

REVIEW

John B. Cobb, Jr. and Ward M. McAfee, editors

*The Dialogue Comes of Age:
Christian Encounters with Other Traditions*

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), paperback, v + 242 pp.

Reviewed by Nancy Fuchs Kreimer, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

John Cobb and Ward McAfee have assembled a valuable book for progressive Christians and for anyone wanting to understand interfaith encounter from that perspective. The book begins and ends with theologically-oriented essays by Cobb, the leading process theologian and author of *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* and *Beyond Dialogue: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhism and Christianity*. Other chapters treat the challenges in Christians' relations with Jews (by Eva Fleischner, a Catholic scholar and veteran of dialogue), Buddhists (by Dickson Kazuo Yagi, a Southern Baptist scholar of Buddhism), and Muslims and Native Americans (by McAfee, co-editor, professional historian, and Methodist layperson). Each chapter includes suggestions for further reading and questions for discussion. The book's design facilitates groups of Christians who want to engage these essays together. They will surely be motivated by the lively presentations to move beyond the text and encounter both the literature and members of other faiths. Study of this book will help them do so with knowledge, sensitivity, and a theological grounding that starts with humility and ends with compassion.

Cobb begins the volume with an admirably clear exposition of the pluralistic religious reality that increasingly characterizes American society. He completely rejects an exclusivist view, spelling out what a pluralist position looks like ("many paths up the same mountain") and faulting it for being "not pluralistic enough" (pp. 20-21). He argues for a "fuller pluralism" (p. 22). This requires no surrender of one's own peculiar positions or a request of other faiths to relativize their own claims. Rather, each faith retains that which makes it distinctive, including universal claims that might impinge on others' beliefs. For Christians, this means faithful discipleship, with Christ at the center.

One of the best insights here is that there is no "one size fits all" method for Christians to relate to other faiths (p. 7). With each of the four faiths dealt with in this book, Cobb finds a unique Christian-based argument for listening and appreciating rather than judging. In the end, Cobb admits this kind of deep pluralism will be very different from a New Testament or traditional Christian understanding of religious difference, but he suggests that such a position is not entirely foreign. Rather, it involves siding with some emphases in the history of Christianity, even if they are muted voices. For example, he mentions the Jesuits who served as Christian missionaries to China in the 16th and 17th centuries. They wanted to allow new Christians to accept faith in Jesus while retaining their commitment to Confucianism. This is an idea the papacy rejected, but one with intriguing resonances today.

Eva Fleischner's chapter is commendably balanced and written with rigor and compassion. She describes the difficult history of Jewish-Christian relations, the remarkable post-Holocaust transformation, and the work still to be done. When she takes on the difficult question of Zionism, her

work becomes particularly strong. In a notably fair-minded way, she reports how the political conflict in Israel has been challenging for Jewish-Christian relations. Some Jews and Christians understand Christian criticism of the state of Israel's policies in the context of Christian historic anti-Judaism. Fleischner reminds Christians of their "confidence in Judaism as a source of peace and justice" (p. 80). I hear in this statement an admonition to avoid despair over Israel's current policies, a gentle rebuke of the policies, and, at the same time, a reminder that Christians too easily revert to criticism of Jews and Judaism. The same tone is continued in the final essay by Cobb when he deals with this topic. One feels a genuine respect and commitment to the Jewish people, along with a concern for the Palestinian people arising from humanitarian values, not anti-Semitism. It is not an easy tightrope to walk, and this book walks it with grace.

Ward McAfee's chapter on Islam has much to recommend in it. He does a beautiful job of explaining to Christians how they can understand aspects of Islam that are problematic to them, such as periods of militancy, both by contextualizing them in Muslim history and, at the same time, by reminding themselves of not-so-dissimilar Christian history. My only objection was that I found the author put too much emphasis on "progressive Muslims" (p. 117f.). The line McAfee draws between "progressive" Muslims and other Muslims is a line I do not think most Muslims would recognize. In fact, explicitly named "progressive Muslims" remain a tiny minority, although perhaps Southern California, where he is a professor, is different. I assume that the problem may arise because McAfee applies a Protestant understanding of Scripture to the Qur'an. But the Qur'an, like Jewish scripture, is read through a body of interpretation, so one can believe that every word on the page was divinely revealed and still find a great deal of room for creative interpretation, as pious Muslims have done for centuries. For this reason, some Muslims believe that Islam itself is progressive, and they resist designating a separate movement called "progressive Islam." McAfee's clear preference for "progressive Muslims," especially when it comes to the understanding of revelation in Qur'an, thus strikes a discordant note. It seems in some tension with Cobb's thesis that it is not for us to judge different manifestations of another's faith. This concern pales in light of my overall sense that the authors of this book are doing the Lord's work with the best of intentions.

While I have no particular insight into the chapters on Buddhism and Native American Religion, my perception is that they share with the other chapters in this book enormous heart along with fine intelligence. They explain difficult subjects precisely in a way that will speak well to Christians less informed about these other faiths. Christians willing to open themselves to the authors' challenge will be better Christians for having done so.