

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

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, he examines religious conversion from "three different angles: religion as worldview, the role of crisis in religious conversion, and the question of 'incommensurability' 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," 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. 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.

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." (Kuhn 1996: 16-18) By this definition, the field of religion is in a pre-paradigmatic state; no single religion can claim superiority over the others. Instead, world religions as they exist now each offer differing sets of views and explanations, each set as plausible and perhaps as appealing as the next. It is evident that no one 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.

To further support the assertion that religion is in a pre-paradigmatic state, 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." (Kuhn 1996: 11) Due to the improvable nature of many of religions' beliefs, there is no "normal science," so to speak, of religion, for there is no single belief that all religions are communally committed to. Even within a single religion there is much dispute over fundamentals, such as belief in the literal reading of doctrine versus metaphorical interpretation. 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. 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." (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. Whereas crisis in Kuhn's theory occurs when anomalies discredit the old paradigm and there is no new paradigm to explain the anomalies, 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. However, there are many world religions, 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. 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. Clearly, any convert who falls under this category, of which presumably the overwhelming majority do, 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).

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. 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, 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, religion as a collective whole must move into a paradigmatic state. However, there is a fundamental problem with this hypothetical scenario, which probably 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 crises for scientists result from a single source. New paradigms can emerge in science because its anomalies are always factual. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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.

## Bibliography

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