

RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND THEIR PLACE IN SECULAR SOCIETIES

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In our postmodern world where there is a recognition and even celebration of difference and otherness, religious traditions have regained their legitimate spaces in the public sphere which were denied of them during the period of modernity. This paper examines how such return of religion has been pursued in order to allow the perspective of faith or of religious ethos contribute to and contest the materialist and impoverished vision of life of modernity. On the one hand, there is Gianni Vattimo's nihilistic-kenotic approach which speaks of the reentry of religion in a humble and self-effacing way. On the other hand, we see John Milbank's and Stanley Hauerwas's self-exalting assertion of a theological perspective. Different from and critical of these two paths, what is put forward in this paper is a liberative and transformative approach that is sensitive to and articulate of the perspective of the marginalized, the excluded, and the poor. This path which Pope Francis treads is the approach we propose along with Enrique Dussel's analectic appropriation of religious tradition that is based on Emmanuel Levinas' metaphysics of alterity. This approach is demonstrated in the way of the mystics and the prophets.

*From our faith experience and
from the wisdom accumulated over centuries,
but also from lessons learned from
our many weaknesses and failures,
we, the believers of the different religions,
know that our witness to God benefits our societies.*

Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti, # 274

INTRODUCTION

Religious traditions have a significant role in the development of our societies. Pope Francis has argued that “different religions, based on their respect for each human person as a creature called to be a child of God, contribute significantly to building fraternity and defending justice in society.”¹ The ecumenical and interreligious dialogue the Roman Catholic Church has pursued, especially after the Second Vatican Council, cannot be dissociated from the Church’s attempt to find a legitimate space in secular societies within which many of the different faith traditions struggle to survive or flourish. This paper aims to reflect on how religion or faith tradition can find its reentry in the public sphere within a highly secularized or secularizing world that has pushed religions during the height of modernity to their private enclaves. We shall investigate proposals of contemporary thinkers on how Christianity could make a comeback in our modern world and appreciate these in the light of Pope Francis’ theological perspective. We shall do this first by trying to understand the return of (the recognition of) the sacred to the public sphere in two distinct ways. On the one hand, according to the postmodern nihilistic-kenotic approach of Vattimo, and on the other hand, according to the self-exalting reinstatement of Christianity by Milbank and Hauerwas, on the other. Secondly, coming from Dussel’s analectic perspective, we shall situate our proposed framework of narrative ethics of liberation as the more appropriate way of retrieving religious tradition. We shall argue that the liberative perspective of Dussel resonates more with Pope Francis’ recognition of the role of religions in our contemporary society. Thirdly, we shall point to the prophets and mystics as key figures in our understanding of the ethico-religious tradition of Christianity from the margin.

¹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* # 271 (3 October 2020) www.vatican.va.

**THE RETURN OF THE SACRED:
POSTMODERN/POSTLIBERAL RETRIEVAL OF TRADITION**

The revolt against modernity is principally an attack against the overarching influence of reason, especially in the direction and control of the lifeworld during the period of modernity. Religion, dismissed in the court of reason as illusory, dangerous and unimportant, has now received a fair hearing, interrogating the legitimacy of universal modern reason in the seat of ethical judgment. The enthronement of reason as the sole basis for the determination of a good life has proven itself dangerous, leading to the most devastating consequences in our modern world. The ideologies of reason (as we have enumerated above) have failed to deliver the good they envisaged. On the contrary, they have brought about, especially in the twentieth century, the worst evil humanity has ever experienced. Max Stackhouse brings home the point in his observation:

It turns out that the twentieth-century experience of secularization theory has brought us Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin, and Pol Pot. And these names remind us of what many of the proponents of secularization seem to neglect: from Genghis Khan through Ivan the Terrible to all those totalitarians of the left and right today studied by such groups as Amnesty International, the greatest terrors and tortures have not been perpetrated in the name of religion, but often against religion and in the name of ‘rational’ or ‘natural’ political and economic purpose.²

The dissolution of the modern meta-narratives of freedom and of knowledge, on the one hand, because of its theoretical failure and, on the other, because of its violence,³ has given way to

² Max Stackhouse, “Piety, Polity, and Policy,” in *Religious Beliefs, Human Rights and the Moral Foundation of Western Democracy*, ed. Carl H. Esbeck, Paine Lectures in Religion (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1986), 13-26, 16.

³ If Nietzsche (and Heidegger) reject metaphysics for its theoretical failings, Levinas and Adorno mistrust metaphysics for its violence. See Gianni Vattimo,

the postmodern skepticism against (modern) reason. Religion, which has been marginalized and relegated to the private sphere in the West during the process of secularization, seems to be regaining its lost stature and its voice, allowing itself to make a comeback with a renewed strength and force or with tactical subtlety in the public arena. "That religion can no longer be regarded as a phenomenon belonging to a distant past, and that it is not a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon either, is no longer disputed in modern scholarship." Hent De Vries makes such a categorical declaration the opening salvo to introduce his work, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*.⁴ George De Schrijver describes such a return (especially of Christianity) in two observable currents: as a humble and self-effacing comeback (as proposed by Gianni Vattimo) or as a strong and self-exalting assertion (as proposed by John Milbank).⁵

SELF-EFFACING RETURN TO THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION IN A SECULARIZED WORLD

The first return to religion finds support in the voice of an Italian philosopher-politician Gianni Vattimo, who has written a considerable amount of works reflecting on religion and its return to the public sphere in our postmodern context.⁶ He draws his reflection on this social phenomenon in the West from his own personal experience of coming back home to his Christian belief. Such a return though is not a naïve embrace of what he once left

Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy (Stanford: CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 30 - 31.

⁴ See Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 1.

⁵ The exposition, which De Schrijver makes of their works, serves as guide in our own reading of Vattimo and Milbank. See Georges De Schrijver, *Recent Theological Debates in Europe: Their Impact on Interreligious Dialogue* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004), 1-122.

⁶ See Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (Stanford University Press, 2000); *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics and Law*, trans. William McCuaig. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); with Richard Rorty, *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

behind. Following the philosophical critique of Nietzsche and Heidegger against the premodern and modern forms of rationality, Vattimo takes a very critical posture against traditional religious institutions and their reliance on metaphysical doctrines and moral absolutes as well as against their modern rational alternatives, especially in the form of ideologies. The demolition work of the metaphysical presuppositions of premodern rationality finds its completion in the destruction of modernity's universalist thinking and the homogenizing tendency of univocal and unidirectional rationality. Vattimo declares the 'end of (hi)story,' by which he means the end of meta-narratives, unilinear history or teleology.⁷ Dogmatic claims to truth as well as to objectivity and neutrality simply have become unsustainable and indefensible. Vattimo assumes along with Nietzsche "[t]hat there are no facts, [but] 'only' interpretations."⁸ He argues for the inescapability of hermeneutics⁹—not according to its Enlightenment origins (demythologizing and rationalistic in inspiration) whose myth of objectivity has undergone dissolution¹⁰—but one that adopts a non-foundationalist approach and proposes 'weak thought' ('weak belief': 'I believe that I believe'), or weak ontology in the rediscovery of religion in our age characterized by postmetaphysical ethos.

Attuned to the postmodern sensitivity to difference and plurality (of religious beliefs, moral convictions, etc.), he appreciates religion not as an institution that pontificates from the mountaintops of metaphysical certainties, but one that is immersed in the valleys of radically contingent human existence that humbly opens up to the hermeneutics of truth. Vattimo elaborates, "For hermeneutics, as we have recalled, truth is not primarily the

⁷ Gianni Vattimo, "End of History," *Chicago Review* 30, 4 (1986): 20-30, 21 and 22.

⁸ Gianni Vattimo, "The Trace of the Trace," trans. David Webb, in *Religion*, eds. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 79-94, 93. See Vattimo's reference to Nietzsche's Unpublished Fragments Autumn 1885, Art. III, 1, 323 in Gianni Vattimo, *Nietzsche: An Introduction*, trans. Nicholas Martin, Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers (London: The Athlone Press, 2002 [1985]), 125.

⁹ Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

conformity of statement to thing, but the opening, within which every conformity or deformity can come about. The opening is not a stable, transcendental structure of reason, but a legacy, the finite-historical thrownness, *Schickung*, destiny, provenance of conditions of possibility that Heidegger sees incarnated in the historical conditions of natural languages.”¹¹ Religion, therefore, should give us an attitude and disposition of openness—listening to the eventful coming of Being that both reveals and withdraws at the same time as it unfolds within the horizon of temporality and historicity. He is convinced that it is only in time and history that we can have contact with the Divine, who takes such humble initiative to make such an encounter possible. Vattimo finds the framework of the 12th century (1132-1202) Italian Cistercian monk Joachim de Fiore’s theology of history (of salvation)¹²—one that is in progress and, therefore, fitting to his own understanding of the historicity of religion and of revelation—as corresponding “to the ‘event’ character of Being discovered by postmetaphysical philosophy.”¹³ Vattimo holds that this postmetaphysical age belongs to the ‘age of spirit’ when “[t]he promised salvation is above all in increasingly ‘fuller’ and more perfect—rather than more literal or objective—understanding of the message.”¹⁴ In order to capture the ‘fuller’ meaning of the message and ‘the active presence of the Christian heritage,’ Vattimo adopts the ‘spiritual interpretation’ of the texts of the Scripture. Such an interpretation makes one “recognize the pervasive religious essence of many aspects of secularized society.”¹⁵ Vattimo’s concept of ‘spiritual interpretation’ actually means ‘secularization,’ that is, “an interpretative application of the biblical message that situates it beyond the strictly sacramental, sacral, or

¹¹ Ibid., 16.

¹² Vattimo captures in the following words Joachim’s scheme of history: “Three are the stages of the world indicated by the sacred texts. The first is the stage in which we have lived under the law; the second is that in which we live under grace; the third is one in which we shall live in a more perfect state of grace...” Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 30.

¹³ Ibid., 31.

¹⁴ Ibid., 26. For Vattimo, the literal interpretation of the Scripture—‘literalism’—means getting tied down to “a historically determined culture falsely assumed to be ‘nature,’” 47.

¹⁵ Ibid., 48.

ecclesiastical realm.”¹⁶ After all, at the heart of the message of the Scripture is the mystery of incarnation of God in Jesus Christ—“disclosing that he is akin to finitude and nature and—I would say—inaugurating the dissolution of divine transcendence.”¹⁷

Vattimo believes that Nietzsche’s nihilism¹⁸ offers an important intuition to retrieve the kenotic dimension of Christianity, which speaks of the redemptive embrace of the world by the self-emptying God through the incarnation of His son. “God is incarnated, and thus is first revealed in the biblical pronouncement that ultimately ‘gives rise’ to the post-metaphysical conception of the event-like character of Being.”¹⁹ Along with this ‘spiritual interpretation’ of the Scriptures, Christian morality will have to focus itself on the kenotic living out of, or witnessing to, Christian charity, compassion and forgiveness as a way of resisting all forms of violence in the world. “The only truth revealed to us by Scripture, the one that can never be demythologized in the course of time—since it is not an experimental, logical, or metaphysical statement but a call to practice—is the truth of love, of charity.”²⁰ Vattimo claims, “the ‘principle of charity’ constitutes the point of convergence between nihilistic hermeneutics and the religious tradition of the West.... the emergence of charity as the single most decisive factor of the evangelical message.”²¹ Such dispositions become especially necessary in the attempt to enter into conversation with others in order to arrive at certain political consensus to which ‘ethics—without transcendence’—is reduced.²²

¹⁶ Ibid., 45.

¹⁷ Ibid., 27.

¹⁸ Nihilism, for Nietzsche is “the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (ed.) and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 7.

¹⁹ Vattimo, “The Trace of the Trace,” 92.

²⁰ Vattimo, “The Age of Interpretation,” trans. Luca D’Isanto, in *The Future of Religion*, 50-51.

²¹ Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 51.

²² Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 67. This position resonates well with Don Cupitt who believes that ethics should be ridden of any perspective of transcendence—beyond human rationality. Arguing that we now live in a post-Christian and post-philosophical age, he proposes a reinvention of metaphysics

For Vattimo, the main principle that should be protected in such a political process in a pluralistic society is “the ample recognition of the right (natural or whatever) to projectuality,” which he understands in Heideggerian terms as freedom (i.e., with informed and explicit consent) of each person to achieve his or her own chosen life’s project.²³

Vattimo’s appropriation of Nietzsche’s nihilism in his proposal for a kenotic retrieval of religion, along with its corresponding morality, seems to run contrary to Nietzsche’s moral vision. Nietzsche rejects Christian morality for adopting what he would refer to as ‘slave morality,’ one that stresses weakness. His central concept of ‘will to power’ and of *Übermensch* goes for the ‘master morality,’ one that takes a position of strength. In his *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Nietzsche extensively discusses the tension between the two types of morality. We see a passage that directly contradicts Vattimo’s theological appropriation:

That should be enough, once and for all, about the descent of the ‘holy God.’ That the conception of gods does not, as such, necessarily lead to the deterioration of the imagination which we had to think about for a moment, that there are nobler ways of making use of the invention of gods than man’s self-crucifixion and self-abuse, ways in which Europe excelled during the last millennia,—this can fortunately be deduced from any glance at the Greek gods, these reflections of noble and proud men in whom the animal in man felt deified, did not tear itself apart and did not rage against itself! These Greeks, for most of the time, used their gods expressly to keep ‘bad conscience’ at bay so that they could carry on enjoying their freedom of soul:

and speaks of religion without alienation. See Don Cupitt, *After All: Religion without Alienation* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1994).

²³ Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 105.

therefore, the opposite of the way Christendom made use of its God.²⁴

Vattimo, of course, is aware of Nietzsche's "hatred for morality, Christianity and socialism (which as a leveling ideology is simply an extreme form of Christianity) [and that it] is motivated by a 'physiological' preference for health and strength."²⁵ Health and strength, Vattimo explains, can be understood as 'a lust for adventure' and 'a multiplicity of points of view.' He elaborates this further along Nietzsche's concept of 'Will to Power': "those who will prove themselves the strongest will be 'the most moderate, who do not need extreme dogmas, who not only admit to a good chunk of chance and nonsense in themselves but also love the idea, who can think of man as considerably reduced in value without thereby becoming small and weak themselves.'"²⁶ Furthermore, Vattimo speaks of the nihilistic possibilities of the 'will to power' when Nietzsche moved to art and aesthetics, in which "the fundamental characteristic of strength and health is not any model of 'normality' but simply the capacity to live in a world where there are no normal models either for things or for the subject."²⁷ The symptom of strength is the preference for the questionable and terrible things; while the preference for the pleasurable, pretty, and delicate is the sign of weakness. Such an interpretation makes us see a possible opening toward an appreciation of certain fundamental intuition in Christianity and understand Vattimo's proposal for a humble and kenotic return of religion—one that rids itself of metaphysical absolutes and incarnationally and kenotically embraces humanity.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 69.

²⁵ Vattimo, *Nietzsche: An Introduction*, 127.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

**SELF-EXALTING ASSERTION OF CHRISTIAN TRADITION
AGAINST A SECULARIZED WORLD**

The emerging theological movement of Radical Orthodoxy, with John Milbank²⁸ as its prominent representative, presents another way of understanding the return of the sacred in the postmodern milieu. We also bring in to our discussion Stanley Hauerwas,²⁹ who, along with George Lindbeck and Hans Frei, of the Postliberal theology, makes quite similar assertions, arguing for the reinstatement of the 'theological' perspective, especially in the search for a 'good life' in the world. The proponents of both Radical Orthodoxy and Postliberal Theology share Vattimo's conclusion that the followers of Jesus should become men and women of 'faith' who can give witness to the demand of charity, compassion, forgiveness, and peace in their lives.³⁰ Like Vattimo, they reject modernity as violent, especially because of its universalist pretension, foundationalist epistemology and dialectical rationality. Furthermore, the call to particularity, historicity and narrativity seems to be also commonly shared and valued in their frameworks. Yet their understanding of the role of religion in the world, especially in the determination of the good life takes off from a different starting point and adopts a completely different posture.

²⁸ British contemporary theologian John Milbank is Francis Myers Ball Professor of Philosophical Theology at the University of Virginia. He has emerged as the most prominent figure in the theological movement of Radical Orthodoxy, protesting liberalism and attempting to face the postmodern challenges to theology. He is an Anglican-Catholic Christian socialist. See the introduction of the author in John Milbank, "Sovereignty, Empire, Capital, and Terror," *From South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (2002): 305-324, esp., 23.

²⁹ Stanley Hauerwas is Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics at the Duke University Divinity School. He earned his M.A. and Ph.D. at Yale University and his D.D. at Edinburgh University. He has written an enormous amount of works and delivered the prestigious Gifford Lectures. See "Stanley Hauerwas," *Theological Studies*, University website of the Duke University Divinity School, accessed February 1, 2006, <http://www.divinity.duke.edu/faculty/theological/hauerwas/>.

³⁰ We find this well-articulated, especially in Milbank's discussion of charity and peace. See John Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, (Oxford: Balckwell Publisher, 1994), 415-422.

If Vattimo's starting point is human experience and history (from a human perspective) of which God becomes part in a self-effacing act of incarnation, Hauerwas and Milbank start from God (from a 'theological perspective') whose revelation, especially perfected in the incarnation of Jesus, is meant to make humans participate in the divine life of grace. As Hauerwas declares, "Our task is not to try to fit God into our histories, but rather to understand the good news that God has made us part of His history."³¹ So do Milbank and colleagues state, "Every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective otherwise they will define a zone apart from God."³² Both stress that, as Christians, our perspective—our way of seeing the world—cannot but be theological and fiducial. Whereas Vattimo finds the postmodern nihilist ethos as a cue for Christianity's retrieval of its kenotic vocation in the world; Milbank and Hauerwas, together with the schools they belong, condemn nihilism by putting Christianity back to its former throne of influence, arguing that it can provide us with a clear vision and normative criteria for good living. Thus, it can be said that while Vattimo's postmodern critique of modern foundationalism extends to the premodern metaphysical realism, Milbank and Hauerwas' critique of modernity would not let go of the metaphysics of premodern religious tradition (explicitly articulated in Milbank and implicitly assumed in Hauerwas—a point we will elaborate below). In the mind of Milbank and Hauerwas, Christian faith or theology, along with its metaphysics, should serve as judge to reason, and not vice versa. They are convinced that as a gift that enables us to respond to God's revelation, faith neither requires nor needs any rational foundation or justification—a modern obsession they consider to be based on debunk and dangerous ideological presuppositions. They criticize any theological attempt to make concessions with modernity through accommodation, correlation, and adaptation as a futile

³¹ Stanley Hauerwas, "Karl Barth: Dogmatics in Outline," in *First Things: The Journal of Religion, Culture and Public Life* 101 (March 2000): 47.

³² John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, "Introduction: Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds. John Milbank et al. (London: Routledge, 2001), 3.

and dangerous exercise that would only lead to the cooptation the Christian tradition by the liberal project and the consequent loss of its specificity and particularity. An open dialogue with modernity as well as with other religious traditions is not appreciated, to say the least, on the grounds that Christian thought and practice, which has all the resources it needs, does not benefit from any experience of cross-fertilization with other religions and much less with the violent modern philosophies and positivist sciences. Theology is itself a sufficient social theory that can put forward a 'Christian *kulturkritik*,' subverting all other forms of discourses, be it secular reason (liberalism, positivism, dialectics, etc.), theological projects (political and liberation theologies), or other religious traditions. Whereas Vattimo stresses the exercise of freedom to be, to think, and to act as an autonomous and responsible individual, Milbank and Hauerwas limit the understanding and exercise of freedom within the horizon of one's own theologically derived or determined narrative identity and character.³³

Having God as the fundamental metaphysical presupposition or theological perspective as its starting point, the attitude that goes with the radical orthodox assumption and postliberal position is one of strong assertion and self-exaltation of the Christian tradition. That is why Milbank, with Hauerwas following him, accuses theologians (directed especially to the liberals—which could be applied more so to Vattimo's postmodern appeal for weak reason/belief) of 'suffering from false humility.'³⁴ Hauerwas argues that a self-effacing posture is tantamount to losing the Church's particular narrative as she is forced to speak the language of liberalism and is made to follow its set of rules and criteria in conversation, consequently preventing her to offer her unique contribution and critical perspective in such a dialogue. Such accommodation of Christianity to the liberal system, Hauerwas thinks, is parallel to what happened to the Church in the

³³ See Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 15; See also Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: SCM Press, 2003 [1983]), 37-46.

³⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 16. See also Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 1.

earlier part of her history when Emperor Constantine made Christianity the religion of the state, co-opting her in the process. Milbank, for his part, explicitly expresses his objective as envisaging “to overcome the pathos of modern theology, and to restore in postmodern terms the possibility of theology as a meta-discourse.”³⁵ It is the Christian tradition that he considers to have the resources for a more supportable basis in thinking about a good and meaningful life in the world. The common recourse to the later Wittgenstein’s concepts of language games and forms of life gives way to a postmodern appeal for a cultural linguistic model of religion.³⁶ Justification, intelligibility and assertion can only be legitimately located within the parameters of a particular linguistic world. This linguistic group is the Church, the community of believers who share the same vision, mores, values and practices in a common form of life, distinct from that of the world. For Hauerwas, it means going back to the biblical typology of the early Christian communities, who were sustained by faith, fashioned by the narratives of the Jesus’ event, and called to witness to the evangelical truth by speaking the language of peace—following faithfully the Christian grammar (ethics) of love. For Milbank and colleagues, it means a return to the patristic and medieval roots whose theological vision of the world is framed according to the Augustinian concept of the *Civitas Dei*.³⁷ Within this theological vision, the Church, identified as the ‘heavenly city’—a community of those who have embarked upon the road of discipleship in Christian charity and love—is commissioned to counteract (‘counter-history,’ ‘counter-ethics,’ ‘counter-ontology,’ and ‘counter-culture’) the ‘earthly city,’ identified with those who have opted to give in to self-love and greed.³⁸ Distinguishing his project from that of the Neo-Orthodoxy of Karl Barth (with whom Hauerwas and other postliberal theologians and ethicists have great affinity³⁹), which he describes to have taken a simple return to faith

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁶ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 32.

³⁷ See Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 389-92.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 390-92.

³⁹ See Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, esp., 184-93.

that is opposed to reason, Milbank acknowledges the role of reason but only within the realm of faith or theological language. In contrast to Barth's dualistic perspective of 'faith versus reason,' Milbank's framework refers to 'faith over reason' and 'grace over nature.' Milbank appreciates the mediating role of philosophy but only within the complex and coherent vision of faith (as *ancilla theologiae*). Outside the realm of faith, reason—and this is especially the case with the modern social sciences—becomes discredited. In his resistance to allow modern reason—social theory—to 'position' theological discourses within the 'secular space' it has invented, Milbank declares that "Theology does not require the mediation of social sciences."⁴⁰ This is so because "theology [is] a social science and the queen of the sciences for the inhabitants of the *altera civitas*, on pilgrimage through this temporary world."⁴¹ He holds "that *all* theology has to reconceive itself as a kind of 'Christian sociology'.... The task of such a theology is not apologetic, nor even argument. Rather it is to tell again the Christian mythos, pronounce again the Christian logos, and call again for Christian praxis in a manner that restores their freshness and originality."⁴² Faith and theology, in the mind of Milbank and Hauerwas, should be able to position the world within its framework.

Christian tradition, we believe, should be able to enter and dialogue with the changing times and contexts, and be open to be transformed as it also transforms other traditions, cultures, and forms of rationality with which it comes in contact. Citing the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*, Pope Francis claims: "We believers need to find occasions to speak with one another and to act together for the common good and the promotion of the poor. This has nothing to do with watering down or concealing our deepest convictions when we encounter others who think differently than ourselves... For the deeper, strong and richer our own identity is, the more we will be capable of enriching

⁴⁰ John Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short Summa in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions," *Modern Theology* 7, no. 3 (April 1991): 248.

⁴¹ Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 380.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 381.

others with our own proper contributions.”⁴³ The mystery of the incarnation, through which God kenotically embraced the human condition, should always be at the heart of the drama of the narrative of Christian tradition. Should one assume, then, the humble posture of Vattimo in retrieving Christian tradition in order to give way to a more meaningful and fruitful dialogue with other forms of beliefs and rationalities? Such consideration makes us see an important point of entry for Dussel and his analectic and liberative perspective to our discussion.

THE LIBERATIVE RETRIEVAL OF CHRISTIAN ETHICAL TRADITION

Vattimo’s proposal for the kenotic approach in the retrieval of tradition seems to fit very well with Dussel’s analectic framework which speaks of the weakening of the position and assertion of the self—be it a system of rationality or of belief—before the ‘Other.’ Within the secularized and pluralistic context, Vattimo’s concept of weak thought—or ‘weakness of believing’ (*la faiblesse de croire*) in the category used by Michel de Certeau⁴⁴—aims to ensure peaceful co-existence and intercultural dialogue. It is assumed that a deep sense of respect and tolerance of the differences, which exist between or among varied forms of rationalities and beliefs, goes with the humility to acknowledge the limits of one’s own claims. The opening citation we have at the beginning of the paper speaks of Pope Francis’ humble recognition that it is “from lessons learned from our many weakness and

⁴³ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, # 282, citing *Querida Amazonia* (2 February 2020), 106.

⁴⁴ In the context in which Christianity has ceased to be the central organizing body of society, de Certeau proposes neither a valorized return to the glorious past nor a complete dismissal of the place of religion in our contemporary milieu. Michel de Certeau, “Weakness of Believing: From the Body to Writing, A Christian Transit,” in *The Certeau Reader*, trans. Saskia Brown, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford and Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), 214-243. Originally published in *La faiblesse de croire* (Édition du Seuil, 1987), 2663-305.

failures [that] we, the believers of the different religions, know that our witness to God benefits our societies.”⁴⁵

Christianity, in particular, which has been an instrument of oppressive and hegemonic control of the life-world, especially during the Middle Ages, should be able to overcome what has been its characteristic authoritarian posture. It needs to abandon a great deal of its metaphysical presuppositions—e.g. concept of fixed and absolute moral norms in the natural law tradition, upon which it makes such strong assertions—if it were to make a reentry into the postmodern milieu. We can safely claim that Vattimo’s rejection of the strong assertion of religion upon its return resonates well with Dussel’s critique of tradition. The Christendom model of Christianity, which played a central role in the organization of the hierarchical structures of the Medieval social order as well as of the centralizing system of the modern expansion of the hegemonic established order during the period of colonization, should be able to give way to new models of understanding of religion in the world today.

THE KENOTIC DIS/POSITION AND TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF CHRISTIAN TRADITION

If Christian tradition is to be at home with and true to the language of liberation and salvation, it should be able to recapture its originary inspiration and undergo a kenotic embrace of the oppressed, the humble, and the excluded ‘Other.’ The retrieval of the originary inspiration does not necessarily mean reliving the particular form of life that belonged to the past but it means rediscovering radically the spirit behind the vision and the set of values (the Kingdom values of love, justice, equality, and solidarity) that sustained such a form of life (of the early Christian communities). Since such retrieval cannot but be hermeneutical—a point we can concede with Vattimo—one simply has to decide whose hermeneutical lens one sees most appropriate in the recovery of the radical sources and the history of the interpretation of

⁴⁵ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* 274.

tradition. This is the reason why it would not be easy to claim—as Millbank and Hauerwas tend to assume—that one’s perspective or vision of life was the *only valid one for Christians*. We say so because even within Christian tradition, one can see so many different currents of interpretation, let alone, ‘forms of life.’ Any particular way of understanding tradition always comes through a particular mediation of understanding. Just as our own way of interpreting reality (and of tradition) can come only from a particular standpoint, shaped by many different interlocking factors, Christian tradition is not homogenous or monolithic. The development of tradition precisely depends on the way it becomes open to the different and intersecting interpretations. This, therefore, demands a keen attention and sensitivity to the movement of the Spirit in the concrete historical landmarks, which would enable us to understand the consistent moral demands from the ‘Other’ through the changing times and contexts. It means more specifically retracing a particular story line in the margin of tradition which shows how the Spirit has moved those holy men and women, who have kept alive in their particular historical exigencies the evangelical vision through the prophetic testimony of their lives, as they responded to the challenging voices of those in the fringes of society. If the Church is to be true to her Christian vocation, she has to experience an on-going process of renewal through a ‘kenotic incarnation.’ Differing from Vattimo’s interpretation of the mystery of the incarnation, which he understands mainly as a ‘kenotic’ weakening of thought, we stress that Jesus’ embrace of our humanity does not mean abandoning the transcendent God, whose Kingdom he preached about. Rather, the evangelical meaning of kenosis suggests more the relativization of the human desire for power, fame and wealth in order for humans to be more open to the inbreaking of God and His Kingdom. Beliefs, convictions, and thought can become dangerous only when they are not freed from such unredeemed desires. Through deep convictions and beliefs inspired by grace, such desires are redirected to God and neighbor in the spirit of love, which makes it possible for humans to kenotically embrace service (not power), humility (not fame) and poverty (not wealth). Called to follow Jesus, the Church’s experience of kenosis happens in the

process of immersion in the life situation of the outcast and excluded of society—assuming their condition and becoming one like them (we recall here the soteriological postulate common among Church Fathers about the *assumptus homo: quod non est assumptum, non est sanatum!*⁴⁶). In concrete terms, it would mean the Church becoming the ‘Church of the poor,’ where the poor could be at home with its life, vision, mission and fundamental option.⁴⁷ It would also mean having the poor and the excluded taking more empowered roles in contributing to the development of new ways of thinking, valuing and living in a constantly evolving community tradition. Verstraeten sees this especially in the understanding of the development of the Catholic Social Tradition, which should go beyond the magisterial doctrinal pronouncements—including rather the reflections of those in the margin—the grass-root communities who have been struggling to live the meaning of Christian life and vocation in the rough terrains of human existence.⁴⁸ A perspective from below can provide a different or a fresh understanding of reality. In another article, Verstraeten illustrates how a reevaluation of certain key concepts can give rise to a new meaning when viewed from the Christian narrative tradition, especially from the perspective of the excluded:

In a liberal society, the sacred right to property (*le droit sacré et inviolable*) quickly denigrates into a negative right to freedom: property is the right of the powerful individual who can exclude others (e.g. by, as owners of shares, giving so much attention to the financial advantage that the labor of others is

⁴⁶ See L. Perrone, “Four Gospels, Four Councils”—One Lord Jesus Christ: The Patristic Developments of Christology within the Church of Palestine,” *Liber Annus* 49 (1999): 357-396, quotation in 363. Accessed 12 October 2005, <http://198.62.75.1/www1/ofm/sbf/Books/LA49/49357LP.pdf>.

⁴⁷ See numbers 122-136 of *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, 1992), 47-52.

⁴⁸ See Johan Verstraeten, “Rethinking Catholic Social Thought as Tradition,” in *Catholic Social Thought: Twilight or Renaissance?* eds. J. Verstraeten. with S. Boswell and F. P. McHugh, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* 157 (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 61.

sacrificed; by, as wealthy citizens, choosing a system of elective health insurance instead of a compulsory system based on solidarity...). In the biblically founded view of the universal use of goods, the right to property becomes a positive right: a right for everyone, in which all in society can fully participate and thus something that demands that an individual's absolute right to property be limited (e.g. via mandatory contributions to the social security system).⁴⁹

With the perspective of the excluded becoming more central, the prophetic call for the transformation of the system and of the structure of relationships becomes one of the top priorities. Going back to Vattimo, we see that it is something that does not seem to be an important concern in his framework. It is true that Vattimo's 'Ethics of Provenance'—or 'Ethics of Finitude'—rejects the very foundation upon which the domination and violence of the system is ideologically justified.⁵⁰ Yet one could argue that it also removes the ground for the possibility of practical and effective forms of resistance—violent or otherwise—against any unscrupulous and un-repenting oppressive system. Vattimo speaks of the need to listen to the 'Other,' as different voices should have a space in the conversation. But he does not address the critical issue of what the 'Other,' the excluded and the silenced, should do once they are not given a space in such a forum. It is for this reason why Dussel criticizes Vattimo's postmodern critique of modernity as remaining Eurocentric—addressing the problem in the West, from which limited social location Vattimo expectedly constructs his philosophy.⁵¹ Coming from a different standpoint, that is, the Two

⁴⁹ Johan Verstraeten, "An Ethical Agenda for Europe: Fundamental Problems on Practical Ethics in a Christian Perspective," *Ethical Perspectives* 1, 1 (March 1994): 8.

⁵⁰ Vattimo, "Ethics of Provenance," in *Nihilism & Emancipation*, 46.

⁵¹ Enrique Dussel, *Ética de la liberación: Ante el desafío de Apel*, Taylor y Vattimo con *repuesta crítica inédita de K. O. Apel* (Mexico: Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Mexico, 1998), 161. See also Enrique Dussel, *Transmodernidad y Postmodernidad: Diálogo con la filosofía de Gianni Vattimo* (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana Plantel Golfo Centro, 1999).

Thirds World, Dussel similarly speaks of the need for the West to allow itself to be attuned to the voices of the 'Other,' which it excludes and marginalizes. But beyond that, within his transmodern approach, he also addresses what could be done from the liberative perspective and rationality (*razón liberadora*) of the excluded 'others'—understanding, above all, the real concerns and agenda they would wish to pursue. A better appreciation of the condition of these 'Others' in their specific and concrete historical exigency would reveal that they are more concerned about the practical question of life, rather than the theoretical question of truth. A living and dynamic faith should, therefore, be able to address that and root out the fundamental causes of the social problems of injustice that prevent the flourishing of human life.

From the perspective of the excluded and marginalized 'Others,' a strong position of critically retrieved tradition of rationality and belief would surely be necessary and indispensable. The Church (of the poor) cannot remain silent in humble surrender to or in alienating escape from the challenging reality of injustice. It is true that she has the vocation to proclaim God's reign of love, compassion and forgiveness, but such a proclamation becomes only authentic when those values presuppose the values of truth and justice, which in Dussel's Levinasian frame of reference is an indictment that comes from the 'Other.' We can agree with Vattimo that the incarnation of Jesus is characteristically kenotic, from the moment of birth until his self-surrender in death on the cross. Yet it is also important to add that Jesus' kenotic life and vocation did not end in the 'seemingly nihilistic' embrace of death. Rather, it culminates in the glorious victory of the resurrection, which gives hope to the promise of the fullness of life in the reign of God—a central theme he preached in his public ministry. It is not without reason why the belief in Jesus' rising to life from death has become the central focus and foundation of Christian faith and tradition. Jesus' resurrection made it possible for Jesus' followers to gain a better and clearer picture of the mystery of the whole drama of his life—starting from the moment of his incarnation through his public ministry leading to its historical climax in his passion and death on the cross. The post-Easter perspective made it possible, for the disciples to receive the gifts of the Spirit whom the risen Lord

breathed into his disciples. Thus, we can say that the appreciation of the mystery of the descending movement of the incarnation would not be complete without the recognition of the ascending movement of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, which pave the way for the human hope and longing for the grace of salvation and 'divinization' in Christ. The neglect of this latter dimension in our faith, a problem perceivable in Vattimo's perspective, would render Christian faith and tradition weak or incapable of 'conquering sin' in the world. A deep level of conviction, faith, and courage is necessary for a Christian to raise a critical and prophetic voice against the oppressive, unjust and sinful elements in the human condition that prevent the possibility for the full blossoming of each human person in his or her dignity as adopted children of God in Christ.

Having said so, we can appreciate the prophetic role that Radical Orthodoxy and Postliberal Theology assume against the structures of sin in the world. What seems to us as lacking in their discourses is the recognition that (religious) tradition, especially in its historical and institutional embodiment, not to mention the texts of the Sacred Scriptures (a point we shall later elaborate), may also suffer from some forms of unredeemed power dynamics that is responsible for the oppressive systems of relations within its own tradition.⁵² We reiterate, therefore, that the validity of the Church's prophetic vocation in the world takes a more solid ground and stronger appeal and acceptability, if she first embraced the kenotic process of self-emptying and self-criticism. The credibility of her truth-claims and prophetic pronouncements comes along with the spirit of humility, in the way of Jesus of Nazareth, in the effort to reach out to the downcast of history, becoming one with the excluded (of the secular and ecclesiastical system) in their condition. Only through this kenotic and humble gesture will the Church become a genuine agent or force of transformation in the

⁵² See Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory*, 231 and 226. See reference made to Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard (London: Barns and Oates, 1937), 8, 23, 51-4.

world through the concrete historical project of liberation.⁵³ Without this the Church's prophetic stance and voice will become like 'empty gongs or clanging cymbals' of moral pontifications that could not celebrate and practically live out the real meaning of Christian vocation and mission in the world. The paradox that characterizes the paschal mystery of Christ (his passion, death and resurrection) becomes, therefore, the key to a more profound understanding and analectic embrace of Christianity. The evangelist John captures this mystery in his account of Jesus' words: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24). It is in this narrative of self-emptying or death to oneself for the sake of the life, survival, and liberation of the other that Christians are able to live out and proclaim as witnesses the evangelical charity and transforming justice of God in the world.

BEYOND PREMODERN AND MODERN METAPHYSICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

What happens now with the metaphysical presuppositions of Christian tradition, theology and ethics? In what way do we understand truth-claims and normative ethical demands? The premodern theologico-ethical discourses rest on a wide range of metaphysical presuppositions. Although the theologians and ethicists of postliberal theology and radical orthodoxy identify their perspective as postmodern—denying the need for a rational foundation of the truth-claims of faith and theology—their reliance on premodern metaphysics casts doubts on their postmodern claims. Milbank and his colleagues rely explicitly on philosophically well-articulated pre-modern metaphysical presuppositions (although he calls it Postmodern Critical Augustinianism⁵⁴), while

⁵³ "I hardly see any concrete element in Milbank's 'social project' that would address these questions." See De Schrijver, *Recent Theological Debates in Europe*, 118.

⁵⁴ Pilario describes it as a theological project that advances "a true Christian metanarrative realism which must elaborate and recover the historical plot given by Augustine in the *Civitas Dei*. Just as Augustine has positioned the Greek and Roman histories, so should Christian theology do in contemporary times." Daniel

Hauerwas' more direct dependence on biblical narratives for his theological ethics operates only on an unarticulated and implicit metaphysics. It is our assumption that theology since the early life of the Church had to seek mediation of reason in order to communicate the message of revelation. The Church Fathers had to appropriate some philosophical schemes to make sensible to human mind the meaning of the received faith. Augustine had to rely on the Platonic dualistic concept of reality, as the basis for his understanding of the 'Two Cities' in his work *The City of God*. In the medieval times, we have Aquinas relying on Aristotelian philosophy in his re-articulation of Christian beliefs and vision of life for his particular context. It is not surprising, therefore, why Karl Rahner had to appropriate Martin Heidegger, or Johan Baptist Metz, the Frankfurt School. Metaphysical presuppositions lie deep in such philosophical mediations in theology. It is more of a question of the kind of metaphysics one adheres to, or the type of foundation upon which we make our truth-claims. We can say that it is only during the nihilist and skeptical ethos of the postmodern period, which denies any universal claim to truth, that metaphysics has been fundamentally put into question. The radicalization of particularity, difference and of plurality ultimately has resulted, for some, in indifferentism, or in what Boeve problematizes and calls as "narratives of disempowerment" or 'disempowerment of plurality' where every claim is relativized as equally true, good and beautiful.⁵⁵ Considering that Milbank and Hauerwas make a very strong assumption and assertion of their truth-claims and a corollary rejection (or out-narration) of other claims, it shows that they have a different understanding of postmodernity. The identification they seem to attribute to the postmodern claim is a fundamental recognition of particularity and specificity of belief or truth-claim against the modern universalizing homogeneous and hegemonic discourse. Yet one wonders whether they acknowledge

Franklin Pilario, *Back to the Rough Grounds of Praxis*, 367. For a programmatic account of this project, see Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism," 265-78.

⁵⁵ Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition, An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context* (Louvain and Dudley, MA: Peeters Press, 2003), 71.

that it is also important to consider and respect the variant currents of traditions within Christianity.

Situating our position vis-à-vis the different and competing discourses, we put forward the narrative ethics of liberation as critical of pre-modern metaphysics, especially in terms of the moral absolutes that were used to justify and legitimize the old social order. But it is one that does not give up our fundamental truth-claim about, or belief in, God and His transcendence. “If there is no transcendent truth, in obedience to which man achieves his full identity, there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people... If one does not acknowledge transcendent truth, then the force of power takes over and each person tends to make full use of the means at his disposal in order to impose his own interests or his own opinion, with no regard for the rights of others... The root of modern totalitarianism is to be found in the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person.”⁵⁶ God’s transcendence, which is presumed ‘metaphysically,’ will be appreciated in terms of immanence through His epiphany or revelation in the world. We appropriate Dussel’s analectic vision of the ultimate Other, the transcendent-immanent God of the Christian tradition, through the proximate ‘Other,’ the poor and the excluded.

LIBERATIVE APPROPRIATION OF METAPHYSICS OF ALTERITY

Dussel’s analectic framework, which gives priority to the voice, the agenda and the perspective of the other, offers a more liberating experience for the excluded and marginalized. It facilitates the process of the genuine transformation of the system. His appropriation of Levinasian metaphysics of alterity, which speaks of ethics—the call by the other to responsibility and obligation—as the first philosophy, puts into question the metaphysical presuppositions and assumptions of a given system or tradition of rationality. The reality of the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded exposes to the system its own inadequacy and

⁵⁶ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* 273, citing St. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1 May 1991), 44: AAS 83 (1991), 849.

limitations, falsifying its claim to truth, justice, and love, among others. Dussel's analectic perspective also prevents the system from legitimizing itself and its claims by resorting to an ideological use of God and religion, assuming that it best articulates the divine design for such a particular form of life and type of social relations. Dussel's analectic framework, following Levinas, speaks of God as an irreducible Other and cannot, therefore, be co-opted ideologically by any system. God, in His infinite transcendence, cannot be confined within the limits of our own particular form of rationality. Rather, the limits of one's tradition or system of beliefs and practices will be repeatedly challenged to undertake changes and transformation. Tradition, in this sense, can be understood as an 'open narrative.'⁵⁷ It is constantly confronted in the concrete exigencies of time and history by the ultimate Other through the appearance of the indicting face of the proximate 'Other'—the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded.

In theological terms, Dussel succinctly describes the epistemic privilege that the poor enjoy as the bearers of the mystery of the Reign of God ("I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Mk 10: 14-15; Lk 18: 16-17). It is here also that we can affirm the eschatological concepts of the 'already' (the here and now) and the 'not yet': an ongoing drama of the creative relationship between God's immanence and transcendence. It is within the context of relationality that ethical normativity imposes its imperative on us and on our tradition or system of thought and practice. The poor and the excluded who demand and fight for justice, equality and rights in order to live with dignity as human beings (or as children of God) are the ones who concretize and historicize the normative principles and values of the Kingdom. We do not wish to romanticize the poor, as we acknowledge that there are those among the poor and the excluded who are completely overtaken and defeated by the logic and machinations of the system and, therefore, fail to see beyond its determined horizon. Belonging to the Kingdom of the 'already' (the here and now) means adopting a different perspective, value system and life style that is constantly

⁵⁷ Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 92.

open to the in-breaking of the Kingdom of the 'not yet.' It means becoming part of the community of liberation that serves as an icon that opens up windows to the divine through which it is transformed according to the divine gaze made manifest in the face of the 'Other.'

TRADITION INTERRUPTED BY MYSTICS AND PROPHETS

The retrieval of tradition that we propose is not one that puts *emphasis* on the institution and on the intra-ecclesial concerns. To do so is to give in to the temptation of totalization and dogmatization that fossilizes itself away from the refreshing and transforming breath of the Spirit. Rather, we envisage the return of religious tradition, that is, more attuned to the interruptions of the Spirit, the Ultimate Other, who comes through the voices and contestation of the proximate 'Other.' We see here the indispensable role of the mystics and of the prophets who are most sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit in the most profound human experiences, especially of those in the margin. The mystics and the prophets challenge institutions (religious or secular) to transformation from the fetishism of the system of beliefs, cultic life, laws and practices. The Jesuit Indian theologian Sebastian Painadath's theological reflection on spirituality within the context of inter-religious dialogue provides us with some deep insights on how mystics and prophets of different religious traditions articulate a common spirituality that underlies the varied forms of institutionalization in different religious institutions (religions).⁵⁸ In the history and the tradition of the different religions, the mystics and the prophets are the ones who awaken the people's religious and moral imagination, leading them to personal conversion and enabling them to gain a renewed vision of life that goes beyond the existing institution of their religious and social order.

⁵⁸ See Sebastian Painadath, "Diversity of Religions, Unity in Spirituality," in *Religious Experience and Contemporary Theological Epistemology*, eds. L. Boeve, Y. De Maeseneer, and Van den Bosseche (Leuven: Leuven University Press and Uitgeverij Peeters, 2005), 141-52.

The distinction between the spiritual and the religious has become popular in certain contemporary movements that one can hear of individuals, who are willing to embrace ‘spirituality,’ but get rid of religion. Boeve observes this in many of the New Age movements, where “Christian tradition only appears to have a ‘future’ in what I would call a post-Christian perception of reality....People autonomously determine their own religious identity on the basis of what is available in the religious supermarket.”⁵⁹ Against this ‘religious do-it-yourself-ism’ (a phrase used by Boeve to refer to the many forms of New Age movements),⁶⁰ it is important to clarify that when we speak of the importance of being open to the Spirit (spirituality), we do not mean giving up the need for some aspects of the traditional institutions of religions. Community living, worship, codes of conduct, etc., remain important elements of meaningful human existence. What we argue here is to keep the institutions of religions constantly attuned to the interruptions of the Spirit, allowing them to change accordingly and preventing them to be absolutized. There is no way that the Spirit can be fully identified with the institutions. One simply has to recognize that the institutions of religions should be understood as the ‘presence of the Absent’ and the ‘absence of the Present.’ Such a paradox is at the heart, especially of the Christian tradition, which is founded on the mystery of the cross and of the empty tomb, which, for Chauvet, precisely speaks of the tension between God’s presence and absence in the Church and in the World. This leaves us in a position of humility and openness in acknowledging that we do not have a full control over life. We are challenged to be in a constant process of discernment of the presence and of the interruption of the Spirit in the world. Referring to Levinas, Louis-Marie Chauvet speaks of the implication of this mystery in our life:

It is thus a question of “holding ourselves in a mature proximity to absence” or, as Levinas puts it, to “hold ourselves in the trace of the Absent.” To

⁵⁹ Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 57.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

hold oneself there, one must unfold a discourse that keeps permanently alive in itself the wound of an Otherness which, always beyond our grasp, nonetheless leaves its trace in the humble call of the neighbor; a discourse where, as Levinas again writes, “an invisible God signifies not only an unimaginable God but also a God accessible through justice.”⁶¹

The prophets and mystics in the world, in our communities, and even in ourselves (discerning heart), have a role to play in our ongoing conversion and social transformation. The biblical notion of prophecy does not focus itself on the prediction of the future. Rather, it serves the people more in reminding them of the need to be faithful to the covenant. The true prophets in the Old Testament distinguished themselves from the false ones by questioning the social order that had turned its back away from the covenant. It is along the same tradition that Christ and his followers through the centuries have become the mouthpiece of God calling for change. The prophetic task is achieved with a double grounding in the human experience and in the experience of God. It includes an on-going process of discernment of the presence of God in the events of life and in the structures of human relationships—announcing the Good News of such presence (of God) and denouncing the presence of sin. It is along this central task of discernment that Verstraeten appreciates the Catholic social thought. He speaks of the need to read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospels with a sense of ‘semantic vigilance’ against dominant worldviews that distort our ways of thinking and speaking and with a constant openness to the Christian witness in their narratives and vision of life.⁶²

⁶¹ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995 [1987]), 75. See his reference, Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité*, (Den Hague: Nijhoff, 1961)”; *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, (1974), 51.

⁶² See Johan Verstraeten, “Catholic Social Thought as Discernment,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Social Thought and Culture* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 94-111.

Also present in many different religious traditions, the mystics who are moved by the religious tendency and desire of the human spirit to seek intimacy with God, achieve immediate intuition and agapeic experience of God through contemplation and love. Such an encounter with God brings them also to a deep encounter with the world, which they also challenge to transform. Dorothee Sölle appreciates the liberating dimension of mysticism when she speaks of the mystics in the following terms: “They lie between withdrawal from the world and the transformation of the world through revolution. But whether it be withdrawal, renunciation, disagreement, divergence, dissent, reform, resistance, rebellion, or revolution, in all of these forms there is a No! to the world as it exists now.”⁶³ Mysticism neither escapes the world (*fuga mundi* spirituality) nor relegates the search for interiority only within the enclaves of private spirituality; rather, it takes distance from the world in order to have a clearer vision and a more intimate embrace of the world—seeing it from God’s loving glance and embrace. It is not only about contemplative silence before the ineffable mystery of God but also about a liberating silence that transforms reality. Michel de Certeau and David Tracy, according to Philip Sheldrake, speak about “the mystics, like the mad, [who] represent a kind of otherness on the social and religious margins. This otherness has the capacity to challenge traditional centers of power and privilege. In this sense, mystics are socially, theologically and politically subversive.”⁶⁴ Liberation theologians, like the Chilean Segundo Galilea and the Brazilian Leonardo Boff and political theologians, like Jürgen Moltmann and Johan Baptist Metz, speak about the mystical-contemplative dimension of the socio-political praxis for liberation and the ethical dimension of

⁶³ Dorothee Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara and Marin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

⁶⁴ Philip Sheldrake, “Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no.1 (2003): 19-37, quotation in 25. See also references to Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable Vol. One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1982]), and to David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics and Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 3-6.

mysticism.⁶⁵ Moltmann categorically states, “As long as we do not think that dying with Christ spiritually is a substitute for dying with him in reality, mysticism does not mean estrangement from action; it is a preparation for public, political discipleship.”⁶⁶ We can, therefore, add to Sölle’s list some more contemporary names, like those of Oscar Romero, the martyred Archbishop of San Salvador, Jesuit priest Ignacio Ellacuría also of El Salvador, Martin Luther King, Jr. of the civil rights movement in the U.S., Mahatma Gandhi of India, and Dorothy Day of New York, among many others. They are prophets but also mystics who “lived their mysticism in the repudiation of the values that ruled in their worlds.”⁶⁷ Not only does mysticism seek to transform the world, but also purify and renew our Christian tradition. In the words of de Certeau, “The various strains of mystics, in their reaction to the vanishing of truths, the increasing opaqueness of the authorities and divided or diseased institutions, define not so much a complementary or substitutive knowledge, topography, or entity, but rather a different treatment of the Christian tradition.”⁶⁸ Prophecy and mysticism, for sure, offer profound challenges toward the transformation of the world as they also keep Christian tradition open to the interruption of the Spirit, especially through the contestation and cry of the excluded other, the poor and the oppressed.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we can say that we have tried to figure out what could be an appropriate reentry of the Christian tradition in our postmodern times and context. On the one hand, even as we appreciate Vattimo’s stress on the kenotic significance of the

⁶⁵ Segundo Galilea, “The Spirituality of Liberation,” in *The Way* (July 1985), 186-94; Leonardo Boff, “The Need for Political Saints: From a Spirituality of Liberation to the Practice of Liberation,” *Cross Currents* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1980/81): 371; Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); and Johan Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World*, trans. William Glen-Doeple (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).

⁶⁶ Moltmann, *Experiences of God*, 73.

⁶⁷ Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, 3.

⁶⁸ de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 14.

mystery of incarnation, which is at the heart of the Christian tradition, we have raised questions and objections against his nihilist approach. We have stressed the importance of maintaining our belief in a transcendent God whose will, inspiration, grace, and providence we seek as we go on in our ethical quest for life and its meaning in the world. Just as we uphold the importance that Milbank and Hauerwas have accorded to the 'theological' vision and perspective in ethics, we have also critically challenged their 'conservative' retrieval of Christian tradition. We have problematized in particular the lack of recognition of the dynamics of power that could be well exposed by critical and emancipatory reason, which they summarily dismiss with the whole modern project. Arguing for the importance of Christian tradition, beyond its system of creed, cult, and code, we have adopted the liberative and analectic vision and perspective. Along with Pope Francis' perspective, we acknowledge the need to be open to the Transcendent Other, whose immanence in the world is made manifest in the cry of indignation of the excluded and marginalized 'others' against oppression and injustice. We have stressed that among the different strands of Christian tradition, it is the tradition of the prophets and mystics that can keep it alive and open to the changing conditions of life. We continue with that tradition by remaining sensitive to the promptings and interruptions of the Spirit. The critical perspective of both the prophets and the mystics usher us into an on-going renewal and search of the eschatological vision of life that can be carefully discerned in the rich narrative resources of tradition and of our contemporary culture, interpreted especially from the perspective of the excluded and oppressed 'others.' An open tradition is one that is willing to liberate its past narratives from enclosed hermeneutics and ontologies through new liberating narratives.

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