

Zen as the Negation of Holiness

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I

*Worldly passions fallen away,
Empty of all holy intent,
I linger not where Buddha dwells
And hasten by where no Buddha is.*

The Ten Oxherding Pictures

HOLINESS has in recent times been distinguished as a concept from truth, good, and beauty, relevant respectively to science, morality, and aesthetics, and has come to be used as a technical term to express in particular the religious. The term "holiness" for Kant held merely an ethical connotation. It remained the ultimate goal of morality, and yet in Kant at the same time it belonged as a matter of course to a dimension surrealist in the sense of being the ideal perfection of good never to be realized in the actual world. Thus holiness embodied a meaning quite different from the good that can be simply realized. Kant, however, did not pursue the question of holiness to the point the particularly religious was discerned as an element distinct from the ethical.

Holiness as a term strictly grounded in philosophy and expressive of the religious in particular for all intents and purposes can probably be traced back to the time of the German Neo-Kantian philosopher Wilhelm Windelband (1848-1915). For Windelband, however, holiness was no more than a transcendental element included as a constituent necessary to and yet not distinct from those of truth, good, and beauty. Conse-

* This paper was originally written in 1937. At that time, Rudolf Otto's approach to religion and the Dialectical Theology of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner were much discussed in learned religious circles in Japan. Footnotes are provided by the translator.

quently, the specific characteristics of holiness in Windelband cannot be recounted apart from or beyond those of truth, good, and beauty.

Holiness in Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), a German theologian-philosopher well-known for his book *The Idea of the Holy*, has in this regard an import differing from that of Windelband. According to Otto, holiness has its basic form in the *numinous*.¹ This is a category completely different from those of truth, good, and beauty. That is, the *numinous* cannot be conceived of in a moral frame of reference; it is not rational *per se*. It remains a matter completely incapable of being cogitated: an irrational, an “absolute other” which is independently existing. It can justifiably be said that in Otto, holiness is not simply synonymous with the *numinous*. It is a compound category created through a synthesis of the *numinous* with rational, in particular, moral elements. Thus it is not completely bereft of moral reference, and at the same time, however, it is neither based on morality as proved the case with Kant, nor based on truth, good, and beauty as with Windelband. In this sense, holiness based on the *numinous* in Otto belongs to an order wholly apart from those of Kant and Windelband.

In reference to the Kantian view of holiness based upon a moral perfection unattainable in man, the Swedish theologian and historian of religions Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931) considered holiness not simply as something moral but as being beyond morality, that is, the religious. However, inasmuch as it still requires moral perfection, the religious of Söderblom, in remaining unattainable by man, is not unlike in quality to morality and can be conceived of from a moral frame of reference. As this order of holiness can never be regarded as being irrational, it would in all probability not be called holiness *per se*, at least not from Otto's perspective. With Söderblom, holiness is not simply a moral concept but a concept of the religious, and he excludes those who regard nothing as holy as

¹ *numinous*. Otto coined the term “*numinous*” from the Latin *numen* meaning “god,” “spirit,” “divine,” on the analogy of “ominous” from “omen.” In his exploration of the non-rational aspects of religion, Otto used the term “*numinous*” to refer to the awe-inspiring element of religious experience which “evades precise formulation in words. Like the beauty of a musical composition, it is non-rational and eludes complete conceptual analysis; hence it must be discussed in symbolic terms.”

being outside of the religious. At first glance, Söderblom's holiness seems much the same as Otto's. Upon closer examination, however, insofar as the holiness of Söderblom is nothing other than perfection based virtually on morality, it must be said that the concepts of holiness of Söderblom and Otto differ fundamentally.

For Otto, whether morality is imperfect or perfect, and whether it can be actualized in reality or not, are not the criteria which determine the holy. The fundamental criterion of holiness is whether the basic substance of "holiness" is moralistic or trans-moralistic. Since that is the criterion which exists, imperfection in morality is by no means deprecatory to the basic substance of holiness. In this regard, more than any previous proponent, Otto deftly grasps the authenticity of holiness, and accordingly is able to establish the independence of the religious. In spite of this, however, as far as what Otto calls holiness is concerned, it can be criticized as being all too humanistic; it cannot be said to be holiness to the extent of having become the "divine," as is the case in Dialectical Theology. By the "divine" we mean the sacredness expressed in the Christian sense of God or the Holy.

For Otto, holiness is to be understood simply as one state of human consciousness, and as such it is nothing but an autonomous element incapable of being reduced into or derived from other forms of consciousness. In Dialectical Theology, however, the "divine" is never a state of human consciousness, being as it is completely outside of man, thus something with the character of "absolute otherness." At points where Otto states that creature-feeling² is our response toward the *numinous*, the *numinous* appears similar to that which is outside of or beyond man. Upon closer examination, however, the *numinous* is found to be merely a special state of consciousness which lies within man in the base of creature-feeling, thus making a chance element of its being evoked. It cannot therefore be said to be strictly outside of or beyond man.

² *creature-feeling*. In place of Schleiermacher's "absolute dependence," Otto substituted the term "creature-feeling" which in his words "is itself a first subjective concomitant and effect of another feeling element, which casts it like a shadow, but which in itself indubitably has immediate and primary reference to an object outside of the self."

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

Bringing this into the light of Dialectical Theology, even the holiness of Otto has little chance of avoiding denunciation for its affinity to the immanent sacredness of mysticism. The "divine" of Dialectical Theology is not to be thought of as man's inner conscious condition or state of feeling but as an objective reality that absolutely transcends man. The "divine" of Dialectical Theology, in this regard, even more than the holiness of Otto, must be said to profoundly penetrate religious reality to its core. While being irrational and "absolute otherness," the holiness of Otto nonetheless dwells within man, being neither outside of nor transcendent of him. It can in other words be said to be either immanent irrationality or immanent Otherness, but not to be either transcendent irrationality or transcendent Otherness.

The irrationality of the religious must be grasped in its character of transcendence, and the reason Otto was unable to penetrate to this level is due to his position which is indistinguishable from that of psychologism, as is the case with Schleiermacher. Being similar to the humanistic approach of Feuerbach and others, psychologism is incapable of grasping the true transhuman character of the divine, a perspective gained only in overcoming psychologism by virtue of a position such as Dialectical Theology. Consequently, when holiness is to be interpreted in its ultimately religious sense, it must necessarily be elevated to that of the "divine" as explicated in Dialectical Theology.

Even when the term "holiness" is interpreted in its most radical form, however, there is something which does not accept even such a concept and strives for the highest reach of the religious in the "non-holy," that is, in the negation of holiness. A religion like Zen is precisely that. The words in the *Lin-chi lu* (*The Record of Lin-chi*), "On meeting a Buddha, slay the Buddha. On meeting a patriarch, slay the patriarch," an allusion indicating attainment of that highest reach, will probably suffice, provided one succeeds in plumbing them to their very depths.

II

Holiness, generally speaking, is originally transcendental. Between holiness and man or the actual world, there persists an unbridgeable gap

or separation. The "divine" of Dialectical Theology represents the most radical form of this separation. Even when speaking of the concepts of holiness in Otto, Söderblom, or Windelband, however, this unbridgeable and transcendent gap or "great separation" has to be regarded as being intrinsic. Without it, holiness does not come to exist. Terms such as Otto's "creature-feeling," or "absolute otherness," or "*mysterium tremendum*,"³ as well as Emil Brunner's "self-extinguish" (*sich verlöcheren*), while not possessing exactly the same meaning, adequately convey the notion of a transcendent gap contingent to holiness or sacredness. Although holiness can be said to constitute a transcendent gap, this of course does not mean interaction does not occur between what is holy and man. It is quite the contrary, for the gap itself is the link which unites man to this "holiness." That is why Otto recognizes the aspect of "*fascinans*"⁴ in the *numinous* and why Dialectical Theologians paradoxically emphasize that the gap or absolute disparity itself is an approach to God.

This conjunction, be it where it may, is one which does not obliterate the separation. It is a conjunction such that no elimination of the separation occurs due to the event of conjunction. Here, the gap itself is a conjunction, and the conjunction itself a gap. Since both the gap and conjunction simultaneously coexist, this could be referred to as a "*disparate conjunction*."

A religion of holiness is a religion of disparate conjunction. Brunner says that faith is discovering the self in the annihilation of self, and that notion indicates something of a disparate conjunction. When Brunner speaks of an extinguishing of self, it has the meaning of entering into a disparate conjunction with God. This stands in contrast to the extinction of self in *unio mystica* with the divine. The self not extinguished of self is a self wanting in faith; it does not enter into conjunction with the divine. Only the self extinguished of self—sometimes called the self that becomes "no thing" or *Mu*—can be said to be the truly faithful self entered

³ *mysterium tremendum*. One aspect of *numinous* experience.

⁴ *fascinans*. Another aspect of *numinous* experience. The dual qualities of *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans* are characteristic of Otto's way of expressing man's encounter with the Holy.

into conjunction with the divine. This is why it has been said that one cannot embrace religious faith unless one becomes "no thing" or *Mr.*

The "no thing" of mysticism should strictly be distinguished from the "no thing" of religious faith. For Brunner, while it is said that one extinguishes the self, the self that has extinguished the self still exists. Such a self has an absolute great separation from the divine, and because of this, even when the self is extinguished, it is not dissolved into sacredness as is the case in mysticism. Instead, it should be made clear that only by the extinguishing of the self does one come to realize this absolute gap, the realization of which brings one into unity with the divine. At this point, the deeper religious content becomes apparent in such concepts as holiness, dependence, extinguished self, and faith.

Schleiermacher's "absolute dependence" indicates a union between the sacred and man, but this concept as well is suggestive of a disparate conjunction. Without a gap, a dependent relation cannot be established, and for Schleiermacher the "feeling of freedom" is absolutely negated. With the appearance of a dependent relation, however, the gap or "great separation" does not disappear. It is rather simply because of this gap that the dependent relation becomes at all possible.

In Buddhism, the Jōdo Shin sect has points of similarity to Dialectical Theology. It can be said to be a religion of disparate conjunction. Jōdo Shin Buddhism absolutely negates the self by extinguishing the self and uniting it with Amida Buddha. By this union, however, one does not dissolve into Amida Buddha. By virtue of "entrusting oneself to Amida Buddha," one enters into a relation of absolute dependence, a relation in which there is an absolute gap between the base evil self and Amida Buddha and yet there is still a union.

The union is of course an element essential to holiness, but it presupposes as prerequisite a gap. There is no order of holiness possible without it. A holiness without such a separation may be considered as meaningless. Precisely because it is transcendent and greatly separated from us, holiness is to be revered, worshipped, trusted, or believed in by us.

Zen nonetheless negates the transcendent and objective holiness greatly separated from us, just as it does not recognize Buddha as existing separately apart from human beings. In this sense it can be properly called

ZEN AS THE NEGATION OF HOLINESS

“non-holy.” By recapturing the holy Buddha which has been separated and far removed from human beings and realizing it within human beings, Zen tries to establish a human-Buddha that is “non-holy.” Neither searching for Buddhas or gods outside man nor seeking Paradise or Pure Lands in other dimensions, Zen advances man as Buddha, actuality as Pure Land. In the *Hsüeh-mai lun* (*On the Lineage of Dharma*), a work traditionally attributed to Bodhidharma, it says:

Being in tremendous turmoil, the unoriented do not know their own mind is Buddha. Outwardly they search about, spending the whole day contemplating the Buddha and paying homage. But where is the Buddha? Do not entertain any such false views. Awaken to your own Mind: outside the Mind there can be no Buddha.

In the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* it says:

The unenlightened person does not understand his own true nature, does not realize the Pure Land in his own body, and thus petitions all over. The enlightened man never differs no matter where he is. For this reason the Buddha says, “Wherever I may be I am always in comfort and bliss. . . . If only your Mind is pure, your own nature is itself the Pure Land in the West.”

Zen from its very outset in deliberate emphasis of man used words such as self-mind, self-nature, Self, original nature, original face, true man, mind-nature, Self-Buddha, and original-nature-Buddha. The reason for this lies in a Copernican effort to bring the transcendental, objective holiness down to the basis of the human self and to grasp it as the subject of the self.

Lin-chi says:

The pure light in your single thought—this is the Dharmakaya Buddha within your own house. The non-discriminating light in your single thought—this is the Sambhogakaya Buddha within your own house. The non-differentiating light in your single thought—this is the Nirmanakaya Buddha within your own

house. This Threefold Body is you—listening to my discourse right now before my very eyes.

In this passage, we can see Zen does not regard the Threefold Body, Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Nirmanakaya, as something mythological or transcendent, but tries to verify it existentially here and now within one's own body. In Zen, the traditional Thirty-two (or Eighty) Distinguishing Features of the Buddha are not to be taken literally. They are regarded as symbolic features of the self.

In the Samadhi on the Distinguishing Features or in the Pratyutpanna Samadhi, in all cases where the Buddha under contemplation is considered to be transcendently taking form, the Buddha is regarded important as an object of contemplation, of meditation, and of prayer, as well as the source from which merits accrue. Consequently, the sometimes elaborately carved and painted Buddha images came to be believed by some people as being the Buddha himself. From the transmission of Buddhism to Japan in the sixth century up to the Kamakura period, one of the reasons why the art of the Buddha image flourished was because the Buddha was considered as holy and transcendent. It is thus natural in view of its religious milieu that the Buddhist sculptures and paintings of this period are typically holy and transcendent.

In Zen, no Buddha exists outside of the self. There is no Buddha to be worshipped or revered as something separate from oneself. Huang-po says, "If you seek the Buddha outwardly and practice Buddhism by attaching yourself to the form of the Buddha, these are wrong ways which sully the way of awakening." In the *Hsueh-mai lun* (*On the Lineage of Dharma*) it says:

One's own Mind is Buddha, so you should not worship Buddha with Buddha. Although there are features of the Buddha and the Bodhisattva, even if they should suddenly manifest themselves before you, you need not pay homage to them.

Since in Zen objectifying or giving form to Buddha is always cautioned against, there is little concern with making Buddha images. This is one reason Buddhist sculptors are not found among the Zen patriarchs as

ZEN AS THE NEGATION OF HOLINESS

they are among the patriarchs of the Tendai, Shingon, and other Buddhist sects.

Human Buddhas such as the images of arhats and Zen patriarchs are more suitable for Zen than transcendent Buddhas such as Amida or Mahavairocana, or the Devas. The mountain scenery as the Buddha's body or the valley stream as the preaching of the Dharma are preferable to depictions of transcendent paradisiacal realms such as the Pure Land or those depicted in mandalas. For Zen it is wondrous just as it is: the head big, eyes small, nose low, mouth horizontal. Mountains towering, valleys plunging deep, birds crying, monkeys gamboling, are, as such, mandalas. Ch'an-yueh's *Arhats* and Mu-chi's landscapes can be said to be Buddhist painting in the Zen style. In periods when Zen flourished, in the Sung Dynasty, in the latter Kamakura, Muromachi, Momoyama, and up to the beginning of the Tokugawa period, it was not only in painting but also in literature, social etiquette, performing arts, architectural design, crafts, and landscape gardening that the expression of the Zen which negates holiness was found. The special characteristics of the culture of those periods, distilled in such words as *wabi*, *sabi*, *yūgen*, simplicity or non-constraint, are qualities rooted in Zen.

Okakura Tenshin⁵ regarded *sado*, the Way of Tea, as an expression of Zen. In his *Book of Tea* he wrote: "The secret of Tea lies in its appreciation of something which is incomplete." The exquisite beauty of Tea, however, lies in the negation of completeness: it is not that, in Okakura's words, "by deliberately not finishing something, one completes it by virtue of one's own imagination." The philosophy of Zen does not consist of that which, as Okakura would have it, "attaches importance to the procedure by which one searches for completeness rather than completeness itself." One should say that importance is attached to the negating of completeness rather than completeness itself. Asymmetry and incompleteness in the Way of Tea do not point in the direction of symmetry and completeness. They indicate the self-negation of symmetry and completeness. In the Way of Tea, *sabi* should not be taken in the

⁵ Okakura Kakuzō (1862–1913), known by his pseudonym Tenshin, was a reformer of Japanese art in the Meiji era. As curator of the Oriental Department of Boston Museum he was also instrumental in introducing Oriental art to the West.

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

sense of the rust over that yet to sparkle, but as the extinguished gloss of that which once had sparkled.

III

Above I mentioned Zen as being a religion of "man simply being Buddha" which negates the "holy" and transcendent and does not search for the Buddha separated from or external to man's self. In speaking these words, however, it is not with the intention of affirming the notion that man in his usual state is Buddha, the view of anthropocentric idealism prevalent in the modern age, or that the idealized form of man is Buddha. Zen's affirmation of man is not so simplistic. It is the position of Zen rather to negate absolutely the usual state of man. Po-chang Huai-hai emphasizes the need for a great "abandoning" by saying:

You should first abandon all ties with the world and cease everything. Do not imagine all manner of things as being good or bad, worldly or unworldly. Be not involved in thoughts, and so doing, abandon body and mind.

Lin-chi preaches the need for a great "slaying" by saying:

Whatever you encounter, whether within or without, slay it at once:

On meeting a Buddha, slay the Buddha.

On meeting a patriarch, slay the patriarch.

On meeting an arhat, slay the arhat.

On meeting your parents, slay your parents.

On meeting your kinsman, slay your kinsman.

Only then do you attain emancipation.

Both of them stress strongly the absolute negation of the usual state of man. Zen in this regard does not differ from Dialectical Theology. The "divine" to be affirmed, it should be noted, has the element of great separation and transcendence from the usual state of man to be negated. For Zen, however, in the absolute negation of the usual state of man, it is not that the absolute great separation exists in fact between the "divine"

ZEN AS THE NEGATION OF HOLINESS

and man, as in Dialectical Theology, but rather that man dissolves into the "divine" and becomes completely "unio mystica."

Unlike Dialectical Theology, Zen is not the union of the great separation. It is the union of non-difference, which, being non-dualistic, leaves no trace of opposition. The Buddha and the unenlightened one are thus of one form. Buddha and sentient being are not two. But this does not imply uniformity in the sense of a Buddha who has a form. Lin-chi says that the true Buddha is formless and thus must have neither spatial nor spiritual form. For a similar reason the Sixth Patriarch says:

The capacity of the Mind is vast and great;
It is like the emptiness of space;
It has neither breadth nor bounds;
It is neither square nor round; neither large nor small;
It is neither blue nor yellow nor red nor white;
It has neither upper nor lower, long nor short;
It knows of neither anger nor pleasure; neither right nor wrong;
neither good nor evil;
It is without beginning and without end.

What the Sixth Patriarch calls "Mind" in this passage is not different from what Lin-chi calls the "True Buddha." These are merely different names for the same thing. Lin-chi also speaks of a True Buddha as Mind-Dharma saying, "the Mind-Dharma being formless penetrates the ten directions." This True Buddha in Zen is referred to by different names and explained in various ways, but I think it can be said to be "the Self which eliminates distinctions internally and goes beyond opposition externally." Only then can the Self of Zen be characterized as being "formless, penetrating the ten directions," "like empty space," "completely clear: not a single thing to be seen," or "the No Thing (*Mu*) outside the Mind, unobtainable even inside of it," or "One Mind only," "neither born nor extinguished, neither increasing nor decreasing," or "Mind in itself is Buddha."

The union of non-difference in Zen is a union of Buddha and man such that the True Man as such is not outside the True Buddha inasmuch as the True Buddha as such is not outside the True Man. The term "union"

here merely involves one and the same thing and does not indicate a combined union of two different entities. If there were two entities, they could possibly be brought into combination. But since the True Buddha and the True Man are one and the same, it cannot be said to combine, or even to unify.

This is the union spoken of by the Sixth Patriarch in his so called "one form samadhi." In Zen, unlike Dialectical Theology, there is found neither a "Thou" in the sense of "All is thine" nor an "I" that is completely nothing. The "I" of Zen is rather the "All" and stands in contrast to Dialectical Theology's "I as complete nothing." Although "I" is "All," this "All" is itself "One" as in "All is One." In the "I" of Zen there is no opposition externally and no discrimination internally, thus it is called "no thing." In this regard, the Sixth Patriarch says, "not a single thing," and Huang-po, "like empty space." In the *Pi-yen chi* (*Blue Cliff Records*) it is referred to as "vastness." All of these are but differing expressions for "no thing" in Zen.

The "no thing" of Zen can of itself be called the "no thing of mysticism." The "no thing" as mere self-negation, however, cannot really be called "mystic." If the latter form of "no thing" were to be insisted upon as being mysticism, then mysticism would necessarily have to be limited to being merely a self-negating element included in all religions. Zen, however, as well as Western mysticism, is not based on such a "no thing" of mere self-negation. It is based on the "no-thing" of the True Buddha, and as such, cannot be seen as an occasion for self-negation.

On the other hand, Zen takes up neither the deification of man, a position naively assumed in modern times, nor the position of a transcendent God insisted upon by Dialectical Theology. The crucial position of Zen is to affirm the "sacred in man" by retrieving the sacred from the reaches of transcendent views or objective forms and returning it to the folds of human subjectivity. Zen is not simply a rational position: it is a rational position paradoxically identical with non-rationality. It is not simply an immanent position but one which takes up the position of transcendental immanence. The original nature of Zen as well as that of Mahayana Buddhism should be perceived of in this light.

Translated by Sally Merrill