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ALREADY, NOT YET

A review of Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Déclousion : Déconstruction du christianisme, 1*. Paris: Galilée, 2005. 248 pp. 30.00€ (paper). ISBN: 2-7186-0668-1. (Translation forthcoming from Fordham University Press.)

THIS IS A LONG-PROMISED BOOK. Jean-Luc Nancy's engagement with Christianity has been long-standing, both in passing glances and in sustained treatments, perhaps most notably in his essay "Of Divine Places."¹ More recently, as well, the prospect of a "deconstruction of Christianity" specifically has turned up in passing references—but references that nevertheless show this "deconstruction of Christianity" to be more and more important to his philosophical project as a whole. In *Being Singular Plural*, for example, one finds a long parenthesis, at the end of which Nancy asserts that "both the summit and the abyss of a deconstruction of Christianity" would be "the dis-location of the West,"² a crucial step in his attempt to begin rethinking "being-with" and therefore also subjectivity, mediation, and place. In *The Sense of the World*, he goes so far as to claim that "sense," one of the key preoccupations of his work, "can proceed only from a deconstruction of Christianity."³

Clearly, then, Nancy has had the basic project of this work in mind for many years. At the same time, however, this book still remains in many respects a promissory note. The fact that more work remains is obvious enough from its designation as a first volume, but this book is not yet what one would expect under such a title. Nancy himself foresees the likely confusion, saying in his

¹ Translated by Michael Holland in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000): 95. In a footnote to this same volume, published in France in 1996, Nancy directs the reader to his *La déconstruction du christianisme*, forthcoming.

³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 55. The note to this passage echoes many of the same themes of *Déclousion*: "[The deconstruction of Christianity] signifies, to be precise, 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.... It will of course be necessary to come back to this" (183n50).

introduction:

A simple warning for those who will not have already hurled the book with fury, pity or discouragement: what follows here does not constitute the steady and organized development that one ought to expect... It has not yet seemed to me to be possible to undertake more systematic treatment of this object... (23).⁴

Instead of a systematic treatment, then, Nancy provides “a recollection, entirely provisional, of scattered texts that turn around the same object without taking it head-on,” mainly texts published before but not widely available now (23).⁵ Spread out over the past ten years and written for a variety of settings, they confirm what the passing references in his more extended works had indicated: namely, that the project of a deconstruction of Christianity is a serious one for Nancy and is the subject of continuous and concentrated (though not yet sustained and systematic) intellectual elaboration.

Indeed, one should not make the mistake of dismissing *Déclension* as merely a book of preparatory exercises: it is not. The essays in this book undertake penetrating analyses of Christian concepts, most notably monotheism, atheism, faith, and sin. By turns, they engage a wide range of thinkers, including Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Roland Barthes, Michel Deguy, and Gérard Granel. The influence of Derrida is particularly important here, and not only in the obvious reference to “deconstruction.” Two of the essays, “The Judeo-Christian: Of Faith” and “Of a Divine *Wink*,” are responses to the essay “Faith and Knowledge,”⁶ one of Derrida’s most important texts on religion, which was itself part of a very important collaboration among European intellectuals on religion. This not only situates Nancy within the broader consideration of religion among European intellectuals generally, and more specifically in the “religious turn” of French phenomenology, but it also explains his distance from the more Nietzschean approach he seems to have taken in “Of Divine Places.”⁷

Here he no longer takes an adversarial stance toward Christianity—not because he has had a sudden change of heart and come to love those aspects of Christianity he formerly critiqued, but because he has come to see to what degree Christianity has determined and continues to determine the philosophical

⁴ All translations from *Déclension* are my own. Parenthetical page references all refer to this text.

⁵ The exceptions are “*Verbo caro factum*” (unpublished) and “*Prière démythifiée*” (intended for a volume not yet published).

⁶ “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002). The essay was originally published in the collection *La Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Paris: Le Seuil, 1996).

⁷ Viz. pp. 138-39 particularly.

tradition in which he works. In his introduction, entitled “Ouverture” (a fascinating essay in its own right), Nancy argues that as Western culture is globalized (*mondialisé*), philosophy will only be enabled to ask the questions it needs to ask through “a mutual *déclension* of the heritages of religion and of philosophy” (16). The word *déclension* stands in contrast with *clension* or *clôture*, as an un-closing or de-closing—tearing down the wall, opening the cloister. The mutuality of this *déclension* is enacted in the essays, in which Nancy explores the philosophical resonances of Christian thought and the Christian resonances of philosophical thought. It is clear, however, that for Nancy, the question of how Christianity can be changed through such an operation is of very little interest. Much more important are the ways in which philosophy can be changed by extending its field of inquiry over Christianity or by recognizing the Christianity at work within itself and within the secular West.

In part, such work among the inheritors of the Enlightenment tradition will serve to correct the arrogance with which the West has viewed its own Christian past:

The Reformation and the Enlightenment, with and despite all their nobility and all their vigor, have also accustomed themselves to behave vis-à-vis the past of Europe like the ethnologists of not so long ago did toward “primitives.” The revision of ethnology today only just begun – or the *déclension* of its ethnocentrism – cannot not hold for the relationship of the West to itself. (19).

Beyond satisfying the demands of simple fairness, it is hoped that through a *déclension* of the *clôture* between modernity and Christianity, the West will benefit from recognizing itself as it actually is:

It is necessary rather to pinpoint the matter of a *congenital* illness (Platonism, Judeo-Christianity) of the West, which, consequently, indicates less a pathogenic accident than a constitution of essence and, thus, another type of “health.” A congenital illness is not an infantile illness; it is often incurable; it can however also give the condition of a “health” that does not comply with standard requirements (19-20).

And so, beyond the many grievances that could be brought against Christianity, one must seek to account for its sheer perdurance, its enduring ability to elicit thought.

To this end, Nancy undertakes to give a sketch of what elicits thought, or of what serious thought elicits. He begins with the most serious intellectual charge leveled against Christianity, a charge that Nancy takes to be accurate as far as it goes: namely, that Christianity underwrites and consolidates the “closure of metaphysics.” Yet the most rigorous critics of the “closure of metaphysics”—primarily Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Deleuze—all

recognized that “closure always un-closes [*déclôt*] itself” by its necessary and constitutive reference to “the extremity of reason in an excess of and above reason itself” (17). Or in other words: “The *alogon* as such as an extreme, excessive, and necessary dimension of the *logos*: it is never seriously a question of anything else as soon as one is speaking of serious things (death, the world, being-together, being-self, truth).” For Nancy, however, Christianity “designates nothing other, essentially..., than the demand to open in the world an unconditional alterity or alienation” (20). Even as it gives aid and comfort to a metaphysical closure, Christianity elicits and enacts the auto-*déclousion* of every *clôture*—including its own.

The essays in this volume vary widely in the directness with which they advance this argument. Broadly, one could place them in two categories: those that treat Christianity in an extended manner and those that deal primarily with specific thinkers and the elements in their thought that resonate with his reading of Christianity. In the remainder of this review, I intend to focus primarily on two of the essays that are more programmatic in character. But before doing so, I must make clear that the essays on particular thinkers were included because of their resonance with Nancy’s more programmatic statements on Christianity, not simply because they deal with broadly religious or Christian themes—but it seems fair to say that their value is basically secondary in terms of the intellectual task Nancy is setting himself here.

I turn first to “The Deconstruction of Christianity” the earliest piece collected here.⁸ The transcript of a lecture delivered in 1995, it clearly lays the groundwork for the project announced in the introduction. Quoting the Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson, he first lays out a first principle: “Only a Christianity that contemplates the present possibility of its negation can be contemporary.” Inverting it, he comes to a second principle, more important for his purposes: “Only an atheism that contemplates the reality of its Christian provenance can be contemporary” (205). This move is crucial to what Nancy is concerned with here: the deconstruction of Christianity, the opening of philosophy to Christian thought, is conceived as being in the service of atheism (a point further developed in the essay “Atheism and Monotheism,” in which he argues that monotheism provides the necessary conditions for atheism). Following these two complementary principles, he then lists three more:

“Christianity is inseparable from the West.”

⁸ This essay has already appeared in English translation, in the collection *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent deVries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

“All of Western thought is Christian through and through.”

“To deconstruct Christianity is to accompany the West” up to the void that is the limit and possibility of sense (207-08).

Or in short: “the modern world is itself the becoming of Christianity” (209).

Clearly, then, the deconstruction of Christianity is going to require historical as well as conceptual analysis, and so on the way to analyzing three key Christian concepts—“faith, sin, and the living God” (205)—Nancy indicates some lines of historical investigation. For example, rather than subscribe to the “projection of Christmas,” the belief that one day, Christianity simply sprang into being, Nancy proposes to ask “how and why Antiquity *produced* Christianity” (211). Further, it is necessary to go beyond the “Rousseauism of Christianity,” which posits “a good primitive Christianity in order to deplore its subsequent betrayal”—a position that he accurately ascribes even to Nietzsche. Rather, he proposes to look at the history of Christian dogma as a philosophical elaboration of the “fundamental structure of the announcement and of the opening of meaning” (218), arguing by way of example that the reworking of the concept of *ousia* through the development of trinitary doctrine transforms philosophy even as philosophy transforms Christian doctrine.

In the concluding analysis of Christian concepts in “The Deconstruction of Christianity,” Nancy takes the position that

faith, in any case, is not compliance without proof or the leap above proof. It is the act of the faithful person, an act which, as such, is the attestation of an intimate consciousness of the fact that it exposes itself and allows itself to be exposed to the absence of attestation, to the absence of parousia. ... Christian faith is distinguished precisely and absolutely from all belief (221).

Faith is faithfulness to that which gives faith, to the infinity of and above sense, and thus ultimately “faithfulness to nothing, faithfulness to no one, *faithfulness to faithfulness* itself” (223). This theme is re-elaborated in other essays, particularly in “Deconstruction of Monotheism,” where he goes on to argue that an atheist who “refuses all consoling or redeeming assurance is paradoxically or strangely nearer to faith than the ‘believer’” (56). This concept of faith—a kind of “atheist Protestantism”—could easily be brought into productive dialogue with two other contemporary thinkers who are taking seriously the call to think

Christianity: Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek.⁹ Badiou's reading of St. Paul finds faith to be faithfulness to an event, which becomes actual as event only insofar as it inspires faithfulness, while in Žižek's analysis of Christianity (through St. Paul as well as GK Chesterton, Kierkegaard, and others), faith becomes analogous to the psychoanalytic cure, in which the analysand is brought face-to-face with the impossible Real—or in other words, with the void.

Nancy decisively furthers this ongoing dialogue on Christianity in the essay "The Judeo-Christian: Of Faith." The recent attention to Paul is an essential first step in a philosophical reassessment of the Christian tradition, but it is equally essential to begin working through the other New Testament and early Christian documents. Nancy's essay is largely taken up with a reading of the New Testament document that I take to be the natural and necessary next step beyond the Pauline epistles: the Epistle of James. The occasion for Nancy's reading is a conference on Jacques Derrida, who in French shares the same first name as the author of this epistle.¹⁰ Beyond the pun on the first name, to which Derrida could not possibly object,¹¹ the epistle suggests itself because of Derrida's attention to "the two sources of religion and morality" in the essay "Faith and Knowledge"—which Nancy here takes to be the "Synagogue and the Church" (66). Beginning with the term "Judeo-Christian," popularly used to denote the religious heritage of the West, Nancy explores various historical meanings of the term before settling on *the* Judeo-Christian in the New Testament: the author of the Epistle of James.

The historical set-up to his reading of the epistle does contain some questionable assertions, indicating areas in which philosophical interpreters of Christianity might make better use of biblical scholarship. For instance, one of his primary scholarly authorities is Harnack, a great scholar to be sure, but one whose work is now a century old. Perhaps more problematically, he takes a remarkably uncritical view of traditional attributions of authorship and, more broadly, of the traditional view of early church history. The James who wrote this Epistle is

⁹ See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), *The Fragile Absolute—Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso, 2000), *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001), and *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Due to the vagaries of the tradition of English translation of the Bible, it is unclear to English readers that the Greek name of this epistle's author is the same Greek name that is translated as "Jacob" when it refers to the Old Testament character—when that Greek name refers to personages living during the New Testament period, it is translated as "James." French translators have, correctly, rendered the name as "Jacques" wherever it appears.

¹¹ See Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), in which he plays with the pun between Walter Benjamin's first name and the German *Gewalt* (meaning "violence," among other things).

taken to be James the Lesser, the brother of Jesus and the head of the Jerusalem council (71), whereas very few biblical scholars today would concede that the James of the Epistle is the same person as the James of Acts. The book of Acts is treated as a straightforward historical account, and speeches of Paul from Acts are unproblematically attributed to the historical Paul. He also attributes Colossians to Paul without noting its disputed character, and even more strangely, he persistently attributes the Epistle to the Hebrews to Paul, despite the fact that virtually no contemporary scholar would find such an attribution plausible and even early interpreters such as Origen and Augustine recognized that Paul could not have written that anonymous epistle.

Certainly it is the case that an overly skeptical view of the traditional account of early church history could contribute to the aforementioned “Rousseauism of Christianity” (218). Alain Badiou, for instance, who scrupulously limits his reading of Paul to those letters that are undisputed by current scholars, leaves himself open to that charge.¹² It is also the case, however, that a failure to take into account the rich resources of scholarly interpretation of scripture that are available unnecessarily hurts Nancy’s credibility among those who would otherwise be quite open to having such an acute intellect grappling with the biblical texts. Nancy has already commended biblical scholarship for its seriousness during a period when many “former materialists or former freethinkers began intoning the mumbo jumbo (*patenôtres*) of a return to the spiritual,”¹³ and so it is to be hoped that he and other philosophers will avail themselves of that scholarship. This would be in the spirit of Nancy’s project as a whole and in the spirit of Jacob Taubes’s recommendation that “a chair for Old Testament and a chair... for New Testament and even a chair for Church History should be instituted in departments of philosophy.”¹⁴ More attention to biblical scholarship would also help his other historical analyses—in particular his persistent inclusion of Manichaeism among the “monotheisms”—be heard for the provocative and insightful comments they are.

In any case, Nancy’s reading in itself does not depend on the historical set-up, and that reading is rigorous and creative. He rightly finds in James an insistence that faith must be distinguished from belief (73), and beyond that, an insistence

¹² Badiou’s named sources for Pauline scholarship are Günter Bornkamm, *Paul*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) and (it seems, more decisively) Stanislas Breton, *Saint Paul* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000). Breton distinguishes the authentic letters from those that are not “part of the elect” (7; my translation), but makes use of disputed texts, particularly Colossians, arguing that even if they do not come from the pen of the historical Paul, they are still “Pauline” in character. I object not to Nancy’s use of Colossians as Pauline *as such*, but rather to the fact that he is not making the argument in favor of doing so that is readily available to him.

¹³ “Of Divine Places,” 134.

¹⁴ Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Saint Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004): 4.

that faith is indistinguishable from faithful action—that faith is not merely “expressed” in works, but that it has utterly no existence aside from the works that expose themselves as faithful. Or in other words: “*Pistis* [faith] is the *praxis* that takes place in and as the *poesis* of *erga* [works]” (77). Beyond this, he derives a conceptual necessity for James’s “preferential option for the poor” in the fact that faith is always *given* and that sin is living in a way that denies the givenness of all things. Yet his thesis that faith *is* the working-out of faithful action keeps him from spiritualizing away James’s diatribes against the rich.¹⁵ Nancy’s recognition that James is fundamentally in agreement with Paul could help philosophical readers of Scripture to move beyond psychologizing readings of Paul’s epistles (to which Žižek in particular has been very susceptible). The sparse references to Jesus are taken to indicate the functional character of Jesus in James’s thought: the use of the proper name together with the anointed indicates that the givenness of faith has actually been revealed, serving to enable faithfulness. Yet, for Nancy, James’s closing description of what would later become “extreme unction” introduces a slippage of identity: in the anointing (which is the concept at the root of the words “christ” and “messiah”), “each dying person is a messiah, and each messiah is a dying person” (86). The structure of the promised resurrection in James is the same structure of resurrection he finds in Blanchot (in the essay “Resurrection of Blanchot”): that is, it is the resurrection of death itself, not an undoing of death.

Having at least touched on most of the contents of this volume, it would perhaps be appropriate to give some attention to the title: *Déclension*. As noted above, the promised project, and even the promised title, was *The Deconstruction of Christianity*—and indeed, two of the most important essays in this volume contain the word “deconstruction” in their title. Yet alongside “deconstruction,” and even above it, displacing it, there is the insistent reference to a *déclension*, which is first of all an un-closing. Certainly there are reasons to work with terms other than “deconstruction,” chief among them being the widespread overuse and misunderstanding of the term itself. It seems to me, however, that there is a deeper necessity in shifting from “deconstruction” to *déclension*, and that necessity is indicated in the brief closing essay of the volume, itself entitled *La déclension*. In the introduction, *déclension* has been paired with *clension*, as is appropriate given Nancy’s emphasis on the “closure of metaphysics.” In the closing essay, however, *déclension* is contrasted also with *éclension*, a word referring literally to “hatching” and used to signify breaking through a barrier into a wider world (as in the examples of Columbus’s journey and, more immediately, of space exploration). For Nancy, the world has reached

¹⁵ As Clement of Alexandria did, in an exemplary and sadly influential way, in his “Who is the rich man who can be saved?”

a point where no further *éclosion* is possible, and so we are entering into a phase of *décllosion*, “the *éclosion* of *éclosion* itself” (230).

This excess of “hatching” over itself is difficult to think, let alone to capture in a literal translation. Yet a first step in thinking this is found in a passage in Nancy’s *Inoperative Community* where he juxtaposes *éclosion* and *décllosion*.¹⁶ In a particularly felicitous translation, Peter Connor renders this pair as “hatching or blossoming.”¹⁷ It is to be hoped that Nancy’s project of a *décllosion* of Christianity, indeed the *décllosion* that was already underway before he named it as such, leads to a blossoming—that for a coming generation of thinkers, what often appears to be the empty husk of Christianity will instead reveal itself to be a seed which, fallen to the ground and dead, can spring forth in a new and unexpected kind of life.

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¹⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois Editeur, 1986): 124.

¹⁷ *The Inoperative Community*, 49.