

Non-dualism and Soteriology in Whitehead, Nishida, and Tanabe:

A Response to James Fredericks

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IN HIS PAPER, "Cosmology and Metanoia: A Buddhist Path to Process Thought for the West," James Fredericks offers a stimulating discussion of Whitehead and Buddhism, especially as the latter finds expression in the thought of Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime, two key thinkers in the Kyoto School. Fredericks considers Whitehead's uniqueness in the modern West, the cosmologies of Whitehead and Nishida, and Tanabe's philosophy. A highlight of Fredericks' paper is his excellent treatment of Tanabe, especially Tanabe's critique of reason, formulation of the way of repentance or metanoia (*zange*), and consideration of history and ethics. In expanding the ongoing Whitehead-Nishida dialogue to include Tanabe, Fredericks taps a rich methodological and philosophical vein.

Each of the various ideas and issues formulated by Fredericks provides a focal point for discussion. Given the overall strength of Fredericks' discussion, this response focuses simply on several of the ideas and issues that strike this reader as most provocative: 1. Whitehead's own encounter with Buddhism, 2. the degree of non-dualism in the cosmologies of Whitehead and Nishida, 3. Tanabe's critique of Nishida along the lines of Other-power and self-power, and 4. soteriology in the three perspectives. As will be obvious in the pages to follow, much of this response is to Whitehead, Nishida, and Tanabe, rather than to Fredericks; insofar as the ideas presented in this response begin with Fredericks' remarks, they perhaps can contribute to further dialogue.

NON-DUALISM AND SOTERIOLOGY IN WHITEHEAD

In the first section of his paper, Fredericks sketches how Whitehead's philosophy diverges from the standpoints of traditional Christian theism and the Enlightenment. Discussing the relationship between God and the World, facts, and value, Fredericks touches upon Whitehead's encounter with Buddhism.¹ He cites Whitehead's statement in *Religion in the Making* (p. 50) that Buddhism is "a metaphysics generating a religion." (p. 113) Though metaphysics and soteriology are closely connected in Buddhism Whitehead's view falls short of an accurate portrayal of Buddhism. Whitehead's statement implies that Gautama, the historical Buddha, formulated a metaphysical system from which he or his followers developed a religious system. Judging from traditional accounts of the life of the Buddha and from what are recorded in the sutra literature as his actual talks, Whitehead misses the boat. Primary texts indicate that Gautama's central concern was the cessation of suffering (Sanskrit, *duhkha*), a problem that is religious, not metaphysical. He sought in vain in the religious and philosophical systems at his disposal for a solution to this fundamental problem, and at the end of a seven-year religious quest he realized the cessation of suffering in himself. Soon thereafter he began to reflect on his religious experience, give talks about how others could follow the same path, and in the process began to give his religious insight an expression that is in part metaphysical. In articulating a way to eradicate suffering, however, Gautama spoke primarily in moral and psychological terms and, as clearly indicated in such sources as the *Majjhima Nikāya*, cautioned his followers about the pitfalls of metaphysical speculation,

¹ At one point Fredericks refers to Whitehead's preoccupation with the Buddhist religious vision." (p. 114) This wording indicates that Whitehead not only studied Buddhism but focused a significant portion of his attention to it. Though at this point in time it is difficult to ascertain the extent of Whitehead's encounter with Buddhism, we do find that explicit references to Buddhism are few and far between in Whitehead's major writings. Although Whitehead compares Buddhism and Christianity in *Religion in the Making*, albeit in ways which, as we will see, distort Buddhism, he does not refer to Buddhism in *Science and the Modern World*; he mentions it briefly three times in *Process and Reality*; he does not discuss it in *The Function of Reason*; in *Adventures of Ideas* he refers to Buddhism once, inaccurately as the epitome of the religious attitude that claims that the passing "shadows" in our experience will end and is tempted "to abandon the immediate experience of this world as a lost cause" (p. 32); he does not discuss Buddhism in *Modes of Thought*.

which in most cases does not directly effect a religious transformation in the speculator or may even hinder it. In short, to convey accurately the Buddhist tradition, one perhaps should state that "Buddhism is a religious experience generating a metaphysics."

Of course, the significance of Fredericks' paper does not hinge on the degree to which Whitehead correctly understood Buddhism. As Fredericks outlines in his paper, striking similarities exist between the two outlooks, including the element of non-dualism. One of Whitehead's great achievements is the metaphysical bridging of the chasm separating God and the world. Similarly, on the basis of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, Nishida wrote at length in his writings on the "absolutely contradictory self-identity" between nirvana and samsara, one and many, time and space. We must examine, however, the degree to which these philosophies in fact sustain the "uncompromised" non-dualism mentioned by Fredericks.

Whitehead's discussion of actual occasions and God as the non-temporal actual entity tends to fall short of "uncompromised" non-dualism. One can argue that Whitehead advances an emphasis on the one at the expense of the many, and this point connects with Whitehead's soteriology. Whitehead locates evil and part of the role of God in perishing: "The ultimate evil in the temporal world is deeper than any specific evil. It lies in the fact that the past fades, that time is a 'perpetual perishing.'"² Wrestling with this fact, Whitehead argues that every actual occasion, even though its enjoyment immediately perishes, is directly prehended by God and preserved forever without loss—perhaps with the exception of subjective immediacy—in the everlasting consequent nature of God. This is "perfected actuality, in which the many are one everlastingly, without the qualification of any loss either of individual identity or completeness of unity. In everlastingness, immediacy is reconciled with objective immortality."³ In this way, God's prehension of actual occasions "up" out of the process of becoming and the retention of the many in the everlasting consequent nature of God circumvent perishing and provide actual occasions

² Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (corrected edition), ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald Sherburne (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1978), p. 340.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 350-351.

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with “objective immortality.” But, this soteriological overcoming of perishing accords greater significance to God than to the world. That is to say, objective immortality features a movement from the many (all actual occasions) to the one (God; more specifically, the everlasting consequent nature of God). Of course, important in Whitehead’s formulation of salvation and morality are the ideas that “the many are one everlastingly”—that all occasions are retained forever in the “one” called God—and that by virtue of this no value is lost; yet we can make the case that in this perspective the one (God) takes precedence over the many, rendering Whitehead’s perspective a “compromised” non-dualism.

When we turn to Nishida, we find him advancing what at first glance appears to be a rigorous non-dualism, but as Tanabe and Fredericks point out, Nishida perhaps falls short of “uncompromised non-dualism” as well. In an essay entitled “The Unity of Opposites,” Nishida writes, “At the base of the world, there are neither the many nor the one; it is a world of absolute unity of opposites, where the many and the one deny each other.”⁴ This world is a dynamic process.

That the one is the one of the many, indicates space-character; the mechanism has the form: from the many towards the one; it means movement from the past into the future. On the contrary, the fact that the many are the many of the one means the dynamic time-character of the world; purpose and evolution have the form: from the one towards the many; it means movement from the future into the past. The world as a unity of opposites, from the formed towards the forming, is essentially a world from present to present.⁵

This exposition of a non-dualistic world that is 100% unified (not-two) and 100% plural (not-one) and that is neither merely mechanistic nor merely teleological bases itself on the Buddhist notions of dependent co-arising (Sanskrit, *pratitya-samutpāda*) and emptiness (Skt., *śūnyatā*).

Although Nishida’s metaphysical approach appears rigorously non-

⁴ Kitaro Nishida, “The Unity of Opposites,” tr. Robert Shinzinger, in *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness* (Tokyo: Maruzen Co., Ltd., 1958), p. 168.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 166–167.

dualistic in such essays as "The Unity of Opposites" (1939), in other writings he falls short of a stance of uncompromised dualism. Early in *An inquiry into the Good* he refers to pure experience prior to the separation of subject and object; he expands this in terms of God, the unifying power and in this sense the foundation of the universe, which is a manifestation of God. As Tanabe points out, Nishida's discussion of intellectual intuition in this context points in the direction of the precedence of an underlying oneness or unity at the expense of the particular parts. Rigorous non-dualism in Buddhism does not derive simply from the dimension of that which is prior to the separation of subject and object (not-two) but rather from the dynamism that also includes subject and object (not-one).⁶ Further, we must join Tanabe in asking whether Nishida's articulation of nothingness in terms of universals, based to a large extent on Hegel, does justice to the non-dualism in Buddhism.

Nishida might argue in this context that Tanabe is wide of the mark in arguing that Nishida advances a type of intuition and ontology of emanation derivative of the philosophy of Plotinus. As James Heisig writes in his foreword to the English translation of *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, Nishida's notion of intuition and enveloping levels of reality does not necessarily derive from Plotinus. More specifically, Nishida would disagree with Tanabe's claim that, in Fredericks' words, "the metaphor of 'place' presumes that the absolute can be known noetically in an aesthetic intuition into the undifferentiated immediacy of being, (p. 121) for Nishida states that the unifying power he is referring to as God eludes our knowing and reason: "This unity itself cannot become the object of knowledge; we can become it and function, but we cannot know it. True self-awareness exists upon the activity of the will, not upon intellectual reflection."⁷

Tanabe also claims that Nishida's "ordinary mysticism" does not call

⁶ This is an elusive facet of Nishida's thought. At numerous points in his later writings he states that pure experience and God, understood as absolute nothingness or "place," do not take precedence over particular individuals, but rather make their concrete particularity possible. He also argues in his treatment of place that individuals are determinations of nothingness and at the same time, given the nature of nothingness, individuals are their own self-determinations as well.

⁷ Nishida Kitarō, *Zen no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 1980), pp. 226-227.

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for the death and resurrection of the ego. To some extent this critique parallels the classic *tariki-jiriki* (other-power/self-power) debate between Pure Land and Zen, represented here by Tanabe and Nishida. As Fredericks points out, Tanabe argues that it is through Other-power that one dies to the ego-self and realizes nothingness. Tanabe conveys this in a critique of Nishida's approach:

Witness to nothingness is not the sort of thing that can be intuited as a ground, or locus, of practice. Such a view is pure illusion in that it interprets practice not as the action of Other-power through which the self dies and comes to nothingness, but as the function of the life of self-power that gives form to existence as an expression of oneness with existence.⁸

A question arises here: to what extent does Tanabe's critique stem from a careful reading of Nishida (and Zen, for that matter) and to what extent does it stem from Pure Land views of Zen as a path of self-power?

Overall, Tanabe overlooks the degree to which Zen and Nishida emphasize the negation of the ego-self and its "self-power." Of course, Tanabe appears to recognize the element of negation in Zen when he takes up the notion of the Great Death; yet he views the Great Death as future-oriented "total affirmation and voluntary acceptance of one's death."⁹ Tanabe's close linkage of the Great Death with future physical death falls short of the deepest sense of the Great Death: a negation of entanglement in ordinary ego-consciousness, which constitutes a liberating existential transformation here and now. In addition, when examining the Zen term *kenshō* (seeing/realizing one's nature), Tanabe states, "It [Zen] does not *confront* the self because it already *is* the self."¹⁰ This notion that Zen practice does not confront the ego-self and that it affirms the ordinary ego-self as the awakened "self" fails to grasp the actual nature of Zen and Nishida's articulation of it.

The negation or "death" of the ego-self appears frequently in Nishida's writings. For example, in his first work, *An Inquiry into the*

⁸ Hajime Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, tr. Yoshinori Takeuchi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 165-166.

⁹ Tanabe, p. 162.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

Good, Nishida writes, "The method through which we can know the true self and fuse with God is our self-attainment of the power of the union of subject and object. To acquire this power is to kill our false self and, after dying once to worldly desire, gain new life."¹¹ Three sentences later he writes, "Christianity calls this rebirth; Buddhism calls it *kenshō*."¹² This theme of death and "resurrection" jumps out at the reader not only in this, Nishida's first work, but also in the works that follow, including his last major piece, "The Logic of Place and a Religious World View," completed in the same year as *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (1945). In this essay, Nishida stresses repeatedly that the self encounters the divine only through dying. At one point he writes, "When a relative being opposes the absolute, it must die. It must become nothingness. The self encounters God only in a relationship of inverse polarity, only through dying. It is linked to God only in this way."¹³ Even more provocative for the discussion at hand is what Nishida goes on to write several pages later:

Essentially, there can be no religion of self-power. This is indeed a contradictory concept. Buddhists themselves have been mistaken about it.

The concepts of self-power and Other-power, the Zen sect and True Pure Land Sect, as forms of Mahayana Buddhism, hold the same position. . . . In any religion, it is the effort of self-negation that is necessary.¹⁴

This issue of the "death" of the ego-self brings us back to soteriology. As we saw before, Whitehead regards perishing as the basic evil, and as a salvific response to this God preserves the actual occasion forever in God's consequent nature—without any type of spiritual death.¹⁵ The Buddhist tradition represented by Nishida and Tanabe

¹¹ Nishida, *Zen no kenkyū*, pp. 206–207.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹³ Kitaro Nishida, "The Logic of Place and a Religious World-View," Part II, tr. David Dilworth as "Religious Consciousness and the Logic of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*," *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. XXV, Nos. 1–2 (1970), p. 206.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 215–216.

¹⁵ Fredericks takes up what ostensibly is a statement about religious salvation by Whitehead, who argues in *Science and the Modern World* that the "salvation of reali-

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consider "perishing" to be characteristic of all actual occasions or entities. In fact, this notion occupies a position in the central Buddhist philosophical triad of *anatman*, *duhkha*, and *anitya*. Mahayana Buddhism sees perishing as a metaphysically-given condition of reality, of *all* reality—it is an inescapable fact, and there is no everlasting realm in which "immortality" of actual occasions and serially-ordered societies is achieved. Further, Buddhism argues that the basic "evil" is not perishing but the effort of the human to fabricate an enduring and independent "self" and to cling to this fabrication and things that support this effort, even though all "things" perish in the impermanent process of which we are part. To Buddhism and Zen, our entanglement in the dualistic ego-self, not perishing per se, is regarded as the true source of suffering and evil. Rather than affirming (albeit, indirectly) the ego-self by speaking of occasions of experience (constituting a serially-ordered society) attaining objective immortality in the consequent nature of God, Buddhism works to eradicate entanglement in the ego-self and bring about a "turning over of consciousness:" (Skt., *pravṛtti-vijñāna*). In the original teachings of the Buddha and in Zen, religious liberation occurs through an Awakening realized upon the "death" of the ego-self, through a way of experiencing/being that lies beyond the ego-self and its concern for its own assertion and immortality. This Awakening is not outside the realm of perishing, but in its midst: upon the "death" of the ego-self, nirvana is samsara and samsara is nirvana. Moreover, from Nishida's perspective, true importance and value are first realized in this "conversion" (*metanoia*):

In transcending in that direction [beyond the ego-self] the highest value of negation of values becomes visible: it is the religious value. The religious value, therefore, means absolute negation of the self. The religious ideal consists in becoming a being which denies itself. There is a seeing with-

ty" lies in matter-of-fact entities. One cannot help wondering, however, whether Whitehead's statement should be taken as expressing a soteriological stance per se or as offering a poetical way of rejoicing that by virtue of the existence of concrete particulars, reality is "saved" from being what Whitehead calls in the previous sentence "the nonentity of indefiniteness" (see Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 94.

out a seeing one, and a hearing without a hearing one. This is salvation.¹⁶

In short, then, while Whitehead sets forth objective immortality as that which circumvents perishing—without calling the ego-self (be it a serially-ordered society or a self-centered way of experiencing) into question—Zen and Nishida deny the ego-self without negating the inevitable perishing that Buddhism sees as value-neutral. Of course, Whitehead does speak of Peace as “self-control at its widest—at the width where the ‘self’ has been lost, and interest has been transferred to coordinations wider than personality,”¹⁷ and regards God as “that function in the world by reason of which our purposes are directed to ends which in our own consciousness are impartial as to our own interests.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, perhaps Nishida and Tanabe would agree with George F. Thomas’ appraisal of Whitehead’s notion of Peace: “Does it not rest upon a rather optimistic estimate of man’s moral and spiritual capacity to respond to ‘ideal aims’ and to overcome self-centeredness?”¹⁹ In short, given that the “death” of the ordinary self and its power is crucial not only to Tanabe but also to Nishida, we must ask from the perspective of the Kyoto School whether Whitehead’s positive view of the “self” is penetrating enough to move him beyond metaphysics into profound religious concern. Again, as Nishida writes, “In any religion, it is the effort of self-negation that is necessary.”²⁰

One might also argue that by viewing actual occasions and serially-ordered societies in a generally positive manner and thereby formulating salvation in terms of objective immortality rather than through negation—brought about in experiencing a metanoia, repentance (*zange*), and faith in the Other-power of Amida or in dying the Great Death—

¹⁶ Kitaro Nishida, “The Intelligible World,” tr. Robert Schinzinger, in *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness* (Tokyo: Maruzen Co., Ltd., 1958), p. 133.

¹⁷ Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1933), p. 285.

¹⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1926), p. 151.

¹⁹ George F. Thomas, *Religious Philosophies of the West* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965), p. 378.

²⁰ Nishida, “The Logic of Place and a Religious World View,” p. 216.

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Whitehead not only diverges from “uncompromised non-dualism” but perhaps also stretches his own metaphysical principles. In a sense, God is not simply the chief exemplification of the categories in Whitehead’s system, but also in certain respects an exception to them. As Masao Abe has pointed out, in the final analysis God is not ontologically the same as other entities (i.e., actual occasions): “In short, . . . although there is interaction between the world and God, God finally transcends the world. God is more self-creative, more inclusive, more influential, than any other temporal actual entities. He alone is everlasting.”²¹ Although that God is *more* creative, inclusive, and influential does not, to the present writer, necessarily constitute an ontological difference, that the consequent nature of God and its contents are everlasting (“immortal”) constitutes a clearly qualitative and ontological difference between God and actual occasions. In this regard, Whitehead appears to transcend his reformed subjectivist doctrine, the touchstone of his speculation, and enter the realm of belief.

This discussion of non-dualism, metanoia, and soteriology brings us to one final question: to what extent can we claim that Whitehead does indeed have a soteriology? More precisely, to what extent does Whitehead’s notion of salvation address the human situation squarely and, in response, offer a spiritually satisfying notion of salvation? Of course, Whitehead states on the first page of *Process and Reality* that his main concern there is Speculative Philosophy as “the endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.”²² Given what we have discussed about Whitehead’s soteriology and the religious philosophies of Nishida and Tanabe, we perhaps are led to the conclusion that Whitehead’s standpoint—as opposed to the development of it by process theologians—is “a metaphysics seeking a religion.”

In this regard, Fredericks’ provocative notion of giving Whitehead a new religious reading through the mediation of Buddhism in its Pure Land and Zen forms constitutes a stimulating area of discussion for process theologians and Buddhists alike. Perhaps the fruits of this

²¹ Masao Abe, “Mahayana Buddhism and Whitehead—A View by a Lay Student of Whitehead’s Philosophy,” *Philosophy East and West*, 25 (October 1975), p. 418.

²² Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 3.

go beyond giving Westerners an approach to Whitehead, however. Fredericks' program can also offer process thinkers an avenue for deepening the religious facets of Whitehead's world view, especially in the areas of religious practice, repentance, and the negation of self-power. In addition, when engaged in as *dialogue*, this approach can also provide a way for members of the Kyoto School and Buddhists in general to clarify or reformulate certain knotty areas of Buddhist philosophy, especially the issues of causality, time, and value.