

MARGINAL NOTES ON „ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS“*

by Joseph J. Spae cism

I. „ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS“ AND THE BUDDHIST CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

Few authors come to their books with such an impressive array of qualifications and opportunities as does WALDENFELS in the case of *Absolutes Nichts*. (AN) W. is a vigorous theologian, a competent philosopher, and a highly trained Buddhist scholar, particularly versed in Japanese Zen. Add to this that he enjoyed a longtime contact with many outstanding members of the Kyoto School about whose interpretation of Buddhism and Christianity he writes. This contact, in many ways, involved both the living and the dead. Through KEIJI NISHITANI (who celebrated his 77th birthday on Febr. 27, 1977), YOSHINORI TAKEUCHI, MASAO ABE, SHIZUTERU UEDA, and others W. was in a unique position to get the feel of their thought, and through them of that of their illustrious predecessors at Kyoto University, KITARŌ NISHIDA and GEN TANABE.

Equally important for W. s cross-cultural, cross-religious interpretation of the Kyoto masters, is the fact that he counts among his friends some of the best-known Christian scholars in the field. To mention but a few, all of them Catholics, whose names appear in the book: CASEY, DUMOULIN, ENOMIYA-LASSALLE, KADOWAKI and VAN BRAGT.

AN is the latest and most thorough confrontation between the Kyoto School philosophers and Christian scholars living in Japan. W. sets very high standards for the dialogue: his arguments are marshalled up without a trace of animosity; he shows deep understanding, the result of deep empathy. In my judgement, his book ranks as the best one-volume introduction to a subject which, as the subtitle announces, is „basic to the Buddhist-Christian dialogue.“

The hub of the book is the philosophy of KEIJI NISHITANI, the venerable dean of the Kyoto school. W. had one last and enviable advantage: NISHITANI read his manuscript, and added his own remarks and corrections. He also graced the book with a laudatory preface in which he points out two important facts: 1. Why *Japanese* philosophers felt called to have their insights bear upon a comparison of cultures, East and West; and 2. Why these philosophers belong, in general, to *the Zen tradition*. It is NISHITANI's considered opinion that Eastern, and specifically Japanese, thought has its own values to contribute to the culture and the philosophy of the West; and that, in doing so, Zen occupies a privileged position of neutrality and freedom which is conducive to a critical answering of the basic questions: What is religion? and What is philosophy?

* WALDENFELS, HANS: *Absolutes Nichts. Zur Grundlegung des Dialogs zwischen Buddhismus und Christentum*, Herder/Freiburg, Basel, Wien, 1976; 222 S.

NISHITANI himself authored a considerable volume of books and articles, some written or translated in European languages and liberally quoted in the book under review. In his own words, he could not have found a better interpreter than W., and „in profound gratitude“ he hopes that this book will become the occasion for „a new impulse toward a deeper encounter between Christianity and Buddhism.“

AN is essentially a comparative philosophical and theological study, and this on two counts: 1. The Kyoto School philosophers endeavor to apply rational, Western, categories to an interpretation of „Buddhism“, especially of Zen. In carrying out this challenging task they use to advantage a noetic and linguistic vehicle which shows overtones from the philosophies of KANT, HEGEL and HEIDEGGER, and from the theologies of BARTH and TILICH. 2. W., interpreting their reading of the inter-cultural situation, comes to his task from within a „Christian“ tradition. He is laudably eager to evaluate the inner treasures of Buddhist thought, even though the way in which he does so remains critical throughout his book.

AN falls into three parts:

1. *The Background.* In some forty pages W. selects topics related to the Buddha, his „homelessness“ (*Heimatlosigkeit* an HEIDEGGERIAN term) and silence; theories on *anātman* and *prā-tīyasamutpāda*. Around the person of *Nāgārjuna*, the Middle Way and *śūnyatā* are discussed. Then follow ten pages on Zen, its ideas on praxis vs. theory, on the mediating role of China in the transmission of Buddhism to Japan, and on the specificity of Japanese Zen. Lastly, we are introduced to KITARŌ NISHIDA (1870—1945), the founder of the Kyoto School, to his views on Zen and on „Absolute Nothingness“, a topic on which W. wrote a substantial article in *Monumenta Nipponica*, 1966: 354—91, now translated into German and incorporated in the book.

2. *Keiji Nishitani and the Philosophy of Emptiness.* In the some ninety pages which make up the corpus of the book, W. describes the background and central ideas of NISHITANI's Philosophy. These ideas cover a wide spectrum of great interest to the philosophical and religious encounter of East and West. Here are the elements of a philosophical anthropology, a critique of Christianity, and of an appraisal of the role of Japan in the philosophical world. Centering upon the specific subject of Emptiness, W. discusses and evaluates NISHITANI's thought on Nihilistic Despair and „Open Hands“, on Zen's „Great Doubt“, on being and nothingness, on subject and substance, on I-Thou and Nothingness, on interpersonality, on God and man, on Nothingness and Emptiness — all titles of the sub-sections in which this part is divided. NISHITANI's key notion of Emptiness is then checked out in its relation to the world, history, and man. At this point a critique of Buddhism is introduced in terms of its being „*A Religion of Absolute This-worldness*“ („*Religion absoluter Diesseitigkeit*“). The world is examined as „nature“ wherein man plays his assigned role. This is related to the concept of history which, in Buddhist terms, is the locus of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. There are some

„open questions“: the matter of religious and cultural language proper to *Mahāyāna*, and the possibilities for transcending some linguistically important antinomies, as for instance, in ABE's reference to „non-thinking“ and „not-thinking“, described in a remarkable article of this Kyoto philosopher which appeared in *The International Philosophical Quarterly*, 1970: 501—41.

3. *Materials for the Buddhist-Christian dialogue*. This part is more than an afterthought. As a matter of fact, it may well turn out to be the most important section of the book, as it goes beyond the somewhat disembodied considerations of NISHITANI's philosophical system and puts them into contact with the concept and experience of mysticism, the limitations besetting deep-religious speech and the implications of this fact for a kataphatic and an apophatic theology. Within these pages, I found particularly interesting NISHITANI's views on God, God-experience, God-belief, and God-talk. The final six pages of *AN* feelingly discuss the person of Christ in the light of „God's Emptiness and Man's“.

There is a good survey of pertinent literature at the end of the book. Perhaps, at this point, I might express a double wish: Considering that one-fifth of the book was originally written in English, I hope the author will prepare an English edition of his work; and, at that occasion, usefully supplement it with a quality index which would help the reader quickly to understand the finer nuances of many technical terms, as well in the Japanese original as in the Western philosophical systems which are used as a vehicle of interpretation by the Kyoto School.

II. THREE QUESTIONS AND THE SEARCH FOR AN ANSWER

While reading *AN* some peripheral questions kept racing through my mind. I should like to put them very simply, not in criticism of the book — which cannot be flawed for not asking them — but for the sake of the expanding frontiers of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. I shall apply three questions by way of example, to one or two opening subjects in the book. The bibliographical data in the notes refer to sources not used by the author.

Basically, my questions boil down to three problems, all of them implicitly touched upon by W., but in my judgement calling for further clarification:

1. What is the specific place, or should I say, the specific „authenticity“ of the Buddhism professed by the Kyoto School within the overall spectrum of Buddhist doctrines, traditional and modern? In other words, when dialoguing with these scholars, to what extent do we dialogue with „Buddhism“ — or with „Christianity“ — seen through their eyes?

2. What are the factual limitations of the Kyoto scholars' knowledge of Christianity? Is their „Christianity“ a sufficient and valid basis for a discussion on „Christianity“ as Christians perceive it: a way of life and love, rather than a philosophical system, and a historic irruption of God, through the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, in the salvation history of

mankind? What specific tasks do Christians face when they intend to witness to their faith, and proclaim it to the Kyoto School?

3. The third question emerges from an eventual response to the preceding ones: At which point of our mutual religious and cultural development, and in which type of gracefilled religious experiences, does living Buddhism — *in casu*, also that of the Kyoto scholars — intersect with living Christianity? Or, to put it somewhat bluntly, at which point could „Absolute Nothingness“ become the springboard toward Zen's „Great Death“, that kenotic attitude in Christian terms which promotes the alchemy of a union of hearts, the goal of all encounter?

I submit that these are honest, and important, questions to which this reviewer has no certain, unambiguous answer. The whole *W.* opus — and it is already extensive, going much beyond the scope of the present book — has varied elements of such an answer. I hope *W.* will consider a systematic presentation of these elements as a worthy follow-up to a task admirably begun.

I now wish to further clarify my questions in the context of *AN*:

1. *The Buddha's silence* (S. 16.)

Professor ABE writes:

After the Buddha attained enlightenment, he expounded various teachings, but as in his reputed utterance, „For forty-nine years I have not preached a single word“, preaching in Buddhism is always a non-preaching. The „word“ — in no matter how fundamental a sense — essentially contains a self-negation in Buddhism. Buddhism standing within the teaching was not, of course, unmindful of this. Rather it depended on preaching, and accordingly on teaching, while standing on the realization that preaching was always non-preaching. In contrast to this, however, it may be said that Zen, while grounded on the realization that preaching is always non-preaching, takes its stand on non-preaching itself, and accordingly stands „outside of scripture“. (*International Philosophical Quarterly*, December 1970: 324).

Ought we to conclude from this quotation, parallel texts of which are found in *AN*, that the Buddhist approach to Reality is one of „pure faith“, a kind of *fides qua creditur*, a type of religious attitude which stands free from a *fides quae*? Can one say that, according to Zen interpreted by ABE, a dogmatic content of faith would, by definition, misinterpret Reality, and consequently, that Supreme Reality whom Christians call God?¹

¹ To this question, unless I am mistaken, RAIMUNDO PANIKKAR tried to give a *positive* answer in his *El Silencio del Dios*, Guadiana de Publicaciones/Madrid, 1970. The answer could, at least in part, be found in the scholastic doctrine on the analogy of being and knowledge, and on the use of the *via eminentiae*, supplementing the *via negationis* (which denies the fitness of the categories of being and non-being in reference to God, acceptable to Buddhist and Christian mysticism alike). Further elements towards an answer: R. PANIKKAR, „Le Silence et la Parole; le Sourire du Bouddha“, in E. CASTELLI and others, *L'Analyse du langage théologique: le Nom de Dieu*, Aubier/Paris, 1969: 121—34, and several other articles in this volume.

The analysis of meaningful silence, complementing meaningful talk, could certainly gain from the emphasis which Zen has put on it. I feel that the Kyoto philosophers would largely agree with the following statement which throws a bridge between silence, East and West:

All speech starts from silence, lives on silence, is limited by silence and leads to silence. Prior and posterior to speech is „wordless contemplation“, called in Taoism and Zen „kuan“. Hereby is meant a silent observation, a basic feeling of the reality at large. Akin to this eastern experience of Being is what HUSSERL calls the pre-reflexive „life-world“, whereas HEIDEGGER speaks of „care“ as being the characteristic mode of the pre-conceptual „being-with-others-in-the world“, and EMMANUEL LEVINAS speaks of „enjoyment of the elemental“ as the original way of being in the world².

Echoes of this statement are found throughout W.'s book. But if, as I hope, the Kyoto philosophers would endorse it, how far would they then care to go and endorse some evaluations as stated by the author of the same quotation?

— An absolute silence about God is philosophically not justified and, for a Christian believer, meaningless and inadmissible;

— Only an active and faithful silence about God is relevant to a believer, because it allows God Himself to act and to speak and the believer to pray;

— Such a silence would renew the naming of God.

If such a silence could be shared with Buddhists, it could perhaps also help rename, in dialogue, the meaning of „*Absolutes Nichts*“. The meaning of silence, in Buddhism and in Zen, as seen by the Kyoto school, is certainly valid within the framework of its own historical and hermeneutical canons of interpretation. But it remains to be seen how it would stand up in the light of a wider context, such as that found within the Indian tradition³, and indeed within the thought of NĀGĀRJUNA himself⁴. I know that, in this matter as in so many others, Zen is stubbornly adogmatic, and might traditionally refuse to take up the gauntlet. But the Christian interlocutor will want to press his friends for some indications implied in the methodology, or rather in the non-methodological methodology, of their approach⁵.

2. *The notion of anātman (S. 17.)*

W. advisedly warns his readers of the difficulties which a correct interpretation of *ātman/anātman* in Indian and Buddhist thought

² FRANS VANSINA, „Silence about God“, *Louvain Studies*, Fall 1976, 100—27.

³ ALEX WAYMAN, „Two Traditions of India — Truth and Silence“, *Philosophy East and West*, 1974: 389—403.

⁴ ETIENNE LAMOTTE, *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nagarjuna*, Tome I, Institut Orientaliste/Louvain, 1949: 32, 154; ID., *L'Enseignement de Vimalakirti*, Institut Orientaliste/Louvain, 1962: 317—8, and other references in the Index under „silence philosophique“; TROY WILSON ORGAN, „The Silence of the Buddha“, *Philosophy East and West*, 1954: 125—40; ISMAEL QUILES, *Filosofía Budista*, Troquel/Buenos Aires, 1968: 90—103.

⁵ RICHARD H. ROBINSON, „Some methodological approaches to the unexplained points“, *Philosophy East and West*, 1972: 309—23.

involves. He refers to the basic text of NISHITANI, found in Ch. 2 of his *Shūkyō to wa nani ka (What is Religion?)*. One of the many Western translations of *ātman* is „soul“, and it is of interest to hear NISHITANI on the matter in a less guarded context than that of his book:

Buddhism sets up consciousness (*shiki*) in place of the soul (*reikon*). Mahāyāna Buddhism stresses the „store“ (*ālaya*) consciousness, which in last analysis is a kind of idea of the soul, which is generally held in the Occident. When the word „soul“ is tentatively used, it is the soul common to all things. Furthermore, consciousness is the foundation of all things which concern the soul (*reikon no taishō*).

The problem of the immortality of the soul is so complicated that, according to one way of thinking, SĀKYAMUNI cannot necessarily be said to have denied it. However, the ordinary idea of the soul as something like a ghost, which appears after one's death, naturally should cease to exist; and the notion of a soul with human functions such as seeing, hearing, and thinking should be dropped. In this sense, Buddhism may be said to deny the immortality of the soul. However, if we say that the truth which Buddhism teaches is the ultimate of individual self-consciousness and that this is what is meant by the „soul“, then it may be permissible to speak of such a thing as being immortal.

NISHITANI is then confronted with a difficult question: „Buddhism often teaches the continuation of *karma* (*gō no sonzoku*). Despite this, if self-consciousness does not continue, isn't this something like saying that the condition after one's death is nothingness (*mu*)?⁶“ To which he gives this answer:

The problem may lie in what is regarded as self-consciousness. We ordinarily regard something about self as constituting self-consciousness, and so, when this is lost, extremely speaking, we feel that we become like plants or lifeless things. In such a case, the self seems to be thought of as something substantial (*jittai-teki*) or solid; but this idea is called ego (*ga*) in Buddhism, and is regarded as an illusion and not the true self. This ego should be eliminated. The true self taught in Buddhism must be a self with a broad and large „center“ (*shin*, literally, „mind“ or „heart“), which is grasped from the standpoint of voidness (*kū*), that is, self-awakening (*jikaku*). This is in its extreme form the immediate self-awakening which Zen Buddhism stresses, but which is also found in the sincere faith advocated by the Shin sects⁶.

I think I understand what NISHITANI is trying to say, and I admire the way in which he fields the question. To my mind, this quotation goes to show two points: (1) The term „soul“ or *anima* in the West inevitably evokes strong religious connotations which then, in turn, imply further theories of a metaphysical and philosophical nature, not necessarily shared by all schools of Christian thought. The result of a close comparison with the nearest Buddhist term, *ātman* or *anātman*, its negative form, only leads to confusion unless the Buddhist meaning is made clear independently from all associations connected with the Western word

⁶. KEIJI NISHITANI in *Living Buddhism in Japan, A Report of Interviews with Ten Japanese Buddhist leaders*, International Institute for the Study of Religions, Tokyo, 1959: 41—2. I have no access to the Japanese record of this interview, and cannot vouch for the accuracy of the translation.

„soul“. (2) With this distinction in mind, NISHITANI finds himself in very respectable Buddhist company. Assuming that the Japanese word *shin* which he uses in the quotation stands for the Sanskrit *citta* or *manas*, rather than for the English „center“ which I would consider a Western-colored philosophical intrusion in a Buddhist context — even though, in Japanese, *shin* does mean „center“, as in *dūshin* — NISHITANI could then appeal to NĀGĀRJUNA for confirmation. For NĀGĀRJUNA, *citta*, translate it „mind“ or „soul“, is the basis, center and seed of personality; „self-consciousness“ (to use NISHITANI’s term) or *viññāna* (*shiki*) in the basis of personal life on which rests the true sense of individuality as distinguished from the false; and it is „the subtle seed of personal life in transition“ which (as NISHITANI indicates) hints at some kind of immortality⁷. It will be remarked that, in Buddhism, birth and rebirth/immortality is not conditioned by biogenetic laws; „it is a volitional, conscious act“⁸. Without this caveat, the Buddhist-Christian dialogue on person, soul and after-life, risks to remain a dialogue of the deaf.

But this is not all — at least not on Buddhist side. We have assumed that the Japanese *shin* translate both *manas* and *citta* (as it indeed does in NĀGĀRJUNA) and that they are almost interchangeable with *viññāna*, „consciousness“. This is acceptable to the older Buddhist literature, such as the *Laṅkāvatāra*. Yet here too, further distinctions may be necessary to find out what the Buddhist interlocutor really has in mind: if self-consciousness is the mind which remembers, judges, imagines, wills, etc., to D. T. SUZUKI, *manas* is the deeply-seated consciousness in the soul which ignorantly clings to the ego-conception and reality of the external world⁹. Which deeper meaning does NISHITANI — also in several quotations of *AN* — intend to convey? Discernment is in order.

NISHITANI finishes his statement with a reference that aligns „the immediate self-awakening which Zen stresses“ with that „which is also found in the sincere faith advocated by the Shin sects.“ Again, I’m sure,

⁷ K. V. RAMANAN, *Nāgārjuna’s Philosophy*, Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan/Varanasi 1971: 233, and *passim*, s. v. *citta*, *viññāna*, soul. Furthers, IID., „Person and Moral Life“, in P. T. RAJU & ALBUREY CASTELL, ed., *East-West Studies on The Problem of the Self*, Nijhoff/The Hague, 1968: 156—162 (where RAMANAN examines the problem from within the *Prajñāparamitā* literature, with interesting variations on the theme); ARCHIE J. BAHM, „Is there a Soul or no Soul? The Buddha refused to answer. Why?“, in *Ibid.*: 133—41.

⁸ *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, Vol. III, Fasc. 1:122.

⁹ E. J. THOMAS, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, Routledge and Kegan/London, 1951: 233; D. T. SUZUKI, *Studies in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, Routledge and Sons/London, 1930: 292—307; LAMOTTE, *Enseignement s.v. ālaya, ālaya-viññāna, citta*. In a discussion on *karma* and self-consciousness, as called for in the question addressed to NISHITANI, further nuances would be introduced by an outstanding representative of Sōtō Zen, the late BENKYŌ SHIŌ, one of the interviewees together with NISHITANI, as seen in his *Gokuraku no kaibo* (An Analysis of the Buddhist Heaven), Tōdai-Gakujutsujoseikyōkai/Tokyo, 4th ed., 1970: 190—216, where the Buddhist no-soul theory, and *karma* and the soul (*reikon*), are discussed in contemporary language.

this is a perfectly true and admirably ecumenical thought of a great philosopher. But to an outsider who consults his Shinshū sources, it raises another problem of „authenticity“. KOSHŌ YAMAMOTO, whose English books on Shin doctrine are known, has this comment:

Karma eternally binds one to the wheel of existence. But one, so to say, slips out of this eternal doom and is born in the Pure Land of Amita Buddha by the power of the Vow (*hongan*)... Against this, the Christian ‚rebirth‘ is the ‚gaining of one more life‘. It does not necessarily mean any repetition of life in the past or in the days to come. It is ‚resurrection‘, if it is in any good sense, which is rebirth. What we may know is that the cosmological basis is totally different between those (beliefs) of the Buddhists and the Christians.¹⁰

To what extent then can Zen and Shin agree on this matter as seen by NISHITANI? But this is not all. The use of the term „store-consciousness“ (*ālaya-vijñāna*; *arayashiki*) in the quotation opens a Pandora’s box of hermeneutical problems. NISHITANI’s overall approach, also found in *AN*, is set squarely within the Vijñānavāda/Vijñapti-mātratā (*Yuishiki*) tradition, the general background of much Buddhist thinking in Japan. It is well known that the concepts of *ātman* (the „self“?), *puḡgala* (person?), *citta*, *manas*, and other central terms used by the Vijñānavādins, are the eye of a doctrinal hurricane which is not quite abated¹¹. Without belaboring the point, it is evident from a reading of *AN* that these terms are very important in the philosophy of NISHITANI, as they bear upon the theory of „self“ which is, as W. indicates, at the heart of his philosophical anthropology.

„Store-consciousness“ traditionally functions as a self-surrogate, allegedly different from an immutable, self-identifying, substratum of the self. Western languages, perhaps unjustifiedly, have translated it by „soul“, or even „person“. *Vijñānavāda* insists that there is an interdependence of phenomena and consciousness which accounts for the fact that both subjectivity and objectivity become the source of „store-consciousness“. The technicalities which enter into an exegesis of this theory are extremely complicated. It seems that even as sympathetic an author as CONZE somehow lost patience with them where he writes that:

All these theoretical constructions are attempts to combine the doctrine of ‚not-self‘ with the almost instinctive belief in a ‚self‘, empirical or true. The climax of this combination of the uncombinable is reached in such conceptual monstrosities as the ‚store-consciousness‘ (*ālaya-vijñāna*) of ASAŊGA and a minority of Yogācārins, which performs all the functions of a ‚self‘ in a theory which almost vociferously proclaims the non-existence of such a ‚self‘. The „store-consciousness“ is a fine example of ‚running with the hare, and hunting with the hounds‘. Most Buddhists rejected it as a soul in disguise... (*Buddhist Thought in India*, Allen and Unwin/London 1962: 133).

¹⁰ KOSHŌ YAMAMOTO, *An Introduction to Shin Buddhism*, The Karinbunko/Ube, 1963: 164.

¹¹ The most extensive treatment, from Japan, of *ālaya-vijñāna* theories is SHUNKYŌ KATSUMATA, *Bukkyo ni okeru shinshiki-setsu no kenkyū (A Study of the Citta-Vijñana Thought in Buddhism)*, Sankibō-busshorin/Tokyo, 5th ed., 1974.

And he finishes with this Latin saying: *Naturam expellat furca, tamen usque recurret*, which the French might translate: *Chassez le naturel, et il revient au gallop*. Returning to one of my questions: Where does the notion of the „soul“ as held by „Buddhism“ and „Christianity“ intersect in relation to a fruitful dialogue?

3. *The Problem of Emptiness (S. 28, and others)*

Similar, and perhaps even more formidable, difficulties arise in the interpretation of *śūnyatā*, the term which gives its name to the book. One has but to look at WELBON's definitive study on *nirvāṇa* as seen by Western scholars to experience to the quick the travail with which, on this and similar terrains, the dialogue must move¹². This is not the place to investigate what influence new and very fine research on *śūnyatā* might mean to the dialogue¹³. I simply want to indicate through the example of WELBON's book how arduous will be the task of bringing together the NISHITANI's of East and West, Buddhists and Christians, concerned with the building of a new world in which we love one another because we understand what we mean, even though we do not always understand what we hear.

III. THE FUTURE OF THE DIALOGUE

NISHITANI is a prophet of the dialogue. Could it be that, at the heart of things, his inner mood was somehow foreseen and poetically described, about one hundred years ago, by a Western predecessor, DR. HERMANN OLDENBERG?

There is a path from the world of the created out into dark endlessness. Does the path lead into a new existence? Does it lead into the Nothing? The Buddhist creed rests in delicate equipoise between the two. The longing of the heart that craves the eternal has not nothing, and yet the thought has not a something, which it might firmly grasp. Farther off, the idea of the endless, the eternal could not withdraw itself from belief than it has done here, where, like a gentle flutter on the point of merging in the Nothing, it threatens to evade the gaze.¹⁴

¹² GUY RICHARD WELBON, *The Buddhist Nirvāṇa and Its Western Interpreters*, The University of Chicago Press/Chicago 1968.

¹³ I refer to what is by all counts the most impressive study, East and West, on classic *śūnyatā*, ETIENNE LAMOTTE, *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse*, Peeters/Leuven, 1976, Tome IV, p. 1955—2151. Useful elements for the dialogue on Emptiness, from the point of view of Shinshū doctrine, and more, are found in the late SUSUMU YAMAGUCHI's (died 1976) *Kū no sekai (The World of Emptiness)*, Risōsha/Tokyo, 1967; and from the point of view of Zen, in HEE-JIN KIM, *Dōgen Kigen — Mystical Realist*, The University of Arizona Press/Tucson 1975.

For a recent discussion of the matter by a Christian theologian, see JOHN B. COBB, JR., „*Buddhist Emptiness and the Christian God*“: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, March 1977, 11—25.

¹⁴ HERMANN OLDENBERG, *Buddha, His Life, His Order, His Doctrine*, Indological Bookhouse/Delhi, 1971: 283—4; original German edition of 1882, p. 328; French edition of 1921, p. 281.

Or does the Japanese philosopher perhaps find more accurate an interpreter in another prophet of East and West, TEILHARD DE CHARDIN?

Has there ever, *in fact*, been a single real worshipper of vacuity? The *Absolutes Nichts* of our book? — JS) Is it not simply that deep down beneath its words (which are the opposite of ours) and its actions (which may well have contradicted its fundamental intentions), the East had vaguely seen and was trying to pin down what we shall later be defining as „the road of the West“? In other words, when the Buddhist is infatuated with that which contains nothing, does he differ essentially from us, when we aspire to that of which nothing can be predicated? For all the assurances of Eastern philosophers, this is a view we cannot but question.¹⁵

The life and thought of KEIJI NISHITANI are a living witness to that quest for truth, that search for integration, that commuting between East and West, that prayerful, intensive putting-on of Buddhism-and-Christianity which he expressed in this poignant auto-biographical description of the dark night of his soul:

I do not feel satisfied with any religion as it stands, and I feel the limitations of philosophy also. So, after much hesitation, I made up my mind and have at present become a *werdender Buddhist*. One of the main motives of that decision was — strange as it may sound — that I could not enter into the faith of present — day Christianity and was nevertheless not able to reject Christianity. As for Christianity, I cannot become anything more than a *werdender Christ* . . . For I cannot bring myself to consider Buddhism a false doctrine. When it comes to Buddhism, however, I can enter into Buddhism as a *werdend gewordener Buddhist* (in a dialectical sense, whereby a faith in the making through the mediation of philosophy is *not yet* complete faith but, at the same time, is *already*, in a real sense, faith, that gives entrance to a religion — JVB, see note), and from that standpoint I can, at the same time, be a *werdender* (not *gewordener*) Christian. Insofar as I am a Buddhist, I cannot be a *gewordener Christ*. However, I do not consider Christianity a false, „outside“ doctrine (*gedō*) . . . From the standpoint of Buddhism, I can do this . . . Christians are inclined to speak ill of such Buddhist „looseness“, but I do not feel that way, and, in my opinion, people who feel that way cannot possibly come to a real understanding of Buddhism. Be that as it may, I am fully aware of the shortcomings of Buddhism and I understand the strong points of Christianity. Because of this, I am all the more convinced that I can, as a Buddhist, with the help of Buddhist dialectics and always from within Buddhism, work for the solution of these difficulties.¹⁶ (AN: 84)

In his own eyes — and certainly in the eyes of his many friends — NISHITANI grows in spiritual stature to the extent that he harmonizes within himself the insights of Christianity with those of his Buddhist past. He even hopes that Christianity will advance among the Japanese masses and become a powerful cultural catalyst in his country. Hence his frank criticism of Christian attitudes:

Christianity in Japan has, until the recent past at least, generally taken a

¹⁵ PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, *Toward the Future*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/New York, 1975:45.

¹⁶ JAN VAN BRAGT, „Nishitani on Japanese Religiosity“, in JOSEPH J. SPAE, *Japanese Religiosity*, Oriens Institute for Religious Research/Tokyo, 1971:280—1.

rather intellectual form . . . But there is also the need for realizing a religious permeation on the subjective level, and that is another kind of problem.

Just because there has been a family squabble — like the proverbial mother-in-law versus new bride conflict in Japanese households — in Western Christianity, that does not mean that it has to be a part of the Christianity that comes to Japan. Why can't the Church in Japan be an example to the rest of the world by being broad enough to transcend the problem of a divided Christianity?¹⁷

More precisely, NISHITANI is critical of the way in which Christians speak of faith, revelation, Christ and God. He feels that „all these concepts make up the indispensable components of religion in general,“ a position in which he draws near to TILICH (whom he personally knew), and which, many think, is of basic importance to the dialogue at the philosophical level. NISHITANI is particularly condemnatory of „a distinct negative contribution of Christianity, the overpersonalization and consequently the anthropomorphism of God“. Yet he admits that, in Japan „Christianity has given the concept of *kami* (god, the Shinto gods) a new dimension, that of God as a personal ‚I-ness‘ which overcomes the primitive mythological and anthropomorphic concepts“ of Japan's traditional religions. And he praises theologians such as TILICH, BONHOEFFER, ROBINSON „who are trying to break down the walls which Christianity has built up between itself and the rest of the world: walls of intolerance, walls of exclusiveness, walls of over-emphasis on the particularistic nature and personalization of God, and walls that tend to imprison a Divine ‚I-Thou‘ relationship which is supposed to be for all men“¹⁸.

NISHITANI is the Buddhist man who can write this profession of Christian faith:

Today no real encounter with Jesus seems to become possible without a descent to the deepest plane of our existence, on which everyone of us has nowhere to lay his head and is „homeless“. Today, man should, as BONHOEFFER has said, „live in the presence of God, as if there were no God“. On that plane alone can we become qualified for the commencement of the quest for the way to exist truly in the emerging One world and thus qualified to search for a way of true encounter between East and West.¹⁹

The *true encounter* of East and West, this is NISHITANI's main concern. In 1966, he admitted that the dialogical encounter between Christians and Buddhists had just been started — and that on Christian initiative. He felt that the Buddhist side was not yet fully prepared to respond to the Christian effort with all seriousness²⁰. During an important conference on the role of religion in Japanese society, Kyoto, March

¹⁷ *Japan Studies*, No. 15 (Autumn 1969): 5—6. See also AN: 79—82.

¹⁸ Quotations are from NISHITANI's „A Buddhist Philosopher Looks at the Future of Christianity“, in H. SHORROCK and J. SPÆ, ed., *The Japan Christian Yearbook*, 1968, Tokyo: Kyōbunkan and Oriens Institute, 1968:108—11.

¹⁹ *The Eastern Buddhist*, September 1966:51.

²⁰ *Dei* (an occasional bulletin of the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions, Kyoto), Vol. 1, No. 2, 1966:2.

29—30, 1971, at which he presided, NISHITANI told this reviewer that the Buddhist-Christian encounter „could lead to tangible results in the near future and bring Japan's religions together in a common effort toward the betterment of society“²¹. His optimism has not been disappointed, witness WALDENFELS' book, and the publication of an ever-increasing number of outstanding studies, by Buddhist as well as Christians²².

At Basel, in July 1964, NISHITANI met with HEINRICH OTT said that „he felt like an anonymous Christian“²³. For him the matter of „conversion“ towards Buddhism-and-Christianity remains a process of spiritual growth continuing throughout the evening of life. For those of us who know and love him, it is clear that Nothingness, which is no thing because it is the All-thing for all things, remains the inspiration that leads NISHITANI toward a glorious dawn.

²¹ The remarkable keynote address with which NISHITANI opened the conference is published in *Korumosu-shirizu*, No. 2, 1972, p. 2—13, NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions, Kyoto. *Korumosu* is a Japanese acronym for „Conference on Religion and Modern Society“, a group of well over one hundred Japanese and foreign scholars belonging to the various Japanese religions. NISHITANI animated the group from its beginning in 1971.

²² Among these publications, two recent books deserve special attention: one by a Christian theologian, SEICHI YAGI, *Bukkyō to Kirisutokyō no setten* (*Points of Contact between Buddhism and Christianity*), Hōzōkan/Tokyo, 1975, 419+4 pages; and one by a Buddhist scholar, YASUNAMI IWAMOTO, *Kirisutokyō to Bukkyō no taihi* (*A Comparison between Christianity and Buddhism*), Sōbunsha/Tokyo, 1974, 471 pages.

²³ As reported in *Deai*, Vol. 1 (November 1966), p. 1—9.