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Florence Juma

*Wilfrid Laurier University, fjuma@luther.wlu.ca*

J. M. Vorster

*Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education*

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### Recommended Citation

Juma, F.A. & Vorster, J.M. (1998) "Kung's theory of paradigm shifts in church history: An evaluation." *Studia Historia Ecclesiasticae (Journal of the Church History Society of Southern Africa)* 24(2), 116-130.

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## ***Küng's theory of paradigms in Church History: an evaluation***

Florence Akumu Juma and J M Vorster  
Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The theory of paradigms is a broad subject that has been discussed extensively from various perspectives including science, religion and history. Its strengths and weaknesses have been aptly considered. This research article seeks to investigate the extent of the theory's applicability to church history. The question that we wish to address is: To what extent, is this theory of paradigms applicable in explaining the changes that have taken place through the history of Christianity?

Küng (1995:62) has done extensive work on this subject and his contribution will be investigated in this research article. He explains that paradigm analysis makes it possible to work out the great historical structures and transformations by concentrating on both the fundamental constants and the decisive variables at the same time. However, he also makes it clear that the history of earliest Christianity shows that history is not only concerned with the ideas and acts of the heroes and powerful peoples and states, but that other things are also important. He makes this observation in light of the fact that the early Christianity period does not necessarily have many history making models and/or powerful persons, and yet it remains an important part of history.

Vorster (1996:11), in discussing "Paradigms in Ecclesiology", observes that "the theory gained acceptance in hermeneutics as a description of the premises preceding the Theory of Exegesis. Thus the historical method of Scripture Exegesis, for example, is defined as a paradigm". He also mentions Sanks and Bosch as having applied the theory to the Roman Catholic view of authority of the church and missiology respectively. It is a fact that this theory has served church historians, missiologists and all theologians for that

matter, in explaining the different epoch making events in the periods of church history.

Lategan (1988:65), in evaluating the theory, rightly states that "whatever the shortcomings of Kuhn's use and development of the concept paradigm ... it remains a powerful metaphor to explain sudden and fundamental changes in the way problems are conceptualised and in the methods and strategies used to solve these problems".

In view of the above observations, it is undeniable that the theory of paradigms and the shift thereof may be applicable in explaining the changes that have taken place in church history. What we need to identify, however, is the extent to which the theory is applicable to church history. But before we consider the question of applicability or relevance, our first task would be to interpret and define the term within its own context.

### *1.1 Paradigm: a definition*

The definition given by Kuhn who first introduced the term in scientific research states that paradigm is: "an universally recognised scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners" (1970:viii). In addition to this, he define it comprehensively as: "an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a given community" (1970:175).

A paradigm shift is the replacement of a paradigm previously held to be valid by a new one. The shift may be a major replacement touching all aspects of life (history) or just minor adjustments of some aspects of life. We can distinguished up to three kinds of paradigm shifts, including:

- Macroparadigms:** *major changes in history;*
- Mesoparadigms:** *limited paradigm shifts as paradigm shifts in theology, church, society generally (Küng, 1988:134);*
- Microparadigms:** *paradigm shifts on individual questions.*

When the beliefs, values, techniques and so forth shared by a certain community cease to adequately solve the problems of that community or become irrelevant to it. It is a natural tendency to try and seek for alternative ways and means to address the problems of the day. The process leads to a paradigm shift. This same phenomenon has been observed in church history where shifts from one church period to another were a result of long time changes either in individual perspectives, interpretation of Scriptures, spread of church from one community to another, differing times, new developments, etc. However, unlike science, paradigm changes in church history exhibit features that are unique to Christianity. A brief overview of church history from the perspective of paradigm changes will be appropriate.

## 2. PARADIGMS IN CHURCH HISTORY

Küng outlines the six major periods of church history as the main paradigms in Christian history. These periods did not occur suddenly, but involved changes in communities, beliefs, values and needs (cf. Küng, 1995:111). In some cases, the change provided a welcome alternative (i.e. from Jewish apocalyptic to Early Hellenistic) while in others, the proposals to change met strong opposition and even led to separation (i.e. the Reformation). In any case, it remains a historical fact that the church of Christ has experienced different periods and various new developments. Multiple changes have taken place and different shapes of Christianity came into being during the two millenia.

The history of this period is enriched with diverse activities, different models, influential persons and new developments. An attempt to give a detailed description even in a single volume, much less in a research article like this one, would not be possible. As such, our focus shall be restricted only to the main facts or models that featured prominently or contributed substantially to the transition from one paradigm to another.

It is further necessary to note that theology and science differ in many ways including the manner in which paradigm shifts take place. Bosch (1991:186) states that "in theology, unlike in the natural science, the new paradigm does not immediately supersede the old

one, the two may co-exist". Therefore, in outlining the six major periods that form the paradigms in church history, we acknowledge that some fundamental issues and even the influence of main models continue through the six periods uniting the church to its origins. The periods as discussed by Küng include:

### *2.1 Early Christian: Apocalyptic Paradigm*

This period refers to the 1st century Jewish Christianity in Jerusalem, Palestine and Mesopotamia. During the time, and soon after the death of Jesus Christ, His imminent return to initiate the Kingdom of God on earth occupied the message of the gospel. An immediate end of time was expected which served as a source of strength and gave hope for a "brighter" future. Jesus Christ, Peter, James and Paul are the models whose contributions gave shape to the paradigm of this time (Küng, 1995:68).

From these models, Paul is singled out as the initiator of a new paradigm, namely the shift from the Jewish apocalyptic paradigm of earliest Christianity to the ecumenical Hellenistic paradigm of Christian Antiquity (Küng, 1995:111-114). Can it be concluded that an imminent return of the Lord ceased to be the only hope that the church needed for survival? Considering the changes that followed after the spread of Christianity to the Gentiles, there seems to have been a need among Christians to settle down and wait for "what life may bring" and therefore a desire for something more than just the expectation of an immediate end. The need to settle down brought with it the desire for elaborate interpretation of Scriptural teachings to address the day to day needs of people. Therefore, the study and interpretation of Scriptures occupied the following periods of church history.

### *2.2 Early church: Hellenistic Paradigm*

So much had changed between the 1st and 2nd centuries causing the church to seek ways and means of accommodating the change. There was a new "constellation of values and beliefs" brought about by gnosticism, early Catholicism, persecutions, Greek and Latin church fathers. Origin, Athanasius and the Cappadocians are the

leading models of this period. What Paul started, Origen who emerged as the inventor of Theology as a science, completed (Küng, 1995:163).

The period overlaps into the 4th and 5th centuries but the doctrines and practices of faith established during this time run through the ages like a cotton in a piece of cloth. Küng has given a detailed analysis of this period's elaborate history. Despite his analysis, he admits that it is impossible to describe this paradigm in one chapter (Küng, 1995:282). Within this paradigm falls the shift under Constantine, ecumenical councils, symphony of church and state, and the split of Eastern and Western churches; all of which contributed significantly to give Christianity the shape it acquired at that time.

As a result, the Christians had to come up with solutions relevant and applicable to the needs of their time, a situation which leads to a paradigm change, an invention of a new and different "constellation" of beliefs, values, techniques and so forth.

### *2.3 Mediaeval: Roman Catholic Paradigm*

The Middle Ages can be compared to a central point in an overstretched elastic thread, with the first and second paradigms in the one end and the fourth, fifth and sixth paradigms on the other. The strain and challenges that faced the church exerted pressure on this central point leading to a sudden cut at the end of the mediaeval period. The 11th century papacy era was characterised by, among others, a myriad of events and innovations - the Gregorian reform, mediaeval popes, crusades and inquisition.

Augustine is said to have laid the theological foundations for the paradigm of the Latin mediaeval West (Küng, 1995:268, 321). The shift from a Jerusalem-centred to a Roman-centred church that began in the second paradigm, also laid the church-political foundation for the third paradigm. Küng gives us the development of the Roman idea of the papacy in five stages, involving five main personalities (Küng, 1995:312-3).

Gregory who was the last of Latin church fathers ushered in the Middle Ages, an event which was accompanied by the crisis of the

12th to 14th centuries (Küng, 1995:333-460). As such Augustine, Leo I and Gregory I are identified as the models who laboured the birth pangs of this paradigm, while Thomas and Bonaventure experienced its effects in the Scholasticism period.

This period further was the context for the 15th century Council of Constance and the Renaissance (Küng, 1995:472). In his book, *Anatomy of Reformation*, Van der Walt (1991:204) discusses the deepest religious driving force behind the Renaissance and the Reformation. He observes that "the turmoil in a number of areas was already noticeable in the late Middle Ages". It follows that the next paradigm was already evolving towards the end of the mediaeval paradigm.

#### *2.4 Reformation: Protestant Paradigm*

The cry for a Reformation was brought about by a whole syndrome of manifestations of crisis and the urge to return to the gospel and refute wrong doctrines, attitudes and developments (Küng, 1995:528-539). It can be said that the overstretched elastic gave way to a dramatic cut with each side falling far away from each other. This happened in the 16th century period bringing about the Reformation, characterised by the Council of Trent, Luther and reformation orthodoxy, wars of religion and baroque culture, Pietism and further splintering. Famous models include Luther, Erasmus, Zwingli-Calvin and Cranmer.

Luther, like Paul and Origen in the previous paradigms, was a major contributor to this new paradigm. Within its confines, the counter reformation, Protestantism and Anglicanism both are to be identified. This period marked the most sudden and dramatic change that the church ever experienced in its entire history. The Reformation initiated the first major split, but also gave way to further splits that were to be experienced by the church later.

#### *2.5 Enlightenment: Modern Paradigm*

The period covering the 17th and 18th centuries which was characterised by scientific and philosophical revolution, cultural revolution of the Enlightenment, American and French Revolutions

and Human Rights movements. In his article: "Modernity, Post-modernity - What are they?", Thomas Finger (1993:21) traces for, and attempts a clarification of these terms. He observes that the deeper roots of modernity are found in the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and early 17th centuries. He further explains this period as a revival of the Greco-Roman themes through the late 17th and 18th century movement called the Enlightenment.

Reason and progress are the driving force of this age and it seems like God has been removed from the scene (cf. Finger, 1993:22). Schleiermacher, liberal theology and Harnack are among the models of this fifth paradigm. The period overlaps into 19th century nationalism, industrial revolution, liberalism and socialism. Gradually the church faced a complete and different set of challenges i.e., privatisation, scepticism, relativism and the like. Trying to resolve these, the church found itself in a new paradigm, namely post-modernity.

### *2.6 Contemporary: Post-modern Paradigm*

The values, ideals, revolutions and discoveries of the modern period brought about the present era commonly known as the post-modern age. This is the 20th century period characterised by First and Second World Wars, a polycentric world and the emergence of the World Council of Churches. All previous five paradigms permeate the contemporary post-modern paradigm in one way or another and sometimes in a reformed state (Küng, 1995:792-793).

In his article, Vorster (1996:14) has given a concise description of the situation of the church in this post-modern period. The catch word which has remained descriptive of the church is "crisis" (cf. Spykman, Bosch & Vorster). It is a period of crisis, when boundaries and distinctions appear blurred (cf. Finger, 1993:24). Secularisation seems to be penetrating into the church despite the efforts by many fundamentalists to resist it.

This situation is made obvious by the quotation: "By the end of the seventies, who will be the worldliest Christians in America? I guarantee it will be the fundamentalists" (Finger). This shows the dilemma of the fundamentalists in this age. Also noticeable in this period, are efforts for an ecumenical paradigm which seeks both



unity of the church and a return to the basics as much as possible (cf. Küng, 1995:792).

### 3. PARADIGM CHANGE: AN INEVITABLE PHENOMENA

Change is an integral part of life for both individuals, societies and history as a whole. Life is not static, new inventions and innovations lead to what may be termed paradigm shifts continually. Change is a reality that each person or community has to deal with at one time or another. Even though people try very hard to resist change at times, it just cannot be ignored or overlooked because it is a reality.

Van der Walt presents the view of certain historians on renewal (change); he states that each period in history, and also history as a whole consists of at least three phases (which man cannot change at all), viz. growth, flowering and decline. However, as Christians we know that in God's plan, there should be continued growth to a blossoming culmination and not decline.

Besides, change is not an experience unique only to general history or secular world, rather it is an experienced shared by all individuals whether in church or in the world. Man is a social, spiritual, rational and physical being and factors affecting one aspect of his being will definitely be felt by his whole person (cf. Adeyemo, 1993:V). Therefore, changes taking place in the social or secular realms of a community affect also the spiritual realm. Van Aarde (1988:52) shares the same thought when he states that "Theology, however, cannot remain in isolation, it's had to cope with the challenges of pluralism and secularisation. As such the need to adopt to all the socio-cultural changes around it".

Anderson's words adequately summarise the phenomenon of change, he states that; "change is not the choice, how we handle it is" (1990:11). The church has been faced with the challenges of responding and dealing with the different changes taking place in individuals', communities' and even world perspectives as a whole. In the process of handling the changes in various ways through history, diverse church traditions have been handed down to the present age. The issue for discussion is not so much the changes that took place, but the different stands and decisions taken by the church leading to the major paradigms.

Crawford Knox (1993, frontflap), in his book *Changing Christian Paradigms*, analyses the pre-paradigm and post paradigm periods by tracing the changes in Christianity from the earliest times to show how they have led to the separation of religion and science, faith and reason, supernatural and natural, and so to current materialism: but also to radical alterations to the understanding of God and His relationship to the world.

But change is not only brought about by time factor, it can also come about as a result of differences in world and life views, perspectives and philosophies. This was the case when the church spread from Jewish community to Hellenistic communities. On the same note Knox observe, among other things, that The Jewish and Greeks understanding of God and the world differs substantially with the Western understanding. A noticeable turning point was attributed to Augustine (Knox, 1993:63-66). Theology and church have taken different shapes from the Jewish Greek times through the major period of church history and down to the modern times. He illustrates the point with cases like (in one example) the Jewish view of God as creator and sustainer of the universe which is not markedly in conflict with Greek ideas, but that many Christian scholars underestimate the accessibility of the divine in Jewish thinking of the time of Christ. Besides, he states that Ireneaus' understanding of God and his relationship to the world further exhibits the Jewish and Greek stance which is in contrasts to the patristic stance (36 & 53).

We may, therefore, conclude that change can be experienced not only in different time periods but also among different communities and peoples living at the same period of time. Communities' worlds view, belief patterns and value systems determine why they behave in certain ways, or that people will react to, or embrace a given truth in uniform way. Change, then, is an "unavoidable" aspect (Anderson, 1990:10).

However, as we observed earlier, paradigm shifts in Christianity are not a total replacement of the old beliefs, values or techniques, but may be described as a new or different interpretation of traditional teachings and doctrines (cf. Küng, 1988:155-161).

This situation is attributed to by the nature and source of Christian Revelation on which the Christian message and teachings are based. It is by understanding the nature of Christian Revelation, that we can

attempt to evaluate the theory of paradigm shifts as applied to church history. K ung has given a comprehensive discussion on this subject under the topics: "The Essence" and "The Centre" of Christianity. He concludes the discussion with the fact that the essence of Christianity is Jesus Christ and the centre of Christianity is also Jesus Christ (1995:parts A & B). It follows that Christianity, unlike other religions, is unique.

But another view on change expressed by some authors is that change in Christianity, or any other religion for that matter, is negative. Christianity is perceived to be worldly, secular and compromising its standards, if it doesn't resist change. This happens to be the case, especially due to the negative view of some Christians on science. Science is considered as an enemy of Christianity (or religion). Haas Jnr. (1994:378-392) has written an article entitled: "John Wesley's Views on Science and Christianity: An Examination of the Charge of Antiscience" in which he surveys the position of John Wesley on this subject as understood by scholars. He states:

*"imperfections offered many illustrations to support the Biblical text, 'we know in part', both to remind his followers of their limited knowledge of the works of God and to 'hide pride from man'. Here he sought to provide a prominent place for the Creator and Sustainer of all things, not to prevent human enquiry."*

Though we cannot deny the negative effects of modernity and post-modernity in the church, we do not rule out all changes or influences of modern technology as anti Christianity. Guinness (1993:3-13) evaluates the situation. Above the negative effects of modernity to Christian mission, he sees the opportunities that modernity affords Christians in missions. His research article outlined "Seven Checkpoints on Mission in the Modern World".

#### 4. PARADIGMS AND GOD'S REVELATION: AN EVALUATION

To evaluate the theory of paradigms in church history, we need to understand the nature of Revelation of God which is the main concern of the church and Theology. Vorster (1996:12) poses an important question regarding the object of Theology. He asks: "If the

theologian's perception of life and the world could change and his results and conclusions be significantly affected, would it imply that Theology is based on relative truths? Does the theologian study man's religious experience or the Revelation of God?"

We affirm that Theology is the study of the Revelation of God, and history, for our purposes, may be described as "His-story" (cf. Van der Walt, 1991:487). God is above history, but also present in history taking the initiative to reveal Himself to mankind. This Revelation as recorded in Scripture, took place in a period of time and focused on different aspects which together make a complete whole. The main subject of His Revelation remains – the salvation of mankind, while the means and lessons learned each time vary.

Paradigm shifts is one means of understanding church history, although it may not fully explain the Revelation in church history. In any case, and as Bosch (1991:187) states "any paradigm shift can only be carried out on the basis of the gospel and because of the gospel, never, however against the gospel." Despite the different paradigm shifts, there has always been continuity in church history (cf. Küng, 1988:123-169). Küng (1995:156) compares theology and science and rightly observe that:

*"Christian theology ... is not only connected to the present and the future. It is also not only, ... oriented to tradition ... it is in a quite specific sense oriented to its origins: The original event in the history of Israel and of Jesus Christ, and hence the primal testimony, the old and New Testament documents, remains for it not just the historical beginning of Christian faith, but at the same time its continual reflexive point".*

Man's experience of and response to God's Revelation has shaped the history of (both Israel and) Christian religion all along. In evaluating the events of the Blood River, Van der Walt (1991:485 ff.) recommends a balanced stand which does not only overemphasise an intramundane (innerworldly) process; but also acknowledges the transmundane (divine) element views on history. Interpretation of given Biblical passages may differ from one time to another or among different churches, due to various presuppositions that people hold. Bosch's (1991:181) advice is that "Christians from different

contexts (should) challenge one another's culture, social, and ideological biases".

We should bear in mind that as humans, we may not possess all knowledge there is to understand Revelation. Fowler (1991:30) explains that the human act of knowing, even though it is a knowing of what is revealed with divine authority, is a creaturely act that carries with it a creaturely authority, never a divine authority. In response to God's Revelation, man formulates doctrines, values and statements of faith (cf. Fowler, 1991:30). In the process of interpretation, one aspect may be emphasised above the other at one time or another but this does not mean that the truth of the Gospel can or has changed, it is the "knowing" aspect of it. It only explains man's limitations in fully understanding the Revelation which is absolute.

There is no doubt that the theory of paradigms is an effective way of explaining and understanding history, however, when dealing with God's Revelation, the theory may prove limited. Using Van der Walt's (1991:485) words, we may conclude that: "For this very reason history has never been completely explicable. God is unfathomable, inscrutable". He uses this statement referring to general history, but it is also applicable to Christian history.

We already stated that Revelation is the act of God who comes down to man in his earthly state to fellowship with him. Concerning this Fowler (1991:30) confesses that "Scripture is the Word of God where, in and through human history God reveals himself as the Creator/Redeemer, calling us to covenant partnership with himself".

## 5. CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that the theory of paradigms may not fully explain the changes that have taken place in the history of the church, yet it remains a resourceful metaphor in understanding historical structures and their sudden replacements. It supplements the church historians' tools in seeking to analyse the forces at work in each period of church history.

The theory of paradigm in itself may not be limited in explaining history, but interpretation of God's Revelation may not adequately be

described by the theory of paradigm shifts. The history of God's people is contributed to by much more than just what appears in the scene. God is always at work behind the scenes, and as things are, He is not through with His people yet.

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