

## TANABE'S IDEA OF WORLD RELIGION IN RELATION TO WHITEHEAD

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**ABSTRACT.** *The Kyoto School philosopher Hajime Tanabe proposes a new idea of world religion in which Christianity, Japanese Buddhism and Marxism are to be unified in a dialectical way as the self-developmental synthesis in history in anticipation of the second religious reformation. It would probably be tenable in comparison to Hegel's idea of history in which abstract and implicit potentiality gradually comes to actuality, superseding each specific stage, until the unity of the whole is completely realized. Whereas for Hegel the Divine Spirit is the immanent agency operative throughout the progressive history, it is the task of human endeavor for Tanabe to construct such a project as unprecedented. How is this feasible? It might be highly productive of the actualization of potentiality to employ the Whiteheadian process which is composed of the subjective becoming for the future ideal and the objective being as the real potential inherited from the past with the view of the advance of human ideas. This piece may be tempted in adventure to open a novel phase of the hidden potential truth up to the actual reality as the Aristotelian entelecheia, suggesting the Hegelian Absolute as the effect or end qua the actualized beginning, in the event.*

**KEYWORDS:** *world religion, Japanese Buddhism, Christianity, actuality, potentiality, objective immortality, process, historical reality*

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## 1. The past as Objective Immortality

With regard to Aristotle's distinction of actuality and potentiality, A.N. Whitehead makes a further distinction between pure potentiality and real potentiality in relation to actuality. While pure potentiality refers to the Platonic eternal ideas or universal forms, real potentiality is on the status of the past being which is no longer subjectively active but still remains the stubborn fact or given datum functioning as the efficient causation for the succeeding subjective actuality of becoming. For Whitehead, the past is never ascribed to nothingness but is rather immanent in the present as the objective immortality. For him, the world is composed of actual entities or occasions in succession of time which have the double structure of subject and object or superject in such a way that when the subjective act of becoming in the present completes and terminates its activity, it is negatively converted and turned out into the object as being without its own subjective immediacy. In other words, the past lives in the present with the vectorial transference to the future, and hence is still actual and active in the form of memory and causality for producing a new creation. The imperishable or immortal past as the preservation of the actualized potentialities may in some way correspond to the Indo-Buddhist idea of *karma*, i.e., action and its potential power influencing the subsequent lives. For Whitehead, becoming is more primary than being in the sense of being as the product of a becoming, and it is the replacement of the traditional metaphysical concept of substance by endurance in supersession of time. Aristotle's analysis of becoming should be balanced by Whitehead's analysis of perishing which is the weakest point of modern philosophy as well. This might contribute to searching for a solution of the puzzled problems involved in the nascent world.

Whitehead says that actual entities perpetually perish subjectively, but are immortal objectively (PR). For him, time is perpetual perishing as well as perpetual arising of actual entities in supersession, and is irreversible and asymmetric in character orienting towards the future, without returning to its beginning. This is the cumulativeness of time, contrary to the Buddhist notion of cyclic time as symmetric and to Hegel's and Heidegger's ideas of the coincidence of the end and the beginning in such a way that at the end time is the beginning fully realized, or the return of the end time to its origin as the retrieval and repetition. The irreversibility of time arises from the objectification of the past in the present, the conformation of the present to the past as the completion.

The past is re-enacted and restored in the present with richness and depth in the direction of the future by reason of its objective immortality in the modes of memory and causation. The power of the past as the immortal potentiality may give rise to the errant cause as the irrational element by virtue of which any unforeseen accident may happen.

This is due to the fact that the potential past is still active and actual in the arising of the present event as its efficient causation. Tanabe refers this errant cause in Plato's idea of *khola*, i.e., space or place or the matrix of becoming in the *Timaeus* to the Buddhist notion of *karma* as the past potentiality. According to the Buddhist principle of non-duality of subject and object, human existence and its environmental

world are viewed as correlative, or even the environmental world is effected by the human subjective action, in the depth of karma causality of action and its potential. This means that one should not be confined within one's own past causality but rather beyond it take action to reform the given actual world in conformity with the subjective aim of the ideal towards the future.

Georg Picht also mentions the significance of the past in that it is necessary as the fundamental law of the past that the thing which once occurred can never be annulled. It is the law of continuance of the fact. Because it is continual, it is set and forms the structure in this setting. So the setting and structure have also their origin in time; in them the past is present (*The Experience of History*).

## 2. Indian vis-à-vis Chinese-Japanese Way of Thinking

In contrast to the Indian way of thinking oriented towards searching for eternal ideal beyond the actual world, the Chinese and Japanese ways of thinking tend to pursue actuality in which eternal truth is manifested as concrete fact. According to the Upanishads, the Brahman is the highest being or Nothingness as ultimate reality and the actual world is like an illusion or dream on the lower level of reality. Even Indian Buddhism regards the actual world as painful and seeks to escape from it to attain peacefulness. So, the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna's concept of *sunyata* (Emptiness) is defined in such a negative way that it is neither arising nor perishing, neither coming nor going, and so on. On the contrary, however, Chinese Buddhism places the emphasis upon concrete fact vis-à-vis abstract truth and goes a step further to unify them in the dialectical way of complete harmony of them as the triadic structure which is represented by the Tendai school. But, even such doctrine as complete harmony of the opposed elements of concrete fact and abstract truth does not go beyond the standpoint of contemplation or intuition without evoking the extended socio-historical practice to reform the actual given world. The element of the socio-historical practice is introduced by Nichiren who stands by the Bodhisattva way of actualizing the potential ideal world. Before him, the main stream of Buddhist thought in Japan is prevailed by the thought of Original Enlightenment which stresses the unity of concrete fact and abstract truth without negation within itself, i.e., the immediate identity of them, resulting in absolute affirmation of the given actuality deemed as directly identical with eternal truth. This may reflect some form of the Japanese mentality of accepting all the given world as good. But, this kind of mental tendency might be in danger of giving rise to a sort of political totalitarianism involving even a war, which took place as a matter of fact in history.

## 3. Historical Actuality

In the western metaphysical history, on the other, Aristotle emphasizes actuality vis-à-vis his mentor Plato's eternal ideas or universal forms transcending the actual imperfect world, and seeks for a unity of the opposed constituting factors of actuality and potentiality as complete reality, i.e., the so-called *entelecheia*. And this tendency towards actuality is taken into Hegel's philosophy as indicated by the famous phrase "what is rational is actual, and vice versa". In this sense, his thought may be regarded

as evolutional pantheism in the way of unfolding of the Absolute in history as its own self-manifestation in process, reaching the goal at the end of history in which the presupposed abstract beginning is fully realized. This thought may be reflective of the Christian idea of the Incarnation of God in history in the human form of Jesus which is also influenced by the Aristotelian immanence of form in matter or of potentiality in actuality.

Another modern German philosopher Heidegger, too, is in pursuit of returning to the historical origin of western type of thinking which is to be resumed as the second other beginning of a new era of history, concealed in the depth of the first beginning, i.e., the pre-Socratic age, at the eschatological present time, in preparation for the coming of the last and ultimate God. His expectation of the last God in the other beginning implies the second coming of Christ along with the realization of the Kingdom of God at the end of history in view of his earlier study of Christian theology, as his disciple Karl Löwith and others mention. The Christian idea of the Incarnation is the immanence of the transcendent God in the human world, and Hegel and Heidegger express this idea in terms of metaphysics as the secularized version of Christian theology. In fact, Heidegger interprets Aristotle's metaphysics, and it might not be denied that his thought is much influenced by the latter as well. Hereby it might be no surprise to find out some affinity in structure between Heidegger's idea of the last God and the Bodhisattva in anticipation of the eschatological era over 2000 years after the historical Buddha's passing, which is predicted in the Lotus Sutra.

#### **4. Inadequacy of Zen and Pure Land**

In this regard, the Kyoto school philosopher Tanabe proposes a new synthesis of Japanese Buddhism, Christianity and Marxism from the dialectical perspective in that Japanese Buddhism, represented by Zen and Pure Land, which are devoid of the historical actuality, should be mediated by the historical character of Christianity and the Marxist socio-historical practice as well, and the mythological connotation of the Christian idea of personal God should be demythologized in terms of the Buddhist principle of Emptiness. Although Tanabe is much influenced by Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, nevertheless, he later on criticizes both of them for being devoid of the socio-historical actuality in such a way that Zen is devoid of social extension of practice due to its abstractness of sole one's own action and with respect to Pure Land the Amida Buddha as the Absolute Other saves human beings in the one-sided way without mediating human beings' own subjectivity and independency.

By the same token, the Japanese philosopher of law Tsuneo Hirano also points out the deficiencies of Zen and Pure Land in that Zen remains abstractness of sublation or abolishment of the historical actuality of the causal determinations into absoluteness and Pure Land is involved in the direct redemption of this world's people by the other world's authority without historical actuality of the causal determinations on this side. These deficiencies are the historical conditions for the further development of intellectual history.

On the whole, however, Tanabe's view omits the matrix of Japanese Buddhism

represented by the Lotus Sutra, i.e., Tendai and Nichiren schools, from which both Zen and Pure Land arose. In this respect, his disciple Iwao Koyama is very critical of Tanabe. And his mentor Nishida also criticizes Tanabe's attempt for his arbitrary making of religion. Another Marxist Kyoto School philosopher Jun Tosaka makes a criticism of Tanabe's philosophy as a kind of creative eclecticism or syncretism as well. Even if so, however, as Hegel also foresees the third religion which is neither Catholic nor Protestant, and Nietzsche declares that a new God has never appeared over 2000 years, Tanabe's insight may not be curious but rather profound in view of the historical development of religion on a world-wide scale. For the French thinker Jacques Attali, too, predicts the future fusion of the Christian view of linear time and the Buddhist view of cyclic time. Whitehead also says that philosophers have expressed the same idea differently. The American process theologian John Cobb also proposes a mutual transformation of Christianity and Buddhism from the Whiteheadian process perspective in favor of the Christian superiority of historical reality of Jesus as the Christ to the mythological Amida Buddha in the other world. If so, it might probably be cogent that the existing world religions are to be unified in the historical development of humankind, though in the immensely far future.

## 5. Dialectic

From the Whiteheadian perspective, since a new becoming of actuality arises from the existing actual world as the past potential data, a new form of creative advance occurs by mediating a diversity of the historical elements accumulated so far to a unity of concrescence of them at a higher stage of development. Tanabe's methodology of dialectic as the triadic logic of the genus or universality, the species on the particular level, and the individual is much influenced by Hegel's dialectic of negative mediation which bears a resemblance to the Buddhist principle of Emptiness perpetually emptying itself in the temporal process. Tanabe's grand project might implicitly reflect the second coming of Christ or the Bodhisattva in anticipation of the eschatological future in a metaphysical manner. So, Tanabe and Heidegger might be in agreement with each other in the expectation and preparation for the unseen God or Being à la Heidegger, or the Bodhisattva as the self-transformation of the eternal original Buddha hidden in the depth of history.

How is this related to Whitehead's concept of the past as objective immortality? A new actuality takes place in conformity of the past to the present together with the subjective aim; in other words, when the efficient causation and the final causation are unified with each other, a new actuality becomes in the present as a creative advance into novelty. This signifies that the past is mediated in and through negation to the present in which the past, in the lost mode of its immediate subjectivity, is turned out into and preserved as the objective being, i.e., superject (his own new term), in the succeeding higher stage of becoming of actuality mediated by the subjective aim. According to this scheme, the existing world religions in the different cultural areas, Buddhism and Christianity, are to be mediated in negation to each other into a novel creation of actuality whereby both religions as the past continuous objective beings (the given data) are negated and still preserved as the inner

constituent elements of a nascent actualization of the real potentialities transformed from the subject to the object. So, Tanabe's attempt at a dialectical unification of Buddhism and Christianity may be necessarily directed towards the ideal world religion in the sublated or lifted up mode in the creatively advancing process of history. As a result, it is not a mere mixing of the different religions but rather a new synthesis of the past beings in potentiality into a higher creative becoming of complete actuality as the self-realization of the real and pure potentialities in the concrescent novel origination of actuality lured by the subjective aim. Hereby it is obvious that the subjective aim plays the important role in the complete actualization of potentiality, and when the potentiality is fully realized, it is no other than what is meant by the Aristotelian concept of *entelecheia*, i.e. the perfect unity of the opposed elements of potentiality and actuality in the dynamic movement. Tanabe's ideal world religion as the postulate aims at a harmony to be attained in the future, though indefinitely remote for the present. Hereby might be seen his propensity for Kantian and Platonic idealism, contrary to Hegelian realism.

## 6. Sway in Christology

One problem of the dialectical logic is involved in its scheme, by virtue of which everything is supposed as if it were already resolved, despite the fact that it has not yet been so in actuality. Another issue is how to unify a variety of doctrines in competition even within a single religion. As a matter of fact, it seems to be hardly feasible for the moment to reconcile them in a harmony beyond conflict. As regards Christology, for instance, there are the opposed opinions: Jesus is a prophet or the Christ as the Incarnated God. On this point, Tanabe makes a distinction between Jesus who believes in the near coming of the Kingdom of God which is postponed to the future end of history and Paul who identifies Jesus as the Christ, i.e. the deification of a human being. The modern German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg resolves this issue as follows: although in and by the person and deed of Jesus has the Kingdom of God already been realized, nonetheless, it has not yet come as a whole of history but is expected to arrive at the end of history.

On the other hand, the British philosopher of religion John Hick advocates the myth of God Incarnate as not truth but a metaphor, along with the denial of the only oneness of Jesus as the Christ but the assertion of a plurality of God's names in the world religions in terms of the Kantian distinction of thing as such and its phenomena. His opinion may be not the first but another expression of the same idea as the Indo-Buddhist tradition according to which even Jesus is regarded as one of the self-manifestations of the highest being like God. Even Schelling holds the multi-revelation of God in his advancing process before and after Jesus, and might be reconcilable with the Hindu tradition.

The Swiss theologian Franz Overbeck, much influenced by his colleague Nietzsche, insists on the early Christian expectation of the second coming of Christ at the end of world history as a new time to come, opposed to Hegelian realism in which the state existence is regarded as God's self-manifestation in history, i.e. the realization of deity in the secular world, with the result of losing the original belief in

the future Advent of Christ, accusing Hegel of disintegrating and abolishing of Christianity in the secular world at the expense of conceptual construction of the religious representation. The elevation of Christianity to the conceptual being by Hegel, however, is in some way Aristotelian in character in its immanent realization of the transcendent deity in the actuality of world history, though history is deemed to close its course with Hegel. But, in fact, after Hegel, history never ends but continues up to now, signifying a spirally cyclic structure of time. In this respect, Hegel's idea in its connotation and implication might be in coincidence with the Chinese idea of the identity of the end and the beginning as well as the Buddhist notion of the eternal return of the same in the hidden way.

Thus, even within Christianity the central doctrine oscillates between the alternative, i.e. either Jesus or Paul, proposed by W. Wrede, or from Jesus to Paul, proposed by A. Schweitzer. The contemporary German theologian Jürgen Moltmann inverts Karl Barth's vertical theology from above, characterized by Greek philosophy as static, into the Biblical origin in the horizontal direction of hoping and awaiting for the future fulfillment of the promise in the messianic dimension from below.

As a whole, it might be tenable that Christian theology and Heidegger's metaphysics as the secularized version of it are indicative of the messianic expectation from the apocalyptic perspective, and this may in some way correspond to the Bodhisattva in anticipation of the eschatological future of the post-the historical Buddha, as alluded in the Lotus Sutra.

## 7. Identity in Diversity

According to Eugen Fink, for Hegel Being is time as the process of producing its own moments in the self-movement of becoming and perishing, retaining itself in and through its changes as the subject as well as the substance. Even so, however, Fink points out that Hegel remains obscure in respect to the possibility of opening up of a new aeon of history. For Hegel, following the Aristotelian concept of *entelecheia*, the Absolute is nothing but actual being as the movement of activity participating in actuality. For Fink, however, it is almost impossible to tell in advance about the possibility of a new self-revelation of God or Being on the final stage of history with Hegel. According to Hegel, Being cannot remain as such but goes a step further to negate itself in the other form, differentiates itself into the multiplicity of forms, and then returns to itself as a unity of the outer appearance and the inner essence. This logic might be applicable to the Buddhist notion of the Bodhisattva who is in search of Buddhahood as the self-negated other form of the Buddha in the self-movement of activity of transforming Himself in response to those who are to be saved by returning to their own potential original essence as the result of the practice of the Bodhisattva way. Hence, the Bodhisattva is the mediator between the Buddha and human beings through whose subjective activity enlightenment/salvation is attained in cooperation with others as the social extension. Consequently, the practice of the Bodhisattva way entails the change of the given actual world into the ideal one latent in potentiality as a novel occurrence of actuality in the horizontal process of time. Therefore, it might be said that Whitehead, Hegel, Heidegger, Tanabe, and the

Lotus Sutra thought are akin to each other in the negative mediation of actuality and potentiality in the temporal process of perpetual creative advance into novelty for opening up the primordial origin concealed so far.

### 8. Process

In particular, for Whitehead the teleology of the universe is directed to the production of beauty as truth which is the conformation of appearance to reality, interweaving absoluteness upon relativity as the realization of harmony, and the harmony of harmonies is peace as the self-completion of civilization. The past objective immortal being is reenacted in the present in unison with the subjective aim for the future. This may imply the return and repetition of the most archaic past or even the eternal original essence hidden in the depth of history upon the present free subjective action of realizing the ideal potential for the future purpose. The messianic expectation of the occurrence of Being as the last God or the coming Bodhisattva as the eternal Buddha in the transformed mode of being as a result of the self-emptied Emptiness in a cyclic way might be in resonance with the Whiteheadian conception of process.

For Whitehead, the process in which actual entities perpetually arise and perish with the vector direction of the future upon the accumulation of the past potentials does not end but goes on further endlessly; there is no eschatology in his system of thought, as compared to Christian theology, its metaphysical versions of Hegel and Heidegger, and Buddhology. In the Whiteheadian process there is no culminating point of the current of time, but ever and always increases the objective immortality of the past towards the future irreversibly in its asymmetric structure of time. Hence, the process theologian Lewis Ford asserts in respect of God's future activity in that God is everlastingly becoming and never in being, always subject, never object, always future, never present, never becoming past. This is the divergence of Whiteheadian thought from others mentioned as above. Even so, however, in order to avoid the involvement in the schematic logic of dialectic, it might be necessary for us to adapt the Whiteheadian idea to the Buddhist and Christian thought with the view of constructing a unification of them.

### 9. Compatibility

According to Tendai and Nichiren, all saints and wise men born around the world are none other than the self-transformations or incarnations of the Buddha *Sakyamuni* as revealed his own original eternity. This may echo to Hegel's and Heidegger's thought in that each philosophy is the voice of Being, the sending of God in each age. In fact, from the all-inclusive perspective of the Lotus Sutra, even the Upanishads and Confucianism as well as Lao-tzu's thought are recognized as the introduction to and preparation for the ultimate *dharma* (truth), being turned out into the authentic elements of the whole of Buddhist truth as the inner moments. For Hegel, too, the history of philosophy is nothing but the self-unfolding of philosophy itself in historical process, the self-manifestation of the Absolute Spirit or Reason in history. This is because the Infinite can manifest itself in the finite regions, and the



finities are the modes of the Infinite in space and time; there is no Absolute apart from the relative, no eternity without history. The Absolute as the Infinite exists in relation to the relative finite as the reciprocal relationship between the opposed. For Tanabe, eternity is to be manifested in the present in and through the mediation of human free subjective action as the self-realization of eternity in history. Even so, however, in Tanabe's viewpoint there is no line and direction to connect each present but simply a point in isolation without conjunction with other points in the form of continuity of discontinuity eventually due to his involvement with the Zen standpoint of one's own action as the self-power.

For Hegel, Being occurs as event, becomes actual in space and time of human existence; God as the subject becomes manifest and present in history, and history is the predicate. On the identity of time and being, for Picht, too, truth is not the truth of unchangeable being but the truth of changing time, and the appearance of the becoming present of the past. God's being is in becoming in the event of the Incarnation in the human form, and this is the logic of Christology, as expounded by Eberhard Jüngel. This logical scheme, however, is not only relevant to Christianity but also to Buddhism as well in which the eternal original Buddha assumes a variety of forms and names in his immensely long journey of salvation history on a multi-universal scale beyond our planet, as elucidated in the Lotus Sutra. The eternal Buddha returns to himself in the primordial origin upon the self-completion of saving course and inaugurates his activity of salvation again ceaselessly. So, at issue is how to make both religions compatible with one another. In this regard, the Kyoto School philosophy is in need of further explication of accommodating them in a harmonic unity on account of its limited scope of the knowledge of Buddhist thought, in particular, without reference to the systematic interpretation of the Lotus Sutra constructed by Tendai and further deepened by Nichiren.

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