Jesus: The only way?

by Leo D. Lefebure in the October 9, 2002 issue

Introducing Theologies of Religions. By Paul F. Knitter. Orbis, 256 pp., $25.00 paperback.

In 1985 Paul Knitter helped to shape the discussion of the significance of other religions for Christian theology by arguing that other incarnations of God equal to the Christ event are possible. His provocative book *No Other Name*? *A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Orbis) proposed a "theocentric Christology." According to Knitter, to claim the event of Jesus Christ is constitutive of all authentic relationship with God or is normative for all genuine religious experience is to "contradict contemporary awareness of historical relativity" and to "impede authentic dialogue with believers of other faiths." Jesus is "universally relevant," not normative. Knitter argued that Christians must engage in dialogue with other traditions in a spirit of openness to finding other liberators and saviors equally important as Jesus. Claiming Jesus as normative or definitive prevents Christians from being fully open to the truth in other traditions.

The proposal aroused a storm of controversy. Many accused Knitter of betraying the heritage of Christian faith and of compromising Christian orthodoxy for the sake of a contemporary consciousness that relativizes all perspectives. Theologians like Gregory Baum who were concerned with social, political and ethical issues questioned whether Knitter's Christology could support any decisive moral positions in resistance to evil. Participants in Buddhist-Christian dialogue pointed out that theocentrism imposes a theistic frame of reference on Buddhists, who do not believe in a creating and redeeming God. Philosophically minded critics such as Hans Küng questioned whether any truth claim, let alone a revelation of God, can be true without being normative. Knitter himself later acknowledged the force of the latter critique, backing off from his earlier assertion and admitting that "any truth claim worth its salt must be normative."

Through ongoing debate Knitter modified his proposal in subsequent books, dropping the language of theocentrism and calling instead for a soteriocentric

approach with a focus on the concrete ways in which religions can promote human well-being and flourishing and contribute to the ecological well-being of the entire planet. His most recent book surveys the current state of the discussion without arguing that any one position is correct and the others wrong.

Knitter proposes new terminology to map the field, finding four models: replacement, fulfillment, mutuality and acceptance. The replacement model holds that Christianity replaces other religions, either totally or partially. A broad range of conservative Protestants embrace this model, from evangelicals and new evangelicals to Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Carl Braaten. The fulfillment model, which holds that Christianity fulfills the salvific good already present and available in other religions, has dominated mainstream Catholic discussions since Karl Rahner and Vatican II, with recent variations in the work of Gavin D'Costa and Jacques Dupuis.

The mutuality model holds that religions can learn mutually from each other. It is represented by John Hick's philosophical approach, Ramon Panikkar's mystical method and Knitter's own ethical-practical procedure. The final option, the acceptance model, holds that religions are profoundly different from each other, and that we should accept these differences. It includes the linguistic-cultural approach of postliberal theologians like George Lindbeck, proponents of radical difference like S. Mark Heim, and comparative theologians like Frank Clooney and James Fredericks.

The great virtue of Knitter's book is his effort to be fair, even sympathetic, to the variety of contemporary voices in this debate. Knitter sets forth clearly the strengths and concerns of models that he had earlier harshly criticized as violating the ethical imperative of dialogue. He also cogently explains the criticisms of the mutuality model, admitting that it has many weaknesses and dangers and even acknowledging its own implicit inclusivism. He also admits that comparative theologians have a point in accusing the mutuality model of reducing the differences among religions to unimportance and of trying to work out the rules of dialogue prior to serious conversations with members of other religions.

To remedy these difficulties, Knitter proposes a network of checks and balances: instead of one true position in the theology of religions, there are now a variety of relatively legitimate positions, each with its own strengths and weaknesses; none of them should consider itself uniquely true or "absolute." Warning of the dangers of

isolationism, relativism and fideism in the acceptance model, Knitter hopes for a “fruitful dialogue” (even a merger?) between the mutuality and acceptance models. The shape of such a merger is left unclear.

At various points along the way, there are echoes of Knitter’s earlier refrain: to learn from other religions, Christians must let go of a traditional high Christology. However, Knitter never clarifies what exactly he has learned or hopes to learn in exchange for this surrender. He generally avoids engagement with the concrete teachings of other traditions about Jesus, such as the Jewish denial that Jesus is the Messiah because the Messianic age has not come, or the Muslims’ divinely revealed interpretation of Jesus as a prophet who taught the message of Islam, who worked miracles that appear in the apocryphal gospels, and who was not crucified.

Knitter’s suggestion, following Panikkar, that Buddha, Krishna, Muhammad and Jesus all carry out the “same role or function” is profoundly misleading and threatens to obscure important differences between the traditions. In the case of Jesus and Muhammad, this claim would mean acceptance of the traditional Muslim interpretation of Jesus as simply a prophet. For Muslims, the central, decisive revelation of God is the text of the Qur’an, not a person; for traditional Christians, the central revelation of God is not the text of the Bible but the person of Jesus Christ.

If one does present Jesus as one prophet among others, bringing him into line with Muslim (and possibly Jewish) perspectives, one then still faces the stark difference between these religions and Buddhism. The Shakyamuni Buddha was not a prophet bearing a message from a transcendent, creating God. Even the term “salvation” can be problematic. In one conference I attended, a rabbi forcefully asserted that “salvation” is not a Jewish or Muslim category but is distinctively Christian. A Korean Buddhist monk once exclaimed that the Buddha did not come to save us but to tell us we do not need to be saved!

One question remaining at the end of the discussion is that of coherence in a model of checks and balances or in a possible merger between the mutuality and the acceptance models. Given the stark disagreements between the positions surveyed, it is difficult to imagine a completely neutral format of checks and balances. Who checks whom, and how is “balance” to be found? Knitter chides Frank Clooney for patiently deferring the question of truth, but he himself appears to defer a decision on truth claims in his own proposal. Nonetheless, Knitter has performed a valuable service in surveying an important discussion with accuracy and fairness.