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NISHITANI ON THE SELF

SELFLESSNESS
AND HISTORICITY

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1

IN PROFESSOR MASAO ABE'S PAPER of 1969 about "God, Emptiness and the True Self,"¹ we find a significant statement about Nothingness as the Ultimate according to Zen Buddhism:

The ground of our existence is nothingness, *sunyata* because it can never be objectified. This *sunyata* is deep enough to encompass even God, the "object" of mystical union as well as the object of faith. (...) *Sunyata* or nothingness in Zen is not a "nothing" out of which all things were created by God, but a "nothing" from which God himself emerged.²

Such a doctrine, Professor Abe argues, might recall Pseudo-Dionysius' Christian mysticism:

In Pseudo-Dionysius, identification or *union* with God means that man enters the godhead by getting rid of what is man—a process called *theosis*, i.e., deification. This position of Pseudo-Dionysius became the basis of subsequent

Christian mysticism. It may not be wrong to say that for him the Godhead in which one is united is the “emptiness” of the indefinable One.³

But if read carefully Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*, we may notice that there is an essential difference between Zen and Christian mysticism: if we adopt the Christian standpoint, we run the risk of subjectivizing and humanizing God:

Pseudo-Dionysius calls that which is beyond all affirmation and all negation by the term *him*. Many Christian mystics call God “Thou.” In Zen, however, what is beyond all affirmation and all negation – that is, Ultimate Reality – should not be “him” or “thou” but “self,” or one’s “true self.”

I am not concerned here with verbal expressions but with the reality behind the words. If Ultimate Reality, while being taken as nothingness or emptiness, should be called “him” or “thou,” it is, from the Zen point of view, no longer ultimate.⁴

2

As early as 1960, an attempt was made by Keiji Nishitani, the well-known philosopher of the Kyoto school, to find a kind of compromise between Zen and Christian mysticism. To the ordinary Christian way of thinking, he says, the transcendence of God is represented as a separation: God is “up in the heavens,” i.e., aloof from the world. Yet every Christian claims that, together with all the created beings, he has been created by God. In that sense, God is omnipresent. But he is not the world, or the life of the world: such a view would lead to pantheism. Rather, he is immanent as well as transcendent. Now, if the encounter with God as transcendent is to be seen as a “personal relationship with God through the awareness of sin,” how is it possible to describe the relationship with God as immanent? The Christian doctrine can but recognize the privilege of Nothingness:

That a thing is created *ex nihilo* means that this *nihil* is more immanent in that thing than the very being of that thing is “immanent” in the thing itself. (...) It is an immanence of absolute negation, for the being of the created is grounded upon a *nothingness* and seen fundamentally to be a nothingness. At the same time, it is an immanence of pure and absolute affirmation, for the nothingness of the created is the ground of its *being*. This is the omnipresence of God in all things that have their beings as a *creatio ex nihilo*. It follows that this omnipresence can be said to represent for man the dynamic *motif* of the transportation of absolute negation and absolute affirmation. To entrust the self to this *motif*, to let oneself be driven by it so as to die to the self and live in God, is what constitutes faith.⁵

As a result, whereas pantheism remains an “impersonal” relationship, when the omnipresence of God is encountered existentially as the absolute negation of the being of all creatures, and presents itself as an iron wall that blocks all movement forward or backward, it is not impersonal in that usual sense.⁶

We should call such a relationship an “impersonally personal” or “personally impersonal” one or, better yet, as expressed in Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki’s “logic of *soku-bi* (= *sive/non*), where *soku* (*sive*) means the inseparability of two entities and *bi* the negativity, a “personal-*sive*-impersonal” as well as “impersonal-*sive*-personal” relationship. In Suzuki’s terms, “A is not A and therefore A is A. A is A because it is non-A.”⁷ Nishitani’s argument relies on the etymological explanation of “person” as deriving from *persona* – which means “mask” in Latin. When we speak of a mask, Nishitani says, we do not imply that there is an actor behind it; in a similar way, the following is true:

Person is an appearance with nothing at all behind it to make an appearance. That is to say, “nothing at all” is what is behind person; complete nothingness, not one single thing, occupies the position behind person.

While this complete nothingness is wholly other than person and means the absolute negation of person, it is not some “thing” or some entity different from person. It brings into being the thing called person and becomes one with it. Accordingly, it is inaccurate to say that complete nothingness “is” behind person.

Nothingness is not a “thing” that is nothingness. Or again, to speak of nothingness as standing “behind” person does not imply a duality between nothingness and person. In describing this nothingness as “something” wholly other, we do not mean that there is actually some “thing” that is wholly other. Rather, true nothingness means that there is nothing that is nothingness, and this is *absolute nothingness*.⁸

The existential encounter with God’s omnipresence means an actualization and realization of nothingness in the self, so that the self

does not cease being a personal being. (...) When person-centered self-prehension is broken down and nothingness is really actualized in the self, personal existence also comes really and truly to actualization in the self. This is what is meant by absolute negation-*sive*-affirmation, and it is here that some ‘thing’ called personality is constituted in unison with absolute nothingness. Without a nothingness that is living and a conversion that is existential, this would make no sense.⁹

In sum, Nishitani’s reasoning shows that “a good bit of the suspicion that the impersonal – OK, more generally, negation – is the dominant notion in Zen Buddhism” has to be “laid to rest.”¹⁰

3

If Nishitani's argument about the reciprocal interpenetration of presence and absence in the self describes, not a theoretical compromise, but the result of an existential conversion, such a conversion is in itself an event which is to be grasped historically. Why? First, as a student of Heidegger, Nishitani knows that our understanding is always historically situated and conditioned. Second, his teacher Hajime Tanabe and his colleague Yoshinori Takeuchi, both involved not in Zen but in Shinran and the Buddhism of Pure Land, have insisted on the "opening up" of history from the existential and individual reality into world history, so that the religious meaning of history may be preserved. As John C. Maraldo has shown in a remarkable paper,¹¹ even if Nishitani does not share exactly their views, he seeks, like them, "a sense of history that realizes the absoluteness and incomparability of each moment."¹²

In other terms, history takes root in a transhistorical realm, the realm of the mutual interpenetration of every particular with other particulars, so that

while A is A itself and B is B itself ($A = A$, $B = B$), yet at the same time, A and B penetrate each other. This is what we call *jitafuni*: (self and others are not two). A and B are not fixed; they are *yuzumuge*, interpenetrating and reciprocal (...). This is, in formal logic, a contradiction. In "natural being," however, this is not a contradiction but two sides of the same coin.¹³

Man's emergence as man from this field of interpenetration without obstruction confirms the uniqueness of his destiny as man—a uniqueness he possesses in its entirety, even if simultaneously he shares it with all other beings:

There is, so to speak, a circumference-less center, a center which is a center only, a center on the fields of emptiness. That is to say, on the field of *sunyata*, *the center is everywhere*. Each thing is its own selfness and shows the mode of being of the center of all things. Each and every thing becomes the center of all things and, in that sense, becomes an absolute center. This is the absolute uniqueness of things, their reality.

Still, to treat each thing as an absolute center is not to imply an absolute dispersion. Quite to the contrary, as a totality of absolute centers, the All is one.(...) "All are One" can only really be conceived in terms of a gathering of things together, each of which is by itself the All, each of which is an absolute center.(...)

"All are One" signifies the "world" as the unifying order or system of all that is.¹⁴

Thus to the extent that the self is “present in the home-ground of all other things,” the self is not the self; but as soon as we begin to consider it differently, i.e., not as a “small, self-centered circle,” but as being in unison with emptiness, the self becomes an absolute center. The circle is open, the circumference has disappeared, and yet everything is “in order,” i.e., gathered together with all the other things into a reciprocal relationship (*egoteki kankei*, translated by Jan Van Bragt as “circum-inessional relationship,” a concept drawn from the doctrine of the Trinity, which uses it to describe the highest reciprocity between the divine Persons in the Trinity; in fact, a word constructed by Nishitani from *e* = “circum, around,” *go* = “one another, mutually” and *teki* = “back and forth,” hence *e-go-teki* = “back and forth around one another”).¹⁵

Now we reach the core of Nishitani’s thesis about historicity: for him, the same *egoteki kankei* obtains *between the different dimensions and epochs of time*. In this sense, it opens the way toward a transhistorical understanding of history; and Nishitani’s argument is not so far from the views of the Zen thinker Shin’ichi Hisamutsu, who considered in 1979 that the emergence of the true self “is not achieved in the movement of history, that is, through the historical dialectic,” but “is accomplished at the root-source of history, which is prior to the birth of history:—and brings about the necessity of a “supra-historical history,” or of an “history that transcends history.”¹⁶

But let us listen to Keiji Nishitani:

The root-hold of the possibility of the world and of the existence of things, namely, the place where the world and the existence of things “take hold of their ground,” can be said to lie in the home-ground of each man, underfoot and right at hand.

In this way, the selfness of the self—insofar as the self is said to “be a self”—lies radically in *time*, or, rather, is bottomlessly in time. At the same time, on the field of *sunyata*—insofar as the being of the self is at bottom only being in unison with emptiness, insofar as the self is said “not to be a self”—the self is, at every moment of time, ecstatically outside of time. It was in this sense that we spoke above of the self of each man as at bottom preceding the world and things.¹⁷

Now, how to proceed from the “historical” self to the “transhistorical” “not-self,” the vice-versa? Nishitani’s answer is decisive, for it shows the relativity of the difference between derived time (or, in Heidegger’s terms, the “ordinary conception of time”) and primordial time (Heidegger’s *Gleichursprüngezeit-lichkeit* or “equi-temporality”). First, Nishitani says, we are simultaneously *inside* and *outside* time:

We are born in time and we die in time. "To be in time" means to be constantly within the cycle of birth-and-death. But we are not merely within time and within the cycle of birth-and-death. On our own home-ground, we are not simply drifting about in birth-and-death: we live and die birth-and-death. We do not simply live in time: we live time. From one moment in time to the next we are making time to be time, we are bringing time to the "fullness of time." That is the sense of what we referred to earlier as "being bottomlessly in time."

But now, thus to be bottomlessly within time and within the cycle of birth-and-death means to stand ecstatically outside of time and outside of that cycle. It means to precede the world and things, to be their master. This, at bottom, is the sort of things we "are" in our home-ground, in our selfness. And when we become aware of that fact, namely, when we truly *are* in our own home-ground, we stand from one moment of time to the next *outside* of time, even as we rest from one moment to the next bottomlessly *inside* of time. Even as we stand radically, or rather bottomlessly (groundlessly and with nothing to rely on), inside the world, we stand at the same time outside of it. In this case, having nothing to rely on means absolute freedom.¹⁸

Second, the simultaneity of the inside and of the outside leads to the realization of a kind of "geology" of time, i.e., to the integration of the various possible time-stratas according to the *egoteki* principle which may very well interpenetrate without obstruction:

On the field of emptiness, all time enters into each moment of time passing from done moment to the next. In this circuminsessional interpenetration of time, or in time itself that only comes about as such an interpenetration, namely, in the *absolute relativity* of time on the field of *sunyata*, the whole of time is phantom-like, and the whole of the being of things in time is no less phantom-like.

(...) We might say, in other words, that because in the field of *sunyata* each time is bottomlessly in time, all times enter into each time. And only as something bottomless that all times can enter into, does each time actually emerge in its manifestation as this or that time, such as it is. This suchness and phantom-likeness must need be one. Therein, to be sure, lies the essence of time.¹⁹

Third, Nishitani shows that the logic of *soku-bi* or *sive-non* holds good in the case of the antinomy of simultaneity and linearity: Kierkegaard, he argues, spoke of a simultaneity occurring in the "moment"; in a similar manner,

past and present can be simultaneous without "destroying" the temporal sequence of before and after. Without such a field of simultaneity not even culture, let alone religion, could come into being. We can encounter Sakyamuni and Jesus, Basho and Beethoven in the present. That religion and culture can arise within and be handed down historically through time points to the very essence of time.²⁰

But in Buddhism, time is circular, because all its time systems are simultaneous; and, as a continuum of individual "nows" wherein the systems are simultaneous, it is *rectilinear* as well. Time is at once circular and rectilinear.²¹

4

In the last section of the Part V of *Religion and Nothingness*, entitled *Sunyata and Time*, as well as in the Part VI (*Sunyata and History*), Nishitani tests his philosophy of self and selflessness by confronting it with the "concrete" history of the emergence and development of the historical consciousness.

His point of departure is the suggestion made by Arnold Toynbee in *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, that the opposition between liberalism and communism, since it concerns two movements which rely on the same Judeo-Christian (or "Western Judaic") religious tradition, will become less and less important in the future, once "Western Judaism" and "Buddhaic" thought will have come really face to face.

Toynbee's analysis of "Buddhaic" thought shows that it holds the movements of nature and cosmos to be cyclical, and in parallel the order which rules the human world to be impersonal. In sum, in a world where the individual is dissolved into the universal, self-centeredness tends to be ignored, but nothing new can occur.

On the contrary, "Western Judaism" as seen by Toynbee professes that the history of humanity is linear, because it reproduces on whatever scale there may be, the rhythms of the individual. Accordingly, history must depend upon the will of a personal being, God. Thus it is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid self-centeredness. The religion of the Prophets of Israel provides the best example of such a self-centeredness; being a chosen people, the Jews consider their selfishness as dictated by God's will.

Such a view is of course oversimplifying: Nishitani would never go bail for Toynbee's fancies. He criticizes Toynbee's interpretation of the conception of time in Mahāyāna Buddhism, because to assume only the circular character of time leads to a denial of any possibility of historical consciousness.²² And in a similar way, "the claim that historical consciousness originated with the Jewish people contains serious problems."²³

Nevertheless, Toynbee's thesis seems to Nishitani "to put its finger on the core of the matter. History is essentially bound up with the fact that the self, here described as self-centered, comes to act from within itself in a certain sense as a *personality*."²⁴

The example of Christianity is convincing. Like Judaic thought, Christianity teaches the highest respect for the Divine Order. But since man has rebelled at the beginning against that very Order, i.e., against God's will, the awareness of freedom, together with the awareness of sin, both confirm the utmost importance of the self-centeredness and the possibility of occurrence of new events, i.e., the affinity of historical consciousness with linear time. The first coming of Christ, as an irrevocable historical event, "prepares" his second coming; similarly, the redemption and the last judgment are or will be irrevocable—simultaneously necessary and unforeseeable.

Now, self-centeredness appears as consolidating and securing its positions when we consider the next step in the development of historical consciousness, namely the European Enlightenment. According to Nishitani, Christianity and Enlightenment have in common their prejudice about the meaning of history; but whereas Christianity attributed such a meaning to God's will and defined it in eschatological terms, Enlightenment ascribes it to man's intellect and describes it as an historical progress.

Of course, modern historiography has given up the idea of progress and consequently the very conception of an historical meaning or teleology. But it has been left the burden of one-dimensional linearity of time by the Enlightenment, i.e., in fact, by Christianity. As such, it has inherited the self-centeredness of "Western Judaism," and can but develop it.

Nishitani's position is now clear: he intends to go beyond the opposition, described by the historian, between the Enlightenment which sees history "as a continuum of moments objectively equal in time, in which each moment may be subjectively heightened by the sum of lived experience, personal and historical," and millenarianism, which conceives the moment "as the sum of all time contained in one lived experience."²⁵

5

In lieu of conclusion, we will set up here some remarks about the meaning of Nishitani's conception of self and historicity in an hermeneutical perspective.

1) For Nishitani, the standpoint of *sunyata*, as developed by Zen Buddhism, is "the standpoint of radical deliverance from self-centeredness."²⁶ A "bottomlessness," it is "the standpoint of the Existence of non-ego":

In the Existence of non-ego, non-ego does not mean simply that self is not ego. It has also to mean at the same time that non-ego is the self. It must reach self-awareness as something come from the self's absolute negation of itself. It is not the case that the self is merely not self (that is non-ego). It must be the case, rather, that the self is the self because it is not the self. Were it simply a matter of the self not being the self, the way would still be open to follow Nietzsche in taking the Will to Power as the true self, or the "selfness" of the self. (...) Or again, the real self might be sought in the union with some absolute being like God, or the One of Western mysticism (...) Yet in all of these, the standpoint of the true non-ego is still incapable of appearing in complete fashion. Only by going a step further does the standpoint of true non-ego appear in the reversal, "self is not self (self is non-ego), therefore it is self." This reversal is precisely that existential self-awareness wherein the self is *realized* (manifested—*sive*—apprehended) as an emergence into its nature from non-ego.²⁷

The hermeneutical orientation of Nishitani's research appears immediately, if we notice that for him, in Jan Van Bragt's words, the question "comes down to this: the West has nowhere to go but in the direction of the Eastern (Buddhist) ideal; but it cannot do so, except from its own Western (Christian) premises."²⁸

2) Nishitani is less interested by history than by historicity.²⁹ His problem concerns time as such or temporality, and he solves it by showing that we are situated both inside and outside time. Consequently, he holds that hermeneutics and historiography cannot be really separated. But the hermeneutics as he foresees it demands a redefinition of historiography itself, since the hermeneutical situation of contemporary historiography is far from clear, due to the Christian prejudices it harbors. Nishitani's hermeneutical approach, since it eschews allegiance to Western methodology, has also to be redefined under a *Buddhist* perspective.³⁰

3) Heidegger is present everywhere in Nishitani's work even if he is not quoted frequently. A remarkable feature of Nishitani's developments consists in their concern with the lack of a hermeneutical self-interpretive stance in Heidegger's last writings. Marlene Zarader, for instance, has noticed that if the references to Greek thought abound in Heidegger, Christian thought is progressively abandoned, and Jewish thought entirely "silenced."³¹ While Nishitani does not necessarily agree with Heidegger's positions, he appears to fill some of the most crucial gaps in Heidegger's self-reflection upon his own hermeneutical strategy. To begin with, he suggests for the first time the outlines of a dialogue between Heidegger and the East; but the dialogue with Christianity and "Western Judaism" in general, if it sorely lacks in Heidegger, exists—and frequently in Heideggerian terms—in *Religion and Nothingness*.

4) The commentators have noticed that Nishitani's aim is to preserve the religious aspect of history. Such an attitude obtains its object when Nishitani speaks of the necessity of considering the solemnity that certain special moments—when God created the world, when Adam sinned, when Christ was born and raised from the dead, when he will come for the second time—possess in Christianity the very same solemnity that each “individual moment of unending time” possesses in the *Bodhisattva* Path.³² Perhaps Nishitani adds, “it is when the self experiences the *metanoia* to faith” that the solemnity of the other moments is “truly realized.”³³

An “edifying” hermeneutics—a meta-noetical hermeneutics—which would contribute to a real existential conversion, and not primarily to an augmentation of our knowledge, may be reconstructed from *Religion and Nothingness*. Shall we compare it to Richard Rorty's definition of hermeneutics as an “edifying” discipline?

NOTES

1. *The Eastern Buddhist*, II/2 (1969): 15-30. Reprinted in Frederick Franck's anthology of the Kyoto school, *The Buddha Eye*, New York, Crossroad, 1982, 62-74. We quote from this latter version.
2. Abe, 72 and 71.
3. Abe, 68.
4. Abe, 68-69.
5. Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (transl. Jan Van Bragt), Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982, 40. (To be quoted here as RN).
6. RN 40.
7. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, quoted in Nishitani, RN 291, n.19.
8. RN 70.
9. RN 71.
10. Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness, Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (transl. J.W. Heisig), New York, Paulist Press, 1980, 142.
11. John C. Maraldo, “Hermeneutics and Historicity in the Study of Buddhism,” *The Eastern Buddhist*, XIX/1 (1986), 17-43.
12. Maraldo, *op. cit.*, 39.
13. Keiji Nishitani, “On Modernization and Tradition in Japan,” N. Kobayashi and Y. Kuyama, eds., *Modernization and Tradition in Japan*, Nishinomiya, International Institute for Japan Studies, 1969, 92. Quoted in Waldenfels, *op. cit.*, 103.
14. RN, 146-147.
15. Waldenfels, *op. cit.*, 105; cf. also 180, note 32.
16. Maraldo, *op. cit.*, 37.
17. RN, 159.
18. RN, 159-160.
19. RN, 161.

20. *RN, ibid.*
21. *RN, 219.*
22. *RN, 204.*
23. *RN, 206.*
24. *RN, 203.*
25. Leonard Marsak, *The Enlightenment*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1972, 7.
Quoted in Maraldo, *op. cit.*, 39, note 56.
26. *RN 250.*
27. *RN, 251.*
28. Jan Van Bragt, Introduction to *RN*, XXXVII.
29. Cf. his declaration to John C. Maraldo in Maraldo, *op. cit.*, 40.
30. Cf. Maraldo's conclusion, *op. cit.*, 41–43.
31. Cf. Marlene Zarader, *Heidegger et les paroles de l'origine*, Paris, Vrin, 1986,
278–282.
32. *RN, 272.*
33. *RN, ibid.*; cf. Hajime Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics* transl. Yoshinori Takeuchi
with Valdo Viglielmo and James W. Heisig, Berkeley, University of California
Press, 1986, *passim*.