

Catalytic Disparities

by Rev. Nobuaki Hanaoka

An eye can only see two-dimensional images, but when two slightly different images seen by two eyes are processed together in the brain, they become three-dimensional. In other words, the brain translates the "retinal disparity" into depth perception. That, of course, is a description of what is known as binocular stereopsis, but it also serves as a metaphor for our bicultural experiences. As Asian Christians, we have lived "cultural disparities" between the East and the West. Even though we have become quite skilled in Western logics and technologies, what is written deep into our spiritual DNA cannot be erased easily. Yet we are often in denial of it, depriving ourselves of the benefit of three-dimensional vistas.

Disparity of any kind is unsettling and often confusing, especially when two cultures are internalized together and the Eastern and the Western parts of our consciousness question and challenge each other. It takes courage and determination as well as intellectual honesty to recognize and process the disparity until the blurry double vision becomes a clear three-dimensional vision.

As part of my ongoing research project, I have identified the following 10 items as *catalytic disparities* between our two cultures. Since the space does not permit me to elaborate on all of them, I would like to offer you this laundry list of mine and a brief comment for your consideration, hoping that it may serve as a catalyst for reassessing and reinventing our theology:

- 1) Western theology emphasizes God's transcendence, while in the East God is generally assumed to be immanent. "The Lamp of Light is inside of you," taught the Buddha.
- 2) Western thought has a propensity toward "either-or" polarization, while the Eastern counterpart seeks "both-and" integration.
- 3) Western, particularly American, theology views ideal human being as an independent, self-reliant individual, while the Eastern philosophy sees it as part of a web of interdependence and mutual-identity.
- 4) Western attitude toward nature tends to be one of subjugation and control, while traditional Eastern attitude is living in harmony with it.
- 5) Western theology is based on God's exclusive self-revelation in Christ and its proclamation by the Church, while Eastern philosophy seeks awakening to a deeper and more authentic "self."
- 6) While Western theology seems to be preoccupied with sin and guilt, the religious philosophies of the East are more concerned about finding a spiritual peace, from which compassion and justice are to flow naturally.
- 7) Because their belief system includes *karma*, those of the East tend to be more passive and deterministic, while those in the West tend to be more optimistic about desired changes. (What you see in the world has no permanence and all things are fleeting anyway, why fight them? *Shikataga nai* -- It can't be helped.)
- 8) Prophetic passion for justice is an important part of the biblical religion, but Buddhist passion seems to be more about individual inner peace.

9) The religion of the Bible often talks about love, while Buddhism talks more about compassion. Love refers to a commitment to relationships, while compassion is a state of mind.

10) While the Buddha taught renunciation of the world as he considered it a fleeting illusion, God, as seen in John's Gospel, loved the world enough to give the Son for it.

The West has long been mesmerized by the glorious image of God's absolute transcendence. In the biblical literature, however, the transcendent God is immanent as well. In other words, God's transcendence and immanence are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The "Imago Dei" (the image of God in which humanity was created) and God's Breath (*Ruah*/Spirit) breathed into Adam's nostrils in the Book of Genesis, the theology of incarnation and the indwelling presence of the Advocate/Spirit in John's Gospel, and the assertion that "The kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, but humans do not see it," in the concluding section of the (Gnostic) Gospel of Thomas all suggest God's immanence in the world. The Western Church did not reject the idea of God's immanence entirely, but minimized its role in theology when it rejected Gnosticism as heresy. Subsequent theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, assumed God's immanence as logical inevitability, but they tried to limit it in favor of making the revelation of God in Christ exclusive. Many Protestant theologians, Karl Barth, for instance, have since challenged everything that could be construed as "natural theology," such as Imago Dei, in order to invalidate all revelations other than Christ himself. Having just witnessed the immense evil of Nazism, their task was naturally to acknowledge and indict humanity's great evil and to proclaim Christ as the only Revealer of divine truth. It was a radical corrective course deemed necessary at the time. However, an outcome of this lopsided emphasis on transcendence is the traditional belief that no human, except Jesus, and no institution, except the Church, holds eternal truth. It has thus eliminated the possibility of God's revelation elsewhere and justified the monopolization of salvation.

I believe that the transcendent God is also immanent in the world, affirming the dignity and sanctity of all beings from within. That, I believe, is the paradox of divinity. As I watch Buddhists in Asia put their palms together to worship the divine in each other whenever their paths cross, I stand in awe of the beauty of their spirituality. We Christians may know how to worship and glorify the transcendent God with solemn liturgies, but we must also learn to worship the God who is immanent in humanity and in nature.

In the age of globalization and pluralism, the Western mode of "either-or" polarity poses a threat to the fragile peace of the world today, as we have witnessed it in Iraq and elsewhere. I believe, therefore, that the Eastern integrative pattern of "both-and" must be considered as our new model. As seen in the Yin and Yang symbol, the opposites are actually intertwined with each other and together they complete a perfect circle. Therefore, to achieve wholeness/holiness/health, according to the wisdom of the East, we must be able to embrace and integrate both Yin and Yang, good and evil, right and wrong, femininity and masculinity, etc. Our Scripture, however, reminds us that when Adam and Eve ate from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," we humans began to live in the world of polarities - good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, black vs. white, etc. Our "Original Sin" was not so much our disobedience to God as it was living in duality itself, because, by so doing, we alienated ourselves from the primordial union with God and with one another. It is interesting to note that the story of the genesis of duality was followed by Cain's murder of his own brother Abel. The rest of Old Testament history was an incident after another of alienation, discrimination and separation. The Christian message, on the other hand, is that we have been liberated once and for all from the curse of polarity/alienation as Christ died on the cross to achieve at-one-ment. The curtain of the temple (of separation) has been torn from top to bottom. If that is what we believe, our theology must be of integration and wholeness, rather than of polarization and discrimination.

If post-modernity is marked by globalization, pluralism, universal accessibility of information/knowledge, and the fragmentation of authority, we are in the middle of it now, and it challenges us to reconsider 1) the idea of the non-immanent God, 2) the church's self-absolute doctrines and self-serving institutions, 3) the imperialistic practices of the church's mission, and 4) the polarizing "either-or" mentality of the church culture. The understanding of God's immanence in the world enables the church to seek meaningful dialogue with the East and draw inspiration from it. It also enables us to adopt and embrace the integrative thinking of the East.

Also, in light of global warming and disappearing rain forests, it is imperative that we begin to cultivate the kind of spirituality that is both ecologically sound and spiritually fulfilling. As we develop a new theology of nature, we need to be reminded that the spiritual resources of the East, such as Chuang Tzu and Ryokan, are readily available to us. In fact, many of us grew up with their wisdom, although we most likely buried it when it came in conflict with the idea that the Westernized Christianity was the only valid Christianity.

The time is indeed ripe for us to use our "cultural disparities" as catalyst for critical assessment and creative reinvention of our theology and ministry.