So What’s New with the New Paradigm? Thoughts on the context of theology

by Duncan Reid

Christian Theology Finds Itself in a world that has changed radically in recent decades. Europe no longer provides the predominant understanding of human culture, and Newtonian physics no longer provides the predominant understanding of the cosmos. If it is to speak to people in this new world, theology needs to take these two interrelated factors into account, and the relationship between them.

The nature of paradigm change

The term ‘paradigm’ is employed by Thomas Kuhn to refer to a set of accepted assumptions or ground rules by which science normally works. The term is very general and has been widely criticised for vagueness. Kuhn has responded to these criticisms with several attempts to clarify his basic argument that at certain significant moments in the history of science, an accepted paradigm will be replaced by a new paradigm. Kuhn defines his central term in this way: ‘A paradigm is not a theory or a leading idea. It is an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on, shared by the members of a given community’. This definition served as the basis for a symposium in Tübingen in 1983 chaired by Hans Küng and David Tracy on the question as to how far the concept of paradigm change is useful in theology.

Küng argues that the task of theology, like science, is carried out within certain conventions, including cumulative growth in knowledge based on certain classic texts, the solution of certain problems and resistance to change in the established paradigm. This method leads inevitably to times of crisis, when the predominant paradigm fails to solve new problems. This does not necessarily lead to the replacement of the paradigm at once. A new ‘paradigm candidate’ must be available and there may be more than one candidate. A new paradigm candidate may then be absorbed into the old paradigm, thus never becoming a new paradigm in its own right; it may be shelved until later, or it may succeed in replacing the old paradigm. Even in the latter case, there are always elements of continuity. There is such a thing as ‘tradition in revolution’, despite Umberto Eco’s relegation of it to his fictional department of oxymorons. This is especially true in theology, where a new paradigm, however revolutionary, consists necessarily in a reinterpretation or a ‘new formulation’ of tradition. Another notable feature of paradigm change (and this is equally true of scientific as of theological revolutions) is that it is never purely rational: it always involves some sort of ‘conversion experience’.

The participants in the Tübingen symposium express general agreement that we are living in a world that has changed. There is evidence, however, of different understandings as to the nature and magnitude of the present paradigm shift. Hans Küng, for example, believes that there have been a number of paradigm changes in the history of Christianity: the early Christian-Apocalyptic model, the Patristic-Hellenistic model, the Medieval-Western model, the
Reformation model, and the Modern-Enlightenment model, all represent distinct theological paradigms, as does the contemporary diversity of theologies. J.B. Metz sees the current paradigm change in more radical terms as only the second really revolutionary change in the history of Christian theology, the first being the change from the early Jewish-Christian paradigm to the Hellenistic-Christian paradigm. The new paradigm that now confronts us is something beyond any comparison with the various theological and ecclesial models of the past eighteen centuries: these are all sub-categories of Hellenistic Christianity. Underlying these differences in interpretation between Küng and Metz is a difference in focus, which in turn gives rise to differing assessments as to what it really is that makes our age so different from past ages.

The nature of the new paradigm: a shift on two levels of magnitude

The new worldview – not restricted here to theology, but in the world at large – can be considered under two headings. The first concerns a shift in political and cultural predominance away from Europe (including Europe’s anti-pole enclaves) and a sense of disillusionment with the whole European cultural tradition. The second concerns a change within the European scientific worldview and a sense of disillusionment with the technology it has given us.

'A paradigm is not a theory or a leading idea. It is an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on, shared by the members of a given community.'

(a) The crisis of European culture. In 1905 the Japanese Navy defeated the Russian Navy in the Strait of Tsushima. The technology and the uniforms on the two sides were not all that different, but the world was put on notice that Europe was no longer its centre. A non-European nation could affect the destiny of Europe. By the mid-century, many former European colonies had dispensed with or were well on their way to dispensing with European political hegemony. A younger generation of Third World leaders was to follow this up by dispensing with European cultural hegemony as well. Coinciding with this has been a change in consciousness in the First World itself: a realisation that the 'progress' of the last 200 years (both in its bourgeois-capitalist and its state-socialist forms) has been very much a mixed blessing. So we live in a world no longer dominated by one culture, but characterised by a constant meeting and mutual interpretation of cultures. In concrete terms, it is a global city, a world-wide community of increasingly urbanised peoples.

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(b) The crisis of the mechanistic cosmology. In 1905 Albert Einstein, at the time a young employee of the Swiss Patent Office in Berne, published a paper outlining his special theory of relativity. The concepts of time and space that had been considered axiomatic in the predominant cosmological paradigm of the previous two centuries were decisively called into question. The cosmology that was to be developed by physicists over the following decades was to judge the Newtonian mechanistic worldview ill-equipped to explain the nature of reality on very small (sub-atomic) and very large (inter-stellar) scales. The new physics, with support from parallel developments in biology and the social sciences, came to understand reality no longer simply in terms of disparate entities located in a 'container' form of space and externally related to one another, but as a complete network, the most basic elements of which were not entities or substances, but relationships. Reality was no longer to be
understood in terms of dualities of mind and matter, or
subject and object, but as a unity of matter merging into and
bringing forth mind; as inanimate matter blending into living
matter, as subject and object standing in an interdependent
relationship with one another. The observer, it was
discovered, affected the object observed—not just when an
anthropologist observes the interactions within a group of
people, but also when a physicist 'observes' or measures the
interactions of sub-atomic particles. Objectivity could no
longer be assured, and the physical sciences, 'the last
stronghold of intellectual absolutes', found themselves, in
Stephen Toulmin's words, 'engulfed in the same historical
flux as the human and social sciences'. All entities, even
inanimate entities, constituted as they were by their
'experiences' of being in relationship, could now be
understood as subjects which adapt to their environment.
Reality was no longer to be 'grasped' solely by analysis and
reduction to component parts. Understanding had to be
reinterpreted in a less dominating, more participatory way, as
the perception of parts interacting in the context of an
indivisible totality.

'That which we call fact, may well be a veil
spun by language to shroud the mind from
reality.'

Contemporary with the emergence of this post-modern
scientific worldview has been a sense of growing
dissillusionment at the role of science in the modern era, and
horror at its effects. A bare fifty years separates Munch's
prophetic scream from its actualisation in Hiroshima. And
this is to say nothing of the subsequent awakening to the
crisis in global ecology.

The shift in paradigms as a context for theology
A new worldview has emerged in the course of this century,
though there were visionaries who saw the writing on the
wall before then. It represents a decisive break from the
modern era in world history (i.e. from the early 17th century
to the present century), an era in which the European middle
classes, aided by a scientific and technological revolution of
their own, and relatively unfettered by cosmological or
metaphysical constraints, were able to dominate the world
politically and culturally, and to exploit it economically.

It is hardly surprising that the theologies of the 1930s
and '40s gave us a theology of crisis, arising out of the
uneasy sense of living 'between the times'. At that time, it
was clear, at least to some, that the older worldview – the
older paradigm, in Kuhn's terms—was a thing of the past. It
was much less clear exactly what was to replace it. Although
it would be foolhardy to attempt a prediction of the future, I
think the outlines of the new paradigm are much more
clearly discernible now as we approach the end of the
century. But this does not necessarily make theological work
any easier. The common thread in the two crises I have
identified, is the loss of any sense of objective certainty,
whether in the political-cultural sphere, culminating in the
crisis of meaning itself, or in the physical sciences,
culminating in the prospect of human and environmental
suicide. It is no longer possible to take comfort in the
existence of an unquestioned absolute—whether in the form
of an ideal society and a corresponding philosophical
absolute, or in the form of an absolutely valid scientific
method and a corresponding empirical certainty. Rather,
'reality'—insofar as the term can be used at all—and the
debate is not over on this one—is seen to consist in
relationship.

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Christian faith, stemming though it does from a non-
European culture, adapted itself very successfully to the
thought-forms of Hellenistic culture. It has, as J. B. Metz has
pointed out, an 1800-year history of theological expression
in these thought forms. Christian faith also adapted itself
very successfully to the modern mechanistic worldview, which
itself was a cosmological paradigm within the larger
context of European cultural history. There is a 300-year
history of compliance with the presuppositions of this
mechanistic cosmology. Both these paradigms—European
culture with its Hellenistic roots and the mechanistic
cosmology of the early modern era—show similar degrees of
complexity, but on different levels of magnitude. There is a
similar difference in magnitude in the crises of these two
paradigms; in one case we are dealing with a shift in
paradigms within an overarching culture and directly
affecting only one aspect of that culture (viz. the scientific
worldview); in the other case we are faced with a crisis of the
culture as a whole.

It is a temptation of theology to offer solutions without
having properly listened to the question. Even so,
Christianity does have within it the memory of an older, non-
European cultural setting, and it does have resonances with
the relational, non-mechanistic worldview that is emerging at
present. Perhaps even more importantly, it has long-standing
familiarity with the idea that the source of all things may
indeed lie in relationships rather than entity, and that there
may be life beyond even the death of meaning.
Some theological implications
(a) Context and tradition—mutually critical correlations.
Edward Schillebeeckx, in his contribution to the Tübingen symposium, points out that the gospel is never found divorced from particular cultural contexts, as if there were such a thing as a ‘peeled substance’ of faith. Rather, he argues, the meaning of the gospel is only to be found on the level of the corresponding relation between the original message (tradition) and the always different situation. Christianity is not to be identified uncritically with a particular culture, and more particularly with that culture’s pre-understanding of the tradition. Christians need to re-interpret the tradition in the light of their own culture, and this includes the contemporary worldview. This is not simply to be taken as a compromise with culture, but, as Metz points out, is a sign of faith itself. If the gospel is not preached in a way that addresses people in their own idiom, or if the church continues to organise itself practically in a way more appropriate to an older worldview, the gospel will not be preached to people now, nor will the church be constituted for contemporary people as the body of Christ.

Contemporary hermeneutics works on the a priori that the meaning of a text does not lie ‘behind’ it in the mind or situation of the writer, but rather ‘in front of’ the text, in the dialogue between the text and its interpreter. We can apply this principle to the task of interpreting our theological traditions as Christians living in the context of a new paradigm. The meaning of our tradition is located in our dialogue with our tradition in what Schillebeeckx calls ‘mutually critical correlations’ between the Christian message and contemporary experience. The tradition will critically interpret contemporary culture, including its status as new paradigm, and our culture, including our experience of living in the new paradigm, will critically interpret the received tradition. Only through this on-going mutual

criticism do Christians remain a genuine ‘community of inquiry and commitment’. The alternatives would be a retreat into fundamentalism (which may well be the form taken by the predictable resistance to paradigm change), or a chaotic pluralism of theologies reflecting different ‘fads, fashions and virtuosities’, (again, a predictable feature of the crisis preceding a change in paradigms).

(b) Doctrinal statements and implicit axioms: the task of reformulation.
The modern worldview took as its starting point Descartes’ duality of the thinking subject and the object of thought. Theologians have followed this duality by sorting themselves into two major groups: those who emphasise the objectivity of doctrinal statements as propositional truth claims, and those who understand doctrinal statements subjectively as expressions of personal and communal experience. George Lindbeck has argued—convincingly, in my opinion—that neither approach is in itself satisfactory, but that doctrinal statements are to be understood as regulative statements somewhat similar to the grammatical rules that govern the use of a language. Lindbeck’s understanding of doctrine differs from a subjectivist understanding in that doctrine is not seen as the result of experience so much as that which gives meaning to experience. It differs from the objectivist understanding in that doctrinal statements are not seen as valid eternally and ontologically, but ‘intra-systematically’, that is to say, in context. Lindbeck’s approach allows for doctrinal innovation without condemning theology to subjectivism. Innovation proceeds not from new experiences, but, as in other forms of paradigm change (and let us not forget that ‘paradigm’ is essentially a grammatical term), ‘because a religious interpretive system . . . develops anomalies in its application in new contexts’, that is, because the old models fail to
meet new needs. More importantly, Lindbeck's approach seeks to go beyond the dualism inherent in most modern theological method. This means that the 'tradition' spoken of up to this point is, in fact, an abstraction: it is our construction or interpretation of what we have received. We need to dig beneath the surface to uncover, or attempt to uncover, the deep grammar or implicit axioms of Christian faith. This deep level of regulative ideas will not be identical with the doctrinal formulations we have inherited. In fact, once I formulate what I judge to be the regulative ideas or implicit axioms, my formulations have become ephemeral, valid perhaps for this context here and now, in which I live, but in need of reformulation for new contexts.

(c) Faith and science: dialogue of equal partners. Methodologically, hermeneutics plays a leading role in the response to paradigm change, not only for theology (the discipline in which the modern science of hermeneutics was developed), but also for the natural sciences. This means that theology and the natural sciences can and must enter into dialogue with each other as equal partners. Stephen Toulmin warns theologians against assembling ideas current among scientists and giving them the same authority they once gave to the ideas of Aristotle and Newton. This would simply be to lay up trouble for theology further down the track. One thing that is now clear is that science can no longer make absolute claims to permanent, objective truth. Science is always liable to crises. Scientific paradigms must henceforth always be considered provisional, and scientific theories must be considered 'either incomplete and consistent, or complete and inconsistent'. Contemporary science in fact makes room for theology to go about its task with a freedom not afforded it since the beginning of the modern era. There is among scientists a new acknowledgment of the limits of human knowledge and a recognition that all enquiries take place within the communities and according to the methodologies appropriate to the particular sort of knowledge. Religious life, for example, can legitimately be studied from within religious communities such a method can no longer automatically be dismissed as obscurantist.

**It is no longer possible to take comfort in the existence of an unquestioned absolute.**

**Conclusions**

A distinction has to be made between paradigm change in theology (in fact this may amount to little more than a periodisation of the history of theology), and paradigm change in the overall culture, and specifically the cosmology of that culture. The crises in culture as a whole and in cosmology form a context—an intellectual and existential milieu—in which theologians work and whose questions they are constrained to take seriously. The concept of paradigm change in theology is more problematic than that of paradigm change in science. Nevertheless, Küng and Metz have both suggested models of paradigm change within the history of Christian thought. They have shown, by the very divergence of their models, that our primary focus or concern will determine our periodisation of the history of theology, and will also affect the extent to which we address (or fail to address) the questions of our day—or more specifically, the question of God as it is posed within contemporary culture and worldview.

**It is a temptation of theology to offer solutions without having properly listened to the question.**

What we have experienced, in the course of this century, has been the coincidence of two quite different but interrelated paradigm shifts, one a larger-scale shift from a Eurocentric culture to a world culture, and the other a smaller-scale shift within the European scientific culture from a mechanistic to a relational cosmology. Metz, with his political perspective, has focussed on the larger-scale shift; Küng, with his more specific interest in applying Kuhn's theories of scientific paradigms to theology, has focussed on the smaller-scale shift. These shifts in paradigms are not 'large-' or 'small-' scale in any absolute sense. The smaller scale shift is just as complex on its own terms as the larger scale shift, in the context in which it takes place. These two paradigm shifts have been contemporaneous: they have taken place this century, and impinged on the vast majority of people, in fact, only since the mid-century. They have affected each other mutually. No Third-World country, no matter what its governing political theory may be, can ignore the reality of contemporary physics, nor are contemporary physicists content to isolate their inquiries from the larger questions of an often very eclectic metaphysic. The inter-relationship between these two contemporaneous paradigm shifts is such that we are justified in speaking of one paradigm shift but on two levels of magnitude. The theological analyses of Metz and Küng are both correct. Their differing conclusions about the magnitude of the present new paradigm are the result of different points of focus. Both are correct, too, in arguing that the theological task cannot be carried out today as if this shift in paradigms had not taken place.
References
5. This raises the question as to whether paradigms co-exist as, for example, N. Grethener argues in ‘What Must be Borne in Mind in a New Paradigm’ in Küng and Tracy, op. cit., pp. 226–229. This is really a problem as to how one defines paradigm and I do not see that Kuhn intends it to include contemporaneous schools of thought. See T.S. Kuhn, ‘Second Thoughts’, op. cit., p. 295, n. 4.
6. C. Birch, *On Purpose*, Kensington, NSW University Press, 1990, p. 64, suggests, for example, that there were three paradigm candidates competing for the dominance of science in the 17th century.
7. U. Ecot, *Foucault’s Pendulum*, London, Picador, 1990, pp. 74–75. An example of continuity within the current change of scientific paradigms is the continuing practical usefulness of Newtonian mechanics: ‘Quantum mechanics did not simply replace Newtonian mechanics. It subsumed it within a broader perspective; one that called into question certain metaphysical assumptions inherent in the Newtonian universe’. (C. Birch, op. cit., p. 78.)
10. For the idea that a change of paradigms represents a new world, see Kuhn, *Structure*, op. cit., chpt. 10.
13. It could be objected that this represents not so much a crisis of modern European culture as the possibility that non-European nations could become modernised and Europeanised. To this I would ask (i) Is the adoption of techniques to be equated with the adoption of a worldview?; and (ii) Does the modern European worldview in any case offer solutions now to the problems of the late 20th century?
16. Kuhn, *Structures*, op. cit., p. 77, notes that paradigm changes are regularly anticipated, but only actually occur when a new paradigm is needed. Leibnitz, for example, questioned Newton's concept of absolute space, but at a time when there was no practical need for a relativistic concept of space. In the same way, Kierkegaard, e.g., questioned Hegel's notion of the historical progress of European culture.
17. It should be noted, though, that it is too simple to regard the hellenisation of Christianity as a one-way process: it is equally true, and arguably truer, to say that Hellenistic culture was Christianised.
22. D. Tracy, op. cit., p. 62. The ‘community of enquiry’ also plays a role in Kuhn’s understanding of scientific knowledge.
25. T. Kuhn, *Structure*, op. cit., pp. 70-71: “proliferation of versions of a theory is a very usual symptom of crisis”.
27. Ibid., p. 39.
34. This paper represents part of a presentation at the National Tertiary Chaplain’s Conference in September 1991. While taking full responsibility for the views expressed here, I want to thank the participants in that conference for their comments and questions.