A CRITIQUE OF NISHITANI’S *SUNYATA* AND TILLICH’S *BEING ITSELF,* AS CONCEPTS FOR ULTIMATE REALITY, WITH WILDMAN’S

APPLICATION OF THE COMPARATIVE RELIGIOUS

IDEAS PROJECT METHODOLOGY

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

A Thesis

Presented

to the Faculty of

California State University Dominguez Hills

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Humanities

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

by

David M. Powell

Summer 2017

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the problem: Can a synergy be derived from Keiji Nishitani’s conceptualization of *Śūnyatā* and Paul Tillich’s concept of *Being Itself*, as philosophies about Ultimate Reality, with the application of Wesley Wildman’s procedures based on the methodology of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project? The paper defines philosophy of religion and argues that it is justified as an academic discipline. A review of the literature demonstrates that both Nishitani and Tillich share common philosophical ground in phenomenological existentialism and nihilism. The paper proceeds to discuss the biographies and religious philosophies of both Keiji Nishitani and Paul Tillich. Subsequently, the paper details the Comparative Religious Ideas Project (CRIP) methodology and then applies Wildman’s procedures to these two philosophers. The thesis concludes that a synergy exists about Ultimate Reality between the contemporary religious philosophies of Nishitani’s description of Buddhism and Tillich’s explanation of Christianity.

Copyright by

DAVID M. POWELL

2017

All Rights Reserved

I dedicate this thesis to Jan, my ever-patient wife

and love of my life for over forty-three years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A long time ago, the professors of the University of the Pacific, Callison College awakened in me a questioning and curious mind. I am very grateful to all the professors in the CSUDH HUX program for helping me grow intellectually and achieve academically. My deepest gratitude goes to Dr. Donald Lewis for the guidance that came from his penetrating questions and thorough editing.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PAGE

COPYRIGHT PAGE ii

DEDICATION iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS v

ABSTRACT vii

CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION . 1

2. PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION 5

3. EXISTENTIALISM AND PHENOMENOLOGY 13

4. KEIJI NISHITANI 17

5. PAUL TILLICH 24

6. *ŚUNATĀ* AND *BEING ITSELF*: C.R.I.P. ANALYSIS 32

7. CONCLUSION 44

WORKS CITED 48

APPENDIX: FURTHER READING……………………………………………………51

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“When we have become a question to ourselves, the religious quest awakens within us.”

* Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (*RN* 3)

As humans gaze out to space, into atoms, and through cultures, our species wonders anew what is the purpose and meaning of life. Today, more than ever before, there are many challenges to our preconceptions about human existence. Because of scientific and worldly exposure, the cosmopolitan and highly educated youth of today, who will lead our world, doubt the veracity, reliability, incorruptibility, and usefulness of traditional religious explanations about human value. Religious exclusivity is irrational; religious institutions are contentious and irreconcilable as they are. With this paper, I aspire to provide a contemporary quantum of philosophical hope for the modern cosmopolitan person who suspects that religion might be important.

I do not intend to contest the concept of ultimate reality as a fundamental basis for religious faith. People and their cultures have always yearned for an expression of ultimate reality, whether or not there is a material construct for it, other than a neurological template for an idea. When that expression is narrated, organized into belief systems, and promulgated by institutions, we call it a religion. Moreover, the globally educated witness first-hand the plethora of religions each with their sincere adherents; and, these observers question the claims to an exclusive revelation or teaching about ultimate reality. Two major predominant teachings about the Ultimate are the Buddhist and the Christian. This paper will propose a contemporary philosophical synergy between them.

I have chosen the word “synergy” to represent my thesis rather than synthesis or symbiosis. A synthesis between Buddhism and Christianity is philosophically too presumptuous for me to attempt in this paper because I lack the necessary academic and scholarly preparation. Moreover, I am unable to describe any social symbiosis between Christians and Buddhists because I have not conducted the necessary anthropological field research. However, *synergy*, as defined by the *OED*, seems to fit with my purposes in this paper: “Joint action, cooperation; esp. *(Theol.)* cooperation between human will and divine grace in the work of regeneration.” Thus, I am attempting to describe areas where Buddhist and Christian philosophers can “cooperate” in their description about ultimate reality.

Toward attaining this goal for a new generation, I will reflect on the ideas of two modern twentieth century philosophers, one from an Asian religious tradition and one from a European religious tradition. Keiji Nishitani was a Japanese philosopher and Zen Buddhist. Paul Tillich was a German philosopher and a Lutheran Christian. Both were influenced by the other’s culture and philosophies: Nishitani studied Continental Philosophy in Germany; Tillich learned about Buddhism while lecturing in Japan. Despite the differences in their respective religious cultures, they applied phenomenological existentialism and argued from the common ground of “nihilism” when they developed their unique religious philosophies about ultimate reality.

My purpose here is not to critique their respective philosophies; rather, it is to locate some useful harmony between them. I wonder if their ideas about ultimate reality represent a very abstract and interdependent dichotomy. Both philosophers studied in Germany under Martin Heidegger, who had been a student of Edmund Husserl, the founder of modern phenomenology. Their arguments were necessarily based on polarities in their systems: Nishitani – being and nothingness, Tillich – being and non-being. Nishitani describes ultimate reality as *Sunyata,* and Tillich describes it as “being-itself.” Therefore, I ask, what is the polarity of *Śūnyatā* and “being-itself?” Do these two concepts represent an unavoidable and interdependent dualism for a philosophy of religion?

Can these two philosophies be rationally compared? Can comparing and contrasting them indicate new and reasonably reliable knowledge? To answer these questions, I intend to apply the methodology of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project (CRIP) as summarized by Wesley Wildman, one of its contributors. In his book *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry* (*RP*), Wildman concludes that all philosophies build a concept about *ultimacy* (26) and its implications for human existence. Wildman organizes the CRIP methodology into six categories: 1) big ideas, 2) description, phenomenology, comparisons and contrasts, 3) thematizing categories, 4) “dyadic” interpretation, 5) justified comparative categories, and 6) hermeneutical difficulties (150-152). Can the application of this comparative methodology to Buddhism and Christianity reveal new truths for a philosophy of religion? Can it inform a synergy between Nishitani’s and Tillich’s philosophies?

The content of this paper will address the following: 1) philosophy of religion as an academic discipline, 2) phenomenological existentialism and nihilism as common grounds for both philosophers, 3) the biography and religious philosophy of Keiji Nishitani, 4) the biography and religious philosophy of Paul Tillich, 5) the CRIP methodology and its application to these two philosophers, and 6) the conclusion that a synergy exists between Nishitani’s description of Buddhism and Tillich’s explanation of Christianity.

CHAPTER 2

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

This section will briefly clarify the distinctions between religion, philosophy, and philosophy of religion. The etymology of the English word “religion” is extensive and variegated according to language and cultural context. The Roman Latin use of *religāre* meant “to read over again.” The early Christians used the word to express a binding to God. The intellectual study of human activities deemed religious began during the Western Enlightenment. Religions, or religious-like rituals, as cultural institutions, have been inseparably woven into the fabric of everyday life, everywhere; nevertheless, most societies have not developed a taxonomic description of their religious institutions. Today it is clear that there are sets of similar actions and ideas by peoples all over the world that scholars can categorize as religious. Nishitani and Tillich philosophically explore religious ideas about what is “ultimately meaningful” and “of utmost concern” to being human.

“Religion” and “Philosophy of Religion” are recent Western European descriptions of a phenomenological set of human activities. As defined by Neville and Wildman in *Ultimate Realities* (*UR*), “. . . philosophy seeks representations that are universal and do not have to be qualified by context or perspective, and that themselves can be used to contextualize other symbols” (179). Enlightenment philosophy emphasized the primacy of reason over faith. Philosophy of religion was developed when philosophers, rather than theologians, used reason, rather than faith, to ascertain religious universals. In Quinn’s and Taliaferro’s *Blackwell* *Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (*CP*), Merold Westphal states that the Enlightenment philosophers like Immanuel Kant sought the “rational kernel of religion . . . whether a priori or experiential, which are available to all people, at all times, and in all places” (112). I will compare Nishitani’s and Tillich’s theories about ultimate reality with the methodology of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project.

Keiji Nishitani progresses through a series of ideas in order to explain religion, philosophy, abyss, nihility, and reality itself. Nishitani argues that religion is an existential experience not a concept:

It is my view that the unique characteristic of the religious way of life, and the basic difference between religion and philosophy, come to this: in religion one persistently pushes ahead in a direction where doubt becomes a reality for the self and makes itself really present to the self. This sort of real doubt may, of course, show up in philosophical skepsis, but philosophy tends to transfer it to the realm of theoretical reflection, and within those confines to seek an explanation and solution of the problem. (*RN* 18)

Philosophers and mystics alike are pricked by doubt. Which, with St. John of the Cross, they might call a “dark night of the soul.” They both notice anomalies between the explanations of the real that they were taught and their observations of what appears to be reality in their time and circumstances. They both seek explanations that reconcile their philosophies with their experiences. Nishitani and Tillich both ground their respective religious philosophies on the great doubting that was twentieth century nihilism.

According to Nishitani, true religion is the experience of following doubt until genuine reality is discovered. Afterwards, philosophers explicate the experiences with logical concepts and poets elucidate the sensations with vivid metaphors. Yet, both philosophy and poetry fall short of an individual seeker’s intense experience of ultimate reality:

We become aware of religion as a need, as a must for life, only at the level of life at which everything else loses its necessity and its utility. Why do we exist at all? Is not our very existence and human life ultimately meaningless? If there is a meaning or significance to it all, where do we find it? When we come to doubt the meaning of our existence in this way, when we have become a question to ourselves, the religious quest awakens within us. (*RN* 3)

Nishitani explains that “Zen Buddhism refers to this radical doubt as the Great Death” (21).

The objectification, description, explanation, and conceptualization of that doubt is the role of a philosophy of religion, which exists between the general practices of both academic philosophy and theological religion. Nishitani the philosopher explains: “A void appears here that nothing in the world can fill; a gaping abyss opens up at the very ground on which one stands. In the face of this abyss, not one of all the things that had made up the stuff of life until then is of any use” (*RN* 3). To experience a resolution between perception and conception, one requires the contrast that the thrust of an intellectual foil presents. The experience of a new revelation derives from solving the problem of doubt about the validity of an extant philosophy. The resolution can be in the form of philosophical concepts, theological dogma, or, ironically, inscrutable mysticism.

Nishitani argues that to fully apprehend ultimacy, the seeker must accept the abyss of “The Great Death”:

In the case of death, we do not face something that awaits us in some distant future, but something that we bring into the world with us at the moment we are born. . . . Our life stands poised at the brink of the abyss of nihility to which it may return at any moment. Our existence is an existence at one with nonexistence, swinging back and forth over nihility, ceaselessly passing away and ceaselessly regaining its existence. (*RN* 4)

This is an eternal recurrence; it is a ceaseless participation by conscious entities in the creation, existence, and annihilation of the universe(s). Nishitani goes on to explain that “Nihility refers to that which renders meaningless the meaning of life. When we become a question to ourselves and when the problem of why we exist arises, this means that nihility has emerged from the ground of our existence and that our very existence has turned in to question mark” (4). Then religion becomes the guiding answer for many people; it shows them a way to live meaningful lives while constantly facing the specter of death to any conscious awareness. Nishitani further defines religion: “I should like to interpret the religious quest as man’s search for true reality in a *real* way (that is, not theoretically and not in the form of concepts, as we do in ordinary knowledge and philosophical knowledge), and from that same angle to attempt an answer to the question of the essence of religion by tracing the process of the real pursuit of true reality” (6). For Nishitani, “tracing the process” is the function of religious philosophy, which necessarily must abstract the experiences of religious people. In their quest for a multidisciplinary comparative inquiry, the contemporary philosophers of religions listen to the experiences of mystic adepts, argue the apologetics of theologians, analyze the data of social and natural scientists, and observe the practices of believers. Then they seek universal categories and construct temporary and fallible abstract descriptions of what religions have in common and of how they differ. Thereupon, a modern student of religions might proclaim with Nishitani: “To see ‘heaven and earth become new’ is to look on the face of the original self. It is the full realization (actualization-sive-appropriation) of the reality of the self and all things. This is the Great Wisdom of which religion speaks, the wisdom that is, in fact, an aspect of the religious mode of being itself” (22-23). Nishitani explains that the religious person understands that “death or nihility are *realized* in the self” (21). This is the “Great Doubt” and “Great Death” in Zen Buddhism that can only be experienced by an individual, not conceptualized with a Cartesian abstraction. A person is truly religious when they accept the great death of life’s nihility.

About this point Paul Tillich might agree with Keiji Nishitani that the experience of “being itself” is the foundation of religion and the ideas that constitute a philosophy of religion. In *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1* (*ST1*), he explains:

It means that the openness of being-itself, which is given in the basic religious experience, is the foundation for the philosophical grasp of the structure of being. This origin of the ultimate philosophical notions explains the fact that they have had and still have tremendous influence on the development of the religious ideas of God, both supporting them and conflicting with them, and affecting religious experience as well as theological conceptualizations. (235)

In the upcoming section devoted to Paul Tillich, I will expand upon his concept of “being itself” and God. Furthermore, Tillich distinguishes philosophy from theology as follows:

The analysis of existence, including the development of the questions implicit in existence, is a philosophical task . . . The difference between the philosopher who is not a theologian and the theologian who works as a philosopher in analyzing human existence is only that the former tries to give an analysis which will be part of a broader philosophical work, while the latter tries to correlate the material of his analysis with . . . theological concepts . . . (63).

Tillich elaborates that the “difference” between philosophers and theologians is rooted in the dialectic between philosophy and religion.

Tillich asserts that “Dialectical realism tries to unite the structural oneness of everything within the absolute with the undecided and unfinished manifoldness of the real. It tries to show that the concrete is present in the depth of the ultimate.” He explains “that the tension in man’s ultimate concern and the different types of the idea of God in which it is expressed are the permanent background (visible or hidden) of the way in which philosophical absolutes are conceived” (*ST1* 235). Even though “. . . philosophy of religion is a dependent part of a philosophical whole and in no sense a theological discipline” (30), the two intellectual pursuits inform and challenge each other. Accordingly, philosophy of religion is a secular discipline necessarily independent from the confessional apologetics of theology.

The guiding inspiration and methodology for this paper has been the work of Dr. Wesley Wildman. Therefore, I will depend heavily upon his descriptions about the philosophy of religion. “Philosophers seek explanatory principles that unite descriptions of what exists into coherent ontological theories of reality” (*RP* 2), for example the Buddhist concept of *pratītyasamutpāda*, or “dependent origination,” which I will explain in the section devoted to Nishitani. Philosophers of religion inquire of religions answers to the ultimate “what” and “how” of existence (16). Wildman rephrases the philosophy of religion as “religious philosophy,” which should be “understood as multidisciplinary comparative inquiry, takes the ideals of objectivity and neutrality seriously by establishing procedures of correction that can detect and overcome intellectual defects of bias and ideological distortion” (26) – “a multidisciplinary comparative inquiry into ultimate matters” (28). The CRIP methodology attempts to be more objective than a traditional philosophical approach. Nevertheless, Wildman argues that “religious philosophy is a humanities discipline aligning itself with multiple fields in order to take full advantage of such corrective resources as are relevant to its inquiries. It does this without forgetting that the intense diversity of interpretations in the humanities is a virtue, in general, and that artificial consensus is dangerous in a world of multivocal meanings” (224). In summary, Wildman is redefining the philosophy of religion thusly: religious philosophy is a fallibilist, pragmatic, multidisciplinary, comparative inquiry into the variety of religious concepts and representations of ultimate reality. Moreover, it is a humanistic philosophical discipline; it asks basic ontological questions about the meaning of human existence from the viewpoint of various religions. The inquiry must undertake the investigation from multiple disciplines: theology, mythology, sociology, neurology, anthropology, economics, politics, and history. This must be done with respect to cultural contexts and respectfully comparative. Yet, all the hypotheses must remain continuously and humbly open to correction. “The most adventurous forms of religious philosophy intend to inquire into ultimacy, in the double sense of matters that are ultimately religiously important and of ultimate reality itself” (26).

CHAPTER 3

EXISTENTIALISM AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Both Nishitani and Tillich acknowledge their respective debt to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who held professorships in philosophy at the University of Marburg (1923-1927) and at the University of Freiburg (1927-1967). Tillich was influenced by Heidegger when he taught theology at Marburg (1924-1925), Nishitani was a student of Heidegger’s at Freiburg from 1937-1939; moreover, Heidegger was a student and successor to the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl at the University of Freiburg.[[1]](#footnote-1) Neither Edmund Husserl nor Martin Heidegger considered themselves to be “existentialists;” nevertheless, both Nishitani and Tillich relied on Husserl and Heidegger to formulate their respective philosophies that were phenomenological and existentialist.

In his work *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (*I*), Edmund Husserl founded a “new science” of “transcendental phenomenology” (5). He instructed that it “is a pure descriptive discipline which studies the whole field of pure transcendental consciousness in the light of pure intuition” (160). This philosophy attempts to “*claim nothing that we cannot make essentially transparent to ourselves by reference to Consciousness* and on purely immanental lines” (160). The objective of phenomenology is to assiduously comprehend and describe the inherently unique particular qualities of a thing that can be objectively sensed without subjective evaluation or interpretation.

Martin Heidegger credits Edmund Husserl for laying the foundation for his own investigations into ontological truth.[[2]](#footnote-2) Although Heidegger did not accept the eponym “existentialist,” he existentially analyzed the phenomena of being (*Dasein*): “Is there a way to attain this being phenomenally on the basis of the present point of departure of the existential analytic?” (*BT* 176). Heidegger was driven to answer “the question of the kind of being of this being that we ourselves are . . .” He searched for an “interpretation of Dasein in its everydayness” (49). He considered his “task” to be the “working out the idea of a ‘*natural concept of world’*” with the “development and above all the *approach [Ansatz]* of an existential analytic of Dasein . . .” (50). Both Keiji Nishitani and Paul Tillich applied Husserl’s and Heidegger’s philosophies to their own investigations and theories.

In his 1949 book of lectures, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism (SON),* Nishitani aligns Buddhism with existentialism. The key to comprehending Nishitani’s Buddhist existentialism is the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda*. It is typically translated as “dependent origination.” Simply, this is the Buddhist analysis that “every phenomenon arises only as a result of other phenomena” (231). In other words, all things, all ideas are caused by other things and ideas; they all have a precedent. Therefore, according to Nishitani, “Since the human mode of being consists in life and death, we must pass beyond the human standpoint to face the problem of life and death squarely” (190). Nishitani observes: “Blossoming out of Husserl’s ‘intuition of essence; it developed further in the ‘existential interpretation’ of Heidegger’s existential phenomenology” (*RN* 171). Moreover, Nishitani asserts that a true existentialism of the human condition must consider “the place of human beings in the order of the totality of beings” (*SON* 189). Following Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein[[3]](#footnote-3)*, Nishitani asked questions like the following: What is our existential identity as a species amidst the plethora of beings, in the relativity of time, and within the vastness of space? Our authentic existence (*Existenz*) is our true self-reflecting about the meaning of its self here and now.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nishitani proposes a further step beyond Heidegger, beyond the despair of an “interminable finitude” “to an essential conversion away from it, a breaking through this being-unto-death. It is the essential conversion from true finitude to true infinity, that is, away from finitude as ‘bad infinity’ in Existenz to infinity in Existenz” (*RN* 176). The only viewpoint for existentialism must be nihilism from the Buddhist concept of “emptiness” or *Śūnyatā* – “the only true infinity” (*ST* 177). This is the non-substantial, non-conceptual ultimate reality from which human existence derives. Nevertheless, Nishitani does not leave us without hope, as will be discussed.

Tillich describes “the human predicament” that people must make sense about the realities of existence, which are confronted by “finitude,” “estrangement,” and “ambiguity.” He interprets Protestant Christian theology through the lens of existentialism. Our predicament is that we, of all creatures, realize that we are finite, that non-being threatens us, and that death incessantly awaits us at every moment; therefore, why should we carry on: “Heidegger’s ‘annihilating nothingness’ describes man’s situation of being threatened by nonbeing in an ultimately inescapable way, that is, by death. The anticipation of nothingness at death gives human existence its existential character” (*ST1* 189). Furthermore, as we gaze with our telescopes to the beginning of time, the big bang, the innumerable galaxies with their probable sentient life, do we not feel separated from all our presumptions about our place in space and time? Finally, Tillich confronts our uncertainty about participation in some form of eternal existence, “life universal” (*ST3* 285-286). “If the word ‘existential’ points to a participation which transcends both subjectivity and objectivity, then man’s relation to the gods is rightly called ‘existential’” (*ST1* 214), in turn, Keiji Nishitani might argue that nihilistic existentialism transcends the “gods.”

CHAPTER 4

KEIJI NISHITANI

At the age of 16, Keiji Nishitani’s (1900-1990) father died from an illness that, afterwards, the son acquired from which he had to convalesce for a year. In the introduction to *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, the translator Graham Parkes comments that the loss of his father and his near death experience drove him “to the enterprise of philosophy as an attempt to plumb the experience of nihilism to its depths” (xx). Moreover, Keiji Nishitani saw how “The Pacific War” incinerated Japan’s nationalist ambitions, turned her cities into a “wasteland”, and immolated his family, friends, and people. Human disasters, more than natural disasters, led him to nihilism.

Nishitani’s driving concern was to help modern people confront the *angst* of contemporary doubt that remained after the economic, political, and social carnage of the Great Depression and World War II. After the war, it became apparent that traditional institutions had failed to provide a meaningful and reliable reason to live. As such, an institution that fails to motivate people to want to survive and risk is useless. Yet, without viable replacements, people feel the loss and anxiety that is existential *angst*. Nishitani captured half the process of change by helping people confront the emptiness of tradition:

Religion, to judge from current conditions in which many people are in fact getting along without it, is clearly not the kind of necessity that food is. . . Religion has to do with life itself. Whether the life we are living will end up in extinction or in the attainment of eternal life is a matter of the utmost importance for life itself. . . . Indeed, this is why religion is an indispensable necessity for those very people who fail to see the need for it. (*RN* 2)

In the depth of personal and social depression, “. . . religion poses as a starting point the question: ‘For what purpose do I exist’”? . . . “Why do we exist at all? Is not our very existence and human life ultimately meaningless? . . . when we have become a question to ourselves, the religious quest awakens within us” (*RN* 3). In every age, a renewed philosophy of religion charts new courses for people’s religious institutions to follow.

Nihilism is central to Nishitani’s philosophical observations. This is true for many of us who travel to the multitude of gigantic metropolises throughout the world, with masses of people frenetically crunched “24/7.” If we ever pause from our self-important responsibilities and indulgences, the ever-lurking nihilistic question about one’s true purpose will perch on our soulful shoulder. Non-human nature cannot ask such a question. It is human nature to question the meaning of life, the purpose of activity, the insult of death.

Nishitani, the Buddhist and the existentialist, viewed existence as a physicalist. That is, everything that exists can be traced to a material cause; everything depends on something prior for its origin. In Buddhist philosophy this is called dependent origination (Sanskrit: *pratītyasamutpāda*). In his article “Mind in Indian Buddhist Philosophy” (“MI”), Christian Coseru makes the connection between *pratītyasamutpāda* and *Śūnyatā*: “following Nagarjuna’s [an Indian Buddhist philosopher (c. 150 – c. 250 CE)] *Foundation of the Middle Way*, is that all things, including all cognitive episodes, by virtue of being the product of cause and conditions, lack inherent existence (*sabhava*) and are thus empty (*sunya*). That is, nothing truly exits on its own, and no entity or mental state has its characteristics intrinsically” (70). Semantically, when a person says that they “know some thing” they inherently acknowledge that “thing” might never have been, might disappear, might not be; beyond the limits of our material explanations, there will always remain the no-thingness of our ignorance.

For the Buddhist, there cannot exist a single object, or unity, out of which all else derives its existence because, to be such, there must be a prior cause *ad infinitum*. There is no-thing that is an original first cause. There is no substantial ultimate reality other than that there is no-thing. An ultimate, original, first prepotency does not exist. Things were not created *ex nihilo* – out of nothing. Nishitani emphasizes the *nihil* upon which a creator – being – depends; hence, the creator-being can be neither omnipresent nor omniscient (*RN* 39).

Phenomenologically, Nishitani argues that what humans perceive to be their consciousness is the result of the physical elements that make up their temporary being. Consciousness did not precede one’s birth and does not survive one’s death. Therefore, neither an everlasting Soul nor a primal God can exist except in the imagination of people. The universe is empty of these reasons for existence. In his article “Nishitani’s Buddhist Response to Nihilism” (“NB”), Stephen Phillips describes Nishitani’s conclusions about European existentialist nihilism as “the view that there is no ultimate meaning to our activities and lives; they go on in a meaningless context” (76). Nishitani explains it thusly: “Nihility refers to that which renders meaningless the meaning of life. When we become a question to ourselves and when the problem of why we exist arises, this means that nihility has emerged from the ground of our existence and that our very existence has turned into a question mark” (*RN* 4). Indeed, it will become so when we courageously eliminate the importance of each presumption about the meaning of our existence.

How does one learn to accept reality nihilistically? This is accomplished when one apophatically peels away the onion layers of their mental processes. Theologically, it discovers and postulates what God is not, or, in Nishitani’s philosophy, what existence is not. It is also known as the *via negativa*. Early Indian Buddhist philosophers, and more recent Japanese Zen Buddhist practitioners like Nishitani, apply apophaticism to ultimate reality. The *via negativa* strips away all causes so that nothing intrinsically exists; no material thing or concept can truly exist independently of other things, phenomena, or causes. Exploring the trail of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), one discovers the center where, like the onion, there is space – an expansive, infinite emptiness. Nishitani informs us that nihilism also applies to all religious beliefs: “. . . into the field of the very existence of God whence it deepens into an abyss. On that abyssal, godless nihility, all life whatsoever, be it animal life and the soul, or even spiritual-personal life, takes on the features of a fundamental meaninglessness” (*RN* 92). I wonder if this “meaninglessness” is merely the horizon of our understanding and the limit of our linguistic expressiveness?

The terminus of this apophatic road is a double-negation – a philosophical roundabout. Not only is there no intrinsic reality to any thing there cannot even be a reality for the abstraction of nihilism itself – all language and semantics must be relinquished. One must even negate negation; what is being removed is the human reliance on conceptualization. Saying: “NO, No, no . . .” is apophaticism. One can become dependent on a process of mere denial that is then built into the edifice of another concept. In radical nihilism, or the Buddhist “The Great Death,” this too must go; hence, the double negation that negation itself must be rejected. Nishitani describes this moment: “But this standpoint of nihility in turn becomes a standpoint shackled to nothingness, from which nothingness is viewed solely as nothingness, so that it, too, needs to be negated. It is here that emptiness, as a standpoint of absolute non-attachment liberated from this double confinement, comes to the fore” (*RN* 97). Masao Abe drives home this Buddhist philosophy in his book, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue* (*BI*), when he wrote:

*Śūnyatā* as the ultimate reality in Buddhism literally means ‘emptiness’ or ‘voidness’ and can imply ‘absolute nothingness’. This is because *śūnyatā* is entirely unobjectifiable, unconceptualizable, and unattainable by reason and will. It also indicates the absence of enduring self-being and the non-substantiality of everything in the universe. It is beyond all dualities and yet includes them. (*BI* 7)

To let go of every concept and thing is a profoundly frightening and threatening endeavor.

Zen master, Ungo Kiyō (1582-1659 CE) ironically expressed the great negation with the following verse that accompanied his enzo:

True emptiness is without form,

Mistakenly we create something to grasp. (Seo, 54)

Despite the dismal depressing feelings that result from nihilism, Nishitani does not leave us without hope: “At this depth the awareness of nihility opens up a horizon that enables a freedom beyond necessity and a life beyond rationality” (*RN* 48). Phillips explains: “a nihilist attitude is, along with *zen* practice, a necessary step to the ‘standpoint’ of *śūnyatā*, ‘emptiness.’” (*NB* 76). Nishitani describes: “The emptiness of *śūnyatā* is . . . an absolute emptiness, emptied even of these representations of emptiness. And for that reason, it is at bottom one with being, even as being is at bottom one with emptiness” (*RN* 123). How can being be at one with emptiness? Perhaps the scholastic concept should not be *creatio ex nihilo* but rather it should be *creatio et nihilo*.

It is only a sentient, self-conscious being (*ātman*) that can experience non-being (*anātman*) and emptiness (*Śūnyatā*). In this realization, all dualities are extinguished, all separations are united, all differences vanish. Nishitani teaches: “For us as human beings, to revert to that field entails at one and the same time an elemental affirmation of the existence of all things (the world) and elemental affirmation of our own existence. The field of śūnyatā is nothing other than the field of the Great Affirmation” (*RN* 131).

Applying Nishitani’s use of the word ecstasy, or “a standing-outside-of-oneself” (*RN* 33), one experiences a profound and abiding compassion (*karuṇā*) for all beings. From within a “dynamic *Śūnyatā*” (*BI* 59) the emptying of suffering-causing attachment is filled with a loving compassion for all beings, a Great Affirmation, such that all creatures may experience the freedom of *Śūnyatā*, which dissolves all divisive angst and despair. Phillips describes the experience of *Śūnyatā*: “Here one ecstatically and spontaneously acts for the welfare of all, overcoming nihilism” (*NB* 76).

CHAPTER 5

PAUL TILLICH

Paul Tillich (1886-1965) was born to a Lutheran minister and his wife in northeastern Germany bordering Poland. His father became a superintendent with the church and Tillich moved with the family four times before college. While in college as a student and professor, he moved ten times between 1904 and 1933, which included an army chaplaincy during World War I. In 1933, the Nazi government disapproved of his teaching and had him removed from his professorship at the University of Frankfurt. That same year he and his family emigrated from Germany to the United States where he respectively taught philosophy, philosophy of religion, and theology at the Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University, Harvard Divinity School, and finally at the University of Chicago.

For Tillich the “religious concern is ultimate. . . The word ‘concern’ points to the ‘existential’ character of religious experience. . . It is the object of total surrender, demanding also the surrender of our subjectivity while we look at it” (*ST1* 12). “What is the content of our ultimate concern? What does concern us ultimately? . . . Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not-being” (14). “The [existential] anxiety in which he is aware of this situation is anxiety about the lack of necessity of his being” (196). Tillich argues that the Christian God is that ultimacy that transcends our finitude (211).

Paul Tillich elaborates a phenomenology and ontology that point toward the solution for our human ultimate concern, which is “Ultimacy.” For him, what drives our questioning is the existential phenomena that humans are worried about the very necessity of their existence. He describes the layers of this anxiety as categories of finitude.

Tillich tries to analyze and thus explain our angst in order to justify a new religious philosophy and theology. He identifies four categories of concern: time, space, causality, and substance. Tillich wrote: “They appear implicitly or explicitly in every thought concerning God and the world, man and nature” (*ST1* 192). Because of our intrinsic finiteness, Tillich calls these analytical forms the “categories of finitude.” Tillich uses the word “anxiety” to describe our categorical reaction to our finiteness. The word anxiety, and its derivatives, implies not only mortal fear but also frustration that we are restricted to finitude. This realization presents us with a challenge and obstacle against which we are always struggling, experimenting, inventing, exploring, questioning, describing, and redefining.

At root, our frustration is directed toward time, the end of it – personal death and species extinction. We have always created lifestyles that attempt to mitigate against death, that attempt to slow the “transitoriness” of life (*ST1* 194). In both East and West we imagine elaborate religious soteriologies that are intended to comfort our fears about death by transporting us to a life after death. There is never enough time before we die; death always seems unjust; no matter how old we grow, the past seems like yesterday. From our insulated domiciles to our complex medical care, we create civilizations that try to cheat death. Moreover, we recognize being because we perpetually dance with non-being; from the two, we conceive and birth ontologies. Nevertheless, at this time in history, our anxiety is more than personal. It is heightened because we almost all carry within us concerns about our ability to destroy humanity with weapons of mass destruction, cause our extinction with human induced climate change, and the knowledge that eventually a planet-destroying asteroid or solar red giant will eventually destroy the earth. Little wonder that humans are filled with angst about the meaning and purpose of our existence, if it might all come to naught anyway, for eternity.

For Tillich, something must be asserted about the “concept” of God that is factual and nonsymbolic wherefrom all other statements about God may be accepted as symbols: “The statement that God is being-itself is a nonsymbolic statement. It does not point beyond itself. It means what it says directly and properly; if we speak of the actuality of God, we first assert that he is not God if he is not being-itself . . . or the absolute.” Tillich teaches that the true symbol “points to something beyond itself,” “participates in the reality of that for which it stands,” and both affirms and negates “that to which it points.” Thereafter, Tillich’s descriptions of God are rightfully symbolic: 1) ontologically, God is both being and the structure of being; 2) God is both the cause and the effect; 3) “God is the ground of being, he is the ground of the structure of being;” and 4) “that which is infinite is being-itself and because everything participates in being-itself” (*ST1* 238, 239).

To better serve the purpose of comparison as a thesis for this paper, I have chosen to appropriate Tillich’s synonym for God - “being-itself” - rather than use the term “God” to describe the absolute or ultimate. “God” is too heavily burdened with specifically Christian overtones and metaphors when “being-itself” as applied by a Christian theologian seems to express the concept of the ultimate with a more general and easy to compare semiotic.

Being, whenever and wherever, is caused; it is the consequence of prior actions, whether intentional or accidental. The question then becomes: what caused the causes, ad infinitum? Moreover, Tillich asserts that our being is unnecessary, it does not need to exist, it is not independent of prior causes, it is derived – it lacks aseity. Thus, the human being might just as easily not-be. We are “contingent” – neither necessary nor not necessary. Tillich sympathetically explains: “The anxiety in which he is aware of this situation is anxiety about the lack of necessity of his being. He might not be! Then why is he? And why should he continue to be? There is no reasonable answer. This is exactly the anxiety implied in the awareness of causality as a category of finitude” (*ST1* 196). Nevertheless, humans are a real expression of this accidentally material and extinguishable world; we exist to think about it.

The final category is the most relatable, immediate, and visceral; it is the finitude of substance. The finiteness of being in time, space, and causality refers to a physical thing, a substance, not only to concepts that are imagined by it. Tillich declares: “. . . this anxiety about change is anxiety about the threat of nonbeing implied in change” (*ST1* 197). For a species that is perpetually aware of its fragility and temporality, this realization is very scary and one to be avoided at all costs by all manner of artistic expression and athletic escapes. Our species hopefulness, willingness to risk, experimental inventiveness, and entrepreneurial spirit depends on satisfying the anthropological demand that society establish some expression about a salvific ultimate reality, to which I will apply Tillich’s labels of “being-itself” and “Ultimacy.”

We are out of time, lost in space, without a cause, and have no substance. No wonder we are anxious. In his third volume of *Systematic Theology* (1963) (*ST3*), Tillich summarizes the human dilemma: “Man’s predicament, out of which the existential questions arise, must be characterized by three concepts: finitude with respect to man’s esential [sic.] being as creature, estrangement with respect to man’s existential being in time and space, ambiguity with respect to man’s participation in life universal” (285-286). The question at the root of a modern concept about ultimate reality is, as it has always been, about the nature of being. Every generation contributes to changing their environment, and hence to their experience of living and being in a new world. Representations and experiences about ultimate reality must be communicated in contemporaneous terms. Tillich observes that “it is impossible to speak of being without also speaking of becoming” (*ST1* 81).

Humans apply their unique power of reason to organize their experiences of reality into categories of subjects and objects (*ST1* 169). Tillich warns that “Without reason, without the *logos* of being, being would be chaos . . . But where there is reason there are [sic.] a self and a world in interdependence” (172). The subject and object that human reason observes are an inseparable and necessary polarity for the existence of being (173).

Nevertheless, the concept that something exists can only be possible because of the opposite realization that it might not exist. Our human place in existence as being and describer of being can only be located because we can imagine the termination or absence of our existence. Although a reasoned object is made possible because of a reasoning subject, neither are necessary; hence, the dread of non-being makes poignant the experience and ontological explanation of being. Tillich explains that: “The basic ontological structure cannot be derived. It must be accepted. The question, ‘What precedes the duality of self and world, of subject and object?’ is a question in which reason looks into its own abyss – an abyss in which distinction and derivation disappear” (*ST1* 174). When humans gaze into this abyss they experience “a ‘metaphysical shock’- the shock of possible nonbeing” (163).

Both being and non-being are the objects of the thinking human as subject. They are interdependent and exist in a dialectical dance (*ST1*187). If one can “envisage nothingness” (186) “one attributes being even to nothing” (163). Tillich concludes: “Therefore, the very structure which makes negative judgments possible proves the ontological character of non-being” (187). Whatever an ultimate reality may be, it must subsume subject and object, being and non-being, existents and nothingness.

Tillich names the expression of ultimate reality “being-itself.” It is the power of being and non-being, of creation and destruction, of finitude and infinity. It contains all polarities but is not polarized. Tillich explains it “As the power of being, being-itself cannot have a beginning and an end” (*ST1* 189). It is not a thing; it “is the beginning without a beginning, the end without an end. It is its own beginning and end, the initial power of everything that is” (189). Tillich continues: “In the moment in which one says that God *is* or that he has being, the question arises as to how his relation to being is understood. The only possible answer seems to be that God is being-itself, in the sense of the power of being or the power to conquer non-being” (*ST2* 11).

What does Tillich imply by using the phrase “the power of being” as synonymous with ultimate reality, being itself, God? Setting aside the derivatives of immanence, does Tillich mean that being itself is a physical force like gravity that either pushes being(s) into existence, repels things from attraction, or fights the inertia inherent in the universe – God’s universe? Is this power of being the physiological and psychological powers of relationships: attraction, manipulation, leadership, coercion, fear, votary, love? Tillich does not explain his frequent use of the phrase “the power of being.” Nevertheless, he teaches that the ultimate reality, God, is “the emptiest of all concepts when taken as an abstraction, becomes the most meaningful of all concepts when it is understood as the power of being in everything that has being” (*ST2* 11).

Nishitani and Tillich ask if there is an absolute or ultimate reality. Phenomenologically, both start with things and concepts that exist because we sense and imagine them. Following a Zen Buddhist tradition, Nishitani apophatically peels away the layers of physical reality in order to arrive at ultimate reality that he calls *Śūnyatā*, or absolute nothingness. Searching through the Protestant Christian tradition, Tillich cataphatically searches through the manifestations of God to arrive at ultimate reality that he calls “being-itself.” Both of their concepts about ultimate reality are accepted and professed, to some degree, by billions of otherwise similar human beings. Are their theories about ultimate reality irreconcilably opposite? Do they represent a necessary and realistic dualism about ultimate reality? Is there a possible synergy between their thought experiments, like the quantum relationship between light waves and photon particles? Both Nishitani and Tillich engage us with the most profound self-questioning. Thereby, we become a question to ourselves (*RN* 3) because we realize the immutable finitude of our being (*ST1* 166), and these explorations lead us to religion and the quest to know ultimate reality.

Why is this question important? Because many people need to feel secure in the truth of a faith that there is some ultimate and absolute reality that causes, orders, influences, and gives meaning to their existence and motivation for right action. Moreover, a human’s existential sense of spiritual security relies on their belief that by their sacramental actions they can positively influence the outcome of their future or secure the blessings of a beneficent being. For most religious believers, sacramentals are the means through which they express their faith and hope to acquire some spiritual merit; e.g. prayers, tithes, pilgrimages, communal services, donations to a temple, prayer beads, support for clergy, etc. For both philosophers, becoming a question to ourselves (*RN* 3) because we realize the immutable finitude of our being (*ST1* 166) is what leads people on a journey to learn about an ultimate reality through religious faith and sacraments.

CHAPTER 6

*ŚUNATĀ* AND *BEING ITSELF*: C.R.I.P. ANALYSIS

The methodology for comparing Nishitani and Tillich is based on Wesley Wildman’s application of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project (CRIP). With it, I will continue to develop my thesis that there is a shared synergy between Keiji Nishitani’s description of the Buddhist principle of *Sunyata* and some aspects of the Christian theologian Paul Tillich’s concept of “being-itself.”

Comparing and contrasting methods of inquiry about religious claims can lead to new truths about reality. Patterns of human behavior that seem similar reinforce presumptions about our shared humanity that will encourage us to cooperate and work together toward common goals. Moreover, when we observe deviations from those patterns, by contrast we notice what is not covered by our presumptions; this, in turn, stimulates our desire for discovery of new ideas about reality. Both Nishitani and Tillich describe their respective arguments about being in contrast to non-being, or some thing contrasted to no thing. Although their fundamental presumptions about existence differ, they were both influenced by the philosophies of phenomenology and existentialism. Contemporary existential angst emerges from the realization that existence of any kind might just as well not be; that human existence in this universe is probably not necessary and that extinction is a distinct possibility. The truth of nihility derives from some comparative understanding of who we are as beings and, by contrast, who we might not be.

The Comparative Religious Ideas Project emerged from the desire by professional philosophers to phenomenologically elucidate the areas of commonality between the world’s many religious belief systems and to acknowledge the irreconcilable differences between religious traditions. CRIP was initially convened in 1995 at Boston University. In the first volume of their study, *The Human Condition* (*HC*), Robert Neville wrote that the purpose of CRIP was “to develop and test a theory concerning the comparison of religious ideas, and to make some important comparisons about religious ideas of the human condition, ultimate realities, and religious truth” (xv). Dr. Wildman was a member of the CRIP team and based his “self-conscious dialectic approach to comparison” on the CRIP methodology (*RP* 149) in order to apply a multi-disciplinary cross-cultural comparative inquiry of religious philosophies (167). Religions are complex institutions that utilize and impact almost all other aspects of culture and society. A religion is more than just an economic, philosophical, sociological, political, or anthropological phenomenon. Therefore, to both validly and fallibly compare religious ideas, the religious philosopher should apply as many intellectual disciplines as possible to the comparative religious inquiry.

Wildman organizes the CRIP methodology into six categories: 1) big religious ideas, 2) comparative categories, 3) thematizing categories, 4) “dyadic” interpretation, 5) justified comparative categories, and 6) hermeneutical difficulties (*RP* 150-152). The big idea for comparison is “ultimate reality” with the comparative category of existential phenomenology as applied to Nishitani’s and Tillich’s philosophies. I will check the validity of the comparisons with CRIP categorical themes: the origin of the philosopher’s use of existential phenomenology, the contemporary usage of this category, a discussion of the category’s theoretical framework, and an investigation into the possibility of distorted readings because of the application of this category. This method is not only a comparative examination of two philosophies but also a check on the reliability of my analyses and conclusions.

First, this type of analysis must focus on the big ideas of religious philosophy that can have global relevancy. Both philosophers were influenced by European phenomenology and existential nihilism. People have always dreaded both individual and tribal death. Today, however, as previously described, the human species has become aware that it must also confront its possible extinction. These threats produce an angst of the deepest order. Whether consciously or subliminally, all humans sense the fragility of our common existence. The culturally expressed exclusivistic religions of the Axial Age can no longer answer the existential questions of our modern Anthropocene era. Although non-religious philosophers grapple with these concerns, Nishitani and Tillich contend that only religion that has struggled with the existential dialectics can satisfactorily address these ultimate concerns about the meaning of our fragile existence.

With contemporary existential language, Nishitani describes traditional Zen Buddhist themes about ultimate freedom from suffering due to material attachments. Because of our unique contemporary nihilism, Nishitani observes, “We become aware of religion as a need, as a must for life, only at the level of life at which everything else loses its necessity and its utility. Why do we exist at all? Is not our very existence and human life ultimately meaningless?” (*RN* 3). The biggest idea for Nishitani is the meaning of life and of its origins in an ultimate reality. From these concepts about ultimacy (or freedom therefrom) a human can experience hope and rediscover wisdom and compassion. Otherwise, they are left with only uninspiring examples of Hobbesian pessimism. Thus Nishitani contends: “The inquiry into religion attempted here proceeds by way of problems judged to lie hidden at the ground of the historical frontier we call ‘the modern world,’ with the aim of delving into the ground of human existence and , at the same time, searching anew for the wellsprings of reality itself” (xlviii).

As with Nishitani, Tillich argues that only religion can discover the answers (ontology) and describe the pathways (epistemology) to human’s ultimate concerns about the meaning of existence in the modern era. Tillich describes traditional Christian objectives of union with God as a synthesis of being and non-being that will help modern people find meaning within meaninglessness. Tillich summarizes religion’s role:

The religious concern is ultimate; it excludes all other concerns from ultimate significance; it makes them preliminary. The ultimate concern is unconditional, independent of any conditions of character, desire, or circumstance. The unconditional concern is total: no part of ourselves or of our world is excluded from it; there is no ‘place’ to flee from it. The total concern is infinite: no moment of relaxation and rest is possible in the face of a religious concern which is ultimate, unconditional, total and infinite. (*ST1* 12)

Tillich is arguing that “being itself” describes a process not a Being, in the way that quantum physics, developmental biology, and mathematics describe the processes of the physical universe. Biological beings result from these functions of the material universe. It seems, therefore, that Tillich’s “being itself” is materially deterministic; nevertheless, an individual is free to decide their response to their existence.

For both Nishitani and Tillich, the most important ideas address the meaning of existence, and religion is the means for experiencing and expressing the answers to these profound questions.

The second, or comparative, CRIP category that I will apply to these two philosophers is existential phenomenology. Nishitani, a Japanese Zen Buddhist, and Tillich, a German Lutheran Christian, were both indebted for their initial phenomenological analytic to Edmund Husserl through his pupil Martin Heidegger. Husserl, the founder of modern phenomenology, instructed that phenomenology “is a *pure descriptive* discipline which studies the whole field of pure transcendental consciousness in the light of *pure intuition*” (*I* 160). This philosophy attempts to *“claim nothing that we cannot make essentially transparent to ourselves by reference to Consciousness* and on purely immanental lines” (160). Its objective is to assiduously comprehend and describe the inherently unique particular qualities of a thing that can be objectively sensed without subjective evaluation or interpretation. However, both Nishitani and Tillich enlarge upon Husserl’s immanentalism. As previously noted, Nishitani considers authentic existence to consist of the “true infinity” of *Śūnyatā (RN* 177*)*; whereas, Tillich argues that “man’s relation to the gods is rightly called ‘existential’” (*ST1* 214).

Wildman applies phenomenology to the philosophy of religion as “careful description that strives for objectivity – in the sense of registering what is important about the phenomena at the right places in the description of it – is the starting point for inquiry” (*RP* 38). The CRIP analysis includes fallibilism (see following) that assumes peer reviewed criticism to correct conclusions that later prove to be wrong. Ninian Smart, for example, applies phenomenology to clearly describe “seven dimensions of religion which help to characterize religions as they exist in the world”: the practical and ritual, the experiential and emotional, the narrative and mythic, the doctrinal and philosophical, the ethical and legal, the social and institutional, and the material (*WR* 12-21).

Nishitani’s phenomenology enters at a level that is more experientially profound than either Husserl or Wildman. He was a member of the Kyoto School of Philosophy that brought Western philosophy to Japan. Moreover, he interpreted European existentialism and phenomenology with the insights of Zen Buddhist practice. He asserts that human meaning cannot be realized by attachment or devotion or union with any idea or thing; meaning has to be *experienced* by an extreme nihilistic renunciation—the Great Death “in which everything is present just as it is, in its *suchness*” (*RN* 21).

Nishitani calls phenomenology “samādhi-being” (*RN* 128); it is a more complete subjective comprehension than Husserl’s objective observation of immanence. Nishitani reflects that this “is not cognition of an object but a non-cognitive knowing of the non-objective thing in itself” (139). In contrast to Immanuel Kant’s influence on modern philosophy, Nishitani argues that samādhi-being recognizes “the nonobjective ‘selfness’ of things prior to any separation between materiality and formality or between matter and eidetic form, and prior to any consideration of the distinction between the phenomenon and the thing-in-itself” (*RN* 163). Thus, a Zen Buddhist perceives irrationally that the object of phenomenological observation “emerges into being as what it is in itself at a point beyond all categories of substance, quality, quantity and the like . . . It is, we might say, the autonomous mode of being of that thing” (127).

Nishitani intones the verses of Basho to accompany his phenomenological observations about samādhi-being:

From the pine tree

learn of the pine tree

And from the bamboo

of the bamboo. (*RN* 128)

Paul Tillich created an existential phenomenology that “illuminates other related ideas” (*ST1* 106), and attempted to account for revealed truth; that is, something is accepted to have been or is real based on the belief that the proclaimer of the revelation was or is accurate. Specifically, Tillich needed this type of analysis, that he labeled “critical phenomenology,” in order to project the revelations of traditional Christian theological ideas through the lens of existentialism. Thus, “Critical phenomenology is the method best fitted to supply a normative description of spiritual (and also Spiritual) meanings” (108), because, the spiritual life “creates unique embodiments of something universal” (107).

The spiritual and religious revelations, although not necessarily concomitant, are phenomenological to the extent that a prophet and their statements and the theological dogmas that follow are objectively existent; although the content of the prophesy must remain phenomenologically subjective. In other words, Tillich’s phenomenology is not Husserlian. As Dirk-Martin Grube observes in his article “A Critical Reconstruction of Paul Tillich’s Epistemology” (“CR”), “Tillich’s critical phenomenology does not possess the normative resources that Husserlian phenomenology possesses” (72).

Tillich expanded Husserl’s phenomenological norms in order to achieve his purpose as a Christian theologian. He developed two specialized tools for Christian phenomenological analysis: “The existential-critical element is the criterion according to which the example is selected; the intuitive-descriptive element is the technique by means of which the meaning which is manifest in the example is portrayed” (*ST1* 107). In other words, the existential-critical criteria must decide which claims are revelations, then the second intuitive-descriptive criteria must interpret the meaning of the prophetic claims. Grube criticizes Tillich’s two-fold theological phenomenology, “being constituted by a particular claim to revelation, the master concept of revelation cannot function as a neutral judge between competing claims to revelation” (“CR”72). Nevertheless, from a dogmatic point of view, Tillich’s apologetic phenomenological *technique* could probably be applied by multiple religious confessions.

I surmise that both Nishitani and Tillich not only expanded Husserl’s contention that phenomenology means “transcendental consciousness in the light of *pure intuition,*” as previously quoted, but also, they diverged from each other’s applications. Nishitani’s phenomenological “samādhi-being” contrasts with Tillich’s prophetic revelation. Although both philosophers argue for a new phenomenology that reflects their respective religious teachings, they diverge in their conclusions.

Thirdly, four thematizing categories test for the truth of the philosophies and the reliability of the comparisons herein set forth: 1) origins, 2) contemporary usage, 3) theoretical frameworks, and 4) testing for distortions. The origins of Nishitani’s philosophy emerged from his interest in European philosophy that he applied to traditional Zen Buddhism. Half a world away, Tillich was a classically trained European philosopher and Lutheran Protestant theologian. Nishitani wrote in Japanese and, for those of us who do not read Japanese, depended on the accuracy and stylistic creativity of the translators. In 1933, Tillich emigrated from Germany to the United States and, after having learned English, wrote his most important works in his adopted language. Both philosophers learned continental European philosophy in Germany, and, although their paths never crossed, Martin Heidegger taught them both. They created connections between contemporary existentialism and their respective religious interests: Zen Buddhism for Nishitani and Protestant Christianity for Tillich. They both saw in existential phenomenology opportunities to contemporize their respective traditional religions with tested philosophic frameworks. However, Nishitani’s approach to ultimate reality with Zen Buddhism, *Śūnyatā*, was experiential and apophatic, in contrast, Tillich’s ascent to the ultimate reality of Being Itself was cataphatic and rational.

Wildman’s fourth criteria is “that comparisons aim to be true, in the dyadic sense that locates the truth or falsity of a proposition in the accuracy of interpretation of its subject matter. . . . in a particular respect and locates the act of interpretation itself in a concrete social and political situation” (*RP* 151). Nishitani’s historical experiences paralleled Tillich’s: World War I, the Great Depression, nationalism, World War II, national destruction and loss. Yet, I appropriate their philosophies in a post-war time of extraordinary prosperity and creative productivity. In other words, the concern that drives me about ultimate reality and the ideas about it by Nishitani and Tillich come together out of different times and cultures. To be honest and true, my comparative interpretations must explicitly acknowledge and account for the historical contradictions between them and myself.

These two philosophers attempted to apply their traditions to the existential angst of modern living. Both Nishitani and Tillich sought new expressions of ultimate reality out of the historical suffering of their youth – war, poverty, death, and disillusionment with the values that catalyzed World War I, fascist and militarist nationalism, the Great Depression, and World War II. Both philosophers were internationally renowned experts in their fields, who were capable of communicating their respective traditions to a contemporary audience. They both confronted atheistic materialism with a new description of an ultimate reality that could restore hope, in part, through Buddhist compassion and Christian charity. My time in the late Twentieth and early Twenty-Second Centuries has been one of relative peace, internationalism, improved educational opportunities for more young people, increasing global prosperity, health, and longevity. Yet, the phenomena of existential angst gnaws at the modern soul as deeply as it did during Nishitani’s and Tillich’s time. The necessity for global cooperation, not neo-nationalistic protectionism, is as great as ever. My own global education, especially in India and Taiwan, and my abiding interest in religions and politics has convinced me that a philosophy of religion that finds some coincidence between the Asian and Euro-American philosophies, as represented by Nishitani and Tillich, is necessary for establishing worldwide justice, the peace that would ensue, and the prosperity that could flourish for all.

The fifth criterion for “the self-conscious dialectic approach to comparison in religious philosophy” is justification (*RP* 150-151). That is, can the comparisons be justified by scholarly peer review and does it contribute to “large-scale theories” about the philosophy of religion. The use of primary documents and the scholarly critiques in professional journals that I cite will satisfy the first justification. Secondly, “ultimate reality” is the grandest theory for any philosopher.

Finally, the CRIP methodology must confront and openly admit the “hermeneutical difficulties” of religious comparisons (*RP* 152). In scientific fashion, the comparative interpretations must remain open to improvements based on further analysis and critiques by other scholars; it must admit its fallibility. Some criticisms of my endeavor follow. The post-modern critique might be correct: religious phenomena are too culturally particular to be respectfully compared. Buddhism and Christianity are too far apart to justify comparison: historically, linguistically, culturally, and theologically (a Western religious category). In the arena of atheist criticism, religious philosophy is irrelevant. Personally, I may not be sufficiently schooled to address this big idea; consequently, my comparative analyses may not be sufficient enough to be judged valid and reliable. Religious philosophy should adopt the fallibilist scientific attitude that a hypothesis is only valid until new experimental evidence and peer reviews contradict it.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Out of the cataclysms of their youth, on either side of the world, both Nishitani and Tillich sought the “tiny whispering sound” (*The New American Bible,* 1Kgs. 19.12) of Ultimate Reality. They survived soul-sapping nationalism, economic depression, and genocidal wars. The rationality of foundational philosophies and dogmatic religions were used to justify the organization of a world that became irrationally self-destructive. Hence, the philosophies and religions were discredited and replaced with existential nihilism. Out of this abyss Nishitani searched for the Great Affirmation that emerged from “absolute emptiness” (*RN* 34) and Tillich described a courage that could conquer the deepest anxieties of our time (*ST1* 208). Both philosophers were inspired by and thereby attempted to renew their respective religious traditions: Nishitani – Mahayana Zen Buddhism, and Tillich – Lutheran Protestant Christianity.

Nishitani’s and Tillich’s phenomenological and existentialist articulation of a philosophy of religion bears some similarities; nevertheless, their concepts about religion differ and their telos diverge. Both consider that a philosopher will analyze concepts (*RN* 6) and develop theories of religion, which is a cognitive process (*ST1* 18). However, Nishitani considers religion to be the experience, not a concept, of searching for reality (*RN* 6). Tillich describes religion as that which existentially concerns us ultimately in all manifestations (*ST1* 11-12). For Nishitani, existential religion is the ongoing and momentary experience of the being and non-being of any and every thing. For Tillich, religion expresses an all-encompassing telos: “Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not-being” (*ST1* 14). Finally, Wildman describes four phenomena that compose activities called religious: 1) “a way to relate every aspect of life to something ultimate and fundamental,” 2) “an answer to concerns about death and immortality,” 3) “a means of bonding human beings tightly together,” and 4) “a source of orienting narratives by which we discern our place in a cosmological framework and gather the courage to make moral decisions” (*RP* 37). Both Nishitani’s and Tillich’s ideas about religion could be expressed, to some degree, through institutions that implement Wildman’s phenomenology of religion. My question is, can there be a successful institutional synergy of both of their philosophies of religion?

Where do Nishitani’s ideas about *Śūnyatā* differ from Tillich’s ideas about “being-itself”and in what respects do they coincide? They agree with the existential phenomenological perspective that sees meaning in subjective experience, not in grandiose abstractions. Traditional theologies, soteriologies, eschatologies, and ritual liturgies no longer satisfy the globally educated person’s search for meaning in a world that can give and take as much as this one. They differ in their epistemologies. Nishitani, through Zen Buddhism, seeks that immediate un-rational apophatic experience of being that is non-being, of non-being that is being, emptiness that is everything, of everything that is emptiness, of thatness, of suchness, of absolute no-thing, of *Śūnyatā*. Tillich acknowledges the dialectic between being and non-being that neither can exist without the other. He asserts that the deep angst that humans feel wells up from the valid sense that our being might as well not be. We are not necessary. All that has been and is our existence on this spinning ball of matter will someday be obliterated. Being, both individual and as a species, is always threatened by non-being; therefore, Tillich constructs a cataphatic ontology, not of the discredited anthropomorphic god, but of the power of being, which he limned “being-itself.”

How can these two concepts about ultimate reality be reconciled? Why should I try to do so? They both form a Hegelian dialectic. The Buddhist, especially Zen, apophasis questions the Christian cataphasis and vice versa. Both force the other to become more realistic about the religious endeavor and its expressions. Buddhism, through its apophatic quest, eschews attachments to worldly ornaments; nonetheless, it expresses itself with symbols, rituals, art, bodhisattvas, sacramentals, and the sangha. Whereas Christianity anthropomorphizes Being with its cataphatic ontology; nevertheless, it quietly sanctifies mystical theology. Like the binding power of whirling bolo balls, human understanding of ultimate reality is necessarily religated to both the apophatic and the cataphatic.

When we observe the infinity of space and its eternal cataclysms, when we see the wanton violence of individuals and governments and religions, when we participate in the compassionless co-dependency of greed and poverty, when our traditional religions preserve themselves and serve stale sectarian answers to our deepest questions, then, are we not justified in asking anew for all humanity “What is the meaning of life?” Should we not quest for new, more universal, and honest answers? Their religious preferences aside, Nishitani, Tillich, and Wildman are providing us with the psychological and intellectual tools with which to prospect for these precious philosophical and religious answers

WORKS CITED

WORKS CITED

Abe, Masao. Ed. Steven Heine. *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue* (*BI*). Honolulu: U Hawai’i P. 1995. Print.

“Correlation.” Def. 1.a. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). 2016. Web. 25 Oct. 2016. <http://0-www.oed.com.torofind.csudh.edu/view/Entry/41934?redirectedFrom=correlation#eid>.

Coseru, Christian. “Mind in Indian Buddhist Philosophy” (*MI*). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford: The Metaphysics Research Lab Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2012. Web. 25 July 2016*.*

Grube, Dirk-Martin. “A Critical Reconstruction of Paul Tillich's Epistemology” (“CR”). *Religious Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1997, pp. 67–80. Web. Fri, 09 Dec 2016 05:28:30 UTC. http://.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time (BT)*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: SUNY P, 2011. Print.

Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (*I*). Trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson. NY: Collier, 1931. Print.

Neville, Robert Cummings. *The Human Condition: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (*HC*). Albany, NY: SUNY P, 2001. Print.

* - - *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (*UR*).
* - - *Religious Truth: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (*RT*).

*The New American Bible*. Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. Camden: Nelson, 1970. Print.

Nishitani, Keiji. *Religion and Nothingness*. (*RN*) Trans. Jan Van Bragt. Berkeley: U of California P, 1983. Print

---. *The Self Overcoming Nihilism* (*SON*). Trans. Graham Parkes with Setsuko Aihara. Albany: SUNY P, 1990. Print.

Phillips, Stephen H. “Nishitani’s Buddhist Response to ‘Nihilism’” (*NB*). *Journal of the American Academy of Religion.* 55.1 (Spring, 1987): 75-104. Web. 15-04-2016.

Quinn, Phillip L. & Taliaferro, Charles, eds. *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Philosophy of Religion (CP).* Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.Web. 23 February 2014.

Seo, Audrey Yoshiko. *Enso: Zen Circles of Enlightenment*. Boston: Weatherhill, 2007. Print.

Smart, Ninian. *The World’s Religions* (*WR*). 2nd ed.. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1998. Print.

“Synergy.” Def. 1. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). 2016. Web. 15 Ap. 2016. <http://0-www.oed.com.torofind.csudh.edu/view/Entry/196482?redirectedFrom=synergy#eid>

Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1(ST1), II(ST2), III(ST3): Reason and Revelation Being and God*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1973. Print.

Westphal, Merold. “The emergence of modern philosophy of religion”. Quinn & Talliaferro (111-117).

Wildman, Wesley J. *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion (RP).* Albany: State U of New York P, 2010. Print.

---. *Religious and Spiritual Experiences (RSE)*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2014. Print.

APPENDIX

FURTHER READING

Dallmayr, Fred. “Nothingness and Śūnyatā: A Comparison of Heidegger and Nishitani.” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1992, pp. 37–48. http://0-www.jstor.org.torofind.csudh.edu/stable/1399690.

Griffiths, Paul J. “Comparative philosophy of religion”. Quinn & Talliaferro (615-620).

Heine, Steven. “History, Transhistory, and Narrative history: a Postmodern View of Nishitani’s Philosophy of Zen.” *Philosophy East and West.* 44.2 (1994): 251-278. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

Heisig, James W. *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School (PN).*  Honolulu: U of Hawaii P. 2001. Print.

O'Meara, Thomas F. “Tillich and Heidegger: A Structural Relationship.” *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 61, no. 2, 1968, pp. 249–261. http://0-www.jstor.org.torofind.csudh.edu/stable/1509278.

Stenger, Mary Ann and Ronald H. Stone. *Dialogues of Paul Tillich*. Macon, GA: Mercer UP. 2002. Print.

Taliaferro, Charles. “Philosophy of Religion.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford:

The Metaphysics Research Lab Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2013. Web. 1 July 2014.*.*

Taylor, Mark C. *After God.* Chicago: U Chicago P, 2007. Print.

---, ed.. *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1998. Print.

Tilley, Terrence W. *Postmodern Theologies: the Challenge of Religious Diversity.* Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1995. Print.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print.

1. Both Heidegger and Nishitani have been criticized for their nationalist tendencies before and during World War II. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “. . . Edmund Husserl, who by providing his own incisive personal guidance and by very generously turning over his unpublished investigations, familiarized the author during his student years in Freiburg with the most diverse areas of phenomenological research” (*BT* 36). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Heidegger describes *Dasein* “is a being that does not simply occur among other beings. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its being this being is concerned *about* its very being” (*BT* 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “As a being, Dasein always defines itself in terms of a possibility which it *is*, and that means at the same time that it somehow understands itself in its being. That is the formal meaning of the constitution of the existence of Dasein” (*BT* 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)