

Kenōsis as a Foundation
for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

The Kenotic Buddhology of Nishida and Nishitani
of the Kyoto School in relation to the
Kenotic Christology of Thomas J. J. Altizer

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Introduction

Nishitani Keiji's work entitled *Shūkyō towa nanika*¹ (What is Religion?), recently published in English translation under the title *Religion and Nothingness*,² has been regarded by many scholars of East-West comparative thought as an epoch-making event in the philosophy of religion. Among the most significant contributions made by Nishitani in this work is his development of the Christian theological notion of *kenōsis* or God's "self-emptying" out of *agapē* or impersonal love from the standpoint of such non-dual Mahayana Buddhist categories as *kū* 空 or emptiness, *muga* 無我 or non-ego, *jishi* 慈悲 or compassion and *taishi* 大死 or great death. The Biblical *locus classicus* for the Christian theological idea of *kenōsis* or self-emptying is Paul's letter to the Philippians, 2:5-8:

In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus. His state was divine, yet he did not cling to equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as

¹ Nishitani Keiji, *Shūkyō towa nanika* (What is Religion?).

² Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, tr. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

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men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.

Throughout the present essay I endeavor to clarify Nishitani's use of this *kenōsis* hymn from the New Testament as a foundation for Buddhist-Christian dialogue. In this context I trace back Nishitani's comparative analysis of the Mahayana Buddhist *sūnyatā* and Christian *kenōsis* traditions to its origins in the writings of Nishida Kitarō. Also I show the extension of Nishida's and Nishitani's ideas of *kenōsis* in the writings of Abe Masao, who is yet another distinguished member of what has become known as the "Kyoto School" of Japanese Buddhism. I then relate the thought of the Kyoto School in Japan to one of the most profoundly original yet highly controversial Christian thinkers of the twentieth century, namely, Thomas J. J. Altizer of the "Death-of-God" movement in theology. Indeed, more than any other Western thinker before him Altizer has attempted to radically reconstruct orthodox Christian theology in terms of the Mahayana Buddhist metaphysics of *sūnyatā* or emptiness with its dialectical interpenetration of *samsāra* and *nirvāna*. Moreover, independently of the Kyoto School, Altizer has synthesized Christian and Buddhist teachings by focussing on the Biblical notion of *kenōsis* or self-emptying as a standpoint for shattering all theological models of dualism and transcendence. Especially interesting here is Altizer's argument that the Buddhist-Christian historical process of kenotic self-emptying is fully manifest in the radical innovations of modern art, literature and music. Finally, it will be emphasized that Altizer is also highly critical of Buddhism, such that his own "kenotic Christology" provides us with an illuminating contrast to what might be termed "kenotic Buddhology" formulated by Nishida, Nishitani and the Kyoto School in Japan.

I

Although there has been considerable excitement over Nishitani Keiji's use of *kenōsis* or "self-emptying" as a fundamental standpoint on which to base a Christian-Buddhist interfaith dialogue, few Western scholars are cognizant of the fact that this theme was earlier developed by his *sensei* Nishida Kitarō (1860-1945). In Nishida's penultimate essay *Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan* (The Logic of Place and a

Religious Worldview) we find the following passage on *kenōsis*:

A God who is simply self-sufficient is not the true God. In one aspect God must be thoroughly kenotic (self-emptying). A God that is both thoroughly transcendent and thoroughly immanent, thoroughly immanent and thoroughly transcendent, is a truly dialectical God. This can be called the true absolute. If it is said that God created the world from love, then God's absolute love must be essential as the absolute self-negation of God, and is not *opus ad extra*.³

In this passage Nishida emphasizes that a merely transcendent and self-contained God is not truly God; for God is only God when in one aspect He "empties Himself" through *kenōsis*, thereby pouring out His total transcendence into total immanence. Moreover, God's primordial act of *kenōsis* or "self-emptying" is precisely God's act of creating the world out of love. God's absolute love is therefore intrinsic to God's absolute negation.

Nishida's passage on the *kenōsis* or self-emptying of God appears in the context of explaining the dialectical (*benshōhōteki* 辯證法的) interrelationship between the absolute and the relative, i.e., between Buddha and sentient beings in Zen or between God and creatures in Christianity. In both the Mahayana Buddhist *sūnyatā* and Christian *kenōsis* traditions the absolute must "empty out" into the relative due to compassion or love, just as the individual ego must "empty out" into the absolute to realize enlightenment or salvation. Similarly, God must undergo His own death or self-negation and pour Himself out into the world, just as the individual ego must undergo its own death or self-negation and pour itself into the absolute. This mutual emptying out of the absolute into the relative and the relative into the absolute indicates that reality is free of any substance or own-being, and can only be described as what Nishida terms *mu no bashō* 無の場所 or the "locus of Nothingness."

Nishida argues that in the "locus of Nothingness" the dialectical interrelationship between the absolute and the relative must be defined in

³ Nishida Kitarō, *Bashōteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan* (The Logic of Place and a Religious Worldview) from *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* (The Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō), 19 vols. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1965; 2nd edition), vol. XI, p. 399, lines 3-5.

paradoxical terms as a “self-identity of absolute contradictions” (*zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu* 絶対矛盾的自己同一). Following Hegel’s polemic, he asserts that the true absolute cannot simply transcend the relative or it would also be relative. The true absolute must possess its own self-negation. Consequently, the relative does not stand opposed to the absolute, but is the absolute’s own self-negation. Since there can be nothing at all which opposes a true absolute, the absolute must be a self-identity of contradictories, i.e., an absolute affirmation through self-negation. Nishida further defines this paradoxical interrelationship between the absolute and the relative through what he terms, following Suzuki Daisetz, the Mahayana Buddhist “*Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* logic of *soku-hi* (即非),” which indicates a logic of “is/is not” or “affirmation-negation.” He writes:

Buddhism expresses this paradox with the logic of “is/is not” (*soku-hi*), as is said in the *Diamond Sutra*:

Since all dharmas are not all dharmas,
Therefore they are called all dharmas.
Since there is no Buddha, there is a Buddha.
Since there are no sentient beings,
Therefore there are sentient beings.⁴

It is precisely at this point where Nishida introduces the passage on *kenōsis* cited previously. For Nishida understands the idea of *kenōsis* as a Christian theological variation of this same logic of *soku-hi* or “is/is not” operative in the Mahayana Buddhist *sūnyatā* tradition. Because the absolute must enter into self-negation, it paradoxically both “is” and “is not.” Accordingly, insofar as God fully “empties Himself” thorough *kenōsis*, He both “is” and “is not” as an absolute affirmation through self-negation.

II

In his work *Shūkyō towa nanika* (What is Religion?) Nishitani Keiji resumes Nishida Kitarō’s intercultural theme of *kenōsis* as the ground for a Buddhist-Christian interfaith dialogue. In the second chapter of

⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 398-99.

this work Nishitani discusses the concept of *kenōsis* or self-emptying in the context of analyzing the Christian idea of *agapē* or non-discriminating love, citing directly from the gospel of Matthew 5:43-48, which disavows the injunction to “love your neighbor and hate your enemy” and instead proclaims: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes His sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. . . . You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Nishitani proceeds to develop this Biblical idea of divine perfection as *agapē* or non-discriminating love in terms of the correlate notion of Christ’s *ekkenōsis* or self-emptying, which is in turn based on the original *kenōsis* or self-emptying of God:

What is this non-discriminating love or *agapē* which loves even enemies? In a word, it is “making oneself empty” (*onore o munashikusuru koto*). In the case of Christ it signified adopting the form of man and becoming a servant in accordance with the will of God. The *ekkenōsis* or “making himself empty” of Christ therefore has its origin in God.⁵

Nishitani continuously asserts that the *ekkenōsis* of Christ has its origins in the *kenōsis* of God. His polemic here is that although self-emptying out of impersonal love may be taken as a characteristic of divine perfection, *kenōsis* or the condition of being self-emptied is essentially entailed from the beginning in the idea of the perfection of God, while *ekkenōsis* or the activity of self-emptying love as typified by Christ and commanded of man is the embodiment or practice of that perfection. He thus writes: “What is *ekkenōsis* for Christ is *kenōsis* for God. In the East this would be called *anātman* (Jap. *muga*) or non-ego.”⁶ Moreover, he asserts that whereas Christ manifest the original perfection of God through the impersonal love by which he “emptied himself,” the Christian is said to practice or imitate that self-emptying perfection when he converts from human discriminating love at the

⁵ Nishitani Keiji, *Shūkyō towa nanika*, p. 67. All references to Nishitani’s work are my own translations based on the original Japanese edition of his text unless otherwise indicated.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 67.

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standpoint of ego to a divine nondiscriminating love at the standpoint of non-ego.⁷

Nishitani then goes on to argue that the *kenōsis-ekkenōsis* whereby God “emptied Himself” out of *agapē* or non-discriminating love is the Christian theological variant of such radically non-dual Mahayana Buddhist categories as *sūnyatā* (Jap. *kū*) or “emptiness,” *anātman* (*muga*) or “non-ego” and *karunā* (*jīhi*) or “compassion”:

The non-discriminating love that makes the sun rise on evil as well as good, enemies as well as friends, includes, as stated previously, the quality of *anātman* (*muga*) or non-ego. Non-ego designates the fundamental standpoint of Buddhism, where it is called *mahāprajñā* (*daichi* 大智) or great wisdom and *mahākarunā* (*daihi* 大悲) or great compassion. . . . There is no selfishness denoted by the term *anātman* (*muga*) or non-ego as well as *sūnyatā* (*kū*) or “emptiness.”⁸

In a lengthy comment added to the English edition of his book, Nishitani argues that both the Christian *kenōsis* and Mahayana Buddhist *sūnyatā* traditions conceive of divine perfection as consisting of self-emptying and ego-negating love or compassion. While developing the Mahayana Buddhist *tri-kāya* or “three bodies” theory, he suggests that the Buddhist equivalent to the Christian idea of *kenōsis* or “self-emptying” is *sūnyatā* or “emptiness,” conceived as the original and essential nature of Buddha in his *dharma-kāya* or “truth body” aspect. The *dharma-kāya* is itself the ground of the *sambhoga-kāya* or “reward body,” conceived as the self-presentation of formless emptiness as the Form of Buddha, i.e., the compassionate *tathāgata* (“Thus Come”). This *karunā* or compassion is therefore grounded in *sūnyatā* or emptiness and has the essential meaning of *anātman* or non-ego in the sense of self-emptying out of impersonal love. Furthermore, the *dharma-kāya* is also the ground of the *nirmāṇa-kāya* or “transformation body” of Buddha, conceived as the self-presentation of formless emptiness in its double form of man-Buddha, i.e., the historical Buddha. Nishitani argues that the appearance of the historical Buddha, like the appearance of Christ, essentially means an *ekkenōsis* or “making oneself empty” since the transition from

⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 69.

formless emptiness to determinate form involves non-ego and compassion. Assuming form means a self-determination and self-negation, i.e., a kenotic "self-emptying" out of egoless compassion as a disclosure of the original emptiness. Nishitani summarizes this entire discussion when he finally asserts: "Throughout the basic thought of Buddhology, especially in the Mahayana tradition, the concepts of emptiness, compassion and non-ego are seen to be inseparably connected. The Buddhist way of life as well as its way of thought are permeated with *kenōsis* and *ekkenōsis*."⁹

Nishitani, like Nishida, regards both the Christian *kenōsis* and Mahayana Buddhist *sūnyatā* traditions as providing a standpoint by which to critique any substantialist notion of reality conceived as consisting of self-sufficient entities, whether this be a self-sufficient and transcendent God or a self-sufficient and independent ego. This is to say that both Christian *kenōsis* and Buddhist *sūnyatā* indicate a self-emptying not only of the transcendent God postulated by theism, but also a self-emptying of the separate ego of Cartesianism. For this reason he argues throughout his work that both the "theocentric" (*kami-chūshinteki* 神中心的) and "egocentric" (*jiko-chūshinteki* 自己中心的) standpoints are dissolved and emptied out in the ultimate standpoint of *sūnyatā* or emptiness, i.e., what he also refers to following Nishida as *mu no basho* or the "locus of nothingness." Hence, Nishitani criticizes the Aristotelian concept of perfection as "self-sufficiency," arguing against both the self-sufficiency of a transcendent God and of an independent ego, maintaining instead that true perfection lies in an "emptying" (*munashikushite* 空しくして) of self:

Aristotle's grasp of divine reality and its self-sufficiency is simply one aspect, namely, an abstraction of the transcendent side alone. Self-sufficiency and perfection are not simply a matter of being complete and self-sufficient in oneself. . . . True self-sufficiency cannot be egotistic but instead must be what one could term the "individual non-ego." It must be a true self-sufficiency in the sense of an "emptying" (*munashikushite*) of self which makes all things to be.¹⁰

⁹ Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 288, fn. This passage appears only in a long footnote added to the English edition of Nishitani's work.

¹⁰ Nishitani Keiji, *Shūkyō towa nanika*, pp. 311-12.

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In this context he further argues that a shift in the concept of divine perfection from "self-sufficiency" to "self-emptying" corresponds to the shift from Hinayana Buddhism to Mahayana Buddhism with its interrelated doctrines of emptiness, non-ego and compassion. Moreover, it corresponds to a shift from the discriminating love which the Greeks called *eros* to the non-discriminating love which the Christians termed *agapē*. He concludes that this shift to a concept of divine perfection as "making oneself empty" (*onore o munashikusuru koto* 己れを空しくすること) in both the Mahayana Buddhist *sūnyatā* and Christian *kenōsis* traditions bespeaks a conversion to a completely new view of Buddha or God, as well as of man.¹¹

Nishitani, like Nishida, argues that a real kenotic God can be truly comprehended only in terms of a Mahayana Buddhist logic of *soku-hi* (sive-non) or "is/is not." Following Nishida he maintains that the absolute cannot merely transcend the relative or it will also be relative. The true absolute must possess the relative as its own self-negation. For this reason, Nishitani repeatedly argues for the necessity of shifting from a standpoint of *nihility* or "relative nothingness" (*sōtaiteki mu* 相対的無) where the absolute is opposed to the relative, to the ultimate standpoint of true "emptiness" (*kū*) or "absolute nothingness" (*zettai mu* 絶対無), wherein the relative does not stand opposed to the absolute but is the absolute's own self-negation. Hence, in the standpoint of absolute nothingness, God cannot be simply transcendent or self-sufficient, but rather, He must "empty Himself" and enter into self-negation as a self-identity or absolute contradictories. It is this contradictory or paradoxical structure of the self-emptying and self-negating kenotic God which must be described through a Mahayana Buddhist logic of *soku-hi* or "is/is not." Nishitani quotes D. T. Suzuki who first formulated this Mahayana Buddhist logic of *soku-hi* which states: "A is not A and therefore A is A. A is A because it is non-A."¹² An example of this form of *soku-hi* logic can be seen in Nishitani's discussion of Meister Eckhart's distinction between God and Godhead. According to Eckhart, one must "stand emptied" (*ledigstehen*)¹³ of both God and creatures so as to break through to the

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 312.

¹² Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 291, fn. This reference to D. T. Suzuki appears only in a footnote included in the English edition of Nishitani's work.

¹³ Nishitani Keiji, *Shūkyō towa nanika*, p. 73.

“Godhead” (*Gottheit*) of absolute nothingness. Yet, with his logic of *soku-hi* Nishitani further argues that the Godhead is the place within God where God is not God:

Godhead is the place within God where God is not God. Although this seems to contradict what I said previously about Godhead being what God is in Himself, in fact there two assertions are the same. To say that God is what God is in Himself is precisely in that absolute nothingness in which God is not Himself means that ecstasy applies to the existence of God as well as of man.¹⁴

Here, using Heideggerian language, Nishitani speaks of *ekstasis* or “ecstasy” (in the sense of “standing-out” into nothingness of boundless openness) as a characteristic applying to both God and the self. In the general context of Nishitani’s analysis, *ekstasis* or standing out into nothingness is used synonymously with the term *kenōsis* or self-emptying. Due to its *ekstatic* or *kenotic* nature, Godhead is what God is in Himself, precisely since it is the emptiness or absolute nothingness in which God is not Himself. Because the *ekstasis* or *kenōsis* of Godhead signifies that God is fundamentally self-emptying and self-negating in character, God *is not* God; yet, precisely because He is not, God *is* God, since His essential function is that of self-emptying out of impersonal love. Moreover, the enlightened self is also fully *ekstatic* or *kenotic* in character in the sense that it “empties out” into the boundless openness of absolute nothingness, and therefore can similarly be described only through a paradoxical logic of *soku-hi*. For this reason Nishitani asserts: “self is not self, therefore it is self.”¹⁵

It is from the standpoint of this same Mahayana Buddhist logic of *soku-hi* or “is-is not” that the Kyoto School interprets the *kenotic-ek-kenotic* self-emptying of Jesus Christ. In his paper entitled “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata” Abe Masao emphasizes that “we should understand the doctrine of Christ’s *kenōsis* to mean that Jesus Christ as the Son of God is essentially and fundamentally self-emptying or self-negating.”¹⁶ He then argues that Jesus Christ “is essentially and fun-

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 277.

¹⁶ Abe Masao, “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata” (delivered at the Second Conference on East-West Religious Encounter, “Paradigm Shifts in Buddhism and Christianity” held in Honolulu, Hawaii. January 3-11, 1984), p. 13.

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damentally true man and true God at one the same time in his dynamic work and function of self-emptying.”¹⁷ In this context, Abe articulates the paradoxical *soku-hi* nature of the kenotic Christ when he states: “Son of God *is not* Son of God (for he is essentially self-emptying): precisely because he is not, Son of God *is* Son of God (for he always works as Christ, the Messiah in his function of self-emptying).”¹⁸

Finally, it can be asserted that Nishida, Nishitani and Abe of the Kyoto School have endeavored to formulate what might be called a “kenotic Buddhology,” wherein the key Mahayana Buddhist principle of *sūnyatā* is itself defined in fully kenotic terms as a dynamic process of “self-emptying” out of egoless compassion or impersonal love. As Nishitani states: “Emptiness in the sense of *sūnyatā* (*kū*) is emptiness only when it empties itself even of the standpoint that represents it as some “thing” that is emptiness, so that originally it is self-emptying.”¹⁹ In his paper “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata” Abe also emphasizes that *sūnyatā* cannot be reified, absolutized or substantialized in any way whatsoever and is that which can never be objectified as some independently existing thing. For this reason, Abe states that “the notion of Sunyata may be in Buddhism, after Martin Heidegger who puts a cross-mark X on the term *Sein* (~~*Sein*~~) in order to show the unobjectifiability of *Sein*, we should also put a cross-mark on the term Sunyata, that is, ~~*Sunyata*~~.”²⁰ Hence Abe argues that Buddhist *sūnyatā*, or as it were, ~~*sūnyatā*~~, denotes not an objectifiable reality, but rather a dynamic process of *kenōsis* or self-emptying:

Sunyata is fundamentally non-Sunyata with a cross-mark. This means that true Sunyata empties not only everything else, but also empties itself. Throughout its self-emptying it makes everything to exist as it is and to work as it does. Sunyata should not be understood in its noun form but in its verbal form because it is a pure and dynamic function of all-emptying.²¹

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Nishitani Keiji, *Shūkyō towa nanika*, p. 109.

²⁰ Abe Masao, “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata,” p. 19.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 23.

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Thus when *śūnyatā* is fundamentally non-*śūnyatā* with a cross-mark, it must be understood in terms of the paradoxical Mahayana Buddhist logic of *soku-hi* or "is/is not." Since *śūnyatā* empties not only everything else but also itself it is not *śūnyatā*; yet precisely because it is not, it is *śūnyatā*, since it is only conceivable as a dynamic process of self-emptying or self-negation. It is this "kenotic Buddhology" formulated by Nishida, Nishitani and Abe of the Kyoto School in Japan whereby *śūnyatā* is defined as a process of self-emptying out of non-ego and compassion which I will now compare as well as contrast to the "kenotic Christology" developed by Thomas J. J. Altizer in the West.

III

The radically dialectical "Death-of-God" theology of Thomas J. J. Altizer, inspired by Hegel, Blake and Nietzsche in the West as well as Buddhism and Oriental mysticism in the East, represents the first comprehensive effort to reconstruct Christian theology focussing on the Biblical notion of *kenōsis* as its fundamental principle. At the outset of his work *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* he states his intent to frame "a consistent kenotic Christology."²² Like Nishida, Nishitani and the Kyoto School, Altizer directs his own criticism against the Aristotelian and Scholastic definition of God as *actus purus* or "pure act," comprehended as a fully transcendent and self-sufficient Lord who is completely isolated from the world.²³ The departure point for his rejection of the wholly other, transcendent and self-sufficient God of Judaism and orthodox Christianity is Nietzsche's prophetic declaration that "God is dead." Nietzsche condemned the Christian God as an oppressive deity, proclaiming that only by the death of God can mankind be emancipated from this tyranny. In Altizer's words:

Nietzsche's protest against Christianity like Blake's and Hegel's, is fundamentally directed against the Christian God. It is God himself who is the transcendent enemy of the fullness and the passion of man's life in the world, and only

²² Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), p. 11.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 62.

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through God's death can humanity be liberated from that repression.²⁴

The God which Nietzsche condemned was not merely the Christian God, but also the metaphysical notion of a supra-sensory world in general developed by the Platonic tradition. Nietzsche's "revaluation of all values" was therefore directed towards the "death of God" as the supra-sensory value common to Christianity and Platonism alike. Although Nietzsche prided himself as being the Antichrist and the complete inversion of all Christianity represents, Altizer nonetheless regards him as the prophetic voice for a radically new Christian vision. Indeed, for Altizer an acceptance of the "death of God" is the starting point for a fully kenotic Christology: "Only by accepting and even willing the death of God in our own experience can we be liberated from a transcendent beyond, an alien beyond which has been emptied and darkened by God's self-annihilation in Christ."²⁵

As indicated above, Altizer understands the "death of God" as signifying the act of *kenōsis* whereby God fully "empties Himself" into the world such that He pours out His total transcendence into total immanence. Altizer's kenotic theology is essentially Christological in that it focusses on the Incarnation and Crucifixion of Jesus Christ as the major events of salvation history whereby God "emptied Himself" and thus completed the process of kenotic self-emptying which began with the act of Creation. He therefore writes that "the Incarnation and Crucifixion are understood as a dual process, a kenotic or negative process whereby God negates his primordial and transcendent epiphany thereby undergoing a metamorphosis into a new and immanent form."²⁶ Hence, for Altizer the Incarnation and Crucifixion of Jesus Christ represents God's self-annihilation and self-sacrifice, i.e., God's act of self-emptying or self-negation whereby He dies to His transcendence and becomes all in all as an immediate and total presence in the actual moment.

Altizer points to Hegel's dialectic of Spirit (*Geist*) as providing the theoretical basis for his kenotic Christology, stating that Hegel is "the only thinker who made the kenotic movement of the Incarnation the

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 136.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 112.

core and foundation of his thinking."²⁷ He traces Hegel's dialectic of Spirit to the Christian mysticism of Meister Eckhart, who saw the Godhead as eternally generating each individual soul as the Son of God. Like the Kyoto School of Japan, Altizer recognizes Eckhart's Christian mysticism as genuinely kenotic, insofar as the Godhead pours out its transcendent fullness into total immanence in the interior depths of each individual soul. Thus, he asserts that "the writings of Eckhart . . . are profoundly grounded in the kenotic self-emptying and self-abandonment of God. The self-emptying becomes realized in us when we are poor and abandoned, for then the fullness of God must be born in us, and God gives birth to me as Himself."²⁸ In a section entitled "*Kenōsis*" from *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* Altizer argues that Eckhart's radical expression of Christian mysticism was driven underground by the ecclesiastical authorities of the church, finally surfacing again in Jacob Boehme, who in turn "provided the germinal source for the one thinker who created a conceptual portrait of the incarnate or kenotic movement of God: Hegel."²⁹ Altizer writes that "Hegel conceived of the 'false infinite' or the impassive and unmoving Absolute as the ultimate source of alienation."³⁰ That is to say, a merely transcendent absolute which stands opposed to the finite itself becomes finite, i.e., what Hegel calls the "false infinite," a notion which functions as the ultimate source of existential alienation between God and man. According to Hegel's dialectical theology of absolute Spirit then, an absolute which is truly infinite must contain the finite as its own self-negation. Altizer develops in detail Hegel's dialectical concept of God or Spirit as the kenotic process of self-emptying or self-negation whereby Spirit becomes its own other and realizes itself through that other: "Historians of philosophy tell us that the truly unique ground of Hegel's thinking is his dialectical understanding of pure or radical negation, a self-negation of Spirit in which Spirit kenotically becomes its own other, existing as the actual opposite of its own original or initial identity."³¹ He adds: "Accordingly, Spirit is

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁸ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *History as Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), p. 116.

²⁹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, p. 63.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 22.

³¹ *ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

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the kenotic or emptying process of negativity; as such it is the true actuality of the world."³² Altizer directly cites Hegel's work *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* which employs the actual language of *kenōsis*, speaking of the "*kenōsis* of eternal Being" whereby Spirit empties out into the world and thereby posits its own self-negation.³³ Moreover, he develops Hegel's understanding of the dialectical self-emptying or self-negation process of Spirit in terms of the *Logos*, i.e., the Christ or Incarnate Word which when spoken fully empties itself. Hegel writes of Spirit: "In this emptying of itself, in this *kenōsis*, it is . . . the 'Word,' the *Logos*, which when spoken empties the speaker of himself, outwardizes him, and leaves him behind emptied."³⁴

Altizer further develops this Hegelian dialectical process of kenotic self-emptying or self-negation as the "*agapē* or total self-giving of God."³⁵ He maintains that insofar as orthodox Christianity has conceived of God as completely transcendent and self-sufficient, it has been unable to incorporate this doctrine of *agapē* as the primary core of Christian faith. Hence, he argues that the Christian proclamation that God is love found in the gospel of John as well as the Christian idea of *agapē* or total self-giving of God can only be realized upon the basis of a Hegelian dialectical notion of Spirit as fundamentally kenotic or self-emptying in character.

Furthermore, Altizer clarifies that the activity of *kenōsis* or self-emptying out of *agapē* or self-giving love involved in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is in fact a dual or two-way process of self-emptying whereby God empties out into man and man empties out into God:

Consequently, the full meaning of the Incarnation is that the Incarnation is a dual and dialectical process whereby God empties Himself of Himself and becomes man and man empties Himself of his historical particularity and his individual selfhood and becomes God.³⁶

In his work entitled *Total Presence* Altizer argues that this dual kenotic

³² *ibid.*, p. 63.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 68.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁶ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (Michigan: The Michigan State University Press, 1967), Chapter II entitled "Incarnation and *Kenosis*," p. 74.

process which empties both God and man involves the total dissolution of both a transcendent center as well as an interior center: "Just as a purely anonymous vision is impossible apart from the loss or dissolution of an interior center, so likewise it is impossible apart from the loss or reversal of a transcendent ground or center."³⁷ Both the transcendent center of a self-sufficient God and the interior center of a self-enclosed ego are dissolved through the kenotic emptying process into an anonymous total presence as all in all: "A kenotic or self-emptying center is now passing into a full and final actuality, and as that actuality realizes itself in our own midst, a pure negativity becomes . . . a total presence which even now is becoming all in all."³⁸

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Altizer's book *Total Presence* is its argument that the kenotic self-emptying of both a self-sufficient God and a self-enclosed ego into a field of total presence devoid of all transcendent and interior centers is itself reflected in the revolutionary innovations of modern art, literature and music. Specifically, he maintains that the kenotic self-emptying of all metaphysical centers, including all transcendent or interior centers, is fully expressed in modern painting as well as the epic literature of James Joyce and the ecstatic improvisations of American Jazz. Altizer's position can be supported by reference to scholarly studies on the subject such as *Break-Up: The Core of Modern Art* by Katherine Kuh, who writes: "The art of our century has been characterized by shattered surfaces, broken color, segmented compositions, dissolving forms and shredded images. . . . during the last hundred years, every aspect of art has been broken up—color, light, pigment, form, line, content, space, surface and design."³⁹ Throughout this work, Kuh argues that the tendency towards diffusion, dissolution and decentralization is manifest not only in the "break-up" exhibited by modern painting and sculpture, but also by the disconnected stream-of-consciousness novels of James Joyce and the syncopated rhythms of jazz.⁴⁰ Altizer's description of the total shattering of all theocentric

³⁷ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Total Presence* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), p. 36.

³⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

³⁹ Katherine Kuh, *Break-Up: The Core of Modern Art* (London: Cory, Adams & Mackay Ltd., 1965), p. 11.

⁴⁰ *ibid.* For a discussion on the "break-up" reflected in the down-beat tempos and

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and anthropocentric images in modern art must therefore be regarded as belonging to this general process of break-up or dissolution characterizing the painting, literature, music and other art forms of the twentieth century. However, Altizer's most significant contribution here is to ground the general break-up at the core of modern art in a systematic metaphysical theology of *kenōsis* or self-emptying.

Altizer asserts that just as there is a dissolution of all transcendent and interior centers into a field of total presence in the Zen-influenced *sumie* inkwash landscapes of East Asian art, so, likewise, there is a radical kenotic self-emptying of both God and man in modern impressionist, cubist and abstract expressionist painting. For example, he writes:

Both God and man seem wholly absent from Monet's landscapes, but once we realize that we are confronting a total presence in his paintings, then we can be aware that this may well be a presence comprehending not only nature, but also both the human and divine.⁴¹

Altizer further argues that this kenotic self-emptying of both God and man or radical dissolution of both transcendent and interior centers in modern painting is also manifest in modern literary trends, culminating in the total break-up of form and content in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. In these two works Joyce shatters all theocentric images representing God's transcendence with the language of blasphemy. In Altizer's words: "Joyce's blasphemy is directed against the primal center and ground of its own world."⁴² For this reason, Joyce can proclaim the death of God with his blasphemous invocation: "Our father who art not in heaven."⁴³ This total dissolution of all metaphysical centers is seen by Altizer as achieving its literary consummation in the "chaosmos" of *Finnegans Wake*. To give an indication of the shattering of ego-consciousness or self-emptying of an interior center into a new and universal humanity represented by *Fin-*

syncopated rhythms of improvisational jazz music as well as the fragmented stream-of-consciousness literature of James Joyce in their relation to modern art see especially pp. 7, 57, 60 and 71.

⁴¹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Total Presence*, pp. 30-31.

⁴² Thomas J. J. Altizer, *History as Apocalypse*, p. 210.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 219.

negans Wake, one need only consider the book's epic hero H. C. E., the universal "everyman" whose initials stand for "HERE COMES EVERYBODY."⁴⁴ This dissolution of all metaphysical centers or absolutes accomplished by Joyce's work is developed in detail by M. Norris in a book entitled *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake*. Norris writes: "The formal elements of the work . . . represent a decentered universe, one that lacks the center that defines, gives meaning, designates and holds the structure together."⁴⁵ Hence, as Altizer points out: "Samuel Beckett justly says that *Finnegans Wake* is purgatorial in the 'absolute absence of the Absolute.'"⁴⁶

In the final chapter of *Total Presence* Altizer argues that although various Eastern and Western contemplative disciplines function to redirect consciousness toward the innermost interiority of the self, such methods culminate in a total dissolution of interiority and a full kenotic emptying of the self: "Manuals of meditation East and West call for a deep and profound movement within, but that is not a movement deeper into ego or self-consciousness, it is rather a movement which leaves self-consciousness and ego behind."⁴⁷ He further remarks on the depth of solitude experienced through inner meditation, stating: "Genuine solitude is a voyage into the interior, a loss reversing every manifest or established center."⁴⁸ Altizer concludes this chapter with a memorable discussion on the kenotic self-emptying realized through the radical innovations of twentieth century music, arguing that the complete shattering and dissolution of our interior center into an immediacy of total presence is high-lighted in the ecstatic improvisations of American Jazz:

Perhaps nowhere is the immediacy of a total presence more manifestly present than in the fullest moments of American Jazz, and it is significant that jazz is the only art which is the fusion between an archaic spirit and a modern art. . . . no in-

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 224. Also, see James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (New York: The Viking Press, Penguin Books, 1939), p. 32.

⁴⁵ Margot Norris, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 120-21.

⁴⁶ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *History as Apocalypse*, p. 226.

⁴⁷ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Total Presence*, p. 105.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 106.

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terior is present when jazz is fully released. . . . The power embodied in jazz violently shatters our interior.⁴⁹

According to Altizer then, it is in such a way that the break-up at the core of modern art, literature and music reflects the historical process of *kenōsis* or self-emptying whereby all transcendent and interior centers are dissolved into an immediacy of total presence as all in all.

IV

On the basis of what has been said above it can be asserted that Altizer employs the Christian theological language of *kenōsis* or self-emptying in a manner which at once suggests what Jacques Derrida has called the language of "decentering," insofar as kenotic language signifies the total dissolution of all metaphysical absolutes or centers. Derrida express his theme of *decentering* as "the stated abandonment of all reference to a center, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, or to an absolute arche."⁵⁰ He further asserts that his project of decentering or the critical deconstruction of all metaphysical centers emerged as the development of a major "rupture" in the history of structure, which took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, heralded especially by Nietzsche's destruction of all axiological-ontological systems as well as Heidegger's destruction of traditional metaphysics and onto-theology. Hence, Derrida writes: "The whole history of the concept of structure, before the rupture I spoke of must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center."⁵¹ He adds that although the history of metaphysical structure has run through a long series of "centers" like substance, subject, ego, consciousness, God or man, "it was necessary to begin to think that there was no center." Consequently, Derrida endeavors to deconstruct the various "centrisms" which have afflicted Western philosophical thinking such as ethnocentrism, theocentrism, anthropocentrism, phallogen-

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 107.

⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Richard Macksey and Eugene Donato, eds., *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), p. 256.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 249.

trism, logocentrism, and so forth, although it is egocentrism or the primacy given to the ego in experience which especially becomes the object of his critical deconstructive analysis.

In the case of Altizer's radical Christian theology, the kenotic self-emptying of both God and the ego is repeatedly described as a total dissolution of all transcendent and interior centers. Moreover he has argued that this dissolution of all transcendent and interior centers is reflected in the break-up or shattering of all God-centered and man-centered images in modern painting and literature in a way reminiscent of certain styles of East Asian art. Indeed, this movement towards "break-up" at the core of modern art must be comprehended as also belonging to what Derrida has described as a "rupture" in the history of structure. Altizer's position at once approximates Nishitani's dissolution and emptying out of both the theocentric as well as the egocentric or anthropocentric standpoints in the ultimate standpoint *sūnyatā* or emptiness, i.e., what he terms following Nishida *mu no basho* or the "locus of nothingness." Thus, Nishitani writes that in the standpoint of *sūnyatā* or emptiness "the theocentric standpoint, as represented by Christianity, and the anthropocentric standpoint of secularism both find themselves presently at the edge of mutual dissolution."⁵² Abe Masao also argues that every metaphysical center, including the transcendent center represented by theocentrism and the interior center represented by anthropocentrism or egocentrism, must all be dissolved and emptied out in the standpoint of *sūnyatā*. In his essay "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata" Abe therefore writes: "Sunyata indicates a boundless openness without any fixed center. Sunyata is free from any anthropocentrism, cosmocentrism and theocentrism. It is not oriented by any kind of centrism. Only in this way is emptiness possible."⁵³ Hence, it can be stated that both Altizer and the Kyoto School have utilized the theological language of *kenōsis* in order to critically deconstruct all fixed metaphysical centers, culminating in the radical dissolution of all transcendent and interior centers into an immediacy of total presence wherein *the center is everywhere*.

The kenotic theologies formulated by Altizer in the West and the Kyoto School in the East have both been profoundly influenced by the

⁵² Nishitani Keiji, *Shūkyō towa nanika*, p. 250.

⁵³ Abe Masao, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," p. 20.

total shattering of all images of transcendence and interiority which resulted from Nietzsche's philosophical sledgehammer during the late nineteenth-century. What is especially remarkable here is that both Altizer and the Kyoto School have related Nietzsche's smashing of all God-centered and man-centered images to the Christian theological notion of *kenōsis* or self-emptying as well as to the Buddhist idea of *śūnyatā* or emptiness. Throughout his writings Altizer frequently relates his notion of the kenotic Christ not only to the emptiness and non-ego of Buddha but also to Nietzsche's Dionysus, the Greek deity of *ekstasis* or ecstasy. Like the ecstatic Dionysus, the kenotic Christ fully "empties Himself" into the world and thereby pours out God's total transcendence into total immanence as a total presence in the fullness and immediacy of the actual moment. Altizer further argues that Nietzsche's shattering of all theocentric and egocentric images culminates in his vision of "Eternal Recurrence." However, he emphasizes that "Eternal Recurrence is neither a cosmology nor a metaphysical idea: it is Nietzsche's symbol of the deepest affirmation of existence, of Yes-saying."⁵⁴ He further clarifies Nietzsche's idea of Eternal Recurrence as representing an ultimate existential affirmation of life in the present moment by his assertion: "Such a love of the world is a total affirmation of life in the present: but in totally affirming the present we must will that it recur, and that it recur eternally the same."⁵⁵ In this context, Altizer makes explicit the relationship between his own kenotic Christology and the teachings of Zarathustra, Nietzsche's prophet of Dionysus, when he writes:

Can we join Zarathustra in his hymn of praise to joy? . . . But this is to ask the Christian if he dares to open himself to the Christ who is fully present, the Christ who has completed a movement from transcendence to immanence, who is kenotically present in the fullness and immediacy of the actual moment before us.⁵⁶

Thus Altizer asserts that the radical Christian atheist who has willed

⁵⁴ Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God," in Thomas J. Altizer and William Hamilton, eds., *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), p. 99.

⁵⁵ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, p. 155.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 155.

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the “death of God” as a kenotic movement from transcendence to immanence and instead has accepted the existential idea of Eternal Recurrence must now “affirm the fullness and immediacy of the present moment as the life and energy of Christ.”⁵⁷

In the final chapter of his book *Shūkyō towa nanika* Nishitani also emphasizes the total shattering of all “God-centered” and “man-centered” orientations by Nietzsche’s sledgehammer of Eternal Recurrence. He writes:

Not only the “man-centered” (*ningen-chūshinteki*) but also the “God-centered” (*shin-chūshinteki*) mode of being has to be smashed, Nietzsche would claim, by the sledgehammer of the idea of Eternal Recurrence. Only when every kind of optical illusion has been shattered through this “transnihilism” does the standpoint of Great Affirmation and Great Life come to light.⁵⁸

For Nishitani and the Kyoto School, both God and the ego are kenotically emptied out in the field of *sūnyatā* or emptiness, which is itself comprehended as the field of Great Affirmation where we can say Yes to all things. This is clarified in chapter four of Nishitani’s book entitled “*Kū no tachiba*” (The Standpoint of Emptiness) where he writes: “Emptiness might be called the field of ‘beification’ (*Ichtung*) in contrast to nihilism which is the field of ‘nullification’ (*Nichtung*). If we speak in Nietzschean terms, this field of beification is the field of Great Affirmation (*kōtei no ba*), where we can say yes to all things.”⁵⁹ For this reason then, Nishitani regards the dissolution of all transcendent and interior centers as well as the total affirmation of life in the present moment depicted by Nietzsche’s vision of Eternal Recurrence as achieving a close structural proximity to the Mahayana Buddhist philosophy of *sūnyatā* or emptiness. Speaking of Nietzsche’s doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, Nishitani writes: “It must be interpreted as one of the currents of Western thought to come closest to the Buddhist standpoint of *sūnyatā*.”⁶⁰ Similarly, Altizer has written: “Nietzsche’s vision of Eter-

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 157.

⁵⁸ Nishitani Keiji, *Shūkyō towa nanika*, p. 259.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 140.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 236.

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nal Recurrence is identical with the Buddhist vision of the Void."⁶¹ For both Altizer and Nishitani then, Nietzsche's vision of Eternal Recurrence represents a complete shattering of all God-centered and man-centered modes of being, culminating in a Yes-saying, an affirmation of the present moment so deep that we can will it to recur, and to recur eternally the same.

Both Altizer and the Kyoto School describe the shattering of our interior or kenotic emptying of the private ego in existentialist terms as the "death of self." Indeed, Nishitani understands the *kenōsis* or self-emptying of the ego as representing *taishi* or the "Great Death" of Zen Buddhist enlightenment. In this context, both Altizer and the Kyoto School emphasize the themes common to both Christianity and Buddhism whereby one realizes true life through the experience of ego-negating death. Moreover, both Altizer and the Kyoto School describe the kenotic emptying of all transcendent centers as the "death of God." Nishitani not only refers to Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead"⁶² but also to the famous iconoclastic injunction of the Rinzai Sect of Zen Buddhism which declares: "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha!" Nishitani writes: "We have to kill the self absolutely. And to do that is also to kill the Buddha."⁶³ Therefore, just as the radical Christian atheist must follow Nietzsche in actively willing the death of God, thereby acquiring liberation from an oppressive deity who is the transcendent enemy of the fullness and immediacy of life, so the Zen Buddhist must "kill the Buddha" in an effort to shatter all images of dualism and transcendence.

For Altizer as for the Kyoto School the "death of God" in its sense as the kenotic self-emptying of God into the world represents the radical reconstruction of Christian theology in terms of the Mahayana Buddhist dialectical identification of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*. In his most recent book entitled *History as Apocalypse* Altizer explains in an autobiographical comment that "my doctoral work was focussed upon Mahayana Buddhist philosophy," adding that

⁶¹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Descent into Hell: A Study of the Radical Reversal of the Christian Consciousness* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 211.

⁶² Nishitani Keiji, *Shūkyō towa nanika*, p. 251.

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 290.

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It provided an initial arena for exploring a persuasion that I adopted and never abandoned: the conviction that Christian theology can be reborn only by an immersion in Buddhism. Perhaps no principle offers a deeper way into our lost epic and theological tradition than does the Mahayana Buddhist dialectical identification of Nirvana and Samsara.⁶⁴

Hence, Altizer's death-of-God theology like Zen Buddhist philosophy of the Kyoto School wholly repudiates any dualistic or transcendent model of reality which separates *nirvāna* from *samsāra*, God from the world or the sacred from the profane. Through the activity of *kenōsis* or self-emptying God dies to His transcendence and becomes wholly incarnate as a total presence in the fullness and immediacy of the actual moment. Consequently, for both Altizer and the Kyoto School the process of *kenōsis* whereby God empties out His transcendence into total immanence itself signifies what in Mahayana Buddhist terms is the dialectical identification of *nirvāna* and *samsāra* or the complete interpenetration of the sacred and the profane in the ultimate standpoint of *sūnyatā* or emptiness.

However, it must also be emphasized that Altizer is highly critical of certain aspects of Buddhism, so that his own "kenotic Christology" should be sharply contrasted to what might be called the "kenotic Buddhology" formulated by Nishida, Nishitani and Abe of the Kyoto School in Japan. Although Altizer's critique of Buddhism and Oriental mysticism pervades his various writings, it is most clearly articulated in the first chapter of his book *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* entitled "The Uniqueness of Christianity." As indicated by the very title of this chapter, Altizer argues not only for the uniqueness of Christianity, but also for its superiority over all Asian religious traditions. According to Altizer, while Buddhism and other forms of Oriental mysticism involve a *backward-moving* process of returning to a primordial Totality or original paradise, the Judeo-Christian tradition alone involves a *forward-moving* or eschatological process culminating in an apocalypse of total presence as all in all:

Whereas the prophetic faith of the Old Testament and the primitive faith of Christianity were directed to a future and

⁶⁴ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *History as Apocalypse*, p. 2.

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final end, and thus are inseparable from a forward-moving and eschatological ground, the multiple forms of Oriental mysticism revolve about a backward movement to the primordial Totality, a process of cosmic and historical involution wherein all things return to their pristine form.⁶⁵

Elsewhere he similarly writes: "If Buddhism is a way back to a full recovery and total embodiment of a primordial All, then Christianity is a way forward to a final and eschatological realization of that All."⁶⁶ Again, in yet another work he specifically aims this same criticism at the Zen sect of Mahayana Buddhism, stating: "I do not see how it is possible, at least from a Christian or Western point of view, to avoid identifying Zen as a backward way to an original or primordial Unity."⁶⁷ Hence, whereas Altizer regards the Buddhist concept of *sūnyatā* as involving a backward movement of self-emptying in the sense of a reversion to primordial origins, the Christian idea of *kenōsis* is unique in its emphasis on a forward movement of self-emptying which culminates in an eschaton or apocalyptic end wherein God pours out His total transcendence into total immanence as a final and total presence.

One might object here that Altizer is mistaken when he describes Mahayana Buddhist *sūnyatā* as involving a "backward-moving" process of self-emptying which results in the return to a primordial Totality. In fact, it can be asserted that the Mahayana Buddhist concept of *sūnyatā* denotes neither a "backward-moving" process of self-emptying, but rather, it signifies an emptying out into the bottomless depths of an Eternal Now. For this reason, Nishida Kitarō writes:

When history is regarded as extinguished in the eternal past, something like the Greek civilization appears, and it takes everything as a shadow of eternity. On the other hand, when history is regarded as going to, and disappearing in the eternal future, something like the Christian civilization appears, and it takes everything as a road to eternity. When, however,

⁶⁵ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, p. 35.

⁶⁶ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Descent into Hell*, pp. 200-201.

⁶⁷ John B. Cobb, ed., *The Theology of Altizer: Critique and Response* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), pp. 230-31.

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history is thought of as a determination in the Eternal Now, where past and future are extinguished in the present, then everything comes without a whence in its coming, and goes without a whither in its going, and that which, is eternally what it is. Such a thinking flows in the depth of the civilization of the East, in which we have grown up.⁶⁸

Consequently, even if the kenotic Buddhology formulated by Nishida, Nishitani and the Kyoto School is *now-centered* rather than the "backward-moving" process of certain other Asian religious traditions, it nonetheless fully lacks the forward-moving, eschatological and apocalyptic direction central to Christian theology in general and Altizer's kenotic Christology in particular.

V

Finally, I would like to raise the problem of *pantheism* which arises in any kenotic theology, whether it is the kenotic Christology of Altizer or the kenotic Buddhology of the Kyoto School. Critics of Altizer's kenotic Christology have often charged that it involves one of the most serious heresies of orthodox Christianity, namely, pantheism or the doctrine that God is identical with the world. For instance, in his book *The Death-of-God Movement*, C. N. Bent rather politely asserts: "Altizer's dialectical and mystical understanding of God and man exhibits certain pantheistic overtones."⁶⁹ In an anthology edited by John B. Cobb entitled *The Theology of Altizer: Critique and Response* Theodore Runyon emphasizes that Altizer employs (a) the *kenōsis* passage of Philippians, (b) the doctrine of the incarnation, and (c) the eschatological message of Jesus to justify dissolving the distinction between God and the world, bringing God into identity with the world in a way is ultimately monistic as well as pantheistic. Runyon states:

Altizer's interpretation of the self-emptying (*kenōsis*) of Christ as the merging of God with the world may be defensi-

⁶⁸ Nishida Kitarō, *Intelligibility and Philosophy of Nothingness*, tr. Robert Shinzinger (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1958), pp. 158-59.

⁶⁹ Charles N. Bent, *The Death-of-God Movement* (New York: Paulist Press, 1967), p. 199.

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ble if one is reading Paul via Hegel and Blake. But if one is attempting instead to get at Paul's own orientation, then it would seem that for Paul the most basic sin of man is that he confuses God with the world.⁷⁰

In defense of Altizer's highly unorthodox if not heretical reading of Paul's *kenōsis* hymn John Cobb points out that Runyon fails to see in his critique that Altizer is part of the "new hermeneutic." Altizer holds that the meaning of any text changes with the evolution of consciousness. What the *kenōsis* hymn in Philippians 2:7 meant for Paul is not what it should necessarily mean today.⁷¹ The question here is whether or not even from a contemporary standpoint, should the idea of *kenōsis* or self-emptying be understood pantheistically to mean the total dissolution of God into the world? According to Altizer's pantheistic interpretation of Paul's *kenōsis* hymn, the "self-emptying" of God which occurred through the Incarnation and Crucifixion of Jesus Christ signifies the process whereby He poured out His total transcendence into total immanence, thereby resulting in the complete dialectical identification of God and the world. Indeed, Runyon has aptly referred to Altizer's kenotic Christology as a doctrine of "Incarnation without a stopper."⁷²

In sharp contrast to Altizer's view, the kenotic Buddhology formulated by Nishida, Nishitani, and Abe of the Kyoto School does not involve a doctrine of pantheism. To repeat Nishida's words cited previously from his essay *Bashōteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan* (The Logic of Place and a Religious Worldview): "A God who is simply self-sufficient is not the true God. In one aspect God must be thoroughly kenotic (self-emptying). A God that is both thoroughly transcendent and thoroughly immanent . . . is a truly dialectical God." Hence, unlike Altizer's position whereby the divine *kenōsis* fully empties God's transcendence into immanence, for Nishida God is kenotic or self-emptying in only one aspect of His nature, such that paradoxically, He is both completely transcendent and completely immanent at one and the same time. Consequently, directly following the above passage on *kenōsis* Nishida goes on to explicitly deny that his view is

⁷⁰ John B. Cobb, ed., *The Theology of Altizer*, p.51.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 176.

pantheistic, arguing instead that it involves a doctrine of *panentheism* whereby God passes over into immanence *without* exhausting His transcendence:

My position here is not pantheistic, but rather should be called panentheistic. However, I am not thinking in terms of object logic. My position is an absolutely dialectical self-identity of absolute contradictions. Even Hegel's dialectic does not escape from the standpoint of object logic. For this reason the left-wing Hegelians can understand his dialectic in pantheistic terms. However, Buddhist *prajñāpāramitā* thought can be truly said to have penetrated into this absolute dialectic. Mahayana Buddhism is not pantheistic as is thought by some Western scholars.⁷³

Nishida, like Altizer, has been deeply influenced by Hegel's dialectical theology according to which God cannot merely transcend the world, but must "empty Himself" through *kenōsis* and enter into self-negation. However, while Altizer remains a left-wing Hegelian who describes the dialectical identification of God and the world in pantheistic terms, Nishida shifts over to a Mahayana Buddhist logic of *soku-hi* or "is/is not" in order to articulate the total paradox of God whereby He is both fully transcendent and fully immanent as a self-identity of absolute contradictions. It is this "panentheistic" theology expressed through a Mahayana Buddhist logic of *soku-hi* which Nishida further articulates in terms of a *gyakutaiō* 逆対応 relationship between the absolute and the relative, understood as a kind of "inverse relationality" between Buddha and sentient beings in Zen or between God and creatures in Christianity. Nishitani adopts a similar position to that of Nishida's on this matter as is clearly demonstrated in the following:

The notion of seeing God in all things of the world is usually rejected as "pantheism" while the correct view is usually regarded as "theism" based on a personal relationship with God. However, to say that God is omnipresent includes the meaning that one can encounter God everywhere in the

⁷³ Nishida Kitarō, *Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan*, p. 399.

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world. This is not pantheism in the usual sense of the term. It does not mean that the world is God or that God is the immanent life of the world. Yet, it does mean that an absolutely transcendent God is absolutely immanent.⁷⁴

In the final analysis, the Kyoto School would no doubt argue that their own standpoint is dialectically superior to Altizer's position in that it enables them to maintain the absolute transcendence of God while simultaneously allowing for His absolute immanence through *kenōsis* or self-emptying out of *agapē* or impersonal love. Hence, from the standpoint of Nishida, Nishitani and Abe of the Kyoto School in Japan, Altizer's kenotic Christology ultimately falls short in that it remains wedded to an abstract Hegelian logic of synthesis, whereas their own view is structured by a more concrete and fully dialectical Mahayana Buddhist logic of *soku-hi* or "is/is not" which alone can articulate the absolute paradox of God.

⁷⁴ Nishitani Keiji, *Shūkyō towa nanika*, p. 46.