1. Introduction

In this paper, I will scrutinise the notion of paradigm shifts and its relevance for religious issues. After a predominantly philosophical analysis of this notion in sections 2–6, I will apply its results to religion, in particular, to the change from the Jewish worldview to the Christian worldview as it occurred in the first century CE. After arguing that this change can be reconstructed as being a paradigm shift (section 7) I will show what consequences follow from this reconstruction (sections 8–10).

The concept of paradigm shifts is firmly linked with one particular name in the philosophy of science, Thomas S. Kuhn. In particular, it is linked with Kuhn’s book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (henceforth abbreviated as *Structure*).1 The concept occupies a central position in this book. Yet, before we proceed to analyse it, we should first answer the question why it is still relevant. After all, *Structure* was written more than forty years ago. Why is it still worth delving into it?

In my view, *Structure* is a classic. At least in the West it has influenced the development of thinking in important ways. It has influenced the philosophy of science in significant ways and as the philosophy of science has become a major domain of Western philosophy, it has also influenced Western philosophy as a whole. And unlike other philosophers of science, Kuhn managed to break through disciplinary barriers. *Structure* is read not only by philosophers but also by people working in other fields, in the humanities as well as in the natural sciences—last but not least by theologians and philosophers

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of religion. That people working in so many different fields are reading *Structure* is probably the reason why it is one of the best-selling academic books in the world.

Furthermore, the discussion on Kuhn turned out to be fruitful soil for the development of a number of philosophical tenets. For example, the discussion to what extent Kuhn is an incommensurabilist fuelled the discussion on the issue of relativism (more on those terms below, see section 3). At least, in my interpretation, *Structure* can accommodate important relativistic insights without yielding to a full-fledged relativism. It allows for the possibility of accommodating plurality without paving the way for a relativistic “anything goes”. This makes Kuhn different from—and in my opinion preferable to—much of current postmodernist thought.

In sum, Kuhn’s *Structure* has triggered a whole lot of discussion in and outside of philosophy and has influenced Western thinking to a good extent. His role in the philosophy of science can be compared to, say, the role Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* plays in hermeneutics and related disciplines in the humanities. Both are classics. Furthermore, as will be demonstrated below, the notion of paradigm shifts as developed in *Structure* provides a valuable tool for the purposes of analysing certain religious issues.

These are the reasons why *Structure* will be scrutinised here in greater detail.

### 2. The Basic Structure of Paradigm Shifts

Let us turn to the concept of “paradigm shifts” as used in *Structure*. There, a paradigm shift is a change of outlook in a certain academic field, e.g., in physics or chemistry. Examples are the change from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics and, in chemistry, the discovery of oxygen replacing the older Phlogiston theory or the discovery of x-rays by Roentgen.

Kuhn’s point is that in all those cases, “factual and theoretical novelty are intertwined in scientific discovery”.\(^2\) Thus, scientists not only learn to see new and previously unknown facts but “observation and conceptualisation, fact and assimilation to theory, are inseparably

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\(^2\) Kuhn, *Structure*, 53.