

FETHI BENSLAMA AND JEAN-LUC NANCY

Translated by Ed Pluth

TRANSLATIONS OF MONOTHEISMS

Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes¹: In his book entitled *Moses the Egyptian*, recently published in French, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann uses the phrase “the Mosaic distinction” to name Moses’ foundation of monotheism (a foundation that was sketched out, during a short period, by Akhenaton, and then repressed in Egyptian history). He shows that the refusal of translation is foundational to monotheism. The Mosaic distinction brings about a radical rupture in the continuum that constituted the basis of polytheisms, which led these to constantly inter-translate themselves. Does this logic of rupture with respect to a perspective on translation among cultures seem to you also to structure the relations among the three great monotheistic religions, or even the relation between monotheisms and other religions?

Jean-Luc Nancy: Indeed, I think this view on inter-translation or inter-translatability can allow us to tackle the question of monotheism. It must then be remarked that the inter-translation of ancient polytheisms, such as Jan Assmann presents it (I am not able to discuss this presentation here, which seems to me convincing), has two sides. On the one hand, it is opposed to the intra-translatability of monotheism (or, more precisely, monotheism is opposed to it, monotheism rises up against it). On the other hand, it is itself a new phenomenon, proper to Antiquity (more or less late; I will not enter into precise historical considerations here). It implies a similarity among gods, and consequently a sliding of identity toward function, and consequently the possible attribution of different names to similar functions. This is how the *interpretatio latina* of the Greek Pantheon was able to be brought about.² Finally, there is the divine function itself, general and generic, that can itself receive a generic and/or multipliable name, “Isis of ten thousand names,” for example (Assman, 49). This supposes that there was an earlier rupture with other “tribal” religions, in which the divinities are simultaneously less individualized and much more singularized, as divinities of a singular people. With Jewish monotheism, one would thus have a chiasm: the God of a single people, but very strongly individualized, while at the same time taking on all by himself the entire divine function (it remains to be seen,

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and this is undoubtedly the most important point, if this “divine function” is the same as the one in polytheisms, whether of the “tribal” or “ancient” type). Translatability thus supposes a position on the propriety of the proper name. This position is a response to a shift in the apprehension of language: a language that is in an underhanded fashion improper, the impossibility of a pure nomination, of expressing being by its name. The possibility of the debate in Plato’s *Cratylus* is found here. Within a polytheism that was already very translatable (I would even say, already translating itself ever since it was put into writing in myths, in Homer and Hesiod, displacing the address to the gods, nomination as address and cult, toward, let’s say, loosely, a “conceptual” nomination, naming the quality or function of god—thus, noticing that “Zeus” is “the day,” the light . . .). Plato, of course, is also the one who began to speak, sometimes, of “god” or of the “god” in the singular (“it is necessary to escape from this world toward god”—*o theos*—it is said in the *Theatetus*, in a passage whose translation poses a real problem: “the god,” “god,” “the divine”—which to choose? Certainly not “a god” in any case. I believe all the possibilities can be found in the diverse translations that exist).

It would thus be necessary to inquire into the mutation that is brought about in the ancient world, in which translatability makes for a considerable modification in the relation to “god,” a modification that allows a particular god, that of the Jews, already endowed with original traits, to give rise to a cultural cross-fertilization several centuries long, from which Christianity will emerge, and later Islam (and in the interim Manichaeism, another religion of “the Book”). What is remarkable to me is that this mutation accompanies a considerable change of civilization in which alphabetic writing on the one hand and commerce on the other, and finally the appearance of cities, forms, horizontally, networks of communication (internal and external) in contrast to the empires structured in hierarchical verticals (in the proper sense of “sacred authority”). All these traits put together could, perhaps, hastily, lead to this conclusion: the mutation is that of a language that from then on designates its own impropriety, one that makes being (or propriety) flee away from its grasp, or beyond its limit (which perhaps should even be put this way: from then on language is conceived of as a “grasp” or “seizure” rather than an “expression” of or “emanation” from the thing). “Communication” changes meaning: instead of words communicating something of being, they serve to communicate a meaning among its speakers. Translatability is then placed at the heart of language. (Babel is perhaps an echo of this phenomenon.)

As a consequence, monotheism is presented as something that puts the divine on the side of impropriety. The names no longer name gods, the divine escapes words, and monotheism posits what has “escaped” (we can come back later to the difference between the unpronounceable Jewish name and the Christian and Muslim names: this will be precisely an aspect of translatability or intra-translatability among monotheisms). What has escaped corresponds to the turn of language, and not to the sudden appearance of a mysterious unnamable being: the unnamable comes from the name conceived as a designator, replacing the name conceived as an address. If I

² Jan Assman, *Moses the Egyptian: the Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998) 45.

address myself to god, if I address myself to someone (in a call, prayer, summons, etc.), I am not concerned with designating him: I interpellate him, I invoke him. “Invoking” is not naming. Or, I “adore” him (which means, literally, I speak to him!). In this address, the “thou,” [*tu*] (“Oh God, I ask of you” [*je te prie*])—“Hosanna!” which signifies approximately “save us now!”) counts as much if not more than the name of god. Now, the address as such, of course, is not to be translated. (But it can communicate something of its force, its emotion.) I stop here in order to let Fethi respond.

Fethi Benslama: Before getting to what you are saying about “the mutation of language” brought about by the Mosaic distinction, I will make some general remarks about Assmann’s book. This book sheds new light on the process of the deconstruction of monotheisms as it is affirmed in the nineteenth century, while exploring one of the modern idealities of the production of the history of religion in the West, that which is constituted around the antinomy *Israel/Egypt*. This exploration is carried out by a method that is inspired by the Freudian perspective. It is inspired by Freud to the extent that it aims at a *history of remembering* that calls upon the concept of “repression” rather than on a history of facts. It sheds light at the same time on Freud’s most enigmatic book, *Moses and Monotheism*, and validates certain hypotheses in it that seemed to Freud’s own eyes very weak. “Freud is the one who restored the suppressed evidence, who was able to retrieve lost memories and to finally complete and rectify the picture of Egypt,” Assmann writes (Assmann, 216). The rediscovery of Akhenaton will have been, in sum, a return of the repressed that allows us to read the case for Moses as an Egyptian. From this point of view, J. Assmann carries out something like a psychoanalytic thinking of historicity: human memory cannot only be understood from the perspective of a history of consciousness and its constructions, especially when it is a question of events that affect our relation to alterity, such as the fall of the gods; human memory is not perfected by a knowledge of the completed past, but depends on a time saturated by a “now-time,” as Benjamin writes in his developments on the concept of history.³ This saturation by “now-time” is the site of memory for psychoanalysis, the site of a temporal block in which the experience of the past and its writing takes place. Recollection bursts the continuity of history and the linearity of the past, and it is in this sense a leap into the anachronistic, thanks to which the event is appropriated and inscribed. Assmann proposes thinking of the event that he calls “the Mosaic distinction” by understanding memory this way. This act of an intransigence, severity and unheard of intolerance cannot have taken place and been perpetuated except under an irrepressible and durable pressure. It is thus that I understand the interpretation you propose of “the Mosaic distinction” as a “mutation of language.” What you identify as traits of this mutation—a language that designates its own impropriety, the divine escaping from words, the change of register of the unnamable, etc.—assumes, it seems to me, the passage or the retreat of the divine into the register of the real. The elements that Assmann provides show that this passage was brought about by a process of extreme purification: a purification of the

³ The French is “à-présent,” probably for the German “*jetztzeit*,” found in Benjamin [Trans. note].

divine from the world, its purification from the natural and imaginary bodies in which cosmotheism had infused it. The difference between the inscription at Saïs—"I am all that is"—and the one who speaks in the Bible, saying "I am he who is," shows us the operation of an abolition of the referent (in the cosmos) in favor of a pure self-reference [*auto-référentiel*]. There are two consequences to this. On the one hand, an extraordinary concentration of the divine into the order of psychic representation, whereas in cosmotheism it was in some sense more "hystericized," since it was the object of a conversion in the evidence of things; on the other hand, because of the fact that it became purely mental, it escapes evidence, which leads to doubt, anxiety, and fright, since such is the attitude of men in relation to what takes place in the real. Whence, as an after-effect, the pressure to over-symbolize the divine in monotheism, with the aim of attenuating doubt and anxiety. In fact, the change of direction in monotheism can be considered on this basis as a radicalization of obsessional neurosis in civilization, because all of these mechanisms—the purification of the divine from the world, its concentration into a psychic representation, doubt, over-symbolization—belong to the obsessional process that does not come without a logicization and a ratiocination without respite. It is the end of the free association of the gods, which is a corollary to the breakdown of their translation. In the place of inter-translation comes an intra-translation made of ruminations, misgivings, and logical sophistications regarding the one who, by his concealment, flooded psychic space. The soul is no longer anything but the representation of the representation of god. But something like a melancholization of the general regime of representation must have been produced, because this absolute act of retreat into the register of the real had to go through the death of the divine—and the death of god is perhaps nothing other than the very advent of monotheism—for which the psyche became the hidden tomb, or the crypt. The obsessional logic as far as death and the ideal goes is not left behind. The question that can be posed here concerns the attitude of the three monotheist religions with respect to this god withdrawn into the register of the real: that is, the question of the over-symbolizing organizations that are invented about him.

Jean-Luc Nancy: For our exchange we should, in fact, get to the question of the relations among the three monotheisms, and I am going to try to get us there. But first I want to remark that, in terms different from mine because you are speaking from the point of view of psychoanalysis, you confirm what I am thinking, which depends in fact on the "melancholization" of a certain epoch in the West. Now, this idea appears in Freud, in *Moses*, who takes it up from a historian (I forget who it was). In my opinion this is a very significant point, because it means that Judeo-Christianity, and then Islam, did not fall from the sky (of course not!) but were products, called for or enabled by a general state of the culture. It involves as well the entire historical movement that links Mosaic Judaism to an epoch of Hellenized Judaism, then to Judeo-Christianity, and from there to Christianity, to its Eastern and Roman success, and later, in a milieu in which the traces of this entire history are present, the birth of Islam. This requires us to think this entire history in a manner other than how it is always thought by a rationalism according to which it would just be a matter of unfortunate and extrinsic accidents to the grand movement of *logos*.

And to add just a word about Freud: when he takes a moment of history into account like this, and says that “a great sadness seems to have taken hold of the people of the Mediterranean,” he suggests a “psychoanalysis” of civilization: a psychoanalysis of that whose “discontent” is not, according to him, amenable to the psychoanalytic cure—and for good reason!⁴ But with respect to which, also, he remarks, that the commandment of Christian love is the clearest (and most impotent) affirmation of a protest against human violence (in *Civilization and Its Discontents*). There is a line of thinking here that it would be interesting to pursue elsewhere: psychoanalysis stops at the edge of civilization as such, and can only designate beyond its own impotence, another impotence—that of religion.

But I come back to the three monotheisms and their relations to the name of God, to focus on just that point for now. On the one hand, what they have in common is the uniqueness of God, and consequently also the loss of specificity: he is not the god of this or that, he is God of a people (in the Jewish stage). But this particular god, as the only true god, is distinguished from all others, which is something new. Then he becomes universal in Christianity, and likewise in Islam. There follow three ways of naming this God, if I can so describe an operation that cancels out the “proper” name in order to bring about something else. There are three main forms: an unpronounceable name (YHWH), revealed to Moses for his people alone, whose meaning revolves around “I am” (I am skipping over the whole discussion on this point); this name is doubled by other designations (Elohim, the plural of the very ancient name of a superior god, El Adonai, which is “lord,” etc.) that always refer to a position of uniqueness and supremacy and never to a particular function (Yahweh Sabaoth is indeed “Yahweh of the armies” but for one thing this is a rather rare appellation, and for another it still needs to be interpreted: it is still about omnipotence, and is not, like Ares, a god proper to war alone). Second form: the appearance of “God” *tout court* (as in Plato there was the singular *o theos*, rather strange in the Greek context . . .). He is also “Father” or “Lord,” but without going back over these designations here, I just want to point out that the proper name became absolutely improper, because it was common. “God” only states the divine quality, removed from any precise god: here begins the possibility and the necessity of a work on the divine name (in Pseudo-Dionysus on up to Thomas Aquinas and beyond). What does this name say? Does it grab on to anything significant in the word that it summons up, or does it instead dissolve every signification? Finally, Allah: Allah, for its part, brings together something of El, and, according to Youssef Seddik (I refer to him, not knowing if he is the only one to have made this assertion) of Allat, a pre-Islamic goddess.⁵ It is very close to “God,” that is, to the common name becoming proper. Moreover, the formula “there is no other god but God” marks this well. At the same time, this is the God who accrues all the names up to a

⁴ Nancy seems to be referring to the following passage from Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*: “The consciousness of guilt in that epoch was no longer restricted to the Jews; it had seized all Mediterranean peoples as a vague discomfort, a premonition of misfortune, the reason for which no one knew.” Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (London: Vintage, 1967), 174. [Trans. note].

⁵ Seddik, Youssef, *Le Coran, autre lecture, autre traduction* (Barzakh/Editions de l’Aube, 2002).

hundred, the hundredth being inaccessible to us. It handles by the accumulation of excellences (the powerful, the generous, the superb etc.) what the preceding handled by the reduction to "God." There is thus something like a dialectic here: a name, no name, a name that sublates all the names—but always in fact a nomination tending toward a beyond of any personal name, toward an over-nomination of the qualities of being in general; the perfection of power, of goodness, and truth. A remarkable ambivalence is produced by this: everything leads to Being in itself, the Supreme Being conceived as the Producer of all being (creator: the concept proper to monotheism), and thus toward what philosophy can make of it, which no longer has anything to do with a person, nor, finally, with a god. The history of philosophy from Descartes (at least) to Kant is the history of the trouble created by this pseudo-concept and its ultimate liquidation. But on the other side of the ambivalence there is, on the contrary, the unique person who is in charge of the world, and with whom there can be a relation . . .

Fethi Benslama: Firstly, it seems to me important to be more precise about the name of God in Islam. Seddik's interpretation is original, but is not confirmed by lexicographers and historical studies. And because of its brevity (in *Le Coran, autre lecture, autre traduction*), it even risks blurring the monotheistic operation of the founder of Islam, because it could allow one to suppose that the Islamic Allah is very close to the pre-Islamic Allah, if not the same. Now, this is not the case at all of course. The use of the same term hides a shift that passes from the name to what you correctly call "a naming." Allah was certainly the supreme god of the pre-Islamic pantheon, but he shared his powers with other very numerous divinities, some of whom were frequently called upon and even eclipsed him. It has been established that in the course of the history of Arab paganism, this masculine god supplanted the god "Lune" and took over the divine qualities of the maternal feminine on behalf of a creator god. Let's note that the schema of this passage (from the evidence of the maternal to the in-evidence of paternity) is underlined by Freud as being correlative to monotheism and the progress it would accomplish in the spiritual domain.

In fact, at the beginning of Muhammad's preaching, the name Allah is not mentioned in the Qur'an! Nor is it mentioned in the course of what is called the first Meccan period, and also not in the second. The names of god that appear at this time are those of "Lord," "Powerful," "Generous," etc. It is only later that the word "Allah" suddenly appears and is systematized in the Qur'an. This usage coincides with the intensification of the conflict with the polytheistic Arabs, who objected to Muhammad that unlike their divinities, whose names gave some idea of their qualities, his did not have any precise ones at all. Whence the following Qur'anic reply, which appears in different places: "these are only names which you and your father have invented" (XII, 40). This is basically in line, then, with a naming that is a loss of the power of the name ("these are only . . .") or perhaps something like a sublimation of the name. This operation finds its ultimate origin in the fact that, in Arabic, "Allah" comes from "*ilah*" which designates "god," to which the definite article, "*Al*," has been added. Grammarians emphasize that the elision of the "i," or its contraction, makes Allah into "the god" (which one could write all at once as Thegod). Outwardly we have the same name, but the passage from Allah the

supreme god and Allah as unique “*Thegod*” is a hollowing out of the name, in the sense that the sound “Allah” no longer possesses any conventional signification. This is what made Joseph Chelhod write, in *Les structures du sacré chez les Arabes*: “If the Jews gave to their supreme god a name that is not one (*Yahweh*, the one who is), the Arabs left theirs practically without a name. Allah would be in fact simply a contraction of *al-ilah*, the god.”⁶

But what does this entail? The proper name “Allah,” despite all this, still does not become common, because no one can be called Allah. *It is no longer either proper or common*. In other words, it is beyond nomenclature, or else to the extent that its trace subsists in discourse, it corresponds to a hole in nomenclature. It is at this point, at the hole, then, that I take up again the formulation that I proposed of a god who passes into the register of the real. Does this formulation not also have a philosophical relevance? For example, that this mutation in language reveals a “there is” that is independent of the objective scope of the subject, escaping from the subjectivity of the thinking subject. Is there not here a decisive orientation toward a real that is at the origin of scientific knowledge? This is perhaps what leads philosophy to aim for a reconciliation of reason with the real, even to the Hegelian saying about the identity of the real and the rational.

The question I ask myself is the following: does Islam, beginning with the Mosaic acquisition, not push the sublimation of the name of God to the point of leaving a gaping hole in the real? The 99 names of god would only be the edge of this hole. Here is what Chelhod has to say about this: “The Muslims are persuaded that if one succeeded in finding it (the one hundredth name), one could revive the dead, tame the elements, and move at will all of nature” (Chelhod, 100). The lack of a name certainly corresponds to a real that is unable to be mastered.

I reformulate my proposition: the Mosaic counterattack to the translation of the gods reveals the untranslatable as an unbearable real, one that is the effect of a fundamental melancholization due to the encounter of god as real. Three ways of affirming and at the same time covering up this real appear: in a sense, three sorts of malaise that contain the marks of a defense against the melancholia due to the divine. In the case of Judaism, a detour that privileges the law with the ethical development that we all know (the oral law and the written law), but also a legislative extremism with respect to which the Messianic utopia can be seen as an attempt at liberation. In the case of Islam, this detour is in some respects similar to Judaism, but it passes rather by the letter in its function as the border of the real (the letter is “*harf*,” edge, coastline [*littoral*]). There is in Islam an ethic and an aesthetics of the letter, but also an extremism residing in this literalism. The magnitude of Sufism signals an attempt at liberation from this. As for Christianity, I see in it an attempt to get away from the melancholic cruelty of god: certainly by means of love, but this is sustained by an operation that brings god back to the body, makes him die and resurrects him, as if one wanted to substitute mourning for melancholia. Christianity’s extremism goes right at the body, because incorporation is, nonetheless, an extraordinary imaginization of the monotheistic real, weakening its

⁶ Joseph Chelhod, *Les structures du sacré chez les Arabes* (Maisonneuve et Larose, 1964) 7.

rigor, and thus opening the possibility of another treatment of this real. In this sense, the only true humanism is Christian, including this shift in the name towards the name of the father. I wonder if we should explore the track of melancholia further . . .

Jean-Luc Nancy: Reacting immediately to your last words, I will say that for me it is not the “melancholic track” that is the one to follow, because it seems to me to be burdened by a serious flaw, which is to suppose that there is melancholia (or mourning), that there is, first and foremost, loss. Now, the change that leads to monotheism is only a loss insofar as there was something that one can designate in the same order as the one in which the beyond or simply the aftermath of the loss is designated. When someone dies, he is no longer there and his empty place can be shown.

(In all that we are discussing, certainly nothing else is at stake but the relation to death. But precisely, the divinity who assures this relation, whether well or poorly, cannot, himself, die. “God is dead” is only, for Nietzsche himself, properly speaking, an affirmation that applies to the moral God. And the “departure” or “retreat” of the gods of polytheisms is not a death. I do not have a word, incidentally, for these grand mutations in humanity . . . “Revolutions,” definitely, in the cosmological sense: humanity turning in varied orbits, bending itself around the black hole of death, of his own death and the death of the world.)

To get back to what I was saying: the “loss”—or absencing, retreat, passage into the “real” as “impossible,” etc.—presupposes a presence or a prior fullness, and what’s more, a presence situated in a register that is homogeneous to that of absence. But I was trying to say, for example, that the gods of polytheisms are not “present” either (while I did say it often, I know, in order to try to grasp the phenomenon . . .) and that every god is in absence—or in the real—but that each one gives to this absence, or this real, different properties—force, for example, or else desire or love (I conflate the two terms here, but at any rate, what is unchanging is that the triple monotheistic god has a desiring or amorous affair with men and the world, whereas the other gods have no such thing: they have relations to forces, often also erotic, but not the stuff of love).

All of this needs to be considered step by step, and for the moment I would rather stay on the track of the names of God and their (un)translatability, following the original proposition for our dialogue. Before doing this, I will just add a few words about the other point in your last reply, because it goes back to what I just said: I am struck to see you use the words “spiritual progress” with regard to monotheism (you seem to take them from Freud, and I do not doubt that he uses them: my question thus pertains to him too). These words form a *topos* of every discourse on the advent of monotheism with the slightest historical, pre-historical, or para-historical scope. In a parallel manner, there is a *topos* of “progress” towards “reason,” to which the history of the Mediterranean world from Sumer to Athens, including Memphis, Apamee, or even Ephesus, is supposed to testify. Now, this seems to me very weak since the measure of “progress” is only given from an endpoint or destination. This point is us, the civilization that is today globalized—and perhaps precisely for that

reason on the verge of a new “revolution” that would completely liquidate the appearance of a goal, a destination, that the ideas of “reason,” “spirituality,” “ethical life” take on for us . . . This spontaneous tendency to wed “spiritual progress” to the “loss of the gods” is remarkable for its overt contradiction. Perhaps it can be said that the question is to know whether this contradiction must be—and can be—taken on as such, head on, as an inevitable fate of our modern destiny, or else whether, on the contrary, it is necessary to displace it, complicate it, or who knows what. For my part, I just want to emphasize the following: there is a contradiction at the same time as it is strictly impossible to say what “progress” would be, and the same goes for what we are supposed to have “lost.”

But getting back to the divine names: you have not said much about Christianity, and nothing at all about the name of Jesus. Now, it is striking that three “sublimated,” as you say, names enter into play here (by the way, this is a category that is not very clear to me, and I would like to talk about it some more)—because there are three of them, if the Christian “God” is first to be completely named, opening the way for “*al-ilah*.” And do not forget that Christianity gave rise very early on (in Pseudo-Dionysius on up to Saint Thomas, Eckhart and beyond) to an interminable reflection on the name or name(s) of the divine(s), on the possibilities or impossibilities of extracting from the word “god” (*theos*, *deus*—the name of Zeus is there too!) some clues about “God.” Behind all this there is even this “*theos*” in the singular, of which Plato speaks here and there. But at the same time, in this perhaps most radical absence of a name (in the sense that the common name remains there in some way more banally and manifestly common than in the case of *Allah*, but this is a tricky comparison, and is precisely a point about translatability: we could return to this), something else emerges: the name of a man, Jesus, followed by an ancient Jewish honorific, “the Messiah.” Let’s set the Messiah aside for the moment, and stick to the proper name: he is a man, and he is god at the same time. All the debates of the first centuries will work towards establishing and consolidating this “double nature.” But in it the god, or God, disappears—one could say that the distancing or absenting (what I like to call an *absentheism*) happens in the mortal body and not in a distant immortal absolute. Is it a “death and resurrection” in the sense that we usually understand? I am not sure. The “resurrection”—an idea already present in Judaism, then passed on from Christianity into Islam—must be analyzed as something completely other than a regeneration or reviviscence. It is another dimension of life—and of death, and without leaving death behind.

Jesus is the “son of God,” but what does one mean by that (by this absolute scandal for the Jews and the Muslims)? *Genitum, non factum*—says the *Credo*—and *consubstantialiē Patri*. Paternity is opposed to fabrication. Engendering means identity of substance: an implementation of divine substance in its human and mortal retreat.

I refrain from going further in this direction, and get back to our guiding thread: can these divine names or these non-names be translated among each other? It appears at first sight that there is a common kernel of sense that does allow for translation: it is “god” as unique and withdrawn. God of Abraham, of Jesus and Muhammad, one can say, to irritate Pascal (“god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God of Jesus Christ!”). But

precisely this translatable or translating kernel, which would allow us to go from one moment to the other of the three monotheisms represents untranslatability itself, in a manner that is completely different from the untranslatability of the most ancient gods (when the god of a tribe is so foreign to the god of another that their names have no way of being put into relation). It is the untranslatability into a *proper name* of the *common name* “god,” which is a common name and the name common to these gods; to the three but also perhaps to all the gods. This untranslatable translatability is what the “people of the Book” (as the Qur’an says) have in common, and at the same time it is the incommensurability of the three religions, because each nicknames what the three together name or un-name. Three nicknames: Yhwh, Jesus, Allah. Three nicknames for the same non-name or beyond-name. Each inevitably tends to seize hold of itself again while turning back in on itself, while at the same time identifying itself as the god-of-those-who-profess-his-name. But that only ever makes for a virtual people, and one virtually universal: that is, not a people, and not a god . . .

There is at least this result: the name “god” is always there, at the place of every divine name, but it marks this place with an ineffaceable, intractable and untranslatable, unpronounceable but necessary name. Can one think a bit more about what is going on with this name (of the) without name? And of the distance or opposition that necessarily occurs if three (or at least two) names appear in this same place? And how to think this triplicity that has remained unshaken for fourteen centuries? (Previously, there was what some have called the fourth religion of the Book, Manichaeism: I note that it disappeared, in sum, rather quickly. As if the third was not the right one, and another third was needed, which would come later . . . I am not trying to construct a Trinitarian or triadic and/or dialectic speculation here, but this grand architecture of the whole intrigues me.)

Fethi Benslama: Your response is swirling with paradoxes. But this is not without a relation to the heart of the matter concerning the Christian god. You reject loss, but about the nature of Jesus you say: “But in it the god, or God, disappears—one could say that the distancing or absenting (what I like to call an *absentism*) happens in the mortal body and not in a distant immortal absolute.” There really is here the idea of a loss that increases, that changes registers according to a historical, and for that matter dialectical, movement. We are not far from what Freud understands by the notion of “spiritual progress.” I share your reservations about the notion of progress in a general fashion (see Benjamin’s pages on history). However, for Freud the progress is without a program, or else it results from a ceaselessly thwarted program, ending up in sometimes insurmountable paradoxes. See on this point *Civilization and its Discontents* and *The Future of an Illusion*. One could say this: the progress that he points to in monotheism is one that is a product of the stripping down of the representation of absence, but I would say rather of *lack*. And moreover, it is curious that we have not spoken of the representation of God (while what you say about representation in *Au fond de l’image* could be brought in here).⁷ This stripping down of the representation of God in monotheism leads to the question of the real, that is,

⁷ English translation is *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) [Trans. note].

to what will be the object of science. Now, nothing lacks in the real (this phrase designates simultaneously the real of science and also the God of fullness in monotheism); it is when the real is designated by the signifier that it becomes a lack. In other words, a symbol is required to evoke absence. We are perhaps in agreement that it is not so much at the level of what lacks that something happens with monotheism, but rather in relation to the signifying or symbolizing function. We agree that God has always absented himself just as much in polytheism, which is a mode of representation and preservation of the lack. The step monotheism takes, and first of all with Moses, aims at the preservation of the lack with respect to its representation, by formulating an objection to it. What does it say? That men construct a representation of the lack in order to posit it at the origin of their existence, but the representation of the lack takes the place of the lack, or covers it up. Thus, the lack lacks. One thus sees here that whatever the mode of signifying the lack is, one always lacks it, including its name and especially its proper name. In short, there is a sort of unveiling of the function of language, as something that is always a construction with respect to the lack, the impossible, absence, etc.; a construction that risks concealing the essential lack. By doing this, monotheism opens up the possibility of the deconstruction of what is by men called, designated, named, and signified by the term "God." The One is thus not an attribute, but the inhuman (or the human that lacks, what lacks to the human) that makes possible human constructions. What Freud designates as a spiritual progress is this deconstruction of the representation of the lack that occurs with monotheism.

Along these lines, here is how I consider the position of Jesus. What appears through this name, in distinction to that of Yhwh and Allah, is the manifestation of lack in a clearly singular form; not only human, but of someone, whereas the name of God in Judaism and in Islam relates itself to no one. From this point of view, one should not be content with saying that Jesus is the incarnation of God, but rather the incarnation of lack by *someone*. That someone is the lack in his very body and at the same time its symbol; this is what perhaps characterizes the revelation of "Jesus." What man lacks, man who lacks, the inhuman and the human become inextricable; and for each case, in someone. There is more than God in Jesus. Let's note here that for Ibn Arabî, Jesus is the symbol of the infusion of the real in the imaginary. There would be God, man, and what brings them together.

Freud takes on this affair from the point of view of the genealogy of the subject. He shows that for everyone the event of lack resides in the loss of the absolute object of desire. God emerges, in sum, when he no longer is. No one ever gets over this, since one never ceases putting some kind of object, or someone—a representation, a name, a signifier of an unnamable—there where there is a hole becoming a lack, by the symbol, or a fullness, by the imaginary. This is why one never ceases killing God, even though it is too late, he is already dead, and it is always already too late, but it must be done again each time, for everyone. Freud takes different routes in order to try to translate this complexity. He takes the imaginary way of the father (God would be the lack of a father, a nostalgia for him, and in *Totem and Taboo* the father is the man who lacks, the minus one), but he also takes the acquisition of language, considering this event to be an access to the "no" (to negation). Lacan, for his part,

takes up the question by thinking of the father, contra Freud, on the basis of God, considering that God is unconscious—and for good reason, since this is required by linguistic structure. In short, none of this is a simple progressivism. It is something else. What is it? The coming of deconstruction by means of monotheism, which, by stripping down the representation of God leaves open the possibility of thinking that the real is apprehended in three ways: through the real as such, the symbol, and the imaginary.

Islamic theosophy is going to build a theory around this, as if it had taken note of what took place with the name of Jesus. Thus, in the case of Ibn Arabî, one passes from the famous profession of faith, “*Lâ ilâha illâ allâh*” (there is no god but God) to the formula that, in his eyes, saves monotheism from the (poorly understood) paradox opened up by Christianity, namely, “*Layas fi’l-wojûd siwa Allâh*,” or, “in being there is only God.” If I understand correctly, this formula posits that the One is at the level of being (*wujûd*), of which names are the nostalgia, which comes to incarnate itself in the plurality of beings (*al-mawjûd*). Again, the track of melancholia appears here. Ibn Arabî theorizes it this way: he notes that if “Allah” is composed of the word “*ilâh*,” this term stems from the root “*wlh*,” which signifies principally adoration, but also being in stupefaction, an inability to be afraid, taking refuge with someone, according protection and security . . . And to accentuate in this etymology of adoration the sense of being sad, being overcome with sadness, sighing. The name of Allah would thus testify to a god of pathos. And the divine pathos originates in the lack of a name, since the One that is not an attribute has no name. The name thus still testifies to the lack of name.

Jean-Luc Nancy: I am just going to try to present very quickly a few of the reactions to your reply that are important for me—awaiting the chance to take this all up again at my leisure!

First of all, the question of “loss” or “lack” or “absence.” This is in fact a very delicate matter, and I would agree that I came close to a contradiction. However I want to distinguish loss (necessarily of something) as strongly as possible from absence, which I would like to say is “of nothing,” but is itself a mode of presence. The entire theme of lack seems to me burdened by a background of “fullness.” Now, the monotheistic god does not arrive on the basis of the loss of the other gods, but he completely changes the mode of divine presence. Having said that, if we want to succeed in saying that in a manner that is not only negative (loss, lack, which are also *de facto* representations that seem to be ineluctably Western), we must elaborate on “presence” otherwise than as being-present, what is posited-there, the given and also the present-to-itself. Philosophy since Heidegger and Derrida is occupied with nothing other than this. And it can be shown that theology has a role to play in this (especially a certain mystical theology). But that only reopens the question—or not the question but the call to the name “god”: what can he still want of us?

But I leave all that in the background to say this: it is at least normal that one finds philosophy again here, as you do in speaking of “deconstruction.” This concept aims above all at presence: what is to be deconstructed or what deconstructs itself is presence under the triple modality of the in-itself, the to-itself, and the for-another; in

other words, substance, subject, and (represented) object. Because of this, the God-Presence who was the substance, subject, and object of metaphysics (as much as of the religious assertions of these same metaphysics) . . . it is because of this, then, that he is dead: his death is programmed by the monotheistic “god.” Where does he go? That is to say, also, where does he absent himself, or does he lose the divine—and which departure does he take?

If I have understood you correctly, Jesus would represent simultaneously an exposition of lack and a completion of it by the imaginary. Very well. And according to Ibn Arabî, as you read him, there would not be this imaginary completion, but the necessary “nostalgia.” That forms, first of all, to pick up the thread of the point of departure of our dialogue, a frontier of untranslatability, perhaps. And it would also be necessary to draw the Jewish God’s boundary line there—but which? At least, seeing it on this side of the Muslim-Christian divide, such as you sketch it out. On this side, or beyond, but when it is beyond—I mean, the most manifestly outside of religion, as Judaism seems to have been by far the most able to make it (through Spinoza, Marx, Freud, at least)—does it not reconstitute a name, that of “Jew”? It would thus be necessary again to be able to name. It is not an accident if it was a question of ridding humanity of this name and all those who bore it, or those who wanted them to bear it even while they sometimes abandoned it. An affair of the “real,” the real of the name, the name of a certainly tangible and destructible real?

I would like, finally, to evoke just this: my difference with you would consist of the fact that I could not be content with the Lacanian tripartition, at least not without considerably reworking the *partition* (the division—and the contrapuntal composition). Is the imaginary-Jesus so full? Is the Symbolic-one so empty? Is the real-without-name so consistent in its retreat? I will evoke here just another category: that of the *sign* in the sense of “signal” in the German *Wink* or our *wink* [*clin (d’oeil)*] which is also *twinkling/blink*ing. An indication without signification, a warning (and at the same time the simple distention of a flashing and of the space around it: a beating/fluttering, an opening/closing). Now, “god”—*dies*—designates the separation day/night: nothing other than the difference or gap. Neither presence nor absence. But I said we needed to finish with that. Excuse me, here is what comes to mind: *clin-dieu* . . . (untranslatable, even in French . . .).⁸

Fethi Benslama: I take seriously what has arrived with “clin-dieu.” It shifts the name “god” away from the field of reference and self-reference. The term is attached to a tacit gesture of the body on this side of, or beyond, sense, but which can still receive it. If I keep going in this direction, I would say that the pulsating sign can be applied to the whole of the body and more particularly to the body with orifices, where, for the child, the most enigmatic apprehension of alterity is at stake. I think also of the way in which we are communicating, in computer code, 0/1, so-called binary, whereas what is not counted or is not taken into account (because it is not countable) is what is between. Between empty and full, between day/night, open/closed, etc. You call that a gap/interval or distancing. I propose leaning it toward the question of

⁸ This neologism, sounding strongly like the French for “wink” used earlier, suggests a winking/signaling/flashing/disappearing God [Trans. note].

the *neutral*. The neutral escapes the negative and the positive, the open and the closed, light and darkness, the visible and the invisible, and in a general fashion possibility, choice, determination, identity, and being displayed. The neutral is without will, without orientation, without ownness, without name: something transparent under the imminence of an appearance, a transposition, an inscription, a sense. The neutral as a condition of translatability is untranslatable. Now, the without will of the neutral is unbearable. It is the silent source of the most radical anxiety, which arouses in us the question: is there someone there? What does he want of me?

What is reserved in your phrase: . . . *the call to the name 'god': what can he still want of us?*” seems to me to be the question of the neutral that has been at work since the beginning of our exchange. In general, everything that is stated, pronounced, or proclaimed “in the name of” (including the Republic and the People) calls upon a will that wants to finish with the non-willing of the neutral. Then to your question—*what can he still want of us?*—abruptly, I would say: he cannot say what he wants, and this is the problem. Not that he does not want, but that he does not have a will. The call of the name of God cannot produce any homogenous will: love and hate, life and death, withdrawal (of melancholy) and projection (of paranoia) surrender to it without decision. That to which the call calls is indecision, but the indecision of the neutral that we must receive is unbearable; it summons the twist, the detour, the trajectory, the sense/direction, the name, the reference. The neutral is perhaps the archaic without *arkhé*, the disorientated jumble; it is probably what Freud designates by “id.”

I leave the subject out of this, because there is the justified suspicion that it belongs to the metaphysics of presence, even though psychoanalysis aims to break away from that. Let's say that there is an Id barred from sense: in other words, on this side of willing and being able to say. A mouth that opens and closes. The cry is already something other than the movement of the mouth; it is already a trace. But we know that there is a saying that precedes it and exceeds it, one that will take body on the basis of the name. The dice throw of the name does not abolish the neutral, but indicates it being subject to the will, or the will to reserve it. At this stage, presence and absence are not contraries but are given the same time. For example, the object (the mother) is absent to perception; memory not only calls upon her, but hallucinates her. Presence and absence coexist, because satisfaction couldn't care less: it wants the non-willing of the neutral. That can go on forever unless the emergence of a necessity stops the addiction to the non-willing of the neutral. What stops it is what one can think of as not wanting to die before one's death, not letting oneself die by the neutral or to the neutral. In short, there is a death by the neutral and a death according to one's death. Necessity is this element of non-homogenous death, of death as heterogenization and appropriation: what happens here is a sacrifice to the neutral that is consciousness. The neutral is kept, however, or becomes the support of appearance. At the level of perception, presence and absence are alternatives, whereas at the level of memory they are simultaneous. The partition of the neutral comes to someone with *its/his/her* death. Thus, it orients the archaic of the neutral. Death in the Id is not able to be represented (there is no representation of its death in

the Unconscious) because according to the neutral, death is not. But there is a representation of its/her/his death in consciousness. Death does not give itself according to the neutral or at the level of the Id; it gives itself at the same time at the level of an Its [*Sa*] (the I as necessity of appropriated death). Not-dead/dead: this is another movement of the mouth.

It seems to me that what religion invokes by the name of god is what remains in death after the orientation; that is, after being put into sense. Here, the term “god” is the name of the occultation of the neutral. What we are aiming for, it seems to me, is the neutral as a suspension of identification, one that falls short of any “*genos*” whether it be Jew, Christian, or Muslim, and what is not able to be assimilated either to the universal or to being.

To close, I copy here a fragment of an interview with an adolescent of Muslim parentage. I find that this adolescent has a strong intuition of what is at stake here:

The first time I entered a church, I must have been six or seven years old, I saw Christ on the cross with the nails, the blood, and his sleepy child-like face. I did not understand why such a thing was in the church, why there were all these images. I was only familiar with mosques in Tunisia and there is nothing inside them. I asked the friends I was with and they made fun of my ignorance, and one of them told me that it is God who died on the Cross. Another told me that it was the son of God, the other, the father. It wasn't clear at all: God or the son of God or the father? This was not what I learned at home. So I asked my father. I asked him: so it appears that God is dead and that we haven't heard yet? No, I don't think I said it like that, I wouldn't have dared. I did not even manage to say it in Arabic. It is not possible to say in Arabic “God is dead”; we do have the words for it, but one cannot translate it like that. I must have said in French: why is the God of the Church dead, or something like that. He told me, for us Muslims God never dies, he is not engendered and he has neither father nor mother, and he is neither a father nor a mother nor a son nor a sister. There is a phrase from the Qur'an that says this quite clearly. Okay, so then why do so many people believe that? Are they crazy? He told me that this was their faith, and in this faith it is the truth. I said to him: so there are many truths, but which one is right? He told me, calmly, that we think it is ours, and they think it is theirs. This was a bit awkward; I said, but why isn't there a single truth for everyone? He said it was because we're all different. Then I asked him a very stupid question, I think just to annoy him: and why are we all different? He told me that I was being a real pain, and said something like: look at you and me, we aren't the same and yet you are my son. Even your two hands are not the same. It wasn't bad, but he messed up afterwards, because he added: there is one God for all. I said nothing, but I thought that it was false. If there was one God for all, why were there so many with their own bit of truth? I thought about my two hands a lot after that, which struck me the most. He and I are not the same, that seemed rather understandable and moreover it's a good thing, but the hands, well, then I looked at my hands in another way. It is obvious, though. But if the left hand does not believe the same thing as the right hand .

. . well, they come together all the same . . . Well, this story of the hands was hard to swallow. One day, years later, I was making a drawing that I kept messing up. I had used many pages, and the story of the hands came back to me. I told myself all of a sudden, if there are so many beliefs, gods, truths, and everyone comes up with their own story, there must be a very very long blank page, and everyone can write on it what he wants. And they all mess up their drawings, which means that there is another who can start it up again, and so on and so on, without end. The truth for all is perhaps the blank page. That's the "God for all" of my father. Well, he didn't think that . . . or maybe he did, who knows? Me, I believe that I put my finger on something very important: God is like a blank page . . . or black, anyway, one can write on it what one wants and it is always there . . . but one does not see it, one only sees the scribbles. I told that to my philosophy professor, and he told me I was an atheist. I don't think so, since I believe in the blank page. The drawing is what makes one Muslim, or Jewish, or Christian. Well, maybe it is a bit crazy, but not any more than anything else; it is something transparent, it doesn't hurt anyone . . .