The Plott Project: An Unfinished Symphony

Wallace Gray
Southwestern College, Kansas

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The Plott Project
An Unfinished Symphony

WALLACE GRAY

1. Importance of the Plott Project

The hour for more integrative multidisciplinary approaches to every topic of human significance has finally struck.

Persons interested in the comparative and historical study of philosophies, religions, civilizations and cultures are in a unique position to appreciate and use a project which focuses the human arts and sciences into what I am here calling an unfinished symphony: the Plott project in the global history of philosophy. Hajime Nakamura is the author of highly authoritative works that in some respects parallel the Plott project. In his preface for Plott's Volume III, Nakamura writes, "Now we see a colossal, gigantic work by Professor Plott. He has traced the development of philosophy in a wider scope than my work, referring to numerous countries."

2. John Plott: the Person and the Vision

From the jacket of Global History of Philosophy, Volume I, we read, "Contemplation, scholarship and adventure: a rare trinity of values in American life these days. Yet such has been the lifestyle of John C. Plott." Educated as a Phi Beta Kappa undergraduate at the University of Oklahoma (B.A. 1938), he served a novitiate with the SSJE, an Anglican Monastic society in Ontario. He received his Ph.D. from Banares University where he went to learn more about Gandhian Pacifism and Indian Philosophy. He seems to have travelled endlessly and to have attended all possible East-West conferences. Whenever he was briefly stationary, he could be found teaching at Marshall University or doing research at the University of Hawaii or other universities. He prized his Planetary Citizen Passport and his membership in the United World Federalist Association, and engaged in lifelong activities on behalf of world peace through global understanding and social justice.

John Plott inspired many students, colleagues, and world-
class scholars such as Nakamura to continue or to undertake more seriously and effectively whatever part of his vision they shared. Many were also inspired to support the planetary peace objectives which Plott saw as intimately related to better mutual understanding across lines of ignorance and hostility.

In his preface to Volume I, Plott urges his readers to adopt a global perspective that can counteract a merely local or myopic perspective. He tells us that he has written for "students who are concerned with problems of peace and international, intercultural, and interfaith relations, and especially students who have begun to realize that there are no short-cut solutions for the planetary crises that have beset mankind in the twentieth century and are therefore willing to work more thoroughly towards the One World goal which [has] become not just an ideal but a necessity."

The series Global History of Philosophy stands on its academic merits even for readers who do not fully embrace John Plott's vision or his objectives for the project. A detailed analysis of the printed work will show why this is the case.

3. Orientation, Content, Methodology

The series in five volumes exemplifies a synchronologically integrated approach to creating a historiography of the philosophies of all major types and many cultures from the times of origin till the fourteenth century. The series stopped with the fifth volume due primarily to Plott's death in 1990. However, there are two other significant volumes more or less directly related to the series, both by Plott. The first to be published (1969) was the bibliography for the whole project: Sarva- Darsana-Sangraja, A Bibliographical Guide to the Global History of Philosophy. The second volume (1974) is the long tome (657 pages) A Philosophy of Devotion. Plott characterizes it as a comparative study of devotion and self-surrender in Ramanuja, St. Bonaventura, and Gabriel Marcel. It also represents a spelling out of Plott's own philosophy of the spiritual and intellectual quest.

The general approach in these seven volumes, as well as in the project as a whole, entails the treatment of as many philosophers as possible in relation to their global contemporaries on a century by century, period by period, basis. In other words, each philosopher whether Indian, Chinese, European, Anglo-
American, Islamic, Japanese, Byzantine, Latin American, or whatever, is seen in relation to roughly contemporary thinkers in other civilizations. For example, in Volume V, contemporaries such as Thomas Aquinas, Dogen, Ibn Arabi, Madhva, and Chu Hsi are given careful consideration from a more global and strictly chronological perspective than a traditional comparative-cultural one. As this exploration of integrated patterns of development on a global scale has progressed, many myths and stereotypes have been exploded, and many new perspectives have emerged. To give only one example, instead of the completely distorted image of the "Orient as mystical and the 'West' as materialistic," the facts of history reveal a rather even distribution of types of philosophy in every civilization in almost every period. In fact, there is no specifically Eastern or Western philosophy, but only philosophy. Of course, there are geographical distinctions among philosophers, just as there are necessary temporal distinctions such as "ancient" and "modern." But the basic issues are perennial and transcultural.

I am only mildly facetious when I suggest that the Global History of Philosophy Project was a brainchild that got out of hand from the very moment of its conception in the fertile brain of John C. Plott. The project has had a kind of life of its own, to some extent transcending individual authors, financial limitations, human strength, and other ordinary restraints on academic enterprises. Plott never had a strong sense of closure, else he would have "closed off" the more unmanageable aspects of the project. For example, he would have desisted from the endless and exasperating search in some of the great libraries of India and the U.S. for relevant primary and secondary materials, and the tedious attempt to construct reliable synchronological charts with which to order his multitudinous finds. The strength of the series, as of its author-director, turns out to be its very scope suggesting a remarkable human and philosophical openness. Paired with that was Plott's so-far untested hope that such work might become a resource for building a saner, kinder, juster, and more peaceful society on this planet.

4. Volume I

The first volume in the Global History of Philosophy series
is entitled *The Axial Age* (Delhi, 1977). It covers the period centering around 500 years B.C.E. The dominant theme of the Axial Age, as Plott and his colleagues describe it, is the emergence of systematic philosophy out of mythological consciousness and the establishment of the different basic types of philosophical systems in India, China, and Greece. Part One discusses from a global perspective such basic themes for philosophizing as causation, mind, soul, spirit, self, the elements, matter, logic and paradoxes, fate, pramanas (means of knowledge), law, freedom/necessity, salvation, deity, and enlightenment. Part Two is a comparison of thinking outside of Greece with that of Plato and Aristotle, especially the latter.

Imaginative readers may in this volume feel that they are gathered in a meeting under one roof (or cover) with ancient Buddhists, Jainists, Confucianists, Taoists, as well as adherents of less famous schools of thought. Much attention is given to the development of philosophical traditions, especially in response to intercultural influences.

5. **Main Body of Volume II**

Volume Two is entitled The Han-Hellenistic-Bactrian Period (1979) and covers the philosophical developments from the third century B.C.E. to the end of the third century C.E. Writers dealing with traditional East-West or comparative philosophy too often are limited to the fields included in Volume One. Therefore, in Volume Two the author has moved into almost virgin territory for the general reader and sometimes for the specialist as well.

The major comparisons in this volume involve significant pairings: Rome and India, Rome and China, the philosophers Philo and Nagarjuna, and Plotinus and Vasubandhu, as well as Han Confucianists and Neo-Taoists. In addition, distinctive Buddhist, Christian, and Jainist religio-philosophical developments are treated under "Paths and Principles."

In the Foreword, T.R.V. Murti says of the Nagarjuna-Philo and Plotinus-Vasubandhu comparisons, "These constitute some of the brilliant spots of the whole book. . . . The comparative study of Vasubandhu with Plotinus is apt, fruitful and sustained."

I would add that that study, more than any other thing in the book, refutes East-West and other stereotypes and dichotomies for this
period and prefigures later significant trans-Eurasian developments. Plott himself states, "Perhaps the greatest comparison between Plotinus and Vasubandhu is not between any of the doctrines we have presented but in the spirit of philosophy as found in them. To follow one rather than the other may mean a difference in method, but their views of the nature, destiny and dignity of man are virtually the same" (p. 164).

Although Plott is all too aware of the contrasts, contradictions, and downright hostilities among the worldviews he characterizes, he chooses to remind us forcefully from time to time of their very real complementariness. In a nutshell, he is advising us that skeptics keep us from being too attached to our beliefs and opinions; founders of religions save us from failure of nerve; mystics combine the surgery of skepticism with the inner vision of wisdom to keep us from building too small a house for our souls. Plott pays due respect to all of these.

6. Periodizations (Appendix of Volume II)

A bonus of Volume II is Plott's appendix on "The Problem of Periodization," a fifty-page essay done in collaboration with Michael Dolin and Paul Mays. Mays has also provided a superb annotated map and time-line of "The Han-Hellenistic-Bactrian World" which rides in the back-cover jacket of the volume.

"The Problem of Periodization" is too modest a title, since the essay offers a proposal by which the problem can be tentatively resolved. Plott and his team identify clusters of more or less contemporaneous events around the world to mark off significant transitions and boundaries for the periods. The events and achievements that provide the "body" for each period identify the specific continuity between turning points. Because the Plott team has had to discuss both the continuities and the turning points of history in their essay, it becomes an outline of world history, both general and intellectual, extending right into our own times. This is fortunate as it allows us to glimpse how the project would have been organized and presented in the volumes that never got published. But the chief virtue of the essay on periodization is that it provides us with a means of delimiting and characterizing periods historically and logically instead of by mere ethnocentric scholarly tradition.
Plott emphasized the imperfections and tentativeness of his periodizations. I am more sanguine about what Plott, Mays, and Dolin accomplished in their essay. It is one long critique of the many scholarly efforts (including Plott's) to periodize area and world history. As a result of the careful critique, they succeed in avoiding many of the pitfalls the essay names.

These findings and proposals on the periodization of world history are applicable to some recent histories such as the single-volume 1992 *Histoire de l'Europe*, produced by the cooperative effort of twelve scholars from as many countries (published by Hachette in Paris under the direction of Frederic Delouche). Plott would appreciate the wonderful maps and other graphics in this volume. He would be critical of the usage, though perhaps necessary, of such clichéd terms as "medieval" and "Renaissance," but he would affirm the long-time perspective with which the volume opens: "From the tundra to the temple (Prehistory to 4th century B.C.)" Also noteworthy is the wide, truly global space-perspective indicated by one map caption which roughly translates, "Europe, the peninsula of Asia." In such contexts Plott prefers the term "Eurasia" which the authors of *Histoire de l'Europe* use in the heading for the section beginning at this same map, a map by the way which suggests the earth as seen from the moon more than the old-fashioned "flat" Mercator projections. Since the philosophy of historical periodization which Plott and team have developed is especially severe in criticisms of the arbitrariness of much traditional period-naming, the comment from the Preface of *Histoire de l'Europe* is apropos. A 19th-century writer is quoted: "God, although omnipotent, cannot change the past. So he created the historians."

7. Volume III

The third volume of the Plott project is entitled *The Patristic-Sutra Period* (1980). It traces the parallel developments of the different systems and traditions from 325 to 800 A.D. During this period there emerges the rich variety of Chinese Buddhist philosophies alongside the later developments of the varieties of non-European Christianity, as well as the early Byzantine heritage in contrast with the Roman/Latin tradition. In India attention is focused on such controversies as that between Buddhist
idealistic systems and the realist Nyaya-Vaisesika and Jaina systems and the remarkably sophisticated logic that emerges. This volume dramatically demonstrates that outside of Latin Europe there was at this time really no period deserving the epitaph "dark ages."

The Patristic-Sutra Period is so named because this is the era in which the great Mahayana Sutras emerge and begin to dominate Central Asia, China, Korea, and Japan, right alongside the final formulation of the Sutra literature of the Jaina, the Nyaya Sutras, the Vaisesika Sutras, the Samkhya and Yoga Sutras, and even the Brahma Sutra of Badarayana which later becomes the canonical basis for philosophizing in India. About the same time, amidst many controversies between rival "heresies," there emerges the Christian Patristic adjustment of Greek philosophy to the Biblical heritage.

In his gently good-humored way Plott gives a hard time to all that is self-satisfiedly provincial, sectarian, anti-humanist, anti-intellectual, heresy-hunting or science-hating. Consequently he enjoys poking a little fun at the narrowness of Augustine (C.E. 354-430) or the irrationalism of Bodhidharma (460-534, if he lived at all). Plott's style in this respect is reminiscent of Bertrand Russell except that Russell was often pretty provincially Western himself. Even Plott's humor is global.

In a serious debate with either Buddhaghosa (fl. 412-434) or Dignaga (fl. circa 480), Augustine would not, Plott conjectures, come off very well. Buddhaghosa's calm collectedness and active expression of goodwill among the common people (in preference to any and all debating) would show up Augustine's disputatiousness, while Dignaga's logical structuring of the dispute would be superior to Augustine's rhetoric. Having found his "better" in such a debate, Augustine would, according to Plott, "storm back to his study to write a scathing denunciation of this new-found heretic, calling him everything from a Pelagian imp to the devil himself!" (p. 144) In another place (p. 131), Plott explains that Augustine is very complex and so cannot be easily categorized or evaluated. Nevertheless, Albert the Great, the teacher of Thomas Aquinas, spoke for Plott and all more or less happy rationalists when he wrote, "In matters of faith... I cannot dream to be equal to St. Augustine; but in matters of science, I
prefer to believe Aristotle and the Arabs who were his commentators, for St. Augustine simply did not know the nature of things" (p. 132).

Plott argues that this can be illustrated either in psychological or geological terms. "Augustine's sense of historical time is all wrong. The strange idea that the whole world was created at a definite date about four thousand or so B.C. prevailed until very recently, and this has worked perhaps irreparable harm. By contrast the Hindu, Jaina and Buddhist cosmology had long since been in terms of vast expanses of time" (p. 145). Psychologically, "Augustine's bad conscience is like an ominous ghost haunting not only our homes but our churches and whorehouses alike" (p. 131).

In commenting on the realist Nyaya-Vaisesika view of time in the thought of Vatsyayana, Plott writes (pp. 67-68):

Needless to say, adequate commentary on this could involve comparisons even with Kant and Bergson in the usual sort of comparative studies, and we cannot deny that these studies have their place. But in our historical perspective one could well re-examine Augustine's views on time as a fair comparison, remembering that according to present dating Vatsyayana was at his peak about 375 when Augustine was about eighteen years old. . . . To what extent Augustine, therefore, was closer to the Mahayana idealist theory of time we must leave to experts, along with the question of to what extent Vatsyayana granted some concessions to his Buddhist opponents....

All of Plott's comments on Augustine tend to shrink that thinker's importance when a truly global perspective is used. Shankara, a later figure, is for many the cultural hero of Indian philosophy. His importance may also shrink somewhat in the broader, quite untraditional perspective recommended by Plott. To some extent, Plott concludes, the Middle Ages transcended Augustine while being heavily indebted to him. Was Isidore of Seville (560-638) "really trying to correct the subjectivist antiscientific influence of Augustine?" (p. 499) Related to this probing question is Plott's observation in another place (p. 452) that while almost all that was transmitted to Latin Europe came through Augustine, Boethius, or Pope Gregory the Great, "still the definitely medieval form that that heritage took was the work of Isidore of Seville."
8. Transition in authorship from Volume III to Volume IV

During the production of the first three volumes summarized above, I was, so to speak, in the cheering section for the project. Since I was not yet a contributor, I was free to publish my largely favorable reviews in various scholarly journals, including Philosophy East and West. With Volume IV my status changed because I became a more active participant and contributor. Although only three of my chapters appeared among the total of fifty-nine, the "Acknowledgments" stated that I really deserved a place on the title page, and indeed Volume V did carry my name in that position. Nine of the thirty-three chapters of that volume originated with me, though Plott and Dolin thoroughly globalized and integrated my contributions. The role of contributor but not primary author has given me a peculiar inside-outside view of the Plott Project.

9. An Insider’s View of the Plott Project

Before I proceed with the more objective side of my task, which is the description of the project in all its completeness and incompleteness, I will briefly disclose my insider's bias toward the project and its major objectives. I have become convinced that if we ever have a global civilization in which the cities, races, city states, and particular civilizations have at least and at last learned to be civil to each other, the work of historians such as John C. Plott will deserve some of the credit. Mere ideologies tend to reinforce prejudices and rationalize violence; philosophies at their best, especially in the global context which Plott and our other colleagues outline, teach people to listen to each other and so far as possible to reason out their differences. In the next sections, I need to fill out some details about the project as planned, what has been accomplished, and what if anything remains to be done.

10. The Plan for the Project after Volume III

The plan for the project, as it evolved with the publication of the early materials in the series, encompassed the first three volumes plus Volume IV, "The Period of Scholasticism" (800-1300), Volume V, "The Period of Encounters" (1300-1800), and Volume VI, "The Period of Total Encounter" (1800 to the present). What
actually developed was that Volume IV kept growing until it required about 1100 pages of print so that it split into two volumes, Volume IV, The Period of Scholasticism, Part One (800-150) and Volume V, The Period of Scholasticism, Part Two (1150-1350). With the unexpected Volume V (the last section of IV in the original plan), the rest of the proposed project has had to be abandoned. So only five of the seven volumes have been completed. Those seven by further splittings could easily have become nine or ten.

Even so, I can here merely sketch and illustrate what has been published in this series to 1989, the date of publication of the fifth volume. Of course, no one can really know what the remaining volumes would have looked like if John Plott were alive today. (He died in the fall of 1990.) For Volumes IV and V, I shall explain the general outline and illustrate for each volume some of what I attempted to accomplish with my work and how it relates to what John Plott contributed to the same volumes.

II. Volume IV

For the Period of Scholasticism Plott suggests these divisions: the period of early scholasticism or "Monism in Many Moods" (800-900), the middle period of "Exfoliation and Elaboration (900-1150), and the later period of the "Great Summas" (1150-1350).

I did the draft chapter on Saadia (b.882 or 892, d. 942) for Volume IV without realizing that Michael Dolin, the managing editor, was probably wondering what to do with a very lengthy, detailed typescript on Saadia from Plott himself. Saadia happened to be a philosopher whom I had never heard of. After my crash course of discovery about this founder of Medieval Jewish philosophy, my submission to the project was bound to look rather thin. Dolin and Plott enriched it considerably. An explanation of the nature of that enrichment will dramatize the challenge Editor Dolin faced in blending the gargantuan researches of Plott with the more limited work of a contributor such as myself.

I was intrigued by two questions. How truly medieval was the first medieval Jewish philosopher? And how did he interpret the most Greek or Hellenistic book in the Bible?

To assist in answering the first question I used the six characteristics of medieval ways of thinking developed by Nakamura
in his *Parallel Developments* (reissued by Kegan Paul International in 1986 as *A Comparative History of Ideas*). By that standard I concluded that Saadia was only about one-third medieval. Nakamura speaks of "the absolute authority of traditional religions" in medieval thought. For Saadia, religious authority was the complete basis for his work, but that did not mean it could not be questioned. In fact, it had to be questioned in order to discover in what sense it was fully rational and relevant. Incidentally, readers of the Saadia chapter can question either the medievalness of Saadia as measured by each of Nakamura's criteria or they can question the validity of the criteria themselves. In my judgment, the criteria are helpful but need to be applied critically, perhaps using some of the tools being developed in Fuzzy Logic. For ready reference the criteria are (1986, p. 477):

1. The absolute authority of traditional religions
2. Dominance of religious orders
3. Absolute sacredness of scriptures
4. Otherworldly tendencies in thought and life
5. Hierarchical social structure
6. "Cultural" life an upper-class activity from which common people are mostly shut out

On Saadia and Ecclesiastes, I learned that Saadia sounds almost more like Aristotle than the doleful Preacher of "All is vanity." Saadia's point is that vanity attaches more to addictive or idolatrous behavior than it does to the well-rounded, pious life. Quoting our chapter in Volume IV,

Though the most prominent side of the little book of Ecclesiastes is its shadow side, Saadia, in his dependence on the more optimistic confidence of Jewish traditionalism and Greek rationalism, chooses to highlight the more hopeful aspects of wisdom. Some of the seeming inconsistencies of Ecclesiastes vanish if we concede with Saadia that the book does not claim that every single act or activity is completely vain. Saadia hears the Preacher saying, "If you seek any one thing exclusively for itself, you will forever chase the wind."

Saadia's principal work *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* concludes with Treatise X, "Concerning how it is most proper for
a man to conduct himself in this world." The major negative thesis here is that whatever is one-sided is wanting. This little treatise, then, presents a surprisingly autonomous ethic, one that is general (if not secular), rational, humanistic and somewhat independent of any particular religion. In contrast, this same Saadia usually presents a more specifically Jewish ethic which is theonomous and dependent on revelation.

My comparisons tend to be binary or at most trinary, whereas Plott's are multivalent and multidimensional. For example, his part of this same chapter relates Saadia not only to earlier and later Jewish and Islamic philosophy but also to very specific tendencies at about the same time in Christian and Hindu thought. Two long sentences are illustrative of Plott's multivalent interests:

Saadia's situation is closely analogous to that of Philo of Alexandria in a different cycle of civilization, coming to the rescue of his community in the face of Caligula, and writing in Greek rather than Hebrew as Saadia was writing in Arabic. There is probably no Jewish thinker who had greater influence since the time of Philo, unless it be Moses Maimonides who himself was much influenced by Saadia as were virtually all other Jewish scholastics in the intervening period. (IV, 341)

After Plott has done his etiologies and his synchronologies, he sometimes rewards the reader by throwing out a bridging rope or two toward times closer to us. He suggests that Saadia the Jew is more like Kant the rationalist Christian, while Erigena the Christian, who is treated in this same volume, is more like Spinoza the Jew.

A reader of Plott can approach him as an activist from whom one can learn principles and strategies for building peace with justice; as a hard-headed natural or social scientist with a healthy respect for empiricism and carefully honed hypotheses; as an esthete in search of joy in the world of nature and human expression both cognitive and noncognitive; or, if it suits one's taste or worldview, as a mystic.

The latter category is the most encompassing and significant for Plott who nevertheless does not restrict himself by it or impose it on his readers by coercive logic or high-pressured persuasion. The Indian philosopher Ramanuja represents the monistic tendency of the ninth century. His highly personalistic yet
panentheistic vision of deity and the world supplies the mystical motif in Plott's own philosophy and is a large factor motivating the academic aspect of the Plott project.

However, Ramanuja does not receive disproportionate space or emphasis in Volume IV. The average chapter length in that volume is twelve pages. Ramanuja receives just nineteen pages in spite of being (as I've just recently realized) a key to the whole project. Plott has dedicated *The Philosophy of Devotion*, a thick tome, to Ramanuja, Bonaventure, and Marcel. Yet in this fourth volume of *Global History of Philosophy*, Ramanuja receives, as I said, nineteen pages. That is the same number devoted to Saadia who is not a mystic. Philosophers around the world tend to treat Shankara (also discussed in this volume) as more important than Ramanuja. Although Plott personally disagrees with some aspects of the near-adulation of Shankara, he recognizes that the case for the lesser long-run importance of Shankara relative to Ramanuja need not be argued in a general history of ideas. Shankara receives twenty-six pages of text, seven more than Ramanuja. So much for fairness and objectivity in the sense of detachment from selfish or one-sided preferences.

From the ethical point of view, Chang Tsai (1020-1077) may be just as important as some of the people who are more famous. Quite justly, it seems to me, he receives twelve pages, the average for the volume. For one reason alone he deserves our notice. He is the author of the Western Inscription. It is both brief and basic, as exemplified in its opening lines:

> Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst.  
> Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.  
> All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.  
> (IV, 543)

12. **Volume V**

Volume V is devoted to thirty-three of the Great Summas and treats their authors in strict chronological order. This system has the advantage of somewhat randomly making "neighbors" of thinkers who are global contemporaries but not usually associated with each other. In the Foreword, George Tanabe of the
University of Hawaii says, "It is always interesting to find out who one's neighbors are, especially in a place of old-time residents. . . . John Plott's *Global History* is an excellent introduction to our neighbors. Actually it is more accurate to say that he creates a neighborhood by bringing together in a single text the major figures of the Western and Asian traditions. . . ."

I would love to delve into a number of the close juxtapositions of this volume, for example, Madhva the Hindu dualist of South India and Nichiren the militant Buddhist of Japan. However, the more exciting and significant thing to do, as it relates to my own work in Japanese language, culture, history, and philosophy, is to meditate upon one amazing parallel between the Western Inscription of China, a Neo-Confucian product of the 11th century, and the almost poetic introduction by the Japanese Buddhist Eisai (1141-1215) to his major work. Recall that the Western Inscription states that the nature of humanity directs the universe. Eisai in a remarkably similar vein claims that the human mind-and-heart (kokoro) transcends the heights of the heavens, plumbs the depths of the earth, and directs heaven and earth. Eisai represents an even more philosophically idealist view than the Western Inscription but the parallels are real and call for explanation.

Plott as a historian and social scientist leans to the cultural diffusion theory for many such parallels. For example, military conquests, exploratory journeys, and commerce spread ideas and not just physical artifacts and litter. "Silk and spices, and occasionally a monk or a philosopher, as well as diseases and ideas, all travelled the silk routes" (II, 98).

Since Eiji Hattori, an Advisor to the Director General of UNESCO, finds much of value in John Plott's approach to the silk routes, it is appropriate here to compare the two writers. While Plott emphasizes thought in its historical and geographical context, Hattori gives greater attention to the highly interactive areas of context themselves. My comment here is based primarily on Hattori's *Bunmei no Kōsa-ro de Kangaeru* [Thinking at the crossroads of civilizations] (Kōdansha, 1995). The contrast is one of emphasis only. Hattori shows tremendous interest in both philosophical and religious issues in all the civilizations whose interactions he surveys. Incidentally, with the help of many people I
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have recently completed a translation of the Hattori book that we think will be published in time for the possible ISCSC meeting in Paris or the US in 2000.

Plott is not averse to considering a kind of convergence of ancient and medieval ways of thinking into an insight which some modern physicists and philosophers are summarizing as Arthur Eddington did in 1920 or so, "The universe is mind stuff." Incidentally, since Eisai is regarded as the founder of one of the two main versions of Zen, the Rinzai School, I have been urging Japanologists to translate into a Western language his classic Kozen Gokokuron so that it may become more than a mere bookmark in intellectual history. So far scholars have agreed with the justness of my call, but no one has stepped forward to undertake the difficult task.

13. Cyclical Reform: Commoners, Snobs, and Gurus

Plott notes one sociological factor that implies that the official summas of the various cultures should be taken seriously but not too seriously. When I interviewed Plott a few years before his death he told me that he agreed with Toynbee in the suspicion that certain types of isms arise and fall according to more or less cyclical rhythms. Now, directly quoting him:

Renewal, I have frequently noted, comes from below. This happens in religion more than in philosophy because philosophers are literate; religion originated in preliterate times and even today does not necessarily depend on writing. But now that the proletariat (blue collar worker or farmer) is becoming both more mobile and more literate, new philosophers, too, may emerge from below.

"Below" is relative of course to someone or some class that looks down from above. In the past certain languages were the natural languages of culture and privilege. When vernacular tongues began to displace the king's Latin, or whatever, they were regarded as impertinent intruders. One of the frustrations of our research has been that so little of this quite massive amount of material has been translated. Isn't that because "scholars" reflect the prejudices of the upper classes in the various cultures and so "know" in advance that vernacular materials are unimportant?

Consider also the tendency of secular bourgeois university profs to look down on religion and mysticism generally and all forms of monasticism specifically, although it was [is?] minds like Merton and Aurobindo who have helped (and may again help) keep civilization civil, if that is possible.
Later in the same interview Plott confesses to having become Indianized or, as he says, indigenized."

But in one respect I was stubbornly myself: I never could see why if one guru were a good thing, many gurus should not be a better thing. Some of my mentors could never understand this quirk in my thinking.

While Plott is heavily critical of some of his Western gurus, he does not turn his critical acumen off in reference to his beloved India. "Alas... India has not yet produced a Kant or even a Descartes who with authentic originality scrapped the whole works and began from a fresh start!" (A Philosophy of Devotion, 484)

14. A Positive Assessment of the Project

The project has some implicit limitations and weaknesses of which both Plott and his colleagues have been all too aware. But we kept plugging along because of what we saw as positive values in the project.

If we were now to summarize a few key contributions or advantages of the Plott Project in the light of both its printed and unprinted aspects, and the academic and personal characteristics of Plott himself, the right words would surely be open, multidisciplinary, multi-perspectival, democratic, and peace-oriented.

It should be mentioned here that the published scholarly work of Plott and his associates is only the print media component of the total project. Plott had a file on related materials for educational use and possible adaptation for later volumes that even when boiled down was probably at least a yard deep. I still have a copy of this "monstrosity," as in our times of affectionate frustration we sometimes dub it. (I recently learned that in various libraries and university settings, somewhat overlapping yet distinctive sets of this material still exist.)

For several years I engaged small classes and seminars of undergraduates with the Plott materials, first with the unpublished files and then with the published materials (as they gradually came into print). Generally students have had two reactions. "This material must be intended for someone else." But also: "It is worthwhile and deserves as wide an audience as possible." Some of my students have done quite substantial studies (beyond
the usual completion of assignments) related to the Plott materials and the objectives behind their production.

I am even more impressed by Professor Plott's own ability to inspire undergraduates as well as established scholars. Through the years he shared with some of us audiotapes from his seminars and classes at Marshall University. The level of exposition, comment, and dialog among the students and with the non-dominating help of Plott was highly motivating not only to me but to these students. Several of these got caught up in travel with Plott and even in writing or editing for the project. The most notable are Mike Dolin and Paul Mays. Mitch Casto has a current interest in archiving the unpublished works for general or specific study-group use on a web site.

15. Unfinished Business or Unfinished Symphony?

Is the project one best left like Schubert's Unfinished Symphony? Is that the best way to honor it and show respect for John Plott's vision? On the other hand, if the project were to be completed, in what form and by what means? Should we contemplate extending the volumes as they were already evolving? Or should completion take place in some completely new way, by creating an electronic encyclopedia of world thought with hard-copy supplements, for example?

If the project were to be concluded in some form, John's own files would help recover or create some appropriate balance in coverage, for example, of South American philosophers.

Whether the project is an unfinished symphony or compellingly unfinished business, it surely can counteract what some are calling the dumbing of America. The intellectual, spiritual, and cultural shock produced by contact with the Plott project can effectively offset much human provincialism, educational dumbing, and other similar genres of mediocrity or global dysfunctionalism.

One astute reader of this article in its pre-publication phase offered a creative solution to the question posed in this concluding section. He suggested that the Global History of Philosophy series was concluded and is complete. "Plott did review philosophy during the entire period when it was, in fact, the predominant form of intellectuality. There need be no lament that only five
Plott's kind of activity may be continued in a new way and even with a name not yet coined. Or if not, we can still study with appreciation what has been completed. It is hoped that some of us may be inspired to import his kind of dreaming and acting into the new millenium.

Southwestern College, Kansas

NOTES

1. This article has evolved from a paper given at the ISCSC conference meeting in Dayton, Ohio, in 1995. In somewhat different form, it is found at the web site address given here. From time to time, updates concerning the Plott Project are found on this home page: http://www.sckans.edu/~gray/plott95.html

2. This book is now available in English (Henry Holt: 1993) as well as in other European languages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


