



Tripp Fuller and Wm. Andrew Schwartz (Eds). *John B. Cobb, Jr: Selected Writings from a Christian Theologian*. Grasmere, Idaho: SacraSage Press, 2023, 334 pp.

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*John B. Cobb, Jr: Selected Writings from a Christian Theologian* is a collection of essays by John B. Cobb, Jr., primarily comprised of previously unpublished lectures, compiled and edited by Andrew Schwartz and Tripp Fuller. Some of these pieces are sermons intended for a church audience, while others are conference papers tailored for academic circles. A notable feature of many of these essays is their autobiographical aspect, providing readers with glimpses into Cobb's personal faith-journey.

John Cobb stands out as an eminent intellectual of the twentieth century, contributing prolifically across various disciplines including politics, education, philosophy, and agriculture. His pioneering application of a process-relational worldview to address environmental challenges, initiated in the late 1960s, remains a foundational influence on discussions regarding the realization of an ecological civilization even decades later.

Since Cobb's scholarly endeavors span a wide spectrum of subjects, distinct from conventional academics, the editors of the book confined this volume to the essays that had explicit theological undertones, dealing with matters concerning Christian identity, belief systems, and rituals.

The book has six sections, which are each subdivided into various chapters. Section one, entitled "On Process Theology and Philosophy", is an introductory part, with three chapters presenting an overview of process thought. In the second section ("On Being a Christian"), through five chapters, it is illustrated what being a Christian through his process worldview means for Cobb. In the third section ("On God & Christ") within four chapters, it is demonstrated how Cobb redefines and understands the three main Christian concepts of God, the Trinity, and Christology through a "process-relational" perspective. In section four ("On Pluralism & Immortality") the first chapter deals with the possibility of life after death and how resurrection would be understood through a process lens. The two remaining chapters are dedicated to his understanding of religious pluralism, and the Christian mission in such a pluralistic world. In the fifth section ("On Science, Nature, & Being Human"), through three chapters, it is demonstrated how Cobb challenges the prevailing modern scientific paradigm – with its dualistic worldview – by advocating for a Whiteheadian organic worldview that incorporates the concept of God as a causal agent and offers a robust view of nature. It is also shown what implications the Whiteheadian cosmology

could have for anthropology. In the sixth and last section (“On Theology Engaging the World”), the role of Christian process-relational theology in the face of the current crisis – including the economic and ecological ones – is discussed.

Reading this book, one is struck by John Cobb’s emphatic rejection of any conception of an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-controlling God who has no implications for nature and for humanity but catastrophe. One can observe, however, that humanistic secularism is not regarded by him as the due alternative but rather the open and relational process metaphysics with its all-loving God.

Through this collection of Cobb’s essays, a portrayal of a social activist appears, who strongly criticizes modernity and some modern values, which turned out to be rather harmful than profitable. He is sharp in his critique of modern societies’ obsession with and pursuit of money and profits, a direction that is destructive for both human societies as well as for nature. He warns about the alienation of the humanities in favor of science and of the development of the academy over time, which has gone in the wrong direction. However, he is not just a critical voice who puts everything under question and aims to destroy the past for the sake of a better future. His goal is *deconstruction*, not *destruction*. He critically interrogates classical theological concepts and dogmas, deconstructing them to reveal their problematic aspects. Subsequently, he proposes alternative interpretations and redefinitions, offering fresh perspectives on established ideas.

The book, therefore, also presents a revolutionary theologian who rethinks and redefines the key concepts of his religious tradition. He reframes “the Kingdom of God” to a concept of a “Divine Commonwealth” that – far beyond passivity – encourages action and speaks truth to power, standing on the side of the oppressed. He is concerned not with “salvation from Hell to Heaven” but with “the salvation of the Earth and its inhabitants from the destructive actions of human beings who threaten to destroy its habitability for future generations” (p. 200). Cobb shows how, through the lens of process philosophy/ theology, humanity could potentially transcend prevailing addictions to ethnocentrism, nationalism, militarism, imperialism, and economism, which currently pose significant threats to the sustainability and livability of our planet. Put briefly, this book emerges as the thought journey of a dedicated theologian who is in pursuit of an authentic faith that offers coherence and meaning and advances the common good.

Through this collection, however, what strikes one – at least as a Muslim reader – is the ambivalent and ambiguous stance of Cobb in regard to other religions, especially Abrahamic religions. This makes one wonder what Cobb’s approach is to other religions if one would suspend one’s previous knowledge of Cobb – i.e. the fact that he is regarded by Alan Race (whose 1983 book introduced the three-fold typology of exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism) as one of the four examples of Christian pluralism, that Cobb is primarily recognized for his staunch advocacy of “deep religious pluralism”.

Reading these essays makes it abundantly clear that we are engaging with a thinker who, driven by his theological and philosophical convictions, wholeheartedly embraces other religious traditions. Hence, there is no doubt that his approach is non-exclusivist. However, whether his approach leans towards inclusivism or pluralism

remains ambiguous. For example, in the chapter entitled "Is Religious Truth One or Many?", Cobb provides a comparison of Christianity and Pure Land Buddhism, eventually moving beyond comparison to defend the view that religious truth is many. As for religious truth claims, he repeats again and again that they are *plural*. His argument posits that despite differing descriptions, we all grapple with the same truth. Moreover, he contends that various cultural and religious traditions highlight different patterns in reality, each naming and interpreting them uniquely. By embracing other religious traditions, we can learn to identify and understand these diverse patterns, which may not be present within our own religious framework.

Up to this point, it is appropriate to characterize Cobb as a pluralist who acknowledges the validity of truth in other religions. Nevertheless, certain passages within this book indicate the presence of another aspect of Cobb's perspective, one that aligns more closely with inclusivism. As a process thinker, one would anticipate reading from him that "in every moment one of the many elements that come together in the new one is God. Without God the present would be nothing but a new arrangement of what has been in the past. There would be no life, no understanding, no love, no freedom" (p. 199). The problem arises, however, when he (in the chapter titled "The Christian Reason for Being Progressive" names these basic constituents of reality and of his process metaphysics *Christ*: "By Christ, I understand God's incarnation in the world. God is that factor in the world that introduces freedom, novelty, spontaneity, life, creativity, responsibility, hope, and love" (p. 314).

Based on this interpretation, Christianity is not merely one among many religions that highlight certain patterns of reality; rather, it is viewed as the sole religion that fully and exclusively embodies the fundamental process metaphysical nature of reality, i.e., freedom, novelty, spontaneity, life, creativity, and love, incorporated in Christ.

This inclusivist view becomes clear in another passage, where he regards "Christ as creative transformation" (p. 316) and in yet another, where he states "Christianity at its best has always been progressive" (p. 302). This implies that Christ and Christianity are progressive and in constant creative transformation, and in a metaphysical system in which creative transformation is the highest value, *that* by implication means that Christianity possesses the best values possible compared to all other religious traditions and that this ideal value, i.e. "creative transformation", is lacking in other religious traditions, especially in Islam.

This is nowhere as best articulated as in the following lines, where he defines Christology: "My central thesis is that Christ is creative transformation, that faithfulness to Christ expresses itself in opening ourselves to that transformation" (p. 314). Or where he defines "creative transformation" as essential to life, and as a marker of a good and healthy tradition versus a sick one:

The ability to be transformed in encounter with new insight and alien wisdom is the mark of life. Even as individuals, not to be open to transformation in encounter with other people is a mark of death, not life. It is also true of great historical movements. A healthy tradition is always undergoing creative transformation. A sick tradition tries to

maintain itself unchanged, protecting itself from all critical examination. (p. 310)

It is here that he applies his binary categorization, which is deeply value-laden, to differentiate his Christian tradition from Islam:

Conservative Christians sometimes try to maintain this, but they do so against many elements in the very past that they try to restore. It is an easier position for Muslims to adopt because of their view of the place of the Koran and the earliest Muslim community. For Christians, the past events we celebrate point us forward to those we anticipate. (p. 310)

This is true of all the other few passages of the book, where he mentions Islam and Muslims, in which the connotation is always that of “submission,” “passivity,” “authoritarianism” and “essentialism.” For example, in one passage he mentions that he has involved himself for a while in a movement that arose in Indonesia in Islamic circles, called *Subud*. He adds:

However, I did sense that *Subud*, too, though more compatible with Christian faith than are yoga and Zen, is bound up with its Islamic origins in a way that can create problems for the Christian. Although there is a note of passive submission common to Christianity and Islam both, the role it plays in the two faiths is different. In Islam submission is of the essence. The *latihan*, as an exercise in passivity before God, is fully appropriate to Islam, and those who involve themselves most deeply in *Subud* tend to become Muslims. In Christianity submission is encompassed by the involvement of all human faculties in understanding and action. An emphasis on submission has affected Christian spiritual discipline; but when carried to its full extreme, as it was in seventeenth-century Quietism, it has proved unacceptable to the church”. (p. 76)

It becomes evident, through these lines, that while Cobb demonstrates humility and openness towards Eastern religions when it comes to other Abrahamic traditions, he preserves a superior stance to Christianity, however implicitly. This happens in the book not just in regard to Islam but also Judaism. For example, in a passage where he talks about the advance of Christianity, he states: “This [Christianity] was not a rejection of Judaism, but it did involve a creative transformation of that tradition opening it much more fully to Gentiles” (p. 310).

The conclusion one could thus draw, through reading this book, is that Christianity, in essence, is “creative transformation”, whereas other religions, at least Abrahamic religions, are not. It is surprising to observe that while John Cobb is so open and receptive to Eastern religions (due to his deep and close contact and familiarity with them) when it comes to Islam, his knowledge of this second-largest religion in the

world does not go far beyond the typical cliched Western Christian understanding of Islam, and thus his approach.

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