

Chapter 5 Does Abba Call for Christian Exclusivism?

Do Christians who focus their life on Jesus damage their relations with other religious traditions? Cobb wishes to show why it doesn't.

1. Cobb advocates what he calls "deep pluralism." This method stands in contrast to all types of fundamentalism, whether they are secular or religious; to anyone who wants to remove all religious discussion from communities; and to those who claim that emphasizing your religion is disrespectful to another's. The latter has been the position of liberalism. Deep religious pluralism does not seek to convert others, or to make persons think yours is the only truth, but it does not shrink from stating your views forcefully and clearly. Genuine dialogue between persons of different traditions requires each one to express their deepest convictions while respecting the deepest convictions of the other. There are some beliefs in any tradition that are contrary to genuine dialogue. For a Christian to ask a Buddhist if she is saved would be to impose a Western assumption on a non-Western religion. Not all traditions are climbing up a single mountain on a different side. Cobb believes there are genuine and often incompatible positions in the different wisdom traditions. Deep pluralism expects each community to express what it believes in its own way and its own language.

2. The three Abrahamic traditions have several things in common. All appeal to Abraham's understanding of God who is not tied to any particular geographical place or to any system of government. They all accept the authority of Moses' concern for morality and the prophetic espousal of justice. Jews may be devoted to Abba without any reference to Jesus, since they could get it of their tradition directly. Jesus himself was a Jew, and Jews might find meaning in Jesus if Christians did not lay claim to him on the basis of creeds like the Trinity. A dialogue between Christians and Muslims is also possible, since the Qur'an has high regard for Jesus. The Sufi tradition in Islam advocates a God much like the one that Jesus affirms. If Christians could de-emphasize the dogmas that were developed by the church and return to Abba of Jesus, then genuine and deep conversations could take place among the traditions of Abraham.

3. Cobb spent many years in conversation with Buddhist scholars and this section is a summary of what you would find in his two published books on Christian and Buddhist dialogue. The God that is often rejected both in the West and East is a God who is thought of as a cosmic ruler and moral judge, not the God of love. The notion of God or gods is a problem, since Buddhism does not advocate the belief in God. To be enlightened, or awakened, is a realization that takes place without the assistance of gods. Since in Buddhism no "thing" exists, each moment is a combination of elements that has no ultimate substance. Underneath all the phenomena is what Buddhists call "emptiness." For Buddhists to let each moment happen as it occurs is the highest form of realization. This understanding of reality makes it difficult to

correspond to something in the Christian tradition. Cobb believes that a form of Buddhism--Pure Land--and its devotion to Amida makes a possible dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity meaningful. To pursue the notion that a " Spirit" that pervades the universe, and is found in every moment that exists, provides an avenue for discussing the presence of Abba and the compassion of the Buddha-nature.

4. While much of the understanding of indigenous tribal religion is lost in history, what we do know is that something like a divine presence in the form of unseen spirits was widespread. Clearly indigenous people had great respect for other creatures and the environment. It is plausible to believe that these indigenous people experienced the presence of Abba in their own way. For Jesus, the Spirit calling forth people to be good and respectful, which grew out of his Jewish faith, seems to pervade what we know about the life experiences of indigenous populations.