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John Cobb's Liberating Work from the Perspective of Black Theology

Theodore Walker Jr.

ABSTRACT: John Cobb offers "a critical view of inherited theology" (1980), and an affirmative answer to the question "Has Europe become theologically barren?" (2002a). He prescribes listening to alternative theological voices, including black, feminist, Latin American and Native American voices demanding liberation from oppression and poverty. He is critically attentive to continuing connections to colonialism and slavery. He offers a Martin-Luther-King-Jr.-like witness concerning the abolition of poverty globally. Hence, John Cobb is doing liberation theology and liberation ethics.

Key words: liberation theology, black liberation theology, liberation ethics, beyond the pale

In 2010-2011, liberation theologians and theological ethicists *implied* tribute to John Cobb's work by excluding the present essay about Cobb's work from a two-volume collection of essays strongly critical of the oppressively Eurocentric orientation of 54 highly prominent philosophers, theologians, and ethicists. In *Beyond the Pale: Reading Ethics from the Margins* (Westminster John Knox, 2011), edited by Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Miguel A. De La Torre, the included essays—concerning "Philosophical Tradition"—were about the works and influences of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Michel Foucault; and—concerning "Social Tradition"—about the works and influences of Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Rawls, James M. Gustafson, Paul Ramsey, Alasdair MacIntyre, Joseph Fletcher, Michael Novak, John Howard Yoder, Richard Mouw, and Stanley Hauerwas. In *Beyond the Pale: Reading Theology from the Margins* (Westminster John Knox, 2011), edited by Miguel A. De La Torre and Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, the included essays were about the works and influences of Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, Augustine, Anselm, Peter Abelard, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Schweitzer, John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead (essay by Luis Pedraja), Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Karl Rahner, Pope John XXIII, Rudolf Bultmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Johann Baptist Metz, Gordon D. Kaufman, Hans Küng, Mary Daly, Jürgen Moltmann, and George A. Lindbeck. The invited essay about John Cobb was excluded from the theology volume.

As indicated in this excluded essay, Cobb should not be included among theologians who are distinguished by failure to advocate advancing beyond "beyond the pale" (beyond white Eurocentric orientation), and by failure to advocate "reading theology from the margins" (from the perspective of marginalized and oppressed peoples globally seeking liberation from poverty and oppression). Moreover, Cobb should not be included among those failing to think critically about continuing connections to colonialism and transatlantic slavery. Thus, this excluded essay was rightly excluded. The following is a March 2016 rendering of the 30 October 2010 edition of that rightly excluded essay.

John Cobb's Liberating Work from the Perspective of Black Theology

CONE'S WITNESS AGAINST EUROCENTRIC THEOLOGY

“Black theology” is a “theology of liberation” instructed by critical appreciation of work by James H. Cone, including among his many books: *Black Theology and Black Power* (Seabury, 1969), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Orbis, 1970), and *God of the Oppressed* (Orbis, 1975). Cone employed the word “black” as an “ontological symbol” for being in solidarity with the oppressed, and the word “white” as a symbol for being the oppressor (1990 edition [1970]: 7). In accordance with the idea that God is “black,” meaning God is “God of the Oppressed,” Cone invited “whites” to “become black” (Ibid: 65), to enter into solidarity with the oppressed by advancing struggles for liberty.

Eurocentric orientation was identified as an oppressive misfortune in Cone's formal theological education. In his preface to the 1986 edition of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone wrote: “Unfortunately, my formal theological and historical knowledge was primarily limited to the dominant perspectives of North America and Europe” (1990: xii). Thus, when Cone started his writing career in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he had been formally schooled in little beyond white North American and European thought [in little ‘beyond the pale’].

COBB'S WITNESS AGAINST EUROCENTRIC THEOLOGY

John B. Cobb Jr. was born in 1925 in Kobe Japan to white Anglo-American Methodist missionary parents from the state of Georgia. He is a retired United Methodist minister and theologian, Professor of Theology Emeritus at the Claremont School of Theology (retired 1990), and co-founder (with David Ray Griffin) of the Center for Process Studies and (with Lewis S. Ford) of the journal *Process Studies*. He earned a PhD in 1952 from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago where Charles Hartshorne taught him to appreciate the works of Alfred North Whitehead. Since then Cobb has become a leading advocate and developer of process theology and postmodern thought.

In his autobiography, Cobb is critically appreciative of his social location, and its relations to theology. Racial aspects of Cobb's social location are described in the 10 February 2010 “Autobiography by John B. Cobb Jr.” Here, Cobb writes:

I was born of Southern Methodist missionary parents in Japan and spent most of my childhood there to the age of 15. This saved me from imbibing the racial attitudes so central to the culture of Georgia, which was their home. None of this freed me from feelings of racial guilt. The Cobb family had been leaders in the Southern slave-holding plantation aristocracy. Knowing that I was a Southerner affected me. I shared the knowledge of having lost a

war and suffered the consequences. I knew also that our cause was wrong.
(Cobb 2010, via www.religion-online.org)

In “A Critical View of Inherited Theology” (1980) Cobb acknowledges the “extreme ambiguity” of his “white American” male identity, saying:

The ‘60s were a shattering time for many of us. We were taught by blacks, Indians and Chicanos to read American history in a new way. The war in Vietnam forced us to look from unaccustomed perspectives ... this was for me a painful experience, forcing me to recognize the extent to which my identity was that of a white American, and making me aware of the extreme ambiguity of that identity . . . I am glad that blacks and women and Latin Americans have, throughout the decade been demanding that theology be so formulated as to call for and advance human liberation.
(Cobb 1980: 194-97)

Here Cobb gladly embraces liberationist alternatives to white Eurocentric theology, and the liberationist demand that theology “call for and advance human liberation” (Cobb 1980: 197).

In “Has Europe Become Theologically Barren?” (2002a) Cobb’s answer is ‘yes.’ Cobb identifies the theology of hope as “the last Protestant movement in continental Europe to attract great interest and a large following in the United States” (Ibid.: 4); and he prescribes “untying the strings that bound Americans to European hegemony” (Ibid.: 7). Here Cobb says:

The theology of hope gained wide attention in the United States as an alternative to the death of God. But the unraveling of Neo-Reformation theology was also the untying of the strings that bound Americans to European hegemony. Attention was grasped by new voices arising in the new world. The three most important were Black theology and feminist theology, arising in the United States itself, and Latin American liberation theology. ... These liberation theologies were highly critical of the dominant European theological tradition. ... The contrast between the Christian claim to universality and the actual European hegemony led to interest in listening to theological voices from all over the world. ...
(Cobb 2002a: 7)

Racial, gendered, economic, and other aspects of various modern oppressions are consistently deliberated about in Cobb’s works. [For instance, see Cobb’s *Postmodernism and Public Policy* (2002b).]

COBB'S KING-LIKE WITNESS CONCERNING ABOLITION OF POVERTY

Many liberation theologians are instructed by the work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (born 1929, died 1968). To be sure, in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967) King was doing liberation theology before it was called 'liberation theology.' For instance, King wrote:

All inhabitants of the globe are now neighbors. This world-wide neighborhood ... We live in a day, said the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, "when civilization is shifting its basic outlook; a major turning point in history where the presuppositions on which society is structured are being analyzed, sharply challenged, and profoundly changed." ... The deep rumbling of discontent that we hear today is the thunder of disinherited masses, rising from dungeons of *oppression* ... All over the world like a fever, freedom is spreading in the widest *liberation* movement in history. ... Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself. The Bible tells the thrilling story of how Moses ...
(King, 2010 edition [1967]: 177-80, italics added).

Here King developed themes now essential to black liberation theology, including oppression, divinely inspired liberation struggles, black liberation struggles (see King's second chapter—"Black Power"), and struggles to abolish poverty.

Furthermore, some liberation theologians are instructed by King's prescriptions for "the total, direct, and immediate abolition of poverty" globally, throughout "the world house" (2010 [1967]: 175-177), and by Gustavo Gutierrez's prescriptions for abolishing poverty in *A Theology of Liberation* (1973 [1971]). Significantly, the global abolition of poverty is advocated by Cobb.

In "Liberation Theology and the Global Economy" in *Liberating the Future*, Cobb advocates global economic policies seeking "the elimination of poverty," but not by way of the usual free-market doctrine "that global economic growth will benefit people in general" (1998: 38). In *For the Common Good* (1989) by Herman E. Daly and Cobb, instead of pledging allegiance to a free-market "economism" that values individual-private preferences above all else (Ibid.: 32-33), Daly and Cobb prescribe "redirecting the economy toward community, the environment, and a sustainable future" (Ibid.: book subtitle).

COBB'S POSTMODERNISM AND TRANSATLANTIC SLAVERY

John Cobb was perhaps the first among theologians to develop and popularize the term 'postmodern.' In Cobb's contribution to the SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought—*Postmodernism and Public Policy* (2002b), series editor David Ray Griffin notes that the term "post-modern" was first used in a theological title in Cobb's "From Crisis Theology to the Post-Modern World" in *Centennial Review, Volume 8* (1964). In 1972 Griffin began using

and enriching the meaning of “postmodern,” and in 1988 he inaugurated the SUNY series in Constructive Postmodern Thought (Cobb 2002b: 193-94, n2).

In my contribution to the SUNY series in Constructive Postmodern Thought—*Mothership Connections: A Black Atlantic Synthesis of Neoclassical Metaphysics and Black Theology* (2004), I argue that while neoclassical metaphysics serves black theology far better than classical metaphysics or modern materialism, most postmodern thought is still much too modern [still too much ‘within the pale’] insofar as postmodern scholars conceive that modernity begins with 17th century European science and technology. Rather than starting with 17th century European science and technology, according to black Atlanta scholars instructed by W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles H. Long, and by Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), modernity starts with colonialism and transatlantic slave trading, beginning in the 15th century.

In *The Slave Trade*, Hugh Thomas identifies the 08 August 1444 landing of 235 slaves shipped as cargo from Africa—across the Atlantic—to Portugal as the first recorded transatlantic slave trade (1997: 21-24). Hence, I hold that any adequate account of modernity and its possible transcendence must include sustained analysis of modernity’s many various connections to transatlantic slave trading and black Atlantic and Native American experiences. By starting with 17th century European science and technology, like modern scholars, postmodern scholars fail to recognize our connections to the birthing of modernity on transatlantic slave ships [modernity’s *Mothership Connections*]. Insofar as Cobb recognizes and critically appreciates influences from his connections to experiences of slavery (Cobb 2010), he is clearly distinct from and well beyond most modern and postmodern scholars.

COSMIC ORIENTATION

From among black liberation theologians, there are some who reject the classical European theological inheritance because it cannot avoid making God a “white racist” [See William R. Jones’s *Is God a White Racist?* (1973)]. And there are some instructed by black historian of religions Charles H. Long who advocate transcending the pale, and the black, and even the global, by reference to “cosmic orientation” (Long 1963: 18 [also Eliade 1949]), thereby placing pale black and global circumstances in cosmic context. For instance, see *Race and Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (2002) by Barbara A. Holmes. And for a few of us, the need for cosmic orientation, without recourse to classical theology or atheism, inspires critical appreciation of a neoclassical alternative such as derives from the study of Alfred North Whitehead’s *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1927-28); and hence, we are doubly appreciative of Cobb’s liberating work. [For instance, see *Hope in Process* (1991) by Henry James Jones; also (Reginald David Broadnax 2003).]

CONCLUSION

Like the 48 liberation theologians and ethicists contributing to *Beyond the Pale* (2011), Cobb offers “A Critical View of Inherited Theology” (1980), and an affirmative answer to the question “Has Europe Become Theologically Barren?” (2002a). Cobb’s fully critical evaluation of European theology—and its complicity with and support for patriarchal and other modern oppressions—inspires him to prescribe that we should be listening to alternative theological

voices. These alternative voices include black, feminist, and Latin American voices, and “new voices” from “the new world,” and from Japan, China, India, and “all over the world” (2002a), voices ‘from the margins’ and ‘beyond the pale.’ By these measures, Cobb is doing liberation theology. Moreover, Cobb’s King-like witness concerning the abolition of poverty globally, his critical awareness of continuing connections to colonialism and transatlantic slavery, and his contributions to ‘cosmic orientation’ (via constructive postmodern process/neoclassical Wesleyan-UMC-Christian thought) places him among the most liberating of those doing liberation theology.

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