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## Ending Christian Hegemony: Jean-Luc Nancy and the Ends of Eurocentric Thought

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## Research Article

Colby Dickinson\*

# Ending Christian Hegemony: Jean-Luc Nancy and the Ends of Eurocentric Thought

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**Abstract:** This essay addresses Jean-Luc Nancy’s “deconstruction of Christianity” and how what Christianity proclaims through enacting a deconstruction of itself brings an end to the western, hegemonic hold that Christian imperialism has perpetuated for centuries. Nancy, for his part, takes up the name of Christianity insofar as it is a religious phenomenon that signals a trajectory of thought in the West that must be discerned as providing an “exit from religion and of the expansion of the atheist world.” Since deconstructing the dominant narratives of the West means deconstructing the myth of a sovereign, autonomous deity whose reign, Nancy declares, has reached its end, Christianity utilizes its own kenotic narrative to point toward the end of religion and Eurocentrism at the same time.

**Keywords:** deconstruction of Christianity, Jean-Luc Nancy, dis-enclosure, messianic, antinomian, adoration, inoperativity

## 1 Transgressing the border between philosophy and theology

Dominique Janicaud concludes his noted critique of the so-called “theological turn” in late twentieth-century French phenomenology by repeating, and so emphasizing, the need to implement the early Heidegger’s call for a strict separation between philosophy and theology, though he will also critique the later Heidegger for introducing elements that would ultimately enable those who would attempt to permeate their distinctness.<sup>1</sup> French phenomenology – or at least the version that often parades itself under the names of Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry and Jean-Louis Chrétien, among others – has sought too brazenly to merge the two fields, Janicaud claims, resulting in errant metaphysical speculations taking place within the heart of twentieth-century philosophical reflection.<sup>2</sup> Heidegger, he further reasons, was right to draw a firm boundary between the two fields whose operations and subject matter are vastly divergent, with the one focusing on human nature and the other taking its cues from supposed divine revelation. By staking out this position, the early Heidegger, I would add, made odd bedfellows with theologians Martin Luther and Karl Barth in terms of proffering this rigorous demarcation, though it is not a position that, of course, remains uncontested, eventually even by Heidegger himself.<sup>3</sup>

Being transgressive of the borders between theology and philosophy, as well as those between theology and the political, invokes more than mere speculative debate: the rise and fall of heretical and antinomian

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1 For more discussion on the relationship between Janicaud, Heidegger and the boundaries between philosophy and theology, see Koci, “Phenomenology and Theology Revisited,” 903–26.

2 Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn,”* 99–103.

3 See, for example, the argument made in Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*.

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movements throughout the centuries in the West, the defense of Christian orthodoxy through philosophical argument and the rise of secularization as a form of western “enlightenment,” all of these events gesture to violations of the boundaries between these two domains. Though when we look at the complexities that arise from such historical interactions – which are no less sociological, economic, political, religious, cultural and linguistic than they are philosophical and theological – we are forced to confront a dilemma that is still in need of resolution: to what degree is the theological a demonstration of philosophical questions in another register, their projection onto another imaginative canvas? And to what degree is philosophical reflection actually capable of reframing the foundations of any theological reasoning?

The past few decades have seen a subtle shift in philosophical methods that entails not simply a rethinking of the relationship of theology to phenomenology, but also of theology to history, politics, economics and sociology, to name but a few. The genealogical studies of Giorgio Agamben in relation to the history of theological inquiry, to take but one prominent example, identify a much more complex relationship between the historical divine science and philosophical investigation than those working in contemporary theological circles have yet been willing to acknowledge.<sup>4</sup> What we are now facing, he deftly points out, is a reality wherein discussions of Trinitarian thought have had a profound impact upon economic models in the West, and wherein too portrayals of Christ’s divine sovereignty have carried significant political implications.

The question of the boundary between theology and philosophy only broadens when we pause to consider how Christianity may have not only transgressed boundaries between various disciplines, but even provoked its own transgressive deconstruction through a debunking of particular notions of sacrality in our world. This is a point championed by thinkers as diverse as René Girard, Gianni Vattimo, Slavoj Žižek, Jean-François Lyotard and the intellectual historian Larry Siedentop. Running through this gamut of thinkers means opening one’s mind toward the possibility that what we consider to be the “secular age” we currently inhabit is the result of Christianity’s impulse to critique itself – a particularly self-reflexive tendency that defines the “death of God” in the West as well as the limitations of continental-colonialist thought.

Take, for example, Christianity’s deconstruction of its own history in Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Differend*. Christianity, he there claims, performs a meta-reflection on the nature of narrative itself, suggestively refiguring religious narratives by “introducing the love of occurrence into narratives and the narrations of narratives,” designating “what is at stake in the genre itself.”<sup>5</sup> By focusing on the divine mandate to “love one another,” Christianity introduced a love for *all* narratives as a link to *whatever* narrative already exists, ending, in the process, the exclusionary mechanisms that had governed other early monotheistic religious narratives (with Christianity itself predicated on the true/false distinctions introduced by Judaism with regard to idolatrous practices).

Modern narratives that are bereft of revelation, he concludes, are still guided by the charitable love of occurrence that Christianity professes to the world, allowing for a universal history to be possible, but only insofar as it is an inclusive narrative, one that speaks directly to the redemption of all creatures.<sup>6</sup> Though such a pronouncement may still strike our ears as essentially Eurocentric in its declaration of Christianity as potentially espousing a universal history, there may yet be a way to read such comments as Eurocentric in origin, but applicable in a much broader sense, as I will argue in conclusion to this essay. What is more, and as I intend to argue throughout, the borders between philosophy and theology are once again transgressed, this time to the detriment of theology, through a closer reading of these dynamics internal to Christianity’s self-reflexive understanding of religious identity. As Lyotard’s sentiments declare Christianity a religion especially attentive to self-critique, they resonate a good deal with the so-called “deconstruction of Christianity,” such as one finds robustly articulated in the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy, that announces its operations as Christianity’s deconstruction *of itself*. By taking a closer look at Nancy’s philosophical

<sup>4</sup> See the genealogical studies that comprise the second tier of the *Homo Sacer* series in Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*.

<sup>5</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, 159.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

endeavors in this regard, I aim to elucidate not only a purported reckoning between philosophy and theology, but also a renewed perspective on the ends of Eurocentric thinking.

## 2 The “deconstruction of Christianity”

Nancy, for his part, takes up the name of Christianity insofar as it is a religious phenomenon that signals a trajectory of thought in the West that must be discerned as providing an “exit from religion and of the expansion of the atheist world.”<sup>7</sup> God is said by him to alienate God from God’s own self – a point perfectly illustrated in the death of its God through the incarnated person of Jesus Christ. There is a kenotic essence to Christianity that opens up its own theology to becoming an atheology so that the truth of its mystery, as he puts it, might be revealed as the destitution (deconstruction) of Christianity.<sup>8</sup> By providing this kenotic impetus, God actually provides humanity with an atheology – God “atheizes himself,” as Nancy puts it.<sup>9</sup> Christianity is, as such, only another sign among the world’s religions that points its narrative toward the end of religion as a whole (something which includes, at least, western monotheisms, various paganisms and Buddhism, from Nancy’s perspective).<sup>10</sup>

The paradoxical phrasing of the “Christian atheist” that Nancy provides has its meaning conveyed through a “posture of thought whereby “God” demands to be effaced or to efface himself,” a truth only further accented through a trinitarian formulation of divine being.<sup>11</sup> Trinity, incarnation, resurrection: all of these most traditional theological concepts speak to the displacement of the divine which Christianity succinctly captures in its narrative.<sup>12</sup> To utilize these concepts becomes a declaration of the Christian God as being paradoxically an atheist at the same time that such an ironic revelation expresses what Nancy calls a “tremendous ambivalence.” Such views *can* be nihilistic, while they also yet contain the possibility of generating “sense itself” to humanity, from the “outside” as it were.<sup>13</sup> This giving can be a form of nihilism, he concludes, because adoration has no object; there is nothing (*nihil*) to which it directs its attention, opting instead to remain open to the horizon before it.<sup>14</sup> Atheism *is* nihilism, according to Nancy, but only in the sense that it points “toward something else,” something outside of a constructed religious enclosure.<sup>15</sup>

In this register, I would argue that Nancy’s comments on nihilism appear as generally equivalent to those other contemporary voices calling for a “black nihilism” that desire to see western metaphysics to its end in order to move beyond the racist and colonialist narratives inscribed at the heart of a western, Eurocentric society.<sup>16</sup> The so-called “death of God” is really little more than an approach to the limits of western dominance, its philosophies and theologies included. Christianity became “a humanism, an atheism, and a nihilism” in the modern period as a way to play out its own internal dynamics of critique and reform, desires that have not receded in the least since the religion’s inception, but have actually expanded in order to enclose others, though themselves stretched to their limits.<sup>17</sup> These dynamics are the same ones that continue to work underneath the veil of secularism, which operates with the same principles

<sup>7</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 22. See too the commentary offered by Raffoul, “The Self-Deconstruction of Christianity,” 46–62.

<sup>8</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 73.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 128.

<sup>11</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 29–30.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 74. See the parallel passage on the ambivalence between nihilism and openness in Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, 124.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> See Warren, *Ontological Terror*.

<sup>17</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 23.

that Christianity bequeathed to the West. Hence, Nancy can suggest that the dynamics that transformed Christian society into its current secular forms are the same dynamics that will allow humanity eventually to pass beyond atheism and toward something else entirely new, though we have no idea what this will be. What we can be certain of, he finds, is that this terrain will be wholly beyond what we can currently conceive it to be: “If we are to pass beyond our atheism one day, it will be because we no longer even pray to God to deliver us from God.”<sup>18</sup>

If Nancy and Lyotard are more or less right, then how exactly has the deconstruction of Christianity taken place in the West and why did western society not see it coming sooner? As with so many other gradual, historical movements, this trend was long in the making, and the result of dynamics central to the elaboration of Christianity and the various contestations and tensions that remained.

### 3 The so-called “Protestant,” “antinomian,” “messianic” principle

The theologian Paul Tillich once coined the phrase the “Protestant Principle” to describe the unending processes of purification that accompany the desire to see a particular tradition reformed from within and so brought closer and closer to a more “authentic,” more “original” version of itself.<sup>19</sup> Catholic Christianity, through an internal division of itself, had brought about an impulse for reform that could no longer be managed through the various religious and monastic orders that had once characterized ecclesial reform centuries prior to the Reformation. Christianity had to confront the fact that it contained within itself a desire so revolutionary, so willing to critique itself, that any existing version of the Church would eventually become subject to a de-stabilizing deconstruction of its identity. This was a tension often captured in the juxtaposition of temporal Church always striving to be, but never quite attaining, the eternal Kingdom of God. The Reformation, in an attempt to be more faithful to the original Christian proclamation, ended up shattering Christianity at the same time as it offered to restore its wholeness. This “Protestant Principle,” however, wasn’t just something that Protestantism brought into existence, but was actually something internal to the nature of Christianity itself that had long been active, if at times suppressed or dormant, within it.

The moment that Christianity began to organize itself as a more or less formalized religion – that is, when it first began to suffer from the weight of its own institutional identity, as the first followers experienced in Jerusalem when Peter and Paul clashed and the Church nearly destroyed itself before it had even really been established – it undertook the steps toward codification that would also give rise at the same time to marginalized movements for the reform of whatever normative measures were being inscribed at the base of the ecclesia. Monasticism arose as a purification of the Church, yet happening *within* the Church, giving humanity a sense of what Christianity was really about at its core: the revolutionary desire for a love which is at the same time the love of a certain revolution of all worldly narratives (myths and perspectives), as Lyotard already emphasized for us. The two are inseparable because they are the twin forces that propel Christianity toward understanding its own true nature as a disrupter of otherwise exclusionary narratives.<sup>20</sup>

But just what exactly is the nature of Christianity when conceived in this context of love and revolution, the desires for authenticity and reform? It should be clear from even the most cursory reading of scriptural texts that claiming to have the most authentic or originalist reading of a text is as much a political act as it is a religious one, as Jaroslav Pelikan once noted when he wrote about the similarities between reading the Bible and reading the US Constitution – documents that both have their (conservative) literalist interpreters and their (liberal) readers of its “spirit.”<sup>21</sup> But what is the larger driving force behind such parallels that gives rise to both political and theological resonances?

<sup>18</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 139.

<sup>19</sup> Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the link between love and political revolution in Horvat, *The Radicality of Love*.

<sup>21</sup> Pelikan, *Interpreting the Bible and the Constitution*.

A closer examination of the “Protestant Principle,” I would argue, reveals that this desire for reform is not unique to Christianity, but seems to be part of the dialectical atmosphere behind so many other political–theological movements in the West, ones that reach far back into the history of monotheism. For example, as the Jewish scholar Jacob Taubes once identified in his reading of the Pauline letters, there is a messianic urge for reform that originated in certain prophetic strands of Judaism before being isolated and uplifted dramatically in Christianity’s fundamental claims about itself.<sup>22</sup> This tension, one that was mirrored in Paul Ricoeur’s analysis of the conflicts between the Pharisaic and the prophetic elements of religion in his study *The Symbolism of Evil*, became the core dynamic driving Christianity’s understanding of itself, though it was really, in truth, simply a force *internal to* Judaism itself, playing itself out in the creation of a particular heretical religion that just happened to come to dominate western history.<sup>23</sup> The Jewish prophetic calls to embody the spirit of the Torah over its seemingly rigid, legalistic application, became the quest to embrace its spirit over its flesh, the very distinction that Paul had highlighted in his Letter to the Romans, and what Taubes perceived as the kernel of the Jewish antinomian desire to somehow break free of all law.

It is of course possible to understand how the power of the messianic can be taken to be essentially antinomian – that is, opposed or established in opposition (*anti*) to any normative sense of order (*nomos*). The messianic, by its nature, is that which comes to upend or deconstruct any recognized or dominant representation, order or symbolic economy, and, for that very reason, it presents a nihilistic front at the head of its reforming impulse. I tend to think here, for example, of how Luther, in the midst of his vision of God’s grace as that which moved beyond the structures of the Catholic hierarchy, had himself to argue against those of his own followers who thought that such an experience of grace meant that they could discard *all* law. Luther was subsequently forced to justify the necessity of laws in our world in a series of “antinomian theses” which he gave in support of governmental rule and normative legal structures.<sup>24</sup> What Luther’s admirers who argued for an antinomian position were flirting with, however, was what many revolutionary movements likewise have to contend with: the antinomian force of love itself, which seemingly moves beyond the rules that otherwise define societal order.

Taubes was himself particularly drawn to Gershom Scholem’s study of Sabbatai Zevi, the mystical and heretical prophet of antinomian sentiment who remained loyal to his faith by converting to a new one (Islam), as well as to Freud’s analysis of Judaism’s origins in relation to a brief moment of Egyptian monotheism that had been repressed only in order to reappear in the hands of Moses as the foundations of Jewish adherence to the one God that the Pharaoh Akhenaton had once symbolized.<sup>25</sup> This “return of the repressed,” as Freud was to describe it, became the basis for a profound religious migration of monotheistic messianism, from Egypt to Israel to Rome. In brief, this messianic form could be said to follow a similar trajectory in each case: whatever normative religious structure prevailed, there was always a dynamic, marginalized element within it that cried out for more justice to be done to those excluded from whatever representations governed the symbolic world unfolding before one’s eyes. These messianic elements may be repressed by a dominant narrative, but they cry out for liberation, and, when they reappear, this “return of the repressed” upends whatever dominant story had prevailed until then. Again, Lyotard’s demonstration of Christianity’s desire to break free of any excluding narrative becomes central to the overall narrative we are pursuing.

It is easy to see how such a self-reflexively deconstructive notion of the messianic became popular among later Eurocentric philosophers bent on exposing the internal contradictions of European thought, such as the deconstructivist Jacques Derrida, who theorized about the coming horizon of justice that was nonetheless always still “to come” because every established structure will still have these lingering elements within it that cry out for more justice to be brought into our world.<sup>26</sup> It should also come as little

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<sup>22</sup> Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*.

<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*.

<sup>24</sup> Luther, *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal*.

<sup>25</sup> Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*; and Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*.

<sup>26</sup> See, among other places in his writing for these themes, Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

surprise that Derrida, for one, had some difficulty in saying whether or not one's commitment to such messianic forces made them Jewish, Christian, Muslim, an atheist or removed from religious identifications altogether. He preferred to simply say that he "rightly passed for an atheist" or that he was a Jew "in secret."<sup>27</sup> His fidelity, I would assert, was only to the "Protestant Principle," which is to say the "prophetic principle," which is to say an always undefined principle that waits to be fully articulated, but which can never be historically embodied. To exist in concrete, embodied terms would be to betray the messianic impulse for reform itself.

To conclude as much is to emphasize Derrida's formulations of a democracy always yet to come, but never actually present in a given historical moment. To make this claim is not an attempt to erect Reason as a substitute God for atheists, but to maintain an openness that cannot be filled with a god, nor with any idol, as Nancy will describe such gestures in his parallel deconstructivist undertaking.<sup>28</sup> It is a pure openness that "we can discuss elsewhere whether to call 'divine'."<sup>29</sup> The "divine or sacred," as Nancy continues, is really only the language we use historically to refer to openness, passivity and receptivity to the senses and to what is sensible.<sup>30</sup> The God of the three monotheisms, he claims, represents nothing more than this openness to what is larger than ourselves, what "infinitely exceeds" us, and so too, as I read matters, what ultimately speaks from within a European setting to push us beyond that very same context.<sup>31</sup> To bring Nancy's discussion of monotheism in conversation with Derrida's concept of the messianic is to see why Christianity has been celebrated more recently among philosophers as a unique access point to these philosophical concepts which continue to dissolve traditional, western metaphysics. It is also, if we can see it this way, a vantage-point from which to view how theology has served for centuries, mainly covertly, to be a ground for otherwise "secular" philosophical and political conversations.

## 4 Rethinking the theological as the philosophical

The truth that is revealed through the Christian proclamation, according to Nancy's reading of this auto-deconstructive act embedded within the religion, is one wherein sense itself is suspended, but not as an end to all sense. Rather, the suspension that Christianity enacts brings about a genuine openness as its fundamental constitutive identity – an identity that actually resists becoming finalized *as* an identity. Humanity is defined as a species that enacts its own disruption in order to define and posit its being. This is why, sharing with the conclusions of Agamben, Nancy can argue that humanity works best when it "is nothing, doing nothing, letting things be."<sup>32</sup> Faith is most authentically a moment of "inoperativity" or "inactivity" at the heart of being human, as Nancy will put it.<sup>33</sup> Or, as he will elsewhere phrase matters, "What do people who love each other do? Nothing, nothing but love each other. That doesn't mean that we must do nothing," though it does characterize our being human in no small measure.<sup>34</sup>

The act of deconstructing Christianity therefore does not just signify the suspension of our own humanity as that move that makes us most human – which it most certainly does as well; it also means questioning the basis of human thought itself, the bulwark of reason. To undertake this approach "means opening reason to its very own reason, and perhaps to its unreason."<sup>35</sup> There is a kenotic poverty, an

<sup>27</sup> See, among others, the comments made in Bergo et al., *Judeities*.

<sup>28</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 32–3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Nancy, *Noli me Tangere*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 93. Agamben confirms this logic of inoperativity at the heart of the human being in his book *The Open*.

<sup>33</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 52. Though Nancy will here label this inoperativity as also being a type of "inactivity," this can be misleading as this form of inoperativity is, at another level, *actively* accomplishing something through its very "inactivity."

<sup>34</sup> Nancy, *Noli me Tangere*, 93.

<sup>35</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 25.

impurity even, within Christianity that opens Christianity up to its own deconstruction and which discloses the nature of reason in the West (and which follows Judaism's earlier deconstruction of itself).<sup>36</sup> Christianity puts forth only, purely, as the theologian Johann-Baptist Metz also describes it, "an interruption" of its narrative, of all narratives in fact, human, social, political, theological and philosophical.<sup>37</sup> Christianity is a religion of interruption, even the interruption of itself, a unique religion in the sense that it recognizes how sense itself "cannot be completed"; sense only indicates with its existence, "an overflowing" that "does not cease."<sup>38</sup> Though we may be able to produce other religious traditions capable of interrupting themselves through similar apophatic gestures, such as in Buddhism, Nancy's claim illustrates what might be considered as the uniqueness of a religion, potentially any religion, willing to critique itself.

The unceasing act of opening up that which had previously been closed is the definition of the dis-enclosure that Nancy wants to see enacted in relation to metaphysics, in its Christian form and its attempts to enclose itself in a dominant historical position throughout the centuries. The self-sufficiency and sovereignty that accrued within the tradition over time due to the enclosure of metaphysics within it has to be opened that much wider so as to continuously prevent any desires for totality from achieving their oppressive intentions.<sup>39</sup> Nancy's vision of the dis-enclosure of Christianity means moving away from the traditional spaces for the sacred, as well as the spacing of the world through the institution of the sacred:

Divine places, without gods, with no god, are spread out everywhere around us, open and offered to our coming, to our going or to our presence, give up or promised to our visitation, to frequentation by those who are not men either, but who are there, in these places; ourselves, alone, out to meet that which we are not, and which the gods for their part have never been. These places, spread out everywhere, yield up and orient new spaces: they are no longer temples, but rather the opening up and the spacing out of the temples themselves, a dis-location with no reserve henceforth, with no more sacred enclosures – other tracks, other ways, other places for all who are there.<sup>40</sup>

Adoration is the term he repurposes from Christianity to describe a state of attentiveness to the contingent within existence, what is present in our world, immanent to it, and yet which, through this immanence, opens up to an infinite dimension *within* the finite, a transcendence *within* immanence, or what Nancy will call a "transimmanence."<sup>41</sup> God can even be said to open up a void within God's own self, one "in which the world can take its place," offering a succinct but profound meditation on the modern, secular age in which we live, where nature, *as* the world, provides a presence which the divine cannot.<sup>42</sup> This displacement is what he elsewhere refers to as "the withdrawal of the sacred and the exhibition of the world to the world."<sup>43</sup>

Evil, from this perspective, is reconsidered as simply a refusal of the contingency within existence and the introduction of a forced necessity through traditional metaphysical impositions.<sup>44</sup> Salvation, on the other hand, by this same reckoning, is what takes place in order to preserve humanity from metaphysical speculation and the "otherworldly" temptation to appeal to a world beyond this one. We are thereby saved "from other worlds" in order to be restored "to the world," to be set "into the world anew, as new."<sup>45</sup> These philosophical re-interpretations of classic theological themes signal the not only porous boundary between the two fields, but also the dissolution of the border altogether, with theology conceding the governance of all concepts to a philosophical register.

Transimmanence is, for Nancy, about locating the infinite within the finite (which shares with a Levinasian sense of the infinite, to be sure), through the infinite deferral of sense (which certainly overlaps

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>37</sup> Metz, *Faith in History and Society*.

<sup>38</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 41.

<sup>39</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 150.

<sup>41</sup> Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 55.

<sup>42</sup> Nancy, *Noli me Tangere*, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 78.



with Derrida's notion of *différance*).<sup>46</sup> There is no metaphysical truth to be found in *another* world, there is only the truth of *this* world to be discovered through an openness that proclaims a love for the contingency of the world (much as Lyotard had suggested concerning Christianity's insertion of the love of the occurrence as a fundamentally inclusive narrative). As Nancy will put it, "This *évenir* opens *within* the world an *outside* that is not a beyond-the-world, but the *truth* of the world."<sup>47</sup>

Nancy's remarks head steadily toward their final conclusion: the theological, in truth, no longer exists after its kenotic outpouring manifested in the self-critique of its deconstruction. After such an outpouring, there is only the philosophical.

Because sense is actually an infinite deferral of sense, "there is no sense of sense," only the inexhaustible possibilities of sense being conveyed throughout existence. As he instructively clarifies,

this is not, ultimately, a negative proposition. It is the affirmation of sense itself – of sensibility, sentiment, significance: the affirmation according to which the world's existents, by referring to one another, open onto the inexhaustible play of their references, and not onto any kind of completion that might be called "the meaning of life," "the meaning of history," or even "salvation," "happiness," "eternal life," no more than it opens onto the supposed immortality of works of art, which are in themselves nothing other than forms and modes of reference. Yet our true immortality – or eternity – is given precisely by the world as the place of mutual, infinite referral.<sup>48</sup>

He is after "the very movement of the occidental history of *sense* as the movement of an ontotheology in principle involved with its own deconstruction, the *end* of which, in all senses, is precisely "this world *here*," this world that is to such an extent "*here*" that it is definitively beyond all gods and all signifying or signified instances of sense: itself alone all in-significant sense."<sup>49</sup> The immediacy and non-essentiality of the *here* as the reality of whatever it is that we encounter and seek to become intimate with, to be in relation to, is an irreducible singularity that we can access only insofar as it bears no inherent classification or labeling that would reduce its singularity. It is therefore "whatever" – an example, but not something that can be classified *per se*.<sup>50</sup>

Nancy's writings on the importance of touch, intimacy, reaching out to another human being and the longing for connection are essential aspects of a philosophy wherein the only sense we have, the sense that we create, are the sensations we undertake, cherish, replenish and provide for each other. The most basic of philosophical tasks, that of thinking itself, in fact, is intimately bound up with the nature of touch. For Nancy, however, "Thinking is a movement of bodies: it begins in the folded-over nerves of the body and is exposed to the infinite of a *sense*, which is to say, of affection coming from other bodies."<sup>51</sup> What Christianity provides for humanity on the whole is a model by which to understand the creation of sense as a form of relations, especially as the notion of relation is central to Christianity's articulation of its Godhead: "The mystery of the trinity strikes this spark: sense is relation itself, the outside of the world is therefore within the world without being of the world."<sup>52</sup> What is rethought in Nancy's depiction of Christianity's most basic claims is, in fact, "less a body of doctrine than a *subject* in relationship to itself in the midst of a search for self, within a disquietude, an awaiting or a desire for its proper identity."<sup>53</sup>

In *The Inoperative Community*, he will reiterate this same nexus of relationship and thought by declaring that the process of thinking itself is identical to the act of loving. Thinking "is the love for that which reaches experience; that is to say, for that aspect of being that gives itself to be welcomed."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*; and Derrida, *Writing and Difference*.

<sup>47</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 79.

<sup>48</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 12–3.

<sup>49</sup> Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 25.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 72. See too Agamben's parallel presentation of "whatever being" in *The Coming Community*. What Nancy considers as an exemplary form of human life seems likewise to be in accord with Agamben's development of a form-of-life.

<sup>51</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 13.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>53</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 38.

<sup>54</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 84.

Thinking, in the form of reason, finds that it is not a sufficient reason “unto itself,” and so “it is in the acknowledgment of this insufficiency that it fully justifies itself.”<sup>55</sup> Just as love comes through experience to recognize its own insufficiencies, as with thinking, we are exposed to the nature of relations, intimacies and even touch itself as paths toward philosophical reflection. To suggest as much is something that philosophy has failed to say throughout its long history, often because it was subordinated to being the handmaiden of theology (*ancilla theologiae*), but it is philosophy’s position – as primary with no secondary, metaphysical theology at all – which desperately needs to be recovered.

Thinking and love converge in the experience of what is “real,” what is “outside” of us and which comprises the world and any sense of equivalence between things that gives rise to every quest for equality.<sup>56</sup> There is a certain powerlessness to thinking that is reflected only in the vulnerability of love, which Christianity once captured brilliantly in its image of a kenotic deity: to seek out that which is beyond, “to think that there is something it cannot think.”<sup>57</sup> Adoration and love are bound up with the desire for equivalency with what lies outside of oneself, hence they exist as fundamental conditions of a democratic existence.<sup>58</sup> Freedom, emancipation, liberation: these are guaranteed only by the processes of opening up the enclosures that confine us, and so by dis-enclosing the metaphysics that constrains humanity. Hence, in Nancy’s terminology, there is an imperative to dis-enclose metaphysics through the deconstruction of Christianity. We must, he implores, follow the connectedness of love and thought that Christianity introduces in order to go beyond the metaphysical–political constraints that all-too-often simultaneously accompanied historical versions of Christianity in the West. We undo the subjects that we are through embracing the *nothing* at our core, while also coming to realize at the same time that this is precisely the path forward for more equitable relations with each other (i.e., love): “You hold onto nothing; you are unable to hold or retain anything, and that is precisely what you must love and know. That is what there is of a knowledge and a love. Love what escapes you. Love the one who goes. Love that he goes.”<sup>59</sup>

As theology goes, it seems, we are asked to love its kenotic operations which illustrate the vital connection between thinking (philosophy) and love.

## 5 Opening up the exclusions

What Nancy perceives as operative within Christianity’s proclamation to the world has more far-reaching philosophical implications, however, ones that return us to Janicaud’s critique of those who would attempt to utilize phenomenological methods for theological ends. Nancy’s methodological starting point for his related reflections on adoration – the title of the second collection of essays on the deconstruction of Christianity, following on the heels of the first collection titled “Dis-enclosure” – is to declare that adoration is contrasted with reduction, even, and especially, the phenomenological reduction. Phenomenological methods, he finds, are limited in that they evade the sense “which exceeds the phenomenon in the phenomenon itself,’ the very point where “all sense is confounded.”<sup>60</sup> The reduction he speaks of instead is one that seeks only to consider how human existence is something “in” the world, whereas adoration begins with the declaration that “I am the world.”<sup>61</sup> In suggesting as much, Nancy shares with Agamben in a possible pantheistic inclination that is really a misunderstood indebtedness of both thinkers to Spinoza and the experience of an “intellectual love,” or what Nancy refers to synonymously as “joy” or “faith.”<sup>62</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 25.

<sup>56</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 59.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>59</sup> Nancy, *Noli me Tangere*, 37.

<sup>60</sup> Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 69.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 94. On the role of Spinoza and nature in Nancy, see Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 54.

What Nancy calls the “gift of the world” is that which prompts our adoration of it. The world contains and presents humanity with an opportunity to affirm life itself, an existence that has no need of a particular essence in order to validate it.<sup>63</sup> In truth, adoration is about recognizing one’s relation to that which is other than it; hence, prayer, linked to adoration by Nancy as much as by the history of theology, is an act of transcending in wholly immanent terms, a “passing-to-the-outside, and passing-to-the-other.”<sup>64</sup>

The relations that exist among the various, diverse and complicated existents that comprise the world as we know and experience it is something that we cannot, indeed *should* not, wish to remove ourselves from.

A subject of relations means definitively a subject that in itself – like all subjects – is relation and nothing but relation: a being-to, to itself/to the same/to nothing, a being whose entire being consists in the *to*. Ultimately, the *Destruktion* of ontology that Heidegger desired can be transcribed in this way: there is no “being”; *being* designates an act or rather an indefinite complex of acts made up by the relations without which the very terms (or subjects) of these relations would not exist.<sup>65</sup>

What exists does so by “exposing” itself in relation to other existents. “Finally, what I am naming “to adore” here means: deciding to exist, deciding on existence, turning aside from non-existence, from the closure of the world on itself.”<sup>66</sup> Any transcendence that we might hope to experience will only come about through our experiences located entirely within the immanent world we inhabit, through our proximity to those relations that sustain us. The tired metaphysical justifications for transcendence that sustained European sovereign powers for centuries must no longer govern our world.

What Nancy presents us with is a stark vision of humanity as entirely unconditioned, hence as absolute and sovereign, though neither being formed in any traditional (ontotheological) sense. Humanity is unconditioned, sovereign and absolute, though without an object to claim or possess, and so without its own condition: exhibiting “the sovereignty of nothing, or of passage.”<sup>67</sup> To clarify his terms in relation to both Levinas and Derrida, “It is less a “relation without relation” than relation itself, in absolute terms, as opening and passage, but above all as opening and passage affect and touch what is open and toward which things pass.”<sup>68</sup>

I know full well that there is no other world, but I believe, I want to believe, I allow the sketch of something possible, or rather not impossible, to form, of an unheard-of way of making sense, or not even sense but simply a way of conducting oneself and of caring for – nothing, nothing but this desire or this nothing as this very desire to believe. Not an unhappy belief reduced to a pious wishing for itself, but the force of an impetus that does not take itself to be an imitation of knowledge but that opens within the impossible the possibility of relating to it.<sup>69</sup>

As with fiction, which allows us to believe in a story we know to be “unreal and unbelievable,” truth, for Nancy, “is figured insofar as it is unfigurable. The infinite receives its finition, it opens within the infinite.”<sup>70</sup>

If Christianity opens the door for non-exclusionary narratives through its demonstration of the significance of love, then it certainly has a long history of exclusionary tactics to account for. Recognizing as much is to recognize a tension within Christianity itself: it clamors for liberation of the oppressed at the same time as it becomes complicit in acts of oppression. Anti-Semitism, as Nancy himself describes the phenomenon, has functioned for centuries as an “internal exclusion” of the Jews in order to constitute European and Christian identity.<sup>71</sup> Suggesting that anti-Semitism is yet “quite far removed” from racism,

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 16. Cf. Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 31.

<sup>64</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 138.

<sup>65</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 69–70.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 70. Cf. Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 152.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>71</sup> Nancy, *Excluding the Jew within Us*, 23.

Nancy claims, and even perhaps overlooks, an equivalency that is also based on “the self-relation of a power that wants to be superior to all groups.”<sup>72</sup>

What he is doing through this particular intervention into the theoretical origins of anti-Semitism is calling into question the attempted “self-sufficiency” of Christianity that invented “an unprecedented mode of belonging” linked inextricably to the formation of subjects who maintained “self-confidence by trusting an unshakable omnipotence.”<sup>73</sup> What such a configuration of relations brought about was a creation of “this world” apart from the deity who created it, a *transcendence* that guaranteed not just God’s omnipotence, but the subject’s distance from the world guaranteed through an act of exclusion, one that had to be maintained, symbolically and literally, in relation to a particular segment of humanity.<sup>74</sup> A “necropolitics” was produced, to borrow Achille Mbembe’s word for such acts of exclusion, so that Eurocentric Christian subjects might elevate themselves over everyone else.<sup>75</sup>

What Judaism actually developed, and what Nancy’s reading of Christianity will contend, is a way of belonging “to that which withdraws from belonging.”<sup>76</sup> It is a Hegelian non-identity brought about by an otherness internal to every identity.<sup>77</sup> As he again defines the human being in the context of the deconstruction of Christianity, “To be a human being is to be open to infinitely more than simply being a human being.”<sup>78</sup>

Christianity’s forced break with Judaism, and the anti-Semitism it fostered historically, was an attempt to ground itself *in itself*, to be autonomous and so to be sovereign of itself.<sup>79</sup> Christian love risks the possibility of being corrupted by turning what is other to it into a permanent form of sameness. It is *this* version of Christianity that must be abolished, Nancy concludes, unless we wish to continue to blame the Jews for everything, so that the Christianized West might actually continue to assert its dominance over the Jews (as over so many others).

We must do away with principles, with the principle of trusting in principles (in “origins,” “natures,” “subjects”) because in principle it excludes, expels, and exterminates. It alone makes possible not only antisemitism, but every kind of racism. Our civilization became racist only because it carried the seed of it to begin with. But it is itself in the process of excluding itself from the very idea of “civilization,” and every expectation (if not every hope) is possible.<sup>80</sup>

To frame things in this manner explains why Nancy subsequently argues that we must locate truth today in the *receding* of theology, and look instead toward the gap between Judaism and Christianity as what took place within that gap in order to ignore its existence.<sup>81</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

At this point, Nancy’s task is threefold: (1) not to promote rationalisms detached from the monotheisms of the West, which produced these rationalisms in the first place, (2) not to return to the religious in any sense, for we are outside of the religious now (a truth he reiterates by defining monotheism as itself an atheism) and (3) to locate underneath Christianity, and monotheism in general, the hidden core of what motivates their existence and which still, for everyone, it might benefit humanity to (re)discover.<sup>82</sup> In other words,

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>75</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

<sup>76</sup> Nancy, *Excluding the Jew within Us*, 43.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>78</sup> Nancy, *Noli me Tangere*, 82.

<sup>79</sup> Nancy, *Excluding the Jew Within Us*, 48.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>81</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 48.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 34. Cf. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 136.

humanity is not to be reactionary in dismissing reason, is not to reinvigorate religious sensibilities that gave rise to the metaphysical problems we continue to face and is to recover what, within western traditions, might be helpful to overcoming these problems. “Our time is thus one in which it is urgent that the West – or what remains of it – analyze its own becoming, turn back to examine its provenance and its trajectory, and question itself concerning the process of decomposition of sense to which it has given rise.”<sup>83</sup>

Thinking the deconstruction of Christianity and the phenomenon of atheism as both being bound up with such processes is to open the western narrative up to that which is other to it, to that which actually founded western civilization historically through an “internal exclusion” (e.g., those racisms, colonialisms and sexist views that are founded upon such disavowals). Nancy’s project of dis-enclosing Christianity is understood thus to be an opening up of sovereign autonomy, to question any attempt to establish a wholly self-sufficient autonomy and to liberate the equality of thinking as a relation of love. His thought marks the ends of Eurocentric thought at the same time as it is firmly grounded in it.

Deconstructing the dominant narratives of the West means deconstructing the myth of a sovereign, autonomous deity whose reign, Nancy declares, has reached its end: “The idea of myth alone perhaps presents the very Idea of the West, with its perpetual representation of the compulsion to return to its very own sources in order to re-engender itself from them as the very destiny of humanity. In this sense, I repeat, we no longer have anything to do with myth.”<sup>84</sup> The sense of sovereignty and self-grounding that results from only turning to your own origins in order to produce a future script is a myth that must be undone.

Nancy’s entire project of “dis-enclosure” takes aim at the enclosed space of metaphysics that, in our age, is rapidly expanding to encompass all outer space, though it is a project that needs to be rethought if we are to have a chance at being less violent as a species.<sup>85</sup> Ending the forms of racism, colonialism, sexism and imperialism that have permeated western existence and its motives for centuries, and which continue to hold sway in our world today in a variety of forms and contexts, needs to be a call that we heed so that we might move outward, away from such exclusive narratives and toward an openness, a love, that actually sits at the heart of the Christian legacy.<sup>86</sup>

Do other traditions – Buddhism, Taoism, for example – provide different resources with which to face the same stakes? Some want to believe so, but their disposition often appears so voluntaristic as to seem dreamy. If the stakes are the same for everyone and if they are based in a rationality – fortuitously – formed in the regions of the setting sun, one might think that it is difficult not to take into account the genealogy of this “reason.” Can we, for example, pass up something recognized as a right by all? In commerce it is impossible, and it will become so in other domains, for other modes of commerce (although this does not mean that “human rights” will always refer to the same “man” as conceived by the same “Enlightenment”). But it will refer to a humanity whose at once fortuitous, ungraspable, and infinite nature we need to think about more. In any case, I can only speak from the position of the old European humanism as it questions itself.<sup>87</sup>

In the end, and at the ends of the long-running historical hold of western theological–metaphysical hegemony, there is only the kenotic outpouring of love that Christianity, at its best, represents and uplifts, even to the point of its own demise. This is the thought that moves consistently through Nancy’s illustration of Christianity’s deconstruction of itself. Though theology has often served as a discourse of authorization and legitimation for western imperialism – a point that is still applicable in a secularized, western context, as Nancy makes clear repeatedly – its hegemonic rule has come to an end, but not through a forced denunciation of its claims. Rather, it is the internal dynamic of Christianity that prompts us to rethink its essence, and the essence of religion as a whole. It is from this precise point of recognition that we might pass into the rigors of philosophical thought and end the hegemony of Eurocentrism wholesale.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>84</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 46.

<sup>85</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 158–61.

<sup>86</sup> “Racism is always the flip side of what one calls an “abstract universality,” and its ignoble stupidity is on the – immense – scale of this universality. But what is not universal in this sense is that the equality of all has for its very condition the nonsameness of ‘humanity’.” Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 158.

<sup>87</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 21.

Though the West must continue to examine its theological history and the layers of sedimentation left within the religious institutional deposits all around us, the dis-enclosure of Christianity can only spell out religion's end, even if the love that it championed carries on only in varied and fragmented forms. Rather than seek to sustain the prominence, privilege and dominance of the Christian Church as a global institutional structure, Nancy's project carves out a space for renewed investigations of historical–theological claims, while also acknowledging theology's demise as a force for political, institutional and communal legitimation.

Though Nancy only hints toward these conclusions, it is clear that what we take to be theology as it has been practiced for centuries has reached its end, though new forms of thought begin to take its place at the same time. There is to be no positive theological project in the sense of recovering the embodied practices, rituals, doctrines and beliefs of the Christian tradition. There is perhaps only the outpouring of a kenotic love which its traditional stories contain, one that is, despite everything, unafraid to lay down one's life, including one's religious faith, in order to love the other who stands before them – something Nancy equates with thinking and philosophy itself. Like the Jesuit priest who betrays his faith through blasphemy and renunciation in order to better love the people he serves at the end of Shūsaku Endō's great novel *Silence*, Christianity now finds itself poised to relinquish its temporal claims to its sense of itself in order to allow the world to reconcile with itself – an unending task, to be sure, but one that also cannot be thrust aside in order to defend one's claims to privilege and power.

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