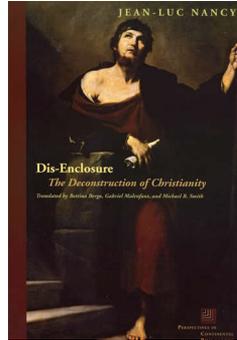


○ REVIEW OF JEAN-LUC NANCY, *DIS-ENCLOSURE: THE DECONSTRUCTION OF CHRISTIANITY*

(TRANS. BETTINA BERGO, GABRIEL MALENFANT, AND MICHAEL B. SMITH. NEW YORK: FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008)

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It is curious to find Jean-Luc Nancy issuing dark warnings about a philosophical ‘turn to religion’ which, in his view, ‘can only sharpen ... all the dangers that religion invariably poses to thought, to law, to freedom, and to human dignity’ (2). Given the sheer number of monographs, edited collections, panels, conferences and journal issues devoted to everything from Paul to post-secular religion, it seems more sensible to accept that the ‘turn’ is past, that religion is currently the context in which some of our most interesting thinking is done. Nancy’s *Dis-Enclosure* was originally published in French in 2005, and much has changed since then. But books on Paul by Badiou and Agamben had already been in circulation for several years by the time Nancy’s appeared, and Derrida, Nancy’s friend and mentor, had been writing on scriptural/religious topics since the mid-1980s. So why this dire tone? Why worry in print that the death of God will give way to the failure of reason (3)?

Nancy would not be the first atheist thinker to hold his nose while discussing, seriously, matters of religion. But the problem is that rather than issuing apologies and caveats in the opening pages, and then moving on, Nancy apparently remains ill-at-ease about this religious turn throughout. In addition to the above-cited warning, he goes on to imply that religious belief is a kind of disease (21), is the province of the gullible (96), is akin to fascism (5, 40, 137) and that the return to religion is, like all such returns, an ‘indecent’ ‘political correctness’ (85). It probably would have been better if *Dis-Enclosure* had been written as a stinging attack upon the religious (re)turn in theory and philosophy, for such sentiments as these will undoubtedly resonate with sympathetic academics – even if most scholars would still prefer a more fully nuanced presentation of religion than Nancy offers. But since Nancy’s book is actually an instance of the very return about which he frets, his effort to engage Christianity is simply perplexing.

Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity, is a collection of 15 unnumbered, mostly occasional pieces on Christianity and religion. The title essay was first delivered as a lecture in

1995, but nearly all of the other chapters originally appeared between 2000 and 2005. Nancy covers some intriguing ground over the course of the book, from a discussion of monotheism in the first chapters to a Space Odyssey-esque meditation on the cosmos in the last. Along the way he touches upon works by Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Blanchot, Barthes, Derrida and others, including the poet Michel Deguy. He also provides a commentary upon a New Testament text. But unlike Badiou and Agamben, Nancy has chosen the Epistle of James, rather than Paul's letters to Rome or Corinth, for the very reason that distinguishes James from Paul in the tradition: the former's emphasis on works. The claim of James 2:17 that 'without works faith by itself is dead' (51) serves to underscore Nancy's ontology, his faith, so to speak, in what he calls 'sense' (a key term in his vocabulary, articulated most evocatively in *The Sense of the World*), i.e., the infinite openness of being-as-relation. James means, in Nancy's reading, that 'faith ... exists only in ... works: in works that are its [i.e., faith's] own and whose existence makes up the whole essence of faith' (51). There is no precedence here of faith over works. Rather, thanks to James' insistence upon 'the law of liberty' (2:12), one can see that faith, as work, 'is the *acting* of relationship or proximity, rather than the *doing* of desire or appropriation' (55, italics in original). It is 'the setting in act ... of the inadequation in which and as which existence exists' (60). Or to put it differently, but in entirely Nancy-an terms, faith makes 'sense'. What it doesn't seem to do, though, is found a politics, as it would in the work of most current thinkers writing on Paul. Nancy is not unaware of James' specific insistence upon the love of neighbor (55), for instance, which illuminates the faith-works connection and which could give rise to a politics, or at least to a politically-inflected riffing on the language of love (especially as one encounters 'love' in Nancy's more overtly political books, like *The Inoperative Community*). But works are not, in Nancy's reading of James, actual deeds done for others, but are the acting of an abstraction: faith. And this leaves little space, it would seem, for the political.

The chapter on James, entitled 'The Judeo-Christian (on Faith),' concludes with a question: 'How did faith, one day, with the West, start composing a decomposition of religion?' (55). Perhaps the most significant chapters in *Dis-Enclosure*, those concerning the deconstruction of monotheism and Christianity, attempt an answer. Deconstruction is possible, Nancy reminds us, only because these religious categories deconstruct themselves. They do so in five ways: 1. since monotheism in (a certain) Judaism implies God's withdrawal from the world, and since in its Christian form monotheism involves the *kenosis* of divinity, the 'void-of-divinity' (36), monotheism is thus already atheism; 2. Christianity is self-demythologizing, that is, it 'tends to erase every distinctive religious sign' in favor of a 'symbolics deciphered within the human condition' (37); 3. Christianity is a system of interpretation aimed at distinguishing itself from its origins in previous religious traditions and elaborating a complex of philosophical concepts in the service of its theology – thus, it is thought rather than belief; 4. the Christian Trinity indicates that monotheism is 'less a body of doctrine' than a way of depicting 'a subject in relationship to itself in the midst of a search for self' (38); and 5. Christianity and the other monotheisms have developed through a history of self-revision and 'self-surpassing' (29), making them fundamentally similar to humanism. Or, to put it in simpler terms, if the West, leaving Christianity behind through its inexorable secularization, is nothing other than 'the unfolding of Christianity' (143), since the West is Christian, then Christianity must itself be considered secular, humanist, atheist. The only people who fail to recognize this are fundamentalists; but the conflict internal to

Christianity between fundamentalist reaction and modernist self-revision is merely emblematic of the religion's evolution into or toward its own demise (146–7).

In the preceding summary, a certain historical dimension predominates, but Christianity is also self-deconstructive from within its own theology, according to Nancy. Christian theology, or better, Christian revelation 'is at once the opening of sense and sense as opening' (147). In Nietzschean (a)theological terms, 'Christianity is accomplished in nihilism and as nihilism, which means that nihilism is none other than the final incandescence of sense, that it is sense taken to its point of excess' (ibid.). Individual Christian concepts bear witness also to this same 'sense'. These concepts have no vitality in themselves – the 'truth' of resurrection, for instance, 'resides in the simultaneity of death and a life within it that does not come back to life' (91); and 'prayer does not supplicate to obtain' (137). Instead, they help to articulate an idea of religion which is both entirely general, empty even, and yet also (or in this very way) ontologically valid.

Individually, each of these analyses might insightfully draw upon Christian terms to elaborate non- or (a)theological concepts. But taken together they amount to little more than, on the one hand, a muddled restatement of Nancy's most pertinent themes ('sense' is here merely twisted through a series of repetitions and chiasms without ever being fully explicated), and on the other an unproductive elaboration of the standard secularization thesis – without, it should be added, any help from Max Weber, Nancy's primary but strangely absent interlocutor. Nancy is also sometimes incomprehensible in his presentation of the religions he discusses: Trinitarian Christianity and Judaism are rendered more or less as equivalents; Buddhism is not really a religion (36); Christianity is unique in conceiving of itself in relation to its religious predecessors (146), and so on. Meanwhile, Islam barely figures at all in any of Nancy's more general discussions of monotheism. One should not expect a cartography of religious difference in a book such as this, just some attention to specificity, and certainly an awareness that most religious people in general live well away from the extremes of fundamentalism and secularizing (a)theology, the only modalities of religion Nancy seems to recognize.

Jean-Luc Nancy's work has always seemed to entertain at least the possibility of a utopian mysticism. Not faith, of course, but some intermingling of inspiration and hope is what characterizes his philosophical project at its best. Consequently, *Dis-Enclosure*, a book dealing explicitly with religious concepts, could have been the most interesting expression of his particular sensibility to date. Its failure to meet the standard set by Nancy's earlier work is thus especially disappointing.