UNFOLDING RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS:  
A Methodological Approach  
Dr. Sebastian Periannan

1. Assumption

Much of the religious thinking, reflection and activity of the great religions or faith are, after all, precisely concerned with the communication of dogmas, values, attitudes, ideas, messages and information using a variety of media. These media could be local or traditional, modern or mass media, and cyber or social media. In the veritable process of communicating the religious tenets, vibrations, orientations, knowledge and faith, a communication system is being followed faithfully and fortunately. Indeed religions themselves could be seen as powerful systems of important forms of media and message.

It is clear, then, that the area and field of interest of this methodological paper suggesting, “Unfolding Religious Communication Systems” is dauntingly an extensive and any single approach of material from it, would be bound to leave out a very great deal. Therefore, the author assumes that a methodological approach will do justice to the topic at hand.

It seeks to do no more than provide a methodological overview to what, for many researchers will be a new area of interest and commitment. A concern about religious forms of communication system and media and their religious implications is the common denominator underlying the thought patterns and approach which make up this paper. This is not meant to suggest that other areas of research and methodology do not exist or that this particular area is most important. This is only one dimension of massive areas of research methodology and should not be allowed to presume or obscure the existence or significance of

Dr. Sebastian Periannan is a Professor of Communication at the St. Peter’s Pontifical Institute, Bangalore, India and a member of the ARB Board.

2. Relevance and Objectives

One of Paul Tillich’s greatest contributions to theology was the insight that religion is being ultimately concerned about that which is and should be our ultimate concern. From this aspect, all religions deal with the search for that which is or should be of ultimate concern. (W. Fore in Chris Arthur, p. 56)

Conferences, round-table discussions, and meetings are designed to encourage the spiritual dimension of life. One may even deny the existence of God, but people normally do not deny the spiritual aspect and dimension of human life. Forums and avenues are created to help believers to express their faith through programs and actions in their local communities and wider society. Religious and theological schools are founded on the one side to research and investigate the root paradigms, values, and dogmas or teachings, on the other side to teach the claim’s coherence, substance and credibility to each new generation of leaders, followers and thinkers. All these religious activities have in common an essential function: Communication. As Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and others are engaged in worship, education or outreach, at the core they are engaged in active communication. As William Fore describes, “Some of their communication is focused inward- to allow the faithful to speak to each other in the tradition and language of their faith. But if the religion is to survive, much of their communication must be focused outward- to interact with the culture in public testimony, education and mission.” (W. Fore in Chris Arthur, p 56)
Since all the religions engage in the vital purpose, form, and method of communication, I wish to propose a methodology to study the Religious Communication System in order to do research on various moral, spiritual and practical nuances offered by each religion.

3. Significance

Today’s communication system is dominated by political economy. The enemy is global capitalism. They take control of the economies of their countries. World economy as subservient one to their interest, a market consciousness is constantly created in people with an attempt to wipe out the traditional values of society and life. Communication system is dependent on communication and information technology today more than ever. People are made to think differently, all about self, satisfaction of their needs and interests with no care for others and the environment. Communication system is impacted by weapons of mass destruction, nuclear weapons of terror; and the USA has terrorized the world with them. The rich and the powerful control the planet’s natural resources which affect the communication systems. We are witnessing looting and plunder of natural resources by global corporations in several parts of the world. Communication system also is affected by global financial recession and control that has a greater impact on the religious thinking and activities.

A methodological approach of communication and available means of religious communication system is therefore called for. Thus the main objective of the study at hand concentrates on a method that will enable the reader and researcher to understand the delicate nature of religious systems and process of religious communication. In communication terms, this means that every religious thought and act, both of organized religion and of local or indigenous faith, is socio-culturally formed. Religion comes framed and clothed in religious communication system, such as language, art, music, symbols, paintings, festivals, and history supplied by current mythology, indigenous knowledge and refers to ongoing religious communication system.

4. Theoretical Framework

Ontological theories, epistemological emphasis, socio-cultural realities, technological impact assessment studies, and research methodological concerns have guided the study. Since the study on unfolding the religious communication system is so complex, wide and diverse, for a clearer understanding, we need to take into consideration various theoretical inputs and insights. Ontological and phenomenological theories of a given subject and reality stand as a base and the foundation for this methodological approach. Any scientific enquiry must bring out and result in providing solid and valid knowledge for the field of study, art, science and society. That is why we insist on epistemological emphasis here. Since religions and religious experiences of people have very strong roots from socio-cultural studies, this paper argues that we need to include and incorporate socio-cultural realities for our methodological considerations. Whether we are aware of it or not, day to day experience tells us that we cannot ignore the impact of technology, particularly information and communication technology in our life. Finally, for a scientific approach and result in any research, be it a research as method or research as purpose, the researcher must be clear about the methodology to collect the data, and to correct the faulty methods. Hence, all these above mentioned theoretical considerations are part of this paper for the purpose of furthering the knowledge of religious communication system.

5. Unfolding the Religious Communication Systems

If we are to unfold a religious communication system successfully, we need to be thoroughly familiar with four broad areas of religious phenomenon such as, (i) uniqueness, (ii) similarity, identity, and change, (iii) divergent views, and (iv) convergence. So that we can have a grasp of the root paradigms which underlie religious values and symbols.

(i) The uniqueness of a religious communication system can
be studied from the aspect and ankle of mystery and intelligibility. The experience of the divine, human, and supernatural realities can be expressed only in symbolic language. In research paradigms, therefore, there will be always a tension and dialectics between faith and reason, mystery and intelligibility. We can know and speak about religious communication system from the research point of view, when we explore the approaches of theological investigations, leadership styles, and moral applications on the one hand, and on the other hand, study the insights of God experiences, mystical utterances, and concrete religious beliefs and practices.

(ii) Similarity, Identity, and Change in religious communication system involves inherent polarity, dissimilarity, broken or continuous, and doubt or bias in researching. Therefore, those ideas, events, persons and their words or world of experience cannot be ignored or altered. The similarity and identity consists mainly in the central fact of religious-event, their beliefs and practices. Change being the unchanging reality, the research has to concentrate on the interpretational and critical reflections on its methodological praxis to understand the unity and plurality from ontological, epistemological and historical values.

(iii) When we observe from the periphery, the divergent views are more prominent than the core or convergent views. Divergence is another potential tension in researching when we look for system because of the embeddedness of orthodoxy versus heterodoxy, and core dogmas in religions. Any experience whether religious, aesthetic or poetic craves for its expression or articulation, in order that the experience may be researched or studied. Therefore, the research must take into consideration the differing world views, unusual styles and subjects in communication media as well.

(iv) Convergence is the longing of any communication system. That being the case, a religious communication system too aspires for convergence. This is viewed from one versus many, universal versus particular, historical, social and contextual versus transcendental, which are the other major areas of research. This is further situated and identified when we look at the ethical orientations, ecological concerns and practices, and ultimately with committed and critical religious analysis for research. Convergence from theory and research perspectives is possible when the focus is on innovative approaches, interactive dialogues, interpretative research, and liberative models of study.

6. Process of Religious Communication

A look at the religious mapping and dialogic communication (table) shows us the clear path for the process of religious communication. The very process is observed and studied from the symbolic language and conceptual process. Conceptual process implies and involves the following characteristics: religious knowledge by listening, writing, reading, primacy of ideas, notional, abstraction, IQ clarity, analytical categories, relationship of words and logic, explanatory method, and temporal order. In the same manner, symbolic language delivers and declares the following structure and processes: religious knowledge by listening, participation, immersion, primacy of perception, experience, inter-action, EQ, dreams, art, music, synthetic view of religious phenomenon, Sensitivity to the signs, and spiritual forces, receptivity to intuition, innovation, and evolution.

Religious communication can be viewed (table) from the four borders of similarity, identity, divergence and convergence. These four borders are directed by four inner directions such as direct, dynamic, critical and open views, opinions and a body of knowledge. Religious communication is “socially performative” at the level of symbols, art, music, rituals and festivals. It is “culturally inter-active” when ideas, information, and root paradigms are interfaced. It is “philosophically innovative”, when values, attitudes, and freedom of expression is exchanged. Finally, religious communication becomes a realization and fulfillment as “religiously transformative”, when mystical experiences, dogmatic teachings, leadership styles, and critical views are studied.
and researched scientifically. And hence there is need for a search of a method.

7. In Search of a Method

For, “In Search of a Method”, I follow my book on “Social Research Methodology: An Introduction” (2010), and Richard L. Starcher on “Qualitative Research in Missiological Studies and Practice” (2011). Other details are provided as end notes.

As it has been noted in the objective of this paper, a researcher has to use and innovate various methods so as to get to the roots of the religious communication system for which a methodological approach is a must. And hence, religious science is our focus and goal, philosophy is our guide and tool, and social science, inter-disciplinary approach is our method. Since the area is so vast, just a glimpse of the insights and nuances are outlined here, for further study and research.

We concentrate on this method:
What is real? Ontology,
How knowledge (religious) is acquired? Epistemology, and
What is valued in research? Axiology.

This approach aims to include “narrative inquiry, biography, symbolic interactionism, personal accounts, conversational analysis, discourse analysis, ethnoscience, life history, and participatory action research” (Starcher, p. 55).

7.1 Ontological Perspectives

Creswell as quoted by Starcher, “Reality is subjective and multiple, as seen by participants in study” (p. 56)

(i) Relativism Versus Realism

A simple understanding of relativism states reality has no independent existence. It is always subject to someone’s perception of it. “Relativism is not a single doctrine but a family of views whose common theme is that some central aspect of experience, thought, evaluation, or even reality is somehow relative to something else” (Starcher, p. 56). Always subject to someone’s perception.

In a similar way, realism is that reality exists independently of anyone’s perception of it. (a). Existence: do rocks or trees really exist? (b) Is there a reality that doesn’t depend on anyone’s perception of it? “everything is relative” “anything goes”, is the general attitude. Both the views are discussed and debated in the research world and parlance.

(ii) Functional Relativism

It means, with respect to experience, thought, and evaluation, our understanding of these phenomena depended on their function within the ambient cultures. Thus, Starcher opines, “It is not wrong; it is just different”

This “filtering” raises the question of the relationship between
theology and culture.

(iii) Theology and Culture

When we speak about God, we do not use some private language that God gives us. We use everyday language; the language that allows us to communicate the most mundane things as well as the most sublime. For this reason, theology cannot be done without culture; that is both its promise and its perils (Swoyer as cited by Starcher p. 57).

Now the question arises, how to unfold the communication system?

Based on the above understanding of the ontological perspectives from a three pronged areas of interest as noted above, we as researchers have to engage in an ontological enquiry of the religious mapping and dialogic communication. This is what we mean when we are looking for a method to understand the religious communication system. We need to take into consideration the implications and investigations of “religiously transformative”, values, thoughts, ideas, when mystical experiences, dogmatic teachings, leadership styles, and critical views are studied and researched scientifically.

7.2 Epistemological Perspectives

Epistemology means the study of knowledge and justified belief. It engages in capturing the reality that is properly the domain of Epistemology using qualitative/quantitative approaches such as: i. Positivist/Empiricist tradition, ii. Constructivist Epistemology, iii. Pragmatic Epistemologies, iv. Liberative Research.

(i) Positivist/Empiricist Tradition

This paradigm holds that knowledge is possible only through senses. Empiricist approach of research has been equated with quantitative research whose hallmark is measurability or quantifiability. Its strength is rigor, generalizability, and replicability. It follows the rigor of the natural science where researches are done through a step-by-step process called scientific process.

Ontologically, it assumes that reality exists independently of the observer. Epistemologically, knowledge is taken to be so impersonal and objective that the researcher is considered a detached actor. Deterministically, this approach proposes that wherever observation of reality has causes, prediction and control can be achieved in that aspect of reality. Reality is unitary and it can only be understood by empirical analytic inquiry, the scientific method followed in the classical physical sciences for investigation. Empiricism is not a method of inquiry, but an assumption or justification of knowledge claim. Social Scientists believe they can uncover independent, objective measurable reality with respect to human phenomena. For this reason quantitative methods are preferred.

(ii) Constructivist Epistemology

As Denzin and Lincoln view, “Constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures. (as cited Starcher p.58) Thus constructivists do not study human subjects; rather they collaborate with human participants to build agreed-upon understandings of the study’s central phenomenon.

(iii) Pragmatist Epistemologies

The focus is on the consequences of research, on the primary importance of the question asked rather than the methods, and multiple methods of data collection inform the problem under study. Thus it is pluralistic and oriented toward “what works” and practice (Creswell & Clark 2007).
(iv) **Liberative Research**

One of the primary aims of this form of research is to contribute to inter-religious dialogue and harmony in the society. Its theoretical rationale is based on an integral view of looking at the socio-cultural and religious reality from the angle of science. In this view, the difference between religion or faith and science will find a new meaning, significance and relevance for the modern man. It could be easily identified and applied with theological and socio-cultural anthropology, insights and techniques from phenomenology, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, psychology and sociology have to be integrated, since the very nature of this research is interdisciplinary. This could also emerge as a new sociology of theological education and liberation, along with critical constructivism, inter-textuality, inter-cultural exchanges, and illuminative religious studies. (Periannan 2010)

Here again, the understanding of religious knowledge system arises. From the epistemological perspectives, we may use qualitative or quantitative approaches, or a mixture of the two. All inquiry is built upon an assumption or hypothesis about what is real, possess stocks of knowledge, occupy social statuses, and pursue purposes that influence their respective views and actions. What is enshrined in the religious system must be unfolded through a proper and appropriate scientific approach. In order to unfold the system, we need to uncover what is, “culturally inter-active” meaning; ideas, information, and root paradigms of the system as interfaced, as well as, what is, “philosophically innovative”, meaning; values, attitudes, and freedom of expression as exchanged has to be studied.

### 7.3 Axiological Perspectives

Axiology, in social science research, refers to the values (explicit or implicit) underlying all research, whether qualitative or quantitative. While positivistic quantitative research often poses as objective, neutral and dispassionate, qualitative researchers “accept the fact that [all] research is ideologically driven” (Janesick, 2000, p. 385) These perspectives include four ways to fulfill the objectives of the study, namely theoretical lenses, theological/religious prism, critical approaches, and transformative values.

(i) **Theoretical Lenses**

While all scientific inquiry is value laden, some qualitative researchers intentionally conduct research using, a particular theoretical lenses, that represents a specific, often marginalized, interpretive community. Interpretative positions provide a pervasive lens or perspective on all aspects of a qualitative research project. e.g. feminist theory, queer theory and critical race theory (Starcher, p. 60).

(ii) **Theological/Religious Prism**

Religious experience and spirituality, as the process, in which one systematically trains sensitivity, to gain regular transcendental consciousness; and ecological spirituality with nature, an inner experience of belonging to larger whole.

(iii) **Critical Approaches**

This inquiry starts with an agenda, “Those of us who openly call ourselves ‘criticalists’ definitely share a value orientation. We are all concerned about social inequities, and we direct our work toward positive social change” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 3) A Critical ethnographer will study issues of power, empowerment, inequality, dominance, repression, hegemony, and victimization. Aids crisis, media and legal system, drug, sex, violence, and cultural rebellion.

(iv) **Transformative Values**

All researchers have convictions about what is good and valuable
in this world. We can always use tools whether theoretical methods or research methods, that allow us to get close to people, understand their situations, and perspectives, give voice to their concerns, and work for our common good which ultimately involves the transformation of life.

I find four aspects of values (theoretical lenses, theology/religious prism, critical approaches, and transformative values) of particular interest because they help us understand the religious communication value system in doing any type of research. Relying on axiological frame, we can use the method, to study the religious communication system, from the four borders of similarity, identity, divergence and convergence; these four borders are directed by four inner directions such as direct, dynamic, critical and open views, opinions and a body of knowledge. Axiological principles are of utmost importance to observe and investigate, what is, “socially performative” at the level of symbols, art, music, rituals and festivals.

The Asian Research Centre for Religion and Communication (ARC) in Bangkok is opening the wider horizon for future research, reflection and religious understanding for harmony, dialogue and transformation. We can always use tools, techniques, and strategies (whether theoretical constructs or research methods) that allow us to get closer to the reality of the people, understand their perspectives, give voice to their concerns, and work for our common good, which ultimately involves the advancement of religious knowledge, truth, spirituality and wisdom for a better a world.

**REFERENCES**


