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Postliberal Approaches to the Theology of Religions: Presentation, Assessment, and Critical Appropriation

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POSTLIBERAL APPROACHES TO THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS:

PRESENTATION, ASSESSMENT, AND CRITICAL APPROPRIATION

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A Dissertation presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
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by

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AN ASSESSMENT AND CRITICAL APPROPRIATION OF
THE POSTLIBERAL APPROACH TO THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Christianity and the Challenge of the World Religions

In recent decades, the variety and vitality of the world religions have become newly

apparent to Western Christians. Factors such as the availability of rapid travel and

communications, changing patterns in immigration, and international trade and business

have brought unprecedented numbers of Christians into first-hand acquaintance with the

followers, beliefs, and practices of non-Christian religions. This encounter has given a

sense of urgency to questions that previously had not often been asked: Do other religions

know the same God? Do they look toward the same goal? Where their teachings

resemble those of the Christian faith, then do they share to some extent in the truth? If

their teachings are quite different from those of the Christian faith, then are these

differences important? What will be the final destiny of those who never have had the

opportunity to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Can God really condemn them, especially

if they have sought, as best they can, to order their lives according to and put their hope in

some ultimate reality?

A new area of Christian theological study has emerged in response to the challenges

that the awareness of religious plurality poses: the "theology of religions." The scientific

study of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) seeks a disinterested course of investigation. Its

aim, as Max Müller put it, is "an impartial and truly scientific comparison of all, or at all

events, of the most important religions of mankind."[1] A theology of religions, however,

pursues an understanding and evaluation of the non-Christian religious communities from

a Christian standpoint, interpreting them, not on a supposedly neutral basis, but on the

basis of the Christian faith.

Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism

The field of the theology of religions has its own variety and vitality. In coming to

terms with this variety, it has become usual to distinguish different theologies of religions

with the threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.[2]

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[1]F. Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (London, 1873), 34; quoted in Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2d ed. (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986), 1.

[2]See, for example, Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, 2d. ed. (London: SCM Press Ltd; and Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1993); Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (London: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986); John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 18-30; and Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*, preface by Hans Küng (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995). David J. Bosch makes the same distinctions but with different terms (exclusivism, fulfillment, and relativism) in *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology, No. 16 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 478-483.

The terms "exclusiveness" and "inclusiveness" as descriptions of Christian attitudes toward other religions were used more than twenty years before by noted historian of religion and mission theologian Hendrik Kraemer in *World Cultures and World Religions* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 363-364. In his book *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York and Ramsey, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978), Raimundo Panikkar categorized Christian attitudes toward other religions under the four headings of exclusivism, inclusivism, parallelism, and pluralism (see pp. xiv-xxviii).

In the theology of religions, the term "pluralism" has two different meanings. Sometimes it is used as a description. For instance, Willem A. Visser 't Hooft defines pluralism as "a situation in which various religious, philosophical or ideological conceptions live side by side and in which none of them holds a privileged status" ("Pluralism—Temptation or Opportunity?" *Ecumenical Review* 18 [1966]: 129). "Pluralism," however, is also used to refer to a theological position that maintains that other religions may be equally valid ways of salvation. To avoid confusion, I shall use the term "plurality" for descriptive purposes, and reserve the use of "pluralism" for the theological position. Where quotations use "pluralism" to describe the situation of numerical plurality, either the context will make this clear, or I shall note it.

Exclusivism maintains Jesus Christ is the sole mediator of salvation and that this

salvation is made available only through the Christian religion. Salvation is found only in

the Christian religion; no other religion leads to it. Exclusivism has been the predominant

attitude of the Christian church for much of its history and clearly can be traced to the

New Testament.[3] As Alan Race puts it:

> Not even the most detached reader of the New Testament can fail to gain the
> impression that the overall picture of Christian faith which it presents is intended to be
> absolute or final. It is indicated in general themes and by specific texts. With regard
> to the latter, the ones which most readily spring to mind are the words of Peter in Acts
> 4.12: 'And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven
> given among men by which we must be saved,' and the words attributed to Jesus in
> the Fourth Gospel in John 14.6: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one
> comes to the Father, but by me.' The negative evaluation which these two texts
> suggest is hard to ignore.[4]

In subsequent centuries exclusivism has been part of the Church's confession.[5] Today,

while it is often questioned and attacked, exclusivism is still held in many quarters, with

the so-called "conservative evangelicals" perhaps being its most widely recognized

defenders.[6]

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[3]For example, this attitude is clearly articulated in the Athanasian Creed.

[4]Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 10.

[5]See also below, 187-188, for specifically Lutheran considerations of an exclusivist nature.

[6]See, for example, see the Frankfurt Declaration and the Lausanne Covenant. On the importance of evangelicals for the exclusivist position, see Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 7 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 75. By their own admission, evangelicals have been slow to engage the problems raised both by religious plurality and the variety of Christian responses to the other. For summaries of evangelical perspectives, see Waldron Scott, "No Other Name—An Evangelical Conviction," in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981), 58-74; *Through No Fault of their Own?* ed. Crockett and Sigountos; and *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, ed. Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce W. Winter, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992). Statements of exclusivism from the evangelical perspective that engage other positions and their objections to

Inclusivism agrees with exclusivism that salvation is found only Jesus Christ, but, unlike exclusivism, it contends that this salvation is extended to non-Christians through their religions. In other words, it affirms "the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God."[7] Inclusivists view Christianity as the fulfillment of all religions; it stands in a *complementary* rather than *adversarial* relationship to the religions.

Perhaps the most influential inclusivist account has been Karl Rahner's so-called "anonymous Christian" theory.[8] For Rahner, the starting point for Christian reflection on other religions was Christianity as the absolute religion; beside it, no religion can rightly claim equal status. Unlike exclusivists, however, he held that non-Christian religions possessed not only a natural knowledge of God but elements of grace. Thus Christian theology must ask other religions what part they play in the divine economy of salvation. Similarly, Christians should regard the follower of other religions not as a "mere non-Christian" but as "someone who can and must be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian."[9] In view of this, the missionary task of the Church is to bring them to an explicit consciousness of what God has already given them.

Pluralism, unlike both exclusivism and inclusivism, "maintains that other religions are

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exclusivism include Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991); and Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994).

[7]D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 80.

[8]Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in *Theological Reflections*, vol. 5, trans. K. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 115-134.

[9]Ibid., 131.

equally salvific paths to the one God, and Christianity's claim that it is the only path (exclusivism), or the fulfillment of other paths (inclusivism) should be rejected for good theological and phenomenological reasons."[10] The foremost proponent of pluralism is John Hick. He has long urged a "Copernican revolution in theology" which involves "a paradigm shift from a Christianity-centered or Jesus-centered to a God-centered model of the universe of faiths. One then sees the great world religions as different human responses to the one divine Reality, embodying different perceptions which have been formed in different historical and cultural circumstances."[11] He contends that the world religions share a common soteriological conception in their different doctrines about salvation or enlightenment or liberation. Whether the ultimate reality is viewed as personal or impersonal, all of them involve "the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness."[12]

The acceptance of pluralism has been helped by increasing dissatisfaction with other Christian attitudes:

> Many Christians . . . are recognizing the inadequacy of traditional values that *exclude* other religions by insisting that there is no salvation outside the Church or the kerygma and that Christianity is the only site of revelation and salvation; but neither are many of

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[10]D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 22.

[11]John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 131. See also Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973). More recently Hick has refined his argument; now instead of referring to the ultimate reality as "God" he speaks of it as the "Real," and he has put his scheme on detailed philosophical and phenomenological bases. See especially John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), which is based on his 1986-87 Gifford Lectures, and *A Christian Theology of Religions*. See also Hick, "Straightening the Record: Some Response to Critics," *Modern Theology* 6 (1990): 187-195, in which, as the title suggests, he answers criticisms raised by his critics, including charges of inconsistency over his use of the term "God."

[12]Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 36.

these same Christians satisified with the more modern, liberal views (developed especially at the Second Vatican Council and in the WCC) which recognize the value of other religions as ways of experiencing God but which then insist that this value originates from Christ and must be *included* and fulfilled in him and his church. And so, more and more Christians and Christian theologians feel the need to explore a *pluralist* approach to other faiths—one that recognizes the possible independent validity and "rough parity" of other religious paths.[13]

Three basic reasons stand behind the growing acceptance of pluralism.[14] The first is historical consciousness—"the ever more impelling awareness of the historico-cultural limitation of all knowledge and religious beliefs, and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of judging the truth claims of another culture or religion on the basis of one's own."[15] Pluralism insists that truth, including religious truth, is always finite and conditioned by historical situations. Therefore, it is necessary that Christians give up claims of being the only or the highest form of religion.[16] The second reason is a religious consciousness that considers divine reality and truth always greater than any person or religion can comprehend. If historical consciousness tells us that truth is finite, religious consciousness tells us that "the object or content of authentic religious experience is infinite—Mystery beyond all forms, exceeding our every grasp. The infinity and ineffability of God-Mystery demands religious pluralism and forbids any one religion from having the 'only' or 'final'

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[13]Paul F. Knitter, "The Pluralist Move and Its Critics," *The Drew Gateway* 58 (1988): 2.

[14]Paul F. Knitter, "Preface," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), ix-xi.

[15]Knitter, "Preface," ix.

[16]Ibid. See also Gordon D. Kaufman, "Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 3-15, and Knitter, "The Pluralist Move,"3-4.

word."[17] The third reason is ethical: "The need to promote justice becomes . . . the need

for a new Christian attitude toward other faiths."[18]

Looking beyond Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism

Challenges to these proposals have come recently from so-called "postmodern"

perspectives.[19] Although specific proposals may differ widely from each other, they share

in the criticism that many exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist proposals are inadequate,

because they hold certain shortcomings specifically associated with a liberal or modern

perspective. While different proposals may pursue very different agendas, they all share a

concern to recognize and account for differences in the theology of religions.

Following Paul Knitter, these critiques and proposals for the theology of religions may

be distinguished into three categories.[20] A first type may be called *hermeneutical*. These

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[17]Knitter, "Preface," x.

[18]Ibid., xi.

[19]A survey of postmodern strategies to the theology of religions see Terrence W. Tilley, et al, *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995). A serious shortcoming of this work is that it proceeds from certain models of postmodern theology and then asks how each views and responds to the challenges of religious plurality. Some of the most important responses that appear to be decisively informed by postmodern concerns are therefore not discussed. This is in part compensated for by an earlier article by Peter Donovan, "The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism," *Religious Studies* 29 (1993): 217-229. Donovan notes selected examples of what he calls a "postmodernist critique" in the theology of religions. The limitations of his work are that 1) he limits himself to critiques, passing by constructive proposals, and 2) that he confines his examples to selections from only two books. Other recent useful discussions include those of John Hick in *A Christian Theology of Religion*, 31-56; and Paul Knitter, *One Earth*, 38-53. In these cases, they discuss only examples of criticisms that bear on their own positions. Since, however, they are probably the two most well-known and widely discussed pluralists, their proposals have been the targets of many of the critiques and the point of departure for a number of alternatives.

[20]I am adopting the distinctions and adapting the terminology of Knitter in *One Earth*, 38, where he distinguishes postmodernist critiques along the lines of "cultural anthropology," "hermeneutical theory," and "political theory." Here I refer to them, respectively, as *postliberal, hermeneutical*, and *political*.

In making these distinctions, I should note that I agree with this assessment of the postmodern

proposals contend that a mutual understanding between religions needs to account for the historical conditionedness of knowledge. Drawing on the insights of philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, these theologies of religions try to make such an account. David Tracy's recent book *Dialogue with the Other* is an example of this type.[21]

Tracy argues that one should be "suspicious of how easily claims to 'analogy' or 'similarity' can become subtle evasions of the other and the different."[22] This can easily happen when one's approach generalizes features of different religions and emphasizes likenesses among them. Tracy argues that this is the case with many inclusivist and pluralist proposals. What is needed are "hermeneutical criteria that can enhance the possibilities of a responsible interpretation of religious differences."[23] He regards hermeneutics as the best methodological hope for entering into a dialogue that can both recognize and appreciate differences and yet can carry on a true conversation.

Another type of postmodern theology of religions may be called *political*. Its basic

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theological scene by Terrence W. Tilley: "The patterns in contemporary theologies are as fluid as wild rivers running in the spring. Each analyst or historian of the theological flood composes a snapshot of the contemporary scene in order to capture a pattern in the chaos and to draw connections and reveal oppositions between the 'types' of theologies he or she 'discovers.' But no pattern is final or definitive. As one who has structured a book with four patterns, I can imagine other interesting ways (e.g., David Griffin's) of setting off the differences and similarities among postmodern theologies. The situation is indeed fluid" (*Postmodern Theologies*, 115; although no reference is cited regarding Griffin, I believe Tilley is referring to David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee, and Joe Holland, *Varieties of Postmodern Theologies* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989]). Here I wish only to make more apparent the variety of postmodern approaches current in the theology of religions, and not to argue vigorously for a definitive pattern.

[21]David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Interreligious Dialogue* (Louvain: Peeters Press; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990).

[22]Ibid., 42.

[23]Ibid., 54.

feature is a critique of many exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist accounts for an imperialistic or colonialist attitude toward non-Christian religions. The pluralist perspective in particular has received strong criticism on this basis. Pluralists often contend that their approach is more open and less prejudiced to other religions. These "post-colonialists" argue that pluralists often close themselves to what the followers of other religions may regard as distinctive or unique. They also agree that the pluralist search for common ground among all religions actually prejudge the results of dialogue.

The essays of John Milbank and Kenneth Surin in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* are examples of this approach.[24] According to Milbank, pluralists fail to recognize that religions are "social projects as well as worldviews."[25] They criticize exclusivists and inclusivists for an imperialism in identifying salvation with Christ but celebrate their own universalism. They do not recognize that their ideal of the Christian community, which they want to carry forward, is itself imperialistic, having "an immense 'deterritorializing' effect in terms of disturbing political, social, and legal barriers."[26] The emphases on justice, equality, and freedom that pluralists regard as universally shared are better

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[24]John Milbank, "The End of Dialogue," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, 174-191, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990); Kenneth Surin, "A 'Politics of Speech': Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald's Hamburger," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 192-212. A fuller version of Surin's essay is "A Certain 'Politics of Speech': 'Religious Pluralism' in the Age of the McDonald's Hamburger" *Modern Theology* 7 (1990): 67-100.

In his most recent book *One Earth Many Religions*, Paul Knitter argues for what he calls "a correlational, globally responsible model for interreligious dialogue" (23). This model is a pluralist approach that acknowledges the concerns and tries to incorporate of both the hermeneutical approach exemplified by Tracy (hence the label "correlational") and political concerns similar to those raised by Milbank and Surin.

[25]Milbank, "The End of Dialogue,"179.

[26]Ibid.

understood as products not even of Christian thought but of the Enlightenment.[27] For

Milbank, this spells the end of dialogue (hence the title). It is better, he claims, to replace

the notion of "dialogue" with that of "mutual suspicion." Conversation between religions

can and should continue, but no one should pretend that "this proposal means anything

other than continuing the work of conversion."[28]

Surin is similarly critical of pluralists—and inclusivists and exclusivists, too. He argues

that common to influential proposals in all three paradigms is

> the assumption that the task of "theorizing the relationships between the religions" is
> one that is pre-eminently, or even solely, a matter of affirming, clarifying, defending,
> and perhaps discarding certain philosophical and theological *formulations*. . . . The
> idea seems to be that most, if not all, the difficulties that stand in the way of an
> adequate understanding of the relationships between the various major religious
> traditions can be overcome if only we are able to get our theories and doctrines
> "right."[29]

Surin is critical of these efforts because fail to grasp the complexity of the situation. Such

"thinkers betoken a thoroughly Eurocentric or First World perspective on their parts: only

someone who is not sufficiently aware of the always particular 'location' from which he or

she theorizes can celebrate the new 'global city' and propound a world or global theology

in this apparently unreflective way . . ."[30] In his view, a more adequate view of

interreligious dialogue

> would be one which focused not so much on theological or doctrinal propositions as
> on the particular histories, the specific social locations, the varying repertoires of

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[27]Ibid., 187.

[28]Ibid., 190.

[29]Surin, "A 'Politics of Speech,'"201-202.

[30]Ibid., 195.

signifying practices, and so on, of those engaged in such dialogue. This is not to say that there is no place for such theological formulation. There is, but only in conjunction with an account of those processes and practices of signification which precisely underlie the always historically specific characterizations a speaker/ theologian/philosopher/historian gives of the particular religious traditions.[31]

A third type of postmodern theology of religions may be called *postliberal*. Unlike many inclusivist and pluralist proposals, which look for common features to tie different religions together, postliberals stress that each religious community is unique. This uniqueness is governed by its scheme of religious doctrines and shows in the claims, directives, rituals, and behavior of the community.

Purposes, Nature, and Outline of this Study

This study focuses on the third type—the postliberal approaches to the theology of religions. In undertaking this, I have two basic purposes. One is to examine these postliberal approaches. This examination will include a description and analysis of selected postliberal proposals concerning issues and concerns in the theology of religions. The second is to assess these proposals on key issues and appropriate certain insights from the postliberal approach for the purpose of developing a Lutheran theology of religions.

While few proposals in the theology of religions have been characterized as "postliberal," there are considerable differences among them. Therefore I shall look at specific proposals, rather than try, for instance, to ascertain first what features should be considered common to the postliberal approach, and then to see how different proposals have incorporated them. Here I shall look at four of the most fully worked out proposals,

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[31]Ibid., 202.

those offered in the writings of Karl Barth, George A. Lindbeck, Paul J. Griffiths, and J.
A. DiNoia.

There are several related reasons for undertaking this study. The most straightforward
reason is that the postliberal approach has been recognized as an important trend in the
theology of religions. It has given some far-reaching criticisms of the focus on salvation in
the prevailing paradigm of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. It also provides
different grounds for thinking about the relationship between religions. Another reason is
the broader importance of postliberal thinking in Christian theology. While recent in
development, postliberalism has already been the subject of much discussion as a way of
conceiving the theological task and for its approach in areas like Biblical interpretation.
Given this significance, its contributions in the area of the theology of religions, itself a
much discussed issue in theology, warrant attention. A third reason is the congruence of
the postliberal approach with traditional theological concerns and ways of thinking. To be
sure, this congruence is partial. But in its criticisms of the liberal conception of the
theological task, in its attention to features such as the religious doctrines and biblical
narratives, and in its concern for the uniqueness of the Christian faith and Christian
community, postliberal theology would seem to hold much potential as a source for
insights. Already the postliberal approach has already attracted the serious attention of
traditionally-minded Christian theologians.[32] For this reason alone it merits a close
examination and response. Beyond this, however, I am convinced that confessional

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[32]Witness, for example, the 1995 Wheaton Theology Conference, which took for its topic the
relationship of postliberalism with conservative evangelicalism.

traditions may find useful such aspects as its critique of theological liberalism and its insights into the task of theology and the nature of doctrine.

There are some limitations that I should make clear. I shall not try to trace the development of any subject's views concerning the theology of religions. I shall not try to relate systematically any subject's views on the theology of religions to other aspects of his theology, although as the need for clarity or to provide a fuller analysis arises, I shall draw on or relate to certain other points. Further, I shall not try in any systematic way to relate or trace a given person's positions or emphases to other sources, although, again, if makes certain points of the presentation clearer, then I shall do so. In assessing them, however, I shall compare and contrast their positions on specified issues, and also evaluate them in terms of the concerns and issues prevalent in the entire area of the theology of religions and in terms of their fitness for a specifically Lutheran theology of religions.

The remainder of this chapter will complete the introduction of this subject with an by outline of the features of postliberal theology and a review of the relevant secondary literature.

Part I is devoted to the presentation of the proposals of Barth, Lindbeck, Griffiths, and DiNoia. Each chapter deals with a single figure, presenting his approach to issues in the field of the Christian theology of religions. The focus falls in two directions. One is on the way in which they identify and distinguish themselves from the traits or tendencies of modern theology. The other is on the constructive proposals they offer as alternatives.

Part II offers an assessment and critical appropriation of these different postliberal proposals. I suggest some points that a Lutheran theology of religions should consider in

light of the postliberal critique and constructive proposals. I shall argue that a

confessional Lutheran view of theology shares with postliberal theology a concern for a

nonfoundational, descriptive approach. To be sure, this can be said only with

qualification. For example, the view of George Lindbeck about the believer's knowledge

of truth claims strongly leans toward agnosticism. This is in striking contrast to the

certainty expressed, for instance, in the explanations to the Creed in the Small Catechism,

each of which closes with the exclamation, "This is most certainly true." I intend to

explore the matter of agreement between postliberal and confessional Lutheran views

further. But like postliberal theology, Lutheran theology is concerned to take nothing but

the Scriptures as its source and its norm, and it is careful to make sure that extrabiblical,

extrachristian categories, concepts, and points of view do not take the Scriptural view

captive. For these reasons, I shall try to show ways in which postliberal concerns and

insights might be appropriated for a Lutheran theology of religions.

Toward a Postliberal Theology

With the 1984 publication of his book *The Nature of Doctrine*, George Lindbeck not

only outlined his own proposal for understanding religion, doctrine, and theology, but he

also brought attention to a range of projects which, following Lindbeck's suggestion, now

are often called "postliberal."[33] More specifically, what Lindbeck did, in the words of his

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[33]George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), esp. 112-138. The most useful discussions of postliberal theology are those by William C. Placher in *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), "Postliberal Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An introduction to Christian theology in the twentieth century*, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 2: 115-128, and in "Revisionist and Postliberal Theologies and the Public Character of Theology," *The Thomist* 49 (1985): 392-41, and John E. Thiel,

Yale colleague Brevard Childs, was to bring to light "a distinct family resemblance among

several recent theological proposals stemming from Yale."[34] This Yale connection has

suggested to William Placher something like a postliberal canon:

> In addition to Lindbeck's own work, a list could include David Kelsey's *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, Charles Wood's *The Formation of Christian Understanding*, Paul Holmer's continuing studies of Wittgenstein and theology, Brevard Childs' interpretation of the Old Testament as canon, William Christian's philosophical analysis of inter-religious dialogue, Ronald Thiemann's discussions of Biblical authority, and above all the work of Hans Frei—all published by people connected with Yale, . . .[35]

Drawing on a diverse lot of sources and disciplines, ranging from philosopher Ludwig

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Nonfoundationalism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1994). David Tracy, an outspoken critic of Lindbeck, used the term "postliberal" several years before Lindbeck to denote the model of theology needed in a pluralistic age (*Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* [Minneapolis: The Winston-Seabury Press, 1975], 32-34; see also 15 n. 7). But more than a decade before Tracy, John Macquarrie had applied "post-liberal" to theologians such as John Baillie who had been influenced by neo-orthodox theology (*Twentieth Century Religious Thought: The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology, 1900-1960* [New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963]). Lindbeck's use, however, is distinct from both Tracy and Macquarrie.

[34]Brevard S. Childs, "The Canonical Approach and the 'New Yale Theology,'" excursus in *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 541. This piece gave wide currency to the label "New Yale theology."

[35]William C. Placher, "Revisionist and Postliberal Theologies and the Public Character of Theology," *The Thomist* 49 (1985): 393. In the accompanying footnote Placher specifies following works: David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); Charles M. Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981); Paul L. Holmer, "Wittgenstein and Theology," in D. M. High, *New Essays on Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); Holmer, "The Nature of Religious Propositions," in Ronald S. Santoni, *Religious Language and the Problem of Religious Knowledge* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968); Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); William A. Christian, *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines* (London: Herder and Herder, 1972); Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974); and Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). It should be noted that Placher himself was once a student at Yale University, and that he is explicitly sympathetic with the postliberal approach over against the revisionist/liberal alternative. For a parallel "canon," but by a rather more critical observer, see Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naivete: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 6 (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1990), 87, n. 2.

Wittgenstein, historian of science Thomas S. Kuhn, literary critic Erich Auerbach,

anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and theologians like Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth,

postliberals urge Christians to do nothing less than rethink the nature and task of theology.

It needs to be noted that the postliberal proposals do not comprise something as unified or

coherent as a school. They do not follow a narrowly defined approach, fix on a particular

and well-defined aim, or stress the same issues. Nor do their efforts amount to much more

than extended sketches: nothing has been produced remotely approaching the scope or

depth of—to draw comparisons with their own sources—Thomas or Barth. They do,

however, share the conviction that the apologetic aim and correlational methods of the

modern theology are thoroughly mistaken and have led to serious and widespread

difficulties for the Christian church. They also share the conviction that the corrective lies

in a "postliberal" approach, which reverses the priorities of the modern aim and seeks

methods of theology that serve these new priorities.

The focus on *narrative* has been the most widely discussed feature of postliberal

theology. For the purposes of the theology of religions, however, a more important

feature of postliberal theology lies with its view of the theological task. The postliberal

conception of theology may be described critically as *nonfoundational* and constructively

as *descriptive*.[36] *Foundationalism* in this context is the attempt to ground all knowledge

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[36]The terms "nonfoundational" and "descriptive" have been adopted from Ronald F. Thiemann in *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 23, and in *Revelation and Theology*, 71-91. Others have used similar terms. See Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 12, 32-41, 113-115, 129-131; William Werpehowski, "Ad Hoc Apologetics," *The Journal of Religion* 66 (1986): 285; Hans W. Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 27, 33-37; idem, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative," in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and

in self-evident beliefs.[37] As Thiemann puts it, "foundationalists all agree that knowledge is

grounded in a set of non-inferential, self-evident beliefs which, because their intelligibility

is not constituted by a relationship with other beliefs, can serve as the source of

intelligibility for all beliefs in a conceptual framework."[38] Such beliefs, which need no

support themselves, can provide sure, stable foundations for knowledge and thus protect

against uncertainty and subjectivity. In theology, foundationalism shows in conceptions of

the theological task as one of translating Christian concepts and practices into those of

other conceptual frameworks. As *nonfoundationalists*, postliberals are doubtful about the

possibility of securing such foundations and suspicious about theology that looks to test or

substantiate Christian language and practice according to external criteria.

The nonfoundational stance and descriptive task are evident in the argument of Hans

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William C. Placher (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 110-114; idem, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative," in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 145-148. See also Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism*, 57-66, for a survey of postliberal theology which he describes under the heading of "theology as nonfoundational description."

[37]For discussions of foundationalism especially as understood by postliberals, see Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 128-134; Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, especially 24-35; Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism*; Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology*, 1-7 and corresponding notes. See also Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), especially 25-92; and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984).

Thiel points out that postliberal nonfoundationalism agrees only partially with such nonfoundational philosophies as those of Willard van Orman Quine and Richard Rorty. As he says: "The nonfoundational philosophers we have examined, for instance, hardly would accept the theological conception of 'foundationless' delineated in the work of Lindbeck and Thiemann. For the philosophers, any appeal to the revelational authority of a religious tradition would constitute a foundationalism that warranted reasoning could not abide" (87). Postliberals are nonfoundational largely in a critical sense, in that they oppose the attempt to find universally accessible criteria against which truth claims may be tested and certain knowledge secured.

[38]Thiemann, 158.

Frei's 1967 lecture, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal."[39] Here he

challenges the aim and the method of modern Christian theology:

> The conviction underlying these pages is that the story of modern Christian theology
> (beginning with the end of the seventeenth century) is increasingly, indeed, almost
> exclusively that of anthropological and Christological apologetics, . . . I am convinced
> that the alternatives are either a nonapologetic and dogmatic, rather than systematic,
> theological procedure in which Christology continues to be the crucial ingredient or
> else a metaphysic or ontology in which Christology would play a peripheral role.[40]

According to Frei, "we have lived for almost three hundred years in an era in which an

anthropologically oriented theological apologetic has tried to demonstrate that the notion

of a unique divine revelation in Jesus Christ is one whose meaning and possibility are

reflected in general human experience."[41] This has meant that theology has aimed to show

the potential in all human beings for a specifically Christocentric faith. For Frei, the

underlying error of modern theology has been its attempt "to validate the *possibility* and,

hence, the meaning of Christian claims concerning the shape of human existence and the

divine relation to it, even though the *actual occurrence*—and thus the *verification* of the

claim—is a matter of divine, self-authenticating action and revelation."[42]

In direct contrast to the modern conviction and approach, Frei argues:

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[39]Frei, "Remarks," 26-44. This lecture was delivered in December 1967 at the Harvard Divinity
School. A useful essay discussing the key features of this lecture and relating them to other of Frei's
works is George Hunsinger, "Afterword: Hans Frei as Theologian," in *Theology and Narrative: Selected
Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press,
1993), 235-270.

[40]Frei, "Remarks," 27.

[41]Ibid., 29. As he explains elsewhere, by the term "apologetics" he means the "appeal to a common
ground between analysis of human experience by direct natural and by some distinctively Christian
thought." Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 129.

[42]Frei, "Remarks," 30. Emphases original.

[I]t is not the business of Christian theology to argue the *possibility* of Christian truth any more than the instantiation or *actuality* of that truth. The possibility follows logically as well as existentially from its actuality. Hence, I should want to draw a sharp distinction between the logical structure as well as the content of Christian belief, which it is the business of Christian theologians to describe but not to explain or argue, and the totally different logic of *how one comes* to believe, or the possibility of believing immanent in human existence, on which the theologian has relatively little to say and on which he should in any case not base the structure of his theology.[43]

It should also be noted that while Frei in this instance has in mind theological liberalism,

elsewhere he extends this criticism against an apologetic, explanatory approach to

theology to conservative theologians like Carl Henry.[44] Postliberal theology, then, is

nonfoundational in the sense that it opposes the view that theology must seek to explain or

justify claims, teachings, symbols, and practices on a foundation outside of the religion

itself. Rather, the theological task aims to *"describe but not to explain or argue"* the

structure and content of Christian belief.

George Lindbeck is also critical of the liberal project, particularly for its appeal to

supposedly self-evident universal experiences:

The great strength of theological liberalism, it can be argued, lies in its commitment to making religion experientially intelligible to the cultured and the uncultured among both its despisers and its appreciators. It is in order to clarify the gospel in a world where it has become opaque that liberals typically choose the categories in which to expound their systematic theologies; and it is by their success in communicating to the modern mind that they assess the faithfulness of their endeavors. If there are no such

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[43]Ibid. Emphases original.

[44]Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 24. See also Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" *Trinity Journal* 8 n.s. (1987): 21-24. Cf. Carl F. H. Henry, "Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," *Trinity Journal* 8 NS (1987): 3-19; and George Hunsinger, "What Can Evangelicals and Postliberals Can Learn from Each Other? The Carl Henry-Hans Frei Exchange Reconsidered," in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds. *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 134-150.

universals, then how can one make the faith credible, not only to those outside the church but to the half-believers within it and, not least, to theologians?

Against the characteristically liberal search for foundations to theology in various nontheological explanations, Lindbeck contends, "The norms of reasonableness are too rich and subtle to be adequately specified in any general theory of reason or knowledge."[45] On this point a "cultural-linguistic" model of religion proves more adequate than the so-called "experiential-expressivism" of theological liberalism, which regards different religions as manifestations of a common prereflective experience. To the extent that religions are like languages, they cannot be learned by relating them to experience, but only through actual practice. Moreover, owing to the linguistic character of religion, the proper approach to theology is not explanation but, again, description: "In view of their comprehensiveness, reflexivity, and complexity, religions require what Clifford Geertz, borrowing a terms from Gilbert Ryle, has called 'thick description,' . . ."[46] The theological task is a matter of tracing the logic, interconnections, and implications of a complex and all-encompassing framework of thought. Theology involves, on the one hand, a very close acquaintance with very small matters, and yet, on the other hand, permits—even demands—wide-ranging investigation, imagination, and invention.

Ronald F. Thiemann offers still another similar argument against theological liberalism. In *Revelation and Theology*, he tries to rehabilitate the doctrine of revelation for the post-Enlightenment age. For the Reformers, the conviction that God himself gives all

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[45]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 130.

[46]Ibid., 115.

knowledge of God was a "background belief" to the doctrine of revelation.[47] Modern

doctrines of revelation, however, no longer held this conviction. Instead, the knowledge

of God came to be understood as "a dependent belief which must be justified in relation to

new basic convictions independent of the Christian faith."[48] This shift in conviction has

forced the need of an apologetic strategy:

> When the assertion of God's prevenience functions as a background belief, a doctrine of revelation simply explicates the content of that knowledge given by God's grace. Issues concerning the possibility or actuality of God's revelation simply do not arise, because theologians begin from the "givenness" of our knowledge of God. But when the assertion becomes a dependent belief justifiable by general epistemological principles, its apparent self-evidence dissolves. Claims about knowledge of God must be demonstrated to be in accord with (or at least not contrary to) the ruling epistemological theory. In light of that demand, doctrines of revelation must do more than simply explicate the content of a "given" revelation; they must justify both the content of particular claims to knowledge and the prior assertion that these claims are given by God.[49]

Against such an approach, Thiemann argues for a nonfoundational, descriptive

theology.[50] This kind of theology does not look outside itself but seeks "to 're-describe'

the internal logic of the Christian faith," that is, "it seeks to uncover the patterns of

coherent interrelationships which characterize the beliefs and practices of that complex

phenomenon we call the Christian faith."[51] This approach does not rule out making a

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[47]By "background beliefs" Thiemann means "certain convictions which are assumed to be true and thus provide stability for the whole framework. These beliefs are *basic* because the coherence of many other beliefs depends on the acceptance of these beliefs as true, and they are *background* because their axiomatic status makes explicit justification of them unnecessary" (*Revelation and Theology*, 11).

[48]Ibid., 12.

[49]Ibid., 14.

[50]See ibid., 71-91.

[51]Ibid., 75.

justification of its claims, but it sees this task as one of making a rational justification

based on its own logic rather than seeking some ultimate causal explanation.[52]

As we have already seen in the case of Frei and Lindbeck, and as Thiemann would

agree, the prevailing form of foundationalism in modern theology is the attempt to ground

theology in a some form of common human experience.[53] Having an apologetic aim,

modern theology typically explains the first-order language of the church (e.g., its liturgy,

preaching, and prayers) as a manifestation of a deeper and more universal experience. In

this view, theology serves Christianity as "both its theoretical defender and its critic."[54]

Postliberal theology, however, recognizes a close connection between the first-order

language and activity of the church and the second-order theological activity. Theology,

then, may be compared to discerning grammar or logic.[55] Paul Holmer offers a clear

explanation on this point. He calls attention to learning the grammar of ordinary

languages, e.g., English or French. When people do so, it often involves learning the

grammatical rules. But the actual speaking of a language is not a matter of speaking the

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[52]Ibid., 43.

[53]For Thiemann's view on this see *Revelation and Theology*, 73.

[54]Ibid.

[55]For the phrase "theology as grammar," see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), §373. For postliberal proposals that compare theology to grammar in a sense resembling Wittgenstein, see Paul Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1978), 17-22; Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*; Kathryn E. Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988); and Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 2, 19-27. Also see Elsabeth S. Hilke, "Theology as Grammar: An Inquiry into the Function of Language in the Theology of Karl Barth," Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1976, which argues that Barth's theology, especially in *Church Dogmatics*, parallels the linguistic method of Wittgenstein.

See Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith*, 17-22; Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 2; and Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology*, 75 for comparisons of theology with logic.

grammar but in saying everything in accordance with the grammar. "The more skilled we become in writing and speaking, the more does our knowledge of grammar inform everything we say and write. After a while we simply speak grammatically without ostentatiously remembering the grammar at all. Our practice becomes intrinsically and naturally grammatical."[56]

So it is also with theology: it is like the grammar of the Christian faith, it is like the logical rules. The ultimate aim of learning theology is not to become firmly acquainted with these "rules," but to be able to think, speak, and act as a Christian. The parallel, however, is not exact: "[T]here is an additional difference about theology that, thought it is like grammar in some respects, namely, in not being the aim and intent of belief and the substance in and of itself (i.e., in not being the end but the means), still it is the declaration of the essence of Christianity. In so far as Christianity can be 'said' at all, theology and Scripture say it."[57]

Seen in this way, the task of theology is not a matter of invention, but an uncovering and extending the already established and applied rules. In other words, the theological task is *grammatical*. It does not invent the grammar of the faith, nor does it arbitrarily handle the faith so as to say what might be desired or desirable. Rather, theology is dependent on the faith, on the Scriptures and consensus of the Church regarding the teachings drawn from them. "Theology," says Holmer, "answers the question—what is Christianity? But it tells us the answer by giving us the order and priorities, the structure

[56]Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith*, 17-18.

[57]Ibid., 19.

and morphology, of the Christian faith."[58]

Postliberal theology may seem to be little more than an argument in a rather sophisticated idiom for a return to a traditional view of theology. But as the label suggests, the postliberal approach to theology views itself as something rather different. This difference might be thought of as literally "*post*-liberal," in the sense that it does not view itself as a return to a premodern stance, but rather a new way that goes beyond what it believes are insuperable difficulties in the liberal or modern approach. This attitude is evident, for instance, in the acceptance of the findings of historical-critical methods.[59]

Postliberal theology, then, is not a "repristination" theology. It is not, however, mistaken to view the postliberal approach bascially as an attempt to appropriate precritical approaches for the contemporary situation. This may be seen in the priority accorded the Scriptures for Christian practice and theology by its stress on an "intratextual" method.[60]

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[58]Ibid., 20.

[59]Regarding the former trait, George Lindbeck's recent comment is important: "The contemporary aspect of the postliberal research program is the acceptance of biblical criticism, but placing it in a very subordinate role as far as the theologically significant reading of Scripture is concerned" (George Lindbeck in "A Panel Discussion: Lindbeck, Hunsinger, McGrath, and Fackre," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm [Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996], 247.) It is also much in evidence in Hans Frei's work on biblical narratives. See *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, especially 10-16; for a specific textual instance, see "Of the Resurrection of Christ," in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 200-206. Frei frequently stresses the need to distinguish a "literal meaning" of the narrative from the question of its "ostensive reference." About the literal meaning, this is a matter of attending to the story, to the identity it cumulatively and unsubstitutably depicts. About historical or ostensive reference, on the other hand, he agrees with the findings of the historical-critical methods, which questions the historicity of much that these narratives depict. The latter trait is evident in Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, in the discussion of the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines (92-96).

[60]See especially Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 113-124. Lindbeck notes that his argument can be supported with examples as diverse as Aquinas, the Reformers, and Karl Barth.

It may also be seen in Lindbeck's suggestion that the postliberal approach to winning

converts "resembles ancient catechesis more than modern translation."[61] Also associated

with this approach is an insistence that scriptural narratives function above all as "identity

descriptions," and a call for *ad hoc* rather than systematic apologetics.[62]

A Review of Relevant Literature

While much attention given to the postliberal approach has been in the areas of biblical

hermeneutics, theological method, and ethics, its importance for the theology of religions

has also been noted.

In his book *One Earth and Many Religions*, Paul Knitter considers postmodern

objections to the pluralist theology of religions.[63] As far as Knitter is concerned, the

postmodernist critique has two basic presuppositions: that all human experience and

knowledge is filtered, and that these filters are highly diverse. These notions lead Knitter

to conclude:

> In acknowledging the "time-bound," "situational," "linguistic," "theory-laden,"
> "hermeneutical," "constructed" filters with which we experience and comprehend our
> world, postmodernists are really deepening and drawing out the content of what has

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[61] Ibid., 132.

[62] On the model of religion, see Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*. On the importance of religious doctrines, see again Lindbeck; see also William A. Christian, Sr., *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines*, and idem, *Doctrines of Religious Communities: A Philosophical Study* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987). On the importance of narratives as identity descriptions see Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*. On the issue of *ad hoc* apologetics, see Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 131-132; Hans W. Frei, "Eberhard Busch's Biography of Karl Barth," in *Karl Barth in Re-View*, ed. H.-Martin Rumscheidt (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1981), 114; reprinted in *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 161; and Werpehowski, "Ad Hoc Apologetics," 282-301.

[63] Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*, preface by Hans Küng (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 38-53.

been called historical consciousness. We are radically and irreducibly historical beings, and that means we look out upon our world from one particular historical situation or perspective. We can never really grasp the world as it is, but only as we see it through our particular historical filters.[64]

Knitter regards different instances of such postliberal approaches as those of Lindbeck, DiNoia, and Griffiths as different versions of this basic postmodern outlook. For instance, he considers the critique of George Lindbeck as an instance of "[t]aking seriously the postmodern awareness of the historical filters that determine what we can know. . ."[65] He understands Lindbeck to claim that it is better to view different religions as being like different languages or cultures, which shapes the experiences of individuals, rather than being different expressions or thematizations of a common experience. Knitter acknowledges that such views confront the pluralist, who believes strongly in the possibility of common ground between religions, with a challenging conclusion: that the followers of different religions in their beliefs and practices do not exhibit different manifestations of the same core experiences, but rather are actually having different experiences.

Knitter calls postliberal alternatives to the pluralist vision like those of Lindbeck and Griffiths a "good neighbor policy."[66] Rather than join in a search for common ground among other religions, postliberals propose that Christians act, as it were, like "good neighbors": "This will mean, first of all, *not* that we try to search for some method or

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[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid., 42.

[66]Ibid., 51.

foundation on which we can understand each other, but, rather, that we let them know

who we are. . . . Let them see who we are, understand as they may, and respond as they

will—this, for postliberals, is the primary responsibility toward persons of other faiths."[67]

Knitter does not consider the postliberal and other postmodern objections to be fatal

to the aim of an open interreligious dialogue. They raise important questions and point

out serious problems. In the end, however, "the warning signs that these critics are setting

up should read 'Danger Ahead' rather than 'Road Blocked.'"[68]

Knitter's treatment of postliberal theologies of religions is a matter of two concerns:

first, criticisms to a pluralist approach to theology of religions and second, a postmodern

perspective. In so doing, he ignores the concerns and aims that are distinctive to the

postliberal approach, and he plays down their most characteristic features.

Terrence Tilley offers a more complete examination of postliberal theology. His

concern, however, is less with the theology of religions than with examining and

comparing different postmodern strategies. Citing specifically Lindbeck and DiNoia,

Tilley contends that the key feature of the postliberal position on non-Christian religions is

its "particularism." As he explains:

> Associated especially with postliberalism, [particularism] takes differences most
> seriously. Like exclusivism, it finds each of the religious traditions substantially
> different. However, a particularist typically does *not* ask the soteriological question as
> an overarching one. Any complete answer to the question "who can be saved?" will
> be a universal answer which inevitably undermines the particular traditions of some
> religious traditions. Moreover, such an answer is presumptuous in the extreme,
> making a claim to know how God finally disposes of everything there is. Hence,

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[67]Ibid.

[68]Ibid., 53.

particularism rejects reductive pluralism and is suspicious of phenomenal pluralism, exclusivism, and inclusivism, much preferring to espouse more modest particular theological claims.[69]

Lindbeck is understood as a particularist because he regards the differences between religions to be real. For him "the real question to be asked is [the religions'] own categorical adequacy to meet the challenges of their own particular community," and not how each religion reflects or manifests some common core experience or aim. Likewise, because he insists that inclusivism and pluralism blurs differences between religious communities, DiNoia is also regarded as a particularist.

More than Knitter, Tilley attends to the distinctive concerns and accents of postliberal theology. But his treatment of the postliberal theology of religions lacks detailed presentation, analysis, and assessment.

The literature is also limited on the particular subjects of this study. Karl Barth's understanding of the concept of religion and of the historical religions has been discussed thoroughly, but discussions informed by a postliberal perspective have been few.[70] Yale

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[69]Terrence W. Tilley et al, *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 158-159.

[70]His views on other aspects of theology have been examined from a postliberal perspective. See, for example, see Hans Frei, "Eberhard Busch's Biography of Karl Barth," in *Karl Barth in Re-View*, ed. H.-Martin Rumscheidt (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1981), 95-116; reprinted in *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 147-163; ibid., *Types of Christian Theology*, esp. 38-46, 78-91; Hilke, "Theology as Grammar"; George Hunsinger, "Beyond Literalism and Expressivism: Karl Barth's Hermeneutical Realism," *Modern Theology* 3 (1987): 209-223; idem, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); idem, "Truth as Self-Involving: Barth and Lindbeck on the Cognitive and Performative Aspects of Truth in Theological Discourse" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60 (1992): 41-56; George Lindbeck, "Barth and Textuality," *Theology Today* 43 (1986): 361-376; Ronald F. Thiemann, "Response to George Lindbeck," *Theology Today* 43 (1986): 377-382; and Bruce D. Marshall, *Christology in Conflict: The Identity of a Saviour in Rahner and Barth* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

philosopher of religion William A. Christian, Sr., whose work on religious doctrines has

influenced the postliberal approach, examined Barth's discussion of truth from non-

Christian sources in volume 4, part 3 of *Church Dogmatics* specifically for its application

to the question of alien religious claims.[71] Christian cites Barth as a clear if surprising

example of a Christian theologian who proposes that the claims of other religious

communities may be true or right, but for which Christians are not bound to teach or

adopt as their own doctrines. In *How to Read Karl Barth*, George Hunsinger traces out

six motifs that characterize Barth's theology in *Church Dogmatics*. The foundational

motifs are *realism* and *rationalism*. Realism refers to the way Barth conceived of

theological language. This way was neither literal (i.e., univocal) nor symbolic of emotive

or noncognitive experience (i.e., equivocal), but analogical. In this light, Barth appears to

anticipate clearly the later postliberal views about biblical narratives and their mode of

reference. Rationalism refers to the way Barth constructed and assessed doctrine. It was

rational, but strictly according to the logic inherent in revelation. Doctrines, in this view,

are assessed by their coherence with the wider scheme of doctrines, not according to

criteria external to the Christian faith. In this way, too, Barth appears to anticipate the

later postliberal approach to theology. Hunsinger applies these motifs as he looks at the

same section that William Christian had examined, but at much greater length.[72] He

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[71]Christian, *Doctrines of Religious Communities*, 212-215.

[72]Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 234-280. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, 3, 1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 3-165, esp. 86-135.

concludes that Barth's position may be called "exclusivism without triumphalism."[73] By "exclusivism" he meant that the Christian scheme of doctrine alone was, as a whole, true. Any other scheme can only be deemed false, because they organize themselves around other doctrines than those of Jesus Christ as the Scriptures attest to him. It is not triumphalist, however, in the sense that aspects of another scheme of doctrine may be true or right at some points. When Christians come across such truths, they should regard them as from the Lord.

Turning to George Lindbeck, a thorough examination of his views on the world religions has been made by Kenneth Surin.[74] He applauds Lindbeck for repudiating the pluralists' assumption of a common core of religious experience in all the world's religions, but criticizes him for the "'essentialization' of religions and their discourses."[75] Much of Surin's discussion centers around the implications and perceived shortcomings of Lindbeck's "prospective *fides ex auditu*" approach to the salvation of non-Christians, which is his version of post-mortem evangelization.

Gavin D'Costa discusses Lindbeck's theology of religions as an example of exclusivism.[76] He defines exclusivism as holding that "only those who hear the gospel

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[73]Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 278.

[74]Kenneth Surin, "'Many Religions and the One True Faith': An Examination of Lindbeck's Chapter Three," *Modern Theology* 4 (1988): 187-210.

[75]Ibid., 204. See 189-190 for Surin's appraisal of Lindbeck and pluralism.

[76]Gavin D'Costa, "Theology of Religions," in *The Modern Theologians: An introduction to Christian theology in the twentieth century*, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 2: 274-290.

proclaimed and explicitly confess Christ are saved."[77] According to D'Costa's analysis,

Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model is a result of the wish "to retain the *solus Christus* as

well as the *fides ex auditu* (faith by hearing) tradition—that is, one may only come to

salvation through hearing the Word and confessing Christ."[78] On this basis D'Costa

concludes that it is exclusivist.

Michael Barnes and Brad Stetson focus on Lindbeck's proposed cultural-linguistic

model of religion. Barnes accepts the notion that language precedes a person's

interpretation of experiences, so that "[l]anguage can, very generally, be seen as an

attempt to organize and classify our patterns of experience."[79] Accordingly, he believes

that the central lesson of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model is that argues that "religion

introduces people into the shared language or story of the group."[80] However, Barnes is

also convinced that the relationship between language and experience is dialectical: not

only does language precede any person's grasp of experiences, but experiences then go on

to shape language. Lindbeck's account, in Barnes's view, is deficient because it fails to

recognize this:

> Lindbeck's distinction [of religion and experience] is misleadingly rigid. Language or
> culture may provide the form in which we come to experience Ultimate Reality, but in
> all religions there is an implicit demand being made to press beyond the limits of
> language, to enter eventually into a silence which recognizes that the Ultimate is more
> than can be spoken of in any human form of words. Whether we speak of the

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[77]Ibid., 274.

[78]Ibid., 277.

[79]Michael Barnes, *Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism: Religions in Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 99.

[80]Ibid.

transcendent and the integrative, or the prophetic and the institutional, of parable and myth, or revelation and religion, the same point is being made: all religion has a common dialectical structure. The two have to be held together.[81]

Brad Stetson concentrates on the regulative or rule theory of doctrine associated with the cultural-linguistic model.[82] He regards it as an important advance for the question of interreligious relationships:

> Lindbeck's rich and unique model seems to open up, as it were, the field of truth when considering it in relation to religious plurality. No longer is truth purely private, as with the experiential epistemology of [John] Hick: it can be assessed by someone exterior to the religious believer herself. With his approach the concept of truth includes not just simple but also the coherence of each doctrinal statement with all other utterances, attitudes, and practices in the religious form of life within which they occur.[83]

While they highlight important aspects of Lindbeck's position on the relationship of Christianity to non-Christian religions, neither Barnes nor Stetson attempt a complete account. The same is true of John Sanders's account, which overlooks Lindbeck's postliberal critique, cultural-linguistic model of religion, and rule theory of doctrine, and devotes itself entirely to his proposal for post-mortem evangelization.[84]

Finally, with regard to Lindbeck, we should take note of the contributions of two Lutheran theologians—Paul Varo Martinson and Theodore M. Ludwig—to the Lutheran

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[81]Ibid., 107.

[82]Brad Stetson, *Pluralism and Particularity in Religious Belief* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1994), 42-45.

[83]Stetson, 44.

[84]John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, foreword by Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 200-205.

World Federation publication *Religious Pluralism and Lutheran Theology*.[85] Both

appropriate aspects of Lindbeck's proposal in formulating their own discussions of a

Lutheran response to religious plurality. Both, however, depart crucially from Lindbeck's

position, which is critical of views that regard different religions as expressions of a shared

core experience, by maintaining that all religious expressions have a single common

source.[86]

Neither Paul Griffiths nor J. A. DiNoia have received as much attention as Lindbeck,

and no review of either person's work is detailed. As it turns out, two of the discussions

are by each on the other.[87] In Griffiths's view, Christian theologies of religions of all kinds

and commitments have tended toward unconditional statements. He commends DiNoia

for *modalizing* the theology of religions, that is, by casting Christian claims regarding non-

Christian religions in terms of possibility and necessity. Griffiths points out that DiNoia

does this by insisting that it should take seriously the specific aims and commitments of

non-Christian religions, and by recognizing that non-Christian claims may or may not hold

significant things in common. The key advance in this is that it is "possible for Christians

to pay serious attention to the doctrinal specificities of non-Christian communities, and to

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[85]Paul Varo Martinson, "Speaking the Truth: Contemporary Approaches to Religious Pluralism," in *Religious Pluralism and Lutheran Theology*, ed. J. Paul Rajashekar, LWF Report 23/24 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1988), 40-73; Theodore M. Ludwig, "Some Lutheran Theological Reflections on Religious Pluralism," in *Religious Pluralism and Lutheran Theology*, ed. J. Paul Rajashekar, LWF Report 23/24 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1988), 129-158.

[86]See Martinson, "Speaking the Truth," 64; Ludwig, "Some Lutheran Theological Reflections," 136.

[87]Paul J. Griffiths, "Modalizing the Theology of Religions," *The Journal of Religion* 73 (1993): 382-389; J. A. DiNoia, O.P., "Teaching Differences," *The Journal of Religion* 73 (1993): 61-68.

do so within an intellectual framework that accords with their own self-understanding."[88]

Griffiths also commends DiNoia's argument for a realist construal of references and

predications in religious discourse.

Paul Varo Martinson gives similar approval to DiNoia's argument concerning religious

language.[89] He draws attention to the fact that DiNoia's approach "is not the same as in

foundationalism, which seeks to identify a point of reference from which one can outside

of any particular religious or philosophical tradition umpire the entire conversation."[90] In

other words, he draws attention to a *postliberal* dimension of DiNoia's argument.

Martinson does not refer to DiNoia as "postliberal," but Bradford E. Hinze does.[91]

According to Hinze, DiNoia "harkens back to Chapter 3 of Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine*

both in its critique of experiential approaches to other religions and in his advocacy of a

doctrinally-specific approach to interreligious dialogue."[92] He finds this stress on a

"doctrinally-specific" approach compelling. He has reservations, however, about DiNoia's

objections to the use of soteriological arguments, contending that they "are always

relevant and sometimes decisive in doctrinal matters."[93]

Turning to Griffiths, DiNoia regards his *Apology for Apologetics*, which sets out the

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[88]Griffiths, 387.

[89]Paul Varo Martinson, "Review Essay," *Pro Ecclesia* 3 (1994): 110-113.

[90]Ibid., 113.

[91]Bradford E. Hinze and George P. Schner, S.J., "Postliberal Theology and Roman Catholic Theology," *Religious Studies Review* 21 (1995): 299-310. Only Hinze (299-304) deals with DiNoia.

[92]Ibid., 301.

[93]Ibid., 302.

conditions for interreligious apologetics and argues for their need, as signalling a change in

the way theologians and philosophers look at religions.[94] The needed change amounts to

this: instead of trying to say how things that look different are really the same, Griffiths

tries to show that things that look the same are really different.[95] The tendency in religious

studies and the theology of religions has been to look for similarities among religions.

DiNoia applauds Griffiths for taking seriously the differences among the doctrines of

different religious communities.

As this survey shows, there is much room for exploration and appropriation of

postliberal views in the theology of religions, both as a movement within the field and in

terms of individual proponents.

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[94]Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991).

[95]DiNoia, "Teaching Differences," 61.

PART ONE

TOWARD A POSTLIBERAL THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

CHAPTER TWO

RELIGION AND THE LOGIC OF REVELATION:
KARL BARTH'S POSTLIBERAL THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

Under the topic "Postmodern theology" in the "Lexicon" of his book *Ethics After Babel*, Jeffrey Stout writes:

> Also called "postliberal theology"; the quest, initiated in recent years by the most interesting American followers of Karl Barth, to get beyond all forms of modernism in theology; either a *cul de sac* or the harbinger of a new theological age (too soon to tell).[1]

As this observation suggests, no single figure has been more influential to the development of postliberal theology than Karl Barth. Others such as William Placher have offered similar comments: "Postliberal theology draws on many sources, from Clifford Geertz's anthropology to the philosophy of Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle to Thomas Kuhn's reflections on the history of science to Eric Auerbach's literary analysis, yet in theology it owes most to Karl Barth."[2]

Postliberals' interest in and appropriation of Barth has itself drawn fresh attention to

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[1]Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 301.

[2]William C. Placher, "Revisionist and Postliberal Theologies and the Public Character of Theology," *The Thomist* 49 (1985): 394. In a similar way but from a different point of view, Mark I. Wallace, who appreciated the postliberal call for theology to center itself once again on the Bible but criticized the approach for relativism, comments: "Karl Barth is virtually the only contemporary theologian that Frei, Holmer, and Lindbeck mention with common approval" (Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naivete: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 6 [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990], 108; see also Wallace, "The New Yale Theology," *Christian Scholar's Review* 17 [1987]: 169).

and brought forward renewed discussion of his theology. One area toward which fresh

attention might be turned profitably is his theology of religions.[3] He has been widely

recognized as an important figure in the field, but he also has been identified "with the

worst kind of Christian arrogance."[4] This judgment is based usually on his discussion in

volume I, part 2, of *Church Dogmatics*, where he describes religion as "unbelief."[5] For

example, Alan Race, in his influential survey of the theology of religions, states that "the

most extreme form of the exclusivist theory has been stated by Karl Barth in his *Church*

Dogmatics . . . ."[6] He concludes that "[i]t is hard not to feel offence at Barth's theory

because he states it in such extreme forms," and he finds it "disturbing," having "an air of

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[3]Peter Harrison gives a useful summary and evaluation of different interpretations of Barth's theology of religions ("Karl Barth and the Non-Christian Religions," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 23 [1986]: 206-227; see especially pp. 206-211).

[4]Michael Barnes, *Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism: Religions in Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 29. It should be noted that Barnes does not agree with this evaluation.

[5]Karl Barth, "Gottes Offenbarung als Aufhebung der Religion," in *Der Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. I, *Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes*, pt. 2 (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1948), 327. The English translation is *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, pt. 2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956). Following the usual usage, I shall refer to them as KD (*Kirchliche Dogmatik*) and CD (*Church Dogmatics*), followed by volume, part, and page number. I usually follow the translations in CD, and in such instances I have cited the English translation first and the German edition second. This is also the case for citations without quotations. Where I offer my own translations, the German edition is cited first.
The English translation renders the title of paragraph 17 as "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion." The rendering of *Aufhebung* as "abolition" has occasioned much controversy, mostly because of its highly negative connotation. As we shall see, Barth does not regard the revelation of God as a pure negation of religion, but, in the specific instance where Christ is known, as an exaltation or supercession of religion. This makes "abolition" a problematic translation, and for this reason I shall simply leave the word untranslated.

[6]Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, 2d. ed. (London: SCM Press Ltd. and Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1993), 11. Race specifies Barth's treatment of revelation and religion in paragraph 17 of CD 1/2.

unreality about it," and "hasty."[7] Others have reacted similarly.[8] There are at least three

kinds of objections. Some, like John Hick, who called his position "sublime bigotry" and

"chauvinism," object because they find it arrogant or intolerant.[9] Others, like Maurice

Wiles and Paul Knitter, find Barth's position contradicted by what they might call simply

the "evidence" or the "facts." Wiles concludes that Barth's claim that revelation stands in

judgment over all religion "stands against, and in my view is wholly unable to stand up to,

the whole gamut of evidence as to how religious understanding has actually developed in

relation to Christian faith or to any other form of faith."[10] Knitter said that, allowing for

oversimplification, a major problem with Barth might be summed up as an attitude of "My

mind's made up. Don't confuse me with the facts."[11] Knitter also is among those who

make a third kind of objection, namely, that Barth's view of revelation is too narrow.[12]

Although the critical position has been the majority view, a persistent minority has

argued that Barth's assessment of the world religions was in the end positive. But even

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[7]Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 14, 16, 24, 25; cf. 27.

[8]See Harrison, "Karl Barth and the Non-Christian Religions," 206-208. See also Carl E. Braaten, *No Other Gospel! Christianity among the World's Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 49-50.

[9]John Hick, "Toward a Philosophy of Religious Pluralism," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 22 (1980): 132.

[10]Maurice Wiles, *Christian Theology and Inter-religious Dialogue* (London: SCM Press Ltd; and Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 30.

[11]Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, American Society of Missiology Series, No. 7 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 91.

[12]Paul F. Knitter, "Christomonism in Karl Barth's Evaluation of the Non-Christian Religions," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 13 (1971): 99-121; *Towards a Protestant Theology of Religions: A Case Study of Paul Althaus and Contemporary Attitudes*, Marburger Theologische Studien, no. 11 (Marburg: N. G. Elwert Verlag, 1974), 20-36; *No Other Name?*, 92-95.

many of them have effectively agreed with the critical assessment of Barth by advancing

their argument on the basis of later volumes of *Church Dogmatics*.[13] In taking this

position, they also accept the conclusions made by his critics about CD I/2.[14]

A few recent observers, however, have viewed Barth's account of religion and the

religions in CD I/2 from a different perspective. Missiologist David Bosch insists that

Barth is the "one important example of an exclusivist position which reveals clearly

postmodern elements."[15] Referring specifically to CD I/2, Bosch concludes: "There can be

no doubt that Barth's was a bold, innovative, and radical attempt at solving an age-old

problem."[16] Central to this attempt was that Barth "turn[ed] consciously against the

Enlightenment's evolutionary optimism and endorsement of the autonomous human

being."[17] This showed particularly in "the way in which he refused to take refuge in the

age-old strategem of blithely contrasting the Christian religion as true with all others as

untrue."[18] From the area of academic religious studies, an unlikely precinct for an

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[13]These minority positions are also reviewed by Harrison in "Karl Barth and the Non-Christian Religions," 210-211. Although it is now dated, Paul Knitter's (highly critical) evaluation of Barth's attitude toward non-Christian religions is still useful (*Towards a Protestant Theology of Religions*, 32-36). More recent attempts include Michael Barnes in *Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism*, 26-44, and Carl Braaten in *No Other Gospel!*, 49-63.

[14]For example, in a recent article Anton Houtepen observes that even within Protestant theology Barth's position is exceptional, because it rejects "the classical apologetic theory of God's *general revelation* among all nations, which served as a praeparatio evangelica." But he then notes that it would be a serious distortion to regard Barth as completely negative about religions. They are gifts of God's good creation [KD IV/3 850ff] and perhaps other religions know God without awareness [KD IV/4 213ff]. Houtepen, "Ambiguous Religion and the Authentic Holy," *Exchange* 25 (1996): 8.

[15]David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology, No. 16 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 479.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., 478.

appreciative assessment of Barth, Garrett Green argued that his thoroughly Christian

theological interpretation of religion exemplified the kind of approach that students of

religion should examine carefully. While academic religious studies claim to have

accepted the so-called "postmodern turn," "the field as a whole has so far failed to carry

out its implications consistently, especially when it comes to theories about the nature,

function, and value of religion."[19] This shows in the refusal to consider positions arrived

at from a definite religious standpoint. Against this, Green contends: "No credible

argument remains for teaching Durkheim, Freud, or Eliade on religion while ignoring

Barth and others who speak on the basis of an explicit religious commitment."[20] He

concludes not only that Barth's specific proposal should be considered, but the explicit

religious basis of his investigation puts the unacknowledged commitments of the field into

much-needed relief.

In this chapter I try to show something similar to but with different emphases than

Bosch and Green by drawing attention particularly to *postliberal* aspects of Barth's

account of religion and the religions in CD I/2. Barth's theology is often regarded as

outdated. Postmodern perspectives, however, encourage a view that considers Barth as

ahead of his time rather than hopelessly behind it. Postliberals, including leading figures

like Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, say they have learned much from Barth and adopt

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[18]Ibid., 479.

[19]Ibid. Green uses the term "postmodern" "in a modest sense to indicate any theoretical position that eschews the 'modern' assumption of a single, universal order of truth to which one can appeal as a criterion in judging particular claims to knowledge" (473, n. 2).

[20]Garrett Green, "Challenging the Religious Studies Canon: Karl Barth's Theory of Religion," *The Journal of Religion* 75 (1995): 474.

both specific features and the overall outlook of his theology. Following their lead, I shall

look at Barth's theological interpretation of religion and the religions from a postliberal

perspective and try to show that its concerns and approach share much with those of

postliberalism. We shall see that Barth's account in CD I/2 shares with the later

postliberal theology both a similar kind of understanding and criticism of modern theology

and a similar constructive theological approach. One goal of this chapter is to show that

this criticism closely anticipates the kind of criticism postliberals characteristically lay

against modern theology, while another goal is to show how his own approach to the

problem of religion in Christian theology anticipates the approach characteristically

advocated by postliberals.

Toward a Theological Evaluation of Religion

Postliberal theology is critical of much of theology since the Enlightenment—

especially liberal theology—for its persistent attempts to articulate and substantiate its

claims in concepts and categories that are external to Christianity. One reason Barth's

theology of religions can be identified with postliberal approaches is that he anticipates the

ways of postliberal theology characterizes and criticizes modern conceptions of religion

and the place modern theologians give these conception in theology.

Barth begins by acknowledging that religion poses a problem for theology, even in the

light of the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He maintains that both the objective

and subjective elements of revelation, that is, both the actuality (*Aktualität*) and the

potentiality (*Potentialität*) of revelation, are "the being and action [*das Sein und*

Handlung] of the self-revealing God alone."[21] Since the initiative and work of revelation

are entirely on the side of God, it might be supposed that religion, understood as a human

activity, does not come together at all with revelation. Revelation, however, is not only

God making himself known; it also includes God being known by the human creature.

Thus revelation is always an event which encounters the human creature. For this reason,

revelation also "has the form of human competence, experience, and activity"; that is, it

has the form of human religion.[22] To deny this is to deny revelation as such.[23]

The decisive question is "how the statement has to be interpreted and applied. Does it

mean that what we think we know of the nature and incidence of religion must serve as a

norm and principle by which to explain the revelation of God; or, *vice versa*, does it mean

that we have to interpret the Christian religion and all other religions by what we are told

by God's revelation?"[24] Where "what we think we know of the nature and incidence of

religion" is used to explain revelation, the task of theology is seen as a kind of more

general investigation. But where we have to interpret Christianity and all religions

according to what the revelation of God tells us, the task of theology is specific to the

Christian community.[25]

Barth anticipates the postliberal approach when he charges that Christian theology of

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[21]CD I/2, 280; KD I/2, 305.

[22]KD I/2, 305; CD I/2, 280.

[23]CD I/2, 283; KD I/2, 309.

[24]CD I/2, 283-284; KD I/2, 309.

[25]KD I/2, 309; CD I/2, 284.

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries characteristically has taken the *first* alternative: "It was and is characteristic of its theological thinking, so far as it here concerns us (in relation to its conception and formulating of the Church and its life), that in its great representatives and outstanding tendencies what it has discerned and declared is not the religion of revelation but the revelation of religion."[26] In other words, Barth sees as a basic feature of modern Christian theology the priority it gives to a general concept of religion over the specific revelation of God in Christ. It is one thing to grant that the event of revelation may be viewed as an instance of religion. This is necessary. It is quite another thing, however, to regard the religion of revelation as a particular instance of a universal phenomenon, namely, human religion, because it undermines the uniqueness of God's revelation. "To allow that there is this whole world apart from and alongside 'Christianity' is to recognise that in His revelation God has actually entered a sphere in which His own reality and possiblity are encompassed by a sea of more or less adequate, but at any rate fundamentally unmistakable, parallels and analogies in human realities and possibilities."[27]

Barth further anticipates postliberals when he concludes that this characteristic is specifically *modern*.[28] For the Scholastics and the Reformers, and for the older Lutheran and Reformed Orthodox theologians and for some of the later ones, a *general* concept of religion was foreign. The "catastrophe" in this matter (as in others, Barth notes) came

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[26]KD I/2, 309; CD I/2, 284.

[27]CD I/2, 282; KD I/2, 307.

[28]See the historical survey and discussion of the concept of religion in Christian theology in CD I/2, 284-291; KD I/2, 309-317.

with the advent of rational orthodoxy at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Barth

singles out Reformed theologian Salomon van Til and Lutheran theologian J. Franz

Buddeus. They were the first to presuppose a universal concept of religion, to which the

Christian instance corresponded perfectly. With them, human religion

> constitutes, in fact, the presupposition, the criterion, the necessary framework for an understanding of revelation. It shows the question which is answered by revealed religion as well as all other positive religions, and it is as the most satisfactory answer that the Christian religion has the advantage over others and is rightly described as revealed religion.[29]

While materially their theology did not deviate much from the line of seventeenth-century

Orthodoxy, their move proved the basic presupposition of the developments that

followed—from Wolff to Kant to Schleiermacher and through to Feuerbach, Ritschl, and

Troeltsch. Of course, Barth acknowledges, van Til and Buddheus would have been

astonished at and disagreed with these developments. Nevertheless, they and their

contemporaries were the "real fathers" of liberal theology, for they introduced the "one

simple theme" of which "these more or less radical and destructive movements in the

history of theology in the last two centuries are simply variations," namely: "that religion

has not to be understood in the light of revelation, but revelation in the light of religion."[30]

Barth, however, insists: "It is always a sign of definite misunderstanding when an

attempt is made systematically to co-ordinate revelation and religion, i.e., to treat them as

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[29]CD I/2, 289; KD I/2, 315.

[30]CD I/2, 290-291; KD I/2, 316-317. But Barth finds that it has not been only liberal ("Neo-Protestant") theology that has been gone astray. So has conservative theology, because it has cooperated with liberal theology by "making such concessions to the prevailing outlook that in spite of the immanent resistance which it has put up it cannot be regarded as a renewal of the Reformation tradition" (CD I/2, 291; KD I/2, 317).

comparable spheres, to mark them off from each, to fix their mutual relationship."[31] This

is the case whether one's intention is to subordinate revelation to religion or it is to

safeguard revelation. Whether one treats religion as an equal to revelation, gives priority

to the concept of religion over revelation, or asks about the relationship between the two

as different spheres of interest and concern, just "the fact that we can do this shows that

our intention and purpose is to start with religion, that is, with man, and not with

revelation."[32] The problem is that revelation itself is not understood: "Revelation is God's

sovereign action upon man or it is not revelation."[33] When revelation is considered an

open question, then it is no longer truly the revelation of God under consideration. "On

the other hand," Barth counters,

> if revelation is not denied but believed, if man and his religion are regarded from the
> standpoint of those statements in the Catechism, then to take man and his religion
> seriously we cannot seek them in that form which has already been fixed in advance.
> There can, therefore, be no question of a systematic co-ordination of God and man, of
> revelation and religion. For neither in its existence, nor in its relation to the first, can
> the second be considered, let alone defined, except in the light of the first.[34]

In view of this, it becomes clear why, although the actual positions at which Buddeus

and van Til arrived differed little from the predecessors, such strong objection should be

made and such stiff opposition should be given to their approach, "why," as Barth asks,

we have "to judge this development negatively as a disruption of the life of the Church,

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[31]CD I/2, 294; KD I/2, 320.

[32]CD I/2, 294; KD I/2, 321.

[33]CD I/2, 295; KD I/2, 322.

[34]CD I/2, 296; KD I/2, 323.

and ultimately as a heresy which destroys it."[35] It was not so much what was done as
what was not done:

> In fact and in practice [theology] ceased to regard the cardinal statements of the
> Lutheran and Heidelberg confessions as definite axioms. Originally and properly the
> sin was one of unbelief. It was that belittling of Christ which begins the moment He is
> no longer accepted as our One and All and we are secretly dissatisfied with His
> lordship and consolation. Without denying the catechetical statements, this later
> theology thought that it should reckon seriously with man from another standpoint
> than that of the kingdom and ownership of Christ. . . The real catastrophe of modern
> Protestant theology was not as it has often been represented. . . . The real catastrophe
> was that theology lost its object, revelation in all its uniqueness.[36]

The problem of religion is not one that tries to see how religion as previously and

independently defined concept can be brought into relationship with the revelation of God

in Jesus Christ. "On the contrary, the question is uninterruptedly theological: What is this

thing which from the standpoint of revelation and faith is revealed in the actuality of

human life as religion?"[37] Barth later shows in another way that he regards this question

as entirely theological when he offers a critique of religion on its own terms. As we shall

later see, Barth argues that, from the standpoint of revelation, religion must be regarded as

unbelief. He justifies this conclusion on grounds internal to Christian beliefs. After this,

he then argues that religion also calls itself into question.[38] On its own terms religion is

not necessary and bears an inherent weakness. For these reasons religions, as their

histories bear out, tend toward a crisis, where they move in the direction either of

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[35]CD I/2, 291; KD I/2, 317.

[36]CD I/2, 293-294; KD I/2, 320.

[37]CD I/2, 296-297; KD I/2, 323.

[38]KD I/2, 343-356; CD I/2, 314-325.

mysticism or of atheism. These options, of course, are radically different, but both effectively negate the religions from which they stem. It would be beyond the scope of this chapter to detail further this "immanent" criticism of religion, but it is very much to the point to note how he relates this criticism to the theological evaluation. This, and any, critique based on the history (*Geschichte*) and phenomenology (*Phänomenologie*) of religions can have no more than "immanent significance."[39] The only decisive criticism—that would break religions completely—can come from the side of God in his revelation.[40] However, this kind of application of religious studies is very much the kind of *ad hoc* apologetics advocated by postliberals. Its findings do not establish truth, but they may serve to support arguments, just as Barth does here. But just like Barth, postliberals insist that such findings, finally, have only relative significance. A theological evaluation or position must be theological from beginning to end, or else it is not theological.

This much is clear, then, when Barth summarizes the approach that must be taken toward the problem of religion.

> To sum up: we do not need to delete or retract anything from the admission that in His revelation God is present in the world of human religion. But what we have to discern is that this means that *God* is present. Our basic task is so to order the concepts revelation and religion that the connexion between the two can again be seen as identical with that event between God and man in which God is God, i.e., the Lord and Master of man, who Himself judges and alone justifies and sanctifies, and man is the man of God, i.e., man as he is adopted and received by God in His severity and

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[39]KD I/2, 343; CD I/2, 314.

[40]KD I/2, 355-356; CD I/2, 324-325.

goodness.[41]

This means, in turn, that "we speak of revelation as the *Aufhebung* of religion."[42]

Barth on the Theological Interpretation of Religion

Barth devotes the remainder of §17 of *Church Dogmatics* to explaining this

proposition in Christian theological terms. This task results in two basic conclusions

about religion. Negatively, revelation is the *abolition* of religion: in view of revelation,

religion is unbelief. Positively, revelation is the *elevation* of religion: in Jesus Christ, there

is true religion, and for this reason (and this reason alone) one can say that a true religion

is possible.

By no means, however, does Barth let things go with bald assertions. In justifying

these conclusions, he relates them to the doctrine of the *assumptio carnis*.[43] Just as his

critique of modern theology on the question of religion bears definite similarities to the

postliberals on modern theology in general, Barth's constructive approach also bears

strong similarities to the postliberal approach. When he insists that the problem of religion

for theology is "uninterruptedly theological," he is already aligned with the postliberal

conviction that theology should be *nonfoundational*, that it should be, as George Lindbeck

might well have put it, "intratextual" rather than "extratextual." But by viewing the

theological interpretation of religion and the religions as an application of the

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[41]CD I/2, 297; KD I/2, 324.

[42]KD I/2, 324. CD I/2, 297.

[43]CD I/2, 297; KD I/2, 323-324.

christological dogma we have the major way in which Barth shares also with postliberals

in a *grammatical* understanding of the theological task.

Barth makes it clear from the outset of *Church Dogmatics* that he understands

theology as an "intramural" or "intratextual" activity.[44] According to this conception,

theologians do not look outside the Christian community to explain, justify, and test its

language and practice. They do so according to the sources and criteria of the community

itself. Theologians should never step outside or behind the Scriptures and the language of

the church based on the Scriptures in performing their task. Theology in the strictest and

most proper sense is the church's own "task of criticism and correction of her language

about God (*ihres Redens von Gott*)."[45] As Barth explains:

> The Church produces theology in this special and essential sense, in which she takes
> upon herself a self-test. She sets before herself the question of truth, i.e., she measures
> her activity—her language about God—against her existence as Church. Thus there is
> theology in this special and essential sense, because, in the Church, before it and apart
> from it, there is language about God. Theology follows the language of the Church,
> provided that . . . she measures it, not by a standard alien to her, but by her own
> source and object.[46]

This source and object is none other than Jesus Christ. For Barth, Jesus Christ is the

one Word of God. He alone is the self-revelation of God.[47] But this one Word of God

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[44]I adopt the term "intramural" for Barth's theology from Elsabeth S. Hilke, "Theology as Grammar: An Inquiry into the Function of Language in the Theology of Karl Barth," Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1976, 1-9, esp. 6; the term "intratextual" from Lindbeck.

[45]KD I/1, 1; CD I/1, 1.

[46]KD I/1, 2; CD I/1, 2.

[47]Barth follows John 1 and identifies the Word of God with the revelation of God in both the objective and subjective sense, so that the revelation of God as the Word of God is the Son of God. The revelation of God, then, is the Word of God as God speaking, not merely speech from God. "Even as we did not understand the Word of God only as proclamation and Scripture, but the revelation of God in proclamation and Scripture, we must understand it in its identity with God himself" (KD I/1, 141). Cf.

comes also in the form of Scripture, which is the authoritative human witness to him, and in the form of proclamation (*Verkündigung*) in preaching and the sacrament (i.e., the Eucharist), and as it is summarized and delivered in dogmatics through the ages.[48] Thus, Jesus Christ stands as both source and object of all the Church's language and activity, and thus constitutes the criterion against which the human activity of proclamation must be measured.

Other disciplines such as philosophy, history, and sociology have undertaken to assess the Church's language about God. Because they work within their own frameworks, they judge the Church's language about God on alien terms, and their criticism and correction speak past the problem.[49] Theology must be grounded entirely in Jesus Christ: "[W]hat must happen here is that [the Church's] criticism and correction be from the essence of the Church: from Jesus Christ as her foundation, her end, and her content."[50]

Theology, in Barth's view, is "intramural" in three respects. First, it is intramural because it is occupied only with the Church's proclamation of the Word of God, Jesus

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KD IV/3, 1: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, in whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death" (quoted from the Barmen Declaration). Barth is careful to maintain, however, that, as we identify the concept of the Word of God with the person of Jesus Christ, we do not lessen in any way the verbal character of the concept (KD I/1, 143).

[48]See "The Word of God in its Threefold Form,"CD I/1, 98-140; "*Das Wort Gottes in seiner dreifachen Gestalt,*"KD I/1, 89-128. On the relationship between the concepts of "language about God" (*Rede von Gott*), proclamation (*Verkündigung*) and dogmatics, see "Church Proclamation as the Material of Dogmatics," CD I/1, 51-97; "*Die kirchliche Verkündigung als Stoff der Dogmatik,*" KD I/1, 47-89.

[49]KD I/1, 4; CD I/1,

[50]KD I/1, 4. Cf. KD I/1, 89: "The presupposition, which makes proclamation to be proclamation and with it the Church to be the Church, is *the Word of God. It attests itself* in Holy Scripture in the word of the prophets and apostles, to whom it was originally and once for all spoken through *the revelation of God*" (emphasis added).

Christ (understood, however, as not merely personal but also verbal revelation). Second,

it is intramural because is guided by this very Word of God as its criterion. Third, it seeks

not to establish the *content* of Church proclamation, but only to guide and correct this

activity so that it is true to its source and object, Jesus Christ. In view of these points, it is

clear that Barth's understanding of theology is consonant with the nonfoundational

approach characteristic of the later postliberals. Barth's approach does not seek an

independent standpoint upon which to build theology, nor does it look to external criteria

for assessment or other disciplines for guidance. On the contrary, Barth opposes such

moves.[51]

Prominent postliberal approaches understand that the theological task is similar to

uncovering grammar-like relationships and applying them in guiding and correcting the

first-order language and practice of the Church. In other words, the postliberal

conception of the theology regards its task as one that seeks and applies rules *inherent* in

the language and practices of the Christian community to the very same. Much the same

holds for Barth. This is seen clearly as he makes the doctrine of the incarnation the key to

a properly theological interpretation of religion. This move, however, is not peculiar to

this topic. It is the starting point of all theological reflection on revelation, that is, "of all

thought and language about [revelation]."[52] Indeed, Barth maintains, dogmatics properly

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[51]"[Other disciplines] judge the Church's language about God on principles foreign to it, instead of on its own principles, and thus increase instead of diminishing the harm on account of which the Church needs a critical science. And that the more perniciously, when they do it in the name of 'theology'!" (CD I/1, 5; KD I/1, 4).

[52]CD I/2, 124; KD I/2, 137.

"must, of course, as a whole and in all its parts be christologically determined. . ."[53] If

dogmatics cannot be regarded as fundamentally Christology, then "it has assuredly

succumbed to some alien sway and is already on the verge of losing its character as church

dogmatics. . . . As a whole, i.e., in the basic statements of a church dogmatics, Christology

must either be dominant and perceptible, or else it is not Christology."[54] While Barth does

not claim Christology is *only* a rule, it certainly does act as "a methodological rule—not an

a priori principle, but a rule which is learned through encounter with the God who reveals

Himself in Christ—in accordance with which one presupposes a particular understanding

of God's Self-revelation in reflecting upon each and every other doctrinal topic."[55]

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[53]CD I/2, 123; KD I/2, 135.

[54]CD I/2, 123; KD I/2, 135. Barth goes on to explain: "That is precisely why there has to be a special Christology, an express doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ" (ibid.). In other words, the christological dogma must exist for the sake of the theological task. This understanding is immediately supported by Barth's own qualification about treating Christology, which is that he will treat it only as far as is necessary for a complete explication of revelation.

Barth regards treatment of this doctrine, as is also the case with the trinitarian dogma, as an individual statement, "if not as an error, at least as a lurking source of error in earlier Christian doctrine. As such, it has had a disastrous effect, and it is our present task to overcome it. After all that has befallen it, church dogmatics will not become 'church' again, i.e., free from the alien dominion of general truths and free for Christian truth, until it summons up sufficient courage to restore what is specifically Christian knowledge, that of the Trinity and of Christology, to its place at the head of its pronouncements, and to regard and treat it as the foundation of all its other pronouncements"(CD I/2, 124; KD I/2, 136).

[55]Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 454.

Mc Cormack's study details the development of Barth's thought toward a thoroughly Christological concentration. He locates the genesis of this concentration to May 1924, when Barth came upon the anhypostatic-enhypostatic Christological dogma of the early Church (327). McCormack shows that its influence on Barth's theology is already present in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* of the mid-1920s, from which he brings to light "the extent to which the fundamental dogmatic decisions which control even *Church Dogmatics* I/1 and I/2 were already made in 1924-5 Göttingen" (375). McCormack also shows that Barth does not work this "Christological concentration" fully until the treatment of election in CD II/2 (see especially 458-463). For this study, it is important to note that *Barth did not set aside the methodological commitment described at length in vol. I*; on the other hand, it must also be noted that "at the point where Barth would seek to correct critically Christian proclamation in the light of a fresh hearing of the Word of God, the 'christocentricism' so described provides a further concretization of what Barth thought that criticism would most likely entail" (454).

Therefore Barth is consistent when he states that a theological interpretation of religion must be christological:

> The point of view, to which one has to orient himself in this matter, in order to maintain the *analogia fidei* and not to fall into untheological thinking, is christological, from the incarnation of the Word as the *assumptio carnis*. As the unity of God and man in Jesus Christ is the unity of a completed event, so also the unity of divine revelation and human religion is that of an event—here, to be sure, it has yet to be completed. As God is the subject of this one event, so also he is of the other. As the man Jesus does not have a prior and abstract existence, but only in the unity of that event, whose subject is the Word of God and so God himself—true God and true man—so also here man along with his religion is to be seen strictly as one who follows God, because God has gone before the one who hears God, because God has addressed him, which man comes in only as a counterpart to God. . .[56]

In defending this approach, Barth argues that, unlike modern theology, the older Protestant theology "did not praise and magnify Christ in word only, as the newer theology definitely had done in its own way. It could also praise and magnify Him in deed, i.e., by the actual (*tatsächliche*) ordering of its thinking about God."[57] That is to say, the christological dogma had real practical (*praktisch*) importance. Modern theology, on the other hand, did not hold this dogma "to be the practical presupposition of its actual thinking."[58]

According to the doctrine of the incarnation, just as the unity of God and man is that of a completed event, so it is also with revelation and religion. They come together in a union that parallels the personal union. This has two basic implications. First, just as the human nature of Christ has no independent existence from the Logos (*anhypostasis*), so

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[56]KD I/2, 323; CD I/2, 297.

[57]KD I/2, 323; CD I/2, 297.

[58]KD I/2, 324; CD I/2, 297.

also religion considered theologically is not true apart from revelation. Second, just as in the unity with the Logos the human nature does acquire existence (*enhypostasis*), so also that religion which is united with revelation also then is true, not of itself, but solely by virtue of its "being assumed" by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

This is why Barth assesses religion as unbelief. In view of the doctrine of the incarnation applied to the problem of religion, the theologian must assess religion negatively, as of itself being false: "We begin by stating that religion is unbelief. It is a concern, indeed, we must say that it is the one great concern, of godless man."[59] Barth is quick to point out that this judgment is strictly theological. "It is not a judgment of religious science or philosophy based upon some prior negative judgment concerned with the nature of religion. . . . Since it aims only to repeat the judgment of God, it does not involve any human renunciation of human values, any contesting of the true and the good and the beautiful which a closer inspection will reveal in almost all religions, ..."[60] He is also careful to warn that a theological evaluation of religion and the religions must be cautious and charitable, and marked by forebearance.[61] As the judgment of God, however, "[o]ur whole existence is called in question," and where this is the case, "there can be no place for sad and pitiful laments at the non-recognition of relative human greatness."[62]

Barth justifies this stance within the logic of Christian doctrine. He notes two basic

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[59]CD I/2, 300; KD I/2, 327.

[60]CD I/2, 300; KD I/2, 327.

[61]CD I/2, 297, 299; KD I/2, 324, 326.

[62]CD I/2, 300; KD I/2, 327.

theological judgments against religion. The first stems from consideration of revelation as

God's self-offering and self-manifestation (*Gottes Selbstdarbietung und*

Selbstdarstellung).[63] Revelation is totally the action of God in coming to and revealing

himself to man. In revelation God tells the human creature something that neither is

known nor can be known apart from revelation. The capacity to know God rests entirely

on the fact that a person knows God, which itself is God's work. There is no possibility

from the human side to know God. A person *is able to know* God only when and because

he *actually does know* God.[64] Therefore, from the standpoint of revelation, religion is the

human attempt to do what God himself seeks to do and in fact does. As Barth explains:

"It is the attempted replacement of the divine work by a human manufacture. The divine

reality offered and manifested to us in revelation is replaced by a concept of God

arbitrarily and wilfully [sic] (*eigensinnig und eigenmächtig*) by man. . . . 'Arbitrarily and

wilfully' means here by his own means, by his own human insight and constructiveness and

energy."[65] In other words, revelation shows religion to be idolatry.

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[63]CD I/2, 301; KD I/2, 328.

[64]As George Hunsinger has pointed out and discussed thoroughly in connection with the whole of *Church Dogmatics*, this line of argument is characterstic of Barth (*How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 32-35). Hunsinger calls this motif "particularism," where Barth's theology tries always to move from the particular to the general, and not *vice versa*. Hunsinger explains:
> Negatively, this procedure means that Barth does not first ask about what might be true or meaningful on general grounds and then move to fit theological statements into that framework. He does not first ask, for example, what we might mean by the word "love" and then go on to apply this general concept to God. Nor does he amplify this procedure. He does not first decide on general, systematic or nontheological grounds what sorts of things are real and what sorts are possible. . . .
> Positively, the motif of particularism means that Barth strove to take his bearings strictly from the particularities of the biblical witness, especially its narrative portions (32-33).

[65]CD I/2, 302; KD I/2, 329-330.

Because it is a grasping, religion is the concentrated expression of human unbelief, i.e., an attitude and activity which is directly opposed to faith. It is a feeble but defiant, an arrogant but hopeless, attempt to create something which man could do, but now cannot do, or can do only because and if God Himself creates it for him: the knowledge of the truth, the knowledge of God. We cannot, therefore, interpret the attempt as a harmonious co-operating of man with the revelation of God, as though religion were a kind of outstretched hand which is filled by God in his revelation. Again, we cannot say of the evident religious capacity of man that it is, so to speak, the general form of human knowledge, which acquires its true and proper content in the shape of revelation. On the contrary, we have here an exclusive contradiction.[66]

This contradiction works both ways. Revelation is the contradiction of religion. Just as religion does not link up with revelation, so also revelation does not link up with religion, but instead displaces it.

The second point is seen by considering revelation as the act by which God reconciles human creatures to himself: "As a radical teaching about God, it is also the radical assistance of God which comes to us as those who are unrighteous and unholy, and as such damned and lost. In this respect, too, the affirmation which revelation makes and presupposes of man is that he is unable to help himself either in whole or even in part."[67] This work of God, then, replaces all religion as human attempts at justification and sanctification. Revelation shows religion as self-righteousness.

In saying that revelation is the *Aufhebung* of religion, then, Barth means that it is the negation of religion. Revelation judges religion, and it condemns religion as unbelief because it is idolatry and because it is self-righteousness. Therefore, revelation and religion stand in contradiction and opposition to each other, not in a mutually

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[66]CD I/2, 302-303; KD I/2, 330.

[67]CD I/2, 307; KD I/2, 335-336.

complementary relationship. But as the *Aufhebung* of religion, Barth also speaks of

revelation as the *elevation* of religion, not because it is possible but because it is so. This

judgment, once again, is grounded in the analogy of faith that relates and views the

problem of religion from the standpoint of the christological dogma. In Jesus Christ, God

and the human creature are one person. Their unity is the unity of revelation and religion,

and so, just as there is the union of God and man in Jesus Christ, so there is also of

revelation and religion. Just as the human nature in Jesus Christ does not have an

existence apart or prior to its union with the Son of God, so also religion has no truth or

true existence apart from or prior to its union with revelation. But just as the human

nature in Jesus Christ exists by virtue of the personal union, so also does religion where it

is assumed by revelation. In this case—and in this case alone—one can and must speak of

the true religion.

As in the case of religion as unbelief, Barth discusses this by relating it to other aspects

of Christian doctrine. In this case, he turns to the doctrine of justification. From the

standpoint of revelation, all religion is unbelief, that is, a lack of faith. Religion in and of

itself is never true, nor is it in any respect capable of becoming true. How is it possible to

speak of "true" religion? Only in the sense that one speaks of a justified sinner: "There is

a true religion: just as there are justified sinners. If we abide strictly by that analogy—and

we are dealing not merely with an analogy, but in a comprehensive sense with the thing

itself—we need have no hesitation in saying that the Christian religion is the true

religion."[68] According to this analogy, the true religion—the Christian religion—is true

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[68]CD I/2, 326; KD I/2, 357.

strictly by grace. There is nothing in the Christian religion that justifies it over against other religions, in the same way that justified sinners are in no respect to themselves superior others. As he explains:

> We must insist, therefore, that at the beginning of a knowledge of the truth of the Christian religion, there stands the recognition that this religion, too, stands under the judgment that religion is unbelief, and that it is not acquitted by any inward worthiness, but only by the grace of God, proclaimed and effectual in His revelation.[69]

This conclusion, however, does not stand alone, because it

> affects the whole practice of our faith: our Christian conceptions of God and the things of God, our Christian theology, our Christian worship, our forms of Christian fellowship and order, . . . in short our Christianity, to the extent that it is *our* Christianity, the human work which we undertake and adjust to all kinds of near and remote aims and which as such is seen to be on the same level as the human work in other religions.[70]

This judgment, in turn, means that Christianity, no less than any other religion, stands under the judgment of unbelief. To be sure, it is unbelief in a different way, because Christians have a clear knowledge of God, but it is no less serious. But this judgment does not mean that the Christian faith is weak or uncertain relative to other religions. Rather, it means that in the Christian church all must be made relative to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Another way to describe the emphasis of this discussion is to say that the knowledge or doctrine of grace has for Barth definite *pragmatic* implications. It affects the whole practice of the faith, putting all human efforts under the judgment of God. It has other pragmatic implications as well. Before we look at these, however, it should be mentioned

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[69]CD I/2, 327; KD I/2, 358.

[70]CD I/2, 327; KD I/2, 358.

that this emphasis on the connection between belief and practice is also characteristic of postliberal theology. As the quotation shows, "practice" means more than activity; it includes all that Christians think, say, and do. It is this not only to which theology always depends for both Barth and postliberals; it is also this for which theology serves as guide and correction.

To return, then, to the implications for the knowledge of grace, it is important for the proper understanding of non-Christian religions. All attempts to secure the superiority of Christianity to other religions on human grounds or by human argument stand under the judgment of God as unbelief. To live by grace means to live in faith. This means that the security of the Christian before God depends completely on God. All human efforts and anything that may be found in the human creature are excluded. Barth finds it objectionable when Christianity neglects this and consequently tries to present itself as superior in itself. To accent this point he discusses three major periods in church history where this has taken place: the early church, the church after Constantine, and the modern era.[71] While its minority status compelled Christianity to rely on grace and live by faith, the church did turn to apologetics, commending itself over its heathen rivals. In these efforts it conceived itself as the best way to salvation. While Barth admits that the advantages Christianity cited for itself were uncontestable, they were also not ultimately decisive. After Constantine, the status of the Christian church in the world changed greatly. Now allied with political powers, the church's ambition was often to become the first and real world power, as shown in matters such as the investiture controversy and the

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[71]CD I/2, 333-337; KD I/2, 365-369.

crusades. The relatively recent collapse of the unity of Church and state signals the modern period of Christianity. Against claims that the human creature no longer need have anything to do with Christianity, the Christian response has largely been one of engaging the skeptical on their own terms. The apologetical task has again taken center stage, now in the form of demonstrations that Christianity can provide human creatures ways to achieve or realize the goals and purposes which they have already recognized in themselves. In this way, Christianity is presented as the fulfillment of an already conceded general religious possibility.[72]

Since it is by grace alone that the Christian religion is true, these efforts, which rely on human efforts, contradict revelation and so are in themselves unbelief, "[f]or contradiction against grace is unbelief, and unbelief is sin, indeed it is *the* sin. It is, therefore, a fact that we can speak of the truth of the Christian religion only within the doctrine of the *iustificatio impii*."[73] The justification of the sinner is a matter of grace, where "we can and must perceive that for our part we and our contradiction against grace stand under the even more powerful contradiction of grace itself. We can and must—in faith."[74] In the same way, the reality of grace rules out any religion's inherent rightness or superiority over against others, including that of the Christian religion.

This is not to say that Barth rules out apologetics altogether. Rather, as he says earlier in *Church Dogmatics*, "Apologetics and polemics can be only an event; they cannot be a

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[72]In this we see another variation of Barth's criticism of modern theology on the problem of religion. See above, pp. 44-47.

[73]CD I/2, 337; KD I/2, 370.

[74]CD I/2, 338; KD I/2, 370.

program."[75] Where apologetics is a *program*, Barth objects. As an *ad hoc* procedure,

however, even he is willing to use apologetics. In all cases, however, care must be taken

not to distort the gospel. The gospel does not need our help, and it is possible for us to

defend it so well that it falls down.[76]

Barth further clarifies what it means that in the knowledge of grace lies the truth of the

Christian religion.[77] It is *not* by the sheer fact or concept of grace that the Christian

religion is true, but solely by the name of Jesus Christ. To illustrate this, Barth discuses

the relationship between Christianity and Pure Land Buddhism (Jodo-Shu and Jodo-Shin-

Shu), which, in Barth's view, provides the most illuminating parallel to Christianity,

especially with regard to the concept of grace.[78] The Jodo school (founded by Honen)

insisted that salvation (as they understand it) comes by way of the grace of the Amida

Buddha. The Jodo-Shin school (founded by Honen's disciple Shinran) went further and

stressed that salvation was unattainable by human effort or merit, and that it comes only

through faith in the Buddha. To be sure, there are significant differences between

Christian and Pure Land Buddhist teachings on salvation and grace, and Barth recognizes

them.[79] This Buddhist teaching, however, shows that the concept of grace does not

belong to Christianity alone, and therefore, that even in the concept of grace as such the

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[75]KD I/1, 30; CD I/1, 33.

[76]KD I/1, 30; CD I/1, 33.

[77]CD I/2, 339-346; KD I/2, 371-379.

[78]KD I/2, 372-377; CD I/2, 340-344.

[79]In fact, Barth readily admits that increasingly closer examination of the two reveals ever greater differences.

Christian religion cannot be judged as true. The decisive factor cocnerning truth is no

concept at all, but a name:

> Concerning truth and error only one thing is really decisive. . . . the name of Jesus
> Christ. . . . the truth of the Christian religion is in fact enclosed in all the formal
> simplicity of this name as the very heart of the divine reality of revelation, which alone
> constitutes the truth of our religion. It is not enclosed, therefore, in its more or less
> explicit structure as the religion of grace, nor in the Reformation doctrines of original
> sin, representative satisfaction, justification by faith alone, the gift of the Holy Ghost
> and thankfulness.[80]

With this, Barth brings not only human religion but the religions of the world under a fully

theological and exclusively Christological interpretation.[81]

The True Religion and Truth in Other Religions

Now that we have seen how Barth's theological interpretation of religion and the

religions is congruent with postliberal approaches to theology, it may be asked whether it

makes much difference. If it does not suggest shortcomings or oversights in the usual

evaluations of Barth's views, then this insight has little more than curiosity value. Let us

consider the three kinds of objections raised in the opening of the chapter.

The first objection is that Barth's view is arrogant. This may be answered in three

ways. First, Barth himself was aware that just such a charge might be laid against him.

For this reason, he stresses that the judgment of religion as unbelief is strictly a *theological*

judgment and is not meant as a judgment against human values. Second, as a religion,

Christianity fares no better than any other religion. On human grounds, there are no

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[80]CD I/2, 343; KD I/2, 376.

[81]Osgood Darby Cannon, III, "The Concept of Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth," Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1975, 124.

definite reasons to assert the superiority of Christianity over other religions. In fact,

Christian attempts to do so can be understood as a denial of grace and therefore unbelief.

Third, Barth's discussion of the problem of religion for theology is not the treatment of an

independent topic. It develops in close connection with a detailed explication of the

nature, basis, and scope of theology. Barth is not trying to justify a position arrived at

intuitively; rather, he is following a very definite and wholly unique logic, and his

discussion is nothing other than an explicit tracing out of this logic and its consequences

for this issue.

The second objection is that Barth does not account for the evidence presented by the

other religions. As Paul Knitter explains:

> A case in point is [Barth's] verdict on Amida Buddhism. What both the scholar of
> religious history and the Christian theologian see in this form of Buddhism is, as Barth
> admits, the very same belief and practice of "salvation through faith alone." But our
> eyes and mind deceive us, Barth tells us. Why? Because the Bible tells us that
> salvation through faith is possible only in Jesus Christ.[82]

Knitter sees this as a clear example of Barth's refusal to allow any finding of the study of

religions to enter into a theological evaluation of religion and the religions. According to

the logic of Barth's own argument, however, any concession to another point of view

involves a denial of the theological nature of such an evaluation. Barth does not deny that

such findings have relative significance and may prove helpful. But they must not be

allowed independence from theology. To do so is effectively to deny a theological

evaluation, because it makes theology relative to a viewpoint independent of Jesus Christ.

Such findings must rather be made relative to the Christian perspective. To argue as

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[82]Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 91.

Knitter does, that Barth does not allow "the facts" to speak needs to address not simply

his findings on this particular topic but Barth's understanding of the very nature, purpose,

and sources of theology.

In fairness, it must also be noted that, after raising this objection, Knitter does discuss

Barth's method. But there is no argument with Barth; he simply asserts that the

Scriptures cannot be understood in themselves but must be related to present-day

experience:

> . . . any viable method of theology will have to make use of *two* sources—Christian
> tradition (scripture and its living interpretation through history) and human experience
> (which includes both thought and praxis). . . . Applying the two-source approach to a
> method for a theology of religions, we must recognize that a Christian understanding
> of and approach to other religions cannot be fashioned only from the fabric of
> Christian beliefs.[83]

This constitutes only disagreement with Barth, but no argument. Clearly a major reason

for doing so was that Barth's position ran directly counter to prevailing trends. In view of

this, it is difficult to maintain the objection that his approach is inadequate because it fails

to account for evidence from the religions themselves. In fact, even raising such an

objection shows a basic misunderstanding of Barth's approach.

The third objection is that Barth holds too narrow a view of revelation. Because he

maintained that God reveals himself only in Jesus Christ, many have concluded that Barth

denies any revelation outside the historical person of Jesus Christ or the ongoing

testimony to him in the Scriptures and through the proclamation of the Church. Barth

himself, however, noted repeatedly that God can and does reveal himself through the

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[83]Ibid., 91-92.

living Lord Jesus Christ outside the church. It is God who must be acknowledged as the only one who can set limits on himself. For this reason, Barth not only recognizes that "God may speak to us through Russian communism or a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub or a dead dog. . . . God may speak to us through a pagan or an atheist" but he also insists that we do well to listen.[84] Therefore, the objection that understands Barth to restrict revelation to the historical person of Christ, the Christian community, and Christian sources, is met.

At the same time, does this put Barth's conclusion that there is only one true religion in jeopardy? To answer this, it is crucial to understand the difference between a religion being true and a religion possessing truth. Barth argues that only the religion of revelation—only the religion which is made true by Jesus Christ—is indeed true. The problem for Barth is to explain how truth can occur in non-Christian writers "given the sheer exclusivity of truth in Jesus Christ."[85] It would be a mistake, however, "to conclude, as is too often done by superficial readers of his theology, that his exclusivist Christology is incompatible with recognizing truth (i.e., theological truth) in non-Christian sources and writers."[86] On the contrary, given that the risen and ascended Lord Christ is Lord of all, one may find and even expect to find that there is truth in other religions.

In the fourth volume of *Church Dogmatics* Barth explains the theme of Jesus Christ as

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[84]CD I/1, 60-61; KD I/1, 55-56.

[85]Hunsinger, *How To Read Karl Barth*, 234-235. Much of the following discussion is indebted to Hunsinger's detailed discussion in this book of this problem (pp. 234-280).

[86]Ibid., 235.

the light of life.[87] As is the one and only light of life, Jesus Christ is the sole source of knowledge of God. This truth, however, may be found outside the words of the Bible and the Christian Church. As Barth puts it, there are "lights, words, and truth" that may be "spoken in the secular world and addressed to the community from it." While it seems that what he has in mind specifically are truths from a secular, non-religious sphere, there is nothing that rules out the possibility that some of these truths are found in the teachings of non-Christian religions, and it would seem from the citation above, where Barth links politics, music, and non-Christian religions together as places in which truth might be revealed, that this extension is entirely allowable.[88]

This possession of knowledge does not make these religions true, nor do these words assume equal standing with the testimony of the Scriptures. But they still can prove valuable for the Christian community, which should make use of them:

> If they are really true, and we have certainly to reckon with this possibility, why should they not do this without being given any canonical or dogmatic status? Their work will consist in leading the community at all times and places, and in all its members, more deeply into the given word of the Bible as the authentic attestation of the Word of Jesus Christ Himself. They will make a contribution to the strengthening, extending and defining of the Christian knowledge which draws from this source and is measured by this norm, to the lending of new seriousness and cheerfulness to the Christian life and new freedom and concentration to the delivery of the Christian message. We may let them do this work without the pretension of acquiring from them new tables or of being empowered and obligated by them to proclaim such tables. They do not need this to accomplish what they can and should accomplish. Why should not those to whom it is given to receive these true words confess them with gratitude, sincerity and resolution, yet also with the humility which is required at this point too?[89]

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[87]CD IV/3, 38-165; KD IV/3, 40-188.

[88]William A. Christian, Sr., *Doctrines of Religious Communities: A Philosophical Study* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 213.

[89]CD IV/3, 134; KD IV/3, 151-152.

Seeing how reading Barth's theology of religions from a postliberal perspective does in fact answer common objections, three things might follow. First, a more thorough study of Barth on the problem of religion from a postliberal perspective might yield a fairer, more complete picture and assessment of Barth's theology of religions than has been usual in the field. This would include not only looking at other sections of *Church Dogmatics* that bear on the issue, but also a more detailed consideration of his conception of the theological task, especially the nature and extent of its logic. Second, it suggests that the postliberal perspective may call into question some key aspects or tenets of major positions current in the theology of religions, just as it calls into question their evaluations of Barth. Third, it might give new or clearer insights into viewing the problem of religion from a theological perspective, including what it means even to do so. These insights, moreover, would not have to be limited to those who materially agree with Barth.

CHAPTER THREE

GEORGE LINDBECK AND A CULTURAL-LINGUISTIC APPROACH
TO THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHRISTIANITY TO OTHER RELIGIONS

During the past four decades, dialogue on doctrinal topics has become a prominent

feature in inter-Christian relationships. Repeatedly dialogue participants have issued

reports that many find hard to believe. On the one hand, they have claimed agreement on

doctrinal matters which had been regarded as divisive—matters such as the Lord's Supper

and the doctrine of justification. On the other hand, each side still held to their traditional

formulations. How could these things be?

This question set George Lindbeck in search of a new understanding of doctrine.[1]

When he realized that other ways could not account for the outcome that doctrines could

be reconciled while not being changed, he sought a different way:

> It has become apparent to me, during twenty-five years of involvement in ecumenical
> discussions and in teaching about the history and present status of doctrines, that those
> of us who are engaged in these activities lack adequate categories for conceptualizing
> the problems that arise. We are often unable, for example, to specify the criteria we
> implicitly employ when we say that some changes are faithful to a doctrinal tradition
> and others unfaithful, or some doctrinal differences are church-dividing and others not.
> Doctrines, in other words, do not behave the way they should, given our customary
> suppositions about the kinds of things they are. We clearly need new and better ways

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[1]George A. Lindbeck is professor emeritus at Yale Divinity School, where he taught historical theology.
He has also long been active as a observer of ecumenical developments and as a Lutheran participant in
ecumenical debates, particularly with Roman Catholics. Along with Hans Frei, he is widely acknowledged
as the most influential of postliberal thinkers. The term "postliberal" is his coinage.

of understanding their nature and function.[2]

The most detailed results of this search are found in *The Nature of Doctrine*, in which he lays out an account combining a "cultural-linguistic" model of religion, a "regulative" understanding of doctrine, and a "postliberal" approach to theology. This book has been among the most influential and widely discussed postliberal accounts. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that his approach to questions concerning the relationship of Christianity to non-Christian religions exhibits some of postliberalism's most widely known and discussed features. We should note, however, that Lindbeck had already addressed some of these questions several years before he published *The Nature of Doctrine*.[3] Still, it is in this book that he discusses most extensively issues involved in the field of the theology of religions, and so it will be central to the presentation here.

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[2]George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 7. Lindbeck goes on to explain that his "inquiry is very much a matter of seeking concepts that will remove anomalies." (8). The anomalies here "have to do especially with the interrelationship of doctrinal permanence and change, conflict and compatibility, unity and disunity, and variety and uniformity among, but especially within, religions" (9). Lindbeck owes the conception of an inquiry seeking to remove anomalies to Thomas S. Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d. ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970). Cf. Lindbeck, "Theologische Methode und Wissenschaftstheorie," *Theologische Revue* 74 (1978): 266-280. Hans Frei has stressed this point as well: "Doctrinal reconciliation without doctrinal change is what Lindbeck reports from his large ecumenical experience: How to understand or account for 'the intertwining of variability and invariability in matters of faith' (p. 17 [of *The Nature of Doctrine*])? The whole book is governed by that question." Hans W. Frei, "Epilogue: George Lindbeck and The Nature of Doctrine," in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, ed. Bruce D. Marshall (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 277.

[3]His earlier writings in the field of the theology of religions are "*Fides ex auditu* and the Salvation of non-Christians: Contemporary Catholic and Protestant Positions," in *The Gospel and the Ambiguity of the Church*, ed. Vilmos Vajta (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 122-157, and "Unbelievers and the *Sola Christi*," *Dialog* 12 (1973): 182-189, which is a revised and condensed version of portions of the former essay.

Lindbeck on Models of Religion

According to Lindbeck, Christian theologians since medieval times have viewed

religion and doctrine basically along two lines, which he calls "cognitivist" and

"experiential-expressive."[4] The *cognitivist* approach, which Lindbeck identifies with

premodern theology, "emphasizes the cognitive aspects of religion and stresses the ways in

which church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about

objective realities."[5] In this view, religion is analogous to classical conceptions of science

and philosophy, consisting essentially in accepting sets of propositions as objectively and

immutably true.[6]

In many quarters of Christianity, the cognitivist view has been superseded by an

experiential-expressivist view of religion, which regards doctrines "as noninformative and

nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations."[7] The

"crucial affirmation" of experiential-expressive accounts has been that of "the basic unity

of religious experience."[8] Although they differ on specific matters, these accounts share

the conviction of locating "ultimately significant contact with whatever is finally important

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[4]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 30. Cf. p. 16, where he find three, not two, types of views on religion. Two correspond exactly to the cognitivist and experiential-expressive, while the third is a hybrid of these two. He cites Roman Catholic theologians Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan as having probably the most influential versions of this "two-dimensional" view. But he immediately notes that he will subsume this view under the cognitivist and experiential-expressivist views.

[5]Ibid., 16.

[6]Ibid., 21.

[7]Ibid., 16.

[8]Ibid., 32.

to religion in the prereflective experiential depths of the self and regard the public or outer

features of religion as expressive and evocative objectifications (i.e., nondiscursive

symbols) of internal experience."[9]

The appeal to an individual's experience characterizes much of contemporary Christian

practice and theology, conservative and liberal.[10] Quite apart from philosophical and

theological trends of the past two centuries, individualism, rapid change, and an awareness

of religious plurality have made it increasingly difficult to understand religion in the

cognitivist fashion. In response to these factors, many have come to understand religion

as a personal and internal affair:

> It is much easier in our day for religious interests to take the experiential-expressive
> form of individual quests for personal meaning. This is true even among theological
> conservatives, as is illustrated by the stress placed on conversion experiences by the
> heirs of pietism and revivalism. The structures of modernity press individuals to meet
> God first in the depths of their souls and then, perhaps, if they find something
> personally congenial, to become part of a tradition or join a church. Their actual
> behavior may not conform to this model, but it is the way the experience themselves.
> Thus the traditions of religious thought and practice into which Westerners are most
> likely to be socialized conceals from them the social origins of their conviction that
> religion is a highly private and individual matter.[11]

As the appeal to experience first developed, the search for religious meaning was thought

to lie within the confines of the Christian tradition in its many forms. In recent years,

however, the boundaries have expanded in the view of many people to include non-

Christian religions.

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[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid., 21-22.

[11]Ibid., 22.

Most theologians following an experiential-expressivist view have assumed rather than shown that the apparent evidence from actual religious communities supports the key affirmation of a unity of religious experience.[12] This, however, is the most problematic element in the experiential-expressivist account.[13] Experiential-expressivism involves itself in a very basic dilemma. The claim of universal religious experience must be balanced against the variety of religious expressions. Therefore characterizations of this common experience must be vague. Yet in doing so, the claim that religious experience is universal becomes empty. As Lindbeck explains: "Because this core experience is said to be common to a wide diversity of religions, it is difficult or impossible to specify its distinctive features, and yet unless this is done, the assertion of commonality becomes logically and empirically vacuous."[14]

Instead, it seems that primary movement in the relationship between religion and experience is from the outside in: "in the interplay between 'inner' experiences and 'external' religious and cultural factors, the latter can be viewed as the leading partners, . . . Instead of deriving external features of a religion from inner experience, it is the inner experiences which are viewed as derivative."[15] Lindbeck calls this alternative view of religion a "cultural-linguistic" approach. The term itself suggests what he readily acknowledges, namely, that recent approaches in cultural anthropology, sociology, and

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[12]Ibid., 32.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid., 33-34.

philosophy have inspired this account of religion:

> The elements of this approach are relatively recent but not unfamiliar, and yet they
> have been neglected by theologians when dealing with anomalies such as the one with
> which we are now struggling. It has become customary in a considerable body of
> anthropological, sociological, and philosophical literature . . . to emphasize neither the
> cognitive nor the experiential-expressive aspects of religion; rather, emphasis is placed
> on those respects in which religions resemble languages together with their correlative
> forms of life and are thus similar to cultures (insofar as these are understood
> semiotically as reality and value systems—that is, as idioms for the constructing of
> reality and the living of life).[16]

The cultural-linguistic approach views religion as a framework that makes it possible

to formulate beliefs and to experience inner attitudes and feelings. As Lindbeck explains:

> . . . a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or
> medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought. It functions somewhat like a
> Kantian *a priori*, although in this case the *a priori* is a set of acquired skills that could
> be different. It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (though
> it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings, or
> sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that
> makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the
> experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it
> is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than
> being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It comprises a vocabulary of
> discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in
> terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed. Lastly, just as a
> language (or "language game," to use Wittgenstein's phrase) is correlated with a form
> of life, and just as a culture has both cognitive and behavioral dimensions, so it is also
> in the case of a religious tradition. Its doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical
> directives are integrally related to the rituals it practices, the sentiments or experiences
> it evokes, the actions it recommends, and the institutional forms it develops. All this is
> involved in comparing a religion to a cultural-linguistic system.[17]

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[16]Ibid., 17-18. Although Lindbeck traces the roots of the cultural-linguistic approach to religion on the cultural side to Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim and on the linguistic side to Ludwig Wittgenstein, only recently has a programmatic approach to the study of religion based on these developments emerged. Lindbeck acknowledges that for his views on the development of the cultural side the statements of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have been crucial (ibid., 27, n. 10). Lindbeck cites philosopher Peter Winch and cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz as having given examples of the programmatic use of a cultural-linguistic outlook for understanding religion (ibid., 20).

[17]Ibid., 33.

The cultural-linguistic model does not so much *replace* as *relativize* both cognitive and experiential dimensions of religion to a more basic linguistic or cultural level. The religious person does not so much choose and explicitly follow known propositions or directives as learn how to think, feel, and act in conformity with the grammar or logic of a given religious tradition. Another way to view this is to regard a religion as "above all an external word, a *verbum externum*, that molds and shapes the self and its preconceptual experience."[18] Without this "external word," it would be impossible to identify or describe experience *qua* experience.

At the same time, the cultural-linguistic model is like the cognitivist account in that it maintains that there are meaningful claims about reality. The cultural-linguistic model, however, holds that religion in its most comprehensive dimension is a framework for thought and life, not a set of claims about reality, because the framework determines the kinds of claims that even can be made meaningfully (i.e., consistent with the religion). Thus the cognitive dimension of a religion, while important, is not basic but stands in a subordinate relation to the cultural-linguistic framework.

Lindbeck links the cultural-linguistic model of religion with a particular understanding of theology. He recognizes that if this view of religion is not useful in the understanding of and faithful to the practice of theology, then it must be judged inadequate.[19] He argues, however, that it can be seen as both useful and faithful. This argument inverts the modern

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[18]Ibid., 34.

[19]Ibid., 112.

priority of theory over practice.[20] An approach to theology consonant with a cultural-

linguistic view of religion would look like this:

> Investigators would look at the communal traditions of the first-order use of the Bible
> in worship, preaching, piety and life (and also in theology in its more kerygmatic or
> proclamatory modes). They would then seek to find the second-order concepts and
> theories which make maximum sense of these actual practices. Perhaps the most
> obvious analogy is to the linguistic study of the grammar of natural languages. In both
> instances, the test of theory is whether the distinctions between acceptable and
> unacceptable usage it mandates fit the consensus intuitions of competent speakers of
> the natural or biblical language.[21]

The proper method of theology should be "intratextual," not "extratextual."[22] In the

latter type of theology, religious meaning is sought *outside* the religion. This type is

characteristic among both those with modern cognitivist and experiential-expressivist

understandings. In an intratextual theology, meaning is immanent. Like languages,

meanings in a given religion are understood as constituted by the *uses* to which terms,

concepts, and categories are put. "[T]he proper way to determine what 'God' signifies,

for example, is by examining how the word operates within a religion and thereby shapes

reality and experience rather than by first establishing its propositional or experiential

meaning and reinterpreting or reformulating its uses accordingly."[23] In this sense,

intratextuality is characteristic of many forms of behavior:

> Hammers and saws, ordinals and numerals, winks and signs of the cross, words and

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[20]George Lindbeck, "Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Intratextual Social Embodiment," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 222-231.

[21]Ibid., 222. Lindbeck adds parenthetically that the question of a competent speaker is another issue.

[22]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 114.

[23]Ibid.

sentences are made comprehensible by indicating how they fit into systems of communication or purposeful action, not by reference to outside factors. One does not succeed in identifying the 8:02 to New York by describing the history or manufacture of trains or even by a complete inventory of the cars, passengers, and conductors that constituted and traveled on it on a given day. None of the cars, passengers, and crew might be the same the next day, and yet the train would be self-identically the 8:02 to New York. Its meaning, its very reality, is its function within a particular transportation system. Much the same can be said of winks and signs of the cross: they are quite distinct from nonmeaningful but physically identical eye twitches and hand motions, and their reality as meaningful signs is wholly constituted in any individual occurrence by their intratextuality, by their place, so to speak, in a story.[24]

Religions, moreover, are like languages or cultures in that they are not only intratextual to a very high degree, but they also embrace all reality and possess what Lindbeck calls the "property of reflexivity." This illustration make these notions clearer: "One can speak of all life and reality from French, or from an American or a Jewish perspective; and one can also describe French in French, American culture in American terms, and Judaism in Jewish [terms]."[25] Theology may be intratextual not only in the sense that it explicates a religion from within but in the stronger sense that its description and interpretation embraces all things, and that this is done according to concepts shaped by the religion itself. This understanding, in turn, has great importance for understanding the theological task properly: "In view of their comprehensiveness, reflexivity, and complexity, religions require what Clifford Geertz . . . has called 'thick description,' which he applies to culture, but with the understanding that it also holds for religion."[26] As a "thickly descriptive"

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[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid., 115. The term "thick description" is borrowed from Gilbert Ryle. On the notion of thick description, Lindbeck cites Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

venture, theology requires a close acquaintance with all aspects that the religious
community undertakes or proposes, and then to explain various features in view of other
features, not on the basis of external criteria.

Intratextual theology, then, is *non- or antifoundational.*[27] It appeals neither to
universal structures or features (such as common religious experience) nor to universal
standards of judgment. A crucial question is whether it implies relativism and fideism,
because, as Lindbeck admits, these would exact too dear a cost for most religious
traditions. The issue, however, "is not whether there are universal norms of
reasonableness," which would make relativism and fideism inevitable, "but whether these
can be formulated in some neutral, framework-independent language."[28] In holding that
the intratextuality of a religion means that its description and interpretation can embrace
all reality, the cultural-linguistic approach affirms standards of judgment and claims about
reality that apply universally. What is denied is the possibility of a neutral language into
which all religions can be translated and thus compared. In this sense (and not in the
wider, relativistic sense) intratextual theology is *nonfoundational.*

The cultural-linguistic view also carries a distinctive view of doctrine. In this view, the
most prominent aspect of doctrines is their use, not as in the cognitive view as truth claims
nor as in the experiential-expressive view as symbols, but "as communally authoritative
rules of discourse, attitude, and action."[29] Lindbeck acknowledges that the view of

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[27]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 130.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid., 18.

doctrines as rules is not new. The early church regarded its deposit of faith as regulative, as the label *regulae fidei* suggests. Later theologians have also "often recognized in varying degrees that the operational logic of religious teachings in their communally authoritative (or, as we shall simply say, doctrinal) role is regulative."[30] That is to say, theologians have often recognized that at least one task of doctrines has been to permit and exclude "certain ranges of—among other things—propositional utterances or symbolizing activities."[31] The novel aspect of Lindbeck's proposal is that this regulative function is the only one that doctrines perform "*in their role as church teachings*."[32] He admits that it may seem odd to suggest that, for instance, the Nicene Creed "in its role as a communal doctrine does not make first-order claims," but this is precisely what he argues: "Doctrines regulate truth claims by excluding some and permitting others, but the logic of their communally authoritative use hinders or prevents them from specifying positively what is to be affirmed."[33]

It is important to recognize, however, that the specific sentences in which doctrines are put forward, such as those of the Nicene Creed, may themselves *also* be first-order claims. While it may seem that Lindbeck is setting out a theoretical position, on closer inspection it is evident that the distinction between first- and second-order relgious

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[30]Ibid., 18-19.

[31]Ibid., 19. Lindbeck defines church doctrines as "communally authoritative teachings regarding beliefs and practices that are considered essential to the identity or welfare of the group in question" (ibid.; emphasis added).

[32]Ibid. Emphasis added.

[33]Ibid.

language is based on observation and not absolute. For instance, Lindbeck says about the

relationship between theology and doctrine on the one hand and direct religious statements

on the other:

> Technical theology and official doctrine, in contrast, are second-order discourse about
> the first-intentional uses of religious language. *Here, in contrast to the common*
> *supposition, one rarely if ever succeeds in making affirmations with ontological*
> *import, but rather engages in explaining, defending, analyzing, and regulating the*
> *liturgical, kerygmatic, and ethical modes of speech and action within which such*
> *affirmations from time to time occur.* Just as grammar by itself affirms nothing either
> true or false regarding the world in which language is used, but only about langauge,
> so theology and doctrine, *to the extent that they are second-order activities,* assert
> nothing either true or false about God and his relation to creatures, but only speak
> about such assertions.[34]

At the same time, however, it is clear that Lindbeck is convinced that for the most part

"technical theology and official doctrine" are in fact used not to make claims but to

explain, analyze, or regulate them, and for this reason he speaks of doctrine *qua* doctrine

as purely regulative in function.[35]

The Cultural-Linguistic Approach and the Theology of Religions

In *The Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck discusses the relationship of Christianity to non-

Christian religions not out of direct concern for the field but in the interest of defending

the viability of the cultural-linguistic approach. His model or theory of religion is, in his

own words, "nontheological." If it is to find theological use, then it must be able to make

sense of theological issues and concerns. If it cannot do so, then, from a theological

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[34]Ibid., 69. Emphasis added.

[35]Lindbeck discusses thoroughly the regulative or rule theory of doctrine at pages 73-111 of *The Nature of Doctrine*.

perspective—and this is ultimately his concern—the cultural-linguistic approach must be

considered a dead end. What he tries to do, in other words, is to give priority to practice

over theory and show that his proposed theory fits with the actual practice of Christians.[36]

The Christian "practice" that Lindbeck selects is what we have been calling the

theology of religions, the Christian theological reflection about other religions and the

relationship of Christianity to them. As he himself admits: "If a cultural-linguistic

approach cannot make at least as good sense of these emphases as do alternative theories

of religion, then it will be rightly regarded as theologically uninteresting."[37] Lindbeck

discusses three issues in particular: unsurpassability, interreligious dialogue, and the

salvation of non-Christians. He chooses them because they raise important questions that

the cultural-linguistic approach must answer adequately if it is to be regarded as

theologically useful:

> Can the possible truth of one or another of these assertions of unsurpassability be
> admitted; or, more precisely, what could such an assertion mean? Could it be
> interpreted in such a way as to allow for the desirability of nonproselytizing
> interreligious dialogue and cooperation, and for the possibility of salvation, however

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[36]Lindbeck, "Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Intratextual Social Embodiment," 222. It may seem that is Lindbeck arguing for a better theory as such. This, however, is not the case. Hans Frei discerns rightly what Lindbeck is doing: "To be sure, Lindbeck thinks of [the cultural-linguistic approach] in its own right as a better theory for the general academic study of religion than its nearest rivals, but that's not the point in *this* book: The cultural-linguistic theory or approach to religion is there solely for the service it can render to the ongoing description or self-description of the Christian community and, by extension, to conversation in which members of various religions would be making grammatical remarks to each other about living, believeing, and ritually enacting what their religion is about" (Frei, "Epilogue: George Lindbeck and *The Nature of Doctrine*," 277. Emphasis original.) Frei goes on to make the point that Lindbeck's ecumenical experience indeed plays a crucial role in the argument of the book. "*Without the absolute priority of that Christian-ecumenical reality, without its reality, forget the 'rule' or regulative approach, forget the cultural-linguistic theory—forget the book*" (ibid., 278. Emphasis original.). In other words, it is the actual practice that is given priority, not the cultural-linguistic theory. My point is that this same general pattern is followed in his discussion on the cultural-linguistic approach and issues in the theology of religions.

[37]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 46-47.

defined, outside the one true faith, if there is such a thing?[38]

Underlying these distinct issues, however, is the question of truth, as the title of the

chapter itself suggests: "Many Religions and the One True Faith." The reason is that a

cultural-linguistic approach does not seem well suited to accounting for the claims to truth

that characterize at least some actual religious communities. Therefore, he also discusses

the implications of the cultural-linguistic model for the nature of truth and truth claims.

Religions and Their Claims to Unsurpassibility

Lindbeck recognizes that the cultural-linguistic model would likely prove unconvincing

unless it were able to allow religions to claim superiority to other religions. "It must not,

in other words, exclude the claims religions make about themselves, and it must supply

some interpretation of what these claims mean."[39] Lindbeck recognizes that theologians

have overlooked the cultural-linguistic perspective because it seems unsuited to allowing

for the possibility that one faith is superior to another. The reason has to do with apparent

meaninglessness of asking whether a language or a culture is more true than another: "One

language or culture is not generally thought of as 'truer' than another, much less

unsurpassable, and yet that is what some religions profess to be."[40] If a religion is likened

to a language, then is it even meaningful to ask whether one religion can be truer than

another? A cultural-linguistic model may seem to suggest that it is not, and if this is so,

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[38]Ibid., 46.

[39]Ibid., 46. Here Lindbeck observes: "The claim to finality is widespread in Western (or, more precisely, Middle Eastern) monotheisms, whether Jewish, Christian, or Islamic, and it appears to be at least implicit in Buddhism and some forms of Hinduism . . ."

[40]Ibid.

then it has limited usefulness at best.

The different models of religion imply different terms of understanding and comparing religious truth claims. The cognitivist model regards the *propositional truth* of religious statements as the basic point of comparison. A proposition either corresponds to a state of affairs and thus is true, or fails so to correspond and thus is false. Religious statements are either always true or always false. A given religion, however, is composed of many such statements, and so at least some, and perhaps all, will be composed of mixtures of true and false statements. Accordingly, the basic question when comparing religions according to the cognitive approach "is the question as to which faith makes the most significant veridical truth claims and the fewest false ones."[41]

Truth in an experiential-expressive model of religion is a function of *symbolic efficacy*, that is, "according to how effectively they articulate or represent and communicate that inner experience of the divine (or, perhaps, of the 'unconditioned') which is held to be common to them all."[42] Experiential-expressivism holds that all religions are different manifestations of a common, prereflective experience, and so function in a nondiscursive, symbolic sense. Therefore the key to comparison cannot be whether a certain religion works in this way, because by definition they all do. Comparisons of truth can only be drawn with regard to the *degree* to which they actually function in this way, that is, to the degree that they are symbolically efficacious.

Since the cultural-linguistic approach regards religions "primarily as different idioms

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[41]Ibid., 47.

[42]Ibid.

for construing reality, expressing experiences, and ordering life," the question of truth among religions accordingly focuses on the *categories* "in terms of which truth claims are made and expressive symbolisms employed."[43] In other words, the question of truth asks about the adequacy of the "grammar" that a religion employs when it deploys its vocabulary of propositional claims and representations of inner religious experiences. This question is not so much an option distinct from the other two as an inquiry more basic to the truth of religions than those of the correspondence of truth claims to reality or of the efficacy of religious statement to symbolize prereflective experiences. The categorical adequacy of a religion means that it is *possible* for a religion to express truth in propositional, symbolic, or practical terms, but it does not *guarantee* that this happens or fails to happen. For instance, it is impossible to say whether one thing is larger than another if one lacks the categorical concept of size. But having this concept still does not insure that a given claim or judgment regarding size is indeed correct. Possession of the concept only guarantees that conceptually meaningful statements are possible. In the same way, "a categorically true religion would be one in which it is possible to speak meaningfully of that which is, e.g., most important; but meaningfulness, it should be remembered, makes possible propositional falsehood as well as truth."[44]

These three notions of truth in turn yield correspondingly different notions of the claim that a religion is *unsurpassable*. Traditionally Christians have understood their faith to be unsurpassed in the *propositional* sense. Most religions are thought of holding both truth

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[43]Ibid., 47-48.

[44]Ibid.

and error, while the Christian faith alone is both perfectly and entirely true, that is, that each of its truths is indeed perfectly true and that its truths as a whole comprise the fullness of truth that can be known. The notion of an unsurpassably true religion is more difficult to grasp under the experiential-expressive model, which views religions as *expressively* rather than propositionally true. When truth is understood as symbolic efficacy, "it is a variable quality without any logically intrinsic upper limit (though it may have a de facto one)."[45] A religion can be expressively unsurpassable, but only in the narrow and weak sense that, if there exists a religion that is most true and human history ends with it unsurpassed, then it will be at that point also unsurpassable.[46] The categorical understanding, however, can be stronger not only than the expressive understanding, but also than the propositional understanding. In its strong version, "there is only one religion that has the concepts and categories that enable it to refer to the religious object."[47] This religion would alone be capable of both propositional and expressive truth, because it alone would have the categorical means to make meaningful truth claims and make possible meaningful experiences. Other religions would lack certain of these categories and so would be false in the categorical sense. In fact, the very notion of a different religion would hinge on differences in categories. Lindbeck compares the categorical understanding to a map. A map becomes a kind of proposition when it shows how to go from one place to another. If it is misread and misused, however, then it is a kind of *false*

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[45]Ibid., 50.

[46]This kind of unsurpassibility would be "a mere historical accident." Ibid.

[47]Ibid.

proposition, no matter how accurate and detailed the map itself may be. Even if it poorly

represents the area it purports to map, it still can be a true proposition when it guides

people to their destinations. The categorically and unsurpassably true religion is like a

map: it is capable of being used rightly and thus guide thoughts and actions in ways that

correspond to what is truly and ultimately real, but it does not guarantee such right use.

But if it is a map of some other terrain or territory, then it cannot even be called true or

false.

Religions, then, which are different would better not spoken of false in either the

propositional or expressive senses, because they would lack ways even to conceive of and

speak of truth. Rather, their discourse would be better understood as *meaningless*. In

this way, the categorical understanding of unsurpassable truth is stronger than either

expressive or propositional terms admit. Lindbeck concedes, however, that the

categorical understanding of truth and unsurpassibility is in a sense also weaker than the

propositional understanding. *Categorical* truth does not rule out *propositional* error;

rather, it makes possible both truth and error. For instance, "Even if there is only one

religion in which reference to God can occur (if there is such a being) yet it will be open to

all sorts of falsehoods in what it affirms of him."[48]

In this way, the cultural-linguistic model allows for the possibility of a religion (and,

moreover, is consonant with the actual) making of a meaningful claim to unsurpassibility.

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[48]Ibid., 51.

Christians and Interreligious Encounters

In the cultural-linguistic view, religions may also differ in that they hold

incommensurable terms. Extending the analogy to mathematics, Lindbeck likens such

differences between religions to differences between mathematical and nonmathematical

descriptions of reality.

> "Larger" cannot be translated by "redder," for example, because that would result in descriptive nonsense: e.g., the red flag is larger than the Red Square in Moscow because it is redder, and vice versa. Similarly, the means for referring in any direct way to the Buddhist Nirvana are lacking in Western religions and the cultures influenced by them and it is, therefore, at least initially puzzling how one can say anything either true or false about Nirvana, or even meaningfully deny it, within these latter contexts. Or, to push the same point farther, many Christians have maintained that the stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus are part of the referential meaning of the word "God" as this is used in biblical religion and have therefore concluded that philosophers and others who do not advert to these narratives mean something else by "God."[49]

For Lindbeck, the crucial advantage or distinction of the cultural-linguistic notion of

categorical adequacy is that it recognizes that different religions "may have

incommensurable notions of truth, of experience, and of categorical adequacy, and

therefore also of what it would mean for something to be most important (i.e., 'God')."[50]

Both cognitive and experiential-expressive approaches must propose or suppose a

framework held in common by all religions by which differences may be identified and

adjudicated. For the cognitive approach, it would be the concept of propositional truth.

For the experiential-expressive approach, it would a notion of common religious

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[49]Ibid. Regarding the last sentence, Lindbeck in a note refers to Pascal as supporting such a position, and further cites Thomas Aquinas: "Unbelievers do not 'believe that there is a God' in the sense in which this can be regarded as an act of faith. They do not believe that God exists under the conditions which faith defines. Hence they do not really believe that there is a God" (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.2.2, ad 3).

[50]Ibid., 49.

experience. A cultural-linguistic approach, however, presupposes no such common framework. Thus it is open to the possibility that religions are incommensurable in terms of propositional truth, religious experiences and their symbolisms, and categories for identifying and communicating about both.

Such a possibility would strike many involved in the theology of religions as troubling. The reason is the widely held desire to allow for interreligious dialogue. It is precisely in this area, however, that the cultural-linguistic model would seem to be at a distinct disadvantage, especially when compared to influential inclusivist and pluralist accounts that assume an experiential-expressive view of religion. This view suggests that dialogue should explore the core religious experience that supposedly lies beneath the diverse expressions of different religious communities. The cultural-linguistic approach, on the other hand, leaves open the possibility of incommensurability between religions. A key challenge for the cultural-linguistic approach is also to accomodate the desire for dialogue. Lindbeck's basic argument is that it can indeed allow a strong case for dialogue, but, unlike experiential-expressivist accounts, it does not suggest any particular approach to conversation or seek any particular kind of results.

Lindbeck's argument draws first on biblical considerations. One reason to argue that dialogue need not depend on the presupposition of a common core of religious experience is that the Scriptures teach Christians to imitate Christ in selfless service to others *whether or not this service happens to promote conversion*. A second biblical reason is that passages such as Amos 9:7-8 authorize the view "that nations other than Israel—and, by extension, religions other than the biblical ones—are also peoples elected (and failing) to

carry out their own distinctive tasks with in God's world."[51] If this view is indeed correct

(Lindbeck does not pursue an argument), then it follows that the coming of the kingdom

of God in part is entrusted to those who are outside the explicit witness of this coming

kingdom, that is, non-Christians. He contends that it further follows "that Christians may

have a responsibility to help other movements and other religions make their own

particular contributions, which may be quite distinct from the Christian one, to the

preparation for the Consummation."[52] Thus the traditional understanding of mission as

evangelization is sharply changed. Under the cultural-linguistic model, the "missionary

task of Christians may at times be to encourage Marxists to become better Marxists, Jews

and Muslims to become better Jews and Muslims, and Buddhists to become better

Buddhists (although admittedly their notion of what a 'better Marxist,' etc., is will be

influenced by Christian norms)."[53]

Lindbeck argues that this view of interreligious relationships is no novel innovation on

his part. For instance, the Second Vatican Council's declaration on non-Christian

religions makes it clear that the purpose of dialogue need not be conversion but for the

benefit of other religions.[54] What is new in his proposal is contending that this kind of

understanding is made more convincingly under a cultural-linguistic approach than an

experiential-expressive one. The cultural-linguistic model does not presuppose a common

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[51]Ibid., 54.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Lindbeck cites *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions) 2.

core, and for this reason does not assume that religions are in varying degrees aiming

toward the same goal or saying the same things. "One can admit the unsubstitutable

uniqueness of the God-willed missions of non-Christian religions when one thinks of these

faiths, not as objectifying poorly what Christianity objectifies well (as Karl Rahner

proposes), but as cultural-linguistic systems within which potentialities can be actualized

and realities explored that are not within the direct purview of the peoples of Messianic

witness, but that are nevertheless God-willed and God-approved anticipations of aspects

of the coming kingdom."[55] In this way, Christians are better able to show respect to other

religions.

Lindbeck admits that the Bible nowhere discusses this move, but if it is not approved,

neither then is it prohibited. Because it draws on biblical considerations, however, it

cannot be recommended to non-Christian religious communities for adoption. They must

develop their own rationales, if they even wish to do so. This condition is at once a

weakness and a strength. In terms of weakness, it means that no common foundation or

warrants can be assumed in interreligious dialogues. But this is a strength in that it means

that dialogue partners do not begin by assuming that they "really" agree. Therefore, the

dialogue partners, while not beginning with a conviction that they all agree, "are not

forced into the dilemma of thinking of themselves as representing a superior (or an

inferior) articulation of a common experience of which the other religions are inferior (or

superior) expressions. They can regard themselves as simply different and can proceed to

explore their agreements and disagreements without necessarily engaging in the invidious

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[55]Ibid., 54-55.

comparisons that the assumption of a common experiential core make so tempting."[56]

Thus a cultural-linguistic outlook means there is "no blanket endorsement of the

enthusiasm and warm fellow-feelings that can be easily promoted in an experiential-

expressive context," but it certainly permits the development of theological warrants and

resulting commitment to serious interreligious dialogue and cooperation.[57]

Lindbeck's views on dialogue, however, do not imply an outright denial of an

evangelistic understanding of mission, whose task is proclamation and whose aim is

conversion. The missionary task, as Lindbeck understands it, is only *at times* possibly to

encourage members of other religious communities to be better members. This

understanding, however, does not rule out for Lindbeck a kind of evangelism. He

conceives it, however, quite differently than a modern extratextual view would see it.

Postliberals, he admits, are skeptical about modern projects, but it is not missions but

apologetics and foundations over which they have their doubts.[58] Their doubts come in

the conception of the evangelistic task, not over the task itself. Liberals, committed to the

foundationalism of experiential-expressivism, see the task as translating the Christian

message into categories and concepts current in the prevailing culture. From the

postliberal perspective, however, communicating the Gospel is like the offering and the

sharing of a language.[59] Thus, "[t]o the degree that religions are like languages and

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[56]Ibid., 55.

[57]Ibid.

[58]Ibid., 129.

[59]Ibid., 61.

cultures, they can no more be taught by means of translation than can Chinese or French.

What is said in one idiom can to some extent be conveyed in a foreign tongue, but no one

learns to understand and speak Chinese by simply hearing and reading translations."[60] The

postliberal approach would be more like catechesis in the ancient church than a program

of translating Christian concepts and categories into those of other conceptual

frameworks: "Instead of redescribing the faith in new concepts, it seeks to teach the

language and practices of the religion to potential converts."[61] This approach is more like

the early church than contemporary Christendom. Drawing on his own experience,

however, he has pointed out that this approach is also very much like the one taken in

China relatively recently:

> I spent seventeen years of my life in China, growing up as the child of missionaries. I
> have been reminded frequently of the Chinese situation, which as I experienced it was
> very much like that of the early church. In the first three centuries of the Christian era
> evangelism took place because people wanted to associate themselves with this
> community of Christians that they found attractive. Years of catechesis preceded
> baptism. In China it took years and years, as the Chinese themselves would later say,
> for them to absorb the language, the understanding ("the worldview," to use abstract
> Christian terms) that enabled their minds to become conformed to the mind of Christ
> well enough for them to begin thinking like Christians.[62]

It sees the Christian religion like a language, and like a language it cannot be reduced or

translated without remainder into another language. Moreover, like a language, it can

only be acquired over time, and like a language, it results finally in the ability to use it.

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[60]Ibid., 129.

[61]Ibid., 132.

[62]Lindbeck, in "A Panel Discussion," 251.

Salvation of Non-Christians

The understanding that a religion is an external word (*verbum externum*) is not simply interesting from a nontheological point of view but (more importantly from a Christian theological perspective) is congruent with a basic conviction of the Christian faith, that faith comes by hearing (*fides ex auditu*). This bears on the important question of the salvation of non-Christians.

It might seem from his cultural-linguistic understanding of religion that Lindbeck would maintain an exclusivist understanding of salvation.[63] But, as is the case elsewhere, his theological motives are ultimate. His motive here is to try to give an account that is compatible with (if not implied by) a cultural-linguistic model of religion (which, as we have already seen, he advances for definite theological reasons), and also will allow for salvation outside the cultural-linguistic system that usually called Christianity. As he sees it, "when the whole of Western society was professedly Christian, it was easy to make harsh judgments about the distant and unknown adherents of other religions; but now that the world is becoming smaller and more unified and the non-Christians are our neighbors and our kinsmen, this is impossible."[64]

The problem for Lindbeck is how best to understand the way God works out salvation for non-Christians. The prevailing view of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberalism was that different religions are simply different paths to the same goal. While

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[63]As Gavin D'Costa concludes ("Theology of Religions," in *The Modern Theologians: An introduction to Christian theology in the twentieth century*, ed. David F. Ford [Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989], 2, 274-290).

[64]Lindbeck, "*Fides ex auditu*," 98.

even today many Christians find this view persuasive, there are significant difficulties. The crucial problem is that evidence from the different religions themselves that make this position implausible. Recognition of such difficulties probably explains in part the success of the dialectical and kerygmatic theologies earlier in the twentieth century which sharply distinguished Christianity from other religions. One consequence of this shift, however, was that for some time it was mostly Roman Catholic theologians who expressed a positive theological appreciation for non-Christian religions.[65] Only in more recent years have many Protestant theologians also viewed the relation between Christianity and non-Christian religions positively.[66]

Lindbeck sees two basic types of explanations for the salvation of non-Christians. One sees God's saving work in Christ as effective for all human beings in the present life, while the other sees the question of final salvation being decided in or beyond death with an encounter with Jesus Christ in the life to come.[67] The first type corresponds to the prevailing views among inclusivists and currently is held much more widely. This type identifies a prereflective experience of the divine in every religion; that is to say, they are experiential-expressive accounts.[68] For instance, according to the influential "anonymous Christian" proposal of Karl Rahner, even the non-Christian religions are means by which the grace of Christ is made available to their followers, so that the same salvation that

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[65]Lindbeck singles out Karl Rahner.

[66]Lindbeck singles out Paul Tillich and Wolfhart Pannenberg.

[67]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 56.

[68]Ibid.

Christians know explicitly is being worked in non-Christians through their religions. While

non-Christians have no conscious connection with Christ, he is "both the ultimate source

and the only fully and finally appropriate objective correlate of their inner experience of

salvation."[69]

From the cultural-linguistic perspective, the difficulty with such approaches is not so

much with "ecclesiological triumphalism," that is, that Christians "appear to reflect an

arrogant claim that whatever is true, good and beautiful in non-Christians is 'really'

Christian."[70] Rather, it is that faith cannot be entirely "anonymous" or implicit. It must be

in some part explicit. These experiential-expressivist accounts, in other words, are

inconsistent with the *fides ex auditu*—the conviction that faith comes by hearing.

Concepts such as "anonymous Christianity" are hard to reconcile with the conviction that

saving faith comes through the *external word* of the Gospel, not on the basis of some

common feature.

Because of this requirement Lindeck argues that the second type of salvation, namely,

the prospective or eschatological view, should be preferred.[71] According to this view, a

person makes a final decision either for or against Christ only upon death, and this is true

for unbelievers as well as believers. All previous decisions taken in one's earthly life, or

failures or the inability to take one at all, are preliminary. "The final die is cast," says

Lindbeck, "beyond our space and time, beyond empirical observation, beyond all idle

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[69]Ibid., 57.

[70]Lindbeck, "*Fides ex auditu*," 106.

[71]It should be noted, however, that Lindbeck acknowledges that the *fides ex auditu* interpretation does not require an eschatological fulfillment scheme.

speculation about 'good' or 'bad' deaths, when a person loses his rootage in this world

and passes into the inexpressible transcendence surpassing all worlds, images, and

thoughts."[72]

Lindbeck finds this view consistent with the cultural-linguistic model. The early

Church coined the phrase *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*: outside the church there is no

salvation. While agreeing, Lindbeck turns it around and insists that outside the church

there is no *damnation*.[73] Lindbeck draws out the implication that just as one becomes

Christian only as one learns the language of faith, so also apart from this knowledge one

cannot knowingly reject it and thus be lost. One becomes Christian only by acquiring this

peculiar language. Without this knowledge, neither the language nor the realities of which

it speaks can be understood. Because of this Lindbeck reasons that neither is it possible to

reject salvation and so be condemned.

Truth among Religions

A leading concern about postliberal theology has to do with propositional truth.

Alister McGrath, for example, put this question to George Lindbeck: "[W]hat reasons

might I give for saying to, for example, a Muslim, that I believe that the community, the

narrative, within which I stand has merit over his or hers?"[74] Lindbeck responded:

> Why Christianity rather than another faith? The answer would depend on the
> character of the questioner and the character of the questions he or she raises. In

[72]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 59.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Alister McGrath in "A Panel Discussion," 252.

regard to some Muslims you might say, Look, this is why I recommend Christ rather than Muhammed to you. To other Muslims you might present a different set of reasons. As Hans Frei expressed it, there is no single logic of coming [to faith]. There is a logic of belief. There is a structure of Christian faith. But the ways in which God calls us through the Holy Spirit to come to believe are so varied that you cannot possibly make generalizations. I would add: people are invariably committed to working within a given conceptual cultural language system. We Christians think, look and argue from within the faith. There's no way of getting outside the faith to objectively compare different options.[75]

As McGrath's question shows, a key concern over the cultural-linguistic approach is

whether it allows for truth claims. As Lindbeck's response shows, he believes it can.

The question is "how?" A cultural-linguistic understanding allows that a certain

religion might be *categorically* true, but can it allow that it be *propositionally* true; that is,

can it allow that the making of claims that correspond to some external reality?[76] The

advantage of a cognitivist view over an experiential-expressivist view is that the cognitivist

allows for the possibility of such truth, "and a crucial theological challenge to a cultural-

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[75]Lindbeck in "A Panel Discussion," 252.

[76]As Lindbeck observes:

Christians, for example, generally act as if an affirmation such as "Jesus Christ is Lord" is more than a categorical truth: Not only do the stories about Jesus define a singular concept of Lordship (including as it does a unique notion of "nonmasochistic" suffering and obedient servanthood); but this concept of Lordship—so a theology of the cross maintains—is alone adequate to what is indeed most lordly in reality. Nor do Christians stop with symbolic truth, viz., the claim that these stories can efficaciously express and communicate the genuine lordliness that Tillich calls "the power of the New Being"; but they go on and assert that it is propositionally true that Christ is Lord: i.e., the particular individual of which the stories are told is, was, and will be definitively and unsurpassably the Lord (*The Nature of Doctrine*, 63).

Lindbeck also notes: Languages and cultures "do not make truth claims, are relative to particular times and places, and are difficult to think of as having transcendent rather than this-worldly origins," and so seem poor "analogues for religions such as Christianity which, as traditionally interpreted, claim to be true, universally valid, and supernaturally revealed" (ibid., 23).

linguistic approach is whether it also can do so."[77]

In mounting his argument, Lindbeck distinguishes between the "intrasystematic" and the "ontological" truth of statements.[78] Intrasystematic truth has to do with the *coherence* of statements with other statements, while ontological truth has to do with *correspondence* to reality. The intrasystematic truth of a religious statement does not in itself guarantee its ontological truth. If a given religion is not entirely incoherent, then intrasystematically true statements are possible. Such statements, however, must also correspond to reality if it is to be ontologically true. As Lindbeck explains: "An intrasystematically true statement is ontologically false—or, more accurately, meaningless—if it is part of a system that lacks the concepts or categories to refer to the relevant realities, but it is ontologically true if it is part of a system that is itself categorically true (adequate)."[79]

Lindbeck, however, contends that the ontological truth of religious utterances "is not an attribute that they have when considered in and of themselves, but is only a function of their role in constituting a form of life, a way of being in the world, which itself corresponds to the Most Important, the Ultimately Real."[80] Ontological truth depends not simply the correspondence of the utterance with the reality spoken of, but also that the context in which the utterance is made. In the case of a religion, a statement is

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[77]Ibid., 64.

[78]Ibid.

[79]Ibid., 64-65.

[80]Ibid., 65.

intrasystematically true when it fits with this total context or form of life, and it is

intrasystematically false when it does not. As Lindbeck explains:

> Thus for a Christian, "God is Three and One," or "Christ is Lord" are true only as
> parts of a total pattern of speaking, thinking, feeling, and acting. They are false when
> their use in any given instance is inconsistent with what the pattern as a whole affirms
> of God's being and will. The crusader's battle cry "Christus est Dominus," for
> example, is false when used to authorize cleaving the skull of the infidel (even though
> the same words in other contexts may be a true utterance). When thus employed, it
> contradicts the Christian understanding of Lordship as embodying, for example,
> suffering servanthood.[81]

The cultural-linguistic perspective is critical of a cognitive-propositional view of

religious truth because it tends to ignore the crucial if complex connection between

religious statements and particular ways of thought and life. Speaking specifically about

Christianity, Lindbeck contends that it is constituted

> not in purely intellectual terms by axioms, definitions, and corollaries, but by a set of
> stories used in specifiable ways to interpret and live in the world. The mistake of a
> primarily cognitive-propositional theory of religion, from a cultural-linguistic
> persepctive, is to overlook this difference. It is unable to do justice to the fact that a
> religious system is more like a natural language than a formally organized set of
> explicit statements, and that the right use of this language, unlike a mathematical one,
> cannot be detached from a particular way of behaving.[82]

Lindbeck believes this view is congruent with the suggestion that religious utterances

acquire propositional force only through what he calls a "performatory" use of language.[83]

In this view, a religious utterance "acquires the propositional truth of ontological

correspondence only insofar as it is a performance, an act or deed, which helps create that

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[81]Ibid.

[82]Ibid.

[83]Ibid. Lindbeck takes the term from J. L. Austin and refers to his essay "Performative Utterances," in *Philosophical Papers*, 2d. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 232-252, and *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

correspondence."[84] He finds support for this in St. Paul's claim in 1 Corinthians that no

one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3), and Luther's similar

claim one cannot affirm that Christ is Lord unless he affirms Christ as his own Lord.

While Paul and Luther hold that Christ is Lord no matter what any person says or hears,

Lindbeck finds them also supporting the claim "that the only way to assert this truth is to

do something about it, i.e., to commit oneself to a way of life."[85]

The difference between the cognitive-propositional and the performative-propositional

views of truth is subtle. It does not involve the correspondence to reality itself, which

both affirm. From the cultural-linguistic side, the correspondence of a statement with

reality is not merely a matter of the statement in itself, in isolation, fitting to a certain

reality, as it is in the cognitive-propositional view. Rather, the statement must also

correspond to the *context* in which the utterance is made. This context includes the way in

which one's life and self is conformed to God. The point, in other words, has to do not

with the *truth* itself of religious utterances but rather with their *justification*.[86] Lindbeck

is not disputing with cognitivists that religious utterances may or may correspond to an

external reality, but he does take issue with the conditions in which one is justified in what

one claims. One is justified not only when what is said holds corresponds to reality, but

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[84]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 65.

[85]Ibid., 66.

[86]Bruce D. Marshall, "Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian," *The Thomist* 53 (1989): 353-370. See also Lindbeck's endorsement of Marshall in "Response to Bruce Marshall," *The Thomist* 53 (1989): 403-406. See also Jeffrey Hensley, "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealists? Reexamining the Metaphysics of Lindbeck's Postliberal Theology," in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds. *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 69-80.

when the context of the utterance, including the disposition and actions of the utterer, coheres with what is claimed. So, going back to the example of the crusader, his cry did indeed correspond to reality and so in this sense was true, but his actions made the utterance unjustified.

It must also be noted, however, that Lindbeck views the correspondence with external reality in a highly limited fashion.[87] Here he relies on a highly agnostic reading of Aquinas.[88] In this reading, Thomas held that the human mode of signifying (*modus significandi*) does not correspond to anything in the divine being, but that which is signified (*significatum*) does. For instance, when one says "God is good," this is not saying that any human concepts of goodness apply to God. Rather, it is to say that God's own understanding of goodness applies to God. In this way, to say "God is good" is to say something that is meaningful and true, but without knowing the meaning of "God is good."

If the cognitive content of such truth claims about God is so slight, then what is the function of these claims? Their function is *pragmatic*.

> [D]espite its informational vacuity, the claim that God truly is good in himself is of utmost importance because it authorizes responding as if he were good in the ways indicated by the stories of creation, providence, and redemption which shape believers' thoughts and actions; or, to put the same point in another way, seriously to commit

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[87]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 66-67.

[88]Lindbeck attributes this reading to David Burrell in *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979) and in *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973). He also notes Victor Preller with a parallel account (*Divine Science and the Science of God* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967]). See *The Nature of Doctrine*, 71-72, n. 26. Kathryn Tanner adopts the same agnostic stance in *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 12-13. She also cites Burrell and Preller (p. 171, n. 5).

oneself to thinking and acting as if God were good in relation to us (*quoad nos*) in ways indicated by the stories involves asserting that he really is good in himself (*in se*) even though, as the canonical texts testify, the meaning of this latter claim is utterly beyond human comprehension.[89]

Lindbeck, moreover, extends the use of analogy beyond God himself to acts of God like the resurrection, creation, and the final consummation. For instance, about the resurrection he says: "the *significatum* of the claim that Jesus truly and objectively was raised from the dead provides the warrant for behaving in the ways recommended by the resurrection stories even when one grants the impossibility of specifying the mode in which those stories signify."[90] Moreover, only as one learns to use such language does their cognitive content, such as it is, become evident. "One must be, so to speak, inside the relevant context; and in the case of a religion, this means that one must have some skill in *how* to use its language and practice its way of life before the propositional meaning of its affirmations becomes determinate enough to be rejected."[91] One learns to use such language in activities such as worship. Only in this way, through these first-order activities, does the cognitive content also become apparent.

Thus, Lindbeck is able to accomodate the possibility of ontological truth claims within a cultural-lingiustic framework. This possibility is not implied by the cultural-linguistic model, but then neither is it excluded. The *function* of such claims, however, seems much different than that in a cognitivist model. For the cognitivist, the assertion of

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[89]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 67.

[90]Ibid., 67.

[91]Ibid., 68.

propositional truth is the basic function of claims to truth. For the cultural-linguist, however, claims to truth are basically categorical and function much differently. They provide categories in which claims to propositional truth are rightly made. The function of propositional truth, however, is independent of this function. This independence gives Lindbeck a warrant for supposing the pragmatic function of propositional truth claims and for suggesting the slightness of their cognitive content.

This, in turn, supports both his understanding of truth being primarily *categorical* and his proposal regarding the salvation of non-Christians. On the one hand, the categorical understanding of truth remains basic; truth claims are permitted but not required under this view. With regard to salvation, this view of truth further supports the notion that outside the church there is neither salvation nor judgment: "nonbelievers are not yet confronted by the question of salvation because it is only by acquiring some familiarity with the determinate settings in which religious utterances acquire propositional force that one can grasp their meaning well enough genuinely to reject (or accept) them."[92]

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[92]Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

DOCTRINE AND THE UNIQUENESS OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES: PAUL GRIFFITHS ON RELIGIOUS PLURALITY

Hans Frei and George Lindbeck are likely the most influential and best known

postliberals, with such Yale professors as Paul Holmer and David Kelsey and such former

Yale students as William Placher, Ronald Thiemann, Bruce Marshall, George Hunsinger,

and Kathryn Tanner also prominent. A less prominent but nonetheless influential figure

has been philosopher of religion William A. Christian, Sr.[1] For instance, Placher noted

that while Holmer's studies on Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein influenced both colleagues

and students, it was Christian who had the deeper philosophical influence.[2] Elsewhere

Placher singled out Christian's philosophical analysis of interreligious dialogue as a key

contribution to the postliberal project.[3] The importance of his contribution for this study

becomes clear when one realizes that all three of the contemporary postliberal approaches

examined here are indebted significantly to Christian. George Lindbeck, at whose views

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[1]Key works include William A. Christian, *Meaning and Truth in Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964); idem, *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines: A Study in the Logidc of Dialogue among Religions* (London: Herder and Herder, 1972); and idem, *Doctrines of Religious Communities: A Philosophical Study* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987).

[2]William C. Placher, "Postliberal Theology," in *Modern Theologians*, vol. 2, ed. David S. Ford (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 126, n. 2.

[3]William C. Placher, "Revisionist and Postliberal Theologies and the Public Character of Theology," *The Thomist* 49 (1985): 393.

we looked in the last chapter, acknowledged him as contributing to the cultural-linguistic model of religion proposed in *The Nature of Doctrine*.[4] J. A. DiNoia, at whose views we shall look in the next chapter, wrote his doctoral dissertation under Christian and Lindbeck at Yale and credits Christian as a key influence.[5] Christian has also influenced the subject of this chapter, Paul J. Griffiths. Unlike either Lindbeck or DiNoia, however, Griffiths has no direct connection to Yale.[6] Nevertheless, he repeatedly acknowledges and appropriates insights, concepts, and terms from Christian.[7]

Griffiths commends the study of Christian's analyses of religious doctrines in *Doctrines of Religious Communities* to theologians wrestling with questions raised by

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[4]George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 20. In the accompanying endnote Lindbeck notes that it is the "relatively greater emphasis on the internal logic or grammar" put on the analysis of religions that puts Christian's account among what Lindbeck called "cultural-linguistic" approaches.

[5]Joseph A. DiNoia, "Catholic Theology of Religions and Interreligious Dialogue: A Study in the Logic of Christian Doctrines about Other Religions," Ph.D. Diss., Yale University, 1980; idem, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992),

[6]Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), xii. Unlike many postliberals, Griffiths has not taught or been a student at Yale University. He was born in England and studied theology, Sanskrit, and Indian philosophy at Oxford before moving to the United States, where he received his doctor's degree in Buddhist philosophy from the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He now teaches philosophy of religion at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, which, ironically, is usually regarded as the center of revisionist theology.

[7]In addition to the book *An Apology for Apologetics* (see above, n. 6), see also Paul J. Griffiths, "Religious Diversity," *The Thomist* 52 (1988): 319-327; idem, "An Apology for Apologetics," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988): 399-420, esp. 417 n. 4, which explicitly relates the article "Religious Diversity" to the present article and the book of the same title; idem, "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 162-170 and 171 n. 16; idem, ed. *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 4-9 and 247, n. 5; idem, "Doctrines and the Virtue of Doctrine: The Problematic of Religious Plurality," in *Religions and the Virtue of Religion*, ed. Thérèse-Anne Druart and Mark Rasevic, *Proceedings of The American Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. 65 (Washington, D.C.: The American Catholic Philosophical Association, 1992), 29-44, esp. 32-38.

religious plurality.[8] Christian explores first what doctrines are and how they are used, and then asks about the kinds of relationship that might be found in a religious community between a doctrine's truth and its authenticity and the implications of these relationships, and about religious communities' positions with regard to alien claims, i.e., claims from outside a given religious community. This work, in Griffiths's estimation, has much to offer the theologian:

> Christian's sensitive and precise delineation of the ways in which religious doctrines may and do function for religious communities provides a detailed intellectual agenda, both for those theoreticians who wish to explore the structural and substantive significance of religious doctrines in communities other than their own, and for those who wish to explore what the inner logic of their own tradition requires them to say about alien religious claims. And both these tasks, perhaps more especially the former, are of urgent importance for the Christian theological community today.[9]

Griffiths both relies on Christian's analyses of doctrine in basic and crucial ways and also follows his own advice and undertakes both tasks.

We shall see this more clearly throughout the chapter. Before we do so, however, it might be helpful to give reasons why Griffiths's approach can be counted as *postliberal*. One reason, as I have just been suggesting, is because Griffiths himself is indebted to important postliberal influences and views. In addition to William Christian, Griffiths acknowledges a significant debt to George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach. Along the lines of both Christian and Lindbeck, he stresses the importance of recognizing the *regulative* dimension of doctrine.[10] Like the Yale postliberals, Griffiths views religions not

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[8]Griffiths, "Religious Diversity," 319-327.

[9]Ibid., 326-327.

[10]See, for example, ibid., 36-44 and 110, n. 2 and 3; Griffiths, "An Apology for Apologetics," 406-412; idem, "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," 162-170 and 171 n. 16.

as expressions of a common experience or quest but as each having its own distinctive

aims. Also like the postliberals, he contends that the dominant or primary direction in the

relationship of experience to language (including doctrine) is from language to experience,

and not vice versa. Finally, like postliberals, he argues *against* the systematically

apologetical approach characteristic of theological liberalism and argues *for* an *ad hoc*

apologetics.

Doctrine and the Problem of Religious Plurality

In Griffiths's view, Christian reflection on religious plurality has grown increasingly

sterile. The discussion has "hardened into an apparently endless rehearsal of the merits

and disadvantages of the standard positions: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and all

their varieties and subvarieties."[11] The non-Christian religions—which are supposed to be

the object of study in the theology of religions—effectively are being ignored:

> There is usually comparatively little discussion of what any non-Christian tradition
> actually asserts, values, and practices. That is to say, Christian theologians, whose
> major speciality is theologizing about non-Christian religions, have entered into the
> realms of secondary, or even tertiary, processing; they have made the enterprise of
> theologizing about these religions a purely abstract *a priori* intra-Christian enterprise,
> constrained not by the religions themselves, as they impinge upon and make claims
> upon members of the Christian community, but rather by presuppositions drawn only
> from some particular reading of the Christian tradition.[12]

Griffiths does acknowledge that the theology of religions has both *a priori* and *a*

posteriori dimensions; that is, he recognizes that the theology of religions can rightly draw

on its own presuppositions and reflect according to the accepted teachings and logic of its

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[11]Griffiths, "Doctrines and the Virtue of Doctrine," 29.

[12]Griffiths, "Religious Diversity," 319.

own tradition.[13] Repeatedly, however, he stresses that the field's focus on *a priori*

reasoning in framing questions and putting issues has meant that concerns about other

religious communities in themselves have largely been bypassed.[14]

For Griffiths, the way out of this serious difficulty begins by recognizing that the

problematic of religious plurality is more complex than usually understood. As the

typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism shows, the field generally understands

the basic problem as the question of *salvation*. Griffiths argues, however, that at least

three questions are involved.[15] One indeed does concern "salvation—or with whatever is

term is taken by the religious community discussing the question to denote the proper goal

of the religious life."[16] Another dimension is related to questions of the attitude one

should take toward other religious communities. A third concerns the "status, function,

and significance of doctrines—both the community's own and those believed and taught

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[13]Paul J. Griffiths, "Modalizing the Theology of Religions," *The Journal of Religion* 73 (1993): 382.

[14]For example, see Griffiths, "Doctrines and the Virtue of Doctrine," 29; idem, "Encountering Buddha Theologically," *Theology Today* 47 (1992): 39-40; idem, "Religious Diversity," 319-320.

[15]Griffiths, "Doctrines and the Virtue of Doctrine," 29.

[16]Ibid. See also *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes*, 4-11. As Griffiths recognizes, the term "salvation"is problematic: "'salvation' is, after all, an explicitly Christian term, freighted with a great deal of theological and metaphysical baggage. It might be thought that by introducing the term here I am loading the dice improperly, bringing in by subterfuge a Christian theological term that will prejudice the results of the enquiry." He stresses, however, that he introduces the term as a *formal* designation for "the religious goal that each religious community regards as desirable for its members." Christians call their goal "salvation," while Buddhists may refer to their goal as "Nirvana." By speaking of both goals as salvation, however, he does not mean to suggest or imply that they are identical, analogous, or related in substance or result. On the other hand, by using the term, he is assuming that every religious community indeed has some goal, purpose, or end in mind for its members, that is to say, has some notion of what he calls "salvation" (*An Apology for Apologetics*, 17).

by other communities."[17]

Griffiths's own work focuses on this third question, the question of doctrine. He is convinced that widespread neglect of the entire *category* of doctrine has had serious consequences, and he contends:

> [p]roper attention to the question of doctrine can only lead to striking advances in the understanding possessed by Christians of both their own doctrinal commitments and those of others. Both kinds of understanding are badly needed and can only be hindered by basing oneself upon the usual a priori [sic] positions developed by Christian theologians to think about non-Christians.[18]

Accordingly, a basic objective of his work has been "to rehabilitate the category of doctrine as a useful one for further analysis of the problematic of religious plurality and in so doing to argue that doctrines have virtues perhaps unsuspected by those who identify interest in them with a rigid and unbending dogmatism."[19]

The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine

We find a detailed example of giving attention to the question of doctrine in Griffiths's contribution to *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*.[20] Here he puts the category of doctrine to use to defend the uniqueness of Christian doctrines and press the point that they are central to a proper Christian understanding of encounters with non-Christians and their religious communities. This view, however, runs counter to the prominent views advanced by pluralist theologies of religions. Their basic argument requires drastic

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[17]Griffiths, "Doctrines and the Virtue of Doctrine," 30.

[18]Ibid., 41.

[19]Ibid., 29.

[20]Griffiths, "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended."

revisions to central Christian doctrines. As he observes about *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, a landmark collection of essays advocating pluralism:

> One of the assumptions shared by many of the contributors to the recent volume entitled *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* is that certain particularist, exclusivist, and absolutist doctrines which have been of great importance to Christianity cannot be true in at least some of the ways in which their formulators, propounders, and professors have often taken them to be true. It follows from this that many traditional Christian attitudes toward non-Christians must be abandoned, that missiology must be rethought, and that much Christian doctrine (especially Christological and Trinitarian) must be reconstructed almost from the foundations. Among many other things, any and all claims as to the normative superiority of Christian doctrines over those constructed and professed by non-Christian religious communities must be rejected. Such a rejection is the starting point of any attempt to construct a (Christian) pluralist theology of religions, and that attempt is, in turn, the central agenda of the contributors to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.[21]

Griffiths admits that if the pluralist position were true, then such revisions would be inevitable.[22] But pluralists have assumed rather than argued that this is the case. Further, while it is mentioned, it is not "sufficiently stressed" that "the doctrines, self-understandings, and attitudes of many non-Christian communities will require equally drastic revision if pluralism should turn out to be true."[23] Among other things, "the understanding of the nature and functions of religious doctrine presupposed and shared by many [pluralists] is jejune, especially in its lack of sensitivity to the wide range of functions

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[21]Ibid., 157.

Griffiths illustrates this rejection with a quotation from the preface of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter [Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986]): "In much Christian discourse, the 'uniqueness of Christianity' has taken on a larger mythological meaning. It has come to signify the unique definitiveness, absoluteness, normativeness, superiority of Christianity in comparison with other religions of the world. It is this mythological sense of the phrase, with all that goes with it, that we are criticizing in this book" (vii). He further substantiates the point with citations in the collection from John Hick (16-17), Langdon Gilkey (37), and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (53-54).

[22]Griffiths, "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," 158.

[23]Ibid., 157.

that doctrines actually serve for religious communities."[24]

Many pluralists have adopted a narrow functionalist view of doctrine, where attention focuses on but a single function: "the transformative effects of professing any given religious doctrine (or set of such) upon the individual or community that professes it."[25] A typical example is John Hick.[26] He contends that the early church formulations are substantially different from what one can conclude about Jesus' own thought from the New Testament. He regards the Christological doctrines as "rigid and literal dogma," but finds Jesus' own thought "poetry" and "living metaphor."[27] This very language suggests Hick's preference for an "inspiration Christology," which understands Jesus as one but not necessarily the unique instrument of the divine purpose. But why this preference? "Hick

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[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid., 159. In an accompanying footnote, Griffiths acknowledges that his analysis applies directly to John Hick. However, he also applies it to other pluralists, with appropriate "It also applies, in varying degrees, to other pluralists. As with all generalizations, there are dangers, and so he asks that these generalizations be taken as of heuristic value rather than as precise descriptions of every member of the

[26]The following largely follows Griffiths's analysis in "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered.* The summary of John Hick's position is taken from "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness,* 16-36, especially 30-34.

[27]See Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," 31. It may be helpful to cite the passage more completely:
> The "son of God" title, which was to become standard in the church's teholgoy, probably began in the Old Testament and wider ancient Near Eastern usage in which it signified a special servant of God. I this sense kings, emperors, pharaohs, great philosophers, miracle workers, and other holy men were commonly called son of God. But as the gospel went out beyond its Hebraic setting into the gentile world of the Roman Empire, this poetry was transformed into prose and the living metaphor congealed into a rigid and literal dogma. It was to accomodate this resulting metaphysical sonship that the church, after some three centuries of clashing debates, settled upon the theory that Jesus had two natures, one divine and the other human, being in one nature of one substance with God the Father and in the other of one substance with humanity—a philosophical construction as far removed from the thought world and teaching of Jesus himself as is the in some ways parallel Mayahana [sic] Buddhist doctrine of the Trikaya from that of the historical Gautama.

takes this line just because it is 'compatible with the religious pluralism being advocated in this book.'"[28] He does not claim that the doctrines comprising an inspiration Christology are true, nor does he think that assent to them is preferable to those of the Chalcedonian definition; he adopts the position because it is "functionally preferable."

> More explicitly, assent to the sentences expressive of an inspiration Christology make possible the realization of theological and practical goals of which Hick approves on quite other grounds, and since these goals are less easily realized—and perhaps actively obstructed by—assent to the Chalcedonian formulae, assent to the former is to be preferred to assent to the latter on that ground alone. The goals in which Hick is interested are, briefly: the removal of traditional Christian antisemitism; the removal of Christian patriarchalism; the removal of traditional Christian attitudes about missions and the inferior status of potential converts; and, finally, the removal of the traditional connections between Christianity and expansionist Western capitalism. Profession of an inspiration Christology is efficacious in aiding the removal of these things; profession of Chalcedonian orthodoxy is not. Therefore the latter is to be rejected.[29]

The pluralist understanding sees questions about the cognitive content of doctrines as unimportant. In the case of Hick, he does acknowledge that religious communities regard at least some of their religious doctrines as making substantive truth claims. Nevertheless, his view of doctrine permits him to conclude that differences and conflicts between doctrines of different religious communities are ultimately insignificant, even when the incompatibilities between doctrines are recognized as genuine and deep, such as the disagreements between Asian religions and Christianity regarding post-mortem existence.[30]

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[28]Griffiths, "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," 159. Quotation from Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 32.

[29]Griffiths, "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," 159-160. The summary of Hick's goals is taken from Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 20-21 (see Griffiths, 171, n. 9).

[30]As an example Griffiths cites the incompatibility between the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth taught in Hindu and Buddhist communities with the Christian view of a single afterlife.

He argues that, since such disagreements can be resolved only eschatologically, they cannot be of decisive significance. Thus, Hick in fact "does not allow the possibility that there are genuine, deep-going, cognitively significant incompatibilities among the doctrines espoused by religious communities about trans-historical matters that are both taken by the communities in question to be highly salvifically significant, and actually are."[31]

This view of doctrine has far-reaching consequences for Hick's theology of religions:

> These convictions enable him to do, with apparent sang-froid, what only the most assured of traditionally exclusivistic apologists is able to do; that is, to judge that certain key doctrines of major religious communities are clearly false, and to do so without engaging them upon their own terms, without discussing their cognitive merits or the epistemic respectability of those who profess them, but rejecting them solely by pointing to a contingent and in many cases weak connection between their profession and certain modes of conduct and attitudes that Hick finds reprehensible.[32]

But is Hick's view of doctrine correct and complete? Griffiths argues that it is neither. And if his view of doctrine is incomplete, "then it is not likely that his easy pragmatic rejection of all particularist and exclusivist doctrines will stand."[33] The radical changes proposed by pluralists are "akin to asking a native speaker of English to please try and do without nouns, since we have reason to think that using them leads to an inappropriately reified view of the world."[34] Such changes require pressing reasons, but none are offered.

> Vital and pressing reasons are needed for such changes, since they will almost always mean, for those who make them, death—or such a radical transformation that the new is not recognizable as the old. And pluralists, and here Hick is entirely typical, give us no such pressing reasons, nothing more, in fact, than a weak pragmatic argument

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[31]Griffiths, "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," 161.

[32]Ibid., 161.

[33]Ibid., 162.

[34]Ibid., 168.

based upon an impoverished understanding of what doctrine is and how it functions.[35]

Griffiths's response begins with a more complete analysis of religious doctrine. He

characterizes doctrines in terms of what he believes are their most important dimensions.[36]

He finds five important dimensions or aspects to doctrines of religious community: as

community rules; as definitions of community boundaries; as shaped by and formative of

religious experience; as instuments of catechesis and evangelism; and as truth claims.[37]

These dimensions cannot be rigidly separated and so they overlap to some extent. But as

a heuristic device, this characterization of doctrine permits a more complete and defensible

analysis of doctrine.

For the question of religious plurality, the most important dimensions of doctrines are

as community rules and as truth claims.[38] By referring to doctrines as community rules

Griffiths is saying that religious doctrines have a regulative dimension. This means that

> religious doctrines function as rules governing the life of the communities that profess
> them. Among other things they delineate the kinds of conduct that are appropriate for
> and required of members; provide rubrics for the ritual acts of the community; supply
> conceptual categories to be used by members in thinking about and analyzing their
> religious lives; and, most generally, structure and order the intellectual, affective, and

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[35]Ibid.

[36]For a parallel but more technical consideration of the nature and uses of doctrine, see especially Griffiths, "Doctrines and the Virtue of Doctrines." For this characterization he relies heavily on the work of William Christian, especially in his books *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines* and *Doctrines of Religious Communities*. He also acknowledges George Lindbeck's proposal in *The Nature of Doctrine*, although, as helpful as he finds it, he notes that he has "significant disagreements" with Lindbeck's analysis ("Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended,"171, n. 16). Here, as I have already claimed, one can see a definite connection with and debt to Yale's postliberals.

[37]Ibid., 162-168.

[38]These two dimensions correspond closely to William Christian's distinction of primary and governing doctrines. See Christian, *Doctrines of Religious Communities*, 1-2, 219-220.

practical life of the community.[39]

In this regard, doctrines are like the *syntax* of a language. Just as a language has both

semantic and syntactical aspects, so also a doctrine-expressing sentence may function both

semantically and *syntactically*. It functions semantically when it makes "a substantive

claim with cognitive content"; it functions syntactically when it is "a rule supplying a

category to be employed in metaphysical discourse."[40]

Griffiths believes that the *syntactical* dimension is "perhaps the most basic of all; from

it the others flow, . . ."[41] He illustrates the syntactical aspect of doctrine by considering

one of the Thirty-Nine Articles:

> They also are to be had accursed that presume to say, That every man shall be saved
> by the Law or Sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life
> according to that Law and the light of Nature. For Holy Scripture doth set out to us

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[39]Ibid., 162.

[40]Ibid., 163.

[41]Ibid., 162. In an accompanying endnote (p. 172, n. 19), Griffiths cites George Lindbeck's discussion on truth in *The Nature of Doctrine* (p. 50) and comments: "Lindbeck goes too far, I think, in saying that the regulative function, the marking-out of proper categories for the use of the community, is the only job that doctrines do (p. 19), but this certainly is one function that doctrine-expressing sentences of the kind under discussion here." Both his agreement and disagreement with Lindbeck is discussed most fully in *An Apology for Apologetics*, 39-44. Basically, Griffiths regards Lindbeck's position (the *regulative* or *rule* theory) as ruling out theoretically any cognitive content for doctrine-expressing sentences. While he fully agrees that doctrine-expressing sentences can and do act regulatively, he finds no reason to believe *a priori* that they can only act in this way. As he explains:

> The doctrine-expressing sentences of an averagely sophisticated religoius community can still
> (and should still) be seen as capable of bearing truth, and this in no way hinders their ability to
> function as rules. Taking this view also leaves open the possibility of interesting empirical
> enquiries into the question of how specific doctrine-expressing sentences do in fact function for
> specific religious communities.
> I suspect, against the rule theorist, that there is no useful a priori answer to this
> question. It is likely that some doctrine-expressing sentences function both regulatively and
> propositionally for some religious communities, some only regulatively, and some only
> propositionally (43-44).

only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.[42]

These sentences *regulate* what the Anglican community says about salvation. As he

explains:

> The two doctrine-expressing sentences given in this article regulate what it is possible
> for the community to say about salvation; they reject, in very clear terms, the
> application of the category "salvation" to those outside the community, and in so
> doing tell the community that the category can be applied only to those inside. This is
> the syntactic function of the doctrine; it provides the community with rules for the
> employment of a conceptual category.[43]

Turning again to the example of the Eighteen Article, it can be seen that it also makes

substantive truth claims, and in this way it is said to function *semantically*.[44] The article

proposes something; it has cognitive content. As Griffiths sees it, most religious

communities regard doctrines of theirs as truth claims: ". . . , almost all religious

communities take most of their doctrines—at least those that make prima facie claims

about the nature of human persons and the world in which they live, as well as those that

make recommendations about what kinds of actions are desirable—to have cognitive

content and to be expressive of salvifically significant truths."[45] We have already

considered Griffiths's use of the term "salvation" and seen how he means not salvation

according to any particular community but as a designation for its ultimate aim or purpose.

In the same way, a "salvifically significant" statement is one that has to do with the goal,

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[42]Ibid., 163.

[43]Ibid., 163.

[44]Griffiths notes that the substantive claim, that is, the semantic function, of these sentences is exactly of the kind that John Hick would reject as necessarily false. Griffiths further adds that it was partly for this reason that he chose this article as an example. Ibid., 172, n. 21.

[45]Ibid., 167.

aim, or purpose of a religious community. Every religious community "judges that membership in it will issue in (or, perhaps, constitute) something that is qualitatively better than the other available options and every religious community judges that assent to its doctrine-expressing sentences will serve (or, perhaps, constitute) that something."[46] That is to say, not all truth claims are salvifically significant and thus sentences expressive of doctrines of a given community. For example, most American members of religious communities would assent to the sentence "Michael Jordan was one of the ten best players in the NBA [National Basketball Association] in 1989."[47] Few, however, would want to claim that it is doctrinally expressive, for the reason that it is of no salvific significance and has no clear uses or functions in the life of their respective communities. An example of a salvifically significant claim to truth, however, is again the eighteenth of the Thirty-Nine Articles, which clearly makes claims as to what really is, in this case, that salvation lies truly and solely in the name of Jesus Christ.

As "definitions of community boundaries," doctrines "exclude what is unacceptable to the community, reject heresy and so define, conceptually and practically, the bounds of the community."[48] In Griffiths's view, it is clear that doctrines of most religious communities often have been formulated specifically for the purpose of excluding things false, inadequate, or misleading. For example, most Christological doctrine-expressing

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[46]Ibid.

[47]Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics*, 11. The relationship between a sentence's authenticity as a doctrine and its truth or rightness, of which Griffiths here is briefly commenting, is explored at length by William Christian in *Doctrines of Religious Communities*, 12-34.

[48]Ibid., 164.

sentences came about as a result of answering and excluding "partial, mistaken, or simply inappropriate delineations of the person and work of Jesus Christ."[49]

A fourth dimension of doctrines is that they "are both shaped by and formative of the spiritual experience of the communities that profess them."[50] For Christians, this dimension comes through in the saying *lex orandi, lex credendi*—the law of praying is the law of believing. It would be too much to say that what one believes is controlled simply by how one prays; many other things may influence belief. It is true, however, that worship and devotional practice does influence what is taught and then believed (doctrine), and it is conversely true that doctrine, once formed, may in turn later influence what one experiences in liturgy and at prayer.

The fifth dimension is that religious doctrines are used to make members of religious communities. There are at least two ways of making members, corresponding to what the Christian tradition calls catechesis and evangelism. Both modes, however, are also evident in other religious communities. The catechetical mode of making members has a doctrinal dimension that is apparent even in the etymology.

This analysis of doctrine suggest that the functionalist view of prominent pluralist accounts is inadequate, because it gives basic reasons why the Christian community at least cannot easily give up their central doctrines. One reason is that central doctrines play a key role in catechesis and so are regarded to the identity of the community. Another is that doctrines are often rooted deeply in the history of the religious tradition through

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[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid., 165.

repeated attempts by the community to exclude unacceptable claims and teachings.

Doctrines are also central and therefore not easily given up because they are related

closely and symbiotically with the worship and devotional life of the community. Finally,

they are very often taken simply and without question as true. Given these reasons, it

would seem difficult, if not impossible, in at least most instances "for the kind of

superficial and pragmatic reasons suggested by Hick and others" for a religious

community to give up its central doctrines.[51]

If this is the case, then it has important implications for the interreligious relations. In

maintaining doctrines such as the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas, Christians

maintain claims that are both fully universal and highly particular. Such doctrines, for

instance, attribute ultimate salvation for all humankind specifically to the person and work

of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ and the Son of God. These doctrines are also central in

that they serve as rules about how Christians should think and speak. Griffiths concedes

that the universalistic and particularistic doctrines of the Christian church may turn out to

be false and so need to be given up. Pluralist thinkers like Hick certainly think so, but they

show no awareness of "how such claims function for Christians and are rooted in and

definitive of their communities."[52] Without such pressing and detailed reasons, however,

these claims, in both their semantic and syntactical functions, should be preserved. If they

are preserved, then it will mean an engagement with non-Christians carried out in terms

quite different from those envisioned by pluralists. It will mean "that the Christian life will

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[51]Ibid.

[52]Ibid., 170.

continue to be structured around and given meaning by a certain kind of universalism and exclusivism, and this must therefore be a constitutive factor in the Christian engagement with religiously committed non-Christians."[53] Griffiths acknowledges that universal and exclusivist claims may have negative effects on interreligious relations, effects like arrogance toward and intolerance of other communities.[54] But these effects do not necessarily follow from these kinds of claims. In fact, insists Griffiths, such an acknowledgement "will lead to the crossing of new frontiers in interreligious dialogue, frontiers inaccessible from within the pluralist paradigm, ..."[55]

Doctrine and Interreligious Dialogue

Griffiths considers the category of doctrine important for a clearer understanding of religious plurality and for an adequate Christian approach to relations with other religious communities. One benefit is as "an aid in coming to a more accurate understanding of one's own doctrinal commitments, as well as of the ways in which ones own doctrines are derived, ordered, argued for, and related one to another."[56] The foregoing discussion about the uniqueness of Christian doctrine is an example of this sort of work. It permits one to understand one's own tradition in deeper and more ways. This, in turn, can help sort out issues surrounding interreligious situations. Another benefit is that it "can provide one with a range of legitimate questions to ask about the doctrinal commitments of the

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[53]Ibid.

[54]Ibid. See also Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics*, 60-63.

[55]Griffiths, "Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," 170.

[56]Griffiths, "Doctrines and the Virtue of Doctrine," 39-40.

alien religious communities with which one is engaged."[57] We shall examine his reasons

supporting this claim shortly, but first let us consider more fully why he raises these

concerns at all.

Basically, he does so for the same reason that he pursues issues in the field at all:

because the discussion in the Christian theology of religions has become largely a matter

of *a priori* reasoning. In this case, he is convinced that the widespread tendency toward *a*

priori reflection on non-Christian religions has effectively decided the outcome of

encounters before they even start.

> If I already know that my Buddhist interlocutors are anonymous Christians; or that
> their faithful appropriation of their tradition relates them to the same transcendent
> reality as does my appropriation of mine; or that they are part of the *massa*
> *perditionis*, outside the elect group of the saved—if I know any of these things before
> I begin, I will neither be able to hear clearly nor respond theologically to what my
> interlocutors are saying. Christian theologizing about non-Christians has for too long
> been focussed upon the abstract *a priori* to the detriment of theological thinking about
> concrete examples of non-Christian religious phenomena.[58]

Against this tendency Griffiths argues that Christians can and should enter into

encounters with non-Christian religious communities in an attempt to understand them on

their own terms and in the expectation that these encounters may be theologically

meaningful.[59] Understanding them on their own terms means suspending judgments as

much as possible as one seeks to comprehend their teachings, practices, symbolism as fully

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[57]Ibid., 40.

[58]Griffiths, "Encountering Buddha Theologically," 39-40. The three different *a priori* positions
are the inclusivist anonymous Christian proposal of Karl Rahner; the pluralist proposals of Wilfred
Cantwell Smith and John Hick; and a traditional exclusivist view, such as summarized in the phrase *extra
ecclesiam nulla salus.*

[59]Ibid., 39.

as possible. In the case of the world's major religious communities, the amount of effort

required even for a preliminary understanding likely will be very great. This, however,

should be no excuse for at least beginning the task. The benefit, moreover, is, in

Griffiths's view, likely to be great. This will be true even where one must ultimately find

the other's views or teachings basically unacceptable for appropriation to one's own

tradition, and even more valuable where it is recognized that something can be learned.[60]

When engaged with another religious community, attention to doctrine and doctrinal

features may result in one of three outcomes.[61] First, one result may be *incomprehension.*

That is to say, one will be led to

> an acknowledgement of otherness that goes very deep, a realization that there do
> indeed seem to be religious communities in the world whose doctrinal commitments
> are neither congruent with nor opposed to one's own but are simply irrelevant to
> them. Different questions are asked, different concerns are evident, and the overall
> result can be like the feelings produced in a lover of Bach's organ music by listening to
> Indian raga: respectful incomprehension.[62]

When one comes to this point, of course, there really is nowhere else to go with

respect to doctrine. The other two results, however, do suggest further paths to pursue.

Cases of Recognition

One such result would be *recognition*; that is, one sees that "[a]n alien doctrinal

system may be trying to achieve something recognizably similar to the goals of one's own

and may, at points, seem to one to be substantively identical in conclusions and even in

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[60]Griffiths, "Doctrines and the Virtue of Doctrine," 50.

[61]Ibid., 41-42.

[62]Ibid.

argument-forms to one's own or even to offer conclusions preferable to one's own."[63] In

saying this, however, Griffiths is not presuming to know what these aspects might be

ahead of investigation; rather, he is encouraging theologians to look carefully and

thoroughly at other communities' sets of doctrines and discover where similarities actually

might lie.

Griffiths has repeatedly pursued the question of whether and to what extent non-

Christian communities may have features similar to those of Christian communities in their

speaking about God.[64] Christian speech about God is a difficult, complex enterprise.

Much of it has been undertaken with tools taken from Greek and Semitic sources. Even

when these tools have been rejected,

> the conceptual rules of the game have still usually been set by the heritage of the
> Hellenistic world, modified, of course, by the Semitic origins. The ideas of substance
> and accident, necessity and possibility, Incarnation and Trinity—these are inescapable
> parts of the Christian theological tradition: one cannot effectively speak of God within
> that tradition without taking account of them.[65]

While Griffiths readily agrees that this has had many good results and help to sustain a

very large and long-lived effort, he also suggests that other conceptual categories and

different methods might be helpful, too.

> My suggestion is that Christian theologians will benefit from looking in a close and
> critical way (but with intellectual humility and genuine willingness to learn) at
> discourses every bit as long-lived, sophisticated, and productive of texts as their

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[63]Ibid., 42.

[64]For these efforts, see Paul J. Griffiths, "John Vattanky's *Gangesa's Philosophy of God*," *Theological Studies* 48 (1987): 687-696; idem, "Buddha and God: A Contrastive Study in Ideas about Maximal Greatness," *The Journal of Religion* 69 (1989): 502-529; idem, "Encountering Buddha Theologically,"39-51.

[65]Griffiths, "John Vattanky's *Gangesa's Philosophy of God*," 687.

Christian counterparts, discourses which appear to be aimed toward at least some of the same goals and which developed historically almost completely outside the Christian sphere of influence.[66]

These discourses might help theologians by providing an example of doing so a similar kind of work, namely, "delineating, describing, and arguing for the existence of a maximally great being," but conducted with very different categories.[67] This, in turn, might suggest new ways to consider old problems. Or such an encounter might raise pressing questions to the theologian, like question a long-supposed universality of certain concepts or categories.

As a suggestion for a starting point, Griffiths has considered some implications for Christian theology of an Indian debate between Buddhists and the adherents of the Nyāya school (so-called Naiyāyikas) over the idea of īśvara, that is, "God."[68] In this debate Buddhists strongly *denied* both the logical necessity of such a being and its "soteriological desirability," while the Naiyāyikas *affirmed* both.[69] Looking at a few Naiyāyika arguments of the existence of "God," he concludes:

> The standard-issue Naiyāyika position on God's relation to the world is that the former is the latter's instrumental or efficient cause. God arranges and shapes the world; he supervises the operation of the causal forces that keep it functioning. But he

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[66]Ibid., 688.

[67]Ibid.

[68]Griffiths explains that the idea of īśvara is closely analogous to the concept of God, being "the owner, the lord, the powerful one, that being to whcih all great-making properties naturally belong" (ibid., 689). Similarly, Griffiths explains, īśvaravāda—literally, the "debate about īśvara"—would be translated well as "theology" (ibid., n. 11). Griffiths' account itself is taken from a secondary source, John Vattanky, S.J., *Gangeśa's Philosophy of God: Analysis, Text, Translation and Interpretation of Īśvaravāda Section of Gangeśa's Tattvacintāmani with a Study on the Development of Nyāya Theism* Adyar Library Series 115 (Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1984).

[69]Ibid.

is not the direct material cause of the existence of every object in it, and is not responsible for either the creation of, or every detail of, the operations of the world's causal operations.[70]

This view comes through most clearly in discussions of *karma*, which is understood as "that force whereby a human's volitional actions have appropriate effects on his or her future."[71] The *Naiyāyikas* hold that God's activity in ordering the universe is limited by the nature and quantity of karmic activity of human beings.

The initial Christian response might be to conclude that *Nyāya* theism is basically (from a Christian point of view) an unusual form of deism, and Griffiths concedes that further examination may well bear this conclusion out. On the other hand, he asks, "Is it possible that, by taking an appropriately developed and complex karmic theory into both their theological anthropology and their cosmology, Christian theists might find their *sermo de Deo* enriched?" Perhaps yes; perhaps no. In either case, however, Griffiths believes much might be gained by the effort to learn the answer, and this (and not for reasons such as reaching agreement or finding common ground between religions) is finally the reason he advocates the effort.

Dealing with Difference: An Apology for Apologetics

The most likely result, however, probably would be to find that alien doctrinal commitments, while comprehensible, relevant, and interesting, are ultimately incompatible with and therefore unacceptable to one's own. In this case, one is obliged to consider

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[70]Ibid., 695.

[71]Ibid.

engaging in apologetics.

Consistent with its nonfoundational stance, postliberals advocate *ad hoc* apologetics.[72] Postliberals are not opposed to all apologetics. They basically agree with Karl Barth that "[a]pologetics and polemics can only be an event, they cannot be a programme."[73] This means that apologetics should be conducted on terms specific but shared by the parties involved: "we should let the common ground we share with a given conversation partner set the starting point for that particular conversation, not looking for any *universal* rules or assumptions for human conversation generally."[74]

Griffiths agrees that apologetics should be *ad hoc*: "apologetics is an occasional discipline, not a systematic one."[75] For Griffiths, however, the discipline also serves as an entry into a much-needed discussion of the status of truth claims in the situation of religious plurality.

> . . . a proper understanding of the status and importance of interreligious apologetics is essential to a clarification of the significance of religious claims to truth made in a context of radical religious pluralism. Religious claims to truth are typically absolute claims: claims to explain everything; claims about the universal rightness and

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[72]On *ad hoc* apologetics, see especially Hans W. Frei, "Eberhard Busch's Biography of Karl Barth," in *Karl Barth in Re-View*, ed. H.-Martin Rumscheidt (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1981), 114; reprinted in *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 161; William Werpehowski, "Ad Hoc Apologetics," *The Journal of Religion* 66 (1986): 282-301; William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 167-168.

[73]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, pt. 1, trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956), 33.

[74]Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 167.

[75]Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics*, 78. Cf. p. 15: apologetics should be "occasional and polemical," by which he means that it is "typically occasioned by a specific challenge of some kind, or by awareness that the ordered set of sentences for which the apologia is being undertaken is not the only one in the field."

applicability of a certain set of values together with the ways of life that embody and perpetuate them; and claims whose referent possesses maximal greatness. These tendencies to absoluteness, although they have certainly been typical of Christian doctrines, are not typical only of them; they are characteristic also of many of the most interesting claims made by the religious virtuosi of non-Christian traditions. . . . It is just this tendency to absoluteness that makes religious truth-claims of such interest and gives them such power; to ignore it is to eviscerate them, to do them the disservice of making them other than what they take themselves to be.[76]

But to ignore this tendency to absoluteness is just what has become the orthodoxy among theologians on the goals and functions of interreligious dialogue. "This orthodoxy suggests that understanding is the only legitimate goal; that judgement [sic] and criticism of religious beliefs or practices other than those of one's own community is always inappropriate; and that an active defense of the truth of those beliefs and practices to which one's community appears committed is always to be shunned."[77] The casualty has not been simply the practice of apologetics, but much of the theological benefit that may be gained through dialogue.[78] For this reason, Griffiths argues that apologetics "can be of enormous philosophical and theological benefit to Christians; even the realization that it is a possibility is an advance over the current theological orthodoxies on these matters."[79]

Griffiths explores potential benefits of and major objections to apologetics through a careful defense of what he calls the *necessity of interreligious apologetics* (NOIA) principle. Formally put, it asserts:

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[76]Ibid., 2-3.

[77]Ibid., xi.

[78]"Intellectual challenge and the response it brings is almost always more productive of understanding and knowledge than the pallid, platitudinous, degutted discourse in which so much contemporary inter-religious 'dialogue' consists." Griffiths, "An Apology for Apologetics," 416.

[79]Griffiths, "Encountering Buddha Theologically," 50.

> If representative intellectuals belonging to some specific religious community come to judge at a particular time that some or all of their own doctrine-expressing sentences are incompatible with some alien religious claim(s), then they should feel obliged to engage in both positive and negative apologetics vis-à-vis these alien religious claim(s) and their promulgators.[80]

By *negative* apologetics Griffiths means the effort to defend one's doctrines against criticisms; by *positive* apologetics he means the effort to argue that one's doctrines are superior to comparable or opposing ones in another religious community.

There are many objections to the conduct of apologetics. Among the most serious objections are those concerning the requirement that at least some doctrine-expressing sentences have cognitive content. The importance of answering these objections is magnified when it is realized that they are widely held in the theology of religions. Moreover, these objections also happen to be among the most important from the standpoint of a discussion of postliberal theology. Griffiths's responses to these objections will help us discern more precisely the postliberal aspects of his approach as well as locate him more definitely with respect to other postliberals, in particular George Lindbeck. This locating, in turn, will later help us to identify a key issue with regard to an assessment of the postliberal approaches.

One objection comes from the view of *conceptual relativism*. This accepts what

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[80]Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics*, 3. Cf. Griffiths's earlier article "An Apology for Apologetics" (of which the book of the same title is largely an expansion), where he defines the principle as follows:

> For any two religious communities, R_1 and R_2, any two ordered sets of sentences, S_1 and S_2, and at any time, T: If S_1 and S_2 are doctrines of R_1 and R_2, and if, at T, representatives of R_1 come to judge that some members of S_2 incompatible with some members of S_1 (or that S_2 and S_1 *in toto* incompatible), then the representative intellectuals in questions should feel obliged to engage in both positive and negative apologetics *vis-à-vis* S_2. (p. 400)

Griffiths calls a "principle of equivalence," which might be expressed in this way:

> All doctrine-expressing sentences are equal with respect to the causes of their credibility for those who believe in them; talk of the truth of doctrine-expressing sentences can be reduced, without remainder, to talk of the causes of their credibility for those who believe in them.[81]

The cognitive relativist and the cognitive realist both acknowledge that there are causes that make belief credible. Causes here are understood as any factors that make doctrines credible to those who hold them; they may include psychological, sociological, economic, political, and cultural factors. The principle of equivalence, then, says that all talk of a doctrine's truth may be reduced exactly (without remainder) to such causes of credibility. The cognitive realist, however, insists that talk about a doctrine's truth goes beyond contingent *causes* of credibility to non-contingent *reasons* for truth. Griffiths acknowledges that no demonstrative argument for such reasons exists. But he also argues that the burden for argument should fall to the relativist and not the realist. The actual practices of many religious communities shows that a widespread intutition that there is a difference between causes and reasons. "[T]his intution appears to have been shared by the vast majority of the representative intellectuals of religious communities throughout human history, and that pursuing it has the major conceptual and interpretive advantage of adequately representing doctrine-expressing sentences as they were (and are) understood by their promulgators."[82] Therefore, the burden of proof rests on the cognitive relativist to show that their position is indeed more credible than cognitive realism.

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[81]Ibid., 32.

[82]Ibid., 35.

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The position of cognitive relativism denies even the *possibility* that doctrines have

cognitive content, and for this reason there is no possible incompatibility between religious

communities regarding their doctrines. Some influential pluralists do not press the

impossibility of incompatibility between sentences, but still maintain for other reasons that

no incompatibility need ever be realized. One such reason stems from a position that

Griffiths calls "universalist perspectivalism."[83] This position basically holds that different

religions are different limited perspectives on a single, ultimate, and ineffable reality. From

the usual vantage point of individual communities, doctrines come into frequent and

serious conflict. When one recognizes, however, that the different religions lead toward

the same goal or reality, however, these apparent incompatibilities can be seen as different

ways of expressing or mediating this single ineffable reality. The pluralistic hypothesis of

John Hick exemplifies this position.[84]

Griffiths responds by noting that the typically-offered reasons for this position are not

compelling, and that there are serious problems with the position. One problem is that it

requires an apologetic discourse anyway. "The thrust of the position is to remove the

need for excluding as false or inadequate any doctrine-expressing sentence of significance

to any community. And yet this leads rather rapidly to very undesirable conclusions."[85]

For example, the Jonestown community, which brought itself to an end in murder and

suicide, would have held a doctrine resembling the sentence *God is such that God wants*

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[83]Ibid., 46-51.

[84]Griffiths refers the reader especially to John Hick's Gifford Lectures, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

[85]Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics*, 49.

God's followers to drink cyanide now.[86] Griffiths presumes that even advocates of

universalist perspectivalism would want to exclude this sentence as congruent with an

adequate description of the ultimate reality. To do so, however, would require some form

of apologetics. A second difficulty is that the position would seem to require it to hold

that any claims to cognitive superiority by a religious community for its doctrines would

be false. This, however, would be to claim that certain doctrines are false, exactly a claim

that universalist perspectivalism would not want to make. In brief, universalist

perspectivalism does not offer a convincing case against the position that doctrine-

expressing sentences are capable of having cognitive content or, by extension, against the

NOIA principle.

A second major challenge to cognitive realism is what Griffiths refers to as

"experiential expressivism."[87] Experiential-expressivism claims that doctrine-expressing

sentences are expressions of "a single, unique, transculturally, and translinguistically

available religious experience. This view calls into question the cognitive content of most

doctrine-expressing sentences because it reduces them to reports of the occurrence and

(presumably) the nature of certain experiences."[88] Such a position might be advanced by

adherents of what Griffiths calls "esoteric perspectivalism," the position that within every

religious community there is an elite whose experience of the ultimate reality differs from

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[86]Ibid.

[87]Ibid., 36-39. The term and also Griffiths's characterization and critique are taken directly from Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine* (see ibid., 110).

[88]Ibid., 36.

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the majority of the community but is basically identical to those of other religious elites.[89]

Griffiths cites two reasons against experiential expressivism. The first is characteristic of postliberals: that the position views the relationship between experience and discourse wrongly.

> For the experiential expressivist, the relation between religious experience and the construction of doctrine-expressing sentences is one-way: the former produces the latter, and the function of the latter is simply to express the core attributes of the former. This view flies in the face of all that we know from historical, anthropological, and psychological studies about the complex phenomenon of becoming and remaining a member of a religious community.[90]

Such studies, to be sure, show the relationship between experience and doctrine to be highly complex and reciprocal, "but if there is a dominant direction of influence it is from doctrine to experience, not vice versa. Assent to a given set of doctrine-expressing sentences . . . makes possible the occurrence of certain kinds of experience, and may at times act as both necessary and sufficient condition for the occurrence of that experience."[91] The second reason is that the claim that all doctrines are expressive of experience is implausible. The sentences for which it is most plausible that they derive from and are expressive of experience are first-person reports. Such sentences are not typically those expressing doctrines, although there may be some, or they might serve as the basis from which doctrine-expressing sentences are derived.

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[89]Ibid., 51-59. In the endnotes Griffiths cites Aldous Huxley and Seyyed Hossein Nasr as examples of esoteric perspectivalism (111). While not cited, Frithjof Schuon would appear an obvious example (*The Transcendent Unity of Religions* [New York: Harper and Row, 1975]). Even the terms of his central distinction, which is not between obvious religious boundaries but across all religious communities into "exoteric" and "esoteric" believers, reflects the position.

[90]Ibid., 37.

[91]Ibid.

It already may have been noticed that while Griffiths agrees with Lindbeck about

experiential expressivism, he uses Lindbeck's critique in the service of cognitive realism,

about which Lindbeck was also critical. From the preceding section, however, we have

already seen that Griffiths recognizes that doctrines have a regulative or syntactical

dimension. This view parallels Lindbeck's own rule theory of doctrine, which regards

doctrines in their *doctrinal* significance and use as purely regulative in nature. Griffiths

acknowledges that the views of religion and theology associated with the rule theory of

doctrine, such as the cultural-linguistic model of religion and intratextuality in theology,

offer "very valuable insights" and their use is "very fruitful."[92] The earlier discussion of

the uniqueness of Christian doctrine shows some benefits of these insights. Where he parts

company is in the purportedly *logical* claim that doctrines function *only* regulatively and

not propositionally. As he reports in *An Apology for Apologetics*,

> There is nothing in the exposition of rule theory given here that suggests that a specific
> doctrine-expressing sentence cannot possess ontological truth (or be fully
> comprehended) outside the (almost) closed, intratextually constituted, circle of a
> particular religious form of life. Much of it suggests that such sentences are very often
> not fully understood outside the circle, and this is almost certainly correct; but that is a
> very different matter from claiming that they cannot be.[93]

From our previous examination, however, we must conclude that Griffiths claims more

for Lindbeck that Lindbeck himself claims. First, the rule theory applies not to doctrine-

expressing sentences, which, actually, Lindbeck clearly insists can operate both cognitively

and symbolically. This was, after all, the very point of discussing the question of truth.

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[92]Ibid., 43.

[93]Ibid.

Rather it applies to the doctrine expressed in these sentences. Second, the regulative view

of doctrine is an empirical claim, not an absolute or theoretical claim.

Having said this, however, there is still the question of discerning what really is the

regulative function or the cognitive content of any given doctrine. Practically, Griffiths

and Lindbeck may be quite far apart. One suggestion why this may be the case is the

stress that Griffiths puts on cognitive content. For Griffiths, it is the fact that doctrines are

often used as truth claims which makes oppositions with the claims of other religious

communities worth investigating and why the topic of apologetics needs to be reopened.

But Griffiths and Lindbeck, at least in the basic outlook, stand close together when

compared to (to borrow Lindbeck's terms) traditional cognitivists and liberal experiential-

expressivists.

While he defends the apologetical task, Griffiths is also ready to admit that it has only

a relatively small part of the theological task in today's situation of religious plurality:

"The NOIA principle simply represents one modality under which theological thinking in a

religiously plural context must operate if it is to stay honest."[94] But it does have important

practical consequences. As we have seen, it challenges much of the current thinking in the

theology of religions about doctrine and other religious communities. At the same time, it

also revives a very useful way for a theologian to learn about not only the claims but the

internal logic of other religious traditions, an activity that may both polemical and

constructive implications.

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[94]Griffiths, "An Apology for Apologetics," 416.

CHAPTER FIVE

J. A. DINOIA ON THE DIVERSITY OF RELIGIOUS AIMS

J. A. DiNoia has summed up the situation in the philosophy and theology of religions

in this way: "Until fairly recently, most philosophers of religion and theologians have

seemed to want to say that things that look different are really the same."[1] DiNoia,

however, now sees "signs of a gathering wave of interest in showing that things that look

the same are really different."[2]

DiNoia's own work is part of the same wave.[3] He believes that more adequate

strategies for theology may be found among an emerging postmodern trend: "some of the

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[1] J. A. DiNoia, O.P., "Teaching Differences," *The Journal of Religion* 73 (1993): 61.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Joseph A. DiNoia, O.P. received his doctorate from Yale University, writing his dissertation under the direction of George Lindbeck and William Christian about the Catholic theology of religions (Joseph A. DiNoia, "Catholic Theology of Religions and Interreligious Dialogue: A Study in the Logic of Christian Doctrines about Other Religions," Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1980. This essay focused on the proposal of Karl Rahner). He now teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C. and is editor-in-chief of *The Thomist*, a Catholic journal of theology whose pages have contained (among many other things) some lively and extended discussions of postliberal theology. Beside his teaching and editorial duties, DiNoia has also written repeatedly on the theology of religions. DiNoia's most important work is *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), which incorporates and extends in a single argument several earlier writings, including "The Doctrines of a Religious Community about Other Religions," *Religious Studies* 18 (1983): 293-307; "Implicit Faith, General Revelation and the State of Non-Christians," *The Thomist* 47 (1983): 209-241; "Philosophical Theology in the Perspective of Religious Diversity," *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 401-416; "Pluralist Theology of Religions: Pluralistic or Non-Pluralistic?" in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 119-134; and "Varieties of Religious Aims: Beyond Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism," in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, ed. Bruce D. Marshall (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 249-274.

most creative initiatives on the American theological scene are those that seek to transcend the agenda posed for Christianity by modernity."[4] While not all involved would want to be called *postmodern*, "it is clear that a series of converging developments is pushing the frontier of theological reflection beyond engagement with the characteristic agenda of modernity."[5]

According to DiNoia, a leading characteristic of this postmodern theology is its confidence in the Christian tradition. It does not begin with skeptical questions about the Christian tradition. Instead it assumes that a religious doctrinal scheme and the pattern of life it commends make good sense and has its own unique logical structure. "If in modern theology the basic question was, how can a modern person believe this doctrine? then in postmodern theology the basic question has become, how can the deep intelligibility of this doctrine be exhibited?"[6] According, a major task of theology is "to discern and exhibit this structure," which it does by explicating "the inherent intelligibility of a particular doctrine within the whole body of Christian doctrines."[7]

This feature is evident in DiNoia's own approach to the question of religious plurality. He insists that the unique aims, assertions, proposals, valuations, and practices that any scheme of religious doctrines puts forward should be taken seriously. This means not only

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[4] J. A. DiNoia, O.P., "American Catholic Theology at Century's End: Postconciliar, Postmodern, Post-Thomistic," *The Thomist* 54 (1990): 512.

[5] Ibid, 513. DiNoia counts among those involved such postliberal figures as Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas, and William Christian.

[6] Ibid., 516.

[7] Ibid.

that individual claims be reckoned with, but that the entire body of doctrine be taken into account. This approach relies on the analysis of religious doctrines and arguments proposed by Yale philosopher of religion William Christian.[8] DiNoia find that his "analysis of some general features of the logic of [doctrines about other religions] brings a much-needed perspective to the study of Christian theology."[9] The results of this analysis leads in two directions: they question the outlook of many current proposals in the theology of religions, and they provide a starting point to work out alternate approaches.

Theology and Dialogue

DiNoia shares two assumptions in common with much of the current thinking in the theology of religions: 1) he affirms the availability of salvation to followers of non-Christian religions; 2) he supports efforts to engage in interreligious dialogue. He justifies the claim that salvation is universally available by asserting that it is the position of "the historic mainstream forms of Christianity" and refers to the conviction about it as "an unexpungeable feature of Christian confession."[10] As he further explains:

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[8]DiNoia acknowledges his debt to Christian repeatedly, most fully in *The Diversity of Religions*, 172. See also J. A. DiNoia, "The Universality of Salvation and the Diversity of Religious Aims," in *Mission in Dialogue*, ed. Mary Motte, F.M.M. and Joseph R. Lang, M.M. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1982). 390 n. 1. Other philosophical analyses that DiNoia acknowledges dependence upon include J. M. Bochenski, *The Logic of Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 1965) and Ninian Smart, *Reasons and Faiths* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958). Aspects of both of the these works have been dealt with by William Christian, the former in William A. Christian, "Bochenski on the Structure of Schemes of Doctrines," *Religious Studies* 13 (1977): 203-219, and in Christian, *Doctrines of Religious Communities: A Philosophical Study* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 30-33; the latter in Christian, *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines: A Study in the Logic of Dialogue among Religions* (London: Herder and Herder, 1972). 11-12

[9]DiNoia, *Diversity*, 172.

[10]Ibid., 70, 94.

Mainstream Christian communities have for the most part been confident that, through the grace of God, persons can receive and develop the dispositions conducive to and necessary for the enjoyment of the true aim of life. They can do so even independently of membership in the Christian community, which devotes itself explicitly to the cultivation of such dispositions. This confidence is based on the doctrines of the unrestricted scope of the divine salvific will and the universality of the redemption won for humankind by Jesus Christ.[11]

His commitment to dialogue stems from the determination of the Roman Catholic church,

beginning with the Second Vatican Council to commit to dialogue. He sees that Catholic

theology

plainly support[s] the attitudes of respect and esteem supposed by the determination to engage in interreligious dialogue. Faith in God's all-embracing providential care for the human race would seem to require of Christian communities that they admit that their own traditions could not have a monopoly on religious truth and virtue. Charity and justice demand that Christians appreciate the goodness of other religious people; . . . [12]

According to DiNoia, the Christian theology of religions has been occupied above all

with questions about salvation, questions such as: "Can non-Christians attain salvation?"

and "Do other religions aim at salvation?"[13] The concentration on salvation shows in the

predominance of the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, which, regardless

of other issues involved, puts the question of salvation foremost. The tendency in the

field, moreover, has been to allow that salvation is possible for non-Christians:

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[11]Ibid., 94. Conversely he explains that "[i]t is no part of the Christian story (at least in its mainstream versions) that only members of the particular Christian community will enjoy the final consummation with which God has promised to end the world's story" (90). Cf. DiNoia, "The Universality of Salvation," 377-391, and ibid., "Christian Universalism: The Nonexclusive Particularity of Salvation in Christ," in *Either/Or: The Gospel or Neopaganism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 37-48.

[12]DiNoia, *Diversity*, 32.

[13]DiNoia, "Varieties of Religious Aims," 249. See also DiNoia, *Diversity*, 36.

Prevailing positions in the field of theology of religions for the most part focus their energies on allowing for the possibility of salvation outside the ambit of Christianity. Allied in their rejection of exclusivism (the view that salvation requires explicit faith in Christ prior to death), incluvisists (e.g., Karl Rahner and Jacques Dupuis) and pluralists (e.g., John Hick and Paul Knitter) deploy various theological and philosophical strategies to allow for the salvation of the members of other religious communities.[14]

Both inclusivists and pluralists usually agree that exclusivist Christian claims about salvation are likely to cause offense, and for this reason they reject such claims.[15] As they see it, "[t]o ascribe a uniquely salvific role to Jesus Christ would constitute a denial of the salvific role of other religious founders (like the Buddha and Muhammed) and thus would be an affront to their communities."[16]

DiNoia finds no reason to think this must be the case. He asks: suppose a Buddhist were to warn him (a Christian) that he would never attain Nirvana by following the course of life laid out by the Christian community.[17] Would he feel anxious about this? No, because he has not been persuaded that he should be seeking Nirvana in the first place. Of

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[14]Ibid., ix.

[15]"An important aspect of the relations of Christians in the United States (and in the West generally) with other religious people is the determination to be respectful of the values enshrined in other traditions and of the upright life of their adherents" (DiNoia, "The Universality of Salvation," in *Mission in Dialogue*, 377). "The esteem that many Christian theologians have come to feel for other religions inclines them to dismiss the exclusivism associated with the notorious formula *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* as offensive to other communities and inconsistent with central Christian doctrines" (DiNoia, *Diversity*, 36). "Is Jesus Christ the unique mediator of salvation? I was one of five panelists assigned to address this question at a recent meeting of Catholic theologians. I was the first to speak and, as it turned out, the only panelist prepared to advance an unqualified affirmative response to the question. Why is this? . . . As the session unfolded, it became clear that their reluctance to do so was motivated at least in part by a desire to avoid giving offense to religious people of other traditions" ("Christian Universalism," in *Either/Or*, 37).

[16]DiNoia, "Christian Universalism," 37.

[17]Ibid., 40-41.

course, were he to begin to be persuaded that he should be seeking Nirvana, then he should try to find out the path leading to it and start up it. But if he were to remain convinced that he should seek Christian salvation, then he would remain on the Christian path. This hypothetical situation illustrates that religious communities are indeed quite different, not only in certain features, but in central ways. Going back to the example, DiNoia concludes: "I could say that the Christian community and the Buddhist community (with their various subcommunities) both seem to have some conception of an ultimate aim of life and have developed a pattern of life geared toward attaining it."[18]

On this fundamental point DiNoia agrees with other postliberals. He has quoted approvingly William Christian's *Doctrines of Religious Communities*: "There seems to be a deep-seated tendency in the major religious communities to develop a comprehensive pattern of life . . . which bears on all human interests . . . and on all situations in which human beings find themselves."[19] He has also noted that George Lindbeck makes a similar point by way of his cultural-linguistic scheme, where he draws "attention to the ways in which religious traditions mold the whole of the life and experience of their adherents."[20] The point, as DiNoia sees it, is this: "Each of the world's great religions seems to direct its adherents to some ultimate aim of life, and each proposes some pattern which life as a whole ought to take in view of that aim."[21] Thus, the Christian community is understood

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[18]Ibid., 41.

[19]Christian, *Doctrines of Religious Communities*, 186. Quoted from DiNoia, "Christian Universalism," 41, n.5.

[20]DiNoia, *Diversity*, 9.

[21]Ibid.

to shape the outlook of the individual Christian by

> the fundamental conviction that a good life is one lived in seeking to be in union with God and with other human beings in him. In effect, the whole burden of the message of the Scriptures as these have come to be interpreted in the traditions of his community is to foster this aim across all the interests and occasions of life. The prayers and stories, customs and rites, beliefs and ethical teachings of the Christian community have the Triune God as their focus and aim.[22]

It also teaches that this aim is intended for all humankind:

> The Christian community teaches that the aim of life it fosters is worthy of pursuit by all human beings without exception. Generally speaking it has not taught (and in view of its central doctrines probably could not consistently teach) that salvation constitutes the aim of life only for some limited group of human beings or only during some one segment of the course of world history. On the contrary, . . . the Christian scheme of doctrines is ordinarily understood to include doctrines about the universality of salvation.[23]

While DiNoia has been careful to note that he is *not* arguing that an "aim of life" is a

defining feature of a religion, nor that within large communities does a single precise

conception of this aim necessarily exist, he does claim that such aims do figure

prominently in existing religious communities.[24] He further observes that religious

communities generally advance their distinctive aims of life and foster their corresponding

patterns of life through teaching specific doctrines, which he defines as "those elements of

discourse in religious communities in which some truth is proposed for belief, or some

good as worth seeking, or some course of action for adoption."[25] As a whole, the set of a

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[22]Ibid.

[23]DiNoia, "The Universality of Salvation," 378.

[24]DiNoia, "Varieties of Religious Aims," 269.

[25]"DiNoia, *Diversity*, 10. Other forms of discourse in religious communities might include stories, prayers, and blessings. A Christian example of a *belief* would be Jesus Christ saves us from our sins." A Christian example of a *valuation* would be "God alone is holy." A Christian example of a recommended

religious community's doctrines (its "body" or "scheme" of doctrines) can be said to teach the pattern of life distinctive to the community.

When this is realized, the criticism of inclusivists and pluralists is undermined: there appears to be nothing unusual about a religious community, Christian or otherwise, claiming uniqueness.

> Each of the world's major religious traditions seems to claim that the aim of life it proposes is the one most worthy of pursuit by all human beings without exception. A claim of this sort appears to be implied by the respective basic religious valuations that analysis suggests are ingredient in the doctrinal schemes of these traditions. To ascribe an unrestricted inherent or intrinsic value to some existent (as do Christianity and Islam, for example) or to some state of being (as does Theravāda Buddhism, for example) is to propose that something be valued in a certain way not only by the members of a particular religious group but by human beings generally. It would be odd (though naturally not impossible) for a religious community—in view of its definition of that on which its pattern of life is centered—to manifest indifference with regard to the courses of action and particular valuations and beliefs that are understood to foster attainment of the true aim of life.[26]

It would be no more strange for Christians to claim that there is no salvation outside the Church than for a Buddhist to teach that Nirvana can be attained in no other way than the Excellent Eightfold Path. While it is true that such claims may be made in an arrogant tone and without respect for the members of other religious communities, "no religious community deserves to be accused of arrogant exclusivism for being consistent and serious in its teachings about the aim of life it proposes and the means it regards as necessary to reach it."[27]

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course of action would be "Strive to live in union with the Holy Trinity."

[26]DiNoia, "The Universality of Salvation," 380.

[27]Ibid., 381.

Far from being an advantage or virtue, the prevailing focus on salvation obscures

rather than clarifies the relationship of Christianity to non-Christian religions: "By framing

the agenda of theology of religions primarily in terms of the possibility of extra-Christian

salvation, pluralists and inclusivists often fail to give enough weight to the specificity and

distinctiveness of religious aims."[28] The problem with the inclusivist position as advanced

by leading advocates like Karl Rahner and Jacques Dupuis is that they attempt "to field an

entire interpretive framework for the understanding and assessment of other religious and

cultural traditions."[29] Usually this framework is Christian; Christian categories such as

revelation, salvation, and grace and theories on possibilities such as implicit faith figure

prominently in inclusivist accounts. The result is that the distinctive features of non-

Christian religions fade: when Christian categories such as revelation and salvation are

introduced even when they are partially or completely inapplicable, then "the distinctive

strands of other religious traditions, woven into the integral fabric of their particular

doctrinal schemes, are never permitted to emerge in the clarity of their intractable

otherness."[30]

Pluralists, on the other hand, fail by regarding "salvation" as a concept that embraces

all the different aims held and commended by the various religious traditions.[31] To be

sure, pluralists recognize that different communities propose and commend different

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[28]DiNoia, "Christian Universalism," 39-40.

[29]DiNoia, "The Church and Dialogue with Other Religions," 81.

[30]Ibid., 82.

[31]DiNoia, "Christian Universalism," 40.

"salvations," if the term can be used broadly to designate ultimate religious aims. They

argue, however, that all such specific aims are ways of seeking after a "more ultimate" or

truly ultimate but ineffable aim. Thus pluralists also effectively efface the distinctive aims

and patterns of life held and promoted by different religious communities.

Given, however, the current acceptance of inclusivism and pluralism, DiNoia

concludes: "The great challenge facing present-day Christian theology of religions and

interreligious conversation is to avoid minimizing distinctive features of the major religious

traditions through a well-intentioned universalism."[32]

The Diversity of Religious Aims and the Universality of Salvation

A major characteristic of postliberal theology is its view that doctrines function

regulatively. So it was with Barth, Lindbeck, and Griffiths. So it is also with DiNoia

about the possibility of universal salvation:

> In the Catholic community, no theology of religions is likely to be regarded as fully
> consistent with central Christian doctrines if it does not permit a strong affirmation of
> the universality of salvation at least as a possibility. This doctrine *rules* assertions of
> the doctrines of grace and salvation in this way: no doctrines of grace and salvation
> can be genuinely Christian that in principle exclude any segment of humankind from
> the possibility of reaching its true and divinely promised destiny. The doctrine of the
> divine salvific will thus has a *global or overall regulative force* for the construal of
> central Christian doctrines and, by implication, of doctrines about other religions and
> their adherents[33]

DiNoia, however, is critical of the usual inclusivist and pluralist approaches, even

though they affirm this possibility. His reason is that their focus on the possibility of

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[32]Ibid., 48.

[33]DiNoia, *Diversity*, 107-108. Emphases added. See also DiNoia, "Implicit Faith," 240-241.

salvation plays down the unique aims of religious communities and the distinctive patterns

of life they propose for attaining these aims. His alternative is summarized in the answer

to this self-posed question:

> Rather than ask whether non-Christians can attain salvation or whether their religions
> aim at salvation, Christian theology of religions might ask: How do the soteriological
> programs of other religious communities promote the pursuit and enjoyment of the
> distinctive overall aims they propose for human life? Questions about salvation would
> continue on the menu, so to speak, but they would take second place to questions
> about the varieties of aims proposed by religious communities and the patterns of
> dispositions and actions they elicit.[34]

Although he does not speak in these terms, we can say that the conviction about the

variety of aims and patterns of life in religious communities also acts *regulatively*. The

basic task, then, is to work out a theological position regarding salvation that, on the one

hand, conforms to the rule that the possibility of salvation is universal, and, on the other

hand, conforms to the rules that there are different religious aims and that these aims

should be respected.

The inclusivist and pluralist positions assert a *present* salvific value to other religions.

Pluralists do so by seeing that other religions are possibly equally valid paths to ultimate

salvation. The distinctive aims and doctrines of Christian and non-Christian religions alike

are made relative to a more basic religious or soteriological movement held to be common

to all. Under the rule that the distinctive aspects of religious communities should be

respected, this position cannot stand. Inclusivists recognize the uniqueness of the

Christian claims, but they attribute to non-Christian religions not only the possibility that

they teach true and right things, but that they contribute to salvation in the specifically

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[34]DiNoia, *Diversity*, 55.

Christian sense. For example, Karl Rahner's so-called "anonymous Christian" proposal

does not simply teach that non-Christian religions have aspects of truth and rightness

among their doctrines, but that they actually contribute toward salvation as Christians

understand and pursue it. His proposal ascribes a hidden fellowship of non-Christians with

God, regarding the followers of non-Christian religions as "anonymous Christians." In

this way he attributes a *present* salvific value to these religions.

By contrast, DiNoia proposes an *eschatological* or *providential* salvific value to other

religions. In this way, he acknowledges the possibility that other religions may participate

in the divine plan of salvation, but he recognizes that the way and extent to which they do

cannot be specified presently. It will only be apparent eschatologically. This view

preserves the recognition that other religious communities are not necessarily aiming for

the same goal as the Christian community. They are not, as a pluralist would claim,

roughly equivalent ways to salvation, nor, as an inclusivist would hold, imperfect and

inadequate ways to salvation, of which Christianity is perfect. Rather, the *eschatological*

view permits one to ascribe to and recognize in distinct aims of life and patterns of life

meant to lead a person to these different aims. As DiNoia explains:

> A theology of religions in this vein expresses the presumption that the members of
> non-Christian communities could give an adequate description—in terms of the basic
> valuations, practical doctrines, and central beliefs—of the dispositions that are fostered
> in their communities and exhibited in the conduct of their lives, in their comportment
> toward others, and in their civic and social intercourse. It would thus be possible to
> do justice to the doctrines of other communities by acknowledging and respecting the
> qualities they engender without describing these qualities in primarily Christian terms.
> At the same time, appropriate Christian valuations of such qualities could be framed in
> terms of an "eschatological" rather than present salvific value. The specific ways in
> which the presently observable and assessable conduct and dispositions of non-
> Christians will conduce to their future salvation are now hidden from view and known

only to God.[35]

What can be recognized in the present are the ways in which religion guides a person towards true salvation.[36] Only to the extent that another religion can be shown to propose a way to salvation as Christians understand it can the religion be said to be superceded and fulfilled by Christianity, in the way that inclusivism has often understood these terms. But where they do not do so, religions are clearly invalidated by Christianity.

If the salvific value of a religion can only be assessed eschatologically, then it follows that salvation for a religion's followers might also best be understood eschatologically, and this is indeed the route DiNoia takes: "By projecting the moment of experienced salvation into the time of death or beyond death, Christian theology of religions in a prospective vein combines a confident affirmation of the possibility of salvation for non-Christians with respect for their distinctive doctrines about the true aim of life and for the finality of the dispositions they foster in their communities."[37] In this regard, DiNoia is much like George Lindbeck.[38] DiNoia, however, goes beyond Lindbeck to by appealing to the doctrine of purgatory. He acknowledges that it may seem "foolhardy" to invoke purgatory, trading one set of problems for an even more difficult set. But if, for the sake of discussion, it can be accepted, then he believes that it helps in seeing more clearly how, from the Christian point of view, salvation of non-Christians can be defended.

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[35]Ibid., 75.

[36]Ibid., 77-78.

[37]Ibid., 104.

[38]See above, pp. 96-98.

As traditionally understood, the doctrine of purgatory teaches how believers with unrepented sins or with lingering consequences of forgiven sins may have these obstacles to the ultimate aim of life, namely, fellowship with the Trinity, overcome. Purgatory is viewed as an intermediate state between death and final judgment in which one may be further transformed into a person who is able to enjoy this fellowship. Purgatory, then, is not so much for the sake of God who cannot abide imperfections as for persons who are unable to enjoy fully fellowship with him. What is crucial to see in this doctrine is that "it allows for an interval (which may be thought of as instantaneous and coterminous with death) the essential feature of which is the experience of a necessary purification or transformation in view of the assured prospect of eternal bliss."[39]

DiNoia extends the doctrine of purgatory to include non-Christians. "If this possibility is open to Christians, then surely there is no reason in principle to rule it out for non-Christians. According to Catholic doctrine, purgatory provides for an interval for the rectification of whatever is lacking in any human being who dies justified or in the state of grace, but unprepared for the full enjoyment of bliss."[40] In DiNoia's proposal, non-Christians can be included among these human beings.

The Diversity of Aims and Truth in Other Religions

Another central concern for the theology of religions is the possibility of truth and rightness in the doctrines of other religions. According to DiNoia, Christians typically

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[39]Ibid., 105.

[40]Ibid.

have been confident about this possibility, and they have often justified this confidence by

relying on a concept of general revelation. In the theology of religions, the concept has

generally been used to attribute the presence of these true and right doctrines to the

activity of God. Concerning the possibility of extra-Christian truth, this concept functions

in much the same way that the concept of special revelation works, namely, to guarantee

or allow for the possibility of revelation. Such usage is therefore *extended* in the sense

that *general* revelation lacks "a level and comprehensiveness of communication and

vehicles" that are held to be present in special revelation.[41]

DiNoia argues that the concept of general revelation does not account adequately for

the specific ways in which different religious communities (including Christianity) portray

and defend the truth and rightness of their own doctrines. He suggests (and in this respect

he shares much with other postliberal accents and concerns) that theologians who rely on

this concept tend for this reason to miss the significance of these particular ways.

This is especially true of those proposals that depend on the presence of a universal

religious experience to make general revelation possible. It has been especially inclusivists

and pluralists who have tried "to explain how 'religious experience' provides the required

universal access to revelation and how the assorted forms of religious expression diversely

articulate this experience of the transcendent realm."[42] For instance, Rahner's account

relies on a notion that itself relies heavily on transcendental philosophy that the experience

of divine grace is ubiquitous to account on the one hand for the full access to the truth

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[41]Ibid., 83.

[42]Ibid.

privileged to the Christian community and on the other hand for the partial access to the

truth available in other religious communities.[43] Pluralist positions, DiNoia concedes, are

more diverse, but he notes that "they converge in ascribing to religious experience the

fundamental role in generating equivalently partial religious conceptions of the elusive

truth of the transcendent realm."[44] Such views cannot rule in principle an unlimited

number of genuine if partial revelations. What is crucial to the argument, however, is that

both views "tend to obscure both the logic of the concept of revelation and the doctrinal

warrants for affirming the possibility of truth in the teachings of other communities."[45]

DiNoia's own account of religious experience is closer, in George Lindbeck's

terminology (which DiNoia acknowledges), to the cultural-linguistic than the experiential-

expressive.[46] It does not, however, depend on this point, nor does it necessarily prefer the

cultural-linguistic account of religious experience as advanced by Lindbeck. DiNoia

allows for a more generalized account of religious experience than Lindbeck's own. The

one inviolable provision, however, is that any such account does not "blur important

cross-religious variations in the doctrines by which religious communities identify the

sources of the truth and rightness of their beliefs and practices."[47]

An adequate account of potential truth in non-Christian communities must do justice

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[43]For his most extended discussion of this issue, DiNoia, "Implicit Faith," 209-241. It is also discussed at length in *Diversity*, 98-103.

[44]DiNoia, *Diversity*, 87.

[45]Ibid., 87-88.

[46]Ibid., 189.

[47]Ibid.

to those communities' own accounts of the truth of their doctrines and the sources of that

truth.[48] Here is where concepts like "general revelation" and "religious experience" meet

with concrete difficulties. DiNoia points out:

> Buddhist doctrines, for example, regard Gautama the Buddha as the rediscoverer of
> the universal Dharma and stress the role of his personal experience and inquiry, rather
> than any revelation, in coming to enlightenment and leading others to it. It seems
> especially inappropriate to suggest that Buddhist and other similarly nontheistic
> communities are in fact in possession of some revelation imparted by a transcendent
> divine agent.[49]

Christians, as they seem to know intuitively and at any rate is necessary doctrinally,

want to attribute all truth to God's initiative and work. Therefore, it is necessary to

acknowledge that truth, wherever it is found, derives from the sole divine source of truth.

This acknowledgement arises from the claim that ultimate salvation, while available to all,

comes through a particular mediator, Jesus Christ. This is understood "not only [as] a

doctrine about the means of salvation but also a doctrine about the knowledge and

promise of salvation."[50] In other words, the Christian community, when it teaches that it

alone points to and shows the true aim of life, also teaches that it alone is the source of the

knowledge and promise of salvation. The whole of Scriptures supposes (when it does not

explicitly affirm) that God himself gives knowledge both of the possibility and the

conditions of salvation. This knowledge cannot be the outcome of human discovery and

observation; it is what God himself makes known to human creatures. The doctrine of

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[48]Ibid., 88.

[49]Ibid., 89.

[50]Ibid., 83.

revelation works to affirm this particular truth about the promise of salvation. The promise of revelation bears on the issue of truth in that it establishes "a domain of knowledge and a perspective on all other domains of knowledge and experience."[51] On the one hand, this knowledge does not oppose human nature and experience, and it is not alien to them, either. On the other hand this knowledge is not confined to them. The knowledge of the promise is relevant to all things and issues in that it appropriates and corrects all other knowledge. This is especially evident where the divine identity and purposes are concerned, and also where human nature and destiny are concerned. As DiNoia elaborates, "However optimistic the Scriptures may be about the possibilities of knowledge of God as 'cause of the world,' it is only by revelation, in contrast with discovery, that we have knowledge of God's self-descriptions and of his promises in our regard."[52]

This knowledge, however, while it extends to all things, is itself "ineradicably particular insofar as it is transmitted in sources entrusted by God to the Christian community."[53] DiNoia insists that there is nothing at all odd about this. As he asks rhetorically: "If in his gracious will God intends to enter into communication and interpersonal relations, how else than according to the structures and processes of communication embedded in the makeup of human beings?"[54] This is not God backing

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[51]Ibid.

[52]Ibid., 84.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Ibid.

himself into any particular cultural or historical corner. Rather, by doing so "he makes

himself accessible in precisely the modalities in which persons become accessible to each

other—specifiably, identifiably, bodily, personally—with names, with ancestors, in the

context of particular natural and ethnic identities, with particular family ties, and so on.

Far from being preposterous, it makes perfect sense . . ."[55]

As in the matter of salvation, the role of other religious communities is "providential."

They may have contributions to make, but it is too much to say that they participate or

provide for the distinctive Christian aim of life and the patterns of life it recommends for

their pursuit. They may contain truths, but their aims and patterns of life prove true only

in the light of the Christian revelation. What might be these contributions? It might

include the function of teaching the Christian community. For instance, Christians might

have something to learn from the Buddhist community about selflessness, mindfulness, and

discipline, or from neo-Hindus about non-violent resistance.[56]

Theology in Dialogue

DiNoia's theological reflection on questions of salvation and truth in other religions

helps to establish a theology *for* dialogue. A second major aspect of his theology of

religions is an effort to examine certain issues of Christian theology *in* dialogue with other

religious communities. Here we turn to his considerations on putting this theology into

the practice of dialogue. Again, the focal point of the effort lies with religious doctrines.

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[55]Ibid., 85.

[56]Ibid., 92-93.

The effort centers around the potential discussion of Christians with non-Christians about

the truth and rightness of their respective doctrines, individually and as a set or scheme.[57]

DiNoia puts the issue into perspective by drawing attention to features of the current

situation. Not since the days of the early Church have Christians been faced with

widespread experience of different religious traditions and their communities. The

Christian aim has not changed, but it is now expressed and understood "in a climate in

which knowledge and appreciation of rival claims about the meaning and aim of human life

may be expected to be widespread."[58] He agrees with sociologist Peter Berger's

assessment that a "pluralization of both institutions and plausibility structures"

characterizes the social and cultural climates of modernized societies.[59] In the area of

religion, people are faced with a vastly expanded number of choices, and Christians find

themselves facing dialogical situations with a variety of positions. Of course, since the

Enlightenment Christians have had to engage religious skeptical or atheistic thinkers in

conversations of various kinds. Today, however, the challenges come from people who

are not religious skeptical but who advocate well-developed conceptions of the aim of life

and of patterns of life. Christians now must contend and converse with members of

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[57]Ibid., 111.

[58]Ibid., 112.

[59]Ibid. I have quoted DiNoia here, although the text suggests that he is quoting Peter Berger from page 17 of *The Heretical Imperative*. I believe he has paraphrased this sentence: "*Modernity pluralizes both institutions and plausibility structures.*" Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1979), 17 (emphasis original). This puts clearer emphasis on a point of fundamental importance to Berger, namely, "that modernity has plunged religion into a very specific crisis, characterized by secularity, to be sure, but characterized more importantly by pluralism" (*The Heretical Imperative*, xi).

communities shaped by and teaching, as DiNoia puts it, "massive and enduring bodies of religious wisdom and highly ramified systems of doctrines derived from sources as ancient and rich as any of their own."[60]

It is this situation of religious plurality which leads DiNoia to suggest a course of action that at first glance appears to be the very antithesis of a postliberal approach. He recommends the rehabilitation and use of topics that belong to the traditional discipline of natural or philosophical theology, namely, *arguments about the existence and nature of God*, and *arguments to support predications.*[61]

DiNoia highlights the importance of the issue and the relevance of this approach by posing a hypothetical conversation about religious matters between a Muslim and a Buddhist.[62] During the conversation, the Muslim repeatedly uses the term "Allah." Unfamiliar with the term, the Buddhist finally asks the Muslim to identify "Allah." The Muslim replies that Allah is the one who spoke to Muhammad, as the Qu'ran reports. The Buddhist, who knows little of either Muhammad or the Qu'ran, asks whether Allah is like a god in the Hindu pantheon. No, replies the Muslim, because Allah is the one and only God. This reply still leaves the Buddhist puzzled, so the Muslim asks him to reflect on the beauty and orderliness of the natural world. This is the creation of Allah. The whole meaning of life, according to the Muslim, is to live in submission to this Allah.

As the conversation continues, the Buddhist repeatedly refers to "Nirvana." He

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[60]DiNoia, *Diversity*, 114.

[61]Ibid., 119.

[62]Ibid., 115-119.

attaches great importance to Nirvana, so the Muslim assumes that the Buddhist must be referring to his God. But this is not so, corrects the Buddhist; Nirvana is not any kind of God, nor is it a presently existing reality. The Muslim, however, remains puzzled, so the Buddhist asks him to imagine those intense experiences in which the Muslim might have felt as if transported outside himself. Nirvana is something like this, only ineffably more so. The aim of life, according to the Buddhist, is to attain this state by following the Excellent Eightfold Path.

In both cases some fact or state of affairs within human observation or experience served as a starting point for reference to their respective ultimate aims of life. The Muslim pointed to the natural course of events in the universe, and attributes this to the activity of Allah. The Buddhist referred to a certain kind of intense experience, and connected this with the state of Nirvana. The arguments of both conversation partners illustrate the kind of arguments that are needed for religious dialogue, namely, *referential patterns of argument.*

Suppose, further, that the conversation turns to describing Allah and Nirvana. The Muslim asserts that Allah is holy; the Buddhist asserts that Nirvana is the fullness of bliss and the absence of bliss. How can such attributes be predicated of beings and states held to be beyond sense perception? Again, a special kind of argument is needed at this point, *arguments in support of predications.*

For these arguments DiNoia turns to precritical theology, in particular to Thomas Aquinas. His reasons are twofold.

For one thing, Aquinas is innocent of the key moves that have been the subject of such

vigorous attack in postmodern philosophy and theology: the quest for a unitary method for all knowledge and inquiry ("foundationalism"), the conflation of epistemology with metaphysics, and the separation of consciousness from bodiliness. Furthermore, Aquinas's theology furnishes a rich resource for exhibiting the logic of referential and predicational patterns of argument, as they function both in the Christian scheme itself and in interreligious dialogue.[63]

DiNoia, however, also notes that "it is neither possible nor desirable to repristinate Aquinas as if the intervening centuries had evaporated."[64] The past two centuries have brought substantial changes to the understanding and undertaking of philosophical theology, and they must be reckoned with. Nevertheless, it is DiNoia's conviction that Aquinas remains useful even for postmodern times.

Religious References and Interreligious Conversations

Referential arguments function logically to introduce a subject into a religious discourse. In the Christian tradition these arguments are usually called arguments for the existence of God, but they have, as the preceding conversation would suggest, parallels in nontheistic traditions. There are special problems associated with religious references. In ordinary conversations, we rely on broad general knowledge to supply references that might be required. If that knowledge fails, then further work is needed to establish the reference. The situation of religious references is usually more complex. The reason is that such references are made to things that are not identical with any objects of ordinary sense perception. Consequently, a special class of referential arguments has arisen in religious communities. In the history of the Christian tradition, three types of referential

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[63]Ibid., 126.

[64]Ibid.

arguments have been advanced.[65] One type appeals to aspects of nature, such as the design of the universe. A second type appeals to certain historical events, such as miracles. A third type appeals to the human self, that is, to subjective states or experiences.

It is just this kind of argument, however, that, while "seem[ing] to be logically required if a religious tradition is to support its claims about the focus of life as a whole," have fallen out of favor in recent centuries.[66] Developments over the past two centuries have undermined the confidence of many Christians in referential arguments.[67] Arguments of the first type include cosmological and design arguments. They became especially prominent in medieval theology, but modernity has subjected them to a critique that has been widely judged as devastating. Similarly, the modern historical consciousness has made appeals to history increasingly uncertain. As a result, modern theology has largely depended on arguments of the third type. But without referential arguments of the first type (appealing to the natural course of events in the world), arguments both on the basis of history and of the human self have proven vulnerable.

But as DiNoia's hypothetical conversation shows, Christian theology needs to adopt once again arguments of this kind in the new situation of religious plurality and interreligious conversations. Against the criticism of contemporary Western philosophy,

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[65]Ibid., 20.

[66]Ibid., 116. DiNoia notes that this account of arguments in religious discourse depends on that developed by William A. Christian, Sr., in *Meaning and Truth in Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 185-237.

[67]DiNoia, *Diversity*, 120-125.

DiNoia argues that interaction between religious communities requires these arguments, and that theories that rule them out in principle themselves become implausible in light of this situation. Without referential arguments, it is impossible to draw the categorical and conceptual maps in which the realities and concepts held by religious communities are located.

The role of these arguments, however, is much more modest than those of the so-called "foundational theology." The use of philosophical theology that DiNoia has in mind is in the *postmodern* or *postliberal* mode that does not seek to ground the truth of Christian affirmations in supposedly universal and universally accessible foundations. Rather, he uses it in a "nonfoundational" way to locate the widest possible context for our understanding and explaining them: "Referential patterns of argument in theology serve not so much to establish God's existence as to secure the particularistic claim to universality that the Christian community makes for its arguments."[68] As he further explains:

> Staking this claim is not equivalent to establishing a foundation for the truth of all Christian doctrines once and for all. That "foundation" exists only in the truth who is God himself and can never be a human construction. Rather, the readiness to develop and employ arguments of the sort described here characterizes a conception of the theological enterprise in which—case by case, doctrine by doctrine—the force of Christian affirmations is expounded in connection with the full range of human knowledge of the world.[69]

In DiNoia's reading, the arguments for the existence of God in the *Summa Theologiae* [do] not signal a methodological doubt such that Christian theology cannot go about

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[68]Ibid., 130.

[69]Ibid., 153.

its business until it has 'proven' the existence of its subject. This possibility is ruled out from the start by Aquinas' prior description of the nature of theological inquiry. To assert that theology gets its subject matter from revelation implies that faith in God constitutes one of the principles of the inquiry. The Triune God is already "in place," so to speak, in his full, scheme-specific characterization.[70]

The "scheme-specific characterization" of God consists of characterizations of him and his work such as are found in the Bible and reflected in the liturgy. This characterization is presupposed before Aquinas turns to referential arguments. In appropriating Aquinas, DiNoia is arguing not only that one can use his arguments, but that they are used in the same way that Aquinas used them, not to establish first the existence of God and thus permit one to speak about him, but to clarify the universal extent to which claims about him apply. For Aquinas, these arguments served primarily internal theological purposes "in sustaining the broadest possible context for Christian affirmation, in connection not only with the doctrine of God but also with the doctrines of grace, christology, sacraments, and so on throughout the Christian scheme."[71]

DiNoia extends their use to serve the purposes of interreligious dialogue. He argues that this is appropriate because their logical function is precisely to secure the universal scope of Christian claims. Such arguments, moreover, are required by dialogue. For example, a dialogue with nontheistic Buddhists would require the Christian to apply some kind of argument for God's existence, not to be able to talk about God at all, but to begin to meet the Buddhist objections.

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[70]Ibid., 129.

[71]Ibid., 131.

Religious Predications and Interreligious Conversations

As DiNoia's hypothetical situation suggests, interreligious conversations are likely to involve attributes ascribed to ultimate realities. Differences in these attributes, if taken seriously, will lead to serious disagreements.

Just as the nature of religious references usually requires special kinds of arguments, so also does the problem of predications. In ascribing attributes to ineffable beings and states, such as Nirvana, one often wants both to exclude imperfections on the one hand and yet advance truth claims on the other. This is certainly the case in the Christian tradition. For instance, in attributing holiness to the Triune God, Christians want to ascribe holiness in a way that makes a claim to truth, and yet to do so in a way that acknowledges that how this applies to God is beyond human comprehension. The problem is how one can predicate attributes of God that meets both these conditions. In other words,

> Christian theology needs some account of our predications about the Triune God to show that, despite their serious limitations, they nonetheless entail claims to truth. When Christians assert that God is holy, or merciful, or sheerly existent, and acknowledge that they do not know what it is like for God to be these things, they still mean to assert that these predications are true of him.[72]

In Christian history, the view of univocal predication has largely been rejected. Several other theories of predication have been advanced, and DiNoia takes note of three which are inadequate.

> The first suggests that all such predications can be reformulated as paradoxical or apophatic utterances that deny limitations to God (thus: "God is good" would be equivalent to "God is not evil"). Another semantic theory of religious predications

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[72]Ibid., 144.

reconstrues them as assertions about the divine causal activity as experienced by us. What appear on the surface as ascriptions of attributes to the Triune God are in fact construable as descriptions of our experience of him, or of our relation to him (thus: "God is good" is equivalent to "God is the cause of goodness"). Neither of these theories denies the propositional force of Christian doctrines that express predications. Rather, according to the first view, the propositional force is always negative, while according to the second, it is always relative to human states. There is a third view that seems to exclude the propositional force of predications about the Triune God. According to this view, such predications must be construed as metaphorical, as evocations (nondiscursive symbols) that afford, occasion, or express certain experiences of the transcendent realm without being directly descriptive of it (thus: "God is good" is symbolic).[73]

While these views are correct inasmuch as they recognize that the nature of God transcends human conception and language, they are all inadequate because they require straightforward affirmative predications to be reconstrued as something beside affirmations.

For help, DiNoia again turns to Aquinas as a resource; here he appropriates his analogical theory of predication. The theory of analogy holds that while there are concepts such as goodness and existence that properly may be predicated of both creatures and the divine creator, they apply or are predicated in unique and incomprehensible ways of God. In the context of interreligious dialogue, the theory of analogy permits one to link specifically Christian predications about God in a straightforward way with visible states of affairs.

This position differs markedly from those typical of pluralists. Pluralist accounts stress the ineffability of the ultimate reality to which different religious communities all refer. They argue that the doctrines of the different communities refer to same object, but that

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[73]Ibid., 144-145.

this object is absolutely beyond all desciption.[74] The result is that pluralist accounts

sharply curtail the possibility of religious communities actually making truth claims.

While in no way underestimating the ineffability ascribed to God or to non-Christian

realities like Nirvana, DiNoia stresses that ineffability does not rule for at least some

religious communities the propositional force of predications. Evidence of this belief

among different major religious communities comes in the form of actual disagreements on

matters such as theistic beliefs and corresponding attempts to secure the universality of

their own distinctive claims. These communities "agree in identifying objective states of

affairs as the context for their teachings about God, the true aim of life, and conditions of

human existence in the world, and so on. This conviction gives rise to arguments that

seek to secure each community's particularistic claim to universality."[75] Consequently, an

account of religious predications that allows for their possessing propositional force is

basic to conducting interreligious dialogue, because it allows one to recognize differences

and oppositions between communities and so take the possibility of disagreements

seriously.

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[74]DiNoia singles out Stanley Samartha and John Hick as examples of pluralists who sharply limit the propositional force of religious predications (147-152).

[75]Ibid., 149.

PART TWO

AN ASSESSMENT AND CRITICAL APPROPRIATION OF THE POSTLIBERAL

APPROACH TO THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

CHAPTER SIX

TOWARD A NONFOUNDATIONAL THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

Sociologist Peter Berger has characterized neo-orthodox theology as "the reaffirmation of the objective authority of a religious tradition after a period during which that authority had been relativized and weakened."[1] Modern theology had subjected the Bible's authority to criteria such as the standards of historical investigation. With theologians like Barth (whom Berger regarded as the most important example of neo-orthodoxy), "[o]nce more theology returns to its source and derives all its propositions from the revelation, the 'Word of God,' assumed to be given there."[2] To be sure, Barth held material positions that were not only different from those of the Reformers, but which the earlier theologians very likely would have opposed. Like the Reformers, however, the priority of the Bible was a central presupposition in his theology.

What Berger said of neo-orthodox theology may also be said of postliberal theology. This is especially true for Barth, whose theology anticipated and influenced those who are more properly called "postliberals." Theologians such as George Lindbeck seek to affirm

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[1]Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979), 79.

[2]Ibid., 80.

once again the authority of the Bible after its authority had been relativized and weakened even further.

This reaffirmation has led postliberals to seek help from premodern theology in overcoming problems raised by modern approaches to theology. William Placher looked to Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin for help in diagnosing and righting modern theology's faulty thinking about God.[3] Lutheran theologian Ronald Thiemann showed how theology after the Enlightenment had failed in its many attempts to rethink the doctrine of revelation. Instead of rejecting the doctrine outright, however, he returned to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession for "a helpful orientation . . . to reconceptualize the doctrine of revelation."[4] Bruce Marshall, in his defense of George Lindbeck's discussion of truth in *The Nature of Doctrine*, argued that the postliberal's conception had been anticipated by several centuries in the theology of Thomas Aquinas, a finding with which Lindbeck wholeheartedly agreed.[5]

Therefore, even though some of its positions may be inadequate or wrong, the postliberal reaffirmation may be expected to have much to offer those who still hold to premodern commitments and approaches to theology. Just as postliberals believe theology should learn from premodern approaches, so I am convinced that a confessional approach might learn from postliberal theology. This is what I shall attempt here. In these

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[3]William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996).

[4]Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 96.

[5]Bruce D. Marshall, "Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian" *The Thomist* 53 (1989): 353-402; George Lindbeck, "Response to Bruce Marshall," *The Thomist* 53 (1989): 403-406.

closing chapters I shall try to assess and appropriate the postliberal approaches of Karl

Barth, George Lindbeck, Paul Griffiths, and J. A. DiNoia for use by the particular

confessional tradition of which I am a part, namely, the Lutheran tradition.[6] This

appropriation is something like the postliberal project in reverse. Postliberals try to

recover premodern, traditional practice and theology and bring them into use in a

pluralized, postmodern context. I shall try, however, to *appropriate* the concerns and

insights of postliberal approaches to make an already-given traditional approach to

theology better able to address issues raised by the contemporary situation of religious

plurality.

This attempt will be limited in scope. It will focus on key topics and concerns raised

either by the postliberal approach or the field of the theology of religions itself. This

chapter will consider questions related to *nonfoundationalism*.

Nonfoundational Approaches to Theology—Present and Past

I have characterized the postliberal approach to theology as *nonfoundational* and

descriptive.[7] The proposals examined in this study share these characteristics. They are

critical of modern theology for its attempts to justify or correct Christian claims,

teachings, and practices on grounds that lie outside the Christian religion itself. Instead,

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[6]By "Lutheran tradition," I mean one which adheres to the Apostles', Niceno-Constantinopolitan, and Athanasian Creeds and the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, i.e., the Book of Concord. Among other things, this implies a "high" view of Scripture and a firm commitment to classical dogmas on the Trinity and Christ. See also James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), 19-20. This is a confessional commitment in a strict sense, and for this reason, I shall refer to the Lutheran Confessions as accepted and normative doctrinal expressions for the Lutheran community.

[7]See above, pp. 16-25.

they call for a nonfoundational theology that *describes* Christian thinking, speech, and action in specifically Christian terms.

In both its nonfoundational and descriptive aspects, postliberal theology converges with the theology of the Lutheran Confessions.[8] The theology of the Confessions is nonfoundational in that it bases and tests doctrine according to the Scriptures alone.[9] There is no appeal to a second source for doctrine or a second set of criteria, nor is there any attempt to justify or test doctrine and practice on grounds that are universally accessible or self-evident.[10]

The nonfoundational character of the Lutheran Confessions shows especially where features or appeals to nature might seem appropriate. This happens in the Apology's discussion of marriage (Ap XXIII). Here the Apology recognizes an unchanging right to enter into marriage based on a natural desire of one sex for the other.[11] This shows that human decisions such as the Roman teachings on celibacy cannot do away with marriage

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[8]I shall use the following abbreviations for the Lutheran confessional documents: AC—Augsburg Confession; Ap--Apology of the Augsburg Confession; SA--Smalcald Articles; SC--Small Catechism; LC--Large Catechism; FC Epit--Epitome of the Formula of Concord; FC SD--Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord.

[9]In its preface, the Augsburg Confession asserts that its faith is based on the Scriptures (AC Preface 8), while in its conclusion it offers to explain further on the same scriptural basis (AC Conclusion 7). The Smalcald Articles assert that the Word of God alone establishes articles of faith (SA II, II, 15). The Epitome of the Formula of Concord states that the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm for teachings and teachers, and that all other writings should be subordinated to them, being received as no more than witnesses to the way the prophetic and apostolic teachings were preserved (FC Epit 1-2).

[10]Other documents, including the ecumenical symbols and the earlier accepted Lutheran confessional documents, were accepted as "the unanimous declaration of [the Christian] faith" (FC Epit 6), and so all doctrines should conform to them. But an absolute distinction was maintained, with the Scriptures reamining the only judge, rule, and norm for doctrine (FC Epit 7).

[11]What the Apology calls "natural love"—στοργὴν φυσικήν.

(Ap XXIII, 7, 12-13). But marriage itself is recognized as a divine ordinance not because of visible evidence but because Scripture teaches it (Genesis 1; Ap XXIII, 7). In the same way, since the Fall into sin, there is also lust, and control of lust is a reason for marriage. Nevertheless, it is on basis of Scripture that marriage is known to be a command of God (Ap XXIII, 17).

The theology of the Confessions also often involves the kind of *descriptive* method that postliberals advocate. In the Confessions, the discussion often centers on matters of Christian language and practice. Here the task is to discern what is proper to the doctrinal "logic" or "grammar" of the Christian faith. The Lutheran criticism is that an objectionable teaching or practice does not cohere with other beliefs, while the Lutheran defense is that its controverted position makes better, fuller sense of Biblical teaching. This is especially prominent in the Apology and the Formula of Concord.

It might be said that the theology of the Confessions had the luxury of relative isolation from the challenges of secularization and competition from other religions that confront Christians of the late twentieth century. A specifically *post*-liberal reflection may be helpful in answering such criticisms. It may also be helpful in understanding the present situation more clearly.

Questions of Truth

Among the most frequent criticisms of the postliberal approach are those concerning its conceptions of truth and truth claims. One criticism is that postliberal focus on specifically Christian authority and sources does not permit it to make claims and

judgments about those who do not recognize this authority. Another criticism is that its approach to questions of truth leave questions of reference open; that is, its approach is non-referential or non-realist.

Religious Plurality and Christian Truth

A major criticism of premodern approaches to theology is that the priority they give to the Christian Scriptures and community does not allow them to make meaningful claims to truth to those outside the community. Such would obviously include members of non-Christian religious communities. Especially worrisome are claims that locate truth and salvation in Jesus Christ based solely on the Christian Scriptures.[12] For example, Stanley Samartha, an Indian theologian and leading proponent of pluralism, worries about these things. Like many pluralists, he argues that both historical circumstances and theological demands call for an examination of all exclusivist claims.[13] He likens such claims to stones thrown into a stream: they make a splash, then sink without making any difference to the waters flowing past. The implications for Christian claims based on the Scriptures are clear:

> Very often, claims for the "normativeness" of Christ are based on the authority of the Bible. Exclusive texts are hurled back and forth as if just by uttering texts from

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[12]E.g., Jesus' claim in John 14:6: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"; the apostolic claim: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"; and the Church's confession: "Whoever would be saved shall, above all else, hold the catholic faith. Unless every person without exception holds this faith whole and undefiled, he will without doubt perish eternally" (Athanasian Creed).

[13]Stanley J. Samartha, "The Cross and the Rainbow: Christ in a Multireligious Culture," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 69.

scriptures the problem is settled. The authority of the Bible is indeed important for Christians. In the multireligious situations, where there are other scriptures whose authority is accepted by neighbors of other religious traditions, how can the claims based on one particular scripture become the norm, or authority for all?[14]

Samartha believes that it is impossible. For this reason, however, he believes not simply that appeals to the Bible (or the scriptures of other religious communities) should stop, but that claims that have their final justification on these authorities should also come to an end. In other words, his concern is not simply with the manner of argument (based on the Scriptures) but with the basis (the Scriptures themselves) upon which arguments are mounted in the first place.

But even theologians who hold traditional, particularistic claims about salvation have argued that it is necessary to step outside of purely Christian considerations and make the case for Christian superiority on more generally accessible grounds. For instance, evangelical mission theologian Harold A. Netland has argued that Christians need to appeal to neutral criteria in evaluating other religions. To overcome the assumption that negative evaluations of other religious communities are basically products of a limited and subjective perspective and therefore nonbinding, Netland argues that it is necssary to appeal to objective, nonarbitrary criteria for evaluating religious traditions. The first part of his argument is to show that there are indeed such criteria. To do this, he contends that if cognitive relativism, which holds that truth, knowledge, and norms for rationality are relative to particular contexts, is unacceptable on epistemological grounds, then it must be

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[14]Ibid., 78.

that there are context-invariant criteria for judgment.[15] Thus he tries to identify some,

such as basic logical principles (e.g., noncontradiction), consistency with other fields of

knowledge, and moral grounds.[16] From these he develops definitions and propositions

which he believes are both context-neutral and justify acceptance of the Christian faith as

true "because it is the only worldview that satisfies the requirements of all the above."[17]

Netland's approach is self-consciously foundationalist. It challenges premodern

approaches to show that claims justified from the perspective of its own community can be

meaningfully made across community boundaries. The same challenge, however, also has

been issued to the postliberal approach. Postliberals refuse to justify and test their claims

on grounds that are external to the community. A key worry about the postliberal

approach is that it leads to relativism and fideism. According to some theologians,

nonfoundationalism means that the postliberal position does not allow for claims to be

made that can apply to those outside the community, nor does it permit judgments to be

made on matters outside the boundaries of its community.[18] As discussed already, this has

been a major concern about Barth. Alan Race, to cite just another example, sees Barth's

exclusive concentration of revelation in Jesus Christ as making belief to be a purely

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[15]Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 151-180.

[16]Ibid., 180-195.

[17]Ibid., 193.

[18]For the discussion in this section I am indebted to William Placher's discussions in "Revisionist and Postliberal Theologies and the Public Character of Theology" (*The Thomist* 49 [1985]: 392-416) and in *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* ([Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989], 154-170), and to John Thiel's discussion in *Nonfoundationalism* ([Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1994], 79-108, especially 97-103.

arbitrary judgment. The result is that Barth has "so isolated theological language that it is impossible to know whether or not what he believes is credible at all."[19] The same has been said about Lindbeck. David Tracy, while recognizing that Lindbeck's approach has an "admirable desire to avoid relativism and fideism," nonetheless cannot escape these charges:

> [H]ow can theologians assess the truth-claims of Lindbeck's grammatically analyzed traditions? Professor Lindbeck is fully aware of this set of problems and tries many ways to meet it . . . . Even those who agree that a "purely neutral" theory of rationality is never "purely neutral" and who agree that skill, practice, etc., are crucial ingredients in any attempts to assess rationally all theological claims will remain unpersuaded that Professor Lindbeck's "epistemological realism" is other than relativism with a new name or that his "cultural-linguistic" grammatical model for theology is other than confessionalism with occasional "ad hoc" apologetic skirmishes.[20]

Let us put aside for a moment the question of whether such concern is justified and note that reasons for such a concern may be found in the four examples cited here. Barth's evaluation of religion explicitly rejects as untheological any grounding of concepts, including the concept of religion, that is independent of internal Christian considerations. Instead, he argues that the Christian interpretation of religion must be entirely theological. Griffiths argues that central and highly specific Christian dogmas should be constitutive for the Christian understanding of interreligious encounters. DiNoia emphasizes that different religions have different aims and so promote different patterns of life to attain their respective aims. The clearest reasons for concern are likely

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[19]Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press Ltd; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1993), 28.

[20]David Tracy, "Lindbeck's New Program for Theology: A Reflection," *The Thomist* 49 (1985): 470, 471-472.

over Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model, because, more than the other proposals, it suggests that religions are not only distinct but self-contained and hermetic. In comparing religions to natural languages and different religious communities to different groups of language speakers, it might seem to make as little sense to ask whether a given religion were *more true* than another as it would to ask, for instance, whether French were more true than Chinese. Would not a cultural-linguistic understanding of religion lead to the conclusion that there is a similar inability to speak about universally applicable truths, such as the triune God alone is the agent of the creation of all things and redemption of all humankind? And if so, then does it not come into conflict with basic Christian tenets? If these questions can be answered satisfactorily, then the same worries about the other proposals—postliberal and premodern alike—also should be relieved.

Let us answer the second question first: this inability would indeed mean that the cultural-linguistic model does conflict with a basic tenet not only of Christianity but of other religions as well. Therefore, the key question is the first: does a cultural-linguistic understanding necessarily lead to an inability to speak about universally applicable truth?

It may be best to begin by recalling that Lindbeck himself has dealt with this question: "One language or culture is not generally thought of as 'truer' than another, much less unsurpassable, and yet that is what some religions profess to be. . . . Can the possible truth of one or another of these assertions of unsurpassibility be admitted; or, more precisely, what could such an assertion mean?"[21] His answer to the first question was yes: the cultural-linguistic model could accomodate assertions of unsurpassibility. His answer to

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[21]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 46.

the second question explained the nature of this unsurpassibility: one or another religion could be unsurpassed in a *categorical* sense. This would not guarantee that the actual truth claims made by the community were themselves true, but it would mean that a given religion could be unsurpassed in the sense that it alone provided the categories by which meaningful truth claims could even be made. Lindbeck, however, recognized that the actual speech and practice of religious communities demanded that his model also accomodate propositional claims to truth, which he then went on to show.

Does this, however, necessarily satisfy critics of postliberal and premodern theology? It would seem not. If so, then where does the problem lie? It does not lie with claims of universal scope; that is, the objection is not that claims of universal scope are being eliminated either by premodern or postliberal theology. The problem lies with the apparent lack of universal justification for these claims. The critics of postliberal and premodern theology seek not only to be able to make claim to truth on a universal scale, but also to provide *justification* of such claims on a universal scale.

A crucial point of postliberal nonfoundationalism, however, is to say that the justification of these claims (and other theological activity as well) is properly based on the grounds and criteria recognized as belonging to the community, and not set by external concerns and considerations, such as those of philosophy or politics. As John Thiel puts it, the fear of postliberal theology's critics is that its restriction of theology to confessional norms of content and logic "leads inescapably to an interpretive exclusivity that limits the claims of Christianity to relative, parochial, and even isolated contexts."[22] This fear,

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[22]Ibid., 102.

however, involves a confusion of the *nature* of theological claims with their *scope*. The postliberal argument, that Christian theology should give priority "in its logic to the meaningful context of Christian belief, does not entail the restriction of reasoning to that context."[23]

What Samartha and Netland exhibit is a tendency that philosopher Richard Bernstein has called "the Cartesian anxiety." It reduces the question of the justification of truth claims to an either/or situation: "*Either* there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, *or* we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos."[24] So it is in interreligious encounters. Either one can make claims that can be shown to be justified apart from any specific religious considerations and context, or one's claims will be considered arbitrary.

Postliberals, however, hold that *justification* of these claims does not depend on the ability to provide warrants on a universal basis. Instead, they argue that one cannot do this, because "the manner in which one commits oneself to [such a] belief, or reasons from it, or gathers evidence for its cogency, or makes judgments about its significance cannot be universal, since these activities are practices tied to particular religious frameworks from which they draw their meanings."[25] They doubt that there is any universal interpretive framework in which to translate the different religious schemes and thus provide a comprehensive basis for discussion and judgment. But does this mean that *no*

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[23]John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1994), 98.

[24]Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 18.

[25]Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism*, 102.

discussion and judgment can take place? Postliberals answer no; discussion is still possible, but it is necessary to seek places where categories overlap and concepts are similar. Moreover, it is not necessary for Christians to dispose of universal claims for which they can find no universal justification. For example, William Placher says that he knows of no way to defend the Christian faith in terms that all rational human beings would be forced to accept. All arguments must be made in the context of some tradition, and the conversation needs to start with the rules and assumptions held in common by the conversation partners. On the other hand, Placher says: "But I also believe that the God in whom Christians believe exists and loves regardless of whether any human tradition acknowledges that God."[26] He finds no reason to do away with this universal truth, just because it is impossible *a priori* to show this to all people.

With this in mind, we can turn back to Lindbeck. He correlated the cultural-linguistic model with an intratextual method of theology, in which meaning is constituted by uses. So, the concept of God is arrived at from the concept developed in the Scriptures and how that concept is used in the Christian community. One learns how to use the term "God" as Christians understand it is *justified*, and how to use it to understand reality and give shape to life. But intratextuality as Lindbeck defined it also means that a religion assumes into itself all reality: it describes all reality as within its scope. In this way, we can see that Lindbeck's understanding of the cultural-linguistic model is capable of universally applicable claims.

If, however, justification of truth claims is limited to particular spheres of

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[26]Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 123.

understanding, to particular contexts, does this not effectively mean a condition of

relativism between contexts? The answer is no. Postliberals doubt that there are context-

neutral standpoints from which different claims can be sorted out and evaluated. But this

condition rules out neither understanding nor evaluating alien claims; neither does it rule

out making claims to apply to another community. In properly understanding the beliefs

or practices of another religious community, or in properly making one's own beliefs and

practices understood, one will have to know the context in which such beliefs or practices

are made. This will almost certainly require much effort, just as learning a second

language does, but there is nothing that in principle rules out understanding. In evaluating

alien claims or in arguing for one's own claims, the postliberal point is that there is no

Archimedean point—no independent evaluative standpoint—and that every evaluation and

argument thus must be made within a certain context.

Realism

A second question of truth deals with cognitive realism. Postliberal theology has been

charged often with antirealism. I should state at once, however, that although postliberal

theology at large has been criticized, the charge only applies to some. But among them

are some of postliberalism's leading figures, including Hans Frei (with whom we are not

dealing) and George Lindbeck (with whom we are).[27] Colman O'Neill charges Lindbeck

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[27]For a fuller discussion of Lindbeck and charges of antirealism, see Jeffrey Hensley, "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealists? Reexamining the Metaphysics of Lindbeck's Postliberal Theology," in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds. *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 69-80; and Marshall, "Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian," 353-402.

with a "novel definition of 'ontological' truth."[28] As O'Neill understands it, Lindbeck sees

the ontological or propositional truth of an utterance depending upon the subjective

disposition of the utterer. This, however, is contrary to the traditional understanding of

ontological truth, in which the truth of an utterance does not rely on the attitude or actions

of the one speaking. Alister McGrath sees Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model as

effectively equating the concept of "truth" to "internal consistency."[29] Similarly, Francis

Watson finds that, since for Lindbeck "religions correspond to different languages and

cultures," truth is purely intrasystematic, "that is, dependent on the grammatical rules for

correct and incorrect utterance that happen to be in force in a given locality."[30] Thus he

concludes that his efforts amount to a "consistent and almost obsessive dismantling of the

various ramifications of a correspondence theory of truth . . . typical of postmodern

theorizing. It induces a sense of mild euphoria as apparently stable structures prove to be

ungrounded, composed of nothing more substantial than words, as if suspended in the

air."[31]

These criticisms are misplaced. What Lindbeck meant by "ontological truth" is not at

all novel: "that truth of correspondence to reality which, according to epistemological

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[28]Colman O'Neill, "The Rule Theory of Doctrine and Propositional Truth," *The Thomist* 49 (1985): 431.

[29]Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 151, 153.

[30]Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 134.

[31]Ibid. Other examples are adduced in Hensley, "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealists," 71-72.

realists, is attributable to first-order propositions."[32] What concerned Lindbeck, and what

many of his critics have failed to understand, is that his concern is with the conditions

under which an utterance is rightly uttered. In other words, Lindbeck's concern is not

with *truth* but with *justification*. It is in order to clarify the conditions under which one is

justified in uttering an ontologically true statement that Lindbeck introduces the notion of

intrasystematic truth, not, as some have supposed, to replace the usual notion of

ontological truth. As Bruce Marshall explains:

> The point of introducing the notion of intrasystematic truth is not, as [Colman] O'Neill
> supposes, to state the basic *meaning* of the term "true" in the religious domain. That
> has already been accomplished in Lindbeck's discussion of ontological truth as
> correspondence to reality. The point is rather to clarify one of the essential *criteria* of
> truth in the religious domain. . . . Thus the issue here is not whether there are
> (ontologically) true propositions, but what the conditions are under which one can
> state a sentence which is a true proposition.[33]

Nonetheless, while these criticisms are misplaced, there is truth in the charge itself.

While Lindbeck acknowledges as important the matter of a theological statement's

reference to reality, he argues that it is limited to the point of agnosticism. Adopting

Aquinas' theory of analogy, he insists that what can rightly be attributed to God is indeed

true, but that it lies beyond our knowing what it means. Moreover, he extends the notion

of analogical "signification" beyond attributes of God in himself (e.g., the being and

goodness of God) to acts of God (e.g., the resurrection of Jesus). In this view, the point

of truth claims is not to know things about God (e.g., what it means that he is good) or

about things he has done (e.g., raising Jesus from the dead). Rather, it is that they provide

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[32]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 64.

[33]Marshall, "Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian," 364.

the warrants for certain patterns of behavior.[34] Here charges of antirealism have merit

against Lindbeck. His own model does not demand this limited notion of reference, and it

runs against both the literal sense and traditional understanding of many theological

statements.

What, then, is the underlying reason for this position? It is his desire to affirm

doctrinal agreement without compromise on doctrinal formulations. If cognitive content

of doctrine were an issue, then compromise would be necessary for agreement. But, at

least in Lindbeck's experience, compromise has not been necessary. He takes this to mean

that the cognitive content is slight enough not to require agreement in this sense. What is

necessary is agreement in *function*: in the ways different doctrinal formulations work in

the lives of believers and communities of believers.

Religious Experience and Religious Plurality

While there is much variety among the inclusivist and pluralist proposals in the

theology of religions, a common trait is the assumption that different religions should be

understood as different responses to the same ultimate reality. From this viewpoint, the

basic difference between these inclusivists and pluralists is that inclusivists relativize non-

Christian religions to the Christian faith, while pluralists relativize all religions to a

religious conception constructed independently of any particular tradition or community.

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[34]The crucial difference between postliberals lies right here. For some, and they include the most prominent—Lindbeck, Frei, as well as Kathryn Tanner—the point of theological language is not to know; they are in the sense "agnostic." Rather, such language authorizes certain ways of life. For others such as Griffiths and DiNoia, the point of theological language is in part to refer to something, and that this reference is meaningful, that it corresponds in some way to ordinary sense experience.

This "experiential-expressivism," as Lindbeck calls it, is the target of postliberal criticism.

One criticism is that experiential-expressivism does not seem plausible. The diversity

of religious referents, texts, teachings, and practices is so great that it is impossible to

specify this reality concretely. Paul Knitter, a leading pluralist, confirmed the pointedness

of this criticism when he acknowledged that it shows that pluralists can "too quickly

presuppose or describe the common ground that establishes unity among religions" and

"too easily draw up common guidelines for dialogue among religions."[35]

Another criticism has to do with the uniqueness of religious communities. The issue of

Christian uniqueness involves the self-understanding of the Christian community with

respect to other religious communities. Understandably, it is at the heart of the current

intra-Christian debate over the theology of religions.[36] The issue is not *whether*

Christianity is unique, but *what is the nature of its uniqueness*. As John Hick and Paul

Knitter, the editors of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, acknowledge: "Christianity, of

course, is unique in the precise and literal sense in which every religious tradition is

unique—namely that there is only one of it and that there is therefore nothing else exactly

like it."[37] The basic question is whether there is a "unique definiteness, absoluteness,

normativeness, superiority to Christianity in comparison with other religions in the

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[35]Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*, preface by Hans Küng (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 44.

[36]The very titles of some leading books in the field illustrates: *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* and *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* (to which both DiNoia and Griffiths contributed); Paul F. Knitter's *No Other Name? (A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, American Society of Missiology Series, No. 7 [Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985]) and Carl E. Braaten's *No Other Gospel! (Christianity among the World's Religions* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992]).

[37]*The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, vii.

world."[38] This question demarcates the line between exclusivism and inclusivism on one side—both of which, while differing in many respects, maintain the uniqueness of Christ for ultimate salvation—and pluralism on the other, which is willing to recognize the independent validity of other religions for salvation.

The Lutheran position maintains a strong sense of Christian uniqueness. The Athanasian Creed connects salvation with affirmations about the Trinity and about the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is necessary for salvation to worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God, without confusing the persons or dividing the substance. It is also necessary for salvation to believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is at once God and man, and yet not two Christs but one; and that he suffered for our salvation and now is raised from the dead, ascended into heaven, and will return to judge the living and the dead. The specifically Lutheran symbols confess their agreement with this and other ecumenical symbols.[39] In other ways, too, the Confessions uphold Christian uniqueness regarding salvation and truth in very strong terms. The understanding of the First Commandment rules all other things, whether of other religions or some other invention, to which a person should trust and depend on.[40] In sin, the First Commandment proves impossible to fulfill, and yet the Creed reveals the redeemer from sin, death, and the devil, namely, Jesus Christ, upon whom "all our salvation and blessedness depends" (LC II, 33). To be sure, the Confessions affirm that the Law of God is known in the

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[38]Ibid.

[39]See the Preface of the Book of Concord; Smalcald Articles (SA), I; FC Epit Rule and Norm, 4; FC SD Rule and Norm, 4.

[40]See especially LC I, 1-23.

consciences of all humankind, and even in the state of sin there remains some knowledge about God (FC SD II, 9). Nevertheless, it is only through knowledge of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit to bring that knowledge that one can know God the Father as full of favor and grace (LC II, 64-65).[41]

Lutheran theology finds both convergence with and lessons from postliberals in their stress on Christian uniqueness. On this point, the usual portrait of Barth as sharply exclusivistic is accurate.[42] His comparison of Christianity with Pure Land Buddhism is instructive. Both may be understood as religions of grace. Even if their conceptions of grace were identical (which, as Barth points out, they in fact are not), Christianity is unique not because of any concept, even grace, with which it shares with this school of Buddhism. Rather, its uniqueness lies solely in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

The later postliberals take an approach different from Barth as well as from many other current proposals. They argue for uniqueness on what I would call *formal* rather than *substantive* grounds. In other words, they develop their positions on uniqueness by looking to characteristics of religions rather than to any particular issue (e.g., Christ or ultimate salvation). Lindbeck does this with his advocacy of a cultural-linguistic model of religion. Different religions are viewed like different languages in that they are like interpretive frameworks that allow one to make truth claims and open particular possibilities for experiences. This permits one to understand that a religion is unique in a

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[41]The issue of the knowledge of God is pursued further in the next chapter.

[42]However, as I argued in chapter two, in other important respects the usual portraits of Barth are inaccurate and better understood from a postliberal perspective.

very strong sense, that does not only see religions as unique but permits *categorical* claims to unsurpassibility. Griffiths argues for Christian uniqueness by way of a careful analysis of religious doctrine. This leads him to conclude that only for detailed and pressing reasons, none of which have been supplied, should Christians consider abandoning doctrines of a highly particular nature and fully universal scope—doctrines such as the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas. This uniqueness would include both universalistic and particularistic dimensions integral to Christian faith and life. Further, far from following the pluralist revision of their body of doctrines, Christians should make their central doctrines basic to the development of their approach to interreligious encounters. DiNoia takes a parallel route, stressing that the aims of different religions are unique, as are the patterns of life, articulated in their bodies of doctrines. In this view, the Christian aim for fellowship with the Trinity and the understanding and way of life that leads one to enjoy it are distinct from the Buddhist aim of Nirvana and the understanding and way of life fostered by Buddhists for achieving it.

The more important postliberal contribution, however, lies with its *arguments* for Christian uniqueness. The arguments of Lindbeck, Griffiths, and DiNoia all can be readily adapted for use by Lutheran theology. The argument of Griffiths is the most detailed and defends most clearly the need and right of Christian theology to retain and put to use its central doctrines. For this reason his is the most attractive. The fact that all three arguments derive from reflections upon features of different religious communities rather from specifically Christian theological considerations is not an obstacle. They are not used to establish the possibility of Christian uniqueness, but rather to make clear that the

presumption of Christian uniqueness is plausible in the situation of religious plurality. All three do this effectively, especially in undermining the presumption of pluralists that a strong notion of Christian uniqueness is untenable.

Related to its defense of Christian uniqueness is the postliberal recognition of the *particularity of all religions*. Just as postliberals insist on the uniqueness of Christianity, so they also stress that each religious community be understood as unique. Acknowledging Christian uniqueness says that other religions are *different*. Acknowledging religious particularity says that other religions are *diverse*. William Placher notes that many theologians and philosophers seem reluctant to accept a genuine religious plurality, where there are different and conflicting religions and no tradition- or community-neutral standpoint from which to evaluate them.[43] To accommodate this reluctance, they have typically adopted one of two basic strategies.[44] One move is to see other religions as versions of one's own. This is the basic strategy of inclusivism. The other move develops an independent standpoint from which one supposedly can evaluate all religions. This is the basic strategy of pluralism.[45]

The later postliberal approaches—Lindbeck, Griffiths, and DiNoia—grant that religions are different and come into opposition and conflict.[46] They recognize not only a

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[43]Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 16-17, 144.

[44]Placher admits that this twofold distinction is really an oversimplification, but useful at least for illustrating the basic issues, which is all that I intend here (ibid., 144).

[45]The former is exemplified by the anonymous Christian theory of Karl Rahner; the latter by the pluralistic hypothesis of John Hick. For summaries of the positions of Rahner and Hick, see above, pp. 4-5.

difference between Christianity and other religions and a corresponding uniqueness to

Christianity, but that different religions are themselves unique. Lindbeck makes the point

by modelling religions after languages and cultures, with each with unique categories,

concepts, and grammar. Griffiths does so by arguing that different religions make

different *semantic* claims with different *syntax*. DiNoia makes the point by stressing that

different religions point at different aims and foster unique patterns of life to attain them.

From this standpoint, both inclusivists and pluralists effectively deny *religious*

plurality. Superficially, of course, inclusivists and pluralists affirm the plurality of

religions, but in their actual treatment of the issue, they do not. By supposing that non-

Christian religions are fulfilled or superseded by Christianity, an inclusivist proposal like

the anonymous Christian theory refuses from the outset to acknowledge religious plurality

by regarding non-Christian religions as incomplete or imperfect versions of Christianity.

By suggesting that all religions are properly understood as incomplete and limited

responses to a single ineffable ultimate reality, a proposal like the pluralistic hypothesis

sees Christian and non-Christian religions alike as versions of a single basic religious

movement, namely, the transformation from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness. By

exposing their inability even to recognize genuine plurality, postliberals effectively

undermine the plausibility of both these inclusivist and pluralist proposals.

The postliberal view also undermines perhaps the most frequent justification for

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[46]Karl Barth, I should note at once, does not do this. The reason is that his argument in §17 of *Church Dogmatics* is not directed toward dealing with a situation of religious plurality, as it would be for the later postliberals, but with the place of the concept of religion in Christian theology. This can be seen not only from the section itself, but its position within *Church Dogmatics*, where it is part of Barth's discussion of revelation.

inclusivism and pluralism, which is the need to respect other religions.[47] As especially

DiNoia notes, both inclusivists and pluralists are concerned about particularistic or

exclusivistic claims, e.g., claims that there is only one way of salvation for humankind, or

that there is only one true ultimate reality. Their concern is not that such views are self-

evidently false or meaningless, but that they may cause offense. This is a basic reason

Christian inclusivists and pluralists seek to account the validity of non-Christian religions

toward salvation. This move itself, as we have just noted, effectively denies religious

plurality, and so actually *works against* showing respect to other religions.

This accent constitutes an even more important contribution than its stance and

arguments for Christian uniqueness. Indeed, it relativizes the whole issue of Christian

uniqueness, because it shows the matter of uniqueness, no matter how conceived, to be

only one aspect in Christian theological reflection about other religions. A proper

understanding of the relationship of Christianity to other religions involves more than

ascertaining whether and how Christianity is unique among the religions of the world. It

also involves reflection on the relationship between Christianity and *each* of the religions

of the world. The contribution of the postliberal approach is to recognize and argue that

each religious community is likely to be unique as well.

As their arguments show, much of the field of the theology of religions has this lesson

to learn from the postliberals, and Lutherans should be among them. It is one thing—an

important thing, to be sure—to defend Christian uniqueness. But this issue does not

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[47]In this regard, postliberals share the basic concern of politically-oriented theologies of religions such as proposed by John Milbank. See above, pp. 9-10.

exhaust the topic. Given the field's focus on the topic of salvation for non-Christians and through their religions, it is understandable that religious particularity has been overlooked. Thus the postliberal outlook provides a much-needed corrective.

One reason for adopting this outlook is simply that it gives others respect by taking them and their religious communities seriously. Another reason is that the situation of religious plurality means religious encounters, perhaps competition. Part of the task of a theology of religions should be to equip Christian communities in effectively approaching and interacting with members of other religious communities. As just pointed out, incluvisism and pluralism can tend to deny plurality. Moreover, a strong accent on Christian *uniqueness* can lead to overlooking specific differences. The postliberal recognition of religious particularity counters both tendencies and instead encourages theology to approach its encounters with non-Christian religious communities on an individual basis, and to proceed in an *ad hoc* manner.

Learning from Other Religions

In so far as theology is a human activity, the product of human reflection, it may be possible to learn something from other areas of human activity. Christian exegetes have long benefitted from the findings, categories, and concepts of grammarians and philosophers. It may be possible also to benefit from the findings, categories, and concepts of others engaged in rational reflection about matters such as the nature of ultimate reality and the purpose of human existence, that is to say, from other religious communities. There is nothing intrinsically alien about human reason for theological

purposes, although there is nothing intrinsically fitting about it either.

This does not mean Christians could or should look to non-Christian truths as criteria

against which to test Christian claims. As postliberals would urge, the proper criteria for

the Christian community to apply in testing alien claims are Christian ones. This

restriction might seem to rule out a great deal that could be learned from another religious

community. However, I can see at least two general ways in which it might be possible to

learn from another religious community.

One way that Christians can learn from another religious community is to use their

stories, discourses, and doctrines to help understand a Christian situation. For instance,

some postliberals are criticized for appearing to bypass questions of reference.[48] For those

like Stanley Hauerwas, the truth of Biblical narratives seems to lie not in whom and what

they refer to but in the kind of people who are formed by the story.[49] In assessing this

approach, Christians might learn from Ramanuja, a Hindu who lived in the eleventh and

twelfth centuries:

> The assertion again that a statement referring to some accomplished thing gratifies
> men merely by imparting a knowledge of the thing, without being a means of
> knowledge with regard to its real existence—so that it would be comparable to the
> tales we tell to children or sick people—can in no way be upheld. When it is
> ascertained that a thing has no real existence, the mere knowledge or idea of the thing
> does not gratify. The pleasure which stories give to children and sick people is due to
> the fact that they erroneously believe them to be true; if they were to find out that the
> matter present to their thought is untrue their pleasure would come to an end that very

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[48]So argues William Placher in *Unapologetic Theology*, 163-164, about David Kelsey and Stanley Hauerwas. My illustration should be understood as hypothetical. For more on hypothetical cases of this kind, see William A. Christian, Sr., *Doctrines of Religious Communities: A Philosophical Study* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 4.

[49]Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 55. Cf. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 164.

moment. And thus in the case of the texts of the Upanishads also. If we thought that these texts do not mean to intimate the real existence of Brahman, the mere idea of Brahman to which they give rise would not satisfy us in any way.

The conclusion therefore is that texts such as "That from whence these beings are born" etc. do convey valid instruction as to the existence of Brahman, i.e., that being which is the sole cause of the world, is free from all shadow of imperfection, comprises within itself all auspicious qualities, such as omniscience and so on, and is of the nature of supreme bliss.[50]

This passage seems to suggest that Christians ask whether their Scriptures would also fail to "satisfy" readers if they did not actually refer to the realities they speak about. If this were so, one might be led to ask whether the Scriptures could be relied on to form their readers' lives, whether they referred to external realities or not. If they could not be so relied upon, then this form of argument might be used against views such as Hauerwas's. In turn, one might be led to seek other discussions of this issue in the Indian religions.

Christians might also learn from other religious communities how they might deal with those outside the community. For instance, as Griffiths pointed out, there has been a very long running exchange between Indian "theistic" religions and Buddhists over the existence of an ultimate divine being. As Christians today encounter Buddhists, it may be helpful to learn how they have been viewed by other Indian religions who have carried on apologetical and polemical exchanges with Buddhists. These exchanges, on the one hand, might help Christians understand Buddhist arguments against the endurance of the self. On the other hand, and perhaps more usefully, one might be able to appropriate some arguments in defending against Buddhist polemics.

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[50]*The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Ramanuga*, trans. George Thibaut (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), 199-200.

CHAPTER SEVEN

KNOWLEDGE, SALVATION, AND MISSION

The last chapter looked at implications of the postliberal approach particularly with

respect to a Lutheran theology of religions. We saw how the theology of the Lutheran

Confessions converged with the nonfoundational dimension of postliberal theology.

Based on this convergence, I discussed some applications and lessons that a Lutheran

theology of religions should draw from postliberals, and I considered some critical issues.

With its focus on doctrine and its advocacy of a "grammatical" method of theology,

however, the postliberal approach would seem to hold more specific implications for a

Lutheran theology of religions. The purpose of this chapter is to uncover some of them.

Such an appropriation is in line with the thrust of the postliberal approach. David

Tracy meant it as a criticism when he called George Lindbeck's theology in *The Nature of*

Doctrine "confessionalism" and likened it to Karl Barth's.[1] But the comparison with

Barth is apt and the characterization of confessionalism is accurate. Confessionalism in

the sense of thinking and working from within a particular context is unavoidable, say

postliberals, and needs to be acknowledged rather than denied. Paul Griffiths speaks also

for other postliberals when he says that to be confessional "is simply to be open about

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[1]David Tracy, "Lindbeck's New Program for Theology: A Reflection," *The Thomist* 49 (1985): 465, 470.

one's historical and religious locatedness, one's specificity, an openness that is essential

for serious theological work and indeed for serious intellectual work that is not in thrall to

the myth of the disembodied and unlocated scholarly intellect . . ."[2] Tracy's comments

speak more to his lack of comprehension about postliberal theology than any fault or

defect on the part of Lindbeck—or Barth or Griffiths.

The advance of postliberal theology lies with its reflection on the challenges of both

the contemporary situation and of the responses of modern theology. In biblical

hermeneutics Hans Frei has pointedly shown how both liberal and conservative exegetes

have made assumptions that have led to an "eclipse" of the category of narrative in the

Bible.[3] Whether or not one agrees with specific exegetical conclusions, his critique is

powerful and the direction in which he points hermeneutics, namely, to consider once

again narrative, is beneficial. Similarly, the postliberal approaches to the theology of

religions, on the one hand, bring an incisive critique against modern approaches and, on

the other hand, point theologians back toward their communities' bodies of doctrines for

considering the challenges of religious plurality. In particular, postliberals point

theologians toward the underlying "logic" or "grammar" of their doctrines. In this view,

the basic theological task is to uncover the rules which govern the thought, speech, and

action of the community and to make sure that thought, language, and action conform to

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[2] Paul J. Griffiths, "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 169.

[3] Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

these rules.[4]

In this chapter I shall begin by discussing briefly the postliberal understanding of rules as they pertain to theology. Next I shall look at the Lutheran Confessions in an attempt to discern some of its central rules and trace out some connections with other aspects of Lutheran teaching. Then we can put these to use in discussing some issues in the theology of religions.

Theology and Rules

In speaking about "theology" and "rules," confusion may easily arise. The rules discussed here is not like the Golden Rule of the Sermon on the Mount or the Silver Rule of Confucius. But since they are not this kind of rule, I should explain further what I mean.

Let us observe first that the crucial metaphor for postliberals is language. This is evident, for example, in central postliberal features like the notion of a *grammatical* method of theology; the concepts of *intra- and extra-textuality*; and the *cultural-linguistic* model of religion. The view of language is analogous to the view of philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Searle that "speaking a language is engaging in a rule-

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[4]Cf. Hans Frei's understanding of theology as an aspect of Christianity and a "religion-specific" task (*Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992], 2):

> Here Christian theology is first of all the first-order statements or proclamations made in the course of Christian practice and belief. But second . . . it is the Christian community's second-order appraisal of its own language and actions under a norm or norms internal to the community itself. This appraisal in turn has two aspects. The first is descriptive: an endeavor to articulate the "grammar," or "internal logic," of first-order Christian statements. The second is critical, an endeavor to judge any given articulation of Christian language for its success or failure in adhering to the acknowledged norm or norms governing Christian use of language.

governed form of behavior."[5] Searle observed that just as games like baseball, football, and chess are governed by rules, so also is speaking a language. In saying this, however, he did not mean simply that rules applied to the already-given activities of speaking or playing, but that some rules *constituted* these very activities.[6] Before one speaks, one must internalize certain rules about *how* to speak. These rules do not specify what actually is said, but without them, one does not actually speak. Accordingly, the task of characterizing language involves an uncovering of these usually implicit rules. The linguistic character of postliberal theology fits this understanding of language, and a similar notion of rules is evident. Lindbeck's proposal is the most explicit about this, where theology is a task that is like uncovering grammatical rules for a language, while doctrines in their strict sense are understood as the rules themselves. In their focus on doctrine and in their stress on the *regulative* function of doctrine, Barth, Griffiths, and DiNoia also share in this characteristic. For instance, in Griffiths, it shows where he maintains that the aspect of doctrine as community rules was perhaps the most basic dimension of all, from which the other dimensions flowed. Griffiths argues that religious doctrines have at least five important dimensions. Two turn out to be central in giving structure and meaning to the Christian life, including Christian engagements with non-

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[5]John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 16. See also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), §81-85.

[6]See especially Searle's distinction of regulative and constitutive rules: "As a start, we might say that regulative rules regulate antecedently or independently existing forms of behavior; for example, many rules of etiquette regulate inter-personal relationships which exist independently of the rules. But constitutive rules do not merely regulate, they create or define new forms of behavior. The rules of football or chess, for example, do not merely regulate playing football or chess, but as it were they create the very possibility of playing such games" (ibid. 33).

Christians. These are the *semantic* (function as cognitive truth claims) and *syntactical* (function as community rules) dimensions. He insists that both these dimensions of the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas were central factors for the Christian life, including occasions when it engages other religious communities. Barth, in fact, makes this move when he appropriated the classical Christological dogma not for its claims about the incarnation but as a rule for guiding theological reflection on religion and the religions.

We can gain further insight into this aspect of doctrines by observing that, in these two dimensions of doctrine, Griffiths's debt to philosopher William Christian is apparent. They correspond to the basic distinction that Christian finds in the doctrines of religious communities, namely, the distinction between *primary* and *governing* doctrines.[7] Primary doctrines comprise the different proposals a community might make that have to do with the setting of human life and the conduct of life in that setting. They include "proposals for belief about existents and the conditions of existence, proposals of courses of outward and inward action, and proposals of valuations of various features of the setting of human life and of human activities."[8] Governing doctrines, on the other hand, are principles and rules that a community works out to govern the formation and development of its body of doctrines.[9] To say, however, that they are principles and rules is not to say that they function *only* to "condition and regulate various sorts of decisions a community makes

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[7]William A. Christian, Sr., *Doctrines of Religious Communities: A Philosophical Study.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), especially 1-11, 219-231. Christian's analysis of doctrine has been important to the development of postliberal theology as a whole and influential to Lindbeck, Griffiths, and DiNoia.

[8]Ibid., 219. See also pp. 1-2.

[9]Ibid., 2.

about its body of doctrines. It would be better still to say that *they express a community's understanding of the structure of its body of doctrines.*"[10] A "rule" in the sense of the Golden Rule is a *primary* doctrine. It proposes a course of action. Other primary doctrines would include the Ten Commandments and the Gospel. A "rule" in the grammatical-theological sense, however, would be a *governing* doctrine.

Discerning the Logic of the Lutheran Confessions

Given this analysis, we can say that the postliberal strategy directs Lutherans to look toward their key *governing* doctrines in trying to think and speak properly about the questions raised by religious plurality.[11] What are these doctrines—these rules—for Lutherans? They are not hard to find. The Smalcald Articles state about Jesus Christ:

> The first and chief article is this: that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, "was put to death for our sins and raised again for our justification" (Romans 4). He alone "is the lamb of God who bears the sin of the world" (John 1). "God laid on him all our sin" (Isaiah 53). And "all have sinned and are justified without works by his grace through the redemption of Jesus Christ in his blood" (Romans 3) [SA II, I, 1-3].

The *governing* aspect of these doctrine-expressing sentences is that this doctrine about Christ and his redemptive activity is the *chief* doctrinal article (*Hauptartikel*). The meaning of "chief" is spelled out later in the article, where it is stated that nothing of this article can be given up or compromised. The same rule is articulated in the fourth article of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, where the doctrine of justification is called

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[10]Ibid., 11. Emphasis added.

[11]In this chapter, too, I shall use the following abbreviations for the Lutheran confessional documents: AC—Augsburg Confession; Ap—Apology of the Augsburg Confession; SA—Smalcald Articles; SC—Small Catechism; LC—Large Catechism; FC Epit—Epitome of the Formula of Concord; FC SD—Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord.

the "main doctrine of Christianity" (*praecipuus locus doctrinae christianae*, Ap IV, 2).

Another set of rules is closely related. They involve the distinction of Law and

Gospel. In the fourth article of the Apology, this distinction is drawn specifically to give

perspective to the importance of the controversy involved. The controversy does not

interest us here, but the distinction does:

> All Scripture should be divided into these two lessons: into the law and the promises
> (*in legem et promissiones*). In some places it presents the law; in other places it
> presents the promise of Christ, namely, when it promises that Christ is coming and
> promises remission of sins, justifiction, and eternal life, or when, in the gospels Christ,
> when he had appeared, promises remission of sins, justification, and eternal life. When
> we speak of law in this disputation we mean the lessons of the Decalogue, wherever
> they are taught in the Scriptures. About ceremonial and civil laws of Moses we are
> saying nothing for the present (Ap IV, 5-6).

Here again, we have some rules about doctrines. On the one hand, we learn that the

Gospel, the message about forgiveness for Christ's sake, stands in close connection with

the Law, and together they comprise the two main doctrines of the Scriptures. On the

other hand, we find that they are to be divided. The Apology, in the interest of refuting

the Roman Confutation, then pursues the kinds of righteousness that obtain from each.

The Large Catechism, however, briefly but illuminatingly amplifies on the differences

between Law and Gospel when it teaches that the commandments (Law) teach people

what to do but the Creed (Gospel) tells of what God does for and gives to people (LC II,

67).

These distinctions are still further amplified in the Formula of Concord. The Law is

described here as a divine doctrine that "reveals the righteous, unchanging will of God,

shows how man should be disposed in his nature, thoughts, words, and deeds so to be

pleasing and acceptable to God, and threatens those who transgress the Law with God's wrath and temporal and eternal punishment" (FC SD V, 17). Here we see that the Law has both content and function. The Formula speaks not only about what the Law says (tells what God expects of human creatures). It also speaks of the kinds of functions that the speaking of the Law may perform, namely, to threaten sinners. It is the same with the Gospel. The content of the Gospel is "that the Son of God, our Lord Christ, took upon himself and bore the curse of the Law and atoned and paid for all our sins, through whom alone we come again to the grace of God, obtain forgiveness of sins through faith, are set free from death and all the punishments of sin, and are saved eternally" (FC SD V, 20). Its content is Jesus Christ; its effect is to comfort; for this reason it is a "good and joyful message" (FC SD V, 21).

It is for reason of these *functions* that the Formula goes on to follow Romans 3 and Martin Luther and further define the Law in terms of the function (*officium*) of condemning sin and leading to a knowledge of sin (FC SD V, 17). The Law includes not only direct commands of God but conceivably could just about any event, including the death of Jesus Christ. This is brought out in the Formula, where it speaks about the suffering and death of Christ as a terrible revelation of God's wrath over sin (FC SD V, 12).[12] James Nestigen further explains this aspect of the Law: "Moral requirements, the law of the state, familial pressures, personal expectations—even a blown leaf, to take one of Luther's favorite examples—can all preach the Law. For each one of them can condemn, the rustling leaf probably most effectively because it makes its threats implicitly,

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[12]See also FC Epit V, 9.

letting the imagination fill them out."[13]

If the things that may count as the Law have very broad boundaries, then the Gospel has highly specific content: Jesus Christ as redeemer. This content is brought out in the Apology, which teaches that when the gospel is properly understood, "it illumines and amplifies the honor of Christ and brings needed and abundant consolation to pious consciences" (Ap IV, 2). The centrality of the doctrine of justification, in other words, is Jesus Christ. A mere recounting of the person and work of Christ, however, is not in itself a presentation of the Gospel; it must have a certain effect, namely, to provide comfort to the repentant sinner. If it does not have this effect, however, then it may indeed have not an indifferent effect but its very opposite: terror.

We could go on at great length about the distinction of Law and Gospel, and the applications of this perspective are also many. Nestigen, for example, draws some out for preaching.[14] But they also help us to stake out a coherent Lutheran understanding of crucial issues in the theology of religions. We should not expect that every issue *reduces* to a question of distinguishing Law and Gospel, but we may expect it to give insight not only into individual topics but into connections between them.

Knowledge of God in the World Religions

A central issue in the theology of religions is the nature of the knowledge of God

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[13]James Arne Nestigen, "Distinguisting Law and Gospel: A Functional View," *Concordia Journal* 22 (1996): 31.

[14]Nestigen draws an entirely correct and easily overlooked lesson from this functional or pragmatic perspective on Law and Gospel: "What is grammatically, doctrinally without question the pure word of the Gospel may become the harshest word of condemnation if the function is not also discerned" (ibid., 33).

available through the world religions. One question raised often is whether nature or society or other extra-Christian spheres of activity and knowledge shows evidence of God and his activity or will. Frequently Karl Barth is cited as the negative position on this issue. This judgment, however, is not true, because Barth affirmed that God could reveal himself outside the boundaries of the Christian community.[15]

The key question is whether this evidence can be understood as making God himself known. It is one thing to say that creation gives evidence that God exists or that the hardships, suffering, and pain of human existence shows God's wrath. It is another thing, however, to be able to say that one comes to know the identity of God through these things. In other words, it is one thing to say "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1) but quite another to say "The heavens present to sinful human creatures the identity of God." The latter, however, is what many theologians now seek to affirm. Pluralists, as they stress the need to recognize a "rough parity" between religions, assume that the nature of the knowledge of God among different world religions is comparable (but not necessarily commensurable or very great). But even those whose positions are far from the pluralist stance argue that God himself is known apart from Jesus Christ. For example, Carl Braaten, a firm opponent of pluralism, contends: "The New Testament nowhere makes the claim that Christ is the one and only revelation of God in history and

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[15]See above, pp. 67-68. To repeat Barth on this point: "God may speak to us through Russian communism or a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub or a dead dog. . . . God may speak to us through a pagan or an atheist" (*Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, part 1, trans. G. T. Thomson [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936], 60-61; *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. 1, *Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes*, part 1 [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1932], 55-56.

to humanity."[16] To be sure, this knowledge of God is not to see the "human face of God," but Braaten believes "[e]very religion has prophets who are similar to John the Baptist in preparing the way for the coming of Christ."[17] A theology of religions should be prepared "to take seriously all that human beings have experienced and believed about God prior to and apart from the preaching of the Gospel," to the point of seeing the so-called religions of grace like Jodo Shin-Shu as what Jesus said about the scribe in Mark 12:34—not far from the kingdom of God.[18]

The Lutheran Confessions seem to give mixed answers to the question of the knowledge of God. The Formula teaches that even the heathen have some knowledge of God through the knowledge of the Law they have naturally (FC SD V, 22), and that human reason itself has some vague knowledge that a God exists and also about his Law (FC SD II, 9). Moreover, the Apology and the Large Catechism specifies that the Law known naturally agrees with the Ten Commandments (Ap IV, 7; LC II, 67). On the other

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[16]Carl E. Braaten, *No Other Gospel! Christianity among the World's Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 69. The differences between the approaches and positions of Braaten and pluralists like Paul Knitter are sharp and profound. For Braaten, it is exemplified in the titles of their major writings on the theology of religions. As Braaten has explained: "Paul F. Knitter has written a landmark book on Christianity and the world religions that bears the title *No Other Name?* The reason for the question mark is to call into question the traditional biblical-Christian claim that Jesus Christ is unique, normative, decisive, and final self-revelation of God and the salvation of the world. Acts 4:12 declares: 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.' In stark contrast, this book bears the title *No Other Gospel!* The exclamation point, however, is included in the title for a reason similar to Knitter's. I can find no better way to accentuate Paul's emphasis in Gal 1:6-9, where again and again he warns his readers about turning to a 'different gospel': 'a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you'; but he also says, 'not that there is another gospel.' . . . Today we stand once again between the question mark imposed by the skeptical spirit of our age and the exclamation point punctuating the christological kerygma of apostolic times" (*No Other Gospel!*, 1).

[17]Ibid., 69.

[18]Ibid., 71, 73.

hand, the Confessions also speak about the sinfulness of human creatures lying especially in their *ignorance* of God and in their inability to trust in him and to fear and love him (Ap II, 7-8, 23).

The first step in resolving this dilemma is recognizing the nature of the Law as understood and kept naturally, that is, according to the unregenerate human creature. The Apology concedes that human reason can understand the Law to some extent, but this extent is a matter not simply of degree but of order. It can only recognize external demands, but it has no grasp of its demands to fear God, love God, pray to God (Ap IV, 7-8). In other words, human reason has some notion how to fulfill the Second Table of the Law, but none with regard to fulfilling the First Table. But in its inability to keep the First Commandment, human reason shows its utter inability even to grasp the true requirements of any others, whether they pertain to God directly or to God through our relationships with other human beings (cf. Ap II, 16; IV, 34). The fulfillment of the First Commandment, in turn, comes not merely in knowing that there is a God, for "there has never been a people as wicked as not to establish and maintain some kind of worship" (LC I, 17), but in trusting in the one true God.

The second step is applying the distinction of Law and Gospel and recognizing that the true knowledge of God's identity, upon which fulfillment of the First Commandment depends, comes not through any features of nature, culture, or religion (which yields only a partial and radically incomplete view of the Law), but specifically in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As the Large Catechism explains about the Creed (which itself is understood as "pure grace" [LC II, 68]):

For God himself has revealed and opened to us the deepest depths of his fatherly heart, his sheer, unspeakable love in these three articles. He created us for this very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us. Besides giving and handing over to us everything in heaven and on earth, he has given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself. As we explained before, we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace except through the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but a wrathful and terrible judge. But we could have known nothing of Christ either, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit (LC II, 64-65).

There is no true knowledge of God except through Christ, and no knowledge of Christ, except through the Holy Spirit at work through the preaching of the Gospel. As the Small Catechism explained: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; . . ."

Thus it must be concluded that true knowledge of God, that is, knowledge of his identity, far from being available through non-Christian religious communities, is restricted to the Christian community in two basic respects. First, it depends on the Gospel, or, more specifically, the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments (see AC V). Apart from this activity, God cannot be known. Second, it depends on the Scriptures. The Gospel is not merely a concept to be grasped or a proposition to be accepted but a message rooted in a particular history and a particular interpretation of that history and a particular framework in which this interpretation is worked out. These are not found, then, generally in a genre of literature but in a specific text, the Christian Scriptures. While a basic reception of the Gospel (that is, one in which God is known and believed in) may require fairly limited knowledge of contents of the Scriptures, the maturity of the life of individual members and of the community as a whole depends on

acquiring knowledge but in developing skills to understand and put to proper use what the Scriptures teach.

There are important implications for understanding properly the Lutheran view of salvation of non-Christians, but before we turn to that, I want to discuss another topic related to the issue of the knowledge of God.

Pluralists stress the ineffability of God. Part of their argument for understanding that different religions are responses to this single incomprehensible reality relies on the assumption "that the object or content of authentic religious experience is infinite—Mystery beyond all forms, exceeding our every grasp of it. The infinity and ineffability of God-Mystery demands religious pluralism and forbids any one religion from having the 'only' or 'final' word."[19] God's nature is such that all human knowledge and understanding of it is always limited and partial.

The Lutheran emphasis moves in the opposite direction. But it is not in the direction of showing that God can indeed be characterized and comprehended. When pluralists stress God's ineffability, they are returning a negative answer to questions about what God is like. Lutheran theology, however, does not look first to ask about what can be known about God—about his characteristics and attributes—but to his *identity*. This identity, in turn, is bound up with the distinction of Law and Gospel. As Lutheran theologian Edmund Schlink explains:

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[19]Paul F. Knitter, "Preface," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), x. For examples of pluralist proposals that hinge crucially on this notion, see the contributions to Part II: "The Theological-Mystical Bridge" of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.

In the Roman church the dreadful fact had become evident that, in spite of the preservation of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, God was *not* known any more, since the Gospel had been lost. But to know God's essence means to know "the most profound depths of his fatherly heart, and his sheer, unutterable love" (LC II, 64). To know God's love means to receive his gracious love. However, the love of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier is not given through the demands of the law but through the gift of the Gospel. The triune God, therefore, is known only in the distinction of law and Gospel, that is, by faith in the Gospel.[20]

God can be known because he has made himself known in Jesus Christ. Knowledge of Christ is the result of communicating the Gospel. This knowledge, moreover, consists crucially of knowing Christ as redeemer, through which knowledge the sinner can receive comfort and assurance.

In this light, the logical centrality of the incarnation becomes clear. As the Nicene Creed says, the eternal Son of God, "for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man." The particularity of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, in other words, is connected closely with soteriology.

What does this mean for the theology of religions? It breaks the dilemma posed by pluralists. Although God in himself is beyond our comprehension, he has made himself known in human form, in the incarnation. In view of this, the first question is not "What is God like?" but "Who is God?" In identifying God with Jesus Christ, then we have a way to know his unseen Father. Pluralists are, in a sense, right about God in himself: he is beyond our knowing. But, unlike pluralists, Lutherans insist that though it is impossible to search and attain true knowledge of God, he makes himself known through Jesus Christ.

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[20]Edmund Schlink, *The Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 66.

To be sure, pluralists like John Hick have adopted Trinitarian and Christological positions largely at odds with classical dogmas and orthodox positions of the Christian church. For them, an incarnational perspective is unacceptable and likely to be rejected out of hand. I shall deal with the implications of this rejection later. But first I shall consider the issue of salvation.

Salvation in Christ and the World Religions

The postliberal approach, with its emphasis on the uniqueness of aims, concepts, teachings, and practices of different religious communities, rules out a clear affirmation that non-Christian religious communities are ways of ultimate salvation. Both Lindbeck and DiNoia, however, wish to maintain the possibility of universal salvation. For this reason, both adopt versions of postmortem evangelization, according to which non-Christians have opportunity to work out their salvation after death.

From a Lutheran perspective, neither is satisfactory. Lindbeck's proposal depends on a reading of Scripture that sees non-Christians in this life as in a neutral state. This view contradicts the Biblical witness and Christian practice on several levels. First, it runs counter to Biblical statements that indicate there are only two ways and no third or middle ground (e.g., the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked in Psalm 1; the two roads in Matthew 7:13-14; darkness and light in John 3:16-21). Second, it runs counter to the Biblical teaching of the universality of sin and of God's punishment for sin (e.g., see Romans 1-3). In view of the sin of all people, God cannot be neutral with respect to anyone, although on account of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is peace

with God for all humankind. DiNoia's proposal depends problematically on the acceptance of the doctrine of purgatory, which from a Lutheran perspective has no strong Biblical support and which runs counter to the central doctrine of justification by grace through faith.

Third, these views call into question the consistency of their postliberal thinking. For Lindbeck, the *desire* of holding out the possibility of salvation is reason enough, while DiNoia's argument is basically that this possibility is the position of the historic Christian mainstream. Both, however, acknowledge that widespread recognition of this possibility is very much a *modern* occurrence, and given their suspicion of modernity, it is contradictory for them not to advance a more detailed argument against traditional positions that deny the possibility.

The question of salvation, when viewed within the perspective of the distinction of Law and Gospel, takes on definite shape. This perspective shows that salvation must be understood as salvation from the consequences of defying the Law of God—death and damnation. Sin must be understood as more than imperfection or finitude; it is nothing short of offense against God and with the result that people face his wrath and punishment. Lindbeck argues that apart from knowledge of the Christian religion it was impossible to know whether to accept or reject salvation. From this, he concludes that apart from this knowledge, one was in a neutral state with respect to salvation. Ignorance of God's Law and of God himself, however, does not constitute an excuse; rather, it is evidence of disobedience toward God. Salvation is the work of God, from first to last. It is also God's offer, and therefore may be rejected. But the initiative and the work of

salvation is all God's doing.

Christian Mission in Postliberal Perspective

Closely related to the issues of knowledge of God and ultimate salvation are questions about the Christian mission. In terms of postliberals, again, the issue is most acute in the case of Lindbeck and his cultural-linguistic model, and as we saw in examining his approach, he does not rule out evangelistic missions. What does happen under the cultural-linguistic model, however, is that the approach becomes akin to learning a language.

This is not a feature unique to Lindbeck's approach but a basic implication of the postliberal stress on the logical or grammatical features of a religion and its theology (or analogous intellectual venture in nontheistic religions). Postliberals draw attention to the fact that religions involve more than isolated beliefs or responses to experiences but includes certain rules like those of logic or grammar that also must be learned to be put to use. Becoming religious, then, is not so much a matter of learning or assenting to beliefs, as a matter of acquiring and using a skill. In this view, mission is a slow, involving process, as Lindbeck suggests, more like the catechesis of the ancient church than conversion emphasis of contemporary revivalism. There is, of course, nothing new in this understanding. Lindbeck himself attests to this from personal experience as a child of missionaries to China. What the postliberal analysis does do, however, is suggest reasons why the same kind of understanding of mission is necessary for *dechristianized* situations, situations toward which Europe and North America are heading. It also suggests that the

understanding of evangelism that emphasizes personal decision and commitment is likely either to become increasingly ineffective or to move increasingly away from the historic Christian positions in doctrine, heritage, and community life.

What also needs to be recognized, however, is that part of the dimension of Law and Gospel is that it is the address *of God.* I have noted that the postliberal proposals we have examined bear a *linguistic* character. It should be further noted that the "speakers" in the postliberal model are human. Insofar as becoming Christian is like learning to speak a language (Lindbeck) or to play a musical instrument (DiNoia), it is the Christian who acquires and puts into use the necessary rules and skills. But from the standpoint of the preaching of Law and Gospel, it must also be recognized that there is language which the Christian hears. To be sure, there is a definite sense in which one must learn to listen, and this skill cannot be assumed to be innate but must be formed. Nevertheless, the listening is a listening to God in the Law as he threatens and in the Gospel as he promises.

The Theology of Religions in Postliberal Perspective

The discussion on the knowledge of God and the world religions concluded with an observation about a Lutheran argument that bounded the knowledge of God in light of the incarnation. I suggested that pluralists would not receive such an argument favorably. One can well imagine a whole range of topics over which pluralists would be in disagreement with other Christians, including Lutherans firmly committed to their Creeds and Confessions. What does this suggest for the state of the theology of religions? I believe that postliberals can give us a different perspective on this general issue.

I shall begin, however, by putting this perspective in perspective, so to speak. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas S. Kuhn challenged the usual accounts of scientific development, which is portrayed as a process of steady, gradual accumulation.[21] Kuhn argued that the history of science showed that scientific disciplines advanced in sudden intellectual revolutions. A prevailing "paradigm," which informs the nature and task of the discipline's inquiries, would become untenable. At that point, new paradigms, incommensurable both with the old and with each other, would emerge and compete until one prevailed. The notions of incommensurability and conflict, of course, ran very much counter to the usual portrayals of science as a highly ordered, rational venture. But Kuhn's account has had a very great influence, extending well beyond the borders of the history and philosophy of science.[22]

The notions of incommensurability and conflict have been used to characterize thought and action in other areas as well. Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, has argued that contemporary moral discourse is in a state of disorder, with incommensurate conceptions of morality competing and conflicting.[23] The same sort of observation has been made

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[21]Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 2d ed., enlarged (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 1.

[22]Statistical evidence of this widespread influence may be found in a study of citations in the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index* from 1975-1983, which showed *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* to be cited more often than any other twentieth-century work (see *Arts and Humanities Citation Index* 1995, vol. 1, 8-9).

[23]MacIntyre begins his book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (2d ed. [Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984], 1-5) with what he calls "a disquieting suggestion." He asks us to imagine a future in which the natural sciences were abolished as fields of learning and areas of study, and in which scientists were imprisoned and executed. Later, although they have been largely forgotten, an attempt is made to revive the sciences from the remaining fragments of knowledge. The result would be sciences practiced in ways that would be ordered but also would seem arbitrary and very different from the perspective of modern science:

about theology. Kathryn Tanner (herself a postliberal) has done this in observing a

widespread incoherence in modern theology.[24] Although various theological positions

may aim for or claim a kind of orthodoxy, consistently there has been little success in

achieving agreement across the lines of different factions. She argues that this incoherence

stems from a very basic sort of disorder. As she explains:

> This lack of success becomes apparent in a mutual failure of recognition, i.e., in the refusal of the various factions to accept each other's orthodoxy. In general, there is a curious inability to arrive at a consensus in modern times about what it is permissible to say on theological issues that had previously been resolvable. To be sure, difference and dissension do not in this way erupt for the first time within a hitherto monolithic orthodoxy in theological statement. A rich diversity in theological forms of Christian self-expression has always existed; orthodoxy in the sense of limits to acceptable Christian statement has never demanded uniformity. What is odd about the modern situation is the degree to which difference takes on the character of mutual exclusivity. Disputes of the fundamental sort under discussion here are never finally resolved one way or the other by a consensus opinion concerning the boundaries of acceptable statement.[25]

In such a culture men would use expressions such as "neutrino", "mass", "specific gravity", "atomic weight" in systematic and often interrelated ways which would resemble in lesser or greater degrees the ways in which such expressions had been used in earlier times before scientific knowledge had been so largely lost. But many of the beliefs presupposed by the use of these expressions would have been lost and there would appear to be an element of arbitrariness and even of choice in their application which would appear very surprising to us (1).

MacIntyre argues that moral discourse in the actual world is in the same disordered state into which scientific discourse would fall in the future he imagined (2-3). While we still use many key expressions of moral thought, the conceptual scheme for morality itself is fragmented and incomplete.

MacIntyre further argues that such breakdowns cannot be diagnosed by contemporary philosophical methods such as analytical philosophy and phenomenology (2). Such a diagnosis would require a historical narrative of at least three distinct stages, corresponding to a pristine state, catastrophe, and attempt at restoration. This historical narrative, moreover, could not be of an evaluatively-neutral kind, but would need to presuppose standards and criteria of success and failure, order and disorder (3).

Others have made similar suggestions about the state of moral language in contemporary Western societies. See especially Jeffrey Stout in *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), where he notes that this diagnosis has been made often (1-7).

[24]Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

[25]Ibid., 3-4.

The generality of this disorder suggests, in turn, "not the accidental corruption of any

particular theological faction through the untoward outside influence of flawed

philosophical principles, but a curious forgetfulness about the rules for proper Christian

talk on the part of the church itself as a whole. A plausible explanation for general

disruption is a wide ranging breakdown of the church's own discursive habits."[26]

There is a widespread discussion in the theology of religions, and much of it can be

comprehended under the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. This

typology sees the basic issue in the theology of religions as a matter of a certain set of

substantive topics, centered in topic of salvation, clearly embracing Christian identity,

truth, and mission, and impacting doctrines of God, Christ, and sin. These topics, to be

sure, are indeed important and raised for Christian reflection by the contemporary

situation of religious plurality and competition. But one finds in the literature of the

theology of religions not merely a sense but actual language that shows increasing

fragmentation in the field. For example, the contributors and editors of *The Myth of

Christian Uniqueness* speak of the pluralist move as "crossing the theological Rubicon"

and as a "paradigm shift," language that clearly signals drastic and irrevocable changes in

Christian thinking on the part of its proponents.[27] The typical historical account shows the

same tendency: a movement from traditional exclusivism to a more open inclusivism to a

wide open pluralism.

In the light of kinds of observations made by Kuhn, MacIntyre, and especially Tanner,

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[26]Ibid., 5.

[27]*The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, vii-viii.

the postliberal approaches examined here can be seen to recognize a "wide ranging breakdown" in discursive habits in the theology of religions. In their critical modes, they recognize a definite departure among whole classes of approaches (e.g., pluralism) from the "rules" for how Christians should think, speak, and proceed toward non-Christians and their religions. In their constructive modes, these postliberal approaches recommend that theologians deal with issues and questions in ways that not only apply specifically Christian concepts but govern their uses by the Christian "logic" or "grammar" articulated in its theology.

In the theology of religions, I find the postliberal diagnosis running in two directions. One has to do with the nature of a Christian theological interpretation of religion, and it comes out most clearly in Barth's critique of modern theology on the concept of religion. When modern theologians granted independence to the concept of *religion*, they surrendered from the outset even the possibility of a properly theological interpretation of religion and the religions. He acknowledged that substantive positions varied widely. Moreover, some positions differed little from those of their premodern fathers. All their approaches, however, effectively denied that religion should be understood in light of the specifically Christian revelation of God. Thus, Barth saw the problem not so much in what was said about non-Christian religions but in the conditions of Christian speaking at all. His constructive alternative, on the other hand, is a clear example of attempting to recover and apply basic rules for Christian discourse. In his view, no topic or issue is to be defined or used apart from specifically Christian theological definition and use. In response, Barth recovered the Christological dogma for *practical* use to guide Christian

thought and speech, a use which modern theology had lost. On the basis of the teaching of the *assumptio carnis*, Barth concluded that, on the one hand, all human religion is unbelief, and, on the other hand, that the true religion was true not of itself but by sheer grace in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

A further difficulty is that the experiential-expressivist understanding of doctrine as symbolic of this experience does not permit one to make propositional truth claims. This understanding runs counter to that of not only Christians but of other religious communities as well, and for this reason (among others) rules out experiential-expressivism. In other words, he finds experiential-expressivism inadequate for failing to follow a basic rule of Christian theology (to say nothing of analogous enterprises in other religions). Lindbeck understands that this issue is serious. This is shown in the fact that he takes it as a major challenge for the cultural-linguistic model to accommodate truth claims, and he deals at length with the issue, trying to show that it can be done. As he does, he isolates a shortcoming in the cognitivist view. This view stresses the ontological truth of claims and beliefs as primary. Lindbeck argues that this stress leads to overlooking the importance of the *conditions* under which a claim is made. It is important, in other words, not only that a truth claim correspond to reality, but also that the claim be made in a way consistent with this reality. And so the example of the crusader: although it is ontologically true that Christ is Lord, Lindbeck argues that the act of killing accompanying and apparently being justified by this claim is not consistent, does not cohere with, the reality of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In failing to comprehend this dimension, the cognitivist model, in Lindbeck's view, is also inadequate, and again, for

failing to recognize a basic rule of Christian discourse.

The second kind of breakdown in theological discourse pertains to characterizations of

other religions. Lindbeck himself does not explicitly pursue this kind of argument, but it is

evident in his discussion on the relationship of Christianity with other religions. He argues

that the cultural-linguistic approach gives a better understanding of religions and their

relationships to each other than the experiential-expressivist model characteristic of liberal

theology. A key difficulty with experiential-expressivism is its view that different religions

are basically different *expressions* of common religious *experiences* (and hence the term

experiential-expressivism). The variety of differences in these religious expressions in

belief and practice makes it impossible to specify features of this allegedly common

experience, thereby making such a claim, as he puts it, "logically and empirically

vacuous."[28]

With Paul Griffiths, a breakdown in theological discourse is the basic reason he calls

for a renewed evaluation of the problematic of religious plurality. His own appraisal of

the discussion in the Christian theology of religions is that it is largely sterile, because it

ignores its purported objects: the world religions. In his rethinking of the problematic, he

stresses the category of religious doctrine as a crucial but neglected aspect of Christian

thinking about religious plurality. This attention to doctrine permits him to argue against

pluralism's demand for radical revision or outright rejection of central doctrines. Their

pragmatic reasons do not stand up to the uses to which doctrines are put in liturgy,

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[28]George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 32.

catechesis, and evangelism, to say nothing of their central value as truth claims and as

community rules. A key result is an argument that Christians should preserve both the

semantic (cognitive content) and *syntactical* (regulative function) dimensions of these

doctrines, and that they should govern Christian thinking about interreligious encounters.

DiNoia advances Griffiths's observation about the theology of religions overlooking

other religions by detailing how both inclusivism and pluralism deny genuine plurality.

Inclusivism and pluralism fail not so much in their understandings of other religions as in

faulty theological commitments. Where both inclusivists and pluralists go wrong is not in

their investigations of other religions, but in a basic assumption about religions, namely,

that at least some, including major religious communities like Christianity and Buddhism,

are basically alike. In inclusivism, this is done by regarding other religions as imperfect

forms of the absolute Christian religion; in pluralism, this is done by regarding all religions

as finite responses to a single ineffable reality. Are these positions the result of empirical

investigation? Postliberals argue that they could hardly be, given the evidence of basic and

thoroughgoing differences between religions. Are they conclusions drawn by

extrapolation from established doctrine and practice? Again, this cannot be the case.

Inclusivism and pluralism both reject traditional exclusivist claims. The grounds for this

rejection are often not doctrinal but pragmatic, especially the desire not to give offense to

non-Christians. But it is precisely in this willingness to let theological reflection be guided

by external reasons such as pragmatic concerns that the breakdown in theological

discourse among inclusivists and pluralists becomes evident.

These postliberal approaches give us a way to observe not only differences among

proposals, which are readily apparent, but diagnose an underlying disorder. This diagnosis, to be sure, is severe; the disorder is, as Tanner put it, of a very basic sort. In this view, the differences between different types of proposals are not simply deep but complex and wide-ranging. The problem, for instance, between exclusivism and pluralism is not simply that exclusivists are arrogant or that pluralists prize tolerance too highly; nor is the problem between exclusivism and inclusivism simply that exclusivists underestimate the desire of God to save the world or that inclusivists fail to recognize that saving faith explicitly results in confessing Jesus Christ. The problem is that although they may use the same terms—God, Christ, salvation, sin, grace—they may mean them in different, perhaps contradictory ways, and they may relate them to other concepts in different, perhaps contradictory ways. Christ, for instance, is for the exclusivist the sole mediator of salvation and the object of saving faith; apart from not only his saving work but also trust in him there is no hope of salvation. He is related to God as the only-begotten Son of the unseen Father. Apart from him there is no true knowledge of God and no salvation. For the pluralist, however, Christ is unique, but he is not necessarily the only mediator of salvation. He is related to God as one of a number of ways through which knowledge of God can be attained and from which salvation can come.

The postliberal analysis does not suggest a way to overcome or reconcile these differences, but it does give Christian theologians a more adequate way to comprehend them. It is also helpful, because it suggests a way at least toward a more constructive discussion, and perhaps a way out. Basically this way would be to recognize and put to uses the contents and logic of Christian doctrine. I have tried to take this approach here

by returning the Lutheran approach to the theology of religions to the contents and especially the internal logic of the Lutheran Confessions.

Constructively, the postliberal argument for a return to the Christian logic or grammar in its discussion of non-Christian religions is grounded well on two fronts. First, it tends to make sense of more of the Christian tradition. A major shortcoming with pluralism is the radical revision it calls for. As Griffiths pointed out, while they acknowledge that non-Christian religions as well as the Christian religion must revise their self-understandings, they do not stress this sufficiently. Further, as Griffiths argues especially clearly, without detailed and pressing reasons to abandon classical doctrines, they must be maintained and their content and function applied.

Second, it tends to take non-Christian religions more seriously. Lindbeck, Griffiths, and DiNoia all argue that different religious communities are distinct, not only in what they claim, teach, and practice, but in the logic or grammar of their thinking, speech and action. In this way, other religions are given the kind of respect, the respect of uniqueness, that inclusivism and pluralism both effectively deny.

CONCLUSION

The growing awareness of the situation of religious plurality has brought new issues

and questions for Christian theologians to deal with, issues and questions that belong what

is now called the "theology of religions." Much discussion in the field has centered on the

question of salvation, especially whether non-Christian religions play a role in attaining

salvation. More recent proposals, however, have been asking about different aspects of

the Christian relationship with non-Christians. An important set of such proposals takes a

postliberal approach.

This study has examined some leading postliberal approaches to the theology of

religions: those of Karl Barth, George Lindbeck, Paul Griffiths, and J. A. DiNoia.

Postliberals work from a nonfoundationalist assumption that criticizes the typically modern

desire for certain grounds upon which one can justify and test. Instead, they argue for the

autonomy and uniqueness of the Christian community. Accordingly, they stress that the

task of theology is not *explanatory* but *descriptive*. The theological task is not to explain

Christian terms, concepts, beliefs, and practices in terms of a more widely accessible

scheme, but a descriptive task that serves the community and follows its aims, logic, and

concepts.

To call Barth "postliberal" is in a sense anachronistic, but he has been a central

postliberal influence and his approach to the Christian interpretation of the concept of religion and of historical religions clearly anticipates both the nonfoundational and descriptive aspects of the postliberal approach. On the one hand, he challenged liberal Protestant theology for granting independent status to the concept of religion. No matter the result that obtained, he objected as untheological all attempts that treated the Christian revelation as an instance—even the most perfect instance—of a general concept of religion. On the other hand, he insisted that a theological interpretation of religion be worked out based on the Scriptures and within the scheme of Christian doctrine. This interpretation was based on the doctrine of the incarnation, which Barth applied as a guide for Christian thinking about the issue. On this basis, he concluded *theologically* that human religion is unbelief, and that the true religion—the Christian religion—was true only by virtue of Jesus Christ, and not for any immanent reason.

The later postliberals—Lindbeck, Griffiths, and DiNoia—all shared with Barth concerns over liberal theology, particularly its tendency to foundationalism. One important result of their arguments is a strong argument for Christian uniqueness. The later postliberals, however, went a step further than Barth in recognizing not only the uniqueness of the Christian faith and community, but that other religious communities also had their own uniqueness. This affirmation of a genuine plurality of distinct religious communities challenges both inclusivism and pluralism for their desire to locate and emphasize features religions hold in common.

A major challenge to the postliberal approach lies with questions of truth. The worry is that postliberalism leads inevitably to relativism and fideism. Postliberalism entails

neither. Postliberals affirm both claims to universal truth and the possibility of justifying

them. They are, however, very doubtful about the possibility of the *universal* justification

of claims to truth. This opposes a central characteristic of modern foundationalism, that

truth claims should be justified on grounds that correspond to the scope of the claim.

This study also attempted to appropriate the postliberal approach for a specifically

Lutheran theology of religions. This appropriation was guided by the conviction that in its

basic features the theology of the Lutheran Confessions, the acknowledged body of

doctrine for the Lutheran community, converged with postliberal theology both in its

nonfoundational and descriptive aspects. The postliberal conception of the theological

task corresponds to its nonfoundational convictions. Instead of seeking to explain and

justify religious statements and practices according to external, universally accessible

grounds, postliberal theology seeks to explicate claims and beliefs according to the

concepts and logic within the tradition. The aim is not to achieve a kind of closeout

argument but to show the overall coherence of the tradition with itself and with features

that might be held in common within whatever context one is arguing or conversing. Here

I discussed questions about the knowledge of God, salvation of non-Christian, and

Christian mission, guided by considerations on the distinction of Law and Gospel and in

light of the postliberal approach. The attempt here was to show what the Lutheran logic

required for responses to these questions. I concluded that true knowledge of God comes

through faith in the Gospel, so that, although things about God may be known through

outside the Christian community, what is true in this knowledge and a knowledge of his

identity comes specifically in Jesus Christ and in the Gospel message of Christ.

Accordingly, salvation, while accomplished for all humankind, is offered in the preaching of the Gospel and secured through faith. In the same way, the Christian mission must be understood as constituted by this proclamation. Postliberal considerations, however, also shed light on this process, at least from a human viewpoint. Understanding the Christian faith involves the acquisition of certain skills and knowledge, something like learning a second language. These conclusions, to be sure, run directly counter to the prevailing inclusivist and pluralist trends in contemporary theology, but they proceed from and are consistent with the logic and contents of the Lutheran body of doctrine.

Although this project is one in the field of the theology of religions, the most important conclusion is that the problem raised by the situation of religious plurality is an internal theological problem. I touched on this problem in the closing section of the last chapter, by recognizing that the results of the postliberal approach presented evidence of a basic breakdown in the field's discourse. However, I could do no more with it. Since I could go no further, I would like to sketch briefly one direction in which further study might go.

It would begin not with the contemporary problem of religious plurality but with the state of theological discourse since the Reformation. In particular it would focus on questions of sin and grace and of Law and Gospel. Behind this attention is a conviction that Christian views about, on the one hand, sin and God's wrath, and, on the other hand, grace and God's forgiveness, have undergone considerable changes and divergence since their Reformation formulations, so that for many theologians these are no longer central doctrines, especially with respect to the wrath of God. From the perspective of the Lutheran Confessions, this is a crucial problem, not least for the theology of religions,

where the question of salvation does become urgent. But if these are the results, what are

the causes and what are related effects or consequences? They surely must be

significant—but are they evident? These are the kinds of questions to which some

answers I might hope to begin to find. The purpose would not be so much to refute a

certain position that may be outstanding in the field, but to come to terms with an

apparent inability to discuss deep theological differences between Christians, differences

that come to the fore in the theology of religions.

There are, of course, many other areas that about which the postliberal approach

opens questions and raises issues. I want here to touch on two. One area is raised by the

linguistic metaphor that is basic to the postliberal understanding. Especially for Lindbeck

and his cultural-linguistic model, but also in the cases of Griffiths and DiNoia in their

understandings of doctrine, there seems no place for Christian language that is the address

of God. In other words, there seems no recognition that God speaks. This, of course,

was central to Barth's theology, although it played no significant role in his discussion of

religion. What is more important, however, the understanding that God speaks in Law

and Gospel, to threaten and to promise, are central to Lutheran theology and constitutive

of its practice. That is to say, without the preaching of Law and Gospel, there is

repentance or forgiveness, and without them there is no knowledge of God in either his

wrath or his grace, nor is there any Church. It remains to be seen how and to what extent

the postliberal approach converges with this crucial dimension of Lutheranism.

The second area concerns ecclesiology. The theology of religions has largely

concentrated on a response to other religions and implications they hold for Christian

belief and practice. These implications do affect the church as a whole, but they do not address the church and its self-understanding as such. Accents like Lindbeck's, however, on intrasystematic truth, which stresses that what one says should correspond to other beliefs and to other aspects of life, and like Griffiths's on the catechetical and liturgical dimensions of doctrine, suggest an ecclesiological dimension to the theology of religions. Although the shape of this direction is indistinct, it can be seen that, because of its stress on Christian uniqueness and the particularity of all religious communities and because of its nonfoundationalism, the postliberal approach points in the direction of a sectarian understanding.[1] Whether others can or should follow down this way is an important question to address.

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[1]This is explicit in Lindbeck. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 126-128; cf. idem, "The Sectarian Future of the Church," in *The God Experience*, ed. Joseph Whelan (New York: Newman, 1971), 226-243.

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