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THE FUTURE OF RELIGION

A review of Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, edited by Santiago Zabala New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 89pp. \$24.50 (hardback).
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IN JANUARY OF 2005, the Italian version of *The Future of Religion*¹ was published in Milan and received favorable attention in the popular press through various articles and presentations. The book represents a dialogue among Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, covering a wide spectrum of issues while focussing on “religion” understood from a cultural and historical point of view. The original English is slated for release by Columbia University Press in March of 2005. The following purports to identify certain key concepts contained in the book and offer critical insights concerning those concepts.

Although the style of *The Future of Religion* is rather colloquial and apparently informal, the underlying presuppositions are dramatically profound and enmeshed within a philosophical current of thought that spans centuries and that today can be considered part and parcel of *post-modern thought*, however vague that term may be. Rorty and Vattimo are two very well known thinkers, not only in the United States and Italy, but also on a global scale. For those who require some sort of label to pin on different philosophers, “Defenders of Weak Thought (*pensiero debole*)” comes to mind, although this may be misleading, for “weak thought” really requires no defence: it is simply the milieu in which reason should understand itself as poorly equipped to deal with what, in the past, great minds considered the “metaphysical quest.” Zabala frequently repeats that we now live in a “post-metaphysical” world, signifying not that we have solved the “great metaphysical mysteries” dealing with God, Man and the World, but that we have realized the futility of pondering those mysteries as if there were some sort of solution, at least in some objective sense of “solution:” “For all these philosophers, objectivity is a question of ‘intersubjective linguistic consensus’ between human beings and not some sort of accurate representation of something that transcends the human sphere” (4).

¹ *Il futuro della religione. Solidarietà, carità, ironia*, edited by Santiago Zabala, Milan: Garzanti, 2005, 93pp.

This “post-metaphysical” culture coincides with *post-modernity* and has ushered in what Zabala calls “The Age of Interpretation” (also the title of Vattimo’s own reflections contained in the volume). “Interpretation” is viewed as the most worthy intellectual enterprise because of our inescapable dependence on language and history: two fundamental categories which permeate the human condition to such an extent that nothing meaningful can exist outside of them. “To surpass metaphysics means, according to Rorty and Vattimo, to stop inquiring into what is real and what is not; it means recognizing that something is better understood the more one is able to say about it. Problems are resolved with irony, privately exercised vis-à-vis one’s own predecessors rather than vis-à-vis their relation to truth” (8). Both Rorty and Vattimo agree that this amounts to scepticism, and they remain consistent to their sceptical position by regarding their *own* proposals as vulnerable to the sceptical critique: “Rorty and Vattimo would not wish to be seen as bearers of new concepts, nor would they want to present their thought as anything more than a form of scepticism about all possible concepts, *including the ones they themselves use and propose to us*” (9, emphasis added).² Although it may strike us as somewhat odd that someone would present an argument using notions that can be considered as intrinsically *both* correct *and* incorrect, the position is quite coherent with the “weak thought” paradigm: Rorty and Vattimo have simply resigned themselves to the ultimate defeat of “strong thought,” i.e., the pretension that there are actually concepts which could be considered *intrinsically true or better* than others. Once we abandon the pretension, we continue with the conversation, and this is the only valid road to attain meaning through the largest possible consensus.

A still more striking example of the same line of thought appears further on: “The truth of Christianity is the dissolution of the metaphysical concept of truth itself” (14), and “[Benedetto] Croce has taught us to look upon the secularized world as one in which weak identities mingle with the legacy of dogma left to us by Christianity; in other words, it is thanks to Christianity too that we are atheists” (6). At first blush, such affirmations seem out of sink with commonly held notions concerning Christianity and other traditional forms of belief. Yet the same affirmations become at least understandable when one considers the philosophical presuppositions underlying the statements. One framework that can help to clarify these positions is that offered by the development of the thought of Harvard University’s Harvey G. Cox, often celebrated as the key promoter of “secularism” in contemporary religious studies. Cox became famous for his widely acclaimed book, *The Secular City*,³ in which he described the demise of religiosity on a global scale as something positive, a sort of maturation, proper of the most evolved socie-

² Perhaps this is why Putnam felt compelled to write: “One of the sources of the continuing appeal of metaphysical realism in contemporary philosophy is a dissatisfaction with the only apparent alternatives” Hilary Putnam, *The Threefold Cord. Mind, Body and World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 52.

³ Cf. Harvey G. Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

ties. However, Cox reneged on his thesis in his more recent work, *Fire from Heaven*,⁴ admitting that his earlier analysis was incorrect and that he now recognizes the emergence of a global religious practice on such a large scale as to constitute the 21st century as perhaps the most religious epoch of history. Cox attempts to make the two positions consistent (aggressive secularism of 1965 and explosive religiosity of 1995) in the following way: at first, theologians and sociologists of religion considered secularism as an *enemy* of religious sentiment, for historically speaking, religion and secularism competed among themselves to become the dominant influence shaping culture and politics; today, at the same time that we have a ever increasing secularization of the entire world, we see an ever increasing thriving of religiosity. The difference now is that we accept the fact that religion is primarily a “private affair” and extremely fragmented, which allows it to no longer be in *opposition* to a secular status quo but actually its ally. It is in this sense that Rorty and Vattimo now celebrate religion in a post-modern world. The “Death-of-God” theology of the 1960’s seemed to logically imply the “Death-of-religion,” but that was then; this is now: “Contrary to the view of a good deal of contemporary theology, the death of God is something post-Christian rather than anti-Christian; by now we are living in the post-Christian time of the death of God, in which secularization has become the norm for all theological discourse” (2).

According to the three authors of *The Future of Religion*, the proper relationship between secularism and religion is stymied by one thing: organized, “clerical,” religious institutions (especially the Catholic Church)⁵ which insist on maintaining certain positions as unchanging (and unchangeable) and therefore prevent an authentic secularization of the religious sentiments found within them. “In the post-modern condition it is precisely this doctrinal, moral and disciplinary function that Christianity can no longer carry out; the most it can hope for is to participate in the confrontation between cultures and religions by insisting on its own specific orientation to laicity” (15). We then see what Zabala claims as that which needs to be altered by this ‘authoritarian’ hierarchy, a type of laundry list for *post-modern* Catholics: “... decision regarding birth control, the marriage of priests, the ordination of women, the free election of bishops by priests, the use of condoms as a precaution against AIDS, the admission to communion of divorcees who remarry, the legalization of abortion” (16). It is no wonder that Rorty now prefers to consider himself “anticlerical” rather than “atheistic,” “For anticlericalism is a political view, not an epistemological or metaphysical one. It is the view that ecclesiastical institutions, despite all the good they do [...] are dangerous to the health of democratic societies” (33). In other words, the post-modern (religious) intellectual does not have to give up God, just ecclesiasti-

⁴ Harvey G. Cox, *Fire from Heaven. The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995).

⁵ Cf. Vattimo’s phrase, “My basic opinion now is that people hate Christianity because of the priests”, *The Future of Religion*, cit., 68.

cal institutions. But is this really an accurate appraisal of the relationship between religious belief and rational discourse?

The Rationality of 'Belief' in a Post-modern Context

The crux of the matter lies in the discussion concerning the "rationality of belief." Perhaps the epistemological nucleus of the logic driving *The Future of Religion* is made explicit by Rorty who states: "[T]he quest for truth and knowledge is no more and no less than the quest for intersubjective agreement. The epistemic arena is a public space, a space from which religion can and should retreat" (36). Although Vattimo's comments tend to be more nuanced than Rorty's, he is basically getting at the same thing. And here certain critical observations are warranted.

1. Conception of truth within analytical philosophy

An effective critique of Rorty's and Vattimo's epistemological framework can be developed from within the analytical tradition, a tradition of which Rorty once considered himself an integral part.⁶ The history of the analytical conception of truth is interesting in its own right, yet the scope of these reflections precludes an in-depth consideration here. The "quest for intersubjective agreement" is a notion that Rorty arrives at through dialogue with numerous analytical scholars, and in particular, with Donald Davidson.⁷ In fact, the notion of "intersubjective agreement" was actually launched by Davidson in order to go beyond Quine's thesis concerning the *indeterminacy of translation*: such indeterminacy is overcome through a "triangular relationship" constituted by two interlocutors and that about which they are speaking. Davidson's "theory of triangulation" also explains why he refuses to accept the notion of "conceptual scheme" as somehow acting as an interface between people and the world. Davidson's epistemological point is that people, language and world are all *pre*-philosophically constituted and that it is precisely through "triangulation" that people of different linguistic frameworks are able to communicate. The task of the philosopher is not to demonstrate that communication actually takes place (for that is obvious), but to explore the mysteries contained therein.

Davidson however does not say that truth is arrived at through simple intersubjective agreement.⁸ He explains the difference in a rare interview that he

⁶ Cf. Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), "Introduction".

⁷ See Part One of Rorty's *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), 19-165.

⁸ For a more specific analysis of a Davidsonian concept of truth within the analytical tradition, see my "Il concetto di verità nella scuola analitica" in *Senso comune e verità*, edited by R. Di Ceglie, Rome: EDIVI, 81-98.

granted to an Italian scholar, Giancarlo Marchetti, months before he passed away. The quotation is lengthy, yet very apropos:

[The concept of truth] should be rehabilitated because it is under attack by various philosophers. Robert Brandom would be a good example. He is one of those who think that the notion of truth is in reality of little importance. From this point of view, he is what we can call a deflationist. Deflationism of one type or another is popular not only among contemporary philosophers, but also among theory and literary critics, sociologists, historians and others. They hold that there is no such thing as truth: that what we call truth is merely a social construction. Unfortunately, Richard Rorty has played an important role in encouraging many people, in the social sciences and in literary criticism, to think that the notion of objective truth is just a myth. He has said that truth is what the majority of people at a given moment accept: he has also quoted James approvingly for having said that truth is that which it is good to believe. These are conceptions that we should oppose. In my opinion, the notion of truth is essential for understanding people; we could not have a single belief if we did not have the concept of truth. This is why I think that truth needs to be rehabilitated.⁹

Davidson had written about the ‘objective nature’ of truth in other articles as well.¹⁰ It would seem that on this issue, Rorty and Davidson “agreed to disagree,” but Davidson’s logical and epistemological rigor (and therefore superior argumentation) is quite clear.

Of course Rorty agrees that the notion of truth is not problematic in certain realms of human knowledge such as those sciences for whose conclusions there are indisputable criteria of truth and where a majority consensus is epistemologically secondary. Here, “intersubjective agreement” may or may not take place, yet that does not alter the validity of the truth claims. Scientific truth claims (beyond completely theoretical speculation) enjoy the greatest of intersubjective agreement because they are correct; yet they are not correct *due to the intersubjective agreement*. Disagreement concerning well established scientific truth is usually a sign of pathology (irrationality). That such “truth” is always couched within historical and cultural contexts does not alter the universal validity of the claims; it simply reveals the nature of scientific truth as adequate for its proper objects.¹¹ To claim (as Rorty and Vattimo have repeatedly done) that the historical and culture dimensions of “scientific truth” preclude universal acceptability is a logical fallacy; the historicity and culturalization of scientific truth claims simply implies that they can not be “absolutized.”¹² It does not mean that “What’s true for you may not be

⁹ Donald Davidson, interview by G. Marchetti in *Reset*, 76 [2003], p. 89. My translation from the Italian.

¹⁰ See Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), Essays 1-5, “Truth and Meaning.”

¹¹ See Gianfranco Basti’s insightful reflections in *Philosophy of Nature and of Science*, Vol. 1, § 0.2.7 “Post-modern Rationality” (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2002), 23-26.

¹² Cf. *Ibid.*, 20-23.

true for me," at least where hard science is concerned.

2. Truth claims beyond science

The problematic nature of "truth" arises precisely in realms such as philosophy or (in this case) religion. The logic behind Rorty's and Vattimo's position goes like this: given that there are no a-historical or a-cultural truth criteria in order to establish the validity of truth claims in religion, then the best we can hope for is the greatest possible "intersubjective agreement" concerning such claims. Rorty has no problem with people wanting their religiously held beliefs to be considered true by other people: he says that this is (in a way) "natural;" but we have to recognize that this is simply a conditioning of the human subject and if not recognized or held in check, normally has two consequences -- fanaticism (and usually antisocial – at times, violent – behaviour) and hierarchical authoritarianism (in the pejorative sense: "I command you to believe this as a true proposition"). Both of these consequences should be considered unacceptable in contemporary, civilized societies. However, I would argue that authentic religious "faith" represents a personal ascent to something proposed as true independently of intersubjective agreement, and consequently the held belief can be proposed to others on its own merits, namely the *reasonableness* involved in subscribing to the belief. Profound respect for the freedom of other subjects necessarily precludes fanaticism here; and a real sense of "service to the truth" permeates hierarchical authority in order to continually point to that which is believed. In the case of Christianity, "that which is believed" is, of course, a person: Jesus Christ, who said "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (*Jn 14: 4-6*).¹³

As pointed out above, Vattimo's position is more nuanced. He asserts with Croce, "We cannot *not* call ourselves Christians" [Zabala, 2005, 54] in the sense that Christianity has shaped our history and culture to such an extent that it is meaningless to tackle any significant issue without taking into account the influence of Christianity. Vattimo takes up this phrase by Croce in order to explain how profoundly Christianity has impacted history itself. Yet Vattimo is one with Croce in attempting to empty Christianity of any transcendence or significance that would go beyond history. Croce's interpretation "honors Christ as an historical figure only, not the divine Revealer, and sees in him the personification of an idealistic awareness, a self-aware critique, of which Christian truth is the image and Jesus, the myth."¹⁴ Croce's original essay was intended as a response to Bertrand Russell's *Why I am Not*

¹³ Such is the more historically accurate way to understand the title that Pope Gregory the Great attributed to the office of the Roman Pontiff, i.e., *servus servorum Dei*, as opposed to the way Zabala interprets the phrase on p. 16 of his book, where he (unfortunately) invokes the dubious support of H. Küng.

¹⁴ Giandomenico Mucci, S.J., "A proposito del «Non possiamo non dirci 'Cristiani'» di B. Croce", *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 2004 III, 403.

a Christian, published in Italy in 1959, not so much in order to answer Russell's individual criticisms, but rather to demonstrate the futility of Russell's presuppositions. "How can Russell even consider himself apart from the Christian heritage?" Yet just as serious Christian scholars sixty years ago rejected Croce's response to Russell, today's Christian scholars must reject Vattimo's response to Rorty.

The adequate response to both Rorty and Vattimo is to recall the rationality of belief in divine Revelation. In this sense, the recent English translation of Antonio Livi's work, *Razionalità della fede nella Rivelazione divina*¹⁵ meticulously examines the logical basis of affirming belief in divine revelation as an endeavour which, although it transcends the strictly rational boundaries of the human intellect, is not unreasonable. The reasonableness of the act of faith in divine Revelation begins with an exploration of what can be called *preambula fidei*, the rational presuppositions of the movement of faith. Vattimo suggests that "the Church elaborated a whole doctrine of *preambula fidei*, entangling itself more and more in a metaphysics of the objectivist kind, which by now – as we see even in recent encyclopaedias – has become inseparable from the authoritarian claim to preach laws and principles that are natural, hence valid for all and not for the faithful alone" (48). This is a crucial point.¹⁶ Yet the proper characterization of the *preambula fidei* sees them not as a pre-constituted metaphysical structure, but rather as the common certainties of a logical nature which make rational discourse possible and experience understandable. It is true that some *preambula fidei* can be used in order to evince a metaphysical foundation of human experience; but one need not *aprioristically* ascent to such *preambula* due to some preconceived notion or held belief. One may even reject the *preambula*. The point is that the hypothetical rejection of the *preambula* implies a reconfiguration of what constitutes rational discourse, a reconfiguration which ends up being *counter intuitive* and contradictory of the principles of *common sense*.¹⁷

The Future of Religion accurately describes what Zabala, Rorty and Vattimo would like to see as the future of *their* view of religion in a "post-modern" world, borne out in the final chapter of the book through a three-way dialogue on the subject. In order to bring that about, a thorough re-working of fundamental notions such as rationality, reasonableness and warranted belief is necessary. Yet by subscribing to such a reworking through the "Age of Interpretation," they undermine the very tools they require for the enterprise. As they have clearly stated, theirs is not necessarily the *best* approach to the

¹⁵ Forthcoming as *Reasons for Believing* (Colorado: Davies Group, 2005).

¹⁶ Cf. several of Livi's publications, in addition to *Reasons for Believing*, cit.; *La ricerca della verità. Dal senso comune alla dialettica* (Rome: Editrice Leonardo Da Vinci, 2003), 206-246; *La verità del pensiero. Fondamenti di logica aletica* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2002), 165-216, especially pp. 203-209, "Logica della presupposizione nei «preambula fidei»".

¹⁷ Cf. Antonio Livi, *Filosofia del senso comune* (Milan: Ares, 1990). Also pertinent is John Searle, *Mind, Language and Society. Philosophy in the Real World* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 1-38.

discussion of religion, nor even a *coherent* one: they simply intend to continue the conversation. And this may be a good thing for religion and religious belief: the future of religion can still ignore *The Future of Religion* and thrive just the same.

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