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Heisig/Rude Awakenings

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Editors’ Introduction

Each of the essays in this book examines the relationship between Japanese nationalism and intellectuals in the Kyoto school and the world of Zen. All the contributions were originally presented at a week-long international symposium held in March 1994 outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and subsequently revised in preparation for this volume.

The definition of the “Kyoto school” has undergone a change from the time that the name was first introduced in 1931 by Tosaka Jun as a way of branding what he perceived as a rightist tendency in the circle around Nishida Kitarō, Japan’s foremost modern philosopher. When the thought of Nishitani Keiji, Tanabe Hajime, Takeuchi Yoshinori, Ueda Shizuteru, Abe Masao, and Nishida himself began to spread in translation through philosophical and religious circles in the West in the 1980s, it rode the wave of the current popularity of Zen thought, whose inspiration was apparent in many of these thinkers. It traveled with little or none of the stigma associated with the fate of Japan’s intelligentsia during and after the war. The names of Suzuki Shigetaka, Kōsaka Masaaki, and Kōyama Iwao—all of whom were well known to historians of Japanese nationalism—were left aside as secondary figures, if indeed they were recognized as members of the school at all. Absent the entire problematic of the war years, the phrase “Kyoto school” soon became synonymous with a wide-eyed, open-minded approach to religious philosophy that seemed to answer the need for a serious encounter between East and West as few contemporary systems of thought have.

Among intellectual historians of Japan, particularly those working in the United States, the enthusiastic reception of the Kyoto school religious philosophy in Europe and North America came as something of a surprise. For by and large, the comparative philosophers and theologians who were giving these Japanese thinkers their warm welcome had simply overlooked the political implications of their thought, especially during World War II. Today, the situation has clearly changed.

If there is one single factor we can point to as having brought the political aspect to the fore, it is the case of Martin Heidegger. In the light of new revelations of Heidegger’s associations with the German Nazi Party, affections for Heideggerian thought underwent a sea change, and in the process the consciousness of a generation was awakened as perhaps never before to the political practices of supposedly apolitical philosophers and scholars. It was only a matter of time before this rude awakening was transmitted to
those attracted to the philosophy of the Kyoto school, not to mention Zen Buddhism.

It was against this backdrop that a group of sixteen scholars (eight Japanese, six from the United States, one Canadian, one Mexican, and one Belgian) gathered to share the results of their research and reflections on the question of nationalism in Zen and the Kyoto school. The present book is a result of the long hours of discussion and debate during the symposium. The essays wind in and out of each other like different colored strings. The four strands that are identified in the table of contents are only one possible way of braiding the concerns into some kind of order.

The first of these strands, “Questioning Zen,” has to do with the conflict between Japanese Zen’s strong emphasis on transcendence on the one hand, and its actual involvement in secular history on the other, even to the point of vociferous support for militaristic nationalism during the war. Hirata Seikô argues that because Zen transcends ethics, it is equally neutral towards participation in war and towards participation in opposition to war. Of itself, Zen is concerned with insight not about how the world is or ought to be run, but only about the nature of the self. Christopher Ives presents the counterposition of Ichikawa Hakugen, a postwar Zen activist who insisted that Zen needs to cultivate a moral posture in the secular world. Following Ichikawa’s lead, Ives questions the connections between the wartime complicity of Zen leaders and the Zen-inspired philosophy of Nishida.

Kirita Kiyohide’s exhaustive research into the writings and letters of D. T. Suzuki leads him to conclude that, short of exposing himself directly to the military authorities, Suzuki did what he could to counter the war effort and its ruling ideology, and that he did so in line with a view of the state that he had held since his earliest writings. Robert Sharf undercuts the entire debate about Zen and ethics by claiming that the world-transcending tradition of Japanese Zen which is being questioned is not the historical fact that Suzuki and others have claimed, but a distinctively contemporary construct read back into history.

The second strand, “Questioning Nishida,” deals with the patriarch of the Kyoto school, whose writings on the emperor system and Japanese culture were used—or misused—as a philosophical justification of militaristic ideology during the war, and of the search for cultural uniqueness in postwar Japan. Ueda Shizuteru’s essay revolves around what he calls the “tug-of-war over meaning” between Nishida and the Army for the legitimation of important traditional Japanese concepts. He precedes his argument with a historical analysis of why the problem arose in the first place and follows it with a presentation of Nishida’s crowning vision of a pluralistic world order. Yusa Michiko’s careful study of Nishida’s letters and diaries supports Ueda’s position by uncovering meanings and intentions that are not always clear in the
philosophical writings. These data bring to light a politically active side of Nishida that has yet to receive the full recognition she feels it deserves. Agustín Jacinto looks at the final years of Nishida’s life, which ended just months before Japan’s defeat in the war, and examines the critical notion of “tradition” which underpinned his late thought. He draws a careful distinction between Nishida’s support for the mythological Imperial Throne, which belongs to the founding ideal of the nation, and Nishida’s view of the actual emperor who belongs to the world of historical fact and moral judgment. The question of whether or to what extent Nishida understood the Imperial Throne as a model for other nations is left open.

A third strand, “Questioning Modernity,” considers attempts by Japan’s intellectuals to find an alternative to Eurocentric and Western-dominated views of world and nation. The symposium on “Overcoming Modernity” held in 1943 is the focus of an essay by Minamoto Ryōen, who examines the background and content of those debates and presents an overview of right-wing and left-wing thinking in Japan at the time. He focuses in particular on the contributions of symposium participants associated with the Kyoto school. Kevin Doak argues that Japanese nationalism is best understood as a consequence of competing ideologies in modern Japan. He shows how populist visions of the identity of a people or “ethnic nation” vied with government efforts to define the role of the nation state in the modern world, and how Buddhism lent its voice to the search for national identity. Andrew Feenberg draws Nishida into the debate about modernity, and shows how his philosophy attempted to articulate the particular contribution Japanese culture could make to a world increasingly defined by Western science and technology. He contrasts Nishida’s vision of an alternative modernity based on Eastern culture with Heidegger’s brand of nationalism and disillusionment with technology. Despite the fate that this vision suffered at the hands of Japan’s wartime state nationalism, Feenberg suggests that Nishida’s insights into cultural pluralism are still of value to us today.

The fourth and final strand in the braid, “Questioning the Kyoto School,” brings together a series of inquiries dealing with specific thinkers. James Heisig looks at the figure of Tanabe Hajime, whose critics—and indeed whose own philosophy of repentance—have raised questions about his complicity in the war effort. An analysis of the elusive notion of the “logic of the specific” reveals how Tanabe had within his grasp a philosophical idea leading in the very opposite direction of the spirit of nationalism with which he flirted during the war. Horio Tsutomu presents a detailed synopsis of the background and contents of the notorious Chûkôron discussions which brought four Kyoto-school thinkers together in 1941 and 1942 for a series of dialogues on subjects directly touching on the military’s ideology. In so doing, Horio sharpens many of the questions that history today is asking of the
Kyoto philosophers. Nishitani Keiji, one of the four participants in those discussions, is the focus of an essay by Mori Tetsuo, who tries to distance Nishitani’s view of the nation and the world from the misunderstandings that have surrounded it.

Jan Van Bragt asks the broader question of whether Kyoto philosophy itself, as seen in Nishitani, Nishida, Tanabe, and in the Chûkôron discussions, is intrinsically nationalistic or only incidentally so. With careful qualification, he comes down on the side of an intrinsic nationalism in their thought. A final essay by John Maraldo takes up three figures from among Zen and Kyoto-school thinkers—D. T. Suzuki, Masao Abe, and Nishitani—to consider what is involved in criticizing positions that in their own way were themselves critiques of nationalism. Since critics themselves do not transcend the critical process, responsible critiques of nationalism inevitably make the past into a present, and personal, concern.

No doubt, under conditions of a totalitarian regime like Japan’s during the war, the semantic rules are not the same as they are for us today. Even the most abstract philosophical ideas invariably take on the concrete significance of questioning the powers-that-be. At the end of our own labors, the number of questions left unanswered, or only partially answered, is greater than it was at the beginning. The problem of what the Kyoto-school thinkers meant by attributing “subjectivity” to the state, the lack of clarity in the distinction between state nationalism and cultural nationalism, the disparity between the intentions of writers and the effects their writings produce in times of crisis, the relationship between the Kyoto school in the narrow sense and thinkers such as Watsuji Tetsurô and Miki Kiyoshi who were also involved in questions of nationalism—these issues and more remain with us still. In that sense, too, the whole project has been something of a rude awakening.

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