

On the Conditions for the Development of Eco-Religious Communication in the Religious System

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ABSTRACT:

Contemporary religious communication is characterized by semantic variations that attempt to integrate new topics and concerns originating in non-religious discourses while still claiming to convey the same religious “truth” or eternally valid view of reality. This development results in new semantics or forms of the religious symbol system. For example, the appropriation of bioethical and ecological semantics by religious individuals and organizations and their engagement in environmental enterprises produces an “eco-religious communication” that intends to be religious and ecological at the same time. The study of these phenomena will have to identify contextual factors that contribute to or directly cause semantic transformations in the religious system, and, in addition, discern the structures and processes that guide the selection and repeated use of new semantics by the system. This paper attempts to discuss these semantic transformations in terms of system/environment relations, and to clarify the internal conditions for the development of eco-religious communication. The paper first mentions an example of eco-religious communication in a Christian context that refers to the concept of “sustainability”, before

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introducing basic concepts of Niklas Luhmann's approach to the Sociology of Knowledge that are relevant to the study of eco-religious phenomena, and finally explaining the conditions for the translation process that results in eco-religious semantics.

Keywords: Religious studies, theory of religion, ecology and religion, systems theory, Luhmann

論宗教系統中生態學宗教溝通形成的條件

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摘要：

本文試圖以盧曼的系統理論探討宗教系統語意的變化。當代宗教溝通經常嘗試把源自非宗教性論域的語意——例如生態學相關觀念——融入宗教系統的象徵語言，但同時堅持這些新語意仍傳達原本的宗教真理或實在觀。此發展形成宗教象徵系統的新語意形式。有關生態學宗教溝通的研究必須掌握在系統整體情境中直接引起或有助於形成這種語意形式的因素，同時也應指出宗教系統內部有哪些結構與過程導致新語意形式的選擇與重複使用。首先，舉德國基督宗教教會推動以「永續發展」來詮釋《聖經》的計畫為例，其次，說明盧曼知識社會學的相關觀念，然後釐清宗教系統形成生態學宗教溝通的內部條件，指出由於宗教是當代社會功能系統之一，以其獨特二元符碼來引導系統運作，所以新

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本文係科技部整合型研究計畫「台灣本土宗教思想倫理對生態、環境的論述、影響與前瞻——台灣環境倫理與動物倫理之佛教論述、影響與前瞻」之第三期報告。該項計畫編號為 NSC 101-2632-H-364-001-MY3。本計畫執行期間自民國 101 年 08 月 01 日起至 104 年 07 月 31 日止。

語意形式必須經過此符碼的應用才能被譯成具有宗教性質的語意。

關鍵詞：宗教學、宗教理論、生態學與宗教、系統理論、盧曼

1. Introduction

Religions are often understood as traditions that transmit – or purport to transmit – some form of eternally valid “message” or “truth”. However, when seen from the perspective of the History of Religions, it is evident that religions – especially those that are based on scriptures – in fact are traditions of self-interpretation: they constantly reassess their understanding of their respective “message” and modify the ways of communicating it. Different historical and cultural contexts obviously manifest different readings and semantic styles. Contemporary religious communication is characterized by semantic variations that attempt to integrate new topics and concerns originating in non-religious discourses while still claiming to convey the same religious “truth” or eternally valid view of reality. This development results in new semantics or forms of the religious symbol system. For example, the appropriation of bioethical and ecological semantics by religious individuals and organizations and their engagement in environmental enterprises produces an “eco-religious communication” that intends to be religious and ecological at the same time. The study of these phenomena will have to identify contextual factors that contribute to or directly cause semantic transformations in the religious system, and, in addition, discern the structures and processes that guide the selection and repeated use of new semantics by the system. This paper attempts to discuss these semantic transformations in terms of system/environment relations, and to clarify the internal conditions for the development of eco-religious communication. Among the various sociological approaches of the Science of Religion (Religious Studies), Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory represents a perspective that appears to be akin to ecological modes of thinking without being involved in or implicitly supporting environmental thought: it is radically non-anthropocentric, based on a theory of distinction (difference) as fundamental to cognitive and communicative processes and the formation

of systems, and it operates with the system/environment distinction on all levels of analysis.¹ This paper applies this approach to the study of eco-religious communication in order to illustrate its theoretical value for the Science of Religion, and to indicate new ways of analyzing and interpreting ecological and bioethical questions in the field of religion. The paper first mentions an example of eco-religious communication in a Christian context that refers to the concept of “sustainability”, before introducing basic concepts of Niklas Luhmann’s approach to the Sociology of Knowledge that are relevant to the study of eco-religious phenomena. Next, the conditions for the translation process that results in eco-religious semantics are explained.

2. Semantic transformations as a problem of system evolution

Although the term and concept “sustainability” (*Nachhaltigkeit*) was explicitly advocated for the first time three centuries ago, it was only after the emergence of the modern environmental movement that it was successfully promoted in public discourse as a principle of responsible development.² Its origins and various contents indicate that there is no direct or necessary relation to or affinity with religious concerns. Therefore, any attempt to interpret sustainable development in religious terms most likely

¹ For a preliminary discussion of this approach in contrast with approaches in contemporary research on “ecology and religion” studies, see Günzel, M., “On Systems Theory as an Approach to the Study of ‘Religion and Ecology’ within the Context of the Science of Religion”, 《玄奘佛學研究》20期 (Sep. 2013), pp. 69-85.

² The invention of this concept is attributed to Hans Carl von Carlowitz (1645-1714), a Saxonian official in charge of mining and forestry. On the history of the concept, see Ulrich Grober, *Die Entdeckung der Nachhaltigkeit* (München: Kunstmann, 2010).

reflects a religious reaction to socio-cultural change. For example, Christian church organizations in Germany are now advocating sustainability within the context of bible preaching, evidently as an expression of their sense of responsibility for the welfare of society. Catholic and Protestant churches cooperate with government agencies to promote environmental consciousness. They even have institutionalized their responsibility for the environment by installing “environmental officers” (*Umweltbeauftragte*) who are in charge of integrating environmental policies into all levels of church operations. For example, they have developed detailed guidelines for the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions during church meetings, general measures for climate protection, and supported biodiversity projects in church buildings.³ However, although these measures address organisational levels as well as individual church members, they rarely try to explicitly integrate ecological semantics into the religious symbol system. By contrast, a long-term ecumenical project called *Nachhaltig predigen* (“Sustainable preaching”) attempts to systematically integrate faith and environmental consciousness. The project provides sustainability-compatible interpretations of the prescribed bible readings of the Catholic and Protestant liturgical year.⁴

“Sustainable preaching” is not an example of random, occasional ecological thoughts and utterances in the context of religious communication, but a long-term project carried out by cooperating religious organizations. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that this effort to combine the

³ Günzel, M., “Functions of Contemporary Eco-religious Communication in the Religious System”, 《玄奘佛學研究》23期 (Mar. 2015), p. 114.

⁴ The texts are mostly written by members and officials of church organizations who are experienced preachers. The main website of this project is www.nachhaltig-predigen.de; all bible interpretations on sustainable preaching published since 2005 are available at www.umdanken.de/?id=604.

non-religious concept of sustainability with the content of the bible represents a subtle change in the religious symbol system.

The systems theoretical interpretation and explanation of this change avoids the anthropocentric distinction human/nature. Its fundamental distinction is system/environment, and transformations are interpreted within the context of system evolution. In order to explain the unusual perspective of this approach, it is necessary to start the interpretation of the semantic transformations that might result in “Sustainable preaching” at a very abstract, general level. The system/environment distinction applies to practically all levels or dimensions of reality: apart from the material world and countless forms of living systems, there are two peculiar types of systems that form what is commonly understood as the human world: social systems and psychic systems. Social systems “exist” as communication, psychic systems as consciousness. They share a unique dimension or substratum: the *medium* meaning. Human experiences and actions are always meaningful in the sense that they are formed in and expressed through the medium meaning. Phenomenologically speaking, meaning is a distinction, it is the difference of something that is actualized as an object or content of intention and the simultaneous reference to other possible intentions that are temporarily excluded during the moment of the present intention. Following the present actualization of a specific meaning, the system will always be able to choose from other, different meanings in order to continue its operations. This is the precondition for the possibility of the continuation of a social or psychic system’s operations.⁵

Although the entire world of possible meanings is implicit in every single selection of meaning, its totality transcends the horizon of possible selections. It is not observable as a definite meaning, but has to be dealt with

⁵ On meaning, see Luhmann, N., *Soziale Systeme* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987), Ch. 2.

in a serial manner or in some form of generalization that omits details.⁶ Obviously, the conditioning of the selection of particular meanings is the fundamental problem that has to be solved during the process of system formation. Since the formation and continuation of a system depends on its ability to distinguish itself from its environment, it must form structures or criteria for the selection of known, familiar meanings that are marked as processable while other possibilities are ruled out. The problem is solved by means of typifications. According to Luhmann, social systems typify meanings in three dimensions (temporal, factual, social) in order to facilitate the smooth transition from one particular meaning to the next.⁷ As a result, the scope and tendency of communication in a social system becomes more predictable.

The term ‘semantics’ refers to these typifications of processable meanings. In the context of Luhmann’s theory, ‘semantics’ does not mean the study of signifiers and their meaning.⁸ Luhmann defines semantics as the totality of the forms of meaning that are usable as processable meanings in a social system; the term refers to the stock of available meanings that are generalized on higher levels and do not depend on specific situations.⁹

Luhmann distinguishes two levels of semantics: a basic level of everyday semantics and an additional, higher level of “refined semantics” (*gepflegte Semantik*) in textual form.¹⁰ The stock of refined semantics also functions to control the limits of linguistic expression and risks of

⁶ Luhmann, N., *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik*, Band 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1993), p. 18.

⁷ On the three dimensions of meaning, see Luhmann, N., *Soziale Systeme*, op. cit., pp. 111-122.

⁸ Luhmann, N., *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik*, Band 1, op. cit., p. 19.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. In this context, “textual” implies oral or written texts.

articulation; it is the precondition for the evolution of ideas.¹¹

The study of ecological elements in historical religions may focus on this level of refined semantics, e.g. religious thought that might be interpreted as reflecting a premodern form of environmental consciousness, or the development of concepts of nature in historical and contemporary religions. However, according to Luhmann's systems theory, even refined semantics is only real when it is actualized in some form of experience or action.¹² Meaning is always present meaning, because its reality depends on concrete, specific actions and experiences of social and psychic systems.¹³ Luhmann argues that the study of the transformations of concepts and ideas may neglect the immediate facticity of everyday processings of meaning and the typifications used if they are not part of refined semantics itself; however, the study should pay attention to the conditions and forms of systems differentiation that are the precondition for any form of actualization of meanings.¹⁴

Accordingly, the study of semantic transformations that result in eco-religious communication must consider the conditions for the differentiation of ecological meanings as part of – or as a subsystem within – the religious system. Occasional environmental or bioethical utterances in religious contexts are not religious per se, they have to be repeated and explicitly “loaded” with religious meaning in order to become part of the symbol system. In terms of system evolution, such utterances represent *variations*. The *selection* of these new forms of meaning by the operations of the religious system and the subsequent *restabilization* may eventually result in eco-religious communication as part of refined semantics of the religious

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 20.

¹³ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

system.¹⁵ “Sustainable preaching” is an example of the selection and restabilization process. The study of this process will have to focus on two questions: first, *why* the religious system selects and adopts ecological meanings like “sustainability”, and second, *how* these meanings are integrated into the religious symbol system. Both questions refer to the *code* of religion and its function.

3. “Sustainability” and the Code of Religion

The selection and appropriation of eco-religious communication by the religious system involves two different dimensions of system operation: the basic operation of communication and the semantics used.¹⁶ The social system reproduces itself as a self-referential network of communications that distinguishes itself from its environment. In order to determine the fundamental preconditions for the formation of system/environment distinctions, Luhmann’s theory applies a functionalist pattern of observation: the formation of a new system – within a system or within a context of other systems – and its specific forms of meaning (semantics) probably are related to the solution of a problem. The religious system exists as a subsystem within the encompassing social system that is called society. Its formation and further differentiation during the evolution of society was an expression of its crucial function within society: Since social systems are based on the reproduction of structures of meaning, they depend on using distinctions, but distinctions construct a world that is divided into actualized and potential

¹⁵ On Luhmann’s discussion of the theory of evolution, see Luhmann, N., *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1998), Ch. 3.

¹⁶ For a brief discussion of this distinction and the functions of eco-religious communication, see Günzel, M., “Functions of Contemporary Eco-religious Communication in the Religious System”, 《玄奘佛學研究》23 期 (Mar. 2015), pp. 101-118.

meanings, and into observable and non-observable causes and conditions; they must be able to deal with sudden events and unknown conditions that challenge the stability of its structures. The forms of meaning that are called religion deal with this problem: they provide meanings that transform the uncontrollable dimension of system operations into controllable forms. Religion conveys meanings that cover the totality of the inevitably split universe of meanings by introducing a transcendent perspective of observation that operates as a *binary code*: the distinction immanence/transcendence.¹⁷

According to Luhmann, the functional systems of modern society are characterized by the use of binary codes. The implementation of a binary code that guides the selections of meanings in a particular system is a result of system evolution, too. Codes are generated in a process that duplicates reality: the entire world of possible meanings that are processable in a social system is now observed from the perspective of the two values of the code.¹⁸ This process addresses a fundamental problem of systems operation: As mentioned above, a system that operates in and through the medium meaning must be able to recognize and distinguish itself and its environment during the process of selecting particular meanings from countless possible meanings. A code effectively solves this problem by applying the rigid form of a binary distinction: processable meanings will be assigned to either positive or negative value of the code.¹⁹ Therefore, a code facilitates the self-identification of a system. Furthermore, it simplifies the process of forming more complex structures and criteria that guide the operations of the system, because the implementation of a binary code enables the system to deal with irritations caused by its environment in a constructive way: just

¹⁷ Ibid.; for Luhmann's explanation of the code of religion, see Luhmann, N., *Die Religion der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), Ch. 2.

¹⁸ Luhmann, N., *Die Religion der Gesellschaft*, Ibid., p. 65.

¹⁹ Ibid.

like any other form of meaning processed by the system, irritations are subjected to digitalization, they are observed as a problem of code value assignment. Therefore, external disturbances that occur in a structured manner may lead to learning processes that eventually transform these irritations into new meaningful structures within the system. To achieve this, the code-based system develops *programs* that guide the assignment of the code values.²⁰ For example, the various teachings of a religious tradition represent the programs that guide its operations.²¹

Since the religious system operates and identifies itself by means of the binary code immanence/transcendence, irregular or new forms of meaning – for example ecological semantics referring to sustainability – that repeatedly occur in everyday religious communication will either be observed as some form of “noise” and consequently be ignored or deliberately excluded from further communication, or they will be interpreted in religious terms. A religious interpretation will observe ecological meanings from the perspective of the transcendent value of the code. In order to facilitate and normalize the use of new semantics denoting concepts of sustainability, the system will have to develop criteria that assist its selection and acceptance in the context of religious communication. These criteria or programs may eventually lead to the integration of ecological thought into the refined semantics of the religious system. The project “Sustainable preaching” represents such a process of developing programs that systematically apply the transcendent point of reference to the observation of ecological meanings. The theological and organizational infrastructure of the Catholic and Protestant churches in Germany lends itself to such an endeavour to transform the system’s religious semantics. Individual communications that convey some form of environmentally

²⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

²¹ On the programs of the religious system, see Luhmann, *ibid.*, pp. 92-101.

conscious meaning might easily be dismissed as irrelevant for the religious context. However, as soon as the organization decides to promote ecological thoughts and values, its institutional subsystems and individual members are encouraged to attempt new interpretations of traditional semantics. It is particularly interesting to study how experienced preachers try to find modern environmental thoughts and values in the prescribed bible passages of the liturgical year – they can't simply search for relevant texts, but are forced to analyze and “translate” the traditional selection of texts in terms of sustainability und environmental values. In some cases, the authors admit the impossibility of combining a particular bible text with ecological thought.²² Only detailed study of the texts will show whether their efforts result in genuine religious interpretations of a secular concept, i.e. a transcendent perspective on sustainability, or actually produce something quite different: an immanent perspective on the transcendent value of the code.

4. Conclusion

Luhmann's theory provides a systematic approach to the study of ecology and religion. The emergence of modern ecological semantics in religious contexts is observed as a phenomenon of communication (social systems). The interpretation focuses on the structural context of semantics, i.e. the conditions and characteristics of system operation in meaning systems. The development of eco-religious communication reflects changes in system/environment relations, it is an aspect of system evolution. The religious system is a functional system of modern society, its operations are

²² For two examples admitting the limits of ecological interpretation, see <http://www.nachhaltig-predigen.de/index.php/component/content/article/21-predigtanregungen/iii-fastenzeit-13-14/194-judika-5-fastensonntag-06-04-14> (accessed 04/04/2015); <http://www.nachhaltig-predigen.de/index.php/component/content/article/16-predigtanregungen-13-14/die-zeit-im-jahreskreis-trinitatis/80-20-sonntag-nach-trinitatis-28-sonntag-im-jahreskreis-13-10-13> (accessed 04/04/2015).

guided by a binary code. Therefore, ecological meanings must be translated into religious semantics by means of its code in order to be religious. This paper only discussed theoretical problems of eco-religious communication within the context of systems theory. The problems and characteristics of this translation process will be reflected in the texts that record the refined semantics of the religious system. Comparative studies of these documents of eco-religious communication from the perspective of systems theory will show how different religious traditions develop eco-religious semantics according to their respective version of the code.

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