

Religion and Social Communication in Asia: Towards a Research Agenda

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Religion and social communication have been the objects of study in the Western world for quite some time especially in their relation to Christianity. Kaspar von Steiler wrote already in the oldest German language book on journalism, *Zeitungs-Lust und Nutz*, published in 1697 about God as the first newscaster, “the all highest God is the first newscaster and followed by his messengers like the prophets in the Old Testament. The apostles in the New Testament are showing that He loved messages and wanted them to be spread throughout the whole world” (Eilers 2009,50).

Developments in the United States and Europe

With the invention of new technical means of communication beyond the press at the end of the 19th century, soon also studies on the relation between these means and religion/church were published like in the case of film which began in 1895. In fact, the initiators of film, the Lumiere brothers themselves, even tried making a film on the passion of Christ. Soon, studies on the ‘use’ of film for faith, on the impact and consequences of the new means for Christianity were done and published (Lindvall 2007; Jonston and Barsotti 2004; May-Bird 1982; Skinner 1993; Walsh 1993; Malone 2006, 2007, 2008). Many of them are more descriptive though some are also critical and of a more serious academic nature (Silk 1995, Mithcell 2007, Rolfes 2007). This trend of media critique continued with radio and television including studies on presentation methods and possibilities.

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Paul Soukup has tried to develop an overview of literature for communication and Christianity (1982, 1989). His 1989 presentation is organized into sections: issues and approaches, resources, communication theory including theology, Church documents and ethics, media education, history, rhetoric including proclamation and homiletics, orality and writing, interpersonal communication including group and organizational communication, liturgy, mass communication, intercultural communication and other media including also computers. The advisory editor of this volume, G.F. Gorman, rightly asserts in the foreword that “in its comprehensiveness, depth and detail this analysis of literature on Christian communication far exceeds anything attempted to date by any organization or scholar.”

Some studies present individual communication personalities, including autobiographies like Bishop Fulton Sheen (1980) or the communication dimensions of their lives like in the case of Pope John Paul II (Melady 1999; Blaney 2009). Official documents of the Church on social communication comprise another field for study and critical reflection (Eilers 1997, 2002, 2014).

Some Church communicators published their own experiences, ideas and reflection in their fields of interest like William Fore on Christian television (1977, 1990). There is further a whole list of “how-to-do” books for different (mass) media programming as well as public relations and communication handbooks for Christian communicators and organization like parishes and religious communities (Aycock and Stuart 2010, Vasallo 1998). A growing number of studies discuss the emerging role of religion in and for cyberspace (Dawson and Cowan 2004, Babin and Zukowski 2002, Campbell 2010, 2012, Campbell and Garner 2016, Hope Cheong, Fisher-Nielsen et al 2012). The relation between religion/faith and communication/media was approached in different studies as a developing field (Buddenbaum and Mitchell 1998, Mitchell and Marriage 2003, Baderacco 2005, Hoover 2006, Geybels 2007, Stout 2012).

Robert Fortner has developed a *Christian Theory of Communication* in a very thorough study placing Christian Theology into the overall developments of communication studies (2007). Most of the books and studies originate from the United States and refer to Christianity but there are also a growing number of studies for Jewish traditions (Cohen 2006) as well as Islam starting with Mowlana (2003).

The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication and Media* edited by Daniel A. Stout in 2006 and republished as a paperback in 2010 contains 124 entries from some 100 different contributors giving an overview of the field including communication relations of the main religions though some general considerations like one on *religion and communication* seem to be missing. Existing ones like the one on ‘religious marketplace’ refers only to sociology of religion and “what people can do to make their own religious and spiritual meanings” (2006, 2010:378) but does not relate to a deeper theological understanding or refer to other fields like philosophy, anthropology or the science of religion. This encyclopedia is later complemented by the editor with his own *Media and Religion. Foundations of an Emerging Field* (2012).

Professional Organization and Study Centers

There are at least two academic organizations for communication with special sections on communication and religion. They are the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). While the AEJMC has a Religion and Media Interest Group with some 200 members, IAMCR has two religion-related work groups—one on Islam and Media and another one on Media, Religion and Culture which was later renamed Media, Culture and Religion and is now proposed to delete ‘Culture’ from their title which seems to exclude culture based religious organization and confine itself to ‘official’ established religions thus limiting their field of concern.

The Islam and Media workgroup of IAMCR, which was founded after the 9-11 experience, described their concerns in the following words: The Islam and Media workgroup looks at the communication phenomenon such as human interaction with a view toward contributing toward mutual understanding and peace and justice, it seeks to engage in research and organizational development efforts geared towards strengthening the global societal structures based on personal responsibility and mutual cooperation in social, political and economic relations. The goal of this working group is to contribute to the advancement of research and evaluation in the media and communication related fields from an Islamic point of view (the TAWHIDI perspective).

The Media, Culture and Religion group does not relate to any specific religion and described itself in the following way:

This working group has a special interest in religious aspects of communication. It tries to foster international cooperation in the field, discussion and exchange of ideas and common research projects.

This working group considers important topics around the interaction between religion and the media including the way religious groups are brought into political alliances, special groups and their uses of the media, the complexities of religious agencies, with regard to public opinion and in community building. To proclamation and the expression of faith, apologetic and propagandistic media use at reception.

Analyzing these two descriptions show that both groups seem to be mainly American-European oriented. They also seem to be mainly concerned about *media* but not the broader field of *social communication*, which goes far beyond technology. A deeper understanding of social communication also considers the so-called traditional and interpersonal communication as well as group communication processes in religion.

The AEJMC Religion and Media group described their activities in the following way: “We encourage the analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, of this interaction in three areas: 1. religion portrayed in secular media; 2. The manner in which religious institutions and organizations use the media to propagate their message, and 3. The impact of religion and/or religiosity of media consumers and its impact on their media use.”

Since 2006, there exists at the University of Colorado a Center for Media, Religion and Culture. It is related to privately-financed international conferences on media, religion and culture which started in 1994 in Uppsala, Sweden. The center describes itself as an inter-disciplinary research team and acts through:

- Public conferences on media, religion and culture;
- Fellowship for doctoral students; and

- International study commission on media, religion and culture.

The website of the center features a whole list of publications, origination from this initiative but also links to websites and people in the field. Directed by Stewart M. Hoover (1988, 1990, 2006) the center is part of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication of the same university. The last of their conferences was held in Toronto from 9-13 August 2010 where it was proposed to create a new and independent International Association for Media, Religion and Culture.

In 1977, the Jesuits started in London a Center for the Study of Communication and Culture which was moved in 1993 to Saint Louis University in the United States. After the university decided to end its relation with the center, the latter was transformed into a somehow ‘virtual’ entity but still keeps their publication *Communication Research Trends* as a quarterly review of communication research under the auspices of the California Province of the Society of Jesus. It is jointly edited by Emile McAnany, William Biernatzki, sj and Paul Soukup, sj. The journal publishes abstracts of contemporary studies and reviews mainly from American and sometimes European authors and attempts to consolidate research outputs under certain themes but also offers reviews of important books in the field.

Asia

Against such a wealth and variety of studies and publications on religion and social communication in the west—and this is only a small part of the whole picture—the situation in Asia is quite different: there seem to be not many specialized studies on Christian communication or on the communication of Asian religions.

The conference “Religious Change and the Media” in Monterey, California in 1989 was the triggering factor for an early publication in the field for Asia with the title: *Media and the Transformation of Religion and South Asia* (Babb, Wadley 1995/1997) dividing the contributions of 10 authors into “printed images, audio recordings, visual media.” Like the conference itself the book is also a product of the Joint Committee on South Asia of the Social Science Research Council in the United States.

Pradip Ninan Thomas published a study on the role of Christian fundamentalism in India under the title *Strong Religion, Zealous Media, Christian Fundamentalism and Communication in India* (2008, 58) sees here a mainly “health and wealth gospel” like with movements where “religion appears as a source of images, concepts, traditions and practices that can allow individuals and communities to deal with a world that is changing around them. The study is an exploration of new Christianity in Chennai, India and in particular the communication strategies adopted by Christian fundamentalist groups” (p. xi).

Some Buddhist and Confucian concepts have been occasionally related to Asian studies and communication theory (Dissanayake 1998, Wang 1985, 2011). The relation between religion and communication, however, never seems to have become a major part of individual studies. In fact, the Asian Media Information and Communication Center (AMIC), a professional organization founded in Singapore in 1970 and now in Manila, never touched religion in any of their annual or other conferences. For the first time in 2010, a panel was offered on “Religious Broadcasting Bombardment 24/7: Search for Analytical Paradigm.” Later, additional considerations in the field were offered and in 2018 even an award was given for the first time in the field of religion.

Beside these few examples of academic approaches, there are, however, now quite a number of ‘how-to-do’ publications of religious organizations and publishing houses for Christianity especially in the Philippines, and also in India and Indonesia (St. Paul’s, Asian Trading, Kanisius etc.). They are mainly concerned about Church practice and ministry. For a few years (1995-2010) the Office of Social Communication of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) organized several conferences in the field which are reflected in respective publications, to make insights and experiences available to a broader public (Logos, Manila).

Communication in ministry and mission as well as planning (Sunderaj 1998) in Church perspective and for Asian conditions have been at the center of a special master’s program in pastoral communication at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila. Since 2003, qualified students also receive a Licentiate in Sacred Theology in addition to the Master of Arts degree. As of 2018, the program had fifty-five (55) graduates from eight (8) different Asian

countries. For this program a series of textbooks have been developed which go far beyond a single university. They are beside a general introduction to social communication from Church perspective (*Communicating in Community*) a collection with full text of all Church documents on social communication—including all World Communication Day messages since 1967—under the title *Church and Social Communication, Basic Documents 1936-2014*. This is accompanied by another volume *Communicating Church: Social Communication Documents* as a social background. The main book for the whole program is *Communicating in Ministry and Mission* which is now on its fourth edition (2018) and to be extended with another text on Communication Theology (Anh Vu Ta, Eilers) (All publications with Logos Publications, Manila).

Despite some progress, it seems that up until now religion and social communication is not a major concern for communication studies in the region and special studies and research on the digitization of the field are still to be developed under the perspective of religion. Here, studies from the United States and Europe might be an incentive, though there is still a growing number of young students developing in the continent to take up their own challenges including students of theology.

Asian cultures have strong communicative elements and dimensions in their use of symbols, in their ritual celebrations, community structures and values based very often on non-verbal communication. James Carey's studies on communication and culture have special value here. Many anthropological studies and ethnographic contributions say something about the communications of people in their societies.

Asia is the cradle of the world's major religions. In all Asian cultures, religion plays an important role. How is this expressed and 'communicated' in word and deed, in rituals, but also in the daily life of peoples and their celebrations? Religious beliefs and practices 'dictate' in many ways behavior and customs. This has been the case over hundreds of years and is still alive in many ways today. Do modern ways and means of communication especially also the digital developments change, endanger or even promote such practices? If yes, how? It will be further important to see the communication dimensions of religion in general but also the specifics of holy books like the Bible, Qur'an, Upanishads, etc. which are in themselves already

communication instruments for proclamation and religious practices. What does all this mean for people of today being “permanently online, permanently connected” (Vorderer 2018) and part of a digital world? Can religious beliefs and practices also be transmitted or even ‘performed’ in and with digital means? How are religions presented and treated in the still existing general, big, also in the individual religion-owned and operated media like Christian, Buddhist, Moslem channels? And beyond single ‘means’: what could and should be the role of communication in interreligious dialogue for countries like Indonesia with a big Moslem population, Christian-majority Philippines or in a Buddhist country like Thailand? All this should be one way or another a special concern for serious social communication research which seems to not yet exist

Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication

The Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication (ARC) at Saint John’s University in Bangkok stands for such concerns though it still lacks the financial and personnel strength for bigger initiatives. It was originally founded in 1999 by an initiative of the Office of Social Communication of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. In 2002, ARC started publishing a bi-annual academic journal, *Religion and Social Communication*, followed by a book series in 2015 with the same name published by the University of Santo Tomas Publishing House in Manila. Annual roundtables, with a limited number of participants presenting academic papers, are partly reflected in the journal. A network of interested researchers is to be developed to slowly create a group of interested and capable specialists in the field of religion and social communication. From these initiatives, a certain basis will be created, which needs however, more personnel and financial support for this is the only initiative of this kind in Asia.

The recent developments in digital social communication bring opportunities and create a worldwide web without any limits in time and space. What does this mean for the communication and practices of religion? Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner speak of Christianity as a *Networked Theology, Negotiating Faith in a Digital Culture* (2016) where they present a “theology of technology” from where they also ask “who is my neighbor in digital culture” (p. 79 ff.) and propose a faith-based community response to new media (p. 97 ff.). There is a growing literature in the field not only for Christianity but also for Islam which shows not only a concern but also a need for integration

and respective research which also has to be inter-disciplinary. Besides social communication, insights from ethnology, sociology, theology and religion should be considered and developed especially in Asia as a continent of great opportunities and also a variety of religious experiences.

Research Agenda

As part of an immediate agenda for religion and social communication studies in Asia, one might consider the following fields:

1. Study of interrelations between religion and communication in different academic fields within Asian contexts which could refer to some of the following fields:
 - a. Communication and religion in Asian cultures: relations, role and functions;
 - b. Religious practices and the role of communication in the process;
 - c. Ways, means, results and effects of communicative practices in religious teaching and life: group communication, traditional media, new media and internet;
 - d. Local theologies and their communicative dimensions and experiences;
 - e. Culture and communication (Carey) in religious realities of Asia;
 - f. Intercultural communication in religion;
 - g. Interreligious dialogue in Asia: the communication dimension, experiences, possibilities and needs;
2. Study of the use of means of communication—traditional and modern—by religious groups in Asia
 - a. Content of programs;
 - b. Presentation and design;
 - c. Style;
 - d. Frequency;
 - e. Impact;
3. Study of recipients/audience of and for religious communication in Asia:
 - a. Composition and style;

- b. Age;
 - c. Expectations;
 - d. Interactivity
 - e. Priorities in use = forming habits;
 - f. Effects;
 - g. Ethics and human dignity;
4. Academic programs and scholarships in universities and centers of study in the field of religion and communication:
 - a. Research needs and methods;
 - b. Teaching programs;
 - c. Interdisciplinary and inter-university cooperation

These are only some of the categories and directions to be considered according to the needs and possibilities as well as the availability of respective researchers. A roundtable conference of the ARC in 2010 listed some areas for research like studies of cultural influences on religious practices/communication, content or effects analysis of means of religious communication, content or effects of analysis of means of religious communication, online and offline communication of and for religious groups, ways of communication between Church/religious leaders and members.

Asking who are the ones to take up these special concerns and studies in Asia, one might first think of Christian, Moslem or Buddhist institutions like universities, specialized schools of higher studies in theology and also other academic institutions with a certain interest in the field. There could be also specialized conferences, academic study groups and specialized publications with respective programs. A listing of such institutions and their special interests in religion seem not to exist but would be of great help to anybody interested and committed to this field.

Christian Church documents (Cf. Eilers 2014) like the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* which was demanded by the Second Vatican Council already called in 1971 for a “rigorous program of scientific research” (No. 184) which seems to have never been developed since. The different faith-based universities in Asia could and should take up this concern and even cooperate in respective studies for the good of people and communities.

Also, *individual researchers* should be encouraged to go into this field,

which might be also sometimes part of a special program of groups of fellow researchers on the national or international level.

Professional and academic *periodicals* and *publications* are another “market” to develop and deepen the concern.

For all this, the concern of ARC could be a home providing also a specialized library with books mail from the 1970s-1980s which used to be part of the Jesuit Communication Center in London. Another some 4000 volume specialized library for the field, belonging to the Divine Word Missionaries, is also at the Saint Joseph Freinademetz Communication Center at the Radio Veritas Asia Compound in Quezon City, Philippines.

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