Communication is not a uniquely human characteristic; but it is a fundamental social building block of human society. Over time, symbolic signs have evolved into spoken symbols. In this regard, Njoku (2017, 50) refers to Aristotle’s comment that the human ability to utilise language is an indication of creative intelligence, differentiating humans from other living beings. This same intelligence (“creative spark”, Fuentes 2017, 243) led to the creation of religion in various cultural forms. The anthropologist Agustín Fuentes indicates how language most probably came into being when the first humans required the need to communicate with one another and expressed meaning by way of mutual agreement on the significance of signs (Fuentes 2017, 214). The origin of language can be linked to the existence of dance, music, and storytelling (Fuentes 2017, 239-242). Sign language most likely preceded spoken language (Fuentes 2017, 78). The development of religion is, according to Fuentes, closely linked to the development of symbols as a means of communication.

Language as a form of human self-expression became a means of controlling reality by naming and labelling experiences of reality (Njoku 2017, 50). Since humans started communicating through language, humans have critically reflected on the nature of language itself. The condition for effective communication is that the sender and receiver of the message reach the same understanding. Over time, communication became more complex, as the plethora of theories on communication attests to.

Religious communication includes different configurations of communication:
- The transcendent and immanent
- Members of the same religious system
- Members of different or no religious system
- Religion as a communicative system within society

Part of religious communication is the ambiguity of naming the unnameable and speaking to and about the unseeable, or as Luhmann (2002, 232) says, the “Unzugängliches” (that which is inaccessible). Religious communication can be deemed to entail speaking about the unspeakable, although the unspeakable “speaks”.

The very nature of religion comes into focus. Religion is in essence a communicative action. Communication between transcendence and immanence constitutes a vertical line of communication. Communication between religions and society constitutes a horizontal line of communication. The ambiguity lies therein that all religious communication is in fact communication about transcendence.
Commenting on theories of religious communication requires awareness of three presuppositions: what is meant by the term theory; what is the definition of communication, and what is religion.

1.1 Theories, Models and Approaches

Theory can be described as the reflection and collection of knowledge on processes or events to explain phenomena. In simple terms, Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks (2015, 2) explain theory as making sense of the world. Theories are informed hunches that are systemic in nature (Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks 2015, 4). This description of theory indicates speculative attempts based on gained knowledge by scholars, to formulate multiple explanations of reality. In order to grasp the concept of theory better, metaphors that describe theories in terms of nets, lenses or maps, can aid understanding (Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks 2015, 5). Theories address questions and problems and present multiple possible solutions and answers based on experiments, indicating relationships between solutions.

Theories on communication abound. The most popular theories range from theories on Mass communication (McQuail 1994), Cross-cultural communication to philosophical theories of communicative action (Habermas 1981 and 1983), to technological theories on communication (Gadamer 1981). Not many theories on religious communication exist, and not all talk about communication in the same fashion, making them difficult to compare. This contribution will focus on Social System Theory, Phenomenology and Material Religion for theories on religious communication.

McQuail and Windahl (1981, 13) indicate that the most basic understanding of communication is to answer the questions related to ‘Who? Says What? In which Channel? To Whom? With what effect?’ This model is attributed to the theory of Harold D. Lasswell. Njoku (2017, 51) confirms that this understanding of communication is linear. A message is carried by a sender onwards towards a receiver. There is, however, no control mechanism to determine if the correct meaning has reached its intended destination. McQuail and Windahl (1981, 14) acknowledge that this model can be effective in mass communication. A variation on the linear theory by Lasswell is discussed by McQuail and Windahl (1981, 16–18). Shannon and Weaver expanded on Lasswell’s theory by adding the element of ‘noise’ to disrupt the process of conveying information. The point of the linear model is to illustrate how information that has been changed into signals by a transmitter is passed on to a receiver which constructs a message from the signal. Successful communication occurs when the meaning produced at the destination corresponds to the meaning intended by the transmitter. Correspondence between meanings is the goal of communication (McQuail and Windahl 1981, 18). By adding another element in order to determine if the received meaning corresponds with the intended meaning, a new model is created.

The circular model attributed to Osgood and Schramm (McQuail and Windahl 1981, 19) implies that the sender and receiver are engaged in similar activities of en-
coding and decoding a message. By checking if the received meaning is similar to the intended meaning, feedback is given in order to ensure successful communication. This model implies that the participants in communication are viewed as equals, both able to encode and decode messages. Both are considered to be ‘in the know’ – having valid and worthwhile messages to be exchanged. This is an important element, as missionaries in the past may have considered the receivers as unequal communication partners with no valid or worthwhile message to give, in conveying the Christian message. This resulted in a monologue; a one-way delivery of messages. A third possible model is created by the theory of F.E.X. Dance when he identifies the limitations of the circular model (McQuail and Windahl 1981, 20). Dance indicates how a message returned to its sender does not return in the same form that it departed from. Communication is dynamic. Participants in communication develop knowledge of a topic as they exchange information. The message is influenced through the very process of conveying it. The participants in communication progressively detangle and assign meaning in an ever-expanding manner. This has implications for how religious communication is perceived: the message changes as it passes through processes and is handled by different participants. The question then arises whether the message does in fact remain congruent to the meaning originally assigned to it.

By reflecting on what theory is, we are already creating a theory on theory. In what follows, a theory on communication and a theory on religion will be presented before discussing several existing theories of religious communication.

1.2 Communication

Communication is a multi-faceted concept. Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks (2015, 6) when discussing definitions of communication, reach the conclusion that it is perhaps impossible to define communication comprehensively. What is however possible is to indicate the essential elements of communication. Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks (2015, 6–7) indicate the following essentials of communication: communication is a process of creating and interpreting messages. Many disciplines are interested in studying communication. So too is theology. Although other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, literature, political sciences, and religious studies only intersect with the study of communication, scholars of communication remain focussed on the study of communication. In this regard, the other disciplines broaden the way in which communication is viewed. Communication can be presented in many different mediums (i.e., texts, art, words, songs, poems, symbols, speeches, gestures, events, dance, etc.).

As indicated, communication can be defined in many different ways. Communication can be the action on others, the interaction with others and a reaction to others (McQuail and Windahl 1981, 3). For Kelly (1981, 227) communication is the shar-
ing of meaning. The sender and receiver of the message in communication assigns the same meaning to the message. Religion is a carrier and transmitter of a message.

### 1.3 Religion

A definition of the concept of religion is notoriously difficult. In fact, it is considered by some to be totally impossible (Caputo 2001, 1).

Several scholars have therefore argued against the use of the term religion. Smith (1991, 50) suggests discarding the term religion altogether. His argument is that the term religion is misleading, confusing, and unnecessary and hampers the understanding of people’s faith and traditions. Instead, Smith (1991, 53 footnote 2) suggests it would be more appropriate to talk about “cumulative traditions”. Olson (2011, 16) indicates how Jean-Luc Marion referred to religion as a “saturated phenomenon”. With this, Marion implies that religion has an excessive nature and therefore religion becomes invisible in its excessiveness. The result is that there is no single concept that captures the essence of religion (Olson 2011, 16).

The concept of religion has proved to have a limited application. Smith argues (1991, 52) that Western culture has determined the way religion is perceived and what can be deemed religious. Western researchers have over centuries determined the field of religion by providing names for the world religions. The methods of studying religions are mainly due to historic Western scholarly processes. As Chidester (2017, 75) summarises, “religion is a modern invention, a Western construction, a colonial imposition or an imperial expansion.”

The point of departure of viewing religion can either be deemed as from beneath or from above. Religion as from beneath reflects an understanding that religion does in fact start with human agency. Humans project images of power, hope and comfort to facilitate coping with human existence. Religion from above is typical bipolar, and even tri-polar. This approach assumes the existence of an autonomous spiritual sphere. Humans merely become aware of the presence and influence of the spiritual sphere (transcendence). The human relation to the spiritual sphere constitutes two separate spheres, the sacred and the profane. The moment in which good and evil are envisaged as belonging to the spiritual sphere, the addition of the human entity changes this into a tri-polar construct.

As to the relation of the above to the beneath, Stoker (2012, 6–8) discusses the various ways in which the transcendent and immanent can relate to one another. This will become important when discussing communication between God and humans. This communication takes on cultural forms.

Religion is not an entity or a field of entities but an aspect of human experience which has specific historical and cultural expressions. Religion as religiousness is the individual human being’s response to what it discerns to be the most comprehensive powers of its environment. Re-
As to Farley’s analysis it becomes clear that monolithic blocks or entities named as religion do not in fact exist. What do exist, however, are contextual expressions of human responses to that which is considered to exist outside of human existence. This confirms the dualistic understanding of the nature of religion. It also confirms varying meanings attached to expressions as determined by contexts. What is considered as religious in one context may not be considered as such in a different context.

The concept of religion tends to call to mind a structured system of beliefs, with a specific and wide-ranging vocabulary Smith (1991, 52) includes terms such as piety, reverence, faith, devotion and God-fearing. Chidester (2017, 76) suggests including related terms such as superstition and magic, heresy and infidelity, secularism, and irreligion into this lexicon.

For the discussion here the following definition of religion is considered a working definition. Sundermeier (1999, 17) defines religion as the communal response of society when becoming aware of transcendence and responding to it in ethics and rituals. This definition of religion has its root in the social behaviour of human beings and acknowledges the impact of religion and society as systems acting upon one another. The definition assumes the existence of transcendence and accounts for its interaction with reality. Religion is, according to this definition, presented as a human response (communication) and thereby implies that religion is man-made although the impetus lies elsewhere. The expressions of religion in terms of ethics and rites are culturally determined. This definition attempts to present a balanced view of religion as it accounts for the interaction and exchange of messages between the transcendent and the immanent.

Religion is expressed in various ways. Several theories have been identified over time. For an exhaustive discussion on the different theories on language in religion, see Walter Capps (1995, 209–265).

Religious communication can be reduced to refer to ways in which Christians convey the Christian message to others in order to lead to a commitment to Christianity (conversion). In this regard, the work by Pierre Babin (1991) is a good example. Babin (1991, 29.188) considers the particular challenges Christians encounter in dealing with electronic media as a means of communication. The message Christians want to convey should consist of correct and relevant symbols (Babin 1991, 163) to enable others to comprehend the Christian message. At times, he suggests, the mere presence, even if silent, of Christians in society can convey a message of care (Babin 1991, 90).

Communication from Christianity to other religions or non-religious persons is, although important, not the main focus of this contribution. Religious communication can be categorised as intra-religious (internally within a religious system), inter-religious (between religions) and trans-religious (communicating to society). The focus of this contribution is to discuss variations on intra-, inter- as well as trans-religious communication.
igious communication as highlighted by the theories in Social Systems, Phenomenology and Material Religion.

2 Social System Theory

Social System Theory has as its goal the study of the relationships between a system and its environment (Pace 2011, 206). The changes in a system and its environment are studied, especially the affect the changes have on other systems (Pace 2011, 221). In effect, the focus is on changing forms and changing consequences (Beyer 2009, 99). A system is considered a system from the moment in which it produces communication (Pace 2011, 222). The seminal work of Talcott Parsons (Parsons 1951) sheds light on the origin of Social System Theory. Parsons (1970, 831) indicates how his research was focussed on analysing how society interacts and develops within a cognitive framework. His thoughts on this were especially influenced by Durkheim, Weber and Freud (Parsons 1970, 874).

Religion is considered as a system functioning within society besides and in relation to other systems such as the judicial, health care, financial, education and government systems (Luhmann 2002, 14). Religion is a system of means of communication endeavouring to simplify the meaning humans ascribe to reality (Pace 2011, 206). Pace (2011, 225) considers religion to be a unique system in that it serves a reassuring purpose with regard to human fears and concerns, which ensures the continuation of religion. Religion is constantly interpreting the relationships between God, humans and reality and disseminating this interpretation. It is clear that religion excels as a communicative system in mediating the exchange of information between God and human beings (Pace 2011, 210). The ability of religions to adapt and evolve also enables their longevity. Pace (2011, 226) considers that the most effective way religions impart communication is through rituals. Niklas Luhmann emphasised the role of rituals in religious communication.

In discussing religion, Luhmann emphasised the understanding of rituals as key to understanding religion (Beyer 2009, 100). Rituals are a form of communication: “Rituals are processes of important ceremonial communication [...]” (Luhmann 1984a, 9). The essential issue with Luhmann would then be to ask how the changing relations between religion and other systems affects communication between systems and how it affects the nature of religion.

In attempting to answer this question, Luhmann’s theory on communication needs to be scrutinized. For Luhmann (1984b, 193–201) communication is the fundamental component of society. Society is made up of communication. Communication is not a characteristic of society. Rather, communication leads to sociality. Luhmann can be suspected of reducing society to the function of communication. Society only exists because communication exists. As to the relation of religion and communication Luhmann (1998, 137) clearly states that religion is only able to exist in society due to the fact, that religion is communication. Beyer (2009, 104) however remarks
that Luhmann never gave a clear description as to what he considers to be religious communication.

For Luhmann there are three elements constituting communication: information, utterances and understanding (Beyer 2009, 101). All three need to be present in order for communication to take place (Beyer 2009, 101). Should communication stop, society will stop existing (Beyer 2009, 101).

As to religious communication, Luhmann (1997, 232) departs from an understanding of religion as consisting of two constitutive elements: the transcendental and the immanent. Luhmann left behind in his writings a quite ambiguous description of religious communication. At times it is clear that rituals are presented as the norm of religious communication (Luhman 1984a, 9) but then again in several writings by Luhmann¹ he indicates the impossibility of communication between gods and humans. It seems as if Luhmann emphasised that religious communication is only possible through human agency (Beyer 2009, 104). Communication from the gods (transcendence) seems to have become obsolete and impossible in Luhmann’s view.

The problem for Luhmann is that God becomes the unobservable observer (1997, 69), the one which cannot be seen but who is participating in communication. The second problem related to this is that Luhmann indicates that it is impossible to differentiate between the information and the utterance in communication from God. The self-revelation of God in fact causes the utterance (revelation) to be the information. The real question according to Beyer (2009, 107) is rather to what extent a non-human participant in communication can be considered an actor within society. Luhmann is not arguing against the possibility of supernatural communication, but rather highlighting the problem with the indivisibility of utterances and information when it comes to communication from God. The messenger in fact is the message.

Ritual and myth are considered to be at the core of religious communication (Beyer 2009, 107). Luhmann (1997, 236) states that ritual does not differentiate between information imparted and the performed action of the utterances made. The utterance becomes the message. The correct performance of the ritual is the message. The conclusion Beyer (2009, 105) draws from this is that Luhmann is emphasising the paradox of communication through something that is not communication. The unique nature of religion should account here for the unique form of religious communication.

A critical analysis of Luhmann’s theory indicates that society cannot only be perceived as a function of communication. Communication should rather be viewed as a function of society, establishing, and reaffirming society. An even more apt description would be that communication creates and affirms community among members of society. This community extends beyond the boundaries of those physically present. Through rituals, connections with the past and with the deceased, as well as connections to future generations to whom traditions will be imparted, are forged, and reaffirmed.

¹ Compare the complete list of references to Luhmann’s writings in Beyer (2009, 113–114).
Luhmann (1997, 645) alludes to this principle when he indicates how myths attempt to make the unfamiliar familiar. Myths refer to already existing knowledge. By a repetition of this known knowledge, myths create solidarity; they do not solely function to convey information.

Beyer (2009, 109) concludes by summarising Luhmann’s theory of communication by identifying two types of communication: paradoxical communication from the unobservable and thus non-communicative, and secondly the communication about the paradoxical communication which consists of interpretation and commentary. Understanding is the end result of communication for Luhmann.

In summary, for Luhmann, communication consists of utterances, information and understanding. There are non-human participants in religious communication; whereby the unobservable communicate in an ostensible manner. Humans are unable to differentiate between the utterances and information in the revelation from gods. The revelation is in fact the information. Rituals and myths therefore become the mediums of communication.

### 3 Phenomenological Approach

Studying different forms of religious communication is dependent on a phenomenological approach, identifying and analysing the different phenomena (i.e., rituals, myths, etc.) which facilitate communication.

Phenomenology is based on the philosophical ideas of Edmund Husserl. For Husserl, the point of engaging with reality is to make things as they appear speak for themselves (Krüger 1982, 16). To prevent the observer from subjectively mitigating meaning, the bias of the observer should be removed (known as *epoché*) to reach an understanding of that which is encountered. An inter-subjectivity replaces an objectification in the relation of the observer engaging with the essences of the object (Krüger 1982, 17).

The historian of religions², Mircea Eliade, introduced a theory on the origin of religion with implications for understanding religious communication. For Eliade (1987, 14) it is clear that reality is to be divided into sacred and profane spheres. The key to understanding religion is the way in which the sacred (transcendent) communicates to or manifests in the world (the immanent). The term ‘hierophany’ is key to understanding this process of communication (Eliade 1987, 9). Hierophany is the manifestation of the sacred in ordinary objects and the only way in which humans become aware of the sacred (Eliade 1987, 11).

For Eliade, the sacred is unknown and unknowable but mediates knowledge through manifestation in space and time. The hierophanies are the mundane objects

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² Eliade is often referred to as a ‘phenomenologist’ as well. Compare John Clifford Holt’s remark in the introduction to (Eliade 1996, xiii).
which become channels by which the sacred is communicated to humans. Hierophanies take on many different forms varying from nature (i.e., trees or mountains) to sacred texts (i.e., Bible, Qur'an), visions and dreams and can even be through human beings (i.e., shamans, prophets or holy people). Discerning the meaning of the hierophany requires a clear choice in order to distinguish the element from its surroundings (Eliade 1996, 13). The hierophanies are captured in myths within traditions and are dramatized in rituals. Interpreting myths and rituals are essential to understanding communication (Eliade 1987, 63). Let us compare in this regard Luhmann’s understanding of rituals. Traces of the sacred (transcendent) are left behind in the mundane (immanent) world. Religion, therefore, is the complex phenomena resulting from the human experience of the sacred and giving expression to this experience.

Interpreting and discerning the meaning of the hierophany requires knowledge of the symbolic. Symbols only make sense in an environment where there is an agreement on their meaning (Fuentes 2017, 214). Symbols are assigned meaning within a certain community, in this case a religious community. This causes symbols to be understood from within the contexts in which they function. The meaning of the communication through symbols is therefore only available to the initiates of the religious community. As an outsider, the meaning can only be accessed through the interpretation provided by the insider. Religious communication is therefore only possible through consensus in a particular community.

Eliade, contrary to Luhmann, assumes that communication is possible reciprocally between transcendence and immanence. Eliade emphasises the communication by the gods imparted to humans through the hierophany. Luhmann (2002, 329,335) refers to such revelation as mysterious communication which requires interpretation in order to convey it into common religious communication. Revelation creates the problem that the utterance and information cannot be differentiated. The utterance is the information: the revelation is the message. What is required according to Luhmann is the interpretation of the utterance in order to reach meaning.

For Luhmann, the requirement remains that interpretation of the utterance through ritual, mythical or revelatory actions is necessary. Only through interpretation can the meaning be conveyed, enabling successful communication. Conveying the interpretation is considered as normal communication and not religious communication (Beyer 2009, 109).

Eliade emphasises the understanding of the symbolic sphere in which the hierophany is presented. Understanding the symbols facilitates understanding the hierophany. The symbols become the means of communication between the transcendent and immanent, conveying meaning between the two spheres of the sacred and the profane.
4 Material Religion

The ways in which religion is studied change as new approaches and methods are discovered. David Chidester (2017, 74) has indicated that in the future, the study of religion needs to orientate towards the material study of religion. Material religion is much more concerned with the “material conditions of possibility” for understanding the human need for expressing religion (Chidester 2017, 76; 2018, 3).

Houtman and Meyer (2012, 11) see the turn to material religion as a “corrective” to the one-sided Protestant emphasis on studying solely beliefs in religion. Keane (2008, 115) calls for a shift “away from beliefs and towards practices.” Material religion expands the understanding of religion in order to include “the social life mediated in feelings, things, places and performances” (Morgan 2010, 12). Religion is not only that which is captured in texts and doctrines. Religion is mostly visible and audible in its everyday expression, or as it is popularly referred to as “lived religion” (Hazard 2013, 59 footnote 2). The emphasis is on studying expressions framed by the social construction of the sacred. The focus of material religion is then on embodiment and belief (Morgan 2010, 13). Focussing on more than utterances of belief would imply that we also consider human behaviour, feeling, intuition and images in everyday existence as expressions of and communication in religion. Religion no longer becomes the symbolic representation but includes the symbols and its world of reference (Morgan 2010, 5).

Keane (2008, 114) indicates how material religion wants to give recognition to the fact that we do not have access to ideas. Humans only have access to ideas once they are mediated by signs which can then be repeated. These semiotic forms are in the public domain, they are repeatable and visible and open to interpretation. It is clear to Keane (2008, 114) that these characteristics do not mean that the signs will necessarily communicate the same meaning every time or in every context in which they are used.

Religion is the cultural expression of an awareness (communication) between the transcendent and immanent. The origin of religion most probably lies within the evolutionary growth of the human psyche. Human self-awareness gave the spark to externalise objects and surroundings from the individual. This alienation from surroundings was exacerbated by the projection of beings that are higher than human. Thus, a dualistic reality was created; a reality co-inhabited by humans and spirits. Fuentes (2017, 197) attests to this distinction between humans and “an ultimate reality”. He argues that humans have always behaved as if there is a transcendent or supernatural reality with which communication is possible. This communication is by way of symbols. This has already been alluded to earlier in this discussion.

Hazard (2013, 60) indicates the approach of studying religion in terms of symbols. She departs from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion as being comprised of a system of symbols. The implication, then, is that the outward appearances of religion (such as in shrines, dances, amulets, portraits) are in fact...
outward symbols communicating inward religious meaning. Material objects thus embody and communicate something else, representing religious essences (Hazard 2013, 60). Studying religion, in this case its material effects, makes the scholar a semiotician – one who reads and decodes symbols in order to glean – and impart – some meaning.

Religion is mediated concretely in order to make it visible, present and tangible. Houtman and Meyer (2012) identify the following as concrete instances of material religion through which communication is possible:

- Objects like relics, amulets, garments, images sculpted or painted, written words and architectural designs;
- Feelings and sensory experiences like seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching;
- Bodily actions like gestures, rituals, ceremonies, and festivals.

Hazard (2013, 59 footnote 4) adds to the above list: space, body, art and visual culture, emotion, technology, media, popular culture, architecture and film, as additional ways in which religion communicates. The function of studying these sensory perceivable elements is to come to an understanding of how the practices of religious mediation effect the presence of entities in the world (Houtman and Meyer 2012, 6).

Religious beliefs are thus not only communicated in texts. Studying visual expressions of religion contribute to the communication process. Art may of course be perceived as having a function of religious communication (Apostolos-Cappadona 2017, 32). Religious art may have in some cases a pedagogical function to educate and remind adherents of religious doctrines. The meaning of art, however, is only discerned by the initiated who understand the symbolic meaning of elements in art. Religious art is therefore to be viewed contextually.

Studying material objects conveying religious meaning may end up as a positivistic endeavour, focussing only on the immanent. In this regard Bruno Reinhardt (2016, 75) evaluates material religion critically as only relying on the immanent at the cost of the transcendent. The corrective would be to view material religion as the means and not the goal. The materiality becomes carrier of the message, rather than being the message itself.

5 Conclusion

Identifying theories on religious communication is a non-exhaustive process. Religious communication takes place on different levels whether internal, external or across religious borders. Communication can be between the transcendent and immanent or on a horizontal level where religions communicate to society. This contribution attempted to present three theories of religious communication. Social System Theory, Phenomenology and Material Religion, however, do not function in absolute isolation from one another. They can be viewed as inter-related. Material forms of re-
ligion, like the various rituals, can be phenomenologically viewed as functioning as mediums of communication within a social environment.

Myths and rites are forms of communication. They convey a certain understanding of a worldview and explanation as to why things are the way they are. Myths as a narrative of a relation between humans and the transcendent convey a message which can be described as ‘holy history’. The rite associated with the myth is the expression and re-enactment of the myth. Myths and rites can bring about social cohesion by binding society to the past while simultaneously engaging with future generations and expressing the relation with the transcendent. Religion as one system among many can influence society by functioning coherently to provide meaning to reality.

Bibliography


