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The Sixth Paradigm [Different Paradigm Shifts in Christianity]

Richard Holloway

I want to take a glance at the whole of Christian history because one of the things I'd like to get at is this widespread notion that Christianity is or ever has been a single thing.

To do this I'll use a large text, but I want to lead into it by addressing first a very slim text.

One of the most important and influential philosophical texts of the twentieth century was a short book called *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* written by an historian of science called Thomas Kuhn. Now Kuhn was a student at Harvard in the 1960s. He was a young physicist and was invited by the President of Harvard to teach a course on the history of science to humanities students who knew nothing about science. He said to himself, "You don't refuse the President of Harvard!"

In his researches and preparing the course he surprised himself. He came across something that he had not hitherto realised was the case. He had a notion of science as a kind of linear activity - a bit like those machines in a coal mine which eat into the coal face - which bites its way through the facts of the universe. He thought of science as a cumulative process in which these facts were gradually laid out.

He discovered that it was in fact a more violent, interruptive activity. Hence the title of his essay. He discovered that science operates by what he called "paradigm revolutions" or "paradigm shifts". He didn't actually coin the word "paradigm" but he did give it a new kind of meaning. He said that the scientific community worked within what it called a paradigm, a constellation of views based on experiment, a world view or set of assumptions that it operated within. This was the going, working science of the time.

The paradigm was operated until it stopped working - that is, until new questions or new discoveries began to collide with the given view. Let me give you a fairly obvious example.

Aristotelian astronomy, upon which the worldview of the entire Bible is based, proposed a three-decker universe with the earth at the centre and all the spheres going round it. The whole idea was that the earth is the centre of the system both physically as well as theologically.

That was the going paradigm. And it still works. The Ptolemaic version of Aristotelian astronomy can still operate for a yachtsperson. You can cross the Atlantic using Ptolemaic astronomy, guiding your boat by the stars. So to that extent it can still be a working paradigm.

But it was overtaken by the great Copernican discovery which was revolutionary because it said, "Ah! The earth is not the thing which everything else goes round. In fact, we go round the sun."

You'll recall the great struggle which then took place. This was because the new paradigm appeared to contradict both the biblical account as well as the going scientific paradigm. Interestingly, it was only fairly recently that the Pope gave the sun permission to be the centre of the solar system.

What happens then is that you get a working set of systems which operates quite satisfactorily until along comes new knowledge, usually discovered by creatures of genius. They begin to ask questions about the old paradigm. Those who use the old paradigm resist the new - and it is entirely right that they should do so. One doesn't want to keep changing a world view which works. It's a confounded nuisance if you're switching paradigms every few years. You need to get traction, a bit of tradition and leverage on the thing.

So you make it work as long as you possibly can. You use it to try to answer the new information which is coming in. There's also in some people a natural kind of conservatism which doesn't like any kind of change. They prefer the going paradigm to anything which is coming down the road. They do so for purely temperamental reasons - but it's also true that the scientific method itself inherently tests new data until it overturns the old. And then you get a paradigm revolution and you move on.

Kuhn's little book has influenced philosophers, culture critics and theologians since the early 1960s. I want to look now at a great text which has applied Kuhn's conclusions about paradigms to Christianity.

The greatest living theologian is Hans Kung, a Roman Catholic. His is the "large text" to which I referred earlier. He doesn't have the Pope's driving licence because he wrote a book in the seventies attacking the doctrine of infallibility and he had his licence to teach withdrawn.

He still teaches theology at Tübingen University but he teaches it in a secular setting. Quite movingly, he's an old man now and he would like to get his licence back. He'd like to die, as it were, in peace with the Roman Church. But he has been told that he will only get the licence back if he commits to the doctrine of infallibility.

So he will have to sacrifice his conscience to get back inside the Church (which shows you how corrupt churches are). I doubt if he will do that because his whole being has been one of challenge. He's been a sort of Protestant theologian in the midst of Catholicism.

Kung set himself a few years ago an enormous task. He wanted to describe the religious situation of our day. He conceived three volumes - one on Christianity, one on Judaism and one on Islam.

He applies paradigm theory to religion. He says that contrary to what we all think, religion has been a story of shifting paradigms - an essentially dynamic, changing enterprise.

I want to race through his application of paradigm theory to Christianity. He says there have been five Christian paradigms. As we'll see, these paradigms are all still in operation. In science, new paradigms succeed, complete and often oust those that came before. In Christianity, religious paradigms never seem to get discarded or superannuated. They simply get stacked up like trays in the trolleys of self-service restaurants.

I'm focusing on this aspect of the Church because I think we're on the cusp of a big paradigm shift. We're living in revolutionary times. All the signs are there. You've got people who resist change; you've got people who see what the future is and want to pull things towards it; and you've got a lot of people who are just very muddled and confused. I want to try to trace continuities of particular paradigms of the past with those of today and to note any enduring value the former may have.

The first paradigm (P#1) which Kung develops is what he calls first-century early Christian apocalyptic. That's a mouthful, but it's actually quite easy to understand.

The point he's making - and if you read Paul with only one eye open you can't fail to get it - is that the early Christians were waiting for the end of the world and the return of Jesus. They didn't expect to be around for very long - which is why one gets such unsatisfactory answers in the New Testament to 20th century questions one puts to it.

You don't get a developed ethic. You get what C H Dodd called an "interim ethic". You don't need a developed ethic because you're only going to be around for two or three months. So what's the point of getting rid of slavery, for example, if the great return of Jesus will take care of it. There's not much point in any kind of social theology because this world is on its way out.

What Christians should do in this in-between state is simply be prepared for the return of Jesus, be expectant, and make as many converts as possible so as to be on the right side of the Rapture when it comes.

The whole point to all this is that there's no point. It's very difficult to get into the consciousness of apocalyptic Christianity. The way I imagine the apocalyptic mindset is to imagine myself waiting for a taxi. I've got a plane to catch at the airport and my taxi's late. I'm standing at the window and I can't settle down to anything. I can't drink coffee or read the newspaper. I'm like a cat on a hot tin roof. I'm waiting for the great eschatological taxi to arrive. I'm in a state of indecision because I need to get out of where I am.

That is the apocalyptic scene. Certain sects set out even now to live permanently in this state. Two thousand years is a long time to wait for a taxi. Yet some claim to have got the timing right this time. While travelling by air in the United States I have seen people reading a magazine called *Prophecy Today* which claims to have finally cracked something called the "Bible code". They think of the entire Bible as a deliberately designed code delineating the right date of the Rapture. Pat Robertson, the great capitalist fundamentalist, has set the date for 2007.

There are many Christians who like this kind of thing, who go in for this notion of a Rapture. It's highly developed in the United States as a strange sort of religious psychology. I think George Bush believes in this. Certainly Ronald Reagan did. Perhaps the Iraqi war was an attempt to bring in the last things.

More amusingly, I read somewhere that it's going to be tough on the people who are not the elect because if you're in a jet 'plane and the pilot is one of the elect, at the Rapture he's going to be caught up, and all the poor passengers are going to crash. And if you're in the dentist's chair getting root canal work, and the dentist is called, then you're going to be stuck with the needles in your jaw. Great stuff!

Was Jesus a genuine apocalypticist? Albert Schweitzer, the great Alsatian theologian, wrote a marvellous book called *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* in which he concluded that Jesus died as a despairing apocalypticist. Jesus felt he was called by God to bring in the *eschaton* (Greek for the end of the world), to precipitate conditions that would cause the irruption of the other into the now.

Almost the last words in Schweitzer's book assert that Jesus "... lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and he throws himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, he has destroyed them".

Schweitzer believed that Jesus is hanging upon the wheel still, which is why, having finished that book, he said that the thing was to stop talking about Jesus and start living like Jesus.

So he went off into the jungle and became a doctor. He thought that there is nothing more to be said. Jesus failed – except as the greatest man who ever lived and who left us this absolutely fundamental ethical challenge. His was an eloquent book and an eloquent life.

Jesus scholars today reckon that Jesus went through an apocalyptic phase as a disciple of John the Baptist. They think that he then gave it up and went into what is technically called "realised eschatology". Jesus taught, they say, that *now* is the day of judgement and that God is *constantly* coming to us every day rather than at some future date at the end of the world. After Jesus died, those disciples who came with him from the Baptist movement reverted to an apocalyptic theology which then quite quickly crept back into Christianity.

You can't prove or disprove any of this stuff. Similarly, there are people who believe that Jesus ran a completely inclusive ministry in which there was no distinction between men and women. The gender prejudices were, they think, brought back later. You can take your pick on that. I don't think there's any way of resolving it.

The enduring value in apocalyptic Christianity is that provided you demythologise it and unshackle it from this notion that there is going to be an irruption from the supernatural into the natural, it's still the most powerful part of theology because it calls us to change the world. The new or apocalyptic world of Jesus is a world we are constantly struggling to bring to pass. A new community is not one that is going to irrupt and land on earth straight from heaven. It's something you have to work for.

Death is our own personal eschatology – "Look thy last on all things lovely every day." You can use apocalyptic theology I think in many ways far more exciting than anything that's left in traditional Christian theology.

That's the first paradigm. It lasted roughly up to the end of the first century of the Christian era. After that it became increasingly difficult to sustain because Jesus obviously had not come again. Nevertheless, Christians kept the theology and the

language around. Hence we sing all those Advent hymns. We talk about “Come again to judge the living and the dead” and all that. We don’t believe it except in some other kind of way.

Let me illustrate from the world of science. If you’re being trained as a scientist today you don’t start learning about Ptolemaic astronomy and then move on to Copernican astronomy. You start with the current paradigm. If you want to know the history of science and the paradigms of the past then you read a book about the history of science.

But, as you know, Christianity never abandons anything, so we still teach the apocalyptic first paradigm as essential to good doctrine – though we do try to demythologise it. Apocalyptic theology may have the deepest existential possibilities for us in terms of the nature of change.

Kung's second paradigm (P#2) *ranges from the first to the sixth centuries.* This is often called the Church's Hellenistic period. The second paradigm arises out of the encounter between the Jesus movement and Greek philosophical intellectual culture.

This paradigm is still around. We call it theology. It's also still around in some parts of the larger Christian institution. If you visit Cyprus you'll see men in stovepipe hats still very much in many ways embedded in this paradigm. It may be true to observe that the Orthodox churches are least of all susceptible to cultural shifts and changes, and most of all likely to become locked into cultural imprisonment.

The language of the second paradigm dates back fifteen hundred years to the period in which Christian theology was being formulated. It was written up in Greek. So it makes understanding it difficult if you're a 21st century English speaker!

Remember that all translation is to some degree a distortion of the original. We all experience this when we talk in the creeds about three "Persons" in one "Trinity". The word "person" means to us a separate individual. But it's actually a translation of a Greek term that probably refers to the mask that Greek actors wore. When you've got three actors playing about fifteen parts in a Greek play, they switch to a new part by picking up a new mask - that is, a *persona* - in order to express another personality in the play. This word has been translated into English as "person", which confuses things a good deal.

So Christian theologians grabbed some of this far older Greek language and these ancient Greek ideas in order to try and express their current experience of God through Jesus in the centuries after the apocalyptic era.

That's when you get a developed christology and the notion of the two natures of Jesus as perfect God and perfect man. It's also when the nature of the Trinity as the *personas* of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is worked out.

Most of the theological language we use today comes from this period. There is something exciting about it - but there's also something intrinsically problematic about giving language that kind of power.

We should note that theological language has more power than normal language because it purports to be about God. It is supposed to inform us what God is like and how God has interacted with humans and the world. And if that's the case we should obviously pay more attention to it than to language about, say, the merits and demerits of a film star.

The thing about words is that things are not what we say they are. My favourite example is that the word "bread" is not something edible. A word is a nothing that points to a something. It's simply a breath. It's simply a sign, rather like a road sign.

Words are a sort of map, if you like. But you can't walk through the countryside on a map. Nor can you climb a hill on the contours of an ordinary survey map. We know that words are only guides to the world, not the world itself. For most purposes of language we make that distinction.

Unfortunately theological language has gone kind of paranoid. Ecclesiastical institutions tend to think that their language is in itself something. So you get theological wars. People actually fight over the meaning of words. And they fight because there's nothing to which they can infallibly refer. When we talk about God we don't actually have before us the thing to which God-talk refers. We only have the sign.

It's a bit like operating in a country that is fully mapped but does not exist. So we have endless opportunity for quarrelling about the road signs themselves. We debate whether the word-maps really have measured that mountain, or whether that loch really does tuck in this way, or whether that firth is exactly like that. Obviously if the country to which the map refers is not available to us then we have an infinite opportunity to punch each other up over the exact status of the language.

That's why theology is such a contentious, argumentative business. Apart from our natural quarrelsomeness as human beings, there's something particularly quarrelsome about religion precisely because we don't have access to the things we claim to be talking about. At the end of the day we can't really decide the issues in question. That's what makes theological language both so exciting and so precarious, and that's why people like Schweitzer gave up on it.

It really is a kind of word game. We constantly invent new ways of doing it. There's a new way, which I vaguely understand, called "radical orthodoxy". It appears to be very highbrow and French and is taught in various universities up and down the United Kingdom. It seems to be very orthodox. It likes the old language and so it keeps it around.

How are we to take this movement? You know where you are with an absolute fundamentalist who thinks that God is essentially a kind of three-headed being or something like metaphysical triplets. They unabashedly place objective meaning on theological language.

It's hard to tell what the radical orthodoxy people are doing except to note that they like to keep all the old words around and that they're trying to develop new meanings for them.

The enduring element of the second paradigm is that it recognises and affirms that we are creatures who can think for ourselves. And if today we're in a faith community we want (at least most of us do) to have the totality of our beings involved in living the Christian life. Insofar as we want that, we also want our minds to be involved.

The American Episcopal Church ran an advertising campaign some years ago which said, "You don't have to park your mind outside our Church before you come in". The idea being that it appealed to the mind as well as the emotions. And there's one that I like even better. As we know, one of the big debates in the USA is the debate about prayer in school. A bumper-sticker in Texas once read, "If you won't pray in my school, I won't think in your church".

The enduring element of this paradigm is precisely the wrestling that we do with our own meanings. As creatures in a universe that appears to be unconscious, we inevitably and irresistibly and compulsively ask questions about ourselves. Do we mean anything? Does the universe mean anything? Is there that which we mean by God? How best to live with one another?

The reason we have not rewritten the creeds, for instance, is that we couldn't agree on any new versions. It's far less trouble to disagree over fourth- or fifth-century creeds

than over 21st-century creeds. If we started thinking through and debating the latter it would surely develop into a major punch-up. At the moment we can keep the creeds, unchanged and inadequate translations of a foreign language that they are, and each claim to interpret them differently. If we actually started writing new creeds we really would show how differently we believe and how wide the gap is between different faith communities.

But rather than operate the way scientists do, which would be to put the creeds in the appendix at the back of the prayer book, we embed them in our worship. We stand up and recite English translations of abstruse metaphysical constructs from the fourth century as worship. Let's not ignore the fact that the perennial debate about the past does provide opportunities for some people to earn a living. That's not to be sneered at.

The whole enterprise of seeking answers is, I think, what is enduring about the second paradigm. And it's very taxing - which is why a lot of people don't want to get into it. They prefer a system which thinks for them and soothes them - and so they simply operate as Christians without too much questioning. You don't want to disturb that. But for people who can't turn their minds off, it does make theology a very vexing enterprise because it never, ever settles.

Paradigm number three (P#3) is *the medieval Roman Catholic paradigm*. We're talking here of *the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries*. This one is still very much in business. It's the biggest of the current paradigms in terms of numbers adhering to it.

If the second paradigm, the Hellenistic one, was the result of an encounter between the Jesus movement and the Greek genius for philosophy and thought, the third paradigm is the result of the encounter between the Jesus movement and the Roman genius for order, for discipline and for administrative brilliance.

And so it is the institutional paradigm *par excellence*. It's highly rationalist. Even its theology is a kind of bureaucratic theology. If you do your philosophy through Thomas Aquinas you'll find it's a bit like reading an enormous theological highway code. You've got all the questions and all the answers. The complete picture is given to you.

This paradigm helped organise the Church in ways that still pertain. It formed Christianity into an enormous hierarchical articulation of order and authority.

All of these theologies are embedded in a particular time, so they partake of what was around. There was a lot of apocalyptic around in the first century. There was a lot of intellectual struggle and strife around in the early Christian and Greek world. In the medieval paradigm there was struggle from social chaos towards a political order based on authority.

It was appropriate in its day. It resulted in a highly articulated absolutist system. One Jesuit describes the Roman Catholic Church today as the last surviving absolute monarchy. It's premised on the notion that there is a single fount of authority, God, and that everything flows from that. God is at the apex - and tucked under God's left wing is the Pope.

Everything descends from that apex. It remains a system of authority in which no one thinks for themselves because they receive the truth from on high. This was brought home to me by the Roman bishops in Scotland some years ago. They said to me, "We would ordain women tomorrow if the Pope told us to". In other words, their objection to the ordination of women was not theological, but entirely related to the hierarchy of what they perceived as a Papal court.

As an aside, and to ram home the point, the present Pope is not going to change his mind on contraception, but his successor probably will. It will probably happen overnight, because in Roman Catholicism everything is forbidden until it's made compulsory.

So this is the great third paradigm. Some of us may in the past have had "Roman fever". I certainly did as a young man. I thought that the Anglican Church was a second-rate, shoddy copy of great Mother Rome. I used to pray for the Pope during the Anglican liturgy (under my breath, of course). I did so because Rome is a grand spectacle. There is something about us which wants to give up the struggle and simply hand ourselves over to what appears magnificent and powerful.

To illustrate further: I was putting together a radio program in Rome some years ago. There were three of us called "The Three Amigos" - a Church of Scotland minister, a Roman Catholic priest and myself. We used to go around making radio programs called *A Sense of Place*. We would go to a place important to one of us who would talk about it while the other two would interrogate.

One day, John Fitzsimmons, a Roman Catholic priest, took us to Rome where he'd once been Rector of a college.

He took us to St Peter's. I had been there many years before. I was overwhelmed. It is so massive with its great pillars and great statues and the nuns fluttering around like

seagulls. I came out into St Peter's square and said all this to John. He replied, "That's just what the bastards *want* you to think!" He was, of course, referring to the whole Counter-Reformation endeavour of the 16th and 17th centuries through which the Roman Church tried re-asserting its absolute authority over a world which was increasingly thinking for itself.

The Roman Catholic Church remains a compelling and fascinating institution. I suppose its enduring value is that it stands as a kind of counter-culture, a world of itself which stands for a sort of absolute dedication and obedience. The Pope can assert and speak truth that contradicts political truth, for example. On the whole his record is good on such issues. He was quite good at saying to Tony Blair and George Bush, "Thou shalt not invade Iraq!" It didn't stop them, of course, but at least someone with some kind of spiritual authority has asked them to think again. I think his record is not so good on issues of private freedom.

The Roman Church is *the* biggest of the Christian shows, and therefore in a sense the biggest paradigm. It is diminishing considerably in Europe, of course, as the numbers of people adhering to it reduce and its institutional power in the secular world gradually wanes.

The main reason for this decline is that it's so entrenched in its own paradigm that it's not very good at adapting to the difficulties of its own position.

If I were the Pope I could, for example, solve all my ministerial problems tomorrow by ordaining celibate women and married men. It wouldn't create new problems because having married clergy would alter the sociology of Rome more radically than ordaining women. This is because with married clergy the Church becomes more inevitably bourgeois and less set aside from the real world of ordinary people.

Kung's fourth paradigm (P#4) is one we're more immediately familiar with - that of *the 16th century Protestant Reformation*. It happened to coincide with the discovery of the Bible by ordinary people. Once the new printing presses had swung into action, many thousands of copies of the Bible became available to the person on the street. It was very soon translated from Latin into the vernaculars.

Just as the Roman institution had provided Christians with a feeling of absolute assurance, so also some people found a similar assurance in the words of Scripture. The absolute institution was replaced by texts which were perceived as the absolute

truth straight from the mouth of God. The fourth paradigm promoted the same need for authority as did the third paradigm and pandered to the same fear of freedom.

More profound than such similarities is the way adherence to scriptural inerrancy prevents attempts to do theology differently. In order to preserve its internal consistencies, this paradigm must perforce retain an absolute commitment to a pre-scientific paradigm of how this world works.

In this paradigm the sun must be able to stand still, people must be able to walk on water, and the dead must be able to rise again. In contrast, institutions like the Roman Church can change and yet pretend they haven't. But how can anyone move off a doctrine of scriptural inerrancy without admitting it?

From study of the Bible as God's Word to humankind came the great theory that Luther evolved in contradistinction to the fundamentalism of the institution. It's nearly impossible for many Christians today to read Paul's letters to the early Church except through Lutheran eyes, so compelling was Luther's interpretation of the infallible authority of the Bible.

Luther taught that God saves us not through any of our own works or good deeds, be they pilgrimages, or masses or earnest prayer, but only through God's grace by the sacrifice of the Father's son. That really was a paradigm revolution for those times. It blew away the monolithic medieval Christianity of Roman Catholicism.

The Reformation church is today perhaps the most dated in feeling of all the churches.

I don't know if you ever go into a United Reformed Church building or a Presbyterian church. A few have developed new liturgical forms and norms, but on the whole the classic churches of the Reformation are, as we say in Scotland, very dour. They're heavy. You get long sermons. They may be very thoughtful sermons but they're *long*. It's all minister-dominated. There's no colour or brightness. It's very heavy, it's serious, it's intense.

That is also its enduring value. It produces very serious people. Presbyterian Scotland was a very serious country which, by dint of focused effort over many years, produced a strongly democratic consciousness.

It also gave birth to the Protestant work-ethic. This was fundamental to Scotland's experience and self understanding. From this paradigm sprang also a well-educated public. John Knox, the Scottish Protestant reformer, wanted a school in every parish and largely succeeded in his ambition.

Despite this enduring value, the Reformation remnant of the fourth paradigm remains depressing and sexless. If you want to have a good time, don't go to one of these places on a Sunday morning. For unless you're solidly masochistic you'll come out feeling pretty rotten about yourself.

I often think that if you want a great exemplar of the virtues and maybe of the downside of the Reformation paradigm, look at Gordon Brown, the United Kingdom's Chancellor of the Exchequer (equivalent to the Minister of Finance in other systems). He is a deeply serious man. There doesn't seem to be any frivolity in him. He's deeply committed to his project - but he's not exactly a laugh a minute (although I'm told that with some decent malt whiskey beside him he can be quite good company). But there's no sense of frivolity or skittishness about him. In many ways he's a brilliant exemplar of the best of the fourth paradigm.

The fifth paradigm (P#5) is *the modern paradigm, that of the 17th - 19th centuries*. It is still powerfully with us, busily influencing and interpreting how we perceive the world and our lives. Nevertheless, we're increasingly able to regard it to some degree dispassionately as we sail into new and unfamiliar seas.

This paradigm can perhaps best be identified as a heroic attempt to steer the Christian vessel between the hard rock of scriptural and institutional fundamentalism and the deadly shoals of the cultured despiser's rejection of all religion as irrational and infantile.

It's often called "liberal Christianity" and generally refers to an amorphous group within the Church which seeks to accommodate traditional formulations of Christian teaching within the strictures of Newtonian science and the thought and culture of modern times.

One is reminded of the well-known crack about Adolf Harnack, the modern German Church historian and theologian. His critics envisaged him looking down the well of time to discover the real Jesus - and seeing only himself reflected there.

The great difficulties of adapting tradition to the demands of analytical thought do not, I think, invalidate the liberal Christian project. All versions of Christianity, without exception, ultimately see themselves reflected at the bottom of that ancient well. Discovering a civilised, liberally-minded 19th century European thinker there is no worse and a good deal better than some of the other characters seen down that well.

Despite its honourable history, however, liberal Christianity is probably the most terminally ill of all the five paradigms. Not only is it attacked from within the Church, but those outside the traditional fold also like to have a go at it. Strangely, and rather like a sewage worker inured to strong smells, the secular detractors of religion often claim to respect and to admire the sincerity of those who still adhere to an outdated way of interpreting the world - even though they don't like it at all.

But the people they really despise are not those who cling to the old paradigms in spite of the ways these have been falsified by subsequent developments in human knowledge. They can quite easily tolerate those they dismiss as cranks, albeit well-intentioned ones. They truly despise those who try to adapt religion to contemporary knowledge.

This, says **the cultured despiser of religion**, is not possible. No translation of religion into contemporary language can succeed. There is no Rosetta Stone to transform pre-modern concepts into today's way of perceiving the world. Not even an approximation is possible. The two world views are utterly incompatible.

As they see it, to be a Christian today one must install in one's mind a set of first-century assumptions, rather like an outdated computer program being put into a new computer. They know and we know that these assumptions are false. The computer will reject outdated software. It simply can't be read by an up-to-date machine. Therefore, the only honest religion is dishonest religion. The only valid religion today, they, they would proclaim, is obsolete religion. Religion itself is a relic, sometimes charming, sometimes scary, of a long dead world-view.

In addition, the mild-mannered, gently rational and somewhat hesitant mode of the liberal Christian (at his or her best) doesn't sit too well with the strident, macho contemporary communications culture, with its straight talk and snappy, sound-bite responses. Generally more mild and unassuming, the liberal Christian voice tends to be drowned out in an all-pervading racket.

And yet the liberal outlook on life and faith endures and no doubt will continue to endure despite its conceptual difficulties and often low impact. Many tend to dismiss the earthy, complex nature of humanity, regarding men and women more as minds on stilts than anything else. They forget that our capacity to think, and all that springs from it, is the most distinctive thing about being human. After all is said and done, it is aspects of the way we think which set us aside from all other living beings.

When it has finished trying the fit a modern set of clothes onto the alien body of the past, liberal Christianity will no doubt retain its nobility. It will do so through its

conviction that honest religion need not run counter to the best of the human intellectual enterprise, which has its own glory and ethic.

The sixth paradigm (P#6) is in the process of emerging. [Sometimes, it is known as “the Postmodern Paradigm”.] It hasn't yet fully formed. We are still, as I mentioned before, on the borders of entirely new territory.

Like a child in the womb this paradigm tends at times to take on rather strange and primitive-seeming shapes. Insofar as I'm able to perceive it, there seem to be five aspects of the embryonic sixth paradigm.

1. First, it is a *paradigm about paradigms*. Once we have discovered the idea of a paradigm, we cannot help but recognise that no religious expression is ultimate.

The religious spirit is as wide and as untidy as humanity itself. Each historic expression has and will have some enduring aspects and qualities. Parts of each will endure beyond the death of the central myth. But every paradigm must by definition be seen as ephemeral in relation to the vast reaches of time through which humankind journeys.

2. The sixth paradigm is *post-modern* in the sense that humanity is increasingly, if gradually, becoming uneasy with any words and concepts claiming to be set in concrete.

We are no longer comfortable with sweeping, absolute claims to verity. In contrast, religion is perhaps to be held up and talked about with modesty and humility if it is to mean anything much to the vast crowds who swarm outside the paper-thin bastions of Christian tradition.

This unassuming stance may be particularly important in the context of ongoing scandals which presently disfigure and discount all the Abrahamic religions.

3. It is *post-hierarchical*. The ancient and not-so-ancient pattern of top-down power and authority is less and less workable.

An increasingly important parameter of our times is a deep suspicion of power. In reaction to its negative use is a growing need to build in checks and balances wherever power is at issue.

In contrast, the dominant Christian paradigms still rest on the foundations of previous, profoundly authoritarian cultures. They need to be radically revised.

4. Religion is recognised as a *human construct*. Those for whom Christianity is the result of divine intervention in the world order frequently accuse others of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

But the sixth paradigm does not necessarily reject the possibility of a transcendent reality when it acknowledges that religion is created by us for ourselves. To admit that no one religion is God-given and that all derive from the fount of human need is not to proclaim the death of God.

If something no longer works, it's in our human remit to discard it. The capacity to move on from what is failing to what works better is a cardinal virtue upon which our very survival as individuals and as a species depends. Old, worn out paradigms can be discarded just as decrepit human institutions inevitably give way to the new.

There is a heavy touch of irony in this aspect of the sixth paradigm. If we ditch claims to the absolute, we cease making absolute claims even for our lack of absolutes. It's absolutely true that all claims to absolute truth are false.

5. The *primacy of the creation* begins to stare Christianity in the face as the sixth paradigm takes hold on our imagination. Perhaps, despite claims to high status in God's dispensation, Christians aren't actually nearly as important as they think they are.

We begin to see dimly that our religion is little more than an accessory in life. Most people in the Western culture get on quite nicely, thank you very much, without any religion at all. In the process they don't become any more deprived

than the average believer. Indeed, they seem to me often to be a good deal kinder and more tolerant than religious people.

It seems we're reaching towards a unitary understanding of the context in which we live, becoming aware of that whole which includes us as a tiny part of it. What a lot of people don't much care to admit is that in this whole we are intrinsically no more important than any other part.

If every one of us were to disappear today, the world would carry on regardless just as it did when the dinosaurs went over the edge. Yet in our case it would be missing something grand and beautiful. No single word yet suggests itself for this all-embracing sense of context - but I would like the word "poet" to be in there somewhere.
