The Treatment of Difference:
John B. Cobb & the Logic of soku-hi

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Abstract

This essay draws some connections between John B. Cobb Jr.'s approach to religious pluralism (*Beyond Dialogue, Christ in a Pluralistic Age,* "Toward a Christocentric Catholic Theology") and the so-called Zen Buddhist "logic of *soku-hi*" (*sokuhi no ronri* 即非の論理*)*, as developed by D. T. Suzuki (*Studies in Zen)* and explicated by Nishitani Keiji (*Religion and Nothingness)* and Abe Masao (*Zen and Western Thought)*; with reference also to the "modalism" of Joseph McLelland ("Via Postmoderna," "A Theory of Relativity for Religious Pluralism"), the "process" thinking of Charles Hartshorne (*The Logic of Perfection and Other Essays),* and the "critical realism" of John Hick.

John Cobb's Approach to Religious Pluralism

The main issue for John B. Cobb Jr.—and a formidable stumbling block for inter-religious dialogue more generally—is whether one can conceive of pluralism without "relativism"; whether "incommensurables" need be "incompatibles," to use terms favored by Joseph C. McLelland. This problem, or *problematique*, revolves around the connection and relation between logic and ontology, and draws us into the question of the meaning and implications of "difference" and "negation" within mainstream Western philosophical and religious thinking, specifically thinking about God, the Absolute, and the ultimate ground of Being. Cobb bemoans the tendency among religious pluralists and dialogists more generally to assume that "difference in image and concept" belies a greater harmony at the core; that, for all the tricks of appearance, there is no difference in the "reality" which is being referred to in divergent theologies and ways of speaking about transcendence, ultimacy, or transfiguration (Cobb 1987, 97). This hypothesis, of an *Ur*-reality to which all religions (and philosophies?) ultimately point—suggested for example, by Paul Knitter—is founded on an *a priori* assumption that metaphysics cannot be pluralistic but must ultimately be united across cultures and epochs. But to take such a step is, in Cobb's eyes, to throw out the baby with the bathwater, sacrificing the core of different religious traditions for the sake of dialogue. Most critically, it is to deny "difference" as a potentially positive and transformative category.

In short, Cobb complains that such a stance stops too soon. Dialogue may well, should, even, provoke not only a re-evaluation of one's theology and history but *also* of one's metaphysics and epistemology; i.e., one's own foundations, the very bases (logical, ontological) of one's experience. In this sense, Cobb follows H. Richard Niebuhr, when the latter says: "Metaphysics, and doubtless logic and epistemology, are as historical as ethics" (Niebuhr 12). The metaphysical ground of our thought cannot be held any more sacred than the theological, ritual, and historical aspects of our particular way. In *Beyond Dialogue,* Cobb tackles this problem, citing as a precedent mid-twentieth century comparitivist F. S. C. Northrop. In *The Meeting of East and West* (1946), Northrop argues for an approach of "complementarity" which rejects both universalism and relativism. Although East and West differ greatly, even to the core of their thinking and experience, the twain shall, or rather *can* meet. *Difference* is not the problem, but rather the treatment of difference in Western thought up to Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Prajña and the Logic of *soku-hi*

This above leads us to an examination of a non-western way of "dealing with difference," in the Zen Buddhist logic of *soku-hi*. Kyoto School philosopher Keiji Nishitani, in speaking about the often cryptic words of Zen, warns that these must not be read in a literal or rational fashion, making them into mere symbols of something deeper or transcendent; they must be taken as themselves ("dispositionally" rather than "semantically," to use John Hick's terms). "We must not turn the so-called logic of *sive/non* into a mere explanatory logic" (Nishitani 190). The logic of *sive/non* (a translation into Latin of Suzuki's *soku-hi)* brings together the Sino-Japanese characters *soku* (inseparability) and *hi* (a negation), and thus denotes the non-inseparability of things (which is not quite the same as the simple "separability" of things, despite the law of double negation). *Soku-hi* is the logic of *prajña*-intuition and can be expressed as "A is not A and therefore A is A. A is A because it is non-A" (Nishitani 291 n.19). *Prajña* is one of the most significant words in the Mahāyāna/Zen vocabulary, referring to "essential wisdom" which "transcends" the knowledge of things and the mind, going beyond the duality of subject and object; but does not "transcend" in the sense of knowledge or a state *outside* or *beyond* this world of everyday existence. Moreover, the logic of *prajña*-intuition is temporal as well as spatial: "the concept of time is intimately connected with that of space, and no facts of experience yield their secrets unless they are surveyed at the same time from the spatial and the temporal points of view"—which are not inseparable but are one. The imputation of temporality here is suggestive of Whitehead's "process theology"; for Charles Hartshorne it is "[e]vents, not things or individuals [which] are the final subjects of predicates" (Boutin 13).

In addition, the logic of *soku-hi* seems to reflect some of premises of "modal logic": [W]hile the *assertoric* or *simple categorical* proposition simply *asserts* (or denies) the predicate of the subjective… the modal proposition not only asserts (or denies) the predicate of the subject, but also states the *manner* or *mode* in which the predicate is identified with the subject or denied to the subject" (McCall 182). In short: a modal proposition states not simply the *that* but also the *how* of a proposition. Nishitani charges Western thinking with refusing to budge from the standpoint of the "*logos*-structure of being" whereby westerners attempt to pursue the *that* of something through the medium of its *what*, never entering the point at which something *is,* the "home-ground" of the "thing itself" (Nishitani 115)—neglecting, in other words, the "mode

of being" or the *how* of things (Boutin 13). As far back as Aristotle (with his tetrad of "modes": necessity, contingency, impossibility, and possibility; and his levels of causality: first, second-material, second-formal, second-efficient), we see flashes of a wider, broader, sense of modalities in logic, swept away, perhaps, out of the need for simplicity, whereby logic becomes reduced, over the centuries, to a shadow of its former self.

Hartshorne and the Necessity of Contingency

In *The Logic of Perfection,* Charles Hartshorne offers a "neoclassical" alternative to classical metaphysics. Whereas the classical model involves "a metaphysics of being, substance, absoluteness, and necessity as primary conceptions," the neoclassical model is *modal*, emphasizing "the metaphysics of creative becoming, event, relativity, and possibility" (Hartshorne ix-xiii). This reflects McLelland's comment that the modal acknowledges Bertrand Russell's remark that the mono-model—i.e., the universalist, Platonist–Aristotelian / Augustinian–Thomistic / Cartesian–Baconian model—has "paid too much attention to substantives and adjectives and too little to verbs and propositions, thus concentrating on the logic of *qualities* to the neglect of the logic of *relations"* (McLelland 1991a, 5). Modal logic, contra the Cartesian system, is a logic not of "therefore" but of "if" (McLelland 1991a, 3); it is the logic of possibility, of conditionality, of contingency. Another aspect of Hartshorne's argument is more directly theological, emphasizing the (paradoxical) "necessity of God's contingency": "God *merely* as necessary," he argues, would be a limited God, "less than any contingent thing whatever" (102). God, to be truly God, must be a partaker in *contingency*, thus, in humanity, rather than staying confined to the spheres of (unreachable, inhuman) *necessity*.

Soku-hi: Identity through Negation

But we must further investigate the logic of *soku-hi. Soku* as a conjunctive is an important trope for Sino-Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhism; put between two "contraries" it draws the "total reality into itself as their constituitive and ontologically prior unity" (Nishitani xxx). Thus, the logic of *soku-hi* shows "inverse correspondence" or "identity through negation" (xxx). Nishitani uses the *sive (soku)* construction to describe the only viable "system of being"—one made possible only on a "field of emptiness," or *sunyata*-field (being-*sive*-nothingness, nothingness-*sive*-being) (147). *Soku-hi* or *sive/non* logic, based upon this conception of non-oppositional difference, refutes the classical position of the Absolute One (whether God, Reason, or Brahman) as Ground to which all things point and converge in "sameness." Traditional philosophy and classical logic exclude "nihility," nothingness. The center in the classical "system of being" is taken as a sort of being itself, and all thought is enclosed within the circle or sphere itself; the center, in other words, is always seen from the circumference. The One is conceived of as "mere non-differentiation," abstracted from the multiplicity of all beings (149).

For Nishitani, if multiplicity and differentiation are to become truly meaningful in and of themselves, not simply as lacunae, deficiencies or deviations from the eternal, undifferentiated Absolute, "the system of being must be seen as something that opens up *nihility* at its ground" (144). The

circular or spherical model must be broken down in order for the points on its circumference to disperse outwardly.

> Of themselves, these points are not merely uniform and undifferentiated. They do not sink into a One that has had all multiplicity and differentiation extracted from it. Instead, each of them displays an orientation towards pluriformity that absolutely denies such a reduction to oneness, an orientation toward infinite tangential dispersion. (Nishitani 144)

Abe Masao, in *Zen and Western Thought* (1985), uses the Huayan/Kegon Buddhist terms *ji* and *ri* to denote the problematic we have been alluding to here: the opposition and tension between the actual, phenomenal, particular, temporal, differentiated (*ji*) and the ideal, noumenal, universal, eternal, and undifferentiated (*ri*). Western thought, says Abe, echoing Heidegger, has swung between the poles of one or the other (empiricism and idealism), perpetuating the dichotomy rather than transcending it by including "nothngness."

Beyond Nothingness: John Hick's Reality

But "nothingness" here does not mean relativism or nihilism in Yeats's sense of "mere anarchy loosed upon the world." In the early Mahāyāna *Prajñaparamita Sutra*, emptiness-as-nullity is replaced by a view of "substantial emptiness" emphasizing "not being, and not not being." *Prajña* wisdom is, in essence, the disclosure of emptiness as free from both being and non-being. According to Abe, it is a sort of "wondrous being" which, because it *empties even emptiness*, is that which makes all existents really *be* (Abe 94). On the field of *śūnyatā,* the possibility of existence is thus rescued from the palpable fall into bottomless nihility; or what Nietzsche might call "weak nihilism" and Heidegger the "forgetting of being" (*Seinsvergessenheit*). Real Emptiness involves not "nullification" but "beification" (Nishitani 124). Here "selfness" cannot be spoken of using the ordinary (either/or) logic of language and reason; here arises the *sive/non* paradoxical formula, whereby "It is *not* this thing or that [*neti, neti*], therefore it *is* this thing or that" (Nishitani 124).

In such a vision, the circle of being is dead; on the field of *śūnyatā* "the center is everywhere, the circumference nowhere." "Everything in its own selfness shows the mode of being of the center of all things" (Nishitani 146). John Hick, in his "critical realist" approach to religious pluralism, offers a vision of the selfness of different faiths, yet each at the same time "responding" to the Reality which grounds the universe; a Reality that is not an entity or a person or a locus that may be directly encountered or observed, "but that source and ground of everything including the experienced deities an absolutes" (Hick 12). As with *śūnyatā* the radical differentiation of all things as "in-themselves" need not entail the absolute dispersion of nullificating relativism, for "as a totality of absolute centers, the All is One" (Nishitani 146). This is the "world" as the "gathering together" (Heidegger) of the "being" of each "being–in–itself." As such the "world" in the *śūnyatā*-field is reminiscent of Whitehead's God, whose "nature" is "the composite nature of all the actualities of the world, each having obtained its unique representation in the divine nature" (Mellert 47). The *śūnyatā*-field is a sphere which is not a sphere by being un-circumferenced and many-centered; it is One only in the sense of being a whole of the

emptying activity (or process) of all beings. Within such, the two sides of all polarities (*ri* and *ji*, positivity and negativity, affirmation and negation) are "paradoxically and self-contradictorily identical." Abe suggests that this is nothing less than "true equality." With the One (the One as Sameness, being, the center of the circle) as ultimate ground, equality is limited by the differentiation between the substantial oneness and the things that participate in this substance. In a relation of "true equality" things do not *participate* in Oneness (substantiality) but are rather *thoroughly fulfilled* through dynamic identity with that non-substantial oneness (temporality, contingency). Thus, only "without eliminating… particularit[ies] and… differentiation[s]" are things realized *in-themselves* (Abe 177). Reverting to the *soku-hi* formula: "Differentiation as it is is equality; equality as it is is differentiation" (177).

Conclusions: Cobb's Warning

It would be tempting to draw an equivalence between the Reality of Hick and the Emptiness which is the "emptying process" of Mahāyāna Buddhism, but Cobb reminds us that much misinterpretation of Buddhism by Westerners can be attributed not to willful intransigence on the part of western Buddhologists and Asian interpreters (such as the formidable but lately much-maligned Suzuki), but to some significant differences (epistemological and logical) in the entire experience of Asia and the West; in particular, the difficulties in aligning the deeply-embedded "categories of thought" with which each side inevitably approaches and conceptualizes things. Hick's Reality-centrism, though beneficial in terms of thinking through what God can mean to Christians in a pluralistic age, does little to help true dialogue, says Cobb, and may even hinder such, assuming an equivalence that may be (probably is) false. Cobb concludes "Buddhism can be understood only by rejecting Western modes of thought and experience" (Cobb 1982, 15).

But this does not reduce inter-religious dialogue to silence; if anything it should be the spur to a more fundamental investigation of the differing "logics" and "ontologies" at work; and more, as John S. Dunne would have it, to "pass-over" these other ways and to "come back" with new insights, enriching but not replacing our own understanding of God and the experience of religion in its many manifestations. In this exposition I have briefly examined one such non-Western "logic," that of *soku-hi* or *sive/non*, which may provide a key to understanding why Western philosophical and religious thinking has had difficulty with the "problem" of difference, negation, and nothingness, mirroring, in some respects, the task of the "process" thinking of Whitehead and Hartshorne, as well as the burden of the modal thinking of Joseph McLelland; i.e., the investigation of the connection between logic and ontology.

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