

LUTHER AND LUTHERANISM: THE P. O. BOX MARTIN LUTHER

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Abstract:

This article explores the idea that social communication performs *coupled* with the consciousness of human beings –but it is not generated by it–, and gives the example of the German reformer Martin Luther. An overlap in the operations of consciousness and of communication – *interpenetration*– is made possible with the person/actor distinction, which actualizes in communication through schemata (the person-schema and the actor-schema), the so called P. O. Box Martin Luther. Luther's positioning in relation to the polemical controversies in which he participated –the Peasants' War (radical Anabaptism), the free will and the sacramental debates–, determined the future course of his Reform, and were decisively oriented by the person-schema. The person/actor schemata also allow the distinction between Luther the person and Lutheranism the doctrine.

Key Words: Theory of Social Systems; Consciousness/Communication Coupling; Language; Schemata; Martin Luther.

1. Introduction.

The theory of social systems provides a novel framework for the study of religions as it considers them strictly as communication re-produced in society *coupled* with the consciousness of human beings (Luhmann 1998, 2007a, 2007b). The example of the German reformer Martin Luther is given in order to show how this works. It has always represented a challenge to explain why Luther and Erasmus of Rotterdam took distance from each other, even though there was a substantial agreement in the communications they both held. Also, it has been difficult to understand Luther's unwillingness to support Swabia's peasants uprising (the radical Anabaptism of Carlstadt and Müntzer), regardless his own frontal criticism of the Roman Church in an institutional and theological ground.

The theory of social systems provides the theoretical and conceptual framework necessary to distinguish Lutheran doctrinal communication from Luther's actions and decisions (and vice versa), without blurring the difference between communication and consciousness, which are both considered non-transparent (operationally closed). Otherwise, it would come out that Luther's actions involved unexpected consequences, or simply that in the plane of declared motives, Luther failed in his intention of reforming the Church from within while keeping it united, in line with the conclusions reached by one of his classical biographers (Febvre 1988: 264ff).

Unexpected consequences or the motives for action are not themselves bad explanations. But there exists a theory which can analyze and provide explanations to complex phenomena such as this one. Now it can be stated: communication performs internal (individual action and its motives) or external (experiences not attributable to intended action) ascriptions, while in this process the individual consciousness only participates coupled with communication as it articulates its thoughts through language.³²⁶

³²⁶ Luhmann (1998: 140ff, 2007b: 258ff). Not even the turn of an intellectual history into a history of mentalities, and further, into a history of ideas (Chartier 1992: 13ff), as the Annales School does, can avoid the Durkheimian notion that society lies in collective representations instead of in actualized communication.

2. Consciousness/Communication Distinction and the Concept of Interpenetration.

As it is already known, the theory of social systems considers that human beings are a part of the environment of social systems but they do not partake in them. Social systems are constituted *exclusively* by communication. Communication, of course, is in need of human beings to actualize communication, as thoughts are in need of a neurophysiological base that would serve them as a platform. What is important here is to note that communication, consciousness and organisms are non-transparent to each other. They are considered by the theory as operationally self-enclosed, *autopoietic* systems. Moreover, “the ordinary structural coupling between systems of consciousness and systems of communications is made possible through language” (Luhmann 2007b: 79).

There is not any continuity between the operations of organisms (reproduction of life), of the psychic (thoughts), and of social systems (communications). One way to explain this is to say that the conscious activity of human beings has performed for millennia without a need for the least understanding about the neurophysiological bases which make it possible. They both work in mutual and idle unawareness of each other’s functioning: “...man is incapable even of observing what goes on within him in respect to physical, chemical and vital processes. His psychic system has no access to life; it depends on itch, pain or any other mechanism to call the attention of the psychic and trigger the operation of another system, the consciousness of the psychic system” (Luhmann 1998: 61).

This same non-transparency is supposed in the functioning of consciousness and communications. The concept of *interpenetration* denotes the fundamental non-transparency between social and psychic systems, regardless the operations of both systems –thoughts and communications– are conveyed through meaning (Luhmann 1998: 77ff). The idea that meaning is a shared habitat for communication and consciousness allows for some kind of overlap between thought and communication sequences –*coupling* that is made possible through language–, precisely what is pointed out by the concept of interpenetration.

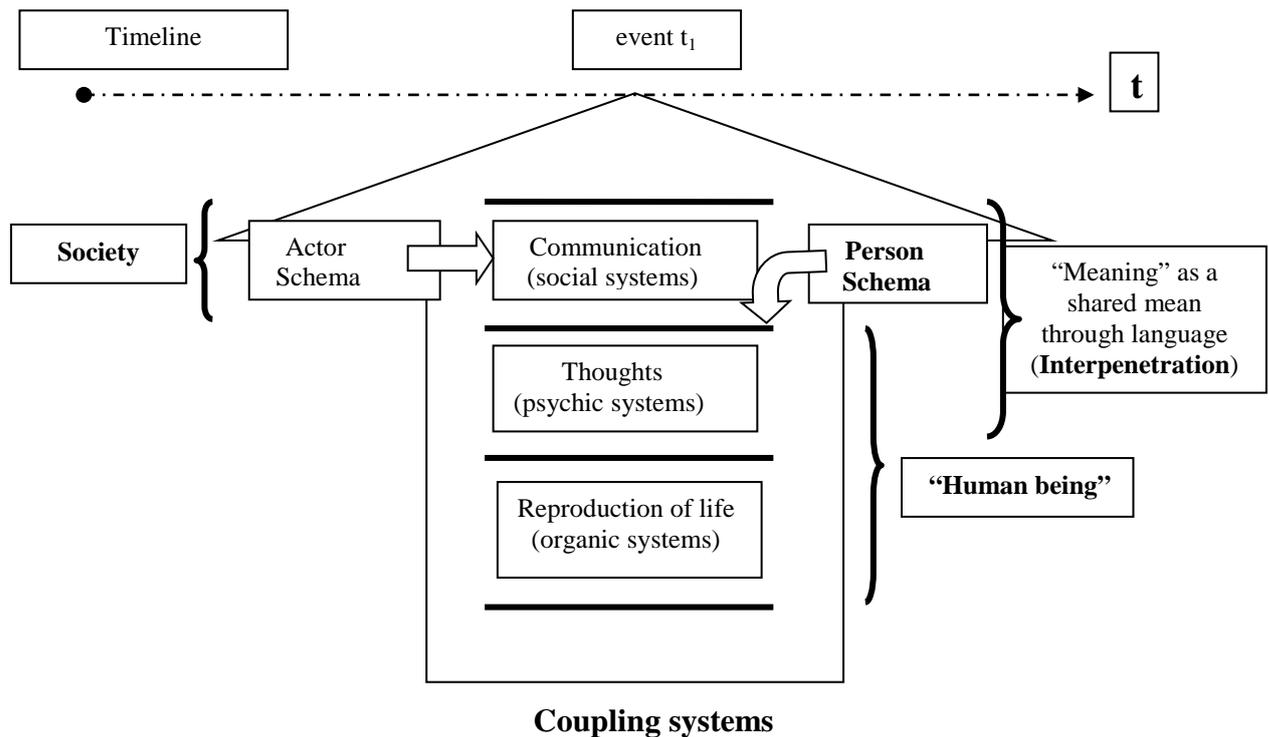
The theory anticipates that bodies or consciousness may interfere with communication, but neither can determine communication. Consciousness does not communicate (nor communication thinks); only communications communicate and only the psychic can think.

As communication follows autopoietic reproduction through iteration, it forms a *sui generis* emergent reality. It is not the human who can communicate, only communication can communicate. In the same manner as communication systems are operationally closed systems which cannot connect to others, likewise, systems of consciousness are operationally closed systems –so are also brains, cells, etc. There is not any communication from consciousness to consciousness that is not socially mediated, in the same way as there is not any communication between the individual and society. The concept of communication is truly understood only by excluding these possibilities, as well as by putting aside the other possibility of conceiving society as a collective spirit. Only consciousness can think, but it cannot think with its own thoughts inside someone else’s consciousness. In both cases we deal with operations within operationally closed systems determined by the structure (Luhmann, 2007b: 76).

Thus, interpenetration is the concept which indicates that every event t_1 in a timeline is the result of a linguistic coupling between communication and consciousness. Communication shares its complexity with consciousness and vice versa by means of language.³²⁷ The concept is graphically shown in Figure 1 (the explanation of the schemata contained in it follows).

³²⁷ In James (2002) one can find an extended and varied study of interpenetration cases between consciousness and religious communications which are classified under the topic: *religious experience*.

Figure 1. The Concept of Interpenetration with Schemata.



3. Schemata: The P. O. Box Martin Luther.

This section is intended to provide an explanation of how communication overlaps the conscious faculty of human beings. The issue is formulated through this question: How interpenetration between consciousness and communication is understood in the case of the beginner of the Protestant Reformation? How can one imagine an overlap between thought and communication sequences in the case of Martin Luther? The answer given in this paper considers the person/actor distinction as fundamental (Japp 2011).

In a very short formulation, the person/actor distinction actualizes in communication through schemata³²⁸ (the person-schema and the actor-schema), which give place to a double operation in communication: by means of the person-schema “communication is reduced to action and consciousness commits to the person” (Japp 2011: 176), while the actor-schema fully guides communication to society and its functional systems.

This theoretical proposal is counter-intuitive because in ordinary language the point of departure assumes the existence of actors in the sense of acting individuals. Individuals have motives and act accordingly... What in everyday *praxis* is considered a compact unit of perception (thought, engagement, understanding, action and even an individual who acts), in the light of the systems sociological theory is broken up precisely into the consciousness/communication difference (Japp 2011: 169).

Nevertheless, one should not forget that even though one speaks about actors, these are but attributions made by communication for the purpose of self-guidance:

³²⁸ “Schemata are simplifications of complex contextual events. A schema discharges communication (and consciousness) of the need of rationalization, and brings about known models, creators of meaning, from not-knowing. In special situations with conflicting meanings (incompatible interpretations of one same fact) or unknown (not-knowing) situations unleash the use of schemata, which link to something already known” (Japp 2011: 174-175). Schemata are supported by classifications and idealizations in order to face the most diverse situations. In this respect see Schützeichel (2012: 75ff), in special chapter 6: Luckmann and the Objectification of Meaning.

From the viewpoint of the systems sociological theory, the actor... is a social address put forward by communication for the purpose of self-guidance. Communication is synthesized in actions by the responsibility of its consequences... One can also say that communication fluency... and linking capacity is acquired by turning into action... One notices that addresses have names that refer to individuals: if communication accounts for them they automatically turn into individuals, they become persons, though they might not be considered by communication as subjects properly speaking, but as “individually attributed expectations of behavior”, that is, as communication units (Japp 2011: 170-171).

This is how a person³²⁹ with a given and a last name (Martin Luther) can be considered as a postal office box in which communication delivers purposes, motivations and achievements (or failures); or maybe it would be proper to say that “‘persons’ are firmly coupled to consciousness, while ‘actors’ are loosely coupled. Or also, that the actors are general standardized addresses, while the persons are individualized addresses with whom one is acquainted” (Japp 2011: 171, fn. 5). The distinction person (with whom consciousness must deal with)/ actor (directed to communication) could then be explained in this fashion:

No one refers to a person with whom one is more or less acquainted and calls him/her an actor. On the contrary, we speak of actors when referring to people who carry out roles, when despite the personal contact they are attributed action capabilities because in principle one can get that knowledge from the person. What is normal is to use the actor concept in order to get rid of communication indeterminacy... Actors assure communication linking capabilities by simplifying a specific attribution of action, which again could be communicated. In a way, actors lead lives as known individuals, but in another way, they also hold a general communication capable of action including that of an address (Japp 2011: 171).

The person/action oscillation makes the person-schema primordial for the consciousness/communication coupling: “As long as the individual remains known as a person, it is the person-schema (not the actor-schema) which makes possible the structural coupling between individual and society” (Japp 2011: 174). The importance of the person-schema lies in that it “comprises a small part of the operations of consciousness as well as a small part of communicative operations –including the one specified by personal expectations. Otherwise, the autonomy of both systems would crumble (one would find either over-socialized persons or an over-personalized communication)” (Japp 2011: 179).

4. The peasants’ rebellions (radical Anabaptism), and the free will and sacramental debates.

Are there examples of ways in which the person-schema operated in Martin Luther? Yes, indeed. One can point to the three issues that were crucial to the development of his Reformation: his separation from the peasants’ rebellions of 1524-25; in relation to these, Luther’s decision to withdraw from the radical Anabaptism of Carlstadt and Müntzer;³³⁰ and finally his argument and breaking-off first with Erasmus, and later on with Zwingli and Oecolampadius.

In relation to the peasants’ rebellions of 1524-25, now is commonly accepted that they represented a point of inflection in Luther’s works between the polemicist and active reformer, and a more conservative reformer focused in organizing the newly non-conformist communication (Lutheranism) (LO, Egido 2001: 15ss; Edwards 2003: 192). How exactly did biography overlap social communication and vice versa? In 1510, when he was returning to Wittenberg from the University of Erfurt, his Alma Mater, Luther faced a peasant revolt that executed the city mayor and burnt the library. It seems that Luther never agreed to this intolerant violence which explained why, years later, at the time of the Peasants’ War, he reacted first with caution, and later decisively opposed violence

³²⁹ One must not mistake human beings of bone and flesh for persons. Persons are but a construct of communication: “Persons are created through the participation of human beings in communication. Persons satisfy the needs of observation in as much as they are attributed with a consistency of opinions and attitudes, behavioral perseverance, self-interests taken into perspective, etc. Persons do not live nor think; persons are constructs of communication for communicational ends” (Luhmann 2010: 117-118).

³³⁰ On the controversial historiography of Thomas Müntzer see Friesen (1974).

when it appeared (Atkinson 1980: 66ff). Various biographical data allow this interplay between the person and the actor schemata in such a way that consciousness and communication remain interspersed (but not transparent to each other).³³¹

The position taken by Luther in relation to the peasants' rebellions took him apart from Carlstadt, his colleague in the University of Wittenberg. Some scholars reduce Carlstadt's radicalism to his capacity to foresee the consequences of Luther's theological statements. Carlstadt was, in such view, an important instigator of the radical Reformation, in particular of Anabaptists:

...it was Carlstadt who translated Luther's assertions into a coherent theological framework, who supplied the theological learning, and who drew out the implications of Luther's pronouncements. One might almost see Carlstadt, therefore, as a forerunner of Melancthon, who performed a similar chore, guided by a vastly different theological propensity, in later years... If Carlstadt's eminent place in the first few years of the Reformation is to be attributed to his ability to discern certain consequences or ramifications of Luther's thought, then the same statement also characterizes his involvement in the rise of the "radical reformation" (Hillerbrand 1966: 395-396).

It seems clear that the Renaissance and the Reformation shared many ideas. The two cultural phenomena were interested in reinforcing Christianity by means of a Church reform: "Both Erasmus and Luther were concerned with restoring Christianity and reforming the church; they differed in their interpretations of the essence of Christianity³³² and the manner of reform" (Kleinhans 1970: 460). Put in other words:

There were many points of contact in both tendencies: the hope for Church reform, interest in literature, opposition to Roman ways, friendly animosity against Scholasticism, priority to the source of Scripture, critical manners, direct and personal spirituality, etc. If only Luther did not fall into the revolutionary path, or if only men and circumstances did not rush him into it, the connection between Humanism and Reformation would have taken another path. Nevertheless, in truth, positions were inflexible and they distanced from each other when Luther clearly expressed his concept of man, of liberty, and when he showed his dogmatism. Acute humanists –Erasmus was one of a kind– sensed that one authority was to be replaced with another one, and –more decisively– that in the Lutheran system there was no place for man in a leading role (LO, Egidio 2001: 28-29).³³³

It is worth noting the way in which a conclusion is reached, and, above all, the labels assigned to each side: "Intelligence was impossible between two persons who depart from basically divergent suppositions, as was the moderate Pelagianism³³⁴ of Erasmus and the acute Augustinian Manichaeism³³⁵ of Luther" (LO, Egidio 2001: 29). The statement here is that dogmatic communication *per se*, without being totally absent, was not the main factor of the explanation. What separates them,

³³¹ Like being overwhelmed by a lightning storm in the open field which caused him to promise to dedicate his life to God; or else, to explain his aversion to Roman ways, including the Pope himself, the trip he undertook to Rome in 1510. The relevance of the trip is not what he saw in Rome, but what he was entrusted to do as an emissary of the Erfurt and Nuremberg Augustinian houses: he tried to negotiate with Rome to keep the discipline of the houses untouched since they had already been changed. But "the Pontificate was not interested in Reform, but only in politics and war, music and hunt, comedy and carnival" (Atkinson 1980: 68). On his trip to Rome and many other biographical details compare also Febvre (1988).

³³² The point of doctrine where Luther and Erasmus disagreed was the understanding of the free will –praised by Erasmus but unacceptable to Luther's Theology of the Cross.

³³³ "Both agreed [Luther and Erasmus] in their opposition to late Scholasticism, to the great ignorance of clerics and monks, and to the shocking and shameless immorality of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, from the Pope way down the ladder. They were eager to return to the old sources and supported the study of Greek and Hebrew. But as early as in 1517, Luther knew that Erasmus' Humanism and Christian ethics were not the true essence of evangelical and theological Christianity, and that his emphasis in Christ, grace, revelation, sin, redemption, servile will, and all the doctrines that were to resound once again worldwide, would open an insurmountable abyss between the two men" (Atkinson 1980: 97).

³³⁴ Pelagianism denies the original sin and even the need of baptism and grace. Moral principles and the monastic discipline propel man to virtue and allows him enter to perfection which frees him from sin (Mitre 2000: 41).

³³⁵ Manichaeism is a religion that opposes two principles, one of light and goodness (God) to another one of evil and darkness (matter). The antecedents of Manichaeism are the doctrines of Gnosticism (Mitre 2000: 12; Marksches 2002: 37-38). Here, Egidio refers to the Augustinian doctrine that opposes the two kingdoms (the earthly kingdom to the kingdom of heaven) explained by Saint Augustine in *The City of God*. One must take into consideration that before becoming a Christian Augustine held Manichaean views.

what makes them different, are the biographical features, the person-schema, consciousness committed to the person, no matter if it is about the libertarian humanistic spirit of the one, or the theological stubbornness of the Augustinian cleric. Something similar could be posed for the Luther/Zwingli argument.³³⁶

As Luther and Erasmus³³⁷ grew apart, the sacramental dispute took shape. Again, to explain the different conceptions of the Supper, scholars take the long-term Christian non-conformist communication.³³⁸ While Luther followed Eutyches (Monophysitism)³³⁹ in regard to the sacramental debate, Zwingli showed Nestorian³⁴⁰ tendencies.

The theology of Luther is here almost Eutyichist in his Christology: in a non-technical language it almost admitted that the divine and the human were interpenetrated; it thought about Christ as present in all parts of the sacrament with his transfigured human body. In a way, Zwingli's Christology is "Nestorian" in this matter; without using technical words we would say that it resisted sharing the idea of the union of two natures in the consecrated elements... It seemed as Luther wanted to intensify the reality of the divine nature in Jesus, the man, who had lowered himself in order to assume our humanity... Zwingli, as Erasmus thought it, stressed the humanity of Jesus (although he did not risk his divinity) (Atkinson 1980: 307ff).³⁴¹

It would be very difficult to delineate here precise borders between Martin Luther, the person and the actor; ultimately one is only able to suggest and uncover some contours... with the help of the theory. According to the specialists, Luther's phobias reached pathological heights. The objects of his phobias were the Jews,³⁴² the Turks, the Pope, and the devil (*LO*, Egido 2001: 53ff). Here one finds an advantage of using a social theory like the one explained in sections 2 and 3: what is considered a feature of personality³⁴³ could as well be considered the interplay of the person-schema (the P. O. Box Martin Luther), which is always guided by the characteristics of sixteenth century European social communications. Besides the accentuated proclivity to superstition common to characters of the time, it could well be assured that Luther's phobias were characteristic of sixteenth century European social communications (the Jews by tradition, the Turks for threatening the supremacy of Christianity, the Papacy for its disrepute and for being questioned by the humanist Renaissance, the demon for obvious reasons). All of them, except the phobia to Papacy, for sure were shared by the Popes themselves... Otherwise, where scholars seem to hit the target is when giving testimony of his mood: "His Saxon character is open to charge in funny remarks and in constant jokes... His theology is based in making

³³⁶ For example, if it is true that Luther accepted the real presence as well as the belief that wine and bread were exactly that, wine and bread (*LO*, Egido 2001: 95), he opposed Zwingli when he asserted thus (that bread and wine were only bread and wine) and called it symbolic presence. See fn. 341.

³³⁷ "Erasmus promoted more than any of his contemporaries the cause of Reformation. He worked hard to revive classical, biblical and patristic studies, and also helped to denounce ecclesiastical abuses, the ignorance and prudishness of friars and the intellectual obscurantism of professors... Erasmus was a man of transition, just like Reuchlin or Staupitz were, but even bigger and more important. Erasmus was John the Baptist of the new movement" (Atkinson 1980: 261).

³³⁸ On non-conformist communication and its importance for the formulation of a Christian dogmatics see Ornelas (2011).

³³⁹ Monophysitism is a doctrine that, even though it does not deny the double nature of the Son –human and divine–, asserts that the human nature in Christ had been absorbed by the divine nature (Mitre 2000: 21).

³⁴⁰ Nestorianism is a doctrine that considers Mary as mother of Christ, but not as mother of God himself (Mitre 2000: 23).

³⁴¹ "Zwingli, with humanist convictions and rigor, was unable to understand the real Eucharistic presence and as he translated 'this is my body' for 'meaning my body', he reduced it to something symbolic. He touched one of Luther's sensitive issues, who had been already warned against the prophet of Zurich. When Zwingli answered back to the *Syngramma* of Wittenberg's circle (1526) with his arrogant *Amica exegesis*, where, besides the title and ambiguous expressions, exposed the Lutheran position as illogical, as well as the violence of Luther's writings, and his servile flattery to the princes, he found a quick response by Luther, in similar tones, in a book with an expressive title: *The Words of Christ 'This is my Body' Remain Firm, Against the Illumined*, which was officially reassured in the *Confession of Christ's Supper*" (*LO*, Egido 2001: 30-31).

³⁴² "One of the most shameful chapters in Christian history is the Christian treatment of Jews. For all his originality in so many areas, Luther was tragically unoriginal in this regard. He inherited a notorious tradition and passed it on with, if anything, increased vitriol" (Edwards 2003: 203).

³⁴³ The "character" attributed to the person and the motives are connected in a way that communicates in a credible manner: "We can say that persons (not human beings!) have a character by which is possible to regulate which motives can be ascribed to in a more or less plausible manner. The historical machine of the social system can change the motives ascribed to persons. The person/motive symbolism provides the social system with a combination of continuity and discontinuity, that is, with the possibility of limited and controlled transformations. And everything happens in a psychic-organic environment which remains inaccessible" (Luhmann 2010: 123).

fun of man who is reduced to a complete wreck, and the enjoyment of finding God in Christ, the cause of happiness, in contrast to the medieval anguish which was his point of departure” (LO, Egido 2001: 59).

Luther’s uncontrollable irascible character seemed to last for a lifetime, and became particularly acute by the end:

A reading of Luther’s polemical corpus does leave the distinct impression, however, that in his later years his anger became more shrill, and less leavened by compassion, humor, or even theological reflection. Moreover, his always pungent language became more coarse and scatological. The targets of his ire become under his pen the vilest of hypocrites, totally wicked and insincere, willing minions of the devil, deserving the most horrible fate (Edwards 2003: 204).

Such remarks do not only refer to Luther’s psychological health, but also to his physico-organic shape, to the point of hypothesizing a Ménière syndrome accompanied by senility (Edwards 2003: 204). One is again faced with the concept of interpenetration and the couplings present in every communicative event: organic/psychic/social.

5. Conclusion.

The theory of social systems allows the difference between Luther the person and Lutheranism the doctrine in account of the oscillating interplay between the person-schema and the actor-schema: the so called P. O. Box Martin Luther. In this way, such theory provides explanations made possible through an overlap in the operations of consciousness and of communication.

Luther’s positioning to the peasants’ rebellion, to Anabaptists and “illuminated” (remarkably Carlstadt, though paradoxically Luther himself can be considered one “illuminated” more), and to Erasmus and Zwingli, were decisively oriented by the person-schema. Luther’s reasons, motives and decisions in these matters (the rigorist view with no concessions of Anabaptists, the free will and the sacramental debates) were strongly determined by the need to make compatible the communications of his immediate social environment –Saxony’s religious and political situation in the beginning of the sixteenth century, and his personal circumstance of being an Augustinian monk from the University of Erfurt recently sheltered in Wittenberg– with highly personalized expectations, *biographical* in kind, so to speak.

Contrary to this, the actor-schema determined the parameters of social communication whose main referent is the millenary tradition of non-conformist Christian communication, indisputably anti-hierarchical and anti-sacramental (one can recall the Christian rigorist tradition of Donatists, Waldenses, Cathars, and the Czech Hussites). This important tradition will be responsible of some principal points of the Lutheran doctrine: rejection to religious authority and its corresponding stress in Scripture, universal priesthood, criticism to indulgences, and extreme distrust of sacraments, considered as external signs of grace.

Thus, in Lutheranism it will be possible to distinguish the *scaling* of a heretical Christian tradition, from the contribution of the *person* to such tradition (justification by faith alone, central point of Luther’s Theology of the Cross). If this point of theory –individual/society coupling– is interpreted in this way, it should be clear enough how far is the theory of considering the conscious faculty of the human being as dispensable to communication, even though it denies at the same time the transparency/homogeneity between the individual and society, between psychic systems and social systems, for the *autopoiesis* of both systems would not stand.

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