

The hope-filled worldview of John B. Cobb Jr.

Cobb was a visionary who saw theology as a force for transformation—as much about action as thought.

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John B. Cobb Jr.

Reflecting on the life and work of John Boswell Cobb, Jr., who died on December 26, is no simple task. To call him a theologian, philosopher, or environmentalist feels insufficient. Cobb was all of these things, and more—he was a visionary who dared to dream big, a World War II veteran who liked his coffee hot, a mentor to generations of professors and ministers, and a relentless advocate for the flourishing

of people and the planet.

His legacy spans more than half a century of intellectual inquiry and activism, all deeply rooted in a process-relational understanding of the world. In some circles, Cobb is known as a foremost expert on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. To others, he stands out as a leading figure in 20th-century liberal theology, particularly for his contributions to process theology. Still others know him for his work in ecological economics and his visionary call for an “ecological civilization.” For those fortunate enough to have known him personally, it is his gentleness, compassion, and genuine concern for others that stand out most. Yet, none of these features of Cobb’s life and legacy can be understood apart from the others—they were all deeply interconnected.

Over the past 50 years, much of Cobb’s professional energy was channeled through the Center for Process Studies, which he founded in 1973 as a faculty research center at the Claremont School of Theology. Under his leadership, CPS became the hub of a global movement—a vibrant interdisciplinary think tank dedicated to hosting conferences, publishing groundbreaking research, and fostering a network of scholars, activists, and leaders committed to a more equitable, sustainable, and meaningful way of being in the world.

For Cobb, theology was never just an academic discipline. In fact, he was deeply critical of the modern university’s tendency to prioritize disciplinary purity at the expense of real-world relevance. I recall one afternoon sitting in his living room—his preferred space for “conspiratorial conversations” about how to make the world a better place—when he remarked, “‘Value-free’ education is not free of values; it’s free of reflection on values. Money has become the default value. The theology of the world today is taught in the graduate schools of economics.” For Cobb, this failure to reflect on values was a fundamental flaw of the modern university—and even, at times, theology. At a 2017 conference, he expressed his belief that “the task of theology today is to save the planet”—but he also opined that trying to save the world is not an academically respectable activity. These words capture the heart of Cobb’s theological vision, which was as much about action as it was about thought.

Cobb envisioned theology as a force for transformation. He believed theology was not about abstract speculation or inward-focused dogma, but about engaging the most pressing issues of our time—climate change, social inequality, political

polarization—and offering a vision of hope. His hopefulness, however, was never blind optimism. He was keenly aware of the systemic challenges we face. His life’s work was, in many ways, about making progress on seemingly intractable issues.

He never shied away from big ideas. In his later years, he focused intently on building pathways to global peace, particularly through US–China collaboration. Cobb’s influence in China is especially remarkable: he inspired the development of 45 process centers at universities there. Over time, his ideas reached millions of Chinese scholars and activists. That a Christian theologian would have such an impact in a communist context speaks to the kind of theologian Cobb was.

I recall visiting the 99-year-old Cobb with a group of students, to whom he explained why he preferred to describe himself as a “disciple of Jesus” rather than “Christian.” He wasn’t interested in promoting a specific religion but rather in living out the core values of Jesus’ teaching—values centered on love. Earlier in his career, he proposed replacing “Kingdom of God” language with “Divine Commonwealth” to emphasize the participatory nature of God and the world. He later began favoring “ecological civilization” over “Divine Commonwealth,” and the new term gained traction globally. It captured his belief in what the church—and all of humanity—is called to build: a civilization that nurtures the flourishing of all life.

Cobb’s work toward an ecological civilization is perhaps one of his most enduring contributions. This vision calls for a radical rethinking of human systems, from economics and education to agriculture and energy, in ways that promote sustainability and justice. Understanding this vision as rooted in love helps illuminate the breadth of Cobb’s work as a theologian, which spanned biology, psychology, economics, ecology, politics, and more, touching every dimension of life.

Even in his later years, Cobb worked tirelessly to articulate his vision and to bring people together to explore its realization. His 2015 conference, “Seizing an Alternative: Toward an Ecological Civilization,” was a landmark event that brought over 2,000 participants from around the world to discuss pathways toward a sustainable and just future. Cobb believed so strongly in this work that he invested much of his remaining assets—and his children’s inheritance—into funding the conference. While he intended this to be his final major contribution, the then-90-year-old Cobb couldn’t have known that it would spark the creation of three new nonprofit organizations, a publishing house, and several more books in the years that followed.

Cobb's theological reflections were deeply rooted in his process-relational worldview, which sees reality as dynamic, interdependent, and participatory. In this framework, God is not an omnipotent dictator but a persuasive presence who works through love and creativity. This vision of divine action challenges traditional notions of power, offering a model of partnership and co-creation. It also underscores the moral responsibility of humans as co-creators in the ongoing process of the world's becoming.

An emphasis on inclusivity also shaped Cobb's legacy. He worked tirelessly to foster interfaith dialogue, particularly with the Japanese Buddhist scholar Masao Abe, and to build bridges between Western and Eastern traditions. No doubt, growing up in Japan as the child of Methodist missionaries contributed to Cobb's cross-cultural interests. And his groundbreaking efforts in China demonstrated the potential of process thought as a bridge for cross-cultural understanding. Cobb showed that theology could be a meeting ground for diverse perspectives, enriching our understanding of the Divine, the world, and one another.

In one of my final conversations with Cobb, we discussed the future of CPS and the challenges ahead. Despite the enormity of the task, he was filled with hope. He often downplayed his own contributions, stating that his hope wasn't in the impact he would make but rather in the impact his students—and their students—would make in the world.

The challenge of carrying Cobb's legacy forward lies in the radical demands it places on us all. His vision for an ecological civilization requires a collective reimagining of how we live, think, and relate to one another. It challenges us to confront entrenched systems of power and privilege, to prioritize sustainability over profit, and to build communities that reflect the interconnectedness of all life.

Cobb has not only shaped the course of theology; he has profoundly shaped the lives of those who knew him and the institutions he founded. His legacy will continue to unfold—not just in books and conferences, but also in the relationships and communities he nurtured. For that legacy, and for so much more, we owe him our deepest gratitude.