

THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF NISHITANI KEIJI

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The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji

Encounter with Emptiness

Edited by

TAITETSU UNNO



CHISOKUDŌ

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Editor's Introduction

Taitetsu UNNO

AMONG the works studied in courses on Buddhism in the five neighboring schools of Smith, Amherst, Mt. Holyoke, Hampshire Colleges and the University of Massachusetts, one of the most challenging has been Nishitani Keiji's *Religion and Nothingness*. For students pursuing religious studies Nishitani's book has found its place alongside the writings of thinkers like Kierkegaard, Barth, Tillich, Whitehead, Teilhard de Chardin, Kafka, Sartre, Camus, Freud, Jung, William James, Buber, Abraham Heschel, C. S. Lewis, Graham Greene, Chaim Potok, Elie Wiesel, Paul Van Buren, Ian Barbour, Peter Berger, and Sallie McFague, as well as occasional texts in Eastern religious traditions and native American religion. Students familiar with these works have felt a strong affinity with *Religion and Nothingness* because of the basic problematic it shares in common with them: religion as an human experience in contemporary life.

The growing interest in Nishitani's thought led to a symposium focusing on *Religion and Nothingness* held at Smith and Amherst Colleges in April of 1984 with the support of the Japan Foundation. Most of the major papers presented at the symposium, plus later contributions by various scholars, theologians, and students are included in this volume. Together these essays may be said to represent the initial American responses to the thought-provoking reflections contained in *Religion and Nothingness*. Further and more extensive studies should be appearing as the dialogue between Eastern religious thinkers and Western theologians and philosophers continues to grow in the coming years.

I

When one asks why Nishitani's work, originally given as a series of lectures in Japanese several decades ago and only recently

translated into English, should elicit such a strong reaction from serious students today, a number of reasons, all interrelated, come to mind.

To begin with, the book appeals to the contemporary American student in search of religious and spiritual sustenance. Unable to find satisfactory answers to the questions of life in traditional doctrines or institutional religions, many students sense a kinship with the driving force behind Nishitani's religious quest: the experience of nihility. Nishitani, born in 1900, the year of Nietzsche's death, grew up in the *Sturm and Drang* of the modernization of Japan. In his youth he came face to face with an overwhelming sense of nihility—not simply as a spiritual temperament but as a question of philosophical dimensions.

Regardless of how nihilism is defined, and no matter how shallow or deep, it is the common experience of countless numbers of reflective persons today. But, as Nishitani shows, nihility is a transitory state, not a final posture. One has still to make the further choice either to retreat into the field of sensation and consciousness, and ultimately to be consumed by nihility, or to undergo a conversion into the field of emptiness wherein the ordinary things of daily life are reaffirmed as extraordinary. Whether one is able to actually achieve that transition or not, one is compelled by Nishitani's example to move forward with hope, following in the path that he has pioneered.

In the second place, a great deal of the attractiveness of Nishitani stems from the unique synthesis of personality and thought which he embodies. The integrity of his person shines through in his ideas, just as his ideas add luster to his person. In the words of his translator, Jan Van Bragt:

We [in the West] find religion and philosophy coexisting in conditions laden with tension. The individual tends to assume one world view, for example, in moments of spiritual reading and another in moments of rational analysis. It is different in Buddhist philosophy, where the unity of the religious and speculative has never been severed (RN, xxvii).

While such a synthesis of religion and philosophy, of personality and thought, is rare even in contemporary East Asia, we find Nishitani personifying the traditional Asian legacy of knowing-as-

becoming which cannot help but appeal to the whole person, both intellectual and affective.

In the third place, Nishitani's is a voice coming from outside the Western tradition to critically discuss certain Western religious and philosophical thinkers and in the process offers new insight into their contributions. Always grounding his analysis in the real concerns affecting the contemporary human situation—the *Lebensnahe*, as one writer puts it—Nishitani makes us take a second look at the ideas of Kant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, and others. Whether or not one agrees with his critique on any given point, there is no doubt that he is posing serious questions that cannot be summarily dismissed. More importantly, we are forced to rethink traditional religious and philosophical concepts, both Eastern and Western, from real needs growing out of life in today's world.

In the fourth place, as a work in the philosophy of religion, *Religion and Nothingness* stimulates reflections on one's own religious roots, whatever they be. Students find that they are inspired to rethink their own religious attitudes and understand them in the light of Nishitani's exploration into the meaning of religion in a technological world. They begin reading Nishitani in the hopes of finding something new and different, but ultimately they are brought back into their own world, perhaps rediscovering something of value that they had previously overlooked.

In the fifth place, Nishitani claims that he is doing philosophy and not Buddhist exegesis. Referring to key Buddhist concepts, he states: "I have not been interested in them as doctrines confined to a merely Buddhist context" (262). And yet he aids both practitioners of Buddhist meditative disciplines and scholars of Buddhist Studies to place their work in a wider context. Buddhist meditative exercises are not merely psychotherapeutic; they have epistemological and ontological consequences that need clear articulation. Nor can Buddhist Studies remain simply philological and textual, or confined to scholars conversing among themselves in the jargon of Buddhist hybrid English; it needs to be grounded in existential and religious concerns if it is to accord with the basic spirit of the Buddha. Nishitani invites us all, practitioners as well as scholars, to explore the meaning of what we are doing and saying.

Finally, the spiraling, poetic style of *Religion and Nothingness*

challenges the powers of imagination and communicates an awareness of how feeling (感性 *kansei*), specifically the mythic and poetic, can tell us as much about the world as reason (理性 *risei*) can. As Sten Stenson writes, "*Religion and Nothingness* is an intricate Zen *kōan* in which question after question is raised on the level of intellection in order to spill us into another order of awareness." For all their clarity, simple declarative sentences and propositions omit and sacrifice much. The circumnavigation in Nishitani's work assures us that he will retrace what we might have missed earlier and bring us back to the main point just when we think we might have lost our way.

II

The present collection opens with papers read at the opening session of the Nishitani Symposium. Although Professor Nishitani was not able himself to attend, due to his wife's illness, he sent an address which set the tone of the proceedings. Jan Van Bragt reminisces on his personal involvement in the English translation of *Religion and Nothingness*, which contains a fuller exposition than the Japanese original, due to Nishitani's own amplifications and the translator's skillful adaptations. Finally, Masao Abe's "Nishitani's Challenge to Western Philosophy and Theology" provides an excellent introduction to the first four chapters of *Religion and Nothingness*, posing for us the crucial question concerning impersonal personality or personal impersonality which is at the heart of Nishitani's reflections on nihilism, scientism, and secularism.

The essays that make up Part One were not originally part of the Symposium but were solicited later to provide answers to the inevitable question concerning the relationship between emptiness and God. The three essays by Langdon Gilkey, Thomas Altizer, and Gordon Kaufman approach this topic from different perspectives, raising questions, and inviting further reflections. (It will not fail to escape the notice of those familiar with *Religion and Nothingness* that none of the writers discuss Meister Eckhart, who is central to Nishitani's interpretation of Christianity.)

Part Two focuses on science, a major concern in Nishitani's philosophical enterprise. The problem is not science itself but the attitudes that have been cultivated by scientific thinking to the

exclusion of other ways of thinking. Cora-Jean Robinson's paper summarizes for us the basic conflict between science and religion, suggesting a resolution, following Nishitani whose basic position is that:

All living things can be seen under the Form of death without thereby being separated from the Form of life. The real appearance of these things must be seen at ground to rest on the basis of absolute being-*sive*-nothingness, nothingness-*sive*-being, or of the absolute non-duality of life and death. . . . This seems to be the only possible starting point for pursuing reflection on the problem of science and religion (RN, 76).

Sten Stenson explores this relationship in Nishitani and some leading thinkers of the modern West, and Robert Thurman gives us his personal appreciation of *Religion and Nothingness* as inspired by Mañjuśrī and discusses the rich tradition of "Inner Science" cultivated in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism.

Part Three deals with questions of ethics, beginning with David Little's critical appraisal from the standpoint of Western ethics. How are practical questions that ethics contends with, such as the problem of human rights, to be answered by those who would sympathize with Nishitani's philosophy? A partial response is given by Elizabeth Gallu, who calls on Tanabe Hajime's *Philosophy as Metanoetics* to provide further answers. Steven Rockefeller gives a detailed, comparative study of John Dewey's pragmatism and Nishitani's religious philosophy, suggesting a complementary mutuality. The crucial question underlying Nishitani's view of ethics is "whether or not the person as an end in itself does in fact reveal the self-awareness of man at its most fundamental field" (RN, 273).

Part Four includes two papers on the most difficult section of *Religion and Nothingness*, the chapters dealing with the meaning of history. Thomas Kasulis gives us a philosopher's interpretation of Nishitani's view of history and Masao Abe critically reflects on both Nishitani's view and Kasulis's interpretation.

Part Five contains essays by specialists in Buddhist Studies who find in Nishitani's work a creative, modern expression of traditional Buddhist thought. There are many Buddhist scholars who talk and write about *prajñāpāramitā*, but very few can articulate it in the language of contemporary philosophy. My own

article is an introduction to the Buddhist background of Nishitani's thought, while Anne Klein explores emptiness in relation to compassion, the central motivating force in Buddhism.

With the exception of Hans Waldenfels's *Absolute Nothingness*,¹ there has been no substantial study of Nishitani's thought in the West. Our hope is that the essays in this volume will suggest further topics for consideration, encourage a closer examination of Nishitani's thought, and contribute to the serious dialogue between East and West that has only just begun.

Valuable contributions from many sources made this volume possible, but regretfully only a few can be mentioned by name: Robert A. F. Thurman, formerly professor of religion at Amherst College and now Tsong Khapa Professor of Indo-Tibetan Studies at Columbia University, who was the co-director of our Nishitani Symposium in April, 1984; my colleagues in the Department of Religion at Smith College—especially Sten H. Stenson, Bruce T. Dahlberg, and the late Jochanan Wijnhoven—who helped with the Symposium during my illness; Jan Van Bragt, Director of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, who acted as our liaison with Professor Nishitani; James Heisig, also of the Nanzan Institute, for his editorial expertise and guidance which made this publication possible; the generous grants from the Japan Foundation, the Ada Howe Kent and Jacob Ziskind Funds at Smith College, and the George Hamilton and Willis Wood Lecture Funds at Amherst College; and the Committee on Faculty Compensation and Development at Smith College for providing research assistants, Elizabeth Gallu, Elaine Cohen, and Susan Olson, for this project. To these and many others I express my infinite gratitude.

¹ Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, trans. by J. W. Heisig (New York: Paulist, 1980).