

book amply demonstrates that the flourishing is even more wonderful than we thought, and the atrophy is more advanced than we feared.

A recent story makes the point. A member of a conservative group of a main-line denomination recently called an African Bishop of that denomination, asking if he might send an evangelistic team to the Bishop's area for a preaching mission. The Bishop said he was always glad to receive fellow Christians in order to hear their testimony to the work of God. He did, however, have one question for the American. "What is the percentage growth in your churches last year?" The American hesitated for a moment, but eventually said, "About 2 or 3 percent." "Well," said the Bishop, "Last year our churches grew between 30 and 40 percent. Perhaps it would be wise if we sent some of our folk to you."

Perhaps it would. I urge you to read this eye-opening and eye-popping account of a Christianity your mother and father never knew, but one that your children will surely know and one you need to know, too.

• John C. Holbert

Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, 183 pp. \$17.95.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once preached a sermon entitled: "Mankind's Deep Need – the Sense of Community." In this sermon, he asked this rhetorical question: "Is there any greater tragedy in life, whether in a family or in a world than thus to have proximity without community?" According to Fosdick, one of the greatest problems of modern life (in the 1930s and 40s) was the crowding together of people without "a right sense of their community." French aesthetic philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, in *Being Singular Plural*, asserts that the basic problem of late modern life is precisely the opposite. It is not that being together is no longer a problem. It remains the problem of our time. But the nature of the problem has changed dramatically. According to Nancy, we should now be more concerned with the way in which the problem of "the we," of sociality, has been solved. He is worried more about the forcing of various models of community without first understanding the meaning of proximity itself.

Nancy is deeply concerned that when we force community as "social contract," political socialism, or liberal egalitarianism, we are doomed from the beginning to have to enforce any number of "essentializing procedures" that ultimately result in various forms of social violence. The problem, as he sees it, is not first of all political, but metaphysical. All of these strategies for "being social," for being "we," are ultimately rooted in a metaphysic of Being (of the Same and its Other) that misses the reality that Being is, in actuality "Being-with." *Proximity*, therefore, is the very meaning of community itself. Indeed, it is the very meaning of Being.

According to Nancy, the others around me are not others "like me" or "unlike me," where the dynamic of self and other remains the divining rod for being-together. Rather, every "other" is, in fact, an "other origin" of the world. As Nancy puts it, "you are absolutely strange, because the world begins its turn with you." (6) Therefore, saying that "people are strange," is "one of our most constant and rudimentary ontological attestations." (6) The world comes into being in each instant simultaneously through these many "other origins." For Nancy, in a world of Rwanda, Bosnian Serbs, Tutsis, Hutus, etc. it is absolutely essential that we begin to feel and respect the proximity of all "other origins" that are creating the world simultaneously in each instant.

Several things in today's world are making us aware of this true nature of Being as "Being-with." Nancy observes that the crowdedness of the world, which is mirrored in the "spectacle" of mediatization (cf. megachurches), is merely Being "exposing" itself to itself as

Being-with. The spectacle of modern capitalist society, therefore, is, quite simply a wake-up call, a jolting reminder that we have missed the meaning of Being all along, i.e. that Being is Being Singular Plural, or Being-with. Likewise, the “retreat of the political,” of liberalism, communism, socialism, communitarianism, etc., in our time, is nothing short of “the uncovering, the ontological laying bare of Being-with.” (37) The fundamental “anxiety” of late modernism is the anxiety of being confronted head-on with the huge plurality of singular origins of the world, origins which have become “exposed” to one another so that we are now forced to think the “spacing” (with) of the world *against* its (self) domination.

Ultimately, Nancy says that he is searching for a form of compassion that is not a charity that “feeds upon itself,” but a “com-*passion*” which is “the contagion, the contact of being with one another in this turmoil.” Compassion, he goes on to say, “is not altruism, nor is it identification; it is the disturbance of a violent relatedness.” (xiii)

According to Nancy, in order for our being-together to avoid becoming a victim of (violent) ontologies of Being, the “we” as “with” must avoid being “the subject of its own representation.” (71) “We” must defy all forms of representation. Whereas for Nancy, this non-representable “we” is something like Nietzsche’s doctrine of “eternal recurrence,” one cannot help but wonder, from a Christian platform, whether this non-representable “we” which, as Nancy says, is “a *praxis*” and an “*ethos*,” might be theologically correlated to the resurrection. After all, what is the resurrection, if it is not a “with,” a “proximity” that is beyond representation, a communal *praxis* and *ethos* that defies ideology and conceptualization.

What is the relevance of an ontology of Being-with for preaching?

We might begin by underscoring what both Fosdick and Nancy raise up for our consideration: that preachers should be mindful that the fundamental “anxiety” of our time is the anxiety of “the we.” How can we move beyond feeble representations of “we” as “the self/same” and its “others” that ultimately have a violent form of sameness at its core (unity as unicity)? How can we move beyond a metaphysics of Being, in which “with” is only a sidebar. For preachers, this may mean that we must reconsider what constitutes the *praxis* and *ethos* of resurrection community? How do we need to rethink our ecclesiologies? How can we recast the theology of love, (especially charity) so that it moves beyond its facile modern representation as being “like the love of myself.”

Second, an ontology of Being-with has the potential to change the way that preachers think about their listeners. If each listener is, in actuality, an “other origin” of the world in which the preacher lives and speaks, and if that world is shared through our co-appearing with each other (on Sunday morning and beyond), then preachers should be somewhat humbled as to the sovereignty of their proclamations. They should be prepared to converse (speak with) and “co-laborate” (labor with) their hearers in every aspect of the homiletic process from sermon preparation to delivery and beyond. In fact, we could determine that, in Nancy’s words, what we are doing in preaching is “establish(ing) a certain origin of meaning, and connect(ing) it to an infinity of other possible origins.” (85) Ontologically, then, preaching could be seen as both “an intersection of singularities” and “the discrete exposition of their simultaneity.” (85)

At a still deeper level, preaching could be seen as an ontological event in which “humanity is, above all, essentially ex-posed in its being.” (85) As speaking-with (homily) and laboring-with (liturgy) preaching exposes Being for what it really is, Being-with, and it exposes human existence as both a “sharing” and a “crossing through.” (87) Preaching has long made itself subservient to the sovereignty of Being-itself, forcing itself into an isolation of the Same (preacher/tradition/scripture) with Others (listeners, public, world). If Jean-Luc Nancy is correct, then preaching may be able finally to return to what it has known itself to be at its deepest oracular level, what Nancy calls a “sharing of the origin at the origin, singular plural.” (86)