

# DISCUSSIONS



# A SURVEY STUDY OF RECENT WORKS ON JOHN B. COBB, JR.'S ECO-THEOLOGICAL VISION

MD. ABU SAYEM\*

## ABSTRACT

This article presents a brief survey on some recent works (five books, two book chapters, five book reviews, two research papers and one Ph.D. dissertation) on John B. Cobb, Jr.'s eco-theological understanding and prescription. The paper aims to analyse these works critically to focus on how and up to what level their discussions can match with Cobb's original understanding. In this study, the readers get familiarized with Cobb's eco-theological view and suggestions to be convinced to work for ecological sustainability. The research methodology is basically a literature review with textual analysis. In so doing, this paper attempts to enhance and enrich the present discussion on religion and ecology through some scholars and their studies on Cobb's eco-theological vision.

**Keywords:** bioregionalism, creative transformation, ecological crisis, ecological model, eco-theology, God-centrism, mechanistic worldview, utilitarianism.

\* University of Dhaka, Department of World Religions and Culture, Bangladesh      sayemwrcdu@gmail.com

John B. Cobb, Jr.'s works are given due attention in the academy. In appreciation of his innovative contribution to different issues, a scholarly work, *Theology and the University: Essays in Honor of John B. Cobb, Jr.* (1991) was compiled. Apart from this, Cobb is studied by some scholars, which can roughly be categorized as Cobb's Christian social ethics, public theology, and eco-theology. We limit the following discussion to Cobb's eco-theology.

Based on a book review (1983) of *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community*, co-authored by Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr., John Langan, S. J. appreciates Birch and Cobb for developing a life-based worldview in contrast to the mechanistic world-view. Langan states their ecological model harmonizes theological and biological concerns rather than addressing the ecological crisis with social policies and guidelines. The present study disagrees with Langan by arguing that Cobb's life-based model equally suggests reforming the current social and economic orders in order to mitigate the present environment degradation. If Cobb's later works relating to environmental issues are consulted more thoroughly, anyone can see how Cobb articulates secular institutes and other wider societies in his discussions for collectively responding to environmental problems with religious communities. Moreover, Cobb's transformist approach advocates a total reformation of the current world policy through a creative transformation of theological and secular worldviews.

In *Ethics in John Cobb's Process Theology* (1988), Paul Custodio Bube presents a comprehensive survey of "Cobb's ethical reflections to his overall theological development" (p. xi). Bube shows how Cobb articulates the approach of "creative transformation" to interpret Christian theology as being somewhat diverted from an empirical method with which he worked before 1969. In Bube's view, the creative transformation approach works as "the central category of Cobb's method and Christology" (1988: xi, 79, 88). He also shows how it is used as "the central norm for Cobb's understanding of humanity's relationship to the environment, social justice, and political and economic liberation" (Bube 1988: xi). All these public issues are dealt with by Cobb from a process theological perspective connecting Christ with a cosmic being, that is why Bube characterizes Cobb's ethics as Christocentric (1988: 102, 105, 173). According to the current research, it may be Bube's shortcoming to unnecessarily label Cobb's approach as Christocentric, but rather better to call it relational or interactional, because Cobb sees Christ as supremely related to the world by incarnating God's consequent nature (Bube 1988: 102, 105). In his book review, Devenish (1990: 126) criticizes Bube for connecting Cobb's approach with God-centrism. Furthermore, Bube's claim seems self-contradictory to his earlier argument where he views Cobb's approach as a creative transformation. The

creative transformation and God-centrism do not imply the same thing, because the creative transformation is a process theological view that sees the Creator and created as interrelated and interdependent, while God-centrism does not include such inter-relational approach rather it sees God as an absolute Being remaining far from any kind of dependency. Though Bube attempts to clarify Cobb's overall methodological issues regarding a wider society, his uncritical claim about "Christology" makes a vague conception on Cobb's interconnected and interactional approach between the Creator and the created. Perhaps Bube's argument is true when it comes to the movement of Cobb's position from the Christology of earlier Christianity to a new form of Christology by discovering a creative transformation of Christ based on process philosophy. Cobb's self-transformation led him to connect all creatures with the cosmic Christ, but Cobb never claims that his approach is Christocentric. Moreover, Cobb's process theological understanding comes from an inter-relational and inter-dependent approach, not from a God-centric or theocentric approach, though he never reduces the significance of God to a single point like creation. Maybe, Bube's argument has a connection with Cobb's earlier approach (before 1969) to public issues; but Cobb's later works cannot be identified with a Christocentric approach. If Cobb's works on ecological theology (1971; 1972; 1982 with Birch; 1989 with Daly; 2007) are consulted properly, Bube's misconception about Cobb's eco-theological approach may be reduced. At this point, the stance of the present study is to clarify Cobb's eco-theological approach from his later works related to environmental issues.

Cobb's proposed "biospheric vision" (Daly and Cobb 1989: 376) remains controversial among scholars. In their book review of *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* authored by Harman Edward Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., both Lisa M. Daniel and Paul R. Ehrlich consider this vision a utopian plan (1990: 346). According to Daniel and Ehrlich, though the biospheric vision gives a prescription for a new system, it is not applicable in human society. They argue, if the biospheric vision is implemented, human physical needs will be left unmet. Similarly, Kasun labels the biospheric vision as a ruining and destructive plan for the modern economic system (Kasun 1991: 46), even accusing Daly and Cobb of positing "a wild plan" to reduce the influence of humans on earth and "to dehumanize the human race" (Ibid.). Kasun argues that this vision promotes a radical program to reduce economic productivity, and thus, to ruin the world economy. Nevertheless, Daniel, Ehrlich and Kasun appreciate that Cobb's and Daly's work, *For the Common Good*, has given a new idea to ponder over a necessary

action to mitigate destructive human thoughts and activities for the purpose of ecological sustainability. It is true that a biospheric vision externally may give an impression of reducing human economic activities and of giving more space for nonhuman animals; but it does not imply dehumanizing the human race as Kasun claims. It is difficult to implement a biospheric vision, but should not be considered a utopian plan as Daniel and Ehrlich argue. If Cobb's later works (1991; 1992; 1994; 1999) are consulted more thoroughly, such misunderstandings about the biospheric vision may be eliminated. By "biospheric vision" Cobb attempts to convince humans about the necessity of a healthier world where every life form can get its justifiable space and opportunity to survive. If biospheric vision is understood in this way, there will be less controversy about it. However, what is understood from Cobb's writings is that humans are not an isolated entity of nature, but rather their health and survival are completely dependent on a healthier interaction with all elements of the natural world, which should not be ignored just for the sake of human economic activities. So, the said criticisms Cobb's "biospheric vision" are seemingly unjustifiable.

In "Doing Public Theology: John B. Cobb, Jr.'s Reconstruction of the Concept of "World" and "God" in *The Context of the Environmental Crisis* (1994), Jerome P. Soneson appreciates Cobb's eco-theological understanding as a "practical or pragmatic" initiative to address public issues including ecological crisis (p. 157). Soneson has accepted Cobb's ecological model of the world and the organic concept of God without any critical analysis. Soneson finds God as the central point of Cobb's ecological model of the world. For him, Cobb's "ecological model" gives humans the idea that nature is alive like them and it deserves their full attention and respect. One problem in Soneson's work is that he compares Cobb's ecological model of the world with "imaginatively reconstructing the idea of the world" (1994: 158). Soneson's statement on Cobb's "ecological model" seems immature, because Cobb (1982 with Birch) never claims that his ecological model is based on mere imagination of the world.

Cobb's bioregional approach (Cobb 1992: 72-81; 1994: 23-44, 125) is also criticized by scholars. In his book review of Cobb's *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy* (1994), John Pisciotta rejects Cobb's proposed bioregionalism as unfit for implementation by comparing it with a neo-Luddite proposal and a utopian solution (1996: 906). Nonetheless, Pisciotta appreciates Cobb's bioregional approach for raising some interesting questions and criticisms about modern economic systems. Pisciotta's criticism of Cobb's bioregionalism seems unjustifiable. Though Cobb's bioregionalism may not be possible for complete implementation, its major parts can be executed if people really think of their

sustainable economic development matching with ecological equilibrium. In consideration of the present unprecedented problems, Cobb's bioregionalism should be appreciated.

In *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (1996), Michael S. Northcott highly appreciates Cobb's eco-theological understanding and includes it in eco-centric approaches. For Northcott, Cobb's ecological model of life presents "a new eco-theological paradigm" in Christian ethics (1996: 147). But it concerns us that Northcott accepts and furthers Cobb's and Daly's bioregionalism without a critical analysis (1996: 300-308). As explained before, bioregionalism is not free from limitations, and a complete bioregional program is not possible for implementation. Another problem is noticed in Northcott's discussion is that he includes Cobb's eco-theological thought in an eco-centric approach while Cobb himself never claims that his eco-theological understanding is an eco-centric ethical approach. Cobb is not satisfied with the current formation of ethics and Christian stewardship conception, it would be one kind of exaggeration to categorize Cobb's eco-theological views as an eco-centric ethical approach. Cobb seemingly attempts to develop his own view of the environment based on his understanding of God and the world. Cobb's argument of a hierarchical value system in nature allows him to put humans in a privileged position among creatures, it may be called a modified and liberal human-centric view.

In *Environmental Ethics and Process Thinking*, Clare Palmer evaluates Cobb's process thought as consequentialist in form rather than in deontological nature (1998: 111). She relates it as an anthropomorphic explanation of the universe and distinct from other forms of utilitarianism, by arguing that process thought possesses the problem of double claims regarding human superiority and humanizing the universe (Palmer 1998: 223). This difficulty, as she shows, still implies the inability of process thinking to generate environmental ethics, and that is why she states process thought is unsatisfactory in dealing with an ecological crisis (Ibid.). Instead, Palmer praises Cobb's argument for maximizing the total richness of experience and feeling (1998: 26, 107). She also appreciates Cobb's statement "the life of the planet is the life of the cells which compose it" (Birch and Cobb 1981: 153, cited in Palmer 1998: 223). Palmer's critical study of process thought also proves the relevancy of Cobb's understanding with different forms of environmental ethics on methodological grounds, but it posits a serious challenge to process thought which should be met by process thinkers. However, Palmer's reductionism in terms of Cobb's eco-theological ethics seems inconsistent with the overall ethical understanding of Cobb's ecological theology. She reduces Cobb's eco-theological views to a consequential ethical approach while Cobb's Christian ecological ethics

seemingly cover all three classical ethical approaches – virtue ethics, deontological ethics and consequential ethics. More importantly, Cobb focuses inner awareness of humans on the natural world rather than general ethical understanding through his process theology, which is totally missed by Palmer. Another problem Palmer discovers in process thought is humanizing nature. Since Cobb is a process theologian, he is automatically included in the category of those scholars who humanize nature. In response to such an allegation by Palmer, we argue that perhaps Palmer misunderstands process thinkers' justification of grading/ranking in values according to the rich experience and capacity for the sentience of living beings. Due to such hierarchical value, humans are given some justifiable priorities over non-human animals by process thinkers, but this does not justify that process thinkers see everything in light of human interest or attempts to humanize the natural world. As far as more sentient animals are concerned, the position of process thinkers seems justifiable, because their argument is not incompatible with the natural system. In the natural environment, some animals are used as food by other animals, like lions and tigers, while humans eat both meat and vegetable. So it would be unnatural to try to make all animals vegetarian. Also, vegetables are alive though they do not appear to feel pain and pleasure like animals. Hierarchical values are not completely unjustifiable. Just because of grades in values, Palmer should not compare all process thought with humanizing of the natural environment. So Palmer's dissertation about deficiency of process thought in terms of generating stable environmental ethics is not fully justified.

Lai Pan-Chiu's (2011) "Inter-religious Dialogue and Social Justice: Cobb's Wesleyan Process Theology in East Asian Perspective" gives a comprehensive understanding of Cobb's methodological issues and approaches to interfaith dialogue on social ethics and ecological theology. Lai notes, as far as interfaith dialogue is concerned, Cobb rejects the commonalities approach of John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, because it avoids some true facts of religions in terms of basic differences, so dialogue should begin with a perception that there are certain dissimilarities between religions. Cobb argues that this acknowledgement makes participants comfortable to recognize diversity among themselves and their faith traditions. Cobb's approach is appreciable, but it seems still partial. The present study argues interfaith dialogue should start with both approaches – commonalities and differences – because religious traditions do not carry only differences or similarities, rather they have both at the same time.

In another paper (2012), "Inter-religious Dialogue on Ecology: A View from China", Lai

appreciates Cobb's arguments for the goals of interfaith dialogue on environmental issues. In Lai's view, being critical of Hans Küng's "Global Ethic" project, Cobb suggests that religious environmental ethics should be formed based on context and cultural diversity. This implies that Cobb does not advocate a unified or universal environmental ethics. Environmental ethics should be, as Cobb suggests, contextual through "the creative transformation of various religious and cultural traditions", through interfaith and intercultural dialogue (Lai 2012: 92); otherwise, it may not work. Lai correctly summarizes Cobb's insightful views of interfaith dialogue on ecological issues and appreciates Cobb's suggestion for a meaningful interfaith dialogue. Someone may be confused by Lai's such statement that Cobb's discussion on ecological issues focuses more on social and political aspects rather than any spiritual aspect. Externally, it seems so; but when we consider his creative transformist approach we cannot deny that he places more importance on spiritual awareness and reformation of human present perception about nature through a creative transformation. However, Lai's paper on Cobb's process theology is an insightful work with a thorough analysis of Cobb's methodological issues and approach, which will help the current study to clarify Cobb's eco-theological understanding of the present ecological crisis.

In the discussions of Cobb's eco-theological thought, scholars are found analysing Cobb's ecological model of life, biospheric vision and bioregionalism. One problem, on which the present study attempts to focus, remains largely unexplored by the scholars about engaging Cobb in dialogue with other eco-theologians. As the current research sees it, if Cobb's eco-theological views are analysed by contrasting them with the eco-theological understandings of other scholars, some more illuminated ideas may emerge from such dialogical discussion about religious perspectives on present environmental issues. In his (1990) Ph.D. dissertation, *God's Relation to the World and Human Existence in the Theologies of Paul Tillich and John B. Cobb, Jr.*, Chul Ho Youn makes a comparative study between Tillich and Cobb from a complementary perspective by interpreting their views of God and humans in connection with panentheism and relative dualism (p. iv); but Youn's comparative study does not deal with their eco-theological understanding. Similarly, Pederson's (1994) "The Understanding of Ambiguity in the Relationship between God and the World: A Comparison between John B. Cobb, Jr.'s and Bernard Loomer's Theologies", presents a comparative appraisal between two process theologians on the nature and location of God in connection with the natural world. Interestingly, both comparative studies deal with Cobb's understanding of the God-World relationship in different ways by comparing it with Tillich and Loomer.

The preceding discussions show that some of the contemporary scholars have got their attractions to Cobb’s works on environmental issues. By appreciating and criticizing Cobb, scholars have enriched the present discussions on environmental issues.

REFERENCES

Birch, Charles and John B. Cobb, Jr. (1981). *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bube, Paul Custodio (1988). *Ethics in John Cobb’s Process Theology*. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press.

Cobb, John B. Jr. (1971). Christian Theism and the Ecological Crisis. *Religious Education*, 66 (1), 31-35.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1972). *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*. Beverly Hills, California: Bruce.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1991). *Matters of Life and Death*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1992). *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology, and Justice* (Ecology and justice). Maryknoll, New York: Orbis.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1994). *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy*. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1999). *The Earthiest Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of The World Bank*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

\_\_\_\_\_. (2001). *Protestant Theology and Deep Ecology* in David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb (ed.) *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. (2007). *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Daly, Herman E. and John B. Cobb, Jr. (1989 / 1994). *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, Environment, and Sustainable Future*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Daniel, Lisa M. and Paul R. Ehrlich (December 1990). (Book Review of *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, by Harman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr. with contributions by Clifford W. Cobb). *Ecological Economics*, 2(4), 346-347.

Griffin, David Ray and Joseph C. Hough, Jr. (Eds.) (1991). *Theology and the University: Essays in Honor of John B. Cobb, Jr.* Albany: State University of New York.

Kasun, Jacqueline (February 1991). (Book Review of *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, by Harman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr. with contributions by Clifford W. Cobb). *Economic Affairs*, 11(2), 46.

Lai, Pan-Chiu (2011). Interreligious Dialogue and Social Justice: Cobb’s Wesleyan Process Theology in East Asian Perspective. *Asia Journal of Theology*, 25(1), 82-102.

\_\_\_\_\_. (Fall, 2012). “Interreligious Dialogue on Ecology: A View from China”. *Religions/Adyan: A Scholarly Journal* (published by the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue), English

only (volume), 83-97.

Langan, John, S. J. (January 1983). (Book Review of *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community*, by Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr.). *Theology Today*, 39(4), 455-456.

Northcott, Michael S. (1996). *The Environment and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Palmer, Clare (1998). *Environmental Ethics and Process Thinking*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Pederson, Ann Milliken (1 May 1994). The Understanding of Ambiguity in the Relationship between God and the World: A Comparison between John B. Cobb, Jr.’s and Bernard Loomer’s Theologies. *American Journal of Theology*, 15(2), 137-151.

Pisciotta, John (August 1996). (Book Review of *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy*, by John B. Cobb, Jr.). *Journal of Church and State*, 38(4), 905-906.

Soneson, J. (1994). Doing Public Theology: John B. Cobb, Jr.’s Reconstruction of the Concept of “World” and “God” in the context of the Environmental Crisis. *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, 15(2), 153-161.

White, Lynn Townsend (1967). “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis”. *Science*, 155(3767), 1203-1207.

Youn, Chul Ho (1990). *God’s Relation to the World and Human Existence in the Theologies of Paul Tillich and John B. Cobb, Jr.* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation). Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University.