, in philosophical terms, relativism, contingency, and weakness, contrary to subjectivity or consciousness, will produce totalitarianism; I think the opposite is much more likely.

JVN: Then we come to Christianity and its relation to truth: Weak thought's own understanding of Christianity often takes as its point of departure the famous Benedetto Croce quote, "Why we cannot not call ourselves Christians", just as it often refers to another, and seemingly contrary, popular Italian saying, "Thank God I'm an atheist!" Can you please explain how these two sentences relate to each other?

SZ: Both propositions are really just ways of explaining, again, how it is impossible to overcome metaphysics. On the one hand, Croce reminds us philosophers that there cannot be any "philosophy" which is not Christian: all Greek philosophy was transmitted to us through that tradition which must inevitably be called Christian. On the other hand,

the second proposition just confirms that atheism is an internal response to theism – that is, a strong secularization is only possible in a strong theistic tradition like ours (and every tradition). These two sentences relate to each other because they are both directed against those intellectuals such as Bertrand Russell, who thought he was able to do without that same tradition which constituted his own work – and I should also add, his own *mathematical* work. These are the worst kinds of attack the Vatican can receive because they imply that the Vatican itself has contributed to producing this lay and secularized culture we are so proud of.

JVN: In Denmark it has been argued by some reviewers, with whom I myself tend to agree, that Vattimo, in his essay on “Pain and metaphysics” in *Nihilism and emancipation*, might seem to cut away an important part of Christianity: can there be a sense of guilt without (at least some) pain involved, and can there be a sense of “sin” without a sense of guilt? Is the Christian concept of sin, as you see it, and here also its mental “collateral” – anxiety – so to speak, solely a cause for (psychic) violence, or could it also exert a more positive function?

SZ: It is difficult to argue with these distinguished reviewers on such a delicate and complex matter, but I will try to answer employing the only way beyond pain and violence, that is, by weakening them. I’m not sure if it is possible to discuss this realm of consciousness (guilt, sin, anxiety) as a platform as Christianity tries to do. I think psychologists have explained that it’s more a matter of different responses to contingent personal histories that must be reconstructed. We are all constituted very differently psychically because we all have a different history, and the way guilt is felt in one Christian may be very different from another Christian who has been educated just like him. The point is that guilt may have any origin, but what is important is how such origin is considered. Let’s imagine I feel guilty because the Pope had told me not to vote for politicians that promote euthanasia (as in Italy this week) and I went on to vote for them. This guilt is just as legitimate as the opposite one, hence, that I did not vote for these politicians because I followed the Pope’s advice. The fact that if at the origin there is a Christian sin or a secular one does not matter; the important thing is that on both occasions, the

legitimate pain is weakened – that is, it is recognized in its contingent foundation. Here comes into play the “positive function” you mention. Once I recognize its origin, foundation, or authority (the Pope) it will be weakened and I will understand its particular condition. This is what therapy is all about, but not only therapy – it is also supposed to be the goal of a sincere priest; after all, they are supposed to absolve us from our sins, not to condemn us.

JVN: A last a question on religion and Christianity: why does weak thought not like the idea of God as a transcendent being? Can you not easily imagine a position which would be both ironic – and even self-ironic – and at the same time understand incarnation as a paradox? First and foremost, I am here referring again to Kierkegaard, whose “weak transcendence” you cannot possibly compare to the dogmatic transcendentalism of the pope and the church: in fact, Kierkegaard too emphasises the same thing you said earlier – that is, that belief and doubt hang together, that one cannot be without the other, and that the relation with God can only be part of our historical “projectuality”. Conversely, Kierkegaard might have wanted to ask of weak thought, with its idea of kenosis: can one really become “friends” with Jesus without any “fear and trembling”? Will Jesus not always somehow remain a skandalon that “transcends” our everyday experience, or all the “language games” that each and every one of us takes part in?

SZ: Your question inevitably invites everyone interested in weak thought to investigate the relation between Vattimo’s and Kierkegaard’s understanding of faith. I wish I could engage in such research, but my investigations are now concentrated on other issues. But this does not mean that it should not be done, and Gianni Vattimo and I would be most interested in supporting it. I do not think weak thought is incompatible with the transcendent idea of God – we just see it as potentially oppressive and dangerous, but we would not perceive its unavailability as a danger. This may even be the only idea or vision we can extract from tradition, but the point is that once we really extract it, we recognize that it’s pretty weak, contingent, etc. What is left of this transcendent idea? Not much. We all know that there are very few American soldiers that actually believe

God gave Bush a mission, or that the Islamist kamikaze are actually following their faith in their self-destructive actions. It's more a matter of political indoctrination or necessity that motivates them – the religious aspect is just a cover created for us. As for becoming friends with Jesus without “fear and trembling”? I think it should be the opposite; it's Jesus that would be in fear and trembling if he tried to become our friend. He would probably say: “What have you become?” He may always remain, as you say, a *skandalon*, but only because this is how he has been transmitted to us. Our own tradition is inevitably a reconsideration of an event, incarnation, but more important than the existence of such event, is its significance today. Perhaps a way to retrieve its significance today is through an emphasis on Kierkegaard's Jesus, which is much more faithful than Pope Ratzinger's Jesus.

JVN: I would now like to ask you some questions about weak thought and its relation to society and politics: Vattimo is one of the philosophers who still speaks of post-modernity. You just spoke about “overcoming” and “recollecting” or “appropriating” metaphysics at one and the same time. Can you briefly explain why weak thought on one hand speaks of “overcoming” modernity, and on the other hand, refuses the idea of moving beyond modernity? Don't the notions “beyond” and “overcoming” easily lead to the misunderstanding that modernity is something which has to be “overcome” once and for all, whereas the idea of weak thought – cf. Heidegger's concept, not of *Überwindung*, but of *Verwindung* – is that we can only, as you say, surpass it or learn how we might live with and within modernity?

SZ: Vattimo is only one of many philosophers (Derrida, Rorty, Baudrillard, Beck) that discuss postmodernity and believe that we are in the postmodern condition. Yes, overcoming and appropriating metaphysics are the same thing, or more precisely, they are the same thing if we follow Heidegger's indications where he says that metaphysics should not be “overcome” (*überwinden*), but “surpassed” (*verwinden*). The difference lies in the idea that, just as a mental problem is never solved once and for all, neither is it forgotten, or discarded. But how can we really overcome a problem such as “violence”? The only way to do so is by recognizing its

existence and weakening it, to appropriate it as something we have to live with. Modernity is as useful as the idea of God; should we cancel the last 3000 years of Christianity? Or should we recognize its positive force and continue to use it as we wish? As far as Freud is concerned, it's better to recognize the problems in order to live with them in such a way that they do not halt us from our practices: this is the meaning of the "post" before "modernity". It might come after, but as a part of it, as its own part.

JVN: But where, then, is the difference to Habermas when he speaks of late-modernity and of modernity understood as an unfinished project? Is it, as it were, the inherent truth-potential of communication which is the difference, because Habermas actually believes that "in principle", the project of modernity can be concluded?

SZ: I'm not a big fan of Habermas because, as you correctly point out, he still believes in a complete emancipation. We do not believe it is possible because it would presuppose the end point, the complete freedom, but once such a state is reached, new emancipative necessities will come about. Moreover, there are only unfinished projects; not even Hegel could be seriously conceived of as the constructor of a finished system: perhaps he thought so, but at the end, the number of ways to see flaws in it are enormous. Perhaps the only emancipation is recognizing how far away we actually are from emancipation.

JVN: Speaking of the possibility of emancipation and violence: In an essay on Pareyson and Vattimo published in Denmark, Alberto Siclari has stated against weak thought that violence is more "real" than this line of thinking is prone to accept.⁴ But on the other hand Vattimo himself underscores that of course there are "facts", whose existence it is useless to discuss. I am here referring to your *Nihilism and religion* published last year, where Vattimo says that if I go outside and actually get wet, then it is of course useless to deny that it is raining! Furthermore, back in 2004, Vattimo wrote in *Il Manifesto* that he had changed his mind, and that this change is attested in his renewed interest in Marx and socialism: "What is now needed", Vattimo said, "is a stronger version of weak thought". Now, my question is: Doesn't violence – that is, the war in Iraq and the capitalism that you write about in your upcoming book

– constitute such a fact or just a form of reality “out there”, which we could of course try to eliminate, but the existence of which we cannot possibly deny? To state it differently, was it perhaps the wish to combat violence that brought Vattimo to redefine a “stronger” and more political version of weak thought as compared to earlier?

SZ: I would urge Alberto Siclari to read carefully what weak thought is about before making such a statement, because it just does not stand; after all, we are dealing here with a thought which is a response to violence. It is a response to the objectivity of violence. I explain in detail how Vattimo came up with it in my introduction to *Weakening Philosophy*. It was really a response to the Red Brigade’s violence with which, incidentally, they even threatened him during the 1970s for not being revolutionary enough. Hermeneutics, weak thought’s philosophy, will not debate the fact that if it is raining then you will get wet; but to just argue that the amount of ways to explain whether it’s raining or not are so numerous, the fact that it is raining will then become pointless. Regarding the stronger version of weak thought, It has nothing to do with facts out there. These facts will always exist. The point is to appropriate them without becoming them, without becoming part of the machine that we are working with. I agree with you that the existence of realities such as violence, military occupations, or that corporate systems are out there, but this should not confound weak thought. A stronger weak thought means an increase of its recognition or emphasis in other subject areas. We are perhaps now working on *From Within*⁵ for this reason you point out, hence its political call, but others have done this already. I’m here referring to Rorty’s *Achieving Our Country*,⁶ which is an elaborate call to reconsider the ideological hope of the left and to stick with moderate and active emancipation.

JVN: Vattimo does not entirely endorse the commandment that you should always turn the other cheek to your enemy: in *Nihilism and Religion* he distinguishes between “pacifism” and “pacification”, and explains that pacification does not exclude the possibility of slapping an intruder in the face in order to stop this intrusion from taking place. Furthermore, in *Nihilism and emancipation* he states that, if necessary, you should not hesitate to use naval force against the human smugglers

in the middle sea and even open fire on their crafts in order to combat such criminals profiting from people's misery. In other words, the goal must be to weaken violence as much as possible. But is there not a risk here, in the sense that this very aim can become so elastic in its definition, that it loses all its critical potential? Will not every government always be able to endorse this definition applying it ad hoc, or perhaps rather "assimilating" it ad hoc? Will governments not always try to argue that what they are actually attempting is to weaken violence "as much as possible", for example when they claim that if we do not secure energy resources in the middle east now, then later on "we" (i.e. "they") would have to use much more (military) force in order to gain access to them?

SZ: Regarding the example of using the navy to open fire on smugglers, we should specify what Vattimo meant. During the years he wrote the essays, Umberto Bossi, the leader of one of the most racist parties in Italy, "*Lega Nord*", thought it would be a good idea to sink all ships arriving with poor immigrants. This is not Vattimo's opinion. One thing is to sink a boat full of immigrants (which is not our opinion) another is to open fire on the criminals that ruin the lives of the immigrants by risking their lives, often just leaving them in the middle of the sea. Coming back to your question, I do not think that weakening violence entails a risk of losing its critical power because today, our governments have lost any consent in their operations. They might sell their operations as a preemptive attack or a way for securing our so called freedom, but we all know very well they are selling us capitalist lies. What you call "securing energy sources" should rather be translated by "occupying", "stealing", or even "hijacking", because what our governments are doing in the middle east represents the worst atrocities seen since what the Nazi's did to the Jews or the US to South Vietnam. Your question could seem to imply that governments are already using weak thought, but I think that if only one of them started to, it would consist in the beginning of a recognition of how other people have the same rights us, that is, the "rights" that the US does not see in any other country except itself.

JVN: One last question about the politics of weak thought: does Rorty

really agree with Vattimo on this criticism of the USA? And what does the concrete proposal of a progressive and alternative global politics look like according to weak thought? Is there any alternative at all to the present world order? And what has to be done in practical terms in order to get there?

SZ: This is a question we are working on in our new book (*From Within*) and it would take too long to answer it fully here. Let me just say that Rorty certainly agrees with the criticism as long as we remember that the criticism is only of the establishment, not of the American people. If Italy or France had the military power that the US has, they would probably behave similarly – Britain certainly did in the last century. As for the second part of your question, I would just say that our political order today is based on an empire of capital that functions following the rules of those state's hierarchies, which we inherited from the winners of the second world war. Socialism is the future of our political order because no one wants the richer people to become the only educated class of the planet. This is why North Korea and Iran should ally with China in order to create another balance as we had during the cold war because today, with only one power, the war is hot, too hot, if we consider that less people died during Saddam Hussein's regime than in these past years of occupation.

NOTES

- 1 Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo: *The Future of Religion*, edited by Santiago Zabala. Danish title: *Religionens fremtid*, under publication at Århus University Press, translated by Jens Viggo Nielsen.
- 2 Gianni Vattimo, *Nichilismo ed emancipazione – etica, politica, diritto*, edited by Santiago Zabala, Garzanti 2003, published in Danish with the title *Nihilisme og emancipation – etik, politik, ret*, Århus Universitetsforlag 2005, translation and introduction by Jens Viggo Nielsen.
- 3 We are talking about *Nichilismo e religione*, Valter Casini Editore 2006, which is a transcript (and DVD) of what was said during a conference in Rome the 30th of January 2005, in occasion of the publication of the Italian version of *The future of Religion*. Furthermore, together with Vattimo, Santiago Zabala edits the periodicals *Contemporary European Cultural Studies* (The Davies Group Publishers) and *Interpretazioni. La collana filosofica delle fusioni* (Valter Casini Editore). Finally, Santiago Zabala also edits the forthcoming festschrift for Gianni Vattimo, who turned seventy the 4th of January 2006, *Weakening Philosophy. Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, with contributions of Richard Rorty, Umberto Eco, Charles Taylor, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Teresa Oñate, Fernando Savater, Nancy Frankenberry, Rüdiger Bubner, Jack Miles, Carmelo Dotolo, Wolfgang Welsch, Jean Grondin, James Risser, Pier Aldo Rovatti, Manfred Frank, Reiner Schürmann, Paolo Flores d'Arcais, Hugh J. Silverman, Jeffrey Perl, Giacomo Marramao, Santiago Zabala and Gianni

- Vattimo. Under publication at McGill-Queen's University Press towards the end of 2006.
- 4 Gianni Vattimo og Santiago Zabala, *From Within. Deconstructing Capitalism through Globalization*. Will be published at Columbia University Press in 2008.
 - 5 Santiago Zabala, *Filosofare con Ernst Tugendhat*, with a preface of Gianni Vattimo, Franco Angeli 2004. Available in English in 2007.
 - 6 Santiago Zabala, *The Remains of Being*. To be published at Columbia University Press 2008.
 - 7 Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, Stanford University Press 1997.
 - 8 Antonio Negri and Mikael Hardt, *Empire*, Harvard University Press 2001; *Multitude – War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Hamish Hamilton Ltd. 2005.
 - 9 Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Empire of Capital*, Verso Books 2005.
 - 10 Gianni Vattimo, *Dialogo con Nietzsche*, Garzanti 2000, pp. 292-94. The book is also available in English.
 - 11 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press 1979.
 - 12 *Vocazione e responsabilità del filosofo*, Il Melangolo 2000, especially pp. 109-115. See also, *Credere di credere*, p. 7ff.
 - 13 Cfr. note 3.
 - 14 Alberto Siclari, "To af hermeneutikkens store skikkelser. Pareysons tragiske tanke og Vattimos nihilistiske ontologi" (based on a lecture held at the philological institute at the University of Copenhagen, spring 1999), in *Pré-téxtes franco-danois*, january 2001, Institut for Sprog og Kultur, Samfundslitteratur Roskilde, pp. 1-28.
 - 15 Cfr. note 4.
 - 16 Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-century America*, Harvard University Press 1999.