Jean-Luc Nancy and the Deconstruction of Christianity

by

Tenzan Eaghll

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto

©Copyright by Tenzan Eaghll 2016
Jean-Luc Nancy and the Deconstruction of Christianity

Tenzan Eaghll

Doctor of Philosophy

Department for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto

2016

Abstract

This dissertation is a study of the origins and development of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s work on the “deconstruction of Christianity.” By situating Nancy's work in light of the broader Continental philosophical analysis of religion in the 20th Century, it argues that what Nancy calls the "deconstruction of Christianity" and the "exit from religion" is his unique intervention into the problem of metaphysical nihilism in Western thought. The author explains that Nancy’s work on religion does not provide a new “theory” for the study of religion or Christianity, but shows how Western metaphysical foundations are caught up in a process of decomposition that has been brought about by Christianity. For Nancy, the only way out of nihilism is to think of the world as an infinite opening unto itself, for this dis-encloses any transcendent principle of value or immanent notion of meaninglessness in the finite spacing of sense, and he finds the resources to think this opening within Christianity. By reading Christian notions like "God" and "creation ex nihilo" along deconstructive lines and connecting them with the rise and fall of this civilization that once called itself "Christendom," he attempts to expose "the sense of an absenting" that is both the condition of possibility for the West and what precedes, succeeds, and exceeds it.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ii
Table of Contents iii
Abbreviations vi

## Introduction

0.1 - What is the Deconstruction of Christianity? 1
0.2 - The Scholarly and Philosophical Context of the Present study 3
0.3 - Nancy's Intellectual Context and Development 8
0.4 - What Follows 18

### Chapter 1: Between Heidegger and Nancy: Deconstructing the Metaphysics of Religion

1.1 - Introduction 22
1.2 - Heidegger
   1.2.1 - Influences and Divergences 23
   1.2.2 - Religion 33
   1.2.3 - Christianity 40
1.3 - Between Heidegger and Nancy 49
   1.3.1 - From Being to Being-With 50
   1.3.2 - From Disclosure to Exposure (or, Creation *ex nihilo*) 60
   1.3.3 - From the Nazi Myth to Myth Interrupted 64
1.4 - Nancy
   1.4.1 - From *Destrucktion* to the "Judeo-Christian" 76
   1.4.2 - Towards an Inoperative Faith 83
1.5 - Conclusion 92

### Chapter 2: Between Bataille and Nancy: Overcoming Religion with *Atheology*

2.1 - Introduction 94
2.2 - Bataille
   2.2.1 - Influences and Divergences 95
   2.2.2 - Religion 101
   2.2.3 - Christianity 109
### Chapter 2: Between Bataille and Nancy

2.3 - Between Bataille and Nancy
   2.3.1 - From *Atheological Community* to *Atheological Abandonment* 117

### Chapter 2: Nancy: Towards an Unsacrificable Sovereignty

2.4 - Nancy: Towards an Unsacrificable Sovereignty
   2.4.1 - Sovereignty 133
   2.4.2 - Sacrifice 136
   2.4.3 - Unsacrificable Christianity 141

### Chapter 2: Conclusion

2.5 - Conclusion 146

### Chapter 3: Between Derrida and Nancy: Deconstructing Religion with Christianity

3.1 - Introduction 148

### Chapter 3: Derrida

3.2 - Derrida
   3.2.1 - Influences and Divergences 150
   3.2.2 - Religion 163
   3.2.3 - Christianity 174
   3.2.4 - The Future of Religion/Christianity 179

### Chapter 3: Between Derrida and Nancy

3.3 - Between Derrida and Nancy
   3.3.1. From *Technē* to Touch 185

### Chapter 3: Nancy

3.4 - Nancy
   3.4.1 - From Incarnation to Areality 199
   3.4.2 - From Resurrection to Retreat 206
   3.4.3 - Adoration and *Salut*: Bringing Derrida and Nancy Back Together Again 214

### Chapter 4: Coda

3.5 - Coda 219

### Chapter 4: Nancy’s Atheological “History” of the West

4.1 - Introduction 223

### Chapter 4: The Flight of the Gods and the Entry into Signification

4.2 - The Flight of the Gods and the Entry into Signification 228

### Chapter 4: Polytheism, Monotheism, Atheism, and the Closure of Nihilism

4.3 - Polytheism, Monotheism, Atheism, and the Closure of Nihilism 236

### Chapter 4: Christianity and the **Atheizing** of God

4.4 - Christianity and the *Atheizing* of God
   4.4.1 - The Emergence of Christianity 242
   4.4.2 - Christian Theism as the Embodiment of this *Atheologizing* of God 247
   4.4.3 - Philosophy as the Continuation of this *Atheology* 250
   4.4.4 - What Remains of Christianity 254
4.5. From Globalization to Creation *ex nihilo*  
4.6. Conclusion  

**Conclusion**  

5.1. Summary of findings and the importance of the present study  

**Bibliography**  

257  
263  
265  
272
Abbreviations

Nancy


**SW**

**Heidegger**

**PRL**

**Bataille**

**TR**

**Derrida**

**OT**

**FK**

**All Bible passages quoted from NRSV:**

Introduction

0.1 - What is the Deconstruction of Christianity?

What the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has announced as the "deconstruction of Christianity" is a study of how Western religious and philosophical foundations are caught up in a process of decomposition that has been brought about by Christianity. In his vast body of works that span over forty years and numerous topics, Nancy, professor of philosophy at the Université de Strasbourg, and one of the leading intellectuals in France today, has argued that Christianity has provided the "exit from religion" (A 49). In this dissertation, we will unpack the meaning and implications of this "deconstruction of Christianity" by situating Nancy's work in light of the broader Continental philosophical analysis of religion in the 20th Century. It will be argued that Nancy's work has nothing to do with destroying Christianity or religion, but rather with furthering the broader deconstruction of metaphysics that philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Georges Bataille, and Jacques Derrida have taken up in the past. For all of these thinkers, metaphysics is that branch of philosophy that involves the question of "first principles," such as being, God, substance, time, and identity, and they suggest that it is important to disassemble and unravel these first principles in order to open the world beyond theological, rational, political, economic, and technological enclosure. For these thinkers, metaphysical assumptions are nihilistic because they reduce the heterogeneity of existence to homogenous paradigms and principles that have no foundation in the world, and they limit the infinite value of each and every human relationship to a logic of equivalence that governs everything from doctrines of salvation to capitalist models of exchange. Nancy's project on the deconstruction of Christianity belongs to this tradition because he wants to break the limits and restraints that have characterized the West since it was first constructed around the Mediterranean several millennia ago, and to show how foundationalist modes of thinking give way to their own exhaustion, or dis-enclosure (déclosion). Taking up where other philosophers have left off, Nancy connects the deconstruction of metaphysics to the history of Christianity and argues that the expansion of our globalized and atheized world has been made possible by a retreat of foundations that is implicit to Christianity. As Nancy puts it, "Whether we take it from Paul or John, from
Thomas or Eckhart, Francis or Luther, Calvin or Fenelon, Hegel or Kierkegaard, Christianity thus dis-encloses in its essential gesture the closure that it had constructed and that it perfects, lending to the metaphysics of presence its strongest imaginary resource" (D 10).

Nancy's project on the "deconstruction of Christianity" is therefore his unique intervention into the problem of metaphysical nihilism in Western religious and philosophical thought, and he proceeds by exposing the dis-enclosure of this tradition. He argues that "'Nihilism' means, in effect: making a premise of nothing"; and then goes on to show how the Christian notions of "God" and "creation ex nihilo" empty this "nothing" of any quality as principle or thing (D 24). For Nancy, the only way out of nihilism is to think of the world as an infinite opening unto itself, for this dis-encloses any transcendent principle of value or immanent notion of meaninglessness in the finite spacing of sense, and he finds the resources to think this opening within Christianity. Tracing the dissolution of foundations that characterized the transition from the ancient to the modern world, he suggests that deconstruction is that movement by which philosophy deports, complicates, and dismantles its own closures, and that "Christianity is at the heart of this dis-enclosure just as it is at the center of the enclosure [clôture]" (D 10). Heidegger, Bataille, and Derrida, in their own right, have also pointed out the connection between Christianity and the critique of metaphysics but Nancy goes further in this pursuit by erasing any distinction between "Christianity" and "the West" and suggesting that deconstruction is only possible from within Christianity:

My hypothesis is that the gesture of deconstruction, as a gesture neither critical nor perpetuating, and testifying to a relation to history and tradition that is found in neither Husserl nor Hegel nor Kant, is only possible within Christianity, even though it is not formulated intentionally from within it. Indeed, it is only from within that which is in itself constituted by and setting out from the distension of an opening that there can be a sense to seek and to disassemble. (D 148)

By linking deconstruction and Christianity so closely, Nancy is not suggesting that the latter invented the former—as if deconstruction was purely a Christian invention—but that the history of the terms and the disappearance of religious and philosophical foundations in the West are so linked as to render any clean distinction impossible. Moreover, he is suggesting that there is a "sense (sens) to seek and to disassemble" contained within Christianity that is
both its condition of possibility and what proceeds, succeeds, and exceeds it. The
deconstruction of Christianity is an attempt to expose this sense of the world by showing how
Christianity already exposes the truth that the world is founded upon "nothing" and consists
in nothing but its own spacing. Philosophers in the past have tried to overcome metaphysical
illusion with various forms of Enlightenment reason, romanticism, or atheism but Nancy
argues that this is only possible by showing how Christianity and the entire tradition from
which it emerges is situated upon an "opening" that overcomes itself from within.

In order to unpack this complex relationship between Christianity, religion,
metaphysics, and nihilism, not to mention all the philosophemes Nancy uses to rethink the
religious and philosophical tradition of the West, we will not only need to explain the
intellectual origins and development of his work, but also that of Heidegger, Bataille, and
Derrida, as these are the thinkers to which he is primarily indebted. Nancy's deconstructive
style is extremely subtle because he doesn't just analyze philosophical concepts like being,
time, community, sovereignty, bodies, touch, and infinity, but reads them into theological
concepts like creation ex nihilo, God, faith, sacrifice, incarnation, resurrection, and adoration,
and this is what we will have to explain. Let us start by situating this study in its scholarly
context and clarifying what any of this has to do with religion. After this, we will briefly
summarize Nancy's intellectual development and philosophical context, and then discuss
what is to follow in the rest of this study.

0.2 - The Scholarly Context of the Present Study; Or, What Does this Have to do With
Religion?

In On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida bemoans the fact that Nancy’s
work has largely been ignored by contemporary thinkers and makes a prophetic wager: “Let
us bet that this ignorance will not last” (OT 245). Since the turn of the millennium when
Derrida wrote these words his wager has most certainly been proven correct, for in English
alone the last decade has seen three full length introductions to Nancy's work and many more
volumes and journal issues dedicated to special topics.¹ In all these publications dedicated to

¹ The three full length studies to which I am referring are Benjamin Hutchens, Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future
of Philosophy (Montreal: McGill-Queens/Acumen, 2005); Ian James, The Fragmentary Demand: An
Nancy, his project on the deconstruction of Christianity has been of growing interest, and in
2011 the first (and only) collection of essays devoted specifically to the topic was published,
*Re-treating Religion: Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy.*

This growth of scholarly work has in part been fueled by Nancy’s own productivity. When
Derrida wrote *On Touching* Nancy had only written a brief essay on Christianity (“The
Deconstruction of Christianity,” first delivered as a lecture in 1995, and originally published
in French in 1998 as "La déconstruction du christianisme"), yet since then Nancy has
released two volumes dedicated to the topic: *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of
Christianity* (La déclosion, Déconstruction du Christianisme I, 2005) and *Adoration
(L’Adoration, Déconstruction du christianisme II, 2010*). He has also published several
books and essays related to the wider project, including *Noli me tangere* (2008) and *God,
Justice, Love, and Beauty* (2011). Though none of these works are conclusive treatments of
the deconstruction of Christianity, each contributes something to the larger project Nancy
referred to in *Dis-Enclosure* as an “open-air construction site” (D 12).

Nevertheless, despite the growing mass of publications by Nancy, and by scholars on
his work, there still remains much confusion regarding the viability, findings, and goals of
the deconstruction of Christianity, not the least of which being what all this implies about
"religion." Thus far, scholars have done a good job of articulating the general framework of
the deconstruction of Christianity, pointing out that Nancy’s work is neither to be associated

---

Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Marie-Eve
Michaelsen and David E. Johnson (eds), "At the Heart: Of Jean-Luc Nancy," Special Issue of The New
Centennial Review 2(3) (2002); Louis Kaplan and John Paul Rico, "Regarding Jean-Luc Nancy," Special Issue

2 Ignaas Devisch, Laurens ten Kate, Aukje van Rooden, and Alena Alexandrova (eds), *Re-treating Religion:
Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); For other
chapters and essays devoted to the topic, see also Peter Gratton and Marie-Eve Morin (eds), *Jean-Luc Nancy
and Plural Thinking: Expositions of World, Ontology, Politics, and Sense* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012);
Sanja Dejanovic, ed., *Nancy and The Political* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Gisèle Berkman
and Danielle Cohen Levinas (eds), *Figures du dehors. Autour de Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Éditions Cécile
Defaut, 2012)

3 The phrase “open-air construction site” is used by Nancy to describe the contents of *Dis-Enclosure,* however,
I think it applies to all his work on Christianity, not to mention his oeuvre as a whole. In his writings Nancy
always follows the traces of etymology and history in a non-linear, loosely connected manner. Most of his
books are just collections of essays and he rarely provides a straightforward logical argument. His writings are
collections of fragments that coalesce and break apart on a variety of topics, touching on the very limit of
thought in order to dis-enclose our sense of the world. This style has the effect of exposing the chaos concealed
in the permanence we ascribe to the world, and undoing the metaphysical assumptions that undergird our
thought. In this manner, Nancy’s thinking of the end, limit, or closure of Western thought, whether in relation to
Christianity, politics, or drawing, is his way of opening sense to its own outside.
with the phenomenon known as the "return to religion," nor with the "theological turn in French phenomenology." The "return to religion" is that broad socio-cultural movement associated with the rise of various fundamentalisms and spiritualisms around the globe, from evangelicalism in the U.S. to Islam in Africa, and scholars have made it clear that Nancy's project has nothing to do with any revivification of religious experience. Similarly, they have done a decent job of pointing out that Nancy's work is to be distinguished from those French phenomenologists who adopt a somewhat confessional stance in their philosophical analysis, like Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-François Courtine, Jean-Louis Chrétien, and Michel Henry. In fact, the general consensus by Nancy scholars that seems to be emerging is that the deconstruction of Christianity is a deconstruction of metaphysics that is connected to Nancy's wider critique of nihilism that extends throughout his oeuvre. For instance, in Marie Eve Morin's introduction to Nancy, she points out that the overarching goal of his work on the subject is to overcome nihilism by showing how Christianity puts into play a non-metaphysical view of God. Additionally, Christopher Watkins and Ian James have likened Nancy's work to that of other contemporary Continental thinkers like Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek, each of whom return to Christian themes in order to critique contemporary ideology and metaphysical limits. However, all of this work has yet to consider how the deconstruction of Christianity relates to religion in any general sense. Is Nancy trying to provide a new theory of religion on a broad cross-cultural level? Is he making a claim about the history of Christianity in relation to other "world religions"? Or, alternatively, is he simply making a claim about how Christianity, religion, and philosophy are intertwined in Western thought? Can his claims about religion even be applied on a broad cross-cultural level or do they only refer to Christianity and the

---

4 Most work on Nancy acknowledges this, as it is one of the clearest points in his writings. As he writes in "Of Divine Places": "What there is to say here can be said very simply: religious experience is exhausted. It is an immense exhaustion. This fact is in no way altered by the upsurge in the political, sociological, or cultural success of religions (Islam in Africa; the Catholic church in Poland or, from another angle in South America; Protestantism in the United States; Jewish, Islamic, or Christian fundamentalism; sects; theosophies; gnomes). There is no return of the religious: there are the contortions and the turgescence of its exhaustion" (IC 136).

5 For a thorough exploration of this topic see Dominique Janicaud, French Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn" (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000). As we will see in Chapter Three, there is some ambiguity in Nancy scholarship regarding this issue, but most scholars are in agreement that Nancy's work is to be sharply distinguished from this turn towards theology.

6 Morin, Jean-Luc Nancy, pp. 17 & 49.

West? Since Nancy's specific publications on Christianity have never received more than essay-length analyses, and research devoted specifically to his writings on Christianity has been restricted to topical themes like "God," "myth," and "reason" these questions remain largely unanswered. Moreover, since no one has yet to fully situate Nancy's work on the deconstruction of Christianity in relation to the twentieth-century philosophers who have most influenced his project, it is not even possible to determine with certainty what is original about his claims.  

Thus far, scholars have treated religion in Nancy's work as a cross-cultural category that is affected by the deconstruction of Christianity, rather than something that the West invents in the very process of this deconstruction. Because of this, Nancy's work on Christianity often comes off sounding as if he is providing a broad anthropological theory of religion or a retooling of Karl Jaspers' old theory about the "axial age" shift in world religions. For instance, scholars are fond of citing Nancy's "overwhelming agreement" with the historian Marcel Gauchet, who has argued that Christianity is "the religion of the Departure from Religion" (D 142), yet no one has pointed out that Nancy never follows up this endorsement by developing a theory of religion, as does Gauchet. Since Gauchet claims that the retreat from religion can be traced back to the origins of monotheism in the West, there are certain parallels to be drawn between his work and Nancy's but it has not yet been stressed enough that Nancy's claims are far less anthropological and systematic than Gauchet's. Unlike Gauchet, or any other post-secular thinker who tries to parse out the

---

8 As noted, the only full length book dedicated specifically to Nancy's project on the deconstruction of Christianity is the collection of essays Re-treating Religion: Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy. The numerous essays devoted to the topic and introductions to his work have gone a long way in preparing the ground work for such an extended analysis, and we will utilize many of these scholarly works in the study that follows, but they don't really lay out how he differs from others on the question of "religion."

9 Karl Jaspers famously argued that around the fifth century B.C.E. all world religions and cultures underwent a transformation. He argued that "the spiritual foundations of humanity were laid simultaneously and independently in China, India, Persia, Judea, and Greece" during this period and that "these are the foundations upon which humanity still subsists today." See Karl Jaspers, The Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 98.

10 For instance, see Devisch, ten Kate, van Rooij, and Alexandrova (eds), Re-treating Religion: Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy, 24; James, The Fragmentary Demand, 251n18. Christina Smerich, "Religion," in The Nancy Dictionary, ed. by Peter Gratton and Marie-Eve Morin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 193-194. No one has yet to point out that, unlike Gauchet, Nancy is not offering a theory of religion, nor have they stressed that all the discourse on the "exit" or "departure" from religion is itself part of the deconstruction of Christianity. For my discussion on Gauchet and his theory of religion see chapter four.

11 As we will discuss in Chapter 4, Gauchet defines religion in very Feuerbachian terms.
religious origins of modernity, Nancy does not present religion as a horizon or limit by which to measure Western thought. In a manner similar to the French poet Michel Deguy or the literary theorist Maurice Blanchot, Nancy's vocabulary on the "departure," "retreat," or "exit" from religion should be understood in far more allusive, poetic, and self-reflexive terms. Nancy is more interested in the worldly and philosophical space opened up within Christianity—what Deguy calls the "combat within the exit from religion"—than any specific historical departure from religion.

To put the matter plainly, it has thus far been underemphasized that there is a distinction to be drawn between an anthropological-historical analysis of religion to understand human culture, and Nancy's philosophical-ontological interrogation of Christianity to understand the sense of the world in its opening and dis-enclosure. Whereas the former tends to be systematic and structural—assuming a broad universal view of religion and human culture—the latter tends to be allusive, poetic, and self-reflective—recognizing that the West views itself from within the construction and dissolution of its own categories and experience. Of course, there is convergence between these approaches at times, which is why Nancy can cite the work of thinkers from different disciplines than his own, but if we really want to understand what the deconstruction of Christianity means we must pay close attention to how Nancy's style and rhetoric avoids the methodological (and metaphysical) pit-falls of the anthropological-historical approach to religion.

In this study, I will clarify this by stressing that the deconstruction of Christianity is a self-deconstruction and that Nancy’s comments on religion cannot be teased apart from this deconstruction. Nancy's work emerges from the Continental philosophical tradition and he is interested in how the sense of deconstruction is intertwined with the unraveling of religious

---

12 There have already been numerous essays pointing out the connection between the deconstruction of Christianity and Nancy's literary influence, so I am not necessarily suggesting anything new with this claim, but no one has yet to use this observation to distance Nancy from those who seek to offer broad anthropological theory of religion, such as Gauchet’s.

13 Christopher Elson makes this point of distinction between the work of Gauchet and Deguy in his recent translation of the latter's poems, and I am here extending it to Nancy. I would suggest that this point is underscored by the fact that Nancy has devoted much more attention to Deguy's work than to Gauchet’s. Whereas Dis-Enclosure only has two or three brief mentions of Gauchet, Nancy has a chapter devoted to Deguy, "De-Mythified Prayer," and has written several essays for the latest English translation of Deguy's work. For Elson's comments, see Michel Deguy, A Man of Little Faith, trans. by Christopher Elson (New York: SUNY, 2014), xvi.
and philosophical foundations in the West. He is not offering a theory of religion on some broad cross-cultural level nor seeking to chart its overcoming in any absolute sense but attempting to expose how the West is caught up in its own dissolution, and the "exit from religion" must be understood in this light. The primary evidence for this is that he doesn't present either Christianity or religion as things out in the world with definable features but as certain registers of experience synonymous with the decomposition of the West. First, Nancy makes no distinction between Christianity and the West, stating that, "Christianity is inseparable from the West," and "coextensive with the West qua West..." (D 142). And further, he claims that Christianity "invented the status of "religion" as an instance and institution of salvation, as distinct from civil religion as it was from philosophical atheism" (A 26). In this manner, all the key terms of Nancy's work fold into each other to suggest that what the deconstruction of Christianity is about is how Christianity, as the West, "understands itself in a way that is less and less religious in the sense in which religion implies a mythology (a narrative, a representation of divine actions and persons)" (D 37). At times, Nancy will refer to religion more broadly by defining it according to its Latin root religio, which has the sense of reverence for the sacred, the gods, or the carrying out of rites and observances, but he is always careful to situate the term in relation to its Western context.

In sum, what needs to be stressed is that Nancy's whole project only makes sense if what is being described is how the West—through Christianity—invented and deconstructed

---

14 This will have the effect of deconstructing the relation between religion and the deconstruction of Christianity by showing how the former is posited by the latter in the very movement of deconstruction, which is an observation elemental to any process of self-deconstruction. As Nancy writes in an essay on history, "It should already be understood that every "deconstruction," doubtless, must itself "deconstruct" the relation to history in which it situates itself." See Nancy, "Review: Our History," trans. by Cynthia Chase, Richard Klein, A. Mitchell Brown, in Diacritics, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1990):108n34.

15 The term religio descends from the Latin word religionem (nominative), meaning “respect for what is sacred,” and “reverence for the gods.” However, its Latin root is believed to be leig, meaning “to bind” a community (the re is believed to be an intensive). This creates an ambiguity in any literature on the topic: does religion describe a substantive thing with definite qualities (i.e. "the sacred," "the gods," "belief," etc.), or is it simply a term to describe how individuals unite in communities around practices and images? In Roman and early Christian Latin literature the nouns religio, religiones, the adjective religiosus, and the adverb religiosus were mainly used to describe the performance of ritual obligations. This early use has more in common with the Latin Pietas than with our modern notion of the word religion, which has acquired the sense of inner belief or faith. The Latin word Pietas means the performance of cultural custom and social propriety, and is similar to the Greek word Eusebia, the Arabic word Dinn, or the Chinese word Li, all of which bear little resemblance to the clearly defined "World Religions" that populate modern text books on the subject, nor any particular experience that could be called "religious." See Russell McCutcheon, Studying Religion: An Introduction (Bristol: Equinox Publishing), 90, 105, 109.
its own metaphysical foundations, not the exit from some universal phenomenon called "religion." For Nancy, Christianity and the West are synonymous terms that inaugurated religion in the West as "retreat," and the deconstruction of metaphysics is caught up in this dis-enclosure. As we will see in the chapters to follow, it is in this precise manner that the "exit from religion" is connected to the broader critique of nihilism in Western philosophy.

By connecting Nancy's work on Christianity to Heidegger's, Bataille's, and Derrida's analysis of religion, this study will not only provide the first monograph on Nancy's project but also the first genealogy of the deconstruction of Christianity. The study will be largely expository, rather than critical or apologetic, as our primary aim is to situate Nancy's work historically and philosophically. Admittedly, this analysis will not be an exhaustive presentation of all the topics and figures related to Nancy's wider project. To do this, we would have to start with Kant and trace the critique of religion and metaphysics up through Hegel, Nietzsche, and Freud, and then more deeply explore Nancy's relation to French thinkers such as Maurice Blanchot, Gérard Granel, and Deguy. Although we touch upon the work of all these thinkers in one way or another in the following chapters, we have tried to narrow our focus to the most important thinkers and terms necessary for understanding the deconstruction of Christianity.

0.3 - Nancy's Philosophical Development and Context

Born in 1940 in Caudéran, near Bordeaux in France, Nancy's philosophical aspirations took shape as a youth in the Catholic environment of Bergerac, and came to maturity after intense study of Immanuel Kant, G.W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Nietzsche, Blanchot, Bataille, Heidegger, and Derrida. As a young student, Nancy was a member of the Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne, a leftist Catholic group very much concerned with social

---

16 Obviously, this is not meant as an assertion of cultural superiority or uniqueness of the "West" over the "East" or any other such designation. On the contrary, it is to point out that if we do not recognize that "religion" is invented and overcome in the West then we merely endorse the universalization of religion and the various imperial forces that spread it around the globe between the 16th-19th centuries. Hence, what must be stressed is that religion is a metaphysical construct that is wrapped up with the deconstruction of Christianity. To undertake a deconstruction of Christianity, or even a mere deconstruction of metaphysics, without noting this fact and referring to religion as some cross-cultural signifier would be an error of the greatest proportions.

17 I am in debt to John Paul Ricco for this formulation.
issues that was banned by the Church in 1954. Nancy not only took part in some of the group's activities to support the democratization of education, he also participated in its Bible study groups. By his own admission, this leftist Catholicism very much influenced his thought as a young man.

After obtaining his diploma in philosophy and a degree in biology in 1963, Nancy went on to write his Master's degree (maîtrise) on Hegel's philosophy of religion (La Religion de Hegel) in 1964 and his Doctorate of third cycle on Kant (Le Discours analogique de Kant) in 1973, both of which were attained under the supervision of the Protestant philosopher Paul Ricœur. In 1987, Nancy received his State Doctorate (Doctorat d’État) following the completion of his thesis on freedom in the work of Kant, Schelling, and Heidegger (L’Expérience de la liberté), supervised by Gérard Granel.

In his earliest writings, such as The Speculative Remark (La remarque spéculative, 1973) and Discourse of the Syncope: Logodaedalus (Le discours de la syncope. I. Logodaedalus, 1975), he uses his graduate work on Kant and Hegel to explore the "presentation" (Darstellung) of philosophical discourse and to critique the classical "subject" of philosophy. In The Title of the Letter (Le titre de la lettre, 1973) and The Literary Absolute (L'absolu littéraire, 1978), both of which he published with his friend and colleague Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, he blurs the distinction between literature and philosophy by examining the work of Lacan and German Romanticism, respectively. In all these early works what is stressed is how metaphysical truth is unworked by interruption, difference, and supplementation. Much like Foucault and Derrida during this period, he performs a philosophical deconstruction of Western essentialism.

In the 1980’s Nancy turned his attention more fully to political concerns and developed many of the key ideas that inform his mature philosophy. Under the advice of Derrida, he formed "The Center for Philosophical Research on the Political" (Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique) and published various essays with Lacoue-Labarthe critiquing the political and economic enclosures that dominate our modern world.

---

20 For more biographical information on Nancy see, A. D. Schrift Twentieth-Century French Philosophy: Key Themes and Thinkers (Malden: Blackwell, 2006) 171-2. See also the biography on the European Graduate School website: http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-luc-nancy/biography/
His major publications in this period are texts such as *The Inoperative Community* (*La communauté désoeuvrée*, 1986) and his state doctoral dissertation *The Experience of Freedom* (*l'expérience de la liberté*, 1987). In these works, he developed many of the key terms that would inform his mature philosophy: "community," "being-in-common," "exposition," "being-with," and "sharing." As Lauren tens Kate notes, by re-reading Bataille and Blanchot in light of deconstruction, this period saw Nancy develop a new philosophy of finitude that framed freedom in terms of retreat, withdrawal, and atheology, an insight that is central to his later project on the deconstruction of Christianity.\(^{21}\) It is also in this middle period that he began to stress that nihilism was the central philosophical crisis of our time and to refashion the work of Heidegger to develop an "ontology of abandonment" to challenge the various "isms" that confront us in modernity.\(^{22}\)

In the 1990's Nancy began to apply these early developments more broadly and produced many seminal works, such as *A Finite Thinking* (*Une pensée finie*, 1990) and *The Gravity of Thought* (*Le poids d'une pensée*, 1991), in which he critiqued the logic of sacrifice that runs throughout Western philosophy and began to apply his "ontology" of abandonment to develop a new interpretation of the history of the West. In *Corpus* (1992), *The Sense of the World* (*Le sens du monde*, 1993), and *Being Singular Plural* (*Être singulier pluriel*, 1996) he takes this even further, developing a whole new understanding of "body," "sense" and "world" in light of deconstruction.

As Badiou notes in "The Reserved Offering" ("L’offrande réservée"), what is unique about these developments in Nancy's style is that he brings concepts and sense into movement by exposing their circular relation. Playing with the French word *sens*, which can signify either the touch of the physical senses or the directionality and movement of thought, Nancy exposes how things only come into existence and make sense in relation, destabilizing any absolute distinction between the sensible and the intelligible. In this manner, "sense"...
implies an opening towards a possibility of value or meaning that is not definite (D x). In this deconstructive gesture, he shows how the sense of the world is made possible by the sharing-out of finitude, which empties out any metaphysical act of signification in an infinite multiplication of horizontal relations. Nancy emphasizes the free play of sense in order to stress that networks of signification do not link together in an enchainment of meaning but expose the multiple and discontinuous spacing of the world, and this allows him to conceive touch and bodies along deconstructive lines; it allows him to conceive of sense as an exemption from meaning. The goal of this emphasis on relation, sharing, and the absenting of sense is not to form a new philosophy, *per se*, but to step outside of philosophical signification and think differently. What he stresses is that the world is not a "work" in the sense of a totality but a place of sharing and heterogeneous mixing without completion.

Nancy’s first specific comment on “the deconstruction of Christianity” can be found in *The Sense of the World*, in a brief footnote, no less. What is striking about this first comment is its boldness, as he directly links the deconstruction of Western metaphysics with Christianity, suggesting that the end of metaphysics is a Christian accomplishment that exposes "the sense of the world." As he writes, the deconstruction of Christianity will be:

[S]omething other than a critique or a demolition: the bringing to light of that which will have been the agent of Christianity as the very form of the West, much more deeply than all religion and even as the self-deconstruction of religion, the accomplishment of philosophy by Judeo-Platonism and Latinity, ontotheology as its own end, the “death of God” and the birth of the sense of the world as the abandonment without return and without *Aufhebung* of all "christ," that is, of all hypostasis of sense. It will of course be necessary to come back to this (SW 183n50/91nl)

What is intriguing about these initial comments on the topic is that Nancy makes it clear that the deconstruction of Christianity has nothing to do with religion, *per se*, but the "death of God" and the "birth of the sense of the world" as abandonment. Strictly speaking, it has to do

---

23 This last line is a description given by Michael B. Smith in the translators introduction to *Dis-Enclosure.*


25 As he writes in The Gravity of Thought: “We have not yet gotten out of philosophy: we are in it the moment when, and the move by which, the signifying will knows itself as such, knows itself as insignificant, and delivers from itself a different demand of ‘meaning’” (GT, 51).
with the deconstruction of metaphysics that Christianity has prepared the way for, and understanding the West in light of this unraveling.

As Adam Kotsko points out in his review of Dis-Enclosure, one of the first in English, what has become clear as Nancy's project has developed is that a full understanding of what this implies is going to require historical as well as philosophical analysis. In his first essay on the topic, “The Deconstruction of Christianity,” Nancy makes it clear that he is not interested in what he calls the "Christmas projection" story, that "one fine day Christianity comes along and changes everything" (D 145); and neither is he interested in a certain "Rousseauism" that seeks to uncover a good original Christianity and then mourn its loss with the development of modernity (D150). Rather, what interests Nancy is "how and why Classical antiquity produced Christianity" (D 145), and the "dimension of sense" concealed in this production that never ceases to open the West to its own decomposition (D 147). Nancy sees a direct connection between the fragmented Mediterranean world in which Christianity emerged and our modern fragmented globalized world, and he suggests that both are caught up in the movement of deconstruction. From the rise of early Christianity in ancient Rome and the eschatological calls for the second coming of Christ, to the expansion of globalization beyond our terrestrial limits through satellites and extra-planetary missions, he suggests that the West has been definable by nothing other than its desire to go-beyond-itself. In a paradoxical manner, this state of "self-surpassing" (autodépassement) is perhaps our deepest tradition in the West and prepares the way for the retreat from all horizons (D141).

Historically, what this implies is that deconstruction is inseparable from Christianity and the retreat from religious and philosophical nihilism—even though it does not originate with it. Recall that deconstruction was a word made famous by Derrida but as a function it existed before him. As Derrida reminds us in On Touching, he inherited it from Heidegger who spoke of a Destruktion of Western metaphysics, and Heidegger inherited it from Martin Luther who advocated the destructio of pagan philosophy (OT 54). To discover where Luther encountered the impulse for his destructio we need only turn to the Book of Isaiah, where God proclaims the destruction of wisdom: “so I will again do amazing things with these

---

26 Adam Kotsko, “Already, not yet,” Review of La Déclosion: Déconstruction du christianisme, in JCRT 6.3 (Fall 2005), 91.
people, shocking and amazing. The wisdom of their wise shall perish, the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden” (Is. 29:14). Deconstruction therefore has literal roots within the history of the West: the Christian opens up into the Judaic and the Greek, and then to the wider Mediterranean and Ancient Mesopotamian world.

Philosophically, what this implies is that deconstruction is always a process of self-deconstruction. As Derrida notes in *A Letter to a Japanese Friend*, when he searched for a word to translate the Heideggarian word *Destruktion* into French he decided against the literal translation precisely because it implied a “negative reduction” and “demolition.” Derrida settled on the word “deconstruction” because what he wanted to convey was the importance of considering the structure, architecture, and ontology of the Western tradition. For Derrida, the point of the deconstruction of metaphysics is not to annihilate or overcome some thing, but to expose how “an object, a text, a theme, etc... deconstructs it-self.”

As Nancy puts it in the introduction to *Dis-Enclosure: Metaphysics*, in the sense given to it by Nietzsche and Heidegger, implies a certain systematicity—a closure of thought—and consists in the attempt to represent being (être) as beings (étant), and as being present (étant présent). Nancy accepts this definition of metaphysics but pushes further than those who have preceded him by asserting that the unraveling of this systematicity involves the “mutual dis-enclosure of the dual heritages of religion and philosophy” (D 6). What Nancy attempts to expose is how our whole tradition is an overcoming and a self-overcoming (D 141). Like Nietzsche and Heidegger before him, therefore, Nancy also seeks to overcome the nihilist logic that governs our history, and yet, unlike them he does not do this by attacking religion or by condemning Christianity as a source of metaphysical error. Rather, following Derrida, he shows how the very principles and paradigms of Western religion contribute to the overcoming of nihilism.

---


28 As we will see in the coming chapters, Nancy borrows heavily from these thinkers in order to make this move. In fact, the French déclusion is the usual translation of Heidegger's Erschließung in *Being and Time*, which implies that something has been "disclosed" or "laid open" (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 105n; See also D X). What makes Nancy's work unique is that he locates this dis-enclosure within the very same monotheistic structures Heidegger rejected as nihilistic.
In this manner, Nancy finds the resources to think the self-deconstruction of Christianity from within Christianity. He contends that Christianity provides a non-metaphysical view of God that consists in nothing more than an opening in the midst of the world and then goes on to show how this opening empties the "nothing" of nihilism of any quality as principle or "thing." Drawing a distinction between nothing (rien) and nothingness (neant)—which is a distinction between “nothing” as an open space that is shared between beings and “nothingness” as a void of nothing or self-positing and unilateral existent—he argues that the creation of the world takes place between beings, ex nihilo (CW 102). In the chapters that follow we will see how Nancy reads this "nothing" of creation into the "Christian mysteries": the incarnation, the resurrection, and the trinity. By reading these theological formulas along deconstructive lines, he shows the displacement that the thinking of "God" has gone through in the history of the West and how this affects religious and philosophical thought. He finds traces of this displacement in ancient Greek atheism, Judaism, and Islam, but suggests that Christianity carries this deconstruction farthest.

Importantly, Nancy never defines Christianity according to a particular set of doctrines or principles but shows how the entire Greco-Roman-Judeo-Christian tradition is constituted by the overcoming of such principles. In fact, Nancy claims that “Christianity” is merely a provisional name to describe “our” world, not a bundle of theological or spiritual truths, and that defining it according to a particular branch of faith or dogmatic creed is ultimately futile since the term “Christianity” is itself caught up in the history of deconstruction. It is in this precise sense that the deconstruction of Christianity is not a pursuit of some essential quality contained within the religious thing that can rescue us, but simply an attempt to expose "the tension of the gap, of the beating [pulsation] or drive [pulsion]" that is in excess of any closed structure and opens dogma to its own outside (A 14). He is not searching for a lost intimacy in a new form of religiosity or to revive Christianity, but to uncover a ground “deeper than the ground of the religious thing [la chose religieuse] that of which religion will have been a form and a misrecognition [méconnaissance]” (A 24). This involves a close analysis of the rise and fall of this civilization that once called itself "Christendom," but only to disassemble its parts and expose the free space it conceals:
The deconstruction of Christianity comes down to this: an operation of disassembling, focusing on the origin or the sense of deconstruction—a sense that does not belong to deconstruction, that makes it possible but does not belong to it, like an empty slot that makes the structure work... (D 149)

This is comparable to Derrida’s statement above that the object, theme, or text deconstructs itself, but, as we have seen, Nancy adds to this formulation the idea that the deconstruction of metaphysics, in all its ontological and theological gestures, “is only possible from within Christianity.” Ultimately, this is why Nancy goes back to the origins of Christianity to find in its dogmatic edifice a certain “slack [jeu]” or “opening in the origin” (D 149), because what he hopes to uncover is the very “disjointing and dismantling [désajointement]” that constitutes the sense of deconstruction (D 11).

What all this implies is not that Christianity is the privileged site of ancient divine wisdom, the purveyor of absolute reason, nor even the site for some new disclosure of being, but simply that it exposes the truth that the world is founded upon nothing and consists in nothing but its own spacing. Philosophers from the 19th Century onwards have deconstructed metaphysics and shown how there is no foundation for the world, yet they have also put forth new rational, subjective, and aesthetic figures to replace the gods of the past. In contrast, what Nancy calls for is a retreat from every form, figure, or value that might guide the world. He tries to show that despite the fact that being is without foundation or common measure, it does not collapse in upon itself in an abyss of nothingness, but opens up towards the space we share between us. As Nancy writes in Being Singular Plural,

The retreat of the political and the religious, or of the theologico-political, means the retreat of every space, form, or screen into which or onto which a figure of community could be projected. At the right time, then, the question has to be posed as to whether being-together can do without a figure and, as a result, without an identification, if the whole of its "substance" consists only in its spacing. (BSP 47)

In sum, what Nancy asks us to consider is how the whole history of the West is caught up in the dis-joining, fragmenting, and retreat of religious representation, and that this retreat is what opens the world beyond all metaphysical horizons or limits. He is not calling for a

---

29 Nancy refers to this as gazing towards the "no-thing [chose-rien]" of the void, which constitutes the very movement of deconstruction (D 11).
retreat from the world into an "interior" or "spiritual" space—as if there was some "backworld" into which we could retire—but to feel and think the world "according to its opening" (A 40).

The starting point for this analysis is the recognition that Christianity and the broader history of "the West" share a synonymous origin and trajectory, and that if we want to have a dialogue about the role of religion in modernity we must “turn back to examine its provenance and its trajectory” (D 30). For Nancy, the failure of contemporary discourse has been to ignore the Christian origins of both "religion" and "secularism," and therefore to ignore the provenance of Western thought. We have become accustomed to thinking of the history of the West as either the emancipation of reason from religion and obscurantism (which is the narrative of many Liberals, New Atheists, and of secularists), or of atheism as responsible for the lack of values in the contemporary world (which is the narrative of many conservatives, classicists and theologians). Contemporary discourse is stuck between a false binary: it either asserts that history is shrouded in superstitious logic that needs to be overcome with reason, or it suggests that reason has given us a valueless world and that a return to religion is necessary. With the former option we are called upon to assert the immanence of reason or humanism as the source of liberation, and with the latter to affirm a divine principle that can secure the meaning of being, but both options are nihilistic because they attempt to ground the world in a definite form of signification. In the introduction to Dis-Enclosure, Nancy suggests that contemporary theoretical and political discourse is dominated by these twin perils that seem ready to engulf the world in a "hyperfascism" or "hyperreligious" upheaval at any moment. (D 3-5). From the rise of various forms of nationalism to religious fundamentalism, contemporary discourse is beset by the nihilist desire to ground beings in some definite form of theological, rational, political, economic, and technological enclosure. To counter these threats, Nancy suggests that we must draw upon a third option, one which is neither an ascent to reason nor a return to God, but is atheological—a term he borrows from Bataille to signify a non-nihilistic atheism. For Nancy, atheology is a way of thinking beyond all modes of ontological foundation or epistemological representation and of opening the space between us.30 Neither theistic nor

---

30 At one point in the Introduction of Dis-Enclosure he describes his goal as a radical rethinking of what "secularism" (laïcité) really means: "At the very least, that should signify the following: that politics
atheistic, atheology is about opening reason to the retreat of the divine and finding faith in this abandonment (D 26). It affirms that the world rests on nothing and vacates any reason, foundation, origin, or end for the world. As Nancy writes, summing up the paradoxical aims of his project: "Let there be no more place for God—and in this way, let an opening, which we can discuss elsewhere whether to call 'divine,' open" (A 33).

0.4 - What Follows

The bulk of this study will be taken up comparing Nancy to Heidegger, Bataille, and Derrida in Chapters One, Two, and Three, respectively. This analysis will take us deep into the jungle of Continental philosophy and will allow us to witness the history of the deconstruction of Christianity in the twentieth-Century. In each of these chapters, we will start by discussing the religious context from which each philosopher emerges, then trace the development of their work and show how Nancy appropriates, critiques, and diverges from them. In Chapter Four, we will turn exclusively to Nancy's historical reflections and show how he reads this "retreat" into the emergence of Christianity, the dis-enclosure of reason, and the rise of Globalization. As noted, this analysis will not be exhaustive of all the topics and figures related to the deconstruction of Christianity but it will cover the basic terms from Nancy's lexicon: "being-with," "creation ex nihilo," "myth," "inoperativity," "Judeo-Christian," "faith," "atheology," "community," "compearance," "sovereignty," the "sacred," "unsacrificable," the "incarnation," "touch," "bodies," "ecotechnics," "resurrection," "adoration," and "the flight of the gods."

We will begin our analysis in Chapter One by tracing the emergence of deconstruction in the twentieth-century with Heidegger's 1919-1921 lectures on The Phenomenology of Religious life. As John D. Caputo notes, what is so exciting about these lectures is that they provide direct evidence of just how formative Heidegger's early work on Christianity was in the development of his argument in Being and Time. As we will see, he

---

assume a dimension that it cannot integrate for all that, a dimension that overflows it, one concerning an ontology or an ethology of "beingwith," attached to that absolute excedence [excédence absolue] of sense and passion for sense for which the word sacred was but the designation" (D 5). We will examine what this dimension of "beingwith" implies in chapter One and Two.

uses the Pauline expectation of the *Parousia*—the second coming of Christ—to formulate his phenomenological method. These lectures also illustrate how Heidegger's reading of Christianity emerged as a critique of theorists of religion like Rudolf Otto, Ernst Troeltsch, William James, and Max Weber, which will help situate deconstruction in relation to other theorists of religion. Since Nancy has published many texts on Heidegger, our analysis of the differences between them will not be exhaustive but we do hope to illustrate how Nancy's finite ontology of "being-with" and his work on myth critiques aspects of Heidegger's philosophy and his political engagements. By explicating parts of *The Experience of Freedom* and *Being Singular Plural*, this chapter will discuss some of the basic key terms from Nancy's lexicon and connect the deconstruction of Christianity to his wider philosophical development. In the concluding section of this chapter, we will turn to Nancy's analysis of the New Testament and Christian faith in *Dis-Enclosure*, and get our first specific example of how he envisions the deconstruction of Christianity in relation to the wider Judeo-Christian tradition. Altogether, this chapter demonstrates how Nancy radicalizes Heidegger's deconstructive method by locating deconstruction within Christianity, thereby turning it from a hermeneutical and phenomenological operation to a project of self-deconstruction.

In Chapter Two, we turn to Nancy's engagement with Bataille and detail the role of atheology in their work. Bataille is the only theorist we will treat at length who never actually used the term "deconstruction" but his work on sovereignty, sacrifice, "the death of God," and atheology are formative to its broader development in the 20th Century. Bataille radicalized the thinking of the "death of God" by locating this death, or loss, at the heart of community. Moreover, since Bataille was influenced by sociologists like Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and Max Weber, this chapter will further situate deconstruction in light of the broader study of religion. The main texts of Bataille that we will analyze here are *Inner Experience* and *Theory of Religion*, which we will juxtapose to some of Nancy's early essays from *The Birth to Presence*, *The Inoperative Community*, and *A Finite Thinking*. By the end of this chapter, we seek to demonstrate that Nancy is not interested in any type of "religious intimacy" or developing a theory of religion. Though he adopts the notion of atheology, Nancy rejects the remnants of subjective romanticism in Bataille's work and the theory of sacrifice that undergirds his work on religion.
Chapter Three is the longest in the study because it deals with the most controversial topic: the relationship between Derrida and Nancy. This is also the only chapter where we can draw upon actual publications by both philosophers addressing each other's work, so it will also be the most contemporary, even allowing us to contrast Derrida and Nancy to some of those thinkers associated with the "theological turn in French Phenomenology." The main texts from Derrida's work we will discuss are "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone" and On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy. This analysis of Derrida's work on religion and his critique of Nancy's on Christianity will allow us to parse out the difference between them and show how Nancy reads sense, touch, and bodies along deconstructive lines. After arguing that Derrida's concern with Nancy is not over any metaphysical error in his work but the nature of deconstruction and what remains of Christianity after deconstruction, we will turn to analyze Nancy's Corpus, Noli Me Tangere, and his work on the incarnation and resurrection in Dis-Enclosure and Adoration. By the end of this chapter, we seek to demonstrate that although they differ in their respective deconstructive styles both agree that Christianity is caught up in a process of self-deconstruction. Nancy's position is more radical because he pushes deconstruction into the very heart of Christianity and leaves behind no indeconstructible terms, but they also share much in common.

The penultimate section of the study will be Chapter 4, as it is here that we will show how Nancy provides an atheological interpretation of the West founded upon the retreat of the gods. Here we also catch a glimpse of the true scope of Nancy's project and see what contrasts his work to that of Gauchet and other post-secular theorists: he provides a reading of Western history based on the erasure of horizons. To prove the point we will collect together Nancy’s sporadic comments on the history of the West that span his vast oeuvre and try to paint a birds-eye view of how he sees things. What he describes is nothing less than a fundamental mutation of civilization that occurred in the shift from the ancient Mediterranean to the modern world, implicating monotheism, atheism, theology, philosophy, and globalization in the process. Drawing upon a wide array of thinkers to support his position, from Plato to the historian Peter Brown, he suggests that Christianity emerged as an inherently contradictory entity that ultimately led to the construction and deconstruction of our globalized world.
In conclusion, it will be stressed that Nancy's comments on religion must be thought of in light of the self-deconstruction of the West. The "exit from religion" mustn't be thought of as an exit from some universal phenomena called "religion," per se, but the exit from nihilism.
Chapter 1

Between Heidegger and Nancy: Deconstructing the Metaphysics of Religion

First, to be done once and for all with the unilateral schema or a certain rationalism, according to which the modern West was formed by wresting itself away from Christianity and from its own obscurantism (curiously, Heidegger repeated, in his way, something of this schema), for it is a matter of grasping how monotheism in general and Christianity in particular also engendered the West. (D 34)

1.1 - Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to situate Nancy in relation to Heidegger and detail both the origins of deconstruction in Heidegger's reflections on Christianity, and the origins of Nancy's project on the deconstruction of Christianity in his reflections on Heidegger. By juxtaposing the work of Heidegger to that of Nancy, we will observe how both philosophers attempt to overcome metaphysical assumptions with deconstruction, but in very different ways. With the invention of deconstruction as a phenomenological method, Heidegger attempts to overcome metaphysical nihilism by showing how philosophical notions like "religion" are abstractions that obscure a true understanding of existence. He develops a deconstructive methodology to critique the ontological tradition that has ensnared the meaning of being in philosophical speculation and open the question of being. Nancy, in contrast, suggests that we can only overcome nihilism by showing how the broader "Judeo-Christian" tradition is already in a state of self-deconstruction. What Nancy suggests is that the deconstructive critique of religious and philosophical nihilism emerges out of Christianity and the wider history to which it belongs, which is something that Heidegger never fully acknowledged. In this manner, Nancy uses deconstruction to go beyond Heidegger.

The guiding question for this analysis may be summarized as follows: "what does deconstruction have to do with Christianity?" To answer this question, we will start by detailing Heidegger's Christian influences and early lectures on religion. After showing how he uses Paul's eschatological anticipations in the New Testament epistles to formulate his method of deconstruction, we will show how this also informs his theory of temporality and
later works. This foray into the historical origins of deconstruction will help us situate the "religious dimensions" of Nancy's critique of Heidegger, which we will detail in the second half of this chapter. By examining works such as The Experience of Freedom and Being Singular Plural, we will show how Nancy radicalizes Heidegger's "first philosophy" of being by emphasizing the plurality of "being-with." After this, we will discuss how Nancy achieves this critique by using the Judeo-Christian idea of creation ex nihilo to erase any horizon or limit by which to measure the appearing of beings in the finite world. This will involve a brief discussion of Heidegger's political entanglements in the 1930's and Nancy's critique of him in "The Nazi Myth" and "myth interrupted." Finally, in the last section of the chapter, we will turn exclusively to Nancy's work on the New Testament in Dis-Enclosure, where he argues that the wider Judeo-Christian tradition emerges as a deconstruction and a self-deconstruction. This will be the cumulative point of the chapter, as it will be argued that Nancy reads deconstruction into the very heart of religious and philosophical nihilism in the West. In conclusion, I will detail how Nancy finds an example of this in the Christian practice of "faith," which he juxtaposes to belief and presents as an inoperative practice that decomposes religion from within.

1.2 - Heidegger

1.2.1 - Influences and Divergences

According to a letter Heidegger wrote to Karl Jaspers late in his life, one of the most constant factors throughout his career was the confrontation with religious faith.\(^\text{32}\) From a certain perspective, the question of being that runs throughout his life's work is really an attempt to expose the true fountain of being that lay behind religious life. Despite the various "turns" in Heidegger's thought, this pursuit was constant. When Heidegger writes in the Contributions to Philosophy that "the last god" stands outside of "those calculating determinations meant by titles such as "mono-theism," "pan-theism," and "a-theism," we

can't help but hear an echo of his earliest phenomenological stirrings.\textsuperscript{33} On close inspection, his early existential analysis of temporality in \textit{Being and Time} seems to be indebted to eschatological notions that he extracted from his readings of Luther and Paul. The question is, does Heidegger's "destruction" of Western metaphysics succeed in breaking from these Christian forms of nihilism, or does he just end up reviving them in a new way?

To begin, it must be noted that Heidegger was practically raised in the Catholic Church. Born in 1889, Heidegger grew up in a home that was situated next to a church and his father was a sexton in Meßkirch, Germany.\textsuperscript{34} From an early age he took an interest in theology and his first experience of higher education was in a Jesuit seminary.\textsuperscript{35} However, though formative, this alliance with theology was also brief. By 1914 Heidegger was a student at the University of Freiburg and distancing himself from theology.

In his early work at Freiburg, Heidegger distinguished himself by developing a philosophical position that opposed psychologism and subjectivism. The title of his Habilitationsschrift was \textit{The Doctrine of Categories and Meaning in Duns Scotus} (\textit{Die Kategorien und Bedeutungslehre des Duns Scotus}), in which he explored the religious life of the Middle Ages through an examination of the theology of Duns Scotus. Signs of his later work are evident here, as Heidegger uses philosophy to analyze theological concepts and to show how they belie a certain relation to existence. True reality, he insists in the postscript to his dissertation, is found not in the concepts or ideas of a particular age but in the way those ideas reveal an orientation to the world. There is a close relationship between language, thinking, and modes of being, and the goal of philosophy should be to explicate these as the very conditions of possibility for human existence. Hence, even at an early age, this bright German student was interested in the existential conditions that make Christianity possible; he was interested in the connections between the particular nature of Christian "grammar" and the more universal experience of "thinking" and "belonging."\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{33}Martin Heidegger, \textit{Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)}, trans. by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 289.

\textsuperscript{34} A sexton is a type of secular officer of the church in charge of maintaining church buildings and graveyards.


By 1919, this exploration of the phenomenological grounds of Christian thought led Heidegger far beyond the confines of the theological training he received in the Jesuit seminary. On January 19, in a letter to a family friend and priest, Engelbert Krebs, he writes that Catholicism now seems unacceptable to him and he will pursue his studies unfettered by any "position outside of philosophy." He states that he will continue to be inspired by Christianity, but now in a new way: "Epistemological insights extending to a theory of historical knowledge have made the system of Catholicism problematic and unacceptable to me, but not Christianity and metaphysics—these, though, in a new sense."

On the surface, this is just a turn towards Protestantism, and up until the end of 1921 Heidegger continued to refer to himself as a "Christian theologian," but this "new sense" with which he understood Christianity eventually took him into uncharted territory. As numerous scholars have documented, Heidegger took the tools he learnt from theology and applied them to philosophy, sailing into new vistas with an ancient compass. All this is not to suggest, of course, that Heidegger’s theological origins are the best way to understand all of his philosophy, at least in any strict sense, but simply that Christian theology was formative in giving him the necessary tools to rethink philosophy. As Heidegger himself states in On the Way to Language in 1959: “Without this theological background I should never have come on the path of thinking.”

The principle method that Heidegger inherited from this theological background was “destruction” (Destruktion) or “deconstruction” (Abbau). Between 1919 and 1921, right around the time that Heidegger wrote the letter to Krebs, he called for a destruction of the Western intellectual and cultural traditions, and suggested that the problem with the modern world was that it had strayed from the fundamental possibilities of its provenance. As he wrote in a review of Karl Jaspers’ book, Psychology of Worldviews, what was needed was not a search for the true cultural meaning of the West (a popular trend in his day) but its

---

40 Many scholars have documented this Christian influence on Heidegger’s thought: John van Buren, Thomas Sheehan, Benjamin Crowe, Sean McGrath, and Judith Wolfe. I cite parts of their work below.
underlying potentiality. The "unwarranted concern to save culture," as thinkers such as Jaspers intended, obscured cursory matters for more fundamental ones. What was needed in order to understand the true meaning of existence was an analysis of the ruins left to us from the past, not their hypostatization in the form of a cultural essence. Eventually, what emerged from this desire was a new radical reading of history that would shake the foundations of Western philosophy.

Taking his cue from the Protestant reformer Martin Luther, Heidegger developed this method of destruction as a way to reform contemporary philosophy. The borrowing of the language is precise and direct, as the very German word "Destruktion" comes from the Latin term 'destructio,' which Luther used frequently in his attacks upon the Catholic Church. Heidegger began studying the writings of Luther as early as 1909, and references to Luther's work are sprinkled throughout his lectures and writings of the 1920's. The first time Heidegger used the term "Destruktion" was in the Winter Semester of 1920/21, while attempting to critique the objectification (and subjectification) of life in philosophy, but after that he began to apply it more broadly to understand the entire history of Western thought. Like a scalpel that a surgeon uses to penetrate to the depths of a diseased body, Heidegger used destruction to expose the false presuppositions of philosophy.

What Heidegger found inspirational in Luther's theological writings was the latter's critique of abstract philosophical speculation. Between 1514-18 Luther was battling the soteriology (doctrine of salvation) of late-medieval scholasticism because he believed that God's grace had been obscured by an undue emphasis on human merit. He argued that medieval scholastics had relied on Aristotle, not the Bible, to form their theological opinions, and that medieval theologians such as Gabriel Biel gave credit to the good actions performed by human beings by relying on Aristotelian presuppositions. Suggesting that these "puffed

42 Cited in Jeffrey Andrew Barash, "Heidegger's Ontological ‘Destruction’ of Western Intellectual Traditions," in Reading Heidegger From the Start: Essays in His Earliest Thought, ed. by Theodore Kisiel and John van Buren (Albany: State University of New York Press), 112
43 Van Buren, "Martin Heidegger and Martin Luther," in Reading Heidegger From the Start: Essays in His Earliest Thought, ed. by Theodore Kisiel and John van Buren (Albany: State University of New York Press), 160.
44 Martin Heidegger, Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie (WS 1919/20), in Gesamtausgabe 58 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1992), 147. All references to Heidegger's Gesamtausgabe from here on cited as GA, followed by volume and page number.
For Luther, mixing patristic literature with Greek philosophy to suggest that God would grant grace to those who took the first step towards Christ was a flagrant sin. He was stealthily opposed to this because he felt both himself and his actions completely unworthy of God's grace, and could find no theological basis for granting power to human agency in matters of salvation. He argued that scholastic interpretations for the reception of grace were theologically inaccurate and didn't own up to the anguish of a true Christian life. Being a Christian is not about being lured into complacency by abstract Greek theorems about human betterment, but facing the temptations of the devil while holding fast to the truth of Christ's cross. Hence, Luther claimed that the power of salvation was solely due to the "alien work" (opus alienum) of God, and that this is a form of "destructio" that lays waste to human vanity. As Luther argued in the Heidelberg Disputations, it was therefore necessary to destroy (destruuntur) medieval philosophy and the various "theologies of glory" (theologia gloriae) with which it is associated to restore the true message of scripture. Christians must return to a "theology of the cross" (theologia crucis) grounded in the suffering of Christ and must reject the "puffed up" conclusions of Aristotelian scholastics. After all, it was not human works that could save human beings but the sacramental grace offered through Christ. It was only through the alien righteousness of Christ's death and resurrection that the "proper work" (opus proprium) of God is located, not human reason or deeds.

The most important thing that Heidegger learnt from Luther's destructio of medieval scholastics was to distinguish between Philosophical abstraction and lived reality. For Luther, as for the post-Catholic Heidegger, Hellenised Christianity and Greek philosophy had corrupted primordial Christianity by burdening it with all sorts of metaphysical ideas that

---


47 LW25, 176, 415.

48 LW31, 53-55.


50 Heidegger would have also encountered this formula in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, Adolf von Harnack, and Franz Overbeck. This basic protestant formulation had been popular in European thought since the reformation.
needed to be overcome. In Luther's time, this required a critique of Neo-Platonism and medieval scholasticism, but for Heidegger it required the critique of modern rationalism, German idealism, scientism, positivism, historicism, and Catholic Neo-Scholasticism. Heidegger believed that the contagion of metaphysical abstraction had only gotten worse in the modern age, spreading to all walks of intellectual life, and he developed his method of destruction as a philosophical remedy. In the early Freiburg period (1919-1923), Heidegger advanced this idea by suggesting that Catholic dogma had burdened the whole history of Western thought with unnecessary impediments that needed to be challenged, and that the true freedom of Christianity is to be found in its dismantling, or interruptive force. As he writes in the Winter Semester (WS) of 1919, “the ancient Christian achievement was distorted and buried through the infiltration of classical science into Christianity. From time to time it reasserted itself in violent eruptions (as in Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard).”

In his earliest lectures, he applied this critique by simply contrasting Protestantism from Catholicism, but in his later work it becomes more sophisticated and he extends it to all of Western thought. Eventually, he would refer to the whole the history of the West as "the epoch of metaphysics."

As Heidegger's ideas developed in the 1920's and beyond, his critique of metaphysics became very focused, specifically regarding the causative association between "God" and the universe of beings. Whether discussing the Christian Parousia or Greek being (ousia), what he critiqued was the metaphysical reduction of being (Sein) to beings (Seiendes). Of course, this was not articulated in this precise language until Being and Time but, as a whole, it can be said that Heidegger critiques Western metaphysics for being an onto-theology: both an ontology—the study of being (ôn) —and a theology—the study of God (theos). This ontotheology reduces being to an oblivion by positing a fundamental ground for existence.

---

51GA58 205, 61-62. Cited in van Buren's "Martin Heidegger/Martin Luther,"160. In the PRL Heidegger makes similar assertions: "Protestant faith and Catholic faith are fundamentally different. Noetically and noematically separated experiences. In Luther an original form of religiosity-one that is also not found in the mystics-breaks out. The "holding-to-be-true" of Catholic faith is founded entirely otherwise than the fiducia of the reformers" (236).


53Though the term "ontotheology" was actually coined by Kant, Heidegger popularized it by using it to signify the attempt to ground all beings in a generative self-causing ground (whether materialist, idealist, or transcendent). See Martin Heidegger, Identity and Difference, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 54.
(i.e. they are nihilistic). His central critique of modern Christianity is that it enshrines this metaphysical error in dogmas and creeds to signify an absolute measure against which all other beings are compared, and in doing so creates a totalistic worldview (which is then passed on to all the human sciences in modernity).\textsuperscript{54} This does not mean that all forms of theism must be rejected \textit{tout court}, but it does mean that monotheism limits the potentiality of being when it becomes absolute and generalizes all beings in the presence of one supreme being. It means that monotheism is dangerous because, as a totalistic idea, it functions as a "lulling narcotic" for being, retarding philosophical thought.\textsuperscript{55} As he writes in WS 1927/1928:

One theme concerns the division of the content of metaphysics and arises from Christianity's devout interpretation of the world. According to this interpretation, every being that is not divine is created: the \textit{Universum}. In turn, the human being has a special place among the created beings to the extent that everything depends on the salvation of the human soul \textit{[Seelenheill]} and its eternal existence \textit{[Existenz]}.\textsuperscript{56}

By critiquing this attempt to ground the meaning of existence upon a singular theistic foundation, Heidegger uses destruction in a manner somewhat similar to Luther, but with a far more atheist edge. His goal is not to correct Christian theology with scripture, but to show how all metaphysical suppositions are based on a philosophical error.

The second thing that Heidegger extracted from Luther is the ability to make this critique of metaphysics in the name of authenticity. As Benjamin Crowe has demonstrated in his genealogy of the term 'destruction,' there is a direct connection between Heidegger's notion of authenticity in \textit{Being and Time} and his use of it in the early 1920's.\textsuperscript{57} What Heidegger saw in the work of Luther was a sharp critique of human ignorance and the ability to help humans "own up" to the inauthenticity (\textit{Un-eigentlichkeit}) of their rational suppositions. Humans have a latent tendency to fall into intellectual laziness, and this is what gave rise to the metaphysical age. Humans obscure the truth about their own mortality in

\textsuperscript{57} See Crowe, \textit{Heidegger's Religious Origins: Destruction and Authenticity}, Ch. 3-6.
abstract speculations on the eternal truth of the soul, or by seeing all of history as directed
towards the fulfillment of human values, and this is merely a way of obscuring the fact that
we are abandoned to finitude. (His critique of ontotheology is therefore connected to his
critique of inauthenticity, as what he saw in the concept of "God" was the desire to fall into
contemplation of the "highest being" (sumnum ens, ens perfectissimum, etc.) as a thinking
being that is distinct from time. This is a form of inauthenticity because it ignores the
temporal horizon of being.)

Much like Luther hated the vanity of scholastics, Heidegger disliked the work of
historians, social scientists, and philosophers that attempted to grasp all things in an absolute
perspective. What he seemed to wholeheartedly embrace from Luther was the idea of getting
behind philosophical and rationalistic pretentions and encountering the freedom of existence.
Just as Luther made freedom the absolute condition of Christian existence and rejected the
subjective appropriation of salvation through human effort, so Heidegger argued that, "The
free (Die freie) human personality holds history in its hand" (PRL 28). Of course, for Luther,
the "freedom of a Christian" is intertwined with grace, salvation, and the resurrection of
Christ, and for the early Heidegger it is simply a fact of finitude, but the parallel emphasis is
striking. For Heidegger, the danger wasn't to be found in the evils of the papacy or
scholasticism but Neo-Kantianism, scientific positivism, and the philosophical categories
thinkers applied to history. The primary problem for Heidegger was not human "sin," as it
was for Luther, but conflating life with human categorization, and he urged philosophers to
be critical of methodologies that didn't start with an analysis of finitude. Ultimately, this is
why Heidegger named this philosophical method 'destruction,' as he wanted to uproot
sedimented forms of thought and uncover a free and authentic way of being in the world.

Of course, none of this is meant to imply that Heidegger's 'destruction' is a negative
method (just as it wasn't negative for Luther). As Heidegger states in Being and Time, he
does not seek to destroy the Western tradition but perform a positive “destructuring” of

58 For more on the connection between a critique of Theism and inauthenticity see Martin Heidegger, Being and
60 For an extended analysis of the parallels between their thought see John van Buren, The Young Heidegger:
Rumor of a Hidden King (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 133-157
metaphysics to uncover the phenomenon in its factual setting. He wants to brush aside useless philosophical problems and abstractions to get back to experience itself, without imposing new philosophical abstractions in the process. Like Edmond Husserl, to whom Heidegger served as an assistant from 1918-1923, what he wanted was a phenomenological method that does not assume the relationship between consciousness and the objective status of the world.

Recall that the term “phenomenology” (Phänomenologie) is a unique German invention. It comes from a combination of the Greek word logos (word, reason, theory, etc.) and phainomenon (appearance), and implies "the study of that which appears". The term began to be used by German philosophers in the 17th and 18th centuries, and was popularized by Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit. Husserl developed this notion in the 20th Century by devising a distinct phenomenological method that replaced general philosophical analysis with formal philosophical analysis. In Logical Investigations, Husserl critiques philosophers for reducing all phenomena to empty categorical forms and proposed a method for analysing the formal content of conscious experience. By bracketing (epoché) and reducing phenomenon to its core conscious constituents, he hoped to dispel the idea that reality exists completely independent of human consciousness. As Heidegger points out, Husserl turned the philosophical gaze back upon itself and made consciousness itself an object of investigation. Prior to Husserl, there was an unquestioned psychologism latent in much philosophical analysis, and Heidegger used Husserl's approach to sharpen his critique of philosophy (PRL 39).

Building upon Husserl's work, Heidegger set out to describe neither objects in the world nor abstract forms of consciousness but the self-showing of beings as they come to light. However, whereas Husserl's analysis culminated in the study of how intentional acts appear in the pure ego, Heidegger sought to historicize all modalities of thought, even the pure ego. As Thomas Scheehan notes, Heidegger didn't want to frame consciousness as a primordial form (Ur-ego) but as the result of material-theoretical acts (sachlich-theoretischer

---

62 See Heidegger, Being and Time, 22-27; 39; 89; 392; 397.
65 For a recent study on the relation between Husserl and Heidegger see, Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Hermeneutics and Reflection: Heidegger and Husserl on the concept of Phenomenology (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).
Akte). This means that he wanted to expose the free situations in which consciousness itself arose, and he saw phenomenology as the study of this appearing.\footnote{Thomas Sheehan, "Heidegger's 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion,' 1920-21," 	extit{Personalist} 60 (1979): 316-317.} As he writes in 	extit{Being and Time}:

Thus the meaning of the expression "phenomenon" is \textit{established as what shows itself in itself}, what is manifest. The \textit{phainomena}, "phenomena," are thus the totality of what lies in the light of day or can be brought to light. Sometimes the Greeks simply identified this with \textit{ta onta} (beings). Beings can show themselves from themselves in various ways, depending on the mode of access to them.\footnote{Heidegger, 	extit{Being and Time}, 25.}

For Heidegger, phenomenology boils down to a radical form of historicity. Before "things" (\textit{Gegenstand}) are classified as "objects" (\textit{Objekt}) and before "human beings" understand themselves as "subjects," there is just the flow of temporality, just the finite world (PRL 25). The rise of industrialization in the modern world has been accompanied by reduction of everything to a form of intellectual technology but the things that make up the world are never properly the objects we take them to be, and all the phenomena we encounter are not necessarily things. The attempt to take stock of existence outside of this metaphysical enframing is the whole purpose of Heidegger's phenomenological analysis.

As a brief conclusion to this section, we might note that it is this liberating force of phenomenology that the early Heidegger locates in his deconstructive reading of early Christianity. In phenomenology, Heidegger thought he had uncovered the very freedom that Luther and other reformers had expressed in their attack on dogma. In WS 1919-20, he directly links the revolutionary potential of Christianity, deconstruction, and phenomenology, and suggests that the latter contains this critique of philosophical abstraction and scientism:

\begin{quote}
The great revolution [of Christianity] against ancient science, against Aristotle above all, who, however, actually prevailed once again in the coming millennium. Indeed should have become the Philosopher of official Christianity—in such a manner that the inner experiences and the new attitude of life [of Christianity] were pressed into the forms of expression in ancient science. To free oneself and radically free oneself from this process, which still has a deep and confusing after-effect today, is \textit{one} of the innermost tendencies of phenomenology.\footnote{GA58 61. Cited in van Buren, "Martin Heidegger/Martin Luther,"160-161.} \end{quote}
As noted, this scathing critique of Western thought is modeled upon the young Luther's rejection of scholasticism in the name of the *theologia crucis*, but has a non-theological agenda. Luther's rejection of Aristotle in the name of Christian freedom finds its parallel in Heidegger's search for a radically finite freedom grounded in phenomenology. Let's unpack how Heidegger achieved this rereading of religion and Christianity.

**1.2.2 - Religion**

From 1919-21, Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of how beings "manifest" in history was focused on elaborating the lived experience of early Christianity. Heidegger began this early analysis of Christianity as a preparation for three different lecture courses on the phenomenology of religious life: "The Philosophical Foundations of Mediaeval Mysticism" (1918-1919), "Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion," (1920-1921), and "Augustine and Neo-Platonism" (1920-1921). Published in English in 1995 as *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, these lectures form volume 60 of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*, and are far from being cursory outliers in a broad career. In fact, what they show is the formation of Heidegger's thought on history, phenomenology, and temporality, and they are the first lectures in which he explicitly connects Luther's *destructio* with Husserl's phenomenological method to present the primordial facticity of human existence, or *Dasein*.

It becomes clear right at the outset of these lectures that Heidegger does not like the category "religion" and that he is not interested in developing a theory of religion. In fact, he sees the entire history of the philosophy of religion as a metaphysical abstraction. The purpose of philosophy is to liberate oneself from an enslavement to scientific analysis, he suggests, not further the objectification of reality through the imposition of constructs (PRL 8). We might say that this is the entire goal of the "Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion," as Heidegger wants to save the philosophy of religion from scientism. He writes that when philosophical analysis is reduced to studying the objectification of ideas then it is no better than science, which posits the objective status of things and then proceeds to study

---

69 Again, see van Buren, "Martin Heidegger/Martin Luther," 161.
them in a quantifiable manner. This reduction of philosophy to science has gotten so bad, Heidegger, suggests, that "At this point we no longer understand how a radical difference between philosophy and science can exist at all" (PRL 12).

For this reason, Heidegger wants to investigate the "sense of philosophical concepts" in order to lead the philosophy of religion to an analysis of facticity and away from the "metaphysics of religion" (PRL 19). What concerns him is the destruction of Western intellectual constructs via phenomenology, not what things objectively are, and this includes religion. This means that he is not interested in what is "naturally real," the "causally determined," or even the real "sense of a thing," but how things called "religion" are enacted (PRL 7). What must be avoided is the constant slip into psychology, epistemology, and metaphysics. As we attempt to understand our world philosophically—that is, according to its meaning—we mustn't presuppose the classical split between the real and the ideal. The experience of oneself in the world is not a "theoretical perception," he claims, or even an "inner perception," but an entirely worldly affair, and this worldly setting is what is called factical life (PRL 10-11).

After this brief intro into the goal and orientation of his project Heidegger discusses the ways in which thinkers have failed to question the facticity of religious life. He lambasts philosophers, historians, psychologists, and sociologists for objectifying religion in order to understand it. For instance, he claims that when Kant defines religion as "the recognition of all duties as divine commands," he is treating religion as a means to a moral life and ignoring its factical significance (PRL 248). Understanding religion as a means to morality merely treats religious life as an objective fact out in the world aimed to serve a particular value for society, rather than a way of orientating oneself to existence. From Fichte onwards, Heidegger suggests, this problem has only increased, as religion has been treated as an essential thing with definite qualities and its historicity has been ignored. In fact, he argues that this is even the case for philosophers who study the "history of religion," because they treat it as an a priori fact whose laws develop historically. Hegel was the first to develop this method at length and he fails to escape the universalist presuppositions of his predecessors.

---

71 This particular reference to Kant comes much later in the lectures series, but he does mention Kant at the outset (PRL 8, 12, 14, 16, 17).
Like Kant, he starts with a metaphysical pre-supposition about what religion is and then attempts to chart its development and surpassing in history (PRL 17).

To make matters worse, this objectification of religion has been coupled (not just in philosophy but also in theology) with a focus on the unprovability of religious dogma and an emphasis on the psychologization of religious faith. Schleiermacher, for instance, recognizing that religious dogma is compromised by history, provided an intuitive definition of religion (PRL 16). To a certain extent, Schleiermacher's definition is better than Kant's because it focuses on the authenticity of experience rather than simply reducing this experience to pragmatic ends, but Schleiermacher uses experiential authenticity to reinforce the metaphysics of the subject, not to question the content of religious life. Overall, Heidegger blames the shadow of Neo-Kantianism for these popular (mis)understandings of religion.

To elaborate upon these sporadic arguments, Heidegger provides a lengthy critique of the Lutheran historian Ernst Troeltsch, whom he scolds for epitomizing all that is wrong with the study of religion. He writes that his intention is not to critique Troeltsch but simply to elaborate his position, yet it is clear that he is not a fan. When Heidegger gave this course as a private lecturer at Freiburg University, Troeltsch was one of the foremost philosophers of religion and a known Neo-Kantian, so his work would have been well known to Heidegger's students. In works such as *The Social Teachings of the Christian Church*, Troeltsch provides a sweeping history of Christianity that treats religion as a universal, material, and objective fact. Heidegger grants that Troeltsch has a wonderful grasp on the history of Christianity but suggests that his approach fundamentally misunderstands the topic because his viewpoint is both theological and scientific, and refuses to submit religion to phenomenological investigation:

Troeltsch possesses a great knowledge of concrete religious-philosophical material and also of the historical development of the religious-philosophical problem. He is coming from theology. The presentation of his views is rendered difficult through the frequent change of his basic philosophical standpoint, throughout which, however, his religious-philosophical position is maintained quite remarkably. As a theologian from the school of Ritschl, his philosophical standpoint was initially determined by Kant, Schleiermacher, Schleiermacher,

---

72 For Heidegger's longer analysis of Schleiermacher see PRL 249-251.
and Lotze. In terms of his philosophy of history, he is dependent upon Dilthey. In the 1890s, Troeltsch turned to Windelband-Rickertian "value-philosophy." In more recent years, he switched finally to the Bergson-Simmelian position. He understood Hegel from Bergson and Simmel and in the end oriented his philosophy of history toward Hegel. What goals does Troeltsch posit for the philosophy of religion? His goal is the working out of a scientifically valid, essential determination of religion. (PRL 14)

What is fascinating about this quote is that Heidegger flips the classical approach to the study of religion by pointing out that it is the assumption that religion is an object of analysis that creates the "religious-philosophical disciplines," and not the existence of religion, *per se*. As he states, the philosophical analysis of religion emerges from these assumptions and "not from religion itself qua religion" (PRL 19). In other words, it is because of the Neo-Kantian and Hegelian influence upon our perception of religion that it is viewed as a category of experience and an object of study, not its experiential reality.

Heidegger then points out the psychologistic, epistemological, historical, and metaphysical assumptions that undergird Troeltsch's assumptions about the subject. He claims Troeltsch's views are psychologistic because he claims that each individual has access to the essence of the religious thing. Like William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Troeltsch's claims are psychologistic because he offers a positive description of religious phenomena. He suggests that the central aspect of religious life is the attainment of God's presence and that this is intertwined with an implicit ethical perspective. Moreover, like Max Weber, Troeltsch classifies religion according to the psychological effects of prayers, cults, liturgies, the deeds of great religious figures, and reformer movements. Heidegger suggests that all this involves the psychologizing of prehistoric cultures, ethnography, and statistics (PRL 15).

Heidegger claims that Troeltsch's views are epistemological because they grant religion an *a priori* reality that is logically, ethically, and aesthetically defined as religious. Troeltsch's logic is tautological and circular: something is valuable to a religious person because those qualities are defined as religious. This sort of reasoning uses a predetermined "value-philosophy" and teaches us nothing about how different communities live. Rather, all that this perspective offers is an explanation of the categories themselves, which are reinforced in Troeltsch's historical analysis. In this manner, Troeltsch uses factical life
experience to simply reinforce his own presuppositions and ignores the way that the phenomena evade his analysis. (An error, Heidegger claims, that is also made by Hegel.)

The prime metaphysical assumption that undergirds Troeltsch's analysis, is the existence of God. Even though Troeltsch moved the study of religion away from theology, the transcendental positing of God's existence still structures his analysis. Unlike Albrecht Ritschl, Troeltsch does not attempt to unify history around salvation, but he nonetheless grounds religious difference in the experience of God's presence through history. What he offers is a self-fulfilling account of what religion is by recounting its development through history:

For Troeltsch, the religious a priori stands opposite a higher mental world [Geisteswelt], the experience of which is the fundamental religious phenomenon. Religious metaphysics is in principle different in Troeltsch as in philosophical metaphysics, just as religious a priori differs from theoretical a priori. Therefore, there can be a historical representation on the basis of a teleological principle of development won by the history of philosophy. (PRL 17)

Putting all this together, what Heidegger is suggesting is that the application of "religion" as a universal category to any area of study is an imposition upon factical life, not an explication of factical life. He is suggesting that religion is not adequate for studying the content of consciousness. Hence, Troeltsch is an emblem of all that is wrong with the philosophy of religion because he attempts to arrive at a valid categorization of religious phenomena independent of its particular historicity. This approach is faulty because it gives primacy to the category "religion," rather than the phenomena itself. For the early Heidegger, as for Husserl, we must start with the phenomenological viewpoint—with the things themselves—not with the secondary categories derived from our factical setting. Troeltsch merely turns religion into an object of consciousness and attempts to make phenomena clear via this object. This is scientific thinking, not philosophical thinking (PRL 19).

Thus far, Heidegger claims, philosophers have utterly failed to submit the category of religion to history. Although they have analyzed how religious forms have changed through

73 Heidegger claims that Hegel makes this error when he documents the transition from animistic, artistic, and revealed religions in the Phenomenology of Spirit. By portraying this development as the law of religious life, he claims Hegel betrays his own historical analysis. These "inductive" laws are a metaphysical remainder (PRL 16-17). For more on Hegel's philosophy of religion see Chapter 2.
history, they have not historicized the category itself. Heidegger even claims that other phenomenologists of religion such as Rudolf Otto commit this same error, as they simply divide existence between the rational and the irrational, and assume the existence of religion as an abstract "category of evaluation" (PRL 18; 251-254).74

Heidegger's corrective to this error is a radically historical approach that he calls "formal indication" (formale Anzeige). In contrast to the Platonic way of studying history and religion (in which phenomena are seen to correspond to eternal or abstract ideas), the Hegelian way (in which historical development produces the values of consciousness), or even Schleiermacherian or Dilthian way (in which human values and history are seen to correspond in some rough sense), formal indication will show how Dasein stands with respect to the historical. As he writes, what we must ask ourselves is the following: "How does the historical stand with regard to factical life existence [Lebensdasein] itself? Which sense does the historical have in factical life existence? (PRL 37)75

Similar to Husserl's notions of epoché (cessation) and reduction, formal indication is an attempt to expose how beings meaningfully relate to the world around them. Heidegger does not seek to impose any concepts on phenomena but to explicate how existence comes to mean something for Dasein.76 Formal indication is a tool for uncovering how the world is experienced, not what is experienced in the world. As Heidegger writes:

What is phenomenology? What is phenomenon? Here this can be itself indicated only formally. Each experience—as experiencing, and what is experienced—can "be taken in the phenomenon," that is to say, one can ask:

1. After the original "what," that is experienced therein (content).
2. After the original "how," in which it is experienced (relation).
3. After the original "how," in which the relational meaning is enacted (enactment).

74Rudolf Otto was probably the most popular philosophers of religion in 1920. Heidegger doesn't go into extensive detail but does state that Otto’s The Idea of The Holy rests upon the same psychologism and metaphysical errors as the work of Troeltsch.
75 See PRL 27-37 for Heidegger's detailed explication of these different historical modes.
76 Husserl sought to overcome the "natural" or "naive" approach to phenomena by finding a focal point for consciousness independent of pre-given assumption. This was developed in a number of places in his work. For instance, Edmund Husserl, Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology, trans. by F. Kersten (New York: Springer, 1983), 81-84.
But these three directions of sense (content-, relational-, enactment-sense) do not simply coexist. "Phenomenon" is the totality of sense in these three directions. (PRL 43)

What Heidegger calls "formal indication" is the sense of the world that is opened up for Dasein by these three key coordinates: the sense of its content (Gehaltssinn), the sense of its relations (Bezugssinn), and the sense of its enactment (Vollzugssinn).\(^77\)

Importantly, Heidegger is not suggesting that this three-fold structure of formal indication provides some sort of historical foundation for beings that determines the status of the objective world, nor that this is the most general sense (allgemeinsten Sinn) of the historical. Rather, he is suggesting that the "sense of the ‘temporal’ is undetermined" (Sofern der Sinn von «zeitlich» unbestimmt ist.) One’s relation to the world is opened by understanding, mood, language, and intention, and is not closed off by them. Moreover, the sense of the historical that is determined by these factual orientations is an original experience of temporality (erfahrung zeitlichkeit ursprünglich).\(^78\) Fundamentally what Heidegger is describing as the "sense of the temporal" is not a process of subjective discovery but the event by which experience occurs. As he writes in WS 1919: "it is not a process but rather an event of appropriation [Ereignis] (non-process, in the experience of the question a residue of this event)."\(^79\) (We will return to this below.)

In relation to the philosophy of religion, what formal indication implies is that philosophers need to be concerned with the situated context of religious claims, not the content of religion.\(^80\) The traditional philosophical analysis of religion (and contemporary scientific investigation) is “derivative” because it is applied as a pre-defined category to historical phenomena, whereas the goal should be to catch sight of "factual Dasein" amidst its daily concerns (PRL 35). Or, to put it another way, we must pay attention to how experience worlds (es welter).\(^81\) This means that we should be suspicious of terms like “religion,” the “soul,” and “God,” and even terms such as “subject” and “object.” They all belie certain presuppositions that obscure the lived orientation of beings.

---

\(^77\) The extract translation of these terms would be content-sense, relational-sense, and enactment-sense.
\(^78\) GA60 65.
\(^79\) Martin Heidegger, *Towards a Definition of Philosophy*, trans. by Ted Sadler (New York: Continuum, 2998), 60.
\(^80\) Vedder, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Religion*, 41.
\(^81\) Heidegger, *Towards a Definition of Philosophy*, 58.
It is telling that Heidegger caps off this analysis of Troeltsch and the metaphysics of religion by suggesting that "a driving motive" for Troeltsch's interpretation of religion is due to his misinterpretation of the Reformation and Luther. He writes that because Troeltsch doesn't understand Luther he provides a theological interpretation of God and relies upon "the metaphysics of religion" to define Christianity (PRL 19). As we saw in the previous section, Heidegger has no problem linking his phenomenological Destruktion to Luther's destructio. However, in light of the above critique of religion, the application of this reformation tool as a means of critique becomes even more pointed, as he is drawing a sharp distinction between "religion" and "Christianity." In a very precise manner, Heidegger is rejecting religion in the name of Christianity. To understand how he thinks this is achieved, precisely, we must now turn to his analysis of Paul.

1.2.3 - Christianity

It is noteworthy that none of the contemporary scholars on Heidegger stress his sharp rejection of "religion." In recent years there has been a trend in Heidegger scholarship to locate the theological influences upon his philosophical critique and to parse out Heidegger's philosophy of religion. From a historical perspective all these studies are exceptional and I do not want to disparage the quality of this scholarship, but no one has yet to point out how Heidegger's analysis has nothing to do with religion, strictly speaking, and have therefore failed to take his own critique seriously. As Heidegger himself argues, religion is a modern metaphysical invention—particularly as it was developed by Troeltsch—not an ahistorical trans-cultural fact. "Religion" does not necessarily precede Christianity but grows out of a certain metaphysical interpretation of Western thought.\(^82\) This is why Heidegger's lectures on the "Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion" are so important. They show not just Heidegger's intellectual development but also the development of the deconstruction of

\(^82\) As noted, this observation has been roundly demonstrated by contemporary theorists of religion. See Tomoko Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Brent Nongbri’s Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept (New Haven and London: Yale, 2013). In Masuzawa’s book she does not reference Heidegger, but she does have a whole chapter documenting how Troeltsch appropriated a type of Christian universalism to create the modern study of "world religions."
Christianity in the 20th Century. As noted, it was right after Heidegger finished these lectures, at the end of 1921, that he stopped referring to himself as a Christian theologian. It is as if, right in the course of this lecture series, the deconstruction of Christianity was playing itself out right before Heidegger's eyes and he recognized the futility of saving religion from deconstruction.

Hence, what makes Heidegger’s specific comments on religion and Christianity so difficult to understand is that he simultaneously rejects religion as metaphysical, condemns Christian theology as onto-theo-logical, and then tries to appropriate the primordial experience of Christianity in the name of facticity. This is confusing because it goes against the grain of how we usually understand these categories (i.e. we tend to see Christianity as a species of the genus "Religion"). However, it is important to follow Heidegger's argument because he is showing us how the metaphysics of religion emerges from a certain misunderstanding of Christian experience.

On the one hand, Heidegger will say that "The late-Scholastic doctrines concerning God, the Trinity, the situation before the Fall, sin, and grace all operate with the conceptual means which Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure provided for theology." He will critique all the core Christian teachings associated with the various orthodox versions of Christianity as thoroughly metaphysical, and suggest that all the dogmas of Christianity put forth an idea of "life which is determined in advance within all of these theological problem-areas [and] is based upon the Aristotelian "Physics", "Psychology", "Ethics", and "Ontology." On the other hand, he valorizes the work of Kierkegaard, Luther, and Paul, and returns to Christianity to understand temporality. As late as 1949, Heidegger continued to hold to some version of this latter position. As he wrote in the "Introduction to 'What is Metaphysics'":

---

83In "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida gestures towards this observation when discussing the work of Heidegger, pointing out that Heidegger considered the word “religion” to be "too Roman" (FK 85n31; 95-96).
84In 1919, when Heidegger was completing the lectures on "The Philosophical Foundations of Medieval Philosophy," he wrote that he wanted to use his method of destruction to recover the "religious consciousness" of the great mystic and reformers of the Christian tradition. As Judith Wolfe notes, Heidegger abandons this language completely by 1922. See Judith Wolfe, Heidegger's Eschatology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 66-89.
85The "[and]" is my addition. See Heidegger, "Indication in of the Hermeneutical Situation," in The Heidegger Reader, ed. Günter Figal (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 57. It is important to note that Heidegger's critique of Aristotle was largely a critique of Aristotelianism, not Aristotle, per se. As he notes in Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics: "Western metaphysics after Aristotle owes its development not to the assumption and implementation of a previously existing Aristotelian system, but rather to a lack of understanding concerning the questionable and open nature of the central problems left by Plato and Aristotle (5).
"Will Christian theology one day resolve to take seriously the word of the apostle [Paul] and thus also the conception of philosophy as foolishness?" In this manner, Heidegger reads Christianity against itself and rejects the metaphysics of religion in the name of Christian experience. Much like Luther, he rejects popular religion in the name of a particular reading of Christianity that can be traced to various protestant reformers.

What I want to show in this section is precisely how Heidegger does this; how he finds in early Christianity the precise structure of temporality that will inform his later work. In Christian eschatology, Heidegger locates a nothingness—a gap—that interrupts the continuity of time bound consciousness and opens Dasein to the unexpectedness of the future. Properly speaking, Heidegger does not have an eschatology but he does use Pauline messianism to inform his understanding of temporal experience.

At the outset, it needs to be stressed that Heidegger is not returning to Christianity to preserve some holy kernel of revelation. Although Heidegger may be guilty of privileging Christianity in the formation of his methodology (i.e. in using Christianity to extract the true experience of temporality) he explicitly claims that there is nothing intrinsically special about Christianity. In the second half of the "The Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion" he states this quite explicitly, writing: "For all its originality, primordial Christian facticity gains no exceptionality, absolutely no special quality at all. In all its absoluteness of reorganizing the enactment, everything remains the same in respect to the worldly facticity" (PRL 83). In other words, all he wants to show is how primordial Christianity prepares the way for authentic relation to temporality, not to disclose any spiritual potential hidden in Christianity. As he writes again in very clear terms: "In the following, we do not intend to give a dogmatic or theological-exegetical interpretation, nor a historical study or a religious meditation, but only guidance for phenomenological understanding.... The formal indication renounces the last understanding that can only be given in genuine religious experience; it intends only to open an access to the New Testament" (PRL 47). Remember, he is using formal indication to uncover the how, not the what. This is not a search for a genuine

---

86 Martin Heidegger, "Introduction to "What is Metaphysics?"" trans. by Walter Kaufman, in Pathmarks, 288.
87 For a detailed study of how Christian eschatology informs Heidegger's work as a whole, see Judith Wolfe, Heidegger and Theology (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).
Another way to frame this is by pointing out how Heidegger goes beyond Luther. By emphasizing the lived enactment of faith, not its theological value, he wants to reject any lingering supernatural essences assumed to reside in the finite. What interests Heidegger is not any theology of faith that might exist in Paul's writings but how Paul's notion of faith formally indicates the world of Dasein. As he notes in the introduction to his lecture on "The Letter to the Galatians," the reading of Paul he provides is indebted to Luther but only in a small way, as "we must free ourselves from Luther's standpoint." He writes that although there are "real connections of Protestantism and Paul," Luther was coming out of Augustine and, "religiously speaking," the two are radically opposite (PRL 47).

Heidegger's focus is how Paul's faith in the eschaton—the second coming of Christ, or the Parousia—turns Dasein from intellectual speculation to anxiety, or care (Greek, merimna, phronēsei). Heidegger uses Paul's emphasis on care to point out that Paul's message (euangelion) about the return of the messiah is an anxious concern that stands in contrast to everyday concerns: "I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety (merimna) for all the churches," writes Paul (II Cor. 11: 28). In his letters Paul writes about two types of care: care for "worldly affairs," such as the relation between man and wife, and care for the "affairs of the Lord" (I Cor. 7: 32-33). Heidegger draws upon this emphasis on care to stress that Paul's faith is a factical relation to others and the world, not a theological idea (PRL 51).

Though Paul's faith is structured around the Parousia, this coming gives rise to a practical wisdom, not abstract speculation. As he writes in Ephesians: "With all wisdom (phronēsei) and insight he [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ... (Eph. 1:8-9). In this manner, when Paul speaks of faith,

---

88 In contemporary scholarship on Heidegger this point is an issue of some contention because it is unclear whether Heidegger is using Christianity to form his methodology or whether it is simply an example of his methodology in action. (On this question See Matheson Russell, "Phenomenology and Theology: Situating Heidegger’s Philosophy of Religion," Sophia, vol 50 (2011):641–655; Lars Bruun, “Back to the future: Reading Heidegger reading Paul,” in The Bible and Critical Theory 5: (2009): 1-14.) However, this is almost an irrelevant question because the two ends of the argument fold in on each other: Heidegger was influenced by Christianity and the origins of phenomenology cannot be understood apart from its Western context. Determining which was the inspiration for Heidegger's body of work therefore descends into what Derrida called "examplarism."

89 In Being and Time, of course, "care" (Sorge) will be a central feature of Dasein facing mortality, but in these early lectures it is discussed in relation to Christ.
righteousness, flesh, and sin, Heidegger suggests that he is not developing a theological system, but describing a way of relating to the world that is outside the dominant mode of being. Paul's eschatological anticipations shatter his sense of time into an open anticipation of temporality.90

This is how Part I of the "Introduction to the Phenomenology Religious Life" flows into part II, as Heidegger uses Paul's language to expose the historical situation of the early Christians, and to show how Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus bleeds into the communal world of those he converts through his preaching. Heidegger uses the overall sense of Paul's world to show how his self-understanding, or self-world (Selbstwelt), is a lived temporal situation of anxiety. In this manner, what Troeltsch would have described as the "religious worldview," of Paul is reduced to a historically enacted situation (vollzugsgeschichtliche). Religion, as a metaphysical category, is exhausted in the lived Christian situation of Paul's world, and an openness to temporality becomes of central importance. In order to frame this proof, Heidegger puts forth two theses right at the outset of his analysis:

1. Primordial Christian religiosity is in factical life experience. Postscript: It is such experience itself.
2. Factual life experience is historical. Postscript: Christian experience lives time itself ("to live" understood as verbum transitivum). (PRL 57)

Heidegger states that these two points are not to be understood as a priori propositions to guide his study but as flowing out of his analysis. Because they are presented at the beginning of his study of Galatians they are hypothetical, but they are nonetheless "phenomenological explications" (PRL 57).

Heidegger's proof for these two points is not really developed until his analysis of the First Letter to the Thessalonians, as it is there that he describes Paul's self-world as one of "having become" (Gewordensein). By asserting that Paul's situation is constituted by "having-become," Heidegger is trying to underscore the temporal structure of Christian facticity, which involves an orientation to the past, present and future.

---

90 Interestingly, Heidegger's assertion here is in line with contemporary scholarship on Paul, which also suggests that Paul's theological work is non-systematic.
First, he points out that the basis for Paul's conversion is an "original experience" that does not appeal to historical tradition for justification. Paul claims to be an apostle solely on his story of conversion, which is not an objective proof. His apostleship is something he "falls" into, and those he converts are those who "fell" to him (PRL 62, 65). Paul does not call others on the basis of a past authority or tradition but precisely because of the revelation he received during conversion, which is an appeal to the anxiety of his experience. Citing Gal. 1: 8-10, Heidegger writes: "The struggle for the "right evangelism... [is] grounded from out of itself, without regard for pre-given forms of religion, such as the Jewish-pharasetical." In other words, Paul is not appealing to tradition to convert his followers, but the anxiety of being afflicted with faith. What Paul offers is a "religious position" that is constituted as a "Complete break with the earlier past, with every non-Christian view of life" (PRL 48-49). Paul's position is one of "having-become," and this is what he shares with the Thessalonians. Their factual knowledge in the present is one of being co-affected by Paul's proclamation. This produces, Heidegger suggests, a "formal schemata" for Christians that is a "turning-away from idol-images" and "turning-towards God." Their expectation of the Parousia is made in this turning, as it is an experience of directed enactment. This implies that the arrival of the second coming is not a specific event to which the faithful are moving but an ever present experience of expectation. The primordial Christian experience is one of "having become" afflicted, in which Dasein is stretched between a "fall" into conversion and the arrival of the Lord (PRL 65-67).  

Following this, Heidegger devotes the rest of his analysis of First and Second Thessalonians to explicating the experience of the Parousia. By drawing our attention to the fact that the kairological moment of Christ’s arrival (in the New Testament ‘kairos’ means “the appointed time in the purpose of God”) defies any chronological categorization, he shows how Paul breaks with any notion of precise chronological expectation. Paul uses the term kairos on numerous occasions and Heidegger points out that this has nothing to do with the mastery of time, or any guarantee of a future event, but the anxiety of existence. The kairos that is expressed via the Parousia belongs to the actualization of history, and what is at stake is not a particular date or given presence but the affect of this coming: Dasein exists in a state of distress as it faces temporality, and this is ultimately what Paul's Letters disclose.

91 See also Sheehan, "Heidegger's 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion,' 1920-21," 320.
Hence, with Paul’s notion of kairos the second coming of Christ can be gestured at but not objectively determined; Christ can be anticipated but not prefigured, and this anticipation affects how Dasein cares for daily life. As Paul writes,

Now concerning the times and the seasons (kairōn), brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction (olethros) will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing (1 Thess. 5: 1-11).

Heidegger wants us to notice how this coming messianic event is already present for the Thessalonians. Paul writes that although they do not know when the event will occur they are already "children of the day." In this manner, what is important about the Parousia is its coming, not the specific content or time of its arrival. Moreover, by urging that "sudden destruction" will ruin the wisdom of the wise, Paul is imploring the Thessalonians to authentically "own-up" to this distressful situation. They are not to flee back to false idols to find peace and security in rationalizations about life. Their situation is one of having turned to God, just like Paul, and they must remain steadfast in this position of anxiety. As Paul also writes in II Thessalonians,

As to the coming (parousias) of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction (apōleias). He opposes and exalts himself above every so called god or object of worship, so

---

92 Vedder, Heidegger’s Philosophy of Religion, 36.
that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time (kairō) comes (II Thess. 2: 1-11).

Heidegger interprets these "apostolic proclamations" as addressing the communal world of the early Christians. Paul details how the communal world of the early Christians is relationally directed towards the absence of the Parousia in the present moment (PRL 61).

To underscore the radicality of this Pauline/Christian development, Heidegger stresses that there is nothing "historical" about this primordial Christian experience. Although the notion of the Parousia can be traced back etymologically to Greek, Hebraic, and even Babylonian sources, these historical traces of the term have nothing to do with Paul's application of the term. Heidegger points out that in Greek and in the Jewish Septuagint, the term means "arrival" in a very specific sense. The Greeks used it to signify the arrival or official visit of an important person in a city, and the Jews used it to signify the specific arrival of the messiah. However, for early Christians, the Parousia means the coming of a messiah who has already appeared. What is appealed to with Paul's use of the term is therefore an absence—a nothingness—at the heart of the present moment. As Heidegger writes:

In classical Greek παρουσία (Parousia) means arrival (presence); in the Old Testament (for instance in the Septuaginta) “the arrival of the Lord on the Day of Judgement”; in late Judaism "the arrival of the Messiah as representative of God." However, in Christianity, the Parousia means the second coming of Christ, and therefore “the appearing again of the already appeared Messiah....” (PRL 71)

This Pauline interpretation of the Parousia changes the entire meaning of the event by erasing the objectifiable content associated with this coming. If Parousia means the arrival of a Lord who has already appeared, then that classical chronological orientation associated with the word is disturbed. No longer does the Parousia convey a sense of awaiting for a future event, but the experience of awaiting itself. Now what is anticipated is the always already present-absence of the Lord. As Heidegger writes,"The structure of Christian hope,
which in truth is the relational sense of Parousia, is radically different from all expectation" (PRL 71).93

Put succinctly, what Heidegger is attempting to demonstrate is that primordial Christian experience is characterized by self-transcendence, not a particular theology or religious dogma. He has explicated the meaning of Christian eschatology not by analyzing how concepts like faith, righteousness, and flesh signify something otherworldly for Paul, but how they create a "break in his existence" (PRL 51). Paul and his converts exist in a state of having-become; their sense of identity is not final, not complete, but an openness to temporality, and it is precisely this openness that characterizes the very nature of the Parousia. Paul and his converts are beings whose experience of temporality is characterized by an absence—a nothingness—which opens the present to its own becoming. For Heidegger, this is the "essential" (Wesen) structure of primordial temporality: the being-absent of the present.94 All of Heidegger's analysis of religion and Christianity has been directed towards recovering this essential primordial experience: revealing the formal schemata of Dasein in its having-become.95

Putting all this together, it is important that we not overlook the significance of what we have just observed. As Thomas Sheehan notes in his wonderful essay on the The Phenomenology of Religious Life, "in 1920-21 the basic lines of Heidegger's doctrine of temporality were set and... they issued not from his reading of the Greeks but from his interpretation of early Christianity."96 What Heidegger has shown is a connection between Christianity and the existential condition of being in the world; between the expectation of the Parousia and the experience of becoming oneself by being open to one's finiteness. Now that we have laid this groundwork, we can situate it in relation to Heidegger's later work and Nancy's critique of him.

93 Also see Sheehan, "Heidegger's 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion,' 1920-21," 321.
94 For Heidegger's specific reference to essentiality to PRL 40. For his reference to the "being-absent" of the present see PRL 138; 218. Heidegger doesn't specifically use the phrase "being-absent" until his analysis of Augustine in the following lecture series where he discusses the "being-absence" of consciousness and God. However, one gets the same implications from his discussion of the Parousia.
95 Sheehan, "Heidegger's 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion,' 1920-21," 322-323.
1.3 - Between Heidegger and Nancy

To quickly summarize all that we have discussed so far, what Heidegger shows in the lectures on religious life is the following: 1) that "religion" is not a native category to the world (something that scholars of religion didn't realize until the latter half of the 20th Century); 2) that the destruction of the metaphysics of religion is made possible by the finitude opened up by Christianity; and 3) that the destruction of Christianity is made possible by the sense of the temporal proclaimed in the New Testament epistles. Prior to Heidegger, various 19th Century philosophers also argued that Christianity exceeds the confines of its own dogmatic enclosures, but what makes Heidegger's analysis so significant is that he rejects any notion of universal history. As Nancy notes, what makes Heidegger's work so valuable—particularly as it expanded beyond an analysis of Christian texts and critiqued the entire epoch of metaphysics—is that he not only shows how Western monotheism is a construction of finite beings, but that the entire "history of being" is constituted by its own disappearance in the movement of temporality. Unlike any philosopher who precedes him, Heidegger provides the means to view the entire "history of Being" and our relation to that history as a Destruktion: the disassembling of its unity as the very essence of its meaning (BSP 21).

For too long our history has been figured according to a "universal" measure that absorbs the singularity of each and every being under the logic of a "great work." However, Heidegger erases the subjective, cultural, and divine foundations for any such "great work" and reads the history of the West as the disappearance of ends. As we have just detailed, what he finds at the origin of history is neither man, community, God, or even some universal will to power, but a "sense of relation" that orientates beings to a future that is to come, and which is acted out in the present in the form of care. In 1921 this is discussed via the Parousia and Christian anxiety, but in 1927 it is discussed via an analysis of the Greek notion of being (ousia). As Heidegger's thought developed in the 1920's he moved from an interest in religion and Christianity to Greek philosophy and German idealism. However, in

---

97What I mean by this is that it is not until the work of contemporary scholars like J. Z. Smith, that scholars of religion of have begun to very critical of the cross cultural application of "religion" to understand human phenomena. Again, see Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism.
all these early periods, what he tries to expose to his readers is the present-absent structure of temporality as the fundamental ontology of *Dasein*.

As we will see below, the primary lesson that Nancy takes away from Heidegger is that "being" is to be understood in its finite difference from itself, not against the backdrop of some finite or infinite presence. Like Heidegger, Nancy suggests that the very attempt to close metaphysics in upon itself—in an imminent communion between being and beings—reveals nothing other than the singularity of free beings in a finite community. However, Nancy also distances himself from Heidegger's early privileging of *Dasein* and his latter emphasis on the event of being (*das Ereignis*). Let's unpack this before turning to Nancy's reading of the New Testament epistles.

1.3.1 - From Being to Being-With

As Jean-Luc Marion notes, phenomenology implies a return to the "things in themselves" precisely to the extent that it makes them visible or phenomenal. This presentation varies among the different phenomenologists of the 20th Century but the "subject matter" is always deployed within a horizon for presenting the phenomena it reduces and constructs. For instance, in Husserl’s work this horizon is “objectivity,” in Levinas’ it is “ethics,” and in Merleau-Ponty’s it is “the body of the flesh.”

These horizons form the basis for the construction of phenomena for each phenomenological thinker. For Heidegger, the definite name for this horizon is being (*Sein*) and no phenomenon exists independent of it. As I will unpack in this section, this does not imply that being is a thing that stands over and above the world but simply that all beings (*Seiendes*) result from the appearing of what gives itself. This is why indication (*Anzeige*) is key for the early Heidegger, because being is not characterizable by what appears but by what does not appear. In fact, being, *in itself*, has no qualities. From an ontic point of view, being is not present: though beings present themselves, being does not. As Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*, “ontology is only possible as phenomenology” because the being of beings does not present itself. This implies

---

that phenomenology involves the study of a horizon that does not present itself, and that the phenomenologist is left to tend to the “meaning, modifications, and derivatives” of Dasein.\(^\text{100}\) Dasein is abandoned to a horizon that does not present itself, and this abandonment is all we can study.

By directing our attention to the how of enactment, Heidegger has been trying to expose the nothingness (das Nichts) at the center of experience. Since Plato, nothingness has formed a key problem in establishing the beingness of being, or what Heidegger calls "the truth of being itself" (das Sein selbs).\(^\text{101}\) Philosophers and theologians have traditionally dealt with this problem by privileging presence over absence—being over nothing—and in the process obscured the temporal structure of existence. They have thought of being as "what shows itself in a pure, intuitive perception," and contrasted this presenting to nothingness, or absence. Augustine, for instance, identified nothingness with evil, and identified the pure presence of God with light.\(^\text{102}\) This type of distinction obscures the finite nature of existence by privileging constancy over change, life over death. In the modern era, philosophers such as Hegel have continued this tendency by privileging the presence of time over the absence of temporal decay, which obscures the role of nothingness in the creation of things.\(^\text{103}\) By calling attention to the absence at the heart of messianic expectation in WS 1920-21, Heidegger is taking his initial steps in reversing this ancient philosophical tendency and showing the formative element of nothingness in temporal experience.\(^\text{104}\)

In Being and Time he continues this project by showing how the Greek notion of "truth" (Alētheia) has been understood according to a logic of presence, and stresses that the original meaning of the term also implies absence. The original Greek meaning of Alētheia means disclosure (Erschlossenheit), or unconcealment, which implies both an opening and a withdrawal. In modern philosophy and scientific analysis, truth is often understood in accordance with what is self-evident. Reason (logos) is presented as that which is eternally true and stands independent of time. However, this obscures the primordial meaning of Alētheia that respects the present-absent structure of things in their having-become. What is

---

\(^\text{100}\) Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, 31.

\(^\text{101}\) Martin Heidegger, Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event), trans. by Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Indiana University Press, 2012), 87.

\(^\text{102}\) Heidegger, Being and Time, 160 (section 171)

\(^\text{103}\) This is Heidegger's critique of Hegel. See Being and Time, 394-395.

\(^\text{104}\) For more on this and its relation to the PRL see Sheehan, "Heidegger's "Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion," 1920-1921," 318-319.
"true," Heidegger stresses, does not have an ahistorical status that is self-evident to all rational minds, but only comes to light in history. What is true is only what is apparent in the presentation of phenomena. Stated simply, Heidegger wants to point out that there is an abiding relation between truth and the primordial experience of temporality. As he writes:

[U]nconcealment, alētheia, belongs to the logos. To translate this word as "truth," and especially to define this expression conceptually in theoretical ways, is to cover over the meaning of what the Greeks posited at the basis-as "self-evident" and as pre-philosophical-of the terminological use of alētheia....

What we presented earlier, so to speak in a dogmatic interpretation, about logos and alētheia has now gained its phenomenal demonstration. The "definition" of truth presented does not shake off the tradition, but is rather its primordial appropriation; and this will be even more the case if we succeed in demonstrating whether and how the theory had to arrive at the idea of agreement on the basis of the primordial phenomenon of truth. Nor is the "definition" of truth as disclosedness and disclosing a mere explanation of words, but grows out of the analysis of the relations of Da-sein which we are initially accustomed to call "true."105

The relation between truth, temporality, and Dasein is like a clearing in the woods. Dasein is disclosed to a certain path, a certain way of being in the world, but this relation is always open to "futural" becoming.106 In fact, Heidegger defines Dasein as that "being held out into the nothingness of being, held as relation."107

Of course, for Heidegger, all this is simply a way of moving from the self-presence of the ego/I of Cartesian metaphysics to a finite experience of Dasein. By exploring the genealogy and factual use of ancient Greek and Latin terms, Heidegger is dismantling the rational objectification of the world to expose the factual situatedness of being-in-the-world. He is presenting us with a new "first philosophy" situated upon the Destruktion of the "history of being." Henceforth, the meaning of Dasein is to be understood through an examination of its relation towards nothingness, not some predetermined ground or end. However, it is precisely in this singular relation to death that Nancy takes issue.

105Heidegger, Being and Time, 202.
106Heidegger, Being and Time, 159.
107Heidegger, Being and Time, 6.
As Nancy reminds us, Heidegger begins *Being and Time* with a description of the everyday and the average, he describes the equipment that makes up the world of *Dasein* and discusses how understanding reflects a certain way of being-in-the-world. For him, first philosophy implies moving from the "I" to the “there” (Da) of “being” (sein), from the presence of "things" to the present-absent structure of temporality. As Nancy notes, the "self" is henceforth to be understood in its relation to the spacing of finitude: “What is born has its "self" before self: it has it there (which is the meaning of Heidegger’s "Dasein"). *There* means over-there, the distance of space-time (it is the body, the world of bodies, the bodyworld). Its appropriation is its moving [transport] and being-moving through [transpropriation] this dispersal of the there; such is the appropriating-event ("Ereignis")" (BSP 95). Heidegger therefore shows how existence is not a property of *Dasein* but the singularity of being, which is exposed as *Dasein* through the existential analytic (BSP 18). From now on, all we have is our relation to other beings in a finite world, and the meaning of the world is determined by our exposure to the limit of presentation, or difference.

Where Nancy begins to break with Heidegger is in the priority the latter assigns to *Dasein* in this finite reduction. For Heidegger, the existential benefit of this finite reduction is the reappropriation of the potentiality of being. Existentially, *Dasein* is a being-toward-death—a being who faces the nothingness (das Nichts) of being—and it is only by choosing to live authentically in the face of this nothingness that a proper understanding of being is possible. It is for this reason that Heidegger warns us of getting lost in the crowd—the "one" (das Man)—and its idle chatter, for it is only by listening to the call of conscience and resolutely facing finitude on a personal level that we can own up to the potentiality of being. Heidegger therefore privileges being-there (*Dasein*) over being-with (*Mitsein*), he suggests that we can only understand the nothingness of being in our singular confrontation with death. In section 26 of *Being and Time*, he unequivocally affirms that being-with is "co-essential" for the personal existence of beings who exist in the world, but he foregoes an analysis of this co-originarity of being-with to study the existential analytic of *Dasein*.

---

108 *Das Man* is most often translated into English as the "they." However, I have followed the translators of BSP by translating it as the "one" because that it is generally translated into French as *le on*. I agree with the translators that the "one" better preserves Nancy’s French and Heidegger’s German (See BSP 195n8). For Heidegger, *Das Man* is that anonymous opinion of the crowd that is constantly referenced in daily conversation as the "they" (i.e. "they say," "they think," "they do," etc.), so the "one" better captures this sense of unanimity he was trying to express (BSP 7).
Moreover, Heidegger recognizes that death always occurs alongside others but passes over an analysis of this shared relation to death to argue that the potentiality of death is a matter of personal authenticity. As he writes, “Insofar as it “is,” death is always essentially my own. And it indeed signifies a peculiar possibility of being in which it is absolutely a matter of the being of my own Da-sein.” What all this implies is that Heidegger presents *Dasein* as a being bound for personal actualization. It is for this reason that Heidegger opposes the proper (*entschlossen*) influence of one's conscience to the improper (*uneigentlich*) influence of *das Man*. It is why he claims that to be authentic is to resolutely live with care, which implies listening to one's conscience and not simply following the unanimity of the crowd. As Nancy writes, Heidegger preserves the traditional privileging of *Dasein* over *Mitsein* in a remarkable way, "in that he does not introduce the co-originarity of *Mitsein* until after having established the original character of *Dasein*" (BSP 30-31).

It is precisely at this juncture that Nancy critiques Heidegger for making *Dasein* subservient to *Mitsein*, and states the we need to return to, "the issue of 'first philosophy' in order to push it even further...." (BSP 26). Like Heidegger, Nancy also wants to use deconstruction to show how the tradition of metaphysics is deconstructed from within by the free movement of finitude, but he wants to move the horizon from the notion of being to "the opening [*la brèche*] or spacing [*l'écartement*] of the horizon itself" (BSP xii). The finite spacing implied in the very definition of *Dasein*, he suggests, also implies separation, and this separation implies division and plurality. Hence, the starting point of philosophy needs to be being-with, not being, as being can only ever be a coexistence. As Nancy puts it: "Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence" (BSP 3).

Nancy’s central critique of the Western philosophical canon is the assumption of a prior being, decision, or essence that precedes plurality. Whether it be Descartes’ starting point of "I think therefore I am" (*Cogito ergo sum*), Hegel's beginning with "sense certainty" (*Die sinnliche Gewißheit*), or Husserl's search for the *Ur-ego*, there is a tendency to privilege

---

111 For more examples see also *Being and Time*, 24; 27.
112 Translation altered.
the singular appearance of consciousness prior to the co-essentiality of being. Hence, in rereading Heidegger, Nancy shows how it is only because of the community, language, and being-with that any "I am" (Ego sum) is ever possible. As Nancy writes, there is an unspoken bias in Western philosophy that places the individual first: "there is for the whole of philosophy what is exemplified in Hegel's statement "'the I is in essence and act the universal: and such partnership (Gemeinschaftlichkeit) is a form, though an external form, of universality'" (BSP 30). By drawing attention to being-with, Nancy is drawing attention to this exterior spacing as the very taking place of meaning. All of the aforementioned thinkers also stress this externality in one way or another, but always in a way that subsumes it to an individual "me" or a collective "we." By emphasizing the with as "first philosophy," Nancy is drawing attention to the way this exteriority unworks both subject and community.113

What is "primordial" for Nancy is the plurality of being-with as the very spacing and appearing of being in its difference from itself. He rejects the subjective ground of phenomenology as it was imagined by earlier philosophers such as Hegel by suggesting that there is no original factual setting for the ego nor the other, but only the alterity experienced with others. Nancy radicalizes the relation between self and other by pointing out that "self-consciousness" is not an underlying substrate that views phenomena. Rather, each and every relation is constituted by a difference that is neither "Same" nor "Other." As Nancy writes:

Others "in general" are neither other "mes" (since there is no "me" and "you" except on the basis of alterity in general), nor the non-me (for the same reason). Others "in general" are neither the Same nor the Other. They are one-another, or of-one-another, a primordial plurality that co-appears. Therefore, "appearing," and appearing to oneself as well as to one another, is not on the order of appearance, manifestation, phenomena.... So co-appearing is not "appearing"; it is not a question of coming out from a being-in-itself in order to approach others, nor is it a question of coming into the world. It is to be in the simultaneity of being-with, where there is no "in itself" that is not already immediately "with." (BSP 67-68).

113 Recall that for Hegel, the sense of the world is appropriated by the "Subject" in its encounter with the other. The subject is the self-identical consciousness that folds all exteriority into itself. Hegel acknowledges that consciousness can only be what it is through its relation to the not-I, but he argues that the subject must recognize this otherness in relation to its own activity. What Nancy stresses, in contrast, is the moment of exteriority that cannot be appropriated by consciousness (BSP 31). For Nancy's specific critique of Hegel in relation to religion see, "The Girl Who Succeeds the Muses," in The Muses.
What Nancy suggests is that there is no underlying substrate for the world, and no being-in-itself that observes itself as the world, but simply the patent presentation of the *with*. For Nancy, there is no horizon of the *with* by which to figure the appearing of beings, only the distancing of the horizon itself as it opens the space between us: "We happen as the opening itself, the dangerous fault line of a rupture" (BSP XII).

Of course, as we have seen, Heidegger also critiqued the ego/I of traditional metaphysics. Heidegger's *Dasein* is not some underlying subjective structure. However, by thinking of being-in-the-world in terms of being-together, being-alongside, and being-with-others, Nancy erases the starting point of Heidegger's first philosophy. As we will see below, this allows Nancy to reconsider all the key Heideggerian terms like "world," "existence," "sense," "abandonment," and "finitude," in relation to the singular plural happening of existence. Fundamentally, what Nancy calls for is a thinking of being-with at the origins of all singularity, or what he calls "being singular plural" (*Être singulier pluriel*). Being singular plural means that there is no singular being that exists apart from the co-appearing of beings. Being does not pre-exist what exists, and "a world is not something external to existence" (BSP 29). Rather, the only meaning of the world is to be found in the spacing of a world. And the only "essence" of being is to be found in its *co*-appearance, which exposes any singular, substantial essence to its own dislocation amongst other beings. As Nancy puts it: "Being singular plural means the essence of Being is only a coessence. In turn, coessence, or being-with (being-with-many), designates the essence of the *co*-, or even more so, the *co-* (the *cum*) itself in the position or guise of an essence (BSP 30).

Recall that the French verb *partager*, which is a key term from Nancy's lexicon, means both “to share” and “to divide,” and points towards the fact that we are first together before we are alone. Existence is characterized by the shared separation that divides beings from each other, not the solipsistic isolation of beings. Moreover, this "shared separation" is not a metaphysical force of existence. *Partage* simply means that nothing is ever created outside of or beyond the spacing of each "share" (Fr. part), which in turn cannot be appropriated but only shared or destroyed; it means that shared space is the only type of space there is. As Nancy points out, the Latin term for singular (*singluli*) already implies plurality, as it signifies the "one" that is *with* all the others. It designates how each singularity is always already plural (BSP 32). In this manner, the *with* is not an addition to being but the
exteriority which exposes the sharing of the world to its own divisions and distancing. The *with* is simply the "primordial plurality that co-appears" (BSP 67). The tendency in the history of philosophy is to place the *with* second in importance, as Heidegger does with *Mitsein*, but the *with* is "at the heart of Being" (BSP 26). A phrase Nancy uses to describe this is "*partes extra partes,*" which is meant to designate the “extra” relations that exceed any unified totality (*unitotalité*) (BSP 60). The space of shared separation cannot be gathered together and made to signify more than the "extra" at the heart of all sharing—the *nihil* of all spacing. As John Paul Ricco puts it, this “extra is the 'part' that is not a part (i.e. fragment), and it is this extra spacing—its excessivity—that lies no place other than just between us.”

As Ricco also notes, Nancy follows Blanchot in calling this space of shared separation "death," as it is the space in which we encounter the impossibility of our relation with others. Nancy writes that, death takes place "in and through being-with-one-another" and that "Death is the very signature of the 'with,'" which is another way of countering Heidegger's distinction between being and beings by rejecting the existential authenticity of resolutely facing one’s own death (BSP 89). As noted, for Heidegger “Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility....” He suggests that by facing our own annihilation in death we learn to resolutely face the potential of existence. From a certain angle, neither Blanchot nor Nancy are opposed to this existential embrace of an authentic life, but they both problematize it by pointing out that any “possibility” is in fact always already an “impossibility,” as death is what wears us down before the other, not something that prepares us to authentically seize the potential of existence. In facing death we do not encounter the meaning of our own lives, but only our insufferable anonymity before the other. Blanchot points out that death is never something that is my own, as death only belongs to the other. As he writes, I never die, “they die.” What Blanchot means by this is that death is not appropriable as a form of negation or quantifiable data. Rather, it is loose in the world like an incurable disease that we confront in our exposure to the other. “Death is public” because it is shared *between us* as the anonymous and immeasurable happening that must continually be

---

115 Ricco, *The Decision Between Us*, 3.
affirmed among us.\textsuperscript{118} Hence, where Heidegger invites us to face our death like a novelist, writing a book of authenticity and attempting to make every moment count, Blanchot invites us to consider how death is the site of our shared separation from every other person, exposing the possible-impossibility of communication:

Therefore it is accurate to say that when I speak, death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address: \textit{it is there between us as the distance that separates us, but this distance is also what prevents us from being separated, because it contains the condition for all understanding.}\textsuperscript{119}

In agreement with Blanchot, Nancy thinks of death as something that permeates life. It is not stretched out before us as a horizon of possibility but is a destabilizing force that upsets our individualistic representations of the world. Nancy writes that "it is the inoperative, but existing, 'with'" that haunts the all being together as the alterity that separates and divides beings (BSP 92). Death is an incommensurate possibility we share with others that defies any ability to measure or appropriate. Death, like birth, takes place in the very signature of the \textit{with}. As Nancy writes, “the dead are those who are no longer 'with' and are, at the same time, those who take their places according to an exact measure, the appropriate measure, of the incommensurable 'with'” (BSP 89). (As we will see below, Nancy connects this interpretation of death with the deconstruction of Christianity to suggest that Christian faith draws our attention to this incommensurable space of shared separation that divides beings. Through a reinterpretation of Judaism and Greco-Roman thought, Christianity proclaimed death as the highest truth and opened a space of division in the midst of the world (A 24).)

In strict theoretical terms, what this implies is that death, like writing, is subject to the recalcitrant movement of negativity that infects all communication and cannot be limited to one particular meaning. Death is workless because it cannot be put to work for some particular end. What Blanchot and Nancy call the "worklessness" or "inoperativity" (\textit{désoeuvrement}) of literature also applies to the encounter with death, which makes facing it

with authenticity impossible (D 90). In life, as in signification, action does not link with meaning in some definite sense, but exposes the alterity between events in a random, or discontinuous manner. Similarly, death exposes the incommensurate relationship we share with others and cannot be appropriated to a larger narrative, such as the authenticity of Dasein or, as we will see below, the destiny of a people. As Nancy notes, “If it is true, as Heidegger says, that I cannot die in place of the other, then it is also true, and true in the same way, that the other dies insofar as the other is with me and that we are born and die to one another, exposing ourselves to one another and, each time, exposing the inexposable singularity of the origin” (BSP 89).

This is how Nancy reorients the problem of nihilism away from a question of Dasein, being-towards-death, and authenticity, and towards the incommensurate relationship we encounter before each and every other. Think of it this way, if there is no outside ground or totality to which existence refers (only the endless division of its parts) then there can be no closed circle of meaning in which existence returns to itself in some moment of appropriation, whether individual or collective, and this is precisely what death exposes. The negativity of death, just like the negativity of all communication, is not appropriable and never transforms into a positivity meaning but only opens up an immeasurable distance between all "things." The negativity of life is the nihil of the with, which haunts all signifying acts and vacates the world of substance into a series of incommensurate fragments. What is communicated between beings is not the particular meaning of the world but only "the fact that there are" things and that they only exist together (SW 137). For this reason, the world is not a work or project to be realized at the level of community but a place of sharing and heterogeneous mixing without completion. What is revealed in the sharing of existence is not the sense of death we each personally bear but the absence that haunts all sense in our being together. It is in this manner that the free movement of negativity overcomes any nihilist reserve from within by turning it inside out.

There is a beautiful passage from Blanchot's novel, Thomas the Obscure that perfectly illustrates this hollowing out of sense that we encounter in existence. At one point in the book, Thomas reads a page of a book that describes the powerful effect that literature

---

120 For instance, see Blanchot, The Work of Fire, 325.
has to release words from their function to designate things, and finds himself wrapped up in an absolute dissolution of meaning:

He perceived all the strangeness there was in being observed by a word as if by a living thing, and not simply by one word, but by all the words that were in that word, by all those that went with it and in turn contained other words, like a possession of angels opening out into the infinite to the very eye of the absolute.  

Once we recognize that the world is made possible by a play of relations, the firmness of reality gives way to a series of infinite interconnections where every being, concept, and symbol, and image refers to ever other, ad infinitum. As this occurs, being cannot turn back on itself in self-referentiality, and the "absolute" is exposed as nothing more than an infinite play of sense in the midst of the finite world. As mentioned in the Introduction, this is what Nancy means by his use of the "sense" (sens), which is meant to expose the finite limit of all relatiomality without reducing those relations to a singular meaning. What we find here is the "making of sense" in the absenting of sense (D 86). (As we will see in Chapter Three, all this is intimately related to Nancy's work on "resurrection.")

1.3.2 - From Disclosure to Exposure (or, Creation ex nihilo)

Nancy's emphasis on the plurality of the with and being singular plural also implies a shift in focus from Heidegger's emphasis on the disclosure/withdrawal of being to the exposure/offering of being. For Nancy, existence is not rendered possible by the disclosure of being to beings but "offered" in the sharing that takes place between beings (FT 77). He contends that finitude is not something that is given by being in an event of appropriation, but is an encounter with the finite limits to which we are abandoned, which implies a different understanding of creation.

Similar to Heidegger’s emphasis on the nothingness of being, Nancy will continue to assert that "nothing" is constitutive of “being the ‘there,’ being that ‘there,’” which is the very

---

122 See Chapter Two for how this relates to sacrifice, which is the precise content of this reference.
point where the entity itself opens being” (CW 103). However, whereas Heidegger conceives of this nothing in terms of reserve, Nancy conceives of this nothing as the free offering of existence that is shared out between beings, *partes extra partes*. Like the open space in an empty cup, nothing is the formative principle in things, it is what realizes itself in its contact as existence. As Nancy puts it, "nothing is what subsists this side of or beyond subsistence, of substance and of subject." (CW 103). This vacates the *nihil* of nihilism by affirming its play in the free movement of the world

As we saw with his analysis of *Alētheia*, Heidegger suggests that the appearing of being is also a concealing, as being is always partially withdrawn from existence. In contrast, Nancy will suggest that the original sharing of the world is a free and infinite circulation of the *with*, and then link sharing to creation in general. After all, if the *with* is not a "thing" but the very exposure that takes place between each and every part of existence, then existence is nothing other (or more) than this sharing that takes place between beings.

As noted in the Introduction, what Nancy is doing here is drawing a distinction between nothing (*rien*) and nothingness (*le nèant*), which is a distinction between “nothing” as an open space that is shared, and “nothingness” as the reification of nothing as a self-positing and unilateral existent (CW 102). By pointing out how being first appears between us, he rejects any distinction between being and beings, existence and existents, and instead suggests that the appearance of the world is brought about by the distance that divides beings: "The nothing, then, is nothing other than the dis-position of the appearing. The origin is a distancing" (BSP 16). The world emerges from the gap that is opened up among beings, which does not pre-exist the cold hard weight of space-time, but opens as its magnitude. Hence, the origin of the world is found only in sharing. There is no idea or generality of existence that exists independent of the existents that make up existence. Being takes place in the offering of its parts, each one to the other. As Nancy puts it: *There is no* existing without existents and *there is no* "existing" by itself, no concept—it does not give itself—but there is always being, precise and hard, the theft of the generality. Being is at stake there, it is in shatters, offered dazzling, multiplied, shrill and singular, hard and cut across: its being is there (IC 105).

Like Heidegger, Nancy will continue to speak of the withdrawal or abandonment of being, but for him these terms simply name the impossibility of appropriating the nothing—
the "extra" part—that divides beings. The world emerges ex nihilo as beings are exposed to the finite limits they share with one another, not the disclosure/withdrawal of nothingness. Creation is constantly occurring in the shared space of separation between beings. Nancy describes this relationship between nothing and sharing as the creation of the world:

[What is called "the creation of the world" is not the production of a pure something from nothing—which would not, at the same time, implode into the nothing out of which it could never have come—but is the explosion of presence in the original multiplicity of its division. It is the explosion of nothing, in fact, it is the spacing of meaning, spacing as meaning and circulation. The nihil of creation is the truth of meaning, but meaning is the originary sharing of this truth. It could be expressed in the following way: Being cannot be anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the with and as the with of this singularly plural coexistence. (BSP 2-3)

Creation ex nihilo is a monotheistic formulation of the Judeo-Christian tradition that is usually interpreted to mean that a supreme being or demiurge fashions the world out of nothing. However, Nancy reinterprets it in light of the deconstruction of Christianity to suggest that creation ex nihilo does not signify a relation between a creator and creation (causa sui) but the creator and nothing (nihil). Nancy states that the "creator' itself is the nihil" (BSP 16). Creation ex nihilo, he argues, refers not to the creation of the world by a pre-existing being but to a world stripped of a God distinct from the world (CW 50). “Creation” does not refer to a producer who gives the world a pre-fabricated sense, but to the emergence of the world from nothing (nihil). In this manner, Nancy points out how the idea of "God" is erased in the creative act of existence. "God" is the “nothing itself,” or is “the nothing growing [croissant] as something.” “The idea of creation," Nancy suggests provocatively, "is above all the idea of the ex nihil” (CW 51). What this implies is that the nihil in creation ex nihilo is not "something" from which the world emerges, but the "very origin [provenance], and destination," of everything" (BSP 16).

Historically, the idea of Creation ex nihilo is linked to the notion of continuous creation (continuo creatio), which has been variously interpreted by philosophers and theologians over the past two thousand years. Both ideas can be found in the writings of mystics, scholastics, philosophers, and, as Nancy points out, even Marx’s notion of value. For instance, the 14th Century philosopher William of Ockham argued that creation
continuously occurs *ex nihilo*, and did away with the essences and formal substances that supported the representational model of creation favoured by Aquinas and Augustine. God, Ockham argued, without any mediating essences or formal substances, constantly recreates the world from nothing. He linked creation *ex nihilo* to the transition from non-being to being, and rejected the idea that the world continuously exists under the management by God. This stood in contrast to the representational model favoured by thinkers like Aquinas and Augustine, as they stressed the ontological dependence of the world upon the rule of God. Nancy's interpretation differs from both of these models because he locates the creative power of existence only in the sharing of the nothing that divides being from itself, not the creative powers of nothingness nor the figuring power of a demiurge.123

For Nancy, the world, as the becoming of "nothing," produces a detheoligization (or a deconstruction) because it shows how existence rests on nothing other than itself, and that this *self* comes from nowhere and does not pre-exist the act of creation. This is why Nancy argues that the world is an abandonment (which, as François Raffoul notes, means “not held by an author or subject but surrendered without origin to itself”).124 Importantly, Nancy argues that this “nothing” of creation is not a lack, in the sense of a complete privation or complete absence, but a “without-reason” (*rien de raison*), because what is created is opposed to any prior logic or rationale. He juxtaposes this to the work of Jean-Luc Marion, who thinks of existence as given by a prior (*en deça*) “difference without compare” (*sans égale*).125 All there is for Nancy is “eternal matter,” which is synonymous with creation because it necessarily implies an infinite series of relations between parts in extension.

It is in this sense that Nancy’s reading of the West is neither “theistic” nor “atheistic,” and proposes a radical materialism that is born (*cresco*) “without roots.”126 Differing from the

123 For more on this and its connection to Luther, see Eaghll, *Martin Luther and the god who acts: Finding common ground in the current debates on justification*, 12-30.
125 Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford University Press, 2002), 295. As I will discuss in the following chapter, Nancy (and Derrida) label this as onto-theological because it imagines the universe as an ipseity that gives to itself in the form of a “call” and a “responsal,” whereas what Nancy suggests is that “nothing gives itself and that nothing shows itself—and that is what it is.” (CW 123n24)
126One way to think of this might be along the lines of the theory put forth by Laurence Krauss in *A Universe From Nothing: Why There is Something Rather than Nothing*. Krauss argues that the whole universe emerges from quantum fluctuations (the mathematical equivalent of nothing), which give rise to hyper inflation and all the matter in the universe.
nihilistic figures of ontotheology, the idea of creation *ex nihilo* as Nancy develops it exposes the nothing of creation, and presents experience as a “unceasing activity and actuality” of singularity (singularity of singularities)” (CW 62). Connecting the etymological links between “growing” (croissant), “being born” (naitre), “to grow” (croître), “to be born, to grow” (Latin cresco), and “to make something merge and cultivate a growth” (Latin creo), Nancy links creation with the movement of the world and growth in general: “In creation, a growth grows from nothing, and this nothing takes care of itself, cultivates its growth” (CW 51). This implies that creation is both birth and death, for it comes from nowhere and goes to nowhere (CW 74):

“Creation” is a motif, or a concept, that we must grasp outside of its theological context. Let me indicate how this can be done schematically: as I have previously suggested, it is theology itself that has stripped itself of a God distinct from the world. At the end of monotheism, there is world without God, that is to say, without another world, but we still need to reflect on what this means, for we know nothing of it, no truth, neither “theistic” nor “atheistic”—let us say, provisionally, as an initial attempt, that it is absentheistic. (CW 50-51)

In this manner, Nancy argues that the idea of creation *ex nihilo* moves beyond theology by positing that existence is made possible by the nothing (*rien*) that lies in each something. He uses the traditional notion of Creation *ex nihilo* to show how our entire tradition is a deconstruction and a self-deconstruction. By showing how monotheism in the West atheizes itself, he shows how the whole tradition is caught up in its own overcoming. Rather than try to overcome the tradition, he shows how it offers up its own absence as a testament to the atheological foundations of the world. (We will develop this topic more in Chapter Two when discussing Nancy's work on atheology, abandonment, and sacrifice.)

### 1.3.3 - From the Nazi Myth to Myth Interrupted

As Nancy documents in his 1987 doctoral dissertation, *The Experience of Freedom*, from 1928 onwards Heidegger began to move away from this early emphasis on *Dasein* and to make a fundamental shift in how he understood being and freedom.
During what Caputo calls the "war years" (1928-1945), Heidegger developed a mytho-poetical analysis of the Western tradition, started lecturing on thinkers such as Heraclitus, Hölderlin, Schelling, and Nietzsche, developed a strong opposition to Christianity, and became rector of the University of Freiburg during the Nazi rule of Germany.\(^{127}\) Although Heidegger never abandons his position from *Being and Time* completely, and in a certain way always privileges the human *Dasein* as the "Shepherd of being," this turn (Kehre) in his thinking in the 1930's is radical.\(^{128}\) As Nancy puts it, "We could say that the freedom of man, and of the subject, is abandoned in favor of a freedom of being" (EF 40). The radicality of this turn is most evident from 1947 onwards, when Heidegger abandoned any emphasis on the heroic heights of man and began to stress that being is given (*es gibt*), a shift in his thinking that would last until his death in 1976.\(^{129}\) This final period of Heidegger's life is most characterized by his anti-voluntaristic emphasis on the withdrawal and the oblivion of being. In this period he stresses the "sway of being" over personal resoluteness, and states in the famous *der Spiegel* interview that "only a god can save us."\(^{130}\)

As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe notes, it is in Heidegger's later work that we can most clearly see the remnants of piety and ontotheology that he carried over from the German philosophical tradition. If Heidegger's early work is indebted to a certain strand of Protestant *destructio*, his post 1928 work is indebted to a certain remnant of Romanticism that seeks to articulate the mythological elements that lead to the accomplishment of being. Indeed, as Nancy notes, what defines Romanticism is the "desire to regenerate the old European humanity by resurrecting its most ancient myths," and this is a political nostalgia that we can trace back through Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Jena Romanticism (IC 46). After all, Heidegger was not the first German philosopher to try to uncover some hidden value in the dissolution of Christendom, nor the first to try and restage the proper destiny of this history.\(^{131}\) Lacoue-Labarthe calls this desire to extricate and repeat the ancient origins of the

---

\(^{127}\) Caputo, “Heidegger and Theology,” 277.


\(^{129}\) As Caputo notes, we know now that this third ‘turn’ can be dated back to 1936-8 when Heidegger wrote the *Contributions to Philosophy*, a text that was not published until after his death. Caputo, “Heidegger and Theology,” 281.


\(^{131}\) For more on this see also Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 106-107.
West a "German ideology" that dreams of a new myth or "great art" in the wake of modernity.132 And Terry Eagleton calls it "a Graecomania that lasted at least until Heidegger’s idyllic vision of the pre-Socratics."133

Schelling and Novalis, for instance, both sought to use mythology to found a new religion upon the ruins of Catholicism and Protestantism. In the Reformation and the Enlightenment these thinkers witnessed a revolutionary spirit in Christianity, and called out for a more contemporary use of myth in the modern age. When Novalis wrote that, “True anarchy is the element within which religion is born,” he was channeling this very idea. When he asserted that "From the destruction of everything positive it [religion] lifts its glorious head as the founder of new worlds," he was searching for the archaic source of myth that could save the West from desacrilization.134

In his turn, Heidegger managed to expunge from his thought the religious sentimentality that guided these eighteenth and 19th Century romantics, but he didn't expunge the connection between myth and the destiny of the people (Volk) that inspired them. As Lacoue-Labarthe suggests, Heidegger's thought on this point was far subtler and slippery than many of the romantics who preceded him, particularly in relation to Christianity and religion, yet we can't help but hear the echoes of this nostalgia in much of his work after the 1930's.135 For instance, in the 1935 course on the Introduction to Metaphysics he explicitly connects his search for the primordiality of temporal becoming with mythology, suggesting that in tracing out the origins of history we are witnessing the formative power of myth: "Knowing a primal history is not ferreting out the primitive and collecting bones. It is neither half nor whole natural science, but, if it is anything at all, it is mythology."136 And in 1933, when Heidegger gave his Rector’s Address (Rektoratsrede) at Freiburg University at the beginning of Nazi rule, he called on the German nation to rise up and to embrace the

133 Terry Eagleton, Culture and the Death of God, 106-107. Part of this quote is Eagleton citing Frank M. Turner's The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain.
135 Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry, 89.
mythic potential of their historical origins. He called upon the inexorable "spiritual mission" and "destiny" of the German people to harness the "spiritual-historical Dasein," and then connected this destiny to the initial Greek interruption of technē. As he states:

Only if we again place ourselves under the power of the beginning of our spiritual-historical being (Dasein). This beginning is the setting out of Greek philosophy. Here, for the first time, western man raises himself up from a popular base and, by virtue of his language, stands up to the totality of what is, which he questions and conceives as the being that it is.137

No longer searching for the factual meaning of the Parousia, as in The Phenomenology of Religious Life, Heidegger is now concerned with the destiny of the German people. What interests him now is how the authenticity of being is accomplished, and he directly links this destiny with the mythic power that figures being at a communal level.

By developing a method of facticity in his early career Heidegger was seeking for an original way of seeing history (Ursprungs-Sehen) (PRL 232), but after 1930 what concerns him is how this primal history (Ur-Geschichte) comes to be. In The Introduction to Metaphysics, "The origin on the Work of Art," and Hölderlin's Hymns, he effectively describes how being "worlds" through poetry (dichtung), language (Sprache), and naming (nennen). What he explores is how these three types of technē function as the figurability of existence itself. As he writes in the Hölderlin's Hymns: "Projective saying [Sagen] is poetry: the fable [Sage] of world and earth, the fable of the arena of their strife and, thereby, of every site of the nearness and distance of the gods. Poetry is the fable of the unconcealment of beings."138 Heidegger therefore uses fable or myth to understand how the historical destiny of Dasein is constituted. As Lacoue-Labarthe contends, this mythic approach to language is the remaining piety and ontotheology that Heidegger never expelled from his thought, and it infected both his philosophical and political errors: "It is perhaps the site of Heidegger's greatest resistance to his own project of "deconstruction," a resistance that we find at work in his most stubborn "political" impulses."139

139 Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry, 11.
In Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's co-written essay, "Nazi Myth," they detail how this reliance on myth to inform the destiny of the German people is not limited to any one particular philosopher. They make the point that Nazism is not reducible to Heidegger's work, anymore than it is reducible to the work of Schelling, Kant, or Rousseau (NM 295). However, they also suggest that it is important to notice the point at which the destruction of ontology gives way to the appropriation of an aesthetico-political logic. The myth of the sun, the light, or the clearing, which is imagined to take hold of a people and shape the spirit of the polis is as old as Platonism, and we must pay attention to how ideas inform German philosophy. Heidegger's unique contribution to this tradition was to combine this myth with Luther's critique of metaphysics, and, as we have seen, this gave rise to his deconstruction of the history of being. However, by rejecting the Greek logos by appealing to the lived experience (Erlebnis) of myth as the figurative element of Dasein, Heidegger lent his destruction to a typological reading of existence, which in turn lent itself to the support of a racist ideology (NM 308). Heidegger rejected the Aristotelian association of presence and being (ousia), the Fitchean idea of the self-creating subject, the Eckhartian spiritual interpretation of God, Hegel's speculative interpretation of Dasein, but he didn't reject the idea that a particular being, or the being of a people, finds itself through its own most proper myth (NM 310).

Although Nancy remains faithful to the idea that language and poetry are key elements in the figuration of being, he rejects the mythic status of this figuration that Heidegger assigns it. The stroke of genius in Heidegger's work, according to Nancy, is in thinking the event of being solely in terms of finitude, and articulating how the meaning of being emerges from the free movement of history. As we have discussed, Nancy rejects the emphasis on Dasein but embraces the emphasis on finitude. And from Heidegger's late work, Nancy embraces the turn to language but rejects his piety. As Peter Connor notes, one way to phrase this is by saying that Nancy folds the late Heidegger into the early Heidegger, showing how all the mythic elements assigned to language and Dasein are also subject to deconstruction: "Thus he tries to think the event wherein a determination of what it means to

---

140 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy don't specifically mention Heidegger on this page but they are talking about the relation between lived experience, typology, and the assumed destiny of a people, which relates to Heidegger. For a specific discussion on this connection to Heidegger see Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry, 10-11.
be comes about and beings come into their presence (Ereignis, Being's advent) in relation to
the movement in which existence is delivered to itself in its freedom and comes to know
itself in and as an exposure to an alterity that it draws out and communicates."141 This is how
Nancy carries Heidegger's early thinking of freedom into his late work on the gathering of
being, and expels the remaining elements of piety from "first philosophy."

Like his arguments concerning being-in-common, Nancy asserts that the logos is
divided against itself and that freedom is only to be found in the division of this sharing.
There is no "one" (das Man) that is affected by being or myth in some singular sense and no
generality of being to which Dasein is directed; rather, existence is relational and directional
through and through—from Galaxies and planetary systems to atoms and quarks, and this
relationality is a form of free communication. As Nancy writes, "Freedom is the specific
logic of the access to the self outside of itself in a spacing, each time singular, of being. It is
in logos: 'reason,' 'speech,' and 'sharing'" (EF71). When you read the late Heideggerian notion
of the givenness of being into his early work on freedom and facticity this is what you get: an
ontological argument for the free, finite, and plural exposure of beings to their own shared
existence. It is in this manner, and this manner only, that Nancy defines freedom as "access
to the essence of the logos" (EF 65).

Nancy makes this claim in contrast to Heidegger and the (traditional) essentialist
interpretation of the Christian logos. Like myth, logos has been imagined as a signifying
discourse that organizes sense into a series of figures and practices; it has been interpreted as
what individuals and communities use to ground identity in a foundational fiction. The use of
myth as logos implies the privileging of full speech; a “way of binding the world and
attaching oneself to it; a religio whose utterance would be “great speech” (grand parler). To
employ myth is to try to structure the universe out of the logos. Recall John 1:1: "In the
Beginning was the Word (Logos), and the Word was with God, and the word was God." In
fact, Nancy defines myth as none other than a name for the “logos structuring itself,” or, for
the “cosmos structuring itself in logos” (IC 49).142

In On the Way to Language, Heidegger gives an interpretation of language that is
similar to this traditional interpretation of the logos, suggesting that language is what gathers

---

141 Peter Connor, "Forward," in IC xii.
142 For more on this, see also Gérard Granel, "Far from Substance: Whither and to What Point," in Dis-
Enclosure (Appendix), 163-174.
(Geflecht) being together. This text is characteristic of much of Heidegger's late work because it reverses the ontological priority ascribed to Dasein in the order of world creation. Here, he is not interested in the facticity of Dasein but how beings come "to reside" and "to dwell" (sich auf halten) in the fourfold movement of earth, sky, god, and man.\(^{143}\) In a very theological tone, he suggests that "the word" is what makes a thing be a thing: "The word begins to shine as the gathering which first brings what presences to its presence." Language is here imaged as a kind of social glue that holds universes together, and brings things into focus in everyday reality. He states that logos is the oldest name for this rule of the word, as it expresses how language "lets beings appear in their 'it is.'"\(^{144}\)

Nancy's critique of this unitary logic is similar to his critique of Heidegger's treatment of being-with and being towards death. Just as Nancy suggests that community is the space in which beings share their incommensurable relation to death, so too are all forms of communication similarly divided. He agrees that logos is how we form meaning but suggests that this meaning merely exposes the partagé that resists any unitary gathering of being. Language shows the impossibility of the "one" ever being unitary; it shows how community is founded upon the difference and separation that makes communication itself possible. Just as death exposes the incommensurate relationship we share with others, so language exposes the incommensurate relationship we share in all forms of communication. The voice of the community is divided by all the "extra" parts of existence and does not coalesce into a singular "great speech." Language exposes the radical historicity of being singular plural, and in doing so expresses the very essence of freedom.

(Of course, all this is not to suggest that Heidegger had a strictly theological understanding of language or logos, but simply that he failed to submit the use of language to the divided experience of the commons. Heidegger never suggests that being-in-the-world comes with a particular signification, as that would contradict the open givenness of finitude, but he does suggest that the world "worlds" through language, and he did so without emphasizing the priority of being-with. Nancy notes that Heidegger went farther than any philosopher before him in emphasizing that Dasein is not the cause of its own being, and in pointing out that to exist in finitude is to be unable to appropriate meaning in some absolute


\(^{144}\) Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 156.
sense, yet it is also true that Heidegger thinks of community in very romantic terms and that sharing is excluded from his theory of interpretation, or hermeneutics.

In "Sharing Voices," Nancy describes the "extra" spacing that separates each one from every other as the inoperativity that is more originary than any form of hermeneutics. "Hermeneutic" (Greek, *hermēneia*), as a singular noun, implies a relation between an interpreter and a god, a lover, a conscious being, a text, or some other subject matter. The modern understanding of hermeneutics was popularized by Schleiermacher as a means to study human interpretation and communication through the historical study of human consciousness. In his turn, Heidegger critiqued Schleiermacher for assuming the universal (and ahistorical) status of consciousness. For Heidegger, of course, hermeneutics is about elaborating the relation between text and context, not the individual conscious mind. As with his hermeneutic analysis of the New Testament, he details how texts give rise to context, and vice versa, in a hermeneutical circle of interpretation.\(^\text{145}\) Heidegger's position is antinaturalist, antipositivist, and antimetaphysical, but he continues to stress the signified meaning of the text. Despite all his advances, he does not take into account the plurality of being-with that animates communication.\(^\text{146}\) In contrast, Nancy suggests that each text, each subject, is plural and divided against itself. Each text, like each "Dasein," speaks difference and alterity. All communication exposes the *logos* as a presentation of finite limits, showing how speech and language trace the exteriority that divides all being:

*Logos* is a sharing, it is *our* sharing, as it is of the "divine"; it shares what *we* mean. In the singularity of voices and announcements, the finitude of the sharing [divided] *logos* inscribes itself. *Hermeneia* is the announcement of the other by the other, and it is to this extent that the other can neither be signified, nor presented, but only announced. The announcement is, in this way, the mode of the proper presence of the other. Thus, *hermeneia* is the announcement of finitude by way of finitude: its division is infinite. (SV 248)


\(^{146}\)Nancy notes that after *Being and Time*, Heidegger stopped using the term "Hermeneutics," shifting to an emphasis on announcement and knowledge. However, Heidegger continued to think of texts in terms of signifying meaning (SV 226).
All this is to suggest that the meaning of the gods, of being, and of language, like the "primordial plurality" of the with, is not a gathering force but a divided spacing. The plural comes before the singular; we are first together before we are alone, and understanding does not come in contact with the meaning of existence in some singular sense. All speech is shared (partagé) and the logos is defined by this difference.

In "Myth Interrupted" Nancy develops this idea further by using it to critique how myth has been interpreted and used by the broader philosophical tradition. He suggests that “myth” is not simply ancient Greek, Roman, Christian, or Egyptian fables, but any narrative that is used politically or metaphysically to formulate a shared essence. As in Heidegger’s Rektoratsrede, myth is the use of language to signify “a full and original speech, which both reveals and forms the intimate being of a community” (IC 48). It is for this reason that Myth is totalitarian: it assigns a self-communication between subjects and language. Myth assumes the perfect communication of the myth to itself; every time the myth is told it communicates the exact same story to each listener. As Nancy writes, “As theogony, cosmogony, mythogony, and mythology, myth’s will is myth’s will to will. Essentially, myth communicates itself, and not something else. Communicating itself, it brings into being what it says, it founds its fiction. This efficacious self-communication is will—and will is subjectivity presented (representing itself) as a remainderless totality.” (IC 56) Myth is also totalitarian because through it the community attempts to provide a complete answer for everything—absorbing disperse singularities and assigning a work or task to everything (gods, mortals, plants, and animals). (IC 57) Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the use of myth closes community in on itself and does not permit different or alternative fictions. It provides meaning once and for all, for all beings in existence. Myth thereby provides the structures for ordering sense and difference; it even provides the history of the community by communicating the in-common according to a narrative around which all sense is structured.

Nancy’s primary deconstructive gesture in "Myth Interrupted" is to point out that this communal power we ascribe to myth is itself mythic. That is, the belief that community actually is dependent upon myth for meaning is a myth. (IC 46) In “Myth Interrupted” Nancy suggests that the salvific power we ascribe to myth is something we tell ourselves about the ancient days of unity and harmony that preceded the dissolution of the modern world. In
reality, myth has never actually held sense and meaning together. Sense is always incommensurate with itself and the idea that myth has the power to structure the world is simply that, an idea. The totalistic powers we ascribe to myth have not only influenced a powerful grasp on how we view religion in the West, but also politics and science:

Comprised within the very idea of myth is what one might call the entire hallucination, or the entire imposture, of the self-consciousness of a modern world that has exhausted itself in the fabulous representation of its own power. Concentrated within the idea of myth is perhaps the entire pretension on the part of the West to appropriate its own origin, or to take away its secret, so that it can at last identify itself, absolutely, around its own pronouncement and its own birth. The idea of myth alone perhaps presents the very Idea of the West, with its perpetual representation of the compulsion to return to its own sources in order to re-engage itself from them as the very destiny of humanity (IC 46).

Although the idea of myth signifies full speech, and has been used to implement totalitarian models of control, at both the religious, political, and scientific level, the belief in those myths has always itself been mythic. This is why Nancy writes that to “speak of myth has only ever been to speak of its absence” (IC 52). Myth does not give us the promise it foretells but only the absence of its name. Myth may be the “name for the cosmos structuring itself in logos” (IC 49), but this structuring is a fiction.

As we will discuss in the following chapter, Nancy suggests that the West is founded on the loss of the gods and any ontological foundation. He makes this point repeatedly in both Adoration and Dis-Enclosure, as it is central to his understanding of the deconstruction of Christianity. However, it is also elemental to his work on community and history. In La Communauté désœuvrée, he suggests that the “mything” of myth has been central to the history of philosophy, in that the strongest desire in philosophy over the past two thousand years has been to appropriate the power of storytelling as the logos itself. As Lacoue-Labarthe points out, it is with Plato’s condemnation of myth in the Republic in favor of a philosophical logos that the rational appropriation of myth began. When Plato opposes the muthos of the poets to the logos of the philosophers in order to claim the power of
storytelling for rational ends, he is in fact inaugurating this tradition. Since Plato, this attempt has been redoubled in various forms—atheology, Romanticism, communism, and as we will see below, structuralism, and phenomenology—but each has only been an attempt to appropriate the supposed power of mythos for the logos. The various “isms” that line our tradition have all claimed to speak with the power of logos, and each attempt to provide a totalistic account of everything under a fictional totality (IC 56).

The core argument in the essay “Myth Interrupted” focuses on describing how we, as beings-in-common, pass from myth to community, and vice versa. The ‘interruption of myth’ is the phrase Nancy uses to describe the exit from these structural totalities offered up in myth. However, he argues that the interruption of myth does not simply occur with the recognition that myth is a fiction, but only when myth is exposed to its inoperativity. In fact, the modern acknowledgement that myth is a myth re-engenders fiction as foundation. Nancy suggests that, “this phrase that underlies our knowledge of myth—that myth is a myth—produces, in a play on words, the structure of the abyss” (IC 52). The reason for this is that asserting that myth is a myth still assumes the unitary nature of myth as a structuring power, and does not interrupt myth. One need only think of Schlegel’s call for a “new mythology” founded on poetry and fiction, or the theogonic powers that Schelling believed were at work in mythology (IC 53). Insofar as we still think of myth as containing the power to bind a community in its great work, we have not understood myth as fiction. What needs to be overcome is the idea that mythic fiction is foundational; that it is self-constitutive, sui generis, or, as Spinoza understood reason, se ipsam patefacit (IC 53). For it is only when the “work” of myth is shown to be broken, that is, as incommensurate with itself, that the exit from myth is possible. What must be grasped is not simply that myth is fiction, but that fiction is not a foundation; and that fiction interrupts any appeal to foundation. The "exit" from myth does not come about through the absence of myth, but when myth stops working, or is unable to unite all being in a singular meaning (IC 60-61).

Admittedly, this is a difficult formulation, but at the core all that is being suggested is that myth is interrupted by the fact that community can’t be figured according to a self-foundational or totalistic model. It is because of the fact that community cannot be figured

---

according to some absolute end that the great speech of myth is exposed to its own failure to subsume all the parts of existence, and opened up beyond totalitarian closure. This does not simply come about when we understand that the logos is intertwined with fiction, for that has perhaps always been apparent, but when myth is deconstructed from within by the singularities which comprise community. Indeed, if the totalitarian attempt by mythic understanding to subsume community were ever to come about, it would in fact destroy community because it would obliterate being-in-common. It would obliterate the difference that constitutes beings as they co-appear, each one to the other—“to the extent that they are exposed, presented, or offered” (IC 58).

Hence, myth is exposed to its own unworking in and through the disjunctive spacing out of the common. But in a reciprocal manner, it is this interruption that gives birth to community. In agreement with Blanchot, Nancy argues that the birth of community is connected to the interruption of myth that communicates community. It is the movement and activity of beings-in-common—their singular relation to each other and to death—that exposes the communication of community as resistance to myth. The community is definable by nothing other than this resistance to myth:

Hence community does not disappear. It never disappears. The community resists: in a sense, as I have said, it is resistance itself. Without the compearance of being—or of singular beings—there would be nothing, or rather nothing but being appearing to itself, not even in common with itself, just immanent Being immersed in a dense pearance (parence). The community resists this infinite immanence. The compearance of singular beings—or of the singularity of being—keeps open a space, a spacing within immanence. (IC 58)

What Nancy is here suggesting is that the absence of mythic speech gives “voice” back to the community. However, this voice of interruption does not reveal the truth of the species, or a common being that will be disclosed in history; rather, all it articulates is that interruption, resistance, and the unworking of myth is all that is common to all sharing (IC 62).

What is demonstrated through the interruption of myth is that “community does not limit community.” Rather, like writing, community occurs along the edges and borders (on

148 As Nietzsche suggests in Beyond Good and Evil, perhaps even Plato slept with a copy of Aristophanes beneath his pillow. See Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, trans. By R. J. Hollingdale (Penguin: New York, 2003), 60.
the outside) of the singularities that comprise existence, and defies the ability of the community to become present to itself. It is in this resistance that beings touch each other, separate themselves from one another, and articulate the singular exposition of gods, people, rocks, animals, etc. Drawing upon the work of Bataille, Nancy calls this interruption the “passion of and for community,” because it is the voice of multiple singularities appearing to one another without limit or end. Ultimately, this passion for interruption is all that remains of myth and community: “On this edge, destined to this edge and called forth by it, born of interruption, there is a passion. This is, if you will, what remains of myth, or rather, it is itself the interruption of myth” (60).

We will return to this relation between myth and community in the following chapter when discussing the work of Bataille, and specifically connect it to Nancy's atheological reading of the West, but first we need to explicate Nancy's analysis of the New Testament and show how his interpretation of the origins of deconstruction differs from that of Heidegger.

1.4 - Nancy

1.4.1 - From Destruktion to the "Judeo-Christian"

Taking into consideration these theoretical differences between Heidegger and Nancy, we are now able to discuss Nancy's specific comments on the New Testament. In the chapter “The Judeo-Christian (On Faith),” in Dis-Enclosure, Nancy uses the New Testament epistles to trace how deconstruction works in Christianity. First delivered, in French, at the international colloquium “Judéités: Questions pour Jacques Derrida,” on December 3-5, 2000, this essay does not address Heidegger’s work directly but does offer a critique of phenomenology through a re-reading of the New Testament epistles. Unlike some of his specific essays and books that offer an extended commentary on Heidegger, this essay is concerned with the connection between the deconstruction of Christianity, the Judeo-Christian origins of the West, and the practice of faith.

149 The chapter, as it appears in Dis-Enclosure, has slight emendations. A version of the text can also be found in Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida, ed. Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen, and Raphael Zagury-Orly (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 214-33.
At the outset, it needs to be stated that this chapter is a tour de force amongst all of Nancy's work on Christianity, we won't be able to unpack all of its implications but in the first three pages of the essay Nancy manages to summarize the origin, theory, and goal of his project in a fascinating genealogical deconstruction of the term “Judeo-Christian.” In doing so, he shows how deconstruction is not a phenomenological or hermeneutical method that is applied to history or Christianity, but constitutes the very movement of the West. In a sense, he performs a deconstructing of Destruktion by reading fragmentation and plurality into our understanding of the origins of community. Let's start by summarizing his analysis of the Judeo-Christian designation and then discuss how this influences his interpretation of Christian faith.

Nancy begins the chapter by noting that the term “Judeo-Christian” is a “fragile designation,” and summarizes how the concept has taken on increasingly liberal connotations over the past one hundred and fifty years. In the 19th Century the term was used to signify the early Jewish converts to Christianity, such as those described in Acts 15 in charge of deciding whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised to join the early Christian community. Then, in the early 20th Century, thinkers such as Adolf van Harnack expanded upon this meaning to distinguish between “Judeo-Christians” and “Pagan-Christians,” and thereby differentiate the various influences in the formation of Christian dogma. The Judeo-Christian designation has taken on even more liberal connotations in the latter half of the 20th Century, as postmodern thinkers have used it to characterize the dual heritage of the West that defies any singular origin. As Nancy notes, in Jean-François Lyotard’s The Hyphen: Between Judaism and Christianity, he calls the Judeo-Christian the “impenetrable abyss that Western thought conceals.” For Lyotard, the Judeo-Christian opens an abyss because Judaism functions as the counter-point to modern Western Culture; Judaism represents a very

---

150 As noted in the Introduction, it is in Acts that the term "Christian" first appears in the literary history of the West. Given Nancy's emphasis on division and plurality, it is noteworthy that the term first appears as a way of designating divisions amongst Jews.

151 We would suggest that the legal and American context of the term should also be taken into account, "Judeo-Christian." Though Nancy doesn't not mention this, the term gained popularity after being exhibited at the 1939-1940 World Fair, in New York. See By Jonathan Z. Smith, "God Save this Honorable Court," in Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 381.

different historical position in world history that throws the narrative of Western progress and development into question.\footnote{Frans van Peperstraten, “Thinking Alterity—In One or Two?” in Retreating Religion, ed. by A. Alexandrova, I. Devisch, L. ten Kate & A. van Roojen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012),155.}

Although Nancy embraces this widening of the Judeo-Christian designation that has occurred in the 20th Century, he takes a different approach from Harnack or Lyotard. Rather than merely attempting to historically contextualize the term, or argue that Judaism and Christianity form the cultural aporia at the heart of the West, he wants to show how the hyphen (\textit{trait d'union}) that forms the Judeo-Christian designation both composes and decomposes how we understand religion, philosophy, and community. In the context of our above discussion, we might say that he wants to show how the Judeo-Christian exposes the plurality of the \textit{with} that spaces being from itself, and to connect this with how we understand Christianity.\footnote{Nancy makes this claim explicitly in Adoration; see A 51 and A 112 n18.} In particular, Nancy lists five specific ways that the hyphen of the Judeo-Christian composition is of interest for us today. The following is a summary of these five points:

1. The name Judeo-Christian, insofar as it is a composition/decomposition, is the "decisive, if not essential, characteristic of a civilization that will call itself 'Western'" (D 43).

2. Insofar as this name also "de-composes what we have agreed to call, in our culture, 'religions,'" it also influences what we agreed to call "non-religious, or even anti-religious." The name draws a hyphen between religion and thought and thereby also influences how we understand the name "philosophy." In this manner, the Judeo-Christian draws a line over the Roman term \textit{religio}, "to destroy it or de-compose it" in the name of the non-religious (43).\footnote{To prove this point, think about the fact that even our words for those things that are non-religious, such as the "secular," took shape in the context of Christians struggling to make sense of the modern world. The first recorded use of the word "secular" can be traced to the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), which brought an end to the wars of religion. The discourse on the "secular" emerged as a space of worldly authority that was distinct from divine authority, and the supposed secularization of the West from the Enlightenment onwards cannot be untangled from this Christian provenance. (The treaty uses the word "secularity" to describe "the conversion of an ecclesiastical or religious institution or its property to sovereigns, princes or lay people"). See Mark C. Taylor, \textit{After God} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 131.}

3. The Judeo-Christian also implicates or communicates with that other central designator in the West: the Greek-Jew and/or Jew-Greek, as well as
varieties of "pagan-Christianity" or "Christian Hellenism." "For this motif, there is no Judeo-Christianity, under the circumstances, that is not also Judeo-Greco-Christianity, and philosophy cannot hold itself apart or stand free from this double mark of dis-union (D 43).

4. This hyphen continually multiplies, de-composes, and dis-unites" the three religions called "of the Book." Religion in the West, if it is ever possible to speak of it in the singular, is constituted by discord, divergence, and dis-union. It was formed under the auspice of Roman globalization and Greek universalism, and does not really mean anything outside of this provenance (A 21). As Nancy writes in “A Deconstruction of Monotheism,” “This too constitutes our provenance: the association and disassociation, the accord and the disaccord [la mêlée et le démêlé] of the Jew, the Christian, and the Muslim” (D 33) It is in this manner that the Judeo-Christian designation helps us understand the many different groups, sects, and new religious movements that have called themselves Jewish, Christian, and Islamic (consider, for instance, that there are over 38,000 Christian denominations!). The “people of the book” are exposed to the tension of this name by the fact that their various interpretations of monotheism and its history are founded upon the division and absenting of foundations (see Chapter Four for a detailed accounting of these historical foundations and their retreat).

5. The influence of this Judeo-Christian dis-union stimulates "what we could call the general dis-position of the West," from the contradictions in our philosophical, psychological, and historical narratives, to the rise of modern globalization. From Philo of Alexandria to Ibn Rushd, and from Meister Eckhart to Karl Barth, this hyphen forms the horizon of our thought on the origin and exit from religion. Tertullian’s famous question, “what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” ignores the implicit conjoining and disjoining that forms (and inspires) thought in the West. The Judeo-Christian contains at its center a gap [en écart], that functions as the general disposition of philosophy and religion in the West. Nancy lists several examples in passing of how this gap has influenced the history of philosophy: Nicolas of Cusa's coincidentia oppositorum, the Freudian Witz, the Kantian schema, and the Hegelian aufhebung. He suggests that these philosophical "figures" mark the void over which the hyphen is placed but never filled (D 44).

With these five points Nancy is suggesting that (1) the West cannot be understood apart from the plurality of the Judeo-Christian designation, (2) that all of our thought on religion and non-religion, theism and atheism, is caught up in this divided origin, (3) all our philosophical

---

156 This is my point, not Nancy's.
157 For examples of how Nancy thinks these "figures" mark nothing other than a void, hyphen, or syncope, see his specific works on Kant and Hegel, *The Discourse of the Syncope: Logodaedalus* and *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative.*
thought can also not be held distinct from this term, (4) that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all implicated in this plural spacing, and (5) that all the philosophical figures and schemas developed in Western thought contain this hyphen at their center; it forms the syncope that divides any philosophical closure.

Hence, what Nancy emphasizes is that the hyphen that forms the Judeo-Christian designation spaces the West out from itself. It is not that the West is exposed to this difference, as if the Judeo-Christian were distinct from the West and merely impacted it in some manner, but that we cannot consider the one without the other. This divided non-singular origin is the plurality that opens Western provenance, dividing it from within and against itself. The Judeo-Christian composition is therefore what opens the very possibility for Western history and all its religious and philosophical thought. Nothing in the West is free of this hyphen— it forms the *cum* (“with”) of all our communions, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the West. Nancy’s primary question is therefore what this hyphen conceals. What interests him—and herein lies the whole basis for his project on Christianity—is the space this hyphen exposes and how it exhausts all our metaphysical figures:

Over what and from what is the hyphen drawn? And how is this hyphen drawn from the one to the other—from the one to the other edge and from the one to the other “self”? How is it drawn such that it might withdraw while at the same time remaining intact: not untouchable but intact, remaining intact throughout the entire Greco-Judeo-Christo-Islamo-Euro-planetary history, an intact spacing that has perhaps never yet come to light, having perhaps never to take form or substance, and to remain always residual, the uncomposable and undecomposable non-thought of our history? (D 45)

Contra Heidegger, Nancy is not seeking some kernel of factual experience that lies beneath theological and philosophical rationalizations; and he is also not interested in "returning to the sources," as Protestants from Luther to Bultmann have attempted. Rather, he is trying to understand the spacing-out of the tradition—interrogating what being-with really means. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, he is trying to understand how Christianity takes the form of this unfigurable opening.

For Nancy, what makes Christianity a deconstruction and a self-deconstruction is that it consists in nothing more than this spacing. Hence, unlike Heidegger, Nancy doesn't see deconstruction as a surgical knife to dissect Christianity but the very nature of the divided
space from which its various "forms" emerges. Like the paintings of Georges Seurat or Vincent van Gogh, deconstruction is a form of "short-stroke composition" ["la composition au trait d'union"] (D 44): it takes places as an infinite series of spacings within any given construction, and Christianity (as the West) is caught up in this disunion (A 40).

To this effect, he provides two axioms for understanding deconstruction as an imminent process that unravels any construction from within:

1. A deconstruction is always a penetration; it is neither a destruction, nor a return to the archaic, nor, again, a suspension of adherence: a deconstruction is an intentionality of the to come [l'à-venir], enclosed in the space through which the construction is articulated part by part.

2. Deconstruction thus belongs to a construction as its law or its proper schema: it does not come to it from elsewhere. (D 44)

Note how the general contours of these axioms are similar to Heidegger's method of Destruktion but with a subtle shift: Nancy takes deconstruction one step further by suggesting that it is only possible from within the "thing" under analysis. On the one hand, Nancy agrees that deconstruction is a positive operation and not a negative demolition. Moreover, he agrees that deconstruction exposes an absence in the present and opens a space for that which is to come. Note how Nancy phrases this openness as the "to come" (là-venir), which is similar to the "having-become" (Gewordensein) structure of the Parousia emphasized by Heidegger (Là-venir and Gewordensein are both ways of suggesting that the present is structured around the experience of an absence). However, by underscoring the fact that the space that is opened up by deconstruction is imminent to the very construction under analysis, he locates the cause of the unravelling within the historical "thing" under analysis. Nancy is suggesting that deconstruction is not a transcendental or even a quasi-transcendental process that happens to the world from the outside, but the very spacing of space-time that takes place "right here" in the midst of the world.

As noted in the Introduction, Nancy argues that deconstruction is only possible within Christianity: "My hypothesis is that the gesture of deconstruction, as a gesture neither critical nor perpetuating, and testifying to a relation to history and tradition... is only possible within Christianity." As also noted, by linking deconstruction and Christianity so closely, Nancy is
not suggesting that the latter invented the former—as if deconstruction was purely a Christian invention—but that the history of the terms and the disappearance of foundations in the West are so linked as to render any clean distinction impossible. Moreover, he is suggesting that there is a "sense (sens) to seek and to disassemble" contained within Christianity that is both its condition of possibility and what proceeds, succeeds, and exceeds it (D 148). In this light, what Nancy sees in the Judeo-Christian designation is evidence for that extra spacing—that "partes extra partes"—which continually opens being beyond any communal closure, creating the world ex nihilo, according to its sharing (partage). In the Judeo-Christian formulation he finds evidence for the nihil of all spacing that lies no other place than right between us, and which fragments all being-together.

To make this connection between deconstruction and Christianity even more explicit, Nancy links the New Testament word koinōnia (Greek: fellowship), and the Latin societas and communicatio, and suggests that they all express a certain “placing-in-common” that characterizes the Judeo-Christian designation, affecting our experience of community in the West. Citing Romans 11:25, Nancy notes that Christianity is driven by a desire to unite a “pleroma of peoples” in a lost community—a community in diaspora (D 44-45). Apropos our above discussion, we might summarize this by saying that the myth of community in the West is one that is always already interrupted because it is founded upon the loss of community, or the retreat of social foundation. 158

Recall that all the New Testament epistles were written at a time when the theological and material status of the church was in question, and Nancy uses this to point out how the meaning of the term “catholic” — which means "universal" — and dispersion are connected in the West. Quite boldly, Nancy asserts that this question of communal dispersion forms the entire question for the deconstruction of Christianity and the history of the West: “That catholicity and diaspora might initially have to do with one another is something worth reflecting upon: do the “whole” and the “dispersion” produce a whole out of dispersion, a dispersion of the whole, or, indeed, a whole in dispersion? In a sense, the entire question lies there: I mean that the entire question of the West as totality and/or as dissemination resides

158 Romans 11:25 states: "Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in."
Let's unpack this by turning to Nancy's specific analysis of James and the emergence of Christian faith.

### 1.4.2 - Towards an Inoperative Faith

After laying out these initial axioms, Nancy turns to the Epistle of James to provide an example of how Christianity takes the unfigurable form of this divided Judeo-Christian space. Since this text is discarded by many Protestants, embraced by Catholics, and its authenticity is doubted by modern scholars, the Epistle of James exposes the historical tension of the Judeo-Christian designation. The epistle provides an early instance of what we designate as “catholic” (καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία) because it is addressed to a community in diaspora, not some determinant church, which is the very sense of the West: a community in dispersion. Moreover, he argues arguing that the faith James offers exposes the inoperativity at the heart of all being, communication, and language. The faith James offers is a testament to the "with" that spaces being out from itself and exhausts the divine in the plural sharing of existence.

In Adam Kotsko's early review of *Dis-Enclosure*, he questions why Nancy bases his reading of Christian faith on the Epistle of James, rather than one of the authentic documents of Paul. Since most New Testament scholars agree that the letter of James is most likely not written by the historical James, why would Nancy choose it as emblematic of the Judeo-Christian position on faith? What Kotsko overlooks in his review is that Nancy does not wish to wade into the scholarly debate concerning the composition of this text, and that the

---

159 James is addressed to the Jews scattered outside Palestine and begins with a salutation to the “twelve tribes in Dispersion.” As *The Harper Collins Study Bible* notes, since at the time the Epistle of James was written the twelve tribes did not exist the author is no doubt trying to connect the early Christians with the ancient nation of Israel. (The twelve tribes were dispersed in 721 B.C.E., when the Assyrians invaded the Kingdom of Israel.) See *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. by Attridge, Harold W. (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 2052.

160 Adam Kotsko, “Already, not yet,” Review of *La Déclosion: Déconstruction du christianisme*, in JCRT 6.3 (Fall 2005), 92. Kotsko also questions Nancy’s attribution of Hebrews and Colossians to Paul, and his use of The Book of Acts as a historical document. I would suggest that Nancy is aware of the contested nature of these documents but doesn't think it is relevant to his broader argument. Just as he reinterprets all Christian terms in light of deconstruction, so he reads these texts and their authors in light of deconstruction. The contested nature of all these historical and literary figures only adds to his broader point. (Note: In a footnote to the aforementioned criticism, Kotsko seems to acknowledge that he only wants Nancy to assert that he is drawing upon these texts for their deconstructive value, which Nancy does not do, and if this is all his criticism boils down to then perhaps we are in agreement.)
controversial nature of James is in fact part of its appeal for a deconstructive analysis. It is precisely because of the fact that James throws the traditional reading of Pauline faith and justification into question that the letter interests Nancy.

What Nancy finds in James is an inoperative faith that deconstructs Christian works from within. Similar to his critique of Heidegger's notion of being towards death, what this analysis shows is that Christian facticity is not a possibility to be faced resolutely, but a measure of incommensurability. Like the shared encounter with death, faith is shared between us as a recalcitrant negativity that disturbs all meaning and ends. Faith is an example of what Blanchot calls the uselessness or ‘worklessness’ (désœuvrement) of literature, because it turns action into a non-appropriable praxis. To unpack this, we will have to explain the context of the text and how Nancy interprets it.

Traditionally, the Epistle of James has been associated with James the Just, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church, who is to be distinguished from James, son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus. However, the validity of this claim and the theological value of James has been a matter of contention throughout its two thousand year history. The author’s proficiency with Greek and his use of the Septuagint probably means that the text was most likely not written by Jesus’ brother. Modern scholars even debate the actual date at which James was written, with suggestions ranging from anywhere between 50 C.E to the late 2nd Century.

The text also has a controversial theological status. Famously, Luther called James an “epistle of straw” and did not believe it was written by any of the apostles. He argued that its emphasis on works obscured the Gospel of Christ and Paul’s message concerning the salvific power of faith (D 48). For good measure, and a little theological context, here is what Luther wrote about James:

Though this Epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and hold it a good book, because it sets up no doctrine of men and lays great stress upon God’s law. But to state my own opinion about it . . . I consider that it is not the writing of any apostle. My reasons are as follows. First: Flatly against

---

161 I would argue this about Nancy’s use of biblical sources as a whole. It is because of the fact that the authorship and historicality of New Testament documents are in question that makes them valuable for a deconstructive reading. What makes these documents ripe for analysis is that they comprise the canon of Christianity scripture, in all their (its) undecidability.

162 The Harper Collins Study Bible, 2052.
St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture, it ascribes righteousness to works. . . . Second, its purpose is to teach Christians, and in all this long teaching it does not once mention the Passion, the Resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. . . . James does nothing more than drive to the law and its works; and he mixes the two up in such disorderly fashion that it seems to me he must have been some good, pious man, who took some sayings of the apostles’ disciples and threw them thus on paper; or perhaps they were written down by someone else from his preaching. . . . In a word, he wants to guard against those who relied on faith without works, and is unequal to the task . . . and would accomplish by insisting on the Law what the apostles accomplish by inciting men to love. Therefore, I cannot put him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from putting him where he pleases and estimating him as he pleases; for there are many good sayings in him.163

What concerns Luther is that James seems to ascribe the righteousness of God to human works, which implies that man can earn salvation through effort (as noted, this was also Luther’s central critique of various Medieval philosophers). Additionally, James does not emphasize the miracle of the Passion and the Resurrection, and therefore seems to teach the law independent of the Gospel (or grace). Luther therefore rejects the message of James for that of Paul, whom he believes teaches the true Gospel:

In a word, St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that it is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to the others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.164

Although Nancy agrees with Luther that James does not offer much of a theological program he does not see this as a reason for critique. Perhaps exposing the Catholic influences of his youth, he thinks that Luther’s reading of James ignores the fact that it was written to combat a “tendentious interpretation of Paul that tended to cut faith off from all action” (D 48). The absence of theology in James demonstrates how theology retreats into Christian practice. Hence, what Nancy does in his reading is try to expose this retreat and show how James’ understanding of faith in fact emerges from the self-deconstruction of Christianity. Nancy does not turn to James to wade into the theological disputes surrounding

163 LW35 362.
164 LW35 395-397.
the New Testament documents but in order to expose the hyphen that decentres Christian theology. Where Luther sees a document that teaches works over faith, Nancy sees a document in retreat from any soteriology. As Nancy writes: “But that means we must look here not for theological thinness but for a retreat of theology, or for a theology in retreat, that is, a withdrawal of any representation of contents in favor of an active information by faith—which is also to say that we must look for that alone which activates the contents” (D 48).

Similar to Heidegger’s reading of Paul, what Nancy finds in the New Testament epistles is not a dogmatic formula but the emptying out of belief in action. Faith is not the acting out of a content but the emptying out of such content in the midst of the world. As Nancy puts it in “A Deconstruction of Monotheism,” Christian faith is not an attempt to signify something that is given, but is “faithfulness to an absence and a certainty of this faithfulness in the absence of all assurance” (D 36). It is not that James privileges works over faith, as Luther argues, or that it privileges faith plus works, as the Catholic Church affirmed in the wake of the Protestant Reformation; rather, James presents faith and works as synonymous. James shows how works are exhausted as faith. What James offers is a praxis—"meaning at work"—that is inoperative. Let us unpack this.

Nancy begins to elaborate this idea by first pointing out that, for James, divine grace is only a trace, or mark, that is stretched-out across creation, not the infusion of a divine presence. James states that, “men are made in the likeness of God,” (1:17-18) but this God is neither the Jealous God of the Torah nor the loving God of the Trinity, but a God withdrawn from his own genealogy (D 48). Nancy questions: what is the “likeness” (homoiōsis) that is engendered by this image? In what way are we similar to God and how do we share in his qualities? He then goes on to argue that it is in and through this homoiōsis that James understands the genealogy offered from Genesis to Christ, and that for him this genealogy is “the mark or the homogeneous trace that dedicates the world to its creator.” In Genesis, the resemblance between God and man passes first from God to Adam, and then from Noah to Shem, and subsequently from Abraham to Jacob (etc.), but what we find in James is a genealogy in which the divine is one step removed from this line of production. The homoiōsis of God does not depend on a direct generational inheritance (as we usually understand divine creation) but the transmission of a trace that is withdrawn: "The created...

---

165 Nancy defines praxis as "meaning at work." in CW 54.
world is less a produced world than a marked world, a world traced, simultaneously imprinted and traversed by a vestige (as Augustine will say later on), that is to say, traced by that which remains withdrawn and by the withdrawal of an origin" (D48).

James suggests that God is the first giver and the “father of lights,” and through him comes “every generous act of giving” (1:17), but what is offered by this light is only *homoioōsis*, not the direct embodiment of divine presence; God gives the gift of action, not the act; God is the “father of lights,” not the inner essence of light. To clarify this Nancy connects the etymology of “light” to the Latin *lux*, which signifies illuminating light, and distinguishes it from *lumen*, which denotes the glimmer of the illumined thing. In James, God gives the possibility of the illumination but not the presence of illumined being, this is how he remains withdrawn: "God gives himself just as much as he remains in himself without shadows" (D 49).

Quite boldly, Nancy then connects this withdrawn God to Derrida’s notion of the gift, in which the giver abandons him/herself in the gift. In *Given Time* Derrida argues that in order for something to be a genuine gift the giving must reside outside of the logic of giving and receiving. We may desire to give or even receive a gift but the gift itself must always remain impossible: the gift itself must never be confused with the presence of its phenomenon.166 Similarly, the *homoioōsis* we share with "God" is that of a shared separation: James does not ground his epistle in the presence of God but in the bounty of God's gifts that only bear the mark of God’s trace. There is no visible manifestation of God that makes faith possible for James, it is rather the result of a gift that is withdrawn. As Nancy writes,

> This gift gives nothing that might be of the order of an appropriable good.... This gift gives itself, it gives its own gift’s favor, which is to say, a withdrawal into the grace of the giver and of the present itself. The *homoioōsis* is a *homodōsis*. To be in the image of God is therefore to be asking for grace, to give oneself in turn to the gift. (D 50)

The gift of grace does not provide a particular good that can be identified as divine, but gives the divine in the withdrawal of the gift. According to this logic the good and beautiful gifts of creation are found in retreat, not presence or exchange. This is why Nancy asserts the gift of

---

homoiōsis breaks with pre-Greek and pre-Jewish models of the man/God relation, because it breaks with the logic of exchange that characterizes the ancient relation to the gods (D 50). God is appealed to in this text not in order to guarantee an extra worldly salvation, but to find the love of God in the abandonment of existence. The gift of grace given through Christ does not relieve one from death, unhappiness, weeping, and humiliation, but exposes these very things as the grace of God. Faith is to be found in caring for the world in abandon, and that is it. In James, abandon is what constitutes the gift of grace (D 51).

Having pointed out how God is withdrawn from the gift of grace, Nancy then suggests that faith is the inoperativity of divine grace. It is a "praxical excess" that can't be directly aligned with either God or the receiver of the act (D 52). What faith exposes is the unmeasurable distance we share with each and every other, including "God." Faith offers a way of being together without determinant figure or form, and which turns to the infinite incommensurability of the finite world in love. He suggests that Christian faithfulness is primarily about towards the world in its passing and retreat in love (D 153).167 This is why we shouldn't reduce James' comments on faith to a particular form of Christian act or belief, as they testify to the alterity of existence that always defies metaphysical closure. As Nancy suggests, "faith, according to James, is effected entirely in the inadequation of its enactment to any concept of that act even if it be a concept formed by analogy, by symbols, or by an 'as if'" (D 54). Faith is a matter of relating to God and his love without proof or belief.

When James famously writes, “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show my faith by what I do” (2:18), and “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead,” Nancy notes that what is being elucidated is existence itself, in all its exteriority, not the inner light of a divine presence or a personal commitment to phenomenon. What James is emphasizing is that "faith does not subsist "independent from works, but only as works." Faith is not the outgrowth of works and works are not the outgrowth of faith; rather, works are shown to make up the whole essence of faith (D 52).

Quite explicitly, James sets up an opposition between works and death, aligning works with life, and connecting death with non-existence. The word James uses for "death" (faith without works) is argē (2: 20), which is a contraction of aergos, meaning “without-existence.” Hence, when James famously states that “faith without works are dead” he is in

167 As we will see in Chapter Three, this is also what he calls adoration.
fact drawing a parallel between existence (ergos) and works (ergon), and stating that faith without works has no existence. This implies, according to Nancy, that Christian existence is not found in any particular belief or practice, but in the putting to work of faith as praxis. This is not a praxis enacted by a subject, but a praxis "of and by an agent." Hence, what is being appealed to is not any particular theological end—the operation of a work—but the free giving of existence as gift (D51).

Admittedly, this is a complicated formula, but all Nancy is suggesting is that faith is the excessive expression of a work that is not reducible to some particular meaning or end. It is the experience of being exposed to the radical heterogeneity of the world and finding love in this exposition that has no common measure. Faith is not a sign for some particular divine content, individual belief, rational idea, or communal essence but exposes the worklessness (désœuvrement) of existence in the freedom of its sharing. To underline the point, Nancy notes that in its Platonic and Aristotelian use, ergos implies poiēsis, in the creative sense of the term, but when James aligns ergos and poiēsis in Chapter One verse 25, he seems to suggest that works are not a creative act performed by a subject but faith in action itself. As James writes, "But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts (ergos), he shall be blessed in his doing (poiēsis)." This alignment between work, creativity, and faith, leads Nancy to conclude that Christian praxis is incommensurate with itself, which signifies nothing other than the excess of existence. As he writes,

One might say: pistis is the praxis that takes place in and as the poiesis of the erga. If I wanted to write this in a Blanchotian idiom, I would say that faith is the inactivity or inoperativity [désœuvrement] that takes place in and as the work [dans et comme l'œuvre]. And if I wanted to pass from one James to the other [to Jacques Derrida], I would say that faith, as the praxis of poiēsis, opens in poiēsis the inadequation to self that alone can constitute "doing" ["foire"] and/or “acting” ["agir"]...." (both concepts implying the difference within or unto self of every concept or the irreducible difference between a lexis and the praxis that would seek to effectuate it). Extrapolating from there, I would say that praxis is that which could not be the production of a work adequate to its concept (and thus, production of an object), but that praxis is in every work and it is ek tou ergou, that which exceeds the concept of it. This is not, as we commonly think, that which is lacking in the concept, but rather that which, in exceeding it, thrusts the concept out of itself and gives it more to conceive, or more to grasp and to think, more to touch and to indicate, than
that which it itself conceives. Faith would thus be here the *praxical* excess of and in action or in operation, and this excess, insofar as it aligns itself with nothing other than itself, that is to say, also with the possibility for a "subject" (for an agent or for an actor) to be more, to be infinitely more and excessively more than what it is in itself and for itself. (D 52).

Faith does not prepare the way for a new form of knowledge, whether historical or phenomenological, and it can no more be the conscious production of a subject than it can be the property of *Dasein*. Rather, faith is excess that opens the "subject" to the infinite sense of sharing existence alongside others, and faith is the sharing of this experience as the truth of existence.

A concrete example that Nancy provides for this is Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul suggests that Abraham was justified in his action because he ‘hoped against hope.’ Despite Sarah’s sterility, Abraham held to the idea that God would still make him “the father of many nations” (Rom 4:18). (Nancy notes that in the original Hebrew what is stressed is the ability of God (*logisamenos*), signifying that Abraham judged that God could deliver on his promise). However, what we find in James is an interpretation of Abraham that stresses the proximity between acts of God and faith, and not a reliance on belief or rational aptitude. James suggests that Abraham's faith is found in his action, not the ability of God. Christian Faith is lived as a *praxis* for James, and it is not the result of a postulate or a particular dogma; action is not separate from faith because the two work together. As James writes: “You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God.” (2:23-24). Nancy suggests that this heterogeneity that James finds in Abraham's works defies any rational, postulate, belief, or utilitarian rationalization.

Connecting this analysis with Heidegger's explication of Paul, we can now note that Nancy also finds in early Christian literature an openness to existence that challenges any rationalization. Both suggest that these Christian texts challenge the rationalization of religion and its ethical prescriptions by creating a notion of faith that problematizes the objectification of reality, or any reduction of life to a singular signification. When Nancy writes that faith opens the *poiēsis* of each *erga* to the *praxis* of existence, this is similar to Heidegger’s argument that content-sense and relational-sense are opened up by enactment-
sense of the *Parousia*. However, whereas Heidegger wants to use this factual setting for an authentic appropriation of being, Nancy suggests that Christian experience opens towards the other in a non-appropriable relation to existence (D 54). Nancy therefore points out how faith exposes the gift of phenomenality as incommensurate with itself. In sum, whereas Heidegger wants to use Christianity to show how being gives itself to *Dasein* in a particular disclosure, Nancy points out that all faith offers is a finite exposure alongside other beings.

Or, to put this in terms of the key philosophical disagreement between them: Nancy reinterprets Heidegger's understanding of death by emphasizing that it is a name for that shared space that divides beings. Recall that a phrase Nancy uses to describe this is "*partes extra partes*," which is meant to designate the “extra” relations that exceed any unified totality (BSP 60). In this light, faith is but another name for the shared space of separation that spaces existence from itself. Faith is synonymous with the *nihil* that is shared-out in all being together; it is that "part" of Christianity that is not a part of Christianity; that "part" that is left in the wake of God's withdrawal. It is in this manner that "a deconstruction comes to pass even before construction, or during construction and at its very heart" (D 58).

Hence, what Nancy finds in the New Testament epistles is not an emphasis on a "sense of relation" that orientates *Dasein*, but the emptying out of sense in action. Faith is not the acting out of a content or belief, but the emptying out of all such content in the midst of the world. In this manner, Nancy tries to go further than Heidegger by deconstructing any phenomenological ground for this experience and by pointing out how this deconstruction is already implicit in the Judeo-Christian designation. Deconstruction is not something that is applied by the hermeneutic to the text under analysis, but the very unravelling of the text. Nancy suggests that what unravels religion is the self-overcoming of Christian scripture, not any factual experience that lies behind objectified content. As Nancy writes,

\[\text{In the Epistle of James, everything unfolds as though faith, far from being a belief in another life, that is, some belief in an infinite adequation between life and itself, were the setting in act [*la mise en œuvre*] of the inadequation in which and as which existence exists. How did faith, one day, with the West, start composing a decomposition of religion? That is what places that}\]

---

168As John Paul Rico noted in a comment on an earlier draft of this chapter, we might also say that "faith is not a belief in anything outside of or beyond the world, but is faith in the world alone, or the many worlds that make up the infinitely finite opening of the world."
curious day still before us, ever before us, ahead of us, like a day that would be neither Jewish, nor Christian, nor Muslim—but rather like a trace or hyphen drawn to set space between every union, to untie every religion from itself. (D 60) (My emphasis)

Philosophically, this boils down to a difference between being and being-with. Heidegger is trying to establish a new "first philosophy" around the free givenness of being. Nancy, in contrast, focuses on the plurality of being that constitutes all singularity.

1.5 - Conclusion

As we have seen, Heidegger searches for a Destruktion of religion in the letters of Paul, Nancy in the Epistle of James, but in a sense they are both searching for the same thing: evidence for the ground of philosophy in the disappearance of religion and Christianity. They are both searching for the real conditions of existence in the absenting of all conditions. The young Heidegger searches for these conditions in the factual being of Dasein and the later Heidegger in the oblivion of being. Nancy, in his turn, searches for these conditions in the sharing of community that divides any singular essence from itself, and finds a specific example of this in the Judeo-Christian designation. However, aside from this key difference in how they approach religion, what divides their respective analysis is that Heidegger thinks there is a way to overcome metaphysics by uncovering "the beginning of our spiritual-historical being (Dasein)." In his early career this salvific prognosis comes in the call for authenticity and in his late work in his emphasis on poetry and language. Nancy, in his turn, claims that this appeal to a reserve contained within the nihil of being is nihilistic, and instead of trying to uncover a reserve hidden within being, shows how the nihil shared between beings exposes the tradition to its own absence. Through his emphasis on creation ex nihilo, the inoperative nature of myth, and the worklessness of faith, Nancy argues that the West is caught up in a deconstruction and a self-deconstruction, and that this exposes the truth that being is always plural. This implies that there is no "beginning of our spiritual-historical being" that is not plural, divided, and interrupted. This is how Nancy uses deconstruction against Heidegger.
In regards to the larger question at stake in this essay: "what does deconstruction have
to do with Christianity?" We can note at this point that we have uncovered contradictory
answers to this question. For Heidegger, the fact that his *Destruktion* of metaphysics began
with Christianity seems like a haphazard accident, and in *The Phenomenology of Religious
Life* he states that he is simply using Christianity to show how the phenomenological method
of *Destruktion* works. However, from our perspective, it is impossible not to notice how his
interpretation of primordial Christianity is in fact informing his phenomenological method,
not the other way around. In his analysis he claims to find the primordial experience of
temporality in the eschatological expectation of the *Parousia*, but what if this primordial
essence of lived experience that he uncovers is simply a result of the deconstruction of
Christianity? That is, what if the deconstruction of Christianity is informing his *Destruktion*
of metaphysics. This is a question Heidegger never really asks, and throughout his work
deconstruction remained a hermeneutical operation (i.e. something that is applied to the
tradition from without). As we tried to document above, Heidegger's own analysis
demonstrates how the critique of religion itself emerges out of Christianity but he never
explicitly states this fact. Nancy, in his turn, embraces the Christian reality of deconstruction
head on. In Christianity, Nancy finds not an example of deconstruction but its provenance.
He asserts that the West, and all our divided interpretations of philosophy and religion,
emerge out of a Judeo-Christian context that is only definable by the hyphen that spaces it
out from itself, and that Christianity takes the form of this opening. Christianity has never
been definable by anything other than difference because it is founded upon a *nihil* that
unravels it from within, and this is evidenced not just in Christian faith but, as we will see,
the incarnation and the resurrection. Hence, in regards to the above question, Nancy answers
in the affirmative and argues that deconstruction is only possible within Christianity. What
this means is not that the deconstruction of religion is Christian in some essential sense—as
if some Christian quality survived the process of deconstruction—but that the entire history
of Christianity is founded upon a "sense to seek and to disassemble" that continually opens
the West beyond any communal or dogmatic closure (D 148). To explain this further, we
must turn to his work on atheology, community, and sovereignty.
Chapter 2

Between Bataille and Nancy: Overcoming Religion with Atheology

[What resists commentary in Bataille's thought is what exceeded his thought and exceeds ours—and what for this reason demands our thought: the sharing of community, the mortal truth that we share and that shares us. Thus, what Bataille wrote of our relation to "the religious and royal edifice of the past" is valid of our relation to Bataille himself: "We can only go farther." (IC 26)]

2.1 - Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to situate Nancy in relation to Bataille and show how his atheological interpretation of "the death of god" provides the wider philosophical framework for understanding Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity. As we will see, Bataille developed his theory of religion as a critique of religious, philosophical, and political nihilism, all of which he blames on an economic logic of equivalence that ignores the loss and destruction of life. For Bataille, the critique of metaphysics revolves not around the meaning of being, as it did for Heidegger, but the sovereignty of existence. With his theory of religion, he tried to propose a model of sacrifice that could restore the sovereignty of existence by retrieving it from the grips of metaphysical abstraction, and his effort has influenced Nancy in several respects. On the one hand, Nancy uses Bataille's notion of atheology to challenge evaluative theories of community and sovereignty that reduce life to a process of economic exchange. On the other hand, he uses atheology to critique all models of sacrifice, even Bataille's. In this manner, Nancy uses Bataille's work on atheology and "the death of God" to go beyond Bataille.

The guiding question for this analysis may be summarized as follows: "does the death of God prepare the way for a new type of religious intimacy?" If it is true, as discussed in the last chapter, that the history of the West is caught up in the decomposition of religion, does this prepare the way for a new encounter with the "sacred" founded upon loss? For Bataille, the answer to this question is yes, so we must start by detailing his early engagement with religious societies like Acéphale and show how this search for a new type of sacred intimacy informed his writings. As we will see, Bataille used the work of anthropologists and sociologists to develop a new theory of religion to critique the dominant models of economic
exchange that informed all representational models of existence. In the middle of the chapter, we will turn to Nancy's work and show how he appropriates Bataille emphasis on loss, expenditure, and sovereignty, but rejects the subjective romanticism that haunts Bataille's writings. By discussing Nancy's works such as "Abandoned Being" and The Inoperative Community, we will see how Nancy uses Bataille’s notion of atheology in light of Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics to come up with a new interpretation of the death of God, appropriating Bataille's theory of sovereignty yet rejecting the logic of sacrifice that sustains it. In conclusion, it will be argued that Nancy uses this re-appropriation of atheology to uncover an unsacrificable form of sovereignty in the Christian death of God. With this discovery, Nancy takes us beyond Bataille's nostalgia for the religiosity of the past or Heidegger's romance with the origins of philosophy, and thinks finitude as an incommensurable sharing without ground, origin, or end.

2.2 - Bataille

2.2.1 - Influences and Divergences

George Bataille had a tormented childhood and a tormented experience with religion growing up, and this might be reflected in his tormented view of what he called the "sacred." Born in 1897 in Puy-de-Dôme, France, and raised with no formal religious education, Bataille spent much of his youth helping care for his partially blind, paralyzed father. In his autobiographical fragments, he recalls a somewhat horrid memory of how the blank whites of his father’s eyes would stare at him while he urinated. In 1914, at the age of seventeen, Bataille converted to Catholicism and began to write with a zealous wonder about God and faith. In his first published text, Notre-Dame de Rheims, he laments the bombing of the famed French cathedral during World War I and prayed for its restoration. Nevertheless, this commitment with institutional religion was brief and Bataille broke with Catholicism in

---

1920. In an opaque autobiographical note, he states that the reason he broke with the Catholic faith is because it "caused a woman he has loved to shed tears."\(^{170}\)

A pivotal philosophical turning point in his young life, which took place just after his break with Catholicism, was when he read Nietzsche for the first time in 1923. Bataille, like Nietzsche, suffered from various illnesses and spent much of his time in solitude, so in the writer of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he found a companion that understood his sense of the world, and from him he learnt to revel in Bacchic excess. Bataille preferred the Nietzsche who wrote with blood to the one who traversed mountain peaks, so he had an idiosyncratic interpretation of Nietzsche, but he loved him nonetheless. He read Nietzsche not as a philosopher who encouraged the soaring heights of the will, but of violence and descent. As he would latter write, "There exists an idea of Nietzsche as the philosopher of a "will to power," the idea that this is how he saw himself and how he was accepted. I think of him more as a philosopher of evil."\(^{171}\) As we will see below in Bataille's analysis of Christianity, this interpretation of Nietzsche was central to his whole theory of religion.

Despite the fact that Bataille abandoned his faith early on and turned to the philosopher of the *Antichrist* for solace, he remained interested in religious topics for the rest of his life. In his scholarly career that spanned almost forty years, he published on ancient forms of art, sacrifice, sovereignty, sociology, politics, philosophy, economics, and eroticism, but his analysis of these topics always had a quasi-religious or "mystical" focus. He worked at the Bibliothèque nationale for twenty years and edited several prominent French journals, such as *Critique* and *Acéphale*.\(^{172}\) Some of his major works that touch on religious issues include *Inner Experience* (published in 1943), the three volumes of *The Accursed Share* (written between 1945 and 1954, with the first volume on “Consumption” published in 1949 and the other volumes posthumously), and *Theory of Religion* (written in 1948 and unpublished during his lifetime), which we will discuss below.\(^{173}\) In both his private life, such as the secret society he belonged to that was associated with *Acéphale*, and in his


\(^{173}\)The years noted here are years of approximate composition, not publication.
writings, Bataille suggested that religion, as we normally think of it, concealed a field of experience and activity that was not reducible to utilitarian or ethical ends.

In his private life this fascination with "religion" was best exemplified in the 1930's by the anti-fascist group associated with Acéphale, called Contre-Attaque. Acéphale means “headless,” and Bataille envisioned it as a "Nietzschean" and "anti-Christian" society that was apolitical and solely religious. Writing of the group in the journal, Bataille declared, "WE ARE FEROICOUSLY RELIGIOUS" (Nous sommes farouchement religieux), and suggested that the acéphalic deity drawn by surrealist André Masson best embodies this religious sensibility. This is a deity that is fiercely anthropomorphic but incomplete; arms outstretched like Christ on the cross, headless, with a blade and a flaming heart in his hands, stars for nipples, a gaping torso with churning intestines, and a human skull for genitals. For Bataille, this figure depicts the "down-going" of Zarathustra, who left his mountain cave to proclaim the death of God. It is a figure that is neither divine nor strictly human, but labyrinthine. As Bataille writes, elusively describing this headless figure: "Beyond what I am, I meet a being who makes me laugh because he is headless; this fills me with dread because he is made of innocence and crime.... He reunites in the same eruption, Birth and Death.... he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster [monstre]."

In his writing, this religious or mystical edge is best exemplified by his emphasis on the "sacred" as a form of communication. For Bataille, the sacred, like the acéphalic figure, was a heterogeneous presence of incompleteness. Bataille had a monstrous view of the sacred and depicted it as a force that burst through the isolation of self, and ruptured any neat philosophical or political distinction between body, mind, and other. All this was Bataille's way of emphasizing danger, filth, and death of religious life over the traditional religious emphasis on safety, luminosity, and form. As Jeremy Biles notes, one etymological line of the word "monster" is the Latin monstrare, which means to "show" or "display," and Bataille wished to display this monstrous aspect of the sacred in order to make space for a sovereign

life. He believed that an emphasis on the sacred could make space for a different type of communication than that exemplified by the fascist governments of his day, one based not on regulation and control but on an ecstatic opening to the other. Hence, by theorizing laughter, eroticism, the gift (potlatch), sacrifice, and the death of God, he sought to display those experiences that stand at the limit of rational thought, and which burst through the illusion of subjective sovereignty, opening the way for a new form of communication—an experience of sovereignty as nothing.

Let us back up for a moment. For starters, it must be appreciated that Bataille's basic approach to religion is indebted to the sociologist Emile Durkheim, who not only distinguished between the sacred and the profane but two types of the sacred. In The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Durkheim defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them." Religion, therefore, is an eminently social phenomenon, and is characterized by a distinction the between the sacred and the profane, two realms which are completely heterogeneous. Religion emerges from the collection of a society around the experience of the sacred, which is identified in a variety of beliefs, practices, and objects that the community distinguishes from the profane. Importantly, the sacred for Durkheim is not some supernatural realm or being, but the very experience of collectivity, it is the representation of collective consciousness (représentation collective), and, on a collective level, oscillates between two poles: the "left-hand" sacred and the "right-hand" sacred. Durkheim writes that the "right-hand" sacred names the "benevolent, guardians of physical and moral order, as well as dispensers of life, health, and all the qualities that men value." These are the things associated with religion that name conservation, absolute transcendence, virtue, uprightness, etc. In contrast to this "right-hand" sacred, the "left-hand" sacred names all the "evil and impure powers, bringers of disorder, causes of death and

178 I make this claim in agreement with Jeremy Biles. See Ecco Monstrum, 38.
180 Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, XLIII.
sickness, instigators of sacrilege."\(^{181}\) The latter is meant to name all the things associated with religion that evoke a sense of horror, danger, waste, and death.

Bataille picks up this basic lexicon of Durkheim (and Weber, we might add)\(^{182}\) but emphasizes the "left-hand" sacred over the "right-hand" sacred, as if to stress the delirium of existence.\(^{183}\) The "FEROCIOUSLY RELIGIOUS" attitude he associated with his anti-fascist group Contre-Attaque is of this latter variety. In numerous texts, such as "The Use-Value of D.A.F.de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades),” Bataille stresses the "heterology" of the sacred (i.e. the "left-hand" sacred) to counter the associations of the sacred with the maintenance of religious and economic life (i.e. the "right-hand" sacred). For instance, after defining "heterology" as "the scientific study of what is completely other," he connects it to the double meaning of *sacer*, "soiled as well as holy," but puts all his emphasis on the former. In order to underline the fact that this "soiled" version of the sacred is associated with death, defilement, and excrement, he associates heterology with scatology. As he writes, "But it is above all the term *scatology* (the science of excrement) that retains in the present circumstances (the specialization of the sacred) an incontestable expressive value as the doublet of an abstract term such as *heterology*."\(^{184}\) Two further terms from Bataille's lexicon that help clarify what he means by the "sacred" are, "*consumation*" and "*expenditure.*" Both of these latter terms are meant to oppose the "right-hand" association of the sacred with consumption, production, and accumulation. By stressing destruction and loss over maintenance and preservation, what Bataille wants to expose is the "unemployed negativity" (*néгativité sanс emploi*), or worklessness of existence.\(^{185}\) In fact, his neologism *consumation* is specifically meant to evoke a sense of non-productive consumption, like a

---

\(^{181}\) Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 415.


\(^{183}\) One specific spot in Bataille's work where he seems to make this distinction is in *Theory of Religion*, where he asserts that "the sacred is divided." He writes that, "the dark and malefic sacred is opposed to the white and beneficent sacred and the deities that partake of the one or the other are neither rational nor moral." See TR 72.


fire that needlessly destroys all the things in a home.\textsuperscript{186} It is in this manner that Bataille uses the "left hand" sacred as a form of critique to challenge various metaphysical limits.

As Nancy notes, from the most general level of critique, Bataille's work needs to be understood as an attempt to counter the totalitarianism that dominated the political landscape in which he was writing. Bataille sought to think a type of community that didn't succumb to the absolutism that dominated Europe during his life. All the dominant political movements of his day subordinated identity, history, and religion to the technopolitical domination of the state, and Bataille attempted to oppose this with a new thinking of community focused on loss (IC 2). In opposition to transcendentalist and immanentalist political formations, both of which appropriate subjectivity to some higher end, Bataille was trying to think of community beyond appropriation. By thinking of the sacred in opposition to any superessential being (\textit{deus absconditus}) that might guide the community, or any imminent human essence (\textit{dues communis}) the might be seen as the historic destiny of the community, he tried to imagine community in a non-productive sense, beyond any figure or form that might be turned into an object of worship.\textsuperscript{187} After all, at the center of all transcendental or immanental forms of political totalitarianism is the attempt to fuse the community into a technological and aesthetic figure, and to present this essence back to the community in an absolute form (IC 22).

Bataille's whole endeavor to think the "left-hand" sacred through \textit{consumation} and expenditure, was therefore an attempt to show how "Human activity is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation...."\textsuperscript{188} As Hegel showed despite himself, the very attempt to present the individual and the community as absolute only ends in failure. The very logic of absolute presentation is only possible because of relation, but this relation, as Nancy writes, "undoes the absoluteness of the absolute" (IC 4). Hence, contra Hegel, Bataille refuses to view history as the slow and steady development of a subject on the road to


\textsuperscript{187} This is Nancy's point, see IC 10. Nancy asserts that all thinking of Christian community boils down to these two ways of figuring the divine, either according to transcendence or immanence. Either we figure community in the image of the distant divine father or we claim his arrival here and now. For example, think about the distinction between post-millennialism and pre-millennialism. Bataille emphasized the here and how and often spoke about immanence but did not claim that this immanence gave him access to a divine essence. Rather, this was an immanence of sacred loss. More on this below when discussing atheology.

\textsuperscript{188}Bataille, \textit{Visions of Excess}, 118
emancipation through work and knowledge, and rather focuses on the futility of production. He shows how acts of gift-giving, mourning, wars, cults, the construction of monuments, games, spectacle, arts, and sexual activity are practices of "unproductive expenditure" which have "no end beyond themselves."\(^{189}\) For Bataille, there are aspects of experience that defy production and constitute a loss for the community. As he writes, "In this world there is no immense undertaking that has any other end than a definitive loss in the futile moment."

Understanding consciousness at the level of communal interaction, he suggests, "is a matter of endlessly consuming - or destroying - the objects that are produced" (TR 102-103). To unpack this interpretation of the sacred, let's explore how it relates to Bataille's writings on religion.

### 2.2.2 - Religion

With this philosophical and political nuance in mind, we can now examine the two distinct ways that Bataille discusses the sacred in his writing: the mystical and the social. As Irwin Alexander notes, it is useful (at least from a pedagogical perspective) to think of Bataille's work as cleaving along these two lines.\(^{190}\) In works such as *Inner Experience*, Bataille typifies this mystical approach/critique of totalitarian models of subjectivity and community, and in *Theory of Religion*, he typifies the social approach/critique. In both his mystical and his social analysis he stresses the expenditure, death, and excrement of the sacred, but he uses these different modes of analysis to discuss different problems.\(^{191}\)

In his mystical writings he describes intimacy and eroticism as states of nonknowledge that stand in opposition to production, whether it be "animal sexuality" or economic exchange.\(^{192}\) Intimacy, eroticism, and the sacred are described as states of ecstatic anguish in which the self is wounded before the other, thereby preparing the self for a form of non-communication, or non-knowledge. In *Inner Experience*, Bataille describes these

---

\(^{189}\)Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 118


\(^{191}\) Of course, we wouldn't want to use this distinction to draw a hard and fast division between all his work, but it is a useful pedagogical distinction.

"naked experiences" as the opposites of salvation in the traditional Christian sense; they are rather Bacchic, as they disturb the illusion of subjective sovereignty. What he describes is akin to the mysticism found in medieval Christianity but it privileges neither an encounter with God nor internal redemption. For Bataille, inner experience is not a subjective attainment but the very absenting of the subject, and this is precisely what makes it erotic. Like those peaks of erotic ecstasy where all sense of separate existence is lost in the embrace of the other, inner experience intoxicates the heart with so much force that it renders impotent all claims to absolute distinction.

Inner Experience was published in 1943, the same year as Sartre's Being and Nothingness and Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus, yet it does not fit neatly with these existential treatises on the authenticity and the freedom of the human will. Contra Sartre (or even the early Heidegger), Bataille is not interested in authenticity, acting in "good faith," or with using language for the betterment of the human will. Rather, Bataille points out how experience transgresses any neat distinction between internal and the external, and that neither the subject nor language can control the excess of existence, either for the purposes of absolute knowledge or some modern day version of the "human." As he writes, "The subject wants to take hold of the object in order to possess it (this will results from being engaged in the play of compositions, see the Labyrinth), but the subject can only lose itself: the nonsense of the will to know appears, nonsense of all possible, making ipse know that it is going to lose itself and knowledge with it." Inner experience, Bataille suggests, is fundamentally an experience of loss, anguish, and expenditure without return. He argues that the negative (or the nihil, as discussed in the previous chapter) is a non-productive excess that cannot be put to use for a personal or communal end. The restlessness of time ultimately exposes consciousness to the absenting of consciousness in its confrontation with death, not to the possibility of authenticity or moral resoluteness.

In Theory of Religion, Bataille applies this argument concerning inner experience to the social conditions of the modern world to develop a full-blown theory of religion. Written in 1948 and never published before his death, the text describes the "profound separation"
that exists between this sacred space of "lost intimacy" and the profane world of discontinuous "things." Its scope is vast, presenting an argument for the origin and development of religion, from the pre-historical world of animality to modern day civilization, but its argument is concise, consisting of just over one hundred pages. Bataille starts off by describing a world of "animality" which precedes the world of things, and then describes how the sacred continuity becomes bogged down in systems of abstraction and religious sacrifice that obscure the non-productive nature of intimacy.

Of course, by describing some primal state of animality that precedes the everyday world of things, Bataille is not recounting some naive anthropology of human origins, but trying to account for the "opaque aggregate" of existence that precedes rationalization and the systemization of production (TR 36). Similar to Freud's notion of the pre-Oedipal state or Kristeva's notion of the semiotic, what Bataille is trying to describe with the term "animality" is a space of primordial chaos that is not clear to human consciousness. Indeed, as Rebecca Comay notes, when trying to understand Bataille's use of risky terminology like "primal" and "animality," and "intimacy," it is important to keep in mind that he always describes this space as 'spaced and disjointed.' They wrote that "everything real fractures and cracks," and when discussing "animal nakedness" he also stressed its incompletion. Hence, he was not appealing to a primordiality beyond abstraction that might save us, or some simple notion of nature that precedes culture, but an original brokenness from which, and in which, we are forever lost. Similar to Nietzsche's hypothetical description of the origins of man in the Genealogy of Morals, we might understand Bataille's description of an originary state of animality as an imaginary reconstruction of the emergence of human society.

Nevertheless, Bataille did feel confident enough about the uniqueness of this opaque state of animality to draw a clear distinction between a world of intimacy and a world of

---

198Georges Bataille, Guilty, 27.
199Another way to describe this is through the term "base matter." In "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," found in Visions of Excess, Bataille lays out a new interpretation of matter that "is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations," and that "refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines...." (50). This would be a sort of primeval space of darkness that is not a thing. In this vein, he writes that he is not trying to develop "an ontology" nor some new interpretation of "matter" as the "thing-in-itself" (49). For a full discussion on this topic see Benjamin Noys, "Georges Bataille's Base Materialism," Cultural Values 2.4 (1998): 499-517.
things, between a state of primal continuity with the universe and the economy of capitalist exchange. In *Theory of Religion*, he details how consciousness and religion emerged out of a primal state of animality through the use of tools and manufactured objects (which he places on the same level) (TR 29). Within the limits of animality, he suggests, there is no distinction between mind and body, subject and object, but the use of tools (sticks, rocks, fire, etc.) creates distinction and gives rise to reason. Animals and plants exist in the world with no autonomy—"like water in water" (TR 35-36) — but the "tool brings exteriority into a world where the subject has a part in the elements" that it distinguishes (TR 28). By using tools for various ends, human consciousness arises in distinction to intimacy, differentiating continuity into a series of objects to be manipulated with tools. In this manner, self-objectification emerged as a distinct thing in a world of other things, and "a profane world of things and bodies, is established opposite a holy and mythical world" (TR 38).

To understand what all this implies about religion in relation to the Durkheimian model mentioned above, it is important to note that Bataille is not attempting to reify the sacred as some heterogeneous realm beyond the finite world, but to name the sacred as the very experience of heterogeneity in the finite—a site of unproductive expenditure. He is not attempting to identify some numinous space beyond phenomena, but to name the site of resistance in phenomena that defies phenomenological classification. As he writes, "The sense of the sacred obviously is not that of the animal lost in the mists of continuity where nothing is distinct" (TR 35-36). Or, as he notes in the short piece, "The Structure of Fascism," it is wrong to provide "homogeneous representation" of the sacred to avoid the "discernible presence of fundamentally heterogeneous elements."201 What needs to be drawn out is all the ways that the heterogeneous and unproductive elements of experience evade rational homogenization and classification. In a sense, we might say that it is precisely the resistance of heterogeneity to any homogenous classification that Bataille names the sacred. Similarly, he argues that religion (re-ligare) also boils down to this experience of resistance and heterogeneity—this space of non-knowledge—at the level of consciousness. He argues that religion, like the sacred, is an experience of loss in which there is a *consumation* of the conscious self. As he writes,

---

Religion, whose essence is the search for lost intimacy, comes down to the effort of clear consciousness which wants to be a complete self consciousness: but this effort is futile, since consciousness of intimacy is possible only at a level where consciousness is no longer an operation whose outcome implies duration, that is, at the level where clarity, which is the effect of the operation, is no longer given (TR 57). (My emphasis)

Religion therefore functions as a means to reintroduce humans to the sacred realm and suspend the social apparatus that has grown up around the development of human consciousness. Moreover—and this is a very important point—this is not a once and for all process. Bataille does not think that recovering this intimacy is a form of divine salvation or rational enlightenment that ends in an absolute appropriation of the true essence of the universe. Rather, the search for this lost intimacy is a repetitious act of loss that is never finalized. As Bataille writes just prior to the above quotation, "clear consciousness is itself looking for what it has itself lost, and what it must lose again as it draws near to it" (TR 56-57). Hence, we might add to the above definition the following caveat: the religious search for lost intimacy is a repetitious search that is itself continually lost.

With this definition in mind, we can now point out that sacrifice is the "paradigmatic religious act" for Bataille. He claims that sacrifice destroys the world of things and allows for a return to intimacy, and places his theory of sacrifice at the center of his theory of religion. He claims that with the development of self-conscious objectification human beings became alienated from the world of intimacy and only through sacrifice can we be properly restored to the sacred. Through the use of tools, human beings came to sharply distinguish themselves from other animals and each other, creating a dichotomous world of things classified according to their use-value. Religion is the attempt to suspend this world of instrumental logic and reintroduce individuals to the sacred via sacrifice (TR 43).

As a combination of the Latin "sacrī" and "facere," which mean "to make sacred," Bataille suggests that sacrifice takes a thing from the economy of exchange, whether it be a bushel of grain, an animal, or a slave, and returns it to intimacy by removing it from this economy of things. Through death, destruction, or simply wasteful exchange, that which is

---

203Irwin, "Ecstasy, sacrifice, communication: Bataille on religion and inner experience," 117.
sacrificed is liberated from its objectification as a thing of "use-value" and returned to the sacred realm of animality. As Bataille writes, through the act of sacrifice the thing is called back "to the intimacy of the divine world, of the profound immanence of all that is" (TR 44).

In the three-volumes of The Accursed Share, Bataille will describe this binary between sacrifice and the economy of production as the distinction between the "restricted" and the "general" economy, suggesting that the former must be overcome in favor of the latter. However, in The Theory of Religion he uses this distinction to trace the emergence of modern religious life, arguing that "Sacrifice is the antithesis of production," and this antithesis has been slowly eradicated in modern society (TR 49). In pre-capitalist societies, sacrifice promised a return to intimacy that has been lost with the rise of empires, modern warfare, and capitalist exchange. The meaning of ancient sacrifice, he suggests, was to "'sacrifice to the deity,' whose sacred essence is comparable to fire." Ancient sacrifice, like the festival, carnival, and potlatch was a form of social practice based on expenditure.

What is happening here is that Bataille is building upon Marcel Mauss's work on the gift (le don), and suggesting that in pre-capitalist societies, wealth was determined by what one gave away, not according to accumulation or production. Bataille is not necessarily idealizing these early forms of exchange, but pointing out that other forms of identity and economy are possible that are not based on blind accumulation and production. He is suggesting that the loss that is elemental to the experience of the sacred is part of a general human economy of experience, and ancient societies provide an example of this. He does not want to return to these ancient forms of community, at least in any specific sense, but to trace out the history of the ancient form of sharing—what he called the accursed share (La Part maudite)—to develop a new theory for the development of religion that is connected to economics, politics, and violence.

Bataille's principle reason for recounting the development of religion and sacrifice in Theory of Religion is therefore to show how religion and society in the West have often been linked with the commodification of sacrifice, rather than its excessive expenditure. From the ancient days of the Roman Prelate to the modern work of the Kierkegaardian Pastor, he points out how intimacy has been compromised by the order of things—by the projection of

---

206 Georges Bataille, Guilty, 27.
the restricted economy upon the general economy (TR 109). For instance, this compromise was made in ancient forms of religious festival when individuality was sacrificed to "drunkenness, chaos, sexual orgy," (such as in Roman sex orgies) in an attempt to drown everything in an erotic immanence. Bataille claims that these festivals were not a return to intimacy but an attempt to produce intimacy at the communal level. All they created was an "amicable reconciliation" between continuity and discontinuity, not an experience of the sacred (TR 55; 65). Another compromise of sacrifice is found in ancient and modern warfare, in which the individual is sacrificed for the greater good of society, the empire, or the state. Here, immanence is sought by a group directing destructive violence to the outside (i.e. an exterior enemy) in unison, which is but another attempt at intimacy through communal effort. For Bataille, all that warfare ensures is the sovereignty of the emperor or the state, not the sovereignty of inner experience (TR 58). Yet another misunderstanding of sacrifice is found in monotheistic models of the world that call for the sacrifice of human action to an all-powerful and beneficent deity. Bataille thinks that by sacrificing our action for some abstract moral force or notion of divine transcendence, we are obscuring the sovereignty of the finite world (TR 73-74).

For Bataille, the basic problem of religion is given in these various misunderstandings of sacrifice, as human beings have "lost," and "even rejected," that which they obscurely are—"a vague intimacy." All of these misunderstandings of sacrifice throughout history ignore the fact that sovereignty is not something to be acquired by "clear consciousness" that lies outside of it. (TR 56). Rather, the true sovereignty of inner experience is only to be found by losing oneself in a state of sovereign expenditure and coming to a state of non-knowledge. As with the sacred, this experience of "clear consciousness" is a negativity without work (négativité sans emploi), or a "Hegelianism without reserve," as Derrida phrased it.206 Our experience in the world ultimately ends in a realization of the impossibility of sovereign self-consciousness (TR 111). The subject cannot appropriate the sense of the world, but is merely exposed to it.

(To understand Bataille's complicated approach to sacrifice, it might be helpful to point out that the end result of Bataille's analysis of religion is very different from the end

---

result of Hegel's analysis of religion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Without a doubt, Bataille's account of the dissolution of the divine into the greyness of the modern world is heavily indebted to Hegel, both methodologically and historically, but he rejects any positive accumulation of knowledge associated with phenomenology that Hegel derives from his sacrificial system.\(^\text{207}\) As Bataille quipped, summing up his critique of the philosopher of *Geist*, "Hegel did not know to what extent he was right."\(^\text{208}\) Bataille is not interested in the developmental stages of religion, but its dissolution through sacrifice, and he fundamentally rejects the assumption of "absolute knowledge" that comes at the end of the *Phenomenology*. Bataille frames Hegel's move towards absolute knowledge as a banal attempt to "take the place of God."\(^\text{209}\) We will return to this below when discussing Nancy's critique of Bataille.)

In sum, Bataille emphasizes the loss of religious knowledge, not its attainment, which is his way of showing how metaphysical structures give way to their own dismemberment. What he gives us is a critique of religious and philosophical knowledge by pointing out the destruction intrinsic to both. His emphasis on *négativité sans emploi* is his own way of showing how nihilistic structures give way to their own dissolution.

\(^{207}\) Recall that the first phase of religion for Hegel, as for Bataille, is a form of natural religion. As the most immediate form of religious life this is also the most alienating, as it takes the divine as a given and does not appreciate the role of consciousness in the formation of religious life. The second phase of religion, what Hegel calls art religion, bridges the divide between the human and the divine by acknowledging the role of human expression in the determinant form of the gods. When the artist builds and constructs the gods he understands himself/herself as a channel for the divine. Finally, in revealed religion, the idea of God takes on human form and self-consciousness is able to see his own reflection in the divine. Christ is the suffering servant who prepares the way for overcoming the alienation of human consciousness by *not only* bridging the divide between the divine and the human via rational expression *but* showing how this whole process of religious development is necessary to the development of self-consciousness (i.e. Spirit). As the religion of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of God, Christianity exposes that the absolute is neither an abstract unity in nature, a beautiful divine form, nor a divine essence standing outside the word, but to be found in the very movement of the world.

For Bataille, Hegel's analysis of religion amounts to the commodification of sacrifice because it reads the history of the West as a divine economy on the path to an absolute perspective. By showing how the underlying truth of religious images works towards speculative knowledge, Hegel attempts to see the truth of the universe as it is put to "work" in religious images. In contrast, what Bataille wants is a speculative understanding of religion founded upon the dissolution of knowledge. The clear consciousness that he finds at the end of *Theory of Religion*, is not the result of the "work" that religious images produce, but the unproductive expenditure of religious activities. As we will discuss below, Bataille retains Hegel's speculative model of knowledge but he uses it to see the destitution of being, not its speculative development. He emphasizes the blindness that results from staring directly at the sun of absolute knowledge. As he writes in a quintessential manner: "But in the end, "absolute knowledge," the discourse in which the subject and the object become identical, itself dissolves into the NOTHING of unknowing...." (Bataille, *Accursed Share Vol. II*, 367).

\(^{208}\) Cited by Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 317.

He agrees theorists like Durkheim that religion fulfills a social function and arises out of the need for communication with the other but stresses that this communication is not a positive production of rational man; rather, it is a wasteful expenditure without end in which experience itself is committed to the fire of sovereignty. Like the headless figure of Acéphale, or Zarathustra in his "down going," Bataille wants a "FEROCIOUSLY RELIGIOUS" community that repeatedly looses itself in erotic abandon. Fundamentally, what he wants to show is how religion is divided against itself and to locate an excess that exceeds itself at the summit of divine power. Interestingly enough, he finds the best example of this in Christianity.

2.2.3 - Christianity

Bataille never wrote in depth on Christianity but only made sparse comments about it in his various works that deal with religious themes. Following the logic of the above summary, we might start out by saying that he doesn't outright condemn Christianity (just like he doesn't condemn religion) but tries to show how Christian sacrifice has been compromised by the idea of God as a transcendent deity and a notion of salvation based on economic exchange. His reading of Christianity, therefore, provides further clarification for his theory of religion and his work on sacrifice.

Technically speaking, Bataille is not opposed to Christianity but only to the form in which it has come down in modern history. He has a certain "fallen" reading of Christ's sacrifice and begins from the claim that Christianity, as we know it today, obscures the truth of sacrifice and is an anti-religion. In a manner similar to Heidegger, he suggests that with the creation of Christianity in antiquity and the subsequent formation of its theological dogma, the West was given a transcendental and dualistic tradition that divides the world into competing notions of good and evil, heaven and earth, and which negates human sovereignty in the name of divine sovereignty. For instance, this is how Bataille defined Christianity in 1958:
What does Christianity mean? It is the negation of human sovereignty for the benefit of a transcendent sovereignty founded on personal superiority. God himself invites us to humility and to death so as to share his sovereignty.²¹⁰

Bataille claims that Christian dogma commodifies human action. As a religion, Christianity offers no encounter with intimacy or human sovereignty. This makes Christianity, in its present form, an invalid religion because it submits the sacred to a utilitarian project of salvation and converts universal expenditure into divine glory. In this manner, Christianity leads to the enslavement of its followers, not their liberation.²¹¹

Bataille details the history of this sacrificial compromise in both the Theory of Religion and The Accursed Share, where he links the rise of Christianity to the development of the restricted economy of production. In these texts, he argues that the rise of capitalism is intertwined with the development of Christian grace, salvation, and sanctification, and links capitalism to the spread of Roman Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation. Like Max Weber argued in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Bataille suggests that Christianity in general, and Protestantism in particular, is developed in conjunction with the alienation of capitalist growth. Instead of overcoming objective alienation as sacrifice should do,²¹² Christian notions of grace and salvation link the capitalist production of individual believers to the economic market, leading them to believe that the fruits of their labor result from the sanctifying work of God.²¹³ In this manner, the social potential for the sacred is obscured by a transcendent deity that sanctifies a class-based society of alienation and exploitation, and trades the sovereignty of the individual for the sovereignty of the market.²¹⁴ In this manner, he suggests that Christianity negates its own sacrificial potential by linking people to the profane world and turning the whole planet into a plantation of divine labor. As Bataille writes,

²¹³ For more on the specifics of this argument, see Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans. by Talcott Parsons (New York: Dover Publications, 2003.).
²¹⁴ Richardson, Georges Bataille, 105.
In theory, *salvation* in Christianity liberates the ends of religious life from the domain of productive activity. But if the faithful's salvation is the reward for his merits, if he can achieve it by his deeds, then he has simply brought more closely into the domain of religion the concatenation that makes useful work wretched in his eyes. Hence those *deeds* by which a Christian tries to win his salvation can in turn be considered profanations. Even the mere fact of choosing salvation as a goal appears contrary to the truth of grace. Grace alone brings about an accord with the divinity, which cannot be subjected to casual series as *things* can. The gift that divinity makes of itself to the faithful soul cannot be paid for.\(^{215}\)

What Bataille is suggesting here is that the Christian concept of grace, in its various developments, is intertwined with the commercialization of the sacred. The more abstract and distant God becomes through dogma, the more profane the social expression of Christianity becomes.\(^{216}\) As man becomes the wretched plaything of God and the Devil (a perspective that is particularly evident in Luther's work), then hard work, asceticism, and the rational organization of life become the visible signs of an absent divinity. In this process, the intimacy of the sacred is completely lost and the profane acquisition of commercial acuity becomes the only means of divine benefit. As Bataille writes, with the work of the reformers Luther and Calvin, "The sanctification of God was thus linked to the desacralization of human life."\(^{217}\) (Or, to put this in the terms of the Italian theorist Giorgio Agamben, "God didn't die, he was transformed into money").\(^{218}\)

Bataille wants to correct this religious false consciousness by emphasizing the "non-knowledge" of sacred expenditure enacted by Christianity. Despite the Christian emphasis on

---


\(^{216}\) This is a confusing formulation. Perhaps a better way to state this would be, the more "secular" religion becomes. Bataille does use the word "secular" in *The Accursed Share* Vol. 1, so perhaps that would be more fitting.

\(^{217}\) Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vol. 1, 124. Remember, although Martin Luther and John Calvin both objected to the idea that divine grace was the result of human labor, they did not object to the idea that divine grace and human labor are connected. Rather, what they rejected was the idea that sanctification was the result of human labour. Both still suggested that good works followed from divine grace, they just contested whether the good resulting from these actions should be ascribed to the human will or the beneficence of God. In fact, the Protestant reformers, and particularly Calvin, only exacerbated the link between capitalist alienation and Christianity by suggesting that contributing to the market place was a direct sign of God's sanctification, not merely a possible outgrowth of grace. They condemned monastic asceticism in favor of market place asceticism, thereby encouraging bourgeois profanation.

\(^{218}\) See the following interview, "God didn't die, he was transformed into money" - An interview with Giorgio Agamben - Peppe Savà:libcom.org/library/god-didnt-die-he-was-transformed-money-interview-giorgio-agamben-peppe-savà
salvation as an eternal gift and on sin as worldly penance, Bataille suggests, that the truth of Christ's sacrifice is a burning *consommation*. He believes there is a drunken laughter of loss at Christianity's core that is ignored in the profanization of the sacred for material production, and claims that when Christ cried out from the cross, "*Lamma sabachtani,*" this was not a cry of sacrificial victory or worldly ascent, but of loss. What the classical formulations of Christian theology do is block out this sense of loss and obscure the abyss into which Christ fell. They ignore that Christ's sacrifice was a sovereign experience that exposed the summit of the divine transcendent to the abyss of worldly decay. And they ignore that this sacrifice transformed the meaning of human communication with the divine.

With all the emphasis on sin and salvation that is part and parcel with Christian dogma, the abyss of sacrificial loss is submitted to a "workable formula" whereby the masses put off the sacred infinitely in a project-based life. Christians live nihilistic lives of production and ignore the sacred expenditure in the present. Bataille writes that "life is condemned in Christianity, and the men of progress sanctify it...." With the commercialization of the sacred, Christians have negated the ecstasy of inner experience and equated life with the sanctification of work.

Fundamentally, what Bataille suggests is that Christian theology is divided against itself. On the one hand, Christianity teaches people to rely upon the grace of God for redemption and to live dutiful lives in the finite world. This has the effect of encouraging participation in capitalism and subverting religious sacrifice to a higher end—the all-powerful will of God. This is the type of Christianity Bataille is referring to above when he writes that Christianity is the "negation of human sovereignty." On the other hand, he suggests that Christianity announces itself as the conjoining of the infinite and the finite, the divine and the worldly, the summit and the abyss. This is the type of Christianity he is referring to when he emphasizes the divine loss expressed through Christ's sacrifice. When he writes that, "The meaning of Christianity is given in the development of the delirious consequences of the expenditure of classes, in a mental agonistic orgy practiced at the

---

219 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 47
expense of the real struggle," he is channeling this deconstructive sense of Christian revelation.

In a certain way, what Bataille is suggesting here is similar to what Dostoevsky suggests in the famous chapter from The Brothers Karamazov, "The Grand inquisitor": the sacred heart of Christianity is divided against the profane Christian institutions that regulate it. Sacred Christianity is concerned with the pious grace of Christ's sacrifice and the arrival of the messianic moment. In contrast, profane Christianity is concerned with the earthly maintenance of the Christian church. This is why, in Ivan's story in The Brothers Karamazov, when Christ arrives in Seville the Grand Inquisitor sends him away and tells him never to come back, because the profane church is divided against the sacred teachings of the church. The two exist in tension. With the development of wealthy church institutions, moral codes, dogmatic creeds, and sacramental formulas, the sacred aspect of Christianity is eclipsed by profane concerns; the individual and social basis of the sacred is negated. Of course, Bataille does not hold to Dostoyevsky's Russian Orthodox piety, so he does not believe that any salvific sacred essence has been held back from humanity by this development of profane Christianity, but he does think that the truth of Christ's sacrifice has been obscured. As we saw above, Bataille's sacred is a lacerated and wounded encounter with the other. It is an erotic confrontation with loss, consumption, and expenditure. He believes that behind the thin veneer of civilization lies a churning space of chaos and continuity, and he suggests that this is what is at stake in the sacrifice of Christ.

As Bataille argues in On Nietzsche, through the image of Christ on the Cross, the sacred is exposed as unintelligible delirium. Christ, like the headless figure of Acéphale, exposes sovereignty as NOTHING. Or, as Bataille writes in Inner Experience, "at the limit of death on the cross and of the blindly lived lamma sabachtani, the object is finally unveiled as catastrophe in a chaos of light and shadow, neither as God nor as nothingness, but as the object that love, incapable of liberating itself except outside of itself, demands in order to let out the scream of lacerated existence." The story of the crucifixion shows the ways in which the very contemplation of God is a contemplation of instability and descent.

---

221 I use this analogy lightly, strictly for the sake of elaborating Bataille. I am aware that there are many ways to interpret Dostoyevsky and that there is ultimately no distinction between the "sacred" and the "profane" church.
222 Bataille, Visions of Excess, 134.
Fundamentally, what the story of the crucifixion shows for Bataille is how communication and communion with others is only possible by being exposed to the dissolution of the sovereign. It is only through the death of God—the laceration of the divine—that communication is even possible. This death opens the space for communication because it makes space for finite beings; it opens up a space for intimacy in the midst of the world.

Echoing the Marquis de Sade, who called "community" the republic of crime, Bataille suggests that the killing of Christ—and therefore the foundation of the Christian community—is a criminal act. In what is perhaps the "greatest sin ever committed," both God and man were lacerated by the finite and opened the world to a new form of communication. Previously, gods and men occupied separate spheres of being, the immortal and the mortal, respectively, but through the monumental murder of God, this grand act of divine patricide, communication between the above and the below (the "intelligible" and the "sensible") was rendered possible. Hence, although this sin was the culmination of the first sin committed by Adam, and a testament to the perversity of humanity, it exposed the summit of universal sovereignty to the world of decay, shit, and death. The descent of the divine into the finite destroyed all superessentiality in a grand offence against the sacred, but it also permitted the "tearing of the veil" (Mt 27:51), which opened the world to its difference from itself. By lacerating God with whips and hanging him up to die on the Cross human beings prepared the way for a communion with the sacred. As Bataille writes, "A night of death wherein Creator and creatures bled together and lacerated each other and on all sides, were challenged at the extreme limits of shame: that is what was required for their communion."

Of course, this communication that is opened by the crucifixion is not pure, not immediate divine access or communication, and it is not a once and for all attainment for mankind. Rather, this crime contaminates the divine with the evil and sin of humanity, and opens the way for broken communication between the high and the low, the summit and the base. In Bataille’s lexicon, summit and sovereignty are comparable terms because both imply excess and heedlessness, and this is what the sacrifice of Christ is all about for him.

---

223 Bataille, On Nietzsche, xvii.
224 Nancy references this connection between the work of Sade and Bataille. See IC 32.
The crucifixion shows that communication with the other requires a complete sacrifice of identity and communication. For Bataille, this is the basis of communication in general, as the only way to have communication is to risk losing everything for the sake of communication:

Communication only takes place between two people who risk themselves, each lacerated and suspended, perched atop a common nothingness.... In sacrifice, humans unite with a god by putting him to death: they put to death a divinity personified by a living existence, a human or animal victim (the means we have to unite with each other).227

As Blanchot points out, for Bataille, the basis of communication is the terrifying exposure to death, which defies dialectical logic. Communication arises not from dialogue between rational subjects but what Blanchot calls "plural speech," which attests to the difference of the "obscure Other" (Autrui) that haunts all relationality.228 This awareness, and the absence to which it attests, opens the possibility/impossibility of community, and this is how death awakens the commons to its essential difference from itself. (We will discuss the implications of this "Other" and how it relates to Nancy's work below.)

Hence, for Bataille, we might say that the value of Christianity is not to be found in the grace bestowed by a transcendent creator but by the sin and crime one is exposed to in community. What is important is the "night of death" in which creator and creation bled together in "lacerated" communication.229 If the point of religion for Bataille is a search for "lost intimacy," then Christianity offers a scent of this intimacy through the crucifixion narrative. As Bataille writes,"In this way God (wounded by human guilt) and human beings (wounded by their own guilt with respect to God), find, if painfully, a unity that seems to be their purpose."230 What we find on the cross is not eternal salvation through divine sacrifice (Bataille never claims that souls were saved at Calvary) but an encounter with the nothing of sovereignty through sacrifice.

228 Maurice Blanchot, The Infinite Conversation, trans. by Susan Hanson, v. 82 Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 215.
229Bataille, On Nietzsche, 18.
Bataille believes that throughout most of Christian history this sacrificial potential has been distorted by a utilitarian logic that reduces sacrifice to a profane commodity, but he nevertheless finds a sacred kernel in the laceration of Christ. In a sense, he suggests that the utilitarian corruption of Christianity can never stifle the sacred excess that defiles heterogeneity, and that the loss and expenditure of this sacrificial act will ultimately defy any dogmatic enclosure. In a piece titled the "Sacred," written in 1939, Bataille nicely sums up his contradictory view of Christianity:

As long as the identification introduced by Christianity between God and the object of religion was imposed upon the spirit, all that could be recognized on the subject of this "grail" was that it could not be confused with God. This distinction had the drawback of setting aside the still profound identity between this "grail" and the very object of religion. But the development of knowledge touching on the history of religions has shown that the essential religious activity was not directed toward a personal and transcendent being (or beings), but toward an impersonal reality. Christianity has made the sacred substantial, but the nature of the sacred, in which today we recognize the burning existence of religion, is perhaps the most ungraspable thing that has been produced between men: the sacred is only a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled. Such a disjunction between the sacred and transcendental substance (consequently impossible to create) suddenly opens a new field—a field perhaps of violence, perhaps of death, but a field which may be entered—to the agitation that has taken hold of the living human spirit.  

The history of Christianity is a history of objectification that turned the sacred into a profane object and helped support class-based alienation and a world of utilitarian exchange. However, what the death of God on the cross discloses is that the sacred is not a graspable thing but a burning consommation that utterly destroys any accumulation of essence and opens a space for communication. In this manner, Christianity unworks itself (and religion) from within by the sacred contagion expressed on the cross.

Tying all this together, we can now see how Bataille's theory of religion shows how an unproductive expenditure at the heart of religion renders it workless. Whether Bataille is talking about religion in the abstract or the particular truths of Christianity, he attempts to show how the sacred explodes religion from within. The tension between the divine and the

---

231 Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 244.
worldly, the sacred and the profane, the summit and the base, subverts claims to transcendence at their heart. Ultimately, he suggests that all divine stories—mythical genealogies, Roman or Shintoist imperial cults, and the Judeo-Christian theory of divine right—are subject to this tension, and what we find in Christianity is an example of it. On the one hand, religions sanctify God, king, or law with the mark of absolute sovereignty. On the other hand, this absolutely sovereign element cannot be understood apart from all the heterogeneous aspects of existence. As he states determinatively, it is at the "apogee" of a religious system that it finds itself enwrapped in heterogeneity: "It can maintain itself only through excesses, through innovations that are too onerous" (TR 61). It is right at the summit of divine power that we find an excess by which sovereignty exceeds itself.

2.3 - Between Bataille and Nancy

2.3.1 - From Atheological Community to Atheological Abandonment

Bataille first devised the term atheology in the early 1950's when conceiving of La somme athéologique, which he imagined as a collection of several of his principal writings: Inner Experience, Guilty, On Nietzsche, and "Method of Meditation." Unfortunately, La somme athéologique remained incomplete at the time of his death in 1962, as did his plan for what texts would compose the volume, but the term has nonetheless become associated with his oeuvre as a whole. The "a" in atheology is of course an alpha privative, which expresses a negation or an absence that is proper to the experience of God (theos = god). In "Aphorisms for the 'System,'" Bataille defines atheology as "the science of the death or destruction of God," or, perhaps more aptly in relation to Nancy, as a "Return to the point of departure."233

Atheology might best be described as a study of the heterology of the sacred; or, to use another Bataillean term we defined above, it is a study of the consommation of God into heterology. In paradoxical terms, for Bataille, atheology is a religious search to suppress religion. As Bataille wrote in "Notebook for Happiness": "This search is the same thing as

232 Bataille, Visions of Excess, 152.
religion, not as philosophy, but it is the ambition of this search, to simultaneously suppress religion and philosophy."\(^{234}\)

What fundamentally concerned Bataille throughout his writing is the space that is left in the wake of God's death and how we might use this space to affect our political, economic, and religious conceptions of the world. Hence, what we need to discuss now is not just the departure of the gods, but what all this implies about community, as that is what is really at stake for Bataille. As we have seen, he believed that religion did have an important role to play in social critique, but in a sort of anti-religious way. He argued that religions, as they have been historically practiced, are closed systems that are often used to support political and economic tyranny. Hence, at the most general level, atheology is the study of how these political and economic systems are founded upon an excess that subverts them from within.\(^{235}\) Atheology is not a science of empirical things but a study of existence as it presents itself beyond any form of sovereign control.

Nancy's first use of the term atheology, properly speaking, is in the essay "A Faith that is Nothing at All," (Orig. 2001) in *Dis-Enclosure*.\(^{236}\) Noting that he is borrowing the term from Bataille, Nancy describes atheology as an absenting of the divine, in which all that remains is the name *dies/divus*.\(^{237}\) An atheology, he suggests, would be an affirmation of the destitution of a name of God, in which all divine places and bodies are emptied of any superessential content (D73). Atheology would not be a negative theology but an analysis of places, texts, and bodies as "a-theos," meaning "not-of-god" (D83).

In his earlier texts, such as "Of Divine Places" (Orig. 1987), Nancy also discusses atheology. Although he doesn't specifically use the term atheology in this text, he suggests that the "modern age secretly corresponds to the true destination of "a theology": "for it indicates to theology that, in order to speak of God, we have to speak of something other than

---


\(^{235}\) Like the surrealists, Bataille sought to revolt against the status quo in the name of true experience, but for him this encounter with experience itself was absent of any foundation. Bataille wrote that "I situate my efforts beyond but alongside Surrealism." See George Bataille, "Method of Meditation," in *The Unfinished System of Non-knowledge*, trans. by Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 77-99.

\(^{236}\) Although this text appears in English in *Dis-Enclosure*, it was first published in Jean-Luc Nancy and Élisabeth Rigal, eds., *Granel—L’Éclat, le combat, l’ouvert* (Paris: Belin, 2001).

\(^{237}\) See section 2.4.3 and Chapter Three for discussion on what this implies. For Nancy, "God" is but another name for the withdrawal of being and he the clearest evidence for this in teaching of the resurrection.
the Other, the Abstruse, and their infinite remoteness (if indeed it is still a matter of "speaking of something")" (IC 113). Echoing Bataille's insistence that atheology is about the departure of the divine, not reclaiming some divine essence, Nancy calls for attention to the fact that "baptizing our abysses" in the presence of the gods ignores the loss that is constitutive of community. What is needed, Nancy claims, is not a new figure for the divine but attention to the open space left in the wake of God's departure. What is needed is to vacate any reason, foundation, origin, or end for the world (A 33).

In "Abandoned Being" (Orig. 1981), another one of Nancy's earliest writings on religious themes, he connects this sense of loss with many of our religious and literary figures in the West, pointing out how these figures form a meta-narrative of abandonment. Moses, for instance, is a preeminent figure in the West that expresses this sense of abandonment: Born Jewish and then abandoned to the Egyptians, raised Egyptian and then abandoned to Jewish exile. Moses was abandoned at birth and spends his entire life in exile. In fact, his whole relationship with God centers around the theme of exile. From the moment of his birth to the hour of his death, Moses is abandoned to the absence of being. Similarly, Jesus is another central figure of abandonment. With Jesus this abandonment is intensified because, as the incarnation of the *logos*, he presents being itself as abandonment. As "God" in human form, he signifies the absence of being in the presence of abandonment. Like Moses, Jesus spends his whole life in the absence of essence; from the moment of his birth to the hour of his death he presents abandonment as the very condition of existence. As Bataille noted above, at the moment of his death he cries out to his father and proclaims this dereliction of being as his very condition:

Eli, Eli, lama sabacthani!
Thee Mou, Thee Mou, ina ti me enkatepilès;
Deus meus, Deus meus, ut quid dereliquisti me? (BTP 40)

Nancy interprets this passage as: “you have given me up to dereliction, where there is nothing left of me to you, you who let me be left. You have not left me to some task, to some station, to some suffering, to some expectation. You have left me to abandonment” (BTP 40). Nancy suggests that this cry of abandonment is also what Nietzsche meant when he wrote
 Ecce Homo, whether he intended to or not. "This man" is the one who cries out in abandonment (BTP 41).

In French, to be "abandoned" (abandonné) implies either a joyous surrender of inhibitions or a condition of being forsaken (BTP 397n1). Abandonment implies the “absence of permanence” and the impossibility of settling into existence as some particular thing. Nancy suggests that evidence for this sense of abandonment is not just found in Biblical characters but can also be found in other mythological and literary figures of the West: Oedipus, Robinson, Olympio, Phèdre, Jean-Jacques, Josef K., the proletariat, and the sovereign, etc. All of these literary figures are exhausted by the interminable abandonment with which they are confronted (BTP 42).

What these literary figures show us is how the West has long since—perhaps "since the beginning," as Nancy often quips—been exposed to the destitution of being and the departure of the gods. We exist in the world without shelter and wane in divine abandonment: "The gods went away long ago," said Cercidas of Megalopolis, in the Third century B.C. Our history thus began with their departure...." (IC 145). Before Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God, and even before the advent of Christianity, the gods had departed. Even in the ancient temples of Rome and Greece, the gods were no longer present. Since the inception of our history in Mesopotamia, the temples have been empty and the only prayers that have been recited were learnt from memory (IC 148). If we want to understand what Nancy means by his use of the term "religion," and how it relates to the deconstruction of Christianity, we must be aware that for him religion has only ever been a sign for this departure. The religions, Nancy suggests, have only ever been a name for the endless circulation of powers, castes, clergies, and various rites and practices that go under its name. As he writes, “the gods have long since—perhaps since the beginning—exhausted themselves in a surfeit of signs and powers, in clergies, clans and castes, in the scrupulous observance and firm ties that form the two possible meanings of the word religio” (IC 134). Religion—this Roman word that was carried around the globe by Christian missionaries, philosophers, merchants, and scholars—has only ever been a name for abandonment.

As evidence for this, Nancy points out how the discourse on the "death of God" has always been a part of Christian consciousness in the West, even if misunderstood. Though the finite implications of the death of God have never been fully appreciated, it has instilled a
sense of divine loss in our most potent theological and political narratives. According to Nancy, the error in most discourse on the death of God has been to assume that the death of God means that "God" is a *dues absconditus*; a radically Other or hidden being. Or, conversely, it has been assumed that the death of God leads to a form of immanence, a *dues communis*; a divine community here on earth. However, Nancy suggests that the death of God has nothing to do with the transcendence of the divine or the immanence of humanity, but the absence that is shared-out in immanence. As he writes, "The discourse of the "death of God" misses the point that the "divine" is what it is (if it "is") only insomuch as it is removed from immanence, or withdrawn from it—within it, one might say, yet withdrawn from it" (IC 10). What the discourse on the "death of God" all too often forgets is that the divine is nothing other than loss, and that humanity is not an immanent essence to be realized in history. The death of God is not about restoring the absolute distance between heaven and earth, or the imminent arrival of the divine among humankind, but the infinite withdrawal—or shared separation—that make community possible. The word "divine," in this usage, like the word atheology, signifies loss, not a particular figure or form that a community needs to gather around (IC 11).

Nancy calls these transcendent and immanent interpretations of the death of God the "Christian consciousness of the loss of community" and thereby links atheology with the very experience of community in Western thought. In "The Inoperative Community" he details how the West, at both the political and religious level, has long been dominated by agendas that attempt to recuperate this sense of loss (IC 11). Politicians, gods, and saints are all too often presented as the figures who can restore the absence that is proper to community, or who can deliver community to a golden future in which the immanence of our humanity will be attained. From the 12th Century mystic Joachim of Fiore who proclaimed the coming "age of the spirit," to 19th Century romantics, plans for the realization of this immanence have been repeatedly put forth. The idea that the West, or the world in general, is a lost or broken community has formed our political and religious provenance. As Nancy writes,

"The lost, or broken community can be exemplified in all kinds of ways, by all kinds of paradigms: the natural family, the Athenian city, the Roman Republic, the First Christian community, corporations, communes, or brotherhoods—always it is a matter of a lost age in which community was woven..."
of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds and in which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols, the representation, indeed the living offering, of its own immanent unity, intimacy, and autonomy. (IC 9)

In a somewhat ironic fashion, all these programs that have been dreamt up to recover or materialize this loss at the heart of community are built upon the idea that community is a “work” of unity to be attained, or a "project of fusion" to be realized. They imagine community as a production or an operative project (IC 15). Whether these operative ends are imagined through divine, national, or subjective means, they present the loss of community as something to be overcome.

In contrast to this long tradition of trying to overcome loss, Nancy suggests that loss is constitutive of the very experience of being-together. In the pursuit of a communal figure to overcome the death of God, all the aforementioned projects gloss over the fact that it is because of the incommensurate space we share between us that we exist at all. Community does not arise from a shared essence or the fusion of subject and object in the spirit of the people, nor from transcending their finite relationality in a leap of faith, but from the exposure of each singular existence to the unmasterable limit of death. As Nancy writes declaratively, "What this community has "lost"—the immanence and the intimacy of a communion—is lost only in the sense that "loss" is constitutive of "community" itself" (IC 12).

The truth of the matter is that if the dreams of Christian millennialists and romantics were to ever come about, it would be the end of community and communication because it would be the end of death. Far from making space for existence and the plurality of being-with, the attainment of immanence would devour the shared separation of being together in the "guise of a supreme work" (IC 13). As discussed in Chapter One, the classic example of this in the 20th Century is the Nazi myth, which demanded the sacrifice of everything that was not immanent to the Aryan community, but examples can also be found in popular literary myths in which lovers unite in the immanence of death, and even in the Hegelian notion of the state (IC 12). The Third Reich is the most extreme case because it imagined itself as a successor to the Holy Roman Empire and attempted to bring this about for the next millennium through genocide, but any time death is proclaimed as the means to an imminent
communion we are hearing a version of this tale. In all cases, what is at stake is the immolation of all individuals for the realization of the community. What is promised is the transition from the “unmasterable excess of finitude” to the homogeneous communion of being (IC 13).

From Rousseau to Heidegger, the various political programs that have been put forth have attempted to put death work to realize the essence of community, and to justify social, political, technical, military, and religious ends in the hopes of recovering or rectifying this sense of loss. Indeed, Nancy argues that since the 17th Century there has been no death in our universe, just a nihilist circulation of meaning, values, and ends that have attempted to appropriate the spirit of the people. History has repeatedly been presented as the absolute sacrifice in the name of progress, and these projects have become increasingly secular since the industrial revolution. What is at stake today is a dialectic logic that justifies bloodshed and suffering in the name of history itself. A sort of secular salvation has come to replace what was once sought in the mystical body of Christ (IC 13).

Oddly enough, it is Heidegger, the philosopher who never completely condemned his own Nazi associations, who takes us farthest in critiquing this communal logic at the subjective level. His analysis of Dasein affirms that we are not subjects who exist like atoms in a void, willfully moving through history towards the realization of a more perfect union. Heidegger takes us farthest in recognizing the finite nature of existence and deconstructing the reification of consciousness. However, as we saw in the last chapter, Heidegger also passed over an analysis of Mitsein in favor of Dasien and never acknowledged that death is shared. When it came to the question of community he reproduced the most classical mythological arguments concerning the "destiny of the people" and communal sacrifice (IC 14). Hence, although Heidegger opened the door to an analysis of finitude he did not implicate the community in this experience and continued the tradition of trying to appropriate death for a higher end.

---

238 As Nancy writes, "All of Heidegger's research into "being-for (or toward)-death" was nothing other than an attempt to state this: I is not—at least not—a subject. (Although, when it came to the question of community as such, the same Heidegger also went astray with his vision of a people and a destiny conceived at least in part as a subject, which proves no doubt that Dasein's "being-toward-death" was never radically implicated in its being-with-in—Mitsein—and that it is this implication that remains to be thought)" (IC 14). See Chapter 1 for the precise unpacking of this critique.
The theoretical value of Bataille is that he helps correct this error. By thinking loss as the very experience of community, Nancy argues that Bataille takes us farther than any philosopher before him in appreciating the connection between the death of God and community. Bataille develops his whole oeuvre as an atheology precisely to think this loss—this unmasterable excess—of finite experience, inviting us to remember that death is only known through the death of others, and that there is no subject, substance, or awareness that precedes this finite encounter with the other. Unlike Heidegger, Bataille doesn't start with Dasein or the givenness of being but with community, and with the unproductive excess that cannot be appropriated by the destiny of a people (IC18). Nancy frames this Bataillian insight in the following terms, stressing the relationship between community and its impossibility:

Community no more makes a work out of death than it is itself a work. The death upon which community is calibrated does not operate the dead being’s passage into some communal intimacy, nor does community, for its part, operate the transfiguration of its dead into some substance or subject—be these homeland, native soil or blood, nation, a delivered or fulfilled humanity, absolute phalanstery, family, or mystical body. Community is calibrated on death as on that of which it is precisely impossible to make a work (other than a work of death, as soon as one tries to make a work of it). Community occurs in order to acknowledge this impossibility, or more exactly—for there is neither function nor finality here—the impossibility of making a work out of death is inscribed and acknowledged as "community." (IC 15)

What Nancy likes about Bataille is his use of death to counter any form of communitarianism. Bataille uses the ("left-hand") sacred in order to think of an alternative to the various religious and fascist political structures of his day, stressing the sovereign expenditure—the négativité sans emploi—that unseats any form of immanence. He stresses that death is not reabsorbed into the community but exposes community to its exteriority, preparing the way for the dissolution of communication. Moreover, he directly connects this with Christianity, arguing that Christ is the sublime figure of loss and communication in the West. He writes that the incarnation showed that the incarnated God was just as "solitary and
as abandoned as the ensemble" of finite beings he came to save.239 In this manner, Bataille uses atheology to affirm the abandonment of existence.

However, despite all Bataille's advances in this direction, it is also true that he was led to a certain nostalgia for archaic forms of religion, community, and sacrifice. Despite all the nuance of his thought, his search for a "FEROCIOUSLY RELIGIOUS" society under an acéphalic deity betrayed a nostalgia for a communal being that was itself a work of death. We know, for instance, that he dreamt of sealing the fate of this secret community with a human sacrifice, just as in archaic religions. The goal was to realize the experience of the impossibility of community by enacting a human sacrifice, and Bataille even offered himself as the willing victim of this acéphalic religiosity. For lack of a willing executioner, this plan for a human sacrifice was never enacted, but it is a testament to how far Bataille was willing to go to encounter the "lost intimacy" that he theorized in his writing (IC 17).

In his nuanced reading of Bataille, Nancy suggests that he never completely overcame this nostalgia. In his late work Bataille moves away from his early emphasis on the sacred and religious sacrifice, but he was always subject to what Nancy dubs a "feverish kind of 'Rousseauism'"(IC 17). All of Bataille's anthropological work on the archaic and the primitive was part of a wider trend in early 20th Century thought (to which Heidegger was also indebted) that was fascinated with past societies, warfare, royalty, and feudalism, and this infuses his thought on communication. Indeed, even his distinction between the general and the restricted economy bears witness to a certain romance for a true appropriation of a communal secret.

In fact, Bataille even came to recognize this error himself. After he witnessed the collapse of Soviet communism into totalitarianism and the emergence of the Nazi state in the 1930's, he became more skeptical of this kind of archaic nostalgia, particularity as it had informed his early engagement with Acéphale. The horror of the Nazi project showed him that a sacrificial community orientated around death could lead to the horror of genocide, rather than the sharing of an unmasterable horizon. Hence, in Bataille's post 1950 work he shifted towards an emphasis on the "community of lovers" and his search for intimacy came

to be articulated through eroticism, rather than ritual practice. As Nancy notes, it is perhaps for this reason that *Theory of Religion* went unpublished before his death (IC 21).

Nevertheless, despite this late shift in his work, Nancy locates the nostalgia in Bataille's work in a certain logic of subjectivity that he was never able to dispel from his thought, and which also informed all of his work on sacrifice. As we saw above, the goal of Bataille's *Theory of Religion* is a clear consciousness of loss. Bataille was not advocating a return to ancient forms of sacrifice but an appreciation of sacrifice through the lens of the unproductive expenditure that is constitutive of community. The last line of his short treatise on religion invokes a "sovereign self-consciousness" that "no longer turns away" from the dissolution of its own laughter, tears, and ecstasy (TR 111). It is as if, Nancy suggests, Bataille offered a "reversal of the nostalgia for a lost community" by pointing out that inner experience was itself an immense failure. Bataille claimed that the ultimate essence of history is not a sovereignty that is worked out by the dialectical progress of history, but an exposure to the sovereign excess that disturbs any attainment, simulation, or work. Like Heidegger's turn (*Kehre*) in the 1930's, Bataille came to recognize that community is nothing other than an exposition before an incommensurate exteriority that can never be appropriated in some absolute sense. However, he continued to relate this sense of loss back to the community in terms of sacrifice (IC 17-18).

Much like Heidegger showed how deconstruction emerges out of the dissolution of the West, Bataille showed how the entire religious history of sacrifice leads to its own decomposition. And just as Heidegger thought nothing other than the impossibility of the presentation of being, Bataille thought nothing other than the impossibility of appropriating the intimacy he sought from sacrifice. Nevertheless, Bataille seemed to think it possible to pierce the heart of this negativity and return sovereign. As Nancy puts it, Bataille wished to penetrate into sacrifice and keep himself there, "enduring his own dismemberment" (FT 73). In this manner, just as Heidegger prepares the way for Nancy's observation that Christianity leads to the deconstruction of metaphysics, so Bataille prepares the way for Nancy's observation that Western sacrifice "ends in the decomposition of the sacrificial operation itself" (FT 74).

We will discuss Nancy's specific comments on sacrifice in the following section, but what is important to understand at this point is Nancy's critique that Bataille, despite the fact
that he thought the "unemployable negativity" of community, still tried to appropriate this negativity as "the absolute propriety of the Self and its limitless self-presence" (FT 72). Paradoxically, Bataille "thought nothing else but this very thing he gave up thinking" (IC 25). With his notion of atheology, Bataille takes us to the limit of community and affirms that the sense of loss that haunts existence is not something to be overcome. He points out how sacrifice does not lead to absolute knowledge of the subject but to its dissolution in a drunken ecstasy of abandon. However, with his emphasis on "clear consciousness" and the "laceration" of communication, he exposes a lingering Hegelianism that seeks to fuse subject and object in a chaotic delirium, which in turn "thwarts" his ability to think of community. As Nancy writes: "Properly speaking, Bataille had no concept of the subject. But, at least up to a certain point, he allowed the communication exceeding the subject to relate back to a subject, or to institute itself as subject...." (IC 24). Bataille affirmed that loss was constitutive of experience, but he also tried to merge with this sense of loss as if it were the very rhythm of the universe.

In the end, Nancy suggests that Bataille remained suspended between "ecstasy and community" in a kind of speculative reciprocity (IC 20), and links this tendency to a tradition that runs back through Heidegger, Husserl, Freud, and ultimately Hegel. What is at play here is the logic of the "recognition of the other," which, for all its moral ambitions, has never done anything more than thwart our thinking of community in the West by locating the importance of death at the level of subjective recognition; or what Nancy calls a "a certain specularity of the recognition of the other through death" (IC 33). In a certain way, Bataille challenges this tradition by placing community first in the order of succession, not the individual, and by stressing that this recognition does not attain its lost object, but he still tries to recognize himself in the loss, fragmentation, and obscurity of the other. Bataille emphasizes the impossibility of communion through death but he still tries to return this impossibility to the self in a lacerated sovereign insight. As Nancy suggests, Bataille's ecstasy is a "'clear consciousness' of separation": What he offers is the "Hegelian self-consciousness itself, but suspended on the limit of its access to self...."(IC 19).

By defining religion as a search for lost intimacy, Bataille offers an anti-Hegelian reading of religion because he suggests that it is the work that religion does not do—that it does not accomplish—that makes it valuable. He suggests that it is because religion mediates
our sense of loss that it is valuable. However, by framing this whole analysis in light of the loss of "clear consciousness," he retained the idea that becoming aware of this happening is a subjective speculative event.\textsuperscript{240} Hence, it is true, as Rodolphe Gasché notes, that Bataille rejects the "steady speculative process towards self-certain knowledge."\textsuperscript{241} However, what Nancy is suggesting is that even in his emphasis on the spectral heterogeneity and excess there remains an emphasis on the subjective blindness of this obscurity. Bataille retains the idea that the ultimate truth of existence ends in a fusion of subject and object. As he writes in \textit{Inner Experience}, "Experience attains in the end the fusion of object and subject, being as subject non-knowledge, as object the unknown."\textsuperscript{242} Hence, even though Bataille frames existence in terms of loss, he presents it as the "specular identity of the object..." (IC 24).

All this is to suggest that Bataille gives us an atheological community that appreciates the withdrawal of the gods but he doesn't take into account the abandonment of our "singular existences" (IC 25). For Nancy, a true appreciation of abandonment has to take into account the communal encounter with death articulated by Bataille and the singularity of existence.

\textsuperscript{240}Etymologically, the word "speculation" comes from the Latin \textit{speculatio} ('spying out, reconnoitering; contemplation') and \textit{speculari} ('to spy, observe; to look around'), and is connected to medieval theology. Throughout the middle ages \textit{Speculatio} was often used by neo-Platonists to emphasize "the mirror" through which images of God could be glimpsed by reason: since God could not be seen directly one had to use speculative reason, or allegory, to see the truth behind the representational thought. Speculation is therefore a vision-based understanding of knowledge and is connected to the Greek term "nôesis," which means "mental perception" (John Russon, \textit{Reading Hegel's Phenomenology} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 205). In the \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}, Hegel effectively overturns this Platonic tradition by arguing that religion must ultimately be surpassed by coming to see the higher speculative truth contained within religious images (\textit{Vorstellungen}). For Hegel, the different forms of religion reflect different stages of human self-awareness; he presents all the gods, beliefs, rites, utterances, and scriptures of religions as mere determinate cultural forms on the road to speculative awareness G.W. F. Hegel, \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}, trans. by Terry Pinkard (http://terrypinkard.weebly.com/phenomenology-of-spirit-page.html), 479/¶788. (accessed 12/13/2015). Hegel's use of the speculative is not an appeal to an idea given by original intuition but one that is worked for and developed \textit{in} a finite community. However, Hegel's speculative still has that sense of peering behind the immediacy of reality to grasp the speculative source of reality. As John Russon notes, Hegel's version of Transcendental philosophy differs from earlier philosophers such as Kant to the extent that "philosophical enquiry does not retreat from experience, but must, so to speak, fight its way through experience in its very \textit{specificity} and it \textbf{thus can see itself} only when, like Odysseus, it \textit{returns after the successful siege}" (Russon 206, my emphasis). See also G. F. W. Hegel, \textit{Science of Logic}, trans. by George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 383-384). According to this logic, it is only when religious images come to reflect the truth of speculative reason that the immediacy of their forms will be surpassed. This is why the sacrifice of Christ is such an important event for Hegel, as it exposes the absolute in the form of self-consciousness sacrificing itself for the community. It is in this manner that religious images come to reflect, like a mirror, the very process that consciousness must go through to become a member of a community.


\textsuperscript{242}Bataille, \textit{Inner Experience}, 9.
articulated by Heidegger. Succinctly stated, what needs to be articulated is communication as the worklessness of finitude in its plural singularity.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Nancy follows Heidegger in arguing that being is not a thing. He suggest that the appearance of things does not result from the emergence of an undifferentiated matter, or even an opaque aggregate without form, but the singularity of being itself, as finitude: "the infinite birth of finitude is not a process that emerges from a ground (fond) or from a fund (fonds) of some kind." (IC27) This provides Nancy with a critique of Bataille since what appears does not result from the production of a clear consciousness, anaestheticizing agent, nor even some prior materiality that might form a gaping abyss. However, at the end of our reading of Heidegger we were left with an essentialist interpretation of community. What Heidegger lacked was an appreciation of the négativité sans emploi, or worklessness, which haunts communication. With Nancy's notion of "being singular plural" he brings these two ideas together to think finitude as an inoperative communication. Nancy states this dual inheritance and critique bluntly: "The 'ground' is the finitude of Being; it is what Bataille was not entirely in a position to understand in Heidegger—and it is why Heidegger, with or without a reading of Bataille, was never quite in a position to be troubled by 'communication'" (IC 28).

Nancy's solution to the impasse offered by both Heidegger and Bataille is to think the sovereignty of community in the singularity of its sharing (partage). He is not interested in the destiny or the conscious recognition of this sharing but the sovereignty of this shared space. For Nancy, neither Heidegger nor Bataille really appreciate how the singular beings who share the world "are distributed and placed, or rather spaced, by the sharing that makes them others" (IC 25). What remains to be thought, therefore, is how communication is nothing other than the very dis-location of sharing that divides community in its origins. Bataille thought sharing in relation to the subject of clear consciousness and community, but he did not consider how sharing spaces out any communal bond, an error that Heidegger also made when imagining the destiny of the community.

If we were to devise this into a pithy formula, we might say that Nancy thinks Heideggerian finitude alongside Bataille's community, conjoining both in an amalgamation

---

243As we will see in Chapter Three, this is what Nancy calls "areality"—the area, or space, in which community is ecstatically spaced-out (IC 20).
to come up with a new formula for communication. In the place of Heidegger's "being," he emphasizes the sharing of death that takes place in community, and in the place of Bataille's "clear consciousness," he emphasizes the nothing of finitude. Taking these points together, he claims that community means that there "is no singular being without another singular being" (IC 28). With this definition, Nancy takes us beyond Bataille's nostalgia for the religiosity of the past or Heidegger's romance with the origins of philosophy, and thinks finitude as an infinite sharing without ground, origin, or end.

A word Nancy uses to express this abandoned form of sharing is "compearance" (com-parution). Like the words, "sharing," "being-with," "being-in-common," "ex-position," and "being-singular-plural," compearance expresses the originary plurality of finitude and the nothing before which we stand whenever we stand together. Above all, "compearance" signifies the barren placeholder of being-together, which is simultaneously the law of our abandonment and our togetherness. He suggests we are not given over to abandonment in finitude, but exposed to the abandonment that is the world, and this exposure is the law of existence: "Before this law without law we have never ceased to compear. In the end we compear there naked."244 Etymologically, "compear" typically means to appear before the law, a judge, or legal-juridical court, yet Nancy uses it to affirm the law of togetherness that amounts to nothing, no ground or substance. In the place of communion all we have is finitude itself, which always presents itself "before the judgment of the law of community, or, more originarily, before the judgment of community as law" (IC 28). Compearance is therefore the opening of sense to the finite nature of all communication, to the fact that communication bears no ground other than "partition," "part," "participation," "separation," and "discord."245 Being-in-common is being extended—partes extra partes—not enclosed in a particular form or essence. It means to be turned toward the outside, towards the infinite relating of sense, as the law of finitude.246

---

245 Nancy, "La comparution/The Compearance, from the Existence of 'Communism' to the Community of 'Existence,'" 374.
246 One way to parse this term is by comparing it to Bataille's notion of animality, for "compearance" also challenges the privilege all too often accorded to "man" throughout the history of philosophy. To affirm the compearance of finitude is to affirm the togetherness of beetles, bears, people, molecules, and stardust, and doesn't privilege any particular type of sociality. Contra Heidegger, who once quipped that "neither the stone nor the animal has world," Nancy and Bataille extend the in-common to all beings who share in the creation of the world (IC 28). For Heidegger's comments see, Martin Heidegger, The Fundamental Concepts of
Importantly, Nancy suggests that this compearance between singularities is not a sacred bond that would allow us to distinguish between a restricted and a general economy. Contra Bataille, he does not frame the compearance of singularities as an improved communal bond to be realized through the sacred, or even by lovers. He suggests that there are not "two societies" that stand in social tension with one another, as Bataille often seemed to suggest, because community is not an "economic link or the bond of recognition" (IC 29). Compearance is more originary than any such distinction and is not some sacred space of sharing that is separate from everyday, ordinary sharing. Rather, compearance affirms that intimacy takes place in the unworking of community and the breaking of bonds, not in the movement from a restricted to a general economy (IC 40).

This affirmation of compearance and the rejection of Bataille's distinction between the general and the restricted economy, also implies a rejection of Bataille's theory of religion and the sacred. Nancy writes that, strictly speaking, there is "no religion of the sacred" (GI 1). In fact, he suggests that atheology signals the end of all such terse metaphysical distinctions and opens the way for the strangeness of the profane. After the death of God, the only "sacred" that is shared between us is the partition of our togetherness that divides each one from every other. Henceforth, he suggest, the sacred names nothing other than the spacing out of the finite, in its distance, particularity, and separation:

Nothing else is sacred, nothing else is ‘the sacred’. The sacred or the holy. Holiness or the pure rupture with the world in the fullness of the world. The sense of the world – which is outside the world – open in the midst of it. Holiness, which is not ‘the good’, which is on the contrary the knowledge of the good: that the good is not given. Thus the sacred is not ‘good’. Nor ‘bad’ or ambivalent (high and low, auspicious and ill-fated sacredness). It is the approach of the distant, which remains at a distance in this very approach.247

As discussed above in relation to Durkheim, the sacred is usually thought to be another realm (or space) of being that revives and sustains the profane world. Through periodic sacrifice, the sacred is imagined to perform the social function of restoring and renewing community.

247Jean-Luc Nancy, "Notes on the Sacred," trans. by Alyosha Edlebi, in Theory, Culture & Society 30(5): 156. As we will discuss in the following chapter, this ordinariness of the sacred actually has a very special role to play in the deconstruction of Christianity.
However, Nancy suggests that the death of God exhausts this distinction, pushing the concept of atheology beyond any theory of religion or model for encountering the sacred. This implies that we cannot use the worklessness of existence—*négativité sans emploi*—to devise a new figural representation for community or communication, especially one based on sacrifice. Let's explain this further by turning to Nancy's texts on sovereignty, sacrifice, and the death of God.

**2.4 - Nancy: Towards an Unsacrificable Sovereignty**

Now that we have detailed the subtle distinctions between Bataille's and Nancy's use of atheology, we can turn our attention to a more in depth analysis of Nancy's work on sovereignty and sacrifice. We already touched upon this topic when noting that Nancy locates a lingering subjectivity in Bataille's work on sacrifice, but now we need to show how this leads Nancy towards an unsacrificable conception of sovereignty and how it is connected to the deconstruction of Christianity.

In his work on sovereignty, just like in his work on Christianity, Nancy argues that we must move beyond nihilism by coming to grips with the inoperative aspect of the death of God. Like Bataille, Nancy adopts the language of atheology to counter the traditional theological political sovereignty of empires and theocratic states and also emphasizes that sovereignty is "nothing"; however, his unique interpretation of creation *ex nihilo* leads him away from any sacrificial logic. In fact, Nancy suggests that the sacrificial logic at the heart of Bataille's *Theory of Religion* is what keeps him bound to a certain logic of subjective romanticism and exposes his own metaphysical commitments. To unpack this, we will begin by laying out Nancy's definition of sovereignty in *The Creation of the World, or Globalization* and then connect it with his work on sacrifice in *A Finite Thinking*. We will then conclude with a brief section by tying both sovereignty and sacrifice together with Nancy's comments on the death of God and the deconstruction of Christianity.
2.4.1 - Sovereignty

Nancy begins his argument in “Ex Nihilo Summum (Of Sovereignty),” by etymologically situating and defining the term sovereignty, and then goes on to relate the term to the nihil of creation. As he notes, “sovereignty designates, first, the summit” (CW 96). It descends from the 13th Century word soverain, which is derived from superanus in the Vetus Latina (Old Latin Bible), meaning “chief, principal, above” and associated with reign. It also has a monarchical connotation through the Italian sovrano, the synonym of which is monarcha.248 Superanus implies height and domination, which demonstrates the linguistic connection between summus and supremus. The nature of the sovereign is to reign from a summit—from the monarch (the “arch-position” that is by definition singular). Just as the “principle” or “chief” implies warlike domination (standing above others), so the word sovereign designates separation, and rising above earthly contingency. Nancy writes that the word sovereign designates height because, “height separates the top from the bottom and frees the former from the humility of the latter—from humus, from the ‘back-bent working of the earth,’ from laying down in sleep, from malady or death, and from extended things in general” (CW 96).

Since the summit is distinguished by height, it does not have a quality or materiality that makes it superior; rather, its position at the pinnacle determines its substance. The sovereign, in this manner, rises above the body. The chief has a physical body; but the sovereign is more than a body even though he occupies a physical form. In Roman triumphal processions this dual stress on physicality and transcendence was enacted by the slave, who stood behind the general during the victory procession. The slave held the crown of Jupiter over the general’s head while whispering into his ear, “remember, you are a man.”249 Sovereignty, therefore, stands in excess of any determinant sovereign rule.

From the Caesars of Ancient Rome to the Holy Roman Emperors of the Middle Ages, “the emblem of the sovereign was the eagle and the sun,” which signify the sovereign because of the height that makes the summit distinct. This separation creates distinction and differentiation and thereby the sacred character of commandment. As the highest, the

---

249 Mary Beard, The Roman Triumph (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007), 82.
sovereign gathers within himself/herself a distance that separates him or her from the means of exchange. This is why Nancy writes that, “The sovereign is separated from this dependence and this endless exchange of means and ends.” As distinct, the sovereign does not belong to the horizontal trajectory: “The sovereign does not only tower over: it is transversal. The sovereign, as height itself, occupies the emptiness of height—it is an “absolute superlative” (CW 97).

In this brief history of the term sovereignty, Nancy suggests that there is a distinction to be made between the traditional theologico-political notion of the suzerain, which is grounded in a mythos, and the atheological sovereign, which has no foundation. For instance, the medieval suzerain, like the God of Aquinas and Dante, was connected to a lineage that included all of creation, whereas the sovereign of the early modern state, as theorized in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, is of a different order of being than his subjects. The medieval suzerain has a vassal and “occupies a certain height within an ordered system” (CW 98). This system is bound by oath, allegiance, and fidelity. It enacts fidelity through a fief, which is a pledge of loyalty between vassal and suzerain. The right of the suzerain is ancestral, and it is not the absolute height occupied by the sovereign. This is why there are several designations of lordship—duke, marquis, knight, or baron—together revealing the manifold of bonds that found fiefs. For the atheological sovereign, in contrast, the bond is not a fief but a matter of absolute authority, absolute distinction. The modern sovereign founds and precedes the laws. This latter notion of sovereignty is completely independent of property, inheritance, or any system of loyalty (CW 99).

Like Bataille, Nancy suggests that this is how an atheological assumption comes to unseat the theologico-political sovereign in modernity: sovereignty, as a position in the order of being, has no relation or measure of equivalence to anything, and thereby voids its own substantiality. The modern notion of sovereignty is a position in the order of being that has no relation or measure of equivalence to anything—it is a conception of sovereignty that is no longer bound to some particular measure or order of being. In sum, what Nancy suggests is that the modern sovereignty is the atheological interruption of the *mythos* associated with

---

the theologico-political suzerain, and that this development can be traced from the practice of medieval fiefs to the rise of modern democracy.

The modern implications of this development were summarized best by Carl Schmitt when he wrote that the "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." In *Political Theology*, Schmitt argues that in modernity the exercise of the sovereign only occurs under the suspension of law because it is recognized that sovereignty is prior to or in excess of any law. For Schmitt, the sovereign act suspends the law because it must be all-powerful in order to be sovereign. He argues that, by necessity, the sovereign act must extend beyond all foundation and precedence. In order to actualize absolute authority, the sovereign must free itself from any limit or responsibility that obfuscates its own self-authorization.

Where Nancy differs from Schmitt is that he argues that this non-substantial source of the sovereign is the thing itself that needs to be thought: the space of creation *ex nihilo* from which sense emerges. Hence, Nancy understands this space of sovereignty not as something to be decided upon but as decision itself. The question of sovereignty is related to the death of God in exactly this manner: only in the recognition that the sovereign is in a state of exception can sovereignty—as a nonsubstantial place of emergence—be thought. This is why it is only through the loss of transcendence ascribed to the theologico-political that the nature of sovereignty can be addressed: the gap of creation that is left in the wake of "the death of God" is not a disaster or crisis that needs to be filled by the sovereign but an opportunity to recognize the nothing of sovereignty in the opening of sense. In this manner, the emptying out of the theologico-political—the death of the sovereign—does not give rise to a nothingness that needs to be filled by a decider but reveals the *nihil* itself—the gap, hyphen, or *with*—as the singular gesture of creation that cannot be totalized.

Ultimately, what Nancy suggests is that the modern expression of sovereignty is not a secularization of the divine but its exhaustion, and this coincides with the exhaustion of any

---

253 See also Jean-Luc Nancy, “Politics I,” in SW 88-93.
254 For Schmitt, this space needs to be filled by decider, or *Fürher*. In contrast, Nancy wants to keep this space open, vacating "nothing" of its substantiality.
political ideology in modernity. The instability that we call ‘the history of the West,’ from the advent of Christianity to the death of Louis XVI and beyond, is the acting out of this atheological displacement. Through this emptying-out, the sacred that was once held in reserve and kept distinct by God, King, and Laws is exposed as the strangeness of the profane and the exhaustion of the sacred. In this movement, sovereignty departs from its divine reserve and becomes the very exercise and revolt of the people (CW 99).

To put this in the words of Bataille: the death of the sovereign leads to a disorientation and vertigo that destabilizes all perspective. The reaching of a summit is equally the reaching of decline because the summit produces a vertigo that arrests all horizons. It is in this manner that the empty space of sovereignty disrupts the very notion of summit and base.256 When Bataille argues that “Sovereignty is NOTHING” he is referring to this instability and vertigo.257 For him, sovereignty is the impossible experience of the summit that is equally a decline. Sovereignty is not an object or a category that can be contained by a god, a sovereign Lord, or a subject, but the deleterious flow of time that decapitates all who try to seize it: “Sovereignty… is the object which eludes us all, which nobody has seized and which nobody can seize for this reason: we cannot possess it, like an object, but we are doomed to seek it.”258

2.4.2 - Sacrifice

In the essay "Unsacricable," Nancy aligns his writing on sovereignty with the basic parameters of Bataille's theory of sovereignty but asks the following question: "if "sovereignty is NOTHING," as Bataille tired himself out saying, is there anything that could be sacrificed for it?" (FT 67). Bataille always capitalized the "nothing" of sovereignty in order to underscore the irony of capitalizing the name of the absolute sovereign (CW 102), yet Nancy claims he didn't consider how this nothing is not offered to anyone or anything. Recall that the problem with religion for Bataille is that it externalizes the act of sacrifice in abstract

rituals and signs, thereby objectifying consciousness and sovereignty according to an economic model of exchange. Bataille suggests that only when this sacrificial logic is itself sacrificed will we encounter sovereignty. By this paradoxical formula, religion is overcome when its objectifications are sacrificed (TR 56-57). This, he claims, is the essence of "sovereign self-consciousness." Nancy, in his turn, wants to detach sovereignty from any sacrificial logic because of its subjective overtones. Nancy writes that, "Nothing, perhaps, marks out the West more distinctly (albeit obscurely) than this dialectical assumption or subsumption of sacrifice" (FT 59). The philosophical attempt, from Hegel to Heidegger, to exceed, surmount, or overcome religion is tied to a certain obsession with sacrifice, but for Nancy existence cannot be sacrificed, only offered up and shared. Bataille sums up this tradition when he writes that: "Sacrifice is a free activity. A kind of mimeticism. Man takes up the rhythm of the Universe."²⁵⁹ From St. Paul onwards, sacrifice has been projected upon the past history of the West as the absolute spiritual sublation of all bodies and death in a sovereign perception of the universe; sacrifice functions as the means to ascend from the death of the flesh to the life of the spirit. What makes Nancy's reading of the West unique is that he rejects the mimetic logic that undergirds sacrifice by showing how this "spiritual economy" falters on the fact that nothing—no being, no subject, and no other—precedes the singular plurality of finitude (FT 74). In this manner, he does not seek to restore the proper mode of sacrifice but to show how religion ends were sacrifice ends, and that the entire history of the West is caught up in this exhaustion (GI 1). Let's explain this by discussing the role of sacrifice and then connecting it to the deconstruction of Christianity.

According to the traditional philosophical and Christian interpretation, sacrifice is an offering made in the name of a transcendent truth or given end. Socrates and Christ are obviously the most famous exemplars of this, since both sacrificed their physical bodies in the name of a higher truth. Through their deaths they appropriate the negativity of existence in a supreme moment of reflection or revelation. In the Phaedo, Socrates depicts his death as a choice made in the name of philosophical thought. Socrates chooses death over expulsion from Athens in the name of justice, asserting that the purification of philosophical thought (i.e. a knowledge of truth) demands this sacrifice.²⁶⁰ Similarly, for Christ, sacrifice is a

²⁵⁹ Cited by Nancy, FT 59.
²⁶⁰ Plato, Phaedo, ed. by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 114c
necessary act that reconciles God with existence. According to the Pauline doctrine of *kenosis*, Christ sacrifices himself as an expression of the divine: "he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2: 7-11). Hence, in the case of both Socrates and Christ, what we have is an attempt to reconcile the truth of the universe with *itself* through death (FT 59).

Another instance of this logic can be found in the Christian Eucharist. According to the Augustinian formulation of sacraments, the Eucharist meal (also called Communion, Mass, "the Lord's Supper," "the Breaking of Bread," "the Holy Gifts," Divine Liturgy, etc.) is an external sign of an internal grace. The Eucharist is the ritual whereby the redemption engendered by the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ is gifted to believers, ensuring the transmission of grace between God and creation. Through the host (the bread) the infinite flesh of Christ infuses the flesh of the finite believer and connects the fallen human body with the redeemed body of God. When the *hoc est enim corpus meum* is announced over the Eucharistic host of bread and wine they become signs of divine sacrifice and Christians partake of the divine presence. The theology behind the Eucharist parallels the sacrificial act of Socrates and Christ because it reconciles creator and creation, inside and outside. The death that infects life is overcome by the mimetic repetition of divine sacrifice.

In "Unsacrificable," Nancy suggests that this sacrificial logic behind the Eucharist extends throughout the Western onto-theological tradition and that it contains four aspects:

1. This sacrifice is self-sacrifice: as in the case of Socrates and Christ, it is a consciously chosen sacrifice (FT 56).
2. This sacrifice is unique and functions as an exemplar by which all are offered a means of sanctification: the *hoc est enim corpus meum* might be the paradigmatic example of this.
3. This sacrifice is the revealed truth of every sacrifice, revealing the very essence of sacrifice itself: As Socrates warns, "As for you, if you will take my advice, you will think very little of Socrates, and much more of the truth." 261
4. The truth of this sacrifice sublates the sacrificial moment of sacrifice itself, promising to be the ultimate overcoming of sacrifice. 262

---

261 Plato, *Phaedo*, 91 b-c
262 See FT, 56-58. See also Dennis King Keenan, *The Question of Sacrifice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 42
It is because of the fourth and final aspect of sacrifice that the West is caught up in its own infinite overcoming (and self-deconstruction). Since it presents the highest form of sacrifice as an infinite sacrifice of itself to itself, it is caught up in an attempt to "exit" from its own past and continually posits new forms or figures to save itself. Nancy calls this final stage of overcoming "trans-appropriation," as it allows for the "appropriation of the self in its own negativity." According to this logic, sacrifice is a form of mimesis that functions to internalize the very essence of existence in a figuration or representation of its true form; it attempts to appropriate the sovereign movement of creation in a grand act of knowing or unknowing. What is presented as the overcoming of sacrifice is therefore still sacrificial because it is done "in the name of a higher, truer mode" of sacrifice (FT 59).

What Nancy dislikes about this "spiritual economy" of sacrifice, in part, is the pain and dismemberment that it encourages. Hegel, for instance, is happy to give up religious sacrifice but remains okay with the warlike violence of the state. And the same could be said about Marx's portrayal of the violent sacrifice required for the success of the proletariat revolution.263 Even Nietzsche, who was opposed to sacrifice in the name of "the good," sometimes portrays history as a necessary sacrificial process to "strengthen and raise higher the general feeling of human power."264 The West seems fixated on the machinery of this process and uses it to justify its endless bloody conflicts, both "internal" and "external." This dialecticization/spiritualization of history is used to sanctify the machinery of war and modern technology, not to mention a whole host of nihilist ends (capitalism, scientism, humanism, positivism, etc.). Though Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, took great care to avoid the snares of these various types of nihilism, they privileged the negative act of sacrifice in an economy of meaning. As Nancy writes, "In fact, economism forms the general framework of representation in which the West takes over a priori all early sacrifice, with the intention of proceeding to a general "sublation" of this economism (FT 59-60).

Nancy's way of critiquing this sacrificial economy is to emphasize the nihil of finitude. For Nancy, existence merely occurs; it happens. He finds the patency of the world in the "unceasing activity and actuality" of its singular plurality (CW 62). He agrees that finitude

---

expresses what Heidegger meant when he wrote that the "essence of Dasein lies in its existence," or what Bataille implied when he writes that sovereignty is NOTHING, but points out that this nihil is not a negativity that can be put to use for some particular end or cut out from the movement of the world (FT 74). He therefore counters both Heidegger and Bataille (and the entire history of representation) and suggests that existence cannot be sacrificed.

Recall that the idea of creation ex nihilo deconstructs all nihilist foundations for the world by exposing that existence is made possible by the nothing (rien) in each something. For Nancy, the world, is a becoming of nothing and this produces a detheologization (or a deconstruction) because it shows how existence rests on nothing other than itself, and that this self comes from nowhere and does not pre-exist the act of creation. He therefore uses the traditional notion of creation ex nihilo to show how our entire nihilistic tradition is deconstructed from within. By exposing how Western monotheism atheizes itself, he demonstrates how the whole tradition is caught up in its own overcoming. However, rather than frame this overcoming as a sacrificial oblation of the universe to itself (as Bataille sought in the sacred acéphalic figure), he argues we cannot find a specific creation to sacrifice; we cannot find a specific “creation” by a “creator.”

For Nancy, there is no whole to which existence refers, but just the unexpected sharing of singularities, bodies, and sense.

Another way of saying this is that there is no whole to which beings are exposed; no deus absconditus or divine Other that maintains a sovereign position over the world (D 113). As we have seen, sovereignty is not some substance or pinnacle of being beyond the world but the very spacing out of beings in the midst of the world, and what he is adding to this insight here is the idea that this spacing is unsacrificable. As Nancy writes, "If sovereignty is nothing, though, if 'the obscure God' is nothing more than the very obscurity of desire faced with its own truth, if existence simply aligns itself with its own finitude, then we need to think it at a distance from sacrifice" (FT 74).

Drawing all this together, Nancy notes that the German word for sacrifice, Opfer or Aufopferung, is actually the same word for offering, so that, technically speaking, to say that

---

being can only be offered, not sacrificed, is to affirm that it already is sacrificed, but with radically different implications. To use sacrifice to turn towards the other (whether divine or human) in a sublime act of appropriation (or dissolution), is to project a self-presence upon existence, but to suggest that there is no self-presence to existence is to suggest that it is continually offered, or abandoned, in the free movement of finitude (FT 74). Nancy sums all this up in the following terms:

A being that exists happens. It takes place. And this happening or this taking place is merely a being-thrown into the world. In this throw it is offered. And yet, it is not offered by anyone or to anyone. Nor is it self-sacrificed, since nothing, no being, no subject, precedes its being-thrown. In fact, it isn't even offered or sacrificed to a Nothingness, to a Nothing or to an Other, in whose abyss it could still impossibly enjoy its own impossibility of being. And it's on precisely this point that Bataille and Heidegger need to be relentlessly corrected. Corrected: that is to say, led even further away from the slightest drift to sacrifice. This drift toward or through sacrifice is always connected to the fascination with an ecstasy turned toward an absolute Other or toward an absolute Outside, into which the subject is emptied the better to be restored. In this way, the subject is promised, through some mimesis and through some "sublation" of mimesis, methexis with the Outside or the Other ... Western sacrifice corresponds to an obsessive fear of the "Outside" of finitude, however obscure and groundless this "outside" may be. (FT 75)

To affirm that finitude is offered, and that it is unsacrificable, is therefore to suggest that the world is not a moment in an economy of being that can be evaluated and sublated to a higher meaning or end. It is to affirm that there is only offering, but an offering that is made to no one or no thing.

2.4.3 - Unsacrificable Christianity

Relating this to Christianity, we can now affirm that what the death of God exposes is not a sacrificial communion between beings, or even a vision of their dismemberment, but simply existence in its singular offering. When you combine Bataille's theory of sovereignty with Nancy's observation that existence is unsacrificable, what you get is a radically atheological interpretation of the death of God, one which cannot be reduced to an economism of sublation or representation. Why? Because what the death of God exposes is
that there is *nothing else* to which sacrifice is directed: "There is no 'obscure God'" (FT 75). The death of God exposes an atheological gap at the center of all political structures; it exposes that all we have is the shared space of being together. Christian revelation is the explosion of the sovereign into the nothing of sovereignty in the midst of the world—it exposes the sovereign as the *nihil* of creation.

The gospel of Mark tells us that when Jesus cried out from the summit of the cross and breathed his last breath, the temple curtain was torn in two: “Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (Mark 15:37-38). The high and low do not become indistinct through this act, but make up the two dimensions of the world that form the dislocated experience of existence. This is what “not belonging to the world” (John 17:14-18) implies for Nancy; it implies recognizing the infinite opening that fractures substance into its irreducible plurality (A 24). This infinite is not beyond being, but is rather a ‘this’ here (the meaning of *Dasein*) that is irreducible to any one meaning.

What Christianity affirms is that the sense of the world was dislocated through the incarnation/retreat of the supreme being; it affirms that the name of God only ever signifies withdrawal and absence. "God," like the word "sovereignty," is the name for the absenting of sense that exceeds the grasp of any sovereign lord. As Nancy writes: "This proper name, *God*, insists, as if it should be the name that remains in the vacancy left by that individual being, in the vacant heart of sovereignty—and in this sense, as “the last god” (D 115). The relationship between sovereignty and the Christian God is therefore that the name “God” only ever signifies this passing and passage. As Heidegger knew well, the name god only ever signifies the coming of “the last god.” This is why “God” is a name for the “present/absent” of every name, because God names the unappropriable excess of our shared separation. When the absolute appears, it does so only as an excess that exceeds the common because it reveals the *thing itself* as nothing more than a passing wink. Nancy writes that, “The name god names the divergence and the step across the gap between nothing and nothing—let us call it the *res ipsa*, the thing itself” (D 118).

(In "The Divine Wink," Nancy elaborates on this point by tracing the etymology of the word god back to its Latin roots: divus/deus. Not only does he note that the word god can be traced back to Sanskrit, *deva* (its pre-Christian roots), but points out that it is connected to
the word *dies*, meaning day or daylight. The origin of the word “god” therefore, does not imply a being, but the syncope between day and night, seeing and not seeing, presence and absence:

The name god names the divergence and the step across the gap between nothing and nothing-let us call it the *res ipsa*, the thing itself. The resource of the Latin *divus/deus* should not produce any etymological or Cratylian illusion, not even any properly significant one, not even and especially not, since the name God would be the pro-noun of the Unnameable as the superessence of arch-significance. On the contrary, god is the common name of the separation between light and darkness, seeing and not seeing, day and night, something and nothing, without that—namely, that separation, that step—being properly named. God names, rather—and in all languages, according to their various resources—the opening of the name to its own non-sense, yet also that very opening as a calling out. (D 118)

God is not the name of a transcendent nor an immanent presence, but the *winken*, the blinking, of existence in its passing and retreat. God is not a sign for the whole but that which passes-by, exposing the oblivion of being to movement of beings. In this way, God is not a name for either a being nor beings, but the difference between the two terms. It is also not the name of an Other beyond being but an alteration within being that reveals being as retreat.266) The disruption brought about by the death of God is therefore not a divine revelation for Nancy, the arrival of the absolute Idea, nor the *Aufhebung* of all history; rather, it is the demonstration that divine sovereignty is unsacrificable and is constituted by withdrawal and obliteration. The kenosis of the sovereign lord of the Old Testament, through Jesus, he suggests, is the disruption of the summit associated with the theologicopolitical sovereign

266 For Nancy, the name “God” is trans-immanent. It does not signify anything transcendental, existing outside of space or time, nor immanent, existing in the world as a realized presence. Rather, “God,” as an infinite that is only ever known through the finite, blows apart any pure distinction between transcendence and immanence, and shows the transcendence in immanence (i.e. trans-immanence). Nancy makes this point by bringing together the work of Heidegger and Derrida. From Heidegger he takes the idea of the “last god,” which is a sign for the passing-by (passage) or sway of being, and from Derrida he takes the transgressive “a” in différance as a sign a-Dieu or adieu (toward-God or farewell) (D 116). What he is trying to suggest is that the gods are only ever a sign of the withdrawal, or farewell of creation. God is what annihilates itself (*s’anéantit*) as a distinct being in the act of creation, and it is precisely this withdrawal that makes possible the opening of the world. With the invocation of the word “divine,” therefore, Nancy does not mean anything mystical. Rather, what he is suggesting is that the divine is simply the opening of being to its own absence (D 116; CW 70). In this manner, he is trying to show that it is in the spacing-out of existence that “the subject—God—flies into pieces (*éclats*)” (IC 137). See also Morin, *Jean-Luc Nancy*, 63. More on this in Chapter Four.
because it opens height to the base, evil to good, and space to time. Through this descent of
the summit, the base is exposed to the grace of the summit and manifestation to its own
"radiance" (IC 125). However, this radiance is not the in-breaking of a divine force from the
outside of the world but the spilling out of sovereignty in the midst of the world and an
invitation for all to stand at the limit of death in the spacing-out of existence. Moreover, the
"real presence" of the divine that is left in this wake of this atheological passing is a broken
intimacy that prepares the way for division, distance, and incommensurality, and even the
end of religion: "That is in fact why the Christian God, and particularly the Catholic God,
will have been the god of the death of God, the god who withdraws from all religion (from
every bond with a divine presence) and who departs into his own absence, since he is no
longer anything but the passion of the intimate and the intimacy of suffering [du pâtir] or of
feeling and sensation..." (GI 11).

Where Nancy fundamentally differs from Bataille on this issue is that he claims that
the decapitation of the sovereign does not provide access to an improved form of
communication (i.e. because sacrifice is not directed towards some thing). Recall that when
Bataille uses Christ as an example of the summit/decline impossibly, he argues that the
summit expressed by Christ on the cross is an “equivocal expression of evil” because it
injures God.267 Bataille asserts that the summit event on the cross permits creator and
creation to bleed together. This co-bleeding is the opening of communication because
“creatures couldn’t communicate with their Creator except through a wound that lacerates
integrity.”268 In this manner, Bataille retains a certain Nietzschean critique of values,
attempting to use the death of God to replace the law of equivalence with a principal of non-
equivalence, as if the two were distinct economies.269 In contrast, Nancy suggests that the
communication of singularities is not to be confused with laceration or an improved sense of
communication because all we have is non-equivalence. When we are confronted with the
death of the other we are exposed to mourning, both for their death and for ours, but this
exposure is where the singularity of being compears. Being doesn't pre-exist this exposure as
a moment in an economy but takes place as this exposure. As Nancy writes, there is "no
tissue, no flesh, no subject or substance of common being, and consequently there is no

269 For example, Bataille's distinction between the general and the restricted economy.
laceration of this being. But there is sharing out" (IC 30). Intimacy is found in the unworking of community.

Admittedly, this is a slightly opaque formulation at the moment, and we will discuss it more in the following chapter when explicating Nancy's specific work on touch, bodies, the incarnation, and resurrection, but what is important to understand right now is that the "experience of the common" is not to be sought because it facilitates communication or an improved communal bond. For Nancy, it is not a matter of death exposing the community to the limits of subjectivity and thereby awakening a true form of relationality. Rather, it is a matter of death exposing the inoperativity of all community and communication in temporality. The value of "death," as discussed in the previous chapter, is that it awakens us to the divided nature of the common—what Nancy calls "the incessant incompletion of the community" (IC 38). It is in this manner that sovereignty and Christianity mirror each other in the nothing they offer: in both cases, the death of God or King is not a loss but the arrival of an undecidability that gives creation back to itself. For Nancy, what needs to be thought is this loss as an opening, not as laceration or an improved sense of communication. What he is after is not a reevaluation of present values in the name of an incommensurability that stands apart from the world, but an affirmation of the infinite incommensurability between existents in the midst of the finite. As he writes declaratively: "Only this provides the way out of nihilism: not the reactivation of values but the manifestation of all against a background where the "nothing" signifies that all have value incommensurably, absolutely, and infinitely" (TD 24).²⁷⁰

For Nancy, what the death of God shows is that the recoiling of being is proper to existence as such, and that freedom is constituted in retreat—it reveals that the absence of foundation is what makes existence possible. The kenotic emptying of the divine opens the common to the nothing at the heart of communication and being, and exposes existence in retreat from itself.²⁷¹

²⁷⁰For more on the critique of "value" in Nancy's work, see Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Insufficiency of ‘Values’ and the Necessity of ‘Sense’," in Journal for Cultural Research 9, no. 4 (2005): 437-441.
²⁷¹In a review of Claire Denis’s film, Beau Travail, Nancy describes Christ as a "lost savoir" and connects this "loss" to what he calls "a-religion." The review sticks very close to the film and doesn't really offer any sweeping comparisons with Christianity at large, or the broader history of religion in the West, but it is possible to see some comparisons between what he calls "a-religion" in this article and "atheology" in his broader oeuvre. If atheology describes the abandonment of God to the finite spacing of the world, then a-religion would describe an abandoned religion with a "lost savior." As suggested above, in order to understand "religion" in
In conclusion, we would suggest that Nancy's use of atheology has nothing to do with religion—at least in the sense of "intimacy" that Bataille gives the term—but the finite moment itself, in its division and disjunction. In fact, we might say that Nancy uses atheology to deconstruct the remnants of sacrificial romanticism that form Bataille's *Theory of Religion*. Nancy uses atheology against Bataille to think about how being-together consists only in its spacing, not to uncover a "FEROCIOUSLY RELIGIOUS" sense of the world. For Nancy, the value of all this talk about religion and the sacred is simply that it helps us think about the atheological opening of the world—it helps us think about the retreat and spacing of existence in its finite incommensurability. To this effect, Nancy agrees with Bataille that life is workless, or non-equivalent with itself, and that it cannot be appropriated to a logic of equivalence, but he does not present this non-equivalence as a bond of recognition (IC 29).

The significance of Bataille for Nancy is that he is the first thinker in the West to think community beyond community—to think the non-equivalence of community with itself. Instead of trying to imagine a new destiny for the *Volk* and do away with religion as a metaphysical structure, he imagined the loss of religion as the essence of religion. For Bataille, what is sacred is the loss of the self and the community in an ecstatic laceration before each and every other, and it was in this laceration that Bataille found a very worldly and material Christ. Where he came up short was in juxtaposing the general to the restricted economy, and in presenting this loss as a communal bond founded upon laceration. By trying to witness his own sacrificial dismemberment, Bataille showed his commitment to one of the oldest nihilistic tropes in Western philosophy: the idea that existence is offered or sacrificed to an Other, or to NOTHING.

Nancy, in his turn, rejects the lingering subjectivity in Bataille's work on community by emphasizing the free sharing, or compearance, of being. Developing Bataille's work on community and sovereignty in light of Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics, he moves towards an unsacrificable conception of sovereignty and affirms the retreat of existence from

---

Nancy's work, we must understand it in conjunction with abandonment, as it offers no redemption or salvation, and speaks only to our finite exscription. This loose connections might be an interesting area for future research on Nancy. See Jean-Luc Nancy, "A-Religion," trans. by Julia Borossa, *Journal of European Studies* 34:1/2 (2004): 14–18.
itself. He agrees that existence is made possible by its own destruction—the workless and deleterious movement of time—but affirms that this destruction exposes nothing more than the opening of sovereignty as the free sharing of existence between each and every being. What the death of God exposes for him is that the foundation of foundations, the ground of all creation, is nothing more than the retreat of being as it presents itself in-common, and this retreat is non-equivalent with itself; it does not offer itself as a sacred bond or stand in juxtaposition to the profane world as a new type of religious intimacy. For Nancy, the sacred is not separate from the profane world of "things" but is simply the strangeness of the world in its compearance, partition, and distortion. In this manner, he critiques nihilism not by trying to overcome it with a new bond founded upon loss but by drawing our attention to a "consumption that occurs in this bond" (IC 37). To explain this further, we must turn to his work on sense, touch, and bodies.
Chapter 3
Between Derrida and Nancy: Deconstructing Religion with Christianity

What I owe Derrida is a certain movement of thought, which is not a teaching or a doctrine any more than it is a corpus of terms, philosophemes, and citations. And that’s where friendship plays a role in thought, the place of a friendship of thought; one stimulates, provokes, and nourishes the other, sometimes aggravates or irritates the other, but one also knows that each must do his own work, have his own style.\(^{272}\)

3.1 - Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to situate Nancy in relation to Derrida, detail the precise points of contention between them, and show how Nancy's work on sense, touch, and bodies diverges from Derridean deconstruction. As we will see, the real difference between Derrida and Nancy is not whether the deconstruction of Christianity is occurring, or even whether deconstruction is a Christian operation, but how it occurs, and the sense of the world that is left in its wake. Both try to overcome the nihilism of metaphysics by pointing out the auto-unravelling of the Western tradition, but Derrida does this by pointing towards the undecidability which deconstruction opens up and Nancy by pointing towards the fragmented heart of the Christian corpus. In this manner, Nancy tries to push deconstruction farther than Derrida and rethink the entire tradition along deconstructive lines. The question is, does he succeed in doing this without essentializing Christianity and falling victim to metaphysical thinking?

The guiding question for this analysis may be summarized as follows: "What, if anything, remains of Christianity in the wake of deconstruction?" In other words, if Christianity is a deconstruction and a self-deconstruction, as Nancy suggests, how do we know it is Christian? This is a question Derrida posed to Nancy on several occasions so it will try to answer it with our analysis. We will start by tracing Derrida's own engagement with religion and show how he avoids any religious essentialism throughout his life's work. Since Derrida has sometimes been associated with the so called "return to religion," we need

to begin by clarifying his own writings on religion before detailing his critique of Nancy. After discussing his early essays and how he critiques all forms of theological and mythological essentialism, we will then move on to discuss his specific work on religion. In this analysis, we will see how Derrida deconstructs religion by showing how it is internally divided and opens towards an undecidable future, opening the world to its "messianic" potential. After this, we will turn to Derrida's reading of Nancy in *On Touching* and begin to explore the latter's work on sense, touch, and bodies. Since Derrida frames *On Touching* as an interrogation of the figure of touch in Nancy's work and contrasts him to thinkers like Jean-Louis Chrétien and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, it has led some scholars to draw a sharp wedge between them, but we will argue that their differences have more to do with philosophical style than any substantive philosophical disagreements. In the latter half of this paper, we will turn exclusively to Nancy's work in *Corpus, Noli Me Tangere,* and *Adoration*, detailing his work on the incarnation and the resurrection. As in the previous chapters, this analysis will show how Nancy wants to unpack the metaphysical tradition differently: Whereas Derrida wants to understand the doctrine of incarnation and the resurrection as metaphysical representations to be deconstructed, Nancy presents them as always already deconstructed. In conclusion, I will argue that despite their differences, Derrida and Nancy end up in the same place because they offer a very similar deconstruction of Christian salvation.

### 3.2 - Derrida

#### 3.2.1 - Influences and Divergences

In relation to Heidegger and Bataille, Derrida is perhaps the most "atheist" thinker we will compare to Nancy in this study. As he wrote in "Circumfession," "I quite rightly pass for an atheist." It is fair to say that he spent his entire academic career trying to expose the phantoms of theological and philosophical essentialism that lurk in Western thought. Additionally, it is fair to note that he lacks Heidegger's penchant for the mystery of being and
Bataille's desire for the agony of the sacred. Derrida never pretends to find himself in the dissolution of being or witness his own dismemberment in the death of God. However, it is also fair to say that his entire attempt to deconstruct the Western essentialism emerges out of the Judeo-Christian tradition and he did not think it possible to completely escape from its influence. As he points out, deconstruction can be traced back through Heidegger's *Destruktion*, Martin Luther's *destruens* (OT 54), Paul's warning to the Corinthians, and the wider Mediterranean and Ancient Mesopotamian world. In other words, there is a provenance to deconstruction that betrays the very ambitions of deconstruction, and Derrida suggests that it is because of this provenance that it is not possible to completely exit from metaphysical structures, whether these be defined as philosophical or religious. As he wrote in 2003, two years before his death:

I never associated the theme of deconstruction with the themes that were constantly being brought up during the discussion, themes of "diagnosis," of "after" or "post," of "death" (death of philosophy, death of metaphysics, and so on), of "completion" or of "surpassing" (*Überwindung* or *Schrift züriück*), of the "end." One will find no trace of such a vocabulary in any of my texts. This is not fortuitous, as you might well believe, and it is not without enormous consequence. It is not fortuitous that, as early as *Of Grammatology* (J965), I explicitly declared that it was not a question of the end of metaphysics and that the closure was certainly not the end. And such a closure, I very quickly clarified, did not surround or enclose something like "Metaphysics" in general and in the singular but instead traversed its heterogeneous space following a grid of complex and noncircular limits.

As we will see, this tracing of the limits of deconstruction forms the corner stone of Derrida's work and his contentious interactions with Nancy. For Derrida there is no end of metaphysics, no "after," "post," or "death" of its vocabulary. Let us unpack this by starting at the beginning and working towards Derrida's late interactions with Nancy.

Born into a Sephardic Jewish family on the outskirts of Algiers in 1930, Derrida's spent his youth submerged in the tensions of the Judeo-Christian world, in which Jews,
Europeans, and Muslims co-mingled but barely spoke.276 Despite being a Jew in a middle class family and being able to attend a decent public school, Derrida was exposed to the conflict of this multicultural world in the early years of his education. As he later recounted, in the schools at this time there was much racial violence, including anti-Arab, anti-Semitic, anti-Italian, and anti-Spanish racism.277 In fact, in 1942, when World War II came to Algeria, this tension only increased as he and other Jews were forced to leave the public schools. Derrida was forced to complete his early education in a Jewish school, whose "communitarian" spirit he strongly disliked.278

From an early age Derrida began to move away from any traditional notion of Jewish religiosity. One book that heavily influenced him early on was *The Fruits of the Earth* by André Gide, which is itself influenced by Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and lionizes Gide's own liberation from puritanical religious influences. Late in his life he would refer to this book as an early "manifesto or a Bible: at once religious and neo-Nietzschean, sensualist, immoralist, and especially very Algerian...."279 Other authors who influenced him in his teenage years were Rousseau, Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre, all of whom cultivated a love of philosophy and a rebellious spirit in the young Derrida.

In 1949 Derrida moved to France to prepare for entrance to the École Normale Supérieure, in Paris. Though he failed his entrance exams on his first attempt he was finally admitted in 1952, and began studying under notable French intellectuals like Louis Althusser, Jean Hyppolite, and the young Michel Foucault. Derrida completed his Master's thesis in 1954, on "The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy," and then his Doctorate in 1967, titled *Of Grammatology* (orig. *De la grammatologie: Essai sur la permanence de concepts platonicien, aristote’licien et scolastique de signe e’crit*). During this period of graduate work and intellectual development Derrida worked as an assistant to Paul Ricoeur and taught general philosophy and logic at the Sorbonne.280

1967 was a big year for Derrida, not just because he completed his dissertation but because he burst onto the academic world with the publication of *Speech and Phenomena,*

---

278 Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography,* 21
280 A. D. Schrift *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy: Key Themes and Thinkers* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 120.
Margins of Philosophy, and Of Grammatology. Derrida was now a rising star. A year before this publication blitz he also gained some notoriety when he presented his seminal paper, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," at Johns Hopkins University. This conference presentation, along with his new publications, helped to spread his name and gave birth to the term "post-structuralism"—a term that was not invented by Derrida but by the American academics who popularized and appropriated his work.²⁸¹

What made Derrida's argument in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" so important is that he effectively put an end to the popular rise of structuralism in America. By critiquing the anthropological structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss for merely replacing the metaphysics of the subject with a metaphysics of the sign, he exposed its underlying assumptions and made space for a new approach to cultural studies.

Up until 1967, structuralism had been gaining popularity because it offered a scientific way to study culture that didn't privilege man as the center of the universe. Structuralism offered a way to study culture at the level of its formal content, not its rational, psychological, or even authentic production. For instance, in regards to religion, Lévi-Strauss argued that all human myths, artifacts, and customs could be studied as a structural arrangement of various "mythemes." He suggested that the myths found in the different cultures were composed of a bundle of irreducible mythic ideas, like the hero, the quest, the father, the sun, the afterlife, etc.²⁸² Building upon the work of the Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure, he argued that the relation between mythemes were arbitrary cultural constructions and that their meaning was determined by their arrangement in a myth.²⁸³ Moreover, just as Saussure argued that the relation between signifiers doesn't reflect some natural relationship to the world, so Lévi-Strauss argued that myths are arbitrary cultural formulations and don't reflect some superessential reality. Hence, for Lévi-Strauss, studying religion was a matter of exposing how its mythemes were structurally arranged and exploring what this reflected about nature and culture. He suggested that the meaning of myths in a culture, just like the meaning of words in a sentence, is determined by the relation between its various parts.

Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss revolves around his rejection of any natural origin or underlying form that could be attributed to language. He agrees that the shift from the subject to language is an improvement upon prior anthropological models, but he rejects the stability of meaning that Lévi-Strauss uncovers in the latter. Derrida praises the rise of Saussurean structuralism as the “moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse…that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences.”

This moment in the human sciences is equivalent to the death of God in philosophy because it erases any center, foundation, or principal of order and exposes that all meaning is dependent upon the arbitrary nature of signification. However, Derrida presses this development further by stressing that there is no underlying structure to contain the "play" (jeu) of meaning that governs any particular sign. Lévi-Strauss' emphasis on the prevalence of mythemes across all human cultures assumes that the meaning, or presence of any sign, can be determined by studying its structural relation to other signs in a system of differential relation. In linguistic terms, what he privileges is the synchronic form of signs; the spatial arrangement and presence of language at any given time. Lévi-Strauss fully recognizes that this linguistic arrangement is arbitrary and a product of history but he nonetheless tries to determine the presence of this meaning at any given moment. In contrast, Derrida argues that there is nothing in language to contain this dissemination and therefore no determinate present meaning. In linguistic terms, what he stresses is the simultaneous synchronic and diachronic dissemination of signs, arguing that the meaning of phonemes is dependent on both their spatial and temporal relations. Hence, Derrida ultimately argues that structuralism is itself a myth, for it teaches us more about how theorists choose to order and understand language than it does about cultural meaning and its relation to nature. We must be skeptical of any attempt to locate mythic structures in a definite interpretive frame, and affirm that all such frames are themselves mythic arrangements—"a historical illusion." As Derrida writes in "Force and Signification," which he first published in 1963, the problem with the structuralist approach is that

---

"structure, the framework of construction, morphological correlation, becomes in fact and despite his theoretical intention the critic’s sole preoccupation."\(^{286}\)

Of course, in emphasizing the "force of signification" that is impossible to contain in any metaphysics of presence, Derrida is not privileging some primordial space of being or chaotic play of forces over and above metaphysics; he is not trying to set up some new opposition between sameness and difference and give existence a new proper name.\(^{287}\) In fact, Derrida suggests that the problem in the human sciences and all previous philosophical methods is that they are circular. Theorists either privilege some definite cosmic origin of meaning—what he associates with a Rousseauian nostalgia for pure origins and nature—or they affirm the infinite play of all meaning—what he associates with a Nietzschean affirmation of "diaphoristic" forces.\(^{288}\) However, in both cases philosophers ultimately privilege presence over absence in some particular form or name; Derrida lists the following as examples: "\textit{eidos, archê, telos, energeia, ousia} (essence, existence, substance, subject) \textit{Alêtheia} transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth." Throughout the middle ages, this transcendental signifier was "God", between the 16th and 19th centuries it was the "subject," at the beginning of the 20th Century "phenomenology" and "structuralism," but in each case some form of presence is ascribed to meaning and being. "The history of metaphysics," Derrida argues, "like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies." The names of these forms which sublate difference are many. The very matrix of Western thought is its nihilistic projection of "Being as presence in all senses of this word."\(^{289}\) What makes the "event" of structuralism so significant is that it exposes that these transcendental signifiers have always been linguistic constructions. Derrida therefore applies the linguistic critique of meaning to the human sciences, pointing out how any attempt to ascribe an ultimate structure to existence is mythic. He suggests that the turn to

\(^{286}\)Derrida, \textit{Writing and Difference}, 17.

\(^{287}\)As Derrida writes in "Force and Signification": "Our intention here is not, through the simple motions of balancing, equilibration or overturning, to oppose duration to space, quality to quantity, force to form, the depth of meaning or value to the surface of figures. Quite to the contrary. To counter this simple alternative, to counter the simple choice of one of the terms or one of the series against the other, we maintain that it is necessary to seek new concepts and new models, an \textit{economy} escaping this system of metaphysical oppositions. This economy would not be an energetics of pure, shapeless force. The differences examined \textit{simultaneously} would be differences of site and differences of force (\textit{Writing and Difference}, 22).

\(^{288}\)Derrida, \textit{Writing and Difference}, 369.

\(^{289}\)Derrida, \textit{Writing and Difference}, 353.
language allows us to see the metaphors and metonymies that dot Western intellectual history for what they are—literary creations.

Derrida developed the basic impetus for this critique of metaphysics early in his intellectual development. In 1957, he wrote a letter to Hyppolite to inform him that what he wanted to study was the undecidable line between writing, literature, philosophy, science, theology, etc. In this letter he states that his MA work on Husserl is not simply an explication of phenomenological thought but an exposure of the "techniques of transcendental phenomenology" as a literary object: "[M]y most constant interest," he notes, "is toward literature, toward that writing that is called literary." He then goes on to suggest that he wants to explore how writing both establishes and disturbs the very question of existence: "when and how does an inscription become literature and what takes place when it does? To what and to whom is this due? What takes place between philosophy and literature, science and literature, politics and literature, theology and literature, psychoanalysis and literature?"  

As Derrida's work developed in the 60's, 70's, and 80's this interest remained constant. In fact, Nancy has remarked that the incredible thing about Derrida's early work on Husserl is that "you can't find the young Derrida in it.... He's already completely there, fully armed and helmeted like Athena."  

The key element of Derrida's early work that defines it so quintessentially and which sets the tone for all his later work, is what he calls différance. As just noted, he doubles down on the structuralist point that language is an arbitrary cultural construction by emphasizing the spatial and temporal deferral of meaning. By stressing both the synchronic and diachronic relation between phonemes, Derrida points out how it is impossible to determine the present meaning of any particular sign. In "Differance," a paper Derrida first gave in 1968, he invented the neologism différance to express the essence of this dissemination of signification. Combining the French verb "to differ" (différer) and "to defer"(différante), he suggests that the presence of any written mark is caught up in the spacing/temporalizing of existence:

---


As distinct from difference, differance thus points out the irreducibility of temporalizing (which is also temporalization—in transcendental language which is no longer adequate here, this would be called the constitution of primordial temporality—just as the term "spacing" also includes the constitution of primordial spatiality). Differance is not simply active (any more than it is a subjective accomplishment); it rather indicates the middle voice, it precedes and sets up the opposition between passivity and activity. With its a, differance more properly refers to what in classical language would be called the origin or production of differences and the differences between differences, the play [jeu] of differences.  

Arguing that language is not a set system of meaning—a determined set of relations—but a set of differences that opens the possibility for meaning, he points towards the differing/deferral "by which language, or any code, any system of reference in general, becomes 'historically' constituted as a fabric of differences." Derrida suggests that the play of linguistic systems are caught up in the spacing of existence because every sign that is "present" is only definable by a whole host of other signs which are absent. This infinite differing/deferral extends into both the past and future iterations of the term and this voids the very content of the present meaning. As he writes, every element of signification "is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element." Hence, this element that constitutes the possibility for meaning in the present does not properly belong to either the past, present, or future, but is rather a relation that opens the signification to the very possibility of meaning. From a general level, all this implies that in order for something to "be" in the metaphysical sense of the term it must be divided from itself—from what is not—and this division, or interval, is what is called "spacing"; it is "time's becoming-spatial or space's becoming-temporal (temporalizing)."

In this manner, "Writing" for Derrida doesn't simply refer to written signs on a page but the marks, cuts, and incisions that constitute the very infrastructure of existence, or what he calls "arche-writing," "reserve," "trace," "supplement," or "techne," etc. These terms are meant to signify the différence of difference. They don't refer to some ideal or material ground but the original technics of mediation, instrumentalization, and machination which

---

293 Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 141.
294 Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 142-143.
haunt that naturalness of life from the very beginning. Writing for Derrida is the "primordial" difference that renders any absolute form of presence or absence impossible. He writes "Differance is the nonfull, nonsimple 'origin'; it is the structured and differing origin of differences."\(^{295}\) Much like Nancy argues that what is "primordial" is the plurality of being-with, Derrida argues that what is "primordial" is the spacing out of difference, which defies any simple or natural origin. As Derrida writes, "from the very first \([dès l'origine]\) there is instrumentalization .... a prosthetic strategy of repetition inhabits the very moment of life: life is a process of self-replacement, the handing-down of life is a \textit{mechanike}, a form of technics. Not only, then, is technics not in opposition to life, it also haunts it from the very beginning."\(^{296}\)

As stressed repeatedly throughout this study, none of this is meant to imply that deconstruction is a negative process of demolition, but an attempt to lay bare the structural assumptions, architecture, and ontology of the Western tradition. When Derrida searched for a word to translate the Heideggerian word \textit{Destruktion} into French he decided against the literal translation precisely because it implied annihilation, and what he wanted to draw attention to is how “an object, a text, a theme, etc . . .” deconstructs itself.\(^ {297}\) Deconstruction is therefore not a form of analysis or method for reading a text but the very difference that permits reading in the first place; it is the passivity of the text that opens it beyond any closure (\textit{closure}). Derrida's clearest explication of his discovery and early use of the term is in "Letter to a Japanese Friend,"

When I chose this word, or when it imposed itself upon me, [. . .] I little thought it would be credited with such a central role in the discourse that interested me at the time. Among other things I wished to translate and adapt to my own ends the Heideggerean words \textit{Destruktion} or \textit{Abbau}. Both words signified in this context an operation bearing on the \textit{structure} or traditional \textit{architecture} of the fundamental concepts of ontology or of Western metaphysics. But in French the term ‘destruction’ too obviously

\(^{295}\)Derrida, \textit{Speech and Phenomena}, 141.
\(^{297}\) Jacques Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese friend," in \textit{Psyche: Inventions of the Other}, vol. 2, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 4. As noted in the previous chapter, Heidegger also didn't conceive of \textit{destruktion} in negative terms. Hence, the reason Derrida couldn't use a direct translation is not because of its "Heideggerian" meaning, but because of the differences between German and French.
implied an annihilation or a negative reduction much closer perhaps to Nietzschean ‘demolition’ than to the Heideggerean interpretation or to the type of reading I was proposing. So I ruled that out. I remember having looked to see if the word *déconstruction* (which came to me it seemed quite spontaneously) was good French. I found it in Littré. The grammatical, linguistic, or rhetorical senses [*portées*] were, I found, bound up with a ‘mechanical’ sense [*portée *‘*machinique’*]. This association appeared very fortunate [. . .].

The only "thing" that can do the work of deconstruction is the "thing" that is being deconstructed, whether we are studying Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* or the history of Christianity; it is the gaps, lines of cleavage, spacing, and technical prosthetics that render it deconstructed.

Hence, across Derrida’s *oeuvre*, it is through his emphasis on writing and *technē* that he critiques negative theology and the so called “return to religion.” By stressing the irreducible supplementation that lies at the origin of all phenomenal experience, Derrida jettisons the neo-platonic and theological overtones that infuse the work of his philosophical forerunners and contemporaries. For instance, in "Differance," he is careful to make a distinction between deconstruction and any form of negative theology, stressing that everything is subject to the radical alterity of technical supplementation. He suggests that *différance* is "irreducible to every ontological or theological—onto-theological—reappropriation." Derrida, he argues, simply appeals to the fact that presence, in any name or form, is always to come, infinitely differing and deferring in the prosthesis of supplementation. In his later works, as the question of ethics, justice, and religion became a central concern, Derrida connected this infinite deferral of presence to religious themes such as the messianic, *khōra*, and justice in order to show how religious essentialism is also unworked by the endless prosthetic supplementation of *différance*.

There has been some disagreement amongst scholars as to the parallels between Derrida’s early and late work in this regard, but there is no reason to claim that there was a “religious turn” in Derrida’s late work. Since his earliest work focused on phenomenology, structuralism, and the traditional philosophical concepts, and his late work focused on religion, justice, and democracy, some have suggested that there is a sharp difference

---

299Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 134.
between some of his work. Thinkers such as John D. Caputo, for instance, have argued that in Derrida’s early work in the 1970’s deconstruction was a Nietzschean “free play of signifiers leading to other signifiers without respite,” but that in the 1980’s & 90’s he developed a more “Levinasian tendency.”

Though it is true that there were definite developments in Derrida’s terminology in his later career, we must resist the simple narrative that Derrida’s discussion of religious themes is accompanied by a shift in his thinking. As Michael Naas notes, there are far more reasons for stressing the continuity between his early and late work than their division. We will mention three of these reasons now in brief, and then we will develop them more below.

First, even in Derrida’s early works such as *Glas* (1973) religion was already front and center. Although this became more pronounced in “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” (1992a) and “Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices” (1992b), where Derrida engaged with the apophatic theology of Pseudo-Dionysus and Angelus Silesius, his interest in religion can be traced back to his earliest work on existentialist phenomenology. Indeed, as Edward Baring has argued in *The Young Derrida*, Derrida's entire project can be read against the backdrop of Christian existentialism that dominated post-war France. Judeo-Christian thought was the milieu in which deconstruction emerged, not a latter ethical development.

Second, Derrida’s engagement with Emanuel Levinas was never without some degree of critique. For instance, Derrida’s critique of Levinas in “Violence and Metaphysics” (1963) is essentially directed at the latter’s emphasis on an "Other" (*autrui*) that is transcendent to experience. Although he praises Levinas’ attempt to get beyond the ‘subject to subject’ equivalence that dominated Hegelian and Husserlian phenomenology, he dislikes Levinas’ use of phenomenal experience to verify the priority of an Other beyond being.

---


303 Like Derrida, Levinas is committed to the trace, and rejects its effacement under any positive proclamation of being (*Writing and Difference*, 147-48). However, as Derrida writes in "How Not to Speak: Denials," it is also true that Levinas stands in the negative theological tradition of Plato and Pseudo-Dionysius. What Plato called *epekeina tes ousias*, that place beyond being and essence, is revised in Levinas's *Otherwise than Being* (or Jean Luc Marion's *God Without Being*). What is offered in these works, Derrida suggests, is the same hyper-essentialism found throughout the Neo-Platonic tradition, whereby God is negated in order to save the name
although Derrida agrees that the trace of the other defies logical reduction and exposes the violence of metaphysical logic, he suggests that by placing over-due stress on the absolute priority of the encounter with the other, Levinas merely recreates the metaphysical tyranny of the philosophers he critiques. As Derrida writes, "Levinas calls us toward this unthinkable-impossible-unutterable beyond (tradition's) Being and Logos. But it must not be possible either to think or state this call." Contra Levinas, Derrida suggests that the violence of metaphysics is not just in reducing difference to sameness, but in assuming some original access (or knowledge) to the heterogeneous Other beyond being. The idea of a radical alterity that stands over and above the world (a beyond to being) is just as tyrannical as assimilating all of existence to one singular rational or conceptual perspective. Hence, Derrida suggests that a more radical way to conceive of alterity is to think *différance* right at the level of finitude, on the very inside of originality. It is not enough to simply emphasize difference over sameness, what we need to do is think difference right at the heart of sameness. This slight alteration implies that the encounter with the other is not a sign for an Other beyond being—which merely reincarnates neo-Platonism—but an irreducible alterity to which all being is exposed.

Third, throughout Derrida’s work he leans towards an emphasis on the Hegelian “bad infinite,” and this challenges any religious reading of his work. For Derrida, the metaphysics of presence consists in “returning ‘strategically,’ ideally,’ to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc.” As noted above, he argues that all metaphysicians have proceeded in this way, privileging positivity over negativity, and he takes Hegel’s distinction between a “negative infinite” and a “right infinite” as a prime example of this. Hegel associates the idea of a negative or "bad" infinity with Kantian freedom and rejects it because it defers the presence of existence forever without end. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel argues that when the negative operates in finitude it leads to an incessant “ceasing-to-be” that makes it impossible for being “in itself” to come into relation to itself. Hegel labelled this negative infinity a “spurious infinity” (*schlechte Unendlishe*) and


Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 114.


juxtaposed it to a positive or "right" infinity, which implies a process of self-actualization that is realized through the negative. The idea of a "right infinite" sublates spatial limitation by completing the movement of negativity by coming in contact with itself. As Hegel writes, a positive infinite negates the negative by forming a circle: “the image of the true infinity, bent back upon itself, becomes the circle, the line which has reached itself, which is closed and wholly present, without beginning and end.” In “Violence and Metaphysics” Derrida seems to side with the "bad infinite" and suggests that any attempt to subsume alterity into a positive infinity remains ontotheological. He writes that “the only effective position to take in order not to be enveloped by Hegel” is “to consider the spurious infinity (that is, in a profound way, original finitude) irreducible.” For Derrida, the spacing of difference is more aligned with the "bad infinite" in an endless differing/deferral of presence, and he rejects the idea of infinity coming in contact with itself in the form of a self-presence. Martin Hägglund nicely sums up this point when he argues that difference must be described as an infinite finitude that is never present to itself and reduces thought to undecidability. Only in this manner, Hägglund suggests, did Derrida think it possible to affirm the alterity of being. (I will return to this complex topic below when discussing Nancy.)

Derrida wishes to draw attention to this "primordial" spacing at the base of all knowledge because it has been undervalued in the political, philosophical, and religious history of the West. The political-philosophical and ethical-religious tradition has always privileged the light of God, being, thought, and language as prior to the technics of writing and communication, and this must be deconstructed by exposing how the exteriority of writing and the interiority of being are caught in an undecidable relationship that renders any self-presence impossible. As we saw in the previous chapters, in Heidegger's and Bataille's work on religion there is a tendency to privilege some space of presence where life encounters itself independent of instrumentalization, and to name this space as the ultimate source (or end) of existence. For both thinkers, the "exit from religion" largely amounts to showing how to uncover the truth of the world beyond religion (or within it), and detailing how the more originary truth overcomes dogma from within. For both, the "exit from

308 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 119.
309 For more on this see Martin Haglünd, Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 92-93.
religion" is sort of a demythologization that ends in a sneak peek at the ultimate truth of reality (even if that view is of a fractured whole or open space of disclosure). For Heidegger this takes place through the temporal sway of being and for Bataille through sacrifice but in both cases what is privileged is some space of auto-affection, some relation to self as other and other as self.\footnote{For more on auto-affection see Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 233-236.} For Derrida, in contrast, it is never possible to peer behind the veil, so to speak, because there is no space of auto-affection—divine, human or natural—that is not infected with the trace of the supplement.

This, I would argue, is the starting point for understanding Derrida’s work on religion and Christianity, not to mention his broader critique of scientific rationalism and philosophy as a whole. His central critique throughout his *oeuvre* is the position of priority that is given to any phenomenological or structural space of presence, whether it be the God of Thomas Aquinas, Hegel's absolute, Heidegger’s *Alētheia*, or Lévi-Strauss' mythemes. To challenge the metaphysics of presence he continually draws our attention to the trace that can't be named. Like a Buddhist monk pointing at the illusory reflection of the moon on water, Derrida points towards the *différance* that haunts all metaphysical structures and then tries to rethink the Western ontotheological tradition in light of this operation. However, he doesn’t do this by trying to destroy religion or overcome metaphysics in some *de facto* sense. Rather, he points towards an opening in the tradition and tries to think the history of the West without reference to a prior truth, light, or unveiling.\footnote{Jacques Derrida, *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. by Yvonne Sherwood and. Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2005), 44.} Let's unpack this by turning to his specific texts on religion, Christianity, and Nancy.

### 3.2.2 - Religion

Derrida’s most direct engagement with religion is in “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” where he offers a direct analysis of the technics of supplementation that infuse all proclamations of salvation and enlightenment. Written for a conference on religion on the Island of Capri, Italy in 1994, “Faith and Knowledge” is a dense and elliptical essay that discusses not just the "sources" of religion
but the sacred, faith, Abrahamic revelation, messianicity, secularism, technology, and globalization, among other things. From a close reading of this text we are able to see many parallels with Nancy’s work, and it is probably not a complete coincidence that Nancy’s original essay on the subject, "The Deconstruction of Christianity," was written only four years after “Faith and Knowledge.”

The title of the text, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone," is a play on the titles of three major works on religion in the philosophical tradition: Hegel’s homonymous Treatise, Bergson’s The Two Sources of Morality and Religion, and Kant’s Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone. However, Derrida never really engages with any of these texts directly but instead puts forward three theses: 1) the thesis that there are two sources of religion, 2) the thesis that religion, technology, and science are caught in an autoimmune relationship, and 3) the thesis that religious faith and rational knowledge have a common cause in a more elementary faith that precedes both. This allows Derrida to expose how science, enlightenment, and religious experience all rely upon an originary faith in the other and the prosthetics of supplementation that facilitates this relationship. In what follows I will primarily focus on the first and second thesis, detailing how Derrida understands the relationship between religion, Christianity, and technology.

Like Heidegger's analysis religion in The Phenomenology of Religious Life, Derrida organizes his deconstruction of religion around the insight that religion is a Western construct. Recall that Heidegger begins by critiquing theorists of religion like Otto and Troeltsch for universalizing the category. Similarly, Derrida points out that religion is not a universal signifier that stands over and above cultural difference but a particular Western term. The history of the word "religion" starts in Rome and then takes a detour through the modern world to become a universal category of phenomena—what Derrida calls religion’s "globalatinization" (French mondialatinization). When we speak of religion "we are already speaking Latin," and "the world today speaks Latin (most often via Anglo-American) when it authorizes itself in the name of religion" (FK 64). There is no discourse on religion that is possible apart from the technical apparatus of our history, and this trace of our past is caught

---

between a certain "Roman Occidentality and the bond it formed with the Abrahamic revelations" (FK 48).

It is for this reason that Derrida spends much of the essay teasing apart the two etymological derivations of the Latin term religio—relegere and religare—and connecting it to its globalatinization.\(^\text{313}\) As he points out, relegere means holiness, and descends from the Ciceronian derivation of religio, “what would seem to be the avowed formal and semantic filiation: bringing together in order to return and begin again.” And religare means faith, and descends from the 3rd Century Christian father Tertullian’s use of religio meaning “obligation, ligament, and hence to obligation, to debt, etc., between men or between man and God.” He connects the first derivation of religio to the experience of the holy or the sacred, and the second derivation to the faith we place in this relationship and its transmission in the world (FK 55). He connects one derivation to the technical trace that facilitates it and one to the type of address this invokes. Let's unpack these points and then connect it to the wider argument in the essay.

Derrida interrogates the first derivation of religio by questioning whether “a discourse on religion [can] be dissociated from a discourse on salvation [sulut]: which is to say, on the holy, the sacred, the safe and sound, the unscathed <indemne>, the immune (sacer, sanctus, heilig, holy, and their alleged equivalents in so many languages)?” (FK 42). Open any textbook on “World Religions” and you will find a subject that is organized around a discussion of salvation, which comes from the Latin salvare, "to save." Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a narrative about religion independent of a promise of health, redemption, and communal restoration through ritual, sacrifice, or prayer. Religious discourse is organized around the promise of salvation via the sacred, and the various forms of atonement associated with this promise. For instance, in Theodore M. Ludwig’s The Sacred Paths, Understanding the Religions of the World, 4th ed., he defines religion as follows:

> We designate this focal point of the religions as the sacred, the ground of ultimate vitality, value, and meaning. The modes of experiencing the

sacred, and the responses to this experience, are many and varied; these are the forms and expressions that make up the religious traditions of the world.314

Among the many possible meanings associated with the sacred, Derrida stresses its connection with the rhetoric of the “unsathed,” with protection, and the desire to keep something safe and sound. The sacred is that which is cut-out (held in distinction) from the alterity of finitude: "Sacred" comes from the Latin sacrere, "to make sacred, consecrate; hold sacred, immortalize; set apart, dedicate."315

Obviously, the reason why Derrida focuses upon "salvation" and the "sacred" is not to identify some essential religious experience. Rather, it is to locate the “sacrosanctifying attitude or intentionality" at work in discourses on the "living, strong and fertile, erect and fecund: safe, whole, unsathed, immune, sacred, holy and so on" (FK 85). The sacred is all too often imagined as that sublime thing which restores health to the finite, as the light of the world that touches creation in order to heal it. It is not only imagined as the source of all the different religions but all law, justice, and truth. According to the logic of indemnification that supports religion, that which is sacred is held in tact and remains proper despite the movement of time. Moreover, it is directly through this logic of indemnification that religion is believed to affect, sanctify, and guide the world.

The religiosity of religion lies in this attempt to locate some space of excess above the living, some absolute value that is exemplary and to which humanity has some special access. Ultimately, it is used to signify a cut between creator and creation, gods and humans, reason and animality, between that which is transcendent and that which is finite.316

It is in this manner that the first source of religion is used to indemnify man, reason, God, etc., from that which is natural, biological, and finite. It is a means of guaranteeing some special place

316 As Derrida notes, designating that which is "sacred" is a way of protecting life from itself, teasing apart that which has absolute value from that which does not. It is a way of protecting the human from the animal, the holy from the sacrificable: "This mechanical principle is apparently very simple: life has absolute value only if it is worth more than life... It is sacred, holy, infinitely respectable only in the name of what is worth more than it and what is not restricted to the naturalness of the bio-zoological (sacrificable) although true sacrifice ought to sacrifice not only "natural" life, called "animal" or "biological;" but also that which is worth more than so-called natural life. Thus, respect of life in the discourses of religion as such concerns "human life" only in so far as it bears witness, in some manner, to the infinite transcendence of that which is worth more than it (divinity, the sacrosanctness of the law" (Fk 87).
for human understanding independent of the messy world of bodies, skin, technics, and death. As Derrida writes in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, at the origin of religion lies a reticence and shame, an attempt to safeguard the human: "This movement of shame, this reticence, this inhibition, this retreat, this reversal is, no doubt, like the immunizing drive, the protection of the immune, of the sacred (heilig), of the holy, of the separate (kadosh) that is the very origin of the religious, of religious scruple."\(^{317}\)

From the start of the essay, Derrida suggests that this attempt to indemnify the sacred can not only be found in the "Abrahamic revelations" but also in the entire philosophical tradition that is a part of our "Roman Occidentiality." Existence has repeatedly been conceived according to a prior space of disclosure that precedes experience, and which often takes the form of an eternal "flame," "light," or "clearing." Derrida goes so far as to suggest that this idea of a prior light of revealability that makes experience possible lies at the core of the religion-mystical traditions, the European Enlightenment, orientalism, and all phenomenology's of religion from Hegel to Heidegger. Not just religion, but the very attempt to overcome religion, has been imagined according to a prior space of light that makes all seeing possible:

> Light takes place. And the day. The coincidence of the rays of the sun and topographical inscription will never be separated: phenomenology of religion, religion as phenomenology, enigma of the orient, of the levant, and of the Mediterranean in the geography of appearing <paraître>. Light (phos), wherever this arche commands or begins discourse and takes the initiative in general (phos, phainesthai, phantasma, hence specter, etc.), as much in the discourse of philosophy as in the discourses of a revelation (Offenbarung) or of a revealability (Offenbarkeit), of a possibility more originary than manifestation. More originary, which is to say, closer to the source, to the sole and same source. Everywhere light dictates that which even yesterday was naively construed to be pure of all religion or even opposed to it and whose future must today be rethought (Aufklärung, Lumieres, Enlightenment, Illuminismo).\(^{318}\)

\(^{317}\)Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I am*, 47.

\(^{318}\) As Derrida writes, “I had insisted on the light, the relation of all religion to fire and to light. There is the light of revelation and the light of the Enlightenment. Light, phos, revelation, orient and origin of our religions, photographic instantaneity. Question, demand: in view of the Enlightenment of today and of tomorrow, in the light of other Enlightenments (*Aufklärung, Lumieres, illuminismo*) how to think religion in the daylight of today without breaking with the philosophical tradition?” (FK 77).
As noted, the problem here for Derrida is one of priority. What comes first, the existence of some primordial being or revealability or the revelation of some particular truth, religious, scientific, philosophical or otherwise? The problem with most of the thinkers of the Western tradition, Derrida argues, is that they have ether ascribed presence to either revealability or revelation. Without considering that this binary forms the aporia of philosophy, they have put forth arguments for the priority of one or the other. From Plato to Aquinas and from Kant to Levinas, there is only a shifting of terms, placing emphasis on revealability or revelation but without attempting to think the aporia itself as the condition of possibility. Derrida's whole project can be summed up as an attempt to do just this: to think the différance between revealability and revelation as condition of possibility of all thought in general. He attempts to move away from any metaphor of revelation or revealability—any space of absolute positivity—and to think the universal archi-originary conditions that render this binary possible in the first place. As he states in Other Testaments: “So I’m trying to think something that removes the event that one calls revelation from the scheme of veil, revelation, revealability. I’m trying to think the event as something other than an unveiling of a truth or the revelation of a truth, as something that has effects but makes no reference to light, no reference to vision, no reference to unveiling.”

Enter the second derivation of religion. If the Tertullian usage of the word religare implies the bond that accompanies any welcoming, greeting, and transmission of the divine, then the second source of religion is the faith we place in the delivery of its promise. The very notion of the “unscathed,” Derrida suggests, is only possible because of the faith we place in its transmission. He calls the trust we place in this second source of religion “an irreducible ‘faith,’” a “sworn faith,” a faith “beyond all proof and all theoretical demonstration” (FK 80). This “sworn faith” precedes any religious pledge (the Hoc est enim corpus meum, the Schema Israel, or the La ilaha illallah) and is what makes the repetition of the sacred possible in the first place. Moreover, he suggests that “Without the performative experience of this elementary act of faith, there would neither be ‘social bond’ nor address to the other, nor any performativity in general: neither convention, nor institution, nor constitution, nor sovereign state, nor law, nor above all, here, that structural performativity of

---

319 Derrida, Other Testaments, 44.
320 For more on this see FK 70-75.
the productive performance that binds from its inception the knowledge of the scientific community to doing, and science to technics” (FK 80). In other words, Derrida argues that this second source of religion is what opens the possibility for religion in the first place.

The second source of religion, this "sworn faith,” doesn't even belong to religion, properly speaking, but is the trust we place in the other before any ideas are shared. In fact, for Derrida, this second source of religion is elemental to deconstruction in general, because it not only precedes any salvific promise of health or redemption but is the condition for any recognition or response in the first place; it is a faith expressed in the originary turn or greeting (salut) towards the other. This faith is an originary “yes” that affirms the other of language before any notion of law, community, or religious adherence is formulated, and is linked to the différance that keeps the future open for what is to-come (à-venir). As Naas notes, this is a thinking of salut “as an originary performative greeting of the other, a threshold greeting that would precede and condition the constitution of any religious community or any community in general.” In this manner, Derrida links the second source of religion to that which simultaneously founds and opens religions beyond themselves, opening dogmatic proclamations on the "unscathed" to the other of language, and opening religious communities to different ways of seeing the world.

What Derrida is offering here is a critique of religious essentialism by pointing to the faith in the other that precedes any notion of the sacred or salvation. Like Levinas, Derrida is gesturing towards the encounter with the other that conditions any subject/object distinction, but he is using this encounter as a sign for a radically finite other, not an Other beyond being. Moreover, unlike Levinas he is not using this faith to identify the essence of religion (what Derrida critiques as the "religiosity of the religious") but to identify how religion exceeds itself in its founding.

---

321 As Derrida writes, "Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the 'other' of language... The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the 'other' and the 'other' of language." (Richard Kearney, Dialogue with Contemporary Continental Thinkers (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 123-24; See also Derrida, Derrida and Negative Theology, 107.)

322 Notice that this is the second time the word salut has been used, but with a radically different meaning. As Derrida argues in Rogues, there are several different meanings of salut. There is a salut that attempts to protect and sustain identity, a salut that promises health and salvation, and a salut of unconditional greeting (see Derrida, Rogues, 112-14).

323 Naas, “Miracle and Machine,” 68.

324 See Writing and Difference, 119.
This other that incites faith and opens religion beyond closure is not a rational subject that demands recognition or a some obscure being that resides in some space beyond the finite, but the multiplicity of singularities that awakens us from our dogmatic slumber (to steal a phase from Kant) and exposes us to difference. Hence, when Derrida writes that "every other is every (bit) other" [tout autre est tout autre]," this means that "there is a multiplicity of others and thus a multiplicity of calls" that continually open thought and meaning. Addressing this infinite multiplicity in some final sense is not possible as a finite creature, and we are continually called towards this incommensurability, which, as he also notes "is not the call of the one, of a one, of someone, but of more than one, more than one at once."325

In terms of the broader ontotheological tradition, Derrida's emphasis on the other and this originary faith is a way of levelling the hierarchical distinction between creator and creation, gods and humans, humans and animals, being and beings that has dominated Western philosophical thought. If all others are "wholly other" than all beings, places, and languages are radically equal in their singularity, and all require an absolute (aneconomical) sacrifice each time we relate to them.326 In The Gift of Death Derrida explores this by showing how Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah defies all rational, religious, and ethical commitments, pointing out how a commitment to God requires a sacrifice of every kind of ontological association ascribed to the name. As Derrida writes, this implies that,

God, as the wholly other, is to be found everywhere there is something of the wholly other. And since each of us, everyone else, each other is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent, nonmanifest, originarily nonpresent to my ego (as Husserl would say of the alterego that can never be originarily present to my consciousness and that I


326 In order to distinguish Derrida's work from the critique levelled against sacrifice in the previous chapter, it is important to note that his is an "aneconomical" sacrifice. As Dennis Keenan notes in The Question of Sacrifice, "Everything on sacrifice in the work of Derrida hinges on that aporetic moment of the double bind of sacrifice: the moment when (economical) sacrifice turns into the sacrifice of (aneconomical) sacrifice, and vice versa" (Dennis King Keenan, The Question of Sacrifice (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 134). In this manner, Derrida tries to think the sacrifice of sacrifice but he does so by rejecting the appropriation of any gift associated with sacrifice. If Bataille retains some element of benefit from sacrifice (even if only an "obscure intimacy"), then it needs to be said that Derrida rejects even this, advocating a sacrifice so "desertic" (see below) that no religion and no ontology could identify themselves with it.
can apprehend only through what he calls *appresentation* and analogy), then what can be said about Abraham’s relation to God can be said about my relation without relation to every other (one)as every (bit) other [*tout autre comme tout autre*], in particular my relation to my neighbor or my loved ones who are as inaccessible to me, as secret and transcendent as Jahweh. Every other (in the sense of each other) is every bit other (absolutely other).

Derrida suggests that the absolute commitment exemplified by Abraham is similar to the faith that is placed in every other, as the relation to the other always precedes any knowledge of language, religion, and law. In being faithful to the other to the point of perjury, we sacrifice the whole world in the name of the unknown. (More on this below.)

In a complicated formula, what Derrida is suggesting is that "God"—or the very idea of the sacred, the safe and the sound—is simultaneously rendered possible and deconstructed by faith. By pointing to the encounter with the "wholly other" and the technics with which religion is hopelessly intertwined, he is exposing the impossibility of safeguarding religion from the finite or completely abolishing it. The irony and duplicity of religion is that the very thing that is meant to be unscathed and held back from the world of technics, death, and the spacing (i.e. the unscathed) is hopelessly intertwined in the finite world, but this is also what propels it onwards. The very thing that the sacred is meant to be distinct from is elemental to its transmission. Religion is divided against itself because it tries to hold the sacred apart from the de-traditionalizing forces of modern teletechnological science.

---

328 It is also important to note that this relation to the other that Derrida is evoking is different from Levinas. For the latter, the infinite "wholly other" is the one who comes first (i.e. ontologically) from "on high," and marks ethical experience. As Caputo notes, "Levinas's thought moves about in the space or 'difference' between the face of my neighbor and the face of God, between other persons and God, between "two, but unique" wholly others" (John D. Caputo, *The Prayer and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 210). Levinas's other is a trace of infinity that is marked by the otherness of God, rather than simply a trace of différance, as it is for Derrida (See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 180-185).
329 At the risk of repeating myself, this is why différance is often labeled as a quasi-transcendental. The trace destabilizes any pure distinction between the immanent and the transcendent, without abolishing either. For instance, See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 61-62).
330 In Derrida’s lexicon, teletechnology is a term that refers to the entire apparatus of television, the press, internet, cinema, radio, mobile, and digital networks of public, industrial, and governmental communications. It is a way for him to address the broader history and media apparatus that makes our public space and thinking possible. As Derrida states, in *Echographies of Television*: “In its very happening, the time of this public gesture is calculated, constrained, “formatted”, “initialized” by a media apparatus... This would deserve near infinite analysis. Who today would think his time and who, above all, would speak about it, I’d like to know, without first paying some attention to a public space and therefore to a political present which is constantly transformed, in its structure and its content, by the teletechnology of what is so confusedly called information or
Ultimately, what Derrida is trying to expose with these two derivations of *religio* is the autoimmune structure of religion. Autoimmunity is a term used at various points in his *oeuvre* but in “Faith and Knowledge” it receives a systematic treatment by showing how the only way to keep religion unscathed from all the displacing and alienating effects of the technological machine is by enlisting the machine. The very things that are proper to religion are what make it improper, and vice versa. In biology, auto-immunization refers to the antibodies produced by an organism in response to and against its own tissues and cellular components, a process that can be both indispensable and dangerous to the body, but in the context of "Faith and Knowledge" it is meant to express how the first source of religion is divided against the second. It refers to how religion is divided against itself because it has to protect itself against its very own prosthetics. Autoimmunity refers to the technical supports, media affiliations, computers, political interests, capitalist entanglements, and written traces that divide the purity of the origin right from "the very first [dès l'origine].”

If terms like "trace" and "technē" refer to the nonsimple, nonfull "primordiality" of différenc, autoimmunity refers to how this instrumentalization of life haunt it from the beginning. From the very start the unscathed is instrumentalized and this affects not just how we understand religion but all things that are used as signs for the unscathed; body, soil, language, family, blood, land, nature, ritual, life, etc. Hence, as Rudolphe Gasché notes, “Autoimmunity means here that the drive to remain unscathed, which constitutes the first source of religion and arises insofar as the founding experience of the unscathed is a reaction against the uprooting, displacing, and alienating effects of the technological machine, enlists the very powers of technology that, precisely, threaten all integrity and purity.”

One example of how this plays itself out, in very practical terms, is how religious adherents often find themselves caught in a reactive antagonism against the very technical conditions that render their faith possible in the first place (FK 43). This irony is particularly evident with Islamic extremist groups such as ISIS or fundamentalist Christians in the U.S.A, as these folks often have to rely on the very evil they condemn in order to spread their

---

332 For more on autoimmunity see Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, pp. 85-86.
They condemn the West as a place of sin and debauchery but nonetheless use Western vehicles, weapons, currency, fashion, and media. These groups expose how the sacred, the other, and the technical are intertwined in an undecidable manner, and this is what Derrida means when he says that religion is divided against itself. The truisms of religion stand in opposition to themselves. They expose how religion is fundamentally contradictory: what renders religion possible is a faith in the transmission of that which stands apart from time, but this sacred message is transmitted via language, writing, fire rituals, radio, television, the internet, cell phones, etc. Hence, the message of religion is always caught in this duplicitous bind because it seeks to indemnify its promise of sanctity from the very medium that facilitates it. Or, as Derrida puts it,

The same movement that renders in dissociable religion and teletechnoscientific reason in its most critical aspect reacts inevitably to itself. It secretes its own antidote but also its own power of autoimmunity. We are here in a space where all self-protection of the unscathed, of the safe and sound, of the sacred (heilig, holy) must protect itself against its own protection, its own police, its own power of rejection, in short, against its own, which is to say, against its own immunity (FK 79-80).

Poison and cure, technics simultaneously makes space for religion and opens it up beyond closure. The machine is the “testimonial deus ex machina” that betrays religion in its founding (FK 66). Religions try to indemnify what they designate as proper and expel the "spectral" elements that haunt the proper in order to sanctify the future, and this arises from what Derrida calls the "mechanics" of life and sacrificiality (FK 86).

The reason why this autoimmune core of religion is important for understanding the deconstruction of Christianity is because it points to the interruptive disjunction that lies at the core of religion. Moreover, it opens religion up for an analysis of all the various parts that make it possible, both ancient and modern. It also raises an interesting question: is it even possible to separate religion from the medium in which it is transmitted? For Derrida, that answer is clearly no, the religious sacred does not absolve the medium which transmits the message in some redemptive act of destructio, past or present, but is rather exposed to the

334 I am placing "traditionalist" in quotations here because I think groups like ISIL are modern creations. Though these fundamentalists groups present themselves as the pure incarnation of "original" Islam, it is very clear that they are a result of, and not an ancient reaction against, the modern technological world.
technical deferral of existence in each historical event. When Karl Barth argued that there
was an infinite difference between God and man, and that the arrival of the Word of truth
was an event that shattered the world from the outside, he was arguing for the former
position, asserting that the world was transformed by an external act of grace. What
Derrida is suggesting is that what lies at the core of the transmission of the sacred is indeed
the relation to the other, but not an absolute other; rather, it is a faith in that which is "wholly
other" to any rationalization, and this faith cannot be separated from technics.

Importantly, Derrida is not simply arguing that the technical overcomes the religious,
as if to put forth a simplistic atheist argument, but that the two sources of religion open the
very space of religion, in all its conflictual, militaristic, nationalistic, and globalizing furor.
The autoimmunity of religion is the very condition of possibility for the very narrative
between evil and good, ignorance and enlightenment, dukkha and nirvana, sin and
redemption, yetzer ra and yetzer tov that characterizes the discourse of religions. As Derrida
suggests: “This interruptive dis-junction enjoins a sort of incommensurable equality within
absolute dissymmetry. The law of this untimeliness interrupts and makes history, it undoes
all contemporaneity and opens the very space of faith. It designates disenchantment as the
very resource of the religious. The first and the last” (FK 99). Religion is therefore in conflict
with the repetition of its own technical supplement, and it is this repetition, around the globe,
which deconstructs religion and simultaneously renders it possible.

335 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics 1/1 (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1975), 193-194.
336 Derrida stresses this disjunction by pointing out how religion allies itself with technology while
simultaneously condemning it as evil: "Religion today allies itself with tele-technoscience, to which it reacts
with all its forces. It is, on the one hand, globalization; it produces, weds, exploits the capital and knowledge of
tele-mediatization; neither the trips and global spectacularizing of the Pope, nor the interstate dimensions of the
"Rushdie affair," nor planetary terrorism would otherwise be possible ... But, on the other hand, it reacts
immediately, simultaneously, declaring war against that which gives it this new power only at the cost of
dislodging it from all its proper places, in truth from place itself, form the taking place of its truth. It conducts a
terrible war against that which protects it only by threatening it, according to this double and contradictory
structure: immunitary and auto-immunitary. The relation between these two motions or these two sources is
ineluctable, and therefore automatic and mechanical, between one which has the form of the machine
(mechanization, automatization, machination or mechane), and the other, that of a living spontaneity, of the
unscathed property of life, that is to say, of another (claimed) self-determination. But the autoimmunity haunts
the community and its system of immunitary survival like the hyperbole of its own possibility" (FK 82).
3.2.3 - Christianity

In “Faith and Knowledge” and “Above All, no Journalists!” Derrida connects this auto-immune spread of religion to the Latinization of the globe, or what Derrida calls *Globalatinization* (*mondialatinisation*), and implies the globalizing of religion's lingua franca is a distinctly Christian contagion. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that "globalized religion" as we know it today is “fundamentally Christian.” In a dynamic manner, Derrida translates the deconstruction of religion discussed above into the deconstruction of Christianity by noting how the former occurs because Christianity completes the exhaustion of the sacred on a global scale. After all, it is only because of the "atheologizing" of the Graeco-Judaean-Christian tradition that we can even speak of religion at all in a universal sense.337

We would suggest that the history of the West and the shadow of religion it drags along with it results from what Derrida called in 1963, the "historical coupling of Judaism and Hellenism." In "Violence and Metaphysics" he had declared that "We live in the difference between the Jew and the Greek, which is perhaps the unity of what is called history."338 Well, what we find in Derrida's late writings on religion is an attempt to show how all our thought on the subject is caught up in the machination of this history. As we have seen, what he wants to point out is how we are caught up in a history that violently seeks to indemnify itself from its own *différance* through the essentialization of all sorts of ontological and theological tropes, and that if we want to understand how this occurs we must expose its Judeo-Christian traces. Derrida states this bluntly when he connects the tele-technoscientific unravelling of religion in the media to the Christian death of God:

“*globalatinization (this strange alliance of Christianity, as the experience of the death of God, and tele-technoscientific Capitalism) is at the same time hegemonic and finite, ultra-powerful and in the process of exhausting itself*” (FK 52).

It is here that we can begin to see the very explicit connections between deconstruction, religion, and Christianity that Derrida is elucidating. If religion has two sources, and those two sources form the autoimmune core of religion that deconstruct its

---

337Derrida uses the term atheology when describing the deconstruction of the *via negativa*. See FK 57.
essentialist claims, then religion is testimony to nothing else but its own technical unravelling. Moreover, if deconstruction has literal roots in the history of Christianity, then Christianity offers an instance and institution of deconstruction in action, which in turn implies that when we examine the history of Christianity in the West, we are witnessing the exhaustion of the sacred playing itself out.

This creates the powerful observation that the history of religion is the history of Christianity viewing/essentializing itself as a universal phenomenon. Whenever we speak in the name of religion we are speaking in the name of its Latin source, which was spread around the globe under the name of Christianity (FK 72). Hence, what Derrida is ultimately trying to elucidate is the impossibility of translating the word religion into some universal cultural essence.

In contrast to Émile Benveniste, he does not use the above analysis of religions Latin roots to clarify the universal meaning of the term, but to expose its inextricable connection to Christian universalism (FK 69-70). Derrida again states this quite explicitly in “Above All No Journalists!,” when he asks what a non-Christian is doing when they say “Islam, or Judaism, or Buddhism is my religion.” Is there a word for “religion” in Arabic, he questions? Certainly not an adequate translation of the Latin. Moreover, what really characterizes Judaism as a religion, or Buddhism? What we know for certain, Derrida suggests, is that the history of the concept religion is wrapped up with a “political and ideological space dominated by Christianity,” and that “to engage in the obscure and equivocal struggle in which the putatively "universal" value of the concept of religion, even of religious tolerance,” is to engage in a semantic space appropriated by Christianity. 339

Importantly, this does not give Christianity a privileged status amongst the religions but shows how it enacts the autoimmune heart of religion. It suggests that the Christian teaching of the incarnation exposes the autoimmune relationship between the sacred and the technical. As Derrida argues in “Above all, No Journalists!”, what is unique about

339 This is not to suggest that there is no other universal aspects to non-Christian phenomena that might be identified as "religious," but simply that the Christian concept of universality is what has come to dominate the globe under the name religion (not to mention the “cosmopolitan philosophy of international law”). Derrida asserts that it was St. Paul who first elaborated the concept of a universal “world citizen,” a “human brotherhood as children of God,” and it is this that dominates the world. As he states, “The universalism that dominates global political-juridical discourse is fundamentally Greco-Christian... It is a Christianity speaking a bit of Greek” (Jacques Derrida, “Above All, No Journalists!,” in Religion and Media, ed. by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) 74).
Christianity is that explicit link that it establishes between the miracle and the machine, the sacred and the technical. The reason why the “globalized mediatization of religion” is “fundamentally Christian,” and not Jewish or Islamic, is because it announces the unscathed as a visible lord, fully manifest. In a way that is foreign to either Judaism or Islam, which always attempt to keep the unscathed secret, safe, and somewhat removed from the world of alterity, Christianity offers the medium as a physical body. Derrida suggests provocatively that Jesus was the first fully divine “news-man,” and that the evangelists are perhaps the first journalists. He presents Judaism and Islam as religions that privilege the secret of the unscathed, and which resist any direct association between technics and the sacred. As Derrida writes, what Christianity offers via the incarnation is “the mediation, the hoc est meum corpus, the Eucharist: God become visible.” Of course, there is a certain embrace of writing and technics in all the religions, as well as a readiness to extend the sacred to “the scale of cosmopolitanism, globalization, and globalatinization” but in Christianity this embrace of technical mediation is pushed to the extreme by turning the technics into the “real presence” of God. Christianity goes further because it imbues technē as the Word of God; it imbues technics with salvific powers of God's uncreated energy.

(It might be helpful here to recall that the Eucharist meal, as a Christian sacrament, is believed to provide the religious adherent with access to divine grace. This was mentioned in the previous chapters but it also needs to be stressed that some version of this logic holds for all the major branches of Christianity [Oriental Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and the many Protestant groups]. Although the Eucharist meal (also called Communion, Mass, “the Lords Supper,” “the Breaking of Bread,” “the Holy Gifts,” Divine Liturgy, etc.) is interpreted differently by the many branches of Christianity, the majority emphasize either the literal or symbolic transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, which is the meaning of the Latin phrase hoc est meum corpus. The Eucharistic meal is an occasion for the believer to come in contact with the presence of the divine.)

341 Derrida, “Above All, No Journalists!,” 65.
342 Derrida, “Above All, No Journalists!,” 57.
This machination of Christianity is most evident today in televangelism, in which the real presence of God is offered over the TV (and now over the internet). Buddhist, Islamic, and Judaic religious material (not to mention Confucian, Taoist, Aboriginal, Hindu, etc.) is also available all over the television and the internet, but Derrida notes how these forms of non-Christian religiosity do not offer the sacrament itself via technology, something Christianity alone does. Derrida puts it in the following terms, contrasting Christianity to Judaism and Islam:

During a Christian mass, by contrast, the thing itself, the event takes place in front of the camera: communion, the coming of real presence, the Eucharist in a certain sense, even the miracle (miracles are produced on American television)—the thing actually takes place "live" as a religious event, as a sacred event. In other religions religion is spoken about, but the sacred event itself does not take place in the very flesh of those who present themselves before the camera. This, I think, stands in a certain structural relation to what probably distinguishes the Jewish or Moslem religion from the Christian religion, which is to say, the incarnation, the mediation, the hoc est meum corpus, the Eucharist: God become visible... But to return to the story of Abraham or Ibrahim, to begin again with this story of the secret God demands of Abraham in an absolutely singular relationship, it must be remembered that this sceneless scene is systematically bound up with the prohibition of the image, with nonincorporation, nonmediation by the body of Christ. 343

One way to phrase this would be to say that Christianity embraces the autoimmune core of religion as the “real presence,” whereas Judaism and Islam attempt to keep the presence of God distinct from the medium. The latter two religions have a tendency to emphasize the secret nature of the absolute other. For instance, in Orthodox Judaism a practitioner is never to utter the name of Jahweh, and in Sunni Islam it is forbidden to depict the Prophet Muhammad; however, in Catholicism God himself takes the form of the Eucharist every Sunday, and this is shared via the teletechnological apparatus that spans the globe. Obviously, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are not monolithic practices and there are exceptions to every rule, but Derrida’s point is that the dominant Christian doctrine flat out affirms the direct association between the sacred and the technical supplement; the “real presence” of God is given to endless repetition in the Eucharist. For Derrida, the doctrine of the “real presence” blatantly exposes the aporia of religion in every mass and sermon in a

343 Derrida, “Above All, No Journalists!,” 58.
way that is foreign to other religions, and this is why Christianity is the most globalized of all the religions. By embracing the death of God in “the form of Christ on the Cross giving his body,” early Christian doctrine laid the foundation for “all the deaths of God that have followed in the history of European philosophy until Hegel and Company.”

What Derrida is suggesting is that by embracing the kenosis of God in Christ, Christianity effectively embraces autoimmunity as the highest truth and the exhaustion of religious presence in the media. This began with the gospels and it continues today with the spread of religion via the internet. The irreducible bond between religion and the media that the incarnation established effectively guaranteed the dis-enclosure of religion, in all its theological and philosophical forms. Indeed, Derrida specifically enlists the history of philosophy as an agent in this abandonment of God to mediatic dissemination:

The vertiginous affinity between the Christian religion and what is happening today passes indubitably via the kenosis and the death of God, via a certain “atheism”; but this also means via Christianity as the end of Christianity. At the end of the Phenomenology of Spirit, it is the figure of Absolute Knowledge, the structure of philosophy as the truth of revealed religion, which is to say of the Christian religion. The "Speculative Good Friday." In abusing these shortcuts, in outspeeding speed itself, I would venture to say that the religion of the media is a phenomenology of spirit. Today there is a religion of the media, and it is, for the moment, precisely the religion of the media: there is the religion of the media, which is to say, the religion that the media represent, incarnate, reveal.

The kenosis and death of God, as the medium of the Word made visible (and eatable), is here connected to the phenomenological attempt to materialize, incarnate, and mediatize the truth of all phenomena. Derrida therefore links the rise of modern philosophy to the incarnation, and the deconstruction of metaphysics to the religion of the media—from the Phenomenology of Spirit to religion and evangelical sermons delivered through the teletechnological apparatus. Although he never unpacks these connections as Nancy does in Dis-Enclosure, Adoration, and other works, he suggests that the death of God is synonymous with the history of the West. Almost anticipating the work of Nancy, Derrida writes that

345 Derrida, “Above All, No Journalists!,” 69.
3.2.4 - The Future of Religion/Christianity

So, does all this mean that Derrida's deconstruction of Christianity also leads to an affirmation that the West has arrived at the "exit from religion"? Is Derrida in full agreement with Nancy concerning the deconstruction of Christianity? Not exactly. Although Derrida certainly agrees that deconstruction transgresses the sacred borders of religion and leads to the desertification of the Abrahamic traditions, he is also adamant that the elementary faith in the "wholly other" makes it impossible to foreclose the future of religion. Derrida is in full agreement with Nancy that deconstruction is transgressive and exposes the technical limit of religious presentation but his emphasis on the "bad infinite" and the "wholly other" lead him to stress that deconstruction is messianic. The autoimmune unraveling of religion keeps deconstruction open to the arrival of the "wholly other," turning faith into a desert like eschatological hope that is lost amidst the traces of the teletechnological. This doesn't necessarily mean that we don't exist in the "exit from religion," as Nancy affirms, but simply that the future of religion is undecidable. For Derrida, the deconstruction of religion is about exposing its autoimmune contagion and keeping space open for the other, not proclaiming its end or exit. To explain this we need to unpack two other Derridian terms, "messianic" and *khora*, as they are what is left of religion after the desertification of the sacred.

Derrida develops his notion of the messianic not only in “Faith and Knowledge” but in “Force of Law” and *Specters of Marx*, and connects it to the faith we place in the other. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition from which this term emerges, the messianic refers to the promise of absolute redemption through a salvific figure, or to an eschatological event that is expected at a particular time and place, but Derrida radicalizes this notion by connecting it to the endless differing/deferral of presence, in any name or form. What he is interested in is a “messianicity without messianism,” one which merely signifies the “coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration” (FK 56). Like *différance*, the messianic is for him not an appeal to something

prior, original, or proper to existence, or even to something immanently real beyond language, but merely an affirmation of the infinite movement of the supplement. It is a way of pointing out how scripture is effaced as writing (in French écriture also means "scripture"), crossing out any determinant signification of the other in an endless process of dissemination. Literal interpretations of scripture are often calculating and determinant, they attempt to figure the precise time of creation and the second coming of the savoir, but Derrida suggests that every act of language and address to the other disturbs these calculations, and disturbs the reduction of experience to any form of economic calculation, whether these be ethical, scientific, or prophetic. Hence, what he stresses is a “messianicity without messianism” that upsets all models of sacrificial exchange; a messianic faith that opens religions beyond themselves, a promise of justice without closure, a salut without salvation. This messianicity is not an extraordinary event that strikes upon history from the outside but one which is found in all ordinary address, and interrupts all acts of communication. In *A Taste for the Secret* Derrida states this quite clearly:

Here, what I call the eschatological or the messianic is nothing other than a relation to the future so despoiled and indeterminate that it leaves being ‘to come’ [à venir], i.e., undetermined. As soon as a determinate outline is given to the future, to the promise, even to the messiah, the messianic loses its purity, and the same is true of the eschatological in the sense we are giving it now. We would find ourselves with a sort of messianic eschatology so desertic that no religion and no ontology could identify themselves with it.347

This messianic faith that opens the space for religion is not the reflecting faith of Kant, the “religion of modern times” spoken of by Hegel, or a faith in the revealability/revelation distinction contemplated by Heidegger. As Rudolphe Gasché notes, Derrida calls the faiths of Hegel and Heidegger the two “temptations” of modernity because neither confront this aporia of religion discussed above. Although Hegel overcomes religion he still allows “the theological, ecclesiastical, even religious development” to inform the content of faith. For Hegel, absolute knowledge simply becomes the truth of religion. And although Heidegger challenged onto-theology, his emphasis on revealability (*Offenbarkeit*) over revelation (*Offenbarung*) is a call to “the origin of light, the originary light, the very invisibility of

visibility” (FK 54-55). What Derrida wants, in contrast, is a faith that knows no horizon, either salvific or ethical. What he is trying to articulate is a space that is “archi-originary, the most anarchic and anarchivable place possible, not the island nor the Promised Land, but a certain desert, that which makes possible, opens, hollows or infinitizes the other”; this would be a “place of absolute exteriority,” what he calls the desert of the desert (FK 57).

This "desert of the desert" is where the Greek term khōra fits in. If the messianic provides a temporal coordinate for the "fiduciary "link" that is left in the wake of deconstruction then khōra provides a spatial coordinate for this desert. For Derrida, khōra is place itself, it is the desert in which spacing takes place, which he locates first in Plato's Timaeus (FK 58). He describes khōra as another place without age, another "taking-place," the irreplaceable place or placement of a "desert in the desert," a spacing from "before" the world, the cosmos, or the globe, from "before" any chronophenomenology, any revelation, any "as such" and any "as if," any anthropotheological dogmatism or historicity.

In Greek, khōra is a slippery word that allows for textual drift. In fact, according to one interpretation it means "anything goes." It might best be described as the space in which things occur but only if we understand this in a contextual non-Newtonian sense. Derrida is not invoking some notion of absolute space and time but attempting to speak of the non-place where spacing takes place. Derrida develops the notion of khōra not only in "Faith and Knowledge" but "Plato's Pharmacy," On the Name, Rogues, and links it to the possibility of any future religious, political, ethical, or legal justice. Derrida links khōra to the very space and possibility of the to-come, in all its forms: "on what receives the name khōra, a call might be taken up and take hold: the call for a thinking of the event to come, of the democracy to come, of the reason to come. This call bears every hope, to be sure, although it remains, in itself, without hope."

---

348 See also Gasché, "In Love of Life: Michael Naas' Miracle and Machine," 86.
349 It needs to be said that there is some controversy in Derrida scholarship concerning the precise meaning of these terms, khōra and the messianic. Naas and Gasché, have different ways of placing them in relation to the two sources of religion and the revealability/revelation binary. In this brief section, my readings of the terms is more aligned with the Gashé. For the precise implications of this debate see Gasché, "In Love of Life: Michael Naas’ Miracle and Machine," 85-91.
350Derrida, Rogues, xiv.
353Derrida, Rogues, xv.
The two ideas of the messianic and the khōra can perhaps be explained by summarizing a beautiful short story that Blanchot tells in *The Writing of the Disaster*. Imagine, Blanchot asks, that the messiah were standing at the gates of Rome with beggars and lepers, wearing nothing but rags. If someone were to recognize the messiah at the instant that he stood at the gates they would undoubtedly ask, "when will you come?" "When will you arrive and deliver the justice you promised?" For despite the fact that the messiah is present at the gates of Rome he has surely not arrived. He is in rags, standing amidst beggars and lepers, so this cannot be his "coming." It does not correspond to any presence. And even if the messiah were to respond to these questions by saying, "I am coming Today," we would still have to wait for his arrival, for this coming is not "now." As Blanchot writes, it is this disjunction between the event of the messiah's arrival and its non-occurrence that is elemental to the very nature of the messiah:

> With the Messiah, who is there, the call must always resound: "Come, Come." His presence is no guarantee. Both future and past (it is said at least once that the Messiah has already come), his coming does not correspond to any presence at all. Nor does the call suffice. There are conditions— the efforts of men, their virtue, their repentance—which are known; there are always other conditions which are not. And if it happens that to the question "When will you come?" the Messiah answers, "Today," the answer is certainly impressive: so, it is today! It is now and always now. There is no need to wait, although to wait is an obligation. And when is it now? When is the now which does not belong to ordinary time, which necessarily overturns it, does not maintain but destabilizes it? When?354

The messiah is the one who is always about to come, always about to arrive. By very definition he cannot arrive in any determinant sense, for then he would no longer be the messiah. The arrival of the messiah is *le pas au-delà* (the step not beyond) to cite Blanchot again.355 The *pas* of the messiah is also a *sans*, something that will not occur, but not in the sense of a simple negation. Rather, the step is a sign of the "wholly other" that is always coming. Or, as Derrida writes, "It forms the trace or the step (*pas*) of the *tout autre* that is at

issue in it, the re-treat of the *pas*, and of the *pas sans pas*. As if to underscore this point, Blanchot finishes his short story on the Messiah with a quote from Levinas and Scholem: "All prophets—there is no exception—have prophesied only for the messianic time [l'epokhe?]. As for future time, what eye has seen it except Yours, Lord, who will act for him who is faithful to you and keeps waiting."

Derrida cites this story in *The Politics of Friendship* when discussing the philosophers of the future who find the undecidable unbearable, or terrifying, and who attempt to cover it over with reassuring forms of faith. Like Blanchot's emphasis on the coming of the messiah, Derrida's emphasis on the desertification of religion is a way of displacing determinant faith in the name of a justice that is to-come. As noted already, he wants to show how religion deconstructs itself to make space for the "pure singularities prior to any social or political determination, prior to all intersubjectivity, prior even to the opposition between the sacred (or the holy) and the profane" (FK 55). What he is offering therefore is neither an exit from religion nor an argument for a "return to religion," but a way to understand and challenge the autoimmune contagion of religion and its indemnification. With the terms messianicity and *khōra* we are given a glimpse of the temporal and spatial coordinates that can keep the future open, not a means to destroy religion or to preserve it.

Of course, from a certain angle it is fair to argue, as Caputo has, that what Derrida offers is a "religion without religion," or what Cornel West calls "prophetic postmodernism." By destroying the idols of philosophy in the name of a promised land to come, deconstruction does (seem to) fulfill a social function that can be traced back to Elijah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. Moreover, at certain points in his *oeuvre* Derrida almost sounds like John Locke in *A Letter concerning toleration* (1689), as he appears to espouse the democratic value of religious tolerance at a universal level, suggesting that all religions prepare the way for an elementary faith. From this perspective, the messianic and *khōra* can be read as the building blocks for a new type of secular faith, what he calls a "religio of disjunction."

---

359As Derrida writes, "Another 'tolerance' would be in accord with the experience of the 'desert in the desert'; it would respect the distance of infinite alterity as singularity. And this respect would still be religio, religio as scruple or reticence, distance, dissociation, disjunction, coming from the threshold of all religion in the link of repetition to itself, the threshold of every social or communitarian link."(FK 60).
However, it also needs to be said that the priority that Derrida ascribes to faith and the "wholly other" does not reduce deconstruction to some kind of religious apologetics, as the originary faith outlined above cannot be separated from the technical prosthetics that render all communication possible. The second source of religion is dual: it refers not just to that which is "wholly other" but the technē with which this encounter is ensnared. Scholars who have associated Derrida's deconstruction with negative theology or an attempt to revive some sense of religion have failed to stress this latter point, privileging some aspect of religion as a space of engagement that is unaffected by the teletechnological. In “Faith and Knowledge,” Derrida plays with the two etymological derivations of the Latin term religio (relegere and religare) in order to expose the self-deconstruction of religion, not to cement the meaning of the category religion, or even to “see it through the cross marks,” as Caputo recently phrased it in an interview with the New York Times.

This is the paradox that underlies Derrida's work on religion and Christianity, at the same time that he speaks of the second source of religion as a "universal faith" and a "religion of the other," he also affirms that this faith, this deconstructed religio, offers no salvation or glimpse of the holy. He stresses that the other is so infinitely distant from me and to which I have no access to it; it is an other that bears no gift other than death. As Gasche notes, there is nothing comforting about this faith in the other and it has no affiliation with determinant religion or any of its modern romantic incarnations. Derrida is neither selling respect for something that needs to be kept safe and sound (relegare) nor is he advocating restraint towards some particular communal essence or memory (religare) (FK 74). He is advocating neither the solace of revelation nor some kind of insight into the primordial ground of revealability, but simply stressing the call from the other that is left in the desert of undecidability. Hence, if Derrida is using the messianic and khōra to sell a 'religio' of the

360 An example of this may be Kevin Hart's work on Derrida, which has attempted to blur the boundaries between negative theology and deconstruction. See Kevin Hart, The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2000).
363 Gasché, In Love of Life: Michael Naas’ Miracle and Machine, 84.
other’ then it is a religion that will never arrive, either temporally or spatially. Moreover, it is a religion of the machine, for it is intertwined with the endless iteration of the supplement.

3.3 - Between Derrida and Nancy

3.3.1 - From Technē to Touch

Derrida’s ultimate fear regarding the deconstruction of Christianity is that the distinction between the two types of faith may be ignored, and that the messianic and khōra may remain shrouded in an incarnational logic that baptizes technē in some determinant form of religion. What needs to be stressed, above all else, is the supplementary, plasticity, and technics that mediate any unscathed or holy source of religion. Without stressing the irreducible spacing that interrupts any attempt to touch the sacred, religion will indemnify itself by sacralising the mediatory elements of its transmission in some claim to presence. As we have seen, Derrida thinks this is of particular importance in Christianity because as the most autoimmune religion—it is caught in the repetitious cycle of its own deconstruction and indemnification. In On Touching, Derrida summed up this fear regarding the autoimmune reconstitution of Christianity when he wrote that the deconstruction of Christianity is “always in danger of being exposed as mere Christian hyperbole” (OT 220).

What does it mean to say that the deconstruction of Christianity is in danger of being mere "Christian hyperbole," and why is it such a grave concern that Derrida devoted a whole book to it in 2000, only a couple of years after Nancy wrote his first essay on the deconstruction of Christianity? Quite simply, because Christianity may not be threatened by deconstruction and Derrida wants to warn us about the dangers of trying to speak in the name of its fragmented corpus. Since Christianity is in the business of sacrilizing technics, what must be stressed is not simply the unraveling of Christianity but its infinite reconstitution. Christianity is caught in a machine-like repetition of its own Eucharistic presence and can do nothing but recreate itself anew, infinitely. Hence, unlike Nancy, who claims that "Christianity, as such, is surpassed, because it is itself, and by itself, in a state of being

---

surpassed," (D141) Derrida points towards the undecidability of religion and Christianity in the future:

...unless “Christianity carries in itself— and all but constitutively consists in carrying in itself—the resource, and the law, of this destricturation,\(^{365}\) of its passage beyond itself,” then it may constantly renew itself. If Christianity has “this ability to part without parting, of universal abandon while remaining with oneself, in a word of death without dying,” then this “death itself” will never come about. Then, the deconstruction of Christianity would have its infinite task cut out for it as its daily bread. "Hoc est enim corpus meum." Bread for the (Last Supper) stage would safeguard the very memory of all deconstruction. Evangelical and apocalyptic (OT 59).

This infinite reconstitution of the body of God is Derrida's ultimate fear regarding the deconstruction of Christianity. How, he asks, do we know when we "exit from Christianity," or, for that matter, when we "enter Christianity"? Because the machine like repetition of Christianity is a constant occurrence, he asserts that we must exercise great care when dealing with either Christianity or deconstruction, not to mention the duplicity of religio. As Steven Shakespeare puts it in his analysis of Derrida, "The risk is that any attempt to deconstruct Christianity only succeeds in following an essentially Christian logic."\(^{366}\) In the work of critical philosophers from the past Christianity has lent itself to all sorts of rationalistic, anthropological, and materialistic ends, so we must be very careful not to appropriate the ontotheological traits of this decomposing corpus. What must be stressed is not simply the movement from theology to community, or metaphysics to materiality, but the technical deferral of any presence that might announce itself as the divine. Remember, the "wholly other" must never arrive for Derrida—it must always remain messianic—and this includes all bodies and sacred figures who reach out to touch the world. Let's unpack this by starting with Derrida's general argument and then slowly make our way to his comments on Nancy.

To begin, it needs to be noted that just as in “Faith and Knowledge,” Derrida’s overall critique of "touch" (haptein [Greek]) is directed against the revealability/revelation binary.

\(^{365}\) Derrida uses this word at several points in his oeuvre to designate the impossibility of "stricture"; or, the absence of destination for the trace. For more clarification see Krzysztof Ziarek, Inflected Language: Toward a Hermeneutics of Nearness: Heidegger, Levinas, Stevens, Celan (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 95.

However, rather than focus on the particular Kantian, Hegelian, and Heideggerian terms he frequently referenced in "Faith and Knowledge," he explores how the figure of touch has been intertwined with the metaphors of "light," reason (enlightenment), and revelation. As in his aforementioned works, Derrida's central point is that touch has been privileged as a form of self-presence over absence, philosophers have used touch to infuse materiality with some form of auto-affection—whether it be divine, rational, or humanistic, and natural. He details how metaphors like the ‘hand of God’ or ‘the hand of man’ have been used by theologians and philosophers to unite creation and creator, body and soul, matter and mind, and from the "body proper" or the "flesh." Touch, in all its semantic variations—tact, tactile, intact, contact, contingent, tangent, tangential, pertinent, etc.—has been used to give life an absolute value above life.

In this manner, On Touching exposes how a certain "incarnational logic" forms the limit of our conceptual thought in the West and how it informs our theories on material presence. Derrida argues that all philosophical discourse on touch in the West has been guided by three prevalent ideas: 1) the theological idea of a “flame” or “light” as first cause that makes all subsequent touch possible, 2) the role of reason or some notion of a pre-reflexive awareness that grounds touch to the first cause, light, and 3) the idea of the human body (or flesh) as the transcendental exemplar that makes touch possible. In a study that is so rigorous that it is at times excruciating to follow, Derrida summarizes the ways in which these ideas have been put to work by Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Freud, Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Louis Chrétien (to mention only some of the major thinkers he discusses).

Derrida deconstructs touch and this incarnational logic by showing how touch itself has always remained untouchable. In a somewhat ironic manner, he points out how touch has been ambiguous and hard to define. Despite the fact that touch has functioned as a medium to unite body and soul, philosophers have never been able to get a firm grasp on its meaning.367

For starters, as Aristotle pointed out in On the soul (Peri psuchēs, De Anima), it is unclear whether touch is a singular sense or a unity of various senses: is touch the means by which we sense the world or the medium that separates us from the otherness of the world? Is touch singular or multiple? Moreover, is flesh a medium for touch or is touch a medium for

---

367 Pun intended.
flesh? If the former, does this mean that touch is an "inward" sense, distinct from materiality in some way. If the latter, then does this mean that touch is a form of material immanence of the body to itself? As Aristotle questions,

> It is a problem [aporia] whether touch is a single sense or a group of senses. It is also a problem, what is the organ of touch; is it or is it not the flesh (including what in certain animals is analogical to flesh)? On the second view, flesh is the medium of touch, the real organ being situated farther inward.368

In the work of most Western thinkers it is the latter position that has been emphasized, as most theologians and philosophers have stressed the "inner" life of touch as a product of the soul, the intelligible, reason, nous, etc. Touch has been privileged as an inner sense where the unscathed (the first source of religio) is transplanted into the heart of creation, providing an absolute value for life above life. Despite the fact that Aristotle acknowledged that touch was multiple and that it "discriminates more than one set of different qualities," he also gave way to this temptation.369 By linking thought, flesh, and touch to that part of the soul that is able to "think itself" in its eternity,370 Aristotle unified touch under that which is "immortal and eternal."371

Beyond Aristotle, what Christianity gave the West to contemplate is the unity of the Greek psuchē with the Latin corpus mediated by the salut of Christian grace, a problematic union that can be traced back across the Western canon, from the work of the French phenomenologists like Jean-Louis Chrétien and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to Aquinas and Aristotle. What Christianity adds to the onto-theo-teleology of the Greek and Jewish sources is a haptic element by making the personal touch of God available through Christ. Christian history is not simply an onto-theo-teleology, whereby the truth of God is made evident through a sacred textual revelation to the community, but a hapto-onto-theo-teleology, because it asserts that the eternal flame became physically embodied, and literally touched the world with light. Each time the hoc est enim corpus meum is announced over the

---

369Aristotle, On the Soul, 32 (§ 418a).
Eucharistic host of bread and wine they become the body of divine sacrifice, and Christians partake of its presence. Hence, in Christianity the ambiguity of touch becomes more pronounced because the touch of God's grace connects creator and creation in a very physical way, making the untouchability of touch an imminent happening. The incarnation brings the dissymmetry of creator and creation together in the physical body, locating the untouchable right on the inside of touch. The body therefore functions in Christianity as a point of contact—an “incursion of a Dissymmetry”—between self and absolute other (OT 246).

Derrida points out that it is Aquinas who really cemented this philosophy of haptics, as he argued that all human touch was ultimately derivative of divine self-relation, which is pure, immediate, and spiritual. All human touch, for Aquinas, is only a figure of the divine original (OT 247).

For instance, in “Tangent V” (Chapter Ten) of On Touching, Derrida connects this haptology to Chrétien's The Call and the Response by pointing out how his work retains a certain incarnational logic. Linking Aristotle to Aquinas, and Aquinas to Chrétien, he exposes how this contemporary thinker uses the figure of divine flame as the condition of possibility for all contact and bodily sense. Chrétien presents the divine flame as that which self-touches, touches itself, and touches us. However, staying true to this tradition, Chrétien also takes great care to stress the absolute distance that separates touch from itself. What Chrétien offers is no crude theology of the flesh that simply accentuates presence over absence but a thinking of the flesh that incorporates distance, spacing, and the historicity of the incarnation. Indeed, Chrétien even suggests that touch always involves something other, some other—or it is not touch. Even when we self-touch the touching is other than that which is touched: "the touching cannot be the same as the touched even when the touching touches itself" (OT 245-246).372

 Chrétien's error, Derrida suggests, is that he attempts to qualify this distance between self and other with the eternal transitivity of the divine flame. Similar to Levinas' notion of the caress, Chrétien uses touch to affirm an other beyond being that provides contingency an ultimate value. Though this other is ultimately untouchable, it functions for Chrétien as the transcendental condition that makes all contingent finite touch possible (OT 247). Like Barth, who argued that all of history was predetermined by the divine predestination of Christ’s

372Derrida's emphasis.
sacrifice, Chrétien suggests the contact/touch of the “eternal flash” arises from an original divine necessity. As Chrétien writes: “It is from contact with itself as intelligible that the divine spirit is inflamed and sets itself on fire eternally, and it is by letting itself be touched that it sets on fire what comes after it. What is most necessary is contingency itself in the etymological sense of the term—the very contact from where the eternal flash of light [éclair] springs forth, from which all is suspended and all depends.”  

Derrida labels this attempt to keep human touch safe and distinct from technics “humanalism” [humainisme], (OT 152; 185; 214) which he associates with a privileging of the “human” over “animality,” and the unscathed over and above the finite. Chrétien falls victim to this critique because he never submits the figure of the divine flame to the spacing of the world. In order to make Christ the transcendent exemplar of touch Chrétien has to privilege the flame over and above its historical mediation in Christ, but he can only do this by making history secondary to the divine. That is, he has to hold God (or beauty, as he often calls the holy) over and above the finite world (OT 255). As Derrida notes, Chrétien never acknowledges this contradiction and never submits the transcendental exemplar of the divine flame to the alterity that renders it possible. What Derrida is pointing out here, just as with his analysis of religio discussed in "Faith and Knowledge," is how Chrétien’s reading of the incarnation is divided against itself, revealing the auto-immunity of Christianity. As Derrida puts it, “This hominization is a humanization after the fashion of God, according to the Face and the Hand of God; it goes through this very Christian “death of God” of which we spoke.

---


374 In brief, Derrida’s argument against Chrétien comes in three strokes. First, he notes how Chrétien borrows from Aquinas the idea of a "spiritual touch," whereby the auto-affection of God is the original and all physical touch merely a figural trace. God functions for Chrétien as the transcendental condition and authority that makes all finite touch possible. Second, he notes Chrétien’s emphasis on the historicity of the Christian body. For Chrétien, the Christian body only presents itself “marked in its very essence by the historical event of revelation, Incarnation, the Eucharist, by the giving, the announcing, the promising, and the memory of Hoc est meum corpus” (OT 247). Third, Derrida points out how for Chrétien, as well as many other thinkers in the Christian tradition, this historical contingency is overcome with an emphasis on necessity of divine providence. Barth, for instance, famously argued that all of history was predetermined by the divine predestination of Christ’s sacrifice, placing all historical contingency under the divine decree of God. Chrétien employs this necessity by connecting the contact/touch of existence with the “eternal flash” from which everything emerges, rooting all contingency in a divine original necessity. For all these reasons, Derrida labels Chrétien’s work a haptologetics of the flame and notes the intimate connection between his work and other ontological thinkers (OT 249).
earlier. And so forth. But Chretien will never translate this substitution into any prosthetics, transplanting, or techne…” (OT 261-262).

In the work of Merleau-Ponty, Derrida finds a similar incarnational logic to that of Chrétien but with an atheist bent. Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty attempts to offer a distinctly atheist phenomenology of the body, he compares touch to the act of grace and describes “flesh” as a “communion” of sense (OT 247). For Merleau-Ponty the figure of touch provides a site of origin and immediacy that intertwines materiality in a phenomenal sense of the world. He does not use technics to stress the supplemental prosthetics of the body, but the intertwining of internality and externality in a chiasm of flesh. Derrida cites the following passage from Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception as an example:

In the same way I give ear, or look, in the expectation of a sensation, and suddenly the sensible takes possession of my ear or my gaze, and I surrender a part of my body, even my whole body, to this particular manner of vibrating and filling space known as blue or red. Just as the sacrament not only symbolizes, in sensible species, an operation of Grace, but is also the real presence of God, which it causes to occupy a fragment of space and communicates to those who eat of the consecrated bread, provided that they are inwardly prepared, in the same way the sensible has not only a motor and vital significance, but is nothing other than a certain way of being in the world suggested to us from some point in space, and seized and acted upon by our body, provided that it is capable of doing so, so that sensation is literally a form of communion.375

According to Derrida, what is happening here is very similar to what we find in Chrétien but with a different source. Instead of appealing to a transcendental exemplar, Merleau-Ponty explicitly affirms the phenomenal experience of the body as a space of disclosure. Like Heidegger, he privileges revealability over revelation by suggesting that the movement of the worldly is the space that makes the event of truth possible. In this manner, Merleau-Ponty locates the self-touching of the flame right at the touch of sense to itself, as an imminent form of communion.

Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty constantly lays stress on the dissymmetry between the parts that make up human existence, both mechanical and material—what he

coins “partes extra partes”—he nonetheless stresses the coincidence between noncoincidence. This is what Derrida claims he finds simultaneously “troublesome” and “exciting” about Merleau-Ponty. At the same time that Merleau-Ponty critiques the scientific and theological abstraction of the body, and thereby brings discourse on the body back to the fragmentary sense of being-in-the-world (apropos Heidegger), he simultaneously emphasizes the synchronous experience of intertwining, chiasm, and flesh. Technics, for him, are “mechanical relations” that are “exterior” but they do not interrupt the phenomenology of touch in any fundamental way. Rather, Merleau-Ponty stresses the coincidence of these non-coinciding parts.

It is in this manner that On Touching compliments Derrida’s work on religion in “Faith and Knowledge,” because it exposes how the Christian/Western concept of the body is subject to the technical spacing of the supplement and its autoimmune repetition. Rather than just focus on the abstract nature of the term “religion,” Derrida here examines how phenomenologists expose a very Christian Eucharistic logic in their attempt to explain the body. He suggests that this "hominization" or “anthropotheological thinking of flesh,” makes no space for technics or animality, and is only concerned with elevating the human over and above life (OT 261-262). Recall from our above discussion that Derrida describes the "religiosity of religion" as the indemnification of existence beyond its instrumentalization. Hence, by demonstrating how this privileging of the present living human touch over all other life he shows how Western religion indemnifies its technics in the name of the divine, the holy, and the safe, which in turn ensures the autoimmune and machine like repetition of religion. As he notes: "This excess above and beyond the living, whose life only has absolute value by being worth more than life, more than itself-this, in short, is what opens the space of death that is linked to the automaton (exemplarily "phallic") , to technics, the machine, the prosthesis: in a word, to the dimensions of auto-immune and self-sacrificial supplementarity, to this death-drive that is silently at work in every community, every auto-co-immunity, constituting it as such in its iterability, its heritage, its spectral tradition" (FK 87).

In contrast to Chrétien and Merleau-Ponty, what Derrida finds in Nancy is an emphasis on technē at the heart of the Christian body. If the various thinkers of the hapto-

---

onto-theo-teleological tradition use the spacing constitutive of the finite to inaugurate a sense of the world and subsume absence under the presence of touch, Nancy does the opposite. Just as Derrida contends that "life is a mechanike,"\(^{377}\) so Nancy contends that life is a "technē of bodies." Both agree that bodies are created, fashioned, and refined in a technical milieu that renders possible all touch and sight, and that there is no pure phenomenological base to experience, whether immanent or transcendent, sensible or intelligible, natural or cultural.

The body is made possible by what Nancy calls “ecotechnics,” the milieu of materiality and technics in which existence exists. This implies that there is no pure distinction between the real and the illusory, nature and technics, just increasing grades of machination. The body is always already caught up in the absenting of ends, foundations, and primary causes (SW 90). As Nancy writes, “Our world is the world of the 'technical,' a world whose cosmos, nature, gods, entire system is, in its inner joints, exposed as “technical”: the world of the ecotechnical” (C 89).

Hence, instead of trying to reconcile the ambiguous nature of touch with some ground, some Sense of sense, Nancy emphasizes how touch is mediated by technics without attempting to ground this difference in some notion of the proper. Primarily focusing on Corpus, The Experience of Freedom, Finite Thinking, and the essay “The Deconstruction of Christianity,” Derrida details how Nancy opens the body and touch to dissemination. In distinction to all the thinkers who have preceded him, Nancy privileges neither revelation nor revealability: the sense of the body he provides is neither given by a divine touch nor unified by the self-touching of being but "shared"(partage) and extended without return. This makes for a body that is originarily friendly to transplantation, prosthetic substitutions, and the teletechnological, and therefore stretched-out. As Derrida notes, "As always in our Nancean use of these words, "sharing out" first of all means participation, indisputable proximity, affinities, crossings, crossovers and crossbreeding—a sort of community or contemporaneity of thinking, language, and discourse" (OT 218).

An emphasis on sharing is key for overcoming the metaphysics associated with touch because the central issue, as we have seen, is the use of touch as the condition of possibility for an overarching sense of the world. Touch is used to grasp what Augustine called Interior intimo meo, the most interior aspect of the self. Although touch is often recognized

---

\(^{377}\) Derrida, Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001, 244.
as multiple and dispersed it functions as a figure for that which self-touches; a sign for an "inner" Sense more original than all disparate sensations. Symbolically, metaphorically, and even biologically, touch is linked to the heart, which is imagined as the center of the body proper. "She touched my heart," or, "I was touched in the deepest possible way," are but two popular expressions which capture this idea. By emphasizing sharing Nancy destabilizes this center and empties out the heart of touch. After all, if all touch is shared then there is no "the touch" or "the body" in any universal sense, but only supplementation, only prosthetics, shared out in the spacing of temporalization. This means that the heart itself is prosthetic (something Nancy, a recipient of a heart transplant in 1990, knows all too well).\(^{378}\)

Though Derrida references Nancy throughout the \textit{On Touching}, it is primarily in Part Three titled, "Punctuations: "And you,"" that Derrida directly engages with his work. Noting how Nancy ends \textit{Corpus} with the words, "And you," (\textit{et toi}), Derrida points out how his notion of touch opens towards the other without return. Otherness is not the basis of bodily self-identity for Nancy—as if the other could be appropriated via touch—but the exact limit of touch. Touch does not come back to an interiority but spills out like writing, to make space for the other (OT 284). To use Nancy’s favoured neologism, the body is exscribed: it is extended, spaced out, and ungathered. Touch does not coalesce into a communion of sense but takes place at the edge of corporeality, always in movement to-itself (\textit{a-soi}) (C 32). This does not imply that there is an inside or an outside of touch but just its exposure; it’s being turned inside out; offered at the limit of other bodies. As Nancy writes, "what's exscribed remains this other edge" that inscription, though signifying on an edge, obstinately continues to indicate as its own-other edge" (C 85).

We will unpack more of Nancy's specific argument in \textit{Corpus} in more detail below, but for now what is important to grasp is Derrida's endorsement of Nancy. Derrida locates in Nancy a resistance to incarnational logic, or any “\textit{general haptics},” in the actual technical supplementarity that the latter locates on the very inside of touch—what Nancy calls the “\textit{technē} of bodies” (C 87). Derrida notes how supplementarity interrupts all metaphysical and religious appeals to either transcendence or immediacy in Nancy’s work, as he does not allow “anything that might be, de facto or de jure, pure and free from the said mixture” (OT

\(^{378}\) Derrida references this in \textit{On Touching} on numerous occasions (OT 97, 262, 273, 294). For Nancy's commentary on this see, "The Intruder" (C 161-170).
He asserts that what separates Nancy from other European thinkers of the body, whether it be Chrétien, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, or even Gilles Deleuze, is his emphasis on the part, departure, and sharing of the body. Nancy allows no immediate intuition of the haptical, but shows how the “plural limits” of touch refute both immediacy and transcendence (OT 126-127). Moreover, he continually affirms the mediation, skin, and distance that interrupts all contact with a “body proper,” offering no immediate contact with the thing itself, but only a touch that touches upon the dividing line between the one and the other. Far from providing a transcendental guarantee to the meaning of touch, Derrida suggests that Nancy makes space for the other right at the external limit of touch. Touch does not reveal the presence of bodies or even the essence of the technical, but only reveals the weight, distance, and interruption of sense. For Nancy, sense does not unite bodies (or matter) in a chiasm of meaning and worldhood but only exposes their limit in the sharing-out of space. Singular beings are what emerge from the touch of these limits, not in their communion but their multiplication.

One thing that has been underemphasized in scholarship on Nancy is precisely this endorsement by Derrida. Although Derrida certainly interrogates the figure of touch in Nancy’s work, his real concern is how this figure relates to the deconstruction of Christianity. The overall consensus among scholars seems to be that Derrida positions Nancy’s work either on par, or very related to, the work of Merleau-Ponty. Ian James writes that it is “in the work of Merleau-Ponty that Derrida discerns the closest proximity between Nancy and the haptological trajectory he uncovers.” And another scholar writes that, “Derrida argues that Jean-Luc Nancy, in privileging corporeality and touch, shares much in common with Merleau-Ponty.” In contrast, I would suggest that although Derrida certainly raises many questions about the role of touch in Nancy’s work, and how it relates to the deconstruction of Christianity, at no point does Derrida directly locate Nancy in the haptological tradition. In actual fact, Derrida goes to great lengths to distance Nancy from all former thinkers of touch, and to show how his work on Christianity is unique. As he writes in the following lengthy quote, Nancy’s work is distinct from all other phenomenologist’s of touch. His work on the

379 Derrida critiques Deleuze and Guattari of privileging haptics with their notion of “smooth” vs. “striated” space.
380 James, The Fragmentary Demand, 121.
382 Although Derrida does write that with Merleau-Ponty’s work “we shall never be closer” to Nancy (OT 214), he also states that Nancy’s thinking is “as near and as far as possible in relation to Merleau-Ponty” (OT 199).
deconstruction of Christianity locates ecotechnics in the midst of the body, radically implicating the plasticity of the supplement and prosthetics of touch:

We can dissociate none of these motifs: the project of a “deconstruction of Christianity,” long announced or prepared; the attention paid to the “technē of bodies” and ecotechnics that “deconstruct the system of ends,” there where we are in “the technē of the next one,” the “fellow man” (Nancy, Corpus, p. 79); a certain decentering of the hand and the fingers; the connection between the interrupting spacing out of con-tact and the question of the technical, and so forth. When I take them together, they seem to draw the shared-out dividing line [la ligne de partage], about the problem of touch, between Nancy’s corpus (to which, for all too obvious reasons, I have been feeling so close for so long) and other problematics of touch, all remarkable, neighboring, yet dissimilar, ones, including the ones already evoked (especially Merleau-Ponty's), or the ones that I shall try to identify with Didier Franck and Jean-Louis Chrétien. These thinkers have spawned original works, while sooner or later referring to Husserl's Ideas II—and let me repeat that it is on this score, first of all, that I am privileging the reading of these works. They also, albeit differently, according to their separate trajectories, but with equal intensity, take some account of the irreducibility of the other and of the untouchable in the experience of touching; and they sometimes pay a certain attention to a spacing out or interruption as the paradoxical and intervalllic “medium” of con-tact.

But of them, who from the beginning would have associated with that the plastic and substitutive structure of prosthetics or the technical supplement? Who takes it into account, as it has always seemed to me that one should do, and as Nancy has never failed to do, with an increasingly legible insistence, a powerful conceptual consistency that has always remained indissociable from his forceful writing (or exscription)? Apart from him, in dealing with touch at least, who has recognized the locus of this technical supplementarity of the body and acknowledged its essential and necessary originarity, as it seems to me that one should always do (and that of course is what is orienting me here)? (OT 223)

Hence, although it is true that Derrida labels Nancy a “post-deconstructive realist” and at one point calls his work “irredentist,” he equally affirms that Nancy’s work is “irreducible to any idealism or subjectivism, be it transcendental or psychoanalytical” (OT 46). As Morin aptly notes, Derrida even distinguishes Nancy from other phenomenologies of the body by pointing out how he employs technical supplementarity right at the level of touch. There is no coincidence of opposites for Nancy in touch, as there is for Husserl or Merleau-Ponty, no
point at which the touching and the touched coincide. As Derrida writes, the originality of Nancy's work is that he thinks "différance in the very inside of haptics" (OT, 229). Nancy's work, he suggests, “first recalls sharing, parting, partitioning, and discontinuity, interruption, caesura—in a word, syncope” (OT, 156).

Of course, I am not suggesting that Derrida does not interrogate the figure of touch in Nancy’s work, or that he does not have doubts about some of Nancy's claims regarding the deconstruction of Christianity, but he definitely clears Nancy of any haptological remainder. In contrast to J. Hillis Miller, I don't think that in On Touching Derrida takes Nancy aside and "verbally spanks him, as one spanks a disobedient child." Derrida certainly wants to warn Nancy of the dangers of using the language of "touch" but he equally clears Nancy of any metaphysical associations. If anything, Derrida wants to hold in tension the ambiguity of touch in Nancy's work, as if to underscore the aporia of the relationship between touch and the other. He is hesitant to use Nancy's language because of the exactitude it implies, but he repeatedly stresses that Nancy thinks the untouchability of touch on the very inside of touch. Indeed, On Touching is more an exoneration of the man Derrida often calls “one of my best friends,” than it is an inquisition. In actuality, Derrida is more interested in popularizing Nancy’s work and explaining how he avoids the metaphysical errors of other philosophers than he is in critiquing him. To prove the point, simply recall Derrida's comments in the preface to On Touching. After lamenting the somewhat haphazard composition of the book and praising Nancy's The Sense of the World, Derrida writes the following: "In spite of all these shortcomings, if this attempt at interpretation, among so many other possible ones, at least persuades others to read one of the immense philosophic works of our time, this publication will not have been altogether unjustified" (OT X).

In short, what I am suggesting here is a very subtle but important distinction: Derrida is concerned about the figure of touch in the metaphysical tradition but he doesn't critique Nancy's use of it. In fact, he seems to stand in awe of Nancy's work. What worries Derrida is

383 For more on this see Marie-Eve Morin, "Corps propre or corpus corporum: Unity and Dislocation in the Theories of Embodiment of Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Luc Nancy," Chiasmi International 18 (2016). *At the time of writing this chapter, this article by Morin has not yet been formally released for publication, so it is not possible to list page numbers. What is being used here is a PDF Morin posted for free on Academia.edu (downloaded 2/23/2016).
385 Derrida, Other Testaments, 32
that despite Nancy's precise language and careful work, the figure of touch will be indemnified post-deconstruction. What concerns him is that no matter how exact we are about asserting the untouchability of touch it may be sacralized by its autoimmune contagion.

At the base level, what Derrida seems to be asking Nancy is the following: Although it is true that touch, the body, and Christianity can be deconstructed, what gives us the authority to speak in the name of its dismemberment? What allows us to speak in the name of Christianity in some singular sense after its unravelling? And when we do so, how do we avoid enacting its autoimmune reconstitution? Hence, although he credits Nancy with rethinking the figure of touch according to the logic of deconstruction, he questions whether this process is ever final and how the language of touch and Christianity survives the process of deconstruction. For Derrida, in order to distance deconstruction from the history of destructio from which it emerges, we must be weary of this Christological language that has repeatedly been used in the ontotheological tradition of the West.386

In “Salve,” the concluding section of On Touching, Derrida states all this quite bluntly, writing that his disagreement with Nancy is not necessarily because of any logic of haptology that remains in his philosophy of touch, but because there is always more differing/deferral that haunts the term “Christianity” and that even to speak of the deconstruction of Christianity might indemnify it:

Nancy doesn't say much about “betting,” it seems to me (but I may be wrong in this), yet I perceive him as a thinker of the bet and a player—or rather like a bettor, a desperate bettor, that is: he never stops staking, committing, committing himself, and doing anything to calculate some hyperbolic odds with exactitude as well as exaggeration. He does this without any expectations, counting neither on the gains of some Pascalian “wager” nor on any salvation. It may also be this perdition frenzy, this impossibility—his “deconstruction of Christianity.” If I were to imitate him in this, there would still remain the way in which a Christian remnant or style still resisting any deconstruction could be seen to differ from one to the other, and how this signs our respective histories and stories in such mutually untranslatable fashions. We are not “Christian” or “non—Christian” in quotation marks, in the same fashion—but no doubt it matters little here (OT 309, My emphasis).

386 In A Taste for the Secret Derrida makes a similar statement about "community," questioning why Nancy and Blanchot seek to retain this word: "I have no qualms about these communities; my only question is, why call them communities?" (Derrida, A Taste for the Secret, 25).
Derrida’s approach to the deconstruction of Christianity is to point out the autoimmunity of religion and call attention to the faith that unworks all determinate figures that might announce themselves in the name of the first source of religion. For him, this is an infinite process that oscillates between deconstruction and construction, faith and religion, and defies any particular "sense" that we might identify as Christian.

3.4 - Nancy

3.4.1 - From Incarnation to Areality

Nancy’s response to Derrida is that Christianity and the entire haptological tradition must be re-thought according to the logic of deconstruction. In order to overcome the nihilism of our metaphysical structures Christianity must be exposed as a deconstruction and a self-deconstruction. In Dis-Enclosure, Nancy states that he is aware of the risks in this debate and that “traps” lurk everywhere but that this is the only way forward (D 12). If we want to move beyond nihilism we must consider the ways in which our whole tradition is caught up in its own infinite unravelling, from beginning to end (D 141).

As noted in the Introduction, Nancy formally began to rethink Christianity in light of this self-deconstruction in Corpus, which was originally published in French in 1992. In this early text Nancy doesn't specifically use the phrase "the deconstruction of Christianity" but he does consider how the traditional figure of touch is rooted in the mind/body distinction inherited from the Christian tradition. Focusing largely on the body, his analysis is limited to very general issues, such as the mind/body distinction, the incarnation, and Christian flesh, etc. It is not until Noli me tangere, Dis-Enclosure, and Adoration that Nancy expands upon this preliminary engagement with more precise considerations of Christian texts and terminology. Let's start with the former by discussing Nancy's work on the Incarnation and the body and make our way to his more recent work on the resurrection and adoration.

Nancy begins Corpus by pointing out how the body has been figured as a site of unity, a universal space in which all humanity partakes through touch. He suggests, like Derrida, that this universalism has its source in the Christian logic of the incarnation and that
the archetype of this unity lies in the phrase *hoc est enim corpus meum*. He argues that we are obsessed with this phrase, obsessed with showing and presenting *hoc est* (this body), and makes the provocative claim that this demonstration is the penultimate sign of our Christian identity: “*Hoc est enim corpus meum:* we come from a culture where this cult phrase will have been tirelessly uttered by millions of people officiating in millions of rites. Everyone in this culture, Christian or otherwise, (re)cognizes it.... It's our *Om mani padme ...*, our *Allah ill'allah*, our *Schema Israel*... we're obsessed with showing a *this*, and with showing (ourselves) that this *this*, here, *is* the thing we can’t see or touch, either here or anywhere else—and that *this is that*, not just in any way, but as its body. The body of that (God, or the absolute, if you prefer) —and the fact that “that” *has a body*, or that “that” *is* a body (and so we might think that “that” is the body, absolutely): that’s our obsession” (C 3). 387

According to Nancy’s reading of this incarnational logic, the flesh is considered to be the divine medium that “gives rise to the *verbum*’s glory and true *coming*” (C 65). The flesh is the space of revelation where touch unites creator and creation. This logic is not only incarnational but representational, it attempts to fuse inside and outside, the ideal and the particular, mind and matter, soul and body, spirit and flesh, God and creation according to the binary of revealability and revelation. He calls this an “angelic logic” that infuses representation into bodies: “Through and through, angelic logic and the whole *corpus* of philosophical bodies are subjected to the signifying law, in such a way that signification (or representation) gives sense to the body, making it the sign of sense” (C 67). Similar to the arguments we have discussed above, Nancy is here critiquing the Christian theological and philosophical tradition for privileging presence over absence; for privileging the logos (*verbum*) as the prior meaning that gives sense to flesh (*caro*) and downplaying the material spacing of the body.

Like Derrida, Nancy wishes to upset the privileged position that this incarnational logic gives to the body as a prior space of revealabilty. He doesn’t simply want to argue that we should emphasize the plastic materiality of the body over and above the *logos*, as if to privilege materialism over idealism—difference over sameness—but to show how the Christian teaching of the incarnation is situated upon the spacing of its own *différance*, and

---

387 Though Nancy uses the phrase Allah ill'allah, the proper Arabic expression is "La ilaha illallah," which translates as, "There is no deity but God."
that it cannot be considered outside of this "spacing" of sense. Nancy draws attention to this ambiguity by referring directly to the Christian phrase, *verbum caro factum est* (Greek: *logos sarx egeneto*), which is the formula for the incarnation found in the Gospel of John. As Nancy writes:

> If I say *verbum caro factum est* (logos sarx egeneto), I say in one sense that *caro* gives rise to *verbum’s* glory and true coming. But I also instantly say, in an entirely different sense, that *verbum* (logos) gives rise to the true presence and sense of *caro* (sarx). And if, in one sense (once again), these two versions belong to each other, and if “incarnation” names them both together, they nevertheless, in another sense, exclude one another (C 65).

What Nancy is doing in this passage is pointing towards the aporia of ideality and materiality, word and flesh, which lies at the center of this incarnational logic. According to one interpretation, the meaning of the phrase *verbum caro factum est* is that the presence of the divine gives rise to existence. This is the sense usually privileged by spiritual or religious readings of the incarnation. However, in another sense, the phrase seems to emphasize the material and prosthetic spacing out of the *logos*. This is its finite and material connotation. For Nancy, the ambiguity of the Christian tradition ultimately lies in this tension—this is the self-deconstruction of Christianity in action. Much like Derrida’s argument concerning the autoimmunity of the "real presence" of the Eucharist, Nancy suggests that there is an ambiguity in the Christian doctrine of the incarnation that renders the body present/absent.

In contrast to the traditional incarnational logic that dominates any theory of "embodiment," Nancy wants to conceive all bodies—even the "incarnated body of Christ"—according to the exposition of their coming, going, death, and technical spacing. He wants to think its creation *ex nihilo* from the spacing of this taking place. He suggests that the body is not the prison of a fallen soul, the expression of an interior "signifying" body, nor the presence of a deified form, but the body as syncope; as extension and spacing in which the sense or "spirit" of the body is found in the "putting aside of disappearance itself" (D 83). The body is the dynamic rhythm of sense being exposed to its own differing/deferral, and this movement is only possible because there is no foundation for existence:
The world of bodies owes its *techne* and its existence, or better, *its existence as technē*, to the absence of a foundation, that is, to "creation." It incurs the tiny expenditure of a few grams that open a place, spacing an exposition. An *exposition* isn't the opposite of a foundation, but rather its corporeal truth. An "absence of foundation" shouldn't be understood as a gulf or abyss but as a local tectonic stirring, a few grams of color placing the burst of a body here (in other words, every time, some burst, because a body is never completely whole, and being-exposed is also that fact). (C 101)

In this manner, Nancy does not start from the idea that the body has a structure to be located in space but by paying attention to its open relation to itself (C 33). He suggests that a body is a space where sense takes place, not a fullness or filled substantiality—which would simply amount to a black hole of being (C75). It is the absence of the body—its withdrawal from itself—that makes space for the existence of the body (C 19).

Recall from our discussion in the previous chapter that the "with" of "being-in-common" does not constitute an intertwining of sense but merely the exposure of sense to the limit of corporeality. This is why Nancy writes that a body is "a skin, variously folded, refolded, unfolded, multiplied, invaginated, exogastrulated, orificed, evasive, invaded, stretched, relaxed, excited, distressed, tied, untied" (C 15). The "with," in this manner, is not a substance that unites beings but merely the space of their shared separation (BSP 35). And no matter how intimately folded, this skin does not imply a bond, penetration, or a laceration: "this melee (*mêlée*) occurs without mingling. Love is the touch of the open" (C29).

A term in Nancy’s lexicon that best captures this re-reading of the body is areality.

Areality is Nancy’s way of stressing the “area” where existence opens up to its own *différance*; its weight, frequency, nuance of place, event, and spatial extension. Etymologically, areality signifies both the "lack" or "suspension" of reality (due to the alpha privative) and the quality of an "area" or surface. To speak of the areality of the body is to emphasize all the technical distinctions that simultaneously construct and deconstruct the body. As Nancy puts it,

> *Areality* is an antique word, signifying the nature or specificity of an *aire* ("area"). By chance, this word also serves to suggest a lack of reality, or rather a slight, faint, suspended reality: the reality of a swerve localizing the body, or

---

388 For more on this, see Morin's essay, "*Corps propre or corpus corporum*: Unity and Dislocation in the Theories of Embodiment of Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Luc Nancy."
a displacement within the body. In effect, a faint reality of “ground,”
substance, matter, or subject. But this faint reality makes the whole areal real,
where the so-called archi-tectonics of bodies is played out and articulated (C
43).

Nancy's first use of the term areality is in the Inoperative Community, where he discusses
how community is not an ideal to be reached but the very opening in which beings are spread
out. However, in Corpus, he applies this same idea directly to touch to emphasize that the
body is not an immanent substance that is closed in on itself nor an embodied spirit. Whereas
a substance is cut off from other things in isolation and an embodied spirit is the realization
of an Idea, a body is an extended "area" that exists as a tension, swerve, vibration in relation
to other bodies. Areality is therefore a word to describe both the suspended presentation of
the body, and the taking place of sense in the displacement of bodies.

As Ian James notes in Retreating Religion, Nancy uses his more literal reading of
verbum caro factum est to stress that there is a logic of atheology at the center of Christian
theology.389 Whereas Derrida wants to understand the doctrine of incarnation as a
metaphysical representation that needs to be deconstructed, Nancy wants to unpack the
metaphysical tradition differently, as a presentation of the spacing or technics within flesh.
As Nancy writes, "If the verb [Word] was made flesh, or if (in Greek) it became flesh, or if it
was engendered or engendered itself as flesh, it is surely the case that it had no need to
penetrate the inside of that flesh that was initially given outside it: it became flesh itself (81).
We will work this out below in more detail when discussing Noli me tangere, but suffice it to
say that this switch from representation to presentation undergirds Nancy’s whole project on
the deconstruction of Christianity. Nancy dares to think of the incarnation as the “word”
touching its own untouchable distension in space; as a presentation of sense, rather than as a
representational model.

Nancy also refers to this extension of the body as the "soul" or "spirit," words charged
with Christological connotations, but he does so in a deconstructive manner. If Aristotle
conceived of the soul as that part of the self that links thought, flesh, and touch to eternity,
Nancy thinks of the soul as the body’s relation to itself (C 126). For Nancy, the soul is
nothing but the sense of the body in its spatial distension. Using the terms "soul" and "spirit"

389 Ian James, “Incarnation and Infinity,” in Retreating Religion, ed. by A. Alexandrova, I. Devisch, L. ten Kate
in this atheological manner, Nancy is able to affirm how the spaciousness of the body is in
disjunction with itself, but also how we have a sense of this extension that we call "the
body." He affirms that if the body is able to sense the world, it is only able to do this because
the soul senses its extension right at the level of touch, in its disjunction with itself. In
contrast to Chrétien and Merleau-Ponty, he affirms that the body is unable to fold touch in on
itself in conjunction with ether the consubstantiality (oneness) of divine presence or some
notion of the "lived body." As Nancy often writes citing Freud, "The psyche is extended:
knows nothing about it" (C 21).

In the introduction to Dis-Enclosure, Nancy relates all of this back to the
deconstruction of Christianity by distinguishing this areal différance of the body from
Derrida’s messianic différance, claiming that deconstruction can only take the form of an
active infinite (l’infini actuel) (D 176fn12). What he wants to stress is that the real is
ultimately characterized by its own retreat into spatial distention, or areality, because the
infinite deferral of sense is always actual. Or, as he writes in Corpus: “The real, as areal,
merely reunites the infinity of maximal existence (“quo magis cogitari non potest”) with the
finite absolute of an areal horizon” (C 43). By thinking the incarnation according to the logic
of areality, he is therefore trying to empty out all ground, identity, and substance right at the
level of touch.

In a strict philosophical sense, what is going on here is that Nancy is rejecting the
very basis of phenomenology by stressing the interruptive spacing that opens experience, but
he is doing so by slightly reinterpreting Derrida's critique of Hegel. Recall from our
discussion above that Derrida emphasizes the "bad" infinite over Hegel's "right" infinite in
order to challenge the metaphysics of presence that allows Hegel to bend the circle of
phenomena "upon itself." Well, what Nancy is doing is emphasizing Hegel’s "right" infinite
over Derrida’s emphasis on the messianic "bad" infinite, but according to a deconstructive
framework. Like Derrida, Nancy also seeks to overcome the transcendent/immanent binary
of the metaphysical tradition, but he thinks this work is always already achieved by the
deconstruction of Christianity. Nancy therefore distances himself from Derrida’s notion of
the indeconstructable (Indéconstructible) by suggesting that the negative deferral of presence
distends and dis-encloses substance (or any representational logic) in the “active and actual
presence of the nothing qua thing (res) of the opening itself” (D 176fn12). What this implies
is that the real is areal because the deferral of sense always implies an actual infinite which distends bodies and matter in a prolongation of sense. Hence, whereas Derrida conceives of the negative in its endless messianic deferral—deconstructing terms like "soul," "sense," and "touch"—Nancy locates this deferral right in the midst of the world as the nothing (nihil) of creation—allowing him to affirm that soul, sense, and touch are already deconstructed. Nancy is therefore able to think the infinite as a kenotic opening without closure, and he claims the "right infinite" as the very movement of “deconstruction and dis-enclosure” (D 10), which exhausts the nihil of any substantiality.

This is a very subtle philosophical move because it allows Nancy to retain Derrida's emphasis on the infinite finite but to also suggest that this leads to the emptying out of substance in the worldly exscription of bodies, which, as we will now discuss, is related to his interpretation of the resurrection. This subtle position allows him to argue that infinity opens the body to its free relation, exposure, and excess of presentation in the finite world.

In Greek, the word “resurrection” is anastasis, literally meaning the “raising,” “uplifting,” or “stance,” and Nancy distinguishes this etymology from its common association in French and English with “reanimation” or “rebirth.” This term is central to how he understands touch, bodies, and the incarnation because Nancy interprets resurrection not as the overcoming of death but the raising, or sending (renvoi), of death in life. If Derrida suggests that the infinite movement of différance is caught up in its undecidable (and messianic) deferral, Nancy suggests that the infinite movement of différance is resurrected as the areal spaciousness of the body.

In 2004, in a conversation in Strasbourg with Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy actually states this explicitly. Acknowledging that the difference between he and Derrida boils down to how they interpret "infinity," and the way in which he (Nancy) privileges anastasis over undecidability:

**Jean-Luc Nancy:** I have to jump in here right away because you just said that the theme of infinite finitude is common to Jacques and Jean-Luc—but you’re leaving yourself out . . .

**Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe:** No, no . . .

**J-LN:** Yes, but with you it’s finite infinitude.
Jacques Derrida: Okay, here we go . . .

PL-L: Yes, if you want . . .

J-LN: Yes, of course that’s right!

PL-L: No, I didn’t mean that . . . I meant that I never thematized it like that, and, moreover, I was never very receptive to it . . .

J-LN: I think there is something here, a certain typology, between the three of us. A typology in which you, Philippe, would be on the side of the tragic, Jacques on the side of the undecidable, and I . . . I don’t know, maybe on the side of anastasis . . . And the way each of these three postures affects what is called infinite finitude is no doubt a real question.390

Let's explore what this means by examining Nancy specific texts on resurrection/anastasis.

3.4.2 - From Resurrection to Retreat

Nancy published Noli me tangere three years after the publication of Derrida’s On Touching, and it addresses some of the concerns raised by Derrida in that text. If Corpus attempts to think the relation between the incarnation, soul, spirit, touch, matter, and the body in light of technics, Noli me tangere continues this project but engages more directly with Christian scripture and terminology. What is offered in this text, much like what is offered in the chapters “There Is No Sense of Sense” and “Mysteries and Virtues” in Adoration (which we will reference in the following chapter), is a reinterpretation of Christology along deconstructive lines. At the same time mimicking Derrida's deconstructive gestures and trying to go beyond him, Nancy affirms the deconstruction of Christianity in the hoc est enim corpus meum—the finite presentation of the body of God—and Christ's Noli me tangere—Christ's refusal of touch to Mary Magdalene. Let's begin by summarizing the first several chapters of the text and then connect it with Nancy's wider writings on the subject.

390 Nancy, quoted in Jacques Derrida, For Strasbourg: Conversations for Friendship and Philosophy: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy, 19. I have entered the full names so we know who is speaking, in the text they just use the abbreviations.
Nancy begins *Noli me tangere* with a Prelude that meditates on the meaning of the parables in the Gospels. Drawing our attention not just to passages from the bible, but the paintings, icons, sculptures, and music which make up the history and legend surrounding the resurrection of Christ, Nancy suggests that a Christian has faith not only in the truths that are signified, translated, or expressed by revelation, but primarily, and in fact perhaps exclusively, in “the effective presentation of truth as a singular life or existence” (NMT 4). By collapsing the distinction between the divine and the worldly, the Christian gospels expose the divine as nothing more than the spacing of the finite. He suggests that in "Christian and post-Christian iconography of both the East to West," (NMT 3) the history or legends of Jesus of Nazareth are presented as the truth that appears in the excess of presentation:

If the parable constitutes a mode of figuration by means of a story charged with representing a moral content, then the entire life of Jesus is a representation of the truth that he claims himself to be. But that does not simply mean that this life illustrates an invisible truth: rather, this life is precisely the truth that appears (*se présente*) in being presented (*se représentant*). This is, at least, what is proposed in Christian faith: one has faith not only in the truths that are signified, translated, or expressed by a prophet, but primarily, and in fact perhaps exclusively, one also has faith in the effective presentation of truth as a singular life or existence.

To that extent, truth itself becomes parabolic: the logos is not distinct from the figure or the image, since its essential content consists precisely in the *logos’s* figuring, presenting, and representing itself like a person who appears unexpectedly, who shows himself and, in showing himself, shows the original of the figure: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Show us the Father? (NMT 40)

According to this reading, the life of Jesus that is depicted in the gospels and the artistic renderings of it, are an appeal to reality in its deepest mystery, not an appeal to a meaning beyond appearance. Rather than establishing the transcendence of God and affirming the heaven/earth binary, Nancy suggests that the history and parables of Jesus disturb this very
distinction (and the realm of signification in general) by exposing the divine in the excess of finite presentation.391

What Nancy is doing here is flipping the usual interpretation of the gospels by pointing out that all that is implied by the incarnation is the infinite spacing of the finite (i.e. via death and the technics of mediation). However, contra Derrida, Nancy is setting up his deconstructive analysis not by juxtaposing etymological derivations of "religion" but by juxtaposing "religious" to "nonreligious" reflection. According to the common theological interpretation, the stories in the gospels are figures, names, and stories for eternal and universal truths, but Nancy is suggesting that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ are instances of the message itself as truth, not a reference to a higher truth (NMT 8). As Nancy writes,

A thought that conceives of revelation as bringing to light a hidden reality or deciphering a mystery is only the religious or believing modality (in the sense of a form of representation or subjective knowledge) of Christianity or of monotheism in general. But in its deep, nonreligious, and nonbelieving structure (or in accordance with the auto-deconstruction of religion that puts it into play), “revelation” constitutes the identity of the revealable and revealed, of the “divine” and the “human” or the “worldly.” (NMT 4)

What constitutes the unworking of religion here is the voiding out of the "revealable" in the spacing of text, sense, and bodies because it is in the very spacing of these parts that this "revelation" comes to be. What Nancy is suggesting here is not the immanent disclosure of the divine to the finite but an exposure of the divine as nothing more than the spacing of the finite; an exposure of the unscathed as scathed. What is "revealed" here is simply the

391 Nancy's comments on the nature of parables in the Gospels, and the way in which they uniquely present the presentation of reality, reminds me somewhat of Erich Auerbach's comparison between the Gospels and antique literature. In *Mimesis*, Auerbach describes the type of narrative and representation in the Gospels as a form of "direct discourse" that it "fits into no antique genre," and which offers a form of immediacy unknown in the ancient world. Since I do not have the time to discuss Auerbach's analysis here, I leave you with this brief quote, in which Auerbach comments on the Gospels in reference to Peter's denial of Christ, a story which is found in all four Gospels: "It is too serious for comedy, too contemporary and everyday for tragedy, politically too insignificant for history—and the form which was given it is one of such immediacy that its like does not exist in the literature of antiquity." See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 45-46. We will discuss the relation between the ancient and the Christian world in Nancy's work in the following chapter.
presentation of the finite in its infinite disjunction with itself, not some otherworldly secret.  

Hence, whereas Derrida suggests that religion is in conflict with the repetition of its own technical supplement, and that this repetition deconstructs religion and renders it possible, Nancy simply affirms the self-deconstruction of Christianity in the withdrawn presentation of the Christian message (via parable, paintings, etc.) (NMT 23). Moreover, whereas Derrida seeks to show how the death of God comes about via Christianity, Nancy affirms that the Christian message has always been pregnant with the death of God (CW 85). By switching registers from "religious" to "nonreligious" reflection, he seeks to expose this death in all its patency.

In the main chapters of Noli me tangere, Nancy discusses how this "nonreligious" reflection impacts how we read the famous scene where the resurrected Christ tells Mary Magdalene, “Don’t touch me.” This scene from the Gospel of John depicts the moment between Christ’s physical resurrection—having just exited the tomb—and his departure/ascension to heaven. Here is the passage from John, which relates the exact moment when Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene:

Jesus saith unto her, “Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?” She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, “sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast lain him, and I will take him away.”
Jesus saith unto her, “Mary.”
She turned herself and saith unto him, “Rabboni,” which is to say Master.
Jesus saith unto her, “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to the my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.”
Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her.

The famous phrase in this passage, "Touch me not" or "Don't touch me," can of course be read as a sacrilization of the body of God, an affirmation by Christ that his ascending and

---

392Jean-Luc Nancy, "Chromatic Atheology," Journal of Visual Culture 4(1) (2005): 126. In this particular text, Nancy is discussing the Matthias Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece and the work of Martin Buber, but there are many overlaps with what we are discussing here; in particular atheology, resurrection, "revelation.
393John 20:13-18 (KJV) Cited in NMT 20-21. In many of the more modern Bible translations the above scene Mary is translated as “Don’t hold on to me,” but I am using the King James version for this quote because that is the text Nancy uses for this specific passage.
glorious body needs to be kept safe and unscathed from finite touch, but this is not what Nancy wants to suggest. Rather, he argues that what is so remarkable about the phrase is not that it speaks to the untouchable nature of Jesus—as if his body needed to be kept safe from contact, as Derrida might suggest—but that it exposes the ascended body of Christ in retreat from the world. In this scene, the reference to touch doesn’t speak to the untouchable, or the unscathed, but says something remarkable about “the sensitive point of touching” that does not touch (NMT 13).

This is how Nancy locates death and technics right at the center of the Christian message: he draws our attention to the paradox and ambiguity of the figure of touch in the Christian tradition. Here, the "unscathed" is exposed to its own spaciousness: the "sacred" is exposed to its distance from itself amidst the spacing of bodies; and the body of "God" is exposed in retreat from its own self-presence: “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father." Fundamentally, Nancy suggests, what this scene demands is that “the two phrases Hoc est corpus meum and Noli me tangere be thought together, in a mode of oxymoron or paradox” (NMT 14). What this means is that the body itself is untouchable in its very presentation.

As Derrida shows in Chapter Five of On Touching, there are many scenes in the gospels where the flesh and garments of Christ touch and heal believers, and of course, there is the scene in John 20 when the doubting Thomas literally sticks his finger in the wounds of Christ (OT 100-103). Hence, Nancy is not making a case for the untouchable nature of the divine, or any form of negative theology that would preserve some sacred essence of the divine from the finite world; rather, he is pointing out that the sense of the divine in Christianity is presented as withdrawal. What "revelation" consists of here is simply "a sense of the retreat." Jesus does not reveal some untouchable realm but expresses it with his words and distance—exposing that touch consists in its spacing.

In terms of what this implies about the actual resurrection, what Nancy is suggesting is that the "raising" up of Christ is the "raising" up of death as life, not a second life or revivification.394 This is not the raising up of a subject or a deity, but a "raising up" (cette levée) of death (D 101). As noted, in Greek the word for “resurrection” is anastasis, and Nancy uses this to signify the “raising,” “uplifting,” or “stance” of the infinite sharing-out of

394 In French résurrection implies the surging forth of death.
sense, distinguishing it from its Latin meaning. Christ's rising is not a second life but the "there" of being—the \textit{da} of \textit{dasein}—in its coming, going, and world configuration. As Nancy writes in the essay "To Accompany Michel Deguy": "But the anastasis does not follow, like a second life. There is no second life; the first is the only and the last one." The resurrection is therefore not a spiritual regeneration but the raising and lifting of the tomb itself; death as the very condition of life rather than death overcome. "The divine, henceforth, is the empty tomb" (D 79). Christ appears to Mary and then departs, the infinite retreats amidst the singularity and spacing of the finite. With \textit{anastasis}, death becomes the "unremitting imminence of absenting \cite{Jean Luc Nancy, "To Accompany Michel Deguy," in \textit{A Man of Little Faith}, by Michel Deguy, trans. by Christopher Elson (New York: SUNY, 2014), 196.} (NMT 39).

As Nancy suggests in the chapter "Blanchot's Resurrection," this is also what we find with the figure of Lazarus, that other resurrected figure in the gospels. What is offered in the New Testament parables is not the miracle of life coming back from death but the advance of death amidst life. What is miraculous here is not a heavenly miracle, "not a crossing through death," but "death itself as a crossing... and a laying bare of life's access to that which is neither its opposite nor its beyond, nor its sublimation...." (D 92). What is being demonstrated in these parables is that death and life are no longer names for two different worlds caught up in an eternal mixing, as they are in Plato's myth of Er or the classical tales of Dionysus and Osiris, but carnal decay alongside the glory of life. What happens when the gods depart is that the separation between life and death becomes the infinite separation of the finite from itself (NMT 47). For more on this see Chapter Four, where we have an extended discussion on the emergence of Christianity from the ancient Mediterranean world and the new relation to death this created. (A 52). To put this in the strict language of deconstruction: \textit{Anastasis} is the \textit{différance} on the inside of touch; it is resurrection stripped of "miracle, magic, belief, and the dead surging out of the
sepulchre." In truth, Nancy claims, the resurrection doesn't even occur, only its attestation by faith:

Even in religion, however, no one has seen someone resurrected, and chief among them, the one who, for Christianity, opens up and takes on the resurrection of all; he only allows that mystery to be attested by faith. He does not truly give it to be experienced. 398

The resurrection and the ascension only signal the raising up of sense in its fleeting withdrawal in the midst of the world, not the final arrival of the messiah or an ascent into heaven. The greeting of Christ is a greeting with salvation (salut) which offers nothing other than its passing, or Wink, sign, or call. 399

In strict philosophical terms, one way to express what Nancy is describing here is with the term “transimmanence.” This is a word that Nancy used frequently in his early career and then later abandoned, and it is another way of affirming the "right" infinite in the midst of the world (A 31). Transimmanence is meant to express the emptying-out of the transcendent into the immanence of the world by stressing the "evanescent character" of the transcendent. It implies that the transcendent, which was previously assumed to be "floating somewhere," is simply the infinite relation of the world to itself without closure. What Nancy is suggesting about the incarnation and the resurrection follows this logic, for he claims that both are a way of affirming the infinite dis-enclosure of the finite. It is in this sense that Nancy understands the incarnation and the resurrection, both speak to the extension of the body and the space in which all bodies meet (côtoiement) (NMT 44). Both are a way of drawing attention to the death that spaces life from itself. As was discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the work of Heidegger, Blanchot, and Bataille: Death opens the very

397Nancy, "To Accompany Michel Deguy," 196.
398Nancy, "To Accompany Michel Deguy," 196.
399Heidegger’s “last god,” according to Nancy, is also to be understood in this sense. The last god is the one whose very mode of being is none other than a Wink; who merely gives a gesture that is a “sign, call, invite, lead on, seduce: a wink of the eye, a motion of the hand.” None of these gestures signify anything, nor do they need to; rather, it is the passing itself, the invite, the call, and the lead which is alone important, because it opens the world “while ‘signifying’ nothing.” Hence, what the last god reveals is none other than the open as such (D 115). See also Marie-Eve Morin, "Towards a Divine Atheism: Jean-Luc Nancy's Deconstruction of Monotheism and the Passage of the Last God," Symposium: The Canadian Journal for Continental Philosophy 15(1) (Spring 2011): 29-49.
possibility of relation, it opens life to the coming and going of existence, and without this opening there would be no division (partage) between things, and therefore no life (NMT 45). Paying attention to what Jesus says to Mary is therefore to touch (toucher à) upon the sense of life, which is a sense of departure. What Jesus gives Mary with his words of comfort and fleeting presence "bears the revelation of everyone's infinite finitude" (NMT 46).

Yet another way to describe this would be in terms of writing, or The Space of Literature, to borrow the title of Blanchot's work. For whereas metaphysical principles speak of a power that orders life in a homogenous balance between life and death, what Nancy is appealing to is the tracing of the present in its disappearing (D 97). Just as literature spaces all of its figures and forms in a set of relations that have no firm or stable sense, so Nancy's emphasis on the resurrection as anastasis points towards the vacancy of the body and the touch of Christ as différence. As Blanchot writes, this is the power of literature: "words, having the power to make things 'arise' out of their absence—words which are masters of this absence—also have the power to disappear in it themselves, to absent themselves marvellously in the midst of the totality which they realize, which they proclaim as they annihilate themselves therein, which they accomplish eternally by destroying themselves there endlessly."400 In his own curious manner, Nancy uses Blanchot's work on writing to emphasize this radical absenting of flesh. Words, bodies, and gods become blurred in the absenting of sense which exposes them to their own disappearance. Whereas Derrida uses Blanchot to emphasize the impossibility of the messiah's arrival—keeping him at bay on the gates of the city walls—Nancy uses Blanchot to stress the "transparency" of the body of the messiah—affirming the resurrection as a site of disappearing, like a "heavy gravestone" (D 96). What Nancy wants to affirm is that the parables of resurrection function more like literature than metaphysics, because they affirm the dissipation of sense not the power of the present. As Nancy notes, "metaphysical practices always designate a 'forward, march,' the future of a renaissance, a kind of possible and of power, whereas literature only writes the present of what has always already happened to us, that is, the impossible into which our being consists in disappearing." (D 97)

---

In sum, *Anastasis* is the withdrawal of presence and the birth of death as the site of divine spaciousness, and this allows Nancy to think of the body as an ontological void. In contrast to the classical interpretations of Christ, where resurrection is a regeneration from a prior principle and establishes a continuum between the sacred and the profane, spirit and matter, Nancy offers us a reading of Christ's resurrection as departure. He exposes the gospel scene as an atheological *kenosis*: "Resurrection is the manifestation of the god inasmuch as he comes in his own withdrawal, leaves his mark in his own obliteration" (IC 25) 401

3.4.3 - Adoration and *Salut*: Bringing Derrida and Nancy Back Together Again; (Or, the Impossibility of Salvation)

The ordeal of this divine departure is what prepares the way for *adoration*. Adoration is what is addressed to this gap, opening, and space of rupture, and holds on to nothing but this passing (A 15). Adoration comes from the Latin *ad-oratio*, meaning "address" and "turning" towards that which exceeds signification. Adoration addresses neither a particular Icon, *Idea*, or image of the divine, but the ever-moving coming-forth of being—the very spacing and presentation (*praesentia*) of beings in their incommensurate sharing. 402 Nancy uses the word adoration in a way that is similar to his use of areality, but instead of just referring to the “area” into which bodies and sense retreat in an always already deconstructed space of happening, adoration is an address to this vanishing. It is an address to the retreat of religion issued forth by the departure of the gods:

Ad-oration is literally the addressing of speech.... And if the adoration of idols... constitutes, throughout our entire tradition, even beyond religion, the touchstone or the *shibboleth* whose charge it is to distinguish “true” religion from the others..., it is clearly because... the “true” addressee of adoration is the real, whose presence is not to be confused with the given present

401 As Nancy discusses in "A Faith that is Nothing at all" (which is dedicated to the work of Gérard Granel), the emptying out of being that has taken place in Western philosophy since Kant has done so under the sign of *kenosis*—the emptying out of God's divinity in Jesus Christ—but this "theological register" need not be thought according to the logic of divine creativity. Rather, it needs to be thought according to the logic of creation *ex nihilo*, which occurs from the "*nihil* opening as world" (D 69). For an extended discussion on the relation between Nancy and Granel, see James, "Infinity and Incarnation," 255-259.

402 The phrase "ever-moving coming-forth of *praesentia*" comes from the essay "To Accompany Michel Deguy." I have not put this phrase in quotations because I am using it out of context, but it applies to how Nancy defines adoration. For the original context see "To Accompany Michel Deguy,"196.
To address the world in its passing-by is therefore to adore the dis-enclosure of the "real presence" of the divine. This is why Nancy points to the resurrection of Christ as an instance of adoration, for it presents the "real" in the voiding of its real presence.

The fact that Nancy's first volume on the deconstruction of Christianity is called Dis-Enclosure and the second is called Adoration, as if the two terms stood in relation to one another, helps understand the significance of adoration for Nancy's larger project. If dis-enclosure refers to the history and movement of thought whereby deconstruction opens reason to the excessive movement of existence, deconstructing metaphysical structures, adoration is the posture of addressing this opening. Nancy begins Dis-Enclosure by claiming that Christianity is what is at stake in this excessive movement, and that it can be summed up "in the precept of living in this world as outside of it" (D 10). Concordantly, he begins Adoration by claiming that "adoration consists in holding on to the nothing—without reason or origin—of the opening (A 15). Hence, between these two volumes we can see the double movement of 'opening up' and 'holding ourselves out towards' the nothing we share between us. The deconstruction of Christianity is all about coming to grips with this sense of retreat as the finite dispersal of the infinite.

In "Prayer Demythified," which Nancy subtitles For Michel Deguy, he follows the poet in suggesting that this dispersal does not open up a new horizon for religion but simply an adoration of this outside, which is the very essence of prayer (D 136). Adoration is therefore not an appeal to any religious or spiritual content but the passing by of a transcendence that is emptied of any credo. It is a prayer that appeals to nothing but the infinite excess of sense. Citing the words of Deguy, Nancy notes that it is "A prayer... emptied entirely of what it 'contained'..." (D 133). It is simply an appeal, "I pray that you will listen to me" (D 138).

Recall that Derrida gestures towards a similar type of address when stressing the endless deconstruction of religion, but he expresses this sentiment with the notion of the messianic. For Derrida, the autoimmune unraveling of religion keeps deconstruction open to the arrival of the "wholly other," turning faith and prayer into a desert like eschatological

---

403 I am here abbreviating Nancy's citation of Deguy
hope. He suggests that any appeal to justice always has this eschatological dimension. In a manner similar to Blanchot's story about the messiah at the gates of Rome, Derrida stresses the undecidable coming of the other to free up the dimensions of the religious and the philosophical.\footnote{Derrida, A Taste for the Secret, 20.} In contrast, Nancy stresses that we exist in the "exit from religion"—in the midst of its disappearance and retreat. In a manner similar to Deguy, who writes "That which is not of this world, is of this world,"\footnote{Nancy citing Deguy's poem "Ris-Orangis," in "To Accompany Michel Deguy,"197.} Nancy suggests that “Christianity' is life in the world outside of the world.” (A 23). What he stresses is not an undecidable relation to a "wholly other" but the infinite sharing-out of sense in the absence of any transcendent guarantor. As we have seen, this difference between Derrida and Nancy in their deconstructive styles hinges on how they interpret the relationship between infinity, the other, and difféance. Derrida’s messianic faith stresses that deconstruction is always to come (l’avenir), whereas Nancy appeals to the nihil that breaks open any closure right here in the midst of the world (ici même) (A 28). This leads Derrida to stress the undecidable relationship we have to the coming of other, and Nancy to stress the retreat and anastasis of the other in the sharing of sense.

Despite these differences, Derrida and Nancy seem to agree that Christian faith offers nothing more than a salut! without salvation. Like Derrida’s notion of faith without religion, or gift without return, adoration is an address to the other without appropriation. Adoration is a prayer, address, and salutation without gift or benefit. It is Nancy's way of affirming the passing of the other without appealing to salvation, but simply a “hi!” or “farewell! In the following quote, Nancy affirms the similarity between himself and Derrida on this point:

Adoratio: the word as it is addressed. Oratio: a solemn word, a word maintained [tenue] before anything else, a tension of the voice, of the mouth, and of the entire speaking body. A word whose content is inseparable, if not indiscernible, from the address. An elevated language that is distinguished from sermo, ordinary language. A prayer, invocation, address, appeal, plea, imploring, celebration, dedication, salutation. And more precisely, not one or another of these registers, but a composition formed from them all. And lastly, or first of all, a salutation [salut]. Yes, the simple “hi!” [“salut!”] participates in adoration. When Derrida writes, or rather cries out, with all his might, “salut!—a salutation without salvation,” he indicates the following: that the
word addressed, the address that barely contains anything beyond itself; bears the recognition and affirmation of the existence of the other. It does nothing more than that, nothing that could be taken up or sublimated into a superior order of sense or of dignity: for this existence is sufficient in itself, it is “safe” ["sauve"] in itself, without needing to exit from the world (A 17-18).

Derrida and Nancy both affirm that Christian faith offers nothing more than a salut! without salvation. There is no salvific "exit from the world" that is offered by the arrival of the "divine news man"; no appearance of a gift that is here to stay. Adoration is not about addressing some particular subject or deity, or giving the world some particular kind of content, such as a sacred boon or a sermon. Recall that Jesus did not provide Mary with the gift of his presence or even say "farewell" (adieu) to her as he departed. His appearance at the tomb, as the Gardener, was not an apparition, a theogony, or epiphany of celestial glory (NMT 45). Rather, the very greeting of Jesus is found only in his passing, his very departure is a salut!406

This is how "salvation" relates to the Christian notion of "sin": the salut! without salvation opens the world towards its own outside and beyond metaphysical closure. Typically, sin is understood as a "fault," but Nancy argues that this is not what sin is; Rather, he suggests that "it is the condition of mankind closed in on itself" (A 53). Sin is the act of absolving the "subject" of its relation to the world, it is not an "original" condition of our mortality, as theorized by Augustine. The act of adoration—of greeting the other without holding on—is thereby a way of unravelling fixed, given, and completed meanings that close us off from others. The salut! without salvation breaks the limits and restraints that hold us to particular representations of the world. It is in this precise sense that sins are pardoned: the passing of Christ before the tomb opens the world to its own infinite relating and referring, shattering any Sense of sense in the brilliance of its infinite sharing (partage): "this greeting is neither a saving [sauvetage] nor a salvation [salut]. It is not sheltered outside the world and beyond the reach of death. It takes place right here among us, it is in relation itself" (A 54).

406 Recall from our discussion in Chapter One that faith is the excessive expression of a work (its inoperativity) and that it is not reducible to some particular meaning or end. Faith is not a sign for some particular divine content, individual belief, or rational idea, but exposes the worklessness (désœuvrement) of existence in the freedom of its sharing. Similarly, adoration is a salut to the passing of the world as exit; it is not a preparation for another world but a drawing away from this world in order to make space for the one who passes. Adoration addresses the gift that exceeds calculation... that is all.
As Nancy notes in “Consolation, Desolation,” Derrida was adamant that there must be no-return to any resurrection and that the “adieu” cannot be a rendezvous with God or the gateway to an afterlife. The greeting or farewell addressed to the other can only be a sign for “a definite leave-taking, and irremissible abandonment” (D 98). The survivor (she who is left behind after the passing of the other) cannot use that salut as a promise of salvation or hope of some life in the beyond. Each passing-by, each adieu, is a complete annihilation of anything that may be passed before, it is a complete break with the past and offers no promise of recovery. The salut is therefore a way of letting go of that which will never return.  

Adoration therefore perfectly sums up the complex relationship we have been trying to explicate in Nancy’s work between the incarnation, areality, and the resurrection, because it designates nothing other than the complete interruption of continuity between bodies and representation. It affirms that Nancy's emphasis on the active infinite (l’infini actuel) is not a means of affirming the “surreptitious return” of the dead, a way of reactivating the past, the subject, or the ground of theology, and is not some way of using a “dialectical machination” to convert the loss of deconstruction into a salvific gain. Adoration simply implies paying attention to materiality in its sharpness and its spacing-out: the effacement of being in its distancing from itself. The tomb does not offer a passage to another world but exposes the divine to its own dissipation.

Assuredly, there are many theological interpretations of the resurrection that present it as a means to salvation, as well as to religious and metaphysical fulfillment, yet Nancy ventures to read these texts, parables, and images according to their presentation, not their representational schemas. He wants to affirm that "Faith can only consist, by definition, in

407 The passage Nancy is citing is from Jacques Derrida, Chaque fois unique, la Jin du monde (Paris: Galilee, 2003).
408 It was on this point that Derrida once distanced himself from Nancy’s notion of anastasis, as he was weary that Nancy's interpretation of "resurrection" provided some consolation for the survivor. In the preface to The Work of Mourning, Derrida writes that Nancy’s notion of anastasis "postulates both the existence of some God and that the end of one world may not be the end of the world (D 99)." What bothered Derrida about Nancy’s notion of “redress” is that it seems to comfort the one who bids adieu to the other. It is for this reason that Nancy attempts to “clarify” his usage of the term anastasis in “Consolation, Desolation,” suggesting that by using this term he “wanted to set up an opposition to resurrection as rebirth, regeneration, a new beginning to life, which is to say, to the representation of a simple beginning anew in “another life” (A 89). In other words, anastasis doesn’t signify some form of salvation, or rebirth, or even holding on to that which is past (D 101). With his emphasis on adoration, therefore, Nancy is affirming that salutation only salutes the untouchable in the “form of an address that confirms, to itself, its disappearance, which gives back to itself in some ways its foreclosed absence, and the world in it that is over” (D 100).
addressing what comes to pass, and it annihilates every belief, every reckoning, every economy, and any salvation” (D 101).

3.5 - Coda

In 2002, in another conversation/conference in Strasbourg, Derrida and Nancy discussed many of the issues we have covered in this chapter. Derrida starts off by acknowledging his profound admiration for Nancy and applauding his "courage" to return to, take charge of, and to treat in a "deconstructive and post-deconstructive" manner, all the great themes, concepts, and problems that he never had the desire to confront. He admits that he had always deemed concepts like "sense," "world," "creation," "community," "freedom," and so on, to be thoroughly bound to metaphysics and that his wonderment with Nancy stems from the fact that he has been able to rethink these concepts without simply returning to the past. On this note, Derrida suggests that the difference between he and Nancy is less a difference of opinion, than a matter of gesture and approach: "As for the honey and the historical situation we are discussing, as well as the question of a possible difference between Jean-Luc and me, a difference that, as those who pay us the honor of reading us know, is less a difference in position or philosophical thesis than in our way or manner of doing things, a difference in body precisely, in flesh, in style, in gesture...."

In this chapter, we have seen these differing styles play themselves out in Derrida's and Nancy's respective deconstructive readings. When Derrida defines religion according to the two etymological derivations of the Latin religio (relegere and religare), he does so in order to expose the auto-immunity at the heart of religion; to expose how the “sacred” is implicated in the movement of finitude (writing, technology, science, commerce, etc.). Similarly, when Nancy attempts to read concepts like the incarnation and the resurrection, he does so by implicating them in the spacing of the world; locating différance on the very inside of touch. What is more, both use deconstruction to challenge the essentialization of religion with a faith that is incommensurate with any form of belief—both affirm that deconstruction leads us towards a salutation (salut!) without salvation; a gift beyond

409 Nancy quoted in, Derrida, For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy, 57-58.
calculation or evaluative measure. In this manner, they both seem to begin and end in the same place: they begin by affirming that the very discourse on religion emerges from the atheologizing of the Graeco-Judaeo-Christian tradition and end by emphasizing the abandonment (abandon) of sense.411

However, aside from the similar terms, philosophemes, and citations that they happily share, they also have many fundamental differences. Whereas Derrida wants to conceive of the deconstruction of Christianity as an endless messianic deferral, Nancy wants to locate this deferral right in the midst of the world as the nothing (nihil) of creation—voiding the substantiality of bodies. Nancy is trying to think the infinite as a kenotic opening without closure and claims that the “right infinite” is the very movement of “deconstruction and dis-enclosure” (D 10). Although Derrida certainly agrees that deconstruction transgresses the sacred borders of religion and leads to the desertification of the "Abrahamic" traditions, he is also adamant that the elementary faith in the "wholly other" makes it impossible to foreclose the future of religion. Derrida is therefore in full agreement with Nancy that deconstruction is transgressive and exposes the technical limit of religious presentation, but he places his emphasis on the "bad infinite," stressing that the future is undecidable. Derrida emphasizes that the autoimmune unraveling of religion keeps deconstruction open to the arrival of the "wholly other," exposing faith to the endless wasteland of the teletechnological. Derrida prefers to defer the exit, speaking of the secret to come, whereas Nancy seeks to affirm its arrival by pointing to the exhaustion of metaphysical forms here and now.

What do these differences mean? Do they fundamentally divide Derrida and Nancy over the question of nihilism and the relationship between deconstruction and Christianity? Clearly, the specific answer to this question is not as obvious as we found in the previous chapters when comparing Nancy to Bataille or Heidegger. Heidegger rejects religion so he can get back to the primordial experience of being, or the oblivion of being, and Bataille developed a theory of religion to uncover the intimacy of the sacred. As Nancy argues, they both conceived of existence as something that is "offered or sacrificed to a Nothingness, to a Nothing or to an Other, in whose abyss it could still impossibly enjoy its own impossibility of being" (FT 74). With Derrida, such easy conclusions are not possible. It is true that Derrida

411Derrida uses this expression frequently in the aforementioned 2002 conversation with Nancy. For instance, see For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy, 65.
often frames the commitment to the "wholly other" in terms of sacrifice but he cannot be charged with offering this sacrifice to someone, or to something, at least in the same sense as Bataille and Heidegger.\(^{412}\) Derrida clearly rejects both the religious romanticism of Bataille and the ontological romanticism of Heidegger, so we cannot level any charges against him in this regard. In fact, as we have seen, in many of their interactions it was Derrida who levelled such charges against Nancy.

For instance, in the aforementioned 2002 conversation in Strasbourg, Derrida charges Nancy with giving an air of revealability to Christianity. He states that what concerns him about Nancy's work on the deconstruction of Christianity is the direct association he ascribed to "Christianity," "sense," and the "opening" of deconstruction. Similar to his argument in On Touching, Derrida suggests that the strict association Nancy draws between Christianity and deconstruction seems to preserve some quality of Christianity after deconstruction. After all, what is so "Christian" about deconstruction? When Nancy writes that deconstruction "is only possible within Christianity" (D 148) is he suggesting that there is some self-same (lui-même) aspect of Christianity that survives its own dismemberment?\(^{413}\) As Derrida states: "you seem to want to save sense after its dechristianization, all the while saying, in other texts, that dechristianization is an operation of self-deconstruction, that is to say, still Christian: it saves itself in the sense it, in some way, loses."\(^{414}\)

Nancy's response to this interrogation is very clear and to the point: he suggests that the connection between "Christianity," "sense," and the "opening" of deconstruction does not speak to some proper singular opening. There is not some "infinite gaping" into which the gods retreat, or some essential Christian opening in the midst of the world. The opening implied by the deconstruction of Christianity is simply an opening to the infinity of sense, not "the Open" in the sense implied by Heidegger.\(^{415}\) This means that the deconstruction of Christianity is an appeal to the cuts, lines, curvatures, and points of departure that space the

\(^{412}\) See n64 in this chapter. I am in agreement with Morin that it is best to think of the difference between Derrida's emphasis on sacrifice and Nancy's emphasis on offering as "two sides of the same discourse." For Morin's argument see Marie Eve Morin, A melee without Sacrifice: Nancy's Ontology of Offering against Derrida's Politics of Sacrifice," Philosophy Today 50, SPEP Supplement (2006): 139-43.

\(^{413}\) This is my example, it is not cited by Derrida. One of the specific texts from Nancy's work that Derrida uses to raise this question is Nancy's first mention of the deconstruction of Christianity in The Sense of the World. See SW 183n50.

\(^{414}\) Derrida, For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy, 74.

\(^{415}\) Nancy quoted in, Derrida, For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy, 78.
world from itself, and adoration is simply an appeal to this areality of sense; an appeal which is non-religious and non-sacrificial. There is no sense with a capital "S" that issues the call of this "lifting up" (levée) or "sending" (envoi), but just an abandoning that never stops issuing its retreat. In truth, this sense is not even "the same as itself" (le même que lui-même) because it is born in division (partage). Fundamentally, Nancy suggests, this is all that is at stake in the withdrawal of the gods: "the sense of an absenting." Does this mean that deconstruction issues forth from Christianity in the West? Yes. But does this imply that it saves (or keeps safe) some essence of Christianity? No. In fact, Nancy contends that in Christianity the retreat of God "destroys" even its own "sameness" (mêmeté) in the act of retreat.

Hence, in relation to the question asked at the outset of this chapter, "What, if anything, remains of Christianity after the deconstruction of Christianity?" we can now give quite a clear answer: "the sense of an absenting." In Derrida's analysis of religion he draws out an aporia that underlies our tradition and connects it to the autoimmunity of the Eucharist. For him, the atheologizing of the West doesn't take place because of any essential connection between Christianity and deconstruction, but because of the present/absent structure of the trace, which haunts life from the beginning. However, Nancy draws our attention to the retreat of God enshrined in Christianity as the acting out of this present/absent of dispersal of sense, and connects it to the resurrection, the incarnation, bodies, and touch, locating a "sense of an absenting" at the heart of experience. For him, this "sense of an absenting" is both what makes Christianity possible and what proceeds, succeeds, and exceeds it. This "sense of an absenting" is the "open gaping," or "empty slot," that makes deconstruction possible but does not belong to it, and which inaugurated religion as retreat in (and as) the West. To explain this further, we need to explore how this "sense of an absenting" relates to Nancy's broader comments on the origins and history of the West.

---

416 Nancy quoted in, Derrida, For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy, 79.
417 Nancy quoted in Derrida, For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy, 81.
418 Once again, I should note that I am indebted to John Paul Ricco for this succinct formulation.
Chapter 4
Nancy’s Atheological "History" of the West

We know that twenty centuries of history did not proceed in a linear fashion. They passed through many variations in the sharing [partage], contrast, and antinomy of what I have gathered under the words observance and relation. But this history began with the mutation that I am attempting to characterize, and the "flight of the gods," then the monotheisms, and especially Christianity, have been its echo chamber. (A 55)

4.1 - Introduction

In this chapter, we turn exclusively to Nancy's work and show how he reads deconstruction and atheology into the formation and dissolution of "the West." Nancy defines the West as that civilization that "initially constructed itself around the Mediterranean by the Greeks, the Romans, the Jews, and the Arabs" (D 30), that subsequently represented itself as the bearer of universal truth and reason (CW 34), and which is no longer definable by this "specific profile" (D 29). In other words, he presents the West as a deconstruction and a self-deconstruction. Nancy begins his history in the Ancient Mediterranean and argues that a cultural mutation from observance to relation took place that dissolved the ancient world of the gods, gave birth to Christianity, and prepared the way for the retreat of religion. Next, he goes onto show how theology, philosophy, and even globalization are all wrapped up in this dis-enclosure.

What makes Nancy’s reading of this history non-metaphysical is that he situates the West upon the retreat of foundations and given mythological ends. Most classical readings of Western history situate it upon some metaphysical ground, whether this be "God," "man," "reason," or "value" itself. Or, alternatively, they provide some horizon by which to measure the development of history, such as politics, religion, secularism, power, or being itself. In contrast, Nancy seeks to show how the entire history of the West is situated upon an opening that unravels it from within. Apropos our findings in the last chapter, we might say that what he seeks to show is how there is "the sense of an absenting" at the heart of the West, and that this is intertwined with the inauguration of Christianity two millennia ago and the eventual dis-enclosure of reason in philosophy.
Nancy’s views on the relationship between polytheism, monotheism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity discussed below should be understood in this sense. What he is recounting in the “history” described below is a view from within the very unraveling of the West, not a universal description of religious development or decline, and this is what separates Nancy from any contemporary reading of Western history, whether it be theological, secular humanist, or post-secular. Nancy offers no ground upon which to situate the history of the world but shows how it is constituted by the retreat of any such horizon. Moreover, by detailing how the West emerged from a world in which the "gods and mankind" were maintained by various forms of observance and how this gave way to an atheological world in which the relation between beings became primary, he is not recounting the secularization of the world but trying to show how it is created ex nihilo, according to its sharing (partage) (A 41).

Of course, since Nancy sees Christianity and the West, or religion and secularism, as developments that have a similar origin and trajectory his work does share many similarities with post-secular theorists, but only to an extent. Like Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg, Charles Taylor, and Marcel Gauchet,419 Nancy also tries to think the emergence of the West in relation to its Christian provenance.420 For these thinkers, the generative seeds of modernity don't begin with modern developments in science and philosophy but with various Judeo-Christian influences, and this is a sentiment Nancy agrees with. In the introduction of Dis-Enclosure, for instance, he calls the "edifying tale" about the liberation of modern reason from religious illusion at the dawn of the Reformation "the most tenacious and insidious illusion ever to be concealed in the nooks of our many discourses" (D 7). However, it needs to be said that Nancy is critical of the way these post-secular theorists use religion and modernity to structure the horizon of the world.421


420For instance, Taylor takes the extreme position of suggesting that the modern secular age was brought about by developments in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Like Nancy, he even suggests that Western culture in fact created a modern world in which religion is "retreating in public space." Taylor, A Secular Age, 15.

421 As the editors suggest in Retreating Religion, "Although post-secularism is part of the philosophical context for the deconstruction of Christianity we are exploring, Nancy's attitude toward it seems predominantly critical" (Alena Alexandrova, Ignaas Devisch, Laurends Ten Kate, and Aukje Van Rooden, "Re-opening the Question of
Among these theorists, it is Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World* that is by far the closest to Nancy's project, as Gauchet suggests that Christianity came into existence as a “religion retreating from religion.”⁴²² In the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Gauchet locates a divinity that is fundamentally in retreat from the world, and then attempts to piece together a broad anthropological theory of how this influenced the birth of modern politics, identity, and economic exchange, etc. In a vein similar to Nancy, he writes that "When dealing with religion, what appears to be an advance is actually a retreat."⁴²³

As noted in the Introduction to this study, however, it is important to draw some distance between Gauchet and Nancy. Though Nancy embraces Gauchet’s dictum that Christianity is the “Religion of the Departure from Religion” he does not accompany this dictum with a theory of religion (D 142). In *The Disenchantment of the World*, Gauchet defines religion in very Feuerbachian terms, suggesting that religion is a historical constant that results from man’s power of negation, and this view is somewhat foreign to Nancy's work. As Gauchet writes:

*Without doubt the religious has been a constant factor in human societies up to now.* I believe, however, that it must still be regarded as a *historical* phenomenon, that is, one with a definite beginning and end, falling within a specified period followed by another. As far as we know, religion has without exception existed at all times and in all places: yet I will attempt to show that religion is organized not as a constraint but as an *institutional action*, not as an obligation but a choice. Finally, if we can detect signs of basic religious schemas in social processes where we would least expect them, this is because religion is the millennia-old veil of a deeper anthropological structure, which continues to operate in another guise after the veil has disappeared.⁴²⁴

I would suggest that this broad anthropological and cross-cultural view of religion is not consistent with Nancy’s subtle work on being singular plural, community, sacrifice, touch, and the deconstruction of Christianity in general.

---

For Nancy, it is not a question of what religion is (something theorists have never been able to agree upon) but what is involved in our understanding of "religion" and its relation to deconstruction.\textsuperscript{425} Nancy is interested in exposing the very spacing/dis-enclosure of existence and philosophical thought, and is not attempting to provide a universal theory of religion, so we need to understand his endorsement of Gauchet in a somewhat limited sense. As Nancy notes in an interview for Retreating Religion, we must be very careful with our use of the term "religion," even when describing it as a form of "departure" and "retreat," as in Gauchet's work:

But when we call monotheism, and in particular Christianity, "the religion of departure from religion" as Marcel Gauchet does, what kind of religion are we talking about? Is there a religion from which we have departed? Then there is the religion of departure, and what do we do with that? That’s the problem with talking about religion: What concept of religion are we talking about?\textsuperscript{426}

Hence, when Nancy uses the term "religion" he is very careful to situate the term contextually and to emphasize that Christianity both reinvented and invented its status in the West. His analysis of our religious origins should be understood in "the sense of an archē and not of historical beginning, of course" (D 143).\textsuperscript{427} He acknowledges that, historically, the Latin word religio was first being defined and debated by philosophers like Cicero before the birth of Christ (or, at least before the author of the Book of Acts provides the first recorded use of the word "Christian") but suggests the invention of "religion" as an "institution of salvation, as distinct from civil religion as it was from philosophical atheism" took shape within Christianity (A 26).\textsuperscript{428} As we will see below, he argues that Christianity mixed

\textsuperscript{425} I am here paraphrasing a comment from Nancy about "myth" made in the inoperative community. See IC 47.
\textsuperscript{427} As Derrida argues in “Violence and Metaphysics,” the question of our historical origins (precisely our “jewgreek” origins) should be understood as a “pre-logical question,” not a “chronological progression.” See Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” Writing and Difference, 192.
\textsuperscript{428} As noted earlier in this study, this point has been made by numerous scholars of religion. For instance, Talal Asad claims that the notion of religion as a universal phenomenon emerged during the seventeenth century in a European context and is “specific to Christian theology at a particular historical juncture.” See Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” in Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 42-43. Nancy never gives a specific genealogy of the term like these scholars of religion but the subtlety of his work does take into account their general insights that religion is a Western construct.
together and redeployed aspects of ancient Mediterranean religions, Greek philosophy, and Jewish monotheism, yet it did so by effacing the divine in the midst of the world. As he makes clear, this did not occur because of any essential religious developments or teachings but because of a fundamental retreat of foundations that lie at the origins of the West. What Nancy attempts to describe is therefore not a spiritual transformation of Mediterranean humanity but a radical “metamorphosis of the cosmic, natural, political, economic, and cultural orders” (A 54).

In what follows, we will focus on elaborating Nancy’s own argument, and we will not contrast him with Gauchet or any other contemporary thinker at length. Since there are few places in Nancy’s work where he steps back from his very fragmented analysis of specific topics to discuss the broader history of the West this will be an ambitious goal, but this is our task nonetheless. In most of Nancy’s writings, his statements on history are too broken up to form a general picture of how he thinks, for example, Ancient Greek philosophy emerged from the Neolithic, or how the philosophical work of Kant or Nietzsche relates to the broader history of Christianity, yet we will attempt to sketch this below by organizing his comments according to a historical chronology. In order to achieve this, we will focus upon the few places in his oeuvre where he offers a broader ‘birds-eye’ view of the West. Of particular focus will be the Introduction and first two chapters in Dis-Enclosure, “In the Midst of the World” in Adoration, and certain sections of The Creation of the World or Globalization. Other sources that I will draw on will be Nancy’s comments in The Ister, a 2004 documentary directed by David Barison and Daniel Ross, and various lectures given by Nancy. Doing so will require us to cover some of the same ground covered in the previous chapters but only in a peripheral manner.

429 On this final point he would be in agreement with Gauchet, as Gauchet also describes a broad societal shift, not a spiritual one. Where they differ is really just on the emphasis they place on religion. Gauchet repeatedly refers to "religious phenomenon's deep structure" and its ability to fundamentally shape culture. Whereas Nancy uses the term far more self-reflexively and in terms of retreat. For instance, see Gauchet, The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion, 17.
4.2 - The Flight of the Gods and the Entry into Signification

An interesting place to begin analyzing Nancy’s comments on the history of the West is with *The Ister*, for in this film he provides a sweeping account of the cultural transformation that occurred in the transition from the Neolithic to the Greco-Roman world. Quite simply, Nancy asserts that the West begins with a question: “What is the fundamental foundation of society?” At the beginning of the West lies not a great myth but a question of institution, foundation, and an interrogation of given ends; not a common narrative but an examination of origin, commencement, and groundwork. The West begins as *auto-foundation*, seeking to justify itself and its sense of the world by interrupting its own myths in the name of "higher" ends that have no ground outside of themselves. No longer is the meaning of the world to be blindly accepted in the form of mythic stories about the gods but produced through an interrogation of its own foundation. No longer is it a question of mythology as unquestioned foundation but of submitting the *mythos* to *technē*, which dissolves any foundation for the world. For Nancy, this is the nervation that lies at the origins of the West and resonates throughout its history like an absent placeholder. Ultimately, Nancy will suggest that this questioning is contemporaneous with "the entry into signification.” Let's unpack this.

Unlike the various empires that existed prior to the West—Egyptian, Assyrian, Assyrio-Babylonian, and even the Hittite empire—the West begins with a rejection of mythic foundations. The various empires that preceded the West all had clear foundations in the myths of the gods, and all spoke of communication with the gods (or the forces and presences in the world, such as plants and animals) (A 55). Ancient peoples conceived of their social hierarchy in relation to these presences and it was by abeyance to their given hierarchy that the people were assured the proper functioning of the world. The gods provided both an origin and an end for human existence, and death was widely portrayed as an irrecoverable curse and affliction that cannot be overcome. This is not to suggest that ancient myth was monolithic, far from it, but each group of peoples had a *mythos* that

---

431 *The Ister*, 1:18:00.
guaranteed a set of cultural ends given by the gods, and there was a terrestrial limit for finite beings. As Nancy writes in "Atheism and Monotheism," in the ancient world:

The gods acted, spoke, or watched from deaths other shore. They did not convey mortals to that shore, or if they did so, they invariably maintained, at the same time, the river that flowed between the shores. They maintained it gaping and threatening: just as it was when it flowed between Diana and Actaeon, for example; just as it would continue to flow between men and their dead shadows. (D 15-16).

As historians of ancient Mediterranean religions suggest, thanatology in this period was characterized by an absolute cut between the realm of the divine and the realm of the humans. The role of gods (and the rituals associated with them) was not to bridge these realms in the ancient world but to hold them intact. The gods and spiritual presences acted within the human world but did not serve to unite this world with the world beyond, as there was a strict separation between the two spaces.

Nancy locates the breaking up of this ancient world of myth with the invention of writing, which he describes as a transition from mythic observance to technical relation. In a quite straightforward manner, he suggests that this world of mythic observance was interrupted when the technē of writing took the place of the mythos. Historically, writing emerged as cuneiform in Sumer (4000-3000 B.C.E.), in ancient Mesopotamia. Cuneiform began in a pictograph form and slowly developed into abstract characters with vowels by 400 B.C.E, in Greece. It began first as a system of notation for book keeping and developed more cultural use as it progressed. In The Ister, Nancy also connects the rise of fine-tuned Cuneiform script with the end of human sacrifice, connecting developments in commerce, economics, calculation, trade, transport, and navigation that occurred between 1200-800 B.C.E. with the disappearance of mythological foundations. He suggests that the inaugural flight of the gods and the beginnings of the West are found in these technological developments:

---

433 Jon Davies, _Death, Burial, and Rebirth in The Religions of Antiquity_ (New York: Routledge, 1999), 3. Interestingly, Davies defines 'thanatology' as "life as seen through the lens of death."

434 See Davies, 1-23. For a specific mythological examples see also 23-60.

What makes mythologies vanish? In what context do they disappear? They disappear in the same context in which human sacrifice disappear. That is, roughly between the 12th and 8th Century B.C.E. I believe this disappearance occurs at the same time as the appearance of a certain number of techniques: the technique of alphabetic writing and all the techniques linked to commerce.  

Importantly, Nancy is not making any definite claims about this ancient world of myth but simply suggesting that the invention of writing gave birth to history as we know it today. In a certain sense, all Nancy is inviting us to consider is how profoundly disquieting a phenomenon this invention must have been in the ancient world, and just how radically it disrupted conditions of human life.

After all, if technē, as Heidegger defined it, is a form of “craft” or “know-how,” a way of obtaining from nature (physis) what is not innately proper to it, then it is possible to see how everything that has happened since the invention of writing has been subject to the spacing of technics. With the rise of writing, commerce, and monetary systems, the people came to obtain from physis what it does not offer of itself. The immanent became abstract, myth was submitted to "know-how," and the sacred bodies of the gods that stood in temples became statues—empty husks of dismembered divinities. In the new order that subsequently emerged, ends were not communicated by the gods but endlessly produced by technē. And since technē has no end, but is rather a “know-how” that is directed at a goal that is not given, it continues ad infinitum as endless production. As Nancy puts it in The Ister, “And

---

436 The Ister 1:26:00-1:27:00.
437 The Ister, 1: 31: 50. This definition of Heidegger’s interpretation of technē is given by Nancy in The Ister.
438 Part of what Nancy is here suggesting is that the advent of technological innovation at the origins of the West already contains its own dis-enclosure. In a sense, whereas Heidegger argues that the advent of technē in the West gave rise to instrumentality, Nancy suggests that it also carries the infinite production of ends, and therefore deconstructs any enframing of being. In fact, Nancy will suggest that it is only because of technology that we even have history as such, for history is the record of the production of ends. Recall that Heidegger suggests that the essence of technology is nothing technological but a type of revealing, and he describes the early Greek craftsman as a bit of a poet, arguing that technē means “bringing-forth to poiēsis” (Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” Basic Writing, 319). However, he also argues that in the modern age the relationship with technē and physis has reduced all being to a standing reserve, and reduced existence to its use for instrumental logic. For Heidegger, this reduction is dangerous because it enframes being and gets in the way of poiēsis. Moreover, he connects this development with the modern anthropological, metaphysical, and religious explanation of man and the world (Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” Basic Writing, 326).
Nancy contests this narrative by linking the rise of technē with deconstruction (recall our discussion on 'ecotechnics' in the previous Chapter 3). Hence, although he cites Heidegger’s definition of technē as “know-how,” he is in fact challenging the idea that technology reduces being to standing reserve. As he writes in Being Singular Plural: If there is a “question of technology,” then it only begins at that moment when technology is
perhaps the entire history of the West, as the history of technics, is the history of an infinite end... of the infinite production of new ends. But that also means the absence of ends.”

All this, of course, is merely to suggest that the West arose through a multiplication of ends and does not have a singular and particular origin at some definite period of time. The West begins with the withdrawal of anything that might be called purely “natural” or “divine” because only after this withdrawal can there be anything like “history,” “philosophy,” or “truth.” Only after myth is interrupted is the space between beings exposed to its own absence, thereby giving way to the differentiation we associate with signification. Nancy puts it in the following terms, “When meaning is denatured—or demythified—truth emerges as such: it is a matter of constructing meaning (the principle and end of Being as such) or else punctuating absence [absens] and, finally, with the two always implicated in any metaphysical construction and deconstruction worthy of the name” (CW 88). This is why Nancy never gives this "happening" a definite name or place, as all that can be said is that it “happens somewhere, in the contingency of a place and of a period, or of several places and several periods” (CW 86). This development cannot even be affirmed as a human product, for the “human” (and particularly humanism) is itself the product of technē. All that can be stressed is that the origins of the West lay in the disappearance of given ends. In a brief essay titled ‘Entre deux,’ Nancy poetically describes this dissolving of foundations and the rise of technē:

One day, the gods retreated. On their own, they retreated from their divinity, that is to say, from their presence. What remains of their presence is what remains of all presence when it absents itself: what remains is what one can say about it. What can be said about it is what remains when one can no longer address it: neither speak to it, nor touch it, nor see it, nor give it a present.

(One might even say that the gods retreated because one no longer gives a present to their presence: no more sacrifice, no more oblation, except by way of custom or imitation. One has other things to do: write, for example,

taken into account as the finish of Being, and not as a means to some other end (science, mastery, happiness, and so on). It only begins when technology is taken into account as an end in itself, sui generis. Technology is the “finality without end” (= without an extrinsic end) of a genre that perhaps remains to be discovered. It is to such a discovery that we expose our history, as a technological-becoming of Being or its finish (BSP 119).

439The Ister 1:33:00-1:34:00
calculate, do business, legislate. Deprived of presents, presence has retreated.)

As discussed in the previous chapter, when Nancy writes that the “gods retreated,” he is not suggesting that the gods left the temples for some other place, as if they moved to some transcendent reality where they remain unscathed, safe, and intact. Rather, he is suggesting that they became absent, and withdrew from their own presence. No longer were the gods spoken too, touched, or even seen. The gods became empty statues and their stories no longer had the power of myth.

Nancy stresses that at the moment in time when these technological developments were occurring, particularly between the 9th and 6th centuries B.C.E, “sophistic techniques” also developed. These sophistic techniques employed language and writing as logos (“reason,” “word,” “speech”) in order to use it as a means of rational persuasion, argument, and law. This development is an application of technics to speech that turns writing and language into a technical object for the benefit of the community. Sophistry uses the logos to win arguments and make laws in the polis, and subsequently contributes to the rise of philosophy, politics, science, art, and monotheism. Hence, what is important about this development for Nancy is that it is an auto-foundational application of technē: it uses “know-how” as a technique that is self-legislative. The West is founded upon this self-legislating application of technē, and is why the rise of technē over myth is not just the rise of improved tools for humans but the emergence of a new order of truth. No longer is truth given by the gods but is found “right here” [ici même] in the midst of the world, in the opening left by the departure of the gods (A 28).

Plato carried this sophistic “know-how” to the furthest extreme by arguing that the logos is the highest good. He suggested that the logos was not simply a tool for persuasion and law but the means to realize the absolute good of the city in the hearts of free men. Philosophy and metaphysics proper begins with this development because Plato positions himself against sophistry and attempts to speak only the truth about the logos. Whereas the sophists had used sophia as a means of persuasion, Plato and other philosophers like Timeaus

---

441 The Ister 1:28:00-1:29:00.
claim to use it solely for the good of the city. With this development the *logos* itself becomes truth, and can be used as a weapon to critique myth in the name of the good.

Accordingly, this development does not signal the creation of a new *mythos* but the attempt to overcome *mythos* with *logos*. With philosophy a new form of sacrifice has been born that presents itself as the sacrifice of sacrifice for a higher end. No longer is the death of humans or animals required but rather a conscious obedience to an abstract ideal. Of course, these new philosophical ideals are human creations like the gods of ancient empires, yet unlike the ancient gods these philosophical ideals present themselves as an auto-foundation:

Philosophy begins as the self-productive technology of its own name, its discourse, and its discipline. It engenders or it fabricates its own concept or its own Idea for itself at the same time that it invents or constructs these instrumental and ideal realities of the “concept” and the “Idea.” In this operation, the best known and most prominent feature is the differentiation of itself from what is called “sophistry”: with respect to this technology of *logos*, philosophy defines itself and constitutes itself as that *technē* that is at the same time different from any other *technē* because it speaks first, or finally, the truth about it. In that very way, it invents itself also in its difference from any other knowledge, any other discipline, or any other science. With respect to this major difference, its self-institution is the key (CW 77).

Think of it this way, underlying the initial flight of the West is the following question: what is the proper technique of technique? No longer is it a question of mythology as unquestioned foundation but of submitting the *mythos* to *technē*. This is why the West is founded on a lack of myth, because *technē* fractures the link between *mythos* and *physis* that was assumed to be given in the ancient world.

In this sweeping account of the cultural transformation that occurred in the transition from the Neolithic to the Greco-Roman world, what Nancy is trying to demonstrate is the beginning of the West as auto-foundation. This flight fractured the relationship between death and life that had always been held in abeyance—the same for Gilgamesh as for Achilles—and prepared the way for the Christian teaching that death is the truth of life. After this interruption, the gods are no longer associated with nature, and death is no longer strictly associated with another world in the beyond, but with the opening of this world to its own outside. As Nancy notes, “The Greco-Roman world was the world of mortal mankind. Death was irreparable there; and whether one tried to think in terms of glory or in terms of
deliverance, it was still the incompatible other of life” (A 23). With the rise of philosophy this all begins to change because truth is now a technical production that is opened up in this world, not a passage into another world. (As I will discuss in the following section, this is why Nancy sees a connection between the death of Socrates and the death of Jesus, as both open a space for truth in the world.)

What Nancy sees in the vast technological developments that overthrew the empires of the Ancient Mediterranean is a certain undoing of self-sufficiency. When technē is associated with physis, as it was when the presence of the gods were accessible, being appears as finished through the narration of the mythos. It is a completed presence that is true in its mythological presentation. However, with the rise of technē as logos, the gods are replaced with an infinite production of ends. Because technē is without a given end, the logos now finds itself subject to rational account and the endless expanse of technological means. Nancy explains this by suggesting that, like the gods, rationality is abstract and also enjoys a certain distance from the world; however, whereas a god enjoys a certain autonomy from the world, reason is subject to logical account: “The absolute difference between God and logos is that God is the one I don’t have to account of him or her.” The gods are just there. Period. “Logos,” on the other hand, “is what I have to give account of what it is.” This is why the rise of technē as logos is the beginning of self-productive technology and the indefinite production of surplus.

In the Gravity of Thought, Nancy describes this development as an “entry into signification.” This shift from observance to relation was so radical that it forever fractured the link with what came before it. The empty and dismembered bodies of the gods, all the broken temple pillars, and shattered tablets are the only record we have of this happening. This withdrawal of the gods is what makes the disorientation of the West possible (and its politics and art are nothing but the attempt to signify this disorientation). In fact, he argues that it is difficult to even say if the prior order of the gods ever “was,” since interpreting it historically is conditioned by the present order of signification. Nancy asserts that all we can really say is that once “There was another day,” and that we cannot confer upon it “the meaning of any of our days or nights” (GT 28). In fact, what Nancy is really talking about

with the “retreat of the gods” is our inability to signify “what the West’s first models were.”
He is attempting to express how our entire history is a grappling with an experience of loss.
As argued at length in Chapter Two, loss is what constitutes the West, and this sense of loss is a result of its lack of definite ends, or lack of definite significations: “By experiencing an “entry” into signification, the West experienced an exit from something that it could not signify, and consequently, the impossibility of signifying either its own advent or the establishment of the order of signification” (GT 28).

Hence, what Nancy is describing here is not some new myth of loss but pointing out that loss constitutes the very experience of community in the West. He is not suggesting that there was once a fullness to the world and that with the development of technology the ancient world lost its innocence. And he is not arguing that we should return to the gods of old and become polytheists again, nor that philosophy or monotheism is the natural successor to polytheism, but simply that this is the path taken in the West, and that this development is intimately tied to a questioning of foundations and the rise of technē. What replaces the presence of the gods with the development of abstract signification is an incommensurate relationship between finite things in the midst of the world, which becomes the new space for the divine and prepares the way for adoration. The distinct realm of the gods gives way to an opening “right here” (ici même)—in the spacing of the finite—and the absent foundations of community and technical creation takes the place of given mythological ends:

The West was born not from the liquidation of a dark world of beliefs, dissolved by the light of a new sun—and this no more so in Greece than during the Renaissance or the eighteenth century. It took shape in a metamorphosis of the overall relation to the world, such that the “inaccessible” in effect took shape and functioned, as it were, precisely as such in thought, in knowledge, and in behaviour (D 8).

Ultimately, Nancy's reason for recounting this history is to show how the open space left in the wake of the departure of the gods has repeatedly been covered over with metaphysical paradigms and principles, and to draw out this space as a resource. As we will now discuss, he suggests that since these first rumblings of the West as auto-foundation, our history has been characterized by numerous attempts to circumscribe the sense (sens) of the world according to a certain order of signification, and this has obscured the "opening" left in the
wake of the "flight of the gods." “In Hegelian terms,” the history of the West has been a history of unhappy consciousness: “the unhappiness of consciousness presents the meaning of consciousness, and presents it as conscious” (GT 31-32). By continually positing a principle over and above the world, either as God, man, or value itself, the history of the West has been a history of nihilism, and this is what he seeks to interrogate.444

**4.3 - Polytheism, Monotheism, Atheism, and the Closure of Nihilism**

The “inaugural flight [échappée] of the West” is essentially a flight into the absence (absens) of meaning. This happening constitutes a “taking-place” of a new experience of space and time, and prepares the way for a new historical quest of meaning.445 However, the question is whether this spacing of space-time will be utilized as a space of possibility or covered over with a nihilist principle. According to Nancy, monotheism and atheism are the initial response to this opening, and both, at least in the forms they have taken in the West, are nihilistic. However, these developments also provide a new emphasis on relation that fractures these very same structures from within, and this sets the stage for the emergence of Christianity.

To begin, let’s remember that even before Plato, Xenophanes had commented that all the gods were human creations. When Xenophanes suggested that different cultures construct the gods in their own image he not only orientated Greek thought but the West in general according to a certain atheist trajectory. Instead of considering creation from the perspective of the given and the destined, this early form of atheism saw reality as a series of parts that shared creation together, and instead of infusing the world with spirits and presences it constructed creation according to a series of principles. Nancy points out that Xenophanes did not speak of “mortals, immortals, low, high, impure, or pure qualities,” but of the

---

444 As Nancy writes, “Signification is itself desire... The West in its entirety is preoccupied with the thought of the sign’s finality, a thought that is exacerbated in the modern age.” I am getting a little ahead of myself here, but the point is that the sense (sens) of the world is produced by the direction to which this signification is ordered, and when this is left unexamined nihilism can set in because signifiers such as Freedom, Man, God, or History take the place of the opening in the midst of the world (GT 32).

principles of reason by which the totality could be understood. Just like other pre-Socratics, Xenophanes turned Homer's gods into a series of causes and effects to be understood by the *logos*. It is true that this “reason” was often referred to as divine, yet this was a divinity devoid of any presence or given ends. In this manner, the gods become indistinguishable from the act of creation itself and are transformed from an order of divine beings into an order of relations to be thought (D14-15).

Nancy suggests that what is most important about this atheistic development is that it is cotemporaneous with the development of monotheism. When Plato speaks of a *theos* it is a god deprived of appearance and a name; it is a force beyond figure. Plato perfectly demonstrates how the gods are in retreat from the world because he shows how the given, structured, and animate universe gives way to a series of figures deprived of appearance. Indeed, with Plato we may be witnessing the invention of “God” as such, because Plato’s *theos* is not subservient to any other prior principle, and is therefore radically different from the ancient gods of mythology:

In Plato’s *theos*, we can say that the gods disappear (even if Plato himself can name them in the plural just a few lines after his singular *theos*). This is to say that the paradigm of the given, structured, and animate universe—the same one that will be called a *mythology*, so that a *physiology* and a *cosmology* may be substituted for it—has ceased to function. Its founding representations and stories are no longer recognized as flexible modelings of the world, but only as fictions. Gods are departing into their myths (D 15).

What unites theism and atheism is that both terms have their “unity in the principal paradigm or premise [paradigme principiel]” (D 15). Unlike the gods “Uranus, Isis, or Baal,” Plato’s *theos* is the essence of creation, not merely a result of it. Moreover, whereas the role of the gods had been to maintain the gap between the “shores” of life and death, this principle unites creation in an all engulfing *Idea*. The ultimate connection between atheism, theism, and nihilism lies in this logical function, which is simultaneously more removed from the world (as a transcendent principle) and more intimate to man (as a function of reason) than the gods ever were. Nancy argues that it is this logical premise of unity that seeks to replace myth: “Such is the logical function that is substituted for the mythical fiction: the dual
positing of a radical alterity (god and man are no longer together in the world) and of a relation from the same to the other (man is called toward god)” (D 16).

Positively, this is an affirmation of truth as down here, not a beyond to which supplications and hopes are addressed. The space towards which the human is to be directed is no longer an elsewhere but the logos that is present in the world. This is why the death of Socrates shares so much in common with that of Christ, because what occurs in both cases is “not a passage into another world but the opening of the truth of this world.” The God spoken of by Plato “is only metaphorically elsewhere: it depends on the “right here” [ici même] of whoever pronounces it” (A 28). In contrast to the supreme gulf between life and death spoken of in ancient mythology, what is opened with Socrates' death is the sense of “this world,” the mundane world “down here.” “If by atheism,” Nancy suggests, “we mean at least the denial of any kind of afterworld extending this world in order to console it,” then what we are seeing in this philosophical development is a fundamental mutation of the ancient world (A 28).

Negatively, this development opens the way for various metaphysical assumptions. By reducing the divine to a premise in a logic of dependence of the world (dans une logique de la dépendance du monde), the origin and end of meaning can be given in a value that is absent (D 20). In this way, the opening in the midst of the world can be covered over with a nihilistic principal. When the logos becomes the absolute beginning—“ēn archē (in the beginning)”—a presence is posited beyond the world in absolute withdrawal (D 20).

It is for this reason that Nancy argues that the monotheistic condemnation of polytheism has never really consisted in the number of gods polytheistic myths proclaim, but in their “effective presence.” Monotheism, in both its philosophical and religious forms in the West, makes being and God equivalent by asserting the “pre-valeness of the being of the divine.” It considers God not as a being but being itself. This is why the fundamental distinction between monotheism and polytheism is not in the reduction of gods, but in making the qualities and action of God dependent upon the fact of its being:

---

446 As Morin points out, there is an error in the translation of this passage in the English version of Dis-Enclosure. The sentence should read, “dependence of the world,” not “dependence on the World.” See Morin, 157n3.
Contrary to a vague and widespread belief, monotheism definitely does not arise out of a reduction in the number of the gods, nor does it result from a condensation or an Assumption of the Pantheon: in short, monotheism does not consist in the positing of one single god as against several gods. It signifies another position of the divine altogether, or an altogether different way of looking at it: here the divine is equivalent to being, and its qualities and actions depend upon the fact of its being (IC 111).

Polytheism (which takes its name from monotheism) also posits the being of the gods, but in polytheism the gods are beings amidst other beings, or other immortal beings, and are not the one preeminent source of all being. In Polytheism the divine only exists in the gods, as what is important is not the preeminence of existence (as in monotheism) but the distinctness of an existent (IC 111).

Monotheism therefore replaces the withdrawn gods of polytheism with an archē that is itself withdrawn and calls this being-as-one (l'être-un). This is what is so radical about monotheism and why it is a form of atheism. It claims that the plural polytheistic world is empty and then posits that the world is created by a transcendent being that is withdrawn from the world. The monotheistic condemnation of polytheism is fundamentally a condemnation of the presence of beings, for it places the absolute ground of existence in a hidden deity (deus absconditus) that stands over and above the world and then denies access to the complete presence of that ground (IC 111).

Nancy suggests that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all inherit this renunciation of worldly immanence, and are all fundamentally atheistic. In each of these traditions, the gods of the ancient world are merely idols, and posited in their stead is the concept of a blinding all powerful God above whose very presence is measured by his absence. As Nancy puts it, monotheism is “an aggravation of the relations with the inaccessible” because what it posits in the place of the gods is the vast ontological distance between God and creation (D 8). In the place of many gods, what the God of Western monotheism offers is a power and a

---

447 It is important to point out here, as I have done in brackets, that Nancy notes that "polytheism" also takes its name from monotheism, which is to say that like our modern use of the term "religion," "polytheism" was invented in the West.

448 Nancy rightly makes a distinction between early Judaic monotheism and Greek philosophical monotheism, for in earliest sections of the Torah what is offered is not monotheism but henotheism. Henotheism involves the worship of one single deity without excluding the possibility that there are other deities. “Hence non-Greek Judaism is not monotheistic: faith in the god of one people is not faith in one god. It is rather the opposite” (IC 111).
presence withdrawn from understanding. This is a God that is so powerful that he is able to renege on the sacrificial economy he establishes. For instance, throughout the Hebrew Bible the God of the Israelites repeatedly fails to live up to his promises on account of his sovereign jurisdiction. The God of the Israelites is so powerful that even the law he provides cannot contain him and he is free to retract from it at anytime. Repeatedly throughout the Hebrew Bible we find examples of this, as God claims that the people of Israel have failed to live up to his requirements and withdraws his contractual promises. In this manner, his divinity is measured by his absolute sovereignty over and above the world and the retreat of his power from any given measure. As Nancy writes,

If the God of Israel is an All-Powerful God (a quality he bequeaths to his successors), this is not in the sense of an active power within a differential relation of powers: his “all”—powerfulness signifies that he alone disposes of this power, entirely according to his will, that he can just as well retract it or pull away from it, and that he is, above all, alone in being able to make a covenant with man. Thus, he expects no sacrifices destined to capture the benevolence of his power, but only unconditional faithfulness to his covenant—a faithfulness to none other than the “jealous” election by which he has chosen his people, or his followers, or man as such (D 36).

Nancy calls monotheism an atheism for precisely this reason, for it is God’s absence that is now the testament of his power. The void of God is made equivalent with the creative power of God, and his presence is measured by his infinitely withdrawn sovereignty. Henceforth, it is precisely because of the fact that no one sees or bears direct witness to God that he is the one true God; his withdrawn presence has become the proof of his divinity.

Nancy notes this withdrawal of God to further extend his argument that the West is founded upon the retreat of foundations and connects it with various sociological developments. He notes that before this monotheistic development the ends of society were given in a mythological order that guaranteed the exchange between gods and creatures, but with the rise of “cities,” “peoples,” and absolute principles, community becomes defined by the incommensurate relationship between beings. No longer is identity fixed by a “sacred heritage” that orders beings but according to what the people share (leurs partages) as autonomous agents under the rule of an atheist/monotheistic principle. This is why the invention of atheism and monotheism is intertwined with the formation of cities (polis), new
forms of technology, and democracy, for when the gods retreat into their myths the traditional tribal and familial bonds are denaturalized and exchange between humans becomes a matter of economic relation. He suggests that this the beginning of “the world of greekjew, jewgreek with which the history of our world opens up,” and the point at which we can begin to speak about Christianity.449 “In this new world,” Nancy suggests, “the relations of men among themselves gradually take over from the common or collective relation to divine powers, and relation itself comes to occupy the place of the gods” (A 50).

Hence, with the rise of atheism and monotheism a new form of economic (oikonomia) exchange based on expansion and production now comes to dominate the world. Where formerly the collective relation to divine powers had been the basis of exchange, now relations between men in their difference takes over. Instead of reproducing stable hierarchies and attaining wealth purely for its shine and its splendour, forms of capitalism emerge in which merchandise and currency are invested for the sole purpose of riches (A 18). In other words, what becomes primary is the relation between God, humans, and value. No longer is it the given order of established relations which dominate but the incommensurate relations between the various parts of existence.

These happenings are not a sign of the spiritual “progress” of mankind but an anthropological mutation of how one relates to the world (A 111fn7). Nancy describes this transformation as the third great mutation after that of the Neolithic and the age of Empires, and as "a transformation of the oikos, of the house(dwelling, hearth, kin, domesticity) and of its running, oikonomia." With these developments, the Mediterranean world entered a new period of development—"commercial, monetary, entrepreneurial, and expansive"—that did not take on its full dimensions until the European Renaissance and Reformation (A 80).450

As noted above, in recounting this movement from myth to atheism Nancy is not appropriating this discourse for himself, as if to suggest that the West emerged from the dark world of myth, but pointing out how Western atheism and monotheism founded themselves upon the disappearance of given foundations. Moreover, he is pointing out how the opposition to religion that characterizes much of the discourse of our modern age is already pre-figured in these early developments. Western monotheism, in both its philosophical and

449 In Dis-Enclosure Nancy writes: “one could wonder whether the “jewgreek” Derrida speaks of at the end of “Violence and Metaphysics” (that “jewgreek” he says is our history) is not the Christian” (D 140).
450See also A 108n14.
religious forms, is constituted by the negation of the gods, and this is in part what leads to Christianity.

4.4 - Christianity and the Atheizing of God

4.4.1 - The Emergence of Christianity

It is only in this context that we can begin to understand Nancy’s analysis of Christianity, which he presents as both the inheritor and battleground for all that has been discussed so far. Indeed, it is only after the retreat of the gods and the emergence of atheism and monotheism that Nancy places the innervation that is Christianity, and he suggests that if Greco-Roman consciousness had not been influenced by a “monotheistic disposition” Jewish Christianity “would not have been possible” (D 32).

Now, there is nothing radical about asserting this dual inheritance of Christian provenance but what is radical is how Nancy uses it to affirm the emergence of a society founded upon the displacement of divine foundations. He suggests that Christianity employs the dual influence of Greek atheism and Jewish monotheism to completely exhaust the religious edifice of the ancient world. If there is an implicit retreat from divine foundations in monotheism, then Christianity takes this retreat to the extreme. Whereas the universality of Greek thought bridges the ancient gap between the realm of the gods and that of men with a unified principle that is accessible by reason, and Jewish monotheism bridges the gap between the transcendent beyond and the community below with the covenant at Mt. Sinai, Christianity bridges this gap by atheizing god in the midst of the world. In Christianity, the rational principle of the Greeks and the sacred transcendence of the Jewish God retreats from any sacred position of reserve, revealing that the world is reliant on no entity (né-ant). This is why Nancy’s atheological reading of the West reaches its culmination in Christianity, for it exposes the divine as nothing but an opening (A 32). The Christian god “atheizes himself” and thereby comes to contemplate itself as an atheological "exit from religion." Nancy puts this in the following terms:
In this sense, the Christian (or even the monotheistic) god is the god who *alienates himself*. He is the god who *atheizes himself* and who *atheologizes himself*, if I may for the moment forge these terms. (It is Bataille who, for his own purposes, created the term atheological.) *Atheology* as a conceptualization of the body is the thought that "god" made himself "body" in emptying himself of himself (another Christian motif, that of the Pauline *kenosis*: the emptying-out of God, or his “emptying-himself out-of-himself”).

What makes Christianity “unique” is that it attempts to bridge the gap between God and community by exhausting the divine principle in the open spacing of the world. Rather than negating the divine principle into a "rational" essence or holding this "sacred" principle in reserve, Christianity affirms "God" as that entity which empties itself out of itself. Nancy phrases the matter succinctly, “I am therefore calling ‘Christianity,’ the posture of thought whereby ‘God’ demands to be effaced or to efface himself” (A 29).

This "happening" has the effect of revealing the immortality of the dead, not negating it. The Christian God becomes man and abandons his divinity by "plunging it into the mortal condition." This doesn't erase death but eternally crystallizes it as the site of divine effacement. Henceforth, as Nancy puts it, "*the effacement of God is the sense of the world.*" The divine *kenosis* spoken of by Paul affirms nothing more than this: that God abandons himself to the finite world and that this abandonment doesn't overcome the pain and sadness of life/death; rather, it affirms the trial of the human condition as the sign of divine passage (A 30).

One way this is expressed in Christianity is through the teaching of the resurrection, which, as we discussed in the previous chapter, Nancy interprets as the "raising up" (*cette levée*) of death in life. However, this new relation to death came to affect civilization in a radical manner. Between the 3rd and the 6th centuries, a Christian "cult of the saints" emerged that enshrined the immortality of the dead in a new form of religious practice that completely upset the ancient mythological relationship to death and prepared the way for the next millennia of Christian history. As historian Peter Brown notes in his work on the topic, the Christian cult of the saints completely broke down the barrier between heaven and earth that had existed in the minds of Mediterranean peoples for thousands of years:
By the end of the sixth century, the graves of the saints, which lay in the cemetery areas outside the walls of most of the cities of the former Western Empire, had become centers of the ecclesiastical life of their region. This was because the saint in Heaven was believed to be "present" at his tomb on earth....

The breaking down and the occasional inversion of ancient barriers implied in the late-antique cult of saints seems to mark the end of a way of seeing the relation between the human dead and the universe, and, as an immediate consequence, a shifting of the barriers by which Mediterranean men had sought to circumscribe the role of the dead, and especially of those dead to whom one had to strong links of kinship or place. Pagan parallels and antecedents can only take us so far in understanding the Christian cult of saints, very largely because the pagan found himself in a world where his familiar map of the relations between the human and the divine, the dead and the living, had been subtly redrawn.  

Early Christians believed that being close to the bodies of the dead brought them closer to heaven. This was not a worship of the dead but of the spirit that was accessible through the corpses of the dead. Brown describes how bodies were brought into the public sphere for the first time and relics were cherished as a way to access the presence of saints. After all, it is a historical fact that the first Christians turned the Roman catacombs into places of adoration and brought death into the heart of religion, and that as Christianity rose to prominence the cemetery areas were moved within the city walls and relics of dead Christians came to occupy the temples of the ancient gods. Medieval Cathedrals, whose walls and floors are lined with coffins of kings and saints, are testament to how this development affected European culture.

Gauchet, in his own way, also affirms the significance of this transition. Through its teaching of the incarnation, he asserts that Christianity modulated the fracture between the “upper” and “lower” worlds by opening a space of "retreat" within the world. The separation between upper and lower worlds, which characterized pagan and early Jewish thought, was transformed into a distinction between inside and outside within the believer. Instead of a messiah who was to establish an earthly kingdom, Jesus claimed to be a messiah of a spiritual kingdom (Lk 17:20-21). By opening a space for life in the midst of death—the

---


452 There are numerous instances of this in Rome, as Christian many churches were literally built upon the ruins of ancient temples to Roman gods.
kingdom of God within the world—Jesus promised himself as the arrival of the kingdom spoken of by the Hebrew prophets, yet in an "inner" manner. What was external to the community through the distinction between the “upper” and the “lower” kingdoms was thereby transformed into a difference internal to the community itself as the holy spirit. This is what Gauchet implies when he writes that, in Christianity, “the inner self opens up the meaning of God’s unknowable withdrawal.”

It is for the above reasons that Nancy argues that Christianity emerged from (and as) the explosion of the Ancient Mediterranean world. Before Christianity there had been a circulation between the upper and lower worlds, and the realm of the gods and men remained distinct. By re-interpreting an aspect of Judaism, Christianity affirmed death in life and broke the harmony of the ancient world. Christianity interrupted the divide between life and death not by holding the uniting principle in abeyance but by shattering it into pieces, and in this manner it is intertwined with the broader retreat of foundations discussed so far:

Christianity was much more than a religion: it was the innervation of a Mediterranean space that was searching for a nervous system after it had put in place the morphological and physiological system of law, the city, and reason. Indeed this ternary—law, city, reason (we can also include art)—was a translation of the disappearance, with which the ternary itself was faced, of any assurance concerning the foundation of existence. That is to say, any assurance concerning what we can also designate as the presence of the gods. It was the Greeks who perceived the absence of the gods in the place of this presence.

We can say this in a different way, in order to move toward an essential characteristic of Christianity. The Greco-Roman world was the world of mortal mankind. Death was irreparable there; and whether one tried to think about it in terms of glory or in terms of deliverance, it was still the incompatible other of life. Other cultures have always affirmed death as another life, foreign yet close by, strange yet compatible in various ways. Irreparable and incompatible death struck life as an affliction. Christianity, reinterpreting an aspect of Judaism, proposed death as the truth of life and opened up in life itself the difference of death, whereby life could know itself as immortal and “saved.” (A 22-23)

By describing Christianity as the "innervation" of the ancient world, Nancy is arguing that Christianity gave an "unfigurable form" to the opening left in the wake of the departure of the

---

453 Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* 120.
gods (A 40). The new relationship to death it offered was not simply the development of a new religious teaching but part and parcel with a fundamental metamorphosis all cultural orders (A 54).

For Nancy, this is what distinguishes Christianity from ancient cultic piety, civil religion, and from philosophical atheism, because Christianity simultaneously borrowed the myths, rituals, narratives, and figures of the ancient world and shattered its distinction between the realm of the spirits and the realm of man. Whereas civil religion and philosophical atheism focused on the relation between men in terms of "the autonomy of law and the indigenous nature [autochtonie] of the city"—firmly distinguishing between "heaven" and "earth" (metaphysics)—Christianity offered the excess of the divine in the bosom of the world and dis-enclosed rational or mythological ends in the finite world of sense. Nancy acknowledges that Greek and Jewish thought prepared the way for this development by opening a separation between the heavenly and early kingdoms—creating a separation between this world and what is not of this world—but he asserts that Christian experience takes the form of this "opening."

Of course, Nancy recognizes that over the next thousand years Christianity took the form of a kingdom or empire that called itself "Christendom," and that in this "apostasizing" of itself the Church became a power in the world, yet he suggests that it was its form as community without given ends or divine foundations that continued to open the West beyond dogmatic, rational, and political enclosure (A 35). As we discussed on Chapter One, Nancy links the New Testament word *koinōnia* (Greek: fellowship), and the Latin *societas* and *communicatio*, and suggests that they all express a certain “placing-in-common” that characterizes the essence of Western history as *diaspora*. The myth of community in the West is one that is always already interrupted by "the sense of an absenting" left in the wake of the departure of the gods. Citing Romans 11:25, he notes that the West is driven by a desire to unite a “pleroma of peoples” in a lost community—a community in *diaspora*, and even connects this with the development of "secularism" and "democracy" in some of his writings (D 44-45).454 Nancy never really details how all of this happened in any precise

---

manner—he offers no detailed accounting of Christian history—yet he does recognize that Christianity went through various stages between its inception as a form of Jewish Christianity ("Christianity is at first a Jewish religion, if not a sect"), its development into Roman Christianity, and all the dogmatic/ecclesiastic formulas and schisms that followed (D 145).

In what remains of this section we will connect this development with theological and philosophical thought. Fundamentally, what Nancy wants to suggest is that since Christianity emerged in the Ancient Mediterranean as the bearer of a god who *atheizes himself* and who *atheologizes himself* it is characterized by its self-transcendence, and that this affected the rise and fall of this civilization that once called itself "Christendom." As the atheological emptying out of the divine, Christianity consists in exceeding itself, and this can be seen in its attempt to locate "the Old Law in the New Law, the *logos* in the Word, the *civitas* in the *civitas Dei*, and so on" (D 145). What interests him is therefore how Christianity embodies a constant moving, turning against itself, and self-surpassing (*autodépassement*) that is made possible because it is founded upon nothing other than an opening in the midst of the world: “Christianity can be summed up, as Nietzsche, for one, knew well, in the precept of living in this world as outside of it—in the sense that this 'outside' is not, [or] not an entity. It does not exist, but it (or again, since it) defines and mobilizes ex-istence: the opening of the world to inaccessible alterity (and consequently a paradoxical access to it)” (D 10).

### 4.4.2 - Christian Theism as the Embodiment of this *Atheologizing of God*

In his numerous works Nancy traces this self-surpassing of Christianity by noting how the dogmatic edifice of Christian theology continually gives way to its own infinity in the midst of the world; revealing not an *archē* upon which to ground beings but an excess that unseats reason. For instance, in his earliest essay on the deconstruction of Christianity he suggests quite bluntly that Christian ontology (*ousia, homoiōsis*, etc.) empties out the being of God in the consubstantiality—*homoousia*—of the Father and the Son. That is, he argues...
that the Christian doctrine of the trinity and the incarnation expose relation, not a selfsubsisting being, as the very core of the divine.

Historically, the doctrine of *homoousia* was established in the 4th C.E. in order to clarify the divine status of Christ. Following the Apostolic Age, which is roughly between 33 C.E. and 100 C.E., there emerged many differing opinions regarding the precise nature of Christ’s divinity that led to various ecumenical councils. The most important of these were the Council of Nicea (325 C.E.), the First Council of Constantinople (381 C.E.), the First Council of Ephesus (431 C.E.), and the Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.). These councils arose because of disagreements between Arians, Ebionites, Gnostics, etc., and established a doctrine of Hypostatic union that became normative for the Orthodox branches of the Church.

It was at Nicaea that Christ was decreed to have one human nature (*physis*) and one divine nature (*physis*), which are neither mixed nor divided, and at Constantinople that this classic formulation of the Trinity was ratified. What was affirmed at these councils was that the one God exists in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and that the Son is the *homoousios* (of the same substance) as the Father.455

This Trinitarian formula is deconstructive, Nancy suggests, because it exposes the divine principle as nothing more than an infinite series of relations. What is “absolute” about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is not a reflexive entity but relation itself, infinitely relating. Think of it this way, because of the fact that the Son is begotten, not made, he is not exterior to the Father but somehow opens up the very experience of relating. Moreover, the “Spirit” is nothing more than a dimension of this relating. The Spirit is the sense of what is shared by the Father and the Son, none of which exist outside of this relation (A 51). “The ternary structure or appearance goes from one of its aspects to the other via something that is other to each of them, which is the relation between them” (A 30). What the dogmatic edifice of Christianity offers is therefore not a ground, but a way of thinking the ontology of God without closing this being around a particular essence or substance; it conceives of the being of God as infinitely distended: “Christianity can only posit and conceive of the infinite remove of *ousia* on the basis of that *ousia*. In other words, the *parousia* of the *homoousia*, far from representing a difference in nature between theology and philosophy, in fact represents

---

the infinite opening of the sense of ousia thought of as presence, a parousia of itself” (D 151).

Unlike Aristotle’s Prime Mover, the Christian God does not stand over and above creation because he is not an entity that is consistent in itself; rather, the trinity consists in the infinite relating-out between the father and the Son. As Nancy writes in Adoration: “The mystery of the trinity articulates "God" himself as relation. That is to say, it removes from him the property of "being" in the sense of a being [être] or being [étant] that is consistent in itself, of a subject that can be represented as a person or even as any "entity" whatsoever” (A 50-51).

Nancy uses this observation to support his claim that Christianity presents itself as a self deconstruction in history. It is less “a body of doctrine than a subject in relationship to itself in the midst of a search for self, within a disquietude, an awaiting or a desire for its proper identity.” The Trinitarian formula at once announces itself in detachment from the whole ancient world, both Greco-Roman ontology and Judaic monotheism, while appropriating the whole discourse of reason (logos) and the Abrahamic faith; Christianity puts reason into play as flesh, while simultaneously emptying that flesh of any substantial essence. Indeed, the essence of God in “the Word made flesh” is that of a “hypostasis” or “sensuous presentation,” which is indistinguishable from the presentation of God as a mystery. The reason this makes Christianity a subject in composition and decomposition is that the mystery revealed is not of the order of myth but of a historical destiny searching for fulfilment. This is what separates Christianity “from the regime of religion stricto sensu,” because it presents itself as the revelation of absolute truth but is inseparable from the destiny and history of man (D 37).

On the one hand, by thinking the divine in three persons, Christianity separates itself absolutely from Judaism and Islam, because it historicizes the divine principle held in reserve by both; and on the other hand, Christianity separates itself from myth because it presents the sacred as a finite interpretation of itself in history. Now, it could be shown that similar tendencies are also implicit in other religions, but Christianity makes this explicit for it presents itself as a divided unity coming towards itself in time. As declared at Vatican I, Christian revelation is constituted through homo viator, “journeying man”; which is to affirm that “Christian faith is itself the experience of its history” (D 146). To comprehend this we
need only recall our lengthy discussion in Chapter One and Two about how the Christian narrative is always stretched between the overcoming of idolatry and sacrifice, and the arrival of the *parousia*. Additionally, we need only reflect on how this distention is itself the very form of “spirit” in the West (D 38). In its Augustinian, Avicennian, Cartesian, and Hegelian elaborations, Christianity is always defined as a perpetual process of self-surpassing: “Christianity (and through this prism, monotheism) has been engaged from its beginning in a perpetual process (i.e., a process and a litigation) of self-rectification and self-surpassing, often in the form of a self-retrospection in view of a return to a purer origin—a process that reaches up to Nietzsche and continues today, but that had begun already between the gospels and Paul, between Paul and James, in the origins of monastic orders, and, of course, in the various reforms, and so on” (D 38-39). Let's unpack this by discussing some specific examples that Nancy provides.

4.4.3 - Philosophy as the Continuation of this Atheology;
Or, the Self-Overcoming of Metaphysics

One of the earliest instances of this self-surpassing of Christianity that Nancy discusses from the history of philosophy is the *Proslogion* of Saint Anselm. Famously, Anselm provided an “ontological proof” by arguing that God was that “…being than which no greater can be conceived” (*quo majus cogitari nequit*), and by asserting that God is greater than what can be thought (*majus quam cogitari possit*). What Nancy finds in this proof is evidence for the excessive function of Christian reason. He stresses that in this proof the maximum of being (*l’étant*) is found totally in the movement of thought, and in the ability of thought to think of an excess to thought. These two posits conjoin, just like the linking of the doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation, to expose the surplus that thinks thought. “It is this movement alone that constitutes reason in its unconditionality or in the absoluteness and infinity of the desire through which man is caught up infinitely in it [s’y passe infiniment].” God, according to this proof, is the ordeal of thought going beyond itself; the *logos* is shown to be intertwined with the *alogon*. This “religious” proof exposes nothing transcendent but the way in which the very thought of the numinous is “tied up in beings and in
communication.” All that is exposed here is the incommensurable alterity of thought itself (D 10).

For Nancy, Anselm’s argument characterizes the transition from the Middle ages to modern thought because God is here the “existential ordeal of thought.” According to Anselm’s logic, someone may reject God but they are not able to not think the maximum of thought (D 11). The maximum of thought is therefore described as the condition of being in the world. In this development “God” is left behind and thought itself becomes the means for exploring the infinite pursuit for meaning.

Nancy links this proof to modern thought by noting that between the Renaissance and Enlightenment, religion itself become that thought to be surpassed or attacked (or “rationalized”). Now that reason had no other ground than the very demand to think thought thinking, religion could be understood as but one state in the historical development of “humanity.” From Bodin to Kant, religion was increasingly imagined in terms of the progress of humanity, and the phantasms that accompanied it appeared merely as a stage in the natural progression of rationality. However, what was exposed again and again, Nancy argues, by all the great rationalists from the 15th to the 18th century, is that “rationality” suffers the same fate as the Trinitarian God, because it is unable to justify its own ground independent of relation. As Heidegger shows in The Principle of Reason, the sufficient grounds for reason ultimately come to tremble in its own foundation, no matter how it is figured. Whether it be Descartes’ “clear and distinct” presentation of the finite, which necessarily presupposes access to the infinite, or Leibniz’s emphasis on the Monad of monads, the “principle of sufficient reason” only ever made clear the dependence of the logos upon the alogon. That is to say, all that the rationalists demonstrated was the necessary tautology of rationality to itself, and that reason is unable to get outside of the world (CW 120). In its various formulations, this principle touched its own limits and exposed the trembling ground of creation to its own absent foundation. Ironically, what became more evident as modern philosophy developed is that reason is exposed to its own limit precisely in the infinite demand of thought.

---

According to Nancy, the recognition of this limit of reason is wrapped up with the Christian demand to atheize the alterity of God in the midst of the world. What the failures of reason exposed is that thought is opened by an unconditional alienation that has no principle or paradigm beyond the world. For instance, when Newton provided his proof for gravity but gave no reason for its actuality—"I feign no hypothesis [Hypotheses non fingo]"—he was acknowledging that an ultimate reason for the world (rendre raison de) cannot be provided. Despite being a deeply pious thinker who spent much of his lifetime calculating the date for the Second Coming of Christ, Newton delimited metaphysics by arguing that axioms should be limited to reflect the available data. Newton therefore feigned no ultimate proof, and just like Kant after him, attempted to avoid the metaphysical errors of his predecessors (A 32).

However, this attempt to save reason from itself proved as impossible as the atheist negation of monotheism, because all that occurred was that reason was given a more delimited space in which to operate. More and more, what became evident was that the very attempt to present the world to itself is an impossibility; the rational representation of the world (or God) was shown to be self-defeating. This is why Nancy suggests that, “there is no need of a prolonged study to notice that, already in the most classical metaphysical representations of God, nothing else was at stake, in the end, than the world itself, in itself and for itself.” The great rationalists attempted to describe nothing else but a tautology of being, and in doing so exposed that the logos is dependent upon the a-logon. “I only ask,” Nancy writes, “that one reflect on the sense of ‘continual creation’ in Descartes, on that of Spinoza's Deus sive natura, on the ‘vision in God’ in Malebranche or on the ‘monad of monads’ with Leibniz” (CW 40-41). What was exposed between Anselm and Kant was that the world thinks itself, and in doing so unseats any paradigm or principle that is posited outside the world.

The assumption of the great rationalists throughout this process was that “rationality” could elaborate a total picture of the world from within the world. Like the Church councils before them, the rationalists wanted to provide a representation of the world, but what they in fact demonstrated was “the immanent relation of the world to itself” (CW 41). And even when Kant did away with the “vertical” theological remnants that haunted the rationalists and conceived of transcendence in a horizontal fashion, he was only able to demonstrate this immanence of reason to itself. In Kant’s philosophy the world appears as “the place,
dimension, and actuality of thought: the space-time of meaning and truth” (CW 41). The world is no longer an object for a subject, or vision of reason, but a becoming that is immanent to the process itself. In this manner, the transcendence of reason gives way to the deconstruction of onto-theology, and the God of metaphysics is revealed in the midst of the world as an excess that cannot be contained.

From ancient Greece to the Critique of Pure Reason, the god of metaphysics is transformed into the immanence of the world in its movement and play, uncontained and unbound by any principle or premise. In this process the God of onto-theology is “progressively stripped of the divine attributes of an independent existence, and only retained those of the existence of the world considered in its immanence” (CW 44), which implies that God (the subject of the world) exhausts himself as the world appearing to itself. The subject of the world is no longer God but the world as subject. This is what Nancy often describes as the “becoming-world-of-the-world,” and it is meant to explain how the world must lose its vision of itself (as object) in order to understand itself as a subject (vacating God of any divine qualities in the process). The world is immanent to itself (as subject) in its infinite relating-out. Just like the trinity, the world only ever exists in relation to itself. This process is made evident by the deconstruction of Christianity because what is shown in this provenance is that the dogmatic edifice of Christianity already contains this affirmation of extension. The God of Christianity is not enclosed upon itself but dis-enclosed. As Nancy puts it:

[T]he God of metaphysics merged into a world. More precisely, the “God” of onto-theology was progressively stripped of the divine attributes of an independent existence and only retained those of the existence of the world considered in its immanence, that is to say, also in the undecidable amphibology of an existence as necessary as it is contingent. Let us recall, for instance, Spinoza's God, the “immanent cause of the world,” or Leibniz”s God, which created “the best of all possible worlds,” that is to say, was limited to being a reason internal to the general order of things. The God of onto-theology has produced itself (or deconstructed itself) as subject of the world, that is, as world-subject. In so doing, it suppressed itself as God-Supreme-Being and transformed itself, losing itself therein, in the existence for-itself of the world without an outside (neither outside of the world nor a world from the outside). (CW 44)
In the history of theology and philosophy God thus disappears \textit{in the world}, which does not imply that God merely changes locations and is to be found within the world (\textit{dans-le-monde}), but “in” the very movement of the world (\textit{au-monde}). As Raffoul notes, this implies that we can no longer speak of the world as something that is enclosed around itself, but only in terms of being-in-the-world. “The preposition ‘an,’ ‘in,’ explains Nancy, represents, in French, what now encapsulates the entire problem of the world. This shift from 'within' to 'in' indicates the radical immanence of the world: everything now takes place in the world, that is to say, right at the world, \textit{à même} the world, as Nancy often writes (CW 7).\textsuperscript{457} It is in this exact manner that the dis-enclosure of reason is the effect of the deconstruction of Christianity and retreat of religion, having thrown of the yoke of observance and subordinated it to the relation of the world to itself (A 43).

\textbf{4.4.4 - Conclusion: the Deconstruction of Christianity as Subjective and Objective Genitive; Or, what Remains of Christianity}

Given this radical reading of Christian intellectual history, it is important to note that Nancy is not suggesting that Christianity no longer exists as a body of doctrines and institutions, or that the further deconstruction of Christianity is no longer occurring, but simply that the monstrous space left after the departure of the gods is no longer occupied by any firm sediment or ground that gives sense to the world. When Nancy writes about the deconstruction of religion stretching from Descartes to Derrida he is discussing how the philosophical tradition has contributed to this project. The deconstruction of Christianity is a subjective genitive that has objective implications. That is, it is an internally deconstructed construction: it is a body of thought that interprets itself as the overcoming of itself. As Raffoul notes, “the deconstruction of Christianity (objective genitive) is the accompaniment—and the revealing—of Christianity’s deconstruction (subjective genitive).”\textsuperscript{458} This is a complicated formula, so let me lay out clearly what it implies for how we understand the religious history of the West.

\textsuperscript{457} This quotation if from the editors’ introduction to CW, written by Raffoul and Pettigrew.
On the one hand, Nancy holds that monotheism emerges as the rejection of the gods, and that Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and atheism are all inheritors of this divine displacement. Already in the formation of monotheism lies the truth that the world rests on nothing and grows from nothing—“No pillars, no turtle, no ocean, not even an abyss or yawning gulf.” The triple monotheistic faiths give us a God who neither posits nor founds the world but only creates it, ex nihilo: “he does not make the world, he makes there be a world” (A 33-34). Like the atheist faiths that are now replacing these monotheisms in contemporary North America and Europe (even creating atheist churches), the monotheism that emerged from the ancient Mediterranean was founded upon "nothing."

On the other hand, Nancy asserts that although Christianity has completely undone itself as a religion only one part of Christianity actively flowed in this direction: that part that emerged from the European Reformation and took inspiration from it. Although he argues that Christianity, as a whole, is a self-deconstruction that has provided the exit from religion, he claims that it is not the whole of Christianity that is objectively unraveling itself. Rather, he claims that the objective deconstruction of Christianity is limited to the various cultural developments that occurred in European civilization from the 14th Century onwards. As Nancy writes,

I hold that, of the three religions, only one has undone itself as a religion and has in some way transformed itself into an irrigation system for the culture of the modern world (its morals, its law, its humanism, and its nihilism). We must say it precisely, though I cannot linger on this point—only one of the veins of Christianity flowed in this direction. This was the Reformation and the part of Catholicism that took inspiration from it, as well as at least a part of Christian mysticism (particularly Eckhart) but not Catholicism stricto sensu, no more than the Orthodox churches. This is to say not only that the Christianity that I claim is deconstructing itself and entering into a relation of mutual dis-enclosure with modern reason is far from being one with the ensemble of dogmas, institutions, and sociopolitical behavior of the different churches, but that it even breaks with them. This break is not new; it doubtless opens from the beginning of Christianity (e.g., between James and Paul, but perhaps also in Paul himself, or else in the difference between John and the Synoptic Gospels), and it can be found down the ages (Anselm, Eckhart, Francis of Assisi, Fénelon, and, of course, the great Reformers up to Barth, Bultmann, and Bonhoeffer; more subtly, it traverses Augustine or Pascal—and these are only a few names at random). I do not wish to linger here: I only
wish to emphasize that it is not the entirety of the Christian religion that is dis-enclosing itself, outside religion and outside Christianity. (A 34)

Nancy only notes this important distinction once in passing but it is central to his entire project. What he is doing here is making a subtle distinction between the dis-enclosure of the West that developed in antiquity and the dis-enclosure of reason that we have traced up through the orthodox theological and European philosophical tradition. The world of post-Reformation Europe became the explicit acting out of the implicit rejection of religion that began in antiquity. The post-Reformation world was not only the bearer of the God of relation embodied in the trinity but actively started to break with this God, and all the dogmas associated with its name. Nancy notes this distinction to stress that it is not the entirety of the Christian religion that is dis-enclosing itself. Although Christianity is constituted as a self-surpassing and our very history books are witness to this self-interpretive overcoming of religion, not all branches of Christianity are engaged in the outright deconstruction of religion. 459

In short, what Nancy is suggesting is that the world of post-Reformation Europe became the explicit acting out of the implicit rejection of gods that took place with the rise of technics in antiquity. The construction of religion as a universal phenomena to be surpassed by philosophy is the direct acting out of this deconstruction, and this development can be traced from Eckhart to Heidegger. 460 The post-Reformation world was not only the bearer of the God of relation embodied in the trinity but actively started to break with this God and the associated dogmas—a development that was intertwined with the capitalist, technological, and global expansion of European civilization between the 14th and 20th centuries.

It is in this sense that Nancy thinks there is still "work" to do, so to speak, in exposing the self-deconstruction of Christianity. As Nietzsche put it in The Gay Science: "God is

459 Of particular interest here is how Nancy connects this unravelling with a particular reading of Paul, James, and the Synoptic Gospels that was developed by thinkers like Barth, Bultmann, and Bonhoeffer, all of whom rejected "religion" in the name of "faith" in the 20th Century. Since Nancy has admitted that he was influenced by the strain of Protestant thought known as "demythologization," which was first developed by Bultmann, this might be a fruitful area for future research on Nancy. For Nancy's comments on "demythologization" see Jean-Luc Nancy, La possibilité d'un monde — Dialogue avec Pierre-Philippe Jandin (Paris: Les Petits Platons, 2013), 17-23.

460 After all, it is by no means a coincidence that the globalization, universalization, categorization, and ontologization of the category "religion" took shape after the Reformation. I think an interesting future study on Nancy would be to show how the "retreat of religion" that Christianity inaugurates facilitates the post-Reformation invention of religion as a universal phenomena.
dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.”

461 Nancy cites a part of this passage in *Dis-Enclosure* to emphasize that the deconstruction of Christianity grows out of the self-deconstruction of Christianity in a manner that is unpredictable and unfinished. He suggests that we can never know for certain how long this shadow will remain but that our task at the moment is to bring it to light, and to do so without “remaining pious” (D 142).

In sum, it is for the above reasons that Nancy is not offering a return to religion through a revaluation of Christian dogmas, as if to suggest that if we all just understand the trinity as he describes it the world will be free of illusion. Moreover, it is also why he is not suggesting that Judaism and Islam (or other cultures) do not partake of deconstruction—as if to suggest that being a confessing Christian is the secret ingredient to deconstruction—but merely that the opening in the midst of the world instantiated in Christianity completely exposes how all sense is a matter of relation, not donation, thereby completing the transition from observance to relation. This transition has now encircled the globe under a monotheistic logic of globalization, and this is what is left to think. What is given for us to think is how this provenance is “divided in its own being-world, in an acosmic and atheological world, which is still a ‘world,’ in some respect...” (D 39).

4.5 - Globalization and Creation *ex nihilo*

In *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, Nancy discusses this connection between monotheism, deconstruction, and nihilism in the context of globalization. He links the deconstruction of monotheism to the universal expanse of globalization and shows how it is always already overcome from within. This is an important text to close with because, from a certain angle, Nancy's whole project on Christianity revolves around the question of globalization. As Nancy writes in “The Deconstruction of Monotheism," it is precisely at the point when the West no longer holds a sense of the world, yet still continues to spread that decomposition around the globe in an indefinite technological expansion, that it becomes urgent for the West to turn back and to examine its history and provenance, in order to

understand the destitution of sense to which it has given rise: “Our time is thus one in which it is urgent that the West—or what remains of it—analyze its own becoming, turn back [se retourne sur] to examine its provenance and its trajectory, and question itself concerning the process of decomposition of sense [sens] to which it has given rise” (D 30).

Now that we have traced the atheological history of the West Nancy envisions, we can understand this imperative with greater significance, as well as its deconstructive implications. Nancy contends that the capitalist and technological expanse of globalization, which reduces beings to their economic value, is a remainder of the monotheistic impulse to unite the world under a universal principle, which reduces beings to being-as-one (l'être-un). Nancy puts the matter succinctly: "The mystery of this history is tied to nothing other than the character—simultaneously absolute and invisible, incalculable, indeterminable, and universal—of the value or unidirectionality [sens unique] that is placed now in 'God,' now in 'man,' and now in the tautology of 'value' itself.” (D 31). The culture that once carried itself around the globe under the name of universal truth and reason has been reduced to what Marx discerned, some one hundred and fifty years ago, as a “the production of the world market” (D 30). On the one hand, Nancy will frame the development of globalization as “the suppression of all world-forming,” and “an unprecedented geopolitical, economic, and ecological catastrophe” (CW 50). Through constant cultural domination and expansion, the civilization that took shape around the basin of the Mediterranean several millennia ago has devalued its highest principles before our very eyes, and the principle of unicity that was once the propriety of its monotheistic God has become synonymous with the law of monetary exchange. On the other hand, he will refer to globalization as that process whereby the "world" destroys itself and opens the chance to experience meaning as a never ending process of becoming. Hence, what Nancy wants to show in his work on globalization is similar to the aim of his specific work on the deconstruction of Christianity: he wants to demonstrate how the universal ambitions of globalization give way to their own dissolution and opens the space between us. He wants to expose how the principle of unicity that undergirds both monotheism and globalization ultimately fails to close the world in upon a definite meaning, and makes space for the creation of a new world. In the remaining section of this chapter, I will summarize this argument and connect it with the broader aims of the deconstruction of Christianity.
One word of preparation before this final cadence: In this attempt to peel back the nihilism of our tradition, Nancy, like Nietzsche before him, thinks that “Christianity is accomplished in nihilism and as nihilism” (D 141). Nancy and Nietzsche are in agreement that Christianity is the religion for the death of God and that it contributes to the history of nihilism that is the West. However, Nancy wants to use "the death of God" to expose the exhaustion of the divine in the midst of the world, and in so doing “go beyond the point where Nietzsche left off” (D 150). For Nietzsche, "the death of God" means that there is no absolute God’s eye perspective and that the only principle of evaluation left is the creative act of the human will.\footnote{Nietzsche, \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}, section 36 (1990, 67).} For Nancy, going beyond nihilism requires a new principle of evaluation which goes beyond Nietzsche’s “will to power.” Emphasizing the “will to power” merely leaves us with an absolute relativism that is located in the will, or what Heidegger calls “classical nihilism.” As we have seen, what Nancy attempts to think is the \textit{nihil} left in the wake of God’s departure in light of our shared separation that divides the world, \textit{partes extra partes}. For Nancy, the only way out of nihilism is to think of the divine as the relation among finite beings, for this dis-encloses any transcendent principle of value or immanent notion of meaningfulness in the spacing of the world (A 73).

\textit{The Creation of the World or Globalization} is directly concerned with this rethinking of nihilism because what concerns Nancy in this text is that we have lost the ability to form a world. Nancy begins by noting that the English word “globalization” and the French word \textit{mondialisation},” mean very different things. Although the two words are used synonymously to refer to the contemporary information exchange, \textit{mondialisation} actually remains untranslatable in this sense. Both terms are often synonymous with the “common assumption of the totality of the parts of the world in a general network (if not a system) of communication, commercial exchange, juridical or political reference points (if not values), and finally of practices, forms, and procedures of all kinds linked to many aspects of ordinary experience” (CW 27). However, although both terms emerged in the 19th and 20th Century, and have been used in conjunction with the idea of the “global,” which evokes a sense of unity or whole, this meaning really only belongs to globalization (in the sense given to it by Marshall McLuhan’s “global village”). \textit{Mondialisation}, as Nancy points out, actually refers to an expanding sense of the world, not a static totality that is integrated in an overarching
Mondialisation “would rather evoke an expanding process throughout the expanse of the world of human being, cultures, and nations” (CW 28). Globalization and mondialization thereby parse the “world” in different ways: the former as an enclosure and the latter as a space of possible meaning. Nancy juxtaposes these two terms in order to show how the very attempt to make the world into a totality actually produces an “unworld” (immonde) and exposes how to "form a world" (faire monde). Globalization simultaneously destroys the world (by trying to absorb it into a totality—a monetary equivalence of sense) and “makes possible the emergence of the question relating to its being” (CW 47).

Though the terminology here may be complex the point is simple: the network that globalization casts upon the world deforms its borders as much as it re-creates them. Between the 16th and the 21st centuries the West has come to encompass the world, but it has also disappeared in the process. From the band of ships that first set sail with Vasco de Gama and Christopher Columbus, which simultaneously opened the world to trade and subjugated it to papal, economic, and cultural domination, to the band of satellites and their debris (“space junk”) that currently reaches far beyond our terrestrial limits, the supposed borders of our world and our continents have rapidly expanded with globalization. The combination of techno-science, population growth, GMO’s, etc., unwork any notion of the “natural” just as much as they harness the potential of the world and make it anew. In the attempt to unite the world globalization has dispelled any notion of the universal, whether it be associated with Christendom or with reason; in the very attempt to unite the world it has dispelled the ability to “form a world” (faire monde) (CW 34).

This emphasis on mondialisation and reclaiming our ability to “form a world” has parallels with Nietzsche’s emphasis on the creative play of the will but it also differs markedly, because for Nancy the creation of the world requires that we lack a representation of the world. A representation of the world presupposes a vantage point outside of the world—what Nancy often calls a cosmotheoros—from which the world can be viewed as an object, and this is what is shown to be impossible by globalization. From the perspective of

---

463 With this distinction, Nancy is not isolating globalization and mondialisation as distinct economies, or spaces of being. As we saw in Chapter Two, Nancy rejects Bataille's distinction between the restricted and the general economy, so clearly we can't use this distinction to bifurcate the world into two separate economic bonds. For more on this, See Jean-Paul Martinon, “Im-Mundus or Nancy’s Globalizing-World-Formation,” in Nancy and the Political, ed. by Sanja Dejanovic (Edinburgh: Edingurgh University Press, 2015), 112-123.
the *cosmotheoros* in the classical figures of ontotheology, the world is “viewed” as if from an all seeing gaze that is outside the world; what is presupposed is a subject of the world (*subjet du monde*) that cannot be within the world (*être dans le monde*). It is from this perspective that the God of monotheism is assigned the ability to manage, create, organize, and address the world as a whole:

A world “viewed,” a represented world, is a world dependent on the gaze of a subject of the world (*sujet du monde*). A subject of the world (that is to say as well a subject of history) cannot itself be within the world (*être dans le monde*). Even without a religious representation, such a subject, implicit or explicit, perpetuates the position of the creating, organizing, and addressing God (if not the addressee) of the world. CW 40

When Nancy asserts in *The Ister* that the West begins with the retreat of these foundations, he is referring to the origins of this self-deconstruction, which, as we have seen, is evidenced in the classical metaphysical representations of God. These representations of being have always been nihilistic because they attempt to fill the place of the gods with divine, rational, or human principles of valuation that make up for the absence of an overarching worldview (*Weltanshauung*). When theological, rational, political, economic, or technological ends are used to install an ontological meaning within the world they are merely covering over this absence. Hence, implicit to Nancy’s critique is the rejection of any logic that understands the play of the world as already circumscribed *within* any evaluative gesture. When Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* that the “will to power” allows one the “right to define all efficient force unequivocally,” he is attempting to delimit the world according to its “intelligible character,” which Nancy rejects. (TD 22).464

It is in this manner that a parallel can be drawn between Nancy’s use of the words “globalization” and “mondialization,” and his use of the terms “religion” and “Christianity.” In fact, in Nancy’s work, these are but different terms for the same deconstruction of onto-theology. In both *The Creation of The World or Globalization*, and in his wider project on the deconstruction of Christianity, his goal is to expose the nihilist principle of evaluation that has no other rational basis than its own perpetuation. By juxtaposing globalization to *mondialisation*, therefore, we are able to see the unquestioned principle of unicity that

---

functions as a nihilistic placeholder for the free formation of the world. Just as with his analysis of Christianity, with his analysis of globalization Nancy wants to draw forth the "nothing of the world" and expose what is at stake in its creation. When it is assumed that there is a principle of unity or meaning that stands over and above the world, this nihilistic impulse runs rampant, destroying everything it its path, but if we can see how meaning is created in the movement of the world, and call attention to the "becoming-world of the world," then we can address its creation *ex nihilo* (CW 44). It is in this manner that the world forming of *mondialization* undermines all the classic ontotheological figures of the West, just as Christianity inaugurates the retreat of religion.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, Nancy uses the monotheistic notion of creation *ex nihilo* to think beyond any such representational figures, whether divine, rational, or evaluative. Creation *ex nihilo*, he argues, refers not to the creation of the world by a pre-existing being, but to a world stripped of a God distinct from the world (CW 50). “Creation” does not refer to a producer who gives the world a pre-fabricated sense but to the emergence of the world from nothing. This world, as the becoming of nothing, produces a detheoligization because it shows how existence rests on nothing other than *itself*, and this *self* comes from nowhere and does not pre-exist the act of creation. By exposing how existence is made possible by the nothing (*rien*) that lies in each something, Nancy suggests that the idea of creation *ex nihilo* moves beyond theology and atheism, and opens the world to its shared separation:

The *ex nihilo* contains nothing more, but nothing less, than the ex- of existence that is neither produced nor constructed but only *existing [étant]" (or, if one prefers, *étée*, "made" from the making constituted by the transitivity of being). And this *ex nihilo* fractures the deepest core of nihilism from within. (CW 71)

The monotheistic God merges with the act of creation, withdrawing into it, and emptying itself out there, leaving nothing behind but the opening of the void that is shared out in the spacing of the world. This overcomes nihilism from within by exposing that the world is neither given nor posited by a prior absence or presence, but simply opened by a *nihil* that "disposes itself" of all presence (and presences), opening the world unto itself (CW 71).
Now, to tie this together with all I have written above, it is precisely this *nihil* of creation that Nancy is referring to when he states his intention to “extract from Christianity what bore us and produced us;” and when he states his intention to explore “the ground of the religious thing [*la chose religieuse*] that of which religion will have been a form and a misrecognition [*méconnaissance*]” (A 26). This *nihil* is the “archi-spatiality” of presences (CW 73); it is the condition of possibility for all experience and what precedes, exceeds, and succeeds it—*partes extra partes*. This *nihil* is not a ground or foundation in the traditional sense but the very movement of deconstruction in its opening and sharing. The whole point of the deconstruction of Christianity is to expose this *nihil* and to show how it does not collapse into a nihilistic abyss but opens the world to the infinity of sense.

4.6 - Conclusion

What we have detailed above is meant to expose how the West presents itself as a deconstruction and a self-deconstruction. By detailing the shift from observance to relation that occurred with the entry into signification in the Ancient Mediterranean and how this was carried forth into monotheism, atheism, modern philosophy, and globalization, Nancy counters both theological and secular readings of the West by locating its origins in the "flight of the gods." Instead of presenting the history of the West as a descent into atheism or an assent towards reason and enlightenment, thereby providing a self-subsisting origin or end for the world, he locates its emergence in the disappearance of foundations and its subsequent "development" as a contemplation of this absenting.

It is in this manner that Nancy’s examination of our provenance has nothing to do with religion, monotheism, or even Christianity, *per se*, but is an attempt to draw out the space of possibility that gives rise to all of these registers in the first place. Nancy does not present a new horizon by which to measure the history of the West but shows how it is caught up with the deconstruction of such horizons and ends. Contra Gauchet, Nancy does not juxtapose Christianity to religion and thereby develop a theory of religion, or even a history of religion, but exposes "the sense of an absenting" that deconstructs our various nihilist conceptions of the world.
At the end of this "history," what we are left to think is the creation of the world in the midst of the world, *ex nihilo*, not according to the history of the gods, the development of man, or the ascent of reason and science. What we are left to think is the sense of the world in light of its atheological opening, which is the infinitely plural *nihil* we share between us in the free creation of the world.
Conclusion

5.1 -Summary of Findings and the Importance of the Present Study

In this dissertation we have traced the origins and development of Nancy's work on the deconstruction of Christianity. By detailing his relation to Heidegger's, Bataille's, and Derrida’s writings on religion, we have documented how the deconstruction of Christianity emerged in Western thought in conjunction with the deconstruction of metaphysics, and how the "exit from religion" is connected to the broader critique of nihilism. At the center of Nancy's project is an attempt to show how Christianity already exposes the truth that the world is founded upon "nothing" and consists in nothing but its own spacing. Nancy reads concepts like creation *ex nihilo*, God, faith, sacrifice, incarnation, resurrection, and adoration along deconstructive lines, and shows how Christianity produces a dethelogization of the divine. In this endeavor, Nancy seeks neither to simply reject religion (in order to overcome metaphysics), nor to restore a sense of religious intimacy (via sacrifice) to the world but to show how foundationalist modes of thinking are simultaneously invented and deconstructed within a certain Greco-Roman-Judeo-Christian register that is caught up in the absenting of foundations, or a "retreat from religion." In this conclusion, I will briefly summarize the findings of this study and discuss its importance for how we understand religion in the West.

In Chapter One, our guiding question was "is the deconstruction of religion a Christian operation?" After an analysis of the origins of Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics and Nancy's critique of him, we uncovered a fairly complex answer: deconstruction emerges out of Christianity in the West but it does not belong to it in some essential sense. Rather, the entire history of Christianity is founded upon a retreat of foundations that precedes, succeeds, and exceeds it. First, we traced how Heidegger returned to early Christianity to uncover a way of being-in-the-world that defies philosophical abstraction and then how he used this observation as the basis for his phenomenological method. Heidegger finds the primordial experience of temporality in the eschatological expectation of the *Parousia* and this informs his mature work. However, Heidegger never fully acknowledged the Christian provenance of deconstruction and remained bound to a certain nihilist conception of being and myth. In contrast, Nancy suggests that the wider
Judeo-Christian tradition is situated upon a hyphen, or spacing, that divides it from within and that Christianity takes the form of this opening, which turns the history of the West into a deconstruction and a self-deconstruction. By way of example, Nancy points out how Christian faith functions as a *praxis* that is incommensurate with any form of religious belief or phenomenology. By stressing that the only thing faith exposes is the inoperativity, or worklessness (*déseoeuvrement*), of existence with itself, Nancy moves beyond Heidegger's phenomenological method. For Nancy, this furthers the deconstruction of metaphysics by reorienting the problem of nihilism away from a question of *Dasein*, being-towards-death, authenticity, and instead shifts the emphasis towards the incommensurate relationship we share with each and every other being.

In Chapter Two, we turned our attention to Nancy's relation to Bataille to find out what all this implies about the broader aims of Nancy's project at a communal level. In this chapter, the question that orientated our analysis was, "does 'the death of God' prepare the way for a new type of religious intimacy?" The pertinence of this question arose from the fact that Bataille framed his atheological reading of the West around the question of sacrifice and attempted to uncover some kind of "religious intimacy" from his particular reading of the death of God. As we observed, Bataille argued that a proper orientation to sacrifice could overcome the economic logic of equivalence that dominates religious and philosophical nihilism and open the path for a new type of communal experience. By emphasizing the heterogeneity and inoperativity of existence, he stressed that life cannot be reduced to some particular end and thus tried to develop a theory of religion founded upon the loss at the heart of community. Although Bataille's atheology heavily influenced Nancy, we saw how Nancy purges the remnants of subjective romanticism from Bataille's atheological history of the West, and argues that the heterogeneity of existence does not allow us to take on the rhythm of the universe. Nancy employs Bataille's notion of atheology not in order to restore a sense of intimacy to community but to show how community has never had a proper sense or ground. What the death of God reveals for Nancy is that existence is constituted by an inoperative sharing of sense, not by some site of sacrificial abandon that can be used to establish religious intimacy. The importance of this insight from the broader perspective of the deconstruction of metaphysics is that it shows that existence cannot be sacrificed to someone or even to "nothing." In this manner, Nancy uses atheology to deconstruct the logic.
of sacrifice that informs Bataille's thought, arguing that the world is not a moment in an economy of being that can be evaluated and sublated to a higher meaning or end, but only affirmed, offered, and shared.

In Chapter Three, we turned to Nancy's interaction with Derrida to ask one more question: "What, if anything, remains of Christianity in the wake of deconstruction?" What was at issue in this chapter was the way in which deconstruction occurs and what it implies about the future of religion. The disagreement between Derrida and Nancy is not whether the deconstruction of Christianity is occurring or even whether it is a wholly Christian operation, but the precise manner in which it is occurring and how far each is willing to go in their respective deconstructive operations. On the one hand, Derrida affirms that “if there is deconstructing to do it is Christianity” (OT 60) and that “Christianity is the most plastic, the most open religion,” but on the other hand he warns Nancy that the deconstruction of Christianity would be a near impossible task, and that it “would have its work cut out for it, to infinity” (OT 59). Nancy's response to this interrogation is to show how deconstruction presents itself at the heart of the Christian corpus, on the very inside of touch. Although the difference between Derrida and Nancy largely boils down to a dissimilarity in philosophical style, Nancy goes farther than Derrida by reading deconstruction into notions like the incarnation and the resurrection and leaving behind no indeconstructable terms. By shifting the question of deconstruction from signs, signifiers, and the aporia of sense, to the infinite spacing of sense and touch of bodies, Nancy finds deconstruction at work in the spacing of the world. Moreover, by showing how the Christian God consists in nothing more than "the sense of an absenting" he takes the deconstruction of metaphysics further than Derrida by showing how the detheologization of the divine is found in the very teachings of the "Christian mysteries." In the end, Nancy suggests that this "sense of an absenting" is all that remains of Christianity (and the West) after deconstruction.

Lastly, in Chapter Four, we explored how "the sense of an absenting" that Nancy finds in Christianity allows him to reread the history of the West as an atheological displacement of metaphysical foundations. By tracing how the West emerges from the "flight of the gods," Nancy points out how the absenting at the heart of our provenance opens

465 This comment was made in an interview with the editors of Derrida and Religion. See Brook Cameron and Kevin Hart, “Epoché and faith: An interview with Jacques Derrida,” in Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments, ed. by Yvonne Sherwood & Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2005), 33.
nihilistic closures from within. Instead of presenting the history of the West as a descent into atheism or an ascent towards reason and enlightenment—thereby providing a self-subsisting origin or end for the world—he locates its emergence in the disappearance of foundations. In particular, he suggests that the unique God of monotheism overcomes nihilism and produces a detheologization by disappearing into the act of creation. This overcomes nihilism by exposing that the world is neither given nor posited but only opened by a nihil that "disposes itself" in the spacing of the world. By detailing the "retreat of religion" in the West, Nancy is not presenting a new horizon by which to measure the history of religion on some broad cross cultural level but exposing how our history is caught up in the retreat from such horizons and ends. In this manner, "the sense of an absenting" that Nancy finds in Christianity is both our condition of possibility in the West and what exceeds it.

Putting all this together, we might summarize Nancy's project on the deconstruction of Christianity as the attempt to show how Western thought has repeatedly covered over the space of our shared separation with a metaphysical logic that frames and limits the plurality of existence, but that in each case these nihilistic principles are overcome by the hyphen at the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition. What Nancy is fundamentally concerned to expose is that existence is plural and consists "only in its spacing" and he finds the resources to think this spacing from within Christianity (BSP 47). In this light, in Nancy's rereading of Heideggerian being, Bataillian atheology, Derridian différance, what is at stake is nothing less than the very formation of existence in its division and its sharing (partage). What he exposes is that even though the world is without foundation or common measure, it does not collapse in upon itself in an abyss of nothingness but continually opens up towards the space we share between us. In this manner, the implicit critique of nihilism that runs throughout Nancy's project is that there is no "Sense" in Christianity other than "the sense of an absenting," and this is also the sense of deconstruction that opens the world beyond metaphysical closure—"like an empty slot that makes the structure work" (D 149). Whether he is discussing monotheism, atheism, theology, philosophy, or globalization, he attempts to expose how this inoperative movement of sense opens a space within the world that is beyond the world, giving way to the dis-enclosure (déclosion) of any enclosure (clôture).

All this implies that Nancy's project is not just a speculative exercise—a mere deconstruction of philosophical positions—but a practical effort to take us from dis-enclosure
to adoration; from the opening of sense brought about by the "flight of the gods" to an adoring of sense in its passing and retreat. At the end of his analysis on Christianity, what Nancy leaves us with is a position very similar to Derrida—a salut! without salvation—but it is one that is made possible by the retreat of the divine in the midst of the world. Nancy sums this up nicely in an interview for Retreating Religion: "If my project is neither about rituals nor a speculative exercise for intellectuals, what is it? First of all, I seek to convey an attitude, a spiritual attitude: yes, we are open to the infinite. Let's say it, let’s show it. It's palpable, it’s not just "words." As noted, what this implies is not that Christianity is the privileged site of ancient divine wisdom, the purveyor of absolute reason, or even the site for some new disclosure of being, but simply an exposure to the truth that the world is founded upon nothing and consists in nothing but its own spacing. Nancy's project is not appealing to some singular divine opening. There is not some "infinite gaping" into which the gods retreat, or some essential Christian opening in the midst of the world that can save us. Rather, the opening left in the wake of the deconstruction of Christianity is simply the sharing, passing, and withdrawal of sense in its infinite movement.

Practically speaking, what all this implies is that Nancy seeks to carve out a space between an atheism and a monotheism that doesn't try to ground the world upon a firm sediment or to calculate the value of beings according to a common measure. Nancy wants us to interrogate what "being-with" really means and to leap beyond the calculable and controllable to the actual and the incommensurable, and he does this by rereading Judeo-Christian terms along deconstructive lines. His wager is that the deconstruction of Christianity will not only expose that atheism and monotheism have a similar metaphysical structure, but also that it will provide a resource for thinking against metaphysical enclosures and expose the infinite value of existence in its shared heterogeneity. This provides a critique of onto-theological, political, and even capitalist structures that reduce existence to a logic of equivalence. For Nancy, the only way out of nihilism is to think of the world as an infinite opening unto itself and dis-enclose any transcendent principle of value or immanent notion of meaninglessness from within. There is no transcendent divine value that can save us nor some atheist reevaluation of values that might rescue us. As he writes, "Only this provides

the way out of nihilism: not the reactivation of values but the manifestation of all against a background where the "nothing" signifies that all have value incommensurably, absolutely, and infinitely" (TD 24).

Aside from these general conclusions that clarify our understanding of Nancy's work on the deconstruction of Christianity as a certain movement of thought in the West, this study has tried to point out that "religion" must be understood in light of the self-deconstruction of the West. This side argument that has accompanied all of the above analysis is central to the scholarly importance of the present study. All of the aforementioned thinkers—with the exception perhaps of Bataille—detailed how "religion" was a Latin term being used in a modern context and that we cannot understand its current use apart from this milieu. As we have seen, Nancy not only suggests that Christianity reinvented and invented the "status of religion" but that it "de-composes what we have agreed to call, in our culture, 'religions'" (A 26; D 43). This is what separates Nancy's work from Gauchet or any other reading of Western history, whether that reading be theological, secular humanist, or post-secular, because he doesn't present religion as a new horizon by which to measure the world but in fact tries to show how its creation and dissolution takes place within the very movement of the West. Fundamentally, what interests him is how Christianity "understands itself in a way that is less and less religious in the sense in which religion implies a mythology (a narrative, a representation of divine actions and persons)" (D 37).

This self-interpretive manner in which religion is invented and deconstructed in the West is what makes Nancy's project different from some broad anthropological analysis of human culture. For instance, when trying to explain the human relation to death and the resurrection, Nancy draws upon the work of Blanchot or Deguy, and not Gauchet. He doesn't provide an anthropological history of religion but a literary and poetic rereading of Christianity along deconstructive lines. There are times when he leans in this direction and seems to make broad cross-cultural claims, but what is really being described is the decomposition of metaphysical nihilism in the West, not some specific departure from some universal phenomena called "religion." As Derrida reminds us, whenever we speak in the name of religion we are speaking in the name of its Latin source, which was spread around
the globe under the name of Christianity, and I would suggest that the "exit from religion" must be understood in this context. What all this means, simply put, is that Nancy's work cannot be used to contrast Christianity to other religions, as if to determine "which one is the most deconstructionist." True, there are many times when Nancy contrasts Christianity to Judaism and Islam, yet even in these comparisons, what is being discussed is the origin and dissolution of the West, which inaugurated itself as retreat, not a kind of Christian supersessionism. At one point in Adoration, Nancy asserts this directly, writing that we should be wary of the universal logic that would seek to apply this deconstruction to other religions like "Buddhism" or "Taoism." As he notes, he "can only speak from the position of the old European humanism as it questions itself" (A 21).

In this manner, one of the things this study exposes is that religion is an exhausted nihilistic shadow that the West projects upon the world via globalization, not some cross-cultural/historical phenomenon that the West leaves behind on the road towards modernization. The typical approach of critical theorists of religion in the past has been to try to challenge the essentialism of religious representation by tearing it apart from without—performing a critique in the Kantian (Kritik) sense—and pointing out how religious claims are rendered inoperative by means of faulty logic or historical inaccuracy. However, Nancy invites us to look for this inoperativity within the tradition itself, at its very heart. For far too long religion has been treated as an object of analysis out in the world fit for classification, scrutiny, and surpassing, but Nancy invites us to presuppose its retreat from the outset. In this manner, religion was not only invented in the West, it was one of the registers in which the West found itself globalized and displaced, and we can only appreciate this by interrogating its Christian provenance.
Bibliography


Kotsko, Adam. “Already, not yet,” Review of *La Déclosion : Déconstruction du christianisme*, in JCRT 6.3 (Fall 2005), 92.


---. “Philosophy as Chance: An Interview with Jean-Luc Nancy,” Critical Inquiry 33:2


Sava, Peppe. "God didn't die, he was transformed into money" - An interview with Giorgio Agamben - Peppe Savà: libcom.org/library/god-didnt-die-he-was-transformed-money-interview-giorgio-agamben-peppe-savà


