Matthew C. Kruger, *The Gospel and Nothingness*

Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications, 2019, vi+269 pages. €12.
ISBN: 978–1072560388

Matthew C. Kruger's *The Gospel and Nothingness* (2019) is, as he explains, a more theoretically-oriented working out of his previous, practically focused work, *Spiritual Exercises for the Postmodern Christian* (2018) (p. 1). Noting the foundational role that his own experiences and religious praxis have played in working out his theology, "*lex orandi, lex credendi*" (p. 2), he claims: "I take as the fundamental philosophical question… following Plato—'how ought we to live?' …a choice made in relation to the ultimate" (p. 235). For Kruger, this "ultimate" is an ultimately unexplainable "nothingness" which is revealed when we are "honest about the horrors of our world and about its beauties, and all that happens under the sun" (p. 2).

Kruger credits Nishida Kitarō and Nishitani Keiji as "core" guides for his own theology of nothingness (p. 2–3). Thus, an exploration of their ideas, with special attention to the problem of nihilism, constitutes the first half of the book (ch. 1 to 4). Kruger proclaims that his "goal" is to "set the groundwork for a Christian nothingness" (p. 14). Characterizing nothingness as the painful and the meaningless and yet as an opportunity for insight and compassion (ch. 1), Kruger explores its relationship with three religious forms, a historical-cultural form and an everyday self-questioning form, and most fundamentally a "religion of nothingness" form (ch. 2), stressing that "nothingness is... something that is lived and not something that is understood conceptually" (ch. 3, p. 45). Moving toward explicitly Christian concerns, Kruger considers the theological difficulty generated by the spatio-temporal particularity of the Christian Gospel. What could the Gospel mean for those who never encountered it? On a "smaller scale," countless people died before Jesus was even born, and geography and language differences still separate several cultures from knowledge of Christianity. On a "grand scale," space aliens would presumably have no contact at all with the Gospel (ch. 4, p. 69). Kruger suggests that a realization of nothingness may overcome these difficulties intrinsic to Christian historicity—difficulties due to Christianity's universally intended trajectory: "go unto all the world [Greek *kosmos*] and preach the Gospel" (Mark 16:15).

Thus the second half of the book (ch. 5 to 12) is "an engagement with Christian theology, especially with the scriptures," to reveal the meaning of repentance (*metanoia*), which [Kruger reminds us of the Greek etymology,] is a "change of mind" entailing, he adds, "a devaluation of the values of the world" (p. 5).

Part I (ch. 5 to 7) explores the "monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience" (p. 85), explained in relation to nothingness as, respectively, abandoning wealth, abandoning attachment to sex, family, and social status, and most notably abandoning one's very self. Directly facing the negativistic implications of such praxis, Kruger assures us in an Epicurus-esque manner that "though fear may be felt, it is recognized that fear is meaningless.... There is only the movement of the universe as...God has deemed it, and those things which we fear will not be changed through our fear" (p. 6–7). Always returning to practical implications, Kruger warns against an escapist quietism, stating: "the ideal approach, I say, is to be able to hold both at the same time—a motivation for achievement with the realization that none of it matters" (p. 98). He adds: "A spirituality in nothingness... is an openness in love.... It is not silence, however. It does not sit and do nothing" (p. 245).

Part II (ch. 8 to 10) turns from praxis to theory. First explored is the futility of society, wherein by Divine directive "the mighty are brought low" in unexpected but inevitable moments of "inversion" (ch. 8). Then, Kruger explores the form of this world, its impermanent *schēma*: "the futility of all creation... or material things,"

which are "passing away" but nevertheless are to be celebrated as the work of God's hands (ch. 9, p. 7–8). Finally brought into focus is the nothingness of God, made manifest in the kenosis of the incarnation, the hypostatic union, and the crucifixion—the "emptiness of existence considered at once as God and as the meaninglessness of all things" (ch. 10, p. 8). Responding to atheist Arthur C. Clarke's short story "The Star" (1967)—which cynically speculates that the brightly shining Christmas Star of the Magi entailed the destruction of a densely populated, civilized planet—Kruger states boldly: "For the Christian, the response is simple: God killed himself in an absolutely appalling fashion, why on earth would we think that a civilization would be safe?... For faith to be faith, there must be no discovery possible which can shake or alter its tendency" (p. 185–186). Kruger adds in conclusion: "The incarnation would occur even if I were the only human in existence, and this because of God's love for me. At the same time, God is nothing and we are nothing..." (ch. 11, p. 219).

Part III (ch. 11 to 12) examines "problems of doing theological work within the context of nothingness" (p. 8). In an initial problem, two challenges to theology are highlighted (ch. 11). Kruger states: "theodicy is presented as an impossibility in the scriptures," notably in the Gospels and especially in Job. Furthermore, darkness in the relationship between God and humans is manifest both in the limitations of human thought, language, and endurance, and also in the divine darkness, which in contrast with the typically prioritized divine light, entails "violence" and encourages but does not have to necessitate "pessimistic" responses: "the God we know does not align simply with goodness as we understand it. The quest for God is therefore, a nothingness" (p. 202). This darkness in humans and God leads to perhaps the deepest problem (ch. 12). Because "God is the darkness, the whirlwind, the cloud, all things which defy easy description.... The theological project... is akin to idolatry.... We build idols with our golden words, but these do not capture God" (p. 9).

Kruger's conclusion turns back to praxis: "We, therefore, despite the fact that we may not have a clear understanding of the way that we ought to live, must decide on a form of life, else we live in hypocrisy" (p. 235). "This work is not perfectly synonymous with my life, but the two are intended to be directly influencing one another and this openly" (p. 236). Kruger concludes, identifying as his inspiration the brutally honest and irreverent Gonzo journalist, Hunter S. Thompson, and partaking in "a shared sense of nothingness" *nada y pues nada* with Hemmingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" (1933) (p. 245ff), stating: "The form of life I have decided upon is to live as the arcane high priest to the God of nothingness who is nothingness" (p. 236). At the same time, Kruger intends that his theology of nothingness is neither escapist nor negativistic, concluding "We can sample the saints of the scriptures for examples of lives lived in bold patterns. We can marry prostitutes

and insult government officials. We can smash pottery and predict the downfall of civilizations. We can eat, drink, and be merry, for it is possible that tomorrow we will die" (p. 243). Kruger claims that his theology is ultimately ethical, aiming to embody "love of neighbor" as well as extending beyond anthropocentrism to include "all of creation" (p. 247). Kruger characterizes the ethical manifestation of his theology as unconventional, practicing what one preaches, open to disagreement and not dogmatic, requiring questions and openness, and "the basic morality of not being an asshole" (p. 250).

As a committed Christian myself devoted to the academic study of Japanese philosophy, I found Kruger's book to be refreshing and necessary to promote the global and dialogical working out of the religio-philosophical quest both theoretically and practically. To Kruger's credit, more than careful and focused precision, he frankly pursues bold and broad exploration, stating: "I will be aiming more for openness than... coherence. I want us to find that emptiness...of living without a why" (p. 67). By this approach, Kruger has raised numerous unresolved problematic issues which I hope can be pursued further.

Evocative of the Platonic-Scholastic *transcendentalia*, Kruger proposes: "Just as there are many possible senses intended by God, there are thus many truths. Truth in itself, of course, is not manifold; God is Truth, and God is one (and not a thing, thus nothingness..." (p. 80). Notably, Kruger arguably replaces the traditional being (*ens*) with nothingness here in his own metaphysical explorations identifying a self-identical, non-differentiated ultimate reality despite qualitative-phenomenal difference. Kruger suggests a practical ramification for this transcendental-esque theme, stating: "Love is not something which stands simply or straightforwardly in opposition to death, decay, and destruction. Love exists in nothingness—just as God is nothingness, God is love, and these must coincide in our conception" (p. 184). Kyoto School thought has similarly pursued the identification God=nothingness=love, a remarkable *transcendentalia* set which has begun its working out in Christian theology via venues such as Kitamori Kazoh's *Theology of the Pain of God* (1946). This fresh approach to *transcendentalia* is worth pursuing, clarifying, and critiquing further, especially for intercultural, mystical, holistic, or praxis-oriented theological directions.

However, Kruger's enthusiastic identification of nothingness with all reality generates theological difficulties which cannot be ignored. He says—"we are already the nothingness that is God" (p. 140), or "as we are all nothingness, we are all God" (p. 245), etc.—bold pantheistic-leaning statements which demand careful justification, especially from the standpoint of traditional Abrahamic theology. Even Kruger's inspiration, Nishida Kitarō, vigorously rejects pantheism and is careful to qualify his own version of the divine nothingness as a pan-en-theism. Kyoto School

thinkers have further tried to avoid conceptual or perhaps moral incoherence by distinguishing, for instance, the all-encompassing "absolute nothingness" (絶対無) which negates negation on the one hand, from purely negative manifestations of "relative nothingness" (相対的無) on the other. Nishida's Christian student Takizawa Katsumi insisted that even more precise distinctions are necessary in order to realize the full moral and soteriological character of the God who is nothingness (無). Thus Takizawa followed the trajectory of his mentor Karl Barth, who distinguished absolutely the nihility (*das Nichtige*—often translated 虚無) of sin and evil from the holiness and goodness of God. Notably, whereas Nishida had characterized evil as part of God's plan and represented this evil metaphorically as the demonic Mephistopheles who tempted Goethe's Faust, Takizawa refused to acknowledge any such association. For Takizawa, the origin of evil is fully independent from God, although—giving credit to the pervasiveness of nothingness in both darkness and light as emphasized by Nishida and Kruger—Takizawa's position is also seemingly open to a redirective functioning of evil toward the divine providence.[1]

Kruger—besides identifying nothingness with God, love, and seemingly all existents on the one hand—also variously describes nothingness as sadness, pain, or meaninglessness on the other hand (cf p. 246–247, etc). Without further explanation, especially from the perspective of philosophical theologians such as Barth and Takizawa, Kruger's disparate characterizations of nothingness verge on incoherence if not heresy. Kruger seemingly defies even the basics of Christian faith when he says: "Personal regard is a meaningless move of attribution by our insecure minds hoping to find something akin to parental security in our conception of God" (p. 183). Especially given Kruger's frequent insistence that the scriptures guide his theology (pp. 5, 8, etc), he at least should address here that most foundational core of Christian faith, the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9–13 and Luke 11:2–4), which Jesus provides as the model for the proper way to address God—a prayer notably beginning with the appeal, "Our Father, which art in heaven."

Moving from the metaphysical toward the explicitly practical, perhaps the most significant problematic issue raised by Kruger for both theologians and philosophers is ethical. It is clear that the moral issues of human society are important for Kruger, as he states "we could use more and better social programs and a higher tax rate for the upper income brackets, along with a higher tax on investment income" (p. 90–91). Notably, he connects religion and morality when he states: "We are implicated in capitalist exploitation and white privilege and sin, always a part of sin

1. For Nishida's rejection of pantheism and his own version of panentheism, see my "Nishida on God, Barth, and Christianity," *Asian Philosophy* 19 (2009): 127.

and sinful existence" (p. 91). And in opposition to those claiming to be "defenders of the faith by virtue of their hatred and intolerance of the LGBTQ community," Kruger insists "This is not religion. The demands of religion, the demands of nothingness, are greater, and they demand an exceptional weirdness and an exceptional willingness to live in contradiction of the typical" (p. 249). Although the religious connection with "the God that is nothingness" is clearly Kruger's primary interest, his brief treatment of race and gender here could benefit from further elaboration, as there are many—both theologians and philosophers—who eagerly seek clarification on these hot topics.

In contrast to the traditional *transcendentalia* which identify God with the good (*bonum*), Kruger states: "the God we know does not align simply with goodness as we understand it. The quest for God is, therefore, a nothingness" (p. 202). Presumably Kruger's argument proceeds as follows: because of "The fact of constant [divine] forgiveness... which is offered before repentance" (p. 189), "Your morality gains you nothing in the sight of God. It does literally nothing for you" (p. 157). Notwithstanding Kruger's proposal that this conclusion is a natural ramification of selected scriptures from Job to the Prodigal Son, Kruger himself recognizes that they are "an affront to justice" (p. 156) and even religiously unorthodox. Objections naturally arise. Can any thoughtful person—especially a devotedly "spiritual" person—listen to a series of truthful victim impact statements matched with remorseless responses from the perpetrators, and in good faith come to the conclusion that there is no ultimate difference between Mother Theresa and a serial killer? Or no difference between a child rapist and his victims? Can we completely deny the reality or significance of responsibility, or the heinous internal and external acts that have earnestly been deemed sin or morally evil?

Kruger characterizes the view of "the average Christian: yes, life is complicated and hard, but is it really so difficult to tell right and wrong from each other?... What about all the other scripture passages about God's judgment?" (p. 220). Again, while Kruger insists that the scriptures guide his theology, the scriptural passages he references to support his thesis—"status as a moral person is insignificant to God" (p. 157)—are arguably outnumbered by other seemingly clearer passages stressing the ultimate significance of human moral commitments and actions.

Understandably due to limited space, Kruger only briefly addresses scripture that does not align with his theological explorations. The primary scripture that Kruger posits as contrasting with his trajectory is the *Book of Sirach*, also known as *Ecclesiasticus*. He explains cautiously: "That *Sirach* is deuterocanonical is perhaps enough for me to ignore its suggestions that we are not as lost as I say, but that is an unsatisfying reason." Rather, Kruger's agnosticism regarding the clarity or value of human ethical activity consists in the thesis that "morality and goodness are not so

straightforwardly parsed" (p. 220). However, the canonical scriptures (not merely deuterocanonical) which parse morality and goodness, and ethical judgment straightforwardly, are legion. From the Psalms, we read: "the Lord loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. Wrongdoers will be completely destroyed" (37:28). Jesus says "go and sin no more" (John 18:11), and "if your brother sins, rebuke him" (Luke 17:3). Paul warns: "the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these... those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:19–21). The entire epistle of James exhorts most vigorously that "faith without [good] works is dead" (James 2:20). And so on. Kruger does acknowledge that even for Eckhart, Nishida, and Nishitani, "God could not be a true absolute were God not to possess mercy *and* justice." Kruger nevertheless intends to be cautious, stating: "I do not rule this out, but I try not to speak too much about anything concerning life after death" (p. 220, footnote 6).

Kruger's book was for me, both as an academic and a committed Christian, a welcome *kōan*, powerful in its sincere and poetic call toward humble and reflective action, despite—or perhaps because of—its controversial or seemingly incongruous explorations. I stand with him when he states, because of the dark side of nothingness, "Perhaps we are still miserable.... But this need not be the case, if we can come to our spiritual poverty, chastity, and obedience. But this will be a special grace, I think" (p. 222).

Curtis Rigsby
Hiroshima University