

Response to Wallis

Mark Hathaway¹

I greatly appreciate the reflections Steven Wallis has presented in his review of *The Tao of Liberation: Exploring the Ecology of Transformation*. In particular, I enjoyed the succinct summary he has provided of many of the key themes of the book along with his astute observations about its contents.

The book is meant to be an integrative text drawing on many different disciplines. Leonardo Boff and I describe it as a “search for wisdom in a time of crisis.” I think one of its strengths is drawing together insights from a wide diversity of perspectives. This may well make it resemble a stroll “through a bustling farmer’s market.” Yet, perhaps a better image would be that of walking the labyrinth – a spiralling journey that is certainly non-linear in its logic, but which serves to help reveal more subtle dynamics at play. To some, the perspectives presented may at first seem to be contradictory, but over time the coincidences of these insights becomes more apparent.

In using the image of the Tao, we speak of a reality that cannot be fully described, but must rather be tasted. The book is meant to engage the reader at a more intuitive level, providing a sense of feel for a “way” that cannot ever be fully described in words.

I would suggest that some of the apparent contradictions that Dr. Wallis perceives may not, in fact, be contradictions at all. Certainly, the book speaks of a cosmology of deep interconnection. While, overall, cosmic evolution seems to be characterized by a movement toward ever greater communion, diversity, and interiority, this does not mean that this process cannot, at least for a time, be thwarted or delayed:

...In harmony with the Tao,
the sky is clear and pure,
the Earth is serene and whole,
the spirit is renewed with power,
streams are replenished,
the myriad creatures of the world flourish, living joyfully,
leaders are at peace and their countries are governed with justice.
When humanity interferes with the Tao,
the sky turns filthy,
the Earth is depleted,
the spirit becomes exhausted,
streams run dry,

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the equilibrium crumbles,
creatures become extinct...
(*Tao Te Ching*, §39)

For us, then, there is no contradiction in affirming that the universe is evolving but that some human actions and institutions may at times impede that process. We can try to harmonize our actions with the Tao or we can (often unconsciously) interfere with it.

The example of large corporations is a case in point. Perhaps they cannot “escape the natural laws of the universe” – if in fact any such “laws” really exist (a point that the book disputes since the process of evolution is best characterized by habits and tendencies rather than hard and fast laws). Corporations are essentially artificial (legally constructed) “persons” that tend to be pathological because of the rules and objectives that govern them. That does not mean that those who work for these corporations, nor even those leading them, are somehow evil. Some corporations, to a greater or lesser extent, have even managed to redefine their objectives and practices in ways that may enhance our evolution toward a more just and sustainable society. Overall, though, the rules that force corporations to prioritize the generation of short-term profit (measured with distorted indicators) over all else pushes them to become machines of exploitation. Fortunately, what we have created we can also change – even though doing so presents very real challenges.

The book does not attempt to separate the “responsible from the innocent,” nor does it cast the world in terms of “us versus them;” rather, it calls all of us to recognize our own complicity in a pathological system that is destroying our planet. At the same time, though, it is fair to point out that the level of complicity of a poor peasant farmer in India, for example, is very different than that of most of us living in the overdeveloped North. Such a realization need not create divisions. As the book demonstrates, the current pathological system undermines the future of all of humanity, both rich and poor, as well as the entire Earth community. Indeed, to the extent that we awaken to this reality, our current crisis can serve to unite us all in a common purpose, and perhaps even impel us to a qualitative jump in our own evolution.

The book spends a great deal of time exploring cosmologies, not – as Wallis suggests – to justify meditative practices, but rather to understand how change happens. It does not postulate any kind of “alternative universe,” but rather a deep unifying reality that is the wellspring of the entire cosmos. We can think of this reality in different ways – as the pregnant void, the implicate order, or as the Tao. The key point, though, is that this is simply a deeper, more subtle, level of reality – not something separate from the universe we live in, but the substrate of its entire fabric.

By exploring the cosmological vision that is emerging from science and seeing its parallels in ancient wisdom traditions, it is our hope that we can come to understand transformative action in a new way that integrates both what have traditionally been considered “spiritual” practices and collective social action. In particular, the emerging new cosmology helps us to understand that our visions, our intentions, our intuitions, and our state of mind have a direct impact on the transformative potential of what we do. We need to unite analysis and deep intuitive insight to discern the right action for a given place and a given time. This is essentially an art that cannot be taught, but must be discovered through both experience and deep insight.

To work for liberation, we are called to open ourselves to the wisdom of the cosmos itself – the Tao – and allow it to act through us so we can come to consciously participate in a process leading us to greater communion, differentiation, and creativity. In this, I would agree wholeheartedly with Wallis in affirming that this book should be engaged with a contemplative, integrative eye so that we may apprehend the threads uniting superficially distinct ideas and disciplines into a holistic tapestry on a deeper level. In so doing, I hope we can help readers to truly taste the Tao and to stimulate new reflections on ways of moving us toward right relationship with each other and the entire Earth community.