Research Project

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Towards a Processual Concept of Unity: Comparing Nishida Kitarô and Muhammad Abduh

Philosophers of early Showa and late Taisho moved away from Meiji ideals of civilization and enlightenment (bunmei kaika) and by doing so, they transcended the most basic ideas of both modernism and of national salvation. Some of those philosophers developed an explicit philosophical concept of space by transforming a traditional notion of communal space into a sophisticated, processual "time-space development."

I find similar approaches in the work of "Islamic liberalists" of the Arab world that emerged in parallel with the Meiji restoration. The 1870's were the period when national consciousness became articulate in Egypt. In particular, I want to concentrate on the work of Egyptian religious scholar Muhammad Abduh, whose writings were not only a response to Western imperialism but also an attempt to produce a modern Arab philosophy. The Arab Cultural Renaissance or Nahda, which lasted from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, is the Arab equivalent of the above modernization movements. Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani (1838-1897), the teacher of Abduh, was one of the initiators of the Nahda. Like al-Afghani, Abduh has been described as the Luther and Calvin of modern Islamic history.

I compare elements from two late texts by the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro with ideas from the book *The Theology of Unity* by the Egyptian philosopher and reformer Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). Both thinkers develop religious philosophies in non-Western cultures and in the context of modernization processes that had begun in the second half of the nineteenth century. Both thinkers attempt to think relationships between the individual and the universal through organic models, and they do so by using similar theological theories.

The philosophies that I want to compare here, one Japanese, the other Arab, emerged within similar cultural contexts. Furthermore I believe that both Abduh's and Nishida's philosophies attempt to manufacture similarly paradoxical positions regarding the integration of reason and religion. Like Abduh, Nishida is interested in the unity of God. How do we have to think the unity of God when every unity is

only composed of individuals? For Abduh "the emanationist cosmology explains that creation is a process in which existence. Stemming from a single source, becomes more and more diversified by successive degrees… Hence, one observes the diversity in the world and how its constituent elements are constantly moving and changing, but one needs to be aware of the inherent unity behind the apparent diversity" (Scharbrodt: 103). Abduh avoids Aristotelian substances by claiming that the physical world emerges. Similarly, Nishida thinks that the world emerges as a place (basho). Both conceptions contradict Aristotelian logic because both avoid the idea of identity, which is necessary for any abstract logic. From the point of view of abstract logic, such world concepts have no meaning.

When Nishida writes that "religion neither conceives God from the standpoint of knowledge as an ultimate principle nor asserts the existence of God as a postulate from the standpoint of morality" (TPR: 39), I find a similarity with Islamic Modernism.

Nishida writes that "the structure of spirituality is the religious form of life, it is not some kind of mystical transcendence. Essentially, that people consider religion to be mystical-that interpretation -is itself in error. I hold that even scientific cognition is grounded in this structure of spirituality. Scientific knowledge cannot be grounded in the standpoint of the merely abstract conscious self" (*Nothingness and the Religious Worldview. Last Writings*: 85).

These are precisely the thoughts of Islamic modernists like Abduh and Muhammad Iqbal.

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