

Unity and Ultimate Reality

A Response to Masao Abe

DONALD W. MITCHELL

Masao Abe has presented a very insightful and challenging comparison of two types of unity based on two different ways of understanding Ultimate Reality. For the Buddhist, true unity must be nondual, free from any duality and therefore free from any transcendent reality which is not "completely right here and right now."¹ This nondual unity is based on the realization of Ultimate Reality as Emptiness (Sunyata or "Great Zero") which includes all things just as they are. The living out of this realization of Emptiness entails both wisdom and compassion. Wisdom affirms everything and everyone in their distinctiveness. Compassion cares for everything and everyone in the universal embrace of Emptiness in a manner that leads to "rapprochement, conciliation, harmony and peace."²

On the other hand, Abe feels that for the monotheistic Western religions, the social unity realized by a particular religion often stands apart from, and in opposition to, other religions rather than embracing them. This type of sectarian unity reflects a particular monotheistic notion of Ultimate Reality that can be found in the West. That is, God can be seen as transcendent or, in Abe's words, "somewhat apart" from humankind and the rest of creation. From that transcendent vantage point, God can be seen as judging persons of other faiths rather than including all of them in his loving care. This particular Western picture of God can color one's living out of a monotheistic unity in a way that stresses keeping apart from and judging persons of other faiths. In its most radical form, one sees others not as brothers and

¹ Masao Abe, "Two Types of Unity and Religious Pluralism," p. 81.

² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

UNITY AND ULTIMATE REALITY

sisters to be embraced in solidarity and unity, but as rightful objects of "punishment, conflict, revenge, and even war."³

Now, this critique of a Western understanding of unity and Ultimate Reality does not mean that Abe is blind to Buddhist distortions of a life of unity based on the realization of Emptiness. He points out that historically in the Buddhist practice there has been an indifference to "social evil and injustice."⁴ It is true that Buddhists have interpreted the nirvanic unity of Ultimate Reality in such a naturalistic way that they failed to recognize and confront the particular samsaric evils that assailed societies. These Buddhists enjoyed a social unity within an isolated monastic setting while ignoring the plight of the rest of humanity. Therefore, Abe says that Buddhism can learn much from the West concerning the importance of justice so as to contribute more actively to the establishment of world peace.

But what about the Western religions? How can we overcome the kinds of distortions that Abe has so carefully outlined for us? Abe's own suggestion is that we re-understand Ultimate Reality in a way that can be the foundation for a more universal social unity, one that embraces all humankind and even the rest of creation. Abe finds a basis for this re-understanding in the mystical concept of "Nichts." Nichts is the unconditional, self-emptying (kenotic) Love that is the absolute interior of the mystery of God. Abe sees this all-embracing reality as being similar to Buddhist Emptiness. It is the "groundless Ground" or "boundless openness" in which one finds a deep spiritual unity with all other persons and nature as well. Since Nichts embraces everyone and everything, indeed is the very Ground of all things, it is not apart from all persons. It can be, therefore, the basis of a nondual social unity that excludes no one, but includes all persons just as they are right here and now. Nichts as Ultimate Reality cannot be the basis of a social unity of one people of faith against peoples of other faiths. Rather, it provides a theological basis for a social unity that can foster true and universal harmony and peace between peoples of different religions, races and cultures.

As a Christian, I am both attracted to these ideas of Masao Abe and a bit cautious at the same time. Let me explain. I am attracted because I

³ Ibid., pp. 84-85.

⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

DONALD W. MITCHELL

too feel that our understanding of unity is tied to our understanding of Ultimate Reality. And, I also agree with Abe's view that the unity we need today in our pluralistic world must be one that helps create a new and more united humankind. It cannot be a limited sectarian unity that actually creates schism and confrontation between peoples, races, cultures and religions—that pits the unity of one group over against another. So, it is important to understand God from a monotheistic point of view in a way that fosters a more universal unity of humankind.

My sense of caution arises when Abe suggests that Christians do this by rediscovering the mystical notion of God as Nichts. This move is typical of modern Zen thinkers, especially of Abe's Zen colleagues in the Kyoto School. In Zen, true social unity is the collective self-realization, or self-determination, of the unity of Ultimate Reality itself. This means that social unity must be the communal realization of the inter-related, interpenetrating, nondual unity of Emptiness itself. Abe finds something similar to this nondual understanding of the unity of Ultimate Reality in the Western mystical notion of Nichts and suggests that Christians find in it a basis for social unity. Of course it is not that easy. For example, there are important questions of Christology and ecclesiology to be addressed.

But these issues aside, what most concerns me is the question of the transcendent personhood of God that Abe seems to call into question with his Buddhist nondual logic. In this logic, Emptiness is so identified with the forms of life that it cannot be conceived as existing apart from the world. As I said above, Abe sees Ultimate Reality as free from any duality so that it is "completely right here and right now." If we look at Nichts through this Buddhist lens, it is hard to see how the transcendent personhood of God can be preserved in the total kenosis of Nichts so understood. Therefore, I prefer to use a trinitarian logic in understanding Nichts. In this logic, Nichts is the dynamic love and unity (*perichoresis*) of the Trinity in which each person is defined in relation to the others (the Father is Father only in relation to the Son, etc.). In this way, the transcendent personhood of the Trinity is eternally realized and preserved in the inner-trinitarian life in a manner that would be impossible in a Buddhist-like nondual relation with creation.

It is this preservation of the transcendent eternal life of the Trinity that I do not wish to see emptied out in any nondual understanding of

UNITY AND ULTIMATE REALITY

the kenosis of Nichts. On the other hand, I do believe that Abe is correct when he says that a deeper appreciation of our mystical understanding of God can help us affirm the kind of universal social unity the world needs today. So, with both of these points in mind, I would propose that it is possible to ground such a social unity on the mystical, trinitarian vision of Ultimate Reality suggested above. That is, the Christian notion of the Trinity affirms a principle of diversity in unity in a manner that supports the universal unity of humankind. Since God's nature is reflected in his action, the diversity in unity in God's trinitarian nature is also a principle of God's creative action. All humankind is therefore created in a communal image of the diversity in unity of the Trinity. The social realization of this communal image of diversity in unity is the goal of all humankind whereby it realizes its true collective nature.

I have explored the similarities and differences between this Christian trinitarian view and the Buddhist nondual view of a united humankind at some length elsewhere; so I will not repeat myself here.⁵ Given the short time I have left, let me just say that I have always appreciated Abe's Buddhist vision of all humankind that he describes in another essay as "a single, living, self-aware entity."⁶ For Abe, to awaken to this fact of our collective existence "in the boundless expanse of Self-awakening" would be the basis of "a united, cooperative human community in the complete sense of the term."⁷ While I interpret this collective unity of humankind with a trinitarian logic, I share Abe's ideal of living this communal reality for the realization of a greater "communion" of peoples. In this way, all humankind can be full sharers in a more just, peaceful and united pluralistic world community. In Christian terms, it is through the communal realization of this true collective nature of humankind that we can all achieve the Kingdom of God on earth.

I would like to conclude by saying that both Abe and I agree that we

⁵ Donald W. Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991). See especially Chapter Six.

⁶ Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 253.

⁷ *Ibid.*

DONALD W. MITCHELL

need to replace the modern individualistic vision of independent human persons with a postmodern communalistic vision of a collective humankind in order to realize the type of unity the world so badly needs today. To accomplish this task, we need to examine how our notions of Ultimate Reality support, or do not support, this new vision that is needed for a more united world community. Do our understandings of Ultimate Reality enable us to envision an ideal of unity that embraces in kenotic love and compassion all humankind as brothers and sisters? Masao Abe's wonderful presentation—so full of clarity and deep wisdom—should inspire us all to go beyond any sectarian boundaries in order to join together more confidently to work for the ideal that “all may be one” (Jn. 17:21) in a more united, just and peaceful world.