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VIEWS & REVIEWS

The Far Side of Nothingness

Reading Mitchell's *Spirituality and Emptiness*

JAMES L. FREDERICKS

A TRADITIONAL TASK for Christian theology has been the need to understand the place of Christianity among the multitude of religions and the meaning of those religions for Christians. Endeavors of this sort can ordinarily be found under the classification "theology of religions." Often these theologies are based on a theory of religion in general in which specific religions are interpreted from a privileged standpoint within which all religions appear as examples. Today, a small but growing number of theologians are expressing dissatisfaction with such top-down approaches to religious pluralism. They point out the tendency of such theologies to interpret religions either as irreducibly different (witness Karl Barth's rejection of religion in favor of revelation) or as simply more of the same (as with Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christian"). Instead of an all-encompassing theology of religions, they are engaging in detailed studies of the texts and symbols of specific religious traditions in the hope of eventually correlating their findings critically with Christian texts. In place of a theology of religions, these theologians are turning to what may be called a "comparative theology."

Comparative theology is still very much in the process of working out its methods and procedures. What constitutes good comparison? Emphasizing only differences can easily become an exercise in apologetics while excusing the theologian from his or her constructive responsibilities. Neither is emphasizing only similarities helpful: appreciating the real differences between religions very often proves to be the occa-

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sion for deepening our own religious understanding. In my view, the comparative theologian needs to ask how a careful study of another religion enables and requires us to revise our understanding of the Christian tradition. This will require not only the recognition of similarities and differences, but the willingness to risk new interpretations of Christian truths in the light of these findings.

A noteworthy example of a comparative theology is John Keenan's *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology*.¹ Keenan uses Mahayana Buddhist metaphysics (especially Madhyamika and Yogacara thought) in lieu of Platonism to interpret anew the doctrine of the Christ for Christianity. In effect, he asks how a Mahayana reading of classical Christian texts allows us to enlarge our understanding of the truth of Christ. Another example of a comparative theologian at work is John Cobb's *Beyond Dialogue*.² In contrast to Keenan, who is interested in using Buddhist thought as a lens for reading Christian texts in new ways, Cobb traces similarities and differences in the two religions as a way of working toward their mutual transformation. As an example of comparative theology, Donald Mitchell's book, *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity*,³ bears more resemblance to Cobb's approach than to Keenan's. Unlike either Cobb or Keenan, however, Mitchell has chosen to focus on spirituality more than systematic theology (although, as the reader shall see, Mitchell's spirituality is dense with doctrinal concerns). Since this point is crucial for appreciating the importance of this book, allow me a few words regarding "spirituality" or "spiritual theology" as an academic enterprise.

The study of spirituality and its relationship to Christian theology is much debated. Bernard McGinn has recently commented on the near "total semantic chaos" characteristic of the discussion.⁴ The roots of

¹ John P. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989).

² John Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

³ Donald Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991).

⁴ Bernard McGinn, "The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline," in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin: Journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1993), p. 4. McGinn also cites Italian medievalist

the problem can be traced back at least to the rise of scholastic theology in Europe. In the first several centuries of Christianity's development in Western Europe, theological reflection on doctrine was inseparable from the monastic practice of asceticism. This began to change when theology moved from the monastery to the university in the twelfth century. As for the word "spirituality" itself, in the Christian scriptures, we find the Apostle Paul contrasting *sarx* (flesh) and *pneuma* (spirit), by which he intended not a dualism of the material and the immaterial, but rather a contrast between a life lived in subservience to egocentric appetites and a life lived in God-given freedom. Paul also rendered *pneuma* as an adjective (*pneumatikos*) in order to describe what has been transformed by the power of God. Mitchell is not concerned with the various attempts to define the study of spirituality. Midway through this book's course, however, he does speak of spirituality as "a mode of spiritual living that enhances one's transformation in God." To study this mode of living is not to exclude Christian doctrine, but certainly it is to emphasize its existential import.

Mitchell's turn to spirituality is calculated. A theme common to many Kyoto School authors is their emphasis on the "existential" meaning of their claims.⁵ This is evident in authors such as Nishitani Keiji, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi and Abe Masao whose concern for the religious fate of the modern world is explicit. Even though it is less evident in figures such as Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime, to read these authors without an appreciation of their concern for the concrete dynamics of religious living is to run the risk of a serious misreading. It is precisely in this forum that Mitchell wishes to engage the Kyoto School and this is what dictates his turn to Christian spirituality. But, the most significant contribution of this book is not that Mitchell responds to

Gustavo Vinay's claim that the term "spirituality" is "a necessary pseudoconcept we don't know how to replace." See "'Spiritualita': Invito a una discussione," in *Studia Medievale* 3a serie 2 (1961).

⁵ Notice, therefore, that the term "spirituality" is more and more being applied to religions other than Christianity. I find it not at all surprising that a member of the Kyoto School, Takeuchi Yoshinori, should be the chief editor of the recent volume of the "world spirituality" series. See *Buddhist Spirituality*, Takeuchi Yoshinori, ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

the Kyoto School from the perspective of Christian spirituality instead of systematic theology. Rather, it is that Mitchell uses the insights of the Kyoto School as a means of carrying on his own explorations of the Christian spiritual life. This means that the book will be a disappointment to some and a breath of fresh air to others. It will disappoint Christians (and no doubt some Buddhists as well) accustomed to approaching spirituality from the standpoint of psychology. Likewise it will disappoint a metaphysically-minded readership interested in the technical problems regarding the relationship between Christian theism and Nishida's philosophy. For the former, Mitchell's text will be too much concerned with doctrine. For the latter, its major claims will not be argued in sufficient detail. Critics from both camps need to be reminded that Mitchell's interest throughout the book remains Christian spirituality.

In the course of this project, Mitchell treats of a great deal of material from both the Kyoto School and the Christian spiritual tradition. The first half of each of the seven chapters summarizes the thought of a Kyoto School philosopher. Mitchell's reflections on spirituality follow as a response. This procedure succeeds well in placing Nishida, Nishitani, Abe, Tanabe, Takeuchi, Hisamatsu and Tokiwa Gishin in conversation with figures from Christian spirituality such as Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Thomas Merton and especially Chiara Lubich, foundress of a lay-oriented spiritual renewal movement known as Focolare. Material is organized around the theme of *kenosis* (self-emptying) in Christian spirituality. The first chapter deals with the theology of creation as the *kenosis* of God which lends itself naturally to a discussion of Nishida's seminal notion of absolute nothingness. Chapter two deals with the "negative *kenosis* of humankind" which is the Fall. Here, Nishitani's protest against secularism serves as the conversation partner. In the third chapter, Abe's kenotic approach to Christology sparks a discussion of the Christian doctrine of redemption. The following two chapters, devoted to the theme of sanctification, brings Tanabe and Takeuchi and their use of Shinran into view. In the sixth chapter, devoted to renewal movements in Buddhism and Christianity, we find a comparison of the FAS Society in Kyoto with the Focolare movement. The final chapter is given over to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a model of Christian spirituality.

Issues of substantial interest raised by this book are too numerous

even to summarize. I will touch on but a few.

The first chapter of the book offers us a perspective on what Mitchell takes to be a fundamental difference between the Christian mystical experience of God and the Buddhist experience of emptiness (as articulated in Nishida's notion of absolute nothingness). In his final essay on religion, Nishida asserts that God and the self arise mutually out of absolute nothingness, which is at once the formlessness out of which all forms arise and the absolute "near side" of reality which overcomes the dualism of transcendence and immanence. But according to Mitchell, this experience of "Void" (Mitchell's word, and not, in my view, a suitable translation of *kū* or *zettai mu* as used by Nishida) is not yet the fullness of Christian mystical experience. Against Nishida, Mitchell claims that the living God of Christian faith does not arise correlatively with the finite self out of absolute nothingness. And against some of Nishida's interpreters, he argues that the Christian God is not a personification of an infinite principle which is ultimately formless. Absolute nothingness does not appear within consciousness as an object. Rather, it forms the "place" (*basho*) within which subjectivity and the world of objects arise. On this point, Mitchell is in agreement with Nishida. However, Mitchell does not think of absolute nothingness as an onto-theological category. It is, rather, a way of experiencing the world.

Absolute Nothingness is not a 'something' that attracts our attention. Rather, it is a transparent "nothing" that directs our attention to the forms of life in a new and compassionate way. [p. 25]

And this qualification leads Mitchell to observe a difference between Buddhism and Christianity of the deepest dye. Christian mystics also are familiar with this Void into which the personal God is annihilated in nothingness. But for Christians, formless nothingness is merely a passage leading to the revelation of the Living God beyond the Void. Thus, in the fullness of Christian mystical experience, the Void itself is given form by the grace of the God who constitutes the "far side" of the Void's "near side."

Simply put, the particular mystical experience of the Void into which the personal God seems to disappear is only a *par-*

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tial experience of that Void. There is another dimension to the mystical experience that must be added for it to be a *full* Christian experience. So, I would propose that while the Buddhist experience of Emptiness perceives no far side apart from the near side, a Christian mystic finds that through the grace of Christ indwelling within, he or she is given a "spiritual eye," as it were, to see into the mystery of the Void. And he or she finds therein a far-side dimension that is *not* absolutely identified with the near side of creation, and is *not* formless and impersonal. [pp. 24–25]

This "far side," Mitchell argues, is in fact the Christian Trinity. Initially, the three persons of the Trinity appear out of the Void. In the fullness of Christian mystical experience, the Void is experienced as a field of experience established by the *kenosis* of the three persons. In other words, the Trinity is not a derivative reality emerging as form out of the formless, but rather the reverse: it is absolute nothingness that arises kenotically out of the intra-Trinitarian relations.

Those familiar with Nishida's writings will find much to object to here. Some, no doubt, will want to argue that Mitchell's "Void" is in fact relative nothingness and not absolute nothingness.⁶ Mitchell's notion of God as the "far side" of the formless Void is perhaps infelicitous. However, disciples of Nishida may want to think again. Mitchell's theological qualification of absolute nothingness has merit to the extent that it tries to offer a corrective to the monistic tendencies in Nishida's thought. Absolute nothingness, as articulated by Nishida, is not a metaphysical monism. Yet as with other examples of Japanese *hongaku* thought, it lends itself readily to rhetorical strategies which privilege the totality and unity of phenomena beyond discriminating consciousness. Nishida's notion of absolute nothingness is then easily misinterpreted as a metaphysical monism. Misunderstood in this way, absolute nothingness is not only unacceptable to Christian theism, it is bad Buddhism as well. Nishida's thought needs to be developed with

⁶ Abe Masao, in his "Preface" to *Spirituality and Emptiness*, notes that Mitchell's argument on this point "is one of the most provocative and suggestive sections in the book, and deserves serious consideration by persons seeking to understand the relationship of God to Emptiness" (see p. xi).

more attention to this issue. Mitchell's insistence on the non-dual "otherness" of the Christian God might serve as starting point for reflection.⁷

Mitchell's position on absolute nothingness also allows him to highlight what he considers a genuinely interesting difference distinguishing Buddhism and Christianity. Buddhism's emphasis on the absolute near side arising as the emptiness of all beyond discriminating consciousness leads it to the practice of compassion. In contrast, Christianity's affirmation of a far side in mystical experience leads it to the practice of love. This is Mitchell at his most provocative. Is there a real difference between love (*agapē*) and compassion (*karunā*)? If there is, can the two be distinguished phenomenologically? If so, what potential does Buddhist compassion hold for transforming and deepening the Christian spiritual practice of love? It would be worth hearing more from Mitchell on this theme.

A second issue of interest has to do with Mitchell's treatment of Tanabe. A fundamental difference between Nishida and Tanabe is the latter's emphasis on the religious as a concrete event of grace resulting in the transformation of awareness. Regarding absolute nothingness, Tanabe and Nishida are in agreement that the absolute does not form a metaphysical substratum. Tanabe parts company with his teacher over Nishida's use of the metaphor "place" (*basho*) for absolute nothingness. In Tanabe's view, absolute nothingness is not a *tópos* intuited by means of non-discriminating consciousness. Rather, it is known "metanoetically" in the transforming event of religious conversion through other-power. Thus, instead of Nishida's "place," Tanabe advances his idea of "absolute mediation" (*zettai baikai*) in which the absolute is present only as relative being.

When Mitchell asks if other-power can be identified with the Christian doctrine of grace, the answer we are given is a surprisingly unequivocal "no." However similar they may appear phenomenologically, the two are not the same. In this respect Mitchell's position seems to resemble Karl Barth's rejection of Jōdoshinshū. Christian grace implies "a

⁷ Elsewhere I have argued that the Kyoto School's encounter with Christian theism might fruitfully lead to a reassessment of Tanabe's criticism of Nishida. Tanabe's sense of the non-dual otherness of absolute nothingness, explored in his turn to Shinran's doctrine of other-power (*tariki*), is not sufficiently appreciated in Japan.

notion of the absolute that is not ‘absolutely’ identified with the transformative process of existence” [p. 93]. Therefore, “in Christian sanctification,” Mitchell claims, “one is opened up to something more than the sanctification process itself” [p. 94]. To be sure, Christianity recognizes that the action of grace requires a mediating role on the part of finite things. However, in Christian mysticism, unlike Jōdoshinshū,

One is aware of the mediation of the absolute as being a Trinitarian mediation of God-Love that is an activity of the Trinity itself. One recognizes the mediating Trinitarian structure to existence, but also sees that this structure reflects something else, something that the Christian calls “Abba,” Father. [p. 94]

Moreover, to distinguish this “something else” from Tanabe’s views on the mediation of absolute nothingness, Mitchell argues that Abba is a manifestation. Thus it seems that while metanoia through Buddhist other-power leads to a mediation of the absolute by finite being, in contrast, metanoia through Christian grace leads to a manifestation of ultimate reality as Abba.

How does Mitchell’s manifestation differ from Tanabe’s mediation? Is it to be construed as an empirical experience unavailable to Buddhists? Seemingly not. Is it to be understood as a supernatural phenomenon bestowed on Christians but not on Buddhists? Such a view is very reminiscent of Barth’s *a priori* rejection of Jōdoshinshū. Barth could walk blithely away from the appreciable phenomenological resemblances between Jōdoshinshū’s other-power and Christian grace because of his decidedly unmediated understanding of revelation as the “incommensurate.” What does it mean to say that Buddhist other-power is mediated by finite being but Christian grace implies a manifestation of Abba? Do Christians enjoy an unmediated (incommensurate) experience of the absolute which simply excludes Buddhists? Tanabe’s notion of absolute mediation has much more to teach Christianity than Mitchell is willing to grant. At the very least it may suggest a way of understanding the action of grace sacramentally without presupposing a supernatural world.

A third issue worthy of comment is Mitchell’s skillful use of Kyoto School thought in exploring the relationship between ascetics and mysticism for Christianity. A traditional task for Christian spirituality has

been to articulate the relationship between religious discipline and the mystical infusion of grace. This problem parallels the doctrinal problem of the relationship between grace and nature. How is the reality of grace related to the spiritual quest? As a way of constructing a model for understanding this issue, Mitchell draws our attention to Zen and Jōdoshinshū and finds abundant resources for Christian spirituality in the Kyoto School. Commenting on his own Jōdoshinshū tradition, Takeuchi Yoshinori notes that salvation arises where the noble quest for enlightenment meets the compassion of Amida. In contrast to the other-power orientation of Pure Land Buddhism, Zen is often criticized as a self-power path. Ueda Shizuteru, however, argues that Zen enlightenment does not arise through ego-assertion, but rather through the death of the ego. Does this not suggest that Zen too is an "other-power" path? Mitchell notes that while Zen places more attention on the quest than Jōdoshinshū, both see the "shipwreck" of the ego and the birth of the True Self as a work not of the finite ego.

The preceding discussion places Mitchell in a position to note that Christianity bears some resemblance with both Jōdoshinshū and Zen. Like Zen, Christianity holds that there are practices which promote the death of the finite ego and like Jōdoshinshū, Christianity believes that even this is grace. To establish this more concretely, Mitchell offers an extended discussion of *The Interior Castle* of Teresa of Avila as a way of exploring Takeuchi's claim. Spiritual transformation happens where asceticism and mysticism meet. Mitchell succeeds in opening up a wealth of possibilities for future discussion. On the Buddhist side, we might compare Dōgen's teaching on the non-duality of practice and attainment with Shinran's concerns about *hakarai* (calculation). How might this intra-Buddhist discussion illuminate Christian questions regarding ascetics and mysticism?

As religions, Christianity and Buddhism are neither utterly different nor fundamentally the same. Why, we must ask, do such extreme positions about their relationship have such wide currency? We need to seek the middle ground which honors differences while noting similarities and which takes both seriously. Therefore, skill in making comparisons is important. The value of Mitchell's effort is that he has not been content merely to catalogue differences, nor even to juxtapose similarity and difference. He has engaged in a form of Christian theology, a normative quest for truth. Throughout the entire book lies the

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presumption that the truth is dangerous but redemptive. It is dangerous in that it requires us to change. It is redemptive in that it empowers us to change wisely. If this book only suggests ways to remain vulnerable to the truth, Donald Mitchell will have succeeded admirably.