

Liturgy on television or “television-liturgy”

Johan G. Hahn

Liturgy presupposes a community which liturgy on television lacks. Are televised church services, therefore, merely television reports, or is a new type of “television-liturgy” emerging, with the producer taking over from the minister or priest, and viewers finding themselves in a make-believe community?

Almost every Sunday a liturgical ceremony is broadcast on Dutch television: either a catholic mass or a protestant service. This is one of the tasks of the two broadcasting organisations that are connected with the Dutch Christian churches: The KRO/RKK - Catholic Broadcasting Foundation/ Roman Catholic Church Broadcasting - and the IKON/ZVK - the Interchurch Reformed Broadcasting Foundations.

The mere number of liturgical ceremonies broadcast justifies a theoretical discussion between theologians, mass communication specialists and television-directors on this rather unique type of programme: when television-cameras are present in church two different modes of communication are joined, one entirely “human directed”, the other both directed to human beings as well as to something beyond human existence: “God”.

A number of books and articles have been published in the last few years covering the discussion amongst theologians on the problems that arise when liturgy is broadcast. The well-known but mass-media scientifically rather “naïve” article of the late Karl Rahner being one of the first (note n° 1). Few of those articles take mass communication theory, i.e. television-theory, into account. As a result there is little grounded theory on the subject.

The following article presents some models that were developed after a two-day seminar in Amsterdam, September 1981. These models are derived from some wellknown mass communication theories and were adapted for the specific communication situation that liturgy on television brings about. They were previously published in a Dutch book under the same title as this article (note n° 2).

Our starting point in the discussion was the accepted fact that television isn't a “neutral” medium that simply duplicates a visual reality in front of the camera. A television-camera interferes with reality and creates a new “television-reality” that should be distinguished from the original reality (note n°3).

So when liturgy is broadcast, the broadcast liturgy only has a conventional relation - through the electronic audiovisual equipment - with the original liturgy. This means that liturgy, seen on television must have another reality than the liturgy that can be seen and participated in in church. To understand both of them, we have to look at the two elements of the phenomenon separately. We'll first consider the authentic liturgy that can be participated in in church, and look at the television-liturgy later on.

Liturgy as it is

In every liturgy the history of salvation is symbolically presented in the present to give the participants a preliminary perspective of their salvation future. This - simplified - point of view gives us the possibility of distinguishing two communicative aspects in liturgy: Liturgy proclaims future salvation by representing it over and over again in the present, and by participating in the liturgical ceremony the congregation proclaims its future communion and celebrates it as the bearer of this future.

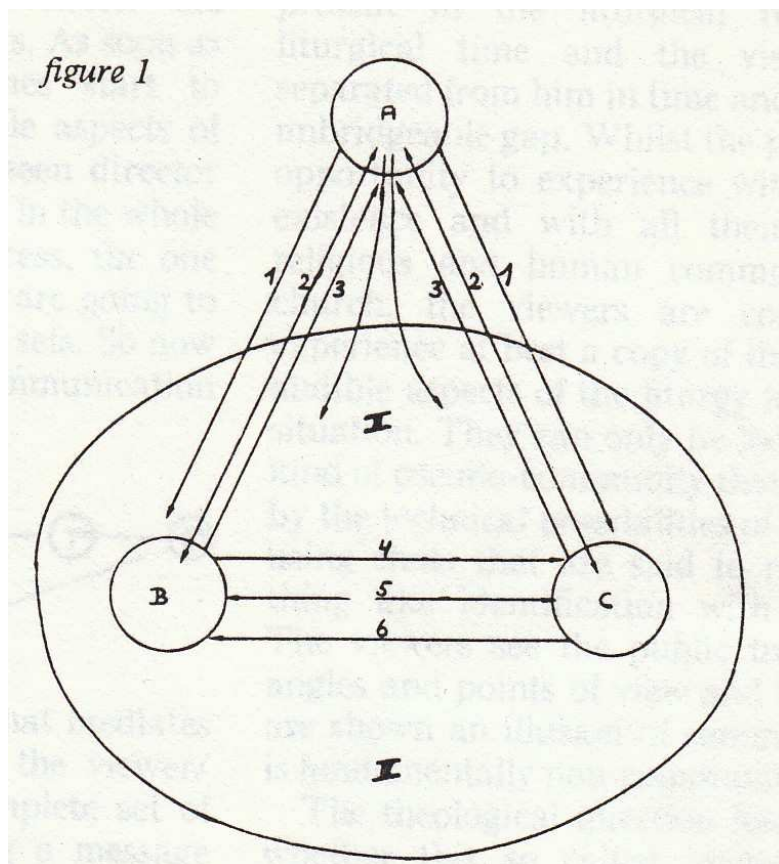
Proclamation and communal celebration are the two main elements without which there can be no liturgy.

Because of these two *conditio sine qua non*, every liturgy consists of a “vertical” axis and a “horizontal” axis, the first founded on the communal “belief in God”, the latter founded on the community as “believers in God”. This means that in a broadcast version of a liturgy both aspects have to be present. If this is not the case, the broadcast liturgy is - theologically speaking - no longer a liturgy, but at its best a television report of a religious happening called “liturgy”. And this is exactly what the makers want to avoid!

Liturgy as communicative event

If we regard liturgy as a communicative event only, we can draw a model that contains both elements that are said to be crucial to liturgy in order to be liturgy (see figure 1).

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- A= God
- B= priest (or minister etc)
- C= congregation
- 1= The revelation of the divine
- 2= felt community of the congregation and of the priest with the divine
- 3= the prayer to the divine
- 4= the proclamation and the preaching

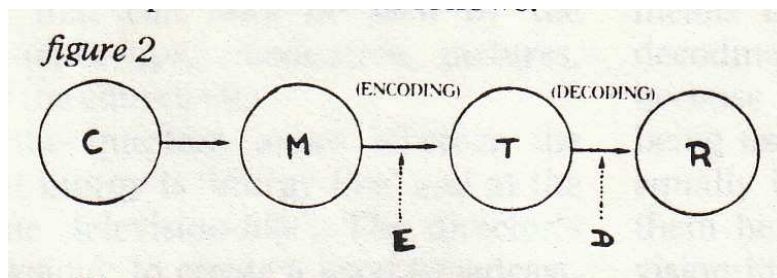
- 5= the social dimension of prayer (felt community a.o. expressed by prayer, singing etc)
- 6= responsive acting and speaking of the congregation (i.e. loud prayer, community singing etc)
- I= The divine presence in the celebration (*praesentia divina*)
- II= The communal celebration of the congregation and the priest.

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For our discussion the horizontal aspect (4, 5, 6) of the model - being the liturgy that is to be broadcast - is important. If we magnify this relation between the priest and congregation, by using the Shannon-and-Weaver-model of communication in a simplified form (note n° 4), we can distinguish the four elements that constitute every communication process, including liturgy as a communication event.

We distinguish a “communicator” (C), the celebrant of the liturgy, be it a priest or a minister, and the “receiver” (R), the “participating congregation”, referred to by us as the “public” for technical reasons. Among these are the “message” (M), being the liturgy as such and the “medium” (T) consisting in our case of the amplifying system in the church, including the “*vox humana*”. Drawn in a model, this communicative process looks as follows:

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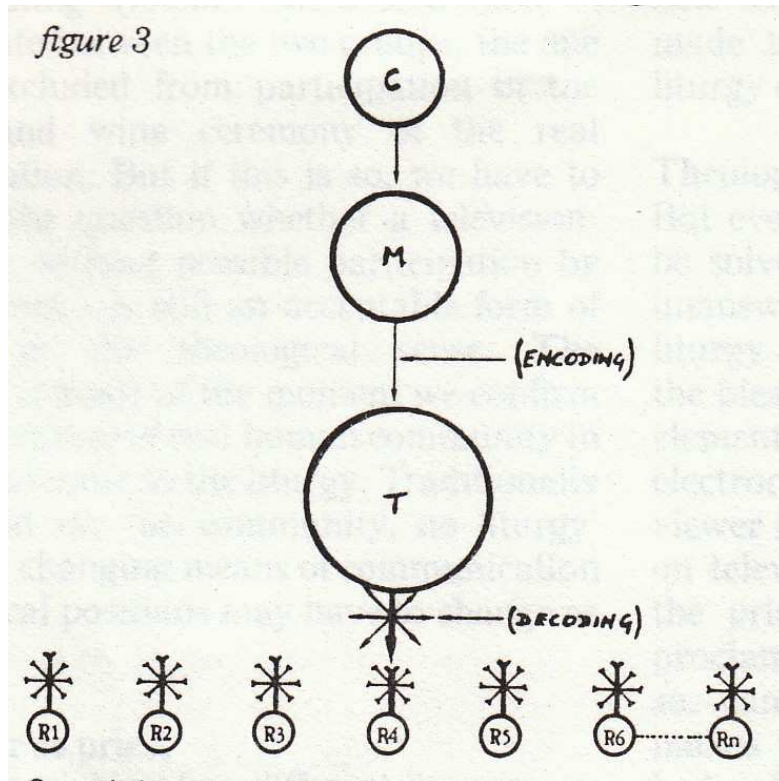


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E refers to the “encoding-process” to make the message fit the medium and D to the reverse “decoding-process” to make the mediated message understandable to the receiver.

If we now split up the receiver-side of the process shown in figure 2, the model becomes even more accurate. Apart from being a receiver of the message from the communicator, there is the basic potential for interhuman communication or social interaction with other members of the congregation. So there is a multitude of receivers that can interact with each other and who are also in the position of being receivers as shown in figure 2. This gives us:

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C= minister/priest
 M= Liturgy (the Gospel)
 T= Amplifier, microphones, speakers etc
 R1-Rn= Receivers i.e. participants in the liturgy.

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In figures 2 and 3 the “vertical” relation from figure 1 that exists in the liturgy (I and 1, 2, 3) does not concern us. For the liturgy it is, of course, a very important relation, but communication-theory cannot deal with it. We are only concerned with the senseperceptible aspects of liturgy. As far as our analysis is concerned, liturgy is a communicative event between human beings only that can be mediated by electronic television broadcasting equipment. Any postulated vertical relation between men and the divine inside the liturgy may or may not be real to the participants. So from a communication-theoretical point of view we cannot deal with it.

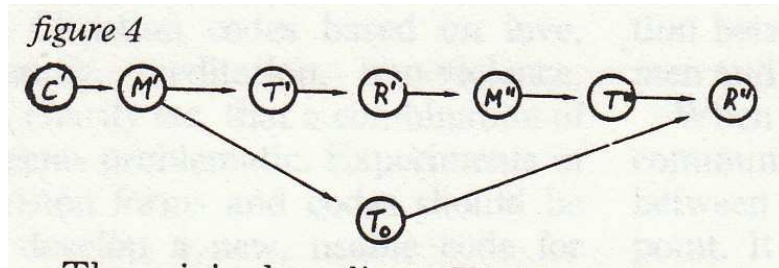
Liturgy on television

At the moment liturgy is broadcast on television a totally different situation comes into being. This is not only from a communication theory point of view, but also from a theological point of view. The communicative situation is changed by interference in the liturgical-communication process by two

important new elements: the television director (with crew and equipment) and the television viewer.

The role of the television director, cameramen, sound technicians, light engineers and their materials etc is decisive for the new communicational situation. As a matter of fact the director places himself as a kind of “mediator” between the minister/priest and the viewers. As soon as the cameras and microphones start to register the visible and audible aspects of the celebrated liturgy, the unseen director becomes the “principal person” in the whole television communication process, the one who decides what the viewers are going to see and hear on their television sets. So now we have the following communication situation:

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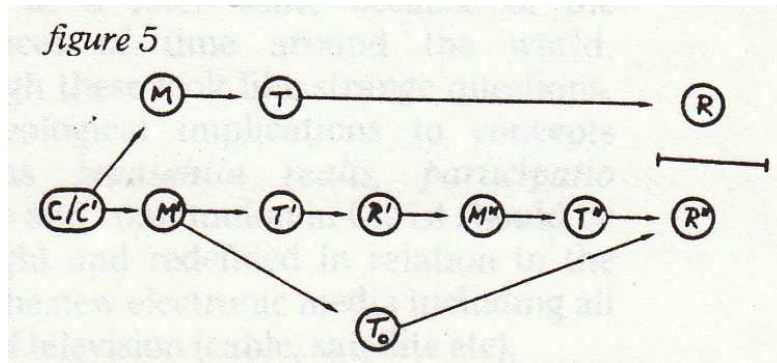


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The original medium (T0) (that mediates between the message M' and the viewer/receiver R'') consists of a complete set of communicative elements being a message (M') that the director receives over his audiovisual equipment (T'), the director (R') - now being both receiver and communicator - the new message (M'') composed by the director and his crew out of the raw M'-material and the electronic television broadcasting equipment (T''). Even the receiver R'' is no longer the same as the original receiver R, as they are scattered over the country. A direct connection between R' and R'' over T0 does not and cannot exist because of the organisational and technical state of the medium T0.

So far, the model in figure 4 also shows that broadcast liturgy consists of two entirely different communicative processes. None of the elements in figure 2 can be compared to the analogous elements in figure 4. If we match both models this becomes clear:

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We also see that the minister/priest, who has to be both C and C' at the same time while the liturgy is broadcast and directed to those in the church, has to play two different and distinct roles. Being C, he is a priest/minister in the concrete liturgical situation. Being C' he has to be something similar in a communicative situation, in which he is separated both in time and space from the receivers at home in front of their television sets. As a matter of fact he has to be a "television priest" and a real priest at the same time, this being a combination of social roles that can hardly be united in one person at the same time without a strong loss of quality of one or of both of the roles.

Participants and lookers-on

The minister/priest in the broadcast liturgy has, as a result, to address two different "groups" of receivers: the public, being present in the liturgical room at the liturgical time and the viewers, being separated from him in time and space by an unbridgeable gap. Whilst the public has the opportunity to experience with their total existence and with all their senses the religious and human community in the church, the viewers are condemned to experience at best a copy of the visible and audible aspects of the liturgy in an isolated situation. They can only be lookers-on in a kind of pseudo-community that is suggested by the technical possibilities of the director, using shots that are said to realise something like identification with the public. The viewers see the public from different angles and points of view and by that they are shown an illusion of community which is fundamentally non-community (note n° 5).

The theological question here should be whether this so called "para-social-interaction" is a sufficient basis for an authentic experience of human community and communication as is fundamental to liturgy. Theoretical analysis seems to differ from the expressed feelings of certain viewers who are prevented from attending a real liturgy (old people, ill people etc) and who say they experience some kind of community-feeling, of being-there, while watching liturgical ceremonies on television. We must therefore ask whether this expressed feeling, built upon an illusion of community is theologically acceptable or not.

Our problem is, whether it is justifiable to use liturgy to generate pseudo-community-feelings or that pseudo-community-feelings should be generated by broadcasting liturgy on television. Is liturgy on television real liturgy or some kind of pseudo-liturgy? Theologians seem to have different opinions in this.

Two liturgies

If we go back to figure 5 we observe that the message M that receiver R gets is to be distinguished from the message M' that receiver R' gets. This means that we are in fact talking about two different messages M and M' which stand for two entirely different liturgies.

There seems to be a “public-directed liturgy” with a bodily-present participating congregation and a “viewer-directed-liturgy”. The latter being the interpretation of the first by the television director and crew. They create a new television-liturgy out of the raw material presented to them by selecting and composing those elements from the original liturgy that best fit the concept the director has of his product. He in fact shows the viewers his vision - with or without the consent of the priest/minister - of the real liturgy. He can do so by using elements that can only be seen by the viewers (close-ups, meditative pictures, details of the church etc).

Here the question arises whether the broadcast liturgy is “liturgy-like” and at the same time “television-like”. The director's task is twofold: to create a good broadcast, but also to make an acceptable new “liturgy-for-the-viewers”. As we know, the liturgical tradition is at least some 1900 years old and the television tradition at its best some 50 years. It is understandable, therefore, that there can be elements in the liturgical tradition that are incompatible with the television tradition. We have to reflect on the question of whether liturgy and television can fit together or not. And yet the director has the task of combining them.

As far as we know now we have to deal with a big gap between the congregation and the viewers that cannot be bridged because of the peculiarities of the television broadcasting system. There is a kind of glass plate between the two groups, the one being excluded from participation in the bread and wine ceremony of the real congregation. But if this is so, we have to discuss the question whether a television-liturgy - without possible participation by the viewers - is still an acceptable form of liturgy in the theological sense. The decision is made at the moment we confirm the importance of real human community in a physical sense to the liturgy. Traditionally we would say “no community, no liturgy” but with changing means of communication theological positions may have to change as well.

Producer as priest

By distinguishing two different liturgies we stress the creative influence of the director on the form and content of at least one of the two. His way of making a new liturgy out of the “priest's-liturgy” is so different from the way liturgy is traditionally composed by priest/minister, that it appears to be necessary to call the director also a priest. His role is to make the (television) liturgy, or at least to assist the priest as a deacon in making the liturgy.

By taking up his role as a deacon he transforms elements from the priest's liturgy into something new, recognisable to the viewers as being liturgy. He uses well known elements, composing a television version of the original liturgy, giving the viewers the possibility to pseudo-participate in the liturgy as shown on the screen. Therefore he uses elements from the gospel, which means that he proclaims a message of community and salvation by an instrument that makes community fundamentally impossible. This is what we call the “television-paradox”. There is a necessary suggestion of community that can never be realised.

The director who wishes to make television-liturgy has also to create a good broadcast, using the codes of television to communicate the codes of liturgy. This means that the process of encoding and decoding becomes very complicated because two entirely different codes are being used. To the director both codes are equally important, because without one of them he fails to make an acceptable television-liturgy. But the question is, whether the two codes can really be combined into one code to make an understandable television programme.

In our opinion there are some serious problems originating from the fact that the television code is built upon a cultural tradition that seems to be in contradiction with the Christian-liturgical tradition. The

(mainly American) television codes, based on violence, action, speed, violation of basic human values and so forth, is so different from the Christian codes based on love, understanding, meditation, non-violence, attention, charity etc that a combination of the two seems problematic. Experiments in new television forms and codes should be made to develop a new, usable code for liturgy on television or television-liturgy.

Theology and television

But even if these technical problems could be solved, an important question remains unanswered: what is the theological value of liturgy on television? In other words: can the blessing of the priest, being an essential element in the liturgy, be transmitted by electronic means of communication? If a viewer is looking at a liturgical celebration on television, does the graceful blessing of the priest, the forgiving of sins, and the proclamation of pardon include him? And if so, can the blessing of the priest which makes wine and bread into the blood and body of Christ be transmitted by electronic communication media also (note n° 6)?

The worldwide live-transmission of the papal blessing “Urbi et Orbi” every year again suggests this possibility. But if this suggestion is taken for real, then the blessing can also be videotaped and transmitted at a later time, because of the differences of time around the world. Although these look like strange questions, the theological implications to concepts such as *praesentia realis*, *participatio actuosa* and communion in Christ should be rethought and redefined in relation to the use of the new electronic media including all kinds of television (cable, satellite etc).

When the world is changing, theological concepts and positions have to change also. The three concepts mentioned in relation to liturgy derived from a world which was totally different from ours today. It is questionable whether we can use these concepts in the traditional way any longer, facing new communication developments in a highly technological world. On the other hand we have to distinguish between the real questions and the false questions that come from a false understanding of the position of the electronic media in the modern world. The videotaping of liturgy is an example of such a “non-problem”.

Liturgy on television is liturgy communicated by modern electronic means. Using these means without due thought is one thing, answering the questions that arise by the use of the modern “social media” is another. The problems are great, and there are no answers in this short article. However, there are suggestions for further research and reflection. This should be done in co-operative projects by theologians, television-directors and experts on religious and audiovisual communication.

Audiovisual communication is of growing importance in our world today and tomorrow and human communication is being influenced more and more by technological media. One of the tasks of theologians will be to reflect on the interaction between men and media and between men and God.

When liturgy is broadcast on television, communication between people and between people and God meets at a single point. It is here that reflection on today's religious communication should have its starting point, on behalf of the receivers and on behalf of the senders of the message (note n° 7).

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Drs Johan G. Hahn studied at the State University at Groningen, Netherlands and at the State University of Utrecht. His main areas are communication studies with particular interest in audio-visual and religious communication. He is a lecturer at the Catholic Theological Faculty, Amsterdam, and author of Liturgie op Televisie of “Televisie-Liturgie” (1982).