Religion and Social Communication in the Changing Cultures of Asia
Anthony G. Roman

NOTES

ARC Roundtable 2014

Call for Papers: 7th ARC Roundtable

Jewish Communication and Culture in Germany

BOOK REVIEWS

David A. Stout
Media and Religion. Foundations of an Emerging Field

Knut Lundby
Religion across Media

BOOK NOTES

Sundeep R. Muppidi (ed.)
Asian Communication Handbook. 6th Edition

John Fiske
Introduction to Communication Studies. 3rd Edition

John Fiske
Understanding Popular Culture. 2nd Edition

Tobias Olsson (ed.)
Producing the Internet. Critical Perceptions of Social Media

Linje Manyozo
People’s Radio. Committing Change across Africa

Denise Solomon/Jennifer Theiss
Interpersonal Communication. Putting Theory into Practice

Keynote Address delivered during the 6th International Roundtable of the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication (ARC) at the Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Chaing Mai, Thailand, October 21-24, 2013.

‘Religion and Social Communication’ is in the name of our center and some people might question what we mean by “Social Communication”. This expression was seemingly used for the first time already 50 years ago as a title for a document of the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council (1963, Inter Mirifica). The expression, however, was only in the title but never further developed and explained. Apparently it was just used as a common name for (Mass) Media. It was sociologist Giorgio Braga who took up the expression in a book with the same title (1969) where he sees the field as the “study of communicative processes in society”. Later psychologists followed in the use of this expression with “Social Psychology of Communication” (Fiedler, 2007). But within the Church or Religion it was never studied in greater detail and perceived in a broader way which seems to be needed today in a time of “Social Media” and “Social Networks” where the full power and potential of this expression as the “communication of and in Human Society” comes to the fore. It means that all ways and means of communication of cultures and societies have to be seen under this perspective. It goes from the cave paintings of some 30,000 years ago via printing to the latest technical developments. It also means that the expression is not determined mainly or only by technology and media. It connotes the communication of people and their society in whatever form available and used. This includes in a special way Religion which cannot exist and live without proper communication on different levels and in different ways. Actually, the study and life of Religion is also the study of its communicative ways and expressions beyond the mere ‘human’. It finally boils down to the fact that communication is people, as Pope Francis recently told the members of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication in Rome (Allocutio, Sept.21.2013).
Over the years and in a common approach communication is often identified with Media - also in Religion like e.g. in the expression on “Religion, Media and Culture”. Such an approach and expression, however, refers only the means or instruments of communication but not to the full communicative happening and process of living Religion, which goes far beyond technical means and reflects the human being and society as the environment for living in relation to Religion. It is therefore important to take a broader and deeper look at this expression of “Social Communication” which seems to get an additional importance through modern communication possibilities and developments.

Looking at Social Communication in this broader perspective and as a field of life and studies one might distinguish three dimensions of communication as subsections of the field.

1. First comes the interpersonal and cultural dimension which is not necessarily related to any technical means but rather seen as a happening between persons which can be traced already to the very first human beings in history: wherever humans lived they communicated with each other with the simple facilities given to them by the creator. This further developed also into social groups and cultures with all their different cultural communicative expressions. But this is not only to be understood in the historical sense from the birth of humankind but it is also today an essential element of living and bonding together on a more personal level.

2. In the course of technical developments, speaking developed into writing and this further developed into printing for preservation and distribution up to the modern Mass Media which also go beyond text into visual and audio with film, broadcasting (radio and TV). Here the technically determined means of communication are central in their mass production, mass distribution and mass consumption: Mass Media. At this stage communication is basically consumption only, passive consumption without any real interaction – communication.

3. Interactive communication, however, comes back and goes now beyond space and time in the third dimension of Social Communication, at the ‘Social Networks’ level. While the interpersonal and cultural level of social communication is still limited in time and place this now is removed with the “Death of Distance” into a communication beyond time and space. It also goes now beyond the older and longtime existing “social networks” of family and other groupings in society which are already part of the first dimension.

“Social Communication” comprises all of these three dimensions and therefore place a special challenge and need for research and study in our concern for Religion and Social Communication. What does all these mean for our lives and communities, our study and research and our ‘practice’ of Religion and its integration into personal and community life? Buddhism in Thailand and our own place of meeting this year might be a concrete example and challenge for all these.

To capture the presentation up till now in a nutshell the following graph might be helpful:

In a certain way these three dimensions might be seen as historically following each other. This, however, is not fully true. Also in mass media, cultural communication can be taken up and multiplied but here the main emphasis is still on the technical transmission of the message which is not the case in the first and ‘original’ position of
the first dimension. There we have a full interaction of all participants while e.g. in a Television program there is no inter-action!

The third dimension refers to ‘social networks’. Such networks do exist already since the beginning of humankind in family and social groups though we did not name them that way. What is new, however, and dominant today is the fact that a) social networks are somehow without limits in space and time (“Death of Distance”). We are not confined any more to people whom we directly see and hear but the whole world is open to everybody, b) it also means - in contrast to the mass media - it is the individual or the social group which determines the application of technical means and not any more powerful corporations. “I” determine which means I use and for whom and how. Here the personal qualities, likes and dislikes come in. But also possibilities of communication which were not accessible to me before are now at my disposal. This means on the other hand it is not any more “media-education” in the narrow sense of critical use of the media which is needed but rather communication competence has to be developed where I know when and how and where to use technologies for my communicating.

When the expression “Social Communication” was first proposed by Church people in 1963, the German communication scholar O.B. Roegele (1964) commented “the title is very progressive, but everything which follows is the opposite.” In those days communication studies in Germany were still more independent from other ‘trends’ like the Shannon and Weaver phenomenon with the Sender-Message-Receiver concept which still dominates much of our communication studies. Those days in Germany communication was defined as everything which is made public (“Publizistik”), regardless through which means and ways this happens. Thus already in those days the dimension of society was considered and not a technical process (technology).

The Role of the Recipient

Considering the role of the recipient in the social communication process it should be clear that he/she is both producer and consumer in the first dimension. In the second dimension of our presentation of the media process, the recipient is basically passive. S/He receives and “consumes” but cannot easily “talk back” nor even “dialogue” with the big media.

This, however, is again possible today in the third dimension were communication takes place directly and immediately in a social network either on the person to person level and in cyberspace. Here the participant becomes what a study group of the German Bishops’ conference (2012) called a “Pro-Sumer”, a contraction of the words ‘Producer’ and ‘Consumer’ S/he moves on both levels and thus can come to a creative exchange similar to the early days where communication took place e.g. in the family.

Religion as an expression to or from a higher being is present in on all three dimensions but also here the mode is different: it can be listening and hearing on the personal/cultural level, or only a passive reception at the media level. It can also be a lively personal exchange in a network - here not so much as listening to a higher power but rather as an exchange of experiences and beliefs and expectations...between people.
How far does all this help us in our concern about Religion and Religion in Asia? Do all these developments contribute to our experience and change in Asian cultures? How is this done, how does this possibly change values? How does it affect the lives of individuals and communities and also the different age brackets within these groupings?

Communication scholar and editor of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication, and Media* Daniel Stout has recently published a textbook on *Media and Religion* (2013) where he distinguishes between (1) organized Religion and (2) elements of Religion like “Rituals, deep feeling, belief and community” (p.2). He quotes Johnston (2001) in defining religion as “a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interprets and responds to what they feel is sacred and, usually supernatural as well” (p.4 ff.). Thus he states “that religion is multidimensional, comprised of belief, behavior community, and feeling”… Referring to Rudolf Otto’s seminal work on the *Idea of the Holy* (German original 1917!) he equals Religion with everything “numinous” and thus goes far beyond Religion in the strict sense. He states that he “uses the term Religion as well as the term ‘numinous’ because numinous experiences are similar to religious ones and may occur outside institutions, and such experiences do not necessarily involve the supernatural” (Intro, p.4). He further refers to the need of an interdisciplinary approach in Religion and Media studies involving Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Ecology literacy (p.19ff) but does not mention Philosophy and Theology.

In our ARC approach I don’t think we want to follow this somehow superficial approach but rather are concerned about Religion as essential part of our Asian cultures, societies and living. Therefore we are concerned about the relation between Religion, Culture and Society under communication perspective in the sense of “Social Communication” as explained above. This includes considerations and studies like:

- How are cultures and their communications determined and even maintained by or through Religion?
- How are Religion and Technology (in the broad sense) related to communication? Does e.g. communication technology influence, change religious practices?
- How do the ways of communication express, influence or change religious practices or even religious convictions and teachings – from official to ‘banal’ (popular) religious practices?
- How is Religion present, needed or accepted in communicating societies and practices in a culture/society?
- Modern ways of communicating e.g. Social Networks and Religion in Asian Cultures and life: practices, possibilities and needs?
- Religious leaders and their communication competence in modern and traditional society? Which kind of competence do they need to develop in order to be at the level of life, culture and Society of people but at the same time integrating or even promoting Religion – beliefs and practices – in our times?

Or the questions placed already in our call for papers:

1. How are traditional ways of communication of and in Religion changed through such developments?
2. How do Religions respond to these developments?
3. Is the internal communication within Religions but also their communication to the outside influenced and changes: How?
4. Does such a situation also have an effect on religious practices (e.g. pilgrimages..) and rituals (e.g. devotions…) of members? How? Where?
5. Do developments in IT enter into religious practices? When, Where, How? With what effect?
6. What do these developments mean for intercultural communication within and between Religions? “Interreligious Dialogue”? 
Introduction

In the past two decades, the development of communication technology has tremendously changed human lifestyles all over the world. A totally new environment has been created through satellites and information superhighways. Rapid changes in the information society are affecting cultural identity and creating a massified society. Moreover, technology and popular culture are cultural elements spread through the media that fuel both cultural integration and cultural change. Both elements are integrated more quickly than the values associated with them, creating cultural lag. Technological advances such as the automobile, the television, more recently, the computer and the cellular phone have brought striking changes in our cultures, our patterns of socialization, our social institutions, and our day-to-day social interaction. Many people are simply connecting to each other through online devices such as e-mails, websites, forums, chatting programs and social networks. The internet has become an essential elevator to change the standard and lifestyle of message senders and receivers.

Thailand is a developing country which plays a recipient role in mass media transfer from the United States and Western European countries.

3 Tofler, Alvin. (1980). The Third Wave, Pan Books,

Asst. Prof. Dr. Samran Khansamrong is a professor at the Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Chiang Mai Campus, Thailand.