

Kuhn's Paradigm-Shift Theory and Its Application to Religious Conversion: Why the Two are Incompatible¹

In his essay *Scientific Revolution and Religious Conversion: A Closer Look at Thomas Kuhn's Theory of Paradigm-Shift*, Tomas Dronen claims that Kuhn's theory of paradigm-shift can be used to explain the process of religious conversion. In his paper,² he examines religious conversion from "three different angles: religion as worldview, the role of crisis in religious conversion, and the question of 'incommensurability'³ of different religions." (Dronen 2006: 1) Dronen's model, however, conveniently redefines Kuhn's concept of a paradigm to support his own religious conversion model. Dronen inaccurately equates religious conversion to Kuhn's "revolution,"⁴ and omits certain key elements from paradigms in order to justify his claim. Although critics have attacked Kuhn for ambiguously defining his paradigm (Margaret Masterman claimed to have found the word used twenty one different ways in his book), he is quite clear about a number of properties that paradigms must have, which Dronen ignores in order to create a plausible synthesis between the paradigm-shift theory and religious conversion.⁵ Bearing in mind the complete set of properties Kuhn defines paradigms by, it seems impossible that religious conversion can be applied within the same context.⁶

The multiplicity of competing world religions is directly contradictory to one key element in Kuhn's paradigm theory. Kuhn says that, "To be accepted as a paradigm, a theory must seem better than its competitors, but it need not, and in fact never does, explain all the facts with which it can be confronted."⁷ (Kuhn 1996: 16-18) By this definition, the field of religion is in a pre-paradigmatic state⁸; no single religion can claim superiority over the others. Instead, world religions as they exist now⁹ each offer differing sets of views and explanations, each set as plausible¹⁰ and perhaps as appealing

as the next. It is evident that no one¹¹ religion can be considered a paradigm simply because no one religion dominates the overwhelming majority of the population's spiritual alliances. Religious conversion thus cannot be modeled by the paradigm-shift theory because the convert does not progress from his old religion to a paradigm, or from one paradigm to another.¹²

To further support the assertion that religion is in a pre-paradigmatic state,¹³ we can look to Kuhn's idea of "normal science." This term refers to the scientific work done within the paradigm "where scientists seldom disagree over fundamentals because they are all committed to the same rules and standards for scientific practice."¹⁴ (Kuhn 1996: 11) Due to the improvable nature of many of religions' beliefs,¹⁵ there is no "normal science," so to speak,¹⁶ of religion, for there is no single belief that all religions are communally committed to.¹⁷ Even within a single religion there is much dispute over fundamentals, such as belief in the literal reading of doctrine versus metaphorical interpretation.¹⁸ It is actually because there are no collective commitments to certain beliefs that the field of religion cannot progress as a whole toward a paradigmatic state.¹⁹ Kuhn even says, "That commitment and the apparent consensus it produces are prerequisites for normal science, i.e., for the genesis and the continuation of a particular research tradition."²⁰ (Kuhn 1996: 11)

Kuhn's idea of a crisis in paradigm-shift is also incompatible with Dronen's application of the concept to religious conversion.²¹ Whereas crisis in Kuhn's theory occurs when anomalies discredit the old paradigm²² and there is no new paradigm to explain the anomalies,²³ Dronen uses the term in a more colloquial sense. He refers to the convert's crisis as a happening where their old religion fails the former believer in some

crucial way.²⁴ However, there are many world religions,²⁵ and more likely than not the believer will not revise his religion or create a new one to deal with the anomalies, but rather convert to an already existing one.²⁶ This directly contradicts Kuhn's original definition of crisis, which asserts that in order for crisis to occur, there must be no other paradigm to account for the anomalies.²⁷ Clearly, any convert who falls under this category, of which presumably the overwhelming majority do,²⁸ converts because the solution to their problems already lies in the chosen existing religion. (This is not to mention that the anomalies aren't discrediting a paradigm in the first place, since any single religion to date cannot be considered a paradigm).²⁹

With these inconsistencies considered, it is evident that the "scientific revolutions" Kuhn claims stem from paradigm-shift are essentially different from Dronen's version of revolution in the ways each is induced.³⁰ Firstly, the existence of a new paradigm is a prerequisite for revolution, and there is no paradigm for a convert to choose. Secondly, revolution must be perpetuated by means of a crisis,³¹ which all converts who simply choose an existing religion will never experience.

In order for Kuhn's theory of paradigm-shift to be applicable to religious conversion,³² religion as a collective whole must move into a paradigmatic state. However, there is a fundamental problem with this hypothetical scenario, which probably³³ explains why religion has not made this move already. Crises (in Dronen's sense of the word) for religious converts stem from two conflicting sources, whereas crises³⁴ for scientists result from a single source. New paradigms can emerge in science because its anomalies are always factual.³⁵ These anomalies can eventually be accounted for by a new paradigm and science can move on. However, to those dealing with

religious faith, religion can fail simultaneously in two ways: factual inconsistency and a breakdown of spiritual confidence.³⁶ In this case, one paradigm cannot always account for both crises. Using evolution as an example, we can see that the idea of evolution conflicts factually with the Bible's account of creation. However, it could also interfere with what one values about his or her religion. Let's say that a particular believer values Christianity because the creation story put forth in the Bible exhibits God's love for humans by directly making them the most intelligent species on Earth. He then might feel compelled to abandon Christianity should it decide to take up evolution as its new creation story because it no longer provides the type of emotional support he needs.³⁷ On the other hand, if Christianity keeps the original creation story, others may lose faith because it is directly contradictory to a generally accepted theory. To account for both problems in one paradigm is impossible; keeping the creation story would motivate some people to start a new religion, while ditching the creation story would similarly compel others down the same road. Either way, religion is once again at a state where neither religion will gain supremacy over the other. Although one could arguably be scientifically proven as superior, the other would be superior in the hope and support it provides to its followers, a condition which is just as important in avoiding crises for religious believers.³⁸

This problem leads me to the conclusion that not only is Kuhn's theory of paradigm-shift incompatible with religious conversion now, but it *always will be*, because it is impossible for religion to progress out of its current pre-paradigmatic state. The implications of this conclusion are actually quite significant.³⁹ Without the capacity for religion to produce paradigms, it is likely that the devastating wars between science and

religion as well the battles within religion itself will never cease. If not physically, religions will continue to battle, at the very least, in the struggle for power.⁴⁰

Bibliography

Dronen, Tomas S. *Scientific Revolution and Religious Conversion: A Closer Look at Thomas Kuhn's Theory of Paradigm Shift*. Brill, Nevada: Leiden, 2006.

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

1. Title is kind of awkward, make it more concise and to the point
2. Vary the start of your sentences, you used "in his essay" as the start of the first sentence
3. Define "incommensurability" and explain your quote?
4. What is Kuhn's "revolution," comma not needed here
5. Consider dividing into 2 sentences
6. Are you applying the structure of the paradigm to the religious conversion or religious conversion to the structure of a paradigm? Or both? This is unclear. Good introductory paragraph, just clarify a few things and maybe touch upon the specific ways in which Kuhn's theory is incompatible with religious conversion, rather than just restating several times that it is.
7. It might be stronger to start this paragraph with the quote from Kuhn, then discuss why the multiplicity of religions contradicts it.
8. Explaining what a pre-paradigmatic state is and its application to the field of religion would be useful.
9. Consider either placing commas before and after the phrase "as they exist now" or rephrasing the first part of this sentence.
10. Really? Too much of an opinion.
11. "No on religion" - awkward
12. "does not progress from his old religion to a paradigm, or from one paradigm to another"—needs to be explained, your paragraph doesn't really support/explain this confusing, conclusive sentence.
13. Explain how religion is in a pre-paradigmatic stage.
14. Good quote/defining terms
15. Change "of religions' beliefs" to "religious beliefs"?
16. Get rid of expressions like "so to speak"
17. Does Dronen believe there is a single belief that all religions are commonly committed to? If so, you should state it and refute it.
18. Is dispute over fundamentals a result of "doctrine vs. metaphorical interpretation"? What are you trying to say? If you're not trying to say that it is, a more specific example would make your argument stronger.
19. This is awkward and confusing, consider inverting sentence structure

20. Good quote, maybe work it in so it forms a complete sentence. This will be a very good paragraph if worded more directly.
21. Weakly structured sentence, consider rephrasing
22. Comma needed
23. Semicolon needed, not a comma
24. Change “a happening where their old religion fails the former believer in some crucial way” to something more specific or phrase it more directly then provide an example
25. Really? This isn’t worth stating
26. An example of this would make it seem more legitimate
27. Good point, but once again, provide an example of one religion accounting for anomalies of another
28. How can you presume that the overwhelming majority does? Back your point up
29. You need examples to back your points up, you’re making too many claims and assumptions without justification
30. Sentence is vague and awkward
31. Expand on how Kuhn talks about crisis and revolutions in his talks about paradigms
32. Aren’t you arguing that the theory of paradigm-shift is not applicable to religious conversion
33. Words like “probably” make your argument sound weak
34. Define the two types of crises
35. This sentence doesn’t make sense, rephrase
36. Is a breakdown of spiritual confidence a failure of religion?
37. Good example, keep it, add more
38. Connect this example back to your main point, mention paradigms
39. Unnecessary sentence
40. Do these sentences about the battles within religion have to do with your thesis? Don’t introduce new ideas in your conclusion.