

THE GOSPEL AND NOTHINGNESS

ENTRE LE VISIBLE ET L'INVISIBLE

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The Gospel and Nothingness

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Introduction

This book is the product of my own spiritual life as it has developed over the past two decades. It is a product of learning, questioning, and general spiritual pursuit accomplished both in and outside of an academic setting, focused on the fundamental issue of human existence. And the problem of existence has been a part of my spirituality for as long as I can remember. It is, after all, a rather essential question, and so I have tried to figure out why we are here and what it might mean that we exist. The pursuit of the answer has led me many places. If I happen to come across the answer, I will be sure to let you know.

This book is in many ways a continuation of my first book, *Spiritual Exercises for the Postmodern Christian*. That work was almost entirely practical in its nature. It captured a set of spiritual practices from that time in my life, some of which are still central to me, others of which I have moved on from. But the aspect lacking from that work was a formal explanation of the theoretical foundation for their practice—that is, an expansive account of the reasons why you should do them, or why they make sense in some way. The reason I did not write this book first, with its intellectual foundation, is twofold. First, there is an inclination in the academy to avoid practice and the practical, or to only use a very limited version of those concepts. I can show you, for example, all of the academic presses who rejected that book because they “don’t publish that genre,” i.e. they don’t publish books that offer a practical spirituality, even as popular presses will not publish works of spirituality with academic depth. Second, the reason I wrote that book first is that I did not have all of the intellectual background sufficiently worked out to put it onto paper. It has existed in pieces and portions in my mind from the time I have encountered all of these texts, but I had

yet to make any attempt to systematize it, something which I did not want to do until I had described the practices. As they say, “*lex orandi, lex credendi*,” and my spiritual practice has shaped my understanding.

If you have read that book, then you have learned that those practices are quite interested in questions of meaning and nothingness, as well as living a life in light of the pervasive ignorance and darkness of human existence. We know so very little about what we are doing, and the world does not provide us with clear direction; we see through a glass darkly; we are lost; but this is the world as God has made it, so let us rejoice. We can do nothing better than to be honest about the horrors of our world and about its beauties, and all that happens under the sun.

This is an attempt to provide some systematic clarity to a set of practices that have guided my life for better or worse for a good portion of my life. A core part of this attempt is the work of Nishida Kitarō and Nishitani Keiji, two philosophers identified as part of the Kyoto School. Let me say a bit about them before I explain why they are so important to my thought.

First, Nishida Kitarō. He was born in 1870 in the Meiji era of Japan, which saw an ever increasing international presence. His philosophical study was the product of this internationalization, and he learned German and English and studied Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer, writing a thesis on Hume. At around the same time as he was doing this work on mainly western philosophy, he was also engaged in the practice of Zen meditation, and in Zen thought in general. Nishida believed in a certain universality to philosophy, and worked to establish the legitimacy of Japanese thought in relation to western philosophy. He also sought to demonstrate the capability of Japanese minds to think philosophically, the subtext of which was the colonial perspective that Asian persons were not intellectually capable of those highest forms. That is, Nishida demonstrated that a Japanese person was not limited only to thinking in “Eastern” terms, but could also engage, develop, and, at times, defeat western philosophical arguments. Nishida is best

known, and I am most interested in his work, for his approaches to religion and nothingness.

These two areas are of particular interest for me because of the work of one of his students, Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990). Nishitani writes in a later generation than Nishida, and among the many differences he engages with a different set of western thinkers, most importantly Nietzsche and Heidegger. This is particularly important for his conception of nothingness, as each of those figures engages with their own version of nothingness, and Nishitani strikingly concludes that the eastern version is superior to those forms generally offered in the west, something I found deeply thrilling as an undergrad eager for truth.

It is hard to express simply what distinguishes Nishida and Nishitani, but they do feel very different as one reads them. Nishida is insistent upon the logical nature of his thought, of the form of logic he describes, and of the importance of a certain reasonability, a fact which perhaps demonstrates his connection with those specific western thinkers who he worked from. At the same time, however, he is frustrating to read, and is not a neatly organized thinker. Nishitani, on the other hand, is quite vocal about nothingness, death, and generally more direct than Nishida. His work is more clearly articulated, but it is also more clearly religiously influenced. And his concern, as he states directly several times, is finding a way through nihilism.

I first encountered their work as an undergraduate, when I was assigned as a writing tutor for a class entitled “Contemporary Zen Buddhist philosophy” or something of that sort. It was around this time that I was going through a standard undergraduate religion major existential crisis of sorts. What does it all mean? What’s the purpose of everything? Does it even matter? It was not as significant a crisis as it may have been, however, and this is because of the texts I was reading, Nishitani and Nishida, along with authors from the Christian tradition. It was a reassuring way to encounter emptiness and meaninglessness—it was, in fact, what Buddhism was teaching, and what

the Christian mystics were teaching, and what the philosophers were teaching. I had guides for my journey into nihilism, such that it was a philosophical nihilism, and a religious nihilism, rather than whatever one experiences without those helpful intellectual resources available.

This is, in many ways, the main concern of this book. For all those who pretend as if nihilism is not one of the principal problems facing our civilization, I am not sure what to say. We see the products of this creeping lack of conviction throughout our society, and it is a struggle for those working in philosophy and theology alike to articulate an answer that might have cultural validity. The responses range, generally speaking, from denying it is actually an issue, to suggesting it is easily defeated by love or by belief in God or something of that sort. Which is why the work of Nishitani, in particular, is important. Like Nietzsche, Nishitani forges a path directly through nihilism, taking into account all that nihilism teaches us about reality, all that it forces us to reconsider. But what Nishitani shows in providing an answer is that this is not a new problem, drawing as he does on resources from Buddhism, Christian theology, and from his philosophical forebears. This is what I found, as well, in looking to my own religious tradition. We see God as nothing, we see the fundamental questioning of knowledge and speech, of what it means to communicate, to know, to understand, and how deeply limited humans are in this respect. What I found, therefore, during my crisis of sorts, was that the Christian tradition had a lengthy history of engaging with emptiness, detachment, vanity, meaninglessness, and nothingness. In this way, I did not need to take one of the weak answers offered in contemporary thought for nihilism, but could find resources in the tradition for encountering a new problem.

This, therefore, is an attempt to speak systematically what has been said in fractured ways throughout the Christian tradition. My effort to provide this bit of systematization is aided by the use of Nishida and Nishitani. The first part of the book is devoted to an explanation of their thought, at least on the issues of religion, nothingness, God, and

nihilism. I am not attempting any expansion beyond current scholarship, nor any innovation in understanding these writers. If you are familiar with their work, you may wish to skip that section and proceed directly to my constructive thought on Christianity. If you are unfamiliar, however, I would encourage you to explore their thought, not just in this book, but in their own work and milieu.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The first portion of this book is devoted to the philosophical framework of nothingness as developed by Nishitani and Nishida, and an explanation as to the importance of this concept for Christianity. The work of these Kyoto School philosophers offers a direct response to western thought, and a fruitful engagement with the problem of nihilism (at least in Nishitani) as developed by Nietzsche. Taking two of their most significant concepts, religion and nothingness/emptiness, a philosophical framework is provided for approaching and understanding Christianity in a different way. This is explained in the latter half of this prolegomena which then introduces nothingness as found in Christianity, along with the altered perspective towards faith, God, and religion that will be articulated in the subsequent chapters.

After this setting of the stage, the text moves into an engagement with Christian theology, especially the scriptures. There are eight chapters in this second half, and they build on each other, each suggesting a moment of significance for the discovery of repentance that is so essential to a Christian form of life. The process articulated is one of *metanoia*, of the change of mind, and particularly towards the way Christianity calls its followers to a devaluation of the values of the world.

The Chapter 5 discusses the need for spiritual death in greater depth. It articulates the manner in which this death is the primary calling of the Gospel. The words of Christ repeatedly call us to give up our way of life. This does not mean that we all become priests or monks;

far from it. Instead, the words of Christ call us to alter our perspective, an achievement that can be made by any person in any occupation, whether theology professor or stripper.

Jesus says, “Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” These are pointed words. “Come to death,” says Jesus, “take up your instrument of torture and carry it struggling through the streets as you are mocked.” We domesticate this saying so easily. As if it means only that we should tithe and make sandwiches for the poor sometimes, when there is so much more to be done, and so much more work to be done on ourselves.

In Chapter 6, Jesus asks the question, “Who is my mother and my brother?” and in doing so dismisses the significance of his family. Before I am quickly accused of overstatement, this is a nuanced argument, one which is well-supported by critical scholarship on the scriptures. It requires no innovation on my part to suggest that Jesus considers family secondary to being his disciple, and I suggest that Jesus’ disdain for his own family is something that is underemphasized. Family is a good thing, or can be a good thing, but can also be something destructive and limiting, something which can inhibit vocation and the offering of oneself to the world. Unfortunately, this path of reasoning which acknowledges the inhibiting or damaging nature of the family can often be used for selfish and self-justifying ends. This is not my intent. My goal is to challenge the inherent dependence on and pedestal placed position of the family, and at the same time make the connection between this questioning of family and nothingness.

Chapter 7 offers an extended exploration of the instruction, “do not fear.” It is an unreasonable recommendation, of course, but one which we are called to be taken seriously. In coming to understand the nature of things, the nature of the world that God has made, one comes to a place where though fear may be felt, it is recognized that fear is meaningless. For all that we would like to stand in resistance and rejection of the movements of existence, we have no power to meaningfully respond to such things. There is only the movement of the universe as

God has made it, as God has deemed it, and those things which we fear will not be changed through our fear.

The second part of this section moves from generally more practical concerns to establishing the theoretical foundation of nothingness in the scriptures. This is accomplished in three chapters: first, Chapter 8 offers an examination of the futility and insignificance of human life through a close reading of several parables, focused on four of them: the prodigal son, the parable of the talents, the dishonest steward, and the parable of the wedding banquet. That the parables offer a direct questioning of the institutions of society is a commonplace of contemporary interpretation. But the fact that this questioning is based in an understanding of the futility of these institutions is often overlooked. Most significantly for us, the parables call into question the notion that moral goodness is cherished by God or brings one closer to God. As Nishida puts it: “Christ loved sinners as those closest to human perfection.”¹ This is, in part, related to the tactic of inversion so often employed by God—the mighty are brought low, those who are full are now hungry. But it is not as simple as inversion, as if the parables simply wanted to create an inverted society where people of limited moral capability are considered “perfect.” Instead, this is rather about the nature of the divine love, which is impersonal and universal. The divine love does not take into consideration the things which humans do—it does not rank or condemn, but extends its love to all persons.

Chapter 9 turns the focus from human life to the futility of all creation. I am careful to avoid arguing that creation or material things are “bad.” Instead, this is a matter of acknowledging the manner in which created things currently exist—which is to say, in a state of decay. This is embodied in a few key passages of scripture, in particular the idea that the world is “passing away” found in the Pauline and Johannine epistles. This is set in the context of the eschaton, but it does not require an eschatological mindset. Instead, through the acknowl-

1. NISHIDA 1960, 184.

edgement of our existence in a state of decay, we can come to better appreciate the world God has made. Much of the interpretation in this chapter is centered on the use of the Greek term *schema* in 1 Corinthians 7. It is translated as “present form,” which is acceptable, but we can miss the connotation of pattern or manner or fashion—that is, the way things operate in our existence is as temporary as the next trend. The Christian challenge, therefore, is to acknowledge the temporary nature of existence, being a sort of lame duck universe, while also celebrating the creation as the work of God’s hands. This coincidental understanding points to the nothingness which is found in existence, not as something apart from it, but something intrinsic to it.

Finally, Chapter 10 offers an account of the nothingness of God through some of the primary moments of the life of Christ, namely the incarnation, embodied in Philippians 2’s description of kenosis, the hypostatic union, and the crucifixion. This chapter begins its reflection by addressing an argument offered in Arthur C. Clarke’s short story, “The Star.” It accomplishes this reflection by engaging with Nishitani Keiji’s account of kenosis in its relation to love, specifically to the nature of love as grounded in nothingness. This begins the discussion of the divine love as something which exists within the violence of the life of Jesus, not as something opposed to the violence, but co-existing with it. This leads to a discussion of the way in which the figure of Christ embodies the emptiness of existence, considered at once as God and as the meaninglessness of all things.

Chapters 11 and 12 address the problems of doing theological work within the context of nothingness. Chapter 11 covers the important theological concept of theodicy. It offers a reading of Job, of course, but also the theodicy offered by Jesus in the Gospels. The chapter suggests that theodicy is presented as an impossibility by the scriptures, and this because of the limits of the human mind, the human approach, and human language. This concept is explored in reference to a few different approaches. First, it is approached by reference to the work of Nishida and Nishitani, and in particular their suggestion in

the transcendence of the self through nothingness and the encounter with the absolute, the distinction between good and evil is complicated. In another approach, Wittgenstein's description of the problem of language related to ethics, and thus value, meaning, and significance is offered as yet another reason why theodicy is denied by God. Finally, the (non)theodicy of Job is considered through the objection offered elsewhere in the scriptures that this manner of nihilistic approach is overly nihilistic, and does not accurately reflect God's concern for us.

This leads to the second chapter in this section, which is on the unknowability of God, and thus, on the fundamentally problematic nature of the work of theology. If God is inexpressible, properly, then what can be expressed in theological writings? Or what can a religion contain and offer to anyone, given these limits. God is the darkness, the whirlwind, the cloud, all things which defy easy description. This is at once the nature of God but also the nature of the human mind, which is incapable of truly understanding God. This first leads to a discussion of the nature of the theological project, and then to the question of whether or not our religion is big enough for the divine activity. The theological project, I suggest, is akin to idolatry, and is represented in the work of those who built idols. We build idols with our golden words, but these do not capture God, and can quite often lead people astray from God. Furthermore, the words we use so often create a religion which is too small for the universe as we understand it. Our understanding of religion must be able to capture the incarnate Christ as a human existing two thousand years ago and also the infinite universe(s) and infinite planets with presumably infinite life throughout the universe. A religious perspective which has no means of accounting for or encountering this expansive notion of creation is one which has done too much to limit God.

The final chapter offers a concluding statement on the form of spirituality that one engaged with nothingness can expect. Relying on examples from my own life and also with the biblical example of Jesus, it explores issues including the commitment to justice, the importance

of rejoicing always in life, and the shortcomings of the contemporary approach to philosophy and theology as seen in the lives of those who do not seem to practice what they academically discuss. The primary argument is that even in a form of spirituality based in nothingness, there is still a call to an ethics.