

# THE AGE OF GLOBAL DIALOGUE

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## 1. A Radically New Age

Those scholars who earlier in the twentieth century with a great show of scholarship and historical/sociological analysis predicted the impending demise of Western Civilization were "dead wrong." After World War I, in 1922, Oswald Spengler wrote his widely acclaimed book, *The Decline of the West*<sup>2</sup>. After the beginning of World War II Pitirim A. Sorokin published in 1941 his likewise popular book, *The Crisis of Our Age*<sup>3</sup>. Given the massive, world-wide scale of the unprecedented destruction and horror of the world's first global war, 1914-18, and the even vastly greater of the second global conflict, 1939-45, the pessimistic predictions of these scholars and the great following they found are not understandable.

In fact, however, those vast world conflagrations were manifestations of the dark side of the unique breakthrough in the history of humankind in the modern development of Christendom- become- Western Civilization, now becoming Global Civilization. Never before had there been world wars; likewise, never before had there been world political organizations (League of Nations, United Nations). Never before did humanity possess the real possibility of destroying all human life-- whether through nuclear or ecological catastrophe. These unique negative realities/potentialities were possible, however, only because of the correspondingly unique accomplishments of Christendom/Western/Global Civilization--the like of which the world has never before seen. On the negative side, from now on it will always be true that humankind could self-destruct. Still, there are solid empirical grounds for reasonable hope that the inherent, infinity-directed life force of humankind will nevertheless prevail over the parallel death force.

The prophets of doom were correct, however, in their understanding that humanity is entering into a radically new age. Earlier in this century the nay-sayers usually spoke of the doom of only Western Civilization (e.g., Spengler, Sorokin), but after the advent of nuclear power and the Cold War, the new generation of pessimists--as said, not without warrant: *corruptio optimae pessima*--warned of

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2 Oswald Spengler, DER UNTERGANG DES ABENDLANDES (Munich: Beck, 1922-23), 2 vols.

3 Pitirim A. Sorokin, THE CRISIS OF OUR AGE (New York: Dutton, 1941).

*global* disaster. This emerging awareness of global disaster is a clear, albeit negative, sign that something profoundly, radically new is entering onto the stage of human history.

There have, of course, also recently been a number of more positive signs that we humans are entering a radically new age. In the 1960s there was much talk of "The Age of Aquarius," and there still is today the continuing fad of "New Age" consciousness. Some may be put off from the idea of an emerging radically new age because they perceive such talk to be simply that of fringe groups. I would argue, however, that the presence of "the crazies" around the edge of any idea or movement, far from being a sign of the invalidity of that idea or movement, is on the contrary a confirmation precisely of its validity, at least in its core concern. I would further argue that if people are involved with a movement which does not eventually develop its "crazies," its extremists, the movement is not touching the core of humankind's concerns--they should get out of the movement, they are wasting their time!

Moreover, there have likewise recently been a number of very serious scholarly analyses pointing to the emergence of a radically new age in human history. I will deal in some detail with two of them below. The first is the concept of the "Paradigm-Shift," particularly as expounded by Hans Küng<sup>4</sup>. The second is the notion of the "Second Axial Period," as articulated by Ewert Cousins<sup>5</sup>. Then, including these two, but setting them in a still larger context, I shall lay out my own analysis, which I see as the movement of humankind out of a multi-millennia long "Age of Monologue" into the newly inbreaking "Age of Dialogue," indeed, an inbreaking "Age of Global Dialogue."

Of course there is a great deal of continuity in human life throughout the shift from one major "Paradigm" to another, from one "Period" to another, from one "Age" to another. Nevertheless, even more striking than this continuity is the ensuing break, albeit largely on a different level than the continuity. This relationship of continuity and break in human history is analogous to the transition of water from solid to fluid to gas with the increase in temperature. With water there is throughout on the chemical level the continuity of H<sub>2</sub>O. However, for those who have to deal with the water, it makes a fantastic difference whether the H<sub>2</sub>O is ice, water, or steam! In the case of the major changes in humankind, the physical base remains the same, but on the level of consciousness the change is massive. And here too it makes a fantastic difference whether we are dealing with humans whose consciousness is formed within one paradigm or within another, whose consciousness is Pre-Axial, Axial-I or Axial-II, whose consciousness is Monologic or Dialogic.

## **2. A Major Paradigm-Shift**

Thomas Kuhn revolutionized our understanding of the development of scientific thinking with his notion of paradigm shifts. He painstakingly showed that fundamental "paradigms" or "exemplary models" are the large thought frames within which we place and interpret all observed data and that scientific advancement inevitably brings about eventual paradigm shifts-- from geocentrism to heliocentrism, for example, or from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics--which are always vigorously

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4 See among others, Hans Küng, *THEOLOGIE IM AUFBRUCH* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1987), esp. pp. 153 ff.

5 See especially Ewert Cousins, "Judaism-Christianity-Islam: Facing Modernity Together," *JOURNAL OF ECUMENICAL STUDIES*, 30:3-4 (Summer-Fall, 1993), pp. 417-425.

resisted at first, as was the thought of Galileo, but finally prevail<sup>6</sup>. This insight, however, is valid not only for the development of thought in the natural sciences, but also applicable to all major disciplines of human thought, including religious thought--religion being understood as "an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly."

A major paradigm shift in systematic religious reflection, i.e., in "theology," then, means a major change "in the very idea of what it is to do theology."<sup>7</sup> Let me give an example from my own Christian tradition: The major Christian theological revolution that occurred at the first ecumenical council (Nicaea, 325 A.D.) did not so much resolve the battle over whether the Son and Father were of "the same substance," *homoousion*, important as that was, but rather that, "by defining 'homoousion,' it tacitly admitted that here were issues in theology which could not be solved simply on the basis of recourse to the language of the Scriptures."<sup>8</sup> In the next several centuries a flood of new answers poured forth to questions being posed in categories unused by Jesus and his first, Jewish, followers in this case--in Greek philosophical categories of thought.

As the paradigm within which the data of what Jesus thought, taught and wrought and how his Jewish followers responded was perceived and understood shifted from the Semitic, concrete biblical thought world to a Hellenistic, largely abstract philosophical one, the questions asked, and the terms in which they were asked, shifted accordingly, and of course so did the answers. As always, when a new major paradigm shift occurs, old answers are no longer helpful, for they respond to questions no longer posed, in thought categories no longer used, within a conceptual framework which no longer prevails. It is not that the old answers are now declared wrong; it is simply that they no longer apply. Aristotle's answers in physics and chemistry in terms of the four elements of air, fire, water and earth, for example, simply do not speak to the questions posed by modern chemists and physicists. Tenth-century Christian theologians answering that Mary remained a virgin while giving birth to Jesus (i.e., her hymen was not broken) were answering a question that no modern critical-thinking Christian theologian would pose, for it presupposed a thought-world which placed a high value on unbroken hymens. That thought world is gone. Hence, the old answer is im-pertinent.

### **3. The Modern Major Paradigm-shift**

Since the eighteenth century Enlightenment, Christendom-now- become-Western Civilization has been undergoing a major paradigm shift, especially in how we humans understand our process of understanding and what meaning and status we attribute "truth," to our statements about reality--in other words, our epistemology. This new epistemological paradigm is increasingly determining how we perceive, conceive, think about, and subsequently decide and act on things.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the role in religion, in the "ultimate understanding of

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6 Thomas Kuhn, *THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed., 1970).

7 Quentin Quesnell, "On Not Negotiating the Self in the Structure of Theological Revolutions," typescript at Jan. 3-11, 1984 conference in Honolulu on "Paradigm Shifts in Buddhism and Christianity: Cultural Systems and the Self," p. 2.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

reality and how to live accordingly," played by the conceptual paradigm or model one has of reality. The paradigm or model within which we perceive reality not only profoundly affects our theoretical understanding of reality, but also has immense practical consequences. For example, in Western medicine the body is usually conceived of as a highly nuanced, living machine, and therefore if one part wears out, the obvious thing to do is to replace the worn part--hence, organ transplants originated in Western, but not in Oriental, medicine.

However, in Oriental, Chinese, medicine, the body is conceived of as a finely balanced harmony: "pressure" exerted on one part of the body is assumed to have an opposite effect in some other part of the body--hence, acupuncture originated in Oriental, but not in Western, medicine.<sup>9</sup> Our conceptual paradigms have concrete consequences.

Furthermore, obviously some particular paradigms or models for perceiving reality will fit the data better than others, and they will then be preferred--e.g., the shift from the geocentric to the heliocentric model in astronomy. But sometimes differing models will *each* in their own ways "fit" the data more or less adequately, as in the example of Western and Oriental medicines. The differing models are then viewed as complementary. Clearly it would be foolish to limit one's perception of reality to only one of the complementary paradigms or models.

Perhaps at times a more comprehensive model, a mega-model, can be conceived to subsume two or more complementary models, but surely it will never be possible to perceive reality except through paradigms or models; hence *meta*-model thinking is not possible, except in the more limited sense of *meta-mono*-model thinking, that is, by perceiving reality through multiple, differing models which cannot be subsumed under one mega-model, but must stand in creative, polar tension in relationship to each other. Such might be called multi-model thinking. This pattern in fact has been characteristic of physics for decades as it uses both particle and wave descriptions of subatomic matter.

Let me turn now to the post-Enlightenment epistemological Paradigm-Shift. Whereas our Western notion of truth was largely absolute, static, and monologic or exclusive up to the past century, it has since become deabsolutized, dynamic and dialogic- -in a word, it has become "relational."<sup>10</sup> This "new" view of truth came about in at least six different, but closely related, ways. In brief they are:

1. Historicism: Truth is deabsolutized by the perception that reality is always described in terms of the circumstances of the time in which it is expressed.
2. Intentionality: Seeking the truth with the intention of acting accordingly deabsolutizes the

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9 I am grateful for this exemplary comparison to Henry Rosemont, who I met when he was the Fulbright Professor of Philosophy at Fudan University, Shanghai, 1982-84.

10 Already two millennia and more ago some Hindu and Buddhist thinkers held a nonabsolutistic epistemology, but that fact had no significant impact on the West; because of the cultural eclipse of those civilizations in the modern period and the dominance of the Western scientific worldview, these ancient nonabsolutistic epistemologies have until now played no significant role in the emerging global society. Although in the context of dialogue, they should in the future.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century Eastern thought has become increasingly better known in the West, and proportionately influential. This knowledge and influence appears to be increasing geometrically in recent decades. It is even beginning to move into the hardest of our so-called hard sciences, nuclear physics, as evidenced by the popular book of the theoretical physicist Fritjof Capra, *THE TAO OF PHYSICS* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2nd ed., 1983).

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3. Sociology of knowledge: Truth is deabsolutized in terms of geography, culture, and social standing.
4. Limits of language: Truth as the meaning of something and especially as talk about the transcendent is deabsolutized by the nature of human language.
5. Hermeneutics: All truth, all knowledge, is seen as interpreted truth, knowledge, and hence is deabsolutized by the observer who is always also interpreter.
6. Dialogue: The knower engages reality in a dialogue in a language the knower provides, thereby deabsolutizing all statements about reality. Before the nineteenth century in Europe *truth*, that is, a statement about reality, was conceived in quite an absolute, static, exclusivistic either-or manner. If something was true at one time, it was always true; not only empirical facts but also the meaning of things or the oughtness that was said to flow from them were thought of in this way. For example, if it was true for the Pauline writer to say in the first century that women should keep silence in the church, then it was always true that women should keep silence in the church; or if it was true for Pope Boniface VIII to state in 1302, "we declare, state, and define that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of all human beings that they submit to the Roman Pontiff,"<sup>11</sup> then it was always true that they need do so. At bottom, the notion of truth was based exclusively on the Aristotelian principle of contradiction: a thing could not be true and not true in the same way at the same time. Truth was defined by way of exclusion; A was A because it could be shown not to be not-A. Truth was thus understood to be absolute, static, exclusivistically either-or. This is a *classicist* or *absolutist* view of truth.

1. Historicism: In the nineteenth century many scholars came to perceive all statements about the truth of the meaning of something as partially the products of their historical circumstances. Those concrete circumstances helped determine the fact that the statement under study was even called forth, that it was couched in particular intellectual categories (for example, in abstract Platonic or concrete legal language), in particular literary forms (for example, mythic or metaphysical language), and in particular psychological settings (such as a polemic response to a specific attack). These scholars argued that only if the truth statements were placed in their historical situation, in their historical *Sitz im Leben*, could they be properly understood. The understanding of the text could be found only in *context*. To express that same original meaning in a later *Sitz im Leben* one would require a proportionately different statement. Thus, all statements about the meaning of things were now seen to be deabsolutized in terms of time. This is a *historical* view of truth. Clearly at its heart is a notion of *relationality*: Any statement about the truth of the meaning of something has to be understood in relationship to its historical context.

2. Intentionality: Later thinkers like Max Scheler added a corollary to this historicizing of knowledge; it concerned not the past but the future. Such scholars also saw truth as having an element of intentionality at its base, as being oriented ultimately toward action, praxis. They argued that we perceive certain things as questions to be answered and set goals to pursue specific

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<sup>11</sup> Boniface VIII, "Unam sanctam," in J. Neuener and J. Depuis, eds., THE TEACHING OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1972), no. 875, p. 211.

knowledge because we wish to do something about those matters; we intend to live according to the truth and meaning that we hope to discern in the answers to the questions we pose, in the knowledge we decide to seek. The truth of the meaning of things was thus seen as deabsolutized by the action-oriented intentionality of the thinker-speaker. This is an *intentional* or *praxis* view of truth, and it too is basically *relational*: A statement has to be understood in relationship to the action-oriented intention of the speaker.

3. The sociology of knowledge: Just as statements of truth about the meaning of things were seen by some thinkers to be historically deabsolutized in time, so too, starting in this century with scholars like Karl Mannheim, such statements began to be seen as deabsolutized by such things as the culture, class and gender of the thinker-speaker, regardless of time. All reality was said to be perceived from the perspective of the perceiver's own world view. Any statement of the truth of the meaning of something was seen to be perspectival, "standpoint-bound," *standortgebunden*, as Karl Mannheim put it, and thus deabsolutized. This is a *perspectival* view of truth and is likewise *relational*: All statements are fundamentally related to the standpoint of the speaker.

4. The limitations of language: Following Ludwig Wittgenstein and others, many thinkers have come to see that any statement about the truth of things can be at most only a partial description of the reality it is trying to describe. Although reality can be seen from an almost limitless number of perspectives, human language can express things from only one, or perhaps a very few, perspectives at once. If this is now seen to be true of what we call "scientific truths," it is much more true of statements about the truth of the meaning of things. The very fact of dealing with the truth of the "meaning" of something indicates that the knower is essentially involved and hence reflects the perspectival character of all such statements. A statement may be true, of course--it may accurately describe the extramental reality it refers to--but it will always be cast in particular categories, language, concerns, etc., of a particular "standpoint," and in that sense will be limited, deabsolutized. This also is a *perspectival* view of truth, and therefore also *relational*.

This limited and limiting, as well as liberating, quality of language is especially clear in talk of the transcendent. The transcendent is by definition that which "goes beyond" our experience. Any statements about the transcendent must thus be deabsolutized and limited far beyond the perspectival character seen in ordinary statements. THE AGE OF GLOBAL DIALOGUE Leonard Swidler, Temple University, Philadelphia, Penn., USA

5. Hermeneutics: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur recently led the way in developing the science of hermeneutics, which, by arguing that all knowledge of a text is at the same time an *interpretation* of the text, further deabsolutizes claims about the "true" meaning of the text. But this basic insight goes beyond knowledge of texts and applies to all knowledge.

Some of the key notions here can be compressed in the following mantra (a mantra is a seven-syllable phrase which capsulizes an insight): "Subject, object, two is one." The whole of hermeneutics is here *in nuce*: All knowledge is interpreted knowledge; the perceiver is part of the perceived; the subject is part of the object. When the object of study is some aspect of humanity the obvious fact that the observer is also the observed "deobjectivizes," deabsolutizes, the resultant knowledge, truth. But the same thing is also fundamentally true of all knowledge, of all truth, even

of the natural sciences, for the various aspects of nature are observed only through the categories we ourselves provide, within the horizons we establish, under the paradigms we utilize, in response to the questions we raise, and in relationship to the connections we make--a further deabsolutizing of truth, even of the "hard" sciences.

"Subject, object, two is one." Knowledge comes from the subject perceiving the object, but since the subject is also part of its object, as described above the two are in that sense one. In knowing also the object in some form is taken up into the subject, and thus again the two are one. And yet, there is also a radical twoness there, for it is the very *process* of the two *becoming* one--or the two being perceived as one, or, even better, the becoming aware that the two, which are very really two, are also in fact *on another level* very really one--that we call knowing.

This is an *interpretive* view of truth. It is clear that *relationality* pervades this hermeneutical, interpretative, view of truth. (It is interesting to note that one dimension of this interpretive understanding of truth can already be found in St. Thomas Aquinas, who states that "things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower--*cognita sunt in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis*."<sup>12</sup>) The sixth category, a dialogical understanding of truth, will be discussed below. In sum, our understanding of truth and reality has been undergoing a radical shift. This new paradigm which is being born understands all statements about reality, especially about the meaning of things, to be historical, intentional, perspectival, partial, interpretive and dialogic. What is common to all these qualities is the notion of *relationality*, that is, that all expressions or understandings of reality are in some fundamental way related to the speaker or knower.

#### **4. The Copernican Turn in the Catholic Church**

As a Catholic theologian let me lift up for brief examination my own religious community. The Catholic Church offers a clear example of the post-Enlightenment Paradigm-Shift on a global communal level. A major paradigm shift has also occurred in the Catholic Church in this century. The 1960s were a momentous turning-point decade for the entire world: 1) American Catholics broke out of their ghetto in the election of President Kennedy; 2) the American civil rights movement began a transformation of the Western psyche; 3) the anti-war, environmentalist, anti-Establishment and related movements in the West brought the transformation to a fever pitch; 4) through Vatican Council II (1962-65) the Catholic Church leapt into modernity, and edged even beyond.

The Copernican turn that occurred in the Catholic Church at Vatican II took place in five major ways:

##### a) The turn toward freedom

The image Catholicism projected at the end of the 1950s was of a giant monolith, a community of hundreds of millions who held obedience in both action and thought as the highest virtue. If the pope said, "have babies," Catholics had babies; if he said, "don't associate with Protestants and Jews," Catholics avoided them like the plague; if he said, "believe in papal infallibility, in Marian

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas, SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, II-II, Q. 1, a. 2.

dogmas," they believed. For a hundred years (but really not much more than that!) Catholics were treated like children in the Church, acted like children, and thought of themselves as children.

With the Second Vatican Council, however, this very unfree image, and reality, was utterly transformed. Suddenly it seemed humanity, including Catholics, became aware of their "coming of age," hence, their freedom and responsibility. This was clearly expressed in many places, but perhaps nowhere clear than in the "Declaration on Religious Liberty."

b) The turn toward the historical/dynamic

For centuries the thinking of official Catholicism was dominated by a static understanding of reality; it resisted not only the democratic and human rights movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also the growing historical, dynamic way of understanding the world, including religious thought.

That changed dramatically with Vatican II where the historical, dynamic view of reality and doctrine was officially fully embraced (unfortunately the present leadership largely resists that radical turn).<sup>13</sup>

c) The turn toward inner reform

Since the sixteenth century, inside the Catholic Church even the word "reform" was forbidden, to say nothing of the reality (there were periods of notable exception<sup>14</sup>, but they were largely obliterated--even from Catholic church history textbooks!). At the beginning of the twentieth century Pope Pius X, leapfrogging back to his prior predecessor, Pope Pius XI (pronounced in Italian, "Pio No-no"), launched the heresy-hunting Inquisition of Anti-Modernism, crushing all creative thought in Catholicism for decades. In the middle of the twentieth century leading theologians were again censured and silenced (e.g., Jean Danielou, Henri de Lubac, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, John Courtney Murray, Karl Rahner).

But Pope Saint John XXIII (so canonized by the traditional method of popular acclamation by the "Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church--ARCC) burst those binding chains and called the Second Vatican Council. He spoke about "throwing open the windows of the Vatican" to let in fresh thought, about *Aggiornamento*, about bringing the Church "up to date."

Indeed, the Vatican II documents even used that neuralgic word "reformation": "Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need"; "ALL [Catholics] are led to...wherever necessary, undertake with vigor the task of renewal and reform," and insisted that ALL Catholics' "primary duty is to make an honest and careful appraisal of whatever needs to be renewed and achieved in the Catholic household itself" (Decree on Ecumenism).

d) The turn toward this world

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13 See, e.g., Leonard Swidler and Hans Küng, eds., THE CHURCH IN ANGUISH: HAS THE VATICAN BETRAYED VATICAN II? (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); Bernard H ring, MY WITNESS FOR THE CHURCH, Translation and Introduction by Leonard Swidler (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992).

14 See, e.g., Leonard Swidler, FREEDOM IN THE CHURCH, (Dayton: Pflaum Press, 1969); Leonard Swidler, AUFKLÄRUNG CATHOLICISM 1780-1850, (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978); Leonard and Arlene Swidler, BISHOPS AND PEOPLE, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).



Until very recently the term "salvation" was understood exclusively to mean going to heaven after death; its root meaning from *salus* of a "full, healthy life" was largely lost in Christianity after the third century.<sup>15</sup> Marx was not far from the mark when he claimed that Christianity (and religion in general) was mainly concerned about "pie in the sky bye and bye." But that focus shifted radically with Vatican II, especially as reflected in the document "The Church in the Modern World," which in effect, though without the name, launched Liberation Theology.

e) The turn toward dialogue

For centuries, especially since the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church has been largely trapped in a kind of solipsism, talking only to itself, and shaking its finger at the rest of the world. When, e.g., a committee of Protestant churchmen shortly after World War I visited Pope Benedict XV to invite the Catholic Church to join in launching the Ecumenical Movement to work for Church reunion, he told them that he was happy they were finally concerned about Church unity, but that he already had the solution to the problem of Christian division: "Come home to mama!" The forbidding of Catholic participation in dialogue was subsequently constantly repeated (e.g., 1928 *Mortalium animos*, 1948 "Monitum," 1949 "Instructio," 1954 barring of Catholics at the Evanston, IL World Council of Churches World Assembly).

Again, Saint John XXIII and Vatican II changed all that navel-staring radically. Ecumenism was now not only not forbidden, but was said to "pertain to the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone" (Decree on Ecumenism). Pope Paul VI issued his first encyclical (*Ecclesiam suam*, 1964), specifically on dialogue:

Dialogue is demanded nowadays.... It is demanded by the dynamic course of action which is changing the face of modern society. It is demanded by the pluralism of society and by the maturity man has reached in this day and age. Be he religious or not, his secular education has enabled him to think and speak and conduct a dialogue with dignity. This turn toward dialogue naturally was directed toward the first obvious dialogue partners for Catholics: Fellow Christians, Protestants and Orthodox. But this turn from an inward gazing outward had its own inner dynamic: why stop at talking with Protestants and Orthodox; why not continue on to dialogue with Jews, and then Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc., and even non-believers? And so it is now happening in an explosion of interreligious/interideological dialogue of exponentially increasing magnitude. One need only look at the flood of books now appearing in the field.

Moreover, this dimension of the Copernican turn will be at least as radical in its creative transformation of Catholic, Christian, self-understanding as the other three, and hence will profoundly affect all aspects of Christian life. For example, since in this new Age of Dialogue we Christians understand that our Jewish or Muslim neighbors can be "saved" without becoming Christian, our relationship to them ceases being one of "convert-making," and becomes one of dialogue and cooperation.

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15 For a discussion of "salvation" and other key terms about the ultimate goal of life see, Leonard Swidler, *THE MEANING OF LIFE? SOME ANSWERS AT THE EDGE OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992).

## 5. The Second Axial Period<sup>16</sup>

It was Karl Jaspers, the German philosopher, who some forty- five years ago pointed out the significance of this phenomenon in his book *The Origin and Goal of History*<sup>17</sup>. He called this period from 800-200 B.C.E. the Axial Period because "it gave birth to everything which, since then, man has been able to be." It is here in this period "that we meet with the most deepcut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short, we may style this the `Axial Period.'"<sup>18</sup> Although the leaders who effected this change were philosophers and religious teachers, the change was so radical that it affected all aspects of culture, for it transformed consciousness itself. It was within the horizons of this form of consciousness that the great civilizations of Asia, the Middle East, and Europe developed. Although within these horizons many developments occurred through the subsequent centuries, the horizons themselves did not change. It was this form of consciousness which spread to other regions through migration and explorations, thus becoming the dominant, though not exclusive, form of consciousness in the world. To this day, whether we have been born and raised in the culture of China, India, Europe, or the Americas, we bear the structure of consciousness that was shaped in this Axial Period.

What is this structure of consciousness and how does it differ from pre-Axial consciousness? Prior to the Axial Period the dominant form of consciousness was cosmic, collective, tribal, mythic, and ritualistic. This is the characteristic form of consciousness of primal peoples. It is true that between these traditional cultures and the Axial Period there emerged great empires in Egypt, China, and Mesopotamia, but they did not yet produce the full consciousness of the Axial Period.

The consciousness of the tribal cultures was intimately related to the cosmos and to the fertility cycles of nature. Thus there was established a rich and creative harmony between primal peoples and the world of nature, a harmony which was explored, expressed, and celebrated in myth and ritual. Just as they felt themselves part of nature, so they experienced themselves as part of the tribe. It was precisely the web of interrelationships within the tribe that sustained them psychologically, energizing all aspects of their lives. To be separated from the tribe threatened them with death, not only physical but psychological as well. However, their relation to the collectivity often did not extend beyond their own tribe, for they often looked upon other tribes as hostile. Yet within their tribe they felt organically related to their group as a whole, to the life cycles of birth and death and to nature and the cosmos.

The Axial Period ushered in a radically new form of consciousness. Whereas primal consciousness was tribal, Axial consciousness was individual. "Know thyself" became the watchword of Greece; the Upanishads identified the *atman*, the transcendent center of the self. The Buddha charted the way of individual enlightenment; the Jewish prophets awakened individual moral responsibility.

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16 I am in this section especially indebted to Ewert Cousins' essay "Judaism-Christianity-Islam: Facing Modernity Together, JOURNAL OF ECUMENICAL STUDIES, 30:3-4 (Summer-Fall, 1993), pp. 417-425.

17 Karl Jaspers, VOM URSPRUNG UND ZIEL DER GESCHICHTE (Zurich: Artemis, 1949), pp. 19-43.

18 Ibid., p. 19; trans. Michael Bullock, THE ORIGIN AND GOAL OF HISTORY (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), p. 1. For the ongoing academic discussion of Jaspers' position on the Axial Period, see WISDOM, REVELATION, AND DOUBT: PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRST MILLENNIUM B.C., DAEDALUS (Spring, 1975); and THE ORIGINS AND DIVERSITY OF AXIAL AGE CIVILIZATIONS, ed. S.N. Eisenstadt (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989).

This sense of individual identity, as distinct from the tribe and from nature, is the most characteristic mark of Axial consciousness. From this flow other characteristics: consciousness which is self-reflective, analytic, and which can be applied to nature in the form of scientific theories, to society in the form of social critique, to knowledge in the form of philosophy, to religion in the form of mapping an individual spiritual journey. This self-reflective, analytic, critical consciousness stood in sharp contrast to primal mythic and ritualistic consciousness. When self-reflective *logos* emerged in the Axial Period, it tended to oppose the traditional *mythos*. Of course, mythic and ritualistic forms of consciousness survive in the post-Axial Period even to this day, but they are often submerged, surfacing chiefly in dreams, literature, and art.

Following the lead of Ewert Cousins, if we shift our gaze from the first millennium B.C.E. to the eve of the twenty-first century, we can discern another transformation of consciousness, which is so profound and far-reaching that he calls it the Second Axial Period<sup>19</sup>. Like the first it is happening simultaneously around the earth, and like the first it will shape the horizon of consciousness for future centuries. Not surprisingly, too, it will have great significance for world religions, which were constituted in the First Axial Period. However, the new form of consciousness is different from that of the First Axial Period. Then it was individual consciousness, now it is global consciousness.

In order to understand better the forces at work in the Second Axial Period, Cousins draws from the thought of the paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin<sup>20</sup>. In the light of his research in evolution, he charted the development of consciousness from its roots in the geosphere and biosphere and into the future. In a process which he calls "planetization," he observed that a shift in the forces of evolution had occurred over the past hundred years. This shift is from divergence to convergence. When human beings first appeared on this planet, they clustered together in family and tribal units, forming their own group identity and separating themselves from other tribes. In this way humans diverged, creating separate nations and a rich variety of cultures. However, the spherical shape of the earth prevented unlimited divergence. With the increase in population and the rapid development of communication, groups could no longer remain apart. After dominating the process for millennia, the forces of divergence have been superseded by those of convergence. This shift to convergence is drawing the various cultures into a single planetized community. Although we have been conditioned by thousands of years of divergence, we now have no other course open to us but to cooperate creatively with the forces of convergence as these are drawing us toward global consciousness<sup>21</sup>.

According to Teilhard this new global consciousness will not level all differences among peoples; rather it will generate what he calls creative unions in which diversity is not erased but intensified. His understanding of creative unions is based on his general theory of evolution and the dynamic

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19 For a more comprehensive treatment of Cousins' concept of the Second Axial Period, see his book *CHRIST OF THE 21ST CENTURY* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1992).

20 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *LE PHENOMENE HUMAIN* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1955); see also *L'ACTIVATION DE L'ENERGIE* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1962) and *L'ENERGIE HUMAINE* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962). For a more detailed study of Teilhard's thought in relation to the second Axial Period, see Ewert Cousins' paper "Teilhard de Chardin and the Religious Phenomenon," delivered in Paris at the International Symposium on the Occasion of the Centenary of the Birth of Teilhard de Chardin, organized by UNESCO, September 16-18, 1981, UNESCO Document Code: SS.82/WS/36.

21 Teilhard, *LE PHENOMENE HUMAIN*, pp. 268-269.

which he observes throughout the universe. From the geosphere to the biosphere to the realm of consciousness, a single process is at work, which he articulates as the law of "complexity-consciousness" and "union differentiates." "In any domain," he says, "whether it be the cells of a body, the members of a society or the elements of a spiritual synthesis--*union differentiates*."<sup>22</sup> From subatomic particles to global consciousness, individual elements unite in what Teilhard calls center to center unions. By touching each other at the creative core of their being, they release new energy which leads to more complex units. Greater complexity leads to greater interiority which, in turn, leads to more creative unions. Throughout the process, the individual elements do not lose their identity, but rather deepen and fulfill it through union. "Following the confluent orbits of their center," he says, "the grains of consciousness do not tend to lose their outlines and blend, but, on the contrary, to accentuate the depth and incommunicability of their *egos*. The more 'other' they become in conjunction, the more they find themselves as 'self.'"<sup>23</sup> At this point of history, because of the shift from divergence to convergence, the forces of planetization are bringing about an unprecedented complexification of consciousness through the convergence of cultures and religions.

In the light of Teilhard's thought, then, we can better understand the meeting of religions on the eve of the twenty-first century. The world religions are the product of the First Axial Period and the forces of divergence. Although in the first millennium B.C.E., there was a common transformation of consciousness, it occurred in diverse geographical regions within already differentiated cultures. In each case the religion was shaped by this differentiation in its origin, and developed along differentiated lines. This produced a remarkable richness of spiritual wisdom, of spiritual energies and of religious-cultural forms to express, preserve, and transmit this heritage. However, now that the forces of divergence have shifted to convergence, the religions must meet each other in center to center unions, discovering what is most authentic in each other, thereby releasing creative energy toward a more complexified form of religious consciousness.

Such a creative encounter has been called the "dialogic dialogue" to distinguish it from the dialectic dialogue in which one tries to refute the claims of the other<sup>24</sup>. This dialogic dialogue has three phases:

1. The partners meet each other in an atmosphere of mutual understanding, ready to alter misconceptions about each other and eager to appreciate the values of the other.
2. The partners are mutually enriched, by passing over into the consciousness of the other so that each can experience the other's values from within the other's perspective. This can be enormously enriching, for often the partners discover in another tradition values which are submerged or only inchoate in their own. It is important at this point to respect the autonomy of the other tradition: in Teilhard's terms, to achieve union in which differences are valued as a basis of creativity.
3. If such a creative union is achieved, then the religions will have moved into the complexified form of consciousness that will be characteristic of the twenty-first century. This will be

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22 Ibid., p. 292; trans. Bernard Wall, *THE PHENOMENON OF MAN* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 262.

23 Ibid.

24 On the concept of dialogic dialogue, see Raimundo Panikkar, *MYTH, FAITH AND HERMENEUTICS* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 241-245; see also his *THE INTRARELIGIOUS DIALOGUE* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

complexified global consciousness, not a mere universal, undifferentiated, abstract consciousness. It will be global through the global convergence of cultures and religions and complexified by the dynamics of dialogic dialogue. This global consciousness, complexified through the meeting of cultures and religions, is only one characteristic of the Second Axial Period. The consciousness of this period is global in another sense, namely, in rediscovering its roots in the earth. At the very moment when the various cultures and religions are meeting each other and creating a new global community, our life on the planet is being threatened. The very tools which we have used to bring about this convergence-- industrialization and technology--are undercutting the biological support system that sustains life on our planet. The future of consciousness, even life on the earth, is shrouded in a cloud of uncertainty.

Cousins is not suggesting a romantic attempt to live in the past, rather that the evolution of consciousness proceeds by way of recapitulation. Having developed self-reflective, analytic, critical consciousness in the First Axial Period, we must now, while retaining these values, reappropriate and integrate into that consciousness the collective and cosmic dimensions of the pre-Axial consciousness. We must recapture the unity of tribal consciousness by seeing humanity as a single tribe. And we must see this single tribe related organically to the total cosmos.

This means that the consciousness of the twenty-first century will be global from two perspectives:

1. from a horizontal perspective, cultures and religions must meet each other on the surface of the globe, entering into creative encounters that will produce a complexified collective consciousness;
2. from a vertical perspective, they must plunge their roots deep into the earth in order to provide a stable and secure base for future development. This new global consciousness must be organically ecological, supported by structures that will insure justice and peace. The voices of the oppressed must be heard and heeded: the poor, women, racial and ethnic minorities. These groups, along with the earth itself, can be looked upon as the prophets and teachers of the Second Axial Period. This emerging twofold global consciousness is not only a creative possibility to enhance the twenty-first century; it is an absolute necessity if we are to survive.

## **6. The Age of Global Dialogue**

Ewert Cousins has basically affirmed everything Hans Küng has described as the newly emerging contemporary paradigm-shift, but he sees the present shift as much more profound than simply another in a series of major paradigm-shifts of human history. He sees the current transformation as a shift of the magnitude of the First Axial Period which will similarly reshape human consciousness. I too want to basically affirm what Küng sees as the emerging contemporary Major Paradigm-Shift, as well as with Cousins that this shift is so profound as to match in magnitude the transformation of human consciousness of the Axial Period, so that it should be referred to as a Second Axial Period.

More than that, however, I am persuaded that what humankind is entering into now is not just the

latest in a long series of major paradigm-shifts, as Hans Küng has so carefully and clearly analyzed. I am also persuaded that it is even more than the massive move into the consciousness transforming Second Axial Period, as Ewert Cousins has so thoroughly demonstrated. Beyond these two radical shifts, though of course including both of them, humankind is emerging out of the "from-the-beginning-till-now" millennia-long "Age of Monologue" into the newly dawning "Age of Dialogue."

The turn toward dialogue is, in my judgment, *the most fundamental*, the most radical and utterly transformative of the key elements of the newly emerging paradigm, which Hans Küng has so penetratingly outlined, and which Ewert Cousins also perceptively discerns as one of the central constituents of the Second Axial Age. However, that shift from monologue to dialogue constitutes such a radical reversal in human consciousness, is so utterly new in the history of humankind *from the beginning*, that it must be designated as literally "revolutionary," that is, it turns everything absolutely around.

Up until almost the present just about *all* were convinced that they alone had the absolute truth. Because all were certain that they had the truth--otherwise they wouldn't have held that position--therefore others who thought differently necessarily held falsehood. But with the growing understanding that all perceptions of and statements about reality were--even if true--necessarily limited (the opposite of "ab-solute," that is, literally "un-limited"), the permission, and even the necessity, for dialogue with those who thought differently from us became increasingly apparent.

Thus dialogue--which is a conversation with those who think differently, the *primary purpose* of which is *for me* to learn from the other--is *a whole new way of thinking in human history*.

At the heart of this new dialogic way of thinking is the basic insight that I learn not by being merely passively open or receptive to, but by being in dialogue with, extramental reality. I not only "hear" or receive reality, but I also--and, I think, first of all--"speak" to reality. I ask it questions, I stimulate it to speak back to me, to answer my questions. In the process I give reality the specific categories and language in which to respond to me. The "answers" that I receive back from reality will always be in the language, the thought categories, of the questions I put to it. It can "speak" to me, can really communicate with my mind, only in a language and categories that I understand.

When the speaking, the responding, grow less and less understandable to me, if the answers I receive are sometimes confused and unsatisfying, then I probably need to learn to speak a more appropriate language when I put questions to reality. If, for example, I ask the question, "How far is yellow?" of course I will receive an non-sense answer. Or if I ask questions about living things in mechanical categories, I will receive confusing and unsatisfying answers. Thus, I will receive confusing and unsatisfying answers to questions about human sexuality if I use categories that are solely physical-biological; witness the absurdity of the answer that birth control is forbidden by the natural law--the question falsely assumes that the nature of humanity is merely physical-biological. This dialogic view of truth, like the five other shifts in modern epistemology described above, is *relational*, as its very name, *dia-logos*, indicates.

With the new and irreversible understanding of the meaning of truth resulting from all the above-outlined epistemological advances, culminating in the insight of a dialogic view of truth, the modern

critical thinker has undergone a radical Copernican turn. Recall that just as the vigorously resisted shift in astronomy from geocentrism to heliocentrism revolutionized that science, the paradigm or model shift in the understanding of truth statements has revolutionized all the humanities, including theology-ideology. The macro-paradigm or macro-model with which critical thinkers operate today (or the "horizon" within which they operate, to use Bernard Lonergan's term) is, as noted, characterized by historical, social, linguistic, hermeneutical, praxis and dialogical --*relational*--consciousness. This paradigm or model shift is far advanced among thinkers and doers; but as in the case of Copernicus, and even more dramatically of Galileo, there of course are still many resisters in positions of great institutional power.

At the same time, with the deabsolutized view of the truth of the meaning of things we come face to face with the specter of relativism, the opposite pole of absolutism. Unlike *relationality*, a neutral term which merely denotes the quality of being in relationship, *relativism*, like so many "isms," is a basically negative term. If it can no longer be claimed that any statement of the truth of the meaning of things is absolute, totally objective, because the claim does not square with our experience of reality, it is equally impossible to claim that every statement of the truth of the meaning of things is completely relative, totally subjective, for that also does not square with our experience of reality, and of course it would logically lead to an atomizing isolation which would stop all discourse, all statements to others.

Our perception, and hence description, of reality is like our view of an object in the center of a circle of viewers. My view and description of the object, or reality, may well be true, but it will not include what someone on the other side of the circle perceives and describes, which also may well be true. So, neither of our perceptions and descriptions of reality can be total, complete--"absolute" in that sense--or "objective" in the sense of not in any way being dependent on a "subject" or viewer. At the same time, however, it is also obvious that there is an "objective," doubtless "true" aspect to each perception and description, even though each is relational to the perceiver-"subject."

At the same time that the always partial, perspectival, deabsolutized view of all truth statements is recognized, the common human basis for perceptions / descriptions of reality and values must also be kept in mind. All human beings experience certain things in common. We all experience our bodies, pain, pleasure, hunger, satiation. Our cognitive faculties perceive such structures in reality as variation and symmetries in pitch, color and form. All humans experience affection and dislike. Here, and in other commonalities, we find the bases for building a universal, fundamental epistemology, aesthetics, value system. Although it will be vital to distinguish carefully between those human experiences / perceptions which come from nature and those which come from nurture, it will at times, however, be difficult to discern precisely where the distinction lies. In fact, all of our "natural" experiences are more or less shaped by our "nurturing" because all of our experience and knowledge are interpreted through the lens of our "nurturing" structures.

But if we can no longer hold to an absolutist view of the truth of the meaning of things, we must take certain steps so as not to be logically forced into the silence of total relativism. First, besides striving to be as accurate and fair as possible in gathering and assessing information and submitting it to the critiques of our peers and other thinkers and scholars, we need also to dredge out, state

clearly, and analyze our own pre-suppositions--a constant, ongoing task. Even in this of course we will be operating from a particular "standpoint."

Therefore, we need, secondly, to complement our constantly critiqued statements with statements from different "standpoints." That is, we need to engage in dialogue with those who have differing cultural, philosophical, social, religious viewpoints so as to strive toward an ever fuller perception of the truth of the meaning of things. If we do not engage in such dialogue we will not only be trapped within the perspective of our own "standpoint," but we will now also be aware of our lack. We will no longer with integrity be able to remain deliberately turned in on ourselves. Our search for the truth of the meaning of things makes it a necessity for us as human beings to engage in dialogue. Knowingly to refuse dialogue today would be an act of fundamental human irresponsibility--in Judeo-Christian-Muslim terms, a sin.

## 7. Conclusion

To sum up and reiterate: In the latter part of the twentieth century humankind is undergoing a Macro-Paradigm-Shift (Hans Küng). More than that, at this time humankind is moving into a transformative shift in consciousness of the magnitude of the Axial Period (800-200 B.C.E.) so that we must speak of the emerging of the Second Axial Period (Ewert Cousins). Even more profound, however, now at the edge of the Third Millennium humankind is slipping out of the shadowy Age of Monologue, where it has been since its beginning, into the dawn of the Age of Dialogue (Leonard Swidler). Into this new Age of Dialogue Küng's Macro-Paradigm-Shift and Cousins' Second Axial Period are sublated (*aufgehoben*, in Hegel's terminology), that is, taken up and transformed. Moreover, as Ewert Cousins has already detailed, humankind's consciousness is becoming increasingly global. Hence, our dialogue partners necessarily must also be increasingly global. In this new Age of Dialogue dialogue on a global basis is now not only a possibility, it is a necessity. As I noted in a title of a recent book--humankind is faced with ultimately with two choices: Dialogue or Death!<sup>25</sup>

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25 Leonard Swidler et alii, DEATH OR DIALOGUE (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).