

Nishitani the Prophet

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A religio-philosophical existence on the basis of non-ego.¹

I DO NOT believe I have a right to call myself a disciple of Nishitani Sensei. If I had been a disciple, he would have had to send me back, time after time, to my koan—the Mu (“emptiness”) koan—without my ever being able to crack it. On the other hand, it would be an understatement to say that I learned a great deal from Nishitani Sensei. It would be truer to say that Nishitani was one of the decisive influences in my life, and that it is he, together with Takeuchi Yoshinori, who “pulled me in” out of my cozy Western-Christian “world”² and into the wide but uncanny spaces of Eastern thinking—and that by his personality, more even than by his philosophy.

This essay is a token payment of an repayable debt. If it does not succeed in achieving a conversation with the late lamented master, I hope at least to make his silent presence felt. The reason for trying to evoke Nishitani Keiji as a “religious prophet” and a living embodiment of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue is because that, of course, is where my own existential interest is centered, but is not, I firmly believe, a betrayal of, or a mere subjective sidelight on, the man.

For one thing, he himself is responsible for that direction of my interest and, I could add, of my very life. It is of course true that Nishitani saw himself, and wanted to be seen by others, as a

¹ Nishitani Keiji, *Chosakushū* (Collected Works), Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1986–1992, Vol. 17, p. 113. References to the Collected Works will be indicated parenthetically by volume and page number in the text. In the translations I shall sometimes, for brevity’s sake, take the liberty of inserting a phrase or clause taken from the context—always taking care not to betray Nishitani’s intention.

² “World” being a word Nishitani was very fond of and which he often knew how to load with fresh meaning.

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“philosopher,” without any further labels (except, maybe, that of “*werdender* Buddhist”).³ Still, there can be no doubt that, for him, “philosophy,” as the quest for true reality, must culminate, and transcend itself, in religion. It is only on the level of religion that true reality reveals itself as it is, and that true subjectivity is reached. “It is philosophy that has traditionally asked the most basic questions about the human as such. However, when it comes to a still more holistic standpoint, not the sole thinking standpoint of philosophy, it is religion that presents itself” (18:12).

The words I put at the beginning of this essay as a kind of motto were meant by Nishitani as a description of the existential meaning of emptiness or of the Buddhist life, but I submit that, in those words, Nishitani has bequeathed to us the tersest possible formulation of the very core of his own existence. And a quick look at the Collected Works reveals that, roughly, about two thirds of Nishitani’s literary output deals, directly or indirectly, with religious themes.⁴ Religion was, indeed, constantly at the heart of his philosophical and existential concerns. Still, nobody who had the privilege of knowing him at all could have been in the least tempted to describe him as a “pious soul,” much less a narrow-minded advocate of any particular religious viewpoint. But, on the other hand, characterizing him simply as a philosopher of religion—something which he undoubtedly was, to an eminent degree—would not be entirely just, since it would give no hint of the depth of his existential involvement, nor of the breadth of his idea of religion.

It is thus extremely important to see Nishitani’s preoccupation with religion in the right perspective: that of his “life project.” Nishitani saw it as his mission in life, his task as a philosopher, not only to

³ This reminds me of the only time, in the 25 years of our acquaintance, that Nishitani ever showed his displeasure in no uncertain terms. It was when I had written that “Nishitani provided Zen with a modern fundamental theology.” He clearly did not want any part of the label “theologian.”

⁴ The remainder consisting of more “technical” philosophical treatises on various philosophers (Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Kant, Schelling, Nietzsche, Nishida, Tanabe, etc.) and philosophy of culture, autobiographical pieces, occasional essays, and analyses of poetry. On this point, there is a marked difference between Nishitani and his mentor, Nishida Kitarō, whose only two direct treatments of religion are to be found at the beginning and the very end of a career dedicated to ontological and epistemological investigations.

diagnose the fundamental problems of human life in the present age, but to point the way to their solution. In his earlier works (up to *Shūkyō to wa nanika*, 1961), as is well known, Nishitani diagnosed nihilism, and its alliance with scientism, as the fundamental problem of our times, and indicated as the remedy the radicalization of that “relative nothingness” into “absolute nothingness” (emptiness)—seeing thereby religion, especially Buddhism and Christianity, as the only force capable of overcoming that nihilism and leading people to the standpoint of emptiness. It cannot be doubted that this remained basically Nishitani’s position up to the very end.

Still, as I want to indicate here *per transennam*, this does not render the question redundant whether Nishitani’s thought in his later years showed any significant evolution—a question I have not found treated anywhere so far. I myself feel far from ready to answer that question, and will offer here only some impressions gathered from a perusal of more recent writings. I was struck by how seldom the word “nihilism” appears in these texts. It may be a sign that religion as such is more than ever taking center stage—religion of which he now said, “Its absence constitutes the fundamental nature of the present age” (18:193). Buddhism and Christianity are now submitted to detailed scrutiny as to their fundamental nature and their relationship to the present age. It is as if Nishitani wants to ascertain whether and to what degree these religions contain the power to save humanity. Here, the recent encounter of the two is fully endorsed, even as it is scrutinized in its turn as to its capacity for the same task. It is on these three topics that my attention will focus in this essay: Nishitani and Christianity, Nishitani and Buddhism, Nishitani and the Interreligious Dialogue.

Before I settled on these topics, however, other possible themes had crossed my mind. Of these, two had looked especially fitting for a commemorative publication. One, “Nishitani as heir to both cultures, East and West,” feeling perfectly at home in both and able to switch from one to the other, or combine elements of both, at any moment. A feat which, to my knowledge, no Westerner has ever been able to achieve and which the younger generations of Japanese scholars are incapable of, since postwar education does not produce the kind of familiarity Nishitani shows, for instance, with Chinese literature and Neo-Confucian thought. I was recently struck again by two examples of that extraordinary versatility. He describes, very aptly, the moral

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situation among the American elite as “the *mappō* (latter day) of Puritanism” (17:242). In a following talk, where the topic is Buddhism and the audience Buddhist, he approaches the question of conscience from the side of Socrates, Jesus, Augustine, and Descartes (17:276–283). Secondly, Nishitani’s love of nature came to mind as a topic. There are certainly in Nishitani’s writings some of the most exquisite passages on the existential meaning of nature I have ever come across.³

But the topic that really tempted me was the one that keeps turning Nishitani’s thought into a koan for me. I formulate it as the “uses” of emptiness or absolute nothingness. This amounts, of course, to confessing that I never really grasped the core of Nishitani’s thought—or, more generally, of the philosophy of the Kyoto School. But there it is and, as if that were not shameful enough, I have not even felt ready to formulate my difficulties in any systematic fashion. There is, however, a sentence by Nishitani himself that consoles me somewhat. In the course of an explanation of emptiness as the principle of Buddhism, he once declared: “To Westerners, what I just said must sound very strange and hard to understand, but that is not really surprising. But I believe that one day understanding will dawn on them” (17:109). While feeling the blast of it directed at me, “Van Bragt only,” I am nevertheless impressed by the supposed universality of that “to Westerners,” and this gives me the courage to jot down, in a desultory fashion and with a show of self-confidence I am far from feeling, a few of my problems and misgivings, trusting that they are not irrelevant to my theme, which is after all about mutual *Auseinandersetzung* between East and West.

I have already had occasion to remark how in Nishitani the traditions of East and West come together in close and familiar proximity and continuous dialogue. In this encounter many connections are made, the most fundamental of which might be that between (Western) being and (Eastern) nothingness or emptiness. This, of course, predestines the thought of Nishitani—and, larger, of the Kyoto School as a whole—to an important historical role as a vehicle of encounter in the present juncture, where East and West “are thrown into one another’s arms,” not only just in Japan but worldwide. A first question here might be to ask the extent this philosophy has succeeded so

³ For two examples, see 17:60–63 and 18:24–25.

far in finding understanding in the West, and in playing its role as bridge. But, a more fundamental and, indeed, critical question would be: How can this philosophy play its role as a bridge between East and West most effectively? By the quiet persuasive power of its present impressive form? Or rather by being taken apart, critically analyzed in all its parts, and patiently built up again in that wider dialogue of East and West which was partly triggered by its own existence? The former may be effective in its own way, but I fear that without the latter, more painful, process, it will not really bear fruit, at least not in the West.

In view of the vastness of the operation and the subtlety required, it is not at all likely that Nishitani's pioneering attempts can have succeeded yet in connecting or merging the two traditions together in all the right places and angles. It is too early to tell. A major problem is of course that unlike the images suggested by metaphoric language, such as the re-attaching of a severed arm, in this case no original unity ever existed. Nor does a blueprint exist for us to follow. What then can serve as a criterion of success? If anything can be said at this early stage, it might be that, in the encounter and symbiosis, the respective riches and dynamics of the two traditions should not be lost in the process but, on the contrary, enhanced and deepened. This brings about my first problem: I do not succeed in "seeing" that in the "absolute nothingness" of the Kyoto School, which purports to be a higher synthesis of nothingness and being, negation and affirmation, the original dynamics of Western being is really and fully preserved.

Would not the name "absolute nothingness" denote, after all, a preponderance of the negative? And if so, a preponderance on which level? On the level of human existence? As a logical priority? Or an ultimate preponderance in the first metaphysical principle? I have no difficulty in seeing the priority of negation in a religious path, over against the natural clinging of the human heart to itself and things; or in admitting a priority of negation in logic, over against the equally natural tendency of human reason to objectify. And I am of course seduced by the "winds of freedom" which emptiness blows into the halls of philosophy and religion, and the texts where Nishitani, in almost lyrical terms, brings out the absolute freshness of the immediately present thing and the bottomless freedom of the subject on the field of emptiness. But, I never succeed in grasping the point in emptiness whereon negation turns into affirmation, deconstruction into con-

struction, (religious) detachment into (metaphysical) grounding, detachment into love.

Or, to try out a last formulation, I do not see how the evident virtues of emptiness could contain or render superfluous the traditional virtues of being. From the reading of Nishitani's later texts I somehow have the impression—although I feel uncomfortable in saying this now that the author can no longer refute me—that Nishitani himself seems to acknowledge this implicitly to some degree. For instance, in his critiques of Buddhism, to which we shall come later, the things Nishitani finds lacking in Buddhism could all be subsumed under the category, "virtues of being." And in the text wherein he submits present society to the most explicit analysis (14:3–39), he deplores the loss in our times of several things which elsewhere are associated with being and appear to be made problematic by a religiosity based on emptiness: the idea that some things are sacred (not merely a universal sacredness of all things); discrimination, especially the "essential distinction" between animal and human; thinking of things as substances with their own irreducible being rather than as mere functions. Finally, in his meditations on the conscience of the individual as the basis of trust in human relations (17:229–287), Nishitani insists that this presupposes in the individual a "fixed point," which he then describes as the solitary stand of the individual before (the Confucian) heaven or God, and which he also associates with Buddha-nature, saying: "There is somewhere in the human something immutable" (17:202). Here, he appears to presuppose an individual whose radical openness in emptiness does not preclude a moment of closure. I am inclined to interpret in the same line a formulation of his which I like very much: "a 'non-ego' wherein the other is present (*ereignet*)" (17:11). Herein the symmetry in the negation of self and other appears to be broken through, and in the "self and other not-two" of emptiness, the accent appears to be on the necessary counterpart: "self and other not-one."

Lastly, I would have liked to develop the theme of "Nishitani, the radical with the ever youthful, future-oriented spirit." In the above, I have already used the word "prophet," and I really believe that only this epithet covers adequately Nishitani's stance towards Christianity, Buddhism, and the encounter of the two. Throughout his many talks to religionists, an urgent exhortation to "listen to the call of the future," with "an independence, in a sense, from the past" (17: 188–

189) runs like a golden thread.

It is in not being exclusively bound to the past, but in being directed onward, in intending the future, that the present is the present, different from the past. . . . It is only by being open to an always new future that the present obtains the meaning of the present, is not dead but alive. (17:188 and 18:195)

I am convinced that it is important to rethink [the traditional ways and doctrines] in light of the problems of today. Young people should do so daringly. It does not matter if they sometimes miss the mark. (17:228)

Out of our new experience of life, we must return the religions and sects to the original source out of which they originated: the real religious needs of the people. . . . To start anew from the needs found in the human condition as such . . . and thereby to thaw out, through life itself, what has petrified. . . . (17:125 and 128)

Nishitani Sensei clearly saw it as his mission to convince Japanese religionists of the newness of the problematics of contemporary society and of the depth of the crisis this constitutes for the traditional religions. He was convinced that none of the traditional religions, as they are today, is able to present a solution to the problems of contemporary humanity, but equally convinced that it is only religion that can save humanity for the future. He therefore calls the religions to reform themselves radically, so as to become able to meet the present dangers of humanity head-on. What he demands from the religions is nothing less than an "*entwerden*" (un-becoming): "to let go of the tradition in a process of growth, and through this growth to find an original return to the power that built the tradition" (18:203).

Just how radical a reform Nishitani has in mind can perhaps be seen most clearly in his consideration of the two fundamental characteristics of the modern age: science and secularization. He demands from the religions: do not sidestep these issues, do not try to negate or downplay the picture of humanity and the world presented in them, but assume them totally, live through them into a new kind of religiosity.

I will have occasion to touch on the problem of secularization later,

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and can suffice here with a quick look at the attitude demanded from religion apropos the world view offered by science. Science presents a picture of a dead world, without any teleology or inner directedness toward God or the human. The religions up to now have not really faced up to this world view, but Nishitani insists: "We must have the courage to admit that the spiritual basis of our existence, that is, the ground from which all the teleological systems in religion and philosophy up to now have emerged and on which they rested has been completely destroyed, once and for all. Science has descended upon the world of teleology like an angel with a sword."⁶ We must, then, "take science upon ourselves as a fire with which to purge and temper the traditional religions and philosophies."⁷ The religion of the future must be a religion that "dares to think existentially of science" and which "accepts the universe with its feature of bottomless death as the place for the abandoning of oneself and the throwing away of one's life."⁸ "To face the problem of science on that basic level is a task for the present. . . . I think that thereby religion will come to show in a true sense new possibilities for the future" (6:294).

I will digress here again with a personal reflection. I greatly admired Nishitani for the radicality of his thought, and I fear, with him, that religion will not regain its necessary grasp on our contemporaries unless the religions pass through a radical reform. Still, I cannot help experiencing the picture of religion which Nishitani thereby paints as "uncanny": a religion of the hero, the superman; a religion that uproots one and sets one on one's way, but in no sense becomes a home; a religion where the "form is emptiness" is pushed to its extreme without any visible return to "emptiness is form"; a religion of "barren heights," a moonscape. In this sense, I would call Nishitani's religion nearer to that of Hisamatsu Shin'ichi than to that of Suzuki

⁶ "Science and Zen," *Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. I, No. 1 (1965), p. 85 (the original Japanese text appeared in 1960; cf. 11:227-261). Truly apocalyptic language, befitting a prophet!

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 86 and 91. It is a moot question whether Nishitani intends any kind of "*retractatio*" when he later writes, for example, "We humans cannot existentially live as our own standpoint the standpoint of science" (14:33; 1962); or again: "It is natural that the human is absent from the world of science, but if we stay on that standpoint, we cannot, finally, solve the problem of the human" (6:343; 1966).

Daisetz. I can then appeal to Takeuchi Yoshinori's considerable pictorial talents to express what I mean:

The tone of Suzuki's religiosity is that of a mountain with forests and coppices at its base, interspersed here and there with lakes and bogs. And even near the top we still find fields of flowers, which lend the whole a poetic sphere. Hisamatsu's Zen thought, on the contrary, gives one the impression of facing the towering rock walls of the Eiger, a lone and forbidding peak."⁹

I. Nishitani and Christianity

*The dilemmas of present-day culture are born out of Christianity, and cannot be overcome without reference to Christianity—but a Christianity gone through the crucible of Buddhism.*¹⁰

*I think that . . . the fundamental concepts of Christianity . . . as well as the traditional attitudes towards them, are today pressed by the necessity of a radical re-examination.*¹¹

Here it appears necessary, as a preliminary and without any intention of studying the problem in depth, to ask the question of Nishitani's religious affiliation. Was Nishitani a Buddhist? From the Western view of religious affiliation or belonging, this question can only be answered by a very un-Western "yes and no." By Japanese standards, Nishitani was a Buddhist all right. He had an affiliation with a particular Zen temple, where his funeral took place, where he practiced zazen for a long time. He was rooted, deeply and affectionately, in the Buddhist tradition, and in 1963 confessed: "I have gradually come

⁹ Takeuchi Yoshinori, "Sei o koeru mono" (Beyond the Holy), in Fujiyoshi Jikai, ed., *Hisamatsu Shin'ichi no shūkyō to shisō*, Kyoto: Zen Bunka Kenkyūsho, 1983, p. 128. This might suggest that Hisamatsu may have influenced Nishitani, but I do not remember Nishitani ever quoting Hisamatsu and in my copy of the *Festschrift* for Hisamatsu, I find the annotation (by myself): "Strange. No contribution by Nishitani!"

¹⁰ The first part of this sentence is taken from the Translator's Introduction to *Religion and Nothingness*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p. xxxvii.

¹¹ Nishitani Keiji, "A Buddhist Philosopher Looks at the Future of Christianity," *The Japan Christian Yearbook*, Tokyo: Kyobunkwan, 1968, p. 109.

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to think things with the Buddhist categories of thought. . . . I have gradually come near the Buddhist way of thinking" (20:185). Still, Nishitani never completely identified with Buddhism, often maintained a certain third-party distance. He once said that he can be called a Buddhist only because in Buddhism such non-exclusiveness or "looseness" is allowed. On the same occasion, apropos of Tanabe Hajime's having described his position with respect to Christianity as at the same time belief and unbelief, he revealed the depth of his own involvement in Christianity:

I have the impression that I understand Tanabe's problem very well. I myself am in a similar situation. I do not feel satisfied with any religion as it stands, and I feel the limitations of philosophy also. So, after much hesitation, I made up my mind and have become a *werdender* Buddhist (a Buddhist in the making). One of the main motives for that decision was—strange as it may sound—that I could not enter into the faith of Christianity and was nevertheless not able to reject Christianity.¹²

To describe Nishitani's attitude towards Christianity we need, I believe, at the least the following qualifiers: an incredibly wide knowledge, a deep understanding aided by a high degree of empathy as with a tradition that is not alien to oneself, a great respect for its past tradition, and great expectations as to its future. Beautiful expressions of Nishitani's empathic understanding can be found, for instance, in his view of original sin (*Religion and Nothingness*, pp. 22–24), on the idea of creation (the mystery of human existence is not sufficiently expressed in "bestowed by nature"; 21:189–195), and his warm sympathy for the veneration of the Virgin Mary (21:208).¹³

¹² In Kuyama Yasushi, ed., *Sengo Nippon Seishinshi* (Spiritual History of Postwar Japan), Nishinomiya: Kirisutokyō Gakuto Kyōdaidan, 1961, p. 194.

¹³ A very practical sign of Nishitani's sympathy with Christianity was his encouraging endorsement of the propagation of Christianity in Japan. "Since in Western civilization, Christianity has been a very important and powerful force, it seems to me that it would be good if the Christian foundations would also be part of Japan's adoption of Western culture . . . and I hope that it [Christianity] will develop so as to have a more powerful base among the Japanese people" ("A Symposium on Buddhist-

However, we must speak, at the same time, of an extremely critical attitude, which appears to have its origin in two interlacing factors. On the one hand, Nishitani combines in himself a double sensitivity (aversion) towards the less engaging aspects of Christianity, in its makeup and in its historical appearance: that of the Easterner and that of the contemporary human being. And, on the other hand, there seems to be at play a kind of intolerance to, or impatience with, those traits which, in his view, could keep Christianity from playing in the future the important historical role which he would like to expect from it.

That Nishitani was immensely informed about Christianity does not mean, however, that no misunderstandings, or representations unacceptable to a Christian, ever crept in. On the more esoteric level, he sometimes seems to confuse "virgin birth" and "immaculate conception."¹⁴ When he writes, "The idea of perceiving God in all things of the world is usually rejected as 'pantheism,' and the correct view is taken to be a 'theism' based on a personal relationship with God,"¹⁵ Nishitani certainly disregards a great, if not the greater, part of the Christian tradition. This is connected with his view of the idea of creation as representing in Christianity a fundamental separation of the creature from God, rather than the primordial, ontological, link between God and creature. This in turn has to do with his converting the "nothing" of *creatio ex nihilo* into a substance or ground, which then is seen as an "iron wall" standing between God and the creature, while in the Christian tradition the whole sense of the expression is to ward off the idea that there would be a second principle or ground besides God. He speaks of "the being of the created being grounded upon a nothingness,"¹⁶ and, elsewhere (17:91-93), he presents Christianity as postulating (in the same way as Plotinus) two principles: God and the nothingness of creation—principles which were originally conceived of as non-substantial, but soon became substantified.

But these are minor lapses, due mostly, I believe, to a philosophical

Christian Encounter," *Japan Studies*, No. 15, 1969, p. 2). That this was an authentic desire on his part was forcefully brought home to me when one day he scolded me, a Christian missionary in Japan, outright: "What are you people doing? Why can't you be more zealous and efficient in your propagation of Christianity!"

¹⁴ E.g., in 6:257-286.

¹⁵ *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Cf. 13:91

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schematization. They do not blunt the power of the objections which Nishitani raises against Christianity—objections which we Christians should consider with the utmost seriousness. One well-taken critique is that the Christian tradition has ceded all too often to the natural inclination of human reason to substantify even the first principle, in *casu* God (leaving the “nothingness of creation” out of the picture this time). But what may have been Nishitani’s deepest-felt criticism of Christianity is the arrogant and exclusivistic stand of traditional Christianity on its own unique absoluteness, and “the firm conviction that a position of unwavering supremacy of faith can be ensured only by excluding all other standpoints from faith itself.”¹⁷ He quotes as a reason why he could not become a Christian: “I could not bring myself to consider Buddhism as a false doctrine”¹⁸—as required by that Christian stand. Fortunately enough, this objection loses much of its power or relevance now that this Christian attitude is, hopefully, on the way out. The same cannot be said, however, about the other ones.

Nishitani’s basic objections to Christianity could possibly be summarized in a single sentence, although such a summary would still need a lot of unraveling: Historically speaking, Christianity gave rise to the fundamental problems of the present world situation and, as it presents itself today, it is not able to offer a solution for these problems.

Christianity is responsible for the traditional struggle between faith and reason in the West, which now has developed into the mutual opposition of religion and science, and makes it impossible for most people today to come to religious faith. This is due to the one-sided, personalistic view of the God-human relationship and to the many dogmas—many of a mythological character—which it imposes. This mythological character is in turn a result of viewing some relations with God, which should be seen as universal human prerogatives, as historical and unique (“only Jesus has God-nature,” “virgin birth applies only in the case of Mary”). Bultmann tried to address this, but he did not go to the source of the problem. A unique supernatural event cannot be demythologized.¹⁹

¹⁷ “A Buddhist Philosopher Looks . . .,” p. 109.

¹⁸ *Sengo Nippon Seishinshi*, p. 194.

¹⁹ For the question of myth and demythologization, see mainly 6:257-301.

Christianity is also deemed responsible for the crisis human subjectivity has been going through in modern times. That is, in the West, human subjectivity, in order to really come into its own, had to distance itself from its religious base and was thus alienated from religion and turned into a self-awareness of human being as a narrow self-enclosed (and lonely) "ego." Nishitani admits that the modern idea of the free individual subject has its initial roots in Christianity's idea of the personal relationship of the human individual with God, the idea of "the essential equality of all human beings before God, and the freedom in the faith-awareness of being a child of God" (17:83). But by this selfsame theocentric vision of the human, Christianity impeded the full development of human subjectivity, for "subject" is essentially something without a ground which would rob it of its subjectivity while appearing to support it. The absolute dependence of the human on the divine Will does not allow real human freedom, and "the idea of divine providence is, indeed, a high standpoint to look back from at the human, but it 'cannot return to the human'" (17:169). As a reaction, then, the Western subject in modern times turned to the idea of full autonomy of the individual ego. "That the self-awareness of the human being could only arise in that form [the "ego" form] is due to the fact that the preceding . . . Christian view of the human was theocentric and, as such, contained something that could not fully permit the standpoint of the subjective autonomy of the human being to arise" (17:84).

Thus, the full awareness of the human as such required emancipation from Christianity; it could develop only together with a movement toward secularization (17:83-85). What is more, Christianity not only did not prevent *de facto* the self-awareness of the Western subject from focusing on a self-centered ego, but contains in its very makeup the seeds of self-centeredness, and thus is not really able to free the human being from its self-centeredness. This is due to its view of history, where "the self-centeredness of man casts its shadow over everything,"²⁰ but more basically still to the priority of the will in Christianity's view of God, the human, and the relationship of the two.

²⁰ *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 203. For this built-in self-centeredness see *ibid.*, pp. 201-208, where Nishitani refers to Arnold Toynbee.

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I think that, in the Western view, the will is seen as the basic element of the human being. This appears especially strongly in Christianity. Therein lies a grave problem. The God of Christianity is very voluntaristic. . . . Everything falls under the dominion of the divine Will. Also the relationship of God and the human is viewed as a relation of will to will (17:26).

Christianity, of course, tends to do away with the cruder forms of self-centeredness, but it encourages a "self-centeredness *via* God." "Human self-centeredness is a permanent fixture in religions in the West; once negated, it reappears, as in the guise of God's chosen people."²¹ This, of course has led to the arrogance of seeing oneself as the "only true religion." Thus we are back where we started. In Nishitani's view, this flaw in Christianity is extremely serious, since he considers religion to be "the only force that can eradicate the deepest roots of our self-centered ego" (4:374), and ego-centered self-awareness is one of the central problems of our times.

II. Nishitani and Buddhism

No route exists to link the religious quest or religious needs that stir in the hearts of our contemporaries with the established religions (17:121).

I have mentioned above Nishitani's personal affiliation with Buddhism. His "identification" with, and intimate knowledge of, Buddhism was clear, in spite of occasional self-deprecatory remarks such as: "My specialty is philosophy, in Buddhism I am an amateur" (17:3); "I have no right really to speak about Zen from my little bit of experience" (18:11). But there was also perhaps the desire of the philosopher to affirm the autonomy of his philosophy. About the fact that Nishida gradually stopped talking about Zen, Nishitani once remarked: ". . . he seems to have felt that his thought was philosophical through and through and not to be reduced to Zen and its traditional views."²² Although Nishitani certainly never stopped talking

²¹ Ibid., p. 203. It may be remarked here that the apparently iron-willed Nishitani wages, in his works, an unrelenting battle, on all fronts and levels, against the will, which plays such a big role in the philosophy of his teacher, Nishida.

²² Nishitani Keiji, *Nishida Kitarō*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku and James W. Heisig, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, p. 25.

about Zen—quite to the contrary, as he grew older he expressed his deepest insights more and more in the form of commentaries on “Zen words”—he can be said to have shared his teacher’s feeling.

How did Nishitani view Buddhism? It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that, with complete disregard of its rich cultural heritage (with the exception of course of its philosophy and *dō* or “ways”), Nishitani went straight to the core of Buddhism. “The most basic characteristic of Buddhism is non-ego” (17:3); “Buddhism is the place for being a subject that is radically non-ego, for being non-ego but thoroughly subject” (17:203). The focus is always on the power of Buddhism to overcome the natural self-centeredness of the human being, in the individual and in society.

Again, however, this “identification” and this appreciation, far from blunting his critical spirit, seemed rather to hone it to an ever-sharper edge. To tell the truth, as a Christian student of his, I sometimes had the impression that Nishitani occasionally “reveled” in exposing the problems Christianity carries in itself, especially with regard to modernity—problems which Buddhism was supposed not to have or to have preempted long ago.²³ It is true that, on many occasions, he indicates the advantage Buddhism has with regard to these points—points which I shall have occasion to mention later—and presents Buddhism as at least carrying the seeds of a solution for the problems of the age. But any idea I might have had of Nishitani enjoying his criticisms of Christianity died an inglorious death the moment I became more acquainted with his writings and recorded talks on Buddhism. I soon learned that his critique on Buddhism is no less “scathing,” and that, while pointing out a Christian weakness, he often adds in the same breath that Buddhism faces a similar problem. So after indicating the necessity for Christianity to rethink its idea of God, he points out that today Buddhism is similarly faced with the problem of how to conceive of the Buddha (17:285). Another example, with a somewhat different slant, is found in his reflections on the demythologization debate, triggered by Bultmann, in Christianity. The main thrust of his essays on this topic is, as indicated above, that Bultmann’s efforts are still insufficient and that Christianity is in deeper

²³ I hasten to add that this impression was only related to Nishitani’s written texts. There was never the slightest hint of it in personal conversation.

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trouble with its mythological character than even Bultmann realized. In so doing, however, he inserts a truly "Nishitanian" remark:

At the same time, the vitality which Christianity continues to exhibit draws its sustenance from the hidden menace this problem poses. In the face of the energetic and wide-reaching debate over demythologizing, Buddhism, in its present tepid and inactive state, almost seems to be like a kind of geological relic from the past. (6:260)²⁴

We find here one of the most strongly-worded formulations of Nishitani's indictment of present-day Buddhism. For, indeed, most of his criticism of Buddhism focuses on its actual situation, especially in Japan: its sectarianism, its lack of adaptation to the present, its alienation from real society, and so on. But let the texts speak for themselves.

[Present-day Japanese] have no religion. Buddhism and Confucianism, the religions of Japan's past, are not alive any longer.²⁵

At present, Buddhism exerts practically no influence on life in society. . . . This is due to the fact that Buddhism has merged too closely into the social life, has turned into social habit, and has fallen into a state of inertia." (17:79)

The present society is totally different from that of the Tokugawa era (1600–1868). Almost nothing remains unchanged. Buddhism alone has not changed. . . . In Japan's Buddhism there are no clear signs of modernization. . . . It is like a kite caught in a tree; it must be made to fly once more." (17:131 and 136)

And Nishitani deplores "the very big gap that exists at present between the Buddhist organizations and society in general," and the fact that, "in the Buddhist communities one sees everything from within" (17:120 and 122).

Regarding the feelings of indifference with which the different sects regard one another:

²⁴ Translation taken from "A Buddhist Voice in the Demythologizing Debate," *Eastern Buddhist* xxiv, 1 (1991), p. 4 (translation by Richard F. Szimpl).

²⁵ In *Sengo Nippon Seishinshi*, p. 341.

I think that a Buddhist community in the true sense does not exist. . . . It is not clear where the common root lies out of which all the different sects originated. . . . Somewhere along the way [the link with] that point of origin has become very tenuous. . . . I do not think I can call that Buddhism.” (18:173)

Finally, Nishitani points out that there is no “Buddhist theology” in the true sense of the word (as opposed to secularized buddhology and the separate doctrinal studies of the individual sects); there is, especially, no “study of the *sangha*” (Buddhist “ecclesiology”) (18:171–174). Buddhism has, for example, not succeeded in giving a modern sense to the oft-repeated expression, “*samsara-is-pure land (nirvana)*” (17:180).

If Nishitani's critique focuses mainly on the present state of (Japanese) Buddhism, it does not restrict itself to that, but is also directed against what he considers to be serious flaws in the very makeup of Buddhism. To begin with, he more than once suggests that one of Buddhism's present shortcomings has its roots in the very nature of the religion. For example, there being no doctrine with regard to the *sangha* is connected with Buddhist doctrine being essentially asocial. Further, he writes:

[In modern times, human beings have become very self-aware, and] also in Buddhism “self-knowledge” is fundamental. Only, in Buddhism, this self-knowledge finds it extremely difficult to step into (or link up with) the real world of society or history. . . . In modern human beings, knowledge of the world and self-knowledge originate in an intimate mutual relationship. For Buddhism, there is a problem in that relationship. An inability to modernize is connected with the fact that self-knowledge and world-knowledge are kept apart. (17:174)

Simply stated, Nishitani's critique can be said to have found two basic formulations. The first is couched in traditional Buddhist terms: Buddhism faces a life-and-death struggle in the gap that exists between *hō* (Dharma) and *nin* (the human being with its social and historical character), and in the tendency to explain everything from the side of the Dharma, in disregard of *nin*. To remedy this, it is necessary to

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recognize the historical character of the Dharma and to follow, first of all, the path that leads from *nin* to *hō*. The second formulation is a more common one: "Buddhism is extremely otherworldly, refusing to enter into the various affairs of human society, politics, economics. . . . From this, one gets the impression that it is somewhat insufficient to probe human life deeply and thoroughly" (17:230–231). In another context, Nishitani articulated that critique into three points, from the viewpoint of modernity:

1. "Is not it true that Buddhism has no ethics"—an ethics capable of becoming a creative force to shape a new economics, new politics, etc.? (17:141; further: 157–168).

2. There is no problematics of history, no historical consciousness, in Buddhism (17:142; further: 154–155).

3. Buddhism has not yet confronted science and technology (17:148–150).

All these decidedly strong criticisms, however, do not belie, but are rather added proof of, the fact that Nishitani never ceased investing high hopes in the Buddhism which he tried to "whip into life again." In Buddhism he also saw and highlighted strong points, which he considered indispensable for the religion of the future and which more often than not appear to correspond to weak points in Christianity. Buddhism (and especially Zen), therefore, has a high destiny, an important mission in the future.

Suzuki Daisetz's motivation in his propagation of Zen in the West was his conviction that, in the future, Zen would have a great significance for the people of the world . . . and he was not mistaken in this. Even I, who have only practiced Zen to a small degree, can see that. (18:17)

For a short overview of the strong points Nishitani finds in Buddhism, we can list the following:

In Buddhism, we find "a self-awareness of the human being in the form of a self-awareness of non-ego." Buddhism can thereby overcome human self-centeredness and solve the dilemma of Christian theocentrism, which does not really return to the human subject, and self-centered anthropocentrism (17:86–87).

Buddhism is not burdened to the same degree as Christianity with

(partly mythological) dogmas. Zen, in particular, is "free" on this point.

What drove Suzuki Daisetz to propagate Zen was that he recognized the great significance of a trait of Zen that is not to be found in any other religion, namely the fact that Zen has no dogma of any kind. (21:114)

Buddhism has the advantage of having a strong "principle of de-substantialization" in its standpoint of non-ego or emptiness.

Although in actual fact it has not yet confronted science, Buddhism contains a standpoint that is able to provide a basis for both religion and science (17:89).

The Buddhist vision of the 'equality of all things' on the highest level [all things having Buddha-nature] resolves, on the one hand, the dilemma of science reducing the human to the lowest equality of all things and, on the other hand, metaphysics and religion which connect only the human with the divine. It can thus integrate the standpoint of science into a religious vision that upholds the nature and dignity of the human. (14:3-39)

In Zen Nishitani finds two more elements that are sorely needed by present-day people. "More than anything else, it is Zen that teaches that stillness which is lacking in the busyness of present-day life" (18:22). "When one enters Zen, one must throw one's knowledge away, become naked, and return to 'square one' [the simple fact of being alive] . . . in order to find bottom under one's feet. . . . Precisely in that point lies the great significance Zen has for the present" (18:18-19).

III. Nishitani and the Interreligious Dialogue

It will be a dialogue, not in heaven but rather in hell. If it is not, religion itself will not be saved. And if religion is not saved, then what other path would there be to save humanity and the world?
(18:62)

In Nishitani's vision there is no salvation for humankind except

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through religion; no single religion in its traditional form is able to meet the needs of present humanity; all traditional religions, specifically Christianity and Buddhism (the only ones he wrote about), have deep flaws; moreover, the weak points of Christianity in many cases correspond to strong points in Buddhism, and vice versa. Therefore, the only possible hope for the future appears to lie in the encounter and mutual enrichment of Christianity and Buddhism.

A clearer blueprint for the urgent necessity of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue is hard to imagine. No wonder Nishitani was a staunch promoter of that dialogue, not only in his writings, but also as an active participant in related organizations. But, of course, here also he remained true to his nature—meaning that he went straight to the crux of the matter and came up with the most radical conclusions possible.

Nishitani devoted much thought to the staggering difficulties of the dialogue. He narrowed the problem down to two main points. First, really encountering another religion implies “recognizing that there is a religion that exists besides one’s own,” and therefore being aware of the relativity of one’s own. That is not easy for religions that have traditionally considered themselves in absolute terms. “The encounter is very difficult since both possess their own different ‘worlds,’ and both have developed into world religions, universal religions that, in a sense, cover the totality of the human” (18:121 and 124). What makes the situation almost “hopelessly difficult” is the fact that both religions have developed doctrinal systems, whereby their religious ideas have acquired a fixed form and developed an unshakable self-confidence (14:54).

The second point lies in the difficulty people in general have in “understanding the other, because it requires entering the other’s ways of thinking, feeling, and intending. . . . That difficulty becomes nearly insurmountable when it comes to a spiritual realm that lies near the innermost inner sanctum of the human heart” (14:54). Nevertheless, if we really want to meet, nothing more superficial will do. “To open a path to mutual understanding, we must descend deep into that realm of faith and doctrine, because that realm is, after all, the profoundest level humanity has been able to reach” (14:55).

Nishitani closes off, right from the beginning, the tempting path of easy compromise in a cozy atmosphere of mutual friendship. “The first

requirement is that both make clear and uphold . . . their own particularity. Otherwise we come to a hybrid product that is neither one nor the other. If each does not bring its strong points into play, the whole exercise is meaningless" (18:125). He insists on the "cutting edge" the dialogue must have in order to be authentic. "We call it dialogue, but it is like two samurai crossing swords" (18:55). Moreover, just as he has insisted that "the religious communities must step out of themselves, to stand in the same place as ordinary people" (17:131), he now declares:

The common "place" where Buddhism and Christianity can talk is the world of historical reality that both of them are confronting. . . . Even the confrontation of the traditional doctrines of the two religions must also occur on the basis of the actual situation of the present world. It must not be an in-house discussion. . . . It is necessary to dialogue on the standpoint of the task that is imposed on both religions: to do something about the problems of present society . . . problems for which both carry responsibility, were it only by the fact that they were not able to prevent them. . . . (18:128 and 130)

This might at first sight give the impression that Nishitani is of the same opinion as those present-day theologians who suggest that the meeting place of the religions lies in their common concern and activity for justice in the world. But, this should not be taken to suggest that working for the good of society is the only substance of religion or that, in that joined activity, each religion can safely rest on its own doctrinal position, because that would be at the opposite pole from Nishitani's position. For, on this point we encounter again, as intimated already, a prime example of the radicality of Nishitani's analyses and of the demands he makes on the religions.

After having stated that, in the encounter, we cannot shelve our doctrinal differences, but must "descend deep into the realm of faith and doctrine," Nishitani points out:

However, on that level an encounter cannot really occur for, when it comes to faith and doctrine, even "world religions," no matter how open they are within their own sphere, are

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closed to other religions. . . . Therefore, after having reached that level, we must go beyond it to a still deeper level, and look there for the possibility of encounter and mutual understanding in the true sense. . . . This will probably be a totally new level. Today, we face a severe demand: that of going beyond even the spiritual forms and norms that lie in the innermost core of ourselves, to break through the settled frameworks of doctrine and theology . . . to return to the original "self" beyond all doctrines . . . the level where the human is merely human, or simply a "son of man" . . . barefooted and empty-handed. (14:55-56)

This, of course, requires the paradoxical attitude of retaining utmost loyalty to one's religion while letting go of it. Nishitani, detecting that attitude in the Zen tradition, uses the terminology of Zen to describe it. In one place, he refers to the spirit of "*butsukōjō*" (roughly, "going beyond Buddha"), "while basing oneself on Buddha, distancing oneself from the Buddha" (18:146). In another passage, he explains this same attitude using a thorough analysis of words by Rinzai (Linchi), "While being on the road, not being away from home" (18:53-58).

But what does this have to do with taking the actual world as the place of the dialogue? Here, Nishitani launches a really breathtaking idea, which I might attempt to formulate as follows. The present unity of the world (the "one world") has been brought about by science and secularization. Also religious unity in this one world can only originate in that same source. It is by fully adopting that secularity that we shall be enabled to assume the paradoxical standpoint that our present predicament requires. But here again, it is better to let Nishitani tell this in his own words.

This possibility [of penetrating deeper than one's own religion and meeting the other there] is contained in the selfsame basic historical situation which at present makes the encounter of Buddhism and Christianity necessary. Namely, in the fact that the present world as a whole is rapidly becoming "one world." . . . The universal situation of the present has been made possible only by the process of secularization, whereby all the realms of human activity have been eman-

culated one by one from the shackles of religious doctrines and theologies that have long dominated them. Today, by their doctrines and theologies, the religions have been set apart in an isolated position in the world: closed in themselves, they form the only exception to the unifying trend of the world.

In such a situation, the only possible path for a true encounter and mutual understanding of East and West on the deepest level of human existence is to expose oneself boldly, radically, to the complicated situation of the actual world, and to find in the midst thereof a new point of departure. This means to enter deeply, gropingly, into the bottom of human existence and to arrive there at the hidden origin, the source wherein the emergence of the present "one world," with its radical and universal secularization of human life, originated . . .

To expose ourselves boldly to that situation of the present world will mean that each of us will become in the most simple and radical way a "son of man" who has nowhere to lay his head. . . .

Today, if we do not descend to that level, no real encounter—with other religions, and even with Jesus—is possible. (14:57-58)