Nishitani Keiji 西谷隆始, one of Japan's most influential philosophers, was born in 1900, in Ishikawa prefecture. He graduated from the philosophy department of Kyoto Imperial University in 1924 and later became a professor at his Alma Mater. Since his retirement (1964) he has been professor of philosophy and religion at Otani University, Kyoto. The titles of his works give a true picture of Nishitani's basic interests but are by no means a sufficient indication of the amount and variety of his scholarly activities. Besides a great number of important articles, he has contributed to most symposia on philosophical and religious subjects which have appeared in Japan since World War II. As president of The Eastern Buddhist Society, Kyoto, and of the International Institute for Japan Studies, Nishinomiya, he is very active in the East-West, Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

In an account of his own philosophical starting point, Nishitani writes:

Before I began my philosophical training as a disciple of Nishida, I was most attracted by Nietzsche and Dostoevski, Emerson and Carlyle, and also by the Bible and St. Francis of Assisi. Among things Japanese I liked best Natsume Söseki and books like the Buddhist talks by Hakuin and Takuan. Throughout all these multiple interests one fundamental concern was constantly at work, I think... In the center of


2 An incomplete list of Nishitani's articles in western languages can be found at the end of this paper. They do not present sufficient material for a study of Nishitani's thought.

3 Two famous and popular Zen masters of the Edo Period, Takuan 東山 (1573-1645) and Hakuin 賀雲 (1685-1768).
that whirlpool lurked doubt about the very existence of the self, something like the Buddhist "Great Doubt" or "taigi 多疑孩童. Thus I soon started paying attention to Zen.4

If we add to this the influence of Schelling and of existentialism, especially Heidegger (under whom Nishitani studied for a time immediately before World War II), and a lifelong interest in the German mystics, especially Meister Eckhart, we get a good picture of the intellectual climate in which Nishitani moves. We are not trying here, however, to analyze Nishitani's philosophy but, rather, to come to an understanding of his "religious world," and through it, of the religious sense of the Japanese, in particular of the Japanese intellectuals.

Nishitani is, beyond doubt, a religious thinker. Not only are religious themes predominant among the subjects of his philosophical investigations, but religion is the ever-present background of all his thought, the locus naturale, as it were, to which his intellect ever returns no matter where it dwells momentarily. Moreover, he refuses to separate philosophy as intellectual endeavor from religion as a practical attitude toward life. In this respect, Nishitani is a typical representative of the "Kyoto School," the disciples of Japan's foremost philosopher, Nishida Kitaro 田中喜多男 (1870-1945). These philosophers have in common a certain philosophical ethos rather than a philosophical system. Together with a deep piety toward the master and his peculiar style of philosophizing, they have preserved his religious spirit or, at least, an interest in religious questions.

Within this group, Nishitani's peculiar place can best be characterized by his preoccupation with nihilism.5 A kind of existential nihilism, a doubt about the necessity and meaning of life, brought him to philosophy and to a thorough study of European nihilism. For a long time he did not succeed in finding for himself a more or less unified system of thought6 but he came to the conclusion that nihilism is the fundamental historical direction of Western culture through the loss of its "absolute center," God,7 and actual endeavor of modern philosophy, of which the last epoch-making thinker is Nietzsche.8 Thus he came to see the conquest of nihilism as the task for himself as well as for contemporary philosophy and for our culture in general. The conviction that this task can only be fulfilled by religion drove him to religion and especially to Buddhism, wherein he sees this conquest of nihilism (at the very least) prefigured in the doctrine of sūnyatā or emptiness.

1. What is Japanese religiosity?

We would now like to ask Nishitani some questions in connection with Japanese religiosity. But first, to what degree is Nishitani representative of "the Japanese," especially of Japanese intellectuals? Is not his religious experience exceptional, and does he not speak for a small minority only?

Indeed, Nishitani himself deplores the fact that, through westernization, "the mentality of the so-called intelligentsia took shape, greatly isolated from that of the more numerous... classes of common people... that layer of society which has long been the native ground for the traditional culture."9 Nishitani's continuous existential concern with religion is certainly seldom found in Japanese intellectuals who are notorious either for their religious indifference or their quiet conviction that religion is definitely rebutted by science.

So it would seem that Nishitani, plagued as he is by contemporary western problems, cannot be a representative of the Japanese "common people" and that, on the other hand, by the fact itself of his religiosity, he sets himself apart from the great majority of this country's intelligentsia.

These remarks contain part of the truth. But there is another part, namely that Nishitani, through close contact with the Japanese religious tradition, succeeds in formulating some of the deepest aspirations of his people. Furthermore, in his effort to bridge the gap between science and religion and between eastern and western traditions, he lays bare for us the battles that are waged mostly unconsciously and non-reflectively -- in the hearts of Japanese intellectuals.

How does Nishitani see Japanese religiosity? In 1940-1941 Nishitani still thought that, notwithstanding the invasion by western secular culture and individualism, the Japanese religious tradition and fundamentally the religious spirit which had been splendidly displayed in the great personalities of the Meiji Restoration -- was still alive in the personal and social life of the Japanese.10 After the war, however, his evaluation became more negative. In a discussion about the possibility of resistance to massification in modern society, Nishitani agrees

9 No. 10, p. 4. -- The intelligentsia lost their roots in the traditional (religious) culture and did not find new roots in the West, since they took over western culture indiscriminately but without its religious basis. Thus, "for the present occidentalized Japanese, Japan does not signify 'I' nor again does the Occident. In fact, he is without an 'I.' He is ephemeral." (No. 10, p. 8) Cf. No. 3, p. 226-7; "Nippon ni okeru dento-shiki shakyo isshiki," in Takada Kyokoku, ed., Shisōshi no hokō to taisō, p. 244 (1941); Shisōshi no hokō to taisō, p. 244 (1941); Kuyarna Yasushi, ed., Senyo Nippon seisshinshū, p. 354-5 (1961); "Nippon bunka ni tsuite" in Proceedings, The Second International Conference for Shinsho Studies (Kokusai Shinshō-shiki, 1968), p. 299-300.

10 See No. 1, p. 187, sq.
that such resistance is particularly weak in the Japanese because they have lost their tradition and religion has become powerless.

Since the Meiji Restoration, emperor worship has been a kind of pseudo-religion, but real religion itself has been powerless... This also explains why we have no real atheism. In Europe, every deviation from tradition has to go through a continuous confrontation with tradition. This tends to give it a certain interiority, an introspective character, wherein man can become a thinking man. In Japan, this tendency has gradually been lost since the Meiji Restoration. The link with tradition has been cut; the "weight in the back," with which one would have to come to terms, has disappeared. The only thing one has left as a background is a void. This means, first and foremost, that one has no religion. Buddhism and Confucianism, in a word, the religions of Japan's past, are not alive any more. And Christianity which entered later... does not succeed in penetrating among the people. The spiritual make-up of the present-day Japanese differs enormously from that of a westerner and also from that of the Japanese of the past.11

However, Nishitani is consistent in his conviction that salvation must be found in a return to the Japanese tradition. He is not suggesting, of course, that we can simply turn back to something that lies behind us. He speaks of "returning to the ancestors in the direction of the future,"12 and he stresses the point that this will have to mean a new synthesis of eastern and western culture.

We can never go back to the past in its old constellation. This old constellation is dead and has to be negated or, at least, severely criticized. Rather, our tradition has to be rediscovered from the extreme point where it can be seen as having in preparation (vorwegnehmend) the "eachaton" of our westernisation and even of western culture itself.13

It is Nishitani's conviction that Japanese traditional culture, and especially its Mahayana Buddhist component, carries the necessary elements for a solution of the modern problems not only of Japanese society, but also of western culture. For example, in connection with the problem of religion and science, he says: "It is my conviction that in Buddhism the ground to conquer the above difficulty is prepared since long."14

What then is the core, the distinguishing fundamental feature, of Japan's traditional culture?15 In other words, how can we characterize the religiosity of the Japanese people?16 At first sight, the distinguishing feature of Japanese religion and culture seems to be its "multi-layeredness."17 I.e., the coexistence of Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism. But Nishitani argues that, insofar as these religious forms are living in Japanese culture, they are mutually assimilated into a "fluid unity"18 in the deeper life of the people and thus become diversified expressions of the same religiosity, the same "folk religion."

In order to discover this "unity," Nishitani looks for the unique element in Japanese culture, that which really sets it apart from every other culture. Like many authors before him, he finds this in the "ways."19 The way of flower arrangement, the way of tea, etc. One could call these activities "arts," but then not arts as specialties but arts undistinguishable from daily life. This means that, in Japan, culture, i.e., a special "way of life," has penetrated into acts which are usually considered to be utterly commonplace. Or that "in the midst of things which look like nothing at all a 'man-shaping way' is opened up, a way whereby man can build himself so as to become man in the true sense of the word."20

It is clear that the moving energy behind this is of a religious nature and, ordinarily, Zen is deemed responsible. However, Zen, in India did not show such cultural vitality and in China, Zen while leading to first-class masterpieces by specialists, did not really penetrate into the everyday life of the people. This leads us to the conclusion that it was by virtue of the bloodstream of the "folk-religiosity" flowing in the veins of the Japanese people that Zen achieved its first flowering with everyday life.

Nishitani's interpretation of the typically Japanese "ways" then can be summarized in the following sentences. The way of archery, e.g., is, of course, concerned from beginning to end with the everyday activity of "shooting a bow." Still, something more enters into it, something more "spiritual," a way of life. However, this higher ingredient does not lead away from "shooting a bow," but, on the contrary, makes this everyday activity into the real "shooting a bow." It is precisely this pattern which reveals the secret of Japanese religiosity and ultimately, also, the real structure of reality.

At the bottom of every form of religiosity lies a certain "sense of reality,"21 a pre-conceptual grasp of reality. In Christianity all reality is felt as concentrated in God's reality. Ultimately real reality is God's reality, the ens reale-simum. For the Greeks "real reality" was an intelligible order: something universal, governed by necessary laws and capable of being grasped by reason. What does a Japanese feel as really existing, real reality? Or, to use an expression of which Nishitani is particularly fond, "what is the place where actually existing things come to appear as 'be,' the place where the sense of reality originates?"22 Nishitani answers: "I think that it is something which, in a sense, is a place beyond our everyday experience but, nevertheless, does not set itself apart from the existence of things."23 In other words, a place where, contrary to our everyday relationships, we touch things immediately in their reality, but where we do not encounter any reality apart from the reality of things themselves, be it God or Idea.

11 Senso nippon seisshinshiki, p. 341.
12 No. 3, p. 239. Cf. no. 9, p. 7: "Japanese or Chinese culture can again be made a vital, living thing. In this case, this traditional culture will of necessity have to be given expression in contemporary terms."
13 No. 3, p. 234-5.
14 No. 7, p. 577.
16 "The religiosity of a people... is that which is at work at the root of a people's life, at the basis of the existence and of all the endeavours of all the members of that people." ("Nippon bunka ni tsuite," p. 192).
18 Ryūdōshiki ni kaitai (動的の統一) ("Nippon ni okeru...," p. 241).
19 Dō or michi 道. The analysis of the Japanese "ways" is found in "Nippon bunka ni tsuite," p. 187-92.
21 See "Nippon ni okeru..." p. 241, sq.
22 Ibid., p. 244.
23 Ibidem.
Nishitani likens this “extra-ordinary” experience to the perception of beauty. In my everyday relationships I, as a pragmatic subject, handle and grasp objects in front of me. In the perception of beauty, on the contrary, the thing grasps, strikes, moves, fascinates me. This is a more fundamental relationship with things, and one whereby the real existence of things manifests itself to us, without any transforming influence of a willful initiative on our part.

In a similar way, Mount Fuji appeared to the ancient Japanese in its sublimity and majesty on a plane over and above their daily experience. But, only on this “out of this world” plane, it seemed to them, did they encounter the real Fuji as it is in itself. All this comes very near the concept of power (mana) in primitive religions. Things as they appear to the eye do not have real consistency or reliable reality in themselves, but only through magic power. And, similarly, the beholder himself becomes real only inside the “magnetic field” of that same power. However, this “power” may not be substantiated into a reality apart from the things themselves. Where things appear in their reality and true consistency, existence and power form an indivisible unity.

Nishitani detects such a sense of reality at the bottom of Shinto. The Japanese kami (gods) would be nothing other than “this sense of reality reflected, represented and conceptualized.”24 The sacred tree of Japan, the sakaki, is a place where a kami is present with its power. But originally the existence of the kami and the existence of the tree are not seen as two different things. For the tree to “be” and to be a dwelling-place for a kami are one and the same thing.

If we compare this with the Christian view of things, the basic difference in sense of reality lies, I think, in the fact that in Shinto the “be” of “god” is linked with the existence of “things,” that the meaning of “god exists” is conceived as one with the opening up of the place of the reality of the “be” of things, of the place where things are as they really are. The “be” wherein things manifest themselves in their reality is identical with the fact that God’s “be” is present therein.25 When we speak of things “as they truly are in themselves,” we are in the field of religion.26

Japanese Buddhism is, of course, different from Shintoism since Buddhism implies a strong negativity, a sweeping negation of all human standpoints (including that of reason), and, through this negation, aims at an awakening of the self. Buddhism is never applied to personal things but rather to the world as a whole.27 In Japanese Zen, this religious concern for things as they really are is expressed, for example, in the saying, “The willow is green and the flower red.” In the Shinshū sect the “as it is” idea would be equally strong. This appears in its central doctrine of salvation: “Being saved in one’s sinfulness as it is.”28

So, it may be said that both Shinto and Buddhism are rooted in the “as it really is in itself” ground,29 and that the common basis of religiosity in the traditional Japanese religions is the immediate perception of reality as it really is. Nishitani stresses once more the fundamental difference of this kind of religiosity with that of the West by explaining the difference between the Buddhist Dharma (hō dharma) and the Greek logos. Logos is never applied to particular things and is a universal unchanging law which has an existence in itself apart from individual things, while Dharma, on the contrary, is applied indiscriminately to individual things and to a general world order, and does not set itself apart from individual things.30

Nishitani completes this picture of Japanese religiosity, the basis of Japan’s culture, with a few brush strokes here and there in his other works. Just as Japanese religiosity does not allow a separation of natural reality and its “supernatural” basis, it did not permit the dichotomy of a philosophical-scientific world view and religious praxis to develop.31 Japanese culture is thus characterized by a strong unity of religion, reason, and raw natural life,32 and succeeds in being a “culture of man as such,”33 previous to all separation of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. It has an all-pervading tendency to “simplicity,” to reduce all complicated matters to their pure and simple practical core, whereby then the deepest reality appears in the most superficial.34

2. Japan’s westernization and her religious role

Which role does Nishitani see for this tradition in the present world? The fact of Japan’s westernization cannot be undone. A real solution for Japan can lie only in a new synthesis of East and West.35 No matter how valuable

28 Ibid., p. 257. This doctrine is called akunin-shōki 忘恩王棋. 
29 Ibid., p. 256-7. 
31 No. 2, p. 157-84. The priority given to praxis explains the symbiosis of Shintoism, Buddhism and Confucianism (p. 173-4).
32 Ibidem and no. 1, p. 4 and 187-90. 
33 No. 1, p. 172. 
34 Ibid., p. 168-70. One thinks here of the reduction of Buddhism to shikantaza (じかんたざ) (“sitting only”) in Sōtō Zen, and to shōmyō-nembutsu (詔命念仏. (“reciting Amida’s name”)) in the Pure Land sect. Regarding Shinto, Nishitani says: “To bring oneself back to one’s fundamental existence and become aware of the reality of one’s life means to simplify one’s existence to something more compliant and to correct it to something straight...” (Proceedings, The Second International Conference for Shinto Studies, p. 28 of the English text.)
35 Cf., e.g., Sengo Nippon seishinshi, 354-7; Nishitani Keiji, ed., Gendai Nippon no tettsugaku, Preface (現代日本の哲學, 京都, 培養社, 1967); and the articles in Japan Studies, no. 1, 2 and 13.
Japan's traditional culture is in itself, it can be brought back to life only through a vigorous cultural interchange with the West. And the fact must be faced that the eastern tradition lacks some fundamental elements without which a culture or a religion of the future is unthinkable.

In considering eastern culture as a whole, the first problem common throughout the Orient is that, from within itself, it could not give birth to science or technology, nor could it create what we call an "individual subjective self-consciousness," — for example, the human posture upon which democracy is based.

On the other hand, western culture has reached a dead end, precisely in its clinging to the subjective ego and in its loss of all human ground in technology. Nihilism is the real outcome of western culture. From this abyss western culture cannot be saved even by a return to its own origins, primitive Christianity and classical Greece. 37 Or, at the very least, "the primiveness of primitive Christianity or the primitiveness of Greek culture must be fundamentally re-considered" on a new horizon, created by "intercourse with a completely foreign heterogeneous culture or religion." 38 The negative, nihilistic slant of an originally very positive culture cannot be set right by a direct return to the positive. "The negative direction must be pursued to its very end... where the negative direction converges, so to speak, with the positive." 39

Nishitani discovers here Japan's special vocation. While in the past Japan was already a country where several traditions lived together, the Meiji Restoration has further compounded the issue and really made Japan a unicum in the world, a melting-pot of eastern and western traditions.

We, Japanese, fell heirs to two completely different cultures... This is a great privilege which Westerners do not possess... but, at the same time, this puts on our shoulders a heavy responsibility: building a foundation for thought in a world which is in the making, a new world that will be one beyond the differences of East and West. 40

Or again:

To make the most of this self-imposed task of creating a fusion of eastern and western cultures and of pioneering the way to the world culture of the future — herein, I believe, is to be found a raison d'être for the Japanese nation. 41

Especially in Japan's Buddhist tradition which in its doctrine and attitude of "emptiness" finds a positive cultural attitude as a result of an absolute negation, Nishitani discerns the solution for the basic problems of western culture. Granting that the complete solution can only be worked out in a new synthesis of East and West, he nevertheless does not shun conclusions like the following: "It seems to us, however, that this standpoint... has already been realized in advance, at least basically, in Buddhism, especially in Zen Buddhism." 42

37 These themes run through all of Nishitani's works.
38 No. 17, p. 86-7 and 85.
39 No. 11, p. 102.
40 Gendai Nippon no tetagaku, p. 2, 3 and 4. On p. 173, he quips: "We Japanese are tormented by our being privileged and privileged by our being tormented."
41 No. 9, p. 5. Cf. "We are a kind of laboratory for an experiment in a future world culture." (No. 14, p. 6).
42 No. 11, p. 108. This conviction is not always expressed as such but underlies all.

3. Nishitani's religious world

What does the analysis of Japan's traditional religiosity tell us about Professor Nishitani's own religious world? In the preface of his book What is Religion?, Nishitani says that his intention is, "to investigate, as a subject, in my own present self, the 'ground' on which out of man himself religion arises." And he adds:

It goes without saying that in this case also [as well as in an "objective study" of religion] we have to take into account the religious facts as they have come down to us from the past. But, at the same time, we are looking for that which appeals to us as contemporary persons and, in that sense, we direct our attention to what "ought to be" rather than to "what has been." 43

This not only characterizes Nishitani's scientific approach as a student of religion (with regard to the famous descriptive-normative dispute), but also defines his personal attitude to the very intricate cultural and religious situation in Japan.

We come now to the question of Nishitani's religious affiliation. Is Nishitani a Buddhist? It seems to me that the answer to this question throws some light on the existential dilemma of many a Japanese intellectual and, furthermore, on the very peculiar attitude — "peculiar" when measured with our western standards — of the Japanese towards religious affiliation.

Nishitani shows a special affinity for that trend inside the Japanese tradition which stresses the negative aspects of human life. This is not surprising since the problem of evil and the problem of the meaninglessness of human life have preoccupied him since the beginning of his philosophical career. He soon learned that, if the task of contemporary man can still be seen as identical with that which occupied Descartes, namely to return to the immediate affirmation which is the original posture of life, contemporary nihilism makes it obligatory to pass through a much more fundamental doubt than Descartes ever dreamt of — a doubt which comes near the "Great Doubt" of Buddhism. 44 In 1963, Nishitani wrote: "I have gradually come to think things with the Buddhist categories of thought... I have gradually come near the Buddhist way of thinking." 45 And it could be argued that Nishitani's whole opus is an attempt to build a theologa fundamentals of Zen Buddhism.

Nevertheless, Nishitani does not fully identify himself with Buddhism. Speaking about Tillich's dialogues with Buddhists in Kyoto, he says: "I assisted as a third party — well, calling myself a third party is maybe a bit strange..." 46

What keeps Nishitani from calling himself a Buddhist?

If it is not too presumptuous to subject such a personal decision to an "objective" scrutiny, an analysis would show the following interwoven elements.

Nishitani's thinking.

43 No. 5, Preface, p. 2. As a rule I refrain from quoting What is Religion? in this paper, because a special study on it is forthcoming. Cf. "In the realm of the spirit there is no pure past." (Gendai Nippon no tetagaku, p. 173).
45 Ibid., p. 221.
46 Kuyama, Yasushi, ed., Gendai Nippon no Kirisutokyō, p. 208. (久山雅美，現代日本のキリスト教, 1961)
Firstly, the traditional “broadmindedness” of the Japanese who, living in the midst of several traditions, soon learn about the relativity of all human traditions when it comes to putting down the absolute. In general it is, of course, very difficult for any Japanese to completely discard the western tradition. In Nishitani’s case, a very critical but nonetheless deep respect for Christianity in its own right goes hand in hand with a strong involvement in western philosophy. He says, for example, “I understood very well that my problem could only be solved on the religious level, but I had to make the detour over philosophy nevertheless.”

Secondly, there is the tension, acutely felt by those Japanese intellectuals who are not indifferent to religion, between religion and science (and the accompanying modern idea of man). In Nishitani’s case, there is the feeling that the problematic of contemporary man is so new that the perfect and complete answer for it cannot be found in any of the traditional religions as they are now. In other words, there is the tension between philosophy as pursuit of “historical reason” and “eternal religion.”

Briefly, the reason for Nishitani’s attitude could be summarized as his decision to bear the full brunt of the tensions pressuring the Japanese intellectual of today, without seeking refuge in one of the horns of the dilemma and ignoring the other. A rather long quotation may help us to understand the issue. In a discussion of Tanabe Hajime’s attitude toward Christianity48 it is mentioned that Tanabe describes his own position as, at the same time, belief and unbelief. So, he considers himself a würdender Christ (a Christian in the making) who is not able to become a gewordener Christ (I would like to translate someone who found his home in Christianity), because he cannot find his philosophical standpoint inside the Christian religion. Nishitani then says:

“I have the impression that I understand Tanabe’s problem very well. I myself am in a similar situation. 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 würdender Buddhist. One of the main motives for 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 würdender Christ, in the same sense as Tanabe. For I cannot bring myself to consider Buddhism a false doctrine. When it comes to Buddhism, however, I can enter into Buddhism as a gewordener gewordener Buddhist in the sense explained above, and from that standpoint I can, at the same time, be a würdender (not gewordener) Christian. Insofar as I am a Buddhist, I cannot be a gewordener Christ. However, I do not consider Christianity a false, “outside” doctrine50. 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 this at 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.”

Our next question is then: What makes it impossible for Nishitani to “enter into the faith of present-day Christianity”? Or, more generally, what is Nishitani’s attitude toward Christianity? The basic answer to this question can be gathered from the above, but we may gain by making things more explicit.

Together with a profound knowledge of its doctrines, Nishitani shows sincere admiration and goodwill toward Christianity. He considers Christianity necessary for Japan as a cultural factor, as a sound basis for Japan’s westernization:

“Because in western European civilization, Christianity has been a very important and powerful force, it seems to me that it would be good if the Christian foundations would also be a part of Japan’s adoption of western culture... and I hope that it [Christianity] will develop so as to have a more popular base among the Japanese people.”

But, at the same time, Nishitani’s attitude toward Christianity is very critical. For example, he sympathizes with these modern theologians “who are trying to break down the walls which Christianity 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.” We may say that Nishitani combines in himself a double sensitivity toward the Western idea of engaging himself in his historical appearance: that of the Easterner and that of contemporary man.

If I may again try a short analysis, Nishitani’s basic objections to Christianity could be summarized as follows. Historically speaking, Christianity gave rise to the nihilism of our present civilization and, as it presents itself now, it does not offer a solution for that nihilism. “Why has this nihilism come up with the assertion that in it man can stand up as a positive and free being? The idea behind it is that, when God is thought as the Absolute in the way Christianity does this, man cannot really live as man.”

On further analysis, this shows two aspects: Christianity is at the same time matrix and main antagonist of science and of the individual. The fact that Christianity is the matrix of science is accepted by Nishitani on historical evidence, but the reasons for the fact are not — as far as I know — investigated very deeply. The antagonism between Christianity and science, on the other hand, has to be seen in the perspective of Nishitani’s own historical situation. Indeed, Christianity was at that time the most important cultural factor in the Japanese world. If Christianity gives entrance to a religion, it will develop in order to have a more popular base among the Japanese people.52

51 Sense Nippon seisheki-shi, p. 194.
52 “A Symposium: On Buddhist-Christian Encounter” in Japan Stud. no. 15, p. 2. In the same paper Nishitani stresses the necessity for Christianity to indigenize and, partly for that reason, to have a real encounter with Buddhism. For one thing, Christianity would have to shed the “rather intellectual form,” the “rationalizing tendency” it has shown in Japan, and aim at “a religious permeation on the subjective level” (p. 5-6).
53 No. 15, p. 111.
54 “Gendai no kyomura to shinkō,” in Kaneko Daizō et al., Gendai Shinron Kōza, Daisan-kan, p. 184 (金子大雄,現代禅研究講座, 第三巻, 現代の思想と信仰, 弘道書房, 1964).
55 See no. 5, p. 66.
the other hand, is subjected to a very sharp scrutiny. Nishitani asserts several times — and rightly, I believe — that up to now religions in general and especially Christianity (which, after all, had most reason and opportunity to do it) did not seriously tackle the science problem.56 Christianity sees the world essentially as a world of life, soul, spirit; a teleological world; the "home of man;" a world in the service of a personal God-man relationship. Science, on the contrary, sees the world essentially as a world of death, dead mechanistic matter, completely indifferent to man and forming a screen between man and any possible God.57

"We must have the courage to admit that the spiritual basis of our existence, i.e., the ground from which all teleological systems in religion and philosophy up to now have emerged and on which they rested, has been completely destroyed once and for all."58 Nothing is left to build on but a bottomless void. The religion of the future should have a worldview beyond the dichotomy of mechanism and teleology; a worldview of "double exposure," where the life and death aspects are both equally valorized. It should be a religion which is not relevant to man alone, but to the cosmos as well; a religion which "dares to think existentially of science" and which "accepts the universe with its feature of bottomless death as the place for the abandoning of oneself and the throwing away of one's life."59

We then move from science to the idea of man which developed concurrently with science. The individual subject, real subject-consciousness, is born. With this step we leave the field of the "conditions of possibility" of religion to enter into the core of religion itself. It is, indeed, apparent from all his writings that, for Nishitani, religion is nothing if it is not the "only force that can eradicate the deepest roots of our self-centered ego."60 And in this crucial point Christianity is again found lacking, this time on two fronts at the same time.

It is once more conceded that the modern idea of the free individual subject has its roots in Christianity, viz. in the idea of the personal relationship of man with God. However, modern man soon discovered that the Christian idea of the absolute dependence of man on God and the divine Will does not permit the human subject to come into its own. For "subject" is essentially something without a basis which, while carrying it, ties it down. So, modern man parted company with Christianity and started pursuing his self-realization in the form of a realization of his ego, in complete separation from any religious outlook. While Christianity calls all "pushing of the ego" sin, modern man calls it self-fulfillment.61 "Nietzsche's Zarathustra says: 'If there were gods, how would I stand not being a god? So, there are no gods.' One cannot take this well-known word of Nietzsche seriously enough. It expresses the whole problem which we are facing now."62

Of course, this attitude of modern man is no solution either, because the more man pushes his ego the more he discovers a bottomless nihil under his feet. What is needed now is a religion which can englobe this modern consciousness and give it life; a religion that can reconcile religious freedom and radicalized human freedom; a religion that enhances man's subjectivity while killing his self-centered ego.

Christianity impeded the full development of man's subjectivity and, on the other hand, never succeeded in freeing man of his self-centeredness. On this point Nishitani agrees with Toynbee. Self-centeredness is built-in in Christianity and its historical character. Of course, it tends to do away with the cruder forms of self-centeredness, but it encourages a "self-centeredness-via-God," "a self-centeredness on the religious level." The consciousness of being elected by the Absolute breeds a superiority complex towards others and intolerance.63

This brings us back to that which seems to be Nishitani's deepest felt objection to Christianity: the impossibility to co-exist with other religions, with philosophy, with eastern wisdom, "the firm conviction that a position of unwavering supremacy of faith can be ensured only by excluding all other stand-points from faith itself."64

Nishitani submits that the root of all the difficulties of Christianity is the conception of God (all too exclusively) as a personal being and that the remedy would be the Buddhist idea of emptiness. But the confines of this study do not permit us to pursue Nishitani's ideas beyond this point and attempt an evaluation.

It seems to me, however, that our Catholic tradition of negative theology and our present consciousness of crisis allow us to agree with Nishitani when he says: "I do think that the traditional conceptions and interpretations of writings in this crucial point Christianity is again found lacking, this time on two fronts at the same time. I for one believe that Nishitani and his fellow-philosophers can help us in that re-examination.

Nishitani's main works

1. Kongen teki shutaisei no tetsugaku, 1940.66
2. Sekai kan to kokkakan, 1941.
5. Shukyō to wani ka, 1961.67

56 E.g., no. 5, p. 56; no. 11, p. 84-5.
57 No. 5, p. 53-6; no. 11, p. 79-108.
58 No. 11, p. 85.
59 Ibid., p. 86 and 91. Nishitani finds all these qualities in Zen.
60 No. 2, p. 201.
62 No. 7, p. 580.
63 No. 5, p. 221-8. See also p. 65-70.
64 No. 15, p. 109. 65 Ibid.
66 The first part of the book has seen a new edition under the title Shukyō to bunka, Kongen teki shutaisei no tetsugaku 1 (宗教と文化, 根源的主体性の哲学 1, 西宮, 国際日本研究所, 1969). I quote from this new edition.
Some of Nishitani’s articles in western languages