

# The Metanoetics of Inter-Religious Encounter

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## I

In an address given at the Nanzan Institute in Nagoya and subsequently published in the collection *God and Absolute Nothingness*, Nishitani Keiji raises the modern problem of universality and uniqueness for inter-religious encounter.<sup>1</sup> Introducing his remarks, Nishitani highlights the problem of fruitful dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity as especially perplexing, due to the fact that both religious traditions constitute separate “worlds” (世界) capable of responding to the entire human being as a universal and exhaustively meaningful “world religion.” Historically, although both Buddhism and Christianity emerged from narrow ethnically and geographically determined cultural contexts within Palestine and Northern India, in their maturity these traditions have not only provided the spiritual foundations for ecumenic civilizations but also religious visions of a universal humanity that is the progeny of these civilizations. Reminiscent somewhat of Jaspers and Voegelin,<sup>2</sup> Nishitani notes that in the world religions, we witness the emergence of the *humanum* as such (*ningen toshite ningen* 人間として人間) out

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1 Nishitani Keiji, 仏教における「向上」の立場 [“The Standpoint of ‘Ascent’ in Buddhism”] in *絶対無と神* [God and Absolute Nothingness] (Toyo:Shunūsha, 1981) 150-80.

2 For Karl Jaspers, see *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1949). For Eric Voegelin, see *Order and History*, Vol. 1-4 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954-1974).

of local ethnicities. Perplexingly, these world religions hold out differing images of what it is to be human. It is this historical fact that is in urgent need of interpretation today.<sup>3</sup>

The rise of the world religions corresponds to the geographical diffusion of interpretations of the human situation which are no longer restricted ethnically: universal paradigms for ethical action, artistic creativity, political expediency and religious realization, which potentially, at least, are capable of encompassing and sustaining every human being. Today, the spread of these universalisms has progressed to the point of a crisis, not sufficiently recognized, but a crisis all the same. Nishitani conceives of it as a problem of “universality” and “uniqueness.” In a way which is without precedent in their separate histories, Buddhists and Christians can no longer regard the universality of their respective religious traditions as unique and unparalleled. This is a new fact for us today, a fact which increasingly should alter the course of our future self-understanding. As universalisms, world religions are capable of including all human groups within their compass and charging them with the possibility of unlimited religious realization. But in our current period, despite their many features in common, religious universalisms have begun to confront one another with deeply conflicting symbols. Without losing any of their universality, the encounter between world religions calls into question their own claims to unparalleled and unsurpassed uniqueness. Religions, which once experienced themselves as unchallenged universality now experience themselves as relative. What was once the unparalleled has now become rivaled. In past eras, in order to maintain their uniqueness, religious traditions have worked out various strategies for denying other religions. At times, the need for denial becomes violent. After commenting on the violent “collisions” between Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism over the centuries as well as in current events, Nishitani once again affirmed his belief in the increasingly urgent need to interpret the meaning of religious universality anew. Since there is not as yet one world with a unified history and humanity, conflicts of this religious and cultural nature will continue. Nishitani’s gloomy prediction makes inter-religious understanding imperative even as it underscores the difficulty of the problem.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Nishitani, “The Standpoint of ‘Ascent’,” 15 1-52.

4 Nishitani, “The Standpoint of ‘Ascent’,” 153-54.

With Nishitani's concerns regarding religious universality and uniqueness as a backdrop, various strategies for inter-religious dialogue present themselves. I will discuss three options,<sup>5</sup> pretending that they are exhaustive, in the interest of developing Nishitani's concern for universality and uniqueness as well as looking to Tanabe's metanoetic philosophy as a source of insight into the problem.

Clearly, one option available to those engaged in inter-religious dialogue is what might be called "exclusivism." Herein, religious truth is simply identified with the uncompromisable uniqueness of symbols. The symbols of other traditions may be humane and praiseworthy, they may represent sizable human achievements, but they are ultimately inadequate when placed alongside the unique and unsurpassable symbols of one's own tradition. As might be expected in the light of Nishitani's insight into religious universality and uniqueness, this strategy comes easily to world religions precisely because of the universal character of their truths. Universality is equated with unparalleled uniqueness readily and without difficulty. To say the least, this approach has a stultifying effect on inter-religious dialogue. At worst, it leads to what Joseph Kitagawa has dubbed a "simultaneous monologue" between dialogue partners.<sup>6</sup> At best, it trades the danger and creativity of authentic dialogue for the safety of merely clarifying points of academic agreement and difference. Curiously, as much as Nishitani's attention to religious universality helps us to understand why this option comes so easily to committed believers in a world-religion, at the same time, it underscores the fact that the results of this strategy for dialogue are wholly unsatisfactory. Buddhism and Christianity, for instance, despite certain similarities, make profoundly conflicting, yet universal truth-claims. To merely highlight these points of contradiction, and leave it at that, seems to suggest that we are dealing with tribal religions, and not world-religious universalities. Ultimately the problem of universality and uniqueness cannot be placed in abeyance.

A second strategy for dialogue, "syncretism," brings with it its own difficulties. The syncretistic strategy tends to protect the universality

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5 These "options" should not simply be identified with Christian theological options for interpreting non-Christian religions. They represent instead intellectual strategies adopted by Christians and non-Christians alike who are engaged in interreligious dialogue. In this respect, I hope to reflect the spectrum of Christian "theologies of religions" while at the same time doing some justice to non-Christian interpretive patterns as well.

6 Joseph Kitagawa, *The History of Religions* (Atlanta: Scholars' Press, 1987), xix.

of religious truth by sacrificing the uniqueness of the various religious traditions. Often the result is a highly intellectualized pseudo-religious philosophy, which ironically, by being wrenched from a specific cultural context, is no longer truly universal either. In understanding religious universality, we must be attentive not only to the vapors, but to the precipitate as well, for it is distilled from both. Casting aside the strong points and rough edges of a religious tradition in the interest of identifying a putative “lowest common denominator” which unites it with other religious traditions, is to abstract a religion from the cultural specificity which is the basis for concrete religious life. Hegel is the great example of the illusory universality which results from this strategy. Kierkegaard reminds us that demythologizing religious symbols into the abstract language of metaphysics is both a gain and a loss. When compared to the specific existential fullness of a concrete religious tradition, the ersatz universality of metaphysics does not suffice as a basis for an encounter in depth between religions.

A third strategy is “inclusivism.” Often this approach is promoted as a middle ground which avoids the problems attending exclusivism and syncretism. Certainly this strategy has found a following among Christian theologians. Karl Rahner and Paul Tillich, to take two salient examples, argue for a wide understanding of general revelation in which all world religions can be affirmed as salvific, even while Christianity retains the pride of place as the final and definitive revelation.<sup>7</sup> Other religions are to be respected, even honored, for it is the truth of the Christian God revealed there. The inclusivist strategy also has its champions among non-Christians as well. There are Hindus, for instance, who interpret Christianity as a variety of mystical “panentheism” which locates Christianity within the pale of Hindu truth.<sup>8</sup> Once again Nishitani’s views on universality and uniqueness are illuminating. The inclusivist strategy seeks to preserve the uniqueness of one religion without

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7 For Rahner, see *inter alia*, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” *Theological Investigations* Vol. 5 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 115-34. For Tillich, see *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963), Vol. 1, 137-44, 218-30; Vol. 2, 78-88; Vol. 3, 98-106.

8 For instance, the so called “Neo-Hinduism” of Tagore and Radhakrishnan apparently is willing to sacrifice itself as a particular religious tradition (presuming that other religions do the same) in order to be transformed into a new universality, without limitation of culture, cult, dogma, etc. Despite the claim to a pan-religious perspective, the “new religion” being suggested seems rather Hindu all the same. For Radhakrishnan, see *The Hindu View of Life* (Allen and Urwin, 1952-1953). For Tagore, see *The Religion of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

sacrificing the universality of the others. In order to do so, however, it pays the unacceptable price of reducing the significant differences between the world-religions to simply “more of the same.” By domesticating the “otherness” of the world-religions, the menace and threat of religious plurality are likewise rendered harmless.

Nishitani’s views on universality and uniqueness raise one more important issue for dialogue between religions. Today, world religions are not the only movements which offer their own vision of universal humanity and unequaled truth. The Western enlightenment, for instance, claims for itself an interpretation of the human situation which is not only universal and unique but also non-religious. It offers modern human beings not only a mythology (“progress”) and soteriology (“technology”) but an ethics (“pragmatism”) as well. It too presents itself as a universal truth (the cosmic universality of scientific law) whose uniqueness is heralded by its own prophets. The political totalitarianisms of our century must also be included in non-religious (or perhaps more accurately, “quasi-religious”) options for a universal humanity. These non-religious or quasi-religious options constitute an important new factor in the current encounter between religions. Not surprisingly, that this novel situation presents the world-religions with a new mutuality has not been lost on various commentators.<sup>9</sup>

This “new mutuality” might easily be mistaken for the emergence of a new religious universality. Even though this would be premature, a better understanding of the “mutuality” of religions vis-à-vis anti-religious or quasi-religious universalities will no doubt have the beneficial effect of leading our dialogues to a recognition of the need for a renewal of religious commitment and, I think somewhat surprisingly, may lead to a profound distrust of any “easy pluralism” as a solution to the problem of universality and uniqueness among the world religions.<sup>10</sup>

The current situation of religious pluralism confronts us with a Janus-faced dilemma. In order to overcome the violence linked to the

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9 In this respect, to deny a specifically religious meaning to National Socialism in Germany, the Stalinist brand of Marxist-Leninism in the Soviet Union and State Shinto in Japan is to misinterpret these political phenomena systematically.

10 For instance, the problem of anti-religious ideologies is the paramount concern of Paul Tillich on the question of Christianity and the encounter with world religions. This has also been a recurring theme in the writing of Abe Masao. For Tillich, see *Christianity and the Encounter with World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963). For Abe see, *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 23 1-75.

profound differences separating religions, we are menaced by the loss of our own religion's uniqueness. Ecumenical tolerance is purchased at the terrible cost of religious relativism. More frighteningly, our century offers abundant examples of an unwelcome relativism leading to the eruption of the demonic. Intolerance is often preceded by an easy pluralism. The fanaticism of Iran's "Islamic Republic," the "Christian America" envisioned by the extreme religious right in the United States, and "Protestant Ulster" are all signs of an intolerable pluralism and the religious and cultural relativity which results from it. It is a peculiar truth that fanaticism and fundamentalism cannot be successfully resisted with more relativism. Only by the assertion of ultimate values can extremism be confronted. For adherents of the world religions, this means that the total world of meaning that the fanatic would impose by violence can be countered only by means of a religiously grounded commitment. What is more, the commitment required arises from within the believer's own religious "world" of values, symbols, loyalties and traditions. Without such commitment to a specific tradition, religiously grounded resistance to fanaticism is diluted by the relativism which gives rise to the fanaticism in the first place.

Recognition of this fact leads to a paradoxical conclusion: in order to respond responsibly and creatively to the current situation of religious pluralism, both a certain type of relativism and a certain type of uncompromised commitment are required. Religious traditions must be understood in terms of a paradoxical juxtaposition of relativity and absoluteness. As the violence of religious plurality leads us in the direction of ecumenical cooperation and tolerance, so also it requires us to re-assert forcefully the religious symbols specific to our tradition. In order to be religious, concretely, existentially and historically, especially given the atrocities of non-religious and religious fanaticism today, we need a standpoint of ultimate concern, an absolute standpoint from which to believe and act. At the same time, this absolute standpoint must be relativized if it is not to become yet another odious fanaticism. We need to envision with one another, as concretely as possible, new interpretations of our differing religious traditions as "paradoxical universalities" and as "relative absolutes."<sup>11</sup>

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11 In addressing himself to this same issue, Langdon Gilkey uses the phrase "relative absoluteness." See his "Plurality and its Theological Implications" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 37-50, esp. 44-46, 47.

## II

It is not inaccurate to say that Tanabe was concerned throughout his life with the problem of universality and uniqueness. For instance, along with his older colleague Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe felt deeply the dilemma faced by Meiji Japan in attempting to import western technology while seeking to maintain its indigenous religious-cultural synthesis. The problem of an untenable religious and philosophical pluralism forms one of the earliest and most forceful motivations of the Kyoto School. Even more directly to the point, Tanabe's "logic of species" reflects his concern with absolute truth and its concrete embodiment in cultural specificities.<sup>12</sup> In the measure that his metanoetic philosophy grows out of his earlier concern with "species," the logic of "absolute mediation" as well can be related to the issue of cultural and religious pluralism.

I am going to offer an interpretation of Tanabe's metanoetic philosophy as a helpful way to clarify the metaphysical underpinnings of the "relative absolute" introduced above. The hope that lies behind this strategy is that metanoetics might better illuminate our understanding of the "paradoxical universality" of the world religions today.

At the center of Tanabe's metanoetic philosophy is his notion of "absolute mediation." I believe that Tanabe's insistence that there is no unmediated absolute addresses Nishitani's concerns about modern religious pluralism. Not only does Tanabe recognize the metaphysical possibility of a "relative absolute," he also understands it as a religious event that is historical, concrete, ethically mediated and existentially transforming. The former point helps us in developing a creative interpretation of the pluralistic situation of world religions today. The latter point might have something to teach us about the praxis of inter-religious dialogue. Since the absolute has no unmediated existence or reality in any sense, it cannot be known immediately apart from the relative. Therefore taking Tanabe seriously will require a fundamental re-evaluation of the absolute truth-claims of religious traditions. This re-evaluation will include the status of religious language, the phenomenology of symbols and the hermeneutics of texts. I also believe that it will require a new understanding of the universality and uniqueness of the world-religions. These factors suggest Tanabe's *zange-dō* as a possible model for creatively guiding the encounter between religions.

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<sup>12</sup> Tanabe suggests as much in the final chapter of *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, trans. by Takeuchi Yoshinori (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 269.

Two points are especially important to the question at hand. First, according to Tanabe's metanoetic philosophy, the absolute has no unmediated existence apart from the relative. Absolute truth is present only indirectly in the medium of our symbols and texts. It cannot be simply fixed in the word, the concept or the text. It cannot be named directly by language as an object is named, nor is it amenable to the direct exercise of critical reason as in "self-power" philosophies. Second, Tanabe insists that the absolute arises only in the existential transformation of subjectivity by the grace-event of Other-power (*tariki*). Therefore, he is unwilling to dissociate the reality of the absolute in any way from the awakening of self-consciousness. This means that what, he calls "authentic religious action is an event that is always concrete, historical and existential. The absolute cannot be known immediately, because it has no separate reality apart from the transformation of subjectivity itself. Both of these issues must be explored in relation to the problem of religious pluralism.

Tanabe's first claim, that the absolute has no unmediated existence apart from the relative, implies that the absolute establishes relative being as its mediation. For Tanabe, this means that the absolute cannot be understood as "being" (which leads to an emanationist metaphysics incapable of sustaining true mediation). Instead, it must be understood as absolute nothingness. Were the absolute present immediately, it would be being and not absolute nothingness since it would in fact be some "thing" that could be named directly by language and understood in the direct exercise of self-identical reason. Therefore, the logic of absolute mediation subscribes in its own way to Nishida's maxim that "the true absolute is not opposable to the relative."<sup>13</sup> Relative being is constituted as such not by being negated by an "absolute" which stands over-against it as absolute being, but by standing over-against another relative in the mutual mediation of the absolute. Tanabe insists that this mediatory action of relatives is the only reality of the absolute.<sup>14</sup>

Venturing a bit beyond the text of *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, we might ask if this means that mediation can be thought of in two different ways. In the first case, the relative, through its practice of metanoia, acts as the mediation of the absolute. In the second case, two relatives, en-

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13 Nishida Kitarō makes this assertion in several texts. See, for instance his final essay, translated by David Dilworth in *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 1987).

14 Tanabe. *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 18ff.



countering each other in mutual contradiction, come to mediate the absolute to one another by practicing metanoia.<sup>15</sup> In this second scenario, the “other” ceases being mere contradiction and negation and through the transformation of Other-power becomes the actual historical occasion of the experience of salvation by means of the absolute. Might not something similar occur in the current encounter between conflicting religious traditions? Religious universalisms, through the praxis of metanoia, would become for one another the paradoxical experience of absolute truth without ceasing to be contradictions. Experienced metanoetically, world religions would in fact be the “paradoxical universalities” and “relative absolutes” discussed above.

This leads us to Tanabe’s second claim, viz., that metanoetic cognition arises only in the existential transformation of subjectivity by the grace-event of Other-power (*tariki* 他力). In his treatment of the “absolute critique” of reason, Tanabe draws attention to the fact that pure reason inherently strains for absolute knowledge. Given the ease with which religious traditions infer the absolute and unparalleled uniqueness of religious truth from the universality of that truth, we might say that something analogous is the case with world religions as well. Finite reason, striving for absolute knowledge, is forced to its limit (the Kantian antinomies) in its encounter with the real. By submitting to its own self-negation (*zange*), reason undergoes a transformation in which it is not restored to its original status, but rather resurrected as “empty being” which acts as the mediation of the absolute. Once again analogously, religious traditions, in their own encounter with the “real” (in this case, the “real” is the other religious universalities), experience their own relativity at first negatively (as the contradiction of their claim to uniqueness) and then affirmatively (as the grace of the absolute mediated by the other religions). In other words, religious traditions are not exempt from the “radical evil”<sup>16</sup> in which the relative mistakes itself as the absolute. The easy equation of universality with uniqueness makes it necessary for the world religions to learn again and again that authentic religious existence is a matter of conversion (*zange*) and subsequent transformation through Other-power.

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15 Tanabe himself seems to be moving in this direction in his discussion of using metanoetics to achieve a religious interpretation of society. In contrast to the “heroic individualism” of European existentialism and Samurai Zen, Tanabe suggests that social existence can find fulfillment in “love,” which he understands as a concrete transforming mediation of the absolute between relative being and relative being. The specific context is a discussion of the master-disciple relationship. See *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 265, 276.

16 Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 4.

Tanabe's metanoetic philosophy gives us a way of approaching Nishitani's problem of universality and uniqueness critically. The true absolute is always experienced as a "relative absolute" for two reasons. It is experienced as a "relative absolute" first because it is always mediated in specific, contingent cultural symbols, while never being simply identical with them. Second, it is always experienced as a "relative absolute" because the plurality of unparalleled and unique "absolutes," by taking the "path of metanoia" (*zange-dō*), can break out of their simple contradiction and negation in an increase of self-consciousness which leads to their absolute affirmation. This affirmation is a concrete event in history, a disclosure of new meaning and value, a religious event, the experience of a transforming power (*tariki*) not identifiable with finite being. In Tanabe's metanoetic view of social existence, this event would be characterized by a rejection of violence, intolerance and fanaticism. It might lead to that in which Nishitani places his hopes, viz., the creative appropriation of religious pluralism and the mutual transformation of world-religious universalities in the restoration of their religious vitality.<sup>17</sup>

With this possible restoration in mind, let us turn our attention to the way Tanabe's metanoetics might re-configure our practice of inter-religious dialogue.

### III

Tanabe's philosophy of absolute mediation illuminates some of the problems of inter-religious dialogue outlined above. First, absolute mediation acts as a critique of the exclusivist strategy for dealing with religious pluralism. Tanabe's notion of authentic religious action stands against all naive religious beliefs in an unmediated absolute. Since the absolute is never experienced directly without the mediation of relative being, fundamentalisms of any sort are ruled out as possible candidates for an authentic religious subjectivity. Truth cannot be determined literally in a text or doctrine. Fundamentalisms must reject conflicting truth claims since they pose a serious threat to the unparalleled uniqueness of their symbols. This amounts to artificially restricting the religious quest for absolute truth: the religious interpreter becomes a mere apolo-

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17 Nishitani, "The Standpoint of 'Ascent'," 160.

gist with his or her imagination under orders. But in keeping with Tanabe's interest in carrying the Kantian critique of reason to its logical and existential conclusion in the "absolute critique," like pure reason, a text or symbol cannot supply its own foundation guaranteeing its absolute truth. Instead, the truth of a symbol is measured by its ability to "die" to its literal meaning in disclosing through mediation what (literally speaking) it is not, i.e., the absolute. In the praxis of metanoia, the religious quest is set free for its ultimate crisis of self-contradiction, self-surrender, and resurrection as mediation of the absolute. As Tanabe believes that the path of metanoia (*zange-dō*) is not an arbitrary route for philosophical inquiry, so also we might ask if it is not merely one alternative for inter-religious dialogue to take in confronting fundamentalism and fanaticism, but rather the path leading to a contemporary renewal of authentic religious subjectivity itself.

Second, metanoetics holds the syncretistic tendency up for criticism as well. Repeatedly, Tanabe insists that, after passing through its absolute crisis and transformation, the contradiction of reason remains. Reason is not transformed into a universal point of view capable of synthesizing contradictions by negating them, but into the mediation of absolute nothingness which is no longer restricted by contradictions but preserves them as "empty being."<sup>18</sup> Contradiction remains, but the intellect is brought back as mediator of absolute truth which is the basis of religious communication between individuals.<sup>19</sup> It is the contradiction itself which acts as a mediation of the absolute. Thus, Tanabe foresees neither an intellectual synthesis of religious differences (along the lines of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*), nor a religious "lowest common denominator" achieved through philosophical abstraction. Both reflect the standpoint of self-power philosophy. Otherness and contradiction must remain in order for the true absolute to be realized in the metanoia of mutually contradictory relatives. It is Tanabe's paradoxical notion of the true absolute, what I have been calling a "relative absolute," that precludes syncretism as a viable option for inter-religious dialogue.

The major problem attending the syncretistic tendency applies to the inclusivist strategy as well. This tendency in inter-religious dialogue seeks to affirm the uniqueness of one tradition while refusing to negate the universality of the others. If, as Tanabe argues, the absolute has no

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18 Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 55.

19 Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 40.

existence apart from its mediation in the relative, then the contradictory otherness of the relative must be preserved in order for there to be true mediation arising in the experience of transformation. The contradictory, the unfamiliar, the unintegrated, the sheer otherness of that which confronts cannot be annulled if there is to be authentic religious action. The inclusivist differs from the syncretistic tendency in its attempt to leave the present interpretation of one's own tradition's symbols intact, by claiming that the symbols of the other religions in fact express the same truth. For instance, if in fact Buddhism reveals the truth of the Christian God, what is called for, then, is a creative reinterpretation of Buddhism and not a rethinking of Christian theism. Dialogue, carried out metanoetically, will be suspicious of any attempt to reduce the genuine differences between world religions to merely more of the same. To do so would be to bring the conversation to a premature end by refusing to place the symbols of one's own tradition at risk.

More positively, understanding inter-religious dialogue as a *zange-dō* makes available to us a way to respond to religious fanaticisms and non-religious ideologies. Perhaps ecumenical tolerance need not be purchased at the cost of an intolerable religious relativism. But this much seems certain: religious and political fanaticism cannot be successfully resisted simply by administering more doses of relativism and pluralism. Instead, it must be met with commitment to ultimate values. It is not without significance to our inquiry that Tanabe consistently locates the concrete, historical mediation of the religious in the ethical.<sup>20</sup> The current situation of religious pluralism drives us toward ecumenical community at the same time that it requires of us a renewed commitment to the specific values and symbols of our respective religious traditions. Tanabe's metanoetic path shows how this paradoxical juxtaposition of commitment and tolerance might be realizable. If the encounter with the otherness and contradiction of religious traditions not our own can be experienced as the event of our self-awakening to the paradoxical reality of the true absolute within our own tradition, then perhaps ecumenical community with serious commitment to religious symbols specific to a particular tradition can become a concrete possibility for dialogue partners. This, of course, will require a revision of the absolute claims of our particular religious traditions. Religious self-understanding will have to be reconfigured along the lines of Tanabe's paradoxical experience of the "true absolute" mediated in the "relative absolute."

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20 Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 152-156.

To look to Tanabe's metanoetics as a model for creative encounter between religious universalities today is to recognize dialogue as a form of praxis arising through the experience of existential transformation by Other-power. This would suggest that dialogue is not really possible for the fanatic or for the uncommitted.<sup>21</sup> Thought of as praxis, dialogue has two moments. The first moment is that of self-surrender (*zange*) in which the symbol (understood naively as an unmediated absolute) is strategically exposed to its contradiction by other claims to unmediated truth. The second moment is that of affirmation in which the symbol is resurrected as the mediation of the true absolute. To think of dialogue as praxis is not to make this "resurrection" automatic. In Tanabe's view, the "Great Compassion" of Other-power is always experienced as grace. All the same, I believe that it can be thought of as praxis in that the transformation of the relative by Other-power does not arise apart from its mediation by the self-surrender of the relative.<sup>22</sup>

The resurrection of the symbol requires that our appreciation of religious symbols undergo its own metanoia. By clinging to the doctrine of *pratīyasamutpāda* as a merely metaphysical position (*drsti*), this religious symbol no longer mediates to the Buddhist the truth of existential release. By believing literally in the kingdom of God coming at the end of time or in a creatio *ex nihilo* at the beginning of time, these religious symbols no longer mediate to the Christian the protological and eschatological meaning of salvation. Tanabe believes that religious doctrines, symbols, texts, etc. become "empty being" in genuine religious action in order to work as a "skillful means" (*upāya*) to salvation.<sup>23</sup> Somewhat similarly, for Tillich the symbol participates in revelation by relativizing itself, because in sacrificing itself (*zange*) it points beyond itself. The unauthentic symbol refuses to die and becomes demonic.<sup>24</sup> Paul Ricoeur's in

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21 While I would exclude the fanatic and the uncommitted as participants in the model of inter-religious dialogue I am developing, it is also true that not all commitment is commitment to a specific religious tradition or religion as such necessarily. Christian theologians and their non-Christian counterparts have no monopoly on the interpretation of religious symbols. The danger and risk of authentic inter-religious dialogue are often enhanced by the contributions of non-religious but existentially committed participants.

22 Tanabe expresses the meaning of metanoetics as praxis in his reliance on the Pure Land Buddhist doctrine, *tariki-soku-jiriki* 他力即自力. In this respect, metanoetics is both a religious path to be practiced (*jiriki*) and a grace (*tariki*).

23 Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 22, 41-2.

24 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, 238-39

vestigations into metaphor theory also bear certain affinities with Tanabe. He explains the rhetorical functioning of tensive metaphors in terms of the self-destruction of the literal meaning in order for there to be a disclosure of a “surplus meaning.”<sup>25</sup> To what degree, we might ask, does Ricoeur’s sense of a “second naivete” correspond to Tanabe’s views of the transcendence of the noetic by the metanoetic in which relative being is resurrected from its self-negation in order to function as *upāya*? To what extent does the meaning of the cross lead Christian believers to the silence of the Buddha?

Finally, Tanabe takes pains to speak of the transformative action of Other-power as a “manifestation” and as an event in history. This too is helpful in coming to terms with the meaning of the contemporary encounter between religions. Might the manifestation of which Tanabe writes herald a step in the direction of a common history, a common humanity, a common religion? On this question, caution seems most appropriate. As noted above, Tanabe’s notion of mediation, if correctly employed, will alert us to the dangers of a premature syncretism of religious outlooks. Participants in inter-religious dialogue are well advised to be as attentive to the meanings which separate religious traditions as they are to those meanings which they share. Tanabe has helped me appreciate that it is the unrelenting “otherness” of Buddhism which instructs and indeed transforms my Christianity. Without this appreciation of “otherness,” the vitality of the Buddhist heritage becomes merely “more of the same” vis-à-vis my Christian belief. Still, it is a peculiar sign of our times that, because of the creative encounter between religions in dialogue, some Buddhists and Christians feel a solidarity with their dialogue partners that they do not share with their co-religionists. Instead of premature talk of a new religion, Tanabe’s metanoetic standpoint seems to suggest that we look to where creative individuals are “breaking through” to a new awareness of the mutual service that religions render to one another. Increasingly, because of the “paradoxical universality” of Christianity, Christians must realize the importance of Buddhism for discerning the future of their tradition in the century to come. Likewise, some committed Buddhists have come to look gratefully on Christianity as the “skillful means” (*upāya*) for realizing their own salvation in the religiously pluralistic situation in which they find themselves today. Herein lies the existential and religious basis for authentic dialogue and encounter in depth.

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25 Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 45-69.

In his reflections on the problem of universality and uniqueness, Nishitani outlined his own hopes for the restoration of the power of religion.<sup>26</sup> Importantly, Nishitani does not suggest that this restoration is to be found in a new religion. He looks instead for the world's great religious universalities to become "living things" (*ikita mono* 生きたもの) once again. The revival of the power of the religious in our day, Nishitani believes, will be by means of a reform from within. At the same time, however, Nishitani thinks that this revival is tied to the willingness of religious traditions to engage in creative dialogue with other religious traditions. In working out his metanoetic philosophy, Tanabe Hajime cautioned that religion degenerates when mediation is not full,<sup>27</sup> but he also held out the hope that, through the praxis of metanoia, we might participate in the "renewal of reality itself."<sup>28</sup> Ultimately what is manifest in metanoetic cognition is the "direction toward which actuality moves." For Buddhism and Christianity, might this not mean that the future of both great religious traditions lies in their mutual transformation?

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26 Nishitani, "The Standpoint of 'Ascent'," 160.

27 Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 152.

28 Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 41.