CHAPTER EIGHT

THE NISHIDA–TANABE PHILOSOPHY AND CHRISTIANITY

I entered the Philosophical Department of Kyoto University in 1938 and graduated from it in 1941. During these years, I had the good fortune of having Professor Tanabe Hajime as my mentor. On the other hand, I only regret that I never had the occasion of attending Professor Nishida Kitarō’s classes. As far as I remember, I attended lectures given by him only twice, but I have watched him walk with the help of a cane a few times in the vicinity of the Kitashirakawa tram stop. I remember only faintly what he talked about in these lectures, but the impression his personality made was surprisingly strong, so that I have a clear image of him even now. He probably was not very tall, but when met in the street his figure somehow looked gigantic. Although he walked in a nonchalant and leisurely way, his presence was felt as something numenous, not to say demonic. Still, there was nothing inhuman about him. We are lucky that, with the publication of the Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō, we have now access to photographs depicting him in various circumstances and poses. At the sight of these photographs one feels well and gratified but, at the same time, one cannot suppress a feeling of awe, and it sometimes feels as if one is scolded with the words, “What you are doing is not up to par!” Indeed, I feel that a good mentor is one who, even by being simply around, makes people aware of their estrangement of their own true selves and puts them back on the right track.

I myself have been led to the Christian faith from my early days on, and at present I am engaged in the study of Christian thought, something

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1 The original title of this essay is Nishida–Tanabe tetsugaku to kirisutokyō. It appeared first in the publisher’s brochure (pp. 3–6) inserted in vol. 17 of Nishida Kitarō Zenshū (Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō; Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten 1966) and was reprinted 1967 in Muto’s book Kyerkegōru sono shisō to shīnkō (Kierkegaard—His thought and faith). Nishinomiya: Kokusai Nihon Kenkyū-sho, 341–347. The following translation by Jan van Bragt is based on the first version and published here for the first time.

2 This tram stop was located at Imadegawa street between Kyoto University and Kitashirakawa street. (Ed.)

which will undoubtedly be my work till the end of my life. Still, the philosophy of Nishida and Tanabe makes me aware of the narrowness of the theological viewpoint (at least of present-day theology), and has become a constant stimulus to emulate the strict discipline of the philosophical enterprise. Moreover, both philosophers have shown an unusual degree of interest in Christianity. Therefore, I now want to say a few words about their attitude to Christianity as it appears to me.

As written down in the Preface to *The Dialectics of Christianity*,4 Tanabe’s interest in Christianity goes back to his days at the First High School,5 and “since then, for more than forty years, the confrontation (Auseinandersetzung; taiketsu) with Christianity has been one of my preoccupations.” Also at the time of my studies at Kyoto University, Tanabe’s involvement with Christianity, especially under the guidance of Kierkegaard, was intense, not to say fierce. The result was that we listened to his famous lectures raptly and as it were in a trance; immediately afterwards we felt drained and, as it were, in a blue fog with total loss of our bearings.

In the case of Nishida, there is something truly amazing in the growth and development of his philosophy after *An Inquiry into the Good*,6 but at the same time this development strikes one as utterly necessary. Would this not be due to the fact that something Zen-like, which supports its very ground, pervades his system from beginning to end?

When we think of Tanabe’s attitude to religion in comparison with that of Nishida, we must admit that in Tanabe’s case the object of his interest kept changing from Christianity (especially through Kierkegaard) to Zen Buddhism (especially the study of Dōgen Zenji), next to Jōdo Shinshū (primarily the study of Shinran’s thought), and then, from around the time of the end of the war, back to Christianity. Of course, a change in interest can happen to anybody and is nothing to unduly focus on as something out of the ordinary. The unusual thing is that Tanabe’s way of refocusing his interest at each turn involved his whole personality and all his powers, and had all the earmarks of a “quest for the way” (gudō).7 In that sense,

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4 Kirisutokyō no benshō (THZ X). The term benshō can also be rendered as “apologetics.” (Ed.)
5 This was the Government elite high school in Tokyo. The government high schools in other cities were classified below accordingly, such as the one in Kyoto ranked third. Mutō attended the Forth High School in Kanazawa. (Ed.)
6 The Japanese title is Zen no kenkyū (1911). For English translations see Nishida (1960) and (1990). (Ed.)
7 This is a Buddhist technical term designating the phase of monks or nuns who are searching to find the proper teaching and practice in order to attain liberation. (Ed.)