

# THE "ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS" ACCORDING TO THE KYOTO SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY

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The group of philosophers belonging to the Kyoto School have some common traits. All of them are, 1) rooted in the classic Buddhist Mahayana tradition; 2) opened to the Western philosophy in a fluid dialogue; 3) interested in the problem of religion and particularly in Christian mysticism; 4) the central common point of their philosophy-religion is the "absolute-nothingness" (mainly as Sunyata); 5) most of them assume the Zen as their central inspiration.

Nevertheless, some of the Kyoto philosophers seem to sympathize finally with nembutsu or Shin Buddhism: D. Suzuki (in his last writings); Keiji Nishitani (*Religion and Nothingness*); Hajime Tanabe (*Philosophy as Metanoetics*) ... It is worthy to analyze how they maintain the unity of their Buddhist thought.

## A. TANABE HAJIME

### 1. Philosophy as metanoetics<sup>1</sup>: The Other-Power

Tanabe gives us a biographical description of his philosophical experience.

After the 2nd World War he felt a profound disillusion and depression, due to the nonsense of his individual life, and also that of his own country. His philosophy (speculative, rationalistic) could not give him any help to understand the truth of this world at all. He felt the necessity to look for a new philosophy, but not like that he had given his confi-

1. Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962) *Philosophy and Metanoetics*. Translated by Takeuchi Yoshimari, Foreword by James W. Heisig, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986, pp. 316.

dence as the last explanation of human life. As he says "a new advanced philosophy" a "philosophy which were non philosophy" or a non-philosophy which were real philosophy<sup>2</sup>. It is interesting to note that he followed the way of interiority: "my penitent confession-metanoesis (zange) -unexpectedly **threw me back on my own interiority** and away from things external" (The underlining is ours). He speaks not only of his "own interiority" but also of "**my own inner self with humility**"<sup>3</sup>.

So he got an illuminating -experience- which he compares with that of the Shinran -loosing confidence in himself and feeling the salvation in the faith and confidence in the "Other-Power" as an Absolute in front of all relative beings in the world. "My experience of conversion -that is, of transformation and resurrection- in metanoesis, corresponds to the experience that led Shinran (1173-1262) to establish the doctrine of the Pure Land Shin (**Yodo Shin Shu**). Quite by accident I was led along the same path that Shinran followed in Buddhist discipline, although in my case it occurred in the philosophical realm. Reflection on this parallel led me to an interpretation of Shinran's *Kyogyoshinsho* from metanoetical point of view"<sup>4</sup>. Tanabe could also mention here the "conversion" (**metanoia, zange**) of St. Augustin<sup>5</sup>.

He explains in the Preface, how he felt the necessity of a change -a "conversion"- and used the Greek term "metanoia" and "metanoesis" to underline a total vital change of his mind. He speaks on "the truth of conversion -and- resurrection experience", the "practice-faith- witness of my conversion", metanoia (zange). It is presented as "the philosophy of my regenerated existence". This is **metanoia**, "the philosophy of Other Power". "I have died to philosophy and resurrected by **zange** (metanoia). "I no longer live for myself, but live because life has been granted to me from "which is neither life or death" the transcendent realm of the Absolute"<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. The Absolute Nothingness

But for Tanabe the Absolute is the **Absolute Nothingness, transformation of every relative.**

2. Ibid. p. 1.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid. p. 1ii

5. St. Augustin, Confessions, X, 10.

6. Philosophy as Metanoetics, p. 1ii.

“Since this Absolute is the negation and transformation -that is conversion- of everything relative it may be defined as **Absolute Nothingness**” (p. li).

But this is for Tanabe just “Love”.

“I experience this Absolute Nothingness, through which I am reborn to the new life as nothingness -qua- love” (ibid).

“It is the truth negation”. “The Great Nay as the Great Compassion”<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. The Unity of Self-Power and Other-Power

The unity of both sides Self Power-Other Power; Zen-Nembutsu, is finally the goal of Tanabe. Metanoetics is Nembutsu -and- Zen “or if you like Nembutsu-Zen”<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless I would say that in Tanabe the accent seems to lay on the side of the Other-Power.

### 4. Pascal and Shinran

It is very interesting that by one way Tanabe approaches Pascal to Shinran<sup>9</sup>, but also points out the differences. Nevertheless he finds in Pascal the necessity to acknowledge, how self-power and Other-Power may mutually find themselves in the interiority of man: “there is a difference in content between Shinran and Pascal, that stands out no matter how closely the two approach one to another”, Pascal and Shinran (the underlining is ours)<sup>10</sup>. It is easy to see that Tanabe’s interpretation of Pascal is rather inclined on the side of self-power, even recognizing the infinite misery of man in itself.

## B. NISHITANI KEIJI

### 1. Religion. Self, sin and faith

Nishitani in his book **Religion and Nothingness**<sup>11</sup> takes as starting point a conception of “religion” and “sin” similar to that of Kierkegaard. From the beginning he approaches to the mentality and terminology of

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid. p. 222.

9. Ibid. Chapter 6, pp. 193 and ff.

10. Ibid. p. 195.

11. Nishitani Keiji, **Religion and Nothingness**, Translated, with an Introduction by Jan Van Bragt. Foreword by Wiston L. King, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982.

this philosopher and through him to Cristian concepts of religion, self, sin, love and personality. Of course he tries to show the similarity of them Zen-Buddhism (Nothingness, *Sūnyatā*) and still more with Amidism<sup>12</sup>.

"The acceptance of divine love is called faith [...]" "So, too, must be faith that signifies salvation as a conversion from that sin be a Great Reality [...]"<sup>13</sup>.

"We can find the concept of faith as a reality in this sense both in Christianity and Buddhism [...]"<sup>14</sup>. And after referring to the *kenosis* and *ekkenosis* of Christ, "who emptied himself, taking the form of a serve", sais Nishitani: "In Christianity, faith in Christ means both man's witness to and appropriation of God's redeeming live, and also God's actualization of and witness to his own divine love in man. In both of these aspects, faith is the working of the Holy Spirit as the love of God which establishes a real bond between man and God, a bond that is both actualized and a appropriated in faith. As it is written, "he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1 Corr. 6:17). In Buddhism, the name Amida is taken to be the sign of the fulfillment of the Buddha's Vow of Compassion, and indeed is itself the name for the unity of the Buddha and all things"<sup>15</sup>.

Finally Nishitani refers again to the conception of self (unique), salvation and sin of Kierkegaard: "in general, then, this sort of faith indicates the point at which the self truly becomes the self itself. The elemental realization, of evil and sin, the field of nothingness opened up in that realization, and the acceptance in belief of the working of salvation all signify, each in its own way, the point at which the self becomes itself as something absolutely unique, the most "private" point in the self, the standpoint of the "solitary" as Kierkegaard has it"<sup>16</sup>.

Religion is the contact point of the self and God (*Anknüpfungspunkt* with God)<sup>17</sup>.

12.Ibid. pp.26-27.

13.p. 26.

14.Ibid.

15.Ibid. pp.26-27.

16.Ibid. p.27.

17.Ibid. pp.24-25.

## 2. Subjectiveness or self apprehension

"Awareness of subjectivity, makes the notion of man as personal being [...] practically self evident". Even Nishitani says: "The idea of man as person is without doubt the highest conception of man yet to appear. The same may be said of the idea of God as person"<sup>18</sup>.

3. But this is only the first subjectivity or personality: "the ego - centered self of man"<sup>19</sup>. It is necessary to transcend the "personal self". This transcendence or negation, discloses the true self or personality, through a "conversion" to the truly elemental selfhood.

"This negation means a conversion within the self-enclosed personality, an outburst of altogether fresh vitality. It is like a key to that innermost depth of personality that has been closed off since the very beginning -the "beginning without beginning"- of personal being. Through this negation the person is broken through, from within and the personal self discloses itself as subjectivity in its elemental sense, as truly absolute selfhood"<sup>20</sup>.

Nishitani distinguishes God and godhead, the last being the ground, so to say, of God, as personal subjectivity. He makes here the interpretation of Eckhart, when this says: "In other words, it must be a point that is not the nihility of *creatio ex nihilo* but rather something like the absolute nothingness of godhead that we saw in Eckhart. Godhead is the place within God where God is not God himself"<sup>21</sup>. See also the interpretation of Eckhart as "beyond theism and atheism"<sup>22</sup>.

This absolute selfhood is the absolute nothingness or *sunyata*. He quotes the Eckhart words: "The ground of God is the ground of my soul, and the ground of my soul is the ground of God"<sup>23</sup>. The ground of the personality in the soul and God is the "urground" which is in itself the absolute nothingness or void, or *sunyata*.

4. Nishitani's *sunyata* coincides with the *theologia negativa* but he

18.Ibid. p.69.

19.Ibid. p.27 and 69.

20.Ibid. p.72.

21.Ibid. p.67.

22.Ibid. p.64.

23.Ibid. p.68.

expresses his feelings rather in personalistic categories. "The point at which this fact can be comprehended in a primer manner is the point of deliverance where "one becomes a Son of God, a Son of Buddha"<sup>24</sup>.

It is very interesting the approach of Nishitani to Kierkegaard and specially to Meister Eckhart in the interpretation of "self", "person", "God", "Subjectiveness", and the relation of this terminology with the absolute nothingness of identified in Buddhism with the Tathagata and also the Amida. But there is always a different final atmosphere in the meaning of "creatio ex nihilo" in Eckhart and Nishitani.

### C. SUZUKI TEITARO DAISSETZ

#### 1. Suzuki: Zen and Shinbuddhism

As it is well know, Suzuki, in his lifelong, was specially concentrated on Zen. That means the doctrine of salvation through the "self power". But in the last years of his life, he turned to the practice of Amida Buddhism, what means the faith on salvation by "Other Power". In one of this posthumus articles he reasumes the doctrine of the self in a different light, which seems to emphasizes a new relation between the Absolute and the relative<sup>25</sup>.

#### 2. Revision of notions of ātman and anātman

Suzuki feels the necessity of such revision.

"Thus all things are declared to be transient, impermanent, in a state of constant flux, subject to birth and death, and this statement is generally understood to be the Buddhist doctrine of non-ego, *anattā* or *anatman*; there is, however, a deeper notion of *ātman* to be found in Buddhism which does not require the denial of *ātman*"<sup>26</sup>.

#### 3. The doctrine of non-ego is not psychological but moral.

"This *ātman* is negated by Buddhism for such a concept is just a name, a convenient way of fixing our attention to something. There is no

24.Ibid. p.158.

25.Suzuki Teitarō Daisetz, *Apropos of Shin*, en *The Buddha Eve*, An Anthology of the Kyoto School, Ed. by Frederick Franck, Crossroad - New York, 1982, pp. 211-220.

26.O. c. p.214.

substance corresponding to it, and therefore it is absurd to cling to it as such. The doctrine of non-ego, of anattâ, is not just psychological, but aims at morally fortifying us against undue attachments to things not really worth clinging to”<sup>27</sup>.

#### 4. Nevertheless “there must be something in us which really constitute selfhood”

Suzuki points out the necessity of searching a true foundation of the real selfhood. “How do we come to know that it really constitutes the basis of our being?”. This is the quest of all religions, Suzuki quotes, and explains the *shin* answer by the distinction of the “absolute self” and “relative”. *Hō* in Japanese is the absolute and *ki* the relative. But the two are really one. “*Shin* teaches them that the *hō* and the *ki* are one and that when this is realized you know what the absolute self is, what Amida is, what his Pure Land is, what the destiny of human existence is, what the significance of life is”<sup>28</sup>.

But is important that Suzuki says that the “oneness does not interfere the duality”. “But there is one most important thing in this connection which ought not to be missed by any means. It is this: the oneness of *hō* and *ki* does not interfere with their duality; they are one and yet two, they are two and yet one. This doctrine is known as the doctrine of non-hindrance, or of interpenetration”<sup>29</sup>.

#### 5. The mystic experience

Suzuki refers to the mystical experience to explain how it happens in Shin Buddhism. He analyzes the case of the mystic and poet Asahara Saichi (died 1933) who says:

“O Saichi, are there two kinds Nembutsu?

No, not necessarily two;

Only, one Nembutsu working in two ways”<sup>30</sup>.

Therefore Suzuki gives the last interpretation: “*Namu Amida Butsu* is

27.Ibid. p.215.

28.Ibid. p.215-216.

29.Ibid. p.216.

30.Ibid. p.220.

not just one undifferentiated oneness, it moves in two directions: the *ki* way and the *hō* way. Saichi is fully conscious of this"<sup>31</sup>.

"The feeling of oneness, however, does not prevent Saichi from cherishing another feeling, which is that of wretchedness and misery of his sinfulness. The oneness does not wipe out the separateness of Saichi from Amida, who is great and infinitely beyond him"<sup>32</sup>.

The oneness and differentiation are both in Amida and in Saichi, according to these verses of the mystic poet:

"According to Saichi's understanding

**Ki** and **Hō** are one:

Namu Amida Butsu is none other than Saichi himself.

This is indeed Saichi's understanding:

He has flowers in both hands,

Taken away in one way and given as gift in another way"<sup>33</sup>.

## 6. Synthesis

Suzuki seems to surpassing the pure Zen (pure oneness absolute nothingness) placing a further element, that of the mystical experience inside the Shinbuddhism -the Namu-Amida-Butsu in which *ki* (the relative) and *hō* (the absolute) are both one and differentiated.

## D. CONCLUSIONS

1. The philosophers of the Kyoto School, already mentioned, seem to underline the necessity not only of oneness but also that of the bipolarity of the mystical experience, and, consequently, a bipolarity implied in Nembutsu.
2. They try to explain this oneness and difference within the doctrine of "absolute nothingness", as the ultimate basis of the self in itself.
3. It is interesting the explanation given in "Glossary" to *Notes on the inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls* on the term "Shinjin": "The realization of Other Power in which human calculation is negated through the working of Amida Buddha. It denotes the central religious experience of Shin Buddhism, and literally means man's "true, real, and sincere heart and mind" (**makoto no kokoro**), which is given by Amida Buddha. This

31.Ibid.

32.Ibid. p.217.

33.Ibid. p.220.



heartmind has basically two aspects: a non-dichotomous identity wherein the heart and mind of Amida and the heart and mind of man are one, and a dichotomous relationship wherein the two are mutually exclusive and in dynamic interaction"<sup>34</sup>.

The "oneness" related to heart and mind, but the "two" to the "mutual exclusion and dynamic interaction".

4. Frequently are compared the "absolute nothingness" of Zen and the **theologia negative** of some Christian mystics. No doubt that there is some similarity in the meaning. There are also some differences. Hajime Nakamura has pointed out this aspects of coincidence and difference:

"Here we see a negative theologia (teología negativa) proposing a negative methodology (via negativa). In the East, Ch'an also can be termed a negative theology. The phrase "is not" permeates Dogen's Shobogenzo. In China the medieval Confucian philosophy of Wang-Yang-ming more than the Sung learning of Chu Hsi- exhibits characteristics similar to a negative theology. The Western Mystics resemble Ch'an in their teaching that true in this world can be expressed only through negation. But in contrast to the incisiveness of negative expressions in Ch'an, the medieval Western mystics leave the impression that they are not entirely free from the tendency to conceive God as some kind of real entity"<sup>35</sup>.

## LA "NADA ABSOLUTA" SEGUN LA ESCUELA DE FILOSOFIA DE KYOTO (Resumen)

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El grupo de filósofos que pertenecen a la Escuela de Kyoto tienen algunos rasgos en común. Todos ellos están: 1) enraizados en la tradición clásica del Budismo Mahayana; 2) abiertos a la filosofía occidental con un diálogo fluido; 3) interesados en el problema religioso, especial-

34. Notes on the inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls, A translations of Shinran's Sango shinzo meimon, Yoshifumi Ueda, General Editor, Kyoto, Japan, 1981, p.126.

35. Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 13/1, 1981, "The Goal of Meditation", Nakamura Hajime, p.76.

mente el misticismo cristiano; 4) el concepto central común de su filosofía - religión es la "nada absoluta" (especialmente como sunyata); 5) la mayoría de ellos asumen al Zen como su inspiración central.

Sin embargo, algunos de los filósofos de Kyoto parecen simpatizar finalmente con **nembutsu** o Budismo Shin: D. Suzuki (en sus últimos escritos); Keiji Nishitani (Religión y la Nada); Hajime Tanabe (La filosofía como una metanoética)... Vale la pena analizar como mantienen la **unidad** de su pensamiento budista. Por ejemplo Hajime Tanabe dice: "En esencia la metanoética es una síntesis del punto de vista del **nembutsu** y del budismo Zen, una especie de "Nembutsu-Zen" si prefieren (o.c. p.222). También la tensión entre **Tariki** y **Jiriji**; el análisis de la filosofía de Pascal por Hajime Tanabe (o.c. pp.193-199); el de Meister Eckhart por Keiji Nishitani (o.c. pp.61-68) y la interpretación por Suzuki sobre la unidad-dualidad del "Nembutsu" y el "Zen" (A propósito del Shin en "The Buddha Eye", pp.211-220), etc.