

Editor: John S. McClure, Louisville Presbyterian Seminary

- 24 Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*. Stanford University Press, 1997. \$16.15.
- 25 Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (editors), *Religion*. Stanford University Press, 1998. \$14.35.

In *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, Gianni Vattimo, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Turin, concludes that hermeneutics represents the beginning of the end for Western metaphysics, as well as the best future for philosophy (and theology?) as a whole. In the first chapter, "The Nihilistic Vocation of Hermeneutics," he distances hermeneutics from its pejorative version which exists as "a comfortable metatheory of the universality of interpretative phenomena, as a sort of view from nowhere of the perennial conflict, or play, of interpretations...." Habermas' appeal to communicative rationality, Gadamer's appeal to the *logos* of textual traditions, and Rorty's romantic aestheticism and vitalism constitute weakly veiled versions of this "view from nowhere." He asserts that hermeneutics "is not only a theory of the historicity (horizons) of truth: it is itself a radically historical truth." Hermeneutics, therefore, must not shrink from thinking its own historicity, at the same time that it identifies the historicity of all theory and truth. This, he asserts, is the "nihilistic vocation" of hermeneutics. Following Nietzsche, he asserts that "there can be no recognition of the essentially interpretative character of the experience of the true without the death of God and without the fabling of the world or, which amounts to the same thing, of Being." The horizon within which hermeneutics is correctly practiced is essentially nihilistic: "There are no facts, only interpretation; and this too is an interpretation."

Unlike Heidegger, who proposes the end of metaphysics as an effort to prepare for a return of a forgotten Being, Vattimo narrates hermeneutics as "the story of a 'long goodbye,' of an interminable weakening of Being....of the oblivion of Being." In part, this oblivion is necessary in order to overcome the violence that ensues even in the most subtle instances in which Being asserts itself as "the ultimate foundation before which one can only fall silent and, perhaps, feel admiration....," in which Being becomes "an authority that keeps things quiet and takes control without explanation." Within this ethical horizon, nihilism becomes "a chance...of emancipation." It is terrifying, however, to imagine what might happen if this "chance" leads more in the direction of Nietzsche's will to power than toward Christian charity. More fundamental, for Vattimo, is the Trinitarian underpinning for this "weakening of Being." He sees in the weakening of Being a direct analogue, if not a direct implication, of the Christian doctrine of incarnation. He points out that the Judeo-Christian

religion "has at its base the idea of the incarnation of God, which it conceives as *kenosis*, as abasement and, in our translation, as weakening." In a *tour de force*, Vattimo argues that "nihilism is too much 'like' *kenosis* for one to see this likeness as simply a coincidence, an association of ideas." He continues by asserting that "we are led to the hypothesis that hermeneutics itself, as a philosophy with certain ontological commitments, is the fruit of secularization as the renewal, pursuit, 'application' and interpretation of the substance of the Christian revelation, and preeminently the dogma of the incarnation of God." If this is correct, then Christians are called to be committed to the "weakening" and "ruin" of Being, to secularizing and hermeneutic vocations. In Vattimo's words, "nihilistic ontology" is "heir to the Christian myth of the incarnation of God."

This vocation of weakening and ruining Being which is at the heart of the Christian experience runs counter to phenomenological-experiential, romantic-aesthetic, and linguistic-communitarian accounts of truth. Indeed, for Vattimo, the ruination of Being is itself "a possible rationality for thought, a possible 'truth of the opening.'" Reason and truth, in this account, have "unfoundation" as their "destiny," and, in an odd way, as their historical criteria. Instead of the "hermeneutic irrationalism" that Rorty and Derrida support within this same unfounded "destiny," Vattimo espouses something closer to Foucault's "ontology of actuality," a rationality "that tries to grasp the meaning of the transformation (of the idea) of Being that has been produced as a consequence of the techno-scientific rationalization of our world." In other words, Vattimo calls for a form of rationality that does not abandon its own historicity, even in its pursuit of the unfoundation of its own historicity. Something becomes "true," therefore, when it conforms both to the historically situated oblivion of Being and to the "conditions, along with technology, for a transformation in the meaning of Being in the direction of its post-metaphysical givenness."

Vattimo's ideas are important for preachers not only because of his striking radicalization of the relationship between incarnation and nihilism. He is also significant because he raises serious issues for homileticians who, in the face of relativism, are prone to settle for critically un-examined forms of traditionalist, communitarian, inductive, or "conversational" rationality that, unless carefully articulated and taught, are likely to harbor latently oppressive "views from nowhere." Without abandoning rationality altogether, Vattimo moves us one step closer to a form of rationality for preaching that is neither positivistically scientific, romantically aesthetic, nostalgically traditionalist, nor fideistically communitarian.

It would be fair to say that some of the ideas in Vattimo's book took root during the summer of 1994, when a group of mostly French, Italian and Spanish philosophers met in Capri to discuss the meaning and significance of religion in the wake of the post-cold war resurgence of ethnic and religious movements in Europe. The result of this convocation was a book of essays edited by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo entitled *Religion*.

Religion begins with a lengthy and typically dense essay by

Derrida. He dissociates religion, which must articulate itself within the limits of reason, from theology, "the discourse on God, faith or revelation." Then he reflects on the close association between Western religion and the history of political and technoscientific reason that has unleashed "a history of radical evil" in Europe, the Balkans, and ex-Soviet bloc countries. In Derrida's estimation, Europe has become a veritable signifier for Nietzsche's death of God. Europe is the end point of a long process that he calls "globalatinization" through which an alliance was formed between "Christianity, as the experience of the death of God and tele-technoscientific capitalism." In the postmodern period, globalatinization is experiencing itself as "at the same time hegemonic and finite, ultra-powerful and in the process of exhausting itself."

Eschewing the fundamentalisms that arise in this religious wasteland, Derrida also rejects Hegelian ontotheology and Heidegger's "ontologico-existential repetition and rehearsal of Christian motifs that at the same time are hollowed out and reduced to their originary possibility(.)" He identifies in the present moment a religious self-reflexivity that springs forth from a "revealability (Offenbarkeit) more originary than revelation (Offenbarung), and hence independent of all religion." Given this situation, and true to his conviction that "origin is duplicity itself," Derrida proceeds to outline a current oscillation within European religious thought between a messianic "opening to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice," and "an infinitely impassible persistence <restance>: an utterly faceless other." This "faceless other" Derrida identifies as Plato's *chora*, which is beyond all memory, and "is nothing (no being, nothing present), but not the Nothing which in the anxiety of Dasein would still open the question of being." Religion in postmodern Europe is something like an oscillation between the other as endlessly deferred justice and the other as *nihil*.

Of significant relevance to teachers of homiletics is Derrida's deconstruction and indictment of the ideas of *witness* and *testimony* – the hallmarks of communication in faith communities. He highlights the relational, social and fiduciary dimensions of testimony – that the hearer believes that the testifier speaks "in good faith," beyond all proof or perception. Testimony, therefore, is rooted in a social acquiescence to "miracle." "Even the slightest testimony concerning the most plausible, ordinary or everyday thing cannot do otherwise; it must still appeal to faith as would a miracle." This "order of faith or trust in the address of the other," however, also opens up an order of "mechanical, machine-like division (testimonial affirmation and reactivity, 'yes, yes' etc.,...and the possibility of *radical evil*: perjury, lies, remote-control murder, ordering at a distance even when it rapes and kills with bare hands)." It is this possibility of radical evil at the heart of testimonial relationality that, in Derrida's words, "both destroys and institutes the religious" in its current European form, in its oscillation between the other under the trope of justice and the other under the trope of the *nihil*.

In the second essay in the book, "The Trace of the Trace," Gianni Vattimo rehearses the central themes in his book, *Beyond Interpretation*

(see above). He identifies, once again, the Trinitarian God of Christian theology as the antidote to philosophies that continue to sneak essentialist reasoning into the discourse over the end of Western metaphysics. It is Levinas, this time, who comes under attack. Vattimo convicts Levinas' idea of the "irruption of the Other" of dissolving the "event-like" character of Being into a "metaphysical essentialism of Greek origin."

Eugenio Trías, in his essay "Thinking Religion: the Symbol and the Sacred," re-hashes symbol theory in terms reminiscent of Paul Ricoeur and Philip Wheelwright. He advances our understanding of symbol, however, by identifying *testimony* as the key element in what he calls the "symbolic event." At the heart of the symbolic event is an encounter, "a (sym-ballic) relation between a presence of some kind that reveals itself and its recognition by a particular witness (defining its form and figure). The presence (of the sacred) and the (human) witness are correlates in an authentic *relation of testimony*...." Once again, homileticians who are interested in the categories of witness or testimony for preaching will find Trías' essay challenging and, perhaps, helpful.

In Chapter Four, "Religious Experience as Event and Interpretation," Aldo Gargani argues that "transcendence immanences itself." He concludes that "the signs contained within religious experience are not rigid designators, the certain proof of a given reality, but announce and prefigure the sacrifice of some parts of life in view of others that do not yet exist and whose unreality offers a more decisive signification of existing reality, in view of which the human individual is carried to another state to which he feels he belongs, even before reaching it." For those who maintain that preaching is a matter of "naming grace," but who want to argue that such priestly preaching does not sacrifice transcendence, Gargani provides yet another provocative perspective.

In Chapter Six, "The Meaning of Being as a Determinate Ontic Trace," Maurizio Ferraris returns to this theme, but with a twist that would make Feuerbach proud. In contrast to Gargani for whom "signs" inscribed within religious experience can ultimately be seen as transcendent, Ferraris argues that he "would be inclined rather to see the transcendental of the trace as a consequence of its empirical and anthropological character." He concludes that "it seems permissible to understand the meaning of Being not as an originary non-meaning, nor ultimately as a past that has never been present, but precisely as a determinate ontic trace that generates meaning by simple iteration." Transcendence, therefore, is basically a supplement to immanence, not something additional given to it.

Chapter Five, "Desert, Ethos, Abandonment: Towards a Topology of the Religious," is, perhaps, the most suggestive essay in the book for homileticians and preachers. In this essay, Vincenzo Vitiello identifies three religious paradigms and discusses significant interpreters of these paradigms. Under the theme of "desert," he identifies the Judaic conception of God found in the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah. God within this paradigm is "always beyond, over there." In Levinas' words, God is "otherwise than Being."

Desert is "not a period of trial, but a *destiny*." Vitiello finds in Walter Benjamin and Edmund Jabès the best contemporary interpreters of this religious vision. Against the "relational character of the symbolic" (cf. testimony) and, therefore, the elevation of history to the status of a "trail of conquest and salvation," Benjamin asserts the "finality of the allegoric," a "radical historic nihilism." History is not the arena in which a meaningful accumulation of miraculous testimonials leads us once again to that place where symbols begin to give back that to which they point. Rather, history is a desert, "the space of the ephemeral, of the senseless, and finds its best expression in the shattered language of the *Trauerspiel*." Here we have a longstanding vision of our homiletic efforts. After the jibberish of our sermonic testimonials, standing together with Moses on Mount Pisgah, what remains for Benjamin is "a human nostalgia...provoked by the absence of God. Of the God – present through the Messiah." What remains for Jabès is "exile, nomadism, and perpetual migration," which ultimately can give way to a positive theology of hospitality in which the desert is turned "into a dwelling place of omni-welcome." The preacher is nomad, stranger, and finally, host.

In section two of his essay, Vitiello uses the theme "ethos" to identify the Greek conception of God found especially in Homeric texts about Odysseus and Apollo. Contemporary interpreters of this tradition include Nietzsche and Hölderlin, especially their writings concerning the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy. Here is yet another homiletic vision, (sermon as chorus?), laced through the Graeco-Roman underpinnings of the New Testament. For Hölderlin the chorus is "ever-contending dialogue." "Everything is speech against speech, one canceling out the other." For Nietzsche, the chorus is "a mask" for the "absent god." According to Vitiello, "the chorus is the *contradictio contradictionis* that saves the contradiction from the contradictoriness of its existence....it heightens the disquiet...."

In the final section of this essay, Vitiello uses the theme "abandonment" to identify the "word of Jesus and the Christianity of Paul." Referring to the writings of Augustine and Kant, Vitiello articulates the "Son's cry of abandonment" as "the most authentic revelation of the Father." This is because "the Logos...is the truth, the tradition and the transmission of it only in so far as it is equally its betrayal <tradimento> and falsehood." He goes on to assert that "it is in the nature of the Trinitarian essence that the truth be given only *in parabolis*, and that is, as a falsehood." It is the work of the Spirit to unite the simple truth of the Father with the abandonment of the Logos in the form of mission. The "highest word," therefore, "is a falsehood that says the truth in betraying it, aware of being unable to say it otherwise." Here we have yet another, more parabolic homiletic vision.

In a concluding essay to *Religion*, Hans-Georg Gadamer attempts to respond to several of its authors. He was handicapped by not having access to all of the essays and so is only able to offer an overly broad assessment of the conference at Capri. Taken together, these two books, *Beyond Interpretation* and *Religion*, offer extensive insight into much of the current European discussion on religion today.

Within this discussion, it is possible to find fleeting glimpses of the nature of the homiletical project in a postmodern world.

□ John S. McClure

- 26 Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*. Fortress, 1997. \$14.00.

In *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*, Paul Lakeland sets out to write a brief (113 page) introduction to the relationship between postmodernity and Christian thought. What he achieves in this small book is astonishing. Chapter One begins with an overview of the culture of postmodernity (shopping malls, virtual reality, microwave cooking, etc.), and an assessment of "postmodern sensibility," which he suggests is "nonsequential, noneschatological, nonutopian, nonsystematic, nonfoundational, and ultimately, nonpolitical." From there, Lakeland moves on to organize "postmodern thought" into three camps: radical postmodernism (philosophers: Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Rorty, Irigaray; theologians: Mark C. Taylor, Altizer, Christ, Welch), late modernism (philosopher: Habermas; theologians: Tracy, McFague, Moltmann, Hodgson), and nostalgic postmodernism or countermodernism (philosopher: Heidegger; theologians: Frei, Lindbeck, Milbank). Lakeland's affinities are clearly with the late moderns. He organizes his discussion of these three schools of thought around three topics: the postmodern "problem of God," the role of the Christian community in the postmodern world, and "the implications of Christian claims to uniqueness in face of postmodernity's attention to otherness."

In relation to the doctrine of God, Lakeland concludes that radical postmoderns have removed God (since God is dead) in order to set in motion "a fuller and deeper sense of the religious." He is less clear about what countermoderns think of God, choosing to spend most of his time critiquing Gustafson and Kaufman, "soft-core postmoderns" who seem to lie somewhere between radical postmoderns and late moderns on his grid. According to Lakeland, these two theologians provide good examples of what happens to the idea of God when all anthropomorphism has been removed. Gustafson's God winds up too passive and Kaufman's too evolutionary and optimistic. Lakeland opts more for the modified panentheism of McFague and Hodgson as preserving more of God's personality (the world as God's body) and of God's agency (God is the spirit of the body).

On the issue of the role of Christian community in the postmodern world, Lakeland turns primarily to liberation movements as fledgling models of "faithful sociality" to emulate. According to Lakeland, Christian ecclesiality in the postmodern world should be "centrifugal, grass-roots-oriented, community-based, nonhierarchical, intersubjective, devolutionary, in a phrase, 'small scale'." He believes that liberation communities ultimately have more in common with late modernism, because they maintain forms of communicative action that reach across communities in order to form public alliances