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KENOTIC THEOLOGY, BUDDHISM, AND TIME

For just as the Buddhist comes to know *samsara* as Nirvana, the Christian must come to know the Nothing as the hither side of God.¹

Since its inception, the kenotic philosophical theology of Thomas J. J. Altizer has been distinguished by its ongoing engagement with Buddhism, which Altizer regards as “the most philosophical religion in the world . . . the only one of the world religions that has evolved a philosophy out of a religious *Weltanschauung*.”² In his first book, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology* (1961), Altizer writes, “Buddhism and primitive Christianity may be taken as representative of the purest – and most radical – forms of mysticism and eschatology; here the religious reality becomes revealed with such power that it leads to an abrogation of existence itself.”³ This close association between Buddhism and Christianity can be found throughout Altizer’s oeuvre; yet, despite the considerable body of literature on his work, there has been little written on this crucial dimension. So figurative in fact is the role that Buddhism exercises on Altizer’s thinking that his *The Descent into Hell* (1970) has been identified as the first Buddhist-Christian theology,⁴ a work that concludes with a discussion of the relationship between Buddhist compassion and Christian love, going so far as to proclaim, “If we can realize that Christian love is the total reversal of Buddhist compassion, then we can know the Buddha as the original name and identity of the New Jerusalem or the apocalyptic Christ!”⁵ Reflecting on his body of work, Altizer declares that *The Self-Embodiment of God*

¹ Thomas J. J. Altizer

² Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 125.

³ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁴ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, ed. with an introduction by Lissa McCullough, foreword by David E. Klemm (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 154; also, Thomas J. J. Altizer, Letter 63 to Friends (June 28, 2012), in *This Silence Must Now Speak: Letters of Thomas J. J. Altizer 1995–2015*, ed. with an introduction by Mike Grimshaw (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 213.

⁵ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Descent into Hell: A Study of the Radical Reversal of the Christian Consciousness* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 203.

(1977)⁶ was an attempt “to write a theology that would be Eastern and Western at once, or Buddhist and Christian at once.”⁷ (Ironically, this book, which focuses on the topic of silence, is silent about this attempt; in fact, Buddhism is not engaged explicitly at all.) And in *Genesis and Apocalypse* (1990), in a chapter titled with a clearly strong Buddhist resonance, “Emptiness and Self-Emptiness,” which he thinks “embodies [his] best work on Buddhism,”⁸ Altizer asserts that “while nothing is or could be more distant from Christianity than is Buddhism . . . it is also the purest and most total way to an absolute reversal of history,”⁹ resulting in an absolute emptiness fully distant from the Christian conception of God. This last statement is telling and prefigures Altizer’s primary stance toward Buddhism, namely, as the “purest” eschatological reversal of history, it is therefore the natural dialectical counterpoint to early or primitive, in other words, *apocalyptic* Christianity.

TOWARD A BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Altizer’s relationship to Buddhist thinking in general is both simple and complex, and it is not within the scope of this essay to take up that relation.¹⁰ Suffice it to say here, Altizer’s interpretation of Buddhism, especially in his earlier treatment, focuses primarily on the Mādhyamika philosophy of the great Indian Dharma ancestor Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE) and on Mahāyāna Buddhism in general. Altizer is a dialectical thinker and therefore it is not surprising that he is drawn toward this most important and influential of Buddhist dialecticians. Nāgārjuna’s realization of the nondual relation between *samsāra* and *nirvāna* and of the impossibility of positively or negatively predicating existence to either, as well as his analysis of emptiness (Sk. *śūnyatā*; Jp. *kū* 空),¹¹ profoundly shaped the early

⁶ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); reprint, with an introduction by Jacob Neusner, Brown Classics in Judaica (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985).

⁷ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir*, foreword by Mark C. Taylor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 31.

⁸ Altizer, Letter 20 to Lissa McCullough (March 9, 2006), in *This Silence Must Now Speak*, 80.

⁹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse: A Theological Voyage toward Authentic Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 93.

¹⁰ For a more critical appraisal, with which I am largely in agreement, see Janet Gyatso, “Compassion at the Millennium: A Buddhist Salvo for the Ethics of the Apocalypse,” in *Thinking through the Death of God: A Critical Companion to Thomas J. J. Altizer*, ed. Lissa McCullough and Brian Schroeder (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 147–67.

¹¹ The following abbreviations will be used to designate the etymological origin of various important Asian terms: Jp. for Japanese; Sk. for Sanskrit. For the sake of accuracy and consistency, in most cases macrons have been placed over Japanese long vowels (for example, Dōgen and not Dogen). For Japanese names and terms, *kanji* is also noted. An exception has been made for persons or institutions who use their Japanese names but do not customarily employ macrons or wish to employ them. In general, Japanese names will be written in the Japanese order of family name first, except in

development of Mahāyāna and ultimately established its distinction from Theravāda Buddhism. Claiming that “the real foundation of the Madhyamika is the assumption that conceptual thought can establish no point of contact with reality,”¹² Altizer focuses on what he considers the most crucial dimension of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy, namely, its nihilism: “This negative dialectic of the Madhyamika has the ultimate object of destroying conceptual thought. For Madhyamika dialectic is nihilistic in that it has the purpose of demonstrating that all intellectual expressions are ‘void’ of reality.”¹³

On a basic or simple level, the fundamental point of difference between Buddhism and Christianity, according to Altizer, is that whereas Buddhism postulates a *primordial* nothingness, which renders history and time as illusory, as “contradictory and unreal,”¹⁴ apocalyptic or kenotic Christianity posits an *actual* nothingness made possible only by the death of God, which results in a complete historicity and irreversible forward-moving conception of time. However, this position immediately becomes more complex, as Altizer qualifies:

It is not that Buddhism is closed to the possibility of a forward-moving and irreversible historical time, but rather that Buddhism transcends and negates every possible identity of history and time. From this point of view, the pure simultaneity of Buddhist time is a purely negative simultaneity because rather than conjoining present, past, and future it knows a pure or an empty time with no possible concrete temporal dimension or dimensions.¹⁵

While Buddhism and Christianity share the standpoint of affirming a metaphysical *totality* that rejects any standard understanding of transcendence, the Mahāyāna conception of *śūnyatā* is “negative and positive at once,”¹⁶ and Mādhyamika makes impossible any conception of either an actual beginning or ending. Because

cases where authors of works in English have used the Western order; in both cases, the family name will be given in small capital letters (for example, Masao ABE, NISHITANI Keiji).

¹² Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, 135.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 137. According to Murti, “The dialectic as Śūnyatā is the removal of the contradictions which our concepts, with their practical or sentimental bias, have put on reality. It is the *freeing* of reality of the artificial and accidental restrictions, and *not the denial* of reality. Śūnyatā is the negation of negations; it is thus a re-affirmation of the infinite and inexpressibly positive character of the Real” (T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System* [London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955], 160; quoted in Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, 138).

¹⁴ Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, 138.

¹⁵ Thomas J. J. Altizer, “Buddhist Emptiness and the Crucifixion of God,” in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, ed. John B. Cobb Jr. and Christopher Ives (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 76.

¹⁶ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *History as Apocalypse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 192.

Nāgārjuna's notion of emptiness "is not and cannot be an actual beginning, there is not and cannot be an actual ending, so that nirvana is not the extinction or the blowing out of consciousness, for it is not an end of any kind, nor even a cessation of act or actuality, for here there is no beginning or actuality to come to an end, for nothing has ever happened, and nothing has ever begun."¹⁷ Buddhism then does not permit any admissible conceptions about reality; therefore, "existence as a category can only be postulated by intuition and not by thought."¹⁸ Christianity, on the other hand, which is grounded in the Logos, makes possible the articulation of the Real, which is immanent and not transcendent to thought. But despite this fundamental difference, indeed because of it, Mahāyāna Buddhism and apocalyptic Christianity form a veritable *coincidentia oppositorum*, which is what allows the full realization of nihility to emerge in recent thinking. Altizer acknowledges that Buddhism is "more profound" and "thus an ultimate challenge" to Christianity since from "the perspective of Buddhist philosophy we can realize the shallowness of Christian theology, which even refuses to think about its own deepest ground, and that despite its endless discussion of God."¹⁹ According to Altizer – and on this very point his entire philosophical theology depends – the deepest ground is the nothingness of Godhead itself. And this is where Buddhism is "purer" than Christianity. Why? Because Buddhism is "empty of every definite and actual image and form, and therefore by necessity is empty of 'God.'"²⁰ This why compassion, which Altizer equates with the love of God, is more present in the Buddhist conception of *śūnyatā* and in the absence of anything that might be known in the West as a subjective will.²¹

Buddhist scholars will certainly object, and with some justification, to several of Altizer's contentions about Buddhism, most notably: (1) the positing of a unified notion of Buddhism, or at least of ancient Buddhism, that ignores the same complexities and variegated expressions that one readily finds in Christianity; (2) the view that Buddhist philosophy is grounded on a view of a primordial nothingness, contrary to numerous Buddhist sources that assert a

¹⁷ Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 94.

¹⁸ Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, 138.

¹⁹ Altizer, Letter 63 to friends (June 28, 2012), in *This Silence Must Now Speak*, 213.

²⁰ Altizer, "Buddhist Emptiness and the Crucifixion of God," 77–78.

²¹ Altizer understands Buddhist compassion as "the total absence of the will, so that it is not and cannot be an acted, for it cannot be present here and not there, or now and not then; these are distinctions that are dissolved and erased in the realization of compassion, a realization that also erases and dissolves every distinction between the subject and the object of compassion. So it is that the 'I' of compassion is purely a 'not I,' and not simply because selfhood is dissolved in the realization of compassion, but because every center is erased in that realization, and if now the 'I' or the center is everywhere, that is because it's circumference is nowhere, for now every distinction between the "I" and 'not I' and the is a race, and that erasure is the erasure of every distinction whatsoever" (Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 98).

primordial presence; (3) that there is no fundamental distinction between Buddhist emptiness and nothingness; (4) that the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness is confused with nihilism (Sk. *ucchedavāda*), a matter that Nāgārjuna himself addresses in the *Mulamadhymakārikā*; and (5) that ancient Buddhism is associated with paganism and therefore cannot account for historical reality at all.²² These are all critical issues to be addressed and, as stated earlier, it is not within the purview of this essay to consider them. The status of Buddhism is complicated in Altizer's later writing, however, in which he engages the so-called Kyoto School of comparative religious philosophy.²³ Here one finds decidedly different interpretations and extensions of Buddhist thinking in addition to an active engagement with both Western philosophy and theology across the entire history of those ideas that results not only in altered perspectives on Buddhology but on Christian theology as well, a view that Altizer certainly shares: "Perhaps nothing is more important in the Kyoto School than the balance that it apparently has achieved between its Eastern and its Western, its ancient and its modern, poles. Who could imagine such a new Christianity?"²⁴

Altizer wrote several essays on the Kyoto School and on prominent thinkers associated with it, namely, NISHIDA Kitarō, NISHITANI Keiji, and ABE Masao 阿部正雄.²⁵ Altizer's mature thinking develops out of his conversations with them, some of which, in the case of Abe and Nishitani, occurred on an interpersonal level. While the abovementioned Kyoto School philosophers often address similar

²² See Gyatso, "Compassion at the Millennium," 149–53.

²³ The appellation "Kyoto School," which appears to have originated sometime in the early 1930s, refers to approximately two-dozen philosophers associated with the Kyoto Imperial University and connected through their association with the principal thinking of NISHIDA Kitarō 西田幾多郎, TANABE Hajime 田辺元, and NISHITANI Keiji 西谷啓治. For a history and critical overview of the Kyoto School, see James W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); Bret W. Davis, "The Kyoto School," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2006), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kyoto-school/>.

²⁴ Altizer, "Buddhist Emptiness and the Crucifixion of God," 75.

²⁵ See the following essays by Thomas J. J. Altizer: "Emptiness and God," in *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji: Encounter with Emptiness*, ed. Taitetsu UNNO (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1989), 70–81; "Abe's Buddhist Realization of God" (a response to Abe's rejoinder), *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 13 (1993): 221–22; "Kenosis and *Śūnyatā* in the Contemporary Buddhist-Christian Dialogue," in *Masao Abe: A Zen Life of Dialogue*, ed. Donald W. Mitchell (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1998), 151–60; "Buddha and God," in *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School*, ed. Bret W. Davis, Brian Schroeder, and Jason M. Wirth (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 179–89; "Buddhism and Christianity: A Radical Christian Viewpoint," *Japanese Religions* 9, no. 1 (March 1976): 1–11. For a critical assessment of Altizer's relation to the Kyoto School, see Steve Odin, "Kenōsis as a Foundation for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: The Kenotic Buddhology of Nishida and Nishitani of the Kyoto School in Relation to the Kenotic Christology of Thomas J. J. Altizer," *The Eastern Buddhist* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 34–61.

themes, the remaining remarks of the present essay is confined to Altizer's dialogue with Nishitani, with special attention to the philosophy of Nietzsche. "It should not surprise us that Nietzsche has so deeply fascinated the Kyoto philosophers," Altizer writes. "Nietzsche is the Western thinker who finally and despite himself became most open to Buddhism, and nowhere more so than in his vision of eternal recurrence, a vision in which beginning and ending are one and the same... an event or a present made possible only by the death of God."²⁶ The remainder of this essay will take up the concepts of nihilism,²⁷ eternal recurrence, will to power, and the death of God in addressing the points where the thinking of Altizer and Nishitani converge and diverge in the project of developing a Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

THE PROBLEM OF NIHILISM

Buddhism is an absolute nihilism, according to Altizer, but one that is liberating and possible only by a deconstruction that goes beyond everything that has been named as that. Because there is no concept of, or analogous to, the Godhead (*Gottheit*) of God (*Gott*) or the Being (*Sein*) of beings (*Seiendes*) in Buddhism, "from this perspective, our Western nihilism could become or perhaps already is a Buddhist nihilism, a nihilism that is truly a 'deconstruction' only insofar as it is an opening to a deeper ground and only insofar as it finally intends an Absolute Nothingness."²⁸ In a personal and later published correspondence with me, Altizer reiterated his firm position that it is the historical event of the death of God that makes possible Nietzsche's thinking and brings forth a uniquely modern nihilism. "Only then did the West become open to Buddhism, which it inevitably understood as pure nihilism, as witness Nietzsche himself, and even if this is a radical distortion, it nonetheless is inseparable from our new opening to Buddhism."²⁹ Altizer's interpretation of nihilism in Nietzsche is intertwined with the latter's later recognition of the close relationship between nihilism and Buddhism, resulting in a new or second form of Buddhism: "Although Nietzsche could finally know his own time as the advent of a 'second Buddhism,' it is so only as a pure nihilism, a nihilism which is the consequence of the death of God."³⁰ "But as the late Nietzsche came to know so deeply, a 'new Buddhism' is now overwhelming the West. This is a purely nihilistic Buddhism, one strangely parallel with that pure nihilism

²⁶ Altizer, "Buddhist Emptiness and the Crucifixion of God," 76-77.

²⁷ On the historical development of the concept of nihilism, including a brief treatment of Nishitani's views, see David Storey, "Nihilism, Nature, and the Collapse of the Cosmos," *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2011): 6-25.

²⁸ Altizer, "Kenosis and *Śūnyatā* in the Contemporary Buddhist-Christian Dialogue," 157.

²⁹ Altizer, Letter 16 to Brian Schroeder (January 23, 2006), in *This Silence Must Now Speak*, 70.

³⁰ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing* (Albany: State University of New Press, 2003), 6. See also Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus* (Albany: State University of New Press, 1997), xv.

which *The Antichrist* unveils as the deepest ground of Christianity, and now and only a nihilism fully incarnate in the world."³¹ Altizer shares Nietzsche's passion for subversion and finds this same aspect in Buddhism: "Buddhism does present itself as being subversive or negative to the Western and Christian mind, and is precisely as such that it is most attractive and real to us. So it is that it is a postmodern nihilism that is most open to Buddhism, a nihilism that pervades our world..."³² What remains to be determined is how this Buddhist postmodern nihilism differs from Nietzsche's nihilism and that of kenotic apocalyptic theology.

Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God is a witness to the crucifixion, the once-and-for-all apocalyptic death of God, according to Altizer.³³ This "greatest recent event"³⁴ announces the ending of an old totality and the advent of a new one in which metaphysics comes to an end, and with it every possible mythical or metaphysical cosmology. This ending is an irreversible event and brings forth a new existential and ontological chaos and abyss, indeed, the full onslaught of nihilism. But is the death of God the sole or deepest way for grasping the problem of nihilism, or does Buddhism offer its own way? Altizer addresses this question in relation to Nishitani's understanding of Nietzsche:

Is a genuine Buddhist selflessness an emptiness or sunyata that has only been understood in the West by Nietzsche himself? As I think you know I once had a deep conflict with Nishitani over Nietzsche's nihilism, and whether it is an absolute or destructive and self-destructive nihilism. I was simply amazed that despite Nishitani's love of Nietzsche he could not accept him as an absolute nihilist in anything approaching its Buddhist sense, but then I suspect that he was finally persuaded that there can only be a Buddhist absolute nihilism.³⁵

What is at stake in this debate is the status of time and temporality, that is, the notion of eternal *recurrence*. For Altizer, this must be construed apocalyptically, and indeed this is crucial to his theology, since now the archaic notion of eternal *return* is ended as a return to the primordial pleroma or Godhead, and ended by way of the total apocalyptic event of God's death, which first occurs in the crucifixion of Christ.³⁶ The crucifixion is the completion of the event of God's

³¹ Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing*, 132.

³² Altizer, *History as Apocalypse*, 3.

³³ For a consideration of Nietzsche's death of God in relation to apocalypse, see Brian Schroeder, "Apocalypse, Eschatology, and the Death of God," in *Nietzsche and Levinas: "After the Death of a Certain God,"* ed. Bettina Bergo and Jill Stauffer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 232-48.

³⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. with commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), §343.

³⁵ Thomas J. J. Altizer, unpublished letter to Brian Schroeder, April 9, 2007.

³⁶ On the distinction between eternal return and eternal recurrence with respect to the death of God, see Brian Schroeder, "Blood and Stone: A

kenōsis that begins with the incarnation of Jesus, but such radical emptying does not occur solely in Christianity. “Buddhism, too, has embodied a kenotic pleroma, but a pleroma which is a full and total pleroma precisely in its emptiness, and in its absolute emptiness, an emptiness which is not ‘other’ than anything else, for this is an emptiness which is the emptiness of fullness or totality itself.”³⁷ According to Altizer, contrary to many interpretations that understand the death of God as simply the assertion that such a being never existed, divine self-emptying is the deepest meaning of Nietzsche’s pronouncement.

Nishitani, who took seriously the death of God, writes that “the meaning of self-emptying may be said to be contained within God himself... that is to say, the very fact itself of God’s being God essentially entails the characteristic of ‘having made himself empty.’ With Christ we speak of a deed that has been accomplished; with God, of an original nature. What is *ekkenōsis* for the Son is *kenōsis* for the Father. In the east, this would be called *anātman*, or non-ego.”³⁸ But despite Nishitani’s attempt to connect *kenōsis* with *anātman*, what distinguishes the radical Christian interpretation of *kenōsis* from Buddhist conceptions, according to Altizer, is that “self-emptying is the sheer opposite of pure emptiness, and pure opposite if only because it is pure act, an act which is itself absolute opposition to pure emptiness, and an act which enacts the absolute ‘other’ of that emptiness.”³⁹ And yet, if it is the Buddhism of the Kyoto School that

most purely understands an absolute self-emptying as the self-emptying of the Godhead, could that self-emptying be an apocalyptic realization of Godhead itself? Western thinkers commonly understand Buddhism as a backward movement to a primordial absolute nothingness, but Buddhist thinkers insist that this is a fundamental misunderstanding, for in Buddhism there is no distinction at all between backward and forward, and hence there cannot possibly be a genuinely backward movement.⁴⁰

In other words, because there is no absolute and irreversible genesis in Buddhism, and all things are empty of form, as the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* famously teaches, there is *no* self, not even a divine one, to enact the kenotic event. Buddhist emptiness, as Altizer interprets, is continually kenotic in its eternal returning—a

Response to Altizer and Lingis,” *New Nietzsche Studies* 4, no. 3/4 (2000–2001): 29–41.

³⁷ Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 95.

³⁸ Keiji NISHITANI, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 59. For more on Nishitani’s views on the *kenōsis* of God and the *ekkenōsis* of Christ, see 26, 58, 288 n4.

³⁹ Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 105; emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Altizer, “Buddha and God,” 187–88

movement that paradoxically is not a “pure act” because, Nishitani argues, it is *transhistorical*.⁴¹

Nietzsche understands the relation between the Christian conception of God and the will to power as purely dichotomous. Nevertheless, the will to power is only manifestly actual as a *historical* consequence of the death of that God whom in *The Antichrist* Nietzsche discloses as “the will to nothingness pronounced holy.”⁴² While one could think of the will to power as the renewal of a primordial abyss, this is only possible as a consequence of the death of God, according to Altizer, which is the reversal of an original genesis that transforms that death into an actual nothingness. “And it is just in knowing the actuality of nothingness that we can know a genesis of nothingness, a genesis or actual beginning that is wholly alien to a Buddhist nothingness, and so alien to every nothingness which is and only is a pure emptiness.”⁴³ This actual nothingness is, for Altizer, only manifest within a biblical horizon, which understands genesis as an absolute and final event. But that event is itself reversed in God’s death, which wipes away the whole horizon of meaning and absolute truth leaving in its wake a total abyss. It is from the perspective of this abyss that the confrontation with the crisis of *nihilism* arises.

Altizer was one of the first in the Western world to recognize that it was the Kyoto School which first realized that what conjoins the East and the West philosophically is the issue of nihilism; what separates the two traditions is how they approach and deal with that issue. A crucial difference is that between a Buddhist conception of time and the thought of eternal recurrence, which Nietzsche calls “the most extreme form of nihilism: the nothing (the ‘meaningless’), eternally. The European form of Buddhism.”⁴⁴ Altizer makes a bold assertion in response to this declaration: “In form, Nietzsche’s vision of eternal recurrence is identical with the Buddhist vision of the Void.”⁴⁵ Nishitani develops this distinction. Nietzsche’s conception of eternal recurrence designates an infinite, irreversible, forward historical movement, but in Buddhism “time is at once circular and rectilinear.” The ambiguity of time is preserved, Nishitani claims, only in the Buddhist conception because, unlike in eternal

⁴¹ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 213–16, 225. On the concept of the transhistorical, see Masao ABE, “Will, *Śūnyatā*, and History,” in *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji*, ed. Unno, 280–83; Steven Heine, “History, Transhistory, and Narrative History: A Postmodern View of Nishitani’s Philosophy of Zen,” *Philosophy East and West* 44, no. 2 (1994): 251–78; Brian Shūdō Schroeder, “Dancing Through Nothing: Nietzsche, the Kyoto School, and Transcendence,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 37 (2009): 54–55.

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954), §18.

⁴³ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Genesis of God: A Theological Genealogy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 150.

⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967), §55.

⁴⁵ Altizer, *The Descent into Hell*, 211.

recurrence, “all its time systems are simultaneous,” thus necessitating the “infinite openness at the bottom of time,”⁴⁶ an openness that can only be grasped as and from the standpoint of emptiness. The question here concerns how to interpret the temporality of the eternal recurrence, which is for Nietzsche both the most “terrible”⁴⁷ and yet potentially liberating⁴⁸ of thoughts. Only the affirmation of meaninglessness eternally opens the self to the standpoint of emptiness, and thus radically transforms the possibility of nihilism into the possibility of absolute affirmation.⁴⁹

Nishitani develops a philosophy that engages both Christian theology and Buddhism. Each proceeds from the “field of nihility” (Jp. *kyomu no ba* 虚無の場)⁵⁰ to advance the relative nihilism of existential atheism in order to arrive at a fundamentally nontheistic religious standpoint—what Nishida calls absolute nothingness (Jp. *zettai mu* 絶対無) or what Nishitani prefers to term *śūnyatā* (emptiness). Nishitani maintains, though, that the notion of absolute nothingness, or *śūnyatā*, has never been truly grasped by the Western philosophical tradition although he acknowledges the advancements of both Nietzsche and Heidegger on this question. Their respective interpretations of the nothingness that attends nihilism, however, are not absolute but are rather relative, in other words, they are concepts of nothingness relative to the concept of being. According to Nishitani, both Nietzsche and Heidegger approach the absolute nothingness of Zen Buddhism philosophically, but “the nihility of

⁴⁶ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 219.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §55.

⁴⁸ See André van der Braak, *Nietzsche and Zen: Self-Overcoming Without a Self* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2011), 114–15.

⁴⁹ This is developed in Schroeder, “Dancing Through Nothing.”

⁵⁰ See Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 108ff. Nishitani writes: “The nihilism we are speaking of takes a firm stance on the awareness of the real experience of nihility at the foundation of ourselves and of all things. It is a standpoint in which we ourselves *become* nihility, a standpoint which, to revert to earlier remarks, can itself be called the ‘realization’ of nihility . . . the representation of nothingness is not the issue. What is at issue is rather the nihility we find opening up before us at the ground of the self-existence when we take a stand there, a nihility that really stretches out like an abyss over which the existence of the self is held in suspense. The point here is simply that nihility is always a nihility for *self-existence*, that is to say, a nihility that we contact when we posit ourselves on the side of the ‘existence’ of our self-existence. From this it follows that nihility comes to be represented as something outside of the existence of the self and all things, as some ‘thing’ absolutely other than existence, some ‘thing’ called nothingness. . . . The *śūnyatā* we speak of points to a fundamentally different viewpoint. Emptiness in the sense of *śūnyatā* is emptiness only when it empties itself even at the standpoint that represents it as some ‘thing’ that is emptiness” (ibid., 96). For an analysis of the “field of nihility,” see Graham Parkes, “Nishitani Keiji: Practicing Philosophy as a Matter of Life and Death,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*, ed. Bret W. Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), esp. 473–79. According to Parkes, for Nishitani the field of nihility is a place of death rather than life that turns us toward the “field of emptiness” (Jp. *kū no ba* 空の場) when we authentically confront our finitude.

Nietzsche's nihilism should be called a standpoint of *relative absolute nothingness*⁵¹ insofar as he remains tied to a standpoint of will. Commenting on both Nietzsche and Heraclitus, Nishitani writes: "They do not contain the other-centeredness by which they become 'empty' and make all others their master. . . . They cannot be said to have arrived at the authentic self-centeredness of absolute emptiness that holds all dharmas in its grip, that, master wherever it is, makes wherever it is true. However one looks at it, theirs remains a standpoint of 'will,' not the standpoint of *sunyata*."⁵² Only the mystical thinking of Meister Eckhart and Jakob Böhme, who were indirect influences on Nietzsche and Heidegger, approaches the realization of absolute nothingness, or to use theological language, the Godhead of God expressed as the groundless (*Ungrund*) or abyss (*Abgrund*).⁵³

THE QUESTION OF ETERNAL RECURRENCE

Altizer and Nishitani concur that Nietzsche's conception of eternal recurrence is fundamentally different than the eternal return of mythical religions. Acknowledging that Christianity broke away from the cyclical time of eternal return and instantiated a sense of historicity, Nishitani writes, "in Christianity consciousness of the once-and-for-all nature and historicity of time was established and the recurrent nature of time in mythical religions was discarded. Along with that, an eschatology of recurrence in mythical religion shifted over to an eschatology within history . . . [however,] this consciousness [is] problematic as it is intertwined with . . . a representation of the end of history."⁵⁴ Nishitani maintains that Christianity's transhistorical understanding of eschatology ultimately undermines any realization of an actual historicity because it also imputes to the mythical (transhistorical) end of time a sense of historicity. Where Nishitani and Altizer break from each other is on the question of whether Nietzsche's conception of eternal recurrence, which avoids such eschatological transhistoricity in its "ecstatic transcendence,"⁵⁵ is able to affirm its endlessness and immanent goal of the *Übermensch*, as Nishitani writes, "only at the cost of history's inability to discharge its full historicity."

⁵¹ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 66.

⁵² See *ibid.*, 67, 265.

⁵³ See Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 67. What stands out in Eckhart for Nishitani is that nothingness is accorded a salvific and not an ontological function. On Eckhart's relationship to Zen, see UEDA Shizuteru, "'Nothingness' in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism with Particular Reference to the Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology," trans. James W. Heisig, in *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School and Its Contemporaries*, rev. ed., ed. Frederick Franck, with foreword by Joan Stambaugh (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004), 157-69; originally published as *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

⁵⁴ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 209.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 33, 55, 93, 171, 211-12, 232, 245-46. On this topic, see Schroeder, "Dancing Through Nothing," 53-54, 59-61.

Therefore the final question amounts to this: How is it possible for what we call history to carry its historicity through to its last and final transhistorical base without thereby being terminated as history at the hands of the transhistorical? In other words: How is it possible for history to become radically historical by virtue of its historicity being carried through to a transhistorical ground? The question leads us inevitably, I think, to the relationship between history and the standpoint of *śūnyatā*. It remains to be shown how.⁵⁶

The issue at hand concerns the status of time and history. Whereas in apocalyptic or kenotic theology eternity empties itself into the totality of historical spacetime, in Buddhism eternity and time go “hand-in-hand,” says Nishitani, and so is it possible to speak of the transhistorical *without* necessarily negating dialectically any and all conceptions of actual history. Nishitani advances the Mādhyamika standpoint on the impossibility of positing and therefore of knowing either an absolute beginning or end:

On the one hand, it must be that dharma is transcendent of time. On the other hand, time has an aspect susceptible to constant transition, for it always renews itself and continually manifests transient ups and downs – that is, phases of prosperity and decline. By contrast, dharma expresses that which goes beyond time, or is transhistorical. But Buddhism tries to conceive of these three aspects as connected into one, in the form of the Buddha-dharma-sangha. They constitute the three pillars of Buddhism. Given the standpoint of these three doctrines united into one, we can say that the characteristic feature of the Buddhist position lies in this: that superhistory and history, eternity and time, go hand in hand. Therefore, when we take history into account, we must always conceive of it as involving within itself such moments as eternity and superhistory. Conversely, it seems to be necessary to conceive of eternity and superhistory as involving within itself time and history.⁵⁷

In short, Nishitani rejects Altizer’s insistence that to conceive an actual nothingness as opposed to a primordial nothingness necessitates thinking an actual historicity that in turn demands thinking an absolute once-and-for-all genesis and ending, which is the very hallmark of apocalypticism. “That history has a beginning and end must be flatly denied from the viewpoint of historical consciousness,” says Nishitani. “How did things get to this point? In

⁵⁶ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 213.

⁵⁷ Keiji NISHITANI, *On Buddhism*, trans. Seisaku YAMAMOTO and Robert E. Carter, with an introduction by Robert E. Carter, foreword by Jan Van Bragt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 48–49.

reply, we cannot but point to a view of God that conceived of the divine as a *personal* being possessed of a conscious ‘will.’”⁵⁸ To use Heideggerian language, Altizer’s insistence on the absolute nihilism of the death of God is, on Nishitani’s reading here, bound to an onto-theological metaphysics, a position that Altizer would strongly contest.

The “unbounded meaninglessness” of the nihilism in Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, Nishitani writes, is “overcome through a turnabout wherein the standpoint of the Will to Power is forged out of this meaninglessness and the world becomes the epiphany of this Will” and so coming “closest to the Buddhist standpoint of *śūnyatā*.”⁵⁹ But coming close is not the same as actually reaching there. The eternal recurrence “does not possess the bottomlessness of the true moment. Hence, it cannot signify the point where something truly new can take place.”⁶⁰ Framing the matter in a different way, the “dropping off of body and mind”⁶¹ of which Zen master Dōgen (on whom Nishitani and others in the Kyoto School have devoted considerable attention) speaks is impossible in the prophet of the eternal recurrence Zarathustra’s “moment” of the *Augenblick* since it stands against the background of eternal recurrence and not at the standpoint of *śūnyatā*. “At any rate,” writes Nishitani, “the return to the standpoint of will to power takes a person of strong will who can stand in existence in the world without ‘purpose, unity, or truth,’ a world of becoming where everything constantly shifts, flows, perishes or is born—in short, one who can stand up to the absolute nihility of the ‘the death of God.’”⁶² In other words, although Nietzsche can substitute the will to power for the will of God in Christianity, his conception of time is unable to avoid a regression to a mythical eternal return because it remains attached to a notion of will that is bound to the self-centeredness that characterizes all

⁵⁸ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 212.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 215–16.

⁶¹ The famous phrase “dropping off (or casting aside) mind and body” (Jp. *shinjin datsuraku* 身心脱落) is found in several of Dōgen’s writings: Dōgen, “Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen [*Fukanzazengi* 普勸坐禪儀],” in *Soto School Scriptures for Daily Services and Practice*, ed. and trans. Carl Bielefeldt and T. Griffith Foulk, with Rev. Taigen Leighton and Rev. Shohaku OKUMURA (Tokyo: Sotoshu Shumuchō and the Soto Zen Text Project, 2001), 81; reprinted in *Engaging Dōgen’s Zen: The Philosophy of Practice as Awakening*, ed. Tetsuzen Jason M. With, Brian Shūdō Schroeder, and Kanpū Bret W. Davis (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2016), 195–98; Dōgen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dogen’s Shobo Genzo*, vol. 1, “Actualizing the Fundamental Point” (*Genjō kōan* 現成公案), ed. Kazuaki TANAHASHI (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), 30; Dōgen, *A Primer of Sōtō Zen: A Translation of Dōgen’s “Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki,”* trans. Reihō MASUNAGA (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1971), 47, 49; Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō-zuimonki* [正法眼藏隨聞記]: *Sayings of Eihei Dōgen Zenji recorded by Koun Ejō*, trans. Shohaku OKUMURA (Kyoto: Kyoto Soto-Zen Center, 1987).

⁶² NISHITANI Keiji, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. Graham Parkes with Setsuko AIHARA (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 47.

Western forms of religion. Yet despite Nietzsche's "turnabout" on nihilism, Nishitani writes:

Insofar as the Will to Power comes down in my analysis to a worldview of Eternal Recurrence, it is my view that the meaning it gives to history as its last and final ground, on the field of ecstatic transcendence, is only based on a negative pole. Yet we must not overlook the positive pole in Nietzsche's thought. Within the perspective available from the standpoint of the Will to Power, all meaning in history that had been transformed into meaninglessness in nihilism was tentatively restored in an affirmative manner in conjunction with the reaffirmation of all "world interpretations" as attempts of the Will to Power to posit values. The standpoint of the Will to Power and the Eternal Recurrence is a standpoint of the Great Affirmation, which could only appear after a nihilistic Great Negation.⁶³

On this last point Altizer and Nishitani stand in agreement with Nietzsche: a yes-saying to life is only possible through a no-saying. "And whoever must be a creator in good and evil: verily, he must first be an annihilator and shatter values. Thus does the highest evil belong to the highest good: but this latter is the creative. —"⁶⁴ Yet there is a certain type of nihilism in Nietzsche, according to Nishitani, that is not completely vanquished inasmuch as time is confined to the negative pole of historical time. In other words, Nietzsche strives for the release of time from the nihility of historical temporality. In this sense, Nishitani maintains, Nietzsche's thinking remains confined to the standpoint of a relative absolute nihilism.

The thought of eternal recurrence is inseparable from a thinking of the origin or beginning, according to Altizer, so much so that one may rightly question whether Altizer's theology is in bondage to an absolute genesis. But from his perspective the issue is, would it be possible to escape that bondage if one accepts the death of God? It is vitally important, for Altizer, even more than it is for Nishitani, to establish a radical distinction between a primordial eternal return and Nietzsche's eternal recurrence. A primordial return forecloses an absolute genesis whereas eternal recurrence forecloses an eternal genesis, and does so precisely because it is an embodiment of the death of God, which is the horizon of modernity alone. The death of God is the apocalyptic event par excellence and as such brings forth an irreversible nihilism. The calling forth of the will to power is a nihilistic act since now good and evil are not only inseparable from each other but also indistinguishable from one another. This is true,

⁶³ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 212.

⁶⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. with notes by Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.12 "On Self-Overcoming," 100; also, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecco Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), "Why I Am a Destiny," 327.

in Altizer's view, for all opposites or contraries, for example, truth and falsehood, inner and outer, I and not-I, subject and object, etc.

WILL TO POWER AND THE DEATH OF GOD

Altizer follows Nishitani's interpretation that Nietzsche's will to power is what traditional Christianity has understood as the will of God. Each is not only an absolute will but rather *the* absolute will; and even if Christianity understood it as an absolutely transcendent will and Nietzsche as a wholly immanent will, each is an absolute origin itself. Moreover, from Altizer's perspective, both conceptions designate an absolute power that assaults and breaks every individual and interior will, or every individual will that is open to its presence. This is tantamount to the Buddhist realization of nonego or no-Self (Sk. *anātman*; Jp. *muga* 無我), the fundamental standpoint of *śūnyatā*, which is to say in other words, of the dependent origination of all things (Sk. *pratītyasamutpāda*). This "standpoint" (Jp. *tachiba* 立場), which is Nishitani's preferred term as opposed to "ground" (*Grund*), is where Buddhism comes closest in Altizer's view to grasping both the genesis and death of God. "Buddhist thinking begins with the question of origin, the origin of pain and suffering, which is here the question of the origin of selfhood or the ego, and if that very thinking necessarily leads to the dissolution of any possible selfhood, that is the dissolution of any possible origin and just thereby a dissolution of anything whatsoever that the West can know as either God or the Godhead."⁶⁵ As has been noted by others, Nietzsche's construal of the death of God is inseparable from the death of the subject or self,⁶⁶ but in the nihilistic unfolding of Western metaphysics it is the death of God that entails the death of the subject, whereas in Buddhism the dissolution of the ego-self – the "great death" (Jp. *daishi* 大死)⁶⁷ – is what makes possible the realization of the emptiness of any and all conceptions of the absolute.

Because Buddhism does not postulate either the beginning or end of history, according to Altizer, this

can even lead Nishitani to interpret Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence as the realization of a Buddhist Great Death ([*Religion and Nothingness*] 231). But Nishitani does concede that Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence and Will to Power were not able fully to realize a Buddhist meaning of the historicity of historical things, and this because of the very presence of

⁶⁵ Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing*, 180.

⁶⁶ See Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), esp. 34–51.

⁶⁷ On the Buddhist notion of the great death with respect to the views of Eihei Dōgen and the Kyoto School philosophers Tanabe and Nishitani, see Brian Shūdō Schroeder, "Recurrence and the Great Death," in *Phenomenology and Japanese Philosophy*, ed. Shigeru TAGUCHI and Andrea Altobrando (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), 245–62.

some “thing” called “will.” Nishitani also notes that the Will to Power in Nietzsche and the Will of God in Christianity are inseparable, for they are inseparably connected with a Western and Christian understanding of time, eternity, and history.⁶⁸

Correlative with the dissolution of the ego-self is a *nonwilling*⁶⁹ (what Meister Eckhart, an important figure for Nishitani and others in the Kyoto School, terms *Gelassenheit*) that overcomes self-willing and makes possible the existential realization of the interconnectedness of all beings and dharmas, which is the Buddha-nature of all things.

How is it possible to speak of the advent of the will to power? In general, Nietzsche opposes biblical apocalyptic language, but from Altizer’s perspective this masks a critical problem: Not only is apocalyptic language the only nihilistic language in the ancient world, but Franz Overbeck, one of Nietzsche’s closest friends and someone whose thinking had a significant impact, is the scholar who discovered the original apocalyptic ground of Christianity. Altizer considers Nietzsche part of the prophetic tradition, and surmises that perhaps Nietzsche reacts violently against apocalyptic language because it is so close to his own, indeed, perhaps because it is the historical source of his own language and the only ancient language paralleling his own. Since it is only through the irreversible apocalyptic advent of nihilism in the death of God that the will to power is manifest as such, and even if the will to power is eternity itself, it is only historically actual as a consequence of the death of God, which is not only a historical event, according to Altizer, but also the ultimate consequence of everything that can be known as history. Nishitani also makes note of this: “The standpoint of the Will to Power, which represented a conversion from nihilism, came also to be essentially bound up with the problem of history....”⁷⁰ The tension or problem Altizer locates in Nietzsche, then, is that despite his refusal of biblical apocalyptic language, Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God is meaningless apart from the apocalyptic dimension of that historical event. Moreover, declares Altizer, “if the death of God is the ultimate historical event for Nietzsche, it is the absolute dividing line between our historical past and our historical future, and therefore is the very axis of historical time itself.”⁷¹ In other words – and here is where Altizer and Buddhism (as he understands it) part ways – only within the horizon of Christianity is the historical actuality of the nihility of existence made manifest since

⁶⁸ Altizer, “Emptiness and God,” 74.

⁶⁹ See Bret W. Davis, *Heidegger and the Will: On the Way to Gelassenheit* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), esp. 14–20, 282–83. On the will more generally as it relates to Nietzsche and Buddhism, also see Bret W. Davis, “Zen After Zarathustra: The Problem of the Will in the Confrontation Between Nietzsche and Buddhism,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 28 (2004): 89–138.

⁷⁰ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 212.

⁷¹ Altizer, “Buddhist Emptiness and the Crucifixion of God,” 77.

the apocalyptic death of God is the irreversible *historical* affirmation of that nihility.

The advent of the death of God is the occurrence of an absolute origin, according to Altizer. It is therefore impossible to return to an earlier horizon and to knowledge of an eternal genesis of God if one takes seriously the death of God, or at least that death as Nietzsche via Altizer proclaims it. This is a death that realizes the *actuality* of an absolute abyss that is alien not only to the thinking of Spinoza and Hegel but to Buddhism as well.

Only in Nietzsche and in Mahayana Buddhism can one discover an actual philosophical understanding of abyss, and understanding or a thinking which is here a dissolution or reversal of thinking itself, or of every thinking which is not a pure and total thinking of abyss. Buddhism knows this abyss as *Sunya*, that absolute void or emptiness which is the dialectically negative form of nirvana or Sunyata, whereas Nietzsche knows an absolute abyss as the consequence of the death of God. In both Nietzsche and Buddhism this abyss is an absolute nothingness, and an absolute nothingness that is absolutely negative and absolutely positive simultaneously. But whereas Nietzsche can know absolute abyss as the Will to Power or as apocalyptic Eternal Recurrence, Mahayana Buddhism knows it as absolute emptiness or an absolute quiescence. If these are truly opposite understandings of absolute abyss, this could illuminate a uniquely Western or a uniquely modern transfiguration, a transfiguration inseparable from an absolute act or an absolute actuality.⁷²

Altizer's understanding of absolute abyss is an eternally recurring chaos, but only as the *consequence* of the irreversible beginning of that chaos, which is the death of God. In other words, an actual nothingness that has an irreversible beginning is unmanifest and unreal apart from the biblical Creator, and thereby is inseparable from the very genesis of that creator, whose own beginning is inseparable from the beginning of an actual, that is, historical nothingness, as opposed to the empty nothingness of Buddhism.

Actual nothingness becomes totality itself with the death of God, according to Altizer, resulting in a nothingness that Nietzsche knows as the will to power. As the very reversal of the Christian God, the will to power is the naming of God, but now as the death of God, and so is identified with the will of God, since God kenotically wills its own demise. This will of God is now taken up by the individual human will, and just as God's self-emptying overcomes and annihilates nihilism on the metaphysical plane, so too on the existential-ontological plane does this occur in the affirmation of time as eternal recurrence. Here Altizer and Nishitani stand on the same

⁷² Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing*, 143.

ground. As “the turning point of history,” the teaching of eternal recurrence “must also be the turning point,” writes Nishitani, “reached internally by who reflects on himself within history. In other words, it must be a consummation of nihilism within the self and at the same time an overcoming of nihilism.”⁷³ The death of God *creates* an absolute abyss now manifest that never was before, and is so only as the consequence of an origin or genesis that has never before occurred. Such an origin could never occur, on Altizer’s account, as the consequence of an eternal genesis, which is an eternal return to Godhead or a Buddhist *śūnyatā* itself. Such an origin could occur, however, as the consequence of the irreversible and absolute genesis of God. And this is an origin necessarily culminating in its own apocalyptic ending, since there cannot be an actual death of God apart from an actual beginning of God.

⁷³ Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, 64.