

An Outline of John Cobb's, "Jesus' Abba"

Preface:

1. We live in a culture in which the word God has become increasingly negative. There are several reasons given for this:

a. Intellectual issues: the modern world has no need of God to explain natural events; the creation of the world by a supernatural God is out of step with modern science; Darwin's evolution has led to the idea that everything can be explained by natural causes. In the 19th century two positions were in opposition to each other: the supernaturalists argued for the infallibility of Scripture and miracles, while science eliminated any interference by God into the activity of nature.

The solution that worked for a while was given by the philosopher Immanuel Kant: he argued there are two kinds of ways of understanding life: one was the theory given by science in which facts could be proven or disproven, and the other was a practical sense in which people could build their lives in morally responsible ways. Science talked about one thing and religion talked about another. In this way religion and science could be kept from competing against each other. But if God is not real, and only a possibility, then religion makes no sense.

b. The idea of God was attacked in other ways as well: how could God be reconciled to the problem of evil? Examples: Christians persecuted Jews and Gentiles throughout history, Christian missionaries exploited the people they ministered to, and the church was often aligned with the powerful against the weak; God was understood in legalistic and patriarchal terms, and Christians often claimed to have a monopoly on truth. While Cobb sees himself as a liberal, he is quite critical of what liberalism has become. To refer to God as "God beyond the God of the Bible," or as "Being Itself," or as the "Great Mystery," all point to God who does nothing. Cobb says liberalism has become harmless. So he wants to advocate a renewal of a concept of God that would be worthy of human devotion and loyalty.

2. Cobb says his proposal is to think about God as Jesus did by making use of critical methods of New Testament scholars to distinguish what Jesus taught from what others said about him. Cobb places great emphasis on Jesus' use of the Aramaic term for father "Abba." Five developments in church history blocked Jesus's own teachings about God. The first is the mistranslation of the Bible into Latin where a term for God was translated as Almighty and became fixed in the English tradition ever since. Second, was the creedal development of the church where faith came to mean the acceptance of beliefs rather than a loyal commitment to God. Third, is the church's adoption of the atonement theory developed by Anselm in the Middle Ages, where God needs a sacrifice to appease his own anger. Fourth, was a theory of natural law that turned God into a moralistic tyrant. Fifth, was Protestant fundamentalism making the Bible infallible, while the Catholics did the same for the Pope. This means neither Scripture nor papal decrees could be challenged or reformed. For Cobb, to refer to God as "Papa" returns the biblical idea of God back into kinship language instead of the monarchical language used in church theology, hymns and liturgy.

3. In this section, Cobb outlines the rest of the book chapter by chapter and provides a good summary of what is to come.

Chapter 1: Jesus' Abba:

Cobb stresses that Jesus never addressed God as King, but employs the language of father, that is language of intimacy and relationships. Because of this Cobb believes the notion of the "kingdom of God" should be translated into English as "commonwealth." The doxology that ends the Lord's Prayer, which is not in the New Testament, misleads people into thinking that the biblical God is thought of as omnipotent. Unfortunately church tradition preferred the language of monarchy and continued to emphasize the non-biblical idea that God is the Almighty or the infinite powerful one. Since attempts to depersonalize the gender terms for God has not proven helpful, Cobb has decided to continue to refer to God as father, and hopes that the term "mother" will be used eventually.

1. The difference between the Greek "Pater" and the Aramaic "Abba" is emphasized to show the contrast between hierarchical, abstract views of God in Greek versus family talk that was also done even by Jewish babies. The main point is the issue of intimacy between God and humans (and creation).

2. Jesus's understanding of God as father is derived from the Old Testament Abrahamic traditions, the Mosaic sense of righteousness, and the prophets. This understanding of God has been undermined by the modern world's adoption of a mechanistic view of nature (that chapter 4 will take up in more detail). While there are extraordinary events described in the Bible, Cobb believes that the main thrust of the Scripture shows that God works through natural things and not by intervening supernaturally. Furthermore, the notion of love advocated by Jesus refers to a reciprocal type of relationship, where one feels the feelings of other people. Abba also feels our feelings; it is a divine love that is mutually fulfilling for God and all existing entities.

3. Faced with the world that emphasized wealth and power, Jesus led a counterculture movement that included a table fellowship for all. He rejected a compromise with Roman authorities to gain as much freedom as possible, or to make an armed struggle to overthrow the government. Jesus' charismatic gifts of exorcism and healing attracted people to form a non-violent counterculture movement. For Jesus this "Commonwealth" was something to be enacted in the present situation and not in some apocalyptic future.

4. Jesus accepted the miserable death imposed upon him in order to witness to the countercultural communities that followed him. There is no evidence whatsoever that Jesus died to appease the wrath of God. The earliest recordings of the New Testament show that Jesus appeared to the disciples in visions and dreams. He was there in "spirit"; the notion that he was physically or supernaturally raised comes later in the New Testament, and such stories are not as reliable historically. Paul's own experience, the earliest recorded resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament, is a vision with a blinding light. Whatever actually happened the disciples were convinced that Jesus was still alive. Jesus would not have been raised without the participation of God, yet there would be no resurrection without the involvement of Jesus himself.