

Thomas Kuhn, the Accidental Theologian: An Argument for the Similarity of Science and Religion

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Abstract : Applying Kuhn's model of paradigm shifts in science to cases of doctrinal change in religion has been a common area of study in recent years. Few authors, however, have sought an explanation for the ease with which this model of theory change in science can be applied to cases of religious change. In order to provide such an explanation of this analytic phenomenon, this paper aims to answer one central question: Why is it that a theory that was intended to be used in an analysis of the history of science can be applied to something as disparate as the doctrinal history of religion with little to no modification? By way of answering this question, this paper begins with an explanation of Kuhn's model and its applications in the field of religious studies. Following this, Massa's recently proposed explanation for this phenomenon, and its notable flaws will be explained by way of framing the central proposal of this article, that the operative parts of scientific and religious changes function on the same fundamental concept of changes in understanding. Focusing its argument on this key concept, this paper seeks to illustrate its operation in cases of religious conversion and in Kuhn's notion of the incommensurability of different scientific paradigms. The conjecture of this paper is that just as a Pagan-turned-Christian ceases to hear Thor's hammer when they hear a clap of thunder, so too does a Ptolemaic-turned-Copernican-astronomer cease to see the Sun orbiting the Earth when they view a sunrise. In both cases, the agent in question has undergone a similar change in universal understanding, which provides us with a fundamental connection between changes in religion and changes in science. Following an exploration of this connection, this paper will consider the implications that such a connection has for the concept of the division between religion and science. This will, in turn, lead to the conclusion that religion and science are more alike than they are opposed with regards to the fundamental notion of understanding, thereby providing an answer to our central question. The major finding of this paper is that Kuhn's model can be applied to religious cases so easily because changes in science and changes in religion operate on the same type of change in understanding. Therefore, in summary, science and religion share a crucial similarity and are not as disparate as they first appear.

Keywords : Thomas Kuhn, science and religion, paradigm shifts, incommensurability, insight and understanding, philosophy of science, philosophy of religion

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