
**DOES THEOLOGY NEED A PARADIGM?
LEARNING FROM ORGANIZATION SCIENCE
AND MANAGEMENT RESEARCH**

Edwin Koster*

*Free University, Faculty of Philosophy, De Boelelaan 1105, NL - 1081 HV Amsterdam,
The Netherlands*

(Received 30 December 2004)

Abstract

Due to the multitude of theological disciplines and the very different confessional backgrounds, theology shows an enormous diversity of approaches. From this fact of fragmentation, one may raise at least two questions. (1) Is the divergence in theology productive or does theology need consensus about methods, theories and assumptions? (2) Can a paradigm in theology be developed or does the nature of theology prevent such paradigmatic consensus?

To answer these questions, theology may learn from an instructive discussion concerning the need of a paradigm in organization theory. Some have been arguing that management research needs to develop consensus through the enforcement of theoretical and methodological conformity. Others have been responding that such a step would be a retrogression. Instead of focussing on the natural sciences, which is quite common in the field of studies in science and theology, I will thus give attention to one of the social sciences. The conclusion of this article is that because of the special object of study a paradigm in theology is hardly achievable.

Keywords: paradigm, organisation theory, theology, diversity, consensus

1. Introduction

Theology, understood as an academic discipline, shows an enormous diversity. This can be explained on the one hand by the multitude of theological disciplines – such as exegesis, church history, systematic and practical theology – with their own methods and their own frames of reference. On the other hand academic theologies have very different confessional backgrounds and because of this every theology is characterized by a specific discourse with an own body of problems.

From this fact of fragmentation, one may raise at least two questions: (1) Is the divergence in theology a fruitful situation or does theology (in order to be

* e-mail: e.koster@ph.vu.nl

‘successful’) need to develop consensus about theoretical and methodological considerations? (2) Is the development of a paradigm in theology possible or can one argue from the nature of theology against the possibility of such paradigmatic consensus?

To answer these questions, theology may learn from debates in organization science and management research. Like theology, these relatively young sciences share the features of consisting of a multitude of disciplines - branches of sociology, psychology and economics for instance - and they are also characterized by theoretical and methodological diversity. Furthermore, there has recently been an instructive discussion concerning the need of a paradigm in organization theory. Some have been arguing that management research needs to develop consensus through the enforcement of theoretical and methodological conformity. Others have been responding that such a step would be a retrogression.

In the first section of this article I treat the problem of speaking about paradigms outside the natural sciences. In the next two sections the debate about paradigm development in organization science and management research will be introduced. In the last section it will be demonstrated that this discussion contains some clues for answering similar questions in theology. The possibility, the desirability and the necessity of a paradigm in theology - as some people strongly plead for today - will be evaluated.

2. Paradigms and the Social Sciences

According to Thomas Kuhn paradigms are the central concepts to understand the history of the natural sciences. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* he introduces the concept ‘paradigms’ in the following way: “These I take to be universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners.” [1] In the rest of his famous book Kuhn used the term ‘paradigm’ in a very loose way. Therefore he felt obliged to do some editorial work upon the first edition, which resulted in a more precise description of the concept. In his ‘Postscript’ to *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* he distinguishes between two different usages: a paradigm as a ‘disciplinary matrix’ and a paradigm as an ‘exemplar’. By a disciplinary matrix Kuhn means a set of components – such as symbolic generalizations, metaphysical views and values – that is shared by the practitioners of a particular discipline. One special class of components are the exemplars: concrete examples of outstanding problem solving activities, which function as models for all kinds of problems in a field [1, p. 176].

According to Kuhn paradigms can be found in the natural sciences but are absent in the social sciences. The main reason is that the natural sciences lack the controversies over fundamentals that are characteristic for the social sciences [1]. In sociology for instance there are a lot of interrelated sets of beliefs, methods and values, and it is difficult to find convergence about exemplary research [2]. Generally speaking the social sciences lack a necessary degree of

consensus. In the words of Gary Gutting, who edited an interesting volume about Kuhn and the various academic disciplines: “Kuhnian consensus is [...] an acceptance that is so strong it eliminates the need for further discussion of foundational questions about the subject-matter and methodology of the disciplines and enables the discipline to devote most of its energy to puzzle-solving.” [3] This is clearly not the case in the social sciences.

However, the conceptual confusion in the first edition of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* made it possible that the concept of paradigm was also used in other academic disciplines, such as organizational analysis [4] and political theory [5]. It is indeed an attractive concept to incorporate: instead of seeing the social sciences as remaining in a ‘pre-paradigmatic phase’, they then can be viewed as ‘real sciences’ characterized by universally accepted methods and theories. Being aware of the use of the word paradigm outside the natural sciences, the question remains in which way the ‘original’ meaning of this concept is changed. An interesting proposal to deal with this question has been made by Mark Smith [6]. He states that there are different ways in which the word ‘paradigm’ is used and that these uses can be divided in three broad categories.

The first category contains the uses of the word paradigm, which can be identified by Kuhn’s account of the natural sciences. Single dominant frameworks for scientific practice succeed one another and no discussions about bedrock assumptions occur.

Into the second category a less strict use of the word paradigm falls. Here, in contrast with the first category, the presence of competing paradigms in the same field of knowledge is allowed, although the move from one paradigm to another would still require a *Gestalt switch*. Different scientific communities with their own educational background and institutional foundation identify the competing paradigms. Inside these communities one finds a high degree of consensus about for instance methods, skills and values. As an example in the field of economics Smith mentions the Marxist and the Keynesian approaches. In the first approach the economy is seen as a huge factory building where the productive relations and the productive forces make up the economic reality. In the second one the exchange relations characterizing capitalist markets constitute the economy. Both approaches have their own frames of reference and one can imagine that a shift from one to another would require a Kuhnian conversion.

The loosest and most common use of the word paradigm falls into the third category. This application of Kuhn’s concept designates a school of thought, a theoretical perspective or a set of problems. It does not require the existence of a coherent scientific community in which the members share the same educational background and have the same methodological approach. The difference between the Keynesian and the monetarist approaches to economy is an illustration of this category. These approaches are quite similar on many topics. Only the role of the state is different. They are schools in the field of economy with common foundations and no *Gestalt switch* is needed to move from one position to the other.

I think this division is helpful in analysing discussions in one of the disciplines of the social sciences: the study of organizations and management. In this field a passionate debate about the need of the existence of paradigms is going on. In this debate the use of the word ‘paradigm’ can be identified as falling into the second category. Because organization science is clearly a branch of the social sciences and due to the lack of a dominant framework in this academic discipline, the use of the word paradigm does not belong to the first category. The strong plea – made by one of the participants in the debate – to build a uniform scientific community prevents a classification in the third category. The emphasis on the role of consensus and on unity inside the field of organization science and management research justifies an understanding of the use of the word paradigm as falling into the second category.

3. Pfeffer’s Plea for Paradigms in Organization Science

Jeffrey Pfeffer has initiated the discussion about the role of paradigm development in the study of organizations. Organization theory, according to Pfeffer, needs consensus around a paradigm to be able to advance and to compete successfully with the other social sciences such as economics. By developing a paradigm, agreement about fundamental problems and the way they have to be solved, would be set. Pfeffer suggests that consensus can be achieved, or better has to be enforced, by building networks of scholars who control the field [7].

3.1. The Effects of the Level of Paradigm Development

By assuming that the physical sciences have a higher degree of paradigm development than the social sciences, Pfeffer provides insight in the effects of paradigm development and sums up the numerous consequences for the social organization and operation of a field of study. According to Pfeffer the level of paradigm development has an impact on the subsequent development of the field: it is a critical precondition to scientific advancement. He states that the most important effect of paradigm development is a higher degree of scientific progress in a field. Due to the greater consensus in more paradigmatically developed fields, collaborative research is easier to organize and accomplish. Just as communication is easier among politicians with the same ideological background, similarly is more efficient to organize the activities and to coordinate the actions of groups of scholars in high-paradigm fields. He bases this conclusion on a variety of empirical studies [7].

For example, it has been found that the physical sciences were much better funded and received a higher amount of grants than the social sciences. The more paradigmatically developed the field, the better the scholars of this field are in the contest for resources. Even when department size and quality were taken into account, these findings held true. Next to the possibility of spending more money on research, in the physical sciences the authority of the

department chair has more esteem than the less developed social sciences. Moreover, the number of conflicts, which results in a turnover in leadership positions, is relatively low in these departments. According to Pfeffer this is the reason why they enjoy more autonomy from the central university administration [7]. Another consequence of paradigm development mentioned by Pfeffer has to do with publication. The rejection rate of articles offered for publication is lower for authors who belong to the field where paradigm development is achieved. These authors are also more successful with regard to the average review times of their publications: these are substantially shorter compared to authors of fields where there is almost no sign of paradigm development. This means for the last group of scholars that the vast majority of research effort in the field is wasted [7].

3.2. Paradigm Development and Organization Science: The Current Situation

Compared to the physical sciences the social sciences are characterized by a fairly low level of paradigm development. Although there are exceptions such as economics, for most of the social sciences this statement holds true. This is particularly the case for the study of organizations, where, according to Pfeffer, “it is almost as if consensus is systematically avoided” [7].

Other scholars also sustain this remark. Lex Donaldson, one of the most significant defenders of positivism in organization theory and management research, writes that the field of organization studies has become “an increasingly fragmented and incoherent jumble of mutually inconsistent ideas...” [8]. Another scholar, Charles Perrow, states that during the first stage of theorizing about organization studies (1920-1955) one could speak of ‘a rational choice paradigm’. After this period – characterized by mass production with worldwide market control – the contingency theory became dominant in the field. Here the move is made from a closed system to the recognition that the structure of organizations always depends on their historical, cultural, social, economical and political context. However, it is hard to call the contingency theory a paradigm because its central claim is in opposition to the whole idea of a paradigm: “There can be no paradigm for all organizations or all times because organizations are ever-evolving responses to social change, and thus the context of organizational behaviour is a major variable.” [9]

Perrow goes one step further than Pfeffer wants to go. The first thinks it is impossible to develop a paradigm for organizational studies, not only because of the implications of the contingency theory, but also because of the ‘unprecedented rate of organizational change’ [9]. Pfeffer on the contrary thinks the development of a paradigm for organization science is possible and necessary. There are at least two reasons why he thinks it is necessary. In the first place he is afraid that a field without a dominant paradigm (and thus with a high degree of openness and pluralism) is at risk for a hostile takeover by for example the rational choice paradigm of economics [7, 10]. A second and in his eyes more important reason to argue for the necessity of paradigm development

is the role of consensus as a vital component for the advancement of knowledge. With assent Pfeffer cites an argument of Stephen Cole: “Without agreement on fundamentals, scientists will not be able to build on the work of others and will spend all their time debating assumptions and first principles...” [7]

3.3 Where does Consensus come from?

Where does consensus come from according to Pfeffer? To answer this question Pfeffer again takes a look at the physical sciences as models for paradigm development. From these sciences he learns that when a small elite controls the developments in a field consensus is comparatively easily achieved. If individuals form a dense network of connections and if they are able to produce a unified view, then the aim of paradigm development can be reached. The strategy to achieve consensus in organization studies according to Pfeffer can be summarized in three steps: (i) authority has to be vested in elites; (ii) these elites have to develop a set of methodological standards; (iii) the elites take care of the maintenance of theoretical and methodological conformity by appointing the important positions only to those who conform to ‘the disciplinary orthodoxy’ and by criticizing those who depart from the dominant paradigm [7].

At the end of the 20th century Pfeffer does not see any consensus in the study of organizations. There is a diversity of ideas and methods without much effort to resolve this diversity at some point. In organization studies Pfeffer sees much disagreement about what the fundamental questions and issues are, about which methodology to follow and about how to resolve controversies between competing approaches. This brings him to a negative conclusion: “Because of these fundamental disagreements, debates about basic epistemological issues, even though useful at one level, never seem to produce much resolution. Rather, they are repeated periodically, often covering the same ground.” [7]

4. Under Debate: Paradigm Development in the Study of Organizations

Due to the provocative article of Jeffrey Pfeffer a debate about the possibility and necessity of paradigm development in the field of organization science was initiated. As has been explained, Pfeffer sees possibilities to develop a paradigm in the study of organizations to sustain the strength of this discipline. However, the possibility to reach this aim has been the subject of a passionate debate.

One objection over against the possibility to develop a paradigm in organizational science has already been mentioned: the unprecedented rate of organizational change. Due to the way organizations are dependent on their social contexts, they change as rapidly as the contexts do. Since organizations are evolving all the time, a ‘paradigm’ suitable for a particular situation can hardly be believed to be appropriate in other situations. Furthermore, the relatively young age of organization theory makes it understandable that

scholars in this field are still feeling their way around and are not willing to accept only one approach.

Another objection refers to the object of study of the social sciences: people and institutions. It is suggested that the phenomena being studied by the social sciences are simply more unpredictable and difficult to explain than the objects of the natural sciences, such as the behaviour of light waves or the course of chemical reactions. Knowledge of organizations is also to a high degree socially constructed (much more so than in the natural sciences) and for this reason scholars from different social and cultural contexts are unable to construct a generally accepted paradigm. In what way should one decide that a particular approach deserves a dominant position? Pfeffer, by the way, is not convinced by this argument. He thinks it is not very satisfying. Although it may have some truth in it, Pfeffer states that it “does not explain the difference in paradigm development between, for instance, economics and either sociology or organizational studies.” In economics the level of paradigm development is significantly higher than in organizational studies, while the main object of study is in both fields the same: human behaviour [7].

The third objection is about Pfeffer’s strategy to achieve consensus by vesting elites who control the field. According to John Hassard and Mihaela Kelemen this is impossible because it is beyond the grasp of the scientific community. These authors emphasize that knowledge may be produced by scholars and their institutions, but that it is only *reproduced* when the consumers of this knowledge find it meaningful: if for instance knowledge can be used to express one’s identity or if it serves the purpose of ensuring social participation. Furthermore they claim that it is impossible “to ‘manage’ acts of consumption ‘at a distance’.” So the power of institutions to control the field would be an illusion [11]. The validity of this argument, applied to organizational theory, is clear in the ‘post-Fordist’ area where the consumer has a central position. However, it can also be argued that organizations have quite a lot of power to manipulate the behaviour of their clients.

Next to the possibility of paradigm development, Pfeffer speaks about its necessity. As we have seen he is afraid that the rational choice paradigm of economics will, by a hostile takeover, become dominant in the field. This argument has some grounds. In recent years economists have expanded their field of inquiry. Instead of staying inside the sphere of commercial life by writing books and delivering courses on topics as money, taxes, tariffs, stocks and bonds, they have passed the traditional boundaries of their domain. Now subjects such as family life, child rearing, sex, crime, politics and other forms of human behaviour are included in an economics book [12, 13]. This can be regarded as a form of ‘economical imperialism’ or, in Pfeffer’s terms, ‘a hostile takeover’: what historically has been the exclusive domain of the other social sciences is now occupied by economics. Although this approach is to a certain extent successful – the great advantage economists have is ‘the measuring rod of money’ – some fundamental questions have been raised about the scope of economics. One of the assumptions of the economic system is that all human

behaviour is rational behaviour. Choices to be made can therefore be expressed as a cost-benefit ratio that can be calculated. According to this approach human behaviour can thus be understood as making rational decisions. But is this a realistic approach? Following for example Amitai Etzioni it has been objected that people are normally not choosing on rational grounds, but are governed by 'normative commitments and affective involvements' [14]. From another perspective Ronald Coase states that there are no reasons to believe that economics will be very successful in the domain of the other social sciences. To understand why people do what they do knowledge of the institutional framework wherein choices are made is necessary. Such knowledge requires specialized methods and skills, tools that are not acquired by those who work in the field of economics [15]. Because of this kind of fundamental objections it is far from sure that a hostile takeover is a real threat to organization science and management research.

John van Maanen has also attacked the necessity of paradigm development. Although his main arguments have to do with the impossibility of 'paradigmatic purity', in my opinion his remarks about the need for paradigms in organization science are more important. Like Pfeffer he raises the question of the conditions for productive scholarly exchange in a field. Unlike Pfeffer he is convinced that this aim can be translated by the phrase 'to learn from one another' and that this goal cannot be reached by controlling the field [16]. Van Maanen suggests two conditions which are quite opposite to Pfeffer's proposal: (i) room for creative individual scholars who may deviate from the dominant stream and (ii) institutional arrangements that facilitate tolerance, conversation and debate [17].

In addition some scholars argue that the role of consensus in the evolution of knowledge has been overstated. Progress in science is not achieved by enforcing a high degree of consensus, but by an ongoing dialogue and the challenge of existing views. Only when our theories and methods are continually confronted with other approaches, we can refine our knowledge of the world of organization and management [18].

5. Does Theology need a Paradigm?

The discussion about paradigm development in organization science and management research provides some clues for the question of this paper: does theology need a paradigm? A few remarks have to be made before treating this question.

5.1. Paradigms in Theology?

Firstly, the question is not whether *religion* needs a paradigm. From the understanding of a paradigm as an exemplar, the Christian religion may be seen as a paradigm. The life of Christ has an exemplary status: Christians are supposed to manage the problems of their lives in accordance with the model

provided by the Gospels [19]. However, I am raising the question about *theology* and paradigms. This question has been raised in the literature as well. Actually there is a large amount of books on the relationship between on the one hand theology and on the other hand paradigms or other subjects from the field of the philosophy of the *natural* sciences. Considering the differences between the natural sciences and theology such a comparison is far from obvious. One may wonder whether a discussion between the *social* sciences and theology would not be more fruitful. In many aspects the social sciences seem to be more close to theology than the natural sciences.

The second remark results from the first. Since theology is in many aspects very different from the natural sciences, the use of the concept 'paradigm' in theology has to be well defined. It has to be made clear that there is some justification to use this concept at all. These demands are not always met when theologians speak about paradigms. Hans Küng for example, who edited an influential work on *Theology and Paradigm Change*, prefers to understand paradigms as interpretative or explanatory models rather than exemplars [20]. Theologians following Küng are therefore not always looking for a unity of method [21], or other forms of rigorous consensus in the sense of Kuhn and Pfeffer. Sometimes their use of the concept 'paradigm' – in spite of referring to Kuhn and the natural sciences – seems to fall into the third category of Mark Smith. It can be concluded that many theologians use the concept 'paradigm' in a very loose way and that the supposed connections to the origins of the concept are lacking.

In the third place, because of the aim of 'learning from organization science and management research', in this section paradigms are taken as falling into the second category of Smith. This means that a paradigm in theology has to be characterized by a certain degree of consensus about methods and skills and that new problems arising in a community can be solved along the lines suggested by the exemplars. Only then we are able to answer the central questions of this article: (1) Is the divergence in theology productive or does theology need consensus about methods, theories and assumptions? (2) Can a paradigm in theology be developed or does the nature of theology prevents such paradigmatic consensus?

5.2. Learning from Organization Science and Management Research

In this section I will reflect on the possibility of introducing a paradigm in theology, by commenting mainly on the objections made against the idea of a paradigm in organization science and management research. My comments on the support given by Pfeffer to the introduction of a paradigm in organization theory will be very short: because of the enormous diversity in theology it is at least necessary to consider the possibility to apply his arguments here. Reflecting on the debate summarized in the last section best does this.

The first objection mentioned above is about the rapid changes in the reality of organizations and about the relatively young age of organization

science. This argument is only partly applicable to theology. Of course theology cannot be called ‘a relatively young discipline’ and if you think of theology as the ‘logic of God’ the rate of change is – at least according to the classical Christian doctrine – not very high. If, however, the focus in theology is upon the experiences of religious people, the objection holds true for theology as well. Nevertheless, in theology religious experiences and doctrines about God come together in the main subject of inquiry: religious traditions. These units of study are clearly less subject to rapid changes than the units of study in organization science and management research. So this objection seems not to be valid in the case of theology.

The second objection is about the object of study: human behaviour. Since human behaviour is far more complex than the objects studied in the physical sciences and also to a much higher degree socially constructed, it is not easy to achieve paradigmatic consensus in the study of organizations. The complexity only increases when we make the move to theology. After all, theology is also about a certain part of ‘human behaviour’: the part that is related to beliefs in a transcendent reality. By definition this reality is beyond our grasp. So if there are reasons to reject the acceptance of one dominant paradigm because of the object of study, theology is surely without any paradigmatic development. On the contrary, many approaches of the subject matter seem to be necessary.

The third objection is about the impossibility to control the field: the central position of the consumers prevents the realization of the plans of Pfeffer’s elites. A same development takes place in theology. Although in most parts of the world ‘the elites of Rome’ seem to control the whole field of study, in all kinds of communities where the Bible is read, readers claim the right to view the text of the Bible through their own eyes. There are also theoretical considerations – Reader Response Theory for example – to argue that even outside these emancipatory movements this process is (unconsciously) happening. The effort to prescribe one approach to read and explain Scripture or to experience one’s faith is therefore doomed to fail.

Just as in organization science, in theology there is the threat of a ‘hostile takeover’. The debate about theology as an academic discipline sometimes ends with the conclusion that the many approaches to religion in the faculty of theology are no more than unnecessary duplicates. They can be substituted by the approaches of for instance cultural anthropology and ancient history. Theology can thus be abolished. Indeed an own strong paradigm may stop such discussions. But theology as an old and respected discipline seems not as much threatened as organization science...

The last objections against the necessity of paradigm development have to do with the need for consensus. In addition to what has been said about the object of study, it seems that in theology (due to the transcendence of God) the creative force of dissent also seems to be important. To book progress in theology it is fruitful to work together and thus to share at least some theoretical and methodological commitments. But to discover the traces of the transcendent

– if they exist – a multitude of approaches is more promising than a forced paradigm.

Taken together these reflections point to a tentative conclusion: like all disciplines theology is in need of a fruitful discussion about many topics under investigation. Therefore it is necessary to hold at least some theoretical statements and methodological tools in common. However, because of the special object of study in theology, a paradigm in the sense of Pfeffer seems to obstruct any progress in theology – if at all possible.

References

- [1] T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2th edn., 1970, viii.
- [2] D.L. Eckberg and L. Hill, Jr., *American Sociological Review*, **44** (1979) 399.
- [3] G. Gutting, *Introduction*, in *Paradigms and Revolutions. Appraisals and Applications of Thomas Kuhn's Philosophy of Science*, Gary Gutting (ed.), University of Notre Dame Press, London, 1980, 13.
- [4] G. Burrell and G. Morgan, *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*, Heinemann, London, 1979, 21.
- [5] B. Kuklick, *American Quarterly*, **22** (1970) 609.
- [6] M. J. Smith, *Social Science in Question*, Sage, London, 1998, 198.
- [7] J. Pfeffer, *Academy of Management Review*, **18** (1993) 599.
- [8] L. Donaldson, *American Anti-Management Theories of Organization. A Critique of Paradigm Proliferation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, 27.
- [9] C. Perrow, *Academy of Management Review*, **19** (1994) 192.
- [10] J. Pfeffer, *Organization Science*, **6** (1995) 682.
- [11] J. Hassard and M. Kelemen, *Organization*, **9** (2002) 337.
- [12] R. B. McKenzie and G. Tullock, *The New World of Economics. Explorations into the Human Experience*, Irwin, Homewood, 1975, 3.
- [13] G. S. Becker, *Journal of Political Economy*, **101** (1993) 385.
- [14] A. Etzioni, *The Moral Dimension. Toward a New Economics*, The Free Press, New York, 1988, 93.
- [15] R. H. Coase, *Economics and Contiguous Disciplines*, in *The Organization and Retrieval of Economic Knowledge*, Mark Perlman (ed.), The Macmillan Press, London, 1977, 488f.
- [16] J. van Maanen, *Organization Science*, **6** (1995) 140.
- [17] J. van Maanen, *Organization Science*, **6** (1995) 689.
- [18] A. A. Jr. Cannella and R. L. Paetzhold, *Academy of Management Review*, **19** (1994) 336.
- [19] I. G. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms. The Nature of Scientific and Religious Language*, SCM Press, London, 1974, 147.
- [20] H. Küng, *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Proposal for Discussion*, in *Theology and Paradigm Change*, Hans Küng and David Tracy (eds.), Crossroad, New York, 1989, 3.
- [21] Chester Gillis, *Pluralism: A New Paradigm for Theology*, Peeters, Louvain, 1993, 16.