

An investigation of the concept Religious Communication

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a study to investigate the complex and diverse concept of religious communication.

In this study the construct, religious communication, is demarcated and defined by using a comparison between two forms of religion: Protestantism as found in the three Sisters Churches in South Africa and the New Age movement.

The religious communications process is analysed through the symbolic interactionistic perspective as a broad theoretical point of departure and within it a religious communication model was developed.

In the study the religious communication process is defined within the parameters of the individual and his different relationships (with God/godhead, fellow-man and himself), his symbolic interaction and social context within which the religious communication takes place.

The conclusion was reached that religious communication is more than just intra-, inter-, or spiritual/intuitive communications. It is a true and real communication action that takes place on a two-dimensional level.

Since the study is based on a qualitative investigation there is room for the model to be empirically tested in possible future research.

INTRODUCTION

Through the ages man has been aware of something or someone bigger than



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himself. To conceptualise this awareness and the influence it has had on us, we created religion.

As humans we have an ontological need, the need to transcend our human limitations and become part of another dimension which cannot be measured by human standards and boundaries.

The mystical element in man is the driving force behind his desire to contact the super natural realm. Religious communication is the link between this world and the "other".

In order to investigate religious communicate, the construct religious communicate is demarcated and defined

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by using a comparison between two forms of religion: Protestantism as found in the three Sisters Churches in South Africa and the New Age movement.

The choice was based on the differences in their God or godhead images, different relationships they established with the God/god concept and differences in communications direction, intent, mediums and messages, as well as the similarities in the religious communication process and structure.

It is also narrowed down to three interdependent communication relationships; the communication relationship between man and himself, between man and his fellow man and between man and the super natural.

In this instance the religious communications process is analysed through the symbolic interactionistic perspective as a theoretical departure.

Communication science is an established science, but it has mainly developed in specific fields, such as interpersonal, organisational and mass communications.

Although a lot of research has been done on religion (including religious communication) in closely related fields such as philosophy, theology, sociology, psychology and anthropology, very little work has been done on religious communication as a sub section of communications (De Klerk, 1988 and Rensburg, 1989).

This study is based on a qualitative investigation of literary research and a pilot study of twenty interviews (10 each of the two religious orientations investigated).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study was to investigate the communication process

within the context of the relationship between man and God or a godhead.

The broad issues investigated were:

1. What is meant by the term religious communication?
2. To what extent is religious communication a true and valid communication action?
3. If religious communication is true communication, is it a unique form of communication?

1. WHAT IS RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATIONS?

The terms religion and communication were assessed from different perspectives and disciplines (psychological, sociological, philosophical, theological and communicative). (See Collins, 1982; Kinloch, 1972; Kuhn, 1966; Thielton, 1988; De Klerk, 1972; Kaufmann, 1958; Davis, 1967 and Nielsen, 1982).

The following working definitions were compiled:

- *Religion* is the process whereby the individual maintains such beliefs towards the super natural that it has a material bearing on his cognitive, conative, and affective communications behavior within a social context.
- *Communication* is defined as the intentional process of symbolic interaction whereby meaning is produced and shared through intra-, inter- and vertical (transcendental and/or immanent) communication in the establishment of horizontal and vertical relationships.

The concept religious communication includes:

- intra and interpersonal communication
- immanent and transcendental communication, and,

- vertical and horizontal communication.

For clarity sake they were defined as:

- *Intrapersonal* communication is, on the one hand, internalisation of thought about activities which can be interpreted. On the other hand it is also a self dialogue where the individual takes on the role of participant and observer. Both Schools of thought were taken into account but the interactionistic view of an "internal dialogue" was used as the foundation in the definition of intrapersonal communication (Makay & Gaw, 1975; Weinholdt & Elliot, 1979; Ruesch & Bateson, 1968).
- *Interpersonal* communication is verbal and non-verbal communication between two or more people (Faules & Alexander, 1978; Wood, 1982).
- *Immanent communication* is communication between an individual and a non-transcendental God, an immanent godhead as it is found in the New Age religious orientation. The direction of the communication is inbound and circular towards the Self on a multi-dimensional level.
- *Transcendental communication* is communication between an individual and a transcendental God as is found in the Protestant religion. The direction of the communication is outward where the response character of the communication is emphasised (De Klerk, 1988; Rensburg, 1989).

Religious communication defines the individual's relationship towards other people, himself and God/godhead. It orientates the individual in his environment through the realisation of his ontological needs.

Religious communication directs the individual's behavior in his communication with others, himself and God/godhead and this communication action is an intentional act which differentiates man from other living organisms on earth. It is a conscious symbolic act that takes place through mentation (the ability to think and therefore communicate) and internalisation of speech.

This is a holistic process where man's self interacts through role adaptation within a social context with the self becoming both observer and participant (Meltzer, Petras & Reynolds, 1975).

It shows man's ability to create a two-way dialogue between himself and others, himself with himself and himself and God/godhead.

In this communication act meaning is shared and a relationship is established. Identification plays a central role, the more it increases the more successful the communication becomes (Burke, 1967).

Religious communication involves the total man; his reason, feelings, attitudes and behavior, but above all his intuition.

As a working definition religious communication is viewed as the symbolic interaction process that takes place between an individual and God/godhead in the establishment of a religious relationship through symbolic shared reality and in so doing the individual's religious communications needs are met.

2. THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATIONS MODEL

The religious communications model consists of three components:

- The first component shows the broad realities which provides the

intersubjective context for religious communications (refer to diagram 1).

- The second component illustrates the communication process as it takes place in the religious reality (refer to diagram 2 & 3).
- The third component emphasises the two-dimensionality of religious communication as a unique form of communication or level of communication (refer to diagram 4).

The point of view taken in this study was that religious communication's structure and process is similar in all religions (referring to the two examined in this study) but that the communication's orientation, direction, intent and message differ.

Due to the similarities in structure and process a general religious combinations model can be devised, but because of the differences in message content, communication direction and intent, people will always realise their ontological needs in different manners or religious practices.

2.1 Religious reality

Religious communication takes place within shared symbolic realities as constructed by the individual. The symbolic realities are:

- External/everyday realities where interpersonal communications take place between the individual and other people.
- Internal/private realities where intrapersonal communications take place between an individual and himself.
- Religious realities where intuitive or spiritual communications take place between the individual and God/godhead (see diagram 1).

Religious communication is possible when different symbolic realities are shared. The bigger the shared reality

the higher the intersubjectivity, which again increases the impact and effectiveness of the communication taking place (Fitzpatrick & Wamboldt, 1990).

The shared realities can either be enlarged or made smaller depending on the effectiveness of the communication between the individual and God/godhead; individual and other human beings and the individual and himself.

- *The individual's religious communication is determined through his image of God/godhead and his religious orientation:*

The study reveals that the individual's personal concept of God/godhead – as formed within a specific religious orientation – determines his vertical relationship. This in turn determines his religious communications context within which his religious communication needs (ontological needs) are realised.

The vertical relationship can either be predominantly transcendental (as illustrated by the Protestant orientation) or immanent (as illustrated by the New Age orientation) (see diagram 5 & 6).

- The Protestant vertical relationship:
The Protestant concept of God and vertical relationship with God is based on a distanced relationship where the creature could never become the Creator. However, because of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Ghost, the Christian can have a personal relationship with God (refer to diagram 5).
The Christian becomes transformed (through religious communication) to live more and more in the image of God (Tucker, 1989).
- New Age vertical relationship;
The New Age god concept is based on the "oneness prin-

ciple" where the individual can enter into a direct but not a personal relationship with the immanent godhead. The immanent godhead is a force or power and not a person. The immanent relationship is based on a voyage of discovery towards becoming one with "oneness" through self knowledge and empowerment (refer to diagram 6) (De La Hunt, 1990; Buitendag, 1990; Groothuis, 1986; McGuire, 1987).

2.2 The communication process

Religious communication takes place in a specific communications context which is symbolic and spiritual but which can never be seen as separate from the individual's everyday physical reality. The physical reality is always the paramount reality against which all the other realities are reflected (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

- *The religious communications process is interactive, dynamic and systematic*

It requires active involvement and participation from both the communicators (between human beings, in the individual himself and between the individual and God/godhead).

The dynamic nature of the religious communications process is indicative of the continued relationship with God/godhead and is never stagnant.

The communications process is systematic in that different realities (open systems) are entered into when the individual shares different symbolic systems.

Meaning is shared by means of the "generalised other"; selfreflection and self-indication; the role playing of the "I" and "me", "minding"; "accommodation"; "assimilation" and "decentering" to interpret, gain an understanding and

to build either a vertical or horizontal relationship.

The individual is thus "transformed" in his religious communication (to become more in the image of God – Protestant orientation or to become more "empowered" in the New Age orientation) through the vertical relationship.

- Protestant religious mediums

Religious communications from God to the Christian takes place through a dialogue and messages are received through Christian meditation, the Bible, nature, religious experiences, preaching and the mass media (refer to diagram 2).

The Christian message is one of salvation and the Christian responds through prayer.

- New Age mediums

The New Age communication transaction takes place in a multi-directional manner between the self and Higher Self. The immanent godhead can also be experienced through other mediums such as Holy Scriptures, nature, meetings of New Ager's, astrology, religious experiences (which includes everyday, numinous and mystical experiences), the mass media and occult sources (refer to diagram 2).

The New Age message is one of empowerment and self-development. The New Ager responds through meditation (which includes, or takes place in conjunction with, yoga, visualisation and "channeling").

The religious communication process is possible because the human being has the ability to become an object, share meaning and has the capability to adapt different roles within different contexts and different realities.

The locus or centre of religious communication is located in the individual's self.

- *The symbolic interaction process takes place in the individual's self where his cognitive, affective, conative and intuitive experiences creates the meaning he ascribes to his world around him and the way in which he constructs his religious reality (See diagram 3).*

– The cognitive:

Through reason and logic the individual defines the unexplainable dimension of religion. The conceptualisation of his image of God/godhead; what kind of relationship he has with God/godhead; what type of rituals and ceremonies he partakes in and how he communicates with God/godhead is analysed through his cognitive faculties (Davis, 1967; Kaufmann, 1958; Stewart, 1980).

The cognitive dimension is the foundation on which the other dimensions rely to place them into perspective, to interpret them and to understand them.

The cognitive dimension is emphasised in the Protestant religious orientation.

– The affective:

The affective dimension provides the individual with the ability to experience feelings in a religious context. The vertical relationship is by its mere nature affective. The Protestant believe in God as the embodiment of love, whereas the New Age person emphasizes emotions as part of being more "aware" of himself and others. This is a backlash on the Western rational and empirical paradigm. The New Age claims emotions have been negated for too long in mainstream religions and therefore need to be encouraged (Johnston, 1983).

– The conative:

The individual acts out his vertical relationship in the conative dimension. Ritual and sacrament create the routine

necessary to reinforce the relationship with God/godhead (Smart, 1973; Davis, 1967; Marty, 1976).

– The intuitive:

The intuitive dimension can be described as the "experience" dimension, where God/godhead is directly experienced in either an everyday existence, a numinous experience or a mystical experience. The intuitive dimension is the funnel through which religious communication is formed into a logical meaning system which is required for the vertical relationship to flourish (Flay, 1991; Maxwell & Tschudin, 1990; James, 1961; Wainwright, 1982; Loader, 1991).

This dimension is emphasised in the New Age religious orientation.

The self is where messages are interpreted (decoded) and encoded according to the different dimensions as influenced by the individual's horizontal and vertical communication.

- *Feedback is an essential part of the communication process between man and the super natural and depends on the orientation of the individual.* It can be identified as either sensitivity-; directional-; or expression feedback (De Klerk, 1972).
- Sensitivity feedback is when an individual is aware of a concept or idea of God or a godhead but his life, behavior and thoughts are not influenced by this knowledge.
- Directional feedback is when an individual's specific believe system directs his thoughts and feelings because of a religious orientation such as being a Christian or believing in a Universal Intelligence.
- Expression feedback is when the individual is expressing his religious orientation in his behavior through rituals and rites or lifestyle as determined by his religious beliefs.

As mentioned earlier the Protestant feedback is mainly through prayer and the New Age feedback through meditation which could include visualisation, "channeling" or yoga.

- *The horizontal relationship*

The horizontal relationship and vertical relationship is interdependent. Everyday horizontal interactions influences the individual's vertical relationship. Interpersonal communication behavior is driven by inclusion, control and affection and the same variables influences the vertical relationship.

There is no difference in the role that interpersonal communication plays in the religious communication between the Protestant and New Age persons, except in the content.

The way the Protestant or New Age person may perceive another human being will differ, since it is directly related to his religious orientation. However, the interpersonal dynamics, function exactly the same.

Intra-personal communication cannot come to its full right without interpersonal communication and therefore religious communications is not possible without an interpersonal or horizontal dimension.

Rensburg (1989) showed that communication with God is the source of ultimate meaning and that vertical communication can enrich horizontal communication.

The religious self needs feedback from "significant others", feedback from itself and feedback from the super natural to maintain its religious communications and relationship.

- *The communication direction differs depending on the individual's religious orientation.* The transcendental communication flow is outwardly bound towards a distanced God. The immanent com-

munication flow is inwardly bound and multi-directional towards the individual's innermost Self as part of the "oneness of all" (see diagram 5 & 6).

- *Religious communication can be temporal or a-temporal*
- It is temporal when the individual is bound in a time/spatial context and communication takes place therein, even if feedback is only received over a period of time.
- It is a-temporal when the individual communicates in an altered state of consciousness or in a mystical experience where time and space is of no consequence (Stace, 1974; Happold, 1990; James 1961).

In both religious orientations everyday consciousness states or altered consciousness states can be found. By entering a different reality the experience is not forgotten by the individual, it is merely more difficult to describe it in a cognitive language system.

- *The religious communication process is also hampered by potential barriers.* Possible barriers could be symbolic systems that are not shared or factors which cannot be controlled by the individual, for instance the unknown mystery of God or even the individual's own psychological state.

Through the symbolic interaction taking place during the religious communication process, a synthesis is created between intra-, inter- and intuitive or spiritual communication. The individual steps out of his own self and becomes the other communicator through role adaptation in his communication with a super natural being. This is a complete communication process with all the communication elements present in both the Protestant and New Age orientation.

The Protestant communicates in a transcendental context in a dialogue situation with God. The New Age person communicates in an immanent context where he becomes one with the Universe interactively through different non-rational symbolic systems.

2.2 Two-dimensionality of religious communications:

In religious communications we refer to a relationship dimension when a systematic convergence between different symbolic realities take place, based on the individual's identification abilities. The more successful the communication, the bigger the identification. The intersubjectivity (which refers to the shared symbolic reality) impacts on the effectiveness of the communication and strengthening of the relationship (Fisher, 1978).

By sharing different realities the individual's communication is coloured by the context and experience of each communication encounter, each time he enters into a different reality.

Religious communication is thus far more than intra-, inter- or vertical communication. *It is two-dimensional communication where interpersonal human communication (the horizontal axis) intersects with the spiritual/intuitive super natural communication between the individual and God/a godhead (vertical axis) through intrapersonal communication in the individual's self (see diagram 4).*

3. IS RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATIONS A TRUE AND VALID COMMUNICATIONS ACTION?

The religious communications process is regarded as a valid communication action since all the communications variables are present in the religious communication process, such as the sender, receiver, message, mediums and feedback (refer to diagram 7).

4. IS RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION UNIQUE?

Religious communication can be described as a unique and true form of communication since it is not only intra- or interpersonal communication, but it is intuitive or spiritual communication, which includes both intra- and interpersonal communication. As such, it requires a different kind of methodology which will also include the non-rational and intuitive aspects of the individual as part of the scientific paradigm.

In order to know more about this phenomenon we need to explore religious communication with different scientific instruments to measure the unique process taking place. This may include developing unique non-empirical measuring instruments.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS:

Some possible future research recommendations are:

- To empirically test the religious communications model as stated here – each variable could be separately tested.
- To further investigate altered states of consciousness and different communications realities.
- To analyse semiotically the different symbolic systems in different religious contexts with regard to shared meaning.
- To investigate the mass media's role in religious communications with reference to the religious communications model.
- To analyse religious communications on different dimensions. A possibility could be to use the systems theory or a combination of the systems and symbolic interactionistic theory.

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RELIGIOUS REALITY

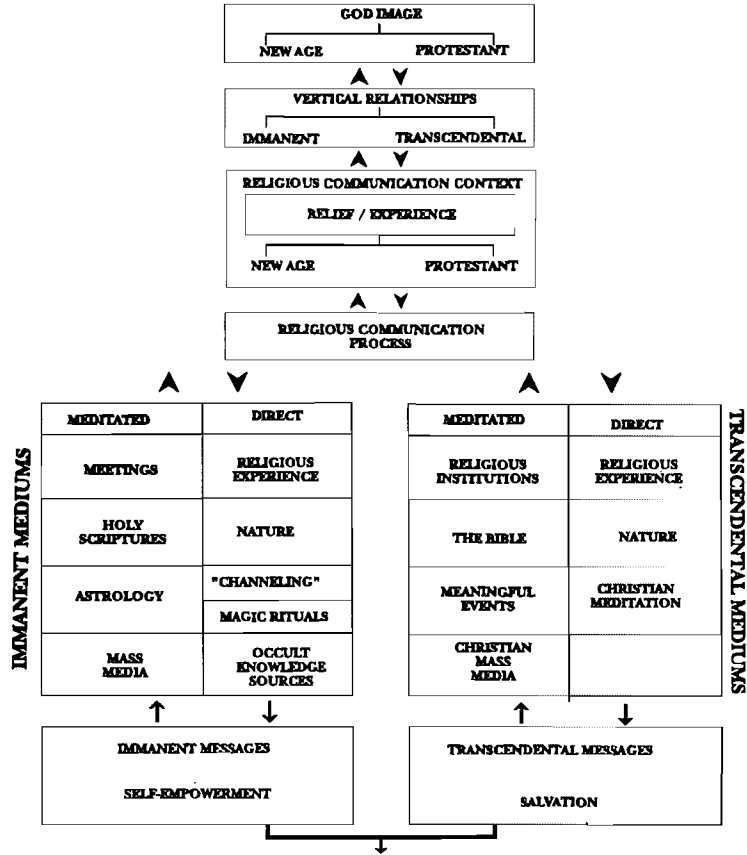
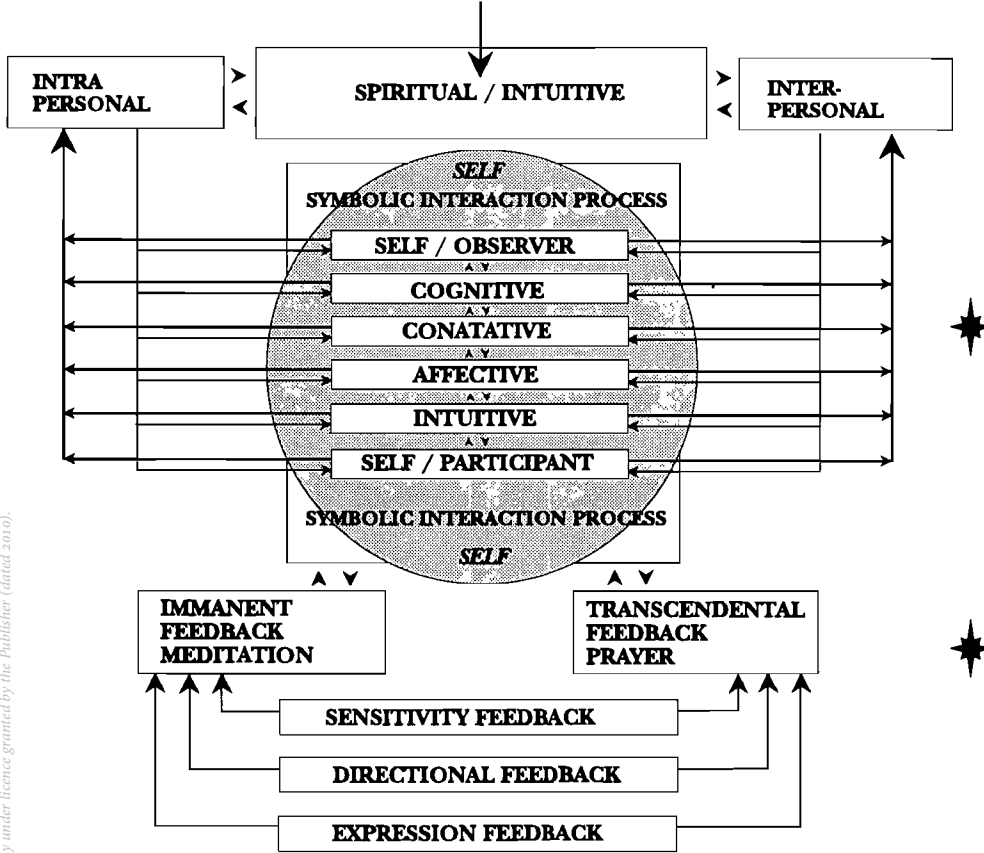


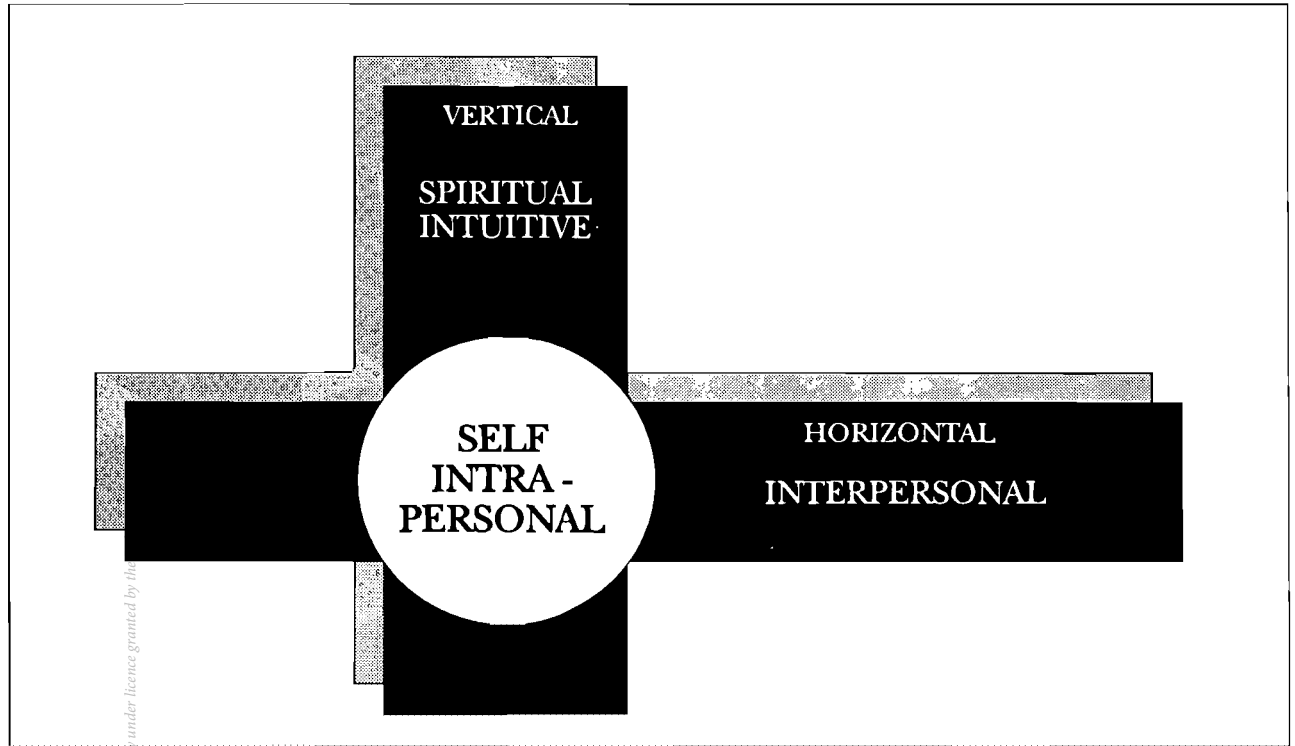
Diagram 2



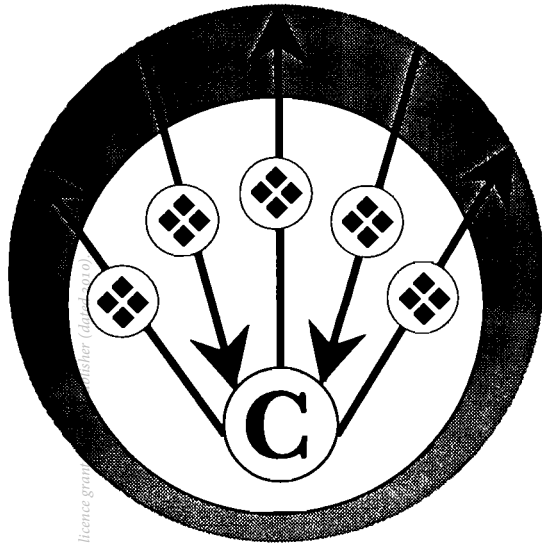
✦ POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS (STABLE & PROCEDURAL ASPECTS)

Diagram 3

Religious Communication as a two - dimensional Communications Model



Protestant (Transcendental) God Image

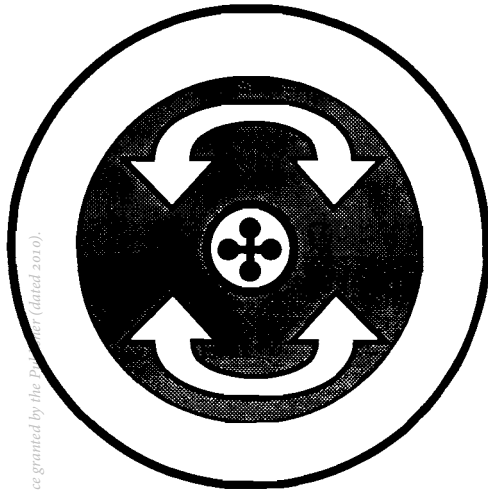


- Linear vertical communication

C

- Distanced relationship

New Age (Immanent) God Image



- **Multi-Dimensional
circular communication**

- **"One-ness of all"**

Elementary Communication Model

