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THE WAY BACK INTO THE WITH OF CHRISTIANITY**

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ABSTRACT

In the ten years since the publication of Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, the relationship between Christianity and global capital has received increasing theological attention among the adherents, critics, sympathizers, and apostates of Radical Orthodoxy. At stake in this conversation is the possibility that Christianity might provide a universal ontology sufficient to ground a counter-hegemonic, specifically socialist, praxis. One question that many of these authors rarely address, however, is the extent to which Christian universalism has been responsible for the emergence of global capital in the first place. This article will address this profound split at the heart of a tradition; that is, Christianity's culpability for and resistance to global capital. To this end, "Capital Shares" sketches the aporia of Christianity's relation to Empire and then appeals to Jean-Luc Nancy's "deconstruction of Christianity"; in particular, his attempt to find "a source of Christianity, more original than Christianity itself, that might provoke another possibility to arise."

Keywords: Christianity, deconstruction, Jean-Luc Nancy, radical orthodoxy, socialism, Slavoj Žižek.

In the ten years since the publication of Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, the relationship between Christianity and global capital has received increasing theological attention—not only among the liberationists who have always incorporated economic analysis into their work, but also among the adherents, critics, sympathizers and apostates of Radical Orthodoxy.¹ At stake in this conversation is the possibility that

1. For a fairly representative sampling of these viewpoints, see Creston Davis, John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, eds, *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham, NC:

Christianity—whether orthodox, heterodox or atheistic—might provide an ontology sufficient to ground a counter-hegemonic, specifically socialist, praxis. This argument finds remarkably clear expression in Daniel Bell's *Liberation Theology after the End of History*, which offers life in Christian community as a remedy to the violence and fragmentation of "savage capitalism." Against the latter's "perversion of desire," Bell argues that Christianity offers a "therapy of desire," which redirects this fundamentally human drive away from the market and individual pursuits, and back toward a good that is genuinely *shared* (the love of God and neighbor).² Bedfellows as strange as Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank have explored this possibility with escalating fervor, arguing in very different ways that since Christianity alone can provide a truly universal ontology, it alone can counteract the forces—at once homogenizing and individualizing—of global capital.³ There tends, however, to be a white elephant in the corner of this particular theo-political salon—namely, the extent to which Christian universalism has been responsible for the emergence of global capital in the first place. Within liberationist and radically orthodox constellations alike, this problem rarely gets the attention it deserves, thanks perhaps to a persistent and *a priori* conviction that "genuine" Christianity is peaceful, counter-imperial and socialist (Jesus was executed as an enemy of the Empire, "give him your cloak as well," "sell what you have and give it to the poor," "look at how these Christians love one another," etc.).⁴ While this reading of the tradition is compelling and not without textual and historical evidence, the problem with refusing to confront the white (Christian-capitalist) elephant is that a massive rift opens up between, to put it crudely, Christianity as it "ought" to be and Christianity as it seems actually to have been—with the exception, perhaps, of the

Duke University Press, 2005). A comparable conversation has recently opened up among more evangelically oriented theologians; see Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Goodwin Helzsel, eds, *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo* (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2008).

2. Daniel Bell, *Liberation Theology after the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

3. See Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Dialectic or Paradox?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); John Milbank, "Materialism and Transcendence," in *Theology and the Political*; Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso, 2000).

4. See Matt. 5:40, Matt. 19:21, and Tertullian, *The Apology*, ed. The Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 2, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). The radically orthodox insistence that Christianity, everything else notwithstanding, "is an ontology of peace," can be found throughout John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

pre-Constantinian Church, the early Franciscans, Dorothy Day, and some remaining base communities in Latin America.

The task, then, is not so much to encourage “dialogue” across the rift between Christian socialists and Christian capitalists, or the one between Christian socialists and anti-Christian socialists. The task is rather to account for the emergence of this profound split at the heart of a tradition: how is it that a certain heritage of Christianity has forged the paths of globalization by means of political and economic imperialism, while another maintains Christianity’s anti-materialism, anti-colonialism and communitarianism? In short, how are we to account for Christianity’s culpability for *and resistance to* global capital? Were we able to find the source of this duplicitous opening, we might be able to ask whether a revolutionary socio-politics might still emerge from it. And so once again, we are looking for a condition of possibility that might unsettle the very formation it has produced. Once again, we are heading for a deconstruction. The essay at hand will therefore proceed in two parts, first sketching the aporia of Christianity’s relation to empire, and then examining what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the “deconstruction of Christianity.” In this recent project, Nancy sifts through the aporetic structure of the tradition in question to find “a source of Christianity, more original than Christianity itself, that might provoke another possibility to arise.”⁵ This extra-Christian “source” of Christianity is, in a sense, the foundation of politics, economics and theology themselves; it is the manner in which beings exist *with* one another.

Christianity and/or Empire

By now, Hardt’s and Negri’s thesis is well known: insofar as capital has overrun state structures, it constitutes a postmodern empire that is both spatially and temporally boundless.⁶ Since there is no outside to global capital, the only possible resistance to it must come from within it, through a redeployment of empire’s very condition of possibility. Negri and Hardt call this unconditioning condition “the multitude”—that “constellation of singularities” which, through its collective struggle against modern imperialism, “called Empire into being,” and which, through its pluralist nomadism and miscegenation, also promises to undermine it.⁷

5. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 143. (Translation altered.)

6. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 11.

7. *Ibid.*, 60, 43.

The multitude, then, acts as a late capitalist reconfiguration of the classic Marxian proletariat; as Negri and Hardt phrase it, “the deterritorializing power of the multitude is the productive force that sustains Empire and at the same time the force that calls for its destruction.”⁸

In response to *Empire*'s call for a universal resistance to universalized capital, secular and post-secular thinkers alike have suggested that “the multitude” might not provide a sufficiently revolutionary ontology, for two interwoven reasons: first, its immanence to the very process it seeks to undermine, and second, its tendency to collapse internal differences into a mobbish homogeneity.⁹ Hardt and Negri have responded to this second critique throughout their book *Multitude* (2004), explicitly distinguishing the racial, sexual and economic diversity of this term from the homogeneity inherent to “the people” or “the masses.”¹⁰ Yet the criticisms remain, partly because *Multitude* has received neither the scholarly nor popular attention of *Empire*, and partly because, however they might interrelate difference and identity in their politics of the multitude, Hardt and Negri insist that this resistance to empire provides “no possibility of any even utopian outside.”¹¹ How can the socialist revolution be truly revolutionary, the radically orthodox in particular ask, if *nothing* exceeds the order to be overthrown? How can a different political economy emerge if nothing truly differs from the old one?

The two contested ontological axes, then, are the old poles of difference and identity on the one hand, and transcendence and immanence on the other. What Hardt and Negri lack, as Žižek and Milbank have argued most forcefully, is a way to articulate the total interrelation of these terms in service of a truly universal ontology. And again, for very different reasons, both Žižek and Milbank have suggested that such an ontology might be provided by Christianity. Milbank phrases their basis of agreement most concisely by maintaining that Christian universalism “is not...a matter

8. Ibid., 61.

9. This latter tendency can be seen in Negri's and Hardt's frequent references to the multitude as a singularity, rather than a shifting assembly of singularities. See, for example, *ibid.*, 363, 395.

10. “The *people* has traditionally been a unitary conception. The population, of course, is characterized by all kinds of differences, but the people reduces that diversity to a unity and makes of the population a single identity: ‘the people’ is one. The multitude, in contrast, is many. The multitude is composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a single identity—different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations; different forms of labor; different ways of living; different views of the world; and different desires. The multitude is a multiplicity of all these singular differences” (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* [New York: Penguin Press, 2004], xiv).

11. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 65.

of subjective opinion or of faith in the first place; it is rather a matter of logic. Christianity is universal because it invented the logic of universality; it constituted this logic as an event.”¹² This event, of course, is that of the incarnation, and it is here that Milbank parts ways with Žižek’s Hegelian, functionally atheistic rendition of this theologeme. For Žižek, Christianity becomes truly universal by killing off the ontotheological God and rendering all of humanity “divine.” For Milbank, on the contrary, Christian universality can only emerge from the unsublatable *particularity* of the incarnation. It is because Christ *alone* is both God and man that he can become Christ for everyone; it is because he remains totally particular that he can, at the same time, stand in for the whole world.

As far as Milbank is concerned, orthodox Christianity grounds this impossible harmony of the specific and the general by means of two doctrines in particular. The first is that of the Trinity, which generates and reconciles differences eternally, drawing creation into participation in its interconstituted dance. The second (and far less popular) is that of the created hierarchies, which harmonize earthly differences by keeping them all in ordered relation to their Creator. Because orthodoxy alone can hold distinctions in unity, Milbank insists, it is the prerequisite of any socialist praxis whatsoever. Heterodox-Hegelian Christianity will not do because it annihilates transcendence, prompting socialism to fall either into uniformity (which is to say individualism, writ-huge) or into an explosion of unmediable differences (in Milbank’s language, “a liberal celebration of plurality and otherness...[that] usually wants nothing actually to do with the exotic other”¹³). Because orthodox Christianity alone can hold the between of identity and difference, it alone promises to ground a genuinely universal onto-praxis of *sharing*; that is to say, solidarity based on “what is universally acclaimable and shareable, albeit precisely because it is unique and particular.”¹⁴

It seems to me that two main objections can and ought to be raised with respect to this line of argumentation. The first is the perhaps banal, nevertheless pressing concern that the Žižekian project, as fully as the radically orthodox one, seems to espouse a neo-imperial vision of Christendom. What sort of genuine difference can a universal Christian socialism sustain, one might ask, if it requires that the whole universe be Christian—whether of the orthodox or death-of-God variety?¹⁵ The second objection was mentioned at the outset: how might Christianity

12. Milbank, “Materialism and Transcendence,” 401.

13. *Ibid.*, 399.

14. *Ibid.*

15. I have treated this question at greater length in Mary-Jane Rubenstein, “Onward, Ridiculous Debaters,” *Political Theology* 10.1 (2009): 126–9.

(again, whether secular or post-secular) provide an antidote to global capital when, in a sense, Christianity and its secularisms got us into this mess in the first place? This would certainly be Hardt's and Negri's concern. Although they begin and end the book with references to Christian anti-imperialism, they suggest throughout the rest of it that a certain Christian ontology is largely responsible for the imperial modernity that has given way to empire. Specifically, they maintain that the idea of *transcendence* has allowed those who deploy it to oppress the laboring multitude under the purported eternity and necessity of the state, the sovereign, and now the market.¹⁶ Far from encouraging a transnational ethic of solidarity and sharing, then, it could be argued *contra* Milbank *et al.* that Christianity's "invention" of universalism has helped to lay the commercial and communicative groundwork for the global circulation of capital.

The mutual reliance of Christianity and capitalism is the premise, of course, of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, of "prosperity gospel" theology in all its varying incarnations, and of the majority of American-style Protestantism since the late 1970s. While this position is more often assumed than systematically defended, it has found a thorough promulgation in Stephen Webb's recent book *American Providence* (2006). Offering a theological response to *Empire* directly opposed to Bell's and Milbank's, Webb interprets the global triumph of American-style democracy and capitalism as a sign of God's *preference* for this political-economic configuration. Like liberation theologians, Webb argues that God is not impartial—that God takes sides in history. Against the liberationists, however, Webb counters that God does not side with the materially poor. The evidence of this is clear; surely if the poor had God on their side, they would be faring a bit better. *Why* does God maintain a non-preferential option for the poor? Because "by definition, the poor are not effective agents of significant historical change."¹⁷ Gandhi needed rich allies to get his message across, just as Martin Luther King needed middle-class black and white people to gain momentum, and as base communities require "money, power, [and] political connections" to transform their communities.¹⁸ God, it seems, has always worked through the bourgeoisie. To those who might counter that the Christian God worked rather centrally through a poor man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, Webb explains that Jesus was, in fact, "middle class":

16. See Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 353–5.

17. Stephen Webb, *American Providence: A Nation with a Mission* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 61.

18. *Ibid.*, 62–4.

Jesus was born into a two-parent, stable family. As the firstborn son, he had an inheritance, an education, and a career waiting for him. He was a tradesman whose carpentry skills were most likely in high demand... Some of his followers owned their own fishing boats... The crowds who gathered around him might have been fully of the most destitute in Palestine, but his disciples hardly fit that category. Christianity was never the mass movement of the poor that some of those on the political left wish it had been... the good news was passed along by merchants and artisans, not beggars and outcasts.¹⁹

The bottom line for Webb is that the Christian God prefers whichever economic vehicle can spread Christianity most effectively. This is the reason American capitalist democracy is “winning”—because God has selected it to be the vehicle of a universal Christianity: “the rise of American global influence and a truly global Christianity go hand in hand.”²⁰ But Webb is careful to explain that capitalist democracy is not a good in its own right. It is only good insofar as it paves the way for global Christianity, much like the Roman roads did for the early Jesus movement. Christianity will continue to “ride on the back” of the capitalism that creates and sustains transnational exchange, until all political and economic formations give way to “the eventual triumph of the church.”²¹ And this church triumphant, Webb predicts, will be a hybrid of Roman Catholicism and Pentecostalism: the former providing “the principle of religious universality” while the latter “penetrates every denominational tradition” by virtue of its being adaptive, complex, and “every bit as dynamic, individualistic, and expansionistic as global capitalism itself.”²² In a sense, then, Webb’s and Milbank’s visions are mirror images of one another: one posits global capitalism as the means of a universal Christianity, while the other posits universal Christianity as the means of global socialism.

It is awfully difficult to know how to adjudicate between these opposing claims to universality—that is, to designate one the “authentic” universal Christianity—especially when one seems to be winning. Is “winning,” in fact, a theological category? Or is the Christian truth more likely to be found in that which the world rejects? And if the latter is the case, then does it make sense to talk about a Christian universality at all?

It is this bind that prompts Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, for example, to reject the universalizing pretensions of “Christendom” entirely. The church is the church, they insist, by being at

19. *Ibid.*, 57–8.

20. *Ibid.*, 44.

21. *Ibid.*, 128.

22. *Ibid.*, 125, 122–3.

odds with the world, not by trying to conquer it. It is only when the church stops trying to accommodate itself to the world that it will be able to “confront the world with a political alternative the world would not otherwise know”—in particular, a political alternative to war.²³ The moment the church tries to articulate an ethic, politics or economy that can encompass the whole world, it has already capitulated to that world, with all its purportedly inevitable violence and injustice.²⁴ At least for now, then, Hauerwas and Willimon suggest that the church will have to be a small, strange thing in order to live out the unworldly ethic of the Sermon on the Mount.

A parallel move has been made among those secular political theorists and anti-globalization activists who advocate small, local economies as micro-antidotes to macro-capitalism.²⁵ According to Hardt and Negri, however, the problem with such appeals is that they are forced to pretend that the local isn't already carved out by the global. For as we have learned from Foucault's critique of bio-power, global capital operates not only to homogenize but also to individualize, which means that “the differences of locality are neither preexisting nor natural but rather effects of a regime of production.”²⁶ It could be, to return to the Hauerwas/Willimon problem, that there *is* no Christianity untainted by Christendom. If this is the case, then one can no more opt for the locally Christian over the globally Christian (or vice versa) than one can opt for the socialist Christian over the capitalist Christian (or vice versa). Somehow, it seems, all of these incompatible, even agonistic formations have arisen *together*, constituting what Derrida might call an “irreconcilable but indissociable” set of tensions at the heart of this tradition.²⁷

23. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Ashgate, 1989), 41.

24. Hauerwas has phrased his difference from Milbank on this matter most concisely in Stanley Hauerwas, “On Being ‘Placed’ by John Milbank: A Response,” in *Christ, Ethics, and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald Mackinnon*, ed. Kenneth Surin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 197–201.

25. In defending the necessity of a universal resistance to Empire, Hardt and Negri discuss the misguided efforts of “placed-based movements” that try to localize all politics “against the undifferentiated and homogeneous space of global networks” (*Empire*, 44). While they do not mention names, one could probably look to the work of Gibson-Graham for this sort of appeal (J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1996]). See also their refusal of the Hardt/Negri rebuttal, along with a careful interrelation of the local and the global, in the Introduction to *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

26. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 45.

27. Jacques Derrida, “On Forgiveness,” in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 45.

Christianity and/or Deconstruction

As Jean-Luc Nancy understands it at least, this self-splitting at the heart of Christianity is one sign among many of the tradition's "deconstruction." By this, Nancy does not mean "Christianity's loss of influence over secular European society"—although that is certainly another symptom of it—what he means, more fundamentally, is that the very essence of Christianity is deconstructive, that Christianity only *is* itself insofar as it undoes itself.²⁸ The same is the case for the "West" to which Christianity in such large part has given rise (in mutually contaminative relationships with Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Greek and Roman philosophy, Islam, etc.—but this only further confirms Christianity's internal distensions). The West has become itself by globalizing itself, which is to say by destroying itself. After all, a body or concept or existent can only become itself in relation to specific ends, limits and horizons. Yet the West has asserted itself precisely by doing away with all of these ("there is no elsewhere left" [30]), which is to say it has distended itself to the point of destroying itself. This movement, which Derrida might call "autoimmune,"²⁹ is not accidental but *essential* to the West as such: the West becomes itself by "dis-enclosing" all enclosures, by coring out its own essence. And the primary means of this auto-deconstruction, of course, is capital itself. By drawing all value into the register of general equivalence, capital extinguishes the possibility of value *tout court* (77). To be valuable, Nancy argues, value would have to remain heterogeneous to other values. Yet genuine difference is impossible within the infinite translations, conversions and replications of globalized capital.

This unrelenting homogeneity is the source and symptom of the West's perhaps overtheorized "crisis of sense": that multifarious eclipse of the old conceptual bulwarks of God, metaphysics, self, ideology, history, humanism, etc. Surrounded by the inadequacy of representation, the failure of the Enlightenment project, the demise of utopian visions, and the reactionary "returns" that pretend none of it is happening, Nancy proposes in a Heideggerian vein that the only way forward is back—back into "that from which or on whose basis the West and Christianity are possible" (149). What Nancy calls "the Deconstruction of Christianity" is therefore both descriptive and prescriptive: it names the essential movement of this

28. "Christianity is by itself and in itself a deconstruction and an auto-deconstruction" (Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 35). Subsequent references to this work will be cited internally.

29. Giovanna Borradori and Jacques Derrida, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides," in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 85–136.

tradition, as well as the way out of the senselessness in which it has left us. And the latter is possible by virtue of the former; it is because Christianity is already deconstructive that it is possible, even necessary, actively to deconstruct it, in the hopes of finding “a resource—hidden beneath Christianity, beneath monotheism, and beneath the West, which...would open upon a future for the world that would no longer be either Christian or anti-Christian, either monotheist or atheist or even polytheist, but that would advance precisely beyond all these categories (after having made all of them possible)” (34).

First, then, how is it that Christianity can be said to be essentially, “originally deconstructive” (149)? This is a complicated question because, as Nancy sees it, the signs of Christianity’s auto-deconstruction are innumerable, yet persistently covered over. In fact, it is *because* Christianity is so inessential that so many of its hermeneutical and ecclesiastical formations present themselves as necessary, substantial and self-identical. One example Nancy mentions is the original proclamation of the good news—the fundament of Christian faith and practice. On the one hand, this news presents itself as new: something *completely different* has happened in the event of the incarnation. The news is unique. Singular. On the other hand, the Christian proclamation is *not* new—not original—but rather “an *integration* of the entire preceding heritage, since Christianity conceives of itself as a recapitulation and *Aufhebung* of Judaism, Hellenism, and Romanity” (145; original emphasis). From the outset, in other words, Christianity is not itself. Or rather, it is only itself as an unsteady syncretic adventure—unsteady because the contaminants shift in number and importance depending on geographical and historical context (one might think here, for example, of the very different non-Christian sources that Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa and Aquinas each imported into the “orthodoxy” they helped to construct). Consequently, there has never been *a* Christianity: Nancy points to its Jewish, Greek and Roman forms as evidence of this, but we could also mention the fissures that have produced (to name just a few, really) Byzantine, Lutheran, Calvinist, Tridentine, Anglican, African-Anglican, Syriac, Pentecostal, New Age, Providentialist, Liberationist, Capitalist, Socialist, Vodou-Catholic, high church, low church and “Godless” Christianities.

More fundamental even than this historical self-splitting, however, is what Nancy construes as Christianity’s constitutive collapse into atheism. As he conceives of it, a gradual “atheization” is set in motion by monotheism in general; for Nancy, it is not so much quantity that distinguishes polytheism from monotheism as it is location. “The plurality of the gods corresponds to their effective *presence*,” he writes, explaining that the polytheistic gods can be summoned, flattered or cajoled into displaying

signs “of power, of threat, or of assistance.” By contrast, “the unicity of God...signifies the withdrawal of this god away from presence and also away from power thus understood...his ‘all’-powerfulness signifies that he alone disposes of this power, entirely according to his will” (35–6; emphasis added). There is, then, an effective godlessness already at work in the positing of one, ineffable God. Christianity becomes the apotheosis of this progressive atheization—or what Nancy in another work calls “absentheism”—by proclaiming a God “emptied out” for his creation (36).³⁰

Of course, even this self-emptying is a feature of the other two “Abrahamic” monotheisms, most notably in the doctrine (more internally contested than Nancy allows, but it is the configuration that ultimately assumes dominance) of *creatio ex nihilo*. God distances himself from himself in order to create what is not-himself out of nothing at all. This divine self-alienation is perhaps most dramatically articulated in the Lurianic conception of *tsimtsum*: God’s contracting Godself to provoke the emergence of the world.³¹ But one need not even search as far as the mystical traditions to find such a teaching; it is already the case with the structure of the *ex nihilo*. If, to put it crudely, the components of creation are God and nothing, then there is nothing but God with which God might create something outside Godself. Or, as Nancy phrases it, creation “is not at all a production, but precisely a putting outside-oneself” (82). God estranges himself from himself in the very act of worlding the world.

The Christian God intensifies his alienation even further, giving himself up to creation through his kenotic dive into it. The event of the incarnation, Nancy argues, radicalizes monotheism’s atheizing tendencies by means of a further “renunciation of divine power and presence” (36). For while Christ *is*, in an important sense, the presence of God, he is only so in human form: emptied out of his divinity to the point of dying a human death. And while orthodox Christianity (as Milbank insists *contra* Žižek) maintains Christ’s consubstantiality with the Father who does *not* die, parleying his absence into a hyper-presence, Nancy (and Žižek) would counter that such shoring up of divine substantialism amounts to a classic disavowal—that is to say, a confirmation by means of denial—of an essentially de-essentialized God. By contrast, owning up to this inessentiality—refusing to force God into presence or substance—is precisely

30. The term “absentheism” can be found in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, trans. Francois Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

31. See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 260–65. Nancy mentions this doctrine briefly in *The Creation of the World*, 70.

what is named by the Christian virtue of faith. For unlike “belief,” faith names the “faithfulness to an absence and certainty of this faithfulness in the absence of all assurance. In this sense,” Nancy continues, “the atheist who firmly refuses all consoling or redemptive assurance is paradoxically or strangely closer to faith than the ‘believer’” (36). Once again, then, we see how Christianity asserts itself by undermining itself: faith remains with the inessentiality of the God-*with-us*.

The *telos* of this atheizing trajectory is “secular” modernity, which (as Nietzsche explains in the *Genealogy*) is itself a product of Christianity.³² Our common understanding—what religious studies scholars used to call the secularization hypothesis—is that as western societies have modernized, they have become less religious; or at the very least (for those who would make exceptions of, say, America and Iran) as *Europe* has become more modern, rational, scientific, etc., it has become less Christian. But Nancy argues that the opposite is the case: Christianity *undermines itself as such*, up to the point of producing “the modern world” that comes to stand against it (144). To be sure, modern Europe considers itself finished with Christianity, but the truth is that Christianity is simply more diffuse, preserved in its atheist dispersion. The strongest indication of this, to return to Nancy’s premise, is the West’s recapitulation of Christian deconstruction in its autoimmune gesture of globalization; like Christianity, the West undoes itself at the moment it most forcefully asserts itself through the vehicle of global capital. To be sure, this does not mean that the (Christian) West *acknowledges* its unbecoming; to the contrary, its “self-destruction is accompanied by self-exaltation and an over-essentialization.”³³ Yet this frenetic self-assertion only deepens the crisis of sense that the (Christian) West’s total dis-enclosure has engendered. So Nancy suggests a different way through. Rather than assert the stability and integrity of a patently defunct set of concepts (what one might call the *Weekend at Bernie’s* approach to social theory and theology), Nancy suggests actively pursuing the West’s deconstruction—completing the job, in a Nietzschean register—so that some new way of making sense might emerge from the undifferentiated fray of general equivalence.

The prescriptive sense of “the deconstruction of Christianity” therefore involves teasing apart the conflicting constitutive elements of the tradition in order to find the condition that made them all possible. Reminiscent

32. For Nietzsche, Christian “ascetic values” encourage the pursuit of truth at all costs, provoking Christianity’s own collapse as western “scientific” truths replace religious ones. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), third essay.

33. Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, 39.

not only of Nietzsche's completed nihilism but also of Heidegger's "way back into the ground of metaphysics," Nancy dives into Christianity seeking "a resource—hidden beneath Christianity, beneath monotheism, and beneath the West...that could form at once the buried origin and the imperceptible future of the world that calls itself 'modern'" (34). And this inessential absence—the core of Christianity's tendency to core itself out—is what Nancy calls "*the very sense of being-with.*"³⁴ It is withness itself to which thinking and practice must return—the fundamental mode according to which lives and things emerge alongside, by virtue of, up against, and through other lives and things. Simply, if overwhelmingly, put, "we, we others, have no lesser task than that of understanding and practicing the sharing of sense—the sharing of the world, no less" (128). As Milbank and Žižek have been insisting, then, diving into the "with" of Christianity opens onto a praxis of sharing.

One therefore wants to ask what exactly being-with means, and how it forms and deforms Christianity as such. Unfortunately, Nancy says very little in response to this second question in particular, mentioning the centrality of *koinonia* from time to time, but for the most part simply asserting that Christianity's (in)essence is "being-with." This being-with is a concept Nancy has treated at length in a number of previous works, weaving what he calls a "coexistential analytic" out of the Heideggerian conviction that Dasein is always Mit-sein.³⁵ Beings are always *with* other beings, emerging together (or com-paring, as Nancy puts it) by virtue of what they share, which is to say being "itself." *Esse*, one might say, is always *inter-esse*, always tied up with "others," prevented from the start from any ontic self-enclosure. Withness thus constitutes the essence of existence itself: "existence is with: otherwise nothing exists."³⁶

Yet what kind of an essence is "with"? How is one to make any sort of substance out of a proposition? This, for Nancy, is precisely the point. Insofar as existence is essentially shared, it is *essentially inessential*: no thing is simply itself because being is not simply itself. Being is *shared (partagé)*, which is to say both common and fragmented, shared and shared out, preventing beings from being themselves in the very gesture of making

34. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Church, State, Resistance," in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 112.

35. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 112. For a fuller explication of the coexistential analytic as it emerges in this and other works of Nancy's, see Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

36. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 4.

them. Of course, to say nothing *is* essential is not to pretend things don't *present* themselves as essential; to the contrary, beings, communities and ideas constantly masquerade as though they were self-determined. They cover over their interconstitution because, frankly put, ontological exposure is hard to withstand. The problem is that denying vulnerability ends up consolidating "self-identical" formations (this/that nation, my/those people, Our/their Father) that, at best, stand agonistically over against one another and, at worst, attempt to incorporate or obliterate one another. Any thinking that seeks to find a way out of this violent positing of essences will therefore have to expose itself to the threatening withness of existence.

If "being-with" relates existents by virtue of their shared inessentiality and mutual exposure, then what does it mean to suggest it constitutes the essence of Christianity itself? Presumably, the fundamental withness of Christianity means that Christian being-in-common empties beings out in relation to one another, and empties *itself* out in the same gesture. To be in Christian community would amount to being exposed, opened out, vulnerable to each of the others. In turn, this persistent vulnerability would account for Christianity's essential splitting and unraveling: its auto-deconstruction is the effect of its fundamental attunement to the with. Thus its ineluctable "atheization," for what is the Christian *theos* apart from "with-us"—inter-ested in and totally subject to the worldly fray? At this point, even if one foregoes the Hegelian-Žižekian patripas-sionism and insists there is an aspect of God that does not endure the vulnerability of the incarnation and crucifixion, then one makes it out to the Trinity: that baffling set of relations that renders three one *and one three*, affording no essence that is not shared and shared-out in mutual self-exposure.

It is at this point that the radically orthodox position comes back into play, asserting Christianity as the exclusively socialist ontology since it alone presents being as fundamentally in-common. And to an extent, it seems, Nancy would agree; Christian being is nothing if not *with*. The perhaps troubling implication of withness, however, is that it does not provide the ontological sturdiness some might want from it. If it is genuinely the case that sharing grounds Christian being, then sharing also ungrounds it from the outset, rendering each of its boundaries exposed to a *constitutive* outside. Sharing shares out that which it holds in common. Hence the deconstruction of Christianity, hence the dis-enclosure of all of the West's old conceptual bulwarks. The task of sharing, then, is neither to install new bulwarks nor to resurrect old ones, but rather, to participate in their undoing. To risk a tautology, to share would mean living into sharing, exposing oneself to exposure.

At this juncture, we have a way not only of accounting for the emergence of seemingly incompatible Christian legacies, but also perhaps—and this is not offered without trepidation, for one so committed to undecidability—a way to decide among them. The witness at the heart of the Christian legacy seems to open two possibilities: acknowledgment or denial. Christianity’s essential inessentiality, and all of the uncertainty, entanglement and vulnerability that this implies, can either provoke a kind of abiding-with-exposure, or a foreclosure of it. The former, as Nancy reminds us, looks a lot like faith; that is, “an exposition to what cannot be appropriated,” whether in the form of “the love of neighbor, the discrediting of wealth, [or] the truthful and decided word” (55) that nevertheless remains obscure (as in 1 Cor. 13:12, for example). Refusing this exposition, by contrast, would amount to appropriating the inappropriable, whether by exploiting one’s neighbor, amassing property, or—and this seems the most stubbornly entrenched of all—by laying *claim* to some truth that purportedly exceeds us. It would mean, in short, turning away from exposure and turning in on oneself—that closing-down that the Pauline-Augustinian tradition in particular construes as *sin*.³⁷

We will recall that, for Hardt and Negri, the only way out of empire is through it; empire is either sustained or undermined by the singular plurality of the multitude, depending on how it is deployed. Similarly, Nancy suggests that while the West’s globalization annihilates sense, it also opens the possibility of *making* sense by revealing “the interconnection of everyone in the production of humanity as such” (37). Of course, capital tends to cover over this interconnection; as J. K. Gibson-Graham have argued, the supposedly “advantageous” quality of capitalism is its presumed independence of all “hot” (that is to say, embodied, political, interested) relations.³⁸ But, to make an old familiar move once again, the global circulation of capital relies upon—and reveals, to the deconstructive glance—the very sharing it obscures. The same can be said of the Christianity that so bafflingly finds itself on all sides of the struggle over global capital.³⁹ If most Christianities have tended to secure themselves with violently enforced doctrinal and ecclesiastical formations, it is because Christianity’s fundamental interconstitution (with other traditions; within the godhead; with atheism, humanism, secularism, Marxism, etc.) reveals a threatening insubstantiality at its core. Yet this interconstitution

37. “The human sinner...is less one who infringes the Law than one who turns back upon itself the sense that was previously oriented toward the other or toward God” (Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 128).

38. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, 83.

39. Catherine Keller calls this Christianity’s “implication” in *Empire* (Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005]).

nevertheless speaks through Christianity's aporetic configurations, as the inessentiality of its very essence. A practice of Christian "sharing," if such a thing were possible, would therefore not be a matter of making the whole world Christian (or post-Christian) in order to secure an economic program. Far from insisting upon its "own" way, such sharing would recognize its being-with in other ways: exposing the exposure at its own core, remaining with the vulnerability of witness itself, and allowing whatever emerges to emerge.

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