Nishida's Philosophy and My Changing Idea of God

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The following is a translation of the 70th Sunshin Memorial Lecture delivered in June of 2018 at the Kitaro Nishida Memorial Museum of Philosophy in Kanazawa and subsequently published as「西田哲学と神概念の行方」. *The argument is basically a montage of things drawn from other writings, stitched together with some personal memories of my way to the question of God and to Japanese philosophy.*

I was born and raised in a Catholic family where the word "God" was a part of everyday life. Before each evening meal we thanked God for the blessing of home and family. My father was quick to reprimand us every time we used the name of God to curse. Only my mother could get away with it. I think her earthy language was part of what attracted my father to her. The only time I can remember discussing theology at home was the grilling our father would give my sisters and me about the Sunday sermon, of which we understood almost nothing. To defend ourselves from reproach, we all learned to memorize short phrases and pretended we knew what we were talking about. You might say this was my introduction to theological method and served me well on any number of occasions in the course of a Catholic education that carried through high school, university, and major seminary. At school, the nuns talked about God all the time, but it was only those who were not afraid of being labeled "pious" that ever dared repeat any of it outside of school.

In a word, belief in God was like good manners for a child: a perfunctory compulsion we put up with to co-exist harmoniously with an adult world and its rules for survival. But it was a compulsion with dire consequences for those who misused the name of God in the presence of those who seemed to know more than we did about the mysterious world beyond. In weekly confession as grammar school children, we were periodically threatened with divine wrath and the "pains of hell" if we did not repent of our sins, but not even the goriest images we were served up in catechism class did much to bring this vaporous will-o'-the-wisp idea any closer to our everyday existence. Like most of my

friends, I was far more afraid of what the teachers and parents could dole out than the eternal flames that awaited those who disobeyed.

My mother had converted from Lutheranism to Catholicism, and this meant that from the time I was eight years old I was carrying her questions to school with me to confound the nuns or surprise the priest on his weekly visits. Looking back, I am a little surprised that her questions never became my own, even as I struggled to write down the answers and carry them home to her.

These were formative years, and it took far longer to replace these habits of thinking about God with something I could appropriate into my adult life. Pretty much everything I thought about God up until I began graduate studies in philosophy was a variation on one or the other of those habits. The two years I spent in meditation and spiritual exercises as a novice to the priesthood were divided between filling notebooks with accounts of my very ordinary life as part of a larger story in which God and the devil were fighting for my soul, and devouring every book I could find on psychology, religious experience, church history, and classics of spirituality. Gradually the latter began to eclipse the former.

By the time I finished university I realized that my initiation into the world of the "regulators" demanded more of me than simply changing places in the scheme of things to the enforcer of traditional thinking rather than the enforced. I consider it a happy stroke of fate that this took place in an increasingly self-critical environment and at a time when theology had moved out of the halls of the academy and into the streets where it was being debated fearlessly. During my first year of graduate school my interest in God was shaped by a movement known as "Death of God theology," and in particular by a young Protestant thinker named Thomas J. J. Altizer who I had heard lecture and began to correspond with. His books were full of Hegel and Nietzsche and William Blake whom he called on to bolster his vision of a "radical kenosis" whereby the old God-in-the-sky had poured himself out, without remainder, into the simple carpenter's son of Nazareth with his ethic of selfless love. I began to sleep less and spent my nights writing a comprehensive book about his ideas and those of others in the movement. I was consumed with the passion that the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen had put in the mouth of his Kierkegaardian anti-hero Brand:

> "Paint him with crutches. I go to lay him in his grave…. It is time, you know. He has been ailing for a thousand years." (Act 1)

I even did a dramatic presentation of the whole play in collaboration with a group of younger nuns and seminarians. By the end of the year I had finished my book and Martin Marty at the University of Chicago offered to intervene

for its publication, but I also faced expulsion from the seminary if I went ahead with it. I made copies for a small circle of friends and kept the original in my desk until two years ago when I handed it over to the Institute's librarian for cataloguing. The decision was not a hard one to make. I was not prepared to abandon the way I had chosen because of other people's ideas that had consumed my intellectual curiosity but had not resonated loudly enough in my breast to displace the void represented by the word *God*.

After ordination to the priesthood, I entered Cambridge for doctoral studies, and once again fate stepped in. My plans to write a dissertation on Karl Jaspers and Alfred North Whitehead were frustrated by the lack of a competent supervisor. The frustration over my studies fell into the same void as the idea of God and I decided it was time to face the matter squarely. Having already read through much of the *Collected Works* of C. G. Jung, I decided to do a critique of his idea of God and its accompanying idea of religious experience. While I did not find the same rigorous thinking I had grown accustomed to in philosophical literature, I was awakened to the world of myths and symbols. Ironically, thanks to just about everything that I found dissatisfying in Jung's approach, the idea of an *idea* of God thickened and I spent years thereafter trying to sort it all out, in the classroom and in my study.

After several years of teaching at graduate schools in Chicago and Mexico City, I was invited to help start the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya. The conventional wisdom of those with experience in such matters was that learning to read, write, and lecture in Japanese was the largest hurdle. I have to smile now when I think how wrong they were.

A greater challenge by far awaited me, and all the questions I had brought with me, in the writings of the Japanese philosophers whom the Institute director, Jan Van Bragt, persuaded me to read from the first week I took up residence—among them, Nishida Kitarō and others of his circle.

For the first few years, as my reading picked up pace and I branched further out into commentaries on the works of the Kyoto School, I had to question my initial sentiments regarding the superiority of Western philosophy as I knew it. At first, each time leading scholars in the field would pay homage to this group of thinkers, I tried to hold my tongue at what seemed to me the almost epidemic ignorance of the great variety of Western philosophy—not just a handful of ancient and nineteenth-century thinkers, but the whole of the field , including its gnostic, mystical, hermetic, alchemical, and literary branches. Even as I discovered that this was not the case, particularly in the case of Nishida, there was

something else not quite right. I remember, in the thick of it, stumbling upon a story in the ancient Chinese classic, *Strategies of Warring States*:

> It seems that a certain Ji-liang who, hearing that his master, the Lord of Wei, intended to launch an attack against the capital city of Handan, interrupted his journey and rushed back to the palace. Dusty and disheveled, he threw himself at the feet of the Lord of Wei, and eager to convince him that he would not become a true leader by trying to enlarge his kingdom at the expense of others, told his lord this story:
>
> I met a man in Daxing Mountains. His chariot was facing north and he told me that he was going to Chu. "But if you want to go to Chu," I asked him, "why are you headed north?"
>
> "I have a good horse," he told me.
>
> "Your horse may be good, but that does not make this the road to Chu," I replied.
>
> "I have plenty of provisions," he retorted.
>
> "However great your provisions, this is still not the way to Chu," I insisted.
>
> "Ah," but he replied, "my charioteer is first-rate."
>
> "The stronger your horse, the better equipped you are, the more skillful your driver," I told him, "the further you will end up away from where you want to go."[1]

I have to smile now when I think how wrong I was.

My respect for Kyoto School philosophers, including what they had to say about God, grew when I realized that I was mistaken about where they were headed. What I had missed in my preoccupation with their use of resources I was familiar with was their orientation. I had assumed they were using the same roads but headed in the wrong direction, when in fact their geography of the philosophical path was drawn very differently. Even Nishida's idea of God in his *Inquiry into the Good*, as naïve a critique as one can find anywhere, held a different place in his questioning than it held in the questioning of the Western authors I had grown up reading. It was *I* who was headed in the wrong direction with all my equipment because I could not imagine any other destination than the one I had been educated in. It was not the nature of reality that drove Nishida but the nature of what Buddhism called the enlightened mind and its experience of reality. If this question were asked in Western philosophy, it was

1.Taken from『戦国策』安釐王, 712 (富山房刊『戦国策正解』).

asked at the fringes and piecemeal. Even so, there was nothing I knew to compare with Nishida's voyage to the heart of the awakened mind.

The possibility of a different mapping of the mind and its relationship to truth meant that my own questions about God might be in need of questioning and perhaps reframing. At the same time, I hold out the possibility of developing Nishida's idea of God a step further than he had been able to take it. I say this not only because Nishida never quite figured out where to fit God into his scheme or what kind of reality it was a name for, but because philosophies East and West find themselves faced with questions that go far beyond using each other's resources to answer their respective questions: questions that tug at the heart of the philosophical vocation itself.

Not everything Nishida wrote about God belongs formally to his philosophy. His lecture notes are clearly full of references to ideas that he explained or referred to without ever espousing them or relating them to his own ideas. In his writings, it is a little harder to know what to do with passing remarks, asides, or other isolated phrases. Reading his earlier works in light of the later might suggest that an idea had been stewing for some time before it ripened, but not always. *Inquiry into the Good* is a good example. He himself knew it was full of half-ideas strung along on a flimsy thread. Some of these ideas blossomed, some withered, but there is no way to predict what he would have done with them in advance. Similarities in phrasing are one thing. To claim that the earlier ideas are seeds of the later is very different. What I am trying to say is that the idea of tracing the growth of Nishida's thought from his first writings to his last is far from a straight line. It has sidetracks, changes of direction, even reversals. Far from being a negative, this is a sign that the vague goal he had in mind to explain—a critical explanation of the enlightened mind—was stronger than any particular route to it.

The idea of God is a peculiar part of this picture. As I said, Nishida could not shake free of the idea even though it never played a significant role in his thought. Somehow, he felt he *had* to come to terms with it. The question is, Why? He was not prepared to side with any of the ideas of God he had met in Western authors, and he knew that it did not have a key role to play in East Asian intellectual history. And then there is the more obvious problem. As with Tanabe and Nishitani, Nishida's idea of God—at least from his middle years—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 Nishida 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 par-

ticularity that opens out onto the wider field of questions to which I wish this lecture 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, Nishida realized that faint 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. Yet even this was not enough of a reason.

Nishida never answered his own question, preferring to refine his earlier comments in light of later developments in his thinking and as his familiarity with Western ideas on the subject grew more sophisticated with time. Earlier criticisms were allowed to fall away without retractions. In *Inquiry* he says that God is not an old man with a beard who lives in the sky but rather the foundation of the cosmos, in which every unity is an expression of God, and the unity of human consciousness attests to the presence of a divine personality at the heart of the cosmos. Fragments of the idea were to survive in later writings, but the turn to absolute nothingness would alter everything.

The most important question about God in Western philosophy, and one debated with great animus, is that of God's existence or non-existence. Obviously, he was not going to submit his philosophy to the logic of faith by endorsing any version of Aquinas' or Anselm's arguments. His most obvious choice was outright atheism, dismissing belief in God as a simple delusion, an intermittently useful superstition with no basis in reality. Nishida could also have weighed in on the matter by taking the safe road of agnosticism and declared himself with those who avoided the question as unanswerable. Then there was Pascal's wager that belief in God was a safe bet "just in case" the unprovable turned out to be true. Any of these options would have freed Nishida from having to fold God into his unfolding thought. He took none of them. Nor did he ever explain why. He just kept pulling God into the picture at every major turn without giving the philosophical date over God's existence a second thought.

Of all the explanations that suggest themselves, it seems most likely to me that Nishida *did* entertain an unexpressed view about the ontological status of God, namely, as a symbol around which a great deal of philosophical thought had accumulated that might be siphoned off for his own purposes. Seeing God as a symbol had two advantages. First of all, it need only exist in the minimal sense in which any great idea is said to "exist"; and second, its meaning is inherently flexible and inexhaustible. I do not see any evidence in Nishida's writings that contradicts this view and indeed find it reinforced at every turn.

The tendency in modern psychology to adopt a similar stance that straddles atheism and agnosticism, recognizing the power and utility of the God-image

while refusing to subscribe to a transcendent being corresponding to that image runs contemporaneously with Nishida. It is hard to know how aware he was of its early spillover into philosophy, though evidence of any serious knowledge of advances in symbolic theory and hermeneutics, let alone psychology of the unconscious, is lacking. No matter. What concerns me here is how he interpreted the image of God and what use it might be to us today.

I begin with two preliminary conclusions on the matter, not all of which there is time to defend here.

First, if all references to God were erased from Nishida's *Collected Works*, it would not affect the stability of his overall structure of thought. At the same time, without some other stimulus to expand his thought to cosmic proportions that came from including God as a "spiritual fact," Nishida's thinking would have turned out quite differently.

Second, there is no single, uniform idea of God to be found in Nishida. We would be poorer off if there were. Precisely because his idea of God was symbolic, his attempts to insert it at each stage of his development meant that it could take on new meanings.

This symbolic ambiguity and continued renovation suggests that dominant ideas of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition have something important to learn from Nishida. On one hand, to enter into Nishida's world of thought is a stimulus to draw forgotten aspects of that tradition closer to the center and liberate them from the fringes where mysticism and hermeticism have long languished in exile as heretical. On the other hand, already from Nishida's early writings, diaries, lecture notes, and letters we find additional stimulus to expose that tradition to the demands of a new perspective. Before turning to that problem, however, I would like to draw a hasty sketch of the various elements of Nishida´s God as they unfolded over the course of his life.

In a letter dated 1909, Nishida speaks of God as Western philosophy's equivalent of "self-awareness." As a young man he had been attracted by "self-awareness" movements in Europe and wrote a short essay about it, but he found them too pessimistic and too infatuated with the very ego that the no-self of Zen aimed to overcome. The self-awareness he was trying to express rationally as pure experience could only be sustained, he wrote, by a "great self-awareness equal to God."[2] In his lectures on religion begun in 1913, we find a whole section

2. 1909, 19: 163. Nishida's works are cited with the date of publication, followed by the volume and page number in his *Collected Works*, 『西田幾多郎全集』 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002–2009), 24 vols.

of his notes devoted to God. While the fragments are choppy, they demonstrate the extraordinary breadth of reading that lay behind the first organized treatment he would give God in the pages of *Inquiry into the Good*.[3]

Although not formally giving God or Buddha that status of an Absolute, he attributes to each "absolute power," in contrast to the power of human beings which is "finite" and "relative." What unites the finite and the infinite is an inborn, cosmic urge to unite.[4] Five years later, at the end of his *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, he absorbs that urge into a larger idea he was experimenting with: that of an absolute will acting with "absolute freedom." Buddha is gone from the picture, but there is one odd passing reference to an acausal nothingness, a spiritual reality beyond subject and object, an absolute "desire" or will, fusion of being and non-being reflected in the idea of God.[5] This sounds like a paraphrase of the treatment of God in *Inquiry.* There remains no question of a creative, provident, other-worldly transcendent, self-sufficient being who caused the world into existence, only the very God he had earlier decided was the equivalent of the enlightened mind. At the same time, Nishida felt the need to elevate the role of the cosmic urge to awakening by assigning it the status of a "divine will." Years later, at the reprint of the book, he dismissed the idea as having "capitualted to the enemy camp of mysticism."[6]

One element of his reformulation of the God idea after *Inquiry*, however, did survive, an attribute taken over early on from the image of the Christian God, namely love. Nishida could have made an allusion to Buddhist compassion, but he prefers to use the word *love* to express the idea that "it is only by actual conscious bonding with the outer world that we arrive at the true self.[7]

In the years to come, all of Nishida's reflections on the God of Western philosophy would mature into an idea of absolute nothingness which would then be the touchstone for all future reference to the absolute. Throughout it all, as far as I know, he never seemed even to hint at a direct equivalence between absolute nothingness and God, who was associated with a Western notion of an absolute being, which he was trying to supersede.

That said, Nishida *did* attempt to subsume the idea of God into both no-self or the abandonment of self and into the metaphysical reality of nothingness.

3. Cf. 2013, 14: 109–35.

4. 1911, 1: 133, 151, 158..

5. See 1917, 2: 241–52. The remark that "being is born of nothingness" (248) appears to be a direct quotation from a book of Hermann Cohen's that he was reading at the time and which Joseph O'Leary has tracked down. See Nishida 1917, 183. The point here is only to dismiss a causal relationship between the experience of self-awareness and the natural world. Soon thereafter, however, he will state more directly that "the true I stands on the edge of being and nothingness" (1919, 2: 389).

6. 1941, CW 2: 3.

7. 1920, 2: 286, 289, 291, 326–7, 376–7, 387–9, 420, 426.

Simply put, he framed the God-man relationship as a metaphor of the relationship between nothingness and no-self, as when no-self is compared to submission to the will of God.[8] Already in 1905 he had stated something similar in his private notes: "The true religious relationship between the human and the divine is an entry into the realm of no-self. It is to abandon self absolutely and turn to God."[9]

It was there from the start, but gradually it became clear that it was not that self-awareness was participation in God's reality, but that God was a symbol of self-awareness. The God who had once united being and non-being is subservient to "the true I stands on the edge of being and nothingness."[10]

I am tempted to trace all of this through what I know of his writings, but this would bore all but the specialist to tears. But there is one final curiosity I would point to. Until his late writings, Nishida by and large avoided Buddhist terminology in favor of a new philosophical vocabulary of his own device. Rather than speak of "no-self" he spoke of "seeing without a seer" and "overcoming the subject/object dichotomy." Instead of "enlightenment" he spoke of "self-awareness." Instead of emptiness or *śūnyatā*, he preferred "nothingness." The equivalence is not in doubt, but the change in vocabulary allowed him to approach his questions philosophically rather than in the context of East Asian Buddhist thought.

There was no such equivalent for "God," a word he used from his earliest writings to his latest. Clearly the term was ultimately untranslatable—and undefinable— for him, a symbolic marker of a gap that he was not able to fill. Perhaps no other concept in Nishida's thought is as pliant to its context and as amorphous to reason as *God.*

Against this background, when we read Nishida's claim that in love God and the self unite to form a *coincidentia oppositorum,* we may conclude that when the *I* is converted to a great *I* that transcends the *I,* self and God are swept up into a nothingness beyond being where they can no longer be distinguished. This is like the *unio mystica.*

Nishida likens getting stuck in the awakened mind without bonding to the world to being absorbed into the universal, all-seeing eye of God, a statement that we may now infer he intends to apply as well to an enlightenment that does not return to serve the enlightenment of others.

In short, within the landscape of absolute nothingness, the true self of self-awareness and God are functionally indistinguishable and therefore in *direct*

8. 1905, 14: 546–7.
9. See 1905, 16: 216–7; 14: 104.
10. 1919, 2: 389.

correlation. For Nishida to relate God to nothingness, however, he must ignore talk of God as an *object* for the religious *subject*. Self-awareness in nothingness is longer awareness *of* anything. Along with everything it once contained, it is now in a place where there is nothing to see or anyone to see it. The language of a self standing *before God* and God standing *over the world* has been transcended—but only at the *ideal* level. In the historical world, the opposition between God and self, between ideal and fact, is a real part of human experience. The two must be mutually defining, or as Nishida has it in his last essay, in *inverse* correlation: the further apart the poles of the opposition, the stronger the correlation and the identity of the things correlated. This does not imply a bond between beings. It functions more like a bond between a being and an ideal, which then fuse in the final negation of both, that is, when they are inset in the absolute of nothingness.

To repeat, Nishida does not justify a simple equation of God and absolute nothingness, as if they were two names—one Christian and one crypto-Buddhist—for the same thing. As we saw, Nishida's earlier association of absolute will with God had hinted at a kind of creative force straddling being and nonbeing, a combination of Bergson's *élan vital* and a Fichtean *I* writ large. These positions were at least marginally compatible with Christian thought and also concur with the position he takes in *Inquiry into the Good,* where God is seen as "the ground of all unifying activity in the universe." In the end, he broke abandoned that view through a rather abstract chain of ideas. Bear with me as I rush through his argument. I do so because I believe the break was unsuccessful and at the same time suggests a new way for the Judeo-Christian tradition to speak of God.

In his final essay Nishida states at the outset that "Without God, there is no religion."[11] The context makes it clear that he understands *religion* as a type of experience within the historical world that straddles the borderlands with absolute nothingness. To see being as the final universal in which God is set as an objective transcendence, and the world as immanent, would therefore amount to a "denial of religion itself."[12] With that qualification, Nishida can still argue that the God of absolute being who stands opposed to relative beings is indispensable to religion because the ultimate absolute of nothingness is only absolute in virtue of enveloping everything that is only relatively absolute. God is such a relative absolute precisely because the divine is only divine in its relation to what is not divine. This self-contradictory nature of God means that *God is only God in self-negation*, or that it is only as an absolute being that the

11. 1945, 10: 296.
12. 945, 10: 364. On the following page he calls this way of thinking "anachronistic."

idea of God can be embraced within the idea of absolute nothingness. But the same is true of the self that comes to its true nature only in denying itself, like the *kenotic*, self-emptying nature of the Godhead.[13] This is the exact inverse of grounding the affirmation of self in belief in a self-sustaining God. For Nishida, the self is a point at which the self-contradictory nature of the divine is projected into reality, transcending good and evil, angel and devil.[14]

The "reality" Nishida has in mind for God is not the realm of objective fact but the realm of "spiritual fact." It is not an external realm towards which the self directs its reason and desire in search of higher meaning; it means paying attention to something that has been there all along "in the inner recesses of the mind." Nishida insists that negating the reasons and desires of the self does not mean slipping into an unconscious state or losing one's identity in a formless One, but becoming "more clearly conscious" as the inner recesses of the self become more intelligible."

The only sense in which God can be said to *become* absolute nothingness is as a final negation of the absoluteness of the Godhead, which is to say, in the radical affirmation of its relativity to the world. Yet Nishida's God is not a transcendent, omniscient, self-sustaining being or a creative cosmic force at work in a pantheistic or panentheistic sense. Only as a spiritual creativity does God become a proper focus of religious faith. As a living "ideal," God cannot not be absolute in itself but only in forfeiting its absoluteness to the relativity of its realization in time and space. The same must be said of the true self: it *becomes* absolute nothingness only in negating the relativity of its relationship to the ideal of full self-awareness.[15] Only in realizing the ideal of true selfhood is the dichotomy between God and self overcome. Consequently, God can only be understood as absolute nothingness when God forfeits Godhead and is united with the true self, and vice versa.

As I have been saying all along, it was not simply out of a sense of loyalty to Western philosophy that Nishida spoke again and again of God. To the last, the idea of God performed a function that neither absolute nothingness nor true self were able to. Now I have no problem with this, but it avoids an important metaphysical rethinking of God. For those who do not need to *believe* in God but only to incorporate the attributes and functions of the God idea—or at least to decide what to do with them—the metaphysical status of the Christian God does not matter. They can pick and choose and leave the rest aside.

13. See, for example, 1945, 10: 333, 335, 347–8, 361.
14. 1945, 10: 321, 324.
15. 1945, 10: 315–6.

As a mere mental ideal, God is able to yield to symbolic representation as perfect love or perfect freedom and yet remain open to the negation of all representation. God could as well serve to symbolize fulfillment of the self's desire for awakening as to expose that fulfillment as a permanently receding goal. The problem is that an ideal that is not grounded metaphysically in the real is always able to be dismissed as a superstition or a delusion.

Nishida's way around this is to assert that even if the universal ideal of no-mind does not exist objectively in the world, that does not mean that it simply transcends the world. It is a spiritual ideal that only becomes real in the negation of its status as an ideal. This is something we can call "no-mind," which is not irrational but a higher rationality in which, as he says, the mind "*becomes* the self of things and of God."[16] This affirmation-in-negation is enlightenment, the self that has seen its true nature as a no-self inset within the ultimate, absolute, all-encompassing universal of nothingness.[17]

Here Nishida draws a clear connection between Buddha and God. Like Buddha, the only way that God can embrace the multitude of created beings is as a universal ideal becoming real through the self-negation of being projected into the concrete experience of individual minds. Both are like a circle whose center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere.[18] In both cases, the self and its ideas of the absolute are relatives set within the historical world as spiritual facts. In nothingness, their distinction is erased. In the world of time and space, the ideal and the real are always mutually defining contradictories, but it is only in absolute nothingness that "things are as they are" and that "we see the real God where there is no God,"[19] no Buddha, and no self. With that, the guiding image of a "great self-awareness equivalent to God" is exposed as a philosophical expression of an "enlightenment equivalent to Buddha."

Nishida is aware that all this has strayed rather far from traditional ideas of God. Two pages from the end of his final essay he raises the unusual suggestion that it may be time for Christianity to break its ties with the God of objective transcendence and open up to a new mode of religion that thinks in terms of transcending oneself immanently, within the world. He then poses the rhetorical question: "From today's world-historical standpoint, will Buddhism have nothing to contribute to a new age?" So long as it remains bound to the specific

16. 1940, 9: 230. The term *no-mind*, or later *Oriental no-mind*, appears often in Nishida's writings as an expression of annulling the self, but care should be taken not to narrow it to any particular Buddhist meaning.

17. 1945, 10: 353.

18. 1945, 10: 316.. Nishida attributes the phrase to Cusanus, apparently unaware of the source of the image in the medieval pseudo-hermetic text, *Liber XXIV philosophorum*.

19. 1945, 10: 363. Nishida uses the Buddhist term *jinen hōni* 自然法爾 to express the idea of things as they are in their true nature.

historical condition that it was shaped in, he added, Buddhism will be "no more than a relic of the past." But if it can regain its universal character, ideas like immanent transcendence might prove valuable for the self-understanding of Christianity, provided of course it had "a thoroughgoing rational foundation."[20] Nishida was convinced that his own logic of *place* (*basho*) had an essential role to play in making room on both counts.

Nishida had all the pieces for a metaphysic of God. He just didn't know how to put them all together, or at least he never wanted to. But if he is going to suggest that the classical God be removed from Christianity in favor of Buddhist enlightenment, his talk of Christianity's "opening up a new mode of religion" becomes empty. I would like to suggest another tack.

I do not dispute the thrust of Nishida's conclusion about the God idea in Christianity. My whole life has been moving me in that direction. But "removal" is too vague and reactionary. Is there not another way to assemble the pieces of Nishida's kaleidoscope of ideas to rethink the Christian God? If so, this would help counter the idea that his philosophy is just for private. I believe that it not only aids in my personal search for an image of God coincident with our contemporary understanding of the place of human beings in the world, but also a contribution to Japanese philosophy.

In taking this on, I have no intention of leveling criticisms against Nishida's understanding of the God of Western philosophy and religion. There is much he did not appreciate in terms of theology, scriptural imagery, ordinary piety, and mystical thought and experience, not to mention the variety of philosophical interpretations of the idea of God. The diminished importance he gave to the figure of Jesus except as an embodiment of God's love deprived him of a valuable source of inspiration for his later thought, particularly his final essay. This is a lacuna that his disciple Nishitani Keiji would later step up to fill impressively. In any case, my interest in Nishida's idea of God is not to set the historical record straight on one or the other point or to highlight logical inconsistencies. I am interested because I think what he wrote is *genuinely useful* for a broader discussion of God.

I begin with three interlocking insights of Nishida's and two oversights.

First, Nishida spoke of the world as a "continuity of discontinuities." Life gets its meaning from human perception and experience, which are by nature finite and discontinuous, but discontinuity implies the idea of continuity. Things that

20. 1945, 10: 365–6.

exist and work are connected to one another not as an unbroken, rational chain but as a continuity of discontinuities."[21] Each and every entity in the world is drawn in two directions at the same time: on one hand, to continuity and rationality; on the other, to discontinuity and irrationality.[22] In other words, pure continuity exists only at the level of abstract reason; in the historical world, the only continuity is a continuity of discontinuities.

Second, the idea of a final, all-encompassing universal that Nishida pursued throughout his philosophy was not that of a uniform quality that defined the whole of reality. While he never explicitly broke with the classical philosophical vision of an *unus mundus*, his speculations suggested a description of reality as a series of ever larger concentric circles, each of them marked by internal inconsistencies or discontinuities that called out for resolution at a higher level. His goal was to reach the outermost circle of nothingness that nothing else could contain and that was itself a pure continuity. Far from imposing any uniform quality on the world of relative universals, final, absolute universality was the ground of the radical and irradicable pluralism of being. The historical world was not one, it was a dialectic of opposing forces, or what Nishida liked to call a "unity of absolute contradictories."[23] In the end, the universal was not a "uniformity" but a "commons" that made room for everything and its opposite.

This flows naturally into the third insight, namely that absolute universality was not to be found in the world of being and becoming but only in the world of nothingness. He spoke of the world as the "self-limitation of nothingness," meaning that nothingness is a kind of power that works out its own identity by transforming itself into the things of the world. It is the continuity that is revealed indirectly by the omnipresence of discontinuities.[24] This nothingness quickly rose to the status of an absolute more satisfying than the absolute he had met in German philosophy.

For Nishida, none of these insights relies on the idea of God, not even his own variations on that idea. But I believe there is an important link to be made. To do so, I have first to free these ideas from their native context and adjust Nishida's vocabulary accordingly. I trust the associations will be self-evident.

To begin with, I suggest we speak of the "connected" and "disconnected" rather than of "continuity" and "discontinuity." The context for this change of vocabulary is best made clear by an example. One day, around dusk, I stood and looked outside my research office window at a tree where small birds were fluttering about. As the light inside my room began to outshine the light coming

21. 1916 2: 100.
22. 1935 7: 15, 22.
23. 1945 10: 348, where he put the 2 in apposition.
24. 1935, 5:7.

in from outside, I could see my own reflection mirrored in the same window through which I was looking at the tree, the one image superimposed over the other. It was almost as if I myself were suspended in the tree and the birds were landing and taking off from my head and shoulders. Then it struck me: I am *connected* to the tree, not just as a subject perceiving an object, but I am *really* connected to it, no less than the tree is connected to the ground and the birds and the other trees… and indeed to everything, everywhere. I mean that literally, not metaphorically. Granted my connection was stronger and more direct than that of a jar of jam on the shelf in a grocery store in Paris, if it is possible to travel from my office to Paris, by whatever roundabout way, there *must* be a connection. And that goes for everything from here to the outer reaches of the outermost universe. Light itself could not travel through outer space if that universal connectivity were broken at some point.

But now, my connection to the tree, which is fairly direct even if only visual, is also fairly short-lived. But no matter how immediate and intense, all connection is still only "relative." To be sure, there are degrees of relativity. My connection here to this podium and to all of you will last, more or less directly, for a short time and then fade. On the other hand, our joint connection to, say, the giant centipedes of the Amazon rainforest is very thin and even at the microbiotic level all but immeasurable with our current technology. Yet in both cases there is something *equally non-relative* at work here. These connections *cannot* disappear altogether—ever. There is no way anything that exists can cut itself off from the fact of universal connectivity and still be said to exist. This connectivity is not just accidental. It is essential. Darwin wrote that, "Nothing exists for itself alone, but only in relation to other forms of life." But we must add, "only in relation to everything else that exists." This might seem to take us back to the same abstract language we were trying to escape. Still, we must reach higher before we return to the everyday.

At this point, there is no reasonable argument for positing an "ultimate reality" that holds the world of being and becoming together, or some transcendent agent who keeps this tangle of relationships working together. As comforting as it has been for human beings to imagine a caste of higher beings like us in all things but our imperfections and defects, there is no need for such a leap just yet.

Now even though Nishida himself did not identify God and absolute nothingness, I believe that we now have a way to draw a clearer line than he could.

To begin with, we have to ask if there is anything that is connected to everything else directly and all the time. Obviously, it would not be a "thing" like all the things that make up the universe since their identity is defined as a particularized web of relations. The only thing that could fulfill this demand

is *connectedness* itself. It is revealed in everything that exists and only exists in that revelation. It is, quite literally in line with Nishida's thinking, an indeterminate, unqualified nothingness. If beings in the world are real because they are a manifestation of nothingness, then connectedness is what grounds their reality. It is, I believe, a more suitable and suggestive notion than that of a great chain of being that extends from inanimate matter to the human. Moreover, this means that nothingness cannot be "absolute" in the sense of being cut off in its essence from all beings, but only "absolutely relative" in the sense that it differs from the reality of things by being directly and permanently present in all things that make up the world.

Next, there seems no way to associate a supreme Being with nothingness without falling into contradiction. But if we describe God in terms of connectedness, then "divine being" would be the philosophical equivalent of that whose essence is to be absolutely related to everything all the time, replacing the longstanding scholastic idea of God as a Being whose essence is pure being. To make God a name for nothingness would relate him to beings not as a *primus inter pares* but as that which the totality of existence reveals to be its common, metaphysical ground.

Before we address the question of whether or not this drains the life's blood from the idea of God, we need to indicate why such a shift needs to be made. Simply put, *very simply put,* moral and religious systems of thought and belief that define God as essentially personal are the mirror image of the idea that the primary spiritual concern of persons is with their own wellbeing and "salvation." The idea of God becomes tethered to the short history of human consciousness, as if all previous history were meaningful primarily as a prelude to human existence, and the history of our individual human lives were meaningful primarily as a prelude to an afterlife continuous with our own individuality. It should be obvious that any spirituality that puts interpersonal relationship with God at the center of moral action easily falls into collusion with blindness about what we, collectively and individually, have done to our planet and continue doing while we eke out our private salvation. My suggestion is that the idea of a personal Supreme Being be nudged out of the center of religions professing belief in God and replaced with a God who is revealed in the connectedness of our lives and of everything that surrounds us. It is not that the image of a personal God is a meaningless superstition, but only that its meaning is neither central nor literal. We are not moved to moral action and the betterment of the world by ideas like nothingness and connectedness. They need to become concrete, symbolic, and woven into the stuff of daily life, as meaningful superstitions. The proposal that we reject any but our own symbolic frame of

reference as superstition is naïve; the counter proposal that we dispense with all superstition seems to me spiritually suicidal.

The proposal to rebuild the image of God as a spiritual fact that can give meaning to life and morality by thinking in terms of connectedness rather than the traditional God of being is prompted by Nishida's logic of nothingness. As for the actual rebuilding, we can expect little help from Nishida's own writings. There are supporting fragments of ideas scattered across the Judeo-Christian tradition, not only mystical, hermetic, alchemical, and gnostic, but also in mainstream theology. It is time we gathered them up and moved them to the center of the religious worldview where they can answer the living questions that more and more are asking about their place on this ailing planet.

My braiding of three ideas from Nishida—the continuity of discontinuity, the contradictory nature of a pluralistic world, and a nothingness that defines itself in the world of being and becoming—has already hinted at what I called earlier his "oversights."

Nishida's philosophy, from beginning to end, is a philosophy centered on human consciousness. No matter how much the subject of self-awareness is dimmed, the fact of self-awareness is the pivot of human life and history. The self-aware, awakened individual standing alone before the final *basho* of all *basho*, the unbounded darkness of absolute nothingness, and then turning around to return to the relative *basho* of human life and history with a heightened sense of compassion, is the goal of the philosopher's quest. The far older but now broken and sickly planet that is our home is not just one more philosophical universal embraced by nothingness. It is the very condition for the possibility of human life, civilization, and philosophy itself. When it is in danger, the short evolutionary experiment with human consciousness is in danger of coming to an end. I admit I do not see any place to graft these concerns naturally onto the corpus of Nishida's ideas, but I do believe they can help restore flow to ideas that have grown stagnant for want of attention to the questions that philosophers are asking today.

A second oversight has to do with the notion of desire. On emerging from his struggles with neo-Kantian thought and the conundrum of a self trying to know itself, Nishida was tempted by ideas of a cosmic impulse or will or instinct driving the world and human beings within it. Traces of the idea of an "urge" to reality surface intermittently in *Inquiry into the Good*. But never quite as explicitly. This was the same time he began to consider nothingness a replacement for the metaphysical ground of being. Before the relationship of nothingness and desire could be made, however, he let go of any role for desire in his philosophical schemes. This, too, I consider an oversight, particularly as it relates to what we have been saying about God. That is to say, in suggesting supreme

connectedness as preferable to supreme Being as a philosophical description of God, I am affirming a dynamic to nothingness. It is not necessary to see a *telos* or *design* but by its nature connectedness entails something like an innate urge or desire built into all things to perpetually connect with what is around them. In other words, if connectedness is universal—indeed, the universal of all universals—it is so not in virtue of the abstract notion but in virtue of the dynamic of connecting occurring everywhere with everything.

Calling this dynamic *desire* is not merely a romantic gesture, but a deliberate rooting of human desire, the primary analogy, with the fundamental force of reality. Religion and morality have their birth in that desire and owe it the reverence owed what is truly divine about reality. Put the other way around the desire for union with the divine is a human variation of the desire that moves all things. In that sense, God and the desire for God are ultimately indistinguishable. As the evidence for connectedness transforms our thought and our sense of right and wrong, the desire for God is transfigured from the desire for personal salvation of a spiritual soul to a desire for the protection of the rich, contradictory, haphazard of plurality that we experience as the world.

From Nishida, then, I have learned to imagine the fulfillment of human consciousness as awakening to the universal continuity that manifests itself as the contradictory unity of the world of being and becoming. From doubts about traditional theology raised against the backdrop of a shameless degradation of the earth in the name of civilization, I have learned to imagine God differently. From what I have said here today, it should be obvious that I think these two lessons are front and back of the same truth.