

Chapter 1

Paradigm Shift

In the fall of 1994, I spent a weekend in the home of a friend in southern California. On Sunday morning, shortly before the time came for me to leave for my plane, I happened to walk through his living room, and on the coffee table I spied a copy of the October issue of *Omni*. I picked up the magazine and started leafing through it, and an article about miraculous appearances of the Virgin Mary caught my attention. Here are a couple of paragraphs from that article:

On March 21, 1994, New York's eleven o'clock Eyewitness News ended with this pious tableau: A solemn, modestly dressed Egyptian immigrant family and their friends crowd an apartment in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, all of them staring reverently at a glistening copper icon of the Virgin Mary. With detached amusement, the TV anchor announces that this icon, which the Boutros family bought in a church gift shop in Cairo, is weeping oil tears. The camera cuts to an exotic, bearded figure in a long, black cassock, identified as a bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church, a sect of Christianity hailing from Egypt. He assures the greater New York audience that a miracle has indeed occurred.

Back in the newsroom, the TV anchor smiles in a who knows kind of way. The story was clearly meant to be a footnote on the richness of life in the Big City (*Omni*, October 1994, 54).

If you're like the average westerner, you probably heaved a sigh, shook your head, and perhaps joined New York's TV anchor in smiling at how very gullible some people can be. That's my reaction to stories like this, I can assure you.

We need to be careful not to smile too broadly or sigh too loudly, though, because the joke just may be on us.

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I don't mean that I think the copper virgin might really have shed miraculous oily tears. If you and I could open up the icon's head, we'd probably find a container of very ordinary cooking oil inside that was connected with a tube to its eyes. And with our rational minds, so carefully honed to look for logical, scientific proof of everything, we'd proclaim the icon a fraud and go on about our business.

The reason the joke might be on us is that more is going on in this story than is apparent to the casual observer, especially those looking at it through Western, scientific eyes. The *Omni* article goes on to point out that "Brooklyn's oily miracle is just the latest eruption in a volcanic surge of miraculous events and apparitions involving the Virgin Mary," indicating that a "tremendous longing for religious experience - for firsthand contact with the miraculous and the divine ... is driving people across the country to sites like Bensenhurst." *Omni's* article states that many people have been having visions of the Virgin and mentions some of the better-known alleged appearances across North America and in other parts of the world. Some have occurred in well-to-do neighborhoods, prompting *Omni* to comment that "middle-class Americans ... cannot reconcile the worldly, skeptical, scientific, conscious parts of their minds with their deeply emotional religious longings and fears."

Above all else, you and I must understand that the issue in the story about the weeping icon is not rational proof. It's belief. It's the human need for *more* than a rational, scientific explanation for everything in life. It's a profound need for the spiritual.

Paradigm shift

That need is exploding in our Western society. It's called a "paradigm shift."

A paradigm is the basic way we explain reality. Two of the most common ways are rational-scientific explanations and religious-supernatural explanations. A paradigm shift occurs when a society changes the way it explains reality. For the past

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several hundred years, Western thought has increasingly been based on rational-scientific explanations of reality, but a paradigm shift is going on in our society even as you read this book. And that's the point of the story about the weeping icon. The problem with New York's TV anchorman is not his skepticism that the oily tears are supernatural. It's that he fails to see in the humble priest's faith something more than mere gullibility. The newscaster fails to realize that the society he's so accustomed to, in which logic and science reign supreme, is on the way out.

Individual humans sometimes change their paradigms quickly. This happens, for example, when a scientist becomes a Christian. This doesn't mean that the scientist gives up all the scientific assumptions he has grown so accustomed to. It means that science is no longer the only way or perhaps even the most important way that he explains reality.

Societies change much more slowly. A paradigm shift for an entire culture may take several hundred years. At least that has been the case in the past.

Hellenism

Two thousand years ago, Hellenism had dominated people's thinking throughout the Mediterranean world for several hundred years. Hellenism was humanity's best effort up to that time to develop a rational basis for determining reality.

However, by the time Christ came into the world, a major paradigm shift was already underway. Ellen White describes it well in her book *The Desire of Ages*.

“When the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son.” Providence had directed the movements of nations, and the tide of human impulse and influence, until the world was ripe for the coming of the Deliverer. The nations were united under one government. One language was widely spoken, and was everywhere recognized as the language of literature... .

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At this time the systems of heathenism were losing their hold upon the people. Men were weary of pageant and fable. They longed for a religion that could satisfy the heart. While the light of truth seemed to have departed from among men, there were souls who were looking for light, and who were filled with perplexity and sorrow. They were thirsting for a knowledge of the living God, for some assurance of a life beyond the grave (*The Desire of Ages*, 32).

Notice the interest in spirituality that Ellen White says was growing at the time Christ came into the world two thousand years ago. Numerous cults with initiation rites and secret mysteries were taking hold of people's minds at this time. One of the best known of these was Mithraism. Ellen White put her finger on one of the major reasons why these cults were so popular: People "longed for a religion that could satisfy the heart... . They were thirsting for a knowledge of the living God, for some assurance of a life beyond the grave."

Another "cult" at that time was Christianity (It sounds offensive to us to call Christianity a cult. However, the general populace of the first century A.D. thought of Christianity as a cult), which, like Mithraism, had a cleansing initiation rite (baptism) and a secret mystery (communion). You and I understand that Christianity offered the only true solution to these longings, and that's why God chose this period of history - when people were searching for truth - to plant His new Christian religion.

Eventually, Christianity conquered the Roman Empire, and the paradigm shift was complete. For the next twelve hundred years religion, and specifically the Christian religion, was the dominant mode of thought throughout the European world. Islam conquered Christianity in the Middle East and northern Africa, but it was also a religion. Thus, the entire Mediterranean world was dominated by religious thought patterns throughout most of the first millennium and the first half of the second.

The Renaissance

The Renaissance changed all that. In 1510 Copernicus announced that our globe was just one of several planets that orbited the sun, and our world was not the center of the universe. All thought patterns die hard, of course, and the religious way of thinking that had ruled for nearly a millennium and a half was no exception. The church fought the new knowledge with a vengeance. About one hundred and twenty years after Copernicus's announcement, Galileo was forced to recant this scientific reality in a church court.

However, no authority, regardless of how long it has dominated people's minds, can keep them from changing once they begin to understand reality according to a different paradigm. By the beginning of the twentieth century, science (or scientism) held a firm grip on Western thought patterns. Another name for this mode of thought is *secularism*, or, as it is often called, "secular humanism." And, increasingly, people throughout the world began explaining reality primarily in rational, secular terms rather than from a religious viewpoint.

Even Christianity, which claims to base its conclusions on the supernatural, has been profoundly affected by the rational, secular, scientific paradigm. For example, when your doctor is puzzled about what ails you, do you expect him to consult the Bible or his medical books for the answer? What kind of books do you think your mechanic read as he was taking his training? And granted that in our Adventist culture we want the Bible to be the basic textbook in education, which book do you expect your son or daughter to study in college if he or she majors in chemistry or physics?

This secular paradigm pervades our lives today in ways we don't even realize. We expect the major institutions of our culture to be secular: public education, communications (news, books, magazines), entertainment, government, *etc.* I realized how much this secular paradigm has affected my own thinking one day when I was reading a secular women's magazine in a doctor's waiting room. As I leafed through the magazine, I came to an advertisement for a religious product, and I got the

strangest feeling that this advertisement didn't belong in this magazine. I had to stop and make myself realize that a religious manufacturer had as much right to advertise in this magazine as anyone.

This secular, scientific mind-set has dominated Western culture during my entire lifetime and the lifetime of my parents and grandparents. Most people would probably feel comfortable with the idea that it reached its peak during the middle of the twentieth century with the explosion of the atomic bomb over Japan in 1945 and the Apollo moon landing in 1969.

The age of Aquarius

I find it extremely significant, however, that the next major paradigm shift in Western society was under way even as Neil Armstrong took his first step on the moon. The hippie movement of the 1960s may seem like a poor candidate for the distinction of leading the way into the next paradigm shift, but that's exactly what happened. For, if we define spirituality as life based on intuition and "inner light" as opposed to rationalism, then the hippie movement was profoundly spiritual. It was also a rebellion against scientism and an affirmation of values other than money and technology - two of the hallmarks of the rational-scientific paradigm.

New Age spiritualism is another evidence of the profound paradigm shift that is underway even as you read these words. Conservative Christians believe the New Age to be false, but that's beside the point in this discussion. What matters is that the New Age also rejects science and technology as the only source of truth. New Age enthusiasts believe that the age of Pisces is giving way to the age of Aquarius, which they claim will be characterized by worldwide peace.

The Twelve-Step recovery movement is yet another evidence that we are entering an age that emphasizes spirituality as much as rationalism. This movement began in the late 1930s with a group of alcoholics in Akron, Ohio. However, during its first twenty or thirty years, it was confined to alcoholics. Only

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in the last twenty to thirty years has it become widely accepted as a way to overcome a large variety of compulsive-obsessive behaviors. And this spiritually-centered movement that is not tied to any one religion has flourished during the same years that New Age spiritual ideas have been catching the attention of the whole world.

So-called out-of-body experiences are yet another evidence of the increasing importance westerners at the end of the twentieth century are placing on spirituality at the expense of rationalism. Interest in angels and appearances of the Virgin Mary also fit in as evidences of the paradigm shift.

A development that has captured the attention of Seventh-day Adventists in North America is the growing influence of the Religious Right, of which the Christian Coalition is the most obvious expression. The increasing popularity of conservative talk-radio programs such as that of Rush Limbaugh goes hand in hand with the growth in power of the Religious Right. And on a worldwide basis, we see the Roman Catholic Church emerging as the world's moral policeman. On certain moral issues, even fundamentalist Muslims are joining hands with them!

Yes, a paradigm shift of major proportions is going on in the whole world, not just the West. The shift is away from secular authorities and secular ways of understanding reality to spiritual authorities and spiritual ways of explaining reality.

Please pay careful attention to what I say next because I believe it is one of the most significant evidences that we live in the end time: God chose the time when a major paradigm shift was occurring in Western society to send His Son into the world the first time. The evidence suggests that He has chosen a similar time to send His Son into the world the second time.