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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Résumé de l'article

La contribution d'Abe Masao au dialogue christiano-bouddhiste a permis d'ouvrir de nouvelles voies de compréhension mutuelle. Toutefois, de la clarté a été sacrifiée dans ce dialogue lorsque des participants chrétiens furent amenés à croire qu'ils avaient trouvé « la vérité bouddhique » dans les présentations d'Abe. Cet article soutient qu'en grande partie Abe ne représentait que l'École de Kyōto qui s'appuyait sur des philosophes japonais du Néant Absolu et leur appropriation de l'illumination zen comme lieu de toute compréhension religieuse ; un lieu où toute négation et toute affirmation sont simultanément affirmées et niées. Cet article soutient que la philosophie de l'École de Kyōto de Abe ne représente pas l'ensemble des traditions bouddhiques classiques du Mahāyāna dans lesquelles le vide ne signifie pas le néant absolu mais l'apparition de tout lieu et de toute philosophie.

# Mahāyāna Emptiness or « Absolute Nothingness » ?

## The Ambiguity of Abe Masao's Role in Buddhist-Christian Understanding

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Even in the late twentieth century, it remained unusual to find an Asian thinker and Buddhist practitioner possessed of both a keen interest in western philosophical and theological works and the ability to read and discuss them fluently in English. Japanese scholar and Zen Buddhist teacher Abe Masao (1915-2006) was the rare theological and philosophical thinker who fit that profile.<sup>1</sup> Born and educated in Japan, with many years of residence in the United States, he mastered English and read widely in the works of Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, and even Martin Luther, as well as Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre, and Nietzsche. Because of this ability to access and discuss western theology and philosophy in depth, Abe was able to engage some of the best minds in western theological circles, and to offer his critical assessment of their thinking from his Buddhist perspective. Seldom had any previous Buddhist participant in

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1. For a summary of Abe's life, including his educational background, see Christopher Ives' « Introduction » (Cobb and Ives 1990, xiii–xix).

Buddhist-Christian conversations delved so deeply into the realm of western theological meaning in all its varied ontological and ontology-averse discourses.

Abe Masao was raised in Japan in the Buddhist Pure Land tradition, but as a young man—after prolonged internal struggle and under the influence of Zen teacher and Kyoto School philosopher Hisamatsu Shin'ichi—he abandoned the Other-Power faith of his Shinshū origins. Meanwhile, he undertook graduate studies in western philosophy at Kyoto University, where he studied with professors Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962) and Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990), two key representatives of the Kyoto School's «philosophers of nothingness». Then, in the mid-1950s, Abe spent two years in New York, where he attended lectures on Christian theology by Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary while serving as an assistant to Zen teacher D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966)<sup>2</sup>, with whom he developed a lasting relationship. Through Hisamatsu and Nishitani, Abe was greatly influenced by the thinking of Kyoto School founder Nishida Kitar (1879-1945). He adopted Nishida's notion of an «absolute nothingness» that is beyond both being and nihilism, functioning in a primal locus with its own awakened way of logic, the «logic of place,» wherein both affirmation and negation are negated in the field of emptiness.

The Kyoto School philosophy of absolute nothingness is a modern venture of Japanese thinkers who confronted the devastation of World War II defeat—the horror of the atomic void visited upon Nagasaki and Hiroshima and the wasteland of many other great cities reduced to flat nothingness stretching in every direction. Only the ancient capital city of Kyoto was spared destruction, an island of tenuous peace graced with hundreds of historic temples and shrines. In the context of a nation that had fallen apart, the Kyoto thinkers reached back into their Buddhist traditions. They folded the Buddhist notion of emptiness, as they conceived it, into a framework of Hegelian dialectic<sup>3</sup>; and developed a view of their world as but one moment of a broader truth that negated both the serene hegemony of the former Empire and the present nothingness of its ruined remains. When one's world has fallen apart, one is drawn to meditate

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2. Suzuki was well known for his skill in introducing Zen to westerners, but he lacked Abe's deep understanding of the western traditions, tending to dismiss them rather casually.

3. See Suarez, *Kyoto School's Takeover of Hegel*.

upon the evanescent nothingness of all things. When the world before one's eyes is a void, one's mind turns to emptiness.

The Kyoto School thinkers have become known for their deep and penetrating articulation of a philosophy of consciousness vis-à-vis modern western thinkers. They draw selectively upon Buddhist notions in their work, but their focus is the development of a fully rational philosophy of consciousness that, although influenced by Japanese Buddhist ideas, is not an expression of traditional Buddhist teaching. They frame their philosophy as a philosophy, speculative in its musings and insights. Today many westerners are understandably fascinated with the Kyoto School thinkers, for these philosophers of nothingness have looked to a broad array of sources both eastern and western and established a vast body of work on who we are and what consciousness means.

During the last two or three decades of the twentieth century, Abe Masao—with his background in a Kyoto School philosophy that professes roots in Buddhism, as well as his own long training and practice in the Zen tradition—came to be a prominent representative of Buddhism in inter-faith dialogue with Judaism and Christianity. I would point out, however, that it was in fact not quite « the Buddhist viewpoint » that Abe offered in his extended theological interchange with Christian and Jewish thinkers. What he presented to his interlocutors was instead a Zen-inspired Buddhist metaphysics enunciated in the language of Kyoto School philosophy.

In constructing his Zen metaphysics, Abe ignored both the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra strains of classical Mahāyāna Buddhism, whether in their Indian or Chinese incarnations. In so doing, he ventured to tread where no Mahāyānist has ever gone before, crafting a full-blown metaphysics that was—to his mind—capable of representing the essential meaning of all religious doctrine and all philosophy. This metaphysics describes a mind of « absolute nothingness », wherein all affirmations and all negations about being and nonbeing are simultaneously affirmed and denied. It entails a viewpoint of emptiness that answers any other viewpoint by means of a mutually canceling negation-cum-affirmation, which in turn protects it from all criticisms, for those must perforce either affirm or deny something. Abe draws this central notion of the logic of affirmation and negation (*soku-hi*) from the Kyoto School philosophers and also from D.T. Suzuki's understanding of the *Diamond Sutra*, one of the foundational Indian scriptures of the early Mahāyāna movement.

In Abe's presentation of Buddhism, however, we perceive much more Kyoto School influence than depth of knowledge about the ancient and

profound Buddhist traditions themselves. Only occasionally does Abe allude, and then briefly, to the extensive history of Mahāyāna in the Mādhyamika of Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva, and Candrakīrti, or the Yogācāra of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. Indeed, he demonstrates very little interest in textual or contextual studies of foundational Buddhist scriptures. And within the East Asian Buddhist tradition, Abe focuses exclusively on Ch'an (Zen) records and writings as he studied and practiced them with Hisamatsu and Suzuki.

In sum, it appears that Abe was largely unfamiliar with the broader traditions of Indian and Chinese Buddhist history. In this, it would seem that he follows in the footsteps of Kyoto School founder Nishida Kitarō, as described by Gereon Kopf: «Most of [Nishida's] academic or semi-academic knowledge of Buddhism probably came, as his diaries and correspondence reveal, from his lifelong friend D. T. Suzuki [...]» Kopf continues, regarding Nishida's use of Buddhism:

It is abundantly clear that Nishida does not engage in any kind of exegesis, textual-critical, conceptual, or otherwise, of the Buddhist texts he cites; he does not even attempt to read the concepts he uses in their context. Rather, he uses sayings from memory or, to use his own image, he raids these texts for terms that echo his ideas, such as «the everyday heart is the way», «saṃsāra-and-yet-nirvāṇa», and «this mind is the Buddha, Buddha is this mind», or that he interprets in the light of his own philosophical terminology, such as Linji's «everyday and ordinary» and the «mutual non-obstruction of phenomena» in Huayan thought. Nishida does not cite Buddhist ideas or texts to analyze, interpret, or apply them, but to illustrate his own philosophy and to claim the Buddhist tradition as his heritage. His hermeneutical method is selective and based on similarity by terminology, regardless of the historical or semiotic context. (Kopf 2005, 325)

In addition to this rather selective use of Buddhism as modeled by his Kyoto School mentors, Abe received from D. T. Suzuki the distinctive traditions and attitudes of Zen Buddhism. These, of course, already differed from the Indian Mahāyāna traditions of Mādhyamika and Yogācāra, which underwent a variety of transmutations when Buddhism crossed the Himalayas and became assimilated into Chinese culture. The early and pivotal Buddhist notion of emptiness as «things are empty» did consistently remain the norm in Chinese Buddhism. However, many Chinese Mahāyāna thinkers retained as well their own ancient Taoist notions of the cosmic Tao as the primal source immanent in the cosmos, identified in the *Tao Te Ch'ing* as the primal nonbeing (本無) that sources

being (有)<sup>4</sup>. Over the centuries, the Zen tradition drew upon these Taoist-Buddhist notions to construct a spiritual cosmology of emptiness, where it can function as does the Tao to invite one back to that primal locus beyond being, and thus beyond even the nothingness that we may contrast with being (See Nagao 1991a, 216–218; 1991b, 51-60). Moreover, the Zen tradition has long professed to go beyond all scriptures and their words, appealing instead to wordless mind-to-mind transmission from one patriarch to the next.

### 1. The contrast between classical Mahāyāna emptiness (śūnyatā) and Abe Masao's Buddhism of absolute nothingness

Classical Mahāyāna thought was developed in India by the Mādhyamika thinkers Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva, and Candrakīrti; elaborated upon by the later Yogācāra thinkers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu; and further developed in China in the T'ien-t'ai meditations of Chih-i, setting the architecture of later Chinese and Japanese Mahāyāna schools.

The Mādhyamika (Middle Path) teachings enunciate Mahāyāna philosophy in two distinctive and interweaving doctrinal themes. The first of these themes is that emptiness (the notion that neither things nor viewpoints possess any essence in themselves) is fully and robustly identified with dependent arising (the notion that all things, including all viewpoints, in this world arise from a multitude of causes and conditions that come into being in dependence upon one another). Thus, emptiness is precisely this dependently-arisen world in which we live<sup>5</sup>. The awakened mind—which through meditative practice comes to realize the essence-free, dependently arisen being of our lives—is freed from its former fixation on essences and thereby enabled to engage in compassionate bodhisattva action in this world. The content of empty awakening, then, is simply this dependently arising and very conventional world (*saṃvṛti-mātra*), reclai-

4. As in Lao Tzu 40: « All things under heaven are born from Something, [but] Something is born from Nothing » (天下萬物生於有.有生於無), where that « Nothing » is understood as in chapter 25, as « a thing confusedly formed, born before heaven and earth. Silent and void, it stands alone and does not change ». These notions figured greatly in the interfaith discussions about the creative force of emptiness in Abe's understanding of Christ emptying himself, and in John Cobb's over-coming of metaphysics within his Process understanding of God.

5. Nagao (1989, 9): « The identity of non-being with being, the identity of emptiness with dependent arising, is the fundamental standpoint of Mādhyamika, » which « is not simply an intuitive and mystical synthesis. »

med from the naïvely held belief that beings exist in self-enclosed essences (*svabhāva*).

The second theme of Mādhyamika is that there are two truths—the truth of worldly convention and the truth of ultimate meaning—and that these two truths are always and completely separate, always differentiated one from the other. So, on the one hand, Mādhyamika thinkers refuse to privilege either emptiness or dependent arising, asserting that the two are entirely *identified* one with the other. At the same time, Mādhyamika insists upon a sharp *differentiation* between the two kinds of truth, conventional and ultimate. This distinction between the two truths serves to preserve a valid and effective role for ordinary language in expressing conventional, worldly truth; but in the face of the ineffable, ultimate truth, all speech is silenced. We may, in the effort to lead others in the *direction* of the ultimate and silent truth, employ every linguistic skill at our command to enunciate true teachings, while still we maintain a wary hesitancy to speculate about that ultimate truth. To Mādhyamika thinkers, any speculation on the ultimate is mere «verbal proliferation» (Sanskrit, *prapañca*).

The truth of ultimate meaning, in its complete otherness from all worldly and conventional truth, is marked as ever silent, unspoken, and resistant to any higher synthesis that might delineate its contours. The Mahāyāna scriptures describe ultimate meaning as empty of any conventional content whatsoever. Such a darkening of our habitually idea-filled minds, whether by Mahāyāna or Christian apophatic markers, can be a frightening experience for religious thinkers. It requires us to move in the tension of lacking any pretense of ontological surety, even as we attempt to enunciate doctrine in the light of that darkness (one may *talk* in the dark, even when unable to see clearly). It is not surprising that deep fear of such theological blindness leads thinkers to prefer certain knowledge to a cloud of unknowing. Most would much rather bask in the brightness of their own vivid ideas. Thus, there are criticisms of Mādhyamika—especially in the works of Āryadeva—as being too fixated on emptiness, even going so far as to insist that it had no viewpoint of its own to offer.

Yogācāra, the second of the two major Indian Mahāyāna traditions, attempts to address such criticisms of emptiness. Its preeminent thinkers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu make a point of grounding Mādhyamika's two themes in a critical understanding of consciousness. They delve deeply into the structure and functioning of our minds as we generate meaning, and map out an understanding of our understanding, both deluded and awa-

kened. They examine the latent structures of our consciousness, including the « storehouse » consciousness whose karmic seeds interact with our understanding to propel us into delusion, greed, and anger.

The Yogācāra scriptures and commentaries begin with a careful analysis of consciousness as we experience it—karmically driven and permeated by our adherence to languaged delusions. Only then do they address the role of practice as the path to awakening, and finally offer teachings on the awakened state of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. In Yogācāra, awakening results in a « perfected » pattern of consciousness, realized in tandem with the undefiled functioning of the « other-dependent » pattern of consciousness, whose basic structure and activity have been distorted by an imagination driven by karmic impulses, but which may be restored to its pristine emptiness upon awakening. This other-dependent pattern of consciousness is the pivot upon which we may turn from the delusion of having a real inner subject grasping a real outer object, to abide thereafter in a non-discriminative, « perfected » pattern of consciousness. Only after that conversion are we able to re-engage in undeluded, everyday subject-object thinking and to carry out effectively deeds of compassion in the world (Nagao 1989, 51-55).

The philosophy of « absolute nothingness » as presented by Abe Masao differs markedly from these basic Mahāyāna teachings, in that Abe's thinking: (1) comes close to reifying emptiness and privileges it over dependent arising, seeing the latter simply as an entailment of the former; (2) presents the two truths—not as completely other and fully differentiated from one another—but as in constant, dynamic, back-and-forth relationship; (3) makes no mention of Yogācāra's analysis of consciousness as karmically entangled and in need of basic reorientation and conversion, speaking instead of consciousness in terms of the Kyoto School's notion of a pure consciousness of non-discriminative abiding in a special realm of thinking; (4) treats emptiness as a dynamic élan that issues in a distinct realm of thinking and logic that collapses all affirmation and negation, rather than in the recovery of this dependently arisen and quite conventional world as the field of bodhisattva practice; and (5) is grounded, not in the actual history of Indian, Chinese, and Tibetan Mahāyāna Buddhism, but rather in his own Zen appropriation of the speculations of the Kyoto School in its critical engagement with western philosophers, in particular Hegel and his dialectic.

In clear contrast to traditional Mahāyāna Buddhism's identification of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) with dependent arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*), Abe pri-



vileges emptiness, treating the dependent arising that inter-relates all things as but an entailment, or sequel, to enlightened insight into emptiness. The Sanskrit word for zero, an Indian mathematical discovery, is *śūnya*, meaning empty; it designates an empty placeholder, the circle of zero. But the intent of Mahāyāna in declaring things to be empty, or *śūnya*, is not to negate being. Its intent is to eliminate our clinging to things *as if* they have stable, self-enclosed essences, *as if* they could provide a safe ground for our attachment to a putative self. The issue all along is our attachment to things—fame, money, religion, ideology—as if those things could provide a sure refuge from the transient life we live. Once we do realize the emptiness of those things as essences, however, the entire world in all its polychrome complexity is restored to us, now recognizable to the awakened mind as the arena for fearless bodhisattva engagement.

As Abe well knew, Mahāyāna emptiness is not to be reified and clung to ineptly. And yet a dynamic, self-emptying « absolute nothingness » is as much of a philosophic construct as Hegel ever managed. One may cling to being, or to nonbeing, or yet again, one may cling to absolute nothingness. When Abe speaks of a « locus of emptiness, » he is expressing his own rather idiosyncratic philosophy of absolute nothingness, not the emptiness philosophy of any traditional Mahāyāna scripture or commentary. In that tradition, emptiness (*śūnyatā*) does not function by itself to disclose any special realm or place of enlightenment, but rather cleanses the minds of practitioners from verbal proliferation and discloses the world of being as the original dependently arisen field for bodhisattva engagement.

Throughout the Indian Mahāyāna schools and the later, formative Chinese T'ien-t'ai tradition, emptiness serves as an adjective rather than a noun, as in « empty attachment » or « empty ideas »; or it may serve as an adjectival predicate, as in the phrase « all things are empty ». Used as an abstract noun, « emptiness » (*śūnyatā*) does not denote any kind of dynamic force, as Abe would have it, but simply being, empty of essence. It makes as little sense to talk of emptiness as a dynamic force as it does to speak of dryness as the inner élan of drying. Emptiness itself does not do anything, for it is not any thing, not even a mystical something or a religious « nothing » beyond being and nonbeing. So, to say that things are empty is like saying that things are dry. They are dry because they are not wet. They are empty because their essences do not exist: they exist essence-free in their dependently arisen panoply.

The content of emptiness is this very world of history and of thinking. When we recognize that our views are as empty as anything else, we may

ratchet down our discourse to engage in conventional reasoning and compassionate bodhisattva teaching (on « the role of reason », see Nagao 1989, 121-139). We can recover the world in its originary being-here, just as it is (suchness) and just as it comes about. Awakened views are empty; they do not represent essences, but they emerge from wisdom and are driven by compassion, expressing truly the conventional teachings of the path. They emerge from our varied and particular experiences and our culturally conditioned insights and judgments. If the answer to the question « What is it? » is taken to be the essence of a thing, then Mahāyāna's denial of essences would suggest that all our answers to such questions are driven—not by pure and detached logic or ascendant reasoning—but rather by our own entanglement in delusion about what is of benefit to our putative selves. However, when views are emptied and the other-dependent pattern is freed from karmic entanglements, one has access to all the best of reasoning.

But even if we do awaken from the delusion that we and our ideas are what is really real, this does not lead us to a special realm or all-encompassing place, no « locus of emptiness », as Abe would have it. The locus of our awakening is not a separate realm of nothingness; in Yogācāra, it is the dependently arisen structure and activity of consciousness, what the Yogācāra philosophers call the other-dependent pattern of the mind. Awakening leads us back to this very dependently arisen world just as it always has been, enabled now skillfully to elicit insights into our lives and to enunciate truth within the horizons available to us here. Emptiness is about our being here, not about our being there.

Moreover, Buddhists do not, as Abe maintains, « emphasize *śūnyatā* [emptiness] as the true ultimate reality » (Abe 2011, 755). The foundational Indian, Chinese, and Tibetan Mahāyāna thinkers do not treat « ultimate reality » as the equivalent of emptiness. To the contrary, they speak of the ultimate only within the structure of the « two truths. » They emphasize the truth of ultimate reality as ultimate meaning (*paramārtha*) and that, they tell us, is the « being of silence (*tūṣṇīm-bhāva*)<sup>6</sup>. » The truth of ultimate meaning is completely other than, and thus unobtainable through, any

6. Nagao (1989, 90): « From the perspective of emptiness, the realization of emptiness is not found in reducing things to empty nothingness, but in the being of beings as originally empty. In other words, emptiness is realized only within the context of dependently arising being. Emptiness does not mean that there is simply nothing. On the contrary, its content pervades the entire universe. It is the transient and differentiated world in all its manifest being. »

foray into conventional languaged truth, no matter how many affirmations and negations might occur. Both affirmation and negation always remain human judgments, which—however much they may point beyond the conventional world—are invariably expressed in language. In classical Mahāyāna thinking as expressed by Nāgārjuna, ultimate truth is marked on every side by apophatic strictures, while language may only strive with upayic skill to enunciate a liberative but conventional truth, which remains fully enmeshed in this world and its ordinary reasoning.

Abe distorts the Mahāyāna doctrine of the two truths, wherein the truth of ultimate meaning (*paramārtha-satya*) is always silent and ineffable. Conventional truth (*samvṛti-satya*), in those who persist in clinging to self, is deluded ignorance. But in those who are awakened, conventional truth is the skillfully enunciated truth of the path that leads from suffering to awakening. Abe nevertheless construes Mahāyāna's two truths as merely two different perspectives—the everyday, discriminative way of affirmation or negation, versus the mystic abiding in absolute nothingness that collapses all distinctions. For him, truth flows from emptiness (which he takes as the locus of dynamic enlightenment rather than as the expeller of all conventional delusions). And emptiness, unacknowledged by Abe as coterminous with dependent arising, becomes mystic insight into ultimate meaning.

Abe is able to neglect the pervasive Mahāyāna teaching on the two truths because his consistent focus is to unpack the very nature of ultimate meaning as first and foremost an absolute nothingness that describes the enlightenment of buddhas and patriarchs. In his 1987 essay «Śūnyatā as Formless Form», Abe describes a mutual relationship between the two realms of truth as though the dynamics of emptiness are like an electromagnetic field wherein an arc flashes between the charged poles of ultimate and conventional, producing the dazzling light of awakening. He writes: «In the Buddhist understanding, the sensual [i.e., the conventional world we experience] and the suprasensual [i.e., dynamic emptiness as ultimate] realms mutually participate in one another» (Abe 2011, 754).

In the boundless field of formless emptiness, he says (Abe 2011, 757), «we come to know the following two points»: The first is that all of our activities take place on this field of boundless and dynamic emptiness, this being the «foundation» that makes possible the second, the dependent arising of our everyday lives, each moment of which is mutually related to and encloses every other moment. Dynamic nothingness, «properly understood only through existential and nonobjective awakening,» is «the

fundamental foundation for the doctrine of dependent origination. Complete interdependence of everything throughout the sensual and nonsensual world is possible only in and through the realization of *śūnyatā*, which is boundless, limitless, and without form. This formless *śūnyatā*, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, best describes ultimate reality » (Abe 2011, 752). Here, for Abe, the dynamic of emptiness is the supporting fundament for dependent arising—not, as in the Mahāyāna texts, coterminous with dependent arising. Moreover in Abe's explanation, Mahāyāna's two truths, far from being completely disjunctive, interpenetrate and are mutually related. By this account, the silence of ultimate meaning becomes a realm obtained as the ground of « absolute nothingness. »

How did we ever get here? How does any Mahāyāna thinker make emptiness into an ultimate viewpoint, when Mahāyāna clearly teaches emptiness to be the expeller of *all* viewpoints (*sarvādr̥ṣṭi*)? (See Keenan 1989, 132–46) Apparently, by sketching Zen awakening within the framework of the Kyoto School while selectively appropriating Hegelian dialectic to cancel out and ablate both affirmation and negation<sup>7</sup>. Abe here follows the Kyoto School in adopting and adapting Hegel's dialectic as the frame within which emptiness is understood, replacing classical Mahāyāna teachings on the emptiness of all things and all views. Abe seemed to feel it unnecessary to ground his thinking in the history of Buddhist doctrine, for—like many late twentieth-century Japanese philosophers—he was engaged in a thoroughly modern encounter with western thinking that did not require any reference to traditional Buddhist scriptures or commentaries (Heisig 2001, 7–9; 2011, 639–44).

Abe offers a rarefied and intellectual discourse that seems ever as speculative and ethereal as the ontologies taught in the theology curriculum of a 1950s Roman Catholic seminary. Moreover, Abe's presentation seems to immunize itself to any further questioning, so celebrating emptiness as to render it, already once emptied, safe from emptying by any further critique. If one appeals—as does Abe—to a special dialectic logic of affirmation and negation (*soku-hi*) that swallows up all affirmations and all negations, how can one reengage in affirming or negating anything? Abe constructs an enlightenist location of « absolute nothingness, » a place that collapses affirmation and negation as the philosophic outcome of true awakening. This brings to mind Christian theologians who seek refuge in

7. See the treatment in Suares (2011, especially the section on Nishida, 1-102), also Swanson (1996).

a fideistic assurance that is based on personal experience and thus beyond any reasoned critique.

The beauty and usefulness of the Mahāyāna philosophy of emptiness as expressed in the Buddhist traditions does not lie in its superior speculative ability to sketch the outlines of the realm of ultimate meaning. Rather, the beauty and usefulness of Mahāyāna is that the mind imbued with emptiness is able—by negating the essential existence of all things and all views—to ground itself in this everyday world in all its phenomenal richness and poverty. Mahāyāna offers no special viewpoint on the essential being of absolute nothingness. To the contrary, it consistently teaches that ultimate meaning is beyond any theory or any viewpoint, and is realized only in a silent awakening from entanglement with all proliferative discourse.

## 2. Christian Theologians in Dialogue with Abe's Buddhism

The study of Buddhism can be a daunting affair for Christian theologians, for these two great religious traditions share no common scripture, history, or even language. Buddhist doctrinal thinking is articulated in the Sanskrit and Pāli languages, in Tibetan and Chinese, while many of the best commentarial studies are written in Japanese. Needless to say, none of these languages are found in the standard toolkit of western theologians. By the time they have learned biblical Hebrew and Greek, classical Latin, and several modern European languages, and have reached their theological maturity, it is simply too much to expect that many will embark anew on even more demanding language training to study the Buddhist traditions. As a result, I would venture to say that the great majority of Christian thinkers who have engaged in dialogue with Buddhism over the past few decades have not been equipped to delve into the scriptures, commentaries, or doctrines of Buddhism in the original languages of that tradition.

Thus it was that the majority of western theologians who entered into dialogue with Abe Masao in the 1980s and 1990s had at best a limited knowledge of the Buddhist traditions and no familiarity with Buddhist texts in the original languages. As a result, Abe's own version of Buddhism seems to have set the agenda for these interchanges, so that his western interlocutors were encountering, not classical Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine as they no doubt expected, but rather Abe's atypically metaphysical take on the Mahāyāna notion of emptiness. Meanwhile, Abe himself had read, absorbed, and critically appraised the works of many western theo-

logians and philosophers, deriving a sense of understanding Christianity from within,<sup>8</sup> and the ability to engage westerners on their own philosophical and theological traditions. This created a certain asymmetry: whereas Abe was confident in his knowledge of western philosophy and the Christian tradition, many or most of his dialogue partners were learning about Buddhism primarily from Abe himself<sup>9</sup>.

In a substantial essay entitled « Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata », first published in 1990, Abe offered a startling new perspective to mainstream Christian theologians already sensitive to critiques of traditional Trinitarian theology. Many of them were cognizant of a need to enunciate this deepest of Christian doctrines as the central mystery of the faith, not just as an abstract metaphysical discourse on essences, substances, and persons. These thinkers were quite prepared to examine and critique accustomed notions of God, for they themselves were already engaged in doing precisely that. Indeed, emptying notions of God is a prominent feature of the western theological tradition, for God is surrounded by ineffable mystery.

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8. See for instance, Abe's « Rejoinder » (1990, 170): « [...] I discovered the notion of kenotic God within Christianity ».
  9. I cannot agree with Charles Jones (2004, 118), who argues that: « The Christian side by and large adopted much the same strategy [as had Abe in focusing upon the “emptiness hymn” (Philippians 2,6-11) as “the emblematic text for Christianity”] in coming to grips with Buddhist thought, choosing a brief text as the paradigmatic statement of the Buddhist view of ultimate reality: the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* (Root Stanzas on the Middle Way; hereafter the MMK) of the second-century Buddhist thinker Nāgārjuna. In this instance, objections from the Buddhist side were not forthcoming, because Abe himself took the MMK as a normative statement of Buddhist thought. Nevertheless, his own presentation of Buddhism, especially his key notion of ‘dynamic *śūnyatā*,’ went considerably beyond Nāgārjuna’s presentation and thus elicited some objections from the Christian side for not hewing to their own understanding of Nāgārjuna. » I agree that Abe went well beyond Nāgārjuna, for with but brief allusions to the MMK, he grounded himself in the Zen traditions that came to him from D. T. Suzuki and Hisamatsu Shin’ichi, filtered through the Kyoto philosophers. But I find little evidence that any of the Christian theologians understood much of classical Mahāyāna or were equipped to address the peculiarity of Abe’s approach. As I read Christian and Jewish responses to Abe, I surmise that they simply accepted Abe’s presentation of Mādhyamika. They could hardly have taken « Nāgārjuna’s exposition of the fundamental concept of emptiness » as being « normative for the Buddhist tradition as a whole » (Jones 2004, 119), because for the most part they were unfamiliar with that tradition. Christian dialogue participants represented in the published volumes make no references to Mādhyamika thought; they simply base their understanding of « the Buddhist view » on Abe’s presentation.

Abe's essay was published as the centerpiece of two books designed to encapsulate the interfaith dialogue between Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism. *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* was issued in 1990, and *Divine Emptiness and Historical Fullness: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation with Masao Abe*, came out in 1995. Each opens with «Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata», offered as the Buddhist view, followed by responses from several western theologians and then Abe's «rejoinder» to those. In fact, both volumes constitute not so much a Buddhist-Christian or Buddhist-Jewish dialogue as an Abe-Christian, Abe-Process, Abe-Death of God dialogue.

The list of western theologians drawn to engage with Abe is impressive. Process theologians were immediately attracted to Abe's ideas, which are in some ways similar to their notion of God as event or process rather than static being; these Process thinkers included Christians John B. Cobb, Jr.<sup>10</sup>, Catherine Keller, David Tracy (with reservations), and Schubert M. Ogden, as well as Jewish theologian Sandra B. Lubarsky. Also intrigued by Abe were liberal Catholic theologians Hans Küng and Hans Waldenfels; Protestant systematic theologians Heinrich Ott, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Jürgen Moltmann; and such Death of God theologians as post-Christian Thomas J. J. Altizer and post-Jewish Richard L. Rubenstein.

Abe's presentation of Buddhism intrigued western theologians initially because of its apophatic thrust and its response to the nihilism of existentialist and postmodern thinkers. He inspired westerners to give more attention to apophatic themes within their own mystical traditions, and he held up the nonverbal experience of *satori* (enlightenment) as the heart of all religious life, describing that pure, immediate experience in philosophical terms as «absolute nothingness». He aimed, moreover, to respond to the «nihilism» of western existentialists from Nietzsche to Sartre, and to the scientism that seemed to negate all religious meaning. Abe and his ideas came to play a central role in Buddhist-Christian dialogue during this period, for he appeared at a time when theologians were already engaged in critiquing traditional ideas of God, whether Trinitarian or Jewish, and rethinking the teaching on incarnation; when Process theologians were

10. Who, with Abe, established and played a central role in the «North American Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter» that met during the 1980s and 1990s. The meetings of this group, commonly called the «Cobb-Abe» dialogues, involved equal numbers of Buddhists and Christians, the majority of whom were westerners who were both scholars and practitioners of either one tradition or the other. See Gross (2005).

challenging traditional ontological theologies; and when Death-of-God theologians were looking for someone more interesting to talk with. To all with their varied interests, Abe presented his ideas on a self-emptying God as the Buddhist alternative to their traditional theologies.

In his introduction to the volume *Divine Emptiness and Historical Fullness: A Buddhist Jewish Christian Conversation with Masao Abe*, Buddhist scholar David W. Chappell does attempt to contextualize Abe's approach within the broad spectrum of Buddhist thought. He points out that Abe does not represent most of Buddhist thinking or most of Buddhist thinkers (in Ives 1995, 1-21). But there seems to have been little uptake on this, perhaps in part because Abe himself apparently felt no need for such historical contextualization of his account of Buddhism<sup>11</sup>. Meanwhile, the western theologians who responded to Abe's account of the Buddhist view were ill equipped to engage at depth on the varied trajectories of Mahāyāna doctrinal development (see, for example, Küng 1995, 218).

In his dialogic engagements with Christian and Jewish theologians, Abe outlines the very nature and structure of awakening within the framework of his Zen metaphysics of absolute nothingness. From the start, he seeks a common denominator—which he calls a « no-common-denominator, » for it functions from « the locus of emptiness ». He hoped that his presentation of the inner dynamics of absolute nothingness might offer an opening to western thinkers who had overcome their Christian cultural biases and were seeking some commonality with religious experiences and traditions that did not move within their own familiar frameworks<sup>12</sup>. From the beginning of these interchanges, however, many of the Christian voices in the conversation—theologians Catholic and Protestant, deeply familiar with Patristic and medieval theology—found Abe's notion of « dynamic emptiness » to be inadequate and unserviceable as a « no-common-denominator » for their experience and their theologizing.

11. For a discussion of Zen attitudes toward doctrinal history and scripture, see Hu (1953) and Suzuki (1953). A summary of Hu's article and Suzuki's full reply are reprinted in Suzuki (1955, 129–64).

12. See Abe (1995, 50): « This non-dualistic stance [...] is beyond the polarity of the affirmative and the negative stances and is realized through the realization that "there is no common denominator for world religions". » Other attempts to locate a commonality among religions fail because they seek a common essence, but the « positionless position » of emptiness can « serve as the common basis » (47).



Process thinkers were on better ground to engage Abe, for their notion of God as event does parallel Abe on « absolute nothingness » beyond being and nihility. Process theologian John B. Cobb, Jr., however, urged Abe to express ultimate meaning, i.e., the « absolute emptiness » of which he spoke, in terms of dependent arising. Cobb—better versed in Buddhism than many of Abe’s counterparts in the conversation—knew that in traditional Mahāyāna thought emptiness is coterminous with dependent arising. But Abe could not do this, for his « dynamic emptiness » describes an enlightened realm wherein emptiness erases all polarities in a mutual emptying. Abe’s focus was firmly fixed on the dynamics of emptiness itself, while he treated dependent arising—not as coterminous with emptiness—but as a sequel to it.

Jewish thinkers, for their part, could not ignore the apparent absence of a visceral response to the Shoah from Abe. He attempted to transcend both history and morality by insisting that in the realm of absolute nothingness, all distinctions are bypassed and every moment is intertwined with every other moment. So in that sense, he himself assumes karmic responsibility for the Shoah, as indeed every human being ought to do. In a more mainstream version of Mahāyāna, of course, the content of emptiness *is* this very world of dependently arising history and morality; no flight to any non-conventional realm is recommended, or indeed even possible. However, whenever Abe’s western dialogue partners critiqued him on these central issues, he gently brushed aside their criticism, noting their failure to appreciate fully his philosophy. Diplomatically and yet persistently, he endeavored to wean both Christians and Jews from their notions of God, and toward an « absolute nothingness » that is beyond being and nonbeing, beyond conventional categories of good and evil.

The only common framework for this interfaith dialogue—at least as represented by the published accounts—seems to have been Abe’s essay « Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata », to which the westerners responded as best as they could. Little or no latitude was given for consideration of the many variations within both Buddhist and western religious traditions. Not surprisingly, the main topic of conversation was ultimate meaning, naturally a common theological concern. But while Abe consistently focused upon the « essential meaning » of the absolute, his critics pointed out that his philosophy of mystical awakening remains in a transcendent realm, making it difficult for anyone to come to ground in either the Jewish or the Christian tradition. Or even in the Buddhist tradition, for that matter, although few of his western dialogue partners were cognizant

of this last fact, continuing to regard Abe's ideas as representative of « the Buddhist view ».

Abe had little scope to encompass a phenomenological approach to Christ, or to consider the central place of life « in Christ » who emptied himself. Abe recognizes no incarnational theology, for to him Christ represents but a prime instance of the dynamic emptiness of absolute nothingness in its encompassing of all events and all things in the realization of suchness. At their best, Christian thinkers have taken refuge in the cross and resurrection, acknowledging that we experience risen life in Christ only as we embrace the cross that is our common life in this world. But circumscribing Christ to a cipher who empties God—as Abe would have us do—hardly aids anyone to understand the meaning of risen life « in Christ, » a notion that percolates throughout the gospels and letters of the New Testament. For Christ, once absorbed into the emptied field of nothingness, never rises again.

Abe often graciously accepted criticisms and committed himself to rethink, for instance, issues of ethics or history, which he regarded as peripheral to his main thesis that ultimate meaning is dynamic emptiness. But when the critiques touched on that main thesis, he rejected them, calling upon his interlocutors to acknowledge the dynamic interplay between the conventional world and the spiritual level of a metaphysical truth. He argued that, in one way or another, his critics failed to appreciate the dialectic tension of *soku-bi*: between the historical level, wherein either affirmation or negation holds sway, serving merely as occasion for absolute nothingness, and an ultimate locus of mutual and simultaneous affirmation and negation of affirmation and negation. This dynamic interplay is unassailable truth emerging within our occasional lives<sup>13</sup>. Always Abe returned to his own previous statements, urging that others did not grasp his central thesis—that the essential meaning of the absolute is emptiness, dynamically intertwined with the realization of the suchness of all events in both affirming them to negate them, only to affirm them once again.<sup>14</sup>

13. Responding to John Cobb, Abe (1995, 178) writes: « At this point, however, I should like to call attention to my previous assertion that we are always working at the intersection of the horizontal, socio-historical dimension and the vertical, religious dimension, and that the former is the occasion or condition but the latter is the ground or source of human existence ». In traditional Mahāyāna, there is no intersection between ultimate meaning and worldly convention.

14. For a broader critique of the logic of *soku-bi*, see Kopf (2005); also Nagatomo (2000). Nagatomo argues that « in order to properly understand the “logic of not”

### 3. Conclusion

Abe Masao's proposal of his philosophy of absolute nothingness as the common experience of all the traditions elicited from his western dialogue partners either broad critique, simple rejection, or nuanced—but radical—reformulation<sup>15</sup>. And his presentation of Buddhist philosophy elicits the further critique from this writer, as a Buddhologist, that it is unrepresentative of the classical Mahāyāna Buddhism of India and China. Abe's account of Mahāyāna Buddhism makes it more difficult than it needs to be for western theologians to engage with that tradition's emptying of essential, ontological categories. Such an emptying is potentially very useful in interfaith understanding. It can enable us to recognize that the thinking that arises in every religious tradition is dependent upon clusters of cultural causes and linguistic conditions; and with that recognition, we may reclaim the value of that thinking. Abe's philosophy, meanwhile, works to usurp the silence of ultimate meaning, to collapse apophatic unknowing into an awakened knowing in the unlocatable place of a dialectic logic of *soku-hi*—a knowing that is available only to the properly awakened.

Mahāyāna philosophy is attractive in our time, not because it provides the distillation of a common religious experience as Abe would suggest, but because it can serve as a philosophic hermeneutic for the doctrinal stances of the various religious traditions. It recognizes that each of those traditions is enmeshed in a complex of cultural ideas and assumptions, and yet steadfastly it refuses to allow ultimate meaning to usurp their true and valuable teachings. At the same time, Mahāyāna bars conventional teachings from invading the silence of ultimate meaning, effectively countering narrow and single-minded insistence that faith must be expressed only in terms of its accompanying ideological framework—a «love-me, love-my-dog» celebration of any one cultural or theological hegemony. Developed in India, China, and Tibet, this Mahāyāna philosophy of emptiness is able

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(Japanese *sokubi*), one must effect a perspectival shift from the dualistic, egological stance to a non-dualistic, non-egological stance». This harmonizes with the Mahāyāna insistence on converting or reorienting the minds of practitioners. On Nishida, see Suares (2011, 1-102).

15. For an example of such a reformulation, see Mitchell (1991, esp. 96-98 on «participation» in the life of God by self-emptying, and 124-141 on John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila). Angelo Rodante's comprehensive *Sunyata Buddhista e Kenosi Cristologica in Masao Abe* is the only western theological work on kenosis that I have found that situates Abe within the broad narrative of Christian kenotic theology.

to serve so widely beyond its own cultural contexts precisely because it empties even Buddhist doctrine from all cultural and ontological constraints, enabling us to move more freely among the traditions while abiding at ease within our own cultural and religious skin<sup>16</sup>.

Mahāyāna teachings on emptiness do not invite us to speculate on nothingness, or on whether emptiness is relative or absolute. They invite us instead, through meditative engagement, to tease out insight into the everyday world of our dependently arisen lives. The ultimate meaning of our lives is and will remain completely other and fully apophatic, resistant to the invasion of any philosophical reasoning. In the Mahāyāna scriptures and commentaries, emptiness entails the dependent arising of all things in *this* world; it provides no special insight into a higher level of dynamic nothingness, no matter how many dialectical syntheses are performed. In both its Mādhyamika and Yogācāra embodiments, Mahāyāna consistently brings its discourse back from the doctrinal heights—away from intransigent arguments about ultimate meaning—and encourages its practitioners toward reengagement in the world, on the bodhisattva path of a practice that really matters. Even when its thinkers would empty all our precious viewpoints, sounding like antireligious secularists, the Mahāyāna tradition remains grounded in the actual history of deeply committed practitioners.

Hence, I find it unfortunate that when in recent years western theologians have sought to learn something of the important Mahāyāna notion of emptiness—and of how it might be of use in addressing Christological concerns—they have been most likely to look to Abe Masao's Japanese Zen metaphysics, which regrettably filters and misrepresents the long and extremely diverse Mahāyāna tradition. What is alluring to me about Mahāyāna Buddhism is its ability to think and to teach in constant awareness of the apophatic silence of ultimate meaning, and its recognition that the content of emptiness is this very world, dependently arisen, just as it is—not Abe's speculative and rarefied realm of pure nothingness.

The theological usefulness of Mahāyāna is not its philosophical ability to empty being and nonbeing and thereby arrive at an absolute. Its usefulness is in the invitation to empty ourselves and our theologizing as well, that we may become more deeply attuned to our scriptures and to our theological discourse. With Mahāyāna, we see neither from a standpoint of absolute nothingness (*sub specie vacuitatis*) nor from the standpoint of

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16. For a proposal to adopt a Mahāyāna philosophy of religions, see Keenan (*et al.* 2009).

God (*sub specie aeternitatis*). Mahāyāna emptiness means that any and every human discourse—including even our most cherished scriptural heritage—is worldly and conventional. Emptiness impels us, not toward a realm of absolute nothingness, but toward engagement in the everyday affairs of this world. As the Zen maxim would teach us: «The everyday mind is the Way».

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## Résumé

La contribution d'Abe Masao au dialogue christiano-bouddhiste a permis d'ouvrir de nouvelles voies de compréhension mutuelle. Toutefois, de la clarté a été sacrifiée dans ce dialogue lorsque des participants chrétiens furent amenés à croire qu'ils avaient trouvé « la vérité bouddhique » dans les présentations d'Abe. Cet article soutient qu'en grande partie Abe ne représentait que l'École de Kyōto qui s'appuyait sur des philosophes japonais du Néant Absolu et leur appropriation de l'illumination zen comme lieu de toute compréhension religieuse ; un lieu où toute négation et toute affirmation sont simultanément affirmées et niées. Cet article soutient que la philosophie de l'École de Kyōto de Abe ne représente pas l'ensemble des traditions bouddhiques classiques du Mahāyāna dans lesquelles le vide ne signifie pas le néant absolu mais l'apparition de tout lieu et de toute philosophie.

## Abstract

*Abe Masao's contribution to late twentieth-century Buddhist-Christian dialogue was important in opening new avenues of interfaith understanding. However, some clarity in this dialogue was sacrificed when Christian participants were given to believe that they encountered « the Buddhist view » in Abe's presentations. The present article contends that in significant ways*

*Abe represented only the Kyōto School philosophy that drew on earlier Japanese philosophers of Absolute Nothingness and their appropriation of Zen enlightenment as the locus for all religious understanding, a place where all negation and affirmation are simultaneously affirmed and denied. The present article contends that Abe's Kyōto School philosophy does not represent the broad classical traditions of Mahāyāna Buddhism, wherein emptiness does not mean absolute nothingness, but the dependent arising of all places and all philosophies.*