

**Tom Fox, NCR editor, interviews Paul F. Knitter about his Catholic faith and the Buddhist thought and practice that have entered into his thinking and life as he has worked in the field of interreligious dialogue.**

**Knitter, author of *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, is Paul Tillich Professor of Theology, World Religions and Culture at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He is a leading advocate of globally responsible interreligious dialogue and author of more than 10 books on the subject. In this, his newest book, he writes very personally, sharing his struggles with his Christian faith while relating how his study of Buddhism -- and his own Zen practice -- has helped him through this struggle.**

### **Double belonging: Buddhism and Christian faith**

#### **Fox: Do you consider yourself to be a Christian?**

*Knitter.* Oh, I definitely do. I was born a Catholic in Chicago, grew up and entered the seminary. I consider myself to be a Christian, especially in its Roman Catholic form.

#### **Would you say that you're a Buddhist Catholic or a Catholic Buddhist?**

Definitely the noun is Catholic or Christian; the adjective is Buddhist. My primary identity is Christian.

#### **As a Catholic theologian, what is your relationship officially with the church?**

I think I'm a pretty reputable member of the Catholic Theological Society of America. I'm a practicing Catholic. My relationship with the church is, as far as I can judge, good.

To be straightforward and honest, I have received some general admonitions from Pope Benedict when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. In a book on dealing with other religions, he mentioned me as one of the people who represent a tendency that could easily slip into relativism. I'm working in an area that is quite controversial, namely how Christianity can understand itself in the light of other religions.

#### **In your book you speak of "double belonging." Just what does that mean?**

Double belonging is being talked about more and more now, both in the theological academy and in the area of Christian spirituality. I think it's the term that is used when more and more people are finding that they can be genuinely nourished by more than one religious tradition, by more than their home tradition or their native tradition.

#### **How widespread is double belonging?**

I wouldn't say it is for general consumption, but in areas of Europe and North America, I think that the number of people who are serious about practicing their faith are finding that some degree of double belonging is becoming more and more a part of their lives.

#### **Why such a broad interest today in Buddhism among Christians?**

There's no one answer. In the book, I quote a friend of mine, Fr. Michael O'Halloran, who is formerly a Carthusian monk and now a priest here in the New York archdiocese. He is also a Zen teacher. Michael once told me that Christianity is long on content but short on method and technique. So I think Buddhism is providing Christians with practices, with techniques, by which they can enter more experientially into the content of what they believe.

#### **What are the needs among Christian believers that you think Buddhism is addressing?**

I hope I'm not generalizing here too much, but I think a lot of it has to do with the dissatisfaction that many of us Christians feel with a God who is all out there, a God who is totally other than I, the God who stands outside of me and confronts me. I think we're searching for ways of realizing the mystery of the divine of God in a way in which it is more a part of our very selves.

I think Christians are searching more for a way of experiencing and understanding God in a unitive way, or what I say in the book is a “non-dual way,” where God becomes a reality that is certainly different than I am, but is part of my very being.

**Buddhism does not affirm the existence of God. It has been described as an “atheistic” religion. How can it have significance for a theistic religion like Christianity?**

We’ve got to be really careful with how we use the term “atheistic.” Clearly Buddhism does not affirm the existence of a personal God, but I think the better term would be “non-theistic” rather than “atheistic.” It’s not denying God, but if I may put it this way, the Buddha and so much of Buddhism is much more concerned with experiencing ultimate reality rather than defining and naming it.

When you ask a Buddha, “What is it that you are part of when you are enlightened, or when you experience nirvana?” one of the terms or images that are used is sunyata, which means emptiness. That’s not a very good translation but it’s the word they use to identify that ultimate reality is not an entity, a being, but rather it is what they call the interconnectedness of everything. Or as the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh uses the term for ultimate reality, “interbeing.”

Buddhism has helped me to rediscover, to deepen what it means when, in the New Testament - - maybe it’s the only definition of God that we find in the New Testament -- when it says that “God is love.”

I think what Buddhism means by “interbeing” helps me appropriate what in our Christian terminology we mean when we say divine reality is love, and then that sets the stage for me -- and I think for many Christians -- for reappropriating one of our central symbols for God, spirit. So for me now when I say the word God, what I image, what I feel, thanks to Buddhism, is the interconnecting spirit -- this ever-present spirit, this ever-present, interconnecting energy that is not a person, but is very personal, that this is the mystery that surrounds me, that contains me, and which I am in contact with in the Eucharist, in liturgies, and especially in meditation.

**Buddha was enlightened; Jesus was divine. That’s a big difference, isn’t it?**

Yes. It’s a big difference. When one looks at, first of all, the language that we Christians use to talk about the mystery of Jesus the Christ, perhaps the two primary words that we use -- or doctrines that we attest to -- are Jesus is Son of God and Jesus is Savior. Now those two terms, Son of God, Savior, are beliefs. These expressions are our attempt to put into words what is the mystery of God.

All of our words are our efforts to try to say in words what can never be fully said in words. In other words, we’re using symbols, we’re using metaphors, we’re using analogies. This goes straight back to St. Thomas Aquinas and to my teacher, Karl Rahner. All of our language is symbolic.

**So when the Catholics say that Jesus came to save us, we are not saying just that?**

We’re saying something that is very true, something that tries to express what we have experienced, but we can never capture the full reality of it in those words. Again, to use the Buddhist image that is often used, our words are like fingers pointing to the moon -- not the moon itself. Words can never be fully identified with the reality that they are indicating.

**You write that Catholics need an eighth sacrament. Explain that.**

This has been perhaps one of the key elements that I and many others have learned from Buddhism: the importance of silence. It is in some form of meditation we recognize that the mystery of God is something that cannot be appropriated simply by thought.

This fits into our Catholic sacramental theology. We say that every sacrament contains matter and form. So the matter in the sacrament of silence is our breath, being aware of our breath, being one with our breath, doing nothing else but breathing.

**A number of times in the book, you quote Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk. You write, echoing Nhat Hanh, that in order to make peace, we have to be peace. Reversing**

**Pope Paul VI's statement, you state that if we want justice, we have to seek peace. Is that right?**

My wife and I spent much of the '80s and the '90s working in El Salvador for peace during the war. So we have been activists throughout our lives -- peace activists, social activists. But when I look back at that activism I am aware of how so often our actions were filled with a certain verbal violence.

We had to resist, we had to confront the evil structures. And there are evil structures, but something was missing for me. What was missing was captured in an experience I had back in 1986 or '87 when I did a Zen retreat with Roshi Bernie Glassman.

I said to him during this retreat that we were going down to El Salvador to try to do something to stop the terrible death squads. He said: "Right, you have to stop the death squads, but you also have to meditate because you will never stop the death squads until you realize your oneness with them."

That is the experience that Buddhism calls us to, this deep, personal experience of our interconnectedness with all beings, even those whom we have to oppose as oppressors, as perpetrators of evil. We are one with them. This is what Thich Nhat Hanh means when he says that we have to be peace within ourselves. We have to overcome our egos and realize our connectedness with all beings.

You've written, "For Buddhists, selfishness is not so much sinful as it is stupid." Explain.

This is an aspect, I think, that is especially appreciated, or needed, by many Christians. For Buddhism, and I would want to say for Catholicism as well, our fundamental nature is good. Our fundamental nature is the Buddha nature, namely we are part of the interconnected whole, called to be aware of it, and to act out of compassion.

But our problem is that we are not aware of this. Because we're not aware of this, because we think we are separate individuals rather than part of the interconnected whole, we think we have to protect ourselves. We think we have to gain things in order to establish our identity and, therefore, we act selfishly. We're acting selfishly, not because we are fallen, not because we are evil in our natures, but because we are ignorant.

**You've written that in the future, Christians will be mystics or they will not be anything at all. What do you mean?**

That is a loose quotation from my teacher, Karl Rahner. What he was getting at is this: There are so many challenges and so many difficulties that we face that unless our identities are based on our own personal experience of God, as part of them, of Christ, as their very being, they are not going to be able to find the strength and the stamina and the wisdom to hang in there.

**You've written that Buddhism has helped you peer into the mystery beyond death. What about death and life afterwards?**

That was perhaps, for me, the most helpful, but maybe the most controversial part of my book. Buddhism tells us that here in this life our true identity, our true happiness, is to move beyond our individuality. I think that resonates with the word, "Unless a grain of wheat genuinely falls into the ground and dies, it will not bear fruit." Buddhism has led me to look more deeply into what that passage means or what Jesus means when he said, "You will not find yourself unless you lose yourself."

This has brought me to recognize something that for me seems to be more satisfying, namely that the life that awaits me after I die is going to be an existence that is going to be beyond my individual existence as Paul Knitter. I will live on, but I will not live on probably as Paul Knitter. In other words, our life in the future life after death is a form of existence that is beyond individuality. That doesn't mean we're annihilated; that doesn't mean we don't exist, but we will exist in a totally transformed, trans-individual existence.

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**Bishop Kevin Dowling, Rustenburg, criticizes the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. This article is by James Roberts.**

***Church in the World***

Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg has launched a scathing attack on the leadership of the Church and the manner in which it exercises its power.

“I think the moral authority of the Church’s leadership today has never been weaker,” he said in an address to Catholic laity in Cape Town last month. “It is important in my view that church leadership, instead of giving an impression of its power, privilege and prestige, should rather be experienced as a humble, searching ministry together with its people.”

Bishop Dowling argued that Catholic Social Teaching provided the way forward for the Church. “Here we have very relevant principles and guidelines to engage with complex social, economic, cultural and political realities, especially as these affect the poorest and most vulnerable members of societies everywhere,” he said. “These principles should enable us, as Church, to critique constructively all socio-political-economic systems and policies – especially [as they affect] the poorest and most vulnerable in society.”

However, the bishop insisted that if the Church is ready to criticise governments and other bodies on the basis of democratic principles, then it must be prepared to introduce such principles into its own governance.

“When thinking people of all persuasions look at church leadership, they raise questions about, for example, real participation of the membership in its governance and how in fact church leadership is to be held accountable, and to whom,” Bishop Dowling said. “If the Church and its leadership profess to follow the values of the Gospel and the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, then its internal life, its methods of governing and its use of authority will be scrutinised on the basis of what we profess.”

Bishop Dowling gave the example of the principle of subsidiarity – according to which decision-making is devolved to the lowest appropriate level – as one that was highly relevant to current needs. “However, I think that we have a leadership in the Church which undermines the very notion of subsidiarity; where the minutiae of church life and praxis ‘at the lower level’ are subject to examination and authentication being given by the ‘higher level’, in fact the highest level,” he said.

He then went on to criticise what he called the “mystique” surrounding the figure of the Pope. “There is more than a perception, because of this mystique, that unquestioning obedience by the faithful to the Pope is required and is a sign of the ethos and fidelity of a true Catholic,” he said. For these reasons, he argued, it has become more and more difficult for the College of Bishops as a whole, or in a particular territory, to exercise their “theologically based servant leadership”.

The church leadership should recognise and empower decision-making at the appropriate levels in the local Church, he concluded, so that the whole Church could be enriched through “a diversity which truly integrates socio-cultural values and insights into a living and developing faith”.

This is not the first time that Bishop Dowling has chosen to confront the church hierarchy. On the vexed issue of using condoms to prevent the spread of Aids in Africa, Bishop Dowling has said that when people choose not to follow church teachings forbidding sex outside marriage “they should use a condom in order to prevent the transmission of potential death to another”. On his way to Africa last year, on the papal plane, Pope Benedict XVI told reporters: “You can’t

resolve [the HIV/Aids crisis] with the distribution of condoms. On the contrary, it increases the problem”, by promoting promiscuity.

Neither the Vatican nor the South African bishops had responded to Bishop Dowling’s remarks when The Tablet went to press.

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**Father Tom Doyle writes on “The Vatican’s new norms” for the NCR. Doyle is a priest, canon lawyer, addictions therapist and long-time supporter of justice and compassion for clergy sex abuse victims. I am sure that the Church is much safer now that the dangerous supporters of women’s ordination have been condemned.**

The latest attempt by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to stem the continuous onslaught of revelations of sex abuse and cover-up in Europe and elsewhere has some good and some bad aspects.

The first revision is relatively radical: the CDF now has the right to judge members of the ruling class (cardinals, bishops, and papal legates). Previously the Code reserved all cases involving accusations of violation of the church's criminal laws by bishops and above to the Pope. This change is a response to the constant criticism of the practice of giving bishops accused of sex abuse a free pass. The fact is that the popes could have disciplined errant bishops all along but instead chose to hide behind the myth that they are some sort of sacred nobility.

The norms list several canonical crimes that are subject to the CDF. There is a serious gap in this list: failure to properly and responsibly respond to report of sex abuse by clerics. This would obviously nail the majority of U.S. bishops, both retired and active. This crime is just as devastating as the sex abuse itself because it obviously enables continued rape and molestation of innocent children and adults. The bishops' systemic practice of cover-up and dishonesty, which should be a crime, is also a gross insult to all lay persons and not just victims and their families. Why? Because it reveals a clear disdain for the non-ordained and a concept of justice that is clearly subjective and therefore self-destructive.

One of the better points which is probably lost on those not savvy to canon law-speak is number 4, the faculty to sanate the acts in cases with procedural errors from lower tribunals. This means that when a case from a diocesan tribunal undergoes the mandatory review at the CDF, procedural errors that did not violate the right of defense will be retroactively corrected. This is important because it potentially eliminates the practice of vacating cases that had procedural errors.

Raising the statute of limitations to 20 years after majority is only a slight improvement but is still very short of what should have been done. The defenders of the church repeatedly try to mitigate the serious nature of most of the victims coming forward, referring to them as "old cases." This is a meaningless categorization but worse, it is a cruel and insensitive label for those who were molested and abused years ago. The constant pain from physical, emotional and spiritual abuse does not disappear over time. It remains and in most cases gets worse. Most child victims hold back for 30 years before finding the courage to take the risk of disclosing their abuse. They are imprisoned and paralyzed by guilt, shame, fear and an unwillingness to re-open the deep wounds. Clergy victims suffer from an added layer of fear imposed by the church itself through its heretical teaching that clerics are somehow superior to lay people and so sacred that they are entitled to exemption from accountability. The better revision would have

been to extend the period to 40 years past majority. The best revision would have been total elimination of the statute. The whining of the lawyers and others that this makes trying cases difficult is nonsense. The statute is actually a presumption in favor of the criminal abuser. The statute of limitations should not evaluate evidence. That's the tribunal's job.

The cloak of secrecy hasn't been removed. Fr. Lombardi claims that secrecy is maintained "in order to safeguard the dignity of all the people involved." This of course, is a lame excuse for the Vatican's obsession with image. Historically totalitarian regimes dispense their peculiar version of justice behind closed doors. In the church's case, closed hearings would be acceptable but as it stands now, tribunal cases in the U.S. are generally buried so deep that even the victims are stonewalled about the case. If Fr. Lombardi's rationale reflects official policy then it seems that everybody's dignity is respected except that of the victims.

The eighth revision is a potential for disaster. This one gives the local bishops the power to proceed judicially against people whom they suspect of heresy, apostasy or schism. The potential for misuse of this norm and the consequent denial of due process and the right of free expression to people the bishops decide don't think like them is terrifying.

The official revisions to the 2001 document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith are an improvement even though they are far too late in coming and lacking in some significant provisions.

Fr. Lombardi's accompanying explanation is remarkable for one reason only: he openly admits that public outcry, which obviously includes secular media coverage, actually had an impact on the pope and other Vatican officials. This is remarkable in light of the usual practice of either accusing the media of being anti-Catholic any time they criticized the church or dismissing them outright as being irrelevant. The problem with his admission is that the media and the public should have been listened to 25 years ago instead of ignored.

The main problem with the Vatican's latest attempt at damage control is that they continue to deny the fundamental issue: the nature of the clericalized monarchical structure of the institutional church and its role in the systematic dismantling of the reality of church as People of God.

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**And, from *The New York Times*, "Rome Fiddles, We Burn," by Maureen Dowd. She concludes with the profound insight that those who have been violated by clerical abuse are the Christ.**

If the Vatican is trying to restore the impression that its moral sense is intact, issuing a document that equates pedophilia with the ordination of women doesn't really do that.

The Catholic Church continued to heap insult upon injury when it revealed its long-awaited new rules on clergy sex abuse, rules that the Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said signaled a commitment to grasp the nettle with "rigor and transparency."

The church still believes in its own intrinsic holiness despite all evidence to the contrary. It thinks it's making huge concessions on the unstoppable abuse scandal when it's taking baby steps.

The casuistic document did not issue a zero-tolerance policy to defrock priests after they are found guilty of pedophilia; it did not order bishops to report every instance of abuse to the police; it did not set up sanctions on bishops who sweep abuse under the rectory rug; it did not eliminate the statute of limitations for abused children; it did not tell bishops to stop lobbying legislatures to prevent child-abuse laws from being toughened.

There is no moral awakening here. The cruelty and indecency of child abuse once more inspires tactical contrition. All the penitence of the church is grudging and reactive. Church leaders are merely as penitent as they need to be to protect the institution.

Can you imagine such a scene in the confessional?

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. I am as sorry as my job or school requires me to be.”  
“But my daughter, that is not true penitence. That’s situational penitence.”

After the Belgian police bravely conducted raids on the church hierarchy, inspired in part by the horrifying case of a boy molested for years by his uncle, the bishop of Bruges, a case that the church ignored and covered up for 25 years, the pope did not applaud the more aggressive tack. He condemned it.

In a remarkable Times story recently, Laurie Goodstein and David Halbfinger debunked the spin that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had been one of the more alert officials on the issue of sexual abuse:

“The future pope, it is now clear, was also part of a culture of nonresponsibility, denial, legalistic foot-dragging and outright obstruction. More than any top Vatican official other than John Paul, it was Cardinal Ratzinger who might have taken decisive action in the 1990s to prevent the scandal from metastasizing in country after country, growing to such proportions that it now threatens to consume his own papacy.”

If Roman Polanski were a priest, he’d still be working here.

Stupefyingly, the new Vatican document also links raping children with ordaining women as priests, deeming both “*graviora delicta*,” or grave offenses. Clerics who attempt to ordain women can now be defrocked.

On Beliefnet, Mark Silk, a professor of religion at Connecticut’s Trinity College, suggested that the stronger threat against women’s ordination is not “a maladroit add-on” but the medieval Vatican’s “main business.”

After the Vatican launched two inquisitions of American nuns, it didn’t seem possible that the archconservative Il Papa and his paternalistic redoubt could get more unenlightened, but they have somehow managed it.

Letting women be priests — which should be seen as a way to help cleanse the church and move it beyond its infantilized and defensive state — is now on the list of awful sins right next to pedophilia, heresy, apostasy and schism.

Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, the chairman of the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, asserted, “The Catholic Church, through its long

and constant teaching, holds that ordination has been, from the beginning, reserved to men, a fact which cannot be changed despite changing times.”

But if it was reserved to celibate men centuries ago simply as a way for the church to keep land, why can't it be changed? If a society makes strides in not subordinating women, why can't the church reflect that? If men prove that all-male hierarchies can get shamefully warped, why can't they embrace the normality of equality? The Vatican's insistence on male prerogative is misogynistic poppycock — enhancing American Catholics' disenchantment with Rome.

In *The New Republic*, Garry Wills wrote about his struggle to come to terms with the sins of his church: Jesus “is the one who said, ‘Whatever you did to any of my brothers, even the lowliest, you did to me.’ That means that the priests abusing the vulnerable young were doing that to Jesus, raping Jesus. Any clerical functionary who shows more sympathy for the predator priests than for their victims instantly disqualified himself as a follower of Jesus. The cardinals said they must care for their own, going to jail if necessary to protect a priest. We say the same thing, but the ‘our own’ we care for are the victimized, the poor, the violated. They are Jesus.”

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