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Jean-Luc Nancy and Paul Tillich on Reason

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A Philosophical Dialogue

Nikolaas Deketelaere: What is Jean-Luc Nancy's 'deconstruction of Christianity' about? Nothing is ever really clear with Nancy, but in this case the answer seems fairly straightforward for once: it is both an exercise in 'post-secular' philosophy of culture and a critique of metaphysics. Yet, one then wonders why anyone would spend the significant amount of time and effort required to decipher Nancy's difficult texts: on Christianity as a cultural formation, he says nothing that we could not learn from Marcel Gauchet (who declared Christianity to be 'the religion of the egress from religion');¹ likewise, on metaphysics, his argument is entirely in line with that of Martin Heidegger (in his analysis of the 'onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics').² Moreover, putting both of these ideas together has been the central preoccupation of Jean-Luc Marion's career (by way of his 'God without being').³ Exactly what, then, is original about Nancy's reading of Christianity?

¹ See Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

² See Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

³ See Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

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To really appreciate the originality of Nancy's 'deconstruction of Christianity', we should take its opening lines seriously, which frame the project as one concerned with reason:

It is not a question of reviving religion, not even the one that Kant wanted to hold 'within the limits of reason alone.' It is, however, a question of opening mere reason up to the limitlessness that constitutes its truth. It is not a question of overcoming some deficiency in reason, but of liberating reason without reserve.⁴

Nancy is examining reason's opening-up from within, how reason by its nature is driven to its limits, in a gesture he calls *dis-enclosure* (*déclousion*). This is due to the fact that, despite its ambitions, reason is unable to give a reason for itself (hence why Leibniz felt the need to produce a 'principle of reason'): modernity is characterised by its extraordinary *faith* in reason, which Nancy calls the "piety of reason."⁵

The 'deconstruction of Christianity' then concerns the critical question of how to understand reason as formed by an act of faith in itself. The project provides a 'critique of pious reason', namely an investigation into how reason operates on the basis of the unreason of faith:

What Kant's expression holds open for us is (...) this: a critique of reason (...) makes unconditionally requisite, within reason itself, an opening and an elevation (*ex-haussement*) of reason. It is not a question of 'religion,' here, but rather of a 'faith' as a sign of the fidelity of reason to that which (...) exceeds reason's phantasm of justifying itself (*rendre raison de soi*).⁶

In its elevation (*ex-haussement*), reason is carried outside (*ex*) itself, where it can no longer *give a reason* for itself, ground itself in itself (*rendre raison de soi*). This is what Paul Tillich calls "ontological reason,"⁷ which constitutes faith as "the act in which reason reaches ecstatically beyond itself."⁸ This ecstasy therefore constitutes, not a *beyond* reason, but "the depth of reason,"⁹ namely faith as "the expression of something that is not reason but which precedes reason and is manifest through it."¹⁰ In words that could be Nancy's, Tillich explains: "this 'outside' is not merely outside," but "represents (...) an element in reason itself, the depth of reason."¹¹ Reason's depth

⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1958), 74-80.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 79-81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

constitutes its piety (or ecstasy, *ex-haussement*): “faith is the fulfilment of reason,” namely “reason in its ecstasy.”¹² By considering this “experience of the ground in which reason is grasped by the mystery of its own depth,”¹³ Nancy’s ‘deconstruction of Christianity’ is thus a profound meditation on how reason works, a new critique of reason, that responds to Merleau-Ponty’s warning that “the experience of unreason cannot simply be forgotten: we must form a new idea of reason.”¹⁴

Schalk Gerber: If the originality of Nancy’s deconstruction of Christianity truly lies in “a profound meditation on how reason works,” then it is perhaps necessary to go a step further and ask how this reason ‘works’ according to Nancy? You rightly suggest liberating reason from the (en)closure of metaphysics in ontological terms, i.e. as ontological reason opposed to technical reason. In short, both Nancy and Tillich are reappropriating Heidegger’s fundamental ontology somehow. Furthermore, as you suggest, reason is not considered in itself, but instead “as formed by an act of faith in itself.”

However, when enquiring into how reason ‘works’ in relation to faith according to Nancy, Tillich’s notion of ‘the depth of reason’ may become misleading at a certain point. For Tillich, faith seems to ground reason, a faith concerning the experience of “the ground of being,”¹⁵ which is what Tillich calls God. This indicates a crucial difference in how both thinkers understand ontological reason: where Nancy and Tillich may share Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology, and reappropriate his fundamental ontology somehow; Nancy contra Tillich takes Gauchet’s discovery of the absencing of God seriously.

How then does Nancy’s version of ontological reason in relation to faith ‘work’? Three moments can help us appreciate the originality of Nancy’s ‘deconstruction of Christianity’: 1) avoiding the positioning of a metaphysico-theological ground or subject; 2) thinking finitude rather than ground, as formulated in the question of *Dasein*; 3) thinking finitude by way of the question of relation, *Dasein* as *Mitsein*, being-there as being-with. Taken together, these three moments of Nancy’s ontological reason mean that instead of making Being (or God) into the ground of reason, the ground or first principle of philosophy is thought as an ‘unground,’ namely the *with* of being-with.¹⁶ As Nancy’s puts it: “it is necessary to refigure fundamental ontology (as well as the existential analytic, the history of Being, and the thinking of *Ereignis* that goes along with it) with a thorough resolve

¹² Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 77.

¹³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 113.

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 3.

¹⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 156.

¹⁶ Nancy already formulates these ‘moments’ in his collaboration with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. See *Retreating the Political* (London: Routledge, 1997), 131.

that *starts from the plural singular of origins, from being-with.*"¹⁷ Being-with cannot constitute a ground since it exposes the co-originality of what Nancy calls 'being singular plural', which avoids the positing of a ground insofar as being-with as 'ground' or 'origin' displaces the gesture of grounding by thinking the co-original plurality of singular origins instead.¹⁸ Hence, thinking the 'the ground of being' in terms of co-originality constitutes Nancy's ontological reason and summarises his thinking of Being.

Moreover, this 'working' of Nancy's ontological reason is another way of formulating the self-deconstruction of Christianity (or metaphysics). To think being-with is to be open to the exposition of the movement of sense that transcends the subject while staying inside the immanent world, which Nancy initially called 'transimmanence' and later elaborated by way of 'adoration'. Accordingly, faith for Nancy means the "fidelity to the opening" of this exposition to sense that takes place each time anew, each time with other origins.¹⁹ Faith does not ground reason through the experience of the ground of being as God (Tillich): "It is no longer a question of 'sufficing' or of 'satisfying,' for there is neither sufficiency nor satisfaction possible if there is also no principle to which satisfaction must be granted. Faith is then the firm fidelity of reason to its own atheology."²⁰ Nancy's dis-enclosure of reason is hence formed in the act of faith, which keeps open the possibility of adoration.

Deketelaere: It is true that I should be careful when identifying Nancy with Tillich: the latter, indeed, refuses to conceive of God as the ground of being straightforwardly understood. However, the terminology is not straightforward here (and Tillich's ontotheology is by no means naive). In calling faith 'ontological reason', Tillich is not using the language of being (Heidegger's 'ground' as the relationship of finite beings to being-itself) but that of human existence (faith as our relationship to Tillich's 'ultimate concern' or Kant's 'unconditioned'): "Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned; the dynamics of faith are the dynamics of man's ultimate concern."²¹ Reprising Nancy's Kantian language, faith is then 'ontological reason' insofar as it relates us to what concerns us ultimately but exceeds the limits of reason, namely the ideas exceeding reason to which reason is nevertheless constantly driven in virtue of its "*metaphysica naturalis*": the self, the world and God—precisely those ideas about which Kant says that *ontological* predication is meaningless but

¹⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 26.

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, 83.

¹⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli Me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 83.

²⁰ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 26.

²¹ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 1.

nevertheless *existentially* necessary.²² The ‘ontology’ at issue in Tillich’s phrase thus concerns, not the ground of being (*reason* as Leibniz understands it), but the ground of reason (*faith* as Kant understands it). In this respect, it is no coincidence that Leibniz makes God *subject* to an all-encompassing reason (i.e., divinity grounded by reason), whereas Kant discovers God both as the *ground* of a limited reason (i.e., moral faith) and the *opening-up* of that reason from within unto its own excess (i.e., the drive of reason)—these are two fundamentally different paradigms. Thus, faith indeed “does not ground reason through the experience of the ground of being as God,” but faith does ground reason through the experience of our ultimate concern. In Kant’s case, this experience is the moral consciousness that expresses itself in faith.

So, reprising the Heideggerian terminology you rightly introduced: the ‘ontology’ the deconstruction of Christianity engages in is not fundamental (the *Seinsfrage*) but existential (the *Daseinsfrage*). That is why I tried to distance it from the question of metaphysics or being: valid and real themes though they are, they are also well-rehearsed elsewhere. Instead, its truly original contribution lies in how it constitutes the *anthropological* branch of Nancy’s broader project: it enquires into the reason that characterises the rational animal. I will therefore persist in associating Nancy with Tillich on this issue, for the deconstruction of Christianity outlines the ‘dynamics of faith’ by renewing the ‘analytic of finitude’ (i.e., an analysis of reason as one of Dasein’s existentials).

Gerber: You are justified in associating Nancy and Tillich, with or without the help of Kant. Nevertheless, the question remains: How does Nancy differ in formulating the ‘excess of reason’? Thus, furthering our inquiry into the originality of Nancy’s ‘deconstruction of Christianity’ from where you last left us—i.e., the relation of the dynamics of faith to the analytic of finitude—, I still disagree with you on how to understand this relation.

First, your claim that the deconstruction of Christianity “enquires into the reason that characterises the rational animal.” If we take Heidegger’s analysis of reason in the *Letter on Humanism* seriously, then the reason of the rational animal is the technical reason of metaphysics that encloses everything in measurable value (*Wert*), the reason of modernity’s humanism.²³ For Nancy, reason indeed concerns the dis-enclosure of reason unto its excess, namely the experience of the hatching of something new (*eclosion*). This experience concerns the excess of reason as the incommensurability of human dignity (*Würde*).²⁴

²² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B21.

²³ See Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239-276.

²⁴ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization* (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), 40.

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Second, the analytic of finitude is that of *Mitdasein* (and not merely *Dasein*): there is no “ultimate concern” for Nancy if, by ultimate, one understands prioritising one thing above all others as the best or final of its kind.²⁵ Instead, the ‘reason’ Nancy is inquiring into, is the one that *thinks* our *ek-sistence* understood as the ecstasis of our own ‘standing out’ in the world: the *Da* of *Dasein*, and for Nancy the *with* of the *there*. What *concerns* Nancy is then the creation of sense in its singular plural according to this logic.

Finally, Nancy’s ‘deconstruction of Christianity’ involves deconstructing the gesture of positing a ground as such: it is a deconstruction of the *place* of a transcendental principle (whether God, modernity’s Humanity, etc.). This deconstruction opens unto the experience of nothing, which is *Ungrund* rather than *Abgrund*.²⁶ Moreover, Nancy describes this nothing—i.e., the groundlessness of our existence—as the *with* of being-with, that which in Kantian terms, indeed, drives us to think our existence as such.²⁷ Accordingly, faith does not, as you suggest, “ground reason through the experience of our ultimate concern.” Instead, Nancy writes of *a faith that is nothing at all*.²⁸ The dynamics of faith then concern the *act* of fidelity to the opening of reason to think our *ek-sistence*: “faith is the being-in-act of a non-appropriable infinite sense and that it becomes progressively, as faithfulness, faithfulness to nothing, faithfulness to no one, *faithfulness to faithfulness* itself.”²⁹

²⁵ See Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 93.

²⁶ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 17.

²⁷ See Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 44; *Adoration*, 14, 60.

²⁸ See Nancy, *Adoration*, 73.

²⁹ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 154.