MEANING, TRUTH AND DOCTRINE: GEORGE LINDBECK'S *THE NATURE OF DOCTRINE*

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INTRODUCTION

When *The Nature of Doctrine* came out in 1984, its importance was instantly recognized. Underlying Lindbeck's fascination with doctrine, there is the more fundamental matter of thought and language as models of reality. In the context of religious language, Lindbeck investigates the meaning and truth of religious statements. He is concerned about whether the metaphysical is sayable, whether God can be referred to and spoken of, whether a religious utterance makes sense if detached from its context, and most particularly, what it is that endows religious utterances with truth or falsity.

THE TRUTH AND FALSITY OF RELIGIOUS UTTERANCES

The classical model of a true proposition has been that of an *adaequatio mentis ad rem* (i.e., the mental isomorphism 'of the knowing and the known') (65). However, Lindbeck considers religious truth as somehow different from other types of truth. He argues that the cognitive content of truth claims about God is minimal. Consequently, religious utterances do not fit this classical model.

What Lindbeck argues is that, in the religious domain, it is possible to speak of the *adaequatio mentis ad rem* only if it is pictured as part and parcel of a wider conformity of the self to God. This follows the principle that the right use of religious language cannot be detached from a particular way of behaving, and that the only way to assert some religious truth, as Lindbeck puts it, is 'to do something about it', since propositions are not independent 'of the subjective dispositions of those who utter them' (64. 66). The main example which Lindbeck uses in order to support his arguments is the assertion '*Christus Est Dominus*'. Lindbeck insists that such a proposition is not independent of the context in which it is said, nor of the subject who utters it. Consequently, according to Lindbeck, those unskilled in the language of faith can neither affirm nor deny that "*Christus Est Dominus*." Linbeck thus

maintains that one must have some skill in how to use the language of religion, as well as practise its way of life, before it becomes possible to affirm "*Christus Est Dominus*" truthfully. According to him, the opposite is also true. One cannot reject the propositional meaning of its affirmations unless one has the skill in the use of the language of that religion, or practises its way of life (68). The implications of such arguments for dogma, as well as for the ecumenical movement, are evident.

THE ONTOLOGICAL TRUTH OF STATEMENTS

The basic contention of 'ontological correspondence' as supported by traditionally orthodox philosophers and theologians is that each proposition or act of judgment corresponds or does not correspond to reality, is either eternally true or eternally false. The underlying tenet of such a position is that there is a world that is independent of thought and belief that we aim to learn about in our inquiries, and that we can discover reality and can make statements that correspond to this reality.[1]

With Lindbeck also, the 'real' is accessible. Lindbeck even says that this real can be 'infallibly known' (101). But this 'real' is, according to Lindbeck, always a '*humanly real*' (my italics), one that is in large part socially constructed and learnt from the outside (62).[2] Lindbeck argues that the 'real' can be 'infallibly known' only as 'intrasystematically' true, since 'ontological truth', or certainty about the correspondence of reality, involves faith in the Christian message, not just knowledge about it (101).[3] Moreover, according to Lindbeck, even if the possibility of ontological correspondence is possible, yet it is not 'doctrinally necessary', nor is it 'binding' (106). Lindbeck even argues that 'ontological interpretations' are often 'unimportant', and that they should not be made 'communally normative' for the way Christians live and think, since they 'may or may not correspond' to reality (106).

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1. Landesman, C., *An Introduction to Epistemology* (1997) 132. Wittgenstein gives some support to this approach to truth when he argues for a picture theory of language (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922), a view which Wittgenstein himself later rejected in favour of language-games (*Philosophical Investigations*, 1953).
2. All references in parenthesis within this text are to the 1984 edition.
3. This has led to Lindbeck's position being compared to Barthian confessionalism. Cf. Tracy, D., 'Lindbeck's New Program for Theology: A Reflection', *The Thomist* (1985) 465.

Furthermore, Lindbeck maintains that 'ontological truth by correspondence' should not be limited to 'propositionalism' (51).[4] He argues that 'ontological truth by correspondence' could also be expressed in more performative uses of language, in 'adoration, proclamation, obedience, promise hearing, and promise-keeping' (68). Thus, Lindbeck opts for a 'performative-propositional theological theory of religious truth', where performative utterances are seen to do something rather than merely say something. Using J.L.Austin's notion of "performatory" language, Lindbeck argues that a religious utterance 'acquires the propositional truth of ontological correspondence' insofar as it is a performance, an act or deed, which helps create that correspondence (65). In this sense, Lindbeck fuses orthodoxy with orthopraxis.

Where creeds are concerned, Lindbeck argues that these are in effect performative, and that they 'function regulatively', rather than propositionally (19). Creeds do not make first-order truth claims, but rather regulate truth claims by excluding some and permitting others. The articles of faith function as rules. Lindbeck sees 'no reason to proceed further and insist on an ontological reference' of articles of faith. Lindbeck argues that creeds already have doctrinal authority, even if this does not necessarily depend on first-order ontological reference (105).[5]

Lindbeck argues for a plurality of theological stances. Ontological interpretations should not, he says, be made communally normative for the way Christians live and think. Lindbeck opts for a rule theory of doctrine, precisely because it allows speculations on the possible correspondence of Christian language to the metaphysical, while not requiring the constraints associated with propositions (106). The one and only task of doctrines, in their role as church teachings, is, he says, to recommend and exclude certain ranges of... propositional utterances or symbolizing activities' (19). Lindbeck thus makes a case for theological speculation, while balancing both the positive and the apophatic ways of doing theology.

His argument for a rule theory of doctrine has implications both for doctrines that have already been formulated and for doctrines that are yet to be formulated. And it has an effect on how one is to understand faithfulness. In this case, faithfulness to doctrines (qua rules) 'does not necessarily mean repeating them; rather, it requires, in the making of any new formulations, adherence to the same directives that were

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4. Lindbeck claims that 'Fundamentalist literalism...is a product of modernity' (51).
5. Lindbeck argues that Athanasius himself thought of the Christological and Trinitarian statements made at Nicaea, not as first-order propositions with ontological reference, but as a second-order rule of speech (94).

involved in their first formulation' (81). In this line of argument, the reasoning behind such formulations becomes more important than the conclusions themselves.

Lindeck does not just support multiple forms of theological speculation on the part of theologians, but also multiple forms of dogmatic assertions on the part of ecclesial authorities. Lindbeck distinguishes 'between what a doctrine affirms ontologically and the diverse conceptualities or formulations in which the affirmation can be expressed', arguing that the two extremes of relativism and traditionalism may thus be avoided (78-9). He then maintains that 'one and the same proposition can be expressed in a variety of sentences employing a variety of conceptualities' (93). His basic tenet is that '**Change in conceptuality need not change the truth claim or rule that is being enunciated' (93). This applies for both first-order and second-order propositions, since** both first-order and second-order propositions (e.g., rules) are separable from the forms in which they are articulated.

It should be pointed out that, according to Lindbeck, first-order ontological truth 'rarely if ever happens on the pages of theological treatises or in the course of doctrinal discussions'. Technical theology and official doctrine are, according to Lindbeck, second-order discourse. They do not affirm anything either true or false about God and his relation to creatures, but only speak about such assertions' (69). On the contrary, affirmations with ontological import' characterise ordinary religious language 'when [religious language] is seen in a comprehensive and a performative sense, when it is used to mould lives through prayer, praise, preaching and exhortation' (69). This is when first-order ontological truth claims occur.

Ontological truth is therefore, according to Lindbeck, not to be automatically attributed to theological discourse. As stated earlier, for Lindbeck, ontological truth is attributable to religious language only if it is expressed within a context, which is coherent, pragmatically, with the speech that is being expressed. Only then may one speak of first-order propositions and of first-order ontological truth. While appreciating that assertions are not independent of the context in which they are made, and the subject that makes them, the truth of such statements is not wholly dependent on such a context and such a subject. Lindbeck may be understood as saying that propositions acquire truth through their context, and that truth is only articulated when propositions seeking to express that truth are pronounced in a proper context and by a coherent subject.

To sum up: Lindbeck therefore assumes that it is possible to have first-order propositions that make ontological truth claims (65), but such claims must be made by someone 'skilled in the language and practice of faith'. Religious utterances do not, in and of themselves correspond to reality. Their correspondence to reality 'is only a function of their role [i.e., the role of religious utterances] in constituting a form of life, a way of being in the world, which is shaped by the Christian stories and which itself corresponds to...the Ultimately Real' (65). Lindbeck thus attempts to establish ontological truth on the basis of context and individual practice. In the process he also offers a valid solution concerning the ambiguity of statements. In this perspective, verbally formulated propositions, which may be ambiguous out of context, in the sense that their correspondence with reality may be difficult to establish, become unambiguously true or false in the concrete situation in which they are pronounced.

INTRASYSTEMATIC TRUTH

While, on a realist view, Lindbeck chooses to recognise that reality has an existence independent of our cultural and linguistic setting, he also wishes to acknowledge that language (and its user) has the power to construct that reality. Lindbeck therefore speaks of 'intrasystematic' truth, or the truth of coherence, and of intrasystematic truth claims, which, he says, are second-order propositions resulting from coherence with 'the total relevant context' (64. 80).

Lindbeck maintains that meaning is 'constituted by the uses of a specific language rather than being distinguishable from it'. One can learn the significance of things (signs, symbols, actions), and how these things fit into 'systems of communication or purposeful action' from 'inside the relevant context'. The meaning of words will then vary along with the context. The two examples which Lindbeck gives are the two terms: 'God' and 'love'. Terms like 'God' and 'love', he points out, operate differently within different contexts, shaping different realities and experiences (114). It is on this basis that Lindbeck argues for the religious truth of statements. It is not a relative stance, but rather an anti-sceptical one. Religious utterances like '*Christus est Dominus*' are true, but, he adds, 'only as parts of 'a total pattern' of speaking, thinking, feeling, and acting' (114). On the contrary, 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 (64).

Thus, according to Lindbeck, there are ways of determining the truth or the falsity of something. Truth is that which the system would recognize as such, that which can be confirmed and corroborated by appealing to the rest of the system, that which has significance within a system. Truth is the meaning, as established by the system (64). It is that which coheres, not just with other utterances, but with 'the correlative forms of life' (64). The way to truth is to learn the language, practice and way of life of that system. Only thus, can one affirm or reject 'the propositional meaning of its affirmations' (68). The system provides the 'supportive environment, the tutelage of expert practitioners, and the assiduous practice' in the language and skills required (124).[6] And, in the context of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic understanding of religion, the system provides the tools for judging the truth and the falsity not just of words, but also of thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Hence, in Lindbeck's theory, a religious utterance like '*Christus est Dominus*' is objectively real for most Christians, but its truth can only be asserted 'if one commit[s] oneself to a way of life' (66). By this, he does not just mean a personal authenticity, but also an involvement in the culture, the language and the whole way of life of a community. One of the implications of such an assertion for truth is that, according to Lindbeck, in order for a statement to be ontologically true, it must be intrasystematically true (64). A second implication is that, though utterances can be intrasystematically true, this in no sense assures their ontological truth or meaningfulness (65). Thirdly, only once intrasystematic truth is established, does ontological truth become possible. Finally, it is possible for intrasystematic truth to be verified, at least within the system (101).

CATEGORIAL TRUTH

Lindbeck sees truth as categories in terms of which a particular vision of reality can be framed. Seeing truth as categorial has the advantage of making ontological truth possible, even while defining truth in the context of a particular meaning system.[7] Lindbeck describes 'categories' as the "grammar", or the "rules of the game" in terms of which truth claims are made and expressive symbols employed' (48). By categories, he appears to mean both the vocabulary of a

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6. By 'system' one is to understand the religion itself, with all that it encompasses, and the community that practises it.
7. Thiel, J.E., *The Nature of Doctrine*, Book Review, p.108.

religion and its 'paradigmatic or normative patterns'.[8] According to Lindbeck, an intrasystematically true statement is ontologically false, or meaningless, if it is part of a system that lacks the concepts or categories to refer to the relevant realities. On the contrary, an intrasystematically true statement is ontologically true if it is part of a system that is itself categorially true (64). Thus, in Lindbeck's mindset, categorial truth makes 'propositional, practical, and symbolic truth' possible, if not certain, because it makes meaningful statements possible (48).

Where religions are concerned, Lindbeck acknowledges that a religion may have the concepts and categories that enable it to refer to the religious object, that there may only be one such religion, and that only in such a religion could propositional, and expressive religious truth or falsity be present. He reasons, however, that truth may be present even in 'partly false religions' (49-50). Most significantly, he asserts that those religions which do not have the concepts and categories that enable them to refer to the religious object might be 'categorially false', 'religiously meaningless', 'nonsensical', which gives them no claim to propositional or expressive truth (51). Lindbeck also concedes that, even if there is only one religion in which reference to God can occur, it could still be open to falsehoods in what it affirms of him, since 'categorial truth does not exclude propositional error.' What categorial truth does is, it makes truth possible, and it makes error possible (51).[9]

INTRA-TEXTUALITY

Lindbeck's concept of 'intra-textuality' affirms his earlier assertions about meaning and truth being intra-systematic. Lindbeck sees 'intra-textuality' as a 'method' which 'locates' religious meaning inside the text or semiotic system, and he sees it as a 'condition' for the faithful description and development of a religion or tradition (122). Intra-textuality emphasises that the text is essential for 'the system', since it shapes one's way of being in the world. Intra-textuality also emphasizes that it is within the text that one finds the normative aspect, the rules, that will enable the adherents of a religion to be in the world in a particular way (65). The text enables them to 'interpret and live in the world' and 'to organize life' in relation to the Ultimate (32. 64).

8. Marshal, B.D., 'Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian', *The Thomist* (1989) 359-60.
9. Lindbeck grants that, however outrageous it may sound, even in the one true religion in which reference to God can occur, there may still be falsehoods in its affirmations of God (51).

Lindbeck speaks of intra-textual 'outlooks' and 'forms of life' and says that the reality of things as meaningful signs is wholly constituted by their intra-textuality, that is, by their place in the 'story' (128. 114). To interpret a text, is therefore, to interpret it in terms of its 'immanent meaning', that is, 'the meanings immanent in the religious language of those whose use the text is a paradigmatic instance' (116).[10] In this sense, the intra-textuality that Lindbeck is proposing requires that the texts be treated as 'mediums of interpretation', rather than as texts 'to be interpreted'.

Within this framework, the Bible is to be seen as a paradigm for Christianity, to be used in order to decode the signs, symbols and actions within the universe (120. 121. 123). Its meanings are then to be extended to the whole of reality. Its language, concepts, and categories are to be applied to contemporary realities (119). Intra-textual theology thus assumes that the text has 'contents and perspectives' on extra-textual reality, that these 'contents and perspectives' may be accessed (117), and that they should be applied.[11] In seeking to correlate the truth of the text with the truth of reality, Lindbeck is seeking to be consistent with his other arguments concerning the nature of religion, as well as his concepts of categorial truth and intra-systematic truth.

Evaluation: Truth and its Context

Lindbeck maintains that religious statements acquire enough referential specificity to have first-order or ontological truth or falsity 'only in determinate settings' (68), when utterances are 'parts of a total pattern' and when they cohere with 'the total relevant context', when the form of life is 'correlative' to the utterances (64). Lindbeck uses the terms 'context', 'determinate settings', and 'total pattern', to include all the elements that may affect the meaning of a statement, whether this be the physical location in which the statement is pronounced, the temporal backdrop in which it is said, the political milieu that sets the scene, the a priori meaning established by those who were responsible for the original statement or

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10. Congar also insists on the paradigmatic value of the Bible story, Congar, Y., *I believe in the Holy Spirit*: Volume II: *Lord and Giver of Life*. Milestones in Catholic Theology, Crossroad, Herder, 34
11. In this sense, Lindbeck's 'intra-textuality' is similar to the Barthian dialectical method and to the model of correlation developed by contemporary theologians. There is a mutual critical correlation between 'the meaning and truth of the tradition and the interpretation of the meaning and truth of the contemporary situation'. Cf. Tracy, D., 'Lindbeck's new program for Theology', *The Thomist* (1985) 471.

by the current community of faith; or whether this be the state of the speaker, his attitudes, feelings, and sentiments, the consequences of his utterance, or the actions accompanying the speech.[12]

There is, of course, no denying that statements such as *Christus est Dominus*, have been misused in the past to justify behaviour that Christ himself would never have approved of. But one certainly cannot reduce the significance and truth of such a statement only to its context, to the situation within which it may be said, and to the components that accompany it. That would make truth overly dependent on meaning and to make truth relative. If *Christus est Dominus* does carry ontological truth, this must transcend the temporal, political and physical situation in which it is uttered. It must have some truth that enables one to recognise it as similar if not the same, even when uttered in different contexts, so that that essential meaning is carried in the various situations. It must have a meaning, a truth, independent of its context. If one does not accept this, one would have to say that Christus est Dominus has a totally different meaning every time it is uttered, since no two contexts will be exactly the same.

Lindbeck's line of argument, regarding the varying factors that affect the truth of a statement gets him into a number of other difficulties. For one thing, it contradicts his notion of intra-systematic truth. *Christus est Dominus*, uttered by a crusader on a battlefield would have been a meaningful combination of speech and act, one approved by the Church of the time, which would have lauded the defence of Christ's name by violent means. It therefore must have had meaning, and its utterance must have carried religious truth. Would *Christus Est Dominus* also have been meaningless, and consequently false, on the lips of Joan of Arc, even as she did something similar to what the crusader did?

Besides, there is a sense in which one should speak about absolute truth, on the principle that 'if something is true, then it must be true for all people and at all times.'[13] While it may be true that various factors modify the meaning of a statement, Lindbeck is exaggerating the context dependence of meaning, and he is correlating falsity too much with the incongruity and inappropriateness of meaning. Moreover, in failing to admit that *Christus est Dominus* has a meaning that persists whether one is uttering it during worship, or uttering it on the battlefield, Lindbeck is

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12. How all these elements are related to doctrine, remains unclear.
13. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 14 September 1998, par 15 and 27.

contradicting his own arguments about the content and form of doctrines, whereby permanence is possible.

Furthermore, in his analytical disputations, Lindbeck seems to forget that there is a sense in which the name of Jesus Christ is always a channel of grace, irrespective of the situation in which the name is pronounced. If I knew no Latin at all, and had no idea what *Christus est Dominus* stood for, that would not make the statement any less true. The effect that the repetition of the phrase has on me, the speaker, and on you, the listener, may vary depending on the meaning that we give it, but its ontological truth or falsity will not be affected by us or by the context in which it is said.[14] This is reminiscent of the principle in sacramentology of the *ex opere operato*, where the validity of a sacrament does not depend on external conditions, such as the state of grace of the priest. While I would agree with Lindbeck that our access to truth remains natural, or 'human', truth is not just anthropological. The anthropological context may authenticate the meaning or truth of a religious sentence, confirm and substantiate it, but not comprise the truth itself. The context is therefore a criterion for truth, but not the truth. A criterion for truth would be a way of finding out what is true.[15] To fail to differentiate between truth and meaning in the way Lindbeck sometimes seems to do, dissipates the authority, supremacy and even beauty of religious language.

Therefore, to give this conclusion a more theological tinge: saying *Christus est Dominus* when my image of a Lord is one of a tyrant, and when I have no respect and trust in his help, when I do not recognise his divine mystery, when I do not love him, honour him, and acknowledge his glory and his power over the world and history, when I am not willing to submit my personal freedom in an absolute manner to him, all of this, in no way reduces the truth of the utterance.[16] If it were our understanding, our intention, or even our coherence, that gave the utterance its truth, it would never become true, since we never really appreciate the lordship of Christ fully. As Lindbeck's discussion on salvation indicated, we are all still at the

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14. It is generally believed by Christians that the name of Jesus has a certain power. F.G. Holweck, 'The Holy Name of Jesus', in *The New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*, www.newadvent.org/athen/07421a.htm. Accessed 8/07/06.
15. One can consistently hold (as Rescher himself does) that coherence provides the 'criterion' of truth, the way of finding out what is true, but that the nature of truth consists in something different, a correspondence of some kind. Cf. Walker Ralph C.S., *The Coherence Theory of Truth: Realism, Anti-realism, Idealism,* Routledge, London 1989, 2.
16. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 448-450.

beginning of our journey, and if we had to wait until our religious statements and our actions became compatible, we would never say anything.

Finally, I feel that Lindbeck fails to acknowledge the miracle and mystery of human language. There is a sense in which religious language takes on a meaning that is unexplainable. The fact that the words '*Christus est Dominus*' have meaning, refer to the Son of God, and claim to express the ontological truth that 'Christ is Lord' is only thanks to the incarnational principle. It is yet another sign of God's 'condescension'.[17] As Newman would say, the doctrine of the Incarnation allows words to be invested with a 'sacramental office'.[18]

This does not lessen the importance of Lindbeck's work. His book remains one of the most captivating books on the subject, and his attempt to clarify some of the issues involved, and to bring together theology and analytical philosophy, as well as the solutions he suggests, are certainly laudable, and oftentimes even compelling.

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17. Dei Verbum, 13.
18. This corresponds to Newman's 5th principle of Christianity, which refers to the mystical sense of the Scriptures.

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