Christianity

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Abstract

Christianity is a diverse phenomenon and is more accurately understood not just as a religion that uses communication, but as a mediated phenomenon in which communication is integral to and constitutive of its character. One of the distinctive aspects of Christian communication theory is the proposition that there is a divine being who communicates its character and purposes with humans, and whom humans can in turn communicate to and exercise some influence on. Within this context, the variety of hermeneutical processes discerning the presence and meanings of divine–human and human–divine communication in speech, text, and visual and material media are explored.

Keywords: communication theory; cultural/critical communication; history of media and communications; material culture; religion

Christianity is a diverse phenomenon, whether considered diachronically or synchronically. This diversity can be seen in all aspects of the religion: its theology, its institutional structures, its rites and practices, its material forms and expressions, its communication practices, and its theoretical understandings of these practices. There have been constant efforts throughout Christianity to build or define a framework of coherence by which to unify this diversity. These range across a spectrum, from efforts to define a universal, exclusive official orthodoxy against which options or innovations are evaluated, to more localized or denominational efforts to build working bodies of agreement for particular purposes. The means for achieving this definition have ranged from reasoned discussion and consensus-building; rhetorical persuasion; psychological or emotional coercion; and imposed censorship and ostracism; to political, ecclesiastical, or military violence and execution. Rather

than unify, these efforts have often resulted in an increased or exaggerated division, leading some to suggest that Christianity may be better understood not as a single phenomenon but as a multitude of communities of discourse and practice, many of them contradictory, with their only commonality being that they are associated in some way with the name of Jesus (Tanner, 1997).

From a communication perspective, Christianity is best approached not through the lens of a religion that uses communication, but as a mediated phenomenon in itself, in which communication and communication practice are integral to and constitutive of its character. It has a rich history of communication practice across the spectrum of communication genres and sensory engagement. Many commonly accepted secular communication practices today have their roots in Christian innovations.

These communication practices are integrated with and integral to distinctive theoretical propositions or assumptions. Though theoretical in nature, these are generally framed in Christianity not as theory but as theological propositions or beliefs, often taking the character not of beliefs or theories but of empirical facts. Though most Christian communication practices have similarities with secular practices—in fact many secular practices were drawn from earlier Christian ones—their theological framework give them distinctive meaning. Because of this, some understanding of the theological framework within which Christian communication takes place is central in understanding and analyzing its character and intent. Two aspects of these in particular are fundamental to most communicative expressions of the Christian faith.

Divine–human communication

Most contemporary communication theory is constructed on the premise that humans are autonomous actors within a defined and contained empirical world and properly understood within those parameters. A fundamental premise of most expressions of Christianity, however, is that beyond or within the empirical world there is a singular moral Divine Being (commonly called God) that transcends the empirical, that created and sustains it, and actively communicates with human beings in a way that can be directly or indirectly perceived and understood by the human mind. A number of elements of this fundamental theoretical premise are important in understanding most Christian understandings and practices of communication.

One is that these divine communications have a self-disclosing or revelatory character. That is, what Christians say they know about the nature and character of God is known not through human initiative or deduction, but because God initiates communication to make known its character, its

purposes in creating the world, its moral expectations of humans, its favor or disfavor, and its general or specific intentions or directions for what should happen.

This divine communication is considered to occur in a number of ways. One is through the world of nature, which, it is theorized, reflects general characteristics of God as creator in a way that can be deduced logically by humans. Though expressed poetically in different ways, the theoretical concept of a generalized communication of God through the world of nature and human reason is formalized in the concept of natural theology.

Second, God is seen as communicating specifically through particular historical events. The spiritual meaning of these events is disclosed, however, only to those who have a particular quality of perception to perceive the inner meaning. This quality of perception, often called "the eyes of faith," is seen in most Christian theory not as something that individuals can generate for themselves, but as a spiritual gift of faith given to particular people by God.

Christianity has recognized a number of events or contexts as sites of this specific divine communication. One is communications from God to selected individuals, through either an audible voice, ecstatic dreams or visions, or interpreted events. A second is through written text, particularly texts in which it is perceived or has been declared that the writing has been inspired by God's Spirit. A third is in material or physical phenomena such as physical locations or holy places, visual and material artifacts such as icons, or material symbols such as relics, the shape of the cross, or the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

The definitive site of divine revelatory communication in Christian thought was the human being Jesus, who after his death was construed by some not just as a messenger communicating on behalf of God but as God communicating as a human being. This perception was extended and embedded culturally after his death by refiguring Jesus as "the Word of God," invoking not just concepts of speech or text, but the broader Hellenistic philosophical concept of *logos* as the intellectual structure of the universe.

The ambiguities involved in interpreting empirical events, or subjective cognitions, as a revelatory communication from God provoked extensive historical processes of evaluation and authorization of which human perceptions and constructions of events and cognitions are valid communications of God, and which are not. From the earliest times of Christianity there is documentation of cautions that not every individual's claim of a revelatory communication from God should be accepted as such.

Deciphering this ambiguity has led to the construction of hermeneutical frameworks, traditions, or guidelines by which what God is deemed to have

communicated has been regulated. Since status, privilege, and power accrue to those individuals and groups whose authority is seen to be based on God's revelations, the processes of Christian hermeneutics have been actively politically contested, frequently fractious, and at times also brutally violent and murderous. Determining the relative authority of communication genres (charismatic rhetoric, written and printed texts, oratorical performance, and institutional establishment), constructing a canon of authorized scriptural texts, determining authorized philosophical creedal summaries of the essence of Christian beliefs, and the religious doctrinal wars of the Reformation period can all be seen as grinding the correct lens for interpreting the presumed divine message within mundane natural and historical events.

Human–divine communication

The other significant theoretical claim made by Christianity is that human beings can also communicate with the transcendent Divine Being when they want to; and when they do, God responds and is influenced by that communication. The paradigms adopted within Christianity for human communication with God are those of submissive or respectful approach of a subordinate to a superior (the feudal concept of speaking to one's lord is frequently invoked), of a contrite approach of a penitent before a judge, or of an intimate or adoring conversation with a lover.

The purposes of such communication are several. One is mystical: for humans simply to have relational communion with God, often expressed in intimate relational terms of mutual enjoyment, expressed adoration of God's magnificence, or mystical or ecstatic absorption into God's wholeness. A second is moral: to clarify God's moral expectations, to acknowledge and seek forgiveness for moral failures, and to seek support or directions for future actions. A third is plaintive: seeking divine intervention for oneself or on behalf of others.

As well as individual practice, a major feature of Christianity has been the communalizing of divine–human and human–divine communication in services of worship. The form, location, frequency, activities, sensory character, and theorization of these gatherings across Christianity have been and are diverse. In some Christian traditions they are theorized in objective terms, as producing an effect of structuring meaning within the universe simply by virtue of their performance; in others the subjective dimension of effecting an emotional response and observable attitudinal or behavioral change in participants is paramount.

The effects that can be expected from communicating with God are perceived differently within Christianity. Some see the effects as mainly

psychological, with any effects flowing mainly from enhancement of a person's sense of well-being, comfort, or optimism. Others see it quite unambiguously as prompting a supernatural action by God on behalf of the person, stimulating God to act supernaturally in a way that is specific, individual, and preferentially addressed to the person's communicated request. Individuals who appear to have a particular ability to produce effects through their communication with God have commonly been revered and often sought out, in some cases in perpetuity through elevation to the status of saints.

There developed early in parts of Christianity the practice of communicating with God through intermediaries, motivated by perceptions that as the supreme lord God was distant and preoccupied with more important things or overwhelming requests, or by the intangibility of God leading to a need for more physical contact or more accessible spiritual beings. An early expression of this was communicating with God at the graves of martyrs, with the expectation or hope that the effectiveness of communication would be heightened by proximity to the remains of a person perceived to have superior spiritual power. This early practice extended to the cult and economy of relics and relic sites, locations where a part of the body or something physically associated with a martyr or authorized saint was housed. Similarly, the early practice of using material artifacts as aids or intermediaries in communicating with God has continued to be a common practice in Christian communication. Physical sensory practices such as holding or kissing icons, crosses, or cloths; smelling incense; fingering rosary beads; making the sign of the cross; kneeling, genuflecting, or rocking in prayer; eating particular foods, particularly the bread and wine of the Eucharist; and chanting or singing have all served to ground communicating with God in physical, sensate experience.

Modes of Christian communication
Though there are institutions and traditions of thought that portray Christianity as simply a continuation of what Jesus was doing and intended, it is apparent that Christianity is more than that. It is a complex and expanding mediated communication phenomenon, born in the imaginations and experience of his followers, who were convinced that in the life and teachings of Jesus they had been given a new revelation from God and set out to communicate this perceived truth in a way that convinced others to believe it also. This was a process of creative reproduction that involved not just a simple recounting of past events but a constant rhetorical reworking of Jesus to match the conditions of an ever-expanding set of constantly changing circumstances. In this process, Jesus the Middle Eastern peasant has been transformed into one of the most powerful communication and media concepts

the world has seen, an extensive and fecund reservoir of media resources capable of immense adaptability: constructed histories, biographies, stories, heroes, heroines, and villains, personal testimony, libraries, cultural interpretations, philosophical speculations and systems, artifacts, ritual practices, visual imagery, dance, theater, ideological sensory experiences, rule books, ethical systems, architectural constructions, digital applications, and traditions of organization, structure, and processes. To summarize this diversity into a brief number of relevant communication theories or philosophies is not possible. But a number of genres are pertinent.

Speech
The vast majority of the earliest Christians were illiterate (some estimate around 95%), and illiteracy may have marked the majority of Christian adherents until possibly the nineteenth century. Some scholars contend that, contrary to some written accounts, Jesus also was illiterate, as reflected in the strong oral characteristics of his storytelling, aphoristic teachings, and interactive performance. Speech and speech performance therefore was, and continues to be, a fundamental communication genre throughout Christianity's history.

There are a number of indicators that the oral-aural mode was perceived by some to be essential to the communication of Christian faith. The Christian Papias, around the year 150, reflected "For I did not think that what was to be gotten from the books would profit me as much as what came from the living and abiding voice." One of the writings of the Alexandrian teacher Clement indicates that even as late as the third century, concerns were expressed about the writing down of Christian teachings, among them a perception that a personal relationship with God could only be instigated through the personal medium of the human voice. Clement's response outlined what has been a common perspective on Christian communication, namely that the different modes of communication should be seen as complementary, though speech has remained as one of the more influential.

Apart from its functional uses, a lot of Christian speech operates within the conditions of rhetorical performativity, where meaning is generated and validated by conventions or authorities that it invokes. This is particularly the case with prophetic or charismatic speech, where legitimacy is claimed on the basis of power embodied in the person and demonstrated through such things as the dynamism and flow of the speaking performance, and accompanying actions such as those that produced conversions or miraculous physical or spiritual healings. Part of the power of such rhetorical speech is invocation of the authority of the divine, with the phrase "In the name of Jesus" being

common not only in Christian charismatic performance but also in spoken and written prayers.

While the genre of charismatic or prophetic speech tends to be the least regulated within Christianity, dependent more on situational authentication and validation, other forms of Christian speech are more regulated in order to reinforce the authority on which the integrity or trustworthiness of the speech is institutionally recommended. Institutional regulations, such as who is authorized to preach from a church pulpit, administer the sacrament of baptism or Eucharist, or make authoritative pronouncements, are managed through institutional processes such as education, formal appointment to a position (such as through ordination), supporting symbols such as the physical location or barriers around the pulpit or altar, and visual symbols such as clerical dress, genuflecting, and stance.

Text

From its earliest times Christianity carried over textual practice from its Jewish roots. This involved rhetorical practices such as retrospective exegesis, where sayings of Jewish prophets in the Hebrew scriptures referring to historical situations of their time were interpreted as predictions of events of Jesus's life or Jesus's religious significance several hundred years later.

Though the membership of early Christianity was dominantly illiterate, it also attracted a small number of those in the wider culture who were literate. Though only a small minority within the Christian movement, because of their higher social status and the affordances of writing they exercised a disproportionate influence on the shape of Christianity's development. The ideas of the apostle Paul, for example, though one among a number of cultural reinterpretations of Jesus being undertaken at the time, had a disproportionate influence on the development of Christianity because of the relative permanence of their written form and subsequent wide copying and circulation. In a similar way, though there were numerous "gospels" and letters about the life of Jesus in circulation in the first several centuries, a small number had an exaggerated and more permanent impact because of their authorization through a canonization process in which they alone were named as the written "Word of God." This small list of writings, finalized in the fourth century—the Bible—has been seen as either influential or even determinative of Christian "truth" to the present time.

However, because of its character as a polysemic material text, but one conveying an immaterial communication from God, a similar sort of hermeneutical process had to be developed to identify which meanings drawn from the text could be considered as legitimately the voice of God and which

could not. This field of Christian scriptural hermeneutics, which also assimilated selected textual practices from other religious traditions and other cultural contexts, has been perhaps one of the largest single fields of literary study in the world, practiced not only in scholarly circles but on a regular weekly basis in the communication practices of most preachers across Christianity and on a daily basis in the devotional practices of many Christians. This attempt to find the "word of God" in the texts of Christian scriptures has produced no single answer or Christian approach, but more a variety of hermeneutical communities or emphases that complement or contend with each other: spiritual, rhetorical, typological, allegorical, historical-critical, poststructuralist, linguistic, political, and feminist, to name a few.

Of particular note and influence in recent times is the textual practice of modern Christian fundamentalism, which in the latter part of the nineteenth century sought to reposition the authority and centrality of the scriptures in Christianity in the face of perceived attack and diminishment by historical-criticism methodology and liberal theology. Christian fundamentalism advocated a theoretical position (though they do not see it as theoretical) of the literal inerrancy of the scriptural text on all matters: not just doctrinal, as was held by some other hermeneutical positions, but in all matters, including its moral positions and historical and scientific information. Though advocating and maintaining it follows a literal face-reading of the text, because of the complexity and at times contradictions within the text, Christian fundamentalism has established hermeneutical guidelines that reflect its own historically situated doctrinal and political concerns (such as the literal historical reality of the biblical account of creation, the virgin birth, and the physical resurrection and miracles of Jesus).

The visual
From the earliest decades, Christians used visual representations in their residences and churches, drawing in many cases on existing cultural images to construct and communicate understandings of Jesus of relevance to their cultural location. The use of visual imagery increased during the fourth century after Christianity was adopted by the emperor Constantine as a favored religion of the empire, and the increasing number of church buildings were being decorated with pictures of angels, holy figures, and biblical scenes. The identification of some images as particularly holy or potent mediators of communication with the divine increased during the sixth century, with practices such as kissing the image and bowing or lighting candles or incense in front of them. By the end of the seventh century, painted portraits, particularly of people recognized as saints, came to be seen particularly in

Eastern Christianity as channels of divine power, as physical relics were, a view reinforced by the circulation of stories of miracles resulting from portrait veneration. This veneration of religious images in the East was contentious, for some because it distracted Christians from purely spiritual realities, for others because it evoked or emulated idolatry. Others defended it on educational grounds and because, as a nontextual form of communication, it was of spiritual value to those who were illiterate.

The contention erupted violently in the eighth century, involving elements of political, military, economic, aesthetic, spiritual, theological, gender, and pastoral interests, all feeding into different positions on the place of the visual in Christian human–divine communication. The communication issue, as outlined in the defense of icons by the Byzantine historian and theologian Nicephorus, was:

> *The problem with words was that thought was required to make sense of them. Words could lead to doubt, indecisiveness, and equivocation. Sight, on the other hand, provided for much more direct perception. Holy images were less prone to misinterpretation than sermons (or holy texts), and in this sense were less threatening to faith. (Freedberg, 1989, p. 400)*

The dispute, which never reached the same level of contention in Western Latin Christianity, was resolved at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, with a position in which text-based theologians were to determine the content and aesthetics of icons to preserve their orthodox content, and visual artists were to implement it. The decision was influential in shaping the theoretical framing of Christian communication to the present time. Even though popular practice was pragmatic, a hierarchy of communication practice was established that gave precedence to the verbal and textual communication of Christianity over the visual and material. This precedence was influential in the resistance by text-based traditions of Christianity to the emergence of popular visual culture in the twentieth century.

The physical and material

More attention has been given in recent decades to the place of material artifacts and the physical senses in the communication spectrum of Christianity (McDannell, 1995; Morgan, 2010). Physical actions such as touch, gestures, posture, dance, genuflecting, vocal resonance, crossing oneself, or anointing; and material artifacts such as buildings, statues, tombstones and memorials, relics, Bibles, candles, prayer beads, and tokens; have been found to play not just a secondary but a primary role for many Christians in communicating with the divine or other human beings. Brown observes that the large and elaborately decorated churches built by Constantine throughout

the empire "spoke more loudly and more continuously of the providential alliance of church and empire than did any imperial edict or the theorizing of any bishop" (Brown, 2003, p. 77). Boniface, the British missionary monk to Germany, on one occasion asked to be sent a copy of the *Epistles of St Peter*, specifying that they be written in letters of gold so that "a reverence and love of the Holy Scriptures may be impressed on the minds of the heathens to whom I preach" (Halsall, 1996, section 21)

Seeing, or trying to understand, such forms of communication as separate from the religion itself is an errant dichotomy. In her analysis, Meyer highlights that the sensory and material nature of religious communication is such that in practice, "media become so entangled with what they contribute to mediate that they are not visible as such, at least not for those who are partaking in mediation" (Meyer, 2011, p. 26).

Christianity and modern communication theory
A major factor prompting change and innovation within Christianity has been practical and intellectual developments in the cultural milieus within which it has been embodied or translated. In the modern period, the development of historical-critical methodologies coming out of the Enlightenment had a marked effect on Christian theorizing and practice in understanding and interpretation of scriptural texts. Some streams within Christianity adopted historical-critical method in its interpretation of scriptural meaning; others strongly resisted it. The dominance of the historical-critical method has only recently been challenged by alternative hermeneutic theories such as poststructuralist, political, and feminist approaches (Barton, 1998).

In the field of modern communication studies, the early paradigm of instrumentalism was most commonly adopted in thinking about Christian communication. A number of aspects of the instrumentalist approach paralleled and supported institutional thinking and structure within Christianity: The view that the construction of meaning was largely determinative and lay in the hands of the communicator or content creator supported the authority structure of most churches; the view that significant power lay in the hands of the one who controlled the means of production and distribution supported the advantages held by the superior resources of the institutions of Christianity; the broadcast model of mass media, dominant through much of the twentieth century, replicated many of the institutional forms of mass communication practiced in Christianity through the centuries.

Developments in communication theory more recently have had a significant impact on the institutional structures and practices of Christianity. Active audience and reader-response theories challenge the authority

structures on which much of Christianity has been built, particularly since the Reformation period, relocating the site of meaning-making within Christianity away from institutions to audiences. Critical communication perspectives such as those on language and power, on hegemony, and on ideology and discourse challenge many of the processes by which power has been constructed and maintained throughout Christian history (Bourdieu, 1977). Perspectives that have elevated the importance of the visual and material in Christian communication are challenging the perceived superiority of text-based theology that has persisted within Christianity since the end of the iconoclastic disputes. The theory of mediatization, though challenged itself by other critical perspectives, has questioned the extent to which religion has been able to maintain its integrity within a mass media cultural context. Each of these perspectives has contributed to a general undermining of the stance of disinterest, moral guardianship, and altruism that have marked a good deal of Christianity's social authority, and a wider reworking and shift of power within Christianity between what Woodhead (2004) conceptualizes as institutionalized and regulated power exercised from above, and decentralized and distributed power from below.

SEE ALSO: Buddhism; Confucianism; Daoism; Hermeneutics; Hinduism; Islam; Judaism; Religion Studies

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