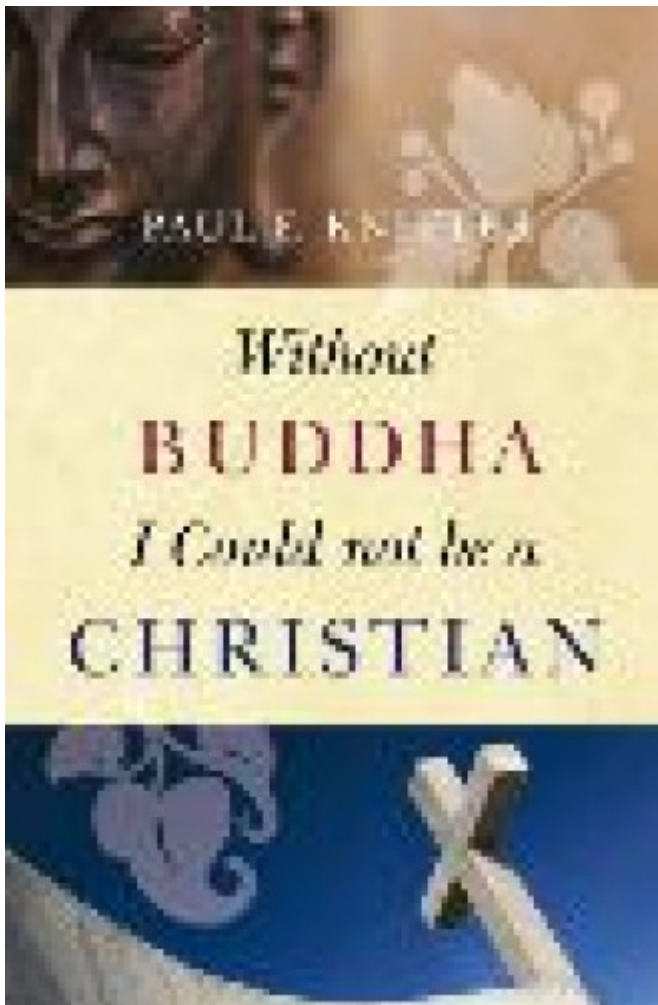


Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian

reviewed by [Tom F. Driver](#) in the [March 9, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian

Paul F. Knitter
Oneworld

Paul F. Knitter, the distinguished and blessedly maverick Catholic theologian, has had many lives. And more than one religion. His devotional life is now a double one—or, as he calls it, a hybrid. Although getting there took him over a rough path, his reward is a deep inner satisfaction that he wants to share, and in this book about his spiritual journey, he reveals himself to be an unusually honest teacher and guide. *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* will be a lifesaver for some and a scandal for others.

A onetime priest who taught theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, for nearly three decades, Knitter was called out of retirement by Union Theological Seminary in New York in 2007 to serve as Paul Tillich Professor of Theology, World Religions and Culture. Religious pluralism has been Knitter's concern from the beginning of his academic work. In 1985 he gained international recognition with a controversial book titled *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*. In that work he both abandoned the exclusivism of traditional Christology and ecclesiology and went beyond the inclusivism of his former teacher, Karl Rahner, who held that it was possible for persons outside the church to be saved by virtue of their "anonymous" Christianity. Knitter opted for a more radical pluralism, arguing that Jesus and Jesus' name do not provide the only path to salvation.

With the exception of John Hick, with whom he has collaborated more than once, there is probably no English-language author as widely known as Knitter for sustained theological attention to religious pluralism. Since *No Other Name?* he has authored four other books on the subject, coauthored one, edited or translated six and been the subject of one. He has also translated a history of Zen Buddhism.

Unlike his previous books, *Without Buddha* is intensely personal. Writing in the tradition of Augustine's *Confessions*, Knitter turns on a light in the inner room of his mind, allowing the reader to see him struggling with himself. Even writers with little exposure to Buddhism will be able to identify with Knitter, for the problems presented by Christian imagery and doctrine are endemic to modern thought.

Knitter has difficulty not only with the image of God as a kindly paternal figure somewhere up above but also with the idea, entrenched in classical theology, that God is totally other than creation (*totaliter aliter*) and entirely sufficient unto himself. The problem is a familiar one. Everything that we know in experience is delineated

by its relation to other things. As human beings we are deeply relational, since our very personhood is produced and maintained by interactions with others, a process that starts in utero and continues throughout life. To say that God is God without relation to anything other than God is to remove God from the realm of the intelligible; it flies in the face of the biblical idea that human beings are made in the image of God. For Knitter this contradiction is too much to bear.

While Knitter's relief from the contradiction came by way of Buddhist thought and practice alongside his Christian faith, other paths can be taken. These, although little mentioned in Knitter's book, have been explored by process theology and in the writings of Gordon Kaufman, myself and the Chicago theologians of an earlier generation.

Still, Buddhist thought can help, and it is there that Knitter has found a healthy supplement and corrective to his once conventional Christian theology. I wish he had said more about what specifically led him into the study of Buddhism and its meditative practices. When did this happen? Did Buddhist thought and practice appeal to him equally from the start? If not, which came first for him? Was the attraction immediate or slow? In midlife, Knitter married Cathy Cornell, a Buddhist convert from Christianity. How did that turn in the road affect his spiritual journey? The book does give us an account of Knitter's thought process as he found himself pulled between loyalty to Christ and attraction to Buddha. Only at the very end does he tell us that he "took refuge," the Buddhist version of joining, and pledged himself to the Bodhisattva vows.

Since the book depicts its author in debate with himself, a theologically trained reader may be tempted to get into the argument as well. Has Knitter adequately understood Christian theology? Does he have an adequate understanding of metaphor and symbol? Is it possible, as Peter Steinfels writes in his review of the book for the *New York Times*, that Knitter's Christianity is "laden with all the impurities of popular piety and workaday theology" while his Buddhism is "that of the best and the brightest"?

Taken on its own terms, this book is wonderfully candid. When Knitter has trouble envisioning and relating to God the Father, he says so. When prayer, especially petitionary prayer, becomes hollow or too self-regarding, he confesses it. When liturgy is too wordy, too symbol-laden or too busy, he voices his desire for something else. And when he finds the stillness and attentiveness of Buddhist meditation

answering his inner need, he goes with it. At the same time, when the love of Jesus and the reality of a reconceived God call him back to his Christian roots and identity, he says yes to that also. His is a spiritual life born of two lineages, joined together yet, as has been said of Christ's two natures, "not confounded." As Knitter puts it, he is forever "passing over" from Christianity to Buddhism and then "passing back."

Knitter encourages us to travel as more than mere tourists, taking the other religion as seriously as we take our own. If we take up residence there for a while, we will see if the Spirit will call us to pass back home, profoundly changed from being away. I do not hear in this any note of betrayal. I hear the Holy Spirit singing.