Denis McQuail, Sven Windahl and F.X. Dance’s communicational dimension vis-à-vis Communication Theology

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Doubts arise when one thinks or envisages the communicational dimension of theology. In what way is communication inherent in theology? It would no doubt be a long thesis and a long discourse if our aim was to be fully exhaustive in our approach. But we will in this text look at some pointers which characterise the process of communication and yet are deeply inherent in theology.

Communication traditionally is defined as the social interaction of messages. This interaction brings about commonality and identification with a particular group of people. For example, “teenagers appreciating one rock-music are expressing their identity as members of a subculture and are, albeit in an indirect way, interacting with other members of their society.”

This has been the case in biblical tradition and biblical history. There has been emission of messages, from God to the human persons – this emission of the messages has brought about a response from the human person. This is interaction – an interaction that has resulted in faith or faith denial. This interaction through messages, of course, in some instances addresses social problems but at times addresses other problems.

The same could be said with regard to the 1982 book entitled Communication models, authored by Denis McQuail and Sven Windahl which basically highlighted three models of ‘mass communication’ beginning from Harold Laswell’s formula in 1948 to models of Convergence and Transnational Communication in 1993. Laswell’s model was a model that described communication as a linear transmission of messages through the well-known formula: “Who, says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect”

Already in other writings we have clearly shown how God is the sender and the human person becomes the receiver of messages. Then the message is the Word – Jesus. He is not only the message but he is also the medium. The messages are sent to the human person in

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1 FISKE, Introduction to communication studies, 3.
2 LEVER - RIVOLTELLA - ZANACCHI, Comunicazione, 265.
order to solicit a response of faith. All this shows that there is a communicational dimension in theology. Nevertheless, this model is a linear-based telephonic system approach to communication and it is not adequate to describe the eminently rich and oral communication of a tribal village in which the headman communicates the hereditary culture of his tribe through stories, dances and rituals that elicit the active participation of the audience – a reality James Carey took seriously in his definition of communication.

That is why, for Carey, it was important to have a ritual view of communication and not only a technical view of communication. The ritual view of communication is associated with terms like sharing, participation, association and fellowship. We can also associate it with terms like commonness, communion, community and communal faith. All these words fall under the concept of communication. The aim of the ritual view of communication is not the transmission of messages from one point to the other but “the maintenance of community ideals, [which] provides a symbolic order of things and is a sign of an ongoing social process.”

This is what we basically see in theology, that God communicates to the human person and that this is done in a context of a relationship between God and the human person. It is a relationship in which human beings collectively share, participate, associate and in fellowship come together in communal prayer to express through a liturgical celebration their longings and aspirations. The faith they profess is not just some private faith but it is the faith of a praying Church community – who learn and are taught the creed – the faith. They inherit the faith tradition from the community and later pass it on to their children and children’s children.

We can also add here the fact that communication constitutes the human being and represents the specific and ontological dimension of the human person. The human being is born out of communion between man and woman, and grows up in a context of love. The cognitive abilities open the mind to curiosity, discovery and doubt, which pave way for articulation of language, thoughts, interpretation and dialogue. Thus, to communicate is to share with others one’s interpretation of things and be enriched in the process of interaction through presence and participation. In this sense, we can say that communication is what existentially and essentially defines the human person not only as “sapiens but also as “communicans.”

4 Cf. LEVER - RIVOLTELLA - ZANACCHI, Comunicazione, 269.
their thoughts and aspirations in a language that is limited and that’s the limitedness of articulating and conceptualising God.

Additionally, communication is a *symbolic exchange* in which subjects engage in an active and creative mode. There is no asymmetry between the sender and the receiver but there is *reciprocity* in which they are both active agents in the process of communication, in which, communication is not only the production and transmission of the message but also the *construction of meaning* and the *conserving of memory* across the generations. Therefore, the human person participates in the revitalization of cultures.⁵

Probably, that is why, already in the year 1970, Frank E. X. Dance published an article “The “concept” of communication,” in *The Journal of Communication*⁶ in which he provided different definitions of the term ‘communication,’ which different authors had given. Dance examined “multitudinous definitions of ‘communication’ and came up with fifteen concepts which according to him represent the 15 main themes of communication⁷ and we here below quote.

The main purpose of this essay is to examine the multitudinous definitions of communication in the light of the meaning of “concept” as reflected in the literature of the philosophy of science. One possible result of such an examination is the derivation of the essential components of the concept of communication as reflected in the definitions. A second, though admittedly less plausible, result would be the synthesis of the components into a single definition of the concept of communication. A concept is the result of a generalizing mental operation. The initial apprehension and perception of individual acts, or realities, lead to the grouping of percepts and the labeling of such grouping. The grouping is the concept and the name, or “term,” serves as the label for a specific concept. A concept is a generic mental image abstracted from percepts and generally relies on an originally inductive process rooted in objective reality.⁸

For Dance, some concepts like, dog, food, colour, clouds, thunder, wealth, among others, are manifestly common and ordinary concepts which come from the obtrusive experiences of daily life of the people. We can here add some concepts like bread and wine on the altar, the bible, and several other concepts that are ordinary in theological terms. However, there are some concepts which are extraordinary and these concepts need cognitive structuring of the experiences and they “have to be cut out, as it were. They are discerned only by a more subtle and devious examination of nature, man, and society than is made in everyday life. […] Terms like IQ and primary group, anomie and repression […]”⁹ We can also here think about

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⁷ DANCE, *The “Concept” of Communication*, 201.
⁹ DANCE, *The “Concept” of Communication*, 203.
the transcendence of God, the Holy Trinity and several other terms which are really difficult to conceptualize and encapsulate.

Dance discovered that communication refers to symbols, or to the verbal and speeches.¹⁰ In this view, “communication is the verbal interchange of thought or idea.”¹¹ That is why communication creates understanding¹² and in this perspective, “communication is the process by which we understand others and in turn endeavour to be understood by them. It is dynamic, constantly changing and shifting in response to the total situation.”¹³ Other important elements of communication are interaction, relationship and social process.¹⁴ To support this assertion, Dance cited the fact that “interaction even on the biological level, is a kind of communication; otherwise common acts could not occur.”¹⁵ Communication “arises out of the need to reduce uncertainty, to act effectively, to defend the ego.”¹⁶ It is in this context that Dance believed that reduction of uncertainty is an important concept of communication.¹⁷ Communication is also a process¹⁸ and this is the case because it involves “the transmission of information, ideas, emotions, skills, etc., using symbols – words, pictures, figures, graphs, etc. It is the act or process of transmission […]”).¹⁹ It is the transfer, transmission and interchange.²⁰ It refers to what is transferred, sometimes to the means by which it is transferred, sometimes to the whole process.²¹ We can talk of communication in terms of linking and binding²² in which case, “communication is the process that links discontinuous parts of the living world to one another.”²³ Communication creates commonality.²⁴ Communication is the channel, carrier, means, route.²⁵ It is the “the process of conducting the

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¹⁰ Cf. DANCE, The “Concept” of Communication, 204.
¹² Cf. DANCE, The “Concept” of Communication, 204.
¹⁴ Cf. DANCE, The “Concept” of Communication, 204.
¹⁷ Cf. DANCE, The “Concept” of Communication, 205.
¹⁸ Cf. DANCE, The “Concept” of Communication, 205.
²⁰ Cf. DANCE, The “Concept” of Communication, 205.
²² Cf. DANCE, The “Concept” of Communication, 206.
²⁴ Cf. DANCE, The “Concept” of Communication, 206.
²⁵ Cf. DANCE, The “Concept” of Communication, 206.
attention of another person for the purpose of replicating memories.”

Communication involves the idea of discriminative response, behaviour modifying, in short, response and change. It is the “discriminatory response of an organism to a stimulus.”

Furthermore, Dance cited stimuli as one of the concepts of communication and believed that “every communication act is viewed as a transmission of information, consisting of a discriminative stimulus, from a source to a recipient.” Communication is intentional. This means that “in the main, communication has its central interest those behavioural situations in which a source transmits a message to a receiver with conscious intent to affect the latter’s behaviours.”

Time and situation are other two closely related concepts of communication. In this perspective, “the communication process is one of transition from one structured situation-as-a-whole to another, in preferred design.”

Another concept of communication is that of power in which “communication is the mechanism by which power is exerted.”

We could indeed go into a long essay and theological discourse to see how all these terms relate to different theological themes and that would all together be another article but for the time being, suffice to say that the communicational perspective is indeed inherent in different themes of theology where we see the intention of God to communicate with the human person through different mediations and how God in history has interacted with the human person through different ways. All the fifteen concepts indeed do have theological connotation and link. This is the relationship between theology and communication in the wider perspective – namely that communication is inherent in theology. Once again this could be done from different angles but we have here done it by looking at the communicational views of F.X. Dance, Denis McQuail and Sven Windahl.

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27 Cf. DANCE, The “Concept” of Communication, 208-209.
29 Cf. DANCE, The “Concept” of Communication, 207.
33 Cf. DANCE, The “Concept” of Communication, 208.
34 S. SCHACTER, Deviation, rejection, and communication, in “The Journal of abnormal and social psychology,” 46 (1951) 191.