Perpetually Preparadigmatic: Religion's Resistance to Kuhnian Revolution

In "Scientific Revolution and Religious Conversion: A Closer Look at Thomas Kuhn's Theory of Paradigm-Shift," Thomas Sundnes Drønen asserts that changing one's religious affiliation is comparable to Kuhn's model of paradigm shifts in science. While in the broadest sense each of these transformations consists of a change in worldview, religion as an institution will never mirror the paradigmatic structure of scientific fields. According to Kuhn, a set of fundamental scientific assumptions which guides future research achieves paradigm status when it gains wide, nearly universal acceptance in the scientific community. In order to become a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense of the term, a religion would have to overpower all other competing belief systems and command the allegiance of the vast majority of the faithful. Because this is highly unlikely, religion will indefinitely exist in what Kuhn would describe as a preparadigmatic state in which believers adhere to many different faiths. The religious conversion of an individual through divine intervention cannot be compared to scientific revolutions because true Kuhnian paradigm shifts involve a change in group mentality resulting from anomalies, testable phenomena which defy the assumptions of the current paradigm. Furthermore, unlike scientists, whose research will only be considered legitimate if they work strictly within the bounds of a paradigm, religious leaders even of a single faith have far greater flexibility in how they guide their flocks. Although an individual's religious worldview can change and the basic assumptions of a scientific field shift over time, religion as an institution does not share the Kuhnian paradigmatic structure of science.

While a single paradigm can gain acceptance in a scientific field, religion will remain in a preparadigmatic state. In the Kuhnian sense, a paradigm cannot be personal to an individual scientist or even a group of scientists— "To be accepted as a paradigm, a theory must seem

better than its competitors" in order to establish "…a firm research consensus" among experts in a particular field (Kuhn 17, 15). Only if a substantial majority of scientists adhere to a set of fundamental assumptions about a particular phenomenon can those beliefs even be considered a paradigm. Drønen's assertion that "…the established world-religions tend to be long-lived paradigms," cannot be true (Drønen 244). Since no single religion has been nearly universally accepted by those who believe in a supernatural agent, no religion could currently be considered a paradigm. Upon closer examination, religion in the world today appears far more similar to the state of scientific fields in which no paradigm has been established. Kuhn describes the field of optics in its preparadigmatic state, noting that "No period between remote antiquity and the end of the seventeenth century exhibited a single generally accepted view about the nature of light…Instead there were a number of competing schools and sub-schools….[until] Newton drew the first nearly uniformly accepted paradigm for physical optics" (Kuhn 12-13). Before Newton outlined a paradigm for optics, scientists could not reach consensus on the nature of light and different researchers promoted various theories. Theologians and believers are perhaps even farther away from developing any sort of agreement about the nature of God. Since they have not reached a consensus, believers adhere to a plethora of competing schools of religious thought in a preparadigmatic state. Will a figure like Newton come along and create a theory about God that could become accepted by an overwhelming majority of the faithful? Barring the undeniable manifestation of a God or supernatural agent here on earth, the likelihood that any one religion could command the allegiance of most of humanity remains miniscule. The countless different religions and sub-schools of major religions, the engrained beliefs of followers of a particular faith, and the emergence of "…two or three [new] religions…every day" greatly reduce the chances that any one competing school will dominate the others and

achieve paradigm status (Dennett 101). Thus, religion will not in all likelihood mirror the paradigmatic structure of scientific fields.

Just as religion does not follow a paradigmatic pattern, religious conversion cannot be considered a revolution, or paradigm shift. Drønen argues that "To convert to a different religious view is always…a revolution," drawing parallels between Kuhn's conception of a scientific revolution, a change in paradigm, and choosing a different faith (Drønen 242). The converted individual has certainly altered his or her worldview, yet such "revolutions" are not true paradigm shifts. As described above, individuals do not have personal paradigms, at least in the Kuhnian sense of term to which Drønen alludes. Paradigms by definition are built on group consensus, so an individual's conversion cannot be considered a Kuhnian revolution. Scientific revolutions "…commence…with the recognition that nature has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations that govern…science" (Kuhn 52-53). Scientists can effectively convince other researchers that a new set of beliefs should replace the current paradigm by citing such anomalies which could be better explained by a new paradigm. A majority of scientists can form a new consensus by testing and experimenting based on the most recent information available. Changing someone's fundamental religious beliefs, some of which could be based on pure faith alone, on the other hand, is far more difficult, making mass conversions equivalent to scientific paradigm creation or shift highly unlikely. Drønen asserts that "The divine interference [which induces conversion] is…to some extent comparable with Kuhn's presentation of …unexpected finding[s]" (Drønen 245). Yet anomalies discovered by scientists are replicable and testable, whereas supernatural elements cannot be examined, making such conversion experiences only applicable to an individual, not a majority. Religious conversions do not mimic Kuhnian scientific revolutions.

Religious leaders, even those within a single faith, have far greater latitude in sharing their faith with others than scientists working within the bounds of a paradigm. Drønen argues that "…the work of the …scientist is remarkably similar to that of the clergy in the religious movement" (Drønen 243). According to Kuhn, a "…paradigm implies a…more rigid definition of [a scientific] field…[and] those unwilling or unable to accommodate their work to it must proceed in isolation or attach themselves to some other group" (Kuhn 19). A scientist who works outside of the current paradigm of his or her field will gain little respect from his or her paradigm-bound colleagues and his or her ideas will easily be dismissed. Drønen's comparison is indeed accurate insofar as religious leaders must adhere to the fundamentals of their religions in order to maintain their status in a faith's hierarchy. A priest must believe or at least teach that Christ was the son of God, for instance, in order to be considered a Christian, and spreading a contrary message to his flock would probably result in his expulsion from the priesthood. Yet the personal and fluid nature of faith, even within a single religion, defies the strict paradigmatic structure encountered by scientists. Personal convictions and experiences will shape a religious leader's individual analysis of religious texts in significant ways. One might hear one priest speaking of hellfire and damnation in relation to homosexuality in one congregation, while in another, a priest could construe Christ's message of tolerance as applicable to the gay community and share that message with his flock. There is enormous ideological breadth in all major world religions. Such vast variation in interpretation could not be tolerated by a rigid scientific paradigm unless it incited a revolution followed by a recreation of consensus. Scientists face constraint within their field's current paradigm; religious leaders, while bound to certain fundamentals of belief, have incredible interpretive latitude which defies purely paradigmatic structure.

The lack of any sort of religious consensus on fundamental questions, the divine element and individual nature of religious conversions, and religious leaders' flexibility in interpretation define religion in contrast to science as an institution without paradigm. While both science and religion involve fundamental worldviews, their practice and basic structure diverge substantially. The laboratory, not the sanctuary, conforms to Kuhn's model.

Bibliography

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