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*“Between Meritocracy and Theocracy in the Perspective of Communication
A Comparative Study of the Influence on Church Dynamics and Theological Schools.”*

Abstract

This research and article explore the comparative impact of meritocracy and theocracy on communication dynamics within a social system. Meritocracy, as a system that prioritizes individual achievement and ability, is assumed to promote egalitarian and transparent information flow, facilitating horizontal and participatory communication based on rational argumentation and empirical data. Conversely, theocracy, which places religious authority as the primary foundation, tends to form hierarchical communication structures, where information flows vertically from the pinnacle of religious authority, with an emphasis on obedience and dogma. This study will analyze how these two systems shape perceptions of truth, narrative authority, and public participation in the communication process. Through a critical communication approach, this article highlights the potential for information distortion, rhetorical manipulation, and restrictions on freedom of expression in both systems, albeit through different mechanisms. This paper also evaluates the conditions of professional placement based on obedience to God rather than superiors within church organizations and theological education institutions. The primary objective is to understand the communication implications of these systemic choices on social cohesion, collective decision-making, and the development of public discourse. Thus, this article contributes to a richer understanding of how power structures influence how society sends, receives, and interprets messages, thereby improving the quality and quantity of personnel within organizations.

Keywords: *Meritocracy and Theocracy in Church and Educational Institutions*

Introduction

In the social and political systems of the world, has a fundamental influence on the way societies communicate. Two contrasting models of systems, meritocracy and theocracy, offer an interesting lens through which to understand how the fundamental values of a society shape its communicative landscape. Meritocracy, at its core, is a system that grants power, status, and rewards based on individual ability, effort, and achievement. Niebuhr, a prominent Protestant theologian and ethicist, frequently criticized utopian visions of a perfect society. His arguments about human greed and the inability of social systems to fully overcome sin implicitly challenge the notion that divine or social rewards can be entirely based on human merit without the intervention of grace or factors beyond human control.

In the context of communication, this principle implies that the best ideas and most rational arguments will find a place and be heard, regardless of social status or background. Communication in a meritocratic system is assumed to encourage healthy competition of ideas, open debate, and objective assessment of information. This means that access to communication platforms and the ability to influence public opinion are theoretically more open to anyone with competence and strong arguments. The hope is for the realization of an

egalitarian, transparent, and evidence-based flow of information, which in turn will support better decision-making and broad public participation.

On the other hand, a theocracy is a system of government in which political and legal authority originates from or is perceived to originate from God or religious authority. In this system, religious authority holds a central position and often serves as the source of legitimacy for power. Communication in a theocracy is often characterized by a strong hierarchy, where messages and interpretations of truth flow vertically from religious authorities to the broader public. Truth is often defined dogmatically, and obedience to these dogmas becomes the dominant value. This can limit space for critical discussion, dissent, and the emergence of alternative narratives that are not in line with prevailing doctrine. The implications of communication in a theocracy often involve an emphasis on conformity, the strengthening of collective identity based on religious beliefs, and the potential control of information to maintain doctrinal stability and unity.

Understanding the interaction between these systemic values and communication practices is crucial in contemporary societies that are increasingly complex and interconnected. Questions about who has the authority to speak, what is considered truth, and how information flows are at the heart of social and political dynamics. This article seeks to analyze how these two systems influence the structure, processes, and effects of communication, with a focus on how they shape perceptions of truth, narrative authority, and public participation. By analyzing the potential for information distortion, rhetorical manipulation, and restrictions on freedom of expression in both systems, this research hopes to provide insights into the communication implications of these systemic choices for social cohesion, collective decision-making, and the development of public discourse.

Theoretical Foundations

To analyze the interaction between meritocracy, theocracy, and communication, this article draws on several key theoretical foundations in communication science and political sociology: Agenda-Setting Theory: This theory explains how the media (and, in a broader context, dominant actors in the social system) can influence what the public considers important. In a meritocracy, agenda-setting may be more dispersed and competitive, while in a theocracy, agenda-setting tends to be centralized around religious authorities. Cultivation Theory: This theory argues that long-term exposure to media messages shapes individuals' views of reality. In a theocracy, consistent messages from religious authorities can shape a homogeneous worldview, while in a meritocracy, diversity of information may result in more heterogeneous views. Critical Communication Theory: This approach views communication as a field of power and ideology, highlighting how power structures influence the production, distribution, and interpretation of messages. This theory is relevant for analyzing how meritocracies and theocracies may conceal or perpetuate inequality through communication mechanisms. Hegemony Theory by Antonio Gramsci: The concept of hegemony explains how the ruling class maintains power not only through coercion but also through ideological consent. In a theocracy, this could mean the acceptance of religious norms as universal truths. In a meritocracy, hegemony could emerge through the acceptance of the narrative of "ability" as the sole measure of success. Interpersonal and Group Communication Theory: This aspect is relevant for understanding how individuals and groups interact in both systems. In a meritocracy, discussion and debate may be more open, while in a theocracy, communication may be more directed toward obedience and consensus-led. Sociology of Knowledge: This theory discusses how social and cultural realities influence how individuals understand and form knowledge. In a theocracy, knowledge is often tied to the interpretation of sacred texts, while in a meritocracy, knowledge is more based on empirical and rational inquiry.

Qualitative Research Method

This study will adopt a qualitative research method with a comparative study and literature analysis approach. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of the nuances and complexities of how meritocratic and theocratic values influence communication practices. This method also allows researchers to understand the interpretations, meanings, and subjective experiences inherent in the communication process in both systems.

The research steps will include:

Extensive Literature Review: In-depth collection and analysis of relevant literature from the fields of communication studies, sociology, political science, philosophy, and theology. The literature will include books, scientific journals, and research reports discussing the concepts of meritocracy, theocracy, and various aspects of communication.

1. Conceptual-Comparative Analysis: A systematic comparison of the foundational principles of meritocracy and theocracy, followed by an analysis of their implications for communication structures (e.g., hierarchy versus networks), communication processes (e.g., deliberation versus dogma), and communication effects (e.g., participation versus obedience).
2. Case Studies (Illustrative): Although it does not conduct direct field research, this article will use historical or contemporary examples (without in-depth analysis as standalone case studies) to illustrate how the principles of meritocracy and theocracy have manifested in communication practices in specific societies. For example, analyzing political discourse in democracies that claim to be meritocratic versus religious narratives in theocratic societies.
3. Content Analysis (Thematic): Analyzing dominant communication themes, the rhetoric used, and forms of narrative legitimization in both systems. The focus will be on how truth is constructed and conveyed.
4. Critical Approach: Applying a critical communication lens to identify potential biases, ideological domination, and restrictions on freedom of expression that may arise in both systems, considering how power is articulated through communication.
5. The data collected will be textual from literature and will be analyzed using thematic analysis methods to identify patterns, themes, and significant differences between communication in the context of meritocracy and theocracy.

Discussion

This discussion will elaborate on the etymology, history, and how the principles of meritocracy and theocracy manifest themselves in communication practices, shaping the structure, processes, and effects within a society. To understand the above, the author will begin by explaining the literal meaning and historical developments that greatly influenced the background of this paper.

Etymology and History of Meritocracy

Meritocracy is a system in which individuals are given positions, power, or rewards based on their abilities, efforts, and achievements, rather than on wealth, social status, connections, or family background. In a meritocratic system, an individual's advancement is determined by the "merit" (excellence or achievement) they demonstrate.

- The core principle of meritocracy is equality of opportunity, where everyone has an equal chance to succeed if they possess the relevant qualifications and achievements. This means that:

- Education: Access to quality education must be equal for all, allowing each individual to develop their talents and skills.
- Work/Career: Positions and promotions are based on performance, expertise, and competence, not on favoritism or nepotism.
- Government: Positions in the bureaucracy or politics are filled by the most qualified and competent individuals.
- Meritocracy is often seen as the antithesis of systems such as aristocracy (power in the hands of the nobility/descendants), plutocracy (power in the hands of the wealthy), or nepotism/cronyism (power based on personal connections).

Etymology

The word “meritocracy” comes from the combination of two words: “Merit”: Derived from the Latin word meritum, meaning “reward,” “success,” “worthiness,” or “goodness.” In modern English, ‘merit’ refers to a quality that is good or worthy of praise. “-kracy” (Kratia): Derived from the Ancient Greek word kratos (κράτος), meaning “power,” “authority,” or “government.” This is a common suffix used in terms describing forms of government, such as ‘democracy’ (rule by the people) or ‘aristocracy’ (rule by the nobility). Thus, literally, meritocracy means “power by the deserving/meritorious” or “government by individuals who are considered deserving or meritorious.”

History of the Concept

Although the term “meritocracy” was only coined in the mid-20th century, the basic idea behind meritocracy has existed for centuries:

1. Ancient China: The civil service examination system in ancient China (which began around the Han Dynasty, 206 BC – 220 AD) is often considered an early example of meritocracy. Candidates had to pass rigorous examinations to obtain positions in the government, regardless of their family background. Confucius (551–479 BC) also advocated that rulers should select officials based on ability, not status.

2. Ancient Greek Philosophy:

- Plato, in his work *The Republic*, put forward the idea of a “philosopher-king” who would rule based on wisdom and knowledge, rather than wealth or lineage. This was an early form of the idea that the wisest and most capable should lead.

- Aristotle also argued that the state should be led by the most intelligent and virtuous individuals.

3. Ottoman Empire: Some historians note elements of meritocracy in the Ottoman Empire, where important positions (including in the military) could be held by talented individuals from various ethnic and social backgrounds through the devşirme system (although this system also had controversial aspects).

4. Enlightenment and Revolution: The ideas of human rights and equal opportunity that emerged during the Age of Enlightenment in Europe and during the American and French Revolutions also laid the foundation for meritocratic thinking, opposing feudal and aristocratic systems based on birth.

5. The Industrial Revolution: With the rise of industrialization and modern bureaucracy, the need for efficiency and professional expertise became increasingly prominent. This promoted the idea that positions should be filled by the most competent individuals to perform the job.

6. The Creation of the Term “Meritocracy” (20th Century):

- The term “meritocracy” itself was first coined by British sociologist Michael Dunlop Young in 1958 in his book titled “The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033.”

- Interestingly, Young used this term in a satirical and dystopian context. He criticized the idea of extreme meritocracy, where society becomes highly stratified based on IQ and education, creating an arrogant elite class separated from the masses. He feared that overly strict meritocracy could create new social inequalities and a sense of injustice for those deemed “less meritorious.”

Although Michael Young coined the term with a critical tone, the concept of meritocracy has been widely accepted as an ideal in many government systems, educational institutions, and organizations worldwide. Many countries, including Indonesia, are striving to implement merit-based systems in civil service management (ASN) to ensure professionalism and better performance.

Throughout history, theocracy has often been characterized by the belief that political leaders have a divine mandate or are intermediaries of God, and that the laws of the state must conform to religious law. This model can provide strong social cohesion and moral legitimacy, but it also has the potential to limit individual freedom and dissent that does not conform to prevailing religious dogma.

Communication in a Meritocracy

In a system that claims to be meritocratic, communication is ideally characterized by openness, rationality, and participatory engagement. Access to information and communication platforms is expected to be more egalitarian, based on individuals' capacity to contribute substantively. Narrative authority shifts from status or religious position to expertise, empirical evidence, and the strength of arguments. Public debate is encouraged, with the assumption that the best ideas will prevail in free competition. For example, in scientific discussions, the validity of arguments is assessed based on methodology and data, not the hierarchical position of researchers.

However, the reality of meritocracy is often more complex. The assumption of a “level playing field” can be a myth. Access to quality education, social capital, and opportunities to develop “merit” is often unequal. This means that communication in a meritocracy can still be dominated by elite groups with greater access to communication resources, platforms, and rhetorical skills. Distortions can occur through selective framing of issues, manipulation of data, or the use of persuasive strategies that override rationality. For example, in politics, the ability to campaign with significant financial backing can override substantive arguments. Information can be framed to serve the interests of certain groups, with meritocracy claims used as justification. Additionally, the pressure to “perform” can create a highly competitive communication environment, where a focus on individuality and winning arguments can erode collaboration and empathy.

Communication in a Theocracy

Conversely, in a theocracy, communication is heavily influenced by religious dogma and hierarchy. Narrative authority is inherently vested in religious leaders and sacred texts. Truth is often defined as transcendent and non-negotiable, flowing vertically from the top authority to followers. Communication in theocracy tends to emphasize obedience, conformity, and the maintenance of collective identity based on religious beliefs. Messages are conveyed through sermons, rituals, and doctrines, with the aim of strengthening faith and religious norms. An example is a fatwa or religious decree that serves as a guide for society.

While theocracy can provide strong social cohesion and clear moral guidance, it also has the potential to limit freedom of expression and critical discourse. Information restrictions and censorship may occur to protect doctrine or maintain stability. Arguments that do not align with dogma may be considered heretical or subversive, thereby limiting the emergence of alternative narratives. This can lead to a homogeneous and less dynamic communication environment, where dissent tends to be suppressed. Rhetorical manipulation can occur through selective interpretation of sacred texts or the use of religious authority for political purposes. Additionally, communication can become a tool for mobilizing the masses based on belief, which sometimes leads to polarization and conflict with groups outside the theocratic system.

The communication implications of both systems are significant. Meritocracy, with its emphasis on “achievement,” can create high pressure on individuals to constantly “prove” their abilities, which can lead to anxiety and a less supportive environment. On the other hand, theocracy, with its emphasis on dogma, can limit freedom of thought and expression, despite offering cohesion and clear purpose.

In an interconnected global context, challenges arise when these two systems interact. Meritocratic societies may struggle to understand the logic of theocratic communication, and vice versa. This can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and difficulties in building cross-cultural and cross-system dialogue.

Correlation Within Church Institutions

Church organizations inherently have a theocratic foundation. The highest authority is believed to come from God, and leadership and doctrine are often based on sacred texts and religious traditions. However, in everyday practice, many modern churches also adopt elements of meritocracy for efficiency, accountability, and growth. This is where communication becomes a crucial bridge:

Legitimacy of Authority and Qualifications: Theocracy: Vertical communication from spiritual leaders (e.g., bishops, priests, imams) to the congregation is paramount. These messages emphasize divine authority and obedience to religious teachings. Communication serves to build faith, instill dogma, and ensure spiritual alignment. Meritocracy: However, in the appointment or promotion of church positions (e.g., department heads, committee chairs, program directors), there is often horizontal and participatory communication that assesses individual qualifications, experience, and performance. This can be through interviews, recommendations, or service records. **Correlation Through Communication:** Effective communication articulates how “merit” (management skills, preaching ability, proven pastoral leadership) can be seen as a manifestation of divine grace or calling. For example, a pastor chosen for his eloquence and ability to organize church programs communicates that these “worldly” abilities are tools for theocratic service. Pastoral rhetoric is often used to unite these two dimensions.

Decision-Making and Discourse, Theocracy: Important decisions (e.g., doctrinal revisions, mission direction) may originate from a governing council considered to have spiritual authority. Communication tends to be instructive and declarative. Meritocracy: In many churches, there are also decision-making processes involving committees, synods, or congregational meetings where ideas are discussed, data is presented, and logic-based arguments are heard. Communication here is more deliberative and persuasive, where the “merit” of an argument is tested. Correlation Through Communication: Internal communication needs to balance respect for spiritual authority with allowing space for rational discussion. For example, leaders may present a decision as “God's will,” but the process may involve input from experts in finance or management who were selected based on merit. The challenge is to communicate the legitimacy of the decision so that it is accepted by all parties.

Transparency and Accountability, Theocracy: Accountability may primarily be to God, and information may be more limited to inner circles. Communication may be introspective and spiritual. Meritocracy: Modern demands for financial transparency, program performance, and leadership ethics require more open and accountable communication to the congregation and the public. Financial reports, independent audits, or program evaluations are examples. Correlation Through Communication: Communication must strategically demonstrate that “worldly” (meritocratic) accountability is part of “divine” accountability. For example, transparent financial reports can be communicated as a form of faithfulness in managing God's blessings. Communication that fails to balance this can lead to a crisis of trust.

Correlation in Educational Institutions: Theological higher education institutions have a dual mandate: to preserve and teach theological truth (theocratic aspect) while also functioning as academic institutions pursuing scientific excellence and scholarship (meritocratic aspect). Communication holds the key to navigating these two dimensions:

Curriculum and Pedagogy: Theocracy: The core of the curriculum is the study of sacred texts, dogma, and church history, with an emphasis on revealed truth. Communication in the classroom can be didactic and interpretive, with professors acting as authoritative interpreters. Meritocracy: On the other hand, the institution must also meet universally recognized academic standards: scientific research methodology, critical essay writing, and logical argument development. Communication here is dialogical, analytical, and encourages critical thinking, where a student's “merit” is measured by their academic ability. Correlation Through Communication: The curriculum and teaching need to communicate that deep theological scholarship requires both adherence to tradition and critical analytical skills. For example, Hermeneutics (the science of interpretation) lessons will teach how to interpret sacred texts using scientific and critical methods, which is a synthesis of theocracy and meritocracy. Good communication can show that faith and reason are not always in conflict, but rather complement each other.

Research and Publication:

Theocracy: Some research might focus on apologetics, defending the truth of specific doctrines, or developing systematic theology aligned with denominational views. Communication of results tends to be aimed at strengthening faith and internal community.

Meritocracy: At the same time, faculty are encouraged to conduct methodologically rigorous research, publish in peer-reviewed academic journals, and participate in academic

conferences. Communication here is external, evidence-based, and contributes to broader scholarly discourse. **Correlation Through Communication:** Institutional communication should articulate how research that meets meritocratic standards (rigorous, innovative, published) can enrich theological understanding and even serve as a tool for ecclesiastical mission. For example, sociological studies of congregations can provide **meritocratic** insights that help churches minister more effectively, ultimately supporting their theocratic goals.

Recruitment and Promotion of Academic Staff:

Theocracy: In some cases, there's an emphasis on doctrinal alignment or denominational affiliation in the selection of lecturers. Communication might focus on "faith testimony" or "calling." **Meritocracy:** However, academic qualifications (degrees, publications, teaching experience), research expertise, and pedagogical abilities are highly considered meritocratic factors. Communication in the recruitment process will highlight competence and scholarly reputation. **Correlation Through Communication:** Institutions need to clearly communicate recruitment and promotion criteria that integrate both dimensions. Someone might need to hold a doctorate from a reputable university (merit) and have a strong commitment to the institution's theological values (theocracy). Transparent communication regarding this process is crucial to avoid accusations of favoritism or bias. Strategic and adaptive communication is key in correlating theocracy and meritocracy within churches and theological educational institutions. Communication must be able to navigate the tension between divine authority and human excellence, between dogma and critical discourse, and between faith and reason. This often involves using persuasive rhetoric, judicious framing, and consensus-building that acknowledges the value of both systems, with the ultimate goal of holistically strengthening the institution's mission.

Conclusion

This research has comparatively explored how **meritocracy** and **theocracy** shape the communication landscape within a society. It was found that meritocracy ideally promotes egalitarian, transparent, and rationality-based communication, where the authority of the narrative stems from expertise and the strength of arguments. However, in practice, meritocracy is vulnerable to elitism, framing biases, and domination by those with greater access to communication resources. Conversely, theocracy forms a hierarchical communication structure, where information and truth flow vertically from religious authorities, with an emphasis on dogma and obedience. While providing strong social cohesion, theocracy potentially limits freedom of expression, encourages homogeneity of thought, and is susceptible to rhetorical manipulation for non-spiritual purposes.

Fundamental Differences and Implications

Fundamentally, the difference between these two systems lies in the **source of legitimate truth** and **narrative authority**. Meritocracy seeks validation in empirical evidence and rational consensus, while theocracy is rooted in transcendent authority and dogmatic interpretation. The communication implications of these systemic choices are profound, influencing how societies understand information, form opinions, and participate in public discourse.

Final Conclusion

No system is perfect; both meritocracy and theocracy have strengths and weaknesses in the realm of communication. Modern societies often struggle to navigate between meritocratic aspirations for performance-based justice and the need for meaning and cohesion often provided by theological frameworks. Understanding the communication dynamics within both systems becomes crucial for:

- Recognizing the inherent potential for distortions and biases in each.
- Encouraging media literacy and critical thinking when encountering various forms of narrative authority.
- Building communication bridges between groups with different systemic frameworks to achieve greater mutual understanding and social cohesion.

Further research is needed to explore the hybridization and negotiation between meritocratic and theocratic principles in contemporary social systems.

Implications

From this analysis, we can draw several significant implications regarding the **role of communication**:

Communication Shapes Legitimacy,

In church organizations, **effective communication** can integrate spiritual authority (theocracy) with managerial efficiency and individual expertise (meritocracy). Communication must successfully narrate that individual "merit" is a gift from God or a tool to serve divine purposes. A failure in communication here can lead to a **crisis of legitimacy**, where congregants or staff question the basis of decision-making or leadership appointments. **Hierarchies and networks are united.** Strong vertical communication from theocratic authorities needs to be supported by horizontal and participatory communication that allows for merit-based input. The implication is the need for **flexible communication channels** that can accommodate both top-down directives and bottom-up discussions without undermining either.

Implications for the Formation of Truth and Discourse

- **Negotiating truth;** Theological institutions, for instance, use communication to demonstrate that revealed theological truth can and should be examined with rigorous academic methods (meritocratic). Communication serves as a **bridge between dogma and critical analysis**. The implication is that this requires the development of strong theological and academic literacy among congregants and students, enabling them to receive "truth" not only dogmatically but also through reasoning and evidence.
- **Managing dissent;** In both contexts, communication must be able to manage the cognitive dissonance that may arise when established theological truths meet challenging research findings or meritocracy-based arguments. The implication is the need for **high mediation and dialogue skills** in internal communication to prevent polarization.

Implications for Participation and Accountability

- **Empowering meritocratic participation;** Transparent communication about decision-making criteria and processes encourages participation based on ability and contribution, not just status. The implication is that organizations must **actively**

communicate opportunities for individuals to contribute based on their merit, thereby increasing a sense of ownership and involvement.

- **Dual accountability;** Churches and theological institutions face the implication of communicating accountability not only to divine authority but also to "worldly" stakeholders (congregants, donors, regulators). Effective communication will **unite ethical-spiritual and managerial-financial dimensions** in their reports and interactions, strengthening trust from all sides.

Implications for Institutional Identity and Adaptation

- **Identity flexibility.** Effective communication allows institutions to **maintain their core theocratic identity** while adopting meritocratic practices necessary for relevance and sustainability in the modern world. The implication is the need for a coherent institutional narrative capable of integrating spiritual heritage with innovation and excellence.
- **Responding to change.** Through communication, organizations can proactively **adapt their structures and practices** to respond to external challenges (e.g., secularization, technological developments) in a way that remains faithful to their theocratic mission while leveraging meritocratic advantages.

Concluding Remark

The success of correlating theocracy and meritocracy significantly depends on communication's ability to build **bridges of meaning, legitimacy, and purpose**. Without careful and strategic communication, the potential conflict between these two systems could erode internal cohesion, hinder growth, and diminish an institution's relevance amid the complexities of contemporary society.

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