

## Editorial Foreword

### A “Nonreligious” Christianity and An “Atheist” Theology

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The most intriguing and maybe also the most controversial topic in this issue is the assertion of the contemporary Italian thinker Gianni Vattimo that “perhaps true Christianity must be nonreligious.”<sup>①</sup> If a “nonreligious Christianity” is a possibility, then perhaps there can also be an “atheist theology”—and indeed “atheist theology” has already been the subject of much research.<sup>②</sup> Is this simply some paradox, or post-modern rhetoric of contemporary intellectuals, or some sort of mysterious word play?

If we trace the source of such thinking, we find that phrases like “nonreligious interpretation of Christianity,” “nonreligious interpretation of biblical concepts,” etc.,<sup>③</sup> were originally used by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and so were not criticisms from outside the Christian community at all. In his book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith discusses how religion is not equivalent to faith; and if you want to distinguish “faith” from “the cumulative religious traditions,”<sup>④</sup> then

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<sup>①</sup> Gianni Vattimo, “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity,” in *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 37.

<sup>②</sup> Daniel R. Boscaljon, “Žižek’s Atheist Theology,” *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol. 4, no.4 (2010):1-14.

<sup>③</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1972), 344.

<sup>④</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991), 154. In Smith’s words, “By ‘cumulative tradition’ I mean the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths, and so on; anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe.” (156)

“faith” is precisely “non-religious.” He claims that if the faith of Christians is not one of the religions in the world, then “neither is the faith of any other people.”<sup>①</sup>

As Smith mentions, the word “*religio*” occurs 9 times in the Vulgate Old Testament and carries varied meanings, including “service or ceremony” (Ex. 12:26), “ordinance,” (Ex. 12:43), “statute,” (Lev. 6:31) and “requirement,” (Num. 19:2). The related term “*religiositas*” occurs 3 times, in Ecclesiastes 1:17, 18 and 26, translated into English as “religiousness” or “godliness”.<sup>②</sup> In John Hick’s “Foreword” to the 1991 version of Cantwell Smith’s book, he sums up the matter: “Nor within the European tradition did the Latin word *religio* mean a religion in our modern sense. The title of St. Augustine’s *De Vera Religione* should not be translated as ‘On the True Religion’ (i.e., Christianity in contrast to other religions), but as ‘On True Religiousness’ or ‘True Piety.’ This was still true a thousand years later, when Zwingli wrote his *De Vera et Falsa Religione*: the subject was not Christianity as the true *religio* in contrast to false religions, but rather the true or false *religio*, i.e., ‘piety,’ of Christians.”<sup>③</sup>

The nuanced differences of these words cannot help but remind us of Derrida’s question: “[W]hat if *religio* remained untranslatable?” Derrida further points out that “As its name indicates, it would be necessary, therefore, one would be tempted to conclude, to speak of this essence with a sort of *religio*-sity. In order not to introduce anything alien, leaving it thus intact, safe, unscathed.” And that is “the very matter – the thing itself-of religion?”<sup>④</sup> Thus, from “*religio*” to the “very matter -the thing itself-of religion,” there exists a process of dynamic generation of the semantic meaning, which occurs not only in Western languages, but also in Chinese.

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<sup>①</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 139.

<sup>②</sup> Ibid, 210.

<sup>③</sup> John Hick, “Foreword,” in Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, vii.

<sup>④</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 67, 61. Emphasis in the original. He also says, “One must in any case take into account, if possible in an areligious, or even irreligious manner, what religion at present might be, as well as what is said and done, what is *happening* at this very moment, in the world, in history, in its name.”

The term “*zong jiao* 宗教” (religion) and “*shen xue* 神學” (theology) share a similarly complicated process of emergence. It is worth investigating this process, and seeing how their current meanings were finally settled.

In the term “*zong jiao* 宗教” (religion), each character has a specific meaning: “*zong* 宗” refers to the origin or root inscribed in the ancestral shrine, and “*jiao* 教” refers to that which elders and teachers instruct and which children should follow.<sup>①</sup> It was only in the modern period that the two characters were joined together. In classical Buddhist scriptures, we find frequent use of the terms. For example, in the North Song, Buddhist Master QI Song (契嵩) said: “We should make Zen the origin (*zong* 宗), and Buddha the ancestor (*zu* 祖). The ancestor (*zu* 祖) is the great pattern for the teaching (*jiao* 教) while the origin (*zong* 宗) is the fundamental system of the teaching.”<sup>②</sup> Reading further, we are told that the “way of education” focusing on “transmitting from mind to mind instead of the transmission of mere doctrinal teachings” is the most profound mystery and secret of orthodox Zen doctrine.<sup>③</sup> Other scholars have noticed that when YAN Fu translated Adam Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* into Chinese, he borrowed from Buddhism the term “*jiao zong* 教宗”, whose semantic meaning should be “the origin of education” (教之所宗) in the context of “*zong* as the fundamental system of education.”<sup>④</sup> As YAN Shou (延壽) of the Five Dynasties (907-960) wrote, “If you have heard of the treasures of Tathagata, and spent all of your life chanting and transmitting them, meditating day and night without wearying, however, your own eyes are not opened, you are merely counting outer treasures; if

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<sup>①</sup> XU Shen, *Shuo wen jie zi zhu*, annot. DUAN Yucai (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 1981), 127, 342.

<sup>②</sup> QI Song, “Chuan fa zheng zong ji: shang huangdi shu,” in *Chinese Electronic Taisho Tripitaka*, Vol. 51, Normalized Version, No. 2078, Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association. [http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T51/2078\\_001.htm](http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T51/2078_001.htm)

<sup>③</sup> QI Song, “Chuan fa zheng zong lun: juan xia,” in *Chinese Electronic Taisho Tripitaka*, Vol. 51, Normalized Version, No. 2080, Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association. [http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T51/2080\\_002.htm](http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T51/2080_002.htm).

<sup>④</sup> F. Masini, *The Formation of Modern Chinese Lexicon and its Evolution toward a National Language: the Period from 1840-1898*, trans. HUANG Heqing (Shanghai: Publishing House of an Unabridged Chinese Dictionary, 1997), 73.

your eyes of wisdom are not developed, how can you dispute the origin of doctrine? (教宗)”<sup>①</sup> This kind of “*zong* 宗” is “revered” and “acknowledged as ruler and honored”<sup>②</sup> (*jun zhi zong zhi* 君之宗之). The sense of “reverence” in “*zong* 宗”, as in the phrase “*jun zhi zong zhi*,” and of “education” in “*jiao* 教,” as in “the sages laid down their education in the way of Heaven” (*shen dao she jiao* 神道設教)<sup>③</sup> were very far from their later meaning in the compound term “*zong jiao* 宗教” (religion).

The changes following the introduction of Western ideas and science and technology into China left a strong imprint on the modern Chinese language. According to records, 129 Chinese books were translated into Japanese between 1660-1895, with only 12 books were translated from Japanese into Chinese, while between 1896 to 1911 the situation was completely reversed, with 958 books translated into Chinese from Japanese.<sup>④</sup> New terms appeared for “Japanese made into Chinese” (*Wasei-kango*, 和製漢語), with much new Chinese vocabulary “borrowed-back from Japanese” (回歸借詞) or “borrowed directly from Japanese” (原語借詞). Long before YAN Fu borrowed the term “*jiao zong* 教宗” from Buddhism, HUANG Zunxian had adopted the Japanese term in his 1887 translation *Annals of Japan*, using “*zong jiao* 宗教” (*shukyō*, religion). In 1896 when LIANG Qichao published

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<sup>①</sup> YAN Shou, “Zong jing juan lu: Book 43,” in *Chinese Electronic Taisho Tripitaka*, Vol. 48, Normalized Version, No. 2016, Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association. [http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T48/2016\\_043.htm](http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T48/2016_043.htm).

<sup>②</sup> “*Jun zhi zong zhi*, 君之宗之”, in the poem “Gong Liu 公劉,” in “Greater Odes of the Kingdom: Decade of Sheng Min,” trans. James Legge, in Book of Poetry, vol. IV of *The Chinese Classics: with a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes*, vol. IV (London: Trübner, 1961), 487. See also “*Ji yan yu zong* 既燕於宗” (The feast is spread in the ancestral temple) in poem “Fu Yi 鳧鷖” (“Greater Odes of the Kingdom: Decade of Shen Min,” 480); or as said in the interpretation of poem “Fu Yi”: “Lai ju zun wei ye 來宗居尊位也,” to be put at the most reverend position.” See LI Chu and HUANG Xun, *Mao shi ji jie*, <http://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=10743&page=161&remap=gb>.)

<sup>③</sup> “Tuan: When we contemplate the spirit-like way of Heaven, we see how the four season proceed without error. The sages, in accordance with (this) spirit-like way laid down their instructions, and all under heaven yield submission to them.” See “Guangua” (no. 20), of “Zhouyi zheng yi: Shang jing.”

<sup>④</sup> F. Masini, *The Formation of Modern Chinese Lexicon and its Evolution toward a National Language*, trans. HUANG Heqing, 127-128.

a series of articles entitled *On Reform* (*Bian fa tong yi* 變法通義), the term “*zong jiao* 宗教” was also used.<sup>①</sup>

The history of China’s exchanges with the outside world and relative power and status provokes a range of responses and emotions now, and perhaps the fate of Chinese terms like “*zong jiao* 宗教” is just like that of “religio” in the west: we cannot ignore the “cumulative traditions” in the term. For the literary leaders of the 1900s, it seemed entirely appropriate to borrow terms from Chinese translations of Western works. For example, when KANG Youwei wrote the preface to his book *Ri ben shu mu zhi* (日本書目志), he wryly ridiculed the debates over the borrowed terms: “The cream of Western books of learning has been mostly translated by the Japanese. I make use of their success: I treat the West as the ox, Japan as the peasant, and I am the one who sits and eats... all of the most important books have been collected for me.”<sup>②</sup>

Given that the meaning of the term “religion” has been so complicated in both Chinese and Western history, what it connotes has long gone beyond debates of “true or false”. In Hick’s analysis, “some of those definitions include Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism among the religions, while others exclude one or more of these. Some definitions regard Marxism and Maoism as religions, while others do not.” Therefore, “there are not only no religions as contraposed socio-theological entities, but also no religion as a definable essence.”<sup>③</sup> This is why the Westerners often feel confused at the notion of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism as three religions in one (*sanz jiao he yi* 三教合一), and fail to recognize that the Chinese do not perceive these three religions as alternatives but “something more analogous to three interpenetrating fields of force within the continuous religious life.”<sup>④</sup> By a similar token, the born rebel like Derrida is taken as writing about “Religion without religion” by the more radical “post-modern theologians.”<sup>⑤</sup>

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<sup>①</sup> F. Masini, *The Formation of Modern Chinese Lexicon and its Evolution toward a National Language*, trans. HUANG Heqing, , 119-120.

<sup>②</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>③</sup> John Hick, “Foreword,” ix.

<sup>④</sup> Ibid, viii.

<sup>⑤</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayer and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

Having analyzed “religion” in detail, we can be assured that the term “theology” (*shen xue* 神學) has as least as much to deliberate over, as seen in Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s book *Towards a World Theology*,<sup>①</sup> echoing Giani Vattimo’s article “Towards a Nonreligious Christianity,” or in Slavoj Žižek’s article “Towards a Materialist Theology.”<sup>②</sup>

At a more radical level, Žižek not only deploys a range of argumentation for his “perverse theology,”<sup>③</sup> but even argues, on the basis of Jesus’ last prayer on the cross – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34) and his close reading of theologian G. K. Chesterton, that Christianity is the only religion in the world “in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.”<sup>④</sup> Australian scholar Roland Boer has extended this a step further, explaining why atheists or Marxist scholars should write about theology,<sup>⑤</sup> and publishing a series of books on “Marxism and theology”, which connect together the ideas of some of the most active contemporary thinkers, including Fredric Jameson, Julia Kristeva, Alain Badiou, and Giorgio Agamben.<sup>⑥</sup>

How can we talk about Christianity and its theology from a “non-religious” or “atheist” perspective? Agamben’s book *The Time that Remains*<sup>⑦</sup> might serve as a good model for this.

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① Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

② Slavoj Žižek, “Towards a Materialist Theology,” *Angelaki Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, vol.12, no.1(2007):19-26..

③ The “Perverse theology,” in my reading of Žižek, is to express theology through an “non-theological” proposition. For more discussions about this please see YANG Huilin, “To Reverse our Premise with the Perverse Core: A Response to Žižek’s ‘Theology’ in Chinese Context,” *Positions: East Asian Cultures Critique*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2011):781-798.]

④ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 145. Quoted from Slavoj Žižek, “A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity,” in *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 48.

⑤ Roland Boer, “Towards a Materialist Theology, Or, Why Atheists (and Marxists) Should Write Theology,” in *Reasonable Perspectives on Religion*, ed. Richard Curtis (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010), 175-202 (Chapter 11).

⑥ Roland Boer, *Criticism of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology I* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); *Criticism of Religion: On Marxism and Theology II* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

⑦ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Daily (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

In comparing verses in Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) with 1 Corinthians, Agamben notes a considerable discrepancy in the descriptions, and uses these to comment on the Christian term vocation, or calling (*klēsis*). Ecclesiastes stresses “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;... a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; ... a time for war, and a time for peace,” (Eccl.3:4-8) while in *1 Corinthians*, St. Paul told his community that “from now on, let even those who have wives to be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.” (1 Cor. 7:29-31) In other words, “*Qoheleth* clearly separates the time Paul melds together.”<sup>①</sup>

Potentially, a “nonreligious” sense and an “atheist” reading could be hidden between the lines in this comparison. For Agamben, “those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not,” inspires a form and logic of the “as not” (*hōs mē*), which is Agamben’s focus. The “as if and yet as not” “from now on” negates our original identity of “possessing” (those who have wives are to be as if they had none) while a new subject is “created”. On the other hand, the newly created subject does not bear any new “identity” as such but is only created in the “relationship” formed by “being called” and “calling” (*klēsis*).

For this reason Agamben reminds us to read 1 Corinthians 7:21? closely: “For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ.” Here the “slave” and “freed person” are both “as if and yet as not.” As he says, “Paul uses a peculiar expression that gave his interpreters much to ponder: *chresai*, ‘make use’. ... this is the definition Paul gives to messianic life in the form of the ‘as not’. To live messianically means ‘to use’ *klēsis*; conversely, messianic *klēsis* is something to use, not to possess. ... The expropriation of each and every juridical-factual property ... under the form of the *as not* ... does not ... found a new identity; the ‘new creature’ is

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<sup>①</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Daily (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 25-26.

none other than the use and messianic vocation of the old.”<sup>①</sup>

Compared to traditional interpretation, we have to admit that Agamben’s reading of Paul and the *New Testament* passage differs greatly. Yet submerged in the confessional language are some insights that might be recovered and reactivated by this way of reading., just as when Alain Badiou was deeply attracted by “evental forms,” theological topics like “person,” “gift,” “eros,” or “body” were given new interpretations.<sup>②</sup> If “the crises, breakthrough and paradoxes of mathematics, the quaking of poetic language, the revolution and provocations of inventive politics, the wavering of the relation between the two sexes,” can stimulate “instituted and consolidated knowledge”<sup>③</sup> and manifest as a typical “correlated structure,” then might it possible for seemingly traditional theological topics to incorporate a “correlated existence”<sup>④</sup> inspired by “calling”? In this way, the similar problematic consciousness of “correlation” might succeed in becoming a common direction for disparate thinkers.

Coincidentally, both Badiou and Žižek have considered the “image of Christian Orthodoxy” established by the Apostle Paul, but their real interest lies in the transition between “calling” and “response”, which in their view constitutes the form for a “truth-procedure.”<sup>⑤</sup> They each evidently treat

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<sup>①</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 26-27. Compare Agamben’s reading with 2 Corinthians 5:17: “So if anyone is in the Messiah, the new creature; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.”

<sup>②</sup> See David Jasper, *The Sacred Body: Asceticism in Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009); *The Sacred Community: Art, Sacrament, and the People of God* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012; Graham Ward, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Malden, MA & Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). See also Graham Ward, “Bodies: the Displaced Bodies of Jesus Christ,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 163-181.

<sup>③</sup> Alain Badiou, *Manifeste for Philosophy*, trans. & ed. Norman Madarasz (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 38.

<sup>④</sup> YANG Huilin, “Limits in Choice and ‘A Metaphysical Grammar’,” in LI Bingquan, *Marion, Zizioulas, and the Overcoming Onto-Theology* (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies Ltd., 2015), 3-6.

<sup>⑤</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 9, 173.



Christianity as a set of prototypical narratives, and even the secular rhetoric of “historical processes” or “the law of the market” are traced back to this archetype by Žižek. In this way, analyzing the myths of faith is similar to analyzing the myths of history; revealing the structure of faith is the same as revealing the structure of all “truth narratives”. In the end, the core lies in questioning the “constitutive subject” and the “emergence” of the “constituted” one, just as Agamben’s “new creature” “uses,” rather than “possesses,” its identity. In this context, we can understand Vattimo’s assertion: “the thing that is most decisive in the event of Christianity is precisely this attention toward subjectivity.”<sup>①</sup>

Vattimo repeatedly refers to “weak thought”, echoing an expression found in the writings of Meister Eckhart and many others, whose root is similar to that which Francis Schüssler Fiorenza sees in the writings of Jürgen Habermas, where the “monological subject” is replaced by “a community of subjects.”<sup>②</sup> This is in keeping with, and extends, Vattimo’s other works such as *Hermeneutic Communism*,<sup>③</sup> which interpret Christianity from a Marxist perspective. Žižek praised the book highly when it was published: “‘weak thought’ does not mean weak action but rather is the very resort of strong radical change. This is a book that everyone who thinks about radical politics needs like the air he or she breathes!”<sup>④</sup>

For Vattimo, “Nonreligious” Christianity is a complementary proposition, and “weak thought” can recover the essence of Christianity: charity. On the other hand, Vattimo frequently quotes a saying of Benedetto Croce - “We cannot help calling ourselves Christians,” and goes further to claim that “we cannot even speak but from a Christian point of view.” This comes from a sense that Westerners are “fundamentally incapable of articulating a discourse” without accepting certain culturally conditioned premises.<sup>⑤</sup> The premise can

<sup>①</sup> Gianni Vattimmo, “Towards a Nonreligious Christianity,” 32.

<sup>②</sup> Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “Introduction: A Critical Reception for a Practical Public Theology,” in *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, eds. Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 4-5.

<sup>③</sup> Gianni Vattimmo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism: from Heidegger to Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>④</sup> Ibid, Žižek’s blurb on the back cover of the hardcover edition.

<sup>⑤</sup> Gianni Vattimmo, “Towards a Nonreligious Christianity,” 36.

fit any context, and “Christian” can be replaced by any other cultural identity, summed up in his phrase “What makes your house a home is the artificial order you establish.”<sup>①</sup>

On the other hand, for Vattimo, “a Christian point of view” does not necessarily mean Christian values, and the relation between identity propositions and the results are far more complicated than we can imagine. Here, Vattimo uses Voltaire as an example, since Voltaire “demanded freedom against authoritarianism,” at a time when authority was the Jesuits, and so attacked Christianity on these grounds. This kind of “standing unconditionally for freedom and against authoritarianism” is precisely what Vattimo defines as Christian values. If what Voltaire fought against was nothing but an empty “identity,” this “being against” was fundamentally a “standing for” Christianity, judged purely from the perspective of value ideals. For this reason, Vattimo believes “Voltaire was a good Christian.”<sup>②</sup>

As Vattimo also notes, the most important spiritual legacy of Christianity, according to Wilhelm Dilthey, lies in the fact that “Christianity accomplished the first attack against metaphysics construed exclusively as objectivity.”<sup>③</sup> In this sense, “everything else associated with the tradition and truth of Christianity is dispensable and may rightfully be called mythology.”<sup>④</sup>

Vattimo’s contempt for a “dispensable” “mythology” also has its theological root as well. Rudolf Bultmann spoke of “demythologization,” while Reinhold Niebuhr’s wording was even sharper: The Orthodox churches ... try “vainly to meet the social perplexities of a complex civilization with irrelevant precepts, deriving their authority from their – sometimes quite fortuitous – inclusion in a sacred canon. It concerns itself with the violation of Sabbatarian prohibitions or puritanical precepts, and insists, figuratively, on tithing ‘mint, anise, and cumin.’”<sup>⑤</sup> Such radical attitudes were seemingly not regarded as heretical by other theologians; in criticizing Bultmann, for instance, Bonhoeffer argued that he “went not ‘too

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<sup>①</sup> Gianni Vattimo, “Towards a Nonreligious Christianity,” 40.

<sup>②</sup> *ibid.* 37.

<sup>③</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>④</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>⑤</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, reprint ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 2.

far,' as most people thought, but rather not far enough." If we continue in this vein, we may find Bonhoeffer's own contribution: "You cannot separate God from the miracles (as Bultmann thinks); instead, you must be able to interpret and proclaim them both 'nonreligiously.'" <sup>①</sup>

The reason why Voltaire's "standing against" could be regarded by Vattimo as a "standing for" is probably related to Derrida's argument to "think about religion abstractly," or "to place quotation marks around this word in order to abstract and extract it from its origins. And thereby to announce, ... a possibility that would not be solely Christian." <sup>②</sup> This abstraction is directed against that which Vattimo criticized, namely "construing metaphysics as exclusively objectivity," since only when we are able to "think about religion abstractly," can fundamentalist ideas, in any form, can be replaced. Here, the strange relationship between metaphysics and fundamentalism led Vattimo to claim that "although not all metaphysics have been violent, I would say that all violent people ... have been metaphysical." <sup>③</sup>

Via Bultmann's "demythologization", the reflections of Derrida and Vattimo can be summarized as a kind of "disobjectivation" or "desacralization." In Badiou's words, this is to cause ideas to be legitimately expressed in "the most naked way," - that is, "truth has no object." <sup>④</sup> Is this nihilism? On the contrary, it is quite the opposite.

Badiou believes that the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* has exposed how "capital is the general dissolvent of sacralizing representations," but that "philosophy has not known until recently how to think in level terms with Capital." If we treat the "objectification of causality" and its organic relations as the sacred universal "Order," then "desacralization" is a necessary condition for ideas to come close to existence and truth. Thus, "for Karl Marx and us, desacralization is not nihilistic at all," because it demands us to "face meaning in an age of no meaning and disorientation." <sup>⑤</sup>

The ultimate purpose for "nonreligious" Christianity and "atheist" theology is to "get rid of one's self-centeredness" (*po zhi* 破執). The reason

<sup>①</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, 285.

<sup>②</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 43, 59.

<sup>③</sup> G. Vattimo, "Toward a Nonreligious Christianity," 43.

<sup>④</sup> Alain Badiou, *Manifesto of Philosophy*, 9.

<sup>⑤</sup> Alain Badiou, *Manifesto of Philosophy*, 56, 58, 74

why the dialectic thinking of a “nonreligious” and “atheist” approach cannot be separated completely from religion and theology lies in the fact that pure “performativity” finds its most direct illustration in the “calling in prayer.” Derrida, referring to Aristotle, says that “calling” is a “performative” fact that is “neither true nor false.”<sup>①</sup> The grounds for this fact rely not on the “pre-assurance” of a “subject of faith” regarding a judgment on truth or falsity, but in the process of action itself. This brings us back to the “emergence” and “semantic meaning” of the noun “religion.”<sup>②</sup>

QI Song, the monk mentioned above, once penned a Buddhist chant: “The Ultimate Truth itself has no name. The name only serves to reveal the Ultimate Truth. The one who receives the true dharma, will realize that it is neither real nor unreal.”<sup>③</sup> The idea probably echoes with Aristotle’s “neither true nor false” with some connection to natal or postnatal. In any case, there is a common principle at work in Chinese and Western philosophical thinking, and Chinese people have faced the same questions as Westerners, as expressed in Professor FANG Litian’s maxim: “Buddhism is in fact an atheist religion.”

To take such thinking a step further, we might say that when “the-ology” is pushed to the extreme, it must almost certainly connote the “atheism” described by some institutionalized believers. If this is the so-called “Post-modern Theology,” then its insights and inspirations are not jokes or throw-away remarks at all. The pity is that we have not yet learnt to think in this way.

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<sup>①</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, edited by Gil Anidjar, 46.

<sup>②</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>③</sup> QI Song, “Chuan fa zheng zong ji: Buddhmitra, of northern India, the ninth patriarch,” in *Chinese Electronic Taisho Tripitaka*, Vol. 51, No. 2078, Normalized Version, Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, [http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T51/2078\\_002.htm](http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T51/2078_002.htm).

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