

A Man of the Universe

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In the early morning of November 24, 1990, Nishitani Keiji passed away. Although I had a premonition that this day would not be too far in the future, when I actually received the news from Sensei's daughter, I found myself in a state of shock and disbelief.

For over forty years I had the great privilege of studying under Sensei. He was my mentor in both official and personal capacities. Sensei was thus "my rock and my fortress," the finest, most remarkable teacher I have encountered upon this earth.

Just three days earlier, accompanied by a friend, I visited Sensei at his home in Yoshida. We chatted on sundry things that afternoon, but to me the most rewarding and unexpected part of the visit was to have been able to see that wonderful face of his looking as gentle and kind as ever. We had been hoping to go out for a drive in his daughter's car to view the last of the autumn foliage, if Sensei's condition permitted, but we decided against doing so. When we left him it was in a heartened, joyful state of mind.

I received a great deal of instruction from Sensei regarding Zen thought and religion. With my limited abilities, however, and being a follower of Christianity as well, I cannot deny that the teaching of Zen has always seemed somehow difficult to accept. Some years ago, while out on a stroll with Sensei, I confronted him with the following question: "Christianity is, so to speak, an historical religion. God, together with his Logos, was revealed in the historical person of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, this was transmitted to the disciples, and Logos has been historically propagated by the Church from generation to generation. It is a religion that was formed historically, a revealed religion. Buddhism, though, call it *satori* or *kenshō*, is not in any way dependent on divine revelation. Isn't it, after all, something attributable to 'human thought'?" This was the gist of my question. In response Sensei, without any hint of reproach, calmly explained the following: "In exchange for that, though, Buddhism, whether you call it Bodhi or *satori*, is ultimately prescribed cosmologically and philosophically." On yet another occasion he said: "In Buddhism, unlike in Christianity, although we speak of 'faith' or of 'enlightenment', there is never the problem of having to demythologize. Things are in their isness, according to nature's law, just-as-they-are."

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The word "universe" appears throughout Sensei's writings. I cannot attempt an explanation of his profound understanding of the term in this short essay. I would like merely to set down a few fragmentary thoughts that come to mind concerning my title, "A Man of the Universe."

Whenever Sensei uses the words "universe," or "cosmological," I find that, in the final analysis, they have philosophical as well as profoundly religious implications. Schleiermacher's words, "Religion is to intuit the universe," are brought to mind by Sensei's use of the term "universe," and indeed may not be totally unconnected to Sensei's thought and experience. But in Sensei's case there is something that breaks through, or rises beyond, a Schleiermacher-like romantic mysticism.

The universe referred to by Sensei is of a different dimension from the world that is ordinarily imagined (world in the historical sense). It is the so-called "Great Chilocosm" or the "Worlds in the Ten Directions," composed of a variety of environments and forms (*eidos*) of even those beings and forms different from our familiar world or environment of human beings." It is a universe in which the non-human ("different kinds of beings") lives in equality with all living beings (*shujō*).

The universe that is studied from the standpoint of natural science is something that excludes previous teleological systems and world views that combined religion and philosophy. To describe it in the fashion of Nietzsche, it is the world of nihilism in which neither "teleology" nor "the world beyond" (*hinterwelt*) exist. Professor Nishitani, too, acknowledges that this sort of world or universe is the world of death or the world of nihilism in which the existence of God has been nullified. To penetrate nihilism and then to go beyond it are fundamental motifs in Sensei's religious philosophy.

The Apocryphal eschatology in the New Testament ("The Revelation of John" being a classical example) is regarded as having inherited the eschatology of later Judaism, and is, according to Bultmann and others, a major object in need of demythologizing. Some twenty years ago, when I accompanied Professor Nishitani to Marburg and we visited Professor Bultmann, it seemed to me that Professor Nishitani came away having affirmed the fact that they shared a common existential standpoint on this issue of demythologizing "mythological eschatology."

In Sensei's thought, "the appearance of bottomless death that is presenting itself in the universe" is also manifesting the ultimate end of the universe. It is none other than the "the annihilation of the self," as well as the place where the self casts off life and body alike. It is at the same time most probably the place where the transformation from "nihility" to "emptiness" (suchness) takes place. In this sense, Sensei has not merely "died." He continues to live—all the more alive—as the "universal" or "original" self.