

Christian Buddhist, Buddhist Christian?

Colleagues,

In some Asian countries Jesus' birthday (December 25) and Buddha's birthday (the 8th day of the 4th month of the Chinese lunar calendar)—both of them—are national holidays. In such places Buddhists and Christians often “cross the aisle” to participate in their neighbors' celebrations. Which may be a bit of a stretch to warrant my posting this Buddhist/Christian item just before this year's Christian celebration of Jesus' birth. Even so, here it is.

Kenneth Dobson has posted on ThTh pages before on Christian-Buddhist themes. Most recently with a two-part essay now archived on the Crossings website: www.crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur102308.shtml and www.crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur103008.shtml

Ken and I met years ago when he was pastor at the Presbyterian congregation across the Mississippi River in Alton, Illinois. For a long time now he's been in Thailand mostly in academic posts. He was host for Marie and me a while back when we were there too. Now for some time Ken works at Payap University “up north” in Chiang Mai. [Google the name to learn more: E.g., “established in 1974, a private institution founded by the Church of Christ in Thailand.”]

So Ken was the obvious one to ask to review Paul Knitter's book with the provocative title: “Without Buddha I Could Not be a Christian.” Knitter is a major and multi-published Roman Catholic voice in world-religions dialogue. But also not without dissent from his own RC colleagues. Here's what Ken has to say

about Knitter's claim that Buddha is the one who keeps him celebrating Christmas.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Paul F. Knitter

Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian

Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2009.

(Amazon price \$15.61)

I slogged along through the foundational three chapters of Paul Knitter's painstaking rehearsal of his attempt to stay Christian by utilizing insights he had acquired from Mahayana and Zen Buddhism. There was so much of it that was irrelevant to me, or that disappointed me that I threatened to quit even though I am a struggling Christian who is surviving in a Buddhist sea. I had hoped to find a kindred spirit and possibly a guru because we are both Illinois boys within a few months of each other in age and both have Buddhist-Christian orientations, and Paul Knitter commands a lot of respect in Buddhist-Christian dialogue circles. I kept on hoping right up to the chapter on Nirvana and Heaven. That's where I knew that we weren't going to find common ground after all, and it's where it began to dawn on me why.

The bottom line is that Paul Knitter wants to initiate a new form of Christian theologizing and my hope is for an expanded form of Buddhism. Knitter's confession is that coming to terms with Buddhism has helped him mend his fabric of faith in Christianity, and my fabric hasn't been critically damaged.

My first critique of Knitter's book is that it is eclectic in its selection of Buddhist teaching, but his thesis is that what he's found in Buddhism has helped him. The rest of Buddhism

outside of Mahayana and Zen is not important to his thesis, but I was disappointed. My own immersion in Buddhism is here in Thailand where the form is Theravada and not Mahayana Buddhism. So my reactions were along the lines of "that's new," "that's not what I have heard before," or "that's not how people around here think of it." The Dharma of Thai Buddhism is different from the emphases in Northern Asian Mahayana Buddhism that have been so helpful to Knitter. On top of that my connection with Buddhism has been as a practitioner of Buddhist village and temple life, while Knitter has been engaged in dialogue with Buddhist intellectuals. Knitter is also a professional theologian, as he frequently mentions, and my field was pastoral and missional. We aren't at the same level.

But even I, as removed as I am from the intellectual strands of the two faiths Knitter and I espouse, choked on his thin rice soup in the chapter on Nirvana and Heaven. First of all Knitter, who can hold symbolism and symbolic language in very high regard, despises Christian language at funerals because the literal meaning of what is said is stretched. But funerals are not pedantic occasions, and the meaning of the language is even less important there than it is in theologizing. Perhaps I quibble, but Knitter can't have it both ways. Either it's OK to use symbolic language or it's not. But, second of all, Knitter doesn't do justice to the issue of karma. It is, as Knitter makes clear, essentially the doctrine that actions have consequences, the consequences are inevitable, they can spread over wide areas and persist through time. It can take multiple life-times to work them off. Knitter finds that the Roman Catholic concept of purgatory may correspond to the more-than-one-lifetime idea in Buddhism. I think it more likely corresponds to the Thai Buddhist idea of narok, which is a hell of punishments for sins through which the more egregious sinners pass before they are reborn into some lower life form.

But here in the southern part of Asia there are two ways of ending the chain of consequences that is the nature of things (Dharma is literally the teaching on "the nature of things.") One way takes a long time and involves the accumulation of more merit than demerit on one's personal account. Merit-making is the motive for virtually all social and philanthropic endeavors as well as all temple practice including the decision to become a monk. But this actually just paves the way for one, in one life or another, to meditate. Vipassana meditation is a form of yoga used by Gautama to achieve the "ah-ha" of Enlightenment, which extinguishes all one's karma and ends the chain of rebirth into a new round of inevitable suffering, old age and death. Enlightenment is a short-cut, some monks here say, to end the chain. There are several forms of meditation, as there are schools or denominations of Buddhism, but I have never heard of Enlightenment being acquired without some form of meditation that produces an altered state of consciousness.

The debate here has been on whether merit is transferable. If merit can be transferred to offset demerit, then karma can be overcome by a second person. Now, this is not as arcane or irrelevant as it first appears, because the vast consensus here in Theravada-land is that merit can be transferred, and it is being done all the time. Sons, by becoming monks, transfer the merit they obtain to an elder relative, a grandparent who died, or a mother. We acquire some of a monk's vast store of merit by various means. There are blessing ceremonies of a great variety that transfer merit. So it is only a few monks who could argue against the principle that merit can be transferred.

It is difficult, then, for Buddhists to argue against the notion that merit can be acquired from Jesus. If atonement works for a Methodist down on her knees in Birmingham, it can work for a Thai girl down on her knees in Bangkok. The matter can be postponed for a moment about whether the girl must immediately

pledge a disavowal of all things Buddhist (which is the “only” [exclusivist] aspect of traditional Christianity that Knitter loathes). The Christian-Buddhist contention is that, yes indeed, the grace of God in Jesus Christ can cover a girl in Bangkok. It also ends the chain of consequences, the very chain that Buddhists call karma.

It was initially perplexing to me that Knitter overlooks this. Actually, I was dismayed by it and then I began to notice the red flags I have posted on my notes. “The primary purpose of all the language of the Bible is to tell us how to live...” (p. 70). Really? And, wait a minute, right here in the discussion of Nirvana and Heaven, “the good news is that things can get better.” Can get, not have gotten? And how is that brought about? The chapter on Nirvana and Heaven doesn’t say. It says that it may take a long time, more than one lifetime perhaps, and Knitter insists that our actions have most to do with it.

So, let’s see what Christ’s role in this is. Knitter’s long chapter on “Jesus the Christ and Gautama the Buddha” ought to have some answers. First, we find that Knitter is aggravated by a lot of the literal interpretations that have been made of the accounts of Jesus. Then Knitter tells us that he is bothered by the exclusive, elitist positions that Christianity has taken. Jesus is the “only” way to salvation and the “best” of all teachers. Things like that. So how is it that Jesus is found as savior for Knitter? Knitter’s main answer is that Jesus is a Teacher-Savior. To say this does not demote Jesus as Savior, he insists. Jesus awoke to a new level of consciousness which became so profound in him that it reveals the Truth in ways that transform those who become a part of Jesus.

But Jesus is not a fixer, a repairman who reconnects us human beings to God. A Father who demands the death of his son as the price for getting over estrangement from us is inconsistent with

a God of Love. Knitter doesn't want to use the idea that Christ had such a store of merit that it was sufficient to cover the karmic demerits (sin) of all who appeal to him. That would be a fix. Knitter has us responsible for that. Transfers of merit are out. So it looks to me that Knitter closes the door on one of the most potentially productive topics of dialogue, about how it might be that Jesus Christ is another way (or a better way, or the only way – Knitter wouldn't like that) to solve the karma problem.

Now we come to the chapter, "Prayer and Meditation," when Knitter talks about his problem with asking God to intervene. "I have the itchy feeling that I'm asking God to do things God is not responsible for (e.g. the weather) or things for which I'm really responsible (exam performance and results, for example)." Knitter does away with petitions and intercessions inasmuch as there is no Superman in the heights above to come down to do what we are asking for in our liturgical as well as our personal prayers. But Buddhism opened up new practices of mindfulness for Knitter. This suggested a new sacrament to him, the Sacrament of Silence, as well as new mental processes that help rescue other sacramental acts from their desecration of the Mystery of the InterBeing (sic).

And in the final chapter where Knitter knits his older liberation theology to his newer socially active Buddhism there is hardly any need for a future-driven action plan to bring about peace. Buddhist insight commends that instead we must "be peace." The Christian notion that if we want peace we should work for justice doesn't jibe with Buddhism's resolute insistence on being in the present. Buddhists do not have an eschatology beyond being fully mindful of what is in the present moment and letting the next moments, not to mention the end times, take care of themselves.

How then is the issue of “the mess” (to use Knitter’s favorite term) resolved? It does not involve any of the aspects I am familiar with: no cross, no grace-filled gift, no intervention, no transfer of any kind. It has to do with being merged with greater energy, being connected, networked and being awake and aware. That’s how we tackle the mess. I don’t think I’m up to it.

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