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# A theoretical perspective on the societal significance of religion in South Africa

## Summary

It is assumed that modernity is a factor inducing change in contemporary South Africa. This assumption is explained in terms of a characterisation of recent social, political and economic changes. The theoretical perspective developed is based on the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann but also incorporates a substantial critique of this theory by Jürgen Habermas. The societal significance of religion is considered in terms of three dimensions of religion in society. The focus of the article is the theoretical articulation of this three-dimensional model in terms of the possible societal significance of religion in contemporary South Africa.

## 'n Teoretiese perspektief op die sosiale belang van godsdiens in Suid-Afrika

Dit word veronderstel dat moderniteit 'n faktor is wat verandering in Suid-Afrika te weeg bring. Hierdie veronderstelling word toegelig in terme van 'n karakterisering van onlangse sosiale, politieke en ekonomiese veranderinge. Die teoretiese perspektief is gebaseer op die sisteemteorie van Niklas Luhmann maar inkorporeer ook substantiewe kritiek van hierdie teorie deur Jürgen Habermas. Die sosiale belang van godsdiens word bespreek in terme van drie dimensies van godsdiens in die samelewing. Die fokus van die artikel is die teoretiese verwerking van hierdie driedimensionele model in terme van die moontlike sosiale belang van godsdiens in kontemporêre Suid-Afrika.

It is often argued that religion is of fundamental significance in understanding South Africa. Although it is clear that religion did play a crucial role in the shaping of South African society, it is often uncritically assumed that this significance will automatically be permanent. This cannot be determined as yet. A number of issues need to be considered. This article attempts to provide some conceptual and theoretical clarity in this regard. The focus is on what theoretical models of modernity can provide in terms of defining the societal significance of religion.

It should be emphasised that the focus here is not on features of religion in personal life or the nature of religious institutions but on the role of religion in forming society at large. The phrase "the societal significance of religion" refers to a whole range of possible ways in which religion can be a resource for change at a structural level. It also refers to ways in which religion can reinforce existing social structures by institutional and/or cognitive means. Religion may provide social patterns, expectations, images and/or material and institutional resources whose influence in society goes beyond the confines of the particular religious tradition or the personal opinions and lifestyles of believers. Such religion has "societal significance".

It is naturally taken as a given fact that modernity will play an important role in South African society and that this role is somehow more important now than before. The assumption is not that a discussion of the nature of modernity will exhaust the various strategies in terms of which an analyst might want to discuss features of social change in contemporary South Africa. Rather, it is assumed that a thorough consideration of this analytical strategy will provide important insights. Nor is it assumed that modernity is the only dimension of change featuring prominently in current South African social change.<sup>1</sup> However, it is assumed that the significance of modernity is presently increasing.

1 It is unproblematic to claim that South Africa is a confluence of a host of legacies and influences. Not only has it been substantially formed by modernity, but also by the cultures, social patterns and ecology of Africa. Some theories try to afford due recognition to the impact of modernity and globalisation on Third or Fourth World or peripheral contexts (the terminology varies

These assumptions can be put into concrete terms by reference to the introduction of the new constitution and the broader political, legal and economic changes taking place in South Africa. These developments are viewed as enhancing the articulation of modernity in South Africa. Furthermore, they are seen as impacting specifically on the societal significance of religion in South Africa.

Ernst Gellner (1994: 54, his italics) has argued passionately that the "*central and by far the most important point about our shared social condition*" is that "we do indeed possess knowledge beyond both culture and morality" and, one presumes, beyond religion tied to moralities and cultures. Gellner calls this type of knowledge industrialism. He has zealously argued over many years that this central fact of "our shared social condition" creates a crucial asymmetry of power relations in the world. This is not to be relativised by any "fashionable" but dangerous idea that all cultures (or moralities or religions) are equal (Gellner 1994: 60 ff).

The idea of a type of knowledge beyond culture and morality has to be taken up if one is to seriously consider the societal significance of religion in South Africa. Modernity is the social embodiment or manifestation of the "knowledge" to which Gellner refers. Modernity is a fact of South African life and it affects and forms social structures and relations,<sup>2</sup> including structures and relations that may be called religious in one way or another.

according to the theory). Nevertheless, theories of modernity, however sophisticated, cannot provide a fully adequate theoretical perspective on South African social reality.

- 2 "Modernity" does not exist outside the categories of theory and should not be seen as more than a conceptual strategy to describe and interpret our world. Nevertheless, it is a coherent and fruitful concept bringing together a number of crucial aspects of our existence. In terms of the aspects Giddens deems to be irreducible dimensions of modernity, government and business at least seem to be pushing for South Africa to become more modern as quickly as possible – although they sometimes operate at cross-purposes. "Heightened surveillance, capitalistic enterprise, industrial production and the consolidation of centralized control of the means of violence" (Giddens 1985: 5) are being promoted. The South African state attempts to develop its political legitimacy and integrity; social and welfare schemes are expanded; the scope of tax-collection

It is clear that modernity is a contested notion<sup>3</sup> and that the contestation of the meaning and sense of this term will persist. But it is unacceptable to discuss the societal significance of religion in South Africa — bearing in mind that the social definition of religion is not fixed — without some sustained argument about the way in which religion is formed and changed by modernity and the ways in which religious people and religious institutions react to modernity. Religion — especially when functioning in the public arena where religious ideas and actors do not define the parameters — is influenced by modernity.

In particular, two noteworthy and sophisticated theories of modernity will be surveyed with a view to distilling a model of religion in modernity that does justice to the complexities of religion. One perspective, that of Niklas Luhmann, has been chosen as a starting point for the development of a theoretical and conceptual strategy. It was selected because it constitutes a systematic attempt to handle very complex issues while at the same time providing a very controversial and debatable argument. Using the “sharp edge” which such a controversial position provides, one is able to make amendments and provide clarification without negating the challenge of having to deal with an incisive argument.

The hypothesis is that an amended systems-theoretical perspective on religion in modernity can provide a valuable heuristic device.

systems is increased; policing efforts are doubled; macro-economic structures and conditions are transformed; incentives for “modernisation” of labour relations, production and products are provided, and the armed forces and means of violence generally consolidated and regulated.

- 3 The difficulties obviously start with the idea of modernity itself. It cannot be said often enough that the idea of modernity is intertwined with a plethora of ideological ideas about the progress supposed to be inherent in the modern Western social structure. But the idea of modernity is not only an ideological “sign” to be used for whatever ideological and political purpose. As Comaroff & Comatoff (1993: xiii, my emphasis) put it: “As a (more-or-less) pliable sign, it attracts different referents, and different values, wherever it happens to land. But everywhere it speaks of great transformations that have reshaped social and economic relations on a global scale; transformations, indeed, which have made the very idea of ‘global’ thinkable in the first place. *These processes are real enough, of course*”.

The systems-theoretical approach (Luhmann) has to be amended by the addition of a lifeworld perspective (Habermas) and the integration of the lifeworld and systems approaches into one conceptual scheme. Such an amended systems-theoretical perspective provides a conceptual framework or model by means of which crucial aspects of religion in South Africa can be understood.

At this stage, three basic distinctions relevant to the societal significance of religion in modernity have been identified. I distinguish the societal significance of "religion as a system", "religion as performance" and "religion as a stock of knowledge". The first two distinctions derive from a systems perspective on religion in modernity, that of Niklas Luhmann. The second distinction has been somewhat amended with reference to the Habermasian critique of systems theory. Jürgen Habermas's restatement of the notion of the lifeworld is used to provide the theoretical background to the third distinction.

## 1. Two approaches to modernity

### 1.1 A systems approach to modernity

According to Luhmann's theory, religion in a functionally differentiated society has very little societal significance. In comparison with pre-modern societies and especially with the Western experience before the development of high modernity, religion has become societally almost insignificant. It remains a controversial enterprise, however, to compare the significance of religion in one type of society with that in another. Both religion and society are changing variables and the difficulties involved in drawing comparisons where very few constants exist are enormous. Rather than continue with this line of argument, it makes sense, in terms of our aim, to ask what the societal significance of religion in modernity is from the point of view of Luhmann's theory.

Luhmann uses systems theory as an interpretative tool to analyse social relations in modernity and finds it especially relevant to contemporary social relations because they seem to be so complex. Systems develop in order to reduce complexity by virtue of the

distinction between system and environment. Social systems are developed to cope with complexity of meaning and can be distinguished from their environments on the basis of the communication which is meaningful within a system. Social systems can therefore be defined as “connections of communication distinguishing [themselves from] an environment by restricting the appropriate communications” (Luhmann 1989: 145).

The two most important results of Luhmann’s restatement of social theory in systems-theoretical terms are the redefinition of the meaning of functional differentiation and the use of the notion of autopoiesis. This will briefly be explained.

Differentiation is the most basic social systems procedure. Functional differentiation is a specific type of systems differentiation. The term describes the process whereby the type of differentiation operative in a system

*relates what is given, whether that be states or events, to perspectives on problems and seeks comprehensibly to enable a problem to be solved in one way or another (Luhmann 1995: 53, my italics).*

Functional differentiation is therefore differentiation of systems from environment on the basis of a defined set of problems. In conditions of increasing complexity a particular set of problems would therefore be likely to engender a system. The set of problems can be called functional if its definition also defines the operation of the particular system. In concrete terms this would mean that modernity would be likely to advance the development of particular systems (or more precisely, subsystems of the encompassing societal system) in which particular sets of problems are defined and sub-systems develop which relate only to events or conditions in terms of those sub-systems.

Autopoiesis refers to the way in which social systems operate and therefore to the basic elements of those operations. The basic elements of social systems are no longer taken to be substances but self-referential operations.

[These] can only be reproduced within the corresponding system and only with the help of a network of the same operations (autopoiesis) [...] the primary goal of autopoietic systems is the

continuation of autopoiesis and any concern for the environment is filtered by corresponding solving entities (Miller 1994: 105).

Each of these sub-systems is a system in its own right and creates and produces meaning in a self-referential fashion. In the process the particular differentiation between sub-system and environment is legitimated in its own self-referential operations. The mode of operation for each sub-system differs. The various modes of operation depend on different binary codes, which are rules that govern the way in which information coming to the system is weighted and interpreted (Luhmann 1986: 76).

### 1.2 A lifeworld approach to modernity

The main point of Habermas's critique of Luhmann is whether Luhmann can access the "communicative everyday practical knowledge" which individuals employ to make decisions if he does not incorporate a theory of action (Habermas 1988: 84). The point of entry into this debate is the distinction drawn by Habermas between system and lifeworld.

By distinguishing the lifeworld from the sub-systems making up the modern societal system as a whole, Habermas opens up a space for understanding the role of practical knowledge of social issues not exhaustively defined by the sub-systems of modern society. On the other hand, the lifeworld, as conceived by Habermas, is not left untouched by modernity or by the process of functional differentiation.

Habermas's work has to an extent culminated in the formulation of a theory of communicative action as the basis for a theory of reason and the rationalisation of modern society. Through a synthesis of Lukács, Weber, Durkheim, Parsons and Mead, Habermas develops a perspective on modernity that tries to overcome what he sees as being a false theoretical divide between action and systems perspectives on the nature of modern society. This is embedded in the argument which he advanced over more than three decades: that one can only understand modern societies if one understands that social integration and systems integration have been separated as social processes (Habermas 1987: 117). It is within this framework that the notion of a lifeworld becomes a central issue for Habermas.

The lifeworld is understood to be the horizon within which all communication occurs and is possible. The process of coming to understanding takes place against this background. The lifeworld concept is defined as "background knowledge that must tacitly supplement our knowledge of the acceptability conditions of linguistically standardised expressions". This knowledge is "*implicit*", "*holistically structured knowledge*", which "*does not stand at our disposition*, inasmuch as we cannot make it conscious and place it in doubt as we please" (Habermas 1984: 336, his italics). These stocks of knowledge (Ingram 1987: 116) are handed down in culture and language, and changes which affect culture and language obviously affect the lifeworld as well.

In general terms, no actor communicating in a social setting can objectify the whole of the lifeworld within which communication takes place. The lifeworld is the horizon within which communication takes place. On the other hand, it is part of the process of reproduction that aspects of the lifeworld come under scrutiny and may be objectified and thought about.

Habermas argues that aspects of the lifeworld come under scrutiny primarily when a loss of meaning threatens stocks of "cultural knowledge", when social conflict and anomie threaten social integration, and when experiences of alienation and psychopathologies threaten socialisation and identity (Habermas 1987: 140-1). But the potential for reflecting on problems of social integration becomes greater when a society is in the process of differentiation and when the normative prescriptions of an "opaque source of authority" (White 1988: 98) are no longer strong enough to control the process. This is the case only in "late modernity".

Reason is not only relevant in the purposive rationality of the various functional systems. Reason is also part of the way in which modern people solve problems that go beyond the functioning of those systems. Here the differentiation of types of rationality in terms of their relation to communication and the lifeworld is crucial. The type of rationality characteristic of functional systems cannot be thought to be characteristic of the type of rationality at work in communicative action. Communicative rationality is orientated



towards understanding and is the “preferred” mode of rationality in modern lifeworld contexts.

The reference to modernity is crucial to Habermas’s understanding of communicative rationality. The reproduction of lifeworlds is a continuous process of the formulation and reformulation of common understandings, of working on ways of co-ordinating action and social integration, and of the formation and development of personal identity and socialisation (Habermas 1987: 135-40). However, these three aspects of cultural knowledge, social norm-formation and personal identity (all aspects of social integration) are very closely related, both with each other and with systems integration in segmental and stratified societies (to use Luhmann’s terminology).

Habermas argues that modernisation has meant the dissociation of social integration and system integration, the differentiation of two separate types of rationalisation for each type of integration and the further internal differentiation of each of these two types of integration.<sup>4</sup> The three aspects of reproduction of the lifeworld become progressively differentiated as they are rationalised in modernity. He argues that

[...] the further the structural components of the lifeworld and the processes that contribute to maintaining them get differentiated, the more the interaction contexts come under conditions of rationally motivated mutual understanding, that is, of consensus formation that rests *in the end* upon the authority of the better argument [...] (Habermas 1987: 145, his italics).

Modernisation is therefore not only a process of differentiation as far as functions and systems go, but also as far as the lifeworld of individuals and society goes. The rationalisation of the lifeworld is not in itself a process threatening modern societies (threats to the lifeworld largely originate in global systems like politics and economics that tend to “colonise” and “impoverish” the lifeworld). It may well even have critical and constructive potential for the

4 Different systems with different governing principles in the functionally differentiated societal system and different structural formations in the lifeworld pertaining to different cultural, normative and personal identity issues, respectively.

opening up of systematic distortions in communication and other crises and problems afflicting modernity.

## 2. A three-dimensional model of the societal significance of religion in modernity

An estimation of the space for religion in modern society will now be developed, based on the concepts and theories introduced above. This will be done by way of a model of the important dimensions of religion in modern society. In each case, the possible societal significance of the particular dimension of religion will be discussed.

### 2.1 Religion as a sub-system of modernity

Given the theory of social systems and the argument that modernity is characterised by the functional differentiation of sub-systems, religion can also be defined as a sub-system of modernity. However, in Luhmann's view, religion is not only relatively insignificant in *modern* public life, as opposed to non-modern societies, but also relatively insignificant when compared *as a system* to other sub-systems of modernity.

#### 2.1.1 The relative insignificance of religion as a system

A particularly forceful way of arguing the societal insignificance of religion is to point to the "privatisation of religion" since the development of the modern state and an economy based on money. Within this argument, non-modern, traditional religious institutions like the church (only rarely is reference made to religions other than Christianity) are often understood to have had a societal role in the legitimisation of political structures and decisions. In addition, religious institutions are understood to have provided a moral code generally under-girding social relations and structures pertaining to public status, knowledge, gender relations, labour relations, the

value of material wealth and so on. This influence has slowly but surely waned, and although religion may still be significant in matters relating to the "private sphere" (often understood to imply family relations, sexual morality, marital relations, and other matters of "personal" morality and "spirituality") it has practically lost its societal role.

Luhmann does not see the privatisation of religion as the relegation of religion to "a private sphere" as if this were some social "fact" — rather than a social "definition" (Dobbelaere 1985: 381).<sup>5</sup> His position is that religion has become a personal choice and therefore individualised or privatised. This does not necessarily mean that it has no social power but that functional differentiation has run its course and that people are no longer ascribed to sub-systems but have equal access to them. Therefore, the privatisation of religion is not a "private matter" but a logical consequence of very public social developments:

We may conclude, then, that individuation is not the establishment of a private 'sphere' [...] Individuation is, however, a structural component of functional differentiation. It refers to the individuation which is typical of *all* sub-systems (Dobbelaere 1985: 383, his emphasis; see also Beyer 1994: 76).

Luhmann explains his point of view further in reacting to the reception (Wallace 1985: 29) of his formulation of the distinction between public and private. He calls the distinction a "purely semantic device regulating access of persons to social systems" and points out that the distinction had its origins in a very different social situation in which the political and the economic had to be distinguished. Luhmann argues that all sub-systems are public, while the motivations and decisions which individuals have and make about these systems are all private. Religion and religious institutions are public institutions and are not privatised in modernity or in terms of the process of functional differentiation.

On the other hand, there has been a notable change in the way in which individuals relate to religion and to religious institutions. The decision to adhere to inherited, common or traditional religious

5 This is the way Berger and Luckmann sometimes argue (Beyer 1994: 72-4) but it is not the position taken by Luhmann.

beliefs and to act according to what (public) religious institutions hold to be the correct way of expressing these beliefs has become a private matter.<sup>6</sup>

When comparing the significance of decisions about how an individual (or community) relates to a sub-system in a functionally differentiated society, very real differences are evident in terms of the consequences of those decisions. The political system and the economic system and any individual's relation to them are decidedly more significant than the religious system. Here both a historical and a diachronic perspective serve to elucidate Luhmann's perspective on the matter.

The functional differentiation of modern society has brought about important changes in the societal significance of religion. Decisions about religion are relatively inconsequential for the individual's position, movement and opportunities within other systems.

Because of the impersonal and functional nature of the sub-systems of modern society, these systems do not have the capacity to interpret religious commitment or religious conduct *in religious terms* (given the re-specification of what religion is in a functionally differentiated society). To refer back to the framework of Luhmann's systems theory, one should bear in mind that systems are understood to be self-referential and to operate in terms of the particular binary code developed in the process of functional differentiation. For example, the religious commitments or conduct of an individual wanting to enter party politics may seem to be important from the "outside". This is a deceptive impression. According to Luhmann, functionally differentiated systems relate to their environments (defined in terms of their system/environment distinction) only in terms of the system itself. Thus the political system relates to its environment, including the religion of the prospective political figure, only in political terms.<sup>7</sup>

6 In this sense of the notion of privatisation there is little difference between Luhmann's ideas and those of many other sociologists of religion, whether they argue in terms of a theoretical framework or the analysis of empirical material.

7 The political system comes into view for political actors through the medium (or mirror) of public opinion and the way the political system draws a frame of political interpretation over the religious attitudes and conduct of political

This may seem at first glance to be a trivial perspective. However, the point of the whole discussion is that the process of reinterpretation of every aspect or set of aspects which comes into the purview of a sub-system of a functionally differentiated sub-system re-configures the aspect or set of aspects. And the re-configuration is done in terms of the relevant system and its own priorities and scheme. In a functionally differentiated society, these will of necessity differ from those of another sub-system. This has fundamental consequences for the significance of private decisions about religion in other sub-systems of modern society. Whatever the individual may hold the significance of a private decision about religion (or morality) to be, its significance in the political system will not be determined in terms of the commitments or aims of the individual but in terms of the binary code set by the sub-system in question. In fact, not only is the significance of a religious decision not determined by what the individual might intend or aim at; it becomes a question of what really takes place in the interaction between the individual and the political system. From Luhmann's sociological perspective, it is a political and not a religious event.

If considered from the perspective of functional differentiation and in terms of the societal significance of religion in modernity, it becomes clear that Luhmann's work implies that private decisions about religion are societally, as decisions about religion, quite insignificant. The only arena where private decisions about religion would have societal significance, as decisions about religion, would be the religious system.

Beckford (1989) evaluates the relative significance of the religious systems *vis-à-vis* other systems of functionally differentiated society in summarising Luhmann's arguments. Agreeing that religion has been privatised, he points out that the differentiated religious system has become less essential. He refers here to the question of symbolic representations of the whole and correctly notes that Luhmann holds that the whole only occasionally becomes significant and that religion concerned with representations about the whole is therefore also only occasionally significant (Beckford 1989: 81, also Luhmann 1982a: 80).

The historical reason behind many attempts of institutionalised religion to resist or push back “secularisation” was the loss of control over areas of society previously under the aegis of the church. This can be shown to be the case in physics, medicine, psychology, education, politics, and so on. The resistance to secularisation from institutional religious quarters relates directly to the diminution of religion’s societal significance to a re-specified set of functions.

As has been seen from the discussion of what the re-definition of religion implies in modernity, restricting religion to “spiritual” matters lessens its societal significance. It even becomes a question of whether the help and consolation provided by a religious system in crisis situations (whether in the form of ritual acts, dogmatic explanations or communal interaction) are really fundamentally religious actions. The same goes for the moral positions that religious institutions and leaders may hold to be central to their societal significance.

The religious system, as it has been re-specified by theologians in their efforts to react to secularisation and in the creation of dogmatics, orthodoxy and ecclesiological discipline (Luhmann 1982a: 257-8), has become a system with functions different from those of other systems and with less societal significance. This is because the issues at stake in the religious system cannot compete for the same public attention as those in systems like politics and economics.

Luhmann comments on the implications of the functional specification of religion in modernity by saying that although religion can now be clearly distinguished from other aspects of society, everyday experience has also lost its immediate religious character. The forms and issues of religion have suffered a loss of actuality.<sup>8</sup> Not only does religion change internally due to the reflective process which necessarily accompanies the changes to a literary world (as discussed above). It also becomes a different experiential reality for those not involved in the institution.

actors can also be “read” from public opinion (Luhmann 1990a: 216-7).

8 “Der Alltag verliert in vielen Vollzügen seine unmittelbare religiöse Relevanz, man kann die großen und ernsten Worte nicht bei jeder Gelegenheit benutzen” (Luhmann 1982a: 36).

Religion, when differentiated, becomes more grave and thoughtful. It does not form part of everyday experience and its relevance in everyday experience changes. The questions now associated with religion, even when not formulated in pious terms or as "spiritual" questions by various schools within theological discourses, cannot be asked continuously. In fact, the fundamental function of religion is to absorb the problems of indeterminacy and not to posit such questions on a continuous basis.

Luhmann radicalises this even further by arguing that the function of religion is, in the case of Western Christianity, not fulfilled by going to church but in the fact that churches exist (Luhmann 1982a: 56). The most radical interpretation of this claim about the church would be to say that the absorption of the general problem of indeterminacy of meaning can be and is often solved by virtue of the fact that there are religious institutions doing what they do. This means that, as long as there is a religious system that has the function of keeping questions about the indeterminacy of meaning at bay, the problem of indeterminacy does not trouble society. The individual's sense of the realness of the solution to these problems may need to be upheld in various and occasional ways. This happens when individuals take part in the rituals associated with religion. However, this pattern of occasional participation does not mean that the institutions, the rituals and the system of religion have societal significance outside of the fact that they continue to exist.

It must be clear from the above that the notion that religion serves to integrate society by virtue of its provision of a cognitive and normative coherence which make society possible (Durkheim, Parsons, etc) is rejected by Luhmann. This is altogether too grand a scheme. Luhmann directly claims that religion must realise that society is possible because all partial sub-systems of society accept that they are part of a larger whole and that all sub-systems form the environment for other sub-systems (Luhmann 1982a: 248; also Dobbelaere 1985: 383). The sharper definition of the function of religion thus depends on the secularisation of the rest of society. Religion does not integrate society but depends for its own "uncontaminated" existence on the integration of society by other

means, in other words, a complex of system/environment relations in the environment of the religious system.

If the societal significance of religion is no longer to be sought in the integrative function of religion, one might, in terms of historical precedence, be tempted to look for societal significance for religion in terms of providing ways of talking about society and human existence as a whole. Luhmann provides forceful arguments to the contrary.

Discounting the role of religion in the provision of discourses about society as a whole, he argues that the only function of the societal system itself is to keep the process of functional differentiation intact. This is the identity and the only all-encompassing problem of modern society. This problem cannot be stated in religious terms without due regard for the partiality of such a statement.

As part of the transformation of the meaning of all the basic concepts of the European political tradition by the end of the eighteenth century, the previously existing coherence between morality, religion and politics has all but disappeared. A moral and religious articulation of political identity has become implausible for the public articulation of the identity and character of European societies. The question here is whether religion can retain something of its old function concerning representation. Luhmann's position seems ambivalent. It has been pointed out that he has retained something of a notion of humanity and human values as necessary for the existence of even modern society. This dimension relates to an extent to his perspective on Civil Religion. This is very much in the background, however, even if one can successfully identify tendencies to that effect. His more dominant themes relate to the stated impossibility of representations of society in modernity.

According to Luhmann, this has become clear due to the increased reflexivity of modern society and modern systems. Because of the increased complexity and pluralisation of systems and functions in modernity, modern societies are acutely self-aware. Discussing the problems of the legitimacy of political power in the context of the demise of "romantic" political theory, Luhmann (1987: 104) argues that



[... a]ll this world has foundered, and with it its semantics of self-observation and self-description. In the place of the *civilitas* we have civilization; in the place of the good life, the difference between values and circumstances; and in the place of the representation of unity, the representation of difference.

To continue with a theme already introduced into the argument, religion cannot integrate society because it depends for its own existence on the differentiation of systems in modern society. Therefore, religion cannot successfully posit the unity of society in religious terms (or in the moral terms so intimately associated with religion in other types of societies). This is another way of saying that Luhmann does not believe that religion can provide society with representations of society which effectively bring about order, unity or moral transformation. In fact, society does not need keeping together and it does not need moral impetus to change. In terms of the different levels of social systems in Luhmann's theory, a functionally differentiated society needs distinctions in order to function and to further the process of functional differentiation. Each function must be clearly formulated, must keep to its partial role in the whole, and must not aspire to do more than its function. This does not leave any room for a way of talking about reality (positing society in religious terms) that has been relegated to the margins of human existence (even if it deals with the most fundamental questions of the indeterminacy of human existence and knowledge).

### 2.1.2 The oblique significance of religion as a system

The problem of the societal significance of religion in Luhmann's work can be approached through his discussion of the paradoxical nature of meaning and human experience. This builds on the notion of religion dealing with the indeterminacy of meaning. If one asks the question about the significance of religion, not in relative terms, but in terms of duration and constancy, a level of significance emerges that is oblique but constant.

Wuthnow (1992) selects this as the angle from which to present Luhmann's ideas about religion. Searching for a more general function for religion in modern society in Luhmann's work, he discusses the "inevitable and enduring confrontation with *paradox*". This is identified as the necessity of closure to make communication

possible while openness is also needed to cope with complexity and change (Wuthnow 1992: 93).<sup>9</sup>

If one explores this line of thought a different perspective opens up on the issue of the significance of religion as a system. In dealing with paradox, religion tackles a fundamental human problem. This problem has to be laid to rest and if religion functions to “solve” the problem of the paradoxical nature of all human knowledge, it gains significance in a continuous if oblique way.

Wuthnow here points to a genuinely universal definition of religion in Luhmann’s work – genuine because it is not bound to the functions taken up by religious institutions (which change their form and import in various types of societies) but to communication itself.

Luhmann (1990b: 122-3) argues that knowledge only comes about through (exists in) distinctions and *therefore has to be finally grounded in paradox*. The point to this crucial argument is that all knowledge, observation, experience and, ultimately, all human existence is paradoxical. This becomes clear when one searches for grounds for knowledge and human existence. As Wuthnow (1992: 93) tries to show, “[i]t is from this simple recognition of paradox that Luhmann develops his views of the functions of religion”.

Luhmann’s dominant arguments rather pointedly put the case for the loss of societal significance of religion, a dimension that Wuthnow evades. It is feasible, however, to draw some inferences about the continued (or even increased) societal significance of religion in terms of the general definition of religion and the concomitant function accorded to religion (as attempted by Wuthnow).

The modern world is one in which awareness of the final paradoxicality of meaning, knowledge and experience is more pervasive than in any other. Moreover, because of this awareness, brought about by the reflexivity built into modern and functionally differentiated society, “religion” becomes a pervasive aspect of modern society. As

9 This is a slight misrepresentation because openness and closure are not opposites as formulated here. It is the closure of the system that enables systems to handle complexity and change. This is a paradox but not in the sense Wuthnow seems to indicate.

Luhmann puts it, “[t]he plenitude and voidness of a paradoxical world is the ultimate reality of religion”. He continues:

Society can exist only as a self-referential system, it can operate and reproduce communications only within a Gödelian<sup>10</sup> world. This general condition makes ‘religion’ (whatever this means) unavoidable. Social life, therefore, has a religious quality [...] (Luhmann 1985b: 8).

This type of definition of religion and the notion of its pervasive existence in modern society is not a new theme. What is new is the formulation that social life, as such, has a religious quality. This sounds Durkheimian, while Luhmann expressly does not hold with Durkheim’s views on the religious nature of all society (Luhmann 1982b: 3-19). Luhmann does not mean that religion is a sort of meta-level of social existence in which people are religious while being social and social while being religious. It is less than that.

When Luhmann talks about the religious quality of life, he talks about a dimension of social existence that deals with a particular problem which never really goes away. However, this problem is not always part of every discussion or of social interaction: “[t]he question of the ultimate meaning can be asked at any time and at any occasion — but not all the time” (Luhmann 1985b: 8). This sounds almost the same as saying that modern religion is too grave and thoughtful to be part of everyday life, although it contemplates the foundation of meaning.

The “gravity” of modern religion was earlier referred to in support of the interpretation that Luhmann deems religion to be insignificant. The difference here, however, is that Luhmann does not focus on the ways in which theologians and religious institutions have reacted to the reality of functional differentiation (in his view mostly bringing about the marginality of religion to modern social existence). Here he is talking about the pervasiveness and universality of the problem of ultimate meaning and the necessity of some sort of religious “solution” to the problem.

10 Kurt Gödel was a US logician and mathematician who showed that consistency in a formal system cannot be proved without using methods from outside the system.

Luhmann seems to be using two definitions of religion in modernity.<sup>11</sup> The first is the concrete forms in which religion has been moulded by religious institutions and theologians in reaction to functional differentiation in the Western experience. The second seems to be a more abstract definition fully in line with his idea of the function that sustains the religious system in modernity. Religious institutions and theologians have simply not quite grasped what their function is in modernity. To put it bluntly, diffuse talk about spirituality has taken the edge off religion and it has even been confused further by attempts at linking morality and religion.

On the other hand, Luhmann does agree that religion needs forms and that these forms always resist change and become ritualistic (Luhmann 1985b: 8-9). In fact, forms are necessary because it is through forms that religion can keep the solutions to "the problem of ultimate meaning" intact for some length of time — thus enabling society to continue without having to suspend everything every time anyone asks a question about ultimate meaning. Since this question can be asked at any time, religion (in terms of both a set of answers and its ritualised forms) is necessary for society and has some societal significance.

This societal significance is, however, oblique. Luhmann (1985b: 9) even hints that

it may become the job of divine detectives to find out what can be observed and described as referring to religion in the paradoxes of art and love, or sovereign power, of making money or of recognizing the conditions of cognition.

The *volte-face* from arguing the insignificance of religion to inferring some societal significance for religion (albeit in a rarefied, abstract form) has more value and sense when another theme already discussed is analysed further. Religion has been said to provide some of the basic values that make society cohere. The more abstract

11 Schmidt (1985: 24) rightly points out that there are two definitions of religion in modernity in Luhmann's writings and that only the very abstract and general one of the two is what Luhmann understands as unavoidable. He also points out that most practitioners of religion (and one could say the same of public opinion in general) would not hold the more abstract definition to imply an adequate description of religion.

definition of religion thus includes a very abstract type of moral code. This code functions not only to absorb paradoxicality but also to provide certain basic values which keep different spheres or systems intact and make the functioning of the system possible (Reese-Schäfer (1992: 166) refers to politics as an example).

The primary argument about morality in Luhmann's work is that functional systems tend towards amorality. This goes for the political and economic systems and all other sub-systems of modern society. However, a secondary theme seems to run concomitant to the secondary (more abstract) definition of the function of religion and to indicate that morality also serves to keep society intact. It is not, however, the conservative version of that notion in which normative consensus is supposed. It is a rather more "liberal" notion of morality drawing vague boundaries within which societal conflict is a normal and everyday occurrence.

It seems possible to construct an approach to religion and morality in Luhmann's work that is rather more inclined to portray religion as having societal significance. However, there are two *caveats* to this. The first is that this societal significance of religion is oblique, as has already been noted. The question is whether religion really has societal significance if not only its power but also its nature first has to be described and explained to religious people and policy-makers alike when these people always thought they knew what religion was about. This is the second *caveat*. Religion has to be actualised in a way and in forms that will be recognisable to all parties involved before its societal significance will be recognised.

Therefore, religion is a guarantor that the paradoxicality of knowledge will not wreck society. Vague moral boundaries for social plurality do exist. Both these elements are oblique and difficult to render in precise terms. Furthermore, its societal significance is limited by its very obliqueness. It is only rarely that a societal manifestation of this is recognised to be religious and to be important.

## 2.2 Religion as performance

The notion of performance religion is proposed by Peter Beyer (1994). It is meant to distinguish functional religion from religion

that is not conforming with its functional specifications. Performance religion is clearly conceived in systems-theoretical terms.

Luhmann holds that religion can occasionally (rather than of necessity) perform outside the specified sphere of its functional competence. It becomes involved in health, development, education, and so on, citing its universal significance in societies that were not functionally differentiated. In addition, it seems that functional differentiation leaves an unspecified number of difficult problems in its wake, none of which can be solved by any one sub-system or by society "at large". This dimension of the possible societal significance of religion is explored first in Luhmann's terms and then in terms of Habermas's critical elaboration and transcendence of systems theory.

Habermas has been chosen as a reference point because of his development of the idea of communicative action. The space provided by the notion of the lifeworld (as the non-systemic aspect of social interaction in modernity) will be explored in particular. Here religion is not only conceived in systems-theoretical terms but also in terms of the lifeworld. Therefore, if religion were to have societal significance, its significance would not be derivative and therefore less authentic.

### 2.2.1 The occasional significance of performance religion I

Luhmann's systems approach places a restrictive framework on the significance of religion when considered outside the functionally specified ambit of religion (as a sub-system of modernity). This does not mean that he is blind to the significance of religiously motivated and organised actions outside the parameters of systemic religion. However, creative interpretation is needed to elicit a proper theoretical place for such religious acts.

Beyer has paid serious attention to the Luhmannian systems definition of religion while at the same time acknowledging that religion is somehow involved in more than its supposed functional focus. The notion of residual problems of functionally differentiated society is the outcome.

Beyer calls the problems of economic poverty, political oppression, familial estrangement, environmental degradation and personal identity "residual problems" created by the sub-systems of modernity but not solvable with any one of those systems (Beyer 1994: 80, 97). The reasons why the sub-systems cannot relate appropriately to each of these problems are varied, but two are basic. First, the problems themselves are multidimensional and require a comprehensive approach. Secondly, they cannot become relevant or understandable to the sub-systems because they may have been created due to the functioning of a particular sub-system but have consequences to which the system cannot relate. Luhmann (1986) has put together an extended argument about the environment to this effect.

The key to the use of religion as a base from which to mobilise is the holistic "memory" of religion. This implies that religious people and religious institutions preserve a memory in which they "remember" having been involved in all the social problems facing society. The pre-modern definition of religion was very different (Beyer 1994: 81). This is often the impulse for religious institutions and people to activate social concern groups and organise themselves around specific social problems which, when reflected upon from a modern perspective, lie outside their function and capacity.

The vast spectrum of literature about social problems which may be classified as residual indicates enough scope for religion to show through its performance, outside "true" religion, that it still has societal significance. In terms of Luhmann's theory, this significance will be occasional because religion is not necessarily involved in these problems in a functionally differentiated society. On the other hand, as functional differentiation increases in an attempt to deal with increased complexity, more and more residual problems may appear.

Luhmann points, however, to another set of difficulties for the religious system. He points out that in the diminution of the societal significance of functional religion, more performance religion is likely. However, religion is not, as a system, competent to deal with

these problems. In order to handle these problems, religion has to take on values and principles that are supposedly foreign to it in its differentiated form. The question arises as to whether it is still religion performing a public service or whether it is some other system or set of principles at work (Luhmann 1982a: 264).

Luhmann sees theology as continually having to solve this problem of integrity and identity, as it requires self-reflection. The theological answers may lead to a refusal to accept modern society as such. This refusal may take on societal significance in the name of religion. Luhmann does not expand on this theme and only refers to so-called "sectarian movements" (Luhmann 1982b: 187) or "counter-movements, the recent actions of the Islamic religion against secularisation being the most spectacular" (Luhmann 1985b: 15).<sup>12</sup>

Using references such as these in tandem with the previous arguments for religion having societal significance, Beyer (1994) comes up with a view that may legitimately be claimed to be Luhmannian. Beyer, however, seems much more informed as to the societal significance of the phenomena of new social movements and the role of religion therein.

According to this view, performing religion can create societal significance for itself in two ways. Both focus on the so-called residual problems of functional differentiation but in different ways. Both are actually modern phenomena because they use religion in a means-ends manner and have internal problems with the relation between performance and function that is typical of modern religion. However, the "conservative" version is exclusive in its approach, attaching universal validity to a particular moral and dogmatic/theological code while attempting to deal with the practical problem at hand. The "liberal" version is inclusive in terms of putting forward a practical agenda within a moral and theological framework. This tends to become more abstract in its attempts to include all perspec-

12 He also alludes to the varying success with which the Christian tradition has appropriated functional differentiation (Luhmann 1982a: 52), which leaves room for speculation as to what the less "successful" Christian responses to functional differentiation entail in terms of societal significance.



tives and to free itself from local and particular moralities and dogmas (Beyer 1994: 86-94).

It seems feasible to use Luhmann's theoretical work to argue that two different ways of dealing with "residual problems" can be differentiated under the category of performance religion. The difference lies in the orientation towards the past and the type of dogmatic commitment needed. The "conservative" type would require more resistance to functional differentiation on the issue of wanting to say more about the world than abstract, universally acceptable professions of the communitarian nature of human existence. On the other hand, the more inclusive "liberal" position would be more successful in securing the support of various groups while also criticising functional differentiation (the "residual problems" being the issue). Nevertheless, both would be modern reactions to modernity and functional differentiation:

[D]efining the modern way of life or western style or capitalist society or secular rationality in negative terms and reacting to it by negating this negativity is in itself a very modern way of coping with problems (Luhmann 1985b: 15).

## 2.2.2 The occasional significance of performance religion II

One level of the societal significance of religion outside its systemic definition is also occasional but in terms of a different set of issues. The societal significance of religion is determined by the logic and nature of the lifeworld in modernity rather than by functional differentiation. If communication is not only determined by systems and if meaning is also (even primarily as Habermas argues) generated on the level of the lifeworld, religion and morality can still function as the basis of a comprehensive critique and understanding of modernity. In this regard, Habermas has given reluctant recognition to the potential for protest that is exhibited in religious and religiously motivated social movements. These are also significant on occasion and in terms of their success as social movements offering an alternative to some essential dimension of modernity.

Habermas has an uncomplicated way of referring to religion. One is thus able to access the definition of religion operative in his work

as well as a first level of his perspective on the possible societal significance of religion in modernity.

In referring to the lifeworld, Habermas argues that the rationalisation of the lifeworld can only come to fruition in terms of the freedom it offers to modernity in that it disentangles itself from metaphysics and religion:

This sort of growing autonomy [characterising the communicative rationality of the lifeworld] can come to pass only to the extent that the constraints of material reproduction no longer hide behind the mask of a rationally impenetrable, basic, normative consensus, that is to say, behind the authority of the sacred (Habermas 1987: 145).

If religion is understood as referring to "the sacred" (as Habermas has more or less understood it until recently), Habermas does not see much sense in thinking that religion would play a positive role in the rational articulation of social problems or in the rational thematisation of aspects of society which are brought to the fore due to these problems. Religion, defined as referring to the sacred, is not compatible with rationalisation or with the differentiation which makes rationalisation possible.

"The sacred" is not just a mode of communication about religious issues but a world view that is incompatible with rationalisation. If religion were to continue to exist, it would operate to provide a unified and authoritative perspective on the world. It is nothing less than a way of life mediated by an autonomous way of thinking or a complete cosmology. Habermas argues this for both "primitive" and "world" religions (Rothberg 1984: 222).

The differentiation of science, morality and art in modernity and the evolution of communicative rationality to a reflexive stage (Rothberg 1984: 222-3) do not provide for an approach to social issues in which certain claims to truth cannot be thematised. The three types of validity claims of differentiated society (truth, rightness and sincerity) can no longer be lumped together.

Habermas has recently made public his recognition of critical theology and its efforts to provide a theological framework that does not presume its own authority (for instance Siebert, Metz and Schüssler-Fiorenza). He especially commends the efforts of a Danish theologian (Glebe-Möller) who has provided an atheistic version of

theology in the form of communicative fellowship with all suffering people (Habermas 1992: 235-6).

But this is accompanied by the very critical sociological question as to who still recognises himself or herself in this interpretation (Habermas 1992: 235). By implication, he is arguing that a select group of theologians may have all sorts of open definitions of religion and of their faith but that these are not shared by many within the particular religious tradition. The reason for this view is simple. Habermas (1992: 233) holds religion to be ultimately rooted in a "ritual community" in which certain questions cannot be asked without disrupting the ritual and therefore the community. Once the community is disrupted, the religion ceases to exist as a sociologically important phenomenon and it can certainly not provide a cosmology which is more than a privatised and optional sub-system of modernity (*à la* Luhmann).

If religion is to have societal significance in the sense that it contributes to the communicative handling of practical moral problems as they are thematised in lifeworld contexts, ways have to be found in which the relative exclusivity of religious claims does not short-circuit the consensus orientation of communicative action. Habermas is still (Meyer 1995: 377) sceptical about the chances of this ever happening and does not see that it needs to happen before the public debate on social issues can be advanced.<sup>13</sup> Others see it as already happening and as a process that can be fostered by theologians and faith communities to the benefit of the moral-practical discourse of the public sphere (e.g. Simpson 1989: 158-9, 1992: 190-5).

Habermas has paid some attention to the "potentials for protest" in social movements. These movements have tried to develop comprehensive critiques of an instrumentalised society and some of these

13 Here he takes issue with Peukert, Tracy and Davis by arguing that there is no reason why moral discourse has to be grounded in theology of any kind (Habermas 1992: 236-42). On the other hand, he has recently (Habermas 1988: 60) recognised that religion can articulate and express certain experiences of modern human beings which do not threaten the public discourse and which have a function to perform in modern life. Peukert (1976) would argue that such a function could be to console.

developments meet Habermas's criteria of open and rational dialogue. They are all in conflict with the instrumental logic of modern systems:

[T]hese new conflicts arise in domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization; they are carried out in sub-institutional — or at least extra-parliamentary — forms of protest; and the underlying deficits reflect a reification of communicatively structured domains of action that will not respond to the media of money and power [...] The new problems have to do with the quality of life, equal rights, individual self-realization, participation, and human rights<sup>14</sup> (Habermas 1987: 392).

Forms of protest include all sorts of new social movements and not all are "progressive". Habermas has analysed some as being neo-conservative. He distinguishes between the potential for emancipation and potentials for resistance and withdrawal (Habermas 1987: 393). These are all important to the societal significance of religion in modernity. Religion has proved to be a frequent option in the resistance and withdrawal mode. However, as some analysts have shown (Beyer 1994: 99-109; Beckford 1989: 163-5), religion is sometimes mobilised to emancipatory ends in modern society. These are often anti-systemic but this does not mean that they defy the communicative logic of moral-practical discourse which is understood by Habermas to be the key to emancipatory potential in new social movements.

On the theoretical level, Habermas also provides some insight into the possible societal significance of performance religion in modernity. A different perspective on the nature of the tensions of performance religion emerges. The tension is not so much between the functional definition of religion and its performance in terms of residual problems of modernity. The lifeworld perspective on the main division between different types of religious movements would be between those willing to engage in non-restricted and open-ended practical dialogue on social issues and those who give their point of departure a status above human and rational scrutiny. On the other

14 This list sounds very much like the list which makes up the new politics which Giddens sees as developing under the name of "life politics" (Giddens 1994: 198).

hand, a clear overlap exists between the type of issue relevant to these protest movements and those presented as residual problems above.<sup>15</sup>

If one accepts that Habermas does not have a very developed view of religion or of new social movements with a religious slant to them, there is still potential for the utilisation of the central features of his theory of communicative action. The lifeworld concept, in particular, is helpful when aiming to define the possible societal significance of religion. Furthermore, such an exploration can investigate some of the reasons why so many new social movements have had a religious slant.

### 2.3 Religion as stocks of knowledge

Functionally differentiated religion is religion marginalised. It is religion without much societal significance. However, this does not mean that religion cannot escape the bounds of functional differentiation. The fact that religion sometimes provides the institutional space, sometimes the very basic face-to-face contact, and very often the organisational base for public discourse about social matters has been dealt with in the previous section on performance religion. However, religious traditions often inform the content of public

- 15 Beyer (1994) presents five case studies of religion in a "performative" mode. All of these show dimensions of the development of public discourse about social concerns. Three have become so politicised that they operate predominantly in an instrumental fashion (American right-wing Christianity, Iranian Shiism and Zionist right-wing politics). These are also the instances where fundamentalist positions regarding the authority of leaders and their interpretation of sacred scriptures as well as a general focus on sacralisation of political policies are the strongest. The other two case studies (religious environmentalism and Latin American Liberation Theology) have operated in a less instrumentalised way, and have certainly facilitated and informed public discourse on norms, values, identity and world-views which do not necessarily depend on a strong view of sacralisation. Casanova (1994) presents another set of case studies somewhat overlapping with those presented by Beyer. He cites the cases of Poland, Spain, Brazil and US Catholicism in support of a thesis of religion facilitating and informing public discourse in a way which is not necessarily or always instrumentalised. Other ways of pointing in the same direction have surfaced in the writings of Robertson (1970; 1993) and Roof (1991), among others.

discourse on social issues by means of the variety of notions of the good, of norms and values and of integrity and identity.

### 2.3.1 The oblique significance of religion as stock of practical knowledge

In particular situations where systems produce crises of various types in the integration of societies, religion has become an important resource in the moral-practical discourse about aspects of the lifeworld. The institutional space, this type of discourse and its content (notions of goodness, integrity and value) are linked.

With recourse to Parsons and a number of anthropological studies, Habermas argues that value generalisation is a necessary component of system differentiation to the level of functional differentiation. Value generalisation can only happen when communicative action becomes progressively divorced from "traditional normative behaviour patterns". This results in the differentiation of morality and law from each other and the institutionalisation of a "de-moralised, positive, compulsory law" (Habermas 1987: 180) as well as a generalised set of values and moral tenets with a loose relation to various traditional normative behaviour patterns. Law becomes a sub-system that can be uncoupled from the lifeworld. However, law and all the other sub-systems of modern society remain linked to the lifeworld and everyday communicative practice through the institutions that embody them in society. These institutions can therefore serve as a channel both for the influence of the lifeworld on the systems and the converse.

If, however, the lifeworld and the institutions grounding the sub-systems of society are merely seen as another sub-system of society, there is no way in which critical insight can be gathered on the effects of the sub-systems in the lifeworld. This is what happens when system integration interferes with social integration. The communicatively structured lifeworld then becomes "instrumentalised" and gives rise to "structural violence" which cannot be seen from the perspective of systems because the communicative orientation of the lifeworld is not visible from a systems point of view. The structural boundaries imposed on communication appear natural to systems analysis (Habermas 1987: 185-7).

That is why the transformation of the lifeworld has often been understood to be dependent on the transformation of the systems. Habermas claims that

the opposite is true; increases in complexity are dependent on the structural differentiation of the lifeworld.

This is because every new

mechanism of system differentiation must, however, be anchored in the lifeworld; it must be *institutionalized* there via family status, the authority of office, or bourgeois private law (Habermas 1987: 173).

And this dependence on the institutionalisation of systems in the lifeworld itself can only come about if the lifeworld is sufficiently rationalised and differentiated to be able to accommodate the new level of system differentiation.

Two types of deduction can be made from the insights gathered from the lifeworld perspective. The first concerns the claim that the lifeworld is the horizon against which modern people act in society and that the systems of modern society do need to be anchored and institutionalised in the lifeworld. This means that there is some "space" for non-systemic but rational discourses on social issues that cannot be resolved in a particular sub-system of modern society. The second deduction concerns the claim that the lifeworld is somehow threatened by systems and can be fragmented and that cultural impoverishment can threaten modern societies' ability to resist the impact of functional differentiation on the lifeworld.

The rationalisation of the lifeworld

[...] brings with it greater contingency and fluidity of social relations and institutions: in *culture*, the breaking of the power of the cultural tradition, the development of competing conceptions of the good, and the institutionalization of criticism and revision of tradition; in *society*, the development and institutionalization of the legal person ... [and] democratic procedure; in *personality*, the differentiation of skills, attitudes, and motivations, and the development of reflexive processes of socialization (Baxter 1987: 54, his emphasis).

The differentiation of systems according to functions is dependent on the processes of rationalisation in the lifeworld. However, these processes of rationalisation make functionally differentiated

societies different from either traditional societies or segmental societies. Functionally differentiated societies depend on the accomplishments of the participants in their efforts at defining themselves, their social environment and how they see the world.

The easy solution to the problems of contingency created by modernity and the ways in which meaning is decided upon in modernity is by means of the functional systems. Most decisions made by modern actors are routine decisions and need to be such. The complexity of modern society is such that it eliminates the option of careful reflection on every aspect of life. Moreover, the authority of tradition or an elite can no longer serve to take over the responsibility of actors in modern life. However, the contingency of meaning also invites a very necessary complement to the differentiation of systems in the differentiation of the lifeworld. This is the arena in which the functionally differentiated systems are to be anchored.

The notion of the uncoupling of systems from the lifeworld may seem to go against the argument of the necessary anchoring of systems in the lifeworld (Baxter 1987: 69). But as Baxter (1987: 72) points out,

{b}esides the inputs of labor-power, demand, taxes, and mass loyalty, Habermas acknowledges that the economic system depends on certain patterns of value and motivation that are required for successful action within economic organizations, and that the political system depends on legitimization.

These "patterns of value and motivation" and legitimisation come not just from loosely defined horizons of culture, society and personality but from concrete forms like the family, voluntary organisations, neighbourhoods, friendships and all sorts of formations which are often classed together under names like "civil society", "public and private spheres", and so on.

However, the critical aspect to remember is that the rationality dominating these forms of life is no longer necessarily dictated by authority and tradition or by the instrumental logic of the systems that depend on them. This opens up scope for a consideration of the societal significance of religion not defined by the logic of functional differentiation and therefore not restricted to the limited definition



of what may be deemed to be religious communication in the functional differentiation perspective offered by Luhmann.

Religion may be part of discourses on the family, on values and motivations, on a variety of voluntary and social organisations, on identity and personality, and so on. In this way, religion may have societal significance. However, it cannot be significant by "traditional" means of authority, through association with a stratified elite or through the structures of a "closed" small-scale society. It must offer ideas of the good, notions of value, points of motivation, and symbols of identity which compete communicatively with other ideas of the good, notions of value, and so on. If religion can successfully make this transition with the rest of the rationalised lifeworld, it can prove to be more than a conservative reaction to the impulses of modernity and fulfil more than the function accorded to it by way of functional differentiation (and functional marginalisation). Moreover, this transition offers opportunities to religious people and religious institutions to take part in the processes of reflection on the ways in which modern systems are anchored in the lifeworld.

The economic and political systems of modernity are products of a differentiated and rationalised lifeworld which have become uncoupled from that lifeworld and taken on a life of their own (more or less in the terms defined by Luhmann). The problem is that these systems turn back on the lifeworld and tend to colonise aspects of it by means of a reified and abstract influence in it. This happens when aspects of the lifeworld are monetarised and bureaucratised and when, therefore, purposive rationality takes on the aura of normality in the public and private spheres of modern life.

While the colonisation of the lifeworld causes ideology to lose its hold on public discourse due to the fragmentation of that discourse, the development of "expert cultures" culturally impoverishes the processes whereby most individuals come to understand themselves, their world and their social integration.<sup>16</sup> The public and private

16 Countering Weber, Habermas claims that "it is not the differentiated structures of a rationalised society which are themselves the problem, but rather the fact that increasingly specialized forms of argumentation become the guarded

spheres are increasingly subjected to “short-circuiting” by these expert cultures, placing in doubt the competence of social actors to form moral-practical judgements and act accordingly.

Summarising his arguments about the threats of colonisation of the lifeworld and cultural impoverishment, Habermas (1987: 327) writes that

[...] the lifeworld is assimilated to juridified, formally organized domains of action and simultaneously cut off from the influx of an intact cultural tradition. In the deformations of everyday practice, symptoms of rigidification combine with symptoms of desolation. The former, the one-sided rationalization of everyday communication, goes back to the growing autonomy of media-steered subsystems, which not only get objectified into a norm-free reality beyond the horizon of the lifeworld, but whose imperatives also penetrate into the core domains of the lifeworld. The latter, the dying out of vital traditions, goes back to a differentiation of science, morality and art, which means not only an increasing autonomy of sectors dealt with by experts, but also a splitting-off from traditions; having lost their credibility, these traditions continue along the basis of everyday hermeneutics as a kind of second nature that has lost its force.

Habermas is no longer proposing ideological critique as the sole and most important response to the negative consequences of modernisation. He is now arguing for the rebuilding of structures of coherence, values and identity. This is because the problem is no longer just *false* consciousness but *fragmented* consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

preserve of experts and thereby lose contact with the understanding processes of the majority of individuals” (White 1988: 116).

- 17 “In the place of the positive task of meeting a certain need for interpretation by ideological means (an earlier task of political ideology in modern capitalist states), we have the negative requirement of preventing holistic interpretations from coming into existence. The lifeworld is always constituted in the form of a global knowledge inter-subjectively shared by its members; thus, the desired equivalent for no longer available ideologies might simply consist in the fact that the everyday knowledge appearing in totalised form remains diffuse, or at least never attains that level of articulation at which alone knowledge can be accepted as valid according to the standards of cultural modernity. Everyday consciousness is robbed of its power to synthesize; it becomes fragmented” (Habermas 1987: 355).

As has been intimated previously, the distinction between lifeworld and system provides a space for practical knowledge in society that is denied by Luhmann. As Beckford points out, Habermas "uses the distinction between social system imperatives and the communicative action of the lifeworld for two purposes", the first of which is "to show that the logics of money and power are threatening to expunge the traces of ordinary human reason". The second reason is "to argue that ordinary human reason still amounts to a relatively autonomous resource which could be deployed in the criticism and repair of the social system" (Beckford 1989: 146).<sup>18</sup>

One area where the lifeworld can be activated and deployed in criticism and reparation of the social system is the public sphere and in the public discourse taking place there. Focusing on the political and economic systems because they are the most important systems of modernity, Habermas argues that the lifeworld has reacted to the formation of these systems and to the media steering them by forming two basic "socially integrated areas of action", in other words, the public and private spheres.

Habermas (1987: 319) understands discourse in the public sphere to be borne by institutions of

[...] communicative networks amplified by a cultural complex, a press and, later, mass media; they make it possible for a public of art-enjoying private persons to participate in the reproduction of culture, and for a public of citizens of the state to participate in the social integration mediated by public opinion.

The area where communicative rationality can be exercised is the public sphere. Although it is clear that the public sphere is threate-

18 Beckford's understanding of Habermas does have one important flaw. He seems to understand the lifeworld as being synonymous with the private sphere (Beckford 1989: 148). Thus the threats of the functional systems of modern society are portrayed as threatening not only the lifeworld but also, as a consequence, the private sphere. Habermas's own point of view is that the public sphere is just as threatened by the social systems as the private sphere. Clearly, both the private and the public spheres are "spaces" where the lifeworld is fostered and reproduced and both are threatened by the logic of modern systems (Habermas 1987: 320).

ned by colonisation from the sub-systems of modernity and by the general weakening of cultural traditions, the lifeworld theory argues that the public sphere has not been "liquidated" in late modern societies (Habermas 1987: 389). The development of the mass media has opened new communication structures that are ambiguous but also offer the potential for rational discourse (Habermas 1987: 390).

If religion were able to function in the public sphere and in terms of the type of rationality required by the lifeworld in modernity, it could be a constant source of ideas, symbols, and patterns informing the basic discussions of practical human issues. Then religion would have constant societal significance, including the provision of aspects of the horizon against which the systems of modernity are formed. However, this significance would quite often be anonymous and oblique. Moreover, it would be just as open to fragmentation and colonisation as all the other elements making up the lifeworld.

## 2.4 An integrated approach to the societal significance of religion in modernity

The concepts making up the perspective on the societal significance of religion in modernity presented here are interrelated. The relations between the three different concepts can be described from two vantage points. The first relates to the integration between systems and lifeworld analyses of modernity and religion in modernity. The second concerns the relations among the three different concepts developed to define the different aspects of the societal significance of religion in modernity.

Because the lifeworld perspective was introduced here and in Habermas's work as an addition to systems theory and a step in the process of integrating the lifeworld and systems perspectives on modernity, the two vantage points converge in terms of the way the three concepts are defined.

It is clear that religion as performance is based both on the notion of religion as a system and the notion of religion as a stock of knowledge. Religion as a system provides an organisational and

functional sphere from which performance religion can develop and into which it can retreat. Performance religion may also add to the status of the religious leaders "normally" in the religious system if their attempts at providing a wider service are successful.

The relation between religion as a system and religion as a stock of knowledge is more complex. Religion as a system is differentiated in terms of its function of providing a point of view from which to solve the problem of indeterminacy. It has a defined role. Religion as a stock of knowledge incorporates holistic practical knowledge that has a much wider reference than the problem of indeterminacy. On the other hand, the binary code of transcendence and immanence is relevant to religion as a stock of knowledge as well. Holism and the potential for developing social integration around notions of goodness, integrity and value found in religion as a stock of knowledge is also characteristic of religion as a system. There is an historical and ongoing link between religion as a system and religion as a stock of knowledge. This link can best be explained with reference to the integration of the lifeworld and systems perspectives.

The lifeworld and systems perspectives are integrated in terms of defining the differences between the two types of rationality dominant in each of the perspectives and the way in which they build and depend on each other. The development of religion as a sub-system of modernity depends just as much on the rationalisation of the lifeworld as the development of the political and economic sub-systems of modernity. The type of rationality found in performance religion when a holistic perspective is posited in an attempt to provide solutions to so-called residual problems of modernity often depends on the communicative rationalisation typical of the lifeworld. Performance religion often becomes instrumentalised and is taken over by the logic of a particular system. On the other hand, performance religion can also become part of social integration around holistic concepts and by means of communicative action.

The theoretical strategy developed above comprises a three-dimensional perspective ordering the various ways in which the societal significance of religion in contemporary South Africa may be understood. Some of the different levels of significance and the contradictory tendencies one may identify in the way religion

impacts on South African society can be better understood by means of this strategy. But that is not the same as claiming that every aspect of religion in South Africa can be understood through this mechanism. It is designed to focus attention on a specific aspect of religion in the contemporary context.

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