

WHAT IS RELIGION, AND WHAT IS RELIGION FOR? THOUGHTS IN LIGHT OF COMMUNICATIVE THEOLOGY

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Summary

The main purpose of my paper is to show that religion is closely connected with communication and action. Religion is rather a life practice than a worldview. This thesis is developed in both conversation and dispute with philosophical and anthropological approaches to religion. On the one hand, an understanding of religion as practice coping with contingency is dealt with. On the other hand, some insights of ritual studies regarding religion as genuine ritual practice are addressed. Both positions have significant shortcomings; the first strictly separates religious practice from other forms of action; the second rightly underlines the aspects of liminality and *communitas* but neglects the ambiguity of rituals which can not only establish true community but can become compulsive as well.

Therefore, the theory of communicative action, introduced by Jürgen Habermas is taken into account. The paper sketches how Habermas in his earlier writings considered religion as having become obsolete in modernity and thus replaced by communicative action. However, his views of religion have considerably changed in the last decade. In the meanwhile, he insists that religion contains a communicative potential and that religious communities must not be marginalized or excommunicated by secular thinking. On the contrary, they belong to the public sphere where they play an inspiring and remembering role.

Taking up central insights from Habermas' philosophical theory of communicative action and integrating them into fundamental theology, I claim that religion itself is a constitutive communicative practice. Following Helmut Peukert and others I try to make clear, that communicative religious speech and action has a creative, an innovative and an anamnestic potential. Religion takes place within religious communities and traditions, and it is done in communicative faith practice. It is performed in dif-

ferent forms of communicative-religious action. The paper underlines that witnessing and confessing are two elementary acts of monotheistic religions. It then turns to further forms of communicative-religious practice and addresses narrating, celebrating, proclaiming and sharing.

Finally, some guidelines for a communicative theology are pointed out, encompassing its academic, ecclesial, communicative and critical dimensions, related to religion(s) and both directed to and aiming at the creative, innovative and rescuing reality of God.

Key words: religion, theory of communicative action, communicative theology, ritual, liminality, J. Habermas.

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»In the beginning was the Word.« (John 1, 1) This is not only the beginning of the Gospel of John. It is indeed a basic statement on communication, and it is a fundamental theological statement as well. There is no human existence without communication and action. Without communication, community is unthinkable. No society can manage without communicative exchange, without discursive dispute and understanding. Religion is also linked to communication in various respects. Religion and communication are profoundly connected with one another.

Religion, I would like to affirm, is first and foremost not a »view of life,« but rather a »way of life.« In this respect, it is not primarily a world view, but fundamentally a performance or life practice. It is in this sense that the principle of the theological theory of action formulated by Helmut Peukert is to be taken: »Faith is itself a practice that, as a practice asserts God for others in communicative action and attempts to confirm this assertion in action.«¹

In the following, I shall try to unfold my understanding of religion as communication and action. First, I am going to address an understanding of religion as a practice coping with contingency and positions that comprehend religion as essentially ritual practice. Then, I shall in brief examine the relationship of religion and communicative action. In the third section, perspectives towards a communicative theological understanding of religion are addressed and developed. Finally, I'll draw some guidelines for a communicative theology.

¹ Helmut PEUKERT, *Science, action and fundamental theology: Toward a theology of communicative action*, Cambridge, 1984, 226 (German: Helmut PEUKERT, *Wissenschaftstheorie – Handlungstheorie – Fundamentale Theologie. Analysen zu Ansatz und Status theologischer Theoriebildung*, Frankfurt, ²1988, 331).

1. Religion as practice coping with contingency or ritual practice

In the modern age, the experience of the contingency of reality – as the contingency one's own life – has become one of the basic problems of scientific theory and philosophical reflection. The German theologian Ernst Troeltsch already observed at the beginning of the 20th century that the problem of contingency contained all philosophical problems *in nuce* and simultaneously concerned religious questions.²The American philosopher Richard Rorty sees the problem of contingency as decisive for his position.³According to him, it is the experience that we are ourselves contingent, that we are what and how we are only by chance – be it through luck or unluck and from no rational ground and without general meaning or purpose. Everything that we know and have to accept is the »sheer contingency«⁴ of existence.

For the German philosopher Hermann Lübbe the relevance, necessity, and future demand of religion are beyond doubt. In his well known work on *Religion after the Enlightenment*,⁵ he pointedly maintains that in the process of modernization and secularization, religion does not just fundamentally fade and finally vanish, but merely changes its forms of cultural expression. Lübbe holds that religion, in the course of this process, basically rids itself of its political and social restrictions. By that it becomes able to adequately fulfil its genuine task. It is the task to cope with contingency. Lübbe describes this task as »practice coping with contingency.« Colloquially, this would mean the practice of overcoming contingency. However, contingency in reality just cannot be overcome. He notes: »What shall then 'coping' mean? The answer is: Coping with contingency is accepting contingency.«⁶

For Lübbe, religion deals with any contingency that bears on life's »indisposabilities.« These indisposabilities are resistant to any enlightenment and emancipation. They are simply there, as we too are simply there. Lübbe emphasizes that it is nothing but sheer chance that we exist instead of not existing, that we are what we are and nothing else. This contingent fact does not in any way allow to be transformed in any meaning of action. It must simply be taken as such and that means being accepted. This is precisely what takes place in the practice of religious life, which he conceives as intrinsically ritual.

² Ernst TROELTSCH, Contingency, in: *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Volume IV, 1911, 87-89, 89.

³ Cf. Richard RORTY, Postmodern Bourgeois liberalism, in: *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, New York, 1991, 197-202.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵ Hermann LÜBBE, *Religion nach der Aufklärung*, Graz, 1986.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

Rituals, he asserts, change nothing: They are there to confirm that which exists, to sanction and bless it. Lübbe refers to ritual ceremonies like the consecration of a new house, a new highway, or a new president. In such ritual-religious action, nothing is added to what the builder of the house or the highway have created: rather it is simply affirmed in the face of technical or institutional accomplishments that the event of the moment is nothing other than an island lapped by an ocean of contingencies and imponderabilities. According to Lübbe, the question does not concern whether such practice contains or refers to truth. He regards the question of truth as irrelevant in view of religion. What matters is whether religion really fulfils its function of coping with contingency through its acceptance of contingency.

On the one hand, Lübbe rightly calls religion a practice, a life practice, and he recognizes that it manifests itself above all in ritual. On the other hand, he strictly separates it from any moral, social, or political practice. He emphasizes that religion has nothing to do with action, but rather takes place in our head, in the spiritual acceptance of our sheer contingency. Such a conceptualization is obviously not simply analytic and certainly not value free. It affirms a bodiless, alienated »bourgeois religion«⁷ separated from real life and action – neither putting it in question nor changing anything. Quite the reverse, it preserves, legitimates, and sanctions the given status quo. In this respect, the apparent affirmation of religion after the Enlightenment proves to be a distortion of at least prophetic, biblical religion.

Religion is seen as ritual practice in Anglo-American social anthropology in particular. Of special interest are the works of Victor Turner, who studied the rites or rituals of passage and their characteristic features of what he calls the »ritual process.«⁸ From these rites of passage Turner determines three phases of ritual process, in which the religious dimensions and meanings of rituals simultaneously become evident.

The rituals of passage – which Turner studied with the Central African people of Ndembu – are, first, always about one's removal of one from a given position in the group, community, or society; second, about a transitional phase in which the ritual subject no longer has the old, abandoned position,

⁷ Cf. Johann Baptist METZ, *Jenseits bürgerlicher Religion*, Mainz, 1980; Johann Baptist METZ., *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie*, Mainz, 1977.

⁸ Victor TURNER, *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*, Chicago, 1969; Cf. Arnold van GENNEP, *Les rites de passages*, Paris, 1981; Catherine BELL, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, New York, 1992; Roy RAPPAPORT, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge, 1999.

but does not yet have a new status; and, third, about the condition in which the passage is fulfilled, a new place or status reached, a new fixed position inside the group, community, or society is gained and occupied.

The middle or »margin« phase provides the key to understanding the ritual process, which Turner designates as »liminality.« The characteristics of the »marginal condition« or »marginal person« are necessarily amorphous or undetermined. Marginal beings are neither here nor there; they are situated between socially fixed positions and are not integrated into the social structure. From this perspective they appear as outsiders, as frontier runners. In the condition of liminality, however, something fundamental happens for ritual subjects. They have the experience of an alternative form of human relations that is opposed to the social structure. Turner calls this »communitas.« While the social structure represents a hierarchically arranged system of fixed positions, the *communitas* is an unstructured and relatively undifferentiated »communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.«⁹In the ritual *communitas* there is no top and no bottom: In the intermediate stage of statuslessness, an egalitarian community is experienced and practiced. The »margin« condition of spontaneous, concrete *communitas* comes into opposition with the status system of the norm-regulated social structure.

Turner discovers a religious, sacred quality in the margin phase. According to him, the religious quality of the marginal position in complex societies is conserved in religious performances and institutions. According to him, the quality of transitional religious life appears nowhere »more clearly marked and defined than in the monastic and mendicant states in the great world religions.«¹⁰The monastic communities and orders would therefore be something like institutionalized liminality, or *communitas*. Turner is, in this context, expressly alluding to the rule of the order of the holy Benedict, and he treats Francis of Assisi's movement of voluntary poverty under the rubric of permanent liminality.

For theistic religions, worship is a central ritual practice. The worship form of ritual action is often dealt with under the concept of the cult. Richard Schaeffler emphasizes three distinctive features of cultic action. The cult is first, according to him, the action of worship; second, ritual action; and third, religious celebration.¹¹ Viewed for a phenomenological point of view, the cult

⁹ Victor TURNER, *The ritual process*, 96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹¹ Cf. Richard SCHAEFFLER, *Der Kultus als Weltauslegung*, in: Balthasar FISCHER ET AL., *Kult in der säkularisierten Welt*, Regensburg, 1974, 9-62; ID., *Kultisches Handeln. Die Frage nach Proben seiner Bewährung und nach Kriterien seiner Legitimation*, in:

is a community action in which groups by means of external actions come into relation with supernatural powers. The cult is therefore an event of communication. It is, *first*, a community action of an action-community, whose members communicate with a supernatural power and simultaneously interact with each other. This happens, as a rule, in the form of a regulated, ritualized action in which the areas of authority and roles of the participants are carefully distributed. Cultic community action is, *secondly*, spatially and temporarily bound; it takes place in particular situations at fixed times in designated places. The cult, *thirdly*, makes use of definite media in which, among other things, language and music, gestures and gesticulations are in play and now and then join together in highly complex rituals and dramas. *Fourthly*, the objects of cultic action are supernatural powers, to whom worship or veneration are shown; they are communicated with, in the case of personally presented powers, through prayer and sacrifice. The goals of such cultic action are, *fifthly*, the magical influence and steering of material powers on the one hand, and on the other, personal communication with the deity. Face to face with the deity the cultic community experiences itself; it is thus constituted and articulated in worship, sacrifice, pleas, and gratitude.

Religious-ritual action creates, strengthens, and transforms community. However, it may not only establish *communitas*, but can also become neurotically compulsive in the Freudian sense; it can degenerate into magical effective-thinking and spiritless ritualism. The cult is constantly threatened with corruption and can degenerate into the demonstration of religious claims to power. The question of power is deeply connected with ritual action. Ritual action structured as or shaped by power brings about the critique of ritual. This critique contests either the very possibility and validity of cultic action in general, or it aims directly – like the prophetic critique of the cult – at »true worship,« at the proper relation of cultic-ritual and ethical-communicative action.

2. Religion and communicative action

The Frankfurt philosopher Jürgen Habermas has developed a highly differentiated and globally discussed communicative theory of action.¹²The basic dis-

Richard SCHAEFFLER – Peter Hünermann, *Ankunft Gottes und Handeln des Menschen* (QD 77), Freiburg, 1977, 9-50.

¹² Cf. Jürgen HABERMAS, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 2 Bde., Frankfurt, 1981; Jürgen HABERMAS, *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats*, Frankfurt, 1992; Jürgen HABERMAS, *Die Einbeziehung der Anderen. Studien zur politischen Theorie*, Frankfurt, 1996; Jürgen HABERMAS, *Wahrheit*

tinctions of the theory elaborated by Habermas contain essential elements for contemporary social-, action-, and communication-theory. And they can also be made religion-theoretically fruitful. Let me just mention some of those distinctions: first the opposition of agreement-oriented or communicative action and result-oriented or strategic action, then the difference between action and action-relieved discourse, further between real and ideal communication communities. Also important is Habermas' differentiation of validity claims of truth, truthfulness, and rightness; or his analysis of the polarity of lifeworld and system.

Habermas has himself for a long time taken the view that religion and communication are incompatible.¹³In his main systematic work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, he develops a sophisticated theory of society, action, communication, and rationality alongside a rudimentary theory of religion. His position contains the central thesis of the »linguistification of the sacred.«¹⁴To make it short: speech or communication replaces the sacred. According to Habermas, the religious-metaphysical worldviews become untenable in the process of social rationalisation and the formation of modern structures of consciousness; they become, as he calls it, »obsolete.« The stage of social evolution reached with modernity differentiates the once-combined dimensions of moral-practical rationality in religion into right and morals. In his view, the religious ethic of brotherliness cultivated especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition, entered into »a communicative ethic detached from its foundation in salvation religion«¹⁵. Thereby religious ethic is both superseded and preserved in secular form.

According to Habermas, religious practice did not only have an ethical orientation, but a ritual shape as well. It became obsolete, when it passed its

und Rechtfertigung, Frankfurt, 1999; Habermas' works have been taken up from a theological perspective in a growing number of publications. Cf. Helmut PEUKERT, *Wissenschaftstheorie*; Edmund ARENS, *Christopraxis. Grundzüge theologischer Handlungstheorie* (QD 139), Freiburg, 1992; Edmund ARENS (Hg.), *Habermas und die Theologie. Beiträge zur theologischen Diskussion, Rezeption und Kritik der Theorie kommunikativen Handelns*, Düsseldorf, ²1989; Edmund ARENS (Hg.), *Kommunikatives Handeln und christlicher Glaube. Ein theologischer Diskurs mit Jürgen Habermas*, Paderborn, 1997; Hermann DÜRINGER, *Universale Vernunft und partikularer Glaube. Eine theologische Auswertung des Werkes von Jürgen Habermas*, Leuven, 1999; Nicholas ADAMS, *Habermas and Theology*, Cambridge, 2006.

¹³ Cf. Edmund ARENS, *Kommunikative Rationalität und Religion*, in: Edmund ARENS – Ottmar JOHN – Peter ROTTLÄNDER, *Erinnerung, Befreiung, Solidarität. Benjamin, Marcuse, Habermas und die politische Theologie*, Düsseldorf, 1991, 145-200; Edmund ARENS, *Vom Kult zum Konsens. Das Religionsverständnis der Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, in: Hartmann TYRELL – Volker KRECH – Hubert KNOBLAUCH (Hg.), *Religion als Kommunikation*, Würzburg, 1998, 241-272. See also Gary M. SIMPSON, *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination*, Minneapolis, 2001.

¹⁴ Cf. Jürgen HABERMAS, *The theory of communicative action*, II, 77-111.

¹⁵ Jürgen HABERMAS, *The theory of communicative action*, I, 242.

functions of social integration and expression over to communicative action. The authority of the sacred was thereby substituted by the authority of a justifiably held consensus. Thus, communicative action is separated and released from sacredly protected normative contexts. The result is that religion belongs to a past stage of humanity, which has in the meantime been superseded by modernity. Religion thereby loses its cognitive, expressive, and moral-practical content; it resolves itself into a communicative ethic. Free and unrestricted communication thus takes the place of religion.

Habermas' view of religion has changed significantly in the last decade. This became obvious in his famous Frankfurt Peace Prize talk on »Faith and Knowledge«¹⁶ in October 2001. He, who still regards himself as »religiously unmusical,« in his Frankfurt speech made it clear that religion hasn't gone. It still represents a relevant and highly ambiguous factor to be taken seriously in today's society. For him, the menacing dimension of religion had become conspicuous with the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, when the »tension between secular society and religion...exploded.«¹⁷ Nevertheless, in contrast to a fundamentalism that has become terroristic, there are also religious forms and religious communities that are entitled to »the predicate 'rational' .«¹⁸ Habermas now acknowledges, not only that the egalitarian law based on reason has religious roots, but that the boundary between secular and religious reasons is after all fluid. Thus, according to him, »the fixing of this controversial boundary should be understood as a cooperative task, which requires of both sides that each take the perspective of the other.«¹⁹

Cooperation, to be sure, presupposes communication. Indeed, the great philosopher of communication reiterates that the resources of religion and its semantic potential have to be translated by philosophy. But even if he remains cautious in view of theology, he nevertheless accepts in the meantime that faith and knowledge, religion and reason, theology and philosophy are not simply antipodes of which one pole belongs to the future, while the other is now disappearing into the Hades of history. Both are rather dependent on the reciprocal communication of each other as well as on the productive dispute with one another. In those disputes the issue is above all the basic questions of human life and survival. Maybe you remember the famous debate between

¹⁶ Jürgen HABERMAS, *Glauben und Wissen. Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels*, Frankfurt, 2001.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

Habermas and former Cardinal Ratzinger about the »dialectics of secularization« which took place in Munique in January 2004.²⁰

Religion is connected with and has to do with communication. »The voice of God calling into life, from the outset, communicates within a morally tangible universe.«²¹Even those who, like Habermas, do not believe in the theological premises of the concept of creation, can nevertheless understand and approve of its consequences. The discourse between religious and secular forms of communication essentially concerns a socially pressing agreement about humane practice.

Habermas now decisively opposes an »unfair exclusion of religion from the public sphere,«²²and at the same time firmly holds that »even the secular side retains a sense of the expressive power of religious speech.«²³Inherent in religion is thus a communicative potential that is of undeniable importance, especially in the post-secular age of globalization and genetic technology, in which fundamentalist regression on the one side and scientific-technological transformation on the other are grappled with. When it is about the clash of social worlds that must develop a common language, and when the reproduction and possibly also bio-technological production of »human nature«²⁴are at stake – there it is evident that religion is in no way merely a private matter. According to both Habermas and Pope Benedikt XVI., religion belongs in public social discourse. It is introduced into such discourse and there it must be examined in a thoroughly Pauline manner. It can here demonstrate its argumentative power of persuasion and its performative power of change. Its potential and power consist not in coming to terms with past injustice and suffering, but rather in calling into question »immutable,« for example, through the speech and acts of memory, forgiveness and the promise of salvation and reconciliation.

3. Towards a communicative theology of religion

The basic distinctions and intentions of the communicative theory of action provide not only a productive social- and action-theoretic apparatus. They are

²⁰ Cf. Jürgen HABERMAS – Joseph RATZINGER, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion*, Freiburg, 2005; Cf. Jürgen HABERMAS, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, Frankfurt, 2005.

²¹ Jürgen HABERMAS, *Glauben und Wissen*, 30f.

²² *Ibid.*, 22.

²³ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁴ Cf. Jürgen HABERMAS, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur. Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik?*, Frankfurt, 2002.

also significant from a religion-theoretic view. They are capable of being integrated into a communicative theology of religion.

In this respect, one should reject the confrontation of communicative reason and religion, which Habermas admittedly put forth several times before his Frankfurt Peace Prize speech. A contrasting of the two is from his own understanding of communicative rationality not tenable, because communicative reason cannot *eo ipso* exclude religion and distance itself from something which belongs to it. Within the bounds of a procedural communicative rationality alone can what religion has to bring to it be proved by participating in the procedure of argumentation and in conversation or discourse with those taking part. This could thus be found in a discourse with the members or representatives of various religions and mutually clarified in a cooperative search for truth. This cooperative search for truth now is agreed by Habermas when he calls for the establishment of an already fluid, disputed boundary between secular and religious reasons to be understood as a cooperative task, which has to be taken up by both sides.

Within the framework of a communicative approach, the following claims can be made: Religion is itself a constitutive communicative practice, which is genuinely intersubjective and agreement-oriented. Within a religion a variety of forms of communication take place, that is speech acts enacted by its members. These speech acts go along with non-linguistic actions – e.g. gestures and other types of behaviour. All these performances or »doings« are embedded in a comprehensive life practice. Such life practice is carried out on the part of, as well as within a communication community. Religions communities of communication in these actions give expression to their obligations to and responsibility in view of a transcendent reality. And by doing so, they create, maintain, question and change community.

If the agreement-orientation represents the distinctive feature of communicative action, then religious practice itself can be viewed as communicative – if and insofar as it is directed at a reality in which people do not deal with one another strategically, do not functionalize, and instrumentalize each other.²⁵ Genuine religious action is oriented at a reality, in which people mutually recognize, associate with, and experience each other in solidarity and in so do-

²⁵ Cf. Edmund ARENS, Quellen und Kräfte konsumtiver, kommunikativer und kritischer Religion, in: *Bulletin ET (Special Issue: Consuming Religion in Europe? Christian Faith Challenged by Consumer Culture*, ed. by Lieven Boeve) 17 (2006), 29-53; this Bulletin ET contains a critical conversation with: Vincent J. MILLER, *Consuming Religion. Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, New York, 2004, and a response by Miller: *ibid.* 164-178.

ing act together. From the community-related and agreement-oriented character of religion, however, arises a significant difference from magic. The decisive difference can be formulated in this manner: Whereas religion represents an intersubjective, consensus-dependent, and agreement-oriented practice originating in and linked to communities, magic has a tendency towards monological, strategic-instrumental dealings with the external, social, or rather inner »world.«²⁶

In communicative-religious action, semantic contents are always brought forth. Thus, religion must not be restricted to an inspiring and stimulating rhetorical power, but it also discloses and names a reality. This reality for human life and coexistence brings forth a most relevant semantic dimension, namely, the dimension of promise. It is the promise of a relieving and reconciling liberation from political, social, physical and psychic bondage and mortality's grip. In such religious speech and communal practices lies both a semantic and a performative-practical surplus. Of course, this surplus can be translated into philosophical speech, but cannot be transformed without residue. In communicative-religious speech and action, according to my understanding, there are different potentials involved: a *creative*, that is, a reality-disclosing potential; an *innovative*, namely a reality-transforming potential; and an *anamnestic* potential of memory and remembrance, which becomes aware of and tries to do justice to the reality of the victims of history. From the perspective of the religious communities, such innovative-anamnestic religious action can be understood as communicative faith practice.²⁷ Religion is performed in the communicative practice of people, who in their communicative, communal, and critical actions communicate either *with* or *about* a reality – or in the theistic religions, with or about a reality called »God«.

Within the monotheist religions of Abrahamic origin, two basic forms of religious-communicative action are recognizable: the act of witnessing and of confessing. Witnessing points to the reality of God in a most personal way; the transcendent reality is made accessible via self-involving action of the witness. In his own action and by his own person the witness discloses and makes visible what is of utmost importance. The witness gives testimony and communicates in order to convince others of this reality. Witnessing is either missionary, or diaconal, or prophetic, or pathic (taking place in suffering). In the last case,

²⁶ This is important for example in order to understand Jesus' communicative practice of healing in the right way; cf. Gert THEIßEN – Annette MERZ, *Der historische Jesus. Ein Lehrbuch*, Göttingen, 1996, 276ff.

²⁷ Cf. Edmund ARENS (Hg.), *Gottesrede – Glaubenspraxis. Grundzüge theologischer Handlungstheorie*, Darmstadt, 1994.

martyria becomes martyrdom. I consider witnessing as agreement-oriented, that means: witnessing aims at convincing. This includes a decisive difference to confessing. Confessing does not aim at convincing; it, rather, publicly and obligingly gives expression to an already realized common conviction. Confessing means achieving consensus, or rather, performing it: Confessing can only be done on the basis of an agreement, which manifests itself in the confessional text, for example a creed. The consensus and commonality once professed is actualized in the acts of confessing or professing.²⁸

Besides the elementary actions of faith practice characteristic of monotheistic religions of witnessing and of confessing, a couple of other actions can be traced across a variety of religions. In the case of Abrahamic religions, they are interwoven with witnessing and confessing and therefore overlapping. I would like to point to four religious speech-acts: the practices of 1) *narrating*, 2) *celebrating*, 3) *proclaiming*, and 4) *sharing*.

Religions do not only speak of God or of Gods, but also of the founders and paradigmatic figures of their religious traditions, whose actions they recount in stories. The cosmic event »in the beginning«, the creation of the world and of people, primeval times, the origin of death, as well as the beginnings of ones own tradition, are the subjects of religious narratives, from creation-myths and myths of primeval times to foundational stories.²⁹ Narrating plays an important role for the development and maintenance of both personal and social identity – and religious identity as well. In a way, we are what we have been told and what we tell our children, friends and fellow believers.³⁰

Communicative-religious practice involves the narrating of stories of promise, liberation, exodus, faith and hope. Through these stories the semantic content of religion is communicated, preserved und passed on. Judaeo-Christian faith has a »narrative depth structure«, as Johann Baptist Metz pointed out.³¹ Narrating faith stories implies their interpretation and contextualization to contemporary situations of action; narration makes an invitation. It is an invitation to imagine the present situation and to act therein in a particular way.

²⁸ Cf. Edmund ARENS, *Bezeugen und Bekennen. Elementare Handlungen des Glaubens*, Düsseldorf, 1989; Cf. Edmund ARENS, *Christopraxis*.

²⁹ Cf. the extensive work of Mircea ELIADE, *A history of religious ideas*, 3 Volumes, Chicago, 1978-1985.

³⁰ Cf. Paul RICOEUR, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth, 1976; Paul RICOEUR, *Time and narrative*, 3 Volumes, Chicago, 1984-1988; Paul RICOEUR, *Das Selbst als ein Anderer*, München, 1996.

³¹ Cf. Johann Baptist METZ, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 18. What narration and remembrance have in common is elaborated in: Paul PETZEL – Norbert RECK (Hg.), *Erinnern. Erkundungen zu einer theologischen Basiskategorie*, Darmstadt, 2003.

Telling God stories and faith stories is communicative-religious practice because religion lives, remains alive and is handed down in these stories, because its contents and intentions are remembered and actualized by and in them.

Communicative-religious practice further comprises celebrating.³² Service to God in Christianity and also in other religions has the character of celebration. Liturgical celebration is a powerful expression of the participant's experiences of community, of their communal interconnectedness; it's an expression and practice of *communitas*. On the one hand, ritual-liturgical action often implies a manifestation and performance of hierarchical power relations; on the other hand, these relations are interrupted and transgressed. An imaginative participation and embedding into a greater or even unlimited community of memory and hope is experienced. Hence, an opening or widening of agency takes place. Liturgical celebration can be understood as »practice of hope«. Celebrating is a decisive communicative-religious practice in which God's saving reality and surpassing action is actualized, narrated, lauded and performed.

A third form of communicative-religious practice is proclaiming. Thereby, religious meaning is communicated in order that it shall be shared. Proclaiming makes known the meaning of a religion and is in this respect informative. This happens of course in the sense of an engaged and evocative communication, which intends that the addressees make what is communicated their own. Proclaiming emphasizes impressing the prevailing religious message upon the addressees while taking into account the situation of its listeners, and is thereby cable of being fruitful. There is a missionary element within proclaiming. Proclaiming aims at persuading people into a religion or – in the case of those who already possess religious conviction – at reinforcing, defending, strengthening, or perfecting such conviction.

Besides the missionary, a second moment of proclaiming is encountered in the Abrahamic religions. It led to their qualification as prophetic religions. In fact, prophetic proclaiming is an important element for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The prophet is first of all the one who proclaims God's word and will. Prophetic action is performed in speech acts, symbolic and subversive actions. They happen, where people raise critical objections against the prevailing conditions in the name of God, where they intervene in God's »lawsuits« with the world or with

³² Cf. Victor TURNER (ed.), *Celebration. Studies in Festivity and Ritual*, Washington, 1982; Jan ASSMANN (Hg.), *Das Fest und das Heilige. Religiöse Kontrapunkte zur Alltagswelt*, Gütersloh, 1991; Siobhan GARRIGAN, *Beyond Ritual. Sacramental Theology after Habermas*, Aldershot, 2004; Rolf ZERFASS, *Gottesdienstliches Handeln*, in: Edmund ARENS (Hg.), *Gottesrede – Glaubenspraxis*, 110-130.

idols and take God's side. Prophetic practice sets these conditions before God's court, acting as the prosecutor against injustice and articulating not only God's objection. But it also announces God's promise of a new, just, and benevolent order. Prophetic practice comprises opposition to the political, social, economic, and religious injustice taking place. It accompanies the »condemnation of sinful conditions« with the »heralding of a new world.«³³A fourth form of communicative-religious action is sharing. This is a general term for what in biblical Christian terminology is called diaconal action or *caritas*. Such practice of benevolence, compassion, pity, and solidarity is central for all religions; it belongs everywhere to the ethical, communicative core of religion. The practice of sharing creates, strengthens, and transforms community in particular ways. All religions have their ideas about how the goods of the earth – the material as the spiritual, the social as the communal goods – are to be shared. Sharing »is here not meant in the sense of occasional conduct, but rather as a definite form of living and dealing with each other. It is the expression of a deep-reaching consciousness of solidarity.« It enables people to mutually engage in a liable, reliable and lasting life practice. »Sharing, thus understood, is the most radical form of communicative practice, in that those involved share with and participate in one another.«³⁴

4. Guidelines for a communicative theology

From my point of view, communicative theology can be characterized by five marks:

First: Christian theology is both scholarly and public practice – the case is thus »doing theology«. As scientific theology it takes place within the framework of the scientific community. It is bound to the principles and procedures of public scientific communication, and it aims at argumentative discourse and discursive agreement.³⁵

Second: Christian theology is a communal practice which at the same time is done within an ecclesial framework.³⁶ Thus, theology serves the communication community called the church. It implies a critical analysis and reflection

³³ José COMBLIN, *Das Bild des Menschen*, Düsseldorf, 1987, 37; Cf. Rainer BUCHER – Rainer KROCKAUER (Hg.), *Prophetie in einer etablierten Kirche? Aktuelle Reflexionen über ein Prinzip kirchlicher Identität*, Münster, 2004.

³⁴ Norbert METTE, (Religions-)Pädagogisches Handeln, in: Edmund ARENS (Hg.), *Gottesrede – Glaubenspraxis*, 164-184, 182.

³⁵ Cf. Edmund ARENS – Helmut HOPING (Hg.), *Wieviel Theologie verträgt die Öffentlichkeit?* (QD 183), Freiburg, 2000.

³⁶ Cf. Albert FRANZ (Hg.), *Bindung an die Kirche oder Autonomie? Theologie im gesellschaftlichen Diskurs* (QD 173), Freiburg, 1999; Clemens SEDMAK, *Theologie in nachtheologischer Zeit*, Mainz, 2003.

of communicative ecclesial faith practice. Thereby, it is oriented at inspiring and helping the church in her communication of the gospel and stimulates the Christian community to become even more communicative.

Thirdly: Christian theology is done within the horizon of the Jewish Christian tradition and in the context of other religions. In catholic Fundamental Theology religion appears as an important and relevant subject.³⁷ Both, the history and presence of religion and religions form the background of biblical, systematic and practical theology. Theology is in need of conversation and dispute with other disciplines in general and with religious studies in particular. However, if theology no longer analyses and affirms the validity claims of truth, rightness and truthfulness implied in Christian faith, it gives up itself. Thus, normative God talk turns into descriptive cultural studies.³⁸

Fourth: Christian communicative theology tries to unfold, how communicative faith practice is done in a whole variety of forms and figures. It explains that faith practice takes place both on a personal and a communal level; it is done in different actions of faith. Theology seeks to elaborate that faith practice is directed at the reality of God. The communication of the reality of God pursues the goal that people will be persuaded of this creative, redemptive and liberating reality, and that the human, worldly, as well as cosmic reality will be transformed in the direction of this ultimate reality.

Fifth: Christian Theology implies a communicative and critical theory of religion, which includes the analysis of strategic distortions and violent corruptions of religious actions.³⁹ This means the uncovering of untruth, injustice and ideological veiling, the denunciation of power structures, the inclusion of the excluded, remembrance of the victims of history, society and church. At the same time, Christian theology reflects on the communicative religious potentials, that is, those perspectives directed at justice, solidarity and sharing. These communicative potentials encompass the practical acknowledgement of others including other religions and the common search for truth and understanding.

³⁷ Cf. Jürgen WERBICK, *Den Glauben verantworten. Eine Fundamentaltheologie*, Freiburg, 2000, 3-181; Perry SCHMIDT-LEUKEL, *Gott ohne Grenzen. Eine christliche und pluralistische Theologie der Religionen*, Gütersloh, 2005.

³⁸ Cf. Edmund ARENS, Im Fegefeuer der Fundamentaltheologie, in: *Orientierung*, 61 (1997), 152-156; Edmund ARENS, Zwischen Konkurrenz und Komplementarität. Zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Religionswissenschaft, in: *Orientierung*, 70 (2006), 116-120.

³⁹ Cf. Helmut PEUKERT, Kommunikatives Handeln, Systeme der Machtsteigerung und die unvollendeten Projekte Aufklärung und Theologie, in: Edmund ARENS (Hg.), *Habermas und die Theologie*, 39-64; Rudolf J. SIEBERT, *The Critical Theory of Religion. The Frankfurt School*, Berlin, 1985; Eduardo MENDIETA (ed.), *The Frankfurt School on Religion. Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, London, 2005.