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The quest for the Absolute: Dōgen and the European mystics

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1. Introduction

Research on Dōgen has become very popular in recent years. Dōgen is widely, finely, and deeply analyzed in all aspects, but most of them treat him as a Japanese Zen master or a Japanese thinker. Recently, however, more and more people have approached him from the viewpoint of "Dōgen zenji as a world thinker" and there have been studies that search for similarities and differences, especially in comparison with Western religious thinkers and philosophers.

Though Dōgen's thought cannot be strictly defined as "philosophy" since he is a Buddhist master, who is not interested in developing a logic and coherent discourse, as requested in philosophy, but points at expressing in words the dimension of enlightenment, I think that a comparison with Western religious philosophers is possible and productive.

It is interesting to note that the thought of Dōgen was the object of interest and study outside the monasteries, for the first time by a philosopher: Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960), a scholar of Japanese thought, who in the early years of the twentieth century wrote "Shamon Dōgen" (The monk Dōgen 沙門道元), appreciating Dōgen's thought for its originality.

Since then, Dōgen's most important work, the *Shōbōgenzō* became part of the texts on which scholars applied their efforts. In Japan, particularly relevant is the influence on the so-called Kyōto school that counts among its major representatives Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) and Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962).

They wanted to combine the native tradition with Western philosophy and saw Dōgen as a precursor of modern Japanese thought. Since then, the secular studies on *Shōbōgenzō* have multiplied.

That of *Shōbōgenzō* seems to be a unique case in the panorama of the history of Japanese thought: no other text or thinker has attracted so much interest from both Japanese and Western philosophers. In my opinion this is largely due to the master's thought which has the characteristic of being very structured and this feature lends itself well to analysis.

However, in my opinion, the thought of Dōgen even more than to the philosophical field, lends itself well to the comparison with the thinkers (or philosophers) of the European Middle Ages who deal with religious philosophy and apply the criteria of philosophy to the analysis of religious themes. They are mostly defined as "mystics". The strong structuring of their discourse, combined with the religious theme, allows feelings of a deep consonance with the approach of Dōgen.

2. Dogen and European Mystics

Now after this brief introduction, I would like to approach the main subject of this essay.

Most of the religious philosophers and mystics of medieval Europe, among the most important themes, deal with the definition of God and with the linguistic strategy best suited to describe Him.

Of course, Dōgen does not deal with God, but has in common with these religious philosophers the definition and the linguistic strategy to describe what could be called the "Absolute". The word absolute derives from Latin *ab + solutus*, which means "unbound", that is, independent of any bond. Its existence does not depend on anything other, but subsists in and of itself, independent and autonomous, precisely because it is "unbound" and not relative to anything

else. In the Christian treatises, certainly God is the Absolute, while in Dōgen's treatises, the Absolute is the true nature of reality: emptiness.

From this perspective, and beyond the difference in names, it is possible to approach two very distant traditions and compare European thinkers and Dōgen. Both approach the religious discourse from the point of view of mysticism which represents the central core of all religious experience and is therefore what most closely connects East and West religious experiences beyond cultural differences.

For most of the European medieval mystics, God is inexpressible, elusive, indefinable: is neither this nor that. All that can be said about Him is not adequate and in defining Him the sign is always missing. Better, therefore, to give up the positive definition and rely on denial, negation, or contradiction, a contradiction which on the one hand affirms and on the other denies at the same time.

One example is the Irish theologian John Scotus Eriugena (c. 815 - c. 877) who says:

"For the same reason, the whole rational and intellegible structure of creatures can be said that they are and are not." (P. 444 C)⁽¹⁾

Dōgen also often resorts to a radical contradiction to overcome the impasse of definition. Here "they are and are not" is a contradiction which in the words of Dōgen is expressed as: *umu* (有無), as in the sentence: "It is like saying the principle according to which Buddha-nature is and is not" (SBGZ, "Busshō")⁽²⁾, or: " Rivers, mountains and the great earth is not 'existing and non-existing', not big nor small" (SBGZ, "Shinjin gakudō") .

The reason for using this linguistic strategy is clearly stated by Eriugena:

"(As to God), if you negate, in all what you say negating there is truth, but in all what you affirm there is not truth. If you affirm that God is this or that, it is easy to prove that there is falsity in these affirmations. The reason is that

nothing exists of what you can say or can think. Conversely, if you say: "It is not this, nor that, it is nothing", these words will be considered true, since not any of these are and are not..." (P. 510 C)

The impossibility of giving a definition of God leads a few among the most important European mystics to the conclusion that God, "being not this nor that" is Nothing (No-thing). Eriugena says:

"Since, then, he is understood to be incomprehensible, he is not underservedly called 'nihilum' (=nothing), on account of his surpassing excellence." (P. 681 A)

Eriugena is not alone in the context of medieval theology to support these theses: another is Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) a German mystic, who puts Nothing as the ultimate foundation. For him,

"But if God is neither goodness nor being nor truth nor one, what then is He? He is pure nothing: he is neither this nor that. If you think of anything He might be, He is not that". (Walshe, 2009, p.287)

For Eckhart God is the One, but "One is the negation of the negation and a denial of the denial."(*ibidem*, p. 467). Eckhart comes to the definition of God as "Nothing" (that is no-thing) because God is the principle without principle, He is the non-founded.

Also Henry Suso (or Seuse) (late 13th-early - 14th century), a disciple of Eckhart agrees. He says:

"Here on earth a man can reach the point that he sees himself as one in that which is the nothing of all the things that one can conceive or put into words. This nothing is called by common agreement 'God' and is in itself a something existing to an incomparable degree. Here a person sees himself as one with this nothing..." (Tobin, p.318-319)

And "...one can call the nameless existing nothingness. Here the spirit

encounters the nothing of unity. This unity is called 'nothing' because the spirit can find no human manner of saying what it is." (*Ibidem*, p. 198)

They call God Nothing, or the "great Nothing" or "Eternal nothing" to mean that God is no "thing", but at the same time all "things".

The mystics want to reach the union or identification with the Absolute, that is God and their search is both from a philosophical reasoning and from a passionate impulse.

Seeing the above, it is clear that the points of contact, if not sharing with the thought of Dōgen are numerous. In fact, Dōgen can also be considered a sort of mystic (see Kim, 2000) whose quest for the Absolute is connoted, however, more by a deep experiential knowledge (combined with great passion), than by a coherent philosophical discourse.

What Dōgen means with "Absolute" is Nothingness or Emptiness (空), or as expressed by himself: *kokū* 虚空: the element in which all phenomena coexist and by which they are never influenced. This term often occurs in *Shōbōgenzō* and a chapter takes its name.

The "Nothing" of European mystics and Dōgen's *kokū* are strictly related: both are taken as the Ultimate Reality, the real nature of things, the Absolute, God. Since they are mystics, their discourse is a consequence of experience, or actual practice which leads to the mystical union with God-Nothing-Absolute on the Christian side, or a practice which leads to the realization of phenomena as Emptiness on the side of Dōgen. However, it is interesting to point out that in both cases, the most relevant among such practices which lead to the Absolute is stripping oneself of oneself and come to detachment, or self-abandonment.

As Van der Braak (2011, p. 165) says:

"For both Eckhart and Dōgen, the mystical process involves leaving behind, even forgetting, the self, in order for the presencing of truth to take place unobstructedly. For Dōgen, awakening is conceived of as casting off body and

mind, leaving behind the sense of self and becoming available for the larger dimension of reality that is called Buddha."

In the words of Eckhart:

- "When I preach it is my wont to speak about detachment, and of how man should rid himself of self and all things."(Walshe, 2009, p. 152)
- "If the spirit were aware of its pure detachment, it would be unable to stoop to anything, but must remain in its bare detachment." (*Ibidem*, p.337-8)
- "If the soul were wholly stripped and denuded of all means, God would appear stripped and bare before her and would give Himself wholly to her. All the while that the soul is not entirely stripped and denuded of all means, however slight, she cannot see God." (Walshe, 1987, p.295).

And with the words of Suso:

- "You must realize that inner detachment leads one to perfect truth." (Tobin, p. 307)
- "This is the ground and foundation of our happiness - a becoming less and an annihilation of oneself. Whoever wants to become something he is not, must of necessity become less of that which he is."(*Ibidem*, p.374)
- "...when one has lost oneself in this nothing, the powers bring about that which is their origin." (*Ibidem*, p. 324)

On Dōgen's side also, detachment plays a decisive role in his quest for enlightenment and the realization of Emptiness:

"In the practice of the Way we must necessarily move away from our own ego. Even if you study and learn a thousand *sūtra* and ten thousand commentaries, if you do not detach yourself from your ego, you will eventually fall into the demon dimension. [...] To abandon your ego means to throw away your own body-mind, and not to practice the Buddha-Dharma for yourself. Only practiced for the Way itself." (Mizuno, Zuimonki, 6-10)

Among the mystics, both West and East, the theme of detachment and renunciation is fundamental. We find it both among Christian thinkers, and in Dōgen, with very similar accents. The annihilation (literally: the reduction to nihil) of oneself in both has the meaning of becoming Nothingness within oneself, that is, the Void that one tries to reach. Only by becoming in oneself the object of research can one identify oneself with it. Identification with God-nihil and with the Void is performed by becoming that Nihil-Void.

Meister Eckhart says:

- "Whoever shall thus receive Him outright must have wholly renounced himself and gone out of himself: he gets straight from God all that He has." (Walshe, 2009, p. 227).
- "Mark then what is required of a man to dwell in Him, that is, in God. He requires three things. First, he must have renounced himself and all things, and not remain attached to anything that is grasped by the senses within, not abiding in any creature existing in time or in eternity". And: "rather he will find emptiness in all things and be totally free of things." (*Ibidem*, p. 318)

It is what Dōgen calls *shinjin datsuraku* 身心脱落, or, "letting body and mind go".

He says:

"If you now think of practicing the Way of the Buddhas and the patriarchs, do not expect anything, look for nothing, do not think to get anything, practice the Way of the saints of the past without thinking about gain, and behave like the patriarchs. Detach yourself from all research, you must not (even) aspire to Buddhahood." (Mizuno, *Zuimonki*, 4-8)

Detachment and renunciation of oneself is the gate which leads to God-Nothing-The Absolute-Emptiness.

The nature of phenomena, which is Emptiness and from which everything comes, is best expressed with the words of *Hannya shingyō* which states: "The five aggregates are void [...] the phenomena are not different from void, void is not different from phenomena, phenomena are, as they are, void, and void is, as it is, phenomena". It is this Emptiness that in Mahāyāna Buddhism (and in Zen) qualifies itself as the "ultimate reality" (or the Absolute) of phenomena: its deepest and truest nature.

Of it Dōgen in *Shōbōgenzō* says:

- "The study of wisdom is Emptiness, and Emptiness is the study of wisdom" (SBGZ, "Maha hannya haramistu")
- "The Way of the Honored of the World (Buddha) is just the Void" (SBGZ, "Kūge")
- "The true body of the Buddha Dharma is Emptiness" (SBGZ, "Tsuki")
- "Take the Void and make it a shrine of the Buddha." (SBGZ, "Hotsu bodaishin")
- "Thought is realized in Emptiness, and also non-thought is realized there. The wisdom expressed by a master and the wisdom not learned by a master, the innate and the one learned through study, are all in Emptiness. Becoming a Buddha and becoming a patriarch likewise happens in Emptiness. The 21st patriarch, the venerable Basubanzu (Vasubandhu) said: 'The mind is the same as the dimension of Emptiness and shows the law of Emptiness. If we achieve Emptiness, good and evil no longer exist.'" (SBGZ, "Kokū")

The "Nothing" of the religious philosophers mentioned above and the "Void" of Dōgen are very similar. In both cases they want to reach the Absolute, the merging of reality, its origin, its true essence through a mystical impulse that involves an understanding that lies beyond rationality.

In philosophy, the incomprehensible, the beyond, is tentatively pursued through a rational effort, however, in the end, bent to the impossibility of achieving a result, only the tool of negative theology remains, placing God beyond all possible definitions. It is what Eriugena calls *Theologia apophatiki*, or «negative theology».

In the thought of Dōgen, however, no attempt at coherent discourse is attempted: his speech is from the beginning a "negative theology" in which the Void is pursued through the MU 無, the only possible linguistic tool that can bring closer to the dimension of Emptiness.

As samples of Dōgen's negative approach to the Absolute, in the chapter "Busshō" we find the following expressions:

"The non-being of all non-beings" (諸無の無), "the being of all beings" (悉有の有), "the non-being of the non-being of non-being" (無々の無) and "the non-being of being and non-being" (有無の無), expressions that definitely want to take thought beyond the sayable (and the non-sayable).

However, there is a fundamental difference between the thought of the Master and that of the Christians mystics: while Dōgen seeks within the human being the original pristine Void, the second seek beyond the human being, outside man, toward God.

For the Christian mystics the Absolute is reached by means of a passionate impulse aimed towards the beyond, in a vision of reality as a manifestation of God. For Dōgen it is reached through the quieting of passions, and the vision of reality as Emptiness: by deep understanding and letting everything go.

In the first case, the vehicle that leads to God is the desire to get out of the miserable human condition by means of a passionate impulse, for Dōgen it is, instead, to return to one's original nature by means of a calm and serious reflection on the nature of reality and of ourselves.

Eckhart:

"Let me explain. When you have completely stripped yourself of your own self, and all things and every kind of attachment, and have transferred, made over, and abandoned yourself to God in utter faith and perfect love, then whatever is born in you or touches you, within or without, joyful or sorrowful, sour or sweet, that is no longer yours, it is altogether your God's to whom you have abandoned yourself." (Connolly, p.181)

Dōgen:

"You must strive to see the Buddha considering that all forms are the forms of the Tathagata, and are not non-form. Receive and maintain this belief based on experience by reciting it and deepening its knowledge. In this way, tirelessly see and listen it with your eyes and your ears. Drop your body, your mind, bones and marrow: abandon it to your mountains and rivers, to the whole world. Study that this is the daily activity of the Buddhas and patriarchs. Since this is a verbal activity, do not think that it cannot illuminate your pupils. (SBGZ, "Kenbutsu")

For both the Way leading to God-Nihil-Void is detachment and letting our ego go, remaining nude. Once reached annihilation of our self, then man can identify himself with the Absolute and become one with it. Once become the absolute within, man can be the Absolute. This is an unavoidable condition in every mystic tradition. Perhaps we can conclude saying that Christian mysticism is transcendental, while Dōgen's mysticism is immanent. Despite these marked differences, the search for the Absolute leads, in both cases, to detachment, denial and contradiction.

The comparison between these distant traditions leads to the realization that mystical research is always and everywhere characterized by a common path. This is why the comparison of the different experiences on the same theme

opens up to a new vision of reality.

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- (1) Quotations from Eriugena are taken from "Corpus Corporum" Ioannes Scotus Eriugena, University of Zurich, Internet site:
http://www.mlat.uzh.ch/MLS/xanfang.php?tabelle=Ioannes_Scotus_Eriugena_cps2&corpus=2&allow_download=0&lang=0
 "P." is abbreviation for *Periphyseon*, and the number which follows is the number of the chapter. Translations from Latin into English are mine.
- (2) SBGZ is abbreviation for *Shōbōgenzō* followed by the name of the chapter. The texts taken from Etō Sokuō are my translations.

- (3) All the text of *Zuimonki* are my translations from Japanese.
(4) Every phenomenon which you see and hear is a manifestation of Buddha.

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要約

本論文では、道元思想とヨーロッパ中世神秘主義における代表的論者の思想を暫定的に比較した。これは、類似した目標を目指しがちな経験には共通点がありうると示すことで、二つの非常に異なった思想を並べて論じるよう試みたものである。

キリスト教思想家における「『無』としての神」という観念と、道元が追い求めたような経験を基礎づける「空」とは、いずれも、自分自身を解脱し放棄することを不可欠の前提とする探求を基盤に据えている。

道元と西洋の思想家の議論を照らし合わせることは、非常に異なった経験を比較するようわれわれを刺激するのみならず、道元とその思想をより広い文脈に置き移すことにより、ひとりの禅師をその故国の境界を超えた思想家とする作業なのである。

(訳：遠藤健樹)