

THE COMMUNICATION SIGNATURES OF RELIGION -- RE-EVENTED IN A SOCIAL MEDIA ENVIRONMENT?

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What communication is like depends very much on the character of its mediation. There is no communication without or outside any media environment – understanding media environment as the social setting, the institutional or situational agreement (“mediality”) of mutual observation. Communication happens as observation as well as action. That remains a question of decision for paradigm (cf. Bauer 2011). In a so-called media society, societal institutions are increasingly assimilated into the logic of media communication. In that sense, technical politics becomes media politics (i.e., politics is done by media and for media). Economy is becoming a media made (virtual) information system before it emerges in its technical dimensions. Education is increasingly overtaken by the media and is searching for conditions to survive within the structures of media communication. This process of assimilation did not and certainly will not stop at religion. Religion is increasingly becoming a media religion, which takes over the media formats (Bauer 2002: 483 ff.) in the interest of its own societal representation. This appropriation of partial systems by media is – if so far considered system, theoretically – not done by media as such, but is the consequence of modernity (cf. Giddens 1990): systems become as we observe them. As systems in organized societies find themselves in mutual competition for legitimacy, trust and attention, they all concentrate their self-reflexive attention to communication – what means in terms of mediality of the society: they increasingly regenerate (re-develop, re-constitute) in the mode of mediality (cf. Bauer 2011: 471).

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When talking about the media, there often predominates the idea of a technically organized system which operates as a self-sufficient circle, because it is used by producers and consumers primarily in the interest of exchange of information, knowledge, news, or entertainment. This technically organized system is thus getting connected to a community or connected to each other as a community of interests and experiences. Being connected and not becoming isolated seems to be the strongest motivation to use media as a confirmation reference to know what others may know; and to know that others might know what I know, or even presuppose that I should know what they know. Framed by such an imagination of inter-relation, media is supposed to be a self-sufficient system that operates technically. As such, it is taken into service for other meta-systems like politics, economy, culture, education, etc. That notion of media correlates to everyday practice and simply is a practical theory, but it is not complex enough to analyse, to explain, or even to resolve theoretically any media communication problems. Beyond this practical conception, built on functional perspectives and technical interests to organize everyday life as practical as possible, a comprehensive social-scientific theory has to go further than such practical theory. It cannot be satisfied being primarily interested in a structural or functional description (i.e., what media is in relation to communication). Rather, it is challenged to ask why individuals, societies, and communities trust in media as the social environment of communication, and why they believe in communication as the social practice of constitution of themselves.

Such an approach demands a cultural theoretical concept of media and communication, since it is asking about the construction of meaning, i.e. what we observe and why we consider it as we observe it. In so doing, a social and cultural theory of media and communication is a critical observation of practical observation (Schmidt 2004:7). In the generalized notion of media, media is seen as a system which individuals, societies, and communities use to exchange information, opinion, and meaning; and through that, organize their interests of identity, of getting connected, but being distinguished of understanding each other, of being

coherent but free and self-determined, etc. It opens a cultural horizon of interpreting the sociability of individuals and communities and, as well, of the communicability of societies. It assumes an essential challenge for the cultural program of social communication, which refers to the notion that media – when relating it to communication – is more than just a technical infrastructure or a system of exchange. At the level of social and cultural theory observation, media is the cultural concept of social practice as well as a social concept for cultural practice. Media is a social program of a mutual attribution of a mutually expected social attention; it is the topography of where and how to meet in order to recall the notion of life's sociability. Shaped into industrially designed organisation of production and consumption, it is the usage of media (infrastructure) that turn a media system into the media, or rather a medium (Flusser/Wagnermaier/Zielinski, 2009). This use can be twofold: social and socialized on both sides and in both roles of the industrialized order of media communication; that is, in the role of producer and in the role of consumer. The social use of media refers to media as a social practice of building relation or referring to relation. In this sense, social media is used in the interest and for the purpose of getting connected through communication to any generalized other, who is supposed to use the same infrastructure in somehow the same interest and purpose to communicate. The socialized use of media refers to the habit of using media as means of information and communication. This usage occurs in the way the technical application of media allows or requires technically to get connected to a media-operated and media-provided system of distribution of news content.

Following that logic of media, the theoretical perspective should be switched from a technical and structural perspective to a social and cultural one. This change in perspective allows and demands to widen and to open the theoretical horizon from a media-for-communication concept to a *mediality-of-communication* concept. In this conception, media theory analyzes the program of mediality as a cultural environment of social communication. It is the mediality of society, of societies, of communities and even of individuals that changes the ontology of

social communication from a mutually negotiated attention to a next-to-next connecting chain of social attention.

Outlining a Contextual Media Theory

To assess the cultural implications of media development and to understand the ontological dimension of media change in reference to the structural construction of societies and communities, a more sophisticated model of the media rather than a simple technological model is needed. Media is a contextual model of action and observation; only in that theoretical design does it make sense to relate media with communication (Bauer 2011: 466, Schmidt 2003: 27). Talking about social media in the context of the question what that version of media means to the structural and cultural change of religion, and what could be the chances and challenges for religions in general to become (as well as media) more social and less socialized, demands more than a one-dimensional concept. To understand and to analyze religious communication in the context of and in reference to the usage of media, demands to enrich the theoretical concept of media by a contextual perspective of social practice. This alternative perspective conceives media as a social model of mutual notice on the basis of reference to the social agreement of and for communication (Bauer 2011: 507 ff.). Such a comprehensive media concept goes beyond the technological, technical, or organizational structures. Rather, it conceptualizes media as a context or connectivity of social practice in relation to a technological system that represents or even governs technically the connectivity of mutually related actions. That perspective focuses on what it culturally (community- and identity- values) means when using a (special) media infrastructure as the symbolic frame for the exchange of experience and opinion among specially meant addressees. Talking about media, then, means to talk about the individual and the collective, social, cultural, and symbolic environment (context of living) of media usage. With respect to cultural change, what is interesting is not Facebook or Twitter itself, but its (cultural) habitus to use the technology. The technical items do not have their order, aesthetics, or ethical values by themselves, but the

attribution is assigned when using them.

The theoretical concept of *Symbolic Interaction* states that people communicate by means of and in relation to symbolic codes that are archived through a cultural program and are individually learned by cultural socialization (Mead 1972, Blumer 1973). This was a first step to that contextual conception, but it did not go far enough. Symbolic Interactionism theorizes communication as a social agreement under the condition of a mutually supposed expectation; namely that each one is acting within symbolic structures within the context of a cultural program. *The concept of contextualized usage of media* goes further than the one of symbolic interaction. Communication does not just happen as an exchange of whatever content is being placed into operation by any infrastructure. Rather, it operates itself opening a communicatively meant relation through a negotiation on the mediating setting. This usually is done by a mutually accepted agreement of what condition of relation (for example, role model) the situation presupposes, or it has to be clarified by gestures or otherwise attributed connotations as long as the situational framing is supposed to be somehow harmonized. Communication starts with the negotiation for a common social (or behavioural) code of framing: the social setting, the media setting then frames the encoding and decoding, the cognition and connotation of what is exchanged to become a relevant matter. Summarizing that theoretical perspective, the media (or the medium) is a metaphor of and for the description of a context-driven complex social mechanism of mutually passed on signals of expectations which are meant to build a common frame of trust, which in technical (mass) media by far are already set by the technical design and habit of use of the media (Bauer 2011: 486, Hepp 2008). It is obvious that such a concept of media provides another view to and a broader perspective for a theoretical interpretation of how social media touch the general social discourse on religion and its position in execution of individual and collective life.

The time and the society we are living in are globally signified by the media; and, in the context of technological development by the

structural and cultural changes of communication. The classical mass media has been technologically developed and technically working in an industry-economic system confined by the logics of distribution of the organization of acting (usage of media) between production and consumption. This order of division of an integrative symbolic acting is also valued as a distinction of competence according to the tradition of hierarchy. The mixture of technological know-how, economic capacity, organizational hierarchy, and mystification of responsibility has built a social mechanism of trust that has turned the media, in the mode of distributive mass media, into an agency of organization of social communication and an institution of and for values in a democratic society. These values include freedom of speech and opinion, right of information and communication and option of discursive participation. The industrial order so far is still of value in a communication society. It is still the plausible model for understanding media as an agency of and for the development of societies. Any further organizational step in technology or in institution-building that affirmed this system was and still is taken as a confirmation of the reasonability of the mode the system works with.

Not only within the professional environment (journalism, advertisement, public relations, etc.) but also within scientific analysis (journalism research, media studies, content research, public relations research, etc.) this structural logic has been used, as long as it frames social (media) communication as a symbolic interaction program of an organized society. The perspective is and was that mass media do the social communication in a way that they structure the society's symbolic interaction. It never was thought seriously to turn the perspective the other way around: social communication do the media. Indeed that is, in short, the cultural message of the so-called "social media." Mass media do not really generate social communication, but they foster the socialisation of societal patterns of communication. The social media irritate the socialized order of communication, but they foster an open source model of societal mass-connection (cf. Faßler 2001)

It seems almost that the turn from mass media communication to media-mass-communication (Bauer 2011: 535 ff), what social media is like, came somehow surprising over a supposedly well-ordered world of public media communication. The euphemistically so-called social media do not only change the surface of society's media communication, but it changes its ontology from an organizational and institution-like system to a system that is less closed, much more oriented on structures of an organism. That system is seeking values of sustainability less in effects but more in its options of connecting people according to their interests through participation. Each observation is constructive, since it builds meaning and sense. The constructive paradigm of observation of change – constituted and codified through communication – is time: Time is the conceptual model (order) of construction of a meaningful relation of the society to an extended (overall) measure of contingent meaning through which societies are considered to be in a state of change. Within this consideration they increasingly become aware of the fact that they are what their communication is like (cf. Bauer 2011a: 145, Foucault 1974, Neverla 2007). The concept of agenda setting (media use structures the attention and the execution of everyday life (cf. McComb 2004) confirms that assumption through a series of empirical findings.

The Cultural Design of Sociability in Social Media Usage

The social media movement follows to some extent new paradigms of communication. Paradigms which signify liberation from organized collectiveness in the manner of mass media rituals in everyday life as well as in basic systems like politics and economy. For example, more individuality, more spontaneity, more personal choice of topics of people to get connected with. But on the other hand, there is still an economic background behind all infra-technological arrangements like Facebook, Twitter or other similar Net or social media versions that satisfy their economic interest on the shoulder of an obviously ever unsatisfied need for connectivity, togetherness, and belongingness. Communication then becomes a metaphor for not being left in loneliness and social

unaccountability. Communication is experiencing an old ritual in new technological environments: becoming friends and being connected to friends. But all that happens in an easy and relaxed way, since the system overtakes the role of acquisition, organization, responsibility, duty and control. It reminds you with more or less pressure to follow the expectations of the connected others. Expectation matters: you cannot disappoint someone in a system you yourself do not want to get disappointed in because of your need for attention and acceptance. Identity has become a work in progress of media and through media usage; an attempt to come to terms with the natural, social, cultural, and symbolic environment (Schorb 2009, Busch 2001). In that system, a friend is someone who is supposed to have something in common with oneself. That already is sufficient to create or to simulate mutually a community, as you become connected to friends of your friends, even if the intrinsic reasons for becoming friends gets mixed up with any other probably unknown reasons. The system then enlarges its circulation and develops into a dispositive for the *communification* of any other reasonability. As a result, the system is disposed to become a social frame (expectation and fulfilling expectations, internal trust, rituals of friendship: attention, help, assistance) for more and for other affairs to get or to be connected and to get engaged for.

That social mechanism, combined with the technological option of instantability, ubiquity and speed, of course, has the potential to be used for political (cf. "Arab Spring" movement) as well as for any other social affairs (cf. "Occupy Wall Street" – movement) and tempts to believe that "free media" liberates in-itself-closed societies. The developments in Egypt, Libya and Iran have shown that the moral power of gathering people for common affairs, and to express a collective stand against something by far is not yet the same (not enough) as the ethical energy of communication that is needed in order to build a community connected by values of freedom, autonomy and sovereignty. Distinguishing two energetic models of communication (discourse and dialogue; cf. Flusser 1998: 16 ff.), there might be power of discourse but weakness of dialogue in those kind of social media communication.

Discourse is understood to be the mode of communication used in order to spread and to repeat information, knowledge, notion, and affairs. Dialogue is understood to be the mode of communication that creates and builds notion, knowledge, as well as common affairs. The mode of discourse follows simple structures of hierarchy and simple principles of leadership. The mode of dialogue is characterized by a dialectic order of finding community through the interest in difference of views and perspectives. Therefore, dialogical modes of communication demand much more sophisticated structures of participation, much more ethical investment in communication (standpoint-reliability, authenticity, responsibility for truth, acceptance, tolerance, etc – cf. Bauer 2009: 57), but it is the communication modus of and for freedom. With this differentiation it might be easy to confirm by analysis, which has not been sufficiently done yet, that the communicational substance – related to its dialogical mode – within the social media sphere of Facebook and Twitter is too short, too invested in producing or getting simple and fast messages across in order to be able to blue-print or to simulate a mood of an open community that is built on the principle of individuality.

So far the sociability character of social media repeats the *hop-on-drop-off-mode* of sight-seeing buses, by which people in the role of distant visitors or tourists get a quick impression of a city environment. However they do not dive in, do not become responsible for what they are seeing and usually choose (select) to keep in media memory (pictures), what they think would be worth to remember or could be nice to show to others. Within the bus, the people share a common setting of perception (media) though being individually interested in somehow the same. The social (*mediality*) setting of that situation is being on the same route (routine) to mutually animate each other to take a picture or at least notice what any other is supposed and expected to do. The sociability reaches so far as they are doing the same, but each of them is doing it in relation to personal/individual and distinctive social rebounds. Such a situation is simulative; that is, the situation is not a community as a habit but as behaviour. It might be as well just a simulation of difference as it is a simulation of commonality that is

not meant for an in-depth distinction as it is not meant for an in-depth going community. This is typical for a *next-to-next society* (Taylor 2002: 76 ff.): everyone just takes and gives each other the same right to do the same thing and to match and realize the same goal under same conditions of investment (skills for using the infrastructure) and outcome (declaration of interest).

Does Religion Need an Institution?

What is relevant to the question, whether this kind of social media communication could be a dispositive of cultural understanding of religion, is the fact that and the reason why we think that this could affect our traditional understanding of religion. Across all cultures there is, of course, a common notion that religion is a matter of communication (Bauer 1980, Taylor 2002). What keeps the world connected as a whole and as an integrated complex are its stories and discourses. What keeps religion to be identified as such, is what it tells about itself and what is told about it. All religions are social contexts of belief in divine messages, of grand narrations and of traditions and rituals of sharing and communicating the truths of and in it. But besides this pragmatic aspect, communication matters in respect to the constitutional and constructive identity of religion. In that context, the media change mirrors the social change in general. As traditional media embody a social institution (system) of communication and religion embodies a social institution (system) of faith and belief, the social change in general goes into the direction of a radical de-institutionalization of systems, which is true of media and religion as well (Seyfert 2011). Concerning the situation of religion, the diagnosis in respect of the relationship between religion and social media finds a multiplying effect. The de-institutionalization of religion will follow the speed and the conditions of the deinstitutionalization of social communication; the de-institutionalization process of religion (perhaps towards secular religions? cf. Manuel Jakab 2011) will increasingly de-institutionalize the internal communication. This means less authority control, less dogma, less jurisdiction, less obligation, but more authenticity, more

casuality, more individuality, more difference and diversity of concepts of faith (cf. Bauer 1980). On the one hand, this might facilitate the inter-faith dialogue. On the other hand, it might lead to assimilation on individual base, which could be assessed as a loss of cultural diversity and originality.

Following the interpretation of communication or communicative systems by the concept of “Symbolic Interaction” (Mead 1973), the change in communication is to be characterized as a process moving from a socialized use of codes towards a social use of codes. This means, communication changes from a habit performed in the interest of repeating and controlling culturally learned attitudes (i.e., the cultural rituals of mass-media).

Having brought things, hopes, and fears concerning social media to a balanced level of observation - far from demonization and also far from euphemism - now an in-depth-analysis should be done in order to get a clear picture of the communicative conditions of establishing interreligious dialogue within the context of social media.

The Communicative World of Religion

The world is a universe of diverse programs through which mankind tries to structure order, state meaning, and to direct perspectives of view and of distinction in relation to the experience of indeterminable contingency (Luhmann 1987: 203 - 207) and, also, of being confronted with a sense of uncertainty of what exists and what happens. The world comprises everything that is a cultural, symbolic, or gestural configuration (cf. Mead 1973) in relation to a mutually supposable perception of any event in a natural, social or cultural environment. The world is the construction of images and frames of connectivity that are negotiated through symbolic interaction in the interest of giving a reliable destination to anything that otherwise would be or would happen as the permanent repetition of surprise. On this note, communication is a socially-engaged cultural program of rationalization and of overcoming

any surprise and a program of reduction of complexity (cf. Luhmann 1973).

Within this world of symbolically generated and socialized environment, religion is a cultural program with a specifically directed interpretation of experience of uncertainty, which is based on special models of knowledge and concepts of sense, and is performing special signatures of the social and cultural practice from which it occurs. The social contexts of religion are the contexts of stories and discourses through which the society remains in flux. The social discourses mirror the stories of social and cultural change which, contemporarily, increasingly appear as media change. The myths and narrations of the agricultural and the subsequent industrial society are now to be replaced by those of a multi-optional and so-called open society (Popper 1992), which is appealed to be a knowledge-, information-, communication-, or media society. This shows that society is a social architecture based on narrations, history, stories and discourse (Schmidt 2003). In this context, communication is the matter of society. And religion, as a phenomenon of discursive connectivity, is an inherent moment of it. Alas, flexibility, elasticity, mobility, and changeability should not be just managerial soft skills for religious institutions and their representatives, but rather the intrinsic quality of their concepts of social self-realisation. Social change is not something that just occurs and society surprisingly becomes somehow aware of it. Social change is the concept of observation of the communication of society and of the society of communication (cf. Luhmann 1998). That is, society is interpreting itself as a cultural connection of a communicatively shared observation that is objectified in structures of symbols and rituals in the interest of exchangeability. In this context, religion becomes a factor in the social conceptualization of life; a system which is also configured through symbolic interaction (Mead 1973). Mankind interacts on the level of symbolically structured codes, whose usage it is learning through cultural socialization.

Conceptual Turns in Theorizing Communication and Media

A General Approach

The claim to refer credibly communication as the significant social model or paradigm of religions (especially the monotheistic ones) and, consequently, of theology, demands a clarification and declaration of which theoretical conception of communication is complex enough and sufficiently reasonable to correspond to the complexity of social reality insofar as it is a configuration of communication. Because of its quality of being a communicative configuration of the signification of experience, social reality becomes the relational focus of religion and in consequence of its theoretical reflection, namely theology. This is based on two assumptions:

- the concept of communication (i.e., the construction of reality through symbolic interaction - cf. Berger/Luckmann 1972) can be taken as the reasonable paradigmatic model *of* religion and *for* theology, and
- the determination of reality was what communication is thought to be competent (able, capable, responsible) for.

Conclusively, religion is a reality model as it is a symbolic-semantic unit of order that has been established through social-reflexive interrelations within mankind's communication (Schmidt 2003: 34). Consequently, theology is the observation of religion as a model of reality in the interest of its relevance for faith. In this context, theology becomes the knowledge building instance of observation of religiously relevant communication respective the religiously relevant reality. One-dimensional and unidirectional concepts of communication (sender-medium-receiver-effect-models) never match this cultural complexity. Therefore, they do not serve for more than the direct practice of communication. That is to say, they enforce the power of the sender (significantly falsifying called: communicator), especially in context of pastoral work.

Relating for a moment to the fact that religions need to be organized as institutions, makes putting the question in what concept of communication those institutions, or churches, might be interested. As a social organization, Church is one among other members of a system competing for attention. Since the Church has a message to be delivered and activities to be legitimized, it must use the ways of social practice of visibility, perception and acceptance. In a media-organized society, that means to use and claim the competence of media-like communication strategies. This interest of religious institutions, such as the Church, to become or to remain a powerful and influential factor in shaping out the order of society might lead them and as well their theological institutions to conceptualize communication (just) as a tool in consequence of those interests.

Since action is the paradigm of a concept of communication in a context of assessing interest of influence, the idea is to enforce all activities as the communication making ones; thus, taking communication for manipulative or instructive strategies of communicative presence within societal discourses.

In reality those concepts of communication that focus only on the relational event structures between sender and receiver and are interested in empowering the sender position to increase the effects on the receiver side cannot sufficiently frame the event of communication. Those concepts just stand for a concept of instruction. As long as the pastoral work (pastoral theology) reflects itself as the station to compensate the weaknesses of pastoral practice or of pastoral personnel through concepts of empowerment, and as long as such a theology has not understood what communication was and what communication was able (responsible) to create in respect of meaningful reality, the cultural upload of such, mostly structuralism and/or functionalism theories of communication is essentially zero. Because they exclude from their perspective all of what is in the cultural environment as this is something, which is not really a feature of the mechanical process itself. Because of that it is not relevant and not accessible for casual

steering. Such concepts of communication and/or media are by far too ontological, too narrow-minded and just interested in, from its environmental contexts, isolated objectification of communication or media structures. Moreover, such concepts are too normatively following the interests of industrial modernity; too much dedicated to models of simply mechanical plausibility; and too much affiliated to principles of mathematical or technical and economical formalization, as for example, causal models between input and output, reason and effect, or action and success (cf. Bauer 2010, Weber 2005). The mechanism of trust within those technically understood conceptualizations of communication just relates to the causal plausibility and controllability of technical rules and mechanically countable processes and programs. Such concepts cannot serve as reliable or comprehensive models of communication which respect the cultural complexity of religion as a matter of communication.

Theoretically, religious experience is a perspective of life within the social, cultural, and communicative conditions of the construction of reality and meaning. Moreover, religion is changing its structure according to social and cultural change. In this context, it seems to be important to be aware of the implications of the change of paradigms in theorizing reality, culture, communication, media, and religion. This is important because change touches upon the legitimacy of declaration and interpretation of religion as well as of theology, which are both contextualized within structures of communication. Compared to traditional concepts of communication and social interaction, which are mostly conceptualized as technical models of transmission and influence, two turns can be identified: the constructivist turn, and the cultural turn. These turns mean more than just a structural change. Because of their cultural affinity, they signify opening chances of theoretically conclusive interpretation of a mutually constitutive relationship between religion and communication. Both turns designate a qualitative change in conceptualizing perception as an intrinsic event of communication, and in interpreting the concept of communication as an event of cultural competence within structures of social practice.

The Value of Constructivist Turn

Constructivism as a philosophical perspective in explaining the possibilities of understanding reality is related to the question of how man is able to produce the meaning of experience, based on two assumptions:

- “mental models” are the key to understand (construct) reality, and
- those mental models are not just individually arbitrary inventions but culturally related (even controlled) frames for social (inter-individual) understanding.

The assumption that there is an external objective reality to be observed as the same and as the one for anyone has misled to dogmatic positions. On the one hand, it has opened up causal-theoretical cosmologies (cf. Bauer 1980). In the course of philosophical conceptual relativeness of an objective reality and of increasing epistemological knowledge on non-dualistic conceptualization of reality (cf. Mitterer 2001, Schmidt 2003: 92 f., Weber 2005), the fictional character has become clearer and successively accepted as a basis for an open horizon of explanation of the autonomous status of man facing the contingency of explaining the reality, thus unrevealing mysteries (cf. Kuhn 1976: 49 f.). Since each enlightenment starts with scepticism (Descartes), mankind is challenged to learn through exchanging the peradventure to agree on a signification that unifies the diversity of observation into a common concept of reality.

There are mainly two schools of the constructivist discourse. The naturalist scientific school of thought argues with neuro-physiological hypotheses, which claim that one can only take as a reality, what s/he is able to observe through wits. The limits of the world are defined by the limits of sensual observation (cf. Maturana / Varela 1984). The more recent cultural school of thought conceptualizes reality as a result of communicative practice within a cultural program (cf. Mitterer 2001,

Schmidt 2003: 38). As an alternative option to essentialist concepts of perception, the constructivist interpretation hypothesizes that perception makes all the difference. Because of that it needs to be shared in the way of communication. It, therefore, does not depict reality thought to exist for any observation to be the same. Rather, it constructs reality as an agreeable issue of relevance. The constructivist position, which observes and interprets reality as a way of construction becoming real because relevance...

- says reality is (not what, but) *how* we observe the natural, social, cultural and symbolic environment. Observing reality scientifically (analyzing society, culture, communication, media etc.) then means to decide for a second order (perspective) of observing the observation, which we use to define the relevance (= culture as a complex of meaning).
- makes a normative epistemological inclusion: observing a culture (of society, communication, media, etc.) always challenges the culture of observation, which is contextualized through the social, cultural, symbolic environment we are living with and through which we learned the attitudes of observation.
- understands theory as an open-source model (a model of interpretation and *for* interpretation) and as a methodological interruption (break) of everyday routines of observation (cf. Schmidt 2003: 89), saying *how* are we observing and *why* are we observing as we are observing?
- conceptualizes truth at this level of and in the context of observation not as a dimension (criterion) of content, but a quality (criterion) of morality of social practice (transparency, responsibility, competence). In this constructionist concept, the carrier of truth is the actor respective to the symbolic interaction program among actors. This has to be taken as a critical alienation to normative concepts of truth, where the content (message) is supposed to be the carrier (responsible reference) of truth. Even the consensus-theory delivered by Jürgen Habermas (1973), which is still considered as one of the most comprehensive conceptualization

of truth within the context of social theories, did not (or could not) go so far.

Understanding Culture as a Matter of Communication

Culture is the most relevant environment to religion. For a long time culture was objectified as a set of aesthetical performance and behaviour related to education, reflection, and ethical orientations. The Cultural Studies, based on the theoretical conception and research of the Birmingham School in the 1950s, (cf. Simon, etc.) contextualized the analysis of cultural expression with conditions of everyday life (social environment). Therefore, this school of thought came up with a very broad and contextual definition of culture as “a whole way of life” (Williams 1971: 16). Using this concept as theoretical framework in describing the cultural structure of religion leads to a contextual analysis of religion. It conceives religion as a way of directing the execution of personal life under condition of sociability towards a concept of intrinsic sense, which heavily conceptualizes God as a source of relevance for the execution of life under condition of society. The consequences of this theoretical paradigm have been wide ranging:

- There is no “naturally logical” necessity in making a difference between high and low culture. Popular culture is culture as advanced culture claims to be culture. Applied to the analysis of religion as a cultural expression, religious culture cannot credibly claim a special dignity of owning a privileged position compared to other systems of belief.
- In the context of religion’s historical programs, especially the Christian one has occupied a hegemonic position which directs and frames social and individual life. It is the interest of Cultural Studies to analyse culture as a factor of power and domination and to generate interpretative systems of social life oriented on the conditions of equal rights.
- The contextual structure of culture (and here as well of religion) is a result of the critical paradigm of observation and demands

a contextual analysis (here: of theology) in the interest of an intervening theory as a challenge for change. This makes (contextual) theology a source of concepts for cultural change.

- Observing culture always means to objectify the social context in the interest of explication of sense; and to find a metaphor for that in order to exchange it or to bring it into the system of social exchange.
- The idea of cultural studies of religion is not to find a generalized normative definition of religion. Rather, it is to describe empirically and critically *how* society discovers and invents the cultural meaning of its existence, knowing that the observation of culture is not the observation of a (historical, social) territorial but the critical observation of interests of territorialisation.

Understanding Communication as a Matter of Sociability

It is important to dissociate the concept of communication from its technical and instrumental interpretation, that is, understanding communication as a tool of or for influence, power, or exchange of whatever. Communication is a concept that describes the experience of the sociability of man. It assumes that there is an intrinsic and inherent meaning; namely that of coming together or of togetherness as the intrinsic meaningful definition of sociability. The instrumental interpretation of communication follows a pragmatic plausibility of technical processes. Moreover, it metaphorizes the experience of functionality as an agreement on social order within the struggle of interests in the process of negotiating a meaningful agreement. As an alternative to the concept of cultural communication, three observations may be offered:

- *The observation of human existence (anthropological perspective).* This observation is derived from the pre-philosophical notion that the contingency of human existence might somehow be the undefined destination of mankind. Communication is the social practice to ascertain the indefinite, to define reality as a point of

reference for social co-orientation, and to decide for relevance (and signification of relevance) of a multi-optional observation.

- *The observation of contingency of experience (cognitive theory / knowledge theory perspective).* Contingency is the experience of man that reality never is one but optionally different. In need of and in order to fulfill the sense of sociability of individual life, we observe ourselves through models of unification of difference, which is a way of communicating the observation (different views). In relation to different unification this makes sense (knowledge or believe). If experiences would be the same, it would be only one. So communication is the social method of defining things (relevance) by and through difference. What makes sense is difference (sic: This is quite different from the way we use communication in our organized society; namely, as a means of reducing and excluding difference.) Speaking the truth then is what does not state another (different) view as true.
- *The observation of sociability of reality (relevance).* This observation denotes the experience of man that nothing has relevance, if it is not brought into the exchange of mutually expected trust. We observe communication as the social practice of exchanging sociability (trust, responsibility, interdependence).

When employing descriptions (interpretative definitions) like that as a model of communication, the analysis comes much nearer to what is or could be the communicative sense of religion; or what is or could be the religious potential of communication.

Understanding Mediality as a Cultural Dispositive

As societies become more and more organized, interconnected, and interrelated by politics, by economy, by social and cultural affairs (i.e., migration, globalization, etc.), social communication increasingly occurs in the media or rather, not in the media but ever more so in a medial environment. This medial environment is increasingly codified through news, stories, narrations, and discourses, or uploaded

through multi-optionality, anywhere mediatized through technology and anyhow medialized through diverse cultural codes. In such an environment, understanding the world means understanding media. The media system explains itself by itself and out of itself. This means, nothing can be observed outside of media: “all, what we know about the world we are living with, we know through mass media” (Luhmann 2004: 9). Increasingly, everything we know we know because of being interconnected with and within stories and discourses all around the world.

That is somehow the desperate position of modernity. But being aware of that, the solution is clear (at least theoretically). There is a need of changing the perspective of observation of structures: from a unique media ontology (the press, radio, television, the Internet as “a” media”) to a contextual observation of cultures of media usage. The issue here is not media as a structural item, but mediality as a cultural quality of societal communication. Due to the double plural of the term (the media) used within everyday practice as well as in scientific theories and due to special media ontologies (Leschke 2007: 245), the view to what the *medium* (not just media) culturally means, has been pushed into the background. Media becomes a *medium* in context of use (cf. Hepp 2008:66, Krotz 2008:48, Innis 1951). It becomes a dispositive (Foucault) of mediality which contextualizes the symbolic, cultural and social environment. Moreover, it becomes a reference of possibility, change and challenge of mutual social understanding. The symbolic interaction increasingly refers to a cultural program (“mediality”) that has been developed by itself (*autopoiesis*). Thus, the interaction program continuously is being replaced by itself; that is, maintaining itself through change by itself.

What does that mean to religion as a cultural program in the context of communication? It means that the media does not change religion, but religion – conceived as the matrix of sense – is changing in and through its symbolically generated medial substance. This statement is based on the following assumptions:

- communication is not a tool of/for religion but the model in which it occurs, and
- the media is not a tool for (the distribution) of religion but the cultural environment (mediality) where it occurs (cf. Luhmann 1974).

It does not make any sense to understand the worlds of belief and knowledge as being dependent on the media. It is not a question of a unique media ontology to get connected to the world. It is a question of mediality as a cultural quality of constructing meaning and sense. In that environment of medial interchange, discourse religion as well is a medial phenomenon; or rather it should be understood and analyzed as a phenomenon of mediality and as a matter of media culture. The structuralist view never can explain sufficiently the relation of religion and media as a phenomenon of modern society. However, the culturalist perspective of analysis can give insight into the interconnectivity of religion and media culture as a post-modern society phenomenon. Religion in a post-modern view of society appears as a communication phenomenon that is confronted with its own deconstruction as any other cultural system of archiving the cultural mind. This does not mean the end of religion. Rather, it points towards a new perspective of religion as a matrix of constructing sense. The difference is noticeable:

- The structuralist view is looking for structural characters in the interest of defining the function of media (functionalist perspective); that is, defining media as a “tool of” or a “tool for” something. This view conceives the media as a tool of communication and understands religion as a (an institutional) tool for (a specified) communication as well.
- The culturalist view is observing the social and cultural meaning of media-related communication in the interest of understanding the (social, organizational, technological, cultural) environment of communication; that is, observing the mediality of communication as a quality of constructing, society, culture and/or religion. This

view is not interested in the media-structured situation of society or religion (as an institution) but in the medium-constituted (and religiously relevant) self-reflection of the society.

- Mediality is the mental, social, cultural, symbolic dispositive environment of communication. We observe communication as a quality of mediality as we observe media in relation to the perspectives of observing communication (sense, difference, sociability).

Understanding Religion as a Cultural Matrix in Contexts of Social Communication

As a model of knowledge (sharing observation and focusing the interpretation of sense to a concept of God) and culture (sharing the orientation of life to that concept of God) realized within social frames (order of distribution of sociability), religion represents the potential of a system (as a mechanism of mutual trust the controlling instance of observation of communication) and develops structures in order to remain as a socially perceptible configuration. It thus overcomes and outlives limits of time, space, and interaction. Faith, which is understood as the communicative dispositive of grand narrations on grand cultural concepts of truth, love, freedom, divinity, and eternal life, mutates into systems of belief or even systems of knowledge of belief within the context of social structures. On that note, knowledge building an interpretative analysis which observes the social and cultural conditions (contexts) of religious practice falls within the domain of theology as a system of knowledge of belief. Within this theoretical framework, the task of practical theology is not to modify the concept of God but to modify the meaning of the concept of God in everyday social life.

Of course, religion needs a social structure (group building, community building, organisation, institution) as it is a symbolically generated contextual model of construction of signification and, as such, a generalized model of designation as a source of mindful meaning. On this note, any socially interested theory related to religion (observing

religious practice) must turn out as a theory that explains religion in categories of communication as a cultural matrix of constructing sense. Connected through structures of exchanging and sharing meaning, any religion gets socially constituted as a community of mutually supposed fiction of the same faith. It provides a notion (knowledge model) of God and a concept of what that means for the execution of life in the framework of such a community. In order to clarify the relevance of communication within the cultural programming of religion, as well as, to understand the relevance of religion in the context of social execution of life, it might be helpful figure out some interpretative positions:

- Religion is a cultural matrix of constructing sense and meaning. It is a model of reference for the assessment of contingency. In this respect, it is a complex of cultural signification that is constituted by the communication of faith (as a habit) and belief (as a model of knowledge).
- Religion is the radical answer to the experience of radical *aporia* in the social model of exchange of interpretation (dialogue and discourse – cf. Flusser 1998). It seeks to overcome the destination of human existence, yet is being undefined through potential attribution of definition through communication.
- Religion is a system that differs from its social, political or everyday life environment through its special operation (i.e., communication in relation to that what people/members might believe), although it intervenes with other systems because of its overall horizon of constructing meaning.
- Based on these notions, it becomes evident that religion represents a model of connectivity of meaning that can only be realized as a communicative operation. And, as such, it always intends to express itself by means of community; thus, sharing and distributing the sociability of individual life.
- Religion is the inspiration of what sociability means in realizing one's individual life, always in responsibility to social meaning (faith). This is why religion counts as the frame of reference for morality and this, in turn, is why religions refer to (or come from)

grand narrations.

Creating Media Religion

Trying to extend this interpretation of religion out of its communicative context to a media context and to a medialized social environment as described before, there is a concrete need of interpreting religion as a media phenomenon. Referring to the media typical effects, as mentioned in any critical analysis of medialized culture of communications (e.g., standardisation, trivialization, reduction of complexity, sensationalism, simulation, fiction, imaging, news attention, entertainment, etc. cf. Postman 1988), it is generally assumed that the substance of religion (as a radical communicative destination facing the indefiniteness of human existence) changes its consistence into a model of media conversation in the manner of simulation, sensationalism, entertainment, standardisation, news attention, etc. Such an effect must not be seen as loss of religion but rather as a social and cultural change of religion. Within medialized structures of communication and in respect to what was called the mediality of communication, the phenomenon of religion might change into what is conceptualized as spirituality.

Spirituality differs from religion. It is build around another paradigm of meaning construction and sense-orientation; that is, belief. While religion is a system and a frame of reference for the sociability of life (ethically, aesthetically and ritually), spirituality is a frame of connectivity and the frame of reference for individual inspiration of life. Spirituality is an individual decision of using (any) framework of constructing a transcendent sense of personal life. The individual uses a system of belief in order to define its status of orientation. Spirituality does not refer to the social and cultural controls through which religions try to territorialize their moral validity. The term spirituality has been used for the description of theological traditions in religious congregations. Recently, it has gained attention and has been used to describe personal religious experience.

Watching the media's contribution to the religious discourse, directs attention to the fact that religion in a competitive environment for media attention among numerous other topics has become a matter of satisfying conversational curiosity. When accepting the condition that the global society is constituting itself in a model (as a model) of mediality (codes of attention and attraction, dissipatedness, coincidence of concernment, presumption of interests of generalized others, conversational character, etc.), it becomes evident that religion as a communicational institution, which connects believers now under condition of media change, will also change its cultural face. The recognition (is it religion, spirituality or philosophy?) depends on the character of communication and/or medial use.

Observation of Change –the Competence Motif of Communication

The world of reality is a world of denotations. Anything that is supposed to exist only can become true (real) by and through denoting observation. All socially and culturally relevant denotations arise from social negotiation and agreement of observation within the context of communication, which can be taken as the definitive metaphor for the social practice of unification of observational difference as well as the social practice of the distribution of the sociability of experience and observation (Bauer 2011b: 60). As an observation, communication is changeable. And as communication, observation is changing just as the world of reality is changing within historical contexts. Reality is the reality of observation. If we can accept this constructivist theoretical notion (Glaserfeld 1996, cf. Schmidt 2003), then the construction of reality has to be measured as a question of observational quality and competence. Based on this argument, reality (matter) of religion is a cultural configuration of denotation, which is kept and remains in contexts of communication – in its quality also depending from competence.

Communication competence (related here to categories of ability, capacity, responsibility, authenticity – cf. Baacke 1973, 1997, Bauer

200: 56 f.) is not a concept of personal habit. In the context of systemic interpretation, it is rather conceived as a cultural good or as an intrinsic cultural motif of mutual social understanding, always related to the diversity of cultural environments. Competence, interpreted as an ethical concept of communication, is a relevant dimension of communication. Competence is also relevant as an ethical component of the cultural usage of religion, which is a communicative configuration in the interest of transcendent denotations of life. It might be a result of the process of secularization (which is by itself a concept of social change – cf. Taylor 2002) that the historical society successively becomes more and more aware of itself and of its intrinsic competencies. This means, the society learns to take care of itself as a matter of self-responsibility for its cultural and moral standards. The contexts of religion are also the contexts of theology, since it was thought to be the theoretical conceptualization of what is and means religion in context of social life. Since the contexts, especially the social ones of religion are changing, the concepts of theology are in need of change, or, as argued previously, social change. Change as the cultural concept of society is becoming a theological concept of theorizing religion as a matter of social life. In the context of such an interpretation, change is not something that happens, but change is the principle that makes things happening – in theory as an abstraction of practice; and in practice as the source of theory.

In such an epistemologically open environment of the interpretability of the relationship between religion, society and change, the two worlds of theoretical interpretation may fall into one. The one consists of society, culture and communication. The other one, the theoretical interpretation of religion, is conceived as the communicative environment of a cultural interpretation of the meaning of the concept of God in social context of life. Both, however, mutually stand for each other as a dispositive of observation (cf. Schmidt 2003): communication as a concept of critical observation of religion; religion as a concept of critical observation of communication. In such a constellation, the objective subject of interpretation then becomes the

(way of) interpretation of the subject. The methodological aim is to create a dialectic model of a hermeneutical circle. The competence of it is to turn the linear imagination of any development in a circular one. The metaphor of a circle interprets a process that is not causal and not final (where what would start or end and what was the direction of causality). It is a trans-effective movement in enriching and enlarging the knowledge of whatever is the subject to come clear. The dialectic-methodological enmeshment should pay attention only to the notion that any theory (diction) has found its legitimacy of interpretation, when it is proved by other (contradiction) views or concepts.

It should be stated clearly that such a dialectic model of a hermeneutical circle as a methodological principle of theology is not just a rhetorical model of a theological wording of or for religious mysteries (God). It is simply the methodological paradigm of a theoretically credible reconstruction of the daily religious discourse in the framework of a theoretical conceptualization for a theoretical model of wording of God. Such a theoretical re-programming of theological claims of explaining religion as a matter of life epistemologically, only becomes credible as a contextual work in progress. Reconstructive hermeneutics is the methodological environment for any method of objectification of religiously meant discourse. It could be done, for instance, in a way of a reflexive critical discourse analysis (cf. Jäger 1993).

The Sense of Diversity and the Fight for Unity

Religion, considered and understood through a concept of communication, appears as a specific culturally differentiated configuration of communicative acting in order to construct the meaning of reality. As such, it pretends to focus on observing the experience of mankind being in intrinsic and existential need of interpreting a concept of God. In such a degree as God is a religious code that unlocks the mystery of sense, it is in the final analysis a communicative construction. This code is then a cultural instance with a comprehensive demand of truth that makes any religion being the communicational environment (more

or less institutional mediality) of belief. The decision of belongingness is socially born out as a decision for a concept of belief and is finally for anyone more or less a coming out for an identifiable concept of life. As far as the concept of belief concerns One-God-religions understanding God as the acting and causing principle in creation of the world, as well as, the first and last principle giving sense to whatever happens to and in this world, it might be explainable that this vertical interpretation of a transcendent world of order becomes a cultural paradigm of and for the hierarchical order of communication within the social body of the religion. It must not be like that.

Considering communication – beyond and before all practical applications of notions of social order – as a concept of distinctive observation of whatever is the environment of everyday social practice, the cognition could accrue that the order of the world not only would arise through acceptance of concepts of already reduced complexity (hierarchical verticality of communication through a given world of order), but also through self-responsible creation of complexity (heterarchical horizontality of communication). Whereas a hierarchical concept of communication is interested in unity and uniqueness of truth, a heterarchical concept of communication is interested in multi-option and diversity of what becomes true. In any way, the question of identity and recognition of identity remains as a challenge of self-awareness and self-presentation for any religion under condition of being structured as a social body.

As any individual, any community or any society, religion as an distinguishable socially and culturally connective body is in need of identity, assuming that identity is the cultural concept of becoming aware of the social environment and the symbolic instance of making oneself being considered by others. Identity differentiates a subject from its environment. In the interpretation of the Symbolic interaction theory (Mead 1973, Blumer 1973), it is a typological abstraction of characters and a conceptual configuration of and for observation, generated through interaction and for communication in order to distinguish any subject

from any other one. Identity is a concept of taking notice of anyone and anything in relation to oneself. Moreover, it is a control instance of observing the natural, social, cultural and symbolic environment. It, thus, objectifies environmental information as a specified subject defined through its characters and determined to mean somehow the same (*idem*) as with any other observation of a generalized other, and becoming aware of those characters.

What characters become significant for a cultural concept of identity or identification of a person, of an organisation, of a community, or of a society finally is a question of the cultural program of mental, rational or moral distinction. Beyond this mechanism of distribution of sociability (Bauer 2010), there is no chance for a socially relevant or self-aware existence. As it is important for any social body to get along with this mechanism, it is a crucial point to perform such identifiable codes of signification through communication.

Yet the social contexts of living, generating and providing such codes are heavily changing, not only because of, but especially in connection with the current migration movement. With them the social frameworks of identity building of persons, groups, organisations, or of cultures have come into severe imposition. Following the political and public debates on religion as a base of national cultures and of social rituals, one could get the impression that there is a mutually supporting relation of legitimacy between culture and religion. Institutions on both sides (i.e., religion and public culture) seem to draw a benefit from that interchanging relationship. It is a noticeable phenomenon that three large One-God-confessions (the Christians, the Muslims, and the Jews) base themselves on an authority of cultural traditions, social rituals, and mental programs; especially when it comes to conflicts or to any other situation, when religious institutions feel challenged to hold their stakes in public life. It is also a remarkable phenomenon that cultural traditions, often specified as national culture, invoke religion as a source of cultural or even national cultural identity.

The Recognizability of Religion in Postmodern Environments

It is a remarkable phenomenon, maybe owing to postmodern cultures of society, that religion is having a comeback after the industrial society (concept of modernity, age of enlightenment). However, religion is not coming back in the form of church or as an institution, but rather as a civil movement or even as a secular movement; that is, as a new moral concept of a secular sociability. Asking within the analysis of social change: What is it, what brings religion back to the societal discourse and, at same time, marginalizes their traditional institutions?

Religion, understood as a complex of communication (constructing of sense and meaning) is the communicative (social) context that becomes relevant in respect to the radical experiences of life and of realizing life. Religion now is socially recognized as an open structured (not merely institutional) communication complex that provides symbols and codes for the need of mankind to get along with transcendent components of interpreting individual life. Whereas before, religion was a system organized as a church, which limited the universal scope of contingency to a decision of faith and belief. Perhaps, it helps to construct a distinction between belief and faith in relation to their communicative impact. The distinction refers to a more institutional and less intrinsic or less institutional and more intrinsic model of construction of the validity of sense.

In such a distinction, belief, a term that is closer to prescription, represents the concept of acceptance for constructions of limitation of contingency. Thus, belief represents the communicative habit assimilated to a system. Faith, in contrast, represents the concept of what is or could be the construction of knowledge that represents the habit of acceptance of an illimitable complexity and open contingency as the model of surprise of meaning. Religion is the symbolic framework for both communicative habits. It is a cultural and social system of translation. It translates the experience of transcendent indications of life into spiritual attitudes towards the psychic, moral and practical

challenges of life. Those habits, attitudes and constructions connect morally to exceptional situations and passages of life (birth, illness, death, good luck, wedding, tragedies and catastrophes), to meaningful periods in social life (childhood, youth, age), and translate the undefined world into a definable and agreeable reality (cf. Luhmann 1968, Schütz/Luckmann 1984, Flusser 1998, Bauer 2011: 466). Such constructions need a medium/media in order to make the idea visible and tangible (cf. Kierkegaard: language as the media of the idea). This search for a visible and tangible religion as the symbolic environment of translation is permanently challenged to change its structures of communication, based on the fact that the cultural legitimacy and social acceptance of religion are depending on its communication concepts. Relating this line of thought to the increasing aesthetization of social communication through a technologically designed mediality, there is also the possibility of a theoretical option and a challenge of shifting from an ontological and structural observation of a religion ("the religion" as an institution) to religion as a concept of an especially medialized (programmed) observation of meaning. It is not that the religiously ritualized social habit that constitutes religion in mode of communication (institution), but it is the intrinsic communicative motif that makes any symbolically (medialized) generated matrix of sense understood as an option of religion.

Finally summing up the argumentation so far and reminding of the notion that communication is what we know about it and religion is what we think about it, the relationship of religion and communication can be described as mutually enabling concepts of sense. As they are different in terms of constructive aesthetics but similar in terms of construction of ethics, they compliment one another and mediate to one another through the whole cultural program of human beings, like one lane next to the other, thus forming a guide rail throughout the history of individuals and societies. Both are concepts exploring, explaining and designing the options of being and becoming human within a community or society. Both insinuate that man is competent (able, capable and responsible –cf. Bauer 2011: 526) for the construction of reality and

sense. Sense in that context relates to three levels of construction of meaning: ethic, aesthetic and benefit (cf. Edmair 1968: 63). In such a degree, religion then is the ritually cultural practice of any sense-related social communication. Communication is the socially cultural practice of any social religion as a cultural, symbolic or ritual event of the construction of sense – ethically, aesthetically and practically.

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