Becoming-Religion: Re-/thinking Religion with A. N. Whitehead and Keiji Nishitani*

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Abstract
For Whitehead and Nishitani, a rethinking of religion necessitates a rethinking of the metaphysics that underlie one's concept of religion. The dynamism of religion is unveiled only within the metaphysical grounding of an ontology that accommodates the philosophical preference of "becoming" as an ultimate category of reality. The novelty of Whitehead's theory of religion lies in the process metaphysics that it presupposes. For him, religion, like the whole of reality, is inherently developing and evolving. What Nishitani offers is a rethinking of Western understanding of religion by way of an Asian speculative approach grounded in Zen Buddhism. He argues that Western religion, particularly Christianity and Judaism, has succumbed to the modern predicament of nihilism, or relative nothingness. He radicalizes this same nihility towards absolute nothingness (*śūnyatā*). For both Whitehead and Nishitani, despite the distortion of religion by religious fundamentalists, genuine religion consolidates and points a society towards its real destiny. However, the realization of religion's role necessitates reflexivity on its own inherent dynamism.

Key terms *Alfred North Whitehead, Keiji Nishitani, process philosophy, philosophy of religion,* śūnyatā, *Zen Buddhism*

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Contemporary Philosophy and the "Re-/turn" to Religion

It is remarkable that in contemporary philosophy, both in the East and in the West, there is a noticeable "re-/turn" to religion. The shifting sense of this term, "re-/turn," reflects our shifting attitudes toward religion. From an attitude that recognizes religion, then distances itself from it, the "re-/turn" to religion can mean to rediscover it anew; but from an attitude that is indifferent (and sometimes even hostile) to religion, a "re-/turn" would mean coming to confirm its value.

The first attitude speaks of "returning to the faith"—occasions of people retrieving their religious roots. In the last centuries, the periods of "departure" from religion were succeeded by episodes of "return" to religion. However, as Jacques Derrida cautions, the contemporary interest in religion is not a *simple* return.[1] Indeed, it is a going back to tradition, but now with a different set of lenses—critical of religion's supernaturalism, its scandalous past, and anti-democratic tendency. Thinkers who had recognized their religious provenance and then later on rediscovered it a new after a religious hiatus include Gianni Vattimo, Anthony Kenny, Alistair McGrath, Jacques Derrida, among others. For them, religion is an element of the past defining, to a lesser or greater extent, one's present identity. Facing our future, we need to look back and analyze our past and hopefully learn to appreciate our own rootedness in a certain tradition. For some, this tradition involves the domain of religion.

The second attitude to religion in contemporary philosophy is a straightforward "turn" to religion. The period between the 17th and the 20th century is markedly influenced by the revolt of some atheistic humanistic thinkers who abhor the very notion of an appeal to

[1] "The said 'return of the religious,' which is to say the spread of a complex and overdetermined phenomenon, is not a simple *return*, for its globality and its figures . . . remain original and unprecedented. And it is not a *simple* return *of the religious*, for it comports, as one of its two tendencies, a radical destruction of the religious." (Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998], 42.)

transcendence. For some of them, religion is not only false, but evil; hence, people born into this cultural milieu are raised in a freedom of life that may even be devoid of the slightest presence of religious influence. For them, there is no return to religion, because they have never been part of religion, or been associated with any institutional religion, in the first place. This is not to suggest that the thinkers who fall under this category, like Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, among others, are not influenced, in any degree, by a religious milieu. Indeed, owing to the long history of Christian presence in Europe, the notion of secularization in the West presupposes certain forms of religious background. Rather than returning to the faith, these thinkers make a deliberate attempt to turn to religion, to consider religion as it is in itself regardless of any fiducial sentiment. Whether we see the above observations as indications of a *return* or a *turn* to religion, the important thing is that religion has once again become a matter of consideration for contemporary philosophy.

There are many factors that may explain this "re-/turn" to religion. Gianni Vattimo identifies two horizons from which religion reemerges in contemporary times.[2] *Firstly*, religion reenters the public scene due to the *fin-de-siècle* state of anxiety that humanity now experiences. Never before has human civilization faced the following threats of global proportion: nuclear war, genetic manipulation, global warning, and the loss of meaning in Western culture—in the West, as well as in Westernized parts of Asia. All these worries leave humanity with a sense of hopelessness, a feeling of uncertainty, and a longing for the security guaranteed traditionally by religion. In this century, we encounter a humanity unanchored and being tossed by Herculean waves of improbability, seeking a solid ground to anchor its destiny. *Secondly*, Vattimo argues that we are now confronted with "the breakdown of the philosophical prohibition of religion."[3] The

[2] See Georges de Schrijver, "Gianni Vattimo and the Comeback of Religion," in *Recent Theological Debates in Europe: Their Impact on Interreligious Dialogue* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004) 1–36.

[3] Gianni Vattimo, "The Trace of the Trace," in *Religion*, 81.

legacy of the Enlightenment in our day holds fast as all human experiences are subjected to the close scrutiny of the watchful gaze of reason. Unless religious belief passes through the thorny passage of the rational, it would be dismissed as mere superstition. However, the philosophical endeavor to delegitimize religion recoils, unwittingly opening philosophy to the possibility of the domain of transcendence. For if there is one strong impulse brought about by postmodernism, it would be the undoing of a form of rationalism that leaves no space for a domain beyond the rational. Modernity's sanction on religion has caved in. In this respect, religion, then, is winning by default, since reason cannot seem to sustain itself or keep up with the rules of its own game. It is forced to recognize the silent presence of religion. Nevertheless, Vattimo reiterates that if ever there were a "re-/turn" to religion, it would not be to religion in its traditional garments. What we see now is a religion and a humanity transformed by global upheavals and revolutions from the 17th to the 20th century.

Moreover, the current interest in religion arises not only from the inescapable questions posed by philosophy and theology, but also by socio-politics, economics, and jurisprudence.[4] Religion is making headlines, not so much in its call for people to come under its fold, but because of certain issues in global socio-politics in which religion is implicated, e.g., when policy making is determined through certain forms of religious fundamentalism, intolerance, and dogmatism. This "religious scenario" effects only the worsening of irritation of anti-religionists like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Michel Onfray.[5] It appears, then, that the topic of religion has made a comeback in philosophical discourse, not so much because philosophy has become interested primarily in religion *per se*,

[4] See Hent de Vries, ed., *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

[5] See, for example, the following publications: Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006); Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (London: Penguin Books, 2006); Michel Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, trans. Jeremy Leggatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2008).

but because the current "religious scenario" has made it incumbent upon philosophy to rethink the concept of religion in the face of fundamentalism, intolerance, and dogmatism in global socio-politics.

What is philosophically exigent is indeed a rethinking of the concept of religion and how it is to be conceived and made relevant, no longer in the medieval sense of a hegemonic absolute, but as a humble yet relevant factor in the creative passage of humanity towards civilization. Notwithstanding the caricature that some votaries make of religion, religion as such is not necessarily an agency of violence and intolerance. Both Whitehead and Nishitani argue that the ills of modernity—individualism, secularization, and dehumanization—are rooted in the alienation of religion, and the values central to it, from contemporary life. Religion has a positive role in the advancement of civilization, what Whitehead calls "the Harmony of Harmonies."[6] Because it is "centered upon the harmony of rational thought,"[7] religion can be a civilizing element in our contemporary experience—an influence promoting beauty, adventure, and peace.[8] The overarching question that animates this essay is, therefore, *how does religion contribute significantly to the advancement of civilization*?

Before we deal with the "how" question, the prior question that needs asking is whether or not religion as such could contribute significantly to the advancement of civilization. This question in turn is answered only in relation to the kind of vision or theory we have of religion.

Each thinker who speaks of religion, in advancing his or her own theory, presents a *vision* (*theoria*) of what religion is. The French thinker Auguste Comte (1798–1857) is famous not just in coining the word "*sociologie*," but also for advancing his law of three stages, whereby the development of human civilization is characterized by a movement from a

[6] Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1933), 296.

[7] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology,* ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald Sherburne, corrected ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 16.

[8] See David L. Hall, *The Civilization of Experience: A Whiteheadian Theory of Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1973), 159–236.

primitive religious explanation of the universe, to its replacement first by philosophical hypotheses and then ultimately by scientific knowledge.[9] Nowadays, his name is hardly mentioned in discourses on religion, save perhaps as an historical footnote in the sociology of religion, yet Comte's theory created "an *attitude of mind* that was to become widely spread not only among intellectuals but among many sectors of society."[10] Since Comte, it has generally been taken for granted that religion and science are conflicting, and that science's triumph over religion is inevitable. Theorists of religion since the time of Comte may have offered various and often conflicting visions of what religion is, whether sociological (Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, etc.), philosophical (Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, etc.), or psychological (Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, etc.). But what they all did was to create *an attitude of the mind about religious issues*. They faced religion with a myopic perspective that highlighted only its less than ideal dimensions. The masters of suspicion proffered a vision of religion as a stumbling block in the realization of the finest human qualities. Is this the only vision tenable for religion in the modern *Weltanschauung*? Does civilization necessarily alienate religion?

This paper argues that both Whitehead and Nishitani espouse a vision of religion where religion can significantly contribute to the advancement of civilization.[11] Histories of civilizations always narrate the crucial and perennial role of religion, either as a social factor that points people toward destinies that transcend them, or as a mediator of socio-cultural relations. In the contemporary scene, the customary link between civilization and religion is evaded. Going against the tide, this paper aims to show that in

[9] "Je crois avoir découvert une grande loi fondamentale, à laquelle il est assujetti par une nécessité invariable . . . . Cette loi consiste en ce que chacune de nos conceptions principales, chaque branche de nos connaissance, passe successivement par trois états théoriques différents: l'état théologique, ou fictif; l'état métaphysique, ou abstrait; l'état scientifique, ou positif." (Auguste Comte, *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, ed. Florence Khodoss [Paris: Hatier, 1982], 61–62.)

[10] Gregory Baum, "The Survival of the Sacred," in *The Persistence of Religion*, ed. Andrew Greeley and Gregory Baum (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), 11.

[11] On the topic of religion and civilization in the philosophy of Whitehead, see Kenneth Masong, "Religion Beyond Religion: A. N. Whitehead and the Advancement of Civilization," in *Hope in the 21st Century*, ed. John Hocheimer (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2009), 39–50.

Whitehead and Nishitani, two philosophers of the 20th century, an intrinsic link exists between religion and the hope of any civilization, Asian or otherwise. Both of them recuperate the integral role of religion in the development of civilization. If civilization is the realization of the cultural ideal, true religion consolidates and points society towards its real destiny. The truth of religion is the finest intuition of the *real* real. Far from providing an apologetic of religion, both thinkers are critical of religion. Nonetheless, the religious spirit remains present in humanity's pilgrimage to a better world to come. Religion's role, however, is realized by a necessary reflexivity. As Nishitani emphasizes, whatsoever this adventure of the religious spirit may be, its desired outcome is what religion essentially is, "the *real* self-awareness of reality."[12]

Why Whitehead and Nishitani? There are other philosophers whose metaphysics expound a dynamic view of religion, like G. W. F. Hegel and F.H. Bradley, among others. What strikes the author is that, other than Whitehead represents the West and Nishitani represents the East, both of them incorporated into their philosophical systems influences derived from the other. Whitehead did study Eastern religions, particularly Buddhism, albeit uncritically; and Nishitani wrote a dissertation on Bergson and Schelling, and was a student of Heidegger. However, beyond the East-West divide, what these two authors proffer is a developmental approach that cuts across the differences between the East and the West. Religion is a universal phenomenon, and the rethinking of religion demands an approach beyond any divide, cultural or intellectual.

Whitehead and Nishitani: Thinking Religion from the West and the East

A rethinking of religion necessitates a rethinking of the metaphysics that underlie one's concept of religion. Metaphysics here may be understood in two senses, one analytic and one synthetic. An analytic

[12] Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 5.

approach to metaphysical thinking seeks to disclose the ultimate principles and causes of reality. This microscopic approach is reflected in the general Western wave of metaphysical thinking, especially in its preoccupation with the ultimate stuff of reality, the originary archē. The synthetic view, on the other hand, seeks to understand reality in its totality—from above, so to speak. It is the understanding of metaphysics as, in the words of Cloots, "thinking things together," viewing reality in its own characteristic interconnectedness.[13] This macroscopic approach in metaphysical thinking is genuinely reflected in the metaphysics that underlies the philosophy of religion of both Whitehead and Nishitani. For the two thinkers, to do metaphysics is to "think things together," meaning, to inclusively embrace all aspects of reality, especially those elements significant in the evolution of human existence. Religion, as the history of civilization attests, is a significant element. But more than just a historical appendix, Whitehead and Nishitani argue that religion is an element that contributes to civilization because of the transcendent ideals and universal values it espouses. Religion is inherently dynamic because it does not remain content in the customary, transitory, and less perfect. It is motivated by a sense of ultimacy that brings out the finest human ideals which any civilization aims at. Indeed, Whitehead entitles his major work on religion as *Religion in the Making* precisely in order to emphasize dynamism. To use a Latin phrase in Christianity: *ecclesia semper reformanda* (the church is always to be reformed). As to Nishitani, his view of religion as "the *real* self-awareness of reality" already suggests the dynamic image of a shell breaking open—the imagery that Nishitani uses for when philosophic doubt leads to the great doubt that ushers one to *śūnyatā*.

Whitehead begins his treatment of religion in his seminal book, *Religion in the Making*, with a peculiar statement that largely defines the contours of our perception of religion. He says, "It is the peculiarity of religion that

[13] André Cloots, "Thinking Things Together: The Concept of Metaphysics," in *Framing a Vision of the World: Essays in Philosophy, Science and Religion,* ed. André Cloots and Santiago Sia (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999) 67–84.

humanity is always shifting its attitude towards it."[14] It was believed that the legacy of the Enlightenment, coupled with the rise of science and technology, would result in the breakdown of religion. As Bainbridge and Stark point out, "The most illustrious figures in sociology, anthropology and psychology have unanimously expressed confidence that their children—or surely their grandchildren—would live to see the dawn of a new era in which, to paraphrase Freud, the infantile illusions of religion would be outgrown."[15] But one can observe that in the present horizon, religion is still a thriving domain of human existence. It is true that religion's appeal to authority seems to have waned; it is true that much of its supernatural claims are either questioned or largely ignored, both by believers and non-believers; it is true that if one measures the health of religion, say Christianity, by Church attendance and the reception of the sacraments, then religion seems to be standing at the threshold of its demise.[16] Yet, it remains to be said that religion, though a silent presence at the periphery of contemporary pedestrian life, is still there with a presence to be reckoned with. "In religion's perpetual agony," avers de Vries, "lies its philosophical and theoretical relevance. As it dies an ever more secure and serial death, it is increasingly certain to come back to life, in its present guise or in another."[17] If this is the case, religion has not gone; we are simply *shifting* our attitudes toward it.[18]

For both Whitehead and Nishitani, rethinking religion means a rethinking of the very attitude or perspective by which we think of religion. It means being clear about the standpoint that one takes in order to

[14] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 13.

[15] William S. Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 1.

[16] For an interesting recent study of the decline of organized religion in the West, see Bob Altemeyer, "The Decline of Organized Religion in Western Civilization," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 14, no. 2 (2004): 77–89.

[17] Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 3.

[18] When Whitehead refers to the shifting attitudes to religion, it is in the sense of "changing" as in from being "for" religion to "against" religion, and vice versa. Religion as such has not disappeared, as it is an important element in a civilized (harmonious) life. What is changing is how we *perceive* religion.

understand religion. The use of the term "standpoint" here is deliberate, because in the Kyoto School of Philosophy, standpoint is a word intentionally used to replace the term "theory." Instead of putting on a specific set of bifocals through which one views reality, taking up a standpoint emphasizes the existential situation within which reality becomes meaningful and relevant. In both philosophers, the uniqueness of the standpoint by which we see religion is that it rests on shifting grounds. It is a standpoint that is constantly "becoming," because the very foundation on which it stands is itself becoming. For both Whitehead and Nishitani, the dynamism of religion is unveiled only within the metaphysical grounding of an ontology that accommodates the philosophical preference for "becoming" as an ultimate category of reality. While Whitehead specifically formulates his own metaphysics of becoming, especially in his magnum opus, *Process and Reality*, Nishitani simply assumes that becoming precedes essence (*esse sequitur operare*), especially when he argues, against Descartes, that there is no fixed nature or essence. This different standpoint, then, which both Nishitani and Whitehead take, is a perpetually shifting ground that eludes finality.[19]

The re-/thinking of religion as a rethinking of the standpoint by which we see religion means that we need to be aware of the important distinction between a "tradition of reform" and the "reform of tradition." It can't be denied that religion is the institutional repository of culture and tradition. Nishitani was critical of the influence of Western thinking on Buddhism in Japan, particularly the scientism or the scientific mindset that modernity brought about.[20] This even led him to argue that "the problem of religion and science is the most basic one facing contemporary man."[21] The most important effect of modernity, upon the personal and social life

[19] A significant theological appropriation of the notion of "shifting ground" may be found in Georges de Schrijver, ed., *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A Clash of Socio-economic and Cultural Paradigms* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998).

[20] Keiji Nishitani, "The Religious Situation in Present-Day Japan," *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 1, no. 1 (1960): 7–24.

[21] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 46.

of Japanese society, to which other Asian cultures need to be attentive, is its severance from tradition. The scientific way of thinking has come to promote the notion of "the reform of tradition" instead of commencing a renewed recuperation of "the tradition of reform" that characterizes world religions.

What results from this severance from tradition is what Whitehead calls "The Bifurcation of Nature,"[22] or what Nishitani refers to as the depersonalization of the human person and the denaturalization of nature.[23] In both thinkers, severance from tradition is an overriding alienation—social, personal, and metaphysical. Religion is a cultural storehouse that roots our identity as personal and social beings. In their dynamic view of religion, both philosophers seek to retrieve religion's "tradition of reform."

Religion and Event Metaphysics: Thinking Religion à la Whitehead

There is a strain in the relation between religion and philosophy, especially since the latter's realization that its vocation exceeds beyond the measly *ancilla theologiae*. Indeed, the very concept of "philosophy of religion" is almost conceptually incoherent. Is philosophy doing justice to religion when, as Marion notes, "the field of religion could be simply defined as whatever philosophy excludes or, in the best case, subjugates"?[24] Is the relation too overwrought that the most tenable alternative becomes the categorization of religions as exclusive language games? Despite the dominant fragmentation brought about by postmodernism, the emerging interest in the philosophy of event, from phenomenology to Badiou's

[22] Cf. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004), 26–48.

[23] Cf. Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. Graham Parkes and Setsuko Aihara (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), especially chapters 1 and 9.

[24] Jean-Luc Marion, "The Saturated Phenomenon," in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn"* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 176. Cf. also James K. A. Smith, "Liberating Religion from Theology: Marion and Heidegger on the Possibility of a Phenomenology of Religion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 46 (1999): 17–33.

ontology of the multiple, promises a new mode of thinking that offers fresh insights important to the rethinking of religion.[25]

One of the philosophers who conceptualized the event is Alfred North Whitehead.[26] Whitehead argues that religion needs a metaphysical backing.[27] This is more than a mere philosophical platitude. The history of how the Christian faith has come to understand itself is a history of how belief appropriates metaphysical concepts and principles in the articulation of its central propositions. Religion will not survive with the fideist ghetto mentality of a Tertullian. This is at the heart of Augustine's and Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum*. This is so not simply because of a need for a critique of religion's fundamental concepts and beliefs, but because religion needs metaphysical structures, conceptual scaffoldings in order to coherently and intelligently make sense of its own belief. The problem here lies on the sort of metaphysics that informs religious beliefs and practices, and the philosophical presuppositions that motivate and influence its own coming to terms with self-understanding. Although Christianity has been judicious in its selection of conceptual scaffolding in order to erect its theological edifice, the flow of transformation has never been totally mutual. When

[25] In contemporary French thought, there is a growing interest in the philosophy of *l'événement*, mostly centered in French phenomenology as a result of an abiding reflection on Husserl's thoughts on temporality and Heidegger's *Ereignis*. The significant thinkers on this field would include, among others: Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002); Françoise Dastur, "Pour une Phénoménologie de l'Événement: l'Attente et la Surprise," *Études Phénoménologiques* 25 (1997): 59–75; Claude Romano, *L'Événement et le Monde* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998). Badiou's philosophy of the event is a *sui generis*, emerging from his philosophical reflection on the metaphysical import of transfinite set theory. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2007). For an exploration of event metaphysics in the Philosophy of the Human Person, see Kenneth Masong, "The Evental Subject: Alain Badiou and the Event Metaphysics of the Human Person," *Journal of Humanities and the Arts* 1, no. 1 (2011): 17–47.

[26] Whitehead says, "Philosophy frees itself from the taint of ineffectiveness by its close relations with religion and with science, natural and sociological . . . . Religion should connect the rational generality of philosophy with the emotions and purposes springing out of existence in a particular society, in a particular epoch, and conditioned by particular antecedents . . . . Philosophy finds religion, and modifies it; and conversely religion is among the data of experience which philosophy must weave into its own scheme." (Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 16.)

[27] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 83.

religion isolates itself from the critique of philosophy, the effect is a mold of religion that occasions accusations of it being unavoidably intolerant and fundamentally dogmatic, and the charge that it is at the heart of religious life to be so. Is this really the case? Is it inscribed in the grammar of religion's faith logic that it should likewise speak the language of fundamentalism? Faith and reason are mutually dependent. As John Paul II says, they are "like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth."[28] On the one hand, religion cannot simply dismiss the critique of reason on the ground that faith is founded on divine revelation. According to Whitehead, "reason is the safeguard of the objectivity of religion: it secures for it the general coherence denied to hysteria."[29] In sidestepping reason, the genuine dogmas of religion degenerate into dogmatism. On the other hand, reason cannot simply dismiss faith. Reason that aims towards the truth anticipates an implicit faith, a *rationis fides*—"an antecedent coherence that is already presupposed in any process of inquiry."[30] Reason, or explicit knowing, has to start somewhere, and this somewhere is what Michael Polanyi calls "tacit knowing."[31] All explicit reasoning is founded on, and guided by, an implicit belief, religious or otherwise. Reason is aimless unless there is a tacit belief. As St. Augustine says, echoing *Isaiah* 7:9, "'The steps are laid down by the prophet who says, 'Unless ye believe, ye shall not understand.'"[32] In the dialogue between faith and reason, each has to "strengthen the other."[33]

[28] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (encyclical letter, September 14, 1998), 1.

[29] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making,* 64.

[30] Reinhard Hütter, "The Directedness of Reasoning and the Metaphysics of Creation," in *Reason and the Reasons of Faith,* ed. Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter (New York: T & T Clark International, 2005), 168.

[31] Michael Polanyi developed his "theory of tacit knowing" in his magnum opus *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1964). A more concise articulation of his theory is found in his *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966). For a more sustained discussion regarding the relation of tacit knowing and religious belief, see Kenneth Masong, "Michael Polanyi: Religious Faith and Tacit Knowing," *Philippiniana Sacra* 40, no. 120 (2005): 501–29.

[32] St. Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio*, Bk I, Ch 2.

[33] Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* (encyclical letter, June 29, 2013), 32.

One may generally argue that, ontologically speaking, there are two types of metaphysics that inform the conceptual articulation of religion, a metaphysics of substance and a metaphysics of event.[34] According to Whitehead, these two metaphysics are the deliverances of an integral experience. We all experience that some things change while others do not, some things move while others do not: Being and becoming, substance and process. Most process philosophers argue that the history of Western philosophy has given undue importance to substance over process, Being over becoming, especially among those philosophical systems where movement, change, and transformation are nothing but attributes, effects, or derivatives of what is permanent or changeless. To a certain degree, substance metaphysics owes its success to the mode of thinking that cultivates such a mentality, that is to say, in ancient times, perfection was synonymous to changelessness. It was even symbolized geometrically as a sphere whose points are equidistant to each other and whose cyclical movement not only suggests the abandonment of beginning and end, but also gives the illusion of stability. Ancient Greek thought was conducive to substance-thinking. In a metaphysics of substance, reality is explicable only in terms of a basic unchanging substratum to which all observations are predicable as its attributes.

When this metaphysics entered the domain of religion, there was an almost perfect fit, especially with the rise of religious monotheism. As the ideas of Being, immutability, and impassibility suggest perfection, the concepts of movement, change, and becoming inversely suggest imperfection. The metaphysical search for the unchanging ground of changing reality became a religious search for an ultimate ground, which was found in the arms of an impassible, omniscient, and omnipotent God. When substance metaphysics found its ultimate category in the concept of

[34] Cf. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 209. Whitehead utilizes the phrase "metaphysics of flux" especially since, in *Process and Reality*, the concept of event has significantly changed from his earlier theorizing. Nonetheless, in this paper, flux, event, process, and becoming are concepts used interchangeably.

Being, religion found its religious ultimate in the God that put on the attributes of Being itself. God became the Ultimate Being, and from then on the history of Western metaphysics and religion has followed the track of what Heidegger would later call onto-theology, the forgetting of the ontological difference between Being as it is in itself and God.[35] The problem of onto-theology is not only metaphysical; it is also religious. If the metaphysical ultimate coincides with the religious absolute, what results is an apodictic faith, a set of unshakeable religious beliefs that fails to accommodate the possibility of revision, of provisionality, and of contextuality. This becomes a fertile ground for intolerance over differences, dogmatic reification of non-final beliefs, and the absolutization of what is only a particular.

We need to appeal to the possibility of re-thinking religion away from a metaphysics of substance towards a metaphysics of event. One may argue that religion can speak and reflect on itself philosophically not only with the conceptual scaffolding of a substance metaphysics where religion becomes objectified, but likewise with the shifting waves of a metaphysics of flux where religion remains in the making.[36] There is freshness to be had with the deterritorialization of religion from the category of object to its reterritorialization in the flux of event.[37] The appeal is to dislodge religion from the certainty of standing on demarcated substantial land, and to invite it to journey into the vast fluid sea. To follow the path of faith is not to remain in the security of standing on the port, but to embark on a risky

[35] Cf. Heidegger's essay, "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics," in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 42–74.

[36] As Whitehead reiterates, "The continuity of nature is to be found in events, the atomic properties of nature reside in objects." (Alfred North Whitehead, *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919], 66.)

[37] In the contemporary landscape of religious inclinations, there is a growing bifurcation of concepts that proceeds along the channels of "object" and "event." On the one hand, there is the channel of growing critique against institutional religion (and sometimes of religion in its entirety); and on the other hand, there is the channel of growing interest in lived spiritualities (ranging from traditional spiritualities to the "New Age" forms). Although this bifurcation is patently a generalization of the religious scenario, there are already noticeable and concrete upshots to this religious disjunction. These upshots are suggested by such catch-phrases as "believing without belonging," "being spiritual but not religious," "spirituality vs. religiosity," etc.

journey of going off-shore, sailing into the expanse of the uncertain and the unknown.

The displacement of religion from the field of substance metaphysics was not simply a result of Heidegger's diagnosis of Western philosophy's metaphysical malaise. Much of it was also informed by the advancement of science. Even during the time of Newton, one could already discern that the basic presupposition of reality is not stability but movement. It was no longer stability explaining movement, but movement explaining stability. Nature is in flux, such that things that are stable are said to be only "at rest," being permeated with kinetic energy (*kinesis*). The credence of Aquinas's first way, that of the unmoved mover, rests only in a mode of thinking in which one asks, "Who or what is it that *moves* something else?" Today, one inquires, "Who or what *hinders* a thing from moving?" Previously, change or process is derivative or attributable to being or substance; now, being and substance are derived from process and becoming. The classical principle *operari sequitur esse* has been reversed into *esse sequitur operari*.[38] In the classical principle, operation or any activity is *owned* by or is subordinate to the being of things. Event metaphysics rejects this; "things are constituted out of the flow of process, and substantiality is subordinate to activity. Things simply are what they do."[39] Taking experience as a metaphysical category, it is what I do that constitutes my being. I can never *be* good, unless I *do* good things. One's activity defines one's identity.

Beyond Thinking: Doing Philosophy of Religion à la Nishitani

The "re-/thinking" of religion is a clamor for the rethinking of methodological considerations. It is not so much asking the straightforward question "What is religion?" but, rather, the question

[38] Cf. Nicholas Rescher, *Process Philosophy: A Survey of Basic Ideas* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 7.

[39] Nicholas Rescher, *Process Metaphysics: An Introduction to Process Philosophy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), 44.

"How is religion to be understood?" Although Nishitani's book *Religion and Nothingness* is translated in English as such, it's original Japanese title (*Shūkyo to wa nani ka*), translated literally, means "What is Religion?" Although the question appears to be asking for the essence of religion, Nishitani's approach reflects his own Eastern orientation with regard to religion. In the West, an inquiry into the essence of a thing is an effort directed at identifying the sufficient reason for its existence. To inquire into the essence of a thing, one singles it out from the rest. Nishitani's approach is different. To ask "What is religion?" does not mean singling out the religious aspects of experience from other non-religious aspects, and then saying this defines religion as such.

For Nishitani, there are two inappropriate approaches to the question "What is religion?" First, there is the *essentialist* approach. In the example given by Nishitani, this approach is like asking "Why do you eat?" Everyone knows eating is essential for survival. In the same way that a person asking another "Why do you eat?" needs to take eating seriously, so do people who ask about religion need to take religion seriously. He avers that "those for whom religion is *not* a necessity are, for that reason, the very ones for whom religion *is* necessary."[40] Nishitani recognizes that religion intimately involves the human person, whether a believer not. Mirroring his Zen Buddhist background, religious institutions as such could not replace the singular importance of the individual human person with regard to the importance of religion. Religion matters not to established institutions but to the singularity of the person.[41] This sense of involvement means that the inquiry into religion, unlike other realities of life, cannot be achieved from a detached perspective. There is no audience-point of view in religion, for religion is about the wholesale involvement of

[40] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 1.

[41] Nishitani affirms that "religion is at all times the individual affair of each individual." (*Religion and Nothingness*, 2.) This appears to parallel Whitehead's remark that "religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness." (*Religion in the Making*, 16.) See also the section "Those Who Belong to a Religious Organization Are Required to Get Out of Their Organization," in Keiji Nishitani, *On Buddhism*, trans. Seisaku Yamamoto and Robert E. Carter (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 30–32.

the human person. As Nishitani affirms, "We cannot understand what religion is from the outside. The religious quest alone is the key to understanding it; there is no other way."[42] This essentialist approach, though opposing the objectivist perspective on religion—which takes a detached position—is still inappropriate because it does not elucidate anything other than religion's necessity—which applies to both the religious and the non-religious.

The second inappropriate approach, according to Nishitani, is the *utilitarian* approach, seen when we ask "What is the purpose of religion for us?" The utilitarian approach already presupposes that the inquirer is only an observer of religion, an audience to other people's religious life. To inquire about the utility of religion is to inquire about the role of religion from a perspective already separate from the religious quest itself. If I ask "What is the purpose of religion for me?" this means that I am still not involved in religion. "Of everything else," says Nishitani, "we can ask its purpose for us, but not of religion."[43] Asking the question of religion's utility already "obscures the way to its own answer from the very start. It blocks our becoming a question to ourselves."[44] Both the essentialist and utilitarian approaches are inappropriate to the question "What is religion?" because they do not throw the question back to the inquirer himself or herself.

The question "What is religion?" for Nishitani is self-reflexive. It's a question that throws itself back to the inquirer, like someone standing before a mirror and asking "Who are you?" It is the kind of question that turns the inquirer into the question itself. This is because for Nishitani, "Religion has to do with life itself."[45] Nishitani's peculiar approach to religion is of a different, decidedly Eastern angle.[46] For him, religion is

[42] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 2.
[43] Ibid., 2.
[44] Ibid., 3.
[45] Ibid., 2.
[46] Nishitani is aware of various approaches in understanding the multi-faceted reality of religion. Some see it as "the relationship of man to an absolute, like God," or "man's becoming one with God," or, following Schleiermacher, "the intuition of the infinite in the finite." (*Religion and Nothingness*, 5.)

understood as "the self-awareness of reality, or, more correctly, the *real* self-awareness of reality."[47] From a Western perspective, this may sound fuzzy-thinking, that is, the conflation of distinct realities, namely, life and religion. This is not surprising since, as Jan van Bragt, the translator of *Religion and Nothingness,* himself remarks, we in the West, "find religion and philosophy coexisting in conditions laden with tensions. The individual tends to assume one worldview, for example, in moments of spiritual reading and another in moments of rational analysis. It is different with Buddhist philosophy, where the unity of the religious and the speculative has never been severed."[48] This is noticeable in fundamentally the whole of Eastern Philosophy. To speak of philosophy in the East, one synonymously speaks of the existing religions, namely, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, etc. There is no divide between religion and philosophy, unlike what one finds in the history of thought in the West. If in the West, a certain metaphysical dualism is at work, in which what is permanent and stable has priority and is distinct from the perishing and changeable, in the East, where experience is an acknowledged metaphysical category, such a metaphysical dualism is overcome with the realism of what Nishitani calls the "incessant becoming" of existence.[49] Echoing some strand of Eastern philosophies, change is reality and permanence is an illusion. One may even note that it is an unfortunate development in Christianity, which is originally an Eastern religion, that it has taken on the garb of Western philosophical concepts in such a manner that Christianity appears to have lost the Asian spirit of the unity of life and thought. In Nishitani's philosophy of religion, this fateful alienation of Christianity from its Asian roots is already a result of an unavoidable uprooting or severance from a decidedly Asian tradition.

[47] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 5.

[48] Ibid., xxvii.

[49] Nishitani further adds "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." (*Religion and Nothingness*, 4.)

That is why ultimately, Nishitani's philosophy challenges Christianity to realize in itself its own vocation towards self-emptying, its proper kenotic experience. For Nishitani, to regress is to progress, or a step backward is to arrive at the self. The logic here is that of fidelity to one's origins. Christianity is being confronted by the important issues of atheism and nihilism. Instead of reactively responding to these, Christianity needs to realize that these are opportunities for the rediscovery of Christianity's origins. Christ emptied himself to become man (*Phil.* 2:7). Jesus died on the cross; hence, there is truth in the statement "God is dead"—unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it cannot bear much fruit (*John* 12:24). Atheism and nihilism are not alien to Christianity. "But what is now demanded of Christianity," avers Nishitani, "is that it deal with [these] in an entirely new way that is different from the traditional understanding, but at the same time includes it."[50] This kenotic experience proper to Christianity is but parallel to what Nishitani would call the experience of *śūnyatā*.

In Nishitani, "the question of religion . . . [was] the main focus of his entire philosophical career."[51] But religion here is not understood as separate from other domains of human existence. Indeed, religion and his own interest in it summarize his own metaphysics, especially when he defines the essence of religion as "the self-awareness of reality, or, more correctly, the *real* self-awareness of reality."[52] As a result of the scientific mindset of modernity, what emerged as the central problem of the 20th century is the phenomenon of nihilism, the understanding of human life as foundationless. It is a nihilism that results from modern science's epistemological presuppositions that introduced a fissure in human consciousness, alienating the human person from itself.

[50] Nishitani, *On Buddhism*, 154.

[51] David Dilworth et al., *Sources of Modern Japanese Philosophy: Selected Documents* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), 375.

[52] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 5.

For Nishitani, this nihilism can only be overcome by *śūnyatā*. *Śūnyatā* is generally translated as "nihilism" or "emptiness." This negative rendition, though true in translation, does not capture succinctly its essence, especially in Nishitani's philosophy. In Sanskrit, this "emptiness" or "voidness" also suggests the positive notion of "swollenness" or "openness." In *śūnyatā*, the emptiness is the opening of the true self to blossom from within. In Nishitani, however, this "nihilism" follows two stages, the relative and the absolute. In his study of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, what they call "nihilism" is, for Nishitani, only a relative nihilism grounded on the inherent dualism of Western thought, namely, the dualism of subjectivity and objectivity, time and eternity, being and nothingness. The "nothingness" that characterizes the nihilism of the modern period is referred to by Nishitani as Nihility or "relative nothingness," a nothingness that is still within the ambit of its correlative opposite, i.e., being. What is needed is a double negation of this relative nothingness towards what he calls "absolute nothingness" or the proper *śūnyatā*. The realization of religion as the "*real* self-awareness of reality" happens only through *śūnyatā*, the experience of which can be likened to an existential *Angst*. In the words of Nishitani himself,

> The religious life arises from within profound mental crisis, or *Angst* . . . . Crisis appears in various forms, but its foundation is the fact that all the things on which one has been relying in daily living can no longer be relied upon, and that the fundamental thing upon which one has entrusted one's entire being comes to be shaken . . . .
> In all these cases of crisis, or existential *Angst*, an emptiness comes to appear from the bottom of the heart.[53]

For Nishitani, acquiring the standpoint of Emptiness or absolute nothingness is a religious conversion that culminates in the transformation

[53] Keiji Nishitani, "Religion and Ethics," in Dilworth et al., *Sources of Modern Japanese Philosophy*, 397.

of consciousness where the self that questions becomes the question itself. Only when a religious becomes an existential issue does religion open up the "*real* self-awareness of reality." Nishitani himself provides a beautiful imagery to illustrate this breaking open of the shell of the ego (as distinct from the world). For him, it's like a bean seed that cracks open in order for it to grow and bear fruit. "Unless the wheat falls to the ground and dies, it cannot bear fruit" (*John* 12:24). It is when the seed cracks its own ego-centricity open in order to give way to the self-awareness of the real that lies within it, that there can be what we call the becoming of religion. It is when the ego awakens to its own absolute Nihility and finitude that a space is carved out of reality for the realization of reality's self-awareness, which is what religion is all about.

By way of a critique, even of Whitehead, Nishitani argues that we need to go beyond the rethinking of religion into a specific *doing* of religion. Whitehead's stepping forward to rethink religion is advanced by Nishitani's invitation to step back through *śūnyatā* in order for religion to come to its originary self. Religion is not a reality to be thought, but a happening to be lived, and this happening is an event that occurs only in the existential depth of an individual. This unfolding of self-awareness through our experiences of existential *Angst* leads to the death of the self that blocks the blossoming of beauty within a flower. For Nishitani, a genuine sense of religiosity bridges the personal, social, and even metaphysical alienations that modernity brings.

According to Waldenfels, the answer to the question "What is religion?" is simply emptiness, absolute emptiness, *śūnyatā*.[54] One can speak of "religion-becoming" only because there is a religious person to whom the real becomes a self-awareness. We don't simply think or re-/think religion, we need to *do* religion. Religion is the eventing at the heart of a person becoming religious.

[54] Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 52.

Still, Religion Becomes

To conclude, the novelty of Whitehead's philosophy of religion lies in the event metaphysics that it presupposes. For him, religion, like the whole of reality, is inherently developing, evolving, and he captures this succinctly in his book *Religion in the Making* (1926). This metaphysics provides a fertile ground for the rethinking of religion in contemporary times. What Nishitani offers is a rethinking of Western understanding of religion by way of an Eastern speculative approach grounded in Zen Buddhism. What Nishitani did, beyond the speculative approach of Whitehead, is to ground religion where it properly belongs, in the existential life-situation of the human person. He argues that Western religion, particularly Christianity and Judaism, has succumbed to the modern predicament of nihility, or relative nothingness, due to forms of alienation attendant to the rise of scientism and modernism. The quest for the contemporary rethinking of religion is to radicalize this same nihility towards absolute nothingness (*śūnyatā*) in order to undo alienation and allow the self to be reunited with the real.

If one were to view metaphysics as a "thinking things together," then all forms of dismissal becomes suspect. There is something lost in that which is removed. What is at stake when modernity incises religion from the advancement of civilization? For Whitehead and Nishitani, much is at stake. For the former, it is to lose sight of the "harmony of harmonies" that only religion brings because harmony is an ideal transcendent to the now. For the latter, it is to wallow in the relative nihilism of modernity, where alienation, separation, and dichotomy reign at the cost of discovering the real self. For both these thinkers, one from the West and the other from the East, religion has a role and place in the hope of any civilization, Asian or otherwise. The truth of religion, what it fundamentally unveils, is the finest intuition of the *real* real. Far from providing an apologetic of religion, both thinkers are critical of religion,

arguing that religion itself is "by no means necessarily good,"[55] and that "religions are so often more barbarous than the civilizations in which they flourish."[56] Nonetheless, the religious spirit, despite the deposition of critics and distortion by fundamentalists, remains present in humanity's pilgrimage to a better world to come, both in the East and in the West. The realization of religion's role, however, necessitates reflexivity towards its own inherent dynamism as fomenting the hope of adventure in the human spirit. As Nishitani emphasizes, whatsoever this adventure of the religious spirit may be, its desired goal is what religion essentially is, "the *real* self-awareness of reality," a religion-becoming.

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[55] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making,* 17.
[56] Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 171.

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