Society, Meaning, Religion: Based on Self-Reference
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Source: *Sociological Analysis,* Vol. 46, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), pp. 5-20
Published by: Oxford University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3710892
Accessed: 10-07-2015 01:46 UTC

Society, Meaning, Religion —
Based on Self-Reference

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> When we are moved to seem religious only to vent wit, Lord deliver us.
>
> John Donne
> A Litany 188–189

I.

Sociological theory in its present Alexandrian phase seems to be preoccupied with the interpretation of its classical authors.[1] Doing sociology of religion means doing empirical research on presumably religious persons or institutions; and it means returning to Emile Durkheim or Max Weber for theoretical inspiration. Religion, then, is supposed to work as an integrative factor on the level of total societies and as a motivational factor on the level of individuals. At both levels it supplies the meaning of meaning, a meaningful "ultimate reality". All symbols and values that operate at this highest level of last resources can be qualified as religion — and be it a civil religion in the sense of Rousseau or Bellah.

We also know the objections. Religions can stimulate debates and fights. They also have disintegrative effects. Their motivational effect may well be a questioning of religion itself. It may be a social activity, but also a retreat. Statements about the function of religion resemble proverbs. They always need counter-proverbs to be operationally useful.

Years ago Clifford Geertz (1966:1) aired the same complaint about dependence upon classical authors with respect to anthropological research. It may have been a mere accident that his lines were written in an essay on the cultural *system* of religion. But if this coincidence happened only by chance, it still was a significant accident. In fact, systems theory, at that time, was hardly able to deliver the goods. Parsons himself had started be presenting his classical authors. He attempted to show that the difference between society and individual, between social and motivational factors, and between Durkheim and Weber does not matter very much; and that it cannot matter very much in the field of sociology where this very difference is the core problem of theory. This preoccupation with a historical problem, with the split paradigm of individual and society, led Parsons to look for a solution by unfolding the framework of the general action system which could assign appropriate places to the personal system, the social system and other systems as well. He had to pay foreseeable costs. He had to present his generalizations as a purely analytical framework, based on an *analysis* of the *components* of the *concept* of

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[1] By the way, to preserve "classical" authors and to need them is a relatively new phenomenon. Until the 18th century, the term "classical" simply meant: used in school classes.

action. Moreover, to compensate for *generalization*, he needed a technique of *respecification*. His decision was to use cross-tabulation, and we all know the consequences.

The verdict on Parsons, accepted today by public opinion, is the verdict of a jury based on an impressionistic evaluation of evidence. It is not based on an adequate understanding of the structural constraints of his theory – or for that matter: of any theory. However, I do not want to found the following considerations on a judgment for or against Parsons. Rather, my point is that, in recent years, general systems theory has taken a fascinating turn toward a general theory of self-referential systems, and I want to explore some of its consequences for a theory of society and a functional analysis of religion.[2]

II.

Self-referential systems are not only self-organizing or self-regulating systems. Recent theoretical innovations use the idea of self-reference also at the level of the elements or components of a system (Luhmann, 1984). This means that self-referential – or for that matter: autopoietic – systems produce the elements which they interrelate by the elements which they interrelate. They exist as a closed network of the production of elements which reproduces itself as a network by continuing to produce the elements which are needed to continue to produce the elements.[3]

Societies are a special case of self-referential systems. They presuppose a network of communications, previous communications and further communications and also communications which happen elsewhere. Communications are possible only within a system of communication and this system cannot escape the form of recursive circularity. Its basic events, the single units of communication, are units only by reference to other units within the same system.[4] In consequence, only the structure of this system and not its environment can specify the meaning of communications.

Unlike other types of social systems societies are encompassing systems, including all communications which are conceived as possible within a given context of communication and excluding everything else – even minds, brains, human beings, animals, natural resources and so forth. Societies, of course, presuppose an environment. They depend

[2]The research to which I refer has interdisciplinary relevance. It is therefore (?) very heterogeneous. It includes: Pula, 1974 (based on Korzybski); Günther, 1976; Morin, 1977, 1980; Barel, 1979; Varela, 1979; Maturana/Varela, 1980; Jantsch, 1980; Zeleny, 1981; von Foerster, 1981.

[3]Since this innovation is largely due to Humberto Maturana, the best formulations might well be his *ipsissima verba*: "We maintain that there are systems that are defined as unities as networks of productions of components that (1) recursively, through their interactions, generate and realize the network that produces them; and (2) constitute, in the space in which they exist, the boundaries of this network as components that participate in the realization of the network". And for a further elucidation: "An autopoietic system is defined as a unity through relations of production of components, not through the components that compose it whichever they may be. An autopoietic system is defined as a unity through relations of form (relations of relations), not through relations of energy transformation. An autopoietic system is defined as a unity through the specification of a medium in its realization as an autonomous entity, not through relations with a medium that determines its extension of boundaries" (1981: 21 and 29 f.).

[4]I avoid the term communicative acts or speech acts and I avoid any reference to "action theory" as the basic framework. Units of communication are not simply acts or actions. They are unified (within the social system) by a synthesis of information, activity and understanding. (The German language would allow me to distinguish between *Kommunikation* in this sense and *Mitteilung* as a communicative act).

upon their environment. Their autonomy cannot be conceived as independence. It is the self-referential circularity itself—not a desired state of being relatively independent from the environment but an existential necessity. Whatever can happen as communicative event produces society, entering into the network of reproducing communication by communication. The system expands and shrinks, depending on what it can afford as communication. It cannot communicate with its environment, because communication is always an internal operation.

Communication systems develop a special way to deal with complexity, i.e. introducing a representation of the complexity of the world into the system. I call this representation of complexity "meaning"—avoiding all subjective, psychological or transcendental connotations of this term (Luhmann, 1971). The function of meaning is to provide access to all possible topics of communication. Meaning places all concrete items into a horizon of further possibilities and finally into the world of all possibilities. Whatever shows up as an actual event refers to other possibilities, to other ways of related actions and experiences within the horizon of further possibilities. Each meaningful item reconstructs the world by the difference between the actual and the possible. Security, however, lies only in the actual. It can be increased only by indirection, by passing on to other meanings while retaining the possibility of returning to its present position. Again, a self-referential, recursive structure is needed to combine complexity and security.

This highly successful arrangement of meaning-based communication is the result of an evolutionary development. It has three important consequences which together build up the basic structures of societies:

(1) The autopoiesis of communication by communication requires *closure*. Meaning, on the other hand, is a completely open structure, excluding nothing, not even the negation of meanings. As systems of meaning-based communication societies are closed and open systems. They gain their openness by closure. "L'ouvert s'appuie sur le fermé" (Morin, 1977:201).

(2) Communication and meaning are different ways of creating *redundancy*. Communication creates redundancy by conferring information to other systems. Third parties, then, have a choice of whom to ask (Bateson, 1977:405ff–417ff). Meaning creates redundancy by implying a surplus of further possibilities which nobody will be able to follow up all at once. In view of this redundancy which is continuously reproduced by meaning-based communication, every next step has to be a *selection* out of other possibilities. Within the world created by the operations of this system every concrete item appears as *contingent*, as something which could be different.[5] Societies, therefore, operate within a *paradox world*, the paradox being the *necessity of contingency*.[6]

(3) Nothing, of course, is paradox *per se*—not the world, not nature, nor even self-referential systems. To call something "paradox" is nothing but a description, and it is appro-

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[5] I use this term in its logical and theological sense, defined by the negation of impossibility and the negation of necessity. The understanding of "contingent" as "dependent on" is only a restricted version, depending itself on the theological interpretation of contingency as created by and depending on the will of God.

[6] This is, of course, a sociological reconstruction of a famous theological problem. See for some aspects of a copious literature Wright, 1951; Jalbert, 1961; d'Arenzano, 1961; Solagurén, 1966.

priate only, if one wants to draw conclusions or use other ways of long-chain reasoning. Paradoxes are obstacles only for certain intentions. The paradoxification of being, therefore, is a sociological correlate of an increasing need for descriptions, particularly for self-descriptions of the societal systems, and it seems to indicate that such descriptions have to be used within a complex, highly interdependent semantic framework with problems of logical control.

<div align="center">III.</div>

The plenitude and voidness of a paradoxical world is the ultimate reality of religion. The meaning of meaning is both: richness of references and tautological circularity.

Society can exist only as a self-referential system, it can operate and reproduce communications only within a Gödelian world. This general condition makes "religion" (whatever this means) unavoidable. Social life, therefore, has a religious quality – Georg Simmel (1898; 1906) would say: a "religioid" quality. The paradoxical constitution of self-reference pervades all social life. It is nevertheless a special problem in social life. The question of the ultimate meaning can be raised at any time and at any occasion – but not all the time. If it can be reduced to one question among others, the meaning of the whole becomes a special problem within the whole. Then, society develops *forms* of coping with this problem, of answering this question, *forms which deparadoxize the world*. Then, it becomes possible to focus consciousness and communication on these forms and, by this very fact, it becomes possible to risk negation or to look for other forms. Religious forms incorporate, so to speak, paradoxical meanings; they differentiate religion against other fields of life; they involve the risk of refusal; they inaugurate deviant reproduction, i.e. evolution.

Forms convince by implicit self-reference. They propose themselves. They can be "taken for granted in everyday life" because they resist further decomposition. They enforce a "take it or leave it" decision. They reject development. In this sense they have a ritualistic quality (Rappaport, 1971; 1971a). The ritual represents religion because it corks up self-reference. The ghost has to stay in the bottle. But, over time and within the context of social evolution ritualistic forms may become maladaptive. They may retain their religious quality and fulfill their religious function *by remaining maladaptive* (Rappaport, 1978). They may, however, find functional alternatives in *increasing the ambiguity of forms*.

Ambiguity of forms comes about, if the problem of form is reconstructed as a problem of the *relation between form and context*. The religious (or aesthetic or whatever) meaning of forms, then, depends upon the way in which the form organizes its context, e.g. the temple organizes the surrounding nature by referring to itself (Valéry, 1960). Ambivalence creeps in, if several views are possible, seeing requires a second look, secrets can be unveiled, *alétheia* (truth as the unveiled) becomes a problem. If such a relation between form and context can be questioned and changed, forms can be preserved within a changing context, for contexts can be used to renew forms. Cults may retain their religious meanings by survival and may transfer their function to a different context; or religious contexts may be used to replace one cult by another, e.g. to build a church in the place of a heathen sanctuary. However ambivalent, the paradox of form is the paradox of organizing *context* by *self-reference*. As long as this is the case, forms can seize

and retain a religious meaning and may, at the same time, be exposed to deviant reproduction, i.e. evolution.

Translating this into the language of functional analysis, we can say that the fundamental problem of the paradoxical world can be "solved" (i.e. transformed into minor problems) by religion. Plenitude and voidness is the same, meaningful and meaningless life is the same, order and disorder is the same, because the world can be constituted as unity only. But since we cannot accept this last unity as it is, we have to replace it by easier paradoxes: by forms. Forms which retain this functional relation to the ultimate paradox remain thereby religious forms. Forms which can be observed as referring to the ultimate paradox are accordingly observed as religious forms. And forms which can be described as referring to the ultimate paradox are thereby described as religious forms. There is no other way to identify religion, and there is no room for free play in observing and in describing religion. There are, however, many functional equivalents fulfilling its function, and we may find, within one society, many different degrees of sensibility in observing and describing religion. Thus, particularly in modern society 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.

IV.

Special forms require special ways to treat them. The ways to encounter them, to avoid them, to behave in their presence are part of their context, therefore part of their meaning. From a structural point of view, the differentiation of forms with specific religious functions inaugurates the development of a special social system serving religious goals. The history of religion is the history of its differentiation.

A theory of religious evolution does not need to be written in terms of a phase model of religious development (Bellah, 1964). It is even questionable whether the theory of evolution can ever arrange history in the form of Guttman scales or any other kinds of linear succession, (Blute, 1979). The theory of evolution tries to explain the possibility of unplanned structural changes; it is not a theory which describes the structure of processes, let alone a theory of a unique process of historical phase-to-phase development. To renounce such an overambitious goal may well be the condition for recombining sociological theory and historical research. The problem of how to combine a theory of self-referential systems and a neo-Darwinistic theory of evolution is increasingly attracting attention (Varela, 1979; Roth, 1982). One possibility might be to conceive of evolution as a *transformation of the paradox of self-reference*. The improbable state of self-referential systems becomes possible and even probable by differentiation – above all by the differentiation of systems and environments. The outcome is the probability of the improbable which, at the same time, is the improbability of the probable.

Translated into a theory of religious evolution this means that religion becomes endangered by its own success. It is a successful way to handle paradoxes. However, every new form inherits the improbable. It may become normal life, normal society, normal religion; but this does not extinguish the fundamental question of how the unnormal can be normal, of how the improbable can become probable, of how the self-referential circularity can become hierarchy.

V.

Evolution is not a goal-seeking process. Its causes are accidental, they are not appropriate means to produce a result. In other words, the evolution of religious forms and religious systems does not depend on religious causes, events, experiences (although the religious system will describe its own history in these terms). Since we conceive of society as a self-referential system of communication, we have to suppose that changes in the structure of communication will be one, if not the important change which makes it necessary to adapt religion to new means. The breakthrough may well have been the invention of an easy system of writing, the invention of the alphabet (Havelock, 1982).

By no means does this amount to saying that religion essentially had to be reduced to written communication. The contrary is true. Orality, as a specific way of communication, even gained in importance (Ong, 1967; 1969). The point is that the new facilities of writing and reading did *change the modes and ways in which self-reference is implied in communication.* Referring to another previous or later communication became independent of the spoken word as an actual event (Ong, 1977:20f). It became independent of the presence of persons, independent of situations, independent of gesticulation and intonation and above all: independent of the individual and collective memory. It became a matter of arranging the text. Moreover, the written text did preserve everything, important or not, that was written. It was no longer necessary to give special marks to preservable communication, e.g. solemn expression or rhythm. But these had been the traditional ways of religious design. Its form became replaceable. It did not become superfluous. But to the extent that the ways of religious expression were the result of general problems of self-reference in oral communication, this was no longer the case. Solemnity became a matter of linguistic choice and, thereby, a problem of belief.

Therefore, it it not inappropriate to see the elaborate forms of theological semantics and argumentation of later on as the desperate attempt of religion and its professionals to survive in spite of the alphabet.[7] This necessity became a virtue. The theological construction of the Trinity has been invented as the most appropriate reaction: Its internal unity achieved by the spoken word which all three components hear at the same time, and its external presentation adapted to the closure of human society as a system of oral and written communication. The technological device of writing itself became sanctified, the Gospel was preserved in book form, and this bookish attitude to religion was still reinforced by the invention of printing. The Gospel was now accessible to everybody who could read. The Church could no longer present itself as a long chain of oral transmissions, it had to change itself into a system of instructing and supporting reading believers. Again, preaching did not become superfluous; but it had to be good preaching with a view to the fact that all cross-references of the religious belief system were available as written and printed text.

Then, and only then, the ancient ways to formulate religion could be rediscovered as "sublime style," and the 18th century pursued this line by inventing the difference between the sublime and the beautiful to make sure that religion (and particularly reli-

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[7]Ong (1967: 190f.) even suggests that God Himself chose this historical moment where orality was important yet, but the alphabet already available – "the precise time when psychological structures assured that this entrance would have greatest opportunity to endure and flower."

gious terribleness) could now, as ever, find appropriate forms and be preserved in spite of aesthetic alternatives (Monk, 1960).

A further consequence of literacy was even more important. The most immediate result of alphabetic writing was the introduction into evolution of wide discrepancies between semantics and social structure. In a way, the resulting problems were formulated by Plato, but his philosophy itself sided with "ideas".[8] In general, the literature of the Greek city states became aware of differing realms of meaning, especially of politics and law, knowledge and friendship (*politeía, nómos, epistéme/dóxa, philía*) (Goody & Watt, 1963) but these differences were no longer representative of social structure, they underrated, for example, economy and religion.

From that time on, and depending upon a technique of easy writing and reading, the increasing probability of the improbable has been generating further complications. For society in general and religion in particular we have to follow two different ways to cope with this dilemma, the one being semantic, the other relying on social structures, e.g. the churches. The discrepancies between these two – the church never becomes a *communio sanctorum* – is one aspect of the problem. It is also the main dynamic factor in religious and perhaps in social history.

VI.

It is easy to recognize our problem if we look at the semantic forms of theological belief which have evolved within the Christian religion. "God" can be seen as the centralized paradox which at the same time deparadoxizes the world. Therefore, we find the asymmetrical notion of creation and, contingent upon this, the idea of the contingency of the world. We have the roots of a hierarchical structure which can be copied everywhere. Original sin symbolizes the beginning of difference and the transformation of the paradox, becoming labor, but remaining difference. The incarnation of God on earth makes the improbable probable. The issue is "salvation", i.e. overcoming difference. But then, salvation again becomes improbable; it becomes contingent upon grace and, finally, in itself turns into an impenetrable and unrecognizable determination. The faith may remain simple, but the belief becomes complex. The theological elaboration uncovers the circular relation between the problem and its solution. It exposes the paradox. It tries to tackle the latter with its own means. And "all was reduc'd to Article and Proposition," as Shaftesbury (Shaftesbury, 1714) complains. Whatever we may think of the belief system of this particular religion, it brings about an important structural change – some would say: evolutionary advance, or even: evolutionary universal (Parsons, 1964) – compared with earlier religions. Never before had religion been so articulate. Never before had it set up its own distinction between believers and non-believers, abstracting from all other distinctions like our people/other people, citizens/strangers or free men/slaves. Never before was it so completely on its own in regulating inclusion and exclusion. Never before had religion in this sense been a network of decision premises. And never before did its own unity of reproduction become so dependent on interpretation, i.e. professional skill in handling distinctions.

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[8]See also, but from somewhat different perspectives, Havelock, 1963.

This kind of self-regulation seems to require another semantic innovation. The old difference between sacred and profane, applied to places, occasions, persons etc., had to be replaced with a difference which could be handled as a purely internal difference within the religious system itself, representing, as it were, the difference between those included in and those excluded from the religious system. This problem was solved by the distinction between *salvation* and *damnation*, accessible to all kinds of clerical and private manipulation. This difference could be presented to the believer as the most important question of his life. It could, then, be conditioned by all kinds of secondary regulations. And even in the face of non-believers Pascal and others (Pascal and Jesuits!)[9] could argue that it was not worthwhile to risk damnation even if one did not believe in it. The scheme could be handled as a totalizing device, including the whole world and even those excluded. At this level, the paradox became a suggested calculus of decision.[10] As a result of long debates, the paradoxes surrounding salvation became more prominent in the late Middle Ages. And whereas tradition did maintain a simple inverse relation between certainty of salvation and fear in everyday life—the more certainty the less fear—the problem became exaggerated and culminated in the issue of salvation itself: in its uncertainty.

Another area of problems relates to communication. A long process of doctrinal evolution has reduced the possibility of communication with the sacred to two forms: revelation and prayer.[11] The same process had intensified the communicative character of revelation and prayer and, thereby, gave rise to private concerns. When Japanese beat the gong, bow and think of wishes in front of the temple we don't know for sure whether this is intended as communication or not. The Christian prayer is intended as communication and therefore requires a sufficient distinctness of belief. Revelation, too, does not simply create states, consecrate places, destroy the evil, or interfere in some other way in worldly affairs. Again, it is intentional communication, and this means freedom to accept or not to accept the message. Since God can and cannot reduce Himself to something visible, (again a paradox!) He sent His son to preach the Gospel.

The result of this doctrinal evolution is differentiation. The specification of forms of communication between God and man leaves the relation of man and nature free for other concerns—be they economic, scientific or aesthetic. All these concerns retain a religious quality too because God has created the world and given nature to man. But there is no communicative relation between man and nature.[12] This must have been a very difficult decision, possible only with religious support. Francis of Assisi talks to animals. The way Petrarch sees nature almost becomes a new religion. Scientific experiments are styled as questioning nature. But, actually nature remains silent as an object of pleasure and exploitation. It does not complain.

[9]For a Jesuit example of the famous wager of Pascal see de Villiers, 1700, vol. 1, pp. 204 f.

[10]There are many secondary paradoxes associated with salvation, for example the idea that the most external sign is given by God as the most reliable warrant of internal certainty: *verbum solum habemus*; or later, as Max Weber would have it: business only!

[11]This statement relates to preaching and to popular religion. Theology, in a technical sense, can of course avoid or circumvent the concept of communication with God, using concepts like *invocatio* or *evocatio* or reducing this difficult operation to: calling God by His name.

[12]The substitute is, or course, labor.

VII.

This stupendo'us and unique construction of theological doctrine was possible only on the basis of structural differentiation. Above all it presupposed a separation of political and religious roles and a certain "privatization" of religious concerns, already realized during the classical period of the Greek city state.[13] This structural differentiation made it possible to think of membership in religious organizations as a matter of private choice and to begin to develop decision premises and rules of control which made it feasible to separate members and non-members without using other roles (e.g. citizenship) as a guideline. The decision to belong or not to belong to a certain religious collectivity became independent from other roles of the individual. The articulation of belief was necessary to orient this choice, and the paradoxical structure of belief (e.g. a man of lowest birth, the Son of God) could symbolize the independence of this choice. It is one of the accidents of evolution that this condition lasted long enough for the consolidation of a belief system that could survive the abolition of its starting mechanism. The established church into which we are born did retain (with new meanings) ceremonies of enrolment and admittance (baptism) and, above all, the independence from other roles. Everybody can become a Christian: a son, a wife, a slave, a heathen of whatever complexion, and even a criminal.

There is a circular relation of reciprocal support between semantics and social structure which for a long time stabilized the result of an improbable evolution. However, we are recovering the improbability of the probable. The religious system evolved and it had to pay the penalty. The inherent improbability reappeared as a discrepancy between semantics and social structure and as a permanent incitement to reform. The Church did not live up to its own expectations. From the twelfth century, it became the object of more or less continuous claims for spiritual and organizational reforms, and it became hardened by accepting and rejecting reforms. This, too, contributed to differentiation. No other institution had a similar history. The differentiation of religion and politics became practically irreversible, and it became one of the main conditions for a new type of solution: for the differentiation of the mother church itself into several churches, sects, and denominations.[14]

At the same time, a new differentiation of religious and economic questions emerged. The religious system had to renounce any attempt to supervise and justify economic behavior – church policy in matters of usury and just prices having been her main foothold in divine economic consultancy (de Roover, 1958; Grice-Hutchinson, 1958; Nelson, 1969; Malorey, 1971) – and the economic system had to renounce any attempt to buy salvation. Both systems had to look for less immediate forms of mutual influence, respecting the autonomy of the other. Quite similar problems of structural differentiation came up in relation to areas of personal intimacy. The religious system had to withdraw from regulating the position of bodies engaged in sexual activities (Flandrin, 1976; 1983),

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[13]For the very advanced state of structural differentiation and religious privatization in Athens, see Humphreys, 1978.

[14]One has to look at the very complicated relations between religious reform movements and the emerging territorial states in the 15th century to see this point. The new forms of symbiosis of church and state which emerged on the basis of differentiation were the precondition, not the result of the Protestant Reformation.

but it could stop all attempts to point to the woman as the way to salvation—from Schlegel's Lucinde to Claudel's *Soulier de satin* (Hörisch, 1983).

Thus, evolution of religion is not simply a change of religious forms. The point is not simply the development of a clearer conceptualization of the paradox. It is differentiation in a more complicated sense. Evolution propels itself by changing *systems* which are at the same time the *environment for other systems*, forcing the latter to adapt or resist. This may amount to changing structures or retaining unchanged structures within a changed environment—but in both cases: to a strengthening of differentiation. Under these pressures of social evolution structural differentiation seems to reinforce and extend functional specification and the result is the functional differentiation of the whole society, the modern type of society we are all familiar with (Luhmann, 1982:esp. 229ff).

Semantic and structural differentiation of religion leaves other areas of life without religious support. Their structures remain inherently paradox, if they cannot be re-formulated in religious terms. Classical political ecomony, for example, defined its concept of labor as relation between man and nature. This contained obvious references to biblical tradition. But labor is no longer the consequence of original sin or an element within the religious dramaturgy of salvation. It is a natural necessity, even a "natural law". Thus, the paradox re-enters the theoretial framework of political economy: The relation between man and nature is again a natural relation. Therefore endless controversies cropped up concerning the status of labor within the system of economic production and distribution, and any solution had to rely, if not on religious, then on ideological deparadoxization.[15]

VIII.

Today, religion survives as a functional subsystem of a functionally differentiated society. It has gained recognized autonomy at the cost of recognizing the autonomy of the other subsystems, i.e. secularization (Luhmann 1977:225ff). It represents the world within the world and society within society. Its paradox can be reformulated as the well-known paradox of set theory: It is a set which includes and excludes itself.[16]

The traditional way to deparadoxize this paradox has been "representation". The modern way seems to require a functional orientation. The "deparadoxization" (I am trying to find a linguistic correlate for the improbability of the probable) of the world becomes a job and "calling God" becomes the solution of a problem. At the same time, we know how inadequate it is to treat religion in this way. We may ask whether a solution will be found at all for the problem of religion, or for that matter: the problem of meaning; and we may also ask, if our solutions, and particularly the solution we call

[15]We can see this by consulting a text from Hodgskin, 1827: 28 ff.: "It is a law of our being, that we must eat bread by the sweat of our brow; but it is reciprocally a law of the external world, that it shall give bread for our labour, and give it only for labour. Thus we see that the world, every part of which is regulated by unalterable laws, is adapted to man, and man to the world" (28). Hodgskin admits "that men have, to a certain degree, the power of throwing the necessity to labour off their own shoulders; as they may alter the direction of the influence of gravity" (30) But "every long-continued attempt in one class of men to escape from the necessity of labour imposed on our race . . . is a violation of a natural law which never passes unpunished" (30) This is in part biblical political economy, but it leads, by dropping the religious reference, to a natural law of class politics.

[16]See also, in relation to problems of "enlightenment" Olivetti, 1981.

modern society, can find their problem. We know of countermovements, the recent re-actions of the Islamic religion against secularization being the most spectacular.[17] But defining 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 and, as we well know, not a very successful one.

A less fundamental and more appropriate way would be to look for adequate theoreti-cal descriptions of this very situation, not negating, but abstracting from the framework in which we experience modern life. We could, for example, start by revisiting the se-mantical and structural choices made by the system of religion as it was approaching modern times. We may ask:

(1) Was it a good idea to strengthen, beginning with the Council of Trent and with Protestant "state churches," the *organizational infrastructure* of the religious system, to re-duce its professionals to a status of functionaries and to develop a hierarchic unification although this centralized power of programming and decision-making proved unable to adapt religion to modern conditions (de Certeau, 1972; Luhmann, 1972; Kaufmann, 1979)?

(2) Was it a good idea to symbolize the paradox by a semantics of *invisibility*[18] which was, by the way, always known or felt to be unsatisfactory with respect to religious needs[19]?

(3) Was it a good idea, this being perhaps most important of all these semantical changes, to drop the notion of *Hell*[20], to renounce terror and fear in religion, to present it as pure love and thereby lose the distinction between salvation and damnation, the only binary schematism specified for the religious system?[21]

It is easy to see that these and similar structural changes responded to the functional differentiation and to the increasing complexity of modern society. It is difficult to see any alternatives and it would be presumptuous to say that this was all wrong. The point is that sociological theory and particularly systems theory offer a conceptual framework

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[17]With respect to "functional differentiation" as societal background of defensive aggressiveness see Tibi, 1981; 1981a. For critical views, see de Certeau, 1972: 31–94; Kaufmann, 1979. See also Luhmann, 1972.

[18]In the 18th century the metaphor of "invisibility" or "hiddenness" was used in many different contexts to solve the paradoxes of order (e.g. the hidden order of order and disorder, the unity of multiplicity etc.). The well-known "invisible hand" refered to by Joseph Glanvill, Adam Smith and others is only one case in point formulating the expectation of progress in functionally differentiated subsystems (science, economy). For a cos-mological argument see Lambert, 1761; 116: "Die Unordnung in der Welt ist nur scheinbar, und wo sie am größten zu seyn scheint, da ist die wahre Ordnung noch weit herrlicher, uns aber nur mehr verborgen."

[19]See a scene in: Mercier, 1767, with the feeble comfort: "un jour nous le connaîtrons" (119). Cf. also for the 17th-century Goldmann, 1956. The point is no longer *hearing* the voice of God (Gen. 3,8; 7,1; 8,15; 22,1; 31,11 etc) but *seeing* something; and the visible is only the surface of things behind which something else may be hidden.

[20]The Hell being but an intellectual instrument of priests to terrify and dominate the people, runs the argu-ment (Cuppé, 1768; "J. J.", 1782). See also Blake, 1969, for a different view concerning the *function* of the differ-ence: "Without Contraries is no Progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell."

[21]One of many critical observations concerned questions of space in Hell. After some time it must have be-come a terribly crowded place without enough fire for all because it had to preserve bodies; whereas in heaven souls could be thought of as an infinitely compressible substance.

for describing such developments in more abstract terms, for example the distinction between society and organization as different types of social systems (ad 1.); the notion of semantic reformulations of paradoxes (ad 2.); or the notion of binary schematisms (good/bad, true/false, right/wrong, healthy/sick, salvation/damnation, to have or not to have property, etc.) as information processing devices (ad 3). Described in this way religion can be perceived as developing along lines which are partly typical and partly untypical of other functional subsystems of modern society. Reliance on organization is characteristic of the political system, focusing on the "state", but not of science. Reliance on formulas which bypass the original problem, are typical of education,[22] but not of art, perhaps of the economy, but not of the medical system. Trying to get along without any fundamental distinction, without any binary schematism seems to be a unique experiment, characteristic of the religious system only. It looks as if the monotony of a loving God had to compensate for the diminishing importance of religion in everyday life[23] and it seems that this reinforces the organizational difference between members and non-members of churches or denominations. And, above all, abandoning the fundamental difference between salvation and damnation, materialized as heaven and hell, leads back to the fundamental paradox of self-referential unity (Barel, 1979:89f). Religion returns to its original problem.

IX.

In sociological terms this original problem is the problem of paradoxical self-reference. In religious terms it may be formulated – and formulation is already a kind of solution – as the problem of transcendence. In fact, the essence of the surviving religious traditions can be resumed under this heading (Dowdy, 1982). Seen from a meta-perspective both formulations may have the same meaning.

Within the context of traditional religious formulation transcendence is conceived as something *given*, an almighty power of creation and/or interference from outside. In the eyes of an anthropologist or sociologist this is but the solution of a problem, transcendence being an imaginary *creation* of man to solve problems of meaning within the world. Each position can take account of the other. To the religious mind, sociologists, living without faith and in a state of sin and limited knowledge, have no chance to see the reality of transcendence. Maybe they took the wrong apple. As sociologists see it, religious people are faced with the problem of "latent functions." They cannot be aware of the functions of their belief because this would destroy the belief itself. They cannot believe in the function of their belief,[24] they cannot believe in "deparadoxization" and have to remain in the shadowy cave of everyday life. However, this may be but a battle of academic disciplines or intellectuals (Luhmann & Pannenburg, 1978; Scholz, 1982). And this, again, may be but an exercise in self-reference, using contradictions to make one's own point. Why are we supposed to decide on this issue? To paraphrase Ranulph

[22]and here: particularly for Germany but not for France. (Luhmann & Schorr, 1979; Schriewer, 1983).

[23]Cuppé, (1768) and J. J., 1782 could at least imagine a system of gradation in heaven to replace the crude difference between heaven and hell with a career-like distinction between better and worse positions.

[24]An argument, by the way, which is much older than sociology as an academic discipline (Villaume, 1791). The argument runs: functional explanations have no access to the truth of what they explain. They have to take everything as "opinion."

Glanville (1978:401–409) the question of fundamentals is not necessarily a fundamental question.[25]

The main problem of contemporary religious practice might well be the problem of transcendental communication. For structural reasons our society discourages any attempt to communicate with partners in its environment. The universe has withdrawn into silence. But relations between God and man have to be communication – or what else? – yet cannot be communication.[26]

The Bible itself seems to react to its own increasing literacy. "Hearing" the voice of God had become a written text, a report about past events and thus was no longer possible in the same sense. God had to send His Son to be audible. He did send Him *as His word. Eo verbum quo filius.* But this again became part of the same written book and will not be repeatable. Today this impossibility of communication is not only enforced by writing, it is reinforced by the structural development of the societal system. All communication reproduces society and remains a strictly internal operation. Moreover, only human beings can support the social network of communication. Communication with gods, like communication with pets, may be emotionally gratifying; but it operates, at least for observers, somewhat out of touch with reality – like "hearing voices." "Calling God" in public places amounts to strange behavior or to socially oriented communication, e.g. by car stickers. Our normal understanding of communication points to human receptors and all the refinements of awareness and empathy makes this so much more unavoidable.

We can of course *say* that we *mean* something different by communication with God. But then, what do we mean? And can we, without stumbling over the paradox, *say* that we do not *mean* what we *say* knowing that others will not know what we mean when we say that we do not mean what we say?

We can renounce any attempt at active or passive transcendental communication. But then, we would admit that we have to rely on psychological and social resources or reinforcement of belief and would again be faced with the invisible God and the situation *etsi non daretur Deus.* We have churches. They are places where calling God, explaining His revelation (as if it were communication) and prayer is adequate and expected behavior. In sociological terms, churches seem to cultivate countermores, depending for their success on being different. Religion may have become counter-adaptive[27], and this may be the very reason for its survival and for its recurrent revival as well. The Church itself, by now, may have become a carnival, i.e. the reversal of normal order (Bakhtin, 1968; Gross, 1978).

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[25]See also another piece of British wisdom: "in reality, *profound Thinking* is many times the Cause of *shallow Thought*" (Shaftesbury, 1968:226).

[26]See again Blake, 1969:153: "The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spoke to them; and whether they did not think at the time that they would be misunderstood, and so be the cause of imposition.
Isaiah anwer'd: 'I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing, and as I was then perswaded, & remain confirm'd, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences but wrote'."

[27]"Counter-adaptive" as the evolutionary result of adaptive advances in earlier times (Wilden, 1980:205 ff.) See also the reference to "maladaptive," above in Section III.

To propose this account may be sound sociological reasoning. And it would be good sociological theory, were it not for the fact that the function of religion refers to the constitutive paradox of the whole society as a self-referential system. On the one hand we can admit that enclosure of the paradox, counter-adaptive behavior, preserving memory, and keeping a place where the unusual may become usual, the unbelievable believable, the improbable probable may be the solution; on the other hand, it is part of the functional perspective to look for functional equivalents and to keep asking the question whether and why we have to be satisfied with this sort of paradoxical solution.

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