

An Interview with Ward McAfee and John Cobb

Fortress Press: Your new book argues that people should be learning from the many religious traditions they encounter nowadays, and you introduce readers to several of them—Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and Native American traditions. Yet often religions seem to occasion conflict. How do we learn from this conflict?

WM/JC: Religions do not develop in self-contained cocoons. They are inter-active creations in which other religions play a part. This has been amply demonstrated throughout history. For example, Judaism's interactions with the Zoroastrian belief system of the Persians who liberated the Hebrew people from Babylonian Captivity encouraged later Jewish eschatological developments envisioning an end-time, when Good would finally vanquish Evil. And Buddhism came into being contextually within an Indian sub-continental religious hothouse that we know as Hinduism. Buddhism borrowed and redefined Hindu terminology, such as dharma (dhamma) and karma. Hinduism and Buddhism both value detachment from human cravings, and their historic competition to outdo the other in this regard is representative of their interreligious engagement.

Intra-Jewish conflicts during the beginnings of Christianity are recorded in the New Testament, and early Christian history was often shaped by a Christian desire to separate Christianity from its Jewish parentage. Concerns over just how separate the two religions should be helped define the development of the Christian Bible. Christian conflicts with Islam's rise were fought not just on the battlefield but also over notions of proper Christian practice, as represented in the medieval iconoclastic controversy. From the Muslim point of view, Christian reliance on statuary and pictorial representation revealed idolatry at the heart of the Christian faith. Byzantine leaders responded by temporarily outlawing all Christian imagery. Despite an outcome that restored pictorial representations, the Muslim challenge temporarily encouraged Christians to consider the Muslim point of view in hopes of perfecting their own faith.

Today, these kind of interreligious differences continue to spur each of the world's major faith traditions to reexamine long-held beliefs and practices. Religions in conflict with one another can at times result in no benefit, but on the deepest levels they encourage within each other a deeper self-examination and reflection. Marriage is a human institution that joins two different individuals in a profound relationship that changes each of the individuals involved. This metaphor applies in meaningful interreligious dialogue and engagement. Religious conflict among peoples who desire no outside influences can lead to genocide. Religious conflict among people who seek to be friends across porous religious boundaries can make Jews better Jews, Christians better Christians and Muslims better Muslims.

FP: Geopolitically, Islam seems to be at the forefront of change and conflict. How do you see the internal conflicts and development in global Islam, and what implications does that situation hold for Christians?

WM/JC: The world is now engaged in a struggle between modernity run amok and a hardening sense of religious traditionalism. Of all the world's great faiths, Islam appears most wedded to

tradition. By contrast, Christians have adapted quite well to rapid change, perhaps too well. The tension between these radically different sensibilities defines our own era.

Who started this tension? It did not begin with Islam but rather with the Christian West that over the last two centuries has forced its colonial presence into Muslim lands, encouraging Muslims to resist. Additionally, the Christian West's historic animosity toward Judaism, resulting in multiple pogroms and ultimately the Shoah, led directly to a Jewish takeover of Muslim Palestine in the name of creating a sanctuary for a persecuted people.

Jesus' eye-based metaphor of the splinter and the log is useful here. Rather than seeing Islam as the source of global disruption and unwanted change, Christians should examine the obstruction in their own vision blurring their own historic role in this conflict. Christians should curb their imperialistic habit of attempting forced reconstructions of "the other." Rather than blame Jews for the dilemma that is Israel/Palestine, Christians should acknowledge their own historic roles as persecutors and agents of disruption to see that their trajectory is not simply one of benign "progress."

The Christian Reformation spanned several centuries of unrelenting bloodshed. Something similar is now happening within Islam. An internal struggle within Islam is raging. This conflagration no longer is simply a response to western imperialism. It is not likely to end in this century. Hopefully, as Islam painfully adjusts to modernity, that part of the world rushing to embrace rapid change will become more responsible about owning its undesirable consequences.

FP: Native American religion has been so bound up with the story of conquest and cultural genocide that our engagement with its practices and spirituality sometimes feels phony or just exploitative. How should Christians approach this encounter? Is there ever any "pure" encounter?

WM/JC: Conquest and cultural genocide are not the only impediments to a meaningful Christian encounter with Native American religion. The spatial consciousness that defines the religious sensibilities of American Indians is alien to those of Christianity, which from its beginnings has been a proselytizing and universal faith. Nonetheless, Native American teachers (especially those who are Christian theologians) should continue to spur those of us who are not Native American to consider their ancient insights that are desperately needed if we are ever going to engage the Earth Crisis in a meaningful way. We ourselves need to reformulate our own faith tradition as if Jesus himself could see the problems caused by human disruption of God's intricate and wonderful Creation. We need to retreat from our exalted notions of being just a little lower than the angels to a place of true repentance. A deep appreciation of Native American sensibilities can help lead us into a wholesome and healthy Christian future.

FP: Progressive Christians Uniting seems to be a serious theological group and therefore a rare church phenomenon. What's the story behind the group? Do you foresee much real theological engagement in the mainline churches these days?

WM/JC: The group that produced this book—the Reflection Committee of Progressive Christians Uniting—is unlikely to be replicated in individual churches. The Reflection

Committee draws upon persons from across the greater Los Angeles basin in forming its membership under the umbrella of an organization devoted to social justice initiatives.

Despite the unlikelihood that individual churches will create serious theological discussion groups, it is possible for churches to reach across faith boundaries to engage non-Christians in serious discussions. For example, the Claremont United Methodist Church (which both of the editors of this volume attend on a regular basis) engages local Muslims in sharing perspectives from their respective faith traditions. Different communities offer diverse opportunities for dialogue. In some, Christian-Buddhist dialogue might be more rewarding. In others, conversations with Jews seeking to discover how Judaism regards Christianity as much as how Christianity regards Judaism may be more promising. The key in religious dialogue is to hear “the other” in the deepest sense, as much or more than to insist upon being heard.

FP: Sometimes it seems in your work that these religious traditions come together more readily in the areas of common action for justice or shared spirituality. But that threatens to ignore real differences, too. So is that trend an easy out or the wave of the future?

WM/JC: Focusing on commonly held social-justice concerns is an easy way for differing religions to come together in service projects. Yet it is not an “easy out.” Rather it is a method to begin a conversation of what separates us from other faith traditions. For example, Jews and Muslims often cite legalistic requirements in their respective faith traditions in order to help those lacking in material resources. In comparing our own “social justice” track record with those of Muslims and Jews, Christians must ask themselves whether the rather abstract Christian imperative to love neighbor as self results in more or less devotion to the common well being. Quite often, close association in common enterprises helps Christians observe the inner motivations of their Abrahamic relatives to do good works, and this in turn causes internal questioning and self reflection.

Engagement with other traditions may often start with social-work projects, but as the relationship deepens, so will knowledge of religious differences. In pondering the role of Judaism’s 613 laws within Judaism, and that of the Qur’an within Islam, Christians will have to consider the corresponding role that the “Christ” as preexistent Word plays (or should play) in their own faith tradition. Similarly, Christians will have to consider how their Bible is not similar to the Qur’an, a holy book composed in one lifetime and given to only one Prophet in one language. Christian-Buddhist dialogue can also reveal faith differences that lead Christians to reconsider ancient mystical influences in their own faith tradition that have been allowed to wither. Correspondingly, Buddhists will be led to consider whether their social outreach is sufficient given their core aspiration to become free of devotion to self.

In our opinion, the goal in all interreligious dialogues should not be to convert the “other” but rather to witness to the other that which is best in the traditions of each. In the process, hopefully, each participant will experience transformation and be motivated to find that which is most attractive in the “other” within its own faith’s past record.

FP: Ward, your historical work includes much about slavery. What have you concluded about people's commitment to ambiguous religious traditions that also have darker sides, such as Christianity's valorization of slavery?

WM: Religion certainly played a role in the rise of slavery in the American colonies, as well as its continuance in the new United States. From its beginnings, Christianity sanctioned slavery but also provided grounds to question it. Eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinking conditioned American thinkers to be anti-slavery, but so did revivalist frontier religion. Reason and emotion joined to produce a powerful trajectory working against slavery. A major religious revival, the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, actively encouraged the equality of all Christian believers. This deepened in the Second Great Awakening during the Early Republic era. Leaders of the anti-slavery impulse in the North owed much to rising Christian expectations that a final confrontation between good and evil awaited at the End Times, which some expected would come soon. Nat Turner, a Virginia slave preacher, was motivated by this aspect of Christian tradition to raise a bloody slave rebellion in 1831, which served to encourage Southern white repression of the few freedoms still allowed to American slaves of that period. Radical Northern preachers thereafter refused communion with slaveholders. Churches split into southern and northern factions. As early as 1850, Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina used this fact to predict that the Union itself would soon dissolve.

John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry in 1859, combining both white and blacks in armed resistance, was crushed but served to trigger a wider conflagration. The Northern response of church bells tolling the execution of this violent "terrorist" served to convince moderate Southerners that they had no future within a Union containing free states. As President Lincoln later noted, each side prayed to the same God. The war came and, in its wake, emancipation. President Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address is unique in the annals of such public proclamations. No other important public address by an American political leader has sounded as much like a Christian sermon as this one document that is inscribed in the inner walls of the Lincoln Memorial. The address reviewed the course of slavery throughout American history up to that time and described God's hand as encouraging every development along the way. Lincoln regarded it as the greatest speech of his life. Within a month after its delivery, he was cut down by an assassin's bullet.

It is hard to imagine a narrative of the account of the battle over slavery that is not drenched in Christian sensibilities. This story holds encouragement for Christians today. While many Christian teachings are couched in ambiguous and abstract formulations, they contain ample power to encourage mass movements that can change history for the better. Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated this ability during his short life. Gandhi inspired him, but King knew that Gandhi, though most familiar with Hinduism, also had been inspired by the Christian Gospels—one more positive example of interreligious influences. The power of Christianity to change the world remains as a vital force for each generation to rediscover, and interreligious dialogue is one means by which that power is both restored and unleashed.

FP: John, a generation ago you wrote *Beyond Dialogue* for Fortress Press. How has your mind changed about the whole area and prospect in interreligious encounter?

Partly because I grew up in a primarily Buddhist country and had had continuing contacts with Japanese Buddhists, and partly because the philosophical theology that I adopted at Chicago pointed to Buddhism as an especially valuable dialog partner, my first ventures in interacting with serious thinkers from another tradition were with Japanese Buddhists. My book resulted from those conversations. I stand by what I wrote there, even if here or there I would now word matters differently.

The Christian dialog with Japanese Buddhists is unusual among interfaith conversations in that it can be almost entirely about the beliefs and practices of the best forms of these traditions. That is, there are few scars on either side based on the past history of interaction. It is true that one of the most severe persecutions of all history was the extermination of Christians by Japanese authorities in the seventeenth century. But few Christians blame Buddhists for this, and Japan was never subject to Western colonization. Obviously, conversations with Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Burma have to take Christian colonial policies into account, but my book did not.

The present book has a chapter on the relation of Christianity and Buddhism, which again emphasizes Japan. Hence it can talk about what we can learn from Buddhism primarily in terms of being affected by its wisdom and sophisticated meditational practices. However, other chapters take up relationships that are far less innocent. They force us to deal with the dark side of Christianity and with the Christian teachings that have supported our most vicious actions. That is, much of what we learn in these encounters is about aspects of our tradition of which must repent. This “repentance” certainly includes regret and even shame, but our focus is on the changes we are called to make in teaching and practice. This does not exclude positive learning, but until we have ceased to teach ideas that lead to destructive actions against other communities, we may not be ready to appreciate what positively we can learn from them.

This negative learning could easily have absorbed our efforts in the chapter on Native American spirituality. We were urged by our resident Native American not go that route. Native Americans do not want to be thought of only as victims of Christian sins. They want us to think more deeply about who we are and how we think. They see that our basic views have changed little even when we are most aware of our crimes. They want us to learn how to live in the world of nature that we still seem intent on destroying. They want to be our teachers rather than our prosecutors.

We believe that the dialog comes of age only as we rethink our faith in such a way that it ceases to motivate us to destructive action toward others or toward the world and instead guides us into working with all people of good will for the salvation of this world and its human inhabitants. The book contributes to this rethinking.