"Weak Thought" and "Liberal Inclusivism"
Functional Affinities between Gianni Vattimo and David Tracy's Hermeneutics

Batairwa K. Paulin

Ph. D. Student, Department of Religious Studies, Fu Jen Catholic University

Abstract: The meanders of the human situation in a post modern context, with its polycentric, complex, fragmented perception had motivated David Tracy and Gianni Vattimo to formulate two different hermeneutical systems. Tracy, who has religious pluralism as his starting point, upholds *"liberal inclusivism"* as capable of enhancing respectful interactions and the much required mutually challenging religious dialogue in a world doomed to deal with pluralism. Vattimo, instead has confronted the problem from a philosophical perspective which he has articulated as *"weak thought."* The answer recommends a non arrogant attitude that pragmatically assumes the conclusions of the inexistence of metaphysical foundation on which humans could resort to.

"Liberal inclusivism" and "weak thought" are analogous not only in what they attempt to answer but also in the method used to shape their answers. Tracy's approach is theistic and religiously founded. Vattimo, on the other hand, is "atheistic" "non-ontological;" but not irreligious and anti-philosophical. The manner and the content of the responses these authors provide for display the diversifications in the modern revival of the interest for a religious and philosophical quest for meaning. They furthermore attest to the interconnectedness between philosophy, religion and metaphysics; an interconnectedness resulting from their commitment to the quest for meaning. As for the methods, the quest for meaning is not a mere enterprise of understanding and interpreting, it also reckons an art of persuasion, i.e. rhetoric. In fact, their usage of rhetoric displays the cross-cuts and affinities (similarities in differences) among these two responses. As a result, *"liberal inclusivism"* and *"weak thought"* could be looked at as post modern homeomorphisms.

Key Terms: Hermeneutics and Rhetoric, Post modernism, Weak thought, liberal inclusivism

I. Introduction

The predominance of the "God talk," the expanding awareness of the plurality of religions and the necessity of dialogue implied, are proving that religion is not dead. It has survived the dissolution of philosophical theories - positivist scientism and Marxism - thought to have definitively liquidated it. Following this recognition, a specific place and role needs to be given to religion in the post modern interpretation of the human condition.

The religious quest (search for meaning) permeates different layers of the human situation and requires appropriate methods of interpretation which need to be open to theology and metaphysics. Furthermore, as a result of the pluralist and fragmented context in which it takes place, the assessment of the religious quest claims a dialogue or conversation that is not only monophonic – but capable of engaging in serious conversation with other forms of interpretation. Gianni Vattimo's *weak thought* carries on the philosophical version of that dialogue and conversation which David Tracy's *liberal inclusivism* materializes in the field of religious pluralism.

The present paper explores these two hermeneutical paradigms as two analogical responses that take serious consideration of the mature awareness of the complexities and pluralities of views which the quest for ultimate meaning are met with today. The incentive for the comparison has been the appeal the two systems make to rhetoric, which Kenneth Burke did define as art of persuasion.[1] Persuasion presupposes that the speaker

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[1] Kenneth Burke says that "the subject of religion falls under the head of *rhetoric* in the sense that rhetoric is the art of *persuasion*, and religious cosmogonies are designed, in the last analysis, as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion. To persuade men towards certain acts, religions would form the kinds of attitude which prepare men for such acts. And in order to plead for such attitudes as persuasively, the religious always ground their exhortations (to themselves and others) in statements of the widest and deepest possible scope, concerning the authorship of men's motives." See Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkley. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), v

is aware and convinced of the very truth he or she defends. That conviction becomes the stimulus for finding means to persuade others of it. What are those truths emerging from the two systems and what are the persuasive methods used in conveying them? Our interest is oriented to these and alike questions. But before proceeding any further, we need a digression on the appraisal of metaphysics in the post Cartesian era. This excursus makes the background to the identification of the problematic Tracy and Vattimo are answering and hence enables to view "liberal inclusivism" and "weak thought" as different responses to the same problem.

II. The Quest for Ultimate Meaning and Metaphysics

In an article about the history of hermeneutics, Garret Green argues and stresses the close connection that since time immemorial existed between the quest for understanding and interpretation and religion. "Hermeneutics, while not a religious term per se," he writes, "has always had an intrinsic relationship to religion."[2] The pre-understanding that sustained and nourished that connection was about the specific characters relative to the kind of meaning which ultimately motivates the human mind. It was considered holistic, universal and ultimate. All these qualities being above and beyond the sphere of our common material and physical world, the quest needed to be directed towards another better equipped sphere. Religion and philosophy were considered specifically appropriate because of the object they dealt with. Religion channels access and interaction with supernatural beings and realities: God, deities, saints, angels, heaven.... As for philosophy, especially metaphysics, it was because of the understanding Aristotle had, since the beginning associated it with. He had subdivided the object of epistemology into two spheres, each with its corresponding methodology: the physical and/or material realm and the realm beyond the material or physical world, i.e. meta-physics. He called the latter "first philosophy" for it dealt with the ultimate nature of existence and principles without which the material and physical realm could not be comprehended.

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[2] Garett Greet, "Hermeneutics," in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion,* edited by John R. Hinnells (London & New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2005), 393.

Meta-physics as first philosophy was Aristotle's contribution to an important on-going discussion in Greek philosophy regarding the ultimate constitutive principles of things, and the way of comprehending them. This discussion had involved personalities such as Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato etc. Each struggled for convincing arguments on what could ultimately account for the existence of the material and immaterial realm as well. Outside, the Greek tradition, the question was also of importance. For instance, stoics and epicureans looked for an essential understanding of human nature and happiness that would enhance the applicability of moral designed for the human nature.

The tradition was further enriched by religious beliefs, especially those of monotheistic religions that associated the concept of a Creator, source and sustainer of being. In this effort, the philosophical concerns of metaphysics were merged with religion. Early Christian philosophy is one of these cases. Neo-platonism enabled reflection on themes such as God, evil, souls; all relevant to metaphysics. Moreover, the core concern of metaphysics inspired Augustine's philosophical and theological reconsideration of the meaning, the nature and the finality of human person, on creation, on time, on space, on redemption. It provided him with terminology to articulate the most complicated views such incarnation and Trinity. The metaphysics concern also sets the framework for the systematic and compact thinking of scholasticism with incorporated the Aristotelian notions of substance, accidents, causes into the Christian philosophy. Moreover, that very concern had resided at the heart of mystics; that is, individuals who, though plunged into the physical realm, are gifted with a more holistic experience and interaction with metaphysical realities. The outcome of that successful marriage made of philosophy (metaphysics) and religion (theology) enjoyed a *prima donna* place and viewed as sciences par excellence.

However, this century's lasting connection was not everlasting. It was met with obstacles starting from the modern era. The seed of the growing alienation points at the seventeen century's development of Cartesian rational philosophy. In Descartes' quest for truth and certainty, doubt was erected as a methodological strategy. Hence, he held as truth only those statements that had survived the methodological scrutiny of the methodic doubt. However, he made a compromise for statements regarding the objects of metaphysics, acknowledging for instance the truthfulness of the statement regarding the existence of God, a conviction he held from his subjective intuition.

The followers in the footsteps of the Cartesian methodic doubt developed great rationalistic systems which pointed at the difficulty of identifying the object of metaphysics. The problem was considered in the 17th century, by philosophers such as Baruch Spinoza, Nicolas Malebranche, and G. W. von Leibniz. The discussion on the place of metaphysics in the context of the post Cartesian philosophical endeavor continued and reached a climax during the 18th century. Hume and other empiricists, such as August Comte and Carnap rejected metaphysics on the ground of difficulty of proving its object. As for materialists who asserted that "nothing exists except matter," the claims of metaphysics as science were nonsense. How could there be a science of something inexistent?

Christian Wolff, in an endeavor to smoothen the discussion suggested a subdivision of the object of metaphysics into four major parts.[3] But those were vain efforts. Immanuel Kant also joined in the discussion. His efforts did not go further than demonstrating the impossibility of a scientific metaphysics, a position that formed a consensus among many modern and romantic thinkers and especially influenced German idealism (J. G. Fichte, Friedrich von Schelling, and G. W. F. Hegel). This position was later on used by positivism in denying any ground for metaphysical claims and declaring the imminent death of metaphysics. The scientific positivism of the 19th century did not foresee any room for transcendental and /or religious explanation. It instead bore a blind trust in the capacity of science to solve out all the mysteries found in the human quest for meaning. However, the process of discrediting metaphysics - and by association religion and theology - was accompanied by implicit tendency of substitution. Scientific theories were being erected into universal and ultimate explanations capable of accounting and answering the human quest for ultimate meaning. Paul Ricoeur's crititicism of the proponent of the so-called "hermeneutics of suspicion"[4] is an illustrative case of this tendency. Another illustration is the mentality that Roger Lundin has called "orphan

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[3] The four major parts mentioned by Christian Wolff (1679-1754) were ontology, rational theology, rational cosmology and rational psychology. See Thomas Mautner, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 351.

[4] It is with those terms that Paul Ricoeur qualifies the hermeneutics developed by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, and implicitly Ludwig Feuerbach, from whom they take inspiration. They called into question not only the authoritative texts of tradition, but also treated the self-consciousness of the interpreter with suspicion.

consciousness,"[5] for it takes pride in the compelling creativity emerging out of the nothingness of the denial of tradition, of origin, a pre-existent history as well as finality.

As it will be developed further, the problematic Vattimo and Tracy address are related to the redefinition of the framework for the human quest for meaning and truth, to a restatement of the basis for understanding and interpretation of the human existential situation in the aftermath of the discredit and negation of metaphysics. Once the traditional foundations are shaken, where and how does one still orient the quest? Modern hermeneutics since its origin struggled with this very problematic and progressively established a long and rich historic tradition which can't be developed further without trespassing the objectives assigned to the present reflection.

The contributors and makers of this tradition are so many to be enlisted here. However, a specific mention must be made of Schleiermacher and Heidegger. Schleiermacher is considered as the founding father of modern hermeneutics. In the midst of the controversy on the scientific nature of metaphysics, he strove to define methodological rules that would enable the recognition of the scientific character of the knowledge emerging from this field. His endeavor, enriched with the contribution of other scholars, initiated an on-going scholarly and critical dialogue that enabled the inclusion of various fields of human sciences and kindled the revival of the interest for metaphysics and religion. As for Heidegger, his insistence on the impact of existential situation wherein interpretation takes place re-introduced ontology at the core of hermeneutics. Heidegger's insights are not a mere repetition or reiteration of traditional metaphysical claims but the fruit of a sincere conversation with other contemporary philosophical views, including nihilism and materialism. He has been effective in affirming the quest for meaning as existentially inherent to the human condition and pointing at areas capable of facilitating that quest. Those influenced by his legacy – as it the case with Vattimo and Tracy – are looking at religion (theology) and philosophy (metaphysics) as areas of interpretation for the modern human condition.

5　Roger Lundin, Clarence Walout and Anthony C. Thiselton, "Interpreting Orphans: Hermeneutics in the Cartesian Tradition" in *The Promises of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1999), 1-62.

III. Gianni Vattimo and the Weak Thought

Gianni Vattimo has emerged as a leading Italian philosopher of post-modernism. For Vattimo, post-modernism refers to the human condition after the discredit of metaphysics. Metaphysics provided the foundation for both the epistemological and practical understanding of the human condition. The imperative for theology and philosophy, according to Vattimo, consists in providing alternative interpretations that take the present post-modern context into account.[6] It is the task of the interpreter to free the human reasoning in the perennial quest for an absolute foundation. That means to awake to the fragmentation of knowledge and realize that unlike the era of metaphysics, post-modernism makes no claim for global or privileged points of views. We can presume that these criteria are taken up by Vattimo's "weak thought" for he offers it as functionally fit for the post-modern context.

III.1. Weak Thought

By *weak thought,* Vattimo means the awareness of our incapability to understand reality in its fullness. Such awareness calls for humility and contentment with the fragmented access we have of reality; it is also a warning against generalization and tendencies to patronizing. As Richard Rorty observes, Vattimo's weak thought is not a term of derision rather a positive term of praise that can be used as a tool for political emancipation and a more democratic philosophy. His weak thought produces "a desirable humility about our own moral intuitions and about the social institutions to which we have become accustomed. This humility will encourage tolerance for other intuitions, and a willingness to experiment with ways of refashioning or replacing institutions."[7]

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[6] During a conference on the theme of the revival of the interest for religion and metaphysics, Vattimo acknowledged the religious recesses in postmodernity calling it the "Trace of the Trace." He suggested that religion is experienced today as a return to a trace that is problematic as is poses the question of the possibility of a religion not associated with traditional metaphysics. See Gianni Vattimo, "The Trace of the Trace" in *Religion: Cultural Memory in the Present,* edited by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 79-82.

[7] Richard Rorty, "Foreword," in *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, edited by Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). [Henceforth Santiago Zabala]

III.2. The Rhetoric of Vattimo: the outcome of the hermeneutic process

Vattimo believes the ingenuity of his *weak thought* to consist in a disposition that knows its limits and thus makes no pretense to fully understand the Being or to penetrate its entire mysterious structures. *Weak though*t can at least give access to the thread which comes from the confusion of the end or metaphysics. By its humility, it liberates the hermeneutical language from a preoccupation to see beyond, to search for extra meaning beyond the words.

Weak thought is about the liberation of metaphors and that is why Vattimo associated it with Heidegger's attempt to criticize and reject the pretension of an objective metaphysics that intends to create the adequate concept of Being. As a presentation of that critique, *weak thought* rejects the haughtiness of global metaphysical visions and promotes nihilism. "The accomplished nihilist; says Vattimo, has understood that nihilism is his or her sole opportunity"[8] By nihilism Vattimo understands the non coincidence of Being and foundation, or the situation in which there is no metaphysical reference on which to cling on. "Ontology" he says "is not something that concerns objects, because objects are not out there; so ontology concerns with our way of relating to 'Being' and 'beings'"[9]

As epistemology, *weak thought* is deeply convinced that "knowledge is always interpretation and nothing but this. [...] interpretation is the only *fact* of which can speak."[10] It thus upholds the fragmentation of knowledge and resists the totalizing and repressive tendencies of dominant discourses, which are tainted with residuals of the globalizing tendencies of metaphysics.

Regarding the divine, Vattimo does not embrace the apophatic attitude of mystics who yield to silence in front of the majesty and incommensurability of the divine. He does neither embrace the methods nor the conviction of the followers of Aquina's *fidens quarens intellectum* applying a critical reasoning to understanding the Divine. He is also very reserved in taking in the interpretation provided by the structural Church. He still

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[8] G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture,* trans. and with an Introduction by Jon R. Snyder, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 19.
[9] G. Vattimo in Santiago Zabala, 77.
[10] Ibid., 44.

however mentions the Christian classics to be one of the constitutive elements of his hermeneutic tools. He says that he wouldn't be a hermeneutical or pragmatic philosopher without being a Christian.[11]

In terms of the *God talk* proper to theology, *weak thought* wants to set a new model of interpretation to replace the traditional theological teaching provided in schools of theology (which is dogmatic and metaphysically founded). What is being addressed is any interpretation that identifies God with "Being" or attributes all the qualities of the Being to God. Vattimo writes: "Since God can no longer be upheld as an ultimate foundation, as the absolute metaphysical structure of the real, it is possible, once again to believe in God. True, it is not the God of metaphysics or of medieval scholasticism."[12] For this reason, weak thought is beyond an invitation to overcome metaphysics or to weaken and dissolve the traditional ontology, which is the basis for a dualistic and conflicting way of relating.[13] It is an appeal to draw the practical consequences of philosophizing and theologizing in a context not abiding to traditional metaphysics. When that invitation is materialized, there is a room for an intermediate way between fideism and atheism and a gradual replacement of the worship of a powerful God with a commitment to social ideas, by means of which Christians worship and experience God as love[14] instead of entrusting oneself to a divine substitute or to individual preferences.

Weak thought also aims at providing postmodern age pluralism with a strictly secular interpretation that views secularism not as opposed to religion but as the way of living religion. In fact, Vattimo claims atheism to be his way of being Christian. *Weak thought* is also a criticism launched against past sources, references and the modes of persuasion. Religion and rationalism, God and Reason are all summoned;[15] because the bet Vattimo wants to win is to go beyond all the sources and foundations provided by ontology and rationalism as a cadre of interpretation of the human condition. To embrace the *weak thought* means to do away with the metaphysical paradigm that was dominated by

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[11] Ibid., 65.

[12] G. Vattimo, *After Christianity,* (translated by L. D'Isanto, New York: Columbia University, Press, 2002), 5.

[13] Santiago Zabala, 3.

[14] Ibid., 57

[15] Ibid., 3

the thought that "there is something nonhuman that human beings should try to live up to."[16] More regarding this criticism will be dealt with in relation to vattimo's use of rhetoric in shaping his response and presenting it in a convincing way.

IV. David Tracy and the "Liberal Inclusivism"

David Tracy is a Roman Catholic theologian with valuable contribution in the fields of hermeneutics and theological method in today's pluralistic context. His philosophical theology critically integrates insights from modern theology, philosophy, biblical scholarship and literary criticism. Influenced by many other thinkers and traditions, such as the hermeneutical work of Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, the process theology of Schubert Ogden, and the mysticism of Simone Weil; all thinkers related to hermeneutics. His work has been widely recognized for its methodological achievements. Those achievements also amount to the clarity of motives David Tracy pursues.

Aware of the complexity and challenges of today's pluralist context, he stipulates appropriate guidelines to what he sees to be the central task of theology: interpreting the critical correlation between the values and claims of postmodern human experience and the *classics* of the Christian tradition. The abundant writings of David Tracy explore the horizon of that correlation; namely, the nature of human hermeneutics (interpretation), the public dimension of theologizing, the role of the *classic* in that dynamics, and finally the liberating impact of analogical imagination.

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[16] Ibid., 55.

IV.1. Liberal Inclusivism

Tracy's "liberal inclusivism"[17] is not a completely new concept in the unfolding of his hermeneutical methodology, rather a concrete application of those very criteria to a theological field which the awareness of plurality of religions has awakened him to. He writes that: "the list of strictly theological proposals for serious inter-religious dialogue is now at the point where it is difficult to understand how any serious theologian in any tradition would not admit the challenge to ordinary theology of the issue of religious pluralism. The expanding list of 'live options' and conflicting proposals either for dialogue or resulting from dialogue make contemporary theology more and more genuinely pluralistic amidst a conflict of interpretations."[18] His engagement in that field, has enabled him to explore "aspects of a crucial issue which" as he writes, "will transform all Christian theology in the long run: the inter-religious dialogue."[19] On the basis of that realization that he writes that "dialogue among religions is no longer a luxury but a theological necessity." In response to that necessity he spoke of "liberal inclusivism"[20] as the paradigmatic method fit for that kind of dialogue.

IV.2. Characteristics of Liberal Inclusivism

Liberal inclusivism is first of all about interpretation. In this particular case, it is

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[17] Whereas the aspects of Tracy's conception of the task of hermeneutical theology were introduced in his previous publications namely *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) ; *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) ; "liberal inclusivism" only appeared as triggered by the need to develop a hermeneutics of interreligious dialogue as it appears in *Dialogue with the Other The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Louvain: Eerdmans/Peeters Press, 1990), 97. [Henceforth David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*]

[18] David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 39-40.

[19] Ibid., xi.

[20] Ibid., 95.

interpretation applied to the understanding of the experience of plurality of religions.[21] Second, this model of interpretation refers to the Christian efforts to interpret other religions. At this point, it is a committed enquiry faced with the necessity to "find a way to formulate a Christian theological question on religious pluralism in such manner that a genuinely new answer may be forthcoming without abandoning Christian identity."[22] Third, it is liberal in that it breaks through the limits and controversies rising from the observations of those theologians who noted that Christian self-understanding could no longer treat the question of religious pluralism in either traditional exclusivist or even classical inclusivist categories.[23] Fourth, it is inclusivist primarily for it strives for a theological interpretation that would "account of how these other ways could be included, in principle, either as constituted by or normatively judged by the Christian belief in general revelation and the universal salvific will of the God disclosed with finality in Jesus Christ."[24] Last, it is also inclusivist in its own identification of the *classics* that frames its entire interpretation of other religions. For Tracy, the Christian tradition constitutes the *classics.*[25]

IV.3. A Christian Centered and Oriented Form of Hermeneutics.

The central place of the Christian classics constitutes the uniqueness of *liberal inclusivism.* Christian symbols focus on the event of Jesus Christ as a religious classic,

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[21] Tracy situates interpretation in the wider range of a participatory understanding involving the temporal and finite horizon in which the human person is thrown and his effort to make sense out of it. See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), 103 [Henceforth: David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*].

[22] David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other,* 96.

[23] Mentioned by R. Panikkar, W.C. Smith, John Hick, John Cobb, Julia Ching, Langdon Gilkey, Paul Knitter, Gordon Kaufman, Leonard Swidler, Rosemary Ruether, Willy Oxtoby, Schubert Ogden, Hans Kung, Wolfhart Pannenberg... see David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other,* 39

[24] David Tracy, Ibid., 96.

[25] According to Tracy, a classic is a person, text, event, melody, or symbol encountered in some cultural experience that bears a certain excess of meaning as well as certain timelessness; it confronts and provokes us in our present horizon with the feeling that something else might be the case. See David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 101-07.

for Christians feel responsible to show how their interpretations of all reality coheres with the Scriptures and other classics that speak of the centrality of Jesus Christ. "How Christians understand the self (and its freedom) as well as history and nature," Tracy writes, "they understand primarily by their affirmation of Jesus Christ as the decisive manifestation both of who God is and who human beings are empowered and commanded to become."[26]

Even though he focuses on the centrality of the religious classic of Jesus Christ, Tracy recognizes that thinkers in other religious traditions are engaged in similar processes of reflection occasioned by their own religious classics. This opens ways to dialogue and conversation. The language of dialogue and conversation are analogical and dialectical. Tracy defines self-respect, self-exposure to the other as other, and willingness to risk in all questioning,[27] as the three constitutive demands of that dialogue. He also sets several criteria or commitments without which interreligious dialogue will not be realistically fruitful. The Christian classics are the recesses where he searches for answers and categories to face even the most challenging and terrifying partner in dialogue. His encounter with Buddhism incited his interest for such thinkers as Nietzsche as well as mystical theologians like Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and Simone Weil. In the end, it is to the mystical and prophetic theology that he returns to in order to find a Christian ground enabling a sincere and fruitful dialogue with Buddhism.[28]

V. Between Weak Thought and Liberal Inclusivism.

V.1. Why such interest for a comparison?

After having surveyed the two systems and realized that nowhere has either of the two authors quoted the other or raised the slightest criticism over the system of the other, I feel compelled to revisit the initial impetus which insinuated that these two authors could be read in parallel. Comparisons are possible only where there are affinities and

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[26] David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other,* 112.

[27] Ibid., 73.

[28] David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*. 95-123.

yet Tracy's *liberal inclusivism* and Vattimo's *weak thought* apparently belong to two different universes. It is safer to say apparent because the notion of affinity discussed earlier has already hinted to the common substratum that links the mental framework of the two authors. By affinities we meant, similarities in differences or differences in similarities. David Tracy rightly says that as human beings we exist in our world by the way we understand it, and that to understand is always to interpret. Tracy and Vattimo have equally thought provoking utterances regarding the interpretation of the human situation in today's post modern context. The meanders of those affinities have been the motivating factors for this comparison.

V.2. Similarities in Differences

The main concern at the heart of Vattimo and Tracy's systems is about the interpretation of the human situation in a post modern context which is polycentric, complex, fragmented and despising any claim for eternally established justifications. For that purpose, they each resort to hermeneutics confirming the claim that knowledge is interpretation. In fact, "weak thought" and "liberal inclusivism" are both hermeneutical systems of interpretation. They insist on the necessity of a relational or participatory nature of knowledge, on narratives, on classics, etc. So, they share a set of jargons that still have to be interpreted carefully; they use similar techniques in defining their audiences and conveying their persuading message.

The use of hermeneutics and the concerns to provide the post modern man with meaning also enables cross cuts of interests and topics among Tracy and Vattimo. In virtue of the public or political nature of interpretation and its liberating vocation, both systems advocate liberation and to a different extent deal with criticisms against oppressive structures, those against the Catholic Church being the most eloquent. Tracy advocates the "mystical-political" or "prophetic-mystical"[29] dimension of Christian faith and is very supportive of all form of liberation theologies. This dimension names the idols in the Church, society, and academy and faces global suffering and a positive way of hope in struggles for justice and integrity. *Weak thought,* which claims that being is

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[29] Ibid.

dialogue and to experience being means to be involved with politics,[30] will certainly be supportive of such advocacy, and even beyond. Further elements of the mentioned similarities in differences; as we will be exploring, are about the criteria the two authors set with regard the development of a genuine dialogue as well as their usage of rhetorical techniques.

V.3. Criteria for Dialogue

Despite the deconstruction and reshaping involved in the praxis of hermeneutics, the question of truth remains. While its nature might be reviewed and reduced to a historicity and relationality, how it is achieved involves a dialogic way. "The universal validity of an assertion" says Vattimo, "can be constructed by building consensus in dialogue, though without claiming any right in the name of an absolute truth."[31] In the case of Tracy, there is no more need to repeat the great importance he gives to dialogue, specifically religious dialogue. Additionally, beside the importance, both Tracy and Vattimo agree that there should be some criteria because dialogue cannot be left to arbitrariness[32] or as says Vattimo, "one cannot talk with impunity of interpretation."[33]

V.3.1. Vattimo's criteria

Vattimo sets four pre requisites for real dialogue to occur. The first of these four is charity. He says that is the "meta-rule that obliges and pushes us to accept the different language games, the different rules of the language games."[34] The second criterion requires a predisposition to submit to the weakening of subjectivity; that is to make it less defensive, to balance its claim to originality and autonomy.[35] The third insures the viability and continuity of dialogue itself because it involves the notion of Being as an event. Vattimo speaks of a system of criteria "that validate themselves only après coup,

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[30] Santiago Zabala, 67.

[31] G. Vattimo, *After Christianity,* trans. L. D'Isanto (New York: Colombia University Press, 2002), 5.

[32] With regard Vattimo's plea for criteria see Santiago Tracy, p.58, and regarding Tracy, see David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 27.

[33] Santiago Zabala, 45.

[34] Ibid., 59

[35] Ibid.

only if they work in the conversation and only if what I say can become a small classic between us."[36] The last criterion consists in assessing the dynamics of power involved in dialogue, because power contains it itself principles that shapes the eventuality of Being. The survival of certain interpretations depends on the dynamics of power and so it is with dialogue.[37]

V.3.2. Tracy's Criteria

Interreligious dialogue, though a must for today's theologizing, is also like a gamble in which one is required "to put everything at risk"[38] enabling "some new beginning for the retrieval of hope."[39] The fundamentals for interreligious dialogue are closely related to the self-identification of the one entering in dialogue. All risks involved are being played at the level of his own identity. Tracy posits further protective measures for that identity. Besides the specific criteria related to that field,[40] he also speaks of a twofold commitment, the first to ontology and Christian metaphysics, the second to reason.

Furthermore, Tracy believes that those two commitments constitute the deepest motivations propelling Christians to enter into dialogue. Accordingly,　Tracy makes the following observation: "Insofar as Christians are willing to enter in dialogue" "they are thus willing either because of their prior commitment to reason-as – dialogical or, more likely, their Christian understanding of *Christian* faith-working- through love as now demanding inter-religious dialogue (that new work of love)."[41] Tracy's self identification while venturing in interreligious dialogue is not an exception to the above criteria. "For my part" writes Tracy, "I cannot but enter an inter-religious dialogue as other than a Christian. Even my willingness to enter is, for me, a result of a twofold commitment: a faith commitment to love of God and neighbor – the heart of Christianity in that command and empowerment of the God decisively manifested in Jesus Christ; and an ethical commitment to these honorable (Western) meanings of what genuine dialogue is (from Plato to Gadamer)."[42] It could thus be inferred that *liberal inclusivism* reaches the

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[36] Ibid., 61.
[37] Ibid., 62.
[38] David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 95.
[39] Ibid., 121.
[40] Ibid., 27-38.
[41] Ibid., 7.
[42] Ibid., 95.

climax of Tracy's previous methodological criteria. According to Tracy, *liberal inclusivism* meets those requirements for it provides "an honest Christian way to affirm other revelations and ways of salvation as real ways" while keeping its own Christian referential point.

V.4. Differences in Similarities: Rhetorical Audience

Every rhetorician targets an audience which according to David S. Cunningham, can be assumed as "simply out there" waiting to be addressed or still to be rhetorically constructed.[43] In the latter case, the rhetorician needs to have clear in mind those he or she intends to persuade, an option that further determines the choices and formulation of his arguments and concerns. The rhetorician knows the powerful effect of arguments in the shaping of an audience. They exclude or include. Additionally, an aware rhetorician knows how to anticipate all resistance and doubts his arguments can arouse. The final goal remains the transmission of the persuasive message or truth. To better relate the two methods, we would thus investigate on the audience they have construed, and on which inclusive or exclusive basis they've made that choice.

V.4.1. Vattimo's rhetoric audience

Vattimo's arguments do not only appeal to philosophy; they also expand to religion, even though his ultimate goal remains the militancy for a secular society that institutionalizes the socio-political rights of homosexuals. Speaking of the horizon in which he conveys his audience, Vattimo says: "I return to think about Christianity, because I constructed a philosophy inspired by Nietzsche and Heidegger and in its light I interpreted my experience in the actual world; most probably I constructed this philosophy with a preference of these authors because I started to move from this Christian heritage, which, it seems, I discover now, but which, in fact, I have never really abandoned"[44]

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[43] David S. Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 68.

[44] G. Vattimo quoted in Rita Serpytyt E, "Nihilism and Weak Thought" Retrieved June 30, 2007 from http://www.crvp.org/book/Series04/IVA-26/chapter_vi.htm

The obvious eclectic tactic appeals to Nietzsche's nihilism[45] and Heidegger's critique of Humanism.[46] From these two sources, he confirms the observation that historicism and progressivism, consisting in a continuous conquering of one's foundation or origin through a critical overcoming (*Aufhebung*), are common characteristics of Western culture. He furthermore welcomes their arguments as ground to deconstruct the craving for "foundations." Obviously, Vattimo considers both Heidegger's critique of humanism and Nietzsche's announcement of an accomplished nihilism as "'positive' moments for a philosophical reconstruction, and not merely as symptoms and declarations of decadence."[47] "The ideas of Nietzsche and Heidegger, more than any others" writes Vattimo, "offer us the chance to pass from a purely critical and negative description of the post-modern condition, typical of early twentieth-century *Kulturkritik* and its more recent offshoots, to an approach that treats it as a positive possibility and opportunity."[48] It is in this sense that he argues and encourages an interpretation of nihilism not as the metaphysical equivalent of nothing.[49]

Rita Serpytyt notes that Vattimo's concept of historicity is derived from Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche.[50] In fact, he positively interprets the inconsistencies Heidegger pinpointed in the nihilistic thought of Nietzsche. Additionally, Vattimo distinguishes two different ways of reading Heidegger - a metaphysical (nearing apophatism), which he also calls a rightist interpretation, opposed to a leftist reading that he calls post-metaphysical, post-modern for it insists on historicity. Vattimo further clarifies that the *weak thought* takes after the leftist reading of Heidegger.[51] According to Vattimo, the

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[45] Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture,* trans. by Jon R. Synder, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 20-30. [Henceforth: Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*]

[46] Ibid., 31-47.

[47] Ibid., 1

[48] Ibid., 11.

[49] Gianni Vattimo, "The Trace of the Trace" in *Religion: Cultural Memory in the Present,* edited by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 82-87

[50] Rita Serpytyt E, Nihilism and Weak Thought " Retrieved June 30, 2007 from http://www.crvp.org/book/Series04/IVA-26/chapter_vi.htm

[51] Rita Serpytyt E notes that Vattimo singles out the two ways of "reading" Heidegger. The right interpretation is inspired by the thought of that takes into account that the Real Being (God) can not be identified with any being, that all efforts to grasp the real Being (God) are always

interpretation Heidegger makes of Nietzsche's humanism is the ground for his yearning for an accomplished nihilism. Yet, despite these subtle explanations, *weak thought* remains a fancy system whose boundaries are difficult to delineate.

Part of the difficulties consists in explaining the connection between this philosophical foundation and its practical application. Vattimo's symbol of the fight for the rights of homosexuals is a problematic not appearing at all in the weak thought. It could be that they are the portion of the audience that does not need to be persuaded of anything. He saves that energy for other battlegrounds dealing with the interpretation of Christianity, with clericalism, with the Church, with the process of secularizing Christianity.

To make his audience more complex, Vattimo adds Christianity as the third constitutive element of his system. It is the *classic* that has shaped the event of his being. However, Vattimo's hermeneutics of Christianity is done through the lens of both Nietzsche's nihilism and the radical interpretation of Heidegger historicity. Its originality is expressed through an effort to estrange other forms of Christian hermeneutics. In the name of 'anti-foundationalism' and liberalism of a post modern, Vattimo applies Christian categories and concepts in an eclectic way or instills them with new meaning in contrast with their traditional and their historical background. He talks of "Charity", of Jesus, the Gospel, in ways that are provoking and opposed or even irritating to a Christian reader. Yet, in doing so he achieves one more goal: to set up a syncretic system which through provocations and inconsistencies stir curiosity and expand his own audience. His fierce anti clericalism and use of antinomy in referring to Christians have the similar effects.

Last, the reference to Christian classic or Christianity enables Vattimo's *weak thought* to cross the confine between philosophy and theology. Although not in the

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unsuccessful, because settled beyond every being, every name, every metaphor and will thus be closer to "negative theology," which still is a form of metaphysics. According to Vattimo, the left side which the weak thought represents takes seriously Heidegger's concept of historicity. This thought both takes into account the ontological difference and fulfils the demand to think "metaphysics as the history of Being". For Vattimo this means to think the ontological difference as the "happening" of weakening, reduction, "continuous farewell", in which "Being consolidates and becomes valuable as far as it liberates itself and withdraws." See Rita Serpytyt E, "Nihilism and Weak Thought" "Retrieved June 30, 2007 from http://www.crvp.org/book/Series04/IVA-26/chapter_vi.htm

traditional way, he blends together religion and philosophy, God and reason, and suggests that *weak thought* as ontological hermeneutics is the way out to solving the gaps left behind the discredit of metaphysics and current fragmentation of the interpretation of Being.[52]

V.4.2. The audience of David Tracy

Before his exposure to religious plurality and involvement into interreligious dialogue, he had understood theological investigation as an authentic public discourse[53]addressing three distinct and related social realities: the wider society, the academy, and the church"[54] This audience encompasses the techno economic realm, politics, culture, concern for social justice and the poor. It also includes the intellectual context of contemporary theology which he thinks can't be detached from other fields of inquiry and knowledge. The Church as part of Tracy's audience is not a mere listener for it sets the reference for the identification of the living faith tradition of a living faith-community.[55] But once he did realize the way religious plurality permeated and affected layers of the public, he brought in dialogue as the most appropriate model for interpretation. The implication of defining theology as a public discourse amounts to the necessity of identifying that public or audience of that discourse. The consideration of the complexity of that audience revealed challenges that were pointing at the necessity to include interreligious dialogue in the bigger audience of theology.

V.5. Differences in Intensity and Purposes

However, the difference in intensity and focus makes it hard to conciliate some

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[52] An observation regarding this creative blending is that it abides to a shared philosophic trend which on the one hand the heritage of its Christian origin and on the other hand wants to be free from any dogmatism. This philosophy reflecting on the revival of religion has twofold task: "to recognize that we need to be free of all dogmatism, above all any dogmatism which refuses to see in religion anything else than the self-deception of human beings; and to agree that no matter to what extent we recognize the urgency of religion, there can be no return to the doctrines of the Church." See Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo eds., *Religion: Cultural Memory in the Present,* (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 207.

[53] David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 30-31.

[54] Ibid., 5.

[55] Ibid., 14-24.

views and positions among these two thinkers. Despite the double commitments (to his Christian faith tradition and Reason), Tracy's *liberal inclusivism* appeals more to theology than to philosophy, and even when the demands of dialogue compel him to risk that position, he would struggle to retrieve it by means of other interpretative categories found in the recesses of the Christian tradition. For Vattimo it is not the case. We've said enough on the religious camouflage he put on his nihilistic system by appealing to "Christian" roots.

There is definitely a difference of emphasis and intentionality between Tracy and Vattimo with regard to the way they treat their Christian background. While Tracy clings on it, sets it as the cadre to analogically interpret other religious traditions, and grabs opportunities to campaign for it. As for Vattimo, Christianity is a tool at hand for the development of his philosophical system.[56] His usage of Christian language and categories might be views as intended to produce a caricature and satirical effect on unchallenged claims of Christianity as a religion. Moreover, his tactics enables him to express the tension and the challenges of religious response that flow from the recesses of his Christian cultural background. This tension is found for instance in his expression of his gratitude to God for being an atheist, or his justification of being an atheist because of Jesus Christ,[57] and his claim that nihilism constitutes the actual truth of Christianity in a post-modern context.[58]

Furthermore, Vattimo and Tracy's hermeneutical quest have led to cherish common thinkers, of whom Nietzsche and Heidegger are most prominent. However it is interesting to note how they differ in their attraction and relation to those authors. Tracy's interest for Nietzsche would remain minimal if he were not to face - the fullest terror of otherness – that is, the challenges of Christian-Buddhist dialogue.[59] His interest and reading of

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[56] These remarks about the place of Christian background also apply to the valuation either author gives to the classics. Christian classics in Vattimo ranks very low, for he insists that they should not posit any claim for "foundationalism." They are classics because of the effect they have on us, not because of the sources from which they originate. What is important is not the sources for anybody can become a source. His own dream is that what he says becomes a classic between him and his interlocutor. See Santiago Zabala, 60-61.

[57] Ibid., 63.

[58] Ibid., 47.

[59] David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other,* 99.

Nietzsche was channeled by the requirements of his self understanding as a committed Christian theologian engaging in interreligious dialogue with Buddhists, and for an audience attuned to nihilistic language. A similar purpose has led him to appreciate Heidegger of whom he emphasizes not the left side (that Vattimo identifies with *weak thought*) but the metaphysical and apophatic side. The right side offers the possibility to connect to the Christian mystical tradition and to suggest a Christian hermeneutic of historicity that stresses that God is uniquely relational, awesome, but brings liberation and transformation. The Christian analogue is always the Christ event – and this event has the character of the grace and gift disclosed in Jesus Christ.

VI. Conclusion

Post modernism deals with various intricacies which taken seriously challenge equally the theologian as well as the philosopher. The problem as felt by either philosophy or theology relates to the impasse of the human situation after the deconstruction of metaphysics. Zabala depicts this situation as he follows: "there are no more strong philosophical reasons either to be an atheist refusing religion or to be a theist refusing science." [60] In other words, there are no clear demarcations lines, nor fundamentals to cling on or reverse to in the interpretation of the present human situation. In response to that situation, Gianni Vattimo has proposed *"weak thought"* philosophy as the solution. [61] It consists in recognizing that there is no metaphysical foundation (nihilism) and recommends being at home with the practical implication of such intuition.

Meanwhile David Tracy has contemplated post-modernism from another angle - that of religious pluralism. From his angle, he was progressively led to affirm the imperative

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[60] Santiago Zabala, 1-2.

[61] This predominant conviction of the weak thought is actually shared by other defenders of the post metaphysical thought. As Santiago writes in his introduction to Vattimo and Rorty' dialogue: "Post metaphysical thought fundamentally aims at an ontology of weakening that reduces the weight of objective structures and violence of dogmatism. The task of the philosopher today seems to be a reversal of the Platonic program: the philosopher now summons humans back to their historicity rather than to what is eternal." See Santiago Zabala, 9.

of a hermeneutics of religious dialogue. He suggested *liberal inclusivism* as a fitting interpretative method for religious pluralism. Beyond a mere understanding, that method sets the conditions for a respectful and mutually challenging religious dialogue.

The results of their hermeneutics are not only confirming a revival of the interest for philosophy and religion, for metaphysics and theology;[62] they also reveal the inner interconnectedness of these fields as accomplices in catering for the quest of ultimate meaning. The responses of the authors mentioned have displayed many cross-cuts and affinities; that is, similarities in differences or vice versa. While the concern, the tactics and the methods for interpreting the trajectory taken by the quest for meaning in our contemporary context unifies the two responses; still the two cannot be qualified as identical because each author assumes different nuances and perspectives. Yet, given these affinities, and provided that they are understood as similarities in differences, *liberal inclusivism* and *weak thought* can be looked at as post modern homemorphic equivalents.

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「弱勢思想」與「自由包容主義」－
Gianni Vattimo 與 David Tracy 的詮釋學在功能上的相似性

鮑霖
輔仁大學宗教研究所博士生

內容摘要：在後現代的脈絡中，人類處境的複雜迂迴往往伴隨著多重中心、複雜、且無條理的觀點，促使 David Tracy 和 Gianni Vattimo 闡發出兩種不同的詮釋系統。Tracy 以宗教多元論為出發點，認為『自由包容主義』能增進彼此尊重的互動，而目前世界註定要處理宗教多元論的問題，因此正需要這種能互相引起興趣的宗教對話。相反的，Vattimo 則以哲學的觀點來面對此一問題，而以『弱勢思想』來聯結。這個答案建議了一種不傲慢自大的態度，務實地假定這樣的結論：形上學基礎在人類使用時是不存在的。

　　『自由包容主義』與『弱勢思想』不論是在所試圖回答的問題，或是在習於表現答案的方法上都很類似。Tracy 的取徑是有神論和建立在宗教上的；相反地，Vattimo 則是「無神論」和「反玄學」的，但並非是無宗教和反哲學的。他們兩位回覆的方式和內容都為展示當代信仰復興的多樣性，及引發對探尋宗教、哲學的意義作了準備。此外，他們也證明了哲學、宗教和形上學之間的互相關聯，及復興的多元性也肯定該領域內所存在的相互關聯，其中之一乃起因於其對意義追尋所固有的獻身。

　　至於追尋意義的方法，兩位作者的特色在於目前考量的不只是理解和詮釋的企圖，還將其視為一種說服的藝術，也就是修辭學。事實上，他們也運用修辭法在兩種回覆中指出其差異中的相似性。因此，『自由包容主義』與『弱勢思想』可視為後現代的異質同形。

關鍵詞：詮釋與修辭學、後現代主義、弱勢思想、自由包容主義