

# Christian Faith, Asian Wisdom Traditions, and the Newly Emerging Paradigm Shift

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*At the Second Conference of Inter-Religio held in Hong Kong in September of 1983, Dr. Paul Clasper, Dean of St. John's Cathedral in Hong Kong and lecturer at the Chinese University, was one of two participants to address the assembly on the question of living theological options for facing religious pluralism in Asia. The full text of his paper is repeated here. The other paper, prepared by Jan Van Bragt of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya, Japan, has since been expanded into a series of articles for the Japan Missionary Bulletin, 1983-1984.*

## THE CURRENT SCENE—FROM ONE ANGLE OF VISION

I am a Christian missionary and priest whose good fortune it has been to spend most of my adult life in close association with two of the rich streams of Asian Wisdom: the Theravada Buddhist tradition in Burma and the steady stream of Taoism in the Chinese world. I have always been interested in how these can be related to the enrichment of all. Currently, I am intrigued with the newly appreciated convergence of the New Physics and Eastern Thought, In this paper I want to explore, in the most tentative and questing way, some of the possibilities for interrelationship for the days ahead.

**The Competing Plurality of World Views.** People in Hong Kong are frequently described as “rootless.” Perhaps a more accurate description is that many of them embody at least three world-views, all intermingling in the same existence. A Chinese youth, say a student at the Chinese University, will embody some residue of Confucian and Taoist experience, usually at the unconscious levels, as the result of a Chinese up-bringing. He will have imbibed a “modern scientific” outlook from his science studies. If he is a Christian he will have added to this

a world-view derived from the Christian tradition: roughly, Medieval Catholic, if he is a Roman Catholic, or Pietistic Biblical, if he is a Protestant. He will know the pull of both East and West. He knows that being from Hong Kong he is not traditionally Asian. When he visits the West he knows he is not wholly at home there. These three worlds, at least, are alive, if not really integrated, in him. Far from being an "odd bird," he may well be a model of our situation today.

This intermixture of world views could be multiplied by looking at almost any culture today. Recently I talked with Christians in Bali. They sense their deep affinity with their own relatively integrated culture: the arts, dancing, music, and the rhythm of the seasons are a part of their very bloodstream. They also value the kernel of Christian faith which has come to them, though they are eager to shed the shell of the Dutch characteristics in which the treasure has been presented. They also wonder if the effects of tourism and technology will soon erode their world with the diseases it has brought to other places.

This summer I have also met, for the first time, Christians from the Kadazan people of Sabah. They are close to the soil and speak of the living belief of their people that at death their souls will go to the top of the holy Mount Kinabalu. But some have now experienced a "western scientific education." They want to bring the benefits of at least some technology to their people. But, being canny, they suspect there are definite limits to the values of technology entering their world. The brightest of them I met were also Christians who valued, as only first generation Christians can, the new quality of life which came to them through contact with the Christian community.

Is it possible that all of us are mixtures of various world-views? This condition may result in paralysis and a kind of schizophrenia if these worlds clash and never become integrated in a life-nourishing way. At the same time, perhaps a deeper truth is that we are enriched by the possibilities of drawing from several perspectives; that these may be stimulatingly complimentary; that we actually do live, simultaneously, on several levels, all at once, and that we would be impoverished if we neglected certain levels by trying to restrict ourselves to one level or one world-view only.

Happily, we are beginning to gain some perspective on the so-called "modern scientific world view," which has dominated much of our seeing for the last four centuries. Two books by Huston Smith may be noted as indicative of this emerging perspective; *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition* and *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*.

What we are now in a better position to see is that the "primal vision" included a sense of wholeness and integrity which seems like "health," compared to much of the alienation and fragmentation which

has resulted from the “modern scientific” world. The effects, social and psychological, of the technological world which resulted from the world that has issued from the mechanistic paradigm (the world as a clock) begun by Newton and Descartes have been enriching at one level, but increasingly impoverishing, if seen in the wider perspective. But there can be no turning back to the primitive or primal for most of us. What is emerging is a world of possibilities for “post-modern man” which, interestingly, has more in common with the “primal” than might first be expected. The world of the post-modern man can be more widely interrelated, more marked by wholeness and integration because it will have become critical of the severe limits of the “modern” world. From this perspective the narrowly reductive view of “scientism” will be seen as an especially cramping world-view; helpful in the more surface and technical aspects of life, but blood-sucking and life-destroying as far as the richer values of living are concerned.

Perhaps we need several world-views; one corrected and complemented by another. One level and one viewpoint can be valued and utilized without becoming the absolute criterion for all others. Perhaps these are to exist in dynamic interaction, not one forcing the others out in sectarian, totalitarian fashion. If so, what would it mean to live more consciously through a healthful and deliberated inclusion of a variety of world views? This would imply the effort to try to understand the phenomenon which is actually already taking place.

**The Choice of Faith and the Plurality of Faiths.** In the expressive words of Arnold Toynbee, we no longer live in the time when the religious map resembles a patchwork quilt—Hindus in India, Buddhists in Burma, Baptists in Texas. Rather, we live in a time when the map resembles a piece of shot-silk: any religion or way of wisdom can be, and is, followed in any place. Some of the finest Zen Buddhists can be found in California and Colorado; Hindus, by conviction and practice, have proliferated in the West. Some of the world’s finest Baptist are found in Burma; numerically the growing edge of the Anglican communion is in Africa. As Toynbee has said: The religious identification will not depend on geography, but on personal choice and psychological taste.

Peter Berger has addressed this matter of the new freedom to choose in religious matters in his fine book *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*. Previously it was considered heretical to choose a way which was not given the “plausibility structure” by the society in which one lived. Now, by contrast, “the social context of this phenomenon has changed radically with the coming of modernity. In pre-modern situations there is a

world of religious certainty, occasionally ruptured by heretical deviations. By contrast, the modern situation is a world of religious uncertainty, occasionally staved off by more or less precarious constructions of religious affirmations. Indeed, one could put the change even more sharply. For pre-modern man, heresy is a possibility—usually a rather remote one; for modern man, heresy typically becomes a necessity. Or again, modernity crates a new situation in which picking and choosing becomes an imperative.” (p.25)

Ways of Asian Wisdom which have always possessed a sense of the universal now have an ecumenical (world-wide) missionary opportunity. Everybody can now be exposed to a fair show of most any way of wisdom in most any place. The pluralism of world-views is matched by the pluralism of plausibility structures, enabling one to choose and practice most any faith in most any place.

This places a fresh responsibility on each person to choose. We now have new opportunities to choose our heritage, draw from more congenial traditions, ally ourselves with new ferments, discussions, and histories. This carries several weighty implications:

1. We are responsible for the choice of the tradition in which we choose to be a pilgrim. By taking on a history or tradition we are happily obligated to repossess it, contribute to it; and so we can also criticize it.
2. We must give sensitive awareness to the pluralism about us. Even as we have chosen one way, others, for equally valid reasons—or maybe reasons as dubious as our own—will choose other ways. In the face of this pluralism of our now near-neighbors we have several possibilities of response:
  - a. we can ignore them—to our own isolating peril;
  - b. we can befriend them—which is risky because friendship can be a life-changing and attitude modifying experience; or
  - c. we can confront them in aggressive sectarian zeal.
3. All will be found to be living by some world-view or tradition. Those who do not consciously choose one of the traditional ways will likely be living by an unexamined secular alternative, which turns out to be no less presuppositional. In fact, the world of scientific and technological values which thinks of itself as emancipated from confining superstitions may well now be seen as the acceptance of an exceedingly narrow, restrictive, and reductionist view which is no longer capable of handling some of the major issues of our time. Those who live naively or religiously ‘from the presuppositions of a restrictive scientism

are no less committed than others, but may well find themselves committed to what the New Testament calls the “gods of this passing age.”

This analysis assumes that we are already entering a post-modern stage which calls for a fresh understanding of the world-views and ways of wisdom.

The Convergence of the New Physics and Eastern Thought. The third aspect of the current scene which I have selected as potentially important for the relationship of Christian Faith and the Asian Wisdom traditions may not seem as obvious as the two preceding ones. Its importance may well be doubted by many in the fields of science. But I venture to think it may be of crucial importance and with consequences reaching far beyond our present imagination. I refer to the radical breakthrough which has taken place in the field of physics and which has produced the conversations about the world-view, or views, which the New Physics has produced.

Until very recent times, physics was valued as the most exact, most objective of the sciences. It appeared to be the embodiment of the empirical spirit and the culmination of the mechanistic viewpoint which has dominated our scientific age since its foundations were laid by Newton and Descartes. But in a series of daring and brilliant experiments in the first three decades of the century there appeared a dramatic change in the concepts, ideas, and world-view of physics. Fritjof Capra has described this by saying: “In their struggle to grasp this new reality, scientists become painfully aware that their basic concepts, their language, and their whole way of thinking were inadequate to describe atomic phenomena. Their problems were not merely intellectual, but amounted to an intense emotional and, one could say, even existential crisis. It took them a long time to overcome this crisis, but in the end they were rewarded with deep insights into the nature of matter and its relation to the human mind.” (*The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture*, p.15.)

While not wholly dispensing with the perspectives of the older science for dealing with certain levels of problems, the New Physics called into question the whole model of the mechanism of the machine, or the clock model. It began to see the world, not by examining the fragments in smaller and smaller entities, but in terms of the inter-relatedness and interdependence of all phenomena. Instead of the machine, the organism became the necessary model. In this framework it had to begin with an integrated whole whose properties cannot be reduced to those of its parts.

To those with imagination it soon became evident that the holistic

and ecological view demanded by the New Physics has remarkable affinities with the views of the mystics of all ages and traditions. The similarities to world-views well known to the Wisdom traditions of India and China began to be seriously explored.

To be sure, many in the physics establishment have resisted this comparison. It is safer to stick within the confines of one tradition and not get lost in extravagant speculations. But now a body of writing is emerging to show that there can well be a convergence of both Eastern Thought and the viewpoint of the New Physics, and that this could be the promise of a holistic world-view which could well constitute nothing less than a “paradigm shift” of far reaching consequence. Among the works which treat this convergence of Eastern Thought and the New Physics a few can be mentioned: F. Capra, *The Tao of Physics*; J. Needleman, *A Sense of the Cosmos*; A. de Reinourt, *The Eye of Shiva* R. G. H. Siu, *The Tao of Science*; H. Smith, *Forgotten Truth*; M. Talbot, *Mysticism and the New Physics*; G. Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*. A provocative introduction to this convergence can be found in L. Leshan’s *The Medium, The Mystic, and the Physicist*. Leshan depicts the strikingly similar maps of reality which have been charted by the mystics, Christian and Asian, who have known well the mysteries of inner space and inner-connectedness and the physicists who are learning so much new about both the worlds of the very large and the very small. In an amazing collection of quotations you discover that it is a modern physicist who is speaking when it sounded like a mystic; and a mystic who is speaking when it sounded like a physicist.

In this convergence, the voices of the pre-modern Wisdom traditions show great affinity with the post-modern physicists—those who have broken from the restrictions of the Newtonian mechanistic model. This new promising conjunction will lead us to be attentive to the Asian traditions of Hinduism, Classical Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism in new ways. It will also give us great concern to see what will happen both in the other scientific fields, as well as in society at large, when older, outdated scientific structures are dropped and the daring perspectives of the new era are taken seriously.

The question that comes to me as a Christian thinker, in the light of this convergence, is this: Where are we in the face of these discussions? Until now I find very few attempts to face these questions, especially when it raises the relationship to the Asian traditions. Perhaps it is because of the long and painfully slow attempt to extricate Christian Faith from a pre-modern outlook, and the attempt to forge a synthesis with the “scientific viewpoint,” for its own apologetic respectability, that there is great hesitation to chal-

lenge the dominance of the Newtonian mind-set.

For whatever reasons, I believe that Christian thought has much to learn and much to give if it is willing to entire into these discussions. Once involved in this world of discourse the relationship of Christian Faith to other Wisdom traditions may well move into a new level of fruitfulness. There is much reason for hope.

#### SOME IMPLICATIONS

In the light of the aspects of the current scene which I have singled out, I see certain implications for myself. I will speak personally and confessionally, not meaning this as a program or “trip” to be imposed on others. However, these implications do come as a kind of mandate for me at the present time.

*I believe it will be necessary to see Christian Faith as more closely related to “the perennial philosophy” (A. Huxley), and hence to the mystical traditions of Asian Wisdom.*

A wise man once wrote these words: “The natural senses cannot possess God or unite thee to him; nay, thy inward faculties of understanding, will, and memory can only reach after God, but cannot be the place of his habitation in thee. But there is a root or depth in thee from whence all these faculties come forth, as lines from a centre or as branches from the body of the tree. This depth is the unity, the eternity, I had almost said the infinity of thy soul; for it is so infinite that nothing can satisfy it or give it any rest but the infinity of God.”

When you first hear that quotation, I wonder what wisdom tradition you think it comes from? Perhaps from an Upanishad or a Mahayana Buddhist Sutra. Actually it is a typical word from William Law, the eighteenth century Anglican devotional writer (*The Spirit of Prayer*, cpt.11). During his later years his life went through a profound change due to a chance contact with the writings of that remarkable Protestant visionary, Jacob Boehme. When I was first taken by Aldous Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy*, many years ago, I was struck by the great number of quotations he had taken from this reserved English gentleman of the 18th century.

I believe that many of the best Christian mystics, of all traditions, can be seen as remarkably close to the vision of the mystics of the Asian Wisdom tradition. This affinity should be appreciated and increasingly explored with gratitude. The Christian tradition has so long and so easily given itself to the insistence on differences and uniqueness that it has had little heart or imagination to explore or appreciate this commonality I believe this should now be done, not

naively, but with a quiet boldness and joy. Actually we are enriched, not embarrassed, by the commonality.

The pressure of the Divine Grace, seeking to reveal itself and draw all life towards wholeness, and the longing of the human, seeking to give itself in adoration and service as an instrument of a creative peace, is glimpsed, albeit through many historical limitations and numerous distortions, in all of the great Wisdom traditions. We encounter this in those who have been nourished on the Rig-Veda, the Upanishads and the Gita, the Buddhist Sutras, the Zend-Avesta, Zen and Sufi tales, the Koran and the Old and New Testaments.

Bede Griffiths, an English monk of the Benedictine Order, who has spent many years living in an ashram in India, has well said: "The Semitic religious, Judaism and Islam, reveal the transcendent aspect of the divine Mystery with incomparable power. The oriental religions reveal the divine Immanence with immeasurable depth. Yet in each the opposite aspect is contained, though in a more hidden way. We have to try to discover the inner relationship between these different aspects of Truth and unite them in ourselves. I have to be a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Jain, a Parsee, a Sikh, a Muslim, and a Jew, as well as a Christian, if I am to know the Truth and to find the point of reconciliation in all religions" (Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, p.71).

But how can such a task be pursued, given the limitations of one existence? Those who study living organisms have discerned that there are two complimentary phenomena of any self-organizing system. These are (a) self-renewal—the ability of living systems continuously to renew and recycle their components while maintaining the integrity of their overall structure; and (b) self-transcendence—the ability to reach out creatively beyond physical and mental boundaries in the process of learning, development, and evolution.

Translated into my own work I believe this means that for my own soul's sake I must participate faithfully in the cultivation of my own tradition—the Eucharist, the daily office, the growing acquaintance of the mystics like Mother Julian of Norwich, William Law, Thomas Traherne, and poets like George Herbert, John Donne, and William Blake. At the same time, I must cultivate the friendship of those outside my circle—for the expansion and enrichment which they give. Since I can only cultivate so many it is best to befriend those nearby. When I lived in Burma it was the Theravada Buddhist tradition. In Tao Fong Shan, I think we have a special responsibility to the Taoist tradition. For the same reason I am glad that Bede Griffiths in India pursues Hindu friends and William Johnston in Japan cultivates the Zen tradition. In this way we all stand to be enriched.

Does this mean that I am precluded from raising questions about the



difference or uniqueness of one way or insight? Not at all! In fact, to be true to myself I must, at times, perform this critical service. But I will do it better if I have first seen more clearly my commonality with the Wisdom traditions. Once a solid basis of friendship has been established, differences can be seen valued and pursued. No friendship results when one begins with differences without an appreciation of commonality

My growth depends upon *both* self-renewal *and* self-transcendence.

*I believe the study of the Wisdom traditions will need to extricate itself from the Babylonian Captivity of the Scientific mind-set which has for too long dominated the disciplines of Theology and the History of Religions.*

Since the 17th century the “scientific mind” has come to dominate western culture and has become the model for serious scholarly investigation. This has been characterized by *reduction* (breaking the subject down into smallest units), *analysis* (the methods of laboratory testing), and *objectivity* (the views of the examiner are to be kept out of the material investigated or conclusions drawn). The obvious gains which have been brought to the world, especially in the area of technological development, need not be denigrated. But it is becoming increasingly clear, and this is what the “breakthrough” of the New Physics is teaching us, that this methodology has severe limitations. It must be radically complemented—so much so as to result in a whole paradigm shift with repercussions in all areas of life.

The humanities, especially, have suffered from the felt necessity to bring all disciplines into line with the assumed scientific respectability of the ideal of scientific objectivity advanced by Newton and Descartes. Sociology, history, psychology, and even history of religions and theology have tried passionately to prove their scientific methodologies so as to recommend themselves in this scientifically dominated culture. The limitations placed on these fields, where a methodology suited to technology is applied to humanistic studies, is becoming ever more plain. In fact, the effects of this in the areas of medical care, therapy, economics, social planning, and ecology are becoming frighteningly obvious for those willing to take a hard look.

It is not surprising that theology and the study of the history of religions have felt the impact of this scientific examination. I believe that a recognition of these limitations and the pursuing of a more holistic, intuitive “systems” approach will be a necessity for valuable work in the relationship and understanding of Christian Faith and the Asian Wisdom traditions. I will simply hint at a few of the implications that follow from this broad assertion:

1. Instead of “objectivity,” the model of friendship—communion of

persons—will serve us better. In this it is by bringing the best of my own growing appreciation of my own faith and a sensitized listening to and learning from the other that experiential knowledge and perhaps transformation may occur.

2. Instead of efforts to “demythologize” (a typical product of the scientific analysis of ancient documents approach), we shall be concerned to appreciate the mythical elements as revelatory of the universal significance of events. We shall value the help of C. G. Jung and others to develop a more archetypal understanding of the rich symbols and metaphors which convey the meaning of events of history.
3. Instead of the specialist tendency (implicit in the now “older” scientific approach), we will work toward a more holistic or “systems” approach to our studies. William Laws’ use of the figure of root and branches of a tree is typical of “systems” thinking in contrast to the static model of the clock in mechanistic models. All is inter-related; therefore the study of my tradition must not be separated from the other living traditions which surround me. And the insights of the mystical traditions must not be separated from the question of life styles, health, music, work, communication, and the whole realm of values.
4. The inner-journey or pilgrimage and the risks and lessons involved will be integral to the adventures and quests of our studies in the future. In the older model this would have little to do with the investigations or the conclusions of the scientists’ findings. In the new view, in the area of the interface of Christian Faith and Asian Wisdom traditions it will be seen as the most important conditioning factor.

I believe we have already come to see that some of the most helpful work being done in this area is not coming from our University departments, but from those whose life has been lived at the meeting point of faiths in a desire to understand two faiths at once. In this it is people like Karl Reichelt, Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths, Kenneth Cragg, William Johnston, Anthony de Mello, and many others who have modelled the lifestyle and pilgrimage which is needed. In each case, bearing within themselves the creative tension of looking with both eyes, or living in two worlds, not dominated by the demand of a cool objectivity, has been the source of their seeing and their special helpfulness.

*I believe that we are being challenged today to participate in the beginnings of a paradigm shift from the world of fragmentation, which has been the result of the domination of the scientific mind, and move*

*towards a holistic vision which can affect every area of life.*

Significant voices in our time—some “trendy,” others visionary, and some prophetic—are seeing the closing of one era and the emergence of a renewed time. This is described in various ways; it is the end of the mechanistic–science era and the beginning of the holistic–systems era; the ending of the yang-dominated, masculine and rationalistic time and the emergence of the *Yin*, feminine, intuitive, imaginative era.

One of the most comprehensive treatments of this theme is that of Fritjof Capra in his *The Turning Point: Science, Society and The Rising Culture*. Having lived as a physicist with the breakthrough of the New Physics and being appreciative of the convergence of this world view with that of the Asian Wisdom traditions, he has come to believe that many of the growing pains of recent times signal the emergence of a paradigm shift, as important for our time as the rise of mechanistic science in the 17th century.

Capra sees the dominance of this mechanistic model as the main reason for the inability of the various fields of endeavor to meet the challenges of our time. “The mechanistic Cartesian world view has had a powerful influence on all our science and on the general Western way of thinking. The method of reducing complex phenomena to basic building blocks, and of looking for the mechanisms through which these interact, has become so deeply ingrained in our culture that it has often been identified with the scientific method. Views, concepts, or ideals that did not fit into the framework of classical science were not taken seriously and were generally disdained, if not ridiculed. As a consequence of this overwhelming emphasis on reductionist science our culture has become progressively fragmented and has developed technologies, institutions, and life–styles that are profoundly unhealthy.... This sense of integrity and balance has been lost in our culture. The fragmented, mechanistic world view that has become all pervasive and the one–sided, sensate, and “Yang–oriented” value system that is the basis of this world view, have led to a profound cultural imbalance and have generated numerous symptoms of ill health” (p.234).

But signs are abundant, both in the social ferments of the world and the pressures on the scientific disciplines, for a new paradigm shift: we are at the beginning of a new time. “What we need, then, is a new ‘paradigm’—and values. The beginnings of this change, of the shift from the mechanistic to the holistic conception of reality, are already visible in all fields and are likely to dominate the present decade.... The sixties and seventies have generated a whole series of social movements that all seem to go in the same direction, emphasizing different aspects of the new vision of reality.

“So far, most of the movements still operate separately and have

not yet recognized how their intentions inter-relate. The purpose of this book is to provide a coherent conceptual framework that will help them recognize the community of their aims. Once this happens, we can expect the various movements to flow together and form a powerful force for social change. The gravity and global extent of our current crisis indicate that this change is likely to result in a transformation of unprecedented dimensions, a turning point for the planet as a whole.” (P.16)

This means that a facing today of some of the implications of the world-views implied in Christian Faith, Asian Wisdom traditions, and the emerging paradigm shift in the sciences will challenge us to a total involvement in social concerns on a global scale and drawing on a cosmic perspective. We will not, unless we persist in a cloistered regression, be able to indulge in a kind of objective study of “comparative religion.” We will discover what Archbishop William Temple meant when he said that God was surely interested in a lot more things than just religion! Our studies will draw us into the web of inter-relatedness in ever widening circles. Old frameworks of tidy discourse will give way to the uncharted, untidy and uncertain paths of a newly emerging future. We will likely experience deaths and renewals of which we have never dreamed. But in this process we will be caught up in new configurations, new visions and new life-styles. For most of us this is exceedingly threatening. Perhaps, for a daring few, it will mean to live dangerously on the growing edge of a new chapter in history.