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DOUBT IN POSTMODERNITY

The Communicative Process of Fixating Beliefs

MSC IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how ideas of truth and knowledge are created, maintained, and negotiated within the context of a community through means of communication. This is achieved by conducting a case study which highlights the social processes of deconstructing and reconstructing ideas of truth. The empirical material analyzed is the podcast *Another Name For Every Thing*, featuring Franciscan friar Father Richard Rohr along with Brie Stoner and Paul Swanson. The show is produced by the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

A prime concept that is utilized in this thesis is that of viewing our understanding of truth claims as ‘fixations of belief’. This idea stems from the philosophical school of American Pragmatism, founded by Charles Sanders Peirce, and the argument it makes is that what we have access to are the concrete, material consequences of our ideas of meaning, truth, or conceptualization of reality, *rather than* meaning itself as a separate, metaphysical entity. In short: a sign is its meaning. Physical money could be used as an analogy: a paper bill represents value to a specific community, but simultaneously it *is* its value. Furthermore, meaning is here understood as necessarily produced within communities. The implications of this perspective is that what we understand as true can be socially de- and reconstructed, which this research demonstrates through its case study.

This research concludes that communication plays a vital role in forming and shaping our understanding of truth and knowledge, in part due to its ability to effect renegotiation of meaning, and also due to its capacity for creating communities in which such renegotiation is possible. New media, such as podcasts, makes the formation of de- and reconstruction communities possible on an unprecedented, global scale, which is why the study of ‘truth production’ processes is highly relevant to the discipline of Media and Communication Studies.

KEY WORDS: *truth, meaning, postmodernity, American pragmatism, religion, podcast, communication*

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Times of Doubt

We live in times of great doubt.

Expressions of such doubt could be observed in the rise of a distrust of government (cf. Grogan, 2019) or, for another example, in social movements that openly oppose vaccination programs (cf. Kollataj et al., 2020). The philosopher Brian Fay (1996: 7) sums up the current state of Western society:

Ours is a time of skepticism: skepticism about truth, objectivity, knowledge, and even the possibility of understanding those different from ourselves. Such skepticism is healthy; but taken to extremes it can degenerate into cynicism [...].

Whether we refer to this phenomena as skepticism, or doubt, or as epistemological questioning, we can all presumably agree that the very idea of what ‘facts’ are is currently subject to revision. Terms such as ‘alternative facts’ or ‘post-truth’ come to mind (cf. Mullins, 2019). The existential uncertainty that this era of questioning causes is by no means a comfortable experience which, it could be argued, is why we hang on to (or manufacture) alternative facts, for, even though they may be alternative – they are at least facts. Charles Sanders Peirce (cf. 2009) states that doubt is that which propels us to investigate and find answers that can dispel the uncomfortable state of not knowing. Thus it follows that if these are times of Doubt, they should also be times of a great search for Truth.

Relativism and skepticism is often attributed to postmodernism, but theologian John D. Caputo (2006: 50) gives a more, perhaps forgiving or flattering, definition:

Postmodernism [...] is not relativism or scepticism, as its uncomprehending critics almost daily charge, but minutely close attention to detail, a sense for complexity and multiplicity of things, for close readings, for detailed histories, for sensitivity to differences. The postmodernists think the devil is in the details, but they also have reason to hope that none of this will antagonize God.

The attention to detail and sensitivity to complexity, as well as the desire to find ‘new truth’ that is deemed reliable can be identified in several different arenas – particularly online. The Internet has provided people with the ability to form global communities in which they can construct and maintain beliefs together. Historically, such activity would have demanded physical and temporal co-presence. That is no longer the case in this age of global media. Internet forums, audio-visual or audio-only media (for example YouTube and podcasts) are key players in these activities.

This thesis examines the phenomenon described above. It focuses on the field of organized religion in order to highlight the social processes of deconstructing and reconstructing truth. These processes are evident in many areas of society, and – as was stated previously – arguably increasingly so due to the Internet, which is why this research is both current and relevant. As I will discuss later on, these issues seem to not have been treated extensively before in the discipline of Media and Communication Studies, and thus I hope that this thesis might be a welcome contribution to the field. I might even be so bold as to say that the study of knowledge production and epistemology *ought to be an obvious part* of Media and Communication Studies, since mediation and communication are central aspects of the construction of ideas of both truth and knowledge.

Secularization processes have significantly undermined religion’s role as a perceived carrier of truth or as a means to find it – or so the common narrative goes. A major characteristic of the Enlightenment was the increased influence of science coupled with the notion of reason (cf. Wood, 2005) and both of these have been viewed as means of discovering various truths. William James (1904: 57) made the following, compelling observation: ”‘Science’ in many minds is genuinely taking the place of religion. Where this is so, the scientist treats the ‘Laws of Nature’ as objective facts to be revered.” What we have is, in other words, a story of humanity’s search for truth, for objectivity, for the really real, and this story seems to have started with religion which subsequently was ‘replaced’ by science. Based on the discussion

in the beginning of this section we can argue that right now, science is not any more exempt from critical review than religion is.

So, this thesis is an exploration of the concept of truth on a metalevel, or how we relate to notions of truth. By analyzing selected, relevant theoretical literature together with equally carefully selected empirical material I discuss ways in which we may understand the processes that go into ‘making’ or ‘re-making’ truth.

The empirical material used for this research is the podcast *Another Name For Every Thing*, produced by The Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC, 2021a), which features Father Richard Rohr, who is a Franciscan friar. He is a well-established voice in circles of ecumenism, contemplation, and spiritual development. The following quote describes his work in greater detail:

Father Richard teaches wisdom found within the Christian contemplative traditions while also incorporating the universal truths found within all sacred paths that point to our common human longing for union with divine love and with each other. His teaching appeals to a vast audience—from current and former Catholics, Anglicans, Evangelicals, and mainstream Protestants, to “spiritual but not religious,” to Buddhists, to agnostics—all around the world. He has referenced the Buddhist proverb to emphasize that his words are only a finger pointing to the moon, not the moon itself. [...]

(CAC, 2021c)

For those of us who are well-acquainted with the tradition of social science the quote above might make our thoughts wander toward terms such as *renegotiation* of one form or another, since Rohr seems to ‘cross party lines’ and appeal to people of many different faith communities rather than staying strictly in ‘the Catholic Christian lane’. Renegotiation, framed as de- and reconstruction, will become an important concept in this thesis.

In the Methodology chapter I go into more detail as to why the *Another Name For Every Thing* podcast was selected for analysis, but the brief version is that the processes of constructing truth are especially visible in the context of religion in general, and in this podcast in particular.

Now, let us move on to a more theoretical overview of the concept of ‘Truth’.

Identifying Our Problem

Truth, Knowledge, and Levels of Reality

In short: this thesis examines how *ideas of truth and knowledge are created, maintained, and negotiated within the context of a community through means of communication*. That is a mouthful. It is nonetheless theoretically significant. The problem, as stated above, indicates how this research – which could run the risk of seeming overly abstract and obtuse – is actually concerned with concrete processes that have (often mediated) communication at their very core.

John Dewey is known for his proposition that we ought to speak of "warranted assertibility" rather than "truth" (cf. Dicker, 1973: 112). This notion finds its roots in *fallibilism*, about which Fay (1996: 208 [italics removed]) writes: "Any theory we believe, even ones for which we have excellent reasons to believe, may be false." The reality that anything we believe may turn out to be false is not a judgement on our methods of inquiry as such; it is not a statement intended to encourage us to find, for example, better scientific methods, as if they could ever get us all the way to perfect knowledge; no, it is simply the acknowledgement that "[...] humans are epistemologically limited [...]" (ibid.). It is important to take note of what has been stated here and not to imply anything that has not – for example, the fallibilist would not claim that there *are no* absolute truths or that there is no objective structure to reality. They would simply maintain that it lies beyond our capabilities as humans to access this ultimate reality, and fallibilism is therefore consistent with the view referred to as *realism* (ibid.).

The reasoning above allows Dewey to refer to knowledge as a product of inquiry, and as such, it can never be anything more than a statement of what is *highly probable* rather than of *what is* (cf. Dicker, 1973: 112). In my understanding, what is at stake here is the differentiation between what I will simply call actual reality¹ and social reality. Allow me to develop this: Dewey (1941: 185) engages in a discussion about the nature of knowledge in which he ontologically speaking places knowledge in the category of a subject's mind – that is: in social reality – based on the argument that Dewey's philosophical interlocutor (in this particular text) seems to place doubt in that same category. The view that Dewey is contesting is that doubts or questions are formulated in the mind of an inquisitive subject, and the resolution to such uncertainty lies *outside* of the subject, that is, in the object of inquiry and from there one may 'extract' knowledge. The point that Dewey makes, however, is that statements which we would refer to as 'knowledge' are *equally* formulated within the mind of the subject. Knowing and not knowing are thus *both* states of mind; it is not the case that one is a matter of object and the other of subject. In Dewey's (ibid.) own words: "If a 'subject' is one end-term in a relation of which objects (events) are the other end-term, and if doubt is simply a state of a subject, why isn't knowledge also simply and only a state of mind of a subject?"

We might be able to further elucidate the general concept I am trying to convey by turning to Fay (1996: 73-74) and his discussion of the idea of facts. He writes that facts are "[...] phenomena under a particular description" (id: 73, [italics removed]). This may be made more clear by the use of an example: I see a blue book lying on a table in a dimly lit room. Then I tell someone, "I saw a blue book lying on a table in a dimly lit room." Some facts we might extract from this statement are *blue book, table, dimly lit room*. But from where did I retain these facts? *Not* from without myself in an objective reality but from *within* myself through my subjective *perception*. The blue book – as object – does not contain another metaphysical object called 'fact' that I can retrieve from it; rather, that which we call 'fact' is created in me – as subject – as a "linguistically meaningful" entity (cf. ibid.) which I can then share with you. However, for this to be of consequence to you, certain criteria have to be met. For one, you must understand what I am saying – we must speak the same language. This is the give-away that facts are inherently intertwined with and dependent upon language, which in turn

situates them ontologically on the level of subjects, which thirdly categorizes them as part of a social reality rather than in an objective reality in the realist sense (cf. id: 202).

It should now be easier to grasp what Dewey (1941) and others with him are trying to say. Knowledge is the product of inquiry which tries to answer questions and – importantly – problems and solutions alike are linguistically created and thus exist on a subject-to-subject level. It is *entirely possible* that the facts and theories we formulate through language on a subjective level actually do, entirely or in part, correspond to an objective reality – but it may also be the case that they do not. Because we cannot claim such correspondence with absolute certainty, Dewey invites us to speak of ”warranted assertibility” rather than making absolute truth claims (cf. Dicker, 1973: 112).

What ought to be obvious by now is the absolute centrality of language – of communication – to questions of both truth and knowledge. That is what propels this thesis in the discipline of Media and Communication Studies to tackle such issues in the first place. An argument I wish to make is that questions of truth and knowledge are particularly prevalent in two very big and significant, societal arenas, namely: science and religion. To tie this back to the beginning of this thesis we might say that both of them are in the business of dispelling doubt. Science can guide us in, for example, areas of physical health, for that which is ‘scientifically proven’ is also viewed as true and trustworthy. Religion cares for our spiritual health, and the different religions have different ways of making statements that are deemed authoritative by their adherents, be it by referring to a guru, a concept within ancient teaching, or to revelation or systematic theology.

In the arenas of science and religion the search for truth is arguably motivated by different incentives, and if I were to put it somewhat poetically, I would say that the scientist tries to uncover *how life works* whereas the religious person wishes to know *what life means*. At the risk of sounding crude or overly simplistic we might identify this as the distinction between disseminating information and encouraging transformation. (It should be noted that I do not wish to imply a value hierarchy between the two.) For the purposes of this thesis, I will investigate religion through the lens of communication in order to explore how the processes of creating *ideas of* truth and knowledge works in action. My reason for choosing religion as

my subject matter is that this is perhaps the oldest and most robust social phenomena that explicitly deals with issues of truth, and on a grand, cosmic scale at that.

What Has Already Been Done?

Not much. I say that at the risk of sounding glib or perhaps overly casual, but truth be told, the study of religion within the area of Media and Communication research seems to be somewhat of a rarity. When we specify a particular faith tradition, in the case of this thesis: Christianity, the field becomes even more narrow. Moreover, the relevance of media and communication research to our understanding of epistemology and theories of knowledge also seems to be somewhat overlooked – which I would hold is a mistake in need of correction. I am nonetheless not pursuing my object of inquiry in a complete vacuum, and I will try to cover some further theoretical ground that is relevant for my thesis before moving into my specific case study.

It bears repeating that what I am interested in here is not only religion or Christianity *per se*, but faith communities as a *context in which ideas of truth are constructed and reconstructed* through processes of *communication*. I should clarify that when I speak of ‘truth’ here I am not simply using it as a binary opposite to ‘false’ but in the broader sense as a word which can be used in contexts of defining reality. For example, we might say that the existence of ‘society’ is true; society exists as something we perceive as objectively real. For the religious person, reincarnation may be seen as something objectively and *metaphysically* real, as could eternal life, karma, divine grace, priesthood and holy orders, and so forth, depending upon which religious tradition one may identify with. That which is perceived as metaphysically real within a religious context could be referred to as truth, and knowledge could be the designated term for the understanding of such truths as true. What I am interested in within the context of this thesis is the dynamic, social process of establishing this truth and knowledge. Peter Berger has tackled precisely that in his sociology of knowledge. Allow me to discuss some of his work:

Berger (1969: 3) states that society – conceived as an entity within a social reality – is the product of human beings. He makes a distinction by saying that society is a “[...] dialectic phenomenon [...]” (ibid) which means that the creation of society is a process that occurs

between humanity and society – we ‘speak’ to society, thus creating it and manifesting it through our language and our actions, but society also ‘speaks back’ to us, thus influencing how we respond. It can therefore be said that while society is a human product, it is also true that humanity is a societal product, according to Berger (ibid). In other words: Through the use of symbols we create a social reality – yet when we interpret symbols that are already manifest before us we internalize them, adding them to our vocabulary, and we become nested into a web of meaning, into a context that is far greater than our own individual lives. The act of creating social reality, which Berger (id: 7) refers to as “world-building,” is therefore always done by the collective; this is what it means to be nested within a web of meaning. That is why we can say that society is a product of humanity rather than of any one person or group.

Berger (id: 11) specifies closer what he means by referring to society as a human product: “[...] society is a product of human activity that has attained the status of objective reality.” This is a very important point. In Berger’s terminology, when something becomes *objectivated*, it is perceived by the vast majority of people as simply a *fact* rather than as a perspective or as a construction of ideas void of any actual impact on reality. For example: to us, stating that the sky is blue is not an expression of opinion but rather that of stating the obvious, as is stating that the sky exists at all. Along the same lines one could say that society also exists ‘for real’ in spite of it not being as tangible as, say, a tree. This is because society has been objectivated, and thus been given the status of ‘objectively real’.

Within a social reality there is a social order. This becomes evident when examining structures of power and authority. It is here that Berger’s (id: 29) term ‘legitimation’ becomes useful. It can be seen as a meta-concept referring to “[...] socially objectivated ‘knowledge’ that serves to explain and justify the social order.” In the previous paragraph we saw that a socially constructed institution can be given the status of ‘real’ – in this paragraph, by introducing the concept of legitimization, we add a normative aspect to our constructed social theory. Through this Berger (id: 29-30) shows that it is not only a matter of us collectively and consciously deciding to call something real, but rather, we call something real because *that is simply what it is to us – real*, due to the process of legitimization; Berger (ibid; emphasis in original) writes: “[legitimations] do not only tell people what *ought to be*. Often they merely

propose what *is*.” Thus it could be said – for example – that it is a ‘fact of the universe’ that a government should have the power that it has; and it is ‘objectively true’ that the monarch of our nation is chosen by God. In these examples the power to reign is perceived as a non-contingent institution that is an inherent part of the fabric of reality. The same can be said for all social institutions, and all the different roles that people play in order to make society. We play by the rules because the rules are simply necessary facts – in our perception.

Berger (id: 12) discusses this phenomenon as a ‘coerciveness’ of society. He stresses that “[...] the fundamental coerciveness of society lies not in its machineries of social control, but in its power to constitute and to impose itself as reality” (ibid). In sum, we should not construe this discussion as an illustration of a coercive society imposing itself on powerless victims by means of symbolic ammunition – that would be missing the point. Rather, it seems to me that what underlies Berger’s abstraction is the capacity for the immaterial to be just as ‘objectively real’ as the material. Just as the word ‘rock’ refers to something that exists, so does the word ‘society’, even though we cannot interact with the latter in the same concrete way as we can with the former – that heavy, gray thing on the ground.

The objectivation process of converting social phenomena into objective reality is not there for its own sake. It performs the function of *ordering* and giving *meaning* to things. This meaningful order, which Berger (id: 19) refers to as *nomos*, “[...] is imposed upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals.” Further: “[t]o say that society is a world-building enterprise is to say that it is ordering, or nomizing, activity” (ibid). All this provides a sense of structure and cohesiveness to the world in which we live. It shields us from the chaos of uncertainty and disorder – and this is important. Here the term ‘socialization’ is relevant, as it refers to the way in which we adapt the order which we are given, in order that we may maintain it and pass it on to future generations. Berger (id: 15; emphasis in original) writes: “[t]he individual not only learns the objectivated meanings but identifies with and is shaped by them. He draws them into himself and makes them *his* meanings.” This is how society can live on and surpass individual people. In reference to its protective function, Berger (id: 22) states that “[...] the most important function of society is nomization” because the ultimate danger, which we would risk should we not have a *nomos* to which we defer, “[...] is the danger of meaninglessness.”

Berger (id: 30) writes: "[i]f the nomos of a society is to be transmitted from one generation to another, so that the new generation will also come to 'inhabit' the same social world, there will have to be legitimating formulas to answer the questions that, inevitably, will arise in the minds of the new generation." This means that social order and social institutions are not objectivated and legitimized once and for all – rather, this is a process that needs repeating throughout the generations if it is to survive. That is why socialization plays an important part: we internalize the social order around us *so that* we can externalize it outside us and thus transmit it to people of the future. In this way 'reality is maintained' over time. Reality-maintenance is the fundamental purpose of legitimation, as Berger (id: 32) puts it. And finally, it can be said that "[...] religion has been the historically most widespread and effective instrumentality of legitimation" (ibid).

Berger (id: 33; emphasis in original) elaborates: "[r]eligion legitimates social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by *locating* them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference." An example of this would be the emperor who has, according to public understanding, been anointed by God. In that case the emperor has been inserted into a cosmic framework, which is legitimized by religious beliefs and practices, and that framework includes God as the highest authority (and author) of reality. That means that if God has chosen someone to govern the people, the people should rightly submit to this person. Another example of religion legitimizing social institutions is that of marriage. Two people with a religious (in this case Judeo-Christian) worldview who decide to live their lives together are not doing so for mere practical reasons but their union is given a higher (sacred) meaning as it is representative of God's will for people to not be alone² and, because it is God's will, it is inherently good.

Berger's work allows us to see our *understanding of* reality on the whole as something that is constructed and maintained through acts of social interaction. The same applies to social institutions such as society or family, to name a few. Social interaction can also be phrased: communication, or mediation of meaning, which brings me to another scholar: Peter Horsfield.

Horsfield (2015: 7) provides an account of Christianity as not merely a religious institution but as a phenomena that "[...] has developed and been constructed in the process of being communicated." Horsfield's view of Christianity as a product of communication, or as an inherently mediated phenomenon, aligns well with Berger's conception of the social construction of reality.

Horsfield (id: 17) notes the following in reference to Jesus Christ: "One of the enduring characteristics of Jesus from a media or communication perspective is his outstanding skill and reputation as an oral communicator and charismatic performer." However, the fact that Jesus specifically focused on oral communication as opposed to written has posed problems, mainly due to the evanescent nature of the spoken word and the very many ways of interpreting it. The content of Jesus's teaching as well as his actions and lived life is not easily systematized into clear categories with absolute definitions. In order to construct a religion in the way that Berger discusses it, one needs to identify and speak truth claims that can be objectivated; one needs to formulate theology that can be fixated. Trying to fixate Jesus as a person as well as his teaching into a clear and easily understood system is highly difficult. Perhaps one could liken it to the seemingly impossible task of turning a poem into a spreadsheet. Yet, spreadsheets are vital to organizations, such as the Church.

Saul of Tarsus, who would later be known as Paul the Apostle, played a crucial role in what we can now refer to as the Jesus Movement. It is *his interpretation* of Jesus, which became *fixated in written form* through his many letters, that laid the foundation for many of the understandings of Christianity's central person, Jesus Christ. One reason that Paul's theology gained so much traction can be found precisely in the medium he utilized for communication: letter writing (cf. id: 36). Horsfield (id: 37) highlights the communicative value of the medium itself, in this case letters, which, in the Greco-Roman world, were associated with the educated cultural elite (cf. id: 36). Thus, Paul's message about the risen Christ was situated within a context of cultural respect and impact. I will let Horsfield (ibid) summarize: "Paul's writing places his particular reinterpretation of Jesus and the work Paul was doing into the wider currents of circulation of what was the elite medium of his time." In this extremely brief historic look at the development of what we now know as Christianity we can catch glimpses

of the *communicative* processes which this thesis is all about: the construction of knowledge and truth claims as a particular process.

As the church grew it was not only created and maintained organizationally but also socially. The church as a socially constructed phenomenon involves hierarchies, traditions, ideologies, roles and authorities, and systems of theology. Furthermore: an important aspect of defining what the church is, is demarcating it from what it is not. This involves weeding out heresy and defining orthodoxy. And as Horsfield (id: 67) states, "[w]ritten documents were crucial in this development."

In other words, written documents – *media; communicative events* – were the site at which the church's teaching, practices, organizational guidelines, theology, and self-understanding was fixated. This has been the case up until our own days, except the specific mediums have changed over time, starting with the parchments of Paul, through to the printing press in the days of the Reformation (cf. id: 192) and on to the Papal encyclicals distributed today online (Papal Encyclicals Online, 2020). Horsfield (2015: 67) points out that the process of shaping the church has not been open to everybody: in the early days, "[...] one not only had to be able to read and write, but also had to be sophisticated in one's knowledge of classical written texts." This is an important point in terms of *who* was either allowed or able to create or influence the theology or structure of the church. For example, the role of women in ecclesial authority has been heavily discussed both within and without the church. While Paul refers in very positive terms to various women as leaders, later church documents seem to disregard this (cf. id: 77). The incredible social power of the pen becomes evident in cases such as these.

Horsfield (id: 214, ff.) discusses the interplay between Christianity and Modernity in his chapter *The Modern World*. A brief overview can be summarized thus: When the unifying authority of the Roman-Catholic church was no more, due to the Reformation, there were all of a sudden a number of competing theological views within the Christian religion, and thus a number of competing truth claims. This ushered forth a yearning for something more stable, some absolute foundation upon which one would be able to build society. The result was a philosophical emphasis on reason and verifiable, objective knowledge.

Finally, in this day and age of digital media, deinstitutionalization and new community formations are key characteristics of Western society (cf. Horsfield, 2015: 268). Theology, as well as religious experience and the everyday lives of religious people, is mediated through the Internet and thus new understandings may develop or older ones may be reinforced. What we see today could potentially be divided into two rough categories: official understandings promoted by institutional church organizations; and the understandings of "lay people" who, thanks to digital media, can join the theological conversations. There are a variety of theological perspectives to choose from and, for those with an Internet connection, they are generally easily accessible. One site for the construction and mediation of theology today is the medium of podcasts – and that is what I will explore in the analysis chapter of this thesis.

To sum up this section, I would say that what I have called attention to are primarily two scholars – Berger and Horsfield – who have focused on the general problem of social reality as a mediated and communicatively constructed phenomenon. Berger took the lead here in a classic sociological sense, and Horsfield provided some insights into how these general ideas can be applied to Christianity specifically. Before I move on to discuss my concrete case study I would like to spend some time responding to a very important question:

Why Does This Matter?

The processes of mediating, communicating, and thus constructing, a social reality along with the production of ideas that are understood as true and that pass for knowledge can be observed in many places. As mentioned before, religion is an area in which such processes are especially brought to the fore due to the nature of religion itself, which is one of the reasons that it is an apt place to start when looking for a case study for this thesis. However, the value of this research lies in the fact that the same patterns can be found in many different areas. Scientific communities search for and communicate ideas of knowledge; journalism works off of assumptions of what is understood to be objective perspectives; these are but two other examples apart from faith traditions. This thesis highlights the mechanisms of defining truth and knowledge in the context of a modern media environment.

The Case: *Another Name For Every Thing*

The podcast *Another Name For Every Thing* (CAC, 2021a) is a conversational audio podcast based on Franciscan friar Richard Rohr's book *The Universal Christ* (2019). It has a total of five seasons. The show's hosts, Brie Stoner and Paul Swanson, talk to Fr. Rohr about the core themes of his book and its theological underpinnings. A recurring theme in Rohr's work – and thus in the podcast – is the differentiation between Jesus and Christ. The podcast is produced by The Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. On the Center's website, the show is briefly described as follows:

Another Name for Every Thing with Richard Rohr is a conversational podcast series on the deep connections between action and contemplation. Richard is joined by two students of the Christian contemplative path, Brie Stoner and Paul Swanson, who seek to integrate the wisdom amidst diapers, disruptions, and the shifting state of our world.

As a part of my analysis chapter I will take closer looks at some of the conversations that are had on *ANFET*³ and I will view them through the lens of different theory-based texts. In the next chapter I provide a methodological foundation for choosing *ANFET* as my case study.

Previous Research

The combined study of media and religion is not unheard of; but viewing it as an opportunity to understand the (re-)formation of theology through communication is on the other hand somewhat of a rarity. I have nonetheless identified a couple of research articles that have relevance for what I am trying to accomplish academically, and what follows is thus an overview what I have identified:

Of particular interest for this thesis is a research project by Fekete and Knippel (2020). They provide an in-depth look at the phenomenon of "the growing number of people who identify themselves as post- or ex-evangelicals" and "who feel critical of White American Evangelical Christianity" (id: 166). At the core of Fekete's and Knippel's research are three online communities of 'religious deconstruction' primarily for people with the common denominator of having a background in Evangelical or Fundamentalist Christianity. These communities are framed as expressions of a general, socioreligious movement within American Evangelicalism away from traditional Evangelical belief systems in favor of more progressive constructions

of faith and doctrine. Fekete and Knippel (id: 172) write: "Like [Rob] Bell, there are many more pastors and writers, such as Nadia Bolz-Weber, Rachel Held Evans, or Jeff Chu, who have moved significantly away from their Evangelical beliefs in recent years." Furthermore, they note: "[t]he rapid growth of podcasting as a communication medium, coupled with widely used social media platforms, has allowed for the creation of community spaces and interpersonal connections that were not possible in years past" (ibid). A fundamental condition for the creation of such communities of religious de- (and re-)construction is, in other words, digital media platforms, one of these being podcasts.

Fekete's and Knippel's research is a good illustration of the general situation in which we also find the *ANFET* podcast. In the analysis chapter I will be discussing the idea that doubt, as spoken of by Charles Sanders Peirce, is the incentive behind not only deconstructionist movements, but – to the point – processes of reconstruction. The research of Fekete and Knippel could be used to back up the idea of large-scale doubt within Western culture at large, to some degree, but particularly within the Christian setting. More on this in the analysis chapter.

The topic of media usage in a Christian context has been explored by Lochte (2008) in his article on Christian radio. He provides a historical overview of this specific area of broadcasting in the context of the United States. However, in contrast to the podcasts which Fekete and Knippel focus on, the Christian radio that Lochte details has not been used as a means of de- and reconstructing the Christian religious tradition but rather as ways of maintaining and disseminating existing structures of Christian theology. The medium of radio has, for instance, been used for preaching and for Bible lessons (id: 61), and thus we have terms such as "broadcast evangelists" (id: 62). Today, Lochte (id: 63-64) notes that Christian media "have become a multi-billion dollar industry." Lochte's article does not, however, deal with the de- and reconstruction of a religious tradition, which is what this thesis aims to do.

Scholz et al. (2008) demonstrate how the concept of authority is established in an online environment, within a Muslim context. They have studied podcasts by Muslim producers, and, importantly, "[...] the podcasts analyzed are always discussed within the framework of the online environment they are embedded in, i.e. the websites of the groups and institutions

responsible for their publication” (id: 472). In one of the podcasts that were analyzed, Scholtz et al. (id: 485; my italics) note that “[...] many lectures strongly resemble sermons by addressing an audience (understood as a group of ‘disciples’) by means of a *normative discourse*.” This could be contrasted with another podcast which they also analyzed, named *Alt.muslim Review*, which “[...] serves to propagate a concrete understanding of Islam, an understanding, though, that is not marked by normative discourses, but by fluidity and diversity – key terms of all episodes” (id: 506). In other words, the *Alt.muslim Review* podcast could be understood as a podcast of religious deconstruction rather than exclusively a show for the maintenance of existing thought structures.

The podcast which this thesis proposes to analyze, *ANFET*, could also arguably be placed in the category of ‘religious deconstruction’, it being in a similar vein of the podcasts (and associated online communities such as Facebook groups) that Fekete and Knippel (2020) have studied. *ANFET* is, however, not exclusively shaped around the notion of post-evangelicals but (which Fekete and Knippel focus on), rather, is targeted to Christians of all denominations. While Fekete and Knippel take an ethnographic approach to the community aspect of the religious de- and reconstruction, they do not detail what that construction process entails nor its specific results. This thesis holds a particular interest in the latter. One might say that if Fekete and Knippel prioritize *context*, this thesis also wishes to hone in on the *text*. Scholz et al. (2008: 478-488) do this to some extent, but in a Muslim context, whereas this thesis focuses on the Christian tradition.

On the notion of *text*, Livengood and Ledoux Book (2004) have studied the use of theological words in Christian music. Their research does not entirely tie into that of this thesis but it is nonetheless useful for setting the cultural stage on which a podcast such as *ANFET* can be found. Livengood and Ledoux Book (id: 127) show that “Christian songs with moderately and ambiguously theological lyrics have become increasingly more popular.” Using framing theory they suggest that what would have previously been identified as explicitly Christian music would now be considered – by the general public – as (non-denominationally) spiritual. One might argue, in an American context, that this is an expression of a general lack of interest in a concrete Christian religious tradition in favor of a growing appreciation – among those who are at all interested in religious or spiritual concerns, that is – for more loosely

defined spirituality. We might also view this as expressions of larger theological and ideological renegotiations through communication.

This has been an overview of some current research that in one way or another shares something in common with the work I present in this thesis. Key ideas that I wish to extract from the summary above are for one the current tendencies of de- and reconstruction within different Christian communities, and secondly the fact that these processes are happening within communities that, thirdly, to a great extent have modern media and communication technology to thank for their existence.

Time To Be Specific: Research Questions

At this point it should be somewhat clear what types of theoretical issues I am pursuing. Now I wish to specify the specific research questions that I ask in relation to my case study:

- *How can we understand the ANFET podcast as an expression of negotiating and generating ideas of truth and knowledge?*
- *What role does communication play in our understanding of truth?*
- *How can we understand not only ANFET, but also the processes of defining our ideas of truth, in the light of postmodernity?*

A Believable Approach

Methodology

Learning By Example

This research is motivated by the problem of truth-construction through acts of communication. I want to examine the processes that go into this phenomenon. My method of choice is that of the case study, which Flyvbjerg (2001: 66 ff.) discusses in detail. But what is the value of a case study? How do we apprehend knowledge produced within the bounds of a particular case?

Flyvbjerg (id: 10 ff.) responds to questions like the ones above as he makes a distinction between *context-independent* and *context-dependent* knowledge respectively, through the use of a model for stages of learning. At the lowest level of learning (novice), generalized rules are what guides a person (id: 11). These rules are, notably, not dependent on context and can thus be applicable in any given situation. At the other end of the spectrum, we have the expert, who knows intuitively what is important in any given situation and who has the ability to see holistically (id: 17). This type of knowledge always depends on and is guided by context, and at this end of the spectrum, there are no universal rules or laws that can be applied everywhere.

”[W]henever [Socrates] asked for universals he got cases” (id: 69). Flyvbjerg uses this as an illustration of the impossibility of finding anything equivalent to ‘laws of nature’ within the

world of human behavior. He further uses Socrates, as well as Aristotle, to elevate the significance of individual cases. Flyvbjerg (id: 70) writes:

Aristotle, who may be seen as the founder of empirical science, asserted that in the study of human activity we cannot be satisfied with focusing on universals. The study of human activity, according to Aristotle, demands that one practice *phronesis*, that is, that one occupy oneself with values as a point of departure for praxis. And Aristotle considered that values and human behavior must be seen in relation to the particular.

We can take "in relation to the particular" to mean: on a case-by-case basis. Universal patterns are context-independent; individual cases are, on the other hand, context-dependent. Flyvbjerg (id: 71) stresses the point that in social science, "a singular focus on deduction and general principles" – context-independent knowledge – "leads to a dead end." Moreover, Flyvbjerg (id: 72) simply states: "Predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context-dependent knowledge is therefore more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals" (id: 73 [italics removed]).

For the purposes of this thesis, Flyvbjerg's approach means that I need to find a particular case where the processes of truth-construction through acts of communication can not only be observed, but also, hopefully: better understood. Cases of this kind could be found in many different places. That is why Flyvbjerg's (cf. id: 77) term *critical cases* is very useful. Such cases are characterized by their richness in information, in contradistinction to merely *representative* cases. Critical cases "[...] can be defined as having strategic importance in relation to the general problem" (id: 78). They "[...] activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied" (ibid.). I argue that the *ANFET* podcast fits the criteria that Flyvbjerg lays out, and here is why:

Human beings have been understood as fundamentally religious in nature (Gustafsson, 1997: 15). This is arguably why we have terms such as *homo religiosus*, 'the religious human' (cf. Sky, 2005: 23). In other words: questions about the meaning of life, about why anything (and any thing) exists at all, and questions about Truth with a capital T could be said to be as old as humanity itself. In a religious context, these exact issues, which also are those I wish to research (truth, knowledge, how we know what we know about existence, and so forth), are given center stage. A podcast about religion and how one can live a contemplative life is thus

a good place to start when looking for a suitable case study, for the purposes of this thesis. But there is more – what is it that makes *ANFET* a *critical* case and not just a representative one? I would maintain that the answer to this question lies in the ecumenical⁴ approach that the hosts of *ANFET* take and the openness to other faith traditions that they exhibit. Because they are not situated within one single tradition, but rather, in a web of several, the act of defining truth – in this case: of shaping a theology that is relevant to people of postmodernity – is not a means for something else but an end in itself. In *ANFET*, ideas both clash and connect. More actors and more basic mechanisms are activated, to speak with Flyvbjerg (cf. 2001: 78), because the amount of premises that can be taken for granted are reduced. In sum: the *ANFET* podcast is an apt and critical case for the purposes of this thesis.

Down To Brass Tacks

What concrete steps have I taken to create the analysis chapter that lies ahead? What does the process of ‘case study’ – in this situation – actually entail?

Firstly, I have been listening to the entirety of the *ANFET* podcast. The various episodes have accompanied me on a personal level since the show was first launched in early 2019 (CAC, 2021b) and I have listened to many of the episodes more than once, sometimes two or three times. Thus, when it was time to start working on this thesis, I came in with a high degree of familiarity with what was to become my empirical material. A second step I took was to create a spreadsheet⁵ that charted all the episodes as well as keywords for each one. I generated these keywords myself through a combination of listening to the episodes or reading through their respective transcripts, as well as pulling information from the descriptions assigned to each episode by CAC. This process can be described as a qualitative content analysis. I identified “themes that [helped me] [...] tell the story of the data” (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020: 338). In other words, what emerged through this process was the key concepts and topics that are discussed on the *ANFET* podcast, as well as the main ideas that the hosts wish to offer their listeners.

The analysis chapter in this thesis is not only, or even primarily, an analysis of the *ANFET* podcast. It is an analysis of certain *ideas*, namely our notions about communication and about our conceptions of truth. A consequence of this is that theoretical literature on this topic plays

a heavy part of the analysis itself. That is also why this thesis does not contain a separate or dedicated Literature Review chapter as one might otherwise expect. The analysis *is* the literature review, or vice versa.

This also means that the analysis, as it relates to *ANFET*, is not structured so as to provide analytical points about every episode. My sampling criteria for episodes to include in the analysis has been meta-thematic in nature. Allow me to explain: because I am looking at the *processes* of communication rather than its *content*, it is of lesser concern which specific episodes I pinpoint when I make analytical observations. The main problem this thesis deals with is philosophical in nature; the theoretical literature serves, in concert with the empirical material, to illuminate that problem. In many cases, the same theoretical point could have been made by analyzing passages from several podcast episodes. I have not done that for the sake of avoiding redundancy. Thus, as far as sampling goes, I have selected quotes and passages from some episodes that – together with the chosen literature – adequately illustrate the main philosophical problem that I tackle. Other episodes might have been selected instead, but the point is not the content of the episodes. The point is the processes which can be observed in all episodes, and which can be better understood and clarified in certain ones.

Quick Note

The CAC provides transcripts to the majority of the *ANFET* podcast episodes. These are the transcripts I have used for the analysis. When I reference a certain episode I follow a formula in which I first list the season and then the episode, and finally the page number(s) of the transcripts. For example, S1E1 (2) means Season 1 Episode 1, page 2. Further details on each episode can be found in the References chapter.

For better readability and clarity, and for inline commenting, I have occasionally used [] when quoting passages from the episode transcripts.

A New Symbol:

The Universal Christ

Religion and Truth

One might ask why a thesis in the discipline of Media and Communication Studies would tackle a subject such as religion. I have discussed this to some extent in a previous chapter but it bears repeating and serves as a good introduction to this chapter.

Communities of faith seem to belong to the scholar of Religious Studies – the merits of interdisciplinary research notwithstanding. I would suggest that we often, colloquially at least, associate media and communication with technology; with blinking bright lights and flashing screens; with news headlines, Twitter hashtags, and social media platforms in general; or perhaps, with the history of the telegraph, or that of radio-wave broadcasting. Lighting candles at a shrine may not seem as relevant to the media scholar as the lighting up of a smartphone screen. Frankly: what do monasteries have to do with ‘the media?’ What interest do churches, mosques, synagogues, shrines and temples hold in the halls and corridors of communication research? Here one might interject that a possible field of inquiry could be the strategies for external communication that are employed by religious institutions, for example studying their use of websites or social media, etcetera. That is indeed one conceivable way of approaching *the topic* of religion from a Media and Communication Studies angle. However, I would argue that this would not be approaching *religion itself* – which is what I do in this thesis – from the viewpoint of Media and Communication Studies.

For the sake of accuracy I should clarify further: I am not only approaching religion itself as the social organisation of people with a common faith; I am approaching religion as communities of negotiation and fixation of beliefs⁶ with the purpose of establishing what is universally, existentially and cosmically true. The act of fixing beliefs in a community is an inherently *communicative* act – thus this thesis does arguably qualify as research within the field of Media and Communication Studies. Religious communities themselves can be understood as mediums communicating and establishing meaning. I will develop this more further along.

I am not here, nor anywhere else in this thesis, making any metaphysical judgements about what claims about reality are ontologically and really true; the fact that I will be discussing truth as socially constructed, or as fixations of belief, does not mean that the truth claims being referenced are not true in reality. Neither does it mean that they are. The *understanding or construction* of truth and *truth itself* are two entirely different topics and I am only investigating the former.

As a means of moving forward I postulate the following: ‘Truth’ can be understood as an abstract object which we as human beings believe to exist, thanks to the fact that abstract objects *are real* to the extent that we *act as if they are*. Let me devote the next section to backing this up:

The Reality of Abstract Objects

”All our attitudes, moral, practical, or emotional, as well as religious, are due to the ‘objects’ of our consciousness, the things which we believe to exist, whether really or ideally, along with ourselves” (James, 1902: 53). This quote from William James is important because it highlights that whether unseen things (such as objects in a spiritual realm) are a part of our reality or not, we behave as if they are regardless. To make this point more clear I would give the example of the abstract concept ‘love’: the sensation of being in love is not something material to which you can point and say, ”Look! Here is *a thing* you can *see* and *touch* and *therefore* it exists.” However, in fortunate cases, what you *can* see are the *effects* of the love as they materialize in the forms of, say, intimate physical touch, self-sacrificial actions, candle-lit dinners and intense emotions manifest as pounding hearts. Even though we cannot see or

touch love itself we act and react *as if* it truly exists. We can see the physical and material manifestations, and consequences, of it. What I am getting at here is that in some sense abstract objects have the potential of being real *for those who believe in them* irrespective of whether any given conceptual thing is true or not in a metaphysical sense.

What is stated in the paragraph above is incredibly easy to illustrate with the religious person: In the act of praying to/with/in God, God – as an abstract concept/object – is real for that person because *their action of praying* postulates that God is real; the reality of God is *enacted* and the abstract concept or object of ‘God’ has *material consequences* in the form of prayerful people. Immanuel Kant stated that words like ‘God’ carry no inherent significance, “[y]et strangely enough they have a definite meaning *for our practice*. We can act *as if* there were a God [...]” (id: 55, italics in original).

Furthermore, for religious individuals, ‘truth’ as an abstract concept also exists since they would say that it is *true that* God exists, and, furthermore, they would make statements of truths *about* God. All such statements are communicated through the embodied actions of the people who adhere to them. In some sense, the truths are thus – sociologically speaking – *made* real. (I will return to this notion as I discuss American Pragmatism.)

I must readily point out that this notion of the reality of abstract objects is applicable to the human experience as a whole, and is not limited to religious contexts. My previous example of ‘love’ should suffice to illustrate this. One could say the same for ‘friendship’ or ‘stress’, just to pick a few examples – none of these things are material, yet they have material consequences; and none of these things are actually ‘things’ which we can directly access with our physical senses, yet they are real things within the context of our social reality as we embody them, thus giving them some sense of being tangible nonetheless.

At this point I would briefly like to bring another thinker into our discussion by the name of John D. Caputo. In his book titled *Philosophy and Theology* (2006) he, among other things, makes an interesting comparison between St. Augustine and Jaques Derrida (cf. id: 59-67). The former represents the premodern whereas the latter represents the postmodern. Caputo (id: 62) brings our attention to a peculiar statement by Derrida in which he talks of his “religion about which nobody understands anything,” and the reason for calling this peculiar

is of course that Derrida is so often associated with secularism, relativism and sometimes nihilism (ibid). But Caputo (ibid.) notes that the word ‘God’ had “[...] an important function for Derrida, serving as it does to give life ‘constancy’.” It may be that the name of God was understood by Derrida as another word for, say, ‘justice’. In any case, it is evident that what is on display here is a man’s belief in the reality of something abstract, something untouchable yet undeniable. Or perhaps ‘belief’ is too strong a word? Maybe we should say ‘a sense of’? Caputo (id: 63-64) writes:

Like Augustine, he [Derrida] is a man of prayers and tears. But to whom is he praying? And for what does he weep? If he knew that, if someone could tell him all that, he would not need to pray. He prays because he does not know to whom to pray or if indeed there is someone there to receive his prayers. The very destitution of his prayer does not spell the end of prayer, but it is what drives his prayer.

As we can see, Derrida, who so often passes for an atheist, seemingly wrestles with the question of whether there is Someone or something who would answer his prayers. If he knew the answer to this question already he would not need to pose it at all – in other words: he would not need to pray. But he does not know the answer, and so he prays. The very fact that he does pray – or ask questions – suggests that he might have a notion, a sense, that something or Someone may answer him. In a similar vein, one could say that if one did not hold the immaterial thing of justice to be real, there would be no reason to fight for it. Yet, there are many examples of people who *do* fight for it, suggesting, if nothing more, that at least they *believe* it is real.

The common human intuition that things of an immaterial nature are real is indeed so common that it gave rise to that which we now know as the platonic theory of ideas (James, 1902: 56-57). I shall let James (id: 58, italics in original) sum up this section: “[i]t is as if there were in the human consciousness a *sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call ‘something there,’ more deep and more general than any of the special and particular ‘senses’ by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed.”

Now that we have established abstract objects as something socially or psychologically real, and identified ‘truth’ as one such real thing, it is time to investigate how truth is socially constructed. As the previous adverb hints at, a key concept in this exploration is: *community*.

Engaging American Pragmatism

In this thesis, I am exploring the idea that what societies understand as truths are *beliefs* that have been *fixated* as such in a *communal* way. Peirce (2009) provides the theoretical underpinnings for viewing truths as ‘fixations of belief’. On the American pragmatist view (cf. Gail Hamner, 2003), that is true which we believe to be true and accordingly *enact*. But where do our beliefs come from? What is the driving force behind their creation? Peirce (2009: 42) writes: ”Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief; while the latter is a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change to a belief in anything else.” In other words: doubt is here understood to be that which creates the incentive to investigate and establish beliefs, so as to eradicate uncertainty.

Let us now delve deeper into American pragmatism. This is a tradition which this thesis engages to a significant degree. As a school of thought it has been characterized as being ‘anti-’, for example: anti-universalist, anti-essentialist and so forth (cf. Gail Hamner, 2003: 3). Pragmatists *de-construct*. Furthermore, “[...] they increasingly emphasize the embeddedness of human knowing in bodily action and social interaction [...]” (id: 7). The question of ‘knowledge’ thus takes central stage: what is the nature of it? How is it accessed, or rather: produced? Such inquiries touch upon the metaphysical problem of ultimate reality. Concerning this, Gunn (1998: 404) draws the contours of a shift in philosophical understanding: Whereas anything of an ultimate nature, such as precisely reality, or truth, or meaning, was historically understood to be *beyond* humanity, on the pragmatist view, it is instead relocated *within* it (ibid.). An apt illustration of this is the relationship between sign and meaning. Someone who does not adhere to the pragmatist standpoint might state that these are two separate entities and that the former *refers to* the latter. The pragmatist philosopher, on the other hand, would postulate that meaning is not beyond the sign, or separate from the sign, but found *in* the sign *as* the sign, expressed within the boundaries of the social interactions of a community. Again, we can refer to Gail Hamner (2003: 7;

emphasis added) who underlines "[...] bodily action and *social interaction* [...]." We can also point to Gadamerian hermeneutics, according to which "[...] meaning is always meaning *for someone* such that it is *relative to an interpreter*. [...] Meaning arises out of the relationship between an act and those trying to understand it – it is the product of an interaction of two subjects" (Fay, 1996: 142; emphasis in original). In the quote above the social aspect inherent to pragmatist philosophy is articulated. In sum, meaning can be conceptualized as *dynamic* and as *created* through the process of interpretation, which in turn is an activity present in both the production and consumption of signs. This notion gets to the heart of the anti-essentialist quality of American pragmatism. If meaning is a product of something else, it follows that it is not inherent or separate from a sign that points to it.

Now, for the sake of clarity and continuity, let us return to the topic of the previous section of this chapter, namely the one about the reality of abstract objects. From the pragmatist perspective, such objects do not *need to exist per se* in any metaphysical sense; it is not as though these concepts are found 'out there' and we are 'down here' referring to them. No, what the pragmatists argue is, rather, that those abstract objects – or *meaning* (at this point, we can probably use these terms interchangeably) – are the products of social interaction in a community, or the result of *fixations of belief*, to speak with Peirce. In other words: That which we hold as true is the product of *communication*.

I mentioned 'community' and this is indeed an important piece of the argument that this thesis wishes to make. If meaning is understood as something that happens in the interaction between two or more people (cf. Fay, 1996: 142), it can also be said that 'community' is a necessary element for meaning to exist; it is within a community that beliefs can be fixated, negotiated, and re-fixated. In the introductory section of this chapter, I stated that "I am approaching religion as communities of negotiation and fixation of beliefs with the purpose of establishing what is universally, existentially and cosmically true" and by now, it should be increasingly evident how I am doing just that. Similar to scientific communities (particularly those in the realm of natural sciences), religious communities have a vested interest in settling matters of Truth with a capital T. Some (American pragmatists) might say that fixations of belief is the very bread and butter of churches and universities alike. The case study of this thesis, the podcast *Another Name For Every Thing* (CAC, 2021a), is here taken to be an

exploration of the negotiation and re-fixation of beliefs in the context of contemporary Christian theology. As such it mirrors what values and questions are currently important to the people of contemporary, Western society.

So far, so good. But how exactly are beliefs fixated, on the pragmatist view? How can we understand ‘community’ as a result of communication? To an attempt at resolving questions such as these I devote the next section. In order to do so, I explore how communication theory has been formulated throughout history, and I demonstrate how we can read the process of communication as that which *creates and maintains* community, rather than, reductionistically, as an act of relaying information.

The Idea of Communication

The Word Became Flesh

That which Durham Peters (2000: 63 ff) refers to as the Spiritualist Tradition, as a foundation for our understanding of communication theory, is centered around the idea of transmission (cf. Carey, 2009: 12). Durham Peters (2000: 64) observes that this is often our everyday perception of communication:

In everyday usage, "communication" rests squarely on such conceptions: Each of us has a treasure chest of thoughts and wishes uniquely our own. [...] Language and signs are crude carriers for the inner life. Words are at best conventions; they refer to meanings inside people's minds and to objects in the world. When we express ourselves, we trust private self-stuff to public symbol proxies. Other people catch only the proxies, not the original fullness we had when we uttered our innards. Every utterance is thus a fall or at least a transition into a crossroads of sign traffic that is subject to collisions and bottlenecks; all communication, whether face-to-face or distant, becomes a problem of mediation. If only the signifying vehicles would vanish so that we could see into each other's hearts and minds, genuine communication would be possible.

As we can see in the quote above, Durham Peters circles the idea of mediation as being a central problem in communication, both theoretically and literally. Communicating is a matter of conveying something immaterial to another and there may be hindrances along the way in this process. Carey (id: 13) notes that the transmissions-based view of communication can trace its origins to religion as he links it to the idea of transportation. He writes (ibid.):

Transportation, particularly when it brought the Christian community of Europe into contact with the heathen community of the Americas, was seen as a form of communication with profoundly religious implications. This movement in space was an attempt to establish and extend the kingdom of God [...].

Allow me to emphasize the phrase "movement in space," and add "or time." At the core of this view of communication lies the notion of something be carried somewhere (or somewhen). Some *immaterial* content is transported from a sender to a receiver through *material* means. For example, when we speak a word, the meaning of that word (which is immaterial) is carried through physical air through vibrations (which is material). The word and its meaning are ontologically distinct; they belong to different categories; the former *carries* the latter. What becomes immediately apparent is that this is not a pragmatist understanding of meaning, since, in the conceptualization described above, meaning is seen as *separate, as an entity in and of itself*, as something which can be handled and transported by a medium. A word is one thing, its meaning another. This split between word and meaning can be illustrated by turning to the work of St. Augustine, and his view on the relationship between the body and the soul. Durham Peters (2000: 70) writes:

Augustine uses the contrast of flesh and spirit to explain signs. The sound of a word is material; the significance of a word is mental. Like human beings, the word is split into a body (sound) and spirit (meaning). To explain the word, Augustine often resorts to the Word, the logos of the Gospel of John, "the Word made flesh," the second member of the Trinity; it is remarkable how consistently discussions of the work of language accompany his discussions of the Incarnation.

Thus, in St. Augustine's framework, a sign or a word is only important to the extent that it points to its interior, immaterial content (cf. id: 68-69). The word is that which carries its meaning and we ought not confuse the medium for the message.

Durham Peters (2000: 71) concludes that on St. Augustine's view, the communication between God and humanity "is essentially a media problem." This can be understood more easily if one conceives of God *as* pure meaning, which is one way of reading John's Gospel when the author refers to "the Word." *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*⁷ What follows is that when God communicates Godself to humanity, God has to be mediated; the eternal meaning of God needs to be carried somehow through a medium, and this medium has to be of such a nature that humanity can interact with it and uncover the meaning within. In short: the message needs a carrier. According to

Christian doctrine, this is exactly what happened historically in the person of Jesus of Nazareth – hence: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us*.⁸ Infinite meaning was mediated from outside space and time, into space and time, to humanity.

Just as Jesus was God incarnated as a human being – as a *sign* meaning ‘God’ – we can generalize this idea and state that meaning regardless of context can be incarnated as physical signs. Here lies the heart of the matter, and an essential link between our understanding of communication on the one hand and (Christian) religion on the other.

So far we have an understanding of communication as the process of carrying meaning from one place to another through some form of medium. We have identified this as a transmissions-based view (cf. Carey, 2009: 12). But this is not the only way of understanding the phenomenon of communication – as we shall see in the next section.

Going To Communion

From the transmissions-based perspective on communication, problems arise in the face of media that are unable to establish a connection that is free from blockage. Durham Peters (2000: 65) writes: “Media, like bodies, become pipes that are interesting only in their tendency to become clogged.” However, framing *communication as transmission* is not the only way of theorizing about this issue. Instead, we can view *communication as ritual* (cf. Carey, 2009: 15). Understanding it thus makes the process of communicating a matter of *community* rather than of transporting information from one place to another while hoping that it is received according to the intentions of the sender. Carey (ibid.) writes that “[...] the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality.” For the sake of example, let us turn to such a sacred ceremony: the celebration of the Eucharist.⁹ I argue that receiving Holy Communion can be understood as an act of communication.

The pinnacle point of a Catholic and Orthodox Mass is the celebration of Christ’s concrete presence in the bread and wine which is dispersed among the baptized people present. In Catholic and Orthodox theology, the Eucharistic host is literally transformed into the body of Christ; the accidents remain the same but the substance is changed. Therefore it is still

perceived as bread by the finite senses, but in terms of ontology, a transformation has occurred (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2016: 346-348). All this goes to say that when someone eats a consecrated host, they are – in the Catholic and Orthodox understanding – literally eating the body of Christ, which means that it is *becoming a part of them on a cellular level*. Not merely symbolically, but also biologically. Not only is a union established (for those who identify as Catholic or Orthodox Christians) between the person who consumes the host on the one hand, and God on the other, but also between the people participating in the Mass. Everyone who receives Communion is receiving *the same* body of Christ, and they are thus becoming intrinsically connected to each other. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (2016: 352; emphasis added) articulates the unitive aspect:

Those who receive the Eucharist are *united* more closely to Christ. Through it Christ *unites* them to *all the faithful in one body*—the Church. Communion renews, strengthens, and deepens this incorporation into the Church, already achieved by Baptism. In Baptism we have been called to form but *one body*. [Quoting 1 Corinthians 10:16-17:] ”The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a *participation* in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a *participation* in the body of Christ? Because there is *one bread*, we who are many are *one body*, for we all partake of the one bread.”

It should be clear at this point that the act of celebrating the Eucharist is a practice that establishes and maintains community: The people who participate in the celebration are united in their shared beliefs, and this union is expressed through the act of receiving Holy Communion. This allows us to conceive of it as communication defined as ritual. Carey (2009: 15; emphasis added) validates the above for us: ”A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of *shared beliefs*.” The practice of celebrating the Eucharist at Mass is indeed a representation of beliefs that are shared among ”the faithful,” or among the members of the Church.

The idea of shared beliefs being represented can be further developed by incorporating some of the work of Berger (1969). He discusses how society is continually established and maintained as an entity within a social reality, when humans impose a ”meaningful order, or *nomos* [...] upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals” (id: 19). In this context, we can substitute church for society – on the basic level, we are simply discussing a group of people experiencing a community. The Catholic Church is such a community. Berger

uses the term *nomization* which can be understood as the process of creating social or immaterial order, and he writes that "[l]anguage nomizes by imposing differentiation and structure upon the ongoing flux of experience" (id: 20). In other words, language – or broadly read: communication – provides structure to our experience of reality, and thus simultaneously constitutes the foundations of our social world by providing *meaning* to it. Communicative practices are therefore also necessary in order to build and maintain communities, for example the Catholic Church.

A social order (such as any community, whether that be society at large or, for instance, a specific religious institution) needs to be approved by the collective if it is to survive. It needs to be made legit, so to speak. Berger (id: 29) discusses this through the use of the term *legitimation*, which is "[...] socially objectivated 'knowledge' that serves to explain and justify the social order." As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Berger (id: 29-30) writes: "[Legitimations] do not only tell people what *ought to be*. Often they merely propose what *is*." As a means of exemplifying: when the Catholic or Orthodox priest holds up the consecrated host at the altar and proclaims that *this is* the body of Christ, and the members of the congregation offer up their 'Amen' to this when they receive it, the reality of the Church and of the mystical body of Christ – as *community* – is affirmed and given the status of objective facticity. Bluntly: the priest and the congregation are not *suggesting* or *proposing* that they are participating in a cosmic mystery of divine union – they are stating with certainty that they clearly are; this constitutes the objective nature of that which is being communicated. Here it is useful to recall Peirce's idea of fixation of belief; one might, from a sociological and pragmatistically influenced point of view, read the entire celebration of Mass as a communicative act functioning as the affirmation of certain fixed beliefs. What is communicated, however, (such as the reality of the body of Christ, on the one hand in the bread and wine, and on the other hand as the unity of the faithful) is not understood as beliefs that might be true or might not, but simply as reality – thus the beliefs are 'fixed'. Circling back to Berger (ibid.), these are legitimations at work that convey the constitution of reality. Furthermore, Berger (id: 30) writes that "[...] the socially constructed world [such as the Church or the mystical body of Christ] legitimates itself by virtue of its objective facticity." To put it another way, the *truthfulness* of the community and the theology that is produced and reproduced at any given Mass is deemed as truthful precisely because it is perceived as being

coherent with the Catholics' prior understanding of objective and ultimate reality. The mystical Body of Christ – as a community – is made real by being perceived as objectively factual *through an act of communication*.

Berger (id: 31) adds that "legitimizing formulas must be repeated" lest the reality which they are upholding starts to fade away. Repeatedly communicating the body of Christ through the celebration of Holy Mass can therefore be read as an act of "reality maintenance" building the community of Church not just in space, but also in time.

Summary

So far in this chapter we have covered the following: understanding religion as communities of negotiation and fixation of beliefs; understanding 'truth' as such fixations; understanding abstract concepts (such as truth, or meaning, or community) as 'things' that are real in a social reality yet not metaphysically separate from humanly experienced reality (according to the American pragmatists); the centrality of embodiment, or enactment, and of material consequences, to the concept of meaning; and finally, communication as that which creates and maintains communities.

In the remaining sections of this chapter I will demonstrate how the theological conversations in the podcast *Another Name For Every Thing* (CAC, 2021a) can be understood as the communicative act of negotiating and re-fixating beliefs. I do this in the light of the philosophical tenets of American pragmatism. Before concluding, I make some suggestions as to how one might situate this analysis in a postmodernity discourse.

Contemplative Conversations

Christ Is Not Jesus's Last Name

The *ANFET* podcast is a conversational audio show based on the core themes of Franciscan friar Richard Rohr's book *The Universal Christ* (2019). The podcast hosts, Brie Stoner and Paul Swanson, talk to Fr. Rohr about the core themes of his book and its theological underpinnings. A recurring theme in Rohr's work – and thus in the podcast – is the

differentiation between Jesus and Christ. Rohr (2019: 5) understands ‘Christ’ as referring to ”the transcendent within of every ‘thing’ in the universe,” or in other words: as a material manifestation of a spiritual reality. On this view, Christ becomes ”another name for every thing” – not for every concept or idea, but for every *thing*. The relationship between spirituality and materiality is thus focused here (id: 13-14). The theological implications of such a christology are significant. Rohr often points out that ”Christ is not Jesus’s last name” (cf. id: 11).

At first glance, Rohr’s interpretation of ‘Christ’ might seem quite different from the literal definition of the word, which becomes evident when we examine the etymology (cf. OED Online, 2021): ‘Christ’ refers traditionally to the *title of an individual person*, namely Jesus of Nazareth, and the word stems from the greek translation of the Hebrew word ‘Messiah’ which situates the word in a specifically Jewish context. The Messiah is known as a ruler anointed by God in the Hebrew scriptures. Furthermore, theologically speaking, ”[...] in various later apocalyptic traditions [Christ/Messiah is] interpreted as the future redeemer of the human race [...]” (cf. *ibid.*). In sum: the meaning of the word ‘Christ’ is commonly understood as a single person to whom the entire world is subject by virtue of this individual’s authority which is granted by God. Christ is ‘the chosen one’.

If we are to follow the lead of the pragmatists, we would not assert the definition above as neither ”true” nor ”false,” but simply as a *fixed belief* that has been established by a community of (Christian) theologians over time and through space and this fixed belief has then been disseminated – *mediated* through word and symbol – to the wider public. Through social interaction an agreement has been struck which stipulates that ‘Christ’ as symbol, or as word, *means* Jesus of Nazareth, as the redeemer of the world, offering eternal salvation to those who place their faith in him. As more and more people have used and continue to use ‘Christ’ in communication to indicate the concept outlined above, the definition I have sketched becomes *understood as true* by virtue of it being *fixated* as a belief – that is: not merely held or suggested, but specifically fixated (cf. Peirce, 2009). To speak with Berger (1969: 11) one could say that ‘Christ’ has been *objectivated* which means that what ‘Christ’ as a particular symbol stands for ”[...] has attained the status of objective reality.” Furthermore, through communication – such as liturgy¹⁰ – the theological understanding of ‘Christ’ as

meaning ‘Jesus, the personal savior’ with all that this entails has been *legitimated* (cf. id: 29-30); as a symbol, it has been used consistently in a particular way so as to establish that this is not only how ‘Christ’ *ought* to be understood but simply that this is what ‘Christ’ *inherently, naturally, and obviously* means.

Allow me now to share a passage from S1E1 (2-3) in which Christ is specifically discussed:

Paul Swanson: [...]

As we talk about the themes of The Universal Christ, how do you explain the Christ to a child?

Richard Rohr:

Wow. [...] [C]ertainly the most simple language of love, caring for you, protecting you, always, everywhere, all the time, they don’t have trouble believing that kind of language. To us, it almost sounds sentimental and like a sales job. I don’t think it’s heard by a small child as a sales job, but [as] a wonderful unfolding presence that they can rely upon. So, any language that communicates presence, availability, caring, protection [...].

[...] It’s all presence, presence, however you can communicate presence, and caring presence.

[...]

Brie Stoner:

You mentioned relationships as being part of how we build that sense of presence with children, and I wonder, what relationships in your life have been part of the significant expansion into a more cosmic Christ? You know, I think for myself, many of the greatest recognitions haven’t been theoretical. They’ve been through—

Richard Rohr:

Concrete, yeah.

Brie Stoner:

—relationships, so I wonder if you could share any of the relationships that come to mind for you, that helped you experience the Universal Christ.

Richard Rohr:

Yes. I think it was precisely after I had, maybe by the intention of others, stretched myself into otherness. [...] I remember that passing over that edge of, ”How do I relate to a poor black man?”

Then, the recognition that not only could I do it, but it was wonderful. That was my early Christ experience. I think the Christ will always be experienced when you cross the line into otherness. [...]

What we see in the passage above could be understood as a *renegotiation* of the fixed belief (or the socially constructed, abstract object) ‘Christ’ that was previously discussed. For it must be so, that if beliefs can be fixed, they can also be unfixed; the screws which hold them in place can be unscrewed and the symbols that are associated with the beliefs in question can be mounted in other places and in different ways – that which has previously provided order to human experience (cf. Berger, 1969: 19) can be scrutinized and a new order can be *collectively* established (cf. id: 7) through new language¹¹ (cf. id: 20).

There are two things I would like to point out in the passage from *ANFET* above. Firstly, the word ‘Christ’ is given a definition which associates it primarily with the concepts of *presence* and *relationship*. Thus, ‘Christ’ which has commonly been understood to mean ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ (particularly in the role of representing the second person of the Holy Trinity¹²), is given a new, or perhaps broader, meaning in the passage from *ANFET* that is quoted above. Rather than having ‘Christ’ mean one specific person, Rohr suggests that it can instead mean ”love” and ”caring presence” (S1E1: 2). The second thing of note from the quoted passage is that this definition of ‘Christ’ is apparently better understood when it is embodied in concrete experience, such as in *relationship*. This makes sense, since it would logically follow that in order to experience presence, and love, there would have to be someone or something to be present *to* or *with*; there would have to be someone *to love* or *to be loved by*. Rohr tells a story of how he established a connection between himself and someone who was different from him, in this case an African-American male with scarce financial resources, and through the experience of finding common ground – dissimilarities notwithstanding – we may assume that Rohr experienced the kind of presence that invites him to name it a ”Christ experience” in the quoted passage from *ANFET* above.

Through the lens of semiotics we can see that what is happening in the conversation among the hosts of the *ANFET* podcast is of great theological and linguistic significance. The symbol of ‘Christ’ (such as the word itself, but it could also be a crucifix, or an icon of Jesus, and so forth) which was previously associated with the meaning ‘an individual, namely Jesus of Nazareth, personal savior’ has now been expanded immensely to not exclusively refer to a person (Jesus) but instead to include ‘love’ or ‘loving presence’ in its definition. The nature of the love referenced is arguably universal and inclusive, as Rohr frames it in terms of ”caring for you, protecting you, always, everywhere, all the time” (S1E1: 2). However, it is not only the *meaning*¹³ of ‘Christ’ that has been broadened, but the *embodiment* of that meaning has reached greater proportions as well. The concept of universal love that Rohr, Stoner, and Swanson are discussing is no longer exclusively linked to symbols such as the word ‘Christ’ or the image of Jesus; it can just as well be incarnated – or *signified* – in the embodied relationships between people. The *acts* that manifest such relationships are added as *symbols* to the web of meaning-making that communicates Christ.

How can we gain a deeper understanding of what I just discussed in the previous paragraph?

Let us elaborate further:

Durham Peters (2000: 82-83) explores the thought of the famous English philosopher John Locke. I shall incorporate him into my account of things by sharing two quotes from the pages referenced above: "Locke's notion of communication rest on his understandings of mind and language," and "[l]anguage makes the inner life of ideas [...] publicly accessible." The point that is being made here, and which I wish to underline, is the definite, conceptual split between meaning and sign, or inner and outer life, or body and soul. Dichotomy is the keyword which separates content from container – on this particular view. For Locke, meaning is something that we can conceive of within ourselves, but in order to share it, to relay it to someone, we are limited to the publicly available signs which constitute our languages. Communication becomes a problem of assigning our inner life – the meaning within – to those public symbols which are best suited to carry our interior ideas across time and space to a receiver, hopefully without distorting the meaning in the process. Language is "[...] a means of transporting ideas" (id: 84). And finally, "[t]he link of word and idea, for Locke, is a social contract held up by the collective agreement of individuals" (id: 85). To return to our 'Christ' analysis, we might suggest that the word 'Christ'¹⁴ has been linked to the identity of the Jewish carpenter born in Bethlehem, and to the idea of personal salvation, and these links have been socially agreed upon by a very large collective of individuals. It is within the context of these links that the conversation between Rohr, Swanson, and Stoner take place, and these same links are also the subject of scrutiny in the podcast. Let me share another passage from S1E1 (3-4):

Paul Swanson:

Richard, you used a phrase just a moment ago that is one of my favorite of yours, which is "Christ-soaked world." What does that phrase mean to you, and what can we learn from that imagery?

Richard Rohr:

What I believe, and I believe the scriptures say, but we just weren't told to look for it, is that reality was christened, if I can use that word, from the very beginning, from the moment of its inception. Now it's interesting that we use the metaphor of anointed, pouring oil over something to reveal its sacredness, starting with the stone of Jacob; Beth-el. This is the house of God. This is the gate of heaven.

So we see this mounting recognition in the Bible, of presence, of presence. So I'm so glad that phrase struck you, that reality is already soaked with the presence, and we sought a metaphor like anointing, to remind us of what was already there, to say, "This is sacred." The oil doesn't make it sacred. The anointing of something makes you [...] aware, "This person, this rock, is sacred." [...]

And of course, that's the meaning of the word Christ. Christ is simply the Greek word for Messiah, the anointed one. And the trouble is that we limited that anointing to the unique body of Jesus, and then didn't convince many people that was true, because once you go on the limiting course, "It's only here. It's not there," then you create argumentative Christianity, deciding what is anointed and what is not.

Here we could apply the theoretical framework that Durham Peters (cf. 2000: 82-85) lays out as he discusses Locke. To do so, let us extract three interconnected symbols being focused in the passage above: 'Christ', 'anointed', and 'presence'. Rohr proposes that the symbol 'Christ' has been linked to the idea of the "unique body of Jesus" (that is: an individual) and this word also functions to ascribe certain divine qualities to Jesus's identity by virtue of the link between the symbols 'Christ' and 'anointed', via the Greek verbal language. Now, what Rohr also does, is that he introduces a third symbol – 'presence' – to suggest a redrawing of these previously, socially established connections between symbols and meaning. The symbol 'presence' becomes that third mechanism which enables the symbols of 'Christ' and 'anointed' to refer to the individual named Jesus, and to ascribe divine "chosenness" to him, yet, at the same time, by connecting 'presence' to the former two symbols, 'Christ' (as some form of main symbol) can now refer to the divine anointing of everything material – whether that be people, or objects, or buildings, or plain rocks. Simply put: Rohr is suggesting new semiotic structures.

In the brief analysis above we have been operating from what is essentially a transmissions-based view of communication (cf. Carey, 2009: 12) or what Durham Peters (cf. 2000: 63 ff) names the Spiritualist Tradition. I have discussed this perspective earlier in this chapter. On this view, signs are mediums that *carry* or *contain* meaning, and as we have seen above, which concrete expressions mediate which meanings is a matter of social contracts made by a collective. The point to stress is that message and medium are viewed as separate entities.

However: How can we view Rohr's explication about Christ from a ritual perspective (cf. Carey, 2009: 15) or through the lens of the other theoretical perspective which I have also covered in previous sections of this chapter, namely American pragmatism?

Durham Peters (2000: 109) turns to another well-known philosopher, Hegel, in order to advance his exploration of the idea of communication: "Like the spiritualist tradition, G. W. F. Hegel puts Spirit at the center of communication; unlike it, Spirit (*Geist*) is always embodied and tragically conflicted." We can understand this as follows: On the view we reviewed

earlier, spirit and body can be used as metaphors for meaning and sign – something immaterial (spirit/meaning) is mediated through something material (body/sign). The important point is that these two elements are separate from one another; a body *has* a spirit. In contrast, while Hegel (according to Durham Peters’s quote) finds the notion of Spirit useful, he does not view it as separate from Body. In other word: *meaning* is not an abstract, actual ‘thing’ of its own, but rather, the sign and its meaning are the same; “[...] there is no content separate from form [...]. [Hegel’s] philosophical method is a kind of incarnational analysis” (id: 111). There is no message without a medium, no “spirit without a body” (ibid.).

This is where our familiarity with the American pragmatists becomes especially useful and relevant. They too would adhere to the rejection of the idea that meaning and sign are two distinct entities.¹⁵ This is illustrated in Hegel’s view of the ‘self’, for in his philosophy, there is no distinct ‘self’ within the interiority of a person that can or should be manifested externally (id: 113). The ‘self’ – much like meaning – is created in relation to other people; “[...] there is no self without an other” (id: 112). The social and collective work of *making* meaning is emphasized (as opposed to pointing to it, as were it *preexistent*), much like in the work of Berger (cf. 1969).

For the pragmatist, the important thing as far as communication goes is not whether ‘Christ’ exists as a metaphysical reality; it is not a matter of whether the word ‘Christ’ *points to* an actual *thing* that exists, and where the trouble is that of assigning the right symbols to the correct corresponding meaning items – on the pragmatist view, that very premise is denied altogether. No, rather: the point of communication is the social and concrete consequences of *our understanding* of meaning rather than *meaning itself*. “The problem of communication for Hegel is not so much to make contact between individuals as it is to establish a vibrant set of social relations in which common worlds can be made” (Durham Peters, 2000: 118). In other words: from this philosophical standpoint, the goal and criteria for ‘good’ communication is not the effective and non-destructive transfer of information from one place to another, but rather, I would venture to say: to create an inclusive community in which people have ideas and understandings in common.

I should add that, in my understanding, attending the pragmatist school does not prohibit one from affirming belief in metaphysical realities. It merely engenders a skeptical stance towards our ability of accessing such realities and encourages us instead to look to the concrete manifestations of *our idea* of, say, Truth, rather than looking for *Truth itself*.

Let us return to the idea of communication as the *social act of making meaning* so as to create *common understandings* among people, which, I would add, in turn makes possible a sense of *unity* among the members of the community. From this perspective, that is precisely what the *ANFET* podcast is an expression of. It is mediated social interaction that one might argue endeavors to "[...] establish a vibrant set of social relations in which common worlds can be made" (ibid.). On a small scale, this is happening between the podcast hosts, but thanks to the medium of podcasting, it can happen on a global scale among all those who listen to the show and interact with it through listener questions, for example. In S1E2 (2), Rohr is asked to reflect on his "greatest mentors" that played a part of "the unfolding manifestation of this insight of the Universal Christ," and Rohr responds by naming Karl Rahner SJ,¹⁶ St. Francis of Assisi, and Henri Nouwen. This further emphasizes the social and communal aspect of making meaning, in this case regarding the understanding of Christ as reality, as it is clearly not something that Rohr as an individual is doing himself, which his reference to the thoughts of other people indicates. The *ANFET* podcast illustrates the *dynamic* and *ongoing* nature of meaning-making from the pragmatist perspective since the conversation does not end with the individual Richard Rohr – by virtue of it being precisely a conversation which inherently includes more than one person. We can see an example of this in S1E2 (4):

Paul Swanson:

With that, how do we develop the capacity to have a practice of love of Jesus and love of the Christ?

Richard Rohr:

How do we love both? Is that what you're saying?

Paul Swanson:

Yeah, yeah, because we've so much focused on, or may just particularly modern traditions, focused on the personal Jesus.

Brie Stoner:

Yeah. How do we move beyond Jesus is my boyfriend?

Paul Swanson:

Yeah, without losing Jesus.

Brie Stoner:

Reclaim it, yeah, without losing the connection to that personal.

Richard Rohr:

Well, the point I try to make in the book [...] is how do you let the personal lead you to the universal [...]. That's almost a question of maturity. A more mature person needs bigger seeing as they move into bigger worlds.

Now, if you never move into bigger worlds, you never experience that need. Why is it that I can't love handicapped people? Why is it I can't love people of a different religion? Well, you've never had a friend there at the personal level. [...]

So, I think Teilhard de Chardin said, "The most personal is the most universal." That's excellent. [...]

Questions are here asked and responded to; an inquisitive conversation is on display. In S1E1 (2-3) the meaning of 'Christ' is broadened to be something cosmic and universal, and in the quoted passage above, Swanson poses the question of how one can hold the tension between the particularity connoted by the symbol 'Jesus' and the universality which *ANFET* ascribes to the symbol 'Christ'. The expanded meaning of 'Christ' is further reinforced by means of contrast when Stoner introduces the idea of 'Jesus as boyfriend'; terms related to romantic relationships often connote exclusivity and focus on an individual, such as the lover or the beloved. Stoner wonders how to move beyond this metaphor, and by extent, how to move past the understanding that a Christian is someone who thinks in terms of exclusivity rather than inclusivity.

Finally, we also see intertextuality at work when Rohr refers to a statement about the personal and the universal made by Teilhard de Chardin which means that the conversation happening here is influenced by a fourth non-present person. This further underlines the communal and social aspects of this communication. Let us add another quote from S1E2 (5) to the mix:

Brie Stoner:

Right. There's a certain safety that the small Jesus world provides, and that I can live my nice life, have my nice things, give those nice things to my nice kids, and on and on we go, but then—

Richard Rohr:

It's so true.

Brie Stoner:

—but then I can ignore what's actually happening in our world right now—

Richard Rohr:

What's actually happening, yes.

Brie Stoner:

—or the needs that are right there.

Richard Rohr:

That appears to be the majority of Christianity in every culture, not just ours. I just toured Europe much of the summer, yeah, same thing there. Christianity is a country club of select people. It self-identifies as such, but it isn't known for building bridges to other groups.

Paul Swanson:

Yeah. That's such a telltale, right? It's like what you're saying, Jesus is the gateway or the door to the universal. When a group that calls itself Christians hunkers down and draws a clear distinction, there's no gateway to the universal.

Richard Rohr:

I'm glad you used that word "gate." "I am the gate." We made Him into a wall, into a hardened silo more than a gate.

Again, we see a discussion of the observed phenomenon of pulling the symbol 'Christ' – which *ANFET* suggest connotes universality – into the semantic realm of 'Jesus', which signifies an idea of the individual, the personal, or of the discrete rather than the connected. Furthermore, and importantly, there is in the conversation a reaction against the aforementioned tendency which serves to deepen and increasingly shape the new meaning of 'Christ' – once more: by means of contrast. By conjuring images of Christians "hunkering down and drawing distinctions" or as being "a countryclub of select people" the hosts of the podcast indicate how they *do not* understand the symbol 'Christ'.

I shall continue by including a passage from S2E1 (2-3):

Brie Stoner:

Yeah. So, as we continue this dialogue on The Universal Christ through these questions, we wanted to begin with an episode that serves somewhat as a review to [...] this concept, as an overview between the relationship of Jesus and Christ, and the distinction, because it's so challenging to absorb the first time through, right?

Richard Rohr:

It is. It is. I do understand that. I had years to work with it, so it isn't shocking to me anymore. But if you never heard this, it sounds unorthodox. The irony is it's supremely orthodox. Of course, that's my opinion. But I think it's true.

[...]

Brie Stoner:

To kick us off, here's a question from [listener]. We love this question because it's sort of the ultimate overview of the whole enchilada. He says:

[Listener comment:] Yes, Jesus and Christ are not the same thing. I get that. Christ existed from the moment God created matter. Christ is the logos, the blueprint for everything. Christ is the eternal union of spirit and matter. [...]

Richard Rohr:

He got a lot.

Brie Stoner:
Yeah, right?

Richard Rohr:
That's good.

Brie Stoner:
He goes:

[Listener question:] I get that, but is/was the Christ in Jesus? Did the Christ reside there in Jesus while he walked on earth as the Christ resides in us? Jesus was fully God and fully man. Am I fully God and fully man, or only a tiny little bit of God and fully man? [...] So, do Christ and Jesus meet if they are separate? I'm sorry if this is a little confusing to this aging Catholic, former Catholic, former fundamentalist, Jewish sympathizer, sinner, healing human.

Richard Rohr:
Wow. There are a lot of questions in there, but they're very basic. [...] So, yes, Jesus was objectively Christ from his birth in Bethlehem, his conception in Nazareth, just like you and I are objectively Christ. Now, his human journey, again, just like us, was the slow coming to that realization. [...]

[...]

Yes. So, let's start with Jesus. [...] I think we're saying, he is fully God and yet only by reason of his unity with the Father and the Spirit. [...] You and I are fully human, which gives us all kinds of permission and freedom to be imperfect, to make mistakes. [...]

We're implanted divinity, we're participatory in divinity. The language I've been using, [...] he is the includer; we are the included. He is the universal savior; we are the saved, but we are a part of that union and that salvation. That's it, that we've been drawn into, this mystery of the Divine and the human coexisting. But for us, it's a gift; for him, it's an identity [...].

Here is a passage from a later part of the same conversation (S2E1: 4-5):

Paul Swanson:
This ties in well with our next question. [...]

[Listener question:] Richard, how would you explain the difference between pantheism and this theology of the Universal Christ?

Richard Rohr:
That's real good to get that clarified right at the beginning. [...] Pantheism, "pan" means everything, "theism" refers to God. So, pantheism is, a simplified way of saying it, is everything is God. Everything is divine. The Orthodox tradition insisted on making a necessary distinction that we can't live up to being the agent. We just can't. [...] So, by inserting an "en" right in the middle, panentheism, God in all things[,] that was deemed to be acceptable. In fact, not just acceptable, but the message itself that God is in all things.

So, I'm sure I'm being criticized for being a pantheist, but that's really lazy thinking. [...] I am a panentheist. Now, our word for that is incarnationalism. [...]

Paul Swanson:
I think of that phrase, "a Christ-soaked world—["]

Richard Rohr:
You've always liked that phrase.

Paul Swanson:

I can't keep it off my lips, but just the way, if the world is soaked with Christ, that is a much different way of explaining panentheism versus pantheism, which I think is a helpful reframing for folks trying to wrap their mind around this.

Richard Rohr:

Then you have the incarnation of Jesus coming out of the world instead of coming into the world. I know it's going to change your perception of Christmas. [...] Well, the Christ was here all the time, but the personification came out of the world that was already Christ-soaked from the beginning, as Ephesians say, three times, in the first chapter, "From the beginning." But, who of us can think in those big terms? We can't, so you can't blame anybody. As I keep saying, I just think the mind was not ready to imagine such magnitude, such infinity.

The two passages from *ANFET* that I have just shared are examples of how interaction with questions submitted by listeners broadens the community of interpreters (cf. Durham Peters 2000: 116) and increases the scope of the meaning-making potential. Through questions, responses, reflections, and comments, 'Christ' starts to mean something special in this particular context that it does not necessarily mean in other situations. This does not suggest that this community – comprised of producers and consumers of *ANFET* – have 'found' a new meaning; no, a new meaning is *incarnating* among them, if we are to believe the pragmatist thinkers and use their terminology. It is manifesting materially through the recorded voices of the podcast hosts and is then distributed to a world-wide audience thanks to the Internet.

All the points I have made thus far suggest that this podcast expresses meaning-making through social interaction. Durham Peters (2000: 115) writes that "[...] Hegel's conception of *Geist* locates meaning as public rather than private." This idea applies here: the meaning of 'Christ' sits not within any of the individual podcast hosts, yearning to be formulated and expressed correctly; nor is the meaning to be found 'out there somewhere' settling the conversation participants with the task of finding the signs that most accurately correspond to a preexistent meaning of the word 'Christ'. Instead, the meaning is public – it is *incarnated* in the community of Rohr, Stoner, and Swanson, and through the podcast medium, this community gets even bigger and can include people from all around the world. The show hosts produces symbols, such as words that are mediated through the podcast, and listeners interpret those symbols and produce signs of their own when they send listener questions to the headquarters of *ANFET* or when they talk about the podcast to people they know. The circulation of symbols both manifests and constitutes the dynamic nature of meaning-making.

We can parallel this process, or illustrate it through means of analogy, by turning to an analysis of Charles S. Peirce's understanding of the self: "As a dialogical process, the self is a self in becoming, a continuous, open-ended process, never complete in itself" (Petrilli, 2014: 10). In a similar way, meaning is also *in becoming*, or continually *in process*, and it is so in community – hence the dialogical aspect. Furthermore: "For Peirce, the self is a sign; it converges with the verbal and nonverbal language it uses. The self is made of language and is inconceivable without language" (id: 7). For our purposes, we can understand this as conveying the notion that there is no meaning that is separable from the medium through which it is expressed. The discussions of the 'Universal Christ' on the *ANFET* podcast can be understood as the incarnation of the meaning of the 'Universal Christ', and crucially: the meaning does not exist separately from this incarnation but *is* the very incarnation. Communication is the crucial phenomenon which makes any of this possible.

Doubt In 'Christ'

In the previous section of this chapter I have analyzed the process of meaning-making as manifest in the *ANFET* podcast. Particular attention has been awarded the word, or symbol, 'Christ'. The notion of the 'Universal Christ' is ultimately the main recurring topic of *ANFET* (cf. Rohr, 2019). From a pragmatist perspective, one could argue that *ANFET* is a manifestation of the renegotiation of a fixed belief (cf. Peirce, 2009) represented by the symbol 'Christ' and the fixation of a new belief to which the symbol 'Universal Christ' is assigned. But how can we understand the motivation behind such renegotiation and -fixation? As mentioned previously in this chapter, Peirce (2009: 42) identifies *doubt* as the core impetus for the fixation of new beliefs. When a certain understanding – which we believe to be the true and correct understanding – suddenly does not seem to hold water anymore, we hurry to find a new way of approaching the subject, a new truth with which to mend the ship lest it sinks. Our questions then becomes: what are the characteristics of our postmodern society that cause enough doubt in the fixed belief represented by 'Christ' so as to motivate the fixation of a new belief represented by 'The Universal Christ'? Insights into this can be found within the podcast itself.

The Stories In Which We Live

Toulmin (1990) discusses modernity in his work *Cosmopolis* and in order to understand postmodernity we must grasp its predecessor. Toulmin (id: 9) writes that "[o]ld-time progressive politics rested on a long-term faith that science is the proven road to human health and welfare [...]" which illustrates belief in progress and prosperity; the vast *possibilities*, the *bright future*, *upward mobility* – all such things could be said to be characteristic of the values of modern society. In the humanist school of thought, which correlates with modernity, there is a critique of tradition – especially religious ones – because adherents of the humanistic philosophical school assert that religion robs people of their moral independence (Henriksen & Vetlesen, 2013: 64). Kant also emphasizes the individual, in the context of moral reasoning (ibid.), which is but one expression of the individualism that constitutes one important aspect of Western, modern society.

What we have so far in our outline of modernity is the idea of progress; a stress on the individual; and critique of religious traditions. An apt headline for the situation described is "The Age of Reason" (cf. Caputo, 2006: 21 ff.) which also points to the birth of modern natural science and significant technological advancements. For simplicity's sake, allow me to identify the ideas above as a metanarrative (cf. de Wet, 2010) or 'Big Story' of societal progress free from tradition and permeated by secularization.¹⁷ Moreover, in our context, we might understand the values and ideological tenets that are circled above as fixed beliefs in the Peircean sense.

However, Toulmin (1990: 9) states that "[m]odern science and technology can [...] be seen as the source either of blessings, or of problems, or both." Beck (1998: 30) frames this as an issue of modernity becoming a problem for itself; new technology introduces new risks caused by that very same technology, and we are faced with questions of how to handle this in the most adequate way, be it technologically, scientifically, or politically. Artificial Intelligence could be viewed as such a current hot-button issue, spanning areas of technology and politics alike, and AI introduces both perceived benefits as well as risks and highlights questions of ethics and values. Another important point that Beck (id: 213) makes is that the process of individualization commonly associated with modernity also constitutes, at least in part, the ambivalent nature of the modern project as a whole. While we may initially

experience a sense of *freedom* in that we no longer are ‘bound’ to traditional institutions (for example religious practices and views), we will soon experience this as equally the *burden* of not having any traditions or frameworks upon which we can rely. What starts to take shape here is a reduced confidence in what I have termed the metanarrative of Modernity; we are given a less optimistic view as far as societal progress goes, by way of Reason, science, technology, and the absence of ‘out-dated’ religious or traditional ideas.

This reduced confidence can also be expressed as the general ‘death of the metanarratives’, which is a concept often linked to the idea of society as influenced by postmodernism. ”For Lyotard, the epistemological mark of our post-modernity is the loss of *authoritative underpinning conceptual structures* to serve as the ‘foundation’ of rational knowledge [...]” (Toulmin, 1990: 172; emphasis added). Allow me to reword such ”authoritative underpinning conceptual structures” as simply: metanarratives. We can understand the importance of these types of narratives by turning to Berger (1969: 3; 22) who discusses human society as ”an enterprise of world-building” and notes that the ”ultimate danger [...] is the danger of meaninglessness.” Metanarratives provide the structures to the worlds which we inhabit and give meaning to our existence. Berger (id: 3) states that religion plays a significant part in this process, and this should be no surprise to us, since religions have as their specialty the objective of dealing in universal truths – *transcendence* – about the nature of existence itself, and about our part in it as human beings along side the rest of creation. However, as stated at the beginning of this paragraph, postmodernism is the scene on which the metanarratives came to die, be they religious in nature, or secular, as would be the case of the Modernity metanarrative.

Postmodernism ruled out any notion of transcendence. This creates problems for anyone wanting to make universal truth claims, as there is no metaphysical, noncontingent category of ‘Truth’. Questions about our free will also arise in the light of this, which Coakley (2015: 21) gives voice to in her book about asceticism and sexuality. What is of great relevance for our purposes in this discussion is that the fundamental questions about reality that postmodernity raises – such as the existence or nonexistence of universal truth, or of our free will – introduce large-scale *doubt* on a societal level.

We – that is: Western, postmodern society – no longer believe in the metanarrative provided by the Christian church. The *ANFET* podcast is understood in this thesis as an act of deconstruction of the story that mainline *Western* Christianity (please note the emphasis) told throughout history, namely that humanity is inherently fallen and in need of a redemption that can only be found in God, incarnated as the individual of Jesus Christ. Weber (2005) suggests that there is a spiritual kinship between Protestantism and modern capitalism, and he starts with the former and moves to the latter – might we just as well do the reverse? It seems that the capitalistic concepts of transaction and balance sheets have had their fair share of influence in the theological discourse as well, as can be gleaned from a discussion in S1E7 (2-3):

Brie Stoner:

Oh, yeah. Did you know this one? [Sings:] "What can wash away my sin, nothing but the blood of Jesus." Wait for it. "What can make me whole again, nothing but the blood of Jesus." [...]

[...]

Paul Swanson:

Yeah. It's a lovely melody—

Richard Rohr:

It is a nice melody.

Paul Swanson:

—with some difficult phrases in there.

Brie Stoner:

Difficult.

Richard Rohr:

That's the essence of transaction.

Brie Stoner:

Yeah.

Richard Rohr:

Magical religion, yeah.

Brie Stoner:

And it's just through so much of that, our sort of cultural assumptions of what Christianity is all about.

[...]

[...]

Richard Rohr:

So many hymns talk about the "wrath of God," which in the Trinitarian theology is impossible.

Paul Swanson:

Yeah, yeah.

Richard Rohr:

It's a human emotion, and why I say in the book it's not God who's violent, it's we who are, and we want God to fit our definition. God doesn't follow our jurisprudence, our tit for tat, you did this much sin, you deserve this much punishment. That's a courtroom, that's not the divine realm, that's not the kingdom of God. But again, it's like we said, we're still in the early stages. History itself hadn't produced many people who understood restorative justice. [...] And so, we even understood the cross in this mechanical way, which is why, also, so many of our hymns thank Jesus. It's all about "Thank you for doing this," and not realizing this eliminates our participation. It's just, "He did it, so we don't have to do it. We can be wealthy, and prejudiced, and everything else and not worry about it.

The passage above paints a picture of what we might call a culturally (Western) specific idea of what it is to be a Christian, and the identity of such a person could be described as follows: it is someone who views God as a judge who cares more about settling scores than love, and it is someone who believe that Jesus paid the price for their sins which means that they do not need to worry about examining the way they live their life and try to conform it to some higher ideal; Jesus *bought* salvation for them, so now they can do whatever they want. Please take note of the clear presence of notions of *fairness* (tit for tat) and *transaction* – again: from the point of view of *ANFET*, this is theology turned capitalism. Rohr discusses the famous substitutionary atonement theory in another passage from S1E7 (4-6):

Richard Rohr:

So, here was the consensus, not everybody, but the general consensus, the first thousand years, there's clearly a *price that has to be paid* [...]. [emphasis added]

[...]

Again we get back to why Mary became so popular but why God the Father became so unpopular. [...] Now when you make the father a tyrant, a sadist, a masochist, or whatever the right word is, who can't love you unless he gets blood sacrifice, you have just destroyed the whole equation. [...]

So that dominated. Now, it didn't get to be called the "penal substitutionary atonement" I think until John Calvin. [...] The idea that [Jesus] was the substitute so we wouldn't have to be punished, but He [God] has to punish somebody. That's the lie in the whole thing: He punished Jesus and Jesus accepted the punishment. [...]

As a means of summing this up we might state that the metanarrative of Western Christianity – according to *ANFET* – tells the story of a god who is not love, but exclusively justice, and who does not shy away from punishing wrongdoers and in the worst case, sentencing them to eternal damnation. This god also seems to have based his creation (and yes, on this view, it is a *he*) on the core tenets of capitalism and transaction. Furthermore, along with this paradigm come ideas about the relationship between matter and spirit, which seem to have had immense societal consequences, and these ideas are also deconstructed in *ANFET*. In S1E5 (4) it is stated that "much of the Church is platonic" which means that the idea of spirit and matter, or

body and soul, are not only separated but situated in a value hierarchy – soul and spirit always being 'better' than body and matter. An example of the consequences of such an ideology can be found in the discussion in S2E6 (5), which is in response to a listener question about menstruation:

Brie Stoner:

One of the things I so appreciate about her question and the way she asked it, is that you can see that for so long, and especially as women, we've been taught to feel shame about bodily-ness and it's been a tool of oppression. It's been a tool of keeping us disconnected from ourselves and disconnected from each other. [...]

Women have historically been the cultural symbol of embodiment, and indeed sexuality, and in a world where 'body' is at best 'less than' spirit, and at worst something bad or dangerous, women have had a rough time, as the quote above suggests. One might turn to Efrat Tseëlon (1995) for further reading on these issues.

What has been stated above should suffice to paint the picture of the Christian metanarrative that postmodern society critiques, and *ANFET* accordingly deconstructs. On the other hand, as discussed previously, the metanarrative of the Enlightenment, or of Modernity, has also been subject to critique and deemed not hold water. The result of this is that we are left with great uncertainty about fundamental questions of reality: what is really True? What values should we uphold? And why? Is there anything worth living or fighting for? Much is at stake in these questions. They cause great doubt (cf. Peirce, 2009) which we wish to eradicate.

ANFET can be read as doing precisely this. For they not only deconstruct; they also reconstruct. The nexus of ideas that constitute the 'old' metanarrative – the *fixated beliefs* of the former paradigm – are replaced by a new metanarrative built up by new fixated beliefs. Speaking of narrative – season five of *ANFET* has as its topic a worldview model consisting of three layers of Story: My Story, Our Story, The Story. The first layer concerns personal identity; the second layer represents group belonging; and the third layer is all about the universal patterns that are always true as is evidenced by human experience and validated by all the major religious traditions. The goal of this model is to invite people to have a healthy relationship to all three levels. Here is a passage from S5E3 (18-19):

Richard Rohr:

You know, one reason I can't give up on religion, for all the criticism I send its way [...] [is that] if you

can hold The Story with grace, with moveability, with deeper understanding, wisdom understanding, nothing else gives you more room to move around inside of Our Story and My [S]tory. It's like an umbrella of protection up here. If you have a good The Story, good religion, a healthy religion, I don't need to hold on to Our Story; I don't need to defend My Story. The gift of [...] the true Gospel, it is good news. It liberates the little self and it liberates the group self from its idolatries. And I bet you in some way [...] it's why we still don't want to walk away from healthy theology, healthy spirituality, healthy religion [...].

Brie Stoner:

Hmm. That's such the gift that you've helped elucidate for us, Richard, and the, you know, laying out of the Universal Christ because it's the personal experience of that universal bigger story [...]

In the section of this chapter that is titled *Doubt In Christ* I stated that *ANFET* represents a renegotiation of fixated beliefs, to borrow Peirce's terminology. The passage above is an example of the conclusion of such a renegotiation. The *ANFET* podcast starts out with the statement that Christ is not Jesus's last name, and under that rubric an entire metanarrative of Western Christianity is drawn out. I suggested that the symbol 'Christ' represents this paradigm, and that the symbol 'The Universal Christ' represents the new paradigm which *ANFET* fixates in response to the doubt that postmodern society has brought upon many people who identify as Christian. While 'Christ' has represented exclusivity, 'The Universal Christ' is the sign of inclusivity.

The hosts of *ANFET* have told a story, and in doing so, they have created a new metanarrative for the postmodern Christian to not simply hang on to, but to trust.

Doubt and Belief in a Postmodern World

This is a thesis about the processes of communication that go into establishing truth claims or that which we understand as facts or knowledge. Because religion as a social phenomena is so explicitly invested in questions of truth, a podcast which has contemplative Christianity as its main topic has been chosen as a case study. Two important points I wish to make are on the one hand that communication plays a central role in our understanding of truth, and on the other hand, there is the point that pragmatists have made before me which is that what we as researchers have access to are our *concrete expressions* of our *ideas about* truth rather than truth itself. Meaning is embodied in community and the analysis chapter demonstrates how this can be seen in action in the *ANFET* podcast. In regards to my first two research questions, I have shown how ideas of truth and knowledge are communicatively negotiated and generated on *ANFET*. Additionally, I want to stress the significant role that media has played over the course of history in the development of that which we understand to be true or define as knowledge. From the writings of antiquity, to the printing press, and on to today's Internet and – for example – podcasting, various mediums have always been factors that have allowed communication to travel through time and space, and thus the different media formats have also been arenas for the fixation of beliefs. A consequence of the research I present in this thesis, I believe, is that inquiry into the processes of knowledge production should be seen as an obvious part of the field of Media and Communication Studies, regardless of whether that has been the case historically or not.

Another important thing to keep in mind which proceeds the processes of 'truth-making' or 'belief-fixation' is that which incentivizes those very processes, namely some form of real and

living doubt which a community (on the greater scale: a society) may experience. As stated in the introduction to this thesis, "we live in times of great doubt." Fay (1996: 7) speaks of the skepticism that characterizes our current age; Mullins (cf. 2019) uses terms like 'alternative facts' and 'post-truth'; Grogan (cf. 2019) was referenced in the beginning for an example of research on government distrust, and Kollataj et al. (cf. 2020) was pointed to as an example of studies on anti-vaccination movements. Due to the apparent, current societal prevalence of skepticism, doubt, and questioning we are likely to find many different communities of sorts that are set on dispelling such doubt and uncertainty. Faith-related communities are but one example. The opportunities for creating these kinds of communities are arguably greatly increased thanks to the Internet; the podcast that serves as this thesis's case study is only one example of a community, in this instance consisting of hosts and listeners.

As for my third research question, the *ANFET* podcast can be seen as but one expression of the *need* to establish new guidelines, 'new truths', something to believe in again in a world where "God is dead" if we are to trust Nietzsche, or where there no longer are any metanarratives, as Lyotard would say. Again, I read this as implying the presence of a large-scale, societal, existential doubt, to speak with Peirce. Toulmin (1990: 203 ff.) responds to this in his idea of either *facing* the future with hope or *backing into* it with perhaps a more cynical stance. He distinguishes between the two approaches by labeling the former as imaginative and the latter as nostalgic. In the context of the *ANFET* podcast, we can see this play out in the ways the hosts adopt a more imaginative stance, seeing new ways of understanding the person of Jesus and the Christian religion. Rather than excluding the secular world they are engaging with it in new ways as they make theology that is more inclusive and reemphasizes Jesus's message of love, healing and restorative justice. Similar patterns can be gleaned in any organization or community that is characterized by hope and renewal, such as people raising awareness about climate change and – importantly – suggesting a way forward in terms of concrete steps to be more 'green'. Organizations that do, for example, peace work of any kind could be another example (in that case political) of this general tendency to face the future rather than backing into it – again, borrowing Toulmin's (ibid.) wording.

With the above in mind, we might interpret the current situation as the end (or at least decrease) of deconstruction, and the dawn of reconstruction. Many scholars, such as Toulmin,

have tried not only to define the boundaries of Modernity, but also that which comes after it. This thesis has not entered into that particular debate. However, the situation described does invite an interesting question, namely: if the postmodern is associated with deconstruction, and we are currently moving into a phase of reconstruction, then what should we call this phase we are in? Have we actually moved beyond postmodernity into something new? Again, these questions are beyond the scope and purpose of this thesis, but they may be entertaining nonetheless. Some scholars have discussed the current trends of reconstruction as *metamodernism* (cf. Vermeulen, T. & van den Akker, R., 2010). Without pursuing the issue further I simply offer it as a related observation.

I will let Toulmin (1990: 203) sum up the ideas above in his statement about our options as a society in times of doubt or uncertainty:

We may welcome a prospect that offers new possibilities, but demand novel ideas and more adaptive institutions; and we may see this transition as a reason for hope, seeking only to be clearer about the novel possibilities and demands involved in a world of practical philosophy, multidisciplinary sciences, and transnational or subnational institutions. Or we may turn our backs on the promises of the new period, in trepidation, hoping that the modes of life and thought typical of the age of stability and nationhood may survive at least for our own lifetimes.

We might interpret these words as implying a choice between faith and fear, or perhaps cynicism. It would seem that Toulmin invites us to choose faith.

So, again I state: This is a thesis about the processes of communication that go into establishing truth claims or that which we understand as facts or knowledge. Whether or not what we understand to be true actually is so is food for thought in another setting, but from the point of view of social science, our understanding of truth has concrete consequences – social and otherwise – as we embody the meaning we make in communities. And as stated before, these processes are more relevant now than ever. This is why this matters and should be researched.

I feel as though a few distinctions should be made for the sake of clarity; this is a subtle matter. This thesis does not argue that there are no metaphysical categories (such as Truth) and that all there is are our fixated beliefs that are created in community. Such a claim would be advocating for a materialistic worldview (cf. Stenmark, 2018). Neither does this thesis

argue for the reverse, that there positively are metaphysical categories beyond our bodily senses. That would likely be advocating for some form of theism (ibid.). This particular thesis neither refutes nor affirms any of the above; the research is simply not about any of those questions.

It is furthermore not my errand to state that the sole function of organized religion is to create highly effective communities for fixations of belief and thus serve a ‘world maintenance’ function as Berger (1969) would have put it. As my analysis chapter hopefully has made clear, the above can be observed as *a* function of religion, but nowhere am I arguing that is the *exclusive* or *only* function that religious communities serve. Such a claim could only be made by committing a logical fallacy which I try my best to avoid.

Finally, I should acknowledge and return to the fact that this is a thesis within the area of Media and Communication Studies. Hopefully I have managed to demonstrate the vastness of this academic discipline by going to the depths of the phenomenon we call ‘communication’. Before closing off I would like to highlight the word ‘media’ in this context as well.

As stated previously, what stands at the center of this research is a case of community-dependent meaning-making through communication. (This relates to my second research question.) At this point, saying that it is community-dependent and communication-based is arguably redundant, as we can understand all production of meaning as a collective, communicative enterprise (cf. Berger, 1969; Peirce, 2009, for example). But nonetheless underlining the centrality of community to meaning is of great relevance in an age where the Internet is as prevailing as it is right now. Through the World Wide Web people are enabled to form all kinds of communities for eradicating doubt and fixating beliefs. Podcasts, Internet forums, YouTube channels, social media etcetera can all be understood as various examples and expressions of this general, social process of ‘creating facts’. The *ANFET* podcast is in other words only one of many examples of such processes in action, albeit a very illustrative and compelling one, as it fits the criteria that Flyvbjerg (cf. 2001: 77-78) sets for his definition of a so called critical case. The processes of fixating beliefs would historically have demanded physical and temporal proximity for people to create community through communication; in these days of a highly increased presence of effective communication technology, that is

simply not the case. This allows for the establishing and negotiating of truth claims to be enacted to a far greater extent right now than it perhaps would be in other historical contexts, whether that be beliefs that pertain to vaccination programs, or to trust in government, climate issues, or religious worldviews. What follows is all the more reason for scholars of media and communication to study such processes in the various forms they may currently take.

In sum, what I have demonstrated in this thesis is how we can understand ‘truth’ or ‘knowledge’ as *fixated beliefs* that are *embodied in community*, and as subject to renegotiation in times of – and in response to – doubt, in the Peircean sense. I have furthermore suggested that we ought not be surprised to see a steady increase of instances in which these processes can be found, due to the presence of new media.

As a nod to Toulmin (1990) I would also argue in favor of faith over fear in these times of reconstruction. It may be the case that we live in times of great doubt, as I stated in the introduction of this thesis, but it may also be the case that we live in times of new possibilities.

Flyvbjerg (cf. 2001: 39) makes the point that the social sciences do not have the capability of predicting the future; we are not studying any fixed laws of nature, as our friends in the natural sciences may be doing. Nevertheless, by observing what is happening on a societal level we may collectively and individually decide to take actions that we believe have the best outcomes. We may allow ourselves to actively dare to hope for a bright future. The subtitle of Rohr’s (2019) book is *How a forgotten reality can change everything we see, hope for, and believe* – perhaps that is precisely the attitude we should embrace in these times of doubt, regardless of the subject matter. I would say it is.

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S1E1

Another Name For Every Thing with Richard Rohr.

Season 1, Episode 1: Christ Soaked World [transcript].

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S1E2

Another Name For Every Thing with Richard Rohr.

Season 1, Episode 2: Radical Inclusivity [transcript].

https://cac.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ANFET_Transcript_S1E2.pdf

[Accessed April 15, 2021]

S1E5

Another Name for Every Thing with Richard Rohr.

Season 1, Episode 5: Respect, Wonder & Reverence [transcript].

https://cac.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ANFET_Transcript_S1E5.pdf

[Accessed April 20, 2021]

S1E7

Another Name For Every Thing with Richard Rohr.

Season 1, Episode 7: The Path of Great Suffering [transcript].

https://cac.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ANFET_Transcript_S1E7.pdf

[Accessed April 20, 2021]

S2E1

Another Name For Every Thing with Richard Rohr.

Season 2, Episode 1: Jesus, Incarnation, and The Christ Resurrection [transcript].

https://cac.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ANFET_Transcript_S2E1.pdf

[Accessed April 15, 2021]

S5E3

Another Name For Every Thing with Richard Rohr.

Season 5, Episode 3: Our Story of The Cosmic Egg [transcript].

https://cac.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ANFET_Transcript_S5E3.pdf

[Accessed April 20, 2021]

Notes

¹ I use this in the realist sense to refer to a reality that exists independent of our perception; cf. Fay, 1996: 202.

² Cf. Genesis 2: 18. New Revised Standard Version.

³ This is how I will be referring to *Another Name For Every Thing* from now on.

⁴ Richard Rohr is a Franciscan friar, and he thus represents the Catholic tradition. Brie Stoner grew up in the Baptist tradition, and Paul Swanson comes from an Evangelical background.

⁵ See appendix.

⁶ This is a concept readily associated with Charles Sanders Peirce, and this will be a recurring theme in my thesis.

⁷ John 1:1 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁸ John 1:14 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁹ This is one of the most central rituals in the Christian religion, especially for the Catholic and Orthodox believers. It traces its origins to Jesus's last supper with his disciples (cf. Matthew 26: 17-29; Mark 14: 12-25; Luke 22: 7-38).

¹⁰ Worship service. From a ritual perspective (cf. Carey, 2009: 15) it is easy to see how this can be understood as communication in action.

¹¹ I use 'language' very broadly to refer to anything that functions as a form of communication. This definition extends far beyond specific verbal languages, such as English, Swedish, or Latin, etcetera, and includes everything from illustrated symbols to clothing to architecture and human behavior.

¹² The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit.

¹³ The idea; the immaterial content; the abstract concept.

¹⁴ We must not think only of 'word' in the literal sense, but also include, for example, visual representations such as crucifixes, crosses, icons, and so forth. Any *symbol* is relevant to the point being made.

¹⁵ Cf. Petrilli, 2014: 7 for a parallel discussion of the self as made of language.

¹⁶ Society of Jesus; the Catholic order commonly known as the Jesuits.

¹⁷ I use the common definition of this term, namely the notion that religious institutions no longer have the same impact on *public* life as they used to have. This does not, however, necessarily imply that people are less religious or spiritual on a *private* level.

APPENDIX

Another Name For Every Thing : KEYWORDS

EPISODE ID	DATE	TITLE	TRANSCRIPT	KEYWORDS / TOPICS MENTIONED
S1E1	24/2 2019	Christ-Soaked World	✓	ontology; holistic worldview; meta-narrative; science/religion; inclusivity
S1E2	24/2 2019	Radical Inclusivity	✓	separation; inclusivity vs exclusivity; personal vs universal; prayer; capitalism; particular/universal; universal truth; hierarchy; power; secular self
S1E3	2/3 2019	From the Beginning	✓	imperfection; win-lose; all-vulnerable God; original sin; collective evil; consumerism/capitalism; corporate vs individual; holistic seeing; transactional prayer
S1E4	9/3 2019	Love Evolves	✓	love; evolution; science and theology; infant Christianity; zero-sum game; Wilber's stages (cleaning up etc.)
S1E5	16/3 2019	Respect, Wonder & Reverence	✓	theology and anthropology; Plato vs Jesus; Western progress; adult Christianity; inclusivity; power; theology in society
S1E6	23/3 2019	An Embodied Path	✓	Jesus as feminine; patriarchy; archetypes; women in leadership; spiral dynamics; structural issues in institutions; incarnation (Last Supper); rapture; meta-narrative; spirit-matter-split
S1E7	30/3 2019	Nonviolent Atonement	✓	atonement; infant Christianity; capitalism; Jesus; victimhood; individualization
S1E8	6/4 2019	Practice Resurrection	✓	transaction vs transformation; meta-narrative; individualism; exegesis (Matthew); universal salvation; not counting; Jesus and Christ; personal vs universal; hell; scapegoating
S1E9	12/4 2019	Peter, Paul & Mary (minus Peter)	✓	privatized religion; uniting Jesus with Christ; spiritual vs rational knowing; subject-object relationship; de- and reconstruction; Bible; privatized salvation; bring heaven here; Paul; meta-narrative; capitalism; corporate sin; idolatry
S1E10	19/4 2019	From Me to We	✓	fire-and-brimstone sermon; starting with the particular; culture vs religion; transactional mentality; love, death and suffering; nihilism; win-lose; critique against Christianity; methodology; Perennial Tradition
S1E11	27/4 2019	An Incarnational Way	✓	worldview; gnosticism; materialism; incarnationalism; clericalism; ontological holiness; order-disorder-reorder; private salvation project; otherness; egocentricity; post-modernism
S1E12	4/5 2019	Feast on Your Life	✓	practice; divine mirror
S2E1	3/8 2019	Jesus, Incarnation and The Christ Resurrection	✓	personal Jesus and universal Christ; story; order-disorder-reorder; relationship
S2E2	10/8 2019	The Holy Spirit	✓	evangelical; pentecost; Holy Spirit; collective vs individual; trinitarian
S2E3	17/8 2019	Hell, The Devil and The Afterlife	✓	death; satan; evil; theological PTSD; storyline; psychology; hell
S2E4	24/8 2019	Non-Duality in Relationships, Community and Religion (Part 1)	✓	evangelizing; non-duality; community; partners with different worldviews; pastoral
S2E5	31/8 2019	Non-Duality in Relationships, Community and Religion (Part 2)	✓	faith groups; threatening ideas; women and the feminine side of God; patriarchy; reform
S2E6	7/9 2019	Embodiment: An Incarnational Worldview	✓	body vs spirit; embodiment; feminine and masculine; gender roles; incarnation
S2E7	14/9 2019	The Path of Great Suffering	✓	transformation; suffering; cynicism; pastoral
S2E8	21/9 2019	Miracles, Signs and Wonders	✓	science and theology; materiality; metaphorical vs literal
S2E9	28/9 2019	Reframing The Great Commission	✓	atonement; evangelizing; Good News; proselytizing vs converting vs service; storyline and worldview; colonialism
S2E10	5/10 2019	Healing Division In A World That Others	✓	reducing injustice; humanity and natural world; corporate sin; systems of oppression; capitalism
S2E11	12/10 2019	Parenting	✓	Christian tradition; pastoral; parenting; communicating theology; boundaries
S2E12	19/10 2019	Spiritual Practice	✓	mediator; cosmic reconciliation; contemplation; baptism; sacraments; reform; healing division
S3E1	15/2 2020	Universal Christ Values (Part 1)	✓	principles; devotion; radical simplicity; public virtue; Franciscan; consumerism; solidarity
S3E2	22/2 2020	Universal Christ Values (Part 2)	✓	living with integrity; aspirational; humor; psychology; political correctness; weaponizing values
S3E3	29/2 2020	What Do We Do with the Bible & Tradition?	✓	Bible; perennial tradition; scripture interpretation; Bhagavad Gita; orthodoxy; experience; Paul and Jesus
S3E4	7/3 2020	Jesus and The Tempire	✓	radical Jesus; living faith in empire; prophetic imagination; healing as resistance; Jesus as culturally adapted; personal vs universal; non-cooperation; non-violence; creative resistance; churchianity
S3E5	14/3 2020	The Personal is Political	✓	partisan politics; power; healing divisions; values; personal and communal agency; status quo; structuring relationships; white privilege; individualism; incarnationalism; facticity
S3E6	28/3 2020	The World, the Flesh, and the Devil	✓	incarnation; failure; redemption; systems of power; sin; structural sin; institutional evil; "the world" = "the system"; psychology; anthropology; "flesh" = "ego"; capitalism; exorcism; devil
S3E7	4/4 2020	Environmental Awareness Rooted in Franciscan Spirituality	✓	climate crisis; Franciscanism; relational; lament; agents of healing; subject-object split; soul; mirror; trinitarian; the Enlightenment; Celtic spirituality; food; body of Christ; Greta Thunberg; proclaiming death and resurrection

EPISODE ID	DATE	TITLE	TRANSCRIPT	KEYWORDS / TOPICS MENTIONED
S3E8	11/4 2020	Emotional Buoyancy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	emotions; selfhood; forgiveness; healthy acceptance and detachment; ego; guilt; community; true/false self
S3E9	18/4 2020	Universal Christ in Deep Time	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	evolution; deep vs linear time; practicing resurrection; chronos vs kairos; science; individualism; Cloud of Witnesses; participation without seeing outcome
S3E10	25/4 2020	The Practice of Awe and Wonder	<input type="checkbox"/>	creativity; music; humor; joy of mundanity; living attuned to awe and wonder; passion
S3E11	2/5 2020	Fruits of The Universal Christ	<input type="checkbox"/>	(summary of previous S3-episodes); conscious participation; personal and collective approaches to action and contemplation; holding tensions; God-talk; grace and works
S4E1	30/5 2020	What is the Alternative Orthodoxy?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	roots of the Alternative Orthodoxy; Franciscanism; dynamism for humanity and God; Roman Catholicism; mysticism; ideological vs transformative Christianity; intellectualist vs voluntarist tradition; modernism
S4E2	6/6 2020	Methodology : Alternative Orthodoxy (Theme 1)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	"Scripture as validated by experience, and experience as validated by Tradition are good scales for one's spiritual worldview"; scripture; tradition; experience; unified field; Tolkien; C.S. Lewis
S4E3	13/6 2020	Foundation : Alternative Orthodoxy (Theme 2)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	"If God is Trinity and Jesus is the face of God, then it is a benevolent universe. God is not someone to be afraid of but is the Ground of Being and on our side"; theological language; evolutionary perspective; flow and exchange; Trinity; dynamic God; artificial intelligence; Sweden; secularism
S4E4	20/6 2020	Frame : Alternative Orthodoxy (Theme 3)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	"For those who see deeply, there is only One Reality. By reason of the Incarnation, there is no truthful distinction between sacred and profane"; separation and oneness; love and suffering; sacramental; deconstruction; cosmos; religion; control; priesthood; archetypal; chaos theory; otherness; "sacramentalize"
S4E5	27/6 2020	Ecumenical : Alternative Orthodoxy (Theme 4)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	"Everything belongs. No one needs to be punished, scapegoated, or excluded. We cannot directly fight or separate ourselves from evil or untruth. Darkness becomes apparent when exposed to the Light"; exclusion; Liberation Theology; prophetic action; othering; scapegoating; cigarettes; interfaith relations; Eucharist and exclusion; homosexuality; Pope Francis; union, not perfection; science; love energy; darkness; Enneagram;
S4E6	4/7 2020	Transformation : Alternative Orthodoxy (Theme 5)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	"The 'separate self' is the major problem, not the shadow self which only takes deeper forms of disguise"; shame; connection to the whole; personhood; true/false self; ego; Buddhism; Carl Jung; archetypes; suffering and sin
S4E7	11/7 2020	Process : Alternative Orthodoxy (Theme 6)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	"The path of descent is the path of transformation. Darkness, failure, relapse, death, and woundedness are our primary teachers, rather than ideas or doctrines"; vulnerability; forgiveness; mortality; vice and virtue
S4E8	18/7 2020	Goal : Alternative Orthodoxy (Theme 7)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	"Non-duality is the highest level of consciousness. Divine union, not private perfection, is the goal of all healthy religion"; prophetic action; holy fool; Jesus' example; flow; relationality; Twelve Step program; "oneing"; mind of Christ; attention to the whole; Pontifex Maximus; Pope Francis; local community; practice; kenosis; postmodernism
S4E9	25/7 2020	Embody : Alternative Orthodoxy (Conclusion)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	embodying the themes in personal and communal ways; perfectionism; Body of Christ; prosperity gospel; trinitarian; Jesus as central reference point; scandal of the particular; inclusion; mystery; divine union; Catholic social teaching; politics; devotion; liberal politics; Ken Wilber; simplicity
S5E1	6/2 2021	An Introduction to The Cosmic Egg	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	framework; Universal Christ; story; "my story," "our story," "the story"; maps; pattern of reality; meaning; psychology; text and context; mysticism; "walking into the wardrobe to Narnia"
S5E2	13/2 2021	My Story of The Cosmic Egg	<input type="checkbox"/>	"my story"; private, small self; power, prestige, and possessions
S5E3	20/2 2021	Our Story of The Cosmic Egg	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	"our story"; metamodern; emerging church; "a new kind of Christian"; relationality; Jesus movement; progressive; belonging systems; personal self; dynamic ontology of "becoming"; purity culture; representation
S5E4	27/2 2021	The Story of The Cosmic Egg	<input type="checkbox"/>	"the story"; "great patterns that are always true"; love; chaos and order; Universal Christ; participation in God; adventure of "becoming"; ego work; decentering the self; personality vs personhood; eternal love affair; the problem of evil; God as vulnerable; Black Elk prayed the Rosary;
S5E5	6/3 2021	Love After Love	<input type="checkbox"/>	summing up the entire podcast; living out the Universal Christ in daily life