

Three Broad Approaches to the Study of Religious Communication¹

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Samevatting

In hierdie artikel word drie moontlike hermeneutiese verwysingsraamwerke vir die bestudering van die Religieuse Kommunikasiekunde aangedui. Onderskeidelik kan hierdie verwysingsraamwerke benoem word as 'n neutrale benadering, 'n konfessionele benadering, en 'n krities-perspektiwiese benadering tot die studie van die Religieuse Kommunikasiekunde. Elk van hierdie benaderings word kortliks omskryf, met die waarde van elk wat krities oorweeg word.

1. Introduction

In a previous article (Lombaard, 2006: 141-147), Religious Communication as a discipline was described in broad outlines. By comparing Religious Communication with another similar and new, but more strongly emerging discipline, Spirituality, the interdisciplinary nature of Religious Communication was indicated. In addition, a range of extant studies that may be classified as Religious Communication and demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of this field of study, were indicated.

In this article, a next step is taken. Three broad approaches, that is the philosophical and hermeneutical frames of reference from within which Religious Communication is practised as a science, are indicated. The first such approach may be termed a *neutral approach* to the study of Religious Communication; the second may be labelled a *confessional*

1 This article reflects part of the research for which the Ph.D. in Communication Studies, in the particular field of Religious Communication, was awarded by the North-West University, Potchefstroom campus – cf. Lombaard 2004. The supervisors were Prof. J.D. Froneman and H.J.M. van Deventer.

approach to the study of Religious Communication; the third may be referred to as a *critical perspective approach* to the study of Religious Communication.

Each of these approaches will now be described briefly, critically weighing the merits of each.

2. The “neutral approach” to the study of Religious Communication

Religion is perhaps more susceptible than most other fields of human inquiry to what may be referred to as detractors from the ideals of scientific objectivity (cf. Schneiders, 1998: 52 - 56). Deep seated emotions, existential commitments, prejudices, social and cultural and other affiliations all hold wary promise of detracting from what modernist science would consider disinterested science. The pursuit of knowledge should be free from subjective human values, this view of science holds.

Though the positivist philosophy that lies at the foundation of this view of science (cf. Mouton 1987: 1 - 29) may in extreme positions deny the legitimacy of religion altogether, the more nuanced and more broadly accepted positions within this world view would hold that religion is a well established human practice, and may as such be studied legitimately, be it by philosophical, psychological, comparative, phenomenological or, most probably, a combination of these and other means. The point on which this approach would insist, though, is that researchers should remain neutral in their study of religion(s). Researchers may not allow their own backgrounds and personal commitments to interfere with their work, if it were to retain its intellectual integrity. Allowing such considerations to enter into the scientific process would render the results questionable, at the least, and most probably scientifically worthless. Researchers into religion should therefore bracket their own presuppositions, as it were, in order to practice good, that is objective science.

The ideal position from which to study religion in this approach, one could surmise, would probably be one of atheism, or, perhaps, agnosticism. One’s own views on the existence of God, the validity of religion, the relationship between religions and other related matters would therefore not interfere – or not interfere quite as easily – with one’s scientific investigations, than would have been the case if one were committed to certain religious views. The researcher would remain neutral (cf. Nielsen 1983: 15, reacting to the views of Freud and Feuerbach in this regard).

This kind of view of science and, more specifically for our purposes here,

of scholarly approach to Religious Communication, will be drawn into question below, in point 4 in particular. However, it should be kept in mind that this “neutral approach” to the study of Religious Communication is not without its value. Most particularly, this approach has rendered us the tools of phenomenological analysis of religion in a way that would have been difficult within a confessional approach (see point 3 below). It is, therefore, not the phenomenological approach itself that usually comes in for critique, but its philosophical underpinnings (cf. Rossouw 1987: 91 - 110 for an overview of phenomenological method), namely when it is placed in an uncritical way within the parameters of modernist views of science and, hence, within an unreflected “neutral” scholarly approach to Religious Communication.

3. The “confessional approach” to the study of Religious Communication

The “confessional approach” to the study of Religious Communication may, in some senses, be described as the opposite of the “neutral approach”, in the sense that, here, a deliberate religious view forms the epistemological platform from which the subject matter is viewed. Interestingly, though, these two approaches – “neutral” and “confessional” – share the element of uncompromising commitments to a certain view of religion. Such commitments would however lie in diametrical opposition (namely: “no religious commitments” versus “only my/our religious commitments”). In both approaches, such commitments may be either intuitive, inadvertent, unawares, indifferent, uninformed or intentional, deliberate, calculated, studied, considered.

In the case of the “confessional approach” to Religious Communication, such commitments would entail that one’s own position – whether it be personally chosen, culturally inherited or socio-politically enforced – would always be regarded positively, and would always be regarded in an exclusivist kind of way. The latter would imply that the own religion (be it Christianity, Islam or Judaism, for instance), the own denomination (be it Baptist, Sunni or Hassidic, for instance), or the own “conventicle” (a substratum or sub-substratum of the denomination that views itself as the purest expression of that particular faith) within a particular denomination, would always be regarded as the only “true way”.

It is here that religious fundamentalism, in its different degrees, may be placed (cf. Alley 1990: 267 - 271), though it must be kept in mind that the spectrum referred to here advances beyond what is usually popularly understood as religious fundamentalism. In reality, liberal, syncretistic or

secularised expressions of/on religion(s) may find their categorisation here – under “fundamentalism” – too, in the case that no options other than those advanced by a particular propagandist (not meant here in any derogatory sense) may be acknowledged as legitimate (cf. Van den Bercken 1989: 97 - 104 especially).

It is imperative to note, though, that the majority of works that may be classified under the heading of “confessional approach” to Religious Communication are not given to such extremist leanings. Confessionalism and fundamentalism are not synonymous. Under a “confessional approach” to Religious Communication may be found publications (such as Kraft, 1999; Ward, 1994, Arthur 1998: 36 - 47) which do not subscribe to any form of neutrality, but is consciously aimed at a certain readership and/or subject matter. Options other than the own may not be acknowledged, for which a whole range of reasons may exist, but the predominant intention of such publications is to serve the own constituency.

This kind of approach is not automatically uncritical either, as may at first be assumed, most particularly of the more extreme versions of the confessional approach which tend towards fundamentalism. Usually within the confessional approach, “outsiders” to one’s own committed position would be critiqued or denounced by using certain arguments. Even “insiders” would be assessed resolutely by means of the most fundamentally held tenets of belief and/or the most entrenched traditional practices. Critical engagement does therefor occur. The point is, however, that with this kind of approach the source or measure of critical assessment would never be a counterpoint taken externally to what is traditionally held; it would always be an internal source or measure; nor could it even contemplate employing such an exterior source or measure. This may therefore be called a “closed system” or an “inward-focussing system”. The purpose of the scientific discipline of Religious Communication (or of any other science, for that matter) would in this approach be to affirm and strengthen what is already accepted, by adding greater depth and scope. Archaeology, for instance, may be employed with the almost exclusive purpose of proving biblical narratives to be historically accurate (cf. Scheffler, 2000: 7 - 8), or cosmology, to make the case for creationism, against evolution (cf. Houtman, De Jong, Musschenga & Van der Steen, 1986.).

The latter, taken on its own, is of course not of necessity an unacceptable motivation for scientific endeavours. It is however the inclination that one would encounter within more extreme versions of the “confessional approach” to make this the sole criterion for valid science – its *raison d’être* – that is problematic. Such a view of science is restrictive, and not

inclusive of wider possibilities inherent to any vigorous scholarly pursuit. This approach to Religious Communication, though, has to its credit that it demonstrates the depth of insight inherent to an insider's role within a particular religion – a depth of insight an outsider (cf. Rabe 2003: 149 – 161 on the insider-outsider issue), coming to the subject matter from a “neutral approach” to the study of Religious Communication, could never hope to attain.

4. The “critical perspective approach” to the study of Religious Communication

This brings us to a third possible approach to Religious Communication scholarship, which may be termed “critical perspective”. This approach seeks to appropriate the strengths of each of the two aforementioned approaches, whilst not absorbing the too restrictive underpinnings of either. The “critical perspective approach” to the study of Religious Communication is certainly not holistic – a modern power word or applause clause² that has become more or less devoid of authentic meaning – in that it does not seek to be all things to all people. Rather, researchers working within this approach would be clear about their broader philosophical and more specific theoretical assumptions, and would be conscious that these assumptions, along with a range of conscious and subconscious personal allegiances, bring both positive and negative aspects to bear on their practice of science, even if they may not always be fully aware what all of these positive and negative aspects are or entail. An example of a publication within this frame of reference, is that by Attfield (2001).

This approach, post-modernist as it is in spirit³, can therefore employ phenomenological description without assuming that such description is

2 We adapt this second descriptive phrase from Kourie 2001:3, who in turn takes it over from Carson 1994:381.

3 Note, though, that we do not accept (with Giddens 1991:2-3 & 1990:45-54) the traditional objection to post-modernism, namely that it allows for (almost) any possibility – à la Derrida (cf. Thiselton 1992:103-132) – and therefore allows for no integrity or stability within the human condition, including scholarship. This view is in line with a further minority view on the matter of post-modernism, which is that post-modernism is in reality not a cultural phase after modernism, but merely the latest development within modernism (Giddens 1990:45-54). Post-modernism, hence, can and does have its truths too. Post-modernism differs from modernism and inherited Greek philosophy, though, in that it appreciates competing truths, not seeking one value in order to elevate it above all others and for all time.

either value-free, nor maintaining that it renders “truth” in any absolute sense. Critical inquiry remains a continuous enterprise; answers / solutions / conclusions / perspectives are not timeless. The words “science” and “scholarship” are thus understood to be grammatically an intrinsically participial in nature.

Equally, the perspective character of the scientific endeavour can now not only be acknowledged, but also embraced. Freed from the unattainable goals of modernist scholarship, science now revels in its humanity⁴. Researchers’ personal histories, academic training and philosophical-theoretical points of reference are not detractors from science, but contribute to it. Scientists practice their craft all the while acknowledging these “personal effects”, and in so doing, invite others to engage in similar activity, which would add to a richer mesh of intersubjective human understanding of the subject area under investigation and those linked with it.

Knowledge is, thus, insight, which springs from certain broad frameworks. Knowledge remains subject to revision, because critical evaluation – taking the critical counterpoint both from within and without the own framework – never ceases. Critical perspectivism in the sciences, and for our purposes here in the science of Religious Communication, thus finds its academic integrity in the quality of the intellectual activity involved. Human activity does not detract from science; human activity finds its place at the very centre of science. The quality of the intellectual activity involved is not measured by criteria external to humanity (as the “neutral approach” would have it) or by internal criteria (as the “confessional approach” would have it) only, but also, and mostly, by other (similarly critical) scholars.

Science is, thus, a social process. Knowledge is intrinsically intersubjective. This kind of view of science comes close to the romantic spirit of classical European Renaissance culture, and in some sense gives expression to the existentialist spirit inherent in post-modernism.

5. In closing

Above, three approaches to science in general, but to Religious

4 Science thus delights in the limitations of humanity, rather than feeling trapped within the determinism of its acknowledged theoretical limits, as modernist science is wont to criticise this approach - neglecting, all the while, to face the reality that it too is *an* approach, in which one could either feel trapped, or, after realising the relative nature of its being and all others, at best relish this utterly human nature of scholarship.

Communication scholarship in particular, have been outlined. Although both the “neutral” and “confessional” approaches have inherently positive features, both also have difficulties. The positive features can however be included in a “critical perspective” approach to Religious Communication. This approach, if its implications are taken seriously, has the additional value that a substantial existential element to the practice of scholarship may be discerned too (see also Lombaard 2002: 97 - 101). Science as a calling – a good Calvinist sentiment – is thus afforded its proper emphasis.

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