

# To Touch or Not to Touch?

Interdisciplinary Perspectives  
on the *Noli me tangere*

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# Mary's Touch

## Reflections on Jean-Luc Nancy's 'Deconstruction of Christianity'

*Marc De Kesel*

Il marchait, seul Lazare véritable dont la mort même  
était ressuscitée.

Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas l'obscur*<sup>1</sup>

And Gregory (Moral. XIV, 29) says that “if aught could  
be changed in Christ’s body after His Resurrection,  
contrary to Paul’s truthful teaching, then the Lord after  
His Resurrection returned to death; and what fool  
would dare to say this, save he that denies the true resur-  
rection of the flesh?”

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III, Q. 54

### 1. Believing with/without Seeing

On what will be commemorated as the first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene was alone when she found the tomb of the crucified empty. Shocked and confused, she ran to “Peter and the other disciple” to tell them that the body must have been stolen during the night. Back on sight, they found the tomb empty indeed. At that moment, only one of them, “the other disciple,” overcame his confusion, for – as we read in John 20 – “he saw *and believed*.” This is to say that he was the only one who did *not see* Jesus’ dead body and, *therefore*, believed in him as being the resurrected Christ.

To believe and not to see: all over the New Testament, this is praised as the hallmark of true faith. A few lines further in John 20, it is illustrated by the story of Thomas, being the one who, in order to believe, explicitly requires seeing – and even touching – Christ’s resurrected body. When

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas l'obscur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1941), 49; new edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 42. Jean-Luc Nancy quotes this sentence in *La décloison*, *Déconstruction du christianisme*, 1 (Paris: Galilée, 2005), 137.

some time later his request is granted, i.e. when Christ himself invites him to lay his hands in the wounds of his body, he is told (and so is the reader): “Blessed are the people who have not seen and yet have believed.”

However, between these two passages defining faith as believing without seeing, another tells the exact opposite. It is the story of how Mary Magdalene was convinced of Jesus’ resurrection. After Peter and “the other disciple” having left her alone among the tombs, she takes another look in the tomb of Jezus and, now, sees two angels to whom she repeats her complaint about the stolen body. When she turns around, she notices a gardener whom she asks if it was he who had carried away the body and, if this was the case, where then he was keeping it hidden. When, at that very moment, the gardener calls her by her name, she suddenly recognizes the resurrected Christ. She must have touched him or at least have shown the intention to do so, for he immediately replies: “Do not touch me.” In the next sentence, so we read in John’s gospel, Mary is already informing the disciples, telling them “I have *seen* the Lord!”

This well-known story tells one of the most crucial moments in the Christian narrative, the first testimony of the resurrected Jesus. And, obviously, this testimony is based, not on non-seeing, but on seeing. Because she has *seen*, Mary gives testimony of Jesus as being the Messiah, as being the one whose dying indicates his success instead of his failure. In Mary’s gaze in the early hour of the first Easter morning, for the first time, Jesus is testified as having overcome death, not only *his* death or *his* personal mortality, but mortality and death *as such*, i.e. as characterising the fundamental shortcoming (the ‘sin’) that, since Adam’s fall, has corrupted Gods Creation. While the “other disciple” is the first to “believe” this, Mary Magdalene, however, is the first to *see* and to *meet* the New Adam, the initiator of a New Creation. She is the first to believe *while seeing* – seeing not Jesus’ empty grave, but the *body* of the Christ. And it is her testimony which is supposed to convince the other disciples. Jesus’ commandment: “go to my brothers and tell them” is clear about that.

“To believe and not to see”; ‘to believe because one sees’. Both paradigms are present in one and the same chapter of the gospel of Saint John. Do they contradict one another? Of course, they do. And does this matter? Of course it does; for it harms the logic of the gospel’s narrative and, thus, the logic of Christian doctrine. It shows how creeping Christian – or, more general, religious – logic can be. It puts forward

two incompatible definitions of belief on one and the same page without even noticing or mentioning it. Faith does imply believe without seeing, so this chapter claims twice; but at the same time, it tells that the first testimony with which Christian faith has started, comes from someone who precisely has seen bodily what he has to believe and who, *therefore*, has come to faith. From the point of view of classical criticism, this kind of contradictions makes this – and so many other religious texts – highly suspect.

Though Jean-Luc Nancy shares this critical point of view and does not believe either in the content of religious texts such as John 20 (for him, God is as dead, as it is the case for any modern atheist thinker, and ‘resurrection’ is a phantasm denying the undeniable fact of human mortality), he nonetheless recognizes a highly important moment of truth in religious, or more specific monotheistic texts, including the stories evoked above. Certainly, such contradictions affect and even harm the inner logic of the Christian doctrine, but precisely *because of that*, they reveal the truth operating in that doctrine. More precisely truth is, for Nancy, exclusively a matter of how the construction of that doctrine reveals its own deconstruction. It is in that sense that the truth of Christianity is to be found in what deconstructs the very opposition between, for instance, believing *without* and believing *with* seeing.

If for Nancy the story of Mary Magdalene meeting the gardener on Easter morning is so interesting (a little book of his from 2003 is entirely devoted to that theme<sup>2</sup>), it is because it lays bare the deconstructing kernel of Christianity, i.e., the ‘thing’ which disturbs the clear opposition between believing *with* and believing *without* seeing. That ‘thing’ is the touch, so Nancy states. Touched by the truth, one has to have faith in it without being able to really get in touch with it. Touched by the truth, one meets it saying ‘do not touch me’. In Jesus’ reply to Mary’s touch, in his saying ‘do not touch me’, the truth of touch – or more exactly, the touch as truth – is revealed. More generally this ‘Noli me tangere’ is an illustration of the deconstructing truth underlying the construction of Christianity’s entire doctrine. Though it is not part of *La décloison*, it fits perfectly in this collection of Nancy’s essays on the “deconstruction of Christianity,” and can easily be considered as an elaboration of its main thesis.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere* (Paris: Bayard, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Nancy, *La décloison*.

## 2. The Truth of Touch / Touch as Truth

Strictly speaking, the prohibition to touch the resurrected Christ is quite a strange idea within the framework of the Christian narrative. Is the latter not based on an explicit touch between man and God, a touch named ‘incarnation’? This is precisely what the idea of *Messiah/Christos* is about: the divine has touched the human in such a radical way that the divine became incarnated in the human flesh, and that, in Christ, the human body was sanctified. And did God Himself, in the figure of his Son, not explicitly ask us that we should touch him in a not less radical way, i.e. by eating his flesh and drinking his blood in the shape of bread and wine? In *Noli me tangere*, Nancy writes:

D’une certaine façon [...] le christianisme aura été l’invention de la religion de la touché, du sensible, de la présence immédiate au corps et au cœur. À ce titre, la scène du *Noli me tangere* serait une exception, un *hapax* théologique. Ou bien elle demanderait de penser ensemble, sur un mode oxymorique ou paradoxal, des deux paroles «*hoc est corpus meum*» et «*Noli me tangere*»: c’est peut-être en effet exactement de ce paradoxe qu’il s’agit.<sup>4</sup>

Christianity is *par excellence* the religion of sensibility and bodily touch. The divine has touched the human on the most human, mortal level, on the level of the body and flesh. Not the mind, but the *body* of Christ is declared to be resurrected. And so is the body that we are asked to eat in order to participate in the mystical body of his Church. This kind of attention for body, flesh, and touch distinguishes Christianity from the other monotheistic religions. Both Judaism and Islam lay emphasis on God’s radical transcendence. In that sense, they are more in line with the most fundamental axiom of monotheism, which tells that nothing of what people suppose to be god is God, for only God is God.

The central intuition underlying monotheism is that people are too easily inclined, not to unbelief, but precisely to belief. Too easily, they take their dreams and wishes for signs of the divine, too fast they take what they suppose to be god for God, while in fact they only cling to idols, false gods, wild ideas covered up by religious fantasies. Criticizing man’s inclination to take idols for God is nothing less than the very *raison d’être* of monotheism. By declaring solely God to be God, it tries to liberate men from their addiction to false gods. Believing in the One True God and criticizing the ever persisting inclination to invent false

<sup>4</sup> Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, 27-28.

ones are two sides of the same coin. This is why the One True God is untouchable: He might be the only truth there is; yet, there is no human being who is able to lay hands upon that truth and appropriate it.

Although Christianity considers itself one hundred percent monotheistic, it defies the genuinely monotheistic idea of this kind of abstract, transcendent, untouchable God by claiming God's incarnation into the human world. Christianity praises God for having emptied himself in order to become as mortal as human flesh – a movement of 'kenosis' which, on the other hand, renders the human flesh and body purified and sanctified. And, again, it is the *body* to which the purification occurs. The body, not the spirit is told to have resurrected and become holy. So, unlike a strong common sense idea claims, Christian religion as well as Christian culture in general is sensual, bodily, focusing on the concrete, fleshly dimension of reality.

Why then, in a crucial passage of a Christian text par excellence (i.e., a chapter reporting the first testimony of Christ's bodily resurrection), is Christ reported to have said: 'do not touch me'? What might be the sense of that contradiction, which is a real 'hapax' in the New Testament's text, as Jean-Luc Nancy correctly mentions? And it does have a sense, so the latter claims. Contradictory as it is, it nonetheless reveals the truth of monotheist doctrine, at work behind the curtain of its apparently magic content.

On the same page of the passage quoted above, we read in a nutshell Nancy's interpretation of that strange 'hapax' in which the Messiah – i.e., God's incarnating 'touch' of the human person – prohibits any touch:

Nous pouvons aussi bien comprendre qu'il [Christ] ne doit pas être touché parce qu'il ne peut pas l'être: il n'est pas à toucher. Cela ne signifie pourtant pas qu'il s'agisse d'un corps aérien ou immatériel, spectral ou fantasmagorique. [...] ici, ce n'est pas en tant que tel qu'il se présente. Ou plutôt, il se dérobe à un contact auquel il pourrait se prêter. Son être et sa vérité de ressuscité sont dans ce dérobement, dans ce retrait qui seul donne la mesure de la touche dont il doit s'agir: ne touchant pas ce corps, toucher à son éternité. Ne venant pas au contact de sa présence manifeste, accéder à sa présence réelle, qui consiste dans son départ.<sup>5</sup>

It is not allowed to touch Jesus' resurrected body, because it is simply *not possible* to do so – so Nancy argues. Of course, Mary can touch Jesus, but she cannot touch his body *as such*, i.e., as resurrected, as marked by

<sup>5</sup> Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, 28.

the truth appearing in it. What cannot be touched is the truth of his touchable body, the truth named by the metaphor of “resurrection.” That truth, so Nancy argues, is withdrawing in the very act of its appearance or presence. “His essence and truth as resurrected are *in* this withdrawal, *in* this ‘retreat’ which is what measures what must be at stake here: by not touching his body, one touches its eternity. By not having contact with his manifest presence, one has access to his real presence, which consists in its departure.”

Nancy does not believe in any kind of life after death or in any idea of resurrection turning mortality into eternal life. Nonetheless, terms as ‘resurrection’, ‘eternity’, ‘empty tomb’ and other similar Christian concepts conceal a sense which, after the ‘destruction’ or ‘deconstruction’ of their orthodox meaning, reveals their very truth. For this is what such terms do: on the one hand, they name the content of the Christian doctrine in its most metaphysical dimension, while, on the other hand, they have the capacity to undermine and to excavate that doctrine and its terms and lay bare the truth they really refer to.

What then is the “essence” or “truth” of Christ’s resurrected body? It does not tell that resurrection makes the body living in eternity, having conquered once and for good the power of death. This is the metaphysical interpretation taking for real the human dream of having full access to the eternal essence, the unchangeable ‘self’ of things, including the own human ‘self’. It takes for real the dream that man’s relation to the world (as well as to himself) is freed from mortality or any other kind of finitude or alterity. The metaphysical interpretation of incarnation – i.e., of the touch bringing the divine and the human radically together – tells that God’s alterity has been ‘sublated’ (in the Hegelian sense of the word ‘Aufhebung’), that it is incarnated in the human and that, in principle, the divine and eternal truth of things is now accessible for human beings. Thanks to the incarnation we are able, at least in principle, to lay hands upon the alterity and the finitude disturbing our life and being. We know at least that we are made for not being marked by them, and that once we will be what we really are: infinite without any reserve or restriction.

So far the metaphysical interpretation. How, then, does Jean-Luc Nancy interpret the “essence” or “truth” of Christ’s resurrected body? Not as death’s destruction but as its affirmation! For him, “resurrection” acknowledges the human body – read: his bodily relation to the world – as being ‘eternally’ marked by death. Neither Christ nor we will ever have full access to the body that ex-poses us to the world and to others.

Our body will for ever keep on being marked by a kind of 'alterity' – other name for 'death' – which remains for ever immune to any attempt of appropriation. The "essence" or "truth" of Christ's resurrected body is only to be found in the withdrawal occurring in the very act of its appearance. That withdrawal does not concern the spirit, but the body or, which amounts to the same thing, the bodily nature of Jesus' appearance. It marks the 'resurrection of his body'.

Christ appears to Mary, saying "*Mè mou haptou,*" Greek for 'do not touch me', but also 'do not hold me'.<sup>6</sup> He is present as the one who will not remain in this presence or, more exactly, who is already leaving. 'I still have to leave to the Father': only to tell this, he is present with Mary Magdalene. He appears as the one who, in that appearance, is already leaving. The aspect of 'leaving' and 'withdrawal' at work in the very heart of his 'presence' is what Nancy defines as the "truth" hidden in the Christian concept 'resurrection'. In the withdrawal at work in the appearing body, one touches "eternity": one touches what escapes the presence of the touching moment. What is touched here is a kind of absence constituting the condition of possibility of any presence, of any kind of 'being present with' or 'touching'. What, in the moment of 'touching', I touch 'first', is an openness that makes my touching possible, an openness that cannot be appropriated by that very touch because it has always already withdrawn.

This kind of 'openness' is not a matter of the mind but of the body, the flesh. Unlike mind or thought, it is not capable of entirely mastering its own operation. It is the openness of a touch which cannot 'sublate' itself or fully master its operation and appropriate entirely what occurs in its own gesture. The act of touching is, so to say, not capable of touching 'itself', its own touch, and precisely this makes touch possible at all. The impossibility of touching its own touching enables that things can be touched at all. The touch's incapability of self-touching is the untouchable kernel formally hidden in the very act of touching. So, 'do not touch me' expresses the condition of possibility for any kind of touching. It is the non-religious sense of the Christian 'resurrection'. Nancy writes:

La 'résurrection' trouve ainsi seulement son sens non religieux. Ce qui pour la religion est recommencement d'une présence, portant l'assurance fantasmatique d'une immortalité, se révèle ici n'être pas autre

<sup>6</sup> "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father" (John 20:17). See also Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, 29.

chose que la partance dans laquelle la présence s'enlève en vérité, partant son sens selon cette partance. Comme elle vient, elle part: c'est-à-dire qu'elle *n'est* pas au sens où quelque chose est posée dans la présence, immobile, identique à soi, disponible pour un usage ou pour un concept. La 'résurrection' est la surrection, le surgissement de l'indisponible, de l'autre et du disparaissant *dans le corps et comme le corps*. Ce n'est pas un tour de magie, c'en est le contraire: le corps mort reste mort et c'est lui qui fait le 'vide' du tombeau, mais le corps que plus tard la théologie nommera 'glorieux' (c'est-à-dire brillant de l'éclat de l'invisible) révèle que ce vide est bien l'évident de la présence. Non, rien n'est disponible ici: ne cherche pas à t'emparer d'un sens de cette vie finie, ne cherche pas à toucher ni à retenir ce qui essentiellement s'éloigne et en s'éloignant te touche de sa distance même [...] comme de ce qui, en décevant définitivement ton attente, fait surgir devant toi, pour toi, cela même qui ne surgit pas, cela dont la surrection ou l'insurrection est une gloire qui s'emploie à décevoir et à écarter ta main tendue vers elle.<sup>7</sup>

"Resurrection" does not name the miraculous overcoming or sublation (*Aufhebung*) of death.<sup>8</sup> It does not designate a kind of eternal life beyond death. On the contrary, 'resurrection' is so to say death's very 'erection', so Nancy argues, here as well as in other essays.<sup>9</sup> It is the 'uprising', the emergence of death *as such*, of death *within* life, *within* existence – of "the movement of leaving [la partance] in which the presence raises itself [dans laquelle la présence s'enlève]."<sup>10</sup> It is the movement of leaving life

<sup>7</sup> Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, 29-30 (Nancy's italics).

<sup>8</sup> For the idea of resurrection as not to be read in Hegelian terms of 'Aufhebung', see for instance *ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy does not use the word, or at least has a certain reserve against it, although he admits that it could "be retaken and elaborated in this context:" "Non pas une érection – ni en un sens phallique, ni en un sens monumental, encore que ces deux sens pourraient être repris et travaillés dans ce contexte [...]" (Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, 34). I shall discuss this passage further on in this essay.

<sup>10</sup> The passages in Christian doctrine that can be read in a 'deconstructive' manner as shown by Nancy are numerous. For instance (to give one example which is not in Nancy), in the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas cites a passage from Gregory which shows perfectly how the Christian logic leads to an affirmation of the body – the body in its radical mortality – as being the 'truth' of resurrection. At the end of *Quaestio 54* of book III, in which the nature of the resurrected body is discussed, the question is if, in Christ's resurrected and glorified body, the wounds of his crucifixion are healed. Since the resurrected body is holy and, thus, perfect, this seems impossible. But, of course, Thomas defends the orthodox interpretation ascribing the resurrected body the 'stigmata', i.e. the five wounds as the result of his crucifixion. What is the argument? The wounds are preserved because they are a sign of Christ's "honour." And because of their "beauty," so Thomas quotes Augustine in a remark on the resurrected body of the martyrs ("and a certain kind of beauty will shine in them, in the body, though not of the body," *De civitate Dei* XXII, 19). At the end of the article, Augustine is again used to

– of opening it towards its other – acknowledged as the very heart of life itself. Life is not opening to another life (or a life ‘hereafter’), but to the otherness of life itself. “Resurrection” is the acknowledgement of life’s transcendence towards its *inner* openness.<sup>11</sup>

Nancy’s definition of “resurrection” is supported by the idea that existence is made possible, not by its supposed substantiality, its being present to and founded in itself, but by an absence or openness constituting its very heart. Existence supposes precisely a non-coincidence with itself, a possibility to differ from oneself, and thus, to *ek-sist*, to transcend one’s supposed identity, to withdraw from one’s presumed ‘self’. Within the realm of presence and identity “resurrection” is the name for the emergence of what interrupts any presence and splits all identity. It is the emergence of what hinders presence of being fully present with itself; the immergence of difference within the realm of sameness and appropriation. “Resurrection” is the appearance of death in its quality of condition of possibility for human existence. It shows an empty tomb in the middle of life, a void or difference enabling life to transcend itself, not into some life after life, but into life ‘itself’, i.e. into life as ‘*ek-sistence*’: life insofar as it is not reducible to any ‘self’, but deconstructs, splits, transcends any presumed ‘self’ or closed identity.

So, for Nancy, both the concept and the event of “resurrection” call for full acknowledgment of the empty tomb *as such*, of death itself as being the very heart of human existence. What it calls for is similar to the attitude vis-à-vis the “power of the negative” as described in a famous passage in the preface of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. “But the life of spirit is not one that shuns death, and keeps clear of destruction;

argue that “I believe our Lord’s body to be in heaven, such as it was when He ascended into heaven.” It is the final argument: the body that resurrected is the same as the body that suffered the torture of crucifixion. What is more: that body is resurrected in the (tortured) shape in which it has died. To enforce arguments, Thomas adds a last quote: “And Gregory (Moral. xiv) says that ‘if aught could be changed in Christ’s body after His Resurrection, contrary to Paul’s truthful teaching, then the Lord after His Resurrection returned to death; and what fool would dare to say this, save he that denies the true resurrection of the flesh?’. The consequences of this argument are that resurrection is the beholding of Christ’s *dying* body – of his body in the ultimate moment of his dying – without any change. This is exactly the thesis Nancy’s deconstructive reading of the Christian resurrection claims: the affirmation of death as such. The passage in Thomas Aquinas is mentioned in: Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance et figuration*, Champs, 618 (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 38.

<sup>11</sup> Or, as he writes at the end of “Le judéo-chrétien”: “l’entrée dans la mort comme dans la parousie finie qui se diffère infiniment. L’entrée dans l’inadéquation incommensurable. En ce sens, chaque mourant est un messie, et chaque messie est un mourant.” (Nancy, *La décloison*, 86).

it endures death and in death maintains its being,” so Hegel writes.<sup>12</sup> “To endure death”: “*das Tote festzuhalten*”: more literally; “to touch and to hold what is dead.” This is what resurrection is about for Nancy. This is the non-religious truth underlying Christianity’s most basic concept.

Yet, Nancy’s most decisive reference in his deconstructive interpretation of ‘resurrection’ is not Hegel, if only because, in the end, Hegel allows death to resurrect – read: to sublimate itself – in the eternal life of the Spirit. With Hegel, the spirit, not the body is the locus of truth, which is why, in the eyes of Jean-Luc Nancy, he misses the point. Nancy’s main reference, here, is not the phenomenology of the spirit (Hegel) but the phenomenology of concrete, bodily human existence as elaborated by Martin Heidegger. The latter analyses human existence as ‘being-in-the-world’, as a ‘project’ (*Entwurf*) realised first of all in every day life.<sup>13</sup> According to Heidegger, man is not simply a being like other beings; it is to be considered as the very place where being *takes place*: not the place where being simply is what it is, but where it *happens*, where it differs from itself and, therefore, makes history. It is the place where being transcends itself and becomes ‘existence’. In Heidegger’s own terms: human existence – ‘*Dasein*’ – is nothing but the ‘*da*’ where ‘*sein*’ is, i.e., occurs, happens. It is the ‘*da*’ where being is not what it is, where it does not coincide with itself, but precisely differs from itself and, so, reveals itself as ‘project’, as ‘happening’, as ‘history’. Human existence is the place where being opens towards a gap or void which can be defined as its inherent otherness.

It opens towards ‘death’ as what renders human existence possible. Indeed, as Heidegger points out in the famous paragraphs on ‘being

<sup>12</sup> “Der Tod, wenn wir jene Unwirklichkeit so nennen wollen, ist das Furchtbarste, und das Tote festzuhalten das, was die größte Kraft erfordert.” Georg W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1988), 26. Nancy quotes this sentence in *Noli me tangere*, 35, note 12. The context of this quote is an explanation of the “portentious power or the negative [die ungeheure Macht des Negativen]:” “Death, as we may call that unreality, is the most terrible thing, and to keep and hold fast what is dead demands the greatest force of all. Beauty, powerless and helpless, hates understanding, because the latter exacts from it what it cannot perform. But the life of mind is not one that shuns death, and keeps clear of destruction; it endures death and in death maintains its being. It only wins to its truth when it finds itself utterly torn asunder. It is this mighty power, not by being a positive which turns away from the negative, as when we say of anything it is nothing or it is false, and, being then done with it, passes off to something else: on the contrary, mind is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and dwelling with it.”

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Zwölfte, unveränderte Auflage (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1972).

towards death' in *Sein und Zeit*,<sup>14</sup> even in the moment of one's dying, his death is still a 'project', something which, he *is* not, but *has to be*. So, even his dying shows that he coincides, not with his being what he is, but with his 'having to be'. My existence will never have been something else than my 'having to be', it will never simply 'be' (what it 'is').

According to Nancy, the Christian idea of resurrection is to be read as the *Dasein's* affirmation of its 'da'.<sup>15</sup> The faith in the empty tomb *as such* is a faith in the openness towards human life's inner otherness, towards the condition of 'non-coinciding with itself' as being the 'ground' of its very being. In the idea of "resurrection," man endures and holds – *festhalten*, as Hegel named it – the void or death which tears up his supposed identity substantiality and affirms human being as a finite project (*Entwurf*). In this idea, he holds what escapes any capacity of holding – of '*festhalten*'. He touches what by definition cannot be touched.

### 3. Faith as Deconstruction

So, Nancy's 'deconstruction of Christianity' consists in revealing a truth operative within the Christian narrative but incompatible with the realm of 'magical' and 'religious' fantasies it believes in. 'Noli me tangere' clearly does not match the idea of radical 'touch' uniting both the divine and the human, a touch expressed in the dogma of incarnation. Precisely in this quality, however, it reveals the non-religious truth working within the heart of Christianity's central dogma. This truth tells that the 'touch of incarnation', although uniting the divine and the human, still does not give the human person the permission to talk in the name of God and to relate to reality as if they themselves were its creator or owner.

The human as creator of the world expresses the pretention to which the classical, i.e. metaphysical interpretation of incarnation has led. Already in Antiquity, thought was supposed to have access to the essence of things. Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle presumed human thinking to be

<sup>14</sup> For the idea of *Sein zum Tode*, see: Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 249-267 (§50 – §53).

<sup>15</sup> In a way, already Heidegger did this in a seminar entitled *Einleitung in die Phänomenologie der Religion* (winter of 1920-1921). In some of these seminar sessions, he regaled his audience on an extensive analysis of three of Saint Paul's letters. See: Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe. Band 60: Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), 67-156.

capable – at least in principle – of telling the real, essential identity of things. Christianity reinforced the ‘metaphysical’ nature of this supposition by pretending to have a direct connection with the Creator of reality’s essences. Consequently, mortal humans were now assigned a position similar to the one occupied by reality’s immortal Creator. Since the creator of the universe was incarnated in the human, since the incarnation has restored the relation of the human with the divine, human persons presumed reality as being at their free disposal. Yet, in genuine ‘Christian times’, this presumption was tempered by the idea that the human person should not take the place of God. Of course, God was incarnated and had sanctified human reality by liberating it from sin and death, but this had happened only ‘in principle’. So far, it has solely occurred to Jesus, who shortly after his resurrection has returned to the Father promising his disciples he would ‘soon’ come back in order to finish the *eschatological* and *apocalyptic* times that his resurrection had started. Since that ‘soon’ is still valid, the far-reaching consequences of the incarnation are still under ‘apocalyptic reservation’. In principle, however, the human person is supposed to be able to act in the name of God’s and reality’s entirely revealed truth, were it not that the human person has still to respect, precisely, the ‘apocalyptic reservation’.

This at least is what Christians contend when they cling to their doctrine as a kind of ‘belief’. As “croyance,” Nancy would say. For him, however, “croyance” (belief) is not the same as – if not to say the opposite of – “foi” (faith). The former is a kind of knowledge, pretending to know what cannot be known. The latter, Nancy argues, is something radically different. In *La décloison*, in an essay entitled “Le Judéo-chrétien (De la foi),” he writes:

Si la croyance doit être comprise comme une forme faible ou comme une analogie du savoir, alors la foi n’est pas de l’ordre de la croyance. Elle n’est en rien de l’ordre d’un savoir ni d’une sagesse, même pas par analogie – et ce n’est pas non plus en ce sens qu’on doit comprendre l’opposition paulinienne de la ‘folie’ chrétienne à la ‘sagesse’ du monde: cette ‘folie’ n’est pas une sursagesse, ni un symétrique de la sagesse ou du savoir.<sup>16</sup>

Christianity as described above is a matter of “belief,” of “*croyance*.” Its emphasis is on the content-side of the narrative, which is fully taken for real. It proclaims that Jesus really has conquered death and that, therefore, we can be sure that we are made for a life without death, for

<sup>16</sup> Nancy, *La décloison*, 78.

eternal life in the company of God and his angels. The Christian's certainty about this surpasses the "wisdom of the world," so Paul claims in his first letter to the Corinthians.<sup>17</sup> But even the 'foolishness of the cross' is still a kind of "super-wisdom [*sursagesse*]" and, thus, of knowledge, Nancy replies.

Faith, on the contrary, has nothing to do with knowledge.<sup>18</sup> It precisely affirms *not* to know. It is an avowal to be in touch with what does *not* allow access at all. This is not necessarily a tricky way of pretending nonetheless some access to the inaccessible, so Nancy hastens to add, warning against the traps of negative theology. Faith rather affirms the inaccessibility as the inner kernel of access as such.<sup>19</sup> In "Une foi de rien du tout," an essay on the references to religion in the work of Gérard Granel, he writes:

[...] la foi [...] ne peut être qu'un rapport au dieu, non seulement 'caché', mais qui 's'est voulu cacher' comme le dit Pascal. [...] Ce n'est pas exactement d'un *Deus absconditus* qu'il s'agit (d'un sujet prédiéqué comme 'abscons'), mais de la divinité de l'*absconditas*. Le rapport de foi est alors accès à 'se vouloir cacher' en tant que tel: accès, par conséquent, à ce qui coupe ou retire l'accès.<sup>20</sup>

Nancy quotes Pascal who in his '*Pensées*' explicitly stresses God's hidden character.<sup>21</sup> Referring to the expression in Latin from Isaiah (45:15), "Deus absconditus," Pascal says that God is not simply hidden from a human point of view. God actively hides himself and deliberately makes himself inaccessible to man. "That God has willed to hide Himself," so we read in *Pensée* 242.<sup>22</sup> Here, Nancy goes a step further and states

<sup>17</sup> 1 Cor 1:18-21; 2:14; 3:19.

<sup>18</sup> In some essays in *La décloison*, Nancy's defines 'believe' in an undoubtedly Nietzschean way, i.e. as fearing the truth behind one's so-called certainties. Faith (*foi*), then, is not afraid of that fear. See for instance "Une expérience du cœur," an essay which is entirely on the deconstruction of Christianity in Nietzsche. There Nancy connects the Nietzschean figure of the "redemptor" in *Also sprach Zarathustra* with the figure of the "empty tomb" in Christianity. (Nancy, *La décloison*, 122).

<sup>19</sup> This is why the touch is such a privileged figure in Nancy's entire oeuvre. Correctly, Derrida considers the touch as the privileged entrance into Nancy's thought. See Jacques Derrida, *Jean-Luc Nancy: Le toucher* (Paris: Galilée, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Nancy, *La décloison*, 91. Nancy quotes from Gérard Granel, *Traditionis Traditio* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 238, 239.

<sup>21</sup> *Pensée* 228, 242, 427, 449, 781, 921 (numbering by Lafuma); 194, 242, 518, 556, 585, 751 (numbering Brunschvicg).

<sup>22</sup> "That God has willed to hide Himself. – If there were only one religion, God would indeed be manifest. The same would be the case, if there were no martyrs but in our religion. God being thus hidden, every religion which does not affirm that God is hidden, is not true; and every religion which does not give the reason of it, is not instructive.

that God's will to withdraw defines exhaustively the divine as such.<sup>23</sup> The divine's hidden character *is* its very essence. And the reference to the divine, Nancy continues, is a way of expressing that, in the end, human access to reality is an access to "what interrupts or withdraws [any] access." As already explained above, this is consistent with the transcendental structure of touching, which is made possible by its inner intransitivity, by its impossibility to touch its own touching. Having faith in this very intransitivity and impossibility: this is what 'belief' ('croyance') denies, while it is practiced by faith (foi).<sup>24</sup> "Belief" changes life and world into closed entities. "Faith," on the contrary acknowledges the inherent *opening* characterizing life and world. This opening gesture – this "déclousion" – is typical for religion as such, thus Nancy in the "Ouverture" of *La Déclousion*:

Il suffit en effet de remarquer que la croyance n'est en rien propre à la religion: il y a beaucoup de croyances profanes, il y en a jusque chez les savants et les philosophes. Mais la foi? ... Ne formerait-elle pas le rapport nécessaire au *rien*: à ceci qu'il n'a pas de butée, aucun repère, aucun terme indéconstructible, et que la déclousion n'en finit pas d'ouvrir cela qu'elle ouvre (l'Occident, la métaphysique, le savoir, le soi, la forme, le sens, la religion même)?<sup>25</sup>

It has become more clear now why, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, Mary Magdalene's '(non)touch' is emblematic for faith: it touches Christ's untouchability, his 'Noli me tangere', which is at the same time the 'Noli me tangere' of human touch in general. Touching – which, in Nancy's highly Heideggerian inspired thought, is a metaphor for being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-sein*) – supposes a moment of facing the untouchable kernel of touching. Recognizing this moment implies accepting that my touch will never be able to appropriate the touched things, if only because it is not even able to appropriate its own act of touching. Faith expresses this kind of acceptance. The matter is not so much to believe

Our religion does all this: Vere tu es Deus absconditus." Pensée 242 (Lafuma); 585 (Brunschvieg). Translation by W. F. Trotter (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1660pascal-pensees.html>).

<sup>23</sup> In "Déconstruction du monothéisme," Nancy develops the same idea, and quotes the German mystic Meister Eckhart praying God that He delivers him from God (Nancy, *La déclousion*, 56).

<sup>24</sup> Rather than a doctrine, faith is indeed a practice, or, as he puts it concerning "Christianity," "un *objet* en rapport avec lui-même dans une recherche de soi, dans une inquiétude, une attente ou un désir de sa propre identité [...]" (Nancy, *La déclousion*, 59). See also *ibid.*, 77.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 24. A few pages before, Nancy has defined Christianity as "l'exigence d'ouvrir dans ce monde une altérité ou une aliénation inconditionnelle."

in what cannot be seen, as to have faith in the blind spot that conditions my very seeing, i.e. to have faith in the passive, 'apathetic' moment of my active 'pathos', my touching.

This is the 'Noli me tangere' touched by Mary Magdalene in the very moment she obeyed Christ's words. This is the 'Noli me tangere' denied by both 'the other disciple' who "believed" without having seen and Thomas the Minor who believed after having touched the wounds of the crucified. Both remain blind for the inner-worldly truth present in the seemingly magical idea of the resurrected Christ. They illustrate an attitude of *belief*, which is precisely what the truth of *faith* contradicts. To believe in the resurrection of the dead is to deny the truth which affirms death as the positive condition of human existence. We should not *believe* in Christ, we should have *faith* in him. Translated on the level of Christian doctrine, this means we should not believe in a life without death, but have faith in the deadly condition of our existence. This is the inner-worldly truth Nancy reads in the phantasmagorical narrative of Christian religion.

This truth, however, is not meant to restore religion's 'raison d'être', so Nancy repeats again and again. His thoughts about the 'auto-deconstruction of Christianity' lack any intention to 'save' this specific religion or religion in general.<sup>26</sup> The discovered truth does not primarily concern the Christian (or other) religion, but our modern condition. Above is explained how, after Antiquity, Christian doctrine still enforced the metaphysical supposition ascribing human persons access to the essence of things. Since the Christian is able to call on the incarnated God, he could consider himself to be (equal to) the world's creator. God's incarnation implied the sanctification of the human person, which makes them sharing God's outer-worldly position. At least 'in principle', i.e., 'not yet', since Christ has still not returned in order to accomplish the apocalyptic and eschatological time he has inaugurated. When, in modernity, God and Christ lose their central position and stop being the point from where the human person regards reality, it is the human person who takes over this position. Modern man relates to the world from a point located *outside* that world, an imaginary point fully inherited from the 'dead' God. In this respect, modernity is the fulfilment of

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Nancy, *La décloison*, 53, where he claims that we have to "arrêter toute tentative de 'guérir' les 'maux' du monde actuel (sa privation de sens) par un retour au christianisme en particulier ou à la religion en général: car il s'agit de saisir comment nous sommes déjà sorti du religieux."

medieval metaphysical Christianity. For modern man, the ‘apocalyptic reserve’ has ceased to be valid. He is free to ascribe himself full access to the essence of things. And even when he does not, he still believes that this does not matter and, therefore, supposes himself all the more to have limitlessly access to all there is. As Heidegger has put it, modernity is the time in which reality is defined as what the human person can bring into vision. It is the “time of world pictures” (*Zeit des Weltbildes*).<sup>27</sup> Modern man does not consider himself as someone who shares the reality he is talking about, but as someone who has a view on it, someone who has the world in a ‘picture’ or an ‘overview’. The position from where that ‘picture’ is made, is necessarily located *outside* the pictured world. It is the ‘outside’ where, in earlier times, God was located.

If, despite centuries of the most intelligent criticism of religion, belief in God still persists in modernity, it is not without connection with the ‘outside’ from where we relate to reality. Beholding the religious myth, we behold the possibility of an outside position. But instead of acknowledging that outside position as being ours, instead of using the religious myth to articulate the problems and impasses generated by this position, we keep on ‘believing’ in the ‘outside’ as *really* – i.e., metaphysically – being *a world outside*. Believing there is an outside world – a world of transcendence, a realm beyond the immanence of death – distracts the attention from the point where the real problem lies, i.e., the outside point from where we relate to the world (including ourselves) and which nonetheless fully belongs to the inner world.<sup>28</sup> ‘Belief’ in the outside world is a tricky way to escape our responsibility to have ‘faith’ in the outside that makes us participate in the world.

Now we understand better why Nancy’s intention is by no means to reinstall Christianity or any other religious practice. When he refers to Christian texts, his purpose remains an unconditional affirmation of modernity, i.e., of the ‘outside’ enabling us, moderns, to participate in reality. Indeed, we participate and share the reality which we live from and by. We have no substance outside that reality. Nonetheless, we do not coincide with reality and neither are we simply a thing among

<sup>27</sup> See the essay, “Zeit des Weltbildes” (1938), in Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, 6., durchgesehene Ausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1980), 73-110.

<sup>28</sup> “Le christianisme peut se résumer, ainsi que Nietzsche, par exemple, l’a fort bien su, au précepte de vivre dans ce monde comme hors de lui – étant entendu que ce ‘dehors’ n’est pas, n’est pas un étant. Il n’existe pas, mais il (ou bien puisqu’il) définit et mobilise l’ex-istence: l’ouverture du monde à – l’altérité inaccessible (et par conséquent l’accès paradoxal à ce dernier)” (Nancy, *La décloison*, 21).

things. What we 'are', is to be defined as an openness in 'being', as a gap in that reality, as an inner outside. This is why we 'are' what makes things not coincide with themselves.

Here, we meet one of the reasons why our metaphysical tradition is something, rather than to be left behind, to be 'accomplished'.<sup>29</sup> Modernity is nothing but the 'achievement' of metaphysics, which is to be done not by denying the 'outside' metaphysics talks about, but by locating it where it belongs: in the very heart of our relation to the world. In the heart of our most bodily touch with reality, there is something escaping the act itself of touching, something untouchable which nonetheless enables touching as such.

In that sense, '*Noli me tangere*' can indeed be read as telling the deconstructive truth of humanity's modern condition. In a world where our technical 'touch' has become omnipotent, more than ever, we have to be aware of the finitude of this infinite power. Although our modern touch is able to master and manipulate almost the entire universe, it is unable to really master its own self. It cannot touch its own touch. That touch is unable to appropriate entirely what it touches. More exactly, it cannot touch its own condition of possibility, i.e. the gap, the opening, the otherness splitting the touching 'self' from its (supposed) self.

This is the insight Jean-Luc Nancy describes in the '*Noli me tangere*' passage in John's gospel: the doctrine based on the touch bringing together the human and the divine in the most radical way ever seen reveals the untouchable as its very condition of possibility. 'Do not touch me' is said to the touch 'itself'. It is especially said to modernity's virtually omnipotent touch, to the time of the world-pictures and its limitless powers. This is the non-religious truth one can read in the narrative of this Christian text, at least if one follows it in its auto-deconstructive line.

#### 4. The Truth of Religion?

Let us presume that Nancy is right, that the truth of monotheism is not to be located in the presence of a metaphysical God, but in his absence, and not even in *his* absence, *his* being '*absconditus*', but in a general kind of '*absconditas*', an *absence* as being the hallmark of any

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger uses the term "verenden" and "Verendung." See his essay "Überwindung der Metaphysik," in Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954), 67-95.

inner-worldly *presence* as such.<sup>30</sup> Let us presume that this is indeed true – a truth highly useful in late-modernity’s technical times where the ideology of ‘presence’ penetrates intimately our daily life. Yet, even then, it is worth asking if this tells the truth *of the religious side* of monotheism? Does it tell the truth *about religion*? The ‘*absconditas*’ in the heart of our every day relation to reality may tell a truth secretly at work in the magical fantasies of a religious narrative, but does it tell why truth had to be kept secret in this narrative? There may indeed be a ‘sense’ underneath the fantasies of the religious story, and Nancy’s idea about it may be correct. But even then, the question still remains whether these fantasies *as such* have any sense. If there is a non-religious truth underlying the phantasmagorias of religion, the question is not only what it tells, but why it is told in a religious way, why it is kept hidden behind sacred veils? What is the sense of these veils *as such*? Apparently, this question is not put on the agenda of Nancy’s ‘deconstruction of Christianity’. Nowhere in his essays on this topic, there is an attempt of explaining why the discovered truth has to be veiled by typically religious fantasies. This question is not even mentioned.

This brings us to another unmentioned question. With the concept of “the auto-deconstruction of Christianity,” Nancy means that, in the inner logic of Christianity, there is a tendency to unmask its typically *religious* dimension, a tendency to “exit from all religion.”<sup>31</sup> Is it, then, not legitimate to ask if Nancy’s critical treatment of monotheistic religion really is a “deconstruction”? It is certainly a “destruction,” in the positive, Heideggerian sense of the term. It treats the elements of metaphysical Christian belief in such a way that the underlying truth comes up again. It lays bare the transcendental – or, more exactly, ‘existential’ – structure underlying religion’s metaphysical content. And it does so by following lines of thought belonging to its inner onto-theological, metaphysical logic. This is what a Heideggerian ‘*Destruction*’ does.<sup>32</sup> And one might justly call this also ‘deconstruction’, for the critical method introduced

<sup>30</sup> Nancy, *La décloison*, 91.

<sup>31</sup> In an interview after a lecture at the European Graduate School Faculty in 2000, Nancy was very clear about that, borrowing the well known expression “*sortie de la religion*” from Marcel Gauchet: “Christianity is the self-deconstruction of religion. Christianity is a religion which would be an exit from all religion. My opinion is that to think Christianity in this way is partly made possible by Heidegger and all non-dialectical ways of thinking of Dasein, exposition, existence, etc.” (see on the internet: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/nancy/nancy-self-deconstruction-of-christianity-2000.html>).

<sup>32</sup> See Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 19-27 (§6: “Die Aufgabe einer Destruction der Geschichte der Ontologie”).

by Jacques Derrida does operate that way.<sup>33</sup> *But not only that way.* Derridian deconstruction, indeed, operates in the inner logic of a system's construction and, thus, subverts it. But this is only one side of the coin. The other side tells that deconstruction, however subversive it may be, never stops being in the service of the system's construction side.<sup>34</sup>

In "Foi et savoir," an essay reflecting on the religious revivals at the end of the 20th century, Derrida treats these concepts by discovering the double bind logic that both constructs and deconstructs religion's performance.<sup>35</sup> On the one hand, religion posits things as safe and sound, as sacrosanct, sacred, untouchable: as things 'known with certainty' ("*savoir*"). This, however, does not go without, in a sense, sacrificing the thing one attempts to save. This "sacrificial logic" is, for instance, what happens when many religions – as well as many non-religions – put forward the absolute value of life. Inevitably, they risk sacrificing the very life they want to save by reducing it to a mere idea, a 'dead fetish': to something one would give his or other's life for in order to defend it. This way, 'life' becomes something life can be sacrificed for.<sup>36</sup>

This is why, on the other hand, performing something as sacred and untouchable requires the assistance of another "fiduciary" or "testimonial logic."<sup>37</sup> To be what it is, the sacred must be recognized as such by others and, thus, testified by me. I must believe, not only in the sacred value I put forward (here, the logic is sacrificial); I also must believe I *will be*

<sup>33</sup> Deconstruction as a new 'format' of critical theory is indeed a project introduced by Jacques Derrida in early works like *De la grammatologie* and *L'écriture et la différence*.

<sup>34</sup> Also in passages where Nancy explicitly refers to the Heideggerian "*Destruktion*," that difference with the Derridian "*déconstruction*" is never mentioned. In a passage in "D'un *Wink* divin," for instance, defining the deconstructive kernel of Christianity (and human existence in general) as the non-presence in the heart of presence, Nancy uses the expression "le retrait de l'être dans sa différence," "difference" with *a* (Nancy, *La décloison*, 170). It is one of the indications of how close Heideggerian and Derridian thought are to one another according to Nancy. When in another passage of the same essay, he criticizes the notion "*Destruktion*," it is solely in order to reproach Heidegger of not having seen that the destruction of Christian theology is an element of Christian faith itself. "[...] Heidegger ignore [...] ce qui de cette foi, engage une *Destruktion* de la théologie [...]" (Nancy, *La décloison*, 165).

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Foi et savoir," *La religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 9-86.

<sup>36</sup> See, for instance, *ibid.*, 67-68. "[La vie] n'est sacrée, sainte, infiniment respectable au nom de ce qui en elle vaut plus qu'elle [...]. Le prix du vivant humain [...], le prix de ce qui doit rester sauf (*heilig*, sacré, saint et sauf, indemne, immun), comme prix absolu, le prix de ce qui doit inspirer respect, pudere, retenue, ce prix n'a pas de prix" (*ibid.*, 68).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

*believed* (here, the logic is testimonial). I need faith in the faith others will have in what I declare to be sacrosanct.<sup>38</sup> This “fiduciary” faith (“*fôir*”) in the testimonial capacity of my message, however, necessarily hands over the sacred to the public space full of uncontrolled communication where inevitably, the sacred message is open to profanation, desecration, violation et cetera. To be valued as sacred and untouchable, ‘life’ has to be handed over to a public communication field where anyone can ‘touch’ this sacred value and use or misuse it in the most unholy ways.

So, the construction of the sacred is impossible by means of its own sacrificial logic alone (reducing the presumed authentic value to an inauthentic fetish). It needs the supplement of a testimonial logic where it is no less infected (deconstructed) by an unavoidable possibility of profanation. Similarly, the sacred message meant to be heard by all, must perform itself as being touchable by no one, as immune to the very audience it has to be received by. The sacred can only be performed – and, thus, exist – supported by and vacillating between these two logics, between the sacrificial and the testimonial one. It is only possible thanks to a double bind relation that unites both construction and deconstruction without ever ‘sublating’ the radical difference separating them. No construction goes without the secret and inappropriable assistance of some deconstructive supplement. Neither goes a deconstructing operation ever without at the same time constructing the entity or identity it subverts.

Does this mean that, for Derrida, nothing is sacred, that sacredness is phony? Certainly not. There are, and always will be, sacred things; but never will they ‘really and fully’ be what they pretend to be. They always already will be contaminated by the non-sacred supplement of a profaning testimonial logic indispensable to perform themselves as sacred. And similarly, there never will be a world definitely delivered from anything sacred or sacrosanct, a world where each value or message is exchangeable for whatever other value or message. The logic of communicational exchange is impossible without the supplementary logic treating the concerned value or message as safe and sound, unhurt, sacred, sacrosanct.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> “Sans l’expérience performative de cet acte de foi élémentaire, il n’y aurait ni ‘lien social’, ni adresse à l’autre, ni aucune performativité en général [...]” (*ibid.*, 59).

<sup>39</sup> Derrida’s term for this this kind of double bind logic, “auto-indemnisation auto-immune” is borrowed from biological or, more precisely medical science (*ibid.*, 56-62).

Even without a extensive elaboration of Derrida's reflections on current religious revivals and the double bind logic they obey, it may be clear that, according to him, construction and deconstruction, how logically incompatible they may be, nonetheless operate together, that the *deconstruction* of Christianity is at the same time constructing it. The construction side of deconstruction is certainly not a restoration, since the deconstructing operation is inappropriable, by definition anarchistic and incurably subversive, but precisely in this quality, it is fully part of the construction.<sup>40</sup>

Does this fit with Nancy's idea's on "the deconstruction of Christianity"? According to him, Christianity is building itself up by deconstructing, for instance, the narrative of 'Noli me tangere'? Not at all. Again and again, Nancy states, the discovery of Christianity's auto-deconstructive move does not save, restore and, thus, (re)construct Christianity.<sup>41</sup> Its auto-deconstruction goes in one direction only: under its metaphysical and religious story, it reveals an insisting non-religious truth. It is true, for Nancy, that the religious narrative is itself the de-constructor of its metaphysical constructions. But, again, the direction is one way: from construction to deconstruction, and not vice versa, as is the case in Derrida.

In a passage from *Noli me tangere*, Nancy hesitates before the word 'erection' as a term that can indicate the non-religious truth of "resurrection." He described the latter as the emergence – the raising or uprising ("la résurrection", c'est-à-dire le relèvement ou le soulèvement)<sup>42</sup> – of

<sup>40</sup> This is why the 'touch' always already has touched – and, thus, contaminated and subverted – the untouchable. When, in his book on Jean-Luc Nancy and more precisely in his comments on Nancy's 'deconstruction of Christianity', Derrida discusses some passages about the touch in the gospels (Derrida, *Le toucher*, 117-120), his emphasis is on the fact that Christ indeed touches (to heal the blind and the cripple ones), but never without being touched himself. This is why, in Derrida's reasoning, the gospel by John (where "allusions littérales au toucher soient plus rares," p. 120) and, more precisely the 'Noli me tangere' passage is treated rather as an exception according to the logic of deconstruction with regard to the 'touch'.

<sup>41</sup> See for instance Nancy, *La décloison*, 53, where he claims that we have to "arrêter toute tentative de 'guérir' les 'maux' du monde actuel (sa privation de sens) par un retour au christianisme en particulier ou à la religion en général: car il s'agit de saisir comment nous sommes déjà sorti du religieux."

<sup>42</sup> "La 'résurrection' trouve ainsi seulement son sens non religieux. Ce qui pour la religion est recommencement d'une présence, portant l'assurance fantasmatique d'une immortalité, se révèle ici n'être pas autre chose que la partance dans laquelle la présence s'enlève en vérité, partant son sens selon cette partance. Comme elle vient, elle part: c'est-à-dire qu'elle *n'est* pas au sens où quelque chose est posée dans la présence, immobile, identique à soi, disponible pour un usage ou pour un concept. La 'résurrection'

death itself within the realm of life. Referring to the raising of Lazarus, Nancy writes there:

Dans l'épisode de Lazare, le mort sort du tombeau lié sans ses bandelettes et enveloppé du suaire: ce n'est pas une scène de film fantastique, c'est une parabole de la station droite levée au sein de la mort. Non pas une érection – ni en un sens phallique, ni en un sens monumental, encore que ces deux sens pourraient être repris et travaillés dans ce contexte – mais un se-tenir-debout devant et dans la mort.<sup>43</sup>

Nancy described resurrection as the uprising of death within life. In the case of Lazarus, it is the other way round: as life's "uprising in the middle of death [*statue droite levée au sein de la mort*]." For Nancy, however, it amounts to the same thing: it indicates the moment where the dead says "I am dead," thus expressing the impossible moment of 'non-coincidence with oneself' – the impossibility which makes presence with oneself possible. "I am dead' (impossible to say) and 'I am resurrected' tell the same," Nancy writes a few lines further.<sup>44</sup> But why does he hesitate to indicate "resurrection" by the term "erection." Because, as he argues, the term has the connotation of being "phallic" as well as being "monumental." And he immediately adds that, if reworked, both connotations as well as the term 'erection' itself could possibly be useful.

Are both connotations – being "phallic" and being "monumental" – different from one another? Not that much. For the phallus, being not the penis, is literally its monument, its blow up representation carried around in Dionysian processions. It is a monument representing the fertility of male potency. So, why does Nancy hesitate to use "erection" as

est la surrection, le surgissement de l'indisponible, de l'autre et du disparaissant *dans le corps et comme le corps*. Ce n'est pas un tour de magie, c'en est le contraire: le corps mort reste mort et c'est lui qui fait le 'vide' du tombeau, mais le corps que plus tard la théologie nommera 'glorieux' (c'est-à-dire brillant de l'éclat de l'invisible) révèle que ce vide est bien l'évident de la présence. Non, rien n'est disponible ici: ne cherche pas à t'emparer d'un sens de cette vie finie, ne cherche pas à toucher ni à retenir ce qui essentiellement s'éloigne et en s'éloignant te touche de sa distance même [...] comme de ce qui, en décevant définitivement ton attente, fait surgir devant toi, pour toi, cela même qui ne surgit pas, cela dont la surrection or l'insurrection est une gloire qui s'emploie à décevoir et à écarter ta main tendue vers elle" (Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, 29-30; Nancy's italics).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> "Je suis mort' (la parole impossible) et 'je suis ressuscité' disent la même chose" (*ibid.*, 35).

explicatory name for “resurrection”? Not because of its sexual character, but because of its connotation of “monument” and, thus, representation, i.e. of representation’s capacity to appropriate the fullness of presence. Resurrection’s truth – i.e. the affirmation of death as inner kernel of life, the affirmation of absence as presence’s inner condition of possibility – cannot be fully appropriated, i.e. ‘sublated’ by the “erection” of a “monument” representing its truth (read: reducing its truth to the limits of a representation).

But is the “erection” of such “monument” avoidable? Can one name the impossibility of being present with oneself, without representing it, without ‘sublating’ that impossibility in the very act of naming it? To this question, the answer of the Derridian deconstruction is negative. In “Foi et savoir,” Derrida dishes up, precisely, a *phallus theory* in order to explain this.<sup>45</sup> So, what then is a phallus, according to Derrida? It is the signifier naming the vitality of life per excellence. It raises human sexual energy to something sacred, sacrosanct, untouchable, carried around in a religious, Dionysian procession. But erected to the level of the sacred, the phallus makes life’s sexual potency into something “more than life,” i.e. a dead fetish. The strange thing is that, only when the erected phallus should “fall down,” it would really show what it pretends to show: life.

Here it becomes clear why Derrida’s reference to the phallus and its erection/fall obviously illustrates the double bind logic as revealed in the performance of religion (and other discourses): an erected phallus is already contaminated by its fall to come, just like, vice versa, the ‘fallen’ phallus is already infected by the erection to come. Both eclipse one another in a kind of ‘elliptic’ logic.<sup>46</sup> This ‘phallic’ construction contains its deconstruction as its inner condition both of possibility and impossibility. And so does its deconstruction contain construction as its inner condition both of possibility and impossibility. Deconstruction is not only part of the construction, also construction is always already at work in deconstruction.

<sup>45</sup> Derrida, “Foi et savoir,” 63-65.

<sup>46</sup> For the metaphor of the “ellipse” which is used in this context, see Derrida, “Foi et savoir,” 54. It is one of the basic schemes of Derrida’s deconstructive theory, already elaborated in his early writings. See, for instance, the last essay in *L’écriture et la différence*, entitled “L’ellipse” (Jacques Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence* [Paris: Seuil, 1967], 429-436).

## 5. Deconstruction Constructing Christianity

So, like Nancy, Derrida puts forward a kind of transcendental truth at work in religion's performativity – as it is in the performance of so many other forms of human culture. But unlike Nancy, Derrida comprehends that this transcendental truth can never appear 'as such'. The appearance or performance of this truth is itself contaminated by the double bind structure told by that truth. In order to appear or to be performed, this truth requires an establishment or 'erection' which is always already infected by the 'bad things' it is unmasking at that very moment (such as untrue fantasies, wrong beliefs, et cetera).

What does this imply, for instance, concerning the Mary Magdalene pericope in John 20 as interpreted by Nancy? That it is, indeed, the untouchable itself – the very '*noli me tangere*' – which has always already been touched, but not only in a way the transcendental structure of touching is revealed (as Nancy contends), but also in a way that this revelation itself always already has been contaminated by a less transcendental touch, by the banality of untrue touching. The clear opposition between the transcendental and the empirical touch, between the phenomenologically irrepresentable truth of touching and its representation is never without being deconstructed on the level of the most authentic truth-revelation. Even in this moment, we always already have appropriated the inappropriable. And we do so in a way which makes the choice between appropriation and its opposite for ever 'undecidable'.

Is, then, the unambiguous difference between religion and non-religion, or between religious and non-religious truth (as Nancy supposes), tenable after all? Following the line of Derridian deconstruction, one must admit that this opposition, too, is in the end deconstructed by its inner 'undecidability'. The non-religious truth has always already been infected by the truth that religion claims. Not so much on the level of content, but on a formal level: the nature of non-religious truths is not definitely separable from the one of religious truths. Which is to say that non-religious truth has always already been infected by the myths, fantasies, magic stories – in short the 'representations' and 'monuments' – religious truths rely on.

Is this to say that there is no outside of religion, according to Derrida? This conclusion is too fast, if only because we do not really know what 'religion' is. The sole thing we know is that, despite centuries of the most intelligent religion critique, a certain 'revival' of religion occurs. Without exactly knowing what it is, we observe that the thing *called*

'religion', imagined having been paralysed and neutralized by ages of criticism, suddenly 'resurrects'. It is quite unsure, however, if the thing resurrecting is the same as the thing which was supposed to have died. It is rather the opposite, Derrida states. Since difference precedes essence, since repetition precedes identity,<sup>47</sup> the very repetition of religion makes it changing by each 'retake', or makes it even turning into something else than religion. History is not a matter of identities which, first, exist on their own and, then, in a logically second moment, undergo changes. It is, first, a process of changing, a game of differences which, in a second time, appeals to so-called identities – identities which above all repress the abysmal and 'undecidable' character of the 'dissemination' of 'difference and repetition that constitutes 'history'.

There is no outside to this disseminating realm of 'difference and repetition'. Or, to put it with a reference to one of the leading themes in Derrida's oeuvre: "*il n'y pas de hors-texte*," there is no outside to the text,<sup>48</sup> i.e. to the world open for us as a text, i.e. as a 'textile' woven with endlessly exchangeable signifiers and written in an "*écriture*" characterized by a double bind logic as mentioned above. Within the limits of that condition, ascribing to something an identity is both separating it from the rest of the 'text' *and* delivering it to the intertextuality of a disseminating realm of references. Constructing something as an identity is impossible without relying on some 'originary supplement' deconstructing it at the same time – which is to say that, precisely because of this, any deconstruction inevitably sustains the construction it undermines.

This is Derrida's way to redefine the core of what after all 'thinking' is, including first of all critical thinking. We owe to Plato our traditional idea of criticism as separating truly real things from false representations, from *mimesis*. In our cave full of shadows, we have to find the way out to true reality. For Derrida, however, there is no outside to the *mimesis* we live in. The world is a 'generalised representation', a construction made of representations which, inevitably relying on some supplementary logic, deconstruct the representational logic and prevent it both from arriving at some supposed 'real' world outside or closing in itself. Within the

<sup>47</sup> A Derridian deconstruction lays bare how a supposed identity is based in an 'originary repetition'. It is difference and repetition which form the basis of what is considered as sameness and identity. "La répétition ne réédite pas [une identité], elle en décrit l'origine depuis une écriture que ne lui appartient pas encore ou ne lui appartient plus, qui feint, le répétant, de se laisser comprendre en lui" (Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, 430).

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 227.

limits of this condition, critical thought will still be possible and highly needed, but it will never be able to claim a truth which is located outside the *mimesis*, outside the representation, in a realm of authentic presence. *Mimesis* will still require criticism, but that criticism will no longer be able to definitely liberate us from that very *mimesis*.

If there is an auto-deconstruction at work in monotheistic religion, it must be defined within the limits of that condition. For monotheism is not so much the religion of belief or faith – as the post-Kantian approach has always stated. According to the main monotheistic texts, belief and faith are put forward, not as religious life's aim, but as its problem to overcome. Again and again the Old Testament prophets repeat that people believe *all too easily*. Too fast, they have faith in the idols they suppose to be God. Too eagerly, they forget that only God is God, a God who himself is unknowable, but of whom they know that, compared to Him, nothing is true. In a way, monotheistic religion is not so much based on trust as on distrust. Of course, God gives a kind of trust, but it is first of all a trust enabling me to distrust the religious aspiration both of myself and of others. The monotheistic message is by definition suspicious about people's inclination to believe, since God is not what they believe God is, for only God is God.

Monotheistic religion is critical to the core.<sup>49</sup> Its very essence is criticism and, even, *criticism of religion*. The God monotheism refers to is radically abstract and it has no defined idea of who He really is. But it has very accurate ideas of how fake false gods, idols, are. This is why, from a strictly religious perspective, monotheism is rather poor. The core of its content is that God is not its first concern, i.e. that people should not fantasize about who He is. To honour God is to be obedient to his word, i.e. to the Law He has given and which tells particularly how to deal with our neighbours, how to do justice to the 'widow and the orphan' and to other brothers and sisters whose dignity and rights are not respected. In the name of God, we should not so much be preoccupied about God himself as about the justice among his creatures. This is the very reason why monotheism is critical about typically religious concerns and reduces that dimension of its practice for a greater part to religion-critical attacks against human inclination to venerate all

<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003); id., *Monotheismus und die Sprache der Gewalt* (Wien: Picus Verlag, 2006); Marc De Kesel, "Religion und/als Kritik," *Wieder Religion: Christentum im zeitgenössischen kritischen Denken* (Lacan, Žižek, Badiou u.a.), ed. Marc De Kesel and Dominiek Hoens (Wien: Turia & Kant, 2006), 15-39.

kinds of false gods. It is also in that sense that atheism is not per se contradictory to monotheism, as Nancy, too, rightly puts it.<sup>50</sup> Atheism and monotheism share in fact the same criticism with regard to man's 'natural' inclination to belief. To fight against it is the central mission of both atheism and monotheism.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, it is crucial, here, to remember that monotheistic criticism, however close it may come to 'atheism', considers itself as full religion. It is true that, in its core, it is nothing but religion critique, attacking anyone who pretends having insight into what is behind the face of a God who, in his very appearing, withdraws – a God who, in his presence, is always already absent. But it, nonetheless, fully admits to be itself a religion. However paradoxical this might be, it is interesting to notice that, thus, it acknowledges being not radically different from the thing it criticizes. It admits to share the same nature as the thing it nonetheless criticizes to the bone.

This is perhaps why the paradox of monotheistic religion critique is not so inconsistent with the condition deconstructionist criticism is in. Is deconstruction not aware that its critical move fully belongs to the construction of what it criticizes? And is its point not that, nonetheless, criticism is possible because no construction can fully appropriate the deconstructive move it is supplied by? In that sense, deconstruction is indispensable even if it cannot offer a non-deconstructible truth, for any construction must recognize and acknowledge its own inner gap or lack making it deconstructible. It is the task of any modern criticism to *actively* make this happen. It cannot offer an alternative for the criticized system – this is what the tragedy of 20th century ideology critique has shown – but it nonetheless has to hold open the system whose nature it is to make full circle and to repress or to deny the system's inner openness.<sup>52</sup>

Here, monotheism, in its quality of age-old religion-critical religion, can offer an instructive point of reference to contemporary criticism,

<sup>50</sup> In "Déconstruction et monothéisme," listing the characteristics of the 'auto-deconstruction of christianism', he first mentions that "le monothéisme est en vérité l'athéisme" (Nancy, *La décloison*, 55). See, also, his essay "Athéisme et monothéisme," in Nancy, *La décloison*, 27-45.

<sup>51</sup> This is why the truly atheist position is more difficult than commonly presumed. It is not a matter of believing there is no God, but of fighting that 'belief' as well – to avoid that the certainty about God's non-existing replaces the certainty of his existence. It is a matter of cultivating an 'uncertainty' in order not to turn it into a new kind of certainty, a new kind of 'God'.

<sup>52</sup> Nancy's work is a perfect illustration of this kind of modern 20th century criticism.

including Derridian deconstruction. For it shows a kind of criticism being aware of its inability to offer a radical alternative to what it criticizes. Its critical gesture has to operate within the realm of magical phantasmagorias it has to unmask without being able to ever leave that realm behind. Just like monotheistic religion critique knows it does not leave the area of religion.

The reference to monotheistic critique, however, confronts deconstructive thought also with the inner weakness – and, thus, the danger – of its own critical gesture. The fact that criticism – or, more exactly, auto-criticism has always been its core business, has not prevented monotheism from being able to claim the absolute truth and to act as if it is legitimized to use (and abuse) absolute power. Just as the high tradition of critical thought in the 19th and 20th century has been able to be used and misused by totalitarian and other disastrous tendencies in political and social life.

## 6. “This is not the object, here”

In the opening essay – the “Ouverture” – of *La décloison*,<sup>53</sup> Nancy explicitly refers to Christianity’s dark pages telling the history of its manipulations, exploitations and other kinds of abuse of power. Nancy does so, however, in order to declare the mention of this issue “superfluous” and to leave it right away behind.

Il me paraît superflu de répéter ici tous les griefs dont il est légitime d’accabler le christianisme, depuis le dessaisissement de la pensée jusqu’à l’exploitation ignoble de la douleur et de la misère. Il faut même pousser plus loin l’accusation – ou bien plus loin *que* l’accusation – pour interroger les conditions de possibilité d’une domination religieuse aussi puissante et durable, exercée sur un monde qui ne cessa presque pas en même temps de déjouer et de déposséder cette domination même, et qui trouva en elle des armes contre elle (la liberté, l’individu, la raison même). Ce n’est pas ici l’objet.<sup>53</sup>

Neither an investigation of how Christianity’s immense and lasting abuse of power ‘in God’s name’ has been possible nor a reflexion on the fact that the Christian doctrine itself has supplied the “arms” to be criticized for that, is part of Jean-Luc Nancy’s “deconstruction of Christianity.” Of course, such investigation is to be done, and these

<sup>53</sup> Nancy, *La décloison*, 20.

auto-critical tools are to be taken seriously, Nancy admits, but nonetheless “it is not the object here”?

“*Ce n'est pas ici l'objet.*” Do we read well? Christianity supplies itself the tools by which it can be (and has been) criticized and deconstructed, and Nancy declares this to be “not the object” of its “deconstruction”? These “arms” of Christian origin – “freedom, individual, even reason” – do they not perfectly illustrate how Christianity possesses in itself the equipment of its own deconstruction? So, why then, does Nancy refuse to take into account as well that, in spite of centuries of the most severe (auto-)criticism – and thus, in a way, auto-deconstruction –, Christianity had upheld its dominion and at times even forced up its abuse of power?

So, the problem here is not only Nancy's refusal to discuss the dark history of Christianity's power. The crucial point to be made is that, declaring the issue of less importance, Nancy leaves undiscussed the possibility that both power and power abuse may be sustained *even by Christianity's (auto)critical tendencies*. The true side of Christianity may be as responsible for its dark pages as its false side. This is a highly important hypothesis which precisely a so-called ‘deconstruction of Christianity’ cannot put aside in one single sentence. It simply touches the heart of the entire ‘deconstructive’ project. In fact, Nancy misses the opportunity to consider the possibility of an inner and dangerous weakness which may be characteristic for all modern religion criticism, *including his own “deconstruction of Christianity.”* What, if the ‘arms’ with which one fights against the abuse of power can turn into the criminal power's most efficient instruments? What if the deconstruction side of Christianity's dark side, is at the same time useful for its very construction? In leaving Christianity's dark history aside, Nancy avoids a confrontation with the possibly dark sides of his own deconstructive thought. “This is not the object here,” he writes, and adds that, for now, just “a remark must suffice”:

Pour le moment, une remarque doit suffire, mais essentielle. Le christianisme ne désigne pas autre chose, essentiellement (simplement, infiniment simplement: dans une simplicité inaccessible), que l'exigence d'ouvrir dans ce monde une altérité ou une aliénation inconditionnelle. Mais ‘inconditionnel’ veut dire: non indéconstructible, et doit désigner la portée en droit infinie du mouvement même de la déconstruction et de la décloison.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Nancy, *La décloison*, 20.

Nancy's "remark" is indeed "essential." In fact it is too "essential" to be simply a "remark," for it tells nothing less than the main argument and the central thesis of his book, "*La décloison*," and even of his entire "deconstruction of Christianity." So, apparently, only the essential *core* of his theory suffices here to neutralize the problem averted in the paragraph above, i.e. the problematic inner weakness of deconstruction and other kinds of modern criticism.

According to Nancy, there is a truth in Christianity which consists in its "demand to open an alterity in this word," "an unconditional alienation." But has that long history of criticism (and auto-criticism) against Christianity's violence and corruption not precisely 'demanded' to open an alterity within Christianity itself as well as within the world in general? How could such openness ever have had a chance if not in the shape of "all the objections [*griefs*] that can legitimately be made against Christianity," i.e. in the shape of critical questions, questions originating in Christianity itself and, thus, organising its "auto-deconstruction"? It is bizarre that Nancy considers this to be "not the object here." As if the ages of criticism and auto-criticism are not the way par excellence to get in touch with the "unconditional alienation" to be opened by Christianity as well as by modern thought.

One might even wonder if Nancy is serious when he writes that, here, "unconditional" refers to the deconstructability of the "alienation" or "alterity" which are to be opened by Christianity ("But 'unconditional' means: non undeconstructible"). Is the line of Nancy's reasoning not just the other way around? Is the "alienation," the 'openness towards its own inner openness', not the final aim of the Nancyan deconstruction? And is it not simply logical to conclude that this openness or "alienation" is *undeconstructible* in itself? Is not precisely this "alienation" to be deconstructed? And, of course, even the term 'alienation' surely once will end up being too much a 'representation' covering the "infinitely simple" experience of being's openness. But that experience *as such* is not to be deconstructed. It is the very *raison d'être* of any deconstruction. According to Nancy, Christianity has a truth (not in the ontological, but in the phenomenological sense of the word), a truth which is unconditional and, in that sense, *undeconstructible*. Or, to put it in the terms of the following sentences in Nancy's essay: within the closing universe of the 'logos', Christianity saves the "*alogon*." And this "alogon" – so, one must conclude against Nancy's own saying – cannot be deconstructed, it is the "*undeconstructible*" that any deconstruction wants to save, to behold, and to restore.

En d'autres termes, le christianisme assume de la manière la plus radicale et la plus expresse l'enjeu de l'*alogon*. Tout le poids – énorme – de la représentation religieuse ne peut pas faire que l'«autre monde» ou l'«autre royaume» ne furent jamais un second monde ni un arrière-monde, mais l'autre monde (*de tout monde: de toute consistance liée dans l'étant et dans la communication*) l'autre du monde. Le christianisme peut se résumer, ainsi aussi Nietzsche, par exemple, l'a fort bien su, au précepte de vivre dans ce monde comme hors de lui – étant entendu que ce «dehors» n'est pas, n'est pas un étant. Il n'existe pas, mais il (ou bien puisqu'il) définit et mobilise l'ex-istence: l'ouverture du monde à – l'altérité inaccessible (et par conséquent l'accès paradoxal à ce dernier).<sup>55</sup>

In the “most radical and direct way,” Christianity assumes “what is at stake in the *alogon*” of the human ‘logos’, in the openness constituting the ‘world’, an openness towards what does not exist but “defines and mobilises the ex-istence” (i.e. the human *Dasein* which, for Nancy, is always *Mitdasein*)<sup>56</sup> as being open to an “inaccessible alterity.” All this repeats what already is explained above. The ‘summarizing’ idea he puts foreword is not quite new either: “Christianity can be summarized, like, for instance, Nietzsche did, as living in the world as if out of the world.” It is the well-known Heideggerian idea that, as human beings, we are in a sense ‘outside’ the world of beings, since we are not simply being (*Seiendes*) but *Dasein* and *Mitdasein* having its locus in the world’s ‘inner outside’, or, more precisely coinciding with (i.e. *being*) that ‘inner outside’.

## 7. The Subject of Deconstruction

Yet, here, a peculiar implication of Nancy’s thesis comes more to the foreground. The kind of ‘inner outside’ he mentions does not simply name the *object* of Christianity’s deconstruction; it names at the same time its subject position or, more generally, the truth of the human subject position as such. It indicates the position from where we take part of the world – which is the position from where we take part in Christianity’s auto-deconstruction as well. Being *in* the world, we are

<sup>55</sup> Nancy, *La décloison*, 20-21.

<sup>56</sup> It is a major theme in Nancy’s entire work, especially discussed in *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Galilée, 1996). *Dasein* is to be defined as ‘we’, as plural, non-totalising plural or ‘singular plural’, so Nancy stresses again and again.

not *of* the world, as early Christianity defined it.<sup>57</sup> Christianity's "inner outside," which during its history has been more and more the object of 'unconcealment', indicates the subject position, the locus from where we relate to the world.

This locus or subject, however, is far from being unproblematic. For the question is if, in our condition of modern subjects, we have made this position *as such* ours? Have we knowingly and consciously assumed this position? Not at all, would be Nancy's answer. For that, we are still too much captured by metaphysical and representational logic. That is why Christianity is still to be deconstructed and to be acknowledged in its auto-deconstructive move. And that is why modernity, too, still has to deconstruct itself by deconstructing Christianity.

But, once Christianity will be deconstructed and we will embrace fully its inner auto-deconstructive move, will we *then* be able to assume this 'inner outside' position and make it properly ours? Or is the question rather: Can we make this position ours *at all*? Can we occupy it in a *proper* way? Can we *appropriate* it? The only Nancyan answer possible is that we cannot. Such presumed appropriation denies the inappropriable 'alterity' of that very position. Every authentic response of a *Dasein* to the injunction proceeding from that 'inner outside' position affirms this. It acknowledges the impossibility of appropriating its own position, of getting 'settled' in its own 'inner outside'.

This, however, is only one side of the coin. For it is *also* the question if one is able *not* to appropriate this position. Has the *Dasein* not always first of all denied the impossibility of a self-appropriation, has it not first of all – *zunächst und zumeist* (to use the expression of Heidegger's *Sein*

<sup>57</sup> "Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world." In the New Testament, one only finds the idea (John 15,19; 17,14-16), not the expression as such. The latter originates from the second century anonymous *Letter to Diognetus* (VI,3) (see on the internet: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anfor.iii.ii.vi.html>). For an allusion to the idea in the New Testament, see also 1 Cor 7:29-31: "The time is short. So then those who have wives should be as those who have none, those with tears like those not weeping, those who rejoice like those not rejoicing, those who buy like those without possessions, those who use the world as though they were not using it to the full. For the present shape of this world is passing away." According to Jan Assmann, this subject position is not only typical for Christianity but also for monotheism in general, insofar it defines the human person as subjected to non-worldly Law. "Wer die Gesetze hält, lebt als Fremder auf Erden. So heißt es in Psalm 119 Vers 19: 'Ich bin ein Fremder auf Erden: verbirg dein Gesetze nicht vor mir'. Dem Gesetz treu bleiben heißt als Fremder auf Erden leben, und sei es im Gelobten Land. Das Gesetz beschreibt eine kontrafaktische Ordnung, die bewirkt, dass man in dieser Welt lebt, ohne sich ihr ganz zu assimilieren. Der Monotheismus fundiert eine existentielle Weltfremdheit." Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung*, 137.

*und Zeit*)<sup>58</sup> – covered up being's openness with representations, and is it not from this 'inauthentic' position that it is susceptible to the injunction of authentically taking its *Dasein* upon itself?

"All the – enormous – weight of religious representation cannot make that the 'other world' or the 'other kingdom' never was a second world or an after world," Nancy writes. This kind of 'second or after world' is fictitious and distracts the attention from the world's 'inner alterity' or 'inner openness'. But is the opposite claim not as valid? Is it not the case as well that all the world's 'inner alterity' cannot achieve that it will be covered up by the "enormous weight of religious representation"? Is the inner openness human existence is 'grounded' in not as necessarily as fatally doomed to be covered up by inauthentic, phantasmagorical, 'religious' representations?

Affirming that we are 'in, but not of the world' consists in affirming our subject position as mere 'openness' towards the world, as an 'open space' within it. Yet, at the same time, it consists in acknowledging that we can never definitely escape from 'repressing' or 'covering up' this openness. Never we will definitely be freed from supposing that we belong to a world separated from the one whose openness we 'are'; that we inevitably start from the supposition of being free subjects independent from the world and that we never will be able to leave that starting position behind definitively. To put it in Heideggerian terms: the pretention to be beyond the every day life mentality (*Altäglichkeit*) is the best definition of this mentality. To assume the impossibility to get beyond is part of *Dasein's* *authentic* modes of being. Affirming to be 'in, not of the world' implies an affirmation of the impossibility to get really 'settled' in that way of being. Such a position is never conquered; it is, again and again, *to be* conquered. No one is ever able to definitely overcome its false starting supposition.

The risks inherent in the ambiguous side of the human subject position – to know we are being's openness and to know that this very knowledge is not able to appropriate this openness – can be illustrated by the way this 'being *in, not of* the world' functioned in the early ages of Christianity. What is more: in the light of this Christian subject position, a kind of dispositive to perversion comes to the foreground – a dispositive laying bare an intrinsic possibility, if not of the subject position in general, at least of the one the *modern* subject is in.

<sup>58</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 35 and *passim*.

As we all know, ‘Christians’ were called those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah, i.e., as the one in whom God was incarnated in order to put an end to the existing Creation corrupted by time, sin and death, and to open up a New Creation, a heavenly world of eternal life. At least, this was what Christians supposed ‘soon’ to be the case. For now, this only had happened to Christ alone. He was still the only one who had made the step from the Old to the New Creation. As the Gospels tell, the resurrected Christ had to return back to his Father, but was soon to come back in order to complete what he had started: the ‘eschaton’ and its ‘apocalypse’, i.e., the end of time going hand in hand with the entire revelation of God and his ‘mysteries’. In the meantime, the old creature was living in the ‘interval’, in the time between the instant time’s end had ‘started’ and the moment of its *definite end*. The coming of the Messiah had completed God’s Revelation (apocalypse) and destroyed death and sin (eschaton). By means of his faith in Christ, the Christian shared the realm of accomplished Revelation and was delivered from sin and death. In that sense, he already was part of the other, newly created world. Yet, he did so *only in principle*. For, in fact, he was still living in the old world, since the Messiah was still *to come* (back) in order to finish his mission, i.e., to definitely finish the act of ‘ending up’ what he only had started. So, indeed, the Christian was – and still is – *in* the world, even though being no longer *of* the world (for already belonging to the new Creation).

This messianic phantasm underlying the Christian position defined as ‘being *in*, not *of* the world’ had farreaching consequences. One of them is that it enabled the tricky way in which Christianity succeeded in claiming absolute power and making abuse of it, as all too often has been the case in history. Is this specific subject position not Christianity’s best guarantee to have the truth *always* on its side, whatever side it is forced to take? Sharing already the Messiah’s new Creation and the completion of Revelation, Christianity is able to legitimately claim the absolute truth, i.e. to speak in the name of a truth not affected by time, sin or death. When, on the other side, Christianity takes up a standpoint ‘in the world’ where it cannot claim any truth or is itself attacked by hostile truths, it can always legitimately criticize the adversary by saying that the Messiah still is to come, that the absolute truth is still not revealed, and that, thus, no one is already able to talk in its name.

This is the *double bind* logic enabled by Christianity’s central phantasm: the messianic expectancy is acknowledged as being both fulfilled

and *unfulfilled at the same time*. On the one side, Christianity can claim that the existing world is still under 'apocalyptic reservation', and that, thus, it is still to be criticised. This is the *critical* aspect of Christianity which, in its quality of a monotheistic religion, is so to speak its core business. But on the other side, it considers itself at the same time to be the holder of the apocalyptic truth *without any reservation*, and claims the permission to criticize the entire world from a point of view which is itself beyond any possible criticism.

Modernity can be defined as a break with a world dominated by the Christian doctrine. Yet, if nonetheless modernity has inherited some aspects from Christianity, its formal subject position of 'being *in*, not *of* the world' is certainly one of them. It is the 'neutral' position of the modern scientist observing reality from a point supposed to be radically separated from the investigation's object – i.e., a point 'outside' 'in' the world. It is the position of the modern 'bourgeois', being engaged in social life from a point supposed to be free, i.e., to be free from what binds him to the society and enabling him to have a free relation to that society.<sup>59</sup>

With this subject position, modernity has taken over the possibility of a perverse double bind logic enabling the modern subject to have always the right on his side. The modesty of science lies in the fact that it relates to reality from a neutral position, renouncing any subjectivity; yet it is precisely from this empty and neutral position that modernity embraces reality with an historically unparalleled 'omnipotence' which shows its dark side in, for instance, its capacity to destroy humanity and world by means of nuclear weapons. Similarly, the point from where a modern bourgeois takes part in the world is at one side an extremely modest point forcing him to declare he is equal to – and equally free as – anyone in the entire world, which makes him really someone *of* the world; on the other side, however, he is at the same time able to suppose himself freed from that world, flirting with the idea to spend his life far from the turbulence of social life or, other possibility, to criticize – including even revolutionary change – that social world. The double bind logic is at its clearest in the so-called post-modernist position. Claiming all 'grand narratives' to be dead and truth to have become an empty pretention, the post-modernist subject in fact

<sup>59</sup> Here, I refer to the way Hegel defines the condition of the modern 'bourgeois' in his *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, more exactly in the third part ("Die Sittlichkeit," "The Ethical System"), second section ("Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft," "Civic Community": §182-256).

tells the truth about everyone who dares to claim truth. He in fact claims nothing less than the absolute truth, the truth about all truths and, in that sense, the apocalyptic and eschatological truth we met in the Christian doctrine. Contrary to what it looks like, post-modernity lacks 'eschatological reserve'.

Precisely because Christianity is responsible for the 'absolute' pretention of modern man's apparently most modest position, the history of both Christianity's power claims and the critical questions attacking these claims genuinely belong to a so-called 'deconstruction of Christianity'. Unlike Nancy states, these critical questions are to be taken up by any deconstructive thought, for they have opened Christianity to its own inner openness, to the 'openness of being' it 'preaches' and 'is'. The crucial point, however, is that these questions deconstructing Christianity's metaphysical doctrine from within have also enabled its abuse of power. These questions – as well as these answers – were at least at the same time attacking *and* sustaining the power pretention of Christian imperialism.

The deconstruction of Christianity (or Monotheism) is not so much about finding the truth at work in the phantasmagorical discourse of that religion, as Nancy supposes. It is rather about discovering the way how even that truth is sustained by – as well as sustaining – 'untruth'. It lays bare how the criticism unmasking the falseness of its object, never is itself without being contaminated by that object, including its falseness. If there is a truth to be found in Christianity (or Monotheism in general), it is the fact that it is both religion criticism *and* religion. It is, so to say, a religion-critical religion. Its core mission tells that nothing of what human brings call God is God, for only God is God. It performs its God as a fundamental critical paradigm, attacking the human inclination to 'create gods' and to feel based in divine 'sacred values'. However, this basically 'atheistic' mission of monotheism does not prevent it from declaring monotheism to be a religion.

This is why monotheism can be revealing for modern criticism. The former can shed some light on the impasse the latter is in. Contemporary criticism is in fact in a similar shape as once was monotheism: having unmasked convincingly the great ideologies of our time, it has to acknowledge that ideology still remains the horizon within which modern man operates. What is more, it has to acknowledge that it not only has no real alternative for the criticised ideology, but that it is itself unable to entirely operate outside ideology, that it is itself never really non-ideological. This is why its ideology critique was unable not to be

(mis)used by ideology itself. This, however, does not declare ideology critique to be impossible or senseless. It only emphasises the necessity – and even ethical duty – of its critique. It only emphasises deconstruction as an ethical injunction, as an absolute and absolutely undeconstructible, untouchable imperative.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>60</sup> In the final pages of *Limited Inc*, Derrida stresses the unconditional character of his deconstruction, even in the ethical sense of the word. “Dans les différents textes que j’ai écrits sur (contre) l’apartheid, j’ai à plusieurs reprises parlé d’affirmation «inconditionnelle» ou d’«appel» «inconditionnel». Cela m’est arrivé en d’autres «contextes» et chaque fois que je parle du lien entre la déconstruction et le «oui». Or le moins qu’on puisse dire de l’inconditionnalité (mot dont je ne me sers pas fortuitement pour rappeler le caractère de *l’impératif catégorique dans sa forme kantienne*), c’est qu’elle est indépendante de tout contexte déterminé, de la détermination même d’un contexte en générale” (Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* [Paris: Galilée, 1990], 281, italics are mine, MdK).