

## ***Prophetic Courage and the Will of God: Comparative Ethics through the Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Nishida Kitaro, By Brendan R. Ozawa de Silva***

### **Abstract**

This article focuses on two concepts, each charged with a distinct ethical valence and ambiguity, namely “courage” and “the will of God,” and approaches them from a comparative perspective. A discussion of either concept by itself could involve the interplay between the philosophical, ethical, mystical, and religious; here, I bring them together in the hope that each may shed light on the other, focusing especially on their conjuncture in what I call “prophetic courage.” There are many ways in which the word courage is used, and in some of them, a courageous act can at the same time be called an unethical act. When we speak of truly great courage, however, we tend to associate it with the ethical and the good. Here I will be concentrating on prophetic courage as a type of great courage, and hence one that is profoundly connected to the question of the ethical.

This comparative enterprise focuses especially on two individuals, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Nishida Kitaro, to draw attention to the way in which these seemingly disparate thinkers hit upon conceptions of the ethical and the will of God that are remarkably similar in certain ways, and that are then echoed by other figures, who will also be explored here. As one would expect, there are significant differences between the views of these individuals and the languages they employ. Bonhoeffer was a Christian pastor and theologian in Germany who was executed by the Nazis for his alleged complicity in a plot to assassinate Hitler. Nishida was a schoolteacher in Japan with a background in Zen Buddhism and is considered the founder of the “Kyoto school” of Japanese philosophy. While their differences cannot be downplayed, bringing these two voices into dialogue can illuminate common ground and help towards developing a theological and philosophical language that is both richer and more encompassing. Both these figures, in their own ways, pointed to a possibility of journeying (through religious practice and self-cultivation, most importantly the cultivation of love) increasingly towards a place where ethical action stems not from a static understanding of “good and evil” or “right and wrong,” but from a dynamic understanding of (and, on a deeper level, even fusion with) a truth and reality that reveals the very distinction between self and other (and hence self-interest and other-interest) as merely provisional in nature. In that sense, although neither figure is traditionally accorded the status of being a “mystic,” one could certainly argue for the presence of a particular mystical dimension to their thought. Examining this dimension of their thought in comparative perspective may challenge some of our conventional notions of ethical discourse as well as help us to engage the concept of the “will of God” at a time when this concept seems fraught with danger.

### **The Will of God in Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics***

Bonhoeffer opens a section of his unfinished work, *Ethics*, which he wrote while in prison, with the bold claim: “The knowledge of good and evil seems to be the aim of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to invalidate this knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer is arguing here that ethics based on the knowledge of good and evil cannot overcome the criticism that it places human beings at the center and makes them the locus for final ethical decisions. To do so is to fail to recognize that human beings are “fallen” and hence limited and relativized by being situated historically and

geographically in time, place, and culture – that they are, in Paul Tillich’s terminology, “finite.” Because human knowledge is limited, it is imperfect, and so human judgments are inevitably hindered by bias, ignorance, self-interest, and subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> As Nietzsche pointed out so forcefully, this compromises any autonomous ethics we might devise. In a 1929 lecture Bonhoeffer noted, drawing from Nietzsche, whom he studied closely,

The Christian gospel stands beyond good and evil. Nor could it be otherwise; for, were the grace of God to be subordinated to human criteria of good and evil, this would establish a human claim on God incompatible with the uniqueness of God’s power and honor. There is a profound significance in the Biblical attribution of the fall to humanity’s eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The original – one might say childlike – community of humans stands beyond their knowing of good and evil; it rests on the knowledge of one thing alone, God’s limitless love for humanity. Thus it was by no means Fr. Nietzsche who first penetrated ‘beyond good and evil’, even though it was on this basis that he denounced the ‘moral poison’ of Christianity. But, however much it may have come to be obscured, this insight belongs to the patrimony of the gospel itself.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, we may ask ourselves, is there any (non-nihilistic) alternative to human knowledge of good and evil? Would there be any other basis for ethics, Christian or otherwise?

Bonhoeffer answers yes, and he points to the example of Jesus. Jesus’ actions, Bonhoeffer argues, were not dictated by ethical “knowledge,” but by union with God. As Bonhoeffer writes, “This will of God is His life. He lives and acts not by the knowledge of good and evil but by the will of God. There is only one will of God. In it the origin is recovered; in it there is established the freedom and the simplicity of all action.”<sup>4</sup>

We may react to the concept of the “will of God” in a number of ways. We might regard it as a return to a kind of heteronomous ethics, one that looks to a source outside individual human reason for its authority, in a sense a return to the middle ages.<sup>5</sup> But this would clearly be a misunderstanding of Bonhoeffer, who is fully aware of the pitfalls of such an approach. Alternatively, we might dismiss Bonhoeffer as a naïf, or worse, a fanatic. After all, to use language such as “the will of God” is to invite danger, raising as it does images of extremism, hearing voices in one’s head, obstinacy, violence, or a delusional or suggestive personality. Even apart from that, what of the staggering epistemological questions? To speak of the will of God is to raise the question of how one would discern what that will might be, as well as *who* would discern such a thing. It might seem safer to avoid the concept altogether.

This would certainly be true if we limited ourselves to a simplistic understanding of the will of God. But what may be both safer and *better*, and in that sense more ethical, is to strive towards a deeper understanding of the will of God than that employed by those seeking to legitimize their questionable actions through an appeal to a higher power. This is precisely the understanding that Bonhoeffer argues against when he writes that the will of God is not solely heteronomous, because it is not a principle or a command, or even a set of principles or commands. Rather, the will of God is a “living truth,” which therefore necessitates that our truthfulness “must assume a concrete form in the world.”<sup>6</sup> The will of God – and hence also truth and ethical action – is not fixed, not enshrined in principles such as the straightforward observation of the Ten Commandments in any and all circumstances of life. On the contrary, for Bonhoeffer the will of God is a dynamic command that springs from creative unity with God and is based on concrete love worked out in each and every situation. His words seem chillingly appropriate in today’s world:

It is only the cynic who claims “to speak the truth” at all times and in all

places to all men in the same way, but who, in fact, displays nothing but a lifeless image of the truth. He dons the halo of the fanatical devotee of truth who can make no allowance for human weaknesses; but, in fact, he is destroying the living truth between men. He wounds shame, desecrates mystery, breaks confidence, betrays the community in which he lives, and laughs arrogantly at the devastation he has wrought and at the human weakness which “cannot bear the truth.” He says truth is destructive and demands its victims, and he feels like a god above these feeble creatures and does not know that he is serving Satan.<sup>7</sup>

One could argue that Bonhoeffer is relativizing truth, but it would be more correct to say that he is contextualizing it and at the same time setting it free from the bonds of the limitations of human reason. By reversing some of Bonhoeffer’s negations in the passage above, we can infer that for him “living truth” is not fanatical, that it does make allowances for human weaknesses, that it preserves the living truth between people, that it embraces or at least tolerates shame, mystery, confidence, and community, that it does not wreak devastation, that it does not create victims, that it involves humility, and that it does not allow itself to be subverted into the service of evil. This is especially important, as it distinguishes Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the will of God from the way this concept is used by to justify fanaticism, violence, and intolerance. At the same time, because living truth is not a simple set of principles to be imposed regardless of the circumstances or the specific needs of those involved and affected, it is complex. To deny this complexity is to succumb to the notion of “cheap grace,” which takes the easy way out by omitting that being ethical, being courageous, and telling the truth are hard won and must be practiced, learnt, and cultivated.<sup>8</sup>

“Telling the truth,” therefore, is not solely a matter of moral character; it is also a matter of correct appreciation of real situations and of serious reflection upon them... Telling the truth is, therefore, something which must be learnt... the ethical cannot be detached from reality, and consequently continual progress in learning to appreciate reality is a necessary ingredient in ethical action... It is a question of knowing the right word on each occasion. Finding this word is a matter of long, earnest, and ever more advanced effort on the basis of experience and knowledge of the real. If one is to say how a thing really is, *i.e.*, if one is to speak truthfully, one’s gaze and one’s thought must be directed towards the way in which the real exists in God and through God and for God.<sup>9</sup>

This aspect of painstaking ethical self-cultivation and the goal of a vision solely directed towards God, exemplified by the last sentence above, suggests the mystical character of Bonhoeffer’s theology and ethics. Yet Bonhoeffer also acknowledges the danger of his approach. A misunderstanding of the “living truth” could easily lead to subjective rationalization or self-delusion. That danger, however, is not reason enough to forsake this path for a simpler alternative. What is necessary, Bonhoeffer cautions, is “attentive discernment of the particular contents and limits which the real itself imposes on one’s utterance in order to make it a truthful one. The dangers which are involved in the concept of living truth must never impel one to abandon this concept in favor of the formal and cynical concept of truth.”<sup>10</sup> In a critique of purely heteronomous ethics, Bonhoeffer writes:

Our relation to God is not a “religious” relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable – that is not authentic transcendence – but our relation to God is a new life in “existence for others,” through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks,

but the neighbor who is within reach in any given situation. God in human form... “the man for others,” and therefore the Crucified, the man who lives out of the transcendent.<sup>11</sup>

Thus Bonhoeffer is careful to dissociate the will of God from conscience, which, he says, “pretends to be the voice of God.”<sup>12</sup> Conscience, it would seem for Bonhoeffer, already reflects the post-lapsarian state of human reason; it involves discerning right from wrong and constructing a static set of rules and principles that guide behavior, sanctioning some and prohibiting others. What is deemed “right” by conscience, however, is actually that which alleviates frustration and moral chaos; it is that which relieves the ethical tensions and dilemmas that plague a person caught in a difficult situation. The will of God, in contrast, is not a negative command, one that prohibits, but rather that which embraces all things and everything, and hence contextualizes and de-absolutizes all things (from a false human tendency to absolutize) by refusing to abstract them from the “real”; in this way it “invalidates” traditional knowledge of good and evil. At the same time, the will of God may not result in the mental relief that doing the “right” thing yields to the person of “conscience.” Again we see here an important distinction that Bonhoeffer is drawing between his ethics and a morality of “right vs. wrong” as determined by human reason and emotion.

This leads to an acceptance of God’s will, but not an acceptance of evil. God’s will is connected to the struggle against evil towards good, from disunity, disruption, chaos, and meaninglessness towards unity. It is not an acceptance that says to everything and everyone, “It doesn’t matter,” thereby invalidating meaning, but one that instills meaning and moves towards deeper meaning. It points not to the unimportance of all these moments, but to the ultimate importance of each moment. Because the will of God can never be simply coterminous with conscience or an individual’s limited reason, it is not a fall back to autonomous ethics. It is based rather in God as revealed in Jesus Christ, whom Bonhoeffer calls “the man for others.” Neither autonomous nor heteronomous, Bonhoeffer’s ethics speaks for the unity between the individual’s will and God’s will, the imitation of Christ, and is therefore always relational, and always an ethics for the other.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Will of God in Nishida’s *An Inquiry into the Good***

It might seem that Bonhoeffer’s ethics, with its emphasis on the will of God and the importance of the *imitatio Christi*, is interesting but ultimately irrelevant in non-Christian contexts. Yet I would contend that it achieves even greater relevance when placed in a comparative framework. Bonhoeffer himself was seized by the idea of a “religionless” Christianity and what he called “a world come of age” (*mündige Welt*). In other words, like Tillich and others, he was looking for the relevance of Christianity in the modern world. When his ideas are compared to those of thinkers from other traditions, they resonate surprisingly far beyond the domain of Christianity.

Like Bonhoeffer, Nishida Kitaro also sought to develop his own philosophical and religious tradition while remaining true to it. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan adopted the European university system, and the discipline of philosophy became fully “Westernized.” As a schoolteacher removed from the university environment, Nishida wondered if there was an alternative to this wholesale abandonment of Japan’s philosophical-religious tradition in favor of Western thought. Accordingly, he set out to bridge the gap between East and West. His first work, “An Inquiry into the Good,” gradually became one of the most important Japanese philosophical works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Nishida was eventually credited with having begun what became known as the “Kyoto school” of Japanese philosophy.<sup>14</sup> In his later work, Nishida became

increasingly concerned with resolving the philosophical and ethical problems articulated by Kant and Aristotle through a combination of his own original philosophical thinking and the Mahayana Buddhist tradition.

Ethics is of central importance in Nishida's philosophy. Yet while Bonhoeffer writes of ethics as uniting with the will of God and becoming "for others," for Nishida, writing from a background in Mahayana Buddhism, there is no fundamental break between the self and the other. This does not render talk of "self and other" or "subject and object" meaningless; rather, these terms must be understood as describing movement along a continuum, a difference in degree rather than kind. Rather than essentializing such categories, they are seen as being inherently relative. Thus for Nishida knowledge and love is in fact the movement of the subjective out of itself towards and into the objective:

To say that we know something simply means that the self unites with it. When one sees a flower, the self has become the flower. To investigate a flower and elucidate its basic nature means to discard all of the self's subjective conjectures and thereby unite with the basic nature of the flower.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, Nishida is arguing (against Sartre, for example) that true freedom does not reside in pure subjectivity but rather in becoming more and more "objective," an idea that may resonate with Bonhoeffer's idea of being "for others." Later in the same section, he continues:

If we are purely subjective, we can do nothing. The will is able to realize itself only by according with objective nature... Thousands of years after their deaths, Sākyamuni and Christ still have the power to move people only because their spirit was truly objective. Those without a self – those who have extinguished the self – are the greatest.<sup>16</sup>

Again we must keep in mind that for Nishida there is no subjective will independent of objective nature (as in a Cartesian dichotomizing of mind and body, for example), and no objective nature independent of subjective will (as in some versions of materialism).

In such a nondualistic philosophy, what might it mean to speak of the "will of God"? Despite the Zen Buddhist and hence atheistic starting point of his thought, Nishida did come to find it necessary to speak of God.<sup>17</sup> It is not clear whether this introduction of God into an otherwise heavily Buddhist-influenced philosophy was an attempt to make his philosophy more intelligible to western readers, or whether, like Alfred North Whitehead's incorporation of God in the course of his development of process metaphysics, it seemed necessitated by the direction of Nishida's philosophy itself. In any case, for Nishida God is clearly not "that being greater than which there is no other."<sup>18</sup> Rather, God is "the foundation of the universe" and "the base of reality," an idea more in line with Tillich's view of God as "the ground of being" or certain aspects of Karl Rahner's theology.<sup>19</sup> In fact, like Bonhoeffer, unification with the will of God is the only true good for Nishida; in his nondualistic view this is at the same time equivalent with knowing the true self, which he equates with knowing ultimate reality. He writes:

[I]n actuality there is only one true good: to know the true self. Our true self is the ultimate reality of the universe, and if we know the true self we not only unite with the good of humankind in general but also fuse with the essence of the universe and unite with the will of God – and in this religion and morality are culminated. The method through which we can know the true self and fuse with God is our self-attainment of the power of the union of subject and object. To acquire this power is to kill our false self and, after dying once to worldly

desire, to gain new life. (As Muhammad said, heaven lies in the shadow of the sword.) Only in this way can we truly reach the realm of the union of subject and object, which is the ultimate meaning of religion, morality, and art. Christianity calls this event rebirth, and Buddhism calls it *kenshō*.<sup>20</sup>

In bringing Nishida and Bonhoeffer into dialogue in this way, we must be wary of certain pitfalls. First, we must recognize that for Nishida, as with Bonhoeffer, unity and the ethics based on it are not purely intellectual. Instead, Nishida writes of the need to bring into harmony the intellect (knowing), emotions (feeling), and volition (willing), and is critical of much of western philosophy for having subordinated the latter two to the first. Here it is important to recognize that the rejection of dualism between subject and object, as with the rejection of an inherent dualism between mind and body, is not merely an intellectual rejection in nondualistic philosophies such as Nishida's.<sup>21</sup> Instead, as Nishida writes in the above section, and as other Japanese philosophers such as Yuasa Yasuo have emphasized, realization of the unity of subject and object (and of mind and body) is actually something to be attained through spiritual practice, and this is no easy task, hence the rigorous training in meditation and other self-cultivation practices common in religious traditions such as Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>22</sup>

The death to worldly desire in Buddhism can therefore be seen in line with the same death in Christianity. It is not a detachment that leads to a lack of feeling and love towards the other, but rather a recognition of transience of the other and self that leads to an increased love for the other and self as interconnected. The movement inward to what Nishida calls the true self, and true self-authenticity, is therefore at the same time a movement outward to the other, to being for the other. Nishida sees the lives of Jesus and Buddha as examples of this, in their recognition of the transience of the current state of affairs, which allowed them to be “for others.”<sup>23</sup>

At the same time it would also be a dangerous to emphasize the autonomous aspect of Nishida's view (he writes, “our self-attainment”), for it is God as unifier who draws us into unity. Therefore, it is not something that we can do entirely by ourselves. According to Nishida, we need to unify ourselves with God's will, but we need God to unify us with God. These two ideas—the inward movement to the true self also being an outward movement to the other, and the idea that it is both we who seek to unify ourselves (autonomously) and God who unifies us with God (heteronomously)—which seem to be paradoxes, are prevalent in the mystical traditions of Christianity and other religions.

### **The Will of God and the Mystic**

That speaking of “the will of God” can lead into murky waters, both ethical and religious, is not only a recent misgiving. Kant, an important figure against whose thinking the ethics of Bonhoeffer and Nishida must both be weighed, seems to have rejected the idea as impractical and dangerous. In his introduction to a collection of Nishida's *Last Writings*, David A. Dilworth writes that for Kant,

The Gospel command, the “law of all laws,” presents the moral disposition in its complete perfection. And yet it remains only “an ideal of holiness... unattainable by any creature,” an archetype which we should strive to approach and to imitate in an uninterrupted moral progress... Thus once more, in the spirit of preventing both religious and moral fanaticism, Kant repudiates the validity of the concept of “a spontaneous inclination” to virtue which is free of the constraining feature of moral duty... Thus he pours invective on “Mohammed's paradise or the fusion with the deity of the sophists and mystics, according to

the tastes of each.”... Kant’s positive thesis concerning “the moral destiny of our nature” is thus articulated in opposition to what he calls “fanatical theosophical dreams,” that is, “a hoped-for complete attainment of holiness of will” in this life.<sup>24</sup>

Yet one wonders whether by opposing these two positions in such a dichotomous manner Kant ends up rejecting too much. Does accepting the possibility of attunement to the will of God necessarily require an abandonment of discernment, reason, and moral development? Neither Nishida nor Bonhoeffer seem to think so. Although Kant’s position certainly gives less leeway for those who would abuse this concept for justifying unethical actions, does it also shut the door on the fuller ethical and spiritual development that Bonhoeffer and Nishida are envisioning, and that is envisioned by the so-called “mystics” Kant disparages?

It may be helpful to turn briefly to the writings of St. Teresa of Avila, a mystic who certainly recognized the dangers of self-deception inherent in the path to unification with God’s will. In *The Interior Castle*, Teresa devotes an entire chapter (6.3) to the problem of discerning whether locutions are from God, or from the devil, or from one’s own imagination. Like Bonhoeffer, she emphasizes that there are no easy answers in dealing with this; continual discernment is necessary, and this discernment is not solely intellectual. Discernment of the ethical is only the first step, however. The next is action upon that discernment. What is necessary along this path, as the soul moves closer to God, according to Teresa, is great courage:

And His Majesty, as one who knows our weaknesses, is enabling the soul through these afflictions and many others to have the courage to be joined with so great a Lord and to take Him as its Spouse. You will laugh at my saying this and will think it’s foolishness; it will seem to any one of you that such courage is unnecessary, and that there’s no woman so miserable who wouldn’t have the courage to be married to the king. I believe this is true with respect to kings here on earth; but with respect to the King of heaven, I tell you there is need for more courage than you think. Our nature is very timid and lowly when it comes to something so great, and I am certain that if God were not to give the courage, no matter how much you might see that the favor is good for us, it would be impossible for you to receive that favor.<sup>25</sup>

Like Bonhoeffer, Teresa wrote in the face of danger. As a woman and a *converso* (a descendent of Jewish converts to Christianity) in sixteenth-century Spain, she repeatedly faced suspicion and accusations of heresy for speaking about her mystical experiences and spiritual practices. The description of her speech as prophetic by others further brought her under the eye of the Inquisition.<sup>26</sup> At that time many other women had already been burnt at the stake for professing similar ideas. Bonhoeffer had to live out his convictions about what it meant to “tell the truth” in situations where it was not easy to do so. Similarly Teresa wrote, “We are in a world in which it is necessary to consider the opinions others have of us in order that our words take effect.”<sup>27</sup> Both had to recognize the dangers inherent in speech. At the same time, her certainty in God is such that ethically she can, like Luther, do no other:

If when I’m in prayer or on the days in which I am quiet and my thoughts are on God, all the learned men and saints in the world were to join together and torture me with all the torments imaginable, and I wanted to believe them, I wouldn’t be able to make myself believe that these things come from the devil; for I cannot.<sup>28</sup>

Teresa addressed *The Interior Castle* to nuns seeking to know God, and she repeatedly states that it is God who must draw them, and that it is God who will give them the courage, who will encourage them.<sup>29</sup> She insists that she can achieve nothing on her own. In this she echoes the sentiments of mystics across religious traditions, who have often pleaded that they can do nothing good by themselves, but rather it is God in and through them who acts, speaks, prophesies. This is seen as exemplified in Jesus, who says, “I and the Father are one,” and whose prayer is always one of acceptance: “Thy will be done.”

Throughout history such claims of unity have met with misunderstanding and martyrdom. The Sufi mystic al-Hallaj was tortured and killed for saying, probably in an ecstatic mystical state, “I am the Truth,” which in Islam, since “Truth” is one of the names of God, is equivalent to saying “I am God.” Yet the “I” in such claims is most likely spoken from a place of unity where it merges with the divine “I,” and the question of who is speaking is problematized. In such union, speech is by necessity prophetic speech. The same al-Hallaj wrote in a poem, “I call You, nay, rather You call me to You.”<sup>30</sup> Al-Hallaj’s line poses in a brilliantly succinct way the two issues we are dealing with here: how to understand that which stands on the fine line between the autonomous and heteronomous, and how to understand the “I” vs. “You” or subject-object dichotomy when we begin to break down that dichotomy to speak of unity. In Japanese Buddhism, in a way somewhat parallel to discussions in the west such as that around Pelagianism, this very problem became the subject of debate between a position of *tariki* or “other power” (that which saves one from beyond) and *jiriki* or “self power” (one’s own effort).

In the language of the Christian tradition, to be united with the will of God is to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to have “the mind of Christ.” Here the corporate, communal element is important. In a sermon delivered at Boston University, theologian Robert Neville connects this concept with the issue of the slippery boundary between self and other.<sup>31</sup> Drawing attention to Matthew 25, where the risen Christ says that when his followers fed, clothed, or healed the least of his family, they did it to him, Neville points out:

When Jesus says “I,” “me,” “my,” and “mine,” it can mean “them,” and sometimes “you.” When Christians take on the mind of Christ, we need to be very careful when distinguishing between ourselves and others. Those others, they are ourselves. The logic of self that distinguishes between self and other gets scrambled in the mind of Christ.<sup>32</sup>

Neville then quotes 1 Corinthians:

Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else’s scrutiny. “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.<sup>33</sup>

This leads Neville to say that “spiritual maturity... is not merely some kind of special knowledge but rather living one’s whole life as filled with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, it is not gnosis, nor is it a matter of principles and rules to be learned and followed in every situation, but rather a life of discernment that is led by God. This must be a life that is for others, for loving others is loving Christ. As Neville says,

For the spiritually mature, led by the Spirit to dwell in those depths, every hungry, thirsty, destitute, and imprisoned person is Christ—God creating. For the spiritually mature, their own first-person suffering and death are only God creating. From the depths of God there is only God creating, bringing from



nothing the brilliant suns, the fragile earth, the human journey...<sup>35</sup>

### Prophetic Courage

We have taken a long route through the valleys of ethics, unity, and the will of God before coming now to speak directly about prophetic courage, but there was a good reason for doing so. Prophetic courage is the natural destination of our journey. If we consider the prophets of Israel as an example, their behavior was ethical and was concerned with the ethical, yet this ethical was not simply the worldly ethics of “good and evil” prevalent and contemporary at their times. In fact, it is typically against the popular views and norms (often a hypocritical, legalistic understanding of ethics) that they rail. And such prophets are accepted, if they are accepted at all, as mouthpieces of God. What they speak is the word of God, but their actions also embody that word. The same holds true for the way Jesus is understood in Christianity, Muhammad in Islam and the Buddha in Buddhism: the traditions that came from them recognize that a transcendent truth came through these individuals, but also that their lives embodied it, and therefore that it is valuable and indeed necessary to imitate their lives.

Prophetic courage requires two things: discernment of the ethical and action upon the ethical. For Nishida and Bonhoeffer, both of these are part of the unification of self with God. This is where Nishida’s concept of the unification of the intellect, emotions, and will becomes especially important. A purely intellectual discernment of God’s will is no discernment at all. To do the will of God, to act ethically, and to engage in an attentive discernment that continually breaks out of the inertia of unthinking habit and patterns of comfort must require great courage. For great courage, like the words of the prophets, speaks to the people and, embodying the will of God, reveals to the people the will of God. In unity with God, there can be no disunity between life and language, word and deed. If that behavior or speech comes from the point of unity with God’s will, then it will contain an element of the prophetic.

“The kingdom of God is near,” Jesus cries out, “Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). Prophetic courage speaks from unity with God and calls to unity with God. That is why it always consists of two elements: one encouraging, the other critical. The criticism is that there is disunity between humanity and God, but the encouragement is that unity is possible, and that indeed God desires that unity and is calling humanity back. The two elements are present in the single line “Return, faithless Israel,” repeated throughout the book of Jeremiah. The tone of prophetic speech is often one of lamentation. This is the tone of the Qur’an when it is recited, just as it is the tone of Thomas Tallis’s setting of the Lamentations of Jeremiah: “Jerusalem, converte ad Dominum tuum” (Jerusalem, return to your Lord). Or in the words of Rabbi Abraham Heschel:

The world is a proud place, full of beauty, but the prophets are scandalized, and rave as if the whole world were a slum. To us, a single act of injustice – cheating in business, exploitation of the poor – is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us, injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets, a deathblow to existence; to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world...

The prophet is a person who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned before humanity’s fierce greed. Frightful is the agony of humankind; no human voice can convey its full terror. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world.<sup>36</sup>

In speaking of unity, however, there is the danger of remaining on the level of separate identities and thinking that these separate and distinct entities (of self and other, or self and God) are unified, whereas in fact the aim of religious cultivation as seen in the perspectives covered in this article may lie in realizing in one's life the provisional nature of that separation itself. In other words, the seemingly insurmountable barrier between self and other, which forms a basis for a "normal" system of ethics, which will therefore naturally distinguish between what is in the interest of the self as distinct from that which is in the interest of others, is surmounted in true realization of reality itself (Bonhoeffer and other Christian figures would say "in Christ" or "in God"), which reveals the provisional (and hence not final, not ultimately real) nature of that barrier.<sup>37</sup> What is then truly ethical is action that emanates from that "place" of realization, not action that still operates as if such provisional distinctions were ultimately real and final. It should be clear that although this could be seen as the true meaning of "doing the will of God" (and this is the very point I am making a case for), it is fundamentally different from the actions of a fundamentalist claiming to do the will of God based on a cynical understanding of truth. In the former case, to harm another is understood as being no different from harming oneself, and to love another is to love oneself. In the latter, self and other remain separate, disconnected, and unrelated, and the individual "doing the will of God" sets up the dangerous dichotomy of himself and God on one side, and the world and others on the other side, a situation that can only result in violence in subtle or not-so-subtle ways.<sup>38</sup>

What we are here calling prophetic courage, therefore, is that which springs from this place of interconnection. Although it is individually experienced, prophetic courage by definition, since it specifies a degree of union with the divine, extends beyond the individual and becomes trans-individual, even trans-historical. This is so because courage comes from the ability to identify with something other than oneself: another person, an ethical cause, and ultimately, in the case of prophetic courage, the will of God. The call to unity is a call to all humanity. The mother who risks her life for her child expresses her strong identification with her child; the stranger who risks his life for her child may express an even broader identification with humanity.<sup>39</sup> In this identification, the self moves from concern regarding its own self-preservation towards the preservation of the other out of a love that is in itself a recognition of unity and commonality with the other.<sup>40</sup> Just as Bonhoeffer spoke out for Jews in Germany, whom he called "the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ," and in so doing was also speaking out for humanity and thus for Germans as well, and just as the messages of Christ, Buddha, and Muhammad are open to all people, truly ethical identification must extend *beyond* one's own tribal group – be it religious, ethnic, national, socioeconomic, sexual, or otherwise – to the place of the other. It is this broader identification with the other that prophetic courage both embodies and encourages others to embody.

In times such as these when suicide-bombings and other acts of supposed martyrdom are prevalent, this point is especially important. There is no easy formula for courage, no straight path to martyrdom, and no set of principles for ethical action. The ethical problems of our day are not to be relegated to black and white categories of "good and evil," as Bonhoeffer points out at the beginning of his book. Now, at a time when many shun any talk of the "will of God," it is necessary that this concept not be relinquished so easily to those who misuse it for the simplistic justification of actions that are self-serving and which take place according to prescribed lines. No one can dictate to another what the will of God is, and any attempt to do so may be merely a pretense for masking one's own will.

It may be that the path of the individual who seeks to unite his or her will with that of God is more likely that of shame than of glory. As the hymn in Philippians says, Christ “humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place.” The way of the prophet is not to die in glory in the name of an other power relegated to the status of a principle, but to walk and die in humility, sometimes even what others would consider shame, and yet to find in that apparent shame true dignity.

What enabled Bonhoeffer to exhibit such dignity, such pride, in the shameful conditions of his cell, waiting to be executed for treason? In *Ethics* he writes of a freedom, a simplicity, and a wisdom that come from union with God’s will:

Because the simple man knows God, because God is his, he clings to the commandments, the judgments and the mercies which come from God’s mouth every day afresh. Not fettered by principles, but bound by love for God, he has been set free from the problems and conflicts of ethical decision. They no longer oppress him. He belongs simply and solely to God and to the will of God. It is precisely because he looks only to God, without any sidelong glance at the world, that he is able to look at the reality of the world freely and without prejudice. And that is how simplicity becomes wisdom. The wise man is the one who sees reality as it is, and who sees into the depths of things. That is why only that man is wise who sees reality in God.<sup>41</sup>

A love which is dynamic and in a continual process of self-emptying and creation must fit correctly for each situation. Furthermore, we see this love configured in the paradox we encountered before: “without any sidelong glance at the world... he is able to look at the reality of the world...” Such love is not easy; it requires the greatest courage. If love means emptying oneself as Jesus did, an act of kenosis, or moving out of the self and into the other until the self is no more, as Nishida describes it, then this love would be terrifying. It will not come easily, even if we decide to journey down that path, for it involves surrender and, though not death of the body, the death of the self.

### **The Cost of Courage**

This is a high form of courage, indeed, and it may not be for everyone.<sup>42</sup> It is certainly not something to be prescribed to people for immediate action, but rather something to be cultivated over a lifetime, to be neared gradually, consistently, and with patience. As Bonhoeffer writes in *The Cost of Discipleship*:

The life of discipleship can only be maintained so long as nothing is allowed to come between Christ and ourselves, neither the law, nor personal piety, nor even the world. The disciple always looks only to his master, never to Christ *and* the law, Christ *and* religion, Christ *and* the world. He avoids all such notions like the plague. Only by following Christ alone can he preserve a single eye.

Teresa fills much of *The Interior Castle* with descriptions of the sufferings the soul will endure for union with God, and Nishida is likewise candid about the difficulty of those who would journey along the path. He writes that one must follow “the most solemn internal demands”:

This is diametrically opposed to self-indulgent decadence and, contrary to what one might expect, it is an endeavor of difficulty and pain... Only when we thoroughly eliminate the subjective fancies of the self and unite with a thing can

we satisfy the true demands of the self and see the true self... Paul said, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).<sup>43</sup>

Despite its high demands, the ethical embodied in, and called for by, prophetic courage seems never to be opposed to true happiness. Both Bonhoeffer and Nishida criticize the view of ethics that bases itself on duty and laws and hence the proscription of actions, since such a view places ethical behavior in opposition to happiness. For them, to do the good is to be truly satisfied and deeply happy, despite the pain and discomfort it may entail. According to the accounts, Al-Hallaj, despite being tortured horrendously and dismembered, praised God to his last, as did Stephen, the first Christian martyr, in the book of Acts. Those who witnessed Bonhoeffer’s final days before execution later said that he was completely at peace, and his final recorded statement is the exemplification of prophetic courage: “This is the end – for me, the beginning of life.”<sup>44</sup>

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In his current studies, he is working towards a second Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies, investigating what Buddhist contemplative practices and contemporary findings in cognitive science may have to offer each other in terms of our understanding of the mind, body, and health, particularly with regard to the cultivation of compassion. He is involved in several current meditation studies in Atlanta and in Japan, and has published recent articles on the mind/body relationship in Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan medicine, the secularization and scientific study of contemplative practices, scientific research on compassion meditation, suicide and mental health in Japan, and the introduction of contemplative practices into education.

<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer points to the example of “the Pharisee”: “The Pharisee is that extremely admirable man who subordinates his entire life to his knowledge of good and evil and is as severe a judge of himself as of his neighbor to the honor of God, whom he humbly thanks for this knowledge. For the Pharisee every moment of his life becomes a situation of conflict in which he has to choose between good and evil.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 30. Bonhoeffer’s point does not regard so much the historical Pharisees of Jesus’ time, but rather an archetype for human behavior.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche. On the Piety of Unbelief* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 5. Fraser notes, “In this Bonhoeffer is simply seeking to restate what he takes to be ‘orthodox’ Lutheran theology; namely, that freedom is the very essence of salvation, and salvation is only possible ‘beyond good and evil’, beyond, that is, the devious delusions of ethical self-righteousness.” *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 33f.

<sup>5</sup> Medieval ethics is typically characterized as “heteronomous,” that is, founded upon a divine or institutional authority, rather than upon the “autonomous” basis of human rationality characteristic of modernity, exemplified by Kant.

<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 359.

<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 361.

<sup>8</sup> “Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian ‘conception’ of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins.” Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 359f.

<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 361.

<sup>11</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 381f.

<sup>12</sup> “Conscience... presupposes disunion with God and with man and marks only the disunion with himself of the man who is already disunited from the origin... For conscience life falls into two parts: what is permitted and what is forbidden.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> This view resembles Emmanuel Levinas’s view of ethics as being “for others.”

<sup>14</sup> The “Kyoto school” has been discounted by a number of American scholars for its supposed alignment with the fascist right-wing in Japan leading up to and during World War II. This is unfortunate if it has resulted in fewer people paying attention to the most important development in Japanese philosophical thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It may even be misguided and based on questionable evidence, as Graham Parkes has argued. See Graham Parkes, “The putative fascism of the Kyoto school and the political,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 47, no. 3, 1997, pp. 305-336.

<sup>15</sup> Nishida Kitaro, *An Inquiry into the Good*, transl. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 77.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, Whitehead presents a view that could be included in this study, if space permitted, since he rejects notions of “God in the image of an imperial ruler, God in the image of a personification of moral energy, [and] God in the image of an ultimate philosophical principle.” Instead, he suggests an alternative, of which he writes: “It dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world. Love neither rules, nor is it unmoved; also it is a little oblivious to morals,” and he says of God, “he is not *before* all creation, but *with* all creation.” Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (The Free Press: New York, 1978), pp. 342-3.

<sup>18</sup> Nishida writes, “God is the foundation of the universe. As said before, I do not regard God as a transcendent creator outside the universe, for God is the base of this reality. The relation between God and universe is not like the relation between an artist and the artist’s work; rather, it is the relation between a noumenon and a phenomenon. The universe is not a creation of God but a manifestation of God.” Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 158. Elsewhere he writes, “What is the nature of God, who in this sense is both the unifier of the universe and the foundation of reality? That which governs spirit must be the laws of spirit... a single unifying power underlies these phenomena. If we call this unifying power personality, then God is the great personality at the base of the universe... The universe is an expression of God’s personality.” *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>19</sup> Such as in Rahner’s concept of prevenient grace. Rahner writes, “Our whole spiritual life is lived in the realm of the salvific will of God, of ... prevenient grace, ... an element within ... consciousness ... which remains anonymous as long as it is not interpreted from without by the message of faith. Even when [one] does not “know” it, ... [one] always lives consciously in the presence of the God of eternal life.” Quoted in Anne Carr, “Karl Rahner” in Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, eds, *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 379f.

<sup>20</sup> Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 145. He also writes, “to actualize and fulfill our personality means to become one with this underlying power.” *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> For a recent investigation of how Mahayana Buddhism addresses questions regarding dualism and the mind/body relationship, see Chikako Ozawa-de Silva and Brendan Ozawa-de Silva, “Mind/Body Theory and Practice in Tibetan Medicine and Buddhism,” *Body & Society*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2011): 95 -119.

<sup>22</sup> Chikako Ozawa-de Silva, “Beyond the Body/Mind? Japanese Contemporary Thinkers on Alternative Sociologies of the Body” in *Body & Society*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2002): 21-38.

<sup>23</sup> Nishida writes, “It is only when we exhaust the intellect and feeling that the true demand of personality-sincerity arises in us; it is only when we exhaust all of the power of the self, when the consciousness of the self nearly disappears and one is not conscious of the self, that we see the activity of the true personality.” Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 133f.

<sup>24</sup> David A. Dilworth, “Introduction: Nishida’s Critique of the Religious Consciousness,” in Nishida Kitaro, *Last Writings. Nothingness and the Religious World View* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 12f.

<sup>25</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, 6.4.1-2. She concludes the following chapter with the paragraph: “Well to get back to the courage that is necessary, does it seem to you that this is so trivial a thing? For it truly seems that because the soul loses its senses, and doesn’t understand why, it is separated from the body. It’s necessary that He who gives everything else give the courage also. You will say that this fear is well paid. So do I. May it please His Majesty to give us the courage so that we may merit to serve Him, amen.” *Ibid.*, 6.5.12.

<sup>26</sup> “This characterization of Teresa as a prophet would seem complimentary, and indeed after her death it was adduced as evidence for her canonization. Yet in mentioning

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prophecy, which from those not already designated as saintly the Inquisition defined as a form of blasphemy, it accused Teresa of heresy.” Carole Slade, *St. Teresa of Avila. Author of a Heroic Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> Teresa of Avila, *Foundations*, 8.7, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Teresa of Avila, *Testimony*, 1.26, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> As William Desmond writes, there is a being encouraged that always comes before the courage and that underlies the courage. The words of Nishida and Teresa point to this primary encouragement as coming from God. They also point to the possibility that union with the will of God might involve, in Desmond’s language, the *conatus essendi* falling back into the *passio essendi*, that is, the individual’s courage coming perfectly into line with the divine encouragement.

<sup>30</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil. Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 34. Schimmel calls this the “secret of the *oratio infusa*: God’s address to man precedes man’s calling to God (as God’s every activity precedes human activity).”

<sup>31</sup> Robert C. Neville, “The Tough Part of the Mind of Christ,” sermon given at the Boston University School of Theology matriculation ceremony, Spring 2001.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 3-5.

<sup>37</sup> In his chief work on ethics, H.H. the XIV Dalai Lama of Tibet, Tenzin Gyatso, writes of the foundational nature of compassion for ethics in a way that resonates very much with Bonhoeffer’s concept of being “for others.” H.H. the Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Trade, 2001). In a talk delivered at Emory University on March 22, 2007, on the Dalai Lama’s view of compassion as a basis for ethics, Geshe Thupten Jinpa, a leading Buddhist scholar and long-time interpreter for the Dalai Lama, began his remarks by noting that unlike western ethics, which is based upon a fundamental division of self and other, the Dalai Lama’s position must be understood within the context of a tradition (in this case Mahayana Buddhism) that sees self and other as interdependent and connected. Therefore benefit to oneself is never completely separate from benefit to others; and harm to oneself is not completely separate from harm to others. For a recent article on the relationship between compassion and ethics described by the Dalai Lama, including recent interdisciplinary and scientific research on the topic, see Brendan Ozawa-de Silva, Brooke Dodson-Lavelle, Charles Raison and Lobsang Tenzin Negi, “Compassion and Ethics: Scientific and Practical Approaches to the Cultivation of Compassion as a Foundation for Ethical

Subjectivity and Well-Being,” *Journal of Healthcare, Science and the Humanities* vol. 2, no. 1 (2012):145-161.

<sup>38</sup> It is informative that in the Buddhist tradition, in those cases when violating an established ethical norm is dictated by attention to the very real and concrete circumstances at hand, the agent of such an action must take full responsibility on him- or herself for the consequences of the deed. Peter Harvey writes: “A final application of the concept [of skilful means] is in the ethical sphere, referring to the idea that Buddhist ethical precepts may sometimes be broken if this is an unavoidable part of a compassionately motivated act to help someone. Thus the Mahayana has a greater tendency than the Theravada to adapt the precepts flexibly to circumstances, though such an approach is not completely absent in the Theravada. Thus, in recent years, when the monastery of the Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah was overrun by a swarm of red ants, causing misery to all, he finally allowed the army in to spray insecticides. When the other monks questioned him on the acceptability of this, he simply said ‘I take full responsibility – don’t you worry about it!’, i.e. he was willing to suffer the karmic results of an act which allowed normal monastic life to resume.” Harvey goes on to say, “Mahayana texts differ on the degree of permissiveness allowed to Bodhisattvas.” What seems crucial here is that the act is motivated out of great compassion, and that the bodhisattva is willing to accept full responsibility for act, even if it means that he or she will be reborn in hell. Thus, there should be no room for using this line of thinking to “justify” one’s own actions that are harmful to others. This is a subtle and difficult point, but I am trying to present in this paper that it is precisely this kind of increased attention to such subtlety, which requires courage, discernment, and brutal honesty about one’s motives, all cultivated over a lifetime, that is called for. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 134f.

<sup>39</sup> This is shown in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Nishida writes, “Fundamentally, the center of the self is not limited to the interior of the individual: the self of a mother is found in her child, and the self of a loyal subject is found in the monarch. As one’s personality becomes greater, the demands of the self become increasingly social.” Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 139.

<sup>40</sup> The idea of an ethics based on the “other” instead of the self has been taken up most notably by Emmanuel Levinas, and it is interesting that many of his conclusions resemble the thoughts outlined in Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*.

<sup>41</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 70.

<sup>42</sup> We might call prophetic courage alternatively the courage of the saint, if we understand “saint” as Panikkar writes: “God calls everybody to be divinely perfect, i.e. holy. Each person receives his personal vocation to sanctity. But only the saint answers fully to that divine call and freely accepts, wills, loves to be this living Temple of the Holy. Each saint is, in consequence, a kind of Revelation of God, he has a message to deliver, though not always with words, he is an instrument of the Divine, he is the Man (and Woman) in whom God, who is Love, finds not only His resting but also His acting place. True sanctity is not so much God-realisation on Man’s part, as Man-realisation on God’s part.” Raimundo Panikkar, “Preface” in Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, transl. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), p. xii.



<sup>43</sup> Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 134f.

<sup>44</sup> Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, eds, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (1995), p. 44.