Nishitani Revisited

JAN VAN BRAGT

The “revisiting” referred to in my title is meant to carry a double meaning. One, that of going back, possibly for the last time, to a place one had lived for quite some time in order to come to a conclusion about the meaning it really had in one’s life. Two, that of going back to reexplore a place one thought one knew well but about which one has heard others say things one was completely unaware of. My paper will thus have two parts. In part 1 I shall try to define my position toward that part of the thought of Nishitani Keiji with which I have had a long acquaintance, basically that of Shūkyō to wa nanika [What is religion?] (NISHITANI 1961).1 In part 2 I shall reflect on the thought of the later Nishitani, of which I knew very little until recently. The question may be whether in its duality the paper still forms a kind of unity.

The Early Nishitani and the Philosophy of Śūnyatā

On review, my acquaintance with Nishitani’s philosophy has not been a very satisfying one. Probably because of my Christian sensibilities and Western background, I have never really felt at home in it, and I have never been sure that I understood it sufficiently to define my own position towards it. I always regarded it as soaring high in the sky and never coming to roost near where I live. I might possibly say that, for thirty-one years now (ever since the time I first read Shūkyō to wa nanika and wrote down my impressions in a long review article [VAN BRAGT 1962]), I have been living with it as with a koan. When pressed by Western scholars to make my own position clear, I have always played a dilatory game. But now I feel that time is running out on me, and that the moment has come, if not to go to the Master with my provi-

1 Translated as Religion and Nothingness by Jan Van Bragt (NISHITANI 1982).
sional solution of the koan, at least to pinpoint, to the best of my ability and for my own peace of mind, where the sore spots and bottlenecks have been lying all the time. Let me borrow the words of another Western scholar who also struggled with Nishitani’s thought to express why I want to bother you with these difficulties of mine: “I am hopeful that, by identifying where my unclarity and uncertainty lie, some of these here, who are more deeply acquainted with Nishitani’s thought than I am, will be able to set me straight” (LITTLE 1989, p. 181).

Before proceeding further, however, a few remarks may be in order. First of all, my interest in Nishitani’s thought has never been a purely philosophical one. In all these years my real concern has always been the compatibility of Eastern and Western ways of thinking and, within that framework, the possibility of a meeting of minds between Christianity and Buddhism. Secondly, I dare say that, in this connection, I have always held a “favorable prejudice” towards Nishitani’s philosophy since it appeared to be genuinely religiously inspired and to promise an intimate view into the way the other half of the world thinks, and thus to offer the Christian theological tradition basic counterbalances to its traditional, culturally limited, categories. Thirdly, there is, of course, the question as to why it would be worth anybody’s while to listen to my personal difficulties with Nishitani’s philosophy. Being fully convinced that a considerable part of such difficulty is due to my lack of understanding, I cannot and do not pretend that my reservations faithfully reflect the real points of divergence between Western and Eastern ways of thinking, a problem with which the international community must come to grips now and in the future. Still, there is the possibility that my difficulties may reveal, here and there, certain aspects of this divergence. Moreover, experience tells me that most of my problems are shared by a great number of other run-of-the-mill Western minds and, to that extent, may be worth considering by those who want to introduce the thought of the Kyoto school (and maybe also of Buddhism) to the Western world.

So, why has there always remained a “glass wall,” as it were, between the beautiful religious ideal painted by Nishitani Keiji in a majestic sweep of negation and my own everyday reality (including my religious needs) and that of human society with its many contradictory components? My search for the reasons may at times appear to be a self-confident criticism of Nishitani’s philosophy (making Nishitani alone responsible for the existence of the wall) but, in truth, my only desire is to see the wall disappear.
Writing about his early years as a philosopher in “Watakushi no tetsugakuteki hossokuten” [My philosophical starting point], Nishitani commented, “It then seemed to me that, in the experiences of the people called ‘mystics,’ there appears a peak wherein religion and philosophy interpenetrate and reach unity” (NKC 20:194). It is safe to say, I believe, that this unity always remained Nishitani’s ideal. However, he tried to realize it not in mysticism but in philosophy, in a philosophy that embraces religion and can rightly be called an “innerly religious” philosophy. I, too, have always felt that “philosophy only” cannot deliver what the human kokoro (heart and mind together) is looking for. Philosophy, I feel, must be “open” to religion (which does not necessarily follow the laws of philosophical reason), just as religion must expose itself ever anew to the light of philosophical reason. But can the respective natures of both partners be safeguarded when one speaks of a “unity” of religion and philosophy?

It has always seemed to me that, in Nishitani as well as in Tanabe, the nature of philosophy is somehow being done violence to by an appeal to a religious experience not obtainable or recoverable by philosophical methods. In other words, Nishitani seems to have wanted at work in his philosophy a prajñā that he nevertheless defines as “Great Wisdom, having the meaning of a transcendence of all ontology and epistemology” (NKC 14: 50), or as “a cognition that originates at the far side of the intellect” (NKC 16: 189). In this connection, the unmediated turnabout of absolute negation into absolute affirmation, so important in Nishitani’s philosophy, has always seemed to me philosophically unwarranted, albeit religiously acceptable.

As to the integrity of the religious aspect, it was the study of Hegel’s philosophy that originally alerted me to the danger inherent in an overly intimate relationship of religion with philosophy. In subsequent years this feeling has been strengthened by seeing the history of Buddhism reduced to a logical development of metaphysical and epistemological ideas. Attracted though I was by the affinity with philosophy shown by Buddhism (as compared to Christianity), I have never been able to believe that such was the “real” history of the Buddhist religion.

With regard to the relationship between religion and philosophy in Nishitani, my misgivings have taken an additional form. Nishitani clearly incorporates in his philosophy many insights from Mahāyāna Buddhist thought. But do not these insights necessarily change in nature by being thus transposed? Do not these “eminently pragmatic” insights become “ontologized” in the
process? Is emptiness as the deconstruction of the false views that lead to attachment and suffering identical with emptiness as the first principle of reality?

In addition, I must admit that, accustomed as I am to the luxurious flora and fauna of Catholicism, I have never been able to feel at home in the stark and disembodied religion that Nishitani advocates. I once expressed this unease in the following words:

I cannot help experiencing the picture of religion which Nishitani… paints as “uncanny:” a religion of the hero, the superman; a religion that uproots one and sets one on the way, but in no sense becomes a home; a religion where the “form is emptiness” is pushed to its extreme without any visible return to “emptiness is form”; a religion of “barren heights,” a moonscape. (VAN BRAGT 1992, p. 35)

It could first be remarked that in Nishitani’s picture of religion one scarcely finds anything of what scholars of religion speak of when they treat their subject: the play of the imagination, bodily observances, rituals, religious community, “strong” places and times, and so on. But what I most sorely miss as a Christian is the role of the emotions, especially the “positive” ones: jubilation and thanksgiving, desire and love for God. The feeling has always remained with me that Nishitani tends to reduce all religion to a contemplative peak experience. By its very nature or structure, Nishitani’s religion appears to relegate all other religious elements at best to the level of distractions. But does not Nishitani thereby forget about the path or ladder that leads up to the peak?

On several earlier occasions I have aired my difficulties with (or lack of understanding of) the notion of emptiness, or at least with the way it tends to be used. This difficulty hampers my understanding not only of Kyoto philosophy but also of much Buddhist thought. If I lay my problem before you it is really in the hope that you will “help my unbelief.” So let me try to formulate it as succinctly as possible.

I do not understand how emptiness, in all the negativity of its form and function, can be considered to comprise in itself a perfect synthesis of negation and affirmation, of nothingness and being. It seems to me that emptiness is often presented as (simultaneously) a point of departure or point of arrival. I am unable to view it as either; I can only see it as an eminently necessary and salutary negative move, starting from an original immediate (one-sided)
affirmation and, in “combination” with this initial affirmation, leading to the right affirmation of myōn 妙有, wondrous being. One will object here, I guess, that this is exactly how emptiness is always presented, but I cannot help feeling that the negative sweep of emptiness is often conflated with the felicitous result and made solely responsible for it. To put my difficulty in a rather lapidary form: the notion of an actively merciful, “nourishing” emptiness is beyond me.

Nishitani Keiji has, indeed, convinced me—something for which I will be forever in his debt—that emptiness has a capital role to play in philosophy and, more still, in religion. He made me see that consciousness and freedom are unthinkable without it; that only emptiness can ensure the newness needed for history and the “absoluteness” of the individual beyond genus and species; and that the central mysteries of Christianity—creation, the forgiveness of sins, death-resurrection, and incarnation with its “kenōsis”—cry out for it as an interpretative category. I am thus convinced that Nishitani’s thought could be enormously salutary for Christian theology. However, a “solo performance” of emptiness is less than convincing for me. Nishitani has taught me to appreciate emptiness as a principle that breaks through the “totality” of world and history, but I cannot accept it insofar as it becomes, or is presented as, itself the totality.

Nishitani’s thought (along with Kyoto-school philosophy in general and, indeed, the Buddhist Mahāyāna thought it draws from) is susceptible to the criticism that it is unable to come down again to concrete, everyday reality (especially social reality), and to endow it with sufficient intrinsic value to motivate serious commitment to it, say in the struggle for social justice. With Mahāyāna Buddhism this has been adequately pointed out (by Nishitani himself, to begin with), as it has with Kyoto-school philosophy, so I think it is unnecessary for me to further belabor the point. Could it be that the contradictions of human life, once spiritually transcended in the wisdom of emptiness, find it hard to resume their “rightful” status?

Old Mahāyāna lore has it that for Wisdom there is no other over against the self, but for Mercy the other is eminently real; that, for the bodhisattva (the being who reconciles in himself Wisdom and Mercy), Mercy is as determining of reality as Wisdom. Could the problem lie in the (putative) fact that, the ideal figure of the bodhisattva notwithstanding, Buddhist (and Kyoto philosophy) theory does not give Mercy equal status with Wisdom but tends to reduce it to Wisdom, often by the formula “Mercy is ‘self and other not
two’” (jita funi自他不二)? In other words, that in the dilemma of the bodhisattva, true reality is put on the side of Wisdom rather than on that of Mercy?

The practical applicability of Nishitani’s philosophy has been put into question, for instance, in connection with the matter of human rights. In the article cited at the beginning of this paper, David Little—an author actively engaged in the international struggle for human rights—asks himself how the idea of human rights could be based on Nishitani’s ideal view of human relations in emptiness: “What exactly would such a notion of human rights look like? (What articles would the new declaration of human rights include? Why would they be there?)” (LITTLE 1989, p. 186). The significant thing here may be that Nishitani’s thought seldom goes in the direction of answering such concrete ethical questions. But, if I may be allowed a little excursus, I would like to use this occasion to put before you a particular bafflement of mine: Why is it exactly that, whenever he mentions human rights, Nishitani does not hide his aversion for the very concept? For example, at the end of Shūkyō to wa nanika Nishitani touches on human rights in a way that seems to set the tone for all further thoughts on them:

True equality is not simply a matter of human rights and the ownership of property. Such equality concerns man as the subject of desires and rights and comes down, in the final analysis, to the self-centered mode of being of man himself. It has yet to depart fundamentally from the principle of self-love. (NISHITANI 1982, p. 285)

In other texts, human rights are further associated with the ego pushing itself on things (instead of letting things come to affirm the self) and with will, law, and power (instead of naturalness). It is also said that a stress on human rights appears in a society where love has disappeared (NKC 17:83–84). To quote one more text:

Christianity… stands on the basis of law. It is based on the standpoint of will. It conceives of the relationship of God and human beings as of a matter of will. When religion is then gradually secularized, this gives rise to the human idea of basic human rights. (NKC 18:191)²

In a word, human rights are put squarely in the camp of the self-centered

² Further references to the question of human rights can be found, for instance, in NKC 17:21–26, 84–85, 201, 270–71, 289; and 20:81–82.
I must confess that I find this hard to understand, since I have always spontaneously felt them to be a matter, not of the rights of one’s own ego, but of the “other” ego (Thou).

Where does this difference originate? Could it be that Nishitani basically sees the I-Thou relationship as a symmetrical one? In that case, of course, every promotion of the Thou becomes at the same time a promotion of the I, and true love demands the negation of the Thou (tako no muga 他己の無我) as well as of the I (jiko no muga 自己の無我). This is clearly suggested by the above-mentioned formula “love is jita funi”; this concept is not expressed as such by Nishitani, I believe, but can be detected in some of Nishitani’s formulations, such as, “The self itself returns to its own home-ground by killing every ‘other’ and, consequently, killing itself” (NISHITANI 1982, p. 263); or again, “To be attested to by all things means to drop the body and mind of one’s own self as well as of the other self” (NKC 17:36). I submit that the symmetry of I and Thou is a very misleading thing. There can be no doubt about the necessity and salutariness of the negation-relativization of the I, but the question whether the negation of the Thou, in whatever form or phase, can be religiously salutary demands at least a special investigation.

I agree, of course, with Nishitani that human rights are not the final word in human relationships and that love goes beyond the level of rights of self and other. But such love always presupposes the existence of rights, like true peace implies justice.

Finally, I want to mention an uneasiness that I have never been able to overcome in my contact with Mahāyāna theory and with the thought of the Kyoto school, and that may be the real root of all my difficulties. Namely, I always get the impression that in this way of thinking emptiness tends to claim absolute (ontological and axiological) priority over form, the one over the many, identity over difference and, indeed, wisdom over love. There seems to be at work therein the presupposition “that the final ideal, the peak of intellectual, religious, and mystical perfection (all in one) is ‘absolute unity,’ wherein all division, duality, multiplicity, relation, and interaction have been perfectly and finally overcome.”

I cannot really develop this theme here but, from the standpoint of my two basic concerns, I want to make two points. For the East-West dialogue it may

---

3 I borrow this phrase here from MOMMAERS and VAN BRAGT 1995, where I treat this difference in basic presupposition between Buddhism and Christianity more extensively (pp. 127–33, 186–96).
be important to remark that, to a Westerner, the superiority of undifferenti-
ated oneness or unity does not necessarily appear as a self-evident truth that
can serve as a basis of argument. This shows up, rather paradigmatically, in a
reaction to Abe Masao’s position by the (former) Chicago theologian Lang-
don Gilkey:

Finally, a Westerner, whether Christian or humanist, cannot help
but wonder why for Abe any hint of “dualism” is taken for granted
as representing an objectively fatal problem for any viewpoint, how-
ever different from his own…. The assumption that duality in the
sense of ultimate structural distinctions is universally a fault repre-
sents an aspect or implication of the Buddhist viewpoint itself and
not an argument for that viewpoint. (GILKEY 1986, pp. 120–22)

And for the meeting of Christianity and Buddhism it must be pointed out
that the Christian ideal of unity appears to be a “differentiated, complex, and
transformative process” of unity; not a unity of total presence, but a unity
that is always open to further enrichment by the other (and, finally, the Other).
We appear to be faced, indeed, with a basic problem: “What is to be considered
as final Reality: Being that finally reduces everything to the same, or Love that
does not cease producing difference?” (MOMMAERS 1991, p. 90, note 7).

The Later Nishitani and “Transcendence in the Earth”

The preparation of this paper has been an occasion to renew my far from
complete acquaintance with the later thought of Nishitani Keiji. I never
found occasion to study this later thought thoroughly, so that my present
comments on it may seem rather presumptuous (even to me). But one thing
that has long intrigued me about it was the question of whether this later
thought shows any notable change or evolution over against the earlier
“Nishitanean system.” It is precisely this question that I would now like to
put before you.

In fact, this question was addressed in last year’s (1997) Kyoto Zen Sym-
posium by Hase Shōtō, and my status questionis is totally based on Hase’s
enlightening paper. I had no access, however, to a transcript of the ensuing
discussion, which may have gone very deep into the question, but I submit

4 Meaning, roughly, Nishitani’s thought after the publication in book form of his magnum
opus, Shūkyō to wa nanika.

84
that the question is important enough to merit further consideration. My treatment of the question will add to Hase’s substantial insights only some random, and probably marginal, reflections. Hase formulated his conclusion as follows:

In the thought of Nishitani’s later years there appears an element that differs from his thought in the early and middle “nihilistic” periods. Here, alongside emptiness, one finds another major pattern of transcendence—namely, “transcendence in the earth” (do ni okeru chōetsu 土における超越), a transcendence finding form in what he called the Buddha Realm (Bukkokudo 仏国土), the Pure Land (Jōdo 净土), and also the Kingdom of God. (HASE 1997, p. 66)

The first thing this reminds me of is the distinction, found in the science of religion, between “primitive” (or tribal) religions and world (or historical) religions. Tribal religions can be called “religions of the earth”: the sacred is located in the primal ingredients of human existence on earth—blood and soil (family and Heimat)—and is thought to function there to give those ingredients reality (in the “earthy” sense of stability and reliability). The world religions, on the other hand, might be characterized as “religions of the sky,” in that they stress transcendence of the things of the earth and point upward and inward. There can be no doubt that this “sky direction” endows them with an added spiritual depth and potency, but the question is whether they can do without the “earth direction.” It would appear that they cannot truly take root in the human heart without incorporating somehow the “earthiness” of the original, primitive religions.

Incidentally, I have always considered Buddhism to be a more typical or radical world religion than Christianity, because in it (at least originally) the transcendence of blood (in the practice of shukke 出家, “home-leaving”) and soil (in the “homeless” lifestyle) appears in a more central and clear-cut form. Christianity may have inherited some of the earthiness of its matrix, Judaism, that world religion which never cut the umbilical cord with its past as a tribal religion. It may be significant that in the Hebrew scriptures we encounter passages such as the following:

Faithfulness will spring up from the earth, and righteousness will look down from the sky. (Psalm 85:11)

Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down right-
eousness; let the earth open, that salvation may sprout forth, and let it cause righteousness to spring up also; I the Lord have created it. (Isaiah 15:8)

To me as a Christian it is significant that Hase seeks in the later philosophy of Nishitani a foundation for the Jōdo Shinshū concept of the Pure Land (HASE 1997, p. 68), because I have always felt that Shinshū was similar to Christianity in its divergence from the younger Nishitani’s idea of religion. Indeed, if it can be said that both the early and the late Nishitani regard the Pure Land concept and the Christian myth to be upāya (though this is something that, to my knowledge, he never says explicitly), this upāya nevertheless takes on a new meaning in the late Nishitani. Whereas before it had simply been an “expedient” means (basically pure imagination, without intrinsic truth), it now becomes an upāya founded in human existence as body and in the imagination as revealer of truth; an upāya possessing all the dignity of Buddhist “post-enlightenment Wisdom” and the “reality of Mercy.”

As to the dual symbolism of sky and earth (a symbolism that plays a big role in the later Nishitani), it seems to me that the Shinshū thinker and older contemporary of Nishitani, Soga Ryōjin, was also inspired by it when he asserted that the real savior we need is not “the Eternal Tathāgata of Unhindered Light” but the “earthly” Dharmākara Bodhisattva.

What is truly demanded by actual, present reality is not light in the sky, but the vessel of the Vow on the ocean of real human life. While all of the world’s idealistic religions are “religions of heaven,” our religion of salvation by Dharmākara Bodhisattva has the distinction of being the only “religion of the earth.” (SOGA 1970, pp. 410–11, 412)

And, I think, basically in the same vein:

The Tathāgata [Amida] is unhindered light shining in the ten directions. Still, when I enter deeply into his breast, I see infinite darkness…. I see the Tathāgata as a limitless candle, but...the core of that light is limitless darkness. This darkness is the Original Vow of Great Mercy, [Amida]'s religious observance. If we consider Wisdom

5 A related idea is to be found on page 288 of the same volume: “The conscious self is only a wave on a great ocean. My totality lies in the unconscious. The faith of Other-Power has listened to the clamor of the unconscious self, adroitly brought it out, and exposed it to consciousness.”
to be light, then Mercy is darkness…. The Tathāgata’s darkness is truly the moving power behind his Wisdom. (SOGA 1970, pp. 317–18)

The last question I want to associate with our present problem is that of globalization and the influence it will have on us human beings, especially our youth. A discussion of this problem I heard the other day suggested to me that globalization may reveal in a new way the importance to us of body and earth. Theoretically speaking, globalization can only be regarded as a great gain: it frees human relations from the bonds of time and place; it allows us to transcend the bodily ties of family and neighborhood that we find ourselves in as givens at the time of our birth. It thus seems to go in the same direction as the transcendence of blood and soil found in the world religions.

By means of the Internet, for example, we can now freely choose, worldwide, the people we want to associate with—people with the same interests and projects. However, a serious question remains: presupposing that personal relationships are essential for the identity of the self, will such freely chosen relationships suffice to build and uphold the identity (“reality”) of the person, or does not human identity rather demand roots in the earth, in “bonded” relationships that always have an “over against?” Does it not require a synthesis of natural necessity and freedom, of onozukara and mizukara (cf. NKC 24:309)? Does it not involve what Nishitani once called “to be made to live from the back” (NKC 25:18)? It could be said that Nishitani himself struggled with this problem when he asked what it meant to be a Japanese, to have one’s identity in the soil of Japan (NKC 25:18–19).

This may be the moment to say simply that I feel more affinity with Nishitani’s later view of religion—a view that incorporates the earthy elements and “comes down from the peak to the foothills”—than with his earlier religious system. Before analyzing the difference, however, I want to ask the question of exactly what role emptiness plays in this new view of religion. Can we really speak of “two patterns of transcendence,” and, if so, what is the relationship between the two?

There may be some ambiguity left on this point in Hase’s paper. On the one hand, Hase seems to suggest that a new dynamics of transcendence, different from that of emptiness and in a sense replacing it, comes to the fore in the later Nishitani. “In his later years, Nishitani turned from the problem of emptiness to the question of nature and the soil” (HASE 1997, p. 75 [my italics]). But, on the other hand, it looks as if the same dynamics of emptiness are still
at work in the later view, only this time a somewhat differently conceived emptiness, an emptiness “profoundly related to the problem of the imagination” rather than to nihilism (Hase 1997, p. 66); an emptiness not remaining in the sky but descending, as the world of images, into body and earth; an emptiness not simply of the intellect, but an “emptiness within sentiment.”

The problem might possibly be reformulated in the following way: Can we still characterize the religion of the later Nishitani as a “religion of the sky,” or does the confluence of sky and earth that we now witness oblige us to look for a third term that no longer suggests an ascendancy of the sky over the earth? To reformulate again, for the sake of argument: Is Ueda Shizuteru justified in characterizing this new religiosity as “the smell of the sky?” I find an indication that maybe Nishitani himself would have hesitated to use that expression, in a text in which he compares seeing the sky and tasting rice:

> These two experiences are slightly different. Tasting is a matter of the whole body, something that happens in the body. Sight can be said to be a higher sense than taste, but one that, as sense, is not directly connected with the body. Touch and taste, on the other hand, happen in direct connection with the body. (NKC 24:133)

Be this as it may, it seems important to me to clarify, if possible, the relationship between the two modes of transcendence, not only in the religion of the later Nishitani but also in religion in general. If, as I think, there is in the later Nishitani a greater possibility of a real meeting between a religion that starts from emptiness and religions that, like Christianity and Jōdo Shinshū, start from the opposite (“being”) pole, the question remains what role emptiness does and must play in Christianity, in a syzygy with its earthy elements.

Presupposing that Hase’s description of the evolution in the thought of the later Nishitani is basically correct, there may still be room to ask once more, in general: What exactly happened with the later Nishitani? What prompted him to move to a (greater) recognition of “transcendence in the earth?” And how, and where, does this change manifest itself apart from the direct treatment of Pure Land and Kingdom of God?

If, among the papers that Nishitani left behind at his death, no relevant personal note is found, we shall probably never know what lay at the basis of this change of direction in his thought. As it is now, we can only guess, and guessing is what I am going to do for a moment.

After the appearance of *Shūkyō to wa nanika*, Nishitani may have felt that
a milestone in his philosophical career had been reached—that he was now in
possession of a system of religious philosophy that was consistent and com-
prehensible (at least for an audience of Japanese intellectuals with a basic
knowledge of Buddhism). He could now, in a sense, “forget” the system and
look at things anew from a certain distance. Did the feeling then gradually
arise that he had not really been able, in his system, to give Jōdo Shinshū and
Christianity the place and legitimacy they had in his “feelings”? Did earlier
criticisms of his system now come to show themselves in a new, more cogent
light? Or was there some decisive experience in his life that made him see that
there was more in reality (specifically religion) than in his philosophy?

We—or, at least, I—do not know, but I must say that I am especially struck
by the frequency and the force with which he now stresses the necessity for a
strictly individual, very private, conscience relating to the individual self and
to human relations. And it could be that he betrayed much of what bothered
him and drove him on when he said, “We must grasp the meaning of the
Buddha and of Buddhism anew through the problem of conscience” (NKC
17:287). (Incidentally, reliable sources have it that Nishitani once jokingly said
to his friend, Mutō Kazuo, “You Christians have responsibility, because you
have a self; I have no responsibility, because I am *muga* 無我, [non-self].”)

How then can we characterize the evolution of Nishitani’s later thought?
I have been calling it a “change of direction,” but is that not too strong a
term? Would a “change of accent” be more accurate? Can we speak of a
change in his way of philosophizing? I do not think so, although it can be
said that he never presented his new insights in a systematic way, and possi-
bly did not feel pressed any longer to do so.

And where, and how, does the change manifest itself? Can we say that the
later Nishitani pays attention to phenomena, or takes up problems, that he
had tended to neglect in his earlier period(s)? In a certain sense we might be
entitled to say so—that, for example, the many religious “forms” had not
really found a place in his system. I think it might be more accurate to say
that, in his later years, Nishitani devoted special attention to aspects of reality
he had not accorded due weight to in his earlier system. But I am admittedly
vulnerable to the objection that these aspects of reality (mostly those aspects

6 I add this restriction because Nishitani often wanted to add some further explanation to the
English translation, worrying that Westerners would not get his point.

7 The nearest he came to this is possibly the essay singled out by Hase, “Kū to soku” 空と即
[Sūnyatā and nonduality] (HASE 1997, p. 69).
I call “positive”) are in fact fully there in his earlier thought, and it is just that I do not recognize them owing to my lack of understanding of Nishitani’s system.

This possibility is, indeed, real enough. Still, I do not think that this objection does away with the real question. To put things a bit drastically, I find in the later Nishitani such a new and strong stress on these “positive” elements that I cannot but conclude that he himself realized that, although these aspects may have been logically present in the soku of negation and affirmation of his earlier system, it was not right to cover them with such a thick layer of (what at first sight appears as pure) negativity that they could not truly appear in their own “self-being” and could not be recognized as such by the ordinary reader. I have the impression that Nishitani himself suggests something of the kind when he says of Buddhism, “Buddhism is extremely other-worldly.... On this point, one has the impression that this [view and attitude] is somehow insufficient to think human life through in a radical way” (NKC 17:230–31).

It is mainly in the aforementioned stress on conscience that the “raw” individual person steps out from under the cover of his or her circuminsessional interpenetration with all others. Conscience appears now as that part of the self that is not accessible to others (“a closed chamber where others cannot look into”), known only to the individual self (though “open to heaven”); the place of a direct relationship with oneself, of a self-identity, permanence, and independence of the self, needed for its trustworthiness, and thus constituting the basis of all personal relations.8 In this privacy and hiddenness, in this “each being absolutely alone” aspect of the self, the body plays a big role: “Having a body means showing oneself to others as containing something hidden” (NKC 17:196). In this connection it is interesting to note that, after stressing that “there is something permanent in the human person,” Nishitani interprets this something as “Buddha nature” and says, “Without Buddha nature, true human relations do not come to be” (NKC 17:202–203).9 It may also be noteworthy that Nishitani finds it necessary to have recourse to the term “substance” at this point, and speaks of “substantial (jittaiteki 实体的) relations” among persons (NKC 17:219).

Parallel with the independence of the self, the irreducibility of the Thou

---

9 I am reminded here of Hakamaya Noriaki’s contention that Buddha nature does not fit emptiness.
(the other self) steps to the fore in a much stronger way than before. In Shūkyō to wa nanika I and Thou are duly recognized as “absolutely two” on the level of personhood, but the overall thrust goes to the more original and authentic personal-sive-impersonal level where the two are nondual, and it is on this level that the real meeting between the two takes place. “On the field of śūnyatā, Dasein breaks down the total self-enclosure of avidyā and goes back to its original Form of the non-duality of self and other” (NISHITANI 1982, p. 265).10

Moreover, the relationship of I and Thou tends to be seen as a symmetrical one. “On the field of emptiness, there is no difference between self-directedness and other-directedness” (NISHITANI 1982, p. 262). In the later years, I find no trace anymore of the priority of the underlying unity of I and Thou, although the emptiness moment is still there, of course, as a structural element. Nishitani now stresses that what is needed is an independent “subjectivity that has at the same time a non-self nature (a ‘non-ego-like subjectivity’)” (NKC 17:193)11

The relationship of self and other is one wherein both support one another at the basic level of being and being. This is truly possible only when each is absolutely independent. (NKC 17:268)

A true meeting with a person is one in which the other really appears to the self as other. (NKC 17:12)

The self becomes truly the self in making the other into an other. (NKC 24:93)

And the symmetry of I and Thou appears to be lost. They do not grow together or diminish together; on the contrary, the more the Thou gains in reality the more the I diminishes: “The real non-self way of being is the opening of a place in which the other is accepted in its reality” (NKC 17:12).

It can even be said, I believe, that Nishitani in his later years came to see

---

10 I like to think, though, that Nishitani did not go so far as Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎, who saw the “betweenness” as “an absolute totality in which self and other are not two.”

11 A formulation I am especially fond of. It seems to represent the necessary wedding of the Buddhist notion of non-self and the Christian (not modernity’s) notion of person.
reality—being itself—as “intersubjective.” He extrapolates the real recognition of the personal Thou to the real recognition of things. We conceive of and meet with things in their reality only when we relate to them as to Thous that are in no way reducible to our consciousness but have an independent existence in themselves. “The things that confront us are radically as themselves, in themselves…. Such a quality of things is best expressed by “Thou”” (NKC 24:111–12). At the same time, “things appear as being essentially interconnected,” an interconnection that is now described as “things communicating among themselves” by “language” in its transcendental sense: they express themselves to each other, step out of themselves into the being of the other. “Truth” then becomes “the language of existence” (NKC 24:114–22),12 and we encounter the strong statement that “the personal is the basic form of being (existence)” (NKC 24:109).

In his new emphasis on the body and the earth Nishitani appears to have become especially sensitive to the “dark,” nondiaphanous sides of human existence: the given (e.g., NKC 24:61–66), the fortuitous (e.g., NKC 25:22), and the “necessary” that underlies freedom (as, for example, in the “natural relations” of family and country); in a word, to the reality that “comes to grasp us” (instead of the other way around), and, as it were, “establishes” its reality by being inaccessible to the light of self-awareness, reason, and the predicate, and is attested to only by the body. And something that surprises one who knows the earlier Nishitani’s “aversion” to “power” (and will): he now stresses that the idea of “being” is innerly connected with the ideas of “power” and “having” (NKC 16:183–85; NKC 24:203–207; NKC 25:23). It all reminds one somehow of Tanabe Hajime’s struggle to catch “real reality” in his philosophy of species.

With regard to religion, Nishitani’s statement that “when it comes to the religious way of being, the matter of the body has a very great importance” (NKC 24:211) seems to indicate a greater inclination to accept the (at first sight) irrational “bodily forms” (image-ing) in religion. It is true that he limits his consideration mainly to those religious “imaginary constructs” that directly imply the idea of “earth,” such as the Buddha Realm, Pure Land, and Kingdom of God (in my incomplete check I found, besides these, only brief mentions of the role of community [NKC 18:171–72] and ritual [NKC 16:186]). But it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that Nishitani was

12 This strongly reminds me of the scholastic veritas ontologica.
ready to recognize other religious forms relating to the body in its link with the earth. The role of food and communal eating in religion is, of course, directly connected with the earth as the nourishing ground of human existence (the role of rice in Shinto and the Eucharist in Christianity are prime examples). I can even imagine that the later Nishitani would agree with what Takeuchi Yoshinori wrote about the role of bodily directions in religion:

It seems to me that in relation to humanity, God, or the transcendent, is indeed “up there,” a reality dwelling above, or at least implying something that makes it inevitable so to symbolize it. In my view, as long as a human being is determined by bodily existence, we cannot but think of God as being “up there.” (TAKEUCHI 1983, p. 132)

The last element of change in the later Nishitani that I wish to mention may have already been sufficiently indicated in the discussion so far, but here I would like to look at it from a somewhat different angle. I cannot escape the impression that, in his later years, Nishitani “bends backwards,” as it were, to explain anew the meaning of some basic Buddhist expressions important to his emptiness philosophy in order to ward off certain common one-sided interpretations of them, interpretations that he may have felt he himself had held to a degree. In the new explanations the stress is always on the point that, although at face value these concepts are uniformly negative, they really express only one pole of a reality, of which the other (positive) pole is equally important.

In connection with the concept of anatman (muga, non-self), we have already seen how the later Nishitani interprets this term as “non-ego-like subjectivity,” in which being a real independent self is just as important as negating the self to make room for the reality of the other. And, in an Otani University lecture in which he investigates the meaning of the Buddhist negation of the “soul” or self, Nishitani declares that Buddhism wants “to radically transcend the standpoint upon which one conceives of a soul. This is different, however, from the standpoint which avers that there is no such thing as a soul” (NKC 24:150). In his subsequent explanation it becomes clear that the anatman thesis condemns the usual soul concept as being an abstraction and substantialization of one particular side of the self (a side that is real enough as one aspect or pole: the “inner” side of the self as “a system with a closed unity”) and attempts to restore balance by stressing the other side (the “outer,”
trans-individual side that communicates with all others “in the earth”).

Something similar happens to the Mahāyāna term *asvabhāva* (mujišō 無自性, non-self-being). We may first remark that the later Nishitani appears to feel free to use the term *jishō* (self-being, own-nature) in a positive sense as expressing a real side of things, the side we honor when we treat a thing as a Thou. *Mujišō* then appears as a negative, counterbalancing, necessary, and salutary move, but not necessarily as the final and all-determining one: “The standpoint of non-selfbeing has the significance of once thoroughly emptying the self in its relationship with all things in this world” (NKC 17:33).

Thus *mujišō* too appears as a “second pole” that is not meant to do away with its antipode, for it is repeatedly stressed that it is important to recognize in a thing “a self-like self-being”; “without this, we cannot conceive of a thing” (NKC 24:315–16).

As a kind of conclusion, meant mainly for myself, I want to confess that—provided Hase’s picture of later Nishitani thought is basically correct and my own random notes on it are not too far off the mark—I feel much more at home in Nishitani’s later thought than in his earlier system. Indeed, most of the reasons for my earlier objections now appear to fall away. There is no longer any “solo performance” of emptiness; due place is given to what I like to call “being” or “the positive side of things”; disembodied spirituality no longer appears as the only authentic expression of religion; it is clear that emptiness does not do away with the reality and importance of worldly things; and human discriminating cognition—though certainly prone to a one-sided view of things that has to be constantly corrected by the emptiness view—is credited with an understanding of at least one true aspect of reality.

From this perspective I feel free to recognize more wholeheartedly the enormous importance that the negative move of emptiness, so splendidly represented in Nishitani’s earlier system, has for our grasp of reality, for the soundness of religion (Christianity certainly included), and for our spiritual freedom.

*Abbreviation*

References cited

GILKEY, Langdon

HASE Shōtō

LITTLE, David

MOMMAERS, Paul

MOMMAERS, Paul and Jan VAN BRAGT

NISHITANI Keiji 西谷啓治

SOGA Ryōjin 曽我量深

TAKEUCHI Yoshinori

VAN BRAGT, Jan