

Summary: God or Emptiness? Zen Buddhist Masao Abe in dialogue with Christian thinkers

(Introduction)

The subject of this study is the dialogue that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century between Christian and Zen Buddhist academics in the United States, Japan, and Europe on God and Emptiness. This study is directed at the dialogue with the central bridge figure on the Buddhist side, the Japanese Zen philosopher Masao Abe (1915-2006). This study explores the development and the results of this dialogue and is, as such, a history of ideas. The main question in this study is:

In what respects did the dialogue between Masao Abe and Christian thinkers lead to a change or shift in the views of these dialogue partners regarding ultimate reality?

To answer this question, this study presents a descriptive analysis of the material and contextual dialogue with Abe and a number of his Christian dialogue partners.

(Part 1) The Modern Zen Buddhist Masao Abe

The first chapter, *Masao Abe's Religious Development*, describes the first part of Abe's life, which casts light on the foundation of his view and his interest in dialogue. Abe's search for meaning began in Jodoshinshu Buddhism (True Pure Land Buddhism), which initially resulted in a faith experience but nevertheless ended in failure. Abe continued to search at the faculty of philosophy at the University of Kyoto where he studied the religious "Philosophies of Emptiness" of the Kyoto School – in particular the philosopher Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990) and in the religious movement Gakudo Dojo. Under the supervision of the philosopher and Zen master Shin'ichi Hisamatsu (1889–1980), Abe had a breakthrough experience that he saw as "awakening." This chapter shows that the study of philosophy and the religious quest were closely connected in Masao Abe.

The second chapter, *Masao Abe's Cosmology of Awakening*, is a descriptive analysis of Abe's philosophy of Dynamic Śūnyatā. The thesis is that Abe's thinking emerges from his religious experience via reflection on it using the English concept of "realization." In constant reference to the necessity of this transformative experience, Abe develops his own view on the basis of the thinking of the Kyoto school. The chapter demonstrates that not only is Dynamic Śūnyatā an important concept with respect to content but that the dynamics of *śūnyatā* are also determinative for Abe's way of thinking. His view can be charted by means of nine dynamics. Four dynamics can be distinguished within Abe's cosmology: the mutual dynamic

between all phenomena as a result of their nature as emptiness, the dynamic between emptiness and manifestation, the dynamic between *samsara* (everyday reality) and *nirvana* (enlightened reality), and the dynamic between past, present, and future.

The following four dynamics play a role in Abe's view that the human being is meant to be awakened and compassionate. The first of these is the dynamics between conventional good and evil and the emptiness beyond good and evil, manifested in human behaviour as spontaneous goodness. The sixth dynamic, which most resembles duality, is that between knowledge and ignorance. The seventh dynamic states the possibility of this: this is the dynamic between the self and reality. The last dynamic is that between emptiness and the original vow. The final section of this chapter explores Abe's political views. He developed a dynamic with respect to this as well – that between nation states and their emptying.

In the third chapter, *Philosophizing Emptiness*, we reflect on the Abe's view of and doing of philosophy in relation to the Zen Buddhist religion. This view coheres with a critical look at objectifying thinking, which is said to stand in the way of a true understanding of reality and the self. Abe's goal is to engage in philosophizing that escapes this defect and corrects it. He holds that a Philosophy of Emptiness such as that of developed by Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, among others, is suited to this. We can point to the following characteristics of Abe's philosophy: the starting point is internal awakening; philosophy is an expression of insight; philosophy should not be coupled with attachment to concepts; stories in Zen Buddhism express what is beyond reason; the best form of thinking is paradox because it is impossible to reconcile this with the intellect; mediated by the academy, philosophy must reflect on the depth dimension of existence in dialogue with modernity. The chapter ends with the question if and how this kind of Zen philosophy can be self-critical in dialogue with Christian thinking.

The fourth chapter, *The Development of Masao Abe's Dialogue with Christian Thinkers*, discusses the history of Masao Abe's dialogues from the time he followed in the footsteps of Daisetz Suzuki (1870-1966) as the promulgator of modern Japanese Zen Buddhist thinking in the United States.

The intellectual biography now becomes, in fact, an intellectual biography of a dialogue. With respect to the material dialogue, an image arises of a multifaceted and diverse series of dialogue projects in Japan and the United States. The period 1963-1984 saw an institutionalization of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in both Japan and the United States. In both countries this institutionalization was supported by both universities and churches. Despite this institutionalization, however, dialogue resembled a "pop-up" character: often, one of Abe's dialogue partners would write a spontaneous article without referring to the dialogues with other thinkers that preceded the encounter. (This observation is one of the reasons for this stock-taking study).

With respect to the development of Abe's thought, the starting point of his story as a bridge figure is localized in the "paper" symposium that his article "Buddhism and Christianity as a Problem of Today" (1963) elicited. The thesis regarding his further development is that he worked this view out steadily via critical questions from and to Christians. Here, in contrast to what is sometimes thought, a development in his thinking can certainly be found. In 1969

Abe first elaborated on his “standpoint of Śūnyatā” in his article, “God, Emptiness and the True Self.” In his dialogues with Christians his view continued to develop up until the article “Kenosis and Emptiness” (1984). After an intensive dialogue project in the United States, the *North American Theological Encounter*, Abe expanded this article into the work “Kenotic God and Dynamic Śūnyatā” (1990). Here Abe also included Judaism in the dialogue.

The view Abe developed in dialogue with Christian thinking was intended to reconsider the concept of God in such a way that it would facilitate a deeper religious liberation. Radical reflection on the *kenotic* quality of God and his love is necessary for this. Within kenosis there is a process of mutual penetration of God, Christ, and the human, whereby God is ultimately each of “the ten thousand things” – as Chinese thought symbolically designates the plurality of all phenomena – in a constant dynamic of emptying.

(Part II) Masao Abe in Dialogue with Christian Thinkers

Part two illustrates the multiplicity of the held dialogues. Chapter 5, *Charles Hartshorne: Relationality*, analyzes the dialogue of the process thinker Charles Hartshorne with Masao Abe that began in 1963. This dialogue is characterized as a fundamental exchange between process thinking and elements of Buddhist cosmology. The focus of the discussion is found in the conversation on transcendence. Hartshorne’s critique is directed at the mutuality between the ultimate and the particular. He considers this illogical because the human being is not all-encompassing and thus does not completely coincide with the transcendent. Using the concept “Supreme Relativity,” Hartshorne argues for a distinction between the absolute and the relative that does not degenerate into dualism. According to Abe, Hartshorne is still thinking in terms of substantialism. Initially, discussion between them could go no further, but, in 1984, via another thinker on Buddhism, Jacobson, Hartshorne did adapt his view somewhat.

Chapter 6, *John B. Cobb: Social Justice*, concerns the dialogue between Abe and the process theologian John B. Cobb, Jr. Cobb entered the dialogue with Buddhism enthusiastically at the end of the 1970s. The insights into non-self and the *pratitya samutpada* in particular struck him as a means of deepening and strengthening the Christian tradition. Via the dialogue with Buddhism, the process thinking of Whitehead was able to make a clear transition to being a practical spirituality. Cobb also formulated his critique of the basis for morality in Abe’s Zen Buddhism very early. He judged his decennia of dialogue with Abe, however, next to this and other learning points, to be a failed attempt to get Abe to think differently about the importance of justice. Cobb argued that Buddhists, to anchor the good in the ultimate, should emphasize the depiction of the ultimate, in the figure of Amida, instead of hold their focus on emptiness.

Chapter seven, *Catherine Keller: Difference and Reciprocity*, discusses the critique of the process thinker and (post)feminist theologian Catherine Keller on Abe’s Zen Buddhism. Using her critical hermeneutics, she declares Abe’s thinking on emptiness and emptying unsuitable for a model for understanding the doctrine of God. It is not a worldview that equips people, women in particular, to change the power inequalities in the world. This is because, in her

view, Abe does not have an eye for alterity, self-affirmation, and reciprocal love. Abe rejects Keller's most important presupposition, i.e., that useful philosophy needs to be gender-specific, and argues instead for the spiritual transformation of both men and women as the starting point for transformation in sociohistorical reality. Keller hardly changed her position at all in response to this. That changed, however, after the critique made by the philosopher Linyu Gu of Keller's view of Abe.

Chapter 8, *Schubert Ogden: Faith*, explores the dialogue with the systematic theologian and process thinker Schubert Ogden. Ogden wants to determine if the Buddhist approach included the truth of the limitless love of God so that it could be accepted as "also true." According to Ogden, *faith* is manifested as a transition from a non-authentic to an authentic existence in which one individual, supported by God, takes responsibility for others. Because this is not sufficiently anchored in Abe's view, it cannot be true. Abe wants to push Ogden beyond his attachment to conventional moral thinking. According to Abe, a breakthrough experience through the fear and alienation of the human being is manifested as a life of spontaneous compassion. Ogden thinks, however, that the social dimension disappears from view too much in Abe.

Chapter nine, *Heinrich Ott: Meandering through Fields of Experience*, discusses a European thinker who had contact with process theologians and also engaged in dialogue with Masao Abe, Heinrich Ott. Ott stands in the philosophical hermeneutical tradition but is, with respect to his view of dialogue, primarily influenced by Heidegger. His dialogue with Abe concerns primarily dialogue itself and, in its wake, the possible interfaces between both thinkers. The *faith movement* was a subject of discussion, more than faith was. Ott attempts to show "neighbourhoods" between religions. Speaking on the basis of and about lived experiences – behind the language or not – creates, according to Ott, an "image" in which religious meaning can arise. A dialogue on truth claims is carried out, in Ott's view, within one's own discussion. Abe was inspired by Ott's theopoetic considerations.

Chapter ten, *Thomas Altizer: God-is-dead Theology*, looks at the God-is-dead theologian Thomas Altizer. In dialogue Altizer focuses on the possibilities of learning from each other's thought *structures*. He sees paradox as a possible way out of the situation of the "death of God." Altizer develops a parallel for the use of paradox in Mahayana Buddhism via the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum*. Moreover, the concept of "absolute emptiness" appealed to Altizer. Abe wonders if Altizer can still be called a Christian and also thinks that Altizer does not fully understand Zen Buddhism because he does not accept emptiness radically as a source of dialectic.

(Conclusion)

The conclusion takes up the question of what changes occurred during and as a result of the dialogues. A number of aspects that are characteristic for Abe's thinking arose through his dialogue with Christians: the emphasis on the spiritual practice of emptying, the emphasis on the dynamics of *śūnyatā* (not only the dynamics of *nirvana-is-samsara* but also the constellation of dynamics concerning emptiness-fullness/Vow/Amida/God and the intersection of the

sociohistorical and the religious dimension). What Abe wants repeatedly to change and expand but is never satisfied about – nor are his dialogue partners – is the integration into his thinking of the term “justice.” For him, and for others, the dialogue was not successful on this point.

The Christian dialogue partners gained numerous insights, but there are a number of main issues that deserve mention. (1) Although thinking about God as emptiness effectively breaks through the limitations of God as Being, there were objections from theology because such a view also led to the disappearance of responsiveness on the part of God. God is not an absolute Other but, it appears, a relative Other, an other-in-relation. (2) The idea of interdependence deepens both the reflection on the doctrine of God as well as that on the relation between people. There is now an ontological basis for the notion of being “members of one another.” The theologians are, however, selective in their appreciation of this idea and do not want to accept the foundation for this idea, i.e., the “non-self” doctrine. (3) An overlap can be seen between the realization of emptiness, after which a certain spontaneous compassion appears, and Christian experiences of the effect of grace in people. The experience that a person can make room for others and that this is part of spiritual life is shared. (4) If social structures are more determinative of world society than human individuality is, Abe’s program of internal conversion loses importance. According to the process theologians, more focus is needed on the practice of collaborating for better communities. (5) A suprarational starting point is present on both sides in the dialogue: faith on the one hand and awakening on the other. (6) Altizer is the only one who takes up and tries out Abe’s dialectic. Others reject a paradoxical speaking about God insofar it entails the momentary negation of God.

The final section poses a few meta-questions about the history of this dialogue. Abe’s thinking on Emptiness has been received in various ways, but many find it worth the dialogue and reformulate their views in response to studying it. None of the dialogue partners discussed in this work turned out to be a proponent of the new spiritual horizon of openness, beyond the boundaries of religion, as Abe envisaged it – namely, characterized by non-dualism. Nevertheless, in the history of the dialogue itself, a glimpse of that horizon that Abe wanted to create can be seen: in the dialogue itself the participants question their core concepts, become less attached to them, and return to them for new or old, but vital reasons.