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“We Work Together for Our Common Well-being”: A Critique of Paul F. Knitter’s Soteriocentrism

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Abstract

The issue of interfaith dialogue has been the preoccupation of the church from time immemorial. This article therefore examines an a soteriocentrism of Paul F. Knitter. This work explores the concept of soteriocentrism and critiques it in the light of Jacque Dupuis’s theocentric model. It serves to show that all the above approaches are not sufficient in each other but they all serves a purpose of complementarily.

Key Words: Soteriocentrism, theocentricism, interfaith dialogue

1.0 Introduction

To reduce the tension between mission and dialogue, in contrast to Dupuis, who makes an *a priori* claim for the superiority of Christianity over other religions, Knitter takes a soteriocentric or liberation theology approach by focusing on human suffering and the destruction of the earth. He believes that if a religion has nothing to say about the reality of suffering and oppression in this world, it has lost its relevance to life in the here-and-now. For him, suffering and the well-being of the earth provide common ground and a viable starting point for interreligious dialogue. His soteriocentric, Kingdom-centred, dialogical approach from below is practical and respectful of the faith of others. This chapter will examine Knitter’s approach, offer a critique of it, and reflect on its relevance to the context of Asia.

2.1 Knitter’s Shift to the Soteriocentric Model

Traditional christology with its insistence on the finality and normativity of Christ just does not fit with what is being experienced in the arena of religious pluralism. Knitter used to say in 1985 with his book *No Other Name?* that we are in the midst of an evolution from christocentrism to theocentrism, and that the theocentric model holds the greatest promise for the future of interreligious dialogue.¹ However, his pluralist turn took on a new twist, because one

¹ Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985), 166-167.

interpretation of God or Ultimate Reality as a common ground is only one among many. He moved on in an article entitled "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions" in 1987,² and he further concretized his view in his *One Earth Many Religions* in 1995.³ Here he explored the connection between liberation theology and the theology of religions, which for him is a better option for promoting dialogue. The connection affected his way of doing theology to the point that he could no longer do a theology of religions unless it somehow connects with a theology of liberation.⁴ For him, the voices of the suffering Other, both humans⁵ and the Earth,⁶ and the voices of the religious Other belong together. The voices of the suffering other have informed and made more comprehensible the voices of the religious other in that together they deepen their understanding of the hard reality of suffering, and attempt collaboratively to respond to the needs of the suffering. Moreover, they need each other, and one without the other is ineffective. Knitter is considered the principal figure to bring these two seemingly disparate streams of theological construction together. Theocentrism seeks common ground in the transcendent other, a religious *object* beyond human subjects, but soteriocentrism seeks common ground in human need, the religious *subjects*. Knitter's new model of salvation has moved to "what in Christian symbols might be called 'Kingdom-centrism' or more universally 'soteriocentrism'."⁷ According to Knitter, this model avoids imposing Western notions of God on other religions, and is less prone to ideological abuse. For Knitter, "the absolute that all else must serve and clarify, is not the Church or Christ or even God – but rather, the Kingdom and its justice."⁸ Knitter's current view of a theology of religion is rooted in a dialogical soteriocentric model. When religious persons together listen to the voices of the suffering and the oppressed, when they attempt together to respond to those needs, Knitter finds that they are able to trust each other, and to feel the

² Paul F. Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1987).

³ Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995).

⁴ Knitter's experience of the suffering poor in El Salvador and Nicaragua is the main catalyst in his change from theocentrism to soteriocentrism. See Knitter's account of his theological and dialogical odyssey in Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 1-22, or Paul F. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 1-22.

⁵ Knitter's approach gets its basic idea from Edward Schillebeeckx's paradigm shift from the narrow ecclesiocentrism of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church there is no salvation) to the broader *extra mundum nulla salus* (outside the world there is no salvation). See Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 113.

Schillebeeckx describes a worldly process in which everyone on this Earth experiences suffering as part of human existence which he calls a pre-religious experience, and thus is a basic experience accessible to all human beings.

See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 5.

⁶ Knitter suggests that the contemporary common scientific understanding of the Earth – how it originates and functions – acting as an ethical story rather than a creation story, can serve as a basis for interreligious dialogue, because of its praxis for the care of our common habitat, and this includes naturally a preferential option for the victimized. See Paul F. Knitter, "A Common Creation Story? Interreligious Dialogue and Ecology," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 37/3-4 (Summer-Fall 2000): 285-300. However, D'Costa criticizes Knitter saying that the danger of divinizing the Earth coupled with claiming the Earth's unitary and authoritative voice is always at the margins of his project. Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 33.

⁷ Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 187.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 190. Another term that Knitter uses is "soteriocentric core." See Paul F. Knitter, "A Liberation-Centered Dialogue Among Religions," *Drew Gateway* 58/1 (1988): 26, and Paul F. Knitter, "Interreligious Dialogue: What? Why? How?" in *Death or Dialogue: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue*, eds., Leonard Swidler et al (London: SCM, 1990), 33. Summary of the ideas of Knitter's Liberation Theology of Religions can be found in James L. Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1999), 55-78; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 309-317; S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 71-79.

truth and the power in each other's strangeness.⁹ He says, "The suffering Other becomes mediator, as it were, or conduit of trust and comprehension, between differing religious worlds."¹⁰ The hinge-pin of Knitter's soteriocentric model for dialogue is: we begin not with conversations about doctrine or ritual, nor even with prayer or meditation, rather we begin with some form of liberative praxis together.¹¹ Knitter says that the preferential option for the oppressed is not an absolute condition for interreligious dialogue, rather it is to be offered or suggested as an invitation to a more authentic and effective dialogue. He suspects that many religions will want to take up this as a starting point, because one has to start somewhere.¹² Moreover, for all religious persons, this truth is appealing because it is practical and transformative.

A theology of religions has to realize that as far as a religion does not address, as a primary concern, the poverty and oppression that infest our world, it is not an authentic religion.¹³ Those religions that deny any relationship between the transformation of this world and personal salvation or enlightenment, that call upon their followers to abandon all concern for this world and concentrate on the next do not qualify for this soteriocentric kind of dialogue. The soteriocentric approach is where ethical issues and ethical responsibility make it possible to recognize that the needs and sufferings afflicting humanity and the earth are a common concern for persons of all traditions,¹⁴ and so call for interreligious dialogue.¹⁵ Knitter favours the soteriocentric bridge, because he thinks that a globally responsible dialogue is most effective for the religions to understand each other and work together. For this bridge, the common ground is reached not by looking within or beneath the various religious traditions, but beyond and around the religions for that which is identifiable, urgent, pressing, and faces them all: the spectre and anguish of suffering in poverty, victimization, violence, patriarchy, and ecology brought about by human choices.¹⁶ This common ground is established mutually being discovered within conversation itself by all partners, not beforehand by any one. When some common ground is discovered, it is important to keep in mind that it will be a terrain on which we can build, not concrete structures, only tents. Knitter admits that it will be "shaky" common ground, which will shift and reform as the conversation stumbles on, because his approach to dialogue and truth is pragmatic.¹⁷ For Knitter, both human and ecological suffering are common starting points or contexts for conversation that call for a common response. It is not something within the different traditions shared by all; it is something outside confronting them all.¹⁸ A global responsibility for *soteria*,¹⁹ that is, for the well-being of the threatened Earth and all its inhabitants can provide the

⁹ Schillebeeckx is the one who first thought of the "ecumene of world religions and the ecumene of humankind" which include all, including agnostics and atheists, and he calls this combination "the ecumene of suffering humankind." Schillebeeckx, 189.

¹⁰ Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 13.

¹¹ See Knitter, "Interreligious Dialogue," 34.

¹² See Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 187-188.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁴ Knitter lists the forms of oppression and needed liberation that can gather all religions into a new community of concern and conversation: physical suffering, socio-economic oppression, nuclear oppression, and ecological disaster. See Knitter, "Interreligious Dialogue," 27-30.

¹⁵ Knitter also speaks of "pastoral moves" where theologians feel the need to explore the pluralist approach to other faiths without pressure from the academic circle. Therefore, there are pastoral reasons for dialogue. Furthermore, he also speaks of "scriptural moves" where the Bible figures among the incentives and paths for a pluralistic theology of religions. It is a new turn of the hermeneutical circle to provide new opportunities to question and be questioned by God's Word. See Paul F. Knitter, "The Pluralist Move and Its Critics," *Drew Gateway* 58/1 (1988): 8-10.

¹⁶ See Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 56-67.

¹⁷ Knitter, "Common Ground or Common Response?" 116.

¹⁸ Paul F. Knitter, "Making Sense of the Many," *Religious Studies Review* 15/3 (July 1989): 207.

¹⁹ A Greek word that encapsulates the concern for human and ecological well-being (salvation). Knitter's *soteria* is similar to Hans Kung's *humanum*, the truly human, human values and dignity, for the ground and criterion for

framework, content, and motivation for dialogue among religions that would be able to navigate between the issue of one universal absolute truth claim, and the issue of many totally diverse truths. Also, this concern will naturally and automatically create solidarity that invites to interaction and conversation among the religions.²⁰ Knitter also speaks of interfaith ethic²¹ as common ground for dialogue.

2.2 The Kingdom of God and Liberation Theology

Perhaps the deepest convergence that links liberation theology with a Christian theology of religions is a shared passion for the widest scope of the Kingdom of God. Knitter believes that the symbol of the Kingdom of God is “clear enough to ‘point to’ a common destination for all religions, but also broad enough to affirm the really different, distinctive, and universally urgent ways in which the various communities contribute to this common goal of greater well-being of humans and all sentient beings.”²² While recognizing that the terms “Kingdom” and “God” are derived from his own Christian tradition, Knitter is confident that the reality denoted by the Kingdom is not an exclusive Christian possession. The understanding is that everyone of deep religious faith can work together for the well-being of all in the here-and-now, regardless of their notion of God. Moreover, we must also include those who do not believe in God, namely atheists and agnostics. Anyway, the Kingdom is present in the world wherever the values of the Kingdom are lived and promoted. In other words, the Kingdom is characterized by justice and peace in both personal relations and social and economic structures. What is the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the Church? Dupuis²³ points out that in the documents of Vatican II, the Reign of God is still identified with the Church.²⁴ Only with *Redemptoris Missio* does the notion of the Reign as larger than the Church begin to emerge, but even though distinct from each other, the Reign cannot be detached from the Church (*RM* 18). However, the majority of theologians argue that from Vatican II onwards, the notion of the Church as not equal to the Kingdom had already begun. The Church is considered the beginning of the Kingdom, or “the initial budding forth of that Kingdom”, and “strains toward the completed Kingdom” (*LG* 5). The Reign is an eschatological reality as well; the Reign is *already* established in this world, but it is also *not-yet*, because it has yet to reach its eschatological fullness. Moreover, the Church is a means or sacrament of the Kingdom.

In the Christocentric model, while the Church has always been the servant of the Reign of God, its servant role has been understood as both necessary for that Reign to really take shape in the world and unique among all the other possible servants of the Reign. Outside the Church, the Reign is “an inchoate reality, which needs to find completion through being related to the Kingdom of Christ already present in the Church yet realized fully only in the world to come” (*DP* 35). This notion that all manifestations of the Reign outside the Church are ordered toward the Church clearly indicates that this model is a Fulfillment Model. However, the Reign of God is more important and extensive

religious conversation, to which Knitter adds the *cosmicum*, the ecological. See Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 98-99.

²⁰ Ibid., 79.

²¹ See Paul F. Knitter, “Responsibilities for the Future: Toward an Interfaith Ethic,” in *Pluralism and the Religions: The Theological and Political Dimensions*, ed., John D’Arcy May (London: Cassell, 1998), 75-89.

²² Paul F. Knitter, “Christian Theology in the Post-Modern Era,” *Pacifica* 18 (Oct 2005): 332.

²³ Ambrose Ih-Ren Mong presents the notion of the Kingdom and the Church based on Knitter and Dupuis in his article, “Crossing the Ethical-Practical Bridge: Paul F. Knitter’s Regnocentrism in Asian Perspectives,” *The Ecumenical Review* 63/2 (Jul 2011): 186-199.

²⁴ See Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 334-336.

than the Church. How is it possible for the servant to end up telling the master what to do and what is allowed? In the missiology of Kingdom-centred or regnocentric theology, the Church does not place herself at the centre, the Church is not placed at her own service, rather she is entirely oriented toward the Reign of God.

According to biblical scholars, the priority of the historical Jesus was preaching and realizing the Kingdom of God, not simply preaching God.²⁵ Knitter calls this “the canon within the canon” which deals with the primary concerns of Jesus.²⁶ Jesus was not ecclesiocentric, christocentric, or even theocentric, but regnocentric. Jesus does not really define the Kingdom of God; he refers to it in parables and similes. It is common to acknowledge that the Kingdom in this world and in history began with Jesus Christ in his earthly life in his preaching. It was only later that the early Christians replaced preaching on the Reign of God with proclamation on the person of Christ. The proclaimer became the proclaimed, because the saving experience of Jesus was felt so strongly by individuals and the community that Jesus became an experience of revelation for them.²⁷ This is understandable, because the life-giving reality of the Kingdom was being experienced by the early community, and they felt that it was still made possible through the ever-living resurrected Christ. Yet, christocentrism was not meant to replace, but rather to enhance regnocentrism. To emphasize Jesus’ original proclamation of the coming Reign of God is to return to regnocentric theology. But we still hold on to the idea that the Reign of God began with Jesus. This is what Knitter calls soteriocentric christology in which liberationists can understand Jesus in the light of the Kingdom, not the other way round.²⁸ To understand our christological professions and titles of Jesus really mean to follow Jesus, and work for justice, peace, and love of the Kingdom as Jesus did.

Knitter’s suggestion is also for a dialogical christology in which dialogue with others is not merely an application of an *a priori* pre-formulated understanding of Christ, but dialogue with others is part of how we see Jesus and determine his meaning for us. In order for christology to be dialogical, it must be regnocentric where the focus of our picture of Jesus today should be the heart of his message: his commitment to announcing and giving shape to God’s Reign on earth.²⁹ A regnocentric focus is also consistent with christology from below, starting with what we can know of the original message and mission of Jesus, rather than with a christology from above, where we understand Jesus as the revealed Son of God, one person with two natures. A dialogical christology will also give certain priority to orthopraxis over orthodoxy.

The Church, following the example of Jesus, should foster the well-being of persons, to bring in the Kingdom of God, and change this world. To insist that the Kingdom, taking shape beyond the Church, has to be fulfilled in the Church is to impose the Church on, rather than adapt it to, what God is doing in the broader

²⁵ Liberation theologians, Jon Sobrino and Juan Segundo, and feminist theologian, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza are examples of theologians who make use of biblical studies to argue for a regnocentric Jesus. Jesus is called the Spirit-filled, self-emptying and dialogical prophet of the Kingdom of God. See Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, 117; Paul F. Knitter, “Mission and Dialogue,” *Missiology: An International Review* 33/2 (April 2005): 202ff.

²⁶ Paul F. Knitter, “A Liberation-Centered Theology of Religions,” *Drew Gateway* 58/1 (1988): 33-36.

²⁷ See Knitter, *No Other Name?* 173-177. Knitter also appends “the proclaimer becomes the proclaimed” to Buddha, because of his analysis of *mythistory*, where the process of mythicization of the historical founder concerns more with what was shown in him rather than in what happened in him. Paul F. Knitter, “Jesus-Buddha-Krishna: Still Present?” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 16/6 (Fall 1979): 667. In contrast, Phan calls Jesus the Enlightened One. See Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 128-136.

²⁸ See Knitter, “Interreligious Dialogue,” 38-42.

²⁹ Paul F. Knitter, “Catholics and Other Religions: Bridging the Gap Between Dialogue and Theology,” *Louvain Studies* 24 (1999): 343-344.

Reign. From a regnocentric perspective, Christians can look upon religious persons of other faiths as co-workers of the Reign, rather than assistants to be finally fulfilled in Christ and the Church. For Knitter, to avoid misunderstandings about the role of the Church, in order to promote the Reign, missionaries must do many things, like plant the seed of the Christian community, proclaim the Word, and dialogue with other faith communities. All these tasks are essential to the purpose of mission. But in insisting that they are essential, we recognize that they are subordinate to the primary goal of working for the Reign, and they never become ends in themselves.³⁰ It is helpful to recall here that for Dupuis, while the believers of other religions perceive God's call through their own traditions and respond to I in the sincere practice of their traditions, they become in all truth – even without being formally conscious of it – active members of the same Kingdom inaugurated by Christ.³¹ Therefore, we admit that the Church is one necessary means for realizing God's reign on earth, but the Church is not the only means. There can be, and this is most likely, that there are other very different and fulfilling ways of realizing the Reign of God.

In reflecting on the Reign of God, it is also helpful to recall Dupuis' trinitarian approach to God and the divine mission. If in the past the Christian understanding of the Kingdom of God and God's mission was based almost exclusively on the mission of the second person of the Trinity, the Word, in a regnocentric approach to other religions, this approach now needs to be expanded and balanced by taking into consideration the mission of the third person, the Spirit. If it is true that Christians cannot make sense of God's mission without Jesus the incarnate Word, neither can they really understand God's mission without the Spirit. If we recognize the Spirit as "the Spirit of Christ", we must also recognize the Spirit as genuinely different from the Word, as the Spirit who fills and renews the face of the earth, who has been at work beyond the Church before the incarnation of Christ. Put differently, the Kingdom of God is alive and active in the world through both the Word incarnate in Jesus and the Spirit filling the earth. Both are involved in building the Kingdom, but in different ways. God has two hands, not one. The Spirit is not subordinate to the Word. For Knitter, when a trinitarian theology is applied to missiology and a theology of religions, one can admit that what the Spirit may be revealing beyond the Church, in other religions, can be different from what the incarnate Word has revealed to the Church. This admission is conducive to interreligious dialogue.³² In a Kingdom-centred understanding of evangelization, can Christians be fired by the zeal to convert? Yes, they can, according to Knitter. Conversion remains a priority for everyone. But it is conversion to the Kingdom.³³ It is to accept the invitation to fashion human life and society according to the patterns of God's Reign. Thus to enable people to become members of the Kingdom of God is more important than to make them members of the Church.

John Fullenbach speaks of the Kingdom as gift and task at the same time.³⁴ The Kingdom as gracious gift from God is obvious, especially from the parables of Jesus. Yet the Kingdom, once accepted, becomes one's task and demands all of one's abilities. The gift is accepted precisely by carrying out the task entailed in it, which consists of the necessary task of creating and building an authentic community. The building of the Kingdom is a task that must

³⁰Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, 110.

³¹Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 345.

³²Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, 113.

³³*Ibid.*, 121.

³⁴John Fullenbach, "Kingdom of God as Principle of Action in the Church," 20 November 1999. <http://sedosmission.org/old/eng/fulellenbach.htm> Accessed on April 19, 2012.

be done together, and according to Knitter, with the collaboration of the followers of different religions.³⁵ Furthermore, for Knitter, in the dialogue with other traditions, a regnocentric hermeneutic will provide us with more practical aid toward determining how far we can go in expanding or adjusting Christian belief and practice; for instance, evaluating new christologies emerging from India and Hinduism not primarily by their conformity with Chalcedon, but by their potential to transform society. Also, we will confront the difficult question of the uniqueness of Jesus by appealing not to verbal statements from the New Testament, but rather, to the “canon within the canon” which is the criterion of Kingdom-praxis.³⁶ The centring on the Kingdom of God rather than on Christ bears fruits in two fields: in the development of a theology of religions and in the theology of liberation.³⁷ In the theology of religions, the Kingdom of God furnishes theologians of religions with a broader perspective for entering into dialogue with other religious traditions than the centrality of Christ. If the Kingdom is the goal, then the question is no longer how other religious traditions are placed in the context of Christ or linked to the Church, but rather how the Kingdom is concretely present in these religions. In liberation theology, one can see how work for justice and freedom for the oppressed in the world is intrinsically linked to the struggle to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, in the here-and-now. The work for justice and liberation both inside and outside the Church can now be connected with the wider Kingdom, because the ultimate goal of the establishment of the Kingdom is to transform all of reality.

The Kingdom is meant to have a worldly, fleshly, social, even political dimension. God's Kingdom is not simply something to be sought in the future. We are called to bring it about in the here-and-now. In the past, we may have been taught to accept the suffering, oppression and injustice of this life because in the next life, in God's Kingdom where our true home is, we would have our final reward and be set free of our afflictions. No, it is not so. The Church is not telling us to reject the vision of a final Kingdom, but to broaden it. By removing oppression, poverty, disease, and discrimination from the world, we are showing God's Kingdom and redemptive presence to be manifested in the here-and-now. When we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are praying that the human family and all beings be transformed into a more just and loving community now as well as in the world to come. But such structural change in the world of politics and economics will be short-lived (maybe not even possible in the first place) without internal structural change, that is, without change in the human heart and consciousness. For Knitter, the vision of God's kingdom to be realized here in this world is, in other words, radically socio-political and at the same time profoundly spiritual. It calls for a change of social structures based on a change of the human heart.³⁸

2.3. Critique of Knitter

³⁵ Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 13. Knitter also speaks of the religions as being part of the solution together, not separately, to the problem of violence instigated by religious creeds. See Paul F. Knitter, *UN Presentation*, 4 Oct 2007. <http://www.un.org/ga/president/62/issues/interreligiousintercultural/remarks.pdf> Accessed April 20, 2012. Following Robert Wright in his book *The Evolution of God*, Knitter contends that religions together with the nations are challenged to move from zero-sum (win-lose) to non-zero-sum (win-win) relationship where collaboration among religions must replace conflict. He uses the term “non-zero-sum Reign of God.” See Paul F. Knitter, “Christianity and the Religions: A Zero-Sum Game? Reclaiming the ‘Path Not Taken’ and the Legacy of Krister Stendahl,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46/1 (Winter 2011): 5-21.

³⁶ See Knitter, “A Liberation-Centered Theology of Religions,” 36.

³⁷ See Fuellenbach, “Kingdom of God as Principle of Action in the Church,” and also John Fuellenbach, *Church: Community for the Kingdom* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 82.

³⁸ Knitter, “Mission and Dialogue,” 201-202.

Theologians like Knitter are concerned that dialogue is impossible if every person makes an absolute claim of religious superiority,³⁹ for this would be a monologue, rather than dialogue.⁴⁰ No one should make an absolute claim, for all truth is truth for the person who believes it. While the intention of Knitter is no doubt conducive to promoting peace and harmony, this is a spurious harmony, according to Gavin D'Costa, because it takes no one seriously by discounting their absolute claims.⁴¹ This matter concerns relativism.⁴² Recognizing the paramount importance of social liberation for justice for all religions is Knitter's way to combat relativism. Knitter emphasizes a processive-relational view of truth,⁴³ while his critics espouse a classicist view of truth. For him, truth is neither a proposition nor a correspondence, but a relation; and this truth is discovered empirically, not through a correspondence or classicist method. Religious truth is a disposition that one enters into by means of religious statements and practices. The factuality of beliefs is secondary to the effects they have on those who hold them. Truth, when properly understood, is precisely about bringing people into right and liberative relationships based on justice.⁴⁴ From their ethical and soteriological fruits, Knitter claims, we shall be able to judge whether and how much other religious paths are salvific.⁴⁵ As James L. Fredericks puts it, by placing his money on the wellbeing of the poor and nonpersons as the central value for evaluating religions, Knitter is suggesting that the real difference that distinguishes religious believers are not theoretical or doctrinal, but ethical. Proceeding from a soteriocentric position, Knitter effectively advocates a suspension of the search for doctrinal unity in subservience to an ethical mandate, namely, the call to advance a liberation agenda. However, Paul R. Eddy asks on a purely philosophical level: How can one justifiably conclude that orthopraxy in general and the preferential option for the poor and oppressed in particular are the touchstone by which to measure all things? In other words, how from a pragmatic starting point can one declare something to be the right or good by which all is to be judged without an appeal to a source of orthodoxy?

³⁹ For Knitter's thought on the claim of religious superiority, see Paul F. Knitter, "My God is Bigger than your God! Time for Another Axial Shift in the History of Religions," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 17/1 (2007): 100-118.

⁴⁰ Knitter agrees with Charles Lindbeck that rather than we first have an experience of God, and then seek a language to express it, it is language that enables the experience, and determines just what the religious experience of God is; "No language, no God." See Paul F. Knitter, "Toward a Liberative Interreligious Dialogue," *Crosscurrents* 45/4 (Winter 1995): 453. Therefore, Knitter suggests that in order to penetrate the content of religious experience, not only must we learn and esteem our own religious language, we must also learn and value other religious languages; in other words, be a theologian of another tradition as well. See Paul F. Knitter, "The Vocation of An Interreligious Theologian: My Retrospective on Forty Years in Dialogue," *Horizons* 31/1 (2004): 139. Furthermore, even though we can certainly learn many languages, we can only speak one language at one given time. This means that when we speak about other religions, understanding and judging them, we are doing so in one particular religious language. Just as we cannot speak in a universal language, so we cannot be religious, or understand religion, in one universal religious language.

⁴¹ Gavin D'Costa, "Pluralist Arguments: Prominent Tendencies and Methods," in *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, eds., Karl Josef Becker, Ilaria Morali with the collaboration of Maurice Borrmans and Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 336.

⁴² Knitter describes relativism with an image: "If we cannot connect, if we cannot communicate and challenge each other, then each particular becomes its own absolute. What is true in my backyard is true for me but not for you; it is true because that's the way things are in my backyard." Knitter, "Christian Theology in the Post-Modern Era," 326.

⁴³ Knitter, *No Other Name?* 7-9.

⁴⁴ Concerning relationships, Knitter speaks of the voice of religious friends with shared aims, and the voice of religious activists cooperating with common concern for the oppressed and marginalized. Despite differences, interreligious friends can become interreligious activists. See Paul F. Knitter, "Is the Pluralist Model a Western Imposition?" in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism*, ed., Paul F. Knitter (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 38-42.

⁴⁵ Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," 193.

Moreover, Knitter's emphasis on ethics is reminiscent of Kant's Enlightenment ethics.⁴⁶

Since we cannot agree on age-old contested religious truths, we can be content with easier-to-establish universally held moral truths. But we know that action comes together with belief, which is the narrative that makes the action good. An action is not just good from its outcome (consequentialism and pragmatism), but is good in terms of its inherent and internal particular type of activity (Aristotelian virtue ethics). In other words, an action is good by itself, and is not judged good because the outcome of that action is good. For example, caring for another human person is not judged good based on the beneficial outcome of that care, but judged according to its inherent action flowing from human dignity. Regarding Knitter's soteriocentrism, Ratzinger asks, "Where do I find a just action if I cannot know what is just in an absolute way?" He further questions orthopraxis over orthodoxy, and criticizes Knitter on the way that "the new foundation

of religion comes about by following a pragmatic path with more ethical or political overtones," rather than following doctrines, based on "the complete, serene faith of the New Testament and of the church of all times."⁴⁷ Therefore, some sort of belief or faith narrative is a necessary basis for ethical propositions. Furthermore, Erik M. Clary, from an evangelical perspective, argues that through his mutualist lens, Knitter has come to see praxis not only as the verifier of religious truth, but also as its originator. As such, Knitter is dependent upon a circular model of truth that holds human experience as the measure of all things, and it is not just any experience, but specifically the experience of the modern religious intellectual that is advanced as the standard.⁴⁸

Moreover, Knitter, by demanding that no one enters into dialogue with a prepackaged final word, ironically imposes imperialist demands on the dialogue partner. Knitter is aware of this problem, but finds that imperialism on behalf of the poor and marginalized more acceptable than one which acts on behalf of correct doctrine. Such a view is allegedly more satisfactory because it does not impose its own views of God on other traditions, even if it does impose its soteriocentrism upon them. However, Knitter fails to account for the way in which a tradition shapes its understanding of what the human condition is, and what it ought to be, and what constitutes liberation. For one tradition, it can mean proper adherence to *jati* (caste); for another, it means obeying the most authoritative interpretation of *sharia* (Muslim law); for another, it might mean adhering to non-contraceptive forms of sexuality; and for another, it might mean opposing all of the above as contrary to liberative justice.⁴⁹ Hence, promoting human welfare is an unhelpful common denominator, as it specifies nothing in particular until each tradition addresses itself to what it means to be human, and what is meant by human well-being. In this sense, there is no way in which theory can be bypassed by praxis, they are always in mutual interaction.

Furthermore, apart from the philosophical problems, according to Eddy, what of the practical problems; for instance, can Knitter's liberative preferential option successfully function as common ground for the numerous religious worldviews? How will this concept serve as an orienting motif for the traditional Indian Hindu who views salvation in terms of release from the karmic cycle, and not as necessary liberation of the poor and the rejected caught in the

⁴⁶D'Costa also argues that Knitter's proposal is wedded to the Enlightenment project begun by Kant, where a universal ethical imperative is prioritized over metaphysics and religion. See Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 30.

⁴⁷ See Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today," 1996. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/atzrela.htm> Accessed April 20, 2012.

⁴⁸ Erik M. Clary. "Theology of Religions in Flux: On Paul F. Knitter's Soteriologic Shift Culminating in Mutualism," *Trinity Journal* 31NS (2010): 258.

⁴⁹ See Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 17.

crushing jaws of the centuries-old caste system?⁵⁰ For D'Costa, Knitter has no grounds to judge whether another religion conforms to Kingdom values, for this is an imposition upon that religion of values that it does not necessarily extol.⁵¹ All religions construe the world from within their own normative paradigm. There is no neutral zone. Religions are driven to explain and make sense of absolutely everything in the universe, including other religions, in terms of their central religious

vision. In this sense, the Kingdom values may be more Christian than one thinks. Conversely, Eddy judges Knitter's understanding of *soteria* on solely in existential/anthropological terms, to the utter neglect of the objective/cosmically redemptive emphasis found in Christian scriptures. Eddy claims that Knitter's notion of salvation-liberation does no justice to the consistent New Testament teaching that the salvation wrought in and through Jesus Christ has ontological implications for the entire cosmos.⁵²

From the outset, the Kingdom-centred approach seems to stress the Kingdom to such a degree as to minimize the role of the Church. Additionally, in doing so, it forgets to bind the Kingdom to Jesus Christ. D'Costa asks how can one speak of the Kingdom without reference to Christ, God and the Holy Spirit? If the Kingdom is separated from Jesus, it is no longer the Kingdom of God which he revealed. The result is a distortion of the meaning of the Kingdom, which runs the risk of being transformed into a purely human or ideological goal... Likewise, one may not separate the Kingdom from the Church. It is true that the Church is not an end unto herself, since she is ordered toward the Kingdom of God (*RM* 18). It is therefore not possible to separate the Church from the Kingdom as if the first belonged exclusively to the imperfect realm of history, while the second would be the perfect eschatological fulfillment of the divine plan of salvation (*DP* 34). Moreover, by stressing the Kingdom too much is also to make human welfare the main purpose of evangelization which reduces the role of the Church to social service; it becomes anthropocentric. This renders the Kingdom as an ideological program or a product of human action alone, bordering on Pelagianism in emphasizing salvation by good works only. When human needs are made the focus of evangelization, the Reign is completely secularized, because the focus is on programs and struggles for socioeconomic and political liberation, and the transcendent aspect is neglected. Knitter is well aware of this criticism. In response he claims that even though the Christian and the social worker may share the same goals for liberation, the humanism of the Christian is transfused and animated by the Spirit, where such human works are also spiritual works. Moreover, he trusts that these Spirit-filled works can be more persevering and hope-filled. Furthermore, there is the aspect of the transcendent; the Christian regnocentric approach understands its goal as the Kingdom of God, where the transcendent is an essential part of the Christian witness and effort to Kingdom-building.⁵³

Knitter calls the persons of other faiths anonymous agents of the Kingdom every time they perform an act of kindness or work for social justice, in contrast to Rahner's anonymous Christians. For him, this means that in looking upon people of other faith traditions as agents of the Kingdom, Christians are not trying to include them neatly in an already clear and definitive eco-human project and vision of well-being, but in a project that is in an ongoing developmental process. However, the Christian understanding of the Kingdom of God is quite clear, especially in its eschatological fulfillment. By calling the followers of other religions agents of the Kingdom, it is also subsuming them under the overall fulfillment of the Kingdom in Christ.

⁵⁰ These are also the concerns of both *Redemptoris Missio* and *Dialogue and Proclamation*.

⁵¹ Paul R. Eddy, "Paul Knitter's Theology of Religions: A Survey and Evangelical Response," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 65/3 (1993): 242-243.

⁵² D'Costa, "Pluralist Arguments," 336.

⁵³ See Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, 130-132.

3. Relevance to the Context in Asia

Asia is a continent teeming with millions of people living in massive poverty, where they struggle each day for mere survival. Even though a number of countries of Asia have made considerable economic progress, there still exist degrading and inhuman poverty, widening inequality, unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. "The Church in Asia then, with its multitude of poor and oppressed people, is called to live a communion of life which shows itself particularly in loving service to the poor and defenseless" (EA 32). The FABC speaks of the reality of the poor as *locus theologicus*, that is, those who suffer from massive poverty are privileged resources for theology, as the medium *par excellence* for a God-encounter that draws God's liberating presence.⁵⁴

The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) upholds that the experience of the struggle of the poor and the oppressed against all forms of injustice and domination in the Third World as a source of theology must be taken seriously, because it provides a new *locus* for theological reflection.⁵⁵ For the EATWOT, the faith reflection on this experience is authentic theology, where the poor and oppressed themselves are beginning to articulate their own reflections in both verbal and non-verbal form.⁵⁶ J.C. Duraisingh and K.C. Abraham affirm that genuine theology is born out of a people's struggle for liberation and therefore no Third World theologian can remain in isolation from the people.⁵⁷ Phan also calls the struggles of the Asian poor a resource for Asian theology.⁵⁸ Knitter suggests that "a liberation-centred dialogue among religions can lead both to a more fruitful conversation and to a broader transformation of this world if participants accord a certain 'hermeneutical privilege' to the experience and voice of nonpersons."⁵⁹ Knitter's 'hermeneutical privilege' for the poor and nonpersons resonates well with the situation in Asia.

An important feature of Asian theology is the primacy of praxis over theology, which Knitter also stresses. For Aloysius Pieris, "theology as God-talk or God's talk is not necessarily the universally valid starting point, or the direct object, or the only basis of interreligious collaboration in the Third World. But liberation is."⁶⁰ For Knitter, the coming together of people of different religions is not primarily to talk about problems within and among religions, but to collaborate on actions to alleviate the problems of poverty, violence, injustice, and environmental degradation. Therefore, the interaction is not explicitly religious, but ethical; not to share our beliefs, but to act out our beliefs together.⁶¹ This type of action-based and ethical dialogue is the kind that Christians in Asia can involve themselves in through the dialogue of life and the dialogue of action. Nowhere the theme of the Kingdom achieves the kind of theological and pastoral preeminence than it has with the FABC. Since the reality of the Church in Asia is challenged by massive dehumanizing poverty, yet rich with diverse cultures, and religious plurality, the mission of the Church can no longer be conceived as saving souls, conversion, and planting the Church, rather the main thrust is the

⁵⁴ See FABC, "Methodology: Asian Christian Theology," May 2000, in Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: FABC Documents from 1997-2001 Vol 3* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian, 2002), 360-361.

⁵⁵ See Final Statement of the Fifth EATWOT Conference, New Delhi, August 17-29, 1981, in *The Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, eds., Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 199.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁵⁷ J.C. Duraisingh and K.C. Abraham, "Reflections from an Asian Perspective," in *The Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, eds., Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 216.

⁵⁸ Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face*, 103.

⁵⁹ Knitter, "A Liberation-Centered Dialogue Among Religions," 24.

⁶⁰ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 107.

⁶¹ Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 243-244.

establishment of God's Reign. As the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC states: "Our challenge is to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God: to promote justice, peace, love, compassion, equality and brotherhood [*sic*] in these Asian realities. In short, it is to work to make the Kingdom of God a reality."⁶² The FABC also speaks of the Church at the service of the Kingdom; "the Church exists in and for the Kingdom."⁶³ Christians can expand what liberation theology calls "basic Christian communities" (BCC) to "basic human communities" (BHC), which gather for interreligious prayer, reflection, fellowship and common action for the good of the neighbourhood. The BHC is what the FABC promotes.⁶⁴ According to Knitter, "participation in such communities is not determined by membership in one particular religion, but by one's concern for and commitment to the removal of human suffering."⁶⁵

Therefore, Knitter's soteriocentrism resonates well with the mission and dialogue situation in Asia through the building of the Reign of God. It is the effective way that Christians, infused with the Spirit, can witness to their faith through their dialogue of life and dialogue of action for the common good. The proclamation of Jesus as unique saviour presents a huge problem in a religiously diverse Asia. The Asian bishops promote Jesus as the servant of the poor in a dialogue of liberation and action; they believe that mutual concern for the poor and oppressed can be a common theme for dialogue. Knitter thinks along the same lines too when he speaks of Jesus not as the only Saviour, but as liberator and compassionate friend of the poor whose "master symbol" is the Reign of God.²¹⁵ In this way, the traditional Christian conviction about the universal importance of Jesus is affirmed without diminishing the importance of other religious leaders. The Asian bishops do not consider the centrality of Jesus Christ as an obstacle to interfaith dialogue, but how to proclaim this centrality is. However, Knitter is against absolutist language to depict Christ in interreligious dialogue, and writes on the relational uniqueness of Christ.

4. Conclusion

By putting forth Knitter's soteriocentrism, I have related it to its usefulness in responding to the mission context of Asia. Pieris states, "Every Asian culture has grown round a soteriological nucleus not yet assimilated into the Christian consciousness." For Knitter, even though the removal of suffering has a priority in the promotion of dialogue, still there is the clear and strong sense that an effective, enduring, really transformative dialogue with the suffering of the world will have to include dialogue with the world religions. Knitter's soteriocentrism offers the possibility for developing a more adequate Asian theology that balances between the theology of the poor, and religions; and not only that, but also with the theology of cultures, keeping in mind the triple dialogue of the FABC. His soteriocentric approach can open up new vistas in the Christian theological understanding of salvation through dialoguing with Asian's rich and diverse religious and cultural traditions in the context of the poor.

⁶² Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC: *Journeying Together Toward the Third Millennium* (1.7), in Rosales and Arevelo, 275.

⁶³ Other terms includes "the Reign of God is the very reason for the being of the Church," "the Church is an instrument for the actualization of the Kingdom." All are from BIRA IV/2, Final Statement of the Second Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs on the Theology of Dialogue. Rosales and Arevelo, 252.

⁶⁴ BIRA IV/2, Final Statement of the Second Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs on the Theology of Dialogue, 1985. See Rosales and Arevelo, 254. Also *FABC Papers No 93*, "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service," The Final Statement of the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, January 2000. <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-93.htm> Accessed April 19, 2012. For Pieris, the goal of a BHC is the total liberation of the nonpersons and non peoples. It is within the process of this ongoing liberative praxis that each member of the BHC discovers the uniqueness of his or her religion. Aloysius Pieris, *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 158.

⁶⁵ Knitter, "A Liberation-Centered Theology of Religions," 47.

Knitter's soteriocentrism is a better starting point for reducing the tension between mission and dialogue. He is more interested in promoting dialogue from below than in proclaiming dogmas handed down from above. Not surprisingly, even Dupuis admits that it is better for interreligious dialogue to adopt a regnocentric rather than a christocentric approach, an approach which coincides with that of Jesus himself.⁶⁶

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⁶⁶ See Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 358-359.