

A Response to James Fredericks

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It is always satisfying to read a review of your work in which the reviewer has understood and addressed with pointed critical analysis some of the major points you are trying to make. This is what I found in reading James Fredericks' very well written, careful and challenging review of my *Spirituality and Emptiness*. In his review, Fredericks has emphasized one very central issue which I have explored in some detail in my book. I would like in this response to his review to sharpen the issue and to answer some of the questions he has raised.

In *Spirituality and Emptiness*, I have tried to focus on points of similarity between views concerning spirituality held by members of the Kyoto School and by spiritual writers within the Christian tradition. I have attempted to trace ways in which Christianity can draw on the philosophies and language of the Kyoto School in order to develop a more universal, and thus less strictly Western, self-understanding and self-expression in the field of spirituality. However, in this comparative process I have also tried to be careful to explore some of the significant differences between both traditions and it is at this point that Fredericks raises some very interesting questions.

The particular issue behind many of his questions has to do with what he perceives as my sense that neither Kitaro Nishida nor Hajime Tanabe have come to grips adequately with either the Christian mystical experience of God or its theological expression. While there are many very positive things that one can learn from both philosophers about the nature of ultimate reality and its function in the spiritual life, and again I have tried to emphasize these positive contributions to comparative religious thought in my book, there is at least one point at which their reflections just do not do justice to Christian experience and theology. Let me clarify this one point first in relation to Fredericks' review of my treatment of Nishida and then of Tanabe.

A RESPONSE TO JAMES FREDERICKS

First, in terms of my comparison of Nishida's philosophical understanding of the Buddhist experience of what he terms absolute nothingness and the trinitarian understanding of the Christian mystical experience of God, I agree with Fredericks that "Void" is not a proper translation of *zettai mu*. However, I did not use the term "Void" when discussing Nishida's philosophy, but only when discussing Christian mysticism which seems to me to be fully appropriate. In fact, I wanted to make the point that in presenting the Christian mystical vision, I was offering a very different paradigm than Nishida uses to understand nothingness in relation to God. This is, I think, a crucial point. I was trying to say that when Nishida uses his logic of absolute identity, he does so in a way that just does not do justice to the richness and fullness of the Christian experience of God. What I have presented in response to Nishida is a trinitarian logic that hopefully gives the reader a sense of what exactly that richness and fullness entails and how it cannot be understood properly in the philosophical paradigm that Nishida developed.

In terms of my use of Nishida's language in presenting Christian spiritual theology, had I said that God is the "far side" of the formless Void, as Fredericks seems to suggest, I would agree with him that such a formulation was indeed "infelicitous." I have to confess that my use of this phrase lends itself to Fredericks' interpretation. However, the kenotic, mystical vision of God that I am exploring does not posit the Void as some *thing* that has a far side. Rather, following such persons as Masao Abe, I am suggesting that the Void is an *activity*, a "creative kenosis," a dynamic "non-being" that is the Ground of being. And for a full Christian understanding of this dynamic, one must posit that this activity of emptying that is of the essence of God as Love is also at the heart of the inner-trinitarian kenosis, what von Balthasar calls the "original kenosis" (*Ur-kenose*), that generates this creative kenosis. By "far side" of the creative kenosis or Void, I just mean that for the Christian there is a transcendent and personal "self-possession" of God, to use Rahner's term, that does not empty out in the creative kenosis. Thus the transcendent or "far-side" reality of the Trinity eternally remains the *topos* of paradise. When I say that Nishida's paradigm cannot account for the "fullness" and "richness" of the Christian mystical experience, I just mean, and have tried to demonstrate in various chapters in *Spirituality and Emptiness*, that it can neither account for

this far-side trinitarian dimension of the kenosis of God, nor for the rich distinctions between the inner-trinitarian kenosis, the creative kenosis, the redemptive kenosis and the sanctifying kenosis of God.

As for Buddhist responses to my position, I would agree with Fredericks that Nishida's philosophy lends itself to "rhetorical strategies" by which one could, for example, claim that my notion of the Void is just a relative nothingness and not an absolute nothingness. But this would be to beg the question. I am questioning the adequacy of Nishida's whole paradigm, in which this distinction is posited, to formulate the relation of nothingness to God in the complete Christian sense. What I would suggest is that one simply look at the two paradigms that I have set side by side in the text. By so doing, I think that it will be clear in what ways Nishida's philosophy based on absolute nothingness cannot provide a sufficient basis for comprehending the Christian mystical experience of nothingness and God. I am proposing that instead of trying to collapse one view into the other, we get clear on this point as we continue to work together in dialogue toward a deeper and more fruitful philosophical-theological encounter.

Fredericks also asks about my views concerning *agape* based on the Christian mystical far-side experience of God, and *karuna* based on the Buddhist experience of the absolute near side. Others have dealt with this issue of late. Aloysius Pieris, in his *Love Meets Wisdom*, points out that *karuna* is not understood to be salvific in itself nor is it directed toward Ultimate Reality. *Karuna* is "essentially" directed toward all "beings." Given the perspective of the absolute near side presented by Nishida, one would have to agree with Pieris. Unless, of course, one wished to posit that given Nishida's logic of absolute identity, in loving beings one is loving Ultimate Reality. However, there is still a difference here with Christian love. For the Christian, God is the personal and relational source of salvific *agape*, indeed is *Agape*. And God so understood is found in the object of one's love in a manner that reflects that love back to God through the person loved. When this love is mutual, it even reflects the communal trinitarian life of love and unity that is the ultimate source of that love. On the other hand, in my book, I have tried to accentuate the great similarities between the Kyoto School's statements about compassion and the Christian notion of love. Through the Buddhist emptying out of the distinction between self and other in compassion, there is a discovery that true compassion

is not just a product of the will, but is a self-determination of the Great Compassion itself. This is an authentic discovery of compassion in the spiritual life about which Christians have a great deal to learn from Buddhists.

Now to the second point, namely, my treatment of Tanabe. I should like to preface my remarks by pointing out that since a number of recent works have dealt with the Zen philosophies of Kitaro Nishida, Keiji Nishitani and Masao Abe, I have tried in *Spirituality and Emptiness* to give a more balanced view of the Kyoto School by presenting the Pure Land philosophies of both Hajime Tanabe and Yoshinori Takeuchi. In this regard, Fredericks asks me about my claim that in Christianity one is opened up by grace to something more than the transformation process itself. For Tanabe, Other-power (*tariki*) is the force of absolute nothingness in and through the forms of life in mutual transformation that ultimately generates "metanoesis" (*zange*). I have tried to show that in Christian spiritual life, one also discovers a similar dynamic in the process of metanoesis. And I have suggested, as Fredericks points out, that for the Christian the mystical transformation of life also leads one to find and to manifest God as "Abba." Here, of course, I am drawing on the mystical theology of St. John of the Cross.

What, Fredericks asks, is the difference between a Christian mystical *manifestation* of God and Tanabe's *mediation* of Other-power? I myself would want to compare the manifestation of Abba in Christian spiritual life with the "witness" (*shō*) of Tanabe's interpretation of "action-faith-witness" (*gyō-shin-shō*). In the latter, such aspects of metanoesis as joy and gratitude give witness to its truth. What is witnessed in the mediation of the transformed person is the truth of Other-power behind that transformation. I did not mean to imply that this is not like grace in Christianity, nor that there is no grace of God in this process of action-faith-witness. Certainly the whole force of my presentation of Tanabe's views, and Takeuchi's in the following chapter, confirms my strong conviction that grace is authentically present in the process of what Tanabe calls "death-and-resurrection" and in its product of "New Life," to use again Tanabe's terms.

However, I did wish to suggest that when Tanabe refers to Other-power as acting in him in a manner that obliges him to perform metanoia, or as being mediated in a transformed Buddhist life, setting

aside the phenomena of metanoia or mediation, his understanding of the nature of that Other-power is something different from what the Christian senses as being manifested in his or her transformed life in the spirit of God. It is different in that for the Christian, a trinitarian God just does entail something more than what Tanabe understands as the force of absolute nothingness itself. I have tried to show what this trinitarian "more" is, especially as it is expressed in its social mediation/manifestation in the Christian community or the Church. So, while I agree with Fredericks that Tanabe's notion of "absolute mediation" has a great deal to teach Christians about the process of sanctification, I also feel that the Christian notion of the mystical and communal manifestation of a trinitarian God has something to contribute to the dialogue concerning the nature of the ultimate origin of this process.

And so we return to the same issue I raised with Nishida: how are we to understand the ultimate origin of the spiritual life (absolute nothingness, absolute mediation and God), in a manner that does justice to the deepest experiences of the respective traditions? What I have claimed throughout is that today we find ourselves in dialogue together on the road to answers to this question. I have tried to show what kinds of things Christianity can learn about the spiritual life and its origin from the Kyoto School, and I have tried to show that there are certain ways in which persons like Nishida and Tanabe have formulated their Buddhist self-understanding that are not yet developed to the point where they provide a satisfactory paradigm for a sufficient understanding of the Christian mystical experience of God. And I would agree with Fredericks' conclusion concerning the third issue he raises about my book, namely, as I pointed out in my response to Takeuchi, it is at the point where asceticism and mysticism meet, where will drops off and reality awakens, that we should look for answers to the fundamental questions about the ultimate ground of spiritual life. For my intention is not that my critiques be taken as flat rejections, but as challenges to think together through further dialogue along this path of comparative theology on to which the Kyoto School has invited us.