

Thomas Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride: The First Reformation in Hussite Bohemia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

Although this volume is now five years old, its publication was unnoticed by most Moravians, myself included. This was no doubt in part because of the high price of the book (nearly \$100), but it is worth checking out of the library. Fudge presents the best account of the tumultuous years of the Hussite revolution since Kaminsky's *History of the Hussite Revolution*. Although the *Unitas Fratrum* does not figure prominently in this volume, Moravians will find a concise and helpful account of the Hussite movement that led to the founding of our church. Fudge does a nice job with the early reform efforts in Bohemia that inspired Jan Hus. He demonstrates the relationship of theological issues to the concerns of ordinary people in Bohemia and gives a good account of the two divergent branches of the Hussite movement. Particularly helpful is his discussion of the chalice and the martyrdom of Hus as the symbols that inspired and unified all Hussite parties. The chalice represented more than just communion, it was also the symbol of a new understanding of the church and was even viewed by some as a sign of the in-breaking of the eschatological age. Fudge's main concern is with how the Hussites communicated their message to the masses. He examines the variety of media available to them and how they exploited music, preaching, and art for propaganda. It may be disquieting for modern Moravians to realize that our rich musical heritage goes back to songs like "Warriors of God" that were used to inspire the Taborites for battle, but this is a volume worth reading.

John M. Klassen, *Warring Maiden, Captive Wives, and Hussite Queens* (East European Monographs, 1999).

The Hussite movement challenged more than just the authority of the medieval church; it also raised serious questions about the social order and Christianity. Klassen focuses on the issue of gender, and he demonstrates that there was a brief window during the Hussite revolution when the social constraints on women were eased somewhat. It is interesting that Hus had a better view of women and the capacity as leaders than his successors who were more bound by traditional exegesis. The most radical perspective on women was offered by Petr Chelcicky, whose theology profoundly influenced the early Unity of the Brethren. Chelcicky broke with centuries of church tradition to argue that men and women are essentially equal in the eyes of the Lord and in the church. Klassen, though, does not adequately address the fact that Chelcicky viewed society and Christianity as opposing forces; therefore his view on women was restricted to the church. All in all, this is a helpful study of an important period of Moravian history.

Review Essay

John B. Cobb, Jr., *Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way Beyond Absolutism and Relativism*, ed. by Paul Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 189 pages.

John Cobb has been one of the leading figures in the area of "theology of religion," and is also an active member of the United Methodist church who teaches Sunday School. Unlike many Americans, Cobb does not see the intellectual life as somehow distinct from the life of faith, and in his numerous books he has called upon Christians to think about their faith and their actions in the world. Paul Knitter, another leading figure in the theology of religion, has collected several of Cobb's essays from the last two decades to show how Cobb's thought has continued to develop. In particular, this volume shows how Cobb has moved from a strong endorsement of relativism to a more nuanced approach to religious truth. Although he continues to reject absolutism in Christianity (or Islam and Buddhism) as untruthful and unethical, he recognizes that the type of relativism popular in our academic institutions makes responsible action in the world almost impossible. What is needed is middle path between

relativism and absolutism, or better, one that goes beyond both of those extreme attitudes to the path of truth, faith, and life.

Cobb clearly recognizes the problems that relativism has created in the academic sphere, and he is very careful to distance himself from the idea that relativism means there is no truth. In a 1990 essay, Cobb rejects other forms of relativism, especially “conceptual relativism” and post-modern deconstruction, as absurd and pointless. For Cobb, there is indeed a world “out there” for which we are responsible, and he calls for the world’s religious and intellectual leaders to seek for common ground in the midst of relative truth so that we may address the pressing problems of our age.

Throughout this volume, Cobb critiques the most important approaches to the question of world religions, and finds them all inadequate. He argues that the pluralists (Hick, Knitter, Smith) are not truly pluralistic because they rely on an ultimate unity behind the world’s religions which renders the particularity of actual religious belief and practice superfluous. Cobb sees this as a paradoxical form of Western imperialism since Western philosophers are telling the rest of the world that their religion is really pointing to a philosophical view of God rather than what they think it is doing. Another approach is simply to ignore all religion as irrelevant in the modern age, but Cobb rejects this because religion continues to be the most important motivating factor for billions of people.

Cobb prefers an approach that respects the genuine distinctiveness of each major (or living) religion and its truth-claims while encouraging intense interreligious dialogue that may lead to the transformation of one or more of the major religions. Through dialog, mutual learning, and common work to alleviate suffering, Buddhism *may* become more “Christian,” and Christianity *may* also become more Buddhist. He argues that Christians should not be threatened by this since “Christianity is a living movement” and “should be ever changing and growing” (p. 45). Without this openness and self-criticism, Christianity would cease to live in the reality of Christ (the way, the truth, and the life) and would be “idolatrous and unfaithful.”

It may surprise some readers that Cobb calls for a Christocentric theology in dealing with the reality of other world religions. Inter-religion dialog and cooperation can only take place if Christians remain true to their central affirmation of Jesus as a revelation of God. Rather than trying to Westernize other cultures in order to evangelize them, he urges that Christians drop their claims to be the only religion for all of humankind and accept the fact that Christians perceive God, reality, salvation, and life itself through Western eyes. We can then enter into authentic dialogue with people of other faiths and perspectives without abandoning our own identity.

In his 1993 essay, “Christian Universality Revisited,” he argues that Christians must engage the world, including other religions, as Christians without apology. He acknowledges that it is difficult to use the name Christ when engaging in dialogs with Jews; however, it would be deceptive and unhelpful for Christians to abandon their own language of faith. Similarly, Christians can engage in dialog with Buddhists without abandoning their conviction that we have responsibility to God and to the world as God’s creation. What Christians should give up, according to Cobb, is their claim that Christianity is the final answer for the world and that those who are ignorant of the Gospel or who reject it are condemned for all time.

This remains the sensitive issue. It has become commonplace to say that we live in a pluralistic world. Some, like Cobb, embrace pluralism, others reject it, and many of us go about their business without acknowledging it. Ironically, though, the world is actually less pluralistic today than it was 500 years ago. Most of the world can be counted among the adherents of just five religions (Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish) and their cognates (Mormon, Ba’hai, etc.). The only ideology that competes with the major religions is Market Capitalism. Certainly there are numerous little sects and New Age groups, but few of them actually develop beyond a website and book store.

The fact remains that in the world at large, there is less religious diversity now than at any time since the dawn of civilization. The world is now divided between three major competing and absolutist faiths. Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity each claim to being the only path to lasting happiness and right living. Each sends out missionaries with their message of salvation. Each dominates a major geographical region of the world and now each infringes on the others' traditional spheres of influence. Each has been the victim and the perpetuator of violence and domination. For Cobb, the only way to avoid continual and fruitless conflict is for the major faith traditions to accept their relativity. Just as in physics all motion is relative motion, so in religion, all faith is relative to time and place. Each religion has changed dramatically through the centuries and truths once held as absolute have been abandoned in favor of better understandings or new revelations. Why not go a step further and acknowledge that other faith traditions may also have relative truths? In specific, Cobb argues that Buddhists and Christians as Buddhists and Christians need to work together from their own faith traditions to engage in work to repair our damaged world.

Most people who know of Cobb's earlier works will probably be surprised to read the essay "Proclaiming Christ in a Pluralistic World," because there he asserts that Christians need to preach Christ in words and actions. The goal of proclaiming Christ is the conversion of the world (including the Christian church) to the mission that Jesus proclaimed in the world. We do this best, Cobb says, when we live by faith rather than relying on ancient confessional statements. "A healthy, confident Christian faith is much more likely when we recognize that we do not know what we will believe in the future, but that we know that for now God in Christ calls us to learn all we can" (p. 184). Although you may reject Cobb's presuppositions and conclusions, it is instructive to see the development of his thought. And the questions he addresses will be the most vexing ones for Christians in the twenty-first century..

-- Craig Atwood

Letters

Dear Craig:

I am writing to comment on the Winter 2003 Hinge, Readiness for Ordination: A Statement by the PECs. I am in agreement with the "Notes from the Editor" specifically the statements "Few clergy report being happy and fulfilled in their work" and also "Pastors in distress more often choose to leave the ministry rather than move to a new congregation." Even though these two statements are certainly nothing new, I am glad that they are being pointed out.

I joined the Moravian Church while at Moravian Theological Seminary as part of the process for ordination. As of this writing I will have served in parish ministry nine years. The fact that morale of Moravian clergy is low and conflict between pastors and those they serve is high doesn't surprise me at all. Neither am I surprised that some of the frustration is traced to the call process itself. I do not believe the call process itself is all that difficult to understand nor are the expectations placed on clergy serving in the Moravian Church. The job description is spelled out in the document, "Steps to Ordination" and the call process is the way the minister "applies" for the job.

On the surface everything seems clear and upfront. Unfortunately, the call process is not without its faults. As I see it, there are two particular problems. The first is that the call process can take a long time depending on the church. Smaller churches, high maintenance churches, and churches suffering financial hardship are less likely to go through the process quickly. When a church of the above description does finally install a pastor, they are often "fresh out of seminary." The simple truth is that the small church can't afford a more experienced pastor and because the newly graduated candidate is fearful of turning down that first call.