

Christianity and Eastern Wisdom

John B. COBB, Jr.

Our topic today has to do with Eastern wisdom. I'm not going to try to expound Eastern wisdom. I'm going to speak of the theological problem for Christians that has arisen out of our encounter with Eastern wisdom, and of how the Christian witness in a non-Christian world is affected by our awareness of this problem.

The East in the West. Most of you doubtless already know something of the vast advance of interest in Eastern traditions in the United States at the present time. Among young people keenly interested in religious practices, Eastern traditions have more appeal than do the Western. On college campuses in the United States today, you are more likely to find sophisticated young people with religious interest participating in religious groups that are oriental in origin rather than Christian in origin—at least in California, and I think that is not an isolated phenomenon. This is a striking, startling reality to which the Christian community needs to pay attention.

So when we think of the Eastern traditions in the United States today, it is no longer a matter of "Isn't it interesting to find out about these things going on thousands of miles from our shores?" We are very often concerned about what it is that is happening to our children or the children of close friends and why it is that they are so fascinated. What has been for scholars a theological question has now become for many ordinary church people a practical question. "Are we to rejoice that our children have found religious depth, meaning, and solace which

A slightly revised and abridged form of a lecture delivered on 29 March before the 1978 Conference of Missionaries related to the United Church of Christ in Japan (Kyōdan) under the conference theme "Christian witness in a non-Christian world." This presentation retains the informal tone of the original lecture.

our own churches seem not to have provided for them, or are we to regard it as some profound betrayal of all that we believe in when they become Buddhists, Hindus, or something of that sort?"

Christian reflection on other traditions. In the West we have had an interesting history of reflection on this subject which I would like very briefly to review. There is a much longer history of Christian reflection about the other members of the Jewish family than about Eastern religions. That is, there has long been Christian reflection about Islam and Judaism, but it was only from the latter half of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth that European theologians knew enough about Eastern religions for their existence to enter significantly into their reflections. Hegel and Schleiermacher seem to me to date the beginning of what we might call modern reflection about Eastern religions. Each, in quite different ways, investigated Eastern traditions largely in order to show the superiority of Christianity. Their awareness of the reality of these other traditions made it theologically important for them not simply to defend religion in general, but to defend the distinctively Christian form of religion.

Hegel spoke of the "human spirit" as arising in the East and moving West, coming to its climactic and full expression in the Prussian state with its form of Protestant Christianity. Schleiermacher did a typological study that likewise displayed Protestant Christianity as the apex of human religious development.

Toward the end of the century, the greatest thinker who dealt with these questions was Ernst Troeltsch. He continued on into the twentieth century, and he too began his inquiries with the idea of showing how the "spirit" (that is, the divine principle, the divine reality) came to its full and final manifestation in Christ and Christianity. But Troeltsch's career marks a turning point that created a new set of problems for twentieth century theology to wrestle with. That is, the way in which Troeltsch

tried, at the beginning of the twentieth century, to demonstrate what he called "the absoluteness of Christianity" did not stand up for him when he later examined more closely the great Eastern traditions. He discovered that the bases on which he had argued for the absoluteness of Christianity could not withstand detailed historical investigation. Therefore he gave up the claim, and toward the end of his life, just after World War I, he wrote a lecture in which he indicated that just as Christianity was bound up with Western culture and the Western spirit and was for Western people the fullest and final form of religious life, so one would have to say of the great Eastern traditions that they were bound up with other cultures that they fulfilled and expressed. In other words Troeltsch introduced what today we call a pluralistic view of the great religious traditions of the world. Around 1920, I think, was the first time a leading Western theologian made that kind of statement.

Troeltsch represented a deep interest in the history of religions, an interest grounded in profoundly theological concerns. After him, the field of religious studies split into two: a confessional theology and a descriptive history of religions.

Barth declared, "Christianity is not a religion." One of the important meanings of saying Christianity is not a religion is the affirmation that the context within which we are to understand Christianity is not that of comparison with other religious traditions. From Hegel through Schleiermacher and Troeltsch, it was assumed that Christianity was a religion, that Buddhism was a religion, that Hinduism was a religion, etc., and that the way to understand Christianity was to see its similarities to and differences from these other religions. Barth said in effect, "No, you don't learn anything about Christianity in that horizon of comparison. Religion is the way in which human beings seek to find their own salvation or to rise up to the divine. Christian faith is a witness to a totally different reality, namely, the divine condescension to us." This contrast, the divine action breaking into history versus the human quest, was fun-

damental to what Barth was speaking of when he denied that we should view Christianity as a religion at all. It might take on religious character, but to whatever extent it did so, that was evil, that was a failure. It was a lack of faith when Christianity became in any way religious.

Barth's influence was so enormous that it silenced to a large extent, within theology, the interest in other religious traditions. Christian theology between the wars, and on into the period after World War II, paid extremely little attention to the other religious traditions of the world. Christianity almost closed its eyes to these questions.

Normative concerns in scholarship. This does not mean that Westerners ceased to be interested in such questions. The discipline of History of Religions ceased to be a *theological* discipline. It became a "purely academic discipline." Scholars denied that they were approaching the vast range of religious experiences in human history from the Christian perspective or with any concerns generated by the Christian faith. They viewed religious beliefs as human phenomena just like all other human phenomena. They announced it as their intention to study religious phenomena with the same spirit in which other human phenomena were studied—a completely secular spirit that would manifest what they are with complete fairness, impartiality, and justice. This secular spirit also tends to mean rather quickly: "without making any judgments whatsoever as to better and worse." We simply describe the phenomena for what they are, doing as much justice to them as we can.

Since about 1925, theology began to ignore the rest of the religions. Those who studied them did so with little or no normative interest. This may have been an important stage of development in the West's coming to terms with the East, but it is surely a very inadequate, broken, fragmented expression for Christians. In order to be fair to the religions we have to step outside of faith. To maintain faith we have to ignore them.

Surely this kind of voluntarily chosen blindness cannot be permanent. But this is the reason that the missionary movement was encouraged for a period of some decades to ignore the question of the traditional religions of the East. Moreover, Christian leadership in the Asian countries to a very large extent followed Barth's lead. So a range of questioning that had become important in the nineteenth century was thus shunted aside.

In the last ten or fifteen years we have begun to overcome this duality. It seems to me that the question of other religions is a profoundly important theological question, not just something to be turned over to purely neutral, objective scholarship. There have been quite a few books written in the last few years that reflect this awareness. I've written a book called *Christ in a pluralistic age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975) and have struggled with the question: how, recognizing the pluralism that we certainly must recognize, can we as Christians make the affirmation of Christ's ultimacy and relevance for all situations? I will try to suggest a few ideas that have come to me on this subject.

Encounter, negation, and incorporation. The encounter with the East has made us reconsider our own Western history in very fundamental ways. A great deal of what we had supposed to be inextricably involved in Christian thinking turns out to be inextricably involved in a particular Western pattern of thinking. We see this more clearly in the encounter with the East.

I think Barth was right in a profound sense when he said that Christianity is not a religion. But then I think we have to go on to say that Buddhism is not a religion, Confucianism is not a religion, and perhaps even Hinduism is not a religion.

What emerged during what Jaspers identified as the "axial period" of human history was in many respects a desacralizing spirit. The frontiers of the sacred were pushed back, and a large area was established for the secular world to be independ-

ent, for the profane spirit to rule. Hence in our dealing with these other traditions, the category of "religion" is not the most illuminating one to use.

A better analogy for us, rather than to think of the encounter with Buddhism as comparable to that with Islam in the medieval period, is to think of the encounter with Eastern traditions as analogous to the encounter of the early church with the Hellenistic environment in which it grew up and spread. In that encounter the first phase was one of negation. Within the New Testament itself we have witness to a period in which what the new believers experienced in their environment was superstition, idolatry, and immorality. They denounced this in the name of Christ. I think it was an appropriate response.

But in the following centuries Christians became aware that in the culture in which they lived, in addition to these crude religious manifestations, there was also *philosophical wisdom*. There was Plato. There were the Stoics. There were the Epicureans, the Aristotelians, and others. Christians simply could not respond to Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics in the way they had responded to Diana of Ephesus and the way she was worshiped. This was a different phenomenon. Now how could the church, how could Christians, respond to Greek wisdom? That was a very important issue which Christians struggled with for several centuries. There were a variety of answers to that question.

One answer was: in order to maintain the purity of Christian faith we must have as little to do with Greek philosophy as possible. "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?" is a phrase of Tertullian's which symbolizes that kind of thinking. Actually, Tertullian was very much influenced by certain strands of Greek thought, but he did not want to be. He wanted to maintain this distance and purity.

Others said, "Yes, there is a great deal of wisdom and truth in what these Greek thinkers have done, and when we investigate this deeply we see that this wisdom and truth come from biblical

origins. Moses is older than Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, and their wisdom must have been derived from our own biblical sources.” This is a response which at least makes it possible to become positive with respect to what one encounters, but historically it is very questionable. One might be able to trace a little influence of Judaism on Stoicism, but to say that Plato got his ideas from the Old Testament is straining history in ways that even the early church could not quite swallow. So that response did not work.

Another possibility is to say that God has not left himself without a witness anywhere and that therefore we find in Greek philosophy a preparation for the gospel comparable to the Old Testament preparation for the gospel. So philosophy can be the Old Testament, so to speak, for Greek Christians. That was another way in which a more positive response was possible.

But the final, practical response of the church was to recognize the relative autonomy of Greek philosophical thinking, to recognize that it was profoundly different from biblical thinking, and then to progressively include Greek wisdom within the whole compass of Christian teaching. Now this was an extremely dangerous thing to do. There were some who did it in such a way that they became in fact more Greek than Christian. The power of Greek philosophy was such that once one became absorbed in it, one had to reinterpret Christian teaching so as to make it fit with, for instance, Plato. Plato's thought, then, really became controlling. But what to me is remarkable in showing the vitality and creative power of the Christian tradition is that in the end it went the other way basically. That is to say, in Augustine, who is the climax of this struggle in the ancient church, I think there is no doubt but that the Christian faith remained the primary unifying principle for all his thinking. Nevertheless in very basic and profound ways he was able to enrich his thought out of the Greek traditions, especially the Platonic and Neoplatonic, though not without influence from other features of Greek wisdom as well. So the form Christianity

took for a thousand years after him was one that assimilated the best of Greek wisdom into the Christian community.

Even so, we should not regard this as merely positive. From our perspective today, Augustine's thought is in profound tension with biblical modes of thought. Much of what makes it difficult today for us to respond appropriately to Asian modes of thought we owe precisely to the way in which the Greek thought influenced the Christian development. So I am not trying to hold this up as an *entirely* good event.

But let us suppose that it had not happened. Let us suppose that the church had really tried to ignore Greek philosophy or had condemned it. Then many of the most sensitive, thoughtful people would have found it absolutely impossible to be Christians. You cannot be wholeheartedly committed to a faith which is consciously and intentionally excluding a great deal of truth and wisdom that, when once investigated, commends itself to you as being good, beautiful, and true. To be wholeheartedly committed to something which insists on leaving out much that is good, beautiful, and true is, precisely, idolatry. I think the church had no choice but to take most serious account of this. In other words, I am trying to say that in the concrete situation in which it was located, to assimilate Greek thought was profoundly dangerous, but that to have failed to assimilate it would have been disastrous. The response of the church is, therefore, commendable.

Our own Protestant history is one of trying to free the gospel from distortions that were introduced in part precisely by this association. We have had a constant struggle within Protestantism between the effort to maintain the purity of the Word of God on the one side, and the effort to develop an inclusive vision of the totality of reality on the other. This problem is not yet settled.

In the modern world we have had similar crises in our encounter with the natural sciences. We have had the same kinds of crises in relationship to the historical consciousness of the

nineteenth century, to modern psychology, and so on. Again and again the Christian community in the West has been challenged by the encounter with an *alien wisdom*, a wisdom involving ideas different from those in the inherited tradition. We have always had this double response of negation and affirmation or incorporation. The question is whether we have the vitality to assimilate what challenges us today as well as the early church assimilated Greek thought.

Religion vs. wisdom. I have said that our topic today is not Eastern religions but Eastern wisdom. I am very consciously making this distinction. Insofar as the early church dealt with what could be called specifically religious features of its environment, it said, "No," and I think that was the right answer. The major religious features it encountered in the Hellenistic world were idolatrous, and in relation to idolatry it is appropriate not to assimilate but to maintain a prophetic stance. The early missionaries coming to India, China, and Japan encountered the religious life of these cultures in ways very much like those in which New Testament Christians encountered the religious life of their environment. What was most manifest was idolatry and superstition. It took a while for most missionaries (and I am speaking now of the nineteenth century movement, not the earlier Catholic movement which was in many ways more sophisticated) to become aware of the fact that in addition to the idolatrous and superstitious elements in religious life, elements that kept people in bondage, there was profound wisdom in the Eastern traditions—wisdom that underlay and even gained some expression in these apparently idolatrous and superstitious forms and was further embodied in impressive forms of spiritual discipline. It is that wisdom, and not the popular religious practices of temple and shrine worship in Japan, that poses so profound a question for Christian theology. I believe that today it constitutes for the Christian community a challenge very similar to that which Greek wisdom constituted

for the early church. This is the best model in terms of which to conceive of the appropriate response.

It would be easy to run through various alternatives. They parallel the alternatives faced in the early church. There are some who still say that any kind of close association with Hindu and Buddhist and Confucian thought at their best is to be avoided. It will confuse and corrupt Christianity. We need to maintain the purity of Christianity and even avoid any great amount of interest in these alien phenomena.

There are others who, recognizing the greatness of these traditions, say that their best features must have been influenced from our biblical and Christian sources. And occasionally one can trace some such influence. But again, historical investigation will not sustain the view that Shinran learned his ideas through the influence of Nestorianism in China or something of this sort, which is an example of claims that have been made in this direction.

Still others say, "Yes, it is extremely impressive, what was achieved by these great religious giants in the East, and we can recognize in their work in the East a preparation for the gospel comparable to that which, in the West, was established both among Jews and Greeks in different ways." That provides a very positive way of dealing with these phenomena, understanding Christianity to be the fulfillment and culmination of what is already prepared for in Eastern soil.

But just as, with the Greeks, it turned out that there was something going on in Greek philosophy that broke the bounds of being mere "preparation for the gospel," so we have to recognize that in Eastern wisdom there is much that goes beyond mere preparation for the gospel. In Eastern wisdom we encounter a depth of truth and a mode of experience which is profoundly alien to what we have dominantly experienced in the West and which yet cannot be dismissed or disregarded without the peril that we will turn a part of the totality into the whole and destroy the possibility of non-idolatrous who-

leheartedness in our Christian faith.

“*The Lord*” and the “*mystical-metaphysical ultimate*.” I want now to explain my own approach to Eastern wisdom.

In both the West and the East, in religious thinking, there have been two poles which have stood in profound tension with each other. Let me point them out in the East where they are perhaps more manifest than in the West.

In Hindu thought we have Brahman on the one hand and Ishvar, the personal Lord, on the other. We have the idea that Brahman represents ultimate reality. I think we could translate Brahman as “being-itself.” Being-itself is beyond any personal manifestation. Nevertheless, being-itself manifests itself in personal deities. A great many Hindus have been much more oriented to the personal devotion and worship of their personal deities than they have been interested in this, to them, abstract ultimate reality that is Brahman. Nevertheless, in Hindu thought, it is overwhelmingly assumed that these personal deities are manifestations of ultimate reality and are, therefore, finally inferior to ultimate reality. The profoundest religious experience is understood to be one that goes either through or around the personal deities. It is not a *worship* experience because worship involves some separation of the worshiper from that which is worshiped. It is actual and experiential *identification* with ultimate reality. This is expressed in Hinduism in the well-known phrase “Atman and Brahman are one.” The deepest reality, the ultimate substance of my being is at one and the same time the ultimate substance of all reality, and when I realize this truth in experience, then I am saved—released from this vale of tears and all the illusions and confusions that embody it. So in Hinduism we have both the ultimate reality and the personal manifestation.

The Buddhist denies both Brahman and Atman because these terms suggest a substantial ground of self and a substantial ground of all reality. Buddhists speak instead of *emptiness* or

nothingness. Yet this same duality can be found in Buddhism also. There is ultimate reality which is emptiness as such. Perhaps it could be called the *dharmakaya*—there are many ways this can be spoken of. And then there are those who have realized absolute emptiness through the enlightenment experience, and they are the buddhas. Personal religious devotion may be directed toward one of these embodiments of ultimate reality, to one of the buddhas, and for a very large number of Buddhists this is the central reality of their religious lives: devotion to these concrete manifestations. In Japan the largest Buddhist churches are those that have focused overwhelmingly on faith in Amida as one of these embodiments whose vow has saving power for all. Amida is sometimes identified with the *dharmakaya* as it has assumed form for our salvation. Even so, in most formulations, Amida is viewed as subordinate to the *dharmakaya* as such, which is the emptiness beyond all form. Hence even in this tradition there is some subordination of the personal embodiment of ultimate reality to the impersonal ultimate.

In the West we have had an opposite relationship between these two. In the Bible we read almost nothing about what could be called “ultimate reality.” We read instead about “the Lord,” about “Yahweh.” Frankly, I think if you wanted something close to ultimate reality in the Bible, you would have to speak of the “chaos” out of which God created. But we are not accustomed to thinking of that chaos as ultimate reality, so it is not a particularly useful point of contact within scripture. But as the Western church expanded and came into touch with much that had been achieved by the Greeks, a kind of questioning came into play which raised the issue of “the ultimate” or “the absolute.” Also there was a mystical tradition of which Plotinus is the greatest representative.

Plotinus was not a Christian, but Plotinus greatly influenced the course of Christian experience and development, especially Christian mysticism. In Plotinus the highest experience was remarkably similar to that of India. He may have been in-

fluenced by Hinduism, but again this question of influence is very difficult to establish historically. So in the church Yahweh was identified with ultimate reality. The name for this reality was "being," and in St. Thomas Aquinas, the most influential theologian in the Western church, being is God and God is being. This meant that under one concept the Supreme Being and being-itself were identified. The Western synthesis was based on this unity of being-itself and God as the Supreme Being.

Of course we had protests, especially in Protestantism, against this identification of the God of the Bible with the God of the philosophers. In some Catholic circles too, this protest was made. When made, the protest was in the name of the ultimacy of the God of the Bible, and I think it was a correct insight that there was a difference between what the philosophers were speaking of and what scripture was speaking of.

In recent times this identification of being and God has been falling apart in philosophy and among philosophical theologians. Paul Tillich represents one expression of this falling apart. He wanted to insist that being-itself is God, but he recognized that there was a profound difference between the God who is being-itself and the God of scripture. He made that difference explicit. But he tilted in the direction of God as being-itself rather than in the direction of the concrete lord of history whom we call Yahweh. From my point of view, at that point he made a Hindu choice rather than a Christian choice. But he did not say he did, and that is my major criticism of Tillich—that he was not clear about the extent to which he was making a choice counter to what I think a Christian is called to make.

The philosopher most influential in process theology is Alfred North Whitehead, and he too made a sharp distinction between "creativity," which was his name for the ultimate—meaning by "the ultimate" what all things are at their absolute base—and "God," who is the principle of order, novelty, creative originality, freedom, and so on. So he differentiated God from the

metaphysical ultimate. Through that differentiation, I believe we in the West have come to a position where we can understand what has been going on also in the East. That is, in both East and West we have a tension between the personal Lord on the one side, and the metaphysical-mystical ultimate on the other. In the East this tension has always been resolved, ultimately, in favor of the metaphysical ultimate, and the religious importance of this kind of resolution has been expressed in the mystical, more meditational, character of Eastern thought. The effort to realize what we ultimately are is something the East has realized much more profoundly than the West. One may find close approximations in some Western mystics, but they have not gone as deeply into this as has the East.

The West, on the other hand, has focused its attention on the relationship between ourselves and the personal Lord, and I think that we, as Christians, must always deny that the personal Lord is a mere manifestation of the metaphysical ground. I do not believe that, as a Christian, I can ever accept any subordination of the God of the Bible to the metaphysical or mystical ultimate. But does this mean that we have to say "No" to the metaphysical and mystical ultimate?

We know a long history of debates in Christianity about mysticism. Is the Christian free to be a mystic? I think that the wiser traditions of the West have said, "Yes, the Christian is free even to be a mystic, but it's dangerous stuff. You've got to watch it, but you're not forbidden." I think Paul's doctrine that we are free must also apply here.

Now I shall just draw one sweeping conclusion from these observations:

I believe that the Christian is free to be a philosopher.

I believe that the Christian is free to be a scientist.

I believe that the Christian is free to be a psychologist.

And I believe that the Christian is free to be a Buddhist.