21ST CENTURY THEORIES OF RELIGION

Edited by Michael Stausberg

First published 2025

ISBN: 978-1-032-88940-5 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-88933-7 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-54045-8 (ebk)

CHAPTER 3

RELIGION AS DIFFERENTIATED COMMUNICATION: ON NIKLAS LUHMANN, *A SYSTEMS THEORY OF RELIGION* ([2000] 2013)

Adrian Hermann

(CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003540458-3

The funder for this chapter is University of Bonn

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

3

RELIGION AS DIFFERENTIATED COMMUNICATION

On Niklas Luhmann, *A Systems Theory of Religion* ([2000] 2013)

Adrian Hermann

When he arrived at the University of Bielefeld in 1969, German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998) described his main theoretical project as a 30-year endeavor to develop a sociological theory of society (Luhmann 2012: xi).[1] From the beginning, he considered religion one of the core societal "subsystems" (Luhmann 1969: 136), next to politics, science, or the economy. In this, Luhmann, despite his complex relationship to the "old European tradition" (2012: 40), was a classical (German) sociologist, like Marx, Simmel, Durkheim and Weber, for all of whom thinking and writing about religion was central to their work (O'Toole 2001). After having written some substantial essays on the topic in the early 1970s (Luhmann 1972a, 1972b), in 1977 Luhmann completed *Funktion der Religion* as his first major monograph on religion. He would go on to publish a few significant longer studies on the topic over the next few decades (Luhmann 1985a; 1989a, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1998), especially in the last years before his death in 1998. This second intensive phase of engaging with religion resulted in Luhmann's second major monograph on religion, *Die Religion der Gesellschaft* (The Religion of Society), posthumously published in 2000 and translated into English as *A Systems Theory of Religion* in 2013 (henceforth *STR*). It is this book, and therefore Luhmann's later theory of religion, that will mostly be discussed in this chapter.

World society theory and functional differentiation

Luhmann's theory of "modern society" (2012: 90), as the larger context within which he develops his theory of religion, is a globally oriented theory of "world society" (Luhmann 1971; 1997b; 2012: 83–99; on world society theory see Stichweh 2019). Modernity, for Luhmann (2012: 96), is mainly characterized by a "primacy of functional differentiation". With this description he highlights

DOI: 10.4324/9781003540458-3
This chapter has been made available under a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

that, from a systems-theoretical perspective, the most important aspect of modern world society is the emergence of a plurality of differentiated and autonomous societal domains. Luhmann (2012: 17) describes them as society's primary "subsystems", like politics, economy, science, law, etc. Systems theory suggests that these domains operate as "operationally closed autopoietic systems" (Luhmann 2013b: 4). It is important to note that this does not indicate complete independence. Rather, functional differentiation leads to both, gains in operative independence *and* an increasing dependence of the function systems on one another, including their "structural coupling" (88, 108–115). According to Luhmann, differentiation should not be understood as "the *decomposition* of a 'whole' into 'parts'". Instead, each subsystem "reconstructs the comprehensive system to which it belongs and which it contributes to forming through its *own* (subsystemspecific) *difference between system and environment*" (3). In this sense, from a Luhmannian perspective, religion – in modernity – should be theorized as a functionally differentiated societal subsystem.

But what is this "modernity", and how did it come to be? As differentiated communication, modern religion is both a result of profound societal transformations over the last half millennium and a main contributor to these changes. Religion has been one of the forces (re)making the modern world. While scholars in global history have described this as the emergence of "empires of religion" since the 19th century (Bayly 2004), in a systems-theoretical perspective it appears as the formation of the "religious system of global society" (Beyer 2006: 62–116).

Religion as differentiated communication

The core concern of Luhmann's theoretical thinking about religion throughout his life was to offer theoretical tools to describe religion as differentiated within modern society as a distinct realm. In his early book *Funktion der Religion*, functional analysis serves to identify religion as a separate societal subsystem that transforms "indeterminate into determinate or at least determinable complexity" (1977: 78–79). In *A Systems Theory of Religion*, religion appears as an "autonomous, structurally determined autopoietic system" of differentiated religious communication (*STR* 223). By transforming Talcott Parsons structural-functional analysis into a functional-structural analysis, however, Luhmann (1967), instead of pointing to a stable list of societal necessities, turned "functions" into a tool for comparative analysis. For him, "functional analysis" is a method "to comprehend what is present as contingent and what is different as comparable" (Luhmann 1995: 53). If I describe something's function, I can begin to think about other ways in which this function could be, might have been, or will be fulfilled in the future.

Between his two monographs on religion, in the pivotal 1984 book *Soziale Systeme* (Luhmann 1984a, translated into English as *Social Systems* in 1995), Luhmann replaced his earlier reliance on the concept of "action" with "communication" as the central concept of his sociology. From this perspective, all

social systems consist of communications (and nothing else) as their "elemental units" (Luhmann 1995: 137–175). Furthermore, there is only one "world society" that encompasses all communications, as the "boundaries of communication (as opposed to noncommunication) constitute the external boundaries of society" (Luhmann 2012: 86). Communication is defined by Luhmann (1995: 147) as the "synthesis of three selections, as the unity of information, utterance, and understanding". This concept of communication as an "event" with three components serves as the basis of a novel theory of society that understands the "autopoietic" (self-generative) reproduction of communication as the basic operative structure of social life. In the "selection" of "understanding" a distinction is drawn between the "information" (the other-referential *what* or content of the communication) and the "utterance" (the self-referential *how* or *why* of the manner of and reasons for the communication). This "understanding", as the third selection of the communicative event, realizes communication by selecting that *something* is *being communicated* (instead of a mere perception of accidental behavior) (Luhmann 1992: 252–253). In this sense, Luhmann's (252) concept of communication "avoids all reference to consciousness or life". While consciousness (or "psychical systems") as well as other environmental factors that make life possible are still necessary for communication and society to exist, on the level of sociological theory they are excluded from consideration. As "only communication can communicate" (251), communication continues through "understanding", and social systems realize "a condition of connection with further communication in the communication system, that is, a condition of the autopoiesis of social systems" (253).

Religion, in the sociological perspective of Luhmann's later work, is understood "exclusively" as "religious communication" (*STR* 26). Throughout his work, he describes the beginnings of religious communication (e.g., on the basis of the distinction familiar/unfamiliar, see *STR* 57) and in some of his longer essays (Luhmann 1984b; 1989a) presents evolutionary accounts of how the differentiation of religion emerged.

Differentiation (*Ausdifferenzierung*) refers to the process in which a system increasingly forms and maintains boundaries to its environment (Luhmann 1995: 30–31). Luhmann asserts that there never was a societal situation in which all communication was religious (*STR* 132) and reconstructs a process in which religion very early on pioneers specific differentiations in form of topics, situations, places, or times for specialized religious communication (Luhmann 1989a: 270; *STR* 132–140). This contributes to answering the question of "*how* religious communication distinguishes itself" and emerges as "a self-reproducing, operatively closed system" (*STR* 132). Rituals and myths, for example, are early forms in which religious communication organizes and distinguishes itself, as is the establishment of specific roles for specialists dealing with religious communication (*STR* 134–138). Despite such "evolutionary advances" (*STR* 191), modernity creates various difficulties for religion, as its "cosmological and moral fixation" becomes difficult to sustain and its increasing functional

differentiation is now mostly a reaction to the differentiation of other systems in its environment (Luhmann 1989a: 276; see also *STR* 128–130).

In *A Systems Theory of Religion*, Luhmann proposes a theory of religion as part of a general theory of society. His focus always lies on if, when, and how religious communication comes to form an autopoietic, differentiated societal system. This basic idea of a "function system for religion" (*STR* 52) as one of multiple function systems in society enables comparisons with law, economics, science, education, or art. In addition to communication, the system/environment distinction, and the idea of functions, Luhmann provides a range of other concepts like "(binary) code", "program", "contingency formula", "symbolically generalized communication medium", and "organization", as well as a systems-theoretical understanding of "secularization" (for a general introduction to Luhmann and many of his theoretical concepts see Borch 2011 and Baraldi et al. 2021). These offer manifold possibilities to ask in what regards religion operates in similar ways to other function systems, and in what regards it might be different, or lacking in particular features.

Having analyzed religion as a specific "form of meaning" (*Sinnform*) in the first chapter of the book – that is as a distinct way of "fashioning forms in the medium of meaning" by drawing distinctions (*STR* 36) – he distances himself from other sociological approaches (Georg Simmel, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber), as well as from the phenomenology of religion (Rudolf Otto) by replacing the humanistic focus on 'religious consciousness' with an analysis of communication. He asks how religious communication can be identified *as religious* and answers this question by claiming that religion identifies and distinguishes itself and should be observed through "an observation of its own self-observation" (*STR* 6–7). How does this self-observation work? This is where Luhmann introduces the concept of *code*. While he implies that *all* use of the "medium of meaning" (*Sinn*) and therefore all communication involves religion, as all communication operates by drawing distinctions (*STR* 36, 14–17),[2] religion *as differentiated communication* in modern society operates with a *specific* distinction: the code of "immanent/transcendent" (*STR* 53). Each function system's differentiation is based on its own binary distinction – its code – that serves as its "guiding distinction". As a "strictly binary schematism", the code excludes "everything else in the sense of a *tertium non datur*" (*STR* 45). Religion's code of immanent/transcendent, therefore, is a binary distinction that can be used to observe everything that is or happens from a religious perspective, "duplicating what is present, attainable, and familiar into a different realm of meaning" (*STR* 55). It provides an answer to the question "which distinctions specify religion (compared to the rest of the world)" (*STR* 14).

As a theoretical and comparative term, a code thus describes a "a duplication rule" that offers a positive and a negative value for anything that can be communicated, building on the basic binary yes/no code of language (Luhmann 2012: 218, 132). The codes at work within the operations of the various function systems result in such duplications of the world through the use of their specific binary distinction. They make it possible to observe everything that

exists from the perspective of the respective system, for example, as legal or illegal (law), true or false (science) (see Luhmann 2013b: 91). In this way, codes establish a "polycontextural" world of multiple, differing observations that are no longer able to be brought into accord (*STR* 205). As a result, on the basis of its code, religion emerges as a specific system that operates as differentiated communication. The co-evolution of the various function systems ultimately leads to a shift of the primary societal order from vertical stratification (a hierarchical order with a dominating upper stratum) to horizontal "functional differentiation" in modernity, with a plurality of equally relevant systems like law, politics, economy, science, religion, or art (Luhmann 2012: 1–108).

Codes are asymmetric distinctions with a "positive" (or "designation") value and a "negative" (or "reflection") value (218). As "the *countervalue is positively excluded*", reflexivity is built into the distinction, indicating that both values "can be considered for the entire domain where the code is applicable … but … can be excluded by determinable operations" (*STR* 47). In this sense, communication is religious "whenever it observes immanence from the standpoint of transcendence" (*STR* 53). This makes apparent, that – just like the binary codes of other function systems like legal/illegal (law) or true/false (science) – (modern) differentiated religion operates both *universally* and *specifically* (*STR* 63). But if "*everything* can be described from the standpoint of transcendence or immanence" in any given situation, criteria and rules for "classify[ing] things and events" become necessary (*STR* 62). It is not (or no longer) sufficient – or even possible – to distinguish religion from other things solely through reference to specific times, places, topics, or roles (*STR* 132–150).

At this point, Luhmann introduces the idea of *programs* (*STR* 62) that provide rules for "the proper choice of one or the other value" of the code (*STR* 193). Just like juridical norms, scientific theories and methods, or budgets and balance sheets provide rules for the application of codes like legal/illegal, true/false, or property/nonproperty (*STR* 65), religious programs like "revelations" or "dogmatics" (*STR* 71, 191, 250; Luhmann 1989a: 319–321; 1989b: 96–97) provide rules for adjudicating the values of the religious code. While coding makes religious communication possible *in general*, programs give an indication when and how to observe "immanence from the standpoint of transcendence" *in particular*.[3] Luhmann provides some specific examples for programming and points to the great importance of "morality" (the binary distinction of good/bad) as a "secondary coding" of religious communication. The concrete forms that religious programs take, however, are less clear. Prevalent programs within Jewish or Christian theology suggest God as a transcendent observer observing the world from the outside (*STR* 62), while current religious semantics could find transcendence "in the inscrutability of one's own self" or, in a Buddhist perspective, in the emptiness "on which everything in existence, including one's own self, is ultimately based" (*STR* 78). Equally, Luhmann describes how in "early Sumerian religion … all relevant appearances of the world, in nature and culture, are assigned gods, who are behind these appearances and responsible for them" (*STR*

43), providing a specific programming of the immanence/transcendence code. In all these cases, this universal code is interpreted and adjudicated in specific ways through the rules or criteria provided by such programs.

In addition, Luhmann (*STR* 105–131) introduces the concept of the *contingency formula*. It refers to the ways in which a system is available to itself as a *unity*, despite operating as a specific *difference* – immanence/transcendence in the case of religion (*STR* 105–106). A contingency formula thus represents "a programme of (all) programmes" (Luhmann 2004: 213). The function of contingency formulas is "to suppress other possibilities also given" (*STR* 107), providing guidance for the 'official' values of the system. In the economy and in law, "scarcity" and "justice" operate as such formulas. For religion, they similarly provide "a selection criterion, an almost complete formula for religious programmatics … indicating what is right and wrong in the relationship of immanence to transcendence" (*STR* 120). According to Luhmann, no single such formula across all religions has emerged. Nevertheless, he argues that

> [t]he most successful attempts, those of Buddhism and the monotheistic religions, appear to be founded on a common element: a redemptive outlook. … They also hold out the prospect of sublating every distinction into something beyond all distinctions. That is the form in which the difference of immanence and transcendence is presented. The programs that become necessary appear as conditions of redemption.
>
> (STR *108*)[4]

To recap: The code of immanence/transcendence provides the basis for the differentiation of religion as a societal function system, and programs serve to operationalize this code. They are necessary for the code to serve the function of distinguishing between communication that is part of the system and that is not, thereby establishing and controlling the system's boundaries. Guaranteeing the system's unity of operations, programs provide the "self-regulation and self-control of the system" (Baraldi et al. 2021: 181), guiding how it observes its own operations. Each system's code is fixed – or rather, communicating using a different code means communicating in a different system. Programs, on the other hand, are variable instructions on how the positive and negative value of a code are to be applied. They, just like contingency formulas, can change over time.

Luhmann supplements these concepts with an additional theoretical building block: *symbolically generalized communication media*. This element of his theory of religion (and of society in general) was present in Luhmann's thinking from very early on (1972b: 56; 1974a; see also Tyrell 2023). The "discovery" of such media by North American sociological theorist Talcott Parsons and the refinement and extension of this concept by Luhmann might even be "regarded as one of sociology's crowning achievements" (Baecker 2016: 151). Such media, like *money, love, truth*, or *power* (*STR* 145), "supply communication with opportunities for acceptance" (Luhmann 2012: 192). Just like the equally

important "dissemination media" (20–189) of "writing" (and the printing press) as well as "electronic media" (from telephone to email), symbolically generalized communication media as "success media" (*Erfolgsmedien*) (122), react to the general "improbability of communication" (Luhmann 1981) and, presupposing language's general code of yes/no, "assume the function of rendering expectable the acceptance of a communication in cases where rejection is probable" (190). In other words: "Symbolically generalized media transform no-probabilities into yes-probabilities in miraculous ways" (192).

In the case of religion, Luhmann was unsure whether societal evolution has led to the emergence of a specific symbolically generalized communication medium. He tentatively described "faith" (or 'belief') as such a medium, particularly in the context of Christianity (*STR* 146). On the one hand, faith provides "[f]orms of communicative confirmation" (*STR* 146). As an "*answer to a communication*", it occasions "communication about this communication", somewhat functioning as a symbolically generalized communication medium (Luhmann 1989a: 318). On the other hand, other such media can be distinguished by whether they either serve to motivate improbable selections of experience (in the case of truth) or action (in the case of power) (*STR* 146). Religion, according to Luhmann, cannot privilege one above the other, instead assuming "that all life was observed by God" (*STR* 146). It is equally unable to "order the professional structure of the distinction between priesthood and laity according to the idea that 'the one acts, the other experiences'", as "[t]his would contradict the notion of a community of faith" (*STR* 146). In addition to such doubts, Luhmann (*STR* 148) variously reflected on "functional equivalent [s] for this omission of a symbolically generalized communication medium" for religion, once more indicating that in regard to his style of theory-building, the concepts on offer should not be understood as a rigid system of fixed categories (relevant to every function system), but rather as tools for formulating comparative questions in the context of a sociological theory of society, which also includes a theory of religion.[5]

As a *sociological* theorist Luhmann paid attention to questions of the *organization* of religion. Early on, he proposed a distinction between *interaction, organization*, and *society* as a second main aspect of the differentiation of society (cf. Tyrell 2006) and a core element of his theoretical edifice.[6] In *A Systems Theory of Religion*, this perspective, which in regard to religion Luhmann had previously explored in a variety of longer essays (1972a; 1974b; 1977: 272–316), appears primarily in the chapter on religious organizations (*STR* 162–179). What he attempts to demonstrate here (once more in a comparative perspective that highlights how religion is similar but also different to other societal function systems), is how "organized social systems play an important, indispensable role" in "all function systems of modern society", while at the same time (most) "organized decision processes" do not "operate in the form of religious actions" (*STR* 162). "Archives are not sacred objects even in church administrations, and majority decisions have to be made and implemented even when individual

participants believe those decisions deviate from God's declared will" (*STR* 162). All this demonstrates how religion in modern society increasingly operates in the form of a "member organization", which contrasts with the idea of a "faith community" (*STR* 164). Organizations, according to Luhmann (*STR* 165), even though there might be a "multiplicity of shapes in which organizations appear within the religion system of world society", are also "autopoietic systems". They operate on the basis of communication, reproduce their own boundaries "by distinguishing between members and nonmembers", and recursively connect the decisions of members by "decision premises", forcing the members to submit themselves to the "special conditions of the system's decision processes" (*STR* 165–166). As Luhmann writes, "in organized social systems, the communication of one member is always a premise for the behavior of others". In this sense, organizations rely on and operate through a "self-guaranteeing autopoiesis of decisions" (*STR* 166).

What does this look like in the context of religion? While religion, like most function systems of modern society, offers general inclusion to all, 'inside' this all-inclusive system, exclusions or rather restrictions of access must also be possible. This is managed through organizations, which allow for decisions about membership and provide "collectives with communicative capacity" (*STR* 168–169). While religion as a societal system offers general inclusion, for organizations, exclusion through the distinction of members/non-members is the normal state. Religion, then, might play an important role in offering possibilities for inclusion where other societal function systems have already decided on exclusion. While exclusions from most function systems reinforce each other through the "strict couplings of negative integration" (no schooling and no job equals no money or medical care) (*STR* 173–174), in the case of religion "what is remarkable is that there are so few interdependencies with the inclusion/exclusion regulations of other function systems". Exclusion from religion does not result in general exclusion from society, while "religion can blithely ignore any near exclusion from other function systems" (*STR* 220).

In general, Luhmann's interest in organization(s) in the context of religion, already in his first long essay on the topic (1972a: 245), was focused on "limits of the organizability of religious experience and action". In this vein, 30 years later, he still sees a stark "contrast between an organization's own logic and what society requires of its function systems", which "turns out to be especially significant in the case of the religion system" (*STR* 172). In particular, as "it is always implicitly acknowledged in the form of a decision that the decision could also have been made differently", decisions seemingly undermine (religious) truth claims (*STR* 172). Additionally, specific religious goals like "salvation of the soul" or "redemption" are "difficult to operationalize", as it is hard to estimate whether they have been successfully accomplished or not. Religious organizations therefore mostly "make do" by defining "substitute ends" (*STR* 172). These may be attendance at religious services, membership numbers, or successful conversions.

As organizations, religions might be driven to "reforms". Luhmann describes these as "ways to plan changes" that can only be found in organizations. Reforms are either aimed at the structure of the formal organization or at the system's programs and presuppose a distinction between the operative execution of decisions and the communication about decision premises (*STR* 175). In the case of religion, "between the implementation of baptism and the determination of the conditions under which such implementation is recognized (and acknowledged) as baptism" (*STR* 175–176). Whether or not such reforms might have concrete results in the operation of the organization, just like in other contexts, religious elites are often implicated in the "addiction to reform within their organizations" (*STR* 178).

In sum, Luhmann (*STR* 179, 178) asks "whether religion and organization are fundamentally incompatible", as organizations – in treating everything as a decision – "appear to be systems for reproducing self-produced uncertainty". Instead of relying on established canons and prohibitions, in organizations everything is seen as a decision and as such contingent, as something "that could be made differently, or not at all in the first place", which might be experienced as destructive in matters of faith (*STR* 179).

In addition to the general and comparative concepts discussed so far, in *A Systems Theory of Religion* Luhmann also discusses the idea of "secularization" as both an established sociological topic and as a specific way in which the religious system observes its environment. For him, "secularization" refers to "the other side of religion's societal form … the description of its environment within society" (*STR* 203). As such, the concept gives an answer to the two questions of how to describe the domain of "nonreligious societal communication" and how religion observes the "rest of the world" (*STR* 203). In this way, "secularization" refers to a very specific form of observation, an observation about religion's observations about its societal environment (*STR* 204). This relativity of "secularization" draws attention to the fact that if something is being observed as "secular" or "secularized", this observation is limited to the perspective of religion. "A system operating in the environment of the religion system is *itself* not determined by the fact that it performs and observes *its own* operations in the environment of religion" (*STR* 204).

As an observer-relative term, "secularization" thus refers to how religion observes itself in modern society, but also to "how religion reacts to the assumption of a secularized society" (*STR* 205). In this sense, "secularization is a concept […] that belongs to a society whose structures suggest polycontextural observation" (*STR* 205). It is clear then, that for Luhmann (*STR* 205), "secularization has to be associated with functional differentiation as a modern form of differentiating the societal system". In modernity, religion finds itself in a society in which it is one of a plurality of functional systems "as autonomous, operatively closed systems" (*STR* 207) and where "almost all structures and operations can now be traced back to decisions" (*STR* 208). Describing society as 'secularized' is the way in which religion, "as well as all

those who try to observe how *it* observes things", have reacted to this situation (*STR* 208). Rather than pointing to "a loss of religion's function or significance", for Luhmann (*STR* 217), then, secularization signifies primarily a "(temporarily?) poor adaptation to the conditions of modern society".

A discourse theory of religion, or a theory of religion?

Any theory of modernity as a theory of societal differentiation must come to terms with the relatively stable, worldwide establishment over the course of last few centuries of several specific, universally relevant distinctions. In global modernity, politics, law, science, or religion are something specific, while clearly being not the same. It is an important feature of Luhmann's theoretical program that he explicitly understands his theory not as an essentialist account of phenomena, but as a theoretical observation of systemic contexts of communication that are already observing themselves in the mode of second-order observation (see also Luhmann 2002). The title of Luhmann's later books on society's function systems must therefore be understood precisely in this sense. "The religion *of society*" (Die Religion *der Gesellschaft*), translated as *A Systems Theory of Religion*, does not describe religion as universal phenomenon, but rather the differentiated communication which *operates in (world) society as religion* (see Beyer 2001). Luhmann's interest in the "operativity" of the social thus leads him to offer a theory of the self-stabilization of systemic contexts of communication that can neither be traced back to an *a priori* of 'social structures' nor to necessary functions within society. Nevertheless, these structures are 'real', as operative series of communicative events *in practice* (Nassehi 2005: 181–183; Nassehi 2012).

What does this mean for Luhmann's sociological theory of religion? I would argue that he offers both, a *discourse theory of religion* and a *theory of religion* simultaneously (on this distinction see Hermann 2018). While he at first attempts to keep these two interests separate (by distinguishing the 'self-observation' of religion from a 'description' by others, for example a sociological theorist), over the course of his book this becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

In the beginning, Luhmann stresses that he does not want to define religion, but rather wants to observe how it distinguishes itself, relying on "what describes itself as religion" (*STR* 40). Assuming that 'religion' is always already operating in society, sociology's task is to reconstruct this self-distinguishing and self-identifying context of communication. We can term this a *discourse-theoretical* approach, which does not ask about religion as a 'phenomenon', but about religion as chains of communicative ('discursive') events, whose operativity and history can be described. At the same time, however, Luhmann reveals a second theoretical interest. This is clearest in his discussion of the "function of religion". As a sociological observer, Luhmann aims to identify "*numerous* functionally equivalent solutions" and possible alternatives (*STR* 82). He makes clear that this is an *external* observation: "functions are always constructions of an observer. […] Who is the observer if it is a question of

religion's function? Is it the religious system itself, or is science the external observer?" (*STR* 83). Luhmann later answers his own question: "to make the most out … of the function question, one has to be able to take the position of an external observer", even if such questions "cannot easily be copied onto that system" (*STR* 84).

It could be said, then, that in *A System Theory of Religion* Luhmann pursues two separate theoretical interests. At first, he differentiates between self-observations (of the religious system) and external observations (by sociology, for example) and makes clear that different observers can (and, from a theoretical point of view, must) understand different things as 'religion'. Over the course of his book, however, these two observations are no longer consistently kept apart, and it often remains unclear to which 'religion' – the self-observing religion or the religion determined by the sociologist via its function – Luhmann's statements refer. Concluding the chapter on religion's function he writes: "It probably will be all the more important to adhere to criteria of recognition such as code and function … Otherwise, every other inexplicable curiosity could figure as religion" (*STR* 104). Here, it is no longer apparent that asking for religion's *code*, which Luhmann defined as central for the *self-identification* of religion as religion, and asking for religion's *function*, which he described as an *external observation* by sociology, are questions asked by two different observers.

It could be argued, of course, that *both* of Luhmann's descriptive interests are *external* observations, because in both cases religion is described within a sociological theory. Nevertheless, we can note the following difference: While the first aims to observe how religion *describes and distinguishes itself* as a self-stabilizing context of communication, the second attempts to describe religion from the outside (for example, by defining *a* function; see *STR* 85) and thus to distinguish religion from the point of view of an external observer. It is this difference that a distinction between *discourse-theoretical* ('*re*constructing') and *theory-of-religion* ('necessarily *con*structing') approaches could be used to indicate.

Interdisciplinary reception of Luhmann's theory of religion

While in 2009, Peter Beyer could rightly describe the impact of Luhmann's theory of religion to be limited to mostly theological debates and to the (German) sociological context (Beyer 2009: 111), in the last 15 years things have shifted at least somewhat. Reception in sociology continues, also internationally (Lidz 2010; Pollack 2015, Petzke 2018; Krech 2019; Vanderstraeten 2023), including attempts to employ Luhmann's thought in empirical analyses (Wohlrab-Sahr 2005; Nassehi 2008). And theologians are equally still engaging with Luhmann (Robinson and Kuehn 2019; Kline 2020; Sariyar 2022; see Karle 2012 for an overview).

Beyer himself, in his 2006 book *Religions in Global Society*, provides an extensive and globally oriented interpretation of modern religious history, building on Luhmann's theory. In two comprehensive theoretical chapters he

presents his version of a systems-theoretical theory of religion, followed by detailed explorations of the "formation and re-formation" (Beyer 2006: 117, 82, 140, 191) of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, Shinto, and various new religions as "world religions" in modern society (257).

In (German) sociology, Martin Petzke has produced the most comprehensive contributions to recent discussions of Luhmann's theory of religion. In his monograph *Weltbekehrungen* (Conversions of the World) (Petzke 2013), as well as various essays (Petzke 2012, 2015, 2018), he attempts to demonstrate that, one the one hand, the theory of world societal religion presented in *A Systems Theory of Religion* falls short of Luhmann's own standards of theoretical coherence. Petzke argues that in contrast to other global societal subsystems, for religion it is difficult to name a specific "elementary operation" which continuously reproduces a closed autopoietic system. While payments, scientific publications, and judicial decisions reproduce the global systemic contexts of the economy, science, or law, one would be hard pressed to identify a similar "elementary operation" in the case of religion.

> This applies not only to *inter*-religious relations: even *within* a single religious tradition such as Christianity, or, more narrowly, Protestantism, we can identify no such 'systematic' interconnection between communicative elements that merits a description as a 'macro-level' system.
>
> *(Petzke 2015: 151)*

On the other hand, in reaction to this critique of Luhmann, Petzke then goes on to find an identifiable global context of differentiated religious communication in how religious organizations have established a "continual self-observation" of the whole world in terms of "religious adherence and conversions" over the course of the 19th century. This "interreligious macrostructure" cuts across evangelical Christianity, reform Hinduism, and Sinhalese Buddhism, but also incorporates Islam and Catholicism into "a religious sphere focused on religious adherence and individual conversions". According to Petzke, it demonstrates a distinct communicative operativity resting on "fundamental notions of organizational rationality, individuality and associational religion sustained by an institutional environment" (167–168, 149).

In religious studies, while there has been an increasing international engagement with Luhmann's thought, partly fueled by the translation of *A Systems Theory of Religion* (Cho and Squier 2013; Driscoll 2016; Atwood 2016; Horii 2018; DeJonge 2023), the most detailed studies still are appearing in the German context.

In various essays, Christoph Kleine has discussed the potentials of Luhmann's theory of religion and its compatibility with religious studies as a discipline (Kleine 2012, 2013, 2016). His main interest in employing Luhmann is to counter recent critiques of religion as a useful comparative concept (Kleine 2013: 1–6; 2016: 51–52) and to demonstrate that, e.g., "the fundamental Buddhist distinction between things that belong to this world (*laukika; seken*) and those which

transcend the world (*lokottara; shusseken*)" in Japanese Buddhism "functions as a culturally specific emic version of the binary code transcendence/immanence" (Kleine 2013: 1). For Kleine, then, religion as differentiated communication can be found in many, or most cultures and in most time periods. In fact, "many cultures conceptually organized and still do organize their world" by the binary distinction of transcendence and immanence (30). In particular, Kleine (5) is convinced that a distinction between "two spheres that we may – from an etic perspective – label as 'the religious' and 'the secular'" is "fundamental and a potentially universal structural principle by which complex cultures are conceptually organized". In this way, his work also points to the role Luhmann's theory plays in recent debates about "multiple secularities" (Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012), which focus on the role of "endogenous differentiations and emic distinctions" in the emergence of differentiated religion(s) in global modernity (Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2021: 49).

One of the most interesting theoretical projects drawing on Luhmann's work in recent years is Volkhard Krech's "Theory of Religious Evolution" (THERE) (Krech 2018a, 2018b, 2021a; on this book see Istvan Csachesz in this volume). He combines a Luhmannian, systems-theoretical understanding of religion as communication with a theory of religious evolution and Charles S. Peirce's semiotics. In particular, Krech (2020: 262) argues that "semiotic research on religion might benefit from social systems theory in order to understand how religious semiosis proceeds *systemically*". He proposes that "the *combination* of the function of ultimately coping with undetermined contingency and of the code immanent/transcendent" together allow us to understand the "societal function" and the "eigenstructure" of the "religious system" (Krech 2021b: 262). Krech (2021a: 19) considers "differentiated religion" a "specific form of meaning and an autonomous system of communication" and describes it as a "co-evolution to societal evolution" (2020: 195) which today is a "special subsystem of the functionally differentiated society" (2021b: 262). His approach demonstrates the ongoing relevance and theoretical potential of a Luhmannian approach to religion as differentiated communication for theory-building in the study of religion. In particular, he points to its potential to build bridges "across the natural and social sciences as well as cultural studies in order to better understand religion in the context of general evolution" (Krech 2020: 216).

A postfoundationalist reading of Luhmann's theory of religion?

Recent critical theory and postcolonial studies have been dismissive towards the theory of functional differentiation, describing Luhmann as "yet another ideologist of the modern" (Jameson 2002: 93) and calling for an "epistemic model which transcends the absolutist border metaphors of systems theory" (Eckstein and Reinfandt 2016: 164; see also Gonçalves 2016; however, on systems theory as critical theory, see Möller and Siri 2023). In this, such critiques echo earlier and current sociological assessments of Luhmann's theory, e.g. from the perspective of practice theory (Knorr Cetina 1992; Reckwitz 2004; Latour 2010: 263).

Nevertheless, I would argue that Luhmann's theory of religion does not have to be read as a realist espousal of a modernist ideology of the separation of societal spheres but can be fruitfully understood through a poststructuralist lens as *postfoundationalist* (see also Richter 2023: 8).[7] As Oliver Marchart (2007: 15) has argued, postfoundational thought takes into account both "a plurality of contingent foundations … and the impossibility of a final ground", which fits well with systems theory's insistence on the radical temporality of societal structures (Müller and Nassehi 2013). Urs Stäheli (2003: 24), for example, has highlighted "important similarities between a systems theoretical and a deconstructive notion of communication", arguing for a Derridean reading of Luhmann's theory (Stäheli 2000). More recently, Hannah Richter (2021: 186, 198) has argued for "enfolding" Luhmannian and Deleuzian "theories of sense … to develop a poststructuralist theory of immanent creative genesis" based on "relational autopoiesis".

Building on such work, religion as differentiated communication could be understood as a contingent and contested structure in modern world society that is the result of historical processes. The "primacy" of functional differentiation "at the world societal level" does not indicate its implementation without alternative. Rather, it points to a structural dimension of world society, without which "everything would be different" (Luhmann 2013b: 131). Luhmann does not argue that other forms of differentiation like stratification do no longer play any role, but that where they occur, they are "ultimately dependent on society's differentiation into function systems" (*STR* 82). The strongest version of this claim is that such differentiations should now be understood as "by-products of the endogenous dynamics of functional systems" (Luhmann 2013b: 12).

Is it possible to understand this structural dimension in non-essentialist and postfoundationalist ways? Systems theory conceptualizes structure in light of the improbability of communication (Luhmann 1981). Understood as the result of continuous chains of communicative events, the stability of societal structures is something that must be explained, rather than seen as a pre-existing foundation of society (Nassehi 2005). In this sense, functional differentiation does not refer to a stable teleological structure but is the sedimented result of historical processes. As structures, function systems continuously have to 'prove' themselves in "present-based practice" (Nassehi 2005: 180; 2004: 102, 104). In Beyer's (2006: 12) words: "Social subsystems are … structures of boundary creation and boundary maintenance, … ways of continuously regenerating certain kinds of boundaries of meaning." Functional differentiation as a structure of world society, therefore, is always contested and only exists as it is reproduced in each present moment on the basis of historical sedimentations. Its stability is not guaranteed by anything beyond the autopoietic logic of its operation.

Based on this view, religion as differentiated communication is a historically contingent development that we can only identify in "contemporary global society" (Beyer 2006) and not in a continuity from pre-modern situations. It is not a universal and timeless 'phenomenon', but an autonomous, eigenlogical,

self-stabilizing system in modern society. Its unity is based on the recursive connection of communications to communications and the autopoietic self-identification of 'religion' as 'religion' (*STR* 7, 39–40). It is the task, then, of a Global History of Religion (Hermann 2021; Maltese and Strube 2021) to recount its history as one of several self-stabilizing global horizons of communication that are characteristic of world society.

Notes

1 All translations from German texts are my own.
2 While I cannot explore this aspect of Luhmann's theory in detail, he argues that, as "[w]e can only make observations in the realm of the familiar" and thus "all the distinctions that can ever be made are immanent distinctions" (*STR* 61), religion is implicated in "how meaning is possible if it is the case that something always remains unobservable" (*STR* 22). Therefore, "religion" is fundamentally entangled with the operation of "observation" itself, as "[a]ll observation must draw distinctions if it is to indicate something" (Luhmann 2012: 139).
3 At times, Luhmann expresses doubts about the success of the differentiation between code and programs in the case of religion. Discussing the "difficulties" (Luhmann 1989a: 319, 323) and precariousness of this separation (Luhmann 1989b: 94), he points to an "alliance with morality" and its code of good/bad as one historically prevalent solution. He identifies a "problem of historical relativity", indicating that in "older societies that have not yet completely adapted to functional differentiation" programs are "used to integrate the more abstract extravagance of binary coding back into society", while "in our functionally differentiated modern society" the programs "are released from the demands of social integration and specifically tailored to each of their codes" (*STR* 65–66).
4 In his systems-theoretical study of *Religions in Global Society* (which I will discuss below), Peter Beyer (2006: 88) suggests that *the various religions themselves* could be considered the programs of the religious system: "For all intents and purposes, the programmes are the religions."
5 In a different line of argument, and using a later, slightly revised understanding of medium (and form) (Luhmann 1997a: 306) as a "specific difference" between a "loosely coupled" medial substratum and "strictly coupled" forms created in this substratum, Luhmann (311–313) suggested that "God" and "souls" (or rather the distinction of God/souls) could be a medium of religion, generating and regenerating an abundance of possible combinations of damnation and salvation, in which an all-observing God judged "each individual *individually*" (*STR* 147). In a functionally differentiated society, however, as Luhmann (1997a: 318) argues, this medium – and therefore a soul – are increasingly relevant "only for communication in the context of religion".
6 See Luhmann 1982b. The most detailed exploration of this aspect of Luhmann's theory can be found in Heintz and Tyrell 2015. For an introduction to Luhmann's theory of organization in English see Seidl and Mohrmann 2014; Nassehi 2005.
7 The encounter of Luhmann's theory with poststructuralist thought is complex and not yet fully explored. At times, Luhmann (1985b, 407) described his own work as "clearly *poststructuralist*". He read, e.g., Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, and understood some of his central concepts like meaning (*Sinn*) and programs as building on their insights (2012a, 8, 65). For further reflections on these theoretical encounters see, e.g., Rasch 2000, Borch 2005, Moeller 2012, Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2013, Opitz and Tellmann 2015, Richter 2023.

References

Atwood, D. 2016. The discourse on primal religion: disentangling regimes of truth. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28 (4–5),445–464.

Baecker, D. 2016. The sociology of media. In: Baxmann, I., Beyes, T., and Pias, C. (Eds.), *Social media: New masses*. Diaphanes, Zürich, 151–171.

Baraldi, C., G. Corsi, and E. Esposito. 2021. *Unlocking Luhmann: a keyword introduction to systems theory*. Bielefeld Univ. Press, Bielefeld.

Bayly, C. A. 2004. Empires of religion. In: *The birth of the modern world: global connections and comparisons*. Blackwell, Malden, 325–365.

Beyer, P. 2001. What counts as religion in global society? From practice to theory. In: Beyer, P. (Ed.), *Religion im Prozeß der Globalisierung*. Ergon, Würzburg, 125–150.

Beyer, P. 2006. *Religions in Global Society*. Routledge, London.

Beyer, P. 2009. Religion as communication: On Niklas Luhmann, The religion of society (2000). In: Stausberg, M. (Ed.), *Contemporary theories of religion: a critical companion*. Routledge, London, 99–114.

Borch, C. 2005. Systemic power: Luhmann, Foucault, and analytics of power. *Acta Sociologica* 48 (2), 155–167.

Borch, C. 2011. *Niklas Luhmann*. Routledge, London.

Burchardt, M. and M. Wohlrab-Sahr. 2012. Multiple secularities: toward a cultural sociology of secular modernities. *Comparative Sociology* 11 (6), 875–909.

Cho, F. and R. K. Squier. 2013. Religion as a complex and dynamic system. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81 (2), 357–398.

DeJonge, M. P. 2023. Transcendence: a defensible and fruitful concept for religious studies. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 36 (1), 21–42.

Driscoll, C. M. 2016. *White lies: race and uncertainty in the twilight of American religion*. Routledge, New York.

Eckstein, L. and C. Reinfandt. 2016. Luhmann in da contact zone: towards a postcolonial critique of sociological systems theory. In: Middeke, M. and C. Reinfandt (Eds.), *Theory matters*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 151–166.

Gonçalves, G. L. 2016. Funktionale Differenzierung als Ideologie. Von Niklas Luhmann zur postkolonialen Kritik. In: Möller, K. and Siri, J. (Ed.), *Systemtheorie und Gesellschaftskritik*. Transcript, Bielefeld, 57–76.

Heintz, B. and Tyrell, H. (Eds.). 2015. *Interaktion – Organisation – Gesellschaft revisited*. Lucius & Lucius, Stuttgart.

Hermann, A. 2018. A call for a permissible plurality within theory-building in a time of excess. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 30 (4–5), 487–497.

Hermann, A. 2021. European History of Religion, Global History of Religion: on the expansion of a Gladigowian concept for the study of religion. In: Auffarth, C., Grieser, A., and Koch, A. (Eds.), *Religion in culture – culture in religion*. Tübingen University Press, Tübingen, 237–268.

Horii, M. 2018. *The category of 'religion' in contemporary Japan: shūkyō and temple Buddhism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Jameson, F. 2002. *A singular modernity: essay on the ontology of the present*, Verso, London.

Karle, I. 2012. Rezeption: Theologie. In: Jahraus, O.*et al*. (Eds.), *Luhmann-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*. Metzler, Stuttgart, 408–413.

Kleine, C. 2012. Zur Universalität der Unterscheidung religiös/säkular: Eine systemtheoretische Betrachtung. In: Stausberg, M. (Ed.), *Religionswissenschaft*. De Gruyter, Berlin, 65–80.

Kleine, C. 2013. Religion and the secular in Premodern Japan from the viewpoint of systems theory. *Journal of Religion in Japan* 2 (1), 1–34.

Kleine, C. 2016. Niklas Luhmann und die Religionswissenschaft: Geht das zusammen? *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 24 (1), 47–82.

Kleine, C. and Wohlrab-Sahr, M. 2021. Comparative secularities: tracing social and epistemic structures beyond the modern West. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 33 (1), 43–72.

Kline, D. 2020. *Racism and the weakness of Christian identity*. Routledge, London.

Knorr Cetina, K. 1992. Zur Unterkomplexität der Differenzierungstheorie. Empirische Anfragen an die Systemtheorie. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 21 (6), 406–419.

Krech, V. 2018a. Theory and empiricism of religious evolution (THERE): foundation of a research program. Part 1. *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 26 (2), 1–51.

Krech, V. 2018b. Theory and empiricism of religious evolution (THERE): foundation of a research program. Part 2. *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 26 (2), 215–263.

Krech, V. 2019. Operative Durchlässigkeit oder Schließung der Religion? Eine differenzierungstheoretische Lesart der Religionssoziologie von Wolfgang Eßbach. *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 3 (1), 103–130.

Krech, V. 2020. What we can learn from semiotics, systems theory, and theoretical biology to understand religious communication. *Sign Systems Studies* 48 (2–4),192–223.

Krech, V. 2021a. *Die Evolution der Religion: Ein soziologischer Grundriss*. Transcript, Bielefeld.

Krech. V. 2021b. The immanence/transcendence distinction at work: the case of the Apostles' Creed. In: Yelle, R. A., and Ponzo, J. (Eds.), *Interpreting and explaining transcendence: interdisciplinary approaches to the beyond*. De Gruyter, Berlin, 243–292.

Latour, B. 2010. *The making of law*. Polity, Cambridge.

Lidz, V. 2010. The functional theory of religion. In: Turner, B. S. (Ed.), *The new Blackwell companion to the sociology of religion*. Blackwell, Malden, 76–102.

Luhmann, N. 1967. Soziologie als Theorie sozialer Systeme. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 19 (4), 615–644.

Luhmann, N. 1969. Die Praxis der Theorie. *Soziale Welt* 20 (2), 129–144.

Luhmann, N. 1971. Die Weltgesellschaft. *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie* 57 (1), 1–35.

Luhmann, N. 1972a. Die Organisierbarkeit von Religionen und Kirchen. In: Wössner, J. (Ed.), *Religion im Umbruch*. Enke, Stuttgart, 245–285.

Luhmann, N. 1972b. Religiöse Dogmatik und gesellschaftliche Evolution. In: Dahm, K.-W., Luhmann, N., and Stoodt, D. (Eds.): *Religion – System und Sozialisation*. Luchterhand, Darmstadt, 15–132.

Luhmann, N. 1974a. Einführende Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie symbolisch generalisierter Kommunikationsmedien, *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 3 (3), 236–255.

Luhmann, N. 1974b. Institutionalized religion in the perspective of functional sociology, *Concilium* 10 (1), 45–55.

Luhmann, N. 1977. *Die Funktion der Religion*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.

Luhmann, N. 1981. The improbability of communication. *International Social Science Journal* 33 (1), 122–132.

Luhmann, N. 1982b. Interaction, organization, and society. In: *The differentiation of society*. Columbia University Press, New York, 69–89.

Luhmann, N. 1984a. *Soziale Systeme: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.

Luhmann, N. 1984b. *Religious dogmatics and the evolution of societies*. Translated with an introduction by Peter Beyer. Edwin Mellen, New York.

Luhmann, N. 1985a. Society, Meaning, Religion – Based on Self-Reference. *Sociological Analysis* 46 (1), 5–20.
Luhmann, N. 1985b. Die Autopoiesis des Bewußtseins. *Soziale Welt* 36 (4), 402–446.
Luhmann, N. 1989a. Die Ausdifferenzierung der Religion. In: *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik: Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft*. Vol. 3. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 259–357.
Luhmann, N. 1989b. *Ecological Communication*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
Luhmann, N. 1992. What is communication?. *Communication Theory* 2 (3), 251–259.
Luhmann, N. 1995. *Social systems*. Stanford University Press, Stanford.
Luhmann, N. 1996a. Die Sinnform Religion. *Soziale Systeme* 2 (1), 3–33.
Luhmann, N. 1996b. Religion als Kultur. In: Kallscheuer, O. (Ed.), *Das Europa der Religionen*. Fischer, Frankfurt am Main, 291–315.
Luhmann, N. 1997a. Das Medium der Religion: Eine soziologische Betrachtung über Gott und die Seelen. *Evangelische Theologie* 57 (4), 305–319.
Luhmann, N. 1997b. Globalization or world society: how to conceive of modern society?. *International Review of Sociology* 7 (1), 67–79.
Luhmann, N. 1998. Religion als Kommunikation. In: Tyrell, H., Krech, V., and Knoblauch, H. (Eds.), *Religion als Kommunikation*. Ergon, Würzburg, 135–145.
Luhmann, N. 2000. *Die Religion der Gesellschaft*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.
Luhmann, N. 2002. *Theories of distinction: redescribing the descriptions of modernity*. Stanford Univ. Press, Stanford.
Luhmann, N. 2004. *Law as a social system*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Luhmann, N. 2012. *Theory of society*. Vol. I. Stanford Univ Press, Stanford.
Luhmann, N. 2013a. *A systems theory of religion*. Stanford Univ Press, Stanford.
Luhmann, N. 2013b. *Theory of society*. Vol. II. Stanford Univ Press, Stanford.
Maltese, G. and Strube, J. 2021. Global religious history. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 33 (3–4),229–257.
Marchart, O. 2007. *Post-Foundational Political Thought*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
Moeller, H.-G. 2012. *The radical Luhmann*. Columbia University Press, New York.
Möller, K. and Siri, J. 2023. Niklas Luhmann and Critical Systems Theory. In: Rogowski, R. (Ed.), *The Anthem companion to Niklas Luhmann*, Anthem, London, 141–154.
Müller, J. and Nassehi, A. 2013. Struktur und Zeit. In: Horster, D. (Ed.), *Niklas Luhmann: Soziale Systeme*. Akademie-Verlag, Berlin, 97–106.
Nassehi, A. 2004. Die Theorie funktionaler Differenzierung im Horizont ihrer Kritik. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 33 (2), 98–118.
Nassehi, A. 2005. Organizations as decision machines: Niklas Luhmann's theory of organized social systems. *The Sociological Review* 53 (1_suppl), 178–191.
Nassehi, A. 2008. Religious communication: the consequences of a qualitative study for the sociology of religion. In Rieger, M. (Ed.), *What the world believes*. Bertelsmann, Gütersloh. 167–200.
Nassehi, A. 2012. What exists between realism and constructivism?. *Constructivist Foundations* 8 (1), 14–15.
O'Toole, R. 2001. Classics in the sociology of religion: an ambiguous legacy. In: Fenn, R.K. (Ed.), *The Blackwell companion to sociology of religion*. Blackwell, Malden, 133–160.
Opitz, S., and Tellmann, U. 2015. Future emergencies: temporal politics in law and economy. *Theory, Culture & Society* 32 (2), 107–129.

Petzke, M. 2012. Niklas Luhmanns "Religion der (Welt-) Gesellschaft" – Theoretische Probleme und lateinamerikanische Perspektiven. In: Birle, P., Dewey, M., and Mascareño, A. (Eds.), *Durch Luhmanns Brille*. Springer, Wiesbaden, 205–227.

Petzke, M. 2013. *Weltbekehrungen: Zur Konstruktion globaler Religion im pfingstlich-evangelikalen Christentum*. Transcript, Bielefeld.

Petzke, M. 2015. Religious differentiation and world culture: on the complementary relationship of systems theory and neo-institutionalism. In: Holzer, B., Kastner, F., and Werron, T. (Eds.), *From globalization to world society*. Routledge, New York, 148–176.

Petzke, M. 2018. Systemtheorie. In: Pollack, D.*et al*. (Eds.), *Handbuch Religionssoziologie*. Springer VS, Wiesbaden, 145–169.

Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, A. 2013. The autopoietic fold: critical autopoiesis between Luhmann and Deleuze. In: La Cour, A. and Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, A. (Eds.), *Luhmann observed*. Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 60–84.

Pollack, D. 2015. Varieties of secularization theories and their indispensable core. *The Germanic Review* 90 (1), 60–79.

Rasch, W. 2000. *Niklas Luhmann's modernity: the paradoxes of differentiation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Reckwitz, A. 2004. Die Logik der Grenzerhaltung und die Logik der Grenzüberschreitungen: Niklas Luhmann und die Kulturtheorien. In: Burkart, G. and Runkel, G. (Eds.), *Luhmann und die Kulturtheorie*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 213–240.

Richter, H. 2021. Re-thinking Poststructuralism with Deleuze and Luhmann: Autopoiesis, Immanence, Politics. In: Rae, G. and Ingala, E. (Eds.), *Historical Traces and Future Pathways of Poststructuralism*. Routledge, New York, 183–203.

Richter, H. 2023. *The Politics of Orientation: Deleuze Meets Luhmann*. SUNY Press, New York.

Robinson, M. R. and Kuehn, E. F. 2019. *Theology compromised: Schleiermacher, Troeltsch, and the possibility of a sociological theology*. Lexington, Lanham.

Sariyar, M. 2022. Death from the perspective of Luhmann's system theory. *Open Theology* 8 (1), 205–220.

Seidl, D. and Mohrmann, H. 2014. Niklas Luhmann as organization theorist. In: Adler, P.*et al*. (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of sociology, social theory and organization studies*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 125–157.

Stäheli, U. 2000. *Sinnzusammenbrüche: Eine dekonstruktive Lektüre von Niklas Luhmanns Systemtheorie*. Velbrück, Weilerswist.

Stäheli, U. 2003. Postal Services: Re-Writing Communication. *MPP Working Paper* No. 19/2003. Copenhagen Business School.

Stichweh, R. 2019. World society. In: Kühnhardt, L. and Mayer, T. (Ed.), *The Bonn Handbook of Globality*: Vol. 1. Springer, Cham, 515–526.

Tyrell, H. 2006. Zweierlei Differenzierung: Funktionale und Ebenendifferenzierung im Frühwerk Niklas Luhmanns. *Soziale Systeme* 12 (2), 294–310.

Tyrell, H. 2023. Symbolisch generalisierte Kommunikationsmedien – ihr religiöses Problem. *Zeitschrift für Theoretische Soziologie* 12 (2), 238–248.

Vanderstraeten, R. 2023. Niklas Luhmann on Religion and Secularisation. In: Rogowski, R. (Ed.), *The Anthem companion to Niklas Luhmann*. Anthem, London, 93–110.

Wohlrab-Sahr, M. 2005. Luhmanns Religionssoziologie und die empirische Religionsforschung – zwei getrennte Welten?. In: Runkel, G. and Burkart, G. (Eds), *Funktionssysteme der Gesellschaft*. VS, Wiesbaden, 71–88.