Religious System (*Religionssystem*)

The function of religion lies in using communication to process the distinction between what is observable and what is not observable. This function can only be fulfilled paradoxically [→*Paradox*]. In order to explain this definition, it is necessary to recognize that every form (i.e., every distinction [→*Identity/Difference*]) draws a boundary between what can be determined and something else that is excluded, implied—but not indicated. In every communication a reference is made to something unobservable. In this way, all communication implies religion, although this universalism is offset by the fact that religion can observe reality only on the basis of its own specific criterion. What is special about religion is how it processes the difference observable/unobservable, since it makes this difference its primary problem. Forms of communication are religious when their meaning refers to the unity of this difference. In the more developed religions of modern society, this difference is encoded [→*Code*] through the binary distinction of immanence and transcendence. For every immanent fact that can be communicated, there is always a transcendental correlate that is as such not observable.

Religion is permanently concerned with a double reality: on the one hand, there is the immanent, real reality and, on the other, the transcendental, imaginary reality. The distinction observable/unobservable is presented by religion as a unity such that a →*re-entry* occurs: the distinction observable/unobservable is observable; it re-enters on the observable side. Forms of meaning can then be experienced religiously if, as the unity of the difference, they are indicated as mysterious and paradoxical.

The reproduction of the distinction observable/unobservable and its social control constitute a problem shared by all religions that have developed throughout the history of society: how can they prevent the imaginary from being reduced to such a degree of arbitrariness that anyone can say something religiously relevant? The other side of the question constitutes the com-

plementary problem: how can they permit and enable situations in which the religious experience, as the unity of the observable and the unobservable, is possible?

One of the first methods used to enable a religious imaginary reality to be projected is the secret: communication is limited to such an extent that it is possible to distinguish the sacred from everything else, for instance from its trivialization. The objects that religious communication refers to (e.g., bones, statues, animals, places) are rendered foreign compared to normality and yet remain perceivable. There is something there that we can touch, but we may not actually reach for it, since objects are always only objects and the events occur within utterly normal processes. This is precisely what secures the possibility of programming behavior in a religiously adequate way.

An evolutionary leap occurs when, alongside the old distinction between things and events, the true code of religion, the distinction between immanence and transcendence, is differentiated. This is advantageous because it allows the whole world to be observed and clearly and precisely duplicated: for everything that is immanently observable, there is a transcendental meaning correlate. Rather than sorting things or events according to sacred or profane, we must now turn to God as observer. In the case of the Jewish religion, for instance, God has no name; he eludes all knowledge and reveals himself to the world only as text that must be interpreted. The duty of tradition is thus to pass on the contradictory interpretations and, in turn, the resulting controversies benefit this passing on. God is therefore the transcendental observer and, at the same time, the unity of observer and observed: every form of holiness permitted in the immanent world is only ever a reflex of transcendence. The particularity of religious coding lies in the fact that the re-entry of the code is realized not on the positive, but on the negative side. While the other codes start out with the condition that it is positive to distinguish between positive and negative (e.g., it is a logical truth that true and untrue must be distinguished between; it is good to keep good and bad separate), religion makes every meaning determinable by referring to what in every meaning is indeterminable.

At least in the high forms of religion, the code is programmed in connection with →*morality*. The difference good/bad provides the orientation for communication, with the resulting problem that God also allows bad actions and thereby proves to be beyond all distinctions. The freedom of choice is thus seen as the pinnacle of creation; the only divine recommendation is to see transcendence in everything that happens.

The particularity of monotheistic religion lies in their specific formula for contingency: God. Transcendence exists as a person, presumably in order to refer to transcendence as an observational perspective on the immanent world. God is a person and as such an observer, but a very special observer, since he needs not make any distinction. Simply put, he can simultaneously realize every distinction schema as a difference and as a unity. People need not know how or what God is and nor may they try (unlike Lucifer), since this would mean distinguishing themselves from God, which means wanting to observe him. But if we assume that God observes everything and must therefore distinguish himself from everything else, then he cannot be observed in the world.

With the shift to functional differentiation [→*Differentiation of Society*], religion encounters a new situation and with it new problems. Its worldview can no longer be valid for society as a whole, and even morality does not function to integrate society. Though morality maintains its universalism, its programs cannot find any general consensus: societal integration is realized only through the relations between the different functional systems, and no longer in reference to commandments. The relationship between religion and other societal domains is no longer one of stratification. In today's theological discussion and reflection, the term secularization is generally used to indicate that a social environment exists which is external to religion, and that religion constitutes only one of society's many functional systems.

Unlike in certain subsystems, religion has no →*symbolically generalized media*. Although faith exhibits certain characteristics of such media, the aspect it primarily lacks is the typical tendency to distinguish between action and experience [→*Attribution*] as improbable selections that require motivation. Religious faith cannot encounter such a distinction, because life in its entirety must be subject to God's observation. Moreover, it would not make sense to be able to obtain holiness through an experience without the accompanying action or, conversely, through action carried out at the behest of an arbitrary will. Religion is too close to the unity of human beings to distinguish in this way.

A type of functional equivalence perhaps lies in the particular tendency of religion to undertake inclusion and exclusion. Religion is society's only subsystem that does not join in with integration and exclusion behaviors [→*Inclusion/Exclusion*]: even those excluded from other systems (such as beggars or homeless) can be included in religious communication. Conversely, exclusion

from religion does not mean, as it did in the Middle Ages, exclusion from society.

How far religion is really able to include the excluded, who make up a large proportion of the world population, is a question that can only be answered empirically and it remains difficult to understand how far religion can reflect this function as its own. *[G.C.]*

Funktion der Religion, 1977; A Systems Theory of Religion (2013); Soziologische Aufklärung 4 (1987: Ch. IV); Die Sinnform Religion (1996).