



BRILL

JOURNAL OF REFORMED  
THEOLOGY 12 (2018) 127–142

JOURNAL  
OF REFORMED  
THEOLOGY

brill.com/jrt

# Emptiness and Presence in a Non-substantialist Formulation of Trinitarian Doctrine

*A Triologue of Madhyamika, Abe, and Torrance*

*Chris Kang*

Singapore Institute of Technology, Singapore

*chriskang.phd@gmail.com*

## Abstract

This paper examines the ideas of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and presence (*svabhāva*) in the discourses of Indian Madhyamika thinkers in comparison with the work of prominent Kyoto School philosopher and key figure in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Masao Abe (1915–2006). Madhyamika's negative dialectic and Abe's oeuvre are applied to the trinitarian theology of Scottish theologian and churchman Thomas Forsyth Torrance (1913–2007), even as Torrance's oeuvre is allowed to recast and illuminate notions of emptiness in light of the trinitarian faith. In this movement of ideas, the dynamic interpretations and reinterpretations of the doctrine of emptiness by Indian thinkers are brought to bear on Abe's thought and, in turn, on Torrance's trinitarian theology. In this way, the metaphysical basis of trinitarian doctrine is drawn into sharper focus even as an emptiness-based, non-substantialist, onto-relational theology of the Trinity emerges as a potentially viable account of the nature of the triune Godhead.

## Keywords

emptiness – two truths – trinitarian – personhood – nothingness

• • •

Form is emptiness and emptiness is form.

Prajñāpāramitā-hrdayā sūtra<sup>1</sup>

• • •

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1:1<sup>2</sup>

• •  
•

## 1 Introduction

In this article, I will sketch a history of the idea of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and presence (*svabhāva*) within Indian Buddhism and critically engage with the modern Japanese reformulation of emptiness as seen in the work of Kyoto school philosopher and interfaith proponent Masao Abe. I will introduce the theology of the Trinity specifically as formulated by Thomas Forsyth Torrance, a noted theologian, churchman, and student of the Protestant theological giant Karl Barth. Through a critical hermeneutical lens, I will engage in a Buddhist-Christian dialogue of sorts by transposing the deontology of Buddhist emptiness into the metaphysic that underpins the interior relationality of the three persons of the triune Godhead. In so doing, I will attempt to draw the contours of a philosophical journey through the soteriological metaphysics of emptiness in order that a fresh, metaphysically non-substantialist theology of the triune God that is acceptable to Christians may be viably constructed. Issues of personhood and personality loom large in such discussion, as does the nature of relationality between the three persons of the Trinity. By viewing these issues through the lenses of the Madhyamikas and Abe, I hope to present a fresh angle to the doctrine of the Trinity as explicated by Torrance. In this dialogical space, I hope to speak into being a way of approaching the triune God of faith that

1 Taken from *Prajñāpāramitā-hrdayām: The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom*, ed. Edward Conze and trans. Anandajoti Bhikkhu. [ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Texts-and-Translations/Short-Pieces-in-Sanskrit/Prajnaparamita-Hrdaya.pdf](http://ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Texts-and-Translations/Short-Pieces-in-Sanskrit/Prajnaparamita-Hrdaya.pdf).

2 Taken from *The Bible* (NKJV) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 1220.

is decoupled from metaphysical substantialism to underscore a relational and non-essentialist mode of comprehending the divine mystery. In so doing, my secondary motivation is to offer to Christian believers the fruit of my own personal journey of theologizing faith into the mystery of the God in Whom we believe—a journey however imperfect, faltering, and ongoing.

## 2 Historical Overview of Emptiness and Presence

The Buddhist doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) with its deep implications for Buddhist soteriological praxis in formal meditation and everyday life justifiably occupies a central place in Buddhist philosophical discourse. While ostensibly a counterpoint to the metaphysical notion of intrinsic existence or presence (*svabhāva*), the notion of emptiness is nonetheless subject to multiple and often competing interpretations throughout Buddhist history. Historically, the concept of emptiness traces its origin to the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna (?150–250 CE), whose magnum opus the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* set the scene for centuries of Buddhist philosophical polemics of the same.<sup>3</sup>

Kalupahana in his study of Pali Buddhism traces the root of Nāgārjuna's intellectual innovation to the *Kaccāyanagotta sutta* from the *Samyutta-nikāya* or collected discourses of the Buddha.<sup>4</sup> He argued that Nāgārjuna, rather than espousing a heretical doctrine divorced from the authentic Buddhist tradition of the early texts, sought to reclaim and return Buddhist philosophical thinking to its original insight of dependent arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) and no-self (*anattā*). Whatever the merits of Kalupahana's argument, it is apparent that the principle and concept of dependent arising was at the heart of Nāgārjuna's articulation of emptiness. Whereas the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta* emphasized the twelve links of dependent arising as experiential and soteriological process, Nāgārjuna saw dependent arising as a pervasive principle of contingency and dependency that applied both to self and to phenomena. For Nāgārjuna, reality could be articulated in terms of the two truths: absolute truth (*paramārtha-satya*) and conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*). Absolute truth is the emptiness of inherent existence of all physical and mental phenomena; conventional truth is the contingent, dependently arisen nature of these same phenomena.

3 Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*. Translated by Jay L. Garfield (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 87.

4 David Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (Albany: State University of New York, 1986), 1–27.

They are like two views into the same things—seeing phenomena as ultimately empty yet dependently-arisen conventional realities. Thus, emptiness does not equate to nihilism but to contingent existence in terms of causal dependence, mereological dependence, and dependence on a cognizing mind.<sup>5</sup>

Out of this seminal insight of Nāgārjuna came numerous attempts by generations of Buddhist thinkers to explicate and flesh out what Nāgārjuna might have meant in his often cryptic statements of philosophical enquiry. What has flowed from this stream of intellectual and spiritual inquiry beginning with Nāgārjuna through his successors in India, China, and Tibet, and more recently to modern revisionist (albeit arguably nationalistic) versions of the concept of *śūnyatā* in the works of Japanese philosophers such as Kitaro Nishida, Keiji Nishitani, and Masao Abe, is a veritable matrix of ideas that profoundly challenges a substantialist metaphysic of person and reality.<sup>6</sup>

### 3 Madhyamika: The Middle Way

Comprehensive reviews of the development of the idea of emptiness and its many shifts of meaning in Mahāyāna Buddhism in India, China, and Japan can be found in Ornatowski and more recently in Liu and Berger.<sup>7</sup> While the term *śūnyatā* appeared in the early Pali Buddhist texts as *suññatā*, it had a meaning quite different than the one that developed later in the Prajñāpāramitā-sutras between 100 BCE and 100 CE in India. The idea of the non-self (*anattā*) nature of the human personality was a seminal and distinctive insight of the historical Buddha Gotama. A parallel term in the Pali suttas that corresponded to no-self (*anattā*) was emptiness (*śūnyatā*), referring to the fact that within the

5 See, e.g., Jay L. Garfield, “Madhyamaka, Nihilism, and the Emptiness of Emptiness,” in *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, ed. JeeLoo Liu and Douglas L. Berger (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 44–54; and Guy Newland and Tom J.F. Tillemans, “An Introduction to Conventional Truth,” in *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. The Cowherds (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–22.

6 See Yasuo Deguchi, “Nishitani on Emptiness and Nothingness,” in *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, ed. JeeLoo Liu and Douglas L. Berger (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 300–326; and John W.M. Krummel, “Aontology and the Issue of Being and Nothing in Kitaro Nishida,” in *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, ed. JeeLoo Liu and Douglas L. Berger (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 263–283.

7 For a clear though dated review, see Gregory K. Ornatowski, “Transformations of Emptiness on the Idea of Sunyata and the Thought of Abe and the Kyoto School of Philosophy,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 92–115. A more recent discussion can be found in JeeLoo Liu and Douglas L. Berger, “Introduction,” in *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, ed. JeeLoo Liu and Douglas L. Berger (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), xi–xxx.

psychophysical composition of the human being was to be found no enduring core or identity. Rather, the twin idea of no-self (*anattā*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*) pointed to the dynamic processes and elements of experience aggregating to project an impression of a permanent self that functioned empirically. At its core, however, such a self was ultimately baseless and non-substantial—it never existed.

From its initial conception as non-self, *śūnyatā* as a central theme in the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras came to denote the unreal, non-substantial, non-essential nature of all things including the elemental qualities that composed the individual psychophysical being. According to the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras (and the Madhyamika thinkers that followed), these elements—form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), compositional factors (*sankhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*)—are themselves essentially essenceless, devoid of any selfhood or inherent existence. Thus, what pervaded the person and all phenomena that made up or were external to the person was the sheer lack of inherent existence termed emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Such emptiness was given the descriptor ‘middle way’ to denote the fact that the notion of emptiness transcended the ontological extremes of inherent existence on one hand and non-existence on the other.

As pioneer of the Madhyamika school of Buddhist thought, Nāgārjuna made use of a negative dialectic aimed at deconstructing opposing viewpoints on existence and non-existence, without asserting a theoretical or ontological position in their place. Nāgārjuna’s *reductio ad absurdum* argument made use of inferential logic to dismantle all essentialist views of reality and to reveal the fundamental lack of inherent existence (or emptiness) at the heart of things. But this emptiness was not itself an affirmative theory of reality per se but an ontological absence that made its appearance once the veil of cognitive distortions had been removed. As such, once the negative dialectic of Nāgārjuna had done its work of deconstruction, what remained as the bare and final status of all phenomena was this absence that he labelled ‘emptiness.’ For him, the non-affirming negation that was emptiness was the final mode of being of all persons and phenomena. This was Nāgārjuna’s notion of absolute truth.<sup>8</sup>

Nāgārjuna equated emptiness with dependent arising—the utter contingency of all things wherein each factor of existence was dependent on other factors outside itself. This was such that without causes and conditions constituting the existence of every phenomena, such phenomena would not have existed. Contingent phenomenality is thus Nāgārjuna’s conventional truth

8 Garfield, “Madhyamaka,” 44–54.

although *saṃvṛti*, the Sanskrit term for ‘conventional,’ also implies conventionality (as in worldly linguistic conventions) and concealment.<sup>9</sup> Conventional truths are said to be concealer truths in the sense that while relatively true, they conceal something that is of deeper import and ultimately true. In his seminal and influential work, the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*, Nāgārjuna set forth a *reductio* argument that deontologized various categories of Buddhist doctrine such as four noble truths and five aggregates into their ultimate mode of existence as sheer emptiness. In doing so, he had a clear soteriological purpose in mind. For Nāgārjuna, insightful realization of emptiness was a quintessential soteriological strategy and crucial to liberation from the anguish and dissatisfaction that marked all of existence.

Nāgārjuna’s intellectual successors, such as Buddhapālita (470–550 CE), Bhāvaviveka (500–578 CE), and Chandrakirti (600–650 CE) continued to explicate the true meaning of emptiness in their quest for philosophical and soteriological certainty.<sup>10</sup> For Buddhapālita and Chandrakirti, the latter of whom pioneered the Prāsangika or Consequentialist school, all phenomena were established in their existence by conceptual designation upon a valid basis, that is, language and conception played a constitutive role in the existence of all things. Both these thinkers saw reality as ultimately constructed by language and conception, with mental imputation levelled upon valid bases that themselves were nominally existent at every turn. In other words, their metaphysical position was that of pure non-realism, specifically of the nominalist kind.

For Bhāvaviveka, pioneer of the Svātantrika or Autonomous school, all phenomena were established in their existence by both conceptual designation and an underlying identity belonging to the phenomenon in question. Thus, while language and conception played a key constitutive role in establishing the existence of phenomena, they alone were insufficient to account fully for phenomenal existents. An ontological core to phenomena must also be present to account fully for such. In other words, Bhāvaviveka’s position can be described as one of qualified non-realism—a view of reality that was different from the one espoused by Buddhapālita and Chandrakirti.

What the preceding discussion meant was that first, the corollary status of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*) found its instantiation in the parallel discourses on emptiness of inherent existence in diverse thinkers such as Nāgārjuna, Buddhapālita, Chandrakirti, and Bhāvaviveka; and second,

9 Newland and Tillemans, “Introduction,” 13.

10 Geshe Tashi Tsering, *Relative Truth, Ultimate Truth* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 99–102.

such variation in Buddhist understandings of emptiness and intrinsic existence offered a rich source of ideas for theologizing on the nature of persons and relationships in the Trinity of the Bible.

#### 4 Masao Abe's Revision of Emptiness

Abe's oeuvre of emptiness struck a metaphysical and existential tone that departed from more traditional Madhyamika articulations of the same, much as pioneers of the Kyoto school of Japanese philosophy Kitaro and Nishitani did in their distinctive ways.<sup>11</sup> In general, East Asian formulations of emptiness as nothingness speak of "absence of determination, of designation, of limitation, and of boundary," and thus as essentially "formlessness" and "a paradigm of ethical practice."<sup>12</sup> Abe eschewed both the Pali tradition's emphasis on psychosoteriological release and later Chinese and Indo-Tibetan traditions' focus on quasi-ontological speculations, opting instead for an existentially and metaphysically rich discourse on emptiness. This Abe did by probing the experiential ground of existence rather than by analysing the factors and elements of psychological experience (as in the earlier Pali Buddhist tradition) or syllogistically splitting hairs about the ontological status of persons and phenomena (as in the later Chinese and Indo-Tibetan traditions). That said, such later Mahāyāna speculative enquiries nevertheless sought to reach a correct view of reality not for its own sake, epistemologically significant though it was, but for a soteriological purpose that lay at the heart of all Buddhist spiritual praxis. Again, Abe himself cited Nāgārjuna several times in his discussions on nothingness and absolute nothingness, suggesting a line of influence from Nāgārjuna to Abe.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as Ornatowski appraised, Nāgārjuna's notion of emptiness was clearly different from Abe's nothingness. Abe's portrayal of emptiness spoke of the fundamental reality of human existence as a spontaneous field of openness and infinite possibilities. For Abe, this open field was not ontologically fixed or substantial, but the dynamic activity of an entityless ground of existence that made all things and events possible. In line with traditional Zen terminology, Abe described emptiness as the "ground beneath one's feet"—a phrase that pointed to the intimate yet non-personal nature of such existential ground.

11 See, e.g., Deguchi, "Nishitani," 300–326; and Krummel, "Aontology," 263–283.

12 Liu and Berger, *Nothingness*, xxi.

13 Ornatowski, "Transformations," 92.

Ornatowski outlined four major differences between Abe's conceptualization of emptiness and Nāgārjuna's. First, Abe used the ideas of nothingness and absolute nothingness (in line with his mentor Nishitani) to counter what he saw as the major philosophical problem of the twentieth century—nihilism. This he did by proposing the idea of absolute nothingness of emptiness as moving beyond the relative nothingness of Nietzsche. For Abe, absolute nothingness transcended both being and nonbeing of Platonic philosophy to result in an emptiness that was at once a positive fullness. Second, Abe tended to describe his ideas of emptiness in positive terms such as 'fullness,' 'potentiality,' and 'wondrous being,' reflecting more of Hua-Yen/Kegon and Ch'an/Zen thought in their world-affirmation than those of Nāgārjuna and his Indian successors in their otherworldliness. Third, Abe was more concerned about constructing a viable metaphysical and existential theory of emptiness than he was in providing a soteriological solution to the human condition. This was unlike Nāgārjuna, Buddhapālita, Chandrakīrti, and Bhāvaviveka, who sought first and foremost soteriological exit from existential suffering and, secondarily, an intellectually tenable articulation of that very soteriology. Finally, Abe tended to equate emptiness with suchness (*tathātā*), a term that connoted the 'as-it-is-ness' of all things in all their individual uniqueness and particularity. In equating emptiness with suchness, Abe followed the Yogacara, Hua-Yen, and Ch'an schools of thought in valorizing and propounding the positive original essence of all things in their totality and purity. In so doing, Abe departed from Nāgārjuna and his successors, for whom suchness was understood as nothing more than a negation of the inherent existence of all things. In short, Abe's view of emptiness was a fully positive one that affirmed all things in their suchness, giving absolute nothingness an absolute and universal nature that made it undifferentiable from the Being of Western philosophy.

That said, Abe through his reformulation of emptiness provided an intellectual challenge to trinitarian theology by virtue of its kenotic implications. This Abe did by challenging Christians to think of God as dynamically full and infinitely self-emptying in his nature and action. Abe drew upon the biblical notion of *kenosis* as found in Paul's epistle to the Philippians.<sup>14</sup> In Abe's view, such a kenotic or self-emptying God essentially emptied himself in the act of creation and redemption, where history as it unfolded was nothing other than the totality of God's self-emptying that left nothing behind. In other words, God became fully immanent in history in the complete outpouring of himself. Abe

---

14 See Phil 2:7, in which the verb *kenōo* was used. Cf. *The Bible* (New King James Version) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).



saw the self-emptying *qua* immanence of God as affirming the open field of spontaneity where all possibilities were to be found. In this sense, Abe's kenotic reframing of the nature and activity of God found some resonance with process theology and kenotic theologies of Christianity, but it was at odds with mainstream theology that maintained a clear distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity of the Godhead. It is to an example of mainstream theology of the Trinity that we now turn our attention.

## 5 The Trinitarian Faith

Thomas Forsyth Torrance (1913–2007) was a prominent theologian of the trinitarian doctrine and a well-respected churchman who served as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland from 1976 to 1977. Torrance explicated his theology of the triune God in a number of works that advocated what he called an onto-relational view of personhood, specifically as it pertained to the nature of the three persons of the Godhead. Torrance's articulation of the mutually indwelling relationships between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in both the immanent and economic Trinity is salient to the present discussion and will be explicated.<sup>15</sup>

Deddo expounded on the realist and onto-relational frame of Torrance's incarnational and trinitarian theology, explicating onto-relational implications for the attributes and glory of God, pastoral ministry, humanity's participation in things divine, Christ's vicarious humanity, and the personalizing and humanizing work of Christ.<sup>16</sup> Focusing on the realism and onto-relationalism of Torrance's theology, it is apparent that the supreme objectivity of the triune Godhead was never in question. Each of the three persons of the Godhead was real, truly existent, and interlocked in a self-giving, other-filling dance of love that made each of them who they were—Father, Son, and Spirit. For Torrance, the onto-relationalism of the triune Being meant that the Father was Father only because of his dynamic outpouring into the Son and Spirit, just as the Son was Son only because of his self-same dynamic outpouring into the Father and Spirit. By the same logic, the Spirit was Spirit only by virtue of his unreserved

15 For a classic and seminal discussion on the Christian Trinity rooted in the Bible and writings of the early church fathers, see Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1993).

16 Gary Deddo. "The Realist and Onto-relational Frame of T.F. Torrance's Incarnational and Trinitarian Theology," *Theology in Scotland* 16 (2009): 105–133.

dynamic outpouring into both the Father and the Son. In such manner, all three persons of the Godhead were established just as they were by virtue of their relationships of love one for another, not by way of any substantial difference in identity between them.

This divine circle of love was a plenitude of self-emptying and other-filling, where each person of the Trinity made the other persons the center of their life around whom each would orbit with unfathomable love. Theologically, this was termed *perichoresis* (from Greek) or circumincession, a concept derived from the church fathers. The very personhood of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit was none other than the totality of the relationships one had with the other two. In other words, the person of the Father was constituted by the totality of his relationships with the Son and Spirit, just as the person of the Son was constituted likewise by the totality of his relationships with the Father and Spirit. In the same vein, the person of the Spirit was constituted by the totality of his relationships with both the Father and the Son. In a mysterious way, one could say that the three persons of the triune God did not exist inherently or substantially from their own sides, with each one cut off from and independent of the other two.

## 6 Dialogue with Emptiness

Seen in this light, for Torrance, it could be said that the three persons of the triune Godhead—Father, Son, and Spirit—did truly exist and were eternally real, even as they were constituted as persons by the eternal relationships between each one of them and the other two. In an interesting twist, the realist and ontorelational metaphysic underpinning the triune being seems to resonate with the anti-realist and nominal metaphysic of Indian Madhyamika philosophy. In the first instance, the three persons of the Godhead, while truly existing, were not substantially or inherently so given that their existence was established by the interflowing relationships between them. Yet, according to Torrance, they were nothing less than real and personal for their very personhood was nothing other than the dynamic reality of relationships obtaining between and in essence constituting them. As such, Torrance would disavow any suggestion of the three persons of the Trinity as being nominally constructed or dependently designated, as per the deontology of the Middle Way Consequentialists (Prāsaṅgika Madhyamikas).

For Middle Way proponents, the substantialist and essentialist undertones of the personhood of the triune God would seem highly problematic. And in the case of the Middle Way Consequentialists, the realism of God's personhood

would also be deemed erroneous and false. But as I would suggest in this article, the perceived and apparent incommensurability between Nāgārjunian and Torrance metaphysics is not inevitable. The antirealist critique and dialectical deconstruction of Nāgārjuna and his successors could be seen as pertaining to all there is in creation, the created order with all its phenomenal multiplicities and ontological levels of reality. From the sensorial realm to the abstract realm of ideas and meditative absorptions in all their depth, and even to the ultimate sphere of emptiness itself, there is nothing that is not empty of inherent existence. This is classic Nāgārjuna and unlikely to meet with opposition from Torrance, in so far as the created order is concerned. Thus, for both Nāgārjuna and Torrance, we can surmise that a contextual nominalist ontology need not be a point of contention. Rather, a nominalist view of created existence would perhaps bear testimony to the eloquence of God, who spoke the universe into being. While Madhyamikas might attribute the existence of phenomena to the process of dependent designation via language and conception of sentient beings, the ultimate source of phenomenal existence according to the Bible is none other than God himself. From a biblical perspective, it is possible to argue that whatever imputative capacity sentient creatures possess came first from the dynamic eloquence of God, who spoke sentient creatures (and human beings in particular) into existence, and whose authority and power was vested in humans to name (and thus define) all other created entities (such as flora and fauna).

As for the heavenly realm of the triune Godhead beyond the phenomenal (creation) and the noumenal (emptiness), the logic of emptiness does not fully apply, nor can it. This is because the absolute interiority of the Trinity lies beyond the ken of deconstructive inferential reasoning performed by and within the locale of human consciousness. While this point underscores an apparent similarity to Nāgārjuna's notion of absolute truth (*paramārthasatya*) in that the Trinity's absolute interiority and Nagarjuna's absolute truth of emptiness both defy linguistic and conceptual analysis, the similarity ends there. The mystery of the triune Godhead as creator not only transcends human linguistic and conceptual analysis, it can never be realized by unmediated trans-conceptual insight stemming from the individual alone, however well-trained. In contrast, emptiness as absolute truth remains ascertainable by trans-conceptual meditative insight, despite variant understandings within diverse Buddhist schools on how such ascertainment takes place and on the role of conceptual insight in this meditative process. For the Trinity, the only means of knowing about and knowing God is the revelatory breakthrough of the divine into history, which can never be achieved or contained by human performance of any kind. In verbalizing and articulating this divine mystery,

the human organs of thought and speech are guided and led by the divine inbreaking to speak grace and truth to a world fallen, broken, and deceived.

## 7 An Emptiness-Based, Onto-Relational Theology?

Despite this limitation, it remains possible to argue for a human conception and languaging of the divine mystery that is nonetheless shot through with emptiness. What this entails is the epistemological claim that while the essence of God's triune being is beyond human linguistic-conceptual ken, the human attempt to conceptualize and verbalize the Godhead results in this-worldly understandings of God that are ultimately empty of inherent existence. That is, whatever or whoever we conceive God to be, and however sophisticated our conceptions are from their own side, all these conceptions are neither ultimately existing nor self-authenticating in their own right. They are but part of the linguistic and conceptual flux involving multiple parties (that in themselves cannot be reified) acting in a dynamic field of unbounded intersubjectivity.

Abe's notion of emptiness as the dynamic open field of spontaneity at the heart of all things, which is none other than the contingent appearance of all things, strikes a chord here.<sup>17</sup> In emphasizing the dynamism, openness, and spontaneity intrinsic to emptiness, Abe offers a fresh albeit Buddhist-inspired perspective on the creative eloquence of God that dynamically and unimpededly speaks creation into being. In other words, following Abe, it is possible for us to understand God's creative power in terms of the dynamism, openness, and spontaneity of his creative eloquence. In this respect, the dialectic of emptiness *does* apply to all our human theologizing of the Godhead on this side of heaven, so to speak. Given this, to speak about the triune God in a realist and onto-relational way, as Torrance had done, is thus empty of self-authenticating existence apart from the matrix of ideas and words used by verbalizing, meaning-making humans to define God.

That said, it does not necessarily mean that the realist and onto-relational Godhead of Torrance is nothing other than a figment of human linguistic and conceptual concoction. What it does mean is that human intersubjectivity is inextricably tied to the very conception of God, no matter who, what, or how God is in his intrinsic reality. In Abe's estimation, the Godhead is kenotic in

---

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion on Abe's notion of emptiness in his own words, see Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 50–57.

that he empties himself completely into the very content and trajectory of human history, leaving nothing of himself behind. Thus, from Abe's perspective of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), God irrevocably self-empties into contingent human history that is none other than a dynamic open field of spontaneity—the self-emptying of God pours into and constitutes the sheer emptiness of the world. Yet, against Abe, even as God empties himself into contingent creation and history, he does not exhaust himself, for his plenitude infinitely supplies and abides without diminution.

In a more radical vein, Nāgārjuna offers his notion of conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) to describe the contingent and constructed nature of all phenomena. For Nāgārjuna, any phenomenon that exists is a conventional truth, a contingent and constructed reality—existing in space-time yet not in isolation from other phenomenon, but constituted by conceptual and linguistic activity. In other words, every conventional existent is contingently constructed by conceptual and linguistic activity in the communal matrix of intersubjective meanings and narratives. Thus, every conventional existent is said to be ultimately empty of inherent existence—that is, every conventional existent is pervaded by the absolute truth of emptiness. Whatever is contingent and constructed is empty, and whatever is empty is constructed and exists contingently.

Yet, for the Godhead, the picture is somewhat different from a biblical point of view. While God's absolute nature can be said to be one of emptiness of inherent existence in that it transcends conceptual and linguistic constructs (as does Nāgārjuna's absolute truth), he nevertheless exists as more than mere concept and word (unlike Nāgārjuna's conventional truth). Using Abe's formulation, God empties but does not exhaust himself in contingent creation and history. In other words, I am arguing that words and ideas in themselves do not constitute all that God is, but are nonetheless inextricable from how we see God and from who or what we think God is, standing as we are on this side of heaven. In this sense, I suggest that Nāgārjuna and his successors, particularly the Autonomous School of Middle Way philosophy, can teach us to theologize God as both intrinsically real and self-authenticating beyond language-conception, yet as inescapably apprehensible by human consciousness through the matrix of language-conception. The closer our human words align with and reflect the image of the divine Word that comes to and into us through supernatural revelation, the more we are able to apprehend the nature and reality of God as he is. Thus, the triune God can be described as empty yet full, transparent yet present.

In light of the preceding discussion, we can now theologially reflect on how the realist and onto-relational triune being of God can be conceptually deconstructed. Taking an emptiness-based, non-substantialist, onto-relational

approach, we can articulate how the Father, Son, and Spirit is each constituted from the perspective of God-in-himself. All three persons of the Godhead are constituted by the sum total of interrelationships obtaining among them, upon which is designated the personal appellations 'Father,' 'Son,' and 'Spirit.' In realist terms, each of the three persons of the Godhead is indivisibly real and indisputably objective regardless of the human perceiver and the human act of designation. This is certainly true when considering the immanent Trinity, the eternal God-in-himself whom no human language and conception can adequately and unmistakably portray.

But when considering the economic Trinity, especially as God relates to humanity and as human consciousness attempts to grasp God-in-himself and God-for-us, the realist metaphysic starts to break down. This is particularly so in the face of the contingent and dependently designated nature of our conceptual articulation of God. From the perspective of created humanity, a metaphysically nonrealist triune God becomes a more logically viable and epistemologically modest way of looking at God.

Onto-rationally, the identity and personhood of each of the three persons of the Godhead is spoken into being within the one Being of God. Father is eternally Father only in relation to the Son as Son and Spirit as Spirit by virtue of the eloquent designation of God himself upon himself. The dynamic eloquence of Father, Son, and Spirit in mutual indwelling and spontaneous joy call forth each divine person's existence in the eternal dance of love, even as Father, Son, and Spirit are transtemporally distinct in their unique personhood constituted by the intrinsic creative eloquence of God-in-himself.

From the perspective of created humanity, though, our conceptual and linguistic imputation of 'Father,' 'Son,' and 'Spirit' using common terms of our human collective understanding of these designations plays a key role in constituting the reality of the triune God for us. In this sense, our human conception of God is based on our consensual understanding of the relationships among the three persons of the Godhead and the shared intersubjective designation of these same three persons. Thus, the triune God is made real for us as we engage in the process of designating him with and through the shared matrix of language and conception that engulfs us. Taken together, the two perspectives of God-in-himself and God-for-us are both necessary for and intertwined in our feeble human apprehension and understanding of the triune Godhead. Such apprehension and understanding are, in the final analysis, necessarily constrained and imperfect on this side of eternity.

## 8 Conclusion

In this journey of ideas through Nāgārjuna, Madhyamika, Abe, and Torrance, we have traversed a fluid territory of seemingly incommensurable ontologies, especially between variants of Asian Buddhist philosophy and the theological memes of biblical doctrine. The concept of emptiness through its multiple iterations and historical variations has a salient contribution to make to the theologizing of the nature of the triune being in their tripersonal relationality. In this article, we have explicated emptiness as the absence of inherent existence in its Consequentialist and Autonomy variations from India, and as the dynamic ground of open spontaneity underlying all phenomena, a philosophical construct from postwar Japan.

I have argued that by plumbing beyond the apparent metaphysical incommensurability of Nāgārjunian emptiness and Torrancian Trinity, it is possible to recognize a deeper concordance by distinguishing the temporal realm of the created from the eternal realm of the Creator. In so far as the created order is concerned, radical contingency and nominalism prevails. The process of nominalization and designation by language and conception constitutes phenomenal universe in all its multiplicity and diversity. Yet, this ground of nominal contingency is dependent upon and finds its source in the eternal Creator. Here, the dynamic eloquence of the triune God speaks the created universe with all its life forms into being. The naming and defining power of humans rests ultimately on the power of the divine Word to speak all into existence. Thus, the power of human language and conception to define all phenomena comes not from themselves but from the divine speaker whose Word calls forth all temporal existence.

As for the absolute interiority of the Godhead himself, neither human language nor conception, including Nāgārjunian deconstructive analysis, can penetrate its surface, let alone its depths. In the realm of the Godhead transcending human designation, the existence of God is self-authenticating and self-establishing by virtue of each person of the triune Being speaking the other into existence. As such, each person of the triune Godhead is dependently designated by the other two, even as each pours his love out fully for the other in a selfless act of *kenosis* within that unfathomable dance of love. In essence, God is love. God is eloquent. And this eloquent loving God is relational within his interior triune being as well as relational with all that he has created.

To the extent that this triune God is relational, dynamic, and eloquent, to that extent can we declare him to be 'empty of inherent existence.' For the triune God, his 'emptiness' is more in accord with the Middle Way Autonomy sense than the Consequentialist sense. Given this, what we have is thus

a nascent theology of the Trinity that is emptiness-based, non-substantialist, and onto-relational inspired by the creative triologue of Madhyamika, Abe, and Torrance. My hope is that in this nascent effort a fresh non-substantialist theology of the triune God that is acceptable to Christians has been constructed, at least in its preliminary form.