

NISHIDA'S PHILOSOPHICAL RESISTANCE TO THE SECULAR-RELIGION  
BINARY

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## ABSTRACT

It has been common in scholarship to frame Nishida Kitarō's philosophy (西田哲学) as an attempt at overcoming the dualities of Western modernity. But what has been downplayed in this reading is how Nishida re-interprets the concept of religion in a way that challenges modernist theories of religion, with implications that speak to the problematics of the secular-religion binary today. Nishida's view of religion, as an existential form of awareness, and a structuring logic of historical reality, with its own epistemological criteria, contrast with the theoretical accounts that assume religion is opposite to the real—or that religion is subordinate to the secular. By designating religion as a logical category that coincides with the real, Nishida's philosophical standpoint offers a means to not only re-think the relationship between the secular and the religious, but to re-think the relationship between the West and the rest of the world, because if rationality is not a superior category over religion, then the races, cultures, and ethnicities that have been historically subordinated are placed on an equal epistemological footing with Western philosophy and science. In this sense, Nishida's philosophy of religion allows us to think critically about the “problem of religion” and presents a discussion that can also be used to address some of the issues raised within post-colonial studies.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
The Aim of a Historical Reading of Nishida.....	10
The Body of the Argument.....	22
Nishida and the Problem of the Secular-Religion Binary.....	27
2. THE SECULAR-RELIGION BINARY: THE POLITICS OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF RELIGION WITHIN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY.....	30
History of the World-Religions Paradigm.....	31
The Theorization of Religion and the Antithesis of the Secular.....	44
Eurocentrism in the Secular-Religion Binary.....	63
Summary.....	73
3. THE CONCEPT OF <i>SHŪKYŌ</i> IN JAPAN.....	76
The Invention and Debate of the Concept of <i>Shūkyō</i> .....	78
The Beginning of Japanese Philosophical Resistance.....	87
The Revitalization of Asian Knowledge.....	94
Nishida's Re-interpretation of the Category of <i>Shūkyō</i> .....	101
Summary.....	114
4. NISHIDA'S EARLY INVERSION OF THE CATEGORY OF <i>SHŪKYŌ</i> .....	118

The Young Nishida on <i>Shūkyō</i> .....	119
Pure Experience and the Conception of the Good.....	128
Nishida's Criticisms of Western Conceptions of the Good.....	138
Intuition in Self-Awareness.....	142
Summary.....	148
5. NISHIDA'S MIDDLE YEARS: THE SEARCH FOR THE LOGICAL FOUNDATION OF THE HISTORICAL WORLD.....	151
The Unity of Beauty, Morality, and Religion.....	154
Activities as Forms of Historical Expression.....	162
The Concept of <i>Basho</i> .....	167
The Unresolvable Issue within Consciousness.....	179
The Logic of Existence: Nishida's World of Intelligibility.....	181
Self-Contradiction in Epistemology.....	185
The Place of Action-Intuition in Historical Reality.....	191
The Logic of Historical Life.....	194
Summary.....	203
6. NISHIDA'S LATER YEARS: THE LOGIC OF <i>SHŪKYŌ</i> .....	205
Nishida's Concept of Humanity.....	206
The Self-Contradiction of Historical Reality.....	212
The Dialectics of Nishida and Hegel.....	215
Nishida's Last Major Writing.....	222
Nishida's View of the Secular.....	230
Nishida's Global World.....	236

Summary.....248

7. CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS OF THE SECULAR-RELIGION BINARY IN  
RELIGIOUS STUDIES.....250

    The Secularization of Religion Today.....251

    Concluding Thoughts.....263

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....268

## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Richard King, in the essay “The Copernican Turn in the Study of Religion” (2017), argues that one of the gravest problems with naturalistic accounts of religion is that they lack non-Western voices, except as “objects of study,” in the attempt to understand religion as a theoretical object. This is hardly surprising, because the “problem of religion” did not emerge until early modern Europe. King then adds that “we do not find any ‘theorists of religion’ in ‘foreign lands’ precisely because ‘religion’ was neither a category nor an operating assumption in the intellectual and cultural traditions of non-European civilizations.”<sup>1</sup> King then goes on to say that “this realization, however, should cause us to reflect upon our own operating assumptions and the implications of their universalization through the language game of ‘religion.’”<sup>2</sup> While it is debated among post-colonial scholars as to whether or not the category of “religion” has been indigenous to non-European places and regions, one can find within the Japanese context though that the concept of “religion” (*shūkyō* 宗教) emerged as a proper category in Japan around the 1850s. Following its lexicalization, the concept of religion became an object of theoretical and philosophical debate, particularly around the question as to

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<sup>1</sup> Richard King, “The Copernican Turn in the Study of Religion,” in *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. Richard King (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2017), 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

whether Japan had religion or not and/or what kind of group or collectivity in Japan would constitute this phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

This is only half of the story. King's argument that a theoretical object called "religion" never emerged in non-European cultures is not entirely correct, though. As I will argue in this dissertation, in addition to the fact that the concept of religion was not native to Japan, it also became a source for critical reflection among many intellectuals in the Meiji (明治時代, 1868-1912), Taishō (大正時代, 1912-1926), and Shōwa (昭和時代, 1926-1989) periods, and in particular for Nishida Kitarō (西田幾多郎, 1870-1945), the father of the Kyoto School (京都学派), toward positioning many aspects of Japanese thought against predominant dualistic epistemologies and ontologies of Western philosophy. Nishida would also redefine the category of religion in a way that expands its explanatory power, such that it advances an imagining of an alternative modernity, a modernity that is opposed to many of the epistemological and ontological claims that structured the development of Western modernity—the worldview(s) established in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that introduced and legitimized the paradigms of rationality and scientific inquiry. Although Nishida's philosophy changed considerably throughout his life, one can still find that Nishida's view of modernity does originate from a stance that was largely shaped by Japanese intellectual heritages, in particular the logics of Buddhism. But Nishida did not just draw on Buddhist logic: Nishida was indeed trained in Western philosophy, even describing his work as being largely Hegelian. However, as

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<sup>3</sup> See Jason Ānanda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

John Krummel reminds us, one should be careful not to think of Nishida's philosophy as a mere synthetic combination of Hegel and Zen, because Nishida provides a standpoint that surpasses the purview of both of thinkers' worldviews.<sup>4</sup> But, as I will show in this dissertation, Nishida develops a logic of religion that seeks to challenge, explicitly and implicitly, rationalism, scientism, materialism, and other theoretical accounts that can be seen as contributors to what scholars call the "secular" in Western modernity, but in a way that is still relevant to the "problem of religion" today.

What makes this discussion important for the field of religious studies is the fact that Nishida, and many other thinkers of the Kyoto School, have formulated a philosophy of religion that is useful for critiquing the problematics of the "secular-religion binary." One can define the secular-religion binary as a discursive frame that emerged out of Western modernity, which inaugurates the view that the category of religion exists as an opposite to the secular. Within the secular-religion binary is a mythological assumption that there is a natural tendency towards opting out of religion as history proceeds, with a move towards non-religious ways of thinking and being. In this regard, there is an implicit privileging of the secular over the category of religion. To further understand this silent privileging, we have to briefly define what we mean by "the secular." Although the notion of the secular is still debated among scholars,<sup>5</sup> the notion of the secular I am using for this study can be taken from Talal Asad, who argues that secularism can be

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<sup>4</sup> John Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō's Chiasmatic Chorology: Place of Dialectic, Dialect of Place*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 226.

<sup>5</sup> To get a sense of the various definitions of the secular that are discussed among contemporary scholars, see Christian Bryan S. Bustamante, "From Secularism to Post-Secularism: Jurgen Habermas on Religion in a Secular State," *Scientia: the Research Journal of the College of Arts and Sciences*, Liberal Arts Issue (June 2015): 1-20.

understood as both a political doctrine and as an epistemic category.<sup>6</sup> In this dissertation, I will mostly focus on the latter, but it would be problematic to assume there is no connection between the two, and so naturally I will make references to the former as well. Politically, though, as it arose in modern Europe, the secular insists on this imperative of separating religion from the secular institutions existing at the state level.<sup>7</sup> The epistemic category of secularism, as opposed to the political doctrine of secularism, is a bit more subtle: it refers to the philosophical, theoretical, and scientific accounts of the world that legitimize a view of history as this natural tendency towards a disentanglement of religion for the sake of clarifying the world. In this sense, the concept of the secular, as Talal Asad says, “brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life,”<sup>8</sup> such that it assumes the non-religious position—justified under the banner of scientific knowledge—to be the most empirically and factually correct view of the world. The implication of this binary is that in order for a society to modernize, religious truth and traditions are either seen as ideological obstacles to the advancement of a better life or they are viewed as irrelevant, which is to say that they are ineradicable positions that must be either tolerated or must remain outside the secular state or the domain of scientific reason.

Recently, there has been push back against this narrative that frames modernity as a historical time period when people no longer believe in spirits, myths, and magic. Jason

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<sup>6</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 25.

A. Josephson-Storm (formerly known as Jason Ānanda Josephson), for instance, argues that many leading intellectuals and scientists within a variety of “secular” disciplines throughout modernity have been enmeshed in the occult milieu and spiritualist revivals, and that the idea that there was ever a disenchanted world is itself a myth.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it cannot really be said that the Western world has progressively grown more secular, and so the notion of a “secular modernity” itself can be thought of as a problematic term. The argument I am presenting in this dissertation is not incongruent to this claim: in fact, Nishida, himself, as someone who tried to combine Buddhism and Western philosophy, can be viewed as another participant who sought to maintain the aspects of what Josephson-Storm calls “occult mysticism.” While Josephson-Storm was speaking mostly about American or European intellectuals and their persisting interest in the occult and magic, one can just as easily cross the Pacific and find that the interest in “magic” and the “occult” among intellectuals never went away, even after secularization. But the fact that there has always been curious play with the occult and magic does not tell us much about why there has been and still is an unquestioned faith or belief in (the myth of) secularism as an epistemic category. As I see it, the narrative around the secular-religion binary and the argument Josephson-Storm is advancing are not mutually exclusive—a point that even Josephson-Storm admits. This is because there is still a belief in Europe and in the US that such a dichotomy outlines a view of reality, even if the dichotomy itself is false and mythological.

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<sup>9</sup> See Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2017).

While my dissertation is not an attempt to address why this “faith” or belief in the occult still lingers, I am hopeful that this study may provide some clues as to why the epistemological aspects of secularism around the world are resisted and renegotiated. As I will argue in this dissertation, Nishida (among many other Kyoto School philosophers) seeks to re-define the concept of religion, as formulated in Western modernity, and to refuse a collapsing of this category into rationality—which I want to suggest is a resistance against the secular and therefore useful in addressing the problems associated with secular-religion binary today. This is because, in order to demonstrate why the category of religion is significant for understanding how historical reality is created, Nishida claims that the category of religion must be saved from being turned into an abstract, objective category of thought that can be reflected upon on rational terms alone. But, as I want to suggest, if we want to understand why the secular-religion binary is problematic, and why it still exists in academic discussions, another route we can take is to look at the history of philosophy around the world (specifically in the case of Japan) to make sense of why religion has been defended against rationality. But then, we still have to ask, why does a faith in the secular-religion binary assume a trajectory that cheerleads the secular?

What I will demonstrate in Chapter Two is that the epistemic category of the secular was built on the back of philosophical and theoretical discourses that have championed the view that the scientific and/or “rational” framing of the category of religion installs a “clearer” understanding of reality. The term “religion,” then, as viewed from the standpoint of the secular, has come to refer to a heuristic concept within a given

inquiry that seeks to illuminate the behaviors, beliefs, and/or practices of a group or collectivity that express a common sacredness. But in this attempt to theoretically reflect upon what is called “religion” is this implication that the “religious” borders on irrationality and/or borders on superstitious thought. That is to say, the variety of standpoints within the secular has framed religion as a category opposite to the real or subordinate to the real. This point can be detected within Freud’s work, for instance, where he translates the phenomena of religion into a form of infantile neurosis that has no real basis in reality,<sup>10</sup> but this point can also be detected among those who smuggled in the connotations of the secular-religion within their theoretical frameworks: i.e., the functional-structuralist schools of thought, such as that of Durkheim, who associates religion with the collective act of sacralization, which advances this idea that religion is something that is idealized within society.<sup>11</sup> If religion refers to a collective order that idealizes the sacred, then religion will always refer to a set of behaviors that articulate representations of the real—instead of referring to an epistemological standpoint that directly apprehends the real. The implication here is that the mystery of religious thought and behavior is cracked by the scientist who has managed to gain access to a reality the objects of study (i.e. the religious) have not. Religion, then, can be turned into a heuristic object for scientific cataloguing.

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<sup>10</sup> Ali Haghi, “God and Man in Freudian Psychoanalysis: A Critical Examination of Freud’s *Future of an Illusion*,” *Religious Inquiries* 6, no. 12 (2017): 44-45.

<sup>11</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2008), 421-423.

But what happens if the concept of religion is re-interpreted within a non-European or non-Western context in a way that conflicts with the idea that religion is the opposite of idealization or the opposite of an illusory form of consciousness? Nishida argues against turning religious awareness into an object of conceptual knowledge, like in the sciences, because such would presuppose an object or thing called “religion” that exists “out there.” As Nishida suggests, understanding religious awareness is not a matter of apprehending a “reified object” that stands completely outside of subjective awareness, but rather is understood from a standpoint where a bifurcation between subject and object is dismantled. In other words, one aspect of understanding religious awareness means to personally experience what that is—an experience that cannot be realized without the negation of all conceptual objects. The point I want to make here, borrowing from Nishida’s viewpoint, is that the continuing movement towards the scientization of religion reinforces a “secularized worldview,” a worldview that tends to translate, sublimate, or subordinate religious awareness. Thus, in order to make this argument, what I want to make visible in this dissertation is how Nishida’s philosophy (*nishida testugaku* 西田哲学) responds to the foreclosure of religion in modernity by articulating a space for the placement of religion, without re-prioritizing rationality nor religion as such. While Nishida himself is not always directly replying to the secular, despite a few comments he made about it in the last years of his life, his non-dualistic philosophical worldview implicitly is. In this sense, the historical reading I am introducing here is a discussion around the history of Western rationality within modern Japan and how the trajectory towards rationality motivated Nishida’s resistance against reproducing a celebration of

this category. Thus, the story of the relationship between Nishida and Western philosophy should not only be read as a series of inter-philosophical exchange, but as a series of historical events that instantiate acts of philosophical resistance to Western modernity, in the attempt to overcome it.

To be sure, while Nishida does not have a systematic definition of religion, we do get the impression that he sees religion as an indispensable category to human life, in that it is indicative of what lies at the depth of the creative formations of the world. What Nishida calls religious awareness is thought to carry within itself an aspect of the real, because it allows one to make immediate contact with it, but there is no fixed content within this form of awareness, because it refers to an intuitive form of creativity that springs out from the negation of all conceptual objects of the mind.<sup>12</sup> In other words, one aspect of religion refers to a cultivated mode of awareness that opposes any act of idealization, fetishization, or objectification, thereby instantiating an epistemological standpoint that sets the limits of rationality and perhaps many of the heuristic concepts of scientific discourse. But Nishida approaches religion in a structuring sense as well, because religion operates as a logic in a way historical creativity does. Thus, Nishida's search to uncover a logic of place (or a "logic of *topos*") to clarify how historical reality is created is also a search for a view of religion as a structuring logic. As a logic that articulates a structuring of the historical world, Nishida's notion of religion can be understood as a category that refuses to be subordinated to the real.

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<sup>12</sup> David Dilworth, "Nishida Kitaro: Nothingness as the Negative Space of Experiential Immediacy," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1973): 466-467.

### The Aim of a Historical Reading of Nishida

I want to caution against painting Nishida as a kind of conservative or an antiquarian reactionary defending religion against the assault of rationality, as do Kierkegaard or Schleiermacher. This is because Nishida is neither categorically opposed to science nor to the rationalist mainstream of Western philosophy; more so, Nishida just does not see Western reason as the highest intellectual standpoint in terms of understanding the real.<sup>13</sup> Instead, Nishida sees that there is a final ground to all things and to all forms of knowing, which also serves as a foundation for the standpoint of reason. This final ground, which Nishida calls a “logic of place” (*basho* 場所), is not something that can be turned into an object of thought, though, because it refers to the placeholder for all modes of awareness and modes of knowledge, religious and rational alike. In this regard, Nishida’s foundation for all historical reality is foundationless, and, as a result, always resistant to any attempt at objectification, since it functions more as the precondition for the creative formations of the historical world rather than an object that can be studied scientifically.<sup>14</sup> As Nishida argues, rationality is indeed important for the process of self-determination, but religion (in particular, the cultivation of religious awareness) is just as important because it points to a more primordial and concrete form of awareness, an awareness that shares an immediacy with the absolute, or with what one

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<sup>13</sup> Nishitani Keiji, *Nishida Kitarō: the Man and His Thoughts*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku and James Heisig (Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications, 2016), 67.

<sup>14</sup> Mayuko Uehara, “Japanese Aspects of Nishida’s Basho: Seeing the “Forms without Form,” in *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy 4: Facing the 21st Century*, ed. Wing Keung Lam and Ching Yuen Cheung (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2009), 158.

might describe as the creative spirit of God. One may think of this as a re-prioritization of religion over the secular, but this would assume that such categories are objective forms of thought. On the contrary, Nishida argues that a religious standpoint is not really a standpoint at all, but a concrete form of knowing or awareness that includes intellectual thought.<sup>15</sup> In fact, since *basho* grounds both religion and rationality, any claim of an absolute privilege between the two is impossible, and so *basho* operates as a “third-term” that makes these two forms of experiences necessary and equal in the pursuit of self-realization. Without the cultivation of rationality and religious awareness, it becomes more difficult for a cosmopolitan world to emerge.

The goal of this historical reconstruction then is to make visible Nishida’s philosophy of religion and his resistance against rationality as a universal category and to show how Nishida’s philosophical resistance can be used today to address the “problem of religion” today. I will argue that Nishida seeks to re-interpret the category of religion, by transmuting the connotations of this category from existing on the side of “irrationality,” to moving it to the side of creativity and liberation—which I will argue represents a subtle inversion of the many leading theories of religion found in Western modernity. This move of defending religious awareness is a consistent one throughout Nishida’s philosophical trajectory, in which he claims that religious knowledge alludes to that which is not reducible to philosophical and scientific objectification, since religious knowledge expresses itself as another mode of creative awareness that exists as part of the logical structuring of reality. In other words, religion, for Nishida, refers to the

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<sup>15</sup> Nishida Kitarō, “Towards a Philosophy of Religion with the Concept of a Pre-Established Harmony as Guide,” trans. David Dilworth, *Eastern Buddhist* 3, no. 1 (1970): 37-39.

creativity that constitutes the structuring of reality, and is not a copy or representation of it.<sup>16</sup> Although Nishida himself, as penned a few days before death, would describe his project as a search for the “historically active-self,” in which he says, “after long years of reflection I believe that I have been able to clarify the mode of thought of the historically acting self—that is to say, the logic of historical creativity.”<sup>17</sup> The implications of what Nishida describes as the “logic of historical creativity” cannot be contextualized solely through the language of epistemology, because understanding what this “historically active-self” refers to cannot be reduced to the problem of cognition. Perhaps one might frame Nishida’s search as an attempt to resolve the problems of epistemology, “metaphysics,” and ethics all at the same time.

Thus, as Nishida asserts, this logic of historical creativity can be distinguished from the logic of substance found in Western modernity and Greek philosophy because it requires one to formulate a logic that begins from the standpoint of existence, or from the standpoint of one’s primordial subjectivity rather, that refuses to externalize the object of awareness. One plausible interpretation of Nishida’s claim here is that the inquiry into what is real can never be divorced from the object outside of it and so this un-detachable subject-object relationship forms the basis for a religious view of the world. To clarify this point further: Nishida argues that one cannot define religion from an objective standpoint, because the starting point for understanding religion depends on one’s first-

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<sup>16</sup> Stylianos Papalexandropoulos, “Two Types of Religion in the Last Essay of Nishida Kitarō,” *Hikaku Bunka Zasshi: The Annual of Comparative Culture* 6 (1995): 39.

<sup>17</sup> Nishida Kitarō, “My Logic,” in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. and trans. James Heisig, Thomas Kasulis, and John Maraldo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 668.

person experience, where there is an internal demand that continuously invites the knower to address the existential contradictions that afflict it. But, within this pursuit, there is a “vanishing point” that occurs in this existential depth, where the subject and object collapse as markers of distinction and all that is left are the creative actions of an embodied intuitive-awareness within the flow of historical reality. What Nishida calls “religious awareness” then is this dialectical relationship between the subject and object, between the self and the absolute, which operates in the fashion of affirmation-*qua*-negation, where in a deeper realization of oneself arises out of one’s ongoing confrontation with one’s own self-contradictions. For Nishida, this is logically possible because a true absolute is inherently paradoxical, and in order to truly grasp the paradoxical logic of the absolute, one must let go of formal logic and plunge into the bottomless contradictions between existence and nothingness, in order to awaken one’s awareness as an expression of the real. Thus, in order to fully appreciate Nishida’s notion of the “historically active self,” I think one must accept that the very structure of reality is ineluctably paradoxical as it continuously forms itself.

Nishida’s use of the term “historical creativity” should not be read as only an elucidation of the creative formations of the world in the purely intellectual and artistic sense. As hinted at earlier, the logic of historical creativity must be read within the language of religion as well, because Nishida claims that the logic of historical creativity refers to the process of uncovering the religiosity of the entire historical world. Nishida writes: “Insofar as the self is a historical reality born from the historical world, acting in the historical world, and dying to the historical world, it must be religious. We should

speak in this way in respect of the ground of the self.”<sup>18</sup> Here, Nishida suggests that the very ground of historical reality cannot be understood outside the context of religion because the very logic that defines historical creativity is the same logic that characterizes the process of religious awareness. In this sense, as Hisakazu Inagaki and J. Nelson Jennings, tell us, Nishida’s logic of historical creativity is a “logic of historical change, a structure whereby the world comes to project the self within the self.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, what Nishida means by historical creativity is not the succession of facts or events that make up historical moments as such, but the creative processes that produce history, and so religion is a term to describe a structuring logic that underlies historical reality seeking to explain the processes that drive one to act, reflect, and create the things historians call facts or events.

I will argue that this position of religion as part of the structuring logic of the creative formations of the historical world stand in contrast to many sociological and psychological views of religion throughout modernity, views that theorize religious awareness as an object that is constituted by more powerful forces in the world—i.e. the psyche, economic ideology, social-political structures, and so on. Therefore, as I will demonstrate, the category of religion is an important structuring principle for Nishida in that it allows him to position his own philosophical worldview against Western philosophical and scientific views of religion in a way that it makes intelligible the

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<sup>18</sup> Nishida Kitarō, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, trans. David Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 109.

<sup>19</sup> Hisakazu Inagaki and J. Nelson Jennings, *Philosophical Theology and East and West Dialogue* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 60.

hegemonic dominance of Western epistemology. Nishida argues that Western modernity's renunciation of any religious standpoint that seeks a non-dualistic orientation of the world has created views of the world that are both incomplete and problematic, because it asserts a form of transcendence that is dualistic in structure. Within much of Western modernity, reason, for instance, has implicitly advocated for a transcendence that depends on negating the other (i.e., religion as an object of knowledge). For Nishida, the implicit hierarchy emerging out from this form of transcendence might explain why modernity has moved towards the exclusion of national, ethnic, cultural, and racial diversity in terms of displaying the different forms of epistemologies around the world. That is to say, a dualistic form of transcendence illustrates why traditional forms of knowledge, such as religious knowledge, are cast as mere stages in the linear process of evolutionary development. In short, I want to argue that one can read Nishida's philosophy in a way that addresses some of the problems associated with the secular-religion dichotomy today—particularly, the problem of subordinating non-Western epistemologies, because the “push back” that is being observed here is against the secular mythology that characterizes science and rationality as ideal modes of clarifying the real while situating religion on the side of superstition and illusion.

As briefly mentioned earlier, I think it is important to emphasize that Nishida is not interested in rejecting all things Western, because part of the process of self-actualization for Japan, as Nishida saw it, was to modernize in light of the West. What this has meant for Japan is that Japanese intellectuals could learn some things from the West—be it Western forms of art, philosophy, or science, etc. In fact, Nishida's

philosophy seeks to combine, as it were, Western and Eastern thought in a way that legitimizes a logical ground that exemplifies a mutual penetration of the contributions made in both.<sup>20</sup> That is to say, Nishida certainly recognizes the advantages and privileges of the West and therefore seeks to link the East and West through a kind of “inter-civilizational logic” that is not confined to any regional particular. One can interpret this move as a rejection of both Eastern and Western excellence then, because Nishida’s project is not an attempt to exalt Japanese intellectual thought at the expense of Western thought, to weave Western thought into the “spirit of the East,” nor is this an attempt to secretly re-assert Western universals, but rather to find a critical foundation that could support multiple self-determinative (and philosophical) trajectories. As a result, one may find it challenging to even label Nishida as an “Eastern thinker,” situating him more as a thinker who stands between both the East and West.

Nishida concedes that Western philosophical discourse was more “noetic,” or more “rationally” oriented, with its culture being more “scientific” in spirit, than the cultures of the East. But this cultural attribute of rationality is not to be taken as a site of absolute privilege, because an intuitive mind, a characteristic found more in Japan, as Nishida claims, grants access to the real in ways the rational mind cannot.<sup>21</sup> Contrary to the critiques that claim that Nishida participated in reverse Orientalism, I want to argue that Nishida is not someone who is reversing the right of veridical access, who bestows

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<sup>20</sup> Nishitani, *Nishida Kitarō: The Man and His Thoughts*, 52-57, 66.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-64. Also, see Nishida Kitarō, *The Fundamental Problems of Philosophy: The World of Action and the Dialectical World*, trans. David Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1970), 237-254.

Japanese intellectual heritage as the bearer of historical truth. This is because Nishida posits the foundation of creative reality as ultimately groundless, with all things and beings forming and dissolving in this groundless ground. If Nishida's notion of "the place of absolutely nothing" (*zettai mu no basho* 絶対無の場所) is a non-objectifiable standpoint with no privileged center, then any attempt to naturalize a cultural hierarchy would only suggest another reification—representing another shallow attempt at self-understanding. Rather, the contrast Nishida characterizes between Eastern and Western philosophical views is more of a grappling of how to create a more global intellectual discourse given the differences in cultural and intellectual practices. In fact, one of the steps that is necessary in order to build a world-philosophical dialogue, according to Nishida, is to bring together a Western standpoint of science and philosophy and the religious standpoint of intuitive knowing.<sup>22</sup> But if epistemological frameworks foreclose religion or religious awareness as an independent epistemic stance in the world, where there is no place for religious awareness in the pursuit of knowledge, then, as Nishida argues, each particular world is at risk of reifying itself, with its own self-identity becoming too ego-focused, thus limiting its own standpoint from realizing a deeper and more cosmopolitan view of the world.

To be sure, Nishida recognizes that science (the natural sciences or the human sciences, and so on), which has become a significant part of the foundation for Western modernity, is one form of inquiry, but part of the problem with scientific rationality was that it helped create a mythology that legitimized a break from its religious past.

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<sup>22</sup> Nishitani, *Nishida Kitarō: the Man and His Thoughts*, 65.

According to Nishida, Christianity, like Buddhism in the East, offered standpoints that resist the totality of Western rationality, but such standpoints, since the formation of modernity, have often been relegated in favor of scientific abstractions, which, for Nishida, reflects a tendency towards self-idealization when universalized. Nishida inspires reflection on these problematics found in the theoretical studies of scientific investigation in one part of the essay “The Problem of Japanese Culture” (1938) (*Nihon Bunka no Mondai* 日本文化の問題),<sup>23</sup> where he points out that one of the issues with scientific analysis until this point is that the theories produced within this standpoint have converted the object of study (the Orient) into a subordinate object in the service of maintaining self-veneration. In other words, European cultures have deployed scientific analysis in a way that have exalted not just rationality, but its own culture at the expense of non-European logic and culture.

European culture, deriving from a Greek culture which was intellectual and theoretical in character and dedicated to an inquiry into true fact, has a great theoretical structure behind it, on the basis of which European scholars criticize different cultures and frictions among the various cultures for several thousand years, a certain theoretical archetype has been developed, which Europeans consider the one and only cultural archetype. On this basis they conceive of stages of cultural development, in terms of which Oriental culture is seen as still lingering in an undeveloped stage. Oriental culture must, if developed, become identical with the Occidental one, they believe. Even such a great thinker as Hegel shared this view. But I think a problem arises here.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Nishida Kitarō, “The Problem of Japanese Culture,” in *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, ed. Ryusaku Tsunoda, Donald Keene, and William Theodore de Bary and trans. Masao Abe (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1958).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 861.

But there is a sub-textual point that Nishida is also inserting in this passage: that is, the tendency among Western philosophers to universalize their own philosophical and cultural standpoint, by crowding out alternative philosophical standpoints that are not found in Western logics, can function as the seeds of a new colonial order.

How is a logic of colonialism linked to a rejection of religious awareness though? Let us contrast the methodological approaches of the sciences with Nishida's viewpoint that takes religion as an independent epistemological stance in the world. The scientific standpoint(s), Nishida argues, mainly moves from the object to the subject, from the external environment to the self, but the religious standpoint, as in the case of Buddhism for instance, is about taking the heart/mind as its central object of investigation. In other words, religion seeks to understand the self by investigating and deconstructing it as part of the very process of understanding reality, instead of looking to the object "out there," and then to include the self in that analysis, because it is not nature and/or the object of study that is transformed as such through the process of investigation, but all of reality, through the transformation of the interior of the knower herself. Nishida illuminates this difference between what he calls "the object logic" (*taishō ronri* 対象論理) and what he describes as "the logic of mind" in the essay "Problem of Japanese Culture," stating that, "Roughly speaking, we might say that Occidental logic is the logic that takes things as its object, while Oriental logic is the logic that takes mind as its object."<sup>25</sup> To characterize "Occidental logic" as a logic that is totally disinterested in the mind is certainly an

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 863.

exaggeration, but one way to redeem Nishida's basic point here is to return to what he said in 1934, when he described the differences between Eastern and Western thought:

How can the cultural forms of East and West be distinguished, as observed from a metaphysical standpoint? I believe they can be distinguished in that the West conceives of the ground of reality as Being, and the East conceives of the ground of reality as Nothingness.<sup>26</sup>

The point that can be extracted here is that if we begin from a ground of nothingness, then the religious standpoint, as an independent epistemological mode of inquiry, must take the mind fully as its object of investigation—to begin and end there. In other words, the religious standpoint can never separate a logic of mind from the pursuit of knowledge, because by centering the mind and heart as the core object of investigation, the very ground(s) that make self-idealization possible (i.e., Being) become(s) the very object negated in the pursuit of expanding self-awareness. Nishida realizes that rendering a logic of religious awareness supports a different kind of foundation for the historical world, a foundation claiming that a deeper form of self-awakening depends on addressing the problem of the self as an infinite nest of contradictions. But this is why, as Nishida argues, there are theoretical standpoints within Western modernity that imply a cultural superiority, because what is foreclosed within Western modernity is the practice of self-negation *qua* self-affirmation, where (historical) self-awareness deepens through its own self-deconstruction.

The point I am trying to make here is that Nishida is not so much critical of science as such, but is rather critical of the de facto “object-logic” positions that emerge from the scientification of all things—in part because it limits the potentiality of

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<sup>26</sup> Curtis Rigsby, “Nishida on God, Barth, and Christianity,” *Asian Philosophy* 19, no. 2 (2009): 130.

individual and cultural realization(s), which could otherwise bring a more cosmopolitan particular. Implicitly, then, this tells us that what is rejected the most in all of this, though, is the idea that the philosophy of the West holds the privilege of intellectual greatness. Questioning this self-proclaimed privilege, Nishida writes: “Must we assume Occidental logic to be the only logic, and must the Oriental way of thinking be considered simply a less-developed form?”<sup>27</sup> One way to read the cultural and philosophical exchange between Nishida and the West then is that it is the sheer dominance of Western ontology and epistemology that is in question, because, as Nishida claims, Japan, as a country that took religious practice seriously, cannot be deemed primitive or inferior to Western culture on the basis of having a different logic of the world. To the contrary: Nishida argues that Japan has something to offer the world, precisely because the foundation of Japanese intellectual history does not hail from Greek philosophy—as is the case with Western philosophy.<sup>28</sup> As such, Nishida’s search for a logic of historical creativity that is determined to be an alternative to the dualities found in Western modernity is in part meant to demonstrate to the West (and themselves) that a world-dialogue is possible, and that Japanese philosophy has good reason to participate in this global dialogue.

My motivation for writing this dissertation is to suggest that there is something that is lost if we ignore the implications of Nishida’s philosophy of religion. The most important implication one can draw from this historical investigation is that Nishida’s philosophy of religion constitutes a challenge to the secular formation of Western

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 862.

<sup>28</sup> Nishida Kitarō, “Der geschichtliche,” trans. Leon Krings, *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* 1 (2016): 218-219.

modernity that seek to subordinate religion and reduce religious awareness to the categories and processes of scientization. If Nishida is correct about religion and/or religious awareness as expressing a logic that cannot be found in Western modernity, then there is a need to not only include this aspect of things within the conversation on the “problem of religion,” but to further investigate the assumptions that constitute the secular as both a political and an epistemological phenomenon that crowd out alternative intellectual histories. In this regard, the implication of this study is also an attempt to bring to light the hidden Eurocentrism found in the secular-religion binary.

### The Body of the Argument

I will proceed by first discussing the history of the secular-religion binary in philosophy and social theory. The goal of this chapter is to show how social theory, philosophy, and the social sciences have contributed to the development of the secular-religion binary, a binary that places the category of religion as an antithesis to an ascribed reality that assumes a real “out there.” In the presumption of a reality where religion is seen as an opposite to the real, an opposite to the secular, is an intellectual history that has supported an intellectual exclusion of non-Western subjectivity. This is because the history of the concept of religion has been entwined with the history of colonial politics, such that the label of “religion,” imposed onto and later internalized by non-Europeans, would lend itself to the history of Western imperialism. Fundamental to this theorization of religion as a heuristic object in intellectual history was a tendency towards deeming the “other’s” worldview as primitive and infantile, in part because they were “objects” of

knowledge, instead of “subjects” of knowledge. That is to say, I am going to argue that the secular has told the story that the colonized had possessed superstition and not real philosophy or science. When intellectuals began to theorize the possibility that non-European cultures had religion, it was deemed in the same breath that such religions were not the same as real philosophy or science. Religions were thought to be superstitions that can be tolerated (and studied). In this regard, the category of religion became the intermediate point between “intolerable superstition” and what was constituted as the real. But in the end, since religion leaned in the direction of superstition, it represented an inferior approach to understanding the world when stacked against philosophy or science.

The point of making visible this intersection between the history of the concept of religion and Western colonialism is to suggest that “to theorize religion is simultaneously to theorize race.”<sup>29</sup> What I interpret this to mean is that the secular and the scientization of religion has some of its roots in the rank ordering of races and ethnicities. William David Hart summarizes this process: “white supremacy, the transatlantic slave trade, and African colonization, as artifacts of that desire [imperial desire], are foundational events in the emergence of theories of religion.”<sup>30</sup> For Hart, as well as for the post-colonial critique in the field of religious studies, it is problematic to view the history of the theorization of religion in the West apart from the history of racialization. This is not to say that the category of religion becomes an equivalent to the category of race or that it is

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<sup>29</sup> William David Hart, “Theorizing Race and Religion,” in *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. Richard King (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2017), 569.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 563.

another category in the racial classification system altogether; rather, to ignore the politics of race that embeds the history of theorizing religion raises the problem of “epistemic racism” in contemporary intellectual discourse.

The point I am making here is not to exclude the fact that the history of Western intellectual thought has been influenced by religious ideas. The origins of the secular were largely a response to the dominance of Christian theology, and the theories of religion that began to form from modernity were very much framed by scholars who studied Christianity. In this regard, theories around the object of religion were largely influenced by Christian ideas. But the mythology of the secular has mostly kept this aspect of its history hidden from its own view of things, preferring to view the history of itself as a story of reason and progress triumphing over religious passions and superstitions. Thus, the secular-religion binary has seemed to operate, to some extent at least, as a kind of strategic construction in the aim of maintaining an intellectual hegemony in the world. The goal of this chapter is to discuss how this history sets the stage for how Japanese intellectuals would view religion, rationality, and secularism, and to make relevant the implications of this history in contemporary discussion.

Chapter Three will start by investigating the historical-intellectual context prior to Nishida’s philosophical career. As I will argue, the theorization of religion in Japan in the Meiji (1868-1912) would set the stage for Nishida to re-interpret religion in a way that challenges Western constructions of it. Following the importation of the category of religion into Japan, there was a tendency among Japanese intellectuals to internalize and reflect on the category of religion in a way that elevated Japanese Buddhism while

denigrating Christianity—a move that was not necessarily accepted by Nishida himself. In this chapter, I will show how Nishida reformulates religion in such a way that refuses a reduction of religion to a particular religious organization and instead seeks to uncover how religion expresses a logic of self-identity that is inherently creative. The rest of the chapter will be devoted to summarizing Nishida’s view of religion as it evolved throughout his writing and to illustrate how Nishida’s commitment to the concept of religion serves to elucidate a logic of self-awareness and its relationship to the real. I will argue then that Nishida’s re-interpretation of religion can be read as a form of resistance against Western modernity.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six are a discussion of Nishida’s philosophy as it appears in his oeuvre chronologically—with special attention given to his view on religion. In order to understand how Nishida’s philosophy of religion can be read as a resistance against Western modernity, one has to discuss, broadly at least, the various claims Nishida brought against the dualistic aspects of Western philosophy. Many scholars have divided Nishida’s thought up into three different time periods (early, middle, and late Nishida), which I will honor in this dissertation.<sup>31</sup> But through this chronological presentation, I will try to show how Nishida was always concerned with the concept of religion, from very early on, and always concerned with ensuring its place

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<sup>31</sup> There is debate around how to divide Nishida up into the different philosophical periods. While some commentators have divided his work up into five stages, others have done three. According to John Krummel, Nishida could be divided up into four stages: a) the psychological period (1911-1915); the voluntarist period (1917-1923); the epistemological period (1924-1932); and the dialectical period (1934-1945). However, I do not see a serious difference between the first and second period, given that both periods are concerned with resolving problems associated with the subject. John Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō’s Chiasmatic Chorology: Place of Dialectic, Dialect of Place*, 7-8.

in intellectual history. This tells us that the concept of religion was never an add-on, a later adaptation of sorts—instead, it was always formulated as a fundamental logic that sought to undermine epistemological and ontological standpoints that subordinate religion or religious awareness. While these chapters may seem like a review of Nishida’s philosophy and his view of religion, they serve the point of showing how the concept of religion functions to clarify the cosmological relationship between the self and historical reality all throughout his life.

One of the points I am trying to make in these chapters is to clarify how the category of religion, as it pertains to Nishida’s motivation to articulate the sorts of criticisms he launched against Western philosophy, is a philosophical necessity in order to address the problem(s) of Western modernity. Nishida argues that historical and social scientific methodologies aim to extract universal or ideal structures that characterize behaviors, beliefs, or experiences, but the problem is that they tend to objectify what cannot be objectified—especially religious awareness, which for Nishida evades standard forms of rational criticism.<sup>32</sup> Thus, as I want to argue in the conclusion, Nishida’s simultaneous move to dethrone the scientification of religion and to legitimize religious awareness as a proper epistemological standpoint can be turned into a resource for a critical reflection on the problematics of the secular-religion binary today. In terms of the broader point I am making in this dissertation, bringing Nishida’s philosophy of religion into conversation on the secular-religion binary reveals to us the hidden Eurocentrism that exists in our attempts to resolve the “problem of religion.”

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<sup>32</sup> John Maraldo, “How Nishida Individualized Religion,” in *Japanese Philosophy in the Making I: Crossing Paths with Nishida* (Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications, 2017), 149.

### Nishida and the Problem of the Secular-Religion Binary

Although Nishida was searching for a logic of historical creativity that breaks the subject-object, mind-body, theory-praxis, one-many binaries (among others) found in Western philosophy, what is not so clearly understood is how Nishida's philosophy of religion seeks to challenge rationality as a foundational or universal category of thought. For instance: because Nishida did not philosophize religion as an opposite to the real, as an irrational form of consciousness, the problem of what to do with the irrational aspects of reality, i.e., religious awareness, would never really arise from a Nishidian standpoint. This is because, from Nishida's point of view, what is rational is in part constituted by what is irrational in the social-historical world, because the absolute expresses itself as a logic of (absolute) contradiction. As it pertains to religion, Nishida argues that a concept of religion can never be forced into a strait-jacket of a rational-irrational binary, because religion expresses itself as a logic that is contradictory as its foundation. What I will argue is that this point tells us that the secular-religion binary, if it is to maintain its ties to Enlightenment rationality, cannot sustain itself as a discursive frame, because, if Nishida is correct about religion being constituted by a (self)-contradictory logic, then how can one frame the concept of religion from a secular standpoint in a way that does not dismiss this viewpoint that believes that the foundation of all reality is paradoxical in structure? This is one of the conundrums I want to illuminate in this dissertation.

What makes this historical reading of Nishida's philosophy of religion as a source for critically reflecting on the secular-religion binary relevant to religious studies is that it makes visible certain tensions that may need to be addressed within Western theories of

religion. In sociological or anthropological theories of religion, for instance, there is a danger of resurrecting the secular-religion binary, because it opts for a translation of the participants' voice into the more respected language of the secular. The problem with this is its tendency towards naturalizing the scientific standpoint as the "de facto" position for understanding religion and then treating the participants' voice on religion as data that can further the goals and interests of the disciplinary enterprise. The concern here is that without the participants' own theoretical view or critique of religion and the secular as part of the very conversation around the "problem of religion," a scientization of religion, as it stands now, can either recuperate the problem of a kind of Eurocentrism that can create the conditions for the emergence of epistemic colonialism or epistemic racism.

Nishida seeks to overcome such an East-West dichotomy by formulating a logic that includes and negates Eastern and Western logics. As Nishida envisions, this "inter-civilizational logic" that touches the hearts of all historical particulars would refuse any intellectual reduction and in fact liberates philosophy from its own parochialism. In order to free philosophy from its own narrow scope, Nishida seeks to formulate a view of interiority that disrupts the essentialism of the subject-object dichotomy in a way that lends support for the problem of intellectual exclusion. By placing meaning outside the modernistic subject, and into the contexts of the world, Nishida's concept of *basho* (場所) and logic of religion worked together to lay down the conditions for a worldhood that accepts radical differences as part of the creativity of historical reality. Thus, a key implication of this dissertation is that there is perhaps a need to consider Nishida's point

that non-Western theoretical and philosophical views of religion should enter the conversation on the “problem of religion.”

## CHAPTER 2

THE SECULAR-RELIGION BINARY: THE POLITICS OF THE CONSTRUCTION  
OF RELIGION WITHIN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Since the 1980s, there has been a shift within religious studies towards criticizing the historical implications of the category of “religion.” This new methodological frame, what is now called the “post-colonial critique,” deploys a kind of critical historicism that aims at illuminating how the category of “religion” was invented, theorized, and reproduced, beginning with the Enlightenment and continuing all the way through the formation of religious studies departments from the 1960s on. But the concept of religion itself represents a local construction, because it has not always been a concept that is native to all cultures of the world. The problem of accepting “religion” as an inherent category is that it reflects a certain scientific vision of the world, a vision that believed that the behaviors, ideas, and attitudes of non-Europeans could be abstracted and studied systematically. Underlying this scientific vision though is this assumption that the object of study, “religion,” is subordinate to the real—in particular, the language of the secular. In other words, what we find in the secular is a set of formalized discourses that assumes a distance from the discourse of religion.

What I will discuss in this chapter is the history of the concept of “religion” as it formed during the Enlightenment, tracing its evolution through the history of the social sciences, social theory, and philosophy in the West (in particular, Europe). As one will see, the positioning of “religion” as a category that is opposite to the real was not only a product of missionaries, colonial officials, and scholars within the department of

comparative religion, but also a product of many leading Western philosophers and theorists—especially among materialist philosophers, such as Feuerbach and Marx, who sought to locate “religion” within a web of causal forces that sought to explain its superstitious qualities, with hope of putting an end to them. The rise of the concept of religion in sociology, anthropology, psychology, and other intellectual fields was the beginning of the secular-religion binary as the default position within the intellectual history of the West. But, as I will argue in the later chapters, it is the sub-textual meanings of the concept of religion as it developed among many Western intellectuals that became the site of epistemological negotiation in the Kyoto School—in particular for Nishida Kitarō. The point of this chapter is to illuminate the intellectual context that would eventually serve as one site of resistance for Nishida, and how this persistent context presents another “problem of religion” when positioned against Nishida’s view of religion.

### The History of the World-Religions Paradigm

Since the move within religious studies towards a post-colonial critique in the 1980s, a great deal of research has been done on the history of the concept of “religion” as an academic construction. Much of this research has revealed that the concept of “religion” arose out of controversies that took place in seventeenth and eighteenth-century England.<sup>33</sup> As this research tells us, the discourses that made up the basic

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<sup>33</sup> Peter Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4.

ingredients for the development of this concept had indeed come out of the Reformation, the Renaissance, and the Classical Age, but it was not until the Enlightenment that one sees the formation of “religion” as an objective category—one which could serve as a heuristic device in the attempt to relate disparate beliefs and practices back to Western universals.<sup>34</sup> As Peter Harrison explains: “The concept of ‘religion’ involved the relocation of religious faith into a new sphere, a sphere in which the presumed substance of religion could serve as an object of rational investigation.”<sup>35</sup> What this revelation suggested to Enlightenment thinkers was that reason itself could be deployed in a way that not only helps to understand the natural world, but, deployed in a way that renders reason itself the criterion and judge of revelation. In other words, reason was elevated to a new status, replacing the “divine judgment” of the Middle Ages with its own system of veracity, while revelation would be relegated, turned into an object that can be reflected upon rationally.<sup>36</sup>

The sub-textual meanings of the word “religion” have not always implied a sense of irrationality. The term “religion” derives from the Latin word *religio*—which historically meant the retracing of “the lore of the ritual” of one’s ancestors. As it gained currency within the Roman Empire, *religio* became nearly synonymous with the notion of tradition (*traditio*), and so *religio* came to refer to practices that paid respect to the gods or to ancient ritual performances. Scholars have found that Jews and Christians

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 32.

within the Roman Empire did not think of themselves as religious, and neither did the Romans: In fact, Romans thought of Christians as “atheists” insofar as they did not have a common cultural identity that participated in a recognizable *traditio*. But, in the third century CE, the term *religio* changed, and the Christian writer Lactantius argued that *religio* derives from *re-ligare*, which meant to bind together or to link—or, more broadly, speaking, it came to mean the worship of the true through a bond of piety. What this denoted, then, was the covenant between (the one true) God and “man,” while those who fell outside of this normative frame were immediately thought of as “pagans” (from *paganus*: village idiots) and as superstitious.<sup>37</sup> The significance of this redefinition was that *religio* would eventually serve to establish the monotheistic frame of Christianity as the normative feature for what a religion is, and so “the comparative method...serves as little more than as a rhetorical technique to naturalize a claim of Christian absolutism.”<sup>38</sup>

One of the more commonly cited examples of this history of converting a theological concept into a formalized category is the term “ritual.” According to Asad, the term “ritual” has a history in Christian discourse. During the medieval period, “ritual” referenced intellectual and practical disciplinary prescriptions within Christianity in the aim of cultivating virtue—in particular, those that have been cultivated through the use of ascetic practices or judicial torture as a means of demonstrating truth.<sup>39</sup> But the concept

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<sup>37</sup> Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India, and the “Mystical East”* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 35-36.

<sup>38</sup> Hugh Nicholson, “Classic Comparative Theology and the Study of Religion,” in *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. Richard King (New York City: Columbia University Press), 78.

<sup>39</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 56-59, 83-87.

of ritual has come to mean something radically different today—it is now generally thought of as a universal category, alluding to the various forms of repetitious action that are performed in accordance with a moral prescription. Another example of how a term is redefined over time is with the term “mysticism.” “Mysticism,” as a concept, has its origins in seventeenth-century France, and it was originally coined as a way to describe and understand the various types of Christian practices that were intended to gain religious knowledge through extraordinary experiences or revelations of the divine.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the linguistic antecedents of the term “mysticism,” much like the term “religion,” have an even longer history: many scholars suggest that this term derives from the Greek word *mustikos*, which derives from the Greek root, *muo*—meaning, to close. In other words, this term came to denote the practice of “closing one’s eyes” or “closing one’s lips” among many esoteric groups within the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the term “mysticism” has come to mean something quite different today than it did in the Graeco-Roman world—namely, it has become a reference to any occult practice around the world. Within philosophy, the term “mysticism” has taken on an even stronger connotation, referring to an anti-philosophical position that seeks to transcend the laws of contradiction and thus protect itself from any sort of rational criticism.

Much of this history orbiting around the normative paradigm of Christianity helps explain why the variety of analytical categories developed in religious studies cannot be easily found in other places around the world. Or, even within Abrahamic traditions:

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<sup>40</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India, and the “Mystical East,”* 7.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

making the definition of religion fit the category of Judaism<sup>42</sup> and Islam has certainly required mental tricks, because one can neither reduce Islamic and Judaic communities to definitions of individual beliefs, nor can one assume that all Islamic and Judaic communities exhibit a distinction between the secular and the religious.<sup>43</sup> And so what the post-colonial critique tells us is that the analytical term “religion” did not appear in the literature of non-Western cultures until after these cultures had made contact with European Christians.<sup>44</sup> This is not to say that other cultures of the past and/or present do not or did not engage in this process of understanding alterity, of making sense of the differences of other groups—a process which is arguably natural. Rather, the critique here is of the projection of religion as a universal, a priori category—one which has not lived up to its heuristic promise.

One clear example of this history of “discovering religions” around the world can be seen in the case of Buddhism. In the first half of the nineteenth century, it was said that Buddhism was “discovered” by the West insofar as it began to appear in literature and scholarly journals in the English, German, and French speaking worlds. Of course, there were periodic encounters between the people in the West and the followers of what

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<sup>42</sup> According to Daniel Boyarin, the construction of Judaism as an analytical category arose more out of the systemic and polemical needs of Christian hegemonic discourse, emerging only as an “other” to Christianity, than from the desires and impulses of modernity. See Daniel Boyarin, “Nominalist “Judaism” and the Invention of Religion,” in *Religion, Theory, and Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. Richard King (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2017), 23-35.

<sup>43</sup> See Victoria Harrison, “The Pragmatics of Defining Religion in a Multicultural World,” *The International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 59, no. 3 (2006): 133-152.

<sup>44</sup> Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 2.

we call Buddhism today, but such encounters did not really contribute to the rise of what we now call Buddhism as a proper religion, because there was no organizing term or title called Buddhism as such. And while it is true that there were reports of travelers, missionaries, and diplomats that made contact with “Buddhists,” it was seldom the case that these reports were cited at the time when the concept of Buddhism began to form.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly enough, the discourses that emerged from taking Buddhism as a “textual object” tell us quite a bit about the way people in the Victorian period thought about the people who practiced “Buddhism.” For instance, in the early literature on Buddhism, it was thought that the Buddha was a Hindu god (the incarnation of the god Vishnu), and it was not until the beginning of the 1850s that a discourse about Buddhism as a category distinct from Hinduism really developed. The goal of investigating Buddhism as an analytical category seemed to reflect the Victorian value of homogenization—the reduction of the particularities of a tradition down to an essence. This new distinction of Buddhism from Brahmanism became fodder for comparative reflection: for example, other than those who converted to Buddhism, those who participated in constructing Buddhism as an object of rational investigation began to suggest that Buddhism represented a kind of degeneracy—that when compared to Western religious practices, the Buddhists were engaged in a form of idol worship, even though the Buddhist teachings themselves did not prescribe such practices.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 7-8.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 24, 29-32.

Some had even suggested that Buddhism reflected the essence of the Asian mind. That is, the Asian mind was inferior, because it was less intelligent, more fanciful, childish and simple, and generally indolent.<sup>47</sup> Even though Buddhism would become romanticized later on in Western history, representing a kind of tonic that can solve the ills of the world, the impulse underlying these dualistic sentiments of romance and primitiveness nonetheless share a common theme: that is, to reduce and maintain Buddhism as an object of rational investigation that could be appropriated for the interest of the Western intellectual. In the case of the former, the construction of an “essentialized Buddhism” was used to maintain the uniqueness of Western ideas, while in the case of the latter, the act of stripping the inconsistencies and eccentricities of traditional Buddhism(s) and to make Buddhism appear more authentic and rational represents an act of cultural appropriation that seeks to secure the place of Buddhism in modernity. If reason is associated with modernity, then both projects reflect the desire to assume reason as a foundational base for which to judge Buddhism.

To some extent, one can interpret this process of “projecting” religion as a universal category as a kind of monologue, because the construction of “religion” was not intended for the purpose of creating dialogue with others, or for the purpose of empowering the other, but rather for the purpose of extending a kind of control and domination over nature and the world around itself—a process Daniel Dubuisson calls “narcissistic objectification.”<sup>48</sup> In fact, the discourses that make up the “religions of the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 37-43.

<sup>48</sup> Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 94-95.

world” have functioned historically in a way that supported Christian hegemony and universalism.<sup>49</sup> And the consequence of these discourses have furthered an imaginary divide between the West and the East. For Richard King, underlying this dualistic projection between the West and the East, between the venerable East and the progressive West, is this implication that the East maintains and preserves history while the West creates history.<sup>50</sup>

What I am suggesting here is that the analytical category of “religion” has links to Western colonialism. As David Chidester posits, the discipline of comparative religion came “not only out of the Enlightenment heritage but also out of a violent history of colonial conquest and domination,” and so the “history of comparative religion is a story not only about knowledge but also about power.”<sup>51</sup> Chidester, in his historical account of colonial domination in South Africa, demonstrates how the techniques of observation, scientific discourse, and theoretical description, alongside procedures of analogical reasoning, served to reconstitute colonial conquest. Chidester argues that theorists in Europe, via its encounters with colonized subjects, created knowledge about religion in a way that reinforced a global control over geographical regions and entire expanses of human history, particularly by rendering vast generalizations about the colonized. This discourse about otherness, as Chidester asserts, is essentially about a discourse of

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<sup>49</sup> Masuzawa Tomoko, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2-5.

<sup>50</sup> See Richard King, “Can Philosophy be Indian?” in *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1999).

<sup>51</sup> David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1996), xiii.

imperialism in that it sought to homogenize the other to maintain political interests. The mentality of the colonized was thought to be primitive and savage-like, because it was a mentality shared by animals, children, women, criminals, the insane, as well as the deaf, and dumb. Such a view legitimized the colonialists' view of themselves, who understood themselves as civilized and rational. But it also legitimized the colonialists' project—this project of needing to subjugate the inferior.

Even in the study of religion, theorists would describe the primitive mentality as one that participates in fetishism, animism, and totemism. As instantiations of an inferior kind of mentality, anthropologists began to argue that this demonstrates why the evolutionary trajectory begins with primitive magic, and ends in civilized science.<sup>52</sup> To be sure, in the early days of the colonial frontier, missionaries, colonial officials, and other settlers would cast the colonized subjects as delusional, barbaric, and superstitious. In short, the colonized had no religion at all.<sup>53</sup> But the stamp of religion did not fare much better. The “discovery of religion” among the tribes of South Africa was still embedded in the politics of control. If religion is what makes people human, then having a religion is better than having no religion (having no religion brings one closer to animality), but religion, even when defined as forms of fetishism and totemism, would constitute a subordinate position when placed next to the epistemic category of the secular (in this case, evolutionary science), because religion can never be scientific in the same way science could be classified as a religion.

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-79.

But why? Why is religion generally viewed as subordinate category to the secular within the academic world? And what are the implications of this? What we have learned from Asad is that if we want to understand this asymmetrical binary, we have to understand the genealogy of the secular formation, and that the rise of the secular was founded on the principle of privatizing religious faith and expanding the different manifestations of the secular into the public sphere in order to regulate the fantasies and political delusions ostensibly associated with religious passions. What was suggested in the formation of the secular, then, was that the concept of religion would stand in contradistinction to the secular, precisely because the former refers to sacred objects, to a sense of “non-rational faith” (and for many, “irrational”), while the latter refers to worldly reason that is linked to tolerance. Asad reminds us that the humanities and social scientists have all participated in constructing this binary: nineteenth century anthropologists, for instance, characterized myths as beliefs about the supernatural world, or about sacred beings, objects, or places that were not in the domain of rationality.<sup>54</sup> This binary would have implications for a the political domain as well—the notion of religion would become seen as a threat to any liberal democracy at large, because religious sentiments are thought to cultivate emotional responses and passions in a way that can hijack the rational faculty, because the secular is associated with non-violence while religion is associated with being prone to violence. That is to say, a liberal democracy, grounded in ideas of individual liberty and tolerance, depends on a kind of civic

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<sup>54</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 21-30.

education that is free from religious contamination, because the secular, unlike religion, is not absolutist, divisive, and intolerant.<sup>55</sup>

This view of religion is rather a convenient formulation, given that the story the Enlightenment told itself was one of rational triumph and one of linear progress, where reason crushed the mythologies of the past. But this *mythology* of the Enlightenment, which created this fantastical narrative around religion and religious identity, has masked many forms of violence associated with the rise of secularism. William Cavanaugh has argued that the track-record of violence in modernity has not been fully convincing either. Other than the ethnic cleansing and genocides that occurred in late modernity (Maoism, Stalinism, Apartheid, Nazism), the aura around the secular continues to disguise, for instance, the violence done in the name of the nation-state.<sup>56</sup> The ideal of dying and killing for one's country is unique to the modern period, a loyalty that, from any perspective that equates religion with violent passions, looks a lot like the "so-called blind worship of deities."

It is in this sense that one can see the historical link between the category of religion and modernity's pursuit of conquest and domination. While the problem with the discourses on "religion" is certainly the continuous reification of the category of religion—this cathexis of religion as a *sui generis* category that explains away vast swaths of behavior; but, what makes this category more problematic is the fact that these

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<sup>55</sup> William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

forms of essentialization(s) have lent themselves to global hegemonic power and interests, in favor of Euro-American superiority.<sup>57</sup> Take the thinker Christopher Hitchens, for instance, who implies that anyone self-identified as religious can be characterized as irrational and fanatical. Hitchens concedes that “religion” does have some positive qualities, but superficially, because in the end, religion is a kind of poison that blinds people from seeing the torture, violence, and atrocities done in their own name.<sup>58</sup> But Hitchens’ view of religion also seeks to legitimize the ideological values of modernity—liberal democracy and global capitalism—by viewing religion as irrational, emotional, and violent while simultaneously inventing the secular as the common sense position, a position based on a European conception of reason.

As argued in my introduction, one should be wary of finding this watertight bifurcation between the secular and the religious as a real phenomenon in history. For, the distinction between the secular and the religious has not always been construed as radically distinct. In fact, Michael Allen Gillespie argues that in early modernity no one was set out to eliminate religion *tout court* but rather to find a new place for religion in human life.<sup>59</sup> That is to say, the notion of modernity emerges out of historical debates around what it means to exist in a world where humans can become masters and

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<sup>57</sup> Timothy Fitzgerald, *Religion and Politics in International Relations: The Modern Myth* (London and New York: Continuum Publications, 2011), 96-97.

<sup>58</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2007), 56

<sup>59</sup> Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), xii.

possessors of nature in the goal of making life more hospitable.<sup>60</sup> As Gillespie argues, the projects Luther, Petrarch, Descartes, and Hobbes put forth were really efforts at reformulating a coherent metaphysical or theological view of the world—a view where religion is retained as an “essential frame”—in a way that leaves room for other viewpoints (including science and other knowledge-producing systems) that can carry humanity to new heights.<sup>61</sup>

Gillespie explains:

Viewed from this perspective, the process of secularization or disenchantment that has come to be seen as identical with modernity was in fact something different than it seemed, not the crushing victory of reason over infamy, to use Voltaire’s famous term, not the long drawn out death of God that Nietzsche proclaimed, and not the evermore distant withdrawal of the *deus absconditus* Heidegger points to, but the gradual transference of divine attributes to human beings (an infinite human will), the natural world (universal mechanical causality), social forces (the general will, the hidden hand), and history (the idea of progress, the dialectical development, the cunning of reason).<sup>62</sup>

But Gillespie’s account is not just about demonstrating how early modernist thought did not think of itself as incompatible with religious thought, Gillespie also aims to demonstrate that even in the origins of modernity, there was an assumption underlying modernist thought that viewed itself as superior to the past, as superior to those who are thought to be “stuck in time.” Perhaps the point here is to describe the secular and the religious as a kind of tension, and in the attempts to address this tension, the momentum

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 19-44, 69-100.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 273.

from modernity on has been leaning towards subordinating the category of religion because of the inauguration of linear time as one of the frames by which to position the scientific data of history. One could credit this assumption to European self-understanding, from Bacon and Descartes on, a self-understanding that characterized antiquity as a time period that is not part of a golden age. According to many leading intellectuals throughout this time period, this golden age was to be marked by revolutionary notions of progress and freedom; and so what motorized this shift towards viewing modernity as a more progressive historical period was this renouncing of the medieval notion of time, a notion of time that was thought of as a finite and circular system, and adopting a notion of time that was thought of more linear and infinite.<sup>63</sup>

#### The Theorization of Religion and the Antithesis to the Secular

The concerns surrounding the secular-religion binary are not new either. In fact, some of the origins of all of this can be traced as far back as Hegel, who saw this problem as a bifurcation between reason and religion. As the story went, Hegel did not think of the age of Enlightenment as the pinnacle of creative and intellectual thought; rather, Hegel saw the Enlightenment period as far too extreme in its projection of religion, for instance, because it held a crude representation of religious consciousness. What Hegel argued was that the Enlightenment thinkers relegated faith to the image of a cult following superstitious and magical rituals to invoke the presence of a divine. Within the context of Enlightenment rationality, religious belief was viewed as the opposite of reason, and as

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 5.

such, thought of as something that must be driven out of the collective consciousness.<sup>64</sup>

Therefore, the committed effort to fix the errors and self-delusion of religious consciousness, if anything, exemplifies the arrogance and hostility of Enlightenment rationality. Here, Hegel points to how the notion of absolute freedom, as manifested in Robespierre's fury of destruction within the French Revolution, represents the vulgarity and violence of an ahistorical and abstract reason that misunderstands itself.<sup>65</sup> But what happened before Hegel within Western intellectual history that drove him to question the prejudices of reason against religious authority? What source of ideas were advanced in the history of philosophy that motivated not just Hegel, but those who came after him, to overcome the reason-religion binary?

One can locate some of the origins of the chauvinistic aspects of the reason-religion binary within the European Enlightenment beginning with David Hume (1711-1776). Indeed, many scholars have credited Hume with being one of the founders of the comparative religion methodology, because he was one of the first who thought that comparison(s) could support a rational explanation of the origins and persistence of religion. Hume was not only one of the major authors in the development of modern empiricism, he was also one of the major Enlightenment thinkers who did not shy away from deploying skepticism toward the knowledge that was created in support of God.

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<sup>64</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. AV Miller (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1977), 329-330.

<sup>65</sup> Jürgen Stolzenberg, "Hegel's Critique of the Enlightenment in 'The Struggle of the Enlightenment with Superstition,'" in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Kenneth Westphal (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 204.

When Hume launched a critique against miracles as proof of religious truths, it was the reliability of the eyewitness accounts themselves that was on trial. Hume believed that in order to have a proper and reliable testimony, one must have trustworthy eyewitness accounts, and so the problem with the belief in miracles as a guarantor of truth, which was widespread in the religious traditions of the past, is that no one was around at this time who scrutinized the credibility of the accounts themselves.<sup>66</sup> The historical significance of Hume's challenge to the credibility of religious truth-claims perhaps set in place an aspect of disenchantment with religion(s) of the modern era, by supplying this impulse to empirically question the veridical claims of religious beliefs.<sup>67</sup>

In *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (published posthumously in 1779), Hume methodically deconstructs the empirical justifications of Christianity by claiming that religious experiences can only arise from sensations, inclinations, and impulses.<sup>68</sup> Hume's effort then can be read as an epistemological breakthrough that claimed cultural practices and beliefs could then be reduced to sense data, making all reality subject to empirical investigation. In fact, even causality itself could not be objectively validated, because causality cannot be verified as an objective law of nature, only a subjective habit of mind.<sup>69</sup> This grounding of causal inference in sense experience would privilege the

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<sup>66</sup> David Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: Of Miracles," in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary Fate Norton (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2000), 108-111.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 581.

<sup>68</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Classics), 24-27.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18, 54-57.

view that one must ground any attempt to justify God's existence in empirical reality. My point is that Hume's view would contribute to the placement of the category of religion within the secular because it would introduce the idea that the method of empiricism was necessary for a comparative investigation of religions. As a result, one can trace modern atheism back to Hume's critique of natural theology (though it is debated whether or not Hume was actually an atheist), because of the way he would argue in the attempt to discredit the doctrines and dogmas associated with traditional theistic belief. What we see after Hume is the beginning of many leading philosophers and (social) scientists who would take up the inquiries of skepticism and empiricism, and continue to drive the wedge between the secular and religion.

Although not an empiricist like Hume as such, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) would participate in laying the foundation for the materialist schools that would eventually become the default position within the secular. In a devastating critique against Christianity, Feuerbach would take historical materialism in a different direction than Hegel, arguing, like Hume before him, that religion or God was a "man-made" construct, or a human invention, if you will; and so for Feuerbach, in order to understand the origins of religion, one had to capture its essence in human life. In an anthropological investigation into the origins of religion (specifically the God of Christianity), Feuerbach argued that religion was ultimately a projection situated within the psychology of the individual—that is, it is an outward projection of an inward nature. Feuerbach had claimed that,

Man— this is the mystery of religion— projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself

thus converted into a subject; he thinks of himself is an object to himself, but as the object of an object, of another being than himself. Thus here. Man is an object to God.<sup>70</sup>

In other words, “man” creates God, not the other way around. Feuerbach reasoned that this is due to religion having the tendency to mischaracterize God as something that it is not. But such a mischaracterization instantiates the emotional longings of “man,” longings that correspond to some wish or need within human nature itself.<sup>71</sup>

Methodologically speaking, as Feuerbach sees it, religion is a phenomenon in which a scientist or philosopher could understand, make intelligible, and explain to the pupil, while the religious minded lack this capacity to self-analyze or “think-through” their own psychological yearnings. Or, to put it another way, religious consciousness is a form of alienation because it is straddled by a deep ignorance that hinders a (self)-realization of its own inward projection. Feuerbach writes:

But when religion — consciousness of God — is designated as the self-consciousness of man, this is not to be understood as affirming that the religious man is directly aware of this identity; for, on the contrary, ignorance of it is fundamental to the peculiar nature of religion. To preclude this misconception, it is better to say, religion is man’s earliest and also indirect form of self-knowledge. Hence, religion everywhere precedes philosophy, as in the history of the race, so also in that of the individual....Religion is the childlike condition of humanity; but the child sees his nature — man — out of himself; in childhood a man is an object to himself, under the form of another man.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. by Marian Evans (London: Trübner and Co., 1881), 1-12.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

This this inability to see through the ignorance of self-identity is related to the fact that it is an archaic form of self-knowledge. In other words, for Feuerbach, religion precedes philosophy and science, and so in this regard, it is rather “childlike” in its outlook when compared to the higher-level discourse of philosophical reason.

Feuerbach’s discussion of religion resembles later thinkers such as Edward Tylor and James George Frazer, who would then characterize religion as a product of history, a mere link in the chain of intellectual progress, only to be negated by what comes after. Although any explicit sense of social evolutionary theory on the nature of religion is relatively absent in Feuerbach’s discussion, what is still implied is this idea that there is an intellectual domain, manifesting as the mind that is ideal for civilization, which can curb and control the passions and emotions of religious life, because all theological claims are child-like fantasies that can be made intelligible by a kind of philosophical anthropology. Thus, it takes a critical analysis of religion to elevate the child-like consciousness of the religious mind to become more rationally minded. What is more important here, though, is that in the end Feuerbach would introduce a different theoretical frame on the nature of religion into the intellectual landscape: this framing of religion as a reified object, a projection that emerges out of the imagination of “man”—a frame Marx and Freud would adopt and then re-configure to fit the broader argument they were asserting.

Marx did not entirely agree with Feuerbach on the nature of religion, however. For Marx, Feuerbach had reduced religious consciousness to mental activity, dissolving the essence of religion into the essence of “man,” thus failing to see the link between

religious consciousness and the practical engagements of daily-life.<sup>73</sup> One interpretation of this, in terms of the direction Marx wanted to take historical materialism, is that Feuerbach presupposed an atomized view of individuality, without consideration of the wider social practices that envelop individual consciousness. Marx writes: “Feuerbach, consequently, does not see that the religious sentiment is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual whom he analyses belongs in reality to a particular form of society.”<sup>74</sup> That is to say, unlike Feuerbach, who sought to locate material practices in the minds of the individual, Marx imagined material practices as an expression of social humanity, or as an expression of social history, and that any human essence could not be truly conceived of as an abstraction inherent to an isolated individual. In this sense, all reality, including that of intellectual projects, is intrinsically grounded in social production (only later did Marx revise this process in more political-economic terms).<sup>75</sup>

Despite distancing himself from Feuerbach’s individualized account of social reality, Marx would also place the nature of religion through the machine of the “ideological critique.” From early on, Marx describes religion as “the sigh of the oppressed creature” or a “protest against real suffering,” suggesting that the mental content of the religious was intimately connected to broader social practices.<sup>76</sup> But

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<sup>73</sup> Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York City: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 145.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>75</sup> Karl Marx, “The German Ideology: Part I,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York City: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 164-165, 172-174.

<sup>76</sup> Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: *Introduction*,” in *the Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York City: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 54.

Marx did not fully abandon Feuerbach's basic premise around the nature of religion—this idea that religion is symptomatic of a deeper form of alienation or a deeper form of suffering. But Marx did move away from Feuerbach's psychological account of religion by claiming that religion is the very "sheath" of ideology itself, one which operates as a ruse for protecting the material interest(s) of the ruling class. While suffering itself motivate people to seek religion, such a refuge in religion only furthers the suffering by misdiagnosing the nature of the problem. In his famous phrase, "It is the opium of the people," Marx would introduce this equivalence between the "illusory happiness" of religious consciousness and the real workings of class domination. But the aim, within the revolutionary politics of Marx, was not to remove religion as such, but to call attention to the material conditions that produce the illusions of religion. This is because the eradication of alienation and suffering would naturally lead to the dissolution of religion anyways. Marx explains: "The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness. The call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a call to abandon a condition which requires illusions."<sup>77</sup> Where Marx's view of religion fits into the history of the secular-religion binary is that beginning with Marx we start to see an inauguration of religion as an ideological category, an illusory type of category that is not congruent with the real. More importantly though, Marx, and to some extent Feuerbach, would present his work as "objective" forms of scientific investigations, thus lending itself to the thesis that "religious experiences" have a kind of sociological being.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 54.

Outside of the discipline of philosophy, one can also see the prioritization of secular in other fields of inquiry. Max Müller (1823-1900), for instance, is often quoted as one of the founders of the comparative religion methodology (*Religionswissenschaft*), contributing to the development of what we call religious studies today. Müller, like Hume, would not place the category of religion on a similar footing as reason, asserting that there is value to investigating the “empirical religions” of the world—that the myths of the world needed some scientific explanation. For Müller, this “scientific study” of religion was to make intelligible other “religious beliefs” by measuring them against each other, or against an intellectual/rational criterion of truth (in this case, a Western constructed rubric), and eventually garner some universal theory about the object of study.<sup>78</sup> In other words, specialized knowledge about religion depended upon comparisons, because they provided a source for critical reflection. Throughout his lifetime, Müller contributed significantly to what was called Indology then, based on a 50-volume set of English translations, which was entitled *The Sacred Books of the East*. The field of comparative philosophy that developed subsequently would give promise to scientific studies of religion, studies that took seriously language and the process of translation.<sup>79</sup>

While Müller was in many ways responsible for the development of the comparative religion method, James George Frazer (1854-1941), another important figure in the development of comparative religion and in the anthropological study of

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<sup>78</sup> Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment*, 2-3.

<sup>79</sup> See Lourens Van Den Bosch, *Friedrich Max Müller: A Life Devoted to Humanities* (Leiden: Brill Publications, 2002).

religion, was in many ways responsible for solidifying the framework that organized the variety of cultural and religious beliefs on a scale from inferiority to superiority. Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, argued that the human mind progressed through stages—from primitive magic, to religion, and then to science, each negating the former. The engagement of primitive magic is precisely the lack of an uncritical belief in contact and imitation, while religion is faith in the natural world, governed by a set of deities with whom one can plead.<sup>80</sup> Both, as Frazer argues, are not sciences though, because of the presupposition that an inquiry into the real is suspended in favor of a belief of some kind. While Frazer contributed to a revival of neo-pagan practices by garnering public interest in exotic cultures, in the end, he set out to challenge Edward Tylor's notion of animism by fixing the stages of evolutionary development. Doing so, though, as I am arguing here, means upholding this view that the scientific domain is not only separate from but operates at a higher meta-analytic level than the domain of religion. The assumption that is snuck in here is this idea that the object of study, religion, is closer to the domain of irrationality than to the domain of science.

This association between religion and “primitive knowing” would then become a hallmark view within the sociology, anthropology, and psychology of religion, to the point where Freud, even, had re-interpreted Feuerbach's thesis on religion to fit the prism of psychoanalysis. In Freud's early writings, religion was already characterized as a kind of universal obsessional neuroses—religious rituals being forms of compulsive behaviors

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<sup>80</sup> See James Georg Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1998).

that are symptomatic of an underlying repression.<sup>81</sup> And in his later piece on religion, *Future of an Illusion* (1913), Freud's view began to shift slightly, arguing instead that any belief in God is a by-product of a childhood desire to be loved, nurtured, and protected by one's parents. Among the religious minded, as Freud sees it, such infantile desire survives into adulthood, and the deity begins to act as a substitute, satiating the longings of such infantile impulses.<sup>82</sup> This view of religion was an attempt to encompass more than mere psychology, because religious beliefs, expressed in culture as a whole, were more of a collection of defense mechanisms meant to protect all of humanity against the overwhelming forces of nature. Maintaining this view that religion was illusory, Freud argues, in the spirit of Feuerbach, that religion is the "fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind."<sup>83</sup> Although Freud does not accept illusion here as a mistaken or false belief, he does position the illusion of religion *qua* wish fulfillment on the side of ignorance—an ignorance that can only really be detected through scientific investigation. Freud explains that,

Having thus taken our bearings, let us return once more to the question of religious doctrines. We can now repeat that all of them are illusions and unsusceptible of proof.... The riddles of the universe reveal themselves only slowly to our investigation; there are many questions to which science to-day can give no answer. But scientific work is the only road which can lead us to a knowledge of reality outside ourselves.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. and trans. Peter Gay (New York City: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), 435.

<sup>82</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York City: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989), 24.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

To be sure, Freud does not deny the positive role religion has played in human history: Freud argues that religion did indeed perform a useful service for human civilization by providing moral principles that curbed the violent impulses or asocial instincts within human society. However, in the end, because there is a collective neurosis that underlie religious organizations, for Freud, the survival of civilization depends on replacing religious beliefs with that of secular motives.<sup>85</sup>

The evolution of Freud's thought featured a softening of his critique against religion, while still upholding the psychoanalytical critique as the proper tool to investigate the psychology of religious beliefs. In *Civilization and its Discontent* (1930), Freud would begin to argue that the need for religion could be explained by the "sensation of eternity," or this "oceanic feeling" of wholeness and infinity, found in many religious traditions. Such energy, Freud argues, cannot really fulfill the desire for immortality, because, if anything, such feelings represent a regression into earlier states of consciousness.<sup>86</sup> And in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud would attempt to investigate the historical figure of Moses in order to explain how the Jewish religion developed (with implications for the origins of Christianity). According to Freud, Jewish folklore revealed that Moses was actually killed by his followers, only to be revered subsequently, due to an underlying guilt that arose from the original murder of Moses.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 37-39.

<sup>86</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontent*, trans. James Strachey (New York City: W.W. Norton and Company, 1961), 2.

<sup>87</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York City: Vintage Books, 1955).

While Freud began to acknowledge the advantages of monotheism as a religious abstraction, crediting the advances of the modern intellect to religion, he did not abandon atheism as a basic scientific premise. After Freud, the default position within psychology then would be to accept the scientific stance of investigating religion as a “cognitive object.”

The secular-religion binary reached its apex with Bertrand Russel (1872-1970), who argued against having any theological or religious influence altogether in philosophy. In *Mysticism and Logic* (1918), for instance, Russel re-affirms the secular-religion binary in the very claim that the procedures of philosophical reasoning should mimic the natural sciences. Since it is science that has led to so many triumphs and innovations, it would be dangerous, as Russel sees it, to maintain the strand of mysticism that has permeated the history of philosophical argumentation because it slows down the progress that could otherwise be made if philosophical reasoning were to follow the scientific method.<sup>88</sup> As opposed to formal logic, which is inherently a-theological, the mysticism that has informed Western metaphysics has been mostly motivated by religious passions and ethics.<sup>89</sup> Russel writes:

It is my belief that the ethical and religious motives, in spite of the splendidly imaginative systems to which they have given rise, have been on the whole a hindrance to the progress of philosophy, and ought now to be consciously thrust aside by those who wish to discover philosophical truth. Science, originally, was entangled in similar motives, and was

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<sup>88</sup> Bertrand Russel, *Mysticism and Logic* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004), 2.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

thereby hindered in its advances. It is, I maintain, from science, rather than from ethics and religion, that philosophy should draw its inspiration.<sup>90</sup>

Russel's agenda is clear here: the goal is to schematize the history of philosophy as a problem of religious contamination. The mystical influence of philosophical reasoning has created the problem of bias, because it has allowed feelings and emotions to seep into the analysis and shape the viewpoint—which eventually leads to philosophical dogmatism. Russel claims that such orientations, which he called “ethical metaphysics,” ultimately disguises the more herd-like or “animalistic” drives that underlie such thinking:

Ethics is essentially a product of the gregarious instinct, that is to say, of the instinct to co-operate with those who are to form our own group against those who belong to other groups....When the animal has arrived at the dignity of the metaphysician, it invents ethics as the embodiment of its belief in the justice of its own herd.<sup>91</sup>

In other words, in order to prevent all desires, feelings, or emotions from entering into the potential objectivity of philosophical analysis, modern philosophy must extricate itself from its religious influence. The goal should be to move away from the constant nostalgia for pre-modernity, from the tendency towards animalism, and to enter into modernity, so that one becomes an agent of historical progress, instead of being a receptacle or relic of history.

My point is that Russel (and perhaps others who promote scientism) was aiming to reject any philosophical thought that has ties to religion. Thus, the secular-religion

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 83.

binary that was inherited and then re-interpreted within Russel's work was very much dependent on ensuring the place of religion within an epistemic hierarchy—that is, by elevating science and “pure” forms of logic and rejecting religiously inspired forms of argumentation. If the implication of Russel's work is taken seriously, then there is good reason for excluding other forms of intellectual or creative thought that have been inspired by religious ideas. Interestingly, the post-modern critique argues that philosophy is not a pure-form of argumentation, because all intellectual ideas (e.g. philosophy, theory, and science) are situated within social, historical, and political contexts. Assuming this to be true, then intellectual ideas have long participated in the naturalization of subjugating others.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, Russel, and nearly the entire history of the secular-religion binary I have discussed, have been involved in fine-tuning the vision of the secular as a series of formations that encompasses philosophy, science, theoretical knowledge, and so on, a push for a future that is free from instincts, desires, emotions, feelings, and tradition—all of which that are associated with religious practices.

This is not to say that there have never been forms of resistance to the secular-religion binary. In fact, we find an entire history of resistance to the secular—starting with Hegel. Hegel, in particular, thought that neither Enlightenment rationality nor religion should have dominance in the spin of the dialectics of history—that there must be some common ground between the two. This is because Hegel argues that the Enlightenment critique of religion as being irrational is not completely unfounded, because faith itself has often times failed to provide external evidence why it continues to

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<sup>92</sup> King, *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, 6.

have such beliefs. If faith results in putting too much trust in some doctrine or creed, then the power of religious beliefs can crumble in the face of any empirical evidence that contradicts its worldview.<sup>93</sup> But how does Hegel continue the movement of the dialectic if both religious belief and Enlightenment rationality are not sufficient in themselves to move towards a higher synthesis?

Hegel argues that in order to reach the absolute one must sublimate the opposing contradictions into a new level of thought that incorporate aspects of the other. This means that reconciliation is possible only by saving certain ideals of each opposing consciousness. Hegel looks at the ideals of the French Revolution, liberty, equality, and fraternity, arguing that they can only be recuperated when situated within the frame of God. But the same is true on the other end as well: religious consciousness can be rescued from the assault of reason if it were to adopt a more philosophical outlook.<sup>94</sup> Hegel claims how these two domains overlapped by illuminating how the unification of opposites captures the “missing relata” in each sphere of thought. The “negativity of negativity” necessary to reach a higher synthesis is precisely this content that was masked in the representation of the other. But why does each structure of consciousness fall short in constituting the totality of spirit? Or why does each consciousness conceal some aspect of reality? The answer Hegel provides is in the notion of alienation. While the engine of creative development resides in the experience of alienation, if there is too much, self-deception takes place. The self-deception of the Enlightenment emerges in its casting of

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<sup>93</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 337-338, 577-578.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 348-349.

religion as a foreign consciousness: by representing reason as something pure and uncontaminated, the Enlightenment fools itself into thinking that it is autonomous from the delusion of religious faith instead of realizing that it is its inverted mirror image. As Hegel explains:

...here Enlightenment is foolish; faith regards it as not knowing what it is saying, and not understanding the real facts when it talks about priestly deception and deluding the people. It talks about this as if by some hocus-pocus of conjuring priests' consciousness had been palmed off with something absolutely *alien* and 'other' to it in place of its own essence...<sup>95</sup>

What I think Hegel is suggesting here is that to overcome this self-deception, the Enlightenment itself must recognize its own relationship to religion—not as an expression of antagonism but as an expression of each consciousness subsuming the other. God is not separate from the world, but conceived as immanent within the world, revealing itself within nature and history.<sup>96</sup>

Around the same time Hegel wrote down his ideas on religious consciousness, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) would make similar moves in the pursuit of saving religious consciousness from a critique of reason—although, here, the defending of religion against the assault of Enlightenment rationality was in the arc of redefining religion within rational consciousness, stating that the Enlightenment critique of religion was over simplified.<sup>97</sup> According to Schleiermacher, the essence of religion is not about

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>96</sup> Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 142-146.

<sup>97</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (New York City: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1.

thinking or acting, but rather intuition and feeling, a sensibility and taste for the infinite.<sup>98</sup> Here, Schleiermacher approaches religion in more psychological or phenomenological terms, and he argues that experiential forms of religious consciousness are what grounds the subject in the quest for truth. In other words, religion lies at the basis of thought, action, and feeling, and intuition is the necessary component for building theoretical insights into the world. Thus, in order to overcome the rational-religion binary, Schleiermacher believes that the methods of science must be positioned within the locus of religious faith and religious awareness.<sup>99</sup> Years later, Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) would further Schleiermacher's position by insisting that religion, as a feeling or as a mode of consciousness, is actually inherently resistant to rational epistemologies or ethical critiques. Defending religion against naturalist critiques, Otto argued that religious experiences are beyond conception, precisely because the qualitative content of the numinous (the experience of the divine) is so awe-inspiring that the feeling of the mystery itself is inexpressible.<sup>100</sup>

While Hegel was determined to bridge the gap between religion and reason, Schleiermacher and Otto would redefine the parameters of religious consciousness and its relationship to reason, and Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) would argue that the bifurcation between reason and religion is in some way an acceptable divorce. Kierkegaard, as one of the first existentialists, wrote extensively about the

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 61-63.

<sup>100</sup> See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John Harvey (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1958).

importance of the distinction between reason and faith in the service of maintaining one's relationship to God. Taking a "leap of faith" in one's subjective relationship to God is not about a decision one makes based on concrete evidence, but more about one's commitment to God or to an act of romantic love, even in the face of doubt. Faith conquers doubt, because it is that which brings doubt into the world.<sup>101</sup> Unlike Hegel, Kierkegaard was less interested in the realm of transcendence via reason and logic, because he thought the absolute reveals itself only through one's faith in God. In this regard, Kierkegaard was more concerned with clarifying what it means to experience immanence in the light of the absolute, instead of tracing the ascent to asserting higher truth(s).

What these instances tell us is that resistance to rationality is rather common, because many philosophers have been compelled to negotiate the markings of the secular-religion binary. Reason's expression of superiority had consistently motivated a counter-reaction—one that depends on staking out a claim that religious consciousness has something to offer the world as well. Furthermore, the tension between the secular and the religious in modernity tells us something about the aura of the secular as well as about the anxiety and insecurity the defender of religious experiences has when confronting the secular. To avoid being "explained away" through rationality or the scientific method, religious-minded intellectuals, in the attempt to justify their commitments to their religious worldview, have found new territories by which to counter the hegemonic bloc(s) of rationality and scientific inquiry—as we see in the cases

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<sup>101</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

above. But the anxiety and self-consciousness experienced among religious intellectuals is arguably reasonable, because of the long history of hostility against religion projected by Enlightenment rationality.

### Eurocentrism in the Secular-Religion Binary

In the book *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy*,<sup>102</sup> historian Peter Park provides an account of the historical development of philosophy and its pursuit of defining the criteria for what counts as “proper” or “actual” philosophy. Park discovers that the great majority of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers almost completely pass over non-European thought—relegating it to “pre-history” or to the study of religion.<sup>103</sup> Before Kant and Hegel, however, it was actually rather common to include non-European traditions within the classificatory rubric of philosophy, and so with the rise of German Idealism, there was a turn to exclusion within philosophy—an event that has been considered relatively recent within European history.<sup>104</sup> This is because historians of philosophy, beginning in modernity, had argued that Africans and Asians did not have philosophy, but religion. That is to say, anyone deemed too primitive and incapable of philosophical analysis was excluded from the canon of philosophy in the

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<sup>102</sup> Peter Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon (1780-1830)* (Albany: SUNY University Press, 2013).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>104</sup> John Maraldo, “Japanese Philosophy as a Lens on Greco-European Thought,” in *Japanese Philosophy in the Making I: Crossing Paths with Nishida* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2017), 26.

West.<sup>105</sup> Thus, in the history of formulating the epistemic boundaries of the discipline of philosophy, one can see the beginning of a bifurcation emerging between what was considered “real philosophy” and what was considered “infantile philosophy,” and how this binary began to provide the frame by which to characterize non-Western intellectual heritages.

Park insists that part of the reason for the exclusion of non-European intellectual thought is racial. Hegel explicitly excluded “Oriental philosophy” from the history of philosophy because it was “preliminary to Greek philosophy”—which was deemed the “the true philosophy.”<sup>106</sup> Park locates the reason for this in Hegel’s hostility towards comparative history of philosophy: that Hegel would go on the defensive against those who compared his own work to Arab and Muslim theosophers, and one way Hegel resisted such comparisons was to completely write Africa and Asia out of the history of philosophy. Of course, this is not to say that there was no one at this time who resisted this process of intellectual exclusion. Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) pioneered comparative philosophy and sought to affirm the reality of “Oriental philosophy” by putting Asian philosophy on par with European philosophies.<sup>107</sup> But then, beginning in the 1780s, such a formulation began to be challenged: it was argued at this time that

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<sup>105</sup> Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon (1780-1830)*, 1-4.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 8. The same was also said about Hegel’s conception of religion, where Asian religions were viewed as primitive, while Christianity was viewed as an ‘absolute religion.’ See Enrique Dussel, “Anti-Cartesian Meditations: On the Origins of the Philosophical Anti-Discourse of Modernity,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 13, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 7.

philosophy was only an invention of the Greeks because other cultural groups (which he referred to as barbarians) had no word or concept of it, making it impossible for philosophy to have arisen among any non-European group.<sup>108</sup> Or Kant, not unlike Hegel, having borrowed from “proto-anthropological” theories of racial classification, would argue that Indians (what he called the “Hindu race”) could not develop philosophy because they simply lacked the capacity to do so.<sup>109</sup>

What does this have to do with the secular-religion binary? Park informs us that scientization of philosophy (what I would describe as part of the history of secularization) participated in the exclusion of Africa and Asia from the history of philosophy because the metanarrative of science subsumes “exclusion under [the process of] scientization, by divorcing the history of race and racism from the history of domination, and by divorcing philosophical developments from their human agents.”<sup>110</sup> In other words, since the scientization of Asia and Africa informed German philosophy and its view of non-European life, the exclusion of Asia and African from the history of philosophy would then reinforce the linear notion of progress in the very claim that Asian and African thought are to be viewed as stages in the history of intellectual development. As part of the secular, scientization had embodied an imaginary that assumes that the world naturally moves away from religion—from what we might call the theological—and move towards purer scientific or rationally philosophical accounts in the attempt to

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 149.

understand the world. Within this rejection of non-European philosophy as “real philosophy” is this assumption that European philosophy is “real philosophy,” and so holding the narrative of linear progress alongside the idea that Asian and African philosophy are intellectual equals to Western philosophy would result in a contradiction. In this regard, the secular-religion bifurcation thus far in intellectual history, in some sense, has depended on the reproduction of an epistemic hierarchy of the world, because of this historical frame that represent non-Europeans as people who live in history, or who live in a fixed state of time.

Furthermore, there is an East-West dichotomy—a tendency to view the East as more primitive than the West—that emerges from the secular-religion binary, which further presupposes a “modern-primitive” dichotomy: that is to say, within this “modern-primitive” dichotomy is this preoccupation of the modern, as a state of existence beyond historical time (as timeless), and the denigration of tradition as something passé, as something primitive, as something that is associated with religion and/or divine revelation. It is worth mentioning that these two frames are not mutually exclusive, and in fact, they co-constitute one another. But note that the following schema, a template I borrowed from Richard King, reveals the kind of sub-textual imagery at work within many leading narratives of the secular:<sup>111</sup>

<i>Secular</i>	<i>Religion</i>
The West	The East
Modern	Tradition
Progressive	Conservative or Regressive
Scientific	Folk Wisdom
Rational	Irrational
Mental Capacity	Emotionally Oriented

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<sup>111</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and the ‘Mystical East,’* 13.

Public	Private
Timeless	Historical
Philosophical	Theological or Divine Revelation

How these binary frames work is by reinforcing the epistemic power structure of the West through the control of rhetoric. Take the Marxist critique of religion, for instance. Instead of taking religious discourse as an intellectual equal, attempts to translate religious discourse within the Marxist frame has assumed the view that religious practice is actually a pre-text for political control and domination. In the Marxian critique of *dāna* (ritual forms of gift-giving in Buddhism), it is believed that the ritual obligation of laypersons having to give material gifts to the *sangha* in exchange for karmic merit disguises the ideological function of religious discourse—that is, to justify the economic divisions between the clerics and laypersons. According to this view, the clerics’ political authority and economic power are dependent on controlling the masses through the production of hope for salvation in the next life.<sup>112</sup> Coincidentally, the same sort of critique was even applied within the context of the Kyoto school—where secularization also gained momentum. Japanese Marxist Tosaka Jun would launch a critique against many of the Kyoto school thinkers on the grounds that they served to reinforce Japanese militarism.<sup>113</sup> But from the standpoint of an epistemological framework that accepts the

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<sup>112</sup> Gustavo Benavides argues that the early formation of Buddhism was involved in the creation of an “economy of salvation” through its production of “merit.” For instance, the formation of the *sangha* was founded on being a recipient of *dāna*, and the princes and emperors who were obligated to give were only giving away things they did not produce. As a skeptic of the notion of a “pure gift,” Benavides claims that in order for one to give away a gift, one must actually produce it, but since the clerics of the monastic community are giving away things they did not make themselves, *dāna* serves more to reinforce the ideology of dispossession. See Gustavo Benavides, “Economy,” in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald Lopez Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 77-102.

<sup>113</sup> H.D. Harootunian, “Introduction: The Darkness of the Lived Moment,” in *Tosaka Jun: A Critical Reader*, ed. and trans. Robert Stolt, Ken Chester Kawashima, and Fabian Schäfer (Ithaca: Cornell

religion-secular binary, any serious defense of religious discourse against more secular critics becomes stereotyped as ideologically motivated or framed as “religious apologetics” because it does not fit the ideal model of what it means to be secular in the modern world. The point is that the secular has managed to circulate discourses in the academy in a way that makes the split between the secular and religion not only a default position, but a position that becomes the final arbitrator of knowledge production. Many of the accounts of the world that have a built-in secular component that present themselves as “neutral,” but such seemingly neutral language appears to be a ruse, inherently fraught with the biases of the scientific, which has led to reductive claims about the East.

One of the more insidious implications here is the underlying epistemic racism of the history of the secular. According to Ramón Grosfoguel, epistemic racism is the rejection of all critical interventions derived from epistemologies that come from non-Western traditions of thought.<sup>114</sup> The assumption underlying this form of racism is that the knowledge produced within non-Western traditions is inferior to Western forms of knowledge. The reason for this is that the Eurocentrism that has dominated the social sciences has become so normalized that the incessant practice of discarding the subaltern has generally escaped the most critical inquiries of Western epistemologies. As a result, as Grosfoguel tells us, epistemic racism can be considered the most hidden form of

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University Press, 2014), xxiii-xxvii.

<sup>114</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, “Epistemic Islamophobia and Colonial Social Sciences,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 8, no. 2 (2010): 29.

racism, and perhaps the most pervasive, because it begins with the purported “objective neutrality” of scientific discourse. Hidden within the view of objectivity are the position of the knowers themselves:<sup>115</sup> that is, the subaltern are pre-emptively disqualified from participating in the pursuit of “real knowledge” because they have been viewed as the “objects of knowledge,” and not the producers of knowledge.<sup>116</sup> Meanwhile, the people who are considered the real producers of knowledge within the West have been those who have managed to adopt, assimilate, and advance knowledge that fits within the parameters of Western epistemology. Here is where it is assumed that non-European cultural practices and intellectual ideas are thought to be closer to religion, than to be instances of real philosophy and science.

Grosfoguel argues us that the epistemic privilege of the West begins with the history of the colonialization of the Americas. The erasure or extermination of non-Western forms of knowledge, such as indigenous knowledge and/or spirituality, was implemented by the colonial process with the belief that indigenous peoples were barbaric, and that colonial expansion was necessary in order for these communities to become enlightened.<sup>117</sup> Since Christian theology was the purveyor of what was deemed true or false, the colonization process began with the assumption that the indigenous peoples of the Americas had no religion, and as such, were inferior. Even though the term

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

<sup>116</sup> Grosfoguel asks the question, why is it that social theory is based mostly on ideas that come from five different Western countries (Italy, the US, Germany, France, and England) when these five different countries only make up 12% of the world’s population? Ibid., 31.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

“race” was not conventionally in use in this time period, the debate surrounding whether or not the indigenous had souls was already implicitly engaging the discourse of race, because what was ultimately in question was the nature and credibility of the object of investigation—i.e., the indigenous peoples themselves. This debate, however, shares the same connotations as the series of debates that unfolded in the biological sciences in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that were developed around whether certain people of color were really human or closer to animality. This is all to say that baked within the very questioning of the indigenous’ theology (or in this case, the lack of theology that was attributed to the indigenous by the colonialist) was the silent prizing of Western epistemology. In this regard, one can argue that the first form of racist discourse was not exclusively color-based but articulated within and around the thematics of religion or theology.<sup>118</sup> As Grosfoguel explains:

Contrary to the contemporary common sense, “color racism” was not the first racist discourse. “Religious racism” (“people with religion” vs. “people without religion” or “people with soul” vs. “people without a soul”) was the first marker of racism in the “Capitalist/Patriarchal Western-Centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system” (Grosfoguel 2011) formed in the long 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>119</sup>

Enrique Dussel argues that the roots of the colonializing impulse of modernity can be found in the ego-paradigm of Descartes’ solipsistic consciousness.<sup>120</sup> Descartes’ view

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<sup>118</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Structures of Knowledge in Western Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16<sup>th</sup> Century,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 11, no. 1 (2013): 80-83.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>120</sup> Enrique Dussel, “Anti-Cartesian Meditations: On the Origins of the Philosophical Anti-Discourse of Modernity,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 13, no. 1 (2014): 12-21.

of the mind and body as existing in different domains lent itself easily to colonial expansion because it allowed the unconditioned mind (apart from the body) to be thought as “similar to the Christian God, floating in heaven, undetermined by anything terrestrial and that it can produce a knowledge equivalent to a God-Eye view.”<sup>121</sup> The universalization of the “I” had replaced God as the foundation of knowledge, albeit mimicking its structure, thus constituting a secularization of the Christian view of God. But this “I” assumed a production of knowledge from nowhere: with no situated context, the *Cogito* produces a view of knowledge that is God-like, and such a position of the world sets the stage for an imperialistic being, because it assumes that the “I” exists as the center of the world.<sup>122</sup> The rest of the world is disposable and expendable, ready to be consumed by the ego, because everything is subordinate to the “I.”

There is a term for this process of historical erasure—what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls “epistemicide.”<sup>123</sup> Foundational to the knowledge structures of Western universities is this process of eradicating the knowledge systems of the subaltern or the colonized. Tshepo Lephakga, a scholar who takes this method to the study of African colonization, argues that colonization and epistemicide are linked by virtue of the supremacy of reason that defines who is human and not human or who is rational or who

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<sup>121</sup> Grosfoguel, “The Structures of Knowledge in Western Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16<sup>th</sup> Century,” 76.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>123</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 152-153.

is irrational.<sup>124</sup> My point is that the elevation of Western epistemology and philosophy at the level of Western universities was the result of the eradication process of non-Western epistemologies, because if there was no historical erasure of the cosmologies, epistemologies, and/or philosophies of the subaltern or colonized, then it would be far more difficult to justify the discarding of non-Western epistemologies.

One may question how exactly Japanese philosophy fits into this all, given that Japan was never colonized by the West, and that from 1895-1945, Japan itself did manage to build a small colonial empire of its own. Despite its forming into Asian imperialism, Japan never shared the same level of global power and influence as Europe or the US did until after WWII. In fact, Japan's insecurity around Europe's global influence before WWII had motivated the desire to establish a sphere of influence to offset the growing imperialism of the West. Many of the Kyoto school thinkers even acknowledged this, such as Tanabe Hajime, Nishitani Keiji, and Miki Kiyoshi, all of whom participated in the Greater Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere in order to theorize a "cooperative bloc" among Asian nations to curb further Western encroachment.<sup>125</sup> Just like Nishida, these Kyoto School thinkers had hoped to challenge some of the views found in Western modernity and to imagine an alternative vision of a global world that is

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<sup>124</sup> Tshepo Lephakga, "The History of the Conquering of the Being of Africans through Land Dispossession, Epistemicide, and Proselytization," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 41, no. 2 (2015): 159.

<sup>125</sup> Interestingly, there have been scholars who have defended Japan and the Kyoto school's attempt to build a cooperative bloc in the region. Historian David Williams, for instance, argued that many of the Kyoto school thinkers imagined that the Japanese state would exercise progressive leadership in the expansion of its sphere of influence in that it would respect the sovereignty and histories of the peoples it liberated. See David Williams, *Defending Japan's Pacific War: The Kyoto School Philosophers and Post-White Power* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

not exclusively grounded in Western intellectual traditions. Therefore, in the end, the sort of philosophical resistance the Kyoto School was asserting was partially based on the fear of Western modernity and its impulse to impose or expand its cultural and philosophical logic without a dialogue with the native.

### Summary

In this chapter, I intended to show how the secular forms part of the de facto position of scientific and philosophical rationality throughout modernity. Although there is some variation on the way different intellectuals and scholars approached the concept of religion throughout Western modernity, there is an underlying assumption within the secular that religion must remain subjectivized or privatized and therefore must not interfere with the work of the scholar or the scientist. This is because, as Saba Mahmood claims, the secular-religion binary upholds this notion that,

critique is predicated upon a necessary distantiation between the subject and object and some form of reasoned deliberation. This understanding of critique is often counterposed to religious reading practices where the subject is understood to be so mired in the object that she cannot achieve the distance necessary for the practice of critique.<sup>126</sup>

The point that is being made here is that secularism is not a neutral stance or critique, even if it presents itself as such. One can point to theology as one academic discipline that tends to interweave the secular and religion into an epistemological approach to reality, but this approach, generally, is viewed as less scholarly when compared to the

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<sup>126</sup> Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, no. 2 (Berkeley: The Townsend Papers in the Humanities, 2009), 90.

more secular approaches in the field of religious studies. Of course, this is not to say that one cannot be religious and undergo a scientific career; one certainly can, and often does, but as Birgitte Schepelern Johansen claims in the article, “Post-secular Possibilities: Modes, Possibilities, and Challenges,” when undergoing this pursuit, one “should learn to know how to effectively separate things” for the fear of “attempting to promote a religious agenda under the cover of a scientific discourse.”<sup>127</sup>

The other argument I tried to show in this chapter is how the category of religion, as viewed from within the secular, was deployed in a way that assisted the process of Western colonialism by virtue of its hidden celebration of Eurocentrism. I argued that the concept of religion itself became in part a kind of political strategy within the secular to assert, and later maintain, Western intellectual hegemony.<sup>128</sup> In this assertion of maintaining the dominance and uniqueness of Western intellectual legacies, the tendency has been either to write-off or subordinate non-Western epistemologies and ontologies and/or to ensure that the scientific or philosophically rational view of things, which tend to be viewed as the final court of all knowledge, are adopted or at least integrated into non-Western or European epistemological systems. But wherever there is domination, there is resistance. In the next chapter, I will present how rationality and its relationship to the concept of religion becomes renegotiated within the context of Japan, and how it sets the stage for Nishida’s effort to resist a scientization of religion by re-defining

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<sup>127</sup> Birgitte Schepelern Johansen, “Post-secular Possibilities: Modes, Possibilities, and Challenges,” *Approaching Religion* 3, no. 1 (2013): 8.

<sup>128</sup> Russel McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

religion as both an existential awareness that is outside a standpoint of reason and as a structuring logic that illuminates the creative processes of the historical world.

## CHAPTER 3

THE CONCEPT OF *SHŪKYŌ* IN JAPAN

One of the more common assumptions within the history of religious studies is that religion is a universal category—meaning, it is something that has always existed, or it is something that every culture has. However, as I want to discuss in this chapter, such a formulation of religion as a natural category in the world has had difficulty fitting the historical evidence—and this is particularly evident in the case of Japan, where the term religion emerged as an analytical category around the 1850s. As the story goes, the term religion was originally exported out of the West, and following its emergence into Japan, the concept of religion as a distinct, irreconcilable opposite to the secular began to be resisted by many Japanese intellectuals. Nishida Kitarō, in particular, reconfigured the concept of religion in a way that refused a prioritization of rationality over the religious, which can be demonstrated in his commitment to turning the concept of religion into a proper epistemological category that has an immediacy to the real. As an epistemic category, Nishida argued that religion can be expressed into the social and the cultural, and implies the political, but it is most importantly expressed within the individual. That is to say, there is no priority given to the social, political, and/or to the cultural over the demand for religious awareness. Thus, Nishida's re-appropriation of the concept of religion can be read as a form of historical resistance because it sought to disrupt the cultural, political, and moral undertones of Western modernity, with the attempt of re-

building a different (de)ontological and epistemological view of intellectual history that does not throw out religion as a fundamental category of thought.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Japanese intellectuals during the Meiji (1868-1912) reflected on the category of religion, and its relationship to Western universals, and how Nishida's philosophical project was motivated to save the concept of religion from being subsumed within rationality and from being reduced to a particular confession of faith or belief. I will show that Nishida, unlike his philosophical predecessors, would seek to not only re-interpret religion as an epistemological category that is impervious to rational criticisms but to push back against any philosophical framework that seeks to minimize and/or subordinate religion in the world. What I aim to show is that Nishida recognizes the biases that were attached to the category of religion, as formulated within Western modernity, and seeks to remove these by re-interpreting the concept of religion in a way that cannot be fully understood through materialist, rational, and/or empirical modes of inquiry.

Although Nishida's philosophy is about turning religious awareness into an independent epistemological standpoint, it is also about resisting the dominance of Western categories. From Nishida's point of view, if any part of Japanese intellectual history is to be included within any global philosophical conversation, then it seems as if there is a necessity to secure the place of religion in philosophy, or even to turn religion into a proper philosophy. This is because many Japanese intellectuals within the Meiji period recognized that they did not have a proper philosophy that could match what was coming out of many leading Western intellectual traditions. Eventually, after the concept

of religion was debated and reflected upon in Japan, many Japanese intellectuals would appropriate and “reclaim” religion as an intellectual resource and argue for its compatibility with science or with rationality. Nishida’s “reclamation” is a little more radical though, such that it seeks to challenge not only the dominance of Western rationality, but the dualities found in Western modernity, with an implicit aim of making all philosophical thought more globally focused. If Japanese intellectual heritages could be part of this world philosophical conversation, as Nishida argues, then there is a need to call attention to the problem of universalizing Western epistemology.

#### The Invention and Debate of the Concept of *Shūkyō*

When the term “religion” (*shūkyō*) first appeared in Japan, in 1853, during the later end of the Edo period (江戸時代, 1603-1868), it was in a pair of American letters that were delivered to the Japanese emperor. Japanese translators encountered this term while reading these letters but had no idea what to do with it, because no word then existed in Japan that covered the range of meanings present in English.<sup>129</sup> Interestingly enough, by the 1870s, there was still no clear meaning for the word “religion,”<sup>130</sup> and it was not until the formation of more academic approaches on the study of religion in Japan in the 1890s that the term *shūkyō* began to take on the meaning of an (religious) identity that is *sui generis* in nature.<sup>131</sup> What these facts represent in Japan is this: the

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<sup>129</sup> Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, 1.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>131</sup> Isomae Jun’ichi, *Religious Discourse in Modern Japan: Religious, State, and Shintō*, trans. Galen Amstutz and Lynne E. Riggs (Boston and Leiden: Brill Publications, 2014), 55-56.

Meiji period was the beginning of recognizing some aspects of Japanese cultural practices as something that is distinctively religious in the field of academia. To be sure, the term *shūkyō*, which eventually became the word the Japanese translators agreed upon to make sense of the word religion, was somewhat an indigenous category in Japan.<sup>132</sup> But the concept of “religion” that was debated among Japanese scholars initially had many proposed translations, and many debated which indigenous practices and traditions actually fit this category.<sup>133</sup> While the concept of *shūkyō* did historically refer to the teachings and principles that were tied to some organization or institution, it was not a natural translation for the Euro-American concept of religion.<sup>134</sup> In fact, the kanji characters that make up the word *shūkyō* reflect the tension of the translation itself—*宗教*: the first kanji *shū* 宗 means sect, principle, or main point, and the second kanji *kyō* 教 means teachings or doctrine, but when combined as a compound, it has come to mean the “teachings of a lineage” or “teachings of the main principles.”<sup>135</sup> The vagueness and ambiguity of the original compound appears as if the concept could just as easily been interpreted and framed as any form of pedagogy or intellectual tradition.

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<sup>132</sup> The term *shūkyō* was originally developed from the Chinese term *zongjiao*, which had a dual meaning of both education and individual belief. Isomae Jun’ichi, “Religion, Religious Studies, and Shinto in Modern Japan,” in *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. Richard King (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2017), 87.

<sup>133</sup> Jason Ānanda Josephson “The Invention of Japanese Religions,” *Religion Compass* 5, no. 10 (2011): 593.

<sup>134</sup> But during this time period, the categories of *shūshi* 宗旨 and *shūmon* 宗門 had also existed as references to specific religious organizational structures, as well to physical ritual practices. Isomae, *Religious Discourse in Modern Japan: Religious, State, and Shintō*, 99.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 199-200.

But the framing of religion in Meiji Japan certainly reflected Western influence. For example, initially, when religion was translated into *shūkyō*, the sort of sub-textual images inaugurated within the process of translation were centered around ideas of civilization, transcendence, and morality. This is because the concept of religion that was introduced, appropriated, and conceptualized was based on a prototype—namely, a belief-focused Protestant-style Christianity. In that sense, Christianity was thought to be the ideal, the benchmark of what religion is, as it became an almost near equivalent to civilization and modernity, while other religions (those that were explicitly seen as “man-made”) were more thought of as superstitions that needed to be tolerated. Naturally, the meaning of *shūkyō* changed over the course of the Meiji era, and the initial indissoluble linkage between civilization, learning, and religion waned, and religion *qua a sui generis* concept came to represent more of an idea of transcendence, as well as, an idea of something that represents a core belief.<sup>136</sup>

Similar to what happened in the West, there was a process of divergence between the religious and the secular that took place in Japan. That is, Japanese intellectuals in the late Meiji period, in an attempt to make sense of religion, superstition, and secularism, designated those who were organized on the basis of a common morality as religious and those who did not fit this schema as either secular or superstitious. The schema that was developed here was a tripartite system: in a hierarchical fashion, the imbricated categories were of “the secular,” “superstition,” and “religion.” While the category of

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<sup>136</sup> Jolyon Baraka Thomas, “The Concept of Religion in Modern Japan: Imposition, Invention, or Innovation?” *Religious Studies in Japan* 2 (2013): 10-15.

science (what we might take as part of the secular) presumed to negate the delusory world of superstition and magic, religion was thought of as a brand of superstition that cannot be fully negated, and so religion perhaps represented the third-term through which the real and delusion was mediated. As Jason Ānanda Josephson explains:

From the vantage point of the Real, religion emerges from the category of superstition.... For the state, religion is the superstition that cannot be expelled.... From another perspective, religion is either a species of the real or a species of superstition; the origin of the real or origin of the superstition; or the excluded middle.<sup>137</sup>

Buddhism, Daoism, and, of course, Christianity were eventually designated as religions in Japan—superstitions that can never really be eradicated (thus demanding tolerance), but Shintoism was excluded from this category.<sup>138</sup> Why was Shintoism excluded in this process of religionization? For many scholars who have studied the Meiji period, it was discovered that the designation of Shintoism as non-religious was the result of it being caught up in the procedures of the state. For instance, one important Japanese political official, Shimaji Mokurai, claimed that Shintoism was not a religion because it had nothing to do with sectarian teachings (i.e. religion). In the case of Shimaji, religion specified the affairs of the human interior, and Shintoism was in the opposite realm—in the realm of political indoctrination—that which extends into and operates within the public sphere.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, 261-262.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-95.

<sup>139</sup> Hans Martin Krämer, “How “Religion” Came to be Translated as Shukyo: Shimaji Mokurai and the Appropriation of Religion in Early Meiji Japan,” *Japan Review* 25 (2013): 93.

But Shintoism was not reconfigured entirely as a political system, as commonly assumed in academic scholarship on Japan. Rather, Shintoism went on to refer to comprehensive systems of knowledge that encompassed cosmogony and natural philosophy, in addition to political theory.<sup>140</sup> In other words, Shintoism, to some extent, was believed to operate more like a science up until the Second World War.<sup>141</sup> This is not to say that Shintoism was not useful to the Meiji, or even later, in the Taishō state—it was: in fact, Shintoism was often presented as a science or a mode of knowing, as a secular formation, if you will, that could be deployed as powerful rhetoric in the service of state interest.<sup>142</sup> On the latter point: what made Shintoism selected for political indoctrination was arguably strategic—Shintoism was often conveniently defined as public morality, and so shifting passions and loyalties onto public shrines was one way to garner consent among constituents. Interestingly, when one examines the separation of religion and state that was established in the Meiji Constitution of 1889, Article 28, on “freedom of religion,” stated that Shinto shrines were distinct from religion; and so the point here is that Shintoism could no longer be associated with degraded or heterodox practices, and, instead, the Meiji state, in its drift towards political consolidation, thought Shintoism was distinctly useful in that it could be used in a way that cathects a distinct Japanese identity (unlike Buddhism or Confucianism).<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Thomas, “The Concept of Religion in Modern Japan: Imposition, Invention, or Innovation?” 6.

<sup>141</sup> Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, 96.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-133.

<sup>143</sup> Isomae, *Religious Discourse in Modern Japan: Religious, State, and Shintō*, 247-248.

All of this is, of course, surprising from a standpoint that defines religion as superstitious, given that Shintoism arguably fits the definition of (a primitive) religion *par excellence*, because of all of its gods, deities, forms of nature worship, purification rituals, and so on. What makes this point even more salient is that in the history of Japan, Buddhism and Shintoism were not afraid to borrow from each other—that Shinto was thought of as a skillful means by which Buddha could lead people to the Pure Land, or to Enlightenment.<sup>144</sup> Thus, the “magical” and “superstitious” qualities of Shintoism merely appear on the surface to be an obvious choice for religious classification. But it was not, precisely because Shintoism was a description of what the gods do—in other words, Shintoism was the “way of the Gods.” While humans practiced the “way of humanity,” Shintoism was a description of the activities of deities; and so Shintoism was not perceived as a religion as such by the Japanese, because religion was only something that could be practiced by human beings.<sup>145</sup>

As mentioned briefly already, throughout this period, Shintoism began to be thought of as something compatible with Western science, and so to assume that “superstitious” thought declined with the introduction of secularism in Japan is not entirely true. In one example, agronomist and scholar Satō Nobuhiro (1769-1850), argued that the laws of creation were put into place by a Japanese deity, Ubusuna, and that such physical laws of the universe could in fact enhance and facilitate a deeper understanding

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<sup>144</sup> Kuroda Toshio, “Shinto in the History of Japanese Religion,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 7, no. 1 (1981): 16.

<sup>145</sup> Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, 99.

of Shintoism.<sup>146</sup> And so the idea of “miracles,” as framed and understood from a secular standpoint, never completely ended in the popular imagination of Japanese leaders, because the “superstitious” practices within Shintoism were never really defined against science.<sup>147</sup> Thus, the formation of the secular in Japan, or the development of scientific authority, did not lead to the dissolution of gods, but rather to the co-existence of “superstition” and scientific rationality.

This example of inventing religion in Japan also tells us something about the violence that goes into the desire to raise the consciousness of the people. Part of the modernization process of Japan involved elements of coercion and violence, as Japan had to also invent superstition (*meishin* 迷信)—practices and beliefs that were antithetical to the modernization vision. That is, the Meiji regime, in carrying out a civilizing project, attempted to punish and discipline its citizens partially based on Western models of superstition.<sup>148</sup> It was in the Meiji period that the belief in monsters, unlucky numbers, frightening savages, and other perceived demonic or evil spirits, were suppressed.<sup>149</sup> To be sure, the idea of “heretical beliefs” have a long history in Japan, and can be found as early as the Edo period when Japanese political officials wrote policies that outlawed Christianity on the grounds that it was a deviant form of Buddhism (though mostly as a reaction against Spain’s own goal of conquering the lands wherever missionaries were

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 252.

sent). But still the secular as a posited negation of its opposite within Japan stands as a historical exemplar of the politics of modernity: in other words, the invention of superstition as a contradistinction to the invention of the (Shinto) secular can be seen as a process of social-political entanglement, because the development of these mutually exclusive categories was part of the same political project.

It is true that in the formation of the Meiji constitution, Christianity and Buddhism became associated with private beliefs that demanded political tolerance, but these beliefs were still considered superstitions by many Japanese intellectuals because they failed to establish a proper unity with Western science. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that these beliefs were tolerated because they were considered types of superstitions that could never really become defunct. In the end, however, the production of the religion classification system in the Meiji period was thought of in a hierarchical fashion: religions connoted an inferiority, because they represent practices that are opposite to the secular real; and so secularism, guided by the principles of scientific rationality, began to function as the final signifier of judgment in the modernization period of Japan.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> This process of inventing religion as a category of thought in Asia was not unique to Japan. One can see a similar case in China, where the term “religion” was imported (from Japan) and then appropriated within the mainstream discourse. In the early stages of translating the term “religion” into Chinese, 宗教 started out as a reference to what Abrahamic traditions did, and not what the Chinese people practiced themselves. Eventually, after years of debate and negotiation, Buddhism and Daoism, along with Confucianism, were accepted as institutional religions among Chinese intellectuals, and China, inspired by Western notions of modernity, would then begin to undergo a sweep of reforms that restricted cultural practices perceived to be superstitious. The most extreme case of this process of “forced evolution” was during Mao’s Cultural Revolution, when a campaign was launched to strip people of any sort of feudalist superstition. Mao Zedong, following the perspective of “science and progress” and social evolution theory, sought to raise the consciousness of the people by dispelling, through violence and coercion, all things backwards—which for him meant not only folk beliefs but all religious beliefs themselves. See Chen Na, “Why is Confucianism Not a Religion? The Impact of Orientalism,” *East Asian Voices on Science and the Humanities* 51, no. 1 (2016): 21-42.

The point I want to show, though, is that while Japan modeled its own modernist project around Western conceptions of modernity, especially around what it means to be a secular nation-state, many Japanese intellectuals, in particular Nishida and much of the Kyoto School, were motivated to resolve some of the tensions that were associated with this project. For instance, what many of these Japanese intellectuals discovered was that Japan had intellectual traditions that are compatible with Western secularism and therefore cannot be fully subsumed by Western thought. These sorts of positions were an attempt to contest the viewpoints that assumed religion was incompatible with the secular real. While Shintoism was one site where the meaning of the secular was negotiated in Japan, the definition of religion was another site—namely by becoming a conceptual framework by which to resist Japanese subordination to Western intellectual hegemony.

As I will argue in the next section, religion, as a site of epistemological correction, offered an even more assertive way for Japanese philosophers and intellectuals to contrast themselves with Western notions of modernity: religion became a strategical weapon by which Japanese intellectuals could insert the particularity of Japanese thought, because of the claim that the Buddhism found in Japan could be understood as compatible with many forms of sciences. But it is important to note that there were a range of opinions established around the question of to what extent Japan should secularize or to what extent Japan should preserve its intellectual history. Nishida, for instance, opposed the state's attempt to renounce past traditions, particularly Buddhism, in its vision of making Japan a technological power.<sup>151</sup> Thus, as Japan underwent secularization, Nishida was

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<sup>151</sup> John Maraldo, "The Problem of Culture," in *Japanese Philosophy in the Making 1: Crossing Paths with Nishida* (Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications, 2017), 172.

determined to demonstrate the necessity of not just saving, but expanding, Japanese intellectual heritages by deploying the concept of religion as a critical tool for revising Western epistemology, “ontology,” and ethics. Nishida agreed with other Japanese intellectuals that took the view that religion is compatible with the technological innovations of scientific discovery and that it should be used to support the process of modernization in Japan.

### *The Beginning of Japanese Philosophical Resistance*

I want to argue that the way the category of religion was theorized in Japan during the Meiji and Taishō periods can be read as attempts at philosophical resistance, by reframing Japanese identity in a way that addresses the tensions fueled by the politics of international relations. What I mean is that Japanese intellectuals were not just challenging claims of Christian superiority, but the theory of progress that elevated Western culture and knowledge. In fact, such resistance goes back as early as Inoue Enryō (1858-1919), a philosopher who studied at Tokyo Imperial University, who inverted the argument that Christianity was inherently superior to Buddhism, stating instead that it was Buddhism, not Christianity, that was in agreement with Western philosophy (in particular, with Hegel). This is because, as Enryō claims, “Buddhism’s connections to both philosophy and religion are especially close,” such that “the link Buddhism has with philosophy has no parallel as yet among the many other religions.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Inoue Enryō, “Buddhism and Philosophy,” in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. James Heisig, John Kasulis, and John Maraldo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 623.

As a result, as he would then argue, Christianity, in contrast to Buddhism, easily slips into anti-intellectualism because of its emotional character or emotional tendency, and that it is actually Buddhism that represents a religion of pure intellect.<sup>153</sup> Interestingly, although Enryō was seeking to resist the theory that positions the West on top of the evolutionary scale, in the end, his own viewpoint reproduces the same hierarchy, except that it is Japan that is at the top.

As one might expect, Enryō was not the only philosopher in Japan during the Meiji era who sought to transpose Western scholarship in a way that was meaningful for the Japanese. Inoue Tetsujirō (1855-1944), who taught “Comparative Religion and Eastern Philosophy” at Tokyo Imperial University, sought to extract the universal qualities that undergirded all religions in the hope of locating a religion that served to unify all religions.<sup>154</sup> Initially, Tetsujirō had high hopes for Buddhism (although he was not a self-identified Buddhist), and argued from early on that Christianity was an unenlightened religion because of its devotion to a creator god and its apparent lack of rational philosophy. While Tetsujirō accepted some aspect of the premises of scientism and social evolutionary theory that religion was inherently inferior to philosophy and morality, he resists these categories by placing Buddhism as existing partly outside of the domain of religion. That is to say, Buddhism should not be understood as a religion as such, but more so as a philosophical religion. This is because the definition of karma as being the law of cause and effect appeared too rational to be thought of as private belief;

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<sup>153</sup> Isomae, *Religious Discourse in Modern Japan: Religious, State, and Shintō*, 46-47.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 49, 83.

and unlike Christianity, which seemed incompatible with science on many accounts, Buddhism held universal truths that were in accordance with much of scientific knowledge.<sup>155</sup> While Tetsujirō admitted that there were some aspects to Buddhism that could be considered religious, in the end, though, Buddhism, like Brahmanism, was perhaps to be understood somewhere between religion and philosophy—in other words, it is more of a philosophical and/or ethical religion. And since, as many Japanese intellectuals theorized at the time, the goal or purpose of any religion was to elevate or improve public morality, Tetsujirō argued that it was Buddhism that had an advantage in terms of educating society, because of its natural sophistication and ability to transcend denominational differences.<sup>156</sup>

Tetsujirō recognized that Japan could not construct its own intellectual identity without resisting Western categories. But in order to develop a unique Japanese identity, Tetsujirō posited that Japanese philosophy and religion had to re-orient itself within Western universals in order to go beyond Western philosophy. Towards that end, Japan should not only produce scholarship that relates to the West, but it should also criticize the very way the West framed Eastern thought. To be sure, Tetsujirō was looking to work within the premises of Western universals, but he was not fully satisfied with the way the West had thought of Buddhism, for instance.<sup>157</sup> Because he found Western research on Asia to be biased and warped, Tetsujirō argued that the Japanese themselves would have

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 78-79.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 82-84.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 86.

to take the lead in researching the remaining aspects of Japanese and Chinese philosophy—namely, the areas that had yet to be researched by the West.<sup>158</sup>

But why did Tetsujirō still desire to establish a national identity for the Japanese people on philosophical grounds? One has to look at the history of the concept of philosophy in Japan in order to answer this question. Not unlike the word “religion,” “philosophy” (*tetsugaku* 哲学) was an invented and/or appropriated category in Japan as well. In 1874, Nishi Amane (1829-1897) introduced the category *tetsugaku* to make clearer the distinction between the forms of argumentation done in the West and the intellectual heritages of China and Japan.<sup>159</sup> Nishi believed that Confucianism and Buddhism were not worthy of being called philosophy, because the former operated more as a belief structure and the latter seemed to contain very little philosophical value at all (and thus was perhaps closer to theology).<sup>160</sup> This was in direct contrast with Tetsujirō, who believes that Japan had philosophy and that it was on par with Western philosophy.<sup>161</sup> What was philosophy for Nishi, though? Nishi believed that philosophy referred more to a system of rational investigations, particularly through the use of

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>159</sup> The term *tetsugaku* perhaps derived from the Confucian term *tetsujin* (哲人)—meaning, the learning of the sages. See John Maraldo, “How Meiji-Era Japan Appropriated Philosophy from Europe,” in *Japanese Philosophy in the Making 1: Crossing Paths with Nishida* (Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications, 2017), 63. In the 1880s, instead of *tetsugaku*, some professors preferred an older Confucian term *rigaku* (理学), which meant the study of principles and patterns. See John Maraldo, “Prologue,” in *Japanese Philosophy in the Making 1: Crossing Paths with Nishida* (Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications, 2017), 5.

<sup>160</sup> Christopher S Goto-Jones, *Political Philosophy in Japan: Nishida, the Kyoto School, and Co-Prosperity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 25.

<sup>161</sup> Maraldo, “Prologue,” 7.

inductive logic. Since any sort of speculative thought or metaphysical claims about reality were excluded from this definition, Nishi's view of philosophy seems to advance a definition that borders on scientism. While wisdom could be extracted from such heritages (in particular, Confucianism), Nishi conceded, such could not contribute to what he described as the chief of all sciences.<sup>162</sup> The key point here is that Nishi had provided a backdrop for how Japanese intellectuals would subsequently internalize Western philosophical discourse, and how they would make sense of their own Japanese intellectual identity in relation to the categories of religion and rationality. Of course, as I will discuss later, with the emergence of the Kyoto School, the philosophical and theoretical frames that were adopted by the West would be reworked in a way that demonstrated the importance of Japanese intellectual history—especially the logics of Buddhism. Both Tetsujirō and Enryō held Western philosophy at a higher standard and therefore sought to work within the general parameters of Western philosophy in order to justify why Japanese intellectual history is worth defending. Tetsujirō, however, would take this one step further and argue philosophically for why a national identity is important and necessary.

By the late 1890s, Tetsujirō began to change his views on religion and philosophy, and began to argue against all forms of religion as a vehicle for establishing unity among the Japanese people. Tetsujirō began to criticize religion, calling Christianity, Buddhism and even Shintoism ignorant, superstitious, and pessimistic, and

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<sup>162</sup> Goto-Jones, *Political Philosophy in Japan: Nishida, the Kyoto School, and Co-Prosperity*, 25-26.

then sought to nationally unify the Japanese people through another means.<sup>163</sup> If unity was the goal, then an axial philosophy to this effect would need a discourse on national morality. Tetsujirō discovered that Confucianism would be beneficial in this regard, because it extolled a loyalty and common love for the nation. Although Confucianism was still a religion, it was more secular and realistic than Christianity and Buddhism for instance. That is to say, Tetsujirō believed that Confucianism was a “this worldly” religion that focused on morality or the supremacy of ethics—which he thought was the essence of religion. While Shintoism had the capacity to unify a distinct identity, it had too many superstitious aspects to be a viable nationalistic solution.<sup>164</sup> Thus, as Tetsujirō saw it, Confucianism, not Buddhism, had a capacity to unify the Japanese people and to link the East together—in particular China and Japan—in order to assert a unique Eastern (and more importantly, a Japanese) identity.<sup>165</sup>

What I attempted to illuminate in this section was how the category of religion was reinvented and philosophically interpreted in Meiji Japan, and how this set the stage for Nishida’s attempt to resist a subsumption of religion.<sup>166</sup> Whether it was by asserting

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<sup>163</sup> Isomae, *Religious Discourse in Modern Japan: Religious, State, and Shintō*, 90.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>166</sup> There were numerous translations for the term “religion” into Japanese that became the basis for Nishida’s philosophical re-appropriation. Johann Limmer provides us eight of these translations: a) a belief in a supernatural existence; b) the difference between the sacred and profane; c) the formal relationship between sacred objects and its community (cults i.e.); d) the justification of God and how this relates to moral law; e) the “awe-inspiring” experiences with the sacred object and how this connects to God; f) the types of rituals and other forms of interactions in relation to God; g) the Buddhist view of emptiness and how this relates to the telos of one’s intuition; h) the relationship between the social formation of sacred communities and ideological belief. Johann Limmer, *Der Begriff der Religion in Nishida Kitaros “Zen no Kenkyu”* (Norderstedt: Grin Publications, 2009), 19-20.

Japanese superiority or by defending Japan's own intellectual heritages against Western intellectual claims, many Japanese scholars prior to Nishida sought to demonstrate the integrity of the Japanese spirit by essentializing Japanese subjectivity for the sake of maintaining the uniqueness of Japanese intellectual culture. To some extent, Enryō and Tetsujirō, were resisting the secular-religion binary, but neither cared to overcome the binary, opting to frame Japanese religions, Buddhism (and Confucianism in Tetsujirō's case), as intellectual developments that lean towards the domain of the secular. What I will discuss later in this chapter is how Nishida, having been influenced by both of these thinkers, continued to resist the secular-religion binary, but with more interest in undermining the binary itself. As opposed to taking rationality as an *a priori* judgment of the world, like both Enryō and Tetsujirō had done, Nishida dethrones rationality by claiming how it only represents a Western particular, instead of operating as a universal foundation for intellectual judgment. One way to interpret this is that scientific rationality can be understood as just another form of knowing that exists within the context of social history. But, the most significant move Nishida makes is in the renegotiation of the theoretical meaning(s) of religion, where religion is viewed less as a doctrinal, ideological, or confessional system and more as a structuring logic for clarifying the absolute as a process of historical creativity. As Nishida sees it, since religion coincides with the real, religious awareness can never be an irrational form of consciousness. The goal of Nishida's resistance is to advance a philosophy of religion that refuses to both superordinate the entirety of Japanese culture as well as to allow "Japanese subjectivity" to be subsumed or sublated by Western modernity. By no means were Nishida and the

other Japanese scholars the first to re-claim their own intellectual heritages, though. As I will show in the next section, there has always been a history of philosophical and/or theoretical resistance within Asia in its encounters with the West. But what is special about Nishida's relationship with Western philosophy was the critical re-appraisal of religion, as formulated within Western modernity, as well as how Nishida deploys religion as an attempt to undermine the dualities of Western modernity in order to put forth a view of a global world that does not exclude other logics of historical creativity.

*The Revitalization of Asian Knowledge*

There is a good amount of scholarly literature that has demonstrated how colonized communities in Asia have modeled themselves around Western modernity but then reframed this identity in a way that demonstrates a kind of resistance. One example of this is India and its imperial encounter with Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After the colonization of India, Britain began to project an image of itself as an agent of history and India as a land of eternal religion, a land that appeared outside of historical time.<sup>167</sup> The implication of this frame was that India was not truly modern, because it was “stuck in tradition.” But as India developed its own modernist identity, this narrative that frames India as not-modern began to be resisted: India, while under colonization by England, had felt pressure to modernize in order to avoid internalizing any sense of inferiority; and

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<sup>167</sup> Peter Van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

so Indian elites, through the play of the category of religion, participated in the process of producing modern subjectivity in India. As Peter van der Veer explains:

Religion becomes a defining feature of the nation and for that purpose is nationalized. It becomes one of the fields of disciplinary practice in which the modern civil subject is formed....This spirit of scientific exploration, so often seen as the hallmark of modern secularity, of language and culture, of race, and of gender and character. In all of these ideas, religion as the site of the nation is crucial.<sup>168</sup>

What van der Veer seems to mean is that religion became a central site of negotiating what it means to be modern in India. But, it is important to note that the idea of the nation-state or the spirit of scientific innovations were not merely appropriated from the West, because such mimetic appropriations made it possible to reframe religion in a way that allowed India to express a kind of unique particularity, and so the act of appropriation became an instrument for political, cultural, and epistemological resistance. Not unlike Japan, Indian intellectuals, along with enthusiasts from the West, would position Indian religion(s) against claims of Christian superiority by asserting that their religions were compatible with scientific investigations. For instance, in the 1880s and on, yoga began to be understood as an experimental science (a conceptualization that still exists today in that it is even accepted as such by the Indian government), alongside other sciences of the time such as “Oriental philology” (as it was called), comparative religion, and anthropology.<sup>169</sup> Perhaps India, like Japan, did not want to see itself as an embodiment of the germ of inferiority, and so re-interpreting the historical trajectory of

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 81.

the philosophical and religious discourses of India as articulating a different kind of “rationality” (what we may call “transrational”) was arguably essential to this move of resistance.

In this process of asserting a “(trans)rational religion” in India, Indian intellectuals, particularly the Hindu-Modern movement, would claim that Advaita Vedanta, for instance, was the only true religion in the world. Neo-Vedantins, such as Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan, argued that the only religious tradition that can address Christian polemics is that of Hinduism because it fully acknowledges and preaches diversity and tolerance in ways that other religions do not.<sup>170</sup> As the argument went, one can be a Hindu and Buddhist at the same time, but one cannot be Christian and Muslim at the same time. In fact, for Vivekananda, Buddhism and Hinduism were in fundamental agreement with each other: that is, both were non-dual positions, instantiating the perennial nature of religious experiences—meaning, all religions are fundamentally the same. In other words, according to Vivekananda, there is a universal religion, Vedanta philosophy, which resides at the core of all religions, and all other religions function to supplement the basic truths of the Vedanta philosophy.<sup>171</sup> Vivekananda writes: “The Vedanta includes all sects ... We are all glad to remember that all roads lead to God.”<sup>172</sup>

It could be said that the same sort of moves of resistance took place in the formation of Buddhism in its early encounters with Western modernity, where the rivalry

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<sup>170</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India, and the “Mystical East,”* 136.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

between Christianity and Buddhism, and the evolutionary theories propagated by the West, generated part of how Buddhism was represented as a “modern religion.” In 1893, at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, the US celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ journey to the New World in an exhibit that displayed all of the resultant nation’s material achievements, featuring art, manufacturing objects, and technology, everything that represented the basic truth of social Darwinism. Because of its growing international power, such a feat demonstrated and proved the US’ superior racial status. Japan’s exposition, on the other hand, would attempt to challenge this theory of linear evolutionary progress and its assigned place in the hierarchy, by re-branding itself as both civilized and unique, and not backwards, as normally perceived by the cultural chauvinists of the West.<sup>173</sup> It is perhaps important to not interpret this event as a gesture towards “Buddhist apologetics,” though, because re-interpretations such as that of Japan’s exhibition appear more as mimetic assertions—a declaration of Japanese and Buddhist exceptionalism. It is true that what happened at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago was not an entirely unique event: for quite some time, Buddhists, in their exchanges with the West, have often reframed their own philosophical positions in a way that affirms Buddhist compatibility with modern science, thereby instantiating the superiority of Buddhism over Christianity. For example, many Buddhists in both the West and in Asia have framed the Buddha’s rejection of metaphysical speculation, the Abhidharma theory of dharmas, as well as atomic particles (*paramanu*) in a way that

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<sup>173</sup> Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exposition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 16-20.

suggests that these Buddhist theories are a prefiguration of modern atomic theory. Or even today, for instance, it is quite common among Buddhists (especially among Zen and Tibetan Buddhists) to make comparisons between quantum mechanics and the non-substantialism and nondualism of Mahāyāna thought—especially the insights that have been cultivated through meditative practices.<sup>174</sup>

More importantly, the history around these types of moves of resistance in Japan is rather deep. Richard King tells us that the intercultural mimesis between modernity and Japanese Buddhism fueled the process of presenting Japanese Buddhism as an ideal export. For instance, D.T. Suzuki's form of Zen was attractive to many Western religious seekers because it was framed as a de-institutionalized approach to self-realization.<sup>175</sup> For those who felt disenchanted with the long, drawn-out rituals associated with Western religious traditions, Suzuki's form of Zen meditation was often appealing. Similar to Vivekananda's defense of Advaita Vedanta, Suzuki would also claim that Zen was more tolerant than Christianity. Suzuki pointed out the ease in which Zen accommodated Confucianism and Daoism in China and the way Zen developed and refined the cultural spirit of Japan—bringing Japan to a higher state of development.<sup>176</sup> It was through Suzuki that Zen began to develop an aura of spiritual authority beyond the borders of Japan.

But the (re)interpretation of Buddhist compatibility is not just limited to examples related to the hard sciences. It has become rather fashionable today in the academic world

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<sup>174</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India, and the 'Mystical East,'* 151-152.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>176</sup> Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exposition,* 266-267.

to discuss the similarities between Buddhist ways of reasoning and post-modern claims on reality.<sup>177</sup> In a more recent example, Robert Magliola argues in the book *Derrida on the Mend* that the Indian Buddhist Nāgārjuna made certain claims about existence, being, and reality that were not unlike the claims made by post-structuralist Jacques Derrida. Magliola insists that both deployed a kind of deconstructive method that makes visible the problems underlying empirical theories of language—in particular, this view of language as being a system of signs that match the external objects in the world. For both Derrida and Nāgārjuna, the signifier-signified relation does not operate within a closed loop, but rather plays out as a function of an excess or surplus of meanings.<sup>178</sup> Buddhist philosopher David Loy is not entirely in agreement with Magliola's interpretation of the Madhyamika (Nāgārjuna's quest to clarify the nature of reality). Building on this conversation between Derrida and Buddhist claims on language, being, and reality, Loy argues that while both philosophers deploy a deconstructive method in order to disrupt the common sense view of language as a system of intrinsic meanings, Derrida, unlike Nāgārjuna, does not complete the dialectic in the end. Rather, Derrida's logocentrism, according to Loy, reproduces the suffering associated with the cycle(s) of life and death because there is a failure to deconstruct the very self that fuels the chain of signifiers—and so it is not just language that needs to be deconstructed but the very world one lives

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<sup>177</sup> For a discussion of the various types of ways that Zen Buddhism is similar to postmodern thought, see Carl Olson, *Zen and the Art of Postmodern Philosophy: Two Paths of Liberation from the Representational Mode of thinking* (Albany: State University Press, 2000).

<sup>178</sup> See Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1984). 11, 118.

in and the way one lives in it.<sup>179</sup> Derrida then, for Loy, remains mired in the labyrinth of discursive thought, never to make peace with one's thinking and its relationship with the world.

As one can see from the examples above, there has always been push back against turning intellectual systems within Asia into primitive religions. Why, though? What motivated such resistance? Perhaps the push back is against the desire of Western intellectual traditions to exclude the original language of the Asian subjects—against this desire to subordinate the language and identity of Asian subjectivity to the language of Western categories. That is to say, the Asian subjects who sought to assert themselves against Western modernity, were trying to carve out a portion of reality that is particularly their own, a reality that perhaps many Western philosophers could not see or detect with the tools they had. If one were to admit a superiority of Western modernity, one would have to admit its own primitiveness, its own inferiority, to Western intellectual thought. Therefore, Japanese intellectuals, alongside Nishida and the Kyoto School, had to find ways to re-affirm Japanese identity without feeling as if all of Japanese intellectual history was going to be swallowed up whole by the logics of Western modernity. But the resistance we saw in Japan was nothing new in historical encounters between Asia or the East and the West (nor even within the Western world where there are many instances of collisions between the religious and the secular). What makes Nishida's own resistance interesting though is the attempt to invert scientific views of religion—challenging the frames that position religion as a phantasm of the real by renegotiating the category of

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<sup>179</sup> David Loy, "The Deconstruction of Buddhism," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: New York State University Press, 1992), 241.

religion to being part of the structure of the real. While most defenders of religion do just that—placing the category of religion on the side of the real, Nishida seeks to do so without advancing a specific religious tradition. It is this last point that I will clarify in the next section.

### Nishida's Re-Interpretation of *Shūkyō*

To get a sense of where Nishida is going with his philosophy of religion, I think it is important to read Nishida as someone who is not concerned with promoting any particular religious institution because he has little interest in the ritualistic symbols that make up a religious tradition or affiliation. Religion, for Nishida, is more ahistorical and diachronic than doctrinal or confessional, because the logic of religion that is being sought here is intended to be irreducible to the particulars of any religious doctrines.<sup>180</sup> In fact, Nishida expressed this sentiment in a book review that was written in 1898:

For me, what makes religion to be religion is not a matter of what kind of creed or ritual it has, but of the individual leaving the finite world to enter into the higher realm of the infinite. It is an extremely variable activity of becoming united, without necessarily knowing it at the time, with what philosophy calls the “absolute.” Calling it feeling or intuition, religion is getting to where life is. Buddhism speaks of liberation, Christianity speaks of salvation.... For me, knowledge is completely unnecessary for religion. By nature, religion does not need to coincide with true knowledge.... Knowledge can easily distinguish true doctrine from false because it is shallow. Religion has a hard time discriminating the two because it is true.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> James Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 102.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.

Thus, as one can see here, Nishida seems to be more interested in understanding religion as a practice that connects to the absolute, rather than the particular stances or confessions of faith that come from within a doctrinal order. Even though Nishida himself was a practicing Buddhist, Nishida's philosophy of religion was not necessarily Buddhist, as one might tell from the passage above, because the standpoint of religious knowledge stemmed more from one's reflection on human existence and the process of growth that comes from this pursuit. For Nishida, religious knowledge can only come from the actual world, which not only includes the body and mind, but all reality that is experienced. This is why, as Nishida said above, "religion is getting to where life is," because religion is not just about the mere understanding of religious and philosophical thought, but about how religion and philosophy manifest themselves in human life.<sup>182</sup> Or, as Kosaka Kunitsugu describes it, "religion [for Nishida] is both the foundation and the end of scholarship-morality."<sup>183</sup>

But is there a systemic view of religion for Nishida? *An Inquiry into the Good* (*Zen no Kenkyu* 善の研究) and "The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview" (*Bashoteki Ronri to Shūkyōteki Sekaikan* 場所的論理と宗教的世界観) are the texts where we see Nishida exploring the theme of religion the most, but we do see specific references to religion elsewhere in his oeuvre. Nonetheless, one does get the sense that Nishida's view of religion was an attempt to make sense of the variety of existential

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<sup>182</sup> Rolf Elberfeld, *Kitarō Nishida (1870-1945) Das Verstehen der Kulturen: Moderne japanische Philosophie und die Frage nach der Interkulturalität* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 98.

<sup>183</sup> Kosaka Kunitsugu, "Nishida's Philosophy and Religious Philosophy," *Journal of Japanese Philosophy* 2 (2013): 283.

experiences associated with the real, with the aim of trying to uncover its “logical foundation.” For the early Nishida, this meant moving away from any objective understanding of religion and towards looking at religion from the standpoint of what one might call “religious experiences” or “religious awareness.” The real is therefore not something abstract, something speculated about, but realized within a wholly different frame of knowing that does not deny paradox (a point that is even clearer in his later years) as part of the constitution of reality. Nishida explained this point to a friend in 1945, “I want to make clear that religious reality cannot be grasped by conventional objective logic, but it reveals itself to the ‘logic of contradiction self-identity,’ or ‘the logic of soku-hi.’ ”<sup>184</sup> This is because, as Nishida says, “religion is a spiritual fact. It is not to be fabricated by philosophers on the basis of their own systems.”<sup>185</sup> In other words, religion is not an object of cognition, an intellectual explanation of sorts, but an irreducible truth at the heart of being—hence Nishida’s writing, “I am not one who would place religion upon a philosophical foundation,”<sup>186</sup> because the intellectual aspect of philosophical discovery are not the same thing as religious awareness, even if they may mutually reflect and/or inform each other.

Since Nishida is not a social theorist, historian, or hermeneuticist, his concern is not about defining or demarcating the proper boundaries around the concept of religion, like it has been in sociology or anthropology, or even for much of religious studies’

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<sup>184</sup> Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 102.

<sup>185</sup> Maraldo, “How Nishida Individualized Religion,” 141.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

history for that matter. Instead, as a philosopher, Nishida is more interested in uncovering the logic of religious awareness and how this logic clarifies an alternative epistemological position in the world—hence Nishida is more often described as a philosopher of religion than a theologian or social theorist. The argument(s) Nishida introduces is that the logic that constitutes religious awareness cannot really be found in the ratiocination of Western thought, because religious awareness reveals itself more from within the practice where the body-mind are taken as a kind of unit, where the “heart” of the individual becomes known and understood. Therefore, the unmasking of “religiousness” is predicated upon the process of fully breaking down the subject-object duality. But to a large extent, this collapsing of the subject-object position was thought of in terms of how Buddhism imagined a non-dual reality: of course, this was not always the case, because Nishida did include Christian mystics—Meister Eckhart and Jakob Boehme, for instance—as important persons who have demonstrated the significance of deep religious insight and their attempts to dismantle the duality between subject and object. Having grown up immersed in his mother’s passion for the Amida Buddha, Nishida gave some attention to the Pure Land school of Māhāyana Buddhism as well. But in general, Zen would constitute the chief influence throughout Nishida’s work (outside of Hegel).<sup>187</sup>

Even though Nishida practiced Buddhist meditation for part (or most) of his life, and can therefore be described as a devotee to Buddhism, he did not necessarily think Buddhism was superior to all other religions. Nishida demonstrates this point in his last

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<sup>187</sup> Maraldo, “How Nishida Individualized Religion,” 138; John Maraldo, “Nishida’s Philosophy in Europe and North America,” in *Japanese Philosophy in the Making I: Crossing Paths with Nishida* (Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications, 2017), 113.

writings when he claims that Buddhism, as it is now, will not be the road to the future, even though it will likely contribute to a new historical chapter:

From the perspective of present-day global history, it perhaps will be Buddhism that contributes to the formation of the new historical age. But if it too is only the conventional Buddhism of bygone days, it will merely be a relic of the past.<sup>188</sup>

This is because Buddhism has always been undergoing a process of evolution, but if it is to remain a viable system of ideas, then it must confront, expose, and address its own contradiction in the face of global change. It is important to note that it is not Buddhism as such that Nishida wants to present to the world, but the logics found in Buddhism, which can function as a tool for clarifying the process of historical creativity. Thus, Nishida is attempting to use Buddhism in a way that facilitates an understanding of the logical foundation of the world, without turning Buddhism into an ontological structure.

It is not a specific religious order that was the ideal for Nishida, but rather the kinds of experiences and insights that can be derived from religious cultivation practices. Interestingly enough, during his high school years, Nishida had, ironically, attacked religion, calling religious beliefs superstitious, but then a decade later, Nishida would become a dedicated student of Zen, for about ten years, eventually reaching *kenshō* (the initial enlightenment experience) in 1903, only to report in his diary that he still felt dissatisfied.<sup>189</sup> Whether or not such dissatisfaction became an impetus for his philosophical career is unknown, but it is certain that Nishida never lost sight of the

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<sup>188</sup> Nishida, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, 120.

<sup>189</sup> Maraldo, "How Nishida Individualized Religion," 129-130.

significance of religious practice and religious knowledge as sources for philosophical reflection.

Robert Wilkinson, in the book *Nishida and Western Philosophy*, argues that Nishida's philosophy was essentially an attempt to articulate a vision of reality from the standpoint of Zen Buddhism, a standpoint where *satori* was deployed as a framing logic. For Wilkinson, much of Nishida's reaction to modern Western thought, which had the tendency to foreclose religious consciousness as an independent logic, was based on the idea that consciousness within Buddhist enlightenment cannot be achieved by mere reasoning, such that *satori* is not bound to everyday ratiocination.<sup>190</sup> While Wilkinson is not incorrect about the role Buddhism has played in Nishida's philosophy nor some of the claims Buddhists have made against Western rationalism, I would argue that it may be too much of a reduction to characterize Nishida as *only* Buddhist. This is because, from the very beginning, Nishida was very much influenced by a panoply of Western philosophers—namely, William James, Fichte, Bergson, Kant, and Hegel (and over time, Nishida became to self-identify more and more as a “Hegelian”). It is certainly true that Buddhism and the sort of religious experiences that are cultivated within that tradition played a significant part in Nishida's critique of Western thought, but his philosophy was by no means “stuck in Buddhist thought,” especially when one looks at his philosophy of culture, where there is not so much a proselytization of Buddhism as it was an envisioning of a global world where other religious, intellectual, and cultural histories would become participants in a world-wide discourse. In fact, Nishida, himself, would

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<sup>190</sup> Wilkinson, *Nishida and Western Philosophy* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 3.

not even fully describe his own work as Zen. As Nishida once wrote to his student Nishitani Keiji: “Certainly it is fine if you say [that Zen elements are present in my thought], but if ordinary uninformed people call my thought ‘Zen,’ I would strongly object, because they do not understand Zen or my thought.”<sup>191</sup>

Of course, one cannot deny the role Buddhism played in the formation of Nishida’s philosophy of religion. Many commentators on Nishida’s early devotion to Zen practice have noted the Buddhist influence on his concept of pure experience, despite the fact that this term was originally borrowed from William James.<sup>192</sup> So much of Nishida’s “passion for inwardness,” to use Takeuchi Yoshinori’s words,<sup>193</sup> is indeed about clarifying the goal of religious philosophy, this goal of seeking the “true-self” or “authentic self” through a perspectival transformation of one’s body and mind. This is clear from a letter he once wrote to a friend in 1897 in which he said that the goal of spirituality was to “dig deeper and deeper into the recesses of the mind to reach the true, authentic self and become one with it,”<sup>194</sup> which he would confirm again later when he wrote, “religion exists where the self is absolutely negated, piercing through its very

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<sup>191</sup> Yusa Michiko, *Zen and Philosophy: An Intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitarō* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), xx.

<sup>192</sup> Nishida appropriates the basic template of “pure experience” from William James, but then reformulates this concept in a way that implies a prior unity of the subject-object distinction. As a result, Nishida’s notion is more radical than the “radical empiricism” of James because pure experience is something that can be experientially realized within everyday life. See Maximiliane Demmel, *Der Begriff der Reinen Erfahrung bei Nishida Kitaro und William James* (Munich: Martin Meidenbauer Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2004), 115-127.

<sup>193</sup> Takeuchi Yoshinori was a disciple of Tanabe—the other important figurehead of the Kyoto school.

<sup>194</sup> Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 40.

source, in the self-realization of the self-contradiction of life.”<sup>195</sup> But does Buddhism sneak in as the essence of what Nishida described as a religious view of reality, even if he rejects this claim as well?<sup>196</sup> Now, though one may read these claims as a mere re-interpretation of *anātman* (no-self),<sup>197</sup> one of the three marks of existence in Buddhism, one could also point out that such a reading of Nishida downplays the influence of Western philosophy on his thought. For instance, notion of action-intuition and its relation to the dialectical universal reads more like Hegel than it does Buddhism.

In the previous chapter, I argued that much of the secular has been driven by the desire to turn “religion” into a scientific object and therefore resist uniting religion and philosophy, because of the underlying assumption that religion is more primitive than scientific rationality. By contrast: in the context of Buddhism, for instance, religious practice and philosophical thought have never been separated, each having a role in terms of improving the conditions of life (through understanding the nature of suffering). Nishida had certainly echoed this view throughout his life, even writing in his diary in 1902 that “in the end, scholarship is for the sake of life. Life comes first; without it scholarship is useless.”<sup>198</sup> And so it might be fair to say that any impermeable distinction between religion and philosophy from a Nishidian point of view would prove fruitless in

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<sup>195</sup> Maraldo, “How Nishida Individualized Religion,” 145.

<sup>196</sup> We also need to bracket the fact that there were many references to Christianity within Nishida’s philosophical canon.

<sup>197</sup> The same could be said about Nishida’s notion of “absolutely nothing” as being a mere re-reading of the Mahāyāna notion of emptiness.

<sup>198</sup> Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 40.

the pursuit of truth. In other words, religion is to some extent philosophy and philosophy is to some extent religion. After all, Nishida believes that seeing reality as it is, is to think reality as it is, and so to think reality is to see reality, and seeing reality as clearly as possible is the ultimate goal of critical thought. But religion and philosophy cannot be collapsed into one category either though—rather, they can be understood, as Bret Davis describes it, as a “contradictory identity.”<sup>199</sup> In other words, the relationship between religion and philosophy exist in a mutually supportive process where the former refers to the self-awareness of reality by seeking to live with it directly through the practice of self-negation while the latter refers to the self-reflection of the religious experience itself in order to articulate a structuring logic of reality.<sup>200</sup> Philosophical reflection begins its starting point from the standpoint of religious awareness.

Other than associating religion with a form of self-awareness, does Nishida propose a concept of religion that is not exclusively personal? The answer is that one can find that the boundaries of what religion means shift in each time period, and that in the later works, religion is not exclusively viewed as a primordial form of self-awareness. While there is some truth to the claim that Nishida’s philosophical project remains fundamentally the same throughout his life, a point Nishida himself believed, but it is also true that Nishida experimented over time with different frames and terminology, perhaps as a way to respond to his critics as well as to his own concerns and personal

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<sup>199</sup> Bret Davis, “Provocative Ambivalences in Japanese Philosophy of Religion: With a Focus on Nishida and Zen,” in *Japanese Philosophy Abroad*, ed. by James Heisig (Nagoya: Nanzan Institution for Religion and Culture, 2004), 249.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 260-261.

critical reflections cast upon his own work. I will show in Chapters Four, Five, and Six that the chronological evolution of Nishida's philosophical project can be seen as an instantiation of both of these truth claims: that is, Nishida, while fundamentally concerned with the nature of reality throughout his entire life, would also continuously find different ways to express what this reality is and how we can know and access it. Nishida did not veer all that much from the same sort of truth claims he made in his early years, but when he did veer, it was mostly to secure the criticisms he launched against the dualities of Western philosophy by creating a logical foundation that can withstand some of the critical responses that could be deflected back at him.

Let us take the early Nishida for instance. As I will show in Chapter Four, the young Nishida can be characterized as more "mystical," because he sought to establish limits to rationality by rendering a primal form of experience as the basis of self-consciousness—what Nishida called "pure experience." One of the goals of "pure experience" was to introduce a non-dual standpoint to the nature of awareness by demonstrating that experience is prior to cognitive or conceptual reflection. Nishida's discussion around this primordial experience began to evolve in subsequent texts where he was driven towards voluntarism—in particular, towards investigating the will within self-consciousness and its immediacy with the concrete things of reality. This turn in his philosophical ideas can be read as an attempt to strengthen the claim that there is a freely willed, creative form of awareness, irreducible to rational consciousness, that can be characterized as religious. But within the very effort to argue for a religious awareness that breaks from the subject-object duality was the planting of the groundwork for an

“logical anchoring” of all beings and forms—what Nishida called a logic of place (*basho* 場所), a term that became a defining mark of his middle years.

Nishida’s frame of religion was for the most part ambiguous, if not generally absent, throughout his middle years, and what we find instead is a search for a structuring logic underlying the creative process of the world. However, Nishida’s numerous references to religion throughout his middle years remind us that his interest in this aspect of reality was never fully abandoned. If one were to read Nishida’s work chronologically, one can see that the notions of action-intuition (*kōiteki chokkan* 行為的直観), *basho* (場所), absolute dialectics (*zettai benshōhō* 絶対弁証法), the place of absolutely nothing (*zettaimu no basho* 絶対無の場所) and other related concepts within his middle years, although seeming to drift away from religion, all in fact serve the function of trying to secure an argument for a non-dualistic reality that makes room for religious awareness to exist as another epistemological standpoint, alongside scientific rationality, for instance. That is, if reality can be demonstrated to be non-dualistic, then religious awareness, as an expression of non-duality, cannot be justifiably criticized by (scientific) rationality because it exists as a different logical form.

While the notion of “pure experience,” which was central to the early Nishida, may have a philosophical correlate in the later Nishida, the exact term itself does in fact disappear. One plausible reason for this is that Nishida saw this approach as a dead-end, because it reeked of psychological reductionism. In order to avoid this particular trap, Nishida sought to formulate a logic of place (*basho* 場所) as a challenge to the ontological assumptions found in much of Western epistemology, while at the same time,

giving logical necessity to experience and self-awareness. Nishida's logic of place was to be an alternative to a logic of substance by positioning the very subject-object distinction within a more inclusive and non-differential schema. From this vantage point, Nishida no longer needed to formulate religion from a standpoint of pure experience (even though the implications of this view are still present in the later texts), because *basho* was granted as the logical foundation that supports the formation of religious awareness as another epistemological mode of inquiry—not unlike rationality. In the passing references to religion and religious awareness found in Nishida's middle years, it appears that he was trying to expand the terrain of the concept of religion by converting this category into a structuring logic that clarifies the relationship between the self and historical reality. While the remnants of religion as being a kind of structuring principle can indeed be found in Nishida's *Zen no Kenkyu*, it certainly becomes more pronounced, if not formalized, in the final writings, where religion would begin to function as a structuring logic to make sense of the role of culture, society, and the nation-state in a global world.

While Nishida himself did not subscribe to any monotheistic notion of God, there is still talk of God in his work. Indeed, through much of Nishida's oeuvre, God was referenced in association with the real, as this attempt to make sense of a "universal of universals." But Nishida's notion of the real was never something abstract, transcendent, or distant from human awareness, and so any imagining of God, as filtered through the prism of many branches of the Abrahamic traditions, would not be useful in this context. In fact, God expresses itself in the everyday life, as part of the experienced reality, which

is to say that God is “neither theism, nor deism, neither spiritualism nor naturalism; it is historical.”<sup>201</sup> Although Nishida’s notion of God is closer to the way Mahayana Buddhism thought of reality than the way Christianity thought of God, one can also point out that his notion of God bears some resemblance to Hegel’s and Schelling’s view of God than to say Martin Luther’s. This is because Nishida’s view of God, as a metaphor for the dynamic nature of historical life, can never transcend the world, since God is an expression of the historical world. One always has an immediate experience with God because God is not outside the world.

According to John Maraldo, the concept of religion can be understood as radically individualized within Nishida’s philosophy, because ultimately “religion is embodied in one’s realization of the self-contradictory nature of individual existence.”<sup>202</sup> But such a framing of Nishida’s philosophy of religion might even be too simplistic, because religion becomes linked to the cultural, to the political, and to God as part of the unfolding of the process of historical realization in Nishida’s later writings. To attest to Maraldo’s point, while Nishida’s notion of religion does refer to some aspect of self-awareness, the extent to what religion amounts to as an epistemological and structuring logic cannot be reduced to a view of atomized subjectivity, though. Nishida attempts to resist this point of reducing religion to mere individual consciousness or awareness when he says (in the spirit of Durkheim),

Religion...does not signify a particular psychological state peculiar to a certain people... It is not a matter of an individual’s consciousness; it is

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<sup>201</sup> Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 102

<sup>202</sup> Maraldo, “How Nishida Individualized Religion,” 153.

nothing other than historical life become self-aware. That is why, historically and socially, every kind of religion originates in folk beliefs. The founders of religion are those who take such beliefs to its full expression.<sup>203</sup>

Thus, Nishida's concept of religion here aims to represent more of a dialectical relationship between the depth of the existential self and the historical world, a relationship that also attempts to characterize the creative process of the universe that brings being (and nothingness) into its fold, and so in this regard, religion is not only a reference to the individual, but to the cosmological as well. Religion is not something that can be reified, because it encompasses the spirit of the historical world as a logic of actualization, and so one way to interpret Nishida's notion of religion, at least in the later years, is to think of this concept as something that includes not just the self, or the universe that expresses itself in the self in its drift towards realization, but the social, cultural, and political struggles for self-awareness expressed in history as well.

### Summary

This chapter began showing how the concept of religion (*shūkyō*) was imported into Japan and then turned into a category of critical reflection during the Meiji period (1868-1912), ending with how Nishida sought to reformulate a view of religion that breaks from Western modernity. On this very last point, in general, the trajectory of Nishida's philosophical career can be read as an attempt to rescue the category of religion from Western modernity by turning it into a proper epistemological standpoint, and then later as a structuring logic, that refuses its subordination to the real. This is why Nishida's

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 130.

early period was about safeguarding the epistemic voice of religion from the critique of rationality, and why Nishida's later years was about clarifying the link between the logic of religion and the logic of historical reality. This is all to say that, in the end, Nishida decided to re-interpret the category of religion as a structuring logic to make sense of the real, avoiding any attempt that would reduce it to just another abstract category of thought or to mere psychological knowledge. In short, Nishida's goal is to disrupt any view that thinks religion has no role to play in historical reality.

The question is now: How do we make sense of what I am calling Nishida's philosophical resistance within the context of intellectual history? Feminist scholar Audre Lorde argues that the only way to really liberate oneself from the master is by abandoning the tools of the master. The recursive act of borrowing the tools, or in this case the language, of the master reproduces the dominion of the master, because the message that is presented in the dominant program is that the minority has nothing really interesting to say about themselves and the world. As long as the minority is preoccupied with the master's tools and concerns, there is no genuine change. For Lorde, converting the differences between people into a source for critique and knowledge becomes a powerful avenue into making positive changes:<sup>204</sup>

Within the interdependence of mutual differences (non-dominant) lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is

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<sup>204</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldra (New York City: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 94-100.

forged.<sup>205</sup>

What Lorde is encouraging here is the urgency to draw on the strengths of difference and the reasons why such a difference is necessary.<sup>206</sup>

Perhaps that is what Nishida is doing as well—drawing on the points of differences between Japan and the West and sculpting that into an entire philosophical schema that makes known the differences that exist between the two cultural and intellectual histories. Nishida recognizes that the differences are indeed an advantage because the legacy of Japanese intellectual history was that of Buddhism (and Confucianism and Shintoism), as opposed to the historically Christian-Judaic West. Such lacunas in intellectual history, as Nishida sees it, would then form the basis for the appropriation, inversion, and/or reformulation of the concept of religion as being on the side of the real, thereby challenging the views of religion formulated in Western modernity. But Nishida's view of religion is also an attempt to dissolve the monopoly the West has had on world intellectual history by redefining the epistemological and logical structure of the world in a way that allows religion to not only operate outside the critique of scientific rationality but to operate as a structuring logic that can clarify the real. If religion is not governed by the same criteria of rationality, then religion becomes a standpoint for non-European cultures and intellectual histories to cultivate their own self-awareness in the pursuit for globality. That is to say, Nishida argues that it is necessary to assert a logic of religion that does not reproduce its subordination to Western rationality,

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 101.

because if rationality is championed over religion throughout the world, then any non-Western subject, cultural, or intellectual heritages, through its own religious discoveries, will never be able to participate in a philosophical global discussion. But to see how Nishida's early period seeks to protect religious awareness from rationalist criticism, we have to see how he turns religious awareness into an epistemological position. This will be the basic theme of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

NISHIDA'S EARLY INVERSION OF THE CATEGORY OF *SHŪKYŌ*

Nishida's early period is quite important to discuss in this dissertation, because it lays the groundwork for how the later Nishida viewed religion. In his earlier works, Nishida describes religion as a primordial form of consciousness or awareness that reveals the structural processes of reality. Opposed to any viewpoint that assumes reason and religion as distinct, the early Nishida did not think religion can be subsumed by reason, because religion refers to a more concrete form of awareness that shares the foundation for all creative activity. Therefore, from early on, one can see where Nishida was already beginning to view religion as not only an independent epistemological position in the world, with its own logic of creativity, but as a position that is more primordial than rationality. As Nishida aged, however, his notion of religion began to morph into a structuring logic, one that seeks to elucidate the processes of historical creativity. What I will discuss in this chapter is Nishida's view of religion as described in the early period, and how the early Nishida seeks to secure the meaning of religion as an immediate or concrete form of awareness, one that precedes, and challenges, the boundaries between body and mind, subject and object, particular and universal, and theory and practice. What I will argue is that, contra the later period of Nishida's work, the early notion of religion is more psychologically framed, perhaps because his search for resolving the problem of the standpoint of knowledge remained within the field of consciousness or the field of experience.

The Young Nishida on *Shūkyō*

In one of Nishida's early works, *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911) (*Zen no Kenkyū* 善の研究),<sup>207</sup> we find the concept of religion discussed as the relationship between God and human beings, a relationship in which both share the same foundational nature. The term God Nishida invokes here was not necessarily that of a wholly transcendent being, a God as often conceptualized within many sects of Christianity, for instance. Such a framing of God *qua* great power that is beyond consciousness would be problematic because, as Nishida writes, “then there is no true religious motive in our response to God.”<sup>208</sup> The result of this relationship would be an encouragement of selfishness on both ends—in other words, both God and the individual cannot be established without some aspect of selfish gain. Rather, Nishida argues that the relationship between God and the individual must be the opposite of selfishness: that the relationship between God and the individual must be based on a consistent return to God as the source for self-realization, where one lives only in God, instead of a self-interested relationship where the self is encouraged to look to God for protection or for the sake of one's own existence. In this sense, Nishida thinks that God must be represented as the foundation of the self and universe, a foundation in which one takes refuge, and so understanding God becomes the goal for human life. Therefore, in order to truly understand oneself, the ultimate task is to find oneself via God.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎, *Zen no Kenkyū* 善の研究 [An Inquiry into the Good] (Nagoya 名古屋: Chisokudō Publications, 2016).

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

If the true God is not a transcendental entity, who exists outside the universe, and yet controls it, then how does Nishida conceptualize God and its relationship to humans as such? If religion, as Nishida sees it, refers to a foundational place for humans to return to their origins, then there must be some unity between God and the self. What this seems to suggest for Nishida then is that while God must have some internal unifying power of the universe, it cannot be thought that God has some form of a personality, because there are no overarching characteristics to God as such. Since God is the foundation of all reality, then the unifying power of God makes possible the ability to directly see God as the basis of one's nature. Therefore, as Nishida contends, the basis of reality—God—cannot be framed in dualistic terms if the true meaning of religion is found in this unity between God and humans.<sup>210</sup>

Nishida claims that his conception of God is not pantheistic. Opposing Spinoza's view of God, Nishida argues that while God is both immanent and transcendent to subjectivity, the things of the world are not modes or parts of God.<sup>211</sup> Rather, humans, along with the universe, are *expressions* of God. Making this distinction between “parts of God” and “expressions of God” allows Nishida to assert a deeper connection between God and humans, because the former does not fully illuminate the unifying power of things in all places and at all times. In other words, nature and spirit are not disconnected from each other (like in the view where the universe is a creation of God), and so the term “expressions of God” is meant to capture this unitary aspect of when it is realized

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 154-155.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 154.

within self-awareness that there is no distinction between self and God. At the basis of reality, then, is a non-dual distinction between subject and object and between mind and matter.<sup>212</sup> Nishida explains:

Fundamentally, spirit and nature are not two separate kinds of reality; the distinction between them derives from different views of one and the same reality. In the facts of direct experience, there is no opposition between subject and object and no distinction between mind and matter; matter in itself is mind and mind in itself is matter, and there is only one actuality.<sup>213</sup>

To understand this relationship between oneself and God, Nishida argues that such a unity is not possible through abstract conceptualization, even though “it can be clearly expressed by an artist’s brush or a novelist’s pen.”<sup>214</sup> Such a claim is foundational to Nishida’s worldview because knowledge is not limited to intellectual reflection; in fact, if anything, the deepest forms of knowledge are directed by one’s intuition—a point that becomes fully developed in Nishida’s middle and later years. To be sure, Nishida is not committed to the destruction of reason by this move to elevate intuition, but rather committed to repositioning it as another voice of consciousness within the stream of God’s unifying activity. Here, Nishida’s frame of intuition as being this form of knowing that expresses a unity with God was to push forth this argument that the unity of consciousness can never become an object of knowledge.<sup>215</sup> For Nishida, a unity of consciousness refers to a constant state of becoming, where a growing awareness of

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 157-159.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 158-159.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 163.

consciousness itself is made possible by one's unity with God, and so if the base of consciousness always implies a unity, a unity that can only be revealed and de-layered in the growth of self-awareness, then there is never a point where one is outside of God. As the young Nishida might ask: How can one turn a teleological relationship with God into an object of knowledge and still maintain and nurture one's unity with God?

In this attempt to make sense of the unitary relationship between consciousness and God, Nishida began to formulate the function and ideal of the spirit of the universe. Nishida asserts that spirit not only requires an infinite unity but that unity itself is also manifested in the form of spirit, because the unifying power of spirit is fully open to a deeper and greater unity in its search for infinite unity. What makes this possible is the fact that spirit unifies the activities of reality by simply acting on nature, or accompanying the activities of the external world. But spirit is not something that always exists consciously, because it is at times an unconscious development, whereby consciousness, whether it is intuitive or reflective, is often ignorant of this unity.<sup>216</sup> Thus, the self seeks this infinite unity of spirit, and so the religious desire that motorizes the search for the unity of consciousness becomes this internal demand for union with the universe at large, a demand for a final experience of a subject-object unity.

If all beings and things are expressions of God, then how does one account for individuality? Nishida argues that it is problematic to take individuality as mere appearances of God. Individuality is not a false reflection of God, but rather, expresses itself as part of God's development, which is to say that individuality becomes one of

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 78.

God's activities of differentiation. In this regard, God is a singular, peerless spirit that envelops all beings and personalities; and so the proliferation of difference within the universe is the expression of God's living spirit.<sup>217</sup> To know God is to know freedom, and to know freedom is to know God—there is no distinction in this “cosmological fusion.”<sup>218</sup> This is because the experience of unity in consciousness is the merging of divine will to God and the universe. That is to say, the integration of oneself, the universe, and God is a singular unifying activity, derived from the same force or power at the foundation of all reality. If God is this intuition at the ground of the universe, then the process of self-realization *qua* process of “absolute unity” is the growing self-awareness of God and the universe itself.<sup>219</sup>

While this view of God sounds very Hegelian, there is a subtle difference: as Robert Wilkinson describes it, Nishida's view of God is absolutely paradoxical in that God embodies its own self-contradiction.<sup>220</sup> This point becomes clearer in Nishida's later work, where God is framed as an “absolute contradiction,” where God confronts nothingness through its own self-negation, and the relationship between self and God is framed as one of “inverse correspondence,” where the living self encounters the divine, and vice versa, through the act of dying—where vitality and self-movement transpires through one passing over into nothing. The paradoxical logic deployed in Nishida's view

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 168-169.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 160-161.

<sup>220</sup> Wilkinson, *Nishida and Western Philosophy*, 149.

of God is best illustrated by Nāgārjuna's eightfold negation, which rejects all predicate claims to reality. From the Nishidian standpoint of God in the early period though, a negative dialectical framework is nonetheless necessary to further one's awareness of God because an "absolute unity is gained only by discarding the subjective unity and merging with an objective unity."<sup>221</sup> In any attempt to unify on the side of subjectivity, one will remain stuck in a circle of relativity, and so any self that is opposed to the objective world will not result in a real absolute unity. Even a union between the subject and object via knowledge and volition form an incomplete unity, because the deepest unity is more in the search for a "unity that is prior to the separation of the intellect and will."<sup>222</sup> Because objective reality cannot be distinguished from subjective consciousness, Nishida argues the culmination of the unity of consciousness is only possible through a convergence of subject and object. In other words, in a kind of Buddhist move, Nishida argues that knowledge of the true self depends on "letting go" of itself so that one's subjectivity merges with the objective reality.

This process of unitary consciousness as this merging of subject and object instantiates what Nishida calls the religious demand. According to Nishida, the religious demand invokes the entirety of one's self and the universe, a demand whereby the self, despite understanding its own relativity and finitude, yearns and seeks to find unity in the infinite power of everything in the universe (what Nishida is perhaps referring to as

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<sup>221</sup> Nishida 西田, *Zen no Kenkyu* 善の研究 [An Inquiry into the Good], 150.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

God).<sup>223</sup> Nishida argued that this search for “absolute unity” is not necessarily about the desire for inner peace. While internal serenity is indeed a by-product of religion and religious consciousness, one has to be careful not to turn religion into a means to something else—religion should instead be the *raison d’être* of the life process itself. This is because a set of virtues or commandments that demand a certain temperament or disposition of human life cannot bring about the deepest insights into oneself and into the structure of reality; to the contrary, religion must operate in accordance to the demand of the will, this demand to maintain and develop the self over time.<sup>224</sup> In this sense, the religious demand should be thought of as the deepest and greatest of all demands, because it refers to one’s fundamental search for unity. Nishida explains:

In this sense the religious demand is the demand for the unity of consciousness and, further, the demand for union with the universe.... People often ask why religion is necessary. This is identical to asking why we need to live. Religion does not exist apart from the life of the self, and the religious demand is the demand of life itself.... Those who try to think seriously and to live seriously cannot help but feel an intense religious demand.<sup>225</sup>

Nishida himself believes that it is a mistake to reduce his view of religion to a form of mysticism. Despite being sympathetic to many Christian mystics, Nishida claims that his notion of religion had very little to do with mysticism, stating, “those who consider my philosophy mystical do so because they still think from the standpoint of an objectifying logic,”<sup>226</sup> because any reduction of religion to ineffable or elitist types of

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>226</sup> Maraldo, “How Nishida Individualized Religion,” 135.

experiences (i.e., existing only among religious clerics or occurring only in special moments) assumes binaries where in fact there are none.<sup>227</sup> One way to interpret this is to posit that Nishida's view of religion refers to the entirety of life, where physical and mental demands are not separate from the activities of the self. There is no experience that transcends the body and mind, because religious consciousness is not separate from the ordinary mind. In this regard, one can see where Nishida's formulation of religion makes room for the inclusion of science within the standpoint of religion. That is to say, religious consciousness becomes the foundation for science and reason.<sup>228</sup> In fact, Nishida himself believes that the pinnacle of knowledge, learning, and morality can only be achieved by entering through the door of religion.<sup>229</sup>

The preconditions that make possible the union of subject and object are found in the expressions of love and knowledge—which, for Nishida, are not fundamentally different mental activities. That is, to know a thing is to love a thing, and to love a thing is to know this thing. But cultivating love is not something that can be done through any internal or external force—rather, it must be done through a casting away of the self, because the feeling of love arises only when the gap between the subject who knows and the object that is known vanishes. So when we are absorbed or immersed in something (in a math problem or a writing a paper for instance), we operate nearly unconsciously

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<sup>227</sup> Wilkinson, *Nishida and Western Philosophy*, 125.

<sup>228</sup> Andrea Leonardi, "Mysticism and the Notion of God in Nishida's Philosophy of Religion," *Philosophy East and West* 62, no. 2 (2014): 450.

<sup>229</sup> Nishida 西田, *Zen no Kenkyu* 善の研究 [An Inquiry into the Good], 151.

because love is expressed in the very dissolution of the self in that moment.<sup>230</sup> There is no room for noetic thought supplementing such moments—it is just the intuition of the object, or of the other’s feelings, and the subsequent response one elicits.

Faith and reverence accompany love as well. This is because the cultivation of true knowledge and love is not possible without faith and reverence (reverence for self and other). Faith, for Nishida, is particularly important here though, because it functions as this unifying power that supports knowledge and will; and so knowledge alone cannot serve as a basis for life without having a strong sense of faith.<sup>231</sup> This makes sense given that God is understood as creative freedom, and if the love of God requires a faith in God, then faith itself becomes the condition of possibility for all creative power. Where Nishida is going with this argument is that love, faith, intuition, and knowledge are all intertwined within the same process. In other words, knowledge is derived from an intuition that depends on a faith that requires the love of a thing—only to be reinforced when the self is discarded. The more the self is cast off, the more there is an absolute faith in the other. Nishida writes: “To know and love a thing is to discard self-power and embody the faithful heart that believes in other-power.”<sup>232</sup> But if all of these qualities are linked to one another, then there must be something that precedes and unites these events within consciousness. In order to understand what precedes and unites these experiences

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 174.

within a single stream of consciousness, we have to return to Nishida's earliest and most fundamental concept: "pure experience."

*Pure Experience and the Conception of the Good*

Nishida's concept of "pure experience" (*junsui keiken* 純粹經驗) is an early attempt at reformulating the relationship between subject and object in a way that resolves the problem of knowledge—this problem of how we know what we know. Opposing views of reality that assume a subject-object binary, Nishida develops the notion of "pure experience" as a way to anchor the process of knowing within a single, undifferentiated stream of consciousness. The purpose of this concept was to make the inter-expressivity between subject and object possible through a kind of direct experience. This is because "pure experience" is a rooted kind of experience that is universal and/or trans-individual, which allows experience to move in the direction of making immediate contact with the real—which makes possible the grounding of metaphysics in the everyday experience. Nishida believes that the conventional wisdom within much of Western philosophy has been to search for a metaphysics that moves away from direct forms of experience, but such forms of thought only posed problems, because they presuppose passive forms of knowing the world. For Nishida, experience must be active and creative.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>233</sup>Masao Abe, "Introduction," in *An Inquiry into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), xiv, xxiv.

Nishida claims that the concept of pure experience enabled him to avoid the problem of solipsism, because it rendered the self not only the experiencer but the experienced as well. According to Nishida, in many Western constructions of the self there is an assumption that it is the individual self that exists first and then this individual self experiences external objects, only to reflect on them as such. But this order is reversed in the Nishidian scheme: experience precedes any individualized differences that are cemented through interactions with objects of the world. One plausible way to think of this is that there is no separate individual self as there is no separate individual thing that exist in the world—there is only the experience of objects arising and falling. And so the unmediated aspects of “pure experience” aim to illuminate that which is prior to any contact with ideational content and/or bodily or intellectual activity, and therefore, to clarify the “primordial foundation” that precedes the subject-object, mind-body, inner-outer, and/or immanence-transcendence dichotomies:

It is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but that an individual exists because there is experience. I thus arrived at the idea that experience is more fundamental than individual differences, and in this way I was able to avoid solipsism.<sup>234</sup>

A more systematic definition of “pure experience” can be stated as follows: the experience and intuition of things and facts as they arise and fall in consciousness. But the “pure” reference here is important because it alludes to “the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination.”<sup>235</sup> When one hears a sound

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<sup>234</sup> Nishida 西田, *Zen no Kenkyu* 善の研究 [An Inquiry into the Good], 4.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

or sees a color, such experience is prior to the thought or judgment of what that may be, and so in many ways, pure experience is not at all meaningful in any intrinsic way. In fact, all mental activities manifest themselves in the form of pure experience: past feelings, memories, and future hopes and feelings always arise in the present and so there is no real way to get outside of pure experience, other than to refine it.<sup>236</sup> When one conjures up traumatic memories and experiences the agony of them, all of that is happening in the present, within a kind of pure experience.

One can interpret pure experience then as something that is always a simple fact, even when moments are complex. And so all events as a whole can only really be pure experience—including perceptual experiences and representational forms. Nishida believes that this idea that thinking or conceptualization are just other forms of pure experience can be argued as long as there is strict unity maintained in consciousness. If there is a unity to consciousness, a singular stream that constitutes awareness, then there is no need to assume a binary between primordial awareness and mental activity. This is not to say that there are no forms of mental or perceptual discrimination—or that there is no interruption in the unity of consciousness. In fact, meanings and judgments can only be made when there is a break in the underling unity of consciousness. But meanings and judgments function only in the way of carving out distinctions in pure experience. When judgments are made, a connection forms between present and past consciousness, and that is how one arrives at an interpretation. There is no leaving the sphere of pure experience: there are only links between different expressions or states of experience

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

within pure experience.<sup>237</sup> The refinement of judgment assumes pure experience when a unity to consciousness returns and becomes firmer. But such forms of disunity do not add anything new to the experience, precisely because they “are simply expressions of its relation to other experiences.”<sup>238</sup> This is why it is fair to say that pure experience, and meanings and judgments are really different forms of the same thing.

This last point is particularly important for Nishida because it serves to demonstrate the fact that the early Nishida did not necessarily champion the forms of awareness that are non-rational. Rather, it is just thought that rationality must be contextualized within the realm of experience. To clarify: rational judgments are based in pure experience such that mathematical formulations, comparisons, inferences, and or any other form of intellectual activity are under the guide of an intuition that unifies and synthesizes these various strings of judgment within consciousness. Nishida writes:

Thinking and pure experience traditionally have been considered totally different mental activities. But when we cast off dogma and consider this straightforwardly, we see that, as James said in “The World of Pure Experience,” even the consciousness of relations is a kind of experience—so we realize that the activity of thinking constitutes a kind of pure experience.<sup>239</sup>

In other words, pure experience includes thinking because thinking exists as a single activity within the same stream of awareness. Thinking is just an expression of pure experience that is not fully complete.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 13-15.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 21.

Nishida claims that knowing and the will are connected to the field of pure experience by virtue of the will accompanying action as its goal, in order to create a unity within experience. But the will and action (thinking for instance) are not the same thing, because the will is always functioning, even in the face of non-action.<sup>241</sup> This is due to the fact that the will is “nothing more than the experience of shifting from one mental image to another.”<sup>242</sup> So when there is a shift of attention from one object to the next, the will is at work, because the goal of the will, in part, is to unify awareness. In this sense, the will becomes the most fundamental aspect to consciousness, because it serves the role of bringing the mind to a state of internal unity. However, the will, as Nishida claims, should not be equated with desire, because it acts more as the driving force of the unfolding processes of differentiation and identification, while desire implies or presupposes the activities of the will. Therefore, the will becomes indispensable for the process of knowing, because it is what makes self-realization possible: claims to truth, whether it involves imagination or thinking, are thus undergirded by the will such that it unifies ideas relevant to the process of knowing. While the will is apperceptive in itself, it involves perception, because the development of perceptual knowledge depends on the activity of the will to express direct forms of experience.<sup>243</sup>

Nishida argues that while it is common to frame the will as something that is inherently free, the reality is that the issue is far more complicated. This is because one

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 27-29.

cannot attribute absolute freedom to the will, since the will cannot get outside of the laws of nature as such. That is to say, there is a limit to what one can control through the will because of the finitude of one's body—and so in this regard, the body and mind are to some extent shaped by the laws of physical necessity. But this is not to say that there is no freedom at all. As knowledge develops and advances, freedom expands. People can extricate themselves from oppression when they are fully aware of the mechanisms of oppression. In this context, freedom stems from an awareness that follows its own nature, and so the unifying activity of the self and the universe is not so much a determinable product of nature as such, but rather the reverse: that nature emerges and develops from this unifying activity of subject and object.<sup>244</sup> If the will is an expression of the infinite power at the foundation of reality, then the will is not entirely under control by natural laws. To look for deterministic causes to agency and will in natural laws becomes just another form of reduction.

As one can see, Nishida does not take any materialistic approach to reality seriously. But Nishida rejects idealism as well, writing, “true reality is neither a phenomenon of consciousness nor a material phenomenon.”<sup>245</sup> If there is a true reality for Nishida, it is perhaps expressed in the very dissolution of subject and object, constituted in the union of willing, feeling, and thinking. While this may all seem contradictory, for Nishida, contradictions exist as proper facts of life. As Nishida argues, the basis of all reality is in fact governed by contradiction and unity—with each presupposing each

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 100-101.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 47.

other, because reality can only really emerge through infinite oppositions. But the reality of this is not easily accessible through abstract reasoning, because the unity of contradictions is realized only through one's direct experience of reality as such.

Nishida also believes that the functions of the will as it connects to pure experience cannot be divorced from intuition. This is because intuition is not a special talent since it is really nothing more than ordinary perception, which is to say that intuition is found in all of our everyday behavior and therefore the starting point for experiential facts. This is not to say that intuition does not mark a kind of profound depth within human experience: in fact, Nishida believes that the union of self and other in religious experiences cannot be achieved without the unitive power of intuition, nor can an artist reach an apex in creative feats without the guide of intuition. Nishida insists that learning, art, morality, and religion are all different manifestations of this unity that is expressed by intuition. This is because intuition not only lies at the foundation of all creative thought, it leads one to the state of unity.<sup>246</sup> Nishida writes:

Thought cannot be explained exhaustively, for at its base exists an unexplainable intuiting upon which all proof is constructed. A certain mystical reality is always hidden at the base of thought, and this pertains even to the axioms of geometry....The intuiting that lies at the foundation of thought becomes the basis of explanation and is at the same time the power of thinking, not simply a form of thought.<sup>247</sup>

What Nishida is arguing here is that there is no difference in qualitative experience between a genius's intuition and ordinary thinking—the difference is in the degree of the

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 36.

intuition of unity. A deeply intuitive person, like an artist or mathematician, has only managed to deepen or enlarge the state of pure experience. In this regard, thinking and intuition are similar kinds of activities, only thinking arises out of intuition.

There is a connection between the will and intuition within the Nishidian scheme as well. According to Nishida, the will is connected to intuition such that at the base of creativity, of thought, and of will is this intuition. When one wills something, one intuits a certain kind of unity, because the self is firmly planted within the functions of the will, and so the development of one's true self becomes this expression of the unifying qualities of intuition. The activities of the will are said to complete themselves on their own in the very departing from and returning to intuitive unity. Now while intuition is often thought of as something passive, for Nishida, it is not: rather, the unifying activities of intuition move the subject from a passive state of contemplation to a more active state of engaging the world. In the deepest moments of intuition, there is no movement on the part of the object nor of the subject, and all that is left is just one scene to witness. In this sense, intuition has the capacity to not only transcend knowledge and will, but to discover a kind of oneness that moves beyond the subject-object distinction.<sup>248</sup> Thus, religious awakening is thought to be this profound unity of intuition at work, this unity that becomes the basis of all truth. This is why, as Nishida says, "religion must exist at the base of learning and morality, which comes into being because of religion."<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 34-36.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 36.

All of this has implications for human action. According to Nishida, consciousness, intuition, the will, the intellect and so on are all part of the physical body that directs movement in the world.<sup>250</sup> It is not “I think, therefore I am,” but rather, “I think, therefore I act.” Nishida’s re-framing of Descartes’ *Cogito* represents a commitment to overhauling the body-mind, subject-object, and theory-practice dualities found in Western philosophy. Towards that end, Nishida argues that much of the Western Enlightenment was about placing intuition, will, and consciousness in the service of reason—that is to say, following reason means to do the right thing, while intuition and will are subordinated.<sup>251</sup> Conversely, for Nishida, understanding the good demands a more thorough investigation of intuition and the will vis-à-vis reason. This is because there is dissatisfaction in life when one goes against the unitary processes of consciousness—only when there is a development and completion of the will is the good realized internally.<sup>252</sup> And when the good is realized, when the will is followed all the way through, then it is said that one has achieved the highest good, where there is a completion and development of the true self.<sup>253</sup> The good can be understood in another way in that it operates as this unifying power that drives the maintenance and development of the true self or personality. This process is rather particularized, for Nishida: each individual has their own unifying power that constructs their personality.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 130-131.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 136.

If the actualization of the personality is the highest good, then it is fair to suggest that health and knowledge are secondary values of the good, even if they are indeed important, because an ultimate satisfaction with one's life cannot be brought out by health and knowledge alone.<sup>255</sup>

The true self, as Nishida sees it, is this personality that has discovered the unifying power within consciousness. Nishida argues that such power is neither a material force nor an unconscious instinct, but rather the "original state of independent, self-sufficient consciousness, with no distinction among knowledge, feeling, and volition, and no separation between subject and object."<sup>256</sup> It follows then that one cannot locate the "unifying force" in either materiality or in ideational content, because such a force transcends the distinctions between mind and matter and subject and object. Internally, this unifying force expresses itself as this feeling of love, but externally, the development of the personality derives more from the activities emerging out of the unifying powers of both consciousness and reality.<sup>257</sup> But the true self is in many ways cosmological because it is thought to be the expression of the universe as a spiritual force. In this regard, one might portray Nishida's early work as an attempt to philosophize a reality that exists between the idealist (for instance, Kant and Hegel) and materialist camps (for instance Marx), but with Buddhist roots. This neither-ideality-nor-materiality position becomes

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 132, 134.

more visible when one lays out the criticisms that Nishida launched against Western conceptions of the good—a theme that will be the focus of the next section.

*Nishida's Criticisms of Western Conceptions of the Good*

Besides responding to Western rationalism, Nishida also makes a point to respond to more hedonistic theories of human ethics—in particular, Epicurus and Aristippus. Nishida claims that hedonistic theories, which take human pleasure as the goal of human life, fail to actualize the highest good, because they promote a kind of selfishness within each individual, where one's own pleasure becomes the standard of the good.<sup>258</sup> The limitation Nishida points out is that within this ethical viewpoint the pleasures of an individual will eventually come into conflict with the pleasures of others. The limited access to pleasure means that no one can ultimately be fulfilled.<sup>259</sup> The other problem, as Nishida adds, is that hedonistic theories are experientially false. Just as much as there are desires for pleasure-fulfillment, there are desires for love and altruism. In fact, love and pleasure are opposites in that when a person acts for the sake of pleasure, this person cannot feel the satisfaction that derives from acts of love, from acts of altruism. The pursuit of pleasure is in part instinctual (such as the desire for food and sex), and so the pursuit of pleasure becomes the sole pursuit of fulfilling instinctual desires.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 117-118.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 121.

What about happiness as the ultimate goal or purpose of human life? Here, Nishida argues that the good and happiness are not in direct conflict with one another. In fact, Nishida, following Aristotle's claim that the realization of ideals and the fulfillment of one's demands constitutes happiness, believes that the actualization of the self brings happiness to the individual. But as a critical reply to Aristotle, Nishida argues the achievement of the ideals of the self or the satisfaction of egoistic demands are not all that different than hedonistic theories of ethical behavior. It is likely the case that, according to Nishida, one will return to pleasure as the ideal or goal of life within Aristotle's view on life and happiness, because one will eventually view the ideals of the self from a position of selfishness or from a position of pleasure. Thus, while self-actualization and happiness go hand in hand, they are not the same, because it is not happiness as such that brings actualization, but rather actualization is that which brings happiness along with it.<sup>261</sup> More than pleasure seeking, achieving one's ideals, and/or finding happiness, Nishida believes that the purpose or goal, rather, is to know the true reality of the self and "to know the reality of the self must mean one has achieved existential realization."<sup>262</sup>

At this point, one can see that Nishida is attempting to posit a view of the good as the processual unity between one's true self and/or personality and the creative flow of the universe. In other words, there is a (prior) unity, differentiation, and then a reunion

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 124-125.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 126.

again between subject and object in the developmental process of religious awareness.<sup>263</sup> Nishida believes that the development of this unity marks the terrain of religion, because in order to cultivate the highest good, one must pursue religious awareness, not abandon it as such. One might thus classify Nishida's early philosophy as a kind of religious apologetics, but this is perhaps too simplified. While one may see Nishida's early work as a defense of religious insights, I would argue that it is better to view Nishida's work as an attempt to "re-ground" the subject-object duality in religious insights. This attempt to ground reality in the religious was one way to preserve the intellectual heritages of Japan, while engaging Western intellectual thought. This move to integrate "Eastern" and Western" insights was based on this idea that a "pure experience" exists as a more inclusive universal than reason by serving as this link between culture, tradition, religion, and morality.<sup>264</sup> In other words, without the category of religion, Nishida would have been unable to justify his attempt to overhaul the various dualities of Western epistemology, precisely because religion to him was the site where Western modernity can be challenged. One may have a tendency to frame Nishida's philosophy as anti-modern, or anti-rational, but this is not quite right—it was not modernity or rationality as such that was the problem, especially because he wanted Japan to "modernize" in the sense of cooperating with Western science and technology; the problem, rather, was the tendency within Western modernity and rationality to deny religion as a resource for improving the world.

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<sup>263</sup> Limmer, *Der Begriff der Religion in Nishida Kitaros "Zen no Kenkyu,"* 96.

<sup>264</sup> Andrew Feenberg, "Experience and Culture: Nishida's Path 'To the Thing Themselves,'" *Philosophy East and West* 49, no. 1 (1999): 28.

How Nishida sought to re-assert religion as this resource was through challenging the powerful grip Kant had on Japanese philosophers. With German Idealism gaining prominence among Japanese thinkers, Nishida's response was to criticize the foundations of Western thought, while incorporating many aspects of "metaphysical philosophy" or "idealistic philosophy" within a new epistemological standpoint that cannot be confined to any particular region of the world. Indeed, some scholars have classified Nishida's early philosophy as a kind of psychological philosophy, along the lines of William James, Ernst Mach, and Wilhelm Wundt, pointing to the fact that such philosophers were emphasizing a sort of "pure experience," where experience can be distilled into its most direct and pure form.<sup>265</sup> Whether or not this is a fair delineation of the commonalities between Nishida and other psychological philosophers, I would argue that it is more important to keep in mind that Nishida was not completely satisfied by any of these thinkers, because the notion of pure experience needed to be active, not passive.<sup>266</sup> As such, as I will show in the following section, Nishida would begin to look at how pure experience can be thought of as "active."

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<sup>265</sup> While James and Mach were considered more pragmatists, and Wundt was not, all three thinkers nonetheless were attempting to ground questions of epistemology within a "psychology of experience." Mach, one of the predecessors of Gestalt theory, claimed that at the basis of all meaning is located in perceptual experience, while Wundt, one of the founders of experimental psychology, claimed that all forms of intellectual activity can be found in sense experience. Both place experience before any form of rationality. See Katherine Arens, "Mach's Psychology of Investigation," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21 (1985): 151–168 and Saulo de F. Araujo, *Wundt and the Philosophical Foundations of Psychology: A Reappraisal* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016).

<sup>266</sup> Masao, "Introduction," xiii-xiv.

## Intuition in Self-Awareness

The central question Nishida is seeking to address in *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness* (1917) (*Jikaku ni Okeru Chokkan to Hansei* 自覚に置ける直感と反省)<sup>267</sup> is how conceptual experiences can arise from within an immediate experience of self-awareness (what Nishida called “pure experience” in *Zen no Kenkyu*) and this process of self-reflection can be active if it stems from a non-cognitive basis. In the attempt to answer this question, Nishida returns to the problem of the standpoint of knowledge and seeks to re-interpret Fichte’s notion of the transcendental ego through the lens of Buddhism, and to place this frame as the foundation for a re-reading of Kantian and Bergsonian thought (particularly, in the service of recuperating Bergson’s concept of *élan vital*).<sup>268</sup> Indeed, Nishida credits Kant for developing an epistemological standpoint that recognized the constructed nature of truth, challenging the notion that essences can be extracted in the world. This, Nishida adds, forces humanity to abandon both views that either take the mind as a mirror incessantly reflecting objects or the scientific view that assumes that the mind has access to the external world.<sup>269</sup> From this viewpoint, any attempt to support dogmatic claims will eventually fall flat. But in the end, as Nishida believes, neither Kant nor Bergson resolved the problem of the standpoint of knowledge, because they never found a way out of the subject-object duality. The central task, for

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<sup>267</sup> Nishida Kitarō, *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, trans. Valdo Viglielmo, Takeuchi Toshinori, and Joseph O’Leary (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

Nishida, then was to provide a proper epistemological standpoint that can make sense of the act of self-reflection within self-awareness.<sup>270</sup> While one could classify this text as part of the early Nishida, I would claim that it seems to be more of a transitional text between the early and middle years of his thought, because it seeks to resolve some of problems that troubled him in *Zen no Kenkyu*.

Nishida put forth the argument, engaging both Bergson and Fichte, that a self-awareness exists, that which “lights up the internal connection” between intuition and reflection. The idea is that the act of reflection, this act where the self takes up an object and reflects on it, instantiates an infinite or unbroken progression of reality, just as it is—so that reflection can be understood as intrinsic to the process of self-development. From this vantage point, self-identity is a dynamic development, because self-reflection, which is responsible for the constitution of the self, flows as an unending process of unification in the very thrusts of itself mirroring itself. This is possible because the activities of reflection never produce an “outside self” that participates in the production of concepts, but rather the reflection process itself is an event within awareness, that which adds something to the self by means of subtracting something from it.<sup>271</sup> The point of this move is to place self-awareness as the unifier that grounds all conscious activity, so that “the subject of the activity can never itself become an object for consciousness.”<sup>272</sup>

Nishida claims that by framing self-awareness as a unitary process, self-awareness itself

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<sup>270</sup> Wargo, *The Logic of Nothingness: A Study of Nishida Kitarō*, 58.

<sup>271</sup> Nishida, *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, 4.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

becomes irreducible and unobjectifiable. Within this standpoint, one might think of being as just being and thinking as just thinking and the reflection of self-awareness as just a flow of “knowing” that unifies experience.

Here, Nishida wants to distinguish his own view of knowledge from Kant’s view of knowledge. According to Nishida, Kant’s placement of knowledge within an *a priori* synthesis of cognition becomes its own dead end because it becomes “impossible to think of a law of causation prior to the construction of knowledge,” because at that point “the law of causation is nothing more than one of the categories of thought which make the empirical world possible.”<sup>273</sup> The argument is that while Kantian philosophers would resolve this issue by pointing to a pre-conceptual experience, Nishida asserts that it can be resolved more quickly if there is a foundational unity that exists prior to the subject and object. Otherwise, what happens if there is no foundational unity as the basis of the subject-object relationship is that in the move to construct an objective standpoint of knowledge, the tendency is to identify the self as another object of reflection in the objective world, forcing the analysis to render the subject and object as two, albeit linked, extremes of one single reality.<sup>274</sup> Within this kind of scheme, Nishida argues that any sense of inter-activity becomes difficult to delineate.<sup>275</sup>

Nishida claims that what is ultimately missing within a Kantian or neo-Kantians framework is a notion of teleology.<sup>276</sup> That is to say, if one can advance a notion of

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>276</sup> Note that Nishida abandons the notion of teleology later in life.

teleology, then it is possible that the totality of experience can move beyond the opposition between subject and object.<sup>277</sup> But Nishida insists that this notion of a teleology needs to be grounded in some concrete experience, because only then is one able to see how a continuity of experience can develop and advance through self-reflection or self-awareness, where there is movement from a universal, a prior experiential unity of subject and object, to the particular (to the formation of the self).<sup>278</sup> But what is this concrete experience? And how does this concrete experience form the basis for a teleological scheme?

Nishida argues that at the basis of a “teleological unity” is the activity of the will, which links the body and spirit within one system of self-awareness.<sup>279</sup> By framing the entire body and mind as a teleological union that is connected through the will, Nishida is looking to position the will within self-awareness in a way that points to a more concrete experience—since “only the will moves the will.”<sup>280</sup> In fact, for Nishida, the will is the “absolute center” of the various worlds of experience, unifying everything into a single system of experience because it has the ability to direct action (artistic and moral).<sup>281</sup> This is why, as Nishida says, “the will is the body of the spiritual world, and the body is the will of the material world.”<sup>282</sup> From this standpoint then, any attempt to reduce the entire

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<sup>277</sup> Nishida, *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, 66.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-123

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-163.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

physical organism to a mere mechanical unit or to a mere material object obscures how the body cannot be teased apart from cognitive reflection or apart from the spiritual activities of the self. If anything, as Nishida believes, the entire physical body, as this fusion of mind and matter, is a kind of “a work of art,” because it instantiates how spirit manifests itself in the physical world by virtue of being an expression of the creative activities of the will.<sup>283</sup>

Here, Nishida argues that it is the will that forms the basis of “the religious standpoint.” This is because the will unifies our experiences that make possible the development of self-awareness, and although it adds nothing to the content of knowledge, the will can freely move from the conventions of time and space, allowing the self to experience the world in a time-less way. As Nishida writes:

The will, which thus combines the physical, physiological, psychological, and historical realms, is itself an eternal now transcending time and place, centered always on the present and expressed by the word ‘this.’<sup>284</sup>

This is where Nishida argues for a distinction between science on one hand, and art and religion on the other, as they relate to the will. According to Nishida, scientific investigations deploy the will through an “objective negation,” while within art and religion, the will is deployed through a standpoint of affirmation *qua* negation—in other words, the creative acts of the will transpire through a dropping of the subject and object duality as an experiential frame. This is because the scientific effort often limits itself to negative reflection as the approach to understand reality, a reflection that does not include

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 162.

the entirety of the personality; art and religion, by contrast, include the personality of the knower, because the entirety of the self must be negated in order to fully activate the creative power of artistic and religious awareness. Art and religion are more concrete in this sense, Nishida believes, because from the standpoint of a complete personality, the universality of the individual, the *a priori* of all *a priori*, cannot be derived from an abstract concept, like in science or historical methodologies, but only from the creative articulations emerging from the will.<sup>285</sup> Hence Nishida writing that “we must move from the merely philosophical viewpoint to the religious one, from self-consciousness as a theme of conscious reflection to the world of mystery that lies behind it,”<sup>286</sup> because this move to the religious standpoint is what unifies “thought and experience, spiritual and material, meaning and fact.”<sup>287</sup> This is why Nishida believes that “the deepest interpretation of reality is to be sought not in reason, but in creative will.”<sup>288</sup>

If we take Nishida’s thought in this text as a whole, we find, not unlike the philosophical view presented in *Zen no Kenkyu*, an interest in erasing the boundaries that separate the categories of art and religion, subject and object, and mind and body. Nishida’s attempt to blur the boundaries of these categories serves the purpose of creating a more unified view of reality and a more unified view of one’s relationship with God. Nishida hints at this when he says,

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 156-157.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 135-136.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 166.

Our experience is stamped in all its forms by absolute will, and belongs to its kingdom of ends. Since absolute will unifies all worlds of experience to form a single system, one may hold, with religious people, that the world is a personal manifestation of God, that the material world is the body and history the biography of God, and that the world of truth is the thought of God.<sup>289</sup>

For Nishida, there is no outside of God, and the only way to really achieve any deep sense of satisfaction in the world is to return to the concrete reality of spirit, to the world of religion. That is, if the problem of human life is this problem of aspiring to the foundation of the world, to the concrete experience of life, as Nishida suggests, then the significance and meaning of life is not to return to the physical world, to satisfy mere biological and psychological needs and desires, but to return to the spiritual life so that we become more self-aware of our own existence. In this sense, Nishida maintains his view of religion, as taken from his earlier work, as being the most concrete or fundamental, and therefore, the most significant in life. Of course, from the standpoint of the secular-religion binary, Nishida's position on religious awareness may seem reactive or defensive, but I want to suggest that it makes more sense to think of Nishida, who seeks to demonstrate that religion has a place in the global world, is more of a visionary than an apologist.

### Summary

I tried to show in this chapter that the overall concern of Nishida's early work was that of protecting certain aspects of experience from being collapsed into scientific objectivity or scientific rationality. That is, Nishida's defense of a first-person experience

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 162.

of reality is in the interest of re-asserting religion in the face of rational and materialist critiques of religion by positioning it as a foundational human experience. One might think of Nishida's viewpoint as an attempt to superordinate religious experience to other forms of experiences, such as rationality, but this would be a simplification. Rather, the early Nishida thinks religious experience is a necessity for understanding oneself in the world, because it unites the personality of the self to the dynamic movements of the universe. Nishida is not rejecting rationality, but making room for religious experience to exist alongside rationality.

To be sure, the early Nishida was often criticized among other Japanese philosophy for "psychologizing" consciousness, thus failing to solve the standpoint of knowledge (a criticism that was held against his subsequent text as well). The argument was that it lacked a rigorous structural foundation and perhaps placed too much weight on this notion of pure experience to account for the dynamic unity of epistemological standpoints.<sup>290</sup> Nonetheless, one can see that the early notion of pure experience was to function as a kind of scaffolding, allowing Nishida to build a more sophisticated account of reality based on earlier ideas. We find that Nishida's middle and later periods were still concerned with the same issues that perplexed the early Nishida, namely—the centrality of self-awareness, the problematics around the subject-object dichotomy, and the importance of religion. In fact, in a later preface to *Zen no Kenkyu*, Nishida would mention that his later works were mainly permutations of his earlier concept of pure

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<sup>290</sup> Robert Wargo, *The Logic of Nothingness: A Study of Nishida Kitarō* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 65.

experience.<sup>291</sup> But one notable difference between the early and later periods is that we begin to see a new vocabulary that allowed him to move beyond the language of psychologization. To get a sense of how he arrived at this position, we have to move forward into the next period of Nishida's life in order to understand where he began to see his own problems with "radical empiricism," or the psychologization of epistemology. Thus, as we will see in the next chapter, the middle years became the search for this foundation that could support both Eastern and Western logic(s), without sacrificing religion or religious awareness as an important piece to understanding the world. In order to maintain the significance of religion, Nishida needed to turn this foundation into a kind of trans-logic that could withstand the charge of psychologism while allowing for a view of how historical reality articulates itself.

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 111.

## CHAPTER 5

NISHIDA'S MIDDLE YEARS: THE SEARCH FOR THE LOGICAL FOUNDATION  
OF THE HISTORICAL WORLD

I am going to argue that the ultimate task for Nishida's middle years was to resolve the problem of knowledge—to create a standpoint of knowing that is free from the subject-object, universal-particular, one-many, and mind-body dichotomies. But the goal was to do so without resorting to more explicit mystical language. Nishida, himself, admitted that his earlier work was a failure in this regard, because not only was the notion of pure experience not a real solution to the problem of standpoint, it was in the end a retreat into mysticism, because it over-emphasized mental activity. One can capture Nishida lamenting his failure when he writes: “I may not escape the censure of having broken my sword, expended my arrows, and finally surrendered to the camp of mysticism.”<sup>292</sup> In this regard, it is helpful to think of Nishida's philosophical career as a series of stages that grew out of introspection and self-criticism. The middle years then can be understood as an attempt to review the problematics surrounding the psychologized notion of “pure experience” and unity consciousness, as discussed in his earlier work, because this is the stage where we see Nishida begins to reformulate these notions by moving away from any claim that support ineffable states of awareness as an epistemological foundation. During this time period, we see concepts like a “logic of place” (*basho* 場所), “absolute contradiction of self-identity” (*zettai mujunteki jiko doitsu*

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<sup>292</sup> Wargo, *The Logic of Nothingness: A Study of Nishida Kitarō*, 66.

絶対 矛盾的 自己 同一), and “action-intuition” (*Kōiteki Chokkan* 行為的直感) that demonstrate a drifting away from a psychologization of experience.

Therefore, as Nishida continued to write, we see another transition in the earlier part of the middle years: a discussion around other forms of self-awareness, such as artistic intuition. Nishida’s attempt to make sense of the role of artistic intuition was already visible in *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness* (*Jikaku ni Okeru Chokkan to Hansei*), but it goes back even further in an earlier essay—“The Explanation of Beauty” (1900) (*Bi no Setsumei* 美の説明), which was written eleven years before *Zen no Kenkyū*.<sup>293</sup> In this particular essay, Nishida seeks to elucidate the role of beauty, aesthetics, and/or artistic awareness in the development of an epistemological standpoint that breaks from the subject-object bifurcation. One’s sense of beauty cannot be understood as a detached or disinterested form of pleasure, but must be understood within the context of a pursuit for emotional meaning and religious truth—a view that was heavily influenced by the fundamental principles of Zen Buddhism.<sup>294</sup>

Nishida would expand this view of artistic awareness in *Art and Morality* (*Geijutsu to Dōtoku* 芸術と道徳),<sup>295</sup> reflecting an increased interest in clarifying the relationship between beauty, truth, and the good. As a back-handed response to the belief of objective knowledge set in place by the physical sciences, in the final chapter of this

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<sup>293</sup> Steve Odin, “An Explanation of Beauty: Nishida Kitarō’s *Bi no Setsumei*,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 42, no. 2 (1987).

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>295</sup> Nishida Kitarō, *Art and Morality*, trans. David Dilworth and Valdo Viglielmo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1979).

text, Nishida argues that the knowledge produced within the sciences are not absolute claims, but factual truths, and such factual truths are just different from the sort of truth-claims experienced in religious and artistic activities.<sup>296</sup> Perhaps it is important to keep in mind that this idea of imagining an independent logic for religious and artistic awareness that can support different truth claims was perhaps a pre-cursor to the later Nishida, who sought to develop this thesis in full. Nonetheless, the following section is not just an overview of Nishida's central theses in *Art and Morality*, but an exposition of how Nishida maintains and expands the epistemological terrain of religious and artistic awareness, and how these forms of awareness are embodied in a way that challenge the subject-object binary.

The aim of this chapter is to chronologically trace the middle years of Nishida's philosophy, while paying close attention to how his concept of religion becomes shaped along the way, and how this concept continued to evolve through his later years. It is true that Nishida began to move away from philosophizing rigorously about the concept of religion in his middle years, instead focusing more on constructing a logic of place (*basho* 場所), but to say that the concept of religion was abandoned completely as a thematic structure in the middle years would be difficult to verify. I want to argue that Nishida maintains an interest in religion throughout the middle years, as demonstrated by his many references to religion and to the nature of God, but it is not until Nishida's last writings, of course, is where we see a return of religion as a central theme—where see religion as both a logic of existential awareness and a structuring logic of historical

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 198-200.

creativity. Perhaps the declining interest in the middle years in the concept of religion though had more to do with the fact that he realized that he needed to build a proper edifice that can logically support the independence and veracity of religious truth-claims. In this sense, one might say that religion as a philosophical theme merely moved from the explicit to the implicit in his middle years. But in order to save religion from becoming “psychologized,” Nishida realized that there was a need to develop an alternative epistemological structure that expands beyond the subject-object distinction, resistance to any reduction to experience. Ultimately, this is what his middle years were about: this search for an alternative logical foundation of the historical world. Before we head in this direction, we have to make sense of Nishida’s prior goal of clarifying the unity of beauty, morality, and religion, in order to contextualize Nishida’s goal of clarifying the alternative foundational structure that he sought in the middle years—a theme I will turn to now.

### The Unity of Beauty, Morality, and Religion

*Art and Mortality* (1923) (*Geijutsu to Dōtoku* 芸術と道徳) had set a different tone for Nishida. What one finds in this text is that much of its undercurrent was motivated by the question how the “creative aspects of the will” relate to a sense of beauty. In fact, this was a theme that can be found in the early Nishida as well, where there was a commitment to exploring the will as the driving force for creative expression. Unlike in his earlier works, however, Nishida here begins to build on a notion of aesthetic intuition and its link to religion and morality by looking at how in “the foundation of

conceptual truth there must always be a creative intuition.”<sup>297</sup> What Nishida is responding to in this work is not just the viewpoints that seek to render equivalences between beauty and pleasure, but the viewpoints that bifurcate the fields of religion, art, and morality. This essay seeks to disrupt the binaries around these categories of thought.

In fact, conversely, Nishida claims that art, religion, and morality originate within the same fundamental field, except that morality also begins with conceptual discrimination. Although religion represents the ultimate standpoint of knowledge because of its ability to operate both within and outside conceptual knowledge, there is a point where artistic expression and moral practice resembles the “unity awareness” that is common to religious experiences, though. As Nishida writes:

Unity at the ultimate point of morality must no longer be art, but religion. Religion transcends and includes knowledge; it transcends and includes morality, as well. Therefore, religion in one aspect resembles art, but, like morality, it is thoroughly rigorous and practical.<sup>298</sup>

This is why ultimately, then, as Nishida adds, “when we view nature from the standpoint of aesthetic intuition, the spirit we see behind nature is directly the spirit of the self.”<sup>299</sup> Here, as Nishida is pointing out, aesthetic intuition mimics the awareness of deep religious insight.

Thus, the question of “what is beauty” is not a matter of locating its essence in the objective realm of things, but neither is it a matter of reducing aesthetic feelings to mere

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 80.

subjective awareness. Beautiful things exist, Nishida reminds us, but the aesthetic object must be understood within the context of intuition, which involves the activities of the will. Nishida maintained the idea that intuition is neither a passive act nor a mere sub-faculty of the intellect, but rather expresses itself as the unity of act *qua* pure feeling. Artistic awareness, in this sense, can be described as a style or mode of being that takes self-awareness in action, whereby action becomes the very expression of one's self-awareness.<sup>300</sup> In other words, all creative acts, including its content, that emerge out of aesthetic intuition come into existence through the actions of the body in the pursuit of cultivating a sense of beauty and truth.

This is where one begins to see a more elaborate view of Nishida's take on the body. For Nishida, the body and mind operate as a single unit, and so any knowledge about oneself and/or the world cannot be developed without the activities of the body. When Nishida spoke of intuition, he was speaking about an understanding of the world through the mode of body as an active function in the physical world. In other words, meaningful forms of knowledge are not defined by something that one can recite, but perhaps better understood as forms of expressions that derive from one's creative intuition. Thus, one's bodily relationship with the mind within the mode of creative intuition is not one of resistance or tension, whereby the mind is constantly putting pressure on the body to act in step with it, but rather one of agreement, whereby the body and mind operate in concert within the movements of the physical world.

As a point of contrast, it might be useful to discuss the differences between

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 5-32.

Nishida's view of the body and Plato's, Aristotle's, and Descartes' respective view of the body. Plato, for instance, had argued that knowing was about discovering the essences of the forms of the world, because the world we all live in is the world of appearances, and not the world of eternal forms, the domain where the truth of things resides. In order to gain access to this world of eternal forms, one has to investigate, on theoretical grounds, what these essences are. For Plato, here, knowing seems to be more about the recollection of information, as derived from memory, as it is deployed in a way that seeks to uncover the essences. In this sense, Plato's theory of knowledge seems to be more about theoretical knowledge rather than about the knowledge that is derived from the lived-experiences of the body and mind as a single-unit in the world. This is because Plato thought that the faculty of conceptual knowledge was sufficient in discovering these essences because all lived experiences are "fleeting images" and thus the only way to capture these essential forms that lie behind what is materialized is through doing away with anything that is impermanent. In fact, the body had to be controlled in order to obtain these essential forms, and thus, the problem of life and death, one of the central issues pervading his *Phaedo*, can only be resolved through conceptual reflection, and not through any lived experiences that involve the body as a means of knowing.<sup>301</sup>

Aristotle did not depart much from Plato's theory of knowledge. If anything, as Nishida would argue, Aristotle formalized Plato's thought into a system of logic by converting Plato's ontological issues into a semantic issue. The argument is that not only was Aristotle in agreement with Plato that these essences could be uncovered, but more

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<sup>301</sup> Plato, *Plato's Phaedo*, trans. E.M Cope (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1875), 14-18.

that it was possible that such knowledge could be illuminated within a subject-predicate structure. That is, if one can find the proper correspondence between the object out there and the linguistic object in the mind, then one can say confidently that they have determined the truth of that proposition. If the aim of philosophy is to discover Plato's eternal forms, then one can obtain such essences, according to Aristotle, by investigating the object under investigation.<sup>302</sup> But what Nishida would point out here is that Aristotle's epistemological position largely neglects the impermanence that is the world because the epistemological procedure used to capture knowledge in the laws of non-contradiction, for instance, assumes a reality that is atemporalized. Thus, as Nishida would argue, what is reproduced in Aristotle is the reification of knowledge as a conceptual piece of information, and not what is realized directly within the embodied mind. Knowledge is not just a noun, but a verb, an activity of creation ("knowing") rather, that functions as a continuous process of self-transformation by discovering fields of knowing that are deeper and more inclusive.

If there is anyone in modern philosophy who can be seen as the antithesis of Nishida's view of the mind and body, it is Descartes. Descartes, much like Plato and Aristotle, saw the body as something one can never really know. The mind is much easier to know than the body, and so one can obtain truth through a mode of rational reflection. But to act rationally, as Descartes saw it, meant more than finding certainty in cognitive reflection, it meant an absence of doubt.<sup>303</sup> Descartes' *Cogito* would suggest a view of

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<sup>302</sup> See Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Santa Fe: Green Lion Press 1999), 53-77.

<sup>303</sup> Rene Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," in *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 30-33.

knowledge that is accessible by anyone who seeks to discover the self-evident facts of an object. The response Nishida would have delivered here is this problem of the disembodied “I”: from a Nishidian standpoint, what Descartes thought he discovered was not an “I” after all, but rather an idea of who the “I” is or belongs to. In this sense, Descartes’ presupposition of this “I” leaves behind an inquiry that not only rejects the body as a mode of knowing, but also an inquiry that assumes a perfect correspondence of truth, with certainty as that which transcends all that is relative. By positing this form of rationality as the essence of what it means to be human, Descartes universalized—by means of reification—an epistemology that re-affirms the noetic activity of our mind as the proper source of knowing the world. One of the legacies one finds in Descartes’ *Cogito* is this view of reality that can be objectively rationalized. The problematic that Nishida is addressing here is this foundation of modernity that began with Descartes’ mind-body dichotomy that characterizes the process of certainty as one of thought capturing thought. As Nishida would see it, while Plato and Aristotle laid the groundwork for the *Cogito*, it was Descartes, in the end, who shifted the scheme of knowledge into a solipsistic space. For certainty to be obtained, Descartes did not need any other *Cogito* nor did he need a body—all that was needed was the noetic mind reflecting on itself reflecting on the world. Thus, as one can see, Descartes, Plato, and Aristotle had a theory of knowledge that prioritized the noetic mind over the body.

Nishida’s view of the body is rather important here because it is already locked into the epistemological process. Like how it was developed in the early Nishida, *Geijutsu to Dōtoku* (1923) seeks to make sense of the body and its relation to art and

religion by clarifying the foundational aspects of awareness that are the base for creative activity. But Nishida structures this foundational awareness in a way that renders artistic awareness as part of unitary awareness. As it is said, when the actor is creative, the actor is engaged in a kind of unitary awareness, because “pure or internal unity means that the act of unity itself is creative and that the act itself creates an infinite creative world in itself.”<sup>304</sup> In other words, any form of creative awareness instantiates a pure unity between subject and object. Note that such a state of pure awareness, for Nishida, then, is trans-conceptual or extra-conceptual, even if conceptual objects are produced and used within the process itself. Thus, one might say that the creative expressions of artistic formations mimic religious or spiritual acts because they act in unison with the movements of reality.

It is here where one can see that Nishida seeks to dismantle the reason-religion and emotion-reason binary. In the case of the former: Nishida was not demarcating a special domain for rational investigations of the world—such activity is fundamentally experiential, and yet spiritual in that the act of rational formulation instantiates not only one’s aesthetic appreciation, but what underlies abstract reflection—intuitive understanding. Nishida writes: “the more we advance rationally, the more intuitive understanding deepens spirituality. There must be intuitive understanding also at the base of any kind of abstract understanding.”<sup>305</sup> Contrary to the view that implies a bifurcation between intuition and reason, Nishida believes that there is a point where reason, or

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<sup>304</sup> Nishida, *Art and Morality*, 38.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

abstract understanding, and intuition, in the form of religious or artistic awareness, become intertwined, even mutually beneficial within the pursuit of understanding oneself and the world.

The collapsing of the religion-reason and emotion-reason binaries are predicated on the argument that the body, mind, and spirit are not operating in separate realms, because, as Nishida sees it, “there is only the activity of mind and body as one lived reality.”<sup>306</sup> When aesthetic feelings and expressions arise, they arise out of the same creative will as morality and/or intellectual reflection, because “knowledge is feeling, and feeling is knowledge and activity.”<sup>307</sup> But collapsing binaries is not the same thing as conflating binaries. Nishida does not believe in conflating emotion and intellectual reflection, because there are distinctions that must be made for the purpose of clarifying the deepest forms of religious feeling. Nishida argues that the deepest forms of religious emotions manifest as attitudes of absolute humility, whereby one abandons the intellectual, emotional, and volitional self, and just conforms to the truth itself.<sup>308</sup> But, implicated within this frame that accepts the inter-expressivity of art, morality, reason, and religion is this idea that entering into the realms of beauty and the good is also an entering into truth—hence “we can think that eternal truth is contained infinitely within a work of art.”<sup>309</sup> In short, I want to suggest that Nishida’s goal here is to clarify the

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 100-101.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 192.

meaning of intuition by discussing how it becomes expressed in the various forms of awareness (artistic, moral, religious, etc.). In the subsequent essay, “Expressive Activity” (1925), Nishida begins to take more seriously the notion of (bodily) activity itself, and how this (bodily) activity is linked to the processes of self-awareness and self-expression.

### Activity as Forms of Historical Expression

While the themes of art, morality, and religion remained within Nishida’s essay “Expressive Activity” (1925) (*Hyōgen Sayō* 表現作用),<sup>310</sup> there was a move towards clarifying how all historical reality itself is a form of creative expression. Throughout all of the texts, Nishida broadly describes reality as creative in all domains: living organisms are creative, the world and nature are creative, and as a social, cultural, and historical species, humans are creative, and these domains of creativity morph and evolve into more complex structures. Thus, one plausible interpretation of what Nishida is alluding to by the term “historical creativity” is that of all of the various domains of creativity that constitutes reality. The notion of “expressive activity” is therefore a reference to how the self and world are expressed through the creative activities of historical things. In this text, Nishida is transitioning towards looking at human creativity, with a deeper interest in looking at the world itself also as a form of creative expression. Instead of locating creativity only within the activities of the will, as argued in his previous texts, Nishida, in

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<sup>310</sup> Nishida Kitarō, “Expressive Activity,” in *Ontology of Production: 3 Essays*, trans. William Haver (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

this essay, begins to search for the structural processes that underlie all historical forms of creativity.

One of the arguments that is laid out in this essay is that “acting,” or “activity,” refers to not just what merely changes as a result of an intentional act. Per Nishida, the act or actor cannot be absolutely independent from what is acted upon, otherwise “it could not even be said that one acts upon the other,” because “if it is posited that the latter is absolutely passive with respect to the former, that is nothing other than to think the latter is subsumed within the former.”<sup>311</sup> If such is the case, then it follows that “to the extent that two things mutually interact, both together lose their independence and are unified by a single force.”<sup>312</sup> Hence Nishida argues that what is acted upon is also that which acts. The act is both passive and active, at the same time. But what is this single force that Nishida is speaking of in this context? Nishida, here, is explicating how the expressive activities of historical things are structured logically. That there is a “single force” that both underlies and unifies what is expressed in the world—that the one gives rise to differentiation (the many). This idea of a unitary force is something we have already seen before in Nishida’s work. But here Nishida is seeking to formalize this unitary force into a proper epistemological structure (a development that is more clearly seen in his later work): that is, at the basis of self-awareness, there is an intuitive unity that functions as the condition of possibility for the constitution of knowledge, and at the basis of creative expression, there is a unifying force that gives rise to the many.

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

One of Nishida's goals here is to respond to mechanistic notions of time, causality, and teleology. For Nishida, mechanistic explanations of creative formations continuously fall short because they are based on a linear succession, which can only progress in a single direction.<sup>313</sup> Now from a standpoint of substance-based or mechanistic-based arguments, this logic works, because all content is structured as temporalized events in space, but from the epistemological standpoint that Nishida is developing in this essay, this logical structure does not work, because in the case of an intuitive unity, for instance, where knowing, thinking, acting and so on, are grounded, this form of self-awareness is not acted on by time as such.<sup>314</sup> Since Nishida does not think that time is outside of space, then unity awareness, as expressed in the absolute present, is neither a subjective awareness facing time nor is it an object that is posited in space, but rather is an expression of time and space by virtue of becoming the movement of events in the absolute present.

This is not to suggest that creative activity is completely outside of time—as if creative activity can exist outside of the historical world. All creative acts are “implaced” in reality. Self-awareness does include time within itself, but it transcends time (and space) by becoming it. One way to interpret Nishida's point here is that the creative acts that express time itself must be thought of as extra-temporal: in other words, the unity of self-awareness includes and transcends time all at once, since time is not a supra-individual force, but the subject itself as a spatial object. Nishida argues such a

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 39.

contradiction is possible because “time comes into being on the basis of self-aware unity:” awareness possesses an internal unity, and such unity means that “consciousness must be both the beginning and the ending; it must be both cause and effect.”<sup>315</sup> On the surface, this may seem rather illogical, but Nishida invites us to think of the creative expressions of the world as a kind of spiral that emerge out of another standpoint that is inherently contradictory—the standpoint of the uncreating and uncreated.<sup>316</sup> Nishida claims that this standpoint of the “uncreating and uncreated” is the ground of creation and the ground of the self—meaning all creative activity, including the unity of awareness, come into existence from this basis. Nishida makes it clear that this standpoint of nothing is not a form of non-being in opposition to being; instead, it is that which includes both being and non-being within itself—hence this standpoint is without any fixed direction. In other words, the standpoint of nothing precedes being and non-being and supports this distinction as a contradictory unity. The same goes for time and space: the standpoint of nothing precedes time and space, and so time and space emerge as creative forms from a process of mutual self-negation. While it seems impossible to imagine how activity can express something if everything emerges from nothing, but it is important to remember that Nishida is not so much concerned with the mechanisms of causation themselves as he is with the logical structuring that make possible the creative forms of the world.

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>316</sup> This standpoint of the uncreating and uncreated develops into the “place of absolutely nothing” in later works. See the following section on *Basho*.

In order to fully understand Nishida's formulation of expressive activity in this essay, one must consider how his notion of self-negation is foundational to the process of self-realization. The transcendence of time, for instance, cannot occur without a negation of a self that supports the constructed sense of time: therefore, in the very negation of the self is where there is an entrance into eternity, where "time loses the form of time" and all activity becomes expression.<sup>317</sup> This particular form of expressive activity is what Nishida describes as the standpoint of religion.<sup>318</sup> But a standpoint is also an intuition of actuality, where "thinking thinks thinking itself,"<sup>319</sup> where acting ceases to be acting, and where the activity of artistic production becomes more concrete, an expression that is more refined than language.<sup>320</sup> From a standpoint that champions an "objective subjectivity," where there is an independent observer who confronts a reality, any notion of a timeless (or extra-temporal) and extra-spatial experience seems absurd, but if one begins from the standpoint where the subject is always inside the world, never to leave one's place, with time and space functioning as constitutive forms of one's existence, then a foundational reality as being both timeless and extra-spatial is not illogical after all. But where is Nishida going with all of this? Does not the notion of expressive activity eventually fall back into a softer mode of psychologism in this context? Nishida seeks to address some of these issues in the "logic of place," discussing how a "logic of

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<sup>317</sup> Nishida, "Expressive Activity," 52.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

place” supports the idea that all reality is a form of expressive activity. It is in the logic of place where we can see how Nishida seeks to escape the problematics of psychologism.

### The Concept of *Basho*

One of the most important essays within Nishida’s philosophical career was “*Basho*” (場所) (1926),<sup>321</sup> which became a breakthrough in terms of his attempt to fully dismantle the subject and object, idealism and realism, and experience and reality dualities. Nishida compares his concept of *basho* to Plato’s *chōra*—this term that designated the “place” in which all forms in reality are held, except that *basho* includes not just the forms themselves, but the formless as well, within itself. In this regard, the concept of *basho* is an attempt to challenge the critics who charged him with “psychologism” because *basho* acts as a corrective for the logic of substance found throughout Western philosophical history by virtue of being a logic that clarifies how substances come into existence.<sup>322</sup> Nishida wants to demonstrate that the dualism between subject and object inaugurated in traditional Western epistemology was in the end not radical enough, because it demanded a kind of raft in order to cross over from subject and object. The uniqueness of the concept *basho* lies in its function to provide a logical foundation to the concrete situatedness in which everyone lives and experiences, a situatedness that is not dependent on a gap between the knower and the known. Since

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<sup>321</sup> Nishida Kitarō, “*Basho*,” in *Place and Dialectic: Two Essays by Nishida Kitarō*, trans. John Krummel and Shigenori Nagatomo (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>322</sup> John Krummel, “*Basho*, World, and Dialectics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō,” in *Place and Dialectic: Two Essays by Nishida Kitarō*, trans. John Krummel (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8-10, 49.

humans are always, already living and breathing within a variety of contexts simultaneously, part of Nishida's goal with this essay is to investigate the logical grounding of this multiplicity, without recurring to the contingencies of the psyche. The concept of *basho* has an aspect of standpoint to it, with the most foundational standpoint being what Nishida called the "*basho* of absolutely nothing" (*zettaimu no basho* 絶対無の場所), and it is at this foundational standpoint where the epistemological and the ontological collapse and dissolve into each other.

If one begins with two worlds, like in any duality of subject and object, it becomes difficult to explain how these two worlds can actually communicate with each other, and so the logic of *basho* aims, in one aspect of things, to illuminate the starting point of epistemology and its pursuit of clarifying the conditions of possibility for how knowledge is structured and realized. Although it is translated as "place," *basho* captures more than the English translation of this term because it seeks to make visible the living dynamism of self-forming formlessness as the most concrete starting point in which we all live and experience. But the image of the spatial, as a field or place, has the other function of trying to prevent any tendency to conceive this dynamism in terms of the psyche. This is because, at the deepest level of *basho*, in the place of absolutely nothing, there is an overcoming of duality between subject and object, because when situated within the *basho* of absolutely nothing, the knower and the known comes to be viewed as different manifestations of the same self-mirroring nothing. There is no starting point from the subject to the object nor from the object to the subject, there is only the *basho* of absolutely nothing that makes possible the structuring of the subject and object forms.

While the term *basho* of absolutely nothing is intimately linked to the process of knowing, a process that involves layers of implacements and envelopments of mental acts and objects that constitute the world, it is more than this: in the deepest sense, it alludes to the dynamic structure of reality that is prior to subject and object and to real and ideal. In other words, by referencing the most concrete situatedness at the basis of all events, the *basho* of absolutely nothing aims to make explicit the nondistinctiveness that grounds, precedes, and envelops being and non-being, form and formless because it aims to clarify how epistemological and ontological dichotomies are structured in the first place. In this sense, one can interpret *basho* as an epistemic logic of non-dualism, a trans-logic or alogic if you will, that articulates how the historical world forms and creates itself. By characterizing *basho* as a trans-logic or alogic way of thinking, one can think of this as a standpoint that is outside of Aristotle's laws of contradiction, because it encompasses more than just abstract thought or what we might call rational thought since it looks at the logical structuring that underlies conceptual categories. As Nishida writes: "We cannot determine *basho* by means of so-called logical forms. No matter how far we proceed with forms, we cannot go beyond so-called forms. The true form of forms must be a *basho* of forms."<sup>323</sup>

The logic of *basho* was in many ways a critical response to Kant, who Nishida believed had assumed a gap between the transcendental consciousness and the transcendental object.<sup>324</sup> According to Nishida, Kant contributes to a kind of "object-

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<sup>323</sup> Nishida, "Basho," 52-53.

<sup>324</sup> Gereon Kopft, "Between Identity and Difference: Three Ways of Reading Nishida's Non-Dualism," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 31, no. 1 (2004): 75.

centered thinking,” where the assumed determinable relation between subject and object either quietly accepts consciousness or awareness as a thing or object standing opposite to its own object, or it presumes the object (the other pole of the epistemological duality) to be an irreducible, unknowable substance, which can never be a predicate. Thus, from a Kantian standpoint, as Nishida believes, cognition assumes a relationship between objectified things or beings.<sup>325</sup> But any act of objectification within any epistemological duality, insofar as it aims to objectify the unobjectifiable, cannot resolve the problem of cognition (the problem of how the subject and object can communicate with each other), because the final product derived from process of objectification, a determination Nishida links to the “grammatical subject,”<sup>326</sup> can never be the root of cognition if one thinks of consciousness as an object one is conscious of. Instead, one must think of consciousness *qua* the act of consciousness, as a consciousness that is conscious. This is why Nishida claims that there must be a pre-objective source to the process of objectification, a more immediate logical form that exists prior to any objectifying act—hence his turn to *basho* as this search for a more primitive unity that clarifies how cognition is possible within the “apparent gap” between subject and object.

The logic of *basho* was also a critical response to Aristotle’s grammatical subject, a standpoint that lays the foundation for Kant’s object logic. In other words, Nishida’s

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<sup>325</sup> Nishida claims that the Kantian reality becomes bifurcated within two spheres: the transcendental sphere of a priori conditions and the transcendental sphere that is the subject of determination. In this bifurcation, Nishida adds, is a hidden premise of cognition that occurs between two objects. This is because the Kantian consciousness, as a subject of judgment, is made into an object of thought. See Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō’s Chiasmatic Chorology: Place of Dialectic, Dialectic of Place*, 20.

<sup>326</sup> Nishida’s notion of “the grammatical subject” refers to the discourses that inaugurate the Aristotelian standpoint that thinks of reality as a substance that can be objectively reflected upon.

argues that the grammatical subject promotes an “object-logic” viewpoint that assumes that it is the individual who is ultimately real. The argument Nishida advances is that if it is the individual that is taken as real, and therefore the prime mover of knowledge creation, then the individual can never become a predicate because it only occupies the subject place within the subject-object relationship.<sup>327</sup> There are ultimately two consequences of the “object-logic” viewpoint: the first consequence is that it promotes a false view of the self, where one becomes tempted to think that there is an enduring, substantive self. Nishida claims that this is not only logically incorrect, but it also poses as an impediment in terms of addressing the religious question. That is, one cannot find any sense of absolute freedom if the self is reified as a category of existence, because it places the subject outside historical reality. The other consequence Nishida mentions is that “object-logic” fails to illuminate the inherent dynamism of the historical world and how the historical world brings the subject into the creative process. To put it another way: the creative process of the historical world, and its relationship to religious awareness, cannot be truly understood within an Aristotelian viewpoint because this view do not fully illuminate how subjectivity emerges within the process of knowing in a reality that is continuously changing.<sup>328</sup>

Nishida asserts that one needs to construct a more holistic situation—an always, already lived situation, if you will—that make visible the very conditions that underlie the determining acts, the determined content, as well as the plane of potential objects or

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<sup>327</sup> Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō's Chiasmatic Chorology: Place of Dialectic, Dialectic of Place*, 24.

<sup>328</sup> Wilkinson, *Nishida and Western Philosophy*, 115-117.

beings that emerge in the world. What Nishida calls the “predicate plane” (*jutsugomen* 述語面) is this attempt to posit a universal pre-context that determines the grammatical subject.<sup>329</sup> That is to say, the “predicate plane” (*qua* universal) subsumes the grammatical subject (*qua* particular), by virtue of operating as an un-objectifiable foundation or paradigmatic form for the process of knowledge formation. The predicate plane, then, can be seen as transcendent to all forms of conceptual judgment, because it implaces or envelopes the particular. Nishida writes:

If we are to say that the universal is not merely subjective but carries objectivity within itself, the significance that the particular is as implaced in the objective universal would have to mean that the universal establishes the form of the particular within just as it is and without distortion.... Universal and particular are not mutually heterogeneous as are things and space. The particular is a part of the universal and moreover it is its image.<sup>330</sup>

All of this is to say that the “predicate plane” Nishida is alluding to here is part of this epistemology of *basho*. In the move away from a standpoint that looks at constituted, objectified beings or objects and in the direction of assuming an “unobjectifiable context,” Nishida’s logic of *basho* aims to show that underlying all of the subsumptive judgments involved are not just the agent doing the acting but also the object or matter or being that is determined by the subject. Therefore, *basho* refers to more than just the determinative judgments within the field of subjective awareness, but also to the very

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<sup>329</sup> Nishida claims that Kant’s transcendental categories can be classified as a “logic of predicates” (*jutsugoteki ronri* 述語的論理), a logic that seeks to clarify the determining features of subjective reality. But the problem with Kant’s logic of predicates, as Nishida argues, is that it reduces subjectivity to mere intellectual categories. Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō’s Chiasmatic Chorology: Place of Dialectic, Dialectic of Place*, 109.

<sup>330</sup> Nishida, “Basho,” 61-62.

dialectical formation of the world through the creative activities of life, because the implacements of act and content, form and matter, subject and object, all of which constitute the historical world, are determined by the system of *basho*.

But at the “base” of everything is what Nishida calls “the *basho* of absolutely nothing”—this “groundless ground” or “infinitely deep nothing” that sustains oppositional categories of objects, things, forms, being, and/or thought, without ever becoming objectified.<sup>331</sup> The role of this concept within Nishida’s philosophy is to show how there is a final and unobjectifiable predicate, a “transcendental predicate” that clarifies the locus for the proliferation of difference (a predicate that is not a predicate as such). In this sense, we might think of the *basho* of absolutely nothing as the final place in which things, beings, events, emerge and disappear, or form and dissolve, because it is the source that encompasses and sustains the very oppositions many of us normally take as individualized opposed objects, such as being and nothing, object and awareness, place and implaced.<sup>332</sup> But the place of absolutely nothing is central to understanding how the field of subjective awareness is contextualized and formed within the Nishidian standpoint as well. For instance, Nishida claims that one’s entrance into the absolutely nothing, what he calls “true nothing,” occurs when one plumbs deep into one’s own

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<sup>331</sup> Chiara Robbiano, “Plato’s and Nishida’s Bridges over Dualistic Gaps,” *Platone Nel Pensiero Moderno E Contemporaneo* 6 (2015): 192.

<sup>332</sup> Or to put it another way: *basho* seeks to make sense of the process of “generation and extinction” that is reality—a claim many suggest was taken from Buddhism. This view of reality as a cyclical process of “generation and extinction,” or in more Buddhist terminology, “life and death,” has practical or existential importance when one considers that the momentary appearance and disappearance of things-events exemplifies the impermanence of reality, as well as the suffering that comes along with it. To “see reality as it is” means to unveil the ignorance of reality and to see the human predicament of finitude and transience. See Nishida, “Basho,” 56.

awareness, because “to deepen intuition means to come closer to the *basho* of true nothing.”<sup>333</sup> This “true nothing” is not literally nothing though<sup>334</sup>—it is, in fact, the basis for all that is real because the formlessness that constitutes the true nothing is thought of as something that forms itself while forming things.<sup>335</sup>

It might be helpful, as John Krummel tells us, to think of Nishida’s form of awareness in more circular terms, rather than a certain point or a thing, because his view of awareness refers to a field of determining predicates that exist in relation to a “relative nothing,” which is “guided by further determining acts, a further context, belonging to what in objective terms is truly ‘nothing.’”<sup>336</sup> In other words, there is a not-I to every “I” that is objectified by the grammatical subject, and this “nothing” *qua* not-I is supported by the *basho* of absolutely nothing that envelops it. Therefore, the *basho* of absolutely nothing includes not just all types of things, forms, and beings, but their negations as well—hence why affirmation is a form of negation and why negation is a form of affirmation. To put it another way: every category of thought reflects (or perhaps we can say, “it implies”) an opposite category and therefore is said to mirror the existence of the

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<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>334</sup> This assertion is rather similar (perhaps even being a borrowed claim) to what Nāgārjuna wrote in the service of the two-truth claim: that the two truths (the conventional truth and the ultimate truth) are really only one truth—only to be realized in the practice itself. The point of this collapse though was actually a way to avoid eternalism and nihilism, because it was an attempt to suggest that even the ultimate truth is a conceptual construction itself, which would require the knower to let go of any reifying tendencies in order to “see” and, therefore embody, the ultimate truth. To see more about this link between this notion of “nothing” and Buddhism, see Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō’s Chiasmatic Chorology: Place of Dialectic, Dialectic of Place*, 36-37.

<sup>335</sup> Therefore, as Nishida suggests, it cannot be the case that intuition is a product or epiphenomenon of pre-existing conceptual content.

<sup>336</sup> Krummel, “*Basho*, World, and Dialectics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō,” 17-18.

other, thereby constituting the other's existence through this process of mirroring itself and the other. But such "knowing through mirroring" cannot even take place without other "mirrors" that exist "above" and "below" it, which gives rise to the entire process of mirroring (*qua* a form of knowing). The final and ultimate mirror is Nishida's *basho* of absolutely nothing—a concept that seeks to encompass all vantage points, with nothing left out.<sup>337</sup>

I want to suggest that one should be careful not to read Nishida's logic of place as a monistic assertion, because there is no one substance or fabric that is real, nor is there one real source that triggers the emanation of existing things. This is because "the nothing that generates must be an even deeper nothing than the nothing that mirrors."<sup>338</sup> Nishida's concept of *basho* is more about how oppositional expressions of reality are actually two sides of the one and same reality—that there is a unity-in-contradictions—and how the production of these opposites are inseparable from an infinitely broader context.<sup>339</sup> The difficulty around grasping Nishida's logic of *basho* is perhaps the result of the influence of Aristotle's law of non-contradiction on our thinking, because it is far more challenging to logically conceive of the unity-in-contradictions that is formed at the base of *basho* if one begins from a dualistic standpoint. In fact, Nishida argues that since the dynamic nature of reality is not something that can be so easily captured by an

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<sup>337</sup> John Maraldo, "Self-Mirroring and Self-Awareness: Dedekind, Royce, and Nishida," in *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy* 1, ed. James Heisig, (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2006), 153.

<sup>338</sup> Nishida, "Basho," 69.

<sup>339</sup> To get a deeper account of the similarities and differences between Plotinus and the earlier Nishida, see Ritsuko Okano, "Plotinus and Nishida," *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 9 (2015): 1-26.

“object-logic” standpoint, the dynamism of reality is better “seen” from the standpoint of an intuitive awareness, because it is freer from more dualistic ways of classifying the world. This is not to say that a standpoint of intuitive awareness transcends conceptual categories, but rather that an Aristotelian logic is not applicable to the logic of this awareness. The point that is being made here is that there is a privileged vantage point that arises from entering into the place absolutely nothing, because of the a-logical or translogical structure of this intuitive awareness—a vantage point that allows one to clearly see the contradictory structuring of all reality.

Instead of equating knowledge with content, Nishida argues that knowing is the act of self-awareness itself, since self-awareness is this mirroring process that is revealed within the dynamic expression of reality. This is why when one enters into the place of absolutely nothing, there is an intuitive self-awakening, an awakening where the self begins to reflect itself within itself (*jikogajikonioitejikowoutsusu* 己が自己に於て自己を映す): “when we thus arrive at the *basho* of true nothing by transcending even the opposition of subject and predicate, it becomes an intuition that sees itself.”<sup>340</sup> Nishida’s frame of knowing as this intuition that “sees itself” points to the deepest form of self-awareness. Nishida explains:

The *basho* of true nothing must be that which transcends the opposition of being and nothing in every sense and enables them to be established within. It is at the place where we thoroughly break through species concepts, that we see true consciousness.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Nishida, “Basho,” 99.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

The “true consciousness” that Nishida is speaking of here is not a state of consciousness that is beyond consciousness, but rather the opposite: it is an intuitive awareness or consciousness that emerges from a negation of being and non-being—through what Nishida calls a “contradictory unity” (*mujunteki tōitsu* 矛盾的統一).

It is here where one can see how *basho* is tied to Nishida’s view of religion. The intuition that is discussed represents his concern for what he described as “the religious” (*shūkyōteki* 宗教的)—the concern for what lies at the very depth of human existence.

Although the more conspicuous language of religion drops out of this essay (to be picked up again in later works), it is nonetheless clear that the concern for religion is still very much alive in this piece, because the existential predicament of *basho* instantiates what Nishida would describe as the religious features of *basho*.<sup>342</sup> In this sense, one might say that *basho*, as a notion to make sense of how the world is logically structured, is in part a replacement for the notion of pure experience as the foundation of knowledge and religion, while providing further clarification for the self-God relationship one finds in Nishida’s *Zen no Kenkyū*—without rehabilitating any notion of experience or any form of psychologization. Unlike the notion of “pure experience,” the concept of *basho* generates a foundational logic that envelops the subject-object binary while providing a logic of self-awareness via self-critique.<sup>343</sup> Nishida claims that the gateway into the place of absolutely nothing is only through an intuition that is activated by means of an infinite self-negation and so one has to animate the religious aspects of *basho* through a plumbing

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<sup>342</sup> Krummel, “*Basho*, World, and Dialectics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō,” 12, 26.

<sup>343</sup> Gereon Kopf, “Between Foundationalism and Relativism: Locating Nishida’s ‘Logic of Basho’ on the Ideological Landscape,” *Nanzan Bulletin* 27 (2003): 25.

into the depth of one's self-contradictions in order to cultivate an awareness of reality as a formless form.

In conclusion, Nishida's interest in developing a logic of place in this essay was motivated in part by a desire to re-position epistemology in a way that avoids psychologism—this tendency to reduce epistemological knowledge to the psyche. This is because the logic of *basho* is not reducible to anything, to neither the subject nor the object, since it refers to the “structuring place” that both precedes and constitutes the making of subjective knowledge or psychological experiences. While Nishida seems to be determined to construct a logic of place that points towards non-dualism in this piece, what needed further clarification for Nishida was how to resolve the problem of the underlying dualism of “object-logic” thought. To that end, Nishida realized that he had to survey the history of Western philosophy in order to get a sense of where the duality in Western philosophy began. It is this point that I turn to now.

#### The Unresolvable Issue within Consciousness

One of the central tasks found in Nishida's project is to find a way to justify a non-dualistic reality on the basis of a logic that is not bound to the laws of non-contradiction. In the essay “The Unresolvable Issue within Consciousness” (1927) (*Torinokosaretaru ishiki no Mondai* 取残されたる意識の問題),<sup>344</sup> Nishida begins to search for the origins of the duality that underlie object-logic thinking, by returning to an

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<sup>344</sup> Nishida Kitarō, “The Unsolved Issue of Consciousness,” translated by John Krummel, *Philosophy East and West* 62, no. 1 (2012).

investigation of Greek philosophy, and then tracking its movement into modern philosophy—with its culmination in Kant’s transcendental philosophy. Up until this point, Nishida had argued that there was a relationship between *topos* and consciousness, and that this relationship is what illuminates the possibility for cognition. But Nishida’s logic of *basho*, as mentioned briefly in the previous section, is deployed in this essay to demonstrate the problematic of the subject-object duality within modern epistemology, by showing how there is a “logically independent” place that precedes and envelopes cognitive activity, which can serve as a “logical ground” for a new epistemology without recuperating the subject-object split. According to Nishida, the reason why Greek philosophy and modern epistemology has failed to clarify the true significance of being and nothing is because the conditions for the possibility of cognition are impossible without a logic of place.<sup>345</sup> Nishida claims that Aristotle privileged the grammatical subject in terms of understanding the transcendent reality, but the problem is that one cannot start from the direction of a substance or being because subjectivity, above all, must be implaced within a logically independent ground in order for it to have a connection to a broader cultural world, and so reality, as a synthetic whole of subject and object, must be investigated from this “predicate plane.” Nishida hints at this when he says, “the knower is not the so-called transcendent object or value; in some sense it must be that which is at-work.”<sup>346</sup> Thus, it is only through a logic of place can one really

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 51-53.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 55.

understand the relationship between subject and object and between particular and universal.

To be sure, the Platonist school, as Nishida concedes, does recognize a notion of “place,” but this concept of place was never conceived as logically independent. This is because the concept of nothing was only formulated as an opposite to being, and that matter was only formulated as an opposite to form, and as a result, both are not implaced within a broader context, undeterminable by being. Therefore, the Platonist school of thought could only fathom the concept of place as a receptacle where ideas are held, and not conceived as an unobjectifiable nothing in which all things and beings (and non-things and beings) are implaced. Nishida launches a similar attack on Kant, who he believed had also failed to render any logical independence for the concept of place. The problem with Kantian philosophy, according to Nishida, is that it “is incapable of clarifying the ground for the establishment of the world of cultural phenomena,”<sup>347</sup> because there is no concept of an un-objectifiable place that makes possible the constitution of reflective categories that overcome the subject-object gap. In order to render a world of cultural phenomenon, in which we all participate and create, there has to be some prior, pre-objective context that makes the world intelligible. For Nishida, if a notion of place is logically independent, then there is a way to imagine a world made up layers or beings that represent a variety of standpoints or positions. It is this last point that becomes thematized in the next section.

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 56.

### The Logic of Existence: Nishida's World(s) of Intelligibility

Up until this point, Nishida did not feel as if he properly clarified the distinction between being and absolute nothingness. In the essay “The Intelligible World” (1928) (*Eichiteki Sekai* 英知の世界),<sup>348</sup> we see Nishida's interest in constructing the different categories of the world-of-being, categories that represent where all things and beings are not only placed, but determined, a theme Nishida thought would make this distinction between being and absolute nothingness clearer. The title of this essay, “The Intelligible World,” speaks to the contextual layers that contain and “transcend” the bottomless contradictions of self-awareness, where intellectual intuition becomes the point of determination. Thus, it is perhaps better to not interpret the term “intelligible world” as a wholly transcendent world, but rather as the center of our conscious existence, because it points to a deeper world or contextual layer we are all a part of. This is because what we consider to be true, moral, and beautiful are in fact placed within this intelligible world.

Nishida speaks of three categories of being here: natural being, conscious being, and intelligible being. The first category of being refers to the natural world or the physical universe that we all experience, a category that has its place within the awareness of subjectivity (what Nishida calls the “universal of judgment”). All things that are known about the physical world (living beings, organic beings, inorganic beings etc.) are constituted within this plane of existence.<sup>349</sup> The second category of being refers

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<sup>348</sup> Nishida Kitarō, “The Intelligible World,” in *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness: Three Philosophical Essays*, trans. Robert Schinzinger (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1958).

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.

to the world of consciousness—what Nishida refers to as the universal of self-awareness. This is the plane of being where action becomes an expression of the will, where one's emotion becomes the union of outward and inward. The last category of being is the “intelligible world” or the “intelligible universal.” This is the universal place where one's self is constituted through an “intellectual intuition” whereby “the self sees itself immediately or the self sees its further depth.”<sup>350</sup> What Nishida is suggesting here is that the constitution of the self is not a product of a union between self and idea, but, rather, the result of an intuition that sees itself directly. In other words, when the self sees the infinite depth within itself, there is a reflection back to the self that invites the self to a deeper layer of itself.

Nishida describes the process of implacement and the processes of determination as a kind of “enveloping universal.” That is, for Nishida, being implies “being within” something, and so when Nishida speaks of this enveloping universal as that which determines the intelligible world, one can think of the world of nature and the world of consciousness as another layer of being that embeds another layer of being. In order to clarify the world of consciousness, Nishida points out that there are two universals that are related to this—the universal of judgment and the universal of self-awareness, with the latter universal being that which envelops the universal of judgment. While the former represents the determination of thought and its content—or knowledge produced through logical judgments, the latter represents the self-awareness that “is beyond the transcendental plane of predicates, and is essentially no longer determined by the

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 111.

universal of judgment.”<sup>351</sup> This is because the universal of self-awareness is both subjective and objective at the same time: in other words, contained within the universal of self-awareness is the contradictory identity of subject and object. But the marks of distinction Nishida makes between these different layers were designed to not only demonstrate how reality is implaced and determined, but to refer to the different kinds of knowledge that are respective of specific kinds of standpoints or levels of discourses.<sup>352</sup> The world of nature is a more abstract level of being and therefore associated with questions and issues that are more physical, and because of this limitation, any contradiction found in this level, like the religious question, for instance, cannot really be resolved here. The religious question is only resolved by entering more concrete levels, by entering the “intelligible world.”

Behind the layers of existence is a place that is only accessible through a plumbing into one’s own contradictory awareness. In other words, one becomes more aware of oneself through self-negation. As contradictions emerge and accumulate within these layers, there arises an internal necessity for further transcendence *qua* negation. Even within the intelligible self, after arriving at a state of pure self-intuition, a contradiction arises—which then tells us that the intelligible universal is not the last layer of being: that the contradiction one realizes points to an even deeper layer of being. In order to resolve this contradiction, Nishida asserts that one must see the infinite depth of oneself by striving for religious freedom. A “truly free self” is precisely the peak of

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., 96-104, 141.

“religious awareness” where one sees oneself without mediation, where one recognizes that the freedom of oneself depends on confronting the infinite contradictions within oneself. The religious ideal that Nishida is speaking of here is that of absolute negation—that is, affirmation through negation, or as Nishida puts it, the infinite search for “becoming a being which denies itself.”<sup>353</sup>

The standpoint of religious awareness is not enacted merely at the level of the intelligible universal. This is because the act of thinking and the object of thought still confront each other in this plane of existence—hence the intelligible self still feeling devotion for God. As a result, Nishida suggests that there is another layer that envelops the intelligible world, that which serves as the “place” for the true self: the place of absolutely nothing. The place of absolutely nothing, one might say, is where religious experience is born, an experience where there is neither “me” nor “God,” only the experience of reality as such.<sup>354</sup> It is through the absolute negation of the self that one sees the end of being, where religious intuition transcends the moral self that is indicative of the intelligible plane of existence. The place of absolutely nothing is the last enveloping universal, because it is that which gives rise to the fullness of being (and non-being). Thus, as one enters and negates each layer or plane of existence, reality and one’s awareness of it, becomes more concrete and unified. Finally, what we will see in the following essay is how the contradictory logic that constitutes the layers of self-awareness form the basis for how Nishida understands historical creativity.

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 134-135.

### Self-Contradiction in Epistemology

Throughout his career, Nishida continuously maintained his interest in addressing the problem of the “immediacy of experience” and its relationship to the creative activities of the world. In the essays, “Fundamental Problems of Philosophy: the World of Action” (1933) (*Tetsugaku no Konpon Mondai (Kōi no Sekai)* 哲学の根本問題 (行為の世界) and “Fundamental Problems of Philosophy Continued: the Dialectical World” (1934) (*Tetsugaku no Konpon Mondai Zokuhen (Bennsyuhouteki-sekai)* 哲学の根本問題 続編 (弁証法的世界),<sup>355</sup> we see the culmination of this attempt to refine what all of this means for the epistemological subject. In order to render reality as a world of creative action, Nishida seeks to clarify how self-identity is governed by a (paradoxical) logic that assumes an “active-being.” As Nishida sees it, self-identity possesses two extremes within itself, and such extremes exists within a kind of unity—what Nishida calls “self-contradiction.” For instance, it cannot be said that the person is neither rational nor irrational, because such would presuppose a duality between subject and object, between inside and outside. Instead, Nishida believes that what is irrational is part of what constitutes the rational:

Something wholly irrational is a thing and not a human person. But a personal self cannot be merely rational either. If merely rational, individual personality would be lost. Moreover, there is no personality which is not individual. The merely irrational may be thought to exist outside of the person. We are always individual, and the absolutely irrational must exist in our very depths. Moreover, there is the self-

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<sup>355</sup> Nishida Kitarō, *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy: the World of Action and the Dialectical World*, trans. David Dilworth (Honolulu, University of Hawaii, 1970).

determination of the personal self at the point where the irrational determines itself rationally.<sup>356</sup>

What Nishida is suggesting here is that concrete human existence must be both rational and irrational at same time, and so the notion of “self-contradiction” is to point to an infinite ground of all action, what Nishida calls the “absolute contradiction of self-identity” (*zettai mujunteki jiko doitsu* 絶対 矛盾的 自己 同一)—a logic of infinite self-constitution through an infinite self-negation. Nishida sees that the deepest form of self-identity is enacted by an intuitive awareness, but such intuitive action exists as a result of this mutual determination through negation. This logic of affirmation *qua* negation explains why one of the deepest forms of action in the world is that of a person who lives through dying—that is to say, who clearly sees that every moment in life is both a beginning and an end.

All of this points toward what Nishida describes as the dialectical movement of the world—a frame that is borrowed from Hegel. Nishida regarded the dialectical movement “as the determination of the self-identity of absolute contradictories.”<sup>357</sup> That is, reality gives life in the very act of negating itself. Or as it pertains to the active self: creative activity arises in the place of absolutely nothing, where intuition becomes an activity without activity, where self-determination articulates itself as a continuity of discontinuity. What Nishida is putting forth here with this idea of self-identity of absolute contradiction is this idea that there is “something infinitely deep” at the foundation of the

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 30.

creative activities of self-awareness.<sup>358</sup> This place *qua* foundation of creative activities includes and transcends individual determination, which is to suggest that the creative activity of self-awareness experiences immanence and transcendence at the same time. That immanence is transcendence and transcendence is immanence.

Much of what Nishida is responding to in this piece was the influence Greek philosophy had on the world. According to Nishida, both Greek philosophy and modern philosophy have been steeped in a kind of rationalism, where the self is understood as too individualistic. Whenever reality is conceived from the standpoint of individualism, there is a tendency to understand the socio-historical world as a series of intellectual objects. But Nishida points out that this fails to account for the truly active self as an agent of self-determination that forms part of the dialectical universal. If one departs from a standpoint where the active self is always placed within socio-historical reality, then one can account for how socio-historical reality is related to the whole reality.<sup>359</sup> This is why the methodologies of scientific rationality, for instance history, the physical sciences, and sociology, have confined the notion of temporality, because these disciplines all seem to presuppose an intellectual self that stands over and against the objective world, an intellectual self caught up in a temporalized world of abstractions. Robert Schinzinger described Nishida's complaint against "abstract logic" best when he says that "abstract logic, on the contrary, is a timeless and spaceless projection of reality on an ideal screen

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 95-96.

or plane.”<sup>360</sup> That is to say, positioning the self against the world inaugurates a view of the self as placed outside of history, outside of time, instead of seeing how the self is both within and outside of temporality, a temporality that flows from past to future and from future to past, with a self that constitutes the world while being constituted.

For Nishida, there is real value in clarifying the characteristics of historical reality as one of a dialectical universal. The most important aspect of this view of temporality from the stance of a dialectical universal is that it renders history less linear, or less idealistically driven, and more circular, because time is not viewed as something outside the subject, but rather as a self-determination of the eternal now. Thus, it is fair to say that the dialectical universal aims at explaining why the world cannot be conceived of as merely a process of continuing transition from one state to the next—like in the historical view of linear progress. When time is understood as a “spatial unity,” as Nishida asserted in his later years, then one can see that the world is only action in a plane of non-action, that the flow of movement from historical age to historical age is more of a self-determination of a circle without any center or circumference.<sup>361</sup>

The essays comprising *Tetsugaku no Konpon Mondai* are not just an attempt to correct Western conceptions of time through the standpoint of an active-self *qua* self-determining universal, it is an attempt to insert an alternative view of the I-Thou relationship. According to Nishida, contra rational views of the world, which assume

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<sup>360</sup> Robert Schinzinger, “Philosophy of History: Introduction to ‘The Unity of Opposites,’” in *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness: Three Philosophical Essays* (Honolulu: East-West Press, 1958), 49.

<sup>361</sup> Nishida, *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy: the World of Action and the Dialectical World*, 110.

absolute separation between I and Thou, individuals are united through an absolute negation, which means that we become who we are by means of mutual self-negation. As Nishida says: “the I meets the Thou by absolutely negating itself. The individual always faces absolute negation.”<sup>362</sup> One way to think about this is that in order for the world to determine itself, the world has to negate itself for the self and the self has to negate itself for the world, and so what one finds within the interstices of this “mutually negative-relationship” is that mutual understanding forms the basis for society and language.

Nishida believes that it is also important to consider that the dialectical movement of self-identity of absolute contradiction implicates religion as an independent epistemological standpoint. The reason Nishida gives for this is that the affirmation of absolute negation (the self-identity of absolute contradiction) is the standpoint of faith, a standpoint that demands the exploration of the existential freedom for the self. Nishida, who drew on Martin Luther for his concept of faith, does not place faith on the side of delusion, because faith is a living, dynamic, and striving phenomenon. Instead, what faith suggests for the standpoint of religion then is that it seeks to find absolute significance within historical reality.<sup>363</sup> The religious question, then, is not whether religion is anachronistic or superstitious, because “religion is neither blind delusion nor dreams, nor mere sentimentality,” but rather whether modern scientific culture can “give us true religion by causing us to know the ultimate limits of man.”<sup>364</sup> In fact, Nishida claims that

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 234-235.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 234.

the past was never really religious anyways, because it was predominantly a world of superstition. Because the foundation of the world is religious, the religious structuring of the world can only become known through the act of negation. The religious standpoint can be understood here then as the act of listening to the voice that calls us into the depth of the self-contradictory of the historical world. Nishida attempts to explain this point in further detail:

...as long as this world is one of absolute dialectic, we must be religious.... Herein lies the reason why this world is religious as the self-determination of the absolute. The religious standpoint does not negate physical matter. We always face absolute negation. On the contrary, it is because of this that we cannot help being religious. As long as even the materialist affirms his own self—indeed, as long as he recognizes consciousness—he cannot help being religious. If he does not recognize consciousness at all, then both society and history become meaningless.<sup>365</sup>

In short, in order to make sense of historical reality as truly dynamic and circular, Nishida needed to clarify the logical structuring of creative actions. But what Nishida finds is that the logic that structures the creative actions of the historical world is inherently self-contradictory. As this pertains to the religious question, Nishida claims that the culmination of such creative actions is religious in certain moments and at certain times by virtue of the fact that the great spiritual visionaries that have cultivated a deep intuitive awareness of the world have manifested this logic of absolute-contradictory identity. To truly know oneself in relation to social history means one has managed to embody this religious awareness that is self-contradictory. Now what remains obscure within the Nishidian project is how historical action emerges from the particular. That is, what is the relationship between historical reality and the singular subject? In the next

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

few essays, I will discuss how Nishida sought to clarify this relationship between historical action and the action-intuition of the embodied subject.

### The Place of Action-Intuition in Historical Reality

The relationship between materiality and spirit is one of many concerns for Nishida in the early period, and while this issue remained present for much of his middle years, it was for the most part not explicitly thematized. There is one clear exception though, where one can see a return to this theme during the middle years: in the essay “The Standpoint of Active-Intuition” (1935) (*Kōiteki Chokkan no Tachiba* 行為的直感の立場),<sup>366</sup> Nishida seeks to address the relationship between historical reality and the creative intuition of the embodied subject by means of returning to the relationship between materiality and spirituality. What Nishida argues in this piece is that materiality should not be set in opposition to ideality, nor even to spirituality, and that perhaps it is more useful to think of materiality and ideality as co-determinants of each other within the place of historical reality, while spirit articulates itself as the very unfolding of the universe as a self-determining force in the place of absolute nothing, that which enjoins the dialectic of ideality and materiality.<sup>367</sup> To get a sense of the mutually determinable,

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<sup>366</sup> Note that there are differences in the translation decision of this title. Others have preferred the term “active-intuition” or “acting-intuition.” The kanji 行為 (*kōi*) is a noun that means act or conduct, while 的 (*teki* てき) is usually deployed as an adjective ending, which in this case, turns the noun into an adjective. The translator of this text, William Haver, preferred to translate this compound as “active,” but this particular translation dilutes the meaning of the first set of kanji, thus, downplaying the co-terminal link between action and intuition.

<sup>367</sup> According to Haver, Nishida’s dialectical framing coheres with Marx’s formulation of ontology is production and production is ontology. Haver claims that Marx’s argument around the body, labor, and ideas as being bound to historical production attests to Nishida’s point about action-intuition being the condition and possibility for appropriation and production. As I see it, however, while the flow of

co-constituting relationships between materiality and ideality, body and mind, one and many, Nishida begins to explore the theme of historical action from the standpoint of “action-intuition.”

When Nishida speaks of action-intuition, he is referring to the relational or dialectical movement between subject and object, between self and other; that the subject determines the object, and the object determines the subject. This especially applies to intentional action: what is inside becomes externalized outward, and what is outward becomes internalized inward in the dialectical determination between self and thing (the thing determines the self and the self determines the thing).<sup>368</sup> In other words, there is a co-immanence between outside and inside in the mirroring process of self-awareness—meaning, that “there is no thing without consciousness; there is no consciousness without things,” because each reflects the other’s determination of itself.<sup>369</sup> For Nishida, this inside-is-outside and outside-is-inside forms part of the basis of action-intuition—this standpoint that takes self-awareness as an intentional active mode of knowing. This is because the standpoint of action-intuition belongs to historical reality in that its immediacy is logically prior to the distinction between the apprehending subject and the apprehended object while operating as the condition of possibility for the creative

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movement within the dialectic seem to be in agreement, there is an important difference: Marx puts more emphasis on material forces as the dominant generator in the dialectic, while Nishida does not. See William Haver, “Introduction,” in *Ontology of Production: 3 Essays*, trans. William Haver (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 1-34.

<sup>368</sup> Nishida Kitarō, “The Standpoint of Active Intuition,” in *Ontology of Production: 3 Essays*, trans. William Haver (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 81-82.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

formations of the world. That is to say, the creative activities of awareness, in one aspect of things, depend on the mutual determination subject and object.

How does this relate to the process of historical reality? Or, what constitutes the process of historical reality for Nishida? According to Nishida, historical reality is this process of the things of the world coming into being through their own self-determination in the world of time *qua* space and space *qua* time. But historical reality is “the alpha and omega of our action,”<sup>370</sup> because while our biological bodies, conscious existence, will, and our ability to see and act in the world make up the historical body, and thus form a singularity within the historical world by virtue of our actions constituting the activities of the world, our bodies, as inherently historical beings, are also determined by the activities of the historical world.<sup>371</sup> It is this last point, this co-determining, commensurate relationship between the actor and the environment that becomes one of the more central themes of the subsequent essay—“Logic and Life” (*Ronri to Seimei* 論理の生命). Perhaps Nishida realized he needed to clarify the relationship between the actor and the environment, in order to clarify the relationship between historical action and the creative efforts of embodied subjectivity. In “Logic and Life,” we see Nishida taking seriously a dialectical view of the world as a way to explain the self-determination of historical reality.

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 112-120.

### The Logic of Historical Life

Nishida's logic of *basho* incorporates new meanings as it evolved over the course of his work. In one of these new meanings, we find that Nishida begins to think of *basho* as a way to frame a dialectical logic of the "historical world" (*rekishiteki sekai* 歴史的世界). As Nishida argues in this piece, the logic of *basho* alludes to the self-determination of the world itself, and so by illuminating the very field of historical change, one can make visible how the intuition of contradictory unity develops into a dialectic that involves the interactivity between the self and the world—a frame he previously called "action-intuition" (*kōteki chokkan* 行為的直観). Here, in the essay "Logic and Life" (1937) (*Ronri to Seimei* 論理の生命),<sup>372</sup> one can see how the concrete standpoint at the base of self-awareness becomes a standpoint of historical reality—how action-intuition becomes more explicitly involved in the creative interactivity with the many things of the historical world, exemplifying the "activeness" and/or "non-static-nature" of self-awareness. In a move away from investigating the logic of judgment and cognition and placing them into the various layers of being, which was ultimately the philosophical premise of the early middle years, in *Ronri to Seimei*, Nishida seeks to move towards clarifying the happenings of the world by delineating the relationship between the interiority that grounds self-awareness and the dynamic structure of the world in which we all take part. Human existence is embodied, and such embodiment cannot be divorced from the world of history and from the world of action. Nishida's concept of "action-

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<sup>372</sup> Nishida Kitarō, "Logic and Life," in *Place and Dialectic*, trans. John Krummel and Shigenori Nagatomo (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

intuition” that is used to describe this relationship between historical world, the body, and self-awareness is positioned in this essay to make intelligible the creative activities of the historical world that become expressed through the body.

As discussed in his previous essays, Nishida’s placement of the body within the historical world (as action-intuition) further suggests that bodily activities, self-awareness, and historical life are inextricably linked in the formation of the world. As historical bodies, we begin the process of creating the physical world from the very moment we are born into the world. The body is the first object of intuition, and so when we act through the body, the world forms itself via our bodily activities as self-awareness of the body continues to grow and expand. Here, we are continuing to see Nishida’s desire to lay to rest the theory-praxis and the mind-body dichotomies—this claim that biological functions and mental activity as well as theoretical narratives and bodily practice are separate phenomena. Rather, from the Nishidian point of view, thinking suggests acting, because seeing things, or understanding what things are, implies that we are acting upon them. Thus, the body, as well as the thinking mind, are both involved in the formation of the self and other, and so Nishida’s notion of “action-intuition” is again used to illuminate the means by which humans participate in the world’s historical formation. Perhaps this is what Nishida means when he says that, “the understanding of historical reality then should start from the fact of “I am” rather than from the fact of “I am at work” or of “I think.” That the “I” exists means that the I intuit by acting. It means that the body is there.”<sup>373</sup> It is not the “I think” that one is aware of first, but, rather, the

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 162.

acting body itself that serves as the mode of existence, and so the notion of “action-intuition” cannot be easily reduced to materialistic or idealistic frames, because humans are neither dictated by pre-established goals or ideals nor causally determined by mechanical forces or structures.

While the concept of *basho* was developed mostly as a response to the epistemological dualities found throughout modern Western philosophy, the dialectic that was further expounded in *Ronri to Seimei* begins as a response to the dualities found in the ontological features of the historical world. Instead of accepting the Kantian view that we are all transcendental subjectivities implicitly separated from the world, Nishida claims that we are always implaced in the self-creating world *qua* the very elements of historical change. The individual may seem creatively autonomous, but such creativity forms part of the dialectical nature of the world of historical events and of human interactivity at the same time. In this sense, human existence is self-contradictory—that is, our bodies as creative manipulators of the world are both independent and self-governing, *and* part of the dialectical unfolding of historical life. Here, it seems that Nishida is trying to demonstrate how the dialectical unfolding of historical life operates as a logic that structures the endless flux of the world. This “*logos*” of the world *qua* the world’s dialectical structure forms what Nishida calls a “dialectical universal” (*benshōhōteki ippansha* 弁証法的 一般者), and for Nishida, this dialectical universal is to discern how the root of what we call logic itself becomes generated from the world and its flux. Logic is therefore inseparable from the dialectic itself by virtue of being a product of our prelogical encounter with historical reality. In other words, logic is not a

universal fact, but a historical one, because logic is founded on the dialectic of the historical world via action-intuition.<sup>374</sup>

Nishida speaks of three levels to the world that operate as standpoints or viewpoints of the world (this should not be confused with the layers of being that were discussed in *Eichiteki Sekai*): the material, the biological, and the historical. While humans are material beings in that we mechanically act upon one another by means of cause and effect, we are also biological beings, because like other living beings with biological bodies, we have instincts, as well as dietary, sexual, and health needs. But unlike much of the animal kingdom, humans are historical beings, and as a result, humans intentionally and consciously make things as part of the world's creative self-formation. In contrast to the mere biological, where the body is more of a product of the environment as opposed to the environment being an object of creative alteration, historical life is one where the environment becomes a tool for existence. That is to say, biological bodies react more to the environment while historical bodies creatively interact with that environment via the various levels of self-awareness. What Nishida means here perhaps is that a mere biological body cannot be radically creative because it lacks the self-awareness to create a level of independence apart from the conditions of the environment, but the historical body, although inescapably conditioned by the environment, is part of the creative elements of the world's self-formation because of this capacity to reshape the environment as it is simultaneously acted upon by the

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 168-173.

environment.<sup>375</sup> Nishida describes this relationship between the self and the environment as one of self-contradiction, because human beings reshape the environment in a way that allows them to assert their independence and autonomy as attempts of creatively working through themselves in the world. Therefore, the dialectic is this process of humans participating in their own self-creation in the very act of making the things of the historical world.

Nishida claims that part of the creative aspects of “historical life” involves the manipulation of tools. For Nishida, tools may mean technological (*gijutsuteki* 技術的) objects, but it also may mean the body itself. In other words, the body becomes a tool for making things or making other tools or instruments: “to possess tools externally means in turn that we possess our body as a tool.”<sup>376</sup> The same idea applies to the world as well—the world itself becomes a tool for the historical self, which then becomes an extension of the bodily self. In this regard, the body, tools, historical self, and environment represent a web of interactive relationships, all of which exist autonomously from one another while co-constituting the other. The self is an instrument for the world, but the world is also an instrument for the self. But by virtue of this creative self-awareness, the historical body is not a slave to the *telos* of the biological articulations of the world. Therefore, one must see humans as freer to construct a history of self-identity that is reflective of the world’s creative self-expression.

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<sup>375</sup> In this sense, Nishida would suggest that humans are both “free” and “determined” at the same time. This schema becomes more pronounced in the subsequent works when he described the interactive flow between humans and the environment as one of “from the made to the making.”

<sup>376</sup> Nishida, “Logic and Life,” 119.

The way Nishida conceives of time is similar to the way he conceived it in his earlier works, but with one subtle change—it becomes framed within the dialectical universal, this dialectic of self-determination via self-negation. In “Logic and Life,” the dialectic of historical time is conceptualized as a movement of negation in the present, manifesting itself as a kind of continuity of discontinuous moments. The present, what Nishida characterizes as the “eternal now” (*eien no ima* 永遠の今), is a historical present where “the temporal is spatial and the spatial is temporal.”<sup>377</sup> Thus, the spatial and the temporal work together, making the “contradictory self-identity” logically possible, because by “spatializing the present,” the experience of time becomes a movement from self-contradiction to self-contradiction. In other words, each momentariness of time instantiates an act of self-negation in the spatialized present, because the *basho* of absolutely nothing makes the self-contradiction of time possible by virtue of holding together the simultaneity of co-implaced opposites—hence the passing of time, this phenomenon of things living and dying, is always felt as a present phenomenon. Therefore, motion and stillness, permanence and impermanence exist together, because co-existing with the passing of time is the permanence of the present moment. The flux of historical life, then, represents a maelstrom of self-contradictory moments, where the death of each moment of life gives birth to new moments and new beginnings, and of course, vice versa.

Although there is no explicit religious language in *Ronri to Seimei*, there are certainly implied religious images, themes, and references. The most obvious example of

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 164.

this is in Nishida's dialectic of time, where time becomes space and space becomes time, an account that strikingly resembles Nāgārjuna's view of time. But there are more subtle cases than this where we see the theme of religion emerge. For instance, Nishida writes: "What is creative is what is self-contradictory. This is why pessimistic philosophers think of life as suffering."<sup>378</sup> Here, it seems that Nishida is speaking of the self-contradictory aspects of creativity, with this implication that there is an inherent connection between suffering and self-contradiction. But one can also interpret this as a reference to the paradoxical formation of the world, where we become a creative element in the historical world via self-negation, through a kind of "living by dying."<sup>379</sup> Such a paradox of life is important for the historical world, because, as Nishida adds, "those who truly create and truly see are the only those in whose pulse historical life flows."<sup>380</sup> Thus, as both passages seem to suggest, the self-contradiction that exemplifies the truly creative, that exemplifies this "living by dying," embodies not just the depth in which suffering reveals itself, but also the way historical reality itself is constituted by the act of death, and so to live by dying is to enact life in the spirit of historical movement. Whether this was an attempt to reference Buddhism or Schopenhauer (who incidentally was also deeply influenced by Asian "religions") directly, it is uncertain, but one can interpret this passage as an attempt to show the interdependency between creativity as a feature of self-contradictory-identity, and the suffering of life as a feature of history reality.

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 144.

In another passage, we find a blurring of the distinction between philosophy and religion. Nishida writes:

A true philosopher must be some sort of a prophet. It is said that the word *prophet* may originally have had the sense of “one who speaks” rather than one who predicts the future. The prophet was the one who conveys on behalf of God, His will to Israel, that is, one who ought to be regarded as the “mouthpiece of God.” The philosopher must be one who speaks of the mission of history. The principle of participation, instead of being logically prior, must be a principle of philosophy, the logic of a worldview.... The standpoint of philosophy, even while based upon society, refers to the standpoint of the action-intuition of the whole historical life.<sup>381</sup>

Although it seems as if Nishida is attempting to demonstrate the socio-historical actuality of life with this passage, there is some additional interesting information that can be extracted here. One interesting point is that Nishida is trying to disrupt any dichotomization of religion and philosophy—that is, as he said, “a true philosopher must be some sort of prophet.” This point is consistent with the notion of action-intuition—where action implies intuitive thought, and intuitive thought implies action. Thus, religion becomes philosophy and philosophy becomes religion, not just because they both refer to standpoints of action-intuition in the scheme of historical creativity, but because the philosopher “must be one who speaks of the mission of history.” While it is tempting to think of this point as an attempt to conflate religion and philosophy, it is more likely the case that each takes on the quality of the other in the engagement of the “metaphysical,” in the sense that they are concerned with experiencing and reflecting on the “logical structuring” of reality. As a philosopher of religion, Nishida perhaps has a particular goal in mind with this claim—to not just demonstrate the relationship between

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 157.

philosophy and religion, by advancing a view of historical reality by grounding philosophy in religious awareness, but also to show that underlying both phenomena is the same dialectical process at work—meaning, any creative endeavor in historical reality is underscored by a contradictory logic of self-identity.

Nishida's point here is that religion and philosophy, although not necessarily the same thing, are not radically distinct either. Given his penchant for engaging theological thinkers, one might read Nishida as a kind of "Eastern theologian" himself, but this would assume that Nishida was attempting to explicate a scriptural paradigm—a point I have contested in Chapter Three. By attempting to clarify and legitimize a religious position in the historical world, Nishida can be best described as a religious philosopher who seeks to create a dialogue with German Idealism, for the purpose of introducing an alternative view of historical creativity without losing sight of the importance of religion. The implication of Nishida's attempt to blur the distinctions between philosophy and religion, as I am trying to argue in this dissertation, nonetheless speaks to the problematics of the secular-religion binary, because it seeks to bring religion and philosophy together, without negating the other.<sup>382</sup>

One has to be careful not to take this point too far out of context. In the end, the point of Nishida's dialectical universal is to show that human life cannot be reduced to any material force, psychological state, or transcendental category or being. This point becomes more explicit in the following passage:

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<sup>382</sup> One might challenge this argument that within the secular movement, theology and philosophy are not seen as radically distinct. However, one can argue that much of continental philosophy since modernity, with exceptions of course, derives its content more from the human sciences than from religious or scriptural sources.

Our life is thus both historical and social. Society would have to be what is formed as the self-determination of historical life and it is that which is seen through action-intuition. Society is not the collection of individual persons. On the other hand, neither is it sheer material force nor mere authority. That which Durkheim calls social fact cannot be reduced to the psychological relationships among individual persons but neither is it something transcendent. It has to be formed by historical life.

Thus, all of what we call “social facts,” such as the observed phenomena related to religion, logic, philosophy, and so on, must be contextualized within broader dialectical processes. What is social is also historical, and what is historical is also social, all of which has been expressed through the action-intuition of self-contradictory forms. In this regard, Nishida is opposed to sociological or anthropological stances of religion or philosophy insofar they dismiss the self-determination of historically embodied life as paradoxically structured. In the later years, we find that Nishida’s concept of religion is developed further as a structuring logic that clarifies one’s relationship with God (as historical reality), pointing to the limits of the scientific standpoint that seeks to subordinate religion or religious awareness to rationality.

### Summary

One of the aims of this chapter is to show the development of Nishida’s philosophical worldview throughout the middle years by discussing how his epistemological and metaphysical formulations can be understood as critical responses to the dualities found throughout Western modernity, and to some extent, Western philosophical history. What I suggested in this chapter, through a chronological reconstruction of Nishida’s middle years, is that Nishida searches for a logical foundation

of historical reality, one that could support the logic of a-rational or non-rational expressions in the world such as artistic or religious intuition. One way to interpret this is that if such expressions, namely, artistic intuition or religious awareness, can have their own logical place in the world, then it would be difficult for one to reduce these experiences to ideational or materialistic categories—or to any other rationalistic frame of thought. Towards the end of the middle years, Nishida re-formulates this logical foundation of reality, describing the logic of place as a logic of contradictory identity, and then later as a “dialectical universal,” pointing to how this dialectical structure of historical reality incorporates the body. In the following chapter, I will discuss the final time period of Nishida’s philosophical career, where I seek to demonstrate how Nishida re-interprets the notion of religion, moving its delineation away from being a self-God dialectic found in “pure experience,” as discussed in the early years, towards an absolutely contradictory logic that structures the very process of historical creativity.

## CHAPTER 6

NISHIDA'S LATER YEARS: THE LOGIC OF *SHŪKYŌ*

One of the more identifiable characteristics of the later Nishida is this concern for placing the creative formations of human life within the context of social-history. Up until this time, this particular issue was largely neglected in his writings, perhaps mostly because there was no one at the time who had confronted him about this. Nishida's students and colleagues, like Tanabe Hajime, Miki Kiyoshi, and Tosaka Jun, had pressed him on the relationship between subjectivity and the role of social-history to the point that it became obvious that this issue had to be addressed.<sup>383</sup> To briefly re-iterate: the first period of Nishida's career was mostly concerned with consciousness or experience, while the second period is characterized more by this interest in developing a structuring logic (*basho*) that clarifies the relationship between epistemology and historical reality, in the attempt to overcome the dualities of Western modernity. But it is not until the later period that we see a concern for social history and material production, and how these processes relate to action-intuition. Thus, what one will notice about this time period is that while Nishida maintained his interest in developing the dialectical universal as a processual determination of co-implaced opposites, he would also then deploy this logical structuring as a way to frame other thematic relationships such as religion and culture, history and society, good and evil, and biology and humanity.

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<sup>383</sup> Maraldo, "The Problem of World Culture," 164-165.

## Nishida's Concept of Humanity

In the essay “The Human Being” (1938) (*Ningenteki Sonzai* 人間的 存在),<sup>384</sup> we almost see an emergence of an entirely new language inserted within the logic of place that was developed in Nishida's middle years. As a kind of reply to some of his students who advanced more materialist positions, such as Miki Kiyoshi and Tosaka Jun, Nishida would further develop a logic of *poiesis* by expounding on the relationship between the creating and the created within social history. What the materialists call “historical production” is what Nishida describes as “historical actuality,” but with an emphasis on action-intuition as part of the very process of historical determination. The relationship that constitutes Nishida's view of the process of historical reality, as discussed in the previous sections, has been characterized as a co-immanent, co-implaced mutual determination between the creating and the created, between the making and the thing made. This relational frame is further developed in this essay, where Nishida rendered this logic of historical reality as a circular flow from the making to the maker, and then back from the making to the made. Nishida characterizes this problematic as follows: “When speaking of expressive activity, people think in terms of a movement from the subjective to the objective, but it must always also be conceived in terms of a movement from the objective to the subjective.”<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> Nishida Kitarō, “Human Being,” in *Ontology of Production: 3 Essays*, trans. William Haver (Durham and London: Duke University Press).

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

What concerns Nishida the most in this essay was the tendency within philosophical discourse to either translate the flow of reality into a mathematic or causal set or to view the development of reality as a process that is internal (i.e. teleology). In Nishida's estimation, formalized logic fails to capture this movement from the made to the making, because it does not illuminate how the past and the future act simultaneously—meaning, there is no “absolute present” within any frame of formalized logic, where time and space collapses into a kind of unity-in-opposition. Nishida claims that the historical materialists fail to make this relational flow visible, because of their tendency to view historical reality mechanically, or to view historical reality as a process that develops biologically.<sup>386</sup> Therefore, the dialectical universal *qua* logic of creativity, or a logic of *poiesis* rather, functions for Nishida as an attempt to resist the frame of a singular beginning point to creation. The reason for this is because the flow of creativity travels more in a vertical, horizontal circular fashion, than say, a linear or uni-directional one, as assumed in the more mechanical views of the world.

Nishida makes explicit that this view of things is not a complete rejection of the insights coming from the natural sciences, because, biological evolution, for instance, must complement the self-formation of the dialectical world, even if the mechanistic logic of this orientation must be renounced.<sup>387</sup> Therefore, it is more plausible to think of Nishida's interpretation of the biological narrative as a kind of re-interpretation of historical and biological, where reality is viewed as a process that exists as a form of

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 172.

expressive-activity. That is to say, there is something to historical production as being inherently active. This is why, for Nishida, this re-framing of the historical trajectory of the world, and of life, must be articulated from the standpoint of action-intuition, because the point of situating the base of the creative circuit within action-intuition is to ensure an element of free will that is not always observable within biological models. Therefore, as Nishida argues, the movement of historical creativity from the made to the making, and then to circulate back from the making to the made, is only possible if the subject is in a self-contradictory position with the object—and so the subject is not only paradoxically active, but also passive to the object of relation.

Nishida discusses artistic creation throughout this essay as a way to demonstrate this point of action-intuition being the foundation of historical creative expression, as a way to clarify the logic of creativity. In perhaps some of the more common-sense views of artistic creation, the creative impulse begins in the mind of a subject, ending in a product that is observed by others. Contrast this with Nishida's view, where there is a circulation of creative energy that flows between the artist and the object that is made such that each is mutually reflected in the other. That is, the artist comes to know and understand the world and herself through her own creative makings, because the artistic form reflects back to the artist in both the contingencies of one's creative freedom and in the subjectivity of the object itself. It is not just the artistic form that is transformed, but the artist as well, as she begins to progressively reflect upon herself as an object that is made by the world she intuits. According to Nishida, in the place (*basho*) where intuition means action and action means intuition, the artist becomes both an active and passive

participant in the process of creation, because instead of trying to intentionally control all factors in the making of an art piece, the artist listens and yields to the “voice of the object,” and then upon letting go of the “I,” all that is left is the movement of the artist’s brush to do the creating for the artist herself.

One can also see how the processes of historical determination are expressed as action-intuition within the field of science. Nishida argues that the scientific enterprise cannot be viewed as an objective system of knowledge production, because the activities of scientific discovery are inherently implaced in the historical world of action-intuition. One way to interpret this is that while critical thinking is an activation of one’s intuition, this activity is also directly intuiting many aspects of the historical world, implying that the self and world are re-created by the very process of scientific activity itself. Since there is a circular loop between that which is created and that which creates, from a Nishidian standpoint then, it cannot be sustained that the world is simply there, independent of historical actions and behaviors. For Nishida, situating scientific activities within the action-intuition implaced in the historical world is not an attempt to undermine reason or the scientific procedure, but rather to reposition such activities within the logic of historical creativity by making visible the creative processes that constitutes the intellectual movements of science:

As I said before, I am not attempting to disparage human reason or freedom; on the contrary, it is quite the reverse. I am attempting to displace its ground from subjectivist man and to posit it in the creative operation of the creative world. I would even seek the ground of moral imperative there. It is to the extent that man is creative as the apex of the movement from the created to the creative that he is of reason, that he is free.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 177.

What this implies is that all scientific theories and concepts (or formal logic) are tools, invented by humans to explain the reality that is experienced. If theories and concepts are invented tools, then they are not perfect, and as a result, are in need of being placed within the context of historical creativity. In the end, though, only experience, as articulated in history, can determine which tools are the most useful, because “only experience can verify the truth.”<sup>389</sup>

I would argue that it is important keep in mind that Nishida’s concrete logic *qua* historical *logos* is very much a recursive attempt at clarifying the processes of historical reason as one of absolute negation. In other words, it is an attempt to show, not unlike the logic of religious experience, that form arises through negation, that creativity arises through a suspension of the “I,” or that life arises through death. In fact, Nishida described the historical transformation from the Middle Ages and into the modern period as a creative movement where scientific theory informed practice, and practice in turn, informed scientific theory. But what was foreclosed in modernity, according to Nishida, was a concept of animality, where “man” is not so much viewed as an animal, but rather as the peak of creation. What Nishida calls “anthropocentric humanism” is this movement within modernity that chose to negate nature in favor of elevating “man” to a position of God.<sup>390</sup> Nishida argues such a movement has consequences: “anthropocentric humanism...has resulted in class struggle within a country and international strife among

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<sup>389</sup> Agnieszka Kozyra, “Nishida Kitarō’s Logic of Absolutely Contradictory Self-Identity and the Problem of Orthodoxy in the Zen Tradition,” *Japan Review* 20 (2007):79.

<sup>390</sup> Nishida, “Human Being,” 179-184.

nations.”<sup>391</sup> This is why, Nishida claims, the historical moment of modernity is one that is marked by imminent threats of annihilation and war, because all things outside of the self (nature, other animals and humans) became viewed as objects of consumption. If there is a way to transition out of “anthropocentric humanism,” as Nishida suggests, it cannot be through an extolment or a celebration of more anthropocentric humanism—in either radical objectivist or subjectivist form; the transition outward must be through the moral and artistic guide of religious conversion, through changing the heart by negating the ego implaced in historical life.

Nishida’s view of *poiesis* as a co-determining relationship between the creating and the created (and, of course, back from the created to the creating) aims to make visible the underlying logic that structures historical reality. In the following essay, Nishida explores the underlying logic of historical creativity even further, envisioning this dialectical process as a movement of self-contradictions implaced in action-intuition. The historical world then becomes framed as a contradictory self-identity of one and many, of whole and parts, of outer and inner, of universal and particular, and of subjective and objective. What Nishida wants to emphasize here is that historical reality *qua* these pairs of opposites is not formed monistically or substantially, but rather dialectically. In other words, historical reality is created through the process of self-negation, through a realization of its own self-contradictions.

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 182.

### The Self-Contradiction of Historical Reality

One can interpret Nishida's view of the real as an unfolding of historical creativity that is both material and spiritual at the same time. For if the real were only material, as Nishida believes, then the movement of the world would only be of an eternal repetition, leaving no room for creative action.<sup>392</sup> Instead, the real must be seen as a historical realization of the unreal, a formation of the formlessness, because the “[historical] world essentially moves from the formed, the product, to the forming, the creative production.”<sup>393</sup> In the essay “Absolute-Contradiction of Self-Identity” (1939) (*Zettai Mujunteki Jiko Dooitsu* 絶対 矛盾的 自己 同一),<sup>394</sup> Nishida seeks to uncover the logical movement of the real, to illuminate the dialectical universal as a nature-spiritual historical unfolding. The unity of opposites in the process of historical creation is what Nishida described as the logic of *poiesis* in this essay. That is, the world, as a logic of the one and many, moves through contradictions in the absolute present—the place of (self)contradiction—and then transcends and includes the contradictions it co-mingles with.

According to Nishida, the process of biological evolution is marked by this unity in contradiction as well, but the biological body is not yet creative in the deepest sense of the term. While production exists in the biological world—desires and instincts lead to

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 164-168.

<sup>393</sup> Nishida Kitarō, “The Unity of Opposites,” in *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness: Three Philosophical Essays*, trans. Robert Schinzinger (Honolulu, Hawaii: East-West Publications), 19.

<sup>394</sup> Note that the translator, Robert Schinzinger, decided on “The Unity of Opposites” as the translation of *Zettai Mujunteki Jiko Dooitsu* 絶対 矛盾的 自己 同一, but it is probably better to translate it as “Absolute Contradiction of Self-Identity.”

new forms, but the historical body only arises when there is a sense of freedom in subjectivity, when there is a sense of creativity within the body as implaced in the historical world. When the self becomes more aware of this relationship of itself being formed by the environment, there is a deeper unity of the contradictions at play. This evolutionary emergence of the world as social history is not a negation of the past, of biological production, as there is no outside of our biological nature; rather, it is to mark a growing awareness around this dialectical contradiction of forming and being formed at the same time. In this regard, Nishida remarked that society must begin with the real meaning of *poiesis*, where “this acting-reflecting, historical-bodily society is based on a unity of opposites, and is progressing in contradictions, transcending itself.”<sup>395</sup> The logic of historical evolution then, according to Nishida, can be grasped as a unity of opposites, a unity with no separation from its real basis.

Nishida insists that this grasping of reality through action-intuition is a grasping of reality from the standpoint of *poiesis*. This means, then, that the knowledge that is developed in social history is an expression of action-intuition that progressively grasps and apprehends the world. Thus, there is a movement that takes place from the forms within action-intuition to expressions in the social historical world. One becomes more concrete as one becomes more intuitive to reality. Nishida asserts that it is in this deeper world of a unity of opposites within oneself where one finds deeper forms of morality in the creative facets of action-intuition, because, as Nishida’s argument goes, one becomes closer to the roots of one’s own self-contradiction as one goes deeper into the self. This is

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<sup>395</sup> Nishida, “The Unity of Opposites,” 205.

where Nishida inserts religion as the foundation of history, as the foundation of the social world. Nishida argues that one aspect to religion refers to the connections we have to our own creative origins; and so getting into contact with this primal source means one enters the creative foundation of the world through its confrontation with its opposite. The more creative the historical world becomes, the more one senses religious transcendence. As Nishida explains:

Self-identity must be contained as moment of spiritual formation of history, from the formed towards the forming, [in the moving world of reality]. Concrete logic is just where we as historical-productive self progressively grasp reality. It can be said that here the world, containing us in the unity of opposites of the many and the one, makes itself clear. Our consciousness, contradicting itself, becomes the consciousness. Therefore, it can also be said that we are mirroring the world through praxis, and that things prove themselves.

Thus, Nishida's logic of *poiesis* directly implicates religion in a way that places the process of historical creativity within the infinite ground of self-contradictory awareness, an awareness that continuously mirrors itself and the other via its contradictions, in the very process of self-realization.

What should be clear at this point is that the early and middle years of the late period in Nishida's philosophy was centered around this interest in dialectics. Nishida finds that a dialectical view of history is useful in making sense of the dynamic nature of reality, because it allows him to uncover the logic that makes visible the structure of historical change. While some scholars have classified Nishida as a kind of neo-Hegelian in this regard, there are some important distinctions that must be made between these two. In the next section, I will take a short detour and discuss some of the differences between these two dialecticians so that we can better position the Nishidian project

within intellectual history. I will then point out how Nishida sees his dialectics as more concrete and paradoxical in terms of unmasking the logic of historical creativity than Hegel's dialectical synthesis.

### The Dialectics of Nishida and Hegel

One of the major reasons for why so many scholars compare and contrast Nishida's and Hegel's dialectics is that both seek to overcome the subject-object dichotomy through a dialectical logic that is not inherently tied to the Aristotelian legacy. For instance, Hegel's response to Kant's dualism was to unify the subject-object distinction by positing an absolute as the peak development of self-consciousness within a temporalized field. Hegel begins by stating that one cannot overcome the subject-object dyad until one addresses the relationship(s) the subject has with its object. Since the object cannot be reduced to inert matter, the object, much like the subject, must include self-conscious activity. In this sense, the subject-object dyad must be re-thought as a fundamental relation between two conscious subjects. Hegel writes:

True union, or lover proper, exists only between living beings who are alike in power and thus in one another's eyes living beings from every point of view....This genuine love excludes all oppositions. It is not the understanding, whose relations always leave the manifold of related terms as a manifold and whose unity is always a unity of opposites [left as opposites]. It is not reason either, because reason sharply opposes its determining power to what is determined.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theology Writings: Works in Continental Philosophy*, trans. T. M. Knox and Richard Kroner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 304.

It is this interaction between subjects that illuminates the *Geist* in self-consciousness—this expansion of knowledge through experience—because self-understanding cannot be fully reached without presupposing the absolute as a process of investigation and reflection. When subjects reflect upon themselves, there is a movement towards “synthesis,” towards “transcendence,” within the very the trajectory of critical reflection, a critical reflection that includes the other’s self-reflection as part of the object of investigation.<sup>397</sup>

This redefinition of the object to include the activity of self-consciousness is crucial for Hegel because it introduces the notion of “inter-subjectivity” as the background frame in which self-consciousness is realized and expressed. In fact, the advancing of “inter-subjectivity” is an attempt to be an intervention that illuminates the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness—as demonstrated in Hegel’s famous master-slave’s narrative. Within this dialectical relationship, the emergence of the “I” within self-consciousness owes its origins to the externalization of one’s makings. The markings or imprints of what is made upon the object outside of oneself becomes a point of reflection for subjectivity; it is this continuous recognition of one’s expressions that brings this “I” into fruition.<sup>398</sup> But what exactly brings self-reflection into the fold of the absolute? In order to truly understand oneself, according to Hegel, one must consider the history of humanity—the very philosophical and intellectual externalization of one’s experiences in history, especially the tragedies of the time, because it reveals what is

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<sup>397</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 109-111.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-118.

unknown at that time. The very examination of historical experiences is where Hegel sees the advantage of the phenomenologist: a space where the inquirer is able to construct a systematic account of self-understanding. The goal is not to reduce the process of reflection to a mere translation of cultural history, but rather to stay committed to self-reflection as a way to sublimate the spirit to a more sophisticated level, but only after the withering of the “in-itself” into the “for-itself.”<sup>399</sup> Why does the spirit get wiser in the vanishing of the “in-itself”? To answer this question, we will have to take up Hegel’s definition of learning: the process within subjectivity of articulating one’s knowledge.

For Hegel, knowledge is not just intuitive; it is the expression of one’s conceptual synthesis of all objects of experience—that is, a trying out of all possible alternatives throughout history in order to find a proper match. In this case, it is the very actualization of speculative thought that pushes history forward into a more elevated structure because self-consciousness (as an awareness of oneself and other) is impossible without the unification of all opposing positions. Hegel arrives at this venue after plotting the “logical movements” one makes in the positions of self-reflection—what we attribute now as “dialectical synthesis.” This process of learning—from a stance of understanding to a stance where one can claim knowledge—reveals a movement from simplicity and superficiality to a more complex and nuanced affirmation of reality because it considers the limitations of each position in reflection. In other words: each position must be both negated and included, as it stands in its original antimony, in order to reach the

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 482-483, 492-493.

absolute.<sup>400</sup> This can only occur though after one listens to all the negativity one experiences; and it is only at that point, after the dialectic stops, that self-understanding becomes equivalent to world-understanding (I=I). As Hegel explains:

In other words, the ‘I’ is not merely the self, but the *identity of the Self with itself*; but this identity is complete and immediate oneness with self, or *this Subject* is just as much *Substance*. Substance, just by itself, would be intuition devoid of content, or the intuition of a content, which as determinate, would be only accidental and lack necessity.<sup>401</sup>

How does this dialectical method differ from Nishida’s dialectical universal? First of all, I want to suggest that it is worth mentioning that Nishida himself recognized the influence Hegel had on him—except that Nishida had wanted to anchor the dialectic within the logic(s) of Buddhism. Nishida writes:

When I mention the concept of place, it is the place of absolute *mu* [nothingness]. This place encompasses much of the dialectic, which is represented purely as a process-oriented form of thought. My conception of the dialectic stands opposed to the Hegelian one. Mine is Buddhist.<sup>402</sup>

That is to say, the dialectical methodology Nishida borrows from Hegel is converted from a process of temporalized synthesis that moves into a higher, elevated form to a process of self-determination where the interrelations of autonomous opposites determine themselves via mutual self-negation—a system of logic many Nishida scholars now call “place dialectics.” Thus, the absolute for Nishida is not seeking to establish a linear totality that moves beyond opposing determinations by subsuming them, as it might have

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 98-103.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 489.

<sup>402</sup> Maren Zimmerman, “Nishida’s “Self-Identity of Absolute Contradiction” and Hegel: Absolute Negation and Dialectics,” in *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy* 1 (2006), Kindle edition, 5726.

been for Hegel, but a process of infinite deepening among all the opposing expressions in relationship to each other—as a kind of “dialectical unity-in-opposition” if you will.

Although Nishida may agree with Hegel on the basic function of contradiction—this role of illuminating the limitation in each stance in opposition—the largest difference in terms of the role of contradiction is in the delineation of where it is placed within the operations of subjectivity: while Hegel understood contradiction as a telling feature of historical obscuration—a feature that prescribes the need for further conceptual expansion, for further synthesis of the missing information, Nishida saw contradiction as an inherent immediacy to all intuitive experience itself—that which always, already pervades all sensory, emotional, and noetic phenomena at the same time. In other words: Nishida sees Hegel’s dialectics, and the concomitant role of contradiction, as too mired in the rationalistic aspects of “object-logics” to consider the “infinite irrationality of rationality” as part of the process of self-constitution via self-negation. This is why Nishida did not think of Hegel’s contradictory synthesis as a true contradiction, because any historical formation operates as a unity-in-contradiction, which the added term “absolute” aims to illustrate (in other words, what the term “absolute contradictory of self-identity” aims to illustrate).

Nishida argues that his concept of “absolute contradictory of self-identity” as the paradoxical simultaneity of self-determination and self-cancelation is virtually impossible to formalize within Hegel’s syllogistic standpoint.<sup>403</sup> As Nishida argues, the dialectical universal that articulates the logic of absolute contradictory self-identity prevents the

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<sup>403</sup> Nishida describes Hegel’s standpoint as a syllogistic logic, a “logic of the world expressed essentially by signs.” Nishida, “Logic and Life,” 137.

subject and object from ever being synthesized. Instead, there is only a simultaneous self-negation among individuals within a dialectical universal. In other words, the dialectics of historical life is such that the subject and object must mutually negate the other in a way that allows the other to affirm itself, because the process of negating the other in historical life is impossible without mutual acts of self-negation—otherwise, each opposite would remain only atomized, while never having the possibility of a relation to the other. In this regard, there is an interdependency between subjects and this interdependency manifests itself as the mutual self-negation of subjects within a place of absolutely nothing.

Another difference between the Hegelian and Nishidian scheme is around the logic of self-negation and how it relates to immanence and transcendence. Nishida's logic of self-negation is formulated as a logic of affirmation *qua* negation, which forms part of the dialectical universal that seeks to clarify the experience of the immanence-transcendence relation. While Hegel approaches infinity and transcendence from the position of immanence—in other words, the infinite is not beyond the finite world but existing within it as the horizon of all material forms which can be realized through reason, Nishida approaches infinity and transcendence as always part of *experiencing* immanence as it is. The experience of immanence as transcendence is always realized in the here and now, disclosing itself in the very expression of the dialectical universal of revealing oneself through negating oneself. One way to make sense of this point is that the development of self-awareness or self-consciousness can only emerge from the place of absolutely nothing through the stance of self-negation—by entering into one's

bottomless consciousness. Kim Ha Tai, who frames Nishida more as a Zen philosopher, offers one way to think about all of this:

What really distinguishes Zen from the dialectic of Hegel may be found in its thoroughgoing contradiction included in the antinomy. In Hegel, the antinomy is sublated in the synthesis, as cancelling and preserving the original antinomy, thus progressing towards an endless realization of the possibilities of the original term. But Zen simply asserts the identity [of] the antinomy, without following the threeway dialectical process of Hegel. The antithesis, instead of developing into a synthesis, reverts to the thesis, and Zen simply declares that thesis is antithesis and antithesis is thesis.<sup>404</sup>

The fundamental problem with Hegel's dialectics, as Nishida sees it, is that if there is no logic of place that grounds the subject and object as oppositional forms, then the process of reflection will eventually recuperate dualistic thought even if such a premise is rejected. According to Nishida, Hegel's absolute idealism shows how reality is monistic, but in the end implicates a dualistic view of reality: since the process of synthesizing temporal contradictions can never lead one out of logical dualities, the ultimate disclosure of contradictory-identity not only remains deferred, but foreclosed, leaving behind a ghost of self-reification. There is no assumed unobjectifiable place in Hegel's dialectic, only the sense of an implicit prioritization. As Gereon Kopf explains:

Nishida chooses the terminology of "nothingness" deliberately to indicate that, contrary to "being," "nothingness" implies openness, indeterminacy, and, in some sense, an infinite deferral of the final sublation of the opposition of objectivity and subjectivity, positively and negatively. The more, Nishida accuses Hegel of privileging being over nothingness and, thus, of destroying the fragile balance between being and non-being.<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> Kim Ha Tai, "The logic of the Illogic: Zen and Hegel," *Philosophy East and West* 5, no. 1 (1955): 23-24.

<sup>405</sup> Gereon Kopf, "Is Dialectical Philosophy Tenable? Revisiting Hegel, Nishida, and Takahashi," *International Journal* 3 (2006): 26.

One can argue that the unhappy consciousness that Hegel projects onto the Stoics is therefore reversed in Nishida's dialectics: that is, according to Nishida, Hegel's failure to situate the logic of self-negation *qua* self-determination within a place that is prior to any formation of subject and object lays the foundation for a bad infinity, where there is no genuine encounter with the divine. As a result, as Nishida believes, there is no room to develop a notion of absolute freedom within a Hegelian scheme—while there are contradictory forms, there are no paradoxical forms that can make sense of an absolute freedom as this process of living by dying.

#### Nishida's Last Major Writing

Nishida's "The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview" (1945) (*Bashoteki Ronri to Shūkyōteki Sekaikan* 場所的論理と宗教的世界観)<sup>406</sup> is arguably the most important and the most comprehensive essay in terms of elucidating the logic of religion as a logical expression of the real. There is no other text within Nishida's oeuvre where one sees the concept of religion or the concept of religious awareness as being so important in exposing the limitations of Aristotle's logic of "the subject that cannot be a predicate" and Kant's logic of "the predicate that cannot be a subject" as premises for formulating the foundation of the world's existence. What we find in this essay as well is Nishida drawing openly on East Asian Buddhist texts as sources for his ideas, an obvious contrast from what we saw before, and so we might describe this text as an attempt to put

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<sup>406</sup> Nishida Kitarō, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, trans. David Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1987).

the philosophy of religion at center stage. What Nishida set out to do in this essay was to demonstrate that there is a logic to religion that does not fit Kant's cognitive, moral, and aesthetic domains of pure reason. According to Nishida, Kant subordinated religious awareness, and as a result, left little space for an "autonomous domain" of an existential-religious view of the world to be adequately articulated within philosophy.<sup>407</sup> But, as David Dilworth has argued, much of Nishida's theoretical edifice in both the earlier works and this work should not be seen as a complete rejection of the Kantian worldview, but rather a gradual assimilation of German philosophy—Kant, Hegel, Fichte, and so on—in a way that allows Nishida to seamlessly re-articulate the German Idealist thought structure from a new ground; and so one could think of Nishida's last piece as a kind of missing "fourth critique" within Kant's critical philosophy.<sup>408</sup> In fact, Nishida himself suggests as such when he says, "Accordingly, I think I can subsume Kant's philosophy within my own logic of the human-historical world."<sup>409</sup> Whether or not Nishida succeeds in this realm remains to be answered, but I want to suggest that one might think of this last essay as one final attempt to philosophically justify the place of religion in the world through a formulation that extends beyond the categorization as merely Buddhist or merely Hegelian.

From the very beginning of this long essay, Nishida defends religion against critics who claim that religion is unscientific and illogical, claiming that by positioning

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<sup>407</sup> Nishida, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, 49.

<sup>408</sup> David Dilworth, "Introduction," in *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, trans. David Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1987), 14.

<sup>409</sup> Nishida, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, 61.

religion on the side of irrationality, one reduces and measures religious awareness against the benchmark of rationality, thus masking the purpose of human existence.<sup>410</sup> But, then, what is religion for the late Nishida, if it is not mystical nor an illusory form of consciousness? Nishida argues that religion is about one's relationship with the absolute in the sense of being a mutual revealment of self and world that reaches the events of one's heart. Since this mutual revealment entails the infinite depth of an individual in both its objective and subjective senses, religion must first be understood as an irreducible truth at the ground of one's existence. But one's experience within this relationship, as Nishida sees it, can neither be reduced to some psychological state of mind nor can it be reduced to a set of social structures, because, at the most fundamental level, religious experiences act as references to God's creative spirit since the very ground of historical creativity is an expression of the absolute.

Furthermore, if one tries to enter the place of religious awareness from a standpoint that begins with morality, very little religious insight will be developed, because one's "self-existence" cannot be problematized and negated in the most radical of ways. In fact, Nishida believes that the deepest of the religious insights cannot begin from any relative (a particular) that assumes an absolute, because any ethical progression that moves from the finite to the infinite makes it impossible to realize one's self-contradictory identity. In this regard, the standpoint of morality faces its own self-constraint as a mode of religious inquiry, because, as Nishida argues, "to negate its [the

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<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 48.

self's] own existence would be to negate the possibility of its own moral progress."<sup>411</sup>

What Nishida is arguing instead is that the deepest insight from religious awareness can only arise if there is an active, conscious self, one that takes interest in the interior aspects of existence, when one realizes that the very existence of the self is problematic.<sup>412</sup>

Therefore, the point of departure for probing into the depth of the absolute occurs when the self becomes aware of its own existential contradictions within the encounter of life and death, because as one's self-awareness grows in the face of death and nothingness, one becomes more aware of their internal contradictions, luring the "reflexive self" to discover that the contradictions of consciousness are bottomless. The subject and object eventually collide in this existential predicament, and therein resides a "vanishing point," what Nishida designates as the beginning of religious awareness, where the subject and object cease to be definitive markers of distinction and all that is left is the existential living in the absolute and the absolute living and dying in the existential.

But why does religion need to be taken seriously as a philosophical project? One thing Nishida wants to show in this essay is how religion can be reflected on, not unlike how one can reflect on morality, science, and art. In order for the logic of religious awareness to be a proper critique though, Nishida believes that one must locate one's religious-existential realization within an absolute that is eternally present. If the process of realization is placed within the absolute, then the very fabric of human life is existentially and religiously grounded, since our relationship with the absolute is

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 65.

something we all cannot escape. In this regard, one cannot compartmentalize society and religion and/or history and religion. As Nishida writes: “Accordingly, every historically crystallized society begins from a religious ground,”<sup>413</sup> and “every historical epoch is religious in its ground.”<sup>414</sup> Here, in both quotes, Nishida suggests that the very motor of all creative transformation of social history carries the stamp of religion, and so in this regard, religion is a part of everything we do, but not everything can be described as religious. Such a contradiction can exist for Nishida because while everyone’s self-awareness always begins from one’s action-intuition implaced in the social world, as part of the creative expression(s) of God, not all actions are reducible or lead to what Nishida describes as religious experience. The deepest of the religious forms, as Nishida describes them, arises more from a deep awareness of historical life through the act of self-negation. As the self is continuously negated in the pursuit of historical self-awareness, what emerges is the religious standpoint. But the religious standpoint is not a standpoint in the singular or objective form, because it refers to one’s own particular relationship with the ground of all existence. Thus, the religious standpoint is both plural and singular at the same time, because it is a multiplicity of particulars’ relationship to an unobjectifiable place. Religious awareness is a unique kind of self-awareness then, because it has its own “incarnate logic,” which is not reducible to the objective procedures of scientific investigations.

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<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 98.

But religion is also about God and how God works in the manner of absolute negation. Nishida does not consider a true absolute as anything other than that which contain its own self-negation. If an absolute merely transcends the relative, or merely negates relative nothingness, then it is not a true absolute. Such an absolute becomes only an abstraction. But if God relates to itself in the form of self-contradiction, then the negation of nothingness reveals an infinite self-affirmation, an infinite creativity that makes possible the history of the self and world. This is because “God must possess negation within himself in order to express himself.”<sup>415</sup> Hence the self and world must be grounded in the self-contradiction of the absolute. Thus, when one begins from the standpoint of absolute negation, then the living self relates to the absolute, to God, through the act of dying. Nishida calls this relational revealment of self and God through mutual self-negation “inverse correspondence,” in which God is realized only in the death of the ego, or in the death of the self. The notion of “inverse correspondence” seeks to challenge the notion of direct correspondence between human imperfection and divine perfection, by claiming that there is an annihilation of finitude in the presence of the infinite. Hence what Zen calls “seeing into one’s true nature” is part of this confrontation with the ultimate other *qua* this awareness of selflessness, because in this mutual self-negation of self and God is where there is an authentication of the self.<sup>416</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>416</sup> John Krummel. “The Originary Wherein: Heidegger and Nishida on ‘the Sacred’ and ‘the Religious,’” *Research in Phenomenology* 40, no. 3 (2010): 394.

The existential that lives in the absolute and the absolute that lives in the existential signifies that God and Satan and good and evil are inversely related as well. Among Abrahamic notions of good and evil, the story that is often told is that of the good triumphing over evil—or God triumphing over Satan, but Nishida opposes this view, stating that,

God as the true absolute must be Satan too. Only then can God be said to be truly omniscient and omnipotent. A God who merely opposes, and struggles with evil, is a relative God, even if he conquers over evil.<sup>417</sup>

This is because, as Nishida explains, “the absolute does not transcend the relative, and that which is opposed to the relative is not the true absolute. The true absolute, as I have said, must negate itself even to the extent of being Satan.”<sup>418</sup> One way to read this passage is that within the hearts of all that is evil is the absolute, is God, because, as Nishida believes, in the vanishing point of the infinite contradictions of the world are both Satan and the divine, are both good and evil. Perhaps Nishida is not trying to blur the distinctions between good and evil as such, but rather to show that good and evil exist as co-ingredients within the identity of the absolute itself.<sup>419</sup> That is to say, without some form of evil in the world, any sort of evolutionary change in the world would eventually come to a halt, because the contradictory identity of the absolute is what drives the creative world.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> Nishida, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, 74.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>419</sup> Robert Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō* (New York City: Paragon House, 1989), 104.

<sup>420</sup> Robert Carter, *The Kyoto School: An Introduction* (Albany: Suny Press, 2013), 53.

I argued in this section that Nishida articulates the notion of religion as a logic of relation between self and world that is found at the ground of all historical reality. But by defining religion as a logic that defines one's relationship to the real, one cannot begin to investigate religion from the standpoint of scientific rationality. Here is where Nishida and Hegel begin to diverge again, because, from a Nishidian standpoint, Hegel's attempt to "unite" reason and religion in the drift towards a more self-aware history fails to consider the importance of the place that structures the logic of affirmation *qua* negation in historical creativity. Like Hegel, Nishida would situate all creative formations—artistic, moral, or rational—within a God that is thought to be the ground of all reality, but the movement towards self-awareness in the "unity" of self and God, unlike Hegel, does not consist of a scaffolding made up of stools that allows one to peek through the eyes of God, because the movement itself is a return to the primordial awareness of self *qua* God as a contradictory identity through the very act of uncovering oneself as living and dying as God. In this regard, Nishida would claim that Hegel's dialectical logic does not go far enough in rendering a historical reality that is constituted through the act of self-negation. Overcoming the secular-religion divide then is not a problem of "historical necessity," where progress depends on sublating opposites to obtain a view of reality that is free from rational errors. The problem, rather, is one of "existential necessity," where seeing and thinking reality as clearly as possible depends on seeing oneself as an absolute contradictory form. In contrast to Hegel, who accepts the rational base of the secular as the end point in the dialectic,<sup>421</sup> Nishida argues for a non-reifiable place (*basho*) as the

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<sup>421</sup> Espen Hammer, "Hegel as a Theorist of Secularization," *Hegel Bulletin* 34, no. 2 (2013): 223-224.

basis of real, thus allowing for a positioning of religion and rationality to exist alongside each other as logics that constitute the processes of historical creativity. Up until this point, I have mostly focused on how Nishida posits a view of religion as another logical form that resists the totalizing functions of rationality, and as a result, I have yet to discuss his view of the secular. In the next section, I plan to discuss how Nishida problematizes the secular as a universal category in the attempt to introduce an alternative view of a global world.

#### *Nishida's View of the Secular*

It is important to mention here that Nishida's notion of the secular was rather under-developed until his last writing. The context in which the term secularism first arises within Nishida's last major essay (*Bashoteki Ronri to Shūkyōteki Sekaikan*) was in a discussion around Western modernity and its vision of a global world. According to Nishida, modern European culture identified secularization as a form of progress, and within the process of secularization, there was a re-casting of the national-racial identity within Europe. But what this seems to mean for Nishida is that the process of secularization demanded a renunciation of old religious traditions, in favor of moving towards a universalization of scientific discourse that seeks to shape the intellectual landscape of the world. Nishida writes:

In the dawn of history, the human world was predominantly spatial. The races existed in spatial contemporaneity, or merely side by side, as it were. The world of the absolute present, dormant in its temporal axis, was not self-transforming and the human world was not yet world-historical.... In that instance, the old worlds lose their specific traditions, become anti-individual, abstractly universal,

anti-religious, and scientific. We see this process of secularization in the “progress” of modern European culture.<sup>422</sup>

In other words, the secularization that took root in European modernity sets the stage to view the world in an abstract universal language that uses scientific discourse to position itself against religion—a concern Nishida expressed earlier in the essay:

Indeed, some philosophers even pride themselves in taking a contrary position. Religion, they say, is unscientific and illogical, or at most something subjectively mystical.... Religion, we are told, is a kind of narcotic.... However, even though I do not consider myself competent to speak about religion to others, I cannot follow those who say they do not understand religion because it is unscientific and illogical.<sup>423</sup>

Nishida is claiming that while Western secularism had thought of itself as having “transcended,” progressed, or moved beyond its own particular historical determination in the shift towards a global world, the reality is that Western secularism is just a superficial realization, because it is merely a particular assuming itself to be a universal. In this regard, there is nothing truly special about Western secularism, because it is only a historical particular, among many others.

The other point that Nishida is making here is that leaving tradition and religion on the shelves of history become an act of determination that masks one’s own religious history. This is because while the old world (here, meaning religious traditions) that did form part of the modern European world was negated in the secular formation, it never stopped playing a role in its constitution, since underlying the secular standpoint is the logic of religion as a structuring foundation. As Nishida writes: “But the absolute does

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<sup>422</sup> Nishida, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, 117.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

not transcend the relative.... And therefore the negation of the old worlds is included within the historical world's self-formative development."<sup>424</sup> That is, Nishida argues that if the basis of all creative formations within historical reality is religious, then the secular as well reproduces the religious structuring of the historical world. To put it another way, while modern European culture has told the story to itself that it had generated a scientific culture in order to overcome its primitive or religious past, what is ultimately obscured in this story is how science itself, as another creative formation in the world, is actually religious in its foundation. As Nishida writes:

But the world of science is still a human product, even as a form of the historical world's self-negation. Therefore science is also a form of culture.... In religious language, it is the fact that God sees himself through his own self-negation. In this sense the world of science may also be said to be religious. Kepler's astronomy, for example, is said to have been religious in inspiration.<sup>425</sup>

But while science is religion, religion is not exclusively science. This is because there is a self-deception around the desire for transcendence within the scientific pursuit, because "from the abstractly theoretical standpoint of scientific discourse, God possesses himself through self-negation," and so "we can also speak, in Hegel's terms, of the world of the spirit that is alienated from itself."<sup>426</sup> In other words, the alienation baked into the mythology of the secular, in the story that it tells itself that it has overcome the problem

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 117-118.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

of religion, functions as this self-deception, because it disguises the place from which science emerges.

But in the very disguising of this ground is where the heart of the problem begins to emerge, because the logic of religion, as a necessary mode for personal and cultural transformation, remains invisible in this narrative. According to Nishida, a more historically aware being or form is one where the context of God's own self-affirmation becomes uncovered through self-negation, where there is a mutual revealment of culture and religion to the point of knowing that a "true culture must be religious and a true religion must be cultural."<sup>427</sup> One plausible interpretation of this passage is to not think of culture and religion as a conflation in the process of self-awareness, where both melt into each other as such, nor should one interpret this passage as a prioritization of one category over the other, where religion negates culture or where culture negates religion, leaving a category in a privileged position. Instead, one can read this relationship within Nishida's logic of religion, this logic that confers the self-realization of cultural history from within the standpoint of religious awareness as an absolutely contradictory identity. In other words, the basis of cultural realization that guides the nation-state is religion as the self-contradictory logic of affirmation *qua* negation, immanence *qua* transcendence, and/or one *qua* many, because in order to arrive at a more self-aware view of itself in the historical world, a particular must express itself culturally through the religious standpoint of self-negation, and to not allow for a singular religion to negate culture, like

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

the way Hegel's philosophy allowed for a slippage of the Christian view of God to operate as the ontological structure of history.<sup>428</sup>

Furthermore, Nishida warns against viewing religion from the standpoint of rationality, which has historically relegated religion as a vector for self and moral transformation. This is because, if a modern, global world negates religion in favor of a secular standpoint, then humanity, the world, and so on, is at risk of losing its "true self" within the entire process. Nishida writes:

When mankind, however, maximizes the human standpoint in a non-religious form, in a purely secular fashion, the result is that the world negates itself, and mankind loses itself. This has been the trend of European culture since the Renaissance, and the reason that such a thing as the decline and fall of the West has been proclaimed. When the world loses itself and the human beings come to forget God, mankind becomes boundlessly individual and selfish. The world then becomes mere play or struggle, and the possibility of a true culture is undermined. The condition of mere secular culture ultimately loses all sense of true culture.<sup>429</sup>

What is particularly concerning Nishida here is the universalization of the secular standpoint, of the "non-religious form," because it leaves no room for the development of a "true culture"—meaning, a culture that encourages its own historical self-awakening. This raises issues for the future: that is, if religion is negated in favor of the secular, then there is no road to a "global culture," or a formation of cultures that form what Nishida calls a "world-historical standpoint" (*sekaishiteki tachiba* 世界史的立場). This is because the resuscitation of reason at the expense of the logic of religion embodies the

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<sup>428</sup> Hegel believed that Christianity, in particular, represents the highest form of religious awareness. See Robert Stern, *Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 191.

<sup>429</sup> Nishida, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, 119.

risk of reifying the self and world as objects outside each other. The “world then becomes mere play or struggle” because, from the standpoint of this subject-object binary, the world becomes viewed as something that conflicts with the self vis-à-vis something that the self is co-immanent with. Instead of self-negation operating as the point of departure into one’s self-awareness, a secular culture starts from the position of cathection, where the atomized particular is converted into an object that must be protected from the struggle of existence. The world from this viewpoint becomes seen as a world of conflict, a world of “rational competition.” In short, there is a creative loss in the universalization of the secular, because instead of truly learning from one another, the self reifies itself and the culture it belongs to, and then begins to privilege its own standpoint above all else, and if this reification and privileging of itself spreads mimetically, then what proceeds from that point is a global clash of cultures.

Here, I want argue against positioning Nishida as a romantic, for he is not inviting a return to the Middle Ages by merely summoning the positive spirit of religion. As Nishida sees it, history is indeed cyclical by nature, but it does not in fact repeat itself in any objective way, and so every arising historical moment is a new creation. Nishida claims that the modern period developed from the Middle Ages out of historical necessity, and so there is no reason to advocate for anything other than for the creation of a new cultural direction. Nishida writes:

It is not possible to return to the standpoint of medieval culture; nor can medieval culture be the factor that saves modern culture. A new cultural direction has now to be sought. A new mankind must be born.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid., 120.

The goal then, as Nishida sees it, is to “advance in the direction that sees God as self-negation,”<sup>431</sup> where historical life sees the foundation of the real as immanently transcendent and as inherently self-contradictory. Only then can the particulars of a historical reality are able to truly realize its vision of a global world, where each particular is seeking to carry out its own ethical mission while seeking to realize its own unique historical identity.

*Nishida's Global World*

I have also tried to show in this dissertation that Nishida was perhaps one example of how resistance to the secular was cemented in the context of Meiji (1868-1912), Taishō (1912-1926), and part of the Shōwa (1926-1989) periods of Japan. Like Tetsujirō and Enryō, Nishida sought to resist the Westernization of philosophical knowledge, but there are differences between Nishida and his predecessors in the approach to philosophy. Although Nishida did not agree with Tetsujirō's nationalist and authoritarian sentiments, he did build on some aspects of his empiricism and Enryō's exposition of Māhāyana Buddhist discourse. Not unlike Enryō, Nishida was interested in translating religious insights (as derived from Buddhism) directly into philosophical terminology, but unlike Enryō, Nishida would describe such an enterprise as one of discovering the logical structuring of the world. While Enryō gestured towards demonstrating how philosophy and religious insights (from Buddhism) can exist side-by-side, Nishida sought to deploy this logical structuring in the search for solving the basic

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid.

problems of human existence—only to make the distinction between religion and rationality for the sake of clarifying the different forms of awareness and its placement or relationship to the real.<sup>432</sup>

In this effort to discover this logical structuring, Nishida was indeed inspired by Buddhism, but, as discussed earlier in this dissertation, it might be an overstatement to think that the goal was to completely turn philosophy into an arm of Buddhism, like how other Japanese intellectuals had attempted to do. Nishida mentions this when he says,

Now in the logic of Buddhism, I think, there are the germs of a logic that takes the self as its object—a logic of the mind—though it has remained a sort of personal experience and developed no further. It has not developed into what could be called a logic of fact.<sup>433</sup>

One way to think of this is that while Buddhism assisted Nishida’s pursuit for a “logic of being” or a “logic of existence,” Buddhism was never really deployed for sublating the entire intellectual project, because in the end, Nishida thought of himself first and foremost as a philosopher who sought to clarify the logic of historical creativity from the standpoint of a historically active self. Borrowing from Buddhist logic nonetheless served a certain hermeneutic function—that is, by grounding his philosophical standpoint from a completely different vista of the world. The logic of this particular philosophical move can be read as a sort of disruption in intellectual history, a disruption that also seeks to avoid a reversed Orientalism, because if Nishida was to succeed in demonstrating the limitations of Western philosophical thought, it was to be done on his own turf, relying on the various insights his own intellectual and cultural traditions had developed over the

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<sup>432</sup> See Wargo, *The Logic of Nothingness: A Study of Nishida Kitarō*, 18-28.

<sup>433</sup> Nishida, “The Problem of Japanese Culture,” 863.

years, but not to the point where philosophical logic collapses into the particulars of Japanese religions or the particulars of the East. By playing both ends, in retaining the legacy of Japan's intellectual history, but moving beyond it as well, Nishida was able to give himself room to maneuver between different intellectual traditions without claiming any absolute loyalty. Hence Nishida believing that the East-West dichotomy cannot be dissolved by merely the East negating the West or the West negating the East, but rather by discovering a deeper and broader ground, through mutual difference and co-relativity in the interactions between East and West.

More importantly though, the way Nishida participates in certain moments of resistance is quite different than the efforts of his predecessors. Many Japanese intellectuals around this time cloaked their resistance against Western encroachment within a garb of nationalism, but Nishida expresses resistance in the form of philosophically appropriating the concept of religion, inverting its theoretical meaning, and then deploying it in a way that is liberating for everyone. That is to say, in order to undermine the dualities found in Western modernity, Nishida realizes that the question one seeks philosophically should not be of the content of knowledge, but of the very standpoint of how we know what we know. By challenging the standpoints by which knowledge is thought to be apprehended and produced in much of Western modernity, Nishida claims that he is renegotiating the foundations of knowledge so that there is room for non-European philosophy to assert their own inclusion—which, from the standpoint of intellectual history, can be read as a move to destabilize the concentration of epistemic power held in the West. In fact, Nishida is skeptical of any culture having the capacity to

universalize others, precisely because all cultures are inherently historical and particularized, which is why Nishida consistently warned against Western imperialism.<sup>434</sup> In this regard, the implications of Nishida's philosophy can be seen as a revision of the Western philosophical canon in a way that in some sense calls out the tendencies of the West to universalize their own particulars of the world, by demanding a new view of the world that allows each particular to articulate its own mission in the world, a mission that assists the very process of global-self-awakening. Thus, the movement towards historical self-awareness that Nishida was introducing can be understood more as an envisioning of an evolutionary progress vis-à-vis revolutionary progress—meaning, the larger anti-imperialist project Nishida was hinting at would always begin with critique, instead of forcing a particular to be universalized.<sup>435</sup> As a result, one cannot really read Nishida as an historical actor who sought to inflame national sentiments, but as one who articulated early gestures at global collaboration—a kind of “rooted cosmopolitanism,” as Graham Parkes once called it.<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>434</sup> To be sure, from the very beginning, Nishida's random and scarce moments of political gesturing were harshly criticized from the right wing during World War II, and then from the left wing, directly after World War II. But, in hindsight, one can argue that Nishida's cultural vision and political posturing are less controversial than they seem. Contrary to the many claims that Nishida was nationalistically driven, there are many instances where Nishida was openly hostile to imperialistic and nationalistic agendas. In fact, from early on, Nishida recognized that history was very much a story of cultural and racial struggles and therefore warned against self-serving nationalism and imperialism as well as blind reverences to the emperor, because if such actions were common place, then there would not be a genuine global world. See Yusa Michiko, “Nishida and Totalitarianism: A Philosopher's Resistance,” in *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*, ed. James Heisig and John Maraldo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995).

<sup>435</sup> Goto-Jones, *Political Philosophy in Japan: Nishida, the Kyoto School, and Co-Prosperity*, 92-94.

<sup>436</sup> Graham Parkes, “The Definite Internationalism,” in *Re-Politicizing the Kyoto School as Philosophy*, ed. Christopher Goto-Jones (London and New York: Routledge), 180.

Many historians recognize that Nishida's attempt to rebuild philosophy embodies the implication of a global pluralism—where an ethical and/or cultural order would allow for a range of voices not just from Japan but from other cultural and national identities that do not belong to Western histories.<sup>437</sup> From Nishida's philosophical viewpoint, an inclusion of non-Western identities in a global world (*sekaiteki sekai* 世界的 世界) is indeed philosophically imaginable if there is a logic of self-identity that transcends defined geographical boundaries, a logic that does not imply a hierarchy of cultures, but rather a logic that can articulate a pluralism of cultural, religious, and national self-awareness, with each retaining its own unique character and identity.<sup>438</sup> But the formation of such a feat is dependent on the continuous self-negation of each culture, ethnicity, and national identity such that each becomes more aware of the thrust towards plurality itself in every act of relativizing oneself. This is because the global world Nishida is envisioning is thought to be grounded in a self-determinative view of the historical world, where the variety of ethnicities, nation-states, and cultures of the historical world evolve by virtue of each particular mirroring the formation of the historical world as each particular becomes more aware of itself as constituents of the process of self-realization. The peak of this vision is only possible though if the epistemic hierarchy of the West was

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<sup>437</sup> It is important to mention here that Nishida never thought of himself as doing “political philosophy,” despite historians attempt to cast some of Nishida's writings as such. Rather, Nishida would describe his writings for political leaders and government officials as a kind of “philosophy of culture.” In Nishida's writings on culture we see his vision of a global world as a kind of cultural inclusion. Maraldo, “The Problem of World Culture,” 164.

<sup>438</sup> What Nishida called a “world-historical standpoint” would be this enactment of a global world whereby each nation, culture or ethnicity “‘is established on its own historical foundation’ insofar as they will all ‘transcend themselves while remaining true to themselves.’” See Parkes, “The Definite Internationalism,” 180.

removed, and if each culture, nation, or ethnicity cultivates enough self-awareness to assert its own global mission in the world.<sup>439</sup> Of course, such a vision of the future is not possible if any self-seeking universal aims to erase the particularities of national or cultural differences—as commonly happens when a nation or empire imposes its (hierarchical) vision on others in order to carry out its hegemonic goals.

This idea of a global world was to realize the cooperative inter-relationships between particular worlds (*tokushuteki sekai* 特殊の世界) or co-prosperity worlds in a way that acts to preclude absolute closure, colonialism, and/or the domination of others. What was implied here was that imperialism and aggression in the world can only be stifled by a comprehensive globalism, where there is a process of world-formation that is without any consolidated center or core.<sup>440</sup> In this historical world-formation, the motivational force must be that of each people existing as their own center at every point, in order to meet the needs of all.<sup>441</sup> If the 21<sup>st</sup> century was to be an age of global-awakening, whereby colonialism begins to subside in the world, then there must have been an inter-expression of mutual self-negation: that is to say, there must be a consistent openness in the encounter of the Other, via a process of self-negation, which would warn against any form of dogmatism that may creep into one's initial position.<sup>442</sup> One might

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<sup>439</sup> Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō's Chiasmatic Chorology: Place of Dialectic: Dialectic of Place*, 220.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>441</sup> Christopher Goto-Jones, "Ethics and Politics in the Early Nishida: Reconsidering Zen no Kenkyū," *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 4 (2003): 527.

<sup>442</sup> Nishida's notion of *basho* is operative here—that the un-delimited place of existence and activity of self-negation also serves as the foundation of global co-existence and the process of de-totalization. That mutual self-negation between each region, ethnicity, and nationality is located within this groundless ground of affirmation *qua* negation—the mark of religious character as

understand Nishida's vision of this globalization of world culture then as an attempt to push the West to recognize the contributions of non-Europeans; and so, what Nishida's view of the global world is indicating here is a vision of the future that aims to move away from the provinciality of Western universals and the West's colonializing impulse to enlighten the rest of the world, and to establish, instead, a paradigm of world-history grounded in a kind of particularized-pluralism.<sup>443</sup>

The aspiration for philosophical inclusion has been a marginal view in the history of the West: from modernity on, Western philosophy and other knowledge-producing systems of the West were oriented more towards exclusion or colonializing foreign lands than including the voices of the subaltern. And yet Nishida was acutely aware of the contradiction between the universal aspirations of European philosophy and its support of imperialist agendas, and so it might be fair to suggest that Nishida's motivation to examine the parochialism of Western philosophy was the result of European intellectuals' own blindness in excluding some non-European philosophy from the history of intellectual thought.<sup>444</sup> Nishida's critique of Western philosophy therefore can be read as one-part assimilation and one-part inversion—meaning, Nishida adopted much of the

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Nishida reminds us. Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō's Chiasmatic Chorology: Place of Dialectic, Dialectic of Place*, 218-221.

<sup>443</sup> Agustín Jacinto, "The Return of the Past: Tradition and the Political Microcosm in the later Nishida," in *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*, ed. James Heisig and John Maraldo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 146-148; Andrew Feenberg, "The Problem of Modernity in the Philosophy of Nishida," in *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*, ed. James Heisig and John Maraldo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 173.

<sup>444</sup> Christopher Goto-Jones, "The Kyoto School and the History of Political Philosophy: Reconsidering the Methodological Dominance of the Cambridge school," in *Re-Politicizing the Kyoto School as Philosophy*, ed. Christopher Goto-Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 8-9.

language of Western philosophy, only to renegotiate much of its epistemological and ontological assumptions in a way that perhaps allows Japanese intellectual history (among other cultural histories) to stake a claim in the world of philosophy.

The historical reading I have introduced in this dissertation is a frame by which to look at Nishida as someone who was in some sense liberating Japan, and perhaps other cultures, ethnicities, and nation-states, from the encroaching stronghold of Western modernity, in part by challenging the assumptions of rationality as a universal category. It seems to be the case that, unlike the modern notion of the nation-state that assumes an ironclad separation between religion and the nation-state, Nishida argues for a view of religion that coheres with the nation-state. In this sense, Nishida's notion of the nation-state is deeply embedded within the structure of religious logic—a view of politics the secular would find hard to swallow. While a distinction must be made between politics and religion because a nation-state alone cannot liberate the self, the nation-state nonetheless must act in accordance to the logic of the absolute, acting as the moral figurehead of historical expression. As Nishida writes in “The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview” (*Bashoteki Ronri to Shūkyōteki Sekaikan*):

Each nation is a world that contains the self-expression of the absolute within itself.... In this sense, the nation is religious. The form of the historical world's self-formation that is religious in its ground is that of the nation.... The nation is the fountainhead of morality, but not of religion. As the nation is a form of the absolute's own self-formation, our moral actions must reflect a national character; but the nation does not save our souls. The true nation has its ground in the religious. A religious person, in his moral behavior, must naturally be a citizen of a nation as something historically formative. And yet the two standpoints must always be distinguished as well. If they are not, the pure development of each, religion and morality, will be obstructed, regressing into the “medieval”

identity of the two.<sup>445</sup>

As Nishida suggests above, the goal of the religious demand is to extend into the public sphere, working its way into the nation state, by shaping the moral sensibility of one's culture, ethnicity, and/or one's national identity. A moral ethnic race or nation-state is therefore one that self-negates for the sake of self-affirmation. Hence, as Nishida states above, "the true nation has its ground in the religious." While Nishida does appropriate the category of the nation-state from European modernity in the end, thus assuming such a category has a particular reference in the world, there is creative resistance around the function and role of the nation-state in the global world. For instance, Nishida does not believe the nation-state is some inevitable formation, as sometimes assumed in the modernist view of the nation-state, because it must have some reasonable justification for why it must exist—which in this case, for Nishida, the "reason of state" is located in the principles of international policy.<sup>446</sup> In fact, as early as in *Zen no Kenkyu*, Nishida had put forth the case that the nation-state is not the final goal of a particular's historical and ethical mission, but is rather a transitional development, until something greater is realized.<sup>447</sup> Therefore, the nation-state is merely a vehicle for a cultural particular to realize, articulate, and express its "true personality"—or, rather, its "ethical mission" in the global world. In short, while one could take issue with my politicization of the

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<sup>445</sup> Nishida, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, 122.

<sup>446</sup> Kawamura, "Introduction to the 'Nishida Problem': Nishida Kitarō's Political Philosophy and Governmentality," *Working Paper Series: Studies on Multicultural Societies*, no. 15 (2013): 7-8.

<sup>447</sup> Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎, *Zen no Kenkyu 善の研究* [An Inquiry into the Good], 140-141.

religious, of what seems to be the apolitical aspects of Nishida's philosophy, for Nishida, the situation is that religion implicates the political.

In this shift towards a global world and the hope for international peace, Nishida argues that it is not the nation-states themselves that must take the lead, but rather the multiplicity of cultures that make up the historical world.<sup>448</sup> Here, one can argue that Nishida's multiculturalism does not accept the traditional anthropological view of culture as an ahistorical substance; culture, as Nishida views it, is more negotiable, transformative, and dialogical, which means that there is mutual mediation among the various cultural worlds, where cultures change and develop through their encounters and interactions with another.<sup>449</sup> On a world scale, this "mediation" is particularly important. This is because, as Nishida argues, cultural differences can only co-exist insofar as dialogical exchange is prioritized. Thus, when dialogue is intertwined within the formation of culture, then neither a formation of a monocultural fusion, which would erase cultural differences, nor a formation of relativist dispersion, which would reify the uniqueness of differences, can arise.<sup>450</sup> This opening up among cultural worlds *qua* dialogical participation is not just a matter of critical appropriation of other cultural practices though; it is a movement that involves self-negation—one of the central principles within the logic of religion.

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<sup>448</sup> Feenberg, "Experience and Culture: Nishida's Path 'To the Things Themselves,'" *Philosophy East and West* 49, no. 1 (1999): 41.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>450</sup> Davis, "Towards a World of Worlds: Nishida, the Kyoto School, and the Place of Cross Cultural Dialogue," in *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy* 6, ed. James Heisig (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2006), Kindle edition, 6470.

What Nishida's point here tells us about the secular-religion binary as a whole then is that a radical distinction between the secular and religion, or even the opposite extreme, a conflation of the two, will only fail to bring humanity to a more cosmopolitan future, because the overcoming of Western modernity depends on reclaiming religious awareness as part of the historical world—in other words, as part of a global world. In this sense, according to Nishida, modernity's championing of the secular over the religious imposes a constraint in the development of self-awareness, not only in Western countries, but wherever Western modernity begins to spread its seeds. As such, the term "religion" within the Nishidian scheme would serve in part as a nominal or heuristic tool or technology that refers to a non-dualistic moral or ethical posture that signifies a logic of self-realization within the world of historical being—a logic that not only applies for individuals, but for cultures, ethnicities, and nation-states as well.

I want to suggest that Nishida's philosophical convictions around the logical structuring of religious awareness should not be treated as a clarion call to blindly take up his account of religion as a substitute to any thought that can be called "secular." Such would be a transmutation of a particular into a universal, the opposite of what Nishida would suggest as a proper logic of self-identity, because rationality and religion must mutually inform each other in order to further self-awareness. Instead, what I hope to contribute with this project is to show that there are non-Western accounts of religion that do not subscribe to a secular-religion binary, that do not dichotomize religion and rationality. This is also not to say that we must return to the fundamental aspects of religious organizations as a means to address the secular-religion binary, because if we

take Nishida seriously, then a move such as rehabilitating traditional forms of religion would only recreate the secular-religion binary by reversing what is privileged in the binary. In fact, to advocate for a revitalization of traditional forms of religion, as Nishida would suggest, would prevent the world from reaching a world-historical-standpoint, because it is a negation of the historical necessity of reason.

Moreover, the intervention Nishida introduces here raises questions about the very way history has been framed in modernity. Unlike Enryō and Tetsujirō, who secretly upheld the modern notion of history as a teleological process through the upholding of rationality as an objective standard, Nishida's logic of *basho* for instance seeks to resist the impulse to resuscitate an evolutionary or developmental view of world history, because, per the logic of *basho*, there is no absolute that transcends all the particulars—there is only a transcendence via one's own self-negation. On a deeper level, then, the way Nishida advances *basho* even disrupts our own understanding of what is considered to be a legitimate historical trajectory, because there is no absolute standpoint by which to judge other cultural histories. If there is an absolute beyond a relative, then the best shot for resistance against Western logic is to make room for marginalized others to assert an “acceptable” historical trajectory within the standards of the master discourse. But this is not what Nishida argues. Instead, the logic of *basho* as part of Nishida's account of religion subverts the entire epistemological and ontological footing of Western philosophical thought and therefore demands a re-thinking of philosophy as an objective mode of inquiry that is outside psychological, social, and cultural history. If philosophy is religion and religion is philosophy at its culminating point, then from within a Nishidian

view of intellectual history, other cultural histories that have been branded as religion are not only allowed, but encouraged to participate in re-inventing the boundaries and/or parameters of what constitutes as philosophy.

### Summary

The aim of this chapter has been to trace the development of Nishida's philosophy as it pertains to the religious standpoint throughout the later period of his life. As I tried to show, the later years of Nishida's philosophy can be characterized by a shift to a stronger interest in addressing the thematics of culture, history, and society. The apex of Nishida's philosophy of religion is eventually reached in the "The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview" (*Bashoteki Ronri to Shūkyōteki Sekaikan*), where it becomes visible to see how the category of religion forms the very latticework of his philosophical worldview. But what makes the later period even more interesting is the fact that it becomes easier to position Nishida's philosophical worldview against many of the Western philosophers he was criticizing. For instance, it seems rather clear in the later years that Nishida imagines a cultural direction for the world that de-prioritizes the secular, envisioning, instead, a globalizing world that re-claims religion as a mode for improving one's cultural and moral existence.

One can argue that since Nishida's view of religion is not merely an intellectual worldview, one cannot solely judge the veracity of what Nishida describes as "religious experiences" or "religious awareness" on the basis of metaphysical, theoretical, or ontological claims. Within the Nishidian philosophical context, theory is impossible

without praxis and praxis is impossible without theory, and so any criticism of Nishida's epistemology would have to at least try to start from that standpoint. This is not to say that Nishida's view of religion is "safeguarded" from the variety of criticisms that are directed from the outside. The point is more to invite the possibility that there is an alternative structuring logic that is not found in the dualities within much of modern Western philosophy and that one should seek to understand the logic of this orientation by at least taking up this standpoint and judging its merits from the inside. Even if one is not convinced by Nishida's religious worldview, I want to argue that there is still some value in studying Nishida's philosophy because it points to some of the tensions, perhaps limits even, to the scientization of religion at this point, and to the lingering secular-religion binary that can be found in religious studies today. In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I will discuss the implications of Nishida's view of religion and discuss what this means for the "problem of religion" in religious studies and/or the theories of religion in the social sciences.

## CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS ON THE SECULAR-RELIGION BINARY IN  
RELIGIOUS STUDIES

In this dissertation, I argued that Nishida puts forth a view of religion that resists many leading theories of religion found in Western modernity. In this conclusion, I want to argue that Nishida's philosophy of religion carries implications that address the problems of the secular-religion binary within religious studies. To be sure, one must be careful not to conflate the entire philosophical and theoretical canon that was produced since Western modernity with secularism and it is equally reductionistic to claim that Nishida was always responding to the secular. Therefore, the argument I am making is not an attempt to reduce Western modernity to secularism nor is my argument an attempt to assume that Nishida was only responding to secular formations. Nonetheless, Nishida's philosophy of religion does provide a critical lens by which to investigate theories of religion and the category we call the secular, because the implications of what Nishida argues pose a challenge, or at least a tension, in the contemporary pursuit of overcoming the religion-secular binary. Towards that end, I will now discuss how Nishida's view of religion and/or religious awareness disrupts and inverts many Western theories of religion, and how his re-interpretation of religion complicates the discussion around the problem of religion in the academy today.

### The Secularization of Religion Today

The implications of this project seek to address the problem of the religion-secular binary in religious studies, particularly around “the problem of religion” within the post-secularism discussion. The term “post-secularism,” as coined by Jürgen Habermas,<sup>451</sup> has generated discussions in contemporary scholarship around how to “de-secularize” future research projects in the academy, but the question of how to “de-secularize” is what is under investigation here. This is because, even in the advancement of a more pluralistic space as espoused by post-secularism, there ends up, according to Ángela Iranzo Dosdad, a reification between “us” and “them,” which is to some extent, another type of colonialism (by other means).<sup>452</sup> Iranzo Dosdad claims that post-secularism inherits the Enlightenment notion of progress, where time is privileged over the domain of space, and so the different cultures, ethnicities, and peoples of the world are considered within this context of thought.<sup>453</sup> In particular, Iranzo Dosdad calls out Habermas for his post-secular schema that seeks to include religions within the space of communicative reason, and despite Habermas’ good intentions, the argument is that Habermas unwittingly bifurcates “secular reason” and “religious reason” in the claim that a religion must go through a process of “translation” before it can become a “reasonable religion” with “secular

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<sup>451</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, “On the Relations on the Secular Liberal State and Religion,” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2006), 251-260.

<sup>452</sup> Ángela Iranzo Dosdad, “From the Secular to the Habermasian Post-Secular and the Forgotten Dimension of Time in Rethinking Religion and Politics,” *Contexto Internacional* 38, no. 3 (2016): 889.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, 889-890.

principles.”<sup>454</sup> That is to say, religions must “adapt to the authorities of the sciences which hold the societal monopoly of secular knowledge.”<sup>455</sup> Implicitly, then, religions must become “post-religious.”

How the “post-secularism” discussion relates to the “problem of religion” in religious studies is that there is also a hidden privileging of the Enlightenment notion of time in some of the approaches that seek to overcome the secular-religion binary. More specifically, in one attempt to dismantle the secular-religion binary, there is an attempt to look at how other cultural practices function in the same manner as traditional religions. David Chidester in his book *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*, investigates how religious impulses are expressed in the practices of popular culture—where baseball, rock and roll, and Coca-Cola will conjure up affections and loyalties in a way that come to feel and look like religion.<sup>456</sup> Chidester’s view of religion and popular culture is underscored by a functionalist view of religion—this view that defines religion as any community that effusively orbits around a set of sacred ideals. Other examples fitting this trend within religious studies include Robert Nelson’s text *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* and Emilio Gentile’s book *Politics as Religion*, which investigate, respectively, how capitalism and different political systems throughout history became sanctified, and how these systems depend on faith, symbols,

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<sup>454</sup> Ibid., 891.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 892.

<sup>456</sup> David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

myth, prophecies, and rituals.<sup>457</sup> As long as there is a community, shared beliefs around what is considered sacred, and a set of rituals that are performed in service of the sacred, then one can argue that a definition of religion fits. The aim of the functionalist view of religion has been to “religiosize” what has been considered secular practices but through the language of the “secular,” in order to demonstrate how cultural, political, or economic systems (nationalism, capitalism, totalitarianism, fascism, Stalinism etc.) share common features and characteristics with traditional religions. But the point I am making here is that the binary returns again in the way the “scientist” or the “observer” positions the “object” (“religion”) within the prioritized language of the secular, where there is a “translation” of “religious behavior” into the meta-language of the “scientist” or the “observer.” The assumption is that the scientific position itself is an “inherently progressive” critique and therefore must be deployed in the context of an investigating the object.

The investigation of collectively shared beliefs that gesture at sacralization can find part of its history within the legacy of Durkheim. The Durkheimian view of religion has been to make visible the social forces and causes present in a society that lead to the processes of religious life. What this generated within the social sciences is this view that, in order to understand the structure of religion, instead of searching for an absolute origin of a given religious expression, one would have to look at the collective idealizations that serve to recreate its effervescence in a given community. Durkheim claimed that all

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<sup>457</sup> See Robert Nelson, *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* (State College: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001). Also, see Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, trans. George Staunton (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

religious communities divide the world up on the basis of what is considered sacred and profane, with ceremonies, rituals, and rites practiced among the members of the community that exemplify the desire to maintain this distinction.<sup>458</sup> But underneath these collective performances are idealized representations that animate the sphere of individual and social action; and although the particulars look quite different, the same “fundamental” process is at work in all communities. Durkheim writes: “The fundamental process is always the same; only circumstances colour it differently. So, at bottom, it is the unity and the diversity of social life which make the simultaneous unity and diversity of sacred beings and things.”<sup>459</sup> In other words, the creation and reproduction of religion is the result of “deep structures” or “social processes” that operate in conjunction with “surface particulars” *qua* “cultural values.” Thus, a Durkheimian approach to religion is to investigate these fundamental ideals, both sacred and profane, that underlie and motivate the members of the community to recreate and reproduce the social formation.

But what makes Durkheim rather unique is that, contrary to other social theorists such as Marx, Frazer, or Tylor, he was not afraid to include science in the definition of religion itself. Durkheim writes:

Religion sets itself to translate these realities into an intelligible language which does not differ in nature from that employed by science; the attempt is made by both to connect things with each other, to establish internal relations between them, to classify them and to systematic them. We have even seen that the essential ideas of scientific logic are of religious

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<sup>458</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 36-37.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

origins.... In this regard, both pursue the same end; scientific thought is only a more perfect form of religious thought.<sup>460</sup>

What was the point of blurring the distinction between science and religion? For Durkheim, since the fundamental structure(s) of reality are ideals that ground and motivate action, these ideals of society are therefore not outside of what is constructed by the members of society, and so the ideal society and the real society are not antithetical poles of expressions, but rather derived from the same source. Hence the basis of society *is* religion, for Durkheim. This is because “if religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion.”<sup>461</sup> That is to say, it is not society as such that produces religion, but rather religion that produces society. The way Durkheim fundamentalizes religion ushers in the idea that there are no false or irrational religions, just collective representations *qua* self-representations of society. On the surface, it seems that the binary between religion and science is obliterated, because the scientific, as a set of collective idealized representations, functions the way “traditional religions” do, but Durkheim re-prioritizes the scientific by identifying science as a more perfect form of religious thought. Durkheim was not advocating a faith-seeking understanding of oneself and one’s relationship to the sacred, as often practiced in the field of theology or in more confessional forms of study, but rather an understanding of social life through the method of scientific reasoning. In this case, Durkheim’s re-inserts the secular-religion binary because in the positioning of science as the most perfect form of a religion is this hidden assumption that the scientific

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<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 429.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 419.

critique is a necessary methodology for “translating” the object of investigation.

Although science is a religion, because of the fact that both pursue the same ends, in the very advancement of the notion of the “perfect form” is the Enlightenment idea of temporality, which equates scientific rationality with progress and religious communities with tradition. Even if science is designed as a religious tradition, within a Durkheimian worldview, it is a more progressive one, by virtue of having the tools of critique to fully crack the mystery of religious behavior.

The point I am making here is that a Durkheimian view of religion does not seem to depart all much from the secular view of religion—this view that religion leans towards the superstitious and mythological domains of life—because the assumption is that the non-scientific frameworks that are deployed in understanding the signification of the sacred are stuck in the orbit of these transcendent ideals and are therefore too far attached to their own sacred object to gain enough distance to clarify the real. If the most perfect religion is the scientific view, then the scientific account becomes the chisel that breaks through the edifice of idealization that otherwise bars access. The idea is that science is inherently creative and progressive, giving the scientist the tools to approach the real, while all the other religions do not have this capacity on their own. What is hidden from view is this split between the scientist who uncovers this process and the religious who are products of this process of sacralization. In other words, undergirding this theoretical view of religion is a hidden binary, where the knower—the scientist—gains access to the real while the object known—the religious—can only represent the real. This is why the secular-religion binary is then smuggled into this theoretical analysis

in the act of recurring to the scientific domain to translate and explain the object of religion, because, in the end, the scientific discourse is championed as the proper critique. In short, despite his commitment to blurring the distinction between science and religion, Durkheim ends up re-creating it.<sup>462</sup>

This view of temporality here contrasts with Nishida's view of temporality, who refuses to bifurcate time (and space) from subjective awareness within religious experience. Nishida asserts that religious awareness represents a mode of existence that is aware of a vanishing point where time and space disappear. Here, Nishida's view of time corresponds to the Buddhist experience of non-duality, the view of the world where time and space begins to dissolve as demarcations, and all that is left over from this "dissolution" is the "natural flow" of reality.<sup>463</sup> Or, to put it another way, the experience of non-duality within Buddhist enlightenment is where one is not outside of time, but rather is time itself.<sup>464</sup> Contrast this with a dualistic conception of time and subjectivity: from this standpoint, time appears to be outside of subjectivity, as it is something a person is "caught" or "positioned" in. Nishida argues that the bifurcation of time is actually a by-product of the object-logic that can be found in Western modernity, and so if the sciences have been trained to begin from the standpoint that externalizes time, then

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<sup>462</sup> This point is reminiscent of Levinas' remarks about humanity consisting of the Bible and the Greeks, while the rest (of the world) can be translated. But Levinas in the end fails to create a universal that encourages differences because Levinas' universalization of Judaism recuperates Eurocentrism. See Raoul Mortley, *French Philosophers in Conversations* (London: Routledge, 1991), 18.

<sup>463</sup> See Rein Raud, "'Place' and 'Being-Time': Spatiotemporal Concepts in the Thought of Nishida Kitarō and Dōgen Kigen," *Philosophy East and West* 54, no. 1 (2004): 29-51.

<sup>464</sup> David Loy, *Nonduality: A Comparative Study in Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1988), 220-223.

the tendency is to investigate a religion “outside” as an object that is placed in time, which is why it seems as if science and philosophy are progressive (and therefore associated with the notion of critique) while the non-scientific and the non-philosophical (i.e. religion) operate in tradition.

As I am suggesting here, the bifurcation of time and subjectivity within an epistemological position plays a role in the positioning of the category of religion on the opposite side of the real because it advances this view that religion, as an object of conceptual thought, can be “critiqued” or “investigated” from an external observer. Let us return to Durkheim’s view of religion again, where it is claimed that the collective “effervescence” or “emotional excitement” that is created and released in the performance of a religious ritual moves the members of the community into a hypnotic state of the sacred object. From the outside, this may appear to be the case, but from an experienced practitioner’s point of view, the reality that is observed is quite different. In the case of Buddhist liberation in the Theravāda tradition, the experience of enlightenment via meditative practice is not exactly described as one of elation, excitement, and hypnosis; in fact, the opposite is described: there is a deep sense of peace and freedom, with no emotional excitement happening much at all.<sup>465</sup> The question is then, how do we account for religious experience in scholarship if there is a form of it that is difficult to grasp from a scientific point of view? Anthropology seeks to address this issue by becoming a participant observer, and while much has been gained from this

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<sup>465</sup> For an account of how Buddhist enlightenment unfolds in experiential stages and how this challenges more functionalist accounts of Buddhist religious experiences, see Ingrid Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 59-83.

methodology, there is still an epistemological tension that needs to be raised here. Nishida argues that religion is not only expressed as a creative mode of existential awareness, but as a structurizing logic that illuminates the broader processes of historical creativity as well. Therefore, from this standpoint, religious awareness can be understood as another form of creative awareness, not unlike the pursuits of science and art, which allows for a critical view of one's own self-awareness as part of the fabric of historical reality. In this sense, religious awareness marks a freedom not just from time, as discussed in the last paragraph, but a freedom from what obscures creativity, and so not unlike science and art, it is inherently creative and emancipatory. One can get a sense of what Nishida means by this in his critique of secularism, as discussed in the last chapter, where Nishida claims that a negation of religion will eventually lead to a world made up of particulars seeking to universalize themselves at the expense of the other. But, according to Nishida, the religious standpoint offers a critical view of the self and world in a way that allows one to negate its own dominating impulses, which makes room for other particulars to realize their own historical self-awareness. Nishida is not suggesting there is no "self-critique" in art or in the sciences, but rather that religious awareness has built within its own standpoint a self-critique that refuses an externalization of time and space, making self-negation, and the impulse to reify oneself and/or the other, central to the very pursuit of self-realization itself.

The implication of this discussion is that if one hopes to fully dismantle the secular-religion binary, then perhaps one must look to how the category of "religion" has been thought about from non-European epistemological standpoints as well. This not

only would give us another window into understanding how the category of religion is theorized, re-interpreted, and/or resisted around the world, but it would also allow us to be more aware of our own insular attitudes and projections, and how such views of the world might mirror back us to our own attempts to re-inscribe colonial or hegemonic formations. The goal of this discussion is not to resolve the problem of the secular-religion binary once and for all, but to make visible how the secular-religion binary still exists within religious studies and to point towards the possibility that addressing the secular-religion binary may require us to renounce the epistemological frames that secretly subordinate religion and perhaps to look to religion(s) as another source for transformation that can create an alternative world order. Coincidentally, this is what Nishida seeks to do: to create an intellectual landscape where the non-secular can explore their own intellectual heritages so that their own personal, cultural, or cosmological knowledge can move to a position of epistemic legitimacy in a way that contributes to a world-wide philosophical discourse. In fact, Nishida's repositioning of science within the logic of *basho* was precisely this effort, to quote Salja Graupe "to locate scientific thinking within a larger system that grants traditional and cultural values a non-subordinate place"<sup>466</sup> because it operates as this "third term" that grounds the secular and the religious.

Nishida's re-interpretation of religion is not a typical move of historical resistance in that it was an attempt at creating ownership around a category (in this case, religion)

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<sup>466</sup> Salja Graupe, "The Locus of Science and its Place in Japanese Culture: Nishida on the Relationship of Science and Culture," in *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy* 6, ed. James Heisig (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2006), Kindle edition, 2103.

and to deny this category to others; the resistance was rather exercised in a way that sought to extend access to those who were otherwise epistemologically and culturally subordinated by making room for those groups to move from a position of exclusion or subordination to a position of epistemological and cultural legitimacy in the world. That is to say, the secular in the Western world has told the story to itself that it represents the goal of civilization, whereas religion represents a mere (primitive) stage within a march toward truth, but as I tried to argue in this dissertation, Nishida recognized the problems associated with the negation of religion within Western modernity and seeks to correct this problem by reclaiming religion as the ground of the absolute, a ground that refuses to grant a universal the power to subordinate one cultural history over another. Nishida claims that a prioritization of scientific rationality in Western modernity has led to the subordination of other cultural or traditional forms of knowing that do not celebrate scientific thinking to the same degree, and so the mere existence of the sciences cannot be taken as evidence for Western superiority. But each individual or group that seeks to understand themselves on their own grounds are also said to be seeking to clarify the real and therefore deserve to be thought of as particulars equal to Western forms of thought. The point here then is that there different epistemologies around the world and that the differences that are expressed among these epistemologies can be used as powerful sources of critique.

In short, this constant subordination of the religious to that of the real stands in contrast to Nishida's view of religion—which advances a view of religious awareness as an epistemological standpoint that is in immediate contact with the real. Nishida's

religious standpoint, then, tells us that, as John Maraldo says, “empirical studies such as the anthropology, sociology, or history of religion are on no better ground than the psychology of religion [religious awareness].”<sup>467</sup> This means that translating religion into a sociological, anthropological, or psychological object misses some aspects of what religion may actually tell us about being-in-the-world because, as Nishida claims, religion does not represent an object outside of awareness, an object that can be empirically probed and studied, but rather, it is a logic of self-forming awareness in an unobjectifiable place of infinite self-negation. If the standpoints that make up the collection of the scientific view of religion maintain religion as an empirical object, instead of viewing religion as first-person encounter with the real, then there seems to be no way to breakdown the secular-religion binary when the scientization of religion depends on the category of religion as a reified object. The broader point that can be extracted from all of this is that Nishida forces us to further reflect on our own theoretical trajectory of religion as a problem that privileges the scientific, instead of considering non-Western views of religion as alternative epistemological positions in the world—standpoints that are perhaps not afraid to place its own cultural, religious, and/or intellectual heritage alongside the sciences. Perhaps the goal is not to jettison the concept of religion as such, but to allow for non-Western accounts of religion into the philosophical and theoretical discussion.

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<sup>467</sup> Maraldo, “How Nishida Individualized Religion,” 132.

### Concluding Thoughts

The history of religious studies in academia is characterized in part by this bifurcation in the history between theology and the secular critique that constitutes religious studies. Richard King best summed up the history of this divergence between theology and religious studies in modernity in the following passage:

The rise of secular humanism and the notion of a secular reason disembodied from tradition, which provides the foundation for the modern Western university system [sic]. This Enlightenment ideal resulted in the development of religious studies as a separate, secular discipline, distinguishable from theology. In the modern era, we have also seen the professionalization of academia along secular lines.<sup>468</sup>

Thus, the reason why anthropology or sociology is not motivated by Christian theology, for instance, is precisely because there is a deep suspicion around any theoretical view of the world that is theologically inspired in the secular academy. To draw on religious or theological ideas in the social sciences is generally not considered “scholarly” because it is explicitly normative and does not abide by the methodological agnosticism of what “critique” is perceived to be. Of course, one can always see some push back against this campaign, like in the case of René Girard, who blended anthropological criticism with Christian thought, in order to make a philosophical critique of the problem of mimetic rivalry. Girard, who fought to preserve the insights of the Bible, refuses to admit any stark dichotomy between the secular and the religious, stating that Christianity itself has had a significant influence upon modernity, as well as on the forms of thought that are typically thought of as secular. The point Girard wanted to make visible was that the

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<sup>468</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and the ‘Mystical East,’* 43.

development of religion—in particular Christianity, which is thought to be unique—has made its way into contemporary practices that seek to control the violence associated with the scapegoat mechanism. Without Christianity, societies will continuously fail in curbing the mimetic desires that fuel collective violence.<sup>469</sup>

Girard's thought has common agreement with Mark C. Taylor's view of the history of religion as a structuring category of thought. According to Taylor, one can see the structural traces of religion in the secular by just illuminating the origins of modernity.<sup>470</sup> And what one finds in an archeology of modernity are the structural frames that were birthed out of the Protestant Reformation: that the religious schema that was developed by Martin Luther proliferated a view of the world that secured a privatized self, a privatized self that broke with tradition, hierarchy, and other institutions of power. Taylor believes that, for Luther, God spoke directly to the "self," and since faith arises from hearing the voice of God, any institution of power claiming an infallibility of a scriptural reading only serves to detract from this relationship between self and God. But this theological-secular commingling is not only mimetic in the sense of mere imitation: it is mimetic in the sense of subsequent copies embodying and subsuming Luther's view of the self as well. Taylor believes that one cannot think of capitalism, democracy, and the nation-state as mere products of modern rationality because the self-God distinction reconfigured by Luther provides the very framework that made these systems possible.<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>469</sup> For a good synopsis of Girard's work, see René Girard, *Satan Falls like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Ottawa: Orbis Publications, 2001).

<sup>470</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv-xvi.

Like Taylor and Girard, Nishida does not recognize religion as something outside the secular. In fact, according to Nishida, since religion refers to the ground of all creative existence, even in what is perceived as “rational activity,” where religious awareness is occluded, there is still the *logos* of God that is in effect in the actualization of historical thought. But my point is that even if one does not agree with Nishida’s philosophical viewpoint, there is something important that can be extracted from his story: that is, there are non-European philosophical logics that refuse to separate the subject and object as well as refuse to separate the secular and the religious, and so if we are not careful on how we dismantle the secular-religion binary, then maintaining the secular and religion as representing carved-out domains of reality may in fact recreate the conditions for a new colonial order. This is because, the professionalization of religious studies and philosophy “along secular lines,” to use Richard King’s words again, has been built on the history of relegating non-Western philosophy to a position that has been perceived as less credible. This why philosophy, at least, still appears to be very “white” and “Western.”

Finally, it is not my intention to apologize for Nishida’s flirtation with Japanism during his lifetime. As many scholars argue, Nishida’s “world of worlds” may have smuggled in a form of cultural essentialism that privileges Japan’s status, with hints that suggest a move to reify the nation-state.<sup>472</sup> In fact, the negligence around criticizing the notion of the nation-state or the notion of culture (such as this assumption of homogeneity within a “single culture” or that it is a natural category in the world) tells us

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<sup>472</sup> Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō’s Chiasmatic Chorology: Place of Dialectic, Dialectic of Place*, 222-223.

that he did not have the foresight to fully understand the problematic implications of these categories. So, if the claims that have been made against Nishida turn out to be true, then there is certainly a limit to his philosophy as a critique. But then again, it is worth mentioning that even though Nishida was not committed to undermining the national polity as a source for political change, his cultural-political philosophy is not necessarily oppressive, ethnocentric, and exclusive—if anything, the opposite is true. While the verdict is still out to what extent Nishida’s philosophy participates in the rehabilitation of reification, imperialism, or cultural essentialism, it is nonetheless important to keep in mind that Nishida’s religious principles such as self-negation and the logic of absolute contradictory self-identity as part of the dialectic of the “world-historical standpoint” tells us that any form of essentialism or reification that makes its way back in can be subverted in the end. If we follow Nishida’s logic of religion all the way through, one can see where reading Nishida’s philosophy as a form of resistance can be useful, especially around the “problem of religion” because the “reclamation of religion” against the championing of the scientific rationality can be viewed as a self-critical standpoint that introduces an alternative vision of the world that seeks to avoid reproducing the colonial politics and the forms of exclusion that coincide with the secular.

To put it another way: what we can learn from Nishida’s inversion of the Western category of religion is that perhaps we need to expand the conversation around the problem of religion, to include the philosophical and theoretical voices that are not entirely embedded in Western modernity, because Nishida’s philosophy of religion represents a non-European philosophical (re)take on religion. From a Nishidian

standpoint, religion can never be a phantasm of the real, only an instantiation of the real, and so from this standpoint, the scientization of religion at this point may still carry a flavor of Eurocentrism if it continues to locate religion as an outside category of a secular critique. Richard King himself makes a similar point about the admission of Eurocentrism in the relationship between the history of religion and the roots of secularism: “One response to such attempts to globalize the history of the field [religious studies] is to reassert European exceptionalism through an appeal to the specifically “secularist” roots of the modern study of religion.”<sup>473</sup> Thus, to return to the secular critique in order to understand the category of religion may in fact reinforce the exclusion of those who have attempted to reclaim the legitimacy of religion, because, as Timothy Fitzgerald explains, “there is no secular history without the exclusion of religion, or its transformation into an object of secular knowledge.”<sup>474</sup> And so my final point is this: if religious studies wish to dismantle the secular-religion binary, then this pursuit will eventually have to confront the possibility that even the post-secular critique, whether in philosophy or religious studies, may have allowed Eurocentrism to slip in through the backdoor.

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<sup>473</sup> King, “The Copernican Turn in the Study of Religion,” 9.

<sup>474</sup> Timothy Fitzgerald, “‘Religion’ Is Not a Stand-Alone Category,” in *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. Richard King (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2017), 444.

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