

# NOTHINGNESS AS THE ULTIMATE

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WHEN AT THE BEGINNING of the present century, the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō attempted to develop a link between Western philosophy and modern Japanese thought, he decided to draw into the discussion “that which (or the one who) is addressed in Christianity as ultimate principle, namely God,” with “that which in Buddhist tradition is addressed as *sunyata*,” and may be “named in a terminology closer to the West (...) as ‘absolute nothingness’ (Jap., *zettai mu*).”<sup>1</sup> In order not so much to develop Nishida’s point than to throw light on what is at stake in such a comparison, let us enumerate five considerations by another Japanese philosopher, Abe Masao, who explores the basic differences between Eastern and Western conceptions of nothingness.

1. From the Buddhist perspective, if “ultimate Reality, wondrous being, is to be disclosed,” the “existential realization of absolute *Mu*” (or “true *sunyata*”) is requested; with only relative *mu*, “there is no awakening to ultimate Reality.”

2. The realization of absolute nothingness is not “a gate through which one reaches the hall of ultimate Reality,” but “it in itself is the hall of ultimate Reality, because absolute *Mu* or true *sunyata* is existentially realized as such through overcoming *Mu* or *sunyata* as a third category standing beyond relative *u* (being) and *mu* (non-being), and through returning to and affirming relative *u* and *mu* as they are.”

3. The Buddhist idea of wondrous being cannot be equated with the Western idea of "Being," since this latter is "neither non-dualistic (unlike absolute Nothingness) nor realized through the realization of Emptiness," but "rather gains its ultimate status by virtue of its being ontologically prior to non-being."

4. The "difference between Western intellectual traditions and Buddhism in their respective understanding of 'Being' as the ultimate reality depends on whether or not the realization of absolute *Mu* is essential for its disclosure and whether or not relative *mu* (non-being) is understood as completely equal and reciprocal to relative *u* (being)."

5. When being is taken as ontologically prior to nonbeing, negativity "is no more than something to be overcome by positivity." When on the contrary "positivity (or *u*) and negativity (or *mu*) are equal and reciprocal, it is the antinomic and contradictory tension between positivity and negativity that is to be overcome." True liberation does not consist of giving to being the ontological priority over nonbeing, but in "emptying" Emptiness "as the final step." The "dynamism of 'Emptiness' (...) is simultaneously Fullness." Life has no priority over death: the oneness of life and death, as antinomic and self-contradictory, may be broken through by the "Great Death" which negates life-and-death and "is beyond a realization of death as distinguished from life." *Nirvana* or liberation does not consist in an overcoming of death by means of the power of life but in an awakening to freedom here and now.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, according to Abe's view, "the ultimate which is beyond the opposition between positive and negative is realized in the East in terms of negativity, and in the West in terms of positivity." But one should not overlook the historical instances in which the Western tradition has seen that ultimate as negative or nothingness. For example, Christian mysticism and negative theology, as forerunners of Nietzsche and Heidegger, "unorthodox" as they are since they represent merely "a strand within Christianity," offer something "strikingly similar to the Buddhist understanding of Emptiness."<sup>3</sup> In Christian mysticism, "which is based on experience of God's uniting directly with the soul, God is not a transcendental, personal being over against the soul, called 'Thou,' but the Godhead from which the personal God emerges. As Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite wrote in his *Mystical Theology*, the Godhead is undefinable, unnameable, and unknowable, beyond dark and light, true and untrue, affirmation and negation. Only the *via negativa* provides a way to reach the ineffable God."<sup>4</sup>

However, in another text of the same period, the tune is not the same. "Pseudo-Dionysius," Abe Masao argues, "calls that which is beyond all

affirmation and all negation by the term 'Him,' and other Christian mystics call God 'Thou.' In Zen, however, what is beyond all affirmation and negation — that is, ultimate Reality — should not be 'Him' or 'Thou' but 'Self' or one's 'True Self.' (...) If ultimate Reality, while being taken as Nothingness or Emptiness, should be called 'Him' or 'Thou' it is (...) no longer ultimate."<sup>5</sup>

### Nothingness and Negative (Mystical) Theology

According to John D. Jones, who is the author of the most recent (and audacious) translation of the Areopagitic writings, the majority of translations and commentaries on these writings have been elaborated according to a traditional framework which is not congruent with Pseudo-Dionysius' *non-metaphysical* way of arguing, or at least "rests on a metaphysics which is significantly different from Pseudo-Dionysius," and which has been the source of systematic mistranslation and misinterpretation of his writings."<sup>6</sup>

Let us recall first the main features of Pseudo-Dionysius' thesis. For him, the divinity of all, is the cause of all that is, and apart from all that is, there is nothing. But since this "nothing" is truly nothing, i.e., "real" nothingness, we cannot even say that *there is* nothing. Jones suggests that the text should be understood as follows: "apart from all that is: nothing." The major emanation is the use of the colon, which yields a reading quite different from the traditional. Hence the basic formula: "the divinity is all that is. Apart from all that is: nothing. (The) divinity: nothing."

The first affirmation "the divinity is all that is," or "all as cause of all" — is unfolded by *affirmative* theology, which, in order to celebrate the divinity as cause of all that is, "embraces Trinitarian theology (the theology of Father, Son and Spirit), metaphysics and symbolic theology (the interpretation of sensible symbols as they apply to what is divine)." As differentiating itself in the totality of beings, the divinity "causes" them, i.e., makes them exist "as both the same as, and different from," itself; and as understood in reference to beings, the divinity is in itself both the same and different from beings. Thus, since this affirmative theology affirms not only the sameness of the divinity and beings, but their difference as well, it may be called, in so far as it deals with that difference, *negative* theology — that is, negative *within affirmative* theology.

The task of this negative theology is to "express the preeminence and simplicity of the divine cause."<sup>7</sup> The divine cause brings all beings into being: beings proceed from God (procession) and they return to and subsist in Him (reversion, *monē*), allowing the divinity itself to abide

preeminently beyond multiplicity. In terms of affirmative theology, the divinity is interpreted to be *the* being of beings, i.e., “the first, highest and most real being (*ens realissimum*) existing in itself (*per se*) apart from other beings.” In terms of negative theology, the divinity is seen as not being a being, but as being beyond being, beyond unity, and beyond multiplicity as well: it is not an *ipsum esse per se subsistens* but the being of beings, which “lets be a hierarchically ordered totality of beings.”<sup>8</sup>

Now Pseudo-Dionysius affirms that it is possible to unite oneself with the divinity: beyond affirmative theology, and beyond the negative-within-affirmative theology, it is possible to “stand out of the light of beings, abandon all knowledge of beings, and plunge into a darkness of unknowing.” Such an unknowing is the requisite for an immediate experiencing of divinity as pure nothingness. It has to be cautiously distinguished from “the function of negative theology within affirmative theology and metaphysics.”<sup>9</sup>

Within metaphysics, negative theology expresses divine causal preeminence by denying that it is anything like what is. Nevertheless, although this serves to deny that the divinity is any intelligible or sensible being, the divinity is still rendered intelligible within this denial, for the denial expresses the divinity in reference to beings as the ultimate cause and source of beings. (...) However, negative (mystical) theology requires the denial of all reference to beings and of every attempt at making the divinity intelligible to us. Thus it requires that we deny affirmative theology and the divine cause (and Trinity). Culminating in ecstatic unity with the divinity, negative (mystical) theology requires that one deny the sameness and difference which prevail between beings and the divinity. In this radical denial, affirmative theology, and, more particularly, metaphysics are not declared to be false. For unlike affirmative theology, which offers an explanation of and discourse about what is, negative (mystical) theology requires the abandonment and indifference towards every explanation and discourse. In the cessation of all discourse, this denial makes possible unity with nothing: (the) non-same and non-other.<sup>10</sup>

Only negative (mystical) theology is able to lead us toward the “nothing” which the divinity “is,” once totally emptied of itself. Only negative (mystical) theology ultimately denies divine causality and preeminence, i.e., metaphysics, for the benefit of a “knowledge (as divine unknowing): nothing.”<sup>11</sup> Such a “no-thing” is not to be understood “simply as no-thing or no-being, so that we understand nothing as be-ing itself (*ipsum esse*), or as simply and unlimitedly being. Rather, nothing: beyond being and hence, beyond cause.”<sup>12</sup> As Pseudo-Dionysius himself says in incandescent words, “no unity or trinity or numbers, or oneness, or anything among beings, or anything known among being, brings down the hidden-ness—beyond all and beyond logos and intellect—of the beyond/divinity beyond be-ing beyond be-ingly beyond all.”<sup>13</sup> The

divinity cannot receive any of the divine names; then it ceases to differentiate itself from the various beings. One has to "abandon all sensation and all intellectual activities, all that is sensed and intelligible, and all non-beings and all beings."<sup>14</sup> One must deny all eminence and support, e.g., all metaphysical interpretation of why beings are. One becomes free to enter the realm of what Emilie Zum Brunn, in referring to Suzuki Daisetz Teitaro's commentaries on Meister Eckhart, calls "trans-linguistic reality."<sup>15</sup> As Jones says, "negative (mystical) theology is not one logos among many; negative (mystical) theology culminates in the denial of all logos. Negative (mystical) theology does not take up a standpoint which is opposed to the standpoint of metaphysics; negative (mystical) theology demands the denial of every standpoint."<sup>16</sup>

### Nothingness and Eschatology

If we attempt to summarize Jones' teachings about Pseudo-Dionysius, we can but confirm, as it seems, Abe Masao's appreciation about nothingness in Christian mysticism: the West does not yield precedence to the East in this matter, and the Areopagitic writings counterbalance easily the five considerations of Abe Masao about Buddhist emptiness. We may profitably think of Pseudo-Dionysius as the "missing link" between Plotinus and Eckhart.<sup>17</sup> But we are still faced with Abe Masao's observation about the lack of radical justification of "Him" or "Thou." In front of the designation ultimate reality, Christian mystical thought seems to shrink from the true encounter with nothingness and rests reassured when the darkness of unknowability melts away to reveal, in full light, the hidden face of God as a human being or person.

Yet the solution to this remark has been given in the midst of the Kyoto school of philosophers itself, by Nishitani Keiji. When we meet a God of "absolute negativity" which "presents itself as an iron wall that prevents us from all further movement, forwards or backwards, it is not impersonal in the usual sense of the word." Between "him" and "us," Nishitani argues, there exists an "im-personally personal relationship," or a "personally impersonal relationship."<sup>18</sup> We have to remember that "person" comes from *persona* (mask), and that there is nothing behind a person; "that is, behind it lies absolute nothingness. While this absolute nothingness is wholly other to his person and means an absolute negation of the person, it is not something different from the person. Absolute nothingness is that which, becoming one with that 'being' called person, brings into being that person. (...) Nothingness is not a thing which is nothingness... Rather, there not being even any nothingness is true nothingness, absolute nothingness."<sup>19</sup>

Nishitani's thesis has been confirmed by Abe himself, who recognized as important the fact that St. Paul as well as Buddhism have considered *death* as "an essential element for true religion."<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the death of Jesus unites him with nothingness, and his resurrection appears as a procession or emergence from nothingness. Moreover, when we define ourselves as beings-toward-death, we underline our dying and awakening at every moment. Thus, even if "Christian spirituality does not lead to *nirvana* but to a state in which, and in union with God, the human person is re-established with all his faculties,"<sup>21</sup> there is no less profoundness in Christian "personal" mysticism than in the Oriental quest of impersonality.

It is worth noting that R. Schurmann insists as well that Plotinus, too, claimed a "very personal and dated experience of the One," and quotes Plotinus' own description of the "union with the divine" as leading toward an "awakening to oneself" and as "above the other intelligible beings."<sup>22</sup> According to Porphyry, Plotinus experienced such an "awakening" four times in his life.<sup>23</sup> However, when Plotinus speaks of these experiences, he insists on the necessity of getting rid of his own body, and in so doing he opens the way to an "intellectualist" (or nominalist) interpretation of the union with God. But another interpretation of this is possible, i.e., in a realist sense—one for which the body, far from being separated from the soul, is to be divinized as well as the soul itself. The absence of a Christology in form seems to have given its ambivalent character to the *Corpus Arcopagiticum* and to have allotted "both nominalists and realists to make use of it";<sup>24</sup> for instance when Barlaam tried to reject any participation of the body in prayer and opposed the hesychast tradition, he quoted Dionysius as his authority for adopting nominalism, i.e., a dualistic anthropology of body and soul.

Gregory Palamas answered that "to make the mind 'go out,' not only from fleshly thoughts, but out of the body itself, with the aim of contemplating intelligible visions—that is the greatest of the Hellenic errors."<sup>25</sup> In this sense, it is clear that Gregory Palamas achieves "the fundamental Christian correction of the dualism of much Greek thought, especially Platonism."<sup>26</sup> But he does not hesitate to "follow the great Dionysius" as well as the Platonists Evagrius and Gregory of Nyssa in building a "synthetic" anthropology which will overcome Barlaam's dualism. For instance, he insists on the importance of calling the union with God of the hesychasts, "spiritual sensation," "a phrase appropriate to, and somehow more expressive of, that mystical and ineffable contemplation. For at such a time man truly sees neither by the intellect nor by the body but by the Spirit, and he knows that he sees supernaturally

a light which surpasses light. But at that moment he does not know by what organ he sees this light, nor can he search out its nature, for the Spirit through whom he sees is untraceable."<sup>27</sup> Such ecstasy, since it entails a perception through the Holy Spirit, "implies a God-inspired love in man," and *the experience of a corresponding ecstasy in God himself*.<sup>28</sup> It is only "through the descending ecstasy of God and the transcendent ecstasy of man" that "their mystical meeting and union is achieved."<sup>29</sup> Man's *theosis* or deification involves God's humanization.

If this is so, then Christology becomes central and decisive. In Palamas' perspective, "the deification of human nature was accomplished for the first time in the person of Christ," and in a reciprocal manner "Christ's uncreated life and energy become the property of the man who is united with Him, and in whose person the Christ Himself lives and operates."<sup>30</sup> The historical dimension becomes essential;<sup>31</sup> "for Dionysius' closed and 'anagogic' universe," Palamas "substitutes a theology of history."<sup>32</sup> According to this theology, Christ's death appears as a turning point: it is the death of the "only man who was not conceived in iniquity, nor born in sin,"<sup>33</sup> and who "alone could inaugurate a new race of humanity, into which man enters by the new birth of baptism."<sup>34</sup> And it is also the death of God, "which finds expression in the outcry of abandonment by God from Jesus on the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me?' (Mk. 15, 34). The paradox of this outcry consists in that the very absent God who is addressed in these words himself becomes present, so that the distance and proximity of God are in some strange way mutually conditioning."<sup>35</sup>

To sum up: Since the deification of man or *theosis*, i.e., the Western version of the encounter with absolute nothingness, is made possible by the coincidence of the self-emptying of God and of the self-emptying of man in Jesus, "what the Christian seeks in spiritual life is not a spatial or material 'beyond,' but a *future*, the Kingdom of God, already present in the sacramental mystery. (...) The Christ whom the hesychast seeks and finds within himself is thus the king of the future, and the divine light which he sees is the 'light of the time to come'; all Christian spirituality can have no other foundation but this eschatological reality, anticipated in the sacraments."<sup>36</sup> Therefore we live *already* in the realm of "realized eschatology,"<sup>37</sup> where, as Wolfhart Pannenberg says, "the differences of present, past and future are overcome in the *eschaton*."<sup>38</sup>

## NOTES

1. Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness, Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*. tr. J.W. Heisig (New York, Paulist Press, 1980), 39.
2. Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*. ed. William R. La Fleur (London: Macmillan, 1985), 130-131.
3. Masao Abe, *op. cit.*, 134.
4. Masao Abe, *op. cit.*, 133.
5. Masao, Abe, "God, Emptiness and the True Self," *The Eastern Buddhist*. 11/2, 1969, 22; quoted by H. Waldenfels, *op. cit.*, 141.
6. John D. Jones. *Pseudo-Dionysius Arcopagite, The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*. Introduction (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1980), 2.
7. J.D. Jones, *op. cit.*, 3.
8. J.D. Jones, *op. cit.*, 4.
9. J.D. Jones, *op. cit.*, 4-5.
10. J.D. Jones, *op. cit.*, 5.
11. J.D. Jones, *op. cit.*, 26.
12. J.D. Jones, *op. cit.*, 91.
13. Pseudo-Dionysius Arcopagite, *The Divine Names*. XIII, 3 (980 D-981 A); quoted in J.D. Jones, *op. cit.*, *ibid.*
14. Pseudo-Dionysius Arcopagite, *Mystical Theology*, I, 1 (997 - 999 A); quoted in J.D. Jones, *op. cit.*, 96.
15. Emilie Zum Brunn, "L'ontologie de Maître Eckhart et la philosophie comparée," *Journal of the Faculty of Letters, The University of Tokyo (Aesthetics)*, Vol. 4 (1979), 41; reed. In Emilie Zum Brunn and Alain de Libera, *Maître Eckhart, Métaphysique du Verbe et Théologie Négative* Paris: Beauchesne, 1984), 233.
16. J.D. Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102.
17. Cf. R. Schurmann: *op. cit.*, p. 347, note 59.
18. Keiji Nishitani, quoted in H. Waldenfels, *op. cit.*, 142.
19. Keiji Nishitani, quoted in H. Waldenfels, *op. cit.*, 81.
20. Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought. op. cit.*, 236.
21. John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*. tr. G. Lawrence (London: The Faith Press, 1974), 169.
22. Plotinus, *Enneads*. IV, 8, 1; quoted in R. Schurmann, *op. cit.*, 349.
23. Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 23; quoted in R. Schurmann, *op. cit.*, *ibid.*
24. J. Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, 209.
25. Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, I, ii, 4, tr. J. Meyendorff (London: S.P.C.K., 1983), 44.
26. J. Meyendorff, In Gregory Palamas, *The Triads: op. cit.*, 126, note 36.
27. Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*. I, iii, 21, *op. cit.*, 37-38.
28. Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man*. tr. Liadain Sherrard (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 103.
29. *Ibid.*
30. G.I. Mantzaridis, *op. cit.*, 128.
31. Cf. J. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas. op. cit.*, 186.
32. J. Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, 189.
33. Gregory Palamas, *Hom.* 16. 192 C, quoted in J. Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, 126.
34. J. Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, 126.
35. H. Waldenfels, *op. cit.*, 158-159.

36. J. Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, 193.
37. J. Meyendorff, *op. cit.* p. 194; cf. also G.I. Mantzaridis, *op. cit.*, 123.
38. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 65.