

A Response to Paul Knitter

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I found Paul Knitter's article *Missionary Activity Revised and Reaffirmed* to be both engaging and challenging. Reading it, one is immediately struck by how well-informed the author is, especially where Latin American theologies of liberation and the contextualization theologies of Asia are concerned. His article reflects his erudition, and he writes convincingly about the need for new perspectives in missiology. Knitter's efforts reminds us once again of the strong impact that Third World theologies are continuing to have on traditional Catholic theology, an influence that can be traced back to certain Third World theologians whose works have preceded his. The movement in local Latin American and Asian churches towards greater inculturation and contextualization has raised a number of challenges to traditional Catholic theology that invite a rethinking of many of its central themes.



Challenge to Missiology's Traditional Thinking

For example, liberation theologies of Latin America challenge Western theologians to reconsider the role of Jesus as "Liberator". Such theologies represent a shift of christological focus from Jesus as "Son of God" to Jesus as "Liberator of humanity". Also the rapid growth and spread of basic Christian communities throughout Latin America and parts of Asia have caused Western ecclesiologies to rethink the traditional model of the Church as "the perfect society". This model, so well received in the past, is gradually receding, and giving way to other models, such as the Church as "the People of God" and "the Servant Church". Now, it is missiology's turn to face up to serious challenges to its traditional thinking. The pluralistic-soteriocentric theologies of religions, which have absorbed the attention of many First and Third World theo-

gians in recent years, are calling for a reappraisal and reinterpretation of traditional concepts about the mission of the Church in a world marked by increased inter-cultural exchange and inter-religious dialogue. The missionary enterprise is no longer considered unilateral but bilateral, where missionaries are sent not only to give and teach, but also to receive and learn. The purpose of missionary work is not merely to evangelize, but to experience self-renewal in the process.

Response to Cardinal Tomko

Knitter wrote his article as a response to an address given by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Cardinal Jozef Tomko, during a missionary congress held in Rome in October 1988. (Complete address was published in Tripod, No. 53, pp. 29-44). Most of what Knitter has to say, I personally find quite attractive. His arguments are always logical and systematic, but at times not without a certain ambiguity. His purpose, however, is clear. He hopes to bring us to a wider understanding of the Church's missionary work, to broaden, as it were, our missionary horizons. By placing Knitter's response alongside the Cardinal's original address, the reader will get a very comprehensive overview of the developments now taking place in new approaches to non-Christian religions by pluralistic-soteriocentric theologies, and come to a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of these emerging theologies.

Points Needing Clarification

I myself found that Knitter's article does broaden one's views about certain areas of missiology. His efforts to explore new possibilities for interpreting mission are admirable. Nevertheless, I also find some of his ideas and explanations ambiguous and at times questionable. There is definitely a need for further clarification of some points. And I would like to raise here a few questions that crossed my mind while reading his article.

Absolute Truth and Absolute Commitment

At one point Knitter says: "Faith is the paradoxical living out of *an absolute commitment to relative truth*." I find this statement lacking in clarity. Is the transcendental dimension of our faith

derived from divine "*absolute truth*" or from the "*absolute commitment*" of created human beings? If this truth in itself--not the expression of truth--is relative, ought Christians then be asked to "give up their lives" for something that is merely relative? What are authentic grounds for Christian sacrifice?

The Historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith

I wonder if Knitter has not unconsciously separated the "historical Jesus" from the "Christ of faith" when he says that "saviour" is a relative and not an absolute term. Indeed, human beings can be saved through other religions, and it is not necessary for salvation to confess openly Jesus as Christ and Saviour. But it causes me to wonder how Knitter can explain to our satisfaction the reality of Jesus as the "full and real symbol" of salvation for the world, and the Sacraments of the Church as true instruments of salvation? Are these Sacraments still valid and efficacious means for salvation? Indeed, are they of any necessity at all?

Christological Questions

Knitter also raises certain questions pertaining to christology. He argues that Jesus' uniqueness, universal and indispensable as it is, can be complemented, enhanced, yes, "fulfilled in other unique revealers." In calling the uniqueness of Jesus a "complementary uniqueness", he seems to be saying that Jesus Himself is relative, and His uniqueness is also relative. However, Jesus is proclaimed in the Scriptures as the Christ and the Christ is God. I would like to know more about Knitter's interpretation of this expression of biblical faith.

The Kingdom of God and Human Well-being

When addressing the concept of the Kingdom of God, Knitter is correct when he makes a distinction between the Kingdom and the Church, for the Church is always in service to the Kingdom. He is also correct in pointing out that while the Kingdom of God "must include or strive for" the well-being of humanity, it cannot "be reduced" to humanity's well-being in this world only. But I do get the impression from reading his article that the Kingdom of God is so tightly bound up in earthly well-being that Knitter leaves little room for entertaining any other aspects of the Kingdom. If he had given more attention to developing these other dimensions of the Kingdom, while continuing to elaborate on the dimension of

earthly well-being, he would, I feel have avoided some unfortunate and unnecessary misunderstandings on the part of his readers.

The Kingdom of God in Parables and Metaphors

The Kingdom of God is described in the Scriptures through a great number and variety of parables and metaphors. Such parables as the mustard seed and the leaven indicate its power and growth; the parable of the great banquet points to how the Kingdom is all inclusive. In the banquet parable God, the gracious host, invites people of every tribe and nation, without class distinction or any other form of discrimination. All are to share equally in the banquet. But people must respond to the divine invitation. This human response always implies both a personal and social dimension. It calls for personal conversion and social participation. Those who respond positively to God's invitation are expected also to cooperate with others in building a better world today and for the future. Does Knitter's explanation of the Kingdom maintain enough balance between the Kingdom as gift from above (the divine invitation) and the actualization of the Kingdom through human efforts here below (the human response)? It seems to me that both of these elements are clearly revealed in the banquet parable. However, there can be no argument with Knitter when he speaks of the well-being of humanity in this world as included in Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom. For Jesus, this was certainly to be one of the consequences of the loving presence of God in the world.

Meaning of Conversion

Finally, Knitter is correct in pointing out that "it is necessary to clarify and expand the traditional notion of conversion." The concept of conversion, however, must be measured not only in its width but also in its depth, which is to say, not only does the concept stand in need of expansion but also of deepening. Conversion also includes both an internal and an external aspect. A spiritual, i.e., internal conversion--a conversion of the heart--is most important for the individual, but sometimes it can be such a profound and genuine experience, so radical and total, so as to demand not merely a confirmation of one's own present identity, but also a change in one's external identity. I wonder if when the Church speaks of evangelization it is not in fact aiming at this total and radical conversion, which is both internal and external.