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Nishida's Philosophy and Religious Philosophy

Kosaka Kunitsugu

1. Nishida's Philosophy as Religious Philosophy

Nishida's philosophy can be seen, overall, as religious. As with the philosophies of Spinoza and Kierkegaard, the essence of Nishida's philosophy is the logic of religious awareness. Nishida considered religion to be the basis and foundation of all things. He argued that all things both come from and return to religion. In his first work, *An Inquiry into Good*, he wrote that "Religion must be included in any work of learning and morality. Morality only comes into existence on the basis of religion" (Part I, Chapter 4) and "when men have not yet been enlightened, they are all the more religious. The culmination of learning and morality is destined to combine with religion again." (Part I, Chapter 4) In his posthumous work, *The Place of Logic and the Religious Worldview*, he wrote "religious consciousness, as the fundamental reality of our lives, must be the basis of the learning and morality" ('Shukyoron' 3, Bunko 349).

In the final year of his life, Nishida devoted himself relentlessly to the question of self-formation in the historical world. Nishida was most concerned with the topic of the historical formation of the real world. In this sense, we should consider Nishida's philosophy as the philosophy of history. The key concepts of Nishida's philosophy were the following terms: "self-identity in absolute contradiction," "action-intuition" and "from the created to the creating." The idea of "self-identity in absolute contradiction" expresses the intrinsic logical configuration of the real historical world. Nishida expressed this specifically with formulae such as "one is many and many are one," "inward is outward and outward is inward," and "temporal restriction is spatial restriction and spatial restriction is temporal restriction." These express how absolute contradictives that are mutually antagonistic can still maintain self-identity in the face of this antagonism and contradiction. "Action-intuition" expresses this unceasing self-formation of the historical world via the work of the individual from the standpoint of the acting agent. In contrast, "from the created to the creating" expresses this same self-formation via the work of the world from the standpoint of the world itself.

However, Nishida thought that religion formed the basis of the historical world, and that the historical world itself has, fundamentally, a religious configuration. He wrote as follows. "Religion is not something that belongs to the consciousness of individuals. It is nothing other than the awareness of historical life." (387) "The historical world is at a fundamental level religious and metaphysical." (388) Accordingly, Nishida goes so far as to say "To deny religion means that the world loses its very self and, conversely, that humans lose their humanity and deny their true selves" (392).

Looking at the work of Nishida's later period, although the length of different works varies, his final sentences invariably conclude either by discussing the relationship between religion and things that appear at first to have nothing to do with religion, or by making general statements on religion. This is also true for Nishida's essays "Self-Identity in Absolute Contradiction," "Empirical Science," "Regarding the Objectivity of Knowledge" and

“Poiesis and Praxis.” This fact alone allows us to fathom the depth to which religion penetrated in Nishida’s contemplations, and the degree of importance that Nishida placed on it.

2. Nishida’s Religious View

Nishida’s philosophy is generally divided into the four periods of “pure experience,” “self-awareness,” “place,” and “dialectical world” or “self-identity in absolute contradiction.” In each of these periods, Nishida considered religion to be the basis of the study of morality. The works in which Nishida showed particular interest in religion and examined it deeply were *An Inquiry into Good* (1911) from his early period, *A Self-conscious System of the Universal* (1930) from his middle period, and *The Place of Logic and the Religious Worldview* (completed 1945, published 1946), which was written in his final years.

Let us therefore attempt to compare and contrast the fourth chapter of his maiden work *An Inquiry into Good* entitled “Religion,” a sublime piece of writing on “The Intelligible World” in *A Self-conscious System of the Universal*, and “The Place of Logic and the Religious Worldview,” his posthumous work.

Three common points can be identified throughout Nishida’s works from each of the periods mentioned above. These are: 1) Religion is primarily considered in relation to morality, and it is considered to be the extreme of morality. 2) Religion is not a question of value, but a question of existence – it is considered to be a question of the whereabouts of the existence of the self. To put it another way, religion is not a question of “how we should live,” but is a question of “why we exist.” 3) Religion is therefore considered to be a question of the relationship between the individual and the transcendent. Specifically, it is a question of the likeness–relationship or the oneness–relationship.

There are aspects of Nishida’s ideas on this issue that remain consistent throughout his corpus, but there are also aspects that underwent changes or shifts in focus according to the period, and aspects where Nishida’s position seems to have changed fundamentally. It is possible to use these different aspects to trace the development of Nishida’s religious philosophy.

3. Nishida’s Religious View Outlined in *An Inquiry into Good*

Nishida’s religious view, as outlined in *An Inquiry into Good*, may first of all be characterized as a consideration from the standpoint of “pure experience.” Pure experience means a complete unity of consciousness free from the distinction between subject and object. Nishida also thought that “the fundamental unifying force” (the work of universal consciousness) lies behind individual pure experiences, and that each pure experience is a particular aspect of the manifestation or development of this fundamental unifying force. This explains why Nishida’s theory of pure experience links both, on the one hand, to William James’s “radical empiricism,” and, on the other hand, to the ideas in post-Fichte German idealism, especially Hegel’s idea of “concrete universality” (konkrete Allgemeinheit). In the former, subject is object and object is subject, inward is outward and outward is inward, and in the latter, individual is universal and universal is individual, and one is many and many are one. The theme of pure experience being free from subject–object distinction makes an appearance in the first chapter of *An Inquiry into Good*, which is entitled “Pure Experience,” and its second chapter, which is entitled “Reality”. However, in the third chapter, entitled “Good,” and the fourth chapter, entitled “Religion,” the emphasis is instead on the oneness–relationship between the self and the fundamental unifying force (God).

Nishida’s theory of religion in this period may be outlined as follows. 1) In *An Inquiry into Good*, Nishida emphasizes the likeness–relationship between each pure experience and the fundamental unifying force, or between the self and God. It is therefore critical towards theism and sympathetic towards pantheism. However, Nishida’s fundamental position was arguably closer to panentheism.

2) Nishida posits religion as something which, being contiguous with morality, extends out of it, and is its ultimate end. There is little detail on what it is that severs religion from morality, and how religion is formed by morality's absolute negation-conversion. Nishida did occasionally mention self-negation in religion, but overall his writings on the matter do not leave much of an impression. He only goes so far as to briefly touch on the confession of the protagonist in Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, and to address the opportunities for spiritual conversion that are offered by religion. In contrast to this, Nishida talks at length about the relationship between the God of the foundation of the Universe and the human self that represents such a God. This relationship is more than a relationship of likeness: it is a relationship of undifferentiated oneness. In explaining this, Nishida quotes and repeatedly explains the words of people such as Westcott, Böhme, Eckhart, Augustinus, Hegel, Tennyson, Simmons, Gutei, and Seng Zhao.

3) With reference to 2), there is little discourse in *An Inquiry into Good* concerning the opportunities for evil or the positive meaning of evil. This is because Nishida considered all things to be pure experience and stated that "the fact of pure experience is the Alpha and Omega of our thought" (Part I, Chapter 2). Because Nishida considered pure experience to be the only fundamental reality, using pure experience to explain all things and believing all things to be different aspects of the development of pure experience, it would have been extremely difficult to discuss the existence of evil and any positive meaning it may have.

4) In short, it can be said that at this stage, Nishida's religious view was in the phase of direct manifestations of religion or religious experience.

4. Middle Period Religious View

Nishida's view on religion during his middle period can be seen in *A Self-conscious System of the Universal* (1930). This work has the strongest metaphysical tone of all of Nishida's works. Nishida sets off from the decisional universal (the natural world) and, based on the subsumptive relationship that exists between the subject (specific) and the predicative (universal) when making decisions, moves on to the "self-conscious universal" (the world of consciousness.) He then uses the will of consciousness as a foothold to cross into "the intelligible universal" (the intelligible world). Furthermore, he passes through the various stages of the intelligible universal to arrive at the ultimate universal, which is called "the universal of nothingness" (the place of absolute nothingness). This is a process of climbing up, step by step, a metaphysical staircase leading from the phenomenal world to the real world. Nishida's religious view is summarized at this final step of the metaphysical staircase. At this stage, Nishida was still holding firmly to the view that religion is both the foundation and the end of scholarship-morality.

And so, at the extreme end of the self-conscious universal (the world of consciousness), the intelligible universal (the intelligible world), which subsumes the self-conscious universal, presses further forward from the intellectual/intelligible universal (the consciousness universal) through the emotive/intelligible universal (the artistic self), and finally heads towards the volitional/intelligible universal (the moral self). At the deepest reaches of the intelligible universal, the volitional/intelligible self, that is, the moral self, can be seen. This voluntaristic tendency is also something that is common throughout each period of Nishida's philosophy.

So the moral self is the intelligible universal that is closest to the place of absolute nothingness, but Nishida characterized it as a "troubled spirit." This is the self-contradictory self. The moral self is always in the no man's land between the opposing forces of ideal and reality, duty and desire, good and evil, and value and anti-value. Then, at the extreme of this self-contradiction, the "troubled spirit" of the moral self undergoes the experience of a conversion through absolute self-negation. This is considered to be religious consciousness. Therefore, the moral self and religious consciousness are not directly contiguous with each other. It is here that an absolute rift runs between them. The moral self and religious consciousness are contiguous with each other only through the medium

of this absolute rift. One dies to the moral self and lives in religious consciousness.

So what is religious consciousness? Simply put, religious consciousness is the awareness that one's self leads to absolute nothingness. At the same time, it is the awareness of the place of absolute nothingness itself. Therefore, religious consciousness, the place of absolute nothingness, and the awareness of absolute nothingness, are all part of an undifferentiated singularity. The awareness of absolute nothingness in religious consciousness is simultaneously the awareness of the place of absolute nothingness itself. Here too, the oneness-relationship between the individual and the universal is advocated. The relationship between pure experience and the fundamental unifying power (God), which is discussed in *An Inquiry into Good*, is replaced here by the relationship between religious consciousness and the place of absolute nothingness, and these are then unified together as the awareness of absolute nothingness.

Nishida's religious view in this period may be characterized as tackling head-on the question of evil from the standpoint of the individual, and asserting that the moral self is ultimately destroyed, and that the religious world appears through this self-negation. At this point, religion has ceased to be contiguous with and extending from morality, and is instead severed from morality – it is discontinuous. In this sense, by this period, Nishida's theory of religion was at a phase of religious self-awareness.

Having said this, just as the awareness of absolute nothingness is defined as “the religious experience of the saying *there is nothing that sees and nothing that is seen, form is emptiness and emptiness is form*,” in this period religion was still being considered from the standpoint of the self as self-negating conversion, and there was only a faint sense in which he also saw it from the standpoint of place as the negation-conversion of the place itself.

5. Nishida's Religious View in His Final Year

In his posthumous work *The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview* (hereafter shortened to *Religious Worldview*), Nishida presents a clarified version of his final religious worldview. Nishida's religious worldview during this period is notable for its strong focus on the power of the other (*tariki*), and for its consideration of religion from the standpoints both of the self and of transcendence (absolute nothingness). This is well represented by Nishida's frequent use in this work of the idea of “inverse correspondence.” There are two major themes when considering Nishida's view of religion in his final year. First, the relationship and the similarities and differences between “inverse correspondence,” which Nishida first introduces in this posthumous work, and “self-identity in absolute contradiction.” The second major theme is the relationship between the “absolute oneness,” a term that appears frequently in *Religious Worldview*, and “absolute nothingness.”

With the exception of the very last year of his life, Nishida's religious view from his early period through to his late period occasionally exposes his strong sympathy and leanings towards Shinran, Augustine, and Kierkegaard, while his views were also heavily colored by the Zen Buddhist idea of self-power (*jiriki*). The core of this idea of self-power lies in the full revelation of the true self by way of the self-negation-conversion of one's self. The quintessence of this is undoubtedly the Zen Buddhist teaching that “upon death all is brought to nothing and then one is born anew.” Nishida was indicating this understanding himself through, for instance, the gatha of Hakuin's foremost disciple Kanemichi Furugori “When one lets go of the hand upon the edge of the highest cliff, the spade releases sparks and sets the universe ablaze. The soul is reduced to ash and is reborn. The field then brings forth ears of rice as always.” If this gatha is considered in Nishida's philosophical language, it is referring to undergoing the absolute self-negation of one's self, and thereby becoming aware that the very core of one's self is absolute nothingness.

However, in *Religious Worldview*, the work from Nishida's final year, religion is characterized as the inverse correspondence of the self-negating work of one's self and the self-negating work of transcendence. Because this

work was originally an attempt to provide a philosophical grounding to Pure Land Buddhist belief, it is natural that the other-power element appears so prominently. However, it is difficult to consider Nishida's tendency towards this idea of inverse correspondence and faith in the power of the other without taking into account the unprecedented historical conditions that existed towards the end of the Pacific War. During this period, Hajime Tanabe, who had until then been a consistent Kantist, worked on the theme of "Metanoetics." He provided his final lecture on this in Kyoto University, and published part of this lecture as "My View of the Philosophy of Kyogyoshinsho." Also, the international advocate of Zen, Daisetsu Suzuki, wrote *On Japanese Spirituality* and developed the "Logic of identity and difference (*sokushi*)." Moreover, Kiyoshi Miki continued writing *Shinran* from 1943 until just before his arrest in March, 1945. This was a time when the individual was all but consumed by a giant wave that could not be resisted by an individual's power. By this stage, it would seem that the individual consciousness was shrouded in a "what will be will be" type of resignation. This must surely have steered many thinkers towards Pure Land Buddhism, and in particular towards the other-power faith of Shinran.

Incidentally, inverse correspondence (*gyaku taiō*) is a concept that represents the mutually negating correspondence between transcendence and the self (God and humans), or between the Buddha and sentient creatures. For example, on the one hand there is the voice of sentient creatures who seek the salvation of Amitabha Buddha, and on the other hand there is the voice of the Buddha calling out to the lost sentient creatures. This accords with the six-character form of the name of Amitabha Buddha "南無阿弥陀仏" *Namu Amida Butsu* ("I take refuge in the Compassion of the Buddha). This name is simultaneously a cry from the side of the sentient creature for the mercy of Amitabha Buddha, and the earnest wish of Amitabha Buddha, who desires to save sentient creatures, even if it necessitates descending into hell. The "voice crying for help" from this shore and the "summoning voice" from the other shore correspond with each other in a self-negating manner. Nishida argues this very inverse correspondence is the logical configuration seen at the heart of the two kinds of deep faith (*Nishu Jinshin*), and the oneness of the receiver and the Dharma (*Kihō Ittaikan*). From the standpoint of sentient creatures, this is the faith in the saying "Even the good person attains birth in the Pure Land, how much more so the evil person" and the conviction in the Shinran's saying "Through untold aeons of deep deliberation, Amida worked out the Primal Vow. Its meaning is brought home to me through reflection, and I see it was all for my sake alone."

This inverse correspondence between the self and the transcendent, or between the relative and the absolute, is also seen in the Christian idea of "divine kenosis." Kenosis (*κένωσις*) signifies "humility or the complete self-emptying of oneself." In the New Testament's Epistle to the Philippians, it is written "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men" Phil.2:6-7. Looking at it from a human point of view, the scripture presents the Incarnation of the Son of God is presented as both conviction: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal.2:20), and faith: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1Cor.15:22). What may be recognized here is the inverse correspondence based on the mutually self-negating relationship between the work of God and the work of humans.

Furthermore, Nishida uses the words of Daitokokushi to explain what he means by inverse correspondence "Though separated for thousands of years, we are not separated even for a second. Though together throughout the day, we are never together even for a fleeting moment." This can also be seen as expressing the manifestation of self-identity in absolute contradiction between the absolute and the relative, between the Buddha and sentient creatures. The Buddha and sentient creatures are absolutely separated from each other and at the same time are not at all separated. The things that meet each other at the extreme ends of entirely contrary directions correspond with each other in a mutually self-negating way. Nishida considered "inverse correspondence" to be the most fitting term to express this non-dualistic relationship found between the Buddha and sentient creatures.

From the first instance of this logic of inverse correspondence appearing in Nishida's posthumous work onwards, the focus of the discussion is the similarities and differences between the logic of inverse correspondence and the logic of self-identity in absolute contradiction. Nishida's leading disciples, including Masaaki Kosaka, Iwao Koyama, and Kazo Kitamori, interpreted this as a different type of logic from that of self-identity in absolute contradiction. They understood it to be a logic that goes beyond self-identity in absolute contradiction, as in the Zen saying "going a step beyond a hundred feet or the tip of an oar" (Hajime Tanabe also understood it this way). However, the posthumously-published letters that Nishida wrote in his final year, in particular those addressed to Daisetsu Suzuki and Risaku Mutai, reveal that the logic of inverse correspondence is not a separate logic from that of self-identity in absolute contradiction. Indeed inverse correspondence logically radicalizes the "absolute contradiction" of this concept and, as such, should be considered in tandem with the logic of "everyday depth (*byoujyou tei*)," which, likewise, radicalizes the aspect of "self-identity". This is seen when, for example, Nishida uses the term "inverse correspondence." When he uses "inverse correspondence," he also uses expressions such as "approach," "contact," or "response," and the words "approach," "contact," and "response" seem to contain the meaning of "self-identity" within them. Likewise, when Nishida used the term "everyday depth," he was invariably using the language of "eschatological everyday depth" or "eschatological place, i.e., everyday depth." Eschatology, as used here, represents the idea that the beginning and end of history simultaneously exist in the absolute present, so it seems to contain an "absolute contradiction." In any case, rather than seeing Nishida's late work *Religious Worldview*, as opening up a new avenue and position through the logic of self-identity in absolute contradiction, it is more appropriate to say this concept was segmented into the elements of "absolute contradiction" and "self-identity," and that each element was clarified and specified, with the former relating to "inverse correspondence" and the latter relating to "everyday depth."

Furthermore, a notable aspect of *Religious Worldview* is the fact that the traditional term "absolute nothingness" fades into the shadows, and the term "the absolute" is used frequently in its place. Why did Nishida use the term "the absolute" in his final work? Nishida himself has offered no explanation about this. However, if inverse correspondence represents the implicit relationship of inverse determination between transcendence and the self, for this transcendence to function, there must be both transcendence that is outwardly manifested (external transcendence) and immanent transcendence. Nevertheless, it is somewhat awkward to represent outwardly manifested transcendence (the Christian God and Amitabha Buddha) as "absolute nothingness." Nishida may therefore have used "the absolute" as an alternative (Nishida probably believed Amidabha Buddha to be immanent transcendence rather than external transcendence. His letters from this period also suggest this). Whereas the Buddha and absolute nothingness are generally regarded as immanent transcendence, and can also be seen as the noesis of noesis, the Christian God and Amitabha Buddha are generally considered to be noematic. The absolute is therefore a fitting term for them. The fact that the term "absolute presence" is repeatedly used in the *Religious Worldview* is probably related to this.

However, towards the end of *Religious Worldview*, Nishida quotes from "The Grand Inquisitor," a chapter of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and presents his own interpretation, expressing the eternally silent Christ as "the Christ of immanent transcendence," then writes "A new Christian world may be opened up by the Christ of immanent transcendence." The meaning of "immanent transcendence" is somewhat vague, but Nishida immediately follows it up with the following words. "To think of returning to the Middle Ages is anachronism. Naturally (*jinen hōni*), we see the true God in the absence of God." Reading this, it appears that the God he refers to is not the God who outwardly manifests transcendence, but the God that is the inside of the inside of the self or the depths of the depths. This is not Noematic transcendence, but the God that is the noesis of noesis: the absolute limit of noesis. It is for this reason that Nishida writes: "Naturally (*jinen hōni*), we see the true God in the absence of God." In this sense, the self and God are interrelated. In his letter addressed to Risaku Mutai, Nishida wrote: "I consider

the world of Pure Land Buddhism to be the world of the sentient creature wrapped up in inexhaustible earthly passions, the world of the Buddha's adoration, and the world of the Buddha's adoration and the sentient creature."

It ought to be noted that the immanent God and the immanent Buddha are also regarded as both "transcendently immanent" and "immanently transcendent." It is generally considered that, whereas Christ is "transcendently immanent," the Buddha is "immanently transcendent." However, Nishida writes at the end of *Religious Worldview*, "I think that the religion of the future lies in the direction of immanent transcendence rather than of transcendent immanence." Whereas God and the Buddha of transcendent immanence are different in character from the human self, they are, ultimately, the true self. Here there is no discrepancy between transcendence and the human self. Both are one and indivisible. In the end, this was surely the characteristic of the transcendence that Nishida had in mind. This being the case, the expression "the Christ of immanent transcendence" carries with it the deepest of meaning and has a great many insights to offer.