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## REMINISCENCE

### The Kyoto Philosopher's Call “*Ad Fontes*”—Asian Humanism

KLAUS OTTE

My first but decisive encounter with Nishitani Keiji took place when he was lecturing at the Basel Art Museum in 1964. At that time, I was exploring the truth behind the different Christian denominations and behind the different world religions. Preparations for the Roman Council Vaticanum II had been completed, and the Council itself had just begun. As a young Swiss theological assistant at Basel University and pastor of the Rhetian Church, I had been invited to attend. This awakening to fundamental spiritual change in the Christian churches opened a new religious horizon for me, a Protestant pastor in the Grisons mountains.

The lecture of the eminent philosopher and teacher of Zen, however, held a challenge for me as a theological and philosophical seeker. The thoughts and images of the Buddhist arguments Nishitani presented flooded not just my intellect: I was moved to the very depths of my being. Whenever Nishitani voiced the old humanistic call “*Ad fontes*”—back to the source or origin—I sensed a fresh wind, a new life that I had never experienced within the traditions of European humanist thought or through the classical education I had received. The mental strength of Nishitani's motivation and his thinking seemed to liberate me by transcending the aims of my humanistic education, which had emphasized historical understanding and the search for truth in a universal context. The theological differences between my teachers Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth were at the time being discussed

\* This article was originally scheduled for last year's memorial volume but due to an oversight it was not included in that issue.—*Eds.*

within the context of the *Entmythologisierung* debate. But the "source" Nishitani Keiji was seeking was not primarily that of the occidental tradition, but was, in a much wider sense, the existential return to a universal being and to universal reason. This helped to prepare the soil for my later encounter with another of my teachers, Karl Rahner SJ.

It was my good fortune to later become a personal assistant to Nishitani Sensei when he was in Europe. Sometimes in the cozy atmosphere of my mountain parsonage in Klosters-Serneus near the valley of Sils in Engadin, where we later, on several occasions, visited the memorial to Friedrich Nietzsche, and in the company of Mutō Kazuo, we would spend hours and hours in discussion, with our worldly needs provided for by my mother Margarethe.

About a decade later, in the dignified pre-Reformation parsonage in Arisdorf near Basel, we would converse night and day. I will never forget one Easter night spent in the company of my colleague Heinrich Ott and other guests from Basel University and from abroad, when my friends and family were asked to explain the nature of the crucified and resurrected Christ! "I have been crucified with Christ: I no longer live myself, but Christ lives in me," says St. Paul in Galatians 2:20. "Who is this being who is living there?" was the unanswered question of the Buddhist sensei.

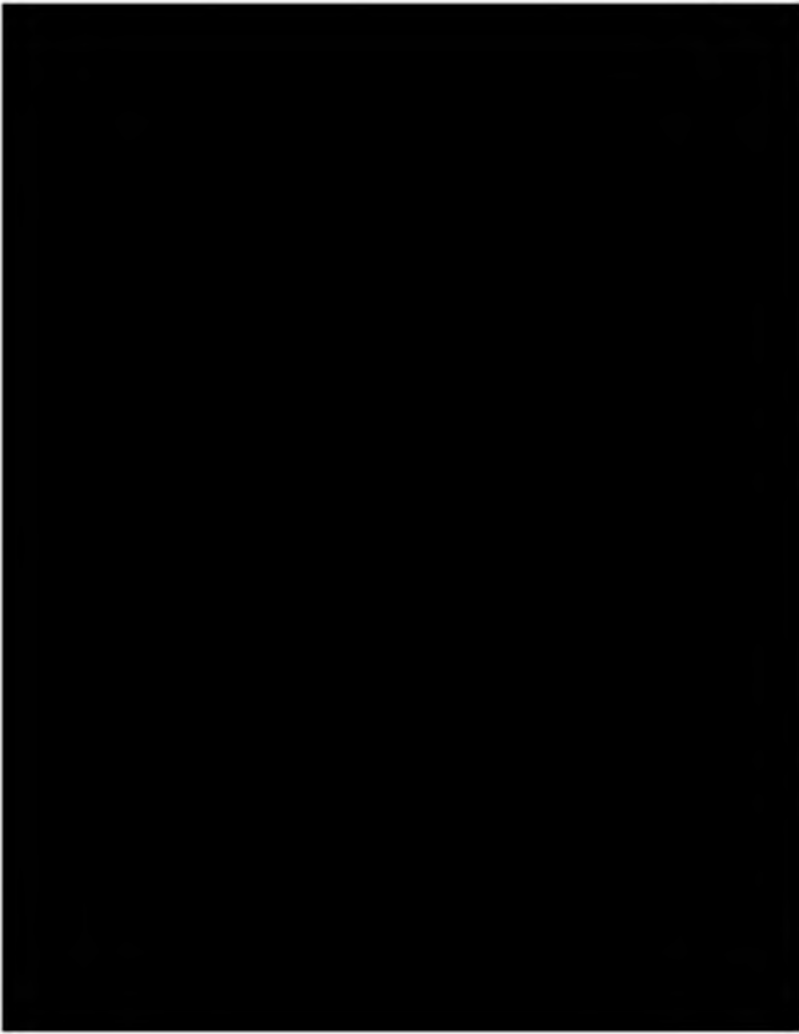
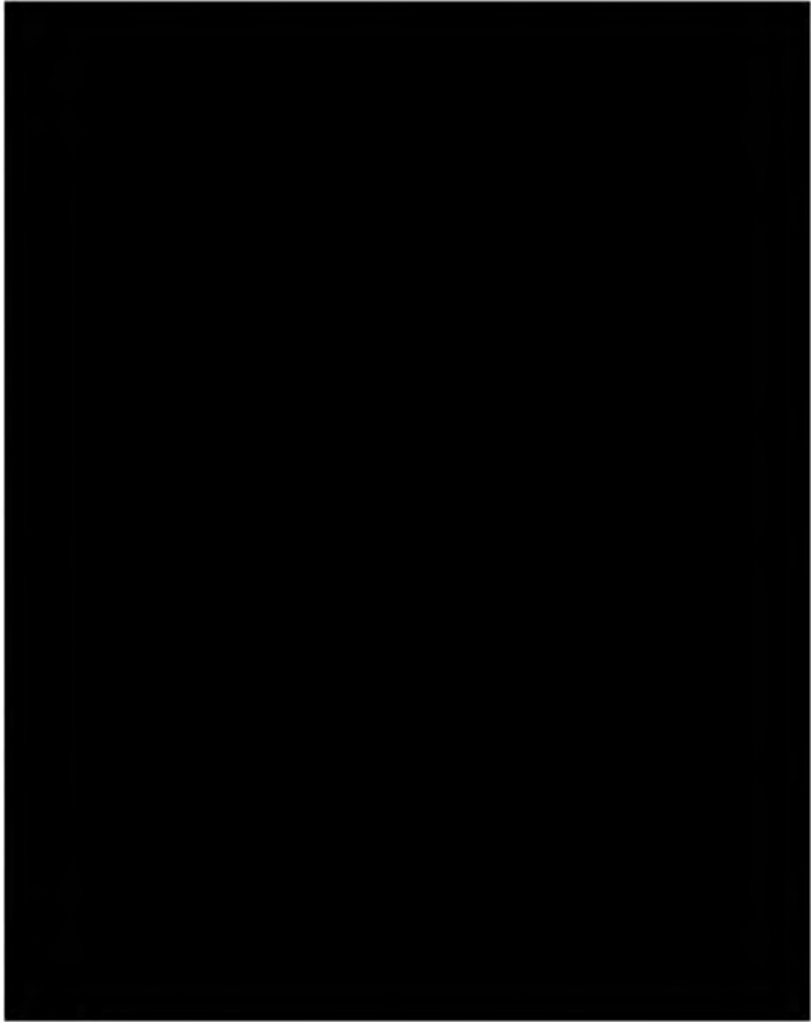
In the early morning we went to attend the Easter service which I led. Perhaps we would experience this being within ourselves. Nishitani Sensei accompanied us to Holy Communion that morning, saying that the Buddhists too had a similar form of communion. After the service he took a long walk in the warm rain and came back very wet. He described this experience as being a Buddha feeling. When he said this, I recalled the words Mutō Sensei had written in the guestbook of my house in Grison: "*Berge, Flüsse, Bäume und Gräser, alle werden je ein Buddha,*" which means, "Mountains, rivers, trees and grasses, all become a Buddha." I wondered whether it was the rain that had given him this Buddha experience or, as Professor Ueda Shizuteru later said, it had been his own action that had made him a Buddha.

On the car trips we made to visit my former teachers, Martin Heidegger near Freiburg in Germany and Karl Jaspers in Basel, I received his influence in imperceptible ways. This now seems to me an invaluable treasure.

In 1990, in Kyoto during the cherry blossom season at Yoshida Shrine, I met my beloved Sensei, now advanced in years, and I realized what the true story of a long discipleship and the relationship between teacher and pupil meant. Most of the non-traditional impulse I received during my theological pilgrimage and my conflicts with the church came from Nishitani Keiji. But while travelling or sitting in his seminars or lectures, I became familiar with his serene untroubled attitude toward everyday life, even toward schedules and arrangements. Sensei was not concerned with these inconsequential matters—he was concerned with observing the path of truth and of being within the process of life. My friend Ōkochi Ryōgi, a professor of German literature at Ōtani University, told me that as a student at Kyoto University, they often had to wait for Sensei for hours and hours for him to come to class. I never had to wait for him because I usually accompanied him—but, unfortunately, I did not always share his serenity!

Two entries in our guestbooks of 1964 and 1972 were made by the hand of Nishitani Sensei. They bear witness to the great teacher who could have done honor to the occidental humanist tradition but whose strength of thought understood that the return to the sources—which is the meaning of “*Ad fontes*”—goes deeper than the return to the original texts. Nishitani used to take particular pleasure in translating koans of this sort into German, and it sometimes took nearly half the night. Although I could not speak Japanese at that time, he made me translate or rather transfer (in the Heideggerian sense) from one culture into another. We did not theorize about hermeneutics; we practiced it. We looked for many possibilities of understanding and translating. During our last evening meal together he wrote down different versions on paper napkins, crossed them out again and again and then put them in the guestbook where they still are today. Experimenting in this way gave me a new feeling for the German language and at the same time a conception of the Japanese. The preparations for my later cooperation with Ōkochi Ryōgi in translating Shinran’s *Tannishō* had begun. But also my own understanding of Biblical exegesis became deeper and more profound.

For me who grew up in the European humanistic tradition these koans sound like a call “*Ad fontes*.” Finding the way to the source involves going against the current—different from the idealistic upward movement of education and also different from the moralistic



*Guestbooks entries,  
1964 and 1972*

Christian ideal of reverence for the golden times of the original situation. Not "Brother, take your brothers with you to the big ocean!" but a sometimes very lonely pilgrimage without many brothers to the source. The experience of "absolute" borders and the "guiding water's end" is not essentially one of community; it throws you unprepared back to the source, back into the archaic first spring of existence. The end and the beginning are one. In the place and at the time when real nothingness or real emptiness are experienced, elementary life or the element of all life will rise: "water." At the source there is the dialectic of truth: end and beginning, nothing and being—or, in Christian terminology, the cross and the resurrection—in fact the mystery of the everlasting dialectic dynamic of existence.

What was intended in European humanism and was hidden by its idealistic deformation appears in the koan. The source is movement, a process, the dialectic dynamic, the identity of nonidentity; it is the end and the beginning at once, the aim of all rest and at the same time the dynamic of all beginning. The Swiss writer C. F. Meyer in his poem "*Der römische Brunnen*" characterizes this truth of the source. He describes the unfathomable mystery of existence which European humanism originally represented but which was lost from sight as a result of the undialectic nature of idealism and moralism.

The journey to the origin nevertheless involves rest: moving in time becomes moving in space. Sitting and looking is the reconciliation of place and time. Far removed from the ecstasy of the escape from reality offered by gnosticism, and far removed from the attitude toward life of the idealist movement, the experience of the source lies in looking and in meditating. The senses are asked to see the clouds as phenomena of time. Not cold, rational theory but the warmth of looking and meditating—the self-disclosing openness of a person—make and create time. This is in no respect the time of train-station clocks or of physical instruments of measuring. It is the time of the developing clouds. Perhaps the clouds are symbols of our wishes for the future. Maybe the time-bearing clouds are a concrete realization of the fullness of the experience of the source. Water is metamorphosed into clouds. Or are the clouds not the essential preconditions of springs and wells, the well of all wells? The full circle of existence—"samsara" perhaps—appears. By means of the water, the dimensions of time and place are provided. It is from these dimensions of time and place that timing and measur-

ing can be derived in a philosophical sense.

Knowing Nishitani Sensei it is clear that the two koans from 1964 and 1972 can be seen together. If the return to the original source happens in this specific moment, heaven may also happen to come down to earth. The moon that was praised by Francis of Assisi as the sister in God presents itself to me when I scoop the water of the source into the palm of my hand. Or in Christian terms: the kingdom of God is near whenever we return to the source after our vagaries through centuries of self-forgetfulness. Repentance means "to think in a new way returning to the sources of being" and daring and seeing the highest values even in your hand. In this way we also perceive the true being of the flowers, the deep reality of beauty, when we encounter them without the reflective gaze of theory. You reach the source sitting and walking, looking and feeling, uncomplicated as it may seem.

The master teacher of the Kyoto School brought time and place into the true light of reality. He understood the identity of nonidentity in our everyday experience. Guided by his Buddhist wisdom we his students learned this truth in many long discussions. He showed it to me through the entries in the guestbooks. He achieved it in a fundamental way in his academic writings, for example in *Shūkyō towa nanika* ("What is Religion?"), the English translation of which was in the making in those days. Numerous contributions to *The Eastern Buddhist*, which Nishitani Sensei directed over the years, bear witness to these experiences. All reality exists purely and simply by the power of the return to the source. The call "*Ad fontes*" was transferred by Nishitani Keiji into Asian thought and was thus infused for me with new meaning.

The back of my parsonage in Mehren, Germany looks onto a lake which is surrounded by forests. Often at night from my study I watch the reflection of the moon on the surface of the water and feel a bridge between me and my venerated teacher who, even now that he is gone, is still alive in me. Before he died, he asked me very seriously about the nature of my belief. I confessed to him the source of my faith and as I spoke I noticed a smile cross his face—a Buddha smile. He told me that as a Buddhist he wanted to be a disciple of Christ. We met in a kind of identity of nonidentity. He then made me promise to take on responsibility for the religious life of the young because they need religious encouragement. On his deathbed the face of Sensei looked tranquil.

## OTTE

After my participation as a Christian priest in the temple service, I was allowed to lay a white lily upon his last raiment. Near to the source of us all, we pronounced the words "Namu Amida Butsu." Kyrie eleison, God have grace! We had, I realized, arrived *Ad fontes*.