

East Asian Voices on Science and the Humanities

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RELIGION AND SCIENCE IN DIALOGUE: AN ASIAN CHRISTIAN VIEW

by *Kim Seung Chul*

Abstract. We may understand natural science as part of the attempt by human beings to understand themselves and their place in the world in which they find themselves. In this sense, as Karl Rahner has suggested, natural science flows naturally into anthropology. Consciously or unconsciously, science is always part of the drive to self-understanding. In an age of religious pluralism like ours, Christian faith in Asia is also brought face to face with the living reality of

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other religions, and that, too, cannot but affect how we understand our shared humanity.

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This article deals with the question why we need both the sciences and the humanities in society. It tries to answer that question from the standpoint of Asian Christian theology, by inquiring into a possible way to integrate the dialogue between Christianity and religion with the dialogue between Christianity and natural science. These issues include the following two questions:

(1) How should we understand religion and natural science in this age where various religious traditions meet each other, and where the worldview of natural science alters the traditional religious understanding of reality?

(2) What might this question mean for Asian Christians?

For several decades, we have faced the fact that our everyday life is an experience of encounter with various cultures and religions. The good old days of “one religion” is not any longer our reality. In fact, it is not self-evident whether such a time ever existed at all. As *Nostra Aetate* (1965) of the Second Vatican Council declares, “men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men.” If so, then the question of whether or not we should engage in dialogue with other religions is already an anachronistic one. Instead, now we are asked to choose a “heresy,” as in the provocative title of Peter Berger’s book, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (1980), in the sense that we are forced to choose one religion among many. The Greek word for heresy, *αἵρεσις*, literally means to *choose* one thing among many things. To be a Christian in this age, therefore, means that one *chooses* the Christian religion as one among many religions. Then to be a Christian means to be heretical, because in the literal meaning of the word, the one who chooses is a heretic. So to have faith in one religion means to be heretical. If *homo homini hereticus* is the religious situation of our age, there is then no way to be “orthodox” except by being heretical.

Considering this from a theological perspective, I have chosen to evaluate two publications from the middle of the first half of the twentieth century are as determining decisively the future of the self-understanding of Christianity and human beings. One is “Die Stellung des Christentums Unter den Weltreligionen” (“The Place of Christianity among World Religions”) by Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) (Troeltsch [1923] 1980), and the other is *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (*The Human Place in the Cosmos*) by Max Scheler (1874–1928) (Scheler [1928] 2007).

On the one hand, Christian theology should, according to Troeltsch, try to understand its essence and value as being located in the history of religion. The traditional Christian assertion of its absolute role in the divine salvation of humanity comes up against serious problems when it faces religious traditions outside Christianity. As Troeltsch ([1923]1980, 11) aptly maintained, Christianity finds itself in the “clash between historical reflection and the determination of standards of truth and value.” Troeltsch felt it as an imperative for a theologian to ask about the right “*place* of Christianity among the World Religions.” The history of religions deprives Christianity of the validity of its traditional dogmatic claim to absoluteness (Kim 2010a,b). Facing the question of the place of Christianity among the many religions in the world, Troeltsch answered as follows: “In our earthly experience the Divine Life is not one, but many. However, to apprehend the one in the many constitutes the special character of love” (Troeltsch [1923]1980, 31).

On the other hand, the critical and self-reflected influence of natural science on the human sciences was already emerging as philosophical anthropology began to ask about the “*place*” of human beings in nature. Biological science since Darwin renders the meaning of ethics and religions, including Christianity, questionable. Scientific research in socio-biology, neuroscience, the cognitive science of religion, and so on draw the common—if not exactly the same—conclusion that religions are nothing more and nothing less than relics of the natural evolution of humanity.

Max Scheler initiated this tendency—that the *naturalistic turn* in anthropology that may be compared with the anthropological turn of theology in the European modern world. In his book, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, Scheler asked about the “special place” of the human being in nature. But his question about the place of human beings in nature was different from the traditional and dogmatic question that we encounter in the history of Western thought. According to Scheler, human beings try to find the meaning of the world and the transcendental Being through the spirit. In this sense, we might say that the human place in the cosmos is outside of the cosmos. But the very spirit of a human being is, according to Scheler, a result of the simple fact that the human being lacks natural instinct. The essence of spirit is found in the ability to maintain a distance from some object, and it is this lack of natural instinct that gives the human being the ability to keep some distance from the environmental world. According to Scheler, the spirit of a human being, which previously had been seen as distinguishing human beings from other living things in a metaphysical sense, could now be explained by a lack of instinct that is nothing more and nothing less than a natural element.

If we accept, however, the scientific understanding of the human being, and especially if we accept positively the explanation of human being proposed by the biological sciences, it will bring Christian theology a new

possibility for understanding human beings. Just as the declaration of the “death of God” by Nietzsche in the nineteenth century went hand in hand with the “anthropological turn” in Christian theology—*homo homini deus*—so the so-called “birth of God” brought about by evolutionary biology in the wake of the Darwinian revolution could give birth to a “naturalistic turn” in Christian theology and theological anthropology: *natura homini deus*.

As much as *history* relativizes the claim of the absoluteness of the Christian faith, *nature* seems to deprive the religions, including Christian faith, of any basis whatsoever. To put it differently, for religion and natural science to be involved in theology on any level will require theology having the courage to expose itself to total self-denial and self-negation for the sake of gaining a new self-understanding. There could not be a theology of religion, or a theology of natural science, as long as they mean that religion and natural science would be integrated into the traditional theological framework, at least the traditional one prior to a deconstruction. The reason for this is evident. The conditions for theology itself are being interrogated by religion and natural science. There could not exist a “hyphen” that connects theology to the religions or natural sciences in such a way that this combination does not touch the essence of theology itself. In this sense, we can invoke the insight that it is completely insufficient to consider recent bioethics as merely “a hypene ethics” (Žižek 2004), because it is life (*bio*) itself that is being questioned in recent bioethics. In this sense, it is no longer possible to relate religion and science to theology with a “hyphen.” There could be neither “religion-theology” nor “science-theology,” because it is theology itself that is being asked to change its essence. To enter a dialogue with religion and natural science would require Christian theology to rethink its essence and construct a new paradigm.

At this point, we have to remember that the Christian dialogue with the religions and the dialogue with natural sciences must be carried through equiprimordially (= *gleichursprünglich*), that is, with equal primordially, because religion and science are to be understood as two different sides of one and the same coin. Martin Heidegger ([1927]1962, 161, 162, 203, 536) said that the three elements for the existential constitution of the “there” (*Da*), that is, “state of mind” (*Befindlichkeit*), “understanding” (*Verstehen*), and “discourse” (*Rede*) are “equiprimordial” (*gleichursprünglich*). This means that no single element could be reduced to the other elements. Both religion and science entail the human understanding of reality. It is impossible, therefore, to either reduce religion to science or to separate them from each other. As Japanese Buddhist philosopher Nishitani Keiji (1900–1999) aptly points out, religion and science, like life and death, being and nonbeing, and spirit and matter, build up one and the same reality in the sense that they are a “double exposure” of the same reality (Nishitani 1982, 52; see also Kim 2015).

I wish to call the intrinsic relation between the Christian faith, religion, and science “circuminsessional integration.” This means, as explained above in Nishitani’s idea of the “double exposure” of religion and science, that religion and science presuppose each other, as do the human and natural sciences. The concept of “circuminsessional integration” between the human and natural sciences is derived from the fact that the human being is a part of nature which is the object of natural science, and that the natural sciences belong to the human being’s effort to understand him or herself. As Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker maintains, “nature is older than a human being,” and “human being is older than natural science.” Human science and natural science are “half circles” of one full circle:

Natural science and humanistic disciplines appear to me like two half-circles. They ought to be joined in such a way that they combine to form a full circle, and this circle ought then to be followed round fully, many times. By this I mean:

On the one hand, man is himself a being of nature. Nature is older than man. Man has come out of nature and is subject to her laws. An entire science, medical science, is successfully engaged in studying man as a part of nature, with the methods of natural science. In this sense, the humanistic disciplines presuppose natural science.

On the other hand, natural science is itself made by man and for man, and is subject to the conditions of every intellectual and material work of man. Man is older than natural science. Nature had to be so that there could be man—man had to be so that there could be concepts of nature. It is possible as well as necessary to understand natural science as a part of man’s intellectual life. In this sense, natural science presupposes the humanistic disciplines. (Von Weizsäcker [1949]1979, 8f.; 1949, 5f.)

The question is then how might we understand the reality with which religion and science have to do simultaneously? To answer this question, I want to mention the change in the self-understanding of human being since the emergence of the natural sciences along with the Buddhist insight that everything exists in mutual dependence (*pratītya-samutpāda*).

Since the emergence of modern science, we have come to realize that we find ourselves experiencing a gradual process of “decentering” within the world in which we find ourselves. We agree with Pierre Baldi when he maintains that “the history of Western science and civilization has been a history of progress of decentering, a gradual movement away from a self-centered view of the world that comes so naturally to us” (2002, 10–12), Baldi adds that “this decentering process toward the cosmic scale of the universe had its counterpart in the decentering process toward the microscopic scale.”

The scientific revolution of the European seventeenth century, which was caused by the paradigm shift from the geocentric to the heliocentric universe, was a kind of pyrotechnics signaling the decentering process of the human being in the universe. The scientific revolution was followed by

the Darwinian revolution of the nineteenth century, whereby the medieval *scala naturae*, which guaranteed a determined position for human beings between the divine and animal spheres, became meaningless. A human being had to understand him/or herself as floating rootlessly, not only within a vast universe, but also within the wild natural world. These two “revolutions” reached their acmes in the manipulation of DNA, which is thought to decide and distinguish the characteristics of one human being from another human being and from other living things. However, work on DNA is clearly revealing the continuity between human beings and other living things.

Decentering therefore accompanies the diminishing of the firm boundary thought to separate human beings from other things in the world. Here I will quote a somewhat long passage from Baldi on the anthropological connotations of “decentering”:

Through millions of years of evolution, our brains have been wired to provide us with an inner feeling of self, a feeling that each of us is a unique individual delimited by precise boundaries. [. . .] A fundamental argument of the book is that this self-centered view of the world is problematic—in fact, it is “scientifically” wrong. It is the result of evolutionary accidents. The reason for its past success lies in being an adequate model of the world during our evolutionary bootstrapping. [. . .] As we shall see, genome, computation, and minds are rather fluid and continuous entities, both in space and in time. Individually, we are just samples of this continuum. Myriad other selves are arbitrarily close to ours, selves continuously interpolated between ourselves and any other being, including those of the opposite sex. [. . .] The boundary between the self and the other, the self and the world, the inside and outside has begun to blur, and ultimately may evaporate entirely. (Baldi 2002, 3–4)

Baldi’s thesis stands on the fact that every natural science ultimately intends to be anthropology and that scientific inquiry has changed the self-understanding of human beings in nature (Rahner 1980, 63). The process of decentering developed by modern science extends to the deconstruction of the self-consciousness of human beings. Put differently, this process of decentering accompanies the decentering of human awareness. In this sense, the scream of Nietzsche’s “mad man” speaks for the psychological fear and anxiety of modern man who has finally lost every ontological center within a dynamic universe upon which he might find a resting place:

The concept of “decentering” reminds us of the Buddhist understanding of *śūnyata*, which means “emptiness” and “no-self.” *Śūnyatā* comes from the fundamental discernment of Buddhism that everything exists in mutual dependence (*pratītya-samutpāda*). To concentrate on the concept of “decentering” and *śūnyata* helps us to inquire whether and how the self-understanding of the human being in modern natural science might

be integrated with the Buddhist view of reality. At the same time, it leads us to consider the Buddhist possibility of accepting the self-understanding of a human being which is demanded by biological sciences.

In the Buddhist understanding of (ultimate) reality, A exists in relation with B, and, therefore, A has no independent Self at all, and A is in its essence Nothing, *śūnyata*. *Śūnyatā* and *pratītya-samutpāda* express two sides of one coin. *Śūnyatā* itself is nothing more than a transient name dedicated to something that exists only in mutual relationship, which are as Nāgārjuna puts it: “Whatever is dependently co-arisen / That is explained to be emptiness./ That, being a dependent designation / Is itself the middle way” (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24:18; see Kim 2011, 2014)

The realization of the interrelatedness of everything reaches its peak in Hua-yen Buddhist metaphysics. “The Hua-yen universe is essentially a universe of identity and total inter-causality” in “which there is no center, or perhaps if there is one, it is everywhere” (Kamata 1974, 102). Hua-yen destroys “the fiction of a sole causal agent” (Cook 1977, 12). Rather, with the insight of Hua-yen Buddhism, we can maintain that “the religious truths are spread out in an organic co-relational network” (Ryūsei 2008, 297). The point to the doctrine of interdependence is that things exist *only* in interdependence, for things do not exist in their own right. In Buddhism, this manner of existence is called “emptiness.” Buddhism says that things are empty in the sense that they lack a self-essence (*svabhāva*) by virtue of which things would have an independent existence. In reality, their existence derives strictly from interdependence (Cook 1977, 15). In the Hua-yen Buddhist understanding of reality, “the lack of the independent ego” of a person is both a starting point for and the ultimate stage of living in the realm of dharma. At the same time, the “lack” is experienced as freedom from the attachment to a self-closing exclusive self of the faith that denies any “simultaneous interpenetrative harmonization” (Odin 1982, 3) in the face of a different religious tradition than one’s own.

Based on the Buddhist understanding of reality, we have to repeat that the Christian dialogue with other religions and with the natural sciences should be carried out simultaneously. Religion and natural science are two insights into human beings that could not be separated from each other. Religion and science as “two half-circles” (von Weizsäcker) that form a “simultaneous interpenetrative” (Odin), or “circuminsessional integration” (Nishitani) for the human understanding of itself and of the nature.

Furthermore, as Karl Rahner maintains, every natural science intends to be an anthropology. Scientific inquiry and its results must change human beings’ self-understanding of nature which was traditionally realized by the religions. In modern Asian society, where Christians experience religious pluralism and the strong influence of the natural sciences, the effort to construct a dialogue with religion and with natural science is urgent and indispensable.

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