Absolute Nothingness or Dynamic Emptiness?
God and the ‘Cult of Nothingness’ in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

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Much Western theology still takes Buddhism to be a form of nihilism or atheism because it dispenses with ‘God’. Many Christians are dissatisfied with a *theologia negativa* which goes beyond ‘God’ to the absolute transcendence of an unknowable Godhead (Eckhart’s *Deitas*), while some Buddhists have become uneasy with the re-ontologising of Nothingness as a new Absolute, the universal ‘Buddha-nature’. These conceptions also have ethical consequences: does an a-personal Absolute connote the a-moral in human terms, and is absolute transcendence in any way commensurate with the reality of evil and historical injustice? Or is it conceivable that the Buddhist-Christian dialogue can give Buddhists a way of formulating the social and political consequences of the Great Compassion which flows from the Great Wisdom of the Bodhisattvas, while for Christians it can purify the concept of ‘God’ so that instead of being their idol (W.C. Smith) it can signify non-dually the immanence of divine transcendence in human lives and histories?

Reflecting on these interrelationships from the point of view of Christian faith and theology is not straightforward, but the issues involved – the possibility of rethinking our whole understanding of ‘God’ and the consequences of this for ethics – are so important that it is well worth our while to examine these complex currents in contemporary Buddhism. I choose to do so by taking up the discussion between some leading Christian theologians and representatives of the ‘Kyoto School’ of Buddhist-inspired Japanese philosophy, for even if the Kyoto School as a group is already fading into history, they initiated a dialogue of extraordinary depth, both among

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1 An earlier version of parts of this paper was presented at conferences on “Evil and the Religions” (Tropical Institute and Free University, Amsterdam, 17-19 March 2005) and “Thinking through Faith” (Irish Theological Association/Society for the Study of Theology, Dublin, 29-31 March 2005). I would like to thank David Loy, Joseph O’Leary and John O’Grady for helpful comments on earlier drafts.
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themselves and with Christian philosophers and theologians. I propose to do this in three steps: first, to recapitulate briefly the early history of Europe’s reception – indeed, ‘construction’ – of ‘Buddhism’ as a scandalous ‘cult of nothingness’; second, to examine the Buddhist conception of Absolute Nothingness, understood as a dialectic of total self-emptying, to see whether it could be interpreted as a way of purifying and strengthening Christian understandings of God; and third, to ask how far we as Christians can go down this road without losing our foothold in history as the arena of moral responsibility.

1. European Revulsion at the ‘Cult of Nothingness’

The story of how Europe encountered Buddhism is extremely instructive, not only as an example of historical self-projection and collective self-delusion, but as a cautionary tale which helps to explain some of the difficulties in present-day dialogue with Buddhists. Around 1820, the contours of what came to be referred to more or less accurately as ‘Buddhism’ began to detach themselves from the Brahmanism of ancient India. As Europeans began to construct their version of Buddhism as a “textual object”, their initial reaction was one of fear, for the idea immediately arose that the Buddhists “worship nothingness”. The impression was created that Buddhism is a form of nihilism or atheism, a negative and life-denying philosophy rather than a religion. In 1827, both the pioneer Indologist Colebrooke and the philosopher Hegel were saying that, since nirvāna means ‘annihilation’ (Vernichtung), Buddhism is “a religion in which ‘man must make himself nothing’”, though nowhere in the sources available to them was this explicitly stated. Relying, as usual, on his speculative genius rather than evidence, Hegel saw that nothingness could be interpreted as the indeterminateness of pure being, making the two concepts equivalent. For European savants at the height of what was seen as an ‘Oriental renaissance’ to rival the rediscovery of Greece and Rome, this realisation was


Droit, Cult, 61, quoting Hegel. As part of his comprehensive bibliography, 255-256, Droit identifies the main passages concerning Buddhism in the major European thinkers.

Droit, Cult, 67.
disturbing. Catholic authors such as Ozanam, and even critical thinkers such as Renan, were outraged at what seemed to be an atheistic cult of nothingness, a revolting nihilism which was impossible in principle and flew in the face of human intelligence.\(^5\)

Hegel’s surmises, Schopenhauer’s enthusiasm and Nietzsche’s scepticism, each based on misunderstandings of the sparse information that was available, did little to help things. Even the gifted scholar Eugène Burnouf, whose *Introduction* put Buddhist scholarship on a firm footing in 1844 and was read by Schelling, Schopenhauer, Wagner and Nietzsche, tended towards annihilationism, and Carl-Friedrich Köppen, now forgotten but widely read in the 1860s and 1870s, passed on to Wagner, Nietzsche and Taine the notion that Buddhism is a religion of weakness, softening violence at the price of dulling intellect and initiative.\(^6\) As a result, “[p]essimism and nihilism were lastingly associated with Buddhism in the European imagination, beginning with the decade of the 1850s”.\(^7\) Schopenhauer, towards the end of his life, seized upon the idea that Buddhism, as an “atheistic religion”, claimed, as he did, that “it was life itself that was to be extinguished”, without adverting to the fact that this does not refer to nothingness “in itself”, but only “for us”; “in saying that nirvana is nothing, that it is nothingness, we are actually only saying: there is nothing that we can say about it”.\(^8\) Nietzsche, led by Taine to suppose that Buddhism, like Christianity, was a religion of weakness, warned of a European Buddhism – or even worse, a “soft Buddhist-Christian belief” – as a possibility and a danger. “Tragedy

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\(^5\) The eminent philologist Jules Barthelémy Saint-Hilaire was still asserting this in 1862, whereas his compatriot and contemporary Jean-Baptiste-François Obry could say one year later what Hegel had proposed in 1827: that absolute nothingness and absolute being are identical. See Droit, *Cult*, 79-81, 119-122, 127.

\(^6\) Droit, *Cult*, 76-77, 137-138; Almond, *British Discovery*, 34, contrasting Buddhism’s popular appeal in Victorian Britain with the scholarly discourse that prevailed on the continent.

\(^7\) Droit, *Cult*, 93.

\(^8\) Droit, *Cult*, 93, 97, remarking that *Nichts* is the last word of Schopenhauer’s main work, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, 100. On atheism and attempts to understand *nirvâna*, see Almond, *British Discovery*, 97-110.
should save us from Buddhism”, he wrote in 1871: the ennobling experience of war would defeat both the world-denying religions!⁹

Of all these nineteenth century thinkers, perhaps Taine came closest to grasping the Buddhist dialectic of nothingness:

Seeing the successive elimination, under the effect of its meditative practices, of object, space, and even consciousness itself, the Buddhist mystic “could affirm that there is nothing, and this affirmation would be something. And he abolishes it, too. At this level, there is no longer any thought, nor is there any negation of thought.”¹⁰

Just as Almond concludes that the Victorians were in fact ‘constructing’ Buddhism as a textual object and comparing it with the squalid realities of Asia along Orientalist lines, so Droit suggests that these nineteenth century scholars were utilising this Buddhism as a medium for the expression of their own deepest fears, for the prospect of a religion devoid of the biblical God forced them to confront the growing atheism and nihilism of a period of secular revolution in which the rise of Communism precipitated the struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie. Hence, “worship of nothingness describes Europe and not Asia”.¹¹ In a time of growing pessimism, the message “deliver us from finite existence, return us to nothingness”, enunciated by Amiel in 1882, had a certain resonance.¹² The same author, however, could also envisage

⁹ Droit, Cult, 144-148, showing that in fact Nietzsche reduced Buddhism to little more than a healthy lifestyle.
¹⁰ Droit, Cult, 140; see Almond, British Discovery, 126-128. Almond points out that the strong anti-Catholicism of Protestant Britain in the mid-nineteenth century probably influenced attitudes to Buddhist monasticism and ceremonial, 119-126.
¹¹ Droit, Cult, 166; see 163-166, where he points out the significance of the revolutionary timeline 1830-1848-1871, the very period in which European awareness of Buddhism grew; see also 23 and Almond, British Discovery, Introduction.
¹² Droit, Cult, 152, referring as well to Freud’s ‘nirvana principle’.
melding the truths of the religious ideas of Asia … together, on the one hand, with the elements of Christianity worthy of being preserved, and on the other hand with the circle of ideas developed by modern culture … into a general heterogeneous system … destined to replace Christianity, which is in decline.\(^{13}\)

Each of these attitudes, the darkly pessimistic and the naively optimistic, presages developments in the twentieth century.

Fear of the atheistic religion of nothingness, which we now realise was a European self-projection onto a half-understood Asian tradition, has more recently been joined by another attitude towards Buddhism which needs to be taken more seriously in the light of recent history in countries like Burma (Myanmar), Japan and Sri Lanka. It concerns the relationship between Buddhism and ethics. Though the most ethical of religions, Buddhism is sometimes said by Buddhists themselves to be incapable of formulating an ethic; at best, it can appropriate the ethic obtaining in a given context (say, in ancient India or China). By regarding rational discrimination between good and evil as a manifestation of dualism, some types of Buddhism, at least, seem to remove the basis for ethical decision altogether.\(^{14}\) There are other Buddhists, however, such as Gunapala Dharmasiri of Sri Lanka, who use linguistic philosophy and logical empiricism to reaffirm the ethical aspects of Buddhism while restating the Buddhist refusal to entertain the existence of a personal God as atheism in the Western sense.\(^{15}\)

In stark contrast, Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945), founder of the Kyoto School of Buddhist philosophers, spent his whole career combating Nietzschean nihilism and

\(^{13}\) Quoted by Droit, *Cult*, 153, with reference to the neo-Buddhism of Tolstoy and Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* (1879; the celebration of Buddhism in Victorian poetry runs through Almond, *British Discovery*) as well as to Vivekananda’s appearance at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago.


positivistic scientism by trying to establish his thought on the ‘field’ (*basho*) of Absolute Nothingness or ‘absolute infinite openness’\(^{16}\) as the source of personal and social fulfilment through love, and Hisamatsu Shin’ichi arrived at a post-modern atheistic Buddhism in which the standpoint of the True Self transcends autonomous reason and makes possible self-less action in history.\(^{17}\) In Southeast Asia, meanwhile, a movement known as Socially Engaged Buddhism has gained momentum, inspired, among others, by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh and the Thai monk Buddhadâsa.\(^{18}\) The next stage of our enquiry, therefore, must be to ask how dialogue with Buddhism, by yielding a deeper understanding of God, might lead to a more responsible ethic.

2. Absolute Nothingness: An Alternative to ‘God’?

The impression has understandably arisen among Buddhists that Christians reason their way to God, yet in a way that is ultimately incoherent. Christians have left themselves open to this interpretation, I would suggest, by claiming that unaided reason can arrive at certain knowledge of the existence and nature of God.\(^{19}\) Karl Rahner, to take just one instance from modern Catholic theology, built his whole


\(^{19}\) The First Vatican Council, in its Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* (1870), stated that “Deum, rerum omnium principium et finem, naturali humanae rationis lumine e rebus creatis certo cognosci posse”, quoting Rom 1:20, “Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] invisible nature, namely, [God’s] eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (*DS* 3004). The Second Vatican Council quotes the same passage, but only after, not before, its statement on revelation itself, see the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 2-3.
theological anthropology on the orientation of human existence to the ‘absolute horizon’ of Transcendence. Even if one accepts these arguments, however, they are at best ancillary to the primary Christian orientation to the ‘Christlike God’ made accessible in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.\textsuperscript{20} When we say ‘God’ as believing Christians, we mean “the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3:6; 6:3), “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 1:3, 11:31; Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3), not Pascal’s ‘God of the philosophers’. This involves us in the enigmas of Incarnation and Trinity, but it also suggests the primacy of a ‘narrative Christology’ over the deductive approach of ‘natural theology’ many of us were brought up on in the tractate \textit{De Deo Uno}.

The centrality of this point for the following reflections becomes apparent when we note that something very similar holds for Buddhists. It is significant that the German fundamental theologian Hans Waldenfels, who knew Nishitani and studied with the Kyoto philosophers, stresses this very point. Affirming that “[b]eyond all doubt, Jesus crucified is the gateway to the Christian understanding of God”, he finds fault with Abe Masao because for him “the historical figure of the Buddha and its significance for future history is left out of consideration”.\textsuperscript{21} Despite later developments of Buddhology which in Christian terminology would have to be called docetic,\textsuperscript{22} the quasi-mythological Buddha legend tells us that in each world-age (\textit{kalpa}) there arises a human being who is an Enlightened One (\textit{Buddha}), one who is liberated yet living among us (\textit{jîvanmukti}), human like us yet no longer under the sway of passions and desires and thus incapable of wrongdoing. This was to lead the Buddhists into endless debates with their Brahmin adversaries in India, especially when the manifest misdemeanours of allegedly liberated ones had to be explained. The problem is as


\textsuperscript{22}I refer, without being able to elaborate further, to the ‘three bodies’ of the Buddha: the \textit{nirmāna-kāya} or ‘manifestation body’, which comes close to what we might call the ‘historical Buddha’; the \textit{sambhogha-kāya} or ‘body of bliss’, in which transcendent Buddhas reveal themselves; and the \textit{dharma-kāya} or ‘Dharma body’ of absolute transcendence; the parallel with the earthly Jesus, the risen Christ and the pre-existing Word is striking.
relevant today as it was then (witness the scandals involving Theravāda bhikkhus in Thailand and Zen roshis in the United States, and the revelations about Japanese teachers who had supposedly experienced satori or enlightenment yet supported militarism and imperialism). Structurally, the problem is familiar to Christians: Jesus is said to be human like us in everything except sin, since he partakes of the divine nature; Gautama Shâkyamuni walked the earth as one already enjoying the absolute peace of Nirvana.

While it could plausibly be said that Christians give too much scope to reason in explicating faith, whereas Buddhists use rational means to transcend reason altogether, it is nonetheless true that neither ‘God’ nor ‘Nirvana’ is available as the conclusion of a chain of deductive reasoning. We know the God to whom Jesus prayed, as we know the Nirvana to which the Buddha’s enlightenment gave him access, narratively, in our response to the stories which bear witness to the presence of these realities in the lives of Jesus and Gautama. The Christian response typically takes the form of ‘faith’, containing elements of hope, trust and reassurance (elpis, spes) but predominantly an intellectual assent to the truth of what one believes (pistis, fides). The Buddhists also have a word for ‘belief’, shrad-dhâ, which is etymologically akin to cre-do, ‘to give one’s heart’. Its function, however, is less prominent than that of ‘faith’ in Christianity: it means giving credence to the accounts of the Buddha’s enlightenment as expressed in his teaching, manifested in his life and handed down by tradition. As the story is told in the Mahâvagga of the Vinayapitaka, those he encounters after the momentous event are challenged to accept his claim that he is now an Enlightened One, though not all do (as the curious episode of Upaka reminds us, the sceptical ‘naked ascetic’ who, on hearing the Buddha’s solemn proclamation, shakes his head and takes a different road, MV I, 7-8). The individual sūtras, bearing witness to this ongoing process of proclamation and transformation, typically begin “Thus have I heard on a certain occasion”, preserving the character of reliable testimony handed down by witnesses (though the more usual punctuation is:

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24 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Faith and Belief (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), chapter 4, develops this point with his customary thoroughness.
Thus have I heard: On a certain occasion…”, which does not materially affect the point).  

The content of that testimony was difficult to accept then and is difficult now. At its core is the teaching on ‘not-self’ (anâtman, anattâ) given in the traditional ‘second sermon’ to the Buddha’s former companions in asceticism. Whatever data of experience are analysed, they do not yield knowledge of what is commonly taken to be the ‘self’ or substantial core of the person; this must therefore be dismissed as the primary illusion, the ego which becomes the focal point for the harmful passions (the ‘roots’, mûla, of lôbha, desire; dôsa, hatred; moha, delusion) and all the subsidiary illusions generated by them. Though the Buddha continually warned his followers about becoming embroiled in the debates of their contemporaries about ‘views’ (ditthî) or theories of the world, defending this teaching demanded an enormous intellectual effort over the centuries. In the course of this it was radicalised to the point where it denied ‘self-existence’ or ‘own-substance’ (svabhâva) to all constituents of reality (sabbe dhammâ anattâ, “all dhammas [ultimate constituents] are not-self [without substance]”, Dhammapâda 279), affirming the ‘emptiness’ (shûnyatâ) of all things, experiences and concepts. The place of ‘being’ in most ontologies was taken by the fundamental Buddhist philosophy of ‘dependent co-origination’ (pratîtyasamutpâda), which posits reciprocal causal relationships in place of substantiality. It was taken by the Mahâyâna to assert the mutual dependency of all things, thus cancelling out the need for any prior cause or creator. It is important to stress that these teachings go back as close as we are likely to get to the very origins of Buddhism as transmitted by the Theravâda Pâli Canon. The Chinese, in their struggles to appropriate Buddhist teachings, bequeathed to the Japanese the terms kû (‘emptiness’) and mu (‘nothingness’) to translate shûnyatâ, thus providing a linguistic basis for the curiously un-Buddhist substantialisation ‘Absolute Nothingness’.  


See Martin Repp, “Die Begegnung zwischen Europa und Ostasien anhand der Auseinandersetzung um die christliche Gottesvorstellung”, Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie 45 (2003), 71-100, 77, 90. The article nicely complements the story of Buddhism’s reception in Europe by detailing European reactions to Buddhism on its home ground in
however, seemed more compatible with European existentialism and lent some plausibility to the Kyoto synthesis as philosophy – something entirely new in Japanese intellectual history.\(^{27}\)

There was, then, definitely a basis for the Mahāyāna, when it arose in India some time before the beginning of the Christian Era, to seize upon the traditional doctrine of Emptiness and turn it, as Nāgārjuna did in the second century, into an intellectual rapier which not only dissects any position an opponent can put forward but does so from the non-position of asserting the emptiness of Emptiness itself.\(^{28}\) I take this, and most of its later elaborations in East Asian Buddhism, to be the expression in the form of an intellectual dialectic of the impossibility of reasoning one’s way to liberation as the conclusion of an argument. In our somewhat inadequate terminology, its intent is ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘philosophical’. Nevertheless, it can be measured against the attempts of our greatest philosopher-theologians to do justice to the mystery of ‘God’ without falling into the idolatry of a substantialist metaphysics.\(^{29}\)

In carrying out such comparisons, we soon realise that the Buddhist teaching on Emptiness is something even more radical than the *theologia negativa* of our own apophatic tradition, and even that is more radical than most Christians are aware of.\(^{30}\) Just as the Mahāyānists can assert the non-duality of Form and Emptiness, Samsara and Nirvana, so Nāgārjuna, like his Chinese Ch’an successors, leaves intact the entire order of ‘conventional truth’ (*samvrtisatya*), i.e. the truth of the ‘constructed’ self or world in its ‘suchness’ (*tathātā*), because it is non-dual with the order of ‘transcendent truth’ (*paramārthasatya*), the emptiness which always takes constructed form but to China and Japan, where there was no equivalent to Western distinctions between spirit and matter, transcendence and immanence, 87.

\(^{27}\) I have David Loy and Martin Repp to thank for this observation.


\(^{29}\) I am grateful to Paul O’Grady of the philosophy department, Trinity College Dublin, for sharing with me his comparative analyses of Nāgārjuna and Aquinas – which, from a purely philosophical point of view, tend to favour Aquinas!

\(^{30}\) A recent seminar by Denys Turner, a specialist in the Medieval Christian thinkers, brought this home to me vividly.
which the enlightened have access – not by intellectual means, however, but by utterly surpassing the sphere of ratiocination and intellection (vitakka and vicāra). The Mahāyānists produced numerous scriptures purporting to contain the teaching of the Buddha finally and fully revealed, implying that those of the Theravāda canon were merely the deployment of ‘skilful means’ (kaushalya-upāya) at a stage when people were incapable of attaining to the One Vehicle (ekayāna) that resolves all differences between the sects and transcends all their inadequacies. But even these were repudiated by the most radical Ch’an masters, for whom the only tradition that mattered, the transmission ‘outside the scriptures’ of the authenticated experience of final liberation from one enlightened master to another, was a matter of person-to-person lineage.

This, briefly, is the background to the attempts by members of the Kyoto School, beginning with Nishida, to mediate this tradition – and, later, the Pure Land (Jōdo-shin) tradition of Amida Buddhism as well – to modernity by positing Absolute Nothingness (mu). Though utterly non-objectifiable in itself, it represents the ‘place’ or ‘field’ (basho) on which not-self can be realised as True Self or liberation (satori). The insight that by not-self Nishitani actually meant ‘letting-go’ of self in a sense close to self-forgetfulness or selflessness in the Christian sense was very important to Hans Waldenfels, and it indicates that there is indeed a moral dimension to this philosophy-cum-spirituality. For the moment, however, the pressing question becomes: what sense can be made, by Christians or anyone else, of the proposition that there is, ultimately, Nothing, that is, no-thing that can be grasped or held onto; that just as Heidegger’s Sein was to be understood as crossed out and negated, so too must shūnyatā, so that we are ultimately faced with the ‘nothingness of Nothingness’? One thing is clear: whatever it means, it means the contrary of

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31 In the terminology of the great commentator Buddhaghosa, Visuddhimagga VIII.
32 The whole discussion has been studied in detail, with abundant references to the literature, by Armin Münch, Dimensionen der Leere. Gott als Nichts und Nichts als Gott im buddhistisch-christlichen Dialog (Münster-Hamburg-London: Lit Verlag, 1998); on attempts to translate basho, see 171-177, and for Hanaoka Eiko’s term ‘absolute infinite openness’, 185.
‘nihilism’ and ‘atheism’ as understood in the West. It is meant to be a radical purification of all attempts to ‘ontologise’ or ‘substantialise’ Self, Nirvana and – eventually – Emptiness itself, as had occurred repeatedly throughout the Buddhist tradition. This is an unexceptionably Buddhist undertaking, but as the Kyoto philosophers have disagreed with one another and built upon one another in extremely fruitful ways, there has been a growing uneasiness, both among Buddhist protagonists and Christian observers, that the process of ontologisation has set in once again: the ultimate realisation of Absolute Nothingness, the Buddha-nature (Buddhadhâtu, Tathâgatagarbha), is now posited as ‘reality itself’, inhering in all beings. This, too, has been seen by proponents of ‘Critical Buddhism’ to have implications for Buddhism’s capacity to generate an ethic: if all beings already have Buddha-nature and remain in their ‘suchness’, what scope is there for transforming self or world, and where are the criteria for distinguishing between good and evil?\(^\text{34}\) Does this amount to the kind of objectification of Nothingness that Nishitani’s ‘absolute infinite openness’ (basho) was intended to overcome, and is there scope for a more phenomenological and less ontological understanding of Emptiness?

One of the most persuasive proponents of Absolute Nothingness as a possible corrective to elements of dualism and substantialism in Christian conceptions of God is Abe Masao, the foremost interpreter of the Kyoto philosophy to the West, who cleverly deploys the dialectic stemming from the Perfection of Wisdom literature of the early Mahâyâna to restate central Christian doctrines in non-dualist terms. David Tracy, after carefully examining Abe’s extensive presentation with reference to the contrast between the intellectualist Eckhart and the more mystical Ruysbroeck, says he is “not persuaded”.\(^\text{35}\) Negativity can be accepted and must be stressed as one moment in the mind’s movement towards ‘God’, but it is not capable of articulating the fullness of Christian faith-experience. Many have been stimulated by Abe’s challenge to locate the self-emptying (kenôsis) attributed to Christ in the Philippians hymn (Phil 2:5-11) in the Godhead itself, thus offering the possibility of a radical

\(^{34}\) See the lively debate in Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson, eds., Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

Trinitarian reinterpretation of Incarnation which dispenses with the ‘two natures’ doctrine. In this perspective, any nature is no-nature, and in Abe’s interpretation the Persons are an absolute self-emptying, what he calls ‘dynamic Shunyata’. Few, however, are willing to go the whole way with him and accept that the fullness of divine love is the absolute self-emptying of God’s Self. In particular, both Jewish and Christian respondents recoil from Abe’s apparent relativisation of the Holocaust as merely another instance of ‘suchness’ determined by karma and his detachment from time and history. Even sympathetic Buddhist commentators ask whether this radical interpretation of Absolute Nothingness leaves any scope whatever for a ‘return to the relative’, from transcendent to conventional truth, in the form of a viable ethic.\(^{36}\)

Feminist reactions to Abe’s proposal highlight both its strengths and its weaknesses in Christian eyes. Mary Grey reminds us that whereas kenos means ‘empty’, koilos means ‘full’ in the sense of the billowing sail or the pregnant womb, an emptiness large with promise.\(^{37}\) Both Buddhist and Christian ‘emptiness’, she claims, are patriarchal, in that they fail to associate emptiness with suffering minds and bodies, both individual and social.\(^{38}\) The Philippians hymn, she says, speaks of God’s voluntary vulnerability, connoting the compassion of a caring mother rather than the power of an almighty father: “…the kenosis of God is a kenosis of the transcendence of God”.\(^{39}\) These reflections, of course, imply acceptance of Abe’s fundamental point that the hymn can be interpreted as speaking not only of the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus as the Christ, but of a “kenotic God” whose “very heartbeat” is justice.\(^{40}\)

Catherine Keller questions the implications of self-emptying for feminists whose project is “the reconstruction of the very notion of self” rather than reinforcing the patriarchal ideology of “self-sacrifice, self-denial, and selflessness that have not first


\(^{38}\) Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 73-75.

\(^{39}\) Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 77-79.

\(^{40}\) Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 72, 78.
thoroughly struggled with the concrete contexts in which selfhood is *engendered*. Is not the Buddhist tendency “toward the obliteration of all differentiation from the perspective of the absolute” in danger of eliminating the *otherness* which first calls forth love and constitutes the self as moral subject? “This implies attributing personality to the sacred”, which means that Christians must “take the metaphors and the analysis of the personal, with its interpersonal dynamic, with utmost seriousness”. Love, as *praxis* in the world, makes irreversible differences:

> Our causal – ethical – responsibility is in this sense nonnegotiable. My effects on the world can be altered, negotiated, diminished or augmented, but what I become and do here and now cannot be retroactively annihilated. The intuition into the irreversible spiral of time may be essential not only to a feminist sensibility, which concerns itself with relational responsibility intimately and collectively, but also to any liberationist commitment to justice in history.

Keller finds much that is positive to say about Abe’s proposal to radicalise *kenôsis*, but here she touches upon the sticking point for those who share the Jewish heritage of Jesus’ God. If ways can be found of showing that “God is fully transcendent *because* fully immanent”, then it may be possible to “claim that God is always and everywhere self-emptying, in essence and not only in one saving event”, such that “the self becomes before it perishes”, for “this dynamic self-emptying” would then mean “a rhythm of emptying and filling, which only extinguishes the self as it realizes it, which empties the moment’s self-actualization not into nothing but into the future shared by the community of all becoming.”

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41 Catherine Keller, “Scoop up the Water and the Moon Is in Your Hands: On Feminist Theology and Dynamic Self-Emptying”, Cobb and Ives, *The Emptying God*, 102-115, 106 (this volume also contains Abe’s essay, “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata”, 3-65; I would like to thank Mary Grey for reminding me of Keller’s extremely perceptive response to it).


43 Keller, “Scoop up the Water”, 110.

44 Keller, “Scoop up the Water”, 109 [my emphasis].

45 Keller, “Scoop up the Water”, 111.

46 Keller, “Scoop up the Water”, 114.
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One wonders whether both critique and appreciation do justice to the radical intent of the Kyoto philosophers, yet the moral and intellectual crisis of the Kyoto School itself underlines the importance of these critical questions. How does the Great Wisdom (mahâ-prajñâ) attained in the Great Death of satori flow into the Great Compassion (mahâ-karunâ) which characterises the Bodhisattva ideal so central to all Buddhism? Is Buddhist loving-kindness (mettâ) at all commensurable with Christian love (agapê)? This prompts us to take the next step in our argument.

3. Nothingness as Love: A Paradigm for Ethics?

It was a necessary step in the emancipation of reason from the tutelage of Church authority in the European Enlightenment to establish the autonomy of ethics, the independence of ethical reasoning from religious presuppositions. The ugly spectacle of the religions themselves initiating and legitimating acts of aggression and exploitation shows how necessary it is to criticise their claims to be the custodians of morality. Yet looked at historically and experientially, this is an extremely limited achievement; the terms in which it is formulated would not even have been available to philosophers like Hume and Kant had they not emerged from the centuries-long interaction between Christianity’s Jewish heritage and Greek thought. Even though reaching moral decisions is a rational enterprise in its own right which can be reconstructed logically, in most people’s experience it presupposes premises and concepts supplied by religious traditions, from Hindu Dharma and Jewish Torah to Muslim Shari’a and the ius divinum of Catholic tradition.47 Christianity and Islam, in particular, with their Jewish inheritance, are strongly ‘prophetic’ religions with a constitutive concern for justice.

For all forms of Buddhism, too, sila or living according to moral precepts is the conditio sine qua non for embarking on the higher paths of meditative practice (dhyâna) and the attainment of wisdom (prajñâ). It is not, however, the Buddhist’s

main preoccupation, though in the course of time there developed a tendency to restrict the religious life of the layperson to the ‘worldly’ (lokiya) sphere of ethical living, while the monks and nuns devoted themselves to the ‘higher’ (lokuttara) realm of spiritual practice. A sharp distinction was made at times between kammic and nibbânic Buddhists, the former interested only in gaining merit to be stored up against future lives, the latter striving for the release of final liberation. This has now been challenged, even in the Theravâda, for example by Buddhadâsa Bhikkhu and his followers in Thailand, for whom ‘rebirth’ is an interior phenomenon of the mind and Nibbana may be attained in and through an active life in the world.48 In Japanese Buddhism, as we have seen, there is a strong tradition, inherited from China, of the ‘Buddha-nature’ (Buddhatâ, Buddhadhâtu) inherent in every being, to which the enlightened become awakened in and as the reality of their everyday lives.

Ethics becomes a problem for Buddhists not because Buddhism is sub-ethical – on the contrary, it is one of the most ethical of religions – but because it is trans-ethical, purporting to render precepts, laws and rights ultimately superfluous.49 Where wisdom and compassion prevail, obedience to laws and the establishment of rights may be presumed without having to be insisted on. Indeed, in the more advanced forms of the Mahâyâna the non-duality implicit in complete liberation from passions and desires makes the discrimination between good and evil or right and wrong, which normally constitutes morality, appear to be a state of delusion, because it posits an ‘I’ for whom supposedly objective grounds for decision actually matter. It is here above all, perhaps, that Buddhism shows itself to be pre-eminently the religion of


49 For an interesting and controversial discussion on this, see Damien Keown, Charles Prebisch and Wayne Husted, eds., Buddhism and Human Rights (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1998); one is reminded, indeed, of Paul’s rather drastic statements about the Law in Galatians and Romans.
monks and philosophers, for the ‘people’s religion’ of most practising Buddhists, especially those of the Pure Land and Nichiren traditions but also in the Theravāda countries, has a strong sense of personal morality and public justice. Nevertheless, it was precisely the supposed transcendence of moral discrimination by the truly liberated that plunged the Kyoto philosophers into crisis.

The story of how some among them wrestled with their dilemma and even attempted some ineffectual interventions to stem the tide of militarism and imperialism cannot be told here.\(^{50}\) In the case of one of them, however, Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962), a complex and independent-minded thinker who had broken with his master Nishida Kitaro, the sense of intellectual (rather than moral!) failure became so acute that he ceased doing philosophy altogether until after the war. The intervening years of isolation and retreat proved to be the incubation period for a ‘converted’ and ‘reborn’ philosophy which he called ‘metanoetics’, what might be termed an epistemology of moral transformation in the encounter with Absolute Nothingness. Tanabe had realised that a philosophy that does not mediate between the abstract universals of ultimate reality and the sphere of moral action in history falls short of both rational principles and the Buddhist ideal. His ‘logic of species’ sought to bring about such mediation by interposing \textit{species}, the intellectually graspable ‘natures’ of things, between the \textit{universalia} of the Absolute and the \textit{individuum} of concrete moral choice. Nothingness, on this view, could be interpreted as the source and guarantor of love; love is the inevitable outcome of Nothingness as the \textit{praxis} of transcendence.\(^{51}\) Tanabe thus thought himself to have achieved something more concrete than Nishitani’s ‘self-forgetfulness’ (and – though it was formulated later – the same would presumably apply to Abe’s \textit{kenōsis}). His succinct formulation: nothingness-\textit{qua}-love, love-\textit{qua}-nothingness, may have prepared the ground for Abe’s:

\begin{quote}
God is love because God is \textit{Nichts}
\end{quote}

\(^{50}\) See my summary of it, with further literature, in J.D. May, \textit{Transcendence and Violence: The Encounter of Buddhist, Christian and Primal Traditions} (New York and London: Continuum, 2003), 75-78, 144-146.

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*Nichts* is God because *Nichts* is love.\(^{52}\)

The question for Christians thus becomes: is anything gained, morally or spiritually, by this radical reduction of the wellspring of morality to absolute transcendence?

There are Christian precedents for moving beyond a morality based on the supposed will of God as a benevolent Parent who sometimes punishes and disappoints God’s children – precisely the conception of ‘God’ which prompted the rationalist revolt and still causes perplexity in the face of the human evil of war and Shoah or natural disasters from the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 to the Southeast Asian tsunami of 26 December 2004 – to God as the mystery of presence-in-absence, the luminous darkness of the mystics, not even Deus as the Urgrund (ultimate ground) of all things but Deitas, the all-transcending Godhead as the Ungrund (non-ground). Thus Eckhart prayed to be delivered from ‘God’ in order to attain ‘Godhead’, which he was bold enough to describe as the birth of the Word in his own soul. Some Buddhists find this congenial, though still not radical enough.\(^{53}\)

There is no doubt that this could represent a purification of theism from the ‘idolatry’ of its God-concept (W.C. Smith) in the crucible of the Emptiness dialectic. Before trying to evaluate it, we should remind ourselves that this is not just a rational enterprise; Abe, in the tradition of Nāgārjuna and ultimately of the Buddha himself, calls it ‘non-thinking thinking’, the position that is ‘no-position’. Reason does not deliver us from the delusions that make us suffer the unsatisfactoriness of existence (*dukkha*), thus prompting us to become immoral in the first place; it only plunges us deeper into them. Such deliverance comes, rather, from the intuition that carries us beyond reason to ‘pure experience’, the ‘bare awareness’ that provides the matrix for ‘clear comprehension’,\(^{54}\) allowing the goodwill, compassion, altruism and equanimity (*mettā, karunā, muditā, upekkhā*) that constitute the ‘boundless perfections’ (*pāramī*,

\(^{52}\) Masao Abe, “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata”, in Ives, *Divine Emptiness*, 25-90, 49.

\(^{53}\) Abe goes so far as to claim that the Christian Trinity still presupposes a ‘fourth’, the divine essence as *ipsum esse* which transcends the *hypostases*; see Abe “Kenotic God”, 47: only when this ‘fourth’ is seen to be the ‘absolute interior’, *Nichts*, the Ungrund, is our way clear to understand God as love, 48.

\(^{54}\) This terminology is proposed by Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation: A Handbook of Mental Training Based on the Buddha’s Way of Mindfulness* (London: Rider, 1962).
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_brahma-vihāra_ to develop. The crux, however, at least for us Western Christians with our narrative-historical interpretative framework, remains the ways these can be mediated to the unavoidable imperfections of moral decision-making in a world characterised by political power, technological complexity and endemic violence. There is also the question of how a concept so abstruse as ‘nothingness-qua-love’ can be made intelligible at all to the people for whom Buddhism and Christianity are the ‘home ground’ (_Heimat_) on which they can erect meaningful and fulfilling lives – not to mention those entirely outside both traditions!

One of the most astonishing insights of Abe Masao as he thinks his way into the very centre of Christian faith is that the Trinity is the kenōsis of divine love as the Persons constitute themselves precisely by emptying themselves absolutely into the Nothingness that is creation, love and liberation. This entirely spiritual – and, in this sense, phenomenological – insight could, for him, supersede the essentialist metaphysics of ‘nature’ and ‘substance’ in providing an entirely theological explanation of the significance of Christ, just as its Buddhist counterpart does for the Buddha. This counterpart would be the (non-)doctrine of dependent co-origination (_pratītyasamutpāda_) of all things without any prior cause over and above their causal interrelationships, which thus becomes a kind of parallel to the _perichoresis_ of Trinitarian theology. If for Buddhists reality is constituted as Empty by the non-objectifiability of the subject (_anâtman_) and the non-substantiality of all its conceivable components (_shûnyatâ_), so for Christians reality bears the imprint of relationality as it flows incessantly from the divine Self-Emptying in what might be termed, in analogy to Nishitani’s ‘absolute infinite openness’, ‘trinitarian space’.\(^55\) Grasped experientially – as theologians might say: as the indwelling of uncreated Grace – this would in itself be the substance of both an ecological and a social ethic, as well as the inspiration of personal morality. As the Buddhists, following Dōgen, might put it:\(^56\) transcendence is neither a principle nor a concept but a _praxis_; it is non-dual with the world just as it is (_tathatā_, ‘suchness’), yet at the same time it is a restless dynamic of the human heart and mind which yearns to die to the world, not in

\(^{55}\) A suggestion by Münch, _Dimensionen der Leere_, 170.

order to escape it or condemn it but to transfigure and transform it. As Abe puts it, we live constantly at the intersection of horizontal and vertical, and it is at this elusive point that visions of the ultimate reality and outcome of things as different as those of the Sutta on Loving-kindness (Metta-sutta) and Romans 8:18-25 begin to coincide. Each is profoundly ethical – and more. Each embodies not only a vision of transcendence but also norms for living. And this frontier of dialogue is by no means beyond the reach of those who may lack the conceptual means to describe it abstractly, because it is prior to conceptualisation: it marks out both the role and the limits of reason in buddhology as in theology.

This implies, of course, that just as Emptiness cannot be ontologised as anything separate from the forms it takes, so ‘God’ as dynamic Emptiness has no reality apart from the constructing and constructed world which is both Form and Emptiness, and may not be personified or substantialised as self-existing.57 There are those, like David Tracy and even John Cobb, who conclude reluctantly that they must finally decline the Buddhist offer of a radical reformulation of transcendence in terms of the Nothingness that is Love. We need to weigh their reasons carefully, but also those of the few Buddhists who are sufficiently informed about theological positions to be engaged with these questions.58 At a time when monotheistic religion is being made responsible for the legitimation of terrorism, it could well be that a better understanding of the relationship between immanence and transcendence, not as the emptiness of denial but as the fullness of acceptance, lies here.

57 This formulation arises out of my conversations with David Loy, who speaks from a radical Zen perspective on both Buddhist and Christian doctrine.