



# RELIGION AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

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- Religion and Communication in Asia: Towards a Research Agenda  
*Franz-Josef Eilers, svd.*
  
- Religious Amplification in South Asia:  
Methodological Issues for Understanding Change  
*Dr. Binod C. Agrawal*
  
- The Interface of Media and Religion  
*Dr. Kiran Thakur*
  
- God Texting: Filipino Youth Response to Religious SMS  
*Anthony G. Roman*

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The ARC Journal Editorial Committee invites contributors of studies and abstracts that provides scholarly insights into the relation between religion, communication and society. The journal serves as a discussion forum board for religion and communication scholars and encourages intercultural cooperation and interreligious dialogue in the Asian region. The ARC reserves the right to accept or decline submitted contributions in order to meet the standards of the ARC publication. We gratefully acknowledge all contributions.

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## **RELIGION AND COMMUNICATION IN ASIA: TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA**

*Franz-Josef Eilers, svd*

Religion and communication have been the objects of study and research in the Western world for quite some time especially in their relation to Christianity. In the oldest German speaking book on journalism (“*Zeitungs Lust und Nutz*”) published in 1697, Kaspar von Stieler has already written 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 through the whole world.” (Eilers, 2009, 50)

### **Developments in the US and Europe**

With the invention of new technical means of Communication beyond the Press at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, soon also studies on the relation between these means and Religion/Church were published like in the case of film which began 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/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 serious academic nature (Silk 1995, Mitchell 2007, Rolfes 2007). This trend of media critique continued with Radio and Television including studies on presentation methods and possibilities.

Paul Soukup has tried to develop an overview for the literature on Communication and Christianity (1982,1989). His 1989 presentation is organized into sections on: 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" which includes computers and New Media. The Advisory Editor of this volume, G.E. Gorman rightly asserts in a 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, Blanery 2009) Official documents of the church on issues of communication comprise another field which also triggered critical reflection and study. (Eilers, 1997/2002)

Some Church communicators published their own experiences, ideas and reflections in their field like William Fore especially on Christian Television (197,1990). 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 organizations like parishes and religious communities (Aycock, Stuart 2010, Vasallo 1998) A number of studies discuss the growing role of religion in cyberspace (Dawson/Cowan 2004, Babin/Zukowski 2002, Campbell 2010). The relation between Religion/

Faith and Communication (Media) in general is approached in several studies as a developing field (Buddenbaum/Mitchell 1998, Mitchell/Marriage 2003, Badaracco 2005, Hoover 2006, Geybels 2007). 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 in the field originate from the United States and refer to Christianity but there are also some studies for Jewish traditions (Cohen 2006) and Islam (Mowlana 2003).

The Encyclopedia of "Religion, Communication and Media" edited by Daniel A. Stout in 2006 and re-published as a paperback re-print in 2010 gives with 124 entries from some 100 different authors an overview of the field which is still far from complete.. The volume includes articles on the main religions originating from Asia and (partly) their relation to communication (Stout 2010). Religion and communication, however, do not appear. An article about "Religious Marketplace" refers only to sociology of Religion and "what people do to make their own religious and spiritual meanings" (Stout 2006/2010, 378) but not in any way to a deeper theological understanding or other related fields like Philosophy, Anthropology or the science of Religion.

### **Professional Organizations and Study Centers**

There are at least two professional organizations for communication with special sections on Communication and Religion. They are the "International Association for Media and Communication Research" (IAMCR), and the

American “Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication” (AEJMC).

While IAMCR has two religion-related “work groups,” one on Islam and Media, and another on Media, Religion and Culture, the AEJMC has a Religion and Media Interest Group with more than 200 members.

The *Islam and Media* work group of IAMCR describes their concerns in the following words:

“The Islam and Media work group looks at the communication phenomenon such as human interaction with a view toward contributing toward mutual understanding and peace with 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).”

Among the topics addressed are the Universal Principles of Communication in Islam and the West, Islam Communication and Sustained Development, Coverage of the American War against Iraq, Islam Communication in Moslem Countries, and Islam Communication and the Spread of Terrorism.

The *Media, Religion and Culture* Group, meanwhile, does not relate to any special religion and describes their concerns 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 workgroup 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.” (IAMCR website)

Analyzing these two descriptions, one realizes that both groups seem to be mainly American- and partly European-oriented. They also seem to be concerned mainly about media but not the broader field of social communication which goes far beyond technology. A deeper understanding of social communication considers e.g. also traditional and interpersonal communications as well as group processes in religions.

**The AEJMC Religion and Media Interest Group describes their activities in the following words:**

“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.” (AEJMC website)

Since 2006 exists at the University of Colorado a *Center for Media, Religion and Culture*. This center is related to international conferences in Media, Religion and Culture which started 1994 in Uppsala, Sweden and were supported by

a European funding agency. The center describes itself as an inter-disciplinary research team and acts mainly through:

- \* Public conferences on media, religion and culture
- \* Fellowship for doctoral students
- \* International study commission on media, religion and culture

The website of the Center features a whole list of publications originating from this initiative. There are also links to websites and people to know in the field. [www.colorado.edu/journalism/mcm/mrc](http://www.colorado.edu/journalism/mcm/mrc). 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 on August 9-13, 2010 where it was proposed to create a new and independent "International Association for Media, Religion and Culture" in the coming years.

In 1977, the Jesuits started in London a "*Centre for the Study of Communication And Culture*" Jesuit center in London which was moved 1993 to Saint Louis University in the United States. After St.Louis University decided to end its relation with the Centre in 2000 it was transformed somehow into a 'virtual' institution but still keeps their Publication *Communication Research Trends* as a "Quarterly Review of Communication Research" under the auspices of the California Province of the Jesuits. It is jointly edited by Emile McAnany, William Biernatzki, sj and Paul A. Soukup, sj. (<http://csc.scu.edu/CSC>). This journal publishes abstracts of contemporary studies mainly done in the Americas and Europe and attempts to consolidate research outputs under certain themes which can be used as resource material for further studies and even practical purposes.

A wealth of booknotes gives a good opportunity to keep abreast with respective publications in the field.

### *Asia*

Against such a wealth and variety of studies and publications on Religion and Social Communication in the West – and this presentation is only a small part of the whole picture! – the situation in Asia is quite different. There seem to be not many specialized studies nor on Christian Communication on other Asian Religions.

A conference on "Religious change and the Media" 1989 in Monterey, California which is the basis for a book on "Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia"(Babb 1997). It was published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1995. Two years later an Indian reprint followed. Like the conference itself also the book was an offspring of a "Joint Committee on South Asia of the Social Science Research Council" in the US. The book presents a collection of 10 articles and studies on South Asia which are organized under the headings of: Printed Images, Audio Recordings and Visual Media.

Pradip Ninan Thomas published more recently a study on the role of Christian Fundamentalism in India under the title "Strong Religion, Zealous Media. Christian Fundamentalism and Communication in India". Thomas (2008, 58)) sees here a mainly "Health and Wealth Gospel" linked 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 on communication theory (Dissanayake 1988, Wang 1985, 2011). The relation between Religion and Communication, however, never became major part of individual studies. In fact the “Asian Media Information and Communication Centre” (AMIC), a professional organization in Singapore since 1970 never touched Religion in any of their annual or other conferences. Only in 2010 for the first time a panel was offered on “Religious Broadcasting Bombardment 24/7: Search for an Analytical Paradigm.” The presentations of this panel are to be published in “Religion and Social Communication” the “Journal of the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication” at St. John’s University in Bangkok.

Beside these few academic studies related to Religion and Social Communication in Asia there are, however, a growing number of *publications for Church practice*, training and formation. These are more in the format of text books based on general Social Communication theory and practice. They are less concerned about research and only partly refer to specific Asian needs and conditions (Eilers 1992, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Kumpiluvellil 2010, Pen 2010, Plathotam 2010; Daniels 1984).

Some documents of the Asian Church on Communication, together with some analyses and experiences are collected and presented in a publication of the “Office of Social Communication” (OSC) of the “Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences” (FABC) (Eilers 2008). They could be a basis for further studies and professional developments.

Communication in Ministry and Mission as well as Planning (Sunderaj 1998) for Social Communication in Church perspective and for Asian conditions are more recently developed

with a special program of Studies (Eilers 2008, 2009a, 2009 b) at the *Pontifical University Santo Tomas in Manila*, the oldest University in Asia (1611). Since 2001 a special MA Theology Program on Social/ Pastoral Communication is offered in their Graduate School which is also linked with the Theological Faculty of the same University (UST 2010) for a Pontifical licentiate degree. These programs comprise general studies in Religion/ Theology and Communication in view of Asian Church realities. With many students coming from different Asian countries the program is in a special way based on and related to Asian cultures and realities.

All in all it seems that up till now Religion and Social Communication is not a major concern of Communication studies in the region yet. Modern developments not only of technologies but also the phenomenon of globalization, in general, however, require a strong and serious attempt in this direction. The research results in American or European studies could indicate a way how to go about things. But also the special conditions, needs and possibilities for Asia as such but also individual Asian Cultures with their needs and experiences must be considered. Therefore, a more elaborated agenda is needed involving not just technology and modern media but also considering cultural realities as well as the different histories which have formed the life of people.

Asian cultures have strong communicative structures and dimensions in their profound use of symbols, in their ritual celebrations, community structures and values and in many ways of 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 communication of peoples in their societies.

**ARC**

Asia is the cradle of all World 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 daily life of people 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 change, endanger or promote such practices today and if yes how? It will further be important to see the communication dimensions of Religion in general but especially in the religious books like the Bibel, Koran, the Uppanishads etc. which are in themselves already communication instruments for proclamation as well as religious practices. What does all this mean to people of today in communication terms? Can religious beliefs and practices also be transmitted, shared and obligations fulfilled e.g. through the Internet? How do Western Television programs portrait, sustain or threaten the different Religions in Asia? What does it mean when in India from some 500 TV channels some 20 are run by religious organizations, mainly coming from the West and often from fundamentalistic groups? What is the impact and experience of several Buddhist channels in Thailand on people and their lives? Do the change, strengthen or question religious practices? What could or should be the role of Communication in different forms and needs of Inter-religious Dialogue in a country like Indonesia with the biggest Moslem population of one country in the world? And there are many more points to be raised... All this should be one way or the other part of a proper Research Program.

*The Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication (ARC) at St. John's University in Bangkok*

stands for such a concern. The Center actually dates back to a proposal by a group of scholars at a Roundtable organized by the FABC-Office of Social Communication in 1999. It started a website which is now in the process of re-construction. In 2004 it began publishing a bi-annual Journal called Religion and Social Communication. The institution also organized two follow up Roundtables on Religion and Social Communication (2005, 2010). The outcome of one of these Roundtables is a publication with the main contributions under the title: Social Communication in Religious Traditions of Asia (Eilers 2006). Related to this publication is also "Interreligious Dialogue as Communication" (Eilers 2005). It is now the concern of the ARC to develop in a more systematic way a comprehensive Research Program and hopefully also to develop a team of concerned scholars and Institutions seeing the importance of this field which in a growing way also touches the public and political life of Asian countries.

What does it mean for Religion, religious teachings and Practices when, for example in India, suddenly 500 television channels are available including some 20 or more channels promoting or related to Religion? How does the use of cell phones change the communication patterns and mentality of people especially those in the rural areas who have been somehow isolated for a long period of time? (Roman, 2005)

How do modern means of communication influence and probably change the lifestyle, values and worldview of young people in rural areas or those migrating to bigger cities for economic reasons? How does traditional religion express itself in worship and life forming attitudes and how are they changed through new ways of communicating? How do different Religions adjust to modern communication patterns?

Religion, the relation to a higher Being and a respective worldview, is an essential part of human life and society. What are the communicative dimensions of this reality in Asian countries and cultures? How should they be seen and studied under social communication perspective?

All this is not only a matter of behavior as studied by sociologists or available technology but it is a question of inner disposition of peoples and societies which are expressed, reflected and inspired by cultural and communicative actions of religion in the life and practices of communities.

Any research on Communication and Religion in Asia will be one way or the other inter-disciplinary. Studies in Ethnology, Anthropology, Sociology, Theology and Religion will contribute as well as special communication fields within Communication like Intercultural Communication.

### Research Agenda

As part of an immediate Agenda for Religion and Communication studies in Asia one might consider the following fields:

1. Study of Inter-Relations between Religion and Communication of different academic fields within Asian contexts:

Since all studies on Religion and Social Communication need one way or the other an inter-disciplinary approach one probably should start with the inter-relation between these different disciplines in Asian realities. This could refer to some of the following fields:

- \* Communication and Religion in Asian Cultures: Relations, Role and Functions

- \* Religious practices and the role of Communication in the process
- \* Ways, means, results and effects of communicative practices in religious teaching and life: group-communication, mass media, 'New Media'(Internet and Cyberspace)
- \* Local Theologies (Philosophies) and Communication
- \* Culture and Communication (Carey) in religious realities of Asia
- \* Intercultural Communication and Religion
- \* Inter-Religious Dialogue in Asia as Communication: experiences, possibilities needs..

2. Study of the use of *means of communication* – traditional and modern - by religious groups in Asia:

- \* Content of programmes
- \* Presentation and design
- \* Style
- \* Frequency
- \* Impact

3. Study of the *Recipients/ Audience* of religious Communication in Asia:

- \* Composition and Style,
- \* Age
- \* Expectations
- \* Interactivity
- \* Priorities in use – forming habits...
- \* Effects
- \* Ethics and human dignity

4. Academic programs for universities and centers of Studies in the field of Religion and Communication:
- \* Research needs and methods
  - \* Teaching programs
  - \* Interdisciplinary cooperation

This are only some examples and directions which could be considered according to needs and possibilities as well as the availability of respective researchers. A Roundtable on “Religion and Social Communication: Towards a Research Agenda” at the ARC Center at St. John’s University in Bangkok on February 8 to 11, 2010 listed some Research areas in general like studies of cultural influences on religious practices/communication, content or effects analysis of religious means of communication, online and offline communication of and for religious groups, ways of communication between clergy and laity in Church and religions. All of them can be included in the more systematic presentation proposed.

#### **Who are the ones to take up these special concerns and studies in Asia?**

One would first think of *institutions* like universities, but also of specialized Schools of Theology or also Communication Centers with research concerns, like the Asian Research Center (ARC) in Bangkok which seems to have a special place in this concerns. Christian Church documents like the Pastoral Instruction “Communio et Progressio”, which was demanded by the Second Vatican Council called already 1971 for a “rigorous program of scientific Research”(No.184) which seems to have never been developed. There are quite a number of Christian, but also Moslem and Buddhist universities in Asia which could take up the concern and even cooperate in respective studies for the good of people and communities.

Beside institutions one might also think of individual researchers who want to specialize in this field. With them there could slowly be one or more Research groups developed either on national or Asian level or also within a specialized field.

Regular scientific conferences, Colloquia or Symposia would also contribute as has been shown already in a small way by a “Roundtable” of interested Scholars at Assumption University in Bangkok on “Social Communication in Religious Tradition of Asia” (Eilers 2006) whose presentations were published as a book.

Another platform for Research and Study should be the Journal “*Religion and Social Communication*” of the Asian Research Center (ARC) for Religion and Social Communication at St. John’s University in Bangkok. It is published twice a year and always looking for good academic contributions. It should become a special place to share any study, discussion and reflection on Social Communication and Religion in Asia. It could become a permanent link and ‘home’ to all those concerned and interested in this field of study.

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**RELIGIOUS AMPLIFICATION IN SOUTH  
ASIA: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES FOR  
UNDERSTANDING CHANGE**

*Dr. Binod C. Agrawal*

**Brief presentation to be made during panel discussion on  
“Religious Broadcasting Bombardment 24 X 7: Search for  
Analytical Paradigm” in 19<sup>th</sup> Annual AMIC Conference,  
Singapore, June 21-23, 2010**

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**Introduction**

While discussing modern Hinduism and Jainism Lawrence A Babb (1998:445-456) a scholar of religious studies postulated that “There are atleast three functional domains shared by most religious systems which to look for change. First, religious traditions must be socially reproduced and propagated, which requires that technical means exist for their *transmission*. Second, religious systems are embedded in *social context* by which they are shaped in fundamental ways. And third, religious systems are often (perhaps always) implicated in the legitimization of *authority*” (Babb 1998:445)

Digital technology coupled with satellite transnational transmission of religious television has multiplied many fold in less than a quarter of a century worldwide and many more fold higher in Asia and South Asia. Information Technology (IT) has reduced physical and social distances and collapsed time and space. Babb (1998:446) has referred the process of 24 X 7 Electronic Bombardment to listeners, viewers, mobile and internet users as “cultural amplification”. Babb (1998:446) defined such religious bombardments as “... the process by which formally parochial or obscure symbols, images or ideas come to be shared by and even normative, for large populations”. According Babb (1998:446) “This is undoubtedly one of the most important general effects that modern communications media have had on societies and cultures everywhere”.



Proliferation and convergence of information technology of Internet and mobile telephony and development of digital technology have penetrated religious communications in every walk and moment of human life. Observations indicated that at least one in five mobile phone owners in India carry religious ringer tones. Ranging from Vedic Hymns, popular religious *Bhajan* (devotional chants) *Sloka* to name a few. Same is the case with computer and Internet, notwithstanding competing several hundred thousand sex and pornographic websites available on the same Internet along with other websites.

At another level religious communication remained at human scale and confined to a limited number of devotees within social context of religious centers like temple, mosques and churches. These religious communications are bound by time, space and religious calendar. The authority to perform religious rituals and ceremonies is legitimized by hereditary religious leaders.

Descriptive analysis at both levels of religious communication must be separately examined in order to develop an analytical framework for the study of religion experiences, effects and consequent impact or lack of impact in the fast changing world order. Hence, both levels of religious communications will be discussed to draw a common methodological paradigm for analysis in which the scope will be limited to India.

The study of social and cultural change in the wake of these unprecedented communication and media revolution along with human religious communication require an urgent multi-disciplinary perspective and research tools for the understanding of change and its implications.

## Aim

The aim of the paper is to suggest method and technique to be employed for the understanding and analysis of the increasing exposure of religious telecast in the Asian context. The religious telecast has been juxtaposed on human scale of religious communication to evolve possible method of analysis. For this purpose ethnographic method has been utilized to provide glimpse of religious experiences of three major religions namely Hinduism, Islam and Christianity in India.

## Explosion of Religious Broadcasting

There has been an explosion of religious broadcasting especially of television in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century South Asia. Also major religious groups have started their separate broadcast. One of the important features of the broadcast are live broadcast form religious worship places like Hindu temple, Sikh Gurudwara, Christian Church and Muslim Mosque. India is fast emerging as an important media hub in religious broadcasting having its reach and access in other South Asia and other Asian countries. Observations indicated that business interest largely dominates religious broadcast thereby jeopardizing meaningful religious broadcast and effective utilization. Also there is a visible conflict between religious dogma and scientific rational thinking among the viewers. At present, there is fairly appreciable number of religious television viewers of both sexes in all age groups who are attracted to view religious broadcast.

Religious broadcasting is relatively a recent phenomenon. It started with a brief religious singing and prayer in the morning telecast by Government of India controlled television-Doordarshan. Same could be said about All India Radio (AIR). However, after the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> Century, religious

broadcast has become round the clock telecast in over a dozen languages of all major religions in India. The religious broadcast has in no way hindered the religious congregation, discourse, pilgrimages and visits to religious centre<sup>1</sup>

### Religious Radio

Radio broadcast in India is over 75 years old. Radio was originally introduced for profit but soon colonial masters started exploiting power of the radio for control and to maintain power supremacy in vast Colonial British Empire fashioned around BBC<sup>2</sup>. All India Radio (AIR) in post independent India after 1947, remained government controlled until recently. AIR took upon itself the responsibility of providing information, entertainment and education to listeners and acted as pro-development change agent. In spite being secular radio, since its inception, religious broadcast remained an integral part of AIR in one form or other.

After economic liberalization and government de-control of airwaves, a large of number privately owned FM radio stations have sprang up in the country. Religious broadcast is a common feature of FM community radio. Religious organizations and commercial companies are in the forefront of its use, training, production and marketing of religious audio cassettes/CD.

Original and pirated audio tapes/CD of religious discourse, prayer and songs in non broadcast mode are available in large quantities in the market. Several music companies have made fortune from recording and marketing religious audio

<sup>1</sup> Largely drawn from brief note prepared for discussion during FABC-OSC Roundtable on Religion and Social Communication: Relations and Challenges, February 8-11, 2010, Saint John's University, Bangkok.

<sup>2</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation

tapes and CDs. Many religious groups have bought air time on the commercial radio stations for religious broadcast and even All India Radio often broadcast live religious events.

Most of these broadcast are "sender oriented" and in the form of *prarchar* (propaganda), recitation and signing. Sporadic communication researches have been carried out to assess the effectiveness and impact of religious amplification. In the wake of large expansion of television, radio listening in urban areas has declined though it continues to be popular in rural and remote areas of the country.

### Religious Television

Television in India is just about a half century old where it started in 1959. Initially Government of India controlled and now public service television has been over shadowed by private national and transnational television companies after 1992. The expansion of television both of telecast and reception or amplification has been phenomenal and breath taking in a very short span of time. Religious telecast and religious video production for non-telecast have been in existence as long as television existed in India though private television and private video production companies have given a great deal of boost to religious television.

Over a dozen exclusive private satellite television channels are devoted to religious telecast. Different shades of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism and Sikhism are being propagated twenty-four hours a day. Other entertainment and news television channels are not far behind in devoting their morning hours to religious telecast covering mythological, philosophical and spiritual discourses, songs and prayers. Live coverage of religious functions, festivals and

ceremonies has become a regular feature in the Indian television news. Most of them earn profit from this telecast.

The analysis of the urban and rural viewers of religious telecast indicates that they belong to all cross sections. Often the entire family watches such religious telecast for entertainment, religious gains and to enrich religious knowledge. Public and private debates and discussions can be heard about these telecasts.

The content analysis of religious telecast indicates that those who appear as religious preachers on television tend to give “scientific” meaning and interpretation of religious principles and practices. The effects of religious television viewing have not been measured. However, observations indicated that there are a growing number of religious programmes which in more than one way, have negated and questioned rational and scientific thinking.

Religious organizations have either sold their live telecast rights to television companies or leased time slot for taped/live religious telecast. The same holds true for other South Asian countries in varying degrees. Major religious events of various religions are covered and telecast as news event. Without any doubt television viewing both in rural and urban homes continued to be a family viewing and most popular form of leisure, actively passive pleasure and recreation.

In the context of India, the effects of religious amplification through media has had long history starting *Raja Harish Chandra* silent movie more than a century ago or *Jai Santoshi Ma* colour movie in the third quarter of twentieth century or for that matter television serial Ramayana a television version of popular Ram Leela performed on stage every year

in almost all cities and towns of North and in other parts of India broadly based on Tulsidas Ramcharitmanas (See Emndl 1993). Many media studies conducted by sociologists and anthropologists including myself found a very high degree of popularity of TV serial Ramayana both in broadcast and non-broadcast mode within and outside India. Video technology helped in amplification of Ramayana.

### Human Scale of Religious Communication

Four descriptive analysis based on first hand observations from among three religions within India are presented to draw common characteristics for developing methodological framework to compare the same with religious amplification.

### Collective Recitation at Home

A day after Christmas, on December 26, 2009 on a Saturday late afternoon at Ahmedabad a group of eminent migrant space scientists and engineers got together and initiated non-stop recital (*Akhand*) of Tulsidas Ramayan composed about 500 hundred years ago. Today, in Hindi speaking states of India especially in the Indo-Gangetic plain, it is considered as a most sacred Hindu treasure of Lord Ram who is considered a reincarnation of Hindu trinity God Vishnu.

About 60 adults got together to start Ramayan collective or recitation which continued non stop until Sunday late afternoon. In these 24 hours, the entire Ramayan was read by the devotees without break. Among the participants there were few Brahmin (Priestly Caste) who helped along with people from other castes to organize this “Akhand Ramayan”(uninterrupted Ramayan recital).

*Akhand Ramayan* came to an end followed by dinner for all hosted by son's family.

The special occasion for collective recitation was "Christmas holiday" visit of son from USA who was recently blessed with a son. This has called for such a religious celebration. Observations indicated that a migrant Hindi speaker regardless of education, economic and social status participate in collective recitation of Ramayan which is popular.

The oral tradition of religious recitation is fairly common and strong among literate and sometime illiterate Hindus across India. The continuing oral tradition of religious communication is deep rooted into the religious scriptures, calendars and set of beliefs. (Agrawal 1980).

#### Sharing of Religious Ritual Harki Pedi

One of the most revered banks of River Ganga is located in Haridwar-a religious town of Uttarakhand state is India. Recently over ten million Hindus and few Sikhs took holy dip at *Harki Pedi* on the occasion of *Mahakumbh (Great Kumbh)* which occurs once in 12 years. On June 5, 2010 after few weeks of the completion of Mahakumbh estimated over ten thousand men, women and children belonging all age groups from different linguistic regions of the country and abroad gathered at Harki Pedi to witness evening 1001 oil candle *Arti* (lighting of lamp). Security arrangements were visible all around, so were volunteers of religious organizations who helped devotees to find sitting place on the floor. Several hours before *Arti* scheduled to be held at 7.20 pm, streams of devotees begin to arrive as early as 4.00 pm. Many Hindu devotees offered cash contributions for *Arti* which were collected by the members of voluntary religious organizations. *Arti* was held in a most peaceful and peaceful atmosphere with lots of

religious fervor and reverence by all present. Mineral water, small eatable and paper mate sellers did good business on the occasion.

The collective sharing of religious experience regardless of linguistic and other social barriers gave a unique and emotional experience of how religion though temporarily bring people together and help reinforced the unity and continuity of Hindu religious tradition. This *Arti* is also telecast often on several 24 X 7 Hindu religious television channels.

#### Around Church

Less than a decade ago a Christian Community Centre was built by professionals and highly educated migrants in a newly growing suburb of city of Ahmedabad. The Community Centre is also used as a Church by Marthomite Syrian Christians of Kerala. They claim to be connected with one of the oldest Christians in the world dating back to first century AD, only after Catholics of Kerala.

Over 70 migrant families, mostly visit this Church for Sunday and other services including wedding and baptism of the newly born. A priest from Kerala lives on the Church premises. He serves the community and visits family to give personal family services. For example, it was observed that he had spent over an hour when one of the Church member's mother passed away and had held a private service for family and their near dear at residence.

Church continues to maintain old Kerala Marthomite Christian tradition in every possible way. The services are given in Malayalam language and other religious etiquettes and styles of Malayalam oral tradition of religious communication are followed. Many of the Church members claim to recite several verses of Holy Bible without opening the Holy Bible.

While public address system is installed in the Church, it is used in a limited way. Face to face communication remained strong in which language plays a vital role in religious communication. By and large, these Kerala Christians believe that they are liberal and tolerant Malayalees.

### Congregational Communication

Three highly educated Bihar migrant professionals working in different research and teaching institutions of Ahmedabad promptly leave their work at about 1.00 p.m. to 2.00 p.m. to attend Friday prayer in a Mosque located about 10 kilometers away from their work place. They all speak Hindi know Arabic and proficient in reading Holy Koran. They are well informed and have made efforts to ensure that their children learn to recite Holy Koran for which private tutors have been appointed by them.

In Gujarat, a large number of migrant Muslims are working in professional and guild based occupations— confectionery, kite making, iron smithy, dying, religious teaching as *Imam* (preacher) to mention a few. Even after spending several years in Gujarat, they continue to lead a life of Bihar Muslim and somewhat remain aloof and distant from the Gujarati Muslim population. The reasons for lack of interaction are language barrier apart from other social factors.

During the prayer, in the mosque, no distinction is observed of any kind among *Namaji* (prayer offered). Regardless of their social, economic and educational background, *Namaji* seat

on the ground of the mosque and occupy space on first come first serve basis.

In the Mosque, there is a public address system used by *Imam*. Introduction of public address system is fairly recent and was felt necessary after the total *Namaji* increased beyond manageable size.

The social and personal interactions among all who come to Friday prayer are largely confined during congregation period and after prayers. Limited face to face verbal communication, in which religious dictums of Holy Koran and other sacred books are discussed apart from family, business and other matters. In case of any doubt *Imam* or *Maulavi* (teacher) advice is sought for clarification.

### Common Cultural Thread

One can discuss several other religious groups living in South Asia like Sikh, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Jews and Jain. But common characteristics among all are a cultural thread that binds them in spite of religious differences. Also even after inter state migration within India or international migration, most of the cultural and religious traits continue to survive and flourish.

### Methodological Issues

Methodological tools and techniques of media and communication research largely focused on quantitative methods though qualitative methods like “focus group discussion” and “participatory research” have been introduced. Given the nature of religious amplification and viewers religious favour listening and viewing these broadcasts require a method by which the strong “faith”, the way the audience relate and respond to the religious broadcast could be studied and analyzed. Also the preachers, priests or communicators who appear on

the television belonging to a religious class must be studied separately. On the other hand human religious communication must be studied using existing tools and techniques.

Keeping these distinct audience/devotees profile, context and other factors in view, it is proposed that "participant observation" and "ethnographic method" must be used for data collection. For any meaningful interaction these methods will be helpful as used by anthropologists. It would, no doubt, be time consuming requiring deeper involvement. The experiential religious knowledge gained in the process would allow in understanding of intensity of the religious impact. For this kind of descriptive field data collection detailed field diary would be required for process analysis. Analytical paradigm for such analysis would require holistic approach for both amplification and human scale religious communication. At two distinct levels of religious communication, it is difficult to fathom the depth of amplification. Hence, there is a need to design and follow research tools and techniques that can capture the effects and measure social and cultural change as a result of religious amplification.

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## THE INTERFACE OF MEDIA AND RELIGION

*Kiranjit Kaur, PhD.*

### Introduction

The increasing global accessibility, proliferation of social media, and the rise of religious movements have contributed to transforming the public sphere. However, there is wide spread concern in many circles that the subject of religion is often not covered well by mass media. Media is more interested with religious festivals and other public celebrations of cultural events, tending to ignore general issues and problems concerning religion.

Majority religious groups are seen to be given more favorable media coverage the world over. In Malaysia, there are special television programmes on Islam daily and very little media coverage on other religions. The country has a multi-ethnic multi-religious population with a Muslim majority (other religious groups include Buddhists, Taoists, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Bahai's, etc). Media adheres to national and organizational policies pertaining to coverage on religion and religious issues. However, the poor coverage of religions other than Islam by the media, to a degree, has resulted in a meager understanding of the minority religions in the country.

The mass media by providing information and creating awareness about religion is deemed to be influential in producing cognitive, emotional and behavioral changes in knowledge, attitude and practice. However, there is a dearth of studies on the media's role and its effects in the context of religion in the country. This paper is a brief exploratory examination of television programmes on religions, especially Islam, in Malaysia. It includes a brief examination of how the mainstream media

portrays religion and examines religious issues.

### Methodology

This paper is based on a preliminary qualitative analysis of media coverage in broadcast media in Malaysia to identify the different types of religious television formats, the scope of coverage given, or not given to religion, and the sources used by journalists for their coverage on religion.

Qualitative interviews with 10 individuals who represent religious groups, the media, and the media audience elicited opinions on how religion and related issues are projected in the news and the media. The individuals included journalists, religious scholars, religious advocates, and members of religious civic groups, like the Interfaith Network.

This paper also examines how journalists are influenced by their religious beliefs and values when covering issues that may have religious connotations. Do the media give a clear picture of religious issues or do they tackle them from an angle to boost their ratings, or through the point of view of the journalist? What is the specific potential of media to engage audiences in religious matters? How should the media cover religion? Do media cover religion adequately? What can be done to improve this reporting?

### Findings and Discussion

Preliminary research shows the genre of these religious shows is primarily information-based. Most types of programmes shown on Islam touch on the explanation of the Quran, the correct way to read the Quran, advice on acceptable practices and values of a good Muslim. Most of these shows are in different formats, including talk show, reality shows

on reading the Quran in the 'correct' way, docudrama, drama, and lectures. These are shown on both the government and commercial networks, such as on TV1, TV3 and NTV7. There is even a dedicated channel called *Oasis* on ASTRO, the sole satellite television station, which telecasts a variety of different genres of programmes, all carrying messages regarding Islam.

### What the media audience thinks and says

Generally, media in Asia has concerns for its role to be socially responsible. Promoting unity and loyalty to the nation is considered important and the media tends to articulate government policies so inclined. However, a local theologian suggested that ample media coverage is generally given to issues on what the media deems to be as the national religion. He suggested that journalists must seek viewpoints from and cover other religions as well create mutual understanding in order to promote unity and harmony.

The concern is that a young generation may grow up thinking that there is only one "revealed" religion and other religions are not valid. The theologian also pointed out that in a case where the media covered the banning of the distribution of bibles translated in Iban (a language of an indigenous group in Sarawak), which use the word 'Allah' to refer to God in translation, they could have explained the issue more clearly for the affected groups. This debate is ongoing for the same reason because of the use of Indonesian translated bibles in East Malaysia for the Malay speaking Christian community. The general Muslim community, the Muslim religious community, and Muslim policy makers object to the use of the word 'allah' to refer to God in non-muslim translated religious materials as they believe its use belongs only to Islam. The media has provided a few diverse viewpoints on this matter but because

of the nature of the Malaysian media and the restrictions they are subject to, the debate was not pursued further.

### Considerations for the interface between news and religion

Perhaps the interface between news and religion can be explained through three broad areas. The first is the regulations and policies that exist for media in a country.

#### 1. Regulations/ Policies

Most Asian governments have policies and regulations that guide the media on what they can and cannot report on, or how they could report on certain issues. Issues pertaining to race and religion factor strongly in this.

The Malaysian media (particularly, the privatized broadcast media) have a clause regarding this in their licensing agreement. Broadly, the guidelines complement the Federal Constitution, which recognizes Islam as the official religion as well as freedom for non-Muslims to practice other world religions. However, the Malaysian media can only propagate Islam and no other religion.



Fig 1: Interface between News and Religion

At the same time, the media cannot demean or criticize other recognized religions nor portray anything that could lead to ethnic or religious conflict. Because of these regulations, while there are special programmes to discuss issues or teachings on Islam, coverage given to other religions is more event-driven during their respective festive seasons. However, sometimes special religious programmes produced overseas are broadcast on the Malaysian media. For example, ASTRO airs daily half hour programmes on *Bhajan* (Hindu religious programme) and 'live' *Kirtan* (Sikh prayers from



the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India- the seat of the Sikh religion) in the early mornings on the Indian channel (Zee TV) watched primarily by Indians.

Also, generally, the media would avoid any mention of religion in news coverage unless absolutely necessary. Proponents of interfaith movements and religious organisations suggest that this may lead to a lack of understanding and acceptance of the diverse religious and ethnic groups. They view media as a primary channel to disseminate information on the diversity of religions to all citizens.

## 2. Journalist's cultural and religious bias

Another factor that may influence coverage on issues with underlying religious connotations is possibly the journalist's religious bias. Journalists are supposed to be objective in their reports, but biases could creep in, in terms of whose opinions are sought, choice of subject matter or emphasis given to it, and usage of certain phrases that bear religious connotations.

The meager knowledge of the journalist and their lack of exposure to other religions could also lead to misinterpretation by the journalist in news framing, and therefore lead to misunderstanding and inter-religious conflicts. Often interpretation is given in the coverage within the scope of the reporter's knowledge in the early mornings and what the reporter perceives to be in the language of the audience.

Proponents of religious organizations and interfaith movements suggest that there is a need to educate journalists and editors on the different religions so that coverage given to news with religious connotations is more sensitive.

## 3. Societal Expectations

The journalists generally are directed in their reporting by what they perceive to be what the society will tolerate. The majority group in any society would expect their religious perspectives to take precedence in the media, whether in the US of A or in Malaysia.

At the same time, no one really wants to see any conflict arising among their citizenry against any religious group as a result of the media's instigation, directly or indirectly. E.g. global repercussions on Sikhs (who had physical characteristics of the Muslims- the turban) and Muslims post September 11, 2001; or the Kampong Medan issue in Kuala Lumpur (a misunderstanding between a small group of Muslims and Hindus in a residential area that led to few deaths and larger protests by the respective communities).

In Malaysia, religious based civic groups (non-Islamic) desire more coverage on their respective religions to ensure that these religions are not considered as unimportant and irrelevant in the society. In addition, proponents of interfaith and other multi-religious groups desire their religious perspectives be sought as well by the media when seeking viewpoints on news or issues covered that have implications for morality or social values (and not just of one religion). They also hold the view of the importance of the media to play the role to unite the diverse groups by creating greater understanding of each other's beliefs, as expressed in the interviews by member representatives of the Interfaith Network.

Generally, society will expect religious connotations to be interwoven into stories that have implications for morality, for example, however much the media may want to ignore the

existence of the religion factor. The expectation though is that these connotations should be fair to all religions and develop better understanding by giving a fuller explanation of reasons behind the story. At the same time, just as the reporter has limited knowledge of most religions in covering a story, the majority of the audience is also ignorant about most religions, and this lack of full knowledge may lead them to interpret too much into a message or what is not in it, concerning religious matters.

The Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission, a media regulatory agency, is a proponent of the idea that the Malaysian electronic media has the cultural objective to consolidate racial and national unity and to foster a strong national identity to reflect cultural diversity.

Some interviewees suggest that religion is seen to be more important than ethnicity or nationality by many Malaysians. Observations have been made that media tended to introduce a religious authority in their reports when covering social problems. Often the media would seek the religious perspective of the official religion or religion of the majority. Such cases include those touching on prostitution (including "bohsia"), sodomy, drug addiction, rape, dress code of women, and syariah (Islamic law) rulings in family matters. One of the Muslim journalist interviewees said that the Muslim journalist cannot not attach himself or herself to religion in Malaysia.

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## **GOD TEXTING: FILIPINO YOUTH RESPONSE TO RELIGIOUS SMS**

*Anthony G. Roman*

*Religious forwarded messages take the form of points for reflection and reminders of religious feasts. In other cases, the messages ask recipients to pray and re-send the same messages in exchange for Divine favor. This study explores the youth's first response to these messages. It aims to learn useful insights that may enhance pastoral ministry for young people, so immersed in cell phone use. The findings show that religious SMS help remind young people of God. But they do not attribute the messages to Divine Providence alone. Response to religious SMS results from an interplay of factors, including the sender himself.*

Mobile communication has created the so-called "texting generation" in the Philippines. Its members both young and old prefer SMS (short messaging system) or "texting" than voice calls for reasons of economy and ease.<sup>1</sup> Since the mobile phone made head-way in the last century, it has become customary for users to exchange text greetings laden with religious messages. This form of greeting introduced a new way of keeping in touch among Filipinos. Messages like the one below would come unexpectedly, giving points for reflection coupled with well-wishes for the relevant part of the day:

Life nveR sEemS t0 bE dA wAy wE wAnt iT..buT wE  
sHud Live iT da bEsT wAy wE caN!.. dErS n0 pErFecT  
Life bUt wE cAn fIL it w/ pErFecT m0mEntS! GuD pM

The Catholic Church welcomes developments like this for its pastoral dimension, assisting the ministry of caring for

<sup>1</sup> Raul Pertierra et. al., "Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity." Manila: De La Salle University Press (2002). p. 150.

people.<sup>2</sup> Religious thought, believed to be Divinely inspired, is now conveyed through the modern means of texting. This development responds well to the call for evangelizing in a way that adopts to the lifestyle and culture of modern times. Pope Paul VI:<sup>3</sup>

The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them.

Texting “religion” or religious thought not only *spreads* the Christian message, it *integrates* that message to the “new culture” created by the modern means of communication. Pope John Paul II:<sup>4</sup>

... since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church’s authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the “new culture” created by modern communications. This is a complex issue, since the “new culture” originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed,

<sup>2</sup> Franz-Josef Eilers, “Communicating in Ministry and Mission, An Introduction to Pastoral and Evangelizing Communication” 3rd Edition. Manila: Logos (2009). pp. 192-198. cf. World Communication Day Messages of the Pope for 2002, 2009 and 2010. Available: [http://www.pccs.va/pccs/documenti/gmcs2010/cd/gmcs\\_eng\\_1967-2010.htm](http://www.pccs.va/pccs/documenti/gmcs2010/cd/gmcs_eng_1967-2010.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World (1975). no. 20. The Holy See, Vatican. Available: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html)

<sup>4</sup> cf. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical on the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate (1990). no. 37c. The Holy See, Vatican. Available: [http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0219/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0219/_INDEX.HTM)

but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology.

Utilizing communication means like the cell phone for evangelization purposes is *mission-based marketing*. This marketing approach “adopts and customizes” Church and relevant teachings according to changing peoples and environment. This type of marketing differs from secular marketing involving tangible, commercial products or services. It uses contemporary communication styles, images, texts, and technology “while remaining faithful to (Church) doctrine.”<sup>5</sup>

Using this approach introduces a paradigm shift in presenting the Gospel starting “where our audience is.”<sup>6</sup> Evangelizing through text messaging is then rather like “walk(ing) gently into the culture and/or experience of others respecting what already is present in their lives.”<sup>7</sup> It is an attempt to address basic evangelization challenges as posed by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:<sup>8</sup>

In our day, what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man’s conscience?

To what extent and in what way is that evangelical force capable of really transforming the people of this century? What methods should be followed in order that the power of the Gospel may have its effect?

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Babin & Angela Ann Zukowski, “The Gospel in Cyberspace, Nurturing Faith in the Internet Age.” Chicago: Loyola Press (2002). p. 154-155.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp. 150-151.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pp. 150-151.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World (1975). no. 4. The Holy See, Vatican. Available: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html)

Does the Church or does she not find herself better equipped to proclaim the Gospel and put it into people's hearts with conviction, freedom of spirit and effectiveness?

The content of religious SMS varies. Some can be compared either to *brand advertising* or *direct sales advertising* known in the business world. Brand advertising aims for recognition and remembrance of a brand name. No specific action is immediately required from audiences after exposure, except acknowledging an existing brand and considering it next time a purchase is made. Brand adverts (advertisements) usually show brand names (or logos), sometimes in contexts not directly linked to the product or service it stands for. The goal is simply to suggest the brand in audience minds. Examples include brand names of shampoo spray-painted on the light-rail train, or that of a men's clothing line hoisted as a welcome sign of a shopping mall.

Direct sales adverts, on the other hand, demand audiences to purchase. While brand advertising is subtle in conveying the message, direct sales advertising is straightforward and more aggressive. That aggressiveness sometimes undermines a particular brand's appeal to target consumers. Nobody wants to be told what to do. Presenting options, meanwhile, or suggesting ideas is quite different and is often more acceptable especially among conservative consumers. As a result, alternative methods of persuasion are now observed to fill in the market place using sound, images and rhetoric.

Like brand adverts, some religious SMS simply remind recipients of truths about the Christian faith. They seek to reinforce certain beliefs, or to renew Church affiliation. The immediate action required from the receiver goes only as far as reflecting on certain teachings. These texts can be considered

*inputs for reflection*, offering encouragement and support as recipients go about daily living. Some examples:

When God takes something away from your grasp,  
Hes not punishing you but merely emptying  
your hand to receive something better... Gudmornig., ☺  
In my existence, I realized dat hpiness is a very subjective  
factor in one's life...  
Being happy doesn't depend on achieving wat u wnt, bt  
rather  
mking D best out of wat is given.. Life isn't fair, it never  
was.. D only thing  
dat can mke u completely happy is contentment..  
Be content on wat u hve,  
bt b sure 2 aim high & never stop blving u cn do better  
evrytime..  
Bt if all else fails, dnt 4get an ordinary u has an extraordinary  
GOD  
To back u up.gdam.

Some religious text convey wishes of Divine blessing, besides giving words of affirmation. Some examples:

Kindness is more important than wisdom, and d recognition  
of this is d beginning of wisdom...God bless your kind  
heart!  
"Good people are like sunlight, filtering into the quiet  
corners of one's heart, offerng bright mornings & fresh  
hope yet demanding nothing in return. Mayyou ALWAYS  
be the SUNLIGHT, refreshing evryone whose life you  
touch today."  
GOD BLESS U!

Another example of religious text functioning as brand advert is the popular sending of Bible quotes. A leading mobile company's religious section does this as one of several add-on services. By texting a keyword, the service is activated and a message like the one below is almost instantly received:

Many are invited but few are chosen. – Matthew 22:14. Get a good laugh to pick up a dull day: Send DD Joke to 2333. Want something to chew on? Send DD Quote to 2333 to get a witty line! Test your trivia powers, Send Trivia to 2333 and see if we can stump you. Gotta question that needs a yes or no answer? Then send askme to 2333 to help you decide! Lonely? Wanna friend from another country? Send ifhelp to 2333 to get you very own International Friend

The religious part of the message is a random quote from the Bible, changing each time the service is activated. What is curious is the juxtaposition of the “religious” with other add-on services, including a prescribed cure to loneliness.

This random sending of Bible quotes recalls the days of *Bible-cutting* done in private moments to aid specific personal needs. The difference is that today a remote digital procedure does the pre-cutting on the recipient’s behalf. Spiritual aid is obtained even with no holy book at hand. The attempt to market the other add-on services, however, seem to place religious text on the same level as a joke, a witty line, a matter of trivia, and the excitement of meeting a foreigner-friend.

Another type of religious text functions like direct sales adverts, seeking a type of physical response from audiences. In commercial enterprises, adverts of this kind persuade consumers to buy. Religious text of a similar nature asks or suggests something else. It usually begins with a life (or problem) situation as in the examples next page:

WORRY destroys ur THINKING, disrupts ur WORK,  
dstroys ur POISE & dsfigures ur FACE  
so get rid of it! BIBLE SAYS.. “Why worry wen u can  
pray?” gdam! ☺  
Take some time to smile when you’re sad. to rest when  
you’re tired. to love if you’re feeling empty. & to let go

if u need to. time endures. time heals. in this life, jst take  
s0me time for y0urself & always take time to PRAY  
GOD really works. Gdpm! GOD bless!

Other texts take the form of “chain letters” circulated in the pre-mobile era. These texts referred here as *chain texts* play on superstition and require re-circulation in exchange for Divine favor:

Make a WISH B4 U PASS DS PRAYER to as many as  
u can. “GOD THE FATHER THANK YOU FOR THE  
LOVE & ALL THE BLESSINGS U HAVE GIVEN ME  
& TRIALS THAT MADE ME WHAT I AM NOW. ON  
BENDED KNEES LIFTED UP UNTO U, SPARE ME  
MERCY & ANSWER MY PRAYERS. Amen! If 3 replied,  
your wish will be granted...

+  
Send this CROSS to 9 people and gud luck wil follow  
immd8ly. Warning: dnt delete sun0d sun0d na blessing  
drting sau try u (translation: don’t delete.. blessings will  
come.. you try)

Some chain texts come on religious feast days. Note that the instruction in the examples below is to re-send the same text to a specified number of people:

Mama Mary called me today & asked hu nids 2 b blessed.  
I have Her ur name. If u luv Her, send ds to 10 people and  
in 5 mins something good wl happen.. Plsoffer ds sacrifice,  
its Her birthday 2day.  
MAMA MARY I LOVE YOU & HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!  
Pass dis 2 15 pers0ns n ur f0nbok, xcept me.. And see d  
miracle on Sept.8..PLs don’t break d chain

There are those which do not simply promise good fortune in exchange for compliance. A threat of bad luck is included to ensure the “chain” is unbroken:

The baby JESUS helps those in need.. Send to 24 persons. Dnt 4get 2pass bcoz ds s true. Mrs. Ayson got a raise bcoz she passed on 24 copies. Mrs. Joy lost her job bcos she forgot 2 pass on. Jz pass ds b4 10 days. Ds is really true!- forward it for JESUS.

How do young people respond to these messages, and to religious text in general? How do they react when they first read them? Are they moved to pray or show acts of kindness? Do they experience the Divine? Do young people trash these messages once received? Or do they keep for re-sending to friends and family? Do religious SMS have meaning in their lives? These are some questions the present study aims to answer.

The respondents are 600 Catholic students in Metro Manila with mean age of 18 years old. Each student were given 62 possible reactions in question form e.g. "Do you remember God?", "Do you have the urge to pray?" and "Are you reminded of the Liturgical Season?" To these questions, the students answered either "Yes," "No" or "Sometimes." They also gave notable remarks to complement their response. The questions were grouped into the following categories and then, relative frequencies of the responses were tabulated:

1. Faith
2. Prayer life
3. Information
4. Disposition/ Attitude
5. Relationship with others
6. Relationship with sender
7. Reception of the message

## Cell phone Studies

Recent studies on mobile technology focus on social effects i.e. how communication patterns and behavior have changed since the mobile revolution. Scholars in this growing field include James Katz, who founded in 2004 the *Center for Mobile Communication Studies* at Rutgers's University (New Jersey). This center was supposed to be a focal point for research and teaching the social, psychological and organizational consequences of mobile communications.<sup>9</sup>

Cell phone interactions are so privatized, according to Katz, so much so that individual users are able to build "walled gardens" of micro-cultures to which they belong. These cultures mainly involve persons in one's own mobile network. James Katz explains:<sup>10</sup>

Cell phones are enabling people to create their own micro-cultures; they are changing cultural norms and values, and demonstrating consumers' ability to modify and repurpose technology for their own use. I believe that cell phones, by allowing people to insulate their private interactions from the culture around them, will encourage a kind of "walled garden" of micro-cultures that is complex, but exclusive.

In *The Future of Microelectronics*, Baron and Curnow (1979) foretold of the coming of "information main rings" resulting from the advent of modern media. Similar to Katz's micro-cultures, information main rings are individual households, shops, offices, universities and persons who in the process of adopting information technology, serve as the

<sup>9</sup> cf. The Center for Mobile Communication Studies (CMCS) website. Available: <http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/ci/cmcs/>

<sup>10</sup> "Cellphone Culture" (Nov 2005). Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Communications Forum (2008). Available: [http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/cell\\_phone\\_culture.htm](http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/cell_phone_culture.htm)

building structures of the so-called “wired society.” Each *ring* comprises similar individuals, households, shops, offices, etc. bound by familial, peer or professional ties. In each ring certain communication norms are observed. Information, greetings, jokes and multi-media files are exchanged in distinct patterns; thus, the ring’s synonymous relationship to a micro-culture.

In *New Tech, New Ties: How Mobile Communication is Re-Shaping Social Cohesion*, sociologist Rich Ling asserts that the mobile phone strengthens social bonds. Elaborating his concept of “anytime-anywhere-for-whatever-type of access” (communication), the scholar says, the “instant and perpetual access to friends and family regardless of where they are” coupled with various social rituals creates what he calls a “bounded solidarity.”<sup>11</sup>

Citing Durkheim’s concept of “ritual,” Ling says mobile communications essentially function as social rituals, which develop social cohesion among individuals living in a highly-structured, urbanized kind of environment.<sup>12</sup> Social rituals performed through mobile phones include the exchange of time-of-day greetings, rites-of-passage greetings as in birthdays or anniversary, religious feast greetings, and others. They are meant not just to pass on immaterial, irrelevant text. Ling says these “mediated ritual interactions” increase bonds of friendship, amity, and confirms membership in social groups in the same manner as the commonly-known rituals done in a co-present, face-to-face mode. In his book, the scholar says that ties within one’s own circle of family and friends are strengthened by mobile communications.

<sup>11</sup> Rich Ling, “The Mobile Connection: The Cellphone’s Impact on Society.” San Francisco, CA: Morgan Kauffmann Publishers (2004). p. 85.

<sup>12</sup> Rich Ling, “New Tech, New Ties: How Mobile Communication is Reshaping Social Cohesion.” The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press (2008). p. 43.

Raul Pertierra and colleagues’ nationwide survey on cell phone use shows that in the Philippines, mobile technology and texting strengthen the individual’s private networks through “immediate and often ritualized exchanges.”<sup>13</sup> However, the messages can hardly be considered “instrumental and cognitive.” Rather, they are “symbolic and ritualistic.”<sup>14</sup> They provide a certain degree of *grounding* along with society’s trek towards modernity. Such grounding comes from family and friends who through “telephatic tactility” offer “support, companionship (and) guide.”

The study also shows that Filipino users mostly receive inspirational messages (45.9%) from family and friends. This figure is quite significant compared to the humorous (16%) and informative (14.1) messages which are also usually received. In return, users send informative (40.6%), inspirational (32.3%), and humorous (13.6%) text messages to others in their mobile network. These messages help maintain micro-cultures and information main rings in the Philippines.<sup>15</sup>

In *Cell Phone Culture, Mobile Technology in Everyday Life*, new media scholar Gerard Groggin finds that although SMS or text messaging was introduced as a secondary feature of the 2G (second-generation) digital cellular system, it gained enthusiastic following and “created new cultures of use.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Raul Pertierra et. al., “Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity.” Manila: De La Salle University Press (2002). pp. 149-152.

<sup>14</sup> Like ritual communication, forwarded messages including religious texts rarely inform or convey new information. *Forwarded text reveals* something more about the kind of relationship between the texting parties, rather than the content they wish to share. Time-of-day greetings are ritualistic in nature and hardly as functional as, say, a text memo sent to a work colleague or classmate.

<sup>15</sup> Raul Pertierra et. al., “Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity.” Manila: De La Salle University Press (2002). pp. 165-166.

<sup>16</sup> Gerard Groggin, “Cell Phone Culture, Mobile Technology in Everyday Life.” New York: Routledge (2006). p. 15.

In Europe, where mobile technology all began, text messaging caught the imagination especially of young people. A culture of text messaging formed very quickly at the turn of the century says Groggin. This culture “grew out of the unique circumstances of teenage life, with its own terminology, customs and social norms.”<sup>17</sup> Eventually, mobile phones are seen “as something that threatens the processes of cultivation and learning around which pedagogy and citizenship revolve.”<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Groggin, F. Hurley says:

“...schoolkids are turning into a generation of illiterates – because of mobile phone text messaging. Many youngsters now write in the abbreviated gobbledegook, rather than standard English.”

This problematic feature of the cell phone may render the technology a failure to culture and moral development.<sup>19</sup> However, a number of “successes,” which contribute as much to Groggin’s “new cultures of use,” is well worth considering. Apart of religion now being expressed through mobile technology, millions of Filipino families separated by the “overseas contract work” phenomenon are able to *reconnect* with their members. Cell phones prove to be useful for those left behind to touch base with loved ones overseas at least in a digital way. Along with email and instant messaging, mobile technology has paved the way for the rise of so-called “digital families.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 115.

<sup>19</sup> Ramon C. Sunico, “Bad ba mag-txt?” (“Is it bad to text?”). Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (June 2007). Available: <http://pcij.org/stories/bad-ba-mag-txt/>

<sup>20</sup> Jose Torres Jr., “Digital Families.” Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (April 2005). Available: <http://pcij.org/stories/digital-families/>

## Theoretical Framework

Jesuit scholar Walter Ong traced significant developments in culture with the evolution of communication technologies. Ong’s theoretical exposition was described by Annenberg School of Communications professor Stephen O’Leary as significant in the growing interest of Western scholars in online religious communications. Because the cell phone and SMS technologies are not “stand-alone technologies” but in fact online technologies, they fall well into the category of so-called “computer-mediated communications” (CMC) to which Ong’s treatise apply.

In *Orality and Literacy* (1982), Ong distinguishes between two important stages in cultural evolution from pre-literacy (he terms as “primary orality”) down to the introduction of writing, printing technology and electronic media (“secondary orality”). He does so by differentiating *sensorium*, which is the complex of human senses and material practices utilized by people in a particular era to communicate – decode, encode, convey, and interpret information. In pre-literate cultures (“primary orality”), oral speech dominates all communication. In this stage, both vocal and aural senses as well as sound make up the sensorium, document rituals, and convey myths and narratives important for the development of identities of individuals and the community.

Then came the introduction of writing which, according to Ong, “divorce(d) the production of a communicative act from its reception. This made it possible to address audiences remote in time and space and turned communication from a public act requiring the presence of others into a private, solipsistic activity



of writing and reading.”<sup>21</sup> This part of human history along with the subsequent invention of printing technology, says Ong, narrowed down the sensorium to include the sense of sight for reading the written and printed word.

The sensorium expanded in the stage of “secondary orality,” with the introduction of electronic media – radio as a medium – uses once again the aural sense as in pre-literate cultures and allows yet again the simultaneous production and reception of messages. Film as well as television uses the aural and visual senses in addition to other perceptual senses. “In the new electronic media, the total sensorium again includes sight and sound, voice, image and music.”<sup>22</sup> This stage, according to the scholar, persisted to the age of CMC and computer networks.

O’Leary observes that “this new medium (combines) aspects of orality and literacy into a new, hybrid form of communication that, in the words of one networker: ‘is both talking and writing yet isn’t completely either one. It’s talking by writing. It’s writing because you type it on a keyboard and people read it. But because of the ephemeral nature of luminescent letters on a screen, and because it has such a quick sometimes instant – turn-around, it’s more like talking’...”<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, Ong’s exposition (described by O’Leary) includes that which applies specifically to SMS. In his description of “writing,” he says “(it) restructures consciousness” and “makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world distinct from itself but also to the interior self against

<sup>21</sup> Stephen O’Leary, “Cyberspace as Sacred Space.” In *Religion Online, Finding Faith on the Internet*. NY, Routledge (2004). p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

whom the objective world is set.”<sup>24</sup> O’Leary says this increased awareness of one’s self and the world in which the self is situated leads to among other things “alienation of this self from the external world” or in other words, individualism that some scholars say has increased as a result of, first, industrialization at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and then of the new millennium buzzword “globalization.” Today, with the strides in media convergence and digitalization, individualism especially that of youth has caused an increasing alarm among Church leaders.<sup>25</sup>

The religious implications of Ong’s insight are “profound” because what religions do offer now as solution to the problem of, say, individualism is in fact “an after affect (albeit “to some degree” O’Leary says) of the psychological changes wrought by literacy.”<sup>26</sup>

In texting cultures, we see yet another impact of the written word laid down in SMS format. If this technology, like other CMC’s, allows increased self-alienation or individualism in Filipino society, might religious SMS be a cure to reverse the process, and work for, say, unity and altruism in society? Can the Church utilize religious text and offer it as solution, to possible “negative effect/s” of cell phone and texting? These points will be answered in the discussion of the survey results.

Another theory used as framework for this study is J. L. Austin’s “speech-act theory” (1970). A *speech-act* or *performative utterance* effects whatever it explains. This communicative act contains words conveyed to “not merely describe an existing state of things, but rather creates a new

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> cf. Final Statement of FABC-OSC Bishops’ Meet (1996, 1997 and 1999) and BISCOM IV (2002). Available: <http://www.fabc.org>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 39

relationship, social arrangement, or entitlement in speech-act terms... these are instances when saying is doing."<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the words of the priest in preparation for Holy Communion, when bread and wine are consecrated and a Scripture passage is read, bring about the miracle of *transubstantiation* believed by Catholics to be the sacred body and blood of Jesus becoming really present in the consecrated "fruits of the earth and work of human hands." Performative utterances are also exchanged in rituals, in marriage for example, where the exchange of "I do's" results in the sacred union of husband and wife before God and community.

Similarly, religious SMS are performative utterances of texters. In fact, the sender exercises ownership of the message, passing it on to selected family and friends as if uttering the very words, and meaning them – like talking though text. The phrase "*God bless u!*" in the example above is actually a well-wish similar to when it is said in a personal, face-to-face setting.

When receivers re-send forwarded messages, a role reversal actually occurs. Receivers become senders, performing the same function as deciding which message to send and to whom. Knowing what it is like to *send* forwarded messages, it then becomes common for receivers to not only attribute the message to Divine Providence, inspiring when inspiration is needed most, but to the sender as well – his *real message*, intention, ulterior motive (if any), etc. In the students' responses, the latter was found to have a bearing on their relationship with senders and ultimately, on their reaction to the message.

This dynamic between sender and receiver suggests that the texting parties are acquainted or related to each

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. 42.

other in some way. In fact, texting has been found to only complement relationships that have already been formed *offline*, in the physical world outside the cell phone circuit; or online, in the virtual sphere via mobile chatrooms perhaps. In the Philippines, no evidence has been found of physically located social relationships "significantly shifting into the virtual" through SMS.<sup>28</sup>

Studies also show that cell phones only reinforce the affective but hardly contribute to increased knowledge. "(The technology) is mainly employed to convey affect rather than cognition. Texting may involve phatic-communion, lead(ing) to communities of intimacy, but it is less likely to generate structures of knowledge."<sup>29</sup>

## Results and Discussion

### Faith

Religious SMS helps young people *remember* (God). Seven out of ten (73%) said "Yes," they are reminded of God. The survey showed no significant difference between male and female responses in this regard. On a general scale, both sexes show reverence for religious text and believe God is actually embodied in the text.

A male respondent says, "*Religious messages such as Bible verses and reminders about God's love (are) one good thing and needs to be paid attention to.*" Young people believe that God is actually guiding them thru text message. A female respondent: "*They (religious texts) brighten up the day and reminds you that Jesus cares.*" Another male respondent:

<sup>28</sup>Raul Pertierra et. al., "Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity." Manila: De La Salle University Press (2002). p. 140.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid. p. 141.

*“Religious messages are good especially they remind you of God thru text messages. It can help you at some unexpectable times.”* Religious SMS also help students examine the state of their relationship with God. *“Sometimes I think that it (religious text) helps us reflect with the status of our faith from time to time,”* a female student said, *“and reminds us to remember God more.”*

These findings show that religious texts are actually being read and not just trashed outright. Most young people find the urge to reflect on the text’s meaning and re-send it to others. A female student says, *“It helps me reflect about the things I have done.”* Religious texts are *“inspiring,”* a male student says, *“and can teach you a lesson if you have done something wrong.”* Another female student says, *“Religious messages make my life more worth than the ordinary message. It sometimes uplifts your faith in God.”*

Item	No	Sometimes	Yes
I remember God	5 percent	22 percent	73 percent
I feel assured of God’s presence in my life	18	26	56
I feel God is talking to me	30	40	30
I feel God is calling me	33	39	28
I remember Mother Mary	36	36	28
I remember my guardian angel	50	33	17
I remember my patron saint	61	28	11

Table 1: Faith Responses

While they do remember God, young people only “sometimes” believe that God is actually “talking” to them, that God is “calling” them via text. This happens only circumstantially, the survey shows, when the text itself directly

applies to a particular spiritual need. That explains the leveled distribution of responses to the points: “I feel God is talking to me” and “I feel God is calling me” (40% and 39% “Sometimes,” respectively).

Note-worthy, however, is when “Yes” and “Sometimes” responses are combined. A majority of youth then say they remember God and that God is talking/calling them. Ninety-five percent at least on certain occasions *remember God* while seven out of ten feel that *God is talking* to them, or *calling* them. This shows that young people respond selectively to religious texts. A male student says, *“For me, it depends whether the religious message makes sense to me or not. If it does not apply to me, I immediately delete it.”*

Young people also see texting as a modern and convenient way to convey religious thought. A male respondent says, *“It is good that cell phones can be instruments to make us closer to God.”* Another male respondent: *“Religious messages are good form of letting people know more about God because it is an easy and fast way to do it.”* Although both views are not expressed in numeric figures in the survey, they indicate that the youth generally feels positive about the fusion of faith and technology. A female student said that her view of the meaning of cell phone and texting has changed because of religious text: *“Text messages change the idea of what text for the youth is today. It tries to imply that God also knows technological advancement.”*

A notable five percent, however, said they do not remember God at all. Religious text is void of spiritual meaning. Male respondents are found to be less inclined to think otherwise. One of whom said: *“(Religious text) does not affect my life in any way. It takes more than a text message for me to have*

an urge for religiosity.” Another male student sees religious texting simply on the level of continuing corporeal relationships: “They prove nothing but still, it feels good that someone remembers you.” A female student regards religious text as a thing of the past, like an article of fashion losing appeal over a period of time: “Religious texts have become a cliché.” Another female respondent said religious texting is “Spam on phone!!!”

But for most young people, religious texts remain to be an inspiring reassurance and bringer of comfort. Nearly six out of ten (56%) feels God’s presence in their lives. A male respondent considers it a blessing to receive religious texts: “I feel blessed when I receive religious messages and I hope religious messages can inspire more people especially young people.” A female student says, “Religious text gives something to me and lets me pause for a time to talk to God and be blessed receiving them.”

### Prayer Life

Religious texts produce a rather less significant urge in young people to pray. In the survey, there was little indication of any desire to attend Mass, read the Bible, spend time in Eucharistic Adoration, go to confession or pray the Rosary. Only a fraction of young people feel motivated to do so as shown in the table below. This may be the case because religious text generally comes when least expected, when the receiver is pre-occupied with other activities and therefore indisposed to prayer.

This survey attempts to capture feelings, thoughts and urges following exposure to or upon reading religious text. Whether those feelings, thoughts and urges are actually translated into actual behavior is beyond our scope. The survey, however, shows evidence that religious text could possibly lead

to latent behaviors. The desire to pray, for example, becomes evident with more than a third (36%) having the “urge to pray privately” and a quarter (25%) having the “urge to attend (Holy) Mass.” Thirty nine percent also said they feel closer to God. A male student said religious texts are “very reflective, makes you feel closer to God.”

Item	No	Sometimes	Yes
I feel closer to God	25 percent	36 percent	39 percent
I have the urge to pray privately	29	35	36
I have the urge to attend Mass	45	30	25
I have the urge to read the Bible	55	33	12
I have the urge to visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament	60	27	13
I have the urge to go to Confession	66	25	9
I have the urge to pray the Rosary	68	25	7

Table 2: Prayer Responses

The above responses may indicate a slack in young people’s prayer life at the same time. At least half of them said outright “No” they would not go to Mass, read the Bible, etc. But it may be useful to point out that not all religious text admonishes or encourages prayer. Some texts, like brand adverts, simply offer points for reflection. But even when admonished to, young people do seem to exercise autonomy over deciding when and how to pray.

Giddens’ notion of *intensified reflexivity* is evidently at work here. The scholar says people in late modern societies increasingly seek freedom from “strictures of nature and

certain forms of community.”<sup>30</sup> This happens as technologies develop and options in many of life’s processes abound. People engage in internal interrogation, weighing alternatives and ultimately making choices about their own destinies. “The world increasingly is not bounded by fixed and unchangeable limits, but is rather recognized as malleable and the outcome of human decisions.”<sup>31</sup> Young people will not be told to pray. When, how and where to pray remains to be a personal decision.

Wilbur Schramm (1954) already discussed the active participation of recipients of communication before the advent of digital media. His model of communication resulted from a classic study that corrected the misunderstood power of communication senders to simply influence receivers.<sup>32</sup> According to Schramm, receivers of communication perform decoding, interpretation and encoding much as senders do. Thus, “audiences must first draw meaning from communication events and from experience, integrate the meaning with previous learning, and then formulate the result into some expression.”<sup>33</sup>

Gerhard Maletzke (1963) also listed factors affecting audiences’ reception of media messages.<sup>34</sup> These factors include the receiver’s self-image, personality structure, membership in social groups and the social environment. That means *offline* experiences, or events and experiences detached from media

<sup>30</sup> Frank Webster, “The Information Society Revisited.” In Leah Lievrouw & Sonia Livingstone (eds.), *The Handbook of New Media*. London: Sage Publications (2002). p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> cf. Franz-Josef Eilers, “Communicating in Community. Introduction to Social Communication” 4<sup>th</sup> Updated Edition. Manila: Logos (2009), pp. 30-31.

<sup>33</sup> William Thorn, “Models of Church and Communication.” In Paul Soukup (ed.), *Communication, Culture & Theology – Media, Culture and Catholicism*. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward (1996). p. 85.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 87. Refer also to Mick Underwood, “Mass Media: Maletzke’s Model.” UK: Communication, Cultural & Media Studies (2008). Available: <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshhtml/media/mc.html>

(and cell phone use), also count. The receiver’s perception of a medium through which communication was received as well as the perceived constraints from that particular medium, whether television, radio, etc. are also included in Maletzke’s list. But as we shall see later, the mobile user’s perception of senders also affect the reception of religious texts.

Because these factors interplay and produce unpredictable responses among different audiences, William Thorn terms these factors as *filters* and groups these filters into *social filters and psychological filters*.<sup>35</sup>

Apparently, these concepts are at work in the way students receive, interpret and respond to religious SMS. A male student said he will not be moved to pray by religious text alone. He said, “(I)t takes more than a text” for him to be drawn to piety or any practice of religion. Another male student aired the same view, saying religious texts are “good supplement only; still needs someone to talk with it.” Young people seemingly need reinforcement to ignite and keep their prayer lives aflame.

### Information

Item	No	Sometimes	Yes
I am reminded of the Liturgical Season	17 percent	25 percent	58
I feel more the essence of the Liturgical Season	19	32	49
I have the urge to buy a religious book/ article related to the Liturgical Season	75	19	6

Table 3: Information Responses

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 87.

Religious texts have moderate effects as far as reminding young people of major religious feasts like Christmas, New Year and Easter. More than half of the students (58%) confirm this finding. Others get the same information from the media and the offline environment.

Text greetings may be a good reminder of religious feasts by taking liturgical seasons as theme. Even then, text messages do not significantly heighten the feast's festive spirit. Just about half of the respondents (49%) feel *more* the essence of the celebration through religious text. Three out of ten (32%) said they only "sometimes" feel the same way. This happens most likely when they are greeted by people they expect to be with during the season like relatives overseas. In that case, "digital families" use religious text as bonding mechanism besides voice calls, online chatting or email.

One out of four youth, meanwhile, feel the urge at least on occasion to purchase tokens like religious books as a result of religious text. This may be felt especially during Christmas/New Year when gift giving is in a frenzied mood. This last point determines whether religious texts contribute positively to marketing Christian merchandise. In twenty five percent of cases, they do, the survey said. Overall, this part of the study confirms the notions of ritualized greetings that sustain "walled gardens" of micro-cultures already built in the physical environment. There is no evidence gathered indicating that *virtual* micro-cultures can be built or can spring up from text messaging alone.

Religious texts rarely cover Solemnities, Feasts or Memorials of Saints in the Catholic tradition. Most, if not all, focus and explicitly mention "God" and/or "Jesus." For example, the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary coinciding with New

Year celebrations (Jan 1) is not widely circulated thru text. Quite the opposite, New Year greetings referencing to "God," "The Lord," etc abound and sent within individual mobile networks.

An exception is the Virgin Mary's birthday on September 8, and Immaculate Conception feast on December 8. In this case, however, religious text is more of the nature of *chain text* rather than being informative or helpful input for reflection. This may point to the tendency among Filipinos to associate the Mother of Jesus with superstition rather than genuine devotion or faith expression. A similar tendency is observed during the Feast of the Black Nazarene in early January, whose accounts of miraculous interventions cause millions to congregate and follow the massive procession around the age-old image's main basilica in Manila.

Some priests and religious sisters admit crafting religious texts and forwarding them to members of their personal mobile network. Initiatives like this, however, are observed to reach only their fellow ordained and very seldom, if at all, the lay people. Of the 600 respondents of this survey, all lay members of the Church, only one student receive religious texts from friend-seminarians. This youngster is hoping not just to be reminded of Church holidays but to be inspired by the messages as well. She says: "*They're ok (religious messages) as long as they're inspiring, and not just a reminder of upcoming Church holidays. I have friends in the seminary so I regularly receive religious texts.*"

### **Disposition/ Attitude**

Over half of the youth surveyed said they feel happy to be Christians after reading religious texts. Four out of ten also said they feel at home with the Christian faith. Females are as

disposed to be happy Christians (55%) as their male counterparts (54%). See Table below.

Except for this and the last two points (“I feel afraid of the after-life,” and “I develop sexual fantasy/ies”), both male and female youth show leaning on the “Sometimes” response. This is likely due to the youth’s psycho-spiritual state at the time of exposure to religious text.

When asked whether they feel afraid of death, three out of five said “No.” Majority of them also did not show concern about the after-life (67%). These findings may indicate young people’s optimism towards their destiny in general. They are either assured of their ultimate end after death; or they simply do not believe that there is an after-life. If the latter is true, this survey confirms a 2002 survey showing a significant number of youth (aged 7-21) who do not believe in eschatology, which happens to be a basic Church teaching. This had caused a leading church leader to call for a re-examination of catechetical programs in parishes and schools. The same call may still be valid.<sup>36</sup>

Item	No	Sometimes	Yes
I feel happy to be a Christian	19 percent	26 percent	55 percent
I feel at home with my Christian faith	27	32	41
I feel inspired	24	39	37
I feel happy	27	39	34
I feel confident	35	39	26

<sup>36</sup>“According to the survey, 88 percent (of the 1,400 respondents from all over the Philippines), believe in God or in a Supreme Being; 76 percent affiliate themselves with the Catholic Church; 42 percent believe in heaven; 21 percent believe in life after death, and 21 percent believe there is hell; 73 percent trust priests, and 70 percent trust nuns.”

- Bishop Teodoro Bacani, “Figures to disturb the Church.” In “Opinion Today,” Manila: “Today” newspaper (January 24, 2002).

I become inclined to change my life	35	39	26
I feel confused	53	30	17
I feel sad	54	36	10
I feel afraid of death	59	28	13
I feel afraid of the after-life	67	24	9
I develop sexual fantasy/ies	87	10	3

Table 4: Disposition/ Attitude

The survey shows one in four young people are inspired by religious text (37%). Female respondents, however, tend to be more inspired (39%), than their male counterpart (33%). A female student says: “(Religious text) inspires me to do well in school and gives me confidence that I can do my job no matter how hard the times may be.” Another female student: “Religious messages are very inspirational and it usually help me when I am down.”

To “be inspired” in general terms, however, can be triggered by Divine/supernatural causes or by the sender of religious text. In the latter case, receivers may conjure up notions of affinity, even romance with the other person. This may explain why a tiny fraction of the students “develop sexual fantasy/ies” from religious text (3% said “Yes,” and 10% said “Sometimes”). In a related study done in the Philippines, cell phones are found to allow not only religious sentiments to flourish but also intimacies beyond familial bounds. Raul Pertierra explains:<sup>37</sup>

Cell phones have extended the scope for social relationships. They have facilitated the inclusion and incorporation of the stranger into people’s private lives. This incorporation has encouraged the rise of the sexualized subject. Young Filipinos have made

<sup>37</sup>Raul Pertierra et. al., “Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity.” Manila: De La Salle University Press (2002). pp. 149-150

the greatest use of this technology for incorporating and exploring new and radical identities. Cell phones are so intimately associated with the body that they become extensions of it. The body, the self, and the cell phone constitute an amalgam of the organic, the spiritual and the material. Together they embody identity as incorporating carnality, desire and materiality.

### Relationship with Others

Young people's inclination to do good to others after exposure to religious text was explored in the survey. And it was found that the urge of doing exactly that is evident in majority of respondents. This finding suggests that sending religious messages, fitting to the youth's situation, may help build a society of altruism and genuinely giving individuals. It further indicates that appropriate messages passed on digitally may avert self-alienation or individualism as a result of increased exposure to CMC's, as Ong and O'Leary suggest. Young people can be moved to do acts of kindness even though an overwhelming majority resists donating money to charity (62%), and increasing offerings at Holy Mass (70%). In this regard, religious texts may not be effective instruments for soliciting donations.

Item	No	Sometimes	Yes
I have the urge to give encouraging/ kind words to others	19 percent	33 percent	47 percent
I have the urge to re-send the message to family and friends in need	22	34	44
I have the urge to offer a helping hand to others	25	35	40
I feel others should change their lives	33	34	33

I have the urge to forgive my enemies	33	39	28
I have the urge to give to the poor on the street	49	36	15
I have the urge to donate to charity	62	30	8
I have the urge to increase my offering at Mass	70	23	7

Table 5: Relationship with Others

As to whether the youth thinks that the message received apply to others and that others should change their lives according to the content of the message, the survey shows equal distribution among the three responses. "Yes" and "Sometimes" responses combined (67%) show more than two-thirds of young people agree on this issue.

This is evidence of the "Third Person Effect" hypothesis at work albeit on a partial basis among young text users. This hypothesis posits that media audiences see other people as more affected by media messages than themselves.<sup>38</sup> The content of religious text is perceived to apply to other people, not to the recipient directly. A female student says, "*Religious messages help people to reflect in their own selves and doings in life and be more closer to God.*"

At the same time, however, students in the survey also wish that other people gain the same help and inspiration they themselves have gained from religious texts. To achieve this, the students re-send forwarded messages to persons thought to most likely benefit from or appreciate the same religious thought.

<sup>38</sup>cf. Bengt Johansson, "Third Person Effect, Only a Media Perception?" Nordicom (Nordiskt Informations Center foer Medie (March 2010). Available: [http://www.nordicom.gu.se/common/publ\\_pdf/180\\_081-094.pdf](http://www.nordicom.gu.se/common/publ_pdf/180_081-094.pdf)



Seventy-eight percent (“Yes” and “Sometimes” responses combined, 78%) said they re-send religious messages to selected family and friends.

Female students are slightly more inclined to re-send religious texts (48% answered “Yes” to this question; 34% answered “Sometimes”), compared to their male counterparts (37% answered “Yes”; 34% answered “Sometimes”). A female student: *“Religious text messages sometimes lighten people’s mood especially when the receivers received it in the most crucial moment of their lives.”* A male student: *“Sending religious messages is not bad at all. It might even help people who are in need of spiritual enlightenment.”* This finding is an example of how SMS are offered as “gifts” to others.<sup>39</sup>

### Relationship with Sender

Forwarded messages are *closed-ended*, didactic messages that either instruct, teach, encourage devotion or spread superstition. As observed, they rarely initiate extended text exchanges and at best, only invite a reciprocal action. A simple *Hello, hw r u* or *Hey wazzup, wat u doin*, on the other hand, triggers conversational exchanges that are cyclic, dialogic, and more “personal.”

In spite of the seemingly countless forwarded messages being circulated, six out of ten (59%) survey respondents still consider original messages as more personal. Half of the students (51%) think “an original message is more helpful.” On certain occasions, the fraction of students who feel this way increases to seventy-six percent (“Yes” and “Sometimes” responses combined). A male student says, *“It is usually just forwarded*

<sup>39</sup>Raul Pertierra, “Transforming Technologies: Altered Selves.” Manila: DLSU (2006). pp. 96-113.

*but the thought and purpose is not intended by the sender (be) cause it is not made by him personally.”*

Eighteen percent and twenty-four percent respectively, however, said “No,” an original message is neither personal nor helpful. This may mean that the act of forwarding messages may be perceived as redundant and meaningless after years of continuous practice. A female respondent says: *“Sometimes it does not have any meaning anymore since it is only a FORWARDED MESSAGE”* (all caps and underline by the respondent).

As to whether the students feel any closer to the sender of religious text, the answer is not overwhelmingly positive (32%, “Yes”; 36%, “Sometimes”). From the students’ remarks, at least some young people attribute religious SMS to the sender, and not entirely as a Divine act. They size up the sender according to sincerity and credibility. A male student says, *“Sometimes inspiring but sometimes irritating! Sometimes these are sent for the sake of texting alone! (not for the meaning!!)”*. A female student: *“Religious messages should be taken into consideration, but it’s better if the sender meant the message, and knows in his heart that what he says to his brothers and sisters is accountable to him.”* A female student says, *“They’re inspiring but sometimes they’re taken too far. It would be better if the sender really lives (the message) through his faith.”* A male student: *“I pray they are sincerely conveyed.”* Another male student says, *“Once sent to the person, he should really reflect on it and as he passes it to others, it should be as saying it personally with care and sincerity.”* These remarks recall Pope Paul VI when he talks about witnessing as having more impact in modern day evangelization rather than teaching.

Item	No	Sometimes	Yes
I feel that an original (not forwarded) message is more personal	18	23	59
I feel that an original message is more helpful	24	25	51
I feel closer to the Sender	32	36	32
I wish the Sender sends an original message	36	32	32
I have the urge to send a similar message to the Sender	35	36	29
I have the urge to buy any token as gift to the Sender	71	21	8

Table 6: Relationship with Sender

Young people also tend to suspect that forwarded texts actually come from mobile phone companies. These business enterprises are thought to use forwarded texts to encourage more texting and increase text spending. A male student says, the exchange is part of a “*commercialized scheme*” and “*lack(s) sincerity*.” Another male student says, “*They are business messages, unless personally made by the sender.*”

Sincerity and credibility are factors motivating students to send a similar message back to the sender. This finding is shown in the leveled response of the students to the question (“I have the urge to send a similar message to the Sender”) with a slight leaning on the “Sometimes” response (36%). Female respondents are more inclined (70%) than males (41%) to reciprocate the favor to the sender. As to reciprocating off-line, giving a tangible gift to the sender, the students gave an overwhelming negative response (71%). Buying itself involves

monetary outlay and this is something young people seemingly try to avoid.

### Reception of the Message

This section discusses that part of the survey which examined if students find certain religious messages disturbing and if they, in any way, distract themselves from reading it. The results indicate that young people do not avoid religious texts. But after reading, seven out of ten said they continue doing what they are doing (68%). In other words, they pause to check incoming messages, and return to their preoccupations.

Alongside this finding, however, some 60 percent of the students (“Yes” and “Sometimes” responses combined) also feel “the urge to be alone and reflect.” This may indicate yearning for certain quietude amid the hustle and bustle of student- but also of city-life. This may not be uncommon because like their matured counterparts, young people do also engage in a search for life’s true meaning, and in fact, this process of searching is continuous in spite of the many distractions in their social and physical environment. Religious text, in this case, may help bring back the need to think about what really matters in life.

Seven out of ten (71% combined “Yes” and “Sometimes” responses) said that on certain occasions they delete the message immediately after reading it. The same fraction of students delete the message after sending it to others. Sixty-five percent said that on certain occasions they “save the message for sending to others later.”

Chain text and young people’s reaction to it were also studied here. In the survey, young people show absolute disliking for this type of text particularly those that threaten

with bad luck. Only a few eight percent comply with chain text instructions, while six out of ten (57%) dismiss the threats as non-sense. Students, male and female alike, negatively describe chain text as “gimmick,” “waste” of effort and pre-paid load, “bull crap,” “waste of time,” “don’t have any connection with God,” “distorted,” “not in accordance to the Catholic faith,” “fraud,” “disrespecting the Name of God,” and “nonsense.” A female student: “..some (chain texts) really helps (but) saying that if you don’t pass this, someone will die.. etc.. completely contradicts the essence of being religious.”

Another female student: “I don’t believe chain texts because I have my own faith in God. I can show my faith in God thru prayers and not thru cellphone.” Another female student: “People do chain texts to entertain themselves. What you believe in is what you believe in. No religious text could ever alter that.” Another female student looks beyond the level of belief and focuses on a personal relationship with God: “Chain texts and religious messages are not the basis of your faith. They are all non-sense text messages. I don’t believe that those texts will lead you closer to God. The important thing is your personal relationship with God.”

Item	No	Sometimes	Yes
I continue what I am doing	4 percent	27 percent	68 percent
I dismiss threats of chain texts as non-sense	22	21	57
I have the urge to be with friends	30	39	31
I have the urge to talk to a friend	32	36	32
I delete the message after sending it to others	29	43	27

I delete the message at once	29	47	24
I save the message for sending to others later	35	39	26
I have the urge to be alone and reflect	37	40	23
I have the urge to listen to pop/rock music	43	34	23
I have the urge to distract myself with television	56	32	12
I have the urge to distract myself with radio	58	32	10
I have the urge to distract myself with (a) movie	62	28	10
I dismiss the religious text as non-sense	65	23	12
I have the urge to distract myself with web surfing	65	25	10
I have the urge to listen to Gospel/ Christian music	66	24	10
I believe the promises/ threats of chain texts	70	18	12
I comply with chain texts	66	26	8
I have the urge to buy a religious article for myself	74	21	5

Table 7: Other Responses

A female student looks at chain texts as distorting the Christian faith and constituting a new faith expression. She says, “I somewhat feel insulted because it created/ became some sort of a new ‘belief’ that influence(s) people, especially those who are ‘superficial.’” A male student looks at deception involved in sending chain texts. “(They) are nothing but frauds,” he says, “and deserve a place called ‘trash can.’ Chain texts use

*irrational explanations and use religion in such a non-sense, disrespecting the Name of God."*

Another female student relates chain texts with the sender, not with God. She says, "*Chain text messages are composed by people who does not have anything to do with their lives. It does not affect me neither threaten me. God could tell me what to do and He is the only one that can punish me, not the sender.*" Another female student says, "*People only send chain texts for them to be saved and become lucky not because they really believe in God.*"

### Conclusion

This survey shows two overwhelming "Yes" responses to religious SMS. Under *Faith* category, "I remember God" ranked number one, followed by "I continue what I am doing" under the *Reception of the Message* category. The youth gave a "Sometimes" response to the following:

#### Faith

I feel assured of God's presence in my life  
I feel God is talking to me  
I feel God is calling me  
I remember Mother Mary  
I remember my guardian angel

I feel happy  
I feel confident  
I become inclined to change my life  
I feel confused  
I feel sad  
I feel afraid of dying

message is more helpful  
I feel closer to the Sender  
I wish the Sender sends an originally crafted message  
I have the urge to send a similar message to the Sender

#### Prayer Life

I feel closer to God  
I have the urge to pray privately  
I have the urge to attend Mass  
I have the urge to read the Bible  
I have the urge to visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament

#### Relationship with Others

I have the urge to give encouraging/ kind words to others  
I have the urge to resend the message to family and friends in need  
I have the urge to offer a helping hand to others

#### Reception of the Message

I dismiss the threats of chain texts as non-sense  
I have the urge to be with friends  
I have the urge to talk to a friend  
I delete the message after sending it to others  
I delete the message at once  
I save the message for sending to others later  
I have the urge to be alone and reflect

#### Information

I am reminded of the Liturgical Season  
I feel more the essence of the Liturgical Season

I feel others should change their lives  
I have the urge to forgive my enemies  
I have the urge to give to the poor on the street

I have the urge to listen to pop/ rock music  
I have the urge to distract myself and watch TV  
I have the urge to distract myself and listen to the radio

#### Disposition/ Attitude

I feel happy to be a Christian  
I feel more at home with my Christian faith  
I feel inspired

#### Relationship with Sender

I feel an originally crafted message is more personal  
I feel an originally crafted

"No" responses were given to the following:

#### Faith

I remember my patron saint

#### Relationship with Others

I have the urge to donate to charity  
I have the urge to increase my offering at Mass

and watch a movie  
I dismiss the religious message as non-sense  
I have the urge to distract myself and surf the Net

#### Prayer Life

I have the urge to go to Confession  
I have the urge to pray the Rosary

#### Relationship with Sender

I have the urge to buy any token as gift to the Sender/ others

I have the urge to listen to Gospel/ Christian music  
I feel afraid of the threats of chain texts

#### Information

I have the urge to buy a religious book for myself

#### Reception of the Message

I have the urge to distract myself and watch

I comply with the instructions of chain texts  
I have the urge to buy a religious article for myself

#### Disposition/ Attitude

I feel afraid of the after-life  
I develop sexual fantasy/ies

#### Reception of the Message

I have the urge to distract myself

The findings suggest that youth reactions to religious SMS result from the interplay between the youth's "online," as well as "offline" experiences. Their psycho-spiritual state when the religious text was read was also suggested as a factor affecting response. This needs further investigation. However, evidence has been gathered pointing to students reacting positively only to messages that apply or has significance to their present situation. They pass on messages as a form of "gift" to others, offering the same spiritual support and inspiration they themselves have gained. This process of gift-giving builds and sustains "walled gardens" of micro-cultures as well as strengthens social bonds.

Religious text is also said to interact with what the students already know from other media sources, attendance in Church, as well as knowledge shared with family, peers and other social groups. Such knowledge includes the seemingly wide-spread notion that God is embodied in religious text, that God communicates via text, as well as that shared by a few seeing mobile technology is an unlikely, if not inappropriate, purveyor of religious thought. Text forwarding is also thought as a marketing scheme instigated by mobile companies for commercial purposes.

Young people exercise a great deal of autonomy in reading (interpreting), and reacting to religious text. They delete messages that are insignificant, especially chain texts which according to them are bogus faith expression. Students are aware that genuine faith springs from a personal relationship with God. Although God is thought to be speaking through text, young people still tend to attribute the gift more to the sender than Divine Providence. The way messages are read sometimes depends on the sender's sincerity and credibility. The way senders are known to live the message sent affects response.

The survey also found that young people are generally less inclined to increase donations to the institutional Church, and would rather help other people through concrete acts of kindness. This finding points to the ineffectiveness of mobile technology as tool for solicitation. On the other hand, it shows that computer-mediated communications may not altogether heighten the spread of individualism in societies. Texting, as evidenced by the students' response, may help form altruistic and genuinely-giving individuals.

Religious SMS can serve to complement religious instruction. Religious SMS alone is not enough to make young people better Christians or better informed of their faith. Although we have seen that a significant number of students remember God through SMS, the comments given suggest a need to reinforce inspiring SMS with similar inspirations in the offline world.

Even with religious texts, young people still seek to forge *connection* with other people. An embodied kind of communication that is both dialogic and intimate is what young people ultimately desire. *Connectivity*, which only serves very functional and pragmatic purposes, is what forwarding *forwarded texts* basically represents.<sup>1</sup> But for young people, cell phones and SMS should not only help them to occasionally keep in touch with those listed in their mobile networks. Technology should help maintain relationships and that entails keeping lines of conversation continuously open and alive.

<sup>1</sup> "Connectivity" and "connection" have been distinguished quite clearly by theology professor John P. Jewell as one that involves technical means (connectivity); in this case, the cellphone. Connection has something to do with relation and relationship, the building blocks of community. cf. John P. Jewell, "Wired for Ministry: How the Internet, Visual Media, and Other New Technologies Can Serve Your Church." Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press (2004). pp. 15.25.

The above findings confirm the results of a previous study suggesting that young people do not appreciate *passivity* in SMS communication.<sup>2</sup> They seem to care less about interacting with a computer server that electronically sends quotes, nor with a sender, who in spite being a human person, mechanically does the same. There has to be a *warm body* on the other side of the line. If the sender is known to the receiver, an originally crafted message is better appreciated. Somebody outside the cell phone circuit, if not the sender him/herself, should also be available to talk about the content of the religious message, about the youth's spiritual journey and search for life's meaning in general. All these have ramifications on pastoral ministry for young people.

This study looks at the youth's *initial* reactions to religious text. The purpose is to gain insight into cognitive and affective processes resulting from exposure to religious messages using the mobile phone. The methodology employed, however, is somewhat limited. It could not make certain, for example, if the *remembrance, urge or desire* experienced by the respondents were actualized in a *latent* behavior. The results can therefore be only considered indicative and by no means final especially as the wave of technology development shifts to more advanced mobile gadgetry.

Future studies can validate the above findings, and complement what may be found lacking. For example, the reactions listed in the survey questionnaire can be augmented, and even supported with interviews. Other statistical tools may also be employed for a more scientific handling of gathered data. It is hoped that the present study provides impetus for further research in the area of religion and mobile phone technology.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony G. Roman, "Texting God: SMS and Religion in the Philippines." In "Ad Veritatem, Multi-Disciplinary Journal of the UST Graduate School" Vol. 6, No. 1 (October 2006). Manila: UST Graduate School (2006). pp. 13-38

## RELIGION AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION: TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA

*A Roundtable at Saint John's University, Bangkok 2010*

The Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication (ARC) held the third of its Roundtable series under the title "Religion and Social Communication in Asia: towards a Research Agenda. The event was held at the center's base in Saint John's University (Bangkok) from February 8-11, 2010.

The 17 participating scholars came from India, Indonesia, Thailand, Korea, Hong Kong, Philippines and Malaysia representing at least ten universities and different religious backgrounds - Catholicism, Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism, Islam and Mainstream Christian denominations.

All of them agreed that the Roundtable has created a new impetus and awareness of the importance of research on the role of religions in Asian societies. Today's communication culture is marked by burgeoning technologies, affecting Asian religious traditions. This has to be studied and researched, the participants said. To this end, they committed to help build a body of knowledge in the field and to enjoin interested colleagues.

The three-day meeting heard summaries of the participants' recent scholarly work. In the end, an 11-point research agenda was drawn. The participants agreed to coordinate among themselves and meet at every opportunity, e.g. in similar gatherings of professional organizations like AMIC (Asian Media Information and Communications Center, Singapore) and IAMCR (International Association for Media and Communication Research). ARC remains as the main hub of coordination.

The above findings confirm the results of a previous study suggesting that young people do not appreciate *passivity* in SMS communication.<sup>2</sup> They seem to care less about interacting with a computer server that electronically sends quotes, nor with a sender, who in spite being a human person, mechanically does the same. There has to be a *warm body* on the other side of the line. If the sender is known to the receiver, an originally crafted message is better appreciated. Somebody outside the cell phone circuit, if not the sender him/herself, should also be available to talk about the content of the religious message, about the youth's spiritual journey and search for life's meaning in general. All these have ramifications on pastoral ministry for young people.

This study looks at the youth's *initial* reactions to religious text. The purpose is to gain insight into cognitive and affective processes resulting from exposure to religious messages using the mobile phone. The methodology employed, however, is somewhat limited. It could not make certain, for example, if the *remembrance, urge or desire* experienced by the respondents were actualized in a *latent* behavior. The results can therefore be only considered indicative and by no means final especially as the wave of technology development shifts to more advanced mobile gadgetry.

Future studies can validate the above findings, and complement what may be found lacking. For example, the reactions listed in the survey questionnaire can be augmented, and even supported with interviews. Other statistical tools may also be employed for a more scientific handling of gathered data. It is hoped that the present study provides impetus for further research in the area of religion and mobile phone technology.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony G. Roman, "Texting God: SMS and Religion in the Philippines." In "Ad Veritatem, Multi-Disciplinary Journal of the UST Graduate School" Vol. 6, No. 1 (October 2006). Manila: UST Graduate School (2006). pp. 13-38

## RELIGION AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION: TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA

*A Roundtable at Saint John's University, Bangkok 2010*

The Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication (ARC) held the third of its Roundtable series under the title "Religion and Social Communication in Asia: towards a Research Agenda. The event was held at the center's base in Saint John's University (Bangkok) from February 8-11, 2010.

The 17 participating scholars came from India, Indonesia, Thailand, Korea, Hong Kong, Philippines and Malaysia representing at least ten universities and different religious backgrounds - Catholicism, Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism, Islam and Mainstream Christian denominations.

All of them agreed that the Roundtable has created a new impetus and awareness of the importance of research on the role of religions in Asian societies. Today's communication culture is marked by burgeoning technologies, affecting Asian religious traditions. This has to be studied and researched, the participants said. To this end, they committed to help build a body of knowledge in the field and to enjoin interested colleagues.

The three-day meeting heard summaries of the participants' recent scholarly work. In the end, an 11-point research agenda was drawn. The participants agreed to coordinate among themselves and meet at every opportunity, e.g. in similar gatherings of professional organizations like AMIC (Asian Media Information and Communications Center, Singapore) and IAMCR (International Association for Media and Communication Research). ARC remains as the main hub of coordination.

The participants listed the following areas for possible Research:

1. Comparative analysis of Christian religious practices
2. Cultural influences on Religious practices
3. Content analysis of Religious media
4. Effects analysis of Religious media
5. Interpersonal communication under cultural/religious perspective
6. Communities and building communities offline and online
7. Psychological disposition of persons (intra-personal) towards modern communication technologies and the new culture created by modern media
8. Religious communication via new media
9. Changing nature, content and relationship between clergy and lay people e.g. online pastoral care
10. Communication for peace building, religious tolerance
11. Interreligious dialogue as communication

As to the *methods of research*, the participants agreed on the following:

1. Content analysis, employing standard techniques available but with slight modification in terms of the use of signs, symbols, religious connotation of language use, and others
2. Effects analysis
3. Quantitative analysis, which we have learned from the West. But this should change in terms of focus

and lean on qualitative analysis, or combine both techniques.

4. Qualitative analysis, involving participant observation, in-depth interview, focused group discussion, photos, videos, etc.

These methods should be coordinated among researchers to allow comparative studies in different locales. The use of small samples within a homogenous population was encouraged. Research in religion and social communication, the participants said, should contribute to better religious/interreligious practice and communication. In conclusion, the participants agreed to promote and develop the above research agenda in their respective countries.

The Roundtable was co-organized with the FABC-Office of Social Communication and Saint John's University, Bangkok. ARC was established in 1999.

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*BOOK REVIEWS*

**DANIEL A. STOUT (ED.): THE ROUTLEDGE  
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGION,  
COMMUNICATION, AND MEDIA. NEW YORK/  
LONDON 2010, 467 PAGES.**

With 124 entries from different fields related to Religion and Social Communication this encyclopedia is indeed “the first comprehensive collection of its kind”, as the editor Daniel A Stout rightly states in his introduction (p.XV). With some 100 cooperators he tries to develop an interdisciplinary approach which not only involves communication scholars but also theologians, philosophers, anthropologists and others. “Emerging fields require new research questions and theory building” he asserts and provides this way “foundational information for the systematic study of a phenomenon that has not been examined adequately” (XIV). This volume is the first attempt for an Encyclopedia on Religion, Communication and Media! Originally published already 2007 under the general title “Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication, and Media” by Routledge it is now reprinted and re-published in a paperback edition with the publisher’s name now in the title. The content of the book, however, is not changed or even updated including the literature accompanying the different entries and end with 2006.

The quality of the different contributions to this work is not always equal as can be expected and has to be accepted in a pioneering work like this. The interdisciplinary gives sometimes a special slant or reflects missing dimensions for a communication scholar with theological and misicological background in Asia. The articles about the major world Religions are a case in point. Thus the influence of media on religion in Hinduism is mentioned in the introduction to the article but not

really exemplified in the contribution itself which talks only about the characteristics of Hinduism, Politics and religion and Hinduism today (pp. 161-164). The article on Islam considers more than others the communication dimensions though it is strongly U.S. oriented. The related article on “Jihad” includes a general description and states that “the Internet is a favorite tool of Jihad groups”, reporting their propaganda efforts and relates also the “Al-Jazeera” TV to this group. The contribution of Judaism considers in a special way the relation between this Religion and Mass Media. Based on scripture the author is convinced that communication “has played an important role in the development of Judaism”(207). Confucianism sees in its founder Kung Fu Tse “an exemplary teacher and sage of ancient China, and its greatest communicator”(89) who influences even today communities in East Asian and beyond.

As easily happens in such works also and here under the title as Religion and communication one misses some entries like Ethics as well as generally entries on Philosophy and Theology and their relation to communication. Keywords like Homiletics and Preaching are somehow included in an article on Sermons, but at least a reference could have been listed referring the the Sermon article. Also religious practices with strong communication dimensions like Liturgy and Ritual as well as Prayer should be part of such a reference book, especially since already the introduction says that communication is the “essence of prayer, sermons, Ritual and congregational Fellowship”(XV). Even the communication dimension of Church (Religion) in general would be a helpful addition.

The simple re-print of the edition from 2006 makes the book in a cheaper edition (paperback) available, which will be appreciated by many. A new fully revised and updated edition

would call for a heavy editorial commitment. But at least some of the entries could have been revised and updates for the reprint like the text of Heidi Campbell (177-181) on “Internet and Cyber Environments”. The rapid developments especially in this field would need an urgent update beyond the basics. How are recent Social Networks related to Religion online and on line Religion?

All in all the book is a masterpiece and brings for the first time Religion and Communication together in a joint effort of many scholars which should also be an incentive to further study and developments in this field.

*Franz-Josef Eilers, svd*

**PETER GONSALVES: CLOTHING FOR LIBERATION.  
A COMMUNICATION ANALYSIS OF GHANDI'S  
SWADESHI REVOLUTION. NEW DELHI. SAGE  
PUBLICATIONS. 2010. 164 PAGES.**

This book is a masterpiece in the field of non-verbal and political communication. Peter Gonsalves from the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome presents Ghandi in his use of "Clothing for Liberation" from the British colonial powers.

In the first chapter the author presents Ghandi as a communicator. An originally shy person develops into one of the most powerful communicators of modern times. He spoke and wrote, but was most successful as a communicative person in representing Truth and Dignity and being able to develop "a gigantic people-to- people communication network" (p.16) not just talking 'at' people but 'with' them. For him, God alone is the real truth (95 f.). He "declares that his exercise in sharing his experiments aims to make him childlike and 'humbler than the dust'."

From chapter onwards Gonsalves looks in more detail at this communicator through different communication perspectives. Using Roland Barthes' semiology he looks at the "Ghandian Fashion System". He considers "Ghandi's Social Drama" in his "Swadeshi Revolution" through the anthropological studies and "Performance theory" of Victor Turner, based on Van Gennep's "Rites de Passage" (1909). In a third step Ghandi is shown as "Performance Manager of the Nation" through the studies of Erving Goffman who is related to the "symbolic interaction" theories of George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. Goffman's ideas on "The Presentation of

Self in Everyday Life” (1959) are applied in a very convincing way to Gandhi. A short chapter on “A Gandhian Approach to Symbolisation” concludes this well documented and researched book which deserves a special place for anyone who studies non-verbal communication and the possibilities and impact of traditional ways of communicating.

Asking “What was Gandhi’s Communication Secret?,” Peter Gonsalves identifies six ‘principles’ as constitutive of Gandhi’s communication (122, ff.):

1. Historical roots (“only after being well informed about the past...can the symbol- maker work out appropriate responses to present ills.”)
2. Grass-root experience (“understanding of contexts from within and below.. immersing oneself fully in a situation...”).
3. Scientific temper (“Gandhian symbol-makers are indefatigable seekers of Truth...”).
4. Ethical religion (“Responsibility is the watch-word of Gandhian communicators...”).
5. Oneness of Reality (“ All symbolisation has value only insofar as it reflects the Truth, the one and only Reality. All else is illusion, or deception masquerading as Truth..”).
6. Socio-political transformation (“ Symbol-making in the Gandhian mould ...breaks free from the mainstream patronage that entreps and controls...”).

This book is also a good example of a serious application of different communication research approaches to one person analysing the dimensions and perspectives of his communication. It can only be highly recommended to everybody who studies

culture and communication, non-verbal communication or also communication ethics and values.

*Franz-Josef Eilers, svd*

*PUBLICATIONS*

**Journals:**

*Richard K. Popp: Visual Culture, Public Space, and Piety in Focus on the Family's 'Citizen' Magazine. In: Critical Studies in Media Communication. Vo. 27, Number 5, December 2010. Pp. 498-518*

*"This study examines how the far-right Christian Group Focus on the Family discussed visual culture – the practices of constructing, seeing, and making sense of visual environments – in its Citizen magazine..."*

*Fathi Migdadi, Muhammad A. Badarneh & Kawakib Momani: Divine Will and its Extensions: Communicative functions of maasaalah in Cooquial Jordanian Arabic. In: Communication Monographs. Volume 77, Number 4, Deecember 2010, pp. 480-499*

*" This study examines the communicative functions of the Arabic religious formula maasaalah in light of speech net theory, Gricean maxins, and Brown and Levinson's politeness model. Analysis of 500 instances... shows that the expression, as an extension of its semantic value of expresing divine will, is used as an invocation, a compliment, an expression of gladness, an expression of modesty, a marker of sarcasm and as conversational backchannel..."*

*Richard F. Wolff: The State of Media Curricula at Accredited Seminaries in the United States. In: Journal of Media and Religion. Volume 9, Number 3, 2010 pp.165-175.*

*"The curriculums of all 197 accredited seminaries in the United States were reviewed to identify classes involving instruction in media...The discussion considers reasons underlying the findings and reflects on the state of media curricula at U.S. seminaries."*

**Books:**

Kristy Madux:

*The faithful Citizen: Popular Christian Media and Gendered Civic Identities.*  
Baylor University Press, 2010. Paperback

Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Singapore:

*Philip Behnke (ed.): Social Media and Politics. Online Social Networking and Political Communication in Asia.* Singapore (Media Programme Asia) 2010, 140 pages

*Stephen Quinn & Kim Kierans (ed.): Asia's Media Innovators. Second Edition.* Singapore (Media Programme Asia) 2010. 137 pages

*Stephen Quinn: Mojo – Mobile Journalism in the Asian Region. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.* Singapore (Media Programme Asia) 2011. 66 pages

**NOTES****ARC Changes**

New Chairman of the ARC Board is Bishop Chacko Thottumarickal, svd Indore (India). Bishop Chacko holds a MA degree in Communication Research from the University of Leicester, England. Since January 1, 2011 he is the chairman of the FABC Office of Social Communication.

Bishop George Phimphisan, cssr, Udon Thani (Thailand) will continue as Honorary Chairman of the ARC Board.

The new Executive secretary of the FABC-Office of Social Communication, Fr. Raymond Ambroise (Hyderabad, India), is ex officio member of the ARC Board.

*New ARC Executive Director* is Dr. Franz-Josef Eilers,svd (June 1, 2010). As one of the founding members, he continues in the board of the Center.

*New Assistant to the Executive Director* is Arthapol Vithayakritsirikul, Bangkok. Together with Anthony Roman (Manila), he is also Editorial Assistant to the Center.

*Additional new Consultants* to ARC are:

- Dr. Binod Agrawal, Taleem Research Foundation, Ahmedabad (India)
- Dr. Keval Kumar, Center for Media Education and Research, Pune (India)
- Dr. Dr. Helmuth Rolfes, University Kassel/ Bremen (Germany)

### IAMCR Academic Conference 2011

The “*International Association for Media and Communication Research*” (IAMCR) will have an academic conference on “*Cities, Creativity, Connectivity*” at Kadir Has University in Istanbul (Turkey) from July 13 to 17, 2011. Within the Association there is a special working group on “*Media, Religion and Culture*” which will be presenting also their own papers on Religion related subjects. For this the organizers write: “In addition to the general theme of the conference on cities, creativity and connectivity, for those of us considering the religious as a factor in that reality, the renegotiation of the place of religion within society, political life etc. emerges as a central matter calling for elaboration...It seems that the rigid secular character of the state -(Turkey)- is adjusting to the overwhelming fact of the religious in the lives of the vast majority of their citizens...”

Co-ordinators of the group are: J.Ehrat ([ehrat@unigre.it](mailto:ehrat@unigre.it)), F. Coffey ([fdcoffey@yahoo.com](mailto:fdcoffey@yahoo.com)) , D. Dipio ([dodipio@arts.mak.ac.ug](mailto:dodipio@arts.mak.ac.ug)) W. Ihejirika ([wihejirika@yahoo.com](mailto:wihejirika@yahoo.com)). They can be contacted via their e- mail addresses.

Website: <http://iamcr.org/>

### Call for Papers

**Religion and Social Communication in Asia: research challenges  
A Roundtable organized by the “Asian Research Center  
for Religion and Social Communication”(ARC)  
at St. John’s University, Bangkok  
October 17 to 20, 2011**

Religion and Social Communication in Asian Cultures and Societies is a field which has hardly been touched by academic research. This 4<sup>th</sup> Roundtable of the ARC wants to look deeper into this need and possibilities:

- How does religion influence the communication of and in Asian societies?
- What are traditional communicative expressions in and of Asian religions?
- Is religious communication in Asian religions changed through modern technologies (Media/New Media)? How?
- What are the different communicative means used by religions traditionally and in modern times? How are they adjusted , when and where? Who are their recipients?
- Are the ways of sharing religious experiences and content today different from the past and with what consequences?

- How are religious convictions and messages communicated to members of the same religion and to other people?
- Does religious communication change humans and political situations of people? Does religious communication contribute to the daily lives of people and how?
- How can social communication contribute to inter-religious dialogue and mutual understanding?

This are only some of the areas and developments which could constitute special challenges for studies and research on religion and social communication.

The Center itself sees its main activities in the following three broad fields:

1. Communication within religions
2. Religion and communication in society
3. Religion and social communication in cultures

### **Contributions**

Any contribution or proposals for the conference along the lines indicated are welcome!

Please send a draft proposal (300 to 500 words) till June 30, 2011 to the Center for evaluation with the remark: "For October Roundtable". If invited Final Papers should be submitted till September 1, 2011. They will be included in the proceedings of the Conference.

While participation in the Roundtable is only for invited scholars, those whose paper is accepted will be able to present it at the Conference on their own expense. Accepted Papers will also be published in the "Journal" of the ARC.

*Address:* [arc@stjohn.ac.th](mailto:arc@stjohn.ac.th)





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