

REVIEWS

James W. HEISIG and John C. MARALDO, eds., *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism*. Nanzan Studies in Religion and Culture. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1995. xv + 381 pp. \$40.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8248-1735-4; \$19.95 paper, ISBN 0-8248-1746-X.

A HISTORIAN OF MODERN Japanese history once confided to me that she had a rather difficult time understanding the fascination with the Kyoto school, because, as she put it, “we pegged them long ago for the leading role they played in Japanese imperialism and militarism, and their ideas don’t seem to have changed very much since then.” Indeed, as the Introduction of *Rude Awakenings* points out, “by and large, the comparative philosophers and theologians who were giving these Japanese thinkers their warm welcome [in the West] had simply overlooked the political implications of their thought, especially during World War II” (vii). As the editors go on to note, however, times have changed, particularly since the uproar over Heidegger’s involvement with the Nazis. And so, perhaps belatedly, many of the most prominent scholars of Zen and the Kyoto school (Japanese and Western) gathered at a symposium in 1994 to “share the results of their research and reflections on the question of nationalism in Zen and the Kyoto school” (viii). I say “belatedly” because in light of the fact that serious criticism has been directed against these thinkers for over fifty years, both within and without Japan (Tanabe was called a fascist well before the war, and immediately after the war a number of Kyoto school philosophers were purged from their jobs), it does seem unusual that a consideration of the relationship between their thought and their politics has taken so long to appear. In a way, though, the reason for this may be found in the essays themselves, for, as William LaFleur notes on the back jacket, they clearly reveal that there yet remains a “palpable tension over the interpretation of events.” Like no other English-language work, *Rude Awakenings* charts just how tense these interpretations are.

The volume is comprised of a short introduction and fifteen essays organized in four sections: “Questioning Zen,” on the role of the Zen rhetoric of ahistorical truth in historical realities; “Questioning Nishida,” on Nishida’s philosophy and political thought and whether they supported militaristic nationalism; “Questioning Modernity,” on the Japanese understanding of modernity and national identity in a world largely defined by the worldview of Western colonial powers; and “Questioning the Kyoto School,” bringing together discussions of other members of the Kyoto school, including Tanabe Hajime, Nishitani Keiji, and Abe Masao. All are well-wrought and provocative, abundantly quoting primary sources as well as providing judgements about their subjects, as in the following:

[Nishida’s] writings...validated the main ideological building blocks of militarists at that time. (Ives, “Ethical Pitfalls in Imperial Zen and Nishida Philosophy,” p. 38)

I conclude...that criticisms depicting Nishida as a nationalist, a promoter of the Japanese spirit, a supporter of the war, an ideologue of the Greater East Asia War, an absolutizer of the emperor, and so forth cannot be substantiated either in Nishida's own writings or in their actual historical context...there is no question of putting Nishida in the camp of the nationalists or cultural supremacists of the time. (Ueda Shizuteru, "Nishida, Nationalism, and the War in Question," pp. 96, 106)

Hegel argued that war is a means of spiritual self-affirmation for modern nations.... It seems that Nishida shared this view.... He supported Japanese hegemony in Asia and he was an enthusiastic advocate of the emperor system. (Andrew Feenberg, "The Problem of Modernity in the Philosophy of Nishida," pp. 167-68)

The *nihonjinron* 日本人論 polemic in Suzuki's work—the grotesque caricatures of "East" versus "West"—is no doubt the most egregiously inane manifestation of his nationalist leanings. (Robert H. Sharf, "Whose Zen? Zen Nationalism Revisited," p. 47)

[Suzuki] was not a nationalist or national supremacist...[some critics] read into his comments [on the possibility of Americans understanding Zen] the belief that the Japanese people themselves are somehow special and superior. Nothing could be further from the truth in Suzuki's case, and only a complete disregard for context can yield such conclusions. (Kirita Kiyohide, "D. T. Suzuki on Society and the State," pp. 72-73)

As should be clear from even this brief sampling, "palpable tension over the interpretation of events" is perhaps best seen as a delicately worded understatement.

How was it that the same philosophers could leave such different impressions? This in itself is a good question. James Heisig's contribution, "Tanabe's Logic of the Specific and Nationalism," looks at five important critics and their complaints against the Kyoto school, concluding that, although Tanabe's logic of the specific "failed in its own lifetime," still, "to allow our judgment of his ideas to be dominated by the fate they met in postwar Japan is no less an error than to uproot them from their native soil altogether" (p. 288). I wish this gulf between the Kyoto school and their despisers had been further explored by the other contributors, especially by those who wish to revise the standard views. Perhaps, though, the sheer volume of Kyoto school writings and their typically abstruse language is itself culpable for such ambiguity and for the "misunderstandings" that Tanabe thought he was a victim of (p. 268). As Michiko Yusa puts it, "As with not a little of Nishida's writing, the variety of interpretations is due not only to the ambivalence of the text but to the presuppositions that the reader brings to it" (p. 129), and critics too have a natural tendency to mine the work for support of their own presuppositions. As many others have pointed out, however, this ambiguity may itself be a pernicious effect of Nishida's notion of the "absolute identity of contradictions," in which Lin-chi's dictate "wherever you stand is the right place" becomes literally true, facilitating the appropriation of his ideas by any ideology at all,

ultranationalism included (see, for example, pp. 11, 20–21, and 72).

One of the most complex and still relevant questions raised by the volume is that of the (im)morality of nationalism and militarism. Although the various contributors might differ in their judgements of individuals and their ideas, it seems to be assumed a priori by all that nationalism and militarism are evils, although such was hardly the case in Japan or the world in general at the time in question, and such is hardly the case in most of the world today. Although many of the articles touch on the definition of nationalism, John Maraldo's "Questioning Nationalism Now and Then" provides the only inquiry into the "assumption that nationalism is something pernicious" (p. 333). It has been some years since John Dower's *War Without Mercy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986) demonstrated just how mutual were the racist elements of the Pacific war; nationalist, militarist, and imperialist sentiments were likewise not limited to the Japanese side. Indeed, many of the authors document the process whereby these sentiments grew in Japan in response to the racist, nation-defining, and empire-building adventures of Europe and the United States:

For the West (Europe and America)...the opening of Japan was but one more stage in the implementation of a grand design, a single step in the centuries-old march towards global colonialist expansion.... The only hope of survival for non-Western nations, caught up in the plans of Western expansion and face-to-face with the Western powers, was to forge a new national consciousness and make themselves as powerful as the nations of the West. (Ueda, pp. 77–78)

Issues of military and economic power were not the only considerations in the attempt to understand the significance of modernity for Japan—another issue of overriding importance for the intelligentsia was to conceptually situate Japan in the "world historical" fact of Western domination. Kevin Doak's contribution, "Nationalism as Dialectics: Ethnicity, Moralism, and the State in Early Twentieth-Century Japan," clearly shows that this conceptualizing was a contested process in which different understandings of the state vied, while Andrew Feenberg's piece, "The Problem of Modernity in the Philosophy of Nishida," notes that for Nishida "the globalization of world culture challenged philosophy and science to recognize the contributions of non-Western peoples" (p. 173). Feenberg concludes that whereas Nishida's earlier ideas on state nationalism may have been conventional for his time, his later work "innovated a new nationalist discourse based not on the state but on culture." Thus, as Horio Tsutomu's article "The *Chūōkōron* Discussions, Their Background and Meaning" notes, there was, in addition to the "external war against the imperialism of the modern West," also an "internal war directed against many of the cultural innovations brought into Japan during the 'Civilization and Enlightenment' of the Meiji era" (p. 293).

It is in this arena that the Kyoto school philosophers strove to forge an identity rooted in Japanese tradition (especially the Japanese Buddhist tradition but including the imperial throne as well) that would be able to take its place in the world. Mori Tetsuo's chapter, "Nishitani Keiji and the Question

of Nationalism,” finds Nishitani’s view of the nation rooted in the religious standpoint of a transcendent Eastern openness, “the standpoint of Zen or the place of absolute nothingness” (p. 322). Minamoto Ryōen’s overview of the symposium on “Overcoming Modernity” (that is to say, the overcoming of Eurocentric modernity) and Horio’s presentation of the *Chūōkōron* symposium show just how important the narrative of culture became in Japan, and how deeply Japanese intellectuals were gripped by the desire to place their culture upon the larger stage of world cultural history as well as within the historical present of the nation at war.

Since both the “Overcoming Modernity” symposium and the *Chūōkōron* discussions have oft been cited as prooftexts by the accusers of the Kyoto school, and since both included thinkers and critics other than those familiar in the West, these chapters provide invaluable information on the intellectual climate of the time. For example, whatever might be said about the ideas, what does it mean that Nishitani and the other participants in the *Chūōkōron* symposium were members of a “secret organization formed, at the request of the Japanese Navy, within the Department of Philosophy of the Kyoto Imperial University” (Horio, p. 300), ostensibly in an attempt to check the growing belligerence of the Army? In any case, as Jan Van Bragt notes, citing Robert Bellah, “The Pacific War posed for Japan the profoundest problems of its cultural identity—the relation of Eastern to Western culture and the relation of the Japanese past to the modern era” (p. 238). It is perhaps also this aspect of Kyoto school thinking that, more than anything else, has been associated with Japanese nationalism; Van Bragt notes that “there is no denying the fact that the...preoccupation with Japan’s identity and unicity...pervades the writings of the Kyoto school, especially in the critical years of the war” (p. 239).

It is in this context that the Kyoto school thinkers argued for the unique and enduring quality of Japanese culture (typically in the transcendent role of the emperor system), and this quality was seen to give the Japanese their “world-historical” mandate to unite Asia under the one roof of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere. Although with hindsight it is easy to criticize the essentialistic excesses to which this cultural chauvinism led, it must still be recognized that similar sentiments characterized the world stage upon which these thinkers wished to stand, and that cultural, economic, and military chauvinism have continued unabated throughout the world. It should perhaps be further noted that religious and cultural nationalism—from the “monks war” in Vietnam to the present crisis in Sri Lanka—have been the typical Buddhist response everywhere in Asia as this century has moved to its post-colonial present. To my mind, therefore, the scapegoating of Buddhist nationalism is far too simple a response; it can (and has) been argued that Buddhism provides a site of opposition for beleaguered victims of colonial hegemony, a place of resistance in which can be found indigenous meaning and pride.

When examining questions of nationalism it is important to explore the fine line between simple hometown boosterism (pride in your local cuisine and child’s hockey team) and the “collective egoism” that leads to disaster.

That is, there is something that is “Japanese” about Japanese culture and sets it apart from other cultures, and to assert this with pride without falling into a narrow and hegemonic essentialism remains a task for the Japanese today even as more virulent strains of cultural and ethnic particularism march onto the “world-historical” stage. For this reason I would have liked to have seen the volume include, say, Korean or Burmese Buddhists addressing the issues raised here; indeed, the lack of voices of any of those who lived under Japanese rule is somewhat startling.

To my mind one of the most important contributions of the volume is to focus attention on the question of whether or not the philosophies of Zen and the Kyoto school in themselves allowed or supported ultranationalism, quite apart from the activities of the individuals involved. That is, how does one get from the “absolute identity of contradictories” or “Absolute Nothingness” to a serious consideration of the suffering of the Other or of the reality of imperfection, contradiction, and opposition, as experienced in, say, the tragedy of war (see, for example, pp. 26–29, 252–54)? How does a transcendental epistemology affirm social realities (p. 261)?

The typical Zen answer is, of course, that the bodhisattva’s compassion arises spontaneously from Absolute Nothingness and that the experience of nonduality entails a return to and practice in the world of duality. I find at least four problems with this structure. First, one simply doesn’t see much evidence for it in actual people and events, leading to the type of embarrassing questions raised by Ives about the wisdom of Nishida, Suzuki, and others during the war (pp. 29–31). Second, even if the structure were valid, it still absolutizes wisdom (whatever that might be) as the only possible basis for ethical or compassionate action, leaving the vast majority (all?) of us nowhere to stand (as opposed to Lin-chi’s “stance that is everywhere true”). Third, as both Van Bragt and Ives make clear, there is a natural tendency in the logic of *soku-hi* or suchness (*tathatā*) to absolutize the “as-it-is-ness” of the world (or the state) as perfect just “as it is,” making it hard to derive an ethical “ought” from an absolute “is” (see also the similar criticism by Nanbara Shigeru cited by Heisig, p. 257). Fourth, in addition to the logical and moral dilemmas posed by the Kyoto school’s emphasis on the “absolute” (dilemmas that bedevil all forms of absolutism), there is also, from my point of view, the problem of just what such a notion has to do with a Buddhist doctrine usually understood to deny the Absolute in favor of dependent relationship. These sorts of considerations lead Van Bragt to conclude that “Kyoto philosophy is intrinsically nationalistic” (p. 245). It should also be noted that, inasmuch as this “structure of the Absolute” remains unchanged after the war in the thought of Suzuki, Tanabe, and Nishitani, the problems that it engenders remain as well (on the failure of Tanabe’s “repentance” to signify any real or deep structural change between his pre- and postwar philosophy see Heisig’s comments, p. 272 and 272 n. 47).

Hirata Seiko provides a perfect example of this. He notes that Zen is fundamentally “not so concerned with deciding issues of right and wrong, of war and peace, as with understanding the self that deals with these questions and makes these decisions.... Zen adapts itself freely to the spirit of the times.

What is called progress...is from the Zen point of view simply change” (pp. 14-15). Still, he recognizes (incoherently, in my opinion) that the Zen practitioner must study the things of the world, and expresses contrition for the Zen priesthood’s “ignorance of the international situation” during the war, adding that “in view of the results, and in view of the legacy passed down from Śākyamuni, we can only bow our heads and humbly accept our thirty blows” (p. 15). One problem with this, however, is that Hirata knows perfectly well that he should get the thirty blows for the correct answer as well as the incorrect answer, thus rendering the whole point moot (or, rather, “mute”). The real problem, though, is that Hirata, like other Zen masters, knows this to be but a koan, so that he will never really get the beating he rhetorically accepts.

One thing I found somewhat curious in the volume is the general lack of self-reflection among the authors about their own stake in the controversies. Maraldo’s meditations on the meaning of nationalism in Suzuki, Abe, and Nishitani provide the one instance in which an author explicitly looks to the ways in which his or her own critique is mediated by many of the same forces that drove the philosophers under scrutiny. In other words, the location of the critics too must be discovered as less than innocent. While we may relocate Suzuki or Abe’s discourse of spiritual uniqueness within our current academic discourse of cultural criticism in order to expose implicit forms of nationalism, that very effort must itself be located in, for example, the effort “to establish non-Japanese voices of authority on Japanese Buddhism” (p. 340), or in the context of the “popular image of American democracy as the prototype of all world governments” (p. 347). Or, it might be added, in the context of a liberal conviction that nationalism is inherently evil and that Buddhism is essentially pacifist.

In a somewhat different vein, Van Bragt acknowledges his own involvement in introducing the thought of the Kyoto school to the West (indeed, Van Bragt, Heisig, and the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture have been seminal in translating and publishing both the works of the Kyoto school and contemporary commentaries on it), but overall there seems little consideration for the fact that all of the authors in the collection are, each in their own way, continuing the story. Given that the issues of Rightism, cultural chauvinism, religious nationalism and ethnocentrism, religious freedom and rights, and even the tie between religion and the military have again become important in Japan, each of these essays has its own role to play in current affairs, in-scribing our present and future even as it de-scribes the past. Heisig, for example, concludes that “*Tanabe’s political conclusions are in no sense a natural outflowing of the logic of the specific*” (p. 288, Heisig’s emphasis) and seems to suggest that Tanabe’s logic could be birthed anew and recuperated for future ages. Horio too concludes that “the construction of a new, pluralistic world order based on moral energy became a world-historical task in the postwar period of the cold war. And with the fall of the Berlin Wall it remains a basic task for us today” (p. 315).

I cannot help but agree (although I think Tanabe’s “logic of the species” is hardly up to the task). From my own perspective as a teacher in an American

college in an election year, the issue of “species” level discourse is of paramount importance. That is to say, somewhere between the individual me and universal humanity stand a host of different groups, each attempting to attain self-definition, respect, economic independence, access to power and authority, and control of the modes of production that re-present them to each other. Whether it is the tragedy of religious and ethnic nationalism tearing apart so much of the postcolonial world, or whether it is the seemingly more benign debate over multiculturalism in the US, there is a clear and pressing need for different groups (“species,” if you will) with a sufficiently robust self-definition to allow true agency in all of the arenas mentioned yet at the same time avoid the narrow essentialism that denies the same agency to others. *Rude Awakenings* underscores the point with a flourish.

In a review of an edited volume it is common to note that the very nature of the enterprise leads to a lack of coherence among the contributions. In the case of *Rude Awakenings*, however, there is a remarkable integrity of theme and at the same time an amazing disparity of conclusions. In this sense it is clear that the issues discussed are still quite relevant today. *Rude Awakenings* joins a growing corpus of works dedicated to a critical presentation of modern Japanese intellectual history, yet is distinguished by its inclusion of many of those who introduced the subject in the first place. The careful scholarship and provocative critiques will provide intellectual stimulation for many a debate; the contemporary relevance and political timeliness are certain to make them lively. The careful editing and superb translations of complex material will make this volume an indispensable sourcebook for scholars of Japanese thought. The Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture has distinguished itself through its fine translations and studies of the Kyoto school, and this volume is yet another testament to their commitment to the finest traditions of scholarship and publishing.

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