ABSTRACT

Abe Masao, a Zen exponent and a representative of the third generation of the Kyoto School of Philosophy (Jpn. Kyōto ha) played a significant role in the field of interreligious dialogue. Trying to understand his own religious identity in a much broader context of other religions and worldviews, simultaneously, he looked for significance in plurality and diversity of the religious views, he encountered. His struggle with the issue of religious pluralism resulted in a unique and subjective approach. Analyzing Abe’s reflections, the author considers two meanings of interreligious hermeneutics: the one applied by Abe and the one advocated by him. Abe’s stance analyzed in the context of these two hermeneutical dimensions provides an example of an overall picture of a man confronted with other beliefs.

KEYWORDS: interreligious dialogue, interreligious hermeneutics, Zen, Christianity

Introduction

The aim of the paper is to analyze the role played by a Zen exponent Abe Masao, a representative of the third generation of the Kyoto School of Philosophy1 (Jpn. Kyōto ha) founded by Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), in the field of interreligious dialogue. Abe’s literary works express the stance of a man who, from his own subjective perspective (based on Zen 2), participated in the interreligious dialogue, mainly with Christianity, but also, for example, with Judaism. There are two issues of essential

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1 The Kyoto School of Philosophy – a group of 20th century Japanese philosophers who presented unique considerations concerning both intellectual and spiritual traditions of East Asia and the philosophy and religion of the West. The three leading representatives of this school are: Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962), Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990).
2 Zen (Chin. chan, Jpn. zen) – a school of Mahāyāna Buddhism (Skt. mahāyāna, Chin. dacheng, Jpn. daijō) which refers to enlightenment of historic Buddha (ca. 566 B.C.E. – ca. 486 B.C.E.). Zen also refers to twenty-eight Indian patriarchs of whom the last one was Bodhidharma (Chin. Putidamo, Jpn. Bodaidaruma, 5th – 6th century C.E.). The first Japanese masters were Kakua (12th century C.E.) and Myōan Eisai (1141-1215). In Japan one can distinguish such Zen schools as: rinzai, sōtō, ōbaku. See: Maryniarczyk (ed.) (2004: 257, 258).
importance which relate to his approach. Firstly, his attempt to understand
his own religious identity in a much broader context of other religions and
worldviews. Secondly, his deep existential need to find some significance
in plurality and diversity of the religious views he encountered.
Abe participated eagerly in interreligious dialogue and also presented his
own theory on the subject and the concept of reinterpretation of other
religions. Thus, he can be regarded as the author of his own, unique
interreligious hermeneutics. Therefore, analyzing Abe’s reflections, one
has to consider two meanings of interreligious hermeneutics: the one
applied by Abe and the one advocated by him. Abe’s stance analyzed in
the context of these two hermeneutical dimensions provides an example of
an overall picture of a man confronted with other beliefs.

Intrareligious Hermeneutics in Abe’s Reflections
The key to understanding Abe’s works is provided by his interpretation of
the religiously-existential path of a Zen adept, the last stage of which is
‘enlightenment’ (Skt. bodhi, Chin. wu, Jpn. satori). The path together with
the metaphor of a ‘finger pointing to the moon’ (Jpn. tsuki o sasu yubi) and
the concept of ‘skillful means’ (Skt. upāya, Chin. fangbian, Jpn.
hōben) constitute hermeneutical tools derived from his own religious
tradition. Using them, Abe develops foundations for a dialogue with other
religions and adapts these religions in his own religious context, reinterpreting them in a Zen way.

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3 Interreligious hermeneutics involves a question to what extent one is able to understand a religion
different from one’s own. It deals with the issue how one’s beliefs influence his or her
understanding of other religions. It is concerned with the dynamics and ethics of reinterpretation
and appropriation of elements derived from different religions. Cornille distinguishes four different
types of interreligious hermeneutic which one can apply in interreligious dialogue: the
hermeneutical retrieval of resources for the dialogue within one’s own religious tradition; the
pursuit of proper understanding of the other; the appropriation and reinterpretation of the other
within one’s own religious framework; the borrowing of hermeneutical principles of another

4 ‘Enlightenment’, in other words awakening, means an insight into one’s true self, into one’s true
nature and at the same time the true nature of the universe. The experience is not based on a
duality of a subject and an object of cognition. Moreover, it neither means acquiring knowledge in
ordinary sense of the word nor a philosophical insight. See: Fischer-Schreiber, Ehrhard, Diener

5 The metaphor plays a key role in Zen. It means that the ‘enlightenment’ should not be confused
with words and concepts indicating it. The finger points to the moon (the symbol of
‘enlightenment’), but it is not the moon.

6 The concept constitutes an essential element of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It allows to adjust religious
message to the capacities and background of the hearers. See: Fischer-Schreiber, Ehrhard, Diener
Abe dissociates himself from philosophy, especially metaphysics, just like Zen masters, who did not want to build a metaphysical system, but wished to lead their adepts to 'enlightenment'. Thus, Abe does not present a metaphysical model of reality available in the act of 'enlightenment', but only religiously-existential path understood as a 'finger pointing to the moon', which includes the act as the last stage.

The first stage means individual ‘self’ based on the duality of ‘self’ as a subject and ‘self’ as an ‘object’ of cognition (as well as e.g. will and feelings). Simultaneously, ‘self’ treats itself as a point of reference in all relations (Abe 1975/1976: 32, 33). In this stage ‘self’ as a subject identifies with ‘self’ as an object. Moreover, it accepts as valid and adequate to reality the description based on defining an object of cognition as opposed to another object of cognition, as well as to the subject of cognition (the description understood as a perspective of looking at reality). (Abe 1989: 5, 6).

The second stage is realized by a religiously-existential breakthrough, i.e. a negation of ‘individual’ self, which also means the negation of all notions, concepts and meanings connected with such an approach to reality (ibid.: 7, 8, 9, 12, 13). The categories of ‘self’ as a subject and ‘self’ as an ‘object’ are still present in this stage. Nevertheless, ‘self’ as a subject is no longer a reference point. The second stage may only involve negation. In such a case this stage means the first breakthrough (‘leap’) as negation and reflection on this experience. Objectified unattainability and nondescriptiveness constitute the reference point in every relation. However, the second stage may also involve a conceptual affirmation, which follows negation (the first breakthrough) as a response to it (according to Abe, Nishida’s philosophy represents such affirmation). In this case objectified ultimate reality becomes the reference point (Abe 1989: 7-16).

The third stage, namely ‘enlightenment’, is realized by the second breakthrough (‘leap’) and means ‘absolute negation’ (freedom from duality and reference points) as well as ‘absolute affirmation’, in other words

8 According to Abe, Nishida’s philosophy expresses an affirmation after the first breakthrough and thus it does not express enlightenment, because Nishida solves the problem of different religious stances in a theoretical way. In Abe’s opinion Nishida’s ‘logic of absolutely contradictory self-identity’ (Jpn. zettaimujuniteki jikodōitsu no ronri), according to which A is A and simultaneously A is not A, constitutes a metaphysical Zen philosophy, characteristic of the second phase, and Absolute as ‘absolute contradictory self-identity’ is an objectified reference point. However, Abe refers to Nishida’s views not in a Zen context, but in the context of Nishida’s approach to other religions. See: Abe (2003: 98, 99, 106, 107, 110-116); Kozyra (2007: 73-75).
experience of authenticity of everything and real engagement in matters of the world and history, as well as in daily life. The third stage is defined according to the sokuhi logic (Chin. jifei, Jpn. sokuhi) of The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras (Skt. Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra, Chin. Banruoboluomiduojing, Jpn. Hannyaharamitakyō), which Abe applies only in the religiously-existential dimension.

Zen masters criticized all analytical considerations, regarding them as obstacles on the way to ‘liberation’ (Kozyra 2004: 83). Thus, they would refer critically to Abe’s approach. However, he was in a completely different situation than a Zen master, whose aim was to create favorable conditions for attaining ‘enlightenment’ by an adept (ibid.: 97). Wishing to tell other participants in interreligious dialogue about the religious experience in Zen, Abe wanted to do it in an intelligible way. Moreover, he wanted them to experience authentic religiousness interpreted by him in a Zen way. In this respect Abe’s approach may be regarded as missionary Zen. He evidently considered his actions as ‘skillful means’ adapted to Western conditions.

Abe claims that ‘not relying on words and letters’ in Zen is often misunderstood, since it does not mean “a mere exclusion of words and letters” (Abe 1989: 23), but “the necessity of not clinging to them” (ibid.: 23). Chinese Zen Master Yuwanwu Keqin (Jpn. Engo Kakugon, 1063-1135) introduced a distinction between ‘live words’ (Chin. huojū, Jpn. kakkū) and ‘dead words’ (Chin. siju, Jpn. shiku) of Zen (Kozyra 2004: 217). Only a true Zen master can turn ‘dead words’ into ‘live’ ones and make them express that which is inexpressible (ibid.: 217, 218). Obviously, Abe believed, he used ‘live words’ and thus escaped the trap of conceptualization. Of course we are not able to verify whether Abe was ‘enlightened’ or not, since only a real Zen master can assess this.

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9 There are aspects of Abe’s considerations which were usually not interesting for Zen masters, namely these concerning political and social issues and history. See: Abe (1989: 4-18); Abe (2003: 34, 35).
10 According to Abe, ‘enlightenment’ in Zen is and is not ‘absolute negation’, since it is ‘absolute affirmation’. Simultaneously the act is and is not ‘absolute affirmation’, since it is ‘absolute negation’.
12 According to Leszek Kolakowski’s statement on Christian mysticism, which is correct also in the Zen context, in one’s analysis one has to stop at the issues, which can be regarded as verbal, intersubjective expressions. All the rest cannot be treated as a subject of academic research. All experiences “constitute the subject of historical research, only when they are verbalized”. See: Kozyra (2004: 10).
Abe’s Borrowing of Hermeneutical Principles of Another Culture

According to Abe, an important aspect of ‘absolute affirmation’, and consequently of ‘enlightenment’, is expressed by the Buddhist concept of ‘suchness’\(^{13}\) (Skt. *tathāta*, Chin. *ru*, Jpn. *nyo*), which he defines in the following way: “[for enlightened one – A.S.] all particular things are respectively just as they are and yet they are equal in their suchness” (Abe 1989: 208).

In Abe’s opinion ‘suchness’ means authenticity free from duality, conceptualization and objectification. Moreover, for Abe ‘suchness’ is and is not oneness (as it means differentiation), ‘suchness’ is and is not differentiation (as it means oneness). Thus, Abe makes a reference to the Buddhist logic of *sokuhi*, though only in religiously-existential dimension. ‘Suchness’ is not considered by Abe independently of ‘enlightenment’. It is not an attribute of ultimate reality of metaphysical nature. Experience of ‘suchness’ means authentic experience. In this aspect of ‘enlightenment’ a man experiences differentiation (i.e. according to Abe uniqueness and individuality) of everything, since he is free from duality and conceptualization. Simultaneously, he experiences equality, in other words according to Abe oneness, of everything, since the experience of authenticity is total, nothing is excluded from it\(^{14}\).

In a Buddhist context one usually talks about oneness and differentiation, however Abe does not limit himself to these terms. In his terminology concerning ‘suchness’, namely a key Buddhist concept, there are also notions of equality (identical with oneness) and notions of uniqueness and individuality (identical with differentiation)\(^{15}\).

Participating in interreligious dialogue, not only does Abe refer to his own religious tradition, but also in this case to cultural tradition of his interlocutors, since ideas of equality and individualism are characteristic of Western cultures, especially the American one, in which they play the key hermeneutical role\(^{16}\). Abe includes them in his unique definition of ‘suchness’, which on the one hand due to its paradoxical character refers to Buddhist tradition, and on the other hand to the fundamental values of

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\(^{13}\) ‘Suchness’, a key concept of Mahāyāna Buddhism, refers to the true nature of all things, ultimate reality, things as they really are. According to a dictionary ‘suchness’ is formless, devoid of self-nature and unmade. See: Fischer-Schreiber, Ehrhard, Diener (1991: 221).

\(^{14}\) For details on the concept of ‘suchness’ in Abe’s considerations see: Abe (1995: 54, 55, 76, 77); Abe (1989: 17, 18, 208, 209, 226, 227); Abe (2003: 8, 9).

\(^{15}\) For details on different terms used by Abe in the context of ‘suchness’ see: Abe (1995: 55, 60, 61, 76, 77); Abe (1989: 208, 209, 227); Abe (2003: 8, 9).

\(^{16}\) For more details on the role of equality and individualism in American culture see: de Tocqueville (1996: 5); Bellah and others (2007: 263-292).
generally understood Western cultures. Thus, discussing a key Buddhist concept, Abe combines two types of interreligious hermeneutics, namely the hermeneutical retrieval of resources for dialogue within one’s own religious tradition and the borrowing of hermeneutical principles of another culture. However, principles borrowed from American culture are interpreted by Abe in a unique way.

Definition of ‘suchness’ presented by Abe differs from the concept of ‘suchness’ derived from the Flower Garland Sutra\(^\text{17}\) (Skt. Avatamsaka sūtra, Chin. Huayanjing, Jpn. Kegongyō), which does not identify notions of oneness and equality, since according to this sutra everything is one and the same, so one cannot evaluate (only then one can conclude that everything is equal)\(^\text{18}\). In the Buddhist tradition the fundamental teaching of the Flower Garland Sutra, namely ‘the one is the many, the many are the one’ (Chin. yi ji yiqie, yiqie ji yi, Jpn. ichi soku issai, issai soku ichi), is expressed by a metaphysical concept of ‘unimpeded interpenetration of all phenomena’ (Jpn. jijimuge) (Kozyra 2007: 49). Although Abe sometimes uses the term interpenetration, he does it only in the religiously-existential context, identifying this notion with equality (Abe 1995: 54, 55, 76, 77). Thus, he dissociates himself from the metaphysical legacy of the Kegon school, since metaphysical concepts are treated by him only as a ‘finger pointing to the moon’.

**Interreligious Hermeneutics as the Pursuit of Proper Understanding of the Other**

Abe’s essays and statements do not express ignorance towards Christians, with whom he participated in interreligious dialogue, since he prepared earnestly for the dialogue. From 1955 to 1957 he studied Western philosophy at Columbia University, and systematic theology and Christian ethics at Union Theological Seminary (Mitchell ed. 1998: xii, xiii). Abe endeavored to understand the meaning and validity of Christian teachings, even though he was able to do so only from a Zen perspective. However, his efforts were appreciated by his partners in interreligious dialogue, as they expressed a religious stance of a man who needed to find himself in the dialogical process, and at the same time struggled with the meaning and truth of Christian texts (Cobb 2005: 91).

\(^{17}\) Kozyra underlines the fact that “the influence of the sutra is evident in the teachings of many Zen masters”. However, it is important to mention that “Zen masters expressed the teachings of the Flower Garland Sutra in a way characteristic of Zen, i.e. essentially avoiding philosophical analyses”. Kozyra (2010: 33, 34).

In 1963 Abe published two important articles on Buddhism and Christianity in *Japanese Religions*, showing his interest in Christianity and inviting responses from Western thinkers. However, it was his paper entitled “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata” that presented his deepest thoughts on Christianity, reflecting his struggle with the meaning of this religion.

**Reinterpretation of Other Religions and the Concept of Universal Religiousness as an Adaptation of Other Beliefs in Abe’s Religious Context**

The universal religiously-existential path of a man is based on Abe’s interpretation of Zen practice, namely on the path of a Zen adept. Thus, Abe (1981: 114, 115) regards as universal the problem of dualism and the dilemma inherent to individual ‘self’, which means that the more one tries to define oneself in an objectified way, the less one is able to do it, because the subject of the question is at the same time the object of the question. The experience of this dilemma is linked with questions about the meaning and value of existence (ibid.: 114). If these concerns are serious enough, they constitute the first glimpses of religiousness and enable the first breakthrough to happen, although they are not its cause (ibid.: 113).

As regards interreligious dialogue, the second stage (of the religiously-existential path), including a metaphysically-religious response to the negation of the first breakthrough, plays an important role. Although the response involves objectification because of its conceptual nature, it expresses deep, but still incomplete religiousness (ibid.: 116). Thus, in the second stage ultimate reality is still conceptualized by a given religious stance. However, it provides a reference point, which gives new meaning and value to human life (ibid.: 116, 117). For this reason, one may speak about conceptually-religious affirmation. However, authentic religiousness, defined as the third stage, including the ultimate breakthrough, is free from conceptualization. In Abe’s (1995: 5, 18, 19, 34-36) opinion the experience of authentic religiousness was present in various religions, but the teachings of these religions were not understood by believers. Thus, taking into consideration the main assumptions of Abe’s general stance towards religiousness and other religions, one can regard him as the author of his own, subjective interreligious hermeneutics.

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20 Abe presented this paper in 1984 at the second conference on East-West Religious Encounters, it is also included in the book *The Emptying God. A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (John B. Cobb Jr., Christopher Ives eds. 1990).
Abe’s reflections on Christianity are based on the universal religiously-existential path of man, especially on his concept of the experience of authentic religiousness, which definition he derives from ‘enlightenment’ in Zen.

In Abe’s (2005:14) reinterpretation of Christianity the key role is played by the concept of kenosis\(^{21}\), which according to him is essential for Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Jesus Christ symbolizes a realization of ‘absolute negation’ (namely according to Abe in the Christian context – kenosis) and ‘absolute affirmation’ in an actual human existence (Abe 2005: 10-12, 167). God’s kenosis as an aspect of ‘absolute negation’ means God not being a conceptual, reference point in this act (ibid.: 14, 16, 17, 167; Abe 1995: 216). Kenosis is inseparable with God’s love, which is identified by Abe with the notion of ‘suchness’, namely with an aspect of ‘absolute affirmation’ (Abe 2005: 16, 167). Jesus Christ realizes both God’s love (corresponding to ‘suchness’) and Saviour’s love for people, corresponding to Buddhist ‘great compassion’\(^{22}\) (Skt. mahākarunā, Chin. daibei, Jpn. daihi)\(^{23}\). The concept of authentic faith, which means a realization of both God’s and Jesus’ kenosis by a believer, may be particularly shocking for a Christian\(^{24}\). Authentic faith means also a realization of God’s love and Saviour’s love by a believer. Such religious act deprives Jesus Christ and God of their unique status in Christian tradition.

Reinterpreting Christianity in this way, Abe reduces its message to a ‘finger pointing to the moon’, namely to the act of authentic religiousness, which for him corresponds to ‘enlightenment’ in Zen. In this respect Christianity and Buddhism are equal, as there was authentic religiousness in both traditions, but in the Christian one it became distorted by the doctrine, so a reinterpretation is necessary (Abe 1995: 35, 36). Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that Christian teachings gained

\(^{21}\) Kenosis (gr. κένωσις, kēnōsis) – the noun κένωσις is derived from the verb which means: to empty, to deprive, to make somebody devoid of something. The concept of kenosis in Christianity refers to the Bible [Phil. 2:7]. Christ descended to take the form of a man, to live among people and die on the cross. The whole concept of his life and death is interpreted in the categories of renunciation, emptying. See: Gadacz, Milerski (eds.) (2002: 439); Perschbacher (2001: 123, 236).

\(^{22}\) The key role in Mahāyāna Buddhism is played by the ideal of Bodhisattva (Skt. bodhisattva, Chin. pusa, Jpn. bosatsu), who devotes himself (herself) completely to the liberation of other beings. Thus the concept of ‘great compassion’ (Skt. mahākarunā, Chin. daibei, Jpn. daihi) – a compassion characteristic of Bodhisattva’s altruistic desire for all beings to attain enlightenment – is of essential importance. See: Mejor (2001: 192-195, 204).

\(^{23}\) For more details on this subject see: Abe (1989: 226); Abe, Cook (1985: 71); Abe (1995: 210); Abe (2005: 9, 10, 14, 16).

\(^{24}\) For more details on the concept of authentic faith see: Abe (2005: 10-12, 17).
their equal status, being reinterpreted in a Buddhist way, especially a Zen one. Thus one cannot speak about real equality between these religions.

**Conclusion**

Applying mixed hermeneutical strategies, Abe as a follower of Zen defines interreligious dialogue, its assumptions and aims. The definition is inseparably connected with his concept of universal religiously-existential path. According to Abe interreligious dialogue offers a chance to experience authentic religiousness, namely the ultimate breakthrough interpreted in a Zen way. The chance is given both to participants in interreligious dialogue and to other members of religious communities, represented by these participants, who should share their dialogical experience and their religiousness understood in such a broader context. The definition of interreligious dialogue is based on the assumptions of community and mutual transformation, in Abe’s opinion essential, as only through the ultimate breakthrough a man stands a chance to face religious pluralism and antireligious ideologies.25

Although the universality of Zen in Abe’s stance may be shocking, the concept of transforming dialogue, which deepens religiousness, was not only Abe’s idea. It was a rule adopted both by Abe and by his main interlocutor, namely John B. Cobb Jr (Rowe 2008: 123).

Moreover, the concept of the universality of Zen is no exception to the ideas of the universality of one’s own religion presented in other religious traditions. Kozyra claims that “[t]he concept of universal Zen should be described as ‘anonymous Zen’ by analogy to Karl Rahner’s (1904-1984) ‘anonymous Christianity’” (Kozyra 2004: 40). Anonymous universality of one’s own religion means reinterpretation and thus adaptation of other beliefs seen from within one’s own religious context. Thus it functions as a type of interreligious hermeneutics.

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25 For more details on this subject see: Abe (1989: 268-271); Abe (1995: 35); Abe (2003: 3).

26 Rahner’s concept of ‘anonymous Christianity’ means that everyone can be saved in the Christian sense, even the one who does not recognize the historical revelation of the word of God. This salvation is not determined by belonging to a church, it does not even require baptism. God’s redemptive will embraces everyone regardless of original sin. This does not mean, however, that all humankind will be saved. However, everyone (irrespective of his or her worldviews and beliefs) is graced with God’s offer. Salvation means acceptance of God’s offering Himself to a human. It is a kind of revelation understood as an absolute and direct contact with God, unrelated to philosophical reflections and intellectual speculations. According to Rahner, in every religion there are traces of revelation. See: Kozyra (1995: 137, 138); Rahner (1987: 138, 146).
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