An Enquiry into the Paradigm Shifts in Contemporary Ethical-Theological Thinking: A Religio-Cultural Critique

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Introduction:

In last six years there has been cataclysmic changes in the world. After seventy-three years of open ideological confrontation, East European countries have changed their political alignments. Berlin Wall has come down and Germanys are united. The former U.S.S.R. has broken up into several fragments and its ideology has undergone seismic, sea-changes. Very few would have expected or anticipated such changes in such a short time even after the policy of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. In the last decade of the twentieth century the world has shifted to a unipolar situation with a single axis. There has been a movement from dictatorship/authoritarianism to a measure of social freedom/democracy. This freedom seems to be a freedom to move from socialism to some kind of capitalism — from state control to private control. This is quite a change for those socialist countries. Within India there is an ideological shift — from building a socialistic pattern of society, the present Government has embarked on a policy of privatisation and consequent liberalisation. Can liberalisation lead to the liberation of millions of this country suffering from economic deprivation, social discrimination and political powerlessness? Obviously, it is within this world-wide ideological shift we have to engage in a discourse on paradigm-shifts in the contemporary theological-ethical thinking affecting our religio-cultural life.

I would like to reflect on the topic taking into consideration the background of this theme, the missiological shifts of our time, the paradigm shift from a multi-religious perspective and then look at the theological-ethical issues that is affecting religio-cultural life.

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I. Background of Paradigm shift in Theology and Ethics:

In 1962, thirty two years ago, Thomas S. Kuhn began a new discussion about paradigms with regard to scientific theories. In 1982, twelve years ago, Hans Kung picked this up and engaged, in a systematic analysis from a theological-ethical perspective. In 1988 there was a Symposium on the subject at Tubingen. The papers were put together and published in 1989 as *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future.* Kuhn defined a paradigm as "an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a given community." Kuhn himself gave several meanings to it such as example, pattern, interpretative models, explanatory models. Paradigm changes are possible through a process of verification and falsification or refutation. Kung maintains that for paradigm formation it is necessary to go beyond logico-critical penetration to historical-hermeneutical investigation to psycho-sociological examination. These factors put together constitute epistemology. In science, paradigm shifts took place from Ptolemy to Copernicus to Newton to Einstein and even beyond. In Christian theology paradigm shifts have taken place from the Alexandrian to the Augustinian to the Thomist to the Reformed to the contemporary theologies. In the past Clement and Origin and others encouraged syncretism between Biblical revelation and Greek Philosophy. They encouraged free enquiry. According to Kung, these paradigm changes are provisional and not absolute, they are continuous and not discontinuous. There is some break, some freshness. Obviously, we need to question this concept of continuity from our perspective. Paradigm shifts take place as a result of 1) doubts of faith 2) non-scientific factors 3) religious conviction 4) conversion. In the light of paradigm shifts, Kung considers theology as "a dialectic of challenge and response." In this context he reminds us of Albert Einstein's affirmation, "smashing prejudices is more difficult than smashing atoms." This is very true in terms of theological-ethical prejudices and presuppositions or pretensions which prevent us from moving to a meaningful, relevant paradigm, thereby bringing about a radical religio-cultural transformation. There is a need of "mutually critical correlations" between the two constants — present world of experience in all its ambivalence, contingency and change and the inherited Judaeo-Christian tradition. Tracy has affirmed, "Interpretation is not something added to experience and understanding but is always already present as intrinsic to understanding itself."[1] We have to aim for an "emancipatory thrust" in paradigm building. Christianity has been distorted into ideologies of oppression and injustice resulting in the division between the winners versus losers; victors versus victims; másters versus slaves; empires versus

colonies and Superpower(s) versus under developed countries. Precisely in that context, we have to remind people of the subversive memories of God's identification with the struggles of victims everywhere in the mystery of Christ Jesus.[2] There has been paradigm shifts from Origen to Augustine, to Aquinas to Luther. Indeed the movement has been from the "Dogmatick to glaubenslehre." Martin Marty reminds us of the *communal* (not parochial) context in which paradigms must occur. Jerald Brauer's article, "New Paradigm for Theology" discusses about pluralism, encounter with religions and the viability of religion itself as the context of new paradigm. Moltmann helps us to see the movement from the denominational to the ecumenical, eurocentric age to the age of humanity as a whole (I am not sure about this), from the age of mechanistic domination of the world to the age of ecological worldwide community. Edward Schillebeckx reminds us that there is a diversity of paradigm-making in the New Testament and states categorically.

> In our times, an authentic faith in God only seems to be possible in the context of a *praxis* of liberation and of solidarity with the needy. It is in that *praxis* that the idea develops that God reveals himself as the mystery and the very heart of humanity's striving for liberation, wholeness and soundness. The concept of that mystery, which is at first concealed in the *paraxis* of liberation and of making whole, is only made explicit in the naming of that concept in the statement made in faith that God is the liberator, the promoter of what is good and the opponent of what is evil.[3]

Gregory Baum has written that theological professors must be in touch with the ground reality at the grassroots level and be humble enough to learn from the *people*. I find this very interesting and important for those of us who engage in this kind of exercise. Metz rightly states that theology is compelled to become political by its own logos.[4] There is a "shrinkage of the world" and the "exposure to other religions." John Cobb, in his own way, has taken cognizance of the third world reality. Leonard Boff asserts the need of a "Christology of liberation." The agonizing and dying of Christ of Latin American tradition is what Assmann calls a "Christ of the internalized impotence of the oppressed." Then Boff goes on to say,

> Redemption as it is proclaimed by the Christian faith is a comprehensive term. It must not be restricted to economic, political, social and ideological liberation. On the other hand, redemption is not realized without these things too.[5]

He takes up this position from the perspective of eschatology and Christology.

This book has helped me to understand the religio-cultural changes

that have occurred. The question is how far those shifts have affected our life and living leading to freedom and justice.

II. Paradigm shifts from a Missiological Perspective:

There is a definitive and systematic presentation of the theology of mission entitled, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission.* Making use of the paradigm theory of Thomas Kuhn and the six epochal shifts of Hans Kung, David Bosch writes in detail about the following paradigms:

1) Missionary paradigm of the Eastern Church
2) The Mediaeval Roman Catholic Missionary paradigm
3) The Missionary paradigm of the Protestant Reformation
4) The emergence of a postmodern paradigm

Prior to Part 2 and 3, in Part 1, Bosch traces the New Testament models of Mission which more or less lay the foundation or basis for the subsequent paradigms and the problems inherent in them. He indicates the religio-cultural impact. For our purpose Part 3 is pertinent after the mission in the wake of the enlightenment. In this Part he takes cognizance of the following elements of an emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm:

Mission as the Church with others
Mission as missio dei
Mission as mediating salvation
Mission as the quest for *justice*
Mission as evangelism
Mission as *contextualization*
Mission as *liberation*
Mission as *inculturation*
Mission as common witness
Mission as ministry to the whole *people* of God
Mission as witness to people of other *living faiths*
Mission as theology
Mission as action in Hope

These various elements of mission paradigms are very significant particularly the italicized one. Bosch has stated clearly,

> Perhaps, however, the real point here is that one should in all research, whether in theology or the natural or social sciences, never think in mutually exclusive categories of 'absolute' and 'relative'. Our theologies are partial, and they are culturally and socially biased. They may never claim to be absolutes. Yet this does not make them relativistic, as though one suggests that in theology — since we really cannot ever know 'absolutely' — anything goes.[6]

This gives us openness and freedom in our theological thinking without making us exclusive and fanatical. I believe in the kind of world in which we are living we have to make our choices and establish our priorities from the above elements of mission. Therefore neither can we reduce nor confuse all of them. The problem is that we are not sure of our aims or goals and consequently we neatly divide into evangelical and ecumenical, between conservatives and liberals. Surely we have to understand our objectives in terms of justice, contextualization and liberation of all people particularly those who are deprived and exploited directly and indirectly, Bosch has offered his own critique for the various paradigms of mission some of which are too neat and theoretical and not helpful for life and living. There is no real objectivity without the presence of the subject in this area of investigation. We have to understand the cultural influences that have shaped these mission paradigms.

III. Paradigm shifts from a Multi-Religious Perspective:

One book which I found to be of immense interest and importance is the one of Samartha, *One Christ — Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology*. Compared to his earlier writings I have noted that he has seriously taken into account the justice issue. But he rightly asserts that theological injustice is as deadly and diabolical as economic injustice. By theological injustice he means Christianity as the religion of the North (Western, missionary religion) has not systematically, methodologically taken the religions of the South. He seriously considers Christ in a multi-religious culture and for this he emphasises theocentric Christology. In this context he talks about *helicopter* Christology versus *bullock-cart* Christology. By helicopter Christology he means,

> ...in its attempts to land on the religiously plural terrain of Asia, makes such a lot of missiological noise and kicks up so much dust that people around it are prevented from hearing the voice and seeing the vision of the descending divinity.[7]

On the other hand, a bullock-cart Christology

> ...always has its wheel touching the unpaved roads of Asia, for without continual friction with the ground, the cart cannot move forward at all. Moreover, a bullock-cart Christology has the advantage of having its bullocks move on with a steady pace even when the driver sometimes falls asleep.[8]

He has taken seriously the religio-cultural pluralism of Asia to do Christology. He has also indicated the various marks of a revised Christology. The two important points to note are the Kingdom of God and the deep compassion for the *anawim*— "a concern for and

active participation in the life of the marginalised, dispossessed, and oppressed people."[9] He has made very clear in this and other writings that this sense of openness is not an easy, cowardly compromise. Thus it is a misplaced debate between tolerance and commitment. He had said, "Commitment without tolerance becomes fanaticism. Tolerance without commitment slips into indifference." Earlier Radhakrishnan had affirmed, "the absolute character of theology is incompatible with the mysterious character of religious truth."[10] Samartha has emphasised again this element of Mystery and therefore our apprehension of God is always tentative and provisional. Koyama has called for "crucified mind" rather than a "crusading mentality." The two paradigms cannot co-exist. Therefore sometime the principle of continuity in paradigms is problematic. C.S. Song has talked of "pain-love" to understand and appreciate the religio-cultural differences without leading to division.

In this multi-religious context it may be useful to remember the book of David J. Krieger entitled, *The New Universalism: Foundations for a Global Theology.* He has made use of Paul Tillich to build the five presuppositions or thesis for global theology elaborating on the revelatory character of all religions.[11] He uses Ludwig Wittgensetin about the problem of language, hermeneutics, logical necessity and of language-game. The meaning depends on the use arising from the *wholeness* of language and actions into which it is woven. Towards the end of the book he has an interesting section on *Satyagraha* of Mahatma Gandhi which helps us to move towards a global form of life. The point here is to emphasise *satya* which is to common to all. Krieger calls for a methodological conversion. He has said,

> *Satyagraha* is a self-suffering (tapas), non-violent, *ahimsa, search* for truth *satya.* It unites religion and politics, private and public spheres of action, thus overcoming the gap between theory and *praxis* which has troubled our culture in one way or another for centuries. It binds the progressive orientation of argumentative discourse to the regressive orientation of hermeneutics in a discourse of disclosure and shows thereby that the search for enlightenment and liberation does not take place apart from the spiritual dimension...[12]

In spite of some of the problems with *satyagraha* which I have indicated earlier in my writing.[13] I believe this is an effort in the right direction. This paradigm is built on inter-disciplinary and multi-religious and multi-cultural foundation.

IV. Paradigm shifts from the Church's Perspective:

We have noted to some extent the nature and content of paradigm shifts of our time. In the process I have suggested some critique

indirectly using various sources. Now I intend to offer a critique from the Church's point of view using another book entitled, *the Gravedigger File: Secret papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church.* I like the book because Os Guiness uses the royal Bengal tiger as a paradigm against many of the historical paradigms. He says, "how wild is the Bengal tiger in the wild life park? How wild is the wildlife in captivity?" Then he goes on to develop what he calls the private-zoo factor, taming and domesticating of religion and culture when it amounts to private preference, a spare-time hobby, a leisure pursuit, cornering (limiting) our faith and driving it towards captivity. All these result in privatisation which he defines as "the process by which modernisation produces a cleavage between the public and the private spheres of life and focuses the private sphere as the special arena for the expression of individual freedom and fulfilment."[14] He compares this cleavage to the Grand Canyon!! The result of this privatisation is a decisive limitation on freedom in the public (real) world. Such a religion fails to rock the boat of the real world, calling for structural/systemic changes. In this context renewal starts in the private world (if that is true) but that it ends there also— "spiritual inspiration they may have. But social inhibitions overwhelm it in the end." Theodore Rozak had talked about Christian religion as "socially irrelevant, even if privately engaging." Secondly, privatisation induces an inevitable sense of fragmentation or dislocation. This results in schizophrenic condition, modular morality and compartmentalised convictions. Thirdly privatisation creates an inherently unstable private sphere. This sphere is unstructured and oversold. Privatised person is not only an "anxious Atlas but a spoilt Narcissus... What begins with Atlas ends with Humpty Dumpty, and all the king's counsellors, the therapists and solicitors can't put the pieces together again."[15] Fourthly, according to him, privatisation produces vulnerability to manipulation to political propaganda about law and order rather than fortifying justice, about abortion and pornography resulting in narrow pietism and religious practice. So the real issue is not between individualism and institutionalism but the private sphere versus the public sphere. Finally, he ends the chapter reminding us, "What once turned the world upside down has now turned in on itself." He perceives of the Church increasingly becoming conservative and reactionary supporting the status quo. Following are some of the problems with conservatism:

1) Vulnerability of extreme conservatism to elimination by force. 2) The tendency of extreme conservatism to harden slowly into rigid and inflexible forms, whether of habit or opinion — ossification. 3) The tendency of conservatism to become docile in the demonstration

of its differences — domestication. 4) The tendency of conservatism to be so preoccupied with its own defence that it becomes wide open to *infiltration* particularly at certain points. 5) The tendency of conservatism to produce individuals who swing violently from one extreme to other. 6) The tendency of conservatism to be absorbed into culture until its Christian identity is lost completely.[16] In and through some aspects of this book I have tried to indicate that in spite of all the paradigm changes basically there is no change in the theological-ethical or religio-cultural perspective of the Church. These paradigm exercises seem to remain at an esoteric, elitist level — rather abstract and remote. Precisely for this reason professional theologians and ethicists must take the initiative to bridge the wide gulf between the conceptual and the practical levels, between theory and praxis between religion and culture. We cannot be rigid or static in our understanding of religions and cultures which are historically conditioned. They need to change with the changing times.

V. A Critique of Paradigm shifts:

In my modest efforts, I have indicated indirectly that paradigm shifts have not been adequately inter-religious inter-cultural inclusive, wholistic, persisting in various sorts of dualisms. Christian theology, conceived for a long period of time, at crucial points, continue to be anti-women (pro-male), anti-poor/poverty (pro-rich), anti-non-white (pro-white) and supremely anti-social (individualistic, non-relational). I will now elaborate these points for our purpose because they have affected adversely the radical paradigm shifts. I have emphasised the issue of justice and peace from a Biblical-theological perspective. Both these terms are not self-evident and needs careful clarification.[17] To recover this passion for justice we have to move from paternalistic, patronising 'charity' to social service to radical political action.[18] To illustrate this point I have made use of the ancient story of the Bible where God's concern for the people (ochlos) is indicated in the context of the larger household (oikos). God has affirmed the people, the nation, the community. God says, "I have heard the cry of my people" and then ordering, "let my people go." This is not an option. It is a command, an imperative — the divine imperative. Many well-known scholars have 'managed' to bypass these emphasis of the Biblical narratives and on the contrary have emphasised individualistic, other-worldly, non-relational piety and practise. I have highlighted this theological issue in my Bishop Joshi memorial lectures entitled, *Christian Spirituality And Indian Reality*. In these two lectures I have attempted to indicate the failure of traditional, historical Christian spirituality of the martyrs, ascetics,

monastics, mystics, pietists and of the puritans to build a just, communal, pluralistic world. Christian experience has been more psychological rather than ethical but the God whom we affirm is a God of justice and righteousness. In my second lecture, through the story of the Transfiguration and of the Good Samaritan, I had suggested the nature and role of spirituality in our modern time. The important aspects of that spirituality is to be multi-religious, multi-cultural, communitarian, contextual and specific.[19] In Jesus' coming we become acutely aware of the conflictual character (tragic dimension) of human reality particularly of the ideological-economic reality. Even good theologians have promoted some kind of a paradigm shifts while indulging in "generic affirmations and false universalism " which perceives the world as undifferentiated, monolithic and homogeneous or looked at the world only from their perspective and universalised that experience. But we live in a divided world and not a Unipolar World.

Another theological issue which I have dealt with is the *Kingdom of God.* I have formulated a theology of the future which takes seriously the present religio-cultural context. It is a future which has continuity and discontinuity. It gives us a distance and an objectivity without becoming unconcerned and insensitive to the present (not in general but in the particular). The tension of the Kingdom does not make us other-worldly as Niebuhr has reminded,

> Against utopianism Christian faith insists that the final consummation of history lies beyond the conditions of the temporal process. Against the other-worldliness it asserts that the consummation fulfills rather than negates the historical process.[20]

To hope in the promise of the righteous and just God does not make us passive but always working enthusiastically for the new and the fresh. We cannot suffer from defeatism and fatalism so rampant in our time. It is necessary to sing the new song in the midst of difficulties and problems. This 'song' has to be multi-cultural and multi-religious.

Another theological issue I have dealt with in my writings over the years is the weakness of much-vaunted *power* of our time and the power of 'weakness' as demonstrated on the Cross of Calvary. I have learnt enormously from Koyama and Song. They have written about the theology from the womb (pain and joy) of Asia, a Cross without a handle, the 'efficiency' of the Crucified one in the world of technological efficiency, the compassionate God, the suffering, vulnerable God. Earlier Kagawa had talked about Cross-consciousness and Kitamori about the theology of the pain of God. How much passion is involved in our paradigm shifts or is it only a cerebral exercise? We are so much caught up and victims of

involuntary vulnerability that we cannot think of voluntary, volitional vulnerability. We want to escape and run away from pain. But there is no resurrection without crucifixion. Jesus is the supreme paradigm of that but more recently people like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Baba Amte, Medha Parkar, Shankar Guha Niyogi and many others remind us of that paradigm. St. Augustine thus had stated long ago,

> The deformity of Christ forms you. If he had not willed to be deformed, you would not have recovered the form which you had lost. Therefore he was deformed when he hung on the cross. But his deformity is our comeliness in this life, therefore let us hold fast to the deformed Christ.[21]

I have dealt with this in my own way under the titles, "Formation—Deformation—Transformation" and "Weakness of Power and Power of Weakness" making extensive use of the Biblical testimony.[22] I was reminded of what Richard Niebuhr had uttered more than fifty years ago,

> If (the Kingdom of God) was secularised by being detached from its context of faith in the sovereignty and the experience of grace, while it was attached to the idea of human sovereignty and natural freedom. It was nationalised, being used to support the feeling of national superiority and of manifest destiny. It was confused with the progress of industrialism and capitalism.[23]

We have no right to absolutise any one religion or culture, anyone nation or ideology. That would be idolatry of the worst kind.

How true this is in our own time. In our struggle for a just, peaceful kingdom we should never lose sight of this warning. He has another warning, "A God without wrath brought men (people) without sin into a Kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.[24]

Another theological issue which I have dealt with is the relation of *Religion, Power and Politics* which is both positive and negative. The nexus among the three is quite obvious particularly in our time where there is the politicisation of religion and communalisation of politics in this country and many other countries of the world. The Christian Conference of Asia addressed this issue and met together in Thailand.[25] It was realised that religion could be used to promote liberation and justice and encourage right kind of political processes and power considerations. At present it is used to domesticate and thereby dominate people who are powerless and weak. In this context, I have raised the ideological-theological issue of our time which I think should determine our religio-cultural paradigm shifts. In that article[26] I have written about the disruption of our wholistic communal (community) life in India and in the world. Hindu

communalism of the RSS-VHP-BJP have 'managed' to subvert the unified vision of Hinduism. Ramjanmabhumi-Babri Masjid issue combined with the recent economic policy of the government of India pose a real threat to the development of our people most of whom are under the poverty line. There is the rise of fundamentalism all over the world among Christians, Hindus and Muslims thwarting the effort of building an inclusive, open and free society. Taslima Nasreen is very much in the news. Earlier Salman Rushdie was under attack. I had maintained, "Privatisation in economics is supporting or reaffirming privatistic (individualistic) theology and ethics even till today inspite of all the talk about 'global village' and 'spaceship earth'." Some are very concerned about "population explosion" but do not see the demands of "population implosion". They stubbornly continue in their insular, immunised homogeneous existence. John Macquarrie had stated, "The history with which Bible deals is the history of communities rather than of individuals."[27] This can be seen in terms of the interaction between Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, and Jewish culture and religion. Later it develops theologically in terms of the suffering servant, remnant, new Israel, Kingdom of God and to some extent the Church (household or family). It is also believed that the apostolic language like "growing into", "building up", or "built into" indicate this multi-cultural, multi-religious communitarian thrust. Bonhoeffer had said, "there is in fact one religion from which the concept of community is *essentially* inseparable, and that is the Christian religion." The triune God is a reminder of this rich community concept. In this sense not only God creates and liberates communities but God is community. Some paradigm shifts take this dimension seriously but generally Christian theology and ethics remain very much individualistic and privatistic. The idea of religio-cultural diversity or plurality seems strange or alien. Such diversity enrich and enlivens community. That is our struggle in modern India.

VI. Paradigm shifts from the Perspective of Responsibility

I may end with another challenging book which I read recently, *Escape from God: The use of Religion and Philosophy to Evade Responsibility*. In this book Dean Turner had defined escapism as "the indisposition of people to look straight into the face of God for fear of seeing the formidable message of responsibility that his eyes clearly convey." Responsibility is the price everyone must pay for freedom. For this reason we are not objects but subjects having the capacity to act on our own. Turner asserts that classical theism is an escapist Philosophy. He questions the theological thinking of Augustine and Aquinas on God. Classical theists have reduced the

whole of history to a total absence of events. But he maintains that ultimate reality is social (communal). In an earlier book, Turner and Hazlett had developed this theme in terms of socialism and free enterprise. He challenges the omnipotence and omni-science of God. Earlier Harvey Cox had reinterpreted the myth of the Fall in terms of *acedia,* not caring, sloth, dereliction of duty. Human beings surrendered their God-given responsibility and leaving it to the snake to take the decision. Thus he states,

> It is a call to adult stewardship, to originality, inventiveness, and the governance of the world. Let's not allow any snake to tell us what to do.[28]

Earlier than all these efforts, Richard Niebuhr had done a systematic theoretical-theological analysis of the concept of responsibility in terms of response(ive) or sensitivity, interpretation (hermeneutics) of the divine and human reality, accountability (stewardship of earth, air and water) and social (community) solidarity.[29]

It is good to recall in this context that the World Council of Churches began its journey with the call for "Responsible Society" in 1948. Later it was modified to "Responsible World Society" and "just participatory, sustainable society." The theme of the last Assembly at Canberra, Australia was "Come Holy Spirit, renew your *whole creation*" which certainly includes the world society. I hope this concern for the biosphere is not at the cost of or exclusion of the 'communosphere'. Prayer is not an escape but an engagement in the life of the religio-cultural and Socio-economic-political world. Paradigm shifts must promote a kind of theology and ethics that is pluralistic and communitarian, liberational and justice-oriented.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion we have realized that we have come a long way but we have a longer way to go. We are on a theological-ethical pilgrimage. It is for us to understand, appreciate and appropriate other cultures and religions in our theological-ethical paradigm shift. The task remains inadequate and incomplete. In this self-conscious 'global village' we have to actively promote religio-cultural cross-fertilisation, work for a *new* heaven and earth and thus move meaningfully toward the twenty-first century.

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