

## **The Philosophy of Religion in Nishida Kitarō : 1901-1914**

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Volume 20, Number 1-2, 2012

Les philosophes de l'École de Kyōto et la théologie

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018853ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018853ar>

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Publisher(s)

Faculté de théologie et de sciences des religions, Université de Montréal

ISSN

1188-7109 (print)

1492-1413 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Jacinto Zavala, A. (2012). The Philosophy of Religion in Nishida Kitarō : 1901-1914. *Théologiques*, 20(1-2), 39-60. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018853ar>

Article abstract

The Study of Religion (*Shūkyō-gaku*) is an early text from a one-year course, 1913-1914, which Nishida Kitarō imparted only once in his academic career. In this text, apart from references to mystics and to early and medieval Christian thinkers, Nishida tries to point out the basic elements of Eastern and Western religions through the writings of XVIII-XX<sup>th</sup> century authors, among them participants in the Gifford Lectures, the Bampton Lectures and Hibbert Lectures. On the other hand, Nishida tries to find the corresponding characteristics of religion in Zen and True Pure Land Buddhism. In short, Nishida's approach to a philosophy of religion gives us an overview of the problems concerning a Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

# The Philosophy of Religion in Nishida Kitarō: 1901-1914

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Traditions studies

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A hundred years after Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) published *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911), there are some texts that have been practically forgotten among the interpreters of his philosophy. This is the case of the *Study of Religion* (*Shūkyō-gaku*). In order to better understand Nishida's concept of religion in his middle and late periods, we need an overview of his ideas concerning religion in his early period. The reader should keep in mind that in his early period Nishida was a Zen practitioner for eight years, from 1897 to 1903, when he penetrated the kōan MU, and continued his practice until around 1908 (Jacinto 1984, 159-193).

The framework for understanding the *Study of Religion* is found in those writings published between 1901 and 1914, in which he reflects on religion, the religious heart (spirituality) or religious spirit, and the elements and the several modalities of religion, from the viewpoint of the philosophy of religion. There are six texts that provide us with this framework. Here I will present only four of them: 1) «Concerning Present-day Religion»; 2) «Concerning Religion», which is a part of *Manuscript #2 of Ethics*; 3) «Gutoku Shinran»; and 4) *The Study of Religion*<sup>1</sup>.

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1. The other two texts, about which I have written before, are: 5) A part of the *Fragments concerning Pure Experience*, which deals with religion (Jacinto 2012, 39-89); and 6) Part IV of Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good* (Jacinto 2002). In section 5.4 of this paper I will also include some of the results I reached in these two texts.

In our reading of these texts we pay particular attention to the following points: a) the importance of a deep religious lived-experience both in preachers and believers; b) true religion begins with the negation of our self; c) there are several modes of religious training for our union with God; d) we become immersed in the all-embracing love of God; e) religions are classified on the basis of the vital requirements to which they respond; f) in some religions God is explicitly recognized and only implicitly in others; g) Buddhism and Christianity, as universal religions, are susceptible to comparison.

### 1. A Criticism of Religious Practice

In his article « Concerning Present-day Religion » (December 1901) Nishida says that a certain group of scholars « do not see that for the finite human heart to long for an infinite spiritual state and to seek to reach a great tranquility and obtain a great self-possession and spontaneity, is a basic instinct » (Nishida 1966b, 81). In this respect the situation in Japan is sad because there is no religion that can respond to the needs of the new generation at the beginning of the xx<sup>th</sup> century (Nishida 1966b, 81).

The religion that is needed, it should not be artificially founded through scholarly research, nor through philosophical or moral investigation, because « in the beginning all religions must arise on the basis of the intuitive contemplation of a great genius [...] and] necessarily must have a deep historical basis ». As there is no prospect for the rise of a new religion, the only feasible procedure is to lead Buddhism and Christianity back « to the true meaning of the founder and patriarchs of each one » of them (Nishida 1966b, 82).

It is not the religions themselves that have gone astray but, rather, the practice of the men of religion, so that they cannot solve the problems of human life through their own religion (Nishida 1966b, 83). Nishida points to three main reasons for this.

1) The first problem concerns the transmission of a meaningful religious message. Men of religion should not « consider religious preaching as a kind of profession and acquire only the knowledge needed for its proclamation », because if they « lack a religious lived-experience [...] they can not properly envisage the true meaning of the founders and patriarchs ». Since they « aimlessly respect and believe in dead forms and consider them as the true meaning of religion », they cannot transmit a religion meaningful for our present-day life. (Nishida 1966b, 83)

2) The second problem in the case of Christian missionaries, is that they «do not enlighten our minds concerning the religious spirit from the bottom of their own heart and through their religious compassion, considering the character and history of each believer». On the contrary, they teach Christianity as if it were a long-winded scientific treatise to be memorized. (Nishida 1966b, 83)

3) The third problem, in the case of Christian preaching, is that the vehicle of delivery is not adequate to the new times, because it reflects remnants of the past rather than the deep meanings of Jesus' message. (Nishida 1966b, 83)

These three problems concern the external forms of Christian practice and not a criticism of Christian religion itself. He does not try to destroy Christianity: «I believe that the true meaning of Christianity is not in these external forms; Christ himself, opposed as he was to Pharisaic formalism, on the contrary, manifested the life of religion» (Nishida 1966b, 83). Nishida interprets the active life of Christ from the viewpoint of the Buddhist *upaya*, that is, from the wise use of salvific means: «Much of what today's Christianity maintains, was originally in its greater part the temporary skillful means Christ used, and they are not his true meaning» (Nishida 1966b, 83). Skillful means should respond to the needs of each epoch, and this is why they are historically dependent.

4) Summing up, what is needed is for men of religion, both Buddhist and Christian, to go through a good religious training that clarifies «the true intention of the founders and patriarchs, and with overflowing vitality, not depending on philosophy or theology, they should ceaselessly preach the Law, according to the times and in response to the people» (Nishida 1966b, 83). By doing this, the religion they preach will be able to respond to the urgent needs of the people in the historical situation in which they live. As we can see, the main criticism Nishida raises against men of religion is the lack of a religious lived-experience, a theme he repeats in subsequent texts.

## 2. «Concerning Religion» (*Shūkyō-ron*)

In Manuscript #2 of Ethics (1904-1905), Nishida includes a section called «Concerning Religion» (Nishida 1966d, 258-266), in which he approaches religion from five aspects.

### 2.1 *The origin of religion*

Nishida says that « the basis of religion arises from our spirit trying to get a satisfactory solution » to the conflict between subjective activity and objective reality when we pursue an infinite ideal (Nishida 1966d, 258). This infinite longing is « the essence of [our] spirit » which, when fulfilled, brings about the union of subjectivity and objectivity, and tranquility to our spirit. However, while we do not reach that infinite ideal, our spirit experiences such conflict and we fall into religious obnubilation. We cannot escape from this conflict through our own forces and must depend on something superior to our selves. Nishida says this is the origin of religion. In this sense, religion inheres in our being and « there is no one who in the depths of his spirit is not religious » (Nishida 1966d, 258). Religion brings about three main effects: it solves the afore-mentioned conflict, brings absolute unity to the human heart, and gives us infinite tranquility (Nishida 1966d, 259). Religion is reached through our sincerity in recognizing our own weakness and powerlessness, evident in occasions such as desperation, death, sin, and so on, although we can also come to religion through the positive aspects of reality and of our lives. In either case, we can detect that in the depths of the human heart there is a « religious requirement » (Nishida 1966d, 260).

### 2.2 *The several religions*

In religion the self is united to God, but this union is multi-modal, and « according to that which each one of us considers as his highest longing, and depending on at which point he has felt the contradiction in his heart, the meaning of religious tranquility differs » (Nishida 1966d, 259). Some of these modes cannot lead human beings to the consciousness of their own self-contradictory existence, or to question their own self. Some other modes question both the self and the world it inhabits. In the last instance, « only when we reach a complete “being quit of self” —when the absolute and the self are “one and not two”—, can we reach true religion » (Nishida 1966d, 260). This means that « true religion begins with the negation of the self [which] perceives the vacuousness of human desire » (Nishida 1966d, 259).

### 2.3 *The essence of religion*

The human heart is basically self-contradictory, because «being finite, it nevertheless desires to become infinite», and religion «is a fact of spirituality in which the whole self reaches the domain of union with an absolute and infinite God» (Nishida 1966d, 259). The solution comes, not from mere knowledge or the will, but «from the plane of the totality of our spirit». Religion is a spiritual activity which renews and strengthens our life: it is a demand of reality itself and not a subjective requirement, for «religion is the basis of our life and, since the beginning, it is the basic condition for the constitution of Heavens and Earth (Hegel)» (Nishida 1966d, 259).

### 2.4 *God*

Our requirement of unification both personal and of the whole of reality, originates «when we recognize in the depths of the universe a unique God [...] that is the basis of everything», and this requirement is fulfilled in religion (Nishida 1966d, 260-261). A God that can satisfy this basic impulse of our heart, is «directly perceived in our internal experience» when we realize «our powerlessness before the great force of an infinite existence» wherein we are enveloped (Nishida 1966d, 261). The self, in its activities, «enters into mutual contact with God, and feels God's activity. This is called the fact of seeing God» (Nishida 1966d, 261). Within our own existential place God becomes evident for us from the viewpoint of our own feeling of being a self. Nishida says that we do not reach this point through our knowledge, which is relative, or through abstract concepts. This is why Nishida states that «religious life is always in the [deepest] direct perception» to which we respond with sincerity of heart (Nishida 1966d, 262).

A demonstration of the existence of God is needed for those who do not have a religion, but the social and philosophical reflection upon religion «is effective to help us refine and deepen our religious consciousness». In this case, «God is the *fundamental Apperzeption* that unifies knowledge and the will» (Nishida 1966d, 263). Even though «conceptual knowledge cannot reflect reality» and serves only to analyze facts, «our feeling and our will are a fact, they show a reality even more concrete than knowledge», and this is the type of truth that «those who have a vision of God» discover (Nishida 1966d, 263).

As Boehme says, «God is identical with Nothingness [and is] the basis of our activity, the basis of the constitution of the world». But God is not

an energy as material cause of phenomena, or a purely transcendent God « outside nature » (Nishida 1966d, 263). God is « the fundamental condition for the constitution of the universe » and, just as with Spinoza, « wherever apart from the heart there are no things, and apart from things there is no heart: wherever things and the heart are unified and everything is one, [there] truly is the foundation and unification of the universe, and this [foundation] we call God » (Nishida 1966d, 263). This is the reason we can say in a philosophical sense, that « God is the creator of the world. [...] Creation is eternal. And in this sense, there is no place where God is not, and nothing he cannot do. (God is the *unendlich Ursache* [primordial infinite event]) » (Nishida 1966d, 263-264). God delivers us from our deepest contradiction, is the foundation of everything: he is the basis of activity of our self and, thus « for us to follow God is to return to the substance of the self [...] and to surmount the barrier existing between the self and Heavens and Earth » (Nishida 1966d, 264). In doing this, we feel infinite consolation, we rejoice, our heart is calm and we come to perceive that « God, as the basis of this joy, is infinite love » (Nishida 1966d, 264).

## 2.5 *Human life*

Men can be united to God because « God is our substance, our true self. [...] To coincide with God means to return to the absolute substance of our self ». Herein lies « the fundamental thought of every religion » (Nishida 1966d, 264). But this divine character is not peculiar to human beings, because « in the sense that all things in their substance coincide with God [...], we should say that animals and plants have a divine character » (Nishida 1966d, 265). The difference between human beings and other beings in the world lies in that « humans are self-perceiving, which means, they have spirituality », and so we can say that « if the cosmos is constituted through the union of subject and object, and God is that unifying force, then our self-perception is just that activity. In this sense, the human being is an ‘*image*’ of God » (Nishida 1966d, 265).

But the self-perceiving spirit of human beings can, of its own free will, fall apart from unity, develop itself one-sidedly, take up something other than its own self and transform it into itself. Whenever this happens, the human heart rises by itself and disobeys God. Here sin originates, from which humans cannot free themselves. However, because of our finitude, whenever human beings design ideals of their own and try to reach infinite ideals, they face sin and, at the same time, the perfection of their spirit.

Nishida interprets Boehme's « sin is an element of God », saying that « while still alive, in the end, man cannot at all eliminate the element of sin ». As Spinoza asserts, « the fact itself of the human heart being infinite and free, is the power of God » (Nishida 1966d, 265). Because of the finitude of our heart, « God manifests himself with a finite character within the human heart. Finitude is a necessary element in God. A God that is simply infinite, is not truly infinite. Within God there is finitude and wickedness (Jakob Boehme) » (Nishida 1966d, 266). Evil in mankind and in the world is not absolute evil: « our evil is a small good », and only the religious man « falls into true evil » when he deludes himself and turns his back on God (Nishida 1966d, 266).

### 3. « *Gutoku Shinran* »

In March 1911, Nishida published a short article titled « Gutoku Shinran » (Nishida 1966a, 407-409). Shinran (1173-1262) was a disciple of Hōnen (1133-1212) and preached the True Pure Land sect of Buddhism. Nishida's mother was a devout follower of this sect and while a child she made him memorize the *Tannishō* (A Record in Lament of Divergencies), which is the basic popular text of the sect.

#### 3.1 *Other-power [tariki] religion*

Nishida states that he never became a follower of the True Pure Land sect but that he was impressed by the two characters of the assumed name of Shinran, « Gutoku » (stupid bald man), « which characterize well a higher person and, at the same time, manifest the teachings of this religious sect » (Nishida 1966a, 407). The gist of every religion lies in casting off one's own wisdom and morality, and entering a new life; this means that we should « go back to the nude essence of our self and having given up our life, to come to life again » (Nishida 1966a, 408).

There are Self-Power and Other Power religions, and the True Pure Land sect « is a religion of absolute love, of absolute Other Power » (Nishida 1966a, 408). As Nishida says, « All religions, be they Other Power or Self-Power [religions], cannot but taste of these two characters of [the name] 'Gutoku' » (Nishida 1966a, 408), because « perhaps the two characters that form it express very well the [higher] nature of [Shinran] *Shōnin* and, at the same time, manifest the teachings of the True Pure Land [sect] and the essence of religion itself » (Nishida 1966a, 407). As it is said, « Other Power



is none other than the power of the Tathagata's Primal Vow » (Shinran 1997a, part II, par. 81, p. 57), from this point of view we understand that *jinen* (the spontaneous working of the power of the Vow) itself is *tariki* (Other Power): « Our not calculating is called *jinen*. It is itself Other Power » (Shinran 1997b, par. 16, p. 676).

### 3.2 *The Primal Vow (hongan) of Amida*

We enter this religion whenever we realize that « the compassionate Vow of Other Power is indeed for the sake of ourselves » (Shinran 1997b, par. 9, p. 665), that is, when we awaken to the fact that the Vow of Amida was pronounced for our sake and personally affects each one of us. This is why the believer becomes full of gratitude and entrusts himself to the Primal Vow of Amida. His « only action » is to recite the Nembutsu relying « solely on the guidance of the Primal Vow » (Shinran 1997c, 690), with a sincere, trusting and Pure Land aspiring heart (Shinran 1997c, 691-693). This is the basis for the distinction between religion and morality.

### 3.3 *The Marvelous Name (myōgō)*

In this text Nishida does not mention the « great theme » (*daimoku*), the « Marvelous Name » which is the vehicle for attaining birth in the Pure Land. As the *Tannishō* says, « when we entrust ourselves to the inconceivable working of the Vow, taking it as essential, the inconceivable working of the Name is also included; the inconceivable working of the Vow and that of the Name are one, with no distinction whatsoever » (Shinran 1997b, par 11, p. 667). Here we can see the Easy Practice: « The Name is meant to be easy to say for the person unfamiliar with even a single character and ignorant of the lines of discourse in the sutras and commentaries; hence it is called “easy practice” » (Shinran 1997b, par. 12, p. 668). It is a religion for everyone: « Among human beings, there are the wise and the stupid, the moral and the immoral. But however great the knowledge of a man, it is still human knowledge, and his morality it is still human morality » (Nishida 1966a, 407).

### 3.4 *The Path of Easy Practice (igyō)*

The path of Easy Practice is a total handing oneself over to Other Power and reciting the Marvelous Name of Amida. Shinran said, « Through the incon-

ceivable working of the Vow, Amida Buddha devised the Name easy to keep and easy to say, and promised to receive and grasp those who say this Name » (Shinran 1997b, par. 11, p. 667). It is said that « for those who entrust themselves to the Primal Vow, no good acts are required, because no good surpasses the *nembutsu* [recitation of Amida's Name] » (Shinran 1997b, par. 1, p. 661). And so Nishida writes, « It is only when the body is turned over and one takes refuge, when we abandon our own wisdom and morals, that we attain to new wisdom, are endowed with new morals, and can enter a new life. This is the gist of religion » (Nishida 1966a, 407).

Nishida says that « even if it is seen from the viewpoint of moral action, religion is followed by its own moral action, but the two are not necessarily to be seen as identical » (Nishida 1966a, 407). The relationship between evil and good, that is, karmic evil on the one hand, and total reliance on Other Power, is a point that is clarified in the *Tannishō*. There we find that sinners need not « despair of the evil they commit, for no evil can obstruct the working of Amida's Primal Vow » (Shinran 1997b, par. 1, p. 661), because the easy practice « is the teaching that makes no distinction between the good and the evil » persons (Shinran 1997b, par. 15, p. 674-675). In this sense, « Other Power lies in entrusting ourselves wholly to the Primal Vow while leaving both good and evil to karmic recompense » (Shinran 1997b, par. 14, p. 672).

We will finish this section with a reflection made by Nishida: « Whoever it is, no one can know this unless he has returned to the substrate of his own self, once he has given up his own life » (Nishida 1966a, 408).

#### 4. The Study of Religion (*Shūkyō-gaku*)<sup>2</sup>

There are two important features in the text that I would like to present: one is the reference to the most important authors for the previous 150 years of Christian thought, and the other is the comparison between Christianity (characterized through those readings) and Buddhism. I will try to present both features, giving preference to the comparative aspect.

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2. Nishida taught this course only once and the text published in the *Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō* is a reconstruction made by Hisamatsu Shin'ichi with the help of Abe Masao, on the basis of Nishida's four notebooks for the course. We are told that Nishida « first made the students take notes and then he explained » the contents, and this is why the text was published with Nishida's original notes in small type, and the notes taken by Nishitani in larger type (Nishida 1966c, 487-490).

#### 4.1 *Sources of Nishida's views on Christian Religion*

Many authors are mentioned in the text, but I will mention only some of the schools to which they belong: rationalism, deism, modernism, the science of religion, romanticism, idealism, pragmatism, and the works of several anthropologists who studied religion. Some names will appear in the next sections, even though for reasons of space I cannot mention them all. I would like to emphasize that research on Nishida's study of Protestant thought will result in a fuller understanding of Nishida's view of religion. And we cannot overlook the great affinity Nishida shows with the mystic writers Bernard of Clairvaux, Eckhart, Tauler, Suso, Boehme, Swedenborg, the *Theologia Germanica*, and Thomas à Kempis.

Basing himself on the works of these authors, at different points Nishida compares Buddhism and Christianity. This provides us with a general view of the manner in which the study of religion from a philosophical point of view allows for that comparison. The subject matter of the course is the philosophy of religion, or as Tiele calls it «science of religion», of which he says, «it is the philosophical part of the investigation of religious phenomena—a study which seeks to penetrate to their foundations. It is not a philosophic creed, or a dogmatic system of what is commonly called natural theology, or a philosophy with a religious tinge, and still less a philosophy regarding God Himself» (Tiele 1897, 15).

#### 4.2 *Religious motivation and the development of religions*

Nishida considers religion as «the relationship between us humans and God», a God in a wide sense. The text refers to Tiele's assertion that religious phenomena are manifestations of the human spirit that enters into relationship with something that is superhuman (Tiele 1897, 4-5; 1899, 90, 102), *etwas Übermenschliches* (Nishida 1966c, 224).

In xix<sup>th</sup> century Christianity, there was a crisis of faith originating from the Kantian revolution in epistemology, from the Darwinian theory of the development of human faculties, the comparative history of religions, and text criticism of the Scriptures. This discussion extended to Eastern religions. Concern for the new approaches was part of the philosophy of religion and particularly of Protestant theology. Nishida did not eschew the discussion of these themes and in his course presented the most influential thinkers, and proposed some points for the comparison between Christianity and Buddhism.

Starting from his lectures on comparative philology (1851), Max Müller tried to respond to the above-mentioned challenge, although his main contribution was the development of comparative mythology and the study of legends, which arose from comparative linguistics founded by him in the study of Indian religions. He first presented the results in his book, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, which were completed by other materials relating to religion through the work of his followers (Müller 1873)<sup>3</sup>. The results of their research led them to view religion as something that develops through time in the different cultures, starting from natural religion (Nishida 1966c, 257-258). Max Müller characterized natural religion as *Henotheismus* (Müller 1872, 52), that vaguely feels there is but one God identified with natural phenomena, be it a water buffalo, an eagle, and so on, and this God can have diverse transformations (Nishida 1966c, 307-308). Hartmann says that there are three cycles in naturalistic *Henotheismus*: the identity of God with natural phenomena; the essential identity of all Gods; and the moralistic content of religions (Hartmann 1906, 54-106).

Natural religions develop into ethnic religions, and moral religions. Even though in the beginning religion is based upon the desires of individuals, as religion develops, those individual desires disappear and social happiness becomes the center. This is the origin of the ethnic spirit. When individual happiness depends on collective happiness, this fact deepens the relationship between society and the individual, and leads him to respect the laws and social order. In this manner, the gods become protectors of the law and happiness of society. Justice and punishment belong to God. In this manner a naturalistic religion becomes an ethnic religion or, in Tiele's terminology (Tiele 1897, 39), a higher religion (Nishida 1966c, 309).

When religion becomes social and popular, the character and ideals of the people are reflected in it. Following Tiele, Nishida says that many legends originate at this time and through them the gods become human and the moral meaning is strengthened (Tiele 1897, 168, 170, 247). In contrast to primitive religions, in which the gods were natural forces, now they become moral forces (Nishida 1966c, 310). While the lower natural religions center around an egotistic spirit of man and his desire for happi-

3. Among his followers the text mentions Edward Burnett Tylor, Andrew Lang, James George Frazer, Frank Byron Jevons, Erwin Rohde, Hermann Usener, William Robertson-Smith, Julius Wellhausen and Hermann Oldenberg.

ness, ethnic religions are born when they take the community as their center and are an expression of the ideals of a people. A religion that can be characterized by such ideals (for example, the aesthetic requirement in Greece, the ethical requirement in Israel, or the intellectual requirement in India) still needs further development in order to become a universal religion because it is still tied to its natural basis in the character of a specific people or a particular culture. For example, when the Greeks thought about art, they did not consider it as a negation of the will in a Buddhist sense (Nishida 1966c, 313). In this sense, Greek religion did not become a universal religion.

Nishida says that «for a religion to become truly universal, it must be born from our absolute normative consciousness» (Nishida 1966c, 316-317). Although throughout the historical development of religions the individual plays a role, this is more noticeable in the case of the higher religions that have a founder (Tiele 1897, 244-271), as is the case with Christianity and Buddhism (Nishida 1966c, 317). In the latter case, Buddhism was a development of Indian religion: «From originally being a natural religion, through its development, it became an ethnic religion and finally it became an ideal religion» (Nishida 1966c, 324).

Essential classifications of religion must be made on the basis of the content of their vital requirement and from this specific viewpoint, the difference between them is found in the deepening of human life with the consequent change in human normative consciousness (Nishida 1966c, 316-317). Other classifications mentioned were elaborated by Wilhelm Dilthey, Eduard von Hartmann, Cornelis P. Tiele, Hermann Siebeck, William James and James Caird, on the basis of the content of the vital requirement to which they respond (Nishida 1966c, 305-307).

### 4.3 *Inner attitudes in religion*

The deepening of human consciousness brings about a change in the inner attitudes in religion. Nishida contrasts the attitude of the heart between stoic obedience as in the case of Marcus Aurelius, who coldly accepts God's designs harmonizing with them, and Christian obedience, as in the author of the *Theologia Germanica*, who says that the enlightened men «are living in pure submission to the eternal Goodness, in the perfect freedom of fervent love» (James 1922, 43-44). Religion adds a dimension of emotion which allows us to reach a freedom that brings about a «sort of happiness in the absolute and everlasting» which is accompanied by an

«element of solemnity» (James 1922, 49). We experience it as a solemn feeling (Nishida 1966c, 264) which brings about a change in our normative consciousness, in our concept of religion and even in our conception of God. Nishida conceives of the divine in a wide sense. He says that though some people (as Emersonians do) conceive of God as an abstract ideality (Nishida 1966c, 264), and even though it is said that Buddhism does not have a God, what happens is that in some religions the existence of God is recognized only implicitly (Nishida 1966c, 223-224).

There is also a change in the attitude of the believers towards the self. This results in a change in moral ideals. For example, Jewish religion, an ethnic religion, became universal on the basis of moral ideals: this universal religion is Christianity and in Christianity there is self-denial, *Selbstverleugnung* (Nishida 1966c, 329). Although Jesus preached the kingdom of God, it was linked to justice in accordance to Old Testament Law, only it was not external but completely internalized instead (Nishida 1966c, 324).

The denial of the self and of the world can be positive or negative. Here lies a basic difference between Christianity and Buddhism, because while Christianity overcomes the world transforming it into the earthly kingdom of God through a direct relationship between the heart of man and the will of God, «Buddhism tries to be free even from this» (Nishida 1966c, 329). This is why «in Buddhism salvation is based on the wisdom that negates this world, but pain comes from ignorance» (Nishida 1966c, 327). In Christianity both the self and the world are crucified together with Jesus, but «the joy of resurrection weakens the tragedy of death on the cross». Buddhism does not go so far, and only looks for detachment [*gedatsu*] with a sadness that «does not reach tragedy» as among the German tribes (Nishida 1966c, 315). Even though Christianity and Buddhism seem to be completely opposite extremes, in both there is detachment (Nishida 1966c, 328).

#### 4.4 *Religion and praxis*

The true relationship between God and man is when man, forgetting his egocentric tendencies, loves himself, loves others and the whole world for God's sake. At this point the true self of man is manifested and it becomes plain that this true self is what self-power religions call Buddha. This is why «When the self forgets itself, this means it is acting from [its] personality, and at that moment God is acting. Salvation and action are just one

activity » (Nishida 1966c, 331). The depths of religion are not reached through mere adherence to moral norms, because religion transcends even the moral good. True religious consciousness is a mystical union with the divine which, when achieved, results in religious praxis faithful to the wise and loving heart of God. In this sense, because of his insistence on moral conduct, « Kant did not yet know the depths of religion » (Nishida 1966c, 300-301).

This leads us to the problem of disobedience to God's commands, be they called grave faults or sins. Natural religions conceive of grave fault and sin as a harmful body that can be transmitted from generation to generation (Nishida 1966c, 367). Ethnic religions conceive of it as the breaking up of God's commandments (Nishida 1966c, 368). The concept of grave fault or sin in Indian religions differs from its concept in Christianity. Indian religions were basically pantheistic, and human faults with their consequent pain and misery were the product of ignorance = obnubilation, so that salvation consisted in the dispelling of obnubilation. The mysticism of Eckhart inclined also towards this idea, and in the *Theologia Germanica* it is said that the origin of all evil is in « the I, the Me and the Mine »<sup>4</sup>. This means that « fault in pantheism means imperfection of the essence, i. e. privation, while in theism it means bad will based on the freedom of the will » (Nishida 1966c, 369).

In the higher religions, sin is thought of as something which arises from the flesh (as in Neo-Platonism and Augustine of Hippo), as something which originates in ignorance and obnubilation (as in Indian religions), or as a result of the free will that disobeys the laws of moral consciousness (as in Christianity and in Kantian philosophy of religion) (Nishida 1966c, 369-370). In medieval Christianity the world of nature was conceived in opposition to the world of grace, which means that God was thought to be outside nature. Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas solved this problem through the transcendence of religious truth beyond human reason; and John Duns Scotus through a complete separation of the regions of reason and of religion (Nishida 1966c, 361-362). In later philosophy this problem was approached from the opposition between intellect and will, as the realm of moral religion versus the realm of reason and science. In the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, thinkers such as Fichte (1762-1814),

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4. « For whenever we speak of the Adam, and disobedience, and of the old man, of self-seeking, self-will, and self-serving, of the I, the Me, and the Mine, nature, falsehood, the Devil, sin; it is all one and the same thing » (TG, ch. XLIII).

thought that in lower religions grace breaks natural laws, but in a higher religion grace transcends natural laws, because the truths of religion are not mere historical facts, and the world of being is a world of the absolute ought which becomes the foundation of the natural world. In this manner, «grace does not break [...] religious norms» and the worlds of nature and grace can be harmonized (Nishida 1966c, 363-364).

There is a similar problem in other religions. In India a religion of salvation was born from Brahmanism and formed the pantheistic mysticism of Buddhism. It was an extremist religion of salvation which required complete abandonment of the world and the disappearance of the sense of self: «the goal is the sublation of self and world towards the total One». In Buddhism, ignorance was the origin of calamity and evil, and pain comes from our attachment to life (Nishida 1966c, 373). In contrast, in Jewish religion backed up by a strong State, the main task of believers was to construct the kingdom of God in the actual world. By the time of the prophets, when the State had decayed, it became a religion of the heart with a strong emphasis on the idea of salvation which, having changed from external to internal salvation, was now for the believer a lived-experience with a social meaning: through calamity and suffering God tried the believer in order to purify him and to save the people of Israel. This is why the suffering Servant of God was a victim for the reconciliation and salvation of the people: martyrdom saved the people, brought them happiness and ensured their being raised from the dead (Nishida 1966c, 374).

It became clear then that without a concept of grace, religion cannot be thought of, but the problem came to be how to conceive of grace and its operation in a material world. Here Nishida finds one same manner of viewing grace in Pure Land Buddhism and in Christianity. In the *Tannishō*, Shinran says, I realize that «it was entirely for the sake of myself alone», and in Christianity it is said that «God sacrificed his only son in order to save [us] from [our] sins». In both cases the truth transmitted is that we are redeemed on the basis of a moral or practical consciousness, in a «world based on love [...] and] enveloped in the light of the Buddha» (Nishida 1966c, 362-363).

From another perspective, we are told that the concept of grave fault or sin «is based on a dualism which considers that norm and anti-norm are separate and independent from each other» (Nishida 1966c, 371). On the contrary, when in our development we come to realize that our faults and sins are God-given grace, then fault and sin are no more. This is the



case in Buddhism, so its concept of fault or sin is deeper than in Christianity. In both cases, human beings cannot free themselves from sin. Following Pfleiderer (Pfleiderer 1888, 154), Nishida mentions that in Christianity it is said that Christ had to pay for it, but as in the case of Orpheus and other gods, «from a historical viewpoint this is a legend: for our atonement consists in knowing that our past faults are not faults [of ours] but, rather, acts of God. In other words, wherever with the character of Other Power we are not responsible for evil, there is our salvation from the viewpoint of religion». The new emphasis is on the personal relationship between God and man, because the purpose of religion is to unite the guilty sinner to God, and this is salvation (Nishida 1966c, 371).

#### *4.5 Relations between God and man*

The God who saves us is seen as a person in Christianity, which is a theist religion. Since it rejects pantheism (in which God supposedly is impersonal), this is a criticism Christianity levels against Buddhism. However, «pantheism affirms that all things are in God [and that] God is the immanent cause of reality». God is seen as impersonal only when pantheism is mixed with materialism, but pantheism and materialism do not necessarily imply each other. On the contrary, «we can also say that the origin of the world is spiritual and that our person is a part of it» (Nishida 1966c, 351). When religions are examined from the viewpoint of the relationship between the self and God, religions can roughly be classified into two groups: moral religions (natural religions) in which the God is the guide of the world and secures the perfection of man; and soteriological religions (religions of the ideal) in which the God saves man, be it by way of negation of the world, as in Buddhism, or through its positive affirmation, as in Christianity (Nishida 1966c, 325).

Religious personal relations are based on love. In the depths of pure experience and at the moment of our innermost birth, we realize that God is love and awakes to the fact that he frees us from the contradiction between duty and our appetites. «Pure experience is the highest love [in which] all oppositions fall away»: it is to surrender our body-life and to see the self within everything. This is so because «the normative consciousness embraces facts within itself [through] transforming itself into love. The ideal is realized through love», and love is the union of personalities (Nishida 1966c, 349). In this sense, it is important for

Christianity to see God as a person, as a great personality as in Illingworth (Illingworth 1898, 38)<sup>5</sup>.

In ideal religions the meaning of salvation is to be utterly or «wholly bereft of self» (TG, ch. XV, XXII). This «being quit of self» (TG, ch. XV, XVII) is a complete change of our self, it is «to discover the great Self within our self», and is psychologically manifest as «a displacement of the center of consciousness». In Hinayana Buddhism there is a negative side to this bereavement, which was the total detachment from the world and self, placing great emphasis on the idea of salvation. In this kind of liberation there are still elements of utilitarianism. True salvation must be to reach a new life after renouncing the self: «When the self has been completely exhausted, there is no thing that is not the self. This is the “casting off” in Mahayana Buddhism [and] the meaning of true Christianity must be the positive life resulting from casting off the self and relinquishing everything» (Nishida 1966c, 375-376).

This positive life in both Christianity and Buddhism, cannot be equated with or based on morality: «it is a mistake in Kant not to have recognized the importance of historical faith». Historical faith, however, is just the symbol, not the essence, of religion. It leads us to realize that our sin originates in self-power—that is, in our reliance upon our own ego—and that we cannot save ourselves. The marrow of Christianity, the central point of its faith is Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection, through which all sins are forgiven. We can be freed from our fundamental sinful state through our dependence on the grace of God alone. This is to be 'quit of self' (TG, ch. XV) and to hand oneself over to absolute Other Power: «we give ourselves over to God, we crucify our own ego, and thus discover our own life». At this point we discover our savior, entrust our life to him and an ethical life begins: the activity of Amidha's Vow is the true Dharma (Nishida 1966c, 378). In other words, «salvation of Buddhism is not amoral, it is trans-moral» (Nishida 1966c, 376): it is not attached to self-centered ethical or moral norms, which are human ideals. To decide concerning good or evil merely from the viewpoint of human ideals is not obedience to the will of an absolute God: it is only «a conjecture of God's power through our own will». True salvation, which is present both in Buddhism and Christianity means «to reject moral good and evil, and simply to return to God» (Nishida 1966c, 377). This is religious action,

5. For a comparison between Nishida's view in *A Study of Good* and Illingworth, see Jacinto (1984, 147-157).

which does not pursue an ego-centered goal, and « sinners stand very close to religion (*Tannishō*; Oscar Wilde) ». Nishida finds that Jesus' expression, « Oh my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me » (KJV, Mt. 26,39), would be an example of such religious action (Nishida 1966c, 376-377).

Another aspect of the relationship between God and man is worship, which develops in two directions. The first one is sacrifice and ritual, in which form becomes most important (as in Indian religions). The second (as in Christianity) is that worship in which « emphasis is placed on [our] consciousness of God, [...] egocentric meaning is cast out, [...] nothing is asked from God, and [what is left] is just the expression of our humble submission and hope full of conviction » (Nishida 1966c, 380). This second kind of worship is an « expression of gratitude for God's love, and means the promise to contribute to the work of God, the humble self-confession of our human frailty, and a joyful confidence in God », and this is also the meaning of prayer in Buddhism, in particular the recitation of the Nembutsu in the Pure Land sect (Nishida 1966c, 381).

The central point in all religious lived-experience is the inner conviction that « the Buddha trained spiritually for us » (Nishida 1966c, 349), or as Shinran says: « When I consider deeply the Vow of Amida, which arose from five kalpas of profound thought, I realize that it was entirely for the sake of myself alone » (Shinran 1997b, 679): it is the inner conviction that the whole of the history of salvation happened just for me, that « the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me » (KJV, Gal. 2,20).

## 5. Conclusion

5.1 Nishida's comparison between two universal religions, Christianity and Buddhism, rests on: a) the main concepts of Christianity articulated by mystic writers, some Church Fathers and xviii-xx<sup>th</sup> century philosophers and Christian theologians; b) the main tenets of Pure Land Buddhism; c) the core of all universal religions: the lived-experience of the « just for me ». Since this comparison is made on the basis of a *philosophy of religion* and not on theological grounds, needless to say, there will be specific vital concepts which need to be reworked theologically in each religion.

5.2 Nishida points to many similarities between Buddhism and Christianity. To mention a few: in Buddhism, the Pure Land sect (*jōdo*

*shinshū*) « recognizes a personal existence that is similar to Christianity » (Nishida 1966c, 223). Another similarity is the desire to see God and be united to him. In both religions this desire leads to detachment, that is, to the death and resurrection of the believer. A further similarity lies in the ultimate negation of God. In Christianity this happens in mysticism, as Eckhart says, « if we believe in God, there is no God » (Nishida 1966c, 223-224). Nishida points out another similarity in that religious faith is a basis for our becoming moral human beings, on the basis of our religious faith which results in infinite respect, whenever we transcend morality without being anti-moral or a-moral. This can also be seen in the Pure Land sect of Buddhism when the believer entrusts himself to the Power of the Primal Vow, for « Other Power is none other than the power of the Tathagata's Primal Vow » (Shinran 1997a, 57); which, just as in Christianity, involves a « change of heart » (Shinran 1997b, par. 16, p. 676). We should not « discuss only good and evil, leaving Amida's benevolence out of consideration ». To live in Amida's embrace leads us to transcend morality because when the believer relies solely on Amida's Primal Vow and recites the Marvelous Name, « The nembutsu alone is true and real » (Shinran 1997b, 679).

5.3 In order to see some of the differences, I would like to mention an unnumbered fragment included in the *Fragments Concerning Pure Experience*, in which Nishida characterizes Christianity in the following manner: 1) it fits itself to the individual; 2) it is of easy access; 3) it implies suffering and fervent enthusiasm; 4) it is very sentimental; and 5) it is based on personal relations between God and human beings. Furthermore, his characterization of Buddhism is as follows: 1) it does not place a separate God on the outside; 2) it centers on enlightenment reached by oneself; 3) it considers the tranquility of the heart and mind as fundamental; 4) its basis is not the person but the original body of the Buddha; 5) the tranquility of heart and mind begins in giving up the world; and 6) it is a truly universal religion (Nishida 1966d, 522).

5.4 Nishida responds to the four modern challenges mentioned above (5.2.), that caused the crisis of faith in XIX century Christianity. This is why his concept of religion responds to a modern religious requirement through the following eight aspects: a) interiorization, as an emphasis on the world- and individual-indwelling of the deity (later formulated as « transcendental immanence »); b) individuation, as a personalized « for me alone! »; c) lived-experience, in which religion is basically a love experience; d) embodiment, since religion includes a meaningful socio-historical

bodily dimension; e) both revelation and dogma conceived as historically situated skillful means; f) religious experience that leads to the realization of personality, but not necessarily to old-style human perfection; g) the community of believers is not placed under a hierarchical bureaucracy, be it Christian or Buddhist; and h) an implicit or explicit concept of God as the mystical desert of the Godhead, and as Nothingness, which results in an ungrounded reality.

5.5 «The Viewpoint of Religion» (1919) Lest specialists in Catholic theology consider that Nishida's treatment of religion in the period here considered smacks of «Modernism», I would like to mention that Nishida was also careful to show the viewpoint proper to religion and how it differs from the truth of the sciences. In order to do so, he first examines several concepts of truth (Nishida 1996e, 303-305), and considers the basis of scientific truth from the standpoint of critical theory; stating that these truths are not the only ones because there are other truths deeper than the truths of science. We reach these through the synthetic union of truths derived from lived-experience, such as from emotion, the will and religion (Nishida 1996e, 306-307). In short, religious truths should be interpreted from a religious point of view, and scientific truths from a scientific viewpoint. When this hermeneutical rule is trespassed in either direction, we reach untenable positions (Nishida 1996e, 309).

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## Résumé

The *Study of Religion* (*Shūkyō-gaku*) provient d'un cours d'un an (1913-1914) que Nishida Kitarō ne donna qu'une seule fois dans sa carrière universitaire. Dans ce texte, à part des références aux mystiques et aux penseurs chrétiens primitifs du Moyen-Âge, Nishida tente de mettre en valeur les éléments fondamentaux des religions orientales et occidentales à travers les écrits d'auteurs des XVIII<sup>e</sup>, XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles, notamment ceux qui participaient aux conférences Gifford, Bampton et Hibbert. D'autre part, Nishida tente de repérer les caractéristiques correspondantes de la religion dans le zen et le bouddhisme de la Vraie Terre pure. En résumé, l'approche de Nishida, en ce qui concerne une philosophie de la religion nous donne un aperçu des problèmes rencontrés dans le dialogue christiano-bouddhiste.

## Abstract

*The Study of Religion (Shūkyō-gaku) is an early text from a one-year course, 1913-1914, which Nishida Kitarō imparted only once in his academic career. In this text, apart from references to mystics and to early and medieval Christian thinkers, Nishida tries to point out the basic elements of Eastern and Western religions through the writings of XVIII-XX<sup>th</sup> century authors, among them participants in the Gifford Lectures, the Bampton Lectures and Hibbert Lectures. On the other hand, Nishida tries to find the corresponding characteristics of religion in Zen and True Pure Land Buddhism. In short, Nishida's approach to a philosophy of religion gives us an overview of the problems concerning a Buddhist-Christian dialogue.*