

TANABE HAJIME'S GOD

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AS WITH OTHERS in the Kyoto School, Tanabe Hajime's idea of God is a staunch ally of his idea of absolute nothingness. At first blush this seems a point-blank contradiction to western philosophy's God of being, not to mention the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. But the question of how the one locks out the other is not nearly as interesting as the question of why Tanabe found it necessary to give God a place in his thinking at all. When we have understood that, we will have caught the genius of a philosophical particularity that opens out onto the wider field of questions to which I wish this essay to lead.

There is every good reason for ideas of God bred in the bone of western culture not to settle easily into Japanese intellectual history. Buddhist, Confucian, and Shinto modes of thought block the way at every turn. Nevertheless, Tanabe realized that as thin as the echo of the western "God" is in the native religiosity of Japan, it clings too tightly to the routines of philosophical discourse to be ignored. At the same time, he was not one to read philosophy without trying to crack open the cultural specificity of its concepts and get to the universally human interest of its conceivers. As we trace the unfolding of Tanabe's idea of God, from a critique of western Christian thought to its reappropriation from a Buddhist standpoint, we come to understand how his moral concern with the historical world led him, after a series of missteps, to a borderland where philosophy and religion intersect in their profoundest impulses.

The God of being

Tanabe's earliest writings do not have much to say about the idea of God as serving any purpose for Japan. In fact, his ideas about God at the time were generally unsteady and scattered amidst accounts of what a small number of western philosophers have had to say on the matter.

At the age of twenty-nine, Tanabe saw "God" as another name for the true essence of nature¹ and "love of God" as a sentimental name that the faint of heart give to *amor fati*.²

Not all his statements are as simple, however. Tanabe freely acknowledged the transition to science as a renunciation of the claim that "knowledge is to be cloaked in belief and truth enfolded by the holy," but he did not think that science alone could do justice to the whole of the human, including religious ideals of relating to God or reality.³ In a discussion of moral freedom, clearly written under the influence of Kant and Fichte, he argues that even if religion is understood as the completion and final extinction of the relative freedom of morality in the absolute freedom of abandonment to God's self-love, it cannot bypass human morality.⁴ From the context, we can infer that he is not advocating religion as such but only addressing a tendency in modern western philosophy to complement the role of uncaused cause that Aristotle assigns to a Prime Mover with the role of God in grounding moral freedom. A month later he returns to these comments, noting that he only meant to insist that moral freedom needs ideals and values.⁵

Other comments at this time on the notion of God in Leibniz⁶ and Spinoza are content to wrestle with the underlying logic by which they arrive at a relationship between human free will and the idea of an absolute, whether it be called "God" or "cosmos."⁷ That said, one has the sense here and there that Tanabe is about to break free and express his own view. The immediate stimulus was Windelband's remark on Leibniz to the effect that God is actually a "civilized" way of unifying all values. This leads Tanabe to judge that the further step of arguing for the actual existence of God is an arbitrary and dogmatic form of theology that has no place in critical philosophy.⁸ Within a year he expressed his sympathy with Fichte's idea that knowledge of God is only true knowledge of the self and finds it a required step for critical metaphysics. Viewing the Kantian idea of consciousness in general through the lens of Fichte's *das Ich*, Tanabe

1. 1914, 14: 347. References are to the year of publication, volume, and page of 『田辺元全集』[The complete works of Tanabe Hajime] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1963–1964), 15 vols.

2. 1921, 14: 336.

3. 1918, 2: 345–6, 349.

4. 1917, 1: 128–9.

5. 1917, 1: 139. The following year he backs further away from his own apparent endorsement of religious belief in God by describing it as Kant's association of the question of the need for essential (*an sich*) freedom to take concrete form (*fur sich*) with the question of why God has taken human form to make himself visible (1918, 1: 252–3; see also 1919, 1: 252).

6. More than any other philosopher, it was Leibniz whom Tanabe return to again and again to clarify his notion of God as distinct from a mere pantheism. In one of his very last essays, composed at the age of seventy-five, he contrasted Leibniz with Suzuki's work on the *Platform Sutra* (1960, 13: 179–98).

7. 1918, 1: 233; 1918, 1: 262, 269, 273–83.

8. 1918, 1: 277, 283–4.

concludes that “Consciousness in general is sacred subjectivity; it is nothing other than God.”⁹

It was not long before Tanabe came to side with Hegel’s idealism in identifying the absolute with the subject, reaffirming his rejection of God—or, for that matter, the pure idea of an absolute, transcendent “reality”—as something existing apart from consciousness or as something whose existence can be proved by examining ideas of God.¹⁰

Upon returning from two years of studies in Europe, Tanabe was asked by Nishida to submit an essay commemorating the two-hundredth anniversary of Kant’s birth. Having already turned his back on Kant in favor of Hegel, he resisted the task at first but eventually saw it as an opportunity to gather his thoughts into a quasi-Hegelian philosophical position that he called a “teleology of self-awareness.” The idea did not take him as far as he must have hoped. For some time Tanabe had been substituting *self-consciousness* with *self-awareness*, a Buddhist idea that Nishida Kitarō had reshaped into a hermeneutical tool for his own philosophy. It was only natural that this would affect his reading of Kant and Hegel, and that therefore it would also have consequences for his consideration of their ideas of God. His new standpoint begins by reaffirming his earlier idea that the idea of “union with God” is the moral equivalent of ultimate freedom, but attributes Kant’s idea that the existence of God as a rational superintendent meting out rewards and punishments is demanded to a traditional Jewish view embraced by Christianity. Thus, without affirming God’s existence, Tanabe suggests that his teleology of self-awareness is grounded in the same moral reason that views God as its goal.¹¹

All of this is little more than a paraphrase of his earlier reflections on the idea of God. A few years after his essay on Kant, he took up the question of the ontological approach to God as a rationally demonstrable “real object,” a “*Dasein* of perceptual intuition,” or as an ideal whose proof requires faith to substantiate.¹²

His closer study of Hegel’s God over the next few years was to prove more constructive. To begin with, it put flesh on his bony idea that God can be understood as another name for the realization of self-awareness. It also reconfirmed his intuition that the Hegelian God supports the overcoming of the subject-object dualism and the traditional philosophical starting point of distinguishing existence from consciousness, which for Tanabe, like Nishida, was foundational for true self-awareness.

9. 1919, 1: 317, 323. The text adheres to the language of Fichte, but there is little doubt about Tanabe’s approval of the conclusion.

10. 1922, 1: 451–3.

11. 1924, 3: 66–9. See also 1933, 3: 527. We should add that from a purely metaphysical point of view, Tanabe finds Kant’s treatment of God preferable to that of Leibniz (46–7).

12. 1928, 4: 280–1.

His study of Hegel also reconfirmed Tanabe's intuition that questions of theodicy and divine providence are a way of including "teleological necessity in the process of self-awareness." In this connection he notes that Schelling's dualism of God and nature suggests an important corrective to Hegel's monistic tendency to "quietism" before an all-knowing, all-powerful, objective divine creator. He was convinced that room needed to be made for the individual moral subject as a teleological mediator between the ideal, rational totality represented by God and the concrete, irrational, unfinished reality of nature and history. In this way, aligning the idea of God with the moral dimension of religion could make sense even to those who do not acknowledge the infinite God of Christianity as necessary for finite subjectivity in the historical world.¹³ At the same time, Tanabe's acceptance of Hegel stops short of accepting his "theologizing" of philosophy precisely because he is struggling to preserve the essential philosophical role of the idea of God without subscribing to the Christian dogma of an omniscient, omnipotent, personal God of being.¹⁴

The turn to a God of nothingness

Tanabe's writing is tangled and repetitious, making it often hard to determine just where he changes direction. Still, there is no mistaking the fact that his turn away from the God of being became more pronounced during the 1930s. He had earlier referred to negative theology and to Eckhart's description of the godhead as a *Nichts*, but without comment. Later in the same work he highlighted Hegel's failure to realize that self-awareness based on the negation of a negation of being has to be founded in "self-awareness of nothingness as the foundation of being."¹⁵ He had also grown dissatisfied with Nishida's "intuitive" and "contemplative" approach to absolute nothingness.¹⁶ In a more direct attack that was fated to sour their relationship forever, he all but accused Nishida of overlooking history and collapsing the standpoint of "self-awareness of absolute nothingness" to religion.¹⁷ These criticisms begged the question of what connection Tanabe himself would find between nothingness and God. He knew that the Augustinian idea of an inner spiritual life relying on the grace of

13. 1931, 3: 121–5, 131–2, 150, 156, 201, 220–1, 224, 227–8, 334–5, 363–4, 369. Tanabe's introduction of the subjective dimension into Hegel's scheme is an attempt to preserve something from Kant that he felt had been lost (see, e.g., 3: 345). At the same time, he faulted Feuerbach's neglect of the spiritual time and again as a partial view of the human (see the summary statement in 1931, 4: 359).

14. 1931, 3: 111; 1933, 3: 491, 494, 499, 511; 1935, 6: 296. Tanabe traces the rational treatment of God back to Aristotle and its expropriation by theology to the middle ages (see, for example, 3: 519).

15. 1933, 3: 443, 507.

16. 1931, 3: 17–18. Hints of this can be seen in an earlier critique of intuition in Leibniz and Kant as grounded in the idea of God's knowledge of eternal truth (1925, 4: 99, 119).

17. 1930, 4: 318.

an absolute God made no sense without an understanding of human life in its socio-historical relativity. He also sensed that historical praxis is at its highest when performed as a “self-awareness of absolute emptiness.”¹⁸ How to connect the pieces eluded him. He continued to struggle with western philosophy’s ideas of God, but they did not give him what he needed.¹⁹

In his first and only sustained treatment of Christian theology on its own grounds, he summarizes Barth and Brunner’s debate over knowledge of the divine and locates it in a broader context of comparison with Catholic teachings on knowledge of God by the *lumen naturae* and the challenge of the mystical tradition to the idea of God as *totaliter aliter*. His own assessment of “dialectical theology” does not directly question God existence so much relocate it in his own dialectic where, in effect, it is liberated from the literalism of theological language and given new meaning outside of the confines of theistic doctrine. The crucial passage reads as follows:

Religion does not ground culture immediately and positively but rather mediates it indirectly by negating it. Not only does it not regulate culture, it negates it in general, and while doing so affirms it and actualizes the rationality of culture as subject. Or perhaps better, “culture” constructed from an immediately human standpoint is not culture. Just as the true “I” is not the immediately natural human “I” but the “I” that has been negated and sublated, so, too, only when so-called culture has been negated can culture come to be. In this sense, culture is absolute revelation and bears the image of God. But this does not mean that culture receives positive regulations from the absolute or is an immediate realization of the will of God. It is just that through the salvation of the human being as subject, culture is mediated by the absolute as a negation-in-affirmation. It is said that “there is no Buddha without deluded thoughts” but also that “the Buddha is in the awakening.” Thus if we say that God is God in mediating the activities of human beings, we need also to say that rational culture *is* God. There is no absolute to be sought outside of human culture. Whatever is to be found outside of human culture is neither God nor Buddha nor absolute.²⁰

These words, written in 1937 when Tanabe was fifty-two years old, are an axis driven through everything he had said up to that point about God and around

18. 1931, 4: 367, 378.

19. See, for example, his examination of Spinoza’s “unworldly” pantheism (1932, 4: 389–91, 394–5, 402, 404, 414).

20. 1934, 5: 77–8. Tanabe qualifies this comment later, noting that sociologists of religion in the Durkheimian school corroborate the idea that “God is society” (1945, 9: 343–4 [PM, 268]).

which a more consistent standpoint will take shape. It should be obvious that Tanabe is not expressing his faith in divine revelation or an absolute God whose will oversees the world in the usual Judeo-Christian sense of those terms. But far from simply brushing God-talk aside as a mythical, foreign way of speaking about human rationality, he accepts it as an index of something absolute that transcends culture from within culture and sustains it. All of this will make better sense when we come to the new logic he was busy formulating.

Other writings of the period reaffirm his concern with getting behind the divine-human, spirit-flesh, infinite-finite dichotomies of the Christian Middle Ages but also behind the humanistic pantheism of the Renaissance in order to recover a proper sense of the historical.²¹ Meantime, as his attempts to demystify philosophy and restore it to daily life—"the greatest mystery is that there is nothing called mystery"²²—grew bolder, allusions to Buddhist ideas also begin to appear here and there in his writings. This should not be seen as a rebuttal of mysticism which, properly understood, awakens philosophy to its original vocation of grasping the absolute, gives it life, and at the same time provides the demands of religion with a religious form.²³ Only when it falls into the trap of focusing on the *noesis* to the neglect of the *noema*, as Tanabe accused Nishida of doing,²⁴ does it become an obstacle to philosophical thinking. This is consistent with his view that the idea of God cannot be reduced to a mode of thought or an ecstatic state beyond reason and language but must be specified as to its content and meaning so that the world as a whole can be seen as the "ordinary self-revelation of the divine."²⁵

Cognates to Tanabe's position that do not require defining the absolute as nothingness abound in western philosophy. But his attempts to expand his understanding of religion beyond an index of moral ideals were urging him to clarify the ontological status of God. For this reason, he begins to fault theology for oppressing the drive to knowledge and trying to take over the attempts of previous metaphysics to absorb nature and science into its domain.²⁶ Here, too, his appeal to Buddhist thought comes to the fore. His first essay on the subject, an extended treatment of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*, while not as well informed as his treatises on western philosophy, was a seedbed of suggestiveness. In it he contrasts theology's clinging to a mythical worldview whose knowledge opposes science and philosophy to Pure Land Buddhism's complete break from the myth

21. 1936, 5: 83–5; 1937, 6: 378.

22. 1936, 5: 201. Tanabe cites the saying of Bodhidharma, "Vast emptiness, nothing holy!" and Linji's "One who has nothing to do is the noble one."

23. 1932, 3: 440; 1936, 6: 224.

24. 1930, 3: 321–2.

25. 1937, 5: 214–5, 226.

26. 1937, 5: 291; 1939, 5: 419.

and its “character of absolute negation.”²⁷ In this regard he finds Buddhism in general more compatible with philosophy for its rejection of mythical explanations. Furthermore, as the importance of “historical dialectics” and ethical praxis came to take a stronger role in his thinking, Tanabe finds both theism and pantheism wanting. Theism loses its relation of mutual negation to ethics by seeing religion as an extension and completion of the moral role, and by setting up salvation as an answer to the problem of evil; pantheism, in contrast, relativizes ethical evil and blurs the distinction with religion. Insofar as religion is biased toward the other world, it encourages the community of believers to focus on the private psychology of its believers and break off relations with historical praxis.

Needless to say, much of Tanabe’s critique could be applied to the Buddhism of his age, and later postwar critics of the Buddhist response to Japan’s militarization would do just that. What is more, many of his arguments would reappear among Christian liberation theologians of the late-twentieth century in their call for a hermeneutics of “orthopraxis.” Given his positive remarks on the views of religion circulating among the existentialist philosophers of Europe, it seems clear that he would have welcomed the idea. Be that as it may, at the theoretical level, Tanabe was convinced that “Dōgen’s thought is particularly significant in terms of the possibility it opens up for religion in mediating the historical subjectivity of the nation and the morality of the individual.” While taking favorable note of the positive attitude toward religious praxis in Kierkegaard and certain existentialist philosophers, he draws a sharp line when it comes to the understanding of the absolute:

In western thought the search for unifying the relative and the absolute is nothing more than an annihilation of the relative as it melts it into the absolute.... This is called “mysticism.” Existential philosophy may not rush in that direction, but seems unable to achieve a true unity of the opposition between *Existenz* and *Transcendenz*. It is different with eastern nothingness, where the opposites of relative and absolute are united in absolute nothingness where going forth to one’s own salvation entails a return to care for the world.²⁸

Along same lines, Tanabe ventures for the first time a redefinition of God as absolute nothingness. The passage bears citing at length:

27. Outside of the Buddhist context, Tanabe often refers to the God of “absolute negation” as preferable to “mythical religion” and the idea of a “creator God” that stands opposed to “nature” (e.g., 1936, 6: 135, 141, 147, 212).

28. 1938, 7: 22; see also 1940, 7: 131. The last phrase (往相面即還相面) is a Pure Land Buddhist term that will return to play a dominant role in Tanabe’s metanoetics.

Christianity's religion of revelation does not allow for a view of God as absolute nothingness that would radicalize a dialectics of faith-praxis-enlightenment. As a result, it does not arrive at a view of dharmic dependent origination with its understanding of the mutual entailment of the absolute and actual reality. As creator, God is always the absolute being who will judge reality at the end of time. For the subject who believes in the rebirth of death-in-life, try as it might to enlighten itself on the dialectical structure of faith, its "God" comes to rest as a transcendent entity and does not reach an enlightened faith that correlates to the conversion of the subject through a dialectically immanent rebirth. Instead, faith directly sets humans in direct opposition to God, and from there to awaken to sin and evil and shoulder the cross of responsibility. For believers, awareness of their tribulations as a grace and of the immediate conversion of the God of wrath into a God of love is dependent solely on Christ's redemptive death, a fact withdrawn from historical relationships and given a universal human meaning that is generally impossible for all but Christians.²⁹

Tanabe's respect for Buddhist awakening is offset by an undisguised animus toward Christian teachings that had not been visible in his earlier writings. While we cannot discount a certain acquiescence to the nationalistic fever that was taking over the country, Tanabe's Dōgen essay represents an important first step toward an idea of God that is more than a pastiche of ideas received from western philosophy. In fact, he ends the essay declaring that it is necessary to "transcend the theistic tendencies of western philosophy from a standpoint of absolute nothingness." This, he claims, is part of a more general project to "accept western philosophy but step beyond its limits."³⁰

The logic of the specific and its nationalistic transgressions

An important turning point came with Tanabe's proposal of what he called a "logic of the specific," an idea that helped him coordinate many of his thoughts on the idea of God up to that point. In a passing comment, he had observed

29. 1937, 5: 487. The allusion to "faith-praxis-enlightenment" is, of course, to the True Pure Land teaching of Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō*. It appears several times during these years to express the concreteness and praxis of absolute nothingness. See, for example, 1939, 7: 61. We may also note that Tanabe breaks ranks with Christianity's perennial attachment to the Jewish and Pauline association of free will with the innate evil and sinfulness of the human condition (1940, 7: 190; 1941, 7: 244; 1948, 10: 51).

30. 1937, 5: 493. I have passed over the many references in Tanabe's early writings to the influence of Aristotle's notions of God on Christian philosophy, but it is worth mentioning that he now begins to contrast Aristotle's view, and its persistence in Hegel's thought, with one that is grounded in a "nothingness of absolute, dialectical negation" that transcends being while being within it (1935, 6: 296; 1937, 5: 304, 464).

some years earlier that “transcendental logic is human logic, formal logic is divine logic,”³¹ by which he meant to mark the transition in logic from Aristotle to Kant. His new logic, a refinement of Hegel’s idea of the “concrete universal,” takes a giant step beyond that. For Aristotle, *species* was a mere intermediary between the *universal* and the *particular*, a less universal “grouping” of particulars and little more. Together with the bifurcation between natural law and church theology, Christian theology defined individual subjectivity in opposition of God, thus underscoring the absence of the social dimension.³²

The aim of his new logic was to show that the universal exists in the particular only under the conditions of its social *specificity*. In other words, the individual subject has no direct, intuitive access to universal ideas or ideals. Everything is filtered through culture, including the idea that such direct access is possible. The logic of the specific is not intended to expose pursuit of the truth as self-deluded folly but to make conscious the extent to which that pursuit and whatever truth it thinks it has found are never able to disrobe themselves completely of time, place, and socially conditioned modes of thought. But “as the free will of the individual takes back the specific and reverses its limitations, it restores it to the control of the self and makes it a mediator of self-realization.”³³ Hence, the greater the consciousness of the irrational specificity of knowledge, the more transparent the specificity, the more knowledge is demystified and open to change, the humbler the “universal” convictions of the individual subject, and the more open the society to the wider world. In a dialectical negation of negation, a ethnic or national identity that is aware of the specific, “primitive, mythical” way in which it dresses ethical and epistemological principles, and even identifies it with religion, thereby negates pure universality and in that very act affirms its specific form as the only kind of universality that it is given us as human beings to know.³⁴

The consequences for the idea of God are easy to see. Obviously, it means that God is always and ever a cultural concept. “Each age that approaches God directly must do so realizing an absolute value in its own particularity.... The glory of God is not a rose that opens up at the limits of a culture; it is more like a lotus in the fire that blossoms in explosions of historical crisis.”³⁵ Tanabe now has a basis for his claim that reason, understood as a cultural phenomenon aimed at expanded consciousness of the world and of the specific conditions of reason itself, is a suitable name for what we call God. This only holds true if

31. 1925, 4: 98.

32. 1932, 6: 54; 1935, 6: 280.

33. 1935, 6: 117.

34. 1935, 6: 148, 153, 200; 1937, 6: 380, 450. Tanabe notes that the failure to understand this led Hegel to absolutize the ethnic nation (1936, 6: 143, 155; 1935, 6: 296).

35. 1937, 6: 382, 384.

self-awareness is made into an absolute universal and divinity is liberated from the individual attributes of person, transcendent creator, judge, and provident will opposed to human will that we see in Catholic doctrine. For Tanabe, this appears to be a necessary condition for a philosophically alert religion.³⁶

Allusions to the error of universalizing specific religious symbols are not very frequent in Tanabe's nationalistic statements, but there is enough of it to turn his previous new logic into a caricature of itself. A single, particularly offensive example should suffice. After locating the Trinitarian doctrine of Paul and Augustine in Hegel's dialectic, Tanabe comments:

To those who are not Christian, Christian mythology inevitably makes even this deep, speculative truth a stumbling block. Along with that, the contradiction that vestiges of a Jewish personal theism pose to absolute nothingness is not washed clean by the dialectical method and could not be mediated by the scientific thought to follow. My philosophy of the state places the nation in the position of Christ, as it were, a substrate manifestation of absolute nothingness in the form of an *adaptation body* that radicalizes the dialectical truth of Christianity and liberates it from its mythical constraints.³⁷

Tanabe takes Ranke's nationalistic ideas of an eternal God at work in each age of history and applies it to the Japanese situation to suggest that only a "new religious spirit" can provide the kind of unifying principle that the present age needs. This means that Japan cannot stop at being a unified ethnic nation but can absorb ideas from other countries and become universal, beginning with a leading role in the construction of a unified East Asia. The concrete manifestation of this principle is service to the emperor in whose person the idea of a society open to the world is made concrete and visible. Christianity is not suited to express this religiously; Mahayana Buddhism is.³⁸

Within this context, the criticism of Christianity and Hegel come together in his attempt to rethink the notion of the absolute as both a negation and an affirmation of the relative, something he considers the Christian idea of God incapable of performing because of its insistence on obeying divine commands and "redeeming" the relative in an unmediated manner, both of which stop at negat-

36. 1935, 6: 122, 141, 144; 1936, 6: 233; 1937, 6: 378; 1937, 6: 492. The stimulus for these ideas, it should be noted, comes from Bergson's distinction between "open" and "closed" societies and his suggestion that the structure of a closed society supports a restricted idea of divine love (1936, 6: 76).

37. 1939, 7: 42. See also 1941, 7: 246-7, on Hegel's detachment of God from history by locating him within history. I have italicized Tanabe's use of a Buddhist expression in the quotation above for a form that a Buddha takes to become present in the world.

38. 1940, 7: 103-12; 1940, 8: 166-7. Tanabe adds that, while he does not consider himself a "Buddhist believer or something with connections to Buddhism," its religious spirit contains the elements to build a new age.

ing the self to affirm God.³⁹ The idea of a metaphysics of “absolute dialectics” or “absolute mediation” goes back to the early 1930s,⁴⁰ but it is only now that he adopts it to contrast nothingness with the Christian God of being—whether expressed overtly or in its “hidden” mystical language of *Gottheit*—as a kind of “universal individual” transcending all specificity of the relative, “natural” world.⁴¹ Tanabe prefers the view that “the nation is God on earth, not God in heaven, a relative absolute, not an absolute absolute.”⁴² Jesus’ dual role as teacher of humanity and son of God keeps Christianity locked into a personal mode of thought that needs liberating.⁴³

These arguments appear with regularity during his essays of 1939 to 1944 and make us expect that, having rejected the idea of the God-man Christ, he would have no further use of the idea of God. In fact, he retains the term and sets up a “trinitarian unity of God, country, and individual.” One has the sense that he needs it to engage western thought critically and to ensure that his own ideas of the absolute can take the place of God, or rather purify it of its mythology, so that “historical philosophy as absolute self-awareness of history with its characteristic relativity” can advance with no loss of sophistication. There can be little doubt that Tanabe compromised the role of “God” during the years leading up to the war. In a talk to students in 1938, he mentioned Pascal’s wager on belief in God, suggesting that they replace it with a wager on the truth of “living by dying”⁴⁵ and later suggested the identity of God and country.⁴⁴

This idea contrasts sharply with a remark made a few years earlier that the idea of the nation must never directly become a kind of “God” directly identified with a local mythology, but only indirectly play the role of expressing “eternity in time,” a call to transcend private ethics not unlike the way the “fear of God” functions in Christianity. In this sense, religious mythology, including talk of God, can even be said to mediate the way to transcend individuality for the sake of the nation. Within two years, however, his mode of expression was more clearly aligned to the prevalent ideology, resembling more the preaching of a crusade than the ethereal philosophical language we had come to expect of him.⁴⁶

39. 1939, 7: 32, 65; 1940, 7: 191–3, 200; 1941. These same arguments support his critique of Kierkegaard’s appeal to Hegelian mediation in support of redemption theory; see, for example, 7: 244–5.

40. 1932, 6: 48; 1935, 6: 248.

41. 1939, 7: 65–6, 68; 1940, 7: 109, 124; 1941, 7: 246.

42. 1941, 8: 205.

43. 1939, 7: 43.

44. 1938, 14: 397. We should add that Tanabe immediately appends the suggestion that as scholarship pays more and more attention to the nation, it becomes truly more responsive to reality. The statement has to be read against the backdrop of the nationalistic treatise of 1937, *The Fundamental Meaning of the Essence of the State*.

45. 1943, 14: 416.

46. 1941, 8: 205–6, 209, 215. Actually, already in a 1937 response to a nationalistic critic, Tanabe had

This is where God comes in to mediate the nation and the individual. To bind oneself directly to the state and its service is a manifestation of the divine. It is God's revelation. We may understand that dedicating oneself to the nation is devotion to God.⁴⁷

As if to remove all doubt of where he stood, the following year, he addressed first-year high school students at his alma mater, repeating his view that his trinitarian model was "the true standpoint for people to take" and that service to the nation is a sign of "our own obedience to the absoluteness of God." The Christian idea of the incarnation may be mythical, he went on, but, like the Pure Land teaching of the Buddha's compassionate return⁴⁸ to save others, it carries the profound meaning of God's participation in human suffering. But more than these, the emperor, as a living divinity, embodies the trinitarian principle of God, nation, and individual.⁴⁹

The God of metanoetics

As the consequences of the war effort became more apparent, Tanabe realized that these views had made a mockery of the spirit of his logic of the specific, but it also pressed him to understand why his rationality had failed him. The brunt of his argument is a self-accusation of hubris with regard to the power of reason. In terms of the facile application of abstract ideas to the concrete historical situation, this is certainly true. But there is another sense in which he had failed to consult the basic principle of his own logic, namely that there is no absolute in culture that is not subject to the critique of relative specificity.

It is not mere coincidence that *Philosophy as Metanoetics* is a religious tract through and through. Three interlocking ideas had been foundational up to that point. The first is the assumption that some conception of an *absolute* is central to philosophical thought. The second is the idea that *God* is the core index of the absolute in western philosophy. I suppose that without Hegel's idea of the absolute, the idea of God would not have found such a self-evident slide into Japanese philosophy. But despite his gradual drift away from Hegel's Christian moorings, he seems not to have been bothered about reading Hegel's original use of *the absolute* as a substantive back into the history of western philosophy, let alone eastern thought. On the contrary, its cash value was so great that it is

compared the emperor's role as a unifier of the country to God's dominion over the universe which grants people freedom and autonomy (8: 19).

47. 1943, 8: 260.

48. I use this term, consistent with Tanabe's paraphrasing, as a free rendering of the Pure Land Buddhist term *gensō* 還相.

49. 1944, 8: 296, 298–9.

not even clear that he, or others in the Kyoto School, were even aware of the novelty of Hegel's coinage.

But it is the third idea that became the focus of his repentance, namely, that *reason* is a more fitting way to describe God than anything that Christianity, Judaism, or ancient philosophy had to offer. Obviously, he was not simply going to forsake critical philosophy for theology or mysticism. This left him with the more radical step: to dethrone reason as such by driving it to the point where its limits are exposed.

The logic of the specific had set out to do this in terms of the concrete ways that human societies exercise reason, but it left the ideal of universal reason in place as an absolute. His whole career had been aimed at showing what disciplined reason can do. What he had failed to see is what even the most critical and self-conscious attempts to be reasonable *cannot* do. "Metanoetics" was his term for a conversion to a standpoint at the threshold of rationality where the mind and heart can be touched by a reality beyond reason. He called it "a philosophy that was not a philosophy." Only by deliberately driving reason to the limits where it would die and crumble in one's hands, he felt, could the last stronghold of the self-centered, self-powered self abandon itself to a power from which reason could be reborn, aware of what it can and cannot do. The first instinct of such reason would be service to others and the building up of a historical community. The consequences for philosophy would be to replace the ideal of "speculation about speculation" with a love of others conscious of the fact that it was the instrument of an other-power not its own. The absolute of reason would thus undergo an "absolute conversion."

After the metanoetics, Tanabe's notion of nothingness sheds its affiliations with the Japanese people and their emperor to return to its previous abstract formulation:

Nothingness, insofar as it is nothingness, cannot work directly by itself, because what works directly by itself is always being, never nothingness. Nothingness works as nothingness only by mediating being. This is why absolute nothing is absolute mediation.⁵⁰

From there he reconstructs the standpoint of nothingness in order to deny the self that does no more than criticize the nation and to enter into a deeper, mutual negation in which both self and nation can be "reborn in the eternal love of God." During these years the idea of God appears with greater frequency, often in a paraphrase of earlier arguments. The difference is that Tanabe adjusts his view to this kind of "absolute conversion" and the character of God is identi-

50. 1946, 7: 261. See also 1945, 9: 35 [PM, 22]. PM refers to the English translation, *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

fied as “absolute nothingness-in-love.”⁵¹ Gone is his earlier nationalist idealism, which he now spoke of as “taking the standpoint of the Gods.” The focus on Christ’s incarnation shifts away from its forfeiture of history to be seen as an “archetype corresponding to an absolute, compassionate return to the relative” and even to a “principle for socialist reconstruction.”⁵² His trinitarian model is broadened to include world-nation-individual and religion-politics-morality as “mediators of absolute nothingness.” He explicitly rejects the model of “a chosen divine land, a unification of worship and politics, a living divinity” and other forms of unmediated unity.⁵³

This does not mean that God now conforms to the transcendent God of Christianity or even to the “universal self” of Hegel. He continues to see the Christian God as limited by the “absolute mediation” that characterizes all of reality, but he seeks a way to preserve the identity of God and the absolute without compromising human freedom. Human freedom requires that the absolute nothingness of God be absolutely related to everything:

Since God, as the absolute, is not being but nothingness, the act of submission or obedience that belongs to freedom represents a spontaneous and self-determining choice on the part of the human person, with no external restrictions. The human individual gains freedom through the mediation of God, while God in turn is realized and made manifest through the mediation of human freedom.⁵⁴

Absolute nothingness is only *real* when relative beings are engaged in historical practice and ethical transformation. In this sense, Tanabe’s God of nothingness aims to recover Kierkegaard’s view of the practice of “eternity in time” as a counterfoil to the “mystical” views of thinkers as diverse as Eckhart and Heidegger and to recognize the metanoetic element to Nietzsche’s nihilism.⁵⁵

He clearly rejects any form of religion that speaks of the unity of the divine and the human, the absolute and the relative. The God of Love, we might say, functions less as a noun than as an adverb qualifying praxis. Love cannot be seen as a mere negation of the self in front of a God who cleanses us of sin and evil by our uniting with God. Rather than a compassion reliant on other-power, it is a mysticism that “divinizes the self.”⁵⁶ It needs to be transcended

51. 1947, 8: 423, 431–2, 438.

52. Tanabe slips into an old but dated bias, dating back to Bishop Marcion of Sinope (ca. 84–160) when he tries to align himself with Jesus’ God of universal love by seeing it as a conversion from Judaism’s tribal God of wrath and justice (e.g., 1947, 8: 393; 1948, 10: 55–6; 1951, 11: 515–31; 1958, 13: 171).

53. 1947, 8: 343, 354, 356. The emperor no longer is a “symbol of absolute nothingness” and his role is now seen as “mediated by national institutions” (373).

54. 1945, 9: 117 [PM, 118].

55. 1945, 9: 61, 86–7, 89, 92–3, 96, 115. [PM, 54, 83, 85, 89–90, 94, 115].

56. 1946, 7: 263, 368; see similar comments against the Christian idea of love in 1940, 7: 195, 205.

through the compassionate return to the real, political world of human society, not abstracted into a Kingdom of God or Buddha that stops short at a denial of the individual before the absolute and risks making the same mistake by turning a concrete nation into a kind of divine universal. He also reiterates his idea that the ideal of uniting with or begging salvation of a God who creates the world by pure thought is reason uncritical of itself, a “mental laziness” that “quickly makes action unnecessary and impossible.”⁵⁷ This is his reason for applauding Eckhart’s famous Sermon on “Mary and Martha” as praising ethical concerns and our duty to the world as a higher state than submersion in joyful unity.⁵⁸ Although he did not reform his criticisms of Eckhart, whose *Gottheit* is dismissed, along with the One of Plotinus, as the very opposite of absolute nothingness, namely absolute being, his reading of Rudolf Otto led him to think that perhaps Eckhart’s idea of self-negation were not so far from his own idea of the metanoetic consciousness, and even to liken it to Dōgen’s “dropping off of mind and body.” From this time on, Tanabe’s attitude toward Eckhart’s writings becomes more positive.⁵⁹

The turn to metanoetics leads Tanabe to organize, and often to reinterpret, his views of numerous western philosophers to conform to the project of converting reason to love. His principal guide here is the Pure Land Buddhist distinction between self-power and other-power. The former is evident in reason’s attempt to absolutize itself and transcend the relative; the latter represents reason’s renunciation to the true absolute of universal love that transforms all spurious absolutes into self-aware relatedness through compassionate return to care for others in the realm of the relative. He sees this other-power as a “principle that brings about religion in general,” a kind of “real ideal,” *real* insofar as it acts only in and through consciousness, *ideal* in the sense that its power to transform is not something consciousness can control or substitute.⁶⁰

God in the late writings

Certainly the years after his metanoetics show Tanabe pursuing the idea that “the philosophy of religion crystallizes the most difficult problems of philosophy,”⁶¹ which turned his interest more and more to religious symbols, and nowhere

57. 1946, 7: 268–9, 281–2, 285–90, 322, 326, 344, 369. On the rejection of associating God and country, an idea often repeated in his late writings, see also 1949, 11: 223–7.

58. 1946, 7: 310; 1953, 13: 414.

59. 1945 9: 160–1, 167–74, 178 [PM, 167, 175–82, 186]; 1948, 12: 8–1, 15–16, 52; 1952, 13, 328–32, 361, 417–24, 453–4, 457–60; 1962, 13: 957–8.

60. 1945 9: 160–1, 167–70 [PM, 167, 175–7]; 1946, 7: 360. Tanabe penned a *tanka* poem in 1952 expressive of his view of God as other-power: “To sleep or not to sleep is not ours—it’s all up to God” (1956, 14: 454).

61. 1945, 9: 209 [PM, 226].

more clearly than in allusions to God and Christ.⁶² Indeed, in the first book of this period he even felt it necessary to clarify to Pure Land traditionalists that he had not converted to Christianity.⁶³ The increase in religious vocabulary in general did not mark a religious conversion to any one faith, though his favoritism toward Shinran's thought in his interpretations of Christianity and Zen is evident.⁶⁴ On the contrary, questioning his own trust in reason strengthened his rational resolve and helped him to coordinate his thoughts on absolute nothingness, self-awareness, historical praxis, absolute mediation, and even the logic of the specific. It was as if he had finished the *basso ostinato* and had turned all his attention to refining the melody and its orchestration. Certainly this is true of his idea of God.

Although Tanabe continues to reject religious dogmatism of all sorts, and describes himself as not belonging to any particular religion, he has begun to see a purpose in religious myth that can survive its displacement by science and reason.⁶⁵ At the same time and despite his rejection of ideological nationalism, he was not so quick to give up the religious significance of the nation,⁶⁶ which he felt needed to undergo a metanoia of its own.⁶⁷ Thus he continued to describe the nation of Japan as a specific mediator of the universal that functions like Buddhist *upāya* or “expedient means” to negate the individual self and its direct route to the absolute.⁶⁸ This is an important part of his attempt to rehabilitate his logic of the specific by way of metanoetic dialectics and to clarify its goal as a critical foundation to overturn Christianity's medieval subservience of philosophy to theology. This involved turning the “mystical bent” of Nishida's “self-identity of absolute contradictories” on its head and seeing his “*basho* of nothingness” as a “nothingness of the *basho* as such.”⁶⁹

62. Tanabe's idea of the “symbol” did not carry earlier negative connotations of “myth” (1939, 7: 36) or rallying points of national identity (1937, 8: 14). Instead he remarks that “the individual is in truth a subject, a symbol, of mediation,... but for the individual this is a task that is never completed” (1949, 11: 265). He further comes to a more positive approach to religious art as “converting the eternity of religion into symbols” (1951, 11: 586–7; 1951, 13: 109). His lengthy study of Paul Valéry's symbolic theory cleared up his views on the role the symbol has to play in philosophy (see 1951, 13: 5–7).

63. 1947, 9: 275.

64. Near the end of his life, he acknowledged Zen as the best guide to a “philosophy of death” (1958, 13: 168; English translation in “Memento Mori,” *Philosophical Studies of Japan* 1 [1959]: 4).

65. 1945, 9: 267–8 [295]; see also 1949, 11: 307. He will later date the Christian “fall into mythical fantasy” to the Jewish bible (1948, 10: 65).

66. The term used to translate the German *Stadt* and the English *nation* is the same in Tanabe (国家), which makes us think twice about rushing to associate its use in postwar years with wartime ideology, or to assume that *nationalism* means the same as 国家主義.

67. In his commentary on volume 9 of Tanabe's *Collected Works*, Takeuchi Yoshinori cites a 1952 letter from Tanabe showing that this idea survived into his later thought (9: 497).

68. 1948, 7: 258.

69. 1946, 7: 372; see also 272, 368; 1950, 12: 203. *Basho* 場所 is Nishida's term for the place or locus or

He had earlier remarked parenthetically that as the self-negation of God, Christ overcomes the duality between the divine and the human, spirit and flesh, but does so in an unmediated fashion that preserves the abstract, nondialectical nature of God as being.⁷⁰ In a critical aside he notes that those who make Jesus an object of faith rather than the God whom Jesus believed in lose the mediating role of Jesus as a religious founder.⁷¹ And yet, consistent with his insistence that a philosophy of nothingness combines myth and logic, he acknowledged in advanced age that the demythologizing movement in Christian theology is indicative of a new trend in religious philosophy toward understanding religious faith in terms of self-awareness by “cleansing” myth and transforming it into meaningful symbols.⁷²

Tanabe’s rejection of the Pauline transformation of Christ into a redeemer⁷³ and its accompanying neglect of history remain in place, but he took a more conciliatory stance toward the state of mind of the confessing sinner. This is particularly evident in *Existenz, Love, and Praxis*, where he reads Kierkegaard’s struggles with faith as a conversion from self-power to other-power and at the same time sympathizes with the “power of his faith” to do battle with organized religion. In that same book, Tanabe reaffirms his interpretation of the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and resurrection as an expression of a dialectics of absolute nothingness, with the result that the idea of death-in-resurrection is drawn out of its theological history and given a permanent place in his thought.⁷⁴ His extended comments on Christianity’s teachings⁷⁵ and his free use of its vocabulary is salted with enough of his own philosophy to make it clear that he is, after all, a philosopher using religious language for his own purposes. And yet, the tone of the writing, compared to what he had said about God before, verges at times on what he would surely in earlier years have considered pietistic. An example may help and save us from having to catalog its numerous paraphrases:

The God who is love makes itself into nothing, gives itself to others exhaustively. In that sense, God is the principle of nothingness and never works immediately and of its own will.... The phrase “God is

that defines the reality of something.

70. 1937, 6: 492,

71. 1946, 7: 284.

72. 1937, 6: 471; 1947, 10: 295; 1948, 10: 31, 35; 1958, 13: 172; 1959, 14: 441; 1961, 13: 285. An extended appraisal of Rudolf Bultmann appears in 1962, 13: 567–76; see also 1962, 13: 604. In reference to demythologizing, Tanabe refers more often to Zen than to Pure Land Buddhism.

73. 1948, 10: 12, 76–7.

74. See, for example, 1947, 9: 320; 323–6. Later Tanabe will summarize his assessment of Kierkegaard in 1951, 11: 607–16.

75. Perhaps Tanabe’s most concerted effort to lay out what he sees as the “core of Christianity” can be found in 1951, 11: 515–40.

love” only becomes real when it is backed up by the actions of people who love God. And action that mediates deeds of compassionate return is none other than love from absolute nothingness.⁷⁶

His language is rather more restrained in his four-volume *Introduction to Philosophy*, where he organizes and simplifies many of his previous reflections on the absolute God in western philosophy in contrast to his matured conception of absolute nothingness. In general, he is circumspect about keeping religion and philosophy distinct in this more popular work in order to avoid alienating philosophy from science.⁷⁷ At the same time, he does not back away from his longstanding conviction that they both treat the same questions with different metaphors that can be united in a “religious philosophy”:

The Christian West has its idea of *God*,... but from our standpoint it is the *absolute*, or more specifically, *absolute nothingness* or simply *nothingness*.⁷⁸

As a theistic, personal will, God cannot anchor the self-awareness of the individual. Thus as an absolute being, God is a threat to individual existence.... The transcendent ground of absolute nothingness is needed for self-awareness to arise. Unless the presence of God is understood in this sense, there can be no self-awareness.... God must be an absolute nothingness.⁷⁹

The notion of God as “absolute nothingness-in-love” completes the picture by ensuring that the absolute God be seen as an “open net” of relationships rather than as a “closed bag.”⁸⁰

At this time, he also set out deliberately to work out a viewpoint that would combine Zen and Pure Land Buddhism with an eye to aligning Christianity and Buddhism with Marxist socialism.⁸¹ It is hardly surprising that there is no reference to Shinto in the project. The brief return to Marxism then slides quietly out of the picture again. His next book, *The Dialectics of Christianity*, carries out in more detail this Buddhist reading of Christian scriptures and contemporary theologians in an attempt to underscore his identification of God and Christ with the working of absolute nothingness in the world of relative being.⁸² It is not at all surprising to find him describing himself as “a Christian in the making”

76. 1947, 9: 329.

77. 1950, 12: 204–7.

78. 1949, 11: 199.

79. 1948, 12: 8, 16.

80. 1951, 13: 107, 160–1; 1949: 11: 130–1; 1961, 13: 295.

81. See 1947, 10: 297–307.

82. A short translation of representative passages from this book can be found in Makoto Ozaki,

who could never “become Christian.”⁸³ It is perhaps in this light that we should understand his new interest in Augustine’s *Confessions* and trinitarian theology to use it to interpret the basic motives behind Heidegger’s treatment of free will, and at the same time to argue against Aquinas and scholastic philosophy for using the *analogia entis* to set up an opposition between the transcendent God and the finite individual with the result that the *visio beatifica* overtakes love in importance and philosophy is made the maidservant of theology.⁸⁴

Finally, mention should also be made of Tanabe’s treatment of Nietzsche’s nihilism and “death of God,” which he sees as compatible with his own thinking if properly radicalized beyond a mere critique of values:

What I mean is something like what Zen calls “the lotus in the fire.” The will that sets itself up to replace the God that is put to death is not an entity of being but a will whose principle is absolute nothingness. In this way, the subject of the will to power that overcomes nihilism and is transformed into an overhuman is not the willing subject it first appears to be. On the contrary it is a will that ought *not* to will.... In transcending the human while being human, one becomes the representative of God on earth as a fulfillment of the Buddha-nature.⁸⁵

The hollow legacy of Tanabe’s God

Tanabe’s ideas of God seem to have made little mark on philosophy or theology inside Japan or out. Indeed his two principal disciples, the Christian Mutō Kazuo and the Pure Land Buddhist Takeuchi Yoshinori, did not even seem to find it essential to Tanabe’s idea of absolute nothingness. Yet without God, that idea would never have developed as it did. The simplest explanation is that Tanabe’s God talk is tied *too* closely to a forbidding style that make his philosophical writings difficult to approach. I cannot believe that is all there is to it.

Introduction to the Philosophy of Tanabe (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), 127–69. Among the theologians he locks horns with are Karl Barth and Albert Schweitzer (e.g., 1948, 10: 71–5, 83; see also 1947, 10: 272–80, 311, 317–9).

83. 1948, 10: 260. Tanabe uses a German phrase here, which Nishitani would later take up to describe himself as a *gewordener Buddhist* and a *werdender Christ*.

84. 1953, 13: 309–22, 360–1, 401, 408. Constructed as a reading of Heidegger, this essay is a rambling summary of Tanabe’s stance on the way the idea of God in western philosophy shows the abiding influence on Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s ontology in making God into a “substance.” He also slips in a criticism of the idea of “inverse correlation” that Nishida had advanced in his final essay as ahistorical, pantheistic, and mystical (413).

85. 1962, 13: 608. Although no mention is made of Nishitani Keiji’s 1949 book *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), the coincidence of ideas is unmistakable.

Simply put, the problem is that, with the possible exception of the postwar repentance of the *Metanoetics*, Tanabe's readers do not feel a sense of companionship with the questions that drove him. Despite his wide-ranging and often radical criticisms against thinkers whose works he was reading for their failure to address history in the concrete, Tanabe himself shied away from applying his own counterpositions to political, economic, institutional, or spiritual problems of his day in any concrete, moral sense; and the upshot is that the practical application of his ideas was never able to reflect back on the quality of the ideas. One has to know a great deal about the times he was writing in to understand what specific issues he was inflicting his abstract terminology on, and even so, it is not clear what tangible difference his reconstructions were supposed to make. To the reader, Tanabe's questions suffocate in the language of his answers.

I do not mean to say that there is *no* question to which he reckoned the idea of God an essential part of the answer, only that its inference is trying in the extreme. Having reviewed his writings from start to finish, I now think that his question comes down to this: *How can I, who feel no need to believe in an other-worldly divine being, recover the impulse to such an idea and describe it, to my own satisfaction, in language that preserves the truth of that impulse without having to compromise my own philosophical impulses?*

As we watch Tanabe move away, cautiously at first but then with more confidence, from merely recording the God talk in western philosophers to struggling with what lies behind it, we realize that he never found another term to which it could be reduced without remainder. The idea was simply too rich, too multifaceted, too plural in its expression to allow for such a reduction. Of no other idea in his philosophy can this be said. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that self-awareness, absolute nothingness, other-power, and even love were humbled before a word too overdetermined to be left aside. He realized that for every idea in the history of God talk there was an opposite, but he also realized that this very contradiction had an irreplaceable role to play in intellectual history. He could not bring himself to dismiss it as an empty concept used to fill in logical gaps. Tanabe's philosophy took shape in redefining, adjusting, criticizing, comparing, and then redefining yet again this singular idea. Try as he might, not even his own metanoetic conversion was able to come up with a substitute. In the end, the idea of God got the better his every attempt to translate it into a functional equivalent.

That said, I do not think that Tanabe ever came to a clear conception of what the *impulse* behind the idea of God is or even where it is to be sought. Ritual practice and its symbols did not interest him any more than institutionalized religion did. He seemed to have a natural aversion to mystical silence and confessional literalism alike. His sole access to the urges that drive ideas of God was through the door of written texts, and yet one has the sense that he was aware

of there being something more to God than could be rationally chastened of its mythical content and then paraphrased. How else explain the teeter-totter in his late works, exhaling the Judaeo-Christian God in one breath and inhaling the God of selfless love in the next?

None of this, of course, proves anything about the nature or existence of a God beyond the impulse. Nor did Tanabe ever suggest it did. The faith in absolute other-power he came to confess was not a faith that provided information about facts inaccessible to reason. The Anselmian idea of “faith seeking understanding” did not attract him. He was closer to Bernard of Clairvaux in seeing faith as a renunciation of reason in order to experience the impulse that reason obscures:

May they believe what they have not experienced, so that one day by virtue of faith they may obtain the fruit of experience.... The soul with experience knows more fully and is happier.⁸⁶

Were the legacy of Tanabe’s idea of God only an unspoken and unanswered question, there would be little more to say. Quite to the contrary, I am convinced that the points at which it intercepts western ideas of God as a transcendent, supreme being bear a closer look. In particular, the suggestion of nothingness as absolutely and directly interrelated to everything that exists poses a serious metaphysical and moral challenge to the dominant complexion of God in the great monotheistic traditions.⁸⁷ More than that, I suspect that once we understand how important Tanabe’s idea of God was to his idea of absolute nothingness, as I believe I have demonstrated sufficiently, we can also see the sense in which his radically relative God can refresh the Kyoto School philosophy’s idea of nothingness by dispensing altogether with the notion of the absolute it had inherited from Hegel and reshaped, which on balance seems to be more trouble than it is worth.

William James reminds us that we prefer what has developed from within to what has been fashioned from without, that an egg is a higher style of being than a piece of clay that an external modeler has made into the image of a bird.⁸⁸ This is certainly true of Tanabe’s approach to the idea of God as he met it in western philosophy. Nevertheless, it was a *western* idea he had in mind. The Gods and spirits of his native literary and religious history were of no interest to him. Tanabe was, after all, like the cuckoo that prefers to have its eggs hatched

86. *Sermones super Cantica Canticatorum*, in *Sancti Bernardi Opera* (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957), 84.7.

87. I have written further of this in *Nothingness and Desire: An East-West Philosophical Antiphony* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2013), §§12–18.

88. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, in *The Collected Works of William James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 5: 73.

in another's nest rather than build a nest of its own. What Tanabe did not figure out was how then to nudge his fledglings to take wing and migrate homeward.