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Absolute Nothingness

Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

HANS WALDENFELS

translated by
James W. Heisig

CHISOKUDŌ

Cover art: Claudio Bado

Facsimile reprint. Originally published by Paulist Press, New York

ISBN: 979-8644162697

Nagoya, Japan
http://ChisokudoPublications.com

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Foreword

This book represents perhaps the first attempt on the part of the West to enter deeply into the heart of the problems that have become the focal point of the contemporary discussion between Christianity and Buddhism. As for its value and significance in this regard, the reader will find proof enough in the pages that follow.

I should like here only to draw attention to two points that, as part of the background of the subject matter treated, may contribute to our understanding of it. First: Why is it primarily the philosophers of Japan who have undertaken to confront the two cultures and two religions with each other? And second: Why are these philosophers for the most part close to Zen?

In contrast to life in European countries that until quite recently was defined exclusively in terms of Christianity, in Japan Shintoism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity all exert an influence. Consequently a worldwide crisis evoked by the clash of different religions and cultures manifests itself in a particularly clear way in Japan. The task of the philosophers is to inquire into life and into the religion that lies behind it. Hence, given their situation, a number of Japanese philosophers have felt impelled to direct their concerns with religion mainly toward the question of the encounter between Buddhism and Christianity. But, we may ask, is this not also the situation of the world at large? How long will Europe be able to go on disregarding the non-European intellectual world?

Regarding the second point, we consider it necessary for our philosophical inquiry to maintain a fundamental religious attitude that accords with the spirit of free and critical thought of philosophy. Since Zen has no dogmatics, and wishes to have none, it is easy to understand why many of us keep rooted in the experience of Zen practice. The age-old questions, "What is religion?, What is philosophy?", need to be posed anew in our times.

The experience the author has gained through extensive stays in Japan, the astonishing amount of material he has brought together, and

his discussion of the topic in Germany have led to results that go a long way toward fulfilling the expectations he has engendered. In deep gratitude I can only express my further hope that his work will inspire new beginnings for a deeper encounter between Christianity and Buddhism.

Kyoto
October 4, 1976

Keiji Nishitani

Author's Preface to the English Edition

In his first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis*, dated 4 March 1979, Pope John Paul II wrote: "True ecumenical activity means openness, drawing closer, availability for dialogue, and a shared investigation of the truth in the full evangelical and Christian sense" (Sec. 6). Not only does the Holy Father ask this attitude of Christians in dialogue among themselves, but he extends it to the wider reaches of ecumenism in which representatives of all the religions of the world seek to come closer together.

After an initial phase of euphoria, those engaged concretely in improving mutual understanding among religions have come to realize that there is simply no such thing as a dialogue between *religions* in the abstract sense. There is only dialogue between *people* of like or different background, mentality, nationality, culture and faith. Like all dialogue, then, it requires a basic *openness* to listen to one another, and this in turn promotes a *drawing closer* to one another. Only then can we speak of an *availability for dialogue* through communication, mutual esteem, an exchange of thoughts and approaches, and a sharing of visions about the road that all men seek or are called to seek. Only then, in the exercise of such communication, can we speak of a *shared investigation of the truth* in the broadest sense of the term.

In the case of the present study, this "truth" which the Holy Father goes on to characterize in its full biblical and Christian sense, no longer has any name at all. To write such a book, about "absolute nothingness," may not be the usual thing. The very title lends itself to misunderstanding and ridicule. But the subject matter has nothing to do with nihilism or apparent meaninglessness and nonsense. It breaks through the superficially meaningless and the menace of nihilism into the realm of speechlessness—of open hands and open hearts and a new kind of communication without words.

In general, training in the experience of wordless communication occurs through the practice and mastery of silence and meditation. The great religions of Asia have provided Western man with new incentives and assistance in this regard. Yet the world in which we all live, orien-

tals and occidentals, is one that has come more and more to bear the stamp of rationality. The quest for *wordless* communication in such a setting, therefore, can only avoid being an escape from the world if it can present itself in *worded* communication as something reasonable and meaningful.

That such an undertaking is not impossible is something I have learned, with increasing enthusiasm, from my encounter with Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani. Professor Nishitani, who will celebrate his eightieth birthday on 27 February 1980, is a thinker who stands at the very cutting edge of the manifold spiritual tendencies of our times. This is something that is treated in detail in the text. I should only like to add here that he is above all a man who teaches by personal example what it means to pursue the truth right into one's old age. Several years ago he spoke of himself as "a Buddhist in the making who has found his home in Buddhism" and at the same time as "a Christian in the making who has not yet found his home in Christianity." As a philosopher he is concerned with erecting bridges of understanding through the awareness that everything that is said is only meaningful if spoken out of the ultimately unspeakable, in whose service it must remain. I myself see in him a fellow traveler of Karl Rahner, whose thought shows a sense of duty to the *reductio in mysterium.* It is in gratitude to Professor Nishitani that I offer this English translation, even as three years ago I was privileged to dedicate to him the original German text.

The present English edition would not have been possible but for two fortunate circumstances. First, I was approached by Jan Van Bragt, with whom I had studied in Kyoto some years ago and who is currently director of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya, for permission to prepare and publish a translation of the book for a monograph series being planned by their Institute. Second, I have found in James W. Heisig an able translator who rendered my text into English in a very short time. To both of them I should like at this time to extend my special thanks.

This book is offered as part of the continuing dialogue among world religions, more specifically the dialogue between Christianity and Mahāyāna Buddhism. If it succeeds in laying down a few "building blocks" to that end, I shall consider it to have fulfilled its purpose.

Bonn
6 August 1979.

Hans Waldenfels

Translator's Note

The reader of these pages will no doubt notice occasional irregularities of usage and grammar in certain of the passages quoted from articles published in the East in English. While such unevenness of editing in English texts is not uncommon in Japanese publications, even in scholarly essays, neither is it by any means limited to those whose native language is not English. I have only taken liberties in putting some uniformity into orthography and punctuation, without drawing any particular attention to the fact.

I have consulted English translations of works published originally in Japanese, where they are available, and have made corrections in translation and grammar where necessary. Where no such translation exists, the renditions are my own. In either case, certain minor differences from the author's German translations have been unavoidable.

An exception has been made, however, of Professor Nishitani's *What is Religion?* which I cite faithfully according to the periodical publication of its English translation, since a fully re-edited edition of this work is being planned for future publication in the Nanzan Studies in Religion and Culture with the kind cooperation of Professor Nishitani.

Amendments to existing standard English translations of German works have been indicated each time in the notes.

Finally, I should like to express my thanks to Jan Van Bragt for reviewing this translation in its entirety.

J. W. Heisig

Introduction

In 1959 the Japanese philosopher of religion Yoshinori Takeuchi wrote in a Festschrift dedicated to Paul Tillich:

> Whenever discussion arises concerning the problem of encounter between being and non-being, Western philosophers and theologians, with hardly an exception, will be found to align themselves on the side of being. This is no wonder. The idea of "being" is the Archimedean point of Western thought. Not only philosophy and theology, but the whole tradition of Western civilization has turned around this pivot.
>
> All is different in Eastern thought and Buddhism. The central notion from which Oriental religious intuition and belief as well as philosophical thought have been developed is the idea of "nothingness." To avoid serious confusion, however, it must be noted that East and West understand non-being or nothingness in entirely different ways.[1]

Heidegger's question, "Why are there beings rather than nothing?"[2] is focused here on an aspect that he himself did not fully appreciate. Tillich, one of the few significant Christian theologians to carry on a dialogue with Asian thinkers, stated in his *Systematic Theology* that the question of being is produced by the "shock of non-being,"[3] and yet that this shock produces an anxiety that must be lived through. This led him in turn to inquire after the courage to accept the anxiety of non-being and to conclude that "the question of God is the question of the possibility of this courage."[4] God is therefore seen as "being-itself, in the sense of the power of being or the power to conquer non-being."[5] Here the thesis of Takeuchi finds its confirmation. For what in the last analysis remained hidden to Tillich was the realization that what the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, from early times up to the present, has termed "nothingness" cannot be encountered from a posture of anxiety.

The Catholic theologian and philosopher of religion Bernhard Welte has recognized more clearly than Tillich that there is a nothing-

ness that is not empty and meaningless, and that does not therefore summon in despair:

> Nothingness is not empty nothingness. In times of basic ethical decision we are given to see how it carries us along, how it safeguards and decides, how it sends out the challenge to trust, to step onto the fathomless and the still of nothingness, and to believe. Its mute power is greater, uncontestably greater than all that otherwise appears great and powerful.[6]

These words form bridges and throw open doors. But someone is bound to take exceptions: Is not that which is called "nothingness" in Buddhism—particularly when it is addressed by its other, and for the Asians themselves its less ambiguous, designation of "emptiness" (Skt., *śūnyatā* Jap., *kū*)—in fact an "empty nothingness"? Here we come up against the helpless impasse that burdens so much of the dialogue between Asia and the West. Obviously similar words do not always carry similar meanings.

The goal of the present work is to make some contribution to a better understanding on this point. On the one hand it is concerned with what is meant by the Asian-Buddhist formula "absolute nothingness" or "emptiness." On the other hand it aims to clarify what kind of response is possible within the horizons of Western-Christian thought. For this reason we do not propose here to trace a detailed picture of the many-faceted history of "absolute nothingness." Instead we shall make the focal point of our exposition the understanding of "nothingness" as it has unfolded, ever more clearly, in the thought of the still active Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, and as it is presented today among students and colleagues who, like him, stand in the tradition of Zen Buddhism.

The advantage of approaching the problem from the viewpoint of the living representatives of the so-called Kyoto School which began with Kitarō Nishida, the father of modern Japanese philosophy, lies in the very way they themselves view their task. From the outset they see it not as a mere reverential backward glance to an aged tradition, but as an existential and dialogical engagement with the modern world characterized as it is by secularization, science and atheism. In this way it can be shown how a one-dimensional view of man[7] presents a distortion of true humanity; and how a radical experience of man that is finally subsumed into the unspeakable, in both its positive and negative meanings, cannot be said to be in contradiction to an equally radical promotion of rationality.

For the Western reader, however, this standpoint needs to be presented, at least in general outline, in its relationship to the heritage of Buddhism. For this reason an initial section on the Buddhist tradition has been included by way of preparation. This should help make clear

how the Mahāyāna tradition of nothingness, which derives from Nāgārjuna, the southern Indian philosopher of the second to third centuries A.D., and which found its most intense expression in the Zen tradition, can be spoken of as genuine Buddhist tradition back to the Buddha himself.

The final section of the book is intended to demonstrate both to the Western reader and to Japanese colleagues that dialogue on questions like those which animate the current discussions of the Kyoto School has recognizable parallels in the Christian West. To point these out to each side as stepping stones to further dialogue can only be a mutual benefit. For Asia is seeking an encounter with the Western world as well, and that precisely as a world which bears the stamp of Christianity. But all too often possible participants for the dialogue go unrecognized. Europe, on the other hand, is in danger of sinking, after a long period of world hegemony, into a kind of self-enclosed provincialism vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Nishitani's reproach is very much to the point here:

> . . . If the various components of our daily life are traced historically, one finds that our present situation is inseparably bound to European history. This is because European history has become a part of our own history. At the same time, it means that Eastern history, which formerly meant all of history from a Japanese standpoint, is now seen as only part of our history. In other words, when we look at ourselves historically, we are now aware of the fact that we belong to a united and larger world comprised of both East and West. And precisely the same thing could be said, to one degree or another, about all non-European nations. However according to Toynbee, in spite of the world having changed in this way, it was Europe alone which was unable to free itself from a Europe-centered outlook. The Europe which, through the dynamic of its civilization, led various other countries to a consciousness of being part of a larger world, was the Europe whose viewpoint remained self-circumscribed. This is what Toynbee calls the "contradiction of the present age."[8]

It is also a question for us then of making some small contribution to the overcoming of this contradiction. The world as a whole can only become a more human and more peaceful place to live if all the parts cooperate in seeking to understand one another and to enter into the kind of meaningful rivalry with one another that will bring it closer to the common goal of a new world, a new society and a new humanity.