

CHRISTIAN APOCALYPTIC COMMUNICATION: A SOCIOLOGICAL OUTLOOK.

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Abstract

How does one of the most important sociological theories of communication –the theory of social systems– deals with religion and more specifically with Christian apocalypticism? This article provides an answer to this question. The answer runs along the lines of connecting the apocalyptic eschatological teachings of Christianity to specific periods of dogma construction and organized religious communication.

Keywords: Christian Apocalyptic Eschatology; Sociological Theories of Communication; Niklas Luhmann.

Introduction

Generally speaking, one can expect that a systematic Christian apocalypticism⁴⁰ comes as a result of societies being able to overcome an incipient stage of development given primarily by segments (clan/totem belonging, sex, age group). This is the least that can be expected from a sociological theory that relates societal types (segmentary/stratified/functionally differentiated or modern societies) to the two forms of religious communication and their concrete expressions: rituals and doctrines.⁴¹ A related theoretical statement would have to be put forward from the very start: the communicative possibilities of apocalyptic eschatology depend on the communicative possibilities of society at large. As far as it goes, this article claims a more earthly and humble view of apocalyptic eschatological teachings, that which makes dependent

⁴⁰ “The term ‘apocalyptic’, an adjective functioning as a noun, is synonymous with the noun ‘apocalypticism’, and both are transliterated forms of the Greek adjective *apokalyptikos*, meaning ‘revelatory’, while ‘apocalypse’ is a transliteration of the Greek noun *apokalypsis*, ‘unveiling, revelation’. The English words ‘reveal’ and ‘revelation’ are transliterations of the Latin verb *revelare* and noun *revelation*” (Aune 2005, 233-234). Apocalypticism in turn is interchangeable with the term “millennialism”, in reference to the thousand-year reign of Christ as described in Rev 20.

⁴¹ Luhmann (2007, 471ff) for a theory of social differentiation; Luhmann (2007b; 2009) for his general view on religious communication.

communications on apocalypticism on characteristics of the communications held in society as a whole.

A Naturalistic Explanation of Christian Apocalyptic Communication.

Where does this more earthly and humble view come from? The Western tradition of thought that is directly responsible for it goes back to the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries in the works of eminent social anthropologists and sociologists such as Edward Tylor (*Primitive Culture*, 1871), James George Frazer (*The Golden Bough*, 1890), Emile Durkheim (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912), Bronislaw Malinowsky (*Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, 1922), and Edward Evans-Pritchard (*Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, 1937). These works have in common to specify a functional and evolutionary analysis of religion.

The remote background of these studies lies on the Illustration theory of “natural religion”. The Illustration conceived of an idea of a natural religion, universal in character, which became the first faith of human beings and the common philosophy of all races (Pals 2008, 27ff). This was a theist religion which postulated a God creator who devised the laws that governed the world, including the moral laws which guided human behavior. This natural religion contained a criticism of revealed religions and of the institutions that represented them. Natural religion had been the religion of humankind long before it was corrupted by churches, dogmas and clerics. Above all, natural religion established that religions could be naturally explained in much the same manner as physics had explained the laws of nature.

The theory of social systems used in this article is generally oriented by this theoretical tradition⁴² and shares with it three assumptions: 1) the principle of the psychic uniformity of the human species, that is, that all human beings are essentially equal regarding their basic mental capacities; 2) the reality of sociocultural evolution, even though there might exist substantial differences in evolutionary conceptions; and 3) that reasons given by the faithful to explain their religious behavior cannot be taken as *the only valid ones* because most of the times they lack a rational base or an inter-subjective consensus.⁴³

The naturalistic explanations of religion sooner than later derived in what is called the functional study of religions. Religion was explained by

⁴² Pals (2008), Cipriani (2004), and selected texts by Robertson (1980).

⁴³ Another way of putting it: it is not necessary to be a faithful to be interested in the study of religions, or not only one who practices religion is in condition to understand what religion is all about. Indeed, this is something easy to say but the matter is hardly settled down. Take Knott (2000) as a good example of this.

the help it gave to other social institutions such as kinship, productive activities and political control. Religion was explained from and for society, or as put in a recent paper on the state of the art: “the understanding of the religious dimension is fundamental for a profound understanding of society as a whole” (Beltrán Cely 2007). Thus, the *function of religion* became the description and study of the relations between religion and society.⁴⁴

The Fate of all Communication.

To this point, it should be clear enough that Luhmann’s theory stands as a (if not as the most important) sociological theory of communication.⁴⁵ The fate of all communication, whether religious or otherwise, is to be either accepted or rejected. Communication can only perform and become stable as a culture inasmuch as it can deliver a permanent and socially accepted set of expectations. There are two ways in which this can be accomplished: through religion or through the symbolic media (money, love, faith/karma, power, truth) of modern and autonomous social systems (Luhmann 1998). Religion is regarded as the first mechanism used by societies to assure successful communication (or a generalized acceptance of communication) (Luhmann 2009, 80ff).⁴⁶

Until the definitive arrival of modern society in the eighteenth century, religious communication helped the purpose of binding communication with religious ideas—including those on apocalypticism—, that is, religious communication supported other social institutions in achieving agreements. Kings ruled by divine grace, and in fact there was not a relevant social problem which did not find religion handy to its purposes. People was educated and healed with a religious meaning in between, and even art could not depart from it.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ This is why a sociologist cannot trust in the absolute principle of an “autonomous” study of religion, as proposed by Eliade (1972), though accepting at the same time the value of his studies for the knowledge of the ritual and doctrinal content of religions. A *scientific* study of religion always takes for granted a *hetero-reference*, which means, observing religion *from another perspective*, this other perspective being the one given by social science. Maybe this viewpoint allows one to distinguish the field of *theology/religious studies* from that of *sociology of religion*.

⁴⁵ Schützzeichel (2012), in special Chapter 12: “Luhmann and the Self-Reference of Communication”.

⁴⁶ There exists a convergent perspective from evolutionary biology in the theory of multilevel selection proposed by Wilson (2002). Wilson’s central thesis is that not only moral schemes but particularly religions accomplish the function of a stabilizing selection at a *group level*. Examples given by him: Calvinism in Geneva in the middle of the sixteenth century, the temple-water system in Bali, Judaism, and early Christianity until the fall of Rome. See also Wunn (2003) from an exclusively biological perspective.

⁴⁷ It is remarkable how close is this understanding of religion from the one given by Burke (1975), who regards religion as a kind of rhetoric, that is, as a *persuasive* language.

What is most important is that what ultimately matters is communication itself (the fact that something is being said), and *not the truth of it*.

There exist powerful myths, for example the myth of the God who became human... But those myths only exist as condensed communication. We can, therefore, in the context of a sociological theory, conceive of religion as an exclusively communication event. We then deal exclusively with religious communication, with religious meaning which actualizes in communication as the meaning of communication (Luhmann 2007b, 37).⁴⁸

Rituals and Doctrines as Forms of Religious Communication.

The so called concrete expressions of religious communication – rituals and doctrines– are interconnected and interrelated so that they are dynamically considered in a comprehensive historical co-evolutionary process. Rituals are based in face-to-face interaction, which is the reason why they produce an excess in sociability. The ritual socializes, that is, it provides an immediate and shared religious meaning. In tribal-like societies, all social interaction is ritualized: religion and society turn out to be one and the same thing.

Beliefs and religious doctrines usually have the opposite meaning: they suppose a religious meaning that is taken away from immediate interactive situations. This is how an abstract religious symbolism appears (Luhmann 2009, 100ff). The process of de-ritualization supposes more complex societies that have at their disposal writing and diverse technical means of dissemination which allow the fixing of various religious meanings. As more complex societies come into existence, a new phenomenon takes place, the appearance of doctrines and dogmas sanctioned by churches.

These reflections lead to the sociological hypothesis of a connection between the forms and degrees of organization of the religious system, and the magnitude of the dogmatization of religion, with which dogmatics could be used in organizations for the purpose of making distinctions needed to point out right faith, to expel heresies, or to fix membership conditions in religious organizations in the form of pre-formulated confessions of faith (Luhmann 2007b, 207).

⁴⁸ Here one can find the main objection put forward to those who, from the viewpoint of science, want to convince everybody that religion is but a sheer lie, for example, the controversies held by Richard Dawkins (2006). It is clear that this “communicational turn” in sociology has not received enough attention even within the scientific community itself.

Back to Christian Apocalyptic Communication.

What do we mean exactly when talking about Christian apocalypticism? We basically mean three things: a *type of literature* “depicting the imminent and catastrophic end of the world”; a *type of eschatology* with two main ideas: “the present world order... is under the temporal control of Satan [which] will shortly be destroyed by God and replaced by a new and perfect order”; and a *type of collective behavior* “inspired by the believe that the world as we know it is about to end and that drastic steps must be taken by an oppressed minority to prepare for an imminent catastrophe” (Aune 2005, 234ff).

In any case, Christian apocalyptic communication has four underlying tenets: *dualism*,⁴⁹ by which is meant “that there were two fundamental components of reality in our world, the forces of good and the forces of evil”; *pessimism*, that is, “we cannot improve our lot in this age, an age of evil, misery, and anguish”; *vindication*, that is, God “will vindicate his holy name, and the people who call upon his name, in a show of cosmic force”; and *imminence*: all this “will happen very soon. It is right around the corner. It is imminent” (Ehrman 2008, 215ff).

Is it possible to connect apocalyptic eschatological teachings of Christianity to specific periods of dogma construction and organized religious communication? This article answers the affirmative. If one considers a long time span –beginning in the second century BC, when apocalyptic ideas appeared in the Old Testament–, until the assertion of the two kingdoms in St. Augustine (*The City of God*), opposed to the realization of the kingdom of God *on this earth* (Schwarz 1984, 501ff), six centuries were needed to allow for a Christian doctrinal evolutionary process which stressed an afterlife with strong apocalyptical overtones characteristic of the Late Middle Ages. Let’s see.

The idea of any kind of afterlife is not yet present in the Ecclesiastes (AANT 2010, 31ff; Ehrman 2008, 189ff). Apocalyptic Judeo-Christian views are only found in the book of Daniel in the Old Testament (Dan 7-12), which scholars now date in the second century BC. Typically, apocalyptic doctrines are developed in the New Testament, in special in The Apocalypse or Revelation of John. So if we had to point to the development of an apocalyptic Judeo-Christian doctrine we would have to refer to the book of Daniel in the Old Testament, to the Apocalypse of

⁴⁹ It would be very difficult to deny the contribution/mutual influence of dualist philosophies, in particular Gnosticism, to/and Judeo-Christian apocalypticism. For example, Schwarz (1984, 471ff) begins his treatise on Christian eschatology acknowledging the possibility of shared teachings between the Judeo-Christian tradition and Zoroastrianism. Also, compare Aune (2005, 239) and Toner (*CE* 2003), without accepting, of course, “the superiority of Christian eschatological teaching”.

John in the New Testament, and to the peak of this development in Augustine's City of God. Specialists have also noted that these developments were paired to historical periods of sociopolitical hardship: the Maccabean Revolt to confront the tyranny of the Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes (167 BC), Christian persecutions –either the Neronian, who blamed on Christians the great fire of Rome of 64 CE, or the later persecution of the 90s by Domitian– (Aune 2005; Ehrman 2008, 197ff), and, as we will see, with the fall of Rome in the hands of Goths in 410, respectively.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was born in Numidia. One main concern in his sermons was to dispute the position of Donatists (Edwards 2004, 100ff), although he also held controversies against Manicheans and Arians.⁵⁰ Donatism was a major heresy in North Africa, rigorist in its kind, which rejected the ease with which communion was re-established to bishops that had committed apostasy under Roman persecution. Were sacraments given by apostate bishops valid? Donatists held an emphatic no, against the opinion held by Augustine on sacrament objectivity: the salvific virtue of sacraments does not depend on the moral dignity of the person who ministers them (Eliade 1999, 74). Besides, Donatists stressed the independence of the church from political power. But, of course, the fourth century was a time for Christian expansion, and Christian rigorist positions were not welcomed by ecclesiastical authorities. In 314, a synod in Arles found against Donatists. What is considered more important is that this was the first synod called by the initiative of Constantine the Great, and considered for that reason, “a major departure from precedent, one that would have far-reaching consequences. For the first time, a Roman emperor had taken the initiative in convening a council of bishops, on any scale. His action instantly elevated the status of such a meeting and changed its nature” (Drake 2006, 118).⁵¹ The newly marriage

⁵⁰ See Portalié (*CE* 2003). Before his conversion into Christianity, Augustine held Manichean views.

⁵¹ It seems that in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and as early as in the second century CE, forced by the Marcionite heresy (Ehrman 2003, 95ff), the appearance and development of heresies is closely linked to the canonical/apocryphal distinction, triggered by organized religious communication. In other words, in early Christianity right doctrine and right testamentary tradition evolved from efforts at Christian organization, that is, were brought about by the decisions of the early synods and councils of the church (Ehrman 2003, 229ff). A strong organized Christian communication, which by the fourth century became fiercely centralized and hierarchical, seems to be what distinguished Christian apocalyptic eschatology from, say, the “relative eschatology” of Theravada Buddhism as depicted by Ladwig (2014) for late nineteenth century Laos and Thailand.

of ecclesiastical and imperial policies should be taken into account as a parallel development of Augustine's doctrine of the two kingdoms.⁵²

Augustine's doctrine of the two kingdoms also accompanies the major sociopolitical development of the fifth century in the Mediterranean basin: the fall of the Western Roman Empire.⁵³ To the traditional patriarchates of the church this meant: the displacement of Alexandria as the main patriarchate in the East in favor of Constantinople, which became the "new Rome". The theological dispute between Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, and Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, could not be fully evaluated without considering this circumstance (Perrone 1993, 68). Moreover, this would eventually constitute the background for the first major schism of Christianity: the separation of the non-Chalcedonic churches (Syrian, Coptic, Armenian and Ethiopic) from their communion with orthodoxy (Mitre Fernández 2000, 24).

What followed was an extraordinary situation in which Rome remained outside the territorial jurisdiction of the Roman emperor of the East, but in terrible need to come into terms with the so called "barbarians", first the Goths and later the Franks. No surprise, in 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne in Rome. Since then the Greek expression *basileus romeion* (Roman emperor) was not anymore exclusive of the emperor in Constantinople, but had to be shared with a westerner, first Frank, later on German, another circumstance to feed the sense of grievance between East and West.⁵⁴

Not all non-conformist Christian communication held rigorist views to the point of becoming millenarian, apocalyptic in nature. What is certain is that all millenarian thought was intrinsically anti-sacramental and anti-hierarchical (Ornelas 2011). Millennialism announced the coming of the afterlife as a matter of fact, which is why it often turned

⁵² Strictly speaking, the Edict of Milan of 313 was only an edict of religious tolerance. It was until 380, with the Edict of Thessalonica (*Cunctos Populos*), that Christianity turned into the imperial religion. Compare Artola (1968, 21-22) and Marco, Pina, and Remesal (eds.) (2002, 154).

⁵³ It should not be forgotten that ten out of the twenty-two books that compose Augustine's work are an extended Christian apology and polemic against the pagans, denying the idea that the catastrophe that fell onto Rome could be explained for Romans having deserted the pagan deities in favor of the one and only Christian God. Compare San Agustín (2011).

⁵⁴ The rivalry between the patriarchates of Rome and Constantinople was evident since the ninth century. The dispute of Rome with the patriarch Photius of Constantinople in 863, regarding the jurisdiction of southern Italy and Dalmatia and concerning the *filioque*, was the beginning of it. To explain the schism of the Greek Orthodox church one can also point to distinct liturgical traditions, the unending dispute on the *filioque* with the patriarch Caerularius of Constantinople in 1054, and the plundering of Constantinople by "pilgrims" of the fourth Crusade in 1204. Compare Mitre Fernández (2000, 35ff) and Jedin (1960, 47ff).

violent. As early as in the second century CE, Montanists appeared in Phrygia preaching the end of the world, claiming that women could minister sacraments, and inviting to martyrdom. In this respect –low consideration for the human life in this world–, Montanists preceded the Cathari of the Late Middle Ages. The Late Middle Ages saw an explosion of millenarian doctrines in Joachim of Flora, the Czech Hussites and the Anabaptists of the Reformation period.⁵⁵

Joachim of Flora was the reformer of the Cistercian order whose millennialism appointed the year 1260 as the beginning of the *parousia*, when monks would govern the world and Humanity would turn to evangelical poverty. This doctrine was taken by spiritual Franciscans (*fraticelli*) to criticize the temporal wealth and power of the church that soon became a protest against the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The Hussites, followers of the Czech reformer Jan Hus, gave the faithful the right to proclaim God’s word. They rejected the purgatory and prayers for the death, and also disliked relics and the cult of saints and of their statues. Anteceding in almost one century Martin Luther’s claims, they criticized indulgencies, and sustained that Christians had the right to communion under the two species. They approved of two sacraments: Baptism and the Eucharist, which could be ministered by the faithful in their own language. Hussites rejected all religious authority: the Pope’s function was not to command the people but to serve it in any possible way.⁵⁶

Finally, Anabaptists represented the radical wing of the Reformation movement.⁵⁷ Their doctrine placed emphasis in the exclusive baptism of adults. They conceived of the church as based in voluntary adherence: the church exists where the faithful join for celebration. They opposed any religious institution as elongation of civilization or the national State, and rejected any apostolic succession.⁵⁸ Anabaptism is said to have promoted the Peasants’ War in Germany (1524-1525), the

⁵⁵ See Cozens (1964), Mitre Fernández (2000; 2003), and Seguy (1981). The Cathari as well as Joachim’s doctrine and later on *fraticelli*, Hussites and Anabaptists were considered heretical by organized Christian communication, that is, councils’ decisions were addressed against them all.

⁵⁶ In 1421, the emperor Segismund declared a crusade against the Hussites, was defeated in the battlefield and retreated humiliated to sign a treaty with the rebels. Compare Hindley (2006, 368ff).

⁵⁷ Seguy (1981, 262ff) and Stauffer (1981).

⁵⁸ The principles of freedom of consciousness, church-state separation, and free will in religious matters, so essential for today’s democracy, are considered a direct contribution of Anabaptism. See Bender (1944).

outcome of which withdrew Martin Luther people's support to his reform.⁵⁹

In all, the emphasis in apocalyptic communication seems to be related to the need of a sufficiently universal concept of the world. Put in other words: *this* world had to be transcended because it was already very well known. It was difficult to ignore the differences between Christians and infidels, and the possibilities of salvation could not be controlled anymore with the distinction member/not member (Christians are good, and non-Christians are evil) (Luhmann 2009, 155ff). Even Christians themselves had to stand the sacramental communion with the sinful, at least until the coming of the judgment day. This further step in dogma construction had its parallel in the crusades, where Christians met face-to-face with non-Christians.

A crusade –or as their participants referred to it: *passagium generale, iter, voyage* or *Reise*– was a military expedition financed and blessed by the Pope or his representatives against the enemies of the Christian faith. Throughout the four hundred years span accounted for in this book, Western Europeans identified the term with the Roman Catholic church. The first declared enemies of the crusades were Muslim regions or rulers, though very soon expeditions were directed against pagan peoples of Central Europe and the Baltic area. The spectrum widened to include heretics and schismatics accused of threatening the authority of the church, and in more than one occasion rival Popes declared crusades against his opponent's supporters (Hindley 2006, 25).

Crusades also triggered further ecclesiastical decisions and dogma construction, like the indulgences granted to crusaders by the Lateran council I in 1123. The Lateran council IV in 1215 (Melloni 1993, 159ff) decided on the consideration of the Pope as *vicarius Christi*, and in the field of liturgy, the dogma of transubstantiation. The control of the sacrament of penance by the ecclesiastical hierarchy could be regarded as another important development that accompanied this new emphasis in apocalyptic eschatology.⁶⁰

The fervent hope for the coming of the Lord was gradually replaced by the sacrament of penance, through which one was assured of entrance into heaven, and by an increasingly elaborated system of purgatory. Once people pass through this vale of tears, they would

⁵⁹ One hundred thousand peasants influenced by the radical views of Thomas Müntzer were killed in the fields of Germany. Specialists now separate Luther's works taking the Peasants' War as a breaking point. Compare Edwards (2003) and (LO 2001, 271).

⁶⁰ See Atkinson (1980, 154ff) for an explanation of how penitence was practiced by the early Christians and how it ended up under the control of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

enter eternal bliss, since the church as the visible representative of the heavenly city mediated their salvation. Salvation at the end of world history was exchanged in favor of salvation at the end of individual history. The cosmic dimension of eschatology receded and the existential component gained (Schwarz 1984, 505).

Conclusion

Even though science does not provide answers for all human problems, most of them certainly benefit from this more earthly and humble mode of observation. One of the world's leading experts in the theory of social systems has established that in the end, this theory is pretty much a theory of observation, one which openly admits that a definitive viewpoint on any matter is hardly ever reached (Torres Nafarrate 2011). This is something that should not be taken for granted, especially when there is always the temptation to totalize the viewpoint provided by science.

Communication, indeed, is the spinal cord of society. And what is said in the social realm, about anything and from any viewpoint, could very well be addressed in a positive fashion and with the methods of science. There exists a solid tradition in social anthropology and sociology which is very close to this understanding of societies and of their religious communication. Within this tradition, rituals and doctrines have been recognized as the two basic components of religions. This is to say: rituals and dogmas are ways of saying things. As rituals are performed and doctrines explained, some meaning is proposed, somehow –rituals and dogmas communicate in their own proper manner–. Now it seems quite baroque to focus on the discussion of the so called “reality” or truthfulness of God, karma, heavenly realms, the afterlife, and the like, when what matters, from the naturalistic point of view adopted in this paper, is the *communicational reality* of all these, and of course that all these are things said by people to guide themselves into and make sense of the world where they live –an obscure one, if you wish, as apocalypticism depicts–.

A systematic and organized apocalyptic eschatology seems to be characteristic of monotheism; it appeared when societies acquired enough complexity to overcome its tribal-like form. To put it bluntly, a basic communication differentiation must have appeared, as well as social roles that would allow the distinction between the lay and clerics, or between other social corporations and the church as an organized body of communication.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, this development began in the second century BC and reached its peak in the fifth century CE. It is very

difficult to subject communicational evolutionary processes to precise dates, but it seems that Augustine's City of God helps the purpose of establishing a solid ground for Christian apocalyptic eschatology. As we have seen, a dualist Christian communication on the afterlife and apocalypticism are closely intertwined. The doctrine of the two kingdoms was a necessary point of departure which stressed an afterlife with strong apocalyptic overtones characteristic of the Late Middle Ages. An emphasis on apocalyptic doctrines was connected to the marriage of ecclesiastical and Roman imperial policies, directed in the first place to put aside the strong rigorist Christian tradition –qualified as heretical–, which did not help the purpose of turning Christianity into the imperial religion; to the face-to-face encounter with the infidel (crusades); and to the individualization of the sacrament of penance, now in control of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

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