

# Toward A Constructive Postmodern Pluralism on the Perspectives of Alfred North Whitehead and David Ray Griffin

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## **Abstrak**

Tidak bisa dipungkiri perkembangan pemikiran keagamaan selalu memberikan corak yang dinamis, salah satunya adalah pemikiran tentang posmodernisme. Kaitannya dengan hal tersebut istilah pluralism posmodern konstruktif merupakan salah satu pemikiran posmodern yang menjadi kajian utama dalam tulisan ini. Meskipun banyak yang menolak penggunaan kata posmodernisme karena banyaknya asumsi yang berkembang namun istilah tersebut mempunyai kegunaan lebih dalam menyelami pemikiran-pemikiran yang berkembang saat ini. Saya menggunakan istilah tersebut untuk membedakan dua macam pluralism; 1) pluralism modern yang mencari kesamaan dasar pada tiap tradisi agama yang berbeda, dan 2) pluralisme posmodern yang menolak setiap pencarian dasar kesamaan berdasarkan penekanan terhadap keragaman dan keutamaan agama. Dari situ, artikel ini menjelaskan tentang ide-ide seputar pluralisme posmodern konstruktif (*constructive postmodern pluralism*). Selain itu, pembahasan dalam artikel ini lebih banyak bertumpu pada pemikiran dua tokoh, yakni Alfred North Whitehead, yang diperkenalkan dan dikembangkan oleh Cobb, dan David Ray Griffin. Pluralisme yang diusung dua tokoh ini melampaui gagasan pluralisme yang dijelaskan oleh John Hick, yaitu pluralisme yang menempatkan agama dalam posisi dasar *the same down deep*.

**Kata Kunci:** Pluralisme, Postmodernisme, Konstruktivisme.

## Introduction

It goes without saying that constructive postmodern pluralism is one of *postmodern* perspectives. Some scholars have rejected the word of “postmodern” because it means such different things to different people.<sup>1</sup> Some argue that the term has outworn any usefulness. However, I use the term because it is helpful in distinguishing two kinds of pluralism: modern pluralism, which is seeking a substantive common essence and unity among different religious traditions, and postmodern pluralism, which rejects any search for common essence based on the emphasis on religious diversity and particularity.<sup>2</sup> From this distinction, it is apparent that Hick’s universalistic religious pluralism is modern, while Heim’s particularistic religious pluralism is postmodern although they are contemporaries. Of course, it should be noted that there is no clear line between modern and postmodern; sometimes we may find some modern elements in Heim’s thought, and also may find some postmodern elements in Hick’s.

Any understanding of postmodernism depends on what one means by modernism. As Griffin points out that modernism have several meanings as it appears in art and architecture, in literature, and in philosophy. I use the words of Griffin to refer a worldview that has developed “out of the seventeenth century Galilean-Cartesian-Baconian science;” and also to “the sense of the world order” that emerged in the West, which both influenced and was influenced by this worldview.

Then, what does it means by the worldview? According to Griffin, the modernist worldview involves a mechanistic understanding of the material world; a dualism between matter and spirit; and, as I will emphasize, the idea that the “really real” things of the world are self-contained and static substances. For Griffin, the modernist worldview is excessively individualistic, anthropocentric, Eurocentric, androcentric, and nationalistic. This is part of what I mean by modernism. I mean a worldview that understands the world in mechanistic and dualistic terms;

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<sup>1</sup> John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths*. (Louisville Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 38.

<sup>2</sup> David R. Griffin, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 11.

that emphasizes Cartesian substances; and that leans toward individualism, human-centeredness, male-centeredness, nation-centeredness, and the assumption that European or Western civilizations provide the norm for evaluating the rest of the world.

By modernism I mean something more. I also mean what Griffin calls a “sense of the world order” or, as it might also be described, an orientation toward life and approach to others. It includes two things: (1) identity thinking and (2) binary thinking. Identity thinking fails to differentiate things that are truly distinct, instead of assuming that they are identical. Such identity thinking, according to Adorno, is an act of violence against the “other”. Identity thinking follows a strong tendency for binary thinking or oppositional thinking. This form of thought used to assume that one claim must be right and the other should be wrong, without considering that both may be right in different respects. And when confronted with different empirical realities—different cultures, for example—it assumes that a person must belong to one or other, but not both. Of course sometimes this is true. Ideas can indeed be mutually exclusive, and sometimes people must choose between different allegiances. An overemphasis on binary thinking neglects these possibilities. In binary thinking one of the opposites is always privileged, controlling and dominating the other, or in Derrida's word, “has the upper hand”.<sup>3</sup> These two habits are also what I mean by modernism. I mean a way of thinking that seeks to reduce diversity to distinct identity, and that tends to assume that different ideas concerning what is ultimate in religion are mutually exclusive, even before considering them.

Finally, in keeping with Griffin's description of a sense of world order, by modernism I mean an attitude toward others and orientation toward life, involving feeling and perception, that is inhospitable or unwelcoming, because it shuts itself off from people who are different and from the diversity itself. This animosity follows from the basic worldview; when a person or a group looks at the world in terms of isolated substances, he or she often thinks of others as isolated by cultural and linguistic boundaries that are insurmountable.

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41.

In sum, then, I mean three things by modernism: (1) a worldview with the various characteristics named above, (2) a way of thinking that emphasizes sameness and binary thinking, and (3) an inhospitable approach to the world that is frightful of diversity. In societies, this inhospitable approach tends to unfold terms of an in-group/out-group mentality, where people who are “inside the group” define themselves by insisting on isolation from, and superiority to, those who are outside the group.

Modernism involves a distinctive approach to religion. On the one hand, given its emphasis on sameness, it can look at religion in general as having a single substantive essence on the basis of which all religions can be defined. This, as we will see, is the problem in John Hick. On the other hand, given its emphasis on Cartesian substances, it can be seen from the various world religions in terms of self-enclosed substances that have no possibility of meaningful and mutual interaction. This is also the problem in Heim. When the first tendency is at work, the essence is often conceived as a single type of salvation or single ultimate reality. This implies that, when it comes to the ultimate reality, the diversity of world religions collapses into unity. The problem with this point of view is not that it seeks commonality, because religions can have things in common. Rather the problem is that it excludes the possibility that religions might have fundamental and complementary differences as well.

Openness to the possibility of fundamental and complementary differences is part of what I mean by a postmodern approach. It rejects the *a priori* approach for a substantive common essence, and it is open to the possibility that many world religions may be diverse in their aims. A constructively postmodern approach is simultaneously open to the possibility that these difference salvations and ultimate may be complementary rather than contradictory.

### **Deconstructive and Constructive Postmodernism**

In saying that Heim’s approach is partly postmodern, though, I must quickly add that it is postmodernism of a distinctive sort, which Griffin and others call deconstructive postmodernism. As Griffin

explains, deconstructive postmodernism is a philosophical postmodernism inspired variously by pragmatism, physicalism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida and other recent French thinker.<sup>4</sup> It overcomes the modern worldview through an anti-worldview, deconstructing or even entirely eliminating various concepts that have generally been thought necessary for a worldview, such as self, purpose, meaning, a real world, gift, reason, truth as correspondence, universally valid norms, and divinity. While motivated by ethical and emancipatory concerns, this type of postmodern tends to result in relativism.

In Griffin's description of deconstructionist postmodernism, the word "deconstruction" refers to a method or line of questioning that is important to many of above thinkers: scholars usually call a hermeneutics of suspicion. This is a way of approaching texts in which one seeks to look behind the text to the hidden motives of those who compose the texts, or who interpret the texts in a certain way.

Deconstructionists are deemed to de-construct the text and find these hidden motives. Thus deconstructionism is not only an anti-worldview, but also an attitude toward others and an orientation toward life that sees the world primarily in terms of combat or tension, and that does not seek to offer alternatives.

The deconstruction of postmodernism is what David Griffin calls a constructive postmodernism. As a worldview, the kind of constructive postmodernism recommended by Griffin sees the world in terms of events-in-relation rather than static and self-contained Cartesian substances, recognizing that people and other actualities can depend on one another even that they are different. As a way of thinking, it emphasizes on thinking and recognizing that people can affirm the ideas, feelings, and practices of people who are different from them. As an attitude toward others and orientation toward life, it embodies a welcoming attitude towards diversity. People can live together with their differences, not only accepting them but even delighting in them.

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<sup>4</sup> David R. Griffin, "Introduction to Spirituality and Society", in *SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), x.

Ultimately, the point of a constructive postmodernism, is that it offers not simply a new worldview, but also a different way of living that can be embodied by people of different religions. Griffin puts the aims of constructive postmodernism as follows:

The constructive activity of this type of postmodern thought is not limited to a revised worldview. It is equally concerned with a postmodern world that will both support and be supported by the new worldview... Going beyond the modern world will involve transcending its individualism, anthropocentrism, patriarchy, mechanization, economism, consumerism, nationalism, and militarism.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of religion, as we will see, a constructive postmodernism will also go beyond exclusivism and essentialism, both of which are rooted in a self-enclosed substantial way of looking the world. My objective is to describe further the constructive postmodern worldview. Before proceeding, it should be acknowledged that there is overlap between the deconstructive approach and the constructive approach. Both reject cultural arrogance and imperialism and affirm differences. But they do such things in very different ways. One reason that a constructive approach can indeed be constructive is that it does not rely on the notion of static, which I briefly introduced above.

### **Whitehead's Postmodern Alternative**

A self-enclosed substance-oriented worldview looks at the world as if it were composed of impenetrable entities that require nothing except them in order to exist. In religious life, the human soul has sometimes been conceived this way, as if it depends only on itself and God in order to exist. Other people have also conceived this way, despite the fact that the natural sciences so often point toward a more relational point of view. When it comes to inter-religious dialogue, religions can be conceived of this way. They can view self-contained realities that rely only on their own internal resources in order to exist.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., x-xi.

The notion of self-enclosed substance has a long heritage in the West. Arguably the Greek philosophers were the founders of substance thinking. When Democritus stated that the universe is composed of tiny, indestructible, unchanging, and indivisible elements called “atoms”, his thinking was one type of substance philosophy, which has had considerable influence in the traditional metaphysical schools.

In the twentieth century the Western philosopher Alfred North Whitehead developed a systematic alternative to self-enclosed substance thinking, and the kind of constructive postmodernism that I recommend builds upon his thinking. His aim is to reject a particular notion of self-enclosed substance altogether, showing how relations between actualities are internal to the actualities themselves, and how, at the deepest level, these relations involve one entity of feeling to another and being affected by the other. Whitehead’s worldview is presented most systematically in *Process and Reality*, where he presents the world as a network of interrelated events or momentary energy-events, which he calls “actual occasions” or “occasions of experience”. He then adds that each momentary event has its identity in accepting many things from the previous world into its own life, without collapsing them into indistinguishable sameness. When this acceptance occurs, the many become harmonized; they become one, and the event is internally composed of those other things. And yet he says that each momentary event has within itself a freedom or creativity, through which it creatively synthesizes those “others” into its own life.

Whitehead uses the words “apprehending” or “feeling” to name the process of an emerging occasion of experience from the past to be brought into unity. This means that the ultimate actualities of the universe are alive. He speaks of the process of synthesizing of many things from the past as one of “apprehending” them. Every actual entity apprehends or feels its past from a unique perspective, which means that no two entities are precisely the same. In this way, then, Whitehead affirms that differences are at the very heart of reality. There are many entities, not one entity, and each is unique. And yet he also affirms that things can be different but related, because one entity becomes itself by synthesizing influences from other entities. Thus Whitehead affirms that

interconnectedness is at the very heart of reality. With this way of thinking, Whitehead offers the West and the rest of the world a new and relational way of looking at the world. Instead of thinking of the universe as composed of inert substances, we think of the world as composed of moments of experience or moments of feeling. Each unity of reality, each genuine actuality, is a process of feeling or apprehending into its nature, which means that the whole of the universe is an “ocean of feeling”.

Given this brief introduction to Whitehead’s concept of an actual entity or actual occasion, it should be clear now that Whitehead’s thought is a constructive alternative to think in terms of Cartesian substances. He offers a relational and dynamic point of view that sees religions as dynamic and changing, dependent on others for their existence. Of course, some writers do not consider Whitehead postmodern, because they have deconstructive postmodernism in mind. But the very word postmodern has a long history that preceded the idea of deconstruction. David Griffin has researched the use of “postmodern” in this tradition.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, Whitehead believes that some material objects, such as human bodies, also contain minds. The mind of a human being exhibits creativity and feeling, and it also has a physical side, which is feeling of the physical brain. He speaks of this mind as the “dominant occasion” of the person at that moment: that is, the center of feeling through which a person receives influences from the body and initiates responses. Thus, Whitehead offers what might be called a post-materialistic understanding of the world, in that he provides a new understanding of matter as creative in its own right, and insofar as he affirms what has traditionally been called as “mind” or “soul”.

An excessively individualistic worldview understands individual human beings as individuals-in-isolation rather than persons-in-community. It sees the human self as analogous to the cogito of

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<sup>6</sup> David R. Griffin, “Reconstructive Theology”, in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 92-94.

Descartes: an entity that can think all by itself, doubting even the existence of an external world until that existence is proven. By contrast, Whitehead understands human beings as individuals-in-relation or persons-in-community, whose very existence emerges out of felt relations with the rest of the world. There can be no fact in isolation and there can be no person in isolation. “There is no society in isolation,”<sup>7</sup> says Whitehead. “an isolation they are meaningless.”<sup>8</sup> This does not deny the uniqueness of each individual, but it insists upon the relational character of that uniqueness. A person’s uniqueness is enriched, not weakened, by healthy relations with others.

An anthropocentric worldview sees human beings as separate from the rest of nature, as superior to all other creatures in every relevant respect, and which also assumes that the rest of nature is valuable only insofar as it serves human purposes. Thus anthropocentrism lends itself to the idea that the whole of the earth and other creatures are to be conquered by human beings. Whitehead sees all of nature as filled with intrinsic value: that is, as consisting of events that have subjective reality for themselves, worthy of respect, and not just objective existence for others. Animals and living cells have intrinsic value, and even the quanta of energy in atoms have such value. There is no sharp dichotomy between the world of facts and the world of values. All objective facts, including the facts of nature, are simultaneously values within the universe as an ocean of feeling.

A Eurocentric worldview stresses European ways of thinking as definitive for all human beings. The Whiteheadian worldview, instead of supporting this prejudice for one point of view, that of European, envisions the world as a community of communities, filled with different civilizations, each of which has something to offer the others. Whitehead puts it this way in *Science and the Modern World*:

A diversification among human communities is essential for the provision of the incentive and material for the Odyssey of the human spirit. Other nations of different habits are not enemies:

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<sup>7</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: an Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David R. Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, (New York: Free Press, 1978), 90.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

they are godsend. Men require of their neighbors something sufficiently akin to be understood, something sufficiently different to provoke attention, and something great enough to command admiration. We must not expect, however, all the virtues. We should even be satisfied if there is something odd enough to be interesting.<sup>9</sup>

Following the lead of Whitehead, then, Cobb encourages us to “celebrate” differences, including differences among religions and cultures. For him, “it is the most radical differences that stimulate the most fundamental reconsideration”.<sup>10</sup>

In this way, Whitehead offers a constructively postmodern worldview. Modernism is not simply a worldview; it is also a “sense of world order” that emphasizes identity thinking and either/or binary thinking. Each moment of experience seeks both to welcome diversity from the past actual world that creates meaningful contrasts between what is welcomed, so that the differences are affirmed in their complementarity. For example, if a Confucian inherits ideas from Buddhism and Taoism from his or her past, he or she need not reject Buddhism or Taoism, as if one were “true” and the other “false”. Instead he or she can seek the wisdom of both points of view, without equating the two, and then find a way of feeling them, so that both are seen together in their differences.

Thus Whitehead’s philosophy encourages thinking, appreciation of differences, and quests for harmonious contrasts. Whitehead offers not simply a different set of ideas, but also a different way of thinking. When these are combined in one’s orientation toward life, the result is a welcoming or hospitable approach to life, which moves beyond the modern tendency to look at the world in terms of combat or antagonism. This does not mean that there are not aspects of life that are inevitably competitive. As Griffin puts it:

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<sup>9</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 207.

<sup>10</sup> John B. Jr., *Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way beyond Absolutism and Relativism*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 44.

There is, after all, surely a deep truth in the testimony of the world's religions to the presence of a transcultural proclivity to evil deep within the human heart, which no paradigm, combined with a new economic order, new childrearing practices, or any other social arrangements, will suddenly eliminate. Furthermore, it has correctly been said that 'life is robbery': a strong element of competition is inherent within finite existence, which no social political-ecological order can overcome.<sup>11</sup>

It is more promising than the deconstructive approach. The deconstructive approach tears things down, and sometimes for good reasons, but it also refuses to build things up. For constructive postmodern thinkers, to construct is to pile up, to build, or pit together in the original sense. This piling up is more than piling rocks or stones; it is also marshaling human resources to solve human problems and needs. As Keller explains, "piling up together" involves acting "in community and solidarity" by "gathering together resources for saving actions refusing the ideologies of world-waste, woman-waste, people-waste, species-waste..."<sup>12</sup>

A constructive postmodern pluralism proceeds in this spirit. It seeks to gather resources for saving actions, rather than waste any of the resources. Furthermore, it creatively develops something new of these resources. According to constructive postmodern thinkers, taking up the constructive task is "one of the challenges of a deconstructive age".<sup>13</sup>

In a Whiteheadian context, the constructive nature of constructive postmodern pluralism is drawn partly from his concept of creativity: the process of concrescence, the process by which "the many become one and are increased by one". Creativity in Whitehead's philosophy implies not only that the universe and the possible increase of intensity, complexity, and plurality expand endlessly, but also that "the

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<sup>11</sup> Griffin, "Introduction", xii.

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Keller, "Piling Up and Hopefully Saving: Eschatology as a Feminist Problem", in Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein, (eds.), *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 243-49.

<sup>13</sup> Peter C. Hodgson, *Winds Of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 39.

future is fully open”. Griffin puts the point succinctly: “A world could not exist without creative experience”.<sup>14</sup>

In the constructive postmodern perspective that emerges from a Whiteheadian point of view, the whole of modernity is not rejected. As Griffin explains, constructive postmodernism “involves a creative synthesis of modern and pre-modern truths and values.” More specifically, it is dedicated to “salvage a positive meaning” not only for the modern notions of modern human self, historical meaning, and truth as correspondence, but also for the pre-modern notions of a divine reality, cosmic meaning, and an enchanted nature. By contrast, deconstructive postmodernism tries to reject most or all modern values, even as it unconsciously extends them. Constructive postmodernism proceeds in a different spirit. It always tries to learn something positive even from the perspectives with which it partly disagrees, rather than abandoning them totally and peeling them away. This is part of its more hospitable approach to the world. This hospitality or openness involves a willingness to change. Thus a constructive postmodern approach to religions recognizes that individual members of different religions can change as they engage in dialogue with others, learning from them and incorporating new insights; and also that religions themselves can change. Religions are not doomed to repeat their pasts. They can also grow into more promising futures. Whitehead once said that the hope for religion is that it can welcome change in the same creative way that science welcomes change: that is, by admitting mistakes in the past, building upon achievements from the past, and being open to new ideas.<sup>15</sup>

In summary, a constructive postmodernism of the kind that follows from Whitehead sees the universe as dynamic, creative, and pluralistic, and it sees world religions as creative traditions that can meaningfully participate in the universe, adding value and beauty to it. Participants in the religions can do this by recognizing that their own

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<sup>14</sup> Griffin and Huston Smith, *Primordial Truth and Postmodern Theology* (New York: State University of New York, 1989), 44.

<sup>15</sup> Whitehead, *Science*, 189.

traditions are dynamic, and that their growth can be enriched by engaging in dialogue with people of other religions.

### John Cobb's Approach

Cobb is not only notable for his resultant attitude of religious pluralism, but has also played a very crucial role in shaping constructive postmodern pluralism, although he does not often use this term.<sup>16</sup> His contribution to constructive postmodern pluralism is clear, although Cobb's view of pluralism has received little attention from British and Continental scholars. In Knitter's words, "In the international, inter-Christian, and increasingly inter-religious conversation about dialogue, I honestly cannot think of any other name that is not only as broadly known but also as deeply respected as that of John Cobb."<sup>17</sup>

As a matter of fact, religious pluralism has been one of the central concerns that have shaped much of his work in the past thirty years. He has been dedicated to promoting pluralism. Like many advocates of religious pluralism, Cobb's pluralism is also based on his rejection of exclusivism. Cobb realizes that, while pluralistic approaches are being developed among theologians, exclusivism still remains dominant and powerful because many Christians still insist that Christianity is the one right or true way. "Other ways are seen either as evil or as anticipations of that which is perfected in the Christian one."<sup>18</sup> Cobb says he feels "uncomfortable" with the statement that "Christianity is the true religion."<sup>19</sup> He confesses that he is quite comfortable to in saying that "Christian faith opens him, in principle, to all truth."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cobb once clearly identified his method as "The Post-Modern Pluralistic Method". John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Paul F. Knitter, "Introduction", in John B. Cobb, *Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way beyond Absolutism and Relativism*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 18.

<sup>19</sup> Cobb, *Transforming*, 175.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

The exclusivist stance, in Cobb's view, is against history. It is against history because nothing historical is absolute. As a historical movement Christianity is alongside others. Nothing about Christianity justifies its exemption from thoroughgoing historical-critical investigation. "Our beliefs about it can only be shaped by such investigation." Therefore, for Cobb, "any tendency to absolute any feature of Christianity is idolatry."<sup>21</sup>

To Cobb such an exclusivist stance eyes is also against Jesus. The historical Jesus was open to God as an indwelling lure toward creative transformation, amid which Jesus creatively transformed his own tradition, Judaism. In doing so he revealed a spirit of creative transformation that is at work throughout the world, which is the Word or Logos that became flesh in his own life. This Word or Logos is what Christians, Cobb suggests, should mean by Christ, and the calling of Christians is to be open to Christ in their way and their time, as Jesus was in his way and his time. "Christ is the Way that excludes no Ways."<sup>22</sup> According to Cobb's interpretation, "Jesus is the Way that is open to other Ways."<sup>23</sup> He emphasizes that when Christ becomes a principle of closeness, exclusiveness, and limitation, "he ceases to be what is most important for the Christian and the appropriate expression of the efficacy of Jesus."<sup>24</sup> That means, for Cobb, "The high appraisal of pluralism does not spring rootless from nowhere." For the Christian it comes from a new understanding of Christ as creative process rather than an object. This involves a reinterpretation of God. In Cobb, "it is the belief that God is love that undergirds our rejection of exclusionary thinking."<sup>25</sup> For Cobb, "Love is not defensive. Love is open to leaning."<sup>26</sup> "We may learn that others do not employ such concepts. But their spiritual attainments, far from detracting from our belief in divine love, will show forth its achievement in even greater fullness."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>22</sup> Cobb, *Christ*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Cobb, *Transforming*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Cobb, *Christ*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Cobb, "Hough's Alternative to Exclusion and Other Options", 84.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Cobb is convinced that Christians can find in their faith in Christ the reason for opening to others. Cobb emphasizes that "Christ" who stops us from being open to others is, "an idol".<sup>28</sup> He remarks, "If I found that being a Christian inhibited openness and honesty, I could not remain a Christian. That is not because I am more committed to openness and honesty than to Christ, but because I understand commitment to Christ involves commitment to openness and honesty."<sup>29</sup>

To Cobb, to affirm pluralism is to affirm universal openness and inward appropriation of other traditions. Inter-religious dialogue is a crucial step in moving beyond exclusivism and toward openness to others.

On the one hand, inter-religious dialogue offers a way to expose the idolatries, falsehoods, and destructive practices present in any religion. Through dialogue, a religion can realize its tendency to make absolute truth. Through mutual questioning and exploration, a religion can find its limits. All of these can serve as an antidote to exclusivism. In Hodgson's words, "dialogue can function as a refining fire that burns away what is false, evil, and idolatrous."<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, dialogue provides a chance for each tradition to realize the truth and strengths that are present in other religious traditions as well as in one's own religion. Dialogue, as Cobb states, requires us to respect our partner and assumes that the partner "is worth listening to as well as addressing".<sup>31</sup> It is through dialogue that people come to understand one another better and learn to cooperate better; it is through dialogue that people learn from one another's ideas and insights and may be enriched by these ideas and insights in turn. For example, the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity provides a

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<sup>28</sup> John B. Cobb Jr., "Toward Transformation", in Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes (eds.), *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 54.

<sup>29</sup> Cobb, *Transforming*, 175.

<sup>30</sup> Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit*, 107.

<sup>31</sup> John B. Jr. Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipe and Stock, 1998), viii.

chance to deepen their self-understanding and mutual understanding as Christianity provides a deep insight into the Buddhist understanding of selfhood and freedom. In turn, Buddhism provides a deeper insight into the Christian understanding of grace as non-attachment or non-clinging or non-self.

Some scholars like Knitter charge that Cobb's statement about openness to others is too extreme. In responding to this charge, Cobb highlights the benefit we can get from encounter with others. He points out the following three advantages of openness to others. *First*, openness to others enables us to discern the truths in other traditions; conversely, closing oneself to one's own community negates the opportunity to appreciate others. For Cobb, "there is no prod that is stronger, more promising, more hopeful than that of encountering saintly people, wise people, who have come to their wisdom and to their saintliness through a very different history from ours, and in the process have learned many things that we have not learned". *Second*, opening to others can help Christians come to "a deeper understanding of faith" by learning something new from other religions. *Third*, opening to others enables us to realize the limits of our truths, thereby being willing to accept the concept of complementarity among different religions.

According to Griffin's interpretation of Cobb's religious pluralism, by stressing complementarity, Cobb rejects the hitherto dominant approaches. He does not only reject dismissing other religions as false or as mere preparations for Christianity, but also rejects the notion that all traditions are at bottom identical. That notion, according to Cobb, can result in subtle Christian imperialism, if other religions are understood in terms of Christian categories of faith and God, or Vedanta imperialism, if it is assumed that the Christian God is finally to be understood as the impersonal infinite.<sup>32</sup> Cobb is convinced that the conception of complementarity is playing a growing and promising role in the emerging postmodern religious world.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Griffin, "John B. Jr. Cobb", in *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, 708.

<sup>33</sup> John B. Jr. Cobb, *Postmodernism and Public Policy*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 53.

## 1. Respect Differences

Although Cobb emphasizes dialogue and opening, he is not blind to the real differences among different religious traditions. As Cobb puts it, postmodernism can “allow the deep difference between Buddhism and Christianity to stand without rejecting the basic truth claims of either.” Although the God of the Abrahamic traditions - typically viewed as transcendent substance - is significantly different from Buddha, they share something in common. “Both have the utmost existential importance, but attending to one leads to a very different sense of reality and of one’s place in it than attending to the other”.<sup>34</sup> Cobb deconstructs the confrontation between God and Buddha both by finding the Buddhist rejection of clinging in Christianity and finding God as all compassion in Buddhism. Traditionally, the conception of Christian salvation is regarded as totally different from the Buddhist one. For Christianity, salvation is new life through faith in Christ. For Buddhism, salvation is the realization of the universal Buddha principle normatively embodied in Gautama. It seems there is an irreconcilable contradiction between the two salvations. But, according to Cobb, if we examine the meaning of salvation carefully, we find the contradiction disappears, as both of them are associated with compassion and love.

Cobb uses this example to indicate “the diversity is acceptable and that people should learn to live in mutual appreciation.”<sup>35</sup> For Cobb, “this affirmation of the reality of highly diverse experiences and the truth of highly diverse convictions is essential to pluralism.”<sup>36</sup> In this way Cobb differs from Hick, who prefers to search for commonality among religions rather than differences. For Cobb, the pluralism of Hick cannot go far enough because of its search for a common essence among different religious traditions.

Cobb affirms not only Christian uniqueness, but also “the uniqueness of Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism.” He is convinced that the most interesting and fruitful dialogue between

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Cobb, *Christ*, 27.

Christians and Muslims will be one in which the Christians accent what is distinctive to them and the Muslims do likewise. From Cobb's point of view, Christians should recognize that there might be other revelations or different ways of revelations. In his judgment, "It is too bad to say that we can only appreciate and respect people who are very much like ourselves". "We should be able to appreciate and respect people who are different from ourselves. It will be almost disappointing to find out that we are all really very much alike and our differences are not very significant".<sup>37</sup> Cobb prefers to speak of the great value and richness of difference rather than only to seek similarity and commonality.

## 2. Creative Transformation

Openness to other religions has repeatedly brought about change; Cobb calls change that comes about in this way transformation or creative transformation. Creative transformation is an important constituent of Cobb's pluralism. In Griffin's words, creative transformation is the central notion in the thought of John Cobb. He calls himself as a transformationist because he seeks both the transformation of religions and the transformation of the world. Cobb clearly states, the basic pattern I am proposing among religious traditions is one of mutual openness leading to mutual transformation.<sup>38</sup> He is convinced that it is the mission of a self-transforming Christianity to invite other religious traditions to undergo self-transformation as well.<sup>39</sup>

Cobb reinterprets the Greek word *metanoia* in terms of creative transformation, which is a central idea in the teaching of Christianity throughout the years. In English, *metanoia* is translated as 'repentance', which indicates feeling ashamed for the bad things we have done. But in Cobb's judgment, this interpretation does not express the real meaning: a change of mind, shift of direction. For Cobb, *metanoia*, or a shift of direction, is not a one-time thing, "We need, again and again, to shift direction".<sup>40</sup> He believes that the Christianity that would emerge from the appropriations of truth developed by other traditions would be a

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<sup>37</sup> Cobb, "Being Open", 7.

<sup>38</sup> Cobb, "Metaphysical Pluralism", 18.

<sup>39</sup> Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, 142.

<sup>40</sup> Cobb, "Being Open", 9.

different Christianity from what the West now knows.<sup>41</sup> For Cobb, creative transformation through openness to other traditions is a healthy way for Christianity to be saved.<sup>42</sup>

### **Griffin's Contributions**

Another leading advocate of constructive postmodern pluralism is David R. Griffin. According to him, the relation of various religions to each other is one of the burning issues. The very survival of civilization for Griffin, depends on the development of relations of mutual respect and even cooperation among the historic religious traditions.<sup>43</sup> Griffin views developing religious pluralism as one of the greatest contributions philosophers of religion can make to human civilization.

Like Cobb, his teacher, Griffin holds a resultant attitude of religious pluralism. For him, the exclusivist stance is unacceptable. He stresses that one's own religious tradition is not the repository of all truth.<sup>44</sup> Each tradition contains important insights; no tradition could have survived without them.

Our first concern in getting to know people from other traditions would be: what can we learn from each other about our own deepest experience of and presuppositions about reality, especially about the Holy Reality and values? For Griffin, this positive, inquisitive concern would replace the two hitherto dominant attitudes, which have been either indifference to the other or zeal to convert the other, both of which presupposed that we had nothing essential to learn from the

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<sup>41</sup> Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, 149.

<sup>42</sup> Cobb, *Christ*, 181.

<sup>43</sup> Griffin, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 247.

<sup>44</sup> Griffin, "Truth as Correspondence, Knowledge as Dialogical", in C. Helmer and K. Detroyer (eds.), *Truth: Interdisciplinary Dialogues in a Pluralist Age* (Leuven-Paris-Dudley: Peters, 2003), 248.

other.<sup>45</sup> What he intends here is to transform our theological differences into opportunities "for mutual learning and growth."<sup>46</sup>

Griffin appreciates not only the differences among religious traditions, but also the commonalities and agreements among them. With his pan experientialist ontology and non-sensationist epistemology, Griffin uses hard-core commonsense notions which are common to all humanity, in the sense that they are presupposed by all human practice and cannot be denied without contradicting one's own practice, to move beyond particularism and complete relativism.<sup>47</sup>

One of the greatest contributions of Griffin constructive postmodern pluralism is that he has emphasized the link between exclusivism and supernaturalism. Super naturalistic theism holds the concept of God as an almighty, omnipotent being, who can arbitrarily give saving knowledge to one religion and withhold it from others. Such a super naturalistic idea of God inevitably laid a foundation for exclusivism and naturally led to intolerant exclusive attitudes. Because "belief in an omnipotent God - in the sense of one who acts unilaterally in the world, not being dependent upon our response - leads naturally to belief in an infallible revelation. This infallible revelation is taken as announcing the One True Way, making all the other ways by definition false, even blasphemous. The desire to imitate deity by coercing others was accordingly reinforced by the conviction that in destroying one's own enemies one was destroying God's enemies."<sup>48</sup>

For Griffin, there is a strong correlation between the rejection of supernaturalism and the affirmation of pluralism, which leads to the ontological basis for the shift to religious pluralism.<sup>49</sup> This discovery can be regarded as one of the important contributions Griffin has made to pluralism.

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<sup>45</sup> Griffin, "A Theology", 17.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>47</sup> Griffin, *Reenchantment*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Griffin, *Spirituality and Society*, 145.

<sup>49</sup> Griffin, "Religious Pluralism", 12.

The second contribution of Griffin to pluralism is that he has found the connection between naturalistic theism and religious diversity. The rejection of divine omnipotence accordingly leads to the abandonment of the notion of the identity of all religion. At the same time, it provides for the difference among religions with its doctrine of self-determination and of context, according to which, every occasion of experience is not only partly self-determining, but also influenced by the past world. Every moment of human experience begins with an initial aim that reflects the eternal character and purpose of God.<sup>50</sup> This means God works in the world, but not alone. God must work within human history that is unfolding in different ways and giving rise to different kinds of religious experience. For example, people who grow up in a Buddhist context are significantly different from those in a Muslim context. At the same time, both of them are significantly diverse from those raised in a Jewish or Christian background. Likewise, modern Jews and Christians are significantly different from Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages.

Therefore, from Griffin's point of view, it is impossible for all religious traditions to share the same experience about ultimate reality due to the no coercive nature of divine influence plus the radical freedom and thereby historicity of human beings.<sup>51</sup> This is, to Griffin, not a bad thing because it provides a chance for each tradition "to contribute to, and to learn from, the other traditions."<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, Griffin challenges people to pay attention to the differences among the world religions.

Griffin maintains that the various religions are not simply superficially different; they are not all saying the same thing. He believes that each tradition, on the basis of its selective focus on certain aspects of our common experience and presuppositions and its interpretation thereof, has made further discoveries that perhaps only it could have made.<sup>53</sup> For example, unlike Christianity that has developed unique

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<sup>50</sup> Griffin, *Reenchantment*, 258.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 259

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Griffin, "A Theology", 18.

doctrines, practices, and institutions with respect to social justice, Buddhism has created methods for self-transformation through meditation disciplines. For him, the words Yahweh, Allah, and God do not point to the same reality as do the words Brahman, Emptiness, and the Tao. Therefore, the different religions, with their different understandings of the Holy, produce people with significantly different structures of experience.

The third contribution of Griffin is that he clearly proposes the doctrine of two ultimate, which lays an ontological foundation for religious pluralism. Before Griffin, Cobb had already asked what is wrong with questioning the notion that there is only one ultimate reality. He knew that those who affirm this doctrine regard it as self-evident and suppose a pluralistic metaphysic to be nonsensical. They may be right. But is this supposition itself not subject to dialogue?<sup>54</sup> This is Cobb's question.

Griffin realizes that traditional exclusivism and modern pluralism are connected to a widespread assumption in the West that all religions are oriented around the same ultimate and God is regarded the only ultimate, from which all other realities are derivative.<sup>55</sup> So Griffin finds it necessary to replace that assumption with the doctrine of plural ultimate in order to repudiate exclusivism.

Conceiving of creativity as an ultimate is a significant contribution process thinkers have made to pluralism. In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead simply states, "In all philosophic theory there is an ultimate which is actual in virtue of its accidents. It is only then capable of characterization through its accidental embodiments, and apart from these accidents is devoid of actuality. In the philosophy of organism this ultimate is termed creativity".<sup>56</sup>

It must be noted that the doctrine of two ultimate has nothing to do with dualism because God and creativity are two equally primordial but mutually dependent ultimate realities. Creativity is the ultimate reality

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<sup>54</sup> Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, 88.

<sup>55</sup> Griffin, *Reenchantment*, 260.

<sup>56</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 7.

of the universe, presupposed by every instance of actuality, including the divine instance. God is the ultimate actuality of the universe, giving Creativity its primordial form.

Furthermore, the doctrine of two ultimate Griffin promotes helps avoid Hickian universalistic pluralism that makes all religions equal and, thereby, equally erroneous. In contrast, Whiteheadian pluralism, according to Griffin, allows us to see that the two basic kinds of religions, insofar as they have been describing different ultimate realities, have been equally right.<sup>57</sup> Thus we can say to those who hold views different from ours; you may also be right, I can learn from your experience, and you can learn from mine. Griffin's doctrine of two ultimate makes the relationship among religions one of mutual teaching and learning, mutual growth and understanding, rather than antagonism and unwelcome attempts at conversion.

## Conclusion

It is apparent that constructive postmodern pluralism based on Whiteheadian philosophy has the virtues of openness, richness and constructiveness. It is these benefits that allow constructive postmodern pluralism to make a unique contribution to religious pluralism by being the antidote to both religious universalism and particularism. The significance of constructive postmodern pluralism is not limited to moving beyond the impasse between religious universalism and particularism.

Openness to others can be regarded as the 'cure' to our Yelangism. Yelangism derives from a Chinese story: There was a small country named Yelang in the Han Dynasty of ancient China. It was located at the southwest border area of China. Once the King of Yelang who had been conceiving of his country as the center of the world asked the diplomatic envoy from China: Which one is bigger, China or Yelang? This story later led to a new Chinese idiom, 'Yelangzida' meaning

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

ludicrous conceit and parochial arrogance: I already have all the truth and there is nothing left to learn.

The second advantage is that it does not only bind the energy of the pluralistic spirit, but also safeguards it against the danger of sheer relativism and indifference. Some critics have linked pluralism with a valueless relativism—an indiscriminating twilight in which all cats are gray, all perspectives equally viable, and as a result, equally un compelling. But constructive postmodern pluralism has nothing to do with conceptual and other debilitating forms of relativism, although it challenges us to relativize absolute claims and make room for a genuine respect for difference. Constructive postmodern pluralism deals with difference in a new way from relational/process thinking. While it does relativize every form taken by Christianity in time, it does not relativize the process of creative transformation.

Constructive postmodern pluralism emphasizes that the understandings and expressions of religions are multivalent. Those various understandings of human existence are not simply different ways of understanding a reality; rather, at least to some extent the different understandings reflect different realities. Therefore, constructive postmodern pluralism stresses interrelation among different religions. It does not absolutize each religion's own absolute and exclusive claim while acknowledging and learning its strengths. For constructive postmodern pluralism, to not absolutize does not mean to relativize. It means to normalize. Such pluralism will be truly humble and open; it will be much easier to accept by religious people at a global level, on which a pluralistic global theology may be based.

More important is that constructive postmodern pluralism, as opposed to falling into complete relativism that fails to recognize that some historical situations are preferable to others, makes room for real commitment to the cultivation of forms of community that are just, sustainable, non-violent, and respectful of both cultural and religious diversity, Cobb and Griffin both show how that commitment leads to the respect of other religions. In this way, their point of view surpasses the more limited perspectives of Hick and Heim.

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