



Hans Schelkshorn  
Herman Westerink (Eds.)

## **Religious Experience, Secular Reason and Politics around 1945**

Sources for Rethinking Religion  
and Spirituality in Contemporary  
Societies

## Religious Experience, Secular Reason and Politics around 1945

# Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society – Supplementa

## *Editors*

Kurt Appel (University of Vienna, Austria),  
Jakob Deibl (University of Vienna, Austria)

## *Advisory Board*

Schirin Amir-Moazami, Eileen Barker, Martin Baumann, Lori Beaman,  
Angelika Berlejung, Azelarabe Lahkim Bennani, Alfred Bodenheimer,  
Lieven Boeve, Paolo Luigi Branca, Patrice Brodeur, Nina Caputo,  
Mauro Ceruti, Jörg Dierken, Luca Diotallevi, Adriano Fabris, Jean-Marc Ferry,  
Charlotte Fonrobert, François Foret, Guiseppe Fornari, Alfred Friedl,  
Ingeborg Gabriel, Volker Gerhardt, Chiara Giaccardi, Necmettin Gökkir,  
Jeffrey Haynes, Susannah Heschel, Klaus Hock, Ernst van den Hemel,  
Hans Joas, Ulvi Karagedik, Assaad Elias Kattan, Jakub Kloc-Konkolowicz,  
Julia Kristeva, Cristina Lafont, Karsten Lehmann, Lucian Leustean,  
Adrian Loretan, Andrew Louth, Vasilios N. Makrides, Pavel Mikluscak,  
John Milbank, Sigrid Müller, Sighard Neckel, Klaus Nellen, Peter Nynäs,  
René Pahud de Mortanges, Detlef Pollack, Sabrina Ramet,  
Niamh Reilly, Marco Rizzi, Mathias Rohe, Olivier Roy, Thomas Schmidt,  
Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Adam Seligman, Pierangelo Sequeri,  
Riem Spielhaus, Levent Teczcan, Christoph Theobald SJ, Jan-Heiner Tück,  
Bülent Ucar, Hacı Halil Uslucan, Giuseppe Visonà,  
Herman Westerink, Paul M. Zulehner

VOL. 3

Hans Schelkshorn, Herman Westerink (Eds.)

**Religious Experience,  
Secular Reason and Politics  
around 1945**

*Sources for Rethinking Religion and Spirituality in  
Contemporary Societies*



BRILL | SCHÖNINGH

Published with the support of the Research Centre “Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society”, University of Vienna.



This is an open access title distributed under the terms of the CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 License, which permits any non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided no alterations are made and the original author(s) and source are credited. Further information and the complete license text can be found at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

The terms of the CC license apply only to the original material. The use of material from other sources (indicated by a reference) such as diagrams, illustrations, photos and text samples may require further permission from the respective copyright holder.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657794508>

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data available online: <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

© 2024 by the Editors and Authors. Published by Brill Schöningh, Wollmarktstraße 115, 33098 Paderborn, Germany, an imprint of the Brill-Group (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands; Brill USA Inc., Boston MA, USA; Brill Asia Pte Ltd, Singapore; Brill Deutschland GmbH, Paderborn, Germany; Brill Österreich GmbH, Vienna, Austria)  
Koninklijke Brill NV incorporates the imprints Brill, Brill Nijhoff, Brill Schöningh, Brill Fink, Brill mentis, Brill Wageningen Academic, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Böhlau and V&R unipress.

[www.brill.com](http://www.brill.com)

Brill Schöningh reserves the right to protect the publication against unauthorized use and to authorize dissemination by means of offprints, legitimate photocopies, microform editions, reprints, translations, and secondary information sources, such as abstracting and indexing services including databases. Requests for commercial re-use, use of parts of the publication, and/or translations must be addressed to Brill Schöningh.

Cover design: Evelyn Ziegler, Munich  
Production: Brill Deutschland GmbH, Paderborn

ISSN 2747-7010

ISBN 978-3-506-79450-5 (hardback)

ISBN 978-3-657-79450-8 (e-book)

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	VII
<i>Hans Schelkshorn, Herman Westerink</i>	
<b>1. Adorno's Philosophy, Religion, and the Second World War</b> .....	1
<i>Gerrit Steunebrink</i>	
<b>2. Bracketing the Future, or Simone Weil's Mystical Politics</b> .....	21
<i>Sandra Lehmann</i>	
<b>3. YHWH in the Drawer: Literary Tsimtsum in Hannah Arendt's Post-War Writings</b> .....	37
<i>Rafael Zawisza</i>	
<b>4. Disintegrated World: Paul Tillich's Interpretation of Modernity in the 1940s</b> .....	57
<i>Christian Danz</i>	
<b>5. Gerardus van der Leeuw: Phenomenology as Mystical Participation and Critique of Modernity</b> .....	73
<i>Herman Westerink</i>	
<b>6. Karl Jaspers: Philosophical Faith and the Vision of an Intercultural Democratic Global Order</b> .....	91
<i>Hans Schelkshorn</i>	
<b>7. Overcoming Nishitani: Nihilism and Nationalism in Keiji Nishitani's Political Philosophy of Religion</b> .....	117
<i>Fabian Völker</i>	
<b>8. Gandhi's Dual Concept of Religion and its Relation to Reason and Politics</b> .....	165
<i>Wolfgang Palaver</i>	

**9. Rebel Nun with a Cause: The Political Sophiology of St Mat' Mariia  
(Skobtsova) ..... 181**  
*Evert van der Zweerde*

**List of Contributors ..... 205**

# Introduction

*Hans Schelkshorn, Herman Westerink*

## Abstract

This volume explores the relationships between religious experience, secular reason, and politics. It aims to provide new insights into relevant and exemplary philosophical positions articulated in a time when totalitarian political powers were on the rise and human rights were proclaimed after the founding of the United Nations in 1945. These contributions are also relevant in view of contemporary developments and discussions. Ideas of human rights, democracy, and international law are again openly challenged by authoritarian movements and regimes. In the present day, religious and spiritual movements are once more engaged in both authoritarian and democratic processes. This volume aims to show that philosophical discourses around 1945 may serve as sources for religious and spiritual renewals and political practice in contemporary societies on the one hand, while revealing the pitfalls and problems involved in these discourses on the other.

## Keywords

Religious Experience; Secular Reason; Politics; Spirituality; Interculturality; Philosophy of Religion

The emergence and downfall of fascism and the Nazi regime in the mid-twentieth century signaled the definitive decline of Europe's geopolitical hegemony. At the end of the Second World War the varied processes of decolonization began, while the United Nations was founded, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declared. In this context we find a diverse array of philosophical interpretations on religious traditions, secular conceptualizations of reason, and political theories, in which the boundaries between secular and religious positions become porous. The contributions in this volume explore the reciprocal receptions between religious and secular philosophical positions that emerged both within and outside Europe in around 1945.

In his contribution *Adorno's Philosophy, Religion, and the Second World War* Gerrit Steunebrink explores Adorno's reflections on philosophy and thought after Auschwitz. Confronted with the Shoah, metaphysics and religion seem to have irreversibly lost their value, while they still remain sources of inspiration



for critical thinking. Given Adorno's insistence on the immanence of life, his thought should, according to Steunebrink, not be qualified as negative theology or negative theodicy. At the same time however, Adorno criticizes Hegel for reducing transcendence to immanence, while in fact arguing along similar lines. This tension can be seen as the core of Adorno's negative dialectics.

Sandra Lehmann in *Bracketing the Future, or Simone Weil's Mystical Politics* explores the religious and political thought of Weil against the background of fascism, National Socialism, and the Second World War, which though she did not live to see the end of. According to Weil, Europe's crises result from a fatal dialectic between hedonism and relativistic liberalism in modern democracies on the one hand and totalitarian regimes (Nazi Germany, Soviet Union) on the other hand. As a way out of these crises she proposes a philosophical mysticism that was to spread amongst the normal population. According to Lehmann, this mysticism oscillates between a radical acosmism and a mystical affirmation of the world that becomes manifest in a new experience of nature, in interpersonal relations, and physical labor. The mystical interpretations of labor doubtlessly belong to Weil's most original contributions to social philosophy and the philosophy of religion.

In his contribution *YHWH in the Drawer: Literary Tsimtsum in Hannah Arendt's Post-War Writings*, Rafael Zawisza examines Hannah Arendt's complex relationships to religion under the impact of the rupturing of civilization in the mid-twentieth century. Although Arendt dealt with religious themes in her dissertation on Augustine, she adhered to Nietzsche's diagnosis of the death of God early in her thought, an attitude that, according to Zawisza, did not change after 1945. However, an engagement with Luria's kabbalistic theology is visible foremost in the "Denktagebuch," which also flows discretely into the publications. Arendt therefore justifies her pluralist and radically secular theory of the political not only with a critique of the unity idea of Greek metaphysics and Christian theology, but also with literary adaptations of Luria's idea of a self-limiting God. Arendt's thinking can therefore neither be unproblematically assigned to Jewish thought nor to the critique of religion in the tradition of Feuerbach; rather, it is to be seen as a crypto-theology that prepares the way for a secular politics after the break with tradition marked by the Shoah.

In *Disintegrated World: Paul Tillich's Interpretation of Modernity in the 1940s*, Christian Danz presents one of the most important Protestant theologians of the twentieth century, who was at the same time closely connected to the philosophical currents of his time. Even before the Second World War, Tillich developed, on the one hand, a subject-centered theory of religion as a breakthrough from the unconditioned to the conditioned, and, on the other, a radical critique of bourgeois-liberal modernity, which in his view led to a

complete disintegration of the world and facilitated the rise of fascism. The critique of capitalist society correlates, as Danz shows, with the early option for a religious socialism, which was Tillich's position in his opposition to the Nazi regime. It was only through the experience of exile in the United States and the Second World War that Tillich moved closer to liberal democracy, which was then absorbed into the vision of the political integration of Europe. However, according to Danz, the option for a third way between capitalism and communism remains present even in the late Tillich, despite these self-corrections.

In *Gerardus van der Leeuw: Phenomenology as Mystical Participation and Critique of Modernity*, Herman Westerink explores Van der Leeuw's contribution to the phenomenology of religion, focusing on his profound critique of the modern subject-object dichotomy as it predominantly manifests in both the modern sciences and secularized culture. In response to the modern eccentric, self-conscious positioning of individual man, Van der Leeuw argues for the possibility of a more profound – one would have to say “mystical” – participation in and experiencing and understanding of religious phenomena in the sensitive inner life of human beings. It is in particular this reference to a mystical current in the psychic life of human beings that colors his phenomenology of religion and makes it distinct from other positions in this field. The author shows that Van der Leeuw's phenomenology of religion can be situated in the context of debates on the relationship between a theological insistence on the subject's search for meaning and divine presence beyond the limits of particular religious and cultural traditions on the one hand, and more secular positions in philosophy and religious studies on the other hand.

In his contribution *Karl Jaspers: Philosophical Faith and the Vision of an Intercultural Democratic Global Order*, Hans Schelkshorn turns to one of the great figures of twentieth-century existential philosophy. For Jaspers, philosophy as such is always philosophy of religion, which, however, can only be continued after Hegel in a critical confrontation with Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. At the same time, according to Schelkshorn, Jaspers became aware of the constitutive relationship between thinking the absolute and political philosophy, which in turn implies a diagnosis of one's own present. Starting with the turn from negative theology to an existential philosophy, Jaspers, as Schelkshorn shows, confronts the challenges of the collapse of the Nazi regime in numerous philosophical studies, ranging from the question of the guilt of the Germans to the possibilities of a renewal of a human rights-based constitutional democracy and through to a global order of international law. In turn, Jaspers situates political philosophy in a new philosophy of history that overcomes the Eurocentrism of European historical thought since Hegel with the theory of the Axial Age. Jaspers therefore envisions an intercultural and, at the same

time, democratic world society, which though is threatened by autocratic and totalitarian powers.

In his article *Overcoming Nishitani: Nihilism and Nationalism in Keiji Nishitani's Political Philosophy of Religion*, Fabian Völker deals with one of the most important representatives of the so-called Kyoto School. Völker first situates Nishitani's thought in the socio-historical context of Japan's modernization since the end of the nineteenth century. In his philosophy of religion, Nishitani reinterprets certain motifs of Buddhism, especially the Sunyata doctrine, which Völker describes in detail. However, as Völker critically points out, hardly any normative criteria for ethical and political orientation can be gained from a Buddhist-inspired philosophy of religion. Against this background, Völker analyzes Nishitani's problematic involvement in Japanese imperialist politics up to the end of the Second World War.

In *Gandhi's Dual Concept of Religion and its Relation to Reason and Politics*, Wolfgang Palaver approaches the writings of Mahatma Gandhi from the question whether, and if so how, religion is one of the main sources of, or political instruments for, violence and intolerance in society, and if there be good reasons to have it strictly privatized. Gandhi represents a way out of this deadlock because he rejected any separation of religion and politics into watertight compartments, while at the same time supporting a secular Indian state. To understand why these two positions are not contradictory, Palaver turns attention to Gandhi's twofold concept of religion: the rejection of the theocratic model and a national religious state; and the "spiritualization of politics" in which religion (as spirituality), i.e., beyond all particular religions, can guide human beings to contribute to a type of politics that serves solidarity and justice in society.

Evert van der Zweerde in his contribution *Rebel Nun with a Cause: The Political Sophiology of St Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova)* explores the fragmentary theoretical work in which Skobtsova not only offers a justification of her activity as a "nun in the world," but also a number of innovative motifs that are part of the tradition of Russian religious philosophy which flourished even in unwanted exile in Paris. Much of this circles around the Sophia figure, which Skobtsova comes close to positing as a fourth hypostasis next to the Holy Trinity and she links explicitly to the virgin mother Mary, thus introducing a feminine element into the very core of the Christian faith. Among the numerous possible approaches to her life and work, this article explores Skobtsova's political sophiology as an attempt to develop and adapt religious discourse in rapidly changing societal and political circumstances and thus create building blocks for an "alternative modernity" that includes individual freedom and accepts political pluralism,

while though avoiding or repairing the ravaging effects of capitalism with its exploitation and devastation of human and natural resources.

The studies in this volume on the relationships between religious experience, secular reason, and politics not only provide new insights into relevant and exemplary philosophical positions articulated in a time when totalitarian political powers were on the rise and then human rights were proclaimed after the founding of the United Nations in 1945. These contributions are also relevant in view of contemporary developments and discussions. In the early twenty-first century, the ideas of human rights, democracy, and international law are again being openly challenged by authoritarian movements and regimes. In the present day, religious and spiritual movements are once more engaged in both authoritarian and democratic processes in various regions of the world, including Western states. Against this background, the question of the relationship between the spiritual sources of religious movements, the status of subjective experiences in ideological positions, and their interactions with secular politics is once again urgent and critical. The contributions in this volume aim to show that the discourses of the philosophy of religion around 1945 may serve as sources for religious and spiritual renewals and political practice in contemporary societies on the one hand, while revealing the pitfalls and problems involved in these discourses on the other.

This volume results from a conference that took place on the 16th and 17th of June 2022 in Vienna. The conference was organized as a cooperation of the research-center “Religion and Transformation in Contemporary European Society” (RaT Vienna) and the Titus Brandsma Institute (Nijmegen). As editors of this volume we wish to thank all those who made this publication possible. In particular we thank Kurt Appel, the speaker of RaT, Jacob Deibl as editor of JRAT supplementa and his staff, especially Noemi Call, and Agnes Leyer, administration of the Department of Intercultural Philosophy of Religion. For correction work we thank Kieryn Wurts.

Hans Schelkshorn

Herman Westerink



# Adorno's Philosophy, Religion, and the Second World War

*Gerrit Steunebrink*

## Abstract

For Adorno's neomarxism Auschwitz as the 'industrialization of death' is the ultimate consequence of modern society as an industrial and capitalistic society. Adorno traces its conceptual roots in the oppressive character of modern conceptual thinking. In this criticism he is heavily indebted to Bergson. Bergson's concept of intuition returns in Adorno's idea of 'mimesis'. In his criticism of modernity Adorno is familiar with the 'neocatholic' movement. The Jewish character of his thinking is a result of the synthesis German assimilated Jews like Hermann Cohen made between German culture and Jewish religion. In the idea of the 'ban of the images' Adorno combines Kantian critical philosophy with the idea of 'absolute', pure instrumental music. This synthesis collapsed in Auschwitz. Modern art is its expression. How to think transcendence again? Is it the 'other' as an utopian world? Or is it God as the 'other' of all worldly conditions?

## Keywords

Adorno; Ban of the Image; Transcendence; Jewish Religion; Modernity; Absolute Music

## 1 Introduction

In this article I want to examine the position of Adorno's philosophy prior to the Second World War, in the interbellum, and in the initial years following World War II. This position is determined by Adorno's reflections about the war itself and especially about the Holocaust. Although Adorno is not himself a believer, reflection on religion was for him an absolute necessity. This necessity was due in part to Adorno's Jewish descent, which forced him to reflect on the meaning of being Jewish and its relation to German culture before and after the war.

This topic is not just any topic, it is a central topic for his philosophy. Further, according to Adorno, it should be a central topic of all philosophy after the Holocaust, which had revealed a self-annihilating tendency in Western

rationalism – that same rationalism in which the Western world vested such great expectations in the form of the Enlightenment. The hope of the Enlightenment seemed to be totally falsified by the Holocaust, inasmuch as it manifested itself to be a consequence of Enlightenment thinking. What had thus become necessary was a new reflection on modern Enlightenment thinking, especially on its great critical representatives, Kant and Hegel. Adorno's ideas on Jewish religion, and to a certain extent his reflections on Christianity, also belong to this new critical reflection. How does Adorno develop his ideas in his reading of the history of philosophy, which is a philosophy of history at the same time?

## 2 Adorno: From Neo-Kantianism to Neo-Romanticism, Neo-Hegelianism and Neo-Marxism

The historical background of Adorno's philosophy particularly and of the Frankfurt School more generally is the Neokantian revival in the decades between the two world wars that found itself transitioning towards neo-Romanticism, Neo-Hegelianism and Neo-Marxism. This "neo-thinking" is applied critically, especially after the War II, against the properly "new" philosophies that emerged following Neo-Kantianism: existential phenomenology and logical positivism. Heidegger is a particular enemy of Adorno.

These transitions are important for Adorno's conception of religion and metaphysics. We see that the idea of God is always treated in relation to Kantian and Hegelian discourses. This results in his understanding of the aesthetic experience as the representative religious experience – the peace of art as the presence of the Absolute. Adorno is a "Neoromantic" thinker. He wants to overcome the Kantian criticism of metaphysics but without being absorbed by Hegel's Absolute Idealism. The aesthetic experience, especially the musical experience, as transcending Kantian critical empirical and Hegelian conceptual knowledge is the metaphysical and religious moment in thinking. One can find this in Schlegel and Schelling as well as in the in Neoromantic thinking of -Stefan George. What is not well-known is the influence of the once important Jewish Neo-Kantian philosopher, Hermann Cohen, in Adorno's philosophy of art and music. We will pay attention to it in the chapter about Adorno as a Jewish philosopher.

The transition to Neo-Marxism is very important to the questions of art and religion. For in Neomarxism the classical Marxist conception of religion as "opium of the masses" disappears in favor of an interpretation of religion, in this case especially Judaism, as an expression of uneasiness with the material

conditions of life and, therefore, as an utopian/messianistic hope. Ernst Bloch is the example *par excellence* of this tendency. During the 1970s, he influenced the emergence of Moltmann's *theology of hope*. One can discover the same tendency in the philosophy of Adorno and in that of his companion Max Horkheimer. The "Western" non-stalinistic Marxism of Georg Lukacs is important for Adorno and Horkheimer too. The Neo-Marxism of Adorno and Horkheimer emerges from disappointment in the predictions of traditional Marxism about the disappearance of the capitalist world.

Two central ideals of traditional Marxism turned out to be a mistake. The claim that there would be a proletariat with an absolute interest in revolutionary change turned out to be false. The other idea that did not come to fruition was that the development of the "forces of production" – technological and scientific development resulting in industrialization – would destroy the oppressive "conditions of production", that is the capitalistic structure of possession. The development of technology did not change the situation of production. Technology was integrated in the capitalistic mode of possession and its oppressive character. Industrial society is the result of this phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

This deception has important consequences for Adorno's thought. Firstly, if technology does not liberate from the oppression of capitalist modes of possession nor lead towards a free society, isn't it because technology has itself the character of oppression, especially the oppression of nature? The next step is the development of the social sciences as the instrument of domination of men, by men. The result of it all was Auschwitz, that is, genocide as an outcome of the attempt to absolutely integrate of all human beings, which is only possible in a society that aims to regulate, to "manage" technologically life absolutely. The exemptions, those not integrated, will be killed.<sup>2</sup> Genocide was then a result of the "administered world" (*die verwaltete Welt*), the same world as the industrial world, and it is such that one can speak about the industrialization of death.<sup>3</sup>

Adorno stretches this criticism of modern technology to find its source in, the modern Cartesian philosophy of the subject. Enlightenment thinking itself becomes therefore the target of Adorno's criticism. Oppression, of which the Enlightenment sought to liberate mankind by way of science and technology, was a part of technology itself as oppression of nature. It tries to emancipate mankind from the domination by nature by dominating, that means

---

1 Horkheimer/Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 29–32; Adorno, *Spätkapitalismus oder Industriegesellschaft?*

2 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 341; 370f.

3 Brumlick, 'Dass Auschwitz sich nie wiederhole'.



oppressing, nature itself. That is the subject of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: how to find a way out of the alternatives of being oppressed by nature and exercising oppression upon nature and upon men by the use of science itself. The basic element of scientific thinking is the concept. And therefore, Adorno's criticism of science and technology results in a criticism of the concept that dominates its matter, i.e. its given.

This criticism is applicable not only to capitalism but to Marxism itself insofar as it vests all hope in the domination of nature. But how ideal is a "state of nature", for example in the phenomenon of death? Adorno and Horkheimer's thinking transcends classical Marxism by relating explicitly the reality of a painful, so to speak "anti-human" character of nature to the idea of a just, reconciled and "happy" society. Religious ideas, for example Jewish, messianic and Christian ideas about a "fallen world" seem to influence Adorno and Horkheimer at times, particularly when they speak about a utopian, messianic reconciliation of man and nature, and a world in which not only war but also death ceases. Following the Old Testament: a world where "the lions lies together with the lamb", a world not dominated anymore by the principle "eat or be eaten".

You find hints of these kinds of ideas, of a "resurrection of nature" in Adorno's work.<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem are important here. You can interpret it as Jewish, but they are also Christian, and are not far from the postulates of practical reason in Kantian philosophy, as we shall soon see.

Characteristic for Adorno is his application of Marxist analyses to the world of culture. Culture, art specifically, is the means by which man becomes conscious of and transcends his given situation, the world of industrial Capitalism in which science is enclosed. It has a potential of utopian-messianic hope, that means of expectation of change.<sup>5</sup> Adorno develops the concept of the "culture industry" for products of entertainment of popular culture that have lost that critical potential and that therefore reconcile falsely their users with their "bad" reality.<sup>6</sup> Adorno's cultural criticism, distinguishing between the self-forgetfulness of the human being in industrial cultural and its true being in true culture.

---

4 Habermas, *Urgeschichte der Subjektivität*.

5 Vgl. Briel, *Adorno und Derrida, Oder Wo Liegt Das Ende der Moderne*, p. 38.

6 Horkheimer/Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 94–136.

### 3 Bergson, Phenomenology and neo-Catholicism

Other dominant trends in contemporary thought, namely Bergson and phenomenology, specifically Husserl<sup>7</sup>, also required evaluation from this neo-Marxist perspective. Adorno understood them as his spiritual ancestors, the famous teachers of his time!<sup>8</sup> Bergson was Europe's most prominent philosopher between the two world wars. The formation of Adorno's thought develops during a time where Bergson's influence was felt very broadly in France and Bergson was a decisive figure in the rise of the so-called "neo-Catholic" movement. But it was Bergson's philosophy of intuition which was, in the first order, important for Adorno. His criticism of conceptual knowledges is indeed the same as that of Bergson! According to Bergson, conceptual analysis knows things from the outside by generalization and abstraction. Generalization and abstraction are furthermore understood as practical appropriations of reality. It poses the question of the use-value of an object: What can we do with it? It is not disinterested knowledge, but knowledge at the service of a decision, of profit. Metaphysics should then transcend the paradigm of the concept. Metaphysics is integral experience.<sup>9</sup>

Adorno is in line with this Bergsonian criticism of the concept;<sup>10</sup> "subsumption under concepts is technology (Bergson aware of this)."<sup>11</sup> Adorno gives this criticism a Marxist bent in his *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Bergson introduces the concept of "intuition" for a different type of knowledge based on sympathy. By sympathy the knower enters into the interiority of the object and into contact with its inexpressible uniqueness! This is very Adornian. But he criticizes Bergson's dualism of intuition and concept by which the intuition becomes independent and therefore irrational.<sup>12</sup> Husserl's thinking is to a certain similar to that of Bergson, In Husserl's phenomenological concept of *Wesenschau*, the "intuition of essence", Adorno sees the same intention to transcend the abstract general concept, however he understands Husserl as regressing back into idealism, whereas the Bergsonian concept of intuition does not. Adorno mentions explicitly Bergson's idea of intuition as a store of unconscious images! It is in this way that Adorno can relate psychoanalytic thought to Bergsonian

7 See Foster, *Adorno and Experience*, pp. 89–138.

8 Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, p. 70f.

9 Bergson, *Introduction à la métaphysique*, pp. 1392–1397.

10 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 6f.

11 Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, p. 77.

12 Adorno, *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie*, p. 52.

intuition.<sup>13</sup> In this context, Adorno compares his rather unclear concept of *mimesis* to Bergson's theory of intuition. Both express the same tendency to look towards the familiarity between subject and object. What is *mimesis* or "imitation"? As a theory of history of knowledge, Adorno designates as *mimesis* the stage in human thinking before the rise of conceptual and scientific thinking. It approaches reality as familiar with the human being and expresses itself largely by way of myth and ritual. On the historical level, all intuition theories are, according to Adorno, remnants of that old mimetic behaviour. On the level of theory of knowledge however, he integrates it into knowledge. *Mimesis*, as a kind of intuition, is an essential aspect of knowledge as such. Without *mimesis*, without familiarity, Adorno argues, with a lot of references to ancient Greek thought, that the gap between subject and object would be absolute.<sup>14</sup>

Adorno's theory of *mimesis* is a kind of "materialistic" theory of intuition that tries to avoid the idea of an intellectual intuition (*intellektuelle Anschauung*).<sup>15</sup> In the neo-Thomistic philosophy of the same period, in the philosophy of his former pupil Jacques Maritain, Bergson contributed to the revival of the idea of an intellectual intuition. Maritain speaks about an *intuition of being* which precedes conceptual knowledge.<sup>16</sup> He too developed the notion of *connatural knowledge*. The relation between Platonism, intuition, Aristotelism, and the concept, in Thomas Aquinas is a hot topic in neo-Thomistic circles.

Adorno never refers explicitly to Maritain, but he was in discussion with the neo-Catholic movement he belonged to.

This neo-Catholic movement was not restricted to France but manifested itself in the whole of the Western world. In France its philosophical representatives were Jacques Maritain and the historian Étienne Gilson. It is very much an aesthetic movement. The poets Léon Bloy, Charles Péguy and Paul Claudel belong to it. The composers Strawinsky and Poulenc sympathized with it as did the painter Picasso.

One of its origins can be found in the courses of Henri Bergson, in which Charles Péguy and Jacques Maritain participated, as well as figures from abroad, such as T.S. Eliott. Many in these circles converted, usually, to the Catholicism of their youth, see Claudel. Strawinsky returned to his original Orthodox faith. T.S. Eliott became an "Anglo-Catholic" protestant. Conversion to Catholicism,

13 Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, pp. 65f.; 70–75.

14 Adorno, *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie*, pp. 147–148 asterix; see also Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 8.

15 See Noppen, *Adorno on Mimetic Rationality: Three Puzzles*, pp. 79–100.

16 See Gwozdz, *Young and Restless, Jacques Maritain and Henri Bergson*, pp. 549–564.

under the influence of this movement, was also popular among assimilated Jews. See in Germany Edith Stein, Max Scheler and Alfred Döblin and in France Simone Weil and Henri Bergson himself who became Catholic at the end of his life, thereby surprising Jacques Maritain.

The leftist intellectual world in which Adorno moved was in critical conversation with Neo-Catholicism. What united the neo-Marxists and the neo-Catholics is criticism of modernity. Walter Benjamin loved, for example, Léon Bloy's criticism of modern bourgeois Catholicism and translated some of his essays into German.<sup>17</sup> The difference is that the neo-Marxist wanted to criticize modernity in the name of modernity itself, they did not want to regress into a pre-modernity, an idealized medieval world, the world of the "cathedrals of France", as the neo-Catholics did. Instead, they wanted to transcend modernity as a consequence of modernity itself.

Adorno confessed once to Ernst Krenek that he felt the seduction to convert to Catholicism. He was just before the brink to convert himself to the religion that he knew very well as his mother's religion, when he realized that it was impossible. For, as he said, it does not make sense to build cathedrals again. It is not only impossible to go back to a medieval ordo, it also not desirable. Freedom is our obligation.<sup>18</sup> That is his answer to the neo-Scholastic endeavor to conquer Cartesianism by the medieval philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. In his Lectures Adorno always mentions "Saint" Thomas Aquinas as the metaphysician *par excellence*, operating at a truly high level of rationality, but Aquinas plays no role in Adorno's chapter about metaphysics in the *Negative Dialectics*. In his *Minima Moralia* he describes Charles Péguy as a "radical" Catholic and supports his idea that modern culture degraded the phenomenon of death.<sup>19</sup>

Adornos' friend and colleague Horkheimer discussed neo-Thomism seriously, but critically in his *Eclipse of Reason (Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft)*. In the article *About Theodor Haecker: The Christian and History (Zu Theodor Haecker: Der Christ und die Geschichte)* he evaluates Jacques Maritain's *integral humanism (humanisme intégral)* very positively.<sup>20</sup> In his little book *The Longing for the Wholy Other (Sehnsucht nach dem Ganz Andern)* Horkheimer refers to Paul Claudel's understanding of the function of the ritual and concludes a familiarity between Judaism and Catholicism in this respect.<sup>21</sup>

17 See Bloy, *Auslegung der Gemeinsplätze*, pp. 373–377.

18 Adorno, *Theodor W. Adorno und Ernst Krenek Briefwechsel*, pp. 46; 55.

19 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, nr. 148, p. 263.

20 Horkheimer, *Zu Theodor Haecker: Der Christ und die Geschichte*, pp. 89–101; 94 footnote 15.

21 Horkheimer, *Die Sehnsucht nach dem Ganz Andern*, pp. 385–405, 387.

So far with regard to explicit references. But in Adorno there is not only an explicit reference, but sometimes implicit references and a kind of familiarity.

The theme of the Fall and the possibility of a reconciled nature, a resurrection of nature after the Fall, and a new creation by redemption is a hot topic in the thinking of the French new Catholicism.<sup>22</sup> One can sometimes find traces of it, together with Jewish mysticism, in Adorno. There is also an implicit reference to this sphere of thinking when Adorno speaks about the Christian idea of resurrection of the body in his *Negative Dialectics*. The neo-Catholics always defended the idea of the “resurrection of the body” against the one-sided rationalism of the idea of the “immortality of the soul”. Adorno sympathizes with this perspective:

Christian dogmatics, in which the souls were conceived awakening simultaneously with the resurrection of the flesh, was metaphysically more consistent—more enlightened, if you will—than speculative metaphysics, just as hope means a physical resurrection and feels defrauded of the best part by its spiritualization.<sup>23</sup>

That was always the answer of neo-Catholicism against Greek and Cartesian rationalism. But the most interesting fact here is that Adorno does not know that this is a Jewish idea. The idea makes its appearance in the Old Testament in the Book of Daniel 12,2 in relation to the Maccabean martyrs. It is taken over by rabbinic Judaism and by Christianity. The neo-Catholic thinkers Maritain and Gilson often speak of a Judeo-Christian tradition which they oppose to Greek rationalism.<sup>24</sup> Adorno’s misunderstanding is apparent in his *Minima Moralia*, in which he states that the great religions maintain the idea of the resurrection of the body, except for Judaism which, in harmony with its ban on images, keeps silent about the salvation of the dead!<sup>25</sup> This says something to what is often described as the so-called Jewish character of Adorno’s thinking. He does not demonstrate specific knowledge about Jewish biblical theology. He mostly refers to Jewish mysticism, inspired by Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem and he identifies Judaism largely with the idea of the ban on the images. So what is his background in and relation to Judaism?

22 Compagnon, *Les antimodernes, de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barth*, p. 216, pp. 88–111. See also Bastiaire, *Le chant des creatures, Les chrétiens et l’univers d’Irenée à Claudel*, pp. 117–132.

23 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 401.

24 Gilson, *L’esprit de la vie médiévale*, p. VIII; see also p. 78 footnote 2; p. 175; p. 378 note 1. Maritain, *Sort de l’homme*, p. 19; 24; 29 ff; 77 ff.

25 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, nr. 151–VII, p. 275.

#### 4 Judaism, the “Ban on the Images” and Absolute Music

Although Adorno has a lemma in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, the author of this lemma, his biographer Müller-Doohm, avoids characterizing him as a Jewish philosopher. Such a characterization would be impossible, because Adorno wasn't a Jew. He had a Catholic mother and was baptized in the Catholic Church. His father was of indeed Jewish origin, but was a totally assimilated convert to Protestantism. Adorno was made a Jew by the laws of the Nazis, and he had always problem with it. After gaining equal rights in the nineteenth century, German Jews wanted to be fully German. At the same time, they had to come to terms with the meaning of their Jewish descent in this new situation. Adorno did not know for a long time how to do it, precisely because he wasn't a Jew but was labeled one. After moving to the UK for his studies, Adorno did not register his religion.<sup>26</sup> When he died, he was buried without religious ritual. He described his colleague Erich Fromm who visited the Jewish *Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt, as a “professional Jew”, a *Berufsjude*. When Martin Buber came to Frankfurt with his Chassidismus, or Jewish folkreligion from Eastern Europe, he called him a “religious Tyrolian”, (*ein Religionstiroler*).<sup>27</sup>

Hannah Arendt hated Adorno because he used his half Jewishness for to behave as a “Crypto-Jew”. Instead of using his father's name Wiesengrund, a typical Jewish-German name, he used his mother's Italian name, Adorno. She reproached him for having had sought out good contact (*anbiedern*) with the Nazis. He accused others like Heidegger of cooperation and therefore being an anti-Semite, but he himself was not clean according to Arendt.<sup>28</sup> In America Adorno eventually solidarized himself with the Jews, that is, he became Jew out of solidarity with the victims. He, having been made a Jew by the Nazi regime, had the typical survivor's guilt that many Jews shared post-Holocaust. In a public letter to Horkheimer, his friend and colleague, he quotes a saying of his: “Decades later you said something in the Emigration, that I never could forget: we the saved are the ones who actually belong in the concentration camp” (*Jahrzehnte später sagtest Du in der Emigration, was Ich nie vergessen konnte: wir, die Geretteten, gehörten eigentlich ins Konzentrationslager*).<sup>29</sup> He was visited in his dreams by the victims of Auschwitz. It is in this sense that he became a Jew.

26 Petazzi, *Studien zur Leben und Werk Adorno's bis 1938*, pp. 22–44, 24.

27 Müller-Doohm, *Adorno, eine Biografie*, p. 37.

28 See Arendt/Jaspers, *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers, Briefwechsel 1926/1969*, pp. 28; 628; 670; 673; 830. See also Müller-Doohm, *Adorno, eine Biographie*, p. 281.

29 Adorno, *Offener Brief an Max Horkheimer*, p. 157; transl. G. St.

Adorno wished to be a Jew in a very cultural, German way. One finds among the German Jews after their emancipation the tendency to identify themselves with German culture from the perspective of their Jewishness. One could perhaps speak of a *superidentification*. Schiller was a hero for the Jews.<sup>30</sup> We see this same identification in the philosophy of the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen, whose philosophy becomes important for Adorno's philosophy of art and for Adorno's way of being Jewish. Cohen sees the roots of the highest products of German culture enclosed within the beliefs of the Old Testament!

I quote Hermann Cohen from his *Concept of Religion in the System of Philosophy* (*Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie*):

Why had the poet of the Psalms to become the lyric poet *par excellence*, and indeed role model for the lyrical poet, so that only in following his example could true lyricism come into existence, a lyricism that finds its summit in the German lyrical poetry of Goethe. (Warum musste der Psalmendichter schlechthin zum Lyriker werden, und zwar zum Vorbild des Lyrikers, so dass nach seinem Muster erst die echte Lyrik, in ihrer Vollendung als die Deutsche Lyrik Goethes entstehen konnte?)<sup>31</sup>

He compares the final scene of Goethe's *Faust II* with the Prophet Isaiah, Chapter 53, the chapter about the "Suffering Servant" of God, who is despised and rejected:

Chapter 53 of Isaiah is perhaps the greatest miracle of the Old Testament. 'All things transient are just a parable'. This word of Faust becomes truth here. (Das 53. Kapitel des Jesaja ist vielleicht das grösste Wunder des Alten Testaments. 'Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis', Dieses Faustwort wird hier zur Wahrheit.)<sup>32</sup>

Cohen reflects similarly on German music:

What in poetry is true for lyricism, can also be said with regard to music. The religious use of music is as characteristic for the music in the Temple of Old Jerusalem as it is for German music. Not only as church music, but even its purely instrumental formation in the spiritual depth of her world of forms, is conditioned by her religious origin. (Was nun von der Poesie für Lyrik gilt, kann auch auf die Musik bezogen werden, deren religiösen Verwendung ebenso für die Tempelmusik im alten Jeruzalem, wie für die Deutsche Musik charakteristisch ist. Nicht nur als Kirchenmusik, sondern auch ihre reine instrumentalen

30 Scholem, *Jude und Deutsche*, pp. 20–47, 30.

31 Cohen, *Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie*, p. 100; transl. G. St.

32 Cohen, *Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie*, p. 128; transl. G. St.

Ausbildung überhaupt in der geistigen Tiefe ihrer Formenwelt ist bedingt durch ihren religiösen Ursprung.)<sup>33</sup>

That means that not only text-related religious music, (for example Bach), but also “absolute music”, or music without text like with Beethoven’s symphonies, has a religious character just like the Jewish temple music of the past.<sup>34</sup> For Cohen, because of the image ban, poetry and music are the typical Jewish arts whereas plasticity is the art of the Greek. And Cohen understands God here, in the Platonic and Kantian way as an “idea” that cannot be copied in sensuous reality, the world of appearance! And those Jewish arts of poetry and music find their perfection in German art.<sup>35</sup> We read too that the Psalms are the origin of that authenticity which only the German song can represent in world lyrics.<sup>36</sup> It is in this way that Mozart’s opera “The Magic Flute” is a true German opera with the same religious background! Is more unity of the German and Jewish culture possible? Now Adorno! We see the same relation in Adorno’s interpretation of the final scene of *Faust II*: “If the carefully selected designation “Chorus mysticus” in the closing stanza means anything beyond the vague clichés of Sunday metaphysics, then the content, whether Goethe intended it to or not, alludes to Jewish mysticism.”<sup>37</sup>

Adorno talks here even about a Chassidic voice with its background in the Kabbala. He describes the situation of modern music in terms of Isaiah 53: “She has taken all the darkness and guilt of the world on her shoulders, ... nobody wants to have anything to do with her ...” (*Alle Dunkelheit und Schuld der Welt hat Sie auf sich genommen ... keiner will mit ihr etwas zu tun haben.*)<sup>38</sup> That is not, as is written understandably, a comparison of modern art with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.<sup>39</sup> It is a reference to the text in the Old Testament, that is the source of that messianic Jesus story too: Isaiah 53. It is Hermann Cohen.

Of utmost importance is Adorno’s analysis of Schönberg’s *Moses und Aaron*, for there all the elements of his German culture, Jewish background and his personal metaphysics come together. Schönberg himself was originally an assimilated Jew. He converted to Protestantism and developed a strong German consciousness. In his opinion, his German music was far ahead of French and Russian music. In response to Nazism he rediscovered his Jewish

33 Cohen, *Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie*, p. 103; transl. G. St.

34 Cohen, *Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie*, p. 103.

35 Cohen, *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls*, I, p. 186.

36 Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus dem Geiste des Judentums*, p. 487.

37 Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, p. 126.

38 Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, p.118.

39 Scheible, *Die Kunst im Garten Gethsemane*, pp. 348–363, 363.



identity and wrote his religious works. At the end he became even a Zionist. Adorno knows this all, but it was not his way. He was not a Zionist, although he cared for the fate of Israel during the Six Days War.<sup>40</sup> But the message, however, of *Moses and Aaron* is his message. That message is the ban on images of God, the “Bilderverbot”.

In this respect, Cohen inspired both Schönberg and Adorno. For both, this absence of images is the core relation between music and Judaism. Music has no reference outside itself. In this opera, In Adorno’s interpretation, music is not an illustration of word in this opera. Rather, it recreates its message purely from its own inner-movement. Music in its inner totality, as a whole of internal references, resembles the Absolute.<sup>41</sup> That is its theological element. Music should be the image of that which is without image. It has an element of revelation. Absolute music is at the same time music of the Absolute!

The opera of Schönberg is a fragment – he did not finish it. For Adorno this is not a biographical accident. It belongs to the essence of the opera. The attempt to express the Absolute that cannot be expressed by human words, has to fail. The fragmentarian character of the opera is an essential element of its message. The music shows the absolute exactly in the fractures, ruptures within the attempt to create a totality. Although it is obligatory to reach out to totality, to absoluteness, even as it is an essential human tendency, it must always remain a failed attempt. Therefore, it was necessary, so to speak, for the opera to fail.

We set aside the question of whether or not this is a correct analysis of *Moses and Aaron*. He treats an opera, the opposite of the idea of absolute music, like a piece of absolute music! Therefore he can relate it to the ban on images and see it as music of the Absolute. In this way the theme of the ban on images transcends definitely its Old Testament context. One should not forget that the philosopher Kant praised the image ban as the most sublime thought in Jewish religion.<sup>42</sup> Through this idea, he made Jewish thinking presentable in the world of philosophy. Jewish philosophers from Moses Mendelssohn to Cohen could say because of this idea that Jewish religion was not in contradiction with reasonable Enlightenment!<sup>43</sup> That is the background of Adorno. For him the ban on images is a philosophical idea of Jewish origin, with its own value for critical thinking about society and art.

---

40 Braunstein, *Der wehrhafte Jude als Dorn im Auge*.

41 Adorno, *Sakrales Fragment. Über Schönbergs Moses und Aron*, pp. 461; 463.

42 Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, p. 365.

43 Bannitzky, *Schoenbergs Moses und Aron and the Judaic Ban on Images*, p. 75.

At the end of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, in the chapter "Meditations about Metaphysics" (*Meditationen zur Metaphysik*), all of these themes of the ban on the image, fragmentary thinking, etc. return in the context of the elaboration of Auschwitz. The problematical character of his style of thinking here too becomes clear. What kind of theology, religion, metaphysics is this?

## 5 Metaphysics after Auschwitz: Negative Theology, "God is Dead" and Unhappy Consciousness

The last chapter of the *Negative Dialectics* discusses the possibility of metaphysics after Auschwitz. For, Auschwitz is the definite rupture in history and the event that shattered all of Adorno's ideas about the moral pretensions of art and religion. His desperate sight, that Auschwitz could happen in the midst of the traditions of philosophy, of art, and of the enlightening sciences,<sup>44</sup> also laments that Auschwitz was possible in the culture of Goethe and Kant, with which he and the German Jews had identified themselves so wholeheartedly. The end of this synthesis brings Adorno to the conclusion: "All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage."<sup>45</sup> That does not mean that we should stop making culture, that we should not write poetry anymore, for suffering should have the opportunity to express itself.

Thus, all culture after Auschwitz should always remind us what has happened there. Adorno wants to criticize the attitude that life just goes on after Auschwitz. Culture after Auschwitz is only possible if Auschwitz is integrated into it. Auschwitz is, as such, the experience of the possibility of total negativity, but at the same time of the impossibility of absolute negativity. For the possibility of absolute despair would eventually be the real triumph of Auschwitz. There is hope, but hope is only there, with the words of Walter Benjamin, in favour of the hopeless. The most important literary expression of this absolute negativity that is not possible at the same time is the work of Samuel Beckett.

What about God in this context? Adorno writes with relation to Auschwitz: "It is why one who believes in God cannot believe in God."<sup>46</sup> That means: the experience of Auschwitz cannot allow us to believe in God, for in being, he would be responsible for this world, and this is something that one cannot believe precisely in the name of God!

---

44 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 366.

45 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 367.

46 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 401.

It is often said that Adorno's theology is a kind of negative theology. But it is not really the case in Adorno. For the idea of negative theology presupposes always the undoubtful existence of God as pure positivity, a positivity that can only be expressed by finite human beings in negative words and expressions.<sup>47</sup> Sometimes it is called negative theodicy.<sup>48</sup> There is some plausibility in this understanding. The disappearance of hope, of any perspective that transcends the misery of Auschwitz, would follow from a mere denial of God in response to the problem of evil. This is the "unthinkability of despair" (*die Unausdenkbarkeit der Verzweiflung*).<sup>49</sup> What is needed is a perspective that transcends this situation, which is sometimes called *bad immanence*. How to think this transcendence.

Adorno is deliberately not clear in his explorations of the idea of God and its relatedness to transcendence, absoluteness and totality. The best way to understand Adorno's reflections is to put them against the background of Kant's postulates of practical reason: the harmony of morality and nature that postulates the resurrection of man and of a creator God that can realize this harmony. This is the world too of German Idealism, Schelling and Hegel that try to integrate those postulates in theoretical, speculative reason. How is it for Adorno? For him as a Marxist the idea of absoluteness in a moral perspective refers primarily to a just society. Not to God!<sup>50</sup> In this respect Adorno, hinting at Kantian ideas, talks about the absolute that could realize itself like "eternal peace" but that can never positively be affirmed. In the same way he mentions Rimbaud's "vision of a mankind freed from oppression as being the true deity."<sup>51</sup> With regard to Goethe, he talks that "transcendence is secularized in more or less Hegelian fashion, into a picture of the whole of fulfilled immanence."<sup>52</sup>

According to Adorno this is Hegel's Absolute Spirit in its positive meaning: "The absolute means simply the reconciled life, the life of the pacified drive that no longer knows either deficiency or the labor to which alone, however, it owes that reconciliation."<sup>53</sup> But this fulfilled immanence would be a "new, second totality of man and nature". For this just society makes claims to nature too, so to speak. Labour is not necessary anymore! What does that mean in relation to nature? In such a society all suffering would be abolished or diminished

---

47 See Kenney, *The Critical Value of Negative Theology*, pp. 439–453. Steunebrink, *Is Adorno's Philosophy a Negative Theology?*, pp. 292–319.

48 Bernstein, *Adorno, Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 371.

49 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 385.

50 Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, p. 196.

51 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 400.

52 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 400.

53 Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. 32.

to a grade, that nobody can give a definite end. Adorno even mentions the possibility of the “abolishment of death”.<sup>54</sup> Does that nature exist?

Death especially is a problem. Adorno refuses very strongly Heidegger's idea that death belongs essentially to life, that life finds its meaning through death. For Adorno, transcendence comes into play with regard to the death of generations passed: “That no reforms within the world sufficed to do justice to the dead, that none of them touched upon the wrong of death.”<sup>55</sup> But how is it possible to do justice to the dead and who does it? Adorno mentions religious ideas of the resurrection of the body as a source of inspiration for his thinking about the harmony of spirit and the body, but he does not believe it himself, neither as a Jew or as a Christian. This is, however, what Adorno is longing for—that the resurrection of the body would be made true. It is in this sense that they are for him also, postulates. But he cannot postulate the almighty God that could recreate man as a harmony of morality and natural happiness!

That God is not there, for such a God would also be the creator of the bad totality of the here and now. Sometimes nature seems to be the Absolute, but Adorno carefully avoids a speculative position of nature as the encompassing Divine Totality more or less like Schelling. Adorno hopes that in the critical reflection of man about his attitude to nature in science and technology, nature will show itself. But what does that mean? Does this imply that nature's self-reflection finds its locus in man? In that case, nature would itself be Absolute, “Divine” Reason or Spirit. Regarding the expression of metaphysical and simultaneously humanistic hope in Beethoven's music, stronger than in traditional religious texts, he says: “Signs that not everything is futile come from sympathy with the human, from the selfreflection of the subjects' natural side; it is only in experiencing its own naturalness that genius soars above nature.”<sup>56</sup>

On the one hand, there is a kind of self-reflection of nature in the subjects, but, on the other hand, in as far the subject, symbolically present in Beethoven's genius, experiences it, he transcends nature! In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno interprets the relation of man and nature as follows:

Enlightenment is more than enlightenment, it is nature made audible in its estrangement. In mind's self-recognition as nature divided from itself, nature, as in prehistory, is calling to itself, but no longer directly by its supposed name, which, in the guise of *mana*, means omnipotence, but as something blind and mutilated.<sup>57</sup>

54 Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*, pp. 413–524, 505, 518.

55 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 385.

56 Adorno, *Negative Dialektics*, p. 397.

57 Horkheimer/Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 31.

Adorno carefully avoids the position that the dividedness of nature in nature and human thinking is a part of the self-reflection of nature in which it shows and realizes itself. For then, this “bad nature”, realized by human oppression reacting on the oppression by nature, the nature of natural sciences and technics, would be the real, divine nature. There is within nature an antithesis of nature and human thinking, but no synthesis. Is it a “fallen nature”? Of course, Adorno cannot think the Absolute Spirit in a Hegelian way. For Absolute Spirit is for Adorno always *absolutized* human spirit. And Adorno always wants to be a materialist: “Nature, once equipped with meaning, substitutes itself for the possibility that was the aim of the intelligible character’s construction.”<sup>58</sup> But, again, there is no all-knowing and omnipotent God that has to be postulated, in the Kantian way, to make this unity between meaning’ (morality) and Nature possible! Where is God?

We meet here in the search for the Absolute the split world of the Kantian postulates, which Adorno opposes to Kant’s criticism of metaphysics in his theoretical reason.<sup>59</sup> Man as a moral being, can he or can humanity in the just society be the Absolute? Can nature be the Absolute? What is God in light of these realities? God is no longer the creator and recreator of man and nature. For, that would make him responsible for the world of Auschwitz: Who beliefs in God, therefore cannot belief in God.

In his idea of God Adorno refers to Kantian theoretical reason, God as idea that has to be thought. In a passage about the proofs of Gods existence, Adorno says that they survived Hegelian criticism and are even resurrected in his thought, but at the cost of the God’s transcendence. It is, however, necessary to think transcendence. Adorno argues: “but the experience that if thought is not decapitated it will flow into transcendence, down to the idea of a world that would not only abolish extant suffering but revoke the suffering that is irrevocably past.”<sup>60</sup>

But what is thought here in this idea of transcendence: God, that means an Absolute, Infinite being that transcends all worldly conditions and makes them possible? Or is Adorno’s idea of transcendence rather the idea of another world? A new world that transcends the old world. Is transcendence the transcendence of the totality of nature and man or is it a new totality that transcends the old one? Is this new world thinkable within worldly conditions?

Adorno’s lack of clarity in this respect constitutes the source of his so-called “negative theology”. Therefore, this transcendent reality is called “the Other”.

---

58 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 296.

59 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 386–90.

60 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 403.

The Absolute is totally different, it transcends all identification. It is, but at the same time it is not. Moreover, for Adorno thinking the Absolute is a danger for the absolute, because the capability to think the absolute would make thinking itself Absolute. It implies self-negation of finite thinking. Paradoxically: Hope exists only in relinquishing that which is hoped for. But it is still necessary to think the Absolute, for the consciousness of the situation is nurtured by the presence of a scattered trace form of a different colour within all darkness.<sup>61</sup>

But trace of what and where? God, another world? Adorno's negative thinking is not so much the refusal to determine God positively as the refusal to himself to determine how to think God. Adorno speaks sometimes about finite thinking and the finite world, but he never articulates the relation of the finite to the infinite as absolute positivity. Therefore, he escapes the question of the finitude not only of this existing world but of all worldly conditions whatsoever. The idea of a finite world disappears between the absolute bad world, symbolized by Auschwitz and the absolute good world without suffering and death. Infinity as the necessary source of the finite world cannot be thought. For this world cannot be understood as an immanence with a meaning that is the radiation of a positively confirmed transcendence.<sup>62</sup> This world is never, put in Hegelian terms, the finite emanation of an infinite fullness. Or in Adorno's words: "That the finite world of infinite agony might be encompassed by a divine cosmic plan must impress anyone not engaged in the world's business as the kind of madness that goes so well with positive normalcy."<sup>63</sup>

If this thinking is not negative theology nor negative theodicy, what is it? Hegel has something to say on this point, which Adorno does not reflect upon. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel interprets the failure to relate God to the finite world as a sign of an "unhappy consciousness" that cannot think God as its own ground. It can only hope for it. It is its opposite. By being thought, God loses the character of an Absolute, subsistent reality, since it now becomes represented in consciousness.<sup>64</sup> Once related to the normal finite world, it becomes a part of it. So God disappears, or "dies", in the finite world. The subject that experiences this is called by Hegel "unhappy consciousness". It is unhappy because it cannot itself think absolute reality as its own essence, the infinite dimension of its finitude. Hegel utters here the idea of the "death of God", which means essentially the death of an abstract idea of God for Hegel.

---

61 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 391f.

62 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 361f.

63 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 375.

64 Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 148 ff.

But these conceptions are not just mistakes. They are necessary stages in the dynamics of the development of human consciousness. Moreover, for Hegel this “death of God” belongs to the idea, to the “life of God” himself.<sup>65</sup> He dies, so says Christianity according to Hegel, and resurrects in the finite world, by creation/incarnation, death and resurrection in Jesus as Son of God. On this last issue one can have many difficulties with Hegel. Does this mean that God dies and resurrects in Auschwitz too? But one cannot “solve” those problems, as Adorno does, by refusing to think the relation of the finite to the infinite. They have to be articulated within that relation. For if the finite is thought without relation to the infinite, it becomes, according to Hegel an absolute reality on itself, infinite so to speak. An infinitely bad world. And then, the infinite as an opposite reality becomes itself finite: a new good world, *utopia*. Adorno praises Hegel for conceiving of the absolute as reconciled life in society and nature, but at the same time he criticizes Hegel, in relation to Kant, for reducing transcendence to immanence! But is Adorno not himself doing the same thing? This tension is the heart of Adorno’s negative dialectics.

### Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Philosophie der neuen Musik (Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 12)*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1970.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie (Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 5)*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1971, pp. 7–245.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Spätkapitalismus oder Industriegesellschaft?*, in: Theodor Wiesenthal Adorno: *Soziologische Schriften I (Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 8)*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1972.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Negative Dialectics* (1966), trans. E. B. Ashton. New York: Seabury Press, 1973.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Zur Schlusszene des Fausts*, in: Theodor Wiesenthal Adorno: *Noten zur Literatur (Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 11)*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1973, pp. 129–138.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Negative Dialektik (Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 6)*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1973.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Theodor W. Adorno und Ernst Krenek Briefwechsel*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1974.

---

65 Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, pp. 502–515, 512.

- Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Sakrales Fragment. Über Schönbergs Moses und Aron*, in: Theodor Wiesenthal Adorno: *Quasi una fantasia. Musikalische Schriften II (Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 16)*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1978, pp. 454–476.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Minima Moralia*, (*Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 4*). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1980.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Offener Brief an Max Horkheimer*, in: Theodor Wiesenthal Adorno: *Vermischte Schriften-I, (Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 20-I)*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1986, pp. 155–164.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Hegel: Three Studies* (1963), trans. S. Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge: MIT Press 1993.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), Rodney Livingstone (transl.). Cambridge: Polity Press 2008.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Notes to Literature*, trans. Paul Kottmann. New York, NY: Columbia University Press 2019.
- Arendt, Hannah/Jaspers, Karl: *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers, Briefwechsel 1926–1969*. Lotte Köhler/Hans Saner (ed.). München/Zürich: Piper 1985.
- Bannitzky, Leora: *Schoenbergs Moses und Aron and the Judaic Ban on Images*, in: *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament* 25/92 (2001), pp. 73–90.
- Bastiaire, Hélène & Jean: *Le chant des creatures, Les chrétiens et l'univers d'Irénée a Claudel*. Paris: Cerg 1996, pp. 117–132.
- Bergson, Henri: *Introduction à la Métaphysique*, in: Henri Bergson, *Oeuvres*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1970, pp. 1392–1433.
- Bernstein, J. M.: *Adorno, Disenchantment and Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001.
- Bloy, Léon: *Auslegung der Gemeinsplätze*, Hans-Horst Henschen (ed. and transl., including some translations of Walter Benjamin). Wien/Leipzig: Karolinger 2009.
- Braunstein, Dirk: *Der wehrhafte Jude als Dorn im Auge*, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine* 26-08-2014 (<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/antisemitismus-der-wehrhafte-jude-als-dorn-im-auge-13116488.html>).
- Briel, Hölger Matthias: *Adorno und Derrida: Oder Wo Liegt Das Ende der Moderne*. New York/Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang 1993.
- Brumlick, Micha: *'Dass Auschwitz sich nie wiederhole'*, in: *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung* 12-12-2008.
- Cohen, Hermann: *Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie*. Gießen: Töpelmann 1915.
- Cohen, Hermann: *Religion der Vernunft aus dem Geiste des Judentums*. Wiesbaden: Fourier, 1966.
- Cohen, Hermann: *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls, I–II*. Hildesheim/New York, Georg Olms 1986.



- Compagnon, Antoine: *Les Antimodernes, de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barth*. Paris: Editions Gallimard 2005.
- Foster, Roger: *Adorno and experience*. New York: State University of New York Press 2007.
- Gilson, Étienne: *L'esprit de la vie médiévale*. Paris: Vrin 1969.
- Gordon, Peter E.: *Adorno and Existence*. Cambridge, MA/London 2016.
- Gwozdz, Thomas L.: *Young and Restless, Jacques Maritain and Henri Bergson*, in: *American Philosophical Quarterly* 84/3 (2010), pp. 549–564.
- Habermas, Jürgen: *Urgeschichte der Subjektivität und verwilderte Selbstbehauptung*, in: Jürgen Habermas: *Philosophisch-politische Profile*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1971, pp. 184–199.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Hamburg: Meiner 2011.
- Horkheimer, Max/Adorno, Theodor Wiesenthal: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. E. Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press (1947) 2002.
- Horkheimer, Max: *Die Sehnsucht nach dem Ganz Andern*, in: Max Horkheimer, *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen 1949-1973 (Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 7)*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1985, pp. 385–404.
- Horkheimer, Max: *Zu Theodor Haecker: Der Christ und die Geschichte*, in: Max Horkheimer, *(Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 4: Schriften 1936-1941)*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1988, pp. 89–102.
- Kant, Immanuel: *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Werke in sechs Bänden, vol 5). Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2005.
- Kenney, John Peter: *The Critical Value of Negative Theology*, in: *The Harvard Theological Review* 1993, vol. 86/4 (1983), pp. 439–453.
- Maritain, Jacques: *Sort de l'Homme*. Neuchatel: Éditions de la Baconnière 1943.
- Müller-Doohm, Stefan: *Adorno, eine Biografie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2003.
- Noppen, Pierre-Francois: *Adorno on Mimetic Rationality: Three Puzzles*, in: *Adorno Studies* 1/1 (2017), pp. 79–100.
- Petazzi, Carlo: *Studien zum Leben und Werk Adorno's bis 1938*, in: Heinz Ludwig Arnold (ed.), *Theodor Adorno*. München: Edition Text+Kritik 1983.
- Scheible, Hartmut: *Die Kunst im Garten Gethsemane*, in: B. Lindner/Walter Lütke, *Materialien zur Ästhetischen Theorie. Adornos Konstruktion der Moderne*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1985, pp. 348–363.
- Scholem, Gershom: *Jude und Deutsche*, in: Gershom Scholem: *Judaica* 2. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1977.
- Steunebrink, Gerrit: *Is Adorno's Philosophy a Negative Theology?*, in: Ilse Bulow/Laurens ten Kate: *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*. New York: Fordham University Press 2000, pp. 292–319.

# Bracketing the Future, or Simone Weil's Mystical Politics

*Sandra Lehmann*

## Abstract

In her late essay *Cette guerre est une guerre de religions*, Simone Weil confronts the liberal and socialist politics of her time with the vision of a “whole people impregnated by a religion entirely oriented towards mysticism”. This article reconstructs what led Weil to this idea and examines its consequences. In particular, I will argue that Weil's mystical understanding of physical labor involves an implicit theory of time in which the significance of the future is deliberately suspended. This is a startling break with the Western tradition, from Judeo-Christian salvation history to postmodern technocapitalism, all of which are essentially future-oriented. It may also prove to be one of Weil's most fruitful ideas.

## Keywords

Simone Weil; Mystical Politics; Mysticism; Future; Labor; Temporality

## 1 Introduction

Simone Weil did not live to see 1945. She died in exile in England in 1943. Many of her writings, however, can be read as a message to the post-war period. This is particularly true of what she produced in 1942–43 while working for the Free French movement under Charles de Gaulle. Weil was asked to review proposals for the reorganization of France after the war. The task apparently fired her own theoretical imagination, and she herself became extraordinarily productive, despite already severe physical exhaustion.

The importance of Weil's ideas was not lost on Albert Camus, who was responsible for the first edition of her writings published by Gallimard immediately after the war. As he wrote in the preface to *Lenracinement* (in English *The Need for Roots*), Weil's fragmentary *magnum opus*, “it seems impossible to me to imagine a rebirth of Europe that does not take into account the demands

defined by Simone Weil.<sup>1</sup> In reality, however, none of Weil's suggestions were put into practice. To a realpolitiker like de Gaulle, they simply seemed crazy.<sup>2</sup> But Weil's eccentricity is not just practical. It is essentially theoretical and has profound conceptual reasons. Indeed, her approach to social and political analysis differs markedly from the mainstream of modern theory in both its liberal and socialist guises. Let me briefly touch on some of the main points that will be explored in this paper. Weil's later thought centers on the mystical and suggests that the mystical life becomes the norm for everyone's life, for the whole social body. This involves a unique approach to a key modern concept, namely the concept of history, which Weil separates from the underlying Judeo-Christian soteriological model.<sup>3</sup> As a result, for Weil, the future is no longer a relevant category. Life, whether understood individually or socially, is without expectation or hope. It does not seek salvation or progress. Rather, it is about the present and its relationship to a *non-objective* Beyond of Being. This ties in with another of Weil's peculiarities, which is that she gives physical labor a higher status than other activities. In this sense she agrees with Marx, and yet unlike Marx, labor is, for Weil, distinguished by its special mystical qualities. By engaging with the forces of nature, by exposing both body and soul to them, through labor, one establishes a relationship with the Supernatural, or that which gives all beings their existence.

This paper will focus primarily on Weil's 1943 essay *Cette guerre est une guerre de religions*.<sup>4</sup> In addition, I will look at some revealing passages from *The Need for Roots* and her notebooks, the *Cahiers*. Some of Weil's most illuminating essays from the early 1940s, *Human Personality* and *Condition première d'un travail non servile*, will complete the picture.

## 2 Politics and the Question of Good and Evil

In *Cette guerre*, Weil succinctly outlines her mystical vision of postwar life and links it to some basic ideas in political philosophy. She discusses three interrelated themes. First, she exposes the political problem in general as ultimately a

---

1 Camus, *Essais*, p. 1701.

2 Hence his exclamation, when Weil's proposals reached him: "Mais elle est folle!" Cf. Pétrement, *La vie de Simone Weil*, vol. 2, p. 483.

3 Cf. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, published in 1953 in German as *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*.

4 Hereafter referred to as "*Cette guerre*." Since the text has not yet been translated into *English*, all the following translations are my own. I have also consulted the German translation for support.

religious problem. Second, she draws on this for an interpretation of the events of World War II. Finally, she concludes with a vision of an alternative social and political order.

Weil begins by establishing a direct relationship between the religious and the moral. All human beings, she writes, are faced with a religious problem, and that is the moral problem of choosing between good and evil. People cannot bear this choice. They suffer from it and want to get rid of it. This can be done in three ways. All three have their own set of cultural, social, and political implications.

Weil articulates these three options with a view to the 20th century. According to her, the *first way* is liberal and relativistic, it is the way of the democratic West. The *second way* is totalitarian, the way of Hitler's Germany and the Soviet Union. The *third way* is Weil's own mystical way, the way of a "whole people impregnated by a religion which is entirely oriented toward mysticism."<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, she sees a continuity between the first two ways, or more precisely, the first way, the liberal way, is always in danger of branching off into the second way, the totalitarian way.

Following the *first way*, one tries to escape the moral choice between good and evil by declaring that what is really important is to live according to one's own desires. But as Weil notes, people need orientation in life, even if they reject their own moral responsibility and moral choice. Desire cannot, however, be an end in itself. It is rather something that occurs in the context of our actions. The result of this hedonistic choice is, therefore, nihilistic ennui. Paradoxically, while people cannot endure the reality of their moral choice, neither can they endure a situation in which all of their choices are indifferent or equally valid. They begin to distance themselves internally from the liberal system. In times of crisis, when the general political situation directly affects individual lives, they even feel a horror toward it. Weil seems to have something like a moral *horror vacui* in mind here. On the one hand, the moral *horror vacui* paralyzes the liberal system. Thus, when attacked by a totalitarian enemy, it is incapable of offering any substantial resistance. Weil may be thinking specifically of Vichy France.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, and here the contemporary example

5 Weil, *Cette guerre*, p. 92.

6 Indeed, the contemporary cultural background requires detailed study. Let me just quote this illuminating passage from Richard Wolin who, himself citing Tony Judt's *Past Imperfect*, speaks of a "vacuum at the heart of public ethics in [1930s] France – the marked absence of a concern with public ethics or political morality." And he continues: "In France during the 1930s this ethical void reached crisis proportions when anti-republican sentiment proliferated on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum, foreshadowing the nation's 'strange defeat' of 1940." Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason*, p. 164.

might be fascist Italy and Germany (to both of which Weil had traveled), moral *horror vacui* can lead people living under liberal regimes to desire a totalitarian order. That is, a liberal system can transform into totalitarianism from within.

Totalitarianism, for its part, also seeks to evade the moral question, but it takes a different approach. It creates a way of life in which the question of good and evil no longer arises, because the answer is clear. Whatever supports the totalitarian complex is good. People thus surrender their moral agency in favor of the collective totalitarian whole, becoming integrated into it and functioning in accordance with it. Totalitarianism may go by different names. It may be disguised behind the signifier of “the people”, “the party”, “the nation”, or even “the church” (Weil considers the medieval Inquisition of the Roman Catholic Church to be totalitarian). Significantly, what unites all of these hegemonic entities is their *quasi-religious* character. For by suspending the moral question, they acquire absolute authority in their own right. It is as if they were divine in nature, as if they were gods on earth. Accordingly, Weil calls the second way the way of idolatry. Totalitarian power presumes to decide on what is true and what is false, what has value and what does not. It assumes the role of absolute ruler of life and, for that matter, of death.

### 3 Immanence and Totalization

One might object to Weil's schematic portrait of the two ways, and especially to her notion of an implicit totalitarian tendency of the liberal way, and argue that she is a typical representative of the 20th century “age of extremes” as described by Eric Hobsbawm.<sup>7</sup> Weil seems only able to move in the element of the absolute. In a kind of negative existentialism, she first assumes that people cannot bear their own freedom of choice, that they seek to escape it.<sup>8</sup> Second, Weil seems to deny the possibility that moral orientation can be a matter of social debate, that it can be subject to ongoing social processes and thus constantly renegotiated. This objection in particular has some merit. And yet there are also good reasons to doubt the notion at its heart, namely, the belief in a communicative rationality at work in liberal societies. For even if one were to assume that everyone participates equally in the communicative process

<sup>7</sup> Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*.

<sup>8</sup> This is also the view of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, when accusing Jesus of having rejected earthly power. In figures such as Carl Schmitt, a contemporary of Weil's, it proves to be a paradigm of the conservative critique of liberalism. Cf. Taubes, *Carl Schmitt*, p. 7.

(which is doubtful enough), a substantive problem remains. What counts as broad consensus is most likely only a surface effect of the fundamental, inescapable and integral capitalization of life. For one might ask whether there is anything today, any action or situation, that is not capitalized upon. To prove this point, consider the rise of digital capitalism in recent decades, and in particular how commerce, marketing and advertising have been transformed by digital platforms. Capitalism now permeates every aspect of life without exception. There is hardly anything that cannot be turned into economic value—no thoughts, needs, feelings, or desires. Only a few practices may still escape commodification, and if they do so, it is because they are absolutely useless like, for example, an aimless glance out of the window. Weil suspects something of this when she writes, in *Cette guerre*, that the anti-fascism of her time could “one day fall to totalitarian state capitalism.”<sup>9</sup> I would only add that the State is no longer the totalitarian agent and the grip of totalitarian capitalism on all aspects of life has become more total than the totalitarian systems of the 20th century could have ever dreamed.

Weil's intuition in her outline of the first two ways thus seems to be that human beings, when given over to themselves and their own immanence, are necessarily subject to totalization. Totalization means that all human relations, that is, relations between humans and relations that humans have with non-human beings, are mediated by a single and comprehensive social structure that has omnipotent and pervasive power over them. This is the case with totalitarianism. But it is also the case of capitalism. Capitalism is not in itself a source of moral values. It does, however, incessantly produce material values, and for a while this is enough to make the moral vacuum (or rather, the constant negotiability of moral values) bearable. Capitalism is, therefore, not characterized by a necessary final crisis and collapse, as Marx argued. Rather, it provides a precarious stability that can prevent a society from sliding into totalitarian or at least authoritarian rule. This is why, in the modern era, economic crisis so often goes hand in hand with an authoritarian turn.

Because of their omnipotence, however, the dominant structures of both the liberal and totalitarian ways outlined by Weil are in a certain sense transcendent. Their transcendence arises out of immanent life itself. It is as if immanent life had split off and hypostasized a particular social reality, so that this reality becomes superior and all-determining. Totalitarian regimes define reality according to a practice that is absolutely consistent with their own worldview, thereby eliminating all alternatives. Capitalism, on the other hand, has no real worldview. However, even within capitalism there is one absolute

---

9 Weil, *Cette guerre*, p. 93.

reality that shapes all other realities, and that is the capitalist economy. Marx went in this direction when he analyzed commodity fetishism as capitalism's central mode of naturalizing itself in people's lives. Commodity fetishism ultimately means the inescapable (and perverse) compulsion to invest one's own life in order to preserve and maintain it. It indicates the transcendence of economic practice over all other practices, its seemingly irreducible and foundational character. In reality, however, it is nothing more than a hypostasis of immanent life, which ultimately suffocates itself.

#### 4 The Way of Mysticism

In contrast, Weil's third way, the way of mysticism, introduces a genuine transcendence that is irreducible to immanent life. Weil characterizes mysticism as follows: "By uniting the soul with the absolute good, mysticism is the passage beyond the sphere of the opposition of good and evil,"<sup>10</sup> and this is the sphere of immanent life. Note that there may seem to be a Gnostic and antinomian element in Weil. In the opening section of *Cette guerre*, she refers to an Albigensian tradition according to which moral freedom, the choice between good and evil is a gift of the devil. If mysticism means overcoming the opposition of good and evil, it also means that all worldly orientations and goals become obsolete. There is no longer any relevant worldly value because it has been replaced by the Absolute Good. This is the difference between Weil and Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor. The Grand Inquisitor believes only in this world. That is why he strives for absolute worldly power and thus for the idolatrous transcendence of immanent life. For Weil, on the other hand, all that is immanent, the world as world, is in itself without any value. While the Grand Inquisitor regards the system of the Church as an absolute good, Weil denies that there can be any kind of worldly good at all. The world as such knows only idols.

But Weil does not reject the world in its entirety. Rather, the world has value insofar as it is connected to the Absolute Good. Weil's relationship to the world is therefore ambivalent. This has to do with Weil's main theological or speculative idea. On the one hand, the world is the Other of the Absolute Good or God, the Other that God created by negating Godself. The world must then be correspondingly negated in order to allow God to be fully God again. On the other hand, however, Weil understands Creation, including its undoing, as an act of God's love for Godself. The meaning of the world is that it unfolds according

---

<sup>10</sup> Weil, *Cette guerre*, p. 92.

to its relationship to God, and mysticism is the human way of achieving this. Thus, everything mundane has meaning and purpose, but not by itself, but because of its relationship to God.

The blemish of the human being is the ego. In the ego, consciousness combines with the instinct of self-preservation. This instinct pervades all of nature. However, in the non-human case, it is neutralized by the relationship between God and nature. The struggle for survival of the individuals comes together to form a self-contained, coherent whole. In the human case, on the other hand, the world has meaning and purpose only in relation to the existential self-assertion of the ego. Unconditional self-interest interferes between the individual and the world. Mysticism counteracts this. In the mystical process, the ego loses its self-will. Its grip on the world loosens. But not only that. The ego itself dissolves. It de-creates itself, as Weil calls it.<sup>11</sup> It detaches itself from itself or even empties itself of itself. But the result of this total self-surrender is not nothingness. On the contrary, it is now possible for the relationship between the world, or more precisely each individual being, and God to unfold undisturbed. To speak with Weil, everything is now experienced as love, resonates as love. In the nothingness of the ego, which dissolves in the absolute transcendence of God, there is absolute positivity. Absolute positivity, however, as absolute negativity, because Weil's God is not substantial. Nothing about this God resembles anything in the world that could be put on a pedestal and worshipped.

Note another ambivalence here. On the one hand, there is certainly a strong apophatic tendency in Weil, for whom there is no greater closeness to God than the abandonment experienced by Christ on the cross. On the other hand, however, Weil uses the notion of God's total transcendence to give supernatural meaning to the world. That is, mundane beings have no meaning in themselves, or only a corrupted human meaning, while their true meaning lies in their relationship to God, and God is the Other in the strictest sense, the non-earthly One who is not a thing, the Beyond of Being. To use mysticism as a path to new life, one must follow Weil's second tendency. In this case, mysticism is not seen as a practice that leads out of the world and into the abyss of God. Rather, it is used to relate to reality in a profoundly different way. Mysticism can thus be called an epistemic method that allows for a comprehensive interpretation of

---

11 Miklos Vetö writes about Weil's concept of *décréation*: "Sometimes 'decreation' is a single word, but more often one finds 'de-creation' or the verb 'de-create'. What is certain is that it is the only term that adequately expresses her fundamental intuition: that of the self-annihilating vocation of human beings". Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, p. 11.



both being as such (to put it more technically) and human practice.<sup>12</sup> On its basis, it is possible to transform concrete life in all of its aspects. Weil herself alludes to this when she writes, as quoted earlier, of a “whole people” that has been “impregnated by a religion which is entirely oriented toward mysticism.” Mystical experience can lead to a new form of life when it is returned to secular practice, when it literally informs that practice.

## 5 The Mystical State of Suspension

The gift of mysticism, the new access to being that it opens up, is that everything exists in a constant tension between its natural and supernatural character. Since its central relation is that to the non-objective Good, in being what it is, it is at the same time beyond itself. Or to put it more succinctly, *to be is to be while being beyond oneself*. That is, both things and actions have not lost their mundane meaning, but mundane meaning is meaningful only in the light of the fact that both things and actions derive their meaning from what is beyond mundane meaning. One might also describe this as a “sublation of natural by supernatural, in which the former is retained but no longer absolute.”<sup>13</sup> The following examples will illustrate this.

There are three areas in Weil's writings that reflect her mystical approach: nature, interpersonal relationships, and physical labor. The first area, nature, gives a first indication of where Weil is heading. From a mundane, egoistic perspective, nature is the realm of blind forces that always threaten to crush the ego. From a mystical perspective, however, the interplay of forces appears to be consistent and necessary because it is related to God in pure obedience. Therefore, it is to be affirmed without qualification. As Weil writes in *Gravity and Grace*: “Things must be like that [...], and, precisely, they are like that”,<sup>14</sup> a quality that Weil also sees as their beauty. She here shows a love of necessity reminiscent of Spinoza. In fact, Weil's education rooted her deeply in classical Rationalism. For her, then, nature corresponds to the mechanistic worldview of the early modern period. The main difference, from Weil's perspective, is only that nature's mechanism, which proceeds without finality, is more than mere mechanism: it is centered beyond itself. It is pure selflessness, perfect submission to God.

---

12 This method can indeed be compared to Husserl's phenomenological reduction, even if Weil probably never read Husserl.

13 Marsh, *Process, Praxis, and Transcendence*, p. 144.

14 Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 148.

The second area, that of interpersonal relationships, connects well with the first. As Weil writes in one of her last essays *La personne et le sacré* (*Human Personality*), "there is something sacred in every human being."<sup>15</sup> Human sacredness is expressed in each person's expectation that good rather than bad things will happen to them. According to Weil, every ego is unconditionally obligated to this claim of the Other. She also develops this point with particular emphasis in *The Need for Roots*, which in its very first sentence places obligation before right: "The notion of obligations comes before that of rights, which is subordinate and relative to the former."<sup>16</sup> However, as Weil continues in *Human Personality*, obligation arises not from the personal but from the impersonal aspect of the Other, and the impersonal aspect is the Other's relationship to the Absolute Good or God. The ego will therefore provide the Other with everything she needs for mundane life. However, the ego won't do this for the sake of the other's ego, but because by claiming the good the Other is testifying to what is beyond her mundane self. Mundane goodness is always a substitute, but at the same time, it is in practice all that we have, and if we know how to read it, it lets the real Good shine through, by virtue of which it exists. We are dealing here with a vision of a life that is literally never entirely of this earth. Rather, it is in a kind of suspended state. It is not important in itself, but only in relation to that which is beyond, but as such, as that which is beyond, is the innermost reality of life.

Weil's ideas are particularly challenging, but also potentially groundbreaking, when it comes to the third area, the area of physical labor. The concept of labor, Weil insists, is the only theoretical achievement modernity has added to antiquity. Through labor, human beings relate to necessity and are thus able to integrate themselves into the whole of Being. In other words, the value of physical labor is that it comes as close as possible to de-creation. As Weil writes in *The Need for Roots*: "Physical labor willingly consented to is, after death willingly consented to, the most perfect form of obedience."<sup>17</sup> Physical labor is a form of death-in-life. It is the result of physical need and the compulsion to wrest the means of subsistence from the forces of nature, to which one must adopt oneself. It makes the ego disappear. It pushes human beings into matter. It binds them to the monotony of the working process. It subjects them to a time that corresponds to the time of the inanimate.<sup>18</sup> But this is precisely what distinguishes physical labor. It is precisely for this reason that "all other human

---

15 Weil, *Human Personality*, p. 70.

16 Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 2.

17 Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 289.

18 Cf. Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 294 et seq.

activities [...] art, science, philosophy, [...] are inferior to physical labor in spiritual significance.”<sup>19</sup> And it is precisely for this reason that, according to the final passages of *The Need for Roots*, “in a well-ordered social life [...] physical labor should be its spiritual core.”<sup>20</sup> Because physical labor is the clearest experience of human submission to nature, it introduces the meaning of nature as such. It is an exercise in God’s annihilation of all that is natural, or rather, of all that is creaturely, through which God returns to Godself and in which creation fulfills itself.

## 6 Labor and Symbolization

Weil’s genealogy of the meaning of physical labor is rather idiosyncratic, but it leads to the core of her thinking. Modern civilization, Weil argues, has forgotten the spiritual aspect of labor. However, there is evidence “that long ago labor was pre-eminently a religious activity and consequently something sacred.”<sup>21</sup> A trace of this can also be found in the biblical book of Genesis, for Adam’s condemnation to work “in the sweat of his face” (Gen 3:19) had an atoning character. Physical labor, in all its harshness and inexorability, brings the human being closer to God.

It is significant that physical labor has two levels of meaning in Weil’s conception. On the one hand, it is a profane confrontation with nature. On the other, it has a symbolic status. According to Weil, it is no coincidence that the ancient Greeks associated certain crafts with certain deities. Crafts are not only taught to humans by the gods. Rather, they themselves point to the supernatural. For example, “in Greek symbolism as in the New Testament, fire is the image of the Holy Ghost. [...] One can imagine a blacksmith’s religion seeing in fire which renders iron ductile the image of the operation of the Holy Ghost upon human nature.”<sup>22</sup> The Holy Ghost, according to the *Cahiers*, means “the love of God for God, [which] by means of the disappearance of the individual ‘I,’ passes through the soul of a man like the *light* through a piece of *glass*.”<sup>23</sup> The interweaving of profane and symbolic meanings in the work process leads to an astonishing result. Ideally, to stay with the example, the forging work would put the workers into a physical or material state that symbolically refers

---

19 Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 295.

20 Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 295.

21 Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 289.

22 Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 289 et seq.

23 Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, vol. II, p. 344.

to what they are experiencing on the spiritual level. In concrete terms, this means: The worker's ego would dissolve in the work process, and the work process itself refers symbolically to this process of ego dissolution. The work process is both a symbol and an experience of what it symbolizes. It is a living symbol imbued with its own symbolic content.

In her 1941–42 essay *Condition première d'un travail non servile*, Weil develops the symbolic quality of physical labor in even greater detail than in *The Need for Roots*. The text places physical labor within the horizon of a nature that possesses a "reflective quality".<sup>24</sup> Nature itself refers to the supernatural, so it too has a symbolic character. Therefore, it is necessary to "read the symbols written in matter from all eternity."<sup>25</sup> According to Weil, however, it is not enough to contemplate the meaning of the symbols. Rather, one must immerse oneself in them practically, that is, one must actively enter into processes of physical labor: agricultural work, craftsmanship, factory work. Working with a pendulum, for example, which swings back and forth, allows us to experience in the flesh how the infinity of human desire is broken to the point of exhaustion by the limited capacity to realize itself.<sup>26</sup> The oscillating movement of a pulley makes the tension between the finite and the infinite tangible.<sup>27</sup>

The self-referentiality increases even more in the Christian case of the parables of Jesus, which often originate in the agricultural sphere and thus explicitly unfold the symbolic dimension of nature. The symbolic sense of the parables refers back to the literal and most perfect sense, the practice itself. Thus, the parable of John 12:24, according to which a seed bears fruit only when it falls into the earth and dies, is only truly revealed to someone who is "busy sowing seed [...] turn[ing] his attention to this truth without the aid of any word through his own gestures and the sight of the grain that is being buried in the ground."<sup>28</sup> Only by immersing oneself in the work process of sowing does the meaning of the biblical parable become fully apparent: It points to the de-creation of the ego that takes place in the work process.

As Weil writes, "there are also some symbols to be found for those who have tasks to perform other than physical labor."<sup>29</sup> For "every social function

---

24 Weil, *Condition première*, p. 220. All translations of this essay are my own, based on my own German translation. For support, I also used the translation of Lawrence E. Schmidt in Weil, *The First Condition for the Work of a Free Person*.

25 Weil, *Condition première*, p. 220.

26 Weil, *Condition première*, p. 221.

27 Weil, *Condition première*, p. 222.

28 Weil, *Condition première*, p. 220.

29 Weil, *Condition première*, p. 222.

has a supernatural purpose.”<sup>30</sup> For accountants, for example, the “elementary operations of arithmetic”<sup>31</sup> allow them to connect with the supernatural. Nevertheless, for Weil, physical labor provides the paradigm of human life.

Its static character is obvious. According to Weil, life is not about development, increasing productivity, improving living conditions, increasing prosperity. Rather, it is about existing in relation to the supernatural and remaining in that relation. Improvement is possible, but it is measured by this, not by material growth and progress. Therefore, according to Weil, workers must be nothing but workers. It follows from this that they must not be concerned with the acquisition of money, but only with the preservation of life, and thus with work itself.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, work must not lose its character of burden, for only in this way does it lead to the supernatural: “A certain subordination and a certain uniformity are forms of suffering included in the very essence of work and inseparable from the supernatural vocation that corresponds to it. They are not degrading.”<sup>33</sup> But the suffering must not be too great. Otherwise, it is a distraction for the workers from their immersion in the work: “Everything that is indissolubly linked to the desire for, or fear of, change, or to the orientation of thought towards the future, should be excluded from an existence that is essentially uniform and must be accepted as it is.”<sup>34</sup>

In Weil’s society, which can be called mystical socialism,<sup>35</sup> working people do not think about the future because it is indifferent to them. They neither fear it nor expect anything from it: “Security should be greater in this social condition than in any other.”<sup>36</sup> That is, they know that their situation will not change, for better or worse. But in the best case, if they resolutely take Weil’s third way, they will have stopped thinking about what is good and what is bad. They will have stopped judging. They will just be there, at work. According to Weil, people do not live in a dignified way because they feel free to do this or that, but because they have learned to dwell in the precariousness or even the near-nothingness of their existence.

---

30 Weil, *Condition première*, p. 224.

31 Weil, *Condition première*, p. 222.

32 Weil, *Condition première*, p. 218.

33 Weil, *Condition première*, p. 224.

34 Weil, *Condition première*, p. 224.

35 Cf. Pornschlegel, *Auf der Seite der Unterdrückten*.

36 Weil, *Condition première*, p. 224.

## 7 An Epoché of the Future

The previous section may have provoked skepticism, and rightly so. In the self-imposed asceticism of a monastic community, Weil's vision might work, and it might be possible to use physical labor as a medium of transcendence. But imagine a broader social life, say in a medium-sized city. The brief sketches that Weil herself gives of a community according to her third way are, at best, reminiscent of an idealized pre-modern peasant life with artisanal elements. Less charitably read, they recall fascist work systems like the Chilean-German commune *Colonia Dignidad*. In his own way, de Gaulle was right. Weil's ideas are not directly applicable in practice. And yet they should not be discarded altogether. Their relevance is of a principled nature. It lies at the fundamental level of the premises that govern modern lives. Therefore, one should approach Weil's ideas in a way that is otherwise not recommended, that is, as abstractly as possible.

Of particular importance here is Weil's treatment of time and temporality.<sup>37</sup> To be sure, Weil did not develop an explicit theory of time. However, the question of time is included in her mystical concept of labor. Therefore, one can speak of an implicit theory of time. According to Weil, labor is essentially only for the satisfaction of needs. It has no real finality. It lacks a *telos*. Therefore, workers are not only indifferent to the future because they are too absorbed in the work process to perceive anything other than the present. Rather, the work process itself knows no real goal and throws the workers back on themselves, that is, on the present. But if labor is understood as a mystical exercise, the present turns out to be more than the present. It turns out to be the gateway to the supernatural presence/absence of God, who sublates time in the beyond of time. Labor, then, suspends not only the future but time itself. It leads to a state of suspension of time in which there is nothing but an intense hyper-presence of the present.

Since labor is the center of human practice for Weil, this leads to an understanding of time that is quite different from the one that fatally shapes contemporary global culture. According to the latter, the future is paramount. The relevant categories are increase, invention, progress, growth, accumulation, maximization, improvement, acceleration, change. Weil breaks with this. Weil's mystically-informed practice is a practice without a future. There is not even something to hope for in Weil. Her break is not only with modern

---

37 On the subject of time, temporality, and the future see also Casey Ford's insightful paper: Ford, *Captured Time*.

progressivism, but also with Judeo-Christian soteriology. For Weil, the core of the Christian message is to remain – to remain at the zero point of creation, that is, at the foot of the cross, where Christ is forsaken by God. Again, this vision of life, in which the future is suspended, will rightly cause some discomfort. But it contains an essential and powerful challenge to our way of life, if not to our entire culture. The questions Weil poses to us seem to be the following: What is it that we actually expect from the future? The ideology of the future to which capitalism is attached has proved to be disastrous. How can we replace it with another idea of the future? Or would the solution not perhaps be, following Weil, to subject the future to an *epoché*, that is, to bracket it, and to find ways of living without a future? In this way we would no longer prepare, plan, invest, hedge, expect, work ahead, take credit, reckon with contingencies, bet on possibilities. The organization of life would then revolve around the present. How can we imagine a life that revolves around the present? What attitudes and actions will determine it? And can we imagine a community life that is not monastic and yet follows these determinants? Could such a life be achieved through a specific practice in time, a specific *askesis* of time? Further, this would have to become a general cultural form that structures life without people having to explicitly affirm it. Just as the orientation towards the future structures our present reality.

At this point, I will leave these questions open. What seems clear, however, is that an *epoché* – a bracketing of the future – is only conceivable by separating being from immanence and the time of immanence. From the perspective of immanent life, the present is a prison from which only the future can free us. No one can endure the present if it is nothing but the present, if it is nothing more than it is. But where the present transcends itself, where it charges itself with surplus, everything changes and takes on a supernatural radiance. Weil senses that modern life can only be profoundly transformed if it is oriented toward such phenomena, which occur in rare moments of bliss (and she teaches us that bliss has to do with a particular intensity and not so much a sense of well-being). Beneath the apophatic veneer of her thought, she calls for a different ontology, one that holds that all mundane beings are grounded in transcendence and are therefore themselves essentially transcendent in character, that is, beyond themselves. To be beyond oneself is to be in suspension of oneself. It is to be irreducible to any objective form, neither now nor in the future. It is to be without image, for the truth of God pervades God's creation. Think of a life according to this. This life would have freed itself from nature as nature, from things as things. It would satisfy its needs, but no more. It would not need anything more or different. It would enjoy what is without feeling

lack. Precisely because this life is simple and elemental, it is more than mere life. In fact, it is just the opposite. It is a self-sufficient life, and it is rich and fulfilled, a floating life that is always a little distant from itself, and for that very reason is attaining a nearness to other entities. Something like this could be the regulating idea that Weil gave to the postwar period.

### Bibliography

- Camus, Albert: *Essais*. Paris: Gallimard 1972.
- Ford, Casey: *Captured Time*. Simone Weil's Vital Temporality Against the State, in: Sophie Bourgault/Julie Daigle (ed.): *Simone Weil, Beyond Ideology?*. London: Palgrave Macmillan 2020, pp. 161–184.
- Hobsbawm, Eric: *The Age of Extremes*. The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991. London: Michael Joseph 1994.
- Judt, Tony: *Past Imperfect. French Intellectuals, 1944-1956*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1992.
- Löwith, Karl: *Meaning in History. The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1949.
- Löwith, Karl: *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1953.
- Marsh, James L.: *Process, Praxis, and Transcendence*. Albany: State University of New York Press 1999.
- Pétrément, Simone: *La vie de Simone Weil*. 2 vol. Paris: Fayard 1973.
- Pornschlegel, Clemens: *Auf der Seite der Unterdrückten*. Sozialismus und christliche Mystik bei Simone Weil, in: Clemens Pornschlegel/Thorben Päthe (ed.): *Zur religiösen Signatur des Kapitalismus*. Leiden: Brill 2016, pp. 95–114.
- Taubes, Jacob: *Carl Schmitt*. Apocalyptic Prophet of the Counterrevolution, in: Jacob Taubes: *To Carl Schmitt. Letters and Reflections*. New York: Columbia University Press 2013, pp. 1–18.
- Vetö, Miklos: *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*. Albany: State University of New York Press 1994.
- Weil, Simone: *Condition première d'un travail non servile*, in: Simone Weil: *La condition ouvrière*. Paris: Gallimard 1951, pp. 216–225.
- Weil, Simone: *Cette guerre est une guerre de religions*, in: Simone Weil: *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres*. Paris: Gallimard 1957, pp. 88–96.
- Weil, Simone: *Human Personality*, in: Siân Miles (ed.): *Simone Weil*. An Anthology. London: Penguin 1986, pp. 69–98.
- Weil, Simone: *Gravity and Grace*. New York/London: Routledge 2002.



- Weil, Simone: *The Need for Roots*. Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind. London, New York: Routledge 2002.
- Weil, Simone: *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*. Vol. II. New York/London: Routledge 2004.
- Weil, Simone: *Dieser Krieg ist ein Krieg von Religionen*, in: Simone Weil: *Krieg und Gewalt*. Essays und Aufzeichnungen. Berlin/Zürich: diaphanes 2012, pp. 205–214.
- Weil, Simone: *The First Condition for the Work of a Free Person*, in: Eric O. Springsted (ed.): *Simone Weil*. Late Philosophical Writings. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2016, pp. 131–143.
- Wolin, Richard: *The Seduction of Unreason. The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006.

# YHWH in the Drawer

## *Literary Tsimtsum in Hannah Arendt's Post-War Writings*

*Rafael Zawisza*

### Abstract

The war experience did not change Hannah Arendt's attitude toward religion and theology. Her vision of God as non-existent in the world is well documented in her doctoral dissertation (1929) and a co-authored text on Rilke (1930). The repercussions of Shoah could be traceable in Arendt's post-war writings only indirectly, namely through a "literary tsimtsum," realised through the literal vanishing of "God" from her public writings. On the other hand, Hannah Arendt often referred to theological models in her intellectual diary, known as "Denktagebuch." The traces of this speculative work are discreetly reflected and dispersed throughout her published essays and books. Whereas for Ludwig Feuerbach "Gott ist der Spiegel des Menschen," Hannah Arendt's writings reflect many such mirrors. The presentation claims that in her literary strategy toward religion, Arendt reproduced the divine gesture of self-withdrawal as the warrant for secularisation.

### Keywords

Secularization; Theology; Hannah Arendt; Denktagebuch; Tsimtsum; Death of God

### 1 Early Stance

In the famous 1964 interview with Günter Gaus, Hannah Arendt protested against counting her among philosophers. She said she represents political theory. The reasons why Arendt refused a dignified title of a "philosopher" were very well grounded in her perception of the Western tradition. According to her, the authority and continuity of this tradition were first severely damaged by the horrific events of the first world war, which made the foundations of Western civilisation tremble, whereas the second world war caused their

collapse.<sup>1</sup> Arendt's intellectual diary, first published in 2002 as *Denktagebuch*, leads to the heart of the matter and reveals why she opposed becoming a philosopher. Half of the material gathered there was written down by Arendt between June 1950 and August 1955, the years after she had finished *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and started to explore new fields, preparing her political anthropology. One can easily detect the motives incorporated in her later books from numerous entries.

Arendt had one main objection against philosophy. It is often repeated throughout *Denktagebuch* that ancient Greek metaphysics – which melted together with Judeo-Christian monotheism – trained European people in thinking unsuitable for grasping political reality, which for Arendt meant first of all its basic premise: human irreducible plurality. According to Arendt, philosophy and theology focused on the cosmos, the Wholeness, the absolute, or on “God”. As a result of this intellectual training, Western anthropology consequently placed at its centre “Man” in singular instead of the multiplicity of individual beings, neglecting and underestimating the fact of natality, which immediately locates ourselves in the world of inborn differences and diversity.

For Hannah Arendt, the fact that Western tradition consolidated this way does not represent any necessary logical development. Her philosophical intervention aims at *unlearning*<sup>2</sup> the whole Western metaphysics, but whereas for Heidegger, what was “forgotten” was Being, for Arendt, it was natality and plurality. Her revolutionary gesture undermines the centrality of “the great chain of being”, which Arthur O. Lovejoy analysed as the “conception of the general *scheme* of things, of the constitutive pattern of the universe.”<sup>3</sup> Although Arendt methodologically distanced herself from the history of ideas, her approach is similar to Lovejoy's in that they both perceive intellectual “systems” as “conglomerates” or “complexes” of ideas.<sup>4</sup> Lovejoy observes that the same premises often bring about opposing conclusions or, vice versa, that thinkers come to the same conclusions from entirely different angles. To answer why that is the case, he points out not only the importance of intellectual fashions but also of “implicit or incompletely explicit assumptions” and “unconscious mental habits.”<sup>5</sup> What is highly relevant here is Lovejoy's statement that “speculative

1 According to her, it occurred due to the second world war, but then it was not even recognised as a “break,” because it had been accomplished between 1914–1918 (see Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 300).

2 The idea comes from Marie Luise Knott; see Knott, *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*.

3 Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. vii. Original emphasis.

4 Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 6.

5 Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 7.

tendencies” are marked by “susceptibilities to diverse kinds of *metaphysical pathos*.”<sup>6</sup>

One can find theogonic narratives in every human culture. However, the problem of the passage from divine unity to worldly dispersion becomes such a burning issue whenever monotheism prevails because it is difficult to justify why perfect oneness formed a multiplicity of creatures. In turn, due to the monotheistic pattern, politics falls into “squaring the circle” when one tries to squeeze “plurality” back into sovereign “unity”.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, even in Plato, without the strictly monotheistic context, the problem of unity appeared. Lovejoy shows that Plato needed an idea of “fullness” (the more things it encompasses, the better a being is) and of “good” (goodness expands into other beings by force of its nature) to transform autarkic Absolute into generative Wholeness. Although it was only in Plotinus and Proclus that “the chain of being” became “the basis of a theodicy”,<sup>8</sup> already in Plato, the main focus was on metaphysics, which – according to Arendt – degraded reflection on politics: “What is remarkable among all great thinkers is the difference in rank between their political philosophies and the rest of their works – even in Plato. Their politics never reaches the same depth. This lack of depth is nothing but a failure to sense the depths in which politics is anchored.”<sup>9</sup> Whether it was the Platonic demiurge, Augustine’s thematisation of the original sin, or Plotinus’ vision of the emanation from the One, it all concerned the riddle of how an imperfect world was created from perfect fullness. Despite the differences between those three discourses, one thing remained relatively similar: the negative view of human plurality, seen as a by-product of neglect, sin, or decomposition. Whatever the motive and whoever could be called “responsible” or “guilty” for this state of affairs, the fact of human diversity was regarded as a misery, misfortune, sad necessity, degradation, something lower in rank and quality than its source, the fullness of Being. In contrast, Lurianic kabbalah – whose traces are detectable in Arendt thinking – problematises the assumption that the Wholeness did not diminish after emanation,<sup>10</sup> which questions “unconscious mental habits” (Lovejoy) of Western metaphysics.

From the beginning of her intellectual path, Arendt had a distinctive flair for politics, recognisable before becoming a political thinker. Already in her doctoral dissertation, dedicated to the notion of neighbourly love in Augustine

6 Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 11. My emphasis.

7 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 242.

8 Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 64.

9 Arendt, *Introduction into Politics*, p. 93.

10 See Necker, *Einführung*, p. 84.

of Hippo, she detects and makes explicit the contradictions inherent in the Christian metaphysics as torn between Athens and Jerusalem. She argues that neither simple God's oneness nor Christ's death and resurrection can constitute the foundation for the human community; those objects of faith can only give coherence to a Christian sect but – against what Paul of Tarsus claimed – cannot build a truly universal community of humankind. The reason for this was not only and not primarily the exclusion of Jews and unbelievers from the Christian, seemingly universal, community. That outcome was only a social manifestation of a specific metaphysical fallacy, which Arendt reveals.

First of all, she contests a vision of God as *summum bonum* since this kind of deity absorbs all goodness – the operation which endangers human agency. The conception of the original sin tends to explain how human freedom is possible if God keeps all power, knowledge, and goodness: man is given freedom as a sinner, whereas all good hangs upon God's grace. This solution, as Arendt insists, brings about a banal and cynical indifference summarised in the formula “we are all sinners”, “we are all guilty”. Instead, Arendt reinterprets “sinfulness” anthropologically as “interconnectedness”, depriving it of its theological causal nexus.<sup>11</sup>

There is another way of contesting the centrality of God by Arendt: for she strongly opposes the idea that one loves one's neighbour for the sake of God. If so, the neighbour becomes insignificant, only a pretext for being good and loving God. To put it metaphorically: when adequate distances between *Creator* and *creatura* are not protected, this results in the incapacitation of the latter because God seems too powerful, staying beyond good, and thus not suitable to be the right model for human conduct.<sup>12</sup> The risk of linking neighbourly love with the love of God lies in the fact that it involves religious faith. Doesn't it mean that without God's grace and faith in God, the neighbour could not be lovable and even not tolerable? What if faith in God hides revulsion which might outburst together with the loss of faith? For that reason, Arendt was afraid that faith in God, religious faith, cannot be taken as a universal basis for human dignity. Later she expressed a similar thought in her *Denktagebuch*: “The wrong way: loving the general [*das Allgemeine*] in a person [...] is almost potential murder: like human sacrifice.”<sup>13</sup>

11 For a detailed reading of how Arendt contested the original sin theory, see Zawisza, *Between Adamite Dreams and Original Sin*.

12 This argument from *Der Liebesbegriff* returns at the discussion about Melville in *On Revolution*.

13 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 15.

The most convincing interpreter of Hannah Arendt's secularity, Samuel Moyn, claims that Arendt abandoned theology just after completing her *Doktorarbeit*,<sup>14</sup> once she had not found what she was looking for in Christianity, namely the source of legitimacy for human equality. It is only a half-truth. My article intends to demonstrate that Hannah Arendt's transformation was not so one-sided and impulsive. First, *Der Liebesbegriff* was less theological than Moyn thinks since, in this earliest work, Arendt aimed to discover secular ground amid a theological context. Secondly, she did not move from Augustine directly to Rahel Varnhagen. When still in Germany, she wrote a few essays between 1930 and 1933 that reflected upon secularisation understood as *Entgötterung der Welt*,<sup>15</sup> de-divinisation of the world. In the text about Rilke, Hannah Arendt signals that her stance is "not the lament over what has been lost but, rather, the expression of loss itself."<sup>16</sup> World's abandonment by God was not only a *fact* but also a *task*. Against Moyn, one has to observe that the task gains its weight because of the fact, in other words, that the project of secular politics depends on the literal vanishing of God, not a metaphorical one.<sup>17</sup> The latter would be "a more elegant solution,"<sup>18</sup> but it does not maintain the dramatic nature of theogony. Modern politics depends upon the fact that "gods do not rule over us [*Götter uns nicht regieren*]."<sup>19</sup>

To avoid nostalgia, Arendt agreed with Rilke on a therapeutical answer to secularisation, namely a "positive nihilism."<sup>20</sup> Arendt did not abandon it later on when she turned to analyse anti-Semitism and totalitarianism. Hence, it is not wholly accurate to say that her reflection on religion ceased in the 1940s since in *The Origins* there is an interwoven theme about the concept of "secular religion". It is, however, true that Arendt had to pause her philosophical thought for the sake of finishing the book on totalitarianism.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless,

---

14 Moyn, *Hannah Arendt on the Secular*.

15 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 57.

16 Arendt/Stern, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, p. 23.

17 Describing the new situation grasped by Rilke, the authors write: "human life does indeed hang in the air, but not because there is no God; on the contrary, it does so because the human being has been rejected and abandoned by Him" (Arendt/Stern, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, p. 23).

18 Necker, *Einführung*, p. 94.

19 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 241.

20 Arendt/Stern, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, p. 23. I would argue that Arendt's positive, necessary nihilism is very close to Rosenzweig's explanation: "A God who deviates even by a hair's breadth from sheer, absolute nothing cannot be accepted as transcending appearance. To be essence He must be nothing" (Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick*, p. 68).

21 She confessed to Jaspers in a letter dated the 4th of September 1947 that she did not read his *Logik* at all and that she refused to write an essay on him. All of this was a very

immediately after she sent it to the publisher, she started to write an essay, *Ideology and Terror*. This summary of the horrific “dark times” was surprisingly concluded with a quotation from Augustine, where the *novitas* of each birth shines with messianic light.<sup>22</sup> Hope comes to the world with birth and a particular faith directed towards the common world.

“Faith in the world”<sup>23</sup> is a formula extracted and slightly adapted from *The Human Condition*, where Arendt claims that Christianity introduced two phenomena unknown to the Graeco-Roman antiquity: hope and faith.<sup>24</sup> Faith in the world is peculiar because it is not religious since it does not need God as its correlate. The formula might sound bizarre because it suggests that one has to believe in something that undoubtedly exists, the earthly reality. However, this faith is not an overcoming of intellectual doubt. In Arendt’s view, the world encompasses all human relations; it is composed of acts, words, and human artifice. Thus, the totality of human culture connects us to time immemorial. Moreover, these dimensions demand this strange “faith” in our daily interactions to achieve a depth of life. We do not usually take into account all people on the planet, nor do we often think about those who lived here before us. Faith in the world makes those invisible ties with the past closer, more intimate, and seen as influencing us, as the active force which haunts us.

## 2 Marranic Writing Manoeuvres

Reading Arendt’s *Denktagebuch*, one can notice that her critique of religion is visibly indebted to Friedrich Nietzsche, whereas her vision of nature – is to Karl Marx. Arendt shared with Nietzsche an insight that people project on God a portion of their vitality to avoid overburdening with responsibility. In this broader sense, the projection scheme could be traced back to Ludwig Feuerbach’s anthropology. In his text about Arendt, Marx, and political theology Artemy Magun recommends reading Hannah Arendt within the frame of

---

conscious decision: “[...] if I attempted even the most modest of presentations, I would also get into philosophising and thus onto a level of generality that is essentially relevant to me alone and from which perspective one cannot very well make a historical presentation” (Arendt/Jaspers, *Correspondence*, p. 97).

22 In the second edition of *The Origins*, this essay replaced the book’s last chapter, which ended with the insistence on commemorating victims of the war.

23 See Zawisza/Hagedorn (ed.), *Faith in the World*, where the authors make sense of this paradoxical phrase.

24 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 247.

Feuerbachian tradition rather than see in it a Jewish intervention in philosophy, comparable to Rosenzweig's, Levinas', or Derrida's.<sup>25</sup>

Although I share Magun's concern and objection that we should not automatically qualify all the Jewish authors to a category of "Jewish thought", I think nonetheless that we can refer to interpretations sophisticated and specific enough to support the following interconnected statements: 1) Arendt's thinking was not only secular but also cryptotheological; 2) Arendt's cryptotheological legitimacy of modern secularity is distinctively Jewish. It becomes comprehensive once we analyse her writings in the context of the "psycho-cultural milieu of Marranism,"<sup>26</sup> as Yirmiyahu Yovel did in his groundbreaking studies on Spinoza, his times, and the innovation that the heterodox Jews brought to modernity. Although *marranos* were initially forced converts from Judaism to Christianity from the Iberian Peninsula, Yovel focuses on their descendants, who emigrated to places, like Spinoza's parents to Amsterdam, where they could theoretically "return" to orthodox Judaism, but many did not. Writing seemingly about Spinoza, Yovel brings back the memory of the Marrano phenomenon, the whole groups of those "who were led by the confusion of both religions into scepticism and secularism."<sup>27</sup>

Arendt's parents were secular Jews, but she retained ties to both religions via religious grandparents and Christian education at school. From her early childhood anecdote saying that she expressed the wish to marry a pork-eating rabbi<sup>28</sup> up to her non-observant adulthood, when she jokingly referred to her winter celebration, calling them *Weihnukkah*<sup>29</sup> – Hannah Arendt kept her equal distance towards Christianity and Judaism and seemed to live in what Yovel, referring to cultural Marranism, calls "a rather inarticulate confusion of symbols and traditions."<sup>30</sup> It is crucial that Arendt personified in her writings the moment Marranism reached its afterlife once the real death threats had gone. What outlives is "the special linguistic sensibilities and gifts of the Marranos," the aesthetic *delight* in "the art of playing the overt meaning against the covert one, deciphering hidden messages, using several voices at a time."<sup>31</sup>

It was the position of Arendt when she went into exile, first to France, then to the United States in 1941. She had to establish herself in the new languages and intellectual cultures. Natan Sznajder depicted how Arendt had to negotiate

25 Magun, *Karl Marx and Hannah Arendt*, pp. 559, 566.

26 Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, p. 29.

27 Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, p. 24.

28 Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 40.

29 Arendt/Jaspers, *Correspondence*, p. 125.

30 Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, p. 28.

31 Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, p. 30.



her public image, e.g. being a representative of German philosophy in America while insisting on speaking as a Jew when she addressed the German audience. What she defended each time – Sznajder claims – was her right to claim both her exiled, wandering rootedness and her universal stance.<sup>32</sup> The same assertiveness one can notice in Arendt's relation to theology. Her choice to write political theory was genuine, but tinting it with theological undertones was meant to remind inquisitive readers about the author's double game.<sup>33</sup>

In Arendt's case, her earliest excavations made within theological material were retranslated into secular language, leaving behind only some rare, allusive *traces*. That is enough to determine Arendt's philosophical Marranism. Nonetheless, I want to risk another hypothesis, which demands more specificity, namely, that Hannah Arendt's cryptotheology was influenced by the rediscovery of Isaak Luria by Gershom Scholem. Whether Arendt heard about Luria before she met Scholem, is not confirmed. However, taking into account the popularity of kabbalah among *Ostjuden*, one can imagine that she could have familiarise herself with Lurianic legacy already in her years in Königsberg. Be it as it may, Christoph Schulte's monograph<sup>34</sup> on *tsimtsum* (the Lurianic idea of Creation through God's contraction) shows that Luria's philosophical offspring can be found, among others, in German Idealism and particularly in Schelling. Arendt studied Schelling at Karl Jaspers' seminar two years before completing her dissertation.<sup>35</sup>

Because Schelling left Lurianic kabbalah as a source of his philosophy unsaid,<sup>36</sup> Arendt – in case she did not inherit *ostjüdisches* common knowledge – might have been unaware of the origin of the Schellingian concept of God's self-limitation while already applying it in her dissertation. From her reaction to Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, we know that Arendt immediately found in Lurianism the interpretative key for her own Marranic situation and an inspiration for her theoretical concerns from the 1940s when she insisted on legitimising Jewish secular politics. In a letter from the 20th of May 1944, Arendt writes to Scholem: "I've been thinking much about you lately, and not just because I've spoken with a lot of people about your book.

---

32 Sznajder, *Jewish Memory*.

33 The double game concerns the cultural sphere and literary practice only. In her text commemorating Arendt, Jeannette M. Baron wrote that Arendt "opposed crypto-Jews and resented those who converted to Christianity" (Baron, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 59).

34 Schulte, *Zimzum*.

35 Editors of Jaspers and Arendt letters exchange claim that Arendt took part in Jaspers' 1926 seminar "Schelling, besonders seine Philosophie der Mythologie und Offenbarung," see Arendt/Jaspers, *Briefwechsel*, p. 723.

36 Schulte, *Zimzum*, p. 19.

The real reason is that I can't get your book out of my mind because it tacitly (please don't think I'm saying 'unconsciously') accompanies me in all of my own work."<sup>37</sup> Could Lurianic (re)discovery, which was hard to contain in the vessels of words, become the admixture that coloured her rereading of Augustine three years later?

### 3 Augustinus redivivus

I want to give evidence of a few transmissions from *Denktagebuch* to Arendt's published writings. It concerns the way her early work, *Der Liebesbegriff*, underwent a resurgence after the war. When in 1965 Arendt got the proofs of her dissertation translated into English, she wrote to her friend, Mary McCarthy:

It is kind of a traumatic experience. I am re-writing the whole darned business, trying not to do anything new, but only to explain in English (and not in Latin) what I thought when I was twenty. It is probably not worth it and I should simply return the money – but now I am strangely fascinated in this rencontre. I had not read the thing for nearly twenty years.<sup>38</sup>

When one reads that confession, one may be puzzled at first because it is evident from the post-war letters between Arendt and Jaspers that "old Augustine"<sup>39</sup> – as she wrote in 1946 – was present in her intellectual world; Jaspers even sent her copies of the dissertation that he still had.<sup>40</sup> It seems that Arendt reread it around 1947. Then, having *Der Liebesbegriff* at hand, she did not open "the thing" for two decades. The confession demonstrates that Arendt practised a hauntological type of writing – to use Derrida's parlance. Instead of returning to the *origin*, she allowed the early intuitions to take new incarnations and give birth to new meanings. What Arendt transmitted into *The Human Condition*, in particular, was removed from the original context; it haunted her, but at her own invitation. She did not repress anything: it was intellectual contraband.<sup>41</sup>

37 Arendt/Scholem, *Correspondence*, p. 21.

38 Arendt/McCarthy, *Between Friends*, p. 190.

39 Arendt/Jaspers, *Correspondence*, p. 50.

40 "It would be wonderful if you could send me the copies of my dissertation. I have only one copy left, and that one, anticipating further travels by water, fell into the bathtub in Paris and still looks waterlogged," Arendt wrote to Jaspers on the 16th of May, 1947 (Arendt/Jaspers, *Correspondence*, p. 90).

41 For this metaphor as the crucial one for Arendt's oeuvre, see the introduction to Zawisza/Hagedorn (ed.), *Faith in the World*.

This way, *Der Liebesbegriff* so strangely merged with her later work that Arendt found it traumatic to dissect the old from the new in 1965.

The first example of the literary transmissions contains the argument that Arendt often repeated in her published texts in more secular ways. She formulated it in her notebooks in August 1950:

Was ist Politik? [...] Politik beruht auf der Tatsache der Pluralität der Menschen. Gott hat den Menschen geschaffen, die Menschen sind ein menschliches, irdisches Produkt, das Produkt der menschlichen Natur. Da die Philosophie und die Theologie sich immer mit dem Menschen beschäftigen, [...] haben sie keine philosophisch gültige Antwort auf die Frage: Was ist Politik? gefunden.<sup>42</sup>

*What Is Politics?* Politics is based on the fact of human plurality. God created *man*, but *men* are a human, earthly product, the product of human nature. Because philosophy and theology are always concerned with *man*, (...) they have found no valid philosophical answer to the question: What is politics?<sup>43</sup>

This tone of voice is typical for Arendt when she speaks about God. It is not a confession. “God” functions here as a part of an equation. Divinity’s absoluteness and transcendence are kept outside of the world. The sequence of God-man-men does not form a “great chain of being” – although Arendt elaborated its classical parts philosophically, including animals and life at large. Those three realities are interconnected through negations. “Man” in the intermediary role serves more as separating than connecting. Feuerbach’s dictum, claiming “Gott ist der Spiegel des Menschen,” is deeply revised – God in Hannah Arendt’s writings often appears as a negative model, or like a negative in photography, a “negated” image whose likeness is simultaneously preserved and “prevented”. In other words, creatures cannot be like their Creator since men cannot be sovereign, and pretension for absoluteness is a usurpation. Arendt would not openly say “usurpation” because it would mean positioning herself religiously, and she abstained from that. Her way of intervening in theological material was speculation. Nevertheless, it is still telling that in answering the question “What is politics?” she introduced the concept of “God” in the second sentence to ground her argument about plurality.

However, in *The Human Condition*, her book from 1958, in which she formulated her political theory, the distinction of man-men is initially introduced without referring to God. At first, God remains in the drawer: “Action, the

42 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 15.

43 Compiling different texts for *Introduction Into Politics*, Jerome Kohn rightly decided to insert this entry from *Denktagebuch* as the initial paragraph since it is how Arendt tends to think about politics, by negatively referring it back to the creation story, see Arendt, *Introduction into Politics*, p. 93.

only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world."<sup>44</sup> Here the Earth replaced God, and the argument sounds thoroughly worldly. It seems that it remains operative without a reference, even a negative one, to transcendence. It is congruent with what she stated on the book's second page: "The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition."<sup>45</sup> However, after a brief comment on the Romans, Arendt turned to Genesis to show from where comes the distinction between man and men.

[...] in its most elementary form, the human condition of action is implicit even in Genesis ('Male and female created He *them*'), if we understand that this story of man's creation is distinguished in principle from the one according to which God originally created Man (*adam*), 'him' and not 'them,' so that the multitude of human beings becomes the result of multiplication.<sup>46</sup>

The idea of two origins of humanity was groundbreaking for Arendt in *Der Liebesbegriff*, where she wanted to determine the origin which could have its legitimacy independent of God. She established this point of departure in the multiplication and dissemination of humankind from the first couple. In other words, we do not have a direct descent from the initiating God's movement, but each derives from one source of human ancestry (today, one could say: from our "African Mother"). The separation of the divine and human origins of humankind empowers human beings as singularities. In the footnote on the same page, Arendt uncovers the source of her speculation:

Especially interesting in this respect is Augustine (*De civitate Dei* xii. 21), who not only ignores Genesis 1:27 altogether but sees the difference between man and animal in that man was *unum ac singulum*, whereas all animals were ordered 'to come into being several at once' (*plura simul iussit existere*). To Augustine, the creation story offers a welcome opportunity to stress the species character of animal life as distinguished from the singularity of human existence.<sup>47</sup>

This reference gives a chance to follow how things migrated from Arendt's philosophical *Werkstatt* to her publications. It appears in *Denktagebuch* among crucial entries from April 1951, where she often refers to Augustine. Arendt wrote down the above-quoted words in a more extended citation in Latin. In

44 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 7.

45 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 2.

46 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 8.

47 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 8.

the next entry, which continues the lecture of *De civitate Dei*, Hannah Arendt proved her Marranic ability – here speaks Yovel again – “to reverse the declared intention of authors, or to draw illicit information from texts not intended to convey it,”<sup>48</sup> namely, she reinterpreted her most favourite passage from Augustine (“[Initium] ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit”) as announcing “the sanctity of human spontaneity [*die Heiligkeit menschlicher Spontaneität*].”<sup>49</sup> This strong *misreading* of Augustine will constitute the deepest *core* of Arendtian natalism, independently of the opinions that Augustinian scholars might have about it. It was her own *Augustinus*, her old friend.

The echo of her dissertation from 1928 is audible when, in another entry from April 1951 – the one about the hostility of Christian philosophers towards politics – Arendt quotes *De civitate Dei* again, mentioning the original sin conception as something that brings solidarity among people. Again, one can be unsure if this is a comprehensive view. What is clear is that in 1951 Arendt still sticks to her 1928 interpretation, according to which original sin describes human interconnectedness. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt wants to repeat the same result: emphasising singularity *despite* human dependence but avoiding the creation myth. She uses the same language with which Augustine explained the animal-human difference, but this time the point of reference is a Marxian idea that work created the human being: “Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species’ ever-recurring life cycle.”<sup>50</sup>

Work creates what Arendt usually calls “human artifice”. In this sense, human life exceeds animal fate. Nevertheless, one cannot compare it to the level of exceptionality guaranteed – for Augustine – by God’s chosenness of humankind. Is it not the case that human singularity in the modern era is less and less significant?<sup>51</sup> All in all, every human individual is a small part of the system of production, only a representative of the species and a unit in the

48 Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, p. 30.

49 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 66.

50 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 7.

51 Since Arendt is known for her praise of plurality, it is vastly forgotten that she was sensitive to this problem and defended a relative transcendence of the individual in her 1930 critique of Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge when she wrote: “We are perhaps so much at the mercy of this public order [economy and society] that even our possibilities of detachment can be defined only as freedom from it. This does not mean, however, that the public order must always have primacy. Only if the ‘economic power structure’ has become so overwhelming that the mind that created it has no longer any home at all in it is it possible to understand thought as ideology or utopia” (Arendt, *Philosophy and Sociology*, p. 41).

long and determining *chains* of ancestry. In the last part, we will see where Arendt located the resources to counterbalance and even overcome all those mighty powers of economy, sociology, and biology.

#### 4 The Echo of a Distant God and Isaak Luria's Ghost

In his attentive reading of Arendtian poetics of natality from *The Human Condition*, Jeffrey Champlin grasped the subtlety of manoeuvres Arendt undertakes to position her distinctive voice, especially when “she combines the natural science language of [Arnold] Gehlen and the divine vocabulary of Augustine to speak, if paradoxically, about her idea of creating something new.”<sup>52</sup> In many instances, it is very confusing what her argument was and what rather an echo of other authors, as she let the ghosts sound through her own words.

Arendt's Marranic language is often like a distillate of many substances reaching, in the end, the volatile state that prevents them from being separated. For example, when the author speaks against genetic engineering and characterises it as “a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking).”<sup>53</sup> Typical argumentation of religious thinkers says that one cannot speak about life being a “gift” without referring to the “giver”. Arendt rejects that. At the same time, this sentence is not incompatible with belief in God because Arendt just “secularised” a religious statement making it more universal but not rejecting religion.

How she interpreted Plato and Heidegger in *Denktagebuch* sheds light on her theological predilection and Lurianic spirit. It can be grasped not as her speculation *sensu stricto*, as in the case of Hans Jonas' neo-Lurianic treaties. Arendt's cryptotheological strategy of hiding God in the drawer leaves us with the task of reconstructing her critique. In the notes on Plato's *Politikos*, she starts from the observation that the metaphor presenting a politician as a shepherd is invalid since too many people could claim such authority. The rule of one person contradicts the plurality of human beings. That is why Plato's attempt to subordinate the mortals to an immortal power is regarded by Arendt as a dangerous error, as the escape from the “shock of reality”,<sup>54</sup> when reality presents itself as possibility (freedom).

---

52 Champlin, *Born Again*, p. 160.

53 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 2.

54 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 11.

This first hint that the absolute is inconceivable *between* people is followed by reviewing a “cosmological speculation” about the creation of the cosmos and humankind, taking into account four options: 1) a self-conceived world; 2) a world constantly kept in motion by a god (a sort of *creatio continua*); 3) two conflicted gods who keep the world in motion by contradicting each other; 4) the world left by god and moving without any further interventions. In the fourth, deistic variation, people take their origin from each other:

*genesis eks allelon* [procreation from one another]: because the world reigns itself: so, the fact that human beings come into being through procreation, from one another, is the surest sign a) of forsakenness by God [*Gottverlassenheit*] – God has let [everything] go; b) for the task of *autokratein* [self-governing].<sup>55</sup>

Creation means, first of all, a *separation*, letting things be, which leaves us with a *task*. The fourth option is for Arendt the only philosophically and theologically viable way to understand human plurality and politics: “Only the fourth alternative is valid: without any dualism, it simultaneously explains the divinity and God’s abandonment of the world. This is the pathos of the earthly.”<sup>56</sup>

Being free of God does not mean being limitless. God’s leaving does create a vacuum, but it coincides with growing human responsibility. In this narrative, original sin does not matter. Arendt’s speculative work contradicts the famous dictum that “if there is no God, then everything is permissible.” Nor would Arendt agree with Jacques Lacan, who reversed that dictum by saying, “if there is no God, then everything is prohibited.” In Arendtian imagination, God is a model for thinking about the limitations of the human condition and the self-limitation of freedom. It is not because God forbid something that we limit ourselves. It is no longer a commandment or a voice of God. Instead, it is God’s fading away as the *example* of how to abdicate from absoluteness. In that sensitivity to distances securing humans from divinity, Arendt proves to be very Lurianic in her theological imagination.

It is not through a prohibition but through *the persuasive* force of the argument that Arendt tries to achieve one revolutionary step: to unlearn people from thinking that an almighty power could guarantee well-being and order in human affairs. “Every second person is already a proof contradicting the omnipotence of man, a living demonstration that not everything is possible. It is primarily plurality that limits [*eingrenzt*] the power of men and man.”<sup>57</sup> This observation is wholly “earthly”, yet, a negative reference to omnipotence

55 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 23.

56 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 22.

57 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 53 et seq.

strengthens it: “In totalitarian regimes, it is clear that man’s omnipotence corresponds to men’s superfluity.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, when an individual usurps absolute power, it can only bring destruction to human beings.<sup>59</sup>

In the spirit of unlearning metaphysics, Arendt proposes additionally such an exercise in political thinking: “God as the Creator of the world: only when we insist on asking for causes [*Ursachen*] in the first place. That we do this at all is because we ourselves are always the cause.”<sup>60</sup> This quotation might sound like wordplay, but it is not. One can read it as an *interplay between literal and literary* in Arendt’s thinking. She asks why we cede our responsibility for the things we do to “nature” or “God”. She does not discourage asking about the ultimate reasons or posing fundamental questions. To the contrary, she welcomes such questions, but using clichés – even if it concerns very honourable theological clichés, like “original sin” – would not illuminate us. That is why Arendt reinvents theological imagination to liberate it from the dogmatic context.

Literal absence of God – analogous to the Lurianic idea of the empty space created through God’s contraction<sup>61</sup> – is the guarantee that we are alone in the world, using “a free place, empty air and space.”<sup>62</sup> However, it is just a first step because the sense of responsibility does not come automatically from confronting empty cosmos. Instead, it comes from defatalisation made in acting thanks to the discovery that “the reality” is composed of unfulfilled possibilities with which human freedom comes to interplay. This “earthly pathos” resonates prominently in a brief note Arendt made at the bottom of one letter from David Riesman, dated the 8th of June 1949: “The stubbornness of reality is relative. Reality needs us to protect it. If we can blow up the world, it means that God has created us as guardians of it; just so, we are the guardians of Truth.”<sup>63</sup> Hannah Arendt’s most profound conviction emerged in this spontaneous note written to herself, uncovering the messianic *task*. What she would call “task” in her public writings, she understood as a mission, which a Lurianic thinker derives not from God but from “Entgötterung der Welt.”<sup>64</sup>

58 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 53.

59 Christian Schulte also sees a political significance of this “Lurianic thought, that omnipotence is destructive, that is why self-limitation is necessary” (Schulte, *Zimzum*, p. 32).

60 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 65.

61 One of the classic kabbalistic formulas says: “God is the place of the world, but the world is not His place” (Necker, *Einführung*, p. 83).

62 The quotation comes from Hayyim Vital, the most influential among Luria’s disciples (Schulte, *Zimzum*, p. 67).

63 Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, p. 254 et seq.

64 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 57. One might identify the last, inconspicuous residues of divinity in Arendt with spontaneity and birth, which one can compare to the kabbalistic image



This phrase, *Entgötterung der Welt*, appears in the context of the objectification and exploitation of the planet, which was possible because of the process Max Weber called *Entzauberung*, disenchantment. Arendt does not lament over a lost pristine natural life, even though, as she writes, the modern man “degraded the whole nature into device [*die ganze Natur zum Mittel degeneriert*].”<sup>65</sup> It is true that here Arendt sounds very Heideggerian, but the closeness of diagnosis should not overshadow the disagreement about the proper response to the crisis. In general, Arendt works more with the vocabulary of Hegel and Marx when she distinguishes between matter and nature: “Just as God created man, but not men and certainly not peoples [*Völker*], so God created nature [*Natur*], but not the matter [*Materie*].”<sup>66</sup> The matter is what humans create out of nature. But whereas God creates not doing any harm because it is the creation out of nothing, human beings must destroy one thing to do another, hence “matter is destroyed [*zerstörte*] nature.”<sup>67</sup> This “element of destruction in all production” is thus inevitable and not problematic; what Arendt finds genuinely destructive is when reality falls victim to objectification.

This unnaturalness of human life, conducted within nature but surrounded by “human artifice”, Arendt finds “natural”, whereas Heidegger pathologises that, equalling the technical capacities of humankind with the excess of will. In the next entry after the just analysed one, Arendt evokes Hegel and Heidegger’s *Hegels Begriff der Erfahrung* (from *Holzwege*), in which Heidegger presents Parousia of the Hegelian Absolute as the entrance of violence (*Gewalt*) into the human world. It is because the Absolute wants to be *bei uns* and *inmitten des Seienden*.<sup>68</sup> Nothing is less compatible with Arendt’s Lurianic insistence on separating from the source of life than the idea that the Absolute could dwell among people. As Heidegger’s comment on Hegel confirms, God, with undiminished absoluteness, could enter the world only violently.

This excerpt she noted without any comment. Nonetheless, the entry finds its polemical continuation when she observes what happens with human agency in Heidegger’s metaphysics of *Sein*, identified with Nothing:

Geschichte: Nach Heidegger müsste der Mensch das Ereignis des Seins sein. Dies könnte klären den Ereignis-Charakter des menschlichen Lebens wie der

---

of the divine sparks in human beings. According to a disciple of Luria, Hayyim Vital, it is the reason why salvation depends on humanity (Necker, *Einführung*, p. 144).

65 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 57.

66 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 61.

67 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 61.

68 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 62.

menschlichen Geschichte. Handeln aber bleibt zweideutig: vermutlich gedacht als Antwortendes, Entgegnendes. [...] Handeln in Sinne der reinen, autonomen Spontaneität wäre als Revolte die höchste Undankbarkeit gegen das, dem man sein Dasein verdankt.

History: According to Heidegger, man should be the event of being. This might clarify the event character of human life [seen] as human history. But action remains ambiguous: presumably thought of as answering, countering. [...] Acting in the sense of pure, autonomous spontaneity would be, as a revolt, the greatest ingratitude towards that to which one owes one's existence.<sup>69</sup>

When we remember that a few entries earlier Arendt called spontaneity *heilig* – sacred – it becomes visible, from which angle she conducts her critique. Heidegger puts Being above anything else. In turn, Arendt asks whether worshipping Being as a new God would not dismantle human freedom. Here they differ without reconciliation. Heidegger's piety is far from a vision of God, which Arendt cherished in her speculative exercises. Being's origin (*Ursprung*) competes and overshadows human origin, but when humankind insists on the importance of its origin, people forget about Being. There is an irreconcilable conflict here in Heideggerian theology. Arendt writes that the revolt against Being "consisted in the fact that being, insofar as it 'occurs' in man, surrendered itself [*sich auslieferte*] to man, so to speak."<sup>70</sup>

Heidegger's divinised Being has left humans some freedom, it even mimes the Lurianic God's gesture of throwing oneself on creatures, but it has expectations about how people should use freedom. Otherwise, creatures show "the highest ingratitude" towards the source of their being. Hence, the source can come back in a violent Parousia. Arendt's vision of God contradicts Heidegger's and is in tune with how Hans Jonas described the cosmic odyssey in his neo-Lurianic reinterpretation of *tsimtsum*. In contrast to the womb-like Being, which never cuts the umbilical cord with creatures and thus can blackmail them constantly, Arendtian-Jonasian God "chose to give itself over to chance and risk."<sup>71</sup> God's retreat or disappearance is *fait accompli*. That is why the joy of being alive and gratitude for that fact, when it occurs, occurs genuinely, not because of calculation or fear.

God kept in the drawer remains the source of delight in multivocality, on which precarious divine existence relies. Hidden exercises in speculative theology may help when some mortals again combust because of the zeal for absolute sovereignty.

69 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 68.

70 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, p. 68.

71 Jonas, *The Concept of God*, p. 134.

## Bibliography

- Arendt, Hannah: *The Human Condition*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press 1958.
- Arendt, Hannah: *Introduction into Politics*, in Hannah Arendt: *The Promise of Politics*, Jerome Kohn (ed.). New York: Schocken Books 2005, pp. 93–200.
- Arendt, Hannah: *Denktagebuch 1950–1973*. Zwei Bände, Ursula Ludz/Ingeborg Nordmann (ed.). München: Piper Verlag 2016.
- Arendt, Hannah: *Philosophy and Sociology*, in: Hannah Arendt: *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, Jerome Kohn (ed.). New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1994, pp. 28–43.
- Arendt, Hannah/Jaspers, Karl: *Briefwechsel 1926–1969*, Lotte Köhler/Hans Saner (ed.). München: Piper 1985.
- Arendt, Hannah/Jaspers, Karl: *Correspondence, 1926–1969*. Lotte Kohler/ Hans Saner (ed.), Robert Kimber/Rita Kimber (transl.). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1992.
- Arendt, Hannah/McCarthy, Mary: *Between Friends*. The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–1975. Carol Brightman (ed.). New York: Harcourt Brace 1995.
- Arendt, Hannah/Scholem, Gershom: *The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem*, Marie Luise Knott (ed.), Anthony David (transl.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2017.
- Arendt, Hannah/Stern, Günther: *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, in: Hannah Arendt: *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (ed.). Stanford: Stanford University Press 2007, pp. 1–23.
- Baron, Jeannette M.: *Hannah Arendt*. Personal Reflections, in: *Response* 39 (1980), pp. 58–63.
- Champlin, Jeffrey: *Born Again*. Arendt's "Nativity" as Figure and Concept, in: *The Germanic Review* 88(2/2013), pp. 150–164.
- Jonas, Hans: *The Concept of God After Auschwitz*. A Jewish Voice, in: Hans Jonas: *Mortality and Morality*. A Search for the Good after Auschwitz. Lawrence Vogel (ed.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1996.
- Knott, Marie Luise: *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*. David Dollenmayer (transl.). New York: Other Press 2013.
- Lovejoy, Arthur O.: *The Great Chain of Being*. A Study of the History of an Idea. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2001.
- Magun, Artemy: *Karl Marx and Hannah Arendt on the Jewish Question*. Political Theology as a Critique, in: *Continental Philosophy Review* 45(4/2012), pp. 545–568.
- Moyn, Samuel: *Hannah Arendt on the Secular*, in: *New German Critique* 35(3/2008), pp. 71–96.

- Necker, Gerold: *Einführung in die lurianische Kabbala*. Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig: Suhrkamp 2008.
- Rosenzweig, Franz: *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy*. A View of World, Man, and God. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1999.
- Sznajder, Natan: *Jewish Memory and the Cosmopolitan Order*. Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Condition. Cambridge/Malden, MA: Polity 2011.
- Schulte, Christoph: *Zimzum*. Gott und Weltursprung. Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag 2014.
- Young-Bruehl, Elisabeth: *Hannah Arendt*. Antoni Torregrossa (ed.), Manuel Lloris Valdés (transl.). València: Edicions Alfons el Magnànim – IVEI 1993.
- Young-Bruehl, Elisabeth: *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*. Second edition. New Haven/London: Yale University Press 2004.
- Yovel, Yirmiyahu: *Spinoza and Other Heretics*. The Marrano of Reason. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1989.
- Zawisza, Rafael: *Between Adamite Dreams and Original Sin*. Hannah Arendt's Cryptic Heterodoxy?, in: Rafael Zawisza/Ludger Hagedorn (ed.): *"Faith in the World"*. Post-Secular Readings of Hannah Arendt. Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus Verlag 2021, pp. 87–109.
- Zawisza, Rafael/Hagedorn, Ludger (ed.): *"Faith in the World"*. Post-Secular Readings of Hannah Arendt. Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus Verlag 2021.



# Disintegrated World

*Paul Tillich's Interpretation of Modernity in the 1940s*

*Christian Danz*

## Abstract

The Protestant religious intellectual Paul Tillich interpreted the social and world political situation in the 1930s and 1940s as a disintegrating world. This signature of modernity owed itself not to chance but to a structurally necessary process connected with bourgeois society. The article reconstructs this thesis of Tillich as well as its foundations in the philosophy of religion and history.

## Keywords

Paul Tillich; Modernity; Capitalism; Religious Socialism; Philosophy of Religion; Interpretation of History

## 1 Introduction

The title of my remarks is based on Paul Tillich's essay *Our Disintegrating World*, which he published in the *Anglican Theological Review* in 1941, the year of Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union and the entry of the United States of America into the war.<sup>1</sup> The controversies about the aims of the Allies in the Second World War formed the background of Tillich's reflections, he was a German-born theologian who had to emigrate to the USA in 1933.<sup>2</sup> *Our Disintegrating World* involves an analysis and interpretation of the global situation in 1941, an analysis which was a prerequisite to participate in the contemporary debates about war aims. The diagnosis that Tillich presents to his readers is that the present world is in a process of increasing disintegration.

---

1 Tillich, *Our Disintegrating World*, pp. 134–146; German under the title *Der Zerfall unserer Welt*, pp. 202–212.

2 Cf. Tillich, *Kriegsziele*, pp. 254–269. Cf. Krohn, *Kairos und "Dritte Kraft"*, pp. 164–173.

This is not due to a coincidence, for example, the takeover of political rule by unscrupulous rulers, but due to an almost structural necessity.<sup>3</sup>

But what is the basis of this structural necessity for the general dissolution and disintegration of the world? To answer this question, Tillich lies points to bourgeois society. Since its rise in the early modern era and its enforcement in the 19th century, bourgeois society was inscribed with decomposition *ab ovo*.<sup>4</sup> As bourgeois society asserted itself globally, it simultaneously dissolved the world. This dialectic of Enlightenment became manifest in the birth pangs of the global world in the First World War.<sup>5</sup>

Paul Tillich varied this thesis in numerous publications and lectures of the 1930s and 1940s. In it, as it were, his historical-philosophical and religious interpretation of the present is condensed. In his analysis of the exploding modern societies, Tillich took up considerations that he had already elaborated in Germany in the 1920s. Already here in the writings on religious socialism, it is the spirit of bourgeois society to which the dissolution of society is ascribed. Tillich's interpretation of modern culture is based in a theory of religion grounded in the philosophy of history, which aims at the reflexive transparency of the concrete historical standpoint in its integration into a determined history. This standpoint is also that which makes overcoming of the disintegrating tendencies of bourgeois society possible. It consists in the constitution of a reflexive historical consciousness in religion. In the 1920s, Tillich connected this historical consciousness with religious socialism, a historically conscious avant-garde that is supposed to overcome the crisis of bourgeois society. These considerations also found their way, in a modified form, into the temporal interpretations of the 1930s and 1940s, as well as their basic thesis that the disintegration of the world owed itself to a structural necessity.

In dealing with Tillich's interpretation of the modern world in the middle of the 20th century, we are interested above all in his historical-philosophical construction of this disintegrating world as well as in the function he ascribes to religion in this process. It will become clear that Tillich was an attentive

---

3 Cf. Tillich, *Our Disintegrating World*, p. 134: "If the cause of our present world-destruction is a preceding world-disintegration, our attitude to the war and the eventual peace must be another one than if the cause of the present events is the bad accident of the rise to power of certain tyrants."

4 Cf. Tillich, *Der Protestantismus als kritisches und gestaltendes Prinzip*, p. 206, note 12: "It is the peculiarity of the bourgeois form of society that in it from the outset the tendency toward dissolution of form is decisive."

5 Cf. Tillich, *Our Disintegrating World*, pp. 135–136: "It belongs to the ironies of history, that 'world' in a concrete sense came to existence in the moment in which its disintegration began; and even more, that the contradictions, revealed in this disintegration, made the unity of our world visible."

observer of the political and social events of his time, who was himself involved in various organizations such as the Council for a Democratic Germany.<sup>6</sup> It will also become clear, however, that both his diagnosis of the social and political developments in the years of that “world revolution”<sup>7</sup> and his demands for reconstruction from the spirit of religion are not free of irritating ambivalences.

The present reflections will begin with Tillich's interpretation of the spirit of bourgeois society and its systematic foundations from the 1920s. The second section will deal with his analysis of the present disintegrating world in a historical-philosophical perspective, as he elaborated it in the United States of America in the middle of the century. Finally, I will address the function that Tillich attributes to religion for the reconstruction of the disintegrating world in the 1940s.

## 2 The Spirit of Bourgeois Society, or: The Iron Cage of Modern Rationality

The spirit of self-sufficient finiteness is for our time the spirit of the bourgeois society. This name-bestowal already points to the sphere of action [*Sphäre des Handelns*] as the most distinguished place in which that spirit realizes itself. Here, however, it is again the economy that is dominant, and whose unconditional rulership [*Herrschaft*] most clearly characterizes the bourgeois spirit.<sup>8</sup>

With these words, Paul Tillich characterized the spirit of bourgeois society that dominated his own time in his 1926 writing *The Religious Situation of the Present*. Even his choice of metaphor suggests Max Weber's famous studies on the genesis of modernity as its background.<sup>9</sup> As is well known, in his studies on the genesis of occidental rationalism, Weber worked out the religious imprinting forces that form the mental pre-condition for the emergence of modern economy: The spirit of capitalism has its roots in puritanical ethics, since this led to a rationalization of the way of life by transferring asceticism to the world, which made capitalism possible in the first place. Although modern purposive economics is based on Protestant ethics, modern economics emancipated itself from these fossil fuels in the process of the history of the development of modernity. “The Puritan wanted to be a professional human [*Berufsmensch*],”

6 Cf. Liebner, *Paul Tillich und der Council for a Democratic Germany*; Krohn, *Der Council for a Democratic Germany*, pp. 17–48.

7 Tillich, *Stürme unserer Zeit*, p. 223.

8 Tillich, *Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart*, p. 41.

9 Cf. Tillich, *Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart*, p. 80.



we, according to Weber, “*must be*.”<sup>10</sup> With an almost fateful necessity, modern human is subject to the iron-cage conditions of modern rationality, from which there is no longer any escape for the individual.

Tillich and some of his contemporaries, like Ernst Troeltsch and Georg Simmel, make use of Weber’s account of the genesis of the modern world as iron cage. Tillich, however, gives this spirit of capitalism an independent justification. It is only from this justification that his assertion of the structural necessity of the disintegration of the world, which is connected with the spirit of bourgeois society, arises. Tillich’s grounding of culture is a continuation of neo-Kantian philosophies of religion in the form of a philosophy of history that understands religion as the constitutive site of a reflexive historical consciousness. We must keep the basic features of this philosophy of religion in mind, since it contains the systematic foundations of Tillich’s theory of culture and society.

Tillich shares the conviction of a strict transcendence of God and his enduring difference from the world with the new theologies that emerged after the First World War. The epistemological-critical approach to theology included the critique of religion in the very foundations of theology. Every thought of God – no matter how transcendent and real it is claimed to be – is a human product and can consequently be negated again. In contrast to such human thoughts of God, the true God is given in his revelation alone. Tillich elaborates this epistemological-critical foundation of theology in connection with and in continuation of neo-Kantianism. Consciousness, as the general foundational instance of culture, is at the same time the basis of all reality, whereby the infinite reflexivity of consciousness, determined by Tillich as the Unconditioned, is the precondition of all theoretical and practical acts of consciousness. The Unconditioned is thus a component of the general foundational structure of consciousness. What does this mean for religion and its placement in consciousness? Religion is not a component of the transcendental faculty-structure (*Vermögensstruktur*) of consciousness, but an underivable act of reflection within it, which, however, can be realized solely in the theoretical and practical functions of consciousness. Religion is consequently the apprehension by the individual consciousness of the general foundational structure of consciousness. This is the substance of Tillich’s determination of religion as directedness towards the Unconditioned in the 1920s.<sup>11</sup> What is meant by this is a reflexive transparency of consciousness, which is strictly bound to its performative act (*Vollzug*) in the self-relation of consciousness.

10 Cf. Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der “Geist” des Kapitalismus*, p. 153.

11 Cf. Abreu, “*Directedness Towards the Unconditioned*”, pp. 31–59.

In terms of a theology of revelation, Tillich describes the emergence of religion in the individual human being as the breakthrough of the Unconditioned into the conditioned. On the one hand, this means that the religious act cannot be produced. It arises underivably in the self-relation of consciousness. On the other hand, the infinite reflexivity of consciousness, i.e., the Unconditioned, is not an object or subject and thus, in principle, cannot be represented. The Unconditioned is the ground and abyss of all concrete acts of consciousness. In the individual consciousness, the Unconditioned, which already underlies every consciousness, is disclosed only as negation of the concrete forms posited by consciousness. Religion, that is, the intention of the Unconditioned, is for Tillich not a particular act, but a general act that is not determined in terms of content. Tillich explicitly rejected a religious function in the interest of the generality of religion. However, this also dissolves religion as a particular cultural form. Religion exists in the reflexive transparency of consciousness and is thereby a kind of accompanying consciousness of the cultural process.

What does this performative-bound version of religion now mean for Tillich's interpretation of modern culture as the spirit of bourgeois society? First: The Unconditioned already underlies all consciousness and thus the entire culture. It is the pre-condition and basis of all theoretical and practical forms of culture in which it presents itself. Culture and its forms are thus expressions of the Unconditioned. By referring to the concrete forms it posits, cultural consciousness implicitly always refers to the Unconditioned as well. It is, as Tillich calls it, a consciousness that is religious in substance but not in intention.<sup>12</sup> Thus culture and its symbolic forms are based on the Unconditioned. Second: By directing itself to the form, cultural consciousness abstracts itself from the substance that supports it. It reposes on itself, namely on the level of its productions. The form orientation of consciousness, i.e., culture, allows the substance of consciousness, the Unconditioned, to recede, so that consciousness lives exclusively in the forms it posits and produces. Tillich calls this attitude the spirit of bourgeois society. It is "an extreme case of self-asserting existence [*Dasein*] reposing on its own form".<sup>13</sup>

Tillich describes the spirit of bourgeois society as an attitude that is constitutive for modernity. It does not concern an empirical consciousness, but rather a kind of ideal type. What is meant by this is a form of reflexive disclosedness of the self-relation of consciousness in its relation to the individual and the concrete. Consciousness is, as it were, bound to itself and its form productions

12 Cf. Tillich, *Die Überwindung des Religionsbegriffs in der Religionsphilosophie*, p. 72; *Religionsphilosophie*, pp. 319–321.

13 Tillich, *Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart*, p. 17.

and grasps itself as form-positing or autonomous. However, since consciousness abstracts itself from the substance of the Unconditioned that sustains it, it becomes not only formal, but also empty. Modern culture not only loses its unity with the Unconditioned, transformed, as it were, by modern cultural consciousness into an infinite form-positing. Modern cultural consciousness also transforms cultural, social, and political reality into the iron cage of modern rationality.

With his spirit of bourgeois society, Tillich reformulates, as we have made clear, Max Weber's interpretation of occidental rationalism: the differentiation of modern society and culture. In modern society, the diverse subsystems stand side-by-side without an overarching unity and merely follow their own functional logic. This spirit of bourgeois society erodes life by transforming the relations to both thing and community into cold forms from which all *eros* has disappeared. Like a leaden veil, the spirit of capitalism lays itself over the entire reality, whose political form is the Weimar Republic.<sup>14</sup>

Already the early analysis of modern society, which Tillich elaborated in his text *The Religious Situation of the Present*, offers the possibility of a kind of exodus from the iron cage of modern rationality. He connects this exodus with religious socialism. It is the social carrier of the overcoming of the spirit of the bourgeois society and designates an avant-garde that is history-conscious. The basis of this socialism is religion, which owes itself to the breakthrough of the Unconditioned in the conditioned which cannot be manufactured. Religion consists, as already mentioned, in a reflexive disclosedness of consciousness, in the transition from cultural consciousness to the directedness towards the Unconditioned. In it, consciousness grasps itself in its wholeness and unity, so that the cultural forms it produces become media of the Unconditioned that underlies them. Tillich associates with religion an integration of the fragmented modern society in a reflexive unity that lies below its antagonistic contrapositions. The social shape of realization (*Realisierungsgestalt*) of this religious unity consciousness is religious socialism, which is realized both in the criticism of the bourgeois society that reposes on itself, and on a reflexive reshaping (*Neugestaltung*) of a socialist society out of the spirit of religion.

Having considered the foundations of the spirit of bourgeois society in terms of a theory of consciousness, religion, and culture, we must now turn to Tillich's construction of the philosophy of history in order to pursue the question of how this spirit came into being and why it dissolves society with an almost structural necessity.

---

14 Cf. Tillich, *Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart*, p. 52: "Bourgeois democracy is the political form of capital domination [*Kapitalherrschaft*]."

### 3 The Harmony Principle, or: Have the Last Hundredweight of Fossil Fuel Already Burned Up?

In April 1933, the religious socialist Tillich became the first non-Jewish university professor to be suspended by the National Socialists from his professorship for philosophy and sociology in Frankfurt. In October of the same year, he emigrated to the United States of America and accepted a visiting professorship at Union Theological Seminary, in New York.<sup>15</sup> With this change, the perspective of his cultural and social philosophical texts also changes and becomes more global, which can be seen in his works from the 1930s and 1940s. But this was not the only change. Religious socialism, which in his German period represented the social realization shape of religious historical consciousness, recedes and no longer functions as that historically conscious avant-garde from which a reintegration of the disintegrating society emanates. In the United States of America, however, Tillich has retained his earlier conviction that the decay and disintegration of the world are a structurally necessary consequence of the spirit of the bourgeois society. In what follows, we must first take a closer look at Tillich's construction of the history of religion and culture and explore the question of how bourgeois society came into being. Then we must reconstruct, in a somewhat more detailed manner, his thesis that this spirit leads with structural necessity to a disintegration of the global world.

In his construction of the course of history, Tillich establishes a parallel between the history of religion and the history of culture.<sup>16</sup> Their basis is the general foundational structure of consciousness, which was already mentioned in the previous section. This means that it does not concern an empirical course of history, but rather with ways of making the self-relationship of consciousness transparent in its relation to itself. The ideal starting point for the construction is an indifference between religion and culture. This construction differentiates itself over the course of the religious-historical development not only in religion and culture, but also religion differentiates itself into two basic directions, namely the *sacramental* and the *theocratic attitude*, which in turn find their ideal goal point (*Zielpunkt*) in the *religion of the paradox*. The mentioned polarity results from the structure of the concept of religion, namely the relation of the Unconditioned to the forms of consciousness. The Unconditioned as the basis and precondition of all concrete acts of consciousness is at the same time ground and abyss, form-positing and form-negation. In the sacramental attitude, consciousness grasps itself in such a way that it fixes

15 Cf. Danz/Schüßler, *Paul Tillich im Exil*.

16 Cf. Tillich, *Religionsphilosophie*, pp. 340–349.

its self-disclosedness in a form and holds it fast. It is different in the theocratic attitude. This is characterized by such a self-disclosedness of consciousness, in which this attitude is represented in consciousness as negation of form.

On the level of cultural development, pantheism and critical rationalism correspond to the two types of religious-historical construction mentioned. The former is the cultural counterpart of the sacramental and the latter of the theocratic attitude. However, as we have seen above, religion and culture differ. While in religion the Unconditioned is disclosed as the basis and precondition of consciousness in the individual consciousness and this disclosedness is symbolized in images, the Unconditioned merely underlies culture. Culture thus lacks the critical negativity of the Unconditioned over against any form-positing. What is important for our question about the genesis of the autonomous culture of the bourgeoisie is now that it presupposes the theocratic critique and thus the critique of a present sacred (*einem gegenwärtigen Heiligen*). The theocratic critique already dissolves the sacramental presence of the divine and transforms it into a demand for form. Tillich thinks here of the Old Testament prophets and the Reformation, but also of Kantianism.

Similar to Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, the autonomous culture of modernity, that is, the spirit of the bourgeois society, is, according to Tillich, based on religious roots. But its emergence presupposes the waning of the religious formative forces as well as a break with the religious integration of society. In the Enlightenment, reason or the idea of harmony takes the place of religion. This is the prerequisite and foundation of the bourgeois society and it functions as its principle of integration, linking not only subject and object, but also domination and power.<sup>17</sup> Thus, while on the one hand the principle of harmony derives from a past religious culture of unity, (of which the idea of harmony is the rational echo), on the other hand it is itself a form-positing of consciousness. It is not based, like religion, on the breakthrough of the Unconditioned through the forms of consciousness, but rather on a form-positing of autonomous consciousness. Tillich's thesis of the necessary disintegration of bourgeois society results from this reformulation of the fossil fuels of modern rationality in the form of the principle of harmony as the basis and precondition of the spirit of bourgeois society.

First: The rise and enforcement of the bourgeois society lead to the dissolution of the principle of harmony as an integrating principle of society in the

---

17 Cf. Tillich, *Die sozialistische Entscheidung*, p. 323; *Our Disintegrating World*, p. 135: "The integrating principle of the society which has come to an end in our period is the idea and reality of harmony between nature and reason in the creation of a man-dominated nature and a reason-dominated society."

transition from the 19th to the 20th century. Since the essence of the bourgeois spirit consists in the critical rationality of the positing of form and the demand for form, in the course of the history of the development of autonomous society it becomes increasingly clear that the principle of harmony is itself a positing of modern consciousness and, like any other positing, can also be taken back again. However, by dissolving the unity principle of society, the opposites of modern society enter with inner necessity into antagonistic contraposition. It can only be briefly mentioned here that Tillich reconstructs this dissolution of the principle of harmony in his texts from the 1940s in the economic, political, social, cultural, individual, and religious dimensions of modern society.<sup>18</sup>

Second: With the emergence of the contraposition of society caused by the dissolution of the principle of harmony, the problem of their necessary reintegration arises.<sup>19</sup> But every principle, which is supposed to reintegrate the disintegrating society, can be produced only as form-positing at the level of culture itself.<sup>20</sup> It thus itself participates in the universal disintegration of society, so that every reintegration only advances and accelerates the dissolution and disintegration of the world.

Third: Against this background, Tillich interprets the emergence and successful implementation of National Socialism and fascism as a structurally necessary consequence of the spirit of bourgeois society. Both National Socialism and fascism promise and perform, highly effectively, a reintegration of the increasingly fragmenting bourgeois society. They replaced the liberal market model of economics with nation-state planning, the balance of powers with a unity enforced in Europe by military conquest, offer new security to people who are insecure in their autonomy, and created an ideology that reintegrates society as a unified whole.

Fourth: Just like the National Socialist and fascist reintegrations of disintegrating bourgeois society, all other attempts at reintegration remain positings of principles of unity that are not fundamentally different from those of the Axis powers, since they operate on the same level of the disintegrating spirit

---

18 Cf. Tillich, *Stürme unserer Zeit*, pp. 221–236; *Die gegenwärtige Weltsituation*, pp. 237–279. Cf. Neugebauer, *Paul Tillich als Diagnostiker und Kritiker der Gesellschaft*, pp. 72–79.

19 Cf. Tillich, *The Totalitarian State and the Claims of Church*, pp. 423–443.

20 Cf. Tillich, *Stürme unserer Zeit*, p. 223: “The general character of the revolutionary transformation in the midst of which we are living can be described in the following way: Following the breakdown of the natural or automatic harmony on which the system of life and thought during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was based, the attempt is now being made to produce a system of life and thought which is based on an intentional and planned unity.”

of bourgeois society. Through the disintegrating bourgeois democracy, society cannot be reintegrated.

The war against fascism, which the United States entered in 1941, emerged from the disintegration of the world, as did Germany's invasion of Poland, which marked the beginning of the Second World War.<sup>21</sup> However, if every attempt to integrate the disintegrating world merely advances its disintegration, what possibilities for a constructive shaping of the future remain?

#### 4 Religion and World Politics, or: The Function of Christianity for the Reshaping of the World

According to Tillich, the global disintegration in the mid-twentieth century is not the result of accidental political, social, or cultural developments, but is the consequence of a structural necessity. Both the "aggressive forces" of fascism and those of the "defense" of the "occidental tradition"<sup>22</sup> represent this disintegration. This diagnosis of the modern world during the Second World War, which Tillich elaborated in varied forms in his texts and statements on the social and political situation of the 1940s, is, he argues, the precondition and basis for a new construction of the world after the war. What role does religion play in this? Programs for a political, economic, cultural, and social reorganization of the world cannot be derived from religion. Nevertheless, religion remains the basis and criterion for the reconstruction of the world after the Second World War, and thus also for the determination of war aims.<sup>23</sup> With this determination of religion as the basis and criterion of political, social, and cultural action, Tillich takes up his earlier reflections on the philosophy of religion and history from the 1920s later in the United States during the war. However, he now replaces religious socialism with religion or Christianity as the supporting group for the religious shaping of culture. The question of what the contribution of religion to a constructive shaping of the world consists in and to what extent it should be able to overcome the spirit of bourgeois society remains to be pursued. Against this background, we can discuss Tillich's concrete proposals for post-war reconstruction.

21 Cf. Tillich, *Our Disintegrating World*, p. 202.

22 Tillich, *Our Disintegrating World*, p. 146.

23 Cf. Tillich, *Die Botschaft der Religion an den heutigen Menschen*, p. 219: "Religion can and must provide the basis for such decisions, it can and must provide the ultimate criteria for these decisions." Cf. also *Kriegsziele*, pp. 254–269.

Although no political, social, or cultural programs of renewal can be derived from religion, religion is, according to Tillich, the basis and criterion for such a renewal. This corresponds to the structure of Tillich's concept of religion. Religion, as we have seen above, consists in the breakthrough of the Unconditioned through the conditioned forms of consciousness, whereby the disclosedness of the Unconditioned as the basis and precondition of all concrete acts of consciousness in the individual consciousness is bound to an act of reflexivity in the self-relation of consciousness. Only in this non-producible act is the originary relation (*Ursprungsbeziehung*) of consciousness given in it, and that, in fact, as negation of the concrete determinations posited by consciousness. In this act of reflexivity, consciousness is disclosed in its wholeness and unity. However, consciousness can only represent this disclosedness in self-created images, which, by their turn, misses this very disclosedness. As necessary as the images are to describe the transparency of consciousness, they are at the same time failures vis-à-vis the indeterminacy of the Unconditioned and must, therefore, be negated again. For Tillich, this reflexive knowledge is the actual religion of breakthrough. Religious consciousness is related to its contents in such a way that it knows them as representations of a non-representable unity and wholeness. Thus religion denotes a reflexive consciousness of unity that has become transparent to itself, which is the foundation and basis of all cultural acts of consciousness.

But religious consciousness is not only the basis of all political, social, and cultural action. It is at the same time also the true critique of this action.<sup>24</sup> For religion is a consciousness disclosed in its own reflexivity. It is the knowledge of a unity that still lies below the fragmented modern culture, a unity, however, which must be represented even though it cannot be represented. This means that every idea of unity and completion of culture must be negated again, since it is always a positing of consciousness that remains particular. Religion is consequently a reflexive shaping consciousness, which negates again all its positings, since all historical realizations remain ambivalent.<sup>25</sup> However, since religion is not a particular form in culture, but a cultural consciousness that has become reflexive, it can realize itself solely in the theoretical and practical functions of consciousness, that is, as a reflexive shaping of the world. Religion,

24 Cf. already Tillich, *Der Protestantismus als kritisches und gestaltendes Prinzip*, pp. 200–221.

25 Cf. Tillich, *Die Botschaft der Religion an den heutigen Menschen*, p. 219: "Religion must teach the young something that they cannot hear anywhere else: to devote themselves with ultimate seriousness and complete sacrifice to a goal that is in itself fragmentary and ambiguous. Everything we do in history has this character of the fragmentary and ambiguous. Everything is subject to the law of historical tragedy. But, although religion knows this, it does not withdraw from history."



precisely because it is itself indeterminate and thus general, universalizes, as it were, the cultural, social, and political goals of action by placing every particular positing under the critique of the Unconditioned.<sup>26</sup>

As the basis and critique of the political, social, and cultural shaping of the world, the Christian religion is, in the first order, a critique of itself and its historical realization.<sup>27</sup> In bourgeois society, religion has itself become a means of decay and disintegration. The main reason for this lies in the fact that in the history of the development of modernity, Christianity has become a component of culture alongside other cultural forms, since it has fixed the forms in which it presents itself and in this way has withdrawn them from critical negation. However, actual religion is not, according to Tillich, a cultural form alongside other cultural forms, but rather the reflexive transparency of cultural consciousness. Consequently, religion can exist in culture only as an indication that it is not itself a particular form of culture. This is the substance of the Protestant principle, which again subjects every special religious form, which is inevitable for the representation of religion, to the criticism from the Unconditioned. Only in this reflexive way is religion general.

Religion, however, is not only criticism, but also constitutive action (*Gestaltung*). What prospects for action arise for Tillich for re-shaping the world after the Second World War on the basis of religious consciousness? Since no concrete programs of action can be derived from religion itself, it can only be a matter of a reflexive consciousness of action in which religion functions as both basis and critique. This means that religion comes into play as a kind of reflexive universalization of the always particular goals of action. A reflexive unity and wholeness of humanity and the world come into focus in the political, social, and cultural reshaping of the world from the spirit of religion. In his texts from the 1940s, Tillich outlined such goals for a future world shaping several times. Thus, in his article *War Aims*, published in 1942, he mentions two goals in particular, which he then took up and varied again and again in other texts. In this regard, he states: "The first principle of peace is derived from this demand to create a larger, supranational entity that is more 'world' and therefore more human than any single sovereign state. [...] But the second is equally important: the transformation of the society that has produced the

---

26 Cf. Tillich, *Religion und Weltpolitik*, p. 139: "The demand of religion on world politics is that it be *world politics*."

27 Cf. Tillich, *Die gegenwärtige Weltsituation*, pp. 269–278; *Die Botschaft der Religion an den heutigen Menschen*, pp. 213–220.

present catastrophe into a society in which at least a catastrophe of the same kind is no longer possible."<sup>28</sup>

Tillich advocated the dissolution of the sovereign nation states and the creation of a European confederation on the one hand and a *cum grano salis* socialist planned economy on the other.<sup>29</sup> As in the 1920s, he is still concerned two decades later with overcoming the bourgeois spirit and liberal democracy. For both are the cause of the disintegration of the world, which can only be overcome by building a society that overcomes bourgeois society and the spirit of capitalism. It is the old model of the third way, which had already stormed the Weimar Republic, that Tillich still adhered to in the 1940s. Although, in contrast to his German period, he had found a more positive relationship to liberal democracy in the United States of America, he could not completely overcome his reserves towards democracy. This is evident not only in his visions of unity, which were born out of the spirit of religion, and which tend to still be based on the political romanticism that he himself had fought against in the 1930s.

### Bibliography

- Abreu, Fabio H.: "Directedness Towards the Unconditioned". On the Theoretical Foundations of Paul Tillich's Theology of Culture, in: Christian Danz/Werner Schüßler (eds.): *Paul Tillich in der Diskussion*. Werkgeschichte – Kontexte – Anknüpfungspunkte. Festschrift für Erdmann Sturm zum 85. Geburtstag. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter 2022, pp. 31–59.
- Danz, Christian/Schüßler, Werner (eds.): *Paul Tillich im Exil*. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter 2017.
- Krohn, Claus-Dieter: *Der Council for a Democratic Germany*, in: Ursula Langkau-Alex/Thomas M. Ruprecht (eds.): *Was soll aus Deutschland werden? Der Council for a Democratic Germany in New York 1944–1945*. Aufsätze und Dokumente. Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus Verlag. 1995, pp. 17–48.
- Krohn, Claus-Dieter: *Kairos und „Dritte Kraft“*. Paul Tillichs Diskurs- und Kampfgemeinschaft mit Adolf Löwe für eine freie und gerechte Gesellschaft, in: Christian Danz/Werner Schüßler (eds.): *Paul Tillich im Exil*. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter 2017, pp. 143–177.
- Liebner, Petra: *Paul Tillich und der Council for a Democratic Germany (1933–1945)*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Tillich, *Kriegsziele*, p. 261.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Stone, *The Ethics of Paul Tillich*.

- Neugebauer, Georg: *Paul Tillich als Diagnostiker und Kritiker der Gesellschaft*, in: Christian Danz/Werner Schüßler (eds.): *Paul Tillich in der Diskussion. Werkgeschichte – Kontexte – Anknüpfungspunkte*. Festschrift für Erdmann Sturm zum 85. Geburtstag. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter 2022, pp. 61–80.
- Stone, Ronald: *The Ethics of Paul Tillich*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 2021.
- Tillich, Paul: *Our Disintegrating World*, in: *Anglican Theological Review* 23 (1941), pp. 134–146.
- Tillich, Paul: *Religionsphilosophie*, in: Paul Tillich: *Frühe Hauptwerke* (Gesammelte Werke, vol. I), Renate Albrecht (ed.). Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk 1959, pp. 297–364.
- Tillich, Paul: *Religion und Weltpolitik*, in: Paul Tillich: *Die religiöse Substanz der Kultur*. Schriften zur Theologie der Kultur (Gesammelte Werke, vol. IX), Renate Albrecht (ed.). Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk 1967, pp. 139–192.
- Tillich, Paul: *Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart*, in: Paul Tillich: *Die religiöse Deutung der Gegenwart*. Schriften zur Zeitkritik (Gesammelte Werke, vol. X), Renate Albrecht (ed.). Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk 1968, pp. 9–93.
- Tillich, Paul: *Der Zerfall unserer Welt*, in: Paul Tillich: *Die religiöse Deutung der Gegenwart*. Schriften zur Zeitkritik (Gesammelte Werke, vol. X), Renate Albrecht (ed.). Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk 1968, pp. 202–212.
- Tillich, Paul: *Die Botschaft der Religion an den heutigen Menschen*, in: Paul Tillich: *Die religiöse Deutung der Gegenwart*. Schriften zur Zeitkritik (Gesammelte Werke, vol. X), Renate Albrecht (ed.). Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk 1968, pp. 213–220.
- Tillich, Paul: *Stürme unserer Zeit*, in: Paul Tillich: *Die religiöse Deutung der Gegenwart*. Schriften zur Zeitkritik (Gesammelte Werke, vol. X), Renate Albrecht (ed.). Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk 1968, pp. 221–236.
- Tillich, Paul: *Die gegenwärtige Weltsituation*, in: Paul Tillich: *Die religiöse Deutung der Gegenwart*. Schriften zur Zeitkritik (Gesammelte Werke, vol. X), Renate Albrecht (ed.). Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk 1968, pp. 237–279.
- Tillich, Paul: *Kriegsziele*, in: Paul Tillich: *Impressionen und Reflexionen*. Ein Lebensbild in Aufsätzen. Reden und Stellungnahmen (Gesammelte Werke, vol. XIII), Renate Albrecht (ed.). Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk 1972, pp. 254–269.
- Tillich, Paul: *Die sozialistische Entscheidung*, in: Paul Tillich: *Writings in Social Philosophy and Ethics / Sozialphilosophische und ethische Schriften* (Main Works / Hauptwerke, vol. III), Erdmann Sturm (ed.). Berlin/New York: de Gruyter 1998, pp. 273–419.
- Tillich, Paul: *The Totalitarian State and the Claims of Church*, in: Paul Tillich: *Writings in Social Philosophy and Ethics / Sozialphilosophische und ethische Schriften* (Main Works / Hauptwerke, vol. III), Erdmann Sturm (ed.). Berlin/New York: de Gruyter 1998, pp. 423–443.

- Tillich, Paul: *Die Überwindung des Religionsbegriffs in der Religionsphilosophie*, in: Paul Tillich: *Ausgewählte Texte*, Christian Danz/Werner Schüßler/Erdmann Sturm (eds.), Berlin/New York: de Gruyter 2008, pp. 63–80.
- Tillich, Paul: *Der Protestantismus als kritisches und gestaltendes Prinzip*, in: Paul Tillich: *Ausgewählte Texte*, Christian Danz/Werner Schüßler/Erdmann Sturm (eds.), Berlin/New York 2008: de Gruyter, pp. 200–221.
- Weber, Max: *Die protestantische Ethik und der „Geist“ des Kapitalismus*, Klaus Lichtblau/Johannes Weiß (eds.). Bodenheim: Athenäum Hain Hanstein 1993.



# Gerardus van der Leeuw

## *Phenomenology as Mystical Participation and Critique of Modernity*

*Herman Westerink*

### Abstract

This article explores Van der Leeuw's contribution to the phenomenology of religion, focusing on his profound critique of the modern subject-object dichotomy as it manifests in both the modern sciences and secularized culture. Van der Leeuw argues for the possibility of a more profound (mystical) participation in and experiencing and understanding of religious phenomena in the inner life of human beings. References to a mystical current in the psychic life of human beings color his phenomenology of religion and make it distinct from other positions in this field. The author shows that Van der Leeuw's phenomenology of religion can be situated in the context of debates on the relationship between a theological insistence on the subject's search for meaning and divine presence beyond the limits of particular religious and cultural traditions on the one hand, and more secular positions in philosophy and religious studies on the other hand.

### Keywords

Gerardus van der Leeuw; Phenomenology; Subjectivity; Mystic Participation; Search for Meaning

### 1 Introduction

The question of the contribution made by Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950) to the contemporary religious studies and more specifically to the phenomenology of religion is not as easily answered as one might think. It is first necessary to define phenomenology. It has been argued that one should preferably speak of a variety of *phenomenologies* that can largely be traced back to a series of distinct philosophical positions – be it Hegel, Husserl or Heidegger. Such phenomenologies rely to some extent on other developments. In the case of Van der Leeuw, in the fields of theology and the emerging field of religious

sciences.<sup>1</sup> In order to answer the question of Van der Leeuw's position within and contribution to the phenomenology of religion and religious studies, one should first clarify the sources and perspectives from which Van der Leeuw developed his most fundamental ideas.

This article aims to contribute to such clarification through an investigation into the most central aspects of Van der Leeuw's thought. It is argued that Van der Leeuw's phenomenology is fundamentally characterized by a profound critique of the modern subject-object dichotomy as it predominantly manifests in both the modern sciences and in secularized culture. In answer to the modern self-positioning of man, Van der Leeuw argues for the possibility of a more profound, one would have to say "mystical" experiencing and understanding of religious phenomena in the sensitive inner life of human beings in general and the phenomenologist of religion in particular. It is in particular this reference to mysticism and a mystical current in the psychic life of human beings that colours his phenomenology of religion and makes it distinct from other positions in this field.

## 2 Phenomenology in Early Religious Studies in the Netherlands

Van der Leeuw's phenomenology of religion cannot simply be regarded as an application of contemporary philosophical phenomenologies in the field of religious studies. In the case of Van der Leeuw it is important to also consider and integrate the phenomenology of religion as it had emerged and established itself at his home university in Leiden. For it was at this university that the world's first chair for religious studies was erected in 1877 (first held by C.P. Tiele). The University of Amsterdam soon followed suit (1878). Here, Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye would be the first Chair until he left Amsterdam for Leiden to chair the religious studies chair holder there. His famous *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte* (1887–1889) includes a section on the topic of "phenomenology". Chantepie de la Saussaye had taken this concept from Hegel, but gave it a somewhat different meaning. Unlike Hegel, he proposed to make a clear distinction between a philosophical perspective of "the essence of religion" on the one hand, and the scholarly study of religious manifestations on the other. He argued that the latter should first and foremost be an empirical study that would integrate and study various data and research findings from psychology, ethnography, literary sciences, folk psychology and archaeology. In this context the phenomenological should bridge

---

<sup>1</sup> Molendijk, *Au fond*.

the gap between a purely empirical data research and a philosophical analysis and meta-reflection. More precisely, a phenomenological analysis of empirical material should (1) aim at identifying the most essential aspects of the various and variable religious concepts, practices and institutions while (2) such a phenomenological analysis should produce classifications and typologies of the empirical material and (3) evaluate this material relative to the essence of religion as the criterion for this evaluation.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the phenomenological analysis aimed at establishing a unity between the (philosophical reflection of) the essence of religion and the concrete religious manifestations.

On this point, Chantepie de la Saussaye argues that such phenomenological analysis is close to psychological analyses. After all, such analysis is to be distinguished from philosophical-metaphysical reflections through the fact that such phenomenological analysis does not aim to identify and distinguish the ontological and the objective characteristics of religious manifestations, but instead focuses on the question how people relate to the Divine. In other words, the phenomenology of religion aims at investigating the subjective side of the religious manifestations, that is, the way in which the manifestations are the expressions of a meaningful relation between individuals and the Divine. A phenomenological analysis thus focuses on religious manifestation in as far as these can be seen resulting from inner subjective ideas and affects as these stand in relation to the divine. Concrete religious manifestations are understood here to be the expressions of the – general human – inner relation between man and god.<sup>3</sup>

This phenomenological approach was further developed by Chantepie de la Saussaye's successor in Leiden, Wilhelm Brede Kristensen. In his thought and writings the influence of Schleiermacher's views on the essence of religion as feeling (*Gefühl*) and intuition (*Anschauung*) of the universe can be clearly recognized. According to Brede Kristensen, phenomenology should not merely classify and evaluate religious manifestations. The primary task of the phenomenologist would be to develop an emphatic feeling for religion in order to understand the essence of religion in its unity and totality.<sup>4</sup> Like his predecessor Chantepie de la Saussaye, Brede Kristensen argued that the philosophy of religion should deal with the question of the definition of the essence of religion. The phenomenology of religion would be a discipline very close to philosophy as in the phenomenology the central question would be

2 Waardenburg, *Religion between Reality and Idea*, pp. 136–144; James, *Interpreting Religion*; Molendijk, *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands*, pp. 27–31.

3 Waardenburg, *Religion between Reality and Idea*, p. 141.

4 Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion*, pp. 254–255.



in what way religious individuals experience this essence of religion and how they make this essence truthfully manifest in their lives. The phenomenologist should therefore aim at approaching this problem through an empathic understanding (*emführendes Verstehen*) of the experiences and expressions of religious people. In short, understanding religious persons should enable one to understand the essence of religion. And one can only understand the statements and practices of religious persons when one regards these to be individual (subjective) expressions and manifestations of a religious reality.<sup>5</sup>

Gerardus van der Leeuw can be situated in this Leiden tradition in phenomenology of religion. However, in comparison to his predecessors he will stress less the objectivity of his methods – a point that Chantepie and Brede Kristensen both emphasized. Instead, in Van der Leeuw's writings the focus is on the subjective character of phenomenological understanding and on the phenomenologist's own experiences of religious phenomena. On this point, we can note that Van der Leeuw sought to solve a problem that Brede Kristensen had already articulated: How can phenomenologists of religion understand the religious experiences and expressions of people living in another epoch (such as antique Greece) or a completely different culture (such as primitive societies)? How can phenomenologists understand such religious people when one is a representative of a completely different, namely modern society characterized by rationality and by the scientific standards of objectivity and reductive explanations?<sup>6</sup> How would a modern researcher in the field of religion be able to understand a primitive religious person with a strong sense of mystery and for the operating forces that organize mystical relationships between objects in this world? Should we not assume that such primitive experiences and worldviews are principally incomprehensible for modern people? Van der Leeuw makes this problem his starting point and uses it to articulate his views on the task of the phenomenologist. Brede Kristensen had already developed a way to solve this problem and address these questions, in holding that it is still possible for modern individuals to develop feeling for and intuition of the Universe, i.e. of the unity of the subject and world in which it participates in its universe.

---

5 Waardenburg, *Religion between Reality and Idea*, pp. 145–161; James, *Interpreting Religion*; Hofstee, *Goden en mensen*, pp. 170–172; Molendijk, *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands*, pp. 30–36; Westerink, *Participation and Giving Ultimate Meaning*, pp. 188–189.

6 James, *Interpreting Religion*, pp. 175–200.

### 3 The Influence of Contemporary Philosophy

Initially, Chantepie de la Saussaye's and Brede Kristensen's views of the phenomenology of religion were hardly related to or influenced by the contemporary philosophical developments in phenomenology – more concretely, the writings of Clemens Brentano and notably Edmund Husserl. By the time Van der Leeuw wrote his *magnum opus* – *Phänomenologie der Religion* published in 1933 – the discussion with and reception of contemporary philosophical approaches in phenomenology had become almost inevitable and in fact – in Van der Leeuw's views – self-evident. Van der Leeuw can be seen as one of the first phenomenologists of religion who consciously and explicitly integrates philosophical approaches into his own theories and methods. Reading his works, one can say that Van der Leeuw is highly flexible, and not always very systematic or rigorous, in applying various philosophical approaches and concepts in his own writings.<sup>7</sup>

This has more than once raised the question as to whether Van der Leeuw's phenomenology is coherent and systematic. Jacques Waardenburg writes on this that “the inner logic of his always very open system is not easy to grasp”.<sup>8</sup> It is exactly this openness and lack of systematic rigor that has been criticized. One might however raise the question as to whether this openness and lack of systematics is either a precondition for or consequence of Van der Leeuw's critique of modernity and modern science, of its fundamental paradigm of the division between subject and object, hence, whether this openness is inherent to his focus on the phenomenologist's subjective act of experience and understanding of religious phenomena. After all, the phenomenologist aims at an encompassing understanding of the totality of meaning of everything in relation to all. Seen from this perspective, a certain openness and lack of systematic rigor and discipline could be seen as an integral aspect of phenomenological approach in which the focus is on the subjective experience and the understanding of a totality of meaning.

With regards to the issue of the influence of philosophical phenomenological approaches, the first obvious question would be whether Van der Leeuw was influenced by the writings of Edmund Husserl. According to George James and Arie Molendijk, this question can be answered in the negative.<sup>9</sup> For, although at first sight Van der Leeuw seems to have integrated Husserl's concept of “*epoche*” in his writings, a closer look at his writings reveals that Husserl's

<sup>7</sup> Molendijk, *Au fond*, p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> Waardenburg, *Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950)*, p. 269.

<sup>9</sup> James, *Interpreting Religion*, p. 21; Molendijk, *Au fond*.

influence was merely indirect. Van der Leeuw never quotes from Husserl's writings, except through the writings of others, notably Karl Jaspers and Max Scheler.<sup>10</sup> In fact, when reading the theoretical part of his *Phänomenologie der Religion*, one would have to conclude that Van der Leeuw is formulating a theory and approach that are clearly distinct from Husserl's. When, for example, Van der Leeuw argues that phenomenology asks for an integration of the phenomenon in one's own life (*die Einschaltung des Phänomens in das eigene Leben*), because "reality" is always "one's own reality", and that "history" is always "one's own history", and when he adds that a phenomenological understanding is "impossible" when we do not experience that which shows itself (*wenn wir das sich zeigende nicht erleben*),<sup>11</sup> it is difficult to see how this could be said by Husserl. To the contrary, Husserl stresses again and again the necessity of an objective view of phenomena. Up and against this position Van der Leeuw strongly favours subjective understanding and inner experience core to the phenomenological method. In other words, whereas Husserl understands himself as an heir of Descartes in the search of a solid ground for philosophy as a rigorous "hard" science, and finds this ground in "intentionality", that is, the intentional relation between the subject and the world of objects (the phenomena), Van der Leeuw reasons that such a "modern-scientific" phenomenological approach supports and legitimates a modern subject-object-dichotomy, and for exactly this reason fails in its objective of understanding phenomena. It is exactly this separation that Van der Leeuw seeks to overcome in a phenomenology of religion that aims to understand even the most primitive religious worldviews, practices, and experiences.

Van der Leeuw realizes that the religious experience and understanding of primitive people cannot simply mimetically be re-experienced (*nacherleben*). The original experience is not immediately accessible and repeatable. One can however re-experience and understand religious phenomena, when one is able to "reconstruct" the meaning (*Sinn*) of the phenomenon. Such a reconstruction is possible, according to Van der Leeuw, when the "structures", that is to say, the network of interconnected phenomena that together builds a coherent and meaningful unity, are grasped as such. Such unity (i.e. an experienced, non-divisible, coherent unity) bridges the separation of subject and object. The gateway to the almost unapproachable experiences of primitive people is

10 Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, p. 640.

11 Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, pp. 638–639.

provided by the possibility of relating to and joining in an “act of understanding” of meaningful coherence.<sup>12</sup>

The phenomenology of religion is therefore not concerned with the philosophical-metaphysical quest for the “truth” of what exists. It is also not concerned with the inventorization and description of historical facts as objective reality, nor with the reconstruction of relations between such facts. Phenomenology is basically characterized by a psychological method, since it aims at re-experiencing and understanding of structural and meaningful coherent unities of phenomena (*Struktur- und Sinnzusammenhänge*). Instead of pursuing historical or theoretical knowledge, the phenomenologist aims at a knowledge that is informed by “intruding meaning” (*sich aufdringenden Sinn*).<sup>13</sup> One should of course not lose sight of empirical data, but the phenomenologist has no other task than to bridge the gap between one’s own reality and that of his object.<sup>14</sup> The focus is on the coherent meaning that exceeds one’s own limited reality. Phenomenology implies a psychological act that surpasses one’s own reality and context.

According to Van der Leeuw, a phenomenon is what shows itself (*dasjenige, was sich zeigt*). What shows itself is not an empirical object, that is, the true reality of an object, and what shows itself is also not the essence of an object. The phenomenon is an object in as far as it relates to the subject (*subjektbezogenes Objekt*) and in as far as the subject relates to the object (*objektbezogenes Subjekt*). In this definition of the phenomenon, Van der Leeuw stresses the idea that the object that shows itself moves the subject to surpasses its own reality and incites the subject to testify of the object as it is now understood.<sup>15</sup>

At this juncture, we should raise the question: which sources does Van der Leeuw use in developing his ideas? We know that already in his opening lecture at the University of Groningen in 1918, Van der Leeuw addresses the psychological method of phenomenology. This method was further developed and more or less systematized in the 1920s.<sup>16</sup> We have already seen that Van der Leeuw on this point could continue the method of empathic and re-experienced understanding his predecessors in Leiden had already articulated. But there were more sources that influenced Van der Leeuw’s psychological method. When one reads his methodological texts on phenomenology, one cannot but note

12 “Die Zugangspforte zur an sich unnahbaren Wirklichkeit des Urerlebnisses ist der Sinn, mein Sinn und ihr Sinn im Akt des Verstehens unwiderruflich zu Eins geworden”. Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, p. 636.

13 Van der Leeuw, *Strukturpsychologie und Theologie*, p. 323.

14 Hofstee, *Goden en mensen*, pp. 180–181.

15 Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, pp. 634–635.

16 Westerink, *Participation and Giving Ultimate Meaning*.

the many references to the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey, Karl Jaspers, Ludwig Binswanger and Eduard Spranger. It is likely that Van der Leeuw became familiar with these authors – notably Jaspers and Binswanger – through his friend and psychiatrist Henrik Rümke. From the 1920s onwards, Rümke showed a keen interest in religion and came to view religiosity and faith as the normal result of the psychic development in which an individual came to understand itself as part of a meaningful totality.<sup>17</sup> Against reductionist approaches such as Freud's psychoanalytic theories, Rümke argued that not faith or belief, but unbelief should be regarded as an obsessional disorder. For Rümke, man was *homo religiosus* – every individual would normally develop into a religious person. For psychologists and psychiatrists the question would therefore not be how to explain belief, but from what constitutional and accidental factors unbelief could be explained. This riddle of unbelief and the articulation of faith/belief in terms of participating in a meaningful totality, was close to Van der Leeuw's intuitions, and was in fact also high on the agenda of kindred spirits such as the Viennese scholar in the study of religion Karl Beth, who in 1931 organized an international conference in the psychology of religion on the topic of unbelief. At this occasion Rümke was invited to give a lecture.<sup>18</sup>

As already mentioned, Van der Leeuw is clearly influenced by Dilthey, Jaspers, Binswanger and Spranger in his writings. It seems obvious to also relate his ideas on phenomenology as experience, understanding and testimony<sup>19</sup> to Heidegger. Yet, more important for Van der Leeuw is Dilthey – it was here that Van der Leeuw found a powerful and clear position with regards to the methodology in the human sciences: experience, understanding and expression.<sup>20</sup> It was indeed Dilthey who had first criticized the emerging psychology for adopting a method of explanation, i.e. a methodology derived from the natural sciences. Against this tendency in contemporary psychology, Dilthey had – according to Van der Leeuw – introduced a structural psychology (*Strukturpsychologie*), that is to say, a psychology that views and understands phenomena according to their value and position amongst a larger unity or network of phenomena.<sup>21</sup> Every phenomenon – and every human individual – can be understood through its position in overarching structures.<sup>22</sup>

17 Westerink, *Controversy and Challenge*, pp. 95–96.

18 Westerink, *Controversy and Challenge*, p. 72.

19 Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, p. 635.

20 Westerink, *Participation and Giving Ultimate Meaning*.

21 Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften VII*, pp. 15ff; Van der Leeuw, *Strukturpsychologie und Theologie*, p. 325.

22 Waardenburg, *Religion between Reality and Idea*, p. 168.

This structural psychological approach was further developed by Jaspers in his *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* from 1913 and by Binswanger in his *Einführung in die Probleme der allgemeinen Psychologie* from 1922. For Van der Leeuw, Dilthey was more important than Husserl or Heidegger, but more influential than even Dilthey were scholars in the discipline of psychiatry, who had been confronted with problems in their own field which had striking similarities to the problems in the study of religion. How could one understand phenomena as primitive or pathological simply on the basis that it appears strange or far removed from the experience of the modern rationalist man? In a few key articles such as "Über einige neuere Ergebnisse der psychologischen Forschung und ihre Anwendung auf die Geschichte, insonderheit die Religionsgeschichte" from 1926 and "Strukturpsychologie und Theologie" from 1928, Van der Leeuw addresses this question while strongly drawing upon the writings of Jaspers and Binswanger. It is the task of the phenomenologist of religion to advance a psychological method of *re-experiencing* and empathic understanding that enables the scholar to gain access to and grasp the psychic reality and the inner structures of consciousness of other people, and by proceeding in this way, bridge the gap between subject and object.<sup>23</sup>

According to Van der Leeuw, this method and approach cannot be easily learned and applied. It requires time-consuming exercises. Through daily interaction with phenomena, objects that show themselves, the "ego of the one who understands" is "broadened" (*Ausweitung des Ichs*).<sup>24</sup> It is through this process of "broadening of the ego" that, for example, the psychiatrist is more and more capable and experienced in understanding the mental life of his patients and of himself. *Mutatis mutandis* the same procedure goes for an empathic understanding of primitive man. In short, it is possible to become more trained and experienced in the psychological approach in phenomenology through a combination of introspection – self-understanding – and empathic understanding of others/objects. The more one understands oneself – the way one thinks, feels, experiences and acts – the more one is capable of understanding even the most estranged phenomena.<sup>25</sup>

The phenomenological experience and the development of understanding through a process of broadening of the ego is, hence, not a method of rational thought/thinking as in the case of Husserl. On the contrary, it is a technique or art of self-transformation that appears to be close to Max Scheler's ideas on this matter. It is indeed no coincidence that in his writings on the

23 Van der Leeuw, *Über einige neuere Ergebnisse der psychologischen Forschung*, pp. 4–5.

24 Van der Leeuw, *Über einige neuere Ergebnisse der psychologischen Forschung*, p. 24.

25 Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, pp. 639–640.

psychological method and approach, and also in the part of *Phänomenologie der Religion* where he addresses the notion of “epoche”, Van der Leeuw refers to Scheler’s writings, notably his *Vom Ewigen im Menschen* from 1921 and *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* from 1928. Although Van der Leeuw occasionally criticizes Scheler when arguing that his views might result in a “mystical theory of knowledge”, that is to say, an emotional-intuitive and esoteric theory of knowledge in which religious phenomena can only be understood by religious subjects, Van der Leeuw nevertheless regards Scheler as an important thinker when it comes to the reflection on the broadening of the ego.

#### 4 The Problem of the Subject-Object-Dichotomy

On the basis of these considerations and notably from the definition of the phenomenon (subject-related object – object-related subject), we can conclude that the overcoming of the separation between subject and object is a, if not *the*, central issue in Van der Leeuw’s phenomenology. The phenomenology of religion not only aims at the reconstruction of a comprehensible structure (i.e., of a meaningful structured reality) that lets itself be experienced as unity. It also aims at the experience of this unity as a meaningful totality that exceeds the categories of subjectivity and objectivity.

Relevant in this context are Van der Leeuw’s references to Max Scheler’s 1928 *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*. In this philosophical-anthropological text, Scheler is concerned with the question of whether a consistent and coherent idea of the human being is possible, and if so, with the question of such an idea’s features. At first sight, according to Scheler, such a coherent idea seems impossible if one postulates a sequence of psychic forces and capacities that produce a dualistic view of man. In such a view, the human being would be an *instinctive-animalistic* being, that is to say, a being that would be driven forward by unconscious, non-representational needs and sensations<sup>26</sup> that provide orientation and purpose. What distinguishes man from animals, however, is not only practical reason and judgements, but also spirit (*Geist*). Spirit means that man in his existential confinement and his freedom is neither detached from nor dependent on organic life. Spirit entails that man is free and unbound with regards to his natural surrounding (*Umwelt*). Whereas animals ecstatically participate in their environment, man has the spiritual capacity to elevate himself above his environment and the world of objects.<sup>27</sup> In the

<sup>26</sup> Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, p. 28.

words of Helmut Plessner: Whereas animals participate and blend ecstatically in their environment, man is a being conscious of its eccentric position, i.e., conscious of its environment as a sum of objects.<sup>28</sup>

In short, man is the spiritual being that perceives its environment as a sum of objects. This capacity towards objectivity implies that man is free in the sense that he is open to the world and unbound to organic restrictions. This capacity is the premise for self-consciousness, and the capacity to manage and control life as evidenced in science and technology. Scheler's concept of spirit goes beyond this. It also points towards the capacity to transcend reality, to understand the essential structures of life, and to perceive life as ultimately meaningful. Self-consciousness, consciousness of reality, and consciousness of meaning (more concretely, consciousness of God) compose a structural unity in which human beings can situate themselves. Spirit therefore not only points towards a principle that makes humans distinct from animals while creating a separation between subject and object, it also points towards the capacity to transcend this separation and to perceive oneself as participating in a meaningful totality. It is this latter aspect that is manifest in religion. A religion represents the victory of the separation of subject and object in the form of participation in meaningful overarching structures.<sup>29</sup> In other words, in religion and through an act of self-transcendence the ego-centric individual surpasses its eccentricity and develops into a person that understands itself as immersed and participating in a meaningful and coherent order. In this context Scheler introduces the concept of *epoche* as a concept that indicates on the one hand the acknowledgement of the distance between the subject and the world of objects, while on the other hand it points towards the capacity to understand oneself as participating in a meaningful totality knowing that it is impossible to grasp and define the essence of being.<sup>30</sup>

The concept of *epoche* in Van der Leeuw's *Phänomenologie der Religion* is in agreement with Scheler's views. According to Van der Leeuw, *epoche* means an attitude of understanding, i.e., an attitude of leaving behind one's egocentric position but without detaching oneself from reality or submerging in the environment like animals do. It is an attitude of perception and understanding developed through training and experience, i.e., through broadening of the ego. The phenomenologist advances in meaningful relation when he is capable of integrating phenomena in his own reality and, by doing so, he overcomes the separation of subject and object.

28 Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, pp. 293ff.

29 Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, p. 65.

30 Hofstee, *Goden en mensen*, pp. 180–181.



## 5 From the Subject-Object-Dichotomy towards Mysticism

The problem of the modern subject-object-dichotomy is of central concern throughout Van der Leeuw's writings. Not only Scheler (and others already mentioned) are important for Van der Leeuw's position on this issue. There are other perspectives that influenced Van der Leeuw and were integrated in his reflections on the phenomenology of religion. The most important among these are the cultural anthropological theories of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl.

In *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* from 1910, and later also in *La mentalité primitive* from 1922, Lévy-Bruhl set himself the task of reconstructing the modes of thinking and the worldviews in different cultures in their own consistency and coherence. According to Lévy-Bruhl, one could clearly make a distinction between the worldviews and modes of thinking in primitive cultures (or mentalities) and modern, advanced cultures. What characterizes primitive mentalities is a "pre-logical" mode of thinking in which there is no clear distinction between affective, intuitive and cognitive processes. Such pre-logical mode of thinking is not un-logical, a-logical or even anti-logical, but merely denotes a different form of logic in comparison to Western culture's focus on differentiating between different types of rational logic.<sup>31</sup> Primitive pre-logical thought is a mode of thinking not organized according to the fundamental principles one finds in modern rational thought. As an example, Lévy-Bruhl mentions the law of the excluded middle (i.e., the law that a proposition is either true or false, but not both at the same time) as a fundamental law in modern thought (and more broadly, Western logic), and yet as absent in primitive thought. The consequences of this different, pre-logical mode of thinking can be witnessed in the way primitive people perceive and experience their environment.

This is evidenced in concrete primitive representations of the lived environment. The consequence of the fact that the rule of non-contradiction is absent from prelogical thought and representation is that primitives can perceive two objects to be in the same place at the same time, or perceive one object to be at different places at the same time. Also, primitive thought is not preoccupied with the questions of causes and effects or of specific facts and objects, but instead assumes that all living and non-living things together form an organic unity. This is what Lévy-Bruhl called *la loi de participation*, the law of participation, or also "mystical participation". The term mystical does here not so much refer to a religious practice and worldview but denotes the assumption that invisible forces and energies are as real and important for the dynamics within

---

<sup>31</sup> Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, p. 78.

this organic unity as visible ones. Primitive mentality is – unlike modern mentality – not characterized by the subject's further differentiations between objects. To the contrary, it is characterized by intuitions and sensations of unity and continuity through mystical bindings in which all living and non-living things participate.<sup>32</sup>

The writings and ideas of Lévy-Bruhl are an important influence on Van der Leeuw's work. This is notably evidenced in two key publications in which Van der Leeuw presents his reading of Lévy-Bruhl: *La structure de la mentalité primitive* from 1928 and *De primitieve mensch en de religie: Antropologische studie* from 1937. As the title of the first book already suggests, Van der Leeuw is not so much interested in the historical aspects of the distinction between primitive and non-primitive (modern) mentality, including the historical development from primitive towards modern mentality – even though such development is part of the premises for understanding modernity and modern life forms. The study of such historical developments would above all shed light upon the question how the separation between subject and object came to be and was intensified over time. Also, it would give a more profound insight in processes of the advancement of intellectuality and abstract thought, and, related to this, the further detachment of the subject from the reality in which it finds itself.<sup>33</sup> Van der Leeuw is not primarily interested in the reconstruction of these developments and tendencies. For him the question how the subject-object-dichotomy can be overcome takes precedent.

In order to answer this question, Van der Leeuw argues that the two distinct mentalities Lévy-Bruhl had identified and described do not so much denote two separate historical epochs or different cultural domains, but denote different psychic structures and modes of thinking that are both present in the modern subject. Also, Van der Leeuw stresses the idea that in man – and hence, also in modern man – one finds a profound *besoin de participation*, a deep-felt need for participation in a meaningful and coherent world.<sup>34</sup> Modern man has reduced the world in which he is living to mere facts and artefacts, but retains the deeply-felt need to experience and understand reality as a meaningful totality and to experience oneself being part of this totality. Among primitive people, this mentality and this need for participation is clearly visible – in modern man it is a more hidden and also more fundamental psychic structure. This primitive psychic structure reveals that man – even modern, secularized

32 Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, pp. 69–104; Hofstee, *Goden en mensen*, pp. 207ff.; Westerink, *Participation and Giving Ultimate Meaning*.

33 Van der Leeuw, *De primitieve mensch en de religie*, p. 144; Molendijk, *Au fond*, p. 61.

34 Van der Leeuw, *De primitieve mensch en de religie*, p. 6.

and scientific man – is *homo religiosus*. That is to say, on the most fundamental psychic level subject and object are felt to be bound in a unity that, according to Van der Leeuw, is itself grounded in a primal unity of man and the divine (God). It is this primal unity that, through the ever-present need for participation, is desired to be the final unity. It is in this context that Van der Leeuw remarks that on a fundamental level religion is mysticism: all religion and religiosity stems from a sense of mystical participation and mystical unity with the Divine; all religion and religiosity aims at such mystical participation and mystical unity.<sup>35</sup>

We have seen that, according to Van der Leeuw, the phenomenology of religion should aim at experiencing (*erleben*) and understanding (*verstehen*) religious phenomena, and that such experiencing and understanding implies certain exercises and training in the broadening of the ego. This process of the broadening of the ego can be described in terms of an inner victory over the modern mentality and the growing capacity to “think and experience in a primitive way”.<sup>36</sup> This implies: to become more and more religious, or in other words, to develop more and more a “mystical current”.<sup>37</sup> On this point, we can affirm what other authors<sup>38</sup> have already concluded about Van der Leeuw’s work: his phenomenology amounts to theology because of the affirmation of the god-relation as both condition and objective for phenomenological understanding. This turn to theology is notably evidenced in Van der Leeuw’s views on ultimate understanding. For, the ultimate understanding of a totality of meaning in which both subject and objects are participating is not the final result from a growing understanding through broadening of the ego. There is a limit, an *epoche*, beyond which there is the “being-understood” by God. The final and ultimate totality of meaning is a matter of Divine Revelation – of God showing ultimate meaning,<sup>39</sup> of God engaging in a revelation with the subject. In this sense, God is the condition for all understanding (*Gott ist die Voraussetzung alles Verstehens*).<sup>40</sup> In *Phänomenologie der Religion* this idea also clearly comes to the fore, when he writes that the more a person understands, the more he realizes that the “ground of understanding” (*Grund des*

35 Van der Leeuw, *De primitieve mensch en de religie*, p. 171.

36 Van der Leeuw, *De primitieve mensch en de religie*, p. 173.

37 Van der Leeuw, *De primitieve mensch en de religie*, p. 175.

38 Waardenburg, *Religion between Reality and Idea*; Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950); Leertouwer, *Primitive Religion in Dutch Religious Studies*; James, *Interpreting Religion*; Molendijk, *Aufond*.

39 Van der Leeuw, *Strukturpsychologie und Theologie*, p. 335.

40 Van der Leeuw, *Strukturpsychologie und Theologie*, p. 336.

*Verstehens*) lies not within himself, but in Another that understands him from beyond the limit (*Jenseits der Grenze*) of understanding. Without such "absolute being-understood" there would be no understanding at all.<sup>41</sup>

In this final turn to theology – infused by Lévy-Bruhl's views on mystical participation – one could conclude that a mystic current is at the heart of Van der Leeuw's phenomenology. As historical phenomenon, concrete forms of mysticism may only play a marginal role in religion.<sup>42</sup> However, as a characteristic of primitive mentality, mystical participation is both the ground and aim of all human desire, experience, and understanding. It's precisely this that is at the heart of all concrete forms of mysticism. The mystic is that person who shows that it is possible to overcome the secular-modern experience of objects as mere facts and artefacts. In mysticism it is shown that boundaries between subject and object can disappear and that both subject and object can engage and participate in a formless and contentless unity (*ein formloses, inhaltloses Ineinander*). In short, in mysticism the subject-object-dichotomy is sublated (*in der Mystik ist die Subjekt-Objekt-Spaltung grundsätzlich aufgehoben*).<sup>43</sup> At the heart of mysticism is the desire for sublation of the subject-object-dichotomy. At the heart of mysticism one finds the need for mystical participation in a meaningful totality and a deep longing to be understood by God.

## 6 Final Remarks

Although in his critique of Scheler, Van der Leeuw had recognized the danger of an esoteric theory of knowledge in which religious phenomena can only be understood by religious subjects, it was precisely this point that evoked severe criticism. Van der Leeuw's own students, such as Theo van Baaren in Groningen, moved away from a phenomenological approach and favoured a scientific-descriptive and explanatory study of religion in which "the faith of the scholar should never be included as a precondition".<sup>44</sup> In Leiden, Van der Leeuw's student and successor Fokke Sierksma would severely criticize his phenomenological approach for accepting "the risk of subjectivity to 100%", whereas it instead should aim at an objective *Schau* of phenomena – an approach more in line with Husserl. For Sierksma, the study of religion

41 Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, p. 647.

42 Van der Leeuw, *De primitieve mensch en de religie*, p. 175.

43 Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, p. 469.

44 Van Baaren & Leertouwer, *Doolhof der goden*, p. 2.

should therefore be further emancipated from theology, and become more “scientific” (and less “existential”).<sup>45</sup> In a next step, Sierksma would argue that such science of religion should fully accept man’s eccentricity and the modern subject-object-dichotomy.<sup>46</sup>

Contrary to this development, there were also scholars that defended Van der Leeuw’s ideas, notably Han Fortmann, professor at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, who in his *magnum opus* from the mid-1960s criticized the secular-scientific study of religion and – strongly inspired by contemporary theological ideas – argued in favour of the possibility to intuitively connect with the Divine and to experience life’s ultimate meaning through “primitive” perception and mystical participation.<sup>47</sup>

In these debates and discussions about Van der Leeuw’s phenomenological method and its anthropological premises, and the question of the relation between theology and religious studies, a central issue at stake was the evaluation of modernity as an age characterized by a subject-object-dichotomy and the growing eccentricity and self-consciousness of modern man. Van der Leeuw had argued that these developments came at a steep price: the loss of the meaning of life through the loss of mystical participation. Mysticism in general and modern mystics in particular – such as Jean de Labadie, Mme Guyon or Gerhard Tersteegen<sup>48</sup> – show that the central problem in mysticism is not the union with God, but the annihilation of the subject (the self, the ego). At the heart of mysticism one finds ascetic exercises in loss of the ego (*Verlust des Ichs*) as a means to overcome the subject-object-dichotomy. Van der Leeuw’s view of mysticism is organized around this idea. Modern mysticism is therefore paradigmatic of all mysticism – it seeks inner paths to the deeper layers of the soul where one expects to be united with God. Modern mysticism is, hence, profoundly modern in taking its starting point in the subject’s detachment from transcendence, and profoundly premodern in its search for mystical participation.

---

45 Sierksma, *Freud, Jung en de religie*, pp. 13ff.

46 Sierksma, *De religieuze projectie*, pp. 159ff.; Westerink, *Participation and Giving Ultimate Meaning*.

47 Fortmann, *Als ziende de Onzienlijke*; Westerink, *Participation and Giving Ultimate Meaning*.

48 Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, pp. 469–486.

## Bibliography

- Dilthey, Wilhelm: *Gesammelte Schriften VII*, B. Groethuysen (ed.). Leipzig/Berlin: Teubner 1927.
- Fortmann, Han: *Als ziende de Onzienlijke. Een cultuurpsychologische studie over de religieuze waarneming en de zogenaamde religieuze projectie, I–II*. Hilversum: Gooi & Sticht 1981 (1966–1968).
- Hofstee, Willem: *Goden en mensen. De godsdienstwetenschap van Gerardus van der Leeuw*. Kampen: Kok Agora 1997.
- James, George A.: *Interpreting Religion: The Phenomenological Approaches of Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye, W. Brede Kristensen, and Gerardus van der Leeuw*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America 1995.
- Kristensen, William Brede: *The Meaning of Religion. Lectures in the Phenomenology of Religion*, H. Kraemer (ed.). Den Haag: Nijhoff 1960.
- Leertouwer, Lammert: *Primitive Religion in Dutch Religious Studies*, in: *Numen. International Review for the History of Religion* 38 (1991), pp. 198–213.
- Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien: *How Natives Think (Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures)*. New York: Martino Fine Books 2015 (1910).
- Molendijk, Arie L.: *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands*. Leiden/Boston: Brill 2005.
- Molendijk, Arie L.: *Au fond. The Phenomenology of Gerardus van der Leeuw*, in: *Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 25 (1–2/2018), pp. 51–68.
- Plessner, Helmut: *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter 1975 (1928).
- Scheler, Max: *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*. Bonn: Bouvier 2010 (1928).
- Sierksma, Fokke: *Freud, Jung en de religie*. Assen: Van Gorcum 1951.
- Sierksma, Fokke: *De religieuze projectie. Een antropologische en psychologische studie over de projectie-verschijnselen in de godsdiensten*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff 1977 (1956).
- Van Baaren, Theo & Leertouwer, Lammert: *Doolhof der goden*. Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff 1980.
- Van der Leeuw, Gerardus: *Über einige neuere Ergebnisse der psychologischen Forschung und ihre Anwendungen auf die Geschichte, insonderheit die Religionsgeschichte*, in: *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 2 (1926), pp. 1–43.
- Van der Leeuw, Gerardus: *Strukturpsychologie und Theologie*, in: *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 9 (1928), pp. 321–349.
- Van der Leeuw, Gerardus: *Phänomenologie der Religion*. Tübingen: Mohr 1933.
- Van der Leeuw, Gerardus: *De primitieve mensch en de religie*. Groningen & Batavia: J.B. Wolters 1937.

- Waardenburg, Jacques: *Religion between Reality and Idea. A Century of Phenomenology of Religion in the Netherlands*, in: *Numen. International Review for the History of Religions* 19 (1972), pp. 128–203.
- Waardenburg, Jacques: *Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950)*, in: Axel Michaels (ed.): *Klassiker der Religionswissenschaft. Von Friedrich Schleiermacher bis Mircea Eliade*. München: Beck 1997, pp. 264–276.
- Westerink, Herman: *Controversy and Challenge. The Reception of Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis in German and Dutch-speaking Theology and Religious Studies*. Berlin/Vienna: Lit-Verlag 2009.
- Westerink, Herman: *Participation and Giving Ultimate Meaning. Exploring the Entanglement of Psychology of Religion and Phenomenology of Religion in the Netherlands*, in: *Numen. International Review for the History of Religions* 57 (2/2010), pp. 186–211.

# Karl Jaspers

## *Philosophical Faith and the Vision of an Intercultural Democratic Global Order*

*Hans Schelkshorn*

### Abstract

This article analyzes the relations between the main research fields of Jaspers' philosophy, concretely the existential philosophy of religion, the philosophy of history including the famous theory of an axial period, and his views on moral and political issues. In his philosophy of religion, Jaspers transforms Kierkegaard's existential thinking through a negative philosophy of the absolute, which can only be indicated by ciphers. In the existential experience of the hidden Absolute, human beings are confronted with an unconditioned demand, which Jaspers uses as a bridge to Kantian ethics. Avoiding irrational pitfalls of existentialism through the unity of reason and existence Jaspers develops a significant contribution to the renewal of the political ideals of the Enlightenment, specifically human rights, democracy, and international law, which faces both the threat of humanity's self-extinction through the atomic bomb and the challenge of the cross-relations within global modernity.

### Keywords

Jaspers; Philosophy of Religion; Theory of Axial Age; Political Ethics; Cross-cultural Philosophy; Global Modernity

### 1 Introduction

In contrast to atheistic existentialism in France, Karl Jaspers is generally considered an exponent of a religious existential philosophy. Indeed, with almost provocative clarity Jaspers placed the question of God at the center of his thought, stating "that the Deity is suffices. To be certain of that is the only thing that matters."<sup>1</sup> Despite its orientation on the Augustinian maxim of "*deum et*

---

<sup>1</sup> Jaspers, *On my Philosophy*, p. 13.



*animam scire cupio* [I desire knowledge of God and the soul],”<sup>2</sup> Jaspers’ philosophy by no means remains embalmed in a realm secluded from the world, beyond politics and history. Quite the contrary in fact: for Jaspers, philosophy of religion and political philosophy are inextricably linked.

During this decade the insight, which for thousands of years had been self-evident and which had been forgotten for a short time only, became dominant in me too: philosophy is not without politics nor without political consequences [...] No great philosophy is without political thought, not even that of the great metaphysicians [...] From Plato to Kant, to Hegel, to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche goes the grand politics of the philosophers. What a philosophy is, it shows in its political appearance [...] It seemed to me that only after I became deeply stirred by politics did my philosophy become fully conscious of its very basis, including its metaphysics.<sup>3</sup>

In this sense, as his study *Die geistige Situation der Gegenwart (Man in the Modern Age, 1931)* shows, Jaspers had long turned his attention to politics prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. In the early 1930s though, in the footsteps of Kierkegaard, the individual consciousness of existence was still positioned and elaborated in contradiction to the currents and compulsions of modern mass society. Under the indelible harrowing impressions made by Nazi atrocities and racist policies, Jaspers resolutely changed tack and turned to the political ideals of the Enlightenment: human rights, democracy, and international law. The intimate connection between systematic philosophy and political thought is unmistakably reflected in his postwar publications. In the immediate aftermath of the extermination camps, which for many mark a “rupture in civilization,” he published not only his second main philosophical work, *Von der Wahrheit (Of Truth, 1947)* and a work on religious philosophy, *Der philosophische Glaube (Philosophical Faith, 1948)*, but also the series of lectures *Die Schuldfrage (The Question of German Guilt, 1947)*, wherein he directly addressed his compatriot Germans. Indeed, his considerations broadened in scope and sought a contemporary orientation, for in his view the capitulation of Germany at the same time sealed the demise of Europe’s global hegemony, moving him to write a global philosophy of history – *Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte (The Origin and Goal of History, 1949)* – that sought nothing less than to overcome the Eurocentric constraints of Hegelian philosophies of history. Finally, Jaspers faced the new and very real problem of humankind’s self-destruction in *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen (The Future of Man, 1958)*.

---

<sup>2</sup> Jaspers, *On my Philosophy*, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Jaspers, *Philosophical Autobiography*, p. 70.

Against this background I wish to trace and examine the relationships between Jaspers' systematic philosophy, which revolves around an existential philosophical interpretation of religious experience, and his political philosophy and philosophy of history. After briefly sketching the anthropological-based fundamental principles, the so-called "periechontology" (section 1), I shall consider Jaspers' philosophy of religion, a dimension of his thought that is in close rapport to his historical perspective, an alliance that produces the famous arc of the Axial Period through to Modernity (section 2). Finally, in a third step, I will look at the relationship between Jaspers' philosophy of religion and political philosophy (section 3).

## 2 Anthropological Foundations: Existential Philosophy as Periechontology

Jaspers' thought moves within the broad stream of the philosophies of life and existentialism which since the mid-nineteenth century had emerged out of critiques of Kant and Hegel.<sup>4</sup> While sharing an orientation on the classical antiquity understanding of philosophy as a form of life, revived in the Renaissance, with Montaigne exemplary, these philosophies are an amalgam of extremely heterogenous currents. Whereas Nietzsche destructs each and every form of metaphysics and religious dogma, Henri Bergson presents the obverse: a metaphysics of vitalism aligned to philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*) and, ultimately, considerations on religion from the same source.<sup>5</sup> Entailing a radical critique of reason, these philosophies have been variously seen as vehicles of irrationalism. However, important proponents of the philosophies of life have vehemently dissociated themselves from irrationalism, for example Ortega y Gasset, who combined Kant's theory of rationality with an emphatic concept of life.<sup>6</sup>

As the programmatic title of the lectures "Vernunft und Existenz" (*Reason and Existence*) from 1937 indicates, Jaspers also traces an arc from Kant to *Existenzphilosophie*. Although in the opening lecture Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are claimed as cornerstones, and thus any contemporary philosophy

4 The boundaries between existential philosophies and philosophies of life are fluid; while Bollnow presents Nietzsche and Dilthey as paradigmatic exponents of *Lebensphilosophie*, in recent times Oliver Viktor has identified Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to be the founders of *Existenzphilosophie*; cf. Bollnow, *Lebensphilosophie*, pp. 5–7; Oliver Victor, *Kierkegaard und Nietzsche*.

5 Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics; The Two Sources*.

6 Cf. Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*; Ortega y Gasset, *The Modern Theme*.

worthy of the name needs to engage with their thought,<sup>7</sup> Jaspers looks to link into and continue the more mainstream philosophical tradition, albeit now in an altered form, so that above all Plato, Plotinus, Nicholas of Cusa, and Kant remain pivotal to his thinking. This integrative trait of Jaspers' approach comes to the fore in the foundations he sets out for his philosophy of "encompassing" (*Umgreifenden*), the aforementioned periechontology that discerns five distinctive dimensions of human existence: empirical existence (*Dasein*), consciousness as such (*Bewusstsein überhaupt*), spirit (*Geist*), reason (*Vernunft*), and existence (*Existenz*).

With the concept of empirical existence (*Dasein*) Jaspers takes up the idea, identified and elaborated by Feuerbach and Marx, of a physically-constituted and socially-situated subject. Due to bodily conditioned neediness and vulnerability, humans are oriented on securing physical and social safety, preserving their existence as living beings. Any forms of action and institutions securing subsistence are thus assigned to the sphere of *Dasein*.<sup>8</sup>

The second anthropological dimension Jaspers introduces is drawn from Kant's concept of consciousness as such (*Bewusstsein überhaupt*), which enables humans to think in universally valid categories:<sup>9</sup> "As the consciousness of living beings [Dasein], we are split into the multiplicity of endless particular realities. [...] As consciousness in general, we participate in an actuality, the universally valid truth."<sup>10</sup> Like Ortega y Gasset, Jaspers saves his philosophy of life / existence from becoming ensnared in irrationalism by resorting to Kant. This is also a clear distinction from Nietzsche, who had disparaged the validity claims of human reason with respect to truth and the logical laws of the intellect, for example the principle of contradiction, as nothing but the epiphenomena of vitalist life processes.<sup>11</sup>

With the third mode of encompassing, spirit (*Geist*), the faculty of creating encompassing unity, Jaspers again draws on Kant, albeit this time in tandem with Hegel. According to Kant, the ideas of reason (God, the soul, the world) are encompassing horizons of a unity, which in relationship to the conceptual tools of the intellect exercise a regulative function. Jaspers describes the spirit in a similar way, as "the totality of intelligible thought, action, and feeling – a totality which is not a closed object for knowledge but remains Idea."<sup>12</sup> Historically, the distinction between the rational intellect and reason was

7 See Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, pp. 19–50.

8 Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, p. 55.

9 Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, pp. 55–56.

10 Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, p. 56.

11 Cf. Jaspers, *Nietzsche*, pp. 123 et seq.

12 Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, p. 57.

already drawn as early as Plato with the differentiation between *dianoia* and *nous*. Cusa was another to draw a clear distinction, in his terminology between *ratio* and *intellectus*. For Cusa, the intellect has a dual function: through encompassing universal ideas (truth, equality, etc.) the intellect provides reason (*ratio*) with the orientation necessary to form concepts; and *intellectus* is the capacity to radically transgress the restrictiveness of reason through a negative philosophy of the absolute, the *docta ignorantia*. The author of a monograph on Cusa,<sup>13</sup> Jaspers will eventually turn to negative theology and continue its tradition in his philosophy of religion. In the context of determining the spirit however, the absolute remains ignored.

Following the three modes of encompassing, Jaspers introduces reason (*Vernunft*) as the fourth anthropological dimension. By grounding it in existential philosophy, from the outset Jaspers distinguishes his conception of reason from an objective-idealistic understanding, i.e., with view to the tradition from Plato and Hegel: "But reason itself is no timeless permanence [...] nor is it Being itself."<sup>14</sup> Instead, Jaspers moves towards a reason that is primarily an activity, precisely the incompletable search for ever new causes and reasons. Reason "is the binding, recollecting, and progressive power whose contents are always derived from its own limits and which passes beyond every one of these limits, expressing perpetual dissatisfaction."<sup>15</sup> Thus, reason has no domain of its own, appearing instead "in all forms of the modes of the Encompassing yet seems to be nothing itself, a bond which does not rest upon itself but always on something else out of which reason produces both what it itself is and what it can be."<sup>16</sup>

As the fifth dimension of what it means to be human, Jaspers, drawing on Kierkegaard, introduces "Existenz". Unable to be delegated to or represented by another, one's unique relationship to oneself, specifically self-choice, breaches the anonymity of consciousness as such, where the concrete, bodily-situated ego appears to disintegrate into an abstract pointedness: "Existenz is the Encompassing, not in the sense of the vastness of a horizon of all horizons, but rather in the sense of a fundamental origin, the condition of selfhood without which all the vastness of Being becomes a desert."<sup>17</sup> Not their own creators, humans spring from a dark and unfathomable origin, and hence their existence is inseparably tied to transcendence, i.e., absolute being: "I am Existenz

---

13 Jaspers, *Nikolaus Cusanus*.

14 Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, p. 66.

15 Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, p. 66.

16 Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, p. 66.

17 Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, p. 60 et seq.

only as I know Transcendence as the power through which I genuinely am myself.”<sup>18</sup> For Jaspers, at this juncture it would be wrong to construe this consciousness of Existenz as an irrational antithesis to reason, a temptation that both Kierkegaard and Miguel de Unamuno had succumbed to. Existenz and reason are mutually dependent on one another, for “Existenz only becomes clear through reason; reason only has content through Existenz.”<sup>19</sup>

The philosophy of Encompassing or periechontology has a twofold advantage for Jaspers. Empirical existence, consciousness as such, and spirit are—in line with a Neo-Kantian perspective—modes of encompassing employed by the human subject, which however—now moving beyond Kant—is itself ontologically encompassed by the world. And thus, following a similar configuration, the individual, as or in its existence, reaches out towards transcendence, but is at the same time encompassed by it.

Lastly, Jaspers combines the architectonic of periechontology with the discovery, inaugurated by Herder and Humboldt, of humankind’s linguisticity and historicity. Due to the linguisticity of the human condition, all dimensions of existence are set in or framed by historical communication processes.<sup>20</sup> This consideration enables Jaspers to extend the scope of Kierkegaard’s concept of “existence” to include the dimension of historical situatedness. The attribute “existentially” now characterizes the self-choice of the subject in relationship to transcendence, while also offering the specificity of ascertaining one’s position in the historical present. It is in this sense that Jaspers—to the dismay of Rickert—could appreciate Max Weber as an existential (!) philosopher. With an unconditional will to truth, Weber had faced up to the fate of his times.<sup>21</sup> Thus, a philosophy of history that seeks to ascertain the universal truth of the age is by no means a form of escapism from the specific individual existence—it is, rather, an indispensable aspect of existential self-consciousness. Reflecting on Weber, Jaspers emphasized:

Max Weber developed no philosophical system. It would be impossible to expound his philosophy as a doctrine. He declined to be called a philosopher. But to us he is the true philosopher of the time in which he lived. Because philosophy is not a gradually progressing science, which recognizes a timeless truth, each philosophy must achieve its reality as a historical existence rooted in the absolute and oriented toward transcendence. Max Weber taught no philosophy; he was a philosophy.<sup>22</sup>

18 Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, p. 61.

19 Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, p. 67.

20 Jaspers, *Reason und Existenz*, pp. 77–106.

21 Jaspers, *Max Weber*, pp. 412f.; see also Jaspers, *Leonardo, Descartes, Max Weber*, pp. 251–256.

22 Jaspers, *Leonardo, Descartes, Max Weber*, p. 251.

### 3 Philosophy of Religion in Global Modernity

Besides the hallowed traditional questions of truth, being, and knowledge, since the eighteenth century a diagnosis of the specific historical present, or more precisely as Michel Foucault encapsulated it, the question "What are we at present?" has become pivotal to philosophy.<sup>23</sup> In terms of integrating the diagnosis of the age into systematic philosophy, various philosophies since the nineteenth century reveal a set of very different approaches, as a comparison between Hegel, Comte, and Nietzsche would make clear. While in contrast to post-idealist critiques of religion Jaspers retains a philosophy of the absolute, any thinking geared towards eternal being must be inseparably connected to a philosophy of history, following Hegel. This gives us the uniquely productive configuration of Jaspers' approach: while systematic philosophy qua philosophy of religion and the historical ascertainment of the present are not mergeable, they certainly cannot be considered or articulated independently of one another.

#### 3.1 *Diagnosis of the Times: The Impending Loss of Axial Period Humanity*

Jaspers' diagnosis of the age revolves around the Second World War. Germany's capitulation not only seals the end of Hitler's fantasy of the thousand-year Reich but quite concretely Europe's global hegemony. As presented in *Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Origin and Goal of History, 1949), the cataclysmic shift in geopolitical power relations necessitates a comprehensive revision of European philosophies of history. In a global perspective, the decisive turn in human history is no longer to be found in Greek philosophy and Christianity, as Hegel had emphasized paradigmatically. For Jaspers, there is a more profound caesura: the Axial age, the period between 800 and 200 BCE, in which the main foundations of the ancient advanced civilizations, foremost polytheism, magic, and the institution of God-kingship, were radically called into question, a shift in focus that took place in China, India, and the West independently of one another. Philosophy is thus not a monopoly held by Europe but emerged roughly concurrently in at least three different regions of the world. According to Jaspers, the qualitatively new characteristic of this age is "that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations."<sup>24</sup> Some authors have thus misleadingly identified the Axial Period with the

<sup>23</sup> Foucault, *The political technology of the individuals*, p. 145.

<sup>24</sup> Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, p. 2.

rise of religious-metaphysical world “pictures”.<sup>25</sup> Jaspers however expressly describes the Axial Period as a time when not only religious-metaphysical ideas of transcendence were developed but also, as if in tandem, “the whole gamut of philosophical possibilities down to skepticism, to materialism, and sophism and nihilism” sprung up.<sup>26</sup> In short, the Axial Period is characterized by a broad spectrum of different philosophies and religious movements, which are still vital and alive today as world religions. It is in this sense that Jaspers’ controversial and much disputed thesis needs to be understood, namely that born in “this age were [...] the fundamental categories within which we still think today.”<sup>27</sup>

A historical consciousness and understanding of the present is not to be limited to a referential consideration of the Axial age, however. Through the disputes between the schools, the Axial age is also marked by social anarchy: “In the end, the collapse took place. From about 200 B.C. onwards great political and spiritual unifications and dogmatic configurations held the field. The Axial Period ended with the formation of great States, which forcibly realized this unity (the unified Chinese Empire of Tsin-Shi-Hwang-Ti, the Maurya dynasty in India, the Roman Empire).”<sup>28</sup> The despotic regimes of the post-Axial Period empires relied foremost on dogmatically petrified religions to establish and maintain their power: “The free conflict of spirits seems to have come to a standstill. The result was a loss of consciousness.”<sup>29</sup> It is first in the Early Modern period that new movements of enlightenment crystallize and break the hold of dogmatism and despotism. The rise of modern science and technology enables man to exercise a hitherto unimaginable power over nature. Indeed, new technologies facilitating the growth of transport, commerce, and communication create, for the very first time in history, a sense of a real unity amongst humankind. Although the spiritual and intellectual impulses of the Axial Period were – thanks to their inherent reflective potential – geared towards universal communication, the existing geographical barriers meant that the Axial cultures had ultimately remained within the confines of their own *oikumene* despite all the endeavor to expand.

The dominance of modern science and technology is driving humankind into an epochal crisis, however. Because humans are reduced to the anthropological dimensions of living beings and consciousness, then a menacing

---

25 See Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*; Joas, *Transzendenz als reflexive Sakralität*.

26 Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, p. 2.

27 Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, p. 2.

28 Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, p. 194.

29 Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, p. 194.

nihilism has spread in the modern period, one that is not just the purview of a small group of intellectual elites, as in the Axial Period, but now, through the imposition of modern ideologies, is saturating the masses in modern industrial society. In short, the scientific negation of the spirit and existential awareness in Modernity has precipitated an epochal process of dehumanization, with the humane achievements of the Axial Period on the verge of becoming irretrievably lost, in particular the search for a final origin of the whole and the ability of self-reflection: "It may seem possible for this skin [of axial humanity] to be cast off, whereas the basic stock of man's being as formed during the prehistoric ages can never be cast off." This means that "we may feel the threat of becoming Stone Age men once more, because beneath the surface we are so all the time. Our weapons would be aeroplanes instead of stone axes, but everything else would be the same as it was then, as though all the millennia of history has been blotted out of memory."<sup>30</sup>

### 3.2 *Reappropriating Religious-Metaphysical Thought post Kierkegaard and Nietzsche: The Importance of Negative Theology*

Faced with the threat of dehumanization in Modernity, Jaspers turns primarily to the religious-metaphysical impulses of the Axial Period for inspiration, leaving aside the skeptical and materialist currents. And yet, as important as a reappropriation of the axial ideas of transcendence are for restituting humanity, for Jaspers it is clear that the reflective level attained in Modernity cannot simply be ignored. The periechontology is therefore oriented on Kant's epistemology and post-idealist anthropology; in the philosophy of religion Kierkegaard is the main reference point, specifically the determination of the self in *The Sickness unto Death*.

Existentially, this construction contains a deeper one: Existenz is the self that works on itself in cognizance of its relation to its constituent power (Kierkegaard) [...] Existenz is freedom [...] a freedom not of its own making, which may fail to appear. Existenz is freedom only as the gift of Transcendence, knowing its donor.<sup>31</sup>

Kierkegaard identified the power that posits the self with the God of Christianity. For Jaspers, this step is hasty. In the wake of the various critiques of religion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the question of God can still only be pursued legitimately in the tradition of the negative philosophy of the absolute. However, the conditions of Modernity have exacerbated

<sup>30</sup> Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, p. 66.



the problem of how to substantially determine the concealed absolute. For this reason, Kant had already proposed a spectacular alternative to becoming entangled in the aporias of the negative philosophy of the absolute: instead of offering a refutable interpretation of the ineffable absolute, Kant approaches the question of God indirectly through the postulates of pure practical reason. In contrast, Jaspers takes his lead from Schleiermacher and attempts to renew the negative philosophy of the absolute through existential reinterpretations of religious traditions.

With numerous Christian theologies in the twentieth century, across the denominations, continuing to adhere to an exclusive idea of revelation, Jaspers sees himself forced to reiterate the defense of the primacy of human reason in relation to the claims of religious authority. Like Socrates in his critique of mythologies, Jaspers' opening move in his rejection of the Christian claim to authority over revelation is to present the diversity of religious transmissions.

As Socrates objects to Euthyphro, the traditional interpretation of piety – “well then, what is dear to the gods is pious, what is not impious”<sup>32</sup> – is misleading, for the gods quite clearly prefer different things: “namely punishing your father, may be pleasing to Zeus but displeasing to Cronus and Uranos, pleasing to Hephaestus but displeasing to Hera, and so with any other gods who differ from each other on this subject.”<sup>33</sup> Given this dissent amongst the gods, for Socrates it is unavoidable that any definition of the pious must now come under the competence of human reason. The decisive question – “is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is pious because it is being loved by the gods?”<sup>34</sup> – permits only one answer: the gods can only love what is pious because it is for reasonable reasons.

The ambiguity of Greek mythology is not simply overcome and resolved with the advent of the monotheism of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a point Jaspers distinctly underlines: “The Bible is the deposit of a thousand years of religious, mythical, historic, and existential experience.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the Bible is full of completely diverging, at times even contradictory statements: “It bears out martial blood-lust and long-suffering non-resistance, the ideas of nationalism and of mankind, polytheism and monotheism, sacerdotalism and the prophetic religion.”<sup>36</sup> Given this ambiguity and plurality of Judeo-Christian “revelation”, when seeking an answer to the question of God we are – as Jaspers

---

32 Platon, *Eutyphron* 7a.

33 Platon, *Eutyphron* 8b.

34 Platon, *Eutyphron* 10a.

35 Jaspers, *The Philosophical Faith*, p. 330.

36 Jaspers, *The Philosophical Faith*, p. 333.

emphasizes in accord with Socrates' movement of thought – forced to return to and rely on our own reason.

Ever since the “emergence of history” (Foucault) in the eighteenth century, interpreting holy scriptures had to add yet another dimension to its considerations, historical contingency. Despite his close affinity to Kierkegaard, for Jaspers this marks a juncture necessitating a different approach. Faced with the countless hypotheses produced by historical-critical Bible exegesis, Kierkegaard placed his trust in the personal immediacy of the existential relationship to Christ. Indeed, for Kierkegaard the paradox of an incarnate God can be accepted and embraced only in a *sacrificium intellectus*. Jaspers evaluates the situation differently – historical Bible exegesis is not necessarily a diversion from the existential earnestness of faith. The opposite is in fact the case. The historical reconstruction of biblical texts is an indispensable and stable terrain for an existential exposition in the light of the concealed absolute:

The point of a historical cognition of the Bible is not to destroy it critically by exposure and relativization. It is to help us bring to mind, truly and with historical accuracy, religious experiences that have no real meaning for us until we react to them in adoption or rejection.<sup>37</sup>

Any direct divine revelation that has erased every trace of ambiguity can only be a fiction: “After all, there is no sentence in the Bible that is not exegesis [...] We never have the thing itself, except in exegesis. Pure, uninterpreted, it is beyond us.”<sup>38</sup> The conclusion to be drawn is that “for us, the object of exegesis exists in the exegesis only. Whatever text we come across is either interpretation or reinterpretation.”<sup>39</sup> In a specific reference to Luther, Jaspers points out that the exegetical labyrinth is quite simply inescapable: “But Luther himself made distinctions in the Bible; he rejects the whole Epistle of St James, for instance. Who can tell the Word that ought to be allowed to stand from the one that is to be questioned or even rejected?”<sup>40</sup>

In response to the obvious question as to how we can interpretatively approach the absolute while simultaneously respecting its hiddenness, Jaspers introduces the idea of the cipher: “Ciphers light the roots of things. They are not cognition; what is conceived in them is vision and interpretation. They cannot be experienced and verified as generally valid. Their truth is linked with

---

37 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, p. 332.

38 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, p. 331.

39 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, p. 331.

40 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, p. 331.

Existenz."<sup>41</sup> Ciphers elude the fixating grip of the intellect's conceptual world, and yet the existential relationship to the absolute, when mediated through them, remains in the brightness of human consciousness.

According to Jaspers, humankind has always lived in and through ciphers as it were, concretely in mythology and religious revelation. However, since the critical view of myths that emerged in the Axial Period, there is an awareness and sensitivity for the difference between embodied manifestations of transcendence and the symbolic character of the ciphers. Pre-Axial age cultures were, so to say, enclosed in ciphers.<sup>42</sup> The impact of this epochal realization of ciphers *as* ciphers has been dampened however, overshadowed by various forms of revelatory belief also from the Axial Period: "Embodying the cipher contents is the basic confusion in our dealings with Transcendence."<sup>43</sup> The Christian belief in the incarnation of God and the ecclesiastical teaching established on it, which usurps transcendence through religious dogmas, is the precedential case for the problematic confusing of ciphers with physical reality. In the spirit of a negative philosophy of the absolute, which has absorbed the inquisitive questioning of post-idealist thought, "the ciphers are suspended, to be questioned over and over; but in this suspension they are a language of the transcendent reality that meets the reality of Existenz. They are not extinguished in unequivocal submission to unequivocal acts of revelation."<sup>44</sup>

According to Cusa, the concealed absolute, precisely because it cannot be grasped and made conceivable by any one name, may be invoked through countless names. With this Cusa sublates the objection of anthropomorphism, raised time and time again since Xenophanes not only against myths but also personal images of God in general, and integrates it into negative theology.<sup>45</sup> In a sober and pointed analogy to Cusa, Jaspers emphasizes that "every phenomenon may turn into a cipher."<sup>46</sup>

As justified as the critique of all forms of an authoritative fixation of suspended ciphers may be, the more pertinent and aggravated becomes the problem of interpretation, which has accompanied negative theology since its beginnings, in Jaspers' philosophy of religion. Given that since Kierkegaard and Nietzsche it is no longer possible to prefigure an interpretation of the concealed absolute as Plotinus had, namely by drawing on Platonic metaphysics, Jaspers' philosophy of transcendence threatens to fall out of the negative

---

41 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, p. 92.

42 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, pp. 92f.

43 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, p. 100.

44 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, p. 326.

45 Nicholas de Cusa, *De Visione Dei*, chap. 6.

46 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, p. 95; 158.

theology tradition altogether, a point Werner Schüßler has critically made.<sup>47</sup> This verdict may be accurate when looking back at the long ramified tradition since Plotinus. With a view forward into the future however, Jaspers' philosophy of religion can be approached and understood as a laboratory, where possible alternatives for continuing a negative philosophy of the absolute "after Hegel" can be tested.

### 3.3 *Task and Limits of Intercultural Philosophy of Religion*

In global Modernity the "battle in the realm of the ciphers" would be fought out ideally in a dialogue between *all* religious-metaphysical and materialist forms of thought. Besides the cipher worlds of Western metaphysics and religion, Jaspers also examines Indian and Chinese thought. Indeed, the battle between the ciphers entails those movements which radically transgressed all ciphers, foremost evident in the Buddhist temple complex of Borobudhor and Meister Eckhart.<sup>48</sup>

Eventually, any call for unlimited communication must inevitably confront the limits of the culturally- and socially-situated subject. Despite all the economic and political networks spanning modern global society, for Jaspers, Modernity remains characterized by a heterogenous range of diverse cultures, a plurality whose origins may be traced back to the Axial Period. In this broad perspective, Jaspers sees European philosophy inseparably interwoven with Christianity, despite all the various secularization processes: "We Westerners, formed in this space, animated, motivated, and determined by this background, filled with images and concepts derived from the Bible, are all Christians."<sup>49</sup> Even radical negations, from the materialist Enlightenment through to Nietzsche, remain tied to Christianity *ex negativo*.<sup>50</sup> The loss of belief in revelation opens up the possibility of not only an atheist inheritance of Christianity; it also enables a religious-philosophical succession. At this point, Jaspers strictly distinguishes his vision from the theological demands to de-Hellenize Christianity. In its essentials laid out by Augustine, the synthesis of Greek metaphysics and the personal monotheism of the Judeo-Christian tradition is not called into question: "Thus the speculation on Being crystallized as a factor in the unfolding idea of God."<sup>51</sup>

47 Schüßler, *Chiffer als Sprache der Transzendenz*, pp. 248–255.

48 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, pp. 265–269.

49 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, p. 20.

50 On the presence of Christian ethics in materialist Enlightenment, see Schelkshorn, *Hobbes und die Folgen*.

51 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, p. 167.

With this speculation on being, Jaspers by no means regresses to a position prior to Kant's critique of metaphysics. As the encompassing, being is accessible through a reflection on the modern split between subject and object. Jaspers rejects however dismantling the speculation, maintaining that "though tied to language, this [the experience of transcendence] cannot be voided by semantics, by linguistic analysis – no more than life is voided by an analysis of the chemical and physical processes it employs and depends upon."<sup>52</sup>

On this basis Jaspers begins with a philosophical reinterpretation of religious traditions. What may be deciphered as the cipher of the concealed absolute is taken up into philosophical faith; central tenets of Christianity, like the incarnation of God, have succumbed to the temptation of mistaking a cipher for physical reality. Many theological teachings, for example the remission of sins through the atoning death of Christ or the Augustinian teaching of hereditary sin, elude philosophical reinterpretation entirely.<sup>53</sup> As Jaspers makes clear with reference to Buddhism, philosophical faith marks a boundary to all religious cults and indeed meditative practices:

We take them [the speculative ideas of Buddhism] for communicable ideas in the world of general consciousness, detaching them from their roots in meditation, which transforms consciousness. We lack the specific experiences of those men, experiences to which we have no access; but we think the thoughts which their liberating operation makes transcendent.<sup>54</sup>

At this point a comparison to recent writings by Jürgen Habermas can help us delineate the contours of Jaspers' philosophy of religion. Unlike Jaspers, Habermas identifies ritual cult practices to be an irreplaceable element of religion.<sup>55</sup> Today however, philosophy is only possible as post-metaphysical thought that shifts away from all forms of thinking the absolute, including even Kant's theory of postulates. Despite rejecting religious and metaphysical world "pictures", for Habermas religion is not merely a relic of a past epoch. Faced with the threatening dynamics of how secular Modernity becomes self-endangering, post-metaphysical thought needs to keep open the possibility of translating the semantic contents of the religions. Philosophical inheritance of religious motifs may not however transgress the horizons of post-metaphysical thought. For this reason, Habermas strictly rejects any philosophy of religion

---

52 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, p. 168.

53 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, pp. 241f.

54 Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith*, p. 267.

55 Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, I, pp. 175–306.

in general and Jaspers' idea of philosophical faith in particular.<sup>56</sup> In contrast, Jaspers adheres to an idea of philosophy as a thinking of the origin (*arche*), which, drawing on Kierkegaard, is transformed into existential philosophy. Thus, religious contents are not squeezed into the tight corset of post-metaphysical thought but are interpreted as ciphers of transcendence and translated into an existential philosophy of the absolute.

In Habermas' conception, the post-metaphysical translation of the semantic contents of religion serves to defend the project of the Enlightenment. Similarly, after 1945 Jaspers devoted all his efforts to establishing and advancing a democratic state based on human rights and a global order subject to the rules and conventions of international law. From this background one question seems particularly pertinent: of what relevance is Jaspers' orientation on existential "origins", which initially had its locale in the illuminating the existence of the individual, for morality and politics?

#### 4 In the Shadow of the Shoah and the Atom Bomb: The Political Future of Humanity

The epicenter of Jaspers' political philosophy is the shock at the Shoah and the totalitarianism of the Nazi regime, both of which show that a hitherto unimagined dimension of dehumanization had taken hold and become reality:

What man may come to has today, almost in a flash, become manifest through a monstrous reality that stands before our eyes like a symbol of everything unspeakably horrible: The national socialist concentration camps with their tortures, at the end of which stood the gas-chambers and incinerators for millions of people realities that correspond to reports of similar processes in other totalitarian regimes, although none but the national socialists have perpetrated outright mass murder by the gas-chamber. A chasm has opened up [...] It appears possible to destroy man whilst he is physically still alive. [...] Man is capable under the conditions of political terror of becoming something of which no one had any inkling [...] That man, in the passivity of torment in a life in which every minute is under compulsion, turns into this mechanism of reflexes is the outcome of a technico-operative procedure which our era alone has been capable of evolving, in the intensification of tortures that were known to earlier periods also. This reality of the concentration camps, this interaction in the circular process between torturer and tortured, the manner of this dehumanisation, is an intimation of future possibilities, before which everything threatens to vanish.<sup>57</sup>

56 For the distinction to Jaspers' philosophy of religion, see Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, I, pp. 100–109.

57 Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, pp. 147f.

Against this background Jaspers – in stark contrast to Heidegger – turns to the painful and bitter question of German guilt. A series of lectures held in 1945–46 on the spiritual situation in Germany and then compiled into a pamphlet-like publication, *Die Schuldfrage. Von der politischen Haftung Deutschlands* (*The Question of German Guilt*, 1947) differentiates the concept of guilt into four categories, Jaspers drawing on the architectonic of his anthropology to steer a course between the problematic reproach of German collective guilt and the reckless denial of any complicity in the crimes of the Nazi regime.<sup>58</sup> Firstly, there is the criminal guilt individuals have burdened themselves with by violating positive laws, including any recognized norms of international law, for example war crimes. Distinct from this is political guilt, which affects all citizens of a state. Despite the repressive mechanisms in place, a state based on a system of unbridled injustice nonetheless relies to a certain degree on the – at least silent – consent of a part of the population, and thus citizens bear responsibility for the state in which they live. Although political guilt has a collective dimension, it is necessary to distinguish this from a moral collective guilt. Drawing on Kant, Jaspers positions moral guilt in the subjective inwardness of moral consciousness, where the individual is both the accused and the judge. As for Kant, Jaspers acknowledges the impossibility of judging the moral quality of an action from the outside. Thus, Germans have to ask themselves, each and every one of them individually, which of their actions and words supported the Nazi regime, without however having put their lives at risk if they had failed to do so. This triad of criminal guilt, political responsibility, and moral guilt is still not yet sufficiently differentiated to cover the possibilities of “guilt”. In reference to “existence”, i.e., the final dimension of his anthropology, Jaspers introduces the concept of metaphysical guilt, which he describes as the guilt of survivors of a totalitarian system: “If I was present at the murder of others without risking my life to prevent it, I feel guilty in a way not adequately conceivable either legally, politically or morally.”<sup>59</sup> Metaphysical guilt, as Jaspers had publicly confessed in his speech at the reopening of Heidelberg University, was a burden he himself had to face up to.<sup>60</sup>

The concept of metaphysical guilt caused quite a bit of confusion, if not controversy, including the personal accusation directed at Jaspers that he was using it to obscure his moral complicity.<sup>61</sup> At this point caution needs to be

---

58 Jaspers, *The German Guilt*, pp. 25–27.

59 Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, p. 26; *Die Schuldfrage*, p. 20. Vgl. dazu Kaegi, *Was ist metaphysische Schuld?*; Weidman, *Absolute Solidarität*.

60 Jaspers, *Erneuerung der Universität*, pp. 32f.

61 Vgl. dazu Kaegi, *Was ist metaphysische Schuld?*, p. 34, note 42–43.

exercised. According to Jaspers, metaphysical guilt only then pertains when morally-motivated resistance to saving innocent people is without any prospect of success, i.e., sacrificing one's own life would not have saved the life of anyone else. Despite the impotence of moral practice in situations of extreme repression, for Jaspers a guilt remains no matter what these mitigating circumstances were: "There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge."<sup>62</sup> The presiding judge in cases of metaphysical guilt is neither a human court nor moral consciousness, but "God alone."<sup>63</sup>

Along with the self-critical clarification of German guilt, in a second step Jaspers turns his attention to what is needed to renew the political ideals of the Enlightenment. In the development from the foment of republicanism in the era of the Enlightenment to the totalitarian systems of fascism and Stalinism, Jaspers sees parallels to the transition from the Axial Period to the despots that followed: "The analogy may, perhaps, cast some light on our future."<sup>64</sup> At the same time, Jaspers is fully aware of the limits of such historical analogies. The contemporary situation is incomparably graver, for unlike the Axial Period, global politics after 1945 seems to be heading inexorably towards a "final battle for the planetary order."<sup>65</sup> The unmistakable apocalyptic overtone echoes the global dimension, with the imminent showdown between the idea of a totalitarian world state and a federalism of constitutional democracies adhering to norms and practices of international law having no precedent in the Axial Period.

Against this gloomy background Jaspers attempts to reformulate human rights, democracy, and international law within the framework of his multifaceted anthropology. Kant had justified the political ideals of the Enlightenment through the transcendental subject, which post-idealist philosophy then proceeded to "de-transcend". Apel and Habermas have attempted to rescue the normative substance of Kant's practical philosophy through the idea of communicative reason. The legitimacy of discourse ethics resides in how it reflects on the presuppositions of argumentative reason, thus replacing the role played by Kant's transcendental reflection, and in turn lays the foundation for the idea of deliberative democracy and a collaborative global society. Jaspers took a different path from Kant. Although Kant's "consciousness as such" is a component

---

62 Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, p. 26; 20.

63 Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, p. 26; 20.

64 Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, p. 195.

65 Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, p. 195.



in his anthropological architectonic, Jaspers was unwilling to consider analogous possibilities of reflection, shifting directly, i.e., without any specific considerations of a justifying reasoning,<sup>66</sup> to the normative kernel of Kant's political philosophy. Once here, in a second step Jaspers uses his existential philosophy to expose the limits of a political philosophy that is grounded exclusively in discursive reason. The existential dimensions of enlightened moral and political theory are first broached in Jaspers' later work *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft der Menschheit* (1958; *The Future of Mankind*), where they are synthesized into the concept of the "Überpolitischen" (suprapolitical).<sup>67</sup>

The significance of a concept of political freedom grounded in existential philosophy, i.e., the suprapolitical, is explicated through two problem zones arising from a mere rational foundation of Enlightenment-oriented politics, the question of democratic ethos in already established constitutional states and the question of self-sacrifice in repressive regimes.

Despite the structural stability provided by its institutions, the efficacy of even an established democracy ultimately rests on the democratic ethos of its citizens. The active involvement of citizens in public life stems from an ethically existential decision made by individuals: "But the will to this political freedom is itself an act of existential freedom."<sup>68</sup> As Jaspers sees it, this is something Kant was aware of. Peace within a state and between states are only possible through the moral sense of justice felt by citizens and their respect of the law.<sup>69</sup>

This focus on the democratic ethos reflects Jaspers' concerns about the political situation in Germany after 1945. After the devastation wreaked by a totalitarian regime, a democratic order can only then be established and developed when the citizens of the new state have undergone a radical inner change, a process Jaspers demanded vehemently and at times with bitterness. With the malevolent spirit of fascism slumbering in the consciousness of many Germans, a democracy relying solely on installing democratic institutions would be built on sand.

On the other side of the divide, in repressive constellations, for Jaspers an idea of democracy based on the Enlightenment has to face up to the existential

66 Weidmann, *Einleitung*; Salamun, *Karl Jaspers*, pp. 44f.

67 See Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 9: "This book wants to aid in bringing the political consciousness of our time into an encompassing 'suprapolitical' whole. For as a mere line of human endeavor – a department, so to speak – politics cannot solve the question whether or not mankind will survive." The English translation is an abridged version of the German work.

68 Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 215.

69 Jaspers, *Kants "Zum ewigen Frieden"* (1957), pp. 209f.

problem of an individual sacrificing their own life.<sup>70</sup> To gain a better understanding of Jaspers' position on this thorny issue it would seem helpful to briefly consider two other important thinkers, Albert Camus and Jürgen Habermas.

To resist repression and injustice means, as Camus emphasized in *L'homme révolté* (1951), that the rebel puts their life on the line: "If the individual, in fact, accepts death and happens to die as a consequence of his act of rebellion, he demonstrates by doing so that he is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of a common good which he considers more important than his own destiny."<sup>71</sup> Revolt, as Camus concedes, appeals to a meta-physical value, one that goes beyond the individual's own life. Indeed, "it is already worth noting that this concept of values as pre-existent to any kind of action contradicts the purely historical philosophies, in which values are acquired (if they are ever acquired) after the action has been completed."<sup>72</sup> At this point Camus gives his line of thinking a remarkable turn. In *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (1942) Camus had radically rejected any hint of metaphysics, invoking the absurd. After the war Camus did not simply return to Platonic metaphysics however: "Nothing justifies the assertion that these principles have existed externally; it is of no use to declare that they will one day exist. But they do exist, in the very period in which we exist. With us, and throughout all history, they deny servitude, falsehood, and terror."<sup>73</sup> In contrast, Jürgen Habermas rigorously restricts the scope of current philosophy to the horizon of post-metaphysical thought. With communicative reason, primarily based on procedural rules, it is possible to justify the normative matrix of constitutional democracy, but not the life-threatening struggle for freedom. As Habermas makes clear, to sacrifice one's own life, even if it means asserting the secular ideas of democracy and human rights, has no place in post-metaphysical thought.

But autonomy can be reasonably expected (*zumutbar*) only in social contexts that are already themselves rational in the sense that they ensure that action motivated by good reasons will not of necessity conflict with one's own interests. The validity of moral commands is subject to the condition that they are *universally* adhered to as the basis for a general practice [...] Only then are moral commands in the common interest and—precisely because they are equally good for all—do not impose supererogatory demands. To this extent rational morality puts its seal on the abolition of the sacrifice.<sup>74</sup>

70 Cf. Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 201; Jaspers, *Kants "Zum ewigen Frieden"*, p. 209.

71 Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 15.

72 Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 16.

73 Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 283.

74 Habermas, *Justification and Application*, p. 34 (translation modified by Hans Schelkshorn).

Jaspers addresses the problem of self-sacrifice within the framework of his negative philosophy of the absolute. The existential philosophy of origins provides access to the unconditionality of the moral postulate: “the sacrifice requires, for example, the moral substance that has come down to us from the past, upholds the present, and holds itself responsible for the future.”<sup>75</sup> But because the absolute remains concealed, Jaspers’ philosophy has no genuinely compelling arguments for sacrificing one’s own life, nor for the struggle to defend or realize the political ideals of the Enlightenment: “Even such images of past and future are not reasons for sacrifice; they are mere symbols in the consciousness of those who freely, as individuals or as individual members of their community, make the sacrifice to eternity.”<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, the negative philosophy of the absolute is at least capable of shedding light on dubious acts of self-sacrifice which are motivated by the abstract certainties or dogmas constructed by the intellect alone, enabling these to be discounted from consideration because they are “for states as they are or for the good of future generations or for a ‘leader’.”<sup>77</sup>

As we have seen, Jaspers illustrates the significance of his existential philosophy for politics and society through examples where questions crystallize at the very limits of thought and action, and in circumstances possible in both established democratic states and repressive dictatorships. Despite their contrariness, these two political orders do not exist simply side by side. As long as authoritarian systems continue to pursue their imperialist interests internationally, then, as Jaspers rightly emphasizes, the question of sacrificing one’s life also remains virulent in functioning democracies. The global political alternative of a totalitarian world state *vis-à-vis* a federation of democracies, of fateful consequence for the whole of humanity, is thus a key intersection in Jaspers’ efforts to combine the triad of philosophies, existential, political, and historical.

To understand the future prospects of Jaspers’ philosophy of history it seems helpful to consider how his theory of the Axial Period has been adopted by sociological theories of civilization, most prominently in the work of Shmuel Eisenstadt and Johan Árnason. The research group around Eisenstadt views the Axial theory primarily as a historical starting point for their critique of sociological theories of modernization which claim that nations and cultures *à la longue* will dissolve and be absorbed into a homogenous secular global society. Acknowledging Jaspers’ assumption that Axial cultures have retained

---

75 Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 210.

76 Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 210.

77 Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 210.

their formative influence in specific regions over centuries, Eisenstadt and Árnason emphasize the ongoing presence of a plurality of cultures within global Modernity.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, in larger cultural regions the pivotal motifs of European Modernity are modified and transformed in a variety of ways – in reality global Modernity consists of multiple modernities. In present-day China, Jaspers' Axial theory is used by both intellectuals and state institutions to justify political isolation from the West, or in other words, from the ideas of human rights and democracy.<sup>79</sup>

The arch Jaspers traces from the Axial Period to Modernity is quintessentially different. Whereas the philosophy of religion, similarly to the sociological civilization theories, affirms a plurality of diverse cultures, not least because the nihilism of the scientific-technological civilization can only be overcome through an integrative return to the intrinsic religious-metaphysical traditions of the Axial Period, in his political philosophy Jaspers gives precedence to European culture despite the intercultural crosscurrents. The idea of political freedom is exclusively an achievement of Greek Antiquity. Jaspers states that “political freedom has only been tried in the West” before immediately conceding however that “most of the realisations have come to naught.”<sup>80</sup> The history of Europe is thus not just a lesson on realizing political freedom but also its repression. The comparison with other regions of the world shows that “political liberty is a Western phenomenon. If it is compared with Indian and Chinese manifestations, liberty proves in both these realms of culture to be devoid of any basic principle and lacking the continuity of a people, fortuitous and personal.”<sup>81</sup> Recalling Hegel's judgement on Asian despots, this denigration of the political thought of Asia's great cultures needs to be corrected today, as the intercultural debates on human rights show. The question of humanity's future is for Jaspers encapsulated in “the historical question of whether something like political freedom, having its source in the West, will or will not become a reality for the education of the whole of mankind.”<sup>82</sup> Or in other words: “These mighty, but still largely passive powers give rise to the question: Will the peoples conscious of liberty, numbering at most a few hundred million, be able to bring conviction to the spirits of more than two thousand million others, and enter with them into a free, legal world community?”<sup>83</sup>

78 Cf. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations*; Árnason, *Civilizations in Dispute*.

79 Vgl. dazu Roetz, *Die Achsenzeit im Diskurs der chinesischen Moderne*, pp. 68–72.

80 Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, p. 153.

81 Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, p. 170.

82 Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, p. 170.

83 Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, p. 203.

For Jaspers, creating a federal system comprised of collaborating free democratic states has a shadow side that demands consideration: the colonialism of the modern age where European powers, for the first time in the history of mankind, established a civilization that exercised hegemony over all other peoples and cultures: "This colonization ushered in an age of horror for all the peoples on Earth. A spirit of greed, ruthlessness, and tyranny became general [...] Decisive for this colonial age was the fact that Europeans did not regard non-Europeans as human beings like themselves."<sup>84</sup> The consequence of centuries of racism and colonial violence "was a hatred of Europeans by all other nations on Earth."<sup>85</sup> If this were not enough, other aspects of European hegemony have long-term damaging ramifications. Europe has "solved" its problem of rapid population growth, caused by the Industrial Revolution, by launching mass emigration to the colonies, a strategical option that is however denied postcolonial states today. Jaspers poignantly underlines this distinctive historical "right": "Now, Earth has been distributed. There is no more freedom to move. Globally speaking, this freedom of movement had been a Western prerogative."<sup>86</sup> For this reason, the demographic and social problems arising from industrialization can only be solved by recognizing the territorial boundaries of existing states. From this perspective it is clear that Hitler's war was a belated colonial war: "The slogan of a "nation without space" confers no right; it simply means war."<sup>87</sup>

The geopolitical constellation is meanwhile very different. After 1945, as Jaspers emphasizes, Europe had irretrievably lost its hegemonic position. World politics is now determined by the nuclear powers, the USA and the Soviet Union. The invention of the atom bomb, making the technological self-destruction of humanity a very real possibility, lends the global struggle between democracy and totalitarianism a completely new dimension:

In the past, the worst disasters could not kill mankind. Multitudes, whole nations, guilty or not guilty, perished; others survived and forgot [...] Now, however, man can no longer afford disaster without the consequence of universal doom—an idea so novel, as a real possibility, that we hesitate to think it through. It takes an effort just to put it into words.<sup>88</sup>

---

84 Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 69.

85 Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 70.

86 Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 68.

87 Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 68.

88 Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 318.

In the age of the atom bomb, for Jaspers the question, formulated more than ten years before Hans Jonas, is: why should the human species even continue to exist?<sup>89</sup> This question not only goes beyond the boundaries of traditional ethics, which had unquestioningly simply presupposed the existence of humankind, but also the categories used in political philosophy up to now, namely the intellect and reason: "If we expect anything from the simple intellectual thoughts called reason, we are concealing the terminal situation from ourselves. We believe in a reason that would be no more than purposive intellect."<sup>90</sup> Jaspers analyzes in detail how the imminent catastrophe can be thought and elaborated on with post-metaphysical means, from technological solutions to political strategies and through to fatalistic repression and illusionary hopes for new leaders and prophets. The conclusion is sobering: "The use of existing weapons will not be dependably confined by the workings of mere intellect."<sup>91</sup>

Jesus told his disciples: 'Behold, the kingdom of God is within you' — it is here. So it is to philosophical thinking: what counts is the reality of the eternal, the way of life and action, as encompassing immortality. This presence of eternity may result in mankind's rescue from suicide. And in this presence, even if reason and existence fail, hope will remain.<sup>92</sup>

### Bibliography

- Árnason, Johann P.: *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions*. Leiden: Brill 2002.
- Bollnow, Otto Friedrich: *Die Lebensphilosophie*. Berlin: Springer 1958.
- Bergson, Henri: *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, R. Ashley Audra/Cloudsley Brereton (transl.), with the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1977.
- Bergson, Henri: *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, T.E. Hulme (transl.), John Mullarkey/Michael Kolkman (ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007.
- Camus, Albert: *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, A. Bower (transl.). New York: Vintage Books 1956.
- Eisenstadt, Shmuel N.: *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities*. Leiden: Brill 2003.

89 Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*.

90 Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 60.

91 Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 60.

92 Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 342.

- Foucault, Michel: *The Political Technology of the Individuals*, in: Michel Foucault/Martin H. Luther/Huck Gutman/Patrick H. Hutton (ed.): *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press 1988, pp. 145–162.
- Habermas, Jürgen: *Justification and Application*. Remarks on Discourse Ethics, C. Cronin (transl.). Cambridge: MIT Press 1994.
- Jaspers, Karl: *Max Weber. Gedenkrede*, in: Karl Jaspers: *Aneignung und Polemik. Gesammelte Reden und Aufsätze zur Geschichte der Philosophie*, Hans Saner (ed.). München: Piper 1968.
- Jaspers, Karl: *Philosophical Autobiography*, in: Paul A. Schilpp (ed.): *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*. New York: Tudor Publishing Company 1957, pp. 3–94.
- Jaspers, Karl: *The Origin and Goal of History*, Michael Bullock (transl.). New Haven: Yale University Press 1953.
- Jaspers, Karl: *Reason and Existenz*, William Earle (transl.). New York: Noonday 1955.
- Jaspers, Karl: *On my Philosophy*, in: Walter Kaufmann (ed.): *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*. New York: Meridian Books 1960, pp. 1–29.
- Jaspers, Karl: *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, E.B. Ashton (transl.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1961.
- Jaspers, Karl: *Erneuerung der Universität, August 1945*, in: Karl Jaspers: *Hoffnung und Sorge. Schriften zur deutschen Politik 1945–1965*. München: Piper 1965, pp. 31–40.
- Jaspers, Karl: *Kants „Zum ewigen Frieden“ (1957)*, in: Karl Jaspers: *Aneignung und Polemik. Gesammelte Reden und Aufsätze zur Geschichte der Philosophie*, Hans Saner (ed.). München: Piper 1968, pp. 205–232.
- Jaspers, Karl: *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, E.B. Ashton (ransl.). London: Collins 1967.
- Jaspers, Karl: *Leonardo, Descartes, Max Weber. Three Essays*, Ralph Manheim (transl.). New York: Routledge 2009.
- Jaspers, Karl: *Nikolaus Cusanus*. München: Piper 1964.
- Jaspers, Karl: *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*, C. F. Wallrarl/F. J. Schmitz (transl.). Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press 1965.
- Jaspers, Karl: *The Question of German Guilt*, E.B. Ashton (transl.), with a new introduction by Joseph W. Koterski. New York: Fordham University Press 2001.
- Joas, Hans: *Transzendenz als reflexive Sakralität. Die ‚Achsenzeit‘ als Einschnitt in der Religionsgeschichte*, in: Hans Joas: *Die Macht des Heiligen. Eine Alternative zur Geschichte von der Entzauberung*. Berlin <sup>2</sup>2017, pp. 279–354.
- Jonas, Hans: *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age*, H. Jonas/D. Herr (transl.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1984.

- Kaegi, Dominic: *Was ist metaphysische Schuld?*, in: *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Karl-Jaspers-Gesellschaft* (14/2000), pp. 9–39.
- Lukács, Georg: *The Destruction of reason*, Peter Palmer (transl.). London: Merlin 1980.
- Nicholas de Cusa: *De Visione Dei*, in: Jasper Hopkins (ed.): *Complete philosophical and theological treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*. Vol. 2, Minneapolis: AJ Banning Press 2001, pp. 677–743.
- Ortega y Gasset, José: *The Modern Theme [El Tema de Nuestro Tiempo(1923)]*, James Cleugh (transl.). New York: W.W. Norton 1933.
- Roetz, Heiner: *Die Achsenzeit im Diskurs der chinesischen Moderne*, in: *Polylog – Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren* (38/2017), pp. 63–80.
- Salamun, Kurt: *Karl Jaspers. Arzt, Psychologe, Philosoph, politischer Denker*. Stuttgart: Metzler 2019.
- Schelkshorn, Hans: *Hobbes und die Folgen. Zur Genese und Transformation des naturalistischen Projekts der Moderne*, in: Wilfried Griesser (ed.): *Reduktionismen – die Antworten der Philosophie*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2012, pp. 207–237.
- Schüßler, Werner: *Chiffre als Sprache der Transzendenz. Ist Karl Jaspers ein „Negativer Theologe“?*, in: Werner Schüßler (ed.): *Wie lässt sich über Gott sprechen? Von der negativen Theologie Plotins bis zum religiösen Sprachspiel Wittgensteins*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2008, pp. 235–255.
- Victor, Oliver: *Kierkegaard und Nietzsche. Initialfiguren und Hauptmotive der Existenzphilosophie*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2021.
- Weidmann, Bernd: *Absolute Solidarität – metaphysische Schuld – bedingte Solidarität*, in: *Jahrbuch der Österr. Karl-Jaspers-Gesellschaft* (16/2003), pp. 25–75.
- Weidmann, Bernd: *Einleitung: eine philosophische Ethik von Karl Jaspers?*, in: Bernd Weidmann (ed.): *Existenz in Kommunikation. Zur philosophischen Ethik von Karl Jaspers*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2004, pp. 10–20.





# Overcoming Nishitani

## *Nihilism and Nationalism in Keiji Nishitani's Political Philosophy of Religion*

*Fabian Völker*

### Abstract

The article concerns, on the one hand, the crucial question of whether there is an internally consistent relation between Nishitani's individual philosophical endeavour of overcoming nihilism by existentially realizing a "subjectivity of no-self" and his collective political enterprise of overcoming Western modernity by creating a Japanese "state of no-self"; on the other hand, the equally pivotal question is addressed of whether Nishitani's position has substantially evolved or was significantly altered over the course of his intellectual development so that Nishitani's earlier political vision and his elaborated philosophy of religion are no longer compatible. By unravelling Nishitani's argument and engaging critically with its Buddhist presuppositions, the article argues that he failed to solve man's existential dilemma and offer a philosophically convincing alternative to nihilism. Furthermore, Nishitani could never satisfactorily resolve the contradiction between his inherently cosmopolitan philosophy of emptiness and his lifelong commitment to cultural essentialism and nationalism.

### Keywords

Kyōto School; Nishitani Keiji; Buddhist Philosophy; Nihilism; Nationalism; Ethics

### 1 A Starting Point in Nihilism and Nationalism

The abiding purpose and primary thrust of Keiji Nishitani's (1900–1990) multifaceted philosophical endeavor was the "overcoming of nihilism by way of passing through nihilism"<sup>1</sup> (*nihirizumu o tōshite no nihirizumu no chōkoku*). Two autobiographical sketches make retrospectively apparent the fact that the underlying concern that existentially motivated and permanently shaped his philosophy was his resolute engagement with the bottomless abyss of meaninglessness that he personally encountered while still in his adolescent years.

---

1 See *Nihirizumu* (1949–1972), in: Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, p. 90.

In his concise memoir *The Days of my Youth* (*Watakushi no seishun jidai*), that was published as part of a collection of his essays entitled *The Heart of the Wind* (*Kaze no kokoro*) in 1980, Nishitani declared that his life at that time “lay entirely in the grips of nihilism and despair (*mattaku kyomu no uchi ni ari, zetsubō no uchi ni atta*)” and his decision to study philosophy was “in fact – melodramatic as it might sound – a matter of life and death (*ōgesa no yō de aru ga, jissai ni ikishini no mondai de atta*).”<sup>2</sup> In his reminiscences he mentions an inchoate but overpowering sense of lack and alienation that vexed him in this phase of “pre-philosophical nihilism”<sup>3</sup>, where everything lost its necessity and utility and his very existence and human life seemed ultimately meaningless.<sup>4</sup> Voided of a metaphysical foundation, the profound and existentially probing problem of nihilism, which served as Nishitani’s *Philosophical Starting Point* (*Watakushi no tetsugakuteki hossokuten*, 1963), gradually came to include “everything”.<sup>5</sup> What dawned on Nishitani throughout these years as a lingering doubt and dismal foreboding of utmost significance converted into a singular quintessential certainty in his later years as a philosopher: “Our human life is established on the base of an abyss of death.”<sup>6</sup>

However, rather than trying to restore God to the universe, retrieve meaning, and recuperate existential security by clinging tenaciously to past philosophical ideas and lost certainties, Nishitani vehemently criticized these futile and stillborn attempts, essentially holding that all philosophical systems before him had to be “thrown away”.<sup>7</sup> There was no philosophical option left that was rationally justifiable and could conclusively provide any existential consolation or absolve Nishitani from his conviction of the utter nullity of life. Thus, it became inevitable for him to follow the nihilist path and its inherent logic of universal ruin and negation to its very end, where it would eventually ruin and negate itself and thus make room for a more thorough and comprehensive affirmation. Tragically, however, Nishitani could not find any “peace of mind

2 *Watakushi no seishun jidai* (1980), in: *Nishitani Keiji chosakushū* (= NKC) XX, p. 176. See Nishitani, *The Days of My Youth*.

3 *Watakushi no tetsugakuteki hossokuten* (1963), in: Nishitani, *The Starting Point of my Philosophy*, p. 27.

4 “I felt a place of emptiness somewhere in my mind. Yes, emptiness. A lack.” Nishitani, *Walking the Waves*, p. 26. See *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 3. On David R. Loy’s immersive analysis of this “lack”, see Völker, *Philosophie der Nondualität*, pp. 53–55, 206–208, 464–580.

5 *Watakushi no tetsugakuteki hossokuten* (1963), in: Nishitani, *The Starting Point of my Philosophy*, p. 29.

6 *Kagaku to Zen* (1960), in: Nishitani, *Science and Zen*, p. 113.

7 Nishitani, *Walking the Waves*, p. 22.

[by] just reading books”<sup>8</sup> and came to a “dead end”<sup>9</sup> within himself that he could not possibly escape no matter how much philosophy he did. Firmly meditating and resolutely ruminating the disruptive, nihilist challenge was apparently not enough to sufficiently counter it. The highly articulate, but abstract rational reasoning and affectless analytical reflections of philosophy needed to be accompanied and complemented by spiritual practice to facilitate personal transformation and ultimately overcome nihilism. Consequently, Nishitani did not experience any kind of existential breakthrough until he began practicing zazen at the Shōkoku-ji temple in northern Kyōto under Taikō Yamazaki (1875–1966), effectively coalescing philosophy and Zen in living synthesis.<sup>10</sup> Thus, only the indissoluble affiliation and reciprocal enrichment of theory and practice eventually rendered him capable to energetically achieve his ultimate existential objective.

Before Nishitani could intellectually engage with nihilism (*Nihirizumu*, 1949) and draft his magnum opus *What is Religion?* (*Shūkyō to wa nanika*, 1961) that would be eagerly received as one of the most important and influential philosophies of religion in the 20th century, he was overtaken by historical events. After studying diligently under Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) in Freiburg from 1937 through 1939, he returned to Japan that was already engaged in the Second Sino-Japanese War that would eventually escalate into the “Greater East Asia War” (*Dai Tōa Sensō*) when the Japanese military bombed the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in the early morning hours of December 7th, 1941. As Nishitani actively endorsed Japan’s alleged anti-colonial imperial expansion and egregious wartime aggressions as part of a larger ideological or “Total War” (*sōryoku sen*) aimed to unify all dimensions of human life in order to relentlessly break the West’s colonial hegemony and liberate East Asian nations from one-sided Western forms of modernization and globalization, he felt the pressing urge to relate his emerging philosophical “standpoint of subjective nothingness” (*shutaiteki mu no tachiba*) to the nation and deliberately expand its reach and potential by looking to political philosophy, as he professed in his first book-length monograph *View of the World, View of the Nation* (*Sekaikan to kokkakan*) published in 1941.<sup>11</sup> His politically shortsighted wartime writings abundantly

8 Nishitani, *An Interview with Keiji Nishitani*, p.3.

9 Nishitani, *An Interview with Keiji Nishitani*, p. 5.

10 “Whatever you do then is done within Zen.” Nishitani, *An Interview with Keiji Nishitani*, p. 5. On Nishitani’s Zen practice, see Horio, *The Zen Practice of Nishitani Keiji*.

11 See Heisig, *Nishitani Keiji and the Overcoming of Modernity*, p. 321. Most of Nishitani’s political thought can be found in the following wartime writings: Nishitani’s *Philosophy of Elemental Subjectivity* contains his controversial take on *The Modern Spirit* (*Kindai seishin*) and *The Spirit of the Hitler-Movement* (*Hittorā undō no seishin*). Besides publishing *View of*

reveal his apparently genuine, but alarmingly naïve hope that the brutal reality of the Pacific War with all its unspeakable horrors and attendant moral evil would eventually lead to a renewed and reinvigorated Japanese identity as self-proclaimed leader and liberator of the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” (*Dai Tōa Kyōeiken*) and usher in a new world order beyond Western imperialism and colonialism.<sup>12</sup>

There has been a longstanding and international controversy concerning the wartime political philosophy of the Kyōto school in general, and Nishitani’s political discourses in particular.<sup>13</sup> Did Nishitani offer a “thinly disguised justification” for “Japanese aggression and continuing imperialism” defining “the philosophic contours of Japanese fascism”<sup>14</sup>, as Harry D. Harootunian and Tetsuo Najita (1936–2021) charge him with; or were his writings expressive of a “definite internationalism”<sup>15</sup> that subversively aimed to “overcome ideas of

---

*the World, View of the Nation* (*Sekaikan to kokkakan*) in 1941 and an essay on *The Philosophy of World History* (*Sekaiishi no tetsugaku*) in 1944, Nishitani participated in several notorious wartime symposiums along with other central figures of the Kyōto school like Masaaki Kōsaka (1900–1969), Iwao Kōyama (1905–1993), Shigetaka Suzuki (1907–1988), and Toratarō Shimomura (1902–1995). His contributions to the infamous roundtable discussions on *The World Historical Standpoint and Japan* (*Sekaiшитеki tachiba to nihon*, 26 November 1941), *The Ethicality and Historicity of the East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere* (*Tōa kyōeiken no rinrisei to rekishisei*, 4 March 1942), and *The Philosophy of Total War* (*Sōryokusen no tetsugaku*, 24 November 1942) that took place in Kyōto were serially published in the *Chūōkōron* (*Central Review*) magazine and later as a monograph under the title *The World Historical Standpoint and Japan* in 1943. See Horio, *The Chūōkōron Discussions*. Between the second and the third session, Nishitani participated in yet another symposium on *Overcoming Modernity* (*Kindai no chōkoku*) that took place in Tōkyō on 23 and 24 July 1942 and was organized and published by the literary journal *Bungakukai* (*Literary World*). See Minamoto, *The Symposium on “Overcoming Modernity”*. However, his written contribution *My View on “Overcoming Modernity”* (*Kindai no chōkoku shiron*) was omitted from his *Collected Writings* (NKC).

- 12 It should be constantly born in mind that the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy perpetrated numerous war crimes while “liberating” the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” from colonial rule, including mass executions, sexual slavery, starvation, forced labor, human experimentation, and the use of chemical and biological weapons, which resulted in tremendous suffering and the deaths of millions of people. It is, of course, possible, albeit highly improbable, that “Japanese intellectuals like Nishitani [...] knew little” about the war crimes “committed in the name of the Japanese emperor”, as Bernard Faure claims. Faure, *The Kyoto School and Reverse Orientalism*, p. 257. However, I am not aware that any proof has been brought forward that Nishitani was informed about them.
- 13 A reconstruction of the existing scholarly discourse is beyond my purview here. See Maraldo, *The War Over the Kyoto School*.
- 14 Harootunian/Najita, *Japanese revolt against the West*, p. 741.
- 15 Parkes, *The definite Internationalism of the Kyoto School*, p. 161.

ultranationalism from within”<sup>16</sup>, as Nishitani himself states his motivations for his political philosophy in an afterword appended to a reprint of *Sekaikan to kokkakan* in 1946? Did he knowingly engage in a “thought war” (*shisōsen*), “oppositional collaboration”<sup>17</sup> (*hantaisei-teki kyōryoku*), “Tug-of-War over Meaning”<sup>18</sup> and covert “civil war’ against ultra-nationalist and imperialist interpretations of the state-sanctioned terminology”<sup>19</sup> representative of his dissenting attitude towards Japan’s wartime regime, as Ryōsuke Ōhashi, Shizuteru Ueda (1926–2019), and Christopher Goto-Jones argue, rejecting the allegation of “war-time collaboration” (*sensō kyōryoku*) levelled against Nishitani’s mentor and patriarch of the Kyōto school Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945); or were his repeated warnings against colonial acquisition merely “apparent”<sup>20</sup> and his endorsement of the Japanese war effort as “anti-colonial imperialism”<sup>21</sup> simply disingenuous as his repeated usage of expansionist propaganda slogans like “the eight corners of the world under one roof”<sup>22</sup> (*hakkō ichiu*) suggests, as Richard Calichman insists? In 2001 Ōhashi published the so-called “Ōshima Memos” taken by Yasumasa Ōshima (1917–1989) during several secret meetings during the war between a group of scholars, including Nishitani and other Kyōto school philosophers as regular participants, and members of a faction of the Imperial Navy affiliated with Mitsumasa Yonai (1880–1948).<sup>23</sup> Do these documents conclusively show that Nishitani, while risking arrest and imprisonment, was initially trying “to prevent war from breaking out” and rectify the increasingly aggressive politics of Prime Minister Hideki Tōjō (1884–1948)? Did he, after the war had broken out, deliberate on “how to bring the War to a favorable end as soon as possible by way of rationally persuading the Army”, even discussing the necessity of “toppling the Tōjō regime and reestablishing the Yonai regime”<sup>24</sup>, as Ōshima, Ōhashi, and David Williams claim in order to vindicate Ōhashi’s mentor Nishitani and the Kyōto school; or do the actual documents neither contain anything “that would testify to the Kyoto School’s

16 *Sekaikan to kokkakan* (1941), in: Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, p. 331.

17 See Ōhashi, *Kyōtōgakuha to Nihon kaigun*, pp. 20–22.

18 Ueda, *Nishida, Nationalism, and the War in Question*, p. 90.

19 Goto-Jones, *Political Philosophy in Japan*, p. 1 et seq.

20 Calichman, *Overcoming Modernity*, p. 34.

21 Maraldo, *Revisiting Rude Awakenings*, p. 12.

22 See *Kindai no chōkoku’ shiron* (1942), in: Nishitani, *My Views on “Overcoming Modernity”*, p. 61.

23 See Ōhashi, *Kyōtōgakuha to Nihon kaigun*.

24 *Daitōa sensō to Kyōto gakuha* (1965), in: Ōhashi/Akitomi, *The Kyoto School*, p. 371. See Ōshima, *Daitōa sensō to Kyōto gakuha*, and Williams, *The Philosophy of Japanese Wartime Resistance*, pp. 40–51.

prewar efforts to prevent the Pacific war” nor “much about any specific actions to overturn the Tōjō cabinet”<sup>25</sup>, as Takeshi Kimoto counters?<sup>26</sup>

However, whether we read Nishitani as a philosopher of “genuine globalism”<sup>27</sup> or “Japanese fascism”<sup>28</sup>, the fundamental principles of Nishitani’s political philosophy of religion deserve critical attention and remain insufficiently examined for their internal coherence as well as their mutual consistency to yield a unified philosophical perspective. We are concerned here with a double issue: on the one hand, the crucial question of whether there is a substantive, argumentatively coherent and internally consistent relation between Nishitani’s individual philosophical endeavour of overcoming nihilism by existentially realizing a “subjectivity of no-self” (*muga no shutaisei*) and his collective political enterprise of overcoming Western modernity by creating a Japanese “state of no-self” (*muga no kokka*); on the other hand, the equally pivotal question of whether Nishitani’s position has substantially evolved or was significantly altered over the course of his intellectual development so that, as Ruth Kambartel contends, Nishitani’s earlier political vision and his elaborated philosophy of religion are no longer compatible.<sup>29</sup>

Undoubtedly, in directly addressing certain aspects of the human condition that resonate with us even today, Nishitani’s philosophy still speaks to us eloquently. In fact, since his death, the urgency of his trenchant and prescient insight regarding the global upsurge of a concealed and ubiquitous nihilism has arguably rather increased than diminished. This makes it all the more important to subject Nishitani’s Zen Buddhist answer to the nihilist predicament and his moral and political philosophy to critical scrutiny questioning their viability, coherence, legitimacy, and interrelation. Even though Nishitani’s attempt to overcome nihilism as a philosopher and Buddhist practitioner has received a fair amount of scholarly attention, the diverse efforts to analyze and understand Nishitani’s philosophy of religion remained largely

25 Kimoto, *Antinomies of Total War*, p. 100.

26 In view of Ōhashi’s claim that critical images of the Kyōto School have to be “largely corrected through the discovery of the ‘Ōshima Memoranda’” and former critics now need “to remain silent”, it is surprising, to say the least, that no translation of these allegedly crucial documents has been provided to date. Ōhashi/Akitomi, *The Kyoto School*, p. 368; Ōhashi, *Einführung zur zweiten Auflage*, p. 20.

27 Parkes, *The definite Internationalism of the Kyoto School*, p. 164.

28 Harootunian/Najita, *Japanese revolt against the West*, p. 741.

29 See Kambartel, *Religion als Hilfsmittel für die Rechtfertigung einer totalitären Staat-sideologie*, p. 73, 86. According to Kambartel, Nishitani used his philosophy of religion in “support for and justification of a totalitarian absorption of the individual by the state.” Kambartel, *Religion als Hilfsmittel für die Rechtfertigung einer totalitären Staatsideologie*, p. 72.

in favor of his prescribed philosophical and existential remedy. By unravelling Nishitani's argument and engaging critically with its Buddhist presuppositions, I will argue that he failed to solve man's existential dilemma and offer a philosophically convincing alternative to nihilism. As will become further evident, Nishitani could never satisfactorily resolve the contradiction between his inherently cosmopolitan philosophy of emptiness and his lifelong commitment to cultural essentialism and nationalism. Thus, to preserve Nishitani's enduring insights and actually overcome nihilism and modernity, we need to overcome Nishitani by way of passing through Nishitani (*Nishitani o tōshite no Nishitani no chōkoku*).

## 2 Asymmetric, Symmetric, and Existential Nonduality

For analysing Nishitani's philosophy of religion, it might be useful at the outset for purposes of clarity and comparison to differentiate briefly between three types of nonduality: *asymmetric*, *symmetric*, and *existential nonduality*. As I have explained elsewhere in detail, in *asymmetric nonduality*, a transcendent yet immanent reality (A) is posited, which constitutes the indivisible essence of the world and transcends the manifold plurality of ephemeral phenomena (B).<sup>30</sup> Here, (A) is (B) but (B) is not (A) as (A) is utterly independent of (B) while (B) is entirely dependent on (A). A paradigmatic example can be found in Śāṅkara's (ca. 650–780 CE) *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, where Śāṅkara explains that "the effect has the essence of the cause, but the cause has not the essence of the effect (*kāryasya kāraṇātmatvaṃ natu kāraṇasya kāryātmatvaṃ*)" and that "*brahman* is the essential nature (*svabhāva*) of this phenomenal universe (*prapañca*), even though this phenomenal universe is not the essential nature of *brahman* (*brahmasvabhāvo hi prapañco na prapañcasvabhāvaṃ brahma*)."<sup>31</sup> In Buddhist terms, to quote from Dölpopa's (1292–1361) *The Categories of the Possible and the Impossible* (tib. *srid mi srid kyi rab dbye dbu phyogs legs par bzhugs so*), "the undefiled buddha-nature can exist without defilements, but there can be no defilements without that buddha-nature."<sup>32</sup> In (2) *symmetric nonduality*, no such unchanging reality is accepted, so that only two different modes of experience remain: a delusive experience with subject-object

30 See Völker, *The Plurality of Nonduality*.

31 *Brahmasūtraśāṅkarabhāṣya* II, 1, 9 and III, 2, 21, in: Deussen, *Die Sūtra's des Vedānta*, p. 272, 529.

32 *Srid mi srid kyi rab dbye dbu phyogs legs par bzhugs so*, in: Duckworth, *Other-Emptiness in the Jonang School*, p. 487.



duality (C) and an enlightenment experience in which there is neither subject nor object (D). Here, (C) is (D) and (D) is (C), as the famous verse from the *Heart Sūtra* (skt. *prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*; chin. *xīnjīng*; jap. *hannya shingyō*) propounds: “Form is emptiness and emptiness is form” (skt. *rūpaṃ śūnyatā śūnyatāiva rūpaṃ*; jp. *shiki soku ze kū, kū soku ze shiki*). In the nondual experience corresponding to *symmetric nonduality* all structuring is removed from our sensory data and we do not see rugs or hear trucks, but see “patches of color and texture free of rugness and hear sourceless noises”<sup>33</sup>. According to Richard H. Jones, with pure or mystical mindfulness all structuring is removed from our sensory consciousness and inner awareness.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the process of the understanding’s determination of sensibility can not only be radically deconstructed, but actually de-automatized, as Arthur J. Deikman (1929–2013) already demonstrated experimentally in the 1960s.<sup>35</sup> Edward Conze (1904–1979) once aptly described this approach in the context of Buddhism as the attempt “to bring the process back to the initial point, before any “superimpositions” have distorted the actual and initial datum.”<sup>36</sup> In terms of transcendental philosophy, we are dealing with an intuition (*Anschauung*) without concept (*Begriff*), or a meditative return to the pre-categorical and pre-synthetic fact of sensation as the basic epistemic phenomenon, the matter of perception and the actual real in intuition. Without the synthesis of apprehension in intuition and synthesis of reproduction in imagination (*Einbildungskraft*), where the manifold of sensations yielded by affection is represented empirically in perception (*Wahrnehmung*), each particular sensation is in itself an “absolute unity” occurring separately without any protentional or retentive relation to any other “zero-dimensional” sensation.<sup>37</sup> Radical phenomenologists, such as David R. Loy, however, extend this analysis to sensibility and understanding and thus to both lower faculties of knowledge. According to Loy, the Kantian dichotomy between the receptivity of sensibility as the source of intuitions and the spontaneity of the understanding as the source of concepts would thus already be an effect of *prapañca* (“conceptual proliferation”; chin. *xìlùn*; jp. *keron*), which distinguishes irreducibly singular conscious events (*Erlebnisse*)

33 Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism*, p. 15.

34 See Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism*, pp. 349 et seq.

35 Deikman had subjects fix their gaze on a blue vase in order to induce what he called a “de-automatization” of our usual perceptual and cognitive experience resulting in alterations in ego-boundaries and ultimately a breakdown of the usual subject-object differentiation. See Deikman, *Meditations on a Blue Vase*.

36 Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India*, p. 65.

37 On the “zero-dimensionality” of a pre-perceptive sensation, see Bunte, *Erkenntnis und Funktion*, pp. 234–242.

from one another and assigns them to different sources.<sup>38</sup> As Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945) already put it in *Zen no kenkyū* (1911): “Thinking and intuition are usually considered to be totally different activities, but when we view them as facts of consciousness we realize that they are the same kind of activity.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, seen from the transcendental perspective, spiritual practice culminates in what Dōgen describes as “eventful passing” (*kyōryaku*) or absolute experiences of a series of zero-dimensional and mutually unconnected sensations and self-authenticating thoughts.

While these two *cognitive nondualities* refer to enlightenment experiences beyond the subject-object dichotomy, another kind of *existential nonduality* may be consistently introduced, which emerges *after* enlightenment and maintains the subject-object dichotomy as does the Buddhist post-awakening experience or “subsequently attained gnosis” (skt. *pr̥ṣṭhalabdhajñāna*; chin. *hòudézhi*; jp. *gotokuchi*). Here, the phenomenal world appears ecstatically transfigured and is again experienced according to the metaphysics underlying the respective enlightenment experience. Returning from the nondual experience corresponding to *asymmetric nonduality*, all phenomena (*sarvadharmā*) are seen as an illusion (*māyā*), a mirage (*marīci*), dream (*svapna*), hallucination (*pratibhāsa*), echo (*pratisrutkā*), reflection (*pratibimba*), and (reflection) of the moon in water (*udakacandra*), as the post-enlightenment experience of the phenomenal world is depicted in the *Nirvikalpapraveśadhāraṇī*.<sup>40</sup> However, in accordance with his radical phenomenalism, Dōgen did not experience the world as an inessential play of ephemeral phenomena in the unchanging sky of the Absolute (*asymmetric nonduality*), but was “actualized by the ten thousand dharmas”<sup>41</sup> (*symmetric nonduality*), as it is said in the famous Genjōkōan fascicle of the *Shōbōgenzō*. Nishitani likewise, who frequently cites Dōgen affirmatively in his writings and cautiously avoids all reference to ontological transcendence, vividly portrays enlightened existence as a “field of emptiness”<sup>42</sup> (*kū no ba*), where “Existenz [*jitsuzon*] becomes actualized as the dharma-like nature of all phenomena.”<sup>43</sup>

38 See Loy, *Nonduality*, pp. 178–186.

39 *Zen no kenkyū* (1911), in: Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 41.

40 See *Nirvikalpapraveśadhāraṇī*, in: Almogi, *Rong-zom-pa's Discourses on Buddhology*, p. 164. Already Nāgārjuna declared origination (*utpāda*), duration (*sthāna*), and cessation (*bhaṅga*) to be like an illusion (*māyā*), like a dream (*svapna*), like the city of the gandharvas (*gandharvanagara*). See *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* VII, 34, in: Siderits/Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*, p. 88.

41 Kopf, “When All Dharmas Are the Buddha-Dharma”, p. 143.

42 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 99.

43 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 193.

### 3 Overcome by Nihilism

In one of his later essays *On Awareness* (*Kaku ni tsuite*, 1979), Nishitani grounds his philosophy in the most immediate and irreducible facts of experience disclosed in some kind of phenomenalist reduction and offers a transcendental analysis that tracks closely with my own. “Self-realization/self-awareness” (*jikaku*) or “primordial wisdom” (skt. *mūlajñāna*; chin. *gēnběnzhi*; jp. *komponchi*) is here identified as unmediated “sensation-wisdom” (*kankuchi*) and contrasted with Kant’s concept of “sensory intuition.” According to Kant, sensory intuition is not yet any kind of knowledge, but only gives the spatio-temporal manifold to a possible cognition. An intuition without thought is as good as nothing for us, as Kant puts it.<sup>44</sup> Nishitani, however, maintains that we can break through ordinary experience by practicing *zazen* and consciously return to the primal actuality of intuitions that are not blind, but endowed with the character of experientially realized knowledge or to an array of “existential moments” (*uji*), as Dōgen calls it.<sup>45</sup> As fundamental events prior to the alienated separation and mutual mediation of subject and object, these instantaneous flashes of unitary sensations are always unique (*ichidoteki*) and singular (*yuichiteki*) and arise perpetually new in each “here and now” (*ima koko ni*). The discontinuous continuity of these incessantly arising sensations is not only without object, but also without subject, so that authenticating and knowing them means actually realizing and becoming them. In the final analysis, Nishitani argues, there simply is no passive spectator or subject having these immediate sensations and there is no object given in them, but only the “primeval place” (*genshi no tokoro*) of these inherently “self-evident” (*jimeiteki*) and prereflexively self-conscious and self-luminous sensations itself. Following his mentor Nishida, Nishitani calls this “pure” (*junsui*) and “immediate experience” (*chokusetsu keiken*), where actual reality and not some subject is really self-aware of itself (*jitsuzai no jitsuzaitekina jikaku*).<sup>46</sup> However, these evanescent sensations that Nishitani perceives to be the primal and irreducible reality are not generated by things-in-themselves causally affecting the subject’s sensibility. Drawing on Vijñānavāda Buddhism and its cardinal doctrine of “designation” (skt. *vijñaptimātratā*; chin. *wéishí*; jp. *yuishiki*) or “mind-only” (skt. *cittamātra*; chin. *wéixīn*; jp. *yuishin*), Nishitani claims that they are effectively projected from

44 *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), A 111, in: Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 234.

45 “Würde die ‘sinnliche Anschauung’ bei Kant, insofern sie Anschauung heißt, den Charakter des ‘Wissens’ haben, so wäre es das hier gemeinte Wissen.” *Kaku ni tsuite* (1979), in: Nishitani, *Über das Gewahren*, p. 83.

46 See *Kaku ni tsuite* (1979), in: Nishitani, *Über das Gewahren*, p. 85; *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 5.

the inexhaustible source of a self-manifesting and self-determining subliminal layer of the mind (skt. *ālayavijñāna*; chin. *ālàyéshè*; jp. *arayashiki*). Thus, what is really the mind's own unconscious activity is mistaken to be affection by a mind-independent thing existing distinctly from us. Accordingly, this auto-poietic *ālayavijñāna* exclusively gives rise to “our seeing, hearing, perceiving and knowing, our egoistic notions and ego-attachment”<sup>47</sup>, which in turn leave residual karmic impressions (skt. *vāsanā*; chin. *xūnxí*; jp. *kunjū*) or karmic seeds (skt. *bīja*; chin. *zhǒngzǐ*; jp. *shuji*) in the *ālayavijñāna* that again “become the potentialities for new activity in our mind-consciousness.”<sup>48</sup> This mind, however, is not an independently subsisting and immutable substance either, but in itself an (un)conscious and unbifurcated flux of ceaseless change and transformation thoroughly cleansed and purged of all empirical and transcendental subjectivity. As Nishitani already wrote in his first published collection of essays entitled *Philosophy of Elemental Subjectivity* (*Kongenteki shutaisei no tetsugaku*, 1940), the notion that “I am” is at its uttermost depth and most fundamental ground something entirely without foundation.<sup>49</sup> In his later collection of essays published in 1961 as *What is Religion?* (*Shūkyō to wa nanika*) he goes on to categorically declare that thinking, feeling, and action are “entirely illusory appearances with nothing behind them.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, the mental events that constitute the subject (skt. *pudgalanairātmya*; chin. *rénwúwǒ*; jp. *ninmuga*) and those representing an object (skt. *dharmanairātmya*, chin. *fǎwúwǒ*; jp. *hōmuga*) are equally empty. Accordingly, the Buddhist doctrine of “no-self” (skt. *anātman*; chin. *wúwǒ*; jp. *muga*), as Nishitani conceives it, implies that

47 *Zen no tachiba* (1967), in: Nishitani, *The Standpoint of Zen*, p. 18.

48 See *Zen no tachiba* (1967), in: Nishitani, *The Standpoint of Zen*, p. 18; *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 240. Some rudimentary elements towards an Aristotelian rephrasing of the Vijñānavāda notion of *ālayavijñāna* are evident in Nishitani's writings, where he calls the “a priori nondetermination prior to the senses's receiving specific qualifications” *sensus communis* (gr. *koiné aisthesis*) and its power to produce material and mental images “elemental imagination” (*kongenteki kōsōryoku*). *Kū to soku* (1982), in: Nishitani, *Kū to Soku*, p. 212. As he already argued in his *Studies on Aristotle* (*Arisutoteresu ronkō*, 1948), this *sensus communis* is not only the “source of the various sense faculties that have developed into diverse forms”, but also a “particular ability which can distinguish between different varieties of sensation, and therefore stands in the position of an integrator within the entire field of sensation.” *Arisutoteresu ronkō*, in: Ono, *Nishitani's Keiji's Theory of Imagination*, p. 207. For a further elucidation of Nishitani's theory of sensation and imagination, see Deguchi, *Nishitani on Emptiness and Nothingness*, pp. 312–314; Hase, *Emptiness Thought*; Hosoya, *Sensation and Image in Nishitani's Philosophy*; Ono, *Nishitani's Keiji's Theory of Imagination*.

49 See *Kongenteki shutaisei no tetsugaku* (1940), in: Horio, *Nishitani's Philosophy*, p. 22.

50 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 73.

neither thing (*substance*) nor person (*subject*) has any “*subjectum*”<sup>51</sup>, that is, there is nothing permanent and indivisible granting identity to any being. Both subject and object are appearances (*Erscheinung*) of nothing. They are utterly without substrate or foundation and thus mere appearances or illusions (*Schein*). However, based on Nishitani’s *Nishida Kitarō: Sono hito to shishō* (1985), Bernard Stevens has unconvincingly argued that Nishitani’s approving rendition of Nishida’s metaphysical notion of an “unconscious unifying force” (*muishiki tōitsu ryoku*) that functions as ontological principle (*ri*) both at the heart of human consciousness and as “foundation of the universe” (*uchū no konpon*), can persuasively be compared to the Vedāntic identification of *brahman* and *ātman* (*ātmaikatva*).<sup>52</sup> At least in Nishitani’s case, nothing could be further from the truth. Appropriately translated into Hindu metaphysical terms, his conception of absolute reality ultimately amounts to asserting the inscrutable power of Śakti without Śiva, assuming a divine creative potency (*daivī śakti*) without a deity sufficient unto itself possessing it, or maintaining the mutable eternity (*pariṇāmi-nityatva*) of *māyā* while simultaneously denying the immutable eternity (*kūṭastha-nityatva*) of *nirguṇa brahman*.<sup>53</sup> The notion of a deeper dimension of an inalterable substantiality or immanent presence of a transcendent reality posited over and against becoming and characteristic of *asymmetrical nonduality* is not only conspicuously absent from his writings, but repeatedly and explicitly denied. According to Nishitani’s forthright acknowledgement, there is no nonobjectifiable absolute to be grasped in contemplation or intellectual intuition, where the empty and vain world of becoming would altogether vanish away; no substantial and immutable reality underlying the infinite complex of apparitional phenomena in which one could ecstatically lose oneself to attain an ontological identity (*Existenzidentität*) with in deathlike trance (skt. *nirodha samāpatti*; chin. *mièjìndìng*; jp. *metsujinjō*) or essential identity (*Wesensgleichheit*) with in

51 *Religious-philosophical Existence in Buddhism* (1958), in: Nishitani, *Religious-Philosophical Existence in Buddhism*, p. 2.

52 See *Nishida Kitarō: sono hito to shishō*, in: Nishitani, *Nishida Kitarō*, p. 100; Stevens, *Reflections on the Notion of Reality*, p. 11. According to Nishida, “there is a fundamental spiritual principle at the base of reality, and this principle is God. This idea accords with the fundamental truth of Indian religion: Ātman and Brahman are identical.” *Zen no kenkyū* (1911), in: Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 80. However, Nishitani himself explicitly rejected such an interpretation: “[T]he real self might be sought in the union with some absolute being like God, or [...] in the oneness of Brahman and self [...]. Yet in all of these, the standpoint of the true non-ego is still incapable of appearing in complete fashion.” *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 251.

53 See *Vedāntaprabodha* VIII, 9, in: Paramānanda, *Vedānta Prabodha*, p. 78.

mystical union.<sup>54</sup> The dismal conception of the world as ephemeral chimera and illusory formation of pure nothingness which Nishitani sets forth involves a complete and adamant rejection of any such trans-immanent reality including any idea of Buddha nature (skt. *tathāgatagarbha*; chin. *fóxìng*; jp. *bussō*) as unchanging and unified consciousness undergirding the consciousness of change and unifying the mutually unconnected events of Nishitani's phantasmal "sensation-wisdom" (*kankuchi*). In his own words: "[T]here is "nothing" outside the various entities in their unending diversity and total reality at any given moment, just as they are there. They are truly and "in truth" there, precisely because there is "nothing" other than these things themselves."<sup>55</sup>

It does not lack a certain irony that Nishitani's philosophical position, which claims to offer an existential "union with the Life of the universe"<sup>56</sup> and thus professes to be beyond the existential conundrum of nihilism, is best described by paraphrasing Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's (1743–1819) famous charge of nihilism against Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814). Having abandoned Kant's thing-in-itself, Fichte's early *Wissenschaftslehre* had left nothing prior to and external to knowledge reducing everything known to insubstantial fictions. According to Jacobi, Fichte's transcendental theory of knowledge necessarily terminated in nihilism, because there was no being concealed beneath the derealized world of becoming that has to "shine through in the appearances if these are not to be *phantoms-in-themselves* or appearances of nothing."<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, everything outside the egological sphere of Nishitani's "sensation-wisdom" (*kankuchi*) is also "nothing" and every single one of these conscious events is "itself a *phantom*—not just a phantom of something, but a *phantom in itself*, a real nothingness, a nothingness of reality."<sup>58</sup> To quote from Fichte's sometimes verbatim, still ingenious and masterly adaptation of Jacobi's critique in his *Vocation of Man* (1800):

Nowhere is there anything which endures, neither outside of me nor in me, but only ceaseless change. Nowhere do I know of any being, not even of my own. There is no being. *I myself* do not know at all and don't exist. There are *images*: they are all that exists and they know about themselves in the manner of images—images which drift by, without there being anything by which they drift; images which hang together through images; images which do not represent anything, without meaning and purpose. *I myself* am one of these images.

54 See Völker, *Methodology and Mysticism*.

55 *Religious-philosophical Existence in Buddhism* (1958), in: Nishitani, *Religious-Philosophical Existence in Buddhism*, p. 10.

56 *Nishida Kitarō: sono hito to shishō*, in: Nishitani, *Nishida Kitarō*, p. 62.

57 *Letter to Fichte* (1799), in: Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings*, p. 514.

58 *Letter to Fichte* (1799), in: Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings*, p. 512.

No, I am not even that, but only a distorted image of these images. All reality is transformed into a fabulous dream, without there being any life the dream is about, without there being a mind which dreams; a dream which hangs together in a dream of itself.<sup>59</sup>

According to Nishitani, nihilism appears “when not only the world of all finite beings (the world of “phenomena”) is seen to be fundamentally null and thus transcended negatively, but also when the world of eternal being (the world of “essences” conceived after thus negative transcendence) is negated. This double negation elicits a standpoint in which finitude and eternity are one against the backdrop of nothingness. Here finitude becomes a full and final finitude.”<sup>60</sup> However, this final finitude is ultimately left unchallenged as one searches the writings of Nishitani in vain for an absolute that would scathingly expose finite phenomena to be secondary or derivative while ontologically transcending, encompassing and grounding them as unchanging substrate. Eventually, Nishitani conveniently solves the problem of metaphysical nihilism, which as dismal outcome is inevitably entailed in his radical phenomenism, with one bold stroke by declaring the actual problem to be the solution: Since there is nothing beyond or transcendent to the spontaneity and actuality of empty phenomenality, the totality of empty phenomenality is deemed “the most real of realities”<sup>61</sup>: “Precisely because it is *appearance*, and not *something* that appears, this appearance is illusory at the elemental level in its very reality, and real in its very illusoriness.”<sup>62</sup>

Strangely enough though, Nishitani’s elevation of terminal finitude to the rank of the absolute was clearly recognized by fellow Kyōto school philosopher Shōtō Hase, but apparently without the slightest awareness of the fundamental tension between Nishitani’s exasperated claim to overcome nihilism and his simultaneous apotheosis of the impermanent and transient (skt. *anitya*; chin. *wúcháng*; jp *mujō*). Hase openly admits that Nishitani does nowhere offer “being over nothingness, life over death, meaning over meaninglessness”, but unreservedly expounds a philosophy where “bottomlessness” is the “principle of reality” and “a total acceptance of nihility as nihility and meaninglessness as

59 *The Vocation of Man* (1800), in: Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, 63 et seq. Nishitani explicitly claims this nihilistic vision for himself with almost the same words: Phenomena are “phantoms” (*maboroshi*), existence is “phantasmic” (*genjū*), we live a “dream’ within a dream”, the life of human beings is a “phantom dwelling” and the entire universe in fact a “phantom reality – or unreality”, as Nishitani puts it. *Bashō ni Tsuite* (1962), in: Nishitani, *On Bashō*, p. 287 et seq.

60 *Nihirizumu* (1949–1972), in: Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, p. 174.

61 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 71.

62 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 129.

meaninglessness”<sup>63</sup> is the Buddhist path leading to a (pseudo-)transcendence of both in existential emptiness. Nishitani’s relentlessly negative attitude taken towards any kind of being, reason, or transcendental subjectivity and his consistent nullification and oversimplifying psychologization of all absolutes as comforting and veiling fictions is without doubt one of the most significant aspects of his philosophy of religion, but also the most disconcerting and philosophically unconvincing.<sup>64</sup> Certainly, transcending the self-enclosure of the reified ego and dying into the *symmetric nonduality* of empty phenomenality may solve the problem of nihilism existentially for the individual so inclined – which is not at all at issue here and from a purely philosophical point of view completely irrelevant – but theoretically it is certainly not the “overcoming of nihilism by way of passing through nihilism”<sup>65</sup>, but its most insidious metaphysical manifestation. For whether we existentially engage and genuinely become these “mere shadows floating over the void”<sup>66</sup> or despair over them makes no essential difference. From a metaphysical point of view, they are still the selfsame contingent and meaningless shadows floating over the void that opened up “in the spiritual depths of the self and the world.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, Nishitani, who reveals himself to be just as deeply nihilistic as the Nietzschean worldview he originally set out to overcome, perilously relapses into an unconscious nihilism now thinly disguised and superficially rationalized as a Buddhist philosophy of religion that is purportedly beyond “hollow nothingness” or “nihility” (*kyomu*). Ultimately, however, Nishitani’s defeatist philosophy of nihilistic surrender leaves us to the unceasing death of the utterly unsubstantial saṃsāric existence and the bad infinity of empty phenomenality. By erasing every vestige of an ineffable transcendence that exceeds all mundane delimitations and might give unconditional meaning, purpose, dignity, and value to life, his philosophy serves only to solidify and thus unwittingly exacerbate nihilism. This rigorous and thoroughgoing annihilation of everything transcendental, transcendent, and transphenomenal into utter nothingness is indubitably a far cry from the originally joyful message of the Buddha:

63 Hase, *Nihilism, Science, and Emptiness in Nishitani*, p. 145.

64 As Joseph S. O’Leary once insightfully remarked and compellingly argued, Nishitani sees all these variously conceptualized notions of an absolute as just so many failures “to be radically nihilistic”: “In his slighting treatment of Western religious and metaphysical values, Nishitani accepts far too readily the nihilists’ despairing standpoint.” O’Leary, *Review*, p. 570.

65 See *Nihirizumu* (1949–1972), in: Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, p. 90.

66 *Nihirizumu* (1949–1972), in: Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, p. 175.

67 *Nihirizumu* (1949–1972), in: Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, p. 181.



There is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned. If, monks, there were no unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, no escape would be discerned from what is born, become, made, conditioned. But because there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, therefore an escape is discerned from what is born, become, made, conditioned.<sup>68</sup>

Of course, this criticism is by no means new. Already Langdon Gilkey (1919–2004) and Thomas Jonathan Jackson Altizer (1927–2018) levelled similar charges against Nishitani. While Gilkey concedes to Nishitani a world “thoroughly transcended in existential awareness”, he is nevertheless fully aware of the utter “lack of ontological transcendence over the ordinary world of experience and temporal becoming.”<sup>69</sup> For Altizer, however, the “epiphany of absolute emptiness” can only be identified as “absolute nihilism”<sup>70</sup> or – to use Nishitani’s own term here – as “*pan-nihilism*.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, Nishitani’s existentially engaged struggle against nihilism ultimately proves to be a complete philosophical prostration covertly asserting and reinforcing nihilism instead of severely criticizing its infinite lack of being. As if all philosophical options are clearly exhausted or “all previous standpoints in the history of philosophy” are “closed to us”<sup>72</sup>, as Nishitani claims as allegedly self-evident truth; a truth that was already clearly discerned as Nishitani’s dogmatically presupposed “faith in emptiness.”<sup>73</sup> However, his Buddhist crypto-nihilism, which he euphemistically calls “religion of the absolute near side”<sup>74</sup> (*zettaiteki shigan no shūkyō*), helps to explain the deep impact and abiding influence of his writings among equally disillusioned Western philosophers and scholars of religion, who actively and thoroughly colluded in their own subjugation to Nietzsche’s allegedly indisputable, but in fact philosophically highly contestable assumptions and conclusions, however deeply ingrained these tacit anti-metaphysical presuppositions may be. According to a bold statement once made by Jan Van Bragt (1928–2007), who thus aptly expressed the attitude of a large number of Western philosophers uncritically appropriating Nishitani and his most dubious premises, “the West has nowhere to go but in the direction of the Eastern (Buddhist) ideal.”<sup>75</sup>

68 *Udāna* VIII, 3, in: Bodhi, *In the Buddha’s Words*, p. 366.

69 Gilkey, *Nishitani Keiji’s Religion and Nothingness*, p. 67.

70 Altizer, *Emptiness and God*, p. 72 et seq.

71 *Religious-philosophical Existence in Buddhism* (1958), in: Nishitani, *Religious-Philosophical Existence in Buddhism*, p. 11.

72 *Nishida Kitarō: sono hito to shishō*, in: Nishitani, *Nishida Kitarō*, p. 91.

73 Hase, *Nihilism, Science, and Emptiness in Nishitani*, p. 141.

74 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 99.

75 Bragt, *Translator’s Introduction*, p. xxxvii.

Bret W. Davis and Brian Schroeder, who may serve as paradigmatic examples here, have articulated this prematurely defeatist view with all desirable clarity. Being thoroughly stripped of the “comforting vision” of the promise of a “higher field of being”, Davis states not only a generally widespread metaphysical weariness to maintain faith in “visions of transcendence”, but also a pervasive wariness towards ideologies projecting a “safer haven for our egos.” According to Davis, all these “ideals” have been shattered by the “experience of nihilism.”<sup>76</sup> Likewise, Schroeder dismisses “transcendence as the vestige of an oppressive past metaphysics”<sup>77</sup> and expresses his subjective certainty of living in a “postmetaphysical world”<sup>78</sup>, where “Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God implies the impossibility or [...] *nothingness* of such transcendence.”<sup>79</sup> In keeping with Nishitani’s strong phenomenistic and mundane bias, Davis claims in one hasty and unjustifiable generalization that “Buddhism is ultimately a religion [...] of an ‘awakening’ (*bodhi*, *satori*, *kaku*) to the genuinely here and now”, an “originary affirmation of the immanence of everyday life” and quest for “authentic everydayness.”<sup>80</sup> In his equally idiosyncratic and untenable interpretation of Buddhist thought, Schroeder even goes so far as to claim that “Buddhist philosophy as a whole (!) affirms being as illusory in the sense of being absolutely transient.”<sup>81</sup> It is easy to recognize Nishitani’s own unsubstantiated views on Buddhism in these superficial and historically unsound idealizations. In a lecture on the poet Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694), originally delivered in Nagano Prefecture and published in the journal *Shinano Kyōiku* as *Bashō ni Tsuite* in 1962, Nishitani declared in one hyperbolic and overconfident assertion that Buddhism generally denies “an absolute existence or absolute being behind impermanent, changing things.”<sup>82</sup> This ubiquitous bottomlessness of impermanence (*mujō*) is then claimed by Nishitani to be the unmistakable hallmark of an intimately “Japanese sense of impermanence” as part of a distinctively different “ethnic mentality of the Japanese people” and cultural hypostasis called “Eastern Impermanence”<sup>83</sup>, previously reified by Nishitani himself as part of an overtly reductionist East-West-dichotomy espoused by virtually all thinkers of the Kyōto school. Rather unsurprisingly, these exaggerated generalizations receive no support from the

---

76 Davis, *The Step Back Through Nihilism*, p. 154.

77 Schroeder, *Dancing Through Nothing*, p. 44.

78 Schroeder, *Dancing Through Nothing*, p. 60.

79 Schroeder, *Dancing Through Nothing*, p. 47.

80 Davis, *The Step Back Through Nihilism*, p. 152 et seq.

81 Schroeder, *Dancing Through Nothing*, p. 53.

82 *Bashō ni Tsuite* (1962), in: Nishitani, *On Bashō*, p. 280.

83 *Bashō ni Tsuite* (1962), in: Nishitani, *On Bashō*, p. 280 et seq.

vast majority of Buddhist traditions but are rather strongly challenged or even explicitly contradicted by a variety of different Buddhist texts and have therefore no claim to represent Buddhism generally.

#### 4 Even the Deathless may Die: Absorbing Nirvāṇa into Saṃsāra

Evidently, there have been many different conceptions of *nirvāṇa* advocated in the course of Buddhist history, conceptions that are by no means entirely consistent with each other. *Nirvāṇa* has been conceived cosmologically as a “place one can actually go to”<sup>84</sup> (skt. *nirvāṇadhātu*, chin. *nièpánjiè*; jp. *nehan-gai*) – much like the Jain Siddhaśilā situated on top of the universe (*lokākāśa*), where the liberated souls reside in perpetual peace and bliss; ontologically as an unconditioned (skt. *asaṃskṛta*, chin. *wúwéi*; jp. *mu’i*) and supramundane (skr. *lokottara*, chin. *chūshìjiān*; jp. *shusseken*) realm that exists independently from being periodically experienced during an Arhat’s lifetime as the most sublime object of liberating insight and perception;<sup>85</sup> epistemologically as highest truth (*paramārtha-satya*), and transcendently as “objectless (*anārammaṇa*), unsupported (*appatiṭṭhita*), non-manifestive (*anidassana*), infinite (*ananta*), unconstructed (*asaṅkhata*) and stopped (*niruddha*) consciousness.”<sup>86</sup> This transcendental notion of a nonobjectifiable *nirvāṇa*-within as a prereflective and pure consciousness completely devoid of all phenomenal content and utterly lacking in self-conscious subjectivity is also invoked in the *Kevaḍḍhasutta*, where the Buddha is relentlessly questioned about the ultimate ground of being: “Where do earth (*paṭhavī*), water (*āpo*), fire (*tejo*) and air (*vāyo*) find no footing? Where are long (*dīgha*) and short (*rassa*), small (*aṇu*) and great (*thūla*), fair (*subha*) and foul (*asubha*), where are ‘name-and-form’ (*nāma rūpa*) wholly destroyed (*uparujjhati*)?” The Buddha’s answer is unambiguous: “Where consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is unmanifest (*anidassana*), boundless (*ananta*), all-luminous (*sabbatopabha*). With the cessation (*nirodha*) of (intentional) consciousness this is all destroyed.”<sup>87</sup>

84 Lindtner, *The Problem of Precanonical Buddhism*, p. 117.

85 Harvey, “Signless” Meditation in Pali Buddhism, p. 35.

86 Harvey, “Signless” Meditation in Pali Buddhism, p. 44.

87 *Dīghanikāya* XI, see Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 179 et seq. In my interpretation I follow Buddhaghosa (5th cent.), who in his commentary (*Sumaṅgalavilāsini Dīghanikāya-atṭhakathā*) interprets the first *viññāṇa* as the “name of *nibbāna*” and the second *viññāṇa* as “phenomenal consciousness.” See Bhattacharya, *Some Thoughts on Early Buddhism*, p. 27. Another reference to this “unmanifest consciousness” (*anidassana viññāṇa*) that is “infinite” (*ananta*) and “luminous in every way” (*sabbatopabha*) is found

Regardless of what the notion of a luminous mind (skt. *prakṛtiprabhāsvaracitta*; chin. *guāngmíngxīn*; jp. *kōmyōshin*) defiled by adventitious afflictions (skt. *āgantukakleśa*; chin. *kèchén fánnǎo*; jp. *kakujin bonnō*) was originally intended to mean in the Pāli discourses, it was later unambiguously identified as a state of no-mind (*acitta*) or immutable (*avikāra*) and undifferentiated (*avikalpa*) consciousness devoid of empirical subject and object that simultaneously constitutes the ultimate reality (skt. *dharmatā*; chin. *fǎxìng*; jp. *hosshō*) of all *dhar-mas*.<sup>88</sup> Ultimately, some Sūtras associated with Buddha nature thought, like the *Anūnatvāpūrnatvanirdeśaparivarta*, identified the intrinsically pure mind with the “reality realm” or “absolute ground of being”<sup>89</sup> (skt. *dharmadhātu*; chin. *fǎjiè*, jp. *hōkai*) that is equivalent to awakening and thus virtually identical with Buddhahood. According to the *Bhadrapālasreṣṭhiparipṛcchā*, “the element of consciousness (*viññānadhātu*) is completely purified” and “encompasses all things, but it is not tainted by anything”<sup>90</sup>, while the influential *Ratnagotravibhāga* states that “the element of the intrinsically stainless nature of the mind” (*cittaprakṛtivaimalyadhātu*) is “all-pervading” (*sarvatrānugata*), just as the sky (*nabha*), being of indiscriminative character (*nirvikalpātma*), is all-pervading.”<sup>91</sup> Based on passages like these, Paramārtha (chin. Zhēndì, 499–569 CE) came to identify an “immaculate consciousness” (skt. *amalaviññāna*; chin. *amólúóshú*; jap. *amarashiki*) and equated it with the “essential element of emptiness” (skt. *śūnyatādhātu*; chin. *kòngjiè*), the “perfected nature” (skt. *pariṇiṣpanna-svabhāva*; chin. *yúánchéng shíxìng*), the *dharmadhātu*, and “suchness” (skt. *tathatā*; chin. *zhēnrú*), ultimately identifying “the truest pure substance of mind with the truest substance of all things.”<sup>92</sup> There is a whole Tibetan tradition of Mahā-Madhyamaka (tib. *dbu ma chen po*) and “ultimate mind-only” (tib. *don dam pa'i sems tsem*) testifying against Nishitani’s

---

in the *Brahmanimantaṇika-Sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* (49), see Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 428.

88 See *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* 121–122, in: Skorupski, *Consciousness and Luminosity in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*, 51 et seq. For a discussion of the luminous mind in Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka Discourses, see Anālayo, *The Luminous Mind in Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka Discourses*. The *locus classicus* of the notion of a naturally luminous mind is found in the *Aṅguttaranikāya* (I, 10): “Luminous, bhikkhus, is this mind, and it is freed from adventitious defilements.” Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 97.

89 Silk, *Buddhist Cosmic Unity*, p. 38. See Silk, *Buddhist Cosmic Unity*, p. 40.

90 *Bhadrapālasreṣṭhiparipṛcchā* I, 30, in: Liljenberg/Pagel, *The Questions of Bhadrapāla the Merchant*, p. 17.

91 *Ratnagotravibhāga* I, 49, see Radich, *Pure Mind in India*, p. 272.

92 Radich, *The Doctrine of Amalaviññāna*, p. 76. For an analysis of the Indian background to Paramārtha’s *amalaviññāna*, see Radich, *Pure Mind in India*.

“Hīna-Madhyamaka” and “relative mind-only” (tib. *kun rdzob kyi sems tsam*) to the existence of a truly existent (tib. *bden grub*; skt. *satyasiddha*), enduring (tib. *brtan pa*; skt. *dhruva*), immutable (tib. *ther zug*, skt. *śāśvata*), and eternal (tib. *gyung drung*; skt. *sanātana*) ultimate abiding reality or “universal ground wisdom (tib. *kun gzhi ye shes*; skt. *ālaya-jñāna*) that is empty of all relative and self-empty phenomena. As Dölpopa describes this unconditioned and transimmanent ground of “other-emptiness” (tib. *gzhan stong*) in his *Sun elucidating the Two Truths* (tib. *bden gnyis gsal ba'i nyi ma*): “Since the relative does not exist in reality, it is self-empty. It appears to consciousness, but not to wisdom. Since the ultimate exists in reality, it is not empty of itself but is other-empty. It appears to wisdom but never to consciousness.”<sup>93</sup>

These rather randomly chosen textual examples could be multiplied here almost endlessly to provide further ample evidence. They testify to a strong current within Buddhism, where the derivative and contingent reality of empty phenomenality is irreducibly rooted and firmly grounded in a powerful experience of an utterly unchanging and transphenomenal yet radically immanent reality variously conceptualized and conceived in different Buddhist traditions. Even though it has legitimately become something of a truism among scholars to say that one cannot justifiably speak of *the* Buddhist view of *nirvāṇa*, it should be uncontroversial to claim, that a large fraction of Buddhists would forthrightly challenge or frankly deny Nishitani’s openly nihilist pretension of an inescapable and insurmountable yawning “abyss of nihility”<sup>94</sup> lurking and looming beneath the transient actuality of empty phenomenality. In fact, only in a few texts was the idea ever seriously entertained that the salvific message of the Buddha exhausts itself in annihilation, ontological nothingness or a special way of apprehending and enacting an ultimately transcendenceless phenomenality *sub specie vacuī*. According to Harivarman’s (ca. 250–350 CE) *Satyasiddhiśāstra* (chin. *chéngshílùn*; jp. *jōjitsu ron*), that exerted a significant influence upon Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, the complete nonexistence of the five material and mental factors (skt. *pañcaskandha*; chin. *wǐyùn*; jp. *goun*) that constitute a person along with the utter annihilation of all forms of existence is called the consummation of the mark of emptiness and *nirvāṇa*. However, this does not mean that some separate “destruction-dharma”<sup>95</sup> (*kṣaya-dharma*) or *nirvāṇa* as a special state of unobjectifiable existence is retained. Just like a tree that has been reduced to ashes by cutting and burning and whose ashes are blown away by the wind and washed away by water,

93 *Bden gnyis gsal ba'i nyi ma*, in: Duckworth, *Other-Emptiness in the Jonang School*, p. 489.

94 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 229.

95 *Satyasiddhiśāstra* CXCVI, in: Aiyaswami, *Satyasiddhiśāstra of Harivarman*, p. 496.

*nirvāṇa* is said to be the remainderless annihilation of our existence.<sup>96</sup> The *Fó xìng lùn* (jp. *busshōron*), again, declares Buddha nature to be nothing but the perfection of no-self (*anātmāpāramitā*) encompassing the insubstantiality of self and the plethora of things, which are nothing but the incessant fluctuations of emptiness. As Sallie B. King argued in her defence of Buddha nature thought against the objections levelled by Shirō Matsumoto, there are only two ways of perceiving the ontological given according to the author of the *Fó xìng lùn*: “either through the discriminatory patterns of the deluded mind, or with a mind that sees reality as-it-is, without distortion.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, Buddha nature thought would not be indicative of “foundational realism” (*dhātvāda*) that posits a “singular, real locus (*dhātu*) that gives rise to a plurality of phenomena”<sup>98</sup>, as charged by “Critical Buddhism” (*hihan bukkyō*), but synonymous with empty phenomenalism and the corresponding “knowledge and vision that accords with reality as it really is” (skt. *yathābhūtajñānadarśana*; chin. *rúshí zhījiàn*; jp. *nyojitsu chiken*).

## 5 The Trouble with Dōgen

Arguably the most radical and influential expression of Buddhist phenomenalism, however, was given by Dōgen, in whose writings Nishitani immersed himself and whose ideas were more immediately congenial to his clearly stated agenda of establishing the vacuity and nullity of all absolutes.<sup>99</sup> No Buddhist thinker before Dōgen had denied transcendence so audaciously and brazenly against the explicit affirmations of his own tradition. Even according to the statements of his ardent followers, his “creative appropriations”<sup>100</sup> or, more accurately, his “deliberately distorted interpretations and intentional reversals of meaning”<sup>101</sup> thoroughly infused Buddhism “with evanescence”<sup>102</sup> and

96 See Liu, *Madhyamaka Thought in China*, p. 92.

97 King, *The Doctrine of Buddha-Nature is Impeccably Buddhist*, p. 188.

98 Matsumoto, *The Doctrine of Tathāgatagarbha is Not Buddhist*, p. 171.

99 According to the informations gathered by Ralf Müller, Nishitani gave lectures on Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* (*shōbōgenzō kōwa*) at the *International Research Institute for Japanese Studies* (Nishinomiya) from 1965 to 1978. They were first published in the Christian journal *Kyōdai* from 1966 to 1979, reissued in four volumes by the Japanese book publisher *Chikuma Shobō* from 1987 to 1989, and finally included in Nishitani's collected works as volumes XXII and XXIII. See Müller, *The Philosophical Reception of Japanese Buddhism After 1868*, p. 196.

100 Heine, *Dogen*, p. 216.

101 Heine, *Dogen*, p. 111.

102 Heine, *Dogen*, p. 20.

advocated an “uncompromising acceptance of impermanence.”<sup>103</sup> Already a brief reference to Dōgen’s repeated criticism of what he calls the “Śreṇika heresy” (chin. *xiānní wàidào*; jp. *senni gedō*) and emphatically rejects in several fascicles of the *Shōbōgenzō* as a pernicious throwback to the Hindu eternalist notions of an *ātman*, clearly indicates Dōgen’s particularly pervasive influence and tremendous impact on Nishitani’s own understanding of absolute reality. The *locus classicus* for the Śreṇika heresy appears in the *Mahāyānamahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, where the Śreṇika Vatsagotra offers a parable of a burning house resembling the one given by the Buddha in the *Aggivaṇṇasuttanta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*, but with a vastly divergent meaning. Here, the burning house is compared to the impermanent body and its fleeting constituents (*skandha*) that are subject to ultimate dissolution and thus existential frustration (skt. *duḥkha*; chin. *kǔ*; jp. *ku*), whereas the householder is likened to a permanent self (skt. *ātman*; chin. *wǒ*; jp. *ga*) that perpetually abides unaffected even though the house burns entirely to the ground. The Śreṇika heresy subsequently became a recurring motif in Chán-Buddhism, as for example in the *Jīngdé Chuándēnglù* (jp. *keitoku dentōroku*), where Nányáng Huizhōng (jp. Nanyō Echū, 675–775) is recorded to have severely criticised the “mind is Buddha” (chin. *zìxīn shì fó*) doctrine of Mǎzǔ Dào’yī (jp. Baso Dōitsu, 709–788) as indistinguishable from the Śreṇika heresy.<sup>104</sup> According to a saying handed down by Yōngmíng Yánshòu (jp. Yōmyō Enju, 904–975) in his *Zōngjìng lù* (jp. *shūgyōroku*), Mǎzǔ taught that “mind is as long-lived as space” and “never has birth and death.”<sup>105</sup> As part of his decisive dissociation of Buddhism from any kind of enduring transcendence, Dōgen also criticised this putative heresy in his *Bendōwa*, *Sokushin zebutsu*, and *Busshō* fascicles and vehemently opposed it with his own alternative vision: Neither are essence and form divided nor is the body mortal, while the mind endures forever devoid of phenomenal content. Not only is “birth-and-death” (*shōji*) itself *nirvāṇa*, but if we think that life and death are something to get rid of, we will commit the sin of “hating the Buddha-Dharma”<sup>106</sup>, as Dōgen daringly asserts. Dōgen’s enlightenment experience of *shinjin datsuraku* (“casting off body and mind”) accordingly entailed no “immaculate consciousness”, but his body and mind now vividly experienced as empty. With his exclusivist advocacy of empty phenomenality that is all-pervasive in his transcendence-defying writings, Dōgen gave an unprecedented intellectual respectability to radical phenomenism within

103 Heine, *Dogen*, p. 19.

104 See Jorgensen, *Inventing Hui-neng*, p. 625.

105 Jia, *The Hongzhou School of Chan Buddhism*, p. 122.

106 *Shōbōgenzō*, *Bendōwa* fascicle, in: Waddell/Abe 1971, *Dōgen’s Bendōwa*, p. 147.

Japanese Buddhism in general and the Kyōto school in particular, where his writings were extensively received.

This is further substantiated by Dōgen's also highly idiosyncratic but particularly telling interpretation of Buddha nature. In his *Busshō* fascicle Dōgen unceremoniously transforms the dictum of the *Mahāyānamahāparinirvāṇasūtra* that "all sentient beings universally possess Buddha nature without exception" (*issai shujō wa kotogotoku busshō o yusu*) to "all sentient beings, all existence, Buddha nature" (*issai shujō shitsuu busshō*).<sup>107</sup> As Masao Abe (1915–2006) noted in his essay on *Dōgen on Buddha Nature* (1971), this involved "a complete, radical reversal of the relation of Buddha-nature to living beings."<sup>108</sup> Dōgen does not merely pass over the ontological difference between being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiendes*), because he was critically unaware of this crucial difference, "but simply because he deliberately denies the idea of *Sein*, which is apt to be considered as something substantial, as ontologically distinguished from *Seiendes*."<sup>109</sup> Already in his study on the *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples* (1964) Hajime Nakamura (1912–1999) depicted Dōgen as a paradigmatic example of what he saw as "Absolute Phenomenalism."<sup>110</sup> Rejecting "the recognition of anything existing over and above the phenomenal world"<sup>111</sup>, Dōgen meant to say that "the truth which people search for is, in reality, nothing but the world of our daily experience."<sup>112</sup> Again, according to Hen-jin Kim, who is widely recognized for his penetrating analysis in his groundbreaking study *Dōgen Kigen. Mystical Realist* (1975), Dōgen's "entire religion may be safely described as exploration and explication of [...] radical phenomenism in terms of its linguistic, rational, and temporal dimensions."<sup>113</sup> It should be clear from the inevitably brief discussion above that Dōgen consistently conveys that nothing but a deeply realized and pervasive experiential presence of impermanence itself is Buddha nature (*mujōbusshō*) and accordingly rejects any notion of an ontologically privileged and apophatic dimension as a common existential feature that might deliver us from the ever changing world of ephemeral phenomenality as preposterous metaphysical hypostatization ineffacious for soteriological purposes. According to Dōgen, the enlightened is neither *in* nor *of* the world, but rather *is* the decentered empty world of boundless becoming. In the course of this pernicious phenomenalization of Buddhism and

107 See Maraldo, *Negotiating the Divide of Death in Japanese Buddhism*, p. 135.

108 Abe, *Dōgen on Buddha-Nature*, p. 33.

109 Abe, *Dōgen on Buddha-Nature*, p. 47.

110 Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*, p. 351.

111 Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*, p. 350.

112 Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*, p. 351 et seq.

113 Kim, *Eihei Dōgen*, XX.



correlative debasement of transcendence, which arguably reached its unsurpassable nadir with Dōgen, “something momentous was lost”, as van Bragt rightly argued: “the refusal to identify the Absolute with anything this-worldly and with it the ‘absolute’ grounding of the individual.”<sup>114</sup>

However, as Nishitani contends in profound agreement with Dōgen, whose influence upon him is abundantly evident and reverberates throughout his writings, being fully actualized and revived by empty phenomenal-ity is “true transcendence, true infinity, and, in this sense, true nirvāṇa.”<sup>115</sup> In Buddhist terms, emptiness is a non-implicative (*prasajya-pratiṣedha*) and not an implicative negation (*paryudāsa-pratiṣedha*) for Nishitani. While a non-implicative negation expresses simply a commitmentless negation without implying any affirmative alternative, the connotative force of an implicative negation or privation points beyond itself and implies a countervailing affirmation.<sup>116</sup> As Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854) once judiciously identified, “privation is not an unconditional negation, and, on the contrary, always includes in itself an affirmation of only another kind, [...]; no being ( $\mu\eta\ \epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$ ) is not nonbeing ( $\sigma\upsilon\kappa\ \epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$ ).”<sup>117</sup> Thus, when Nishitani speaks of *śūnyatā*, he does not imply the existence of anything that is not empty and could possibly ground his groundless world but defines the unconditioned as mere absence or complete cessation leaving a total void of being. It follows that one of Nishitani’s most cherished scriptural statements from the *Heart Sūtra* – “Form is emptiness and emptiness is form” – conveys definitive (skt. *nītārtha*; chin. *lǐǎoyì*; jp. *ryōgi*) and not provisional meaning (skt. *neyārtha*; chin. *bùlǐǎoyì*; jp. *furyōgi*) for him. It is explicitly true and does not require any further interpretation. Alternatively, in the phenomenalist parlance of Davis, *śūnyatā* is no “apophatic gesture towards an inexpressible transcendent Being” but involves only “the dynamic of emptying our reified representations of beings so as to return us to their phenomenal ‘as isness’.”<sup>118</sup> Thus, despite drawing on the same terminology and concepts, the similarities between Nishitani and much of his Buddhist coreligionists evaporate rather quickly and vastly more significant

114 Bragt, *Kyoto Philosophy–Intrinsically Nationalistic?*, p. 251.

115 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 179.

116 The standard example for an implicative negation provided in Buddhist texts is “The corpulent Devadatta does not eat during the day”, which implies a positive phenomenon, namely, that he eats at night. See *Madhyamakahrdayavṛttitarkajvālā* III, 26, in: Heitmann, *Nektar der Erkenntnis*, p. 124 et seq.

117 “[N]icht Seyn ( $\mu\eta\ \epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$ ) ist nicht Nichtseyn ( $\sigma\upsilon\kappa\ \epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$ ).” *Philosophische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie oder Darstellung der reinrationalen Philosophie* (1847–1952), in: Schelling, *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, p. 288.

118 Davis, *The Step Back Through Nihilism*, p. 158.

differences appear. As Ratnākaraśānti (10th/11th cent.) once remarked in his *Prajñāpāramitopadeśa*, “Yogācāras assert that the fundamental nature of things – mere luminosity (*prakāśamātra*) – exists substantially (*dravyata*), while the Mādhyamikas do not even assert such a substance.”<sup>119</sup> According to Asaṅga (4th/5th cent.), a Buddhist like Nishitani, who steadfastly refuses to affirm a real substance (skt. *dravyasat*; chin. *shíyǒu*; jp. *jitsuu*) and inveterately denies that the mere factuality of knowing and phenomenal being necessarily implies an underlying unchanging and unconditioned ground of both, is to be fiercely criticized as the foremost of nihilists (*pradhāna nāstika*).<sup>120</sup>

In summation, rather than letting his wide-ranging engagement with his Buddhist tradition seriously challenge his own Zen-inspired philosophy of bottomless nothingness, Nishitani predominantly refers to those Buddhist thinkers and texts that conform to his nihilist presuppositions without contradicting them. He seems scarcely interested in a self-critical engagement with his own tradition; nor does he pay much attention to Buddhist philosophers, who would rigorously reject his idea of overcoming *saṃsāra* by becoming it as completely misguided and spiritually deleterious. If we were to follow Nishitani’s philosophy consistently, we would ecstatically “lose ourselves in a bottomless void and find ourselves like hollow, transparent spheres from whose void a voice is speaking, while the cause of it is not to be found within, and in wanting to grasp ourselves we shudder as we catch nothing but an insubstantial phantom”<sup>121</sup>, as Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) once tellingly put it. Nishitani’s singularly bleak proposal to resolutely plunge “into a fleeting world” and unreservedly make “impermanence into existence”<sup>122</sup> might thus not only provoke serious reservations and severe objections even among fellow Buddhists, but inevitably call to mind Bhāskara’s (8th to 9th century)

119 *Prajñāpāramitopadeśa*, in: Apple, *Atiśa and Ratnākaraśānti as Philosophical Opponents*, p. 26.

120 See *Bodhisattvabhūmi (Tattvārthapaṭala)*, in: Salvini, *Language and Existence in Madhyamaka and Yogācāra*, p. 29. According to Paul Williams’ penetrating analysis, for a follower of Yogācāra “the conclusion that Madhyamaka amounted to nihilism did not rest on a misunderstanding of Madhyamaka (a failure to understand that emptiness does not equal nothing at all, but is an equivalent of dependent origination). It rested rather on an understanding that there is something very strange in maintaining that all is a conceptual construct (i.e., *niḥsvabhāva*). Even if the Mādhyamika says he or she is not a nihilist, in fact, if the Mādhyamika does not accept any *dravya* at all, then he or she is playing with words and must be a nihilist nevertheless.” Williams, *The Reflexive Nature of Awareness*, p. 14.

121 *The World as Will and Representation I* (1859), in: Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, p. 304.

122 *Bashō ni Tsuite* (1962), in: Nishitani, *On Bashō*, p. 285 et seq.

memorable remark on Śaṅkara's advaitic vision of liberation and deliverance: "Better to be a jackal in the forest than this."<sup>123</sup>

## 6 Empty Ethics

Nishitani tries to justify and rationally substantiate the ethical significance and practical applicability of his phenomenalist philosophy of emptiness by identifying his "field of emptiness" (*kū no ba*) as a "field of love toward all living beings, and even toward all things."<sup>124</sup> Since this field extends beyond the realm of living beings to include the whole universe, existentially realizing the "standpoint of emptiness" (*kū no tachiba*) naturally implies to see "one's own self in all things, in living things, in hills and rivers, towns and hamlets, tiles and stones," and accordingly love "all these things 'as oneself'."<sup>125</sup> In contemporary re-narrations of Nishitani's philosophy we are normally given a romantic quote by some exalted Zen-Master at this point, who came to realize clearly, like Dōgen, that mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars, very likely to be followed by a reminder to the obvious deep ecological implications and ramifications of this nondual realization.<sup>126</sup> Unfortunately, however, what is all too often forgotten and usually goes unnoticed in the modern apologetic's habit of trivializing the implicit dangers is that we necessarily also come to realize that mind is no other than tsunamis, hunger, poverty, and disease. Mind is "bleached bones"<sup>127</sup>, as Nishitani puts it, or most clearly manifested in "piss and shit"<sup>128</sup>, as Zhuāng Zhōu (ca. 4th cent. BCE) says. If, according to Nishitani, "all things, just as they are, are dharma-like"<sup>129</sup>, this implies the "dharmic naturalness" (*hōni jinen*) of the greatest and most inhuman cruelties and heinous crimes, like rape, torture, murder, terrorism, and genocide. Alternatively, in the words of Harada Sogaku Dai'un (1871–1961) that reflect his personally realized understanding of

123 Uskokov, *Bhāskara*, p. 242.

124 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 280.

125 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 281.

126 See for example Parkes, *Resources for Ecological Thinking*. Nishitani repeatedly expressed his fundamental approval of what is now discussed as holistic approach to environmental ethics within Buddhism by quoting Dōgen or Kokushi Musō's (1275–1351) dictum that "hills and rivers, the earth, plants and trees, tiles and stones, all of these are the self's own original part." *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 108. For an extended discussion, see Völker, *Philosophie der Nondualität*, pp. 706–714.

127 *Bashō ni Tsuite* (1962), in: Nishitani, *On Bashō*, p. 284.

128 *Zhuāngzǐ* XXII, in: Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*, p. 178.

129 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 191.

Zen Buddhism: “[If ordered to] march: tramp, tramp, or shoot: bang, bang. This is the manifestation of the highest Wisdom [of Enlightenment]. The unity of Zen and war of which I speak extends to the farthest reaches of the holy war [now under way].”<sup>130</sup> In view of such statements and Nishitani’s own romanticized notion of enlightened life as “playful samādhi”<sup>131</sup> (chin. *yóuxì sǎnmèi*; jp. *yuge zammai*), Stephen H. Philipps’ outcry of moral indignation is perfectly comprehensible: “What horrible ‘play’ is sustained by *śūnyatā*, war and all moral evils as well as all the natural evils of disease, pain, and death! [...]. If ‘Emptiness’ may be conceived, with qualifications, as ‘God’, as Nishitani often suggests, then God would hardly appear to be worthy of worship.”<sup>132</sup>

Again, this criticism is by no means new. As Hans Waldenfels already critically stated in his pioneering work *Absolutes Nichts* (1976), “for the man of today, ‘things as they are’ are machines, electricity and atomic power, artificial products and manipulation, as well as hunger and war, infrequent peace, social injustice, political uncertainty, pollution.”<sup>133</sup> Accordingly, Graham Parkes rightly asked, if Nishitani would indeed criticize all human attempts to annihilate the *tubercle bacillus* as a “violation of the Dharma” and if his injunction to love empty phenomenality as oneself actually implies to love “noxious artifacts as plutonium waste.”<sup>134</sup> If we are inextricably and inescapably tied to all phenomena without exception while existentially dwelling in undifferentiated emptiness, as Nishitani consistently claims, then all critical distance between reality and our daily experience of it is obliterated. Thus, Nishitani is undoubtedly confronted with insuperable difficulties to distinguish “the eradication of the polio or smallpox virus from the extinction of the Bengal tiger”<sup>135</sup>, as Thomas P. Kasulis concisely addressed the issue: “From the standpoint of *śūnyatā*, everything is equal.”<sup>136</sup> Nowhere, in fact, does Nishitani provide a systematic explanation, let alone philosophically compelling justification of how Buddhist ethics with all its subtle evaluative distinctions might possibly follow from the distinctionless experience of emptiness; nor does he provide a convincing rationale why this intrinsically amoral experience should manifest itself in compassionate activity and not rather find its appropriate expression in the living conviction of being beyond good and evil and the corresponding bold antinomian transgression of all morality. Robert Charles Zaehner

130 *The One Road of Zen and War* (1939), in: Victoria, *Zen at War*, p. 137.

131 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 253.

132 Philipps, *Nishitani’s Buddhist Response to “Nihilism”*, p. 97.

133 Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness*, p. 117.

134 Parkes, *Resources for Ecological Thinking*, p. 93 et seq.

135 Kasulis, *Whence and Whither*, p. 273.

136 Kasulis, *Whence and Whither*, p. 274.

(1913–1974) already clearly recognized and ruthlessly exposed the striking resemblance between Buddhist thinkers like Nishitani and Charles Manson (1934–2017), who claimed to have had a profound “enlightenment” experience which “transported him into an eternal Now in which time was transcended and in which, therefore, all the opposites which confront us on earth were seen to be either non-existent or identical.”<sup>137</sup> In the words of Manson himself: “If God is one, what is bad?”<sup>138</sup> As the controversial debate between David R. Loy and Brook A. Ziporyn has likewise shown, the indiscriminate experience of emptiness does not teach us what is “good” and what is “bad”, why Jesus or Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926–2022) were inherently better persons than Josef Stalin (1878–1953) or Adolf Hitler (1889–1945), and a human being is intrinsically more valuable than a gorilla or a tree, because the “absolutely transcendent near side”<sup>139</sup> (*zettaitekini chōetsutekina shigan*) of undifferentiated emptiness transcends the autonomous subject guided by practical reason and nullifies the validity of all ethically relevant differences.<sup>140</sup> Instead of providing a convincing ground for Buddhist ethics and a standard by which good and evil actions can be measured and judged, Nishitani offers us a naturalistic fallacy of cosmic proportions: “Here [within the world-nexus; F.V.] ‘as it is’ and ‘as it ought to be’ are one and the same.”<sup>141</sup>

Ultimately, there is nothing in Nishitani’s thought that would prevent any Buddhist practitioner following its impeccable logic to disavow all restrictions of orthodox Buddhist ethics but the naïve Buddhist narrative that with enlightenment “the roots of immoral behaviour are entirely eradicated and the virtue of the enlightened one has become perfect,”<sup>142</sup> as Perry Schmidt-Leukel once appropriately framed it. The manifest fallacy consists in assuming that experiencing emptiness would dictate a certain automatism of behaviour or automatically entail the embrace of specific philosophical or political positions. This apologetic myth, however, has been thoroughly refuted by all those morally corrupt Zen masters, who have been ritually recognized as genuinely enlightened by their sectarian traditions and yet manifested the veracity of their nondual union with the cosmos by alcoholism, misogyny, sexual abuse, ultranationalism, racism, antisemitism, warmongering, and other deeds

137 Zaehner, *Our Savage God*, p. 12.

138 Zaehner, *The City within the Heart*, p. 35.

139 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 90.

140 See *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, pp. 272–280. See Völker, *Philosophie der Nondualität*, pp. 712–714.

141 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 260.

142 Schmidt-Leukel, *Understanding Buddhism*, p. 64.

expressive of their idiosyncratic inclinations, anxieties, and obsessions.<sup>143</sup> The radically antinomian element in Zen Buddhism and the fundamental compatibility of Zen awakening with inhuman ideologies had, in turn, been openly and unapologetically conceded by Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki (1870–1966) in *Zen Buddhism and its Influence on Japanese Culture* (1938). According to Suzuki, Zen can in principle adapt to almost any political ideology with great pliability and be on friendly terms with anarchist, fascist, communist, or democratic ideals, in short: with any political dogma including the totalitarian militarism of imperial Japan.<sup>144</sup> Apparently, the realization of emptiness is not necessarily accompanied by a spontaneous and effortless outflow of indiscriminate love (*musabetsu no ai*) towards all living beings and nature nor do ethical norms ideally “well up spontaneously from the deepest, pure core where the self is one with emptiness.”<sup>145</sup> In fact, there is no possible connection between the experience of emptiness and critical ethical discernment and there can in principle be no logical entailment between the two. What Nishitani gave up with the irreducible dignity and autonomy of the moral subject, emptiness cannot recover: The “normative base has been taken away with nothing to

143 See Völker, *Philosophie der Nondualität*, pp. 49 et seq, 75–86, 409–415. Even though this narrative is no longer tenable or conscientiously justifiable, Jason M. Wirth, who is apparently undeterred by such critical objections, still wants us to see “Nishitani’s Great Death” as a serious response to the “unfolding ecological catastrophe.” Wirth, *The Great Death and the Pure Land*, p. 30. He does this, however, without even mentioning the longstanding scholarly debate within Buddhism with its fundamental objections to the invocation of extreme holism in the field of environmental ethics. See Völker, *Philosophie der Nondualität*, pp. 706–714.

144 See Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and its Influence on Japanese Culture*, p. 36.

145 Bragt, *Kyoto Philosophy—Intrinsically Nationalistic?*, p. 254. See Völker, *Philosophie der Nondualität*, p. 408. While Abe is willing “to part company with Nishitani”, because he flatly conflates *is* with *ought* and does not sufficiently cope with a “possibility of disobedience to logos or dharma on the axiological dimension”, his “answer”, however, offers no solution, but the unsubstantiated assertion that suchness implies value judgements, because each “human being is more important than a rock *not to God nor to the human self, but to absolute no-thingness*.” Abe, *Will, Śūnyatā, and History*, p. 298. Nor can this problem be solved by merely referring to the doctrine of the two truths or the claim that the conventional realm of worldly “veiled truth” and moral conduct is re-established after enlightenment, for Abe presents no principle as conventionally true from which the Buddhist canon of ethical rules could have possibly been derived from in the first place. See Abe, *God, Emptiness and Ethics*, p. 200 et seq. For his later attempts to reconcile the “vertical dimension” of “individual salvation” (emptiness) and the “horizontal dimension” of “collective emancipation” (ethics), see Abe, *Ethics and Social Responsibility in Buddhism*. Thus, if we cannot possibly derive ethics from the ultimate truth of emptiness, the question still remains: “What principle would guide such ‘non-discriminating discrimination’ (*mufunbutsu no funbetsu*)?” Davis, *Letting God of God for Nothing*, p. 239.

replace it"<sup>146</sup>, as already van Bragt astutely recognized in his short reflection on Nishitani's ethics. Thus, "Critics of Zen" rightfully suggest that "*śūnyatā* seems ill-suited as a basis for a system of ethics."<sup>147</sup> According to Christopher A. Ives, "in viewing good and evil as relative, the philosophy of *śūnyatā* postulates no absolute Good; in taking what might be called a trans-rational approach, it does not speak of a practical reason (or natural law) through which moral direction can be found; it takes ordinary moral judgements to be non-substantial and hence tentative, thereby undercutting attempts to establish universally applicable (deontological) rules."<sup>148</sup>

Fortunately, however, and in spite of the accumulated anti-intellectual prejudices of centuries, the long-overdue realization seems to be gradually gaining ground in contemporary Zen Buddhist circles that "*even deep Zen enlightenment is not by itself enough*" and correspondingly nothing "will automatically turn out all right", if "Buddhists just face the wall and meditate", as Loy confessed in face of Brian Victoria's revelations of the direct involvement of his own traditon (Sanbō Kyōdan) and pervasive entanglement of its leaders in the "*collective delusions*"<sup>149</sup> of Japanese nationalism and militarism.<sup>150</sup> From this Loy draws the only reasonable conclusion that it is also "necessary to be educated"<sup>151</sup> in order to live in a truly compassionate way that fulfills one's Bodhisattva vow. With regard to Nishitani's political philosophy, Loy's exceedingly important insight deserves to be quoted in its entirety: "In sum, insofar as the Zen experience 'transcends' concepts and ethics and history and emphasizes oneness with one's immediate situation, its practitioners seem more vulnerable to the prevailing ideology and more likely to be coopted by the dominant social system. Then, instead of providing a moral perspective on secular authority, Zen often ends up helping to sacralize secular authority."<sup>152</sup>

---

146 Bragt, *Kyoto Philosophy—Intrinsically Nationalistic?*, p. 253.

147 Ives, *Zen Awakening and Society*, p. 39.

148 Ives, *Zen Awakening and Society*, p. 39.

149 Loy, *The Lack of Ethics*, p. 280.

150 Accordingly, it follows that Buddhist ethical principles do not "approximate the way of relating to others that nondual experience reveals," as Loy had consistently argued before. He continues: "If we have not developed to the degree that we spontaneously experience ourselves as one with others, by following the precepts we endeavour to act as if we did feel that way." Loy, *Beyond Good and Evil?*, p. 44.

151 Loy, *The Lack of Ethics*, p. 280.

152 Loy, *The Lack of Ethics*, p. 281.

## 7 Overcome by Nationalism

The yawning gap between the “ultimate truth” (skt. *paramārtha-satya*; chin. *zhēndì*; jp. *shintai*) of emptiness and the “veiled truth” (skt. *saṃvṛti-satya*; chin. *súdi*; jp. *zokutai*) of worldly affairs becomes even more apparent when turning to the critical issue of Nishitani’s political thought. Descending from the lofty heights of his philosophy of religion to the mundaneness of his political philosophy, one cannot but wonder about the many unwarranted hypostases that dominate Nishitani’s reactionary worldview in its distinctive shape and character. The most obvious and consistent consequence of his philosophy of religion would have arguably been to indiscriminately open the embodied individual mind to an unconditional acceptance of all of humanity and elevate it to an existential community with the entire living cosmos without bounding it to the constraints of a particular ethnic group, nation, or culture. As Nishitani once wrote in his preliminary remarks on *Two Addresses by Martin Heidegger* (1966), the very possibility of mutual understanding between “East” and “West” rests upon our will “to strip ourselves once and for all of those fixed forms and norms enclosing our thoughts, feelings and volitions within ready made and seemingly eternal frames. It calls upon us to return to the most basic plane where man is solely man.”<sup>153</sup> Realizing this “innermost kernel of man’s mind” and “basis of existence itself”<sup>154</sup> involves the “transcendence of both the body and its natural world and the mind and its cultural world”<sup>155</sup>, as Nishitani already declared in his lecture on *Overcoming Modernity* in 1942. Judged solely from his Buddhist philosophy of religion, Nishitani should have been a “citizen of the cosmos”, as he once called himself, only to nullify this self-description again as “ridiculous”<sup>156</sup> immediately afterwards.

Indeed, throughout his long philosophical career and apparently unaffected by the atrocious events of the Pacific War, Nishitani continuously and consistently held nationalistic, ethnocentric and culturally chauvinistic views and unabashedly expressed his pronounced antipathy toward the values and principles that are central to liberal democracy clearly and unequivocally on numerous occasions, compelling even philosophers overall sympathetic to his philosophical enterprise to acknowledge his “lifelong suspicion of ‘human

153 *Two Addresses by Martin Heidegger* (1966), in: Nishitani, *Two Addresses by Martin Heidegger*, p. 50.

154 *Two Addresses by Martin Heidegger* (1966), in: Nishitani, *Two Addresses by Martin Heidegger*, p. 51.

155 *Kindai no chōkoku’ shiron* (1942), in: Nishitani, *My Views on “Overcoming Modernity”*, p. 55.

156 Parkes, *A Citizen of the Cosmos? – Ridiculous!*, p. 107.



rights.”<sup>157</sup> During the third *Chūōkōron* symposium on *The Philosophy of Total War* (*Sōryokusen no tetsugaku*) he disparages individual rights as nothing but “the individual’s right to pursue selfish desires”<sup>158</sup> and this “selfish individualism” as the “ideology of democracy”<sup>159</sup> (*demokurashii no shisō*). Accordingly, he saw it as the essential task of the state to “suppress the arbitrary freedom of individuals”<sup>160</sup> as he expected the Japanese people to selflessly exert themselves in performing the required “self-annihilation in devotion to the nation”<sup>161</sup> (*messhi hōkō*) in anticipatory obedience.<sup>162</sup> In his concise treatment of *The Spirit of the Hitler-Movement* (*Hittorā undō no seishin*) and his brief discussion of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (1925/1926), which Nishitani appreciated as “confessions of a political genius”<sup>163</sup> (*hitori no tensaiteki seijika no kokuhakuron*), it is precisely the “capacity of the individual to sacrifice for the whole”<sup>164</sup> (*zentaisei ni taisuru [...] kojīn no gisei nōroyoku*) propagated by the Nazis and their insistent exhortations to the German people to willingly sacrifice themselves for the greater good of the nation that Nishitani approvingly quotes.<sup>165</sup> However, Nishitani was unambiguous in his resolute rejection of the private freedom of separate individuals even after the war, as the concluding passage of *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961) clearly demonstrates: “True equality”, Nishitani contends, “is not simply a matter of an equality of human rights and the ownership of property. Such equality concerns man as the subject of desires and rights and comes down, in the final analysis, to the self-centered mode of being of man himself.”<sup>166</sup> According to a lecture on *Modern Nihilism and Religious Faith*

157 Davis, *Turns to and from political philosophy*, p. 37.

158 *Sōryokusen no tetsugaku* (1942), in: Williams, *The Philosophy of Japanese Wartime Resistance*, p. 310.

159 *Sōryokusen no tetsugaku* (1942), in: Williams, *The Philosophy of Japanese Wartime Resistance*, p. 316.

160 *Kindai no chōkoku’ shiron* (1942), in: Nishitani, *My Views on “Overcoming Modernity”*, p. 56.

161 *Kindai no chōkoku’ shiron* (1942), in: Nishitani, *My Views on “Overcoming Modernity”*, p. 56.

162 See Ōsaki, *Nothingness in the Heart of Empire*, pp. 51–83.

163 *Hittorā undō no seishin* (1940), in: NKC I, p. 144.

164 *Hittorā undō no seishin* (1940), in: NKC I, p. 146.

165 Heisig and Parkes rightly point out that Nishitani’s appreciation of the Hitler movement, while exhibiting “a disconcerting blindness to the dangers of totalitarianism” (Parkes, *The Putative Fascism of the Kyoto School*, p. 315), is accompanied by a fundamental critique of its “lack of humanity and world-citizenship” (*hyūmanitī to sekaishiminsei matawa sekai-kokuminsei no rinen ga kaketeru*), which was “a transformation of the concept of universal love in Christianity” (*kirisutokyō ni okeru fūhen-ai no kannen no tenka*). Hitler’s standpoint, thus, fundamentally “lacks the religious dimension” (*shūkyōsei no kaketeiru koto*), as Nishitani argues. *Hittorā undō no seishin* (1940), in: NKC I, p. 147. See Heisig, *Nishitani Keiji and the Overcoming of Modernity*, p. 316.

166 *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 285.

(*Gendai no kyomu to shinkō*) he delivered in 1964, it is this “essentially self-centered” and “egotistic self” to whom Western societies have most fatefully conceded “the right to live and to possess freedom of speech, choice of religion, and so forth” and which is the true bearer of the vaunted “democratic virtues of freedom, equality, and human rights.”<sup>167</sup> For democracy to truly function as a viable system, personal participation in public life and responsibility for its social aspects is necessary, as Nishitani argued in a roundtable discussion on the *History of the Spirit of Postwar Japan* (*Sengo nihon seishinshi*) in 1961.<sup>168</sup> But this cannot be achieved without preceding moral education or “human rehabilitation”<sup>169</sup> (*ningen kaifuku*), as he explained in yet another lecture on *Rehabilitation and Religion* (*Ningen kaifuku to shūkyō*) in 1966, for Japanese society at that time resembled “a kind of madness” to Nishitani. This collective madness was most obvious to him “in the thinking of juvenile delinquents”, “free sex, which recognizes no limits”, the “casting off of all restraint”, “disrespect for the law”, “students parading through streets and struggling with the police”, “provocative dancing”, and “street demonstrations.”<sup>170</sup> For Nishitani, such contemptible behaviour is originally rooted in a “deep latent anxiety” that can be treated solely by discovering one’s “true self”<sup>171</sup> on the path of “Oriental religiosity.”<sup>172</sup> But what happens when there is no collective voluntary will to “human rehabilitation” and “self-annihilation” in devotion to “democracy”? Does this necessitate a repressive government and justify the preventive application of coercive and compulsory measures by the authoritarian State as a way of controlling those “worldlings” (skt. *prthagjana*; chin. *fānfū*; jp. *bonbu*) caught up in delusion and unwilling to enlighten themselves? According to Davis, there can be “no doubt that Nishitani supported democracy over any totalism or totalitarianism after the war.”<sup>173</sup> This is hardly convincing. In fact, Nishitani argues for the impossibility of a functioning democracy based on unenlightened individuals and, thus, implicitly for the necessity to suppress the arbitrary freedom of individuals by the state in order to counter the “madness” of democracy. Given the socio-political actualities of Japan at that time, Nishitani had to acknowledge what he had tried to prevent and why he had initially endorsed the war and promoted Japanese expansionism: “Western

167 *Gendai no kyomu to shinkō* (1964), in: Nishitani, *The Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji*, p. 98.

168 See *Sengo nihon seishinshi* (1961), in: Nishitani, *Postwar Japanese Thought*, 166 et seq.

169 *Ningen kaifuku to shūkyō* (1966), in: Nishitani, *The Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji*, p. 66.

170 *Ningen kaifuku to shūkyō* (1966), in: Nishitani, *The Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji*, p. 66 et seq.

171 *Ningen kaifuku to shūkyō* (1966), in: Nishitani, *The Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji*, p. 67.

172 *Kindai no chōkoku' shiron* (1942), in: Nishitani, *My Views on “Overcoming Modernity”*, p. 56.

173 Davis, *Turns to and from political philosophy*, p. 43.

culture has spread all over the world"<sup>174</sup> and with Western political and cultural hegemony Japan seemed to have fallen into an irresolvable predicament for him.

The "Oriental liberalism"<sup>175</sup> Nishitani initially devised as corrective counterdraft was modeled upon the liberticidal idea that "true freedom" consists in deliberately suppressing one's personal freedom and that "true subjectivity" can be realized only in annihilating oneself completely while selflessly serving the state. The decisive difference between "the absolutist state in which the citizens are mere substratum without subjectivity"<sup>176</sup> and the Japanese state conceived by Nishitani in *Sekaikan to kokkakan* (1941) is reflected precisely in the traditional virtue of the Japanese people to deliberately abandon their individual subjectivity in service to the state and to be completely absorbed by a collective subject of their own free will.<sup>177</sup> According to Krummel, this glorification of social submission and unquestioning compliance with the state must be seen within the broader context of Nishitani's ethics of self-negation "showing how, for Nishitani, self-negation must be accomplished *from the self* and *extends also to the state's self*."<sup>178</sup> Admittedly, already in 1942 Nishitani applied the idea of "no-self" (skt. *anātman*; chin. *wúwǒ*; jp. *muga*) and the moral imperative of self-negation to the Japanese state and called for a "state of no-self" (*muga no kokka*) that involves "the negation of the standpoint of mere national self-interest" to open up a "horizon of inter-national communality, as based on the nonduality of self and other (*jita funi*)."<sup>179</sup> However, the real problem with Nishitani's political philosophy lies not so much in his global vision for the Japanese state or his moral ideal for the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere", but in the underlying conception of the state itself that is based in particular on the National Socialist theory of the racial state expounded by Otto Koellreutter (1883–1972) in his *Grundriss der allgemeinen Staatslehre* (1933) and Rudolf Kjellén's (1864–1922) theory of *The State as a Living Organism* (*Staten som livsform*, 1916), both of which Nishitani had probably read while studying abroad in Germany. Drawing chiefly on these intellectual predecessors,

174 *Gendai no kyomu to shinkō* (1964), in: Nishitani, *The Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji*, p. 103.

175 *Kindai no chōkoku' shiron* (1942), in: Nishitani, *My Views on "Overcoming Modernity"*, p. 56.

176 *Sekaikan to kokkakan* (1941), in: Ōsaki, *Nothingness in the Heart of Empire*, p. 60.

177 See Mori, *Nishitani Keiji and the Question of Nationalism*, p. 321.

178 Krummel, *On Nothingness in the Heart of the Empire*, p. 101. It seems to me at least uncontroversial to claim that Nishitani "seriously mistook his nation's capacity to negate itself and overcome self-centeredness." Maraldo, *Questioning Nationalism Now and Then*, p. 355.

179 *Kindai no chōkoku' shiron* (1942), in: Nishitani, *My Views on "Overcoming Modernity"*, p. 61. See Mori, *Nishitani Keiji and the Question of Nationalism*, p. 325.

Nishitani conceptualizes the Japanese state as an “organized bio-power”<sup>180</sup> (*soshikika sereta seikenryoku*) and “community of destiny”<sup>181</sup> (*unmei kyōdōtai*) based on the unity of “blood and soil” and common culture. Even though a state, unlike a human being, is evidently not a living organism that operates within intersubjective relations, but historically, culturally and ethnically contingent and open to severe transformations, Nishitani advocates the organismic reification of the state as “singular life-body”<sup>182</sup> (*hitotsu no seikatsutai*) and naturally occurring phenomenon.<sup>183</sup> Concomitantly, just as the embodied self does not cease to exist when it has realized its authentic “subjectivity of no-self” (*muga no shutaisei*), neither does the living organism of the Japanese state perish when it has realized itself to be a “state of no-self” (*muga no kokka*). Thus, Nishitani’s perspective of “transnational universality”<sup>184</sup> (*chōkokkateki na sekaisei*) is permanently tied back to the separate existence of a distinctively Japanese nation-state. In fact, he explicitly cites the “indiscriminate ‘universality’”<sup>185</sup> (*fuhensi*) of “radical cosmopolitanism (or socialism)”<sup>186</sup> as Western aberration that must be resolutely opposed and overcome. This view remained effectively unchallenged even after the war. As founding director of the International Institute for Japan Studies (*Kokusai Nihon Kenkyū-sho*) he published a *Rationale* (1964) and approvingly quotes at length from his older essay on *The Task of Culture in the Future* (*Shōrai no Bunka no Kadai*, 1953), thus, expressing the continuity of these ideas himself. Even though he embraces the inevitable and progressive march of globalization and takes it to be a “present and increasingly urgent need” that “cultural consciousness becomes worldwide in its scope”<sup>187</sup>, the “world culture”<sup>188</sup> envisioned by Nishitani is based on the enduring existence of distinct nations, cultures, and ethnic groups. According to his essay on *Japan in the World* (1964), “the loss of subjectivity (or identity) has made the Japanese incapable of viewing true uniqueness as possessing true universality or cosmopolitanism, and instead has made them

---

180 *Sekaikan to kokkakan* (1941), in: NKC IV, p. 268.

181 *Sekaikan to kokkakan* (1941), in: NKC IV, p. 267.

182 *Sekaikan to kokkakan* (1941), in: NKC IV, p. 278.

183 See Iida, *Constituting aesthetic/moral national space*, p. 88; Maraldo, *Questioning Nationalism Now and Then*, 347–349; Mori, *Nishitani Keiji and the Question of Nationalism*, p. 320.

184 *Sekaikan to kokkakan* (1941), in: NKC IV, p. 284.

185 *Japan in the World* (1964), in: Nishitani, *Japan in the World*, p. 2.

186 *Kindai no chōkoku’ shiron* (1942), in: Nishitani, *My Views on “Overcoming Modernity”*, p. 53.

187 *Rationale of the International Institute for Japan Studies* (1964), in: Nishitani, *Rationale of the International Institute for Japan Studies*, p. 7.

188 *Rationale of the International Institute for Japan Studies* (1964), in: Nishitani, *Rationale of the International Institute for Japan Studies*, p. 5.

regard the abstracted universality, devoid of uniqueness, as having cosmopolitan nature.<sup>189</sup> This is consistent with Nishitani's earlier statements in *Sekaikan to kokkakan* (1941), where the world foreseen by Nishitani is a decentered world divided into geopolitically natural life-spheres of different ethnic communities.<sup>190</sup> The tendency toward "bloc formation" and the attainment of a self-consciousness identity among "various politically and culturally unified spheres"<sup>191</sup> was something Nishitani heartily welcomed.

## 8 Bridging the Gap: Toward a Buddhist Philosophy of Blood and Soil?

According to van Bragt, there is a real evolution beyond the thought of *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (1961) traceable in Nishitani's subsequent philosophical endeavors: "Nishitani now pays special attention to aspects of reality to which he had not allotted full weight in his earlier system: the dark, nondiaphanous sides of human existence in its connection with the body and the earth."<sup>192</sup> Shōtō Hase, who had first drawn attention to this development, saw another "major pattern of transcendence" emerging that Nishitani called "transcendence in the earth" (*do ni okeru chōetsu*) and identified as "Buddha land" (skt. *buddhakṣetra*; chin. *fóguótǔ*; jp. *bukkokudo*), "Pure Land" (*jōdo*), and even as Kingdom of God (gr. *basileiā tou theou*). At the end of his life, Hase asserts, Nishitani turned to bodily existence and "the question of nature and the soil."<sup>193</sup> As Nishitani himself argued in his lectures *On Conscience (ryōshin ni tsuite)* delivered to the Shin Buddhist Association of the Great Earth in Kyōto in 1974, we are irrevocably embodied and as such inseparably intertwined with a particular land that sustains our embodied existence. However, the body envisioned by Nishitani is not the body "in itself" as an isolated entity and abstract notion hiding the concrete and variable reality in which it is naturally embedded, but the always ethnically particularized and geoculturally differentiated body determined by "blood and soil": "At any rate, the most positive meaning of a country consists in 'blood and land,' just as the National Socialist Party in Germany had insisted on *Blut und Boden* when they tried to think of their country. But blood

189 *Japan in the World* (1964), in: Nishitani, *Japan in the World*, p. 8.

190 See *Sekaikan to kokkakan* (1941), in: Nishitani, *Sekaikan to kokkakan*, p. 382.

191 *Sekaikan to kokkakan* (1941), in: Nishitani, *Sekaikan to kokkakan*, p. 383. See Mori, *Nishitani Keiji and the Question of Nationalism*, p. 327.

192 Bragt, *Foreword*, p. viii.

193 Hase, *Emptiness Thought*, p. 75.

relations and the land in the sense of the land of the country must be dealt with as crucial issues.”<sup>194</sup>

In a lecture *On the Modernization of Buddhism* (*bukkyō no kindai ka toiu koto*, 1972), Nishitani enthusiastically recalls how he had been struck by a quasi-metaphysical experience of a transhistorical Japanese essence after having consumed miso soup after a long absence, while living in a foreign country. “At that very moment”, Nishitani recounts, “I was compelled to become conscious of the fact that I was a Japanese. This indicates, after all, that food reaches to the root of my existence, such that the mere remark that it tasted very good was not enough.”<sup>195</sup> A perusal of Nishitani’s post-wartime writings reveals that this openly displayed irrationalism, crude essentialism, and mysticism of Japanese “Blood and Soil” is not a momentary lapse or an unrepresentative statement selectively seized upon to construct a straw man, but a recurring theme throughout his later writings. Continuing along these irrational and essentialist lines, he wrote an autobiographical essay on *The Experience of having eaten Rice* (*meshi o kutta keiken*, 1980), where he explains the phrase “one’s country” as referring to the “inseparable connectedness of soil and [...] human being as a body.”<sup>196</sup> Nishitani’s invocation of the Buddhist notion of the “nonduality of soil and body”<sup>197</sup> (chin. *yīshèng bùèr*; jp. *eshō funi*) is particularly revealing of the ways in which his decontextualized readings of Buddhist treatises serve his ideological purposes. Similar to the miso soup anecdote, he reminisces about the tremendous joy of eating rice after returning to Japan and its far-reaching implications:

The elements that compose the soil of Japan have become the elements of the rice characteristic of Japan, and have passed into the blood of my ancestors through their eating of the rice. This blood flows also in my body. The vital link that since time immemorial has bound together the rice, the soil, and the innumerable people that are my ancestors forms the background of my life, and actually comprises my life.<sup>198</sup>

These passages evidence Nishitani’s abiding concern with questions of Japanese identity and ethnic self-awareness. The claim that Nishitani underwent a radical change of heart and that his late work is correspondingly ideologically

194 *Ryōshin ni tsuite* (1974), in: Nishitani, *On Buddhism*, p. 123.

195 *Bukkyō no kindai ka toiu koto* (1972), in: Nishitani, *On Buddhism*, p. 104.

196 *Meshi o kutta keiken* (1980), in: Hase, *Emptiness Thought*, p. 73.

197 *Meshi o kutta keiken* (1980), in: Hase, *Emptiness Thought*, p. 73. *Eshō funi* is one of the ten nondualities in Zhànrán’s (jp. Tannen, 711–782) *Ten Gates of Nonduality* (chin. *Shí bùèr mén*). See Völker, *Philosophie der Nondualität*, p. 689 et seq.

198 *Meshi o kutta keiken* (1980), in: Hase, *Emptiness Thought*, p. 73.

unencumbered thus seems rather unfounded. Apparently, he was trying to bridge the gap between the “ultimate truth” of emptiness and the “veiled truth” of his worldly biases by developing the notion of a “transcendence in the earth” (*do ni okeru chōetsu*). Was Nishitani groping his way toward a truly disturbing Buddhist philosophy of Blood and Soil in the last years of his life? This deserves closer scrutiny within the broader context of his late writings.

## 9 Concluding Remarks: Overcoming Nishitani

In a brief essay on the *Japanese Art of Arranged Flowers* (*ikebana ni tsuite*, 1953), Nishitani likens the task of the philosopher to the Ikebana artist’s intention behind each floral arrangement. Like flowers, humans naturally exhibit a delusional desire to endure and an intrinsically inauthentic mode of being that tries to vainly resist the “gravitational pull” within themselves “toward cessation.”<sup>199</sup> But since there simply is no immanent transcendence offering timeless deliverance beyond their essentially temporal and groundless existence, the corresponding task of the artist and philosopher is to ruthlessly sever their elemental attachment to this “time-negating life” and deliver them to the “world of death”, where emptiness is disclosed and a “new existential possibility of being a moment of eternity in time”<sup>200</sup> is allegedly gained. But what if there is more to life and something greater than the pseudo-transcendence of empty phenomenality? Throughout his writings Nishitani sets up a false and reductive dichotomy between empty phenomenality, on the one hand, and the impossibility to grasp any transphenomenal absolute without objectivication and reification on the other. It tacitly rests on an incomplete and simplifying disjunction, where rather unsurprisingly only Nishitani’s radical phenomenism evades the charge of reification and engenders a mode of being that is neither subjective nor substantial.

Thus, overcoming Nishitani entails the task to provide philosophical grounding for a truly post-nihilist philosophy of religion that rationally illuminates and critically clarifies the concept of transcendence. It should not deliberately undermine and destroy it or prematurely sacrifice the absolute upon the altar of nihilism, as Nishitani does.<sup>201</sup> Nor should it undermine critical ethical discernment, which is necessarily based on an autonomous moral

199 *Ikebana ni Tsuite* (1953), in: Nishitani, *Ikebana*, p. 1198.

200 *Ikebana ni Tsuite* (1953), in: Nishitani, *Ikebana*, p. 1199.

201 For an outline of a transcendental and transcultural philosophy of religion, see Völker, *Transzendentalphilosophie und transkulturelle Religionsphilosophie*.

subject that can and ought to determine itself rationally according to universal laws. Instead, the unresolved tension between Nishitani's "ultimate truth" of emptiness and self-transcendence and the "veiled truth" of morality and self-immanence must be sufficiently resolved to provide rational standards for normative evaluation of economic and socio-political realities and an impetus for critical resistance and social activism.<sup>202</sup> This inevitably involves refinement and revision of Nishitani's destructive notion of overcoming modernity. As Toratarō Shimomura (1902–1995) rightfully demanded in his contribution to the *Overcoming Modernity* symposium, the "purpose is strictly to conceive of sublating modernity after having recognized its positive aspects, rather than focusing solely on the negative ones. For it is dishonest in respect of our own actuality to describe modernity as simply a bad or useless period."<sup>203</sup> Nishitani, however, did not intend to single out isolated features of "Western" modernity as particularly reprehensible, while simultaneously trying to retain what is of abiding or perduring value, but explicitly aimed at "overthrowing every aspect of Western modernity, including its sense of progress, humanism, democracy, and the rule of law"<sup>204</sup>, as Bernard Stevens argued. "Moreover", Stevens adds, "this overthrow problematically excludes the militaristic and economic means of modern industrial national power."<sup>205</sup> This component of Steven's criticism corresponds to points made by other scholars. Elena Lange argues that the contribution of Nishitani's political thought to "actual, 'really existing' world politics" remained "poor, if not simply banal." Overcoming Nishitani accordingly implies the necessity to broaden the scope of political philosophy by including what is "completely absent" in his political writings, i.e., a criticism of "the political economy and its categories, the addressing of concrete social problems," and "an analysis revolving around the notion of freedom."<sup>206</sup>

---

202 However, given Nishitani's fundamental Buddhist inspiration of his philosophy and its emphasis on boundless love toward all living beings, one may still ask, why no "humanistic anger toward the evils of society and the state" welled up in Nishitani as it gradually did in Hakugen Ichikawa (1902–1986) and many other Buddhists during the war. *Ichikawa Hakugen chosakushū* III, p. 18, in: Ives, *Ethical Pitfalls in Imperial Zen and Nishida Philosophy*, p. 17.

203 *Kindai no chōkoku no hōkō* (1942), in: Calichman, *Overcoming Modernity*, p. 113.

204 Stevens, *Overcoming Modernity*, p. 235.

205 Stevens, *Overcoming Modernity*, p. 235.

206 Lange, *Review of Re-politicising the Kyoto School as Philosophy*, p. 748. Unless we are willing to acknowledge the existence of reified cultures, states, and ethnicities and endorse a planetary vision that exhausts itself in an equilibrium of autonomous regional spheres (*Großräume*) based on blood ties and a common cultural heritage, I do not see why "the Kyoto School's wartime political thought ought to be taken seriously even today as political philosophy", "particularly in the emerging subdiscipline of comparative political



As far as I have been able to determine, Nishitani never acknowledged guilt, neither personal nor collective, and never publicly criticized his own failure to oppose Japanese militarism and the socio-political actualities of wartime Japan more actively, because he never altered the fundamental assumptions of his ideological worldview or his basic conviction pertaining to the essential righteousness of the Pacific War. Certainly, Nishitani was thinking beyond the confines of a narrow chauvinism and cultural solipsism, but the entanglements of the roots of his “definite internationalism”<sup>207</sup> or “globalist nationalism”<sup>208</sup> were tainted with deep-seated parochial and ethnocentric biases from which even a lifetime of philosophy and decades of Zen practice could not free him.<sup>209</sup>

### Bibliography

- Abe, Masao: *Dōgen on Buddha-Nature*, in: Masao Abe: *Zen and Western Thought*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1989, pp. 25–68.
- Abe, Masao: *God, Emptiness and Ethics*, in: Masao Abe: *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1995, pp. 195–204.
- Abe, Masao: *Ethics and Social Responsibility in Buddhism*, in: Steven Heine (ed.): *Zen and the Modern World. A Third Sequel to Zen and Western Thought*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2003, pp. 24–35.
- Abe, Masao: *Will, Śūnyatā, and History*, in: Taitetsu Unno (ed.): *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji. Encounter with Emptiness*. Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications 2019, pp. 279–304.
- Aiyaswami Sastri, N.: *Satyasiddhiśāstra of Harivarman*. Vol. II. English Translation. Baroda: Oriental Institute 1978.
- Almogi, Orna: *Rong-zom-pa's Discourses on Buddhology*. Tōkyō: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies 2009.

---

theory”, as John W. M. Krummel and Kenn Nakata Steffensen have argued. Krummel, *The Kyoto School's Wartime Philosophy of a Multipolar World*, p. 83; Steffensen, *The Political Thought of the Kyoto School*, p. 80.

207 Parkes, *The Definite Internationalism of the Kyoto School*.

208 Maraldo, *Questioning Nationalism Now and Then*, p. 347.

209 According to Nishitani, the ignorance (skt. *avidyā*; chin. *wú míng*; jp. *mumyō*) rooted in the *ālayavijñāna* manifests itself in various ways: “One falls into pride in one’s country, moral pride, pride in one’s gods or buddhas.” Judging Nishitani according to his own ideal, he never cured the “profound blindness” at the very root of his intellect and was clearly far from awakening to what he himself considered enlightenment. Nishitani, *On the I-Thou Relation in Zen Buddhism*, p. 84. As Parkes accurately observed, “an outbreak of nationalism is a sure sign that the project of letting nihilism overcome itself has failed, that the experiential inquiry into the self has not gone deep enough.” Parkes, *Introduction*, p. xxv.

- Altizer, Thomas Jonathan Jackson: *Emptiness and God*, in: Taitetsu Unno (ed.): *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji. Encounter with Emptiness*. Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications 2019, pp. 70–81.
- Anālayo, Bhikkhu: *The Luminous Mind in Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka Discourses*, in: *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* (13/2017), pp. 10–51.
- Apple, James B.: *Atiśa and Ratnākaraśānti as Philosophical Opponents with Attention to Yuktiṣaṣṭikā, Verse 34*, in: *Critical Review for Buddhist Studies* (23/2018), pp. 9–38.
- Bhattacharya, Kamaleswar: *Some Thoughts on Early Buddhism*. With Special Reference to its Relation to the Upaniṣads. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute 1998.
- Bodhi, Bhikkhu: *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*. A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya. Boston: Wisdom Publications 2001.
- Bodhi, Bhikkhu: *In the Buddha's Words*. An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon. Boston: Wisdom Publications 2005.
- Bodhi, Bhikkhu: *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*. A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya. Boston: Wisdom Publications 2012.
- Bragt, Jan van: *Translator's Introduction*, in: Keiji Nishitani: *Religion and Nothingness*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press 1983, pp. xxiii–xlv.
- Bragt, Jan van: *Kyoto Philosophy—Intrinsically Nationalistic?*, in: James W. Heisig/John C. Maraldo (ed.): *Rude Awakenings. Zen, the Kyoto School & the Question of Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1994, pp. 233–254.
- Bragt, Jan van: *Foreword*, in: Keiji Nishitani: *On Buddhism*. Albany: State University of New York Press 2006, pp. vii–ix.
- Bunte, Martin: *Erkenntnis und Funktion*. Zur Vollständigkeit der Urteilstafel und Einheit des kantischen Systems. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter 2016.
- Conze, Edward: *Buddhist Thought in India*. Three Phases of Buddhist Philosophy. New York: Routledge 2009.
- Calichman, Richard F. (ed.): *Overcoming Modernity*. Cultural Identity in Wartime Japan. New York: Columbia University Press 2008.
- Davis, Bret W.: *The Step Back Through Nihilism: The Radical Orientation of Nishitani Keiji's Philosophy of Zen*, in: *Synthesis Philosophica* (37/2004), pp. 139–159.
- Davis, Bret W.: *Turns to and from political philosophy*. The case of Nishitani Keiji, in: Christopher Goto-Jones (ed.): *Re-Politicising the Kyoto School as Philosophy*. London/New York: Routledge 2008, pp. 26–45.
- Davis, Bret W.: *Letting God of God for Nothing*. Ueda Shizuteru's Non-Mysticism and the Question of Ethics in Zen Buddhism, in: Victor Sōgen Hori/Melissa Anne-Marie Curley (ed.): *Neglected Themes and Hidden Variations*. Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture 2008, pp. 221–250.
- Deguchi, Yasuo: *Nishitani on Emptiness and Nothingness*, in: Douglas L. Berger/JeeLoo Liu (ed.): *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*. New York: Routledge 2014, pp. 300–325.
- Deikman, Arthur J.: *Meditations on a Blue Vase and the Foundations of Transpersonal Psychology*. The Collected Papers of Arthur J. Deikman. Napa: Fearless Books 2014.

- Deussen, Paul: *Die Sûtra's des Vedânta oder die Çârîka-Mîmânsâ des Bâdarâyaṇa nebst dem vollständigen Commentare des Çañkara*. Hildesheim/New York: Georg Olms 1982.
- Duckworth, Douglas: *Other-Emptiness in the Jonang School: The Theo-logic of Buddhist Dualism*, in: *Philosophy East and West* (65,2/2015), pp. 485–497.
- Faure, Bernard: *The Kyôto School and Reverse Orientalism*, in: Charles Wei-hsun Fu/Steven Heine (ed.): *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*. Albany: State University of New York Press 1995, pp. 245–281.
- Fichte, Johann Gottlieb: *The Vocation of Man*, Peter Preuss (ed.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 1987.
- Gilkey, Langdon: *Nishitani Keiji's Religion and Nothingness*, in: Taitetsu Unno (ed.): *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji. Encounter with Emptiness*. Nagoya: Chisokudô Publications 2019, pp. 49–69.
- Goto-Jones, Christopher S.: *Political Philosophy in Japan*. Nishida, the Kyoto School and Co-Prosperty. London/New York: Routledge 2005.
- Harootunian, Harry D./Najita, Tetsuo: *Japanese revolt against the West: political and cultural criticism in the twentieth century*, in: Peter Duus (ed.): *The Cambridge History of Japan. Volume 6. The Twentieth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press 1988, pp. 711–774.
- Harvey, Peter: "Signless" Meditation in Pali Buddhism, in: *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (9,1/1986), pp. 25–52.
- Hase, Shôtô: *Emptiness Thought and the Concept of the Pure Land in Nishitani*. In the Light of Imagination and Body, in: *Zen Buddhism Today* (14/1997), pp. 65–79.
- Hase, Shôtô: *Nihilism, Science, and Emptiness in Nishitani*, in: *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (19/1999), pp. 139–154.
- Heine, Steven: *Dogen. Japan's Original Zen Teacher*. Boulder: Shambhala 2021.
- Heisig, James W.: *Philosophers of Nothingness. An Essay on the Kyoto School*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2001.
- Heisig, James W.: *Nishitani Keiji and the Overcoming of Modernity (1940–1945)*, in: Raquel Bouso/James W. Heisig (ed.): *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy 6. Confluences & Cross-Currents*. Nagoya: Chisokudô 2023, pp. 297–329.
- Heitmann, Annette L.: *Nektar der Erkenntnis*. Buddhistische Philosophie des 6. Jh.: Bhavyas Tarkajvâlâ I–III. 26. Aachen: Shaker 2004.
- Horio, Tsutomu: *The Zen Practice of Nishitani Keiji*, in: *The Eastern Buddhist. New Series* (25,1/1992), pp. 92–97.
- Horio, Tsutomu: *The Chûôkôron Discussions, their Background and Meaning*, in: James W. Heisig/John C. Maraldo (ed.): *Rude Awakenings. Zen, the Kyôto School & the Question of Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1994, pp. 289–315.
- Horio, Tsutomu: *Nishitani's Philosophy. The Later Period*, in: *Zen Buddhism Today* (14/1997), pp. 19–32.

- Hosoya, Masashi: *Sensation and Image in Nishitani's Philosophy*, in: Victor Sōgen Hori/Melissa Anne-Marie Curley (ed.): *Neglected Themes and Hidden Variations*. Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture 2008, pp. 177–200.
- Iida, Yumiko: *Constituting aesthetic/moral national space*. The Kyoto School and the place of nation, in: Christopher Goto-Jones (ed.): *Re-Politicising the Kyoto School as Philosophy*. London; New York: Routledge 2008, pp. 75–95.
- Ives, Christopher: *Zen Awakening and Society*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1994.
- Ives, Christopher: *Ethical Pitfalls in Imperial Zen and Nishida Philosophy*. Ichikawa Hakugen's Critique, in: James W. Heisig/John C. Maraldo (ed.): *Rude Awakenings. Zen, the Kyoto School & the Question of Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1994, pp. 16–39.
- Jacobi, Friedrich Heinrich: *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Altwil*, George di Giovanni (ed., transl.). Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1994.
- Jia, Jinhua: *The Hongzhou School of Chan Buddhism in Eighth- through Tenth-Century China*. Albany: State University of New York Press 2006.
- Jones, Richard H.: *Philosophy of Mysticism*. Raids on the Ineffable. Albany: State University of New York Press 2016.
- Jorgensen, John: *Inventing Hui-neng, The Sixth Patriarch*. Hagiography and Biography in Early Ch'an. Leiden; Boston: Brill 2005.
- Kambartel, Ruth: *Religion als Hilfsmittel für die Rechtfertigung einer totalitären Staatsideologie in Nishitani Keijis Sekaikakn to Kokkakan*, in: *Japanstudien* (1/1989), pp. 71–88.
- Kant, Immanuel: *Critique of Pure Reason*, Paul Guyer/Allen W. Wood (ed., transl.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998.
- Kasulis, Thomas P.: *Whence and Whither: Philosophical Reflections on Nishitani's View of History*, in: Taitetsu Unno (ed.): *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji. Encounter with Emptiness*. Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications 2019, pp. 259–278.
- Kim, Hee-Jin: *Eihei Dōgen, Mystical Realist*. Boston: Wisdom Publications 2004.
- Kimoto, Takeshi: *Antinomies of Total War*, in: *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* (17,1/2009), pp. 97–125.
- King, Sallie B.: *The Doctrine of Buddha-Nature is impeccably Buddhist*, in: Jamie Hubbard/Paul L. Swanson (ed.): *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1997, pp. 174–192.
- Kopf, Gereon: *"When All Dharmas Are the Buddha-Dharma"*. Dōgen as Comparative Philosopher, in: Steven Heine (ed.): *Dōgen and Sōtō Zen*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 2015, pp. 138–164.
- Krummel, John W. M.: *On Nothingness in the Heart of the Empire and the Wartime Politics of the Kyoto School*, in: *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* (14,1/2022), pp. 99–109.

- Krummel, John W. M.: *The Kyoto School's Wartime Philosophy of a Multipolar World*, in: *Telos* (201/2022), pp. 63–83.
- Lange, Elena: *Review of Re-politicising the Kyoto School as Philosophy*, in: *Asiatische Studien* (63,3/2009), pp. 746–755.
- Liljenberg, Karen/Pagel, Ulrich: *The Questions of Bhadrāpāla the Merchant. Bhadrāpālaśreṣṭhiparipṛcchā*. <https://read.84000.co/translation/toh83.html> (date of last access: 06.06.2023).
- Lindtner, Christian: *The Problem of Precanonical Buddhism*, in: *Buddhist Studies Review* (14,2/1997), pp. 109–139.
- Liu, Ming-Wood: *Madhyamaka Thought in China*. Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill 1994.
- Loy, David R.: *Beyond Good and Evil? A Buddhist Critique of Nietzsche*, in: *Asian Philosophy* (6,1/1996), pp. 37–57.
- Loy, David R.: *Nonduality. A Study in Comparative Philosophy*. New York: Humanity Books 1997.
- Loy, David R.: *The Lack of Ethics and the Ethics of Lack in Buddhism*, in: G. William Barnard/Jeffrey J. Kripal (ed.): *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*. New York/London: Seven Bridges Press 2002, pp. 265–287.
- Maraldo, John C.: *Questioning Nationalism Now and Then. A Critical Approach to Zen and the Kyoto School*, in: James W. Heisig/John C. Maraldo (ed.): *Rude Awakenings. Zen, the Kyoto School & the Question of Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1994, pp. 333–362.
- Maraldo, John C.: *The War Over the Kyoto School*, in: *Monumenta Nipponica* (61,3/2006), pp. 375–406.
- Maraldo, John C.: *Negotiating the Divide of Death in Japanese Buddhism: Dōgen's Difference*, in: Steven Heine (ed.): *Dōgen and Sōtō Zen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015, pp. 109–137.
- Maraldo, John C.: *Revisiting Rude Awakenings. The Dangerous (?) Thought of the Kyoto School*, in: *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (4/2019), pp. 5–43.
- Matsumoto, Shirō: *The Doctrine of Tathāgatagarbha ist Not Buddhist*, in: Jamie Hubbard/Paul L. Swanson (ed.): *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1997, pp. 165–173.
- Minamoto, Ryōen: *The Symposium on "Overcoming Modernity"*, in: James W. Heisig/John C. Maraldo (ed.): *Rude Awakenings. Zen, the Kyoto School & the Question of Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1994, pp. 197–229.
- Mori, Tetsurō: *Nishitani Keiji and the Question of Nationalism*, in: James W. Heisig/John C. Maraldo (ed.): *Rude Awakenings. Zen, the Kyoto School & the Question of Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1994, pp. 316–332.
- Müller, Ralf: *The Philosophical Reception of Japanese Buddhism After 1868*, in: Gereon Kopf (ed.): *The Dao Companion to Japanese Buddhist Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Springer 2019, pp. 155–204.

- Nakamura, Hajime: *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*. India, China, Tibet, Japan. Honolulu: East-West Center Press 1964.
- Nishida, Kitarō: *An Inquiry into the Good*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press 1990.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Rationale of the International Institute for Japan Studies*, in: *Japan Studies* (1,1/1964), pp. 2–8.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Japan in the World*, in: *Japan Studies* (1,2/1964), pp. 2–9.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Two Addresses by Martin Heidegger*, in: *The Eastern Buddhist* (1,2/1966), pp. 48–77.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *On the I-Thou Relation in Zen Buddhism*, in: *The Eastern Buddhist* (2,2/1969), pp. 71–87.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Postwar Japanese Thought: 1945–1960*. A Roundtable Discussion in Five Parts, in: *The Japan Christian Quarterly* (47,3/1981), pp. 127–178.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Religion and Nothingness*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press 1983.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *The Standpoint of Zen*, in: *The Eastern Buddhist* (17,1/1984), pp. 1–26.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *The Days of My Youth: An Autobiographical Sketch*, in: *FAS Society Journal* (1985), pp. 25–30.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *An Interview with Keiji Nishitani*, in: *FAS Society Journal* (1985), pp. 3–9.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *The Starting Point of my Philosophy*, in: *FAS Society Journal* (1986), pp. 24–29.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Walking the Waves*. An Interview with Keiji Nishitani, in: *Parabola* (11,4/1986), pp. 18–27.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Nishitani Keiji chosakushū* (Collected Works of Nishitani Keiji). Tōkyō: Sōbunsha 1986–1995.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. Translated by Graham Parkes with Setsuko Aihara. Albany: State University of New York Press 1990.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Religious-Philosophical Existence in Buddhism*, in: *The Eastern Buddhist* (23,2/1990), pp. 1–17.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Über das Gewahren*, in: Georg Stenger/Margarete Röhring (ed.): *Philosophie der Struktur – „Fahrzeug“ der Zukunft?* Freiburg/München: Karl Alber 1995, pp. 77–93.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Sekaikan to kokkakan* (Selections), in: David A. Dilworth/Valdo H. Vaghielmo/Agustin Jacinto Zavala (ed.): *Sourcebook for Modern Japanese Philosophy. Selected Documents*. Westport/London: Greenwood Press 1998, pp. 381–401.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Kū to Soku*. Emptiness and Sameness, in: Michele Marra (ed.): *Modern Japanese Aesthetics. A Reader*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1999, pp. 179–217.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Science and Zen*, in: Frederick Franck (ed.): *The Buddha Eye. An Anthology of the Kyoto School and Its Contemporaries*. Bloomington: World Wisdom 2004, pp. 107–135.

- Nishitani, Keiji: *On Buddhism*. Albany: State University of New York Press 2006.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *My Views on "Overcoming Modernity"*, in: Richard F. Calichman (ed.): *Overcoming Modernity. Cultural Identity in Wartime Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press 2008, pp. 51–63.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *On Bashō*, in: Michael F. Marra (ed.): *Japan's Frames of Meaning. A Hermeneutics Reader*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2011, pp. 276–297.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Ikebana*, in: James W. Heisig/Tomas P. Kasulis/John C. Maraldo (ed.): *Japanese Philosophy. A Sourcebook*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2011, pp. 1197–1200.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *The Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji 1900–1990*. Lectures on Religion and Modernity. Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press 2012.
- Nishitani, Keiji: *Nishida Kitarō. The Man and His Thought*. Nagoya: Chisokudō 2016.
- Ōhashi, Ryōsuke: *Kyōtogakuha to Nihon kaigun: Shinshiryō "Ōshima memo" wo megutte* [*The Kyōto School and the Japanese Navy: On the Newly Found Historical Document "The Ōshima Memoranda"*]. Kyōto: PHP Shinsho 2001.
- Ōhashi, Ryōsuke: *Einführung zur zweiten Auflage*, in: Ryōsuke Ōhashi (ed.): *Die Philosophie der Kyōto-Schule*. Freiburg/München: Karl Alber 2014, pp. 11–48.
- Ōhashi, Ryōsuke/Akitomi, Katsuya: *The Kyoto School: Transformation Over Three Generations*, in: Bret W. Davis (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press 2020, pp. 367–387.
- O'Leary, Joseph S.: *Review of The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism and The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji*, in: *Monumenta Nipponica* (46,4/1991), pp. 569–572.
- Ono, Makoto: *Nishitani's Keiji's Theory of Imagination*. The Theory of Imagination in "Emptiness and Immediacy", in: Victor Sōgen Hori/Melissa Anne-Marie Curley (ed.): *Neglected Themes and Hidden Variations*. Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture 2008, pp. 201–220.
- Ōsaki, Harumi: *Nothingness in the Heart of Empire*. The Moral and Political Philosophy of the Kyoto School in Imperial Japan. Albany: State University of New York Press 2019.
- Ōshima, Yasumasa: *Daitōa sensō to Kyōto gakuha: Chishikijin no seiji sankā ni tsuite* [*The Greater East Asia War and the Kyoto School: On the Political Participation of Intellectuals*], in: *Chūōkōron* (August 1965), pp. 125–143.
- Paramānanda Bhārati, Swāmī: *Vedānta Prabodha*. Bangalore: Jnanansamvardhani Pratishthanam 2014.
- Parkes, Graham: *Introduction*, in: Keiji Nishitani: *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, Graham Parkes with Setsuko Aihara (transl.). Albany: State University of New York Press 1990, pp. xv–xxviii.
- Parkes, Graham: *A Citizen of the Cosmos? – Ridiculous!*, in: *The Eastern Buddhist. New Series* (25,1/1992), pp. 105–109.

- Parkes, Graham: *Resources for Ecological Thinking* in the Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji, in: *Zen Buddhism Today* (14/1997), pp. 81–95.
- Parkes, Graham: *The Putative Fascism of the Kyoto School* and the Political Correctness of the Modern Academy, in: *Philosophy East and West* (47,3/1997), pp. 305–336.
- Parkes, Graham: *The definite Internationalism of the Kyoto School: Changing Attitudes in the Contemporary Academy*, in: Christopher Goto-Jones (ed.): *Re-Politicising the Kyoto School as Philosophy*. London/New York: Routledge 2008, pp. 161–182.
- Philippis, Stephen H.: *Nishitani's Buddhist Response to "Nihilism"*, in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (55,1/1987), pp. 75–104.
- Radich, Michael: *The Doctrine of Amalavijñāna in Paramārtha* (499–569), and Later Authors to Approximately 800 C.E., in: *Zinbun* (41/2008), pp. 45–174.
- Radich, Michael: *Pure Mind in India: Indian Background to Paramārtha's Amalavijñāna*, in: *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (39/2016), pp. 249–308.
- Salvini, Mattia: *Language and Existence in Madhyamaka and Yogācāra*, in: Jay L. Garfield/Jan Westerhoff (ed.): *Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. Allies or Rivals?* Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 2015, pp. 29–71.
- Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von: *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*. Stuttgart/Augsburg: Cotta'scher Verlag 1856.
- Schmidt-Leukel, Perry: *Understanding Buddhism*. Edinburgh: Dudedin Academic Press 2008.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur: *The World as Will and Representation*. Volume I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010.
- Schroeder, Brian: *Dancing Through Nothing: Nietzsche, The Kyoto-School, and Transcendence*, in: *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* (37/2009), pp. 44–65.
- Siderits, Mark/Katsura, Shōryū: *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way. Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications 2013.
- Silk, Jonathan A.: *Buddhist Cosmic Unity. An Edition, Translation and Study of the Anū natvāpūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta*. Hamburg: Hamburg University Press 2015.
- Skorupski, Tadeusz: *Consciousness and Luminosity in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*, in: Khammai Dhammasami (ed.): *Buddhist Philosophy and Meditation Practice*. Ayutthaya: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2012, pp. 43–64.
- Steffensen, Kenn Nakata: *The Political Thought of the Kyoto School: Beyond "Questionable Footnotes" and "Japanese-style Fascism"*, in: Michiko Yusa (ed.): *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Philosophy*. London: Bloomsbury 2017, pp. 65–103.
- Stevens, Bernard: *Reflections on the Notion of Reality* in the Thought of Nishida and Nishitani, in: *Zen Buddhism Today* (15/1998), pp. 1–14.
- Stevens, Bernard: *Overcoming Modernity: A Critical Response to the Kyoto School*, in: Bret W. Davis/Brian Schroeder/Jason M. Wirth (ed.): *Japanese and Continental*



- Philosophy. Conversations with the Kyoto School*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2011, pp. 229–246.
- Suzuki, Daisetsu Teitarō: *Zen Buddhism and its Influence on Japanese Culture*. Kyoto: The Eastern Buddhist Society 1938.
- Ueda, Shizuteru: *Nishida, Nationalism, and the War in Question*, in: James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo (ed.): *Rude Awakenings. Zen, the Kyoto School & the Question of Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1994, pp. 77–106.
- Uskokov, Aleksandar: *Bhāskara*, in: Jeffery D. Long/Rita D. Sherma/Pankaj Jain/Madhu Khanna (ed.): *Hinduism and Tribal Religions*. Dordrecht: Springer 2021, pp. 240–243.
- Victoria, Brian Daizen: *Zen at War*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2006.
- Völker, Fabian: *Transzendentalphilosophie und transkulturelle Religionsphilosophie. Zur Lehre des Absoluten bei Śāṅkara und Fichte*, in: Kai Gregor (ed.): *Philosophie der Zukunft – Zukunft der Philosophie. Zu den Perspektiven der Philosophie als Grundlagenwissenschaft*. Freiburg/München: Karl Alber 2019, pp. 184–242.
- Völker, Fabian: *Philosophie der Nondualität*. Religionshistorische Einordnung und philosophische Kritik der Buddhismusinterpretation David R. Loys. Freiburg/München: Karl Alber 2020.
- Völker, Fabian: *Methodology and Mysticism: For an Integral Study of Religion*, in: *Religions* (13,2/2022).
- Völker, Fabian: *The Plurality of Nonduality*. Toward a Tripartite Typology, in: Jen Wade/Anthony Watson/Jon Paul Sydnor (ed.): *Nondualism: An Interreligious Exploration*. Lanham/Boulder/New York/London: Lexington Books 2023 (forthcoming).
- Waddell, Norman/Abe, Masao: *Dōgen's Bendōwa*, in: *The Eastern Buddhist* (4,1/1971), pp. 124–157.
- Waldenfels, Hans: *Absolute Nothingness*. Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue. New York: Paulist Press 1980.
- Walshe, Maurice: *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*. A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya. Boston: Wisdom Publications 1995.
- Williams, David: *The Philosophy of Japanese Wartime Resistance*. A reading, with commentary, of the complete texts of the Kyoto School discussions of 'The Standpoint of World History and Japan'. London/New York: Routledge 2016.
- Williams, Paul: *The Reflexive Nature of Awareness*. A Tibetan Madhyamaka Defence. London/New York: Routledge 2013.
- Wirth, Jason M.: *The Great Death and the Pure Land*: Nishitani Keiji and the Ecological Emergency, in: *Journal of Japanese Philosophy* (8/2022), pp. 29–46.
- Zaehner, Robert Charles: *Our Savage God*. The Perverse Use of Eastern Thought. New York: Sheed and Ward 1974.
- Zaehner, Robert Charles: *The City within the Heart*. London: Unwin Paperbacks 1980.
- Ziporyn, Brook A.: *Zhuangzi*. The Complete Writings. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company 2020.

# Gandhi's Dual Concept of Religion and its Relation to Reason and Politics

*Wolfgang Palaver*

## Abstract

The article starts with a reflection on the murderer of Gandhi who seemingly had religious reasons for killing Gandhi. The murderer, however, ultimately represents a secular take on politics, in that he tried to defend against Gandhi's spiritualization of politics. A second part shows why Gandhi rejected a separation of religion and politics into water-tight compartments. Despite his anthropological and religious stance, however, Gandhi was a supporter of a secular Indian state as the third part of this article shows. To understand why these two positions do not contradict each other, the fourth part introduces Gandhi's twofold concept of religion showing that he was not aiming at a theocracy or a national religious state based on a particular denomination but maintained that it is a religion beyond all particular religions that can guide human beings to contribute to a type of politics that serves a solidary and just society.

## Keywords

M.K. Gandhi; Religion; Politics; Reason; Secularism; India

## 1 Introduction

In the contemporary debates in Europe and in much of the Western world, religion is seen as a primary source of violence or intolerance. The privatization of religion is an often-recommended course to correct for violence and intolerance in society. Rather than contributing to lasting peace, this attitude might instead exacerbate societal conflicts and problems. I just mention as an example the fight of recent Austrian governments against a "political Islam" that increased anti-Islamic tendencies in Austria and did not lead to a more inclusive society. To see political Islam as the main problem presupposes that a good religion is completely separated from politics and nothing but a private matter. This attitude does not fit for Muslims and is also inappropriate for almost all religious people, regardless of the specifics of their religious

or confessional backgrounds. It contradicts my own understanding of being a Christian because my religious orientation also implicates certain political attitudes and activities. As a young student of Catholic theology, I fought against church leaders who wanted to forbid political or liberation theology by claiming that religion should be free from politics. We soon realized that their criticism was aimed only against a certain type of political orientation and not against political involvement in general.

To come to a better understanding of how religion and politics might relate to each other I recently turned to the writings of Mahatma Gandhi who developed an approach to these matters that I find very helpful for our contemporary world. Before I turn directly to Gandhi's writings, I can assure you that my reflections on religion and politics do not neglect the fact that religious leaders or members of religious communities have been involved in violent politics and acts of intolerance. The support of Putin's war against Ukraine by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow is a most recent and reprehensible example of a bad religio-political symbiosis. Political instrumentalizations of religions are a widespread phenomenon that are especially dangerous if religious leaders collaborate with politicians that try to use religion for their own interests.

The following article begins with a reflection on the murderer of Gandhi who seemingly had religious reasons for killing Gandhi. The perspective of the murderer however ultimately represents a secular take on politics, in that he tried to defend against Gandhi's spiritualization of politics. A second part shows why Gandhi rejected a separation of religion and politics into watertight compartments. Even with his anthropological and religious stance, Gandhi was a supporter of a secular Indian state as I will show in the third part of this article. To understand why these two positions do not contradict each other I turn in the fourth part to Gandhi's twofold concept of religion which shows that he was not aiming at a theocracy or a national religious state that is based on a particular denomination but maintained that it is a religion beyond all particular religions that can guide human beings to contribute to a type of politics that serves a solidary and just society.

## 2 The Murder of Mahatma Gandhi as a Secular Fight Against Religion

To show that a careful interpretation of acts of violence attributed to religion may be more difficult than one thinks at first sight, I turn to the murder of Gandhi on January 30th, 1948. Nathuram Godse, Gandhi's murderer, was from an Indian family of Brahmins, a Hindu nationalist and part of a group that already tried to kill Gandhi a couple of days earlier through a failed bomb attack. We immediately might think that Godse represents a problematic

religious approach whereas Gandhi seems to be a more moderate person closer to a secular humanism.<sup>1</sup> This is however quite a superficial analysis, which a study of Godse's elaborate defense at his murder trial helps to problematize. Similar to his mentor Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, who developed the Hindutva ideology as a secular-political ideology,<sup>2</sup> Godse presented a secular defense of his murderous attempt and accused Gandhi of supporting religious superstition and undermining "reason" that is necessary for a "sound nation-building".<sup>3</sup> According to Godse, religion should be "entirely eschewed in the public affairs of the country" as it suits a "secular State".<sup>4</sup> Like other Hindu nationalists, Godse was an imitator of the Western colonial powers and their understanding of a nation state.<sup>5</sup> Following this model, Indian politics would be "practical, able to retaliate, and would be powerful with armed forces".<sup>6</sup> To achieve this goal, Gandhi and his ideal of nonviolence needed to disappear. In Godse's eyes, Gandhi stood for a passive femininity, that hindered the imitation of the "aggressive British colonial hyper-masculinity":<sup>7</sup>

I firmly believed that the teachings of absolute 'Ahimsa' as advocated by Gandhiji would ultimately result in the emasculation of the Hindu Community and thus make the community incapable of resisting the aggression or inroads of other communities, especially the Muslims.<sup>8</sup>

Godse fully rejected Gandhi's attempt to base politics on a spiritual life of the people: "In Gandhiji's politics there was no place for consistency of ideas and reasons. [...] His politics was supported by old superstitious belief such as the power of the soul, the inner-voice, the fast, the prayer, and the purity of mind."<sup>9</sup> Godse's secular understanding of the nation-state seeks to protect it against any kind of spiritual or religious interferences regarding its political ethics. According to the Indian political psychologist Ashis Nandy, Godse's critique of Gandhi aimed at conducting "normal" politics along the lines Professor Henry

---

1 Nauriya, *Gandhi*.

2 Devare, *Secularizing Religion*; Mishra, *Age of Anger*, pp. 258–268.

3 Godse, *May it Please*, p. 155.

4 Godse, *May it Please*, p. 64.

5 According to Ashis Nandy, many Indian nationalists were "counterplayers" of the British colonizers. Imitation or an "identification with the aggressor" plays an important role for a certain type of anti-colonialism. Gandhi, however, does not belong to this group of counterplayers but to an Indian tradition that does not depend on the colonizing West. At the same time, he was significantly influenced by an alternative type of Western thinking as we find it in thinkers like Tolstoy or Ruskin. See Nandy, *Intimate Enemy*, pp. xiii–xiv, 7–12, 68, 70–80.

6 Godse, *May it Please*, p. 154.

7 Devare, *Secularizing Religion*, p. 162.

8 Godse, *May it Please*, p. 42.

9 Godse, *May it Please*, p. 133.

Kissinger would have approved of".<sup>10</sup> Also the Indian essayist Pankaj Mishra underlined Godse's endorsement of modern realpolitik: "Godse turned out to be one of the many rationalists and advocates of realpolitik exasperated and bewildered by Gandhi's attempt to combine politics with morality".<sup>11</sup>

Despite this secular understanding of politics, Hindu nationalism nonetheless utilized religion in its own way. It was understood to be useless as an ethical guide, but important as an identity marker to strengthen nationalism and to motivate the fight against Muslims.<sup>12</sup> Savarkar's call was to "Hinduize all politics and Militarise Hindudom".<sup>13</sup> Godse saw an undivided Hindusthan as his "holy land" that was endangered by Gandhi's concessions to Muslims.<sup>14</sup> Like other Hindu nationalists, Godse knew the Bhagavadgîtâ by heart and understood its message as a divine call to kill Gandhi:

I believe in Lord Krishna's promise that whenever religion is in danger and contrary forces raise their head, I shall assume incarnation for the re-establishment of the religion. I believe with the poet prophet Jayadeva that in the tenth incarnation the Lord Almighty will act through human beings.<sup>15</sup>

Godse expressed his devotion to the Bhagavadgîtâ also on his last day when he carried it on the morning of his execution.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these religious overtones in Godse's self-understanding, we may follow Ashis Nandy for whom Godse represents the "secular solution, Gandhi the religious".<sup>17</sup> This strange claim makes sense as soon as we distinguish between different understandings of religion. Savarkar's Hinduism "instrumentalizes and secularizes religion" without allowing "room for the sacral, spiritual, or transcendental."<sup>18</sup> Religion in this sense is a completely worldly affair, fully in the hands of humans. The French political scientist Olivier Roy described a similar understanding of religion with the example of the Islamic State in Iran, in which "religion does not define the place of politics but the converse".<sup>19</sup> This

---

10 Nandy, *Outside the Imperium*, p. 191; cf. Nandy, *Final Encounter*.

11 Mishra, *End to Suffering*, p. 343.

12 Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the politician and founder of Pakistan, is a Muslim example for a rejection of a Gandhian type of a spiritualization of politics and using religion at the same time to create the Islamic state of Pakistan. See Marin, *Einleitung*, p. 59.

13 Mishra, *Age of Anger*, p. 263.

14 Godse, *May it Please*, pp. 63, 157.

15 Payne, *Life and Death*, pp. 757–758. On Jayadeva see Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 31:158.

16 Davis, *Bhagavad Gita*, p. 145.

17 Nandy, *Outside the Imperium*, p. 191.

18 Devare, *Secularizing Religion*, p. 159.

19 Roy, *Secularism*, p. 63.

“affirmation of the supremacy of the political over traditional religious law” accelerates “secularization” despite the official expression of religious claims by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Gandhi, to the contrary, represents a much more traditional understanding of religion that does not succumb to an ideology of the nation-state. He was much closer to folk Hinduism than to the Brahmanic elite. Granted, he sometimes succumbed to a superstitious understanding of religion. For instance, Gandhi claimed that the Bihar earthquake of 1934, which killed 15,000 people, was a divine punishment for the sin of untouchability.<sup>20</sup> The Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore harshly and justly criticized Gandhi for this problematic interpretation of a natural disaster.<sup>21</sup>

This claim was not Gandhi at his best and rather atypical of him.<sup>22</sup> It indirectly expresses, however, the popular Hindu belief that everything is divinely ordained. Gandhi had a strong trust in God's providence and did not think that human beings should act in place of God. In this regard he differed significantly in his interpretation of the Bhagavadgîtâ from Hindu nationalists like Godse. They claimed that the verse eight in the fourth chapter of the Bhagavadgîtâ called them to kill by being God's avatar. In this verse Krishna says: “To save the righteous, to destroy the wicked, and I am born from age to age.”<sup>23</sup> Gandhi protested heavily against interpretations of this verse as a call to kill those who were seen as wicked. He did not understand the Bhagavadgîtâ as a description of “physical warfare” but as a spiritual battle in one's own soul and insisted strongly on the difference between our limited human perspective and God's absolute truth. In a response to an Indian revolutionary in 1925 he rejected the possibility to identify oneself with the perspective of God: “According to the verse quoted, it is God the All Knowing Who descends to the earth to punish the wicked. I must be pardoned if I refuse to regard every revolutionary as an all-knowing God or an avatar.”<sup>24</sup> Gandhi addressed this question again dur-

20 Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, pp. 332–340; Devare, *Secularizing Religion*, p. 163; Allen, *Gandhi after 9/11*, pp. 106–107.

21 Sen, *Argumentative Indian*, pp. 103–104.

22 “Though the statement is often recalled, it was atypical of Gandhi, except in the general sense of the popular Hindu belief that everything is divinely ordained.” Nauriya, *Gandhi*, p. 108.

23 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, pp. 41:109; cf. 32:191–193; 49:120–122.

24 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 26:488; cf. 137. Reflecting on the story about Rama who defeated Ravana, Gandhi concludes that humans should not take revenge: “This is a story. It does not mean that the effigy of Ravana is made with an idea of taking revenge. The lesson I draw from it is that it teaches man not to take revenge. Who would be more arrogant and foolish than I if I imagined myself to be Rama and other people sitting around here to be Ravana? [...] According to me, the making of Ravana's effigy on the Vijayadashami day

ing a prayer meeting in 1947, at a time when Hindus and Muslims killed each other in their violent clashes during the partition of India and Pakistan. Again, he underlined the difference between the human and the divine perspective without this time mentioning a God that directly punishes:

If the Muslims think that the Hindus and the Sikhs are at fault and the Hindus and the Sikhs think that the Muslims are at fault, they are both wrong. They are all the same to me. In my eyes the Hindus and the Muslims are all one. Only the true among them are recognized by God. Who are you to punish the wicked for their wrong deeds? They are going to be punished themselves. I have no doubt about it. This is the essence I have drawn from all religions.<sup>25</sup>

On the day after the failed bomb attack against him, Gandhi came back to this verse in the Bhagavadgîtâ to reject human claims to act in place of God:

The man who exploded the bomb obviously thinks that he has been sent by God to destroy me. [...] I am sure God is not out of His mind to continue sending such men. If we do not like a man, does it mean that he is wicked? Even if I become wicked in the eyes of everyone I shall not be considered such in the court of God. If then someone kills me, taking me for a wicked man, will he not have to answer before God? Let us pray that God may grant him good sense. [...] This is not the sort of thing that God will prompt anyone to do. When he says he was doing the bidding of God he is only making God an accomplice in a wicked deed.<sup>26</sup>

Gandhi's distinction between the relative truth of the human perspective and God's absolute truth is the basis of his philosophy and also his understanding

---

means that it is not up to human beings to take revenge. Even if we do not call it revenge, God alone can harm or kill." Gandhi, *Collected Works*, pp. 89:412–413. This comes close to Rom 12:19: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" (Rom. 12:19 NRS) Gandhi was aware of "this remarkable text" in the New Testament, see: Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 15:331; cf. Emilsen, *Gandhi's Bible*, p. 144.

25 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 89:187. – "The wicked sink under the weight of their own evil." Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 90:40.

26 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 90:472. Cf. "The youth probably looked upon the speaker as an enemy of Hinduism. After all, had not the Gita said that whenever there was an evil-minded person damaging religion, God sent someone to put an end to his life? That celebrated verse had a special meaning. The youth should realize that those who differed from him were not necessarily evil. The evil had no life apart from the toleration of good people. No one should believe that he or she was so perfect, that he or she was sent by God to punish the evil-doers, as the accused seemed to flatter himself he was." Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, p. 365.

of religion.<sup>27</sup> The absolute truth that is identical with God relativizes all worldly affairs. Contrary to Hindu nationalists like Godse, Gandhi – who was himself an Indian patriot – could never sacralize his own country in an exclusive way. His religious perspective prevented him from doing that: “My religion has no geographical limits. If I have a living faith in it, it will transcend my love for India herself.”<sup>28</sup>

Gandhi's distinction between relative and absolute truth is essential to understand that he has never taken an absolutist stance in regard to nonviolence or truth.<sup>29</sup> He distanced himself from a relativism that rejects all truth claims and from fundamentalist claims to absolute truth. Throughout his life, he tried to pursue truth and nonviolence as regulative ideals without ever claiming their possession. This distinction between relative and absolute truth is at the center of his understanding of nonviolence that he identifies with truth and expressed with the term *satyagraha*:

Satyagraha [...] is literally holding on to Truth and it means, therefore, Truth-force. Truth is soul or spirit. It is, therefore, known as soul-force. It excludes the use of violence because man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and, therefore, not competent to punish.<sup>30</sup>

Gandhi insisted on the fact that we only have access to relative truth and that we always must take relative truth as our starting point: “Nobody in this world possesses absolute truth. This is God's attribute alone. Relative truth is all we know. Therefore, we can only follow the truth as we see it. Such pursuit of truth cannot lead anyone astray.”<sup>31</sup> The human distance to absolute truth caused Gandhi to emphasize the need of reason to interpret holy scriptures.<sup>32</sup> They have to be submitted “to the acid test of reason and universal justice.”<sup>33</sup> This also applies to the interpretation of the *Bhagavadgîtâ*:

---

27 Allen, *Gandhi after 9/11*, pp. 27–35. – “Absolute truth alone is God. It is beyond reach. At the most we can say it is *neti, neti* [Not this, not this]. The truth that we see is relative, many-sided, plural and is the whole truth for a given time. There is no scope for vanity in it and the only way of reaching it is through *ahimsa*. Pure and absolute truth should be our ideal. We can reach the ideal only by constantly meditating on it, and reaching it is attaining *moksha*.” Gandhi, *Collected Works*, pp. 82:39–40; cf. 39:4–5; 71:294; 84:199.

28 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 18:134.

29 Palaver, *Gandhi's Militant Nonviolence*.

30 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 19:466.

31 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 84:199.

32 Noort, *Gandhi's Use of Scriptures*.

33 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 26:202. – “To believe that all that is in print – especially if it is in Sanskrit – is true religion is nothing but blind superstition or stupidity.” Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 31:157.



I exercise my judgment about every scripture, including the *Gita*. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason. Whilst I believe that the principal books are inspired, they suffer from a process of double distillation. Firstly, they come through a human prophet, and then through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly.<sup>34</sup>

His emphasis on reason, however, did not overlook the fact that also reason has its limits. It must not turn into rationalism, “a hideous monster when it claims for itself omnipotence”.<sup>35</sup> According to Gandhi, reason must be complemented by faith that is related to the heart: “My reason follows my heart. Without the latter it would go astray. Faith is the function of the heart. It must be enforced by reason. The two are not antagonistic as some think. The more intense one’s faith is, the more it whets one’s reason.”<sup>36</sup> The heart is especially important to trust in nonviolence because it “is a quality of the heart” and “cannot come by an appeal to the brain”.<sup>37</sup> With Gandhi’s distinction between relative and absolute truth and how he understands the cooperation between faith and reason, we are well prepared to grasp his view of the relationship between religion and politics.

### 3 Religion and Politics cannot be Divided into Water-Tight Compartments

From the time onwards that Gandhi returned to India he frequently remarked that religion and politics cannot be separated. Initial evidence for this view can be found in the constitution that he wrote for the newly founded Satyagraha Ashram nearby Ahmedabad:

Politics, economic progress, etc., are not unconnected matters; knowing that they are all rooted in religion, the Controllers will make an effort to learn and teach politics, economics, social reform, etc., in a religious spirit and work in these fields with all the zeal that they can command.<sup>38</sup>

Gandhi also underlines the interconnectedness between religion and politics with the following remark: “I claim that the human mind or human society

---

34 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 64:75.

35 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 31:496.

36 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 71:377.

37 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 72:196.

38 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 13:95.

is not divided into water-tight compartments called social, political and religious. All act and react upon one another."<sup>39</sup> In a speech in which he defended his fight against the discrimination of the untouchables he most strongly expresses the religious root of his political engagement:

I could not live for a single second without religion. Many of my political friends despair of me because they say that even my politics are derived from my religion. And they are right. My politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion. I go further and say that every activity of a man of religion must be derived from his religion, because religion means being bound to God, that is to say, God rules your every breath.<sup>40</sup>

Gandhi also ends his autobiography by underlining the interconnectedness of religion and politics:

To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.<sup>41</sup>

The religious attitude that Gandhi describes in this passage comes close to the preferential option for the poor that we find at the center of today's liberation theologies. Anantanand Rambachan underlines this claim with the following passage from Gandhi's writings:

I count no sacrifice too great for the sake of seeing God face to face. The whole of my activity, whether it may be called social, political, humanitarian or ethical, is directed to that end. And as I know that God is found more often in the lowliest of His creatures than in the high and mighty, I am struggling to reach the status of these. I cannot do so without their service. Hence my passion for the service of the suppressed classes.<sup>42</sup>

Whereas Gandhi's starting point to enter politics in the service of the weakest is his longing to see God from face to face his view of politics is rather critical and it is for this reason that he wants to introduce religion into politics:

---

39 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 22:491.

40 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 57:199.

41 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 39:401.

42 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 25:117; Rambachan, *Essays in Hindu Theology*, p. 144.

The politician in me has never dominated a single decision of mine, and if I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics encircle us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries. I wish therefore to wrestle with the snake, as I have been doing, with more or less success, consciously since 1894, unconsciously, as I have now discovered, ever since reaching the years of discretion. Quite selfishly, as I wish to live in peace in the midst of a bellowing storm howling round me, I have been experimenting with myself and my friends by introducing religion into politics.<sup>43</sup>

Gandhi tried to introduce religion into politics, an attempt that also explains why he counts “politics without principles” among the “seven social sins”.<sup>44</sup>

Gandhi’s insight that religion and politics cannot be divided into water-tight compartments stems mainly from his adherence to the non-dualistic Indian advaita tradition. God and his creation are not dualistically separated but deeply interconnected:

Man’s ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities, social, political, religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavour simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can only be done by service of all.<sup>45</sup>

Compared to this Indian tradition, Western thinking has a strong dualistic leaning as Raimon Panikkar observed decades after Gandhi.<sup>46</sup> He recommended an “advaitic’ relation, a non-dualistic relationship” between religion and politics that is “an intrinsic and thus nonmanipulable relationship that distinguishes but does not separate, allows for diversity but not for rupture, does not confuse roles, but equally does not raise roles to ontological status.”<sup>47</sup>

One expression of this Western dualism is the apolitical interpretation of Jesus as it seems to be underlined by his words that one should render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God (Mt 22:21).

---

43 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 17:406.

44 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 28:365.

45 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 63:240; Rambachan, *Essays in Hindu Theology*, p. 144.

46 “The history of the relationship between religion and politics in the West resembles the history of a marriage: at the outset the partners promised an eternal fidelity; then came a mutual disenchantment, accusations were levied on both sides with recriminations; there followed a legal divorce, after which each side began to respect the other; and now attempts are being made to declare the marriage null and void. Politics and religion should never have been married; there must have been a misunderstanding on the side of one or the other party that now must be cleaned up *a radice*.” Panikkar, *Religion or Politics*, p. 51.

47 Panikkar, *Religion or Politics*, p. 59.

Gandhi rejected such an understanding of Jesus and claimed that he was a political activist committed to nonviolence. "Jesus, in my humble opinion, was a prince among politicians. He did render unto Caesar that which was Caesar's. He gave the devil his due."<sup>48</sup> Gandhi interpreted Jesus' words in accordance with his interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount and claimed that these words express the "great law [...] of refusing to co-operate with evil."<sup>49</sup>

#### 4 Gandhi's Support of a Secular Indian State

The non-dualistic *advaita* tradition does not mean to choose monism instead. "Not-two (*advaita*) is not to be construed simplistically as one."<sup>50</sup> This also applies to Gandhi whose claim that religion and politics cannot be separated did not result in any kind of theocracy, integralism or fundamentalism. This becomes most obvious in his support of a secular Indian state. In 1931 he already called for the "religious neutrality" of the state.<sup>51</sup> The pluralism of religions in Indian endangered the Indian nation whenever the religions turned into communalist groups fighting each other. Challenged by communal riots in 1940, Gandhi no longer emphasized the connection between religion and politics but – to the contrary – called for a religious abstinence from politics: "Religion is a personal matter. It ought not to affect the political field."<sup>52</sup> He even more harshly expressed this view in a talk with a Christian missionary:

If I were a dictator, religion and State would be separate. I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The State has nothing to do with it. The State would look after your secular welfare, health, communications, foreign relations, currency and so on, but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern!<sup>53</sup>

This does not mean, however, that he no longer thought that the world needs spiritual orientation but that it could not be exercised by the state or on the state-level. In the same talk he said that the religious movement will dominate the future if it will "be lived every moment of one's life".

48 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 18:196.

49 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, pp. 23:105; cf. 107, 43:131; Emilsen, *Gandhi's Bible*, pp. 89–92.

50 Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, p. 8.

51 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 45:373; cf. Nauriya, *Gandhi*, p. 84.

52 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 74:27.

53 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 85:328.

Gandhi had a very special understanding of what it means to introduce “religion into politics.”<sup>54</sup> It was neither the theocratic imposition of Hinduism or any other particular religion on the Indian society nor a secular exclusion of religion from the social sphere. What he meant was politics that is rooted in the virtuous self-rule of rulers and ruled. He found a model for this, for instance, in the Indian epic *Ramayana* in which the godly prince Rama is expelled to the wild forest on the very day of his planned coronation and accepts his exile in accordance with his righteousness and his commitment to truth. Rama’s conduct is at the center of Gandhi’s concept of *ramarajya*, his Indian expression for the kingdom of God: “Rama did justice even to a dog. By abandoning his kingdom and living in the forest for the sake of truth Rama gave to all the kings of the world an object-lesson in noble conduct.”<sup>55</sup>

Gandhi referred, for instance, to Rama when he himself stopped the non-cooperation campaign after members of his movement killed twenty-two policemen and three civilians in Chauri Chaura in 1922: “Bardoli’s civil disobedience has vanished like a dream. God meant to stop it at the very moment when it was to start. There is nothing to wonder at in this. If for one like Rama the hour of coronation turned out to be the hour for going to the forest, why speak of Bardoli?”<sup>56</sup> Gandhi did not want to continue a campaign that seriously failed in its commitment to nonviolence. In this decision, he could draw in this on the example of Rama, who was an ideal king because he no longer followed the Indian warrior traditions.<sup>57</sup> The *Ramayana* tells how Rama’s brother challenged him for not acting like someone belonging to the warrior caste. Rama’s response shows that he follows an alternative ethos: “So give up this ignoble notion that is based on the code of the kshatriyas; be of like mind with me and base your actions on righteousness, not violence.”<sup>58</sup>

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber reflected in 1930 on Gandhi’s religious engagement in politics and despite the fact that he did not completely accept Gandhi’s view he recognized a parallel between the Indian Mahatma and the Jewish prophets:

Through his attempt “to introduce religion into politics” Gandhi has entered the ranks of those who strive to overcome the still continually growing duality of

54 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 17:406.

55 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 25:558.

56 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 22:423.

57 Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, pp. 560–561, 577.

58 Vālmiki, *Rāmāyaṇa*, p. 123 [2.18.36].

politics and religion. The tragedy he has thereby entered is that peculiar to the prophetic man. This tragedy must be recognized and honoured.<sup>59</sup>

Gandhi's position is definitely closer to Buber's theopolitics than to all those political theologies in which violence and power are dominating by using religion for worldly ends.

The religious pluralism in India caused Gandhi also to reject denominational religious education in public schools:

I do not believe that the State can concern itself or cope with religious education. I believe that religious education must be the sole concern of religious associations. Do not mix up religion and ethics. I believe that fundamental ethics is common to all religions. Teaching of fundamental ethics is undoubtedly a function of the State. By religion I have not in mind fundamental ethics but what goes by the name of denominationalism. We have suffered enough from State-aided religion and State Church.<sup>60</sup>

Gandhi also expressed his position on the secular state and religious education in a discussion with a Christian pastor. Gandhi's position was summarized in the following way:

Gandhiji expressed the opinion that the State should undoubtedly be secular. It could never promote denominational education out of public funds. Everyone living in it should be entitled to profess his religion without let or hindrance, so long as the citizen obeyed the common law of the land.<sup>61</sup>

Gandhi was also critically "opposed to State aid, partly or wholly, to religious bodies".<sup>62</sup>

## 5 Gandhi's Twofold Concept of Religion

Realizing that Gandhi rejected the Western separation of religions and politics but endorsed a secular state is at first sight puzzling. Dieter Conrad, a German law scholar and expert on Southeast Asia helps us with his seminal book *Gandhi und der Begriff des Politischen* to entangle this riddle.<sup>63</sup> Conrad explains how

59 Buber, *Pointing the Way*, pp. 135–136; cf. Nelson, *Buber and Gandhi*; Meir, *Gandhi and Buber*.

60 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 87:1.

61 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 89:51.

62 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 87:5.

63 Conrad, *Gandhi*.

Gandhi was able to criticize the Western separation of religion and politics without falling back to a position that would automatically result in religious wars. Even though Gandhi was a committed Hindu with no intention to convert it was not so much a particular institutionalized religion that he wanted to introduce into politics but rather a type of religion that can be expressed by terms like religiosity, spirituality, or piousness. Politics is, according to Gandhi, in need of a religion that transcends all institutionalized denominations:

It is not the Hindu religion, which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself.<sup>64</sup>

It is along this line of thinking that Gandhi maintained that God is truth, turning this formula even into "Truth is God", allowing therefore even atheists to participate in this type of spirituality.<sup>65</sup> Gandhi's two uses of the term religion are tangible in the following quote: "There are many religions, but religion is only one."<sup>66</sup>

This double meaning of religion allowed Gandhi to differentiate the uses of religion in politics. While he argued for bringing religiosity and spirituality to bear on politics, he simultaneously supported the idea that a secular Indian state should ban religious education from state schools. According to Gandhi, institutionalized religion must be separated from politics. Instead, introducing religion into politics meant for him to seek truth in a communicative, non-violent way. "'Satya', in truth, is my God. I can only search Him through non-violence and in no other way."<sup>67</sup> Because Gandhi's understanding of a "spiritualization of politics" is committed to non-violence, it is not prone to result in religious wars. Truth must be completely detached from any egoistic will to power. If human beings succeed in seeking truth in this way, they can become committed to this truth by patiently struggling for it.

---

64 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 17:406.

65 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 48:404.

66 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 83:11.

67 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, p. 59:8.

## Bibliography

- Allen, Douglas: *Gandhi after 9/11: Creative Nonviolence and Sustainability*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press 2019.
- Bellah, Robert N.: *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2011.
- Buber, Martin: *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays*. New York: Harper & Brothers 1957.
- Conrad, Dieter: *Gandhi und der Begriff des Politischen*. Staat, Religion und Gewalt. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2006.
- Davis, Richard H.: *The "Bhagavad Gita": A Biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2015.
- Devare, Aparna: *Secularizing Religion: Hindu Extremism as a Modernist Discourse*, in: *International Political Sociology* 3 (2/2009), pp. 156–175.
- Emilsen, William W. (ed.): *Gandhi's Bible*. Delhi: ISPCK 2001.
- Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand: *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. New Delhi: Publications Division 1958–1994.
- Godse, Nathuram Vinayak: *May it Please Your Honour*. Delhi: Surya-Prakashan 1989.
- Marin, Lou: *Einleitung: Zur Rezeption von M. K. Gandhis libertärem Anti-Kolonialismus*, in: Ashis Nandy (ed.): *Der Intimfeind. Verlust und Wiederaneignung der Persönlichkeit im Kolonialismus*. Nettersheim: Verlag Graswurzelrevolution 2008, pp. 7–62.
- Meir, Ephraim: *Gandhi and Buber on Individual and Collective Transformation*, in: *Religions* 13 (7/2022), p. 600. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070600>
- Mishra, Pankaj: *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2004.
- Mishra, Pankaj: *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*. London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2017.
- Nandy, Ashis: *Final Encounter: The Politics of the Assassination of Gandhi*, in: Ashis Nandy (ed.): *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture*. Delhi: Oxford University Press 1980, pp. 70–98.
- Nandy, Ashis: *From Outside the Imperium: Gandhi's Cultural Critique of the 'West'*, in: *Alternatives* 7 (2/1981), pp. 171–194.
- Nandy, Ashis: *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford 1983.
- Nauriya, Anil: *Gandhi, Secularism and Reason*, in: Alain Tschudin/Susan Russell (ed.): *Gandhi Now: Blessed Are the Peacemakers and Sustainers of Life*. Johannesburg, SA: Good Governance Africa 2020, pp. 83–114.
- Nelson, Eric S.: *Buber and Gandhi: Prophetic Theopolitics, Intercultural Critique, and Non-Eurocentric Cosmopolitanism*, in: *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences (SH&SS)* 21 (1–2/2020), pp. 105–128.



- Noort, Ed: *Gandhi's Use of Scriptures: A Hermeneutic of Nonviolence Against Letters That Kill*, in: *Religions* 13 (2/2022), p. 153. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020153>
- Palaver, Wolfgang: *Gandhi's Militant Nonviolence in the Light of Girard's Mimetic Anthropology*, in: *Religions* 12 (11/2021), p. 988. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110988>
- Panikkar, Raimon: *Religion or Politics: The Western Dilemma*, in: Peter H. Merkl/Ninian Smart (ed.): *Religion and Politics in the Modern World*. New York: New York University Press 1983, pp. 44–60.
- Payne, Robert: *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi*. New York: Brick Tower Press 1997.
- Rambachan, Anantanand: *A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two Is Not One*. SUNY series in religious studies. Albany: SUNY Press 2015.
- Rambachan, Anantanand: *Essays in Hindu Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2019.
- Roy, Olivier: *Secularism Confronts Islam*, George Holoch (transl.). New York: Columbia University Press 2007.
- Sen, Amartya: *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2005.
- Tendulkar, Dinanath Gopal: *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*. Vol. 3: 1930–1934. New Dehli: The Publications Division 1951.
- Tendulkar, Dinanath Gopal: *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*. Vol. 8: 1947–1948. New Delhi: The Publications Division 1954.
- Vālmiki: *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: An Epic of Ancient India, Volume II: Ayodhyakāṇḍa*, Sheldon I. Pollock (transl.). Princeton Library of Asian Translations. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1986.

# Rebel Nun with a Cause

## *The Political Sophiology of St Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova)*

*Evert van der Zweerde*

### Abstract

Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova), born Liza Pilenko in 1891, also known as Elizaveta Iurevna Kuz'mina-Karavaeva, died as a nun and martyr in Ravensbrück in 1945 – in 2004, the Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarchate (Constantinople) canonized her as St Mary of Paris. Her fascinating biography easily overshadows her shattered theoretical work. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it not only offers a justification of her activity as a “nun in the world”, but also a number of innovative motifs that are part of the tradition of Russian religious philosophy that flourished in involuntary exile in Paris. Much of this circles around the Sophia-figure, which Skobtsova comes close to positing as a fourth hypostasis next to the Holy Trinity, and which she links explicitly to Virgin-Mother Mary, thus introducing a feminine element into the very core of the Christian faith. Among the numerous possible approaches of her life and work, this article explores Skobtsova's political sophiology.

### Keywords

Sophiology; Politics; Modernization; Monasticism; Philosophy of Action; Gender

Now there was a time  
When they used to say  
That behind every great man  
There had to be a great woman  
But in these times of change  
You know that's no longer true  
So we're coming out of the kitchen  
'Cause there's something we forgot to say to you (we say)

Sisters are doing it for themselves  
Standing on their own two feet  
And ringing on their own bells

Sisters are doing it for themselves

ANNIE LENNOX & ARETHA FRANKLIN, 1985<sup>1</sup>

\*\*\*

It is clear to everybody that we must seek a path to free, purposeful, and expedient labour, that we must take the world as a sort of garden that it is incumbent upon us to cultivate. Who doubts that?

MAT' MARIIA (SKOBTSOVA), 1933<sup>2</sup>

## 1 Introduction<sup>3</sup>

In 2004, Mat' [Mother] Mariia (Skobtsova), born Elizaveta Iurevna Pilenko (Riga, 1891 – Ravensbrück, 1945), was canonized as St Mary of Paris by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Russian Orthodox Church [henceforth: ROC], recognizing Skobtsova as a martyr and an exemplary human being, has not accepted her sainthood and maintains a certain distance because of the scandalous way in which she self-handedly shaped her religious existence.<sup>4</sup> The ROC does endorse publications, but without blessing them, and Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev) appreciates Mat' Mariia in forewords to such publications, but calling her nun [*monakhinia*] instead of saint [*sviataia*].<sup>5</sup> Skobtsova was awarded, under her worldly name, a second-rank Order of the Great Patriotic War by the Soviet authorities in 1985, and honoured, by the Israeli authorities, with a monument at Yad Vashem in 1987, this time under her religious name: Mother Mariia (Skobtsova).<sup>6</sup> Who was this woman, why is she an object of controversy and what can we learn from her?

1 Recorded on: The Eurythmics, *Be Yourself Tonight* (1985) and Aretha Franklin, *Who's Zoomin' Who?* (1985).

2 Skobtsova, *The Cross and the Hammer-and-Sickle*, in: *Essential Writings*, p. 87.

3 Where applicable, I have included multiple references. I am grateful to student-assistant Anneloes Joosten for retrieving a number of relevant publications, to my colleague Josephien van Kessel for references to Sergei Bulgakov, and to Natal'ia Likvintseva, who instantly answered the questions that I posed to her. Russian names and words are transliterated in line with the Library of Congress system without diacritical signs, spelling has been harmonized into UK spelling, and, unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine, EvdZ.

4 Steinmair-Pösel, *Im Gravitationsfeld*, p. 115, n. 61 and p. 116, n. 64.

5 Krivochéine, *La beauté salvatrice*, pp. 9–11.

6 Krivosheina, *Sviataia nashikh dnei*, p. 668.

The aim of this article is to come closer to an answer to those questions, and to place her in a broader political-philosophical context. This implies a certain “translation” from the Russian-Orthodox theological and religious context that was Skobtsova’s to a more wordly one and also from a gendered to a post-binarist perspective. This translation inevitably goes at the expense, to an extent, of what was proper to Skobtsova, who herself strongly identified with the Russian language and people, as well as with the Russian Orthodox tradition, rather than being of an ecumenical or cosmopolitan or even generally Orthodox-Christian orientation; in comparison with important predecessors like Vladimir Solov’ev or Sergei Bulgakov, Skobtsova qualifies as a “Russian nationalist”. At the same time, an attempt at “translation” as undertaken in this article tries to go further and bridge the gap between religious and “secular” or even “atheist” approaches within the field of political philosophy. On a more pragmatic level, the same point was made by Dominique Desanti: “Pour elle, le soutien est venu d’un dialogue avec son Dieu. Que dire sinon que les incroyants aussi peuvent connaître des moments de survol, de débordement, d’enchantement par la beauté et la grandeur de la vie.”<sup>7</sup> The challenge is to take religiously motivated discourse and action seriously without taking it literally, but also without engaging in “vulgar” reductionism.

The background hypothesis of my approach is that, at the most general level, any form of human living-together, i.e. “society” in the broadest possible sense, constitutes a situation of both plurality and finitude, and is marked by the ubiquitous and permanent possibility of conflict as well as concord (both in a variety of forms), which implies the inevitability of some sort of politics (again in a variety of forms) in order to deal with that possibility. Since human existence is intrinsically linked to both thought and language, humans will have to make sense of their socio-political (and economic, cultural, etc.) reality, and for this they will use the conceptual material that is available (in many forms) in their concrete situation. This conceptual material can be derived from a religious tradition, a philosophical culture, a ruling ideology, scientific “academia” and everyday “folk wisdom”, or any combination thereof. From this perspective, it becomes relatively insignificant if a particular “theory” is stated in religious, philosophical or other terms. At the same time, this insignificance is only relative: the political-philosophical approach adopted in this article will regard a religious claim regarding a transcendent or supernatural reality or dimension as a claim in this world, just as it will regard a science-based claim as a truth-claim in this world, and not as a given truth.

---

<sup>7</sup> Desanti, *La sainte et l’incroyante*, p. 249.

A key concept in Skobtsova's thought (and action) is Sophia, which does entail a reference and truth-claim to a transcendent, in this case also transcending, entity. Sophiology is the theological theory or doctrine about Sophia, but with a tendency to turn Sophia from object into subject of that theory, so that it ultimately is Sophia who is speaking, and also with a tendency to turn sophiology into the basis of a philosophical system that, to a varying extent, exceeds church-bound theology. What then makes this sophiology political? From the perspective adopted here, it is political in the precise sense that it is a case, Skobtsova's case, of humans trying to make sense of their socio-political reality, using an available conceptual framework, in this case the sophiological one, and not simply to better understand it, but also to intervene in it. The late f. Aleksandr Men' labelled Skobtsova a "philosopher of action [*filosof deist-viia*]," an apt qualification which, however, understates her importance as a thinker.<sup>8</sup> The central argument of this article is that it makes a significant political difference that Skobtsova acted and wrote as a woman and a nun, not as a gender-neutral intellectual. While this does not make her a "feminist", it does function as a crowbar that unsettles traditional conceptions and practices, and even the very character of monasticism, both within and beyond the Russian-Orthodox Christian tradition.

In order to develop this argument, the article consists of three parts. The first part gives an overview of Skobtsova's life and legacy; the second part places Skobtsova in the sophiological tradition; the third part zooms in on her own political-sophiological contribution, highlighting three aspects.

## 2 Life and Legacy

A visible and public figure during most of her life, biographies are easy to find and do not show substantial differences.<sup>9</sup> As Natal'ia Likvintseva rightly states, Mat' Mariia is much better known because of her life, than because of her theoretical legacy or her contribution to Russian religious thought.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Likvintseva, with her publications on Skobtsova and her effort in publishing a joint French-Russian, five-volume critical edition of her works, "as complete as is the maximum possible right now," is among the pioneers in addressing and

8 Men', *Russkaia religioznaia filosofia*, p. 386 / Men', *Russian Religious Philosophy*, p. 187.

9 See Stratton-Smith 1965, Hackel 1982 / Gakkel' 1992, Zepter 2002, Ageeva 2003, Pérez 2007, Varaut 2014, Krivosheina 2015, Likvintseva 2018, Oboimina 2019.

10 Likvintseva, *Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova) kak bogoslov*, p. 49.

assessing her scattered written, including theoretical legacy.<sup>11</sup> The project of “unearthing Mat' Mariia” was started by Grigorii Benevich in 2003 who set out to “establish an integrated image of E.Iu, Kuz'mina-Karavaeva (mother Maria), to show of what consists the indissoluble unity of her life and work along its whole duration.”<sup>12</sup> In passing, Benevich rightly warns against a certain reverence [*pietet*] towards Mat' Mariia which “hinders those who write about her to objectively assess her place in twentieth century Russian culture and to perceive the road that she travelled in its full complexity and contradictions. The latter not only distances us from the truth, but also pays bad service to the memory of mother Mariia.”<sup>13</sup> Outside Russia, pioneering work is undertaken, in France in particular, by Xénia Krivochéine [Ksenia Krivosheina] and Héléne Arjakovsky-Klépinine, but also by Rowan Williams, Petra Steinmair-Pösel, Kateřina Bauerová, Michael Plekon and others. The development of international Skobtsova-studies is seriously hampered by the fact that scholars need to have a working knowledge of Russia, French, and German – and then be able to publish in English. In the West, this is a relatively rare combination, while Russian scholars, who usually will be able to use sources in English, German and French, tend to focus on Skobtsova's contribution to specifically “Russian religious thought” rather than to religious or philosophical thought generally.

Born Elizaveta [shortened as Liza] Iurevna Pilenko in 1891, she long bore the name of her first husband well after their divorce: Elizaveta Iurevna Kuz'mina-Karavaeva (1910–1919); when she married Daniil Skobtsov, she became E.Iu. Skobtsova (1919–1932) and then, after her *postrig* [tonsure] as nun, had her name changed after St Mary of Egypt: Mat' [Mother] Mariia (Skobtsova) (1932–1945). What better way to give a summary of her rollercoaster life than by quoting the first paragraph of Benevich monograph, adding a number of points and details between square brackets:

Befriended during her childhood with [neighbour and family friend] Konstantin Pobedonostsev [(1827–1907) *oberprokuror* of the ROC], then breaking with him [and losing her Orthodox-Christian faith for some time, finishing the gymnasium and studying philosophy at the Bestuzhev Highschool for girls,] she

11 Of this five-volume edition, which rightly features both names, E.Iu. Kuz'mina-Karavaeva and Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova) as authors, three volumes have appeared: *Vstrechi s Blokom* (2012), *Rossia i é migratsiia* (2019), and *Put'* (2022); the remaining two, *Pravoslavnoe delo*, and one volume that aims, as far as possible, to collect her poetry and mystery plays, are scheduled for 2023 and an unknown date [based on private communication with Natal'ia Likvintseva and on *Ot sostavitel'ei*, in: Kuz'mina-Karavaeva / Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova), *Rossia i é migratsiia*, p. 5].

12 Benevich, *Mat' Mariia*, p. 6.

13 Benevich, *Mat' Mariia*, p. 6.

hopelessly fell in love with Aleksandr Blok, was a poetess and artist, member of the “Poets’ Guild” [*Tsekha poetov*] [also being the first woman to study theology as St Petersburg Theological Academy, graduating unofficially with excellent results], was an activist for the right wing of the Social-Revolutionary Party [*ésery*] [planning an assault on Bolshevik Lev Trotsky whom she rightly saw as enemy], became [freely elected and first female] deputy mayor and then mayor [*gorodskaia golova*] of the city of Anapa [on the Black Sea], [saving the population by striking deals with Whites, Bolsheviks and anarchists alike], [avoided being shot by a Red Army soldier on the train back from Moscow by threatening to send a telegram to her alleged friend, Lenin’s wife Nadezhda Krupskaja,] was put on trial by the [White] Denikin Army and barely saved herself from execution, wife of a prominent figure [Skobtsov] of the Kuban Rada, mother of three children, all of which she lost [Gaiana 1913–1936 (Moskva, typhoid); Iurii 1920–1944 (Buchenwald, furunculosis); Anastasiia 1922–1926 (Paris, meningitis)], [evacuated from Anapa, when it was seized by the Bolsheviks in 1920, and fled, while pregnant, first to Tbilisi, then Constantinople and Belgrade to, finally, Paris (1923)] then, in emigration [exile], a writer, a literary critic, [active member of the staff of St Serge Theological Institute where Nikolai Berdiaev and f. Sergei Bulgakov, her friend and spiritual father, taught, and where she organized conferences and gave lectures,] member of the board of the RSKhD [*Russkoe Studencheskoe Khristianskoe Dvizhenie* – Russian Student Christian Movement], nun, [co-founder and] president of *Orthodox Action* [*Pravoslavnoe delo*; also translatable as Orthodox Cause], author of a collection of poetry, theological studies, and mystery-plays, [maker of] icons and embroideries, founder of an asylum for Russian émigrés, [joining the French *résistance* and] saving Jews during the war, [arrested and deported by the Gestapo] and perishing in the Ravensbrück concentration camp [days before it was liberated by the Red Army] – the legendary Mother Maria [*Mat’ Mariia*], glorified in poems, heroin of novels and a few movies, stumbling block in the quarrels between “liberal” and “conservative” Orthodox Christians [until the present day].<sup>14</sup>

Skobtsova was an energetic *homo universalis* who was not only politically active and an engaged social worker, but also wrote poetry, stories and mystery pieces, and has become famous for her embroideries: icons, paintings, and drawings, including heart-breaking portraits of her dying daughter.<sup>15</sup> Arguably, theory, whether theological or philosophical, was not her first or main concern, and the claim that her intellectual legacy deserves our attention is not meant to suggest that in fact it is what is most important. Instead, it means that, in addition to one of the most impressive biographies of the twentieth century, there is also an interesting theoretical work that still has not borne its potential fruit.

14 Benevich, *Mat’ Mariia*, p. 5.

15 For pictures, see Krivochéine, *La Beauté savatrice* and <http://mere-marie.com/gallery> [last visited 02/04/2023].

She took monastic vows in 1932, but the great turning point in her life occurred in 1926 at her dying three year-old daughter Nastia's bedside, when she scribbled down:

At Nastia's side I feel that my soul has meandered down back alleys all my life. And now I want an authentic and a purified road, not out of faith in life, but in order to justify, understand and accept death [...] No amount of thought will ever result in any greater formulation than the three words, 'Love one another', so long as it is love to the end and without exceptions.<sup>16</sup>

Returning from Nastia's funeral, she had a vision of "universal motherhood": "I became aware [*mne otkrylos'*, which literally translates as "to me was revealed", EvdZ] of a new and special, broad and all-embracing motherhood. I returned from that cemetery a different person. I saw a new road before me and a new meaning in life. [...] to be a mother for all, for all who need maternal care, assistance or protection."<sup>17</sup> The full text of this citation, which stems from an interview that Tat'iana Manukhina held a few months after Skobtsova became m. Mariia, emphasizes this "width" of the all-encompassing motherhood that she perceived by repeating the word *shirokoe* [wide or broad]: "[...] some special, *shirokoe-shirokoe*, all-encompassing [*sveob'emliushchee*]. [...] The rest was already of secondary importance. I talked with my confessor, my family, then went to the Metropolitan."<sup>18</sup> This, one could say, is when Liza Pilenko substantially became Mother Maria, and it marks the beginning of that period of her life that established her fame, even among the Nazi camp-guards at Ravensbrück, one of whom reportedly said during his post-war trial: "She was known to us as the "wonderful Russian nun", and we didn't want her to die. Her death was a mistake, and we were sorry it happened."<sup>19</sup>

Having been restless and "searching" for much of her life, she now developed a purpose to which she dedicated her seemingly endless energy. As Anthony Bloom, Metropolitan of the Sourozh Diocese (United Kingdom), put it: "She took the road of genuine Folly in Christ [*iurodstvo*]: she lived, if judging by human reason, madly."<sup>20</sup> This *iurodstvo* enjoys a strong tradition in Russia that runs all the way from Saint Basil the Blessed [Vasilii Blazhennyi] (1468–1552 or 1557) to the protest punk-group Pussy Riot that performed on top of the *lobnoe mesto* right in front of the Cathedral named after St Basil and,

16 Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price*, p. 4 / Gakkel, *Mat' Mariia*, p. 20.

17 Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price*, p. 16 / Gakkel, *Mat' Mariia*, p. 39.

18 Manukhina, *Monakhinia Mariia*, p. 420.

19 Target, *The Nun in the Concentration Camp*, p. 12.

20 Bloom, Anthony, *Slovo o Materi Marii*, in: Krivosheina, *Sviataia nashikh dnei*, p. 370.



like him, in full view of the Kremlin. Skobtsova wrote an article in 1930, in the middle of her transition from housewife, spouse and mother of three, to nun and “universal mother”, in which she stated, first, that after a period of “bloom” in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, it was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that the phenomenon resurfaced in Russia, second, that it had changed in character from speaking truth to the authorities to “a kind of everyday-life spreading of the faith [*nekoe bytovoe ispovednichestvo*]” that was barely recognized by the church authorities, and third, that it was an authentic way of being a Christian that meets two requirements at the same time: “In this manner, in *iurodstvo* two requirements [*potrebnosti*] run into each other: the requirements for the zealous fool in Christ him[her]self [*iurodstvuiushchego podvizhnika*] not to seduce the world with his [her] own personality and the requirement for the world to see in the zealot who turns towards it not something distant and alien, but “everything for all”, in front of whom there is no need to be proud of one’s own small virtues, in front of whom one can, without shame, uncover one’s inner poverty, one’s spiritual feeblenesses [*dukhovnye nemoshchi*], he [she] is, as they say, your own brother [sister] who understands, does not judge, does not reproach with his [her] hypocritical perfection [*fariseiskoe sovershenstvo*].”<sup>21</sup> As former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams wrote: “If there is one twentieth-century Orthodox saint who exemplifies both the “canonical” holy folly of martyrdom and the more ambiguous side of *iurodstvo* that has to do with compromised behaviour and scandal to the conventional faithful, it has to be Mother Maria Skobtsova [...]”<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, this “folly” had very concrete results. In a text from 1929 that is as unfinished as it is programmatic, Skobtsova wrote:

It now is already two thousand years, since the world was assigned the empirically ineffective task, – to realise within itself God-manhood. [...] Only all the fullness of human creativity, all the torment of its failure and all the delight of its attainment, – only they alone are worthy to be united in God-manhood. Otherwise, even as a goal, God-manhood would be repudiated. The empirical task appears for us to be a synthesis of culture, a struggle for the wholeness of culture.<sup>23</sup>

21 Skobtsova, *O iurodivikh*, in: E.Iu. Kuz'mina-Karavaeva / Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova): *Rossia i Emigratsiia*, p. 88 and p. 98 / *Les-fols-en-Christ*, in: Sainte Marie de Paris, *Le jour du Saint-Esprit*, p. 396 and p. 413 [gender adaptation mine, EvdZ].

22 Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, p. 216.

23 Skobtsova, *In Searches of Synthesis*, in: E. Skobtsova (Mother Maria), *The Crucible of Doubts*, p. 125 and 141 / Russian: *V poiskakh sinteza*, in: E.Iu. Kuz'mina-Karavaeva / Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova), *Put'*, p. 96 and 108.

This “wholeness of culture” took the form of “something greater than culture and [which] at the same time includes it, namely the wholeness of life,” which in Skobtsova’s case meant the house on Rue Lourmel as an “open Church,” without obligations or regulations, “a sort of laboratory for creating this wholeness,” including cheap rooms and a soup kitchen, academic lectures and poetry readings, embroidered icons for the liturgy and a place for “communication [...] through God with the whole world.”<sup>24</sup> On Rue Lourmel, the feast day of Basil the Blessed was always celebrated, while Skobtsova acted like a *iurodīvaia*: “she smoked, did not go to the liturgy, did not dress properly, and enjoyed the company of drunkards, ex-convicts and the homeless.”<sup>25</sup>

### 3 Skobtsova’s Sophiology: Background and Contribution

The starting point of the Russian sophiological tradition is undoubtedly Vladimir Solov’ev (1853–1900), who experienced three direct, mystical encounters with Sophia, and in whose work the Sophia-figure is present, implicitly or explicitly, from beginning to end, from his unfinished dialogical text *La Sophia* of 1875–6 until the poem *Three Encounters* [Tri svidaniia] of 1898.<sup>26</sup> In the case of Solov’ev, his mystical, gnostic and romantic overtones, his synthetic view of Sophia as Divine Wisdom, World Soul and Eternal Femininity, as well as a direct coupling with erotic and sexual, gendered love [*polovaia liubov'*], and with his own love for concrete, real-life women (some of whom actually were called Sophia), made his sophiology quite personal as well as controversial from a traditional Orthodox-Christian perspective. His influence on symbolist poets like Pilenko (/Skobtsova)’s hero Aleksandr Blok and on the Russian religious philosophers, including Nikolaj Berdiaev and especially Sergei Bulgakov, who had become priest in 1918, was enormous, and reached Skobtsova via both ways.

Sophiology has been controversial from the beginning: it is an undeniable part of the Orthodox-Christian tradition, but it also constitutes a slippery slope in the direction of Gnosticism, esotericism and a deconstruction of masculine and patriarchal overtones: Sophia not only invites mystical, holistic and pan(en)theistic visions, but also serves as a way to bring in feminine elements. Under the triple, arguably unique conditions of, first, booming Russian religious thought during the *Serebrianyi Vek* [Silver Age, 1890–1920],

24 Likvintseva, *Overcoming the Gap*, p. 83.

25 Bauerova, *The Play of the Semiotic and the Symbolic*, p. 296.

26 See also van der Zweerde, *Between Mysticism and Politics*; for Solov’ev’s Sophia-writings, see Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia*.

the liberation of the Russian Orthodox Church from state tutelage in 1917 (February Revolution), and the subsequent situation of exile, emigration, and repression once the Bolshevik regime had established itself, the possibilities of sophiology were explored and developed in a variety of ways, exceeding to various extents the boundaries of what was theologically acceptable and pointing in both conservative as well as leftist and revolutionary directions.<sup>27</sup> Succeeding religious-philosophical societies in Russia, the *Bratstvo Sviatoi Sofii* [Brotherhood of Holy Sophia] was founded in Paris, while gradually an opposite camp took shape under the label of neopatristic synthesis. The ensuing *Spor o Sofii* [Quarrel over Sophia] continues to the present-day.<sup>28</sup>

Skobtsova, with her background in symbolist poetry, in Orthodox theology and in philosophy, started working on religious themes, including Sophia, from around 1926, and became affiliated with the *Bratstvo* which, for reasons of gender, she could not join as a member. By the same token, she enjoined relative freedom and could develop Bulgakov's ideas further in directions that would likely be unacceptable for church authorities. In *Svet nevechernyi* [*Unfading Light*] (1917), Sergei Bulgakov had introduced Sophia as a fourth hypostasis, of a different order, yet "in addition to" the Holy Trinity:

[...] as the love of Love and the love for Love, Sophia possesses personhood and countenance, is a subject, a person or, let us say it with theological terminology, a hypostasis; of course she is *different* from the Hypostases of the Holy Trinity, and is a special hypostasis, of a different order, a fourth hypostasis. She does not participate in the inner-divine life, *she is not God*, [...] But she is the beginning of a new, creaturely multihypostaseity, for after her follow many hypostases (people and angels) which are found in a sophianic relation to the Divinity.<sup>29</sup>

Ordained priest in 1918, f. Sergii (Bulgakov) revised his position in 1924, ascribing to Sophia not the status of a hypostasis [*ipostas'*], but the quality of hypostasis-ity [*ipostasnost'*] in contradistinction to both hypostasis and non-hypostasis-ness [*bez'ipostasnost'*].<sup>30</sup> Still, his sophiology was condemned at the 1938 synod of the ROC Abroad in Karlovtsy.

In at least three texts, Skobtsova's own variant of sophiology is articulated: a lecture on the world-understanding [*mirosozertsanie*] of Vl. Solov'ev (1929), an unfinished article, likely from the late 1920s or early 1930s, in which she

27 For a general discussion, see van der Zweerde, *Russian Political Philosophy*, pp. 129–146.

28 For the history of this brotherhood, see Nikita Struve (ed.), *Bratstvo Sviatoi Sofii; materialy i dokumenty 1923–1939*. Moskva: Russkii put' / Paris: YMCA Press 2000.

29 Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, p. 217 / *Svet nevechernyi*, p. 186 et seq. See also Van Kessel, *Sophiology and Modern Society*, p. 82.

30 Bulgakov, *Ipostas' i ipostasnost'*, p. 318 [scholium 8].

comments on Bulgakov's 1924 *scholia* to his *Svet nevechernyi* and traces Sophia back to the Old Testament (the books Wisdom [*Premudrost' Solomona*] and Kingdoms [*Kniga Tsarstv*], esp. 1 Kings 3:16–28),<sup>31</sup> and a posthumously published short text, "About the Antichrist [*Ob antikhriste*]" (late 1930s, possibly 1942).<sup>32</sup> Stated in broad terms, she does not follow Solov'ev's romantic and synthetic vision of Sophia as Divine Wisdom / World Soul / Eternal Femininity, nor Berdiaev's anthropological and artistic understanding, but rather follows Bulgakov in identifying Sophia with Maria, Mother-of-God: "The difference, however, is that where f. Sergii speaks of Christ and the Mother-of-God [*Bogomater'*] separately and connects the notion of Sophia to each of them, for Mat' Mariia the theme of Sophia is linked, as a matter of principle, to a *dyad*: Mother-of-God [*Bogoroditsa*] – Son-of-God [*Syn Bozhi*]."<sup>33</sup> In this way, Skobtsova situates her notion of universal or all-encompassing motherhood close to the heart of the Christian triune scheme, and it also allows her to articulate an anti-Mother next to the anti-Christ as the two parts of an anti-Sophia. Moreover, reviving Solov'ev's emphasis on androgyny (with Platonic roots and very influential among Symbolist poets), she overcomes the gender bias inherent in the Holy Trinity.<sup>34</sup>

In general literature on Russian sophiology, Skobtsova's name rarely pops up, if at all,<sup>35</sup> and her relevance as a thinker tends to be understated. The liberal parish priest Aleksandr Men', in a famous 1989–90 lecture series on then booming "Russian Religious Philosophy", included a chapter on Skobtsova, but focused more on her life than on her thought. While this is partly explicable in terms of limited access to her writings, the impression cannot be avoided that it also is due to the possible implications of her conception. It should be emphasized, at this point, that this was not a matter of a purposeful program,

31 Skobtsova, *O sude Solomona i o materinstve*, in: E.Iu. Kuz'mina-Karavaeva / Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova), *Put'*, pp. 160–166; see also Likvintseva, *Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova) kak bogoslov*, p. 55 and Bauerová, *Motherhood as a Space for the Other*, p. 135 et seq.

32 For a comprehensive discussion of the latter text, see Benevich, *Mat' Mariia*, pp. 143–162.

33 Benevich, *Mat' Mariia*, p. 150.

34 See Bauerová, *Motherhood as a Space*, p. 143 et seq.

35 See, for example, Oravec, Johannes M., *God as Love; The Concept and Spiritual Aspects of Agapè in Modern Russian Religious Thought*. Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans 2014; Panagopoulos, Georgios D., *Russische Sophiologie zwischen orthodoxer Tradition und moderner Philosophie; V. Soloviev, S. Bulgakov, G. Florovskii*. Berlin: Lit Verlag 2021; Porus, Vladimir N. (ed.), *Sofologiya*. Moskva: BBI 2010; Schipflinger, Thomas, *Sophia – Maria; eine ganzheitliche Vision der Schöpfung*. München & Zürich: Verlag Neue Stadt 1988; Sergeev, Mikhail, *Sophiology in Russian Orthodoxy: Solov'ev, Bulgakov, Losskii and Berdiaev*. Lewiston & c: The Edwin Mellen Press 2006; Kornblatt, Judith Deutsch/Richard F. Gustafson (eds.): *Russian Religious Thought*. Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press 1996.

but rather part of a life-work that can be labelled *kenotic*.<sup>36</sup> There is evidence that Skobtsova rarely revised writings and that, as Sergei Hackel puts it, both her prose, her poems, and indeed all of her work seems of “volcanic origin”, emitting “the heat of uncooled lava.”<sup>37</sup> While this fits the image of the *iurodivaia* who speaks Holy Truth no matter what, it also evokes the image of the unruly, uncontrolled, and unreasonable, not to say hysterical woman – a standard way of not taking seriously and of not asking *why* they would be acting like that. It is anyhow striking that Skobtsova’s most interesting theoretical writings date back to the “apocalyptic” period before and during World War Two (1937 and after). We need to discern two aspects of *iurodstvo* here: one is that, in a fallen world rife with egoism, exploitation, and enmity, the radical perspective of Christian morality can only appear as “foolish” – unwilling to compromise, willing to self-sacrifice; the other aspect is that such “folly” is not necessarily only targeting worldly authorities, as it did in tsarist and Soviet Russia, but can just as well aim at a church hierarchy or at the conservative values of a religious community.

In the exile milieu, marginal and vulnerable on the one hand, but outlawed and free on the other, the members of the diaspora community had to reinvent themselves, including the theory, praxis and *poièsis* of their religious life, like Agambenian *homines sacri* in the margin of society: “[...] the status of “being uprooted” as Russian émigrés brought new freedom to the Orthodox Church. The status meant absolute falling out of the rule of law of the public opinion but also tradition and history of the country.”<sup>38</sup> Compared to Bulgakov or Berdiaev, who had lost their position of prominent intellectuals and academics, Skobtsova succeeded better in “taking uprootedness as a new opportunity rather than loss,”<sup>39</sup> re-rooting herself, one could say, on the streets and market-places of Paris and setting her own specific and unique accents.

When Metropolitan Evlogii (1866–1946), head of the ROC Abroad, suggested Skobtsova to become nun,<sup>40</sup> this was not without reservation: “She took the tonsure to dedicate herself fully [*bezrazdel'no*] to social service,” “calling her social work “monasticism in the world,” while monasticism in the strict

36 See Bauerová, *Motherhood as a Space*, p. 134, and Plekon, *Living Icons*, p. 61.

37 Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price*, p. 17 / Gakkel, *Mat' Mariia*, p. 145.

38 Bauerová, *Emigration as Taking Roots*, p. 198, referring to a 1937 article by Skobtsova, *Pod znakom nashogo vremeni*, in: Mat' Mariia, *Vospominaniia, stat'i, ocherki*, vol. 2, pp. 250–260, and in: Mat' Mariia / E.Iu. Kuz'mina-Karavaeva: *Zhatva dukha*, pp. 419–427 / *Under the Sign of Our Time*, in: Skobtsova, *Essential Writings*, pp. 107–115.

39 Bauerová, *Emigration as Taking Roots*, p. 198; see also Bauerová, *The Play of the Semiotic and the Symbolic* and Bauer, *Emigration as a Space for Creative Freedom*.

40 Steinmair-Pösel, *Im Gravitationsfeld*, p. 123.

sense of the term [...] she not only did not understand, but even rejected, considered it outdated and unnecessary."<sup>41</sup> Arguably, she understood it very well, and deliberately set out to design a different monasticism. Her theoretical writings are directly connected to her practical and poietical activities. In one of her key texts, *Tipy religioznoi zhizni* [Types of Religious Life] (1937, first publication 1997), she analyses four types in a way that recalls Bulgakov's and Weber's ideal-types, rejects all four and then proceeds to sketch a fifth, labelled *Evangel'skii tip* [Evangelical Type], consisting of "a radical return to the gospel" driven by the "desire to "Christify" all of life."<sup>42</sup> It is impossible not to note the continuity of Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova)'s radically worldly, yet profoundly spiritual "monasticism in the world" with Elizaveta Kuz'mina-Karavaeva's life as a Social-Revolutionary activist and administrator. Prepared, in some way, by Vladimir Solov'ev, the notion of "social Christianity [*sotsial'noe khristianstvo*]" was at the heart of the debates in which Skobtsova moved.<sup>43</sup> Like Solov'ev, she refrained from the idea of creating a just society instead of the Kingdom of God, a general challenge for Russian religious thinkers around the turn of the century: the sometimes thin line between participatory co-creation [*so-tvorenie*] and a "godless" humanist socialism.

#### 4 The Political Dimension of Skobtsova's Political Sophiology: Three Key Aspects

In spite of a tendency to exaltation, mysticism, and romanticism that colours much of sophiological discourse, though more the discourse about it than sophiology itself, a more sober perspective allows us to see the way in which sophiology in general, and Skobtsova's intervention in particular, can be qualified as "political". Here, three aspects require attention.

First of all, Sophiology generally stands for a modernizing trend in Russian Orthodoxy, both as an attempt to bring it closer to the other branches of Christianity and in order to facilitate a turn to society and politics. Both this trend and its opponent, the so-called neo-patristic synthesis, were attempts to deal, from a Russian-Orthodox background, with the challenges of the twentieth century. To an extent, these challenges were similar to those that Christian

41 See *Put' moei zhizni: the memoirs of Metropolitan Evlogii, expounded on the basis of his accounts by T. Manukhina* (Paris, 1947), p. 541 and p. 566; quoted from Nikolai Os'makov, *Zhizn' – podvig*, in: Kuz'mina-Karavaeva, *Izbrannoe*, p. 13; auch Jim Forest, *Mother Maria of Paris*, in: Skobtsova, *Essential Writings*, p. 23.

42 Plekon, *Living Icons*, p. 73 et seq.

43 Manukhina, *Monakhinia Mariia*, p. 414.

churches elsewhere were facing: adaptation to a societal reality in which the expansion of civil society, the rise of “secular ideologies” and the extension of electoral democracy changed the role of religion and made it unavoidable for churches to regauge their relation to state and society. In the Russian Empire, these processes took shape during the last decades of the nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth century, culminating in the February 1917 revolution that, among others, liberated the ROC.

However, to this were added three more factors: the new, anti-religious, though not nominally atheist regime (religion was expected to “wither away”), a period of Civil War, exile, emigration and exodus, and the emergence of new polarities, political as well as theological, in the diaspora. During the 1930s in particular, the Russian-Orthodox community in the Paris diaspora of which Skobtsova was part, became increasingly independent from church jurisdiction, whether of the ROC Abroad or of Constantinople. This created a space of freedom, of which younger émigrés like Skobtsova both could and had to make the best. Towards the end of the 1930s, when Stalinist terror, Hitlerite aggression and the Spanish Civil War made the situation more and more grim, and in the early 1940s, during German occupation, the position of somebody like Skobtsova became more and more precarious and her views more and more her own.

There are two sides to this. On the one hand, it concerns the so-called social question on which Skobtsova stuck to the leftist principles that had also defined her activity as a member of the SR, where she had belonged to the “right-wing” faction that supported the “bourgeois” February Revolution, but rejected the Bolshevik take-over in October 1917. If, with Benevich, we look at Pilenko / Kuz'mina-Karavaeva / Mat' Maria (Skobtsova)'s life as a whole, we can point to a *fil rouge* that, if like Skobtsova we reject the label “Christian socialism”,<sup>44</sup> can be called “socialist Christianity”. This is in line with her membership of the SR, a party which did not share the anti-religious stance of the RSDLP and welcomed the liberation of the ROC. It could hold a first national synod [*sobor*]<sup>45</sup> in more than two centuries in 1918, electing a patriarch and addressing pressing societal issues. In 1929, Skobtsova gave a precise analysis of the political situation in which she had been an active participant, highlighting the democratic dimension:

44 See Van der Zweerde, *Russian Political Philosophy*, p. 140.

45 Two different Russian words reflect the political change: *sinod* refers to the Holy Synod that replaced the Patriarch during the two centuries of direct subordination of the ROC to the tsarist regime and of which Skobtsova's early friend Pobedonostsev had been *ober-prokuror*; *sobor* refers to the bishops' conference that can elect a patriarch from its midst and is related to the concept of *sobornost'*.

after a period of two centuries of Russian history [during which the ROC was headed not by a Patriarch, but by a Holy Synod [*sinod*] directly subordinate to the tsar, EvdZ] there were *only eight months*, when this synod [*sobor*] could be held, when the Patriarchate could be re-established, that is the half-year between the February to the October revolutions, during the period when the Provisional Government was in power. Of course, it would be totally incorrect to equate on this basis the idea of Orthodox *sobornost'* [conciliarity, communality] with the idea of democracy or even with that of 'socialist democracy', as some participants of the synod itself did at the time. But at the same time it is completely in order and correct to assert that *the idea of sobornost' is in stark contradiction with the idea of autocratic power of one person, or class, or party – under any dictatorship there is nothing left for it* [the idea of *sobornost'*, EvdZ] to do, it suffocates, it is distorted or it goes in hiding.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, during the 1930s, against the backdrop of two equally anti-religious totalitarian ideologies, Skobtsova's perception obtained apocalyptic overtones and led her to advocate a revision of monastic life.<sup>47</sup> As Michael Plekon emphasizes, her "entire monastic experience was rooted in the chaos and suffering, the turmoil and poverty of the Russian emigration in France during the Great Depression and then in the occupation during World War II."<sup>48</sup> Her self-made monasticism, therefore, is not only an adaptation to modernity, but also a return to those forms of religious life, in early Christianity, that had preceded the coupling of religious faith and worldly power in the Roman Empire. As she stated in one of her most dramatic texts, *Pod znakom gibeli* [Under the sign of destruction] (1938):

There also exists an active monasticism, turned towards the world. We [the Orthodox, EvdZ] have had very few representatives of it during the last centuries. It is mistaken, it seems to me, to define it as some kind of immersion [*pogruzhennost'*] in worldly affairs [*v stikhiu mira*], as some kind of Christian vanity. Perhaps, in such a world-oriented monasticism it is sensed particularly strongly that the world lies in evil. Which world lies in evil? The one created by God, the one which He loved so much that He delivered His Son to the torments of death for its sins. This monasticism [Skobtsova's, EvdZ] turns towards the world, because it loves the Divine image of the world, the Divine image of man [*obraz Bozhii cheloveka*], which it sees in the sin and pus [*gnoi*] of historical reality.<sup>49</sup>

46 Skobtsova, *O tserkovnom sobore 1917 goda*, in: E.Iu. Kuz'mina-Karavaeva / Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova): *Rossia i emigratsiia*, p. 327.

47 Zapter, *Ungezähmt*, p. 42, Romanowski, *Mat' Mariia*, p. 453 et seq., Kahla, *Russian Idea in Exile*, p. 238 and p. 250 et seq.

48 Plekon, *Living Icons*, p. 63.

49 Skobtsova, *Pod znakom gibeli*, in: Mat' Mariia / E.Iu. Kuz'mina-Karavaeva, *Zhatva dukha*, p. 434 / Mat' Mariia, *Vospominaniia, stat'i, ocherki*, vol. 1, p.193 / Sainte Marie de Paris, *Le jour du Saint-Esprit*, 427 et seq.



Secondly, though not advocating a radical feminist agenda, Skobtsova claimed, in deed if not in word, an equal role for women in both worldly and church-related affairs, not only deploying her organizational and practical skills, but also adopting the role of “spiritual mother” for a significant number of people and by writing a number of texts that accompany and substantiate her activity. Among her sophiological innovations was the introduction of a Christ – Mary dyad, effectively either introducing a fourth hypostasis, Sophia, or turning the second hypostasis into a dual one, a dyad within the Trinity. Moreover, by not only explicitly adding a call, in *O podrazhenii Bogomateri* [On the Imitation of the Mother-of-God] (1939) for an *imitatio Mariae* [*podrazhenie Bogomateri*] in addition to Thomas à Kempis call for an *imitatio Christi*,<sup>50</sup> but also by more radically turning these two imitations into a single, gender-neutral call upon every human being, Skobtsova is transgressing gender boundaries in a way that was not only innovative in Orthodox circles in the interbellum, but also well beyond them and well into the twenty-first century. Is it, in fact, reductionist to assert that the combined call for an *imitatio Christi* and an *imitatio Mariae* boils down to the joint demand of being a good person and a caring parent, in both cases without an a priori limitation to an “inner” circle?

While Skobtsova’s initial emphasis on “universal motherhood” may suggest an extrapolation from her own position as a mother of three, and possibly has been such an expansion initially, it developed into something beyond gender divisions,<sup>51</sup> pointing towards a universal call for “motherhood [*materinstvo*]” as a “spiritual adoption [*dukhovnoe usynovlenie*]” of (all) others. In Skobtsova’s own words:

If a man [*chelovek*, meaning both ‘male person’ and ‘human being’ in Russian, EvdZ] is not only the image of God but also the image of the Mother of God, then he [the word *chelovek* has male gender grammatically, but does not per se point to a male person, EvdZ] should also be able to see the image of God and the image of the Mother of God in every other man [. ... A]nd in this sense, the God-motherly part of the human soul begins to see other people as its children; it adopts [*usynovliaet*] them for itself.<sup>52</sup>

50 Skobtsova, *O podrazhenii Bogomateri*, in: E.Iu. Kuz'mina-Karavaeva / Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova): *Put'*, p. 140 / *On the Imitation of the Mother of God*, in: Skobtsova, *Essential Writings*, p. 63 / *De l'imitation de la Mère de Dieu*, in: Skobtsov, *Le sacrement du frère*, p. 177.

51 Steinmair-Pösel, *Im Gravitationsfeld*, p. 315.

52 Skobtsova, *O podrazhenii Bogomateri*, in: E.Iu. Kuz'mina-Karavaeva / Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova): *Put'*, p. 145 et seq. / Skobtsova: *Essential Writings*, p. 70 / Skobtsov: *Le sacrement du frère*, p. 186.

These words may well contain even more volcanic potential than she herself imagined. The same applies to her articulation of an anti-Maria in addition to the anti-Christ, as the dyadic part of an anti-Sophia. If *imitatio Mariae* and *imitatio Christi* apply indistinguishably to all humans, then the presence of anti-Maria and anti-Sophia requires the indistinguishable fight of women and men against evil in the world. Skobtsova joining the *résistance* thus fits her argument in *Ob antikhriste* (late 1930s, possibly 1942).<sup>53</sup> It also suits Skobtsova's nonconformism, scandalous to some, heroic for others. Tat'iana Manukhina described her as indifferent to how she was dressed, always holding a *papiros* and reminding her of a revolutionary student [*kursistka-revolutsionerka*]: "One could only wonder how she managed, in Paris, the centre of fashion and of all kinds of pretentious outward aestheticism, to preserve the looks, familiar to all of us, of a Russian emancipated woman."<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, Skobtsova can be regarded as part of a broader generation of young Russian women who claimed an equal position in society, obtained a higher education in spite of existing restrictions, participated in literary and artistic circles on an equal footing and decided themselves in matters of love and marriage. The fact that Skobtsova, on the one hand, continues to be looked upon with a certain suspicion by at least part of the ROC, while, on the other hand, she was a fully accepted member of the Paris exile circle established by Berdiaev, Bulgakov and others, dovetails with her position as a "stumbling block [*kamen' pretknoventiia*] in the quarrels between "liberal" and "conservative" Orthodox Christians."<sup>55</sup> Elizaveta may have been searching in her life, but at no point seems to have been willing to let men decide about what she should be doing, indeed a prototypical "Russian emancipated women" (Manukhina p.415) who was, moreover, accepted as such and taken seriously, intellectually as well as practically, by her male compatriots in Paris, as appears from her correspondence with Bulgakov as well as from Berdiaev's short text "To the memory of Mat" Mariia [*Pamiati Materi Marii*].<sup>56</sup> Skobtsova not only founded a new form of Orthodox female monasticism, but she also did this in a way that was not up for negotiation, thus twice negating the traditionally humble role of women in the Christian tradition.

Finally, on a theoretical plane, we can point to a certain "stretching of the Holy Trinity": in Solov'ev and Bulgakov, the insertion of Sophia does lead to

53 Skobtsova, *Ob antikhriste*, in: E.Iu. Kuz'mina-Karavaeva / Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova): *Put'*, pp. 135–137 / Sainte Marie de Paris: *Le jour du Saint-Esprit*, pp. 555–558.

54 Manukhina, *Monakhinia Mariia*, p. 415.

55 Benevich, *Mat' Mariia*, p. 5.

56 See Krivosheina, *Sviataia nashikh dnei*, p. 371 et seq.

a rehabilitation of the feminine element, but from a generally male perspective, “Romantic” in Solov’ëv, more theological, but still “benevolently paternalistic” in Bulgakov with manifestly “binarist” claims like “The mystery of the world is in Femininity [*ν Zhenstvennosti taina mira*].”<sup>57</sup> Skobtsova, by explicitly connecting Sophia to Virgin Mother Mary, came indeed very close to arguing a fourth, female hypostasis. From an outsider’s point of view, this may look like a much-needed correction, the only viable alternative to which would be a radical gender-neutrality of not only God, but also Jesus Christ, who would then stop being Father and Son, and become Parent and Child. From any more or less doctrinal or church-bound perspective, however, such an innovation would be unacceptable, heretic, or even blasphemous. Skobtsova, though tied to the Russian-Orthodox community in Paris in a multitude of ways, did not fall under any substantial church jurisdiction. The more radical character of her innovations is due to the “outlaw” position of said community.

While many people of Christian background will generally deny the political dimension of sophiology, emphasize the irenic nature of Christianity and consequently aim to keep the peace, particularly in connection with a hypersensitive key dogma, the Holy Trinity, others will just as self-evidently draw a red line, defend tradition, and accuse others of heresy, thus mobilizing the conflict dimension of the same world-view. From an outsider’s perspective, this goes to show the intrinsically political nature of, in this case, sophiology, as one among innumerable many fields of human activity that contain the simultaneous possibility of both conflict and concord. Sergei Bulgakov emphasized the “sophianic nature of concepts [*sofinaia priroda poniatii*],”<sup>58</sup> but we can well apply here Jacques Rancière’s “Si les mots servent à brouiller les choses, c’est parce que la bataille sur les mots est indissociable de la bataille sur les choses.”<sup>59</sup> The least we can then conclude is that life and work of Liza Iurevna Pilenko aka Elizaveta Kuz’mina-Karavaeva aka Mat’ Mariia (Skobtsova) were about very real things and that, as a consequence, sophiology became the conceptual battlefield that it had always been, but less manifestly so.

In all three cases, Skobtsova did not so much bring in completely new points, but developed, in a more consistent and radical manner, with less reservation and inhibition, points and arguments reluctantly and cautiously made by others, including Bulgakov.

---

57 Bulgakov, *Svet nevechernyi*, p. 187 / *Unfading Light*, p. 218.

58 Bulgakov, *Svet nevechernyi*, p. 194 / *Unfading Light*, p. 227.

59 Rancière, *La haine*, p. 101.

## Conclusion

From this discussion of Skobtsova's sophiology, which has focussed on its political dimension, we can draw conclusions regarding sophiology as well as regarding Skobtsova. When it comes to sophiology, which found one of its clearest and most political expressions in the life and work of Skobtsova, one way of reading it is a crowbar within the (Orthodox-) Christian tradition that forces it to open up, make itself more flexible and, thereby, capable of adapting to its historical time – one of the possible meanings of “secularization”. From its starting point in Solov’ev (and with forerunners among the slavophiles) until the end of Skobtsova’s life (and well beyond it, as the debate has not stopped since), one can read sophiology as the accompanying discourse of such a process of adaptation to rapidly changing circumstances, both during the Silver Age in which Skobtsova took part as a poet, during later years when the new Soviet regime had pushed sophiology largely into exile, and during the “apocalyptic” 1930s leading up to World War Two. Under these circumstances, adaptation meant, on the one hand, modernization and opening-up to society and politics, and, on the other, resisting the rise of totalitarianism – on this last point, one should not overlook the tragic circumstance that the thinkers (philosophers and theologians) who had involuntarily left their native land when the Bolshevik regime finally established itself, within twenty years found themselves in a situation in which the other major form of totalitarianism, Nazism, became a direct threat to their anyway fragile existence, especially if “love thy neighbour” included Jewish neighbours, as it did in the case of Skobtsova.<sup>60</sup> This explains the sense of “urgency” one gets when reading publications from the 1920s and especially the 1930s by, among others, Skobtsova.

Of course, it is up to the participants in a particular religious tradition to adapt, to accommodate, or not. In Russian Orthodoxy, the tendency to do the opposite, to stick to the traditional focus on spirituality, salvation, and afterlife, and, more concretely, to stick to traditional norms and values, and to defend a symphonic relationship between state and church rather than the latter's entrance in a pluralistic civil society, is present, too, and probably stronger. The choice in favour of modernization is implied by the wish to make a difference in this world based on a perspective on another world. The figure of Sophia, and hence sophio-logy which we can read as “Sophia-talk”, generally stands for the attempt to develop the conceptual building bricks for an “alternative modernity,”<sup>61</sup> one that does include individual freedom and accepts political

60 See Benevitch, *The Saving of the Jews*.

61 See Van Kessel, *Sophiology and Modern Society*.

pluralism, but avoids or repairs the devastating effects of the other side of the same coin, namely capitalism with its exploitation and devastation of human and natural resources.

This motif, also, is present throughout the sophiological tradition, from Solov'ev's view on "the social question" to Skobtsova's argument in 1933 (when Italian fascism was established, German Nazism was on the rise, the coercive collectivization of agriculture in Soviet Russia was in full swing, the enforced labour system, the GULag, was growing fast, and the French Left was in the process of creating a *front populaire*) that:

By the name of Christ, by the cross of Christ, the hammer-and-sickle can be given their authentic meaning; by the cross labour can be sanctified and blessed. 'And' not only can but should stand between the words 'Church' and 'labour', 'cross' and 'hammer-and-sickle'.<sup>62</sup>

The least we can say is that Skobtsova, already Mat' Mariia, remained very close to the social and political agenda she had been defending as a social-revolutionary activist and mayor against the Bolsheviks. For Skobtsova, socialism was implied by Christianity just as much as communism in its Soviet, violent and variant was excluded by it.

Skobtsova rebelled in different ways, from cancelling Pobedonostsev, via protecting citizens as elected mayor of Anapa, to cooking soup for the homeless as a nun. Yet, her cause was one and the same: to foster salvation, spiritual as well as corporeal, in this world. Her rebellion is not just due to her undeniable intrinsically rebellious nature, but to the historical rollercoaster she found herself in and to the many grave injustices she perceived in the world around her during all of her life, the many and often lethal contradictions between the world as it is, the world as it could be if humans made other choices, and the world as it should be if it were guided by universal love – with "all-encompassing motherhood" as one of its realizations. We can read her texts as expressing an implicitly feminist sophiology, moving beyond gender and binarism, and claiming another than subservient role for women within the Russian Orthodox-Christian tradition.

Referring back to the motto above this article, we can certainly state that Mat' Mariia did "serve" her spiritual father Sergei Bulgakov and also "served" in several functions to support the "Orthodox cause" in the Russian exile community in France. In that respect, she clearly was a great woman behind

---

62 Skobtsova; *The Cross and the Hammer-and-Sickle*, in: Mother Maria Skobtsova, *Essential Writings*, p. 86; French: Skobtsov, *Le sacrement du frère*, p. 204; Russian: Mat' Mariia, *Vospominaniia, stat'i, ocherki*, vol. 1, p. 239 et seq.

several men. However, she did not come out of the kitchen because she “also” has something to say, but to state something universal and radical. Organizing shelter and food for a large number of people, travelling across France to assist the Russian community, assisting Jewish people to escape from the Gestapo, and playing a central role in Ravensbrück in supporting the other convicts was her statement. Moreover, she was doing this not for herself, but for all, for what she perceived to be Christ’s Cause on Earth: the cause of freedom, equality, and social justice. In times of rapid and, in many respects, tragic change, she stood on her own two feet when cooking, not caring what anybody might think of “the state of her monastic habit with its marks of cooking [and] her attachment to Gauloises cigarettes.”<sup>63</sup> As we are beginning to understand, now that her writings are becoming more completely available, there was an organic unity to her practical, organizational and social work, her poiètic, artistic work, and her theoretical writings which may suffer from a certain lack of conceptual precision and often make the impression of being written with impatience, but which, at the same time, testify to the life and thought of a person who had been “searching her destiny” for her entire life and found it in a Nazi concentration camp saving others. Like Dominique Desanti, one does not have to be religious in order to find this inspiring.

## Bibliography

### *Writings by Skobtsova*

- Kuz'mina-Karavaeva, E.Iu.: *Izbrannoe*. Moskva: Sovetskaia Rossiia 1991.
- Kuz'mina-Karavaeva, E.Iu. / mat' Mariia (Skobtsova): *Vstrechi s Blokom*. Moskva: Russkii Put' / Paris: YMCA-Press 2012.
- Kuz'mina-Karavaeva, E.Iu. / mat' Mariia (Skobtsova): *Rossiiia i èmigratsiia*. Moskva: Russkii Put' / Paris: YMCA-Press 2019.
- Kuz'mina-Karavaeva, E.Iu. / mat' Mariia (Skobtsova): *Put'*. Moskva: Russkii Put'/Paris: YMCA-Press 2022.
- Mat' Mariia: *Vospominaniia, stat'i, ocherki* [2 vols]. Paris: YMCA-Press 1992.
- Mat' Mariia / E.Iu. Kuz'mina-Karavaeva: *Zhatva dukha*. Sankt-Peterburg: Iskusstvo 2004.
- Sainte Marie de Paris (Mère Marie Skobtsov): *Le jour du Saint-Esprit*. Paris: Cerf 2011.
- Skobtsov, Mère Marie: *Le sacrement du frère*. Paris: Cerf 2001.
- Skobtsova, E. (Mother Maria): *The Crucible of Doubts*. Mohrsville: frsj Publications 2016.
- Skobtsova, Mother Maria: *Essential Writings*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2003.

63 Plekon, *Mother Maria Skobtsova*, p. 236 et seq.

*Secondary literature*<sup>64</sup>

- Ageeva, Larisa: "Peterburg menia pobedil ...": dokumental'noe povestvovanie o zhizni E.Iu. Kuz'minoi-Karavaevoi, materi Marii. Sankt-Peterburg: Zhurnal "Neva" 2003.
- Bauerova, Katerina: *The Play of the Semiotic and the Symbolic: The Authenticity of the Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova*, in: *Feminist Theology* 22 (3/2014), pp. 290–301.
- Bauer, Kateřina: *Emigration as a Space for Creative Freedom: Mother Maria Skobtsova and Sister Joanna Reitlinger*, in: *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 26 (2018), pp. 95–107.
- Bauerová, Kateřina: *Emigration as Taking Roots and Giving Wings: Sergei Bulgakov, Nikolai Berdyaev and Mother Maria Skobtsova*, in: *Communio Viatorum* 54 (11/2012), pp. 184–202.
- Bauerová, Kateřina: *Motherhood as a Space for the Other: A Dialogue between Mother Maria Skobtsova and Hélène Cixous*, in: *Feminist Theology* 26 (2/2018), pp. 133–146.
- Benevitch, Grigori: *The Saving of the Jews: The Case of Mother Maria (Skobtsova)*, in: *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 20 (1/2000), at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol20/iss1/1>.
- Benevich, Grigorii: *Mat' Mariia (1891-1945); dukhovnaia biografia i tvorchestvo*. Sankt-Peterburg: Vysshiaia religiozno-filosofskaia skhola 2003.
- Bulgakov, Sergei: *Svet nevechernyi*. Moskva: Respublika 1994/*Unfading Light*. Grand Rapids/Cambridge, MA: William B. Eerdmans 2012 [orig. 1917].
- Bulgakov, Sergei: *Ipostas' i ipostasnost' (Scholia k "Svetu nevechernomu")*, in: Sergei Bulgakov: *Pervoobraz i obraz; sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*. Moskva: Iskusstvo / Sankt-Peterburg: Inapress 1999, vol. 2, pp. 313–323 [orig. 1924].
- Desanti, Dominique: *La sainte et l'incroyante; rencontres avec mère Marie*. Paris: Bayard 2007.
- Hackel, Sergei: *Pearl of Great Price; The Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova 1891-1945*. Crestwood NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press 1982/Gakkel', Sergei: *Mat' Mariia*. Paris: YMCA-Press 1992.
- Kahla, Elina: *Russian Idea in Exile: Mother's Maria Skobtsova apolyptic thought*, in: *Acta Byzantina Fennica* 2 (2003–2004), pp. 165–194; also in Elina Kahla: *Life as Exploit: Representations of Twentieth-Century Sainly Women in Russia*. Helsinki: Kikumora Publications 2007, pp. 235–262.
- Kahla, Elina: *Return of the Prodigal Daughter: The Portrait of the Heroine in the Soviet Novel Mat' Mariia*, in: Elina Kahla: *Life as Exploit: Representations of Twentieth-Century Sainly Women in Russia*. Helsinki: Kikumora Publications 2007, pp. 287–307 [orig. in *Russian Literature* 59 (1/2006)].

64 In the Bibliography, Bauer, Bauerova, and Bauerová refer to the same scholar, as do Krivosheina and Krivochéine, Benevich and Benevitch.

- Kornblatt, Judith D.: *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov*. Ithaca & London: Cornell UP 2009.
- Krivochéine, Xénia: *La beauté salvatrice: Mère Marie (Skobtsov) – peintures, dessins, broderies*. Paris: Cerf 2012.
- Krivosheina, Kseniia: *Sviataia nashikh dnei: Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova)*. Moskva: Èksmo 2015.
- Likvintseva, Natalia: *Overcoming the Gap between Religion and Culture: The Life and Work of Mother Maria (Skobtsova)*, in: Artur Mrówczyński-Van Allen/Teresa Obolevitch/Paweł Rojek (ed.): *Apology of Culture: Religion and Culture in Russian Thought*. Eugene OR: Pickwick Publications 2015, pp. 79–86.
- Likvintseva, Natal'ia V.: *Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova) 1891–1945*. Moskva: Dom russkogo zarubezh'ia imeni Aleksandra Solzhenitsyna 2018.
- Likvintseva, Natal'ia V.: *Mat' Mariia (Skobtsova) kak bogoslov i religiozni mysliatel'* in: Anton V. Anashkin (ed.): *Russkaia Èmigratsiia; tserkovnaia zhizn' i bogoslovskofilosofskoe*. Moskva: izd. PSTGU 2022, pp. 49–64.
- Manukhina, Tat'iana: *Monakhinia Mariia*, in: Kuz'mina-Karavaeva, *Izbrannoe*, pp. 414–435.
- Men', Aleksandr: *Russkaia religioznaia filozofia*. Moskva: Zhizn' s Bogom 2008 / Men', Fr. Aleksandr: *Russian Religious Philosophy; 1989-1990 Lectures*. Mohrsville PA: frsj Publications 2015.
- Oboimina, Elena: *Svet zemnoi ljubvi; Elizaveta Kuz'mina-Karavaeva (Mat' Mariia)*. Moskva: Veche 2019.
- Pérez, Emilia Bea: *María Skobtsov; madre spiritual y víctima del Holocausto*. Madrid: Narcea 2007.
- Plekon, Michael: *Living Icons; Persons of the Faith in the Eastern Church*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2002.
- Plekon, Michael: *Mother Maria Skobtsova (1891-1945): Commentary*, in: John Witte Jr./ Frank S. Alexander (ed.): *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity on Law, Politics, & Human Nature*. New York: Columbia UP 2007, pp. 233–270.
- Ranciére, Jacques: *La haine de la démocratie*. Paris: La fabrique 2005.
- Romanovski, Dymitr: *Mat' Mariia: bogoslovskie aspekty religiozno-filosofskogo tvorcestvo*, in: *Slavia Orientalis* 66 (3/2017), pp. 449–469.
- Steinmair-Pösel, Petra: *Im Gravitationsfeld von Mystik und Politik: christliche Sozialethik im Gespräch mit Maria Skobtsova, Dorothee Sölle und Chiara Lubich*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh 2019.
- Stratton Smith, T.: *The Rebel Nun: The Moving Story of Mother Maria of Paris*. Springfield IL: Templegate 1965.
- Target, G.W.: *The Nun in the Concentration Camp: The Story of Mother Maria*. Exeter: The Religious Education Press 1974.



- van der Zweerde, Evert: *Between Mysticism and Politics: The Continuity in and Basic Pattern of Vladimir Solov'ëv's Thought*, in: *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 5 (1/2019), pp. 136–164.
- van der Zweerde, Evert: *Russian Political Philosophy: Anarchy, Authority, Autocracy*. Edinburgh: EUP 2022.
- van Kessel, Josephien: *Russische religieuze filosofie in ballingschap: broedertwist en generatieconflict*, in: *Filosofie-tijdschrift* 33 (2/2023), pp. 14–18.
- van Kessel, Josephien: *Sophiology and Modern Society: Sergei Bulgakov's conceptualization of an alternative modern society*. Nijmegen: PhD Radboud University 2020.
- Varaut, Laurence: *Marie Skobtsov, Sainte orthodoxe et victime du nazisme*. Paris: Éditions Salvator 2014.
- Wikipedia: Aretha Franklin, *Who's Zoomin' Who?* (1985). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Who%27s\\_Zoomin%27\\_Who%3F](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Who%27s_Zoomin%27_Who%3F) (date of last access: 20.09.2023).
- Wikipedia: The Eurythmics, *Be Yourself Tonight* (1985). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Be\\_Yourself\\_Tonight](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Be_Yourself_Tonight) (date of last access: 20.09.2023).
- Williams, Rowan: *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition*. London &c: Bloomsbury 2021.
- Zepter, Sr. Agnes Bernharda: *Ungezähmt in Ehe, Kloster und KZ: Mutter Marie Skobtsov 1891–1945*.

## List of Contributors

### *Christian Danz*

Christian Danz studied Protestant Theology at the University of Jena (1985–1990); 2000–2002 professor for systematic theology in Essen, since 2002 professor for systematic theology at the University of Vienna, president of the German Paul-Tillich-Society since 2006. Since 2009 member of the commission to the edition of the works of Schelling of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and since 2015 of the project “Schelling – Archive and Edition” of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences.

Selected books: *Die Deutung der Religion in der Kultur. Aufgaben und Probleme der Theologie im Zeitalter des religiösen Pluralismus*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2008; *Einführung in die evangelische Dogmatik*, Darmstadt 2010; *Grundprobleme der Christologie*, Tübingen 2013. *Einführung in die Theologie Martin Luthers*, Darmstadt 2013; *Systematische Theologie*, Tübingen 2016; *Gottes Geist. Eine Pneumatologie*, Tübingen 2019; *Jesus von Nazareth zwischen Judentum und Christentum. Eine christologische und religionstheologische Skizze*, Tübingen 2020.

**Position of the author:** Professor for Systematic Theology A.B.

**ORCID:** 0000-0003-4096-603X

**Email:** christian.danz@univie.ac.at

**Address (Faculty):**

Institut für Systematische Theologie und Religionswissenschaft

Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät

Schenkenstraße 8–10

Universität Wien

1010 Wien

Österreich

### *Sandra Lehmann*

Sandra Lehmann is a Postdoc at the Department of Intercultural Philosophy at the University of Vienna. After several research and teaching visits at universities in Austria (Vienna, Linz), the Czech Republic (Prague, Olomouc), Israel (Jerusalem), and Spain (Seville), she was a deputy professor in Perception Theory at Hochschule für Gestaltung Offenbach in 2019. Additionally, in 2019–2020, she was a visiting professor at the Institute of Philosophy at the University of Kassel.

**Position of the author:** Postdoc at the Department of Intercultural Philosophy of Religion at the University of Vienna

**ORCID:** 0000-0002-9680-0680

**Email:** sandra.lehmann@univie.ac.at

**Address (Faculty):**

Department of Intercultural Philosophy of Religion

Faculty of Catholic Theology

University of Vienna

Schenkenstraße 8–10

A-1010 Vienna

Austria

*Wolfgang Palaver*

Wolfgang Palaver was from 2002 until 2023 Professor of Catholic Social Thought at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. His English books are “Transforming the Sacred into Saintliness” (Cambridge University Press, 2020); “René Girard’s Mimetic Theory” (Michigan State University Press, 2013). He is the co-editor of “Passions in Economy, Politics, and the Media” (LIT, 2005), “The European Wars of Religion” (Routledge, 2016), “The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion” (Palgrave, 2017), and “Mimetic Theory and World Religions” (Michigan State University Press, 2018). In fall 2018, he was a member of the research workshop on religion & violence at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton. From January until June 2021, he conducted a research project on Gandhi’s concept of nonviolence at The Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study. This project resulted in a special issue of the journal “Religions” that came also out as a book that he co-edited: “Nonviolence and Religion” (MDPI, 2023).

**Position of the author:** Professor of Catholic Social Thought (retired)

**ORCID:** 0000-0001-9879-6569

**Email:** wolfgang.palaver@uibk.ac.at

**Address (Faculty):**

Institute of Systematic Theology

Faculty of Catholic Theology

University of Innsbruck

Karl-Rahner-Platz 1

6020 Innsbruck

Austria

*Hans Schelkshorn*

Hans Schelkshorn (1960) is professor for philosophy and head of the Department of Intercultural Philosophy of Religion at the University of Vienna. After the doctorate in catholic theology (1989) he defended the PhD (1994) and his habilitation (2007) at the department of philosophy of the University of

Vienna. His research fields are philosophy of religion, cross-cultural philosophy with a focus on Latin American philosophy, ethics and global discourses on modernity. He is president of the Viennese Society of intercultural philosophy. **Position of the author:** Full Professor, Head of the Department of Intercultural Philosophy of Religion/University of Vienna

**ORCID:** 0000-0001-8574-2983

**Email:** johann.schelkshorn@univie.ac.at

**Address (Faculty):**

Department of Intercultural Philosophy of Religion

Faculty of Catholic Theology

University of Vienna

1010 Vienna

Austria

*Gerrit Steunebrink*

Gerrit Steunebrink, 1948, is a former assistant professor at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He taught philosophy of culture and religion. He published about art, religion and metaphysics in Adorno, Kant, Hegel and Karl Jaspers. He published also about the multicultural society, about christianity and islam in Europe and Turkey. After his retirement in 2013 he became an associated researcher at the Titus Brandsma Institute of the Radboud University in Nijmegen.

**Position of the author:** Associated Researcher at the Titus Brandsma Institute, Radboud University Nijmegen

**ORCID:** none

**Email:** gerritsteunebrink@gmail.com

**Address (Faculty):**

Titus Brandsma Institute

Radboud University

Erasmusplein 1

6525 HT Nijmegen

The Netherlands

*Fabian Völker*

Fabian Völker is University Assistant post doc at the Institute for Intercultural Philosophy of Religion and board member of the European Network of Buddhist Christian Studies (ENBCS). He is currently working on his habilitation treatise ("Transcendental Philosophy and Transculturality"). His fields of research include transcendental philosophy with a focus on Fichte, intercultural philosophy, philosophy of religion, phenomenology of religion, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

**Position of the author:** University Assistent post doc at the Institute for Intercultural Philosophy of Religion at the University of Vienna

**ORCID:** 0000-0003-1897-7859

**Email:** voelkerf83@univie.ac.at

**Address (Faculty):**

Department of Intercultural Philosophy of Religion

Faculty of Catholic Theology

University of Vienna

Schenkenstraße 8–10

A-1010 Vienna

Austria

*Herman Westerink*

Herman Westerink is endowed and associate professor for philosophy of religion and intercultural philosophy and scientific director of the Titus Brandsma Institute at the Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He defended his PhD at the university of Groningen in 2002, and his professorial dissertation (Habilitation) at the University of Vienna in 2009. He has written many books and articles in the fields of philosophy of religion, psychology of religion and psychoanalysis. Most recently he published monographs on Michel Foucault's late texts on Christianity and Freudian metapsychology of trauma.

**Position of the author:** Endowed and Associate Professor for Philosophy of Religion and Scientific Director of the Titus Brandsma Institute

**ORCID:** 0000-0003-1897-7859

**Email:** herman.westerink@ru.nl

**Address (Faculty):**

Center for Contemporary European Philosophy / Titus Brandsma Institute

Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies

Radboud University Nijmegen

Erasmusplein 1

6525 HT Nijmegen

The Netherlands

*Rafael Zawisza*

Rafael Zawisza obtained his PhD at the Faculty of Artes Liberales at the University of Warsaw with his dissertation "Cryptotheological Defence of the Secular: Hannah Arendt's Anthropology and the Secularisation Thesis" (2019). The Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw distinguished

the dissertation in the Majer Bałaban Contest (2020). He received fellowships from the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna and the Karl Jaspers Society in Oldenburg. He was a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago (2017–2018). With Ludger Hagedorn, he co-edited a volume published by Campus Verlag in 2021: “Faith in the World”: Post-Secular Readings of Hannah Arendt.” During his stay at the IWM in 2022, he researched political theologies in Central and Eastern Europe.

**Position of the author:** Independent scholar

**ORCID:** 0000-0002-8771-1408

**Email:** rafal.w.zawisza@gmail.com

**Address (Faculty):**

None

*Evert van der Zweerde*

Evert van der Zweerde (b. 1958) studied philosophy and Russian language & culture at the universities of Nijmegen, Moscow [MGU] and Fribourg. He defended his PhD in 1994, on academic history of philosophy [istoriko-filosofskaia nauka] in the former USSR. Since then he has been working and publishing in two field. On the one hand, political philosophy, with a focus on concepts like ideology, civil society, and democracy, resulting in a wide range of publications in several languages. On the other hand, philosophy in Russia with a relative emphasis on political philosophy, resulting in a collection of articles that appeared in Russian and then, later, in Greek translation, and, most recently, in a monograph entitled *Russian Political Philosophy: Anarchy, Authority, Autocracy* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2022).

**Position of the author:** Full Professor of Social and Political Philosophy

**ORCID:** 0000-0002-4786-6798

**Email:** evert.vanderzweerde@ru.nl

**Address (Faculty):**

Department of Ethics and Political Philosophy

Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies

Radboud University

Erasmuslaan 1

6525 HT Nijmegen

Netherlands

The emergence and downfall of fascism and the Nazi regime in the mid-twentieth century mark the definitive decline of Europe's geopolitical hegemony. The end of the Second World War is the beginning of both decolonization processes and the founding of the United Nations as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In this context, we find a variety of philosophical interpretations on religious traditions, secular conceptualizations of reason and political theories. In and outside of Europe, philosophical and spiritual movements develop different political orientations, whereas fruitful dialogues between religious and secular philosophical positions emerge. In this volume, such positions and interactions are explored in an exemplary way.



universität  
wien

**Vienna University Press**

ISBN 978-3-506-79450-5



9 783506 794505