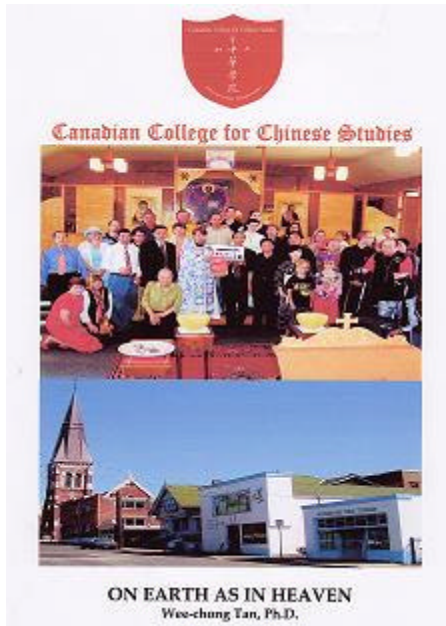


Wee Chong Tan, *On Earth as in Heaven: Collected Papers on Environmental Issues and Organic Farming*, Victoria, BC: Canadian College for Chinese Studies.

**By Matthew Francis**



In *Jesus and the Earth*, written by James Jones in 2003, the world is called a “field – hedged in by both ecology and theology.” Other recent important works, such as Alistair McIntosh’s *Soul and Soil* focus on the public reorientation that is taking place towards the critical importance of the environment. At the April meeting of the Community Planning Association of Alberta, which I had the privilege to attend, speakers and participants constantly referred to “the triple bottom-line” of sustainable development: the economic, the social, and the environmental. Clearly, even in provinces not generally known for their ecological stewardship, a sea-change of sorts is taking place. Patriarch Bartholomew’s annual encyclical letters on the environment, delivered at the beginning of each liturgical year, have highlighted the responsibility and solidarity we as Christians have to “the whole creation.” As the Apostle Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Romans:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the

Spirit groan inwardly as we wait for our adoption as sons , the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:19-23).

We, as the “personal creation,” crowned with God’s image and called into the likeness of Jesus Christ, are given the priestly vocation of stewardship of the rest of creation, of which we are a part.

Dr. Wee Chong Tan’s recent book, *On Earth as In Heaven: Collected Papers on Environmental Issues and Organic Farming*, brings together fifteen essays, previously unpublished lectures, and occasional writings on ecology that express his holistic, Christian worldview. Dr. Tan, a parishioner of All Saints of Alaska Orthodox Church in Victoria, BC, is well known in both scientific and Church circles. Born in the Fujian Province of China in 1930, he received his Ph.D. in Biochemistry from the Indiana University in 1966, later studying Theology in Britain, and was ordained as a priest of the Church of England at St. Paul’s Cathedral in 1971. A fellow of the Imperial Cancer Research Fund and the Royal Microscopical Society in Oxford, Dr. Tan has had a distinguished scientific career. Following his time in Britain, Dr. Tan became one of the founding faculty members of the Lester B. Pearson College of the Pacific in Victoria, BC, where he taught Biochemistry until his retirement in 1985. In retirement, he founded the first college teaching Traditional Chinese Medicine in Canada, and also the Canadian College for Chinese Studies. A longtime friend of the Orthodox Church, Dr. Tan was received into Orthodoxy at All Saints this past year and has become an integral part of the parish community.

Composed of essays written between 2003 and 2005, *On Earth as in Heaven* is a sort of whirl-wind tour of hot topics in ecology and agriculture: the impact of chemical pesticides, GMO (genetically modified organisms), organic farming, and the relationship of humanity with nature. Constantly in view is Dr. Tan’s comparison of the East and the West’s respective approaches to these matters. The first essay “Why China Chose to Build Her Civilization on the Foundation of Agriculture,” delivered at the University of Stockholm,

Sweden in 2003, demonstrates China's traditional emphasis on sustainable agriculture and the interrelationship between humanity and the earth. Even the cycle of the seasons has been linked in Chinese philosophy to the patterns of history, suggesting that we must always be reminded of the importance of what modern Western planners refer to as the "triple bottom line." If the economic, social, and environmental aspects of life become unbalanced, threats to the quality of our common life will challenge us to reorient our way of living accordingly.

Several other essays follow Dr. Tan's 2003 visit to Europe, where he visited 18 countries exploring environmental issues. His meetings with such important figures as Leen Aarnoutse, who pioneered organic farming in the Netherlands in 1978, are recounted with both scientific detail and stylistic panache. Several chapters carefully elucidate the risks associated with long-term use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, which may be linked not only to health concerns such as infertility and birth defects, but also to global warming. This conviction was born out in further interactions with farmers and agricultural experts throughout Alberta and Saskatchewan. In short, *On Earth as in Heaven* is a testimony of how Dr. Tan, a biochemist became an ardent supporter of organic farming.

In this "field – hedged in by both ecology and theology," some of Dr. Tan's later essays are more explicitly theological. For instance, in recounting his experience at a meeting of the Moscow Academy of Oceanography in 2000, Dr. Tan was challenged to summarize Western Civilization using one word. He chose "logic." When later asked to define Chinese Civilization in one word, he chose "the Tao," the organizing principle of life and nature. Hieromonk Damascene's well known book *Christ the Eternal Tao* immediately comes to mind, where the Johannine concept of Jesus Christ as the *logos*, or eternal Divine word of the Father is related to its Chinese counterpart, "the Tao."

In some chapters, Dr. Tan's work reaches towards a sort of "theology of culture," which does not isolate ecology from the arena of

*politeia* or the stewardship of public life, or even *leitourgia*, in the sense of public good done at private, Christian, expense. Perhaps one can even hear thematic echoes in Dr. Tan's works of some of the thinking of His Eminence, Archbishop Lazar (Puhalo). In "Freedom and Kingdom," the author explores Western society's focus on individual freedom, which he sees as now having become a sort of obsession or *passion*.

Some classical Greek philosophers have said that the foundation of happiness is in freedom and that the foundation of freedom is in courage. I hope that the ultimate value of western history is not the attainment of individual freedom. If one equated individual freedom with happiness, happiness would not last. Such happiness is not lasting and such freedom is not perfect. *The Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, 1662*, says that "His service is perfect freedom." The Chinese refer to this as the "Heavenly mandate," doing God's will. During the Last Supper Jesus renewed the commandment that people should love one another. Seeking the Kingdom of God, through the execution of God's will, will lead to a change in human nature. This change will consist of the decrease of selfishness in human nature. God's service is perfect freedom. True freedom does not conflict with the Kingdom. It is through the Kingdom that perfect freedom is found, and not by the pursuit of individual freedom, which sometimes is a departure from the Kingdom....Service, especially to the weak and needy, is the essence of the freedom which will decrease the self/ego of the individual. Therefore, the essential consciousness of the idea of freedom is the moral sentiment of reason. True freedom bears fruit of peace and harmony with mutual respect for different traditions; weaker nations must be treated with fairness and not with double standards" (*On Earth as in Heaven*, pages 84-85).

All in all, *On Earth as in Heaven* is a challenging book that presents not only a compelling argument for stewardship of creation, it does so in Dr. Wee Chong Tan's mercurial tone of voice. I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Tan at All Saints of Alaska Church at the end of March. Clad in a brightly coloured Ecuadorean-knit sweater, he offered a generous welcome to his home parish, and gave me a copy of his book *Jesus in China* to share with our parish here in Edmonton.

For a man of such deep learning, Dr. Tan's attitude reminded me of this quote from Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom) of blessed memory:

The word 'humility' comes from the Latin word *humus* which means fertile ground. To me, humility is not what we often make of it: the sheepish way of trying to imagine that we are the worst of all and trying to convince others that our artificial ways of behaving show that we are aware of that. *Humility is the situation of the earth.* The earth is always there, always taken for granted, never remembered, always trodden on by everyone, somewhere we cast and pour out all the refuse, all we don't need. It's there, silent and accepting everything and in a miraculous way making out of all the refuse new richness in spite of corruption, transforming corruption itself into a power of life and a new possibility of creativeness, open to the sunshine, open to the rain, ready to receive any seed we sow and capable of bringing thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold out of every seed.

*About the Reviewer:* Matthew Francis is a parish member of the St. Herman of Alaska Sobor, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.