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Singular Plural Catholic Spirit: John Wesley with Jean-Luc Nancy

The juxtaposition of Jean-Luc Nancy and John Wesley is, on the face of it, an arbitrary one. Although some degree of genealogical work might be able to uncover an intersection of the intellectual lineages that produced Nancy and Wesley, respectively,[1] this juxtaposition can ultimately only be justified retrospectively, by the degree to which it is productive of thought. But prospectively, one can at least lay out the purpose. First, I wish to make it clear that my intention here is not somehow to incorporate Nancy's philosophy, in whole or in part, into Wesleyan theology, nor is it to subject the Wesleyan tradition to a Nancean critique—all the less so since critiques based on contemporary philosophers so often have the air of a moralizing judgment passed on a heritage that has, culpably, failed to stay up to date, paradoxically granting the philosopher a presumptive moral, or even *theological*, authority whose precise basis is never specified. No, my goal is more modest: to use Nancy's approach to a particular philosophical problem as a way of highlighting the distinctiveness of Wesley's approach to a similar theological and ecclesiological problem. In short, the goal is to point out something that was, in a sense, there the whole time, but which our accustomed ways of thinking have not allowed us to see clearly.

The problem at issue here is the relationship between the individual and the community. It is a commonplace among theologically educated people that something called "individualism" represents a major problem in the church. The solution to this problem is "community." For

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[1] The only connection that comes immediately to mind is the general atmosphere of Pietism, which produced both John Wesley and Søren Kierkegaard, the latter exercising a decisive influence on Heidegger, one of Nancy's continual points of reference. At a certain point, however, such exercises begin to take on the feel of a game of "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon." Suffice it to say: here, the relevant connection is simply me, a Wesleyan by upbringing who has spent a lot of time immersed in a certain French Heideggerianism.

many people who agree with this basic scheme, "community" often ends up as a more or less utopian ideal—something that would be nice, but is assumed to happen very rarely. But those who take upon themselves the task of joining an actual existing community, or of "being the church," most often end up espousing some form of sectarianism, where one must submit oneself to "the community." That is, some kind of uniformity is presupposed, often couched in terms of sacrificing one's own individual preferences for the sake of community. There are many examples of this, but the most emotionally charged example currently is the question of accepting practicing homosexuals—and especially those who are so adept at homosexuality that they no longer need practice—into church communities. Many hold that, even if it turns out that becoming homosexual isn't a morally culpable "choice," the community is still within its rights to demand that members choose either celibacy or heterosexual marriage. It must not be the business of the church to take into account members' individual sexual preferences, or their opinions more generally. Indeed, church bodies that do allow significant leeway in matters of morality and belief are often taken to be somehow less serious attempts at "being church."

In point of fact, however, don't those less serious, permissive churches have their own kind of uniformity, albeit ones that the communitarians tend to regard as being too conformed to this world? Even the Unitarians, surely the most scoffed-at religious group currently in operation, manage to adhere fairly closely to what one might call an "NPR aesthetic"—one feels that, despite their wide range of religious beliefs (nowadays extending even to Trinitarianism), one can identify certain shared cultural affinities of Unitarians just as reliably as of Baptists. And on the other side, don't the rigorous sectarians base their enterprise on the presupposition of a pre-existing, ready-made individual who can freely choose whether or not to join the group? Isn't this individualistic presupposition relied upon to keep the communitarian demands from

appearing to be tyrannical? One could say, then, that even though they initially appear to be opposed to one another—one sacrifices individuality for the sake of community, and too great an assertion of individuality is incompatible with community—there is in fact a deep connection between individualism and communitarianism.

The early Methodist movement, as well as some of its more rigorist offshoots like the early Church of the Nazarene, vividly illustrate this coimplication of individualism and communitarianism. On the one hand, there is a strongly individualistic emphasis on conversion and on the interior life—pushed to a particularly hyperbolic level by the doctrine of entire sanctification. On the other hand, there is a strongly communitarian emphasis on adhering very closely to a set of rules, in practice producing uniformity. These two are held to belong together, to the point where one often encounters genuine suspicion of whether people outside the community are "real Christians"—that is, failure to submit to communitarian guidelines indicates that one's individual spiritual life may not be in line. Even in my home church, where many of the regulations of the Church of the Nazarene had long since lost their sway, the general idea that belonging to this particular community has a special relationship precisely to what is most individual still had a certain plausibility. [2]

What one needs to ask here is *why* it is that Wesleyan groups seem to be so exemplary in this regard. I would like to suggest that this is, paradoxically, because Wesley was at least gesturing toward a different way of thinking and living the relationship between the individual and the community. In order to clarify what it might mean to think this relationship differently, it will be necessary to take a detour through the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. Those of you who have

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[2] It would seem to underline my thesis of the coimplication of individualism and communitarianism all the more strongly when one reflects that this basic thought-structure remained plausible even as this local church—along with the Church of the Nazarene more generally—was in the process of distancing itself from its traditional ways of disciplining the community and of conceiving the individual's spiritual life, that is, trading in a distinctively Wesleyan ethos for a more generically "evangelical" ethos.

had first-hand experience of Nancy's work may well be chuckling at the idea of using Nancy to *clarify* something—indeed, in the secondary literature, it seems to be more or less obligatory to comment on his extremely difficult writing style, which an acquaintance of mine once characterized as "the kind of thing that gives the French a bad name." Yet Nancy is not just being difficult—rather, his language reflects the intrinsic difficulty of the philosophical project he is undertaking. For pedagogical reasons I will here attempt to keep direct quotation to a minimum and to translate Nancy's oblique French style into an assertive American one, but I will have done Nancy and you a disservice if I presented this quasi-translation as anything but an attempt at giving you a way into Nancy's texts themselves.

The text of Nancy's that provide the primary focus for this investigation of the individual and the community is the one I evoked in my title: *Being Singular Plural* (1996; trans. 2000)[3]. The question of community is one that has interested Nancy throughout his career, starting with his collaboration with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe at the Center for Philosophical Research on the Political (beginning in 1980) and continuing through *The Inoperative Community* (1982) and many other works. *Being Singular Plural* represents the most recent major development in Nancy's treatment of the question of community. Much of this development consists of shifting terminology and differing assessments of Nancy's primary interlocutors—most notably Heidegger—but the most significant step forward is a major raising of the stakes. Instead of treating something like the "question of community" as a particular topic, Nancy insists on the necessity of reworking first philosophy itself beginning from the question of community, which he here terms the question of "the 'singular plural' of Being" (xv).

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[3] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Citations in-text.

This massive enterprise is not merely Nancy's own ambition—and in fact he disavows any claim to have accomplished it in this work—but rather "the necessity of the thing itself and of our history" (xv). As this sweeping epochal statement makes clear, *Being Singular Plural* is a very Heideggerian work. On one level, this is reflected in the fact that Nancy's concepts here derive from a critical re-reading of Heidegger, but more deeply, Nancy's Heideggerianism comes out in the very *way* in which he critiques Heidegger. At the risk of oversimplifying, for Heidegger, early Greek philosophy represents the initial revelation of the question of Being, but at the same time the point of its forgetting. In the same way, Nancy regards Heidegger's reopening of the question of Being as an absolutely essential starting point for all contemporary thinking, but nevertheless believes that Heidegger allowed the crucial question to slip away from him in the very moment that he perceived it (93). Specifically, in *Being and Time* Heidegger argues that *Dasein*, human existence or being-there, is always already *Mitsein*, being-with. In the course of his analysis, however, Heidegger consigns *Mitsein*, being-with, to the realm of inauthentic everydayness, while thinking authentic *Dasein* in terms of the individual's orientation toward death as what cannot be shared. In a similar move, Heidegger thinks the question of community in terms of the authentic historical destiny of a people—again subordinating the inauthentic being-with to an individual unit, only on a larger scale.[4]

This is of a piece with a kind of snobbish "romanticism" that consistently causes Heidegger's analyses of modern life to miss the mark—including his very popular analyses of technology, which for Nancy are among the least creative parts of Heidegger's philosophy. The task is not, however, to critique Heidegger in a purely negative sense, but rather to "retrace the

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[4] This presentation of Nancy's critique of Heidegger is indebted to that of Mary-Jane Rubenstein in her essay "The Unbearable Withness of Being: On the Essentialist Blind-Spot of Anti-Ontotheology" in Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

outline of [his] analysis and push it to the point where it becomes apparent that the coessentiality

of being-with is nothing less than a matter of the co-originality of [sense]—and that the '[sense

or] meaning of Being' is only what it is… when it is given as with" (94).[5] To put it differently,

the task is to come to terms with the fact that Being just "is" Being-with, to come up with a way

of thinking multiplicity *as such*, without collapsing it back into individuality. *Being Singular*

Plural is not a systematic exposition of an ontology of Being-with, but rather a fragmentary

series of overlapping approaches to the question. [An aside: This is, again, a reflection of

Nancy's deep Heideggerianism, evincing a kind of megalomaniacal modesty that will claim, on

the one hand, to be revolutionizing the entirety of philosophy and, on the other hand, to only be

able to make the first tentative gestures toward beginning a labor that will perhaps take

millennia.] All of Nancy's reflections in *Being Singular Plural* are helpful in understanding this

thinking of multiplicity, but I will focus on two particular themes. First, simply because it is

among the easiest aspects of the work to understand, I will discuss Nancy's explanation of the

title of the book itself. I will then proceed to explain Nancy's concept of "sense," which is one of

his most elusive concepts, but is necessary to grasp what is really distinctive about Nancy's

project.

So first, the title: *Being Singular Plural*, or in French, *être singulier pluriel*. In his

elucidation of this phrase, Nancy first points out the indeterminate syntax. It is not a complete

sentence, and it is unclear which, if any, of the words is to be taken as a noun. *Être* is the

infinitive form meaning "to be," but French infinitives are also frequently used as nouns—[as

when *être* is used to translate Heidegger's *Sein*, the capital-b Being of English translations.] In

addition, as in other Romance languages, adjectives in French can be substantives. For Nancy,

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[5] The translators of *Being Singular Plural* very often render Nancy's *sens* as "meaning." While this is a perfectly valid translation of the French word, it is—as I will argue below—more faithful to Nancy's intentions, to render it more literally as "sense." I will accordingly be altering the translation throughout.

this indeterminacy is a way of indicating the mutual implication of the three terms. The apparent

contradiction between "singular" and "plural" is resolved, or at least attenuated, by recourse to

the etymology of the word "singular." The Latin word from which "singular" derives is *singuli*,

an adjective meaning "one by one." Interestingly, *singuli*—as is evident from its form—appeared

most frequently in the plural. Nancy capitalizes on this to declare that the singular is always

already in the plural, because the singular "designates the 'one' as belonging to the 'one by one'"

(32). Coming at this same insight from another direction, Nancy argues that the "one" can never

be indicated except by reference to the "more than one," or that you can't count "one" without

counting more than one. A pure "one" with no reference to the plural would not be "one" at all—

indeed, wouldn't "be" at all. But by the same token, this "singular" that only finds its place in the

"plural" is not simply dissolved into an undifferentiated mass. The singular is *really* singular

precisely in its being-with other singular beings—not simply the generic being-with of

juxtaposition, but each time in a singular way.

　　　　To emphasize the fact that the singular being is not simply absorbed into an

undifferentiated blob, Nancy points out the spacing between the words "being singular plural."

Simple spaces allow Nancy to avoid the subordination that other punctuation marks would imply

and thereby to avoid predetermining the precise relationships among the terms[6]—yet it is

nonetheless the case that any particular reading of the terms will necessarily place them in a

particular relationship. The terms aren't simply randomly juxtaposed; rather, they are *with* each

other, they appear together. One could say that their co-appearance has some *meaning* to it, and

this wouldn't be completely foreign to Nancy's intention, as the French word *sens*—which can

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[6] One can get at a similar insight by linking the three terms together using a hyphen, which is "a mark of union and also a mark of division, a mark of sharing that effaces itself, leaving each term to its isolation and its being-with-the-others" (37).

denote "sense" or "meaning"[7]—is one of the key words of Nancy's philosophy. But it does seem clear that Nancy leans more toward *sens* as "sense" than as "meaning." Staying with our example of the phrase "being singular plural," were one to seek its "meaning," one would most likely have in mind something outside the phrase (such as the intention in the writer's mind) that the phrase points toward. But seeking its "sense" connotes more of a philological enterprise, as when one reads some ancient text and tries to construe the grammatical relationships among the terms so as to give the most satisfactory "sense." Though one should not push this contrast too hard, the "sense" of the phrase seems to be more *immanent* to the phrase itself—not completely foreign to "meaning," of course, but indicating a meaning that arises out of the phrase itself, more than a meaning that would be pointed toward or intended.

The "sense" of a phrase has a certain closeness to the text, almost a physical or tactile quality—and of course the English word "sense" also operates in the register of physical sensation, a quality it shares with the French *sens*. In this respect, *sens* or "sense" overlap considerably with the German *Sinn*, which plays a prominent role in Heidegger's thought in the compound word *Seinssinn* or the phrase *Sinn von Sein*, both customarily translated into English as "the meaning of Being." Whether or not it was Heidegger's intention in using the term *Sinn*, Nancy places special emphasis on the sensory and especially tactile dimensions of *sens* or "sense," which allows him to think the (meaning or) sense of Being in a very bodily way—and not only in terms of human bodies. There is sense to the particular relationships among inanimate objects and among animals and among humans, as there is in the various relationships among the singular members of these groups. As Nancy says, "We would not be 'humans' if there were not 'dogs' and 'stones.'" This is because of the way that we live with animals and stones, and the

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[7] It can also mean "direction," but Derrida claims that Nancy does not use it in this sense in his book on Nancy, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), pg. 57.

way that the animal-like and the stone-like (bone) live in us. For this reason, Nancy says that the

world "is not so much the world of humanity as it is the world of the nonhuman to which

humanity is exposed and which humanity, in turn, exposes" (18)—and so, he is able to use "we"

and "us" in the broadest possible sense, to include the human, the animal, the inanimate. This is

not simply a matter of sheer juxtaposition or leveling-off: the human relates to the non-human

differently than vice-versa, most notably in language; and of course the relationships among

humans have a different sense than those among animals, etc.

Even this talk of "having" sense may ultimately be misleading, however, as Nancy begins

the main text of *Being Singular Plural* with a fragment entitled *Que nous sommes le sens*, which

can be translated "We Are Sense." The translators of the English edition, however, translate it as

"We Are Meaning," for an understandable reason: in this section, Nancy is addressing the

widespread feeling of a "loss of meaning" or *sens* in our postmodern world. This bemoaning of

the loss of meaning does indeed have a meaning, but a "meaning" that is nothing other than

Nancy's concept of "sense"—that is, this discourse of the loss of meaning "brings to light the

fact that 'meaning,' used in this absolute way, has become the bared [*dénudé*] name of our being-

with-one-another. We do not 'have' meaning anymore, because we ourselves are meaning [that

is, sense]—entirely, without reserve, infinitely, with no meaning other than 'us'" (1). This

doesn't mean that we make up the "content" that Being in general indicates or "means," but

rather that we—again, this is thought in the broadest possible sense—we are "sense as the

element in which significations can be produced, and circulate" (2).[8] One could say, then, that

we are where sense happens—but that sense isn't something separate from "us." Rather, it is

precisely sense as the concrete and always singular relationships that constitute our being-with

that makes us *us* rather than simply "a cloud of juxtaposed beings" (39).

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[8] Translation altered, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), pg. 19.

This idea of the "cloud of juxtaposed beings" can be understood in terms of the relationship between liberalism and sectarianism as discussed in the beginning. Liberalism would tend to emphasize the "juxtaposed beings," the atomistic individuals. Sectarianism would emphasize the unity of the "cloud," though they would likely prefer something more substantial for their end of the metaphor. Nancy's thinking of the being-with seems to me to offer a genuine alternative—not simply as the "middle ground" between two "extremes," but as a way of getting around the polarity altogether. Having traced out this alternative, the task that remains is to investigate whether Wesley offers a similar alternative. It seems to me that there are elements in Wesley's thought—as indeed in the New Testament and the Christian tradition more generally— that would be compatible with Nancy's very expansive use of "we" to designate humans, animals, rocks, etc. For the sake of this discussion, however, we will provisionally limit the investigation to inter-human relations. A good place to start this investigation—and within the time remaining, this can only be a start—is Wesley's sermon "Catholic Spirit." This sermon suggests itself not only because it is one of his best-known, but also because he so often seems to veer toward a kind of generic liberal tolerance (one version of the "cloud of juxtaposed beings") while at the same time insisting that "indifference to all opinions" is "the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven."[9] This very proximity will help us to measure more accurately the distinctiveness of Wesley's approach.

The text for this sermon is 2 Kings 10:15—"And when [Jehu] was departed thence, he lighted on Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him, and he saluted him, and said to him, Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? And Jehonadab answered: It is. If it be, give me thine hand." When I was considering the specific sermon of Wesley's that I could use in

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[9] John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), pg. 307 (§III.1). Further references will be given in-text to section numbers rather than page numbers.

this presentation, this one came to mind in connection with the title of Derrida's book on Nancy, *On Touching*, because of the phrase, "give me thine hand." On the face of it, this is a fairly superficial connection, but that short phrase introduces a bodily element into the usually bloodless and abstract discussion of how to deal with differing opinions. Wesley follows up on this with persistent imagery that blends together the bodily and the emotional. Most of the time, this is a matter of the "heart," but there are also occasional references to a depth of feeling that penetrates even to the "bowels" (I.17, III.6). The purpose of this recourse to the bodily and emotional is not to sidestep religious opinion, but rather to situate it in the context of the whole person—and of the porous boundaries between persons.

Wesley makes two basic moves in this respect. First, he argues that a particular person's body of beliefs, taken simply on the intellectual level, must necessarily be lacking and inconsistent: one "knows in general that he himself is mistaken; although in what particulars he mistakes he does not, *perhaps cannot*, know" (I.4; emphasis added). This lack of self-consistency and self-transparency in belief undermines the possibility of treating opinions as an autonomous or self-enclosed matter. Second, Wesley argues that one's beliefs are not entirely under one's control: "It does not depend on my choice. I can no more think than I can see or hear as I will" (II.1). This is because "invincible ignorance" is always coupled with "invincible prejudice… which is often so fixed in tender minds, that it is afterwards impossible to tear up what has taken so deep a root" (I.5). False beliefs that are the product of "invincible prejudice" may not be culpable, because "all guilt must suppose some concurrence of the will"—that is, all "my" beliefs are not necessarily "mine" in the same sense, and in the end, only God can finally sort them out (Ibid.).

To be indifferent to someone's opinions would be to fail to love them as they really are, because one's opinions are always formed through the same passionately charged relatedness that produces the person—as singular, to use Nancy's terminology. But this very acknowledgement of the singularity of each person means that "love" cannot mean the same thing between every person. Wesley specifically asks that he be loved in a particular and intense way (namely, "as a friend that is closer than a brother") by the fellow-worker who will take his hand, a way that is different from the love extended to humankind in general, to strangers, to enemies (II.3). This intense love is *not*, however, limited to members of a particular defined group aside from Christianity at large—which in Wesley's context would've been practically everyone. If Wesley is here positing an ecclesiology or a vision of Christian community, it is one that, like Nancy's vision of being-with or "being singular plural," is open-ended and irreducibly multiple. It is a vision of an intense relatedness that is not necessarily always harmonious— certainly because of inevitable contingent conflicts, but also because of a purposeful form of conflict whereby each member would ask the others to "smite me friendly, and reprove me" (II.6). Wesley no doubt would have approved of Nancy's formulation: "Compassion is not altruism, nor is it identification; it is the disturbance of violent relatedness" (xiii).

In the long run, this vision was not sustained, and was perhaps unsustainable: Methodism made the transition from an emergency measure to an institution and thereby became one denomination among others. If it is the case that the mutual coimplication of "individualism" and "communitarianism" is particularly evident in certain Wesleyan denominations, it is a testimony to how powerful and at the same time how fragile such a vision is—and to the dangers posed by its breakdown.