Intimate Distance: Rethinking the Unthought God in Christianity

On Jean-luc Nancy's Deconstruction of Christianity, Compared and Confronted with the 'Theological Turn in Phenomenology'

Laurens ten Kate

University for Humanistics

Postbox 797

3500 AT Utrecht, The Netherlands

ltk@uvh.nl

Tel. 0031 6 20621671

Fax 00321 30 2735043

Abstract

The work of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy shares with the thinkers of the 'theological turn in phenomenology' the programmatic desire to place the 'theological', in the broad sense of rethinking the religious traditions in our secular time, back on the agenda of critical thought. Like those advocating a theological turn in phenomenology, Nancy's deconstructive approach to philosophical analysis aims to develop a new sensibility for the other, for transcendence, conceptualized as the *non-apparent* in the realm of appearing phenomena. This is why Nancy launches a project looking for the 'unthought' and unexpected within the Christian traditions, called *deconstruction of Christianity*.

However, the deconstructive approach to the non-apparent differs fundamentally from that of the thinkers of the turn (1) in its being non-apologetic and non-restorative with regard to religion, because it starts from a problematization of the – typically modern, that is romantic – desire to defend and protect what would be 'lost' and possibly to restore this, (2) in its focus on the complex difference-at-work (*différance*) between religion and secularism, a difference that can be termed *entanglement* and *complicity* between these two, (3) in its hypothesis that this entanglement is essentially one between (the meaning and experience of, the rituality around) presence and absence in modern culture, (4) in its conviction that the philosophy and history of culture must join, support, complete and maybe even turn around phenomenology when dealing with the difficult task of determining what exactly would be 'left' of the 'theological' in our time.

In this article both positions are compared and confronted further, leading to an account of Nancy's re-readings of the Christian legacy (its theology, doctrine, art, rituals etc.), and ending in a more detailed, exemplary inquiry into the tension between distance and proximity, characteristic of the Christian God.

1. Phenomenology and deconstruction: Derrida, Nancy

Since Jacques Derrida's groundbreaking analyses in *Speech and Phenomena*[1], the relation between phenomenology and deconstruction has always been a complex one. In this little book, which was one of the first examples of deconstructive thought, Derrida went to the heart of original philosophical phenomenology, that is, Husserl's *Logical Investigations*[2], not in order to criticize from an external position, but to read Husserl's text so carefully and meticulously – from within – that the unthought and unspoken features of it came to the fore.

Reading the first chapter of the *Investigations*, Derrida problematizes the 'essential distinction' (*wesentliche Unterscheidung*) Husserl introduces between two modes of human language: that of *expression* and of *indication*.[3] Both modes are determined by Husserl by the measure in which they produce *presence*: presence-to-self (*présence à soi*) of the thinking subject and presence of the object to this thinking. Derrida traces the moments in Husserl's argument when the *entanglement* (*Verflechtung*) between presence-to-self and absence that decenters the self claims its place – whether explicitly or implicitly. He then conceptualizes this entanglement as *difference*, that is, as an uncontrollable difference-at-work[4] between the auto-presence of meaning and sense Husserl is preoccupied with, and its opposite, absence.

---

[1] See Derrida 1973.

[2] See Husserl 1984.

[3] The first mode is supported, according to Husserl, by expressive signs, that coincide with the sense (*Bedeutung*) they create and hence *present* this sense: they create a *presence* by which the sign itself is absorbed. The second mode is supported by indicative signs, that 'only' suggest sense and hence do not create the enveloping presence of sense brought about by expressive signs. See Husserl 1984, 3-66.

[4] Here Derrida uses the well-known neology *différance*, probably the key concept in the philosophy of deconstruction (which can therefore be called a central current within the 'philosophy of difference' that came up in France since the sixties with thinkers like Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard, Nancy). *Différance* is a variation on the French *différence* indicating an active, verb-like meaning of the word. A dynamic differing of difference is expressed in the *a* replacing the *e*. Furthermore, the double meaning of the French *différer* is played out here, that of differing and that of deferring. Différance always defers, postpones unity and presence; it keeps the dynamic between presence and absence open and undecided. See on this also my 'Randgänge der Theologie. Prolegomena einer "Theologie der Differenz" im Ausgang von Derrida und Barth', in *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 14-1, Fall 1998, 9-31.
Whenever the word 'difference' is used in the following, this neologic meaning is referred to.

This difference is the unspoken, unthought element in phenomenology, challenging and contaminating its preference for presence in the ideal world of expression – the world in which the subject is one with itself by reducing the realm of empirical objects (outside) to the life of transcendental consciousness (inside).

Ultimately, by addressing this so-called *phenomenological reduction*, Derrida questions the foundations of phenomenological theory; but the unsettling impact of his book consisted in the fact that he does this by respecting Husserl's text and language to the limit, taking it seriously on a microscopic level. These foundations are questioned by showing that the subject expressing itself can never achieve an immediate and pure presence-to-itself in which it would be one. On the contrary, the instances of entanglement and Husserl's reflection on it in his text demonstrate that this all-absorbing pursuit of the subject – its *voice* (*voix*) or its *speech* reducing and absorbing *phenomena* – will always leave a remainder of unfitting absence embarrassing us. This absence, or rather non-presence, should be understood as absence of meaning and sense (so, indeed, non-sense) as well as absence of unity within the subject – a unity constituting its transcendental 'ego' – and between subject and object, that is, between the 'I' and its voice on the one hand and the reality of phenomena on the other. In fact, in the phenomenological schematism, the creation of sense – in expression – *is* the creation of this double unity.[5]

So, deconstruction is neither against phenomenology, nor does it propagate it. In a way, it merely confronts phenomenology with its limit: the limit of expression and reduction when facing absence. This 'neither-nor' makes the relation between these two currents of and approaches to thought, which have been immensely influential in 20th-century philosophy, art, literature, and culture, a delicate one.

The work of Jean-Luc Nancy (b. 1940) follows the path of deconstructive analysis Derrida has set out in many ways. His discussion of the phenomenological tradition bears the marks of what was at stake in *Speech and Phenomena*. Nancy also observes and questions the phenomenological tendency to think the constitution and structure of meaning and sense as an intentional act of the ego, which thereby constitutes itself[6]. Equally, to Nancy the idea that this act can and will lead to the appearance (φαίνομαι [*phainomai*] in Greek, from which

---

[5] See for an instructive exploration into new possibilities in the Husserl-reception, in which Derrida's deconstruction of Husserl in *Speech and Phenomena* plays a clear role, Rudolf Bernet, 'Husserl's Theory of Signs Revisited', in Sokolowski 1988, 1-24.
[6] See e.g. Nancy 2000, 200 n53.

'phenomenon' is derived) of a full, pure, immediate and, in Husserl's words 'original' presence, should be deconstructed to the extent of losing its self-evidence. Nancy also joins Derrida in an attempt to demonstrate how phenomenology, in its strict methodological and egological Husserlian form, in its existential, ego-critical Heideggerian form and in its postwar developments in for instance Sartre's, Ricoeur's or Levinas's work, 'touches upon its own limit and transgresses this' time and again. (Nancy 2000, 200 n 53) This limit is reached in the difference between presence and absence, as Derrida points out, but also, Nancy adds, in the difference between the 'I' and the other, in the co-existence in time and space, touched upon by Husserl in the *Cartesian Meditations*.[7] The emphasis in Nancy's discussion of phenomenology lies on the structural analysis, fed by a certain wonder and fascination, of this limit – an analysis *in* and *with* the phenomenological traditions rather than *against* them.

The same problem of presence and absence, and of the difference deregulating their dualism, is formulated by Derrida (especially in his later work[8]) and Nancy, when they enter the fields of the philosophy of *religion* and of *theology*. The strange and in a way impossible status of God – as concept, as name, as figure, as experience – and of the divine, in short of what is called the transcendent or transcendence, is discussed here: how can God be without being, be present without presence? And how can this non-God be the figuration of the divine, of the transcendent, unless these two are left to non-presence as well? Already in *Of Divine Places* (1991; *Des lieux divins*, 1987) Nancy seeks an answer to this question by following a historical line: the line of the complex development of Western and modern culture, going back all the way to its Jewish and Greek/Latin roots, via Christianity and modern Enlightenment to our so-called 'postmodern' time. In Nancy's work the question of the (non-)presence of God does not receive an essentialist response (telling us something about the presence, however outstanding, however transcending all being), but a historical one: how and why have the gods, has God disappeared, and how and why does he persist lingering on in our societies, our lives, *as the disappeared?*

---

[7] See again Nancy 2000, 200 n 53; here Nancy refers to the paragraphs 55-58 of Husserl's *Cartesianische Meditationen*, Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff 1950.

[8] See e.g. Yvonne Sherwood, Kevin Hart (eds.), *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, London and New York: Routledge 2005. See also the useful volumes edited by John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley and Michael J. Scanlon, *Questioning God*, Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2001; and John D. Caputo, Michael J. Scanlon (eds.), *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1999. These are just two examples of an immense array of publications and literature that came out in the last 10 to 15 years, in particular in the anglophonic world. Derrida's later work is quite a central source in this literature.

> 'The gods went away long ago', said Cercidas of Megalopolis, in the third century
> B.C. Our history thus began with their departure, and perhaps even after their
> departure – or else, when we stopped knowing they were present. They cannot return
> in that history – and 'to return' has no sense outside of that history. But where the gods
> are – and according as they are, whatever the present or absent mode of their existence
> – our history is suspended. (Nancy 1991, 145)

The emphasis on this history of the West and of its recent phase, that of modern culture, being threatened by its 'suspension' by a place 'where the gods are', where God is – without presence, and yet… – is also crucial in Nancy's critical discussion of the so-called 'theological turn in phenomenology'. Furthermore, this historical accent is the basis of his inquiries into what he calls the *deconstruction of Christianity*. Let us see in what way.

2. Nancy and the 'theological turn in phenomenology'

The protagonists of the theological turn in phenomenology, as studied elaborately in other contributions to this issue, share with the deconstructive approach in philosophy an interest in what they see as phenomenology's blind spots. By this they designate (1) the 'unapparent'[9] or 'non-appearing', or in Derrida's and Nancy's terms, absence, as opposed to or as a 'remainder' of the apparent, the appearing, to presence; and (2) the other person, the others (the community, society) as well as the Other of transcendence, of God, all of whom are tacitly marginalized or even negated by phenomenology's preoccupation with the ego and its presence-to-self. This double criticism refers back to Heidegger's early reservations with regard to his teacher, Husserl, in *Being and Time* (orig. 1927), where Heidegger proposes a distinction between being (*das Seiende*) as analyzed by phenomenology, and Being (*Sein*) which he thought as the condition of, and constant interruption into, being and beings; *Sein* is never reducible to presence. In a parallel way, being which opens itself onto Being – Heidegger calls the existence of this being *Dasein* – is never reducible to presence-to-self: it is not even a 'subject' in the classical sense, as Nancy states (Nancy 2000, 14). Both to those

---

[9] The suggestion of a 'phenomenology of the non-apparent' was introduced by Heidegger in 1973, in the Zähringen seminars. It was adopted more or less by Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, and in a different way by Emmanuel Levinas – the latter's critical discussion with phenomenology and his claim that phenomenology would exclude the non-apparent as its 'other' date from well before 1973, see his *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press 2003 (orig. 1961). See on the 'history' of this phenomenology of the non-apparent Dominique Janicaud in Janicaud et al. 2000, 28-34.

thinkers in favour of a 'turn in phenomenology' and to Derrida and Nancy this so-called ontological difference is an important starting point and, in a way, a legacy from which they live.

So Nancy and those advocating the 'turn' do not disagree as to this turn itself. They are focused on a turn within phenomenology, bringing it toward and maybe even outside its limits; they do not attempt to 'overturn' phenomenology. However, Nancy disagrees on a fundamental and methodological level on the issue how to treat the *theological* in that turn.

For the thinkers of the turn the non-apparent which is the key feature of the other/Other, of transcendence and ultimately of God, should be treated as a belonging to the realm of phenomenality. This 'appearing of the non-apparent', in a phenomenal mode, is not of the order of the simple presence of things, but it should be thought as an event, an act of *giving*: donation. By giving itself and by giving what is then 'given' for us (the world of presence, of things), it invests itself into the phenomenal world without giving up its transcendence, its absoluteness and irreducibility. In the end, rethinking the non-apparent, the remainder of absence, rethinking transcendence as a feature of phenomenality boils down to rethinking the *religious* as a feature of phenomenality: the thinkers of the turn attempt to rehabilitate religion, and religious experience and practice, *as* a category of phenomena: creation, incarnation, salvation, but also rituals like prayer or confession, are all re-phenomenalized in this way. Marion, for instance, aims to 'examine (…) the phenomenological figure of philosophy and the possibility it keeps in store for God.' (Marion 2008, 284)

According to Nancy, bringing up the question of the non-apparent – of God, of the gods, of the divine – can never end in a reconciliation, however subtle its form, with phenomena. Absence can never stop being the blind spot of presence, of phenomenality, and thus of phenomenology. In other words, phenomenology can not be 'improved' or 'completed' by making it theological, by adding God (*theos*) to its field of inquiry or at least to its language or vocabulary. For Nancy one can only locate God and point at His 'place' or 'places', by looking at the dynamic difference between absence and presence, as formulated by Derrida in *Speech and Phenomena*. This difference is thought by Nancy *as* a place, a *lieu divin*, a place as the dynamic in-between presence and absence. It is the place 'where the gods are – and according as they are, whatever the present or absent mode of their existence

(…).'[10] (Nancy 1991, 145) The question of God, Nancy states, is 'no longer one of being or appearing'. (Nancy 2008, 111) The logic of being, appearing, of phenomenality, should be challenged by a 'dynamic of passing' and of the moment and momentary. Below I will investigate further the possible meanings of such a dynamic in which absence and presence are constantly entangled, in which God 'is' only in 'passing': passing by and passing on or even away, seen as two modes of one and the same moment.[11]

The inclination toward a re-presentation of the non-apparent by the thinkers of the turn also bears the characteristics of a rehabilitation of religion in a secular age. One may even speak of an apologetic tone here, where (aspects of) Judaism (Levinas) or Christianity (Henry, Marion, Chrétien) are revitalized and defended against modernity's negation or suppression. The corollary of the attempt to re-introduce religion into a modern context, that is, to re-introduce absence into presence, bringing the non-apparent towards a new state of appearing, is the attempt to defend something which was 'lost' but has to be found again. It is the inevitable second nature of any 'turn', let alone a 'theological' one, to be apologetic in its self-legitimation as well as restorative in its practice.

By contrast, the path Nancy aims to set out and enter is a completely different one. It is a path that combines critical-philosophical with historical methods, in order to explore the way religion and secularism, theism and atheism are still entangled in our time. Not a re-presentation and re-phenomenalization of religion, of God, is necessary, but an understanding how, why and to what extent religion, God are still 'present' – albeit, maybe, *as* absence – in our secular societies and lives. Concentrating on the dominant religion in the West, Christianity, Nancy introduces in the last decade of the previous century a project of studies around the *deconstruction of Christianity*. We will have to take a closer look now at what such a path of explorations involves. But let me conclude so far that the deconstructive approach to the non-apparent differs fundamentally from that of the thinkers of the turn (1) in its being non-apologetic and non-restorative with regard to religion, because it starts from a problematization of the – typically modern, that is romantic – desire to defend and protect what would be 'lost' and possibly to restore this, (2) in its focus on the complex difference-at-work between religion and secularism, or religion and atheism, a difference that can be termed *entanglement* and *complicity* between these two, (3) in its hypothesis that this

---

[10] See also above, section 1, for the full quotation.
[11] In the text quoted from, 'On a Divine *Wink*', in Nancy 2008, 104-120, Nancy compares this moment of passing to a wink of the eye. For an analysis of this rich and fundamental chapter of *Dis-Enclosure*, see also several contributions to Alexandrova et al. 2009 (forthcoming).

entanglement is essentially one between (the meaning and experience of, the rituality around) presence and absence in modern culture[12], (4) in its conviction that the philosophy and history of culture must join, support, complete and maybe even turn around phenomenology when dealing with the difficult task of determining what exactly would be 'left' of the 'theological' in our time.

3. The deconstruction of Christianity[13]

So, for the time being, let us leave phenomenality for what it is worth, and fix our attention on history.[14] One of the most remarkable features of the modern period in Western history is its relation to religion. On the one hand, modern times are rightly defined as those in which the 'end of religion' has taken place: or more precisely, the end of Christian dominance on the cultural, social and political scene of Europe, by means of the church and the clergy. From the 15th century, modernity destroyed the foundations of the medieval, feudal society, and, on the *tabula rasa* that ensued, it constituted itself as 'new world' or *Neuzeit*: a world for humans and their sciences and arts, a world of public criticism, tolerance and democracy. In the first phase of this new world, religion was effectively marginalized and transformed into private business: a logical counter-solution to the traumatic religious wars of the 16th and 17th century.

Modernity thus defines itself as secularization and as the critique of religion – brought to its summit in Marxism and in the communist systems – but also as freedom of the individual and hence private religion. *Humanism*, the name that gradually was invented for this disposition of public critique, marginalization of religion and freedom in the private realm, could only choose as its new foundation the human person as an autonomous, individual self. As a consequence, humanity proper is its own ground. There is no external force – like the medieval God-in-Christ and his delegates: Maria, the saints, the pope – who can ground us; we, moderns, have to ground ourselves.

---

[12] Or to put this in slogan-form: We need not fight for absence: if necessary at all, absence will fight for itself…

[13] See for an introduction into Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity also a 'dossier' of articles in *Bijdragen. International Journal for Philosophy and Theology*, forthcoming Fall 2008, esp. Ignaas Devisch, Aukje van Rooden, 'Deconstruction, Dis-enclosure and Christianity: Introduction', and Laurens ten Kate, 'Outside in, Inside out: Notes on the Retreating God in Nancy's Deconstruction of Christianity'.

[14] Parts of the following analyses in this section are a reworked version of my 'Heilig heidendom. Over de complexe relatie tussen humanisme en christendom', in Duyndam et al. 2005, 143-160.

On the other hand, Christianity has rather easily adapted itself to its new marginal role. It has not disappeared at all after the 'end of religion'. Whereas other elements of medieval life, like the nobility, the feudal economy and the political power of the clergy, slowly vanished away to make place, in the 19th century, for the free market and a bourgeois-ruled society, Christianity lingered on and invented its own persistance. This religion seems to have survived the death of its God.

Religion against religion (1): a hypothesis
Starting from this peculiar combination of death and survival, Nancy's hypothesis, formulated tentatively in his entire work and more systematically in his recent *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (2008), is the following. The modern rejection of religion – considered as something that hinders humanism, freedom, progress and emancipation – is intimately related to and a continuation of a rejection that the Jewish and Christian traditions carried in themselves from the outset: the rejection of religion. This process of self-rejection has been analyzed by Marcel Gauchet by depicting Judaism and Christianity as 'religions of the retreat from religion',[15], or as Nancy puts it, as religions that are connected closely with atheism.

> The only Christianity that can be actual is one that contemplates the present possibility of its negation. (…) The only thing that can be actual is an atheism that contemplates the reality of its Christian origins. (Nancy 2008, 140)

In particular Christianity, with its emphatic narrative of the suffering and death of God-in-Christ, abolishes religion only to let this abolishment reappear as the nucleus of religion, to be performed by the believers again and again in the eucharist. Judaism and Christianity share a complex origin – or a plurality of origins – in which natural religion and spontaneous religiosity, embedded in a polytheistic universe, seem to play only a minor role. Judaism and Christianity attempt to break away from the human, 'natural' need for the polytheistic gods, who – if treated respectfully by bringing them sacrifices regularly – are experienced to be beneficial and salutary for human life: in this way, humans are dependent on the gods and as

---

[15] 'La religion de la sortie de la religion.' See Gauchet 1985, esp. 133-232.

such subjected to them.[16] With this rupture from natural religion the *exodus*, a key theme in the Jewish and Christian narratives, is first and foremost an exodus out of religion proper.

If one pursues this hypothesis to its radical consequences, one would qualify Christianity and its Jewish roots as the inventor of modernity instead of its enemy, and modernity as the achievement, fulfillment and radicalization of Christianity, at a moment in history – decline of the medieval societies in Europe, Renaissance, Reformation, rise of early capitalism, development of the sciences etc. – when this became historically possible.

Questioning the model of secular emancipation

Nevertheless humanism as described above, in its Renaissance and modern form, is often defined as an emancipation out of the Christian era. Two important 20th century thinkers of modern secularization, Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg, have both tried to demonstrate the uselessness of this model of emancipation.[17] They do this from quite different perspectives. Both philosophers state that modernity cannot be understood if one thinks it primarily as a historical negation and liberation from a previous period. The uniqueness and proper, 'new' character of the *Neuzeit* disappears out of sight if one considers it only as a history of secularization and emancipation.

Blumenberg wants to determine this unique 'legitimacy' of modernity by disconnecting it radically from the Christian era; 'modern' consists of a series of historical processes that cannot be reduced to the Christian legacy, nor to the protest or resistance against it. Löwith, on the contrary, sees the singularity of modernity in its being a unique, secularized continuation of Christianity. Michel Foucault defends a similar position when he points out how the modern way to treat and experience sexuality has been stamped by the Christian experience of shame and guilt, which transforms sexuality into a scene of limitation and transgression.[18]

---

[16] Compare the concrete gods of rain and fertility, in sum of nature, criticized and fought in the stories of *Tenach* (the Jewish bible) in favour of the nameless, abstract, intangible Jehova, who does not tolerate other gods next to Him – although these stories also describe the immense attraction the gods of nature have on the people of Israel.

[17] See for Löwith's position e.g. *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1953; *Permanence and Change: Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Cape Town SA: Haum 1969; *Christentum und Geschichte*, Düsseldorf: Pädogischer Verlag Schwann 1955. For Blumenberg's position see above all his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT 1983 (orig. 1966).

[18] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, New York: Pantheon Books 1978 (orig. 1976), and more specifically his groundbreaking article on the work of Georges Bataille, 'Préface à la transgression', in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits* (D. Defert, F. Ewald, eds.), vol. I, 233-250, esp. 233-235.

Nancy clearly takes the same starting point as both German thinkers, that of a critique of the emancipatory model. Then, not unexpectedly, he joins Löwith's position, without mentioning his work explicitly. As he suggests, the marginalization and dissolution of Christianity is far too easily

> assumed to be the effect of the modern transition toward a rationalized, secularized, and materialized society. So it is said, but without having any idea why that society has become what it is… unless that is because it has turned away from Christianity, which merely repeats the problem, since the defined has thereby been placed within the definition. (Nancy 2008, 143)

Peter Sloterdijk pursues a similar critique of the model of emancipation. He states that modernity cannot be thought without taking its Christian bedding into consideration. He even takes one normative step further. Modern humans need protective 'spheres' they can experience as virtual but nonetheless very meaningful and reassuring 'spaces' that distinguish them from, and immunize them against, the infinite, spaceless, fragmentary world they have to live in: the globe called Earth. Religion, and particularly Christianity, has invented and offered numerous 'tools' to form these temporary spheres. However, according to Sloterdijk, in a certain phase of its history, that is, in the scholastic period in late-medieval theology and doctrine, the Christian religion has detached itself from this vital role.[19]

Both Sloterdijk and Nancy share in their method and approach a search for the *unthought* and *unexpected* in Christianity, or rather, in the relation between modernity and Christianity. Only an inquiry into such a 'remainder' in Christianity can open up the rigid antagonism of Christianity and modern humanism. In this sense, in the focus on the unthought, both thinkers' analyses fall into the realm of deconstruction. The 'turn' these thinkers advocate and exercise is not so much a theological turn – which would leave theology and its traditions more or less intact; they would 'return', 're-appear' as they were – but rather a turn *in* theology and in religious studies in general. Such a turn looks for what may contaminate theology from within, exploring the 'untheological' in theology.

Addressing the unthought in Christianity

---

[19] See Sloterdijk 1998, ch. 8 and 1999, Introduction and ch. 5. In my view, a critical account of Sloterdijk's proclamation of a certain decline of Christianity towards the end of the Middle Ages would certainly be necessary, despite the admirable and innovative analyses of the *christliche Erbe* (Christian legacy) he offers. See on this my 'Zwischen Immunität und Infinität. Der Ort in Peter Sloterdijks Sphärologie, im Hinblick auf seine Durchdenkung der christlichen Erbe', in Koenraad Hemelsoet, Sjoerd van Tuinen (eds.), *Peter Sloterdijk zum 60ten Geburtstag*, München: Fink Verlag, forthcoming Spring 2009.

In a conversation with the German magazine *Lettre International* Nancy is requested to describe his project of a deconstruction of Christianity. It is, he says, the inquiry into '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'. (Nancy 2002, 76) What could this remarkable feature of Christianity be, that Nancy locates simultaneously within and beyond, inside and outside 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 that the unthought of Christianity should be understood as something that can only be discerned in its 'coming' (*im Kommen*).[20] So, the deconstruction of Christianity 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 to these classic structures, one immediately perceives that both are deconstructed themselves, to the extent that they lose their oppositional rigor; the outside[21] 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*)[22] and its movement (*im Kommen*). Surely, this complex and open structure of the unthought neither coincides with Christianity's avowed '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*. (Nancy 2008, e.g. 71[23]) It is not of the order of an origin or of a destination, but belongs to a logic of self-undermining or, as Nancy puts it elsewhere, of its 'self-surpassing'. (Nancy 2008, 141) In turn, this logic parallels the logic of what Nancy describes

---

[20] Nancy 2002, 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 begriffene Ungedachte des Christentums selbst wäre.' My transl., also later quotations.

[21] Outside Christianity in the sense Nancy formulates it (see note 20): 'that what has not mingled with it' – and I would add: what can never mingle with it according to a logic of presence.

[22] 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..

[23] The French terms used by Nancy in *Dis-Enclosure* are *épuisement* and esp. *exhaustion*.

as the 'entire structure of Western civilization' (*abendländische Zivilisation*; Nancy 2002, 76)[24]: 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 ways in which this unthought questions the relation already discussed above between Christianity and secular modernity.

Religion against religion (2): the (auto)deconstruction of Christianity
In a key paragraph in *The Sense of the World* (1997, 54-58) 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. 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 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'. (Nancy 1997, n. 50)

In the same paragraph of *The Sense of the World* Nancy warns his readers that a deconstruction of Christianity is 'something other than a critique or a demolition'. (Nancy 1997, n. 50) The end of Christianity and of its experience of sense is present *in* Christianity, before and after its medieval phase of dominance and glory. As a consequence, a simple opposition between 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.

---

[24] See also note 20.

This ambivalence is expressed, for example, in the way Christianity oscillates from 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 Augustine 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.

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.

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. Due to Christ, there is a sense in which the unthought, the unheard of which is 'in coming' (*im Kommen*), is 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 with 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. Nancy rightly, if unorthodoxly, 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. God's presence in Christ is a presence of *retreat*[25]: the retreat from being as the only possible 'mode' of being. (Nancy 2002, 80)

As is abundantly clear from the first chapters of *Dis-Enclosure*[26], Nancy defends an understanding of Christianity that problematizes the opposition of religion and atheism. 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 inner-worldly 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 involves both 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. In the next section we will further explore the complexities of this God.

4. Christianity and Modernity entangled: exploring features of the Christian doctrine of God

The distant God…

---

[25] 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. A similar structure of thought is visible in other concepts and pairs of concept dealt with above: presence-absence, inside-outside, passing by, passing on. It is a *differential* and not a dychotomic or dualist structure, since what interests Nancy in every case is what 'happens' between the opposites, disrupting or undermining their being opposed to one another alltogether.
[26] See Nancy 2008, in particular 'Atheism and Monotheism', 14-28, and 'A Deconstruction of Monotheism', 29-41.

The Jewish concept of a monotheistic God, continued in Christianity, implies a maximum distance between heaven and earth, between God and humans. It breaks with the proximity of the gods in a polytheistic world. The opening of the Ten Commandments in the book of Exodus reads:

> Then God spoke all these words, saying: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol (…)'.[27]

These famous words mean first of all: there are no gods, and I, your God, the God-who-is-not, am the name and narrative figuration of this 'there are no gods' – the gods you, my people and I , your God, we have left behind in 'Egypt' the land of slavery when you were still serving idols.

The basic experience resonating in this self-proclamation of the monotheistic God is one of embarassment with the gods. If one has to speak about God, if one has to 'have' a God, then let it at least be a God who 'is' not in the way humans, animals and things 'are': let it be a God who properly may not be in order to 'be'. Although the Christian church has made so many attempts to reformulate, reinstall and re-appropriate the presence of God, doing away with the paradox, the latter is formulated regularly and kept alive in all phases of Jewish-Christian history: in *Tenach* and in the Gospels, and for instance in the hidden traditions of medieval 'negative theology'. In (post)modern times one can find the echoes of this paradox wherever in philosophy and theology the relation between modernity and Christianity is problematized: from Spinoza, Pascal via Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Otto, Heidegger and Bataille to Taylor[28], Derrida and Nancy.[29]

In modern thought, for example in Nietzsche's work, the critique of religion parallels the revaluation and reinvention of religion. One emancipates oneself from the Christian God only to discover that this God has emancipated Himself from Himself long ago. In Nietzsche's texts the aversion *and* attraction to this God come together. The fool on the

---

[27] Exodus 20: 1-4. Transl. The Open Bible, Nashville/Camden/New York: Th. Nelson 1977.

[28] See Charles Taylor, 'Ein Ort für die Transzendenz?', in *Information Philosophie* June 2003-2, 7-16, 8: here Taylor states that the forces behind what Max Weber once called the disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of the world (that is, a world that has put God at great distance) 'have always been the Jewish and then the Christian tradition.' In his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press 1989, Taylor offers a large scale elaboration of this idea.

[29] See on the recent interest in and rephrasings of negative mysticism in (post)modern times Ilse N. Bulhof, Laurens ten Kate (eds.), *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, New York: Fordham University Press 2000. Some protagonists of the theological turn in phenomenology, like Marion, have also showed substantial interest in these traditions, see e.g. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1991 (orig. 1981).

market place from the well-known fragment 125 of *The Gay Science* (1882) does two things simultaneously; most interpretations miss this ambivalence of his act. The fool not only proclaims the death of God – 'We all have killed Him, you and me. We all are His murderers…' – but at the same time he keeps asking for and about the God who would have provoked his own assassination – 'Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?' (…) 'Do not we feel the breath of emptiness in our neck?' (…) 'Who will wipe the blood from our hands?'.[30]

… and the intimate God…

However, the God who does not want to 'be' is also the God who wants to become human. God who is far away, intangible, indeed absent, is at the same time the God who is closer than close, the intimate fellow-sufferer of humans.

The remarkable founding narrative of Christianity, that of God's incarnation into human flesh, or in Paul's terms, that of the *kenosis* (the emptying Himself) of the Father into the Son, has no real parallels in other religions. This Christian deregulation of the classical, hierarchic relation between God and humanity is in fact a *thanatography* without end: God dies as God in order to live again as human; this human being, Christ, then dies the humblest of deaths on the cross only to live again as God; still this God is only God *as* the crucified God; hence, this strange God can never be a 'normal' God again, since He can only be worshipped as the One who has humiliated Himself and given up his divinity. Death of God, death of man: both these events structure Christianity, precisely in their endless repetition.

In this context Nancy speaks of the ambivalence of the Christian concept and experience of *revelation*. Both structuring events – death of God, death of man – preclude the imagination of a clear-cut, assignable and unequivocal revelation of transcendence within the immanent world, formulated and set down in a sacred text and in testimonies of believers. The God who wants to get rid of God reveals Himself only as emptiness, as 'the Open as such' (Nancy 2008, 148). This would mean that in Christianity revelation has no subject or object; it refers to something or someone which/who always may come but never 'is there'[31] – despite the innumerable concrete experiences of God and his interventions claimed by Christians throughout the ages.

---

[30] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1882/1885, fr. 125, second paragraph. My transl.
[31] Cf. Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: The Hermeneutics of Religion*, Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2002.

> …The idea of Christian revelation is that, in the end, *nothing is revealed*, nothing but the end of revelation itself (…). Yet to reveal nothing is not a negative proposition. It is, rather, the Hegelian proposition that the revealed is properly that God is the revealable: what is revealed is the revealable, the Open as such. It is on that sharp point that Christianity breaks and reveals itself to be what Nietzsche has termed nihilism. (Nancy 2008, 147-148)

So, ultimately, following Nancy's line of thought, revelation reveals only the possibility of revelation. As soon as a 'something' or 'someone' desires to take the place of this possibility, and fill it with presence, both structuring events of Christianity (death of God, death of man) frustrate the desire.

…and what about phenomenology?

Christianity's undecidable shifting between a death of God and a death of man, that is, between radical distance and closest intimacy invites a deconstructive analysis of this constant instability – in which Christianity, as I stated above, first of all deconstructs *itself* infinitely. It does not invite a 'phenomenology of the non-apparent', but a 'phenomenology' of the constant *economy* or *negociation*[32], of the dynamic difference between the apparent and the non-apparent. But since this difference-at-work is far from a 'phenomenon', one cannot speak of a phenomenology of this difference in the proper sense.

The kenotic God

From a similar 'unthought' perspective Nancy treats the Christian-Pauline doctrine of kenosis. 'Kenosis means that God empties Himself [33] and abandons His divinity, in order to enter humanity.' (Nancy 2002, 78) This death is immediately continued in the death of the human being into whom God had entered. Hence, it is not so much a question of God becoming human, but 'the divine in man becomes a dimension of retreat, of absence, indeed of death.' (Nancy 2002, 78)

> At least Christianity brings to light, right from this very first dogma, in a profound way the atheistic dimension as the retreat of God. Not simply the retreat of God in the

---

[32] These terms are Derrida's, see e.g. his *Writing and Difference*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1978 (orig. 1967).
[33] The Greek *kenos* means 'empty'.

> face of humanity, but God's retreat in as far as He opens up in humans this dimension of retreat proper.' (Nancy 2002, 78)

Christianity is rephrased here as a religion that, starting from a rather amazing narrative and – later – dogmatic structure, that of kenosis and incarnation, looks for God *in* humans, only to withdraw humans from themselves.

5. Conclusion – an afterthought

The deconstruction of Christianity is a deconstruction of the relation between Christianity and modernity; it develops the idea that this opposition should actually be rethought as a complex, and certainly not harmonious entanglement. This entanglement receives a more fundamental meaning in a second entanglement: that of distance and proximity, abstraction and intimacy, whenever the relation between God and humans is concerned. It is this structure of distance *in* proximity and vice versa, that marks the unthought 'remainder' of Christianity. Could it be that this remainder also structures the secular, humanist and atheist traditions of modern culture? Such an interrogation may well help us clarify the complexities and ambiguities of modernity. Surely it will help us to understand the persistance of religion in our era, and in particular its challenging and often painful 'return' onto the socio-political scene of the 21st century.

Literature

Alexandrova, A., Devisch, I., ten Kate, L., van Rooden, A. (eds.). *Retreating Religion: Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy*, forthcoming 2009.

Derrida, J. *Speech and Phenomena*, Evanston, Il: Northwestern University Press1973. Orig. 1967.

Duyndam, J., Poorthuis, M., de Wit, Th. (eds.). *Humanisme en religie. Controverses, bruggen en perspectieven*, Delft: Eburon 2005.

Gauchet, M. *The Disenchantment of the World : A Political History of Religion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1997. Orig. 1985.

Husserl, E. *Logische Untersuchungen*, U. Panzer (ed.), Den Haag: Nijhoff 1984.

Hutchens, B. *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy*, Chesham: Acumen 2005.

James, I. *The Fragmentary Demand. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2006.

Janicaud, D. 'The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology', in idem et al., *Phenomenology and the 'Theological Turn': The French Debate*, New York: Fordham University Press 2000, 16-103.

Marion, J.-L. 'Metaphysics and Phenomenology:A Relief for Theology', in H. de Vries (ed.), *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, New York: Fordham University Press 2008, 283-296.

Nancy, J.-L. 'Of Divine Places', in *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1991, 110-150.

– *The Sense of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997.

– *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford: Stranford University Press 2000. Orig.1996.

– 'Entzug der Göttlichkeit. Zur Dekonstruktion und Selbstüberschreitung des Christentums', in *Lettre International*, Winter 2002, 76-80.

– *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, New York: Fordham University Press 2008.

Sheppard, D., Sparks, S., Thomas, C. (eds.). *On Jean-Luc Nancy: The Sense of Philosophy*, London and New York: Routledge 1997.

Sloterdijk, P. *Sphären I: Blasen*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1998.

– *Sphären II: Globen*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1999.

Sokolowski, R. (ed.). *Husserl and the Phenomenological Tradition. Essays in Phenomenology*, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press 1988.