

John Cobb

“Process Christianity in the 21st Century”

Episode 6 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



John Cobb is a United Methodist theologian instrumental in the development of process theology. Author of 30 books, Cobb is a founder of The Center for Process Studies and was on the faculty of Claremont School of Theology (in California) from 1958 until his retirement in 1990.

HIGHLIGHTS

This is one of two interviews with “process theologians” (the other is with Philip Clayton), and it is thus an **excellent introduction to “process theology”** by one of its main founders and advocates. Although many of the interviews in this series delve into different understandings of God and **God’s action in the world**, this is perhaps the best episode for getting a sense of (a) the spectrum of choices, and (b) perceived **problems with both interventionist and deistic understandings of God**. Cobb deals with “**the problem of evil**” by confronting the notion of an “all-powerful” God, advocating for **God’s “persuasive power” rather than “controlling power.”**

Editor’s warning: This is the only conversation in the series in which a thought-leader mischaracterizes a key aspect of mainstream evolutionary biology. Cobb says that evolutionary theory . . .

. . . has no place in the world for anything like *purpose*. So, the exclusion of purpose from evolutionary theory is one of the mainstays, and any attempt to introduce any notion of purpose is regarded as heretical. But on the other hand, the evidence that animals behave purposefully is pretty strong. The denial that they behave purposefully is a metaphysical denial; it’s not a scientific one. Nevertheless, it is a central part of official neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory.

Editor’s suggestion: Mainstream evolutionary biology actually does accept that “purpose” is a quality not only of animal behavior but of all life, even of bacteria and other single-celled creatures (who actively strive to survive, reproduce, and recover or flee from stressful conditions). The key distinction is that biologists today agree that purpose emerges naturally with life; it does not require a purposeful designer. For this reason, the term *teleonomy* was coined by biologists. *Teleonomy* distinguishes organic purpose from the kind of over-arching

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purpose (*teleology*) previously assumed to have been designed into the universe. Prior to Charles Darwin's development of the concept of *natural selection*, there was, of course, no known process by which matter and life itself could have brought forth a *teleonomic* form of purposeful behavior. For more along these lines, see chapter 2 in Dowd's book, *Thank God for Evolution*. That chapter is freely available online; its title is "Evolution Is Not Meaningless Blind Chance." <http://thankgodforevolution.com/pdfdownloadform>

For technical discussion, see an extract from biologist Ernst Mayr's 1988 book, *Toward a New Philosophy of Biology*:

The most important conclusion of the recent research on teleology is that it is illegitimate to extrapolate from the existence of *teleonomic* processes (that is, those directed or controlled by the organism's own DNA) and *teleomatic* processes (those resulting from physical laws) to an existence of cosmic teleology. There is neither a program nor a law that can explain and predict biological evolution in any teleological manner. The Darwinian mechanism of natural selection with its chance aspects and constraints is fully sufficient.

Episode 29 (Clayton) can also be used to explain the natural emergence of purpose in the universe (see Question 6 in its study guide).

NOTE: Question 3 below quotes Cobb's misconstrual of standard evolutionary theory. Instructors and discussion leaders may therefore wish to supplement that material with the Editor's warning and Editor's suggestions, above.

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

Highly recommended for audiences curious about, or already favorable toward, process theology. Highly recommended also for seminarians and those comfortable with rigorous theological discussion. Do note that because Cobb challenges the grounding metaphysics of scientific pursuit (see "Editor's warning" above), this episode may be jolting for the scientifically inclined and for the nonreligious. Because Cobb also strongly challenges "interventionist" notions of God, this episode may also be too harsh for conservative Evangelicals to productively engage with. Even so, because concepts of God are central to this talk, lay people may benefit from learning the menu of choices around "God concepts" and then reflecting on their own. This dialogue may be especially welcome for those who struggle with the problem of why evil and suffering exist in the world, if God is supposedly all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. (Cobb's notion of God's "persuasive power," as distinguished from "controlling power," may offer a solution for some.)

BLOG COMMENT

Richard Powell says:

I was powerfully affected by this talk, particularly the reminder of an "events"

view of reality and how strongly a "parts" or mechanistic view has dominated our perspective for over 100 years.

I appreciated the way both Michael and John expanded the idea of God being in the creative, joyful, life-giving, moments and the role of purpose in evolution. I have been wrestling with the strong arguments of new and not-so-new atheists, feeling a conviction that much of what they are saying is accurate and faithful to reality, but also grieving the loss of purpose and transcendence. I loved Neil deGrasse Tyson's "sermon" at the end of the Beyond Belief series when he talked about the Universe calling him. That talk, and this one, together have given me hope that a larger and more compelling view of God can be grasped by the human mind, even if the simpler and less elegant ones of yesteryear continue to be adequate for many.

I, for one, appreciate being pulled and challenged and encouraged to use my mind to conceive of bigger and hopefully more integrative views that transcend and include mechanistic, mystic, and mythic conceptions. This talk, and this series, really opens windows and I feel the fresh air of open-minded dialogue that I have not felt for quite some time.

KEYWORD TOPICS

Process theology, **David Ray Griffin**, **Hendrik Wilem van Loon**, **Charles Hartshorne**, **naturalism**, **neo-naturalism**, **reductionism**, **metaphysics**, **purpose** (in animal behavior), **Cartesian worldview** (criticism of), **God's purpose**, **God's action** (in the world), **Intelligent Design** (critique of), **biblical literalism** (critique of), **novelty**, **animal behavior** (purposive), **morality** (evolution of), **evolutionary emergence** (as replacement of Cartesian worldview), **Alfred North Whitehead**, **Catherine Keller**, **Jay McDaniel**, **Marjorie Suchocki**, **evil** (theological problem of), **theodicy**, **God's power** (persuasive v. controlling), **suffering**, **the cross** (meaning of), **love** (power of, and God's presence in)

BIOGRAPHY

John B. Cobb Jr. was born in Japan in 1925 to parents who were Methodist missionaries. In 1940 he moved to Georgia for high school. After graduation he attended a junior college, Emory College (now Oxford College of Emory University) in Georgia. He was deeply devout and held strong moral convictions, fighting racism and prejudice among his peers. Joining the army in 1944, he met intellectuals from other religions, including Judaism and Catholicism, who showed him new perspectives. At about this time he had a religious experience that led him to become a minister. These experiences gave him a taste for intellectual thought. He entered an interdepartmental program at the University of Chicago, where he tested his faith by setting out to learn all the modern world's objections to Christianity, so that he could answer to them. His

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faith did not come out intact. Cobb became disillusioned with much of his previous belief. Hoping to resolve his crisis of faith and reconcile the modern worldview with his Christian faith, he transferred to the Divinity School in 1947. He was successful primarily with the help of Richard McKeon, a philosophical relativist, and Charles Hartshorne, who taught him Whiteheadian metaphysics and philosophy, which Hartshorne had integrated into what would become known as process theology. This gave Cobb renewed confidence in the idea of God.

Cobb received his M.A. in 1949 and Ph.D. in 1952. He then taught at the Candler School of Theology of Emory University until 1958, when he moved to the Claremont School of Theology, where he stayed until his retirement in 1990. He collaborated with Lewis S. Ford in 1971 to start a journal called *Process Studies*. In 1973 he worked with David Ray Griffin in founding the Center for Process Studies. He is the author of 30 books. His profile on Wikipedia is:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_B._Cobb

SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEOS

- 2-minute video interview of Cobb, “Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes”:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGOvZk8aWm4>
- 4-minute video interview of Cobb on evolution, God, and process thought:
<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/john-cobb-process-theologian-par-excellence/>

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found (and new ones posted) at the following url:
<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/john-cobb-process-theologian-par-excellence/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **“The modern world left no place for God.”** John Cobb speaks of a sixth-grade teacher giving him a book on the history of humanity as being a pivotal moment in his easy acceptance of evolution. He then goes on to talk about encountering other faiths during his World War II experience in the military. After the war he began a masters program and chose to study “all the reasons that in the modern world belief in God had become so problematic.” He continues, saying, “Within six months of that kind of study, I fully understood why belief in God had become very problematic—**and I was in trouble in my own belief in God.**” Cobb then explains that his crisis of faith owed to the sense that “the modern world had a way of understanding things which really left no place for God.”

Question 1: Did you appreciate **the story that John Cobb tells about his crisis of faith?** What, if any, similarities do you see in your own faith journey? Please elaborate.

2. **Modernity, mainstream science, and a crisis of faith.** John Cobb's crisis of faith when he faced the implications of modernity pushed him toward questioning the very assumptions, the underlying metaphysics, of modernity and mainstream science. The result, in part, was what has come to be known as "**process theology**," which became Cobb's bedrock for arguing against, what he calls, "**the dominant metaphysics of modernity.**" He says,

Much of my work has been to argue against the dominant metaphysics of modernity and to say there is a deeper way of understanding that makes more sense of contemporary science—but that requires revision of a great deal of what is now ordinarily understood as mainstream science. That's true for me with respect to the theory of evolution. **I'm an evolutionist, without any question, but I think the dominant theory of evolution is bad.**

Question 2A: *What do you think about **John Cobb's resistance to the modern, scientific assumptions about reality** (i.e., metaphysics) of his time?*

Question 2B: *To what extent is it important to learn of **an author's grounding assumptions, their metaphysics, when evaluating the truth-value of a philosophical theory they propose?** What about the worldview or faith outlook of someone proposing a scientific theory? of someone teaching a class on science? teaching a class on religion? teaching a class on religion-and-science?*

3. **Problems with the "Cartesian" worldview.** John Cobb says, "**I think the dominant theory of evolution is bad.**" His reasons are that "it doesn't take account of the evidence, and its implications are extremely **humanly destructive.**" He explains:

I'm talking about the fact that the Cartesian worldview is adopted by many of the sciences and by the mainstream of biology. That worldview (and of course this is especially emphasized in evolutionary theory) has no place in the world for anything like *purpose*. So, **the exclusion of purpose from evolutionary theory** is one of the mainstays, and any attempt to introduce any notion of purpose is regarded as heretical. But on the other hand, the evidence that animals behave purposefully is pretty strong. The denial that they behave purposefully is a metaphysical denial; it's not a scientific one. Nevertheless, it is a central part of official neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory.

John Cobb is very clear about why this question of "purpose" is so important to him. Here is his grounding principle for viewing the world and its processes:

I believe that *purpose* in the world is derived from divine purpose. That does not mean that God has a purpose which is *the* outcome of evolutionary theory. I think God's purpose is the increase of value in the world, and we derive our purposes from the divine purpose.

Question 3A: *Given your own degree of understanding about the scientific enterprise, did this interview with John Cobb **affect your confidence in how the discoveries of science extend out into the world?** Or do you share Michael Dowd's critical reaction to Cobb's contention that mainstream evolutionary theory denies animal life of purposeful behavior — and that divine purpose is therefore necessary?*

Question 3B: *Do you think other speakers you have already encountered in this series would agree or disagree with Cobb on his critique of science?*

Question 3C: *Overall, for topical areas in which the speakers in this series conflict, how do you decide whom to trust or which position to hold? Alternatively, is the level of disagreement so far removed from your practical faith and life concerns that the issues really aren't important for you to make sense of or to sort through?*

NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS: Discussion leaders and classroom instructors may wish to supplement Question 3 material with the “Editor’s warning” and the “Editor’s suggestion” that appear on p. 1 of this document. Speakers are, of course, entitled to their own opinions, but John Cobb (in the view of this editor) mischaracterizes what mainstream evolution theory is about, and so a correction was deemed warranted.

4. **An “interventionist” v. a “process” view of God.** John Cobb disputes both **biblical literalism** and the proponents of **“Intelligent Design”** as presuming an “interventionist” God. First, his critique of an “Intelligent Design” view of God’s action in the world:

I'm not an authority on **Intelligent Design**, but what little I have read sounds to me as if they accept basically the **Cartesian** worldview. Then *within* the Cartesian worldview, in order to bring God into the picture, you have to point out anomalies in the course of evolutionary development that require something from outside the natural order—so that it has a supernaturalist tone to it. And that is, I think, not a good way to go about it. Some of the things they point to have very remarkable features of evolutionary development, but to separate them from the normal course of evolution in a drastic way seems to me to be a serious mistake. **I think God is present in every step of the process.**

Similarly, of biblical literalists he says,

The **biblical literalists** have to too great an extent accepted the **Cartesian** world, and then they can be biblical literalists only by then saying, “but there are a lot of exceptions, a lot of interventions into it.” I think the interventionist approach is very destructive of science. But if we see that God is a factor in everything that happens, which is **the process view**, then one can understand that the way God works generates an evolutionary process.

Question 4A: In a way, John Cobb faults two theologically conservative groups (Intelligent Design and biblical literalists) for having too limited a view of God. For Cobb, God is active in the entire process—hence the idea of “process theology.” *What do you think of Cobb’s criticism of an “interventionist” view of God?*

Question 4B: *If God’s action in the world is not “interventionist”, what might be a process understanding of **prayer**?*

5. **God’s role: introduction of novelty and freedom.** John Cobb continues his explanation of **process theology** in this way:

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If you accept the **Cartesian view of the universe as basically a machine**, then the only way that anything can happen that is not purely mechanistic is by an action *upon* things from the outside. And this was true in the 18th century debates—that either you say the machine just goes on, on its own, and God's role was just to set it up, or you say from time to time **God intervenes** in the process in a supernatural way.

But **if you understand that the world is not a machine to begin with—it's really made up of events, happenings, occurrences**. Each of these occurrences is a synthesis of many, many things. In every moment of my experience, everything I've ever experienced in the past plays some slight role, and new things are playing some slight role. To say that also God is active in every one of those events means that God is one element in my experience—but not to displace the other elements.

God introduces freedom, novelty, also ultimately order. God's role is extremely important, and it is the role of God especially to introduce novelty—that is, a purposive novelty.

Question 5A: *Based on this interview, or anything else you may have heard or read by John Cobb, how would you describe Cobb's understanding and experience of **God**?*

Question 5B: *Do you find John Cobb's "**process theology**" view of God's action in the world attractive? (In particular, this would be the idea that God is especially active in the introduction of novelty and creativity.) Or, is your sense of God more as an aloof Creator—one who established the basic laws and foundation of the universe, from which evolutionary novelty then emerged on its own, but who really doesn't get involved in running the show? Or do you think of the word 'God' as a mythic name for 'Reality' as a whole—similar to how the host of this series, Michael Dowd, uses the word 'God'. A metaphorical understanding of God is that the word helps personalize the process of evolution and emergence, so that we relate to what is undeniably real personally, even if the process itself is not a 'person', nor is it tweaked by a 'person'. Or have you dispensed with the notion of God altogether? Roughly speaking then, the choices are **(1) interventionist God, (2) process God, (3) (deistic) Creator God, (4) God as the mythic face of Reality, (5) no God**. Which of these comes closest to your own sense of the divine?*

Question 5C: *Are you satisfied with **your current faith stance concerning God's presence and action** (or inaction) in the world? What do you find most fulfilling and least fulfilling about your current sense of God's presence and action?*

6. **God's "persuasive power" and the problem of evil.** The "problem of evil" existing in the world, despite an allegedly "all powerful," "all knowing," "all loving" God, is one of the most difficult problems—even for professional theologians to solve for their own peace-of-mind. John Cobb solves it to his own satisfaction by challenging the assumption that God need be characterized as "all powerful." He distinguishes that form of "**controlling power**" from what

he calls “**persuasive power.**” Persuasive power (or “empowering” power) is, to his mind, more powerful than controlling power. He gives this example:

As a parent, when I couldn't find any alternative but to coerce one of my sons to do something—I was never very successful at it, anyway—then I felt almost completely powerless. I wanted them to do things because I could persuade them, or point them in a direction they would then recognize as being the right direction. That's a very different way of thinking of power. So unfortunately, when we use words like **almighty** and **omnipotent**, we almost inevitably connect that with controlling everything. I think that's just **the wrong notion of power** to begin with. That is not what Jesus reveals to us as divine power.

So, **I would never use the world all-powerful**. It happens not to be a biblical word, anyway. *Almighty* is used a lot in our English translations, but it just replaces the proper name Shaddai, which doesn't have any such connotation. So **the whole idea that the Bible teaches God's almightiness or omnipotence is, I think, fundamentally misguided**. So, I just want to get rid of that, and then we can talk and marvel at the wonderful power of God that brings so much into being out of what is so much less than that—which transforms human lives, which gives meaning to our lives. I think the idea that God controls everything, so that everything that happens is what God wants, is deeply, deeply contradictory to the biblical view, which repeatedly indicates that God is not too happy about what we're doing in the world. There surely is a difference between what God wants and what happens in the world.

So, if you start out with the assumption that the only kind of power that you want to talk about is the power of controlling things, then of course you hate to say, “Oh, but God only has a little bit of it.” That makes it sound like God is weak. But if you understand that **God's power is the power of love, not the power of force**, then you can marvel at how great that power is.

Question 6A: *Has “the problem of evil” been a personal concern of yours at any point in your life? If so, what were the circumstances, and how did you move through this faith concern?*

Question 6B: *For you personally, is there a distinction between **human-generated evil** (e.g., injury or death of a loved one owing to a drunk driver or a multinational corporation wreaking havoc to a community or ecosystem) and **natural catastrophes** (e.g., earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes)? In other words, is one kind of dreadful harm easier for you to accept as happening “for no reason” or “just because” or “outside of God’s purview”?*

Question 6C: *Is the problem of evil **less** of a conundrum in our science-savvy world (e.g., we now know why earthquakes and hurricanes happen) or is it **more** troubling because electronic media keep us informed of every natural disaster and genocidal action anywhere in the world?*

Question 6D: *How do you regard John Cobb’s distinction between thinking of God as having “**controlling power**” v. “**persuasive power**”? Is it a helpful distinction that you would like to blend into your own faith perspective? Or does it not work for you in some way? How so?*

Question 6E: *For most of us, **vivid examples are important** in conveying new ideas and points of view. Here, John Cobb draws upon his own experience as a parent for telling a story*

*of how persuasive power excels over controlling power. Reflecting on your own needs for making points and persuading others, do you see opportunities **for using more stories** and examples to bolster your position—beyond mere logical presentation of a particular position? And what steps might you take to begin using stories more often?*

NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS: If the **problem of evil** is something you would like to delve into further, know that the study guide for Episode 32 (the Kevin Kelly interview) **excerpt**s all **12 speakers** in the series who directly address this topic. You will find the excerpts as part of question 4C in Episode 32.

7. **God's suffering and the cross.** John Cobb says:

I see God as present wherever we see loving relationships, wherever we see creative imagination, wherever we see healing taking place. There are all kinds of ways of talking about where God is. And there's an element of that in *everything* that happens, but often it gets crushed. So I think God suffers greatly in the world.

If we see God as revealed in **the cross of Christ**, it's very hard to say that God is not involved in, or does not experience, suffering. God rejoices with those who rejoice, but God also suffers with those who suffer. **God shares our suffering with us.** That is comforting to us, I think. To have another person who empathizes fully with me is extremely beneficial to me—no matter what evil I'm experiencing. That really is a kind of suffering that God endures. So when we injure a neighbor, we are injuring God. When we give joy to a child, we are giving joy to God. To me, that's a profound source of the meaningfulness of life's actions.

Question 7: *Do you find this “process” understanding of God's presence in worldly suffering plausible and comforting? Overall, what is your personal response to a “process” understanding of why there is evil and suffering in the world?*

8. **God's action in the novelties of evolution.** John Cobb says:

The idea that complex things suddenly appeared out of nowhere is so different from any aspect of our experience, including our own personal experience of God. It seems so artificial. So to me, the natural way of thinking about how God works is to see **God as operative in all things, aiming to bring greater value into the world...** I think God has been at work that way all along, and that means that everything that happens is largely the product of its past. There's no way of avoiding that—but that it is not simply the product of its past. There's always the possibility of some element of creativity and novelty, of adventure. That all comes from God. And **it's only because of God, then, that the evolutionary process is possible.**

Question 8: *Do you find this “process” understanding of God's presence in the evolutionary process plausible and attractive? Or does it bring religion too deeply into the usual province of science? Overall, what is your personal response to John Cobb's “process” understanding of the role “God” plays in the evolutionary process?*

9. What would you ask John Cobb?

Question 9: *If you had an opportunity to ask John Cobb **just one question** to better understand his perspective on science and religion, what would it be? (Please be sure to phrase your question in a way that he would appreciate as coming from genuine curiosity rather than confrontation or disrespect.)*

10. **Humans as cancer or immune system of Earth?** Occasionally the host, Michael Dowd, introduces concepts and opinions of his own in this series. In this interview, his lengthiest contribution occurs at the end of the dialogue, where he offers **the metaphor of “cancer” as the role humans are currently playing in the body of life**. This is not a novel suggestion; others have offered this analogy. But where Dowd offers something new is in his description of a cancer cell as having lost its genetic sense of belonging to something larger than itself—and then suggesting that **culturally modern humans are missing a “common creation story” that would connect us to the larger whole**. He proposes a solution: teach “Big History,” which is also known as “the Epic of Evolution” or “the Great Story.” **Dowd** also suggests we can assume a new planetary role, as

. . . **an immune system**—where humans protect and foster and defend the health and the wellbeing of this larger body of which we're a part and upon which we depend utterly. To the degree that we *do* that—that we make a top priority the health and wellbeing of other species, the air, the water, the soil upon which we all depend—we will thrive in that kind of a world. It's like becoming an immune system in this larger body.

Question 10: *How does Dowd's appeal for **teaching the “Epic of Evolution”** as our common creation story land on you? What about Dowd's suggestion that humanity should work toward taking on a new planetary role, as **an immune system within the body of life**?*

11. **One listener's positive experience of this dialogue.** On the online comments page for this particular dialogue in the series, one of the listeners posts an appreciative comment. On December 11, 2010 **Richard R. Powell** writes,

I was powerfully affected by this talk, particularly the reminder of an “events” view of reality and how strongly a “parts” or “mechanistic” view has dominated our perspective for over 100 years.

I appreciated the way both Michael and John expanded the idea of God being in the creative, joyful, life-giving, moments and the role of purpose in evolution. I have been wrestling with the strong arguments of new and not-so-new **atheists**, feeling a conviction that much of what they are saying is accurate and faithful to reality, but also **grieving the loss of purpose and transcendence**. I loved [Neil deGrasse Tyson's “sermon”](#) at the end of the Beyond Belief series when he talked about the Universe calling him. That talk, and this one, together **have given me hope that a larger and more compelling view of God can be grasped by the human mind**, even if the simpler and less elegant ones of yesteryear continue to be adequate for many.

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conceive of bigger and hopefully more integrative views that **transcend and include mechanistic, mystic, and mythic conceptions**. This talk, and this series, really opens windows and I feel the fresh air of open-minded dialogue that I have not felt for quite some time.

NOTE: This comment (and many others of interest!) can be found at:

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/john-cobb-process-theologian-par-excellence/>

A YouTube clip of the Neil deGrasse Tyson ‘sermon’ can be viewed at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CsjOVqHuho>

Question 11: *Does this comment by a listener open up new territory that interests you—or not? To what extent does exposure or access to comments by others, including live or virtual participation in a discussion group, help you take in and digest complex ideas and perspectives—such as those presented here?*

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