

20<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Philosophy of Religion

Münster, 28<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> August 2014

*Revelation under Deconstruction*

-

*An Investigation on the Significance of Christianity in post-confessional Approaches to Religion*

by

Friederike Rass

### **1. The modern self and its “homelessness”<sup>1</sup>**

The starting point for this investigation forms the not-that-brand-new but still very central observation of a still further increasing, world-wide pluralization of society. The vast multiplicity of perspectives being readily available to offer the possibility to develop a more differentiated expression of our identity provides a huge opportunity on the one hand. On the other hand, the sheer variety of perspectives seems to overstrain individuals in the task of their specific individualization that is being highly promoted by society and even more so by the economy. Alain Badiou deplures especially this last point as the loss of any possibility for an actual, distinct singularity. He characterizes the situation in an admittedly rather cynical but pointed way, when he states: “each identification (...) creates a figure that provides a material for its investment by the market. (...). What inexhaustible potential for mercantile investments in this upsurge (...) of women, homosexuals, the disabled, Arabs! And these infinite combinations of predicative traits, what a god-send! Black homosexuals, disabled Serbs, (...) prematurely aged youth! Each time, a social image authorizes new products, specialized magazines, (...) targeted advertising networks, and finally, heady ‘public debates’ at peak viewing time.”<sup>2</sup>

As a result, and as Badiou already indicates in his examples, Religion also becomes one option among many that has to secure its position in a highly competitive and globalized market. This market-orientation in Germany for instance became lastly rather noticeable regarding the keynote paper on impulses for the Protestant church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when a

---

<sup>1</sup> G. Hindrichs, *Das Absolute und das Subjekt. Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von Metaphysik und Nachmetaphysik*, Frankfurt a.M. 2008, 240 u.ö., Translation F.R.

<sup>2</sup> A. Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, transl. by R. Brassier, Stanford 2003, 10.

leading representative of the consulting agency McKinsey was assigned to the responsible committee for the paper.<sup>3</sup>

Gunnar Hindrichs, a German philosopher, develops a characterization of the modern subjects situation in a less political framework than Badiou, which I want to presuppose as the theoretical backdrop of my following remarks. He argues for a state of “Heimatlosigkeit”<sup>4</sup>, meaning the homelessness, of the modern individual. For him, the modern individual realizes that it is constitutive for “the” world as it is creating it again and again by assuming and experiencing different perspectives. What follows according to Hindrichs is an alienation of the subject from what it starts to regard as its own work: As the responsible constitutive agent it can’t at the same time create and be part of its own “creation”. Following this derived logic, the subject consequently strives for “an order of cause and effect to integrate itself in”<sup>5</sup>. However, as it is unable to transcend itself in that matter without creating the same problem all over again, namely creating another ‘world’ it again couldn’t be an integral part of, the subject realizes that it can’t provide the claimed order. In consequence, it is forced to keep on revolving around itself.<sup>6</sup> For Hindrichs, this is the overall dilemma characterizing an existential homelessness of the modern subject.

To highlight the problem from another point of view and to indicate the movement in philosophy that I want to take a closer look at, I would like to introduce John Caputo, an US-American philosopher, who places the dilemma of modernity also in the wide context of an order of cause and effect, but stresses it differently: “We are justified in saying or doing something only if it is an effective means to an end ... this results in a world in which everything is a means but we are increasingly at a loss to say what the end is. Nothing is sacred.”<sup>7</sup> He goes on to characterize the “sacred” as “valued – or rather loved – for itself”<sup>8</sup>. So, while Hindrichs places the emphasis on the missing ground on which the modern subject could localize itself, Caputo highlights the perceived lack of a higher end in a society structured by a cost-benefit ratio in a way that brings him close to what Badiou deplored as the loss of an actual singularity. Both cases describe the dilemma of a modern subject that - based on its modern rationality - is required to decline the possibility of any form of external

---

<sup>3</sup> Kirche der Freiheit. Perspektiven für die evangelische Kirche im 21. Jahrhundert. Ein Impulspapier des Rates der EKD, ed. by Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, Bad Münster 2006, 108.

<sup>4</sup> G. Hindrichs, *Das Absolute und das Subjekt. Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von Metaphysik und Nachmetaphysik*, Frankfurt a.M. 2008, 240 u.ö.

<sup>5</sup> i.O. „Ordnung von Gründen und Folgen, in der es stünde“, G. Hindrichs, *Das Absolute und das Subjekt. Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von Metaphysik und Nachmetaphysik*, Frankfurt a.M. 2008, 286.

<sup>6</sup> G. Hindrichs, *Das Absolute und das Subjekt. Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von Metaphysik und Nachmetaphysik*, Frankfurt a.M. 2008, 286.

<sup>7</sup> J.D. Caputo, *Truth. Philosophy in Transit*, London 2013, 55.

<sup>8</sup> J.D. Caputo, *Truth. Philosophy in Transit*, London 2013, 55..

foundation, which introduces an existential vacuum, so that at the same time a considerable, but unfulfilled need for a self-transcending dimension persists.

This panorama – that is what I will state for the purpose of this paper – builds the foundation for a cluster of contemporary philosophers to set out on a re-investigation of the phenomenon of religion in search for its ontological potential. This is especially interesting as neither of the representatives of this philosophical cluster would identify themselves as religious, rather the opposite. Consequently they unanimously claim to not investigate on religion as such, but rather on the “event” that seems to appear – not exclusively, but remarkably – within religion. However, it is striking that each in their own way rely on specifically Christian content to elaborate their approaches. Generally, the approaches are to be localized in the wake of Derridas deconstructive approach to a “religion without religion” as well as in close intertwinement with a – theologically twisted – late Heideggerian understanding of “Ereignis”, i.e. the event. Caputo for example claims to develop a “theology of the event” which is supposed to transcend all confessional borders. Jean-Luc Nancy, another enthralling thinker in this field focuses explicitly on Christianity while calling at the same time for “an effacement of this [i.e. the name of Christianity] name and of the whole corpus of references that follows it”. At the same time, however – and this is characteristic for the movement that can loosely be described as a philosophy in the wake of the “theological turn” – he encloses the following claim: “But I do think it is important to follow the movement that this name has named: that of an exit from religion and of the expansion of the atheist world.”<sup>9</sup> From this exposition Nancy then sets out to disclose a self-deconstructing structure of Christianity that also offers a new understanding of rationality to overcome the previously drafted dilemma of the modern subject.

Even though there are of course remarkable differences in the approaches of philosophers that identify as close to this field of thought, I want to focus on their reception of Christianity to cut a first trail “off the beaten track” they set foot on and hopefully shed some light on this rather new and from a theological point of view very promising approach to speak of truth beyond relativism or fundamentalism, dangers that are closely aligned to the “homelessness” of the modern subject.

## **2. Secularization – On the Re-evaluation of a deprecated approach**

---

<sup>9</sup> J.-L. Nancy, Preamble. In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?, übers. v. J. McKeane mit J. Fort, in: Re-treating Religion. Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy. With a Preamble and Concluding Dialogue by Jean-Luc Nancy, hg. v. A. Alexandrova/I. Devisch/L. ten Kate/A. van Rooden, New York 2012, 1-21, 1.

That not only the western world's culture but also its language are drenched in Christian tradition and closely intertwined with its history, are no breaking news. Sometimes it even seems as if that were more and more the only legitimization left for Christian authority to give one's view on current events or questions, which found its expression in the theory of secularization, naming the increasing loss of religious values and authority in society.

What has been treated a long time as a threat to religion in general and Christianity in particular found a new accentuation in the 90's, when of all people Gianni Vattimo, an Italian philosopher from a pretty left-winged political background introduced a new emphasis on secularization with a rather surprising accentuation: He summarized „*We cannot even speak but from a Christian point of view.*“<sup>10</sup> He denied that secularization is a threat to Christianity. On the contrary: Secularization for him meant first and foremost a *realization* of the very “essence” of the Christian religion – the so called “weak thought (*pensiero debole*).” . For Vattimo, the process of weakening undermines all objective claims and therefore overcomes the metaphysical structure of being that modern thinking presupposes, when it assumes an eternal, unchangeable and absolute being. Vattimo so criticizes the actual use of metaphysically founded “objectivity”, meaning the assumption that there is an absolute being, and those who think to know about it derive an legitimization from this knowledge to enforce its eternal Truth, as a means to protect and enforce the interests of people in power. It is against this abusive understanding of being as a legitimization of personal interests that Vattimo posits the “weak thought.” For him, the process of the weakening of being, i.e. the secularization, has its origin within *the Christian Church itself*. In Vattimos opinion, the weakening of being originates from the weakening of God himself, that is manifested in his incarnation in Jesus Christ, when God became man. The process of secularization, then, is the mode of the realization of this “weak thought” through time. Thus for Vattimo it is the genuine core of the Christian message to question and to weaken absolute claims made in the name of an “objective truth,” which does include the Church as an institution itself. As a consequence the current ‘secular’ situation signifies to him the application of the very message of Christianity to the institutional frame of the Church by which it has been preserved.

Vattimos approach offers an intriguing twist to the described dilemma of religious authorities, especially in his intention to overcome the presupposed opposition of religion and society. In order to do so, however, he is forced to simplify world history as such into one

---

<sup>10</sup> G. Vattimo, *Toward a Nonreligious Christianity*, 27-46 in: J.W. Robbins (Hg.), *After the Death of God*. John D. Caputo und Gianni Vattimo. With an Afterword by Gabriel Vahanian, New York 2007, 36.

single scheme. While turning against any metaphysical foundation, he promotes at the same time the process of weakening to become the new constitutive and insofar unifying paradigm for world history. So, what started with the attempt to create an approach to religion that dis-encloses its “essence” to every member of society regardless of their beliefs, ends in a position that can’t take the historical particularity of the human existence seriously. Especially the following question remains unanswered: If the *kenosis*, the secularization, is having its origin in the Christian religion but aims at the same time to overcome any “historical positive religion”<sup>11</sup>, what difference is there in the end between the “traditional” modern understanding of secularization and Vattimos interpretation, when both result in the conclusion that there is no more need for the existence of religion in modern society.<sup>12</sup> Also, from a theological point of view his very selective reception of theological thought and dogma appears in his uncritical focus on Incarnation as an isolated occurrence as a distortion of the very source Vattimo refers to.

It is in Jean-Luc Nancy's Philosophy of a „Deconstruction of Christianity“ that we recently can find an adaption of Vattimos basic argument in a new and more elaborated framework, even though Nancy doesn't refer to him explicitly. Nancy sets as well out from the assumption of an inseparable intertwinement of European culture and Christianity and claims this to be an exclusive feature of the *Christian* religion: “Christianity produced itself as the ‘West,’ and it alone decomposed its confessional features and disintegrated its religious force in this West.”<sup>13</sup>. In accordance with this he also is convinced, that it is “no accident (...) that Christianity has desacralized, demythologized, and secularized itself in such a constant and irreversible way for at least six centuries-if not for far longer. (Should we not say: from the moment Christendom existed, it entered into deconstruction and dis-enclosure?)”<sup>14</sup>. This movement thereby combines two components, that Nancy considers as being mutually dependent: On the one hand, it articulates and opens up the dilemma of the modern confinement to reason. On the other hand the self-deconstruction of Christianity for Nancy engenders the modern atheist outlook. I'll come back to that in a moment.

Other than Vattimo, however, Nancy engages himself less selective in his reception of the theological body of thought when he identifies not only the Incarnation, but also its essential relation to the death and its culmination in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the crucial

---

<sup>11</sup> R. Girard/G. Vattimo, *Christianity and Modernity*, in: *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith. A Dialogue*, hg. v. P. Antonello, übers. v. W. McCuaig, New York 2010, 23-47, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. to this point the also in general very insightful investigation of H.J. Prosman, *The Postmodern Condition and the Meaning of Secularity*, *Ars Disputandi Supplement Series 4*, ed. by M. Sarot u.a., 2011, 221.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy, *Preamble. In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy, *Preamble. In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?*, 4.

hermeneutical key for the solution of the dilemma of the modern subject. All this while being a philosopher, mind you, that distances himself emphatically from a religious point of view, as the following quote shows: “Why speak of Christianity? (...) I’d like to speak of it as little as possible. I’d like to move toward an effacement of this name and of the whole corpus of references that follows it”<sup>15</sup>. “As little as possible”, however, then proves to be quite something: Like Vattimo, Nancy sets out with an interpretation of the Incarnation as the negation of any metaphysical or positive understanding of God: “In a word: the Christian ‘god’ is atheist. In fact, ‘atheist’ signifies the nonpositing of ‘God,’ the deposing [*déposition*] of any god that can be named as such—that is to say as a ‘being’ or ‘subject’ to which one property or another is given (including the perfection of all properties).”<sup>16</sup> Nancy goes much further than Vattimo, however, when he encloses a distinct interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, where he identifies it not as the overcoming of death, but rather as the realization of the radical interruption that death provides within life itself: “Christianity (...) proposed death as the truth of life and opened up in life itself the difference of death”<sup>17</sup>. According to Nancy, the death of Christ so – instead of opening up some sort of “*Hinterwelt*” or afterworld – interfuses this world by changing the focus completely: “In death, the definitive suspension of sense (of existence) eternally crystallizes the shattering brilliance [*éclat*] of this suspended sense.”<sup>18</sup> Having the suspension of sense established in the mortality of God himself, and held present in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is here that atheism finds its conceptual christian foundation.

Regarding the crucial problem whether it is at all possible to overcome metaphysical thinking without falling into a metaphysical framework oneself – a problem Vattimo has to carefully address several times and never completely overcomes regarding his unifying paradigm of “weak thought” – Nancy provides an intriguing follow up on his proposition of a christian atheism: “*There is not even ‘atheism’; ‘atheist’ is not enough! It is the posting of the principle that must be emptied. It is not enough to say that God takes leave, withdraws, or is incommensurable. It is even less a question of placing another principle on his throne—Mankind, Reason, Society. It is instead a question of coming to grips with this: the world rests on nothing—and this is its keenest sense.*”<sup>19</sup> Nancy states that the core of the Christian faith is not its ability to generate existential significance in providing a religious narrative but that rather the opposite is the case: The Christian narrative, for Nancy, “has dis-enclosed itself

---

<sup>15</sup> Nancy, Preamble. In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy, Preamble. In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Nancy, Preamble. In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Nancy, Preamble. In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy, Preamble. In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?, 11.

by telling us that Reason cannot be satisfied with explanations or ‘reasons given’ [*raisons rendues*] but pushes toward an (...) unnameable of sense – or toward a truth without concept or figure.”<sup>20</sup> It is only this inner drive, anticipated in the Christian understanding of the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ, that prevents that “reason wilts and sinks into general commensurability and an interminable nomination in which all names are interchangeable.”<sup>21</sup> Nancy so opposes the self-deconstructive potential of the Christian faith to a danger that leads back to the aforementioned thesis by Alain Badiou of a complete coverage of the modern subject guided by economical reason preventing any actual singularity.

For Nancy, the growing absence of any clear-cut propositional content for existential orientation is therefore not part of the problem, but rather part of the solution, which is where he again comes close to Vattimos approach to Christianity and Secularization. It is precisely the absence of any conceptually determinable sense, that lays ground to a meaningful existence by interrupting the “myth” of a sense circulating without any discontinuity in the world.<sup>22</sup> For Nancy, “sense is made complete in its interruption: (...) Sense is a dissatisfaction, a permanent desire for sense”<sup>23</sup>. This is the structure that Nancy contributes to the Christian revelation as its self-deconstructing power and where this revelation comes explicitly into play: For him, the Christian “revelation does not unveil anything that is hidden: it reveals insofar as it addresses, and this address constitutes what is revealed.” He develops this understanding of revelation especially from a close reading of the biblical scene in John 20,11-18, where Maria Magdalene first confuses the resurrected Christ with a Gardener, before she recognizes him when he calls her by her name. It is this scene with the resurrected, that for Nancy reveals most clearly the presence of the already absent *in this world*: It is the revelation of the existential experience of the absence of any sense, as the only possible sense, that at the same time calls for a response. This structure of revelation is therefore at the same time inseparably connected to the danger of the experience of an opening up of the world as a mere collapsing into emptiness.

### 3. Conclusion

This dual structure applies very precisely to the aforementioned “homelessness” of the modern subject. Other than Hindrichs however, who created the term “homelessness” for the subject that can’t provide its own existential foundation, Nancy turns things around by

---

<sup>20</sup> Nancy, Preamble. In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Nancy, Preamble. In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Nancy, Preamble. In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?, 20, vgl. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy, Preamble. In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?, 2.

identifying precisely this “homelessness” as the very place of existential truth as the truth revealed in the christian revelation: “Truth revealed is truth that contains no doctrine or preaching. It is not the truth of any adequation or of any unveiling. It is the simple, infinite truth of the suspension of sense: an interruption, for sense cannot be completed, and an overflowing, for it does not cease”<sup>24</sup>.

Of course, one can't endorse neither Nancy's nor Vattimos approach without careful criticism but they both elaborate a very central point, that I wanted to focus on: It is not the task of the Christian church to provide nicely packed and easily comprehensible offerings to fill the void of contemporary meanings of life. It is neither the case, that there is one certain, individually tailored existential meaning, that only would have to be found yet for everything to fall neatly in its place. Rather, the very experience of an existential lack of meaning opens up to the Christian dimension of the “western” culture, meaning precisely not only the historical dimension, but the underlying non-foundational structure being revealed in the Christian revelation. How this postulation then relates to a theological angle, however, has to remain at this point to be clarified.

---

<sup>24</sup> Nancy, Preamble. In the Midst of the World; or, Why Deconstruct Christianity?, 20.