

*Jesus and the Other Names:
Christian Mission and Global Responsibility*

By Paul F. Knitter
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Review By

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In his foreword to *Jesus and the Other Names*, Harvey Cox speaks of “two urgent movements” in Christian theology which “shook him to his roots”, requiring him to completely rethink his theology. The first, impacting him in the 60’s, was liberation theology. The second, a decade later, was the persistent question of a Christian response to other faiths. For too long he felt that those two movements were like two separate conversations. Those interested in the one concern, had little interest in the other. Paul Knitter, he suggests, has found a way to blend the two conversations – conversations concerning the *religious other* and the *suffering other*.

Jesus and the Other Names focuses Christian theology on the issue of “globally responsible, correlational dialogue among religions”. His discussion bears the hall marks of the classic liberal persuasion, as do the discussions of John Hick in *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* and S. Wesley Ariarajah in *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*. And like them, he draws heavily upon his own human experience. This I believe has always been the strength of the liberal position.

Paul Knitter knows the discussion of Christian mission in a pluralistic society from both ends of a spectrum. In the late 50’s after four years of Catholic seminary high school, he officially joined the ranks of the Divine Word Missionaries (“SVD” or *Societas Vergi Divini*). Those were the years of missionary “adaptation” and “accommodation” in Catholic circles. Missionaries on furlough were often invited to speak to the novitiates. Knitter was struck by the time spent in speaking appreciatively of the other faiths and other ways encountered on the mission field. Such appreciation and accommodation disturbed the ardent young Knitter. Yet by the time of his college graduation in 1962 it was becoming clearer, “that the old exclusivist model of Christianity as light and other religions as darkness didn’t fit the facts” (p. 5).

What to do with that dawning realization became clearer to Knitter at the Pontifical Gregorian University. He arrived just two weeks before the opening of

the Second Vatican Council. There Knitter took a course from Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who was a visiting professor at the time. He was deeply impressed by Rahner's concept that even those individuals who did not know or profess Christ, even those followers of another religious persuasion, were nonetheless saved by Christ's sacrificial death. Thus they were, without at times even being aware of it, "anonymous Christians".

Knitter chose to write his doctorate under Rahner on the theme of Catholic attitudes towards other religions. A year and a half later, to his "devastating surprise" he discovered that someone else had not only chosen the same dissertation topic, but had published it that year in Rome. It was this which prompted Knitter to apply to Marburg University (and was the first Roman Catholic ever admitted to the Protestant Marburg), in order to pursue the topic of a *Protestant* theology or religions. Though he must admit to a biased Rahnerian Catholic perspective, Knitter does not deny the validity of his conclusion:

In their efforts to recognize the value of other religions, Protestant theologians, I claimed, were stymied by the Reformational insistence on "faith alone" through "Christ alone" (see Knitter 1975). Protestants such as Paul Althaus, Emil Brunner, and even Wolhart Pannenberg, could recognize "revelation" in other faiths, but never "salvation." This was, I concluded, to go only halfway in their efforts to reach out to other religious believers (p. 7).

This move towards an "inclusive" understanding would ultimately be but a bridge to "the other side" - where lay a more pluralistic understanding of world religions. To move across this bridge he found he must sublate a christocentric approach with one that was theocentric. Thus in his book *No Other Name* (1985) he would claim "*the possibility* (and nothing more) that other religions may have their own valid views of and responses to" (p. 9) the Divine Mystery we call *Theos* or God. Now in *Jesus and the Other Names* he attempts to correct some of his earlier conclusions (seeing a need to emphasize the soteriological issues rather than theocentric), as he continues to move in the direction of pluralism.

In the midst of his wrestling with "the religious other", Knitter, like Cox, was impacted by the issues of "the suffering other". Becoming involved with the Sanctuary Movement, he entered into discussion with those for whom suffering takes precedence over doctrinal disputes. He found himself increasingly aware, along with friend and colleague Hans Küng, that as religious persons we bear responsibility for a global ethic. Inter-religious dialogue becomes not simply a question of how to discern God, but even more urgently the question of how to bring about God's reign.

...the avalanche of dangers forming on the slopes of economic injustice, environmental devastation, and military build-up will not be stayed unless the nations of the world come together to formulate and endorse some kind of shared ethical convictions and guidelines. But such a task will not

be accomplished unless the religions of the world, in dialogue, make their contribution. In other words, inter religious conversations must make their most pressing agenda the ethical issues behind the mounting suffering of humans and Earth (p. 12).

Having described the autobiographical journey which led him to a pluralistic (he prefers the word correlational to pluralistic) perspective, Knitter turns to the theological underpinnings which support such a view. He suggests that all of our theological understandings must be defined and shaped both by *human experience and Christian tradition*.

Human experience has some common aspects Knitter believes, at least in Western cultures. Whether interacting with co-workers, gathered socially around a dinner table, attending our children's school programs, or sharing a marriage bed, we are becoming more intimately and acutely aware that there are others for whom another faith persuasion has enriched and transformed their lives. To suggest that ours is the only possibility for grasping religious truth is no longer possible. Pluralism, whether we advocate it or not, is a cognitive reality for most of the Western world. Thus *awareness of "others" is one aspect* of our human experience.

A second is a historical consciousness that recognizes the limitations of knowledge. Says Knitter, "There is no such thing, we know today, as factual knowledge; it is always interpreted knowledge" (p. 29). He quotes Langdon Gilkey:

...in order to preserve their integrity, they must accept *theologically* what they have long accepted *culturally*. Given the context-conditioned, "theory-laden", socially constructed interpretative limitations of every grasp and statement of truth, and given also the ever-changing, always confining flow of history, Christians (and all religious persons) have to admit honestly that, within our human condition, there can be no final word, no one way of knowing truth that is valid for all times and all peoples (pp. 29-30).

George Lindbeck (*The Nature of Doctrine*, 1984) and David Tracy (*The Analogical Imagination*, 1981 and *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 1987) are also cited:

(They) remind their fellow Christians that to think that they have a fixed source of truth, an unchanging criterion they can apply in all cultural situations in order to decide what is true or good, a foundation that transcends the process and pluralism of history, is to fly in the face of reality, to lust after the unreal. There is no fixed place of truth outside the fray of historical process and continuous dialogue...which means that Christianity is one of the *many, limited* religions of the world (p. 30).

A *third component* which supports a pluralistic or correlational theology is *the moral imperative*. Knitter insists that we cannot know our own truth except in dialogue with others. To know only one religion is to risk that it will tend toward a “barbarous or self-indulgent abuse of our own truth” (p. 32). Humorously, Knitter suggests that, just as we need someone to tell us when we have bad breath (!), we need the dialogue partner, the other perspective, to open our eyes - to enable us to see not only how *others* see our “truth” and also how it *affects* them, which is perhaps even more important.

And *finally*, human experience recognizes our *responsibility for the welfare of the world*. Knitter believes that we have a moral obligation, bequeathed to us by God, to participate in the coming of the reign of God. We are God’s physical hands and heart in this world and thus are obligated to aide in the Divine work of Shalom.

Aspects of the Christian tradition which support a correlational dialogue are again four in Knitters listing. First, says Knitter, the traditional understanding of *the nature of God* requires such a pluralistic posture. God is beyond our comprehension. Hence, to say that we have a final or exclusive understanding of the Mystery that is *Theos* is idolatrous. Moreover, Knitter contends that our understanding of God as Trinitarian implies plurality. Christian ethical incentives provide a basis as well, he claims. Here he relies almost exclusively on the commandment which calls us to love our neighbor as God loves us. To exclude our neighbor from salvation seems to Knitter the epitome of inhospitableness and lack of love.

Whenever we hold up a truth or a revelation and insist that according to the will of God it is the only or the absolutely final norm in which all others have to be included, then we cannot treat them as our brothers and sisters in God. Such a norm does enable us to confront them, as love sometimes requires, but it does not allow us to be confronted by them, as love also requires. Whenever we are not disposed to learn as much from our neighbors as they can from us, we cannot love them. We may help them, we may build hospitals and schools for them, we may lift them from their poverty - but we are not loving them (p. 39).

Pastoral concerns must be honored in conjunction with supports of the Christian tradition. We do a disservice to those who struggle with these questions if we simply cite doctrine and creed as final answers. We must wrestle along with them in order to give satisfaction to their “cry from the heart”.

And then there are the *scriptural incentives* for correlational dialogue. Along with Krister Stendhal and John Hick, Knitter suggests that we must understand much of the biblical language as metaphor. The grand and divine appellations are really “love talk” (Stendahl). And while he wants to honor and respect texts such as Acts 4:12 – “There is no other name given to human kind by which we can be saved than the name of Jesus Christ”, he begs we remember the context (these

words for example are spoken in connection with a specific healing), as well as the polemic nature of other passages such as “I am the way the truth and the life...”.

We must always distinguish between the universal and the particular, says Knitter, citing Schubert Ogden’s understanding that we must locate “the *particularity* of Jesus within the *universality* of God’s self-revelation, rather than locating God’s universality *within the particularity* of the historical Jesus”(p. 42). It is that understanding of universality that drives us towards correlational dialogue.

Why the term “correlational”? Here Knitter honestly admits that inter-faith dialogue is not easy. He takes issue with those who suggest that we come together easily around issues of “common essence” or “common experience”. Such suggestions are “gossamer theories spun out by academicians who most likely have never felt the hard, obstructing reality of otherness” (p. 13). And yet, his actual inter-faith dialogue experience has convinced him that, despite what are often chasms of perspective, there remains a relatedness. This, he trusts, is a sign from God to persistently pursue areas of “correlation”, and those ways in which we can go forward together in the global work of peace and justice.

In the face of his critics’ real and valid concerns (1 - that the ambiguity of pluralism jeopardizes a firm foundation of meaning and purpose, 2 - the difficulties of prophetically resisting evil in Christ’s name, 3 - the corrosion and possible destruction of missionary outreach), Knitter maintains that he is still able to conceive of Jesus as *unique* for Christians and for the world. Stressing ortho-praxis (doing as he did) rather than orthodoxy, Knitter claims that Jesus is truly & fully all that the Newer Testament witnesses profess that he was. Yet this does not require that he was the *only* one, who *solely* embodied the self-revelation of God.

Whatever it is that brings a person to be a Christian and follower of Jesus, by its very nature it must enable the person to say that Jesus is truly and effectively the vehicle of the Divine Presence in his or her life. For this person Jesus is truly the Son of God, the savior, mediator, word of God, messiah, the living one. Without the feeling - without an experiential awareness - that inspires the “truly,” one cannot be, one would not want to be, a Christian.

But I don’t think that is true of “solely.” When one knows that Jesus is truly savior, one does *not* know that he is the *only* savior. One’s experience is limited and has not been able to take in the experiences and messages of all other so-called saviors or religious figures.

But if Christians do not or cannot know that Jesus is the only savior neither do they have to know this in order to be committed to this Jesus. The experience of Jesus that has enabled them to say “truly” enables them

to keep following him. That there may be others is not an impediment to faithful following. Discipleship requires “truly”; it does not seem to require “solely” (p. 73).

With similar logic he concludes that Jesus need be neither fully definitive nor unsurpassable. Rather he proposes that Jesus is universal (not limited to one people), decisive (in that he challenges us) and indispensable (which flows naturally from acceptance that he is universal and decisive).

Christians bring to the table the uniqueness of Jesus’ interest in inclusivity and relationship. In representing that Christ-like uniqueness they will share with others the Christian value of *contemplatives in action*, says Knitter. Prompted by love of neighbor (which is, according to the first commandment, the manifestation of their love for God), Christians believe in the value of “historical involvement”. Believing that the God whom Jesus served has a preference for the poor and oppressed, Christians are concerned for those who suffer due to injustice, engaging in work to alleviate that injustice as they are able. And to the dialogue Christians bring a deep and abiding hope, a hope that enables them to believe that the world can be saved. Says Knitter, a “distinguishing mark of the disciples of Jesus and co-workers in God’s reign is that *they don’t give up*” (p. 97).

To enter into dialogue with other faiths does not require that we abandon our understanding of Jesus’ uniqueness, or abandon a conviction that his way is an ethically important way.

Insofar as Christians proclaim the “pure, unbounded love of God” at work in the world and therefore do not insist that Jesus is God’s full, final, or unsurpassable Word, they expect that for the most part their relationships with sincere believers of other paths will indeed be complementary. But insofar as Christians also experience God’s presence in Jesus to include universal, decisive, and indispensable claims, they will also be ready to take strong stands, sometimes in opposition, to the claims of others. (p. 82).

But what of missions? This is perhaps the most critical issue for those who fear the goals of correlational or pluralistic dialogue. Throughout the centuries the Christian church has been motivated and animated by a sense of having been “sent” with good news of salvation. It believed it had a necessary role to play in God’s unfolding drama. But if the content of that good news is not for all people in all times, then is the missionary focus of the church still necessary or vital? Knitter claims that it is. And he contends that a pluralistic or correlational posture is still able to beckon disciples who will be sent out to speak good news that they believe is for everyone. It will however require a revision of the missionary mandate.

Knitter contends that pluralistic missionary disciples will still continue to affirm Jesus' divinity. But by this he means (along with Karl Rahner, Paul Tillich, Edward Schillebeeckx, Hans Küng and Monika Hellwig) that

To feel and proclaim that Jesus is divine is to encounter him as God's sacrament, as the embodiment, the historical reality, the symbol, the story that makes God real and effective for me (p. 105).

The message of salvation that they bring will encourage others to join in bringing about God's reign (as opposed to desiring that they join the Christian church). The wellbeing of all creatures must be the mission's foremost goal. More than Christological missiology, they will be concerned with pneumatological missiology which, Knitter believes, allows one to grasp the universality of God's saving purpose, without dissolving the distinctive uniqueness of Jesus for Christians. Pneumatology allows for the moving of God's spirit into realms and through mediums that doctrinal Christology disallows.

Though it is a revisioned understanding of missions, Knitter believes that his missionary passion is as ardent today as it was in his earliest years of missionary work. The urgency of its goals can indeed beckon future generations to bear witness to the way of salvation and the good news that God is still engaged with us in saving work, albeit through a multiplicity of religious mediums. Missions *as dialogue* then, is Knitter's image of missiology into the third millennium.

Perhaps Knitter's most intriguing and practical suggestion is his call for a dialogical model of theological education. Seminary students need opportunities to learn about traditions other than their own. In as much as dialogue with those of other faiths will become more and more the norm, there should be required courses in Islam, Asian religions and indigenous spiritualities. These courses should be taught not in an abstract informational way, but by professors and guest speakers who can present material experientially. Students must be called to enter "the other's world of experience" (p. 162). There should be personal encounters fostered by "experimenting with the truth of - or at least observing - the spiritual practices of other religions" (p. 162). Another way of engaging the "other's" voice might be to engage certain issues from a variety of faith perspectives - "Courses on 'Religions and Peace' or 'Buddhism, Christianity and Ecology', or 'Feminist Voices in Muslim-Christian Dialogue' (p. 163).

Such perspectives should be mainlined into *all* courses of Christian history, doctrinal, ethical and social issues. By this, Knitter means...that in teaching a standard course on evil or redemption or church or the question of God, teachers will inject into the discussions what other religious perspectives hold, how they sometimes radically differ, and how they provoke Christian tradition to further reflection. Naturally, given the expertise and general background of most theological faculties, such dreams of mainlining an interreligious conversation into the general curriculum cannot be realized overnight. But they will never be realized at all unless the ideal is affirmed (p. 163).

To this end, he would propose that all seminaries should include one or more faculty members trained in a non-Christian tradition. And students should be encouraged or required to sub-specialize in the “history, beliefs, and spirituality of another non- Christian religious path” (pp. 163-164).

Paul Knitter envisions a new world of missions, one where the ultimate goal is no longer salvation through Christ to eternal life. Rather, the focus is on the reign of God emerging in our here and now. “The Kingdom of God is among you,” Jesus is purported to have said. Paul Knitter is eager, as a Christian, to join hands with those of other faiths in order to realize that very possibility.