

DECONSTRUCTION, DIS-ENCLOSURE AND CHRISTIANITY

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1. Are we still Christians today?

One of the most complicated and ambiguous tendencies in contemporary Western societies is almost certainly the phenomenon that is perhaps too easily referred to as the 'revival of religion'. What at first sight appears to be a simple return to religious values, inspired by a critical rejection of the basic assumptions of our modern secular culture, is in fact often a refined and delicate dialogue with this culture, a dialogue in which religious and secular arguments often change places. This delicate relationship between religion and modernity does not only manifest itself in daily practical discussions on the role of religion within our democratic societies, but touches just as much on philosophical questions regarding the historical and systematic ties between Western culture and its religious heritage. Many of the recently published philosophical works deal with the problem of how to understand this co-emergence of both the revival and the rejection of the religious.¹

One of the most original thinkers in this field is Jean-Luc Nancy (1940-). Contrary to what is commonly thought, his work neither advocates a turn or return to religion, nor does it proclaim or request the end of religion. Instead, it should be understood as an attempt to relate Christianity and secularisation in a profound way by conceiving of them not so much as historically successive and opposite views, but rather as views that spring from the same origins and that are inextricably linked to the point of synonymy. This attempt has resulted in a project called the *Deconstruction of Christianity*, the first part of which was

¹ For instance see: M. Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde* (1985) and *La religion dans la démocratie* (1998); M. Gauchet & L. Ferry, *Le religieux après la religion* (2004); J. Derrida & G. Vattimo, *La religion* (1996); H. de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (1999), *Minimal Theologies* (2005), and *Religion and violence* (2006). For a very different perspective, see: D. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (2006) and R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006).

published as *La décloison. Déconstruction du christianisme I* in 2005.² Although the title of this work conveys the impression of a project that has just been launched recently, it is actually a culmination of several lines of thought that have been developed gradually by Nancy in his works.

The deconstruction of Christianity has been one of Nancy's major philosophical concerns in recent years and appears to be part of a broader project involving the deconstruction of monotheism. Although it is not always clear how he relates Christianity and monotheism in general, Nancy had already indicated that Christianity plays an exemplary, although not unique, role within the deconstruction of monotheism.³ Nancy had already announced his project in the footnotes of one of his major books, *Being Singular Plural* (note 20, p. 197 and note 52, p. 200), in *La pensée dérobée* (note 1, p. 155), and even at an earlier stage in 1993, when he wrote in *The Sense of the World* (note 50, p. 183)⁴ that a deconstruction of Christianity is:

‘(...) something other than a critique or a demolition: the bringing to light of that which will have been the agent of Christianity as the very form of the West, much more deeply than all religion and even as the self-deconstruction of religion, the accomplishment of philosophy by Judeo-Platonism and Latinity, ontotheology as its own end, the ‘death of God’ and the birth of the sense of the world as the abandonment without return and without *Aufhebung* of all ‘Christ’, that is, of all hypostasis of sense. It will of course be necessary to come back to this.’

Nancy did indeed come back to this issue, although it took him some time. First, with a sort of programmatic text called ‘La déconstruction du christianisme’

² J.-L. Nancy, *La décloison. Déconstruction du christianisme I*, Paris: Galilée (2005). Eleven of the fifteen texts in this book have been, or will be, published elsewhere. This work has recently been published by Fordham University Press.

³ One of the major ambivalences in this project is whether it is a deconstruction of Christianity or of monotheism in general. At certain points in *La décloison*, Nancy speaks of monotheism, which he describes as ‘L’opération consistant à désassembler les éléments qui le constituent, afin de tenter de discerner, entre eux et comme derrière eux, en retrait de la construction, ce qui a rendu possible leur assemblage, et qui nous reste encore peut-être, paradoxalement, à découvrir et à penser comme l’au-delà du monothéisme en tant qu’il s’est lui-même mondialisé et athéisé’ (Nancy, 2005: 54). At other points in the same book, however, he prefers to speak only of Christianity. In the end, it seems that Christianity serves as a prototype for monotheism: ‘... je vais limiter l’analyse, ici, à la forme du monothéisme qui est devenue sa forme la plus européenne – et donc, de là, celle qui a accompagné, du moins jusqu’au milieu du XXe siècle, l’occidentalisation du monde –, c’est-à-dire à la forme du christianisme’ (p. 52). It could be formulated even stronger: ‘My hypothesis is that the gesture of deconstruction, a gesture that is neither critical nor perpetual and that testifies to a relation to history and to tradition not found in Husserl, Hegel, or Kant, is only possible from within Christianity, even if it is not expressly formulated thus’ (Nancy, 2003: 216).

⁴ The pages refer to the English translations, where available, and if not, to the original French texts.

in 1998, and finally with *La décloison* in 2005. Beginning with the question of how we (still) wish to hold on to Christianity, Nancy's main aim in this book is to explore the ways in which we still remain Christians in general and how deconstruction is in itself a Christian 'gesture'. Or in other words: to explore if and how Christianity has deconstructed itself. The purpose here is not to defend, save or criticise Christianity, but rather to 'exhaust' it, to let Christianity reach its own limits.

As will hopefully become clear in the following texts, Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity consists mainly of a reworking of Christian and traditional philosophical notions, a process through which he demonstrates how these notions have in a way exhausted themselves. Or rather, how such notions contain, as their very condition, the possibility of their own exhaustion. As a result, Nancy's project involving a deconstruction of Christianity is actually a 'reading' of Christianity deconstructing itself, i.e. of Christianity's *raison d'être* containing at the same time the possibility of its own exhaustion. Or as Derrida would have phrased it, Christianity's construction generates its deconstruction at the same time. Fundamentally inspired by Derrida's writings on this deconstruction, Nancy emphasises that the Christian religion is in itself deconstructive, instead of opposing Christian religion and secular modernity.

Taking this assumption as a starting point, Nancy hypothesises that the paradigm of secularisation, as being the *emancipation* of Christianity, provides an inadequate description of the development of the relationship between Christianity and Western modernity. According to Nancy, secularisation is not a matter of freeing oneself from the Christian legacy, but is itself essentially Christian. This makes Christianity a 'religion retreating from religion', thereby repeating Gauchet's description of Christianity as a '*religion de la sortie de la religion*' (Gauchet, 1985: II). In contrast with the paradigm of secularisation, Nancy views modernity as something that has evolved from Christianity, and thus as a process by which Christianity has turned away from itself. To be more precise: to turn away from itself, as Nancy's thesis goes, is perhaps a movement which *as such* is Christian, and thus Christianity is 'in essence' – as far as we can still use that word – a turning away from itself.

In *Noli me tangere* (2003), Nancy already explained what he meant by this *autodeconstructive* gesture. In a footnote, he described the deconstruction of Christianity as a movement that is at the same time an analysis of Christianity and a displacement of Christianity overcoming itself (Nancy, 2003: 10). The hypothesis of Christianity's autodeconstruction has thus already been touched upon implicitly in this text: if Christianity detaches from itself, or from the religious, a deconstructed Christianity will be the place where the opposition of

theism and atheism no longer matters. Therefore, as Nancy writes in *La décloison* in 2005, the history of God is nothing but the process of atheism itself (Nancy, 2005: 35).⁵ (One could think here of Spinoza's 'Deus sive natura' as the *exemplum* of God as an outside principle of the world within the world, an entity which more or less depends on a worldly logic. God *is* only to the extent that he is attached to the world.)

If Christianity is a religion that has deconstructed itself, then the paradigm of secularisation also has to be questioned, since the relationship between modernity and Christianity within this paradigm is completely different than the one used within Nancy's conceptual framework. If modernity is in the first place not a liberation or emancipation from Christianity, but Christianity evolving from itself and thus being itself, then we have to reconsider what is meant by the process of secularisation. The 'monotheistic' provenance of our modern understanding of the world is never simply a past, but continues to produce its effects. It goes on forming the modern present and the (re-)presentation of the modern world (Nancy, 2005: 50).

As Nancy already mentioned in 'La deconstruction du christianisme', conceiving of Christianity in terms of this new paradigm requires two main precepts (Nancy, 1998: 504):

1. The only current form of Christianity is one that contemplates the present possibility of its negation;
2. The only current form of atheism is one that contemplates the reality of its Christian provenance.

Although he uses the word 'possibility', Nancy unceasingly repeats that the role of Christianity as a founding principle in society has vanished. Christianity no longer makes *sense* in the 'Nancian' meaning of the word: it no longer structures and organises our horizon of thinking and acting in the world (e.g. Nancy, 2005: 206). But as the second precept seeks to clarify, atheism, or a certain type of atheism (i.e. the idea that a modern, enlightened understanding of the world was, and is, only possible by destroying 'obscure' Christianity) is for Nancy neither an option nor a goal. Modernity has been made possible *within* Christianity, not *despite* Christian monotheism. Thus, if we want to understand what modernity – or atheism – really means, then we have to think through the Christian traces of our contemporary understanding of the world.

In order to understand the contemporary world, we have to examine in how far the West can be called 'Christian'. To what extent is Christianity 'Western' and

⁵ See the text of Laurens ten Kate.

how can such ‘Occidentalism’ reveal something about monotheism in general? Such an examination would help us to achieve at least three results, as Nancy writes in ‘Déconstruction du monothéisme’⁶:

1. To end with the unilateral scheme of a certain rationalism, according to which the modern West could only appear as a striving against Christianity and its obscurity;
2. To stop any attempt to overcome the ‘evils’ of the contemporary world when it returns to Christianity or religion in general;
3. To ask how we could open ourselves towards a future which will be neither Christian nor anti-Christian, neither monotheist nor atheist (Nancy, 2005: 53-54).

These are the tasks Nancy sets himself in the 15 texts that constitute *La décloison*. Most of these texts have been published or presented before, including the three texts that can be considered programmatic: ‘La déconstruction du christianisme’ (orig. 1995), ‘Déconstruction du monothéisme’ (orig. 2001), and ‘Athéisme et monothéisme’ (orig. 2004). In addition to these programmatic texts, the book offers a large amount of in-depth examinations of specific elements of monotheistic religions in general and the Christian religion in particular. They deal with, among others, the name of God, *kenosis*, incarnation, and prayer. Working his way through Kant, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Granel, Blanchot and Derrida, Nancy constantly tries to discern traces and hints of Christianity’s auto-deconstructive movement. One of the most interesting, but also complex, texts of *La décloison* is its ‘Ouverture’. Being the only new text contained in the book, it takes a step back and places the tentatively and fragmentarily developed project in a broader framework, which – retrospectively – lays bare in the most general terms what is at stake. In the end, it is what he calls the ‘unilateral scheme of a certain rationalism’. In what follows we aim to explain, by means of a close reading of the text, Nancy’s lines of thought in the ‘Ouverture’.

2. ‘Beyond’ as the truth of reason

As previously discussed, a deconstruction of Christianity is not only an attempt to explore if – and how – we are Christians, or in more general terms,

⁶ In Nancy’s own words: ‘Il importe donc de discerner en quoi l’Occident est Chrétien en profondeur, en quoi le christianisme est occidental comme par destination, et en quoi, à travers cette occidentalité chrétienne, est mise en jeu une dimension essentielle du monothéisme tout entier’ (Nancy, 2005: 53). It should be noted that the texts in *La décloison* serve as a platform for asking the questions properly, rather than really providing an answer to them. Has this not been the guiding principle of his whole project up until now? After reading *La décloison*, the questions are numerous and the answers sometimes fragmentary or confusing.

monotheists today, but also the other way round: if – and how – we are atheists today. As Nancy writes in his ‘Ouverture’ of *La décloison*, and explicitly in contrast with Kant’s *Religion within the Limits of Pure Reason*, this exploration is a matter of ‘ouvrir la simple raison à l’illimitation qui fait sa vérité’ (Nancy, 2005: 9). If such ‘illimitation’ is the truth of reason, then a deconstruction of Christianity has everything to do with the status of reason. It is a matter of asking ourselves in a renewed way how we can understand ‘reason’ or ‘man’, rather than merely paying attention to the ‘return of religion’.⁷ As Nancy writes, this question is one that essentially deals with that of *humanism*, which is a question that currently places the most urgent demand on thinking. (Nancy, 2005: 10).

What is the reason for this urgency, an urgency that leads Nancy to articulate his thoughts in a rather hasty manner? He gets straight to the point: in today’s world, humanism is in a state of agony (Nancy, 2005: 10). According to Nancy, humanism is a way of living that has become more or less exhausted. It has come to its end, an end which fits within the context of what Derrida called the ‘closure of metaphysics’. Far from striving for an ultimate ‘Aufhebung’, Nancy is particularly interested in this movement of ‘ending’, an interest he shares with many other twentieth century French philosophers, beginning with Georges Bataille in the first place, and which in turn leads him back to the role of negativity in Hegel’s thought.⁸

The conviction that metaphysics has come to an end, implies the end of a possible foundational presence (Idea, Subject, Reason, etc.) beyond the world.

⁷ In *The Forgetting of Philosophy* (1986), Nancy already analysed why a ‘return’ can never simply be a return of the identical: ‘The point of view of the “return” conceives of each crisis in an identical manner and as the reproduction of the same episode. However varied the discourses that stem from this point of view may be, their fundamental typology can be reduced to a single model: in times of crisis, meaning is lost sight of, but when the crisis ends, when the dust has settled and the vagrancies and extravagances of the crisis have run their course, the demand for meaning reemerges: intact and unmistakable. The *return* thus first means that nothing had truly been lost and that neither the length of the crisis nor the abundance and intensity of its manifestations could have *fundamentally* altered a certain Idea (a schema, a paradigm, sometimes a norm) of Meaning.’ (Nancy, 1997: 13-14). Above all, Nancy uncovers the logic of a ‘return to’: ‘The logic of the return is caught in a history that it at once denies and affirms, at once corrects and submits to. This is confirmed by the fact that no one advocates a return to pre-Christian Antiquity (although, from time to time, someone makes a move in that direction, regarding law, morality, or happiness ...): the gap is too great, and no one would find that something was lacking; for some, it would be God, for others, the subject, for everyone, it would be freedom and man’s vocation. This is to acknowledge that the return has limits, and that “somewhere” there is a past that has passed, a past in relation to which something has happened, a past in relation to which, in the end, *we have arrived*’ (Nancy, 1997: 22-23).

⁸ See Nancy’s *Hegel. The Restlessness of the Negative*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2000).

'Beyond' here means: infinite, ignoring the finite conditions of our being-in-the-world, as Heidegger would say. Metaphysics stands for the hope that an exhaustive presence with itself could be realised. It stands for the fact that reason is not conceptualised as a finite means within the world by which we obtain certain insights, but as Reason, the attempt of man to achieve an all-inclusive and fully transparent view of himself and the world. It is the dream of a world where every kind of opaqueness has dissolved into bright Ideas or where subjects become Subjects, fully present to themselves.

It is in the context of this striving for the Presence of Man to himself, evolving from the realisation of an Idea or Presence, that Nancy speaks of an 'exhaustion', referring to a striving that has become unable to fulfil itself, and which therefore keeps on hitting against its own boundaries, as an ongoing movement of ending. The last few centuries have shown several attempts within philosophy to question Infinity or Reason, and to think about the finite conditions of reason in its finite conditions. Nietzsche's 'God is dead' is but only one example of this attempt, Nancy writes. Indeed, if one looks back upon twentieth century philosophy, from Wittgenstein to Heidegger, and many others, it is marked fundamentally by a desire to think the 'finitude' of our condition and thought. What all these thinkers have in common is an awareness that the installation of a foundational presence beyond the world was no longer possible and that we had to think this impossibility. This means that metaphysics is no longer operative, that its Ideas have collapsed, and that we therefore can no longer understand the world in a metaphysical way. More precisely, it is time that we think about the world *as* world, and only as world.⁹ Later on in the 'Overture', Nancy makes the urgency of this task more specific when he speaks of the danger of 'religious resurrection'. But the general logic behind this task already underlies the closure of metaphysics: the unsuccessful attempt of reason to exclude the irrational from rationality, to separate belief and reason, to get rid of its own 'beyond'. We cannot take for granted that we have finished with the metaphysical project of rationality. To the contrary, this hasty conclusion is actually the problem Nancy tries to identify. It is also what deconstruction is all about: it is not a question of being finished with something, of leaving it behind us, or of simply overcoming it; instead, it is a question of an endless process of ending, of bringing something to its very end, as well as the continuing necessity of thinking it. Consequently, Nancy refers to the failure of philosophy (and also that of literature and poetry)

⁹ See also Nancy's *La création du monde ou la mondialisation*. Paris: Galilée (2002).

in the last few centuries to complete this labour of exhaustion and a deconstruction of metaphysics. It is true that philosophy opened up the closed metaphysical systems and excavated metaphysical grounds, but it has not, according to Nancy, affirmed the groundlessness of this opening. At the very least, it has not affirmed that this opening (of the world) equates with nothing; not with a thing, principle, or cause, but with nothing. That the world is groundless, without foundation, that it is (an) opening and nothing more, is a point that Nancy tries to make time and again.

Until now, modern thinkers failed the task of trying to comprehend the world as ‘nothing’, since twentieth century philosophy also showed that what one actually expected to be exhausted, was – and still is – haunting our thought (Nancy, 2005: 11). For example, it is not because Nietzsche shouts that ‘God is dead’, that God is really dead, that He no longer plays a role in our thinking. Instead, we should ask ourselves what enables us to think of a ‘world’ without a God. This question is clearly Nancy’s main focus in the deconstruction of Christianity: how are we atheists today, or, how are we still Christians today?

Let us try to specify this question by continuing Nancy’s line of thought in his ‘Ouverture’ of *La décroissance*. After having explained why humanism is in a state of agony, Nancy rephrases this agony in terms of the withering of the dimension of a ‘beyond’ around which belief was centred, and which became an institutionalised praxis within this world:

‘Ce qui, dans la foi, ouvrait le monde en lui-même à son *propre dehors* (et non à un arrière-monde, paradis ou enfer) se referme et se rabougrit dans une gestion intéressé du monde’. (Nancy, 2005: 10, our emphasis)

It is this dimension of a ‘proper outside’, of a transcendence *within* the world, of a non-closure of the world, that should once again be articulated by the deconstruction of Christianity (Nancy, 2005: 10).

To illustrate this, Nancy refers to the famous phrase used by Kant in his preface to the second edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason* as an illustration of this ‘proper outside’ of rationality: ‘Ich mußte also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen’ (Kant, 1992: 33).¹⁰ Kant uses this

¹⁰ In his famous speech ‘Glaube, Vernunft und Universität’ – famous because of the references to the prophet Mohammed – pope Benedict XVI also mentioned it: ‘In einer für die Reformatoren nicht vorhersehbaren Radikalität hat Kant mit seiner Aussage, er habe das Denken beiseite schaffen müssen, um dem Glauben Platz zu machen, aus diesem Programm [das Enthellenisierungsprogramms des Christentums] heraus gehandelt. Er hat dabei den Glauben ausschließlich in der praktischen Vernunft verankert und ihm den Zugang zum Ganzen der Wirklichkeit abgesprochen.’ See: <http://www.tertio.be/archief/2006/doc3/060912.htm>.

expression in a context where he announces why the ideas of God, immortality and freedom can never be the object of pure knowledge, but can only be understood as regulative. In other words, pure reason is marked by finite (transcendental) conditions and these conditions are constitutive for its possibility to obtain knowledge. Although Nancy does not make clear in any sense what this quote really means for him, it is undeniably the dimension of belief within reason that interests him. We have to open up thought, as he writes, not on the basis of a Transcendence, but along the dimension of its 'proper outside'. We have to open up rationality to its proper dimension of the absolute, to what Hölderlin refers to as its 'höher Besinnen' (Nancy, 2005: 11).¹¹

3. Civil religion

Although Nancy's thesis is transparent – the exhaustion of reason has not been really undertaken and this exhaustion is one of the tasks of a deconstruction of Christianity – its consequences might not as yet be clear. We need to create a space for a *belief of reason* ('une foi de la raison'), but why? Why is there this urgent need for a 'religious' dimension to rationality? First of all, as has already been mentioned above, there is a historic-philosophical need: the past two centuries show that neither philosophy nor poetry have succeeded in the task of opening the dimension of a 'proper outside' or, as Nancy also writes, to 'touch the exact spot where the emptiness is open' (Nancy, 2005: 11). The emancipation of reason experienced in the last few centuries, the so-called 'death of God', has substituted Reason for 'understanding', thereby affirming the groundlessness of reason, but without touching upon 'the empty heart of emptiness itself' (Nancy, 2005: 11).

Nancy uses the word 'understanding' (*entendement*) in a rather negative sense. It stands for 'rationalités, parfois ratiocinations des techniques, des droits, des économies, des éthiques et des politiques' (Nancy, 2005: 12). As Nancy writes in a rather apocalyptic style, this is why – and apparently also the fundamental reason for trying to convince us of the urgency mentioned above – the real threat today is the possibility of a 'religious or hyperreligious surrection

¹¹ Nancy quotes from 'Der Gang aufs Land' (Hölderlin F., *Werke in Zwei Bänden. Erster Band*. Carl Hanser Verlag, München, 1978: 297): 'Nur daß solcher Reden und auch der Schritt' und der Mühe / Wert der Gewinn und ganz wahr das Ergötzliche sei. / Darum hoff ich sogar, es werde, wenn das Gewünschte / Und gefunden das Wort, und aufgegangen das Herz ist, / Und von trunkener Stirn höher Besinnen entspringt.'

(*surrection*)' (Nancy, 2005: 12), a silent monster that can wake up any minute. What the thinkers of the Enlightenment could not shine their light on, is now ready to inflame in a messianistic way, and its effects will be more impressive than fascist or revolutionary exaltations (Nancy, 2005: 12).

All necessary conditions are present for letting the desert of sense and truth, which we allowed to grow ignite into a devastating conflagration. The ultimate space for this conflagration is that of 'politics', where the exigency of doing justice to the integral character of reason becomes visible time and again in the *Gestalt* of a political foundation. But this political order itself is in default. As can be seen in Rousseau's search for a civil religion, politics does not only consist of the rationality of governance, but presupposes a being-together, a social bond, which exceeds this rationality and precedes it. This being-together manifests itself in what can be called a sentiment or a passion. The repetitive failure of a civil religion is due to the fact that politics has precluded this last dimension and is confined to conflicting possibilities within the domain of governance. On the one hand, democracy is therefore more than just a collection of institutions, rules and rights in aid of the individualistic subject – the liberal option. On the other hand, however, it is not a fusion of identities in a shared collective that swallows the individual – the communitarian option. As Nancy already wrote in *The Sense of the World*, neither of them can be an option:

'Our entire history seems to answer that this [both options] is not possible – or that to attempt to maintain in its purity either one demand or the other is immediately to precipitate oneself into the inverse purity: the totalitarian subject turns out to be suicidal, but democracy without identification turns out also to be without any *demos* or *kratein* of its own.' (Nancy, 1998: 108).

So what is at stake in Nancy's *La décloison*? It seems that it is centred around the *aporia* expressed in this quotation. Up to now, religion has been kept out of sight in the name of modern democracy and rationality. The only possible perspective, as Francis Fukuyama once said, is the perspective of a liberal and secular society, where politics can be no more than management of opportunities and rights: governance. Precisely because of this gesture, democracy is often nothing except such form of management and leaves out all other questions of our being-together: sense, truth, world, etc. The longer it takes, the more this 'desert' ('democracy without identification'), as Nancy calls it, grows and the greater the risk of an inflammation to occur ('totalitarian subject'). Nancy writes that this *aporia* was already detected by Rousseau, who indeed knew that a social contract also needs a *civil religion*, if it wants to

respect the being-together, in order to affirm the prior social bond. This is the reason why civil religion is in fact a reformulation of an old political aporia:

‘Peut-être, la démocratie n’a-t-elle été, depuis Athènes, rien d’autre que *l’aporie renouvelée d’une religion de la cité* qui eût été capable d’assumer la succession ou bien la suppléance (si l’un ou l’autre de ces mots peut convenir...) des religions d’avant la cité, c’est-à-dire des religions qui, par elles-mêmes, faisaient lien social *et* gouvernement: Athènes elle-même, puis Rome, puis L’État moderne souverain ont tour à tour renouvelé cette aporie’ (Nancy, 2005: 13, our emphasis).

If being-together is more than a question of governance, then politics has to assume a dimension that surpasses its order, a dimension that is described by Nancy as being-with or a social bond (Nancy, 2005: 14).

This ‘transcendence’, if you wish, this ‘empty heart of emptiness’, is what it is all about. As already mentioned previously, Nancy’s complaint about humanism and nihilism is that they do not touch upon ‘the empty heart of emptiness itself’ (Nancy, 2005: 11).¹² The possibility of a hyperreligious resurrection is a consequence of this failure. It is not because today we can no longer think our living together on the basis of an Idea or a Cause – the empty heart of emptiness refers to this impossibility – that the question of being-together as such is resolved. The very reason why we live together, the *raison d’être* of a society, transcends the order of everyday governance. It is its ‘proper outside’, as Nancy calls it, or its ‘finite transcendence’, as Heidegger would say.¹³ This outside is proper or finite because it is not a transcendence beyond an order, but an opening of this order, an order marked with a non-immanence, a non-closure.

Consequently, this proper outside is what we have to think today and is what Nancy tries to lay bare by means of his deconstruction of Christianity. If politics leaves aside the dimension of its proper outside, then the desert of sense, of our being-with, grows and the risk of inflammation increases. But if politics once again tries to fill the gap of sense, of our being-with, it swallows its subjects into a Subject. As far as it operates according to a worldly logic, Nancy writes, the aporia of politics or of democracy reveals that politics can

¹² Nancy appears to use ‘humanism’ and ‘nihilism’ as synonyms in the context of the outcome of the history of metaphysics.

¹³ This has been examined by Lacoue-Labarthe in his explanatory text ‘La transcendance finie/t dans la politique’, J.-L. Nancy & Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe (eds.), *Rejouer le politique*, Paris: Galilée (1981).

only redefine or *retreat* into/upon¹⁴ itself according to one, or perhaps both, of the following alternatives (Nancy, 2005: 13-14):

1. To found itself again in religion: theocracy;
2. To be determined by a dimension that transcends it and belongs to the order of sense, the dimension of the 'proper outside', and by a redefinition of the tension between the government of society and the projections of its ends.

The first option is described as hyperfascism, the second as a radical (re-)invention of 'laïcité', the word the French use for their particular definition of secularity (Nancy, 2005: 14). Nancy clearly sees only one viable option: a radical and profound questioning of what sense, politics, world and secularisation mean. Politics has to confront these questions, with this dimension that surpasses and constitutes its everyday order:

'A tout le moins, cela devrait signifier ceci: que la politique assume une dimension que, pour autant, elle n'intègre pas, qui la déborde, la dimension d'une ontologie ou d'une éthologie de l'être-avec, articulée sur cette excédence absolue du sens et de la passion du sens dont, après tout, le mot 'sacré' ne fut jamais que la désignation' (Nancy, 2005: 14).

Philosophy struggles with the same problem. Like politics, it has to recognise that it is intimidated by what it has excluded: religion.

'La philosophie (et la science avec elle) s'est en quelque sorte intimidée elle-même par l'exclusion qu'elle avait prononcé d'une religion dont, en sous-main, elle ne cessait de se nourrir – sans pour autant, il faut y revenir, s'interroger réellement sur cette "sécularisation", ni, par conséquent et pour répéter ce mot, sur la "laïcisation".' (Nancy, 2005: 14)

Nancy reformulates this problem with the question of the 'world'. What does it mean that we are living in this world and this world alone? And what is the sense of this world? The sense of the world is no longer provided by a transcendent creator. The only horizon left is that the world – and the world alone – is merely there, and that this provides the sense of the world. Sense, then, is not so much something that 'we secularised' successors to God ascribe to the world, which would result in filling the empty heart of emptiness again. If the sense of the world is no longer provided by a transcendent creator, then what is left as a horizon is that the world – and the world alone – is merely there.

¹⁴ To retreat has a double meaning, i.e. to draw back, but also to retrace, to start again. See Nancy J.-L. and Lacoue-Labarthe P., *Retreating the Political*. Edited by Simon Sparks. London: Routledge (1997).

But this ‘there is’ is not closed in its own immanence, as Nancy previously wrote in *The Sense of the World*:

‘Here is the greatest difficulty: the difficulty of the “transimmanence” of sense. Quite simply, that the sense of the world is this world here as the place of existence. This “quite simply” contains the most formidable stake, the one that requires of us, in order to say this *absolutely simple* thing, a completely different style or, rather, an interminable alteration of style’ (Nancy, 1998: 56).

In the same book, he wrote the following about sense and atheism:

‘As long as we do not take into account, without reserve, the worldly as such, we have not gotten rid of demiurges and creators. In other words, we are not yet atheists. Being an atheist is no longer a matter of denying a divine instance that has reabsorbed itself into itself (and this can perhaps therefore no longer be called “atheism”). It is a matter of opening the sense of the world’ (Nancy, 1998: 158).

As Nancy writes in *La décloison*, it amounts to a reconsideration – within a world whose ‘beyond’ no longer lies in an *arrière-monde* – of phrase 6.41 of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: ‘the sense of the world must lie outside the world’.¹⁵ In other words, it comes down to a reflection on dis-enclosure.

4. Dis-enclosure of Christianity – Christianity as dis-enclosure

In order to fulfil this task, we thus have to question the self-prescribed limits of rational thinking. Although contemporary thinking did not succeed here, it does not mean that it cannot help us at all. A ‘beyond of the world’ *within* mundane immanence has been opened in diverse ways since Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Nancy also mentions Freud, Derrida, Deleuze and Levinas as thinkers who were aware of the same necessity of thinking: to enlighten its proper obscurity, not by finally bringing the obscure into daylight, which would be a very classic and almost Platonic gesture, but ‘en acquérant l’art, la discipline et la force de laisser l’obscur émettre sa propre clarté’ (Nancy, 2005: 15). The ‘dis-enclosure’ of the historical legacies of religion and philosophy is the opening of the closure of metaphysics and, as far as Christianity is concerned, it is a powerful confirmation of this metaphysics. The gesture of dis-enclosure also includes Christianity and monotheism in general (Nancy,

¹⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, London/New York: Routledge (1961) 86.

2005: 16). Metaphysics generally introduces an otherworldly Principle or Idea to govern the world and to guarantee its sense. This stabilises and closes being upon its proper being. The closure is the accomplishment of this totality (Nancy, 2005: 16).

Many of the deconstructors of metaphysics have shown that this attempt at a closure has been destabilised from within, i.e. that metaphysics in a way deconstructs itself. Thus it is a question of understanding how the gesture that destabilises the closure from within forms itself and how 'elle fomente elle-même le débordement de son principe de raison' (Nancy, 2005: 17). If the closure always dis-encloses itself, if metaphysics and Christianity autodeconstruct themselves, then we have to know how this dis-enclosure works, what it does, how it operates. This is obviously Nancy's concern in the deconstruction of Christianity. Far from pointing the finger at Christianity, we have to look for its 'excellent motifs' (Nancy, 2005: 19), and need to investigate how it is constituted, instead of presupposing that 'the West' is born out of an enlightenment of the obscure, or a reduction of the unknown, and characterised by a progressive movement towards an ever growing enlightenment. The history of the West can never be understood as a history of pure enlightenment. According to Nancy, it is far more accurate to speak of an aggravation of the incommensurable, i.e. of that which cannot be measured by reason (Nancy, 2005: 18).

Christianity or monotheism in general then, is not the primitive stage of a subsequently rationalised, enlightened modern culture. If we want to think the problems outlined above, then Nancy believes that we cannot be satisfied with such easy judgements. With the invention of monotheism in the West, man is related to God as to a radical otherness. Whereas the history of monotheism can be read as such a relationship with otherness or alienation, it is at the same time the theological affirmation of atheism, it is 'the reduction of the divine to a logic that depends on this world' (Nancy, 2005: 34). It reminds us of Spinoza's 'deus sive natura'. This is also the reason why Nancy conceives of deconstruction as a Christian gesture, as was discussed earlier. That monotheism and atheism are two sides of the same history, i.e. monotheism affirms that *being* is nothing but being opened towards the other than itself, towards an itself as constituted by its 'proper outside'. As a result, monotheism is in essence dis-enclosure and atheism a process that is invented within monotheism itself. In *La décloison*, Nancy defines the meaning of Christianity as 'the exigency to open up an otherness or an unconditional alienation within this world' (Nancy, 2005: 20). Nancy writes that Christianity may be summarised as 'living in the world outside itself', where the outside 'is' not, is no being, but has

to be understood as what defines Heidegger's ek-sistence: being opened towards the world (Nancy, 2005: 21). Or in other words: *dis-enclosure*.¹⁶ The success of this undertaking can only be measured by means of the following question:

'Quoi qu'il en soit, la portée véritable de la 'déclosion' ne peut-être mesurée qu'à ceci: oui ou non sommes-nous capables de nous ressaisir – par-delà toute maîtrise – de l'exigence qui porte la pensée hors d'elle-même, sans pour autant confondre cette exigence dans son irréductibilité absolue avec une construction d'idéaux ni avec un barbouillage de fantômes?' (Nancy, 2005: 23)

Although Christianity's deconstruction is a central and probably the most crucial element in Nancy's examination of Western thinking, it belongs to the much broader project of a *dis-enclosure* of Western metaphysics as a whole. This is also the reason why *La déclosion* is not an exceptional excursion within Nancy's oeuvre, but rather exposes one of its leading motifs.

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¹⁶ See also in *Au ciel sur la terre. Petite conférence sur Dieu*: '...il y a quelque chose qui dépasse infiniment ce que je suis, avec à la fois ma personne, ma personnalité, mes moyens, ma localisation, ma façon d'être quelque part à un endroit dans le monde. Dans tout cela, il y a de l'ouverture. Or, le dieu des trois religions monothéistes, et tous les autres dieux aussi, le dieu ne représente pas autre chose que cela' (Nancy, 2004: 30-31). Nancy also defines 'faith' (as different from 'belief') as 'être fidèle à ce dépassement infini de l'homme par l'homme, ou à cette ouverture' (Nancy, 2004: 36).