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# Outside in, inside out: Notes on the Retreating God in Nancy's Deconstruction of Christianity

Laurens ten Kate

*Abstract*
According to Jean-Luc Nancy, a deconstruction of Christianity looks for the 'unthought' in the christian religion. By this unthought dimension he means 'something' *in* Christianity that at the same time 'is not Christianity proper' and 'has not mingled with it'. It appears to be simultaneously outside and inside Christianity. At the same time, this unthought undermines and 'exhausts' Christianity, and it would be this self-exhaustion that would be a key characteristic of Christianity; it follows that a deconstruction of Christianity primarily investigates the way Christianity deconstructs itself. In this article, the thesis is developed that this complex, unthought structure of Christianity (1) expresses Christianity's *modern* status, and (2) is expressed in the nucleus of the christian traditions, namely in the ways in which Christianity deals with the name, the experience and the concept of *God*. This is demonstrated – in dialogue with Nancy's work – by offering short analyses of the christian doctrines of the *Creation* and of the *Trinity*. These analyses show that the christian God 'incarnates' in various concrete ways the structure of being outside and inside: outside as well as inside Himself, the world, and even outside and inside Christianity. Shaped by this double bind, the unthought God is always a *retreating* God.

## *1. Introduction: Christianity's 'unthought'*

In 2002, in an interview in the German magazine *Lettre International*, Jean-Luc Nancy defines his project of a deconstruction of Christianity as follows. It is, as he states, the determination of 'something' (*etwas*) in Christianity that would have 'made it possible', but that, at the same time would be the 'unthought' of Christianity: that is to say, something *in* Christianity that at the same time 'is not Christianity proper' and 'has not mingled with it'. What could this remarkable feature of Christianity be, that Nancy locates simultaneously within and beyond this religion, as if this beyond belongs to Christianity in the form of what does not and can never belong to it?

Then, in the next sentence, Nancy adds to these rather complex formulations an even more difficult one. He states that the unthought of Christianity should be understood as something that can only be grasped in its 'coming' (*im Kommen*).[1] So, the deconstruction of Christianity

[1] 'Entzug der Göttlichkeit. Zur Dekonstruktion und Selbstüberschreitung des Christentums', in *Lettre International*, winter 2002, 76-80, 76: '…was das Christentum möglich gemacht hat (und mit ihm das, was die gesamten abendländischen Zivilisation strukturiert hat), was aber gleichzeitig nicht das Christentum selber wäre und sich nicht mit ihm vermischt hätte – etwas, was das noch im Kommen

involves a focus on two structures of thought: firstly, that of inside versus outside, and secondly, that of being or presence versus coming. In the complexity of Nancy's approach of these classic structures, one immediately perceives that both are deconstructed themselves, to the extent that they lose their oppositional rigor; the outside[2] is something contaminating the inside *from within*, and on the other hand the inside can only be understood as something opening itself towards an outside described as its condition (*möglich machen*)[3] and its movement (*im Kommen*). In is never in, and out never out. Surely, this complex and open structure of the unthought does neither coincide with Christianity's 'construction' – its historical traditions, doctrines and institutions – nor does it transcend it; the unthought, in other words, is neither simply present in, nor radically absent from (beyond) Christianity, but it deconstructs the latter's construction right from its nucleus.

However, this unthought inside and outside Christianity, as Nancy thinks it, is not the hidden essence of the christian religion leading eventually to its fulfilment in time, but refers to its *exhaustion*.[4] It is not of the order of an origin or of a destination, but belongs to its logic of self-undermining or, as Nancy puts it elsewhere, of its 'self-overcoming'.[5] In turn, this logic parallels the logic of what Nancy describes as the 'entire structure of western civilization' (*abendländische Zivilisation*)[6]: both Christianity and western culture as a whole are characterized by a dynamic of self-exhaustion, which according to Nancy achieves its radical form in modern, secular times. In this sense, Christianity's unthought which keeps 'coming' *to* and *from* it, makes us aware of its close interwovenness with modernity – aware of its being a modern religion.

Hence, the philosophical project of a deconstruction of Christianity has two key objects of investigation: first of all the unthought of Christianity and its complex structure, and next the

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begriffene Ungedachte des Christentums selbst wäre.'

[2] Outside Christianity in the sense Nancy formulates it in the interview (see note 1): 'that what has not mingled with it' – and I would add: what can never mingle with it according to a logic of presence.

[3] One should speak here of a continuous 'opening of possibility', of an active and dynamic 'making possible', in other words, of a beginning or starting point that 'begins time and again', rather than of a stable and pre-existent 'condition'. Considered this way, the 'condition' is part of the movement (*Kommen*) instead of preceding it; it is an unconditional condition. See on the problem of the outside as an unthought possibility, promise or even revelation also below, section 7, esp. note 32.

[4] The French terms used by Nancy are *épuisement* and esp. *exhaustion*: see e.g. 'Une foi de rien du tout', in *La déclosion. Déconstruction du christianisme I* , Paris: Galilée 2005, esp. 102. See also the Introduction in this issue by Ignaas Devisch and Aukje van Rooden, 'Deconstruction, Dis-enclosure, and Christianity'.

[5] See 'The Deconstruction of Christianity', in H. de Vries, S. Weber (eds.), *Religion and Media,* Stanford: Stanford University Press 2001, 112-130, 114; orig. 1998, republished in *La déclosion*, 203-226.

[6] See note 1.

ways in which this unthought questions the relation between Christianity and secular modernity.

*2. Between the end and the beginning of religion*

Almost ten years earlier than the 2002 interview, in a key paragraph in *The Sense of the World*, Nancy relates this modern unthought of Christianity with the *end of premodern* Christianity. He defines a deconstruction of Christianity as a project unmasking and interrupting the christian experience of sense, so that a new insight in the way sense 'works' in modernity becomes possible.[7] Whereas the Christian-medieval era, according to Nancy, received sense ultimately outside this life (the afterlife), outside this world (the Kingdom), and outside history (the *eschaton*, the 'Last Day'), modern secular culture has no option but to affirm and expose to the sense *in* and *of* this world. This commitment to the here and now is modernity's trouble *and* challenge. Sense is being disconnected from its non-worldly Giver, and it is simple *there* without the gift of a transcendent Giver. Here the deconstruction of Christianity seems primarily directed towards clearing up the christian veils that would block a new, modern understanding of sense. In the same paragraph Nancy speaks of an 'abandonment without return' of everything that is present in the Christ figure: that is, of 'all hypostasis of sense'.[8] The complex formulations of the 2002 interview seem to be opposed here by a critical definition aimed at disrupting Christianity, limiting its historical meaning and influence. This parallels Nancy's multiple statements about the presumed 'end of Christianity'. But is it that straightforward, first of all according to Nancy himself? Is this 'end' really an end?[9]

One might place both definitions in chronological order, discarding the older one in favour of the newer. That would imply that one of the key theses of *The Sense of the World* would have been abandoned by Nancy; this clearly is not the case, for his concept of sense in relation with the modern condition is very much at work in his later and recent publications.[10] Furthermore,

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[7] *The Sense of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997, 54-58; orig. 1993. See on this paragraph also the Introduction in this issue.

[8] *The Sense of the World*, 55, note 50.

[9] In a dialogue with Nancy, Jacques Derrida also quotes and comments the aforementioned paragraph from *The Sense of the World*, interrogating Nancy about his view on the possibility of an opposition between (premodern) Christianity and modernity. Derrida is critical with regard to any notion of an 'abandonment without return' of Christianity: 'Le mot "sens" paraît d'une part lié à ce christianisme qu'il faut abandonner. Mais une fois que l'on a abandonné le christianisme, on garde néanmoins le mot "sens" déchristianisé, si j'ose dire, il le faut encore. (…) Autrement dit, tu sembles vouloir sauver le sens après sa déchristianisation tout en disant, dans d'autres textes, que la déchristianisation est une opération d'autodéconstruction, c'est-à-dire encore chrétienne…' See Francis Guibal, Jean-Clet Martin (eds.), *Sens en tous sens. Autour des travaux de Jean-Luc Nancy*, Paris: Galilée 2004, 186-187.

[10] See e.g. *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, New York: Suny Press 2007 (orig. 2002), and

the author of *The Sense of the World* warns us already in the same paragraph, that a deconstruction of Christianity is 'something other than a critique or a demolition'.[11] It may be more correct, then, to try and think this end of Christianity and of its experience of sense as something already present *in* Christianity. In that case, an opposition of modernity and Christianity – the latter's end being the beginning of the former – would become pointless. It would be more worthwhile to explore the ways in which Christianity bears its own end within itself – an end that marks a never-ending beginning. This ambivalence is expressed, for example, in the way Christianity oscillates, from its earliest, its medieval to its modern phase, between an affirmation of sense outside and of sense inside the world. The life of the christian receives a powerful fulfilment as a form of care for oneself in the here and now and as responsibility for the earth, as for example Augustin teaches in his *Confessions* and Erasmus in his *Enchiridion*; but an equally forceful fulfilment is found in the longing for a life and sense outside the self and outside this world, as has been evoked by the chiliast movements, by numerous mystical traditions or by early modern puritanism.

But how to connect the philosophical announcement of the end of Christianity – of the end of its experience of sense – with the philosophical announcement of the unthought in Christianity that is still coming and more importantly, has always been coming? How to read the end as something never-ending? In order to come to terms with these questions and prepare for possible answers, we need to turn our attention to the christian *God*, or rather, to the ways in which Christianity deals with the name, the experience and the concept of God. For the unthought of Christianity analyzed so far is expressed mostly in its complex God.

*3. A God who wants to get rid of God*

The deconstruction of Christianity can be described as the determination of a radical ambivalence within Christianity, within its history, its theology, its doctrine, its rituals, its art: an ambivalence through which Christianity deconstructs itself. Hence, a deconstructive analysis of Christianity studies primarily Christianity's *autodeconstruction* as its basic characteristic.[12]

This ambivalence consists in the fact that the christian religion has itself, and from its very beginning – a beginning that should be traced back beyond the beginning of Christianity, in its Jewish and Greek roots – a double relation to the possibility, or rather, to the event of sense. This double bind of sense comes to the fore in Christianity's double experience of its God. On the one hand, it is almost obsessively occupied with the here and now of sense, that is, in the intimacy of our personal relation with Christ and his flesh and blood; here, no outside is necessary, for the outside is inside. The unthought, the unheard of that which is 'in

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the interview 'Rien que le monde' in *Vacarme* 11, Spring 2000.

[11] *The Sense of the World*, 55, note 50.

[12] See also below, note 30.

coming' (*im Kommen*), is in and since Christ always already there. On the other hand, Christianity remains totally devoted to the experience of a sense that is not of this world and transcends time and history: God's heavenly Kingdom is only one of the relevant metaphors here. In this second sense the outside is so radically transcendent that no relation to it is possible: only an experience of distance and of waiting remains. In sum, the christian God is 'so close and yet so far'.

In a parallel way the christian concept of the *parousia*, of Christ's appearance and subsequent presence in the world, with and among us, should be read in a double meaning, which would also be consistent with its traditional use. Christ's *parousia* refers to both his presence in the world, close to us, and his coming presence – his presence *as* coming – outside the world, that is, when he will finally gloriously return at the end of time. The first meaning of *parousia* is usually associated with the story and symbolism of the Cross, the second with the apocalyptic images and visions evoked in the last book of the New Testament. But a double *parousia* can never be a full presence. Though to many believers probably in a very unorthodox way, Nancy rightly points out that *parousia* should be thought in its literal meaning of a presence that falls short of being present: of a presence (*ousia*) that remains close but at a distance (*par-*). God's presence in Christ is a presence of *retreat*[13]: the retreat from being as the only possible 'mode' of being.[14]

As is abundantly clear from the first chapters of *La déclosion*, Nancy defends an understanding of Christianity that problematizes the opposition of religion and atheism.[15] Christianity *is* an atheism, Nancy attempts to demonstrate, because in it a fundamental retreat from religion is present and active. Why? Surely both sides, both extremes of the double bind explored above lead toward this retreat. The continuous deregulation of the inside-outside scheme, of the dualism of an innerworldly and a non-worldly sense, results in a religion that first of all enacts the death of God: the christian God dies in the intimacy of his becoming human in Christ, as well as in the infinite distance of his absence. The retreat consists of proximity *and* distance. In other words, *because* Christianity cannot choose between a present God and an absent God, this religion challenges the idea of a religion proper; for what remains of a religion that is devoted to the death of God? I suggest that it is in this direction that Nancy interprets the well-known dictum of Marcel Gauchet: Christianity, as the religion

[13] The double meaning of this term should be kept alive: retreat as withdrawal, and as dealing with (treating) something/someone *again* (re-), in other words: re-addressing. It indicates a turning away as well as a turning towards. The French word *retrait* contains the same contradictory meanings; however, in the German *Auszug/Entzug* the second meaning is lost.

[14] See 'Entzug der Göttlichkeit', 80.

[15] See in particular *La déclosion*, 'Athéisme et monothéisme', 27-46, and 'Déconstruction du monothéisme', 47-64, translated from an earlier version as 'Deconstruction of monotheism' in *Postcolonial Studies* 6-1, 2003, 37-46.

of the West, is 'la religion de la sortie de la religion'.[16] Christianity does not oppose atheism, it forms no counterforce against the 'disenchantment of the world', but accompanies it or, as Karl Löwith would state, has actually led to it.[17]

Well before the publication of *La déclosion* Nancy has already been involved in this complex exploration of Christianity's retreating God. This is indicated, for example, by two interesting footnotes in *Being Singular Plural*.[18] Just as the aforementioned paragraph and footnote in *The Sense of the World*, both footnotes refer to a future project called the deconstruction of Christianity, but the second footnote deals also briefly with the christian doctrine of the *Trinity*. I hold the view that this strange dogma formulated by the early Church and never after abolished or even revised seriously, may add to the clarification of the double bind just mentioned. If so, a deconstruction of Christianity cannot do without a deconstruction of the Trinity.
I will first present and comment the complex and sometimes cryptic paragraph in *Being Singular Plural* to which this second footnote belongs. Subsequently, in section 5, I will compare Nancy's remark on the Trinity with his view on the christian theology of the Creation. Finally, in section 6 and 7, I will formulate a few opening analyses to a deconstruction of the Trinitarian God. In doing so, I aim to explore new paths or side-paths in the deconstruction of Christianity, staying close to Nancy but going my own way as well.

*4. The God who is 'being-with'*

The paragraph in *Being Singular Plural* deals with one of Nancy's main subjects: the meaning of 'ensemble', of 'together', of 'être-avec', of 'being-with'. Nancy states that the word 'ensemble' always 'oscillates' between two obvious assumptions: either it is thought as a relation to something/someone *outside*, as a 'juxtaposition of isolated parts' or entities, or it is thought as a relation that encompasses the *relata* or *relati* (those who relate) in a fusional 'unified totality' by which the relation itself is being absorbed and transformed into 'pure substance': that is, into a pure *inside*. Although Nancy describes the restless oscillation between these extremes as an inevitable predicament of western thought, he also affirms this oscillation as an important feature of the 'ensemble' – maybe its only feature. For 'being-

[16] 'Religion retreating from religion.' See M. Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, Paris: Gallimard 1985, 133-232, transl. As *The disenchantment of the world : A Political History of Religion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1997.
[17] See e.g. Löwith's *Christentum und Geschichte*, Düsseldorf 1955.
[18] See *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2000, 16, note 20 and 60, note 52; orig. 1996.

with' defies the structure of outside and inside; it is neither *extra*, nor *intra*, and both simultaneously. Any thought of a pure outside or a pure inside precludes the possibility of the 'ensemble', Nancy claims.

'Both [a pure outside and pure inside – LtK] suppose a unique and isolated pure substance, in such a way that one cannot even say 'isolated', exactly because one would be deprived of all relation with it.'[19]

Against this God that is identical to a pure substance – inside, as in the pantheist option[20], or outside: think of the Being above or beyond Being characteristic of negative theology – Nancy now hints at a different God. This he does in the footnote. This different God, who is 'together' with the world neither in the form of a pure outside nor of a pure inside, might be the *trinitarian* God of Christianity. In this concept of God, Nancy suggests tentatively, the 'ensemble' is not thought as substance, but as a relational dynamics, an 'oscillation' within God himself. The divinity of this God is togetherness proper: 'Being-with of the onto-theological species'.[21]

This God is not a subject, according to the logic of the pure outside: not an isolated identity temporarily entering a relation; equally, this God is not the absorption of all subjectivity in a *totum*, according to the logic of the pure inside: not a fusion of identities that makes any relation superfluous. In this sense, this God is 'no longer "God"', as Nancy writes in the footnote. Still, the trinitarian God, whoever or whatever he may be, is a God. What strange God is this trinitarian God then? In *La déclosion* Nancy treats the question of this strange God by discussing the meaning of monotheism. He rephrases the formulations of our footnote in *Being Singular Plural*, and in doing so, persistently speaks about the God of christian monotheism. We will discover that here again, the trinitarian God creeps in.

'…the "One" of "God" is not at all Unicity as a substantial thing, present and joined to itself: on the contrary, the unicity and the unity of this "god" (or the divinity of this "one") consists precisely in the fact that the One can be neither posited, presented nor figured as conjoined in itself [*réuni en soi*]. Be it in exile and diaspora, be it in the becoming-man and in a being-threefold-in-itself (…), this "god" (…) absolutely excludes its own presentation (…).'[22]

So the monotheistic God, of which the trinitarian God seems to be a further expression according to Nancy, is no one in itself – not 'conjoined in itself'. Clearly, since the trinitarian

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[19] *Being Singular Plural*, 60.

[20] From which Nancy excludes, remarkably enough, Spinoza and Leibniz. In their work one would encounter a concept of God that defies the structure of outside and inside and that proposes a God that is no 'God' seen as substance or identity. Their God, Nancy claims, follows the logic of the 'ensemble' as described above: He *is* the ensemble. Hence, their God 'is not together with anything or anyone (…)', but He is 'the togetherness or being-together of all that is: God is not "God".' (60)

[21] One discovers that Nancy suggests a close proximity between his own thinking on the christian God and that of Spinoza and Leibniz: see note 20.

[22] 'Deconstruction of monotheism', 46.

God falls apart in three persons, it cannot be thought as a single 'person' in the sense of an isolated and self-indulgent subject, nor as an all-absorbing *totum*. It has a complexity to its being that is caused by its being-three-in-one: its being seems to be a being-with or being-together in a fundamental way.

*5. The unthought God as the God of Creation*

Elsewhere Nancy demonstrates the not-being-one-in-itself of God by means of an analysis of the God of Creation, e.g. again in *Being Singular Plural*[23], and later in *The Creation of the World*.

Nancy's interpretation of the christian narrative and subsequent doctrine of the creation of the world is provocative to the extent that the relation between creator and creation is not one of subject and object. The sense of the world as a *created* world consists in the enigma that the 'creator becomes indistinct from his creation'.[24] Or, formulated more radically: there is no God outside or before the event of the creation. Again, outside is inside, and the reverse. This event, in which the protagonists of the creation story (God and *Adam*, the humans; creator and creatures) are always already involved – they do not exist prior to it, nor as a result of it –, is the *nihil* of what has later been named the *creatio ex nihilo*, as Nancy sees it.

In fact, if the creation is *ex nihilo*, this does not signify that a 'creator' operates 'starting from nothing'. As a rich and complex tradition demonstrates, this fact instead signifies two things: on the one hand, it signifies that the 'creator' itself is the *nihil*; on the other, it signifies that this *nihil* is not, logically speaking, something 'from which' what is created would come [*provenir*], but the coming [*provenance*] itself (…).[25]

So the *ex nihilo* is the event of the coming, of the coming into being, and of being-as-coming (*provenir, provenance*). This may add to our understanding of Nancy's complex formulation in the 2002 interview I quoted at the beginning, that the unthought of Christianity can only be grasped as something or someone constantly *coming* (*im Kommen*), *moving* and *passing* only to *retreat* again: the unthought of the christian narrative of creation consists in the fact that creation is an act or event of 'coming itself'.

The *ex nihilo* is, in other words, the event of the relation in which God and humans, heaven and earth, outside and inside meet. In this meeting their being op-posed shifts to a being ex-posed to one another, thereby problematizing the closure of their identities. In this event, God is indeed no one in itself, but exists only in his gift of the creation, that is, in his giving himself away – 'himself' defined as the *coming* of the event of the creation.[26] Can we

[23] See 15-21.

[24] Ibidem, 15.

[25] Ibidem, 16. I have changed the rather awkward translation of this sentence a bit, rendering it more literal.

[26] The same could be said of the identity of *humans* in the creation, that is, of *Adam* (Hebrew for

demonstrate this same structure by focusing on the Trinity? Do we find a similar enigma here?

*6. The unthought God as a trinitarian God*

The concept of the Trinity can Ibe rephrased as a specific treatment of the problem we have been occupied with up to this point: how to portray a God that is 'so close and yet so far', in whom the sense of the world becomes apparent as a new involvement between outside and inside? For the Trinity bears as its central issue the event of the *incarnation*, of the becoming human of a God who, as such, *in* this becoming, still is God. In this sense the Trinity is an intriguing and troubling feature of christian theology: in it the unthought of Christianity, as analyzed earlier, is articulated in a formal, doctrinal manner, leading to its creed of a complex, multiple God. In this sense, the unthought of Christianity indeed resides primarily in its unthought God. How and why did this concept emerge?

The Trinity, as is well known, consists of three persons: (1) God, the Father, (2) Christ, his Son, who left his father to enter the world and become human, and (3) the Holy Spirit, which is the spirit of Christ left in the world to blow among humans after the Son had returned to his Father. In this formal summary of the concept, the Trinity reflects the threefold order of the biblical history. Firstly, the Jewish God of the Old Testament, the God of the creation, the law and the prophets (the Father) sends himself away in the figure of his son to become human. Secondly, this becoming human forms the material for the New Testament gospels telling the story of Christ. And thirdly, after Christ's ascension back to heaven, his Spirit lives on in the world: the stories of the concluding books of the New Testament.

So far, things are pretty straightforward. The Trinity would, according to this formal approach, be a linear structure, an image of a chronology: from outside to inside and back outside; from God to humanity and back to God. However, it becomes a lot more complex as soon as we recognize that the early church has always presented the Trinity as a threefold *God*: the Father, the Son and the Spirit are three gods within one. There is no question of a God temporarily leaving his divine topos only to return to it later on: the leaving itself is

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human being). Peter Sloterdijk elaborates this double problem of identity (of creator and creature, God and humans) in his *Sphären*, vol. I: *Blasen*, Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp 1998, esp. 31-45. Sloterdijk defines the creation, as imagined in the opening narratives of the jewish and christian bible, as an event *between* God and *Adam* which consists in a 'ursprüngliches Hin und Her reden, bei dem es keinen ersten Pol geben kann' (41). Hence, the creator is not the subject of the creation, but subjectivity 'happens', 'begins' or 'comes' (to use Nancy's vocabulary) in a *shared* event – Sloterdijk speaks of *Teilung*, which reminds of the important concept of *partage* (sharing, dividing, separating) in Nancy. 'In der intimen Teilung der Subjektivität durch ein Paar (…) treten Zweites und Erstes immer nur gemeinsam hervor. Wo das Zweite nicht eintrifft, war auch das Erste nicht gegeben. Daraus folgt: Wer Schöpfer sagt, ohne Adams vorgängige Koexistenz mit ihm zu betonen, hat sich bereits in einen ursprungsmonarchischen Irrtum verlaufen.' (42)

called God. In other words, God is God, but the human person in the Trinity, Christ, is equally God, as is his Spirit. And consequently: if the human person is human, than God is human as is the Spirit. Here, in the confessing and worshipping of a threefold God the scheme of an outside- and an inside-the-world begins to crumble.

Traces of this complex God can already be found in the New Testament, e.g. in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, and subsequently in a more explicit way in the writings of Tertullian in the second and of Origines in the third century. Whereas the former, standing in the tradition of Aristotelian metaphysics, emphasized God as 'One Substance' in whom three persons were embedded, the latter adopted a more free approach to the Trinity, by declaring the unity of three different and distinctive divine persons related to each other in an interplay. Already for Origines the incarnated, human God (Christ) and his Spirit were the central modalities of the trinitarian God; to him the Father-God remained in the background, as a transcendent creator of humans, while the Son-God was their redeemer, the Spirit *of* this Son their sanctifier.

But it was at the Council of Nicea in 325 and later of Constantinople in 381 that the first trinitarian creed was formulated by theologians like Alexander and Athanasius[27]; later it was established further as a doctrine in the fifth century, in particular by Augustin. Now, the Trinity is not an invention out of the blue. It is a heavy compromise that has emerged slowly within a fierce debate in the first centuries of the church on the status or 'nature' of Christ. If Christ is the central figure of the christian religion, should he simply be God or simply a human being? The former position was taken by the tradition called docetism, the latter by arianism. The theologians present at these Councils developed a compromise between the two positions, first in the famous dogma 'Vere homo, vere deus': Christ is both divine and human at the same time and this forever. Subsequently this compromise was placed into a coherent structure: the Trinity.

The historical background, in as far it can be reconstructed[28], leads us back first of all to the early Christians' resistance against the sacrality of the Roman emperor. Then still illegal and oppressed, the Christians needed to distinguish their God from the Ruler of the Empire, who, since Augustus, was proclaimed to be God on earth: to be the fusion of the divine and the human world, which gave him absolute power. Christ could hardly be a similar fusion of God

[27] The 381 creed is a much more elaborated version, which has become the standard text in the Christian liturgy.

[28] Research on the historical and political context of the debates on the Trinity are still rather rare. I just mention a few recent studies that are important to me: Susanne Hausammann, *Gottes Dreiheit – des Menschen Freiheit. Trinität, Anfänge des Mönchtums, Augustinus und Augustinismus*, Neukirchen/Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 2003; R. Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology and Worship*, Phillipsburg NJ: P&R 2004; William G. Rusch's edition with commentaries *The Trinitarian Controversy*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1980; and of course the older, famous study by Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers: Faith, Trinity, and Incarnation*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1976 (orig. 1956).

and humans, so the gospel narratives were interpreted, e.g. by docetist and on the other side arianist movements, into a direction wherein he was seen as either pure divine or pure human, pure 'exterior' or pure 'interior' 'substance' – to take Nancy's words from the footnote in *Being Singular Plural* I discussed earlier. The trinitarian theologians opposed these one-sided views and attempted to formulate a *different* entanglement of God and humans – different from the fusion presented in the Emperor. They experimented with a notion of entanglement in which both identities were constantly problematized in stead of being synthesized and neutralized. The enigmatic trinitarian God, I repeat, was seen as a God who opposes his own deity, who gives himself away to become human, and as such, as a non-God, was considered God. This enigmatic God was seen as a much firmer and more effective resistance against the Emperor-God than the rigid dualisms of the docetists or the arianists.

In the fourth century the doctrine of the Trinity was shaped in its definite and influential form in a period when the Church shook off its illegal status and became the dominant religion of the Empire. Consequently, the first theologians of the new, powerful church aimed to formulate a God that could replace and succeed the Emperor-God convincingly. Also, it became necessary for the new, christian emperors as well as for the first popes to ground their power in the idea of being an earthly representative of Christ and of his apostles: thus, outside and inside had to be brought together in a certain way. Christ himself needed to be thought in a radical incarnational structure, in which his divinity and humanity were his double truth.[29]

*7. The Trinity as a theology of retreat: incarnation, revelation, kenosis*

The Trinity presents a God that consists of 'leaving himself', I stated above. After having explored briefly the historical soil of the debates on the Trinity, let us now explore – again briefly, by means of some preliminary thoughts – we can now turn final attention to why Christianity, in its eventual choice for the trinitarian God figure, is a religion that retreats from itself – that *deconstructs* itself.[30]

The narrative of the incarnated God is not only the centre of the christian religion, but it is also its distinctive feature as compared to other religions and even to the other monotheisms. Nancy indicates this time and again in his texts on the deconstruction of Christianity. The

[29] In a similar way, Nancy compares the outside-inside-complexity of the christian God with that of the *sovereign*. See e.g. 'D'un Wink divin', in *La déclosion*, 158-159.

[30] Indeed the deconstruction of Christianity and of its theological doctrine – like the Trinity – is not primarily an act to be performed and conducted by an agent or subject in the here and now: by us philosophers or scientists e.g. First of all, it is something inherent to Christianity proper, as Nancy points out; hence, he speaks of the *autodeconstruction* of the monotheist religions, and in particular of Christianity (see e.g. *The Sense of the World*, 55, note 50, quoted earlier), and elaborated in 'The Deconstruction of Christianity', esp. 121-122). Deconstructivist analysis as an active academic practice can be nothing more than a way of demonstrating this autodeconstructive dynamic and make it explicit.

incarnation disorders the classic, hierarchic relation between gods and humans by introducing an infinite *thanatography* – a story about dying. God dies as God only to regain life as human: but this human then dies (on the cross) only to live again as God. However, this deceased and resurrected God can no longer be a 'normal' God, for he cannot be worshipped but in the shape of the one who humiliated himself and refrained from being God. Death of God, death of humans: these two events structure Christianity, precisely in their endless repetition. Maybe the Trinity should be understood, more than as a concept or dogma, as the story of this double event, the narrative of the incarnation.

In this context Nancy also speaks of the ambivalence of the christian *revelation*. Christianity does not start from a straightforward and concrete revelation of a God, supported by an originary holy text or by witnesses; The God that wants to get rid of himself reveals himself only as emptiness, as 'the Open as such', as Nancy names it.[31] Despite the multiple experiences of divine appearance or divine intervention by Christians throughout the history of this religion, revelation in Christianity does not have a subject or object, but refers to something that never 'is' but that 'is' to come. This 'something' is nothing in itself, but revelation proper. Revelation reveals the possibility of revelation, just as the creation, as we saw Nancy formulate earlier on, creates nothing in itself, but the possibility of creation. Neither a revealing instance, a creator, a subject, nor a revealed, created entity, an object, are articulated here; but in between these two the possibility, the promise, the event, that is: the possibility and the promise *as* event, as the gift and *kairos* of revelation. As soon as a subject threatens to overtake and appropriate this empty possibility, as soon as an object threatens to fill it with realization, both structuring events of Christianity – death of God, death of humans – question and even disarm these appropriations.[32]

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[31] 'The Deconstruction of Christianity', 121.

[32] Needless to say, this approach of revelation refers to Heidegger's distinction of *Offenbarung* (revelation) and *Offenbarkeit* (usually translated as revealability), in *Being and Time* (1927), and more prominently in his text 'Phenomenology and Theology' (from the same year), later published in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, 39-62 (orig. *Wegmarken*, 1978). The emphasis on the possibility and the promise of revelation, that is, on its revealability rather than on what/who may be revealed, is central to Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity, just as the emphasis on 'messianicity' as opposed to messianism is crucial to Derrida's work (e.g. in 'Faith and Knowledge', in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, *Religion*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998, 16; orig. 1996); the 'fact' of revelation *is* its coming, here and now, however not as a substance appropriable to a certain religious tradition or group, but only as possibility, as a 'not yet'. A radical thinking of the difference between the old Aristotelian modalities of potentiality and of substance is at stake here. Nevertheless, both thinkers also formulate their reservations with this rigorous distinction, e.g. in the dialogue quoted above (see note 9). Derrida states: 'Ce couple-là, *Offenbarkeit/Offenbarung* (…) est un couple diabolique, très difficile à maîtriser. On ne peut pas décider, quant à savoir si la condition de l'*Offenbarung* a été l'*Offenbarkeit*, autrement dit de l'ouverture du révélable dans laquelle une révélation historique s'est inscrite, ou si, au contraire,

The experience of an empty revelation parallels the other experience central to Nancy's thought, that of the christian God as a retreating God, with all emphasis on the 'event', the 'revelation' of this retreat. What is revealed is a retreat, rather than a 'God'. The prime model for this retreat is the concept of *kenosis*. God retreats by becoming human, 'emptying himself' as Paul's letter to the Philippeans[33], laying off his divinity in order to enter the human world. This is a remarkable feature of the idea of incarnation: for here God retreats, creating as much distance as possible between him and the world, between outside and inside, but this retreat only results in the most intimate proximity of the divine and the human, in Christ. Furthermore, the kenotic death of God is continued immediately in the death of the human being into which God had entered. Here we encounter the two aforementioned structuring events again. Following similar lines of thought, Nancy states that the incarnation does not simply mean that God becomes human, but that 'the divine in humans becomes a dimension of retreat, of absence, and indeed of death'.[34]

The Trinity, as much as its doctrine leans heavily on the doctrine of the incarnation and its complexities, reflects the problem of the latter. If the Christians worship Christ (centre and axe of the trinitarian structure) as their Lord, than they actually worship a double death: death of the Father, death of the Son – death of God, death of humans. As a strange concept of a threefold God that is no God, the Trinity may well be considered as the telling of a story rather than as a concept in the proper sense. It is the story of this double death. As was suggested above, the trinitarian creed of Constantinople may be rethought as the telling of a story rather than a confession of dogma's.[35] The spirit of this story, of this drama between God and humans must be told time and again. This Holy Spirit, the third person within the trinitarian God, the spirit of this death story, is called 'giver of *life*' in the creed. Wouldn't it be one of the 'unthought' features of Christianity that in the fourth century the assembled christian communities decided that their creed could only be to believe in two deaths (of God, of Christ) that, surprisingly and mysteriously, 'give life': 'I believe in God the Father, in Jesus Christ, his Son, and in the Holy Spirit, giver of life?'[36]

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une *Offenbarung*, c'est-à-dire un événement est arivé, imprévisiblement, qui a ouvert la révélabilité à elle-même…' See *Sens en tous sens*, 189. Here, the difference is rephrased as a tension articulating the inevitability of both terms and the undecidability between them. See on this also Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1999, 36, 40-95.

[33] Letter to the Philippians 2:7.

[34] 'Der Entzug Gottes', 78.

[35] This is especially true for the main part of the creed, that on Christ, which happens to be by far the longest part as well. Whereas the short opening lines on God the Father and the short concluding lines on the Spirit, the Church, Baptism and Eternal Life are phrased like theses, the lengthy middle part on Christ remarkably presents in the narrative form the story of his impossible birth, life, death and resurrection, stressing his being divine *and* human at the same time.

[36] See for an interesting rethinking of the Spirit as giver or rather as 'gifting person' within the

God is the 'story' of a double death (of the Father, of the Son) giving life (the Spirit): here one observes how Christianity's autodeconstruction and 'self-exhaustion' already come to light in the way it deconstructs its God. Christianity's modernity and modernity's christianity rest on this groundless ground.

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threefold God Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996, esp. 153-156. Here the Spirit is not merely seen as Christ's Spirit remaining on earth after His death and disappearance into heaven, but as the differential economy itself relating the other two persons to eachother. The Spirit is not a third person, but the middle and mediatory person initiating and 'organizing' the excess of the drama that happens between the Father and the Son – or, in a theological generalization of this event, between God and humans –, leading to their giving themselves away. Indeed the Constantinople creed of 381 states in an intriguing way that Christ has incarnated *from* or by (Latin: *de*) the Holy Spirit, and then, in the same breath, *out of* (Latin: *ex*) the Virgin Mary. Through this strange double gifting movement, by a God, the Spirit, and by a mortal being, the virgin, Christ is offered to the world. Here it is suggested that the Spirit comes before Christ, whereas the verse in the creed that actually introduces the Spirit as the third divine person in whom to believe, follows much later in the text.