The way open to other ways: Paul Knitter, Buddhist Christian

interview by David Heim in the November 11, 2015 issue

Photo courtesy of Union Theological Seminary

Since his 1985 book No Other Name? *Paul Knitter has been exploring religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue. He is especially concerned with how religious communities of the world can cooperate on issues of social justice and the environment—the topic of* One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility *(1995). He has taught at Xavier University in Cincinnati and at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and has long been active in CRISPAZ, an ecumenical peacemaking organization in El Salvador. His personal multifaith journey is recounted in* Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian *(2009).*

In *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, you say you needed resources outside Christianity to make sense of Christianity. Could you mention an aspect of the faith that didn't make sense and say what Buddhist resources helped you?

I think that the uneasiness I had with much of the Christian creed had to do with its pervasive (but not necessarily inherent) dualism between God and the world. In much Christian speaking and preaching, God is referred to as an almighty but benevolent being who is in charge of everything and intervenes here but not there. Granting that we can't avoid anthropomorphisms in speaking about the Ultimate,

Christians seem to take their anthropomorphic images literally. In line with the Christian mystics—including Paul and John in the New Testament—I was searching for a nondualistic God.

Help for such a search can come from many sources, but I found a particularly useful one in Mahayana Buddhism, especially its teaching on the nondualistic coinherence of Emptiness (its pointer to the Ultimate) and Form (the relative, finite world). There can be no Emptiness without Form and no Form without Emptiness. Emptiness (or for me, God) is manifest and perceptible in Form.

Or in the words of Julian of Norwich, there is a "oneing" between God and the world. With such a nondualistic experience of God, God does not intervene. God comes forth and manifests. God doesn't step into our lives; we become aware that God is already there.

You note in the book that many insights of Buddhism can also be found within parts of the Christian tradition—like loss of self, or the interpenetration of the divine and this world. Couldn't some or all of the concerns you name be addressed from within the Christian tradition, without venturing into Buddhism?

Certainly. I just referred to the mystical tradition, a resource that many Christians neglect or are unacquainted with. For me, and I think a growing number of Christians, Buddhism is an entry into, or a flashlight with which to explore, the mystical or nondualistic contents of Christianity.

But it's not just that Buddhism has provided the flashlight with which I have discovered what was already in the Christian basement. Buddhism has also added to that basement. It has deepened, clarified, and sometimes corrected the way Christians image and experience the reality we call God.

To use the issues you mentioned: the loss of self in Buddhism is even more radical than what Christians generally mean or feel in talking about kenosis, or self-emptying. I might even dare to suggest that Buddhism could have helped St. Paul grasp what he was getting at when he wrote to the Galatians: "It is no longer I who am alive, but Christ who is alive in me." Buddhism has helped me to feel and comprehend what that "no longer I" contains and makes possible.

And as to the interpenetration of the divine and human, Buddhism is pushing or inviting me to overcome the possibly lingering dualism in understanding and grasping what that interpenetration really means. Buddhism invites Christians to recognize a real reciprocity between Emptiness and Form that can be also experienced between the divine and the human. It is not just that it is God in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), but also it is we in whom God lives and moves and has God's being.

It's an asymmetrical reciprocity, for sure—God is the living sun and we are its rays—but still it's a reciprocal interpenetration. God can't be God without some finite, relative *other*. I think this is a possible—for me, a needed—stretching of Christian understanding and practice.

Is there a problem with taking an aspect of one faith and inserting it into another faith? Can this really be done?

Not only can it be done, but it has been done throughout the history of religions and is being done today. As comparative theologians like John Thatamanil and Michelle Voss Roberts point out to the postmodern critics of interreligious dialogue, religions are not isolated, impermeable, unchangeable realities. Religions have been affecting, challenging, learning from each other throughout time.

I give you Christianity, the amalgam of the early Jewish Jesus followers and the Greek-Roman members of Paul's communities; or Zen Buddhism, the offspring of the merging of Indian Buddhism and Chinese Taoism.

When interreligious dialogue really works, it leads to an "inserting" into—or more appropriately, a transformation of—one religion by another. The whole point of dialogue is not just to learn about and tolerate each other—although we certainly need more of that—but to learn from and ultimately collaborate with each other.

Eboo Patel and others have argued that interreligious understanding needs to begin with cooperation on practical matters of justice and peace, not with large theological questions. How do you see it?

I fully agree. In fact, let me be the typical academic and mention that Eboo Patel once told me that his reading of my *One Earth, Many Religions* was a guide for him in establishing the Interfaith Youth Core. One of the most effective, even urgent ways of entering interfaith conversation is to address and collaborate on the

pressing ethical issues that confront and demand a response from all religious communities: the environmental crisis, poverty, horrendous economic inequality, and especially violence inspired by religion.

However, I have urged Eboo to move from cooperation to conversation. Acting together for the well-being of others and of the planet will naturally lead to solidarity and friendship, but such friendship will also naturally and necessarily lead to talking together, to sharing with each other what in our respective traditions grounds and guides our acting together. Friends want to share what they hold true and sacred. And it's only friends who can handle the differences, sometimes the contradictions, between the teachings of, for instance, Jesus and Buddha and Muhammad.

The claim that "Jesus is the only way" strikes some people as exclusivist and imperialistic. Do you agree?

I certainly do. There is a debilitating tension, if not contradiction, in our Christian calls for dialogue (for instance, the revolutionary call for dialogue by the Second Vatican Council in *Nostra Aetate*) and our insistence that God has given us the only savior for all humankind and the full and final truth that is meant to include all other truths. If I may use an inappropriate comparison: it is like calling people to a card game, but also insisting that we have already been dealt all the aces.

To insist on the supremacy of Jesus leads (whether we intend it or not) to claims for the supremacy of Christianity. Just as we cannot build a multiracial society if we believe in white supremacy, we cannot build a multireligious society if we believe in Christian supremacy.

That's why I have devoted much of my career as a theologian to exploring the resources (often neglected) in our scriptures and our tradition that allow us—indeed, require us—to understand Jesus as truly savior of the world but not necessarily as the only savior of the world. With such an understanding of Jesus, Christians can be just as committed to Jesus as we are open to recognizing and learning from what God may be up to in other religions. As John B. Cobb Jr. has beautifully put it: "Jesus is the way that is open to other ways."

One way to understand that claim might be not as the insistence on a certain formula about Jesus but as the insistence that Jesus' life of humility, inclusive compassion, and suffering love is the only way to God. Does that advance the discussion? Or is that exclusivist too?

Yes, I think it does advance the discussion. It is one of the ways in which we can reconstruct traditional Christology in a more pluralistic, dialogical way. It's a way of handling John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This interpretation understands Jesus not just as an individual human being but as the incarnation of the way of living that will enable us to find and live the life of God. Without compassion for others, without the readiness to give of ourselves for the well-being of others, we are not going to be able to be in harmony with the Ultimate Reality that Jesus called "Abba" or Father-Dad.

This understanding of Jesus sees his salvific role as one of revealing the truth about God and how we are to live God's life rather than as one of fixing a broken relationship with God. If we understand Jesus' role as savior to be one of revealing the truth, we can be open to others who also enable us to deepen our understanding of God's truth. But if we think that Jesus saves us by fixing or bridging the gap between God and us, once the problem is fixed, we need no other fixers. So clarifying or correcting our understanding of *how* Jesus saves is an important piece in our efforts to construct a Christology that is open to dialogue with other religions.

There are fruitful points of convergence between religions, but also points of fundamental divergence. How important is it, for example, that Christians view the created world as good in a way that Buddhists don't, and posit a self that is more substantial? How important are these divergences and what difference do they ultimately make in interreligious conversation?

There are real differences between Buddhism and Christianity, and these differences must make a difference in the dialogue. But I would want to qualify the suggestion that Buddhists don't "view the created world as good." This is an issue that Roger Haight and I explore in our soon-to-appear book *Jesus and Buddha: Friends in Conversation* (Orbis).

It's true that in their emphasis on personal transformation, Buddhists often have not taken the material world and history as seriously as have Jews, Christians, and Muslims. But at least in the Tibetan form of Buddhism that I practice, the world, although it is transient and therefore not to be clung to, is the manifestation of Emptiness. We are to embrace it, but not get stuck in it. Nirvana, Buddhists remind us, is to be found and lived nowhere else but right here in the middle of Samsara—this messy world.

So in the dialogue, Christians need to remind Buddhists that they have to take the world and historical-social structures more seriously than they perhaps have done in much of their tradition. It is not enough only to call for personal transformation; we also have to transform social structures. This Christian-Jewish challenge has been one of the factors in the recent development of what is called Socially Engaged Buddhism.

But at the same time, Buddhists remind Christians that a personal, nondualistic transformation by which we overcome our clinging to ourselves and our programs is a prerequisite for being able to transform society. This is the point that Thich Nhat Hanh makes in reminding Christians that they must first *be peace* if they are going to be able to *make peace*.

Taking differences seriously is crucial in any religious dialogue, but I have found that our differences and disagreements, if we engage them with humility and charity, almost always turn out to be complementary rather than contradictory.

The forging of a personal faith by engagement with other faiths seems like an inherently individualistic task, marked by the threads of biography and circumstance. Does one lose in such a venture the very community in which faiths—and narratives of faith—take shape? Can religious faith survive without being embedded in such communities?

As I engage my Buddhist friends who know that I am a Christian, I feel the responsibility to represent my tradition—in other words, to present not just what I think, but what I believe accurately represents or continues the message of Jesus of Nazareth as that message has been passed on, in abundant diversity, through the centuries. Admittedly, there is no one way of being a Christian or understanding the gospel. But to say that there are many does not mean that *any* representation of the gospel is acceptable. Fidelity to the community is essential in the dialogue.

At the same time, I feel the need to bring back to the community what I and others think they are learning in the dialogue with Buddhists. That obligation to bring back has, I think, a twofold grounding. I want to share the benefits of what I have learned from Buddhists in the conviction or expectation that it can help many of my fellow Christians, as it has helped me, to come to a reaffirmation of Christian beliefs and practices. But I also need to report back to the community in order to make sure that what I have learned from the dialogue can be received and affirmed by my

fellow Christians. Certainly, not everyone will find it meaningful and acceptable. But if I don't hear an "Amen" from at least a significant number of the people I break bread with every Sunday, I would have to question whether I belong in that community.

What I have discovered in my engagement with Buddhism—and I am not alone in this discovery—is that I can and must belong to two different communities. I am spiritually nurtured and sustained by both the Buddhist (specifically the Tibetan) and the Christian (specifically the Roman Catholic) communities. I need to belong to both of them; I need to practice both—the Eucharist every Sunday and my daily Tibetan meditation. This is a spreading phenomenon in the United States and Europe that theologians are calling double or mutual belonging. I suspect that in the coming decades, the ranks of Christian double-belongers are going to increase.

It seems like someone with the kind of dual practice you describe would face a particular challenge in passing it on to a second generation. One can imagine parents bringing kids to two kinds of services, say, but that would itself not constitute the kind of community of support that religions typically foster. Do you think in the end one needs a primary community?

In my marriage, when I realized that I was a Buddhist-Christian double-belonger, and when my wife moved from a Christian to a Buddhist spiritual practice around the same time, our two children were already young adults and out of the house. In a sense, I wish that our shifts in religious practices would have happened earlier so that we would have had to face the challenge of bringing up children in a family in which the parents had two very different spiritual practices and communities. I think this is becoming more and more the situation for many children.

Though I am no expert in child psychology, I suspect that in a child's early years, belonging to two different religious communities can be a bit confusing. Kids need the clarity and security of one community or church, where they can witness adults living and practicing the message either of Jesus or of Buddha. As the kids become older— perhaps already in late grammar or early high school—double-practicing parents can introduce them, for example, to meditation practices at home or visit mom's sangha instead of dad's parish. What develops out of such openness and exposure is, of course, for the children to see and determine.