
PARTICIPATORY ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY: The Ecological Theological Perspective of John B. Cobb Jr.

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Abstract

John B. Cobb Jr., a well-known theologian, philosopher, and environmentalist in the United States, has developed his participatory ecological theology from process philosophy to process theology. Some scholars believe it belongs to a distorted form of anthropocentrism, while others suggest it belongs to biocentrism. This study seeks to explore how participatory ecological theology from the perspective of John B. Cobb, Jr. based on a participatory ecological approach to the discourse of environmental ethical methods, especially from a theological perspective. However, through Cobb's attention to and exploration of environmental crises and interactions with other environmentalists, his ecological theology is shown to be a new form of participatory ecological theology that recognizes the intrinsic value of all existence and affirms the participatory ecological order of nature. He challenges the traditional Christian doctrine of "dominion". He points to a more responsible concept for humanity, that is, to serve all parts of the natural world as responsible creations, just as serving God.

Keywords: Process philosophy; Process theology; Ecological theology; Ecological sustainability; John B. Cobb, Jr.

INTRODUCTION

John B. Cobb, Jr. (1925-) is an American theologian, philosopher, and environmentalist who is an outstanding scholar in the fields of process philosophy and process theology (a philosophical movement associated with Whitehead's philosophy). According to Gary Dorrien, he is considered one of the two most important theologians in North America in the 20th century. Cobb has written extensively, including books such as *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology, For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future, Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community, and Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank*. Cobb is known for his interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from various fields of study and bringing different disciplinary perspectives into productive exchanges. The recurring theme in Cobb's work is the emphasis on the interconnectedness of ecological interdependence - with each part of the ecosystem relying on other parts. Cobb believes that the most urgent task for humanity is to protect

the world on which he depends for survival, a sentiment that Whitehead describes as “world-loyalty”.¹

The process philosophy in the Whitehead tradition is often regarded as primarily an American philosophical movement, but it has become global and has attracted great interest from Chinese thinkers. As one of the leaders in the field of process philosophy, Cobb has played an important role in bringing process philosophy to the East, particularly in helping China develop a more ecological civilization. It is widely known that sustainable development has been written into the Chinese Constitution and Party Charter. Under Cobb’s leadership, the China Institute for Postmodern Development was established in 2005, with the founders looking to China as the hope for our planet. They believe that China plays a unique leadership role in resisting various forms of hegemony in today’s world and realizing the process of postmodern transformation.²

The institute aims to invite talents from home and abroad, bridge Chinese and Western cultures, integrate scientific and humanistic knowledge, and expand research on China’s ecological civilization, constructive postmodern studies, process philosophy, and sustainable development within the new era, in order to promote the transformation of human civilization towards postmodernity. In terms of academic activities, the institute has organized more than 100 large-scale international conferences with wide-ranging impacts, including the “Rural Civilization Forum” co-sponsored with the National School of Administration of China. The Claremont Ecological Civilization International Forum, co-organized with the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, has had 12 sessions since 2006 and has had a significant positive impact both domestically and internationally.³

In addition, the institute has organized the translation and publication of major works on Western constructive postmodern and process philosophy, and has served as the chief editor of World Culture Forum News and China Process Studies, among other publications. In terms of organizational structure, the institute has established branches such as the Center for Ecological Civilization Studies, Center for Corporate Social Responsibility Studies, and Center for Sustainable Urbanization Studies. It has also

¹ The Institute for Postmodern Development of China. “About us.” April 27-28, 2018, <https://postmodernchina.org/CN/home.html#about-us>.

² Martin Savransky. “Ecological uncivilisation: Precarious world-making after progress.” *The Sociological Review*, 70, no. 2 ((2022): 367-384, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261221084782>.

³ The Institute for Postmodern Development of China. “About us.”

established more than 30 sub-centers in mainland China to conduct specialized research on ecological civilization, process philosophy, sustainable development, and postmodern agriculture, making China the largest academic force in the world in the study of ecological civilization, postmodern research, and process exploration. Cobb's vision of China leading the world in ecological civilization has garnered the attention of the highest leaders of the Party and the state.

Recently, a reporter from Xinhua News Agency interviewed Dr. Cobb and President Xi Jinping personally gave instructions on the report, expressing his hope that relevant parties would pay attention to it. After the historic China Ecological Civilization Conference in May 2018,⁴ Cobb once again expressed his support for China in an exclusive interview with Xinhua News Agency, emphasizing that "China is bringing a ray of hope to global ecological civilization. The practical actions of the Chinese government and society in promoting ecological civilization have been praised by Cobb as an important contribution to the sustainable development of human civilization."⁵

This study aims to explore how participatory ecological theology from the perspective of John B. Cobb, Jr. based on a participatory ecological approach to the discourse of environmental ethical methods, especially from a theological perspective. Through Cobb's attention to and exploration of environmental crises and interactions with other environmentalists, his ecological theology is shown to be a new form of participatory ecological theology that recognizes the intrinsic value of all existence and affirms the participatory ecological order of nature. This paper examines key aspects of Cobb's ecological theology, including his use of process philosophy, emphasis on interconnectedness and non-hierarchical relations, critique of anthropocentrism, and advocacy for an inclusive, eco-friendly, and sustainable world.

DISCUSSION

⁴ Pang Yuanyuan, Ma Xiaodong, and Xia Zhilin. "Xi Focus: Xi leads green development as world's largest horticultural expo opens." *Xinhuanet*, April 4, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-04/29/c_138019499.htm.

⁵ Gao Yang, Liu Yuexin, Qian Jianli, Guo You, and Hu Yingshan. "Improving ecological security pattern based on the integrated observation of multiple source data: A case study of Wannian County, Jiangxi Province[J]." *Resources Science*, 42, no.10 (2020): 2010-2021, <https://doi.org/10.18402/resci.2020.10.17>.

Cobb's Concern and Elaboration on Environmental Issues

Since the 1960s, Cobb has been dedicated to thinking and working on environmental issues. During this period, Paul Ehrlich's "The Population Bomb"⁶ and Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of the Environmental Crisis,"⁷ inspired Cobb to continuously contemplate the problem of environmental degradation. White held Christianity responsible for the anthropocentric view that places humans at the center of the natural world,⁸ which has guided humanity's exploitation of nature for several centuries.⁹ In other words, White believed that Christianity is the historical root of the current environmental crisis. Brennan and Y.S. Lo further explained White's perspective: (major premise) Christianity leads to anthropocentrism, (minor premise) anthropocentrism is harmful to the environment, and (conclusion) Christianity is the intellectual root of the environmental crisis.¹⁰ Like many other theologians, Cobb found this conclusion difficult to accept.¹¹ Therefore, he continued to read and discovered consistency in White's argument. Cobb insisted that Christian theologians had interpreted the biblical description of human domination in the wrong way, and that the Bible does not only concern humans but also all creatures. Therefore, this was not an error in the Bible, but rather a misunderstanding by Christian theologians of the path of human-centrism.¹² Ultimately, Cobb established an environmental participation theory.

Therefore, Cobb believes that "Christianity was certainly not the cause of the environmental crisis,"¹³ but rather the crisis is mainly caused by modern science and technology. For Cobb, technology has changed the world, but it is only a means of science.

⁶ Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968).

⁷ Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no.3767 (1967): 1203-1207.

⁸ White straightforwardly stated that the world has seen that Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion, especially in its Western form. White, "Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", 1205.

⁹ J. Soneson. "Doing Public Theology: John B. Cobb, Jr.'s Reconstruction of the Concept of "World" and "God" in the context of the Environmental Crisis." *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (1994): 154-155.

¹⁰ Andrew Brennan and Y.S. Lo, *Understanding Environmental Philosophy* (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 165.

¹¹ For many Christians, White's discourse is controversial. They accuse White of misunderstanding the creation story in the Bible. They believe that this same Bible assigns to humanity the managerial responsibility of caring for God's creation. Soneson, "Doing Public Theology", 155; White overlooked the fact that management is a reality in his paper.

¹² John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1992), 93.

¹³ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*, 2.

Science and technology are also responsible for the degradation of the Earth's environment. He stated, "The present global crisis has emerged from the modern wedding of science and technology."¹⁴ In some ways, Cobb supports White's view because as the dominant religious tradition in the West,¹⁵ Christianity has encouraged the anthropocentric attitude of exploiting the environment.¹⁶ He criticized the church and some Christian theologians for supporting the so-called human domination of nature in the name of human supremacy. He said, "Christianity teaches that only man alone is made in the image of God and God has established him as lord over all other creatures..... This tendency has dominated Western Christendom..... Man may be lord of all other creatures, but he is accountable to a far superior lord, the creator of all."¹⁷

According to Cobb's view, the degradation of the Earth's environment is mainly carried out in two ways: natural and human-made. Before humans arrived, natural phenomena such as epidemics, volcanic eruptions, blizzards, floods, and earthquakes were the main cause of natural degradation. With the arrival of humans, their hunting and gathering activities accelerated environmental degradation. During the period of animal husbandry and agriculture, the activities of domesticating animals and plants led to systematic degradation, and the development of human civilization has accelerated this degradation. Along with the dominant philosophical view that humans dominate nature, modern science and technology have strongly promoted the continuation of environmental degradation. Therefore, the environment is degrading due to "mechanistic assumptions of nature, human greed, lack of long-term vision, and social arrogance."¹⁸ Natural degradation of the environment is mostly beyond human control, so it is difficult to take necessary action to slow down environmental degradation. Cobb believes that after each natural cause, the environment can enrich itself through self-sustaining ecosystems. However, human-made natural degradation will have sustained destruction, and humans must be very cautious about this. For Cobb, the current environmental crisis is mainly caused by human behavior and activity, and humans' most urgent responsibility

¹⁴ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology* (Texas: Environmental Ethics Book, 1972), 33.

¹⁵ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, 33-35

¹⁶ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, 33-35. John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*, 2.

¹⁷ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, 117.

¹⁸ J. Soneson, "Doing Public Theology: John B. Cobb, Jr.'s Reconstruction of the Concept of "World" and "God" in the context of the Environmental Crisis." *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (1994): 155.

is to strive for environmental sustainability. Cobb does not focus on who or what bears greater responsibility for the environmental crisis.¹⁹ Instead, he tries to show a framework to address and reverse these issues. For example, in the book "For the Common Good," which Cobb co-authored, they emphasized ecological regionalism, which seeks to reform modern economic theory and activities to mitigate current environmental problems.²⁰

The Influence of Process Philosophy on Cobb's Understanding of Natural Theology

Cobb was influenced by Whitehead's process philosophy in many ways. Process philosophy connects metaphysical reality with continuous change and growth, maintaining that all things require a creative process for their growth and change. Whitehead observed that in previous eras, human understanding of science, ethics, and religion was influenced by their community worldview. However, now, all things are influenced by Western science. Cobb disagreed with this partial view and attempted to develop a comprehensive way of thinking through process philosophy, in order to express religious, ethical, cultural norms, and traditional values.

In order to seek a comprehensive cosmology, Whitehead developed his process philosophy in a new dimension. For him, nature has an intrinsic value, and each part of the environment is real and participates in it in its own way along with humans. For Whitehead, all organisms, living and non-living, in nature are interconnected and he criticized those who denied this fact. He identified two types of evil: firstly, the neglect of the real relationships of all organisms in the environment; and secondly, the denial of their intrinsic value. And Whitehead views the entire universe as a gigantic ecosystem.²¹ Cobb deeply influenced by this idea and applied some of its concepts to the natural view of Christianity. Ultimately, Cobb transformed Whitehead's process philosophy into a theology of the environment, known as process theology.²² He used process theology to

¹⁹ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, 13-17. John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*, 127-130.

²⁰ Similarly, in the book "Is It Too Late?". Cobb discusses the ecology of life and developmental models in order to address the current ecological crisis.

²¹ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, 112-113. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

²² The core of process theology involves the process philosophy, which rejects the dichotomy between mental and material realms and does not support the notion of "every entity existing independently of all other entities." Rather, it advocates for the idea that "every event is largely composed of its relations with other events. John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, 33-35. John B.

shape a new Christian perspective, in order to reverse the destructive practices supported by dominant theology in the past. In this view, Cobb viewed creation as a dynamic process of shaping, growth, and change, with all things following this process, originating from nature and returning to nature. In this sense, God is also described as a creator of the process. Many scholars refer to the process as natural law, but Cobb prefers to refer to it as nature, hence, nature is sacred.

This naturalistic perspective greatly assisted Cobb in comprehending ecology. As a natural system, ecology concerns the relationship and interconnectedness between biological organisms and their environment. Such a natural view believes that everything is interconnected and interacts with each other, while also competing with other groups for existence and growth. Interdependence and competition are both necessary for the ecological system. In Cobb's view, as a part of nature, humans must respect this wonderful natural system. Going against this system is betraying humanity itself. Cobb pointed out that nowhere in the Bible does it indicate that this natural system is valueless. After rejecting the traditional Christian anthropocentric view held by radical humanism, it is committed to the rights and values of ecology from the perspective of self-constructive process theology.

Traditional Christian Ecological Theology

Cobb is a critic of traditional Christian ecological views. Traditional Christian theologians and scholars believe that in the creation story in Genesis, God tells humans to control nature (Genesis 1:27-28). It is this idea of humans being commanded to conquer other things that leads to the belief that humans are superior and other things inferior.²³ They cite other biblical passages, claiming that other living things and organisms have instrumental rather than intrinsic value and are therefore not considered valuable. However, in Cobb's view, this Christian faith path has given humans unrestricted permission, causing humans to exploit nature for several centuries. He believes that for a long time, relevant biblical verses have been misunderstood by theologians.²⁴ From the same biblical text, Cobb shows that humans are responsible for

Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*, 2-3.

²³ Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 125.

²⁴ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Matters of Life and Death* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1991), 27 ; John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*, 92-93 ; Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, *For the*

taking care of God's creation, rather than seeing themselves as beneficiaries.²⁵ Since humans were created in God's image, this is an indication that humans are superior to other created beings and that the Bible also tells humans to manage other created beings. However, at the same time, this creation story describes Adam as a worker and caretaker in the Garden of Eden. Similarly, Santmire, Bouma, and Bakken have further elaborated on the same view.²⁶ This means that the special status granted to humans is to protect nature, not to exploit it.

Cobb points out that before humans, creations were considered good by God, and after humans were created, the entire creation was very good in God's eyes.²⁷ This shows the intrinsic value of other creations and that their value does not depend solely on their relationship with humans. Therefore, what Cobb intends to point out is that when other creations are created by God other than humans, they have intrinsic value, and this value comes from their creator, not humans.²⁸ According to this argument, human co-creative identity is among all of God's creations, not external to them, and vice versa. Similarly, Jesus in the New Testament showing concern for the value of sparrows suggests the intrinsic value of other animals.²⁹ "How the lilies grow in the wild" (Matthew 6:28) also shows the intrinsic value of plants. Paul's redemption theory includes all created beings. Similarly, the Noah's Ark shelter for other creations is also in God's command,³⁰ and the rainbow covenant after the flood also includes the animal world.³¹

In fact, human beings are often viewed as part of nature, and the Bible does not employ a binary view of humanity and nature. Regrettably, later Christian scholars and theologians used binary thinking to support an opposition between humans and nature, which actually lacks biblical support. Cobb straightforwardly points out that, "if there is

Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 393.

²⁵ There are 46 references in the Bible to humanity's responsibility to care for the natural environment.

²⁶ H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken, *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics* (Michigan; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 232.

²⁷ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Matters of Life and Death*, 27.

²⁸ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, 117.

²⁹ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), 18.

³⁰ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Matters of Life and Death*, 23-24.

³¹ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy*, 18.

a dualism, it is between creator and Creation.”³² He continues, “...the Bible does not support strict centrism in terms of the relation of human beings to other creatures...”³³ For Cobb, the Bible calls for a strong consistency centered on God, which has been replaced by a human-centered viewpoint. Cobb notes that over centuries it has been misunderstood and distorted in many ways. First, it was interpreted through anthropocentric perspectives.³⁴ Second, service to God was separated from service to creatures. God was separated from creatures other than human beings, and nature was considered to be external to humanity. However, according to the path centered on God, service to creatures should be seen as service to God, as one of the ways to please God. Therefore, the path centered on God pushes for “participatory inclusion.”³⁵

From Cobb’s interpretation, the conclusion can be reached that the Bible never supported this kind of human-centered perspective that seems to have assigned value only to things that enter into a relationship with humanity. On the contrary, the Bible mentions the relationship between all creatures and God, and their Creator has designed them for a special purpose. This is why all organisms, living and non-living, have their own value in nature, regardless of human beings’ intrinsic value. By rejecting the traditional human-centered path, Cobb discusses a participatory view of nature, which has close links to a biocentric environmental ethics. However, in the most genuine sense of the term, it is not a biocentric path.

Cobb’s Participatory Ecological Theology View

Environmental ethics can be mainly divided into anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism paths.³⁶ Cobb considers both of them, but is not satisfied with the current form of environmental ethics, as they are not sufficient to address the environmental crisis. For him, the current environmental ethics fail to create a strong sense of nature and an inner consciousness within human thought. Furthermore, he believes that without cooperation between religions, such a spiritual sense and inner consciousness cannot be generated. Cobb first tries to transform the human attitude

³² Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*, 93.

³³ Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*, 93.

³⁴ Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*, 93.

³⁵ Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*, 93.

³⁶ Kees Vromans (Ed.), *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction and Learning Guide* (Sheffield: Greenleaf Publishing Ltd, 2012), 59.

toward nature and persuade people to practice a lifestyle that is compatible with ecological sustainability. In this regard, he sees religion as a positive force to achieve this goal. He tries to reinterpret Christian teachings to give Christianity a brand-new face.³⁷ If Cobb's ecological theology view is evaluated based on the value path of environmental ethics, it can be found that it is quite in line with the biocentric value path. Northcott pointed out that Cobb's environmental ethics path is between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism³⁸: he is not entirely biocentric.

For Cobb, although all creatures have their inherent value, their values are not all at the same level, and there is a hierarchical system of value between them.³⁹ He supports Leopold's biotic pyramid theory,⁴⁰ which states that humans have more value than animals, and animals have more value than plants, and all living organisms have more value than non-living organisms. An organic being in the environment depends on other organic beings for its survival and growth. For example, tigers and lions feed on other animals, not on grass. Therefore, Cobb advocates a healthy biotic pyramid with humans at the top.⁴¹ There is a cycle in the ecosystem, and without this cycle (interdependence), nothing will exist. All things are important to others, that is, they have inherent value and instrumental value for others. Humans are also like this, they have value as a responsible part of nature and have value for others (such as becoming food for other living organisms in the environment after death). Therefore, becoming a vegetarian cannot solve the problem of animal rights. Schweitzer supports killing fish as food for some birds. In Cobb's view, when feeding on other animals, a principle of compassion-based justice needs to be constructed.⁴²

Unnecessary, luxurious, and overly comfortable lifestyles are not justifiable. As a rational being, humans should be responsible and act with reason and accountability in all their actions. Cobb emphasizes the need for rational and responsible changes to current lifestyles to preserve every part of the natural world.⁴³ However, this responsible

³⁷ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, 55-56.

³⁸ Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 161.

³⁹ Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (Texas: Environmental Ethics Book, 1982), 205.

⁴⁰ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 215.

⁴¹ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, 55-56.

⁴² John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, 55-56.

⁴³ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*, 34.

way of life is only possible when humans see themselves as collaborators in the healing and growth process of the natural world. When mutual relationships are the primary factor and neither party displays dominance over the other, partnership entails responsibility.⁴⁴

To some extent, Cobb's understanding of Christian ecological ethics also includes biocentrism, ecofeminism, and environmental pragmatism. Although Cobb's hierarchical value system and Leopold's biotic pyramid concept have a foundational existence in anthropocentric paths, he opposes the radical anthropocentric paths that come from Christian literature and theological teachings. Dissatisfied with this approach to environmental ethics, he attempts to reconstruct it through participatory environmentalism.

Cobb also notes modern radical environmental movements such as "earthism"⁴⁵ and refers to it as a challenge to "economism"⁴⁶. This movement is a response to the development of the current economic system and global economic policies, which neglect the ecological response. He recognizes that this movement is becoming increasingly popular and has the potential to transform current aggressive economic growth into sustainable development. He hopes that earthism can become a healthy and ideal opposition center to economism, as only it can generate the passion and energy needed for such efforts. However, Cobb criticizes the formation of this movement. He expresses it as a scientific materialism that puts the Earth in God's place and serves the Earth in the same way as serving God. Of course, Cobb cannot view Earth as God, and vice versa.⁴⁷ He compares earthism to idol worship and does not support it for the same reason.⁴⁸ For the same reasons, Cobb has reservations about the "Gaia hypothesis," although he

⁴⁴ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, 124.

⁴⁵ Geocentrism refers to the efforts that are devoted towards the care of the Earth, but it is not limited to the viewpoint of looking after the Earth and all its inhabitants. Instead, it gradually becomes a kind of religion of the Earth; John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1999), 168.

⁴⁶ Economic liberalism is an opportunistic trend that emerged in the late 19th century, characterized by an emphasis on short-term economic gain and a reduction in consideration of all social factors for the sake of economic expansion. As an ideology, it has been criticized by philosophers and rights movements for its disregard of human welfare. According to Cobb, economic liberalism has become so dominant that it has replaced nationalism as the dominant force in society; John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1999), 20-25, 35.

⁴⁷ John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank*, 179.

⁴⁸ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*, 40.

appreciates it to some extent. In summary, for Cobb, viewing the Earth as a living and sacred thing is appropriate because it can help people respect the Earth without harming her. However, worshipping the Earth as the ancient Greek people did and honoring the Earth as the goddess "Gaia" are unacceptable to Cobb.

Of course, Cobb's process theology in environmental ethics has also attracted some criticism, such as from Palmer. Palmer argues that Cobb's process theology contains a double statement on human superiority: one is an existing hierarchical system, and the other is that humans produce more value than other species.⁴⁹ This process path is also not immune to anthropomorphism, ultimately distinguishing humans from other forms of life. The characteristics of Cobb's process theology lie in the explanation of the God-human-similarity in the universe, which seems to be questionable in the construction of environmental ethics. Based on these limitations, Palmer regards Cobb's process theology as an unsatisfactory choice for environmental ethics. He points out that many biologists may find it difficult to understand Cobb's "grades of being" view.⁵⁰ Cobb believes that human communities are classified as existing units like cells, but in Hartshorne's view, human communities are a quasi-organism rather than a true organism like cells.⁵¹ In Cobb's understanding of life, there is still neglect of the function of non-perceptible entities in the environment.⁵² In addition, Kreel sees that Cobb is more concerned with living organisms, although he also mentions the happiness of the unconscious.⁵³ For this reason, Trickitt criticizes Cobb's neglect of this issue.⁵⁴ From an ecological perspective, non-perceptible entities cannot be denied, and when Cobb discusses ecological definitions, he also acknowledges this fact.⁵⁵

Although Cobb acknowledges the value hierarchy and the biological pyramid, which shows human superiority over other species, he does not deny the inherent value of other non-human entities in the environment. On the contrary, with his interpretation of the Bible and scientific evidence, he shows that other non-human entities have intrinsic

⁴⁹ Clare Palmer, *Environmental Ethics and Process Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 93.

⁵⁰ Clare Palmer, *Environmental Ethics and Process Thinking*, 93.

⁵¹ Clare Palmer, *Environmental Ethics and Process Thinking*, 94.

⁵² David G. Trickitt. "Book Review of *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* by Charles Birch and John B. Cobb." *Environmental Ethics* 5, no. 1 (1983): 93.

⁵³ Clare Palmer, *Environmental Ethics and Process Thinking*, 94.

⁵⁴ David G. Trickitt, (Book Review of *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* by Charles Birch and John B. Cobb), *Environmental Ethics* 5, no. 1 (1983): 93.

⁵⁵ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, 28.

value.⁵⁶ He criticizes those Christian theologians and scholars who misunderstand the scripture (Genesis 1:28) and thereby deny the intrinsic value of other entities.⁵⁷ He suggests reinterpreting Genesis 1:28 and 2:15 to have a clear and comprehensive understanding of the relationship between humans and other non-human components in nature. Linked to the biocentric value path, Cobb developed his own ecological theology view of environmental ethics, which mainly focuses on the participatory relationship of all life forms on Earth.

Other Environmentalism Paths beyond Anthropocentrism

Other influential environmental paths beyond anthropocentrism require a comprehensive understanding. Cobb first talks about animal rights organizations, which are raising their voices against the abuse and misuse of animals in the name of food and scientific experiments. Their popular slogan is, "We should survive and let others survive." In practice, this is almost impossible to follow, because in nature, one organism feeding on another is commonplace. It is logical to apply ethical ethics to unjustified animal slaughter, and people should show compassion for domestic and wild animals. Extreme ecologists support the elimination of the classification between living and non-living things. They suggest forgetting about human identity because this identity consciousness produces superior concepts in human thinking and exploits nature on this basis. Of course, this is criticized by social ecologists who believe that forgetting about human identity or merging into nature cannot solve the environmental crisis. Instead, the solution lies in changing the organizational patterns of human life. For social ethicists, the main culprit of the environmental crisis is capitalism, so the first battle should be against capitalism. Along with social ecologists, ecofeminists also raise a strong voice against human oppression. However, they think that simply changing organizational patterns is insufficient, and they demand the complete destruction of patriarchal social order. They believe that men dominate and exploit women and nature, both of which suffer torture from men. They link post-patriarchal society with ecological sustainability.

Meanwhile, extreme ecologists, social ecologists, and ecofeminists are also under attack from supporters of sustainable agriculture. They believe that these three have not provided farmers with teaching on how to produce food in a sustainable way, as they only

⁵⁶ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, 117.

⁵⁷ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*, 92-94.

focus on the wild and forget that the wild cannot sustain human beings. The animal rights movement has also failed to provide a sustainable pattern for agriculture. For them, it is important to return to the traditional wisdom of farmers cultivating the land, which is overlooked by modern science and technology. Those who focus their theories and understandings on environmental sustainability try to identify the core issue as controlling environmental degradation. They think that people are impatiently trying to reach Marxist socialism, post-patriarchal society, significant spiritual change, and a return to the traditional wisdom of sustainable agriculture, all in order to solve the current environmental problems. For them, rapid environmental degradation is due to the use of nuclear energy and fossil fuels to produce energy. Their focus is on how to reduce the use of these fuels and specialize in renewable clean energy, such as solar, wind, water, and biogas. Those who are committed to the Green Revolution are considered to take a moderate path. They try to incorporate all of the above environmental ethicists and environmental movements into practical work. They do not despise any group, but work with a humble spirit at the grassroots level. Their main projects include planting trees, discouraging people from cutting down trees, encouraging the reduction of natural resource consumption, and being responsible for saving the environment. This movement is becoming increasingly popular in Europe and in some European countries, such as Germany, where it has become a political party.⁵⁸

Cobb appreciates all of the above-mentioned ideas and activities because they indicate that people are now aware of the major issue of environmental sustainability. However, he is very critical of the unnecessary arguments between these new theories and practices. He supports forming a joint force among them to solve the unprecedented ecological crisis.

He is happy to see that the church has now recognized that “human beings are not the only parts of God’s creation with inherent value.” But he thinks that this is far from enough. Cobb suggests that the church reform its policies.⁵⁹ In his view, the traditional concept of management responsibility and the current environmental ethics are not enough to take care of God’s creations. A sense of responsibility must be realized, and the Christian community must do something for sustainable ecology. At the same time, they

⁵⁸ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*, 101-105.

⁵⁹ Ferre Frederick “Book Review of *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology, and Justice* by John B. Cobb, Jr.”: 360.

must realize in thought and behavior that they have not neglected God's position, which Cobb has always emphasized. Faced with the urgent need, as an ecological theologian, Cobb supports participatory environmental ethics and strengthens this argument with evidence from the Bible and other logical analyses.⁶⁰ Although Cobb starts from a process theological perspective and focuses on the Christian environmental morality foundation, he wants to include all religious traditions in the discourse of ecological balance. Therefore, he advocates for inter-religious dialogues on global ecological issues, combining inter-religious dialogues with environmental concerns.⁶¹ This is not to form a global ecological ethics based on all cultural and religious traditions, but through "the creative transformation of various religious and cultural traditions, and corresponding transformations of the world".⁶²

The efforts and activities of Christianity to take care of the environment have so far been limited, compared to the demands of the current ecological crisis. The environment is God's creation and human beings are an integral part of it. Since human beings who are an integral part of God's creation have been given the responsibility of care and nurture of the environment, it means that human beings will give an account of how the environment is used or misused. Environmental stewardship is the responsibility for environmental quality shared by all those whose actions affect the environment, including the church and every member of the church.

CONCLUSION

From process philosophy to process theology, Cobb has developed his participatory ecological theology. Despite being misunderstood by some scholars as anthropocentric due to its endorsement of a value hierarchy system and biological pyramid, Cobb's discussion on theocentrism reveals that it does not belong to anthropocentrism, but rather is centered on God and recognizes the inherent value of all existence based on a hierarchical order. Some scholars also consider it to be biocentric, although there are indeed many similarities between the two, Cobb's ecological

⁶⁰ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy*, 401-404.

⁶¹ Pan Chiu Lai, "Inter-religious dialogue on ecology: A view from China", *Religions* 4, (2014): 91-92.

⁶² John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank*, 92.

theological ethics suggests a direct and unique measure to address current environmental issues. As Noscoot pointed out, Cobb's environmental ethical path is between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, dramatically deviating from traditional monotheistic Christian theology, and sharing many similarities with a holistic, mystical, and ecologically centered ecology. However, Cobb does not confine himself to the interpretation of relevant biblical scriptures, but integrates himself with modern biological scientific knowledge. By connecting faith tradition with philosophy and science, he presents a comprehensive understanding of life based on ecological sustainability.

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