

## BOOK REVIEWS

the cogent philosophical insights proffered in this volume. Abe knows how to create clarity and lucidity in what is probably some of the most difficult and elusive thought in any philosophical literature, West or East. We can be grateful that there is someone who can interpret these extremely difficult and important ideas and who also has a sound knowledge of Christianity and Western philosophy.

JOAN STAMBAUGH

***THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF NISHITANI KEIJI: Encounter with Emptiness.*** Edited by Taitetsu Unno. Nanzan Studies in Religion and Culture, James W. Heisig, General Editor. Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1989, xv + 350 pp. ISBN 0-89581-871-1

***THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF TANABE HAJIME: The Metanoetic Imperative.*** Edited by Taitetsu Unno and James W. Heisig. Nanzan Studies in Religion and Culture, James W. Heisig, General Editor. Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1990, xiii + 399 pp. ISBN 0-89581-873-8

These two volumes (henceforth abbreviated as RPNK and RPTH), collections of papers coming out of international symposia on the thought of Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990) and Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962) respectively, draw attention to the significance of the Kyoto School and its contribution to world philosophy. They also further the conversation already going on in some circles on the issues raised by and about this religio-philosophical current, notably since the publication of English translations of major works of the two religious philosophers (Nishitani's *Shakyō to wa nanika*, published as *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, and Tanabe's *Zangedō toshite no tetsugaku*, published as *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, trans. Takeuchi Yoshinori, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

The publication of the above mentioned translations, as well as the preparation of the symposia (held at Smith College, Massachusetts, in 1984 and 1989) and now the publication of the collections of papers based on these, are in great part due to the initiative and efforts of the Nanzan Institute of Religion and Culture (based at Nanzan University, Nagoya, Japan) under the director-

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ships of Jan Van Bragt and James W. Heisig.

Space does not allow us to take a detailed critical look at the individual papers in both volumes, many of which raise important issues, as this would produce another book-length manuscript by itself, so we will focus on three questions concerning Absolute Nothingness, the pivotal term in both Nishitani's and Tanabe's religious philosophies, as our way of assessing the thrust of the two volumes.

### a) How Can One "Know" Absolute Nothingness?

The most scathing criticism of Nishitani's thought and of the Kyoto School as a whole in the English language that has come to the attention of this reviewer so far is Paul Griffith's paper, "On the Future of Buddhist-Christian Interaction" (see Minoru Kiyota, ed., *Japanese Buddhism: Its Tradition, New Religions, and Interaction with Christianity*, Tokyo/Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1987, pp. 145-61). Griffiths criticizes Nishitani's position, calling it "esotericist-triumphalist," in that, locating the essence of religion in the experience of the individual, Nishitani banks everything upon this experience, and according to Griffiths, "seems almost completely unaware of the need to offer arguments to support what he says." (p. 157)

Unfortunately, none of the papers in RPNK has taken the trouble to respond to Griffiths' critique in a way that would at least elucidate Nishitani's true position vis-à-vis the above accusations. The papers in the collection, with one or two exceptions, generally take a sympathetic stance toward their subject matter and develop their arguments already presupposing such a stance "from within." This is perhaps most expected and unobjectionable, also given the invitational nature of the symposium out of which the collection arose. However, leaving Griffith's criticisms unaddressed only widens the rift between the "converted" on the one hand, and on the other, those who are still struggling with terminology used by Nishitani (not to mention Tanabe and other Kyoto School writers) that is unfamiliar to many Western readers.

Sten H. Stenson's paper (RPNK, pp. 114-42) comes closest to addressing this question of the epistemological grounds of Nishitani's Absolute Nothingness. Rather than taking Nishitani to be expounding a propositional truth "about something called Absolute Nothingness," Stenson suggests that we can liken Nishitani to the legendary bird that sings because "it has a song to sing." (pp. 141-42) What is called for then is a stance of openness to *listen* to that song of the bird, rather than one that would want to catch that bird or classify it into genus and species and describe its color, shape, etc.

Taking Stenson's hint, one may then venture that the attempt to "know" Absolute Nothingness in a way that relies solely on propositional language is one that is doomed from the start, due to the very nature of what we are deal-

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ing with. We are in other words confronted with a question that cuts right through our very being as a thinking and knowing subject, a question that invites a stance of *listening* from the depths of our being, rather than a discursive pursuit that would lead to logically coherent and certain conclusions open to verifiability or falsifiability.

To hear the song of the bird, however faintly, is also to be called and challenged, by something of an inner exigency, to make that song more and more audible, to oneself, no less than to others. Philosophical discourse can thus be understood as an endeavor that can pave the way for the hearing of the song, in posing the basic questions, carrying out tasks of critical reflection, clarifying concepts used, sorting out of the issues involved, etc.

Such an endeavor by itself counters the charge of esotericism, as it lays itself open to public scrutiny and proceeds in a rationally coherent and demonstrable way as far as it can. That is, up to the point where, having exhausted reason to its limits and recognizing these very limits, one is led to stop and listen and invite the conversation partner likewise to listen in silence, lest one drown out the song in futile chatter. It can overcome the attitude of triumphalism, precisely in humbly recognizing its own limits, and letting this recognition become the basis for genuine *metanoia* that will in turn open the way to a renewed vitality of reason, in the way, for example, that Tanabe sets out for us.

### b) How Can Absolute Nothingness Ground Right Action?

We come now to an issue, raised or touched upon in different ways, by many of the papers in the two volumes, incorporating many aspects and corollary issues (such as the relationships between the absolute and the relative, ontology and axiology, individual and social transformation, eternity and history, etc.): can the realization of Absolute Nothingness ground Right Action in the historical world? And if so, how? This is a key question upon which we dare say the viability of the whole Kyoto School hinges.

The sections on Ethics and on History in RPNK, and the section on Society in RPTH include papers specifically meant to address this issue. A reading of these will give us the different angles, which we will not enumerate here, from which a negative answer seems inevitable, despite all the dialectics about “emptiness-*sive*-compassion,” “nothingness-*qua*-love” offered in the apologetics of Absolute Nothingness. David Little’s paper (RPNK, pp. 181–87) in particular is most eloquent in outlining inherent difficulties in relating Absolute Nothingness to a viable ethical stance that would meet the challenges of our contemporary world.

On an *ad hominem* level, which can be a more persuasive one for many of us than all the theoretical arguments that can be mustered on paper, the

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ethical lapse of noted persons supposed to have been embodiments of that “real self-realization of reality” militates against a positive answer to whether Absolute Nothingness grounds ethical action. The accusation of complicity with and cooptation by Japanese imperialistic nationalistic propagandists in prewar times leveled against prominent Kyoto School members, for example, has often been raised, and continues to be a stumbling block. In more recent times, the sexual and financial scandals associated with renowned meditation teachers in the Western hemisphere also raise questions about the “ethics of enlightenment.”

But perhaps we can overlook examples of individual failures, or join others in glossing over the past and in refusing to consider it at all in assessing the viability, the contribution of the Kyoto School to world culture and philosophy. It is then the actual *and living response* of its current proponents to the various contemporary issues facing the global community, rather than *the way they argue out* the theoretical possibilities or modes of historical engagement from the standpoint of Absolute Nothingness, that would be the gauge of such viability.

In other words, the “emptying of emptiness in history,” “absolute mediation in historical events,” “the return to the world (*gensō*) from the standpoint of Absolute Nothingness,” awaits genuine realization (hyphen emphasized), not only in scientific, artistic, cultural and other events in our historical life, as Kawamura Eiko aptly demonstrates (RPTH, pp. 223–34), but more significantly at this point of our history, in the face of the vital ethical issues that have to do with our very survival as Earth community—issues of economic injustice, of physical and structural violence wrought upon individuals and communities throughout our globe, of ecological destruction, issues of human, animal, and Earth rights, etc.

The question can perhaps be rephrased in a double-edged way: what does the standpoint of Absolute Nothingness have to do with such “mundane” issues? And here is where a dilemma comes to the fore. To answer in the negative, i.e., “No, it has nothing to do with such issues,” is to make it cease to be Absolute Nothingness. Such an answer misconstrues or fails to appreciate its dynamic nature that also embraces the relative, that empties itself into the historical. On the other hand, to answer positively, i.e., “Yes, it must have something to do with such issues,” would tend to reduce this standpoint to a moralistic position, again regressing to the standpoint of opposition of “good vs. evil,” and would also thus make it cease to be Absolute Nothingness.

The challenge to the proponents of the Kyoto School then would be in the grounding of a resounding “Yes” that does not thereby regress into a mere moralism based on the traditional oppositions of “good vs. evil.” The precise

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way of real-izing the unity of ontology and axiology, the unity of the absolute and the relative, or the non-opposition of nirvana and samsara, etc., in the context of the concrete issues facing Earth community as outlined above, remains an open and ongoing and rather crucial task, not only in its theoretical formulation, but more so, in its actual *praxis* in the real world especially by those who speak and write about these issues. To put it in rather simplistic terms, “don’t talk of nothingness-*qua*-love, show me.”

### c) Does Absolute Nothingness Engender Hope?

This third question on the prospects of the Kyoto School is raised also in a double-edged way. The first level has in mind the nihilism impinging upon the human condition since modern times, the backdrop against which Nishitani wrote his *Religion and Nothingness*. And Nishitani’s whole project is precisely to elucidate the path that would overcome the nihilism plaguing modern humanity, i.e., the path of negation of this nihilism in the realization of Absolute Nothingness. Needless to say, following the intricacies of Nishitani’s thinking leads us to an affirmative answer to our question. The further elucidation of this affirmative answer in the light of related questions and issues remains an ongoing task, and the RPNK collection is indeed a valuable contribution in this regard.

However, it is a second level of meaning in the above question that concerns us here. With Absolute Nothingness understood as the overcoming of linear time, that is, time as present receding from past moving toward the future, and as the realization of the dimension of eternity, the paradoxical statement can be made that, from the standpoint of Absolute Nothingness, *there is no room for hope*. There is no longer hope, precisely because everything is realized: each moment is, as Abe Masao explains, a “monad of eternity.” Such is a view of the end of history that can be called “absolutely realized eschatology,” in Abe’s terms (RPNK, p. 302)

But this is precisely where a major pitfall lurks, not unrelated to what we considered on the grounding of ethical action: from such a lofty standpoint where each moment is a “monad of eternity,” there is no longer any sense in talking of success nor failure, attainment nor non-attainment, etc.—everything is already fulfilled! This is indeed in keeping with the dialectic of negation and super-affirmation in Mahayana Buddhism. But the pitfall is in the attitude: *if everything is realized, then what is the point of striving?* And taken in a one-dimensional way, here we have the classic expression of what is known as *hongaku shisō* or the doctrine of original enlightenment, at its worst. Lai (RPTH, pp. 256–76) and Hubbard (RPTH, pp. 360–79) have pointed this out for us in their respective papers, and the latter’s charge of “absolutism” against Tanabe as well as the whole Kyoto School makes sense in

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this context.

This attitude comes as a result of clinging to the *idea* of Absolute Nothingness, and thereby losing it as a living and dynamic reality that negates all ideas, even about itself. We have seen degenerative tendencies, such as the neglect of practice, lax moral behavior, etc., as results of this attitude, in the history of Buddhism, and all this serves as a caution against taking the mere idea of Absolute Nothingness and making it an ideological buttress for certain kinds of attitude or behavior.

What we call Absolute Nothingness can only be the living and dynamic reality that it is, as it continually acts as a *critical principle* that radically negates everything we tend to idealize or idolize, whether these be things or persons, or concepts such as God or Absolute Nothingness. The continuation of the discourse and dialectic reflected in RPNK and RPTH is one, though not the only, way of keeping it a living and dynamic reality.

Finally, some comments on particular aspects of the two volumes are in keeping.

The essays in the section on God in RPNK, solicited for the volume after the original symposium "to provide answers to the inevitable question concerning the relationship between emptiness and God" (Editor's Introduction, p. x), present liberal Protestant perspectives, and do provide insightful material for further Buddhist-Christian dialogue. However, the inclusion of representatives of a wider range of Christian approaches, for example, those who are able to delve into the riches of the tradition on "the analogy of being," or into Patristic sources, and to engage these in the dialectics of Absolute Nothingness, would provide a broader base for ongoing conversations and would undoubtedly open new dimensions.

The section entitled "Society" in RPTH raised the greatest expectations, but was a disappointment to this reviewer. With the exception of Himi Kiyoshi's essay, the other papers placed under this section seem to belong elsewhere. One would have hoped that the authors of the papers in this section would ask pertinent questions and struggle with these in giving the reader a more well-rounded picture of the strengths as well as the limitations of Tanabe's metanoetic philosophy in relation to Society, an issue parallel to that of Nishitani's Absolute Nothingness in relation to history. For example, Tanabe's explorations of *fraternité*, as a notion that can balance off the excesses based on the pursuits of *liberté* on the one hand and of *égalité* on the other (characterizing capitalistic and socialistic models of society, respectively), and as a principle that can provide the foundations for the reconstruction of human society on a metanoetic basis, could have been addressed by one or other of the papers as a key contribution of Tanabe's to a vision of the human future that we in our time are sorely in need of.

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There are some minor points to be noted in the interests of Buddhist scholarship. Thomas Kasulis' assertion that "Yogācāra schools advocate a return to the buddha-womb (*tathāgata-garbha*) or store-house consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*)" (RPNK, p. 262) is a misstatement of the intent of the Yogācāra. Johannes Laube's paper (RPTH, pp. 316-39) is subject to historical imprecisions, such as taking "the Pāli canon as the oldest source of Buddhist literature" (RPTH, p. 322), identifying "Hīnayāna" with "Theravada," giving a one-dimensional and inadequate picture of the development of the bodhisattva ideal (which he derives from a single reference source), etc.

Ueda Yoshifumi's article (translated from the Japanese by Taitetsu Unno) makes a valuable note for readers of Tanabe's *Philosophy as Metanoetics*: "action-faith-witness" is a mistranslation if referring to Shinran's *gyō-shin-shō*, which is better rendered as "practice-entrusting-enlightenment" (cf. RPTH, p. 140), although we can concede, as Ueda does, that the former translation opens new nuances in Tanabe's cases as his thought is transplanted into a different linguistic context.

Some notes concerning the editing/proofreading of RPTH: Langdon Gilkey's paper is entitled "Tanabe and the Philosophy of Religion," but the headers throughout the remaining pages (pp. 73-85) read "Tanabe's Contributions to East-West Dialogue." Heisig's second paper (pp. 277-90) cites "TCW" for Tanabe's Collected Works in the footnotes, but this is listed in the list of abbreviations as THZ. This same paper lists a note number 28 in the text (p. 289, 1.22) without a corresponding footnote. SSZ (*Shinshū Shōgyō Zensho*) is cited as a source in footnotes in Unno's and Ueda's papers, but is not listed in the abbreviation table.

Finally, concerning both volumes, the use of gender-inclusive language, not just to conform to demands of "political correctness," but precisely to address an imbalance in our consciousness, needs to be considered if further editions of the volumes are planned.

RUBEN L. F. HABITO