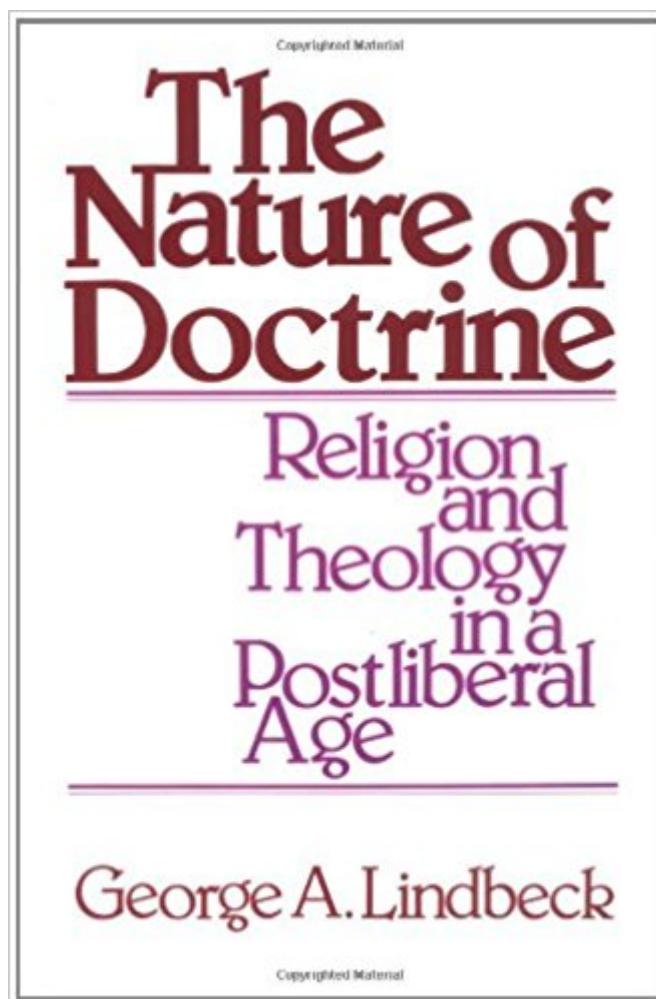


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The Nature Of Doctrine: Religion And Theology In A Postliberal Age



Synopsis

This groundbreaking work lays the foundation for a theology based on a cultural-linguistic approach to religion and a regulative or rule theory of doctrine. Although shaped intimately by theological concerns, this approach is consonant with the most advanced anthropological, sociological, and philosophical thought of our times.

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Customer Reviews

George A. Lindbeck is Pitkin Professor Emeritus of Historical Theology at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. He is the author of several books, including *The Church in a Postliberal Age*.
--This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Lindbeck categorizes doctrine as one of the following three: Cognitive Propositional. This is the understanding that doctrines make truth claims about objective reality. Propositionalism finds certitude in Scripture and emphasizes the cognitive aspect of faith and religion. This has been the traditional approach of Orthodox Christian belief. Synthesizing these Scriptural truths and doctrines is also a part of this method. Thinkers in this group remain critical of post-foundational approaches. Experiential Expressive. This method, which emphasizes religious feeling, was thought to have found universal objectivity for religious truth. While it was presupposed that all religious feeling had a common core experience, it was discovered that there was no clear evidence that this was the case. Further difficulty with this approach was found in specifying distinctive features of

religious feeling, such that “the assertion of commonality becomes logically and empirically vacuous” (18). Cultural Linguistic. This is Lindbeck’s method. Its design is ecumenically minded but has fostered a larger discussion pertaining to its use in theological method. At the risk of sounding too reductionistic it might be said that this alternative seeks to understand religion as a culture or a semiotic language. Religion shapes the entirety of life, not just cognitive or emotional dimensions. A religion is a “comprehensive scheme or story used to structure all dimensions of existence” (21). And “its vocabulary of symbols and its syntax may be used for many purposes, only one of which is the formulation of statements about reality. Thus while a religion’s truth claims are often of the utmost importance to it (as in the case of Christianity), it is, nevertheless, the conceptual vocabulary and the syntax or inner logic which determine the kinds of truth claims the religion can make” (21). In terms of measuring religions for truth, categorical truth is what is to be accepted, which may or may not correspond to reality (37). Truth, in this regard, is what is meaningful (34). Lindbeck uses a map metaphor in which the knowledge provided by the map is only “constitutive of a true proposition when it guides the traveler rightly” (38). This dynamic understanding of truth is not answerable to static propositional truth claims. Religion must be utilized correctly to provide ontology, or meaning (38). The possibility of salvation as *solus Christus* is said to conform to this approach.

“One must, in other words, learn the language of faith before one can know enough about its message knowingly to reject it and thus be lost” (45). Lindbeck has in mind here *fides ex audit* and envisions a post-mortem offer of salvation. In readdressing propositional truth, it is said that religious sentences have first-order or ontological truth or falsity only in determinate settings (54; recall the map metaphor). Understood in this way, the Cultural Linguistic approach proves to successfully supply categorical, symbolic, and propositional truths. Rule Theory maintains that what is “abiding and doctrinally significant” about religion is not found in inner experience or their propositional truth, but “in the story it tells and in the grammar that informs the way the story is told and used” (66). In order to make sense of religious experiences they must be interpreted within an entire comprehensive framework. Lindbeck presents a softer view of doctrine, which is less truth-claiming, and more about community rules. Doctrines, thus, may be reversible or irreversible, unconditional or conditional, temporary or permanent.

This work is a small classic in the ‘postliberal’ movement which originated under the influence of

Lindbeck and Hans Frei. Other theologians who bear some of the same characteristics include Placher, Hunsinger, Thiemann, Tanner, Kelsey, and Hauerwas. Postliberals emphasize the specificity of Christianity (and all religions) and a Christological and intratextual method of theology that finds the meaning of Christian language within Scripture. This meaning is given in the praxis of the church and the task of the systematic theologian is to give a normative self-description of the community as well as to discern deficiencies and distortions in communal practices. New proposals are primarily pragmatic in that they aim to 'build up the body of believers.' Accusations of relativism and fideism naturally follow the postliberal denial of a universal ground of knowledge and their stress on internal description over external description (usually philosophy). However, Lindbeck believes the cultural/linguistic model will generate more conversation with other disciplines than the usual models (cognitive and experiential) since many historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and philosophers also employ approaches that utilize a cultural and/or linguistic scheme. Postliberal theology is open to rational testing, but reasonableness is assessed by its ability to provide an intelligible interpretation, in its own terms, of the relevant practical and cognitive data of Christian believers. Ad hoc apologetics is preferred over systematic. The main argument of this book is twofold: religion (Christianity included) as a cultural/linguistic community and a regulative view of doctrines. The religion provides a frame of interpretation that shapes life, thought, and actions of the believer. Basic patterns of the religion are interiorized through worship, proclamation, and instruction. Doctrines serve as rules that regulate the communities' discourse, attitudes, and practices. Lindbeck's work reflects aspects of Wittgenstein, Geertz, and Peter Berger among others. One word of warning: this book is meant to be provocative and not definitive. If you are not already sympathetic to the cultural/linguistic approach (or unsympathetic to the cognitivist or experiential approaches) you will probably not be convinced. The *Nature of Doctrine* initiated an ongoing conversation and simply seeks to establish the viability of a cultural/linguistic framework and rule theory of doctrine for ecumenical, interreligious, and non-religious discussions. What follows are some points in the book that I found interesting. A religion is described as one large proposition. Does it as a whole (discursive and nondiscursive symbols, practices, action, etc.) correspond to God's will (for Christians)? The basis for interreligious dialogue is that other religions may contain potential actualities and realities explored that may not fall within the scope of Christianity but nevertheless be God-willed, God-approved aspects of the coming kingdom. Just as Cyprian said there is no salvation outside the church, Lindbeck states that there is no damnation outside the church either. One must know the language of faith before one can ultimately reject it. He also speculates of a post-mortem encounter with Jesus. Theological assertions are true only in context

i.e. 'when speaking religiously.' He gives the example of Luther who says 'I can only say "Christ is Lord" when I make him my Lord.' Ontological truth happens in the context of existential participation in proclamation, praise, and prayer not in the abstract. Lindbeck advocates a modest cognitivism he finds in Aquinas. 'God is good' is true but we do not know how it is true. The scriptural world "absorbs" the universe. Scripture gives the world meaning rather than vice-versa. He states that Aquinas, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and even Schleiermacher used this method to varying degrees. A couple aspects I would like to see given more rigorous treatment are the relation of intrasystematic to ontological truth and a theological treatment of the church as a cultural/linguistic community. If anyone knows if this has been done please contact me. An aside: Unlike other reviewers I am not a masters student in theology only an educated layperson but I had little difficulty in comprehending the vocabulary employed in the book. If you are used to reading theology you will not have much trouble with Lindbeck's book. Also, one wonders that if you admittedly had trouble understanding the concepts in a text if you are then able to adequately critique that same text. Anyway, if you are interested enough to come here and read reviews you are interested enough to read the book. Enjoy. PIC

The previous reviewer does a fine job of summarizing the argument. I don't think he got everything right, but you should read the book yourself if you want more nuance than he gave. I mostly just want to recommend this edition. After 25 years of vibrant scholarly debate, Bruce Marshall wrote an introduction for this edition and Lindbeck wrote an afterward. Lindbeck's afterward is mostly about some clarifications from Chapter 3...one of the most contended sections of the first edition. Marshall's introduction is worth the price of the new edition if you are a new reader to Lindbeck. Some veterans will appreciate Marshall's summary comments as well. While Lindbeck intended to write one sort of book (about ecumenism and a model for furthering dialogue), the book has largely been taken to be another sort of book (a book on epistemology and theological method). Marshall helps illuminate some of this history.

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