

John Cobb's *Beyond Dialogue*

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IN 1982 JOHN COBB, JR., a leading theologian, published a remarkable book entitled *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press).¹ The title of the book is significant, indicating as it does the necessity of going beyond dialogue that is oriented only toward mutual understanding, and of working at a mutual *transformation* of Christianity and Buddhism. Clearly realizing the necessity for both traditions to transform their present forms of doctrine and practice, Cobb emphasizes the importance for each to hear the truths that the other tradition has to teach, and to transform their own religion by means of it. He not only proclaims the necessity of such a transformation, he also sets forth concrete ideas as to how it might be achieved.

In urging Christians and Buddhists to transform themselves by learning the truth of the other side, Cobb's book constitutes a significant step forward in the history of Christian-Buddhist dialogue. Cobb himself is open to Buddhist truth, and makes a serious and creative effort to universalize Christianity in this pluralistic age by means of transformation through dialogue with Buddhists.

The book consists of six chapters. Chapter One, entitled "The Road to Dialogue," surveys the history of Christian teaching with respect to followers of other religious ways, that is, the Christian struggle to understand Christian faith in relation to other traditions. Chapter Two, "The Road Through Dialogue and Beyond," critically summarizes recent theological discussion of the meaning of the contemporary pluralistic situation for Christian theology, and includes Cobb's own constructive theological arguments. With the title "Western Interpretations of Nirvana," Chapter Three clarifies how

¹ Page numbers in parentheses refer to this work.

western scholars and thinkers have interpreted the key Buddhist notion of Nirvana.

In Chapter Four, "Passing Over," Cobb offers his own understanding of Nirvana as it has been formed in dialogue. Unlike most theologians who, even in interfaith dialogue, do not go beyond the realm of Christian theology, Cobb "passes over" into the realm of Buddhism. In Chapter Five, "Coming Back," Cobb attempts to assimilate into Christianity the Buddhist truth he has learned. In Chapter Six, "The Christian Witness to Buddhists," Cobb proposes that a Christianity transformed by its encounter with Buddhism can offer Jesus to Buddhism in a realistic and helpful way.

Some overall comments on the main body of the book are in order. In Chapter Four, in which Cobb offers a penetrating statement of his own understanding of Nirvana, he nevertheless writes, "Nirvana is primarily nontemporal. The individual's realization or attainment of Nirvana may be future, but what is attained or realized is unaffected by this. Nirvana is primordial and ultimate, beyond all time and change" (p. 86). I am afraid that here he overemphasizes the nontemporal aspect of Nirvana at the expense of its temporal aspect. It is true that Nirvana is fundamentally trans-temporal. Yet this does not indicate that Nirvana lacks temporality or is devoid of any temporal aspect. Rather, that Nirvana is nontemporal and temporal at once is the real meaning of the trans-temporality of Nirvana. This is clearly shown by a central idea of Mahayana Buddhism, which Cobb himself rightly mentions: that Nirvana is Samsara, and Samsara is Nirvana. Mahayana Buddhism teaches us not to become attached to Samsara, the flux in time which is a process of transmigration, but rather to reach Nirvana, the blissful state of nontemporality. At the same time, Mahayana Buddhism admonishes us not to become attached to Nirvana either. If one becomes attached to and remains in Nirvana, one is not free from self-interest, in that one is enjoying one's own blissful state of Nirvana while forgetting the anguish of others who are still suffering in Samsara. "Do not abide in Samsara for the sake of wisdom; do not abide in Nirvana for the sake of compassion"—this double negation of both Samsara and Nirvana is the quintessence of Mahayana Buddhism, for only through the double negation of Samsara and Nirvana can one fully realize complete detachment, the liberation which is the realization of true Emptiness. Nirvana in Mahayana

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Buddhism is realized by moving freely back and forth between so-called Samsara and so-called Nirvana without attachment to either one. Nontemporality is realized by not abiding in Samsara and going to Nirvana; temporality is realized by not abiding in Nirvana and returning to Samsara. Nontemporality and temporality are hence two aspects of Nirvana's dynamic functioning. In this dynamic realization of Nirvana, at each and every moment Buddhists are living at the intersection of nontemporality and temporality, of so-called Nirvana and so-called Samsara, of wisdom and compassion.

Cobb is not unaware of the dynamic character of Nirvana in Mahayana Buddhism, indicated by the expression "Samsara is Nirvana; Nirvana is Samsara." But in his understanding of Nirvana, the temporal aspect is not as clear as the nontemporal aspect. What is the temporal aspect of Nirvana? As I suggested before, Nirvana involves wisdom and compassion. From the perspective of wisdom, all sentient beings are enlightened; they are in Nirvana, and thus time and history are transcended. This is a radical form of realized eschatology. Most people, however, consider themselves still involved in Samsara. An enlightened one thus takes on the task of awakening people to the fact that they are in Nirvana. Because of his compassionate activity, time and history are concerns that come to appear in Nirvana. Since those who consider themselves to be in Samsara are countless and this condition will continue endlessly in the future, the enlightened one's work of compassion is endless. Accordingly, time and history, in which the work of compassion takes place, are also endless. This is the temporal aspect of Nirvana, realized in the light of compassion, which is inseparably connected with the nontemporal aspect of Nirvana, realized in the light of wisdom. And so, Nirvana is not merely the goal of Buddhist life—it is also its ground and its point of departure.

In coming back to his own tradition, Cobb discusses the problem of faith, self, God, and history in Christianity in light of Buddhist insights he has encountered. Insisting that the key requirement for Christianity is that "God be understood to be wholly, unqualifiedly empty" (p. 113), Cobb makes two important remarks. First, distinguishing between ultimate reality and ultimate actuality, which allows God to be worshipped by man, he states that "Emptiness, while the supreme reality for Buddhists, is wholly devoid of actuality" (p. 112). Thus, God cannot be identified with Emptiness. Secondly, God as the ultimate

actuality, though not identical with Emptiness, is the everlasting Empty One, and God as the everlasting Empty One is not subordinate to Emptiness as ultimate reality.

God is thus understood as quite open and receptive. If, as Cobb suggests, God is understood as the everlasting Empty One, the kenotic nature of God is much deepened; that is to say, God is grasped to empty himself not only as the son of God but also as the Father, as God. Thus God himself is understood as becoming even more deeply involved in human suffering and redeeming man's sinfulness unconditionally.

In regard to Cobb's notion of God as the everlasting Empty One, the question arises: If the Christian notion of God is interpreted as the everlasting Empty One, then how is God's righteousness, which is so essential to Yahweh, maintained? Divine righteousness is based on God's will. If this is the case, how is the will of God realized in the everlasting Empty One?

In the last chapter of the book, "The Christian Witness to Buddhists," Cobb, as a convinced theologian, asks his Buddhist dialogue partners to take account of the truth embodied in Jesus Christ and suggests how Christianity can contribute to the fulfillment of Buddhism. This chapter is the most original and insightful one in the book, and stands as a unique contribution to Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

Taking Pure Land Buddhism, especially the Shin sect (Jōdo-shinshū), as a form of Buddhism in which universal salvation is fully realized, Cobb asks himself whether Amida, as that which is incarnate in all Buddhas, and Christ, as the creative and redemptive activity of God in the world, are two names for one and the same reality. His answer is in the affirmative: Amida is Christ. Cobb writes: "The feature of the totality of reality to which Pure Land Buddhists refer when they speak of Amida is the same as that to which Christians refer when we speak of Christ" (p. 128). To Cobb, when Buddhists recognize that Amida is Christ they can acquire new insights into Amida's personality. In Christianity the interaction between God and man is clearly realized. Particularly in prayer, God is presupposed to hear us and take account of contingent human acts as they occur. In Process Theology not only God's activity but also his receptivity is emphasized. In Whitehead's terminology both the Primordial Nature and the Consequent Nature are essential to God. In the light of this understanding of

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God in Christianity, the Primal Vow of Amida may be equated with the Primordial Nature of God, but in Buddhist faith in Amida, there is nothing comparable to the Consequent Nature of God. In this regard, Cobb urges Buddhists to appropriate from Christianity a receptive aspect, and thereby develop the interaction between Amida and sentient beings.

Moreover, from the Christian experience of Christ, Buddhism may acquire new insights into ethical directiveness contained in Amida faith. Diverging from the common Christian view that Buddhism is weak in its ethics, Cobb fairly and accurately clarifies the ethical role played by Buddhism in Buddhist societies. With this understanding as a background, he writes, "What seems to the Christian to be missing, then, is not virtue or goodness. What is lacking is a trans-social norm by virtue of which society is judged. . . . On the whole, Buddhism does not encourage attention by its adherents to critical evaluation of social and political programs or exhort them to be in the forefront of movements of social protest. This seems to be because the mode of the relation of individuals to trans-social reality, namely, to Emptiness or to Amida, does not direct them to a judgment of social structures and their historical roles" (p. 133).

Hence, as a crucial question, Cobb asks "whether Buddhists could discover from the Christian experience of Christ those aspects of Amida which would strengthen their critical orientation to the socio-historical world" (p. 134). Responding to his question, he states that "the call of Christ" introduces "possibilities for our self-actualization that lead to good for ourselves and for others" (p. 135). Referring to the coalescence of the world into each new experience, Cobb contrasts Christian and Buddhist attitudes as follows: "Christian spirituality has concentrated on discerning the possibilities, determining which constitute God's call, and responding appropriately thereto. Buddhist disciplines have concentrated on the realization that what is occurring is just this coalescence in which there is finally no dualism of subject and object. Attention has been directed to the actual world as it coalesces rather than to novel possibilities" (p. 135). To Cobb, Amida is to be understood as calling people to achieve freely whatever is possible in each moment, including the possibility of changing society.

Finally, Cobb suggests that in order for Buddhism to become more universal it should relate itself to the totality of world history, in-

cluding the history of Israel and the event of Jesus.²

I believe that Buddhists must listen to these highly provocative suggestions based on the Christian experience of Christ and rethink their present form of teaching and practice. As to the problem of possibility and freedom in religious experience, I think it can be said that, in Buddhism, attention has indeed been directed to the actual world as it coalesces, to the reality of dependent co-origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*). In a full realization of dependent co-origination, all forms of duality are overcome, and the nonsubstantiality of everything, that is, Emptiness, is realized as ultimate reality. In this realization of Emptiness, the actuality of self and the world is clearly realized as it is. This is the goal of Buddhist life. But, just as Nirvana is not merely the goal but rather the ground and the point of departure for Buddhist life, this realization of Emptiness is the ground and the point of departure for Buddhist life, too. This means that, in the realization of dependent co-origination and Emptiness, novel possibilities are fully taken into account while what is actually occurring is clearly realized in terms of coalescence.

The realization of actual coalescence and the realization of novel possibilities are inseparably united in the authentic form of Buddhist life. Realization of mere actual coalescence without the discerning of novel possibilities would be lifeless, and realization of sheer novel possibilities without the awareness of actual coalescence would be groundless.

This dynamic realization of actual coalescence and novel possibilities is not different from the realization of the fact that Nirvana has a temporal aspect which is dynamically united with nontemporality. As I said before, at each and every moment Buddhists are living at the intersection of nontemporality and temporality, of so-called Nirvana and so-called Samsara, of wisdom and compassion. Time and history in Buddhism are nothing but a succession of these dynamic moments. At each and every moment Buddhists return to the primordial depth of timeless eternity and at the same time advance toward the future to actualize novel possibilities. The return to the eternal depth and the advance to the novel future are one in each and every moment. Accordingly, I do not think it can be said that Buddhism's attention has been

² Cobb, p. 140.

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directed to the actual world as it coalesces rather than to novel possibilities.³

In the temporal aspect of Nirvana, novel possibility derived through freedom does not come from God but from the depth of Emptiness. Novel possibilities are not experienced as "gift and task"⁴ given by God, but as spontaneity springing from the bottomless depth of self and the world. It is in Pure Land Buddhism that novel possibilities are accepted as the call of Amida.

But the crucial question in this regard is the way in which novel possibilities are realized in Buddhism or the kind of novel possibilities that are realized in Buddhism. Generally speaking, Buddhists realize novel possibilities in their everyday life or in their cultural-artistic way of life, not necessarily as a socio-political program—with a few exceptions, such as Nichiren's emphasis on the Lotus Sutra's role in safeguarding the country and the uprisings by the adherents of the Ikkō sect.⁵ Even in these cases, directionality for free decision in terms of socio-political program is not objectively clear. In this respect, Buddhists may learn from Christianity, and in particular must seriously consider Cobb's aforementioned suggestion.

The eloquent argument offered by Professor Cobb in the last three chapters of the book concerning the need for a mutual transformation of Christianity and Buddhism is an achievement that no one who is engaged in the future Christian-Buddhist dialogue can afford to overlook. With heartfelt agreement, I say with Cobb that "Buddhism needs Christianity as much as Christianity needs Buddhism" (p. 18).

³ Cobb, p. 135.

⁴ John Cobb, Jr., "Can a Christian be a Buddhist, Too?" in *Japanese Religions*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (December 1978), p. 13.

⁵ Under the leadership of Rennyō (1415-1499), the Ikkō sect, now called the Pure Land Shin sect (Jōdo-shinshū), became a powerful religio-political society. In the sixteenth century, the followers of this sect often fought against the feudal lords to defend their teaching.