

“Weak Thought” in the Face of Religious Violence: Perplexing Dimensions of Modernity and Globalization

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Abstract:

Modern comprehension of religion and violence, particularly modern attitudes toward religious violence, is the main topic of this paper. Mainstream secularization theory states that religion triggers conflict, tension, oppression, violence, and even war. As a continuation of this theory, the “myth of religious violence” assumes that religion is intrinsically connected with terror. These two narratives provide no sufficient proof for their claim about the irrelevance of religion; nonetheless, these narratives are expressions of the human agent’s struggle in his/her search for meaning. Referring to Gianni Vattimo’s idea of weak thought (*pensiero debole*), this writing proposes a narrative that treats religious and spiritual dimensions of human identity as essential for human life, as a source of remarkable consolation and hope in enduring the terror of violence, and as an opening to the new transcendental dimension of the ultimate meaning of human life.

Keywords: Weak thought, Religious violence, Modern identity, Secularization theory.

Introduction

The place of religion in a democratic society and the inevitable presence of violence are probably the two most puzzling issues of any liberal and secularized Western society. The way we relate to religion and violence shapes not only our society but also the process of making our own identity. Charles Taylor describes the process of making our identity as a dynamic and ongoing search for a meaningful life, in which the understanding of our own agency is “closely connected to our understanding of our moral and spiritual predicament, and of our moral existence” (Taylor 1994, 185). By definition, this search explores religious and spiritual dimensions of human existence which present areas wherein the human agent, as a spiritual being, confronts the darkest elements of his/her existence, including suffering, violence, and death.

Our comprehension of religion and violence in general, and in particular our attitude toward religious violence, is the main argument of this writing. The key question is where we place religious violence in our construction of modern identity. Our argument opposes the narrative that violence has spiritual roots and that it exists as something ontologically bound to human existence. We will start with the mainstream secularization theory that has been inclined toward neglect and dismissal of religion from the public sphere because religion triggers conflict, tension, oppression,

violence, and even war (chapter one). A continuation of this theory presents the “myth of religious violence”, based on the assumption that religion is intrinsically connected with terror (chapter two). Despite their apparent persuasiveness, these two narratives provide no sufficient proof for their claim about the irrelevance of religion and leave us with an ambiguous comprehension of violence; nonetheless, they are expressions of the human agent’s struggle in his/her search for meaning (chapter three). By analyzing the limits and insights of Gianni Vattimo’s idea of *weak thought* (*pensiero debole*), I argue for a narrative that challenges the human agent living in modernity to treat religious and spiritual dimensions as something essential to his/her human life, and not as something existing at his/her arbitrary disposal. Modernity needs to rediscover spirituality as a source of remarkable consolation and hope, empowering us to endure the terror of violence, and opening us to a new and transcendental comprehension of the ultimate meaning of our lives.

Neglect and Dismissal of Religion from the Public Sphere in the Mainstream Secularization Narrative

Recalling some unpleasant events from history, the advocates of the mainstream secularization theory argue that religious issues trigger conflict, tension, oppression, and even war.¹ The founders of the modern social sciences, from Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, and Auguste Comte, to Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Sigmund Freud, predicted the institutional differentiation of the religious and secular spheres, as well as the privatization of religion, followed by its marginalization and decline. Additionally, modern science would soon provide satisfactory answers to unknown questions, and democracy would discover adequate grounds for a peaceful life. For this reason, religion should be kept apart from the public sphere, or even done away with entirely. The peak of this assumption presents the conviction that “God is dead,” a slogan repeated many times in modernity referencing Nietzsche. In short, religion should be replaced with exclusive humanism, which places the human agent at the center of the whole universe, able to reorganize all of reality in a better way without reference to any religious or spiritual dimension.

In opposition to such a conclusion, Charles Taylor in his book, *A Secular Age*, critically analyzes and develops mainstream secularization theory, claiming that secularization, which is deeply rooted in modern Western societies, can be understood only through a historical perspective of the pre-modern period. Many changes have taken place in the last 500 years in the areas of art, literature, human and natural sciences, politics, and society. There is a degree of agreement that there has been some decline of religious belief and practices: religion has gradually withdrawn from the public sphere; modernity with its modern technology makes it difficult for us to believe or relate to any kind of magical and enchanted world; urbanization, industrialization, and the development of class society has had a negative effect on previously existing religious forms. All these features present sufficient evidence for mainstream secularization theorists that religious belief and practices are disappearing in modernity.

In Taylor's reflection, these theories appear plausible only to people with a certain view of religion and the meaning of secularization (Taylor 2007, 434). The theories presuppose that religious belief and action can only function for a distinct goal or purpose, such as bearing the misery, suffering, and despair of the human condition. Once we control our human condition, society, and nature, religion should lose its functional connection to these goals and purposes, and consequently disappear. As a way out of such misunderstanding of religion, Taylor distinguishes between two different ways of understanding the process of secularization and different facets of secularity.

(1) The term secularization designates different phenomena: the decline of religious belief and practices; the withdrawal of religion from the public sphere due to social fragmentation, disappearance of community, rationalization, urbanization, and the rise of modernity; the repression and reduction of the influence of religion; and the disenchantment or distancing from a magical world. It is a fact that all these changes are taking place in modernity. It would be erroneous, however, to conclude that religion is disappearing due to these changes. In Taylor's reflection, we can trace in the last 500 years of our Western history many changes and new ways of understanding Church institutions, expressions of faith, ways of placing religion in society, and other phenomena related to religion, faith, and spirituality. New forms and practices of religious and non-religious life have continuously been replacing those proving disruptive and unviable. So we cannot deduce that religion has constantly been present and functioning in the exact same way in different periods of history; changes are part of this process of replacement. Consequently, the process of secularization in modernity presents nothing new and extraordinary: changes in the social, political, economic, religious, and spiritual spheres form a part of our history as well as a part of the transformation of religious practices.

(2) Although mainstream secularization theory argues that belief and religious practices are declining and falling off in modernity, Taylor disagrees with this position. In modernity, we are at the end of a move from a society in which belief in God is unchallenged and unproblematic, to a society in which belief in God is once again understood to be one option among many, and frequently not the easiest one to embrace. Taylor characterizes this move as the change that "takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others" (Taylor 2007, 3). Certain experiences that were previously more or less occluded or left aside are returning now to the forefront as new possibilities. Taylor describes this phenomenon of an increasingly expanding number of options and alternatives in the field of religion in terms of the *nova effect*, what he defines as "spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond" (Taylor 2007, 299).

Taylor argues that there are different sources from which the *nova effect* originates. One of them is the human agent's belief in the creation of a new order of freedom and mutual benefit, based on the agent's reason, modern technology and new discoveries in material nature, which are

constantly reinforcing the sense of power in the agent. The second possible source is the sense of flatness and emptiness that the modern human agent experiences in his/her life within the immanent frame, in which s/he lays aside the transcendent. The sense of the fragility of meaning, the search for an overarching significance, the perceived flatness of the agent's attempts to solemnize the crucial passages of human life, and the emptiness of the ordinary, become more and more evident. People do not necessarily seek the cure for these malaises through a return to transcendence or in the traditional forms of religion; their search for meaning might take place through a different reading of the same immanence. They may find meaning in Nature, in the wisdom of the old, in bearing and loving children, in living a more natural life, or in the elaboration of more demanding standards of justice and solidarity.

In other words, secularization in Taylor's reflection represents much more than the retreat of religion from the public sphere. We should rather talk about the forces, unease, and spiritual dissatisfaction underlying so many of the changes of the last 500 years, and ask ourselves where the modern human agent in modernity hopes to find his/her fulfillment, fullness of life, and flourishing, which means having a fuller, richer, deeper, more worthy and admirable life. What moves the human agent in modernity towards his/her transformation, wholeness of life, or harmony? The crucial question for modernity is whether people recognize in their search for fullness something beyond their lives (Taylor 2007, 16-17). Does their search for fullness include a good that is transcendent, i.e. independent of human flourishing?

Taylor distinguishes between two different understandings of human flourishing, and both of them are hard to justify. The first one claims that the power to reach fullness lies within the human agent, who feels capable of facing meaninglessness, the hostility of the universe, the violence of human actions, and of finding a set of rules likely to bring him/her to the fullness s/he seeks. In short, s/he wants to be the kind of person for whom this life is fully satisfying. On the other hand, the believer believes that human fullness requires reference to God or something beyond his/her life. The fullness of life will come to him/her, most likely through another being capable of living and giving. In short, s/he feels the need to be opened, transformed, brought out of the self, and receptive to a power that transcends him/herself (Taylor 2007, 7-8).

Whichever way to human fulfillment one embraces, s/he will face a similar dilemma: is the fullness of life based on immanence or transcendence, and is the search for fullness inclusive or exclusive? Instead of searching for a dogmatic definition and accurate description of human flourishing, Taylor proposes some general guidelines for how to reach this fullness and flourishing (Taylor 2007, 609-612). Our search for fullness should not be reduced to the requirements of the disciplined, disengaged rational agent, who is willing to sacrifice his/her spontaneity, creativity, and feelings. Fullness of life should be based on the integration of all human forces, drives, and desires into something that allows us a more harmonious and whole life. The rational, emotional, sensual, creative, and spontaneous aspects of bodily existence have to find their place in this concept of harmony and wholeness. All aspects of human life, including violence, sex, and suffering, have to

find their place in this harmony. In other words, every aspect of human life should be integrated, especially the highest spiritual, religious, and moral aspirations (Platovnjak 2015, 8-10).

In the words of David M. Jones, secularization as a significant achievement of Western modernity has failed to silence the quest for meaning or the urge to find alternative ways of satisfying this existential human need (Jones 2014, 7). Taylor's reflection offers us an insightful framework for where and how to place religion in our modern society. By referring to religion as an inevitable factor of our social and personal life, we can start dealing with the dilemma of religious violence.

The Secularized Myth of Religious Violence

As shown in the previous chapter, the mainstream secularization narrative struggles to incorporate religion and the innermost dimensions of an agent's existence as an essential part of the agent's search for meaning and fulfillment. Even though this narrative has almost completely lost its intellectual appeal, nowadays an updated version of this narrative challenges intellectuals in the form of "the myth of religious violence" and the conviction that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural concept inclined to violence (Cavanaugh 2009, 3-4).

Like any other myth, even the myth of religious violence does not provide a sufficient rigor of logic or evidence for its claim. Additionally, the message of this myth remains unquestioned because modern society constantly creates new categories through which it conforms to the myth, on the one hand, and on the other, what society presents as real gradually takes on the color of myth. So, it becomes "very difficult to think outside the paradigm that the myth establishes and reflects because myth and reality become mutually reinforcing" (Cavanaugh 2009, 6). No wonder this myth has become so powerful and widespread, especially after September 11, 2001.

The anatomy of this myth is based on a strong conventional wisdom of secularized Western societies that religion is absolutist, divisive, not sufficiently rational, and consequently dangerous. This myth assumes that religion includes a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence, including killing and dying in the name of religion. For this reason, religion should be distinct from "secular" features, such as politics and economics; the modern and liberal nation-state, as it has developed in the West, with its rational and peace-making interventions, feels the need to control and eventually remove the irrational, absolutist, divisive, and fanatical impulses of religion from political life.

Cavanaugh's reflection does not negate the fact that ideologies and practices - including Islam, Christianity, and other religions - can promote violence under certain conditions. Similarly, new religious movements and violence are often closely intermingled (Lewis 2011). Nonetheless, this myth of religious violence is incoherent and problematic when it states that religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism, are necessarily more inclined toward violence than ideologies and institutions that are identified as secular: violent use of nationalism, capitalism with its invisible hand of the market, liberalism, Marxist utopias, and others. So-called secular institutions

and ideologies can be as absolutist, irrational, and divisive as those called religious. The history of the past century proves that its secular ideologies have caused far greater suffering in the modern world than religious ones. If this is the case, why should religious institutions be considered more inclined to violence than those that are non-religious? People do violence on behalf of those things, either religious or non-religious, which they take seriously enough to do violence for.

At this point, Charlene P. E. Burns' reflection about the origin of religious violence can be very insightful. When someone claims that religion causes violence, s/he is making a mistake in logical thinking, because s/he is treating religion, an abstract concept, as though it were a concrete entity, having agency in its own right. By speaking this way, s/he makes a scapegoat of an abstraction, which allows him/her to distance him/herself from the issue and reduce his/her sense of personal responsibility (Burns 2008, 6-7). Following this interpretation, the myth of religious violence creates in the modern human agent new space for peace, indifference, and intellectual satisfaction.

How come the violence labeled "religious" is considered virulent and reprehensible in liberal Western societies, while the violence labeled "secular" hardly counts as violence at all. Secular violence seems to be inherently peacemaking, necessary, and sometimes praiseworthy, especially when we are dealing with the inherent violence of religion. Equal attention should be given to both secular and religious violence because in both cases we are talking about the same phenomenon: violence. The distinction between secular and religious violence is unhelpful, misleading, and mystifying.

Just as the myth of religious violence does not pass a critical examination, neither does the concept of religion as something existing beyond history and manifesting itself in all cultures. Religion is not something that exists beyond human nature or outside of human history; it is always embedded in a certain historical context, or in a given configuration of power and authority. For this reason, it is presumptuous to have an all-inclusive or descriptive definition of religion. Scholars and non-scholars in different times and different places refer to different meanings with the term "religion". For example, Émile Durkheim claims that religion is at its core a social phenomenon or an eminently collective thing formed by beliefs and practices relating to the realm of the sacred (Durkheim 1915 37; 43-4). Clifford Geertz defines religion as a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful and stable moods and motivation in men and formulates conceptions of a general order of existence (Geertz 1979, 79-80). Max Weber states that religion is "the relationship of me to supernatural forces which takes the forms of prayer, sacrifice, and worship" (Weber 1963, 28). A more complete definition of religion also includes sacred texts, leaders, religious buildings and places, land, money, religious tradition, and much more. In addition, Gregg introduces a distinction between religions in theory and in practice. Religion, such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, exists in theory, but in practice, these religions do not exist as singular units; there is much diversity within each religion across time and space. Religions in practice are changing over

time according to historical contexts, responding to political, social, and cultural circumstances, which makes them different across time and space (Gregg 2014, 14).

With all these and other attempts to define religion, Cavanaugh - referring to Charles Kimball - rightly concludes that there is no essence of religion such that we all know it when we see it. "What counts as religion and what does not in any given context is contestable and depends on who has the power and authority to define religion in any given time and place" (Cavanaugh 2009, 59). The category of religion is a construct, powerfully present in the ideology of the West since the rise of modernity, both in Western cultures and in the colonization of non-Western cultures. Religion is "a term that constructs and is constructed by different kinds of political configurations" (Cavanaugh 2009, 58).

In other words, the very definition of religion is part of the history of Western power, which has with its so-called empirical observations and neutrality come to the conclusion that religion causes violence. Cavanaugh concludes at the end of his book *The Myth of Religious Violence* that the same definition of religion, and consequently the myth of religious violence, is already an expression of Western power, which legitimizes certain kinds of political and social practices and delegitimizes others. This myth was created as a promotional tool of Western secular forms of governance, which believed that for the creation of a peaceful and prosperous world, the dangerous impulses of religion should be separated from politics. This myth fosters the idea that Western secular social orders are inherently peaceful and rational. Consequently, the idea of Western peacefulness justifies secular violence against religious actors, whose irrational violence must be met with rational violence. By marginalizing religious discourses and practices, the secular and liberal states hope to reinforce adherence to a secular social order, which Gregg calls "earthly salvation" (Gregg 2014, 17). Individuals, societies, and nations, as well as animals and the environment, are in a state of decline and need to be restored to a particular order and a state of harmony and justice. In view of this restoration, justification of certain means, including violence, seems to be acceptable. In reaction to such threats, religiously motivated violence and violent interpretations of a faith arise; "religiously motivated violence is often a reaction to radical changes to society and political order, drastic changes that compel religious groups to take defensive action" (Gregg 2014, 4).

In short, the myth of religious violence has become a very useful tool in authorizing certain types of power by marginalizing certain religious practices, and by reinforcing and justifying "our" attitudes and policies against "theirs". We are talking about a widespread phenomenon in Western traditions, also well known in other non-Western traditions, as Nicholas F. Gier shows in his *The Origins of Religious Violence: An Asian Perspective*. History and our modern times present us with a myriad of examples of religiously motivated violence: the Crusades, Hindu-Muslim riots, Buddhist violence in Sri Lanka, battles over Jerusalem, the current declaration of jihad against the West, and so on. What the motivation behind all these examples of religious violence could be is our next question.

Plurality of Interpretations based on Vattimo's Weak Thought

The narrative of mainstream secularization theory, as presented in Taylor's writing, overlaps in many aspects with the myth of religious violence, analyzed in Cavanaugh's reflection. Both narratives are based on a very specific and narrow definition of religion, reducing religion to something private, irrational, ancient, impractical, linked to violence, and as such unable to find its place in modern liberal society. In agreement with the main thesis of Harrold J. Ellens' reflection about the destructive power of religion, this article supports the thesis that these two narratives adopt an apocalyptic worldview based on the ancient principle of dualism, in which good and evil are pitted against one another and given transcendental and cosmic dimensions. The main psychosocial and political problem of modern and post-modern culture, in Ellens' view, arises from, or maybe returns to, the ancient apocalyptic worldview based on the split between good and evil, or God and evil. This ultimate dualism became the model for explaining the meaning of everything, from the unconscious level of the Western person to the sociopolitical dimensions of Western culture. "It becomes the primal archetype of our understanding, reflecting a schizoid misunderstanding of the real way things are" (Ellens 2004, 3). In this perspective, Hannah Arendt claims that totalitarian ideologies of the past century attribute *sacred status* to an earthly political concept: the race, the nation, the proletariat, the planet itself, and the like. This sacralization provides the space for an apocalyptic clash between the decadent past about to perish, a present that reveals the opportunity for radical change, and the potential to realize an ideal future (Arendt 1951, 472-9).

Consequently, the human agent in modernity feels the call to be actively engaged in the battle between good and evil. Ignoring and pushing away the religious dimensions as something less relevant and too old-fashioned for modernity, together with the belief that evil exists ontologically and can be controlled and finally eradicated, are two expressions of the cosmological worldview based on dualism. The present time reveals an opportunity for radical changes and engagement that can easily justify the inclusion of violence, terror, and wars. Mainstream secularization theory and the myth of violence are expressions of hope for the human agent living in modernity, believing that active participation in the cosmological tension between good and evil will result in the realization of an ideal future. Individual involvement in this tension is very appealing and spiritually rewarding; the human agent feels responsible for his own future, willing to win the war for God and the good. The always victorious heroes in action movies, popular literature, money-making music, and radical TV programs can be taken as expressions of this fight. The eternal combat also reflects itself in political policy, international relations, social values, as well as in the heart of each individual. When such cosmological interpretation about the fight between good and evil acquires a cultural and social function, it produces enormous potential for violence both at the individual and social levels (Ellens 2004, 6).

The return of the cosmological worldview based on dualism might seem a surprise, considering the fact that Western societies are historically rooted in two thousand years of

Christianity, which is a worldview that opposes and denies dualism. What opened the door and created new space for the re-emergence of ancient dualism? It would not be an exaggeration to assume that a cosmology based on dualism was never completely eradicated in the last two millennia of Western history. Whenever human thought deviates from, or even completely denies, the idea of an absolutist principle or a monotheistic vision, this reopens space for dualism. Similarly, when the human agent believes in an unbridgeable gap between immanence and transcendence, s/he stops looking for the Absolute. Or when the human agent is not able to accept his/her own finitude, even the space for the infinite remains concealed, and consequently, the agent gives up his search for the Absolute. All this creates new space for alternative, i.e. non-monotheistic, cosmological interpretations.

Gianni Vattimo's philosophical reflection, based on the idea of "weak thought" (*pensiero debole*), presents an interesting paradigm for our investigation about the reasons for the rebirth of dualism in modernity. Vattimo argues that the philosophy of the 19th and 20th century, especially the philosophical writings of Nietzsche and Heidegger, involved the denial of stable structures of Being, to which thought must adapt itself in order to find itself upon stable structures. By reducing or denying something stable, we open the door to radical transformation and deconstruction of Western values. Such transformation and deconstruction are possible when we step aside from interpretations based on a single ideological principle. This is the key idea in Vattimo's book *The Adventure of Difference*, published in Italy in 1980, in which he argues in favor of Nietzsche's "eternal return" and Heidegger's "overcoming of metaphysics," two key factors allowing us to think differently. Once we are able to think differently, which means not reducing everything to one single principle, we can accept Vattimo's description of Nietzsche's Superman as "liberated for differences and the multiplicity of experiences" (Vattimo 1993, 3). This Superman is also able to accept the disintegration of unity, and consequently any definitiveness or dialectical harmonization. With this perspective, Vattimo continues, we should read Heidegger's *Being and Time* as a philosophy of decline, "a philosophy which sees what is constitutive of Being not as the fact of its prevailing, but as the fact of its disappearing" (Vattimo 1993, 5). If this is the case, then the metaphysical tradition appears to be a tradition of violent thinking, constantly trying to unify and govern with sovereign and generalizing categories, so typical of pre-modern and modern philosophy. On the other hand, Vattimo states, post-modern philosophy recognizes the Being not as a unitary principle, but as an event which is constantly exposed to our interpretation. For this reason, Vattimo prefers to talk in terms of not ontology but hermeneutics: the Being can be only interpreted, and what we consider to be objective truth and facts are only the results of our interpretations. Consequently Vattimo claims at the very beginning of his book *A Farewell to Truth* that "everything is turning into a game of interpretations – not disinterested, not necessarily false, but (and this is the point) oriented toward projects, expectations, and value choices at odds with one another" (Vattimo 2011, XXV). In this hermeneutical framework, Vattimo places his idea of weak thought, i.e. a worldview in which the question of "truth" has become a game of

interpretation, a philosophy without a global and metaphysical vision and without a guiding principle or an Absolute.

By connecting Vattimo's idea of "weak thought" with the assumption that religion does not deserve a legitimate place in modernity, our reflection gains new dimensions. In modernity, even religion has become a matter of interpretation, conditioned by the historical events taking place in given spatiotemporal frameworks. Religion seems to be at the mercy of the interpreter's intentions, projects, and desires. If the interpreter's plans are to combat evil and create earthly salvation, then the myth of religious violence finds its perfect justification. If religion is considered the source of continual conflicts and limitations of the human agent's activity, then mainstream secularization theory has right to suggest limitation of religious presence from the public sphere.

Rediscovery of Religion in the Globalized World

As illustrative as mainstream secularization theory, the myth of religious violence, and philosophy based on weak thought might be, they provide weak grounds for their claim about the irrelevance or inadequacy of religion in modernity, as well as for the ontological connection between religion and violence. As long as we consider religion as something external and instrumental at our disposal, not essentially linked to the human existence, our understanding of religion will always remain one-sided, partial, and subordinated to the logic of human efficiency, growth, and benefits of the strong. In this perspective, the myth of religious violence and mainstream secularization theory easily find their legitimate interpretation of the rule of religion as something that is hindering and blocking the human agent's efforts for a peaceful social coexistence.

While the claim about the irrelevance and inadequacy of religion gains preferential attention within Western liberal societies, the rest of the non-Western world hesitates to accept as the best possible principle of any social organization both the claim about the irrelevance of religion and Western ideologies about democracy, grounded on separation of religion from the public sphere. If Western societies are really as democratic as they claim to be, then they should be more tolerant and democratic toward non-Western social and political structures, which are often based on religious principles.

Would a discussion based on religious dogmas or certain absolute principles present a better path toward peaceful coexistence and more efficient confrontation of violence? It is not my intention to undermine the importance of a dogmatic approach in our reflection; nonetheless, I believe that religious dogmas, as a starting point, would present more obstacles than it would remove. At the same time, I disagree with Vattimo's claim that there is no truth and that everything is a matter of interpretation. If we adopt this claim of Vattimo uncritically, we will finish with the position of relativism, grounded on the idea of the absence of any absolute principle and the agent's inability to grasp something absolute.

Referring to Vattimo's book *After Christianity*, I suggest a different way for how to reintroduce a discussion about the place of religion in our time, as well as a new interpretation of

the connection between religion and violence. When reflecting on the place of Christianity in the post-modern world imbued with the process of globalization, Vattimo argues in favor of an ultimate foundation that would be valid for all, above and beyond any cultural differences. "The universal validity of an assertion can be constructed by building consensus in dialogue, though without claiming any right in the name of an absolute truth. Dialogical consensus may be reached by acknowledging that we share a heritage of cultural, historical, and technological-scientific acquisitions" (Vattimo 2002, 5). Vattimo goes on to claim that philosophy in post-modernity has recognized that it cannot grasp with certainty the ultimate foundation. If this is the case, then God cannot be upheld as an ultimate foundation, as the absolute metaphysical structure of the real, as was the case with modern rationalists and absolutist metaphysics. It follows that even philosophical atheism with its refutation of religious experience is no longer necessary because it does not provide sufficient grounds for the search for the ultimate foundation. So, we are free again, Vattimo concludes, to hear the words of Scripture and to read the biblical notion of creation, namely with the contingency and historicity of our existence; "we can think of Being only as event, and of truth not as the reflection of reality's eternal structure but rather as a historical message that must be heard and to which we are called to respond" (Vattimo 2002, 6).

Vattimo's reflection on the place of Christianity in post-modernity offers us a useful paradigm for our reflection. In our search for an ultimate foundation that would be valid for all, Western post-modern philosophy needs to humbly recognize and accept other non-Western philosophical reflections as equal partners in search of wisdom, peaceful coexistence, and meaningful life. In a similar way, dialogue and search for consensus should become the guiding principles for monotheistic religions based on Abraham, either when they talk among themselves or with other non-monotheistic religions. The search for consensus should not be framed with a particular dogmatic question or religious principle, but in Vattimo's words by "a historical message that must be heard and to which we are called to respond." There is a call for a world united beyond cultural, religious, and historical differences. Are we willing to hear this call? Our answer should not be that type of nihilism that is anchored in its own inability to know something absolute, and therefore, denying the absolute. Post-modern nihilism allows us to open our reflection beyond traditional metaphysics toward the unexplored horizons of the absolute that will reassure us of a foundation in the uncertainty of the changeable world. Our answer to the call will be also an expression of our freedom and responsibility. Consequently, the present crisis will also become an opportunity for a renewal of Western democracy (Jones 2014, 199).

Human agency in the globalized world, as well as post-modern philosophy, needs to go beyond the categories of thinking in terms of "what use do things have for us?" If this is the starting point of our discussion, then any discussion about religion will always remain one-sided, instrumental, and at the mercy of the interpretation of the strong. The real question is an existential question, "for what purpose do we exist?" In other words, the nihilist mindset of modernity challenges us to find something solid under our feet.

Religion has to do with life itself, not with some viewpoints of its utility. For this reason, religion and the question of violence cannot be treated from the outside as something purely rational and scientifically objective, like how we can study natural sciences. When facing violence or innocent suffering, for example, a religious answer from the outside might be helpful, but its reach will remain restricted if it is not integrated into the individual or collective spiritual quest for meaning in life. When facing the limits of our life, religion reminds us that the ultimate meaning of our life is transcendental, beyond our simple existence in this changing world. The ultimate test of our spiritual and religious authenticity is our facing of the challenges that go beyond human capacities, such as, for example, the burial of an innocent child (Ellens 2004, 2-3). In this perspective, our challenge remains the question of whether our spiritual and religious quest and search for meaning enable us to live in the world of human pathos, pain, suffering, vulnerability, violence, wars, killing, and destruction, so that we can stay hopeful and empowered at the tomb of the innocent child.

In every crucial moment of existence, the modern human agent finds himself facing a dilemma: either to put his faith and hope in an ontological evil and participate in a transcendental cosmic conflict between good and evil, or to be actively engaged in a community of weak, inadequate, ignorant, sick humans trying to find their way to meaning in the world. A religious quest might be a very helpful path to explore.

When talking about the myth of religious violence, we have a similar dilemma: shall we put our hope and search for meaning in this myth, or shall we challenge its validity and go to the heart of this myth? An active engagement, in this case, requires from us alternative interpretations of historical and contemporary events, or “interpretations that do not describe the religion as under attack or that do not call for violence as a necessary means of defending religion” (Gregg 2014, 150). Mark Juergensmeyer is even more explicit in this regard when he argues for a redirection of the mythology by redefining the message of the myth. A different interpretation of the sacred texts, religious doctrine, and the heritage of tradition will provide us with abundant examples of non-violent interpretations (Juergensmeyer 2000, 163). The reduction of religious violence is a long-lasting project, including the informing and educating of laity, the active role of states and of charismatic leadership, the recognition of symbols of religion and collaboration between secular and religious institutions, and meaningful dialog between religions in conflict; these are only a few possible ideas (Selengut 2003, 232-9). Appleby R. Scott, in his book *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, challenges the gifted religious leaders to see religion as an opportunity for a promotion of religious peace-building (Appleby 2000, 281). Lloyd Steffen phrases our dilemma in moral terms: How do I choose to be religious? The moral point of this question recommends to individuals that they decide to be religious in a way that they affirm life and do not support violence, injury or destruction of life (Steffen 2007, 276).

Conclusion

Within the framework of globalization, religion has made its reappearance in a dramatic fashion, in a variety of forms: from denying its constitutive role in human existence and abusing its empowering presence for achievement of non-religious goals, to a silent presence, creating meaning for the majority of humankind and providing a foundation for a new universal moral order. On the global level, it should not be acceptable to claim that there are only two possible solutions for how to integrate religion into our social and political life: either denial and diminishing of religion, or a theocratic vision, based on some one-sided interpretations of certain religious principles. Religions should be seen as a plausible opportunity to advance the cause of peace and stability, or as a powerful medicine. Religious peace-building is already taking shape in and across local communities plagued by violence, even though this process remains inchoate and fragile, uncoordinated and in need of a greater number of trained practitioners (Appleby 2000, 7).

It is true that violence, including religious violence, will never completely disappear from our world; nonetheless, its appealing force can be diminished with alternative paths, starting with the eradication of violence from our hearts and minds. Subsequently, even our fear and discomfort in the face of alien otherness (humans, religions, traditions, transcendence) will gradually dissolve.

Endnotes

1. Very illustrative in this regard is Peter Berger's comment: "I do not want to be a crude empiricist, but it seems to me you could start making body counts. In this century, the godless have a slight moral edge, but if you take all of history, I am not sure." In Adam B. Seligman, *Modest Claims: Dialogues and Essays on Tolerance and Tradition*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dam University Press, 2006. p. 61.

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