Panentheism and the Conception of the Ultimate in John B. Cobb's Process Philosophy

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Abstract

The concept of ultimate reality has an important role in the metaphysics of religious pluralism. John B. Cobb—a process philosopher in the Whiteheadian tradition—has suggested not only two ultimates, like other process philosophers, but three ultimates: God, creativity, and the cosmos. Based on this, I argue, firstly, that Cobb's tripartite conception of the ultimate offers greater conceptual resources for inter-religious dialog than, for example, John Hick's conception of ultimate reality or 'the Real'. In support of this first claim, I will apply Cobb's conception of the ultimate to Zen-Buddhism, thus exemplifying the resources of this conception. Secondly, given the conclusion that Cobb's conception of the ultimate does indeed offer greater conceptual resources, I further explicate how panentheism, understood as the thesis of a transcendent, immanent divine being who is bilaterally related to the world, can be read in terms of Cobb's conception of the ultimate. I thus argue that panentheism in general inherits and retains many of the conceptual resources of Cobb's understanding of the ultimate, and can be seen as a preferable position in relation to religious pluralism. Finally, I conclude from the example of Zen-Buddhism that, although Cobb's conception offers greater resources for engaging in a dialog from a metaphysical point of view, work has to be done to adequately address questions on the level of soteriology.

Keywords Panentheism · Process philosophy · Ultimate reality · Zen-Buddhism · Religious pluralism

Introduction

A standard concept in the metaphysics of religious pluralism is 'ultimate reality'. Presumably, it is common to think of ultimate reality (for simplicity, henceforth mostly

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denoted as 'the ultimate') as one reality. Obviously, an understanding of the ultimate as one can easily be associated with One God; and consequently one may wonder whether this understanding has its roots in Western monotheistic thinking. In any case, conceptions of the ultimate in terms of one reality have famously been proposed by John Hick, for example, who attempts to understand the ultimate in terms of the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal (Kant Kant 1787 KrV B294-215; Hick 1983:487, Hick 2004:240–246). Hick's position has been widely discussed and criticized, but this is not the place to repeat such criticism in detail. Instead, one main issue in this paper will be to present and discuss a specific alternative conception of the ultimate; and Hick's well-known position of one ultimate will be helpful in contrasting it with Cobb's conception of the ultimate. Proponents of process philosophy and the views defended by them have frequently suggested novel ideas and approaches to various problems, both within philosophy in general and more specifically within the philosophy of religion. Unsurprisingly, process philosophers—in particular, those in the tradition of A.N. Whitehead—have also suggested a different, alternative approach to the concept of the ultimate. For example, Whitehead himself, and initially David Ray Griffin, have both suggested that there may be two ultimates, God and creativity. John B. Cobb, in his later works, has gone one step further down this path, and thinks of the ultimate as tripartite: God, creativity, and the cosmos (Cobb 1999). Even Griffin, in his later works, has supported and developed Cobb's ideas about three ultimates (Griffin 2005a, 2005b). In this paper, I will initially present and describe this presumably unusual understanding of the ultimate. After briefly introducing Cobb's tripartite understanding of the ultimate, I will attempt, with Zen-Buddhism as an example, to apply this conception and exemplify the conceptual advantages of Cobb's tripartite understanding. Furthermore, after briefly introducing a generic form of panentheism, I will describe the relationship of panentheism to this tripartite understanding of the ultimate, and argue that it inherits the conceptual advantages of Cobb's understanding of the ultimate. Thus, I will argue and conclude that even panentheism—not necessarily in the process philosophical framework of Cobb, but also in a generic understanding—has some conceptual advantages in relation to the metaphysics in religious pluralism. I will also briefly argue that, despite these advantages for generic panentheism and Cobb's conception of the ultimate, problems related to soteriological question are not adequately addressed. Still, such soteriological questions are common within the discourse of religious pluralism, and are also related to the metaphysics of the ultimate. So, if one wishes to engage in a dialog between different religions, even within a tripartite understanding of the ultimate, further conceptual resources would have to be provided in relation to soteriology.

Some Preliminaries and the Ultimate in a Process Philosophical Understanding

To start with, the two concepts of ultimate reality and religious pluralism, mentioned in the introduction, are both central to the following discussion. The concept of ultimate reality, or the ultimate, is a broad one that refers, loosely speaking, to something supreme, absolute, 'ultimate', or divine in reality. This supreme, absolute, 'ultimate' or divine in reality has been described by Cobb as '[…] that at which a line of

questioning ends' (Cobb 1999:184). Clearly, the ultimate is thought of and named in various different ways, depending on the religion or philosophy. John Hick, for example, names a variety of possible terms, all referring in some sense or another to what here is denoted as the ultimate: God, Allah, Vishnu, Brahman, Sunyata, the Transcendent, the Ultimate, the Ultimate Reality, the Supreme Principle, the Divine, the One, the Eternal One, and the Real (Hick 2004:10). Hick himself usually uses the last term, 'the Real' with a capital 'R', thereby emphasizing the ultimate (Hick 2004:11). John Hick's conception of ultimate reality (or 'the Real', as he denotes it) seems at first sight to be firmly rooted in a monotheistic understanding of divinity in this world. I shall not extensively argue for or further explicate the following claim in detail; but I do think that there is a conceptual closeness between conceiving of the ultimate as one—and in an extended Kantian sense—noumenal Real, and thinking of God as the one God. In so far, this claim is correct, there already seems to be a bias in favor of religions focusing on one ultimate reality, whereas religious pluralism should be able to relate to any religion without initial bias.

Next, following David Ray Griffin, the concept of religious pluralism will be understood here in a generic sense as the thesis (a) to reject that one's '[...] own religion is the only one that provides saving truths and values to its adherents [...]' and (b) '[...] that there indeed are religions other than one's own that provide saving truths and values to their adherents' (Griffin 2005b:3). Griffin extends this understanding of religious pluralism, and subsequently introduces the distinction between *identist* and *differential* pluralism. The former means that all religions are ultimately directed at the same religious object, and that they ultimately have the same goal—e.g., salvation in Christianity. Here, a brief note is in order: although the term 'salvation' is often used for the goal of a religion in general, I find this terminology misleading, since it is strongly connected to Christian theology and, as shall become clear later in the case of Zen-Buddhism, it does not necessarily capture the goal of all specific religions. The differential position, in contrast, claims that religions do not necessarily have the same ultimate goal, and that they may not be directed at one and the same ultimate (Griffin 2005a, 2005b:24). The understanding of pluralism as *differential* does not stand in conflict with the above generic description of religious pluralism. It should also be noted here that Hick's pluralism is an identist position, in that the noumenal 'Real', the ultimate, is claimed to be the same for all religions in so far as the soteriological goal is understood to be the shift from 'self-centeredness' to 'reality-centeredness' (Hick 1983:487, Hick 2004:36).

So how is the ultimate actually understood in Whiteheadian process philosophy? To start with God as one possible expression of the ultimate is commonly construed in process philosophy as *dipolar*. This dipolarity is usually expressed in the distinction between God's primordial nature and God's consequent nature (Whitehead 1978:345). God's dipolar nature has a parallel in the dipolarity of actual occasions described in process philosophy and, according to Griffin, corresponds to God being affected by and affecting the world (Griffin 2001:146–150). Whitehead himself describes the primordial nature of God as conceptual and the consequent nature as conscious (Whitehead 1978:345; Griffin 2001:146–150). Importantly for the problem of religious pluralism, this dipolarity is reflected in how ultimate reality is described, although the dipolarity of God and the two ultimates should not be identified. Again, based on Whitehead's understanding of creativity as an ultimate, Griffin suggests that there are two aspects of

ultimate reality: one being creative experience or creativity and the other being God (Whitehead 1978:7, 21; Griffin 2001:264). Likewise, Charles Hartshorne emphasizes that creativity must be understood as a universal category, and in fact suggests that creativity should be an important feature in any theistic philosophy (Hartshorne 1967:24). Cobb goes one step further, claiming that one should distinguish between three ultimates: God, creativity, and the cosmos (Cobb 1999:184–185; Griffin 2005b:49, Griffin 2014:255–261).[1]

The motive for Cobb to suggest three ultimates, I believe, is the insight that what could be understood as ultimate in different religions in fact differs significantly. Cobb admits that introducing multiple ultimates may not be important in a Jewish-Christian-Muslim context; but in dialog with Hindu, Buddhist, or Taoist religions or worldviews, it will be of great significance (Cobb 1999:184). As an example that there are significant and apparent differences between what can be regarded as 'ultimate,' Cobb contrasts 'emptiness' in Zen-Buddhism with 'God' in Christianity (Cobb 1987:88). (I shall return to this example later.) Starting with a reasoning about efficient causes, Cobb identifies 'God' as one ultimate and 'prime matter' as a second. This prime matter, he then suggests, should be described as '[…] pure activity or as creativity [...]' (Cobb 1999:184). Finally, with reference to pantheism and Taoism, he introduces the cosmos as a third ultimate (Cobb 1999:184–185). Thus, the three ultimates are God, creativity, and the cosmos. In an earlier essay, Cobb uses a slightly different terminology and, with reference to Jack Hutchison, talks about theistic, cosmic, and acosmic religions (Cobb 1993:119–123). Cobb also admits that the use of the term 'ultimate' is problematic, since it is so easily associated with a 'single' ultimate, and that it may be of value to find another, more suitable term (Cobb 1999:184). Nevertheless, he sticks to this common and widely used terminology.

Cobb's tripartite understanding of the ultimate results in a *differential* form of religious pluralism rather than an *identist*. In relation to any specific religion, this would mean that it is directed at one of the three ultimates in various degrees and combinations. For example, a religion could focus entirely on the worship of the ultimate as God or the divine; or it could focus on the ultimate creative force in the world or on the cosmos. Such a differential pluralism, based on Cobb's tripartite distinction between God, creativity, and the cosmos, would apparently allow for a great variety and diversity of different religions. The details for specific religions obviously need to be worked out in each case. It is even conceivable that the three ultimates suggested by Cobb are not sufficient for describing all approaches to the ultimate in all religions. However, Cobb is open to the possibility of multiple ultimates (Cobb 1999:184–185). Thus, there may be ultimates that have not yet been recognized and conceptualized.

This tripartite conception of the ultimate may, at first glance, seem unusual and possibly even unreasonable. Would not such a distinction point in the direction of some form of polytheism? Would not monotheistic positions at least be questioned by this approach? Cobb acknowledges these charges. Most importantly, in my reading, he

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[1] It should be noted here that the tripartite conception is the result of a development throughout Cobb's career. Initially, like other process theologians, he argued for two ultimates; and even later it is not entirely clear whether he thinks that all three ultimates are of equal importance. This development is also reflected in the fact that he made a substantial revision of the chapter discussing Whitehead's doctrine of God (Cobb 1965, 2007). Be that as it may, in this paper I assume that it is possible and reasonable to think of at least three ultimates.

points out that '[...] not all religions are theistic' (Cobb 1999:185). Obviously, an understanding of the ultimate should be able to account for theistic, non-theistic, and polytheistic forms of religion. Cobb points out that the claim that there is only one ultimate '[...] reflects the Western passion for unity and metaphysical tidiness which should be respected but not allowed to dominate' (Cobb 1999:185). Indeed, Cobb's tripartite understanding of the ultimate is a form of *metaphysical* pluralism; it is not a form of *theism*. Griffin uses Cobb's view as a starting point to develop his *deep religious pluralism* (Griffin 2005b:3–66), and both Cobb and Griffin claim that the distinction of three ultimates has clear advantages in the discourse of religious pluralism. These possible advantages of a tripartite conception will now be investigated, with Zen-Buddhism as an example.

Zen-Buddhism and the Three Ultimates in Cobb's Process Philosophy

In order to demonstrate how an understanding of the ultimate in Zen-Buddhism relates to the tripartite concept of the ultimate introduced above, and what advantages this conception might have over an understanding of the ultimate as one, a brief description of some important aspects and ideas in Zen-Buddhism, without claiming completeness, is appropriate.

It is well-known that, historically, Zen-Buddhism evolved from a Chinese version of Mahayana Buddhism, with the term 'Zen' being the Japanese counterpart of the Chinese word *Chan* or the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, meaning 'meditation' (for example: Jacobsen 2002:197–207; Suzuki 2006, chap. 3). Zen-Buddhism, as in other forms of Buddhism, focuses on liberation, ultimately resulting in a new outlook on life and the world. The Japanese term for this liberation, salvation, or 'enlightenment' is *satori*. Liberation or satori is a goal in the practice of Zen-Buddhism. Thus there is already a strong focus on soteriology in this important feature of Zen-Buddhism. Daisetz Tataro Suzuki (1870–1966) defines satori '[...] as an intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradistinction to the analytical or logical understanding of it' (Suzuki 2006:98). More specifically, he describes this state as follows: 'Logically stated, all its [the world's] *opposites and contradictions* are united and harmonized into a consistent organic whole' (Suzuki 2006:99; comment and emphasis added). Apparently, in satori, the duality perceived in the world is overcome. This overcoming of the duality in the world is repeatedly emphasized in Zen-Buddhism. Commenting on Suzuki, Abe Masao (1915–2006), a philosopher of the Kyoto School, discusses precisely this overcoming of all duality in relation to creation in Christianity; and, in my reading, in an attempt to understand Zen in terms of Christianity, and to engage in dialog, he even claims that '(t)he Christian idea of God is certainly beyond the duality of subject and object, transcendence and immanence, being and non-being' (Abe 1989c:74). Furthermore, with reference to the Zen-Buddhist monk Dōgen (1200–1253), Abe names three dualities that are overcome in satori: the duality of subject and object, the duality of potentiality and actuality, and the duality of means and end (Abe 1989a:58–59). Indeed, the overcoming of duality in Zen-Buddhism goes 'all the way down'. Even the priority of 'being' over 'non-being' is regarded as '[...] not ontologically justifiable [...]' (Abe 1989d:109). What becomes clear is this: the overcoming of duality in satori concerns the relationship of the person practicing Zen to the world or cosmos. It is, for example,

the subject-object or the 'being'-'non-being' duality that is addressed. The relationship with God certainly does not primarily seem to be an issue within Zen.

One should nevertheless be aware of the following: overcoming duality in the above sense is not primarily understood as a synthesis, but rather as an 'emptying', as both '[...] beyond all affirmation and all negation [...]' (Abe 2004:63). Indeed, Abe regards this emptiness or śūnyatā as ultimate reality (Abe 2004:63), and Suzuki explicitly writes: '(t)he ultimate reality as conceived by Buddhist philosophy is "pure experience", śūnyatā [...]' (Suzuki 2004:98). So, given that the overcoming of all duality is experienced in śūnyatā, śūnyatā surely is a key term within Zen-Buddhism. Nevertheless, understanding śūnyatā as 'the ultimate' is not entirely obvious. Christopher Ives, for example, claims that śūnyatā for a Buddhist '[...] is not some mysterious ultimate like the Godhead *behind* God but the mode of reality *in front of* God [...]' (Ives 2005:184). He persists in thinking that Buddhist religions are *cosmic* religions in the sense understood by Cobb and with reference to Griffin's interpretation of Cobb's tripartite conception of 'the ultimate' (Ives 2005:184).

In summary, satori can be regarded as the soteriological goal in Zen-Buddhism; śūnyatā is connected to the process of achieving this goal; and both address the Zen-Buddhist practitioner's relationship to the cosmos or the world.

The 'non-relation' to God, which has already been hinted at, is another aspect of Zen-Buddhism. In contrast to Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, for example, there is no God to be worshiped while practicing Zen-Buddhism. This does not mean that the existence of God is denied, that Zen is atheistic, but rather that the focus in the practice of Zen-Buddhism is not on worshiping God or the divine (Suzuki 2003:50–52). Even when Keiji Nishitani links śūnyatā or emptiness/nothingness to Nietzschian nihilism, he does not conclude that śūnyatā is atheistic like nihilism (Nishitani 1982:98). The lack of focus on God or the divine is also reflected in the strong emphasis on liberation in the sense of overcoming duality in the world, as described above. In a comparison of Christianity and Buddhism, Abe points out that the ground for the goal to be achieved is *different* in these religions: '[...] in Christianity it is personalistic, whereas in Buddhism it is cosmological' (1989a:31). Here again, it becomes clear that the focal point of Zen-Buddhism is not God but rather the cosmos. In a brief discussion of Zen-Buddhism in relation to Catholic theology, Cobb emphasizes the importance of realizing that the goal of salvation in Christianity (in this case, in a Catholic context) and the goal of achieving satori in Zen-Buddhism are quite different, and also that the ultimates that are addressed are different: 'Christians speak of the *underlying* reality, the reality that somehow is the cause of the finite world itself. Zen Buddhists point to the reality *of* that finite world itself' (Cobb 1987:89).

This brief description of Zen and its practices shows that, on the one hand, Zen-Buddhism focuses on the world or the cosmos.[2] On the other hand, it also shows that God as an ultimate is not addressed. Still, it is also important to realize that, although a

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[2] Interestingly, for example Griffin with reference to the early Cobb has argued in earlier works for the conclusion, that the ultimate in Buddhism should be associated with creativity (Griffin 2001:273–284). This is however unsurprising, since he originally defended the position of two ultimates, more firmly rooted in the works of Whitehead. If only two ultimates are assumed—God and creativity—it is quite obvious, that, as a process philosopher defending this claim, one would have to choose either one of the ultimates, and the choice of God as an ultimate in Buddhism seems more farfetched. Also, there obviously may be differences in what should be regarded as the ultimate in different forms of Buddhism.

Zen-Buddhist focuses on what is the third ultimate in Cobb's tripartite understanding, she presumably would not talk of the cosmos as an ultimate at all, since the concept of the ultimate still bears the connotation of something transcendent—that is, as something that can be read as part of a duality; and it is precisely the overcoming of such dualities as the one between transcendent and immanent that is at issue. In any case, the tripartite conception of the ultimate would capture the above aspects of Zen-Buddhism—the focus on the cosmos and the 'non-relation' to God—without the need to argue why the ultimate is expressed or experienced in this specific way.

In contrast, if there only were one ultimate (as, for example, in Hick's understanding of the ultimate), one would have to argue why the Real, the ultimate, is understood as *śūnyatā* in this case, but in others as God. In an attempt to do so, Hick identifies *śūnyatā* as the key term for many Buddhist schools in the Mahayana tradition, including Zen-Buddhism. He also acknowledges that, in Zen-Buddhism, the ultimate can be seen as immanent in the world. With reference to Abe, he points out that 'emptiness', *śūnyatā*, replaces 'God' (Hick 2004:287–292). Abe, a Zen-Buddhist himself, has argued that *śūnyatā* may replace God in Mahayana Buddhism, even in relation to Whiteheadian philosophy (Abe 1989b:167). Yet, it should be noted that, in this specific essay, Abe attempts to engage in a *dialog* with Western concepts and thinking from the viewpoint of Zen-Buddhism; and so it is unsurprising that he seeks to relate to Western—or, more specifically, Christian monotheistic—concepts. Whether this approach fully acknowledges the ideas developed in Zen-Buddhism is an entirely different question. Indeed, in the same passage referred to earlier, Ives criticizes Abe for the move to incorporate personal deity in the concept of *śūnyatā* (Ives 2005:184). Anyhow, after his above-mentioned description of *śūnyatā*, Hick then states that if *śūnyatā* is understood '[...] as referring to the ultimate reality beyond the scope of all concepts, knowable only in its manifestations, then it is indeed equivalent to what in our pluralistic hypothesis we are calling the Real' (Hick 2004:291). So, for Hick, *śūnyatā* is one expression of the ultimate, of the noumenal Real *an sich*. Even if the observation that *śūnyatā* is beyond the scope of all concepts reminds one of a Kantian description of the noumenal, the fact that *śūnyatā* and Hick's 'the Real' are in a sense beyond the scope of concepts does not mean that they can be identified. Another problem is that, if there is only one ultimate, then on the one hand it seems odd (to say the least) that this ultimate can be addressed in so many ways. But, on the other hand, if the ultimate is understood as a noumenal 'Real-an-sich', then this ultimate could be expressed in many totally different ways without ultimately being able to say anything more specific about it, thus ending up in what has often been called 'debilitating relativism' (Griffin 2005a:4, 2014:250–252).[3]

A further problem for understanding the ultimate as one would be the following. Consider again that in Christianity, for example, the ultimate is identified as the transcendent God, and in Zen-Buddhism as *śūnyatā*. Would not this allow for statements like this: 'Well, for Zen-Buddhism, *śūnyatā* actually is what God is for a Christian'? This would, at the very least, suggest that *śūnyatā* and God are somehow the same. Clearly, as mentioned above, Abe, also proposes something in this direction.

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[3] This problem, especially in relation to Hick's understanding of the ultimate or the Real as *noumenal*, has been extensively discussed in the philosophy of religion by Philip L. Quinn, Ninian Smart, Keith Ward, and Victoria Harrison, to name only some examples.

Still, I think that such a conclusion or identification would be quite inappropriate, and that an understanding of the ultimate should preferably not encourage conclusions or statements in that direction. It should rather affirm that the ultimate may be different for different religions. Indeed, understanding the ultimate as one (presumably transcendent) ultimate in a sense reproduces a monotheistic paradigm; and that, I think, *is not* a desirable consequence.

So a conception of the ultimate as one either does not address the diversity in different religions—in the above example, it may fail to capture that the duality to be overcome or the emptiness to be experienced is in relation to the cosmos—or it does capture the aspects of religion, as in Hick's approach, at the cost of coming closer to a relativistic position. Also, it may reproduce a Western, Christian understanding of 'what a religion is supposed to be'—namely, in some sense monotheistic.

Instead, by introducing three ultimates, the possibility is created of being oriented to any of the three ultimates and to combinations of them in different strengths. Thus, it should be possible to capture the apparent diversity of religions without facing the threat of relativism. In the specific case of Zen-Buddhism discussed here, it is possible to express the orientation of a religion towards the ultimate more in terms of what it actually addresses, which in this case would be a mode of relation to the world, rather than a relation to a possibly 'Godlike' transcendent ultimate. In relation to the definition of religious pluralism, it can be said that, although the understanding of the term 'saving' in Griffin's definition has its origin in Christian theology, this initially Christian perspective of a tripartite understanding of the ultimate is apparently not taken to be the sole way of finding liberation, and that the tripartite understanding obviously allows for other possibilities, such as in Zen-Buddhism, to find liberation. Thus, neither of the features of religious pluralism in the definition is contradicted by this tripartite understanding of the ultimate.

Generic Panentheism and Cobb's Tripartite Understanding of the Ultimate

Given the conclusion that Cobb's tripartite understanding of the ultimate indeed has some conceptual advantages, I will now turn to the question of how panentheism relates to this understanding, and in which sense even a generic form of panentheism may inherit the conceptual advantages.

Generic panentheism can be defined as follows. Firstly, God is transcendent—that is, God in some sense is greater than the world. Secondly, God is immanent—that is, the world is in God and God is in the world. Finally, God has a bilateral relationship with the world (see also Gregersen 2004; Stenmark 2018). Although, presumably, it has not been emphasized strongly, it is clear that the immanence of God also can be found in 'classical' or 'traditional' theism (Aquinas ST I Q8).[4] With reference to Aquinas, Niels-Henrik Gregersen thinks that '[...] the real demarcation line between panentheism and classical philosophical theism is neither the immanence of God nor the use of the

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[4] Aquinas discusses the following four questions related to God's immanence: Is God really present in all things? Is God everywhere? Is God everywhere by his essence, power and presence? Does to be everywhere belong to God alone? His answers to these four questions are positive in all four cases (Aquinas ST I Q8) (Aquinas 1988).

metaphor of the world's being "in" God. The real difference [...] is that the natures and activities of the creatures do not have a real feedback effect on God' (Gregersen 2004:24). So it is important to realize that the third feature in panentheism, together with the emphasis on immanence and a balance between transcendence and immanence, clearly distinguishes panentheism from classical or traditional theism. More specifically, the third feature in Whiteheadian philosophy is understood such that '[...] the world contributes to God as much as God contributes to the world' (Gregersen 2004:22).[5] Consequently, the causal nexus of the world as the creative power of God is totally in God (Peacocke 1999:235).

These three features of panentheism can be associated with or seen in analogy to Cobb's tri-partite conception of the ultimate. The cosmos or the world corresponds to the immanent part of God or the divine in panentheism, and can thus be regarded as ultimate, or at least as one aspect of the ultimate. Any religious sentiment directed towards the world or the cosmos would then obviously, in the panentheistic understanding of the divine, be directed towards the ultimate. Directing one's religious sentiment towards the immanent in a panentheistic view would, by definition, amount to directing it towards the world or the cosmos. Next, what Cobb denotes as God in his tripartite understanding of the ultimate can be associated with the more 'traditional' transcendent aspect of the divine in panentheism, which, even in panentheism, would obviously be regarded as ultimate. Again, by turning to God in Cobb's tripartite understanding, one would also turn to the transcendent in a panentheistic view, and vice versa. Finally, the bilateral relationship in panentheism certainly involves God's continuous creative activity in the cosmos or the world; panentheists often emphasize God's creative activity (for example, Moltmann 1985; Clayton 1997; Peacocke 1993). Cobb emphasizes that, as an ultimate, '[...] "creativity" draws attention to the ever ongoing process through which the cosmos continues in being' (Cobb 2015:69). Understood in the preceding sense, creativity as an ultimate can be seen in analogy to God's continuous creative activity in the cosmos or the world. This bilateral relationship also implies that, in panentheism, the processes of the world are reflected in God, and 'experienced' by God, through the immanence of God. Even this activity of the totality of processes in the world can be understood as creative activity, since, on the one hand, God's continuous creative activity in the cosmos is reflected in them and, on the other hand, the evolving, ever-changing processes in the world also result in the creation of novel constellations, which in turn are experienced by God, and through God's immanence also are part of God. Thus, the bilateral relationship of God can also be seen as at least an aspect of the ultimate, and can be associated with creativity as an ultimate.

In this sense, the three features of panentheism can be seen in analogy to the three ultimates of Cobb. It is therefore reasonable to think that, by this analogy, panentheism inherits at least some of the conceptual advantages depicted above. Yet, there is an

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[5] This bilateral relationship is also expressed in a more poetic form in the well-known citation of Whitehead: 'It is as true to say that God is permanent and the World fluent, as that the World is permanent and God is fluent. It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one and God many. It is as true to say that, in comparison with the World, God is actual eminently, as that, in comparison with God, the World is actual eminently. It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World. It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the World transcends God. It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God' (Whitehead 1978:348).

important difference. While Cobb clearly thinks of the three ultimates more as three distinct ultimates, the three features of panentheism are all aspects of one God. This has been hinted at by the use of the words 'aspects' and 'at least' in the above reasoning, and would rather suggest one ultimate with three different aspects than three ultimates. Cobb himself points out that, while the three ultimates are distinct, they are not separate, thus indirectly suggesting a form of relationship and possibly even dependency between the ultimates (Cobb 1999:185). It should also be noted that, in Cobb's reading of Whitehead, Whitehead did not regard God as an ultimate at all, but rather as a 'derivative notion' (Cobb 2015:72). Be that as it may, a relationship between the ultimates could again possibly be seen in analogy to the three features in panentheism, which apparently also are related to one another.

Still, the observation that panentheism focuses more on unity is in a sense unsurprising, since panentheism is after all a form of theism involving one God. And as a form of theism, even panentheism in this generic version carries connotations of the Western Christian tradition in which the term has its origin. However, panentheism still may be able to inherit the advantages discussed above, although in a slightly modified form. Thus, panentheism in a Christian context, for example, would be more suitable in inter-religious dialog.

It should also be kept in mind that Whiteheadian process theism commonly results in a panentheistic concept of God. Thus it may be unsurprising that the three ultimates in Cobb's philosophy can be related to panentheism, since Cobb is also a Christian panentheist. Of greater importance is that the tripartite understanding can be related to a generic form of panentheism. Thus, the understanding itself, and its conceptual advantages, need not be read in a specifically process philosophical or process panentheistic setting, but can—possibly with some qualifications—be transferred to other panentheistic traditions and concepts of God. The anthology edited by Philip Clayton and Loriliai Biernacki, Panentheism Across the World's Traditions (Clayton and Biernacki 2014), can be read as one such attempt to identify traits in other traditions that can be related to a generic understanding of panentheism.

Summary, Final Discussion, and Conclusion

In the previous sections, it has become clear that understanding 'the ultimate' not merely as a single ultimate has the advantage that it is easier to capture what various religions focus upon or are directed towards. This has been exemplified in the practice of Zen-Buddhism. A tripartite conception also allows for a great variety of combinations and degrees of strength of the three features, and thus has resources to relate to a broad variety of different religions. The threat of ending up in relativism, and the risk of indirectly reproducing a Western Christian monotheistic concept (which a single ultimate reminds one of) are likewise avoided.

Except for the avoidance of the risk related to the reproduction of monotheism, panentheism, at least in the generic form described by transcendence, immanence, and a bilateral relationship, inherits the above advantages by analogy. Therefore, a panentheistic conception of the divine should be preferable in a dialog between religions.

In any case, the use of the term 'God' in the tripartite conception of 'the ultimate' can still be easily associated with a preference for monotheism, in much the same way

as panentheism can rightly be regarded as a monotheistic conception of God. Could this be avoided? In the case of the tripartite conception of the ultimate, replacing 'God' with capital 'G' with 'the divine' already reduces the risk of concluding that the tripartite conception is a monotheistic conception in disguise. For panentheism, one would first have to drop the name 'panentheism'; and secondly, one would have to rephrase the three features such that they do not remind one of monotheism in general, or more specifically of Christian monotheism. One could, for example, simply talk instead about the transcendent, the immanent, and a bilateral relationship between the two, in order to avoid the term 'theism'.

However, returning to the example above, would a Zen-Buddhist agree with the above reasoning? I believe that the answer would be both 'yes' and 'no'. The answer would be 'no', since there still are dualities in the tripartite understanding or in panentheism; the divine—at least in some sense—is opposed to the world; the transcendent and the immanent are obvious counterparts; and such dualities should be overcome in Zen-Buddhism. Also, presumably, the whole project of attempting to conceptualize the ultimate does not fit well into Zen-Buddhistic thinking. However, the answer to the question would be 'yes', since the conception of three ultimates allows one—even a Zen-Buddhist—successfully to describe central ideas and processes in the practice of Zen-Buddhism.

Another problem that has not been addressed by the tripartite conception as a *metaphysical* framework, but that is indirectly implied by it, is the following: If there is more than one ultimate, then it would at least be reasonable to assume that there may also be different goals, not just one, which is to move from self-centeredness towards reality-centeredness. (Again I use Hick to create the contrast.) It seems quite obvious that this should be the case: would not focusing on the cosmos, and striving for the overcoming of duality, as has been exemplified in the case of Zen-Buddhism, be quite different than focusing on God or the divine? The earlier description of satori and *śūnyatā* in Zen-Buddhism has also shown that satori is a goal, and that the process of achieving satori by emptiness, *śūnyatā*, need not be identified with the ultimate—although Ives describes it as 'the mode of reality in front of God'. The tripartite conception in itself does not provide a conceptual framework for different forms of goals, although it is implied that there should be different forms of goals. Relating to the cosmos as the ultimate, for example, should result in other goals than relating to a personal God. Thus, the goal in relation to the cosmos need not be similar to salvation in the Western/Christian sense. I suggest, therefore, that the tripartite conception, with its roots in process philosophy, needs to be developed such that it also provides relevant conceptual tools for addressing diverse forms of goals—such as salvation in the case of Christianity, or overcoming duality, as has been explicated in the case of Zen-Buddhism.

However, even if the above tools in relation to soteriology were to be developed, there is still reason to be cautious. The tripartite conception of the ultimate or panentheism should not be seen as new attempts to present a novel universal religious framework. That would yet again reproduce a monotheistic paradigm: 'There is just one theory, there is just one God!' Instead, I suggest, these conceptions should be taken in a more pragmatic sense. They may be useful tools in inter-religious dialog, and useful conceptions in a generic form of religious pluralism; but they should not be seen as a final truth.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest   The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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