

Kenosis Seen from the Standpoint of Nishitani Keiji

Towards a New Understanding of the Kyoto School's Interpretation of Christianity

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Abstract

In this paper, I outline how the Kyoto School's interpretation of the Christian cross follows a coherent general strategy, despite the idiosyncrasies of each of the Japanese thinkers. Their strategy aims at reducing God to absolute nothingness. This can be understood as a radicalization of the theological concept of "kenosis," i.e., the "self-emptying" of Christ on the cross. The kenotic negativity of Christ's sacrifice on the cross is inscribed within God's very being or nature itself. My paper demonstrates how early reflections of Nishitani Keiji on the Christian cross provide a key for understanding this interpretative strategy. Following Nishitani, I argue that the real significance of the Kyoto School's kenoticism lies not so much in its theological veracity, but rather in its effectiveness as an "expedient means" (jp. *hōben* 方便, skt. *upāya*), as a remedy against the historical reality of Christianity, taken as "the Christian church kingdom and the vast architecture of its theological system," which stand on a "distorted" foundation by clinging to the reified negativity of Christ's cross as object of their worship. Finally, I examine the later Nishitani's genealogy of modernity to further elucidate the historical significance of this engagement with Christianity.

Keywords: Kyoto School, Nishitani Keiji, Christianity, Kenosis, Emptiness

1. Kenosis as the Challenge of the Christian Cross

While the focus of theological debates and controversies has shifted through the ages, Christianity and the Christian gospel have continued to challenge the world with the "scandal of the cross": the death of Christ as God-Man on the cross, as an ultimate act and expression of his redeeming love. The theological term for this "death of god" is "kenosis." The word kenosis stems from the Greek verb *κενόω* *kenoō*, which appears in the grammatical form of the aorist, indicative, active, 3rd person singular *ἐκένωσεν* *ekenōsen* in the New Testament text of Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 2, verses 5 to 11. Bible scholars have identified

this passage as a liturgical hymn of early Christianity. There we read (I quote the bible, here and in the following, from the *Revised Standard Version*):

[5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. [9] Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, [10] that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The expression, which appears at the beginning of verse 7, reads in the Greek *ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν* *heauton ekenōsen*, and is translated as “emptied himself.” This has become the scriptural basis for the theological concept of kenosis, or the “self-emptying” of Christ through his passion and death on the cross. For the purpose of the argument of this paper, rather than turning to theological elaborations of this concept¹, I want to sketch out from a philosophical standpoint the nature of the historical reality and significance of what I would like to term the “kenotic impulse” inherent to the gospel of the cross, which has found its expression in this concept.

I therefore turn to Hegel to grasp what is philosophically at stake in this idea of kenosis. Hegel, in his lectures on the philosophy of religion, elucidates kenosis as follows:

God has died, God is dead, – this is the most frightful of all thought, that all that is eternal, all that is true is not, that negation itself is found in God; the deepest sorrow, the feeling of something completely irretrievable, the renunciation of everything of a higher kind are connected with this.²

¹ For a most detailed account of the historical development and theological interpretations of this concept, from the early Church fathers to the mid-20th century, cf. Henry 1957, 7 ff. As Henry points out in meticulous detail, although comments on the scriptural passage of Phil. 2: 5-11 can be traced back to the 2nd century AD, a theological concept of kenosis only started to emerge prominently from controversies surrounding the theological problem of Christ’s “state of humiliation” within Lutheran theology in the 16th century, cf. *ibid.* 138 f. A fully developed theology of kenosis properly so called first takes shape in the 19th century in the idiosyncratic work of the Lutheran theologian Thomasius, especially in the second volume (1857) of his *Christi Person und Werk* (1853-1861).

² Hegel 1962, Vol. 3, 91.

That “negation itself is found in God,” means that, for Christianity, thinking God necessarily requires thinking this negativity; even thinking, in some uncanny way, a negativity “in” God. This kenotic negativity in God has found its most profound scriptural expression in the cry from the cross, which we hear through the Gospel of Matthew: “Why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mt. 27, 46).

The later convert and catholic apologist G. K. Chesterton, who was posthumously declared defensor fidei by Pope Pius XI., called this “... a matter more dark and awful than it is easy to discuss ... a matter which the greatest saints and thinkers have justly feared to approach.” And in his book *Orthodoxy*, he continues to write:

... in that terrific tale of the Passion there is a distinct emotional suggestion that the author of all things (in some unthinkable way) went not only through agony, but through doubt [...] When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God. [...] Nay (the matter grows too difficult for human speech), but let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.³

On this same issue, Hans Blumenberg writes in a study dedicated to Bach's St. Matthew Passion:

The paradox of this primal [›ursprachliche«] word of the Lord [Eli, Eli, lama asabtani] consists in the fact that one calls on God as his own and at the same time accuses him of being abandoned, as not-his-own. It is this God of the Crucified who must not exist if man is not to repeat the desolation of a passion. The antinomy of this word demands its solution.⁴

The Christian experience of God, meaning the specific “view of God”⁵ (Nishitani), which Christianity has introduced into history, essentially includes a confrontation of the cross and its kenotic negativity, and therefore demands a response to this theological paradox of divine desolation at its very heart. There is an antinomic, perhaps even self-subverting thrust inherent to the gospel of the cross, which constitutes a profoundly unsettling challenge to the mind of believers and non-believers alike, and for that very reason urgently requires interpretation. The

³ Chesterton 1995, 144 f.

⁴ Blumenberg 1988, 70. (Translated from German by T.B.)

⁵ RN 37, 「キリスト教の神観」 NKC 10, 43.

concept of “kenosis,” taken in a broader, philosophical sense, signifies precisely this antinomic thrust.

Therefore, I claim that the Kyoto School’s interpretations of Christianity should not be read as mere contributions to theological discourse in a narrow sense. Rather, through their engagement with Christianity, the Kyoto School thinkers are responding to the historical challenge of the kenotic impulse which is carried by the gospel. This is why it was necessary for the Kyoto School to engage with Christianity precisely on the issue of God’s emptiness and the concept of kenosis.

In the following section, I attempt to give a general outline of the Kyoto School’s interpretative strategy. Then, turning to Nishitani Keiji’s early reflections on the cross and finally his genealogy of modernity, I will try to elucidate the aim and historical significance of this interpretative strategy.

2. “Japanese Kenoticism” as Interpretative Strategy of the Kyoto School

Taking the concept of kenosis as a common entrance point, a coherent general strategy of interpretation can be identified in the thought of the Kyoto School, despite the idiosyncrasies of each of the Japanese thinkers. My use of the word “strategy” here again emphasizes what I perceive as the confrontational character of their engagement with Christianity, insofar as it can indeed be read as a response to the historical challenge of the cross. This however does not presume that each individual thinker was necessarily consciously employing this strategy. Rather, I merely wish to suggest that the interpretations can be deciphered as strategical in nature, insofar as they de facto propose a specific “solution” (Blumenberg, see above) to the antinomic problem of the cross and its kenotic impulse.

Steve Odin has aptly summarized their strategy as “Japanese Kenoticism.”⁶ The passage, which Odin points to as the locus classicus of this kenoticism can be found in Nishida Kitarō’s late work *The Logic of Basho and Religious Worldview* (*bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan* 『場所的論理と宗教の世界観』). It reads (I quote from the English translation given by James Heisig):

A God who is simply self-sufficient in a transcendent way is not the true God. It must have a kenotic aspect that is everywhere present. A truly dialectic God will be one that is at all times transcendent as it is immanent and immanent as it is transcendent. This is what makes a true absolute. It is said that God created the world out of love. Then God’s absolute love has to be something essential to God as an absolute self-negation, not as an opus ad extra.⁷

⁶ Cf. Odin 1989, 71 ff.

⁷ Quoted from Heisig 2001, 102, original in NKZ 11, 399.

And in reflecting on the love of God and its triune structure, Tanabe Hajime writes:

A God who is love is an existence that forever reduces itself to nothing and totally gives itself to the other.⁸

Nishitani Keiji stands in the same line of thinking:

Accordingly, the meaning of self-emptying may be said to be contained within God himself. In Christ, *ekkenōsis* is realized in the fact that one who was in the shape of God took on the shape of a servant; with God, it is implied already in his original perfection. What is *ekkenōsis* for the Son is *kenōsis* for the Father.⁹

And finally, representing the same tradition, Abe Masao formulates even more recently:

The kenotic God is the ground of the kenotic Christ.¹⁰

Through just these few exemplary quotes one can already grasp a general outline of the Kyoto School's interpretative strategy. To summarize its basic thrust succinctly: their common aim is to reveal a primordial "nothingness" or "emptiness" essential to God himself. Seen in light of God's "absolute self-negation" proposed by the Kyoto School, the "praxeological" self-negation of Christ becomes indicative of a more fundamental "ontological" self-negation of God as such, thus grounding Christ's redemptive act in a primordial self-negation and emptiness of God's being.¹¹ In other words, Japanese Kenoticism could also be theologically defined as a radicalizing inference from God's self-emptying act on the cross, inscribing the kenotic negativity of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, a radically self-negating act of love, within God's very being or nature itself.

⁸ Quoted from Heisig 2001, 163, original in THZ 9, 329.

⁹ RN 59, original in NKC 10, 67. One should note here that the concept „*ekkenōsis*“ (the spelling is from the original text, the accent should correctly be written *ekkēnōsis*) in distinction from *kenōsis* was most likely borrowed by Nishitani from Schelling and is not commonly used in theology. On this point see Münch 1998, 184 and Hoffmann 2008, 178 f.

¹⁰ Abe in Corless/Knitter (ed.) 1990, 18.

¹¹ Hans Waldenfels also identifies this as the general aim of their interpretation, cf. Waldenfels 1976, 115.

However, it is important to note that this rough outline cannot make us overlook the individual differences between each of the thinkers. A more nuanced investigation, which is outside the scope of this paper, would have to bring to light how in each case this general strategy plays out and what conclusions are drawn from such an understanding of God's essential nothingness.¹²

As I will try to show in some more detail below, this amounts not just to one more theological interpretation among others. Rather, what is at stake in this inference to the essential nothingness of God, is a radical calling into question of the possibility of theology as such and a transformation of the entire theological frame and its inherent antinomies, insofar as it has traditionally rested on its object of faith as *being*.¹³

In the next section, I will examine closely some of Nishitani's earliest reflections on the Christian cross, which, I argue, provide a key to understanding what this kenoticism of the Kyoto School aims to achieve as an interpretive strategy.

3. Reflections on the Christian Cross in the Early Thought of Nishitani Keiji

In a short article entitled *Worshipful Faith* 『禮拜的信仰』¹⁴, published in 1928 as the first of a small collection of texts titled *Religious Miscellany* 『宗教雜感』, Nishitani contrasts Christ himself with his Christian followers, opposing the experience of Christ himself to the experience of those who imitate him. For Nishitani, this contrast becomes an absolute contradiction when we consider Christ's death on the cross and especially his cry of dereliction. The words "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt. 27, 46) signify for Nishitani an experience of extreme suffering in the attempt to "overcome in man what must be

¹² It is true that for example in the context of the passage quoted from Tanabe above, he does not like the other thinkers explicitly make reference to the theological vocabulary of kenosis or the cross. Yet, his conclusion of having God essentially reduced to nothingness in love, is perfectly consistent with the general approach of the Kyoto School. And it is no coincidence that Tanabe also does so while making explicit reference to the Christian Trinity. A more detailed analysis would have to show how the "triune structure of love" which Tanabe speaks of must be read in relation to the theology of the cross. Indeed, Tanabe's thought provides a most valuable basis for seeing how the Kenoticism of the Kyoto School must eventually lead to a radical transformation of the Trinity itself.

¹³ Here it should be noted in passing that this interpretative move will also famously allow Nishitani to reconcile the mystical speculations of Meister Eckhart on the "Godhead," or the "abyssal ground" of God's being, with the Mahayana Buddhist experience of emptiness (空). Cf. especially NKC 7, which is entirely dedicated to the interpretation of Meister Eckhart.

¹⁴ NKC 2, 163 ff. This text has not yet been officially translated into English. All translations are by myself, T. B.

overcome”¹⁵. For Christians, however, this passion eventually became an occasion for joy: Christ became a vicarious victim who suffered on humanity’s behalf, transforming his personal experience of suffering into a means of general salvation. According to Nishitani, “Christ strove to overcome in man what must be overcome. Instead of striving to do so themselves, the faithful have created a phantom (*genzō* 幻像) of Christ as having completely accomplished this overcoming, and made it the object of their faith.”¹⁶

Nishitani points out that even in the case of Christian martyrs, who supposedly imitate the passion of Christ most perfectly, there remains in fact an insurmountable gap between their experience and that of Christ himself, the object of their imitation. Christian martyrs, too, find a source of joy in their suffering by believing in its redemptive value; it is through their suffering that they are assured of God’s presence. And yet, by contrast, the suffering and anguish which Christ himself experienced on the cross found their ultimate expression in a final cry of complete abandonment. According to Nishitani, “we must assume that there was not even a molecule of joy in the anguish of Christ, which they are imitating.”¹⁷

Thus, Nishitani essentially argues that the worship of Christ as an object of faith necessarily implies a failure of imitation; to objectify Christ through worship is rather a “distortion” (*waikyoku* 歪曲) of his authentic experience, preventing the complete imitation and true understanding of his original experience. And, Nishitani continues, “the Christian church kingdom and the vast architecture of its theological system stand on the foundation of such a distortion.”¹⁸

In other words, seen from the young Nishitani’s perspective, it is not the imitation of Christ and his voluntary “kenotic” passion which constitutes a problem in Christianity. He even explicitly denounces those “free thinkers” who, turning against Christianity, tried to justify as “natural” that which Christ strove to overcome through personal suffering; for Nishitani, such justifications of human nature are nothing but “indolent excuses” (*taida no kōjitsu* 怠惰の口実)¹⁹. On the contrary, Christian kenosis should rather be affirmed as a necessary attempt to “overcome in man what must be overcome.” However, at the same time, for this imitation to become truly complete, it must ultimately also abandon Christ and his cross as objects of worship. Only such a negation of the self-negating Christ as sacred object of worship allows for a complete imitation of Christ, founded on a more radical experience of kenotic emptiness.

¹⁵ 「人間のうちの征服さるべきものを征服せんと努力した。」 Ibid. 166.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. 164.

¹⁸ Ibid. 165.

¹⁹ Ibid. 166.

This early text of Nishitani on the essential contradiction between mere worship and imitation shows that there is in Nishitani's own engagement with Christianity a continuous focus on the cross, God's kenotic self-emptying, and the question of divine emptiness, and a remarkable consistency in his interpretation from this very early text to the additional footnotes he provided in his very late years to the English (and German) translations (1983) of his seminal work *Religion and Nothingness*²⁰.

Furthermore, I want to argue, Nishitani's early insight can serve as a key for understanding the general strategy of the Kyoto School in their engagement with Christianity. The Kyoto School shows how, making use of Christian concepts, one can reach a radical experience of "nothingness" or "emptiness." They attempt to make the subject of theological discourse experience such a fundamental "emptiness" by radicalizing the kenotic "emptiness" inherent to the content of theological discourse, aiming at love as the self-negation of God's very being; radicalizing the self-emptying of Christ on the cross to the level of a fundamental emptiness of God's essence. This, seen from the standpoint of Nishitani outlined above, should be read precisely as the negation of God as a possible object of worship. Or, as James Heisig commenting on Tanabe writes: "... the idea of an object of faith defined by its non-being seems radically to demythify all the metaphors of faith and religious experience."²¹

Therefore, the kenoticism of the Kyoto School strategically leads Christian theology as traditionally founded on the being of its object of faith, beyond itself through a more radical negation; it could even be described as a "theology of man's exit from theology."²² Paradoxically, from Nishitani's point of view, such a theology would at the same time constitute the most faithful relationship to Christ himself. Thus, Nishitani asks provocatively: "If Christ would actually return, isn't the first thing which would have to be destroyed by his hands – Christianity?"

Furthermore, one can see even more clearly from this perspective how the kenoticism of the Kyoto School argues against the orthodox concept of God not merely at the level of its abstract content, but rather at the level of its "historicity" or its concrete historical consequences. Put differently, I want to suggest that the real significance of the Kyoto School's kenoticism should be seen not so much in

²⁰ See for example RN 288, footnote 4, where Nishitani provides an explicit commentary on the Buddhist reading of kenosis.

²¹ Heisig 2001, 162.

²² This formulation echoing Marcel Gauchet's famous description of Christianity as "the religion of man's exit from religion," « la religion de la sortie de la religion » Gauchet 1985, 12.

its theological veracity, but rather in its effectiveness as an “expedient means” (jp. *hōben* 方便, skt. *upāya*)²³, as a remedy against the historical reality of Christianity.²⁴

In Nishitani’s words, which I already quoted above, this is a remedy first and foremost for “the Christian church kingdom and the vast architecture of its theological system,” which stand on a “distorted” foundation by clinging to the reified negativity of Christ’s cross as object of their worship. The aim of the Kyoto School’s strategy is precisely the further negation of this reified negativity, for the purpose of allowing access to the authentic experience of Christ’s kenosis. For the Kyoto School, kenosis is therefore ultimately again a very concrete and practical issue, and not just an abstract speculation on the nature of God.

In the next and final section of this paper, I will examine Nishitani’s historical or “genealogical” observations, in order to explicate more clearly what the “historical consequences” of Christianity’s kenotic impulse are, to which the Kyoto School’s kenoticism constitutes a response.

4. The Christian Genealogy of Modernity According to Nishitani Keiji

Nishitani stands out among the thinkers of the Kyoto School in that he most clearly recognizes a radical ambiguity in the nature of Christianity. In his works, he not only attempts an interpretation of Christian theology from an overtly Buddhist standpoint of “emptiness” (jp. *kū* 空, skt. *śūnyatā*) but at the same time explicitly addresses Christianity as a historical problem. This is why, in a

²³ See the entry for *hōben* 方便 in the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism: <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=方便> (last accessed 10.12.2022): “A method, means; skill-in-means; expedient means (Skt. *upāya*, *upāya-kausālyā*; Tib. thabs). A method that is convenient to the place, or situation, – opportune, appropriate. A stratagem, device. Teaching according to the capacity of the hearer, by any suitable method, including that of device or stratagem where there is benefit to the recipient. The notion of skillful means is something distinctive to Buddhism as compared with other religions, and is related to the fundamental view expressed in the earliest Buddhist teachings that the actual content of the Buddha’s enlightenment is not expressible in language. In this sense of the term, any sort of teaching that occurs through language can be seen as a skillful method.”

²⁴ If the Kyoto School’s kenoticism would only constitute another heterodox version of Christianity, one would indeed have to agree with the critique of E. D. Cabanne that it is nothing more than the “height of presumption” to “explain” the “true” content of Christian belief as a non-believer to the believers (Cabanne 1993, 115). However, I would argue the aim of this kenoticism is ultimately not a contribution to Christian theology. The true originality and power of Nishida and the Kyoto School must be seen elsewhere. They have systematically paved the way for a conceptual translation of Christianity into Buddhist terms; their kenotic doctrine ultimately shows how one can reach the Buddhist experience of nothingness (jp. *mu* 無) or emptiness (jp. *kū* 空; skt. *śūnyatā*) starting from Christian premises.

remarkable passage of *Religion and Nothingness* Nishitani raises the following question:

What problem inherent to Christianity itself has led to modern man taking a direction away from Christianity?²⁵

Nishitani's question ultimately aims at an understanding of Christianity as carrying in its very own structure the seed of its own historical demise. In other words, Nishitani suggests that "Western" history and the rise of secular modernity have a specifically Christian origin and as such implicitly rest on theological presuppositions. In another remarkable passage of *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani accordingly points his readers towards further tracing the problems of modernity genealogically²⁶ back to Christianity:

Historically speaking, these questions are intimately related to Christianity, which has functioned at once as the matrix and the antagonist of modern science since its beginnings in the Renaissance or even before. It is the same with modern atheism, whose variety of forms is unthinkable apart from Christianity. If we trace the genealogy of the ideas that make up the ingredients of modern atheism – for example, the idea of a natural law of unyielding necessity, the idea of progress, and the idea of social justice that has motivated so many social revolutions – we come back eventually to Christianity.²⁷

The importance of this passage for understanding the historical significance of the Kyoto School's engagement with Christianity cannot be overestimated. Seen within the horizon of Nishitani's genealogical perspective, it becomes possible to read the thinking of the Kyoto School in the context of the debate on "secular" modernity²⁸. Nishitani himself is confronting the reality of an unsolved antinomy at the heart of Christianity, which as such constitutes the genealogical origin of modernity. This paradoxical origin can be identified as more or less suppressed

²⁵ RN 37 (trans. modified), original in NKC 10, 43: 「近代的人間の立場がキリスト教からの乖離という方向を進んで来たということは、一体キリスト教のどういう点に問題があったからであろうか」

²⁶ It does not have to be pointed out that such a "genealogical" investigation follows in the footsteps of Nietzsche.

²⁷ RN 57 f., original in NKC 10, 66.

²⁸ Such a contextualization would first and foremost involve going back to the classic contributions to this debate: from Carl Schmitt, Karl Löwith, Jacob Taubes, Hans Blumenberg to Charles Taylor.

theological presuppositions, hidden under the guise of seemingly “secular” modern predicaments.

With Slavoj Žižek one could speak of this antinomic or paradoxical origin as the “dark core of Christianity,” as the “traumatic Real” of Christianity in a Lacanian, psychoanalytical sense of this term.²⁹ Žižek explicitly links this “dark core” to Christ’s death on the cross as a separation or “isolation of God from God,” and quotes the Christian apologist G. K. Chesterton:

Because of this overlapping between man’s isolation from God and God’s isolation from himself, ‘Christianity is terribly revolutionary. That a good man may have his back to the wall is no more than we knew already; but that God could have His back to the wall is a boast for all insurgents for ever. Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete. Christianity alone has felt that God, to be wholly God, must have been a rebel as well as a king.’³⁰

One of the most concise descriptions of the historical significance of what Chesterton here calls a “terribly revolutionary” element of the Christian gospel of the cross can be found in Hegel’s lectures on the philosophy of religion, which is worthy to quote at length:

In connection with this death we have to notice first of all what is one of its special characteristics, namely, its polemical attitude towards outward things. Not only is the act whereby the natural will yields itself up here represented in a sensible form, but all that is peculiar to the individual, all those interests and personal ends with which the natural will can occupy itself, all that is great and counted as of value in the world, is at the same time buried in the grave of the Spirit. This is the revolutionary element by means of which the world is given a totally new form. [...] the cross is transfigured, what according to the common idea is lowest, what the state characterises as degrading, is transformed into what is highest. Death is natural, every man must die. But since degradation is made the highest honour, all those ties that bind human society together are attacked in their foundations, are shaken and dissolved. When the cross has been elevated to the place of a banner, and is made a banner in fact, the positive content of which is at the same time the Kingdom of God, inner feeling is in the very heart of its nature detached from civil and state life, and the substantial basis of this latter is taken away, so that the whole structure

²⁹ See Žižek 2003, 20 f. and 123 ff.

³⁰ Žižek *ibid.* 14. The quote from Chesterton can be found in: Chesterton 1995, 145.

has no longer any reality, but is an empty appearance, which must soon come crashing down, and make manifest in actual existence that it is no longer anything having inherent existence.³¹

This passage, I argue, is the answer to Nishitani's suggestive question, quoted at the beginning of this section: Hegel is describing precisely the kenotic impulse of Christianity in its historical dimension, which through the historical spread of the gospel, has led, as a "problem inherent to Christianity itself," to perpetual upheaval and eventually to modern man taking a "direction away from Christianity." Through the course of history, the "terribly revolutionary" (Chesterton) element inherent to the gospel of the cross has led to even those ties which bound Christian society and civilization itself together being "attacked in their foundations, shaken and dissolved." Or, put in Nishitani's words, its "distorted" and essentially unstable foundation has led the "Christian church kingdom and the vast architecture of its theological system" themselves into collapse.

To further relate this to the above discussion of Nishitani's early text on the contradiction between worship and imitation of Christ, one could say that making the cross of Christ a "banner" (Hegel) corresponds precisely to making the crucified Christ a "distorted" (*waikyoku* 歪曲) or reified object of worship. When seen from this perspective, the kenotic impulse at the heart of Christianity, taken as "the Christian church kingdom and the vast architecture of its theological system," built upon the worship of the cross, ultimately amounts to, in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben, an "equivalence of messianism and nihilism,"³² which has become concretely manifest in history as the problem of "secular" modernity and which has to be confronted as such. However, this is not the place to elaborate this thesis in more detail. My only goal was to tentatively suggest understanding the kenoticism of the Kyoto School as a response to this historical challenge.

5. Conclusion

I will close this paper by recapitulating and briefly summarizing the main points, which I have traversed above.

First, after introducing the theological concept of kenosis, I sketched out some of its philosophical implications, by elaborating on the paradoxical or antinomic nature of this concept. This introduction served to highlight the urgency of responding to the challenge of Christianity precisely on this point of kenosis.

³¹ Hegel 1962, Vol. 3, 89 f.

³² Nancy 2005, 203 ff. and Agamben 1999, 171.

Second, I gave an outline of the general interpretative strategy found in the thought of the Kyoto School, which Steve Odin has aptly named “Japanese Kenoticism.” This strategy ultimately aims at reducing God to nothingness. Put in theological terms, it can be read as an attempt at radicalizing the kenotic self-negation of Christ on the cross through an inference from the praxeological dimension of his acting to the ontological dimension of God’s being, thereby taking Christ’s kenosis as indicative of a primordial “nothingness” or “emptiness” essential to God as such.

Third, I analyzed an early text of Nishitani on the Christian cross, which, I argued, provides the key for interpreting the kenoticism of the Kyoto School. I showed how the young Nishitani therein opposes the Christian worship of Christ to the imitation of Christ, and argues for the necessity of negating Christ as an object of worship to truly imitate and understand his original experience of kenosis. This is, I propose, what the Kyoto School’s general strategy of kenoticism effectively amounts to and achieves.

Fourth, I followed the genealogical line of thought of Nishitani to examine more closely the historical significance of the Kyoto School’s response to Christianity and their interpretation of the cross. Relying on various philosophical reflections from Hegel to Žižek, the kenotic impulse at the heart of the gospel was traced back and shown to be at the origin of “secular” modernity. Seen from the genealogical perspective of Nishitani, modernity could be described as an “unconscious” Christianity, carrying the unsolved antinomy of its theological presuppositions to its atheistic and nihilistic conclusion.

I end this paper referring to religious scholar Notto R. Thelle, who quotes the Shin Buddhist master Zuiken Inagaki Saizō 瑞剣・稲垣最三 from a private conversation with the following words:

Christianity has been through many ordeals. It has endured the fire of persecution, and has through 2000 years been exposed to various cultures and philosophies. It has been tried by the fire of science, philosophy, skepticism, and antireligious thought, and has somehow managed to get through. However, it has not yet been through the fire of Mahayana Buddhism. When that happens, I have no doubt that Christianity will enter a melting pot in which it will be thoroughly transformed by Buddhism.³³

In lieu of conclusion, I suggest recognizing in the thought of the Kyoto School this “fire of Mahayana Buddhism” as the decisive ordeal for Christianity; their

³³ Quoted from Thelle 1987, 259.

philosophy has indeed become a “melting pot” into which Christianity has entered; whether the way of interpretation paved by the Kyoto School will indeed lead to a “thorough transformation” of Christianity by Mahayana Buddhism, remains an open question.

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Abbreviations

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