MEANING TO BE HUMAN

Conversations with George Lindbeck’s
The Nature of Doctrine

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.
ABSTRACT

In his *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), George Lindbeck offered a culture-theoretical approach to doctrine over against liberal and conservative approaches. Respondents to Lindbeck objected that he had misunderstood his opponents, but they displayed their own misunderstandings of his argument. I seek a more fruitful engagement with Lindbeck’s work, proceeding by way of constructed ‘conversations’ between Lindbeck and some of those who made substantial responses to his work from liberal and conservative perspectives. Some underlying issues are clarified with the help of the older voices of F.D.E. Schleiermacher and Karl Barth.

A recurring theme in these conversations is the nature of particularity and its implications for theology. Lindbeck criticises liberal theology on this point, yet he, like Schleiermacher, defines Christian particularity in terms of a ‘pretheological’ social anthropology and on this basis asserts that Christianity is a comprehensive faith. To avoid such incoherence, theological accounts of particularity must attend to Christianity’s own account of what its particularity is.

Though labelled ‘conservative’ by some, Lindbeck’s theory of doctrine relies on philosophical argument rather than the usual conservative grounds in tradition and/or scripture. Yet all such foundations are problematic insofar as they ignore the priority of the Christian confession and its witness to the intrinsic vulnerability of tradition and its sources. Lindbeck’s theory, and some conservative proposals, harbour ideological intrusions alien to the Christian confession, thereby illustrating that critique is needed precisely because of, and for the sake of, that confession.

The key issues emerging from these conversations with *The Nature of Doctrine* are the comprehensiveness of religious claims and the vulnerability of human discourse. To these I respond with a ‘confessional and therefore critical’ theological hermeneutic: confession of Jesus Christ as Lord implicates its confessors, and therefore the confession itself, in the vulnerability of human finitude and fallenness, from which Christian tradition and scripture are not excepted. This hermeneutic avoids problems noted in the various proposals offered by Lindbeck and his respondents, and poses challenges for future theorists of religion and doctrine.
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_Soli Deo Gloria._
ABBREVIATIONS & CITATIONS

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>BO</td>
<td><em>Brief Outline on the Study of Theology</em> (Schleiermacher 1966).</td>
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<td>CD</td>
<td><em>Church Dogmatics</em> (Barth 1975 and 1956).</td>
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<td>CF</td>
<td><em>The Christian Faith</em> (Schleiermacher 1928).</td>
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<td>LL</td>
<td><em>On the Glaubenslehre: Two Letters to Dr Lücke</em> (Letters to Lücke = Schleiermacher 1981).</td>
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<td>OR</td>
<td><em>On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers</em> (Schleiermacher 1988).</td>
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<td>Speeches</td>
<td>Alternative brief title for OR.</td>
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<td>TCW</td>
<td><em>Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective</em> (Watson 1994).</td>
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*ND25 changes the pagination of the original, but not the text. The foreword appears in ND on pp. 7-13, and in ND25 on pp. xxxiii-xxxviii, with different page breaks. In ND, chapter 1 begins on p. 15, while in ND25 it commences on p. 1, and subsequent page breaks are identical to those in ND. Thus, in the main text (chapters 1-6), page numbers in ND25 are 14 less than those in ND. In this study, page references to ND are to the original edition.

Works for which abbreviated titles have been provided are cited by abbreviation and page number, e.g., ND 56. Where it is clear which work is being cited, the abbreviated title may be omitted. Other citations are given in Author-Date format, as follows:

Author Year, Page(s), e.g., Smith 1988, 154-5.

Where an ‘n’ for ‘notes’ is required, it appears without punctuation, e.g., n35. ‘p.’ and ‘pp.’ for ‘page(s)’ are used occasionally for clarity.
Works with numbered sections or paragraphs are usually cited by those numbers (prefixed by §). Page numbers may also appear if the sections are long. In citations from Schleiermacher’s *The Christian Faith*, ‘ps’ stands for ‘postscript’, e.g., ‘CF §19.ps’ refers to the postscript appended to the discussion of paragraph 19.

Full details of all cited works appear in the bibliography in Author-Date order.
MEANING TO BE HUMAN

Conversations with George Lindbeck’s
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INTRODUCTION

My attention was first drawn to George Lindbeck through references to his work in Lesslie Newbigin’s writings on ‘gospel and culture’ issues. Newbigin’s approach to these issues was philosophically aware, but was not (and not intended to be) technically rigorous. Intrigued that Newbigin was open to the possibilities of Lindbeck’s approach, yet guarded as to its actual achievements, I came to The Nature of Doctrine seeking more technical detail than Newbigin provided, and wondering about the basis of his reservations.

With reading and re-reading Lindbeck I came to understand Newbigin’s attitude towards him, and was stimulated to much wider reading and reflection. I have found ND and Lindbeck’s other work on related themes highly stimulating, and a sense of unease with his constructive proposals has continually goaded me to return to the issues with which he grappled, to examine and re-examine my misgivings concerning his solutions, to listen to the substantial responses of others who were provoked by his ideas, and gradually to find my own direction.

That my assessment of Lindbeck’s work is not more positive is a matter of regret, for it has contributed significantly to my theological development, for which I am grateful. I do not expect that Lindbeck will welcome my criticisms, but perhaps he can welcome an acknowledgment of debt: in ways of which I am no doubt incompletely aware, he has been a crucial contributor to my appreciation of what it means for humans to presume to speak of God. Although I think my conclusions are firmly based, I cannot hope that they are entirely ‘right’. Perhaps others may find in this study some lines of argument that offer the benefit I found in Lindbeck: that of fruitful provocation.

1.1 THE NATURE OF THE ARGUMENT

Lindbeck wrote ND in response to issues arising in his ecumenical work, and intended it mainly as a contribution to ecumenical theology, but much of its impact arose from the fact that he developed his proposal over against ‘standard’ conservative and liberal approaches to doctrine, criticising them strongly. The ensuing debates had more to do with arguments between liberal, conservative, and Lindbeck’s ‘postliberal’ approaches to religion and doctrine than with the phenomena of ecumenical discussion that had prompted Lindbeck’s thinking, and seemed to be richer in misunderstanding than in genuine engagement. Lindbeck’s respondents were

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2 Lindbeck 1984, abbreviated henceforth as ND.

3 In the foreword to the German edition of ND (ETs in Lindbeck 2003a and ND25, page numbers given for both), Lindbeck comments that ND ‘was captured by unanticipated interest groups who so shaped the public reception that even I, the author, now read it partly through their eyes’ (p. 196/xxix). Whereas he ‘ naïvely supposed it would be
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distracted from his substantive argument by their desire to counterattack what they saw as his misrepresentations of liberal and conservative positions. There was truth in Lindbeck’s critiques, and truth in the responses, but less real engagement than one might wish. I found myself sifting noisy polemics so as to hear the underlying issues, and imagining a conversation that could have taken place had those issues been more fruitfully engaged.

In this study, I use ‘conversation’ as a kind of literary conceit for structural and thematic purposes, partly because it reflects the way I responded to what I found in the literature, and partly because it is an appropriate response to one aspect of my conclusions. In this ‘conversation’ I am a self-appointed sympathetic listener. I think misunderstanding is occurring, and I want to know what could be achieved if the misunderstandings were clarified. In view of the perspectival character of knowledge, accepted by all parties to the conversation, it is better to seek clarification from within a given standpoint before venturing to offer correction from without. Critique from another standpoint already assumes the superiority of that standpoint, which begs another question (especially in these kinds of debates). Adopting another’s standpoint, one can perhaps show how it can meet a challenge; or why it can’t do so without changing in certain ways. Therefore I rely mainly on immanent critique, and treat coherence as an important criterion. The conversation proceeds by listening to one speaker at a time, trying to appreciate the inner dynamic of each standpoint, and pausing occasionally to relate the different standpoints to each other in a way that is sympathetic to each.

A potential difficulty with this approach is that, while Lindbeck’s proposal can plausibly be called ‘a standpoint’, the same cannot be said for ‘conservative theology’ and ‘liberal theology’, each of which is a complex movement encompassing many standpoints and many arguments. I hope it will suffice at this stage to say that the nature and identity of these movements are among the points at issue in this study, as indeed they were at issue in ND and the debates following its publication. Not only the underlying issues, but these movements also, will come into clearer focus as the conversation unfolds.

‘Adopting another’s standpoint’ is not a way of making my own standpoint invisible, but an attempt to find out whether one can actually stand at the point occupied by the other; whether it is advantageous to do so, or whether it is rather uncomfortable. My standpoint will be visible everywhere, since I share it with Lindbeck and most of those with whom I engage: that Jesus’ Lordship is the context in which Christians find themselves, and the light by which they see. Because it is common ground, I neither justify it, nor even defend it very much. However, the logic and basis of this confession, its basic content, its implications for theology, and the various protagonists’ relations to it, are recurring themes.

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interesting chiefly to doctrinally committed ecumenists’, in the event ‘the discussion came to be dominated by non-ecumenists’ (p. 198/xxx).

4 Lindbeck 1971, 232: ‘The affirmation of the Lordship of Christ is historically so thoroughly embedded in the very notion of Christian identity, that it is…cognitively dissonant to maintain one without the other.’ Compare ND 94.
1.2 THE CONVERSATION IN OUTLINE

Naturally enough, the way in which I have constructed the conversation is conditioned by the structure of Lindbeck’s argument in *ND*. Even so, my own argument, which emerges as the conversation unfolds, takes some surprising turns, so it may help to orient the reader if I indicate the flow of the conversation and describe some of the major signposts along the way. Chapter 2 begins with a detailed account of the origins, aims, argument and structure of *ND*, proceeding on that basis to a survey of the theory of religion—and the critique of liberal approaches to it—that comprise its first half. In this material Lindbeck develops the idea of religions as intentionally comprehensive ways of life in terms of which adherents engage the world. On this basis he faults ‘experiential-expressive’ views of religion for not taking seriously the comprehensiveness of religious claims, and for offering an allegedly greater comprehensiveness (and hence, covertly, a greater religion) in which religions with their practices and doctrines are treated as diverse expressions of underlying religious experiences that are essentially the same.

In chapter 3 I attend to some liberal scholars (David Tracy, Delwin Brown) who responded mainly to this aspect of Lindbeck’s argument, consider how their arguments appear from Lindbeck’s perspective, assess their relative strengths and weaknesses, and identify agreements and divergences. I find that Lindbeck and liberal theology can learn much from each other, and indeed have already done so, inasmuch as they both define Christian particularity in terms of anthropologies derived independently of Christian tradition. This unexpected (if in hindsight rather obvious) agreement prompts me to turn, in chapter 4, to the older voices of F.D.E. Schleiermacher and Karl Barth, and to view Lindbeck’s theory of religion in the light of their work. I find the roots of the agreement between Lindbeck and liberal theology in the work of Schleiermacher, and conclude that both are his offspring, with Lindbeck more faithfully representing both Schleiermacher’s basic orientation and his incoherence. Taking up Schleiermacher’s and Lindbeck’s methodological assertion of the comprehensiveness of Christian faith (but not their practical denial of it), I explore in conversation with Barth the possibilities and pitfalls of a coherent Christian understanding of both Christian particularity and particularity in general, concluding that the confession ‘Jesus is Lord’ must shape theological hermeneutics. Those who make this confession cannot be content to appropriate any ideology or technique without critically engaging it from the standpoint of the gospel of Jesus’ Lordship. This gospel means *inter alia* that human beings with their actions and ideas find their true, though still vulnerable and provisional, standing only as they enter into Jesus’ service. This point concludes discussion of the first of the underlying issues to emerge from the conversation, namely, the particularity and comprehensiveness of religious claims.

The second part of Lindbeck’s proposal is his ‘rule theory’ of doctrine and the case for its superiority over ‘propositional’ accounts. In chapter 5 I describe this material and discuss some of its difficulties. Lindbeck’s critique of propositional views of doctrine overlooks the possibility that such views could affirm the historicity of doctrine, its sources and its interpreters—matters on which his own theory is vulnerable—and his argument that rule theory is better than propositional views does not succeed. As well, the rule theory harbours philosophical and theological difficulties: it shares in some of the problems of propositionalism; it misconstrues Wittgenstein;
and it arises from a precommitment to the possibility of doctrinal constancy, a precommitment that not only pushes doctrine into an ahistorical realm but is in tension with confession of Jesus’ Lordship. I argue that an account of doctrine informed by the Christian doctrines of Creation and Fall must see tradition (and hence doctrine) as fully implicated in creaturely finitude (historical particularity) and moral frailty (susceptibility to ideological distortion). Identifying tradition’s vulnerability as the other major issue underlying the debates sparked by Lindbeck’s work, I suggest that a robust approach to religion and doctrine must address both the comprehensiveness of religious claims and the vulnerability of human discourse, while recognising that it is itself comprehended within such claims, and is itself vulnerable as human discourse.

Thus far in the conversation, I have welcomed Lindbeck’s insistence on the comprehensiveness of religious claims, but have found that his proposal does not allow for it coherently, and is inattentive to tradition’s vulnerability. The question then arises as to whether I can offer a proposal that meets these challenges while also accounting for the phenomena that prompted Lindbeck’s original enquiry. The conclusions of chapters 4 and 5 point towards a confessional propositionalism that includes among its propositions the vulnerability of tradition and its own nature as traditioned inquiry. Chapter 6 takes this direction in dialogue with Alister McGrath, Karl Barth, and Francis Watson, with special attention to ideology as an aspect of the vulnerability of human understanding. I argue that, precisely because it confesses Jesus as Lord, Christian theology is obliged to engage ideology wherever it is recognised, be that in theological liberalism and conservatism, in traditional statements such as ‘the Bible is the Word of God,’ or in ‘unredeemed tradition’ in scripture itself. In this engagement, theology can never assume the high ground, for it shares in the vulnerabilities common to all human discourse, even as it seeks, in and through its own vulnerability, to bear witness to Jesus.

The concluding chapter 7 reflects on the entire conversation in terms of its major issues: the comprehensiveness of religious claims (and especially the universal intent of the Christian confession that ‘Jesus is Lord’) and the vulnerability of human discourse (including religious discourse). These issues can be addressed through a theological hermeneutic I describe as ‘confessional and therefore critical,’ indicating the priority of confessional commitment and the fact that the Christian confession comprehends its own vulnerability. Such a hermeneutic provides a stronger, if more challenging, basis for ecumenical engagement than that provided by Lindbeck in ND, and a more coherent and more reliable guide to the significance of liberal, conservative and ‘postliberal’ approaches for Christian theology.

Seeing that Lindbeck in ND engages first with liberals on the nature of religion and then with conservatives on the nature of doctrine, one might be tempted to read this study as a postliberal-liberal debate balanced by a postliberal-conservative one. Though partly true, such a reading would be mistaken. My concern is less with reviewing and assessing debates arranged under customary categories than with uncovering and addressing the issues that lay dormant beneath them. Identifying writers as ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal’ and maintaining ‘balance’ between them are less important than identifying the comprehensiveness of religious claims and the vulnerability of human discourse as key issues in theological hermeneutics, and proposing a theological response in terms of confession, criticism and the relation between them.
1.3 THE SELECTION OF VOICES

In choosing Tracy, Brown, McGrath and Watson as the main contemporary speakers in conversation with Lindbeck, I do not mean to suggest that others have not made significant contributions, or that these four responses include the full scope of such reflection. Rather, their responses have been of most assistance in refining my own approach. Brown and McGrath are the most substantial contemporary conversation partners because their book-length arguments were in large measure written in response to Lindbeck, they offer their own treatments of the cultural processes that loom so large in ND, their theological orientations fall clearly within the two main streams of response, and they share my concern for the foundation and structure of argument. Tracy’s early responses open up issues that receive fuller treatment in Brown’s book, and Watson illuminates an important matter arising from engagement with McGrath and Barth.

I was drawn to Schleiermacher and Barth because of the way their names were used in liberal / postliberal polemics. In the event, they not only helped to locate Lindbeck on the canvas of modern theology, but made profound contributions to the argument. I attend to them as to the other ‘speakers’—by inhabiting their arguments and seeking out their tensions and coherences.

Apart from these contemporary and older scholars, many others wrote articles and essays to which I refer at the relevant points. As a way of further orienting readers to my enquiry, I offer the following comments on monographs which, although they interact with Lindbeck, receive less attention from me than some might expect.

John Milbank comments on Lindbeck in the final chapter of his *Theology and Social Theory* (1990). An outline of that chapter will help to set these comments in their context. Milbank argues that social theory is a covert theology and that Christian theology offers a true social science (pp. 4, 6) which presupposes the true society it explicates (p. 380). This society arose as ‘a definite practice’ in certain precise historical circumstances, and exists only as a particular historical development (*ibid.*). Therefore Christian theology as social science requires a ‘counter-history,’ i.e., a re-narration of world history from the viewpoint of the emergence of the church (381). It must also describe the emergent ‘counter-ethics’, i.e., the church’s distinctive practice, and provide a ‘counter-ontology’ that provisionally articulates the framework of reference implicit in Christian story and action so as to clarify its total difference from all other cultural systems. Lastly, theology as social science must revisit counter-history with a view to self-critique: it must reflect on the fact that, ‘for the most part, the Church failed to bring about salvation, but instead ushered in the modern secular – at first liberal, and finally nihilistic – world’ (381-2).

Milbank engages Lindbeck as he begins his counter-history with a section on ‘Metanarrative Realism’. He concurs with Lindbeck’s rejection of foundationalism in its propositionalist and expressivist forms and his assertion that the entirety of Christian cultural practice, with all its images and actions, is a single performative proposition. Milbank maintains, however, that this implies a greater role for propositions than Lindbeck allows. Firstly, every ‘performance’ (including the articulation of theology) makes sense only within a historical and mythical setting that narrates reality and is thus ‘propositional’ at the level of creative imagination. Propositions

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5 Milbank 1990, 382-88.
INTRODUCTION

arise inevitably at a theoretical level in response to questioning of the performative setting (383). Secondly, doctrinal reflection is not just a more exact reading of preceding practices and narratives. It is the speculative interpretation of the implicit assumptions of the tradition. Its interpretations are necessarily historically situated and contribute to the tradition they interpret. Hence, while doctrines do not ‘refer’ on their own, they do so in conjunction with the interpreted tradition, contributing a propositional element to the overall ‘imagination of reference’ (383-5). This leads to his deepest reservation—Lindbeck’s treatment of scripture as a self-contained and world-containing ahistorical narrative leads not to metanarrative realism but to a new narratological foundationalism (385-6). Against this, Milbank asserts the fundamental importance of understanding the Christian story as an open historical story. The church stands in a narrative relationship with Jesus and the gospels, in a story that subsumes both (387). It is the whole story of human history which is still being enacted and interpreted in the light of its central events (388).

In summary, Milbank says that Lindbeck has replaced two illicit foundationalisms with another of his own devising, has not recognised the indispensability of doctrine’s propositional aspect, and, most crucially, has insulated Christian narrative from its necessarily historical genesis and its intrinsic historical openness. This enquiry offers some similar observations, and also raises questions that may challenge two aspects of Milbank’s constructive proposal: the idea that the church is ‘a distinct society’ (p. 381), and the claim that the Christian ontology of harmonious difference is not vulnerable to deconstructive secular critique (376, 427-30). One might have expected such assertions to be at least qualified by, and preferably fully integrated with, Milbank’s narration of ecclesial history as largely a history of failure (432-4). One strand of my argument is that vulnerability belongs to the core of Christian thought, not only because God’s vulnerability in the incarnation lies at the core of Christian faith, but also because all reflection upon this core is conducted by finite and fallen creatures.

In Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda (1996), Nancey Murphy describes liberalism and fundamentalism in Anglo-American Christianity as responses to modern philosophical frameworks characterised by foundationalism, pursuit of objective verification and an account of the natural world that reduces causation to the laws of physics. Now, however, such frameworks appear vulnerable to ‘postmodern’ insights that emphasise the existence of knowledge in webs of interlocking ideas and practices, the possibility of verification only within traditions of enquiry that are communal, pragmatic and historically extended, and scientific acceptance of top-down causation and multi-levelled explanation. In view of this, Murphy suggests that ‘it is time to ask how theology ought to be done in a postmodern era and to envision a rapprochement between theologians of the left and right’ (p. 1). She hopes for answers in terms of fresh approaches in method rather than fresh starts in content (154). The distinction between method and content is important to Murphy’s ‘strong claims for the role of philosophy in theological development’, namely, that theology’s content comes from its own special sources (such as revelation), while its concepts and forms of argument are the province of philosophy (p. 4). These matters are of some importance in this study—the relation between philosophy and theology occupies much of chapter 4, and the distinction between method and content is addressed in chapter 5.
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Murphy’s references to Lindbeck are positive. She gratefully adopts his descriptions and terminology for conservative and liberal approaches to Christian faith (p. 36n, 37, 41-2) and relates these approaches to options available in modern philosophy. Later she presents Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic proposal as an example of how theology can respond to postmodern insights (127-31, 154). The little critical engagement she offers is concerned with refinements rather than basic concepts (44, 52, 116n, 128, 130). Murphy’s positive attitude to Lindbeck is due partly to her concern for ‘healing the…rift between Christians of the left and the right’ (156), and to her belief that this healing can occur in the new philosophical environment. Thus her aim is less critical engagement than proclamation of the possibilities created by the new situation, and Lindbeck is something of a beacon of hope for her in this regard. Murphy’s general support for Lindbeck also reflects basic resonances in their thinking on the matters mentioned above: the distinction between method and content, and the relation between philosophy and theology. I argue that these areas of Lindbeck’s (and hence of Murphy’s) thought are problematic, and that it is theology rather than philosophy that will not only resolve these difficulties, but heal the ideological wound of Christendom that is Murphy’s concern.

Like Lindbeck, Kathryn Tanner (Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology, 1997) believes that culture-theoretic concepts can be employed profitably in theology (p. x). Her work falls into the two parts indicated by her title: the first part provides a history of the idea of culture, an account of modern cultural anthropology, and a reconstruction of these ideas in the light of postmodern critiques; the second part uses the resulting postmodern view of culture as a basis for exploring some basic issues in Christian theology (p. 61). She finds Lindbeck’s (and Milbank’s) proposals indebted to modern concepts of culture and hence in need of reassessment. She notes that Lindbeck’s rule theory of doctrine requires rules that are insulated from the vicissitudes of history, and that postliberal appeal to Wittgenstein is problematic. I agree with many of Tanner’s observations and conclusions, and will refer to some of them later, but we differ in mode and structure of argument. For reasons alluded to above I proceed by way of immanent critique, and for reasons that will emerge in the course of chapters 3 and 4 I am unwilling to base my critique on cultural theory, notwithstanding the undoubted advantage of several more decades of cultural-anthropological scholarship than were available to Lindbeck. The perspective that Tanner shares with Murphy, namely, that cultural theory and/or philosophy ‘set the agenda’ for theology is one of the points at issue in the post-Lindbeck conversation.6

Paul Lakeland’s concerns in Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age (1997) are similar to those of Tanner, but focus specifically on the ways in which postmodernity ‘informs the agenda for religion and theology’ (p. ix). To this end he surveys the postmodern mood in popular culture and its manifestations in critical thought, considers the interconnections between postmodernity and religion, and offers ‘a theological apologetics for the postmodern world’ (xiii-xiv). Postliberals, he says, think that secular thought adulterates the gospel and that Christianity meets no other group on equal terms in open dialogue (43). Their fundamental motivation is to

6 This is not to deny that Tanner offers theological as well as cultural critique, or that she notes (as I do) that theology may have good reasons for ‘going along with’ postmodern insights (e.g., p. 119).
‘stem and reverse the tide of theological liberalism’ (65), and Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model of the church suits the devolutionary and fragmented nature of the postmodern world (66).

In his own proposal, Lakeland distinguishes between systematic and fundamental theologies. Systematic theology addresses ‘the clarity and consistency of the tradition’s expression of its convictions’ (82) in language ‘derived directly from revelation and the dependent narratives’ (87). Such theology most closely approaches the postliberal claim that ‘the text absorbs the world’ (85, 87). Fundamental theology is ‘quite a different enterprise, however’ (87), which explicates ‘the plausibility and intellectual respectability of its worldview in categories which, while compatible with revelation, are not drawn from it’ (82, 88). It mediates between tradition and world in a way that favours neither, and is thus a correlational theology conceived in Gadamerian terms (87-8). For Lakeland, theological engagement with the world is to be undertaken in fundamental, rather than systematic, theology (84, 85).

Lakeland’s proposal is problematic at several levels. I doubt that systematic and fundamental theology are separable to the extent his proposal requires, such that postliberal and correlational approaches can coexist as different departments in the same enterprise. How is fundamental theology ‘fundamental’, or, as he prefers, ‘foundational’ (87, 123n1)? It cannot be foundational for systematics without contradicting his definition of that discipline. Again, fundamental theology’s task of representing the tradition to the world is in tension with the requirement that neither tradition nor world be favoured in the mediation. Further, Lakeland approaches apologetic theology on the basis that ‘the fundamentals of Christian theology’ are ‘the rhetorical background out of which the tradition encounters the world,’ so that ‘theological statements are not claims about the way the world is,’ but claims about how we as individuals and faith communities exist in it (91). Yet no religion is content to say ‘this is true for us.’ Such problems make Lakeland’s work less useful for this study than some others.

David G. Kamitsuka (Theology and Contemporary Culture: Liberation, Postliberal and Revisionary Perspectives, 1999) responds to the unfruitful debates between liberation, postliberal and revisionary theological movements in the 1990s. He identifies the core values of these movements as, respectively, solidarity with the struggles and spiritualities of the oppressed, thick description of the habitable scriptural world which forms Christian communal character, and fully critical reflection in the public realm (pp. 3, 12). In his view, if theology is really to engage the contemporary situation, it needs to incorporate all three core values in a more open method (p. 4), which he pursues by means of non-foundationalist apologetics (chapter 3) and a regulative-dialectical hermeneutic (chapter 4). Kamitsuoka’s approach is like mine insofar as he listens carefully to representatives of the various approaches and considers how each could incorporate the others’ values; but he does not criticise the core values themselves by asking how they are related to Jesus as the core of Christian faith. The result is an

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7 Another point of distinction (raised specifically in the context of theology of religions) is that ‘while systematic theology necessarily proceeds on the assumptions of universality, it need never thematize these assumptions. But foundational theology, which is in the business of thematizing, cannot proceed on the unthematized assumptions of universality that are proper only to the in-house activity of the systematician’ (Lakeland 1997, 83). I do not understand how systematic theology could possibly avoid directly addressing the universality of Christian claims.
insightful and sophisticated compromise which concludes with a mediation of methodological questions using as criteria the core values with which he began (chapter 6). I agree with Kamitsuka that all three movements offer genuine insights, but where he asks how each can integrate the others’ core values, I interrogate the core values themselves. I also ask whether the arguments of Lindbeck and various others cohere with their own values, and whether in the end they lead to life in which those values are embodied.

Shelia Greeve Davaney (2006) comments on Lindbeck in her introduction to historicism in the *Guides to Theological Inquiry* series, attending especially to those aspects of his proposal that are most relevant to her theme. Her understanding of his relation to historicism is similar to mine. By way of critique, she notes Lindbeck’s view ‘that humans firmly reside within singular historical traditions, characterised by firm boundaries delineating insiders and outsiders, and structured by stable and unchanging cores that can be used to regulate the beliefs and practices of a tradition’s adherents’ (141). Each of the three elements in this critique emerge in my enquiry through conversation with earlier writers.

C. C. Pecknold (Transforming Postliberal Theology, 2005) sees in postliberal theology a vital and ongoing tradition of reflection. He wants to redirect postliberal thought along the path of what he calls ‘scriptural pragmatism’, and in this sense offers to ‘transform’ it. He promotes postliberal theology as a theology that serves the church conceived as a world-transforming practice responding to and furthering God’s world-reparative action in Jesus mediated through the theosemiotics of scripture. Pecknold’s description of postliberalism focusses on Lindbeck, with little mention of Hans Frei. He sees in Lindbeck ‘a new version of pragmatism’ (13), or at least ‘implicitly pragmatic tendencies’ that need ‘to be developed in an explicitly pragmatic way’ (34). He finds such development in Augustine’s theosemiotics, which transform Lindbeck’s intratextuality ‘into an outward movement that aims at an embodied replication of God’s work of repairing the world where it has been broken’ (59). This is a scriptural pragmatics—‘a programme of scriptural reasoning which follows a rule of love, a love that is known by its fruits’ (59). Having set Lindbeck in an Augustinian context, Pecknold finds in Peter Ochs’ work on C. S. Peirce’s pragmatism a ‘logic of scripture’ that ‘can help postliberals continue the work of reform’ that Lindbeck began (62-3)—a reform aimed at repairing theology so that theology in turn can serve the church’s calling to repair the world.

Pecknold uses Augustine not only to develop Lindbeck’s ‘intratextuality’ into a transformative conversation with the world, but also to replace Lindbeck’s ‘pretheological’ cultural-linguistic theory with a semiotics rooted in incarnational and trinitarian theology. Despite these significant modifications, comments critical of Lindbeck are rare, apparently because Pecknold strongly identifies with Lindbeck’s motivating concerns. Thus, Pecknold’s reading of Lindbeck seems to be more charitable than mine. As I read it, Lindbeck’s argument is *intentionally* ‘pretheological’, carefully proceeds as such, and on this basis arrives at the comprehensiveness

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8 See section 5.3.2 *The Possibility of Permanence* commencing on p. 187 below.


10 The point is important to Lindbeck, who strongly reaffirmed it the Foreword to the German edition of *ND* (Lindbeck 2003b, 198) while discussing the widespread misinterpretations of *ND* in North American debate.
of religious claims. But this same argument is motivated by theological and religious conviction (ND 10), so its destination does not cohere with its mode of travel. Where Pecknold charitably ‘repairs’ Lindbeck using Augustine’s semiotics, I pursue the internal tensions of his argument until they yield insight. In focussing on foundations and construction, I offer a different charity—that of carefully attending to Lindbeck’s text, and heeding his advice that ‘motivations and convictions...have little to do with the strength of arguments’ (ibid.). My conclusion indicates that insight into foundations and construction may reshape our motivations.

From its subtitle, Paul J. DeHart’s The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology (2006) appears to be offering graveclothes rather than Pecknold’s therapeutic transformation, yet there is much more here than a prophecy of postliberalism’s demise. DeHart does think postliberalism is in decline, but sees this not as the failure of a theological movement, but as the dispersal of a fog that has obscured what was really valuable in the work of Lindbeck and Frei (55). Like me, he notes that the heated debates over postliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s left the deeper issues stubbornly elusive,¹¹ and describes being motivated to write by a ‘mixture of fascination and frustration’ with this situation (xiv). Unlike me, DeHart deals with both Lindbeck and Frei at some length, introducing their work with a historical treatment of the sources of their thinking, the development of their thought in the course of their respective careers, the debate following the publication of ND, and the subsequent dissipation of postliberal momentum (chapter 1). He provides descriptive surveys of Lindbeck’s and Frei’s writing, drawing out the similarities and distinctive elements in each (chapters 2 & 3), and critically engages important oppositions that structured their arguments (chapters 4 & 5). In conclusion (chapter 6), he suggests that the appropriate framework for understanding Frei and Lindbeck is not one of liberal/postliberal opposition, but one centred on witness, the people who are charged with it (Lindbeck’s emphasis), and the object they attest (Frei’s emphasis).¹²

DeHart’s interest throughout is in the nature and method of theology,¹³ and he goes to some trouble to identify the motivating dogmatic convictions of Lindbeck and Frei and the structural problems of the views of theology they espouse. He finds Lindbeck’s work to be motivated by an ecclesiology of the people of witness (98), but flawed by his construction of ‘postliberal’ theology in opposition to ‘liberal’ theology (160-71) and by specification of theological faithfulness in terms of ‘intratextuality’ over against ‘extratextual’ translation (171-84). Frei’s focus is on ‘the unique, personally concrete and scripturally rendered object of Christian witness: Jesus Christ’ (142), and the problematic oppositions in his work concern the nature of theology as either dogmatic description or apologetic explanation (217-25), and whether correlation between theological and non-theological discourses should occur in a systematic or an ‘ad hoc’ manner (225-39). DeHart finds it more meaningful to ask how Lindbeck’s work might fit into Frei’s theological vision than to assume that Frei is ‘postliberal’ in Lindbeck’s sense. His proposal in the light of their work is that theology serves the ecclesial witness to Christ as that witness undergoes ‘trial’ through endurance, submission to judgement, and experimentation.

¹¹ DeHart 2006, xiii, and see pp. 33, 35-40, 42.
¹² Mike Higton (1997) and Geoff Thompson (2000) also see significant differences between Lindbeck and Frei.
¹³ DeHart 2006, xv, 54-56, 66, 76, 78, 82, and chapter 6 passim.
In preferring Frei to Lindbeck and placing theology at the service of an ecclesial witness that is fully engaged in the world, DeHart’s conclusions are not so far from my own. Yet our treatments of Lindbeck differ markedly. Firstly, I refer to Hans Frei only for his historical work on Schleiermacher and make no attempt to relate his work to that of Lindbeck. Secondly, I do not engage (or even define) postliberal theology as such, or analyse its problems. Thirdly, I do not try to discern the guiding motivation of Lindbeck’s theological career so as to set ND in that context. Consequently, it may appear that my work, relative to DeHart’s, lacks a sense of historical and contemporary context. I gratefully commend DeHart’s book to those who seek such material.14

As mentioned above, this inquiry will engage the arguments of Lindbeck and others largely in terms of the foundations they rely on and the constructions they present. Motivations and goals may explain why an argument takes a certain direction, but they tell us nothing about whether it does so successfully, i.e., so as to progress to a desired destination rather than into a cul-de-sac or some unintended outcome. In these terms, I find DeHart’s discussion too much oriented to motives and goals: his own concern for the nature of theology, and Lindbeck’s ecclesiologial and Frei’s Christological interests. The faulty oppositions he finds in Lindbeck—postliberal theology vs liberal theology and intratextual faithfulness vs extratextual translation—play little part in my inquiry, because both Lindbeck and I see them as the outworking of more basic issues, and because they appear only in the last chapter of ND, which Lindbeck calls ‘an addendum to the main argument’.15 As will become apparent in what follows, reading ND in terms of ‘the nature of theology’ already reflects the terms of liberal polemic in the ensuing controversy,16 notwithstanding that DeHart wants to recover what he sees as Frei’s and Lindbeck’s abiding strengths. I read and criticise ND as a treatise on the nature of doctrine. It has implications for theology, certainly, as does my critique, but this is a subsidiary motif rather than the main theme.

Introducing the 25th Anniversary Edition of ND17, Bruce Marshall summarised twenty five years of interpretation and criticism under three headings:

Epistemically, Lindbeck’s theology amounts to a biblical or ecclesial “fideism” that fails to seek rational justification for Christian beliefs in an adequate way and may even be hostile to the good of created reason itself.

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14 See also the biographical note comprising section II of Bruce Marshall’s ‘Introduction’ to ND25 (ix-xii). I live in Perth, Western Australia—about as far from New Haven, Connecticut USA as it is possible to be on this earth. Coverage of contextual detail is better left to those who know the context at first hand.

15 ND 112. This chapter, titled ‘Towards a Postliberal Theology’ discusses ‘the implications for theological method of a cultural-linguistic approach to religion’ (in loc.). For Lindbeck, then, the main argument of ND implies ‘postliberal theology’ and its associated ‘intratextuality’. If these are problematic (as DeHart and I agree), then, as implications of an earlier argument, they are not the basic problem. If the earlier argument is faulty (as I maintain), its implications may be modified (or even dissolved) in the critique.

16 DeHart’s focus on the liberal/postliberal polemic is indicated by his definition of ‘postliberalism’, which makes no reference to the conservative approaches with which Lindbeck engaged in ND (DeHart 2006, 1-2). This makes sense in the context of DeHart’s preference for Frei over Lindbeck, but detracts from Lindbeck’s intention, and marginalises half of the substantive argument in ND.

17 Hereafter ND25.
Lindbeck counsels a social and political withdrawal of the church into a self-enclosed ghetto, isolated from the world. His theology is “sectarian” in a bad sense, perhaps to the point of irresponsibility.

Lindbeck is soft on truth, giving away too much to postmodern relativism and scepticism and thereby failing to account for the universality and objectivity of truth, in particular the truth of Christian doctrine.\(^{18}\)

Marshall finds all three lines of critique mistaken: acknowledgement that Christianity (and indeed any religion) has its own ultimate standards of truth neither results in “fideism” (xiv) nor implies any deprecation of human reason (xvi); concerns about ‘ghettoisation’ are based on a non sequitur (xvi); and perceptions of ‘softness on truth’ arise from a ‘terminological infelicity’ in Lindbeck’s text that has since been clarified (xvii). From what follows, it will be evident that I agree entirely with these comments. My own engagement with Lindbeck relates to the first and third of Marshall’s headings. Under the first, I am less concerned with “fideism” (which Lindbeck already addressed sufficiently in \textit{ND}) than with the basis and implications of the comprehensiveness that Lindbeck rightly sees as intrinsic to Christian (and other religious) claims. Under the third, the important issue is not any alleged ‘softness’ in Lindbeck’s account of truth, but rather its inappropriate ‘hardness’ or rigidity in two specific areas: the possibility of doctrinal constancy and the distinction between first-order and second-order discourse.

Having now introduced the enquiry in terms of its origins, style, organisation and conclusions, and sketched its relation to some other recent works that engage with Lindbeck’s seminal book, it is time to hear Lindbeck himself on what it means for humans to speak of God.

\(^{18}\) Marshall 2009, xii-xiii.
2

LINDBECK’S CULTURAL-LINGUISTIC VIEW OF RELIGION

Lindbeck’s account of the nature of doctrine, or, as his subtitle has it, his vision of ‘religion and theology in a postliberal age’ is a brief work, though dense and complex. To aid understanding, this chapter presents it in various ways, involving some repetition. The first main section is an overview. It describes Lindbeck’s goals and the key ideas he drew on in writing ND, sets out the main elements of his constructive proposal and how they operate to achieve his aims, and comments on the overall structure of the work. The second section presents in detail the argument in the first half of ND (for reasons that will become clear, the remainder of the argument is dealt with later). A third section deals with the pivotal technical excursus in which Lindbeck clarifies the basic principles of his proposal and the inner logic of his polemics against what he sees as the main alternatives to it. Finally, the polemic against liberal theology is followed in some detail in preparation for the following chapter, which constructs a conversation between Lindbeck and some liberal scholars on the topic of cultural theory.

2.1 LINDBECK’S PROPOSAL IN OUTLINE

2.1.1 Overview: Lindbeck’s Goals and Conceptual Tools

When ND appeared in 1984 it quickly became a defining document of what has become known as ‘postliberal’ theology. Indeed, the adoption of ‘postliberal’ as the standard descriptive term for this theological stream arose largely from its use in the subtitle and argument of Lindbeck’s book. Not that all theologians who could be called ‘postliberal’ necessarily claim the appellation—far from it—but ND has become an important conversation partner for theologians concerned with the relation of religion and theology to contemporary philosophy and popular culture.

The interest generated by ND arose from its use of then-contemporary intellectual tools to forge a significant and vigorous vision of the Christian church and its theology, as well as from Lindbeck’s reputation as a serious and careful ecumenical theologian. But, on Lindbeck’s account, ND had its genesis not in any overarching concern to forge new links between theology and philosophy, but in a desire to make sense of his own experience in ecumenical discussions.¹ Lindbeck observed that these discussions frequently uncovered large areas of inter-confessional doctrinal agreement, apparently without requiring modification, let alone retraction, of doctrinal

¹ ND 7, 15. That Lindbeck’s motivation was ecumenical is, for some, a matter of regret. For example, Gordon Kaufman, in his review of ND, saw Lindbeck’s ‘clear exposition of the theological significance of the cultural-linguistic conception of religion’ as assuring ‘the lasting significance of his book.’ Yet, he noted, ‘one might wish…that he had not been so intent to put his important insight exclusively into the service of the theologically conservative enterprise of ecumenical debate…’ (Kaufman 1985, 241). This comment may say more about Kaufman than it does about Lindbeck. As will become clear in this study, Lindbeck’s proposals have had, and can still have, significance for theological activities well beyond ecumenical discussion, as Lindbeck himself was aware.
standards which had originally functioned as symbols of self-definition, distinction and division (ND 15). If this can be so, argued Lindbeck, it would seem that doctrine is not what we thought it was. What account of the nature and function of doctrine will be adequate to these phenomena?

Lindbeck develops his answer to this question by applying to religion conceptual tools from the philosophy of science, philosophy of language and social anthropology. He begins by emphasising that cultures and languages function together as given conceptual and behavioural frameworks which shape the entirety of life and thought. That is, they function as a priori idioms in terms of which reality is construed and life is lived (ND 18). There is therefore no non-situated neutral vantage point available to humans from which differing cultural construals of reality can be objectively compared. Lindbeck’s exposition of the social construction of knowledge is essentially that of Thomas Kuhn, and significant debts to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (philosophy of language) and Clifford Geertz (social anthropology) are also acknowledged.2

Lindbeck views religion as a ‘cultural-linguistic framework’. That is, it provides the practices and conceptual categories through which its adherents construct reality. As with cultures and (especially) languages, the primary function of a religion is not to provide an array of beliefs or a symbolism for expressing basic attitudes, though it may do both of these. 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 (ND 33, 47-8).

For Lindbeck, Christian identity is formed within the Christian cultural-linguistic community, which construes the Bible as a complete semiotic system, projecting a world which frames the believing community’s understanding of and interaction with reality. The biblical text is read for the meanings immanent within it, and these become the hermeneutical framework for understanding reality. The communal hermeneutic is ‘intratextual’, in that normative meanings are derived wholly within the authoritative text, and unidirectional, in that the community redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrabiblical categories.3 Lindbeck employs the metaphor of absorption: ‘the biblical world absorbs all other worlds’.4

2 Lindbeck (ND 28 n28) notes that much of his understanding of ‘what is theologically important in Wittgenstein’ has come through the work of Paul Holmer. Unfortunately, it would appear that Holmer’s reading of Wittgenstein has missed some crucial emphases (see sub-section 5.3.1 Learning from Wittgenstein, commencing on p. 181 below). For Lindbeck’s use of Geertz, see ND 37, 115. Some criticisms of Geertz, and of Lindbeck’s adoption of his theory of cultures, are outlined below in chapter 3 (see 3.2.2 Tradition, Culture and Canon commencing on p. 66).

3 ND 116-7. Lindbeck explicitly contrasts the intratextual reading of scripture with the intertextual approach employed in deconstruction. He notes that ‘for the deconstructionists there is no single privileged idiom, text, or text-constituted world…they treat all writings as a single whole: all texts are, so to speak, mutually interpreting.’ By contrast, in ‘an intratextual religious or theological reading…there is…a privileged interpretive direction from whatever counts as holy writ to everything else.’ (p. 136 n5)

4 This precise phrase is not from ND but may be found in a number of Lindbeck’s publications, most recently Lindbeck 1996a and 1996b. Close conceptual and verbal parallels occur at various points in ND. See pp. 80-1 on the Bible as (supplying a) framework. On the Bible as a world, see pp. 113-8, especially p. 116: ‘One test of faithfulness
The community’s expression of the world projected by the Bible is a ‘socially-embodied hermeneutic’ reflecting its reading of the Bible as a single, interglossing, narrative whole. The importance of narrative as a way of understanding the Bible is that narrative renders the characters of unsubstitutable personal and communal agents, especially God, Jesus, Israel and the church. The narrative is open-ended and invitational, continually inviting the reading community to enter the story and make it its own, thus continuing the biblical narrative in its own story.

The references to ‘the biblical world’ and the singleness of the biblical narrative should not be taken as implying uniformity of historical expression, or even as requiring movement towards it. Rather, Lindbeck uses the linguistic metaphor as a way of imagining how one religion (e.g., Christianity) can be so fruitfully and perplexingly diverse, and yet be recognisably one religion.

Thus, in widely differing circumstances, the particular embodiments of various communities’ readings of the same scriptures may (and in fact do) vary enormously.

Within this embodied hermeneutic, Lindbeck sees doctrine as having a regulative, rather than an assertive, function. That is, it functions as the ‘grammar’ of the community’s faith, providing a pattern for the expression of its life and thought, rather than defining in advance how to act or what to think. Similarly, theology, rather than defining and asserting foundational truths on which communal belief and practice are to be built, explicates and clarifies the rules underlying those beliefs and practices with a view to furthering their coherence and their faithfulness to the biblical world.

for all [scriptural religions] is the degree to which descriptions correspond to the semiotic universe paradigmatically encoded in holy writ.’ On the canonical writings of religious communities, see p. 117: ‘For those who are steeped in them, no world is more real than the ones they create. A scriptural world is thus able to absorb the universe. It supplies the interpretive framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality.’ Or again, ‘It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text’ (p. 118).

5 ND 83. Here, as often, Lindbeck borrows Calvin’s metaphor of the Bible as eye glasses, taking it in much the same sense as his own ‘absorption’ metaphor. He makes the equation explicit in a later article: ‘Scripture, in Calvin’s phrase, could serve as the spectacles, the lens, through which faith views all reality; and, to change the figure, the world of the reader could be absorbed into the biblical world’ (Lindbeck 1988, 14). In fact, the theological import of Calvin’s spectacles differs from that of Lindbeck’s sponge. Lindbeck’s point concerns the interpretation of reality and the construction of a worldview, but Calvin’s point in Institutes I.6.1 is more focused. He says that Scripture clearly shows us the true God, thus bringing clarity and focus to the confused impressions of Deity that our minds otherwise form based on God’s works of creation. He wishes to show that Scripture is needed so that we may reliably distinguish the true God from ‘the whole herd of fictitious gods’, and avoid ‘wandering up and down, as in a labyrinth, in search of some doubtful deity’. That is, Calvin’s focus is on the construction of God (i.e., the avoidance of idolatry) rather than the construction of reality in general. At ND 90 n23 Lindbeck notes that Calvin’s metaphor was ‘employed…with specific reference to Scripture’, but the application concerning idolatry is probably the more important difference.
By proposing a theory of religion in which the primary metaphor is religion-as-language, with
doctrine functioning as grammar, Lindbeck makes considerable progress towards his inclusive
ecumenical goals. Indeed, he expands his horizon beyond Christian ecumenism to include
Islam, Judaism and, to a lesser extent, Hinduism as further examples of scriptural religions
seeking to embody world-projecting texts.

Lindbeck’s vision is characteristically generous towards those who, in their differing religious
traditions, think differently. His theory respects the integrity of each tradition by allowing that
particular aspects of each are not easily translatable or comparable with ‘corresponding’ aspects of
the others. For some terms or practices there may well be no correspondence. For example, how
will a Christian understand the Buddhist concept of compassion? How will a Muslim understand
the Christian affirmation of the suffering love of God? Any particular aspect of a religion has its
‘true’ meaning only in relation to the religious tradition as a whole, and this means not only its
teaching, but also its living, communal practice through history. Thus, in general, Lindbeck sees
different religious traditions as being incommensurable. This does not mean that they cannot be
compared, but it does mean that one should be able to speak the language fluently, or understand
the religion from within, before assuming any confidence in making comparisons.

But how exactly does Lindbeck’s regulative theory explain the phenomenon of reconciliation
without capitulation that prompted his inquiry? The rule theory of doctrine locates the doctrinally
significant aspect of a religion in its categorial framework, rather than in propositions to be
affirmed, or in inner experiences. For Christianity, ‘the framework is supplied by the biblical
narratives interrelated in certain specified ways’ (ND 80). Continuing the linguistic analogy, the
vocabulary of the faith consists of the symbols, concepts, rites, injunctions, and stories that
compense its concrete practice. In practice, these are highly variable, but the ‘lexical core’ may be
located in the Christian Scriptures, together with certain postbiblical traditions. In relation to this
vocabulary, Lindbeck sees doctrine functioning in three different ways. It can function lexically in
helping to determine the Christian vocabulary by delimiting the canon and relating it to other
sources of authority; it can function syntactically in guiding the use of this material in construing
world, community and self; and it may also function semantically in defining the referents of
vocabulary terms. Lindbeck regards all three functions as ‘grammatical’.

It is important to recognise that when Lindbeck proposes that doctrines function grammatically,
that is, as rules, he is not necessarily (and perhaps not even usually) referring to those statements
of faith that are normally taken to be doctrines. While some doctrines, such as the Reformers’
sola gratia or sola fide, are ‘explicit statements of general regulative principles’, most doctrines
are not actually rules but rather ‘exemplary instantiations or paradigms of the application of
rules.’ Having embarked upon a rule theory of doctrine, according to which it is only the
regulative or grammatical use of a ‘doctrine’ which should be accorded the binding status of a
communal norm (ND 80, 96, 106), Lindbeck goes on to indicate that most ‘doctrines’ are not

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6 ND 81. Lindbeck offers the ‘doctrine’ that Jesus is the Messiah as an illustrative example. It ‘functions lexically as
the warrant for adding the New Testament literature to the canon, syntactically as a hermeneutical rule that Jesus
Christ be interpreted as the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises (and the Old Testament as pointing toward
him), and semantically as a rule regarding the referring use of such titles as “Messiah.”’
rules at all. Rather, rules are most often implicit rather than explicit in doctrines, and we need to go behind the doctrines to uncover the rules which were followed in their formation.

It is to these rules alone that Lindbeck will allow normative force, and it is to the uncovering of these implicit rules in the course of ecumenical discussions that Lindbeck attributes the surprising agreements which those discussions repeatedly bring forth, even in the face of unchanged ‘doctrinal’ positions. For him, such agreements consist precisely in the conscious or unconscious treatment of doctrinal statements as really different, socio-historically conditioned instantiations of underlying rules which are discovered to be really the same. In this light, ecumenical agreement over ‘doctrine’ is less an agreement over particular doctrines, than over the ways in which the core traditions of the Christian church ought to be interpreted. That is, the fact of ecumenical doctrinal agreement arises from underlying agreements in respect of (i) the content and ‘deep grammar’ of the core traditions of the church, and (ii) the range of ways in which those traditions can now be faithfully interpreted. In these terms, Lindbeck’s ‘rules’ constitute the ‘deep grammar’ of the gospel, and as such they define operating principles according to which doctrines can faithfully develop. They are enduring principles that guide, rather than define in advance, the permissible construals of the Scriptures and early tradition in ever changing circumstances.

These, then, are the main conceptual ingredients of Lindbeck’s argument. We will now consider its structural aspects before embarking on a more detailed examination.

2.1.2 A Comment on Structure

In a polite (if often vigorous) conversation, one must listen to one speaker at a time, and it may be that subsequent speakers will respond only to that part of the first speaker’s discourse that most interests them. In this chapter I take advantage of my self-appointed role as commentator on an overheard conversation by presenting, along with Lindbeck’s introduction, only that part of his proposal that most concerns one group of respondents. Consideration of the remainder is deferred to a later chapter. While this may appear to be less than fair to Lindbeck (in that it might work against appreciation of his work as a whole), the division arises fairly naturally in Lindbeck’s text.

ND is laid out in six chapters, the first being a general introduction in which Lindbeck outlines the origins, content, and context of his proposal. At the other end, his final chapter is less a conclusion to the argument than an overview of what theology’s role would be (and should be) if the preceding account of religion and doctrine were accepted. The intervening four chapters fall into two groups of two, and it is worth considering for a moment the various grounds on which this division may be made, and the relations between them. Lindbeck describes chapters two and three as presenting first nontheological and then theological (the order turns out to be

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7 ND 19, 81, 94-6, 107. See especially the statements on pp. 95-6: The classic creedal terminology and concepts may be absent from new formulations, ‘but if the same rules that guided the formation of the original paradigms are operative in the construction of the new formulations, they express one and the same doctrine’ (95). ‘…though the ancient formulations may have continuing value, they do not on the basis of rule theory have doctrinal authority. That authority belongs rather to the rules they instantiate’ (96).

8 Lindbeck gives examples of such agreements in detailed notes (ND 26 n1, n2).
significant arguments for the viability (and perhaps superiority) of his proposal vis-à-vis ‘one of the currently influential theological theories of religion’ (ND 11). In these chapters the scope of the argument is wide, and is concerned with the nature of religions: how should religions, as human phenomena, be described and analysed? What kinds of things are they? What sense do they have and how is this sense communicated? How should one view the relations between them and the claims they make? These questions are considered ‘nontheologically’ in chapter two, and then in chapter three Lindbeck asks whether the answers proposed in chapter two are such that Christianity can make theological use of them. Finding that he can answer this question affirmatively, he shifts his focus from religions (now seen as socio-cultural wholes) to the doctrines they (and Christianity in particular) espouse. This shift turns on Lindbeck’s understanding of the relation between religions and their doctrines, which he lays out in an ‘Excursus on Religion and Truth’ at the end of his third chapter (ND 63-9).

Thus, at the beginning of chapter four, the scope of the discussion contracts from interreligious to intrareligious concerns (ND 47, 69). But within this more specific focus we find that the fourth and fifth chapters exhibit the same first-nontheological-then-theological ordering that applies in the second and third. Chapter four sets out Lindbeck’s proposal that the function of doctrine is essentially regulative rather than expressive or propositional, while the fifth chapter examines the application of this proposal to three specific doctrinal loci—christology, mariology and infallibility. As in chapters two and three, the later chapter takes up the theoretical proposal offered nontheologically in the earlier, and asks the same basic question: is this theory available to us (i.e., us Christians)? Does it, firstly, acknowledge the meaningfulness of what we traditionally say in our religion (chapter three) or in our doctrine (chapter five) and, secondly, provide a way in which we can imagine interreligious or ecumenical dialogue being fruitful in terms of both agreement and faithfulness?

I can now offer a rationale for the way in which I present Lindbeck’s text and the ensuing ‘conversation’. As indicated above, the first part of ND (after the introductory chapter) is concerned largely with phenomenological questions about religion, or what might be called philosophy of religion. But the general question of the nature of religion is vitally important for only one of Lindbeck’s two main groups of opponents, namely, those holding what he calls an ‘experiential-expressive’ view of religion. This being so, it is hardly surprising that Lindbeck’s experiential-expressivist respondents, while not ignoring other aspects of the book, have taken particular exception to this part. Moreover, Lindbeck’s argument in this first part of his text produces, as an important by-product, the judgement (repeated several times in the text) that the

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9 Lindbeck’s distinction between nontheological and theological argument is important and is mentioned on a number of occasions in ND. See especially his introductory remarks to chapters two and three (ND 30-1, 46-7). It is also important in my analysis of Lindbeck’s argument and of the responses that are the subject of the material in the following two chapters of this work.

10 While Lindbeck says at one point (ND 47) that the fourth chapter ‘continues the discussion of theological issues’ begun in chapter three, in fact Christianity and its theology appear in chapter four neither as modes of argument, nor as premises from which to proceed, but as sources of examples that illustrate an otherwise nontheological argument. That is, the argument of the fourth chapter is in Lindbeck’s terms rather more ‘nontheological’ than ‘theological’.

11 Lindbeck’s descriptions of the major rivals to his own proposal will be discussed shortly.
experiential-expressive view can be dismissed from consideration in the second part, in which doctrine, rather than religion, is the phenomenon of interest. There the discussion revolves around whether and in what way doctrines concern reality, and this is naturally the part of Lindbeck’s argument that causes most concern among the other main group of respondents, those holding a ‘cognitive’ or ‘propositional’ view of religion.

To summarise, ND consists of an introduction (chapter one), two major substantive parts (chapters two to five), and an addendum (chapter six).12 Each substantive part explores a metaphor, beginning with a ‘nontheological’ presentation of Lindbeck’s proposal in comparison with one major rival (while not entirely forgetting the other), and proceeding to an assessment of the proposal’s suitability for use in Christian theology, and especially ecumenical theology. The first part develops the overarching metaphor of religion-as-culture, the main opponent holds an experiential-expressive view of religion, and theological suitability is assessed in relation to questions in the theology of religions. In the second part, the focus moves to the more specific metaphor of doctrine-as-grammar, the main opponent has a propositional view of doctrine, and theological suitability is assessed in relation to the needs (and observed outcomes) of ecumenical dialogue and doctrinal rapprochement.13 It may be objected that this structural outline is too neat. Lindbeck’s text is a complex whole with many subtleties, and rarely focuses on one aspect of the argument, or one opponent, to the exclusion of others. Yet the structure has been read largely from Lindbeck’s own connective comments, as well as from his substantive arguments, and in this sense arises from the text.14 I hope that, in spite of this analysis (and perhaps partly because of it), the following description remains sufficiently sensitive to the interconnections and the wholeness of Lindbeck’s work.

2.2 RELIGION AS CULTURE: THE FIRST PART OF LINDBECK’S PROPOSAL

2.2.1 Theory, Ecumenism, and Culture: The Proposal in Context

In the first chapter of ND, Lindbeck sets his proposal in context with respect to ‘theory, ecumenism and culture’, if not quite in that order. Section I, ‘The Ecumenical Matrix’ (ND 15-9) presents not only the ecumenical but also the basic theoretical framework of the inquiry.

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12 The term ‘addendum’ is Lindbeck’s. See ND 112.

13 The name ‘cultural-linguistic’ might suggest taking the first part of Lindbeck’s proposal as the cultural element and the second part as the linguistic, but the double-barrelled name is not used in this way. It is used in the absence of a single term that would adequately connote the structures of meaning that permeate human existence. Lindbeck is very aware that these structures are not simply linguistic, but include socio-cultural institutions, habits, practices, rituals and customs. At the same time, it is important to Lindbeck’s proposal that the functions of some elements in this complex can be distinguished and clarified by analogy with language: some function as grammar, some as vocabulary, some as lexicon, some as assertion, etc. Application of the labels ‘cultural’ and ‘linguistic’ to the two parts of Lindbeck’s proposal might obscure the appropriateness of ‘cultural-linguistic’ as the name of Lindbeck’s single controlling metaphor. To the extent that two metaphors may be identified corresponding to the two parts of Lindbeck’s argument, these would be, firstly, ‘religion as culture’ (or, more strictly if more clumsily, ‘religion as cultural-linguistic phenomenon’), and secondly, ‘doctrine as grammar’ (understanding the corresponding ‘language’ to be a religion taken as a whole).

14 An exception among Lindbeck’s connective comments is noted at n10 above.
Section II, ‘The Psychosocial Context’ (*ND* 19-25) takes up the cultural context in terms of the psychosocial reasons for the ascendancy of experiential-expressivism at the time of writing.

In section I, with respect to ecumenism Lindbeck notes the strange conjunction of ‘constancy and change, unity and diversity’ that provoked his inquiry—‘once we disagreed; now we agree; yet none of us have changed our minds’. Such reports are often greeted with scepticism, yet Lindbeck objects, as one who knows this puzzling phenomenon at first hand, that if reality seems unintelligible then we should not discard it, but seek better ways of understanding it. We should admit that it is not reality that is inadequate, but our theories concerning it (*ND* 15-6).

Concerning the theoretical context, Lindbeck divides the currently available theories into three main types: cognitive (also called propositional) approaches, usually associated with traditionalist or biblicist orthodoxies, in which doctrines are propositional truth claims about objective realities; experiential-expressive approaches in which doctrines symbolise inner feelings, attitudes or existential orientations (an approach typical of theological liberalism); and a hybrid approach that attempts to combine the emphases of the first two. None of these can satisfactorily explain the phenomenon of ‘doctrinal reconciliation without capitulation’ (*ND* 16) with which Lindbeck is concerned. The first two approaches simply deny the possibility. For the propositionalist, propositions are always what they once were—if they were once opposed, they must always be so. For the experiential-expressivist, by contrast, the whole problem is vacuous, since religious agreement or disagreement really occurs at the level of the underlying experience rather than at the level of its symbolic expression which is in any case intrinsically highly variable. Theories of the third type appear to offer greater subtlety and flexibility but they have difficulty with coherence, and Lindbeck finds them too complex and lacking in

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15 ‘Dialogue members…say they have been compelled by the evidence, sometimes against their earlier inclinations, to conclude that positions that were once really opposed are now really reconcilable, even though these positions remain in a significant sense identical to what they were before’ (*ND* 15).

16 Where, as in this chapter, I describe a single work at some length, I have appended to each paragraph a reference to the range of pages that the paragraph surveys. These references are in addition to references for specific passages and quotations.

17 ‘Agreement can be reached only if one or both sides abandon their earlier positions. Thus…doctrinal reconciliation without capitulation is impossible because there is no significant sense in which the meaning of a doctrine can change while remaining the same’ (*ND* 16-7).

18 ‘[Doctrines] are not crucial for religious agreement or disagreement, because these are constituted by harmony or conflict in underlying feelings, attitudes, existential orientations, or practices, rather than by what happens on the level of symbolic (including doctrinal) objectifications.’ (*ND* 17)

At *ND* 16-7 Lindbeck appears to neatly balance his comments on the conceptual shortcomings of the two main approaches: faced with simultaneous constancy and change, propositionalism denies change, while experiential-expressivism denies constancy. But the discussion and his later argument reveals a more subtle—and more far-reaching—distinction. Propositionalism sees the paradox but takes it as a simple contradiction and forces a choice: doctrines may be constant, or they may change, but not both at once. Experiential-expressivism may be more inclined than propositionalism to see doctrines as highly variable, but the crucial point is that, on this view, doctrines are not really religiously important, and the ‘paradox’ of simultaneous constancy and change is not so much resolved as dissolved. In short, Lindbeck finds that propositionalism takes doctrine seriously while experiential-expressivism does not. As will become clear, this distinction is important for Lindbeck’s own attitude to each of these alternatives.
criteria for doctrinal faithfulness. He would prefer an alternative in which concurrent doctrinal constancy and change are rendered intelligible without undue complexity (ND 16-7).

Of course, Lindbeck wrote ND in order to propose just such an alternative, and this is the ‘cultural-linguistic’ approach outlined above. This approach finds the essential function of doctrines in their use, not as expressive symbols, nor as truth claims, but as ‘communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action.’ Lindbeck finds that his regulative approach to doctrine ‘has no difficulty in explaining the possibility of reconciliation without capitulation’ (ND 18). The basis of this facility is the clear distinction Lindbeck draws between rules and the circumstances in which they are applied. He views the phenomenon that prompted his inquiry as arising from the application of invariant rules in varying circumstances. While the idea of doctrines as rules is hardly novel, as the notion of regulae fidei reminds us, what is new in Lindbeck’s proposal is the idea that the specifically doctrinal function of statements is entirely regulative.

Lindbeck commences section II with a programmatic observation concerning the current status of the three rival approaches. For a long time now, propositionalism has been on the defensive and experiential-expressivism has been dominant. Cultural-linguistic approaches, though relatively new, are increasingly common in nontheological religious studies but generally neglected by ‘those who are religiously interested in religion’ (ND 19). What are the cultural factors that have encouraged the development of this situation? Well, the sheer novelty of the cultural-linguistic approach tells against it to some extent, and the success of experiential-expressivism in supplanting ‘the earlier regnant cognitive-propositional views’ (ND 20) partly explains the inertia of what has become an academic orthodoxy. But these factors are merely ‘accidental’. There are also systemic factors at work (ND 19-21).

These factors include, firstly, ‘that “deobjectification” of religion and doctrine which, from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, is an inescapable consequence of the individualism,

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19 For more details, see 5.2.1 Propositionalism and the ‘Third Approach’ commencing on p. 159 below.
20 ND 18. Lindbeck’s reference to the function of doctrine is significant. Propositionalism and expressivism tend to speak of statements as doctrines. In Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic view, doctrine does not name a kind of statement, but a particular way in which a statement may be used. This distinction becomes important later, especially in Lindbeck’s critique of propositionalism.
21 ‘Rules, unlike propositions or expressive symbols, retain an invariant meaning under changing conditions of compatibility and conflict’ (ND 18). This proposal is examined in detail in chapter 5 below.
22 ND 17-20. Critics sometimes forget that Lindbeck is not saying that statements that make truth claims or fruitfully symbolise religious experience may not also function doctrinally. What he is saying is that these other functions are not doctrinal functions. Thus, although Lindbeck has been accused of emptying doctrinal statements of any reference to divine reality, he does not see himself as emptying statements of anything at all. Rather, he is in a sense wanting to target more precisely the meaning of the word ‘doctrine’. This is apparent in his contention that ‘the Nicaenum in its role as a communal doctrine does not make first-order truth claims’ (ND 19). Critics too easily neglect the qualifying phrase in this statement. Lindbeck does not say ‘the Nicaenum does not make first-order truth claims’.
23 That is, the propositional, the experiential-expressive, and the cultural-linguistic. Following Lindbeck, we will usually subsume the ‘hybrid’ approaches mentioned above under either the propositional or experiential-expressive approach. The problems of this tactic are discussed below in chapter 5. See 5.2 Lindbeck’s Engagement with ‘Propositionalism’ commencing on p. 158.
rapid change, and religious pluralism of modern societies’ (ND 21). This situation makes it difficult for people to see religion either in propositional terms (acceptance of objectively and immutably true propositions) or in terms which privilege the communal over the individual, as in a cultural-linguistic approach. But experiential-expressivism suits perfectly the commodification of religion in the religious smorgasbord of contemporary western societies, for it views religions as ‘multiple suppliers of different forms of a single commodity needed for transcendent self-expression and self-realization’ (ND 22). Secondly, experiential-expressive approaches seem particularly well suited to inter-religious dialogue, in that they assume a common core experience of the Ultimate, and thus confer equal status on all participants. By contrast, a cultural-linguistic outlook privileges particularity, which may facilitate discussion within a single religion, but not between religions. Thirdly, since languages and cultures do not make truth claims, are relative to times and places, and are very much features of this-worldly existence, it is difficult to think of them as analogues for putatively transcendent religions. Propositional approaches with their transcendent truths, and experiential-expressive approaches with their transcendent inner-human religious depths, appear to be better placed in this regard (ND 21-4).

Yet there are some countervailing tendencies against experiential-expressive dominance. Lindbeck acknowledges that classical propositionalism is by no means extinct, that Barth’s theology ‘avoids the experiential-expressive turn to the subject’, and that ‘Wittgenstein’s influence has been strong in some theological circles.’24 In addition, there is the work of Rahner and Lonergan, who, while accepting some form of experiential-expressivism, insist that this by itself cannot account for the enduring self-identity and unity of (some) religions, and that some categorial or propositional element is required. However, the most significant factor working against the theological hegemony of experiential-expressive approaches is their increasing isolation in the academy. ‘Historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers…seem increasingly to find cultural-linguistic approaches congenial’, so that ‘experiential-expressivism has lost ground everywhere except in most theological schools and departments of religious studies where, if anything, the trend is the reverse’.25 At this early stage of the book Lindbeck thinks it would be inappropriate to venture a value judgement on this situation. On the one hand, increasing isolation in the academy ‘tends to ghettoize theology’ (ND 25). On the other hand, experiential-expressivism would seem to be so well suited to contemporary sensibilities that the case for the superiority of an alternative would need to be very strong indeed. To this end, the second and third chapters of ND are devoted respectively to the nontheological and theological cases for Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic proposal (ND 24-5).

24 ND 24. Unfortunately, neither here nor elsewhere does Lindbeck specify just what he thinks this influence is. His own rather uncritical appropriation of Wittgenstein is a recurring theme in this study.

25 ND 25. Lindbeck opines that the reason for this gap is that ‘experiential-expressivism fits the religious needs of modernity, while…cultural and linguistic approaches are better suited to the nontheological study of religion’ (in loc). Both parts of this statement become important in later chapters of this study. On the one hand Lindbeck hints that one is entitled to ask which agenda experiential-expressivism serves: that of religion or that of modernity. In his view its primary service is to the latter, and it is therefore theologically suspect. On the other hand, the reference to the nontheological study of religion, allied with Lindbeck’s claim of neutrality for his cultural-linguistic approach, might lead one to wonder whether modernity’s presumption of objectivity has really been vanquished.
2.2.2 Religion and Experience: a Pretheological Enquiry

Lindbeck’s second chapter sets out to substantiate the claim that ‘a cultural-linguistic approach is preferable to traditional cognitivist and experiential-expressive approaches, provided the aim is to give a nontheological account of the relations between religion and experience.’ In fact, the chapter is an extended comparison of the experiential-expressive and cultural-linguistic approaches, and the propositional alternative temporarily drops out of the picture. For his experiential-expressive exemplar, Lindbeck uses Bernard Lonergan, though specific reference to his work is limited to a short section (ND 31-2) from which a few crucial theses ‘characteristic of experiential-expressivism in general’ are extracted. These theses are:

(1) Different religions are diverse expressions or objectifications of a common core experience. It is this experience which identifies them as religions. (2) The experience, while conscious, may be unknown on the level of self-conscious reflection. (3) It is present in all human beings. (4) In most religions, the experience is the source and norm of objectifications: it is by reference to the experience that their adequacy or lack of adequacy is to be judged.

Lindbeck notes that Lonergan, in common with most experiential-expressivist theologians, assumes rather than argues the adequacy of the crucial affirmation of the basic unity of religious experience. Yet this assumption creates a nest of problems for critical thinkers, not least of which is that of providing supporting evidence, which is surely needed to counteract the implications of our historical awareness. Lonergan grants that religious experience ‘varies with every difference of culture, class or individual’, and admits the lack of clear cut evidence for his model of religious experience, but ‘nevertheless takes for granted that the model accommodates the evidence better than does any other’.

Lindbeck’s main exposition of his cultural-linguistic proposal comprises the second section of the chapter (ND 32-41). As already indicated in outline above, the cultural-linguistic proposal is that religion can be viewed as a cultural and/or linguistic framework that shapes the entirety of life and thought. Like culture and language, religion is quasi-transcendental (somewhat like a Kantian a priori), though it comprises a set of acquired skills that could have been different. It is not so much a set of beliefs or an expressive symbolism as an idiom that makes these possible. Like language, religion is a communal phenomenon. It comprises terms that may be likened to

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26 ND 30. Why such a clear insistence on a prior nontheological assessment? Lindbeck explains that ‘this question needs to be addressed before we deal…with the theological issues raised by what we have already noted is a suspiciously secular-looking model of religion. If this model cannot handle the anthropological, historical, and other nontheological data better than do the alternatives, there is no reason to ask whether it can be religiously useful’ (p. 30). Perhaps Lindbeck means only that theology would have little use for a theory that was clearly flawed even before the question of its theological use was raised. Still, the priority accorded to nontheological judgement here sits oddly with the theme of intratextuality that will emerge later.

27 ND 31. Discussion of other theses, in which ‘Lonergan is obviously speaking as a Christian theologian rather than simply as a theorist of religion’ (in loc), is deferred to the following chapter.

28 ND 32. Lindbeck also notes a logical difficulty, again acknowledged by Lonergan. ‘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 done, the assertion of commonality becomes logically and empirically vacuous’ (in loc).
vocabulary and structures that may be compared to grammar, all of which are integrally related to its rituals, sentiments, actions and institutions (ND 33).

Regarding the relation between religion and experience, religion as an *a priori* semiotic framework defines and conditions a field of possibilities available to us for the conceptualisation of our experiences. Thus, by comparison with an experiential-expressive model, a cultural-linguistic one ‘reverses the relation of the inner and the outer’ (ND 34). For experiential-expressivism, the inner experience is primary, and religious expression derivative. But in a cultural-linguistic approach, the outer religious semiotic framework has both temporal and conceptual priority, and our conceptualisation of experience (as it were, our experience of experience) is derivative—shaped, moulded and constituted by cultural and linguistic forms. Thus to become religious is not so much to have certain ineffable experiences but, as with cultural and linguistic competence, to interiorise a set of skills by practice and training. In Christianity, for example, these skills will enable one to interpret and experience oneself and one’s world in terms of the story of Israel and of Jesus. In this priority of the external, cultural-linguistic approaches ‘resemble cognitivist theories for which external (i.e., propositionally statable) beliefs are primary, but without the intellectualism of the latter’ (ND 35). A ‘language’, a semiotic framework, allows propositions to be formed but is also used for many other purposes, just as religion is more a medium in which in which one moves than a set of propositions to be believed. The same priority, with its stress on the code rather than the encoded, and on encoding as an acquired skill, means that cultural-linguistic models acknowledge the importance of the experiential side of religion, though in a different way to experiential-expressive approaches. Moreover, on a cultural-linguistic view, the way a religion functions through these interiorised skills is much better described in expressivist than in cognitivist terms. So Lindbeck maintains that, precisely by acknowledging the priority of the external, his proposal gives full and proper recognition to the roles of cognition, experience and expression in religious life (ND 33-6).

Having introduced the key features of his proposal, and indicated how its comprehensiveness is enhanced by a ‘reversal of the relation between the inner and the outer’ relative to experiential-expressivism, Lindbeck turns to a more analytical examination of the nature of experience and its relation to expression and communication. He finds the quite different construals of this relation in the experiential-expressive and cultural-linguistic approaches to be the major contrast between them, and so the ensuing discussion aims to bring this contrast into much sharper focus.

Lindbeck challenges the idea that ‘inner experiences’ can be ‘prior to conceptualization or symbolization’ (ND 36). His initial counter-argument is an adaptation of the theory-ladenness of knowledge: drawing on Noam Chomsky and Clifford Geertz, Lindbeck espouses the language-ladenness of experience. He speculates that ‘language…shapes domains of human existence and action that are preexperiential’ (ND 37), though he also maintains that his basic thesis

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29 Lindbeck’s phrase at ND 35. One could equally say ‘the medium rather than the message’, or ‘the form rather than the object’, though this last may come too close at this stage to opening up the topic of Platonic (and Enlightenment) idealism, which will become a significant theme in chapters 5 and 6 below.

30 ND 34, 36. See also ND 62.
(‘language is a condition for religious experience’) need not rely on such ‘perhaps empirically falsifiable speculations’ (in loc). Rather, he prefers to rely on the assertion —

that an experience (viz., something of which one is prereflectively or reflectively conscious) is impossible unless it is in some fashion symbolized, and that all symbol systems have their origin in interpersonal relations and social interactions. It is conceptually confused to talk of symbolizations (and therefore of experiences) that are purely private (ND 37-8).

Lindbeck supports this claim in several ways. He cites Wittgenstein’s contention that private languages are logically impossible, and sees a similar conclusion applying to the idea of private religious experiences. Although Lindbeck finds this argument telling, he neither develops nor assesses it in his text (there is, however, a lengthy note31). After all, an argument that ambitiously tries to ‘demonstrate the impossibility of unthematized yet conscious experience’ (ND 38) is not really needed if one can succeed with another argument that more modestly concludes that the hypothesis in question is simply unnecessary.32 Lindbeck’s ‘modest’ argument is an Ockhamist one which turns on a recognition that experiential-expressivism treats religious experiences as if they were different in kind from other more ordinary experiences. But if one’s account of ‘ordinary’ experiences could also serve for religious experiences then the hypothesis of a special kind of experience called ‘religious’ would seem to be superfluous. Lindbeck maintains that cultural-linguistic insights offer just such a comprehensive account of experience. He makes the point through ‘the classic medieval distinction between first and second intentions’, though contemporary philosophers (especially philosophers of science) offer some quite similar explanations.33

As applied to objects (intentio objectiva), “animal” in the first intention is this or that creature, Fido or Socrates, in its own actual or possible, imaginary or real being, while in the second intention it is a generic concept embracing many species such as the human and the canine.

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31 In this note (n18 at ND 43–4, referenced on p. 38), Lindbeck briefly considers the various transcendental arguments offered by Karl Rahner, David Tracy and Bernard Lonergan. He notes some significant differences (especially that Lonergan’s argument is theological, while Rahner and Tracy develop their positions on non-theological grounds), but sees all three as maintaining, as he puts it, ‘a kind of privacy in the origins of experience and language’ (p. 38). Lindbeck finds Lonergan’s disagreement with Wittgenstein’s views on private language to be ‘based on the misapprehension that a denial of private languages entails a denial of mental acts’ (p. 44). If this misunderstanding is allowed for, the private language argument against prelinguistic experiences may be less unacceptable to Lonergan than to Tracy or Rahner. In the end, ‘the crucial philosophical issue [for Lindbeck] is the validity of transcendental deductions of the necessary conditions of human knowing and willing. If the postulation of such conditions by means of transcendental arguments is valid, then it makes sense to say that one may experience these…prior to, even if not separable from, their thematization by linguistic or other conceptual systems’ (in loc). Lindbeck clearly regards such transcendental arguments as invalid, but, as we shall see, the more important fact for him is that they are unnecessary.32

32 Because of its importance, the relevant passage is quoted at considerable length below, but I have provided the following outline because I do not think that Lindbeck’s text makes the argument’s logical structure very clear. In my initial readings of this passage, other interpretations, resulting in rather less successful arguments, seemed more likely. I believe the reading I have adopted is that most favourable to Lindbeck.

33 Candidates among twentieth century writers include Michael Polanyi (to whom Lindbeck refers here) with his distinction between focal and tacit awareness, Thomas Kuhn’s work on scientific paradigms (also important for Lindbeck, but misappropriated in modernist vein in David Tracy and Hans Küng’s Paradigm Shifts in Theology), and Gadamer’s analysis of traditioned learning (to which we shall be referring again in the next chapter).
As applied to mental activities (\textit{intentio formalis}), the first intention is the act whereby we grasp objects, while the second intention is the reflex act of grasping or reflecting on first formal intentions. In the modern philosophical language of consciousness, we are only unthematically (or, in Polanyi’s terminology, “tacitly”) aware of first intentional activities while we are engaged in them: our attention is focused on objects, not on the subjective experience involved in knowing them. It is only in the second intention that we attend to this experience, that we are focally rather than tacitly aware of it. Yet this does not lead us to suppose that the first-intentional experiences of, for example, attending to Fido or to the logical characteristics of the concept of animal are somehow preverbal or linguistically unstructured. Surely… the same could be said of religious experiences. They can be construed as by-products of linguistically or conceptually structured cognitive activities of which we are not directly aware because they are first-intentional. The sense of the holy of which Rudolf Otto speaks can be construed as the tacit or unthematic awareness of applying a culturally acquired concept of the holy in a given situation. Similarly, concert pianists tell us that it is disastrous for them to become focally conscious of their fingers while they are playing, but nevertheless their playing (and their sometimes ecstatic experience of playing) depends on their fingering. It seems that the most economical hypothesis is to suppose that the relation between religious experiences and a given culture, language, and form of life is similar. If my application of the notions of first and second intentions is correct, then this is a thesis on which Thomas Aquinas and other medieval Aristotelians… agree with Wittgenstein against post-Cartesian philosophers of consciousness as well as against some professed Thomists such as Lonergan and Rahner. For the Aristotelians, affective experiences (in which would be included a sense of the holy or of absolute dependence) always depend on prior cognition of objects, and the objects available to us in this life are all in some fashion constructed out of (or, in medieval terminology, “abstracted from”) conceptually or linguistically structured sense experience \textit{(ND 38-9)}.

Lindbeck finds that abandonment of the notion that the source of religion is in prior experience has implications for other aspects of one’s theory of religion.\textsuperscript{34} The first of these is that ‘religious change or innovation must be understood, not as proceeding from new experiences, but as resulting from the interaction of a cultural-linguistic system with changing situations’

\textsuperscript{34} But, strictly, the abandonment that Lindbeck’s argument justifies is not this one, and the ‘implications’ he draws (and his language elsewhere) can jump too easily to the opposite pole, to the idea that religious experience is unilaterally ‘produced by’ the religious framework in terms of which it is conceptualised. The terms of Lindbeck’s argument primarily concern the relation, not between experience and religion, but between experience and conceptualisation, and so its proper or direct effect is that it encourages us to abandon the idea that experience has a simple priority in this relationship. But abandonment of this idea would not imply the opposite conclusion (that conceptualisation is simply prior to experience); nor could it be used to imply anything concerning the relation between experience and \textit{religion} without a further assumption that religion can be assimilated to conceptualisation in the primary argument. In other words, insofar as Lindbeck’s argument here leads to conclusions concerning the relation between experience and religion, it implicitly assumes a more-or-less straightforward correspondence or analogy between religion and conceptualisation. Lindbeck goes to some trouble elsewhere to argue that a religion, though it may be a ‘system’, is much more than a \textit{conceptual system}. Although Lindbeck criticises propositionalism for being ‘intellectualist’, his argument here is not entirely immune to the same charge.
Such change occurs because a religious interpretive scheme develops anomalies in its application in new contexts, forcing the discovery of new concepts that remove the anomalies. ‘Religious experiences in the sense of feelings, sentiments, or emotions then result from the new conceptual patterns instead of being their source’ (in loc). A second consequence is that one is led to question the idea of ‘an inner experience of God common to all human beings and all religions’, the question being not merely whether this idea has any veracity, but whether it has any meaning. For Lindbeck, religion ‘need not be described as something universal arising from within the depths of individuals and diversely and inadequately objectified in particular faiths; it can at least as plausibly be construed as a class name for a variegated set of cultural-linguistic systems that, at least in some cases, differentially shape and produce our most profound sentiments, attitudes, and awarenesses’. Lindbeck closes his second chapter with a short section headed ‘The Inconclusiveness of the Comparison’. If this section is intended to be a kind of disclaimer or a cautionary note directed toward over-enthusiastic cultural-linguistic converts, then it is a rather curious one, as fully two-thirds of it presents further reasons why cultural-linguistic theorists find the ‘common religious experience’ hypothesis untenable. To begin with, Lindbeck cautions that a decision between

35 Lindbeck sometimes puts this point too strongly, e.g., ‘There can be no experiential core because…the experiences that religions evoke and mold are as varied as the interpretive schemes they embody. Adherents of different religions do not diversely thematize the same experience; rather they have different experiences’ (ND 40). It seems to me that a cultural-linguistic view cannot rule out the possibility of a universal religious experience, but can claim, on the basis of its general understanding of the relation between culture, language, experience and knowledge, that such universality would be (a) anthropologically extremely unusual, and (b) extremely difficult (if not impossible) to verify even if it were the case. (Perhaps an advantage of a universal religious experience, if such were discovered to be actually the case, would be that it would fly in the face of everything we otherwise know about human experience, and must therefore be explained as an experience of the divine! Unfortunately, such a conclusion would be illogical, if rather tempting. It is just as illogical, though some have found the temptation irresistible, to argue in the reverse direction, that is, to argue that because an experience is of the divine, it must be universal, or to argue that in order for an experience to be of the divine, it must be universal.) In short, a cultural-linguistic approach highlights experiential-expressivism’s use of the hypothesis that religious experience is a special kind of experience which, unlike all other kinds of experience known to us, transcends human historicity. Having drunk deeply from the waters of the sociology of knowledge, the cultural-linguist feels obliged, (a) in the absence of very strong empirical support for such a hypothesis, to presume it to be false; and (b), in the absence of any clear idea of the means by which such a hypothesis could be demonstrated even if it were true, to presume it to be meaningless.

36 ND 40. This rather irenic expression, that a cultural-linguistic model is ‘at least as plausible’ as the available alternatives, is consistent with Lindbeck’s stated aim of making this model ‘available’ for use by theologians, presumably alongside those models (mainly experiential-expressivist ones) already in use. But Lindbeck is quite capable of using rather stronger language and clearly believes his argument will support it. For instance, at the conclusion of the second section of his second chapter, looking back on the examples and arguments he has offered (and which have been summarised above) he remarks:

In the face of such examples, it seems implausible to claim that religions are diverse objectifications of the same basic experience. On the contrary, different religions seem in many cases to produce fundamentally divergent depth experiences of what it is to be human. The empirically available data seem to support a cultural-linguistic rather than an experiential-expressive understanding of the relation of religion and experience (ND 41).
‘all-embracing and fundamentally different notions of what religion is’ cannot be made ‘on empirical grounds alone’, since each approach ‘shapes the view of what is relevant evidence for or against its own truth.’ He notes Friedrich Heiler’s case for ‘one and the same root experience of transcendence’ being the common source of ‘the higher religions’. Lindbeck is prepared to grant that Heiler ‘makes a plausible case that if one wants to find similarities in the world’s major religions, and if one looks at them through Christian eyes’, then his list of common elements is defensible. ‘It seems certain, however, that an adherent of an Eastern religion embarked on a similar task would formulate a very different list that would make Christianity sound rather like Taoism or Buddhism, for example, rather than vice versa’.

Moreover, if one compares languages, the fact that they may have common objects of reference that we identify by the English words mother, child, water, fire, etc is utterly unremarkable. What counts for linguistic comparison is the relations between these terms, their symbolic connotations, and the grammatical patterns, ways of referring, and semantic and syntactical structures of the languages. Similarly for religions. The fact that they may share objects that we might identify as ‘love’ or ‘that which is taken to be ultimately important’ is ‘a banality as uninteresting as the fact that all languages are (or were) spoken’.

Still, cultural-linguistic sympathisers should not take these arguments to be conclusive. The argument shows only that an experiential-expressive position is unprovable, not that it is false; experiential-expressivism remains a (bare) possibility. Besides, even in the physical sciences, ‘theories are abandoned, not so much because they are refuted (on their own terms, that is), but because they prove unfruitful for new or different questions…The old theories may still hold perfectly well in their primary areas of application’.

Similarly, says Lindbeck, ‘the inferiority of experiential-expressivism for the scientific study of religion may be quite compatible with its superiority for other purposes (for example, theological ones)’.

37 ND 41. Leaving aside the surprising implication that Lindbeck’s argument to this point has been purely empirical, one can also note that this statement regarding the nature of evidence is already rather more in tune with a cultural-linguistic than an experiential-expressive view. The classic exponents of experiential-expressive theories were well aware of the theory-ladenness of others’ knowledge, but somewhat less inclined to acknowledge the relevance of this insight to their own understanding. One might expect Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model to be more aware of its own reflexive reference (though we shall have occasion to wonder whether Lindbeck appreciates the importance of this point).

38 ND 41. The fact that such hypotheses nearly always include a qualifying adjective on ‘religions’ (e.g., ‘higher’, ‘monotheistic’, ‘scriptural’, ‘great world religions’, etc) already indicates that the thesis of universality is difficult to establish. Lindbeck notes that Heiler’s list of ‘higher religions’ includes Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Anti-universalists inevitably wonder what an indigenous Australian, a Native American, an animist, or a Shintoist would make of such a list, and of their own exclusion from the ‘higher’ category.

39 ND 41. That is, although Lindbeck has gone to some trouble to unfavourably compare experiential-expressive theories of religion with cultural-linguistic ones, experiential-expressivists should not despair. After all, there is (at least) one good cultural-linguistic reason why the comparison is inconclusive!

40 Lindbeck seems not to recall his earlier suggestion that the experiential-expressive case is meaningless. See p. 27 above, especially n35.

41 ND 42. Lindbeck provides an example: ‘mechanics, for example, remains to this day entirely Newtonian, untouched by Einstein’s theory of relativity.’

42 Lindbeck shows familiarity with the work of Michael Polanyi, Thomas Kuhn, and Imre Lakatos, but his
This caveat seems to do no more (and no less) than damn experiential-expressivism with faint praise, and the ironic tone may be a little disingenuous. Lindbeck’s comments at the start of the chapter indicated that the argument was aimed precisely at substantiating the claim that a cultural-linguistic approach is ‘preferable’ to experiential-expressivism (and propositionalism) because it is ‘intellectually and empirically the most adequate’ (ND 30-1). Now, at the end of the chapter, Lindbeck clearly thinks his argument has succeeded and he offers the possibility of experiential-expressivism’s theological superiority as a consolation prize. Perhaps he wants to appear magnanimous in offering the hope that experiential-expressivism may still have some relevance (if only as a reasonable approximation) in its ‘primary area of application’. But if experiential-expressivism is what Lindbeck says it is, such a situation would be indistinguishable from complete failure.

2.2.3 Many Religions and the One True Faith

Lindbeck’s third chapter begins an inquiry into the theological usefulness of his proposal, an inquiry which continues in subsequent chapters. Chapter 3 considers cultural-linguistic perspectives on a Christian theology of religions, while chapters 4 and 5 focus on the ‘intrareligious…problems of doctrinal diversity and teaching authority within…Christianity’ (ND 46). Issues in the theology of religions are important to Lindbeck because he considers that his ‘nontheological theory of religion’ cannot be useful to those who are religiously interested if it excludes their religious claims a priori, or treats them as meaningless. In particular, Lindbeck wants to consider traditional religious claims to finality or unsurpassability. But, since we live in a world that values peaceful coexistence and mutual respect, can a cultural-linguistic theory admit the possibility of claims for supremacy while also allowing for ‘the desirability of

extrapolations from the philosophy of science are sometimes unsatisfactory, as in this case. Firstly, Lindbeck’s account of the relation between ‘scientific’ (what he means by ‘nontheological’) and theological scholarly disciplines is inconsistent. Earlier (ND 30), he asserted that a theory that is not scientifically viable need not be considered for theological use. On that basis there is no reason for him to give experiential-expressivism any further consideration, since he holds it to be scientifically unviable. But now he is saying that, even though experiential-expressivism is scientifically unviable, it may nevertheless be not merely viable, but superior, for theological purposes!

Secondly, the example of Newtonian versus Einsteinian physics (see previous note) is hardly appropriate. If one is not dealing with quite extreme space-time dimensions, densities, and/or velocities, Einsteinian physics is not practically distinguishable from Newtonian. Einstein’s is the more general theory, Newton’s the special case. Is Lindbeck suggesting that experiential-expressivism is now eclipsed and encapsulated by the more general cultural-linguistic theory? I think not. Other relationships are possible. The phlogiston theory of combustion was, simply, wrong. The discovery of ‘N-rays’ by Blondlot in 1903 regrettably owed rather more to chauvinistic self-deception than to scientific method (N-rays being the Gallic answer to ‘Germanic’ X-rays).

Thirdly, what does Lindbeck have in mind for experiential-expressivism’s ‘primary area of application’? This theory was once dominant in the scientific study of religion, but science (here, the social sciences and the philosophy of science) has moved on. Should we now take its primary area of application to be the small scope to which it is now restricted, viz. Christian theology and Christian-oriented religious studies, or its original scope, viz. philosophy of religion and the (social) scientific study of religion? In the former case, experiential-expressivism appears as a curiosity at best, its limited persistence perhaps telling us less about the nature of religion than about theology’s place in the history of the social sciences. In the latter case one would be more inclined to say that experiential-expressivism had been discarded because some of its key assumptions turned out to be wrong. Lindbeck believes he has demonstrated the latter case, but now, for reasons that remain unclear, he wants to proceed with the former.
nonproselytizing interreligious dialogue and cooperation’ and the possibility of the salvation of nonbelievers.\textsuperscript{43} Lindbeck devotes a section to each of these issues before concluding the chapter with a technical excursus on the notion of ‘truth’ (ND 46-7).

Just what is entailed in the idea of a religion’s ‘unsurpassability’ will vary according to what one takes the prime value of a religion to be, but Lindbeck’s discussion, both on this issue and throughout the chapter, assumes that ‘unsurpassable’ means ‘unsurpassably true’.\textsuperscript{44} Not surprisingly, the different models of religion Lindbeck has described relate differently to the idea of truth, let alone to the possibility that some formulation of it might be unsurpassable. For propositionalists, truth is ‘a function of the ontological correspondence or “isomorphism” of the “structure of knowing and the structure of the known.”’\textsuperscript{45} This correspondence, or lack of it, is a property of each proposition or act of judgement, and is not a matter of degree.\textsuperscript{46} The truth of a religion as a whole depends on the mixture of false and true statements it makes, and so the comparative question for a propositionalist turns on which religion ‘makes the most significant veridical truth claims and the fewest false ones’ (ND 47). By contrast, in an experiential-expressive approach ‘truth’ is a function of symbolic efficacy and religions may be compared in terms of how effectively they articulate or represent or communicate the common inner experience of the divine. A cultural-linguistic view presents a further contrast in that it views a religion less in terms of the truths it articulates or its symbolic expressions of experience, than as an idiom that enables that articulation, those expressions, and a way of ordering life. An

\textsuperscript{43} Lindbeck asserts that ‘if a cultural-linguistic approach cannot make at least as good sense of [interreligious dialogue and the salvation of nonbelievers] as do alternative theories of religion, then it will be rightly regarded as theologically uninteresting’ (ND 46-7). The logic of the chapter is (relatively) clear. Lindbeck is taking a step towards accommodating religions’ traditional claims (rather than dissolving them as liberal approaches tend to do), but he wants to demonstrate that he can do this while continuing to uphold key liberal virtues. If his approach is rejected, it will not be because it endangers dialogue or denies that non-Christians can be saved. See also ND 57, and n60 below.

\textsuperscript{44} Lindbeck slides quickly from the more abstract term ‘unsurpassable’ to the slightly more concrete ‘unsurpassably true’, but to some extent this prejudices the issue, since it is mainly propositionalists, and, indirectly, cultural-linguistic theorists, for whom truth is a major religious criterion. Lindbeck’s discussion of unsurpassability would have been improved, I think, had he stayed with the more abstract term until he had examined the various criteria according to which a religion might be unsurpassable. To illustrate, let us use the term ‘prime religious value’ to denote the criterion that one finds most relevant to the question of unsurpassability. Although Lindbeck clearly accepts that prime religious value will vary according to one’s view of what religion is, his assumption that truth is the value in terms of which unsurpassability should be assessed makes it implicit, rather than more properly explicit, that the standpoint from which he is examining the issue can only be one for which truth is a (or the) prime religious value. As we shall see, this choice of criterion already excludes experiential-expressivism from Lindbeck’s discussion, not because it is not interested in truth—far from it—but because its prime religious value is something more like ‘authentic expression’ than ‘truth’. None of this alters the outcome of Lindbeck’s discussion, but simply makes clear that Lindbeck is considering things from a particular point of view: one that is shared (at least to some extent) by propositionalism and his own cultural-linguistic theory.

\textsuperscript{45} ND 47, citing Lonergan.

\textsuperscript{46} Lindbeck’s amplification makes clear that he is speaking of a very absolute or extreme form of propositionalism. ‘Each proposition or act of judgement corresponds or does not correspond, is eternally true or false; there are no degrees or variations in propositional truth’ (ND 47). Although this extreme portrayal of propositionalism is not necessary to some aspects of Lindbeck’s argument, we shall see later that several of what he takes to be his most telling criticisms of this view rely for their effectiveness on the absoluteness that he imputes to it.
idiom is neither true nor false in itself, but the categories it provides for articulation and expression may be more or less adequate to reality. ‘Adequate categories…make possible, though they do not guarantee, propositional, practical, and symbolic truth’ (ND 48). A religion having such categories may be called ‘categorically true’.  

Because the idea of categorial adequacy has a certain novelty, Lindbeck provides some further explanation. Firstly, although an idiomatic system is in itself neither true nor false it enables both truths and falsehoods to be stated regarding objects that have a property corresponding to one (or more) of the system’s categories. Mathematics, for example, enables us to make meaningful statements about the quantifiable aspects of reality, but those statements may be either true or false. If a system lacks the appropriate categories then the statements it enables will be, strictly, neither true nor false but meaningless. Secondly, the crucial categories of one religion might have no equivalents in another. ‘The cultural-linguistic approach is open to the possibility that different religions and/or philosophies may have incommensurable notions of truth, of experience, and of categorial adequacy’. With the help of this explanation Lindbeck feels able to conclude that ‘unlike other perspectives, this approach proposes no common framework such as that supplied by the propositionalist’s concept of truth or the expressivist’s concept of experience within which to compare religions’.

47 ND 47-8. In a later article, Lindbeck acknowledged that it may be better to speak of ‘categorial adequacy’ than ‘categorial truth’, since he maintains that truth is not a function of categories, which by themselves affirm nothing either true or false. Rather, truth is a function of the affirmations that may be made using adequate categories. See Lindbeck 1989b, and also sub-section 5.1.1 The Nature of Truth commencing on p. 154 below.

Lindbeck has identified propositional truth, expressive or symbolic efficacy, and categorial adequacy as being what I have called the prime values of religion under the propositional, experiential-expressive, and cultural-linguistic approaches respectively. The three models of religion will thus offer three different views of what it means for a religion to be ‘unsurpassable’. Interestingly, Lindbeck focuses on how these prime values might differ between models of religion, but disregards how they might differ between religions, apart from indicating that his cultural-linguistic theory is open to this possibility.

48 ND 49. Using Lindbeck’s examples, ‘larger’ cannot be translated by ‘redder’: it may be impossible for adherents of Western religions to say anything meaningful about the Buddhist Nirvana; faith in the biblical God is logically independent of philosophers’ arguments concerning the existence or otherwise of the philosophers’ God (ND 48).

49 ND 48-9. But what does Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory supply, if not a ‘common framework’? Lindbeck and some others (e.g., Marshall 1990) explain their ‘no framework’ framework by saying that a cultural-linguistic view recognises that each religion has its own criteria for evaluating its own success in relation to its own idea of what is most important. This reluctance to impose an alien common framework on others results in all participants being treated as ‘others’. But if Christianity is also ‘other’ from a cultural-linguistic viewpoint, then Lindbeck will surely refrain from recommending that Christian theologians adopt his cultural-linguistic proposal, as they will no doubt already have Christian ways of evaluating Christianity’s ‘success’. As Lindbeck himself explains:

When affirmations or ideas from categorially different religious or philosophical frameworks are introduced into a given religious outlook, these are either simply babbling or else, like mathematical formulas employed in a poetic text, they have vastly different functions and meanings than they had in their original settings (ND 49).

Granted, the common framework of the cultural-linguistic approach is more abstract than those of the alternative views Lindbeck considers. Perhaps it is more a ‘meta-framework’ than a framework in the ordinary sense.
From this discussion Lindbeck returns to claims of unsurpassability. The propositional form of this claim is the most familiar. A propositionally unsurpassable religion would be free of error and would also contain all those religiously significant truths susceptible of being revealed to human beings. Most religions, however, are a mixture of truth and error, and so even an erroneous religion might contain truths not initially present in the ‘highest’ religion. In the experiential-expressive model, where ‘religions are thought of as expressively rather than propositionally true’, the possibility of mutual enrichment is increased, but the meaningfulness of the designation ‘unsurpassably true’ becomes problematic. The difficulty lies in the fact that ‘when truth is understood in terms of symbolic efficacy it is a variable quality without any logically intrinsic upper limit’, as well as in the possibility that a comparison on these terms might produce a multiple tie rather than a clear victor.

The categorial form of the claim to unsurpassability may be, in different respects, both stronger and weaker than the propositional form. In the stronger case, if there is only one religion that has categories adequate to enable reference to the actual ultimate reality, then it would be the only one in which propositional and expressive truth could occur. Other religions, to the extent that their categories were inadequate, would not refer to ultimate reality, and would be propositionally and expressively neither true nor false, but meaningless.

The categorial form of the claim to unsurpassability is weaker that a categorially adequate religion enables false statements as well as true; in fact, only in such a religion is falsehood, as distinct from meaningless babble, possible. If this ‘sounds outrageous..."
to traditionally pious ears’, this is because ‘ordinary common sense’ regards truth in terms of propositional correspondence (ND 50). But in a cultural-linguistic view, truth as correspondence is not a property of particular propositions, nor even of a religion’s categorial scheme. Rather, correspondence may (or may not) be a property of a religion insofar as, as a whole lived reality, it corresponds (or does not correspond) to ‘what a theist calls God’s being and will’ (ND 50-1).

As actually lived, a religion may be pictured as a single gigantic proposition. It is a true proposition to the extent that its objectivities are interiorized and exercised by groups and individuals in such a way as to conform them in some measure in the various dimensions of their existence to the ultimate reality and goodness that lies at the heart of things. It is a false proposition to the extent that this does not happen (ND 51).

This passage introduces important emphases which are taken up again in the ‘Excursus on Religion and Truth’ that comprises section IV of Lindbeck’s chapter. For now, let us note that Lindbeck takes truth-as-correspondence to relate less to ideas than to the people who have them; less to single ideas than to complex lived realities; less to statements than to the ways in which people use them; less to agreement between idea and reality than to agreement between ourselves and ultimate reality. Amplifying the point with an extended cartographic simile in which a categorial scheme is likened to a map, Lindbeck concludes: ‘the categorially and unsurpassably true religion is capable of being rightly utilized, of guiding thought, passions, and action in a way that corresponds to ultimate reality, and of thus being ontologically (and “propositionally”) true, but is not always and perhaps not even usually so employed’ (ND 51-2).

In the following section, on ‘The Interrelationships of Religions’, Lindbeck sets out to explain how the cultural-linguistic approach can accommodate the desire to affirm dialogue, which is ‘a major cause for the popularity of experiential-expressive approaches’ (ND 53). He begins by noting various ways in which religions might understand their interrelations. They could be related as (1) the incomplete to the complete, promise to fulfilment; (2) diverse objectifications of the same or similar experiences; (3) complementary approaches to different but not incompatible dimensions of existence; (4) direct opposites; or (5) the coherent to the incoherent, the inauthentic to the authentic. Finally, Lindbeck notes that religions may well be comparable in more than one of these ways. All this is by way of introduction to Lindbeck’s claim that a cultural-linguistic approach ‘can allow a strong case for interreligious dialogue, but not for any single type of such dialogue’ (ND 53). Such a case begins from the assumption that each religion may (or, perhaps, may not) have its own grounds for engaging in dialogue, and avoids the disrespect inherent in the assumption that at their deepest level all religions are basically the same. Christians might wish to talk to adherents of other faiths because they desire to serve them, or in order to help them become better Marxists, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, etc, and so make ‘their own particular contributions…to the preparation for the Consummation.’ Thus, Christians have reasons for dialogue, but we must not presume to speak for others in this regard (ND 52-4).

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54 Examples are provided for each case. See ND 52-3.

55 That is, Christians may see that, in the providence of God, non-Christian traditions can bear witness to aspects of truth that are only poorly attested or exemplified in Christianity. They may therefore wish to contribute to the total witness to truth by helping others to become the best they can be in their own ways. Of course, there are other possible Christian
From a cultural-linguistic perspective, experiential-expressivism’s assumption of a common foundation for dialogue is not a strength but a weakness. The presupposition that the various religions’ deepest experiences and commitments must somehow be basically the same runs the risks of (1) disguising the multiplicity of problems and motives; (2) forcing dialogue partners to think of themselves as representing either a superior or inferior articulation of a common experience. In contrast, a cultural-linguistic approach recognizes the integrity and particularity of each religion and allows the participants to regard each other as being simply different ‘without necessarily engaging in the invidious comparisons that the assumption of a common experiential core make so tempting.’

Lindbeck concludes that the cultural-linguistic view allows for dialogue, though it cannot itself provide reasons why dialogue should take place (ND 55).

Concerning the salvation of those belonging to other faiths (the third section of the chapter), Lindbeck notes that it is usual for religious believers to be convinced that there is some value in being religiously right rather than religiously wrong. And if this means that those of other faiths (or none) are thereby hindered or even excluded from salvation (however defined), then out of sheer humanitarian concern one would wish to convert them to the true way. Thus, ‘the claim of superiority or unsurpassability, when combined with concern for fellow human beings, would seem to lead almost inevitably to polemics and proselytizing instead of the dialogical and cooperative attitudes toward other religions favored officially…or unofficially by a large proportion of contemporary religious people’ (ND 55-6).

As with the issue of dialogue, so each religion has its own way of formulating this problem. Lindbeck sees the specifically Christian conundrum to be that of reconciling salvation solo Christo with the salvation of non-Christians. There are two basic types of explanation: those in which salvation in Christ is effective in the present age for all human beings; and those in which the question of eternal destiny is decided at or beyond death in encounter with Jesus. Lindbeck finds the ‘currently most widespread’ solution to be an experiential-expressive one in which the ‘prereflexive, inarticulate experience of the divine…at the heart of every religion’ is identified with the saving grace of Christ (ND 56). All those who respond to the inward call share in the same salvation: Christians consciously through faith in Christ, non-Christians unconscious that Jesus Christ is ‘both the ultimate source and the only fully and finally appropriate objective

motivations for dialogue, such as evangelism, cooperation in common tasks, avoiding violence in multifaith societies, or helping others to better serve their own communities. Of these, evangelism might be problematic in a discussion of ‘nonproselytizing interreligious dialogue and cooperation’ (ND 48), but to exclude it a priori would presumably violate Lindbeck’s desire to respect each religion’s own reasons (if any) for engaging in dialogue.

It seems that experiential-expressivism cannot win. Here, comparability, with its associated temptation to the assertion of superiority, is a serious fault. Previously, the likely absence of a means of declaring one religion to be clearly superior appeared to be a fault (see n52 above).

Lindbeck leaves to one side the views of those who deny the salvation of non-Christians (‘most Protestant and Catholic traditionalists’, p. 56) or those who acknowledge the dilemma but refuse to explain it (the view that ‘we know of salvation in Jesus Christ; the salvation of others is God’s concern not ours’).

Lindbeck observes that Western Christians have generally rejected both of these options on the grounds that ‘explicit faith in the Triune God and/or membership in the visible church…is necessary now that the truth has been finally revealed in Jesus Christ’ (ND 56). ‘The major doctrinal concern has been to preserve the Christus solus, not to deny the possibility of salvation to non-Christians’ (ibid.).

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correlate of their inner experience of salvation’ (ND 57). Thus salvation is only through Christ, yet also includes non-Christians. But this solution cannot satisfy either cognitivists or cultural-linguists; cognitivists because a minimal, propositionally statable universal religious awareness seems to lead to a rationalistic deism rather than Christianity; cultural-linguists because they find untenable the basic premise of universal religious experience. Besides, the universalism behind the experiential-expressive approach is experiential, not propositional. So Lindbeck finds that ‘the only currently available alternative for those of a cultural-linguistic inclination is a prospective theory’.  

The theory Lindbeck favours abandons the notion of implicit faith in favour of honouring the traditional insistence on an explicit faith that comes ex auditu, from hearing. In other words, Lindbeck wants to combine not only salvation through Christ alone and the salvation of non-Christians, but also the requirement for explicit faith that has historically been the factor creating tension between the first two, and this achieved by asserting ‘the possibility of a saving encounter with the risen Jesus Christ beyond the bounds of this present life’ (ND 59). Seeking common ground with some recent Roman Catholic authors, Lindbeck hypothesises that the ultimate fate of every human being is definitively decided at death, and only at death, and that this applies to believers as much as to non-believers. ‘All previous decisions, whether for faith or against faith, are preliminary’. 

Lindbeck has affirmed the possibility of religious superiority, and also the availability of salvation through Jesus Christ alone on the basis of explicit faith, but now he goes to some length to emphasise that his cultural-linguistic version of this traditional-sounding theory removes all ground for Christian boasting. Firstly, though Christians may think that theirs is the categorically true faith, they should remember that this advantage enables both truth and error, and that those of other religions not only lack the true faith, but also the means of knowingly rejecting it. Since both

59 ND 56-7, final quotation from p. 57. The logic required to reach such a conclusion would be (1) the two types of theory mentioned define the entire field of possibilities; (2) the first type are, without exception, theories that assume a universal religious experience (or a universal religion); (3) the universalist assumption is unacceptable on cultural-linguistic grounds; and therefore (4) the acceptable theory (if there is one) must be of the second type. Unfortunately, Lindbeck’s argument falls short of demonstrating (or even arguing) premises (1) and (2). It does, however, provide an opportunity for him to draw on and adapt some earlier work on this issue (see Lindbeck 1973 and Lindbeck 1974).

60 Lindbeck pauses at this point to emphasise that the point under consideration is ‘whether a prospective fides ex auditu explanation of the salvation of non-Christians...is theologically as tenable as an “anonymous Christian” one.’ He thinks that both options ‘can be made consistent with scripture and tradition and with the contemporary need for interreligious dialogue’, and so ‘the decision between them is likely to depend on the contemporary Zeitgeist (i.e., on nontheological factors) and therefore does not affect the issue of the Christian availability of the associated theories of religion.’ This reminder (see also n43 above) provides an interesting twist to the theological/nontheological division in Lindbeck’s thinking. Lindbeck is here foreshadowing the conclusions of the following argument, and he indicates that inner-Christian arguments do not allow a clear decision to be reached between the two views—both appear to be adequate. But this means, not that a decision cannot or need not be made, but that it may be made on other, nonreligious, grounds; and such a decision, because it is made on nontheological grounds, has no effect on theological assessments. It seems that the Zeitgeist is a world that has not been absorbed by the biblical world.

61 Thus, in comparison with the experiential-expressive approach, Lindbeck transfers the possibility of a universal faith from this life to the transition between this life and the next.

62 ND 57-9, final quotation from p. 59.
truth and falsehood are open to Christians, their situation is in some respects more perilous. Judgement begins in the house of the Lord. In other words, Cyprian was only half right: not only is there no salvation outside the church, but no damnation either. Secondly, explicit faith is to be understood, ‘not as expressing or articulating the existential depths, but rather as producing and forming them’. Even mature Christians are beginners in this process of formation. ‘What distinguishes their love from that of the non-Christian is, not its present subjective quality, but rather the fact that it is beginning to be shaped by the message of Jesus’ cross and resurrection’ (ND 60). All human beings are like toddlers, but Christians have the advantage of beginning to learn the right language. Lindbeck wants us to see that his cultural-linguistic prospective view of salvation provides less reason for Christian boasting than does an experiential-expressive view invoking implicit without explicit faith. With such a wide and potentially all-embracing view of salvation, and with strong structural (cultural-linguistic!) reasons for religious humility, Lindbeck is satisfied that ‘the possibility of the salvation of non-Christian—as well as maintaining the solus Christus—can be affirmed with equal plausibility (or implausibility) from either an anonymous Christian or an eschatologically futuristic perspective’ (ND 63).

63 ND 60. For Lindbeck, Christians have just begun to have their ‘existential depths’ produced and formed. However, in the following text it seems that Lindbeck is describing the production and formation, not of ‘existential depths’, but of expressions of such depths. Lindbeck’s ‘explicit faith’ produces and forms ‘the existential depths’, rather than expressing or articulating them. A third possibility, that faith might itself be the ‘existential depth’, informed by and variably expressed in terms of a categorial framework, has been passed over.

64 ND 61. Lindbeck downplays the ‘now’ and emphasises the ‘not yet’ of salvation, trading off the former against the latter: ‘The Holy Spirit which is in them is the pledge of, not the participation in, future glory.’ ‘In short, every aspect of the new life exists in the modality of hope’ (ND 60, emphasis added). The ‘presentness’ of salvation is the merest beginning. Christians are outwardly undistinguished and boasting is therefore excluded: ‘Believers have by grace just begun to learn the one in whom alone is salvation, but in moral and religious quality they are like other human beings, worse than some and better than others’ (in loc). That is, since the fullness of salvation is the successful completion of learning (albeit practical and personal learning), the mere beginning of learning is nothing to boast about. But by emphasising the futurity of salvation while merely mentioning grace, Lindbeck reverses the biblical priorities which exclude boasting, not because we have much to learn (which is true), but because salvation is God’s gracious act of self-giving to us, corporately and individually. It is a matter of how salvation is given rather than how much has been received. Lindbeck’s trading-off of the now and not yet of salvation is also unbiblical, in that New Testament writers see the Holy Spirit as both pledge and participation, while denying the possibility of a fully realised participation in the present age.

65 ND 59-61. Lindbeck admits that ‘perhaps the greatest difficulty’ with his view on the salvation of non-Christians is that ‘its prospective reference seems mythological or unreal to those who think science or philosophy makes it impossible to affirm a temporally and objectively future eschaton’ (ND 62). In response, he grants that this could well be a difficulty for those who are so inclined, but then, they have their own mythology—that of ‘an anonymously Christian preconceptual and prelinguistic experience of salvation’ (in loc). The choice is less between myth and science, than between two mythologies, and Lindbeck thinks that ‘there is no specifically theological way of deciding between these competing charges of unreality’ (in loc). So the prospective proposal looks unreal from an experiential-expressive perspective, and the ‘anonymous Christian’ proposal looks unreal on a cultural-linguistic view. Lindbeck has already indicated his belief that the witness of scripture and tradition on these proposals is ambiguous (ND 57-8).

66 Lindbeck’s ‘Afterword’ in ND25 revisits the argument of ND chapter 3 so as to emphasise inter-religious questions and show that a cultural-linguistic approach does not foster isolationism and fideism as some critics fear (ND25 126). Lindbeck sees no need to change the basic argument of the original, but acknowledges that chapter 3 dwelt more on the particularity of religions than on their universal intent. He restores balance by referring to his basic definition of religions as ‘comprehensive interpretive schemes’ (ND 32-33) and goes on to show that, with both particularity and universalism kept in mind, and in the context of ND as a whole, the alleged problems of isolationism, relativism and
2.3 TECHNICALITIES AND IMPLICATIONS

2.3.1 Excursus on Religion and Truth

Lindbeck’s ‘Excursus on Religion and Truth’ appears as the final section of his third chapter, but its importance to his respondents, the significance of its technical detail, and its role as a hinge between the two major parts of his argument, all call for detailed treatment. Let us begin with the role of the excursus in Lindbeck’s overall argument. To this point, Lindbeck has presented his cultural-linguistic theory of religion and justified it against its main rival. From a nontheological standpoint he has found the cultural-linguistic view to be superior to experiential-expressivism, though there may be little difference in relation to their respective abilities to meaningfully accommodate Christian theology’s traditional views of other religions. Propositionalism, the other alternative approach considered by Lindbeck, has been briefly described, and mentioned at various points, but was prominent only in the discussion of unsurpassability. That discussion gave us the first example in ND of a reasoning strategy which becomes sharper in the second part of the book, namely, that where the discussion concerns the truth content of religious affirmations Lindbeck effectively dismisses experiential-expressive approaches from consideration in favour of contrasting his cultural-linguistic theory with propositionalism. We saw how, in relation to unsurpassability, Lindbeck took the issue to be about the unsurpassability of a religion’s truth claims, and found experiential-expressive approaches problematic in this regard because they locate the specifically religious value of a religion not in its truth claims but in the evocative efficacy of its symbols.

We must remember that one of Lindbeck’s goals is to provide a theory of religion and doctrine that can be accepted by adherents of various Christian traditions (and perhaps by adherents of various religions) without requiring them to modify their existing beliefs. Such acceptability requires that a theory be compatible with the claims made in the various traditions—claims to truth, claims concerning themselves, and claims concerning other traditions. This is the basis of Lindbeck’s claim that his cultural-linguistic proposal is religiously and doctrinally neutral—the truth or falsity of traditional claims about doctrine may be established through historical and theological research, but the proposal itself can accommodate either outcome and does not prejudice the issue. To this extent it is therefore ‘available’ to those traditions, i.e., there is no reason why they should not take it seriously.

By contrast, experiential-expressivism requires subordination of traditional religious claims to the ‘deeper truth’ of the universality and commonality of religious experience; religion ‘expresses’ or evokes this experience, but does not describe it, define it, or speak its true nature. All religions may be ‘true’ precisely because they deal not in truth but in the aesthetic expression of human experience. Truth belongs to the realm of knowledge, of science, the realm to which experiential-expressivism’s basic assumption (namely, the universality and commonality of religious experience) is assumed to belong. Thus, it is of the essence of experiential-expressivism that it fen

fideism (and associated religious imperialism) need not arise. Lindbeck’s insight that religions are both particular and comprehensive is very important, and its implications are a major theme of this study.

67 See pp. 30-33 above.
cannot allow the possibility that traditional religious claims might indeed be ultimately meaningful as truth claims. Rather, experiential-expressivism already knows the truth and rejoices in the richness of its many expressions—but what these really mean can now be articulated in other, more contemporary, terms. In short, because of this prior commitment, experiential-expressivism does not treat the traditional doctrines of Christianity (or of other religions) as serious truth claims, and cannot allow itself to do so. Its contribution towards doctrinal reconciliation is the recommendation of a new faith in which doctrinal reconciliation does not matter anyway because doctrines do not matter. Hence, experiential-expressivism is not an option for those who take their own doctrinal traditions seriously.

With experiential-expressivism eliminated, the field is left to the propositional and cultural-linguistic approaches. Lindbeck’s discussion of unsurpassability included a brief account of the way in which a cultural-linguistic view allows for the possibility of propositional truth, but, as he acknowledged, it is quite usual for religious adherents to treat their doctrinal affirmations as literally (i.e., propositionally) true. If the weekly recital of the Nicene Creed is an affirmation of what ‘we (Christians) believe’ to be the case concerning the triune God and the life of the church, then it would seem that theories stressing the cognitive and/or propositional content of doctrine have an advantage. How then will Lindbeck ensure that his own proposal is not susceptible to the kind of dismissal already meted out to experiential-expressivism? The excursus presents Lindbeck’s more detailed case for the possibility of propositional doctrinal truth in a cultural-linguistic theory of religion.

The great strength of a cognitive-propositional theory of religion is that, unlike a purely experiential-expressive one, it admits the possibility of such truth claims, and a crucial theological challenge to a cultural-linguistic approach is whether it also can do so (ND 63-4).

The argument of the excursus begins with some further delineations of the concept of truth. In his discussion of unsurpassability Lindbeck spoke of ‘propositional’, ‘symbolic’ and ‘categorial’ truth, though we have seen (and Lindbeck readily admits) that ‘symbolic truth’ is not really concerned with truth but with evocative efficacy. Moreover, since categories are not themselves affirmations but only enable affirmations to be made, one should perhaps speak (as Lindbeck sometimes does) of ‘categorial adequacy’ rather than ‘categorial truth’ (ND 47-9). There is also ‘ontological truth’, understood as correspondence to reality, and Lindbeck has already hinted (ND 51) that this is to be distinguished from ‘propositional truth’ understood as a propositionalist (or indeed common usage) might take it. It may be that for many purposes the two are the same, but there is a subtle and important distinction between them, and much of the excursus is taken up with expounding that distinction by means of another aspect of truth, what Lindbeck calls ‘intrasystematic truth’, i.e., the truth of coherence.

Utterances are intrasystematically true when they cohere with the total relevant context, which, in the case of a religion when viewed in cultural-linguistic terms, is not only other utterances but also the correlative forms of life. 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.68

This passage, comprising a key sentence and an example that has subsequently attained a certain notoriety, indicates the dual importance of intrasystematic truth in Lindbeck’s argument.69 Firstly, ‘utterances are intrasystematically true when they cohere with the total relevant context…’. Cognitive-propositional theories of religion overlook the fact that our statements do not map directly onto reality, but only indirectly and always in terms of the categories available to us. We have already seen that Lindbeck holds categorial adequacy to be a necessary if insufficient condition for ontological truth. Now the same statement is made in relation to intrasystematic truth. It too is necessary though not by itself sufficient for ontological truth. A statement that is intrasystematically true in a categorially inadequate system is merely meaningless, but it is ontologically true if the system is categorially adequate. Both categorial truth (adequacy) and intrasystematic truth (coherence) are necessary, and are together sufficient, conditions for ontological truth.70

Secondly (and completing the sentence quoted above), Lindbeck draws attention to the nature of the ‘…total relevant context, which, in the case of a religion when viewed in cultural-linguistic terms, is not only other utterances but also the correlative forms of life.’ Religious utterance occurs in a more-than-linguistic context, the context of a whole religious way of life. Of course, not all meaning systems have this property. Euclidean geometry, for example, is a purely conceptual system. From a cultural-linguistic perspective, a cognitive-propositional theory of religion overlooks the crucial difference between purely conceptual and socially embodied systems.71 Lindbeck develops this point into a modified definition of ‘propositional truth’.

For propositionalists, truth is a property of a statement that corresponds to the reality it is describing. Lindbeck can agree that such ‘ontological correspondence’ is the ultimate criterion of truth, but he insists that, in the case of religious utterances, correspondence is not an attribute of statements 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

68 ND 64. See also the discussion of this example in Marshall 2000, 191-4.
69 Lindbeck himself weaves the two aspects together, whereas, for clarity and emphasis, I have distinguished them with ‘firstly’ and ‘secondly’. Nevertheless, both points emerge strongly in Lindbeck’s text, serving to highlight what appear, from a cultural-linguistic perspective, to be shortcomings in the propositional approach. See ND 64-5.
70 ND 64-5. Lindbeck finds that this analysis holds as well in religions as in geometry or the theatre, in which the ‘truth’ of statements can only be appreciated by reference to the existence and nature of a particular context. Statements in Euclidean geometry are intrasystematically true, but since Einstein indicated that the geometry of space is actually Riemannian rather than Euclidean, it is inappropriate to hold them to be ontologically true. Again, ‘the statement “Denmark is the land where Hamlet lived” is intrasystematically true within the context of Shakespeare’s play, but this implies nothing regarding ontological truth or falsity unless the play is taken as history’ (ND 65).
71 ‘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’ (ND 64).
Real’ (ND 65). That is, Lindbeck goes beyond the medieval scholastic definition of truth as an adequation of the mind to the thing, and asserts that, ‘in the religious domain, this mental isomorphism of the knowing and the known can be pictured as part and parcel of a wider conformity of the self to God’ (ND 65). Borrowing from J. L. Austin’s notion of a ‘performatory’ use of language, Lindbeck indicates that he will allow that 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 correspondence’.72

In something of an aside (but one which will have importance for us later) Lindbeck admits that this ‘performatory conformity of the self to God can also be pictured in epistemologically realistic fashion as involving a correspondence of the mind to divine reality’ (ND 66), but this concession is only in respect of a ‘modest’ propositionalism that conceives of ontological correspondence in a quite limited way. He finds such an approach exemplified in Thomas Aquinas and some other ‘classical theists’. Such a modest propositionalism acknowledges that we do not know what we mean by ‘God is good’ apart from that ‘goodness’ indicated in the biblical stories of creation, providence and redemption which shape believers’ thoughts and actions. We might not know what ‘God is good’ means in the being of God, but we can know what it means for us. ‘When propositionalism becomes as modest as in this “agnostic” reading of Thomas Aquinas, it is no longer incompatible with the kind of “performatory-propositional” theological theory of religious truth that fits a cultural-linguistic approach’ (ND 66-7).

After this aside, Lindbeck gives further consideration to the specifically religious nature of the context within which religious utterances occur. This context is not abstract and static, as in mathematical systems, but concrete and dynamic—sentences are not simply there, they are used, with intent, by human beings. Religious sentences acquire propositional force not simply by virtue of containing terms referring to religious objects, nor merely through being used in a religious context, though both are necessary properties. It is necessary, in addition, that religious sentences be used religiously, that is, that they function in their context to further the speaker’s (or, by extension, the community’s) ontological correspondence to the reality to which they mean to refer.

[Religious sentences] acquire enough referential specificity to first-order or ontological truth or falsity only in determinate settings, and this rarely if ever happens on the pages of theological treatises or in the course of doctrinal discussions. The theological and doctrinal uses of, e.g., “Christ is Lord” are important…but they are not propositional. For Christian theological purposes, that sentence becomes a first-order proposition capable…of making ontological truth claims only as it is used in the activities of adoration, proclamation, obedience, promise-hearing, and promise-keeping which shape individuals and communities into conformity to the mind of Christ (ND 68).

72 ND 64-5, final quotation from p. 65. At this point Lindbeck indicates biblical and theological parallels, and concludes: ‘Paul and Luther…quite clearly believed that Christ’s Lordship is objectively real no matter what the faith or unfaith of those who hear or say the words. What they were concerned to assert is that the only way to assert this truth is to do something about it, i.e., to commit oneself to a way of life; and this concern, it would seem, is wholly congruent with the suggestion that it is only through the performatory use of religious utterances that they acquire propositional force’ (ND 66).
This passage highlights a crucial point in Lindbeck’s argument. Words in themselves, even whole sentences, are not, and do not become, affirmations or propositions apart from intentional acts occurring in determinate contexts. That is, affirmation or proposition is less a kind of sentence than a kind of use, a property not of words or sentences in themselves but of their function in a specific context. Lindbeck draws several implications from this. Concerning context, he reiterates the point made earlier regarding the salvation of non-Christians: “those unskilled in the language of faith not only fail to affirm but also cannot deny that “Jesus is Lord”” (ND 68). The occurrence of meaningful affirmation, i.e., an act having propositional force, depends in part on one’s competence (skill) in the language and practice of the way of life that frames the act. And we have seen that ontological correspondence between statements and reality is also conditional on the categorial adequacy of the terms employed. So Lindbeck maintains that ontological correspondence (i.e., what propositionists usually mean by ‘propositional truth’) can only ever be indirect (rather than direct as propositionists seem to assume), and that religious propositions should not be abstracted from their religious use by human beings (that is, they should not be treated as if they were simply a religious variety of the supposedly ‘purely rational’ discourse beloved of Enlightenment philosophers). Yet Lindbeck wants to make clear that, despite these caveats, where categorial adequacy and religious skill are present, ‘propositional truth’, in something like the propositionists’ sense, can occur, and so a cultural-linguistic approach can very well accommodate the usual conviction of believers ‘that when they rightly use a sentence such as “Christ is Lord” they are uttering a true first-order proposition’. 73

Concerning use, Lindbeck distinguishes between ‘first-order’ religious uses which are ‘performance propositional’ (as he puts it) and second-order uses which are not. First-order uses occur only when one is speaking religiously, that is, ‘when seeking to align oneself and others performatively with what one takes to be most important in the universe by worshiping, promising, obeying, exhorting, preaching’ (ND 69). ‘Technical theology and official doctrine, in contrast, are second-order discourse about the first-intentional uses of religious language’ (in loc). Here, at the end of the excursus, the metaphor of doctrine-as-grammar comes to prominence for the first time:

Just as grammar by itself affirms nothing either true or false regarding the world in which language is used, but only about language, so theology and doctrine…assert nothing either true or false about God and his relation to creatures, but only speak about such assertions (ND 69).

The conclusion to which the excursus leads, then, is that, on the one hand, a cultural-linguistic approach shares with propositional approaches an openness to epistemological realism in religious affirmations. 74 That is, Lindbeck’s proposal can provide for religious affirmations being ‘propositionally true’ in (roughly) the sense understood by propositionists. On the other

73 ND 68-9, final quotation from p. 69.
74 Lindbeck also indicates in passing that the cultural-linguistic approach can be just as open to the possibility of nonrealism: “There is nothing in the cultural-linguistic approach that requires the rejection (or the acceptance) of…epistemological realism and [the] correspondence theory of truth” (ND 68-9). As we shall see, cognitivists have felt some disquiet regarding the openness of his proposal on this question.
hand, the nature of ‘propositional truth’ and its relation to doctrine are understood quite differently in the two approaches, and with respect to these differences Lindbeck clearly finds the cultural-linguistic approach superior to the propositional. He has presented some general technical arguments to support this position in preparation for his fourth and fifth chapters, which go on to examine the relative merits of the two approaches in terms of their ‘availability’ and usefulness for ecumenical discussions (ND 69).

But that is a later discussion. In the excursus itself, the contrast that Lindbeck draws between these two views of doctrine and truth is as follows. In the propositional view, truth status is a property of sentences (including doctrinal sentences), and the truth value of sentences is evaluated in terms of their correspondence to reality—meanings of terms may be debated but are resolved by reference to other sentences that are evaluated in similar fashion. The task of doctrine is to state the truth, so that others may know it and affirm it in similar sentences. In the contrasting cultural-linguistic view, truth status is a property of affirmations, and the truth value of affirmations depends on both their coherence with the relevant categorial system and that system’s adequacy with respect to the objects concerning which the affirmations are made. Moreover, religions as cultural-linguistic systems are primarily concerned, not with correspondence between formal propositions and religious objects, but with enabling a growing conformity of persons to ultimate reality. Therefore, firstly, the context or categorial system relevant to the evaluation of the (intrasystematic) truth value of a religious affirmation includes not only other utterances or sentences but a whole way of life; secondly, religious truth, properly understood, is a property of acts of affirmation rather than of the sentence(s) used in those acts; and thirdly, doctrine does not make such ‘first-order’ affirmations but belongs to ‘second-order’ discourse concerned with the ways in which acts of affirmation may be appropriately made according to a particular religious way of life. That is, doctrine fulfils a ‘grammatical’ function in relation to the ‘language’ of a religious tradition.

Since most of the excursus compares conceptions of truth under the propositional and cultural-linguistic approaches, my account of it could have been deferred until the ‘propositionalist side’ of the conversation is more in view. Yet its inclusion here helps to explain the division that appears both in Lindbeck’s book and in the ‘conversation’ I am constructing. We have already seen that Lindbeck dismisses experiential-expressive views from his discussion of doctrine because those views dismiss doctrine from the realms of truth. In terms made clearer in the excursus, we can now see that Lindbeck’s argument with experiential-expressivism is an argument over categories, or rather, categorial systems: the experiential-expressivist places religions in a wider categorial system according to which propositional truth is a property of scientific knowledge, the truth of religion lies in the common religious experience of humankind, and its varied expressions, which we know as ‘religions’, have an aesthetic and evocative value akin to that of poetry, drama, and the arts. In this framework, talk of ‘doctrinal truth’, or even of ‘doctrinal disagreement’ is a confusion of categories, so Lindbeck’s dismissal of experiential-expressivism from the doctrinal discussion may be after all a matter of little moment—an experiential-expressivist would not want to join a discussion on the terms Lindbeck has set. Experiential-expressivism cannot really be dismissed from the field, for it has already decided that the field is not worth contesting, or that the contest lacks meaning and is therefore inappropriate. Thus, in the context of Lindbeck’s proposal,
it makes sense that he engages with experiential-expressivism in his discussion of religion, but not in his discussion of doctrine.

By contrast, propositionalism does not encapsulate religion within, or absorb it into, a wider context, but rather takes the faith to be, simply, true—and in this sense its context of meaning is already the widest possible. Lindbeck is therefore not concerned with propositionalism’s understanding of religion in general, for ‘religion in general’ is not a category that features in propositionalism’s self-understanding. Rather, Lindbeck is concerned with the nature of the truth that the propositionalist believer espouses. His own view is that truth in general and religious truth in particular are not what propositionalists take them to be, and that while religious affirmations may be true, they are never ‘simply’ so. Consequently, as he goes on to argue and illustrate, a propositional approach to doctrine as religious truth is not adequate to the phenomena of doctrinal development or to the requirements of ecumenical negotiation.

2.3.2 Lindbeck’s Last Word on Experiential-Expressive Theories

The end of the ‘Excursus on Religion and Truth’ marks the end of Lindbeck’s third chapter and also the transition from his dispute with experiential-expressivism concerning the nature of religion to his argument with propositionalism concerning the nature of doctrine. If the logical structure of ND is as I have described it, we would not expect to find very much material relating to experiential-expressivism in Lindbeck’s fourth and fifth chapters, and in fact, apart from scattered allusions to or repetitions of earlier comments,75 there is only one substantial passage, a long paragraph on socio-cultural aspects of the expressivist antipathy to doctrines as communal norms (ND 77). But this is by no means the end of Lindbeck’s critique of experiential-expressive ideas of religion. In his last chapter he turns from considering the nature of doctrine to expounding the nature of theology, and how its methods, sources and responsibilities might appear if formed in a manner consistent with his view of religion and doctrine. This material has attracted close attention from experiential-expressive theologians. In fact, for all that Lindbeck calls it an ‘addendum’ to his argument, it is probably this chapter more than any other that has provoked the vigour of experiential-expressive responses to ND.76

But let us first consider the passage in chapter four. The argument of this chapter begins with a definition of doctrines (here, ‘church doctrines’) as ‘communally authoritative teachings regarding beliefs and practices that are considered essential to the identity or welfare of the group in question’ (ND 74). After making a series of clarificatory distinctions in preparation for his discussion of theoretical questions about the nature of doctrine, but before actually embarking on that discussion, Lindbeck finds he ‘must say a word about the difficulty in our day of taking doctrines seriously enough to try to understand them’ (ND 77). The antipathy of the modern mood towards the very notion of communal norms can be seen as the product of religious and ideological pluralism and social mobility. Constantly faced with conflicting and

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75 See ND 78, 79, 83, 91, 93. Some of these comments, such as those on pp. 83, 92-3 provide examples of experiential-expressive treatments of particular doctrines, but do not modify or extend the point already made, namely, that this approach treats doctrines as dealing in symbolic evocation rather than truth.

76 See the responses mentioned below in 3.1 The Lindbeck – Tracy ‘Debate’ commencing on p. 51.
changing views, people lose confidence in all of them, even doubting that any of them might be true. In such an environment, doctrines no longer represent objective realities and are instead experienced as expressions of personal preference. Moreover, in their role as communal standards of belief and practice, doctrines are experienced as an intolerable infringement on the liberty of the self. Such enduring value as may attach to the doctrines of the past lies in their role as expressive symbolisations of deeper experiences and orientations that ought now to be articulated in other and more contemporary ways. Thus, Lindbeck concludes, ‘an experiential-expressive approach to religion can be easily, though not necessarily, used to legitimate the religious privatism and subjectivism that is fostered by the social pressures of the day’ (ND 77). That is, experiential-expressivism accommodates contemporary culture and serves its agendas.

How can this ‘urge to accommodate’ be countered? Perhaps partly by exposing ‘contemporary antidoctrinalism’ as being no less a product of social processes than are the doctrines against which it is prejudiced (as Lindbeck has just done). Perhaps partly by arguing that the privatism and subjectivism underlying this prejudice tend to weaken ‘the social groups that are the chief bulwarks against chaos and against totalitarian efforts to master chaos.’ But such intellectual arguments are relatively impotent in the face of the Zeitgeist of popular culture (ND 77-8).

It may well be that some measure of what I have on other occasions called “sociological sectarianism” is required. Religious bodies that wish to maintain highly deviant convictions in an inhospitable environment must, it would seem, develop close-knit groups capable of supplying the psychosocial “plausibility structures” (as Peter Berger calls them) needed to sustain an alien faith. These groups need not withdraw into sociological ghettos in the fashion of the Amish or the Hasidic Jews, but can rather form cells like those of the early Christian movement (or of the more recent international communist one), or develop ecclesiologies in ecclesia similar to those of monasticism, early pietism, or some portions of the contemporary charismatic movement.

In short, Lindbeck feels that culture can be effectively opposed or criticised only by means of counter-culture, and that his intellectual arguments (including ND itself) will be of use only to the extent that they serve the creation and maintenance of vibrant counter-cultural communities. Description of the kind of theology that will best fulfil this service is the burden of Lindbeck’s last chapter.

In his final chapter, having completed the substantive argument for his cultural-linguistic proposal, Lindbeck explores its implications for theological method by means of an assessment

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77 Lindbeck is well aware (as his ‘not necessarily’ indicates) that this passage says nothing concerning experiential-expressivism’s truth or falsity. The argument here is purely a hermeneutic of suspicion in which Lindbeck casts himself in the role of a swimmer against the cultural tide. This also features among the outcomes of the discussion in the sixth chapter.

78 ND 78. The ‘other occasions’ to which Lindbeck refers are his earlier articles ‘Ecumenism and the Future of Belief’ (Lindbeck 1968) and ‘The Sectarian Future of the Church’ (Lindbeck 1971); see ND 89 n9, 28 n22.

79 ‘The overcoming of the current aversion to doctrinal standards and its replacement by concern for correct doctrine depends much more on social and ecclesial developments than on the solution of the theoretical questions with which this book is concerned, yet theory does have a role to play’ (ND 78).
of ‘the faithfulness, applicability and intelligibility of fundamentally different types of theology’ (ND 112). The types of theology are those he associates with the various views of religion he has considered: ‘preliberal’ or traditionalist theology is associated with propositionalism, ‘liberal’ theology with experiential-expressivism, and ‘postliberal’ theology with his own cultural-linguistic approach (ND 112). The introductory section of the chapter concludes with an acknowledgment that ‘each type of theology is embedded in a conceptual framework so comprehensive that it shapes its own criteria of adequacy’, and so the most that can be done is ‘to comment on how faithfulness, applicability, and intelligibility might be understood in postliberal theologies, and then leave it to the readers to make their own assessments’ (ND 113). The balanced and irenic discourse that this comment might lead one to expect never eventuates. Rather, the mood of the first few chapters returns, as postliberal acceptance of Christian particularity is repeatedly contrasted with liberal theology’s accommodation to the universalist presumptions of Western culture. Traditionalist (‘preliberal’) positions are rarely mentioned. After prefatory remarks, the chapter proceeds in sections which explore the manner in which a postliberal theology might show itself to be faithful, applicable, and intelligible. In relation to faithfulness (section II, ND 113-24), postliberal theology is ‘intratextual’ in that religious meaning is taken to be immanent in the biblical text, and the faithfulness of theological descriptions may be measured by the degree to which they ‘correspond to the semiotic universe paradigmatically encoded in holy writ’ (ND 114, 116). Meaning derives from the text and is applied to the world, so that Scripture functions as the lens through which Christians view the world. In contrast, the experiential-expressive and propositional approaches to religion use an ‘extratextual’ method insofar as they treat Scripture less as a way of seeing than as an object of study, and locate its religious meaning outside the text, either in the objective realities to which it refers (propositionalism), or in the experiences it symbolises (experiential-expressivism). As a result, they are preoccupied, not with the world depicted in the Bible, but with questions of facticity or experience (ND 114, 119). Nevertheless, Lindbeck has confidence in the power of Scripture to draw people into its world. There is no reason for surprise if the theology of an ‘undoubted experiential-expressivist’ such as Schleiermacher were in practice more intratextual than his theory of religion would seem to allow (ND 123). The manner in which postliberal theology will show its applicability is closely related to the manner of its faithfulness (section III, ND 124-8). A judgement of the relevance or practicality of an idea or course of action depends not only on knowledge of the concrete situation in which it will be applied but also on a vision of the end for which it will be applied. ‘A theological proposal is adjudged both faithful and applicable to the degree that it appears practical in terms of an eschatologically and empirically defensible scenario of what is to come’ (ND 125). (On this basis, Lindbeck titles this section ‘applicability as futurology’.) The ‘crucial difference between liberals and postliberals’ in this area lies in ‘the way they correlate their visions of the present and of future situations’ (ND 125). Liberals, says Lindbeck, ‘start with experience, with an account of the present, and then adjust their vision of the kingdom of God accordingly, while postliberals are in principle committed to doing the reverse’ (ND 125-6). A liberal approach assimilates the kingdom of God to some construction of present trends, often in the name of ‘progress’, whereas a postliberal approach is methodologically committed, neither to
traditionalism nor to progressivism, but to an intratextually derived eschatology (ND 126). Lindbeck then includes another reflection on the culture of modern western societies, recycling earlier material to show how ‘the cultural climate is on the whole antithetical to postliberalism’ and ‘favourable to liberalism.’ Yet, he claims, although experiential-expressivism may have the advantage of being entirely at home in an economy of self-maximising individuals looking for the particular brand of transcendence that works for them, such atomistic individualism is self-destructive in the end. The viability of a unified world of the future may depend on ‘communal enclaves’ that ‘counteract the acids of modernity’ by socialising their members into ‘highly particular outlooks supportive of concern for others rather than for individual rights and entitlements, and of a sense of responsibility for the wider society rather than for personal fulfilment’. In this respect, ‘it may well be that postliberal theologies are more applicable than liberal ones to the needs of the future’. The paradoxical conclusion is that ‘religious communities are likely to be practically relevant in the long run to the degree that they do not first ask what is either practical or relevant, but instead concentrate on their own intratextual outlooks and forms of life’ (ND 128). The community is justified through its faithfulness.

But what of intelligibility and credibility (section IV, ND 128-34)? This, surely, is liberal theology’s greatest contribution, and it would seem to be postliberal theology’s Achilles’ heel. As Lindbeck puts the problem:

First, intratextuality seems wholly relativistic: it turns religions, so one can argue, into self-enclosed and incommensurable intellectual ghettoes. Associated with this, in second place, is the fideistic dilemma: it appears that choice between religions is purely arbitrary, a matter of blind faith (ND 128).

Lindbeck is well aware that his proposal offends against liberalism’s most basic apologetic inclinations. Liberalism has sought to make religion intelligible and credible ‘to the cultured and the uncultured among both its despisers and its appreciators’ (ND 129). Its choice of expository categories has been apologetically motivated with a view to their clarity and communicability to the modern mind, and this same concern ‘accounts for the liberal commitment to the foundational enterprise of uncovering universal principles or structures—if not metaphysical, then existential, phenomenological, or hermeneutical’ (ND 129). Whether or not one sees ‘the liberal program’ as an accommodation to culture, there is no question in Lindbeck’s mind that it is often motivated by strong ‘missionary impulses’. But if his own proposal respects the motivation, it surely questions the value of the work in which it was expressed. As he says, ‘postliberals are bound to be skeptical, not about missions, but about apologetics and foundations’ (ND 129). Religions can no more be taught by means of translation than can a natural language. Like languages and cultures, religions can be understood only in their own terms, not by transposing them into an alien speech. Apologetic activity is not excluded, but it

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80 ND 126-7. Lindbeck does not (quite) make the point, but he could also have argued that, if modernity’s individualism and technological preoccupation corrode the societies on which it feeds, so nurturing the seeds of its own destruction, and if experiential-expressivism (theological liberalism) is in so many ways modernity’s amiable fellow-traveller, then experiential-expressivism’s lack of ‘otherness’, of critical difference and distance, serves the destruction of the society to which it would be chaplain, but to which and over against which it never could bear witness.
‘must be of an ad hoc and nonfoundational variety rather than standing at the center of theology’ (ND 129). This is not to ghettoise theology. On the contrary, liberal theology, with its apologetic focus on credibility expressed in a commitment to anthropological universals, ‘seems increasingly to be a nineteenth century enclave in a twentieth-century milieu’. A postliberal approach, with its commitment to intratextual description, may well have interdisciplinary advantages in an academy where cultural-linguistic orientations hold sway.  

But that argument concerns academic respectability, whereas, in the end, we are concerned with religious viability, and is this not endangered if, in a nonfoundationalist proposal lacking universal criteria of judgement, there appear to be no rational grounds for choosing between religions? In this respect at least, the cultural-linguistic proposal would appear to perfectly accommodate popular culture and deny what most religions traditionally affirm of themselves. Can it really claim any advantage over experiential-expressivism and liberal theology? Lindbeck sees this as a crucial objection, and he faces it directly.

Antifoundationalism…is not to be equated with irrationalism. The issue is not whether there are universal norms of reasonableness, but whether these can be formulated in some neutral, framework-independent language….As T. S. Kuhn has argued in reference to science, and Wittgenstein in philosophy, the norms of reasonableness are too rich and subtle to be adequately specified in any general theory of reason or knowledge….Thus reasonableness in religion and theology, as in other domains, has something of that aesthetic character, that quality of unformalizable skill, which we usually associate with the artist or the linguistically competent….In short, intelligibility comes from skill, not theory, and credibility comes from good performance, not adherence to independently formulated criteria.

In this perspective, the reasonableness of a religion is largely a function of its assimilative powers, of its ability to provide an intelligible interpretation in its own terms of the varied situations and realities adherents encounter. The religions we call primitive regularly fail this test when confronted with major changes, while the world religions have developed greater resources for coping with vicissitude. Thus, although a religion is not susceptible to decisive disproof, it is subject…to rational testing procedures not wholly unlike those which apply to general scientific theories or paradigms (for which, unlike hypotheses, there are no crucial experiments). Confirmation or disconfirmation occurs through an accumulation of successes or failures in making practically and cognitively coherent sense of relevant data, and the process does not conclude, in the case of religions, until the disappearance of the last communities of believers or, if the faith survives, until the end of history.  

81 Lindbeck seems not to appreciate the irony here. So far as the quest for intellectual respectability is concerned, what is there that allows us to choose between postliberalism’s ‘interdisciplinary advantages’ and liberalism’s appeal to the cultured despisers of religion? The major difference would seem to be about fifty years, that is, the change from late nineteenth-century universal anthropology to mid-twentieth century cultural anthropology. The appeal to the academy would seem to be much the same in each case: to put it crudely, ‘This is how the theorists think nowadays, and we should too.’ The idea that postliberalism may in some respects be more liberal than ‘post-’ turns out to be of some importance in this study. See Lindbeck as Schleiermacherian Theologian commencing on p. 127 below.

82 ND 130-1. The typology of Lindbeck’s argument may be (over)simplified as follows. Modern theologies have typically sought to bring religion into the modern world by making it compatible with scientific understanding of the
In short, a religion’s intelligibility is manifested primarily in the skill with which its adherents deal with life, and its credibility comes from the success of their dealing, but the particular skills involved and the measure of success are, ineluctably, products of the particular religion. On this view, the systematically prior and controlling apologetics of post-Cartesian natural theology and later liberal theology are simply an argument for one faith on the basis of another. And so Lindbeck draws on a very familiar argument:

As Aquinas himself notes, reasoning in support of the faith is not meritorious before faith, but only afterward; or, in the conceptuality employed in this book, the logic of coming to believe, because it is like that of learning a language, has little room for argument, but once one has learned to speak the language of faith, argument becomes possible.83

In other words, ‘I believe, with the result that I may understand’.84 It is those who believe that can demonstrate understanding in the way that they deal with life. How then does one preach the gospel in a dechristianised world? This is a worthy problem. In Lindbeck’s view, liberal foundationalists see this as the primary theological problem, while postliberals see it as the primary ecclesial (not ecclesiological) problem. That is, liberals will produce an apologetic theology, while postliberals will produce theologically informed catechesis aimed at building up the church to be the gospel’s apologetic by demonstrating in life the comprehensiveness of its intratextual reading of the scriptures. Unfortunately, the former cultural dominance of Christianity in Western societies has led to a situation of Christianity by assumption. Widespread Christian nominalism is receptive to liberal translations of the gospel into existential or psychological terms, but has immunised the unchurched masses against catechesis. This does not lead Lindbeck to shrink from his conclusions, but he ends on a rather depressing note. He doubts that a postliberal emphasis on building up the life skills of Christians through catechesis can succeed until the dechristianisation of society has reached a point where Christians are reduced to a small minority that, for the sake of survival, ‘form communities that strive without traditionalist rigidity to cultivate their native tongue and learn to act accordingly’ (ND 133-4). Moreover, it is only in some (then) younger theologians that Lindbeck discerns the desire to serve the church by enabling Christians better to absorb the universe into the biblical world. He concludes with the hope, if not the confidence, that their tribe may increase (ND 135).

In some ways, the material surveyed in this section is among the most interesting and important in ND, for it draws attention to ecclesiology, and especially the relation between theology and church, as one of Lindbeck’s primary concerns (and it is also a major concern of the broader postliberal movement in theology). Here, the implications of Lindbeck’s notion of ‘intratextuality’

world and of humanity. The liberal strategy was to take science as truth and religion as aesthetics. The conservative (propositionalist) strategy was to take both science and religion as truth and seek to reconcile them. Lindbeck takes religions, like general scientific theories, to be large scale socio-cultural phenomena involving particular institutions, practices and ways of viewing the world. In short, in this aspect, religion is like science, but the popular view of science as a purely rational and empirical activity, a view commonly held among both liberals and conservatives, is an Enlightenment fairy tale.

83 ND 132. Lindbeck notes the reference in Aquinas as ST II-II.2.10.

84 A good argument for this translation of credo ut intelligam is given by Rogers (1998, 344).
for the church’s identity and particularity are of special interest. The questions raised include inter alia whether the church can draw its identity purely from the scriptures (‘intratextually’) as he suggests, and articulate and demonstrate a distinctive vision for human flourishing on that basis; whether the strong awareness of Christian difference implicit in Lindbeck’s ‘apologetics by catechesis’ might cause problems as much as solve them; and whether the effectiveness of his approach must really wait upon society’s ‘dechristianisation’. Concerning the relation between church and society, we might ask how the church can be considered a distinct cultural-linguistic entity when it is so intricately enmeshed in the wider societies in which it lives, and has only ever existed in symbiotic (not to say parasitic) relation with them; and we might inquire into Lindbeck’s conception of the boundaries between church and non-church cultural-linguistic systems. While such ecclesiological concerns are important to Lindbeck and other postliberal writers, I do not directly address those concerns in this thesis.85 Rather, as in ND itself, they remain in the background, without ever being entirely absent. Lindbeck’s opening and closing remarks in his final chapter indicate that he understands that chapter to be presenting the implications, the likely outworking, of the cultural-linguistic approach to religion and doctrine expounded in the body of the work, an approach that is rather more social-anthropological in character than theological or ecclesiological. He intends ND to be a kind of prolegomenon to ecclesiology, and indeed to theology in general.86 Its substantive argument concerns contemporary trends in social anthropology and their implications for our understanding of religion, doctrine, and theology. A properly attentive conversation with Lindbeck must walk the same ground.

2.4 LINDBECK AND THE LIBERALS: REVALUING PARTICULARITY

The heart of Lindbeck’s anthropological critique of experiential-expressivism is his theorisation of particularity and identity, which will be major themes in this study. Lindbeck accuses experiential-expressivism and liberal theology of treating particularity as an embarrassment, as something to be avoided, and which can be avoided, or, in more moderate formulations, at least ameliorated. In contrast, Lindbeck’s postliberal theology not only accepts but embraces human particularity, and hence Christian particularity, and is therefore happy to contribute to the definition, the building, and the deepening of Christian identity. Lindbeck expected that experiential-expressivists would find his view of the church and theology too suggestive of sectarianism, and he was certainly not disappointed in that regard.87 But the grounds of his

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85 Later discussion will have implications for some of these questions. The idea of distinct cultural-linguistic systems will be considered in the next chapter. Intratextuality is problematic in view of the discussion of historicity in chapter 6. The ‘boundary’ between church and society is touched on in section 5.3.1 Learning from Wittgenstein.

86 Concerning ND, Lindbeck remarks in his Foreword that ‘the theory of religion and religious doctrine that it proposes is not specifically ecumenical, nor Christian, nor theological’ (ND 7), and that its pages are ‘intended as prolegomena to a book I have long been trying to write on the current status of the doctrinal agreements and disagreements of the major Christian traditions’ (ND 8). In the concluding section of his final chapter, having emphasised that the ultimate test of theological viability is communal performance (ND 134), he comments that ‘the present chapter…is not a theological performance but at most a fragment of ad hoc apologetics. It discusses theology, but there is, by intratextual standards, scarcely a single properly theological argument in it’ (ND 135). That Lindbeck’s argument is pretheological, and hence not Christianly intratextual, is an important observation to which we shall repeatedly return.

87 For example, Lindbeck is targeted by James Gustafson in his article, ‘The sectarian temptation: reflections on
proposal are less ecclesiological than anthropological: it is not so much that the church should embrace the particularity of a sectarian identity, as that all human understanding—be it religious or secular, liberal or postliberal, progressive or conservative, academic or commonsense—all human understanding is ineluctably particular and historically located; and no one, not even well-meaning Christian theologians, should pretend otherwise.

Yet particularity itself is a multivalent and contested concept. Lindbeck takes particularity to be unavoidable; experiential-expressivism, on Lindbeck’s account, thought it avoidable. Lindbeck embraces particularity, making a virtue of necessity; experiential-expressivism was embarrassed by particularity, and sought to subsume it under universality. But apart from its necessity and value, many different accounts of particularity have been offered. In what does particularity consist? How does it affect the production of meaning? How should we describe, and then deal with, the limitations it imposes, bearing in mind that our description and dealing will already be subject to those limitations? The crucial issue for Lindbeck may be the particularity of meaning, but this cannot be asserted without giving due attention to the meaning of ‘particularity’, and reconsidering our basic attitudes to it. Not surprisingly, liberal scholars did not simply accept Lindbeck’s account of particularity, and were not content to join the conversation on his terms. In the following chapter we will listen to some liberal contributions, and re-consider Lindbeck’s proposal in their light, seeking a better understanding of particularity, and a genuine liberal-postliberal engagement.

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Gustafson (1985). By ‘sectarianism’ in theology Gustafson means the isolation of ‘Christian theology and ethics from critical external points of view’ or ‘the separation of theology from other ways of construing the world’ (p. 83). Lindbeck is arguing that sectarianism may be less a temptation than a tactical necessity, and even a virtue, for the church and its theology. He fears that the counter-cultural resistance on which the church must embark for the sake of the world may be impossible without a sectarian stance, and his final chapter offers a theological approach that can support such a stance. He presents similar arguments in Lindbeck 1971 and 1989a. Apart from Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas is also commonly identified as relying on, or assuming, a sectarian position. For example, Gustafson (1985, 84-5, 88) identifies Hauerwas with ethical (as he identifies Lindbeck with theological) sectarianism. See also the articles in Miscamble 1987, which include a rejoinder by Hauerwas.
After the publication of ND in 1984, criticism was quickly forthcoming, especially from those who felt themselves to be identified with the liberal theology that Lindbeck had criticised under the label of ‘experiential-expressivism’. In this chapter I begin by surveying some early liberal responses, and especially that of David Tracy, with a view to clarifying misunderstandings and identifying the real issues at stake. Among other things, Tracy calls for due recognition of liberal theology’s responses to the fact of particularity—responses which Lindbeck seems to have ignored. Partly in response to this call, the major part of the chapter examines Delwin Brown’s account of culture and theology. Throughout the chapter, Lindbeck’s critics will prompt us to re-read ND, and ND will prompt us to put certain questions to Lindbeck’s critics. This conversational reading will reveal strengths and weaknesses in both liberal and postliberal accounts of particularity, and identify areas in which the two approaches tacitly agree. These agreements will be further investigated in the following chapter.

3.1 THE LINDBECK–TRACY ‘DEBATE’

The first substantial responses to ND appeared in theological journals that devoted whole issues to discussion of its argument. Although David Tracy’s was not the most substantial of the articles responding to ND in the July 1985 issue of The Thomist, Tracy was often mentioned as a protagonist with Lindbeck in the North American liberal-postliberal debate.

3.1.1 Tracy on the Nature of ‘The Nature of Doctrine’

Tracy finds two loosely-connected studies in ND: one dealing with the nature of doctrine and the rule theory; the other articulating the ‘cultural-linguistic’ paradigm for theology over against ‘propositionalist’ and ‘experiential-expressivist’ alternatives. In his view, Lindbeck’s interpretations of doctrine and of religion and theology are coherent, but he does not see ‘how [a] grammatical reading of doctrine entails a grammatical reading of theology or a cultural-linguistic reading of religion.’ For Tracy, this is ‘the greatest puzzle of Lindbeck’s argument as

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2 See, for example, Comstock 1987, Lints 1993, Stell 1993, and Holland 1994. The debate was often enough characterised as a tale of two cities (Chicago versus New Haven), or of two universities (Chicago versus Yale).

3 Tracy 1985a, 460, 462.
a whole’—‘this question of “coherence” or “entailment” between the title and sub-title of this programmatic work’.\(^4\)

Tracy appears to have misread Lindbeck on this point. Admittedly, Lindbeck can speak of ‘the theory of religion and doctrine that we have been exploring’ (\textit{ND} 108) and even of ‘a rule theory of doctrine and the associated cultural-linguistic view of religion’ (\textit{ND} 91-2). However, in his programmatic statements the direction of implication is consistently from the cultural-linguistic theory of religion to the rule theory of doctrine, that is, from the larger frame to the smaller. This direction is controlled by the linguistic metaphor, which frames and unifies Lindbeck’s whole argument: doctrine is to religion as grammar is to language (\textit{ND} 18, 69, 80-1, 84). Lindbeck sees his theory of doctrine as being entailed by, or implicit in, his theory of religion. The reverse relation is never contemplated.

Tracy, however, apparently takes Lindbeck to be beginning from the rule theory of doctrine and somehow deriving theories of theology and religion from that. The absence of any such derivation in \textit{ND} lets Tracy view these elements of Lindbeck’s thesis in relative isolation and assess them separately. While Tracy is quite positive towards Lindbeck’s exposition of ‘the grammatical aspect of theology’s wider task’ and the rule theory of doctrine,\(^5\) he offers a decidedly negative evaluation of Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory as a potential new paradigm for religion and theology. But from the viewpoint of Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory, the very possibility of such separate consideration indicates a basic misunderstanding of the argument.

Tracy seems not to appreciate that, as Lindbeck himself points out, the cultural-linguistic theory is not really a \textit{theological} proposal at all, even though it is theologically motivated.\(^6\) Rather, Lindbeck wants to draw attention to what have become standard conceptual tools in social anthropology and the philosophy of science, and then to apply these tools to the craft of theology (\textit{ND} 17-8, 20, 25, 30-2). He then pursues the question of whether or not these tools are useful and appropriate for that craft (\textit{ND} 46-7, 73, 91, 112). But new tools have a way of transforming the craft in which they are employed. Some objections to Lindbeck’s proposal are most concerned with what Christian theology would become if the proposal were adopted, as in Tracy’s putatively argument-closing accusations of ‘relativism’, ‘confessionalism’, ‘fideism’, and ‘Barthianism’.\(^7\)

That such epithets are employed without explanation or argument concerning their content implies that, for Tracy, the extent of their truth is the extent to which Lindbeck’s proposal lies beyond the theological pale. Such terms may reveal more of Tracy’s position than of Lindbeck’s, for it is immediately apparent from the manner in which they are employed that the

\(^{4}\) Tracy 1985a, 461-2.
\(^{5}\) Tracy 1985a, 471. Note that, while Lindbeck sees doctrine \textit{qua} doctrine as \textit{essentially} grammatical in nature, and theology as disciplined reflection on that grammar, Tracy’s reference to ‘theology’s wider task’ flags one of the major points of liberal/postliberal divergence: that of the scope of theology, its task and its audience.

\(^{6}\) \textit{ND} 7-8, 10, 32, 46. Several commentators have noted that the core of Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory is not theology, but anthropology (and not even \textit{theological} anthropology). See for example Allik 1993a \textit{passim}, and Higton 1997, 85-6. In \textit{ND}, Lindbeck is quite clear that his cultural-linguistic theory is a ‘pre-theological’ or ‘non-theological’ proposal, and he repeated the point in a later article (Lindbeck 1997, 448-9 n2).

\(^{7}\) Tracy 1985a, 461, 465, 467-8, 469-70.
one making these charges is dedicated to making Christian faith intelligible by means of a common rationality. But the nature of intelligibility and rationality is framed by the nature of those who seek them, that is, by the nature of human beings, so a crucial difference between Tracy and Lindbeck lies in their respective anthropologies. From Lindbeck’s viewpoint, Tracy has missed the essentially anthropological nature both of the cultural-linguistic theory and of Tracy’s own objections to it, and so has not given content and clarity to what may be his deepest misgivings. From Tracy’s viewpoint, Lindbeck’s anthropological critique of the ‘experiential-expressivist’ paradigm mistook its target and failed to engage a worthier opponent.

3.1.2 Experience and Expression in Lindbeck and Lindbeck’s ‘Liberalism’

In Tracy’s view, Lindbeck’s analysis of the liberal theological paradigm under the ‘experiential-expressive’ label is seriously, even fatally, flawed. This is a crucial point for Tracy, since a major element of Lindbeck’s case (and certainly a major element in the interest stirred by the book) is the justification of the cultural-linguistic theory over against this ‘dominant’ theological tradition. Tracy finds Lindbeck’s account wanting in its description of liberal theology as a purely modernist theological version of the ‘turn to the subject’. That is, Lindbeck sees liberal theology as a foundationalist approach based on an assumed universal inner experience of absolute dependence which is pre-reflective, pre-linguistic and non-discursive. Lindbeck, says Tracy, maintains that experiential-expressivists ‘possess a “unilateral” understanding of the relationship of experience and language as well as of experience and culture when what we need is a “dialectical” understanding of these complex relationships (1985a, 462).

By including Lindbeck’s passing mention of a dialectical experience-language relation (ND 33) in this summary of Lindbeck’s critique, Tracy has been too kind. Lindbeck does see the liberal tradition as having a unilateral view of the relation between experience and its cultural-linguistic expression, but he does not develop a different kind of relation (such as a dialectical one)—he merely reverses its direction. For Lindbeck, a cultural-linguistic milieu forms the idiom or unconscious a priori in terms of which experience is conceptualised and expressed. In comparison with the experiential-expressive paradigm, the cultural-linguistic view proposes a ‘reversal of the relation between the inner and the outer’ (ND chapter 2, especially pp. 34, 36).

Lindbeck allows that the relation between religion and experience is really dialectical rather than unilateral; but the cultural-linguist is simply not interested in this possibility:

It is simplistic to say…merely that religions produce experiences, for the causality is reciprocal. Patterns of experience alien to a given religion can profoundly influence it. The

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8 Lindbeck repeatedly describes the experiential-expressive tradition as ‘ascendant’, ‘dominant’, and ‘pervasive’ (ND 19, 21-3, 25, 29 n30, 31, 124). The frequency with which Tracy repeats and apostrophises the term ‘dominant’ may be merely a rhetorical device (‘Brutus is an honourable man’), or an indication of discomfort at being labelled a dominator. But the label is of doubtful value in any case. While Lindbeck sees experiential-expressivism as an oppressor of religion and theology, his own cultural-linguistic theory derives from the social anthropology that he takes to be dominant in contemporary cultural studies. Is cultural-linguistic theory simply hoping for the triumph of a new oppressor over an older one? Or is it an opportunistic alliance by means of which oppressed traditionalists may resist the encroachments of ‘dominant’ liberals? Answers to these questions will emerge in this chapter and the next.
warrior passions of barbarian Teutons and Japanese occasioned great changes in originally pacifistic Christianity and Buddhism. These religions were pressed into service to sanction the values of militaristic societies and were largely transformed in the process. Yet in providing new legitimations for the ancient patterns, they also altered the latter. Presumably the inner experiences as well as the code of behaviour of a Zen samurai or a Christian knight are markedly different from those of their pagan or pre-Buddhist predecessors. Yet, as this illustration shows, in the interplay between “inner” experience and “external” religious and cultural factors, the latter can be viewed as the leading partners, and it is this option which the cultural and/or linguistic analyst favours.’ (ND 33-4)

The example Lindbeck employs here does not make the desired point. The situation depicts one of the ways in which two cultural-linguistic systems (a pacifist religion and a militaristic culture) can interpenetrate to create a new cultural-linguistic framework (thereby serving, as well as baptising, the political interests of ruling elites). It does not depict a potentially dialectical or reciprocal relation between religion (or culture) and experience, in which the religion provides the framework for the conceptualisation of experience, while the actual experiences (as encounters with oneself or with the world) have the potential to resist a priori conceptualisations or to raise questions which may suggest modification of the framework.

The element of arbitrariness in Lindbeck’s discussion at this point is striking given the crucial role of the hermeneutical relation between experience and culture in his cultural-linguistic theory. Lindbeck’s view of this relation as essentially unidirectional—from cultural-linguistic framework to experience and conceptualisation—affects all the major elements of his position. For him, it is the truthfulness (or otherwise) of the available conceptual categories which creates (or frustrates) the possibility of ontological truth for actual affirmations. Moreover, he maintains a clear distinction between framework on the one hand and experience and conceptualisation on the other. Doctrine qua doctrine is framework—it specifies a grammar, a set of rules which enables affirmations to be made, and of itself affirms nothing. Theology is the ‘second-order’ activity of reflection on doctrine, and makes affirmations concerning only the grammar according to which ‘first-order’ affirmations can be made (ND 69, 80).

At this point Lindbeck and the liberal tradition he is criticising are similar, though the similarity is that of a mirror image in which right and left appear reversed. As noted above, Lindbeck is happy to describe the cultural-linguistic view of the experience/religion relation as a simple reversal of the ‘liberal’ conception.9 In both cases the relation is unilateral, with one pole taken as a given (religious experience or location in a cultural-linguistic framework) and the other as its variable expression (the expression of religious experience or the conceptualisation of experience). The task of theology is to inquire into and reflect on the nature of the given, and to demonstrate or call in question the coherence of the variable expression with the given experience or framework that gave rise to it.10

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9 Other commentators see much the same similarity. Stell (1993, 680-8) notes a ‘mirror-image reversal’, documenting and discussing it at some length.

10 The more dialogical nature of Tracy’s conception of theology is evident in his ‘correlational’ understanding of theological method, and this is clearly one of the ways in which he sees himself as having moved beyond a straight-
Regarding Lindbeck’s analysis of liberal theology, Tracy objects that Lindbeck has completely ignored developments in the liberal tradition during the twentieth century. He acknowledges that Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory offers some insights that are not found in the work of liberals of a previous generation; but he will not allow Lindbeck to suppose he is successfully criticising the liberal tradition on anthropological grounds when he ignores the ways in which the contemporary heirs of that tradition have criticised their own forebears on the same grounds and sought to transform the tradition from within. It is not as though the liberal tradition has ignored or failed to recognise the recent developments in social anthropology and philosophy which Lindbeck assumes as the basis of his critique.11

The force of Tracy’s comments on Lindbeck’s analysis of the ‘experiential-expressive’ tradition must be admitted. Lindbeck has not given any attention to the effect on that tradition of the conceptual developments he is seeking to make theologically available (ND 47, 69, 91). Indeed, his claim to be making these insights ‘available’ to theology is tantamount to a claim that theology, of whatever methodological persuasion, has not hitherto paid them any attention. It can hardly be expected that either of the alternative theological traditions criticised by Lindbeck would allow such a claim.

But does the transformed liberal tradition in fact evade or adequately counter Lindbeck’s criticism of the earlier liberal position? Tracy is cautiously confident that it does and, not unreasonably, he argues that it is this contemporary ‘hermeneutical-political’ liberal tradition that Lindbeck must deal with if he is to make a case for his methodological proposal over against the liberal tradition.

Tracy sees the theological tradition stemming from Schleiermacher and continuing in this century through Tillich, Eliade, Rahner, and Lonergan as having already responded to the ‘issues which Lindbeck announces as news’ (Tracy 1985a, 463). Following the classic ‘turn to the subject’ of nineteenth century theology, these new ‘turns’ respond to the changing contemporary understandings of the nature of the subject, and how the subject knows and lives. Under the headings of a ‘turn to an explicitly hermeneutical position’, and a ‘turn to a radical de-privatizing of the…tradition by political, liberation and feminist theologians’, Tracy sees the liberal tradition as squarely facing, and transforming itself in response to, the same issues which Lindbeck sees as bringing its eclipse (Tracy 1985a, 463).

The hermeneutical turn, arising largely from the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur, has rethought the relation between experience and language very much in dialectical terms, ‘without abandoning the classical liberal insight into a non-empiricist notion of experience’ (Tracy 1985a, 463). Tracy is careful not to presume the final success of this hermeneutical rethinking forward ‘experiential-expressivist’ approach. Tracy’s recasting of the liberal project is discussed below, but here we can note his view of theology as working with two givens or ‘constants’ — the contemporary situation and the Christian tradition—as it seeks to bring interpretations of these constants into mutually critical correlation. Most succinctly, see Tracy 1985b, 36, 52-9.

11Tracy 1985a, 462-7.
of experience, but he notes that it results in the abandonment of the earlier liberal ‘expressivist’ understanding of language in favour of a new understanding which is far more dialectical than Lindbeck’s mere reversal of the old formulation (Tracy 1985a, 463–4).

Further, although Tracy does not stress the point, he clearly sees the new hermeneutical understanding as leading the liberal tradition to abandon its earlier assumptions in relation to a universal inner-religious experience (Tracy 1985a, 467-8). The hermeneutical recasting of the language/experience relation, and the concomitant abandonment of liberal pretensions to universal foundations, have resulted in a two-way movement within liberal theological method. ‘Hermeneutically informed theologians…find themselves called to become more cultural-historical-political’ (Tracy 1985a, 464) At the same time, political theologians, liberation theologians and feminist theologians have become more concerned with hermeneutics in order to achieve an adequate political theology. Tracy concludes that those who continue to identify themselves with the liberal tradition —

should hardly feel overwhelmed by [Lindbeck’s] charge of ‘experiential-expressivism’ when their own work has challenged the ‘expressivist’ and ‘privatist’ tendencies of the earlier liberal experiential traditions. They have done so by developing explicitly hermeneutical-political theologies: theologies critical of the earlier liberal accounts of language and experience and self-critical of some of their own earlier formulations. But they have also done so without abandoning the noble correlative enterprise of the great liberals and their self-critical successors…(Tracy 1985a, 465)

In short, Tracy maintains that the heirs of the liberal tradition have already learnt the lessons that Lindbeck wishes to teach, and have done so not by abandoning the liberal tradition, but by transforming it. Whereas David Ford suggested that ‘there could be a liberal Christianity in cultural-linguistic mode,’12 Tracy argues that it already exists. The question is then whether the transformation of the liberal tradition is in fact adequate to the problems it sought to transcend. Even Lindbeck would perhaps answer this question hopefully, if not positively. After all, if both liberals and postliberals are responding to largely the same challenges, albeit responding differently, this would be analogous to a situation of categorial adequacy, which for Lindbeck is a precondition of genuine engagement. Such a situation might allow the identification of illusory disagreements arising from misunderstandings, enable real agreements and disagreements to emerge with greater clarity, and thus lead to fruitful, if still energetic, debate.

In preparation for such a conversation, I outline in the following sub-sections three issues that emerge from a comparison of Lindbeck’s proposal with Tracy’s theological method of the 1980s.13 These are, firstly, intelligibility, which is important to both Tracy and Lindbeck but

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12 Ford 1986, 281. Section 3.2 below will examine an example of such a theology.

13 Developments in Tracy’s account of theological method over about twenty years since 1975 have been the subject of several studies; see especially Thomas 1992 and Sanks 1993. In contrast, Lindbeck has not felt obliged to revise the proposals in ND, and in a recent article was content to refer readers to ND for his views on doctrine and theology (see Lindbeck 1997, 448-9 n2). My intention in the following pages is to compare two roughly contemporaneous bodies of work, and to this end I will concentrate on Tracy’s work up to the late 1980s. I identify some tensions in Tracy’s work—tensions that had some significance for the later development of his theology—but I do not address
differently described in each case; secondly, the distinction between Christian tradition and the contemporary world; and lastly, the particularity and diversity of human understanding. The last two are problematic for both authors, though in different ways. All three issues will be recurring motifs in the remainder of the thesis.

3.1.4 The Experience of Intelligibility

Already in 1985, Tracy lamented that

a fruitful and critical discussion between Lindbeck’s ‘cultural-linguistic’ model and a ‘hermeneutical-political’ model has not yet been posed sharply by anyone—and surely not by Lindbeck’s description of the alternative as ‘experiential-expressive’.  

Since the July 1985 issue of *The Thomist* in which Tracy’s article appeared, a considerable number of articles have contributed to the ‘fruitful and critical discussion’ sought by Tracy. Some of these have highlighted the issue of the intelligibility of Christianity as an area of basic difference between Lindbeck’s proposal and liberal-revisionist methodology. For example, Gordon Michalson, in his article introducing the responses to *ND* in the January 1988 issue of *Modern Theology*, muses on various possible reasons why Lindbeck’s book attracted the attention it did. After mentioning (and passing over) the theories of religion and doctrine, and ‘Lindbeck’s relative insouciance about ontological truth claims’, Michalson suggests that

the most sensitive nerve ending touched by Lindbeck concerns the question of the sheer intelligibility of the Christian faith, by which I mainly mean the degree to which Christian faith can be placed in correlation with natural modes of human consciousness.

Michalson sees Lindbeck’s position on the intelligibility of the Christian faith as controlling his whole argument. In fact, he says Lindbeck ‘is not adopting [the cultural-linguistic] approach and then seeing where it leads him theologically; rather he is adopting it because, as theologian, he already knows where he wants to end up.’ Michalson’s point seems to be that Lindbeck adopted the cultural-linguistic theory because he found it congenial to the Barthian convictions that development in any detail. In brief, Tracy’s methodological thought showed a deepening recognition of the challenges of radical historicity and the insights of critical hermeneutics. For example, Tracy’s earlier espousal of ‘common experience’ as the core insight of the liberal theological tradition in *Blessed Rage for Order* (Tracy 1975) was progressively modified in the light of the irreducible particularities of human experience emphasised by critical theorists. By the end of the 1980s, e.g., in *Plurality and Ambiguity* (1987), Tracy acknowledged the radical plurality of situations and theologies as a fundamental datum for theology. This is not to say that Tracy abandoned the quest for theological conclusions that are universal in scope, but he increasingly recognised that even putatively universal conclusions are nevertheless particular in that they seek to survey all of reality from one vantage point. This recognition is evident in the evolution of Tracy’s formulations of his basic ‘correlational’ method.  

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14 Tracy 1985a, 467.
15 Notable among these are essays which seek to clarify or carry on the Lindbeck-Tracy debate (Michalson 1988, Lints 1993, Stell 1993, Holland 1994), comment on the liberal response to Lindbeck (Allik 1993b) or respond to Lindbeck from within particular revisionist theologies (Pauw 1993, Garrett 1997, Reynolds 1997).
16 Here quoting Jackson in Wood and Jackson 1985, 241.
17 Michalson 1988, 111.
18 Michalson 1988, 112.
that predetermined the goal of his argument. The new twist in the otherwise old conversation is Lindbeck’s denial of the possibility of any inner experience which is not already framed in terms of the subject’s cultural-linguistic tradition.19

But such a hermeneutic of suspicion tells us nothing about the validity or otherwise of Lindbeck’s argument. Lindbeck presents the issue of intelligibility as an anthropological issue, not a theological one (though it is certainly an issue which theology will want to address). It may well be, and indeed it could be hardly be otherwise, that Lindbeck’s theological sympathies (‘Barthian’ or otherwise) have influenced his appropriation of a cultural-linguistic approach to religion and his position on the intelligibility of the Christian faith. But to argue that the use to which an idea is put tells us anything about its validity or its appropriateness for other uses is a logical non sequitur.

Nevertheless, Michalson’s identification of intelligibility as the crucial arena in which liberal thinkers must resist Lindbeck’s proposal is accurate, the degree of accuracy being indicated by the all but visceral quality of the negative reactions of some liberal theologians to Lindbeck’s allegedly ‘Barthian’ position on the intelligibility of Christian faith. The nature of this reaction indicates that the issue of intelligibility may be at least as determinative for their position as for Lindbeck’s. Indeed, for liberal-revisionists, and especially those who, like Tracy, describe their method in terms of ‘correlation’, it may not be an overstatement to claim that the intelligibility of religious faith functions as both presupposition and methodological guide.20

To the extent that this is the case, the importance for liberals of Lindbeck’s recasting of the experience-expression relation becomes clear. Tracy points out that the classic post-Kantian liberal tradition protected the notion of ‘non-empirical experience’, and defended it again in the mid-twentieth century against logical positivism. In his exposition and defence of the liberal tradition against Lindbeck’s misconceived critique, Tracy is at pains to stress the retention of this concept through the hermeneutical and political developments in liberal theology (Tracy 1985a, 463-4, 466). For him, the concept of ‘non-empirical experience’ functions as an intellectual basis for the intelligibility of religious faith, since the non-empirical ‘limit experiences’ common to

19 Michalson 1988, 113-4. See also 114-5. Tracy’s accusation of Barthianism has already been noted. However, Tracy and Michalson, together with Scott Holland, appear determined to see Lindbeck not merely as Barthian but as a kind of Barthian Trojan horse (for a threatened Barthian revival?). Tracy (1985a, 465) charges Lindbeck with producing ‘a methodologically sophisticated version of Barthian confessionalism’ in which ‘the hands may be the hands of Wittgenstein and Geertz but the voice is the voice of Karl Barth’. Holland (1994, 134 n15) characterises his reading of Lindbeck as ‘presenting him as a kind of radical Barthian merely hiding behind the theories of Geertz and others as a cover for his neo-orthodox ideology of the “Word-Event.” ‘ In the same note Holland cites other similar readings of Lindbeck as if they lent support to his own reading and did not perhaps say as much about the readers as the read. We shall return to the revisionists’ demonisation of Lindbeck as ‘Barthian’ when considering the likelihood (certainty in my view) that Barth would not have been at all happy to acknowledge Lindbeck as a follower.

20 That is, intelligibility has a ‘foundational’ role in liberal theological inquiry, though I do not mean that term in the pejorative sense which has become common. I would maintain that some measure of foundationalism is unavoidable, and that Lindbeck himself is, in a sense, a foundationalist. In the terms of Imre Lakatos, liberalism and postliberalism are ‘research programs’ which each have a ‘hard-core’ of concepts and practices that define the problems of interest and the ways in which further enquiry will be conducted. ‘Hard-core’ concepts and practices can reasonably be called ‘foundational’ to the research program which uses them, and the idea of intelligibility seems to work in roughly this way in liberal theology.
contemporary humans provide significant points of contact between ‘secular’ existence and religious faith. Tracy wants to argue that some kinds of common experiences are best understood from the standpoint of religious faith. Lindbeck’s denial of the possibility of any inner experience which is not already framed in terms of the subject’s cultural-linguistic tradition appears to minimise, and perhaps deny, the possibility of such points of contact, thus holding out the prospect of a Christian religion and theology transformed into a postliberal ghetto.\(^{21}\)

For Lindbeck there is nothing special about Christian faith, or any faith, in relation to the problem of intelligibility. Lindbeck is not addressing the question of the relation of Christian faith to empirical experience as if faith were an experience different in kind from experiences of the ‘empirical’ type. Nor is he raising the issue of the relation of Christianity to other forms of knowledge, which can then become a matter of argument about sources of knowledge and ways of reasoning. Lindbeck’s point is essentially, again, an anthropological one. All knowledge is traditioned knowledge. All experience is traditioned experience. And tradition, for Lindbeck, must be understood not merely as an historically extended body of knowledge, but rather, in Alasdair MacIntyre’s phrase, as ‘a socially embodied and historically extended conversation’.\(^{22}\)

That is, all human knowing and experience is unavoidably and inextricably embedded in and mediated through cultural traditions comprised of social institutions, customary practices, rituals, art, politics, power and the intricate webs of family and social life. On this view, there are no ‘modes of human consciousness’ that are not already artefacts of culturally embedded, socio-historically located traditions; no ‘natural’ modes of human consciousness that are not already cultural (and therefore particular) ‘modes of human consciousness’.

But knowledge is not only particular, it is embodied. From the critiques of Enlightenment philosophy offered by Wittgenstein, the American empiricist tradition, and contemporary social anthropology, Lindbeck has learned that the nature of human beings as social bodily creatures means that human reasoning assumes and subtly relies on the specific social and physical contexts in which it develops. Human rationality, conversation, understanding—all the activity of the mind exalted by the Enlightenment—are bodily and social activities, inextricably entwined in the physical interaction with each other and the world that is everyday life. It is in the success and fruitfulness of such interaction, if at all, that intelligibility is demonstrated.

Tracy does not deny the importance of human embodiment,\(^{23}\) but his is a conversational hermeneutic that emphasises an hospitable ‘openness to the other’. He follows Gadamer in the metaphor of hermeneutics as a game, with its to-and-fro movement and its feeling of playing

\(^{21}\) And as we have seen, this is not an accusation that Lindbeck goes to any great pains to refute. For him, some kind of ‘whiff of the ghetto’, some manner of ‘sociological sectarianism’, may be necessary to the survival of Christianity and its witness to (and sometimes against) contemporary Western societies. See p. 44 above, especially n78. Lindbeck continued to express similar thoughts, e.g., in Lindbeck 1989a, 54-5 and Lindbeck 1993, 99-100.

\(^{22}\) MacIntyre 1984, 207. Lindbeck has indicated his general agreement with MacIntyre’s understanding of tradition and epistemology (Lindbeck, Hunsinger et al. 1996, 252), and indeed, his exposition in ND of the way in which disparate traditions are ultimately vindicated or dissolved is very similar to MacIntyre’s understanding of the vindication of a tradition. See ND 128-34.

\(^{23}\) Tracy, too, calls in the American empiricist philosophers in his defence of the concept of ‘non-empirical experience’, but his concepts of rationality and intelligibility remain cerebral and somewhat remote from bodily life.
Tracy continued to develop this conversational, dialogical model of hermeneutics through the 1980s as a way of explicating what happens when we encounter a text or situation that challenges our understanding. The ensuing conversation takes a form that has its natural habitat in the scholar’s study or the academic seminar, being concerned throughout with standards of credibility and rationality accepted in other academic disciplines.

For Lindbeck, pursuit of theological intelligibility through translation, correlation or conversation still echoes modernity’s vain quest for a rationality that rises ‘above’ the body. He sees the demonstration of intelligibility having less to do with the polite and elevated conversation of the seminar, and rather more to do with skilful dealing with the world enabled by the worshipping life of a local congregation. He asks, not ‘How can we implement the Enlightenment’s vision of intelligibility?’ but ‘What kind of intelligibility is available to us humans?’ Tracy offers a conversational hermeneutic, Lindbeck a hermeneutic of social embodiment.

3.1.5 Theologies of Distinction

The tone and content of the early mutual critiques of liberals and postliberals point to a common belief that the other side just has not understood the nature of human beings and how they in fact make meaning and make their way in the world. But perhaps consideration of those aspects of anthropology on which these writers agree will help to bring more clearly into focus those aspects on which they differ. Lindbeck and Tracy, at least, have in common that their descriptions of the hermeneutic situation, and the theological methods they see arising from those descriptions, rely on a conceptual separation of the Christian tradition from non-Christian sources of interpretation. For Lindbeck, this separation operates so as to enable the exclusion of non-Christian sources from any formative influence on the tradition. The theological task thus requires theologians to be continually redescribing the world in biblical terms and continually cultivating the faith community’s biblical vision so that it may practise the discernment necessary to the assertion of Christian identity in the world. For Tracy, the faith tradition and its environment are conceptually separated so that they may be clearly and systematically correlated in a mutually critical engagement. The theologian continually builds connections between the faith tradition and the contemporary situation, discerning and interpreting ‘those fundamental questions…that disclose a genuinely religious dimension in our contemporary experience and language.’

In each case, there is a tendency to fix and hold pristine those fields of meaning or experience that provide the source material for theological construction. Perhaps Lindbeck and Tracy

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24 The Gadamerian hermeneutic led Tracy’s theology into a strongly hermeneutic turn in The Analogical Imagination (Tracy 1981), a turn which was continued in postmodern vein in Plurality and Ambiguity (Tracy 1987). This direction developed an ethical/relational dimension with a ‘turn to the other’ in Dialogue With the Other (Tracy 1990a). Tracy’s theology in the 1980s was hermeneutic, but never merely hermeneutic.

25 Both Lindbeck and Tracy advance their proposals as general descriptions of the situation for any religion, Christian or otherwise, Lindbeck perhaps being more circumspect in this regard than Tracy. The shared hermeneutic strategy of distinguishing Christian from non-Christian sources is also noted and criticised by Kathryn Tanner (1997, 106-7).

26 See above p. 45 and ND 113-20.

27 Tracy 1985b, 53. The fundamental questions Tracy has in mind are ‘finitude, estrangement, alienation, oppression, fundamental trust or mistrust, loyalty, anxiety, mortality, and so forth’.
would protest that they do not mean to do any such thing, and that I have pressed their metaphors too far. Yet the tendency towards (re)pristination of sources is not merely deduced as a logical corollary of their governing metaphors. Lindbeck continued to speak of ‘the biblical world’ that becomes differently instantiated in the myriad differing circumstances encountered by Christian communities:

[A hermeneutics of intratextual social or ecclesial embodiment] is intratextual in a double sense: first, Scripture is interpreted in the light of Scripture, and the biblical canon is read as a single, interglossing whole; and second, all reality is interpreted in this same scriptural light: the biblical world absorbs all other worlds.28

More subtly, Tracy repeatedly refers to the two ‘constants’ of situation and tradition, but equally emphatically cautions that ‘it is possible to distinguish, but not to separate’ their respective interpretations, for each interprets the other.29 But two ‘constants’ that are found only in an inextricably commingled state, and are ineluctably further commingled in our interpretation of them, may owe less to reality than to the needs of Tracy’s ‘critical correlation’ model.30

The maintenance of pristine sources, present as given, subject only to our interpretive appropriation of them, functions differently for Lindbeck and Tracy, and becomes problematic for each in different ways. For Lindbeck, ‘the biblical world’ defines the fixed identity of the Christian tradition. As such, it is pushed beyond the realm of human historicity so that, in dealing with the flux of historical existence, we can always know who we are by reference to it. This amounts to an implicit denial of the role of tradition in the formation of scripture, with the result that the God who comes to us within, and becomes vulnerable to, the vicissitudes and viciousness of human history becomes strangely disincarnated into a pristine and idealised text.31 For Tracy, the language of distinct and pristine ‘constants’ which emerged in his earlier writing came increasingly into tension with the growing hermeneutic awareness evident in his work from the early 1980s onwards. Though he remained an ‘unrepentant correlational

28 Lindbeck 1996b, 151.
29 Tracy 1985b, 53. This chapter of Tracy’s on theological method is a most useful example. The language of ‘constants’ appears throughout the last section of the chapter (pp. 52-9), in which we are also warned: ‘in interpreting either of these constants, the other constant is always already present: theologians…inevitably interpret…each reality in the light of the other’ (p. 52); ‘we cannot simply separate these analyses, for…the theologian too is influenced by the history of…the Christian tradition’ (p. 53); ‘As we saw above in the analysis of the inevitably hermeneutical character of any theological appropriation of either constant, every theological act of interpretation already involves some correlation of the two constants. It remains methodologically helpful to distinguish these two distinct acts of interpretation as distinct. At the same time, the interpreter cannot existentially separate the two acts’ (p. 56).
30 Tracy emphasises the hermeneutic inseparability of situation and tradition, but hardly mentions the anthropological fact that ‘situation’ can be understood only by means of traditioned concepts and ‘tradition’ can be perceived only in the context of some situation. Other correlationists may be vulnerable at the same point. For example, Werner Jeanrond points out in relation to Hans Küng: ‘the contemporary human world is already present, of course, in perspectives which guide our reading of the Bible, as indeed the history of effects of the biblical texts is always present in our Western interpretations of the world. Therefore Küng’s “fundamental trust in reality” is already socially and religiously conditioned, a fact which Küng has not yet explicitly stated’ (Jeanrond 1989, 174).
31 For more detail on these problems see section 5.3 The Pattern of Sound Teaching commencing on p. 181 below.
theologian’, this was to some extent despite his adoption of hermeneutic principles that point towards abandonment of ‘constants’ and their correlation. Thus, while Lindbeck’s pristine text is in tension with that text’s witness to the God of the gospel, Tracy’s idea of anthropological ‘constants’ sets his methodological framework at odds with the hermeneutics he acquired from Gadamer and Ricoeur. The tension is located, in the one case, in the deep resistance of the biblical text to Lindbeck’s methodology for reading it, and in the other case, in an intra-methodological inconsistency in Tracy’s description of what reading is and how it occurs. There would seem to be little to choose between the two sets of difficulties.

3.1.6 Experience, Expression and Particularity

In the experience-expression relation, of which Lindbeck makes so much, Tracy and the more hermeneutically inclined among ‘liberal’ theologians have exposed a major flaw in Lindbeck’s proposal. A wholly (or even largely) unilateral construction of this relation is untenable. It may well be that all experience is traditioned experience, but equally, all tradition is experienced tradition. World and tradition(s) are ineffably there, patiently resisting our interpretations of them. The particularity of our experiences constrains us towards differing interpretations of world and tradition and the relation between them. In this light, a tradition is less an agreed vision of how to live in the world than an inherited consensus on what is worth arguing about as we attempt to make our way. There is some suspicion that Lindbeck sees intractable diversity as something to be explained away (as the result of the varied instantiations of the one biblical world in diverse circumstances) rather than embraced as intrinsic to the nature of tradition. The suspicion is encouraged by Lindbeck’s description of Christianity as a tradition that seeks to socially embody ‘the biblical world’, as though the Bible did not provide sufficient evidence of its own genesis in traditioned experience and reflection, or did not reflect the complexity, argument, inspiration, fragmentation, innovation, reconstruction, and stubborn cohesion that characterise traditioned life.

For its part, liberal theology realised the problems inherent in the idea of experience as a human universal, even if this idea has not entirely disappeared. As Tracy and others pointed out, the particularity of experience, as traditioned experience, is inescapable. What has been somewhat

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32 Tracy 1990b, 36. I have not found Tracy moving away from correlational method, though he indicates in a later interview that he has become less concerned with methodological issues and more concerned with issues ‘within’ the Christian tradition—the relation between spirituality and theology, Christian appropriation of postmodernity, recovery of marginalised Christian voices, the systematic-theological understanding of God (Breyfogle and Levergood 1994, 302). In the same interview, Tracy reflects critically on his earlier work and its assumptions. He now sees the weaknesses, not only of ‘some of my own formulations in Blessed Rage for Order [Tracy 1975], but of the modern project itself, of which that book is representative’. Nevertheless, there is much in Blessed Rage he would still wish to defend, ‘especially things like the reflections on limit language and the demand for the publicness of theology’ (Breyfogle and Levergood 1994, 301).

33 This is certainly the way it has worked for some others who also draw their hermeneutics largely from Gadamer and Ricoeur. See Brown 1994, chapter 2, and Brown’s comment on Tracy (here linked with Langdon Gilkey, as well as with Lindbeck and ‘evangelical theologians such as Clark H. Pinnock’) as one who presupposes a systematic disjunction between ‘the claims of modernity’ and ‘the claims of revelation or tradition’ (1994, 154 n13).

34 In part, this reflects MacIntyre’s understanding of the nature of tradition (see p. 59 above, with n22). Tanner (1997) offers a persuasive exposition of Christian identity as a ‘community of argument about the meaning of true discipleship’, see especially pp. 151-5, and her concluding chapter (pp. 156-75).
less realised, perhaps, is that a thoroughgoing acknowledgment of particularity calls into question, at least to some extent, the usual liberal strategy of systematically relating (correlating, connecting, translating) Christian tradition to the wider world (or better, to the particular location) of experience. Granted, the proliferation of contextual theologies reflects an awareness of human particularity, but it is less evident that the consequences of this awareness for theological method have been adequately addressed. Lindbeck’s proposal suggests that it is anthropologically inappropriate for such relating to form part of theology’s systematic core, and that there is a basic tension between such a method and a tradition’s identity as Christian. Liberals may find such suggestions unwelcome, and may view them as ‘confessional’, ‘fideistic’ and ‘Barthian’, but these are not sufficient reasons for discounting them.

This brief survey of ND’s reception has indicated some of the misunderstandings and shortcomings on both sides. At that time (mid to late 1980s) a limiting factor on the liberal side was the dearth of liberal proposals that fully addressed the methodological implications of embodiment, particularity and the social construction of knowledge. Only by engaging these issues could liberal theology offer substantial criticism without resorting to labels such as ‘confessionalism’ or ‘sectarianism’; labels that, from Lindbeck’s viewpoint at least, did little more than indicate liberalism’s own confession.

3.2 A ‘CULTURAL-LINGUISTIC’ LIBERAL THEOLOGY

3.2.1 Position Vacant

As mentioned above, in his review of ND David Ford claimed that ‘there could be a liberal Christianity in cultural-linguistic mode.’ Ford offered this opinion in support of an appeal that Lindbeck’s proposal not be dismissed too quickly by liberal theologians who might see it as ‘inevitably promoting too conservative a form of Christianity.’ We have seen that David Tracy wanted to show that liberal theology had already appropriated the insights Lindbeck castigates it for ignoring, albeit as a ‘hermeneutic-political’ rather than a ‘cultural-linguistic’ paradigm. But Tracy’s own theological methodology shares in some of Lindbeck’s faults without really answering the basic anthropological critique—that liberal theology has not faced the implications of human particularity and communality for its interpretation of religion and reason.

In this respect, Delwin Brown’s Boundaries of our Habitations appears to be a suitable candidate for the vacant position advertised by Ford. In that Brown’s primary metaphor for

35 Ford 1986, 281. See above p. 56.
36 The fuller context is as follows: ‘From the experiential-expressive side the most telling criticisms might come from those who see the theory inevitably promoting too conservative a form of Christianity. Yet I think there could be a liberal Christianity in a cultural-linguistic mode. It would need to be rethought, but one hopes that Lindbeck’s own rejection of much in liberal Christianity will not prevent others from reconceiving their positions in his terms.’ Ford does not indicate what any substantive liberal critique might look like, but one would like to think that Ford had higher hopes for liberal theologians’ critical abilities than that they would merely find Lindbeck ‘too conservative’ for their liberal tastes. Such responses are really the same, and inadequate for the same reasons, as the question-begging accusations of ‘Barthianism’ or ‘confessionalism’ noted earlier.
37 Brown 1994, abbreviated herein as BH.
tradition is ‘culture’, it is tempting to describe his proposal as ‘cultural-linguistic’, though Brown’s understanding of what culture is and how it functions is significantly different to Lindbeck’s, and Brown would prefer the ‘linguistic’ reference to be absent from any label applied to his position. (He himself calls it ‘constructive historicism’.)38) Clearly, however, Brown’s approach to describing tradition and theology is formally similar to Lindbeck’s—a general understanding of culture and tradition is developed from non-theological sources, and this then forms an interpretive grid for understanding the Christian tradition, with special reference to the nature and role of canon.

To a significant extent, Brown’s work is a response to Lindbeck’s, though Brown acknowledges ‘at least four motivations’, which he describes in order of importance.39 The first motivation is dissatisfaction with the pervasive diminution of the past in liberal thought. The liberal exaltation of reason has typically regarded the past as an encumbrance to be shed as a butterfly sheds its cocoon. But in losing its past, liberal thought has lost its character, its identity, its direction. Brown’s second motivation is ‘academic politics’, under which heading he sets out to offer a substantial response to ‘the narrative or postliberal approach to theology’ that he believes ‘is likely to dominate theological discussions for a significant time ahead’. Brown considers this approach is both ‘extremely right and extremely wrong’, and he writes to affirm the postliberal emphasis on ‘the crucially constructive role of the past in theology, in religion, and by implication, in culture for the viable conduct of human life.’ But he also wishes to sharply question its ‘stifling and ultimately untenable repristination of the religious heritage’. Brown’s third motivation is his philosophical conviction that the ‘distinctively American tradition’ of philosophical empiricism represented by Peirce, James, Dewey, and Whitehead ‘is more adequate than the Kantian perspective that now dominates theological analysis.’ Thus, in part, Brown offers his work with a view to displaying that greater adequacy by showing that radical empiricism avoids the deleterious dualisms that plague Kantian approaches. Fourthly, Brown wants to address issues left unresolved in an earlier article on biblical authority, specifically, the role of canon in the formation of human identity, and the relation of this function of canon to the broader and generally more prominent formative role of the rest of a religious tradition.40

A fifth motivation emerges in Brown’s introduction, where he sets his proposal in the context of post-Enlightenment attitudes to tradition and twentieth century critical studies of its cultural function. Brown wants to continue ‘a commitment to open inquiry’ which has consciously moved beyond ‘a premodern notion of a tradition as a repository of privileged data and specially protected criteria,’41 thus opposing the postliberal view that criteria of judgement are wholly

38 As we shall see, Brown specifically wants to correct what he sees as an over-emphasis on ‘linguisticality’ in Gadamer (BH 46-8), and also (though in a different way) in Lindbeck. His correction is developed through a balancing emphasis on ‘bodily feeling’ (BH 49-52) and takes the concrete form of a recovery of the importance of ritual in the life of traditions (BH 53, 92-109).
39 The remainder of this paragraph draws on pp. ix-xi of Brown’s preface.
40 The article referred to is Brown 1985.
41 BH 4. Other comments in loc indicate that ‘the examination of tradition and its relationship to religious and theological reflection undertaken here will draw upon extratheological resources, specifically those of philosophy and the social sciences, religious studies, and the history of religions. The assumption underlying this approach is that what
intrasystemic. At the same time, Brown’s procedural remarks explicitly eschew the older liberal reliance on anthropological universals. Rather, ‘criteria [of judgement and evaluation] overlap some standpoints—disciplines, cultures, religions, and so forth—even if no criterion overlaps them all’ (BH 5-6). To the extent that such overlaps exist, and only to that extent, intersystemic reason-giving is possible. Brown ‘assume[s] that theology is obligated to give reasons whenever reason-giving is possible and that only in so doing can its claims gain credibility’ (BH 6). Gaining credibility for theology thus emerges as a further motivation, its considerable importance being indicated most clearly in the concluding chapter. There Brown laments that ‘[i]n North America, academic and mainline theologies languish at the margins of religious and cultural influence’ and offers his proposal as a way of rescuing contemporary theology from ‘cultural and religious impotence’. Credibility and the giving of reasons thus inform Brown’s whole inquiry.

Taken together, these motivations foreshadow a proposal that will seek to advance the liberal theological tradition through constructive criticism. At the same time, it will try to avoid the idealisation of tradition characteristic of postliberal (and conservative) theologies while dealing substantially with the nature and role of canon and with human particularity, which are also of great importance to Lindbeck. In short, we have good reason to expect a proposal that will reward, at point after point, a careful comparative analysis with respect to Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory. As much as a liberal theory can be, it will be in cultural (if not cultural-linguistic) mode.

In view of the difficulties already indicated in the proposals of Lindbeck and Tracy, this is indeed a hopeful prospect. Brown wants to take seriously the fact of cultural inheritance and he understands human life and its attempts at meaning to be always deeply and inextricably, though often critically, enmeshed in that inheritance. The following material displays what I believe to be the strengths of Brown’s proposal, namely, that his account of culture and of religions (traditions) as cultural processes is preferable to that offered by Lindbeck. Attention will then be given to other areas of Brown’s work that are less robust, with a view to exploring some tensions between his proposal and the liberal virtues that motivated it. After reflecting on theology says about tradition and the relationship of tradition to the theological task must make sense in terms of the actual phenomena of Christian and other religious traditions, as these phenomena are delineated by other humanistic fields of scholarship’ (emphasis added). It is only in the italicised clause that some difference from Lindbeck’s approach is apparent, even if more apparent than real. Lindbeck draws on the same sources, but his rhetoric indicates an intention to make the resulting insights available for theology. This allows one to suppose that the desirability of what has thus been made ‘available’ might then be assessed on intrasystemic grounds. The fact that Lindbeck actually argues for the superiority of his cultural-linguistic theory on extrasytemic grounds is thus, in the context of his theory, an inconsistency. Brown is more consistent in his advocacy and use of ‘extratheological’ resources.

Brown points out that if the hypothesis of anthropological universals has not been demonstrated, neither has the hypothesis of the complete absence of such universals. Nevertheless, in such a situation the most appropriate working hypothesis is that such norms do not exist (BH 5).

BH 111-2. I would not wish to imply that this fifth motivation somehow constitutes a ‘hidden agenda’ simply because Brown does not list it among the motivations acknowledged in his preface. Brown is quite clear and unapologetic about his interest in rescuing theology’s credibility. Although, at BH 6, Brown ‘assume[s] that theology is obligated to give reasons whenever…possible’, his repeated reference to theology’s credibility in loc may indicate that this is the basis of the obligation (and hence of the assumption) to which he refers. Brown does not say so, but I think it reasonable to infer that concern for theology’s credibility is the reason why he wants to be able to give reasons.
the strengths, weaknesses and possibilities of Brown’s proposal, the chapter concludes with an assessment of the idea of a liberal theology in cultural-linguistic mode.

3.2.2 Tradition, Culture and Canon

The subtitle of Brown’s work is ‘Tradition and Theological Construction’, so it is no surprise that he, like Tracy, takes his hermeneutical lead from Gadamer. However, unlike Tracy, Brown is not content simply to appropriate the metaphor of the two horizons, and, far from coercing these horizons into ‘constants’, is very much on guard against the temptation to reify complex processes. Brown welcomes Gadamer’s rehabilitation of tradition as mediator of knowledge, his emphasis on knowledge as participation rather than observation, and his exposition of learning as dialectical play rather than unilateral mastery. He then offers two extensions of Gadamer’s hermeneutic, using resources that are present but undeveloped in Gadamer’s analysis.

In the first such extension, Brown finds Gadamer’s view of tradition’s historicality to be too closed, the mood of Truth and Method too much one of ‘brooding…determination’. When considering ‘the question of truth as it emerges in the experience of art’, Gadamer’s development of the game and play metaphors is preoccupied with an observer’s experience of a given artwork, and does not speak of the game and play that occur in a creator’s experience of producing art (BH 39–41). While Brown welcomes Gadamer’s rehabilitation of tradition, he extends it by emphasising not only the reception and use of tradition in our dialectical engagement (game and play) with reality, but also the (re)construction and transmission of tradition that arises from, and indeed is, that engagement (BH 41–5).

The other extension of Gadamer arises from Brown’s perception that Gadamer’s critique of modernity’s illusion of objective reason does not utilise the full significance of his participatory metaphors—Gadamer’s hermeneutic remains largely logocentric and cerebral, and, despite occasional glimpses, ignores the possibility that humanity’s physical and sensual dimensions may be hermeneutically important (BH 46–8). Building on the hints Gadamer offers, Brown maintains that human interpretive understanding is not only conscious and linguistic, but ‘derives from and continuously interacts with’ human experiences ‘at the level of bodily feeling…embedded in the larger sphere of the efficacies of the natural process’ (BH 46). Brown’s development of this theme draws on ‘the American philosophical tradition of “radical empiricism”’, especially the work of A.N. Whitehead. The chapter concludes by

44 For example, in Tracy 1985b.
45 Brown accuses both Lindbeck and Tracy not so much of idealising sources in the sense of decomplexifying them (he makes this charge only of Lindbeck) as of idealising the distinction that can be made between tradition and the claims of modernity. They do this in that they presuppose that one can say unequivocally what belongs to each. Brown acknowledges a difference, a boundary, but insists that it is fluid, as indeed are the boundaries between all arenas of discourse (BH 154 n13).
46 BH 49–53. Brown names Jonathan Edwards, William James and John Dewey as other representatives of this tradition. Henry Nelson Wieman, Bernard Mieland, Bernard Loomer, William Dean and Nancy Frankenberry are mentioned as applying radical empiricism to the interpretation of religion. Brown summarises ‘radical empiricism’ in four points: (1) ‘our primary connectedness with things is at the level of largely nonconscious feeling’; (2) ‘feelings at the preconceptual and largely unconscious level are always weighted, patterned, or directional,’ that is, they move us; (3) ‘the relationship of the human subject and her or his given environment is, in either case, neither simply
foreshadowing the employment of these developments of Gadamer’s work in two key assertions: that change, transformation and novelty are just as essential to tradition as continuity, reception and conservation; and that disciplined action, i.e., ritual, is as important to the efficacious transmission of a tradition as disciplined reflection (BH 53-4).

Moving on from his treatment of Gadamer in chapter 2, Brown’s third chapter takes a cultural turn that brings him unequivocally into the same territory as Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory. Brown provides a brief history of concepts and theories of culture, from pre- and post-Enlightenment ideas, through Vico and the organic metaphors of J.G. Herder and E.B. Tylor, to the more plural and conflictual understandings of culture among contemporary cultural theorists and anthropologists. Like Lindbeck, Brown gives honourable mention to Clifford Geertz’s view of cultures as socially established structures of meaning in terms of which human actions, understood broadly, gain their meanings. This is immediately recognisable as the view of cultures adopted by Lindbeck, though Brown mentions it only in order to immediately qualify it with later views that are more dynamic, process-oriented and conflictual. In these formulations, cultures are not well-defined unitary structures, and Geertz’s view is regarded as a remnant of the ahistorical organic metaphors more common in the nineteenth century. Rather, to the extent that cultures are identifiably distinct, they are dynamic processes in which continuity and change are always dialectically related, in which order is always contested, in which cultural identity is constantly (re-)negotiated, and in which inheritance cannot be reproduced without novelty and transformation. To the extent that cultures are unities, they are complex, dynamic, permeable and tensive unities concerned with the negotiation of identity amid chaos and order (BH 67).

This view of culture, which is far richer and rather more realistic than that which Lindbeck derives from Geertz, becomes Brown’s interpretive key for understanding Christian tradition and theology’s role within it. Tradition, he proposes, ‘is one type of cultural strategy, one way of negotiating chaos and order. Tradition…is the cultural negotiation of identity that takes place within, and with, a canon’ (BH 67). But what is the nature and role of canon, tradition’s allegedly fixed core, in such a dynamic process? Brown introduces this question by defending the idea of canon against political and philosophical critiques. He finds that, on the one hand, canons are not so unified as to be necessarily oppressive, but are sufficiently plural to facilitate the subversion of dominant ideologies. On the other hand, canons are not so diverse as to be...
illusory, but exhibit a sufficient unity to be themselves, rather than something else or nothing at all. Thus, the ground is prepared for Brown’s account of canon.

In his fourth chapter Brown develops a list of characteristics of canons, each characteristic having a parallel in the complex life of traditions. Shorn of the richer detail Brown provides, these characteristics are as follows. Canon is bounded; tradition responds by using it creatively. Canon is curatorial, a collection; tradition is continually goaded to unitary construals. Canon is normative; it is these answers, points of view, claims to truth, ways of life, that together in their interplay are adequate to author lives lived within the tradition. Canon is contestable; it defines a field of negotiation or play and is itself a protagonist, both eliciting interpretations and resisting them. Canon is contemporary, presenting diverse resources with which people live their lives; but the adequacy of these resources is, and must be, continually tested and evaluated in arenas of contemporary discourse beyond canon’s boundary. Canon is existential—in relation to canon, and within its field of play, personal and corporate identities are given and won; tradition can be considered as the process of this giving and winning, that is, tradition is canon lived. A more general description of the relation between tradition and canon according to Brown might be that canons are artefacts of traditional processes, and therefore reflect, insofar as may be possible in a (relatively) fixed form, the complexity, diversity, dynamism, conflict and tense creativity that are characteristic of living traditions. At the same time, insofar as they are fixed, canons are able to exist over against the traditions from which they arose, and so they not only provoke but resist the interpretations given them—they are the negotiable reference points for that continual (re)negotiation of individual and corporate identity that is tradition.

Two features of Brown’s proposal immediately attract attention. First, he is working with an understanding of tradition and canon that is broadly consistent with contemporary understandings of textuality and cultural processes. Second, he has coupled canon and tradition closely together in a way that renders their similarities and differences into a reasonably coherent complex of historical forces. In both respects Brown’s proposal is clearly an advance on Lindbeck’s. Brown has had the advantage of reflecting on the work of theorists who have criticised and extended Geertz’s social anthropology, and his understanding of culture reflects this. For him, a culture has

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48 Brown promotes canons’ diversity in response to the ‘political’ charge, deriving from the work of Michel Foucault, that canonical unity is oppressive. It is interesting to juxtapose this defence with the traditional apologetic which sought to defend the Bible’s status as revelation by displaying its otherwise inexplicable unity. Alongside the Foucauldian charge, Brown lays the ‘Derridaen’ charge that canon is always an illicit attempt to fix meaning: canon fails because meaning ‘is in fact an endless play of difference admitting no privileged or continuing construals of the sort that canon is usually taken to imply.’ His reply is that the meaning of the text is not anything we make it. The play of difference is not endless, though it is multiple and fluid. Rather, meaning arises interdependently from interaction between text and interpreter: the text can resist our interpretations of it (BH 69-70). But this does not constitute an argument that there is any meaningful unity to a canon’s diversity. It merely argues that a canon is something, it is what it is, and we cannot really make of it anything that we want to. Apart from the fact that canons exist as collections, Brown offers no positive argument for the unity of canons in general, or for the unity of the Christian canon in particular.

49 Brown develops the characteristics of canon at BH 75-83. He then returns to considering tradition against the background of his earlier general characterisation of it as a cultural process, but now focusing on its relation to a canon (BH 83-9). The paired list of characteristics of canon and tradition is found at BH 89.

50 Brown’s own summary of the culture–tradition–canon argument appears at BH 89-91.
no one structure of meaning, but includes ongoing arguments and negotiations over what the structure of meaning is. The abandonment of the idea of a single socially agreed structure of meaning has helped Brown to move towards a view of canon that is far more historical. No longer is the biblical canon presumed to exist beyond history as seems to be the case for Lindbeck. Even less can Brown’s canon be envisaged as projecting a single ‘world’. For him, canons, like traditions, are by nature plural and conflictual. It is only our construals, partial and provisional though they are, that may appear to be unitary and thus ‘habitable’.

A third notable, if less successful, feature is Brown’s notion of canonical diversity. For him, a canon may be diverse both in the streams of thought it includes and in the media which comprise it. A canon includes not only its tradition’s holy scriptures, but also other texts such as creeds and confessions; and not only texts, but also myths, stories, rituals, doctrines, institutions, symbols, and ‘patterns of cultivated sensibilities’. The conceptual and material diversity of canon has a special role in Brown’s argument, and will be addressed at length below.

3.2.3 Discerning the Body

Having expounded the receptivity and creativity of traditions, Brown develops his other extension of Gadamer: correcting the view that ‘the essence of tradition is to exist in the medium of language’. He criticises the general ‘intellectualist bias’ in studies that reduce the ‘affective elements of tradition’—story, myth, symbol and ritual—to what they can become as exemplars or vehicles of belief, and introduces an account of ‘the place of affectivity in the dynamic of tradition.’ Brown’s development of this theme comprises the third section of his fourth chapter. Taking as his primary datum ‘[r]itual, perhaps the most obviously affective dimension of traditions’, he sets out to answer the question: ‘how and why does ritual—and, mutatis mutandis, other affective elements of tradition—contribute to the life of a tradition?’ (BH 91)

Beginning with a critical survey of anthropological studies by Jonathan Z. Smith and Victor Turner, Brown finds that rituals are more than expressions of belief. ‘Rituals do things:’ they function both to continue (conservate, enhance, sustain) and transform (create, shape, change) their traditions and their participants (BH 97). To explain why and how rituals do this, Brown critically extends the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and A.N. Whitehead into brief phenomenological and philosophical explorations of the connection between human embodiment and ritual. Merleau-Ponty’s work on the phenomenology of behaviour and perception points to a profound interpenetration of self and world that is mediated by the body, and indeed is the body. Brown finds this fully congruent with his view of ‘ritual action as a

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51 See the lists Brown provides at BH 77, 90, 114. These lists, like St Paul’s lists of spiritual charisms, are evidently meant to be exemplary rather than exhaustive.
52 See A Diverse Canon commencing on p. 79.
54 BH 92-7. Other scholars more briefly mentioned are Robertson Smith, J.G. Frazer, Bronislaw Malinowski, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Clifford Geertz (BH 94-5).
55 BH 98-102 for Merleau-Ponty. BH 102-8 for Whitehead. For a summary of Brown’s appropriation of Whitehead and ‘radical empiricism’ see n46 above.
carrier of tradition’ (*BH* 102). Whitehead’s process-relational ontology provides an interpretive context that is at once all-embracing and infinitely detailed, in which reality is viewed as a fantastically complex matrix of atomic events. This ontology allows for the directed relation of past to present to future, the potential for innovation in the present, the formative and transformative possibilities of patterned action, the basically physical character of our engagement with the world, the inseparability of the mental and physical aspects of human existence, and the dynamic interaction of all aspects of human functioning. Brown finds that these more theoretical studies provide a robust intellectual context for understanding the anthropologists’ conclusions. Ritual does things: reciprocally affecting not only the affections, but also the character and conclusions of reflection.

Brown is careful not to claim too much for ritual: ‘rituals are neither the primary nor the privileged vehicles of tradition, nor are particular ritual practices indisputably universal’ (*BH* 108). Nevertheless, he concludes strongly: ‘If tradition is the negotiation with/in the dynamic space of canon, then ritual no less than conceptual analysis is a means of that negotiation….In the play of ritual enactment we engage our canonical space…Without ritual, traditions perish’ (*BH* 108-9).

Brown’s reclamation of ritual as vital to tradition, and hence as a worthy focus of theological attention, is very welcome, and I largely agree with his argument. What I find problematic lies not so much in the argument as around it: the scope of Brown’s appreciation for humanity’s affective and bodily life, and the use he makes of his conclusions. Because these aspects are related not only to each other but to other problematic areas in Brown’s overall proposal, I will defer their further consideration until we have surveyed his concluding chapter.

### 3.2.4 Integrating Imagination and Character: Brown’s Vision for Theology

Having completed his survey and development of the necessary theoretical background, Brown can now present his vision of what ‘professional’ theology must become if it is to emerge from its present ‘cultural and religious impotence’. From the results of the earlier chapters (summarised at *BH* 112-7), he draws two main implications. Firstly, if theology is to make a cultural and religious difference it must integrate character and imagination—receive inherited symbols and creatively reconstruct them. The way to the future lies through the imaginative reconstruction of the creatively appropriated past (*BH* 117-8). Secondly, the reconstructive task is inextricably tied to tradition’s affective life: ‘the ongoing task of theological construction will falter unless it somehow has vital roots in practicing religious communities’ (*BH* 118-9).

Following this brief statement, Brown devotes a section of text to developing each implication.

56 *BH* 111-2, and see p. 64 above. In Brown’s prefatory comments to this chapter, he variously denotes the object of his concern as North American ‘academic and mainline theologies’, ‘“professional” American theologians’, and ‘the dominant theologies in America’. Preoccupation with the North American context is particularly evident in Brown’s final chapter, both in this passage and in the selection of contemporary theologians with whom he engages. I have not specifically addressed Brown’s North American focus in this study, and I offer no opinion of his reading of the North American situation. However, his concern for ‘academic’ or ‘professional’ theology, and its relation to church and academy, provides an important point of comparison with Lindbeck.
In the first of these (BH 119-37), he identifies the novelty of his proposal, not in the claim that Christian history is ‘a succession of communal reconstructions of the Christian past’, but in the claim that this is as it should be. Even more so for theology, which ‘ought to be the community’s creative reconstruction, and it ought to be the creative construction of the community’s canonical symbols’. Yet Brown finds little evidence that contemporary theology shares his view, and he supports this assessment by comparing and contrasting his proposal with those of selected conservative, radical and liberal theologians. The comparative evaluation focuses on the extent to which each theologian’s proposal integrates character (inheritance) and imagination (creativity). Brown concludes that conservative theologies are ‘theologies of character’ that fail ‘to engage adequately and openly in the creative reconstruction of the canonical past’ (BH 120-7); radical theologies are ‘theologies of imagination’ that valorise novelty but neglect tradition’s ‘power for good as well as ill’ (BH 127-32); and liberal approaches, having identified an interpretive centre for the canon, all too often go on to silence the divergent voices, resulting in theologies in which both character and imagination are ‘diminished’ (BH 132-5). While Brown finds all three theological approaches unsatisfactory, he finds most affinity with the balance of character and imagination in liberal theology, which he hopes to reform by curing it of its habit of elevating an ‘authentic’ interpretive core to the exclusion of the canon’s diversity. He therefore casts his own proposal as a revision of liberalism rather than a fourth type of theology (BH 135-7).

Brown’s second implication was ‘that the effective reformulation of inherited symbols must be rooted in the affective dynamics of practicing communities’ (BH 119). However, rather than focusing on this specific implication the next section of Brown’s text takes the broader path of following up the preceding section’s critical comments with a positive vision of theology as a whole, a vision in which affective and communal elements play a significant part. The new section, entitled ‘What theologies are and do’ (BH 137-47), begins with a programmatic summary: ‘Theology should return to traditions’ and accept the role of critical analyst and creative conveyor of the vast conceptual resources, actual and potential, of religious traditions. In thus critically and creatively reconstructing the past, a theology is a tradition’s caregiver. That, indeed, is the vocation of theology.

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57 BH 120, original italics. This passage, to which we shall refer again, is notable for the prominence given to the religious community.

58 The ‘conservatives’ are Clark Pinnock and George Lindbeck, the ‘radical’ is Mark C. Taylor, and the ‘liberals’ are Schubert Ogden, Rosemary Ruether, Gordon Kaufman and John Cobb.

59 Brown finds that radical theologies are ‘doomed to cultural and religious impotence by their neglect of tradition’ (BH 132). The liberal approach defines what the religious imagination ought to be (the interpretive core), thus diminishing imagination. Then, for its own creative stimulation, it finds itself looking to extra-traditional voices, which ‘have increasingly provided not only the catalyst, but also the content’ of its proposals, thus diminishing character. Therefore, ‘liberal theology is in grave danger of becoming in disguise what radical theology is openly—creativity without the substance of inherited symbols.’ Hence it receives a similar verdict: ‘culturally and religiously ineffective’ (BH 137). Brown will allow that conservative theologies can be ‘temporarily effective’ but finds conservatism ‘stultifying because it fears the imagination’ (BH 127).

60 BH 137-8. A similarly programmatic statement, cited in full on p. 74 below, opens the section on ‘Theology’s Consent’ (pp. 147-50).
This summary is expounded in three sub-sections that address theology’s task (BH 138-40), its authority (BH 141-4), and its place in church and academy (BH 145-7). In a schema with clear links to David Tracy, Brown describes theological caregiving ‘diachronically, as a threefold activity’. The first activity is the ‘systematic’ task of inquiring into the meanings ingredient in a tradition. The second activity is the ‘empirical or political’ activity of examining ‘the ways [in which] the conceptual forms of a tradition…are and might be related to actual and possible modes of life.’ The third activity is evaluative, and comprises the derivation and application of criteria by which the tradition’s ideas, in interaction with other ideas and with social realities, can be assessed.

For Brown, as for Tracy, theologians’ evaluative claims ‘must be open to public debate and vulnerable to criticism from all of the communities of contemporary discourse that collectively constitute the public sphere’. The three activities of theology are inseparable (BH 140) yet also somehow distinct (theological caregiving is ‘diachronically…a threefold activity’, BH 138). Moreover, none

is free of the fallibility and messiness of constant adjudication in our ever-changing and varied communities of contemporary discourse. Each—systematic analysis, empirical analysis, and evaluation—is a constructive activity rooted in the creativity of theologians in communities. And therefore each is conducted with risk, without reassuring guidelines or guarantees.

Brown’s acknowledgment here of the complexity and messiness of the hermeneutic situation is quite similar to the sentiments expressed by Tracy in some of his later work.

Brown expands on the idea of theological risk when addressing theology’s authority (BH 141-4). If theological caregiving is ‘the negotiation with/in canon of continuity and change’, should the negotiation favour either of these poles? The traditional preference has been for the tradition, i.e., for continuity, but this is misguided. Even if pure repetition were possible, it would offer no guarantees. Against recent French critical thought, Brown judges that neither relative change nor relative continuity should be privileged. Rather,

\[\text{[t]he only authorization of the theological reconstruction of a tradition is the tentative and fallible affirmation that, for some times and for some places, might be granted by contemporary communities of evaluation, in which communities the varied voices of the tradition itself are entitled to full but unprivileged participation (BH 143-4).}\]

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61 Not that Brown’s account necessarily shows direct dependence on Tracy or development of his method. In view of the fact that both make substantial use of Gadamer in developing their respective hermeneutics, a lack of correspondence would be very surprising. Brown’s first two theological activities, the systematic and the empirical, immediately suggest Tracy’s two ‘constants’, an interpretation of the tradition and an interpretation of the contemporary situation. Brown’s third activity, evaluation, roughly parallels Tracy’s ‘mutually critical correlation’ of the two constants, but Brown has provided a much fuller account of this aspect of the theological task.


63 For example, in Plurality and Ambiguity (Tracy 1987) and some later short works and papers.

64 Brown has in mind Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva (BH 142).
For Brown, neither tradition nor canon have authority in the sense of ‘that which norms or authorises’. They author, rather than authorise; their authority is formative, rather than normative.

The authority of a canon is the creative power it manifests and therefore enables in those who inhabit it, and the authority of a tradition is the power of its canon again and again to *author* reconstructions, conceptual and affective, that yield viable individual and communal identities.65

It is only when Brown speaks of theology’s ‘place’ (*BH* 145-7) that the affective vitalities of communal practice receive any further attention. ‘Theological imagination is formed in the emotional tones of patterned actions and felt relationships not fully rationalized.’ And unless theology makes a difference to the kind of symbolic milieux that formed its own imagination, it will in the end make little difference to anything. Brown’s vagueness about the nature of theology’s relation to faith communities (it must be ‘somehow’ vitally rooted in their affective dynamics) reflects the fact that this relation ‘cannot be governed by fixed rules of method or practice, only by the fluid and debatable judgements of common sense.’ A theological caregiver need not be an adherent,66 but if the care offered is to be effective in the long run it must at least be ‘open’ and ‘sensitive’ (not indifferent or hostile) to communal feelings and practices, and let itself be held accountable for the contribution it makes to these communal vitalities. At the same time, like other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, theology is ‘a perfectly legitimate form of disciplined scholarly consideration, even within the secular university.’67

Theology, then, which ought to be part of and at home in the academy, should also be rooted in the vitalities of practicing religious communities.

Brown’s concluding section on ‘theology’s consent’ to tradition68 cogently summarises his proposal, before briefly sketching its place in the past, present and possible future of North American theology. Let Brown’s own summary conclude this overview.

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65 *BH* 144, original italics. Brown says (*in loc*) he has rejected the Roman model of authority, which guards foundations as sacred and eternally binding, in favour of ‘authority as “exousia,” which in portions of the New Testament at least connotes the power and freedom given to the community of faith’.

66 I find it hard to describe a non-adherent as being ‘somehow vitally rooted’ in the affective vitalities of communal practice. Apart from the organic ‘vital roots’ metaphor, Brown describes the relations between theologian and religious community in terms suitable to a well-conducted relationship between consultant and client.

67 *BH* 146. In this section, Brown uses the scholarly study of human love as an illustrative parallel to the scholarly activity of theology. In both cases, scholarly attention neither requires nor excludes the scholar’s personal involvement in the aspect of human life that is their object of study. Conversely, far from disqualifying a person from scholarly inquiry, personal involvement may support, or even be essential to, a properly open and sensitive stance towards the object of study. Brown sees this argument applying across a wide range of scholarly inquiry in the humanities and social sciences (*BH* 147).

68 This neatly balances the brief mention of Cicero’s consent to tradition with which Brown began his Introduction. While Cicero’s consent was apparently comfortable (‘tradition is rather like our second nature’), theology’s consent must be both more informed as to the nature of tradition and more critically engaged in shaping its future. See *BH* 1-2, 147-8. Earlier (*BH* 86), Brown usefully exploited the ambiguity of the phrase ‘to take on’: theology ‘takes on’ tradition by gratefully receiving it as a gift, and also ‘takes it on’ as challenge and task. Brown wants theology to consent to ‘take on’ tradition in this dual sense.
The theologian—as analyst, critic, and artist—is a tradition’s caregiver. Her or his task is to try to discern the varied conceptual possibilities ingredient within a tradition’s lived realities, to formulate and elaborate these potentialities, to evaluate them in relation both to the practice of the communities that house them, often unknowingly, and the critiques of the critical discourses that surround them, thus to advocate some conceptual possibilities over others, and finally, to serve as he or she can the integration of these reconstructions back into communal feeling, practice, and articulation.

It is in light of this task that theology will “consent” to tradition: Theology accepts as a starting point what a tradition has been and is, accepts as a goal what it might be and should become, and accepts as an obligation the advocacy of that potential realization….Theology is the creative reconstruction of inherited symbols, the construction of a tradition’s future from the resources of its past (BH 147-8).

3.3 DELWIN BROWN’S PROPOSAL: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

While Brown’s proposal offers important insights into the nature of tradition and theology as cultural processes, it also has its weaknesses, some of which acquire greater importance when viewed against the backdrop of Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory. In this section I will consider the scope of Brown’s appreciation of the affective dimension of human existence and the way he uses this insight, the strange diversity of his ‘canon’, and the problem of ‘authority’.

3.3.1 A Disciplined Body

We have seen that Brown develops his insights into the significance of bodiliness and religious affection in just two places: at the end of his treatment of Gadamer and in the section he devotes to ritual.69 The latter promotes ‘the realm of the affective, of which ritual is a conspicuous example’ as worthy of theological attention, though this introductory comment already provides a hint that Brown’s attention will be mainly on the disciplined form of ritual at the expense of the wider, less-disciplined affective realm.70

To help redress the logocentric, cognitive bias in theology’s view of ritual, Brown calls on Merleau-Ponty and radical empiricism (especially Whitehead). But in view of his description of the scope and profundity of their reflections, it is strange that Brown makes such strictly delimited, if still important, use of their insights into embodiment.71 Brown sets out to ‘correct’ an overemphasis on disciplined, tradition-oriented reflection (theology and doctrine) by means of a balancing emphasis on disciplined action (ritual) and disciplined feeling (myth, story, symbol). Wild being, ordinary being, messy and undisciplined being—in other words, everyday human

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69 For these, see BH 46-53 and p. 66 above; and BH 91-109 and pp. 69-70 above.

70 Another way of putting it is that Brown focuses on the importance to tradition of traditioned affective forms (ritual, story, symbol, myth) and neglects the possible significance of untraditioned (or less traditioned) affections and their complex interaction with the traditioned forms.

71 Brown’s account of Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead is at BH 98-106. The present point concerns Brown’s appropriation of their work. I do not dispute his description of it.
life—seem to lack importance for him.\footnote{This is in spite of the fact that Brown gives specific consideration to ‘wild being’, a term taken from Merleau-Ponty and mentioned more than once in \textit{BH} (pp. 99, 102\textit{(bis)}, 104\textit{(bis)}, 105, 142). Brown traces a late shift in Merleau-Ponty's thought, in which hermeneutic primacy is no longer given to ‘the body-subject’ but to ‘the intersection of self and world wherein each comes into being’. Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental image for this formative milieu within which both the body-subject and its world are coformed was ‘flesh’: ‘By this image he indicated a field of forces, “wild, brute Being,” that throws forth both self and world..., even though each to some degree also forms and forces the movements of the other’ (\textit{BH} 99). Brown finds that Merleau-Ponty’s later phenomenology of ‘flesh’ indicates that ‘all structured behaviour, not merely speech, is the mark and carrier of meaning’ and that ‘through its ritual enactments “the body [serves] as the carrier...of our tradition, passing on its culture, its history, its life” ’ (\textit{BH} 102, citing Levin 1985). My point here is that, while Brown thinks that ‘Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of human expression exhibits a curious neglect of...ritual action’ (\textit{BH} 100), his appropriation of Merleau-Ponty neglects non-ritual action. The hermeneutic significance of the body includes ritual and non-ritual action.} He appears not to realise that the scope of radical empiricism extends well beyond the manageably complex reality of disciplined forms. The whole of life in its unmanageable complexity—disciplined, ill-disciplined and undisciplined alike—is what radical empiricism tries to take seriously. For all that Brown wants to advance the cause of this philosophical stream, he does not fully appreciate its implications. Neither Merleau-Ponty nor Whitehead offer perspectives that are content to serve Brown’s promotion of a polite bodiliness.\footnote{In other words, Brown’s bodiliness is too neat. Lindbeck, too, harbours an incongruous neatness, though his is on the conceptual side (see Tracy 1985a, 466-8). In both Brown and Lindbeck, inappropriate neatness appears among the subservient: Brown’s neat body serves an agenda delineated by an all-encompassing rationality; Lindbeck’s neat (theological) rationality serves the agenda of the all-encompassing life of a tradition.}

3.3.2 The Head of the Body

Earlier, I welcomed Brown’s conclusion that, along with textual and conceptual elements, and no less than these, the affective realm is fundamental to the negotiation of identity within a tradition.\footnote{Brown’s summary concerning the affective dimension of tradition includes the following: ‘...playing the past, and being played by it, is far more than a merely conceptual activity. Inherited texts, beliefs, and doctrines are central to this process, but not exclusively so. The realm of the affective, of which ritual is a conspicuous example, is also fundamental to the negotiation of identity within a tradition....it seems quite clear that feelings and actions, no less than ideas and analyses, are carriers of tradition and thus are essential to its effective continuation’ (\textit{BH} 117).} Unfortunately, the reinstated affective realm slips back into subservience to rationality during the course of Brown’s final chapter. The reversion occurs in two related ways: descriptions of ‘theological caregiving’ become more immediately concerned with a tradition’s conceptual than its affective heritage; and the affective elements of tradition (even the disciplined forms of ritual, myth, etc) lose the canonical status Brown previously insisted was rightfully theirs.

These trends emerge as Brown, having completed his critique of contemporary theologians, begins to present his vision of ‘what theologies are and do’.\footnote{\textit{BH} 137-47, and see p. 71 above. Perhaps the diminution of the affective dimension can be seen earlier, in that this dimension makes no contribution to Brown’s assessment of contemporary theologies. The omission seems strange, in that Brown could surely have made some comment on these theologies in terms of their acknowledgement of or attitude towards what is in his view a vital aspect of tradition. Also strange is the fact that, although the affective dimension is presumably intimately involved in the formation of traditioned ‘imagination and character’, Brown’s discussion of these remains firmly conceptual. However, while this argument from silence seems consistent with the} As we have seen, Brown wants theology to ‘return to traditions’ and accept the role of
critical analyst and creative conveyer of the vast conceptual resources, actual and potential, of religious traditions. In thus critically and creatively reconstructing the past, a theology is a tradition’s caregiver. That, indeed, is the vocation of theology (BH 137-8).

It seems that theological caregiving is fulfilled primarily in caring for a tradition’s conceptual resources, and this impression is reinforced when Brown describes theology’s task (BH 138-40) and ‘authority’ (BH 141-144) without mentioning tradition’s non-conceptual resources. These resources do not regain their voice until Brown discusses theology’s place in church and academy (BH 145-7). Here, he stresses that ‘conceptual construction in theology has its wellsprings in the affective vitalities of communal practice’, and that theology’s responsibilities include making a difference to these vitalities. Brown’s point is essentially that, although theological construction is a conceptual activity, it cannot afford to live only in the sphere of concepts and cognition. Or rather, tradition cannot afford a theology that does only this, since such a theology would not be giving the care that a vital tradition requires.

Brown wants to overcome what he sees as an ‘intellectualist bias’ in studies of tradition’s affective elements. As he defines it, this bias manifests itself in the assumption that what really matters about a tradition’s affective elements is their cognitive meaning, and what really matters about a tradition is its beliefs, and so a tradition’s affective elements are reduced to what they can become as exemplars or vehicles of belief. But in fact, traditions are not like that, and so, in his own proposal, Brown has the affective dimension of tradition entering into theology’s caregiving in three ways: theology will acknowledge the full range of tradition’s conceptual, affective and communal vitalities as the wellsprings of its own constructions; theology will continually re-evaluate and re-imagine not only traditional concepts, but also the conceptual content implicit in tradition’s affective heritage; and theology will contribute to faith communities’ affective integration of reconstructed concepts through appropriate use of myth, symbol and ritual.

An ‘intellectualist bias’ is still quite evident here. Although theology at least recognises its own affective roots, thereby gaining a little humility, it nevertheless mines the tradition’s affective dimension for conceptual content, evaluates and reconstructs that content, and gives further attention to the affective in order to further the integration of reconstructed conceptual content into the life of the tradition. The affective dimension is clearly important, but the conceptual content is still what really matters. Further, Brown primarily associates the affective dimension with tradition’s vitality; theological attention to the affective will further the effectiveness of theology’s creative reconstructions. This comes close to treating the affective as a mere vehicle for tradition’s real (conceptual) substance. In this way, canon largely reverts to its more familiar

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76 The same impression of conceptual primacy pervades Brown’s final summary, cited in full at p. 74 above.

77 BH 91. Brown ironises the point: ‘in actual traditions the affective is not marginalized and the cognitive is not triumphant (except, perhaps, in the imagination of its specialized practitioners who in some traditions are called theologians)’ (original italics).

78 This paragraph combines material from BH 145 (on theology’s place) and BH 147-8 (Brown’s final summary). Note the shifts in location: affective → cognitive → affective. Later, this pattern of psychological location will be paralleled by shifts in discursive location: community → academy → community.
conceptual (textual and doctrinal) description, and the affective dimension remains far more relevant to a tradition’s vitality than to its identity.\textsuperscript{79}

3.3.3 Embracing the Body

If Brown’s acknowledgement of bodily and affective existence remains politely restrained, more like a nod than an embrace, how might his proposal change if it embraced a bodiliness that was less disciplined by tradition and less subservient to conceptual analysis? I suggest that perceptions of the locus of a tradition’s vitality would expand to include the daily living of its adherents, and would in fact be weighted towards everyday life as this is shaped (or misshaped) and enabled (or disabled) by the tradition as a whole. I also suggest that theology’s conceptual analysis would no longer constitute the evaluative task, though it would of course contribute to the religious community’s evaluation of its traditional resources.

We have seen that, when reclaiming the importance of ritual and the affective dimension, Brown focuses on disciplined affective elements as the locus of a tradition’s vitality. But the insights of Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead, as Brown describes them, extend well beyond what he asks of them.\textsuperscript{80} In particular, they bring to attention the realm of undisciplined and ill-disciplined being, thus raising the possibility that a tradition’s vitality resides, not in its affective elements as such, but in the contribution the tradition (including those elements) makes to the vitality of its adherents as it patterns their affections, thoughts and behaviours, continually (re)forming them as whole beings in every aspect of their lives. This bears some resemblance to Lindbeck’s view that everyday life is the primary arena in which a tradition’s adherents continually demonstrate its viability and vitality (to the extent that it is viable and vital) by living skillfully and successfully.\textsuperscript{81} Lindbeck would not wish to deny the importance of the affective elements in which Brown locates a tradition’s vitality—far from it—but he would find their importance in the contribution they make to a tradition’s real vitality, namely, the vitality of its adherents, who live their lives in and through their tradition, and seek to engage the world using the concepts, stories, symbols, rituals, and affections in which it continually (re)forms them.

The relocation of vitality can be seen as a matter of emphasis, but the relocation of evaluation is much more a matter of substance. Earlier, we noted that Brown’s theological caregiving privileges the cognitive: theological imagination is fed by the affections; proving and approving is a conceptual activity; appropriation occurs at the affective level. There is an ‘ascent and descent’ movement here, in which the evaluative task draws on and feeds back into the affections, but remains, in itself, distinct from them. Brown has not allowed for the possibility that the bodily and affective dimensions of human life might contribute more directly to the evaluative task—the

\textsuperscript{79} The fact that Brown does not maintain the canonicity of the affective is more than a simple inconsistency, since it is related to the far more important matter of his view of canonical diversity, which I address below.

\textsuperscript{80} See above p. 66 n46, p. 69, p. 75 n72. Again, I am not engaging Brown’s account of these scholars. I am claiming that, if they say what he says they do, then the implications reach further than he allows.

\textsuperscript{81} See Lindbeck’s account of ‘Intelligibility as Skill’ (ND 128-34) and p. 45 above. Admittedly, one could reasonably raise doubts about Lindbeck’s appreciation of the body in that there is little mention of ritual in ND. However, Lindbeck’s understanding of religion as a semiotic system includes an awareness of the importance of bodily existence and of specific formative action (ritual).
possibility that the proving that really matters might be experiential in the broadest sense, happening as much through bodily and affective venture as through cognitive reflection.

My point is not that the cognitive is relatively unimportant (a difficult point to argue in a doctoral thesis), but that the proving and approving of ideas, actions, resources, canons, traditions and many other aspects of our pasts that bear on daily life—to the extent that they are proved and not merely assumed—is conducted in a deeply dialectical and dialogical manner. We can reflect, ponder, argue, discern, and evaluate ideas against other ideas, form judgements, and so propose new possibilities (often not so new as we like to think). But we do not really test these possibilities until we venture them in life, until we declare ourselves in word and/or deed to others who may respond verbally and/or take up (their understanding of) our venture for testing in their own lives. The fundamental challenge for traditioned life lies in the question ‘Can we really live this way?’ Both the answer to this question and the means by which it is achieved are, at every point, more than conceptual just as life is more than conceptual.

As with the idea of vitality, the idea of bodily and affective involvement in the evaluative task moves us in the direction taken by Lindbeck, who argues that the primary measure of a tradition’s success, coherence and intelligibility lies in its adherents’ success (or otherwise) in dealing with life in all its fullness. In this endeavour, the role played by conceptual analysis and reconstruction is important, but not decisive by itself. Nor will the evaluative task belong solely to the academy as Brown seems to envisage, but will be a task of the religious community, drawing on all the resources available to it.

Taken together, the suggested modifications seem likely to bring Brown’s proposal much nearer to fulfilling one of his goals:

Theology ought to be the community’s creative reconstruction, and it ought to be the creative construction of the community’s canonical symbols.

But if embracing the body has led to reflection on the nature and location of reconstruction, making that reconstruction primarily the community’s task rather than theology’s alone, we must still consider the subject of the reconstructive enterprise: the ‘canonical symbols’.

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82 The idea of ‘proving’ being used here is meant to be the one that is common in the Bible. Proving occurs as the proving of metal in the refining process, tempering, suffering, the gaining of experience. The key word group in the New Testament is δοκιμαζων and its cognates (I Peter 1:7, James 1:3 etc. See the references and field of meanings given in BAGD 202-3 and MM 167-8). The expression ‘Proving is experiential; possibilities are conceptual’, captures something of what I am trying to say. However, stated this simply, the distinction is too neat. Cognition is clearly important in experiential proving, and experience is clearly important to the imagination of possibilities. Another relevant distinction is that between elites and broader communities. Possibilities may commonly originate from individuals or (intellectual) elites, but I suggest that their testing and proving belongs more to communities.

83 The preceding discussion deals largely with cognitive/affective polarities, rather than academy/community polarities which were mentioned above (see p. 72) and are further addressed below (see Norming the Norm commencing on p. 81).

84 BH 120, original italics. Perhaps the word ‘construction’ should read ‘reconstruction’, echoing the first clause.
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3.3.4 A Diverse Canon

Comparative reading of Brown and Lindbeck has indicated that Brown has dealt more adequately than Lindbeck with the culture-theoretical aspect of their common territory, while Lindbeck has a more robust appreciation of the significance of human bodiliness. Two further aspects of Brown’s proposal have particular relevance to an assessment vis-à-vis Lindbeck’s offering. These are Brown’s view of the scope and diversity of canonical materials, and his idea of the relation between a canon and its non-canonical environment.

The range of material Brown includes in canon is remarkably diverse. We noted earlier that texts, myths, stories, rituals, doctrines, institutions, symbols, and ‘patterns of cultivated sensibilities’ may all be canonical. This diversity of materials (as distinct from conceptual or narrative diversity) is introduced without discussion. These, we are told, are (some of) the materials found in the canonical field of play; within this field all elements are apparently equally canonical; and ‘canon’ in this broad sense seems to remain distinguishable from ‘tradition’.

It is entirely reasonable to consider non-textual material as having the nature of canon. Many Christian traditions may be distinguished from each other by just such non-textual matters as Brown mentions, and to the extent that Christians draw a sense of identity from these things and ascribe a normative status to them, they can be said to function in a canonical way. But if all these elements may be called canonical, then it must be insisted that no substantial Christian tradition ascribes canonical status equally to all such material. Rather, the scriptures reign supreme, both in official doctrinal standards and for many Christians simply as a matter of fact, whatever theologians may say. For example, in the Anglican tradition(s) one might say that the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion and the Book of Common Prayer of 1662 are ‘canonical’ in that, if one did not hold them to be normative, then one could not meaningfully identify oneself without qualification as an Anglican. But the Anglican standards (like most other official doctrinal standards) hold themselves out to be authoritative only insofar as they truly reflect the teaching of the Christian scriptures. That is, they subordinate their own authority to that of the scriptures. Similarly, modern doctrinal standards that acknowledge contemporary sources of learning generally do so in a way that makes plain the supremacy of Holy Scripture (e.g., the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia). Brown’s inclusion within canon of a wide diversity of materials could well describe the actual circumstances of Christian traditions if his account allowed for gradations or degrees in canonical status. Unfortunately, he gives no attention to the hierarchy of authorities acknowledged in most major doctrinal standards.

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85 See p. 69 above.
86 The fact that many people identify themselves with Anglican Christianity while, at the same time, denying normative status to these standards raises the question of the nature and sources of such identification. If tradition is the process of negotiating identities with/in a canon (as Brown has it), then what is really functioning as canon in such cases? Do we need to expand ‘canon’ beyond (even radically beyond) the official canons of particular traditions? Perhaps we need to distinguish between official canons (as defined in traditions’ own accounts of their intentions regarding sources of identity) and empirical canons (the sources of identity that can be identified as actually operating in a tradition).
87 It is tempting to think that the undifferentiated authority of Brown’s canon derives from his metaphor of the galaxy (see BH 75-7). But, as with most metaphors, it is not the metaphor itself but what Brown sees in it that makes it fruitful for him. For Brown, ‘Just as a galaxy is composed of a vast and varying multiplicity of elements, a canon is
If it is clear that different levels of authority attach to different officially recognised texts, let alone to other official media such as ritual, symbol and the like, what of the Christian scriptures themselves? Although Brown tries to develop a general idea of ‘canon’, he uses these scriptures, and only these, to illustrate his claims. Perhaps within the Christian scriptures, at least, we could expect Brown’s implicit assumption of undifferentiated canonical authority to apply reasonably well. After all, where the scriptures alone are accepted as canonical, are they not generally acknowledged (officially, at least) to have the same authority throughout? However, an undifferentiated authority cannot be said to apply throughout the Christian scriptures. It has always been the case that certain texts and textual traditions within the canonical corpus have been privileged over others. In the Hebrew scriptures, Torah has traditionally been privileged over the Prophets and Writings. In the New Testament, we see the early Christians re-construing the Hebrew Bible in the light of what they believed to be the definitive self-revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. Precisely what the relation actually was between Jesus and the Hebrew scriptures became a matter of vigorous dispute, a dispute which is by no means exhausted even today. The early church, receiving the Septuagint as scripture and the apostolic witness to Christ as its authoritative interpretation, privileged the witness to Christ in what became the ‘New Testament’ over the witness to God in the ‘Old Testament’. In so doing, they typically reinterpreted the Old Testament as a witness to Christ and, to the extent of any conflict, subordinated it to the New Testament. In short, the early church received scripture as a witness to Jesus Christ; the authority of scripture was derived from that of Jesus, and, in consistent (if circular) fashion, scripture was both received as authoritative insofar as it bore witness to him, and (re)interpreted so as to bear that witness.

This brief precis is hardly a fully nuanced account, but it may suffice for the limited purpose of indicating that the authority of Christian scripture is a matter of complex relations, not only between the scriptures and the extra-scriptural tradition, but within the scriptures themselves, and also ‘beyond’ the scriptures in the sense that the scriptures bear witness to Jesus Christ, rather than dynamic, richly plural, and pluriform. As a galaxy is nevertheless something of a unity, so a canon has enough unity and structure to be one thing rather than another. ... Like a galaxy, a canon’s rough unity translates at the broadest level of analysis into an identifiable “gravitational pull.” Like that of a galaxy, the gravitational force of a canon, though real, is interactive. Moreover, a galaxy is neither as arbitrary as a constellation (a human invention), nor as definite as a planet (a precisely circumscribed given object). Brown allows that ‘at any given time, and from any given perspective, canon has a coarse and practical unity, though that unity is always differently construed from different perspectives.’ This comment could have been extended into considerations of a galaxy having both a centre and a periphery, as having not merely enough structure to be ‘one thing rather than another’, but enough identifiable structure to be described as an ordered complex of things. But Brown does not take the metaphor in this direction.

I believe this question must be answered in the affirmative, but it contains an unnuanced representation of the positions of major Christian traditions regarding the scriptures. Terms such as ‘authority’ and the role of the interpreting community would need further amplification in a satisfactory statement.

This is not to suggest that the Christian Bible’s internal privileging of some texts over others, and some meanings over others, is unequivocally clear, and that we should be able to identify the internal structure of canonical authority, or a canonical core or trajectory of meanings, as if these were entirely properties of the texts themselves. In this, as in all matters of meaning, we are faced with the possibility that the meanings or structures we find owe as much to our construals as to the object(s) construed. But this does not mean that all possible construals are equally possible, and that decisions between them are to be excluded a priori.
themselves, as the definitive revelation of God. Brown’s account of the diversity of canons does not support an appreciation of the complex relations of authority within the Christian scriptures, even if the Christian canon is taken to include only those scriptures (as Brown would not wish). But if, as Brown proposes, ‘canon’ also includes diverse non-textual elements, the complexity of these relations is all the greater, making Brown’s silence in this regard all the stranger.

For all its rich diversity—in doctrine, in narrative tradition, in types of material—when Brown’s canon is viewed in terms of authority it presents a face that is curiously and unrealistically featureless.\(^{90}\) It turns out that this blank aspect plays an important part in Brown’s argument concerning the renegotiation of canonical boundaries, which we will now consider.

### 3.3.5 Norming the Norm

When reflecting on the undifferentiated nature of authority in Brown’s view of canon, it must be remembered that Brown invests the terms ‘authority’ and ‘normativeness’ with a very particular meaning. Consider the following passage:

To assert the normativeness of a canon is not to make a claim about any particular construal of it. Given the diversity of canon, this must be the case. A canon is not an answer, a point of view, a truth, a way of life. It is many answers, points of view, claims to truth, ways of life. The normativeness of a canon, therefore, can apply to this diversity only taken as a whole. The claim can be only that in this field of many voices viable answers may continuously be found and made. To assert the normativeness of a canon is to make a claim for the adequacy of these voices in their interplay.…The normative character of a canon is the depth of its fecundity (\textit{BH} 80).

The first sentence of this passage is consistent with the idea of a norm as a rule or guide. Brown’s earlier comment that ‘to speak of a canon’s normativeness is to speak of its gravitational pull’\(^{91}\) seems to indicate the same sense, while allowing for a gravitational centre that is somewhat diverse rather than precisely defined. But by the end of the above passage, a canon’s ‘normativeness’ is expressed in terms of its adequacy and fecundity, which is Brown’s preferred meaning.\(^{92}\) In a footnote to the same passage, Brown indicates that he speaks similarly of a canon’s ‘authority’. The ‘authority’ of a canon, he explains, is ‘its power to \textit{authorize} identity rather than…its entitlement to \textit{authorize} belief and action. Authorizing is a task fallibly

\(^{90}\) Brown’s canon, as a bounded field of authorised sources apparently lacking internal structure, seems to offer as canon a smaller version of the chaos that exists outside the tradition. Such a canon expresses a preference for circumscribed, ‘authorised’ chaos rather than the truly chaotic extra-canonical chaos. Thus the plurality of Brown’s canon seems to be very like that of contemporary (post)modern Western societies, in which every acceptable view is equally acceptable, and acceptability is acceded to all views that accept (or at least don’t question) that basic premise.

\(^{91}\) \textit{BH} 79, see n87 above.

\(^{92}\) See also \textit{BH} 81: ‘Canons present the diverse resources with which people live their lives. They employ these resources, elevating some to pre-eminence, subordinating others, dismissing others, and remaining oblivious to most. They presume the adequacy of this broad resource, and in this sense privilege it, not because it has come down from the past, but because through the ages it has seemed to prove its wisdom and, especially, its generativity.’ Brown does not completely exclude questions of truth, but he clearly privileges fecundity over validity.
conducted through critical examination in the arenas of contemporary discourse. Thus, Brown uses ‘normativeness’ and ‘authority’ in similar ways, and the sense he gives them relates to (actual or potential) fecundity.

The ideas of ‘normativeness’ and ‘authority’ are more commonly taken teleologically and ontologically—a canon would be ‘normative’ in that it calls us towards what we ought to be, and ‘authoritative’ in that it tells us the truth. Brown has moved the ideas of ‘normativeness’ and ‘authority’ away from ‘rule’ (i.e., the meaning of κανον) and towards creativity. For him, these terms are more concerned with the ability to produce possibilities than with defining or choosing valid possibilities. But if the meanings of ‘normativeness’ and ‘authority’ are redirected away from canon’s role in defining the content, and thus the boundaries, of a bounded set of possibilities, the question of ‘rule’ must be addressed in other ways. What is Brown’s account of canonical boundaries? How are these boundaries (re)negotiated? In short, and reverting to more usual meanings, what, for Brown, is the norm of a canon?

Brown mentions the negotiation of canonical boundaries several times. Firstly, he extends Gadamer’s metaphor of play to include creative play that not only plays the game as given but plays with the rules themselves. It is not just that the players play the game and the game plays the players, but the players play with the game. Hence Brown’s frequent recourse to expressions such as that canons are ‘the spaces with/in which adherents…negotiate who they are’ (BH 90). Canons are not fixed, or at least, their fixity is only relative.

Secondly, in Brown’s understanding of the dynamism of traditions, change is generally provoked ‘by the interaction, usually conflictual, between a religious tradition and its socio-political environment’; but, if change in a tradition is to be lasting and efficacious, it ‘is accomplished primarily by recovery and re-formation of elements internal to the tradition’. The viability of such a change seems to be related to a perception of continuity: ‘I know this seems different to what we did/said/thought before, but this is the course we must now follow if we are to be faithful to our identity/roots/scriptures.’ If this principle is applied to the

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93 BH 184 n13, original italics. Also on p. 144: ‘From this perspective the authority of a canon is the creative power it manifests and therefore enables in those who inhabit it, and the authority of a tradition is the power of its canon again and again to author reconstructions, conceptual and affective, that yield viable individual and communal identities.’

94 Just how it can do so may be a matter of some complexity and subtlety. The nature of ‘truth’, especially, moves towards the centre of the argument in chapters 5 and 6 below.

95 In itself, this is unexceptionable. For example, Karl Barth, a great respecter of the scriptural canon, insists on leaving open the question of its scope and contents. For him, canon is a consensual acknowledgment by the church of the authority of certain texts as witnesses to the Word of God. This consensus is as historically situated, and therefore as provisional, as any other human agreement. Insofar as the responsibility of the church is not primarily to the scriptures but to the scriptures as witnesses to the Word, one must say that the question of ‘the concrete form of the Canon is not closed absolutely, but only very relatively’ (CD I.2 476, and the whole argument on pp. 473-81).

96 BH 26, 86-7. For his basic point about the provocation for and response to change, Brown may briefly say ‘the provocation for change is external, but efficacious response draws on internal resources,’ but he can also be more equivocal about the source of provocation (e.g., BH 186 n31). The fuller expositions indicate that he does not rely on a strict sense of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. For him, traditions are intrinsically porous, and their boundaries always negotiable.

97 Brown makes clear his awareness of the importance of this perception as perception. He notes that ‘explicit syncretism seems rare’ (BH 87), but adds the following observation:
negotiation of canonical boundaries, then, whatever the source of the provocation or question, one would expect a viable change to arise from (or at least, to be justified on the basis of) resources internal to the tradition, and especially canonical resources.

Lastly, the testing of a canon’s adequacy is discussed in the context of ‘contemporaneity’, one of the six main characteristics of canon. ‘[C]anons present the diverse resources with which people live their lives’. 98 Confidence in the present adequacy of the canonical resources for this purpose derives from the testimony of personal experience and the tradition itself concerning the canon’s past adequacy. (As mentioned above, this functional adequacy is what Brown means by ‘normativeness’.) From this, one might imagine drawing a conclusion that favours holistic justification, that is, that a tradition is tested and justified in and through the lives of its adherents.99 However, Brown insists that ‘the evaluation of canonical commitments as ways of life…must…take place outside the canon, in the arenas of contemporary discourse’.100

Let us first address the element of necessity in this prescription. Why must evaluation occur ‘outside the canon’? Brown is not insisting on a supposedly ‘objective’ assessor with no personal attachment to the tradition. Rather, the necessity is a logical one arising from his view of canonical diversity. Having stressed the importance and necessity of testing and evaluating a canon’s adequacy, Brown argues that –

…those who inhabit a canon are inevitably driven to evaluate and justify their particular construals in relation to other visions, both inside and outside their canonical home. Canon cannot provide the measure in terms of which adherents justify their commitments or choices from within the diversity of a canon, however, because it is the canon that presents the diversity. The evaluation of canonical commitments as ways of life, thus, must in the nature of the case take place outside the canon, in the arenas of contemporary discourse. Of course, canonical voices, too, are to be full participants in this evaluative discourse. They are as entitled as any other to make their cases and proffer their challenges to rival visions. But here, in the evaluation of what is adequate and inadequate, true and false, redemptive

Whether the material drawn upon is “really” canonical is, at this level of analysis, a moot point. Just as for the reader a particular text is in part the history of its interpretations as they affect the reader, so, too, a canon is in part the history of its interpretations through communal celebration, imagination, and explication as they impinge upon the adherent. Pressing the question of what is “really” canonical occurs, or may occur, as a strategy within the process of negotiating canon, but not in the process of characterizing that negotiation (BH 187 n32).

We are about to see just why Brown holds that a canon cannot rule the (re)negotiation of its own boundaries.

98 See p. 68 above. Brown’s main treatment of the contemporaneity of canon is at BH 81-2. The remainder of this paragraph draws on these two pages.
99 This was imagined in the section Embracing the Body commencing on p. 77 above. The present point indicates another way in which Brown’s proposal pulls in the direction of holistic justification without actually taking that turn.
100 BH 82. Fuller context is provided in the following paragraph.
and destructive, canon has no privilege. Canon is a contemporary, one alternative among others, one inquirer among others, in the tasks of assessment and validation.\textsuperscript{101}

Thus Brown argues that a canon cannot provide, from within its own resources, the (or even \textit{a}?) measure that its adherents can use to justify their canonical choices and commitments. The reason for this is that ‘it is the canon that presents the diversity.’ This is the featureless diversity noted and criticised earlier: a diversity apparently without internal structure, without stronger and weaker themes, without deeper and more superficial meanings; a diversity without any (or sufficient, or adequate) indication of criteria that could guide evaluation. Brown offers no other reason for locating the evaluative task outside the canon: evaluation of canonical claims \textit{must} take place outside the canon \textit{because} the canonical resources present ‘diversity’. Earlier, I indicated that Brown’s account of canonical diversity is untenable. Here, as a logical deduction based on a false premise, the necessity of extra-canonical evaluation may be likewise dispensed with.

But if the \textit{necessity} is discarded, the \textit{notion} of extra-canonical evaluation remains. Brown wants evaluation of the canon to take place outside the canon, in ‘our common discourse’ where the canon has no privilege. This is clearly in tension, even in contradiction, with his observation that a viable change in canonical boundaries will be one that arises from (or at least, is justified on the basis of) resources internal to the tradition, and especially canonical resources. Often enough, this prescription and observation are all but juxtaposed in Brown’s text.\textsuperscript{102} If I understand him rightly, the manner of canonical evaluation he advocates is one that, on his own criteria, is unlikely to be viable or efficacious, though he seems unaware of this difficulty. I assume Brown is not suggesting that a recommendation for change issuing from extra-canonical evaluation should be justified on the basis of intra-canonical resources. Such a course would lack integrity. Our choices, then, are limited. If we are truthfully to justify a recommendation for change on the basis of intra-canonical resources, our evaluative process will rely on those resources, or at least privilege them in some way. Or if, following an extra-canonical evaluation, we are to be truthful about the basis of our recommendation, we will frankly acknowledge that we have subjected the canon (and hence the tradition) to the judgement of another canon (and hence, another tradition).

I think Brown is right to maintain that viable changes require intra-canonical justification, and I favour intra-canonical evaluation,\textsuperscript{103} the possibilities and pitfalls of which are discussed later in this work. But what follows from relying on extra-canonical evaluation, as Brown proposes? In his view, a canon’s diversity requires that its interpreters look elsewhere for criteria that will allow decisions to be made concerning canonical boundaries. That is, the canon (and tradition) in question is inadequate to the task of choosing its own future and is obliged to seek what it

\textsuperscript{101} BH 82. Much the same point is made elsewhere. For example, at BH 88 Brown asserts that ‘the responsible habitation of a canon…cannot be viewed solely as the making of corporate and personal identity. It must also address the integrity of the space wherein identity making takes place.’ This entails a negotiation in which ‘canon becomes a contemporary—one alternative among others, one inquirer among others, one advocate among others, in the continuing, public task of assessment and validation.’ See also BH 90-1, 115, 139.

\textsuperscript{102} See BH 26-7, 86-7, 113, 116.

\textsuperscript{103} Here, I am asserting only that intra-canonical justification is \textit{consistent with} intra-canonical evaluation. The question of logical implication (i.e., of which implies the other) would already indicate a misunderstanding. Essentially, both derive from taking seriously a tradition’s claim to offer a comprehensive vision of life.
lacks in the resources of another, presumably more adequate, canon. But this is really the same as saying that the canon and tradition in question are, simply, inadequate. Inadequate traditions do not survive. But neither do they actually die. Rather, they are absorbed into more successful traditions, and this would be the outworking of what Brown proposes for the evaluation of canonical boundaries. For to the extent that religious traditions submit to evaluation according to the canons of ‘our contemporary discourse’ they renounce their claims to a comprehensive vision and acquiesce in their domestication into the tame pluralism of late modernity.104 That is, Brown’s proposal encapsulates tradition, as Lindbeck’s encapsulates religion. Neither proposal can really be adopted by an adherent, for to the extent that one genuinely adopts either of these positions, one is no longer an adherent, or rather is already an adherent of the wider ‘common discourse’. The stances they offer can be adopted consistently only by those who, while they may care about the tradition, have placed their faith in the ‘common discourse’ that norms the tradition.105 Like Lindbeck, Brown seems unaware of this difficulty.

3.3.6 Theology and ‘Our Common Discourse’

Interestingly, Brown’s Introduction hints at another possibility. He maintains that ‘intersystematic reason-giving’ can and should occur wherever criteria exist that are accepted beyond a tradition’s boundaries (BH 5-6). For Christians, such reason-giving would presumably involve, firstly, identification of criteria accepted within Christianity; secondly, identification of those ‘Christian’ criteria that are also accepted in another tradition; and thirdly, the giving of reasons to adherents of that tradition in a manner consistent with those shared criteria. In fact, Brown does none of these things, but concludes that Christian theology must be ‘tested in the varied arenas of contemporary knowledge and experience’.106 There are two unargued shifts in rhetoric here. Firstly, the egalitarian language of ‘reason-giving based on shared criteria’ has given way to the more power-laden language of ‘testing’;107 and secondly, what could have been a piecemeal process of seeking out points of contact that would enable Christianity to tell its story (and hear others’ stories) in

104 That is, canons that need extra-canonical evaluation are not viable. Brown’s concern for viability is mainly a concern for the viability of recommendations for canonical change. Yet Brown has these recommendations issuing from an evaluation that presupposes the non-viability of the canon itself.

105 The main difference on this point is that, unlike Lindbeck, Brown does not at the same time maintain that Christianity must live ‘intratextually’.

106 BH 6. Brown’s argument in the wider context (BH 5-6) is as follows: (1) the claims that universals do, or do not, exist seem equally presumptuous; (2) ‘Whereas it may be the case that no criterion is universal…many criteria are common to sets of varied perspectives’, and this is ‘crucially important’; (3) ‘Reasons can make a difference intersystematically only if they may appeal to intersystematic criteria of adequacy’; (4) ‘if there are intersystematic criteria, intersystematic reason giving is possible’; (5) Brown assumes that ‘theology is obligated to give reasons wherever reason giving is possible’, and thus (from 4), ‘providing warrants for our views, in theology…is a cross-contextual obligation’; (6) Therefore (Brown’s word, my italics) ‘theology…must be tested in the varied arenas of contemporary knowledge…’. Points (1) to (5) may not be entirely unproblematic, but they appear to me to be broadly consistent. However, they lead logically to a statement of truly intersystematic reason-giving, rather than a ‘testing’ in which external criteria are privileged. That is, the ‘therefore’ is a logical non sequitur. Brown’s conclusion seems to follow less from the preceding argument than from his goal of bolstering theology’s credibility in the academy.

107 Or, as Brown puts it at BH 4, Christian theology is ‘answerable’ to the common discourse.
particular contexts threatens to become a wholesale process of determining (or knowing in advance) which criteria may be shared across a range of contemporary discourses. Thus, the possibilities for genuine ‘intersystematic reason-giving’ remain unexplored. In Brown’s judgement, Christian theology ‘is answerable to canons of critical inquiry defensible within the various arenas of our common discourse and not merely within those that are Christian’ (BH 4-5).

Brown’s attachment to a normative and apparently singular ‘common discourse’ resonates with the familiar echo of modernity’s failure to imagine that it too might be a tradition. He offers no substantive argument for taking ‘our common discourse’ to be the all-encompassing boundary of discursive possibilities for religious canons, and no reason for not treating it as another tradition. Rather, he begins, continues and ends his book in a committed stance which is never given more substance than an assumption or a priori judgement: ‘our common discourse’ defines the terms in which theology must make sense and sets the canons to which theology is answerable (BH 4-5); since religious canons are necessarily unable to answer questions concerning their own adequacy, these must be answered in ‘the arenas of contemporary discourse’. Thus Brown assumes a privileged (if not necessarily universal) Reason sitting in judgement on traditions. We may wonder, then, how the ‘canons of critical inquiry’ of ‘our common discourse’ might be evaluated. What criteria could be used, given that, due to its ‘diversity’, ‘our common discourse’ could not provide criteria for its own evaluation? To what wider, more comprehensive discourse might ‘our common discourse’ appeal if (Reason forbid!) faced with intimations of its own inadequacy?

Without addressing such questions, Brown’s ‘common discourse’ assumes the position of default evaluator, albeit a benevolently non-intrusive one. It allows the canon to exist as a protected space within which personal and corporate identities may be negotiated, stepping in when needed to resolve questions about the canon’s own identity, but otherwise leaving canon to its own devices and its own community. But, unlike the protected canonical space, ‘contemporary public discourse’, in which Brown locates theology’s evaluative task, is an unprotected space where tradition has no privilege (BH 90). Thus, when summing up theology’s task in its three activities—systematic, empirical and evaluative—Brown says that each of these ‘is a constructive activity rooted in the creativity of theologians in communities. And therefore each is conducted with risk, without reassuring guidelines or guarantees.’

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108 This is not to say that a religion can have stories that are entirely its own and not, to some extent, also those of ‘the world’. The identification of stories as having ‘this identity’ rather than ‘that one’ is in any case problematic if we accept (as I do) Brown’s point about the fluidity and fuzziness of boundaries.

109 This (at BH 6) is Brown’s closest approach to acknowledging that the pluralism of these discourses might result in piecemeal ‘intersystematic’ conversations. For the most part, however, his appeal to ‘our common discourse’ tends towards a more wholesale approach to determining criteria.

110 BH 82. See also BH 143-4 and the passages cited in n101 above. That Brown is relatively content to leave this assertion unsupported is indicated at BH 4-6 (referred to in the text) and at BH 139: ‘The view here espoused—in fact, the view that underlies the study itself, as was indicated in the Introduction—is that the evaluative claims of theologian[s] must be open to public debate and vulnerable to criticism from all of the communities of contemporary discourse that collectively constitute the public sphere.’

111 BH 140. In the previous sentence, Brown mentions ‘our ever-changing and varied communities of contemporary
I take Brown’s point that, like any disciplined reflection, theological reflection involves taking risks and working without guarantees. But I doubt that it is ever undertaken ‘without reassuring guidelines’ derived consciously or unconsciously from some community of inquiry, i.e., from a tradition. When Brown says that the activities ingredient in theological reflection are to be conducted ‘without reassuring guidelines’, he is apparently referring to guidelines that are inherent in a traditioned way of thinking, but absent from ‘our common discourse’.

This may be countered not only by recognising it as an example of Reason’s failure to see itself as a tradition, but also by noting that the criteria of ‘our common discourse’ appear throughout Brown’s text precisely as ‘reassuring guidelines’ which can reassure theologians that they are properly fulfilling their role. Thus, Brown casts theologians as natives of the modern academy, who are willing to care for a tradition whose canon is (regrettably, but necessarily) inadequate to the tasks of life, so that its adherents may, in time, become acclimatised to (the academy’s construals of) contemporary life, and feel, at least to some extent, less chafed by the constraints of (the academy’s construals of) their traditional identities.

That is, Brown’s theologians act as agents of ‘our common discourse’, facilitating and maintaining the domestication of religious traditions by shaping religious canons according to the academy’s ‘canons of critical inquiry’. Once ‘our common discourse’ is recognised as tradition and Brown’s argument from ‘diversity’ is discarded, we can be open to the possibility that Christian traditions might have significant criteriological resources that could be offered to assist ‘public discourse’ with its own canonical inadequacies. But exposure of the myth of a non-traditioned ‘common discourse’ does not provide Christianity with any reason for ignoring resources (including criteriological resources) that may be offered to it. On what basis could it claim to have nothing to gain from respectful attention to the best that other traditions can offer? If ‘our common discourse’ is a tradition after all, then at discourse’, while the immediately following section speaks of theologians being ‘vitally rooted’ in practicing faith communities. This leaves me unsure as to the meaning of the phrase ‘theologians in communities’. Is Brown meaning ‘theologians in communities of contemporary discourse’ or ‘theologians in faith communities’? I feel that the former is more likely here.

Brown’s reference to risk in the same context is taken up in his immediately following section on ‘the authority of theology’ (BH 141-4). Here he speaks of the risk inherent in negotiating between continuity and change, order and chaos, (relative) stasis and (relative) novelty. He concludes that neither pole is entitled to privilege, and so the inherent risk of evaluation is not minimised by preferring either. Rather, ‘[t]he outcome of theological construction must always be carried into whatever the contemporary communities of evaluative inquiry, without special privilege because it changes or continues, because it orders or disorders,…[etc]’.

This point is to some extent implicit in Brown’s view of theology’s ‘place’: theology is ‘at home’ in the academy, but only ‘somehow’ rooted in the affective vitalities of faith communities (BH 145-7). The tone of condescension reflects Brown’s formulation: ‘The only authorization of the theological reconstruction of a tradition is the tentative and fallible affirmation that, for some times and for some places, might be granted by contemporary communities of evaluation…’ (BH 144).

That Brown privileges the academy is consistent with the fact that the credibility he seeks for theology is very much credibility in the academy’s eyes. See his preface, Introduction, and introductory comments to chapter 5 (and see p. 64 above). However, if viable innovation is generally justified on the basis of resources internal to a tradition, as Brown maintains, then, insofar as theology seeks credibility, it should perhaps be more concerned for credibility among the adherents of its own tradition. This is not to say that credibility in the academy can be ignored, but that it should be of secondary importance in a successfully innovative tradition. (And I would add that the academy’s terms of credibility should not be left uncontested.)
the very least it may be as deserving of respectful attention as any other tradition, and it may in fact have great riches to offer. But the manner in which the offerings of one tradition might be received—discerned, clarified, evaluated, modified, adopted, integrated—into another tradition is another matter, and will be addressed later.\textsuperscript{115} ‘Intersystematic reason-giving’ should be more like the giving and receiving of respectful attention between traditions, and less like a ‘common discourse’ granting a tradition a circumscribed freedom within its own unquestioned hegemony.

3.3.7 Brown’s Proposal in Review

Earlier, I found that Brown’s proposal faced difficulties in the form of an intellectualist bias and a preoccupation with disciplined forms of bodiliness, but I indicated that, if certain resources within his proposal were developed and allowed greater freedom, these problems could be overcome. That is, these criticisms were more like redirection than refutation. I do not think this option is available in respect of my comments on canonical diversity, the negotiation of canonical boundaries, and allegiance to ‘common discourse’. For Christianity, at least, canonical diversity is not featureless as Brown assumes, so his argument that the negotiation of canonical boundaries necessarily requires outside adjudication does not succeed. The combination of external evaluation with internal justification seems incoherent, but, in any case, advocacy of external evaluation is already, if implicitly, a dual confession: a confession that the tradition being evaluated does not really offer a comprehensive way of life, and a confession of faith in the greater adequacy of the extra-canonical context.\textsuperscript{116} That Brown does not acknowledge and address the traditioned nature of that context and of his own argument is a serious problem that leaves his proposal far too open to complicity in modernity’s assertion of hegemony over ‘mere’ traditions. In view of these difficulties, little remains of his case for extra-canonical evaluation.

But this critique should not make us forget that there are at least five areas in which Brown’s argument is clearly more robust than Lindbeck’s. Firstly, his treatment of cultures seems far more viable than the idealised meaning-systems offered by Lindbeck. Brown’s ‘culture’ is a tensive, complex, dynamic, historical negotiation of identity. ‘Tradition’ is a cultural process in which the negotiation of identity is conducted with reference to a canon which is itself an artefact of traditioned (i.e., cultural) processes. Considered against this background, Lindbeck, with Geertz, has remained wedded to nineteenth century organic metaphors of culture.

Secondly, and notwithstanding my criticisms, Brown’s appreciation of the diversity of canon is an improvement over the ahistorical, idealised canon offered by Lindbeck. If canon is an artefact of traditioned processes, then we should not be surprised if it shows signs of the same characteristics—a polyphony of voices, conflicting points of view, arguments, distinct theologies, intrusive ideologies, etc. The Christian canon is not only quite readily read in this way, but its major anthropological themes provide a conceptual space within which such

\textsuperscript{115} See sections 4.4.6 Reflections on a Christian View of Particularity commencing on p. 146 below, and 4.5.2 The Idea of Particularity in Christian Theology commencing on p. 150.

\textsuperscript{116} I am not claiming that Brown \textit{intends} such a confession, but that he is mistaken in advocating external evaluation in his model of theological caregiving.
features make good sense. Moreover, Brown’s inclusion of diverse (especially non-textual) materials in canon, though problematic, is valuable and potentially fruitful.

Thirdly, Brown is aware of, and tries to resist, the temptation to idealise one’s preferred sources (a problem he notes in both Lindbeck and Tracy). If, as Brown says, tradition is a complex negotiation, and if there is no resource available to tradition that is not already implicated in and mediated by tradition, then any tendency towards idealisation of sources must be regarded with suspicion. Regrettably, Brown’s monolithic view of canonical authority, and his appeal to a singular ‘common discourse’ apparently detached from tradition, indicate that his own proposal has not entirely avoided this problem.

Fourthly, Brown has resisted Lindbeck’s linguistic emphasis. Nothing in Brown’s work compares with Lindbeck’s extension of the metaphor of language into idealised distinctions between grammar (doctrine) and vocabulary (scripture), or between syntactical, lexical, and grammatical functions of doctrine. Brown acknowledges that language, as the prime bearer of culture’s conceptual inheritance, is nevertheless enmeshed in all the dynamic complexity and bodily and affective mediation that is common to cultural processes. He therefore resists ‘Lindbeck’s assertion of the primacy of language’ ([BH] 201 n39), which gives the cultural-linguistic theory its reductionist cast. Unfortunately, Brown’s resistance has not been sufficient to prevent him locating the evaluation of canons very much in the conceptual (linguistic) realm at the expense of the bodily existence of a tradition’s adherents.

Fifthly, although Brown’s appreciation of human bodiliness and the affective life remains too disciplined and too subservient to intellection, he has displayed philosophical resources that can support a more robust and richly-textured account of the body’s hermeneutical significance. Such an account would embrace the ‘wildness’ of bodily existence and the ineffable interpenetration of mind and body in the making of meaning. These resources point in the direction taken by Lindbeck on this issue, but they add a richness and depth lacking in Lindbeck’s account.

I have indicated elements in Brown’s proposal that point to a different location for the evaluative task. Radical empiricist philosophy and a phenomenology of embodiment strongly suggest that evaluation is not solely (nor even primarily) a matter of conceptual analysis, but that it is broadly experiential, emerging in the daily lives of a tradition’s adherents as these are informed by reflection (including the reflections of specialists), formed in ritual and other communal practices, and continually challenged in ongoing encounter at the margins of traditioned life. Religious traditions’ intrinsic claims to comprehensiveness, and the observation that viable change in a tradition is justified on the basis of internal resources, suggest that evaluation cannot be ceded to the agents of another canon, but must remain the task of the religious community as it continues to seek life in the canon that has given life in the past. In turn, the community’s deliberations are evaluated indirectly in its own ongoing vitality, or even survival, as witness that their tradition is one in which life may be found. If the evaluative task were relocated in this way, Brown’s proposal would be much closer to fulfilling one of his more
programmatic statements: that theology ought to be the community’s creative reconstruction of the community’s canonical symbols.\textsuperscript{117}

3.4 CONCLUSION

3.4.1 Liberal Virtues and the ‘Religion-as-Culture’ Metaphor

Can there be a liberal theology in cultural-linguistic mode? Brown offers a much more robust and realistic view of culture than that adopted by Lindbeck, but we have seen that some of Brown’s advances create tensions with his liberal virtues. But what is ‘liberal theology’? Leaving confessional questions aside for a moment,\textsuperscript{118} Brown’s liberal theology appears to have two virtues at or near its core. Firstly, it refuses to rely on mere tradition, and therefore seeks a stance that somehow transcends tradition, is somehow objective, somehow privileges no tradition, and is thus able and entitled both to evaluate the claims of traditions, and to arbitrate between claims. Secondly, liberal theology advances reason (or unconstrained critical inquiry) as the means by which transcendence of tradition may be achieved. Reason provides the ‘how’ of the ‘somehows’ and the basis of the ability to sift traditions for truth. However, in the light of anthropological insights gleaned from reason, including cultural studies and empiricist philosophy (radical or otherwise), these liberal virtues have been sharply qualified as human possibilities. That is to say, reason has discovered its own nature as tradition; it has found that it, too, is only human. We no longer dare to know but to construct, and then always in and for particular places, times and peoples.

But if certain aspects of classic liberalism’s vision turned out to be mirage, this does not require the wholesale abandonment of liberal virtues. It is entirely reasonable for mere humans to refuse to rely on ‘mere tradition’ and to use reason as a tool whereby that refusal may be crafted. But I find the set of virtues incomplete. Do we refuse to rely on ‘mere tradition’? Yes—but we have learned that there is no knowledge available to us that is not mediated by tradition. Can we continue to use reason as a tool for transcending tradition? Yes again—but we have learned that reason cannot overcome tradition, because it is itself traditioned. Insofar as these two, once seen as antagonists, can be distinguished, reason may guide us in using tradition wisely, and tradition may guide us in reasoning wisely. But in fact we never have the one without the other. In short, reason indicates that among the virtues on the difficult path to undistorted construction, methodological humility may be just as important as reliance on reason.

While in this somewhat homiletic mode, the discussion could be expanded to include experience and scripture. Experience is relatively unproblematic in the present context in that, as an object for reflection, it is another learning tool, only notionally distinguishable from reason and tradition. Each of these three tools can be said to be bound up with the other two, in that none is available without the others, and the relation between them can be described in terms of mutual

\textsuperscript{117} Adapted from BH 120, original emphasis. This statement of Brown’s is not, of course, intended to be a complete statement of what theology is, yet, within the scope of what it addresses, it seems very serviceable.

\textsuperscript{118} As will be clear later, I do not actually think confessional questions should be left aside, even for a moment. But the following comments on liberal theology are more in the nature of an immanent critique than a theological one.
(dialectical) guidance and correction.\textsuperscript{119} Of course, much more could be said in this regard, and I will be returning to the ‘special case’ of scripture later.\textsuperscript{120} The point I emphasise here is that the ideas of a reason distinct from tradition, and of reason, tradition and experience as distinct ‘sources’ of knowledge, must be left behind entirely if we are to show we have gained anything from the work of cultural anthropologists and philosophers of culture.\textsuperscript{121}

One of the more important consequences of this situation is that reason cannot take an ‘outside’ stance in relation to tradition. Methodological humility thus calls us to acknowledge that we cannot speak of tradition without speaking of ourselves. The point is simply that we, too, are human. Clearly, any proposal touching on hermeneutics or theological method should engage with the anthropological insights of contemporary hermeneutics and cultural studies. Just as clearly, any proposal that does not apply the outcome of that engagement just as rigorously to itself as to other proposals has to some extent forgotten its own humanity, and is, to the extent of that forgetting, weakened intellectually, epistemologically and morally.

The intellectual weakness is incoherence. The situatedness of human knowledge applies to critics as much as to those on whom they presume to pass judgement. The (post)modern academy, just as much as religions and primitive cultures, is a repository of traditions and plausibility structures. This is not at all to say that judgement should be withheld, or that good reasons for preferring the academy’s traditions do not exist. It is to say that, to the extent that a proposal is based on uncriticised criteria, it has not shown itself to be anything more than mere presumption.

\textsuperscript{119} Not forgetting other alternatives, such as distraction, misdirection and distortion! In this light, the idea of reason as ‘unconstrained critical inquiry’ should perhaps be modified. ‘Subtly constrained critical inquiry’ might be a better description. Later, when examining Lindbeck’s (mis)use of Wittgenstein, we will consider the problems of the invisibility of one’s own perspective: the constraints on one’s own reasoning elude complete specification.

\textsuperscript{120} The second half of chapter 6 addresses the relation between scripture, tradition, history and the divine Word.

\textsuperscript{121} Some of my fellow listeners to the liberal-postliberal conversation demonstrate a fine sensitivity to the experience-tradition dichotomy present in both Lindbeck and Tracy (for example), but tend to see reason or ‘the creative imagination’ (a more Brownian phrase) as somewhat detached from the vicissitudes to which these two aspects of human discovery are subject. For example, Stephen Stell notes (as I have) that Lindbeck and Tracy share a bipolar understanding of the relation between experience and tradition, though they prefer opposite poles. But he comments, in relation to Lindbeck, ‘if one can be extricated from such a dichotomous hermeneutical structure, then the creative imagination is freed to discern the intrinsic interrelationships of experience and tradition’ (Stell 1993, 683 n5). I am less confident of the ‘freedom’ of the creative imagination in this regard. In the constructive section of his article Stell develops an interpretive framework in which experience, tradition and creative imagination are inseparably related and each is understood in the context of a vital interaction with the other two. Yet, for him, his proposal is ‘not a method imposed upon one’s interpretive endeavors, but is itself determined by the internal perichoretic relationships which compose tradition, experience, and the creative imagination’ (p. 697). As the allusion to ‘perichoresis’ might lead us to expect, this ontological perspicacity very sharply turns out to be grounded on the certain foundation of the trinitarian reality of God and the consequent necessity of anthropological \textit{vestigia trinitatis} : ‘As theological interpretation…[the] creative conjoining of tradition and experience is structured by its intrinsic relationship to God. Indeed, if [meaning ‘since’] God is the “sole and single objective ground of all reality,” as Tracy suggests…, then theological understanding draws upon human capacities which are inseparably related to divine reality’, and thus ‘the distinctions and interrelationships of human religious understanding correspond to the distinctions and interrelationships of the divine life as it has been stretched out to humanity’ (p. 698). This is the familiar story in which the creative imagination assumes the qualities of the object imagined, while implicitly shedding the qualities of the imagining human being. And this appears to be a \textit{solitary} human being. Community is notably absent from Stell’s account of understanding.
Epistemological weakness appears as uncritical construction. A forgetful proposal is uncritical in that it harbours unexamined assumptions concerning the adequacy of its own point of view. I will be engaging this issue more substantially in later chapters. Suffice for now to foreshadow later conclusions by saying that the problem with uncritical construction is that it obscures the difference between knowledge and imagination.

Moral weakness is evident in the facilitation of oppression. To the extent that a proposal forgets its own human frailty, it also forgets the practical importance of the virtue of methodological humility, and so succumbs to the vice of epistemological arrogance implicit in modernity’s now-notorious ‘view from nowhere’. A proposal that unconsciously relies on such a perspective is too easily implicated in the projection of power, and so its offering of knowledge, however well-intentioned, will serve the interests of entrenched paradigms.

Brown’s proposal has highlighted some issues that are relevant to a broad range of ‘liberal’ theologies. If, with Brown, liberal theology has overtly eschewed the Enlightenment’s apotheosis of Reason (and of itself therewith), it has nevertheless generally continued worshipping in much the same way at much the same shrines, shrines of gods it now knows to be idols with feet of very human clay. Perhaps it has yet to take seriously the boundaries of its own habitations.

3.4.2 Unfinished Agenda

Apart from topics in which Brown’s proposal can provide a corrective to Lindbeck’s, and vice-versa, there are areas in which the two are similarly problematic or incomplete. For example, both authors take religious traditions to be somehow distinct and identifiable, though Brown sees the boundaries between traditions as rather more fluid, vague and porous than does Lindbeck. Yet neither author gives much attention to the nature of the boundaries between traditions, or between a particular tradition and the ‘wider culture’. What is the nature and function of these boundaries? How do they actually work? If Christianity is (like) a culture, as both authors suggest, to what extent is it, to what extent can it be, and to what extent should it be distinct from ‘mainstream’ culture? Since it arises from exploration of the cultural metaphor, the question of boundaries has naturally been of most concern to authors who are generally sympathetic to the direction indicated in Lindbeck’s theory (if not always to the means he employs). Some insights into the boundaries between religious traditions will emerge in the course of the following chapters, though it will not be a major theme.

Then there is the question of truth. Brown sees tradition as the cultural process of negotiating identity with respect to a canon. Lindbeck sees scriptural religions as semiotic systems that seek to instantiate scriptural worlds by socially embodying them. But both visions seem somewhat indifferent to reality. Are traditions merely vehicles for personal self-realisation? Are religions merely concerned with embodying biblical worlds? What are traditions/religions actually for? Usually, and always in their own terms, traditions refer beyond themselves. They refer to truth, to reality, and (for most religions) to God. The question of truth will come to the fore in chapter 5, as we critically examine Lindbeck’s ‘rule theory’ of doctrine, and in chapter 6, as we challenge Lindbeck’s more ‘conservative’ respondents on the issue of historicity.
But perhaps the most urgent question arising from the present chapter concerns the theorisation of particularity. Both Lindbeck and Brown take over general concepts (culture, religion, ritual, canon, story) from non-theological disciplines without re-evaluating them in their application to the particular object in question, namely, Christianity. Similarly, they both see cultures as comprehensive mediators of meaning, yet neither attempts to assess his general theory in terms native to the ‘culture’ to which he wishes to apply it, namely, Christianity. The significant point is not that Brown offers no advance on Lindbeck in this respect, but that Lindbeck shares this problem with much liberal theology, and especially classic liberal theology of the truly experiential-expressive type. Does this shared problem suggest that Lindbeck’s proposal is not after all postliberal, but rather a modified liberalism—one more liberal response to the insights of cultural anthropology? The question of the identity of Lindbeck’s proposal is opened up in the next chapter by way of an exploration of the theorisation of particularity in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Barth. Against this background the character of Lindbeck’s proposal will emerge more clearly, and we will progress towards a better account of Christian particularity.
LINDBECK AND THE ROOTS OF MODERN THEOLOGY

If the previous chapter brought into sharper focus some shortcomings in Lindbeck’s appropriation of cultural anthropology, it also indicated that a more robust and realistic approach to culture (such as Delwin Brown’s) would not necessarily alleviate the problem Lindbeck shares with his liberal critics: the encapsulation of religions within a universalising account of particularity.¹ On first recognising the commonality of this methodological move, I researched its genealogy and found my attention drawn quickly to the seminal work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. That Schleiermacher appeared to stand on both sides of the argument was particularly intriguing, since Lindbeck’s liberal critics would commonly trace their lineage to Schleiermacher, while identifying Lindbeck somewhat pejoratively as ‘Barthian’, thus structuring the debate along the lines of a familiar argument. Consistent with this, Lindbeck generally spoke approvingly of Barth, and identified Schleiermacher as ‘an undoubted experiential-expressivist’. It seemed to me that attention to theologies of Schleiermacher and Barth might serve a dual purpose: shedding light on the strange coincidence in theological method noted above; and indicating to what extent the invocations of Schleiermacher and Barth were justified, and to what extent great names were being taken in vain. It turned out that Schleiermacher and Barth can contribute significantly to an appreciation of Lindbeck’s work, and especially to an understanding of his place in modern theology. It may be true that we reach highest by standing on the shoulders of giants, but it would be sad to do so unawares.

The all but universal recognition of Schleiermacher as ‘the father of modern theology’ has resulted, on the one hand, in his idolisation by those who see themselves as standing in the ‘modern’ or ‘liberal’ theological tradition, and, on the other hand, in his demonisation by those (usually labelled ‘conservative’) who see themselves as standing for ‘the tradition’ (however constructed) against the acids of modernity. However, idolisers and demonisers alike can easily forget that the immediate object of their adoration or abhorrence is, at least in part, a socially constructed image, and that such images have a way of reflecting the constructors as much as the reality. By means of an excursion through Schleiermacher’s major works I hope to gain some critical distance from these constructions, and also to show how the reading of Lindbeck with Schleiermacher can be fruitful for our understanding of both writers.

The following section provides a survey and summary of Lindbeck’s comments on Schleiermacher, noting the work of some scholars who have offered corrections or clarifications. These preliminary enquiries raise the question of the relation between the views of Lindbeck and Schleiermacher on the nature of religion, theology and, especially, philosophy.

¹ As mentioned above, the main difference between Lindbeck and the liberals on this point is that the liberals generally know what they are doing (that is, they seem more methodologically aware), while Lindbeck seems not to recognise this move for what it is, and hence does not see that it renders his methodology incoherent.
A survey of these issues in Schleiermacher’s work enables a comparison with Lindbeck, leading to important conclusions regarding the identity of Lindbeck’s proposal. The underlying theme of the comparison, and indeed of the whole chapter, is the theorisation of particularity. Our critical engagement with this theme in Schleiermacher and Lindbeck is supplemented with an excursion into the work of Karl Barth. These various threads are then drawn together in a reappraisal of Lindbeck against the backdrop of modernity’s preoccupation with the necessary truths of reason and modern theology’s ambiguous quest for freedom.

4.1 AN EXPERIENTIAL-EXPRESSIVE SCHLEIERMACHER?

4.1.1 Lindbeck’s References to Schleiermacher

Lindbeck’s references to Schleiermacher in ND are few, and are not intended to show any substantial engagement with Schleiermacher’s theological writings. Association of Schleiermacher with ‘experiential-expressivist’ approaches to religion and theology is evident in Lindbeck’s use of Schleiermacher’s name to identify the theological tradition to which the ‘experiential-expressivist’ tag refers. An ‘experiential-expressive’ view of religion –

…interprets doctrines as noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations. This approach highlights the resemblances of religions to aesthetic enterprises and is particularly congenial to the liberal theologies influenced by the Continental developments that began with Schleiermacher (ND 16).

…when [Peter Berger] writes an apologetic for religion, his theory [of religion] is basically experiential-expressivist with strong affinities to that of Schleiermacher (ND 20).

The ‘long and notable experiential tradition’ stems from Kant’s ground-clearing work, in which he demolished ‘the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of the earlier regnant cognitive-propositional views’ (ND 20) and reduced God to ‘a transcendental condition (albeit a necessary one) of morality [that] seemed to the sensibilities of most religious people to leave religion intolerably impoverished’ (ND 21).

This breach was filled, beginning with Schleiermacher, with what I have called “experiential-expressivism,” but this comes in many varieties and can be given many names. In Schleiermacher’s case, it will be recalled, the source of all religion is in the “feeling of absolute dependence,” but there are many and significantly different ways of describing the basic religious experience, as is illustrated by a succession of influential theories of religion stretching from Schleiermacher through Rudolf Otto to Mircea Eliade and beyond. Nevertheless, whatever the variations, thinkers of this tradition all locate ultimately significant contact with whatever is finally important 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 (ND 21).

Thus, Lindbeck uncontroversially regards Schleiermacher as the father of the modern ‘liberal’ theological tradition. But although Lindbeck identifies Schleiermacher’s espoused theological
method with a tradition that he feels must now be seen as basically wrong-headed, he generously opens the door to the possibility of seeing Schleiermacher’s actual theological practice as postliberal. When Lindbeck expounds the typically postliberal theme of the world-absorbing character of ‘the biblical world’, Schleiermacher appears as a parallel example alongside Aquinas and Augustine. Lindbeck describes Augustine’s —

progressive, even if not always successful, struggle to insert everything from Platonism and the Pelagian problem to the fall of Rome into the world of the Bible. Aquinas tried to do something similar with Aristotelianism, and Schleiermacher with German romantic idealism. The way they described extrascriptural realities and experience, so it can be argued, was shaped by biblical categories much more than was warranted by their formal methodologies (ND 117).

Or again, in relation to the practice of intratextuality, by means of which the absorption of the world into the biblical world is achieved:

…it needs to be reiterated that the practice of intratextuality is only loosely related to explicit theory….There is no reason for surprise if an apparent propositionalist, such as Aquinas, or an undoubted experiential-expressivist, such as Schleiermacher, were more intratextual in their actual practice than their theories would seem to allow. Their performance would perhaps have improved if their theories of religion had been different, but this is true only if other conditions remained equal (ND 123).

From his training in medieval theology, Lindbeck has some claim to expertise as an Aquinas scholar, and I leave his peers in that field to assess his comments on Aquinas.3 For Schleiermacher the ‘undoubted experiential-expressivist’, Lindbeck judges that his theological practice was inconsistent with his theological method by virtue of being more intratextual (i.e., more biblical) than his espoused theological method would allow, as though Schleiermacher, in spite of his deficient method, could not ultimately resist the gravitational pull of the biblical

exposition of this tradition in ‘experiential-expressive’ terms that has proved to be problematic. Writers who have taken exception to Lindbeck’s description of Schleiermacher as an ‘experiential-expressivist’ are mentioned below.

3 Lindbeck appears to be saying that Aquinas and Schleiermacher would perhaps have done better theology if they had adopted an explicitly cultural-linguistic theological method; but not to worry, their methodological shortcomings ‘may be relatively harmless’. In respect of Aquinas, at least, it may be that Lindbeck would now prefer to revise this opinion. Lindbeck’s former student Bruce Marshall (Marshall 1989) has provided a detailed exposition of the relation between Lindbeck’s and Aquinas’ understandings of religious and theological truth. This is offered in response to criticisms that Lindbeck’s approach on this point is incompatible with the mainstream of Christian tradition in general, and with Aquinas in particular. After providing some minor correctives and clarifications of Lindbeck’s argument, Marshall concludes that ‘Aquinas’ views on truth are, as Lindbeck affirms, compatible with postliberal emphases’ (Marshall 1989, 353). Lindbeck’s response to Marshall (Lindbeck 1989b) indicates complete agreement with Marshall’s exegesis of both himself and Aquinas, even going so far as to say that Marshall’s work has prompted him to recognise that his cultural-linguistic theory is ‘in part a clumsy rendition in modern philosophical and sociological idioms of what Aquinas often said more fully and more precisely long ago’ (p. 405). In view of this, and indeed in view of the ubiquity of references to Aquinas in support of the argument in ND (not all of which appear in the index), the impression given (ND 123) that Aquinas’ theological method was not really adequate to his theological practice is surprising, and may now be a matter of regret for Lindbeck. More recently, Marshall provided further thoughtful defence of Lindbeck’s reading of Aquinas: see ND25 xviii-xxi.
text. A little later, Lindbeck again sets Schleiermacher in exalted company by describing his theological outlook, alongside those of Augustine, Aquinas and Luther, as one that ‘proved to be conceptually powerful and practically useful’, and thus became ‘established’ as a ‘standard’.4

Lindbeck’s later articles reflect a similar assessment of Schleiermacher’s legacy. In a 1988 reflection on the role of the Bible and its interpretation in the life of the church, Lindbeck mentions Schleiermacher as the originator of the practice of ‘deliberately and systematically’ translating the biblical message into ‘contemporary conceptualities’.5 He allows that such translation does not necessarily yield unchristian results, and that it can ameliorate the difficulties of ‘would-be believers’, but he sees its apologetic value in our de-Christianised culture as doubtful, and its contribution to a biblically informed and communally unitive sensus fidelium as at best neutral and perhaps negative. This is close to his opinion in ND that, although Schleiermacher’s theological method was defective, we should not be too concerned, since it probably did little harm. The only other mention of Schleiermacher in Lindbeck’s published work is a passing reference to Schleiermacher’s judgement that Judaism is religiously inferior to Christianity, and quite distinct from it.6

Thus, Lindbeck acknowledges Schleiermacher among the theological greats, describing him quite conventionally as the original and quintessential liberal theologian, or, as he puts it, an ‘undoubted experiential-expressivist’. But this identification is qualified to some extent by a distinction between Schleiermacher’s espoused theological method and his actual theological practice. Lindbeck’s more nuanced view appears to be that, while Schleiermacher’s espoused method was undoubtedly experiential-expressivist, his actual practice tended towards a postliberal intratextuality. An excursus into Schleiermacher’s work will allow us to assess this view, and also to return the compliment by assessing how Lindbeck’s espoused method and actual practice relate to those of Schleiermacher.

4.1.2 The Need for Reassessment

Lindbeck’s characterisation of Schleiermacher has been criticised not only by those who favour Schleiermacher’s approach, but also by some who are sharply critical of it: Brian Gerrish and Alister McGrath agree that Schleiermacher is not really an ‘experiential-expressivist’.7 Georg

4 ND 134. Lindbeck also published summaries of the description of postliberal theology contained in chapter 6 of ND. See Lindbeck 1993, where the same passages mentioning Schleiermacher occur on pp. 90-1 and 98-9.
5 Lindbeck 1988, 14. Lindbeck also uses ‘nonbiblical idioms’ (p. 14) and ‘alien idioms’ (p. 15) as parallel descriptions of the translation target.
6 Lindbeck 1997, 436. Lindbeck is here pursuing the ecclesiological interests that have lately been his focus, and treating at this point the theological relation between the Christian church, Israel in the Old Testament, and contemporary Judaism. Schleiermacher is cited as an example of those who regard Christianity and Judaism as ‘two different religions with historical but no theologically significant connections.’ Schleiermacher continued to hold this view from the early Speeches on Religion (Schleiermacher 1988, abbreviated henceforth as OR, pp. 211-3) to the end of his life (see CF §§8.4, 12), but it was by no means the comment of an ignorant Gentile. ‘The portrayal of Judaism as no longer a living tradition was dominant in Berlin Enlightenment (Haskalah) Jewish circles in which Schleiermacher moved’ (OR 211 n13).
Behrens argues that neither ‘cognitive-propositionalist’ nor ‘experiential-expressivist’ aptly describes Schleiermacher, who combines strong elements of both, while differing in important ways from many of those who now espouse positions that could reasonably be described in these terms.\(^8\) Gerrish and McGrath note the extent to which Schleiermacher recognizes the believing community’s role in the formation of doctrine, thus hinting that Schleiermacher may have more in common with Lindbeck than either Lindbeck or his critics have allowed. While this says nothing about Lindbeck’s claim that Schleiermacher’s theological practice showed postliberal tendencies, it does suggest a degree of methodological similarity: it may be that Schleiermacher sought to address some of the questions that preoccupy Lindbeck.

Judging by the publication of journal articles and new critical editions and translations, there has been a renewed interest in Schleiermacher’s work over the last 20 years or so. The renewal of Schleiermacher scholarship may be associated with a feeling of unease among scholars who see themselves as part of a tradition derived, at least in part, from Schleiermacher’s ground-breaking work. It would be an overstatement to say that this unease is due to the rise of postliberal theology, but, clearly, liberal theologians see the need to meet squarely and realistically the challenges to which both postliberal theology and the a/theologies of Mark C. Taylor and Don Cupitt are responses, albeit, in their view, inadequate ones.\(^9\) As Delwin Brown has reminded us, an important part of a tradition’s response to external challenge is the re-examination of its sources with a view to finding and displaying resources with which the challenge can be met.

The need for, and some pitfalls attending, a re-examination of Schleiermacher are apparent in a 2001 article by Georg Behrens, a regular contributor to Schleiermacher studies.\(^10\) The article argues an exegetical point regarding the meaning of the famous phrase ‘das Gefühl schlechthinniger Abhängigkeit’ (‘the feeling of absolute dependence’). The argument includes Behrens’ suggestion that one of Schleiermacher’s goals in the Introduction to *The Christian Faith*\(^11\) was to develop a kind of proof for the existence of God. This is the now-conventional view that Schleiermacher was attempting some kind of transcendental anthropological argument, via religious experience, for the existence of God and hence for the validity of theology as God-talk, a view that became so at home in scholarly folklore that Lindbeck appeals to a transcendental reading of Schleiermacher as to common knowledge.\(^12\)

Although Behrens presents some detailed work on the German text of *CF*, especially §§4 and 8, and has now published a series of articles on aspects of Schleiermacher’s theology, he provides no warrant whatever for the suggested transcendental reading.\(^13\) The lack is particularly acute in

\(^8\) Behrens 1994.

\(^9\) Jesse (1997, 25-9, section 2 on ‘Remembering Our Past’) is one example of a re-reading of Schleiermacher explicitly associated with re-evaluation (and, hopefully, redirection) of the liberal theological tradition. Rogers’ (1998) title is self-explanatory: ‘Schleiermacher as an Anselmian Theologian’. See also the series of articles by Behrens. New translations of Schleiermacher’s major works have recently appeared or are in preparation.

\(^10\) The article under consideration is Behrens 1998. See also Behrens 1994 and Behrens 1996.

\(^11\) Schleiermacher 1928, abbreviated henceforth as *CF*.

\(^12\) As described in the previous sub-section.

\(^13\) Behrens (1998) advances the proposal without discussion, on pp. 472, 478 and 481.
view of the fact that, elsewhere in CF, Schleiermacher himself dismisses transcendental arguments as having no dogmatic significance.\textsuperscript{14} It is also notable that Behrens finds the relevant context for his exegesis entirely within Schleiermacher’s Introduction,\textsuperscript{15} and mentions neither Schleiermacher’s own view of the Introduction,\textsuperscript{16} nor two highly relevant works—\textit{On Religion},\textsuperscript{17} Schleiermacher’s famous apologetic work, and his \textit{Brief Outline of the Study of Theology},\textsuperscript{18} an overview of the structure, content and aims of theology—which Schleiermacher revised together with CF in the late 1820s. \textit{BO} in particular, was intended to be read together with CF, and \textit{vice versa}, and the cross references between the two works are numerous. In short, substantial contextual resources for clarifying Schleiermacher’s thought have not been used.

The habits of viewing the Introduction in isolation from the rest of CF, and of viewing both the Introduction and \textit{OR} in isolation from Schleiermacher’s overall theological vision, are very little younger than CF itself. As regards CF, it is as though the Introduction stood independently of the rest of the work, or as if the relation of the rest of CF to the Introduction was one of absolute dependence, rather than reciprocity, or something more subtle.\textsuperscript{19} The first to object to such readings was Schleiermacher himself in his letters to Lücke,\textsuperscript{20} which are largely devoted to consideration of the means by which he might dissuade his readers from reading CF in transcendental-cum-foundationalist terms, and treating it as though it contained nothing of interest after the Introduction. Unlike Schleiermacher’s earliest critics, late twentieth century scholars cannot really plead ignorance of Schleiermacher’s strong denunciation of such readings, or unfamiliarity with his other work.

I shall argue that the idea that Schleiermacher was attempting a ‘transcendental argument’ in the Introduction to CF is at odds with the text of CF itself, at odds with Schleiermacher’s own reflections on the matter, and at odds with the overall theological vision set out in his major

\textsuperscript{14} As is well known, Schleiermacher remarks in CF §33 that recognition of the universality of the feeling of absolute dependence ‘completely replaces for the faith-doctrine all the so-called proofs of the existence of God’. It is less well known that he almost immediately goes on to say that such proofs are entirely superfluous to dogmatics (CF §33.3). Appreciation of this point depends on the material in the following section. Some of the subtleties of argument in CF §33 are laid out in n65 on p. 116 below.

\textsuperscript{15} Because much of the following material concerns the Introduction to CF and its relation to the remainder of that work, I will often refer to it simply as ‘the Introduction’ or ‘Schleiermacher’s Introduction’.

\textsuperscript{16} In the second letter to Lücke, Schleiermacher considers an alternative arrangement of CF, one in which the present Introduction is placed at the end: ‘If I had separated the dangerous Introduction more clearly and sharply from the body of the work, I surely would have prevented that most serious and glaring misunderstanding that detects in my \textit{Glaubenslehre} a speculative tendency and a speculative foundation’ (\textit{LL} 58). A clearer statement of what the Introduction was meant not to be can hardly be imagined.

\textsuperscript{17} Schleiermacher 1988, abbreviated henceforth as \textit{OR}.

\textsuperscript{18} Schleiermacher 1966, abbreviated henceforth as \textit{BO}.

\textsuperscript{19} An assumption that set in very early indeed, as it was already lamented by Schleiermacher before the second edition of CF was prepared! See the second letter to Lücke (\textit{LL} 56): ‘Most of my critics began with the presupposition that a work organized as mine necessarily has an anticlimatic [sic] ending. Or is it not true that the Introduction has been regarded as the main subject and core of the book, although it was intended only as a preliminary orientation which, strictly speaking, lies outside of the discipline of dogmatics itself? And then what follows is obviously the first part!’

\textsuperscript{20} Schleiermacher 1981, abbreviated herein as \textit{LL}.
writings. But since my account of Schleiermacher is in part the story of my own puzzlement over him, it may be as well, in the interests of clarity, to foreshadow my conclusion that Schleiermacher’s dogmatic practice does not in the end cohere with his vision of the nature of dogmatics. That is, Schleiermacher’s vision of dogmatics, and his execution of that vision, are in tension, and I argue that that tension in fact amounts to incoherence. Moreover, I find that liberal and postliberal approaches to theology can both look to Schleiermacher as progenitor—with liberals drawing on Schleiermacher’s theological practice, and Lindbeck’s postliberalism better reflecting his methodological prescription.21

After surveying the political and intellectual context of Schleiermacher’s work, I consider passages in which Schleiermacher insists that dogmatics must begin with and continue in piety, and that philosophy must be excluded. The tensions and difficulties of this position are elucidated using material from Schleiermacher’s theological and philosophical writings and his exchange of views with Jakob Fries. The discussion then expands into a more general consideration of the ways in which one might attempt to keep theology independent of philosophy, using some hints in Schleiermacher and an approach found in the early Barth. Against this background, Lindbeck’s relation to modern theology, and to Schleiermacher in particular, emerges in stark and perhaps surprising form. Regrettably, the following argument adds to the all but universal tendency of paying greater attention to Schleiermacher’s Introduction than to his dogmatics proper, but even Schleiermacher was obliged to do this in order to clarify his thought in the face of what he saw as determined misreadings.22

4.2 SCHLEIERMACHER AND THE FREEDOM OF THEOLOGY

4.2.1 A Place for Theology in the Academy: Ist Theologie eine Wissenschaft?

Hans Frei, in a posthumously published collection of papers, has noted the importance for Western high culture of the time and place in which Schleiermacher developed his thought and considered the relation between Christian-theological and other modes of inquiry.23 The complex intellectual life of Berlin in the early nineteenth century was a rich ferment of many influences: a general mood of self-inclusion in the Aufklärung championed by the new philosophy of Kant; the early romantic reaction against rationalism, seeking to reclaim the integrity of the human as spiritual being; the external (and all too often internal) political ferment occasioned by the reverberating echoes of French revolutionary upheaval; the Napoleonic wars; and the redefinition of the power structures and bureaucratic apparatus of the Prussian state. Against this tumultuous backdrop, a concrete struggle took place which was of

21 This is much the reverse of the relation envisaged by Lindbeck, noted above.
22 Schleiermacher himself contributed to this tendency, since, in seeking to make yet clearer the distinction between what was properly dogmatics and what was merely prolegomenon, he modified the second edition of CF so that ‘everything that introduces and specifies the organization of the work will be brought into close relationship to the account of dogmatics, and the Introduction will be rounded off into a self-enclosed whole.’ He was doubtful as to whether he would find this arrangement any more pleasing (LL 80).
23 Frei 1992, especially Appendix A.
considerable importance for Schleiermacher, and thus for our understanding of him: the foundation of the University of Berlin in 1809.

This struggle is also important for us because of the enormous influence exerted by Berlin on universities elsewhere in Europe, and throughout the great imperial reach of Western culture. Indeed, soon after its establishment, ‘the University of Berlin became the prototypical German university and the model for many others on both sides of the Atlantic.’

But, although its influence as a model university emerged quite early, the arguments surrounding its establishment, like those brought to bear in any concrete struggle, were caught up in the circumstances of time and place, particularly the parallel ascendancies of Wissenschaft and the bureaucratic state. These arguments concerned not only the general nature and aims of the university, but especially the organisation of its faculties.

The chief protagonists in the debate over the inclusion or exclusion of disciplines and the relations between them included not only professional sages such as Fichte and Schleiermacher, but also representatives of the state, such as Wilhelm von Humboldt of the Prussian Ministry of the Interior. For all of them, the main criterion for the inclusion of disciplines in the university centred on ‘that untranslatable German word Wissenschaft, and all that it implies for cultural and philosophical argument.’

‘Wissenschaft was the tutelary deity present—blessed and blessing—at the birth of this new university.’ Frei does not say so, but it may not be overstating the case to suggest that the extent of Berlin’s influence in Western university education was largely due to the comprehensiveness and practical outcomes of the debates

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24 Frei 1992, 97. Frei continues: ‘If one reads the history of Western universities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one repeatedly encounters lengthy references to the University of Berlin. Negatively as well as positively, its influence was great; it was a national institution of transnational cultural significance, nowhere more so than in American higher education.’

25 See Frei’s interesting account of the conflicts and paradoxes present in the complex relations between state power, Wissenschaft, and religion at the time, and the ways in which this particular context was reflected in the eventual outcome for theology’s place in the university, and in its relations to the state and the church (Frei 1992, 99-116).

26 Frei 1992, 97. Although Wissenschaft in current usage is commonly and straightforwardly translated as ‘science’, Frei is more concerned with its use among intellectuals, and especially with the contraction in its meaning during the nineteenth century. He notes various English renderings, including ‘science’, ‘knowledge’, ‘philosophy’, ‘theory of science or explanation’, and ‘theory of reason or understanding’, and goes on to point out that, especially in the nineteenth century, this complex of meaning was far from static:

[I]t changed drastically from the vast sense that it carried at the time when the new university was being planned and begun, to a much more limited sense two generations later….But Wissenschaft was never confined to the natural or physical sciences; it always included the social sciences, whether behavioural or humanistic. Wissenschaft, then, is the inquiry into the universal, rational principles that allow us to organize any and all specific fields of inquiry into internally and mutually coherent, intelligible totalities; perhaps, if we just watch our language and do not try too hard for lucidity, it may be translated as “an inquiry into the transcendental principles justifying all systematic method and explanation” (Frei 1992, 97-8).

27 Frei 1992, 98.
surrounding its foundation. Here, for the first time, the plan of a university had been thought through on rational, philosophical (wissenschaftlich!) principles, and one of the outcomes of the debate was the decisive repudiation of a Christian confessional basis: ‘all religious qualifications for teachers and students were abandoned right from the start.’

The exaltation of an objective, putatively universal rationality as the core value of the academy, a rationality defined precisely by its freedom from tradition-bound authorities such as the church, made the place of theology in the academy highly problematic, to say the least:

If indeed the intellectual idea of this university was totally wissenschaftlich and therefore secular, not only in the sense of being religion-neutral, but also of prohibiting any institutional or intellectual allegiance from inhibiting the free exercise of the critical faculty, then Christian theology was in principle, if not in fact, in the position of having to demonstrate that it was truly wissenschaftlich and had a right to citizenship in this university.

Schleiermacher’s approach to this problem, in part reflecting a long tradition of regarding theology as practical knowledge, was to have theology seen as a ‘positive’, rather than a normative, science. Theology did not pretend to objective, disinterested knowledge. Rather, it was explicitly interested, professional knowledge, serving and guiding the practice of the Christian church much as medical knowledge served and guided the profession of medicine, and legal knowledge served and guided the profession of law.

For Schleiermacher the particular interest of the discipline of theology was ecclesial: the manifold strands of theological knowledge were ‘as integrally related to the will to be effective in the leadership of the Church

28 Frei 1992, 99. The following pages of Frei’s account indicate the extent to which, although the university was officially free of confessional bias, it was certainly not free of interference from the continually encroaching bureaucratic state, and implication in its agendas. For Schleiermacher, this presented a second battle front for the church, since not only was the church’s relation to the new university highly problematic, but the state already had virtually complete control of the church, and handed the monopoly for the training of ordained ministers ‘to the very institution, the university, which was bound to be most uneasy, perhaps even deeply skeptical, about the compatibility of such training with its own ideal of Wissenschaftlichkeit’ (Frei 1992, 101). Schleiermacher saw the ‘fatal kindness’ conferred by the state’s official recognition of the church, with the corresponding expectation by the state that it had a right to the church’s ‘active gratitude’, as the source of the greatest corruption and degeneracy in the church’s institutional and spiritual life (OR 177-84). That the state presumes to govern the church is certainly bad enough; but that it both guarantees the intellectual freedom and institutional independence of the university (thus underwriting its wissenschaftlich character) and requires that its captive church send all its ministers to be trained there (i.e., in an institution that, in its state-sponsored Wissenschaftlichkeit, is innately suspicious of their presence), poses very serious problems indeed. These problems concern the identity of theology as Christian, the acceptability to the church of having its ministers trained in a hostile environment, the acceptability to the university of having theology among its faculties at all, and the exacerbation of the church’s corruption by the state through its bondage to the state’s university.


30 Tice, in his ‘Editor’s General Introduction’ to the Brief Outline (BO 14) remarks that ‘by “positive” Schleiermacher means studies which are not merely empirical or speculative or theoretical in character but rather (a) refer directly to actual or historical experience, (b) within a given social relationship, and (c) in order to serve a definite practical function.’ Such a definition applies quite well to professional knowledge in medicine and law as well as to Christian theology. A similar, and similarly tensive, conjunction of the ideals of service, leadership and academic rigour is present in each.
as the body is to the soul’. \(^{31}\) Other ways of talking about God might be interesting, but they are not Christian theology. \(^{32}\)

This ecclesial interest does not render theology *unwissenschaftlich*, any more than medicine or law are rendered unscientific by their professional attachment to the agendas of society and state. Rather, Schleiermacher sees the essence of theology in its combination of ecclesiastical and scientific interests, and this is especially the case in dogmatic theology (BO §§1-12). The *wissenschaftlich* character of dogmatic-theological propositions lies in the clarity and coherent interconnection of their concepts and in their fruitfulness in opening up and cohering with other propositions (CF §17). As with the other professions, the primary context and datum with which theology is concerned is an aspect of human culture, in this case, religious piety. As such, if one considers theology’s place among the conventional Wissenschaften, it appears more closely related to the social sciences than to philosophy and the natural sciences. \(^{33}\)

This view of theology’s ‘place’ and its basic nature as a particular form of disciplined inquiry is consistently reflected throughout Schleiermacher’s systematic work beginning from the first editions of the *Brief Outline* and *The Christian Faith*. Indeed, as the *Letters to Lücke* make abundantly clear, the later revisions of these works were motivated in large part, not by any conscious change in Schleiermacher’s views, but by his strong desire to counter the many misunderstandings by making yet clearer his vision of theology as a kind of ecclesial Geisteswissenschaft. Examination of the outworking of this vision in these core systematic works

\(^{31}\) BO §7, compare CF §19.ps: Scriptural exegesis and Church history, as major branches of Christian theological study, each has ‘its own peculiar value directly for the advancement and guidance of the Church, which is the ultimate purpose of all Christian theology, Dogmatics included.’

\(^{32}\) BO §1, and see Tice’s ‘Editor’s General Introduction’ at BO 14.

\(^{33}\) Frei (1992, 114-5) notes that ‘to the extent that Schleiermacher advocated the primacy of the practical aim of theology within the Church [i.e., its orientation towards church leadership], the nearest external discipline to it is a social science that describes, and in describing explains, the way theological language functions as a part of the web of relations constituting the community of which it is a part.’ Although Schleiermacher was well aware of the need to give an account of theological language, I think the linguistic slant of Frei’s comment misrepresents him. For Schleiermacher, although theology is expressed in language, it is not about language, but about communal piety.

The linguistic slant in Frei’s reading of Schleiermacher is pervasive, having already intruded into his comments on Schleiermacher’s description of the proper place of the professional faculties within the university (Frei 1992, 112). Here, Frei notes Schleiermacher’s assertion of ‘the need to found a (socially) indispensable practice through theory, through a tradition of Kenntnisse’, and goes on to explain that the theory referred to is ‘obviously’ not the explanation of the conditions for the possibility of the practice, but is ‘more like the grammatical remarks that further us in the use and informal reflection on the rules of the use of a language we are learning, to appropriate the language of the later Wittgenstein and his little flock’.

The linguistic turn of this exegesis, and especially the reference to Wittgenstein, might not be inappropriate if Frei emphasised the Wittgensteinian insight that language is a communal tool among other communal tools that we use in our dealings with the world. (Postliberal (mis)appropriation of Wittgenstein in support of an understanding of ‘theology as grammar’ will be given attention in the next chapter.) But the repeated intrusion of linguistic preoccupations strains against Schleiermacher’s real intention. All his care over properly dialectical language and systematisation is aimed at giving Dogmatics ‘the scientific form which is essential to it’ as a clear and communicable account of the content of Christian piety (see CF §§16, 18, 28).
will prepare the way for a better-grounded assessment of Lindbeck’s criticism of Schleiermacher, and a more nuanced appreciation of their respective views of the nature of doctrine and theology.

4.2.2 The Idea of Dogmatics in the Introduction to ‘The Christian Faith’

Beginning from §1, the reader of CF is left in no doubt that what Schleiermacher is writing is a work of dogmatic theology, an account of Christian faith. Notwithstanding the moderate disclaimer in CF §1.1 to the effect that the Introduction will ‘go its own way independently’ with respect to his Brief Outline, it is apparent to a reader familiar with both works that the Introduction to CF exactly fulfils the description given in BO of ‘philosophical theology’. In this regard, Schleiermacher first mentions ‘philosophy of religion’ as the investigation of the necessity and nature of religious communities, and the differences and distinctions between them (BO §§22-3). ‘Philosophical theology’ is then the discipline that uses this framework to present (i) the distinctiveness of Christian faith, (ii) the form of Christian community, and (iii) the divisions and variations in Christian faith and community (BO §24). The other major divisions of theological study are ‘practical theology’ and ‘historical theology’. Practical theology is knowledge concerned with the ‘technology’ by means of which the church’s concerns are integrated and furthered. Historical theology is a knowledge of the whole community which is to be led, a knowledge embracing it in both its present and its past, for historicity is of the essence of the Christian church (§26). Historical theology, the core and crown of theological study for Schleiermacher, is connected with science by philosophical theology, and with the active Christian life by practical theology (§28). Within historical theology, Schleiermacher acknowledges three divisions: knowledge of primitive Christianity (exegetical theology), knowledge of the total career of Christianity (church history as the history of doctrine and the history of community), and knowledge of the present state of Christianity (dogmatics and church statistics).

Before inquiring further into the relation between philosophical theology and dogmatic theology in this schema of disciplines, it will be helpful to focus attention for a moment on Schleiermacher’s delineation of their respective spheres of inquiry. His definition of dogmatic theology as ‘the systematic representation of doctrine which is current [in the church] at any given time’\footnote{BO §97. The phrase ‘at any given time’ should not be allowed to occlude Schleiermacher’s acute historical awareness, which is the main reason for his preference for ‘dogmatic’ rather than ‘systematic’ as the appropriate adjective for this discipline. Although the term ‘systematic theology’…rightly stresses that doctrine is not to be presented as a mere aggregate of propositions, whose coherent interrelation is not clearly shown’, it nevertheless ‘conceals, to the detriment of the subject, not only the historical character of the discipline but also its connection to Church leadership; and numerous misinterpretations are bound to arise as a result’ (BO § 97).} indicates a systematic and ecclesial orientation that is recognisable in contemporary usage. However, his comments on ‘philosophical theology’ show that his idea of that discipline may be rather less familiar. For example, after introducing the historical theological disciplines in the order just described, Schleiermacher notes —

The proper order in which to study them, however, does not correspond to the order in which their derivation has been shown here. On the contrary, the knowledge of primitive Christianity, as most immediately connected with the work of philosophical theology, ought
always to be the first stage in one’s study, and the knowledge of the present time, as
constituting the direct transition to practical theology, ought to be the final stage (BO §85).

In contemporary parlance the term ‘philosophical theology’ would generally be taken to refer to
a discipline having among its closest relations systematic or dogmatic theology (in the
theological sphere) and critical philosophy or hermeneutics (in the non-theological sphere). But
Schleiermacher relates it ‘most immediately’ to the knowledge of primitive Christianity, that is,
exegetical theology and especially New Testament studies. What is the content of ‘philosophical
theology’ according to Schleiermacher? This discipline, as Schleiermacher conceived it, did not
actually exist in the early nineteenth century. Yet that did not prevent Schleiermacher from
seeing a need for it, not as a foundation for dogmatics, but as providing a context for it, and a
link between dogmatics and other Wissenschaften. Briefly, philosophical theology, for
Schleiermacher, is the application of ‘ethics’ to the Christian community (BO §25). And what is
‘ethics’? Ethics is ‘that speculative presentation of Reason, in the whole range of its activit-
y which runs parallel to natural science’ (CF §2.ps2), or ‘the science of the principles of history’
(BO §29, cf §35). Terrence Tice explains that it refers to the Geisteswissenschaften, the
knowledge of the distinctively human (as distinct from knowledge of the natural world, the
Naturwissenschaften, which Schleiermacher called ‘physics’). Further, since ‘ethics’ is
cconcerned with the whole of human culture, and not merely with humans as individual moral
agents, it pursues a fundamentally social and historical understanding of humanity. That is,
Schleiermacher’s ‘ethics’ covers a broadly similar field to Lindbeck’s ‘social anthropology’,
and Schleiermacher’s ‘philosophical theology’ is, roughly, a social-anthropological
understanding of the Church among other religious communities. And this is precisely what
Schleiermacher lays out for his readers in the Introduction to CF.

Philosophical theology, thus understood, is neither strictly empirical nor purely scientific, though
its scientific character emerges in its critical method, especially in historical criticism (BO §§32,
37). As regards its ecclesial orientation, philosophical theology’s service to church leadership is
expressed in apologetics and polemics. Apologetics is the presentation of the distinctive nature of
Christianity (and of Protestantism) so as to ‘ward off hostility towards the community’, and thus it
contributes to the ‘clerical practice’ of evangelism (BO §39). Polemics seeks to provide an
‘authentic representation of the essence of Christianity’ (and of Protestantism) so that ‘diseased
deviations arising in the community’ may be brought to light. In this way it helps the Church’s
leadership to maintain a cohesive fellowship, that is, it contributes to the ‘clerical activity’ of
church discipline. These two tasks comprise the whole aim of Schleiermacher’s philosophical

35 Schleiermacher noted that the whole course of theological study could begin with philosophical theology ‘if…it
were adequately developed as a discipline’ (BO §29).
36 See Tice’s ‘Editor’s Postscript’, BO 116.
37 BO §40. Schleiermacher insists on the wholly outward and non-aggressive orientation of apologetics, and the wholly
inward and self-disciplinary orientation of his polemics eschews the common (then as now) understanding of polemics
as inter-sectarian sniping. Such ‘polemics’, says Schleiermacher, are unsalutary in any mature practical theology. Rather,
the vital first step towards a proper polemic is the recognition that it is fundamentally a self-disciplinary practice.
Therefore, it is invalid for Protestants to argue against Catholicism as a whole, but valid to criticise that within it which is
regarded as a diseased condition of Christianity, or as inconsistent with its own particular essence (BO §41).
theology, and nicely illustrate the coincidence of ecclesial and scientific interests in his understanding of theology. The conceptual tools employed in philosophical theology are ‘borrowed from the philosophy of religion’ (seen as that branch of ethics, i.e., of the social sciences, that we would now call the sociology of religion) but are here clearly employed in the service of church interests. The philosophical theology in the Introduction to CF incorporates both apologetics and polemics, with apologetics being the more prominent.

Using this philosophical theology Schleiermacher seeks to create a wissenschaftlich space for dogmatic theology, describing what it is and what it is not, its sources and its limitations, its core and its boundaries. He begins in CF §2 with a preliminary definition of dogmatics as an ecclesial discipline. Since dogmatics ‘pertains solely to the Christian Church’, the explanation of it can proceed only on the basis of an explanation of the concept ‘Christian Church’:

Granted, then, that we must begin with a conception of the Christian Church, in order to define in accordance therewith what Dogmatics should be and should do within that Church: this conception itself can properly be reached only through the conception of ‘Church’ in general, together with a proper comprehension of the peculiarity of the Christian Church. Now the general concept of ‘Church,’ if there really is to be such a concept, must be derived principally from Ethics, since in every case the ‘Church’ is a society which originates only through free human action and which can only through such continue to exist. The peculiarity of the Christian Church can neither be comprehended and deduced by purely scientific methods nor be grasped by mere empirical methods.38

Schleiermacher’s Introduction develops just as this passage indicates. He lays out a social-anthropological (i.e., a ‘borrowed-from-ethics’) understanding of what a church is (§§3-6, ‘church’ here being understood in the general sense of ‘religious communion’). From this general definition, the argument becomes progressively more empirical and particular, considering, first, the diversities of actual religious communions (§§7-10) using material borrowed from the philosophy (read ‘sociology’) of religion, and, second, the distinctive nature of Christianity among the other major religions (§§11-14) using ideas borrowed from apologetics. As the argument develops, general and particular elements make crucial contributions as the idea of dogmatics is developed in §§15-19. The general element is that piety, the basis of all religious communions, consists in the feeling of being utterly dependent, that is, of being in relation with God.39 The particular element, in the case of Christianity, is the fact that ‘in it everything is related to the

38 CF §2.2. On a personal note, I regret that I did not become acquainted with Schleiermacher’s work at first hand until my reading of the liberal/postliberal debates indicated that such an acquaintance was long overdue. I shall never forget the surprise, almost shock, of recognition that I felt on reading passages such as this one, which seemed (and still seem) very much like slightly archaised accounts of Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory. The congruence is all the more apparent when we make the appropriate translations: ‘religious communion’ for ‘Church’ (as in CF §3.1), and ‘social anthropology’ for ‘ethics’ (as indicated above).

39 §§3-4. Schleiermacher explains feeling (Gefühl) as ‘immediate self-consciousness’, the intention being that the phrase ‘a feeling of being utterly dependent’ can be taken in the sense of ‘an immediate awareness of the self as utterly dependent’. The adjective ‘immediate’ should be taken in the sense of ‘unreflective’, that is, Schleiermacher is speaking of an awareness that is not mediated by intellection or self-contemplation. See CF §3.2.
redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth’ (§11). Hence, participation in the Christian communion is only ‘through faith in Jesus as the Redeemer’ (§14).

The programmatic passage quoted above already hinted that the content of Christianity’s peculiarity would not be another borrowed concept, but might have to do with Christianity’s own account of itself.40 Schleiermacher advances his formulation of Christian peculiarity in §11, not as having been (or even as something that could be) gained by other means, but rather as the least basis on which a Christian theology could reasonably be identified as such:

For the interests of Apologetics as well as of Dogmatics it seems advisable rather to be content with a scantly result at the beginning and to hope for its completion in the course of further procedure, than to begin with a narrow and exclusive formula, which is of necessity confronted by one or more opposing formulæ, with which there must be a conflict sooner or later. And it is in this sense that the formula of our proposition is set up (CF §11.1).

Schleiermacher continues §11 with an exposition of the meaning of redemption and the centrality of Christ in Christianity, beginning §11.5 with the hope that this exposition will ‘serve to confirm’ what he has proposed for the distinctive element of Christianity. Not only does he not provide any transcendental grounds for his formulation, but in increasingly emphatic terms, he denies the possibility, and even the desirability, of doing so. He concludes §11.5 with the following declaration:

Everything we say in this place is relative to Dogmatics, and Dogmatics is only for Christians; and so this account is only for those who live within the pale of Christianity, and is intended only to give guidance, in the interests of Dogmatics, for determining whether the expressions of any religious consciousness are Christian or not, and whether the Christian quality is strongly and clearly expressed in them, or rather doubtfully. We entirely renounce all attempt to prove the truth or necessity of Christianity; and we presuppose, on the contrary, that every Christian, before he enters at all upon inquiries of this kind, has already the inward certainty that his religion cannot take any other form than this [i.e., a form in which everything is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth].41

40 According to §2.2, the concept ‘Christian Church’ is obtained from a general concept of religious communion together with an understanding of what is peculiar to Christianity. While the general concept of a religious communion ‘must be derived principally from Ethics’, at this point Schleiermacher says of the peculiarity of the Christian church only that it must be ‘properly comprehended’ and that this proper comprehension cannot be achieved by purely scientific or empirical methods. He does not describe the method by which ‘proper comprehension’ may be achieved until, at §11.5, he reviews the argument of §11.1-11.4 in these terms: ‘[W]e have tried, as it were by way of experiment, to single out from among the common elements of Christian piety that element by which Christianity is most definitely distinguished externally; and in this attempt we were guided by the necessity of regarding the inner peculiarity and the outward delimitation in their interconnexion.’

41 CF §11.5. Compare §13.ps on the rationality and supra-rationality of Christianity: ‘In one respect all Christian dogmas are supra-rational, in another they are all rational. They are supra-rational in the respect in which everything experiential is supra-rational. For there is an inner experience to which they may all be traced: they rest upon a given; and apart from this they could not have arisen, by deduction or synthesis, from universally recognised and communicable propositions. If the reverse were true, it would mean that you could instruct and demonstrate any man into being a Christian, without his happening to have had any experience. Therefore this supra-rationality implies that a true appropriation of Christian dogmas cannot be brought by scientific means, and thus lies outside the realm of reason.’ This does not mean that
Thus Schleiermacher brings to light what he foreshadowed in §2.2—that dogmatics ‘pertains solely to the Christian church’ and hence must be defined ‘in accordance with’ the conception of the Christian church. A peculiar church will have a peculiar theology. The strength of Schleiermacher’s feeling about the integrity of dogmatics as a loyal servant of the household of faith is indicated by his polemical tone, and by the fact that, although at §11 he is defining Christianity’s peculiarity and will not return to defining dogmatics until §15, he is already defending this sacred territory.

Having defined the concept ‘Christian Church’, in relation to which ‘dogmatics’ was given a preliminary definition (§2), Schleiermacher completes the definition of dogmatics by specifying its nature and its relation to the Christian church’s particular piety (§§15-19). These propositions contain some of Schleiermacher’s more famous statements on dogmatics. Christian doctrines are descriptive accounts of the content of Christian piety. The need for such accounts arises necessarily from the communication of piety, whether within the Christian community (in teaching) or at its boundary (in preaching). Therefore, the development of doctrine is itself an expression of piety, in that no human activity can be imagined apart from its communication. Dogmatic theology is then the scientific activity which systematises the doctrine prevalent in the church at a given time. The cumulative effect of this is not that dogmatics aims to provide a scientific explanation of piety. Theology’s immediate raw material is not piety, but doctrine, which is always already present in the church as the accumulation of historical (and therefore situated and provisional) communal decisions concerning the meaning of Christ’s original self-proclamation. Jesus’ person and work remain the overriding norm for dogmatics precisely because Christian doctrine stems from a piety, or religious self-consciousness, in which ‘everything is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth.’

In the discussion of doctrine, the polemical tone noted earlier reappears in two substantial postscripts which emphasise the complete independence of (Protestant) Christian dogmatics from philosophy. In §16.ps, Schleiermacher idealises early Christian dogma as being entirely free of speculative philosophical influence. However, in the Middle Ages, a ‘conglomerate-
philosophy…took shape within the Christian Church,’ giving rise to a regrettable ‘confusion of the speculative with the dogmatic, and consequently a mingling of the two.’ But now the Evangelical (Protestant) Church has effected the restoration of a dogmatics that ‘has not proceeded at all from a speculative interest, but simply from the interest of satisfying the immediate self-consciousness solely through the means ordained by Christ, in their genuine and uncorrupted form.’ Consequently, the Evangelical Church can consistently adopt only those dogmatic propositions that can show such a derivation. Not that the restoration of a pristine dogmatics, free of all speculative contamination, has yet been achieved, but it remains a major goal of theological inquiry.

In §19.ps, Schleiermacher notes that many theologians who agree with his definition of dogmatics nevertheless assign this theology a low status as mere ‘ecclesiastical opinion’, and make it answerable to ‘the essential truths of religion.’ But Christian theology cannot admit to any distinction between ecclesiastical doctrines and ‘essential truths of religion’, because all Christian doctrine, if it really is Christian doctrine, issues from the same source and is of the same type.

There is only one source from which all Christian doctrine is derived, namely, the self-proclamation of Christ; and there is only one type of doctrine, for, whether more perfect or less perfect, it all arises out of the religious consciousness itself and its direct expression.\textsuperscript{44}

Any doctrine that does not issue from this source or is not of this type is not Christian doctrine, and has no claim on dogmatics. Against those who wish to furnish theology with putatively transcendental foundations, lest it become (or remain) mere shifting opinion mixed with error, Schleiermacher maintains that —

\begin{quote}

nevertheless there is nothing else superior to [ecclesiastical doctrine] in the realm of Christian knowledge, except the purer and more perfect ecclesiastical doctrine which may be found in some other period and in other presentations. But this purifying and perfecting is just the work and the task of Dogmatic Theology’ (§19.ps).
\end{quote}

It is clear that dogmatics for Schleiermacher really works with ‘faith-doctrine’, or \textit{Glaubenslehre}, as \textit{CF} became universally known soon after it was published. In the conjunction of ecclesial and scientific interests that characterises all theological study, the ecclesial interest clearly has priority. But ecclesial faith does not \textit{dominate} the scientific inquiry of theology, as though the two could be played off against each other in a kind of zero sum game—the more science, the less need for faith. Still less can the results of scientific inquiry be added directly to ecclesial faith as an increase or deepening (let alone as a grounding or basis). Rather, the faith of the church and the discipline of scientific inquiry are simply not the same kind of thing. On the one hand, the church’s common piety is a positive and personal thing (faith in Jesus as the Redeemer) the nature of which is communicated in the church’s understanding of Jesus’ original self-proclamation. On the other hand, although theology, viewed externally, is a

\begin{footnote}

\textsuperscript{44} §19.ps. Note the conjunction of the general and particular elements to which I drew attention earlier. Both elements, and not only the particular, are deployed here with a view to keeping Christian doctrine and dogmatics free of philosophy. This strategy is discussed more fully in the next sub-section.
\end{footnote}
positive science in that it serves an explicit ecclesial interest, within the church it operates as a normative and critical discipline, not by deciding what norms and standards should currently apply, but by assisting the church in its ongoing work of clarifying and completing its doctrine by reference to Jesus’ self-proclamation. Faith is immediate self-awareness—awareness of being in relation with God through Jesus Christ; scientific inquiry is activity—asking what is the nature and content of that relation. Thus, the church’s faith is the domain within which scientific theological inquiry occurs, that is to say, theological inquiry supports ‘the cultivation of doctrine, or the process by which the religious self-consciousness gains clarity’ (BO §166).

I am not aware of any context in which Schleiermacher provides analytic reasons for this position. Indeed, he could hardly do so, since, as we have seen, he repeatedly and vehemently rules out of court approaches that attempt such reasons. ‘Speculative’ or ‘rational’ theology is excluded, not because it is, or can be shown to be, invalid on its own terms, but because it is simply not Christian theology. Schleiermacher’s delineations of the boundaries of speculative and dogmatic theology have a somewhat arbitrary air about them, as though they were mere matters of definition rather than of substance. He does, after all, begin both CF (§2.1) and BO (§1) with disclaimers which make clear his eschewal of any transcendental aims or pretensions. Yet his apparently unsupported starting point is not really arbitrary. It is just that nothing can be more fundamental than the immediate self-awareness of being utterly dependent on God. Thus Schleiermacher begins dogmatics, not with ‘a Doctrine of God, or an Anthropology or Eschatology either’ (CF §2.1), but with this immediate self-awareness, once perfectly realised in history in the person of Jesus Christ, and communicated by him to the Christian church, and continually, if only partially, realised in the church as it listens to him. This awareness, in which everything is related to the redemption accomplished in Jesus of Nazareth, must be presupposed by the Christian theologian. Notwithstanding Schleiermacher’s unorthodox conclusions at various points, his trenchantly articulated theological vision indicates that he saw himself as a confessional theologian, and his dogmatics as a church dogmatics.

4.2.3 ‘We do not philosophise’: Keeping Dogmatics Free of Philosophy

If the polemical tone evident in Schleiermacher’s account of dogmatics reflects his determination to keep dogmatics entirely free of speculative elements, what did this freedom mean for Schleiermacher and how did he go about achieving it? We should perhaps begin answering this crucial question by noting that he did not mean that non-theological disciplines in general, and philosophy and the social sciences in particular, do not, or even should not, contribute terms and concepts to theology.

Schleiermacher is quite clear that his conception of theology operates with a concept of religious communions derived, or, as he puts it, ‘borrowed’, from extra-theological sources. But he is also quite clear that concepts or propositions borrowed from extra-theological sources

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45 By ‘borrowing’ Schleiermacher means taking initially alien concepts and giving them new meaning by using them in a new context. Such concepts are not simply taken and used in the usual way. The word ‘borrowed’ thus acknowledges the source of a concept and an awareness of its usual context, but also indicates some distancing from the original context, and a presumption that its meaning must be reconsidered as it is brought into the sphere of Christian piety.
cannot, or at least should not be assumed to, operate in theology with the same meaning that they had in their original disciplines. The tendency to assume that borrowed concepts do carry over their original meanings into theology is understandable, but this characteristic weakness of dogmatics highlights its need of church history and biblical studies as interdependent partners in theological study. However, when such borrowing is properly done, this tendency is avoided.

That Schleiermacher sees such proper borrowing not only as a real possibility, but as effectively realised in CF, is apparent from a passage in the second letter to Lücke in which he responds to a criticism made by Jakob F. Fries. Fries, influenced by the Speeches, agreed with Schleiermacher in locating the source of piety in feeling rather than in morality or thinking, and in the nature of the distinction between religion and philosophy. However, he argued that any attempt to describe religion as true is necessarily ‘based in some sort of philosophising’.

Unless they have explicitly worked out their philosophical positions, religious persons will inevitably think in the philosophical terms common to their day, or as Schleiermacher says, Fries ‘maintains that in religious doctrine every consideration is essentially philosophical and

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46 This follows from Schleiermacher’s view that a proposition’s meaning depends on the context in which it is used: Our dogmatic theology will not…stand on its proper ground and soil with the same assurance with which philosophy has so long stood upon its own, until the separation of the two types of proposition is so complete that, e.g., so extraordinary a question as whether the same proposition can be true in philosophy and false in Christian theology, and vice versa, will no longer be asked, for the simple reason that a proposition cannot appear in the one context precisely as it appears in the other: however similar it sounds, a difference must always be assumed (CF §16.ps, compare §2.ps1).

47 …it would be a very suspicious thing if it were just Dogmatics [and not also the other branches of theological study] that principally set the tone in this progress [towards the perfection of doctrine], because it depends more than the other branches (if only in form) upon Philosophy (Weltweisheit). For philosophy makes frequent new beginnings, and most of these revolutions engender new combinations and new expressions for the field from which Dogmatics draws its vocabulary; hence it is in this branch of theology that those variations most easily arise which provoke irrelevant controversy, and also those restatements which do not exactly represent progress but rather hinder than advance the theoretic development’ (CF §19.ps). Compare BO §226, where, speaking of the sources of the terminologies employed in dogmatics and Christian ethics, Schleiermacher notes: ‘we have referred the theological sciences in general to ethics and the disciplines dependent on it. If we consider dogmatic theology in particular, however, we find that the terminology of faith-doctrine proper rests largely upon that philosophical science which used to have its place in metaphysics under the name of ‘rational theology’, whereas Christian ethics can draw for the most part only from discussions about duty in philosophical ethics.’

48 This point acquires some subtlety in view of Schleiermacher’s claim that dogmatics entirely set aside the question of truth (i.e., as defined in philosophy—demonstration of knowledge available to the objective consciousness without reference to piety). Dogmatics does not examine the truth of propositions, but their Christian-ness: ‘whether the Christian quality is strongly and clearly expressed in them, or rather doubtfully’ (CF §3.5). It is precisely Schleiermacher’s point that he does not try ‘to establish anything objectively without going back to the higher self-consciousness’ (CF §17.2). He is not ‘trying to describe religion as true’; he is trying to describe it as faith. Therefore, he is not philosophising. This point will emerge more clearly in the following argument.
that anyone who tries to avoid philosophy will only fall prey to the philosophy that is passively communicated in language’ (LL 81, 126 n53).

Schleiermacher allows Fries’ claim in relation to ‘religious doctrines’ derived from speculative theology, but he objects to this use of the term ‘religious doctrine’, which for him must always refer to the doctrine of some particular religious community. He also agrees with Fries that the implicit adoption of current philosophical concepts by those who do not explicitly philosophise when formulating a faith-doctrine would indeed be a matter of concern if it actually occurred or turned out to be unavoidable. But such a possibility holds no terrors for him, since not only does he regard such implicit encroachment of philosophy into dogmatics as entirely avoidable, but he has cultivated in himself a finely tuned awareness of the difference between dogmatic and philosophical method, and consequently does not believe that he could ‘unconsciously fall victim to any danger’ (LL 83).

Schleiermacher’s account of the Christian appropriation of philosophical terms is usually descriptive (this is what actually happens, by virtue of the appropriation) rather than prescriptive (we must make sure we do this when we appropriate such terms). The use of indicative rather than imperative mood lends an air of relaxed confidence that, when philosophical (or any other) language is appropriated for Christian use, the appropriation in and of itself frees that language from its previous moorings and gives it new meaning in its new context, so that speculative philosophy is not imported. He presupposes that the discourse of Christian dogmatics is clearly distinct from other discourses, and that the meanings of terms and concepts are determined by the discursive context in which they are used. On this basis, Schleiermacher need not rely on carefully critical appropriation of terms and concepts in order to keep dogmatics free of philosophy.51

But what, then, is the basis of Schleiermacher’s clear distinction between dogmatics and other (especially philosophical) discourses? What is he really relying on in this matter? The basis emerges when he contrasts the potential problems of philosophical intrusion with his own borrowing from ‘the foremost English philosophers who greatly influenced pre-Kantian German philosophy’. Since these philosophers proceeded from feeling as a given, Schleiermacher questions whether their work should strictly be called ‘philosophical’ at all. And that is just the point, because —

this serves to make clear the similarity between their method and ours, and it also shows why we could most easily incorporate the field of language formed under their influence. Even though this mixture of elements drawn from the languages of different, sometimes contemporaneous, sometimes successive, schools seems to be confused and useless for philosophy so that now every new school is justified in creating a new language of its own,

50 Schleiermacher refers to the insinuation into theology of unnoticed philosophical elements as a ‘danger’ to which one might ‘fall prey’ (LL 81, 83).
51 Tanner (1997, 107) notes this view as a point of kinship between postliberals and ‘Schleiermacher and his liberal Protestant followers.’
52 Duke and Fiorenza’s editorial note at this point nominates as examples ‘Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), who related moral values to the “aesthetic sense” or faculty, and Francis Hutcheson (1654-1746), who found the moral sense to be rooted in inward affections and dispositions’ (LL 128 n38).
it is not useless to us because we do not philosophize. Indeed, those elements of it that we carry over into our dogmatic language can become completely clear, when properly treated in our field (LL 82).

Schleiermacher’s argument here presupposes an understanding of philosophy as a self-consciously objective or transcendental inquiry into knowledge-in-general.\(^{53}\) The English philosophers’ work on feeling is distinct from philosophy just because the object of their inquiry, namely, feeling, is distinct from knowing. This is why philosophy struggles to make use of their language, while dogmatics can do so quite easily since it, too, proceeds from feeling as a given.\(^{54}\) That is, Schleiermacher’s clear distinction between philosophy and dogmatics rests on a clear distinction between knowing and feeling. In turn, this distinction comes from a tripartite psychology of the human person expressed in terms of knowing, doing, and feeling (CF §3). Although he is clear that none of the three is ever completely unaccompanied by, or unconnected with, the other two, Schleiermacher insists that it is feeling, and not knowing or doing, that is the essence of piety.\(^{55}\) On this basis he maintains that his psychology (and that of those who influenced him) is not ‘philosophy’ inasmuch as philosophy is not inquiry into feeling, but inquiry into knowing. For its part, piety, with which dogmatics is concerned, is neither a knowing (with which philosophy is concerned) nor a doing (with which ethics is concerned) but exists precisely on the border between knowing and doing: ‘piety is just the determination of self-consciousness which comes between the two’ and doing cannot arise from knowing except as mediated by such a determination.\(^{56}\)

As may already be apparent from this description, Schleiermacher’s psychology alone is not sufficient to clearly separate dogmatics from philosophy (and ethics). Two further presuppositions are involved: a general presupposition that the boundaries between disciplines are determined by distinctions between phenomena rather than by distinctions in method (a presupposition clearly expressed in the organisation and exposition of BO); and a presupposition that the fields of philosophy, theology and ethics in particular may be delineated by means of the distinctions between knowing, feeling and doing in the human person.\(^{57}\) Thus the real basis

\(^{53}\) This parallels his understanding of, say, philosophy of religion, as an intentionally objective inquiry into a particular field of knowledge, namely, knowledge of religion. ‘By Philosophy of Religion is understood a critical presentation of the different existing forms of religious communion, as constituting, when taken collectively, the complete phenomenon of piety in human nature’ (CF §2.ps2).

\(^{54}\) Schleiermacher does not explain just what he means by ‘proper treatment’ of these borrowed terms. Most likely, he is referring to his clear distinctions between knowledge and feeling, and hence between philosophy and dogmatics—distinctions that preserve the English philosophers’ language from the confusions that result when it is used in fields for which it is not suited (e.g., philosophy). The whole context at LL 80-2, 86-7 seems consistent with this reading.

\(^{55}\) CF §3.4: ‘there are both a Knowing and a Doing which pertain to piety, but neither of these constitutes the essence of piety: they only pertain to it inasmuch as the stirred-up Feeling sometimes comes to rest in a thinking which fixes it, sometimes discharges itself in an action which expresses it.’ CF §3.5: ‘piety in its diverse expressions remains essentially a state of Feeling. This state is subsequently caught up into the region of thinking, but only in so far as each religious man is at the same time inclined towards thinking and exercised therein; and only in the same way and according to the same measure does this inner piety emerge in living movement and representative action.’

\(^{56}\) CF §3.5. The background to this idea is explored in the next sub-section.

\(^{57}\) Even Schleiermacher’s use of the verbal form (‘we do not philosophize’) fails to alert him to the very basic similarity
of Schleiermacher’s strict separation of dogmatics from philosophy lies in the combination of his tripartite philosophical psychology, the conception of disciplinary boundaries as clearly determined by the objects of inquiry, and an ordered correspondence between knowing-feeling-doing and philosophy-theology-ethics. These presuppositions operate together to guarantee that no philosophy will intrude into Schleiermacher’s dogmatics: in always referring back to the religious affections he not only does not but cannot ’philosophise’.\(^{58}\)

Unfortunately, as the following discussion will show, the presuppositions underlying Schleiermacher’s confidence on this matter derive entirely from his philosophy.

### 4.2.4 Sources of Freedom: Schleiermacher’s Engagement with Kant

A digression into Schleiermacher’s extended critical engagement with Kant’s *Critiques* will be useful here, as the philosophical background to Schleiermacher’s psychology has special relevance to an appraisal of his theological vision.\(^{59}\) For this I will critically adapt the insights of Thandeka (1992), whose presentation of Schleiermacher’s recovery of the self ‘lost’ by Kant is based on an assessment of the *Dialektik* as possessing ‘an underlying basic structure and overall coherency to the entire series of lectures.’\(^{60}\) Thandeka’s presentation of Schleiermacher’s critical and constructive responses to Kant’s analysis of the self is cogent, and coheres with my reading of Schleiermacher’s view of the relation between theology and philosophy.

Although the precise nature and extent of the gap in Kant’s description of the self (and Kant’s awareness of it) can be debated,\(^{61}\) it seems clear that Kant was aware that his argument in the first and second *Critiques* had left unresolved the question of the unity of the self: ‘What is the link between self as subject and self as object?’ This difficulty preoccupied Fichte and was a focus of Schleiermacher’s extended argument in the six series of lectures later collected as his *Dialektik*. In these lectures Schleiermacher considered and dismissed Fichte’s solution to the problem—the adoption of intellectual intuition as the highest standpoint—for failing to break

\(^{58}\) I speak of a ‘guarantee’ here in view of the systematic importance of Schleiermacher’s psychology and the very high level of confidence he expressed in the philosophy-free status of his dogmatics. Yet Schleiermacher himself would not speak this way. Such a guarantee would presume to speak for philosophy as well as dogmatics: But ‘we theologians…would not even think of policing a foreign territory. …If it becomes established that church doctrine, when correctly presented as the content of faith, cannot conflict with true philosophy, all the better! But we theologians cannot attempt in any way to guarantee that’ (LL 86).

\(^{59}\) Schleiermacher’s work on philosophical psychology and epistemology, as represented for example in his *Dialektik* and *Hermeneutik* among other works, is a substantial contribution to the Western philosophical tradition. His critiques of Kant and Fichte are of major importance, and his anthropology (and especially his identification of *Gefühl* as the locus of the self) are worked out largely in response to inadequacies he perceived in those thinkers’ accounts of the self. While the opinion that ‘no one can adequately interpret Schleiermacher’s theological masterpiece, *The Christian Faith*, without having read and understood his *Dialektik*’ (Reuter 1979, 17) is somewhat daunting, I hope I have paid sufficient attention to the text of *CF*, and to specialists’ works on the *Dialektik*, that no serious distortion will result.

\(^{60}\) Thandeka notes that this view conflicts with major English works on Schleiermacher by Brandt (1941), Spiegler (1967) and Thiel (1981)

\(^{61}\) Thandeka 1992, 434-8 helpfully outlines the issues involved.
out of the boundary of pure thinking. Being, the ‘I’ of the ‘I think’, remained unaccounted for. For Schleiermacher, both Kant and Fichte failed because they tried to ground transcendental consciousness sheerly in the agencies of human thinking. But the self is more than thinking, and thinking cannot be its own ground.

For his own solution, Schleiermacher sought the ‘I’ at the border between determinate moments of consciousness. At this border there is no actual object of consciousness, so from the viewpoint of objective consciousness the border is an empty or null awareness, which Schleiermacher called Anschauung (‘immediate intuition’). This empty consciousness is self-consciousness described from the objective standpoint of thinking. It is Schleiermacher’s equivalent to the gap in Kant’s account of the self, and it represents the limit of thinking’s access to self-consciousness. At the limit, there is nothing there for it to think! Schleiermacher thus leaves the Kantian impasse intact in the objective consciousness, effectively agreeing that, from the viewpoint of determinate thinking (objective consciousness), it cannot be resolved. The means by which our thinking shifts between one determinate moment of consciousness and the next is not thinking, but the self that thinks and remains when thinking has ceased.

Schleiermacher’s innovation was to pose the question ‘What is the counterpart to Anschauung in ourselves as organic beings who think?’ This counterpart is self-consciousness considered from the viewpoint of subjective consciousness, or Gefühl (‘feeling’). It is Gefühl that is the ground of the self for Schleiermacher and the source of identity at the border between two determinate moments of consciousness. Schleiermacher described the subjective state of Gefühl as the self’s unreflected, immediate awareness of its own identity in two moments of determinate thinking which are linked by a border. Crucially, the actual content of the self in the transition point is not a determinate state of the self because the self is between two actual moments of determination. In the transition point, the self’s individuation has been cancelled and it is therefore unbounded and undifferentiated from all of reality.


63 Thandeka 1992, 444.

64 Thandeka 1992, 446-8. Thandeka, borrowing gratefully from Dieter Henrich’s work on Fichte (Fichtes ursprüngliches Einsicht, Klostermann, Frankfurt, 1939; ET ‘Fichte’s original insight’, trans D.R. Lachterman, Contemporary German Philosophy 1, 1982) describes Gefühl as ‘subject-less awareness’. Why adopt such a paradoxical concept? Thandeka quotes Henrich on ‘subject-less knowing’ in Fichte: ‘if every item of knowledge really had a subject, then the subject itself could not be an item of knowledge. Otherwise we would have to assume a subject of this subject and thus surrender to the infinite regress that Fichte had so feared. The idea of the Self would sink into the abyss. The paradox of subject-less knowing is preferable to that.’ That is, Thandeka prefers the paradoxes of ‘subject-less knowing’ and ‘subject-less awareness’ to losing the self in a vortex of reflexion.

I doubt that this problem existed for Schleiermacher, for whom the self-in-transition is inseparable from all of life and is therefore, in this sense, ‘subjectless’. Admittedly, both subjectlessness and infinite reflexion would be highly problematic for a determinate self, whose awareness and knowledge will be of objects distinct from it. But for an unindividuated (i.e., indeterminate) self (if this is in any sense a meaningful concept) these problems would scarcely arise. This is because, for an unindividuated self, there is (presumably) no other, i.e., no object which is not already one with the self, and for the self as subject, no possibility of regarding the self as object since the self’s subjectivity is unbounded. The paradox inherent in Schleiermacher’s idea of the unindividuated self is clouded, rather than clarified, by the deployment of further paradoxes (infinite regress of reflexion and subjectless awareness). In any case, the difficulties of attributing meaning to
This compressed outline of Schleiermacher’s theory of (self-)consciousness is based largely on selected secondary sources and so has shortcomings as a scholarly account. However, I am not attempting a philosophical evaluation of Schleiermacher’s theory. All I require is an indication of the extent to which he developed his theory in conversation with the then-new philosophy of Kant and Fichte, and a demonstration that the main features of his psychology, as presented but never demonstrated in CF, emerged from this conversation. Assuming acceptance of these points, I now draw attention to three aspects of Schleiermacher’s argument that are directly relevant to the discussion in this chapter and the next.

Firstly, a matter that will be recalled in later argument is the extent of common ground between Schleiermacher and Ludwig Wittgenstein. This is relevant to two common perceptions in liberal-postliberal debates: the perception that postliberals are opposing a liberalism that stems from Schleiermacher, and the perception that Wittgenstein’s work provides philosophical support for postliberal claims. In this chapter I am laying out what I believe to be a strong argument that the relationship between Schleiermacher and liberal theology is not so straightforward, and that, in any case, Schleiermacher’s name should be just as much connected with postliberal as with liberal theology. I will show in the next chapter that the case against aligning Wittgenstein with postliberal thought (as espoused by Lindbeck, at least) is equally the idea of the self and to subject-object language under such conditions are apparent.

In those secondary sources I have paid most attention to the descriptive passages that present summaries of Schleiermacher’s Dialektik. The interpretive comments appear to me to be less reliable, especially where they reflect the encroachment of a transcendental viewpoint. For example, Thandeka (1992, 442) finds that: ‘in The Christian Faith, Schleiermacher claimed that there is a “common religious communion” accessible to all because it is based on “the absolutely common essence of humankind.”’ She cites CF §§29, 33 to support this statement, but §29 carefully disclaims any reliance on the idea of a common religious communion, and indeed (yet again) affirms the Christian particularity of Schleiermacher’s project. The idea of a common religious communion is specifically rejected at §§6.ps, 10.ps. The phrases ‘natural religion’ or ‘religion in general’ can only be applied to ‘the general susceptibility of individual souls to religious emotion’ (CF §6.ps), not to any ideal of a universal religious fellowship.

This susceptibility or capacity or disposition of ‘the intelligence in its subjective function’ is what Schleiermacher postulates as an anthropological universal in §33.1. At least, this is the position that his argument allows in both the Dialektik and CF. Unfortunately, he goes on in CF §33 to maintain the universality of the feeling of absolute dependence by means of a logical sleight of hand: the universality of a potential is assumed to entail the universality of its realisation, any lack of which is explained (away) in terms of arrested development, confusion, or diseased understanding (§33.2). Further, the realised feeling of absolute dependence ‘as such’ is assumed to be ‘the same in all, and not different in different persons’, again by virtue of the universality of that same potential (§33.1).

But Schleiermacher himself relays his transcendental anthropology (and hence my critique of it) to the status of a mere curiosity. Even if the (alleged) universality of the feeling of absolute dependence ‘entirely takes the place, for the Glaubenslehre, of all the so-called proofs of the existence of God’ (§33), yet such proofs are ‘entirely superfluous’, since Glaubenslehre is ‘only for those who have the inner certainty of God’ of which they can be ‘directly conscious at every moment’ (§33.3). Schleiermacher does indeed think that the feeling of absolute dependence is an anthropological universal, but its universality or otherwise is of no dogmatic importance, since, as the reader of CF is reminded yet again, Christian dogmatics can proceed only as the explication of the content of a particular feeling of absolute dependence, namely, that in which everything is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth. Glaubenslehre proceeds only from Glauben.

Hauerwas’ grasp of Wittgenstein may be more reliable, though he refers to him only rarely. He does however, mention an extensive reading of Wittgenstein bearing fruit in the realisation that he did not need an epistemology (Hauerwas 1997, 229). Although ‘thinking you need an epistemology is a hard habit to break’, Hauerwas believes he
compelling. The present point is that the existence of substantial congruences of perspective, position and technique in Schleiermacher and Wittgenstein flags the possibility that, where a debate sets them against each other, the parties to the debate may have substantial misconceptions in common. In short, not only are postliberals and liberals wrong in their respective perceptions of Schleiermacher and Wittgenstein, but the area of agreement between Schleiermacher and Wittgenstein (an agreement not to be taken lightly) emerges as a potentially fruitful source of critique of both postliberal and liberal positions.  

What is this area of agreement? An account of the similarities and contrasts in philosophical stance and rhetorical method between Schleiermacher and Wittgenstein would be a fascinating and substantial work, and well beyond the scope of this study. I can offer only a brief indication of agreements relevant to my argument. For both Schleiermacher and Wittgenstein, the relation between mind and reality, language and world, is not available to objective consciousness and therefore cannot be expressed in words. It is rather a mystery, and hence a matter for wonder.  

is learning better ‘how to think without assuming that I must first have an account [of] how to think.’ Unfortunately, Hauerwas seems to think that this realisation supports or leads to the claim that ‘I simply do not have an ‘epistemology’’. But ‘not needing’ is not the same as ‘not having’.  

67 These comments should not be taken as minimising the methodological and substantive differences between these two thinkers. For example, although I think some similarity can be demonstrated in their views of philosophy’s limitations and their accounts of the self, Wittgenstein is more reticent than Schleiermacher regarding analytical description of the self, and far more suspicious of metaphysical arguments. Wittgenstein’s analytical reticence enacts his dictum ‘Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen.’ His preferred technique (and increasingly so through his career) was to probe the edges of what cannot be spoken. So that his remarks might provoke wonder he deliberately set out to make analytical reading of his work difficult, using syntax and punctuation that would force his readers to go slowly and ponderingly. The analytically-oriented are apt to find such work difficult to penetrate. By contrast, Schleiermacher remains analytical, as required by his approach of developing his Dialektik in detailed conversation with Kant and Fichte, whereas Wittgenstein deliberately eschewed notes and references. I think Wittgenstein would have found Schleiermacher’s ‘theory of the self to be flawed by metaphysical dualism, and would have seen his picture of the oscillating (now you feel it, now you don’t) individuation of the self as an illicit analytical encroachment into the realm of what cannot be said. Yet both knew that philosophy is not fundamental, but presupposes something beyond its scope, a conviction, a relation of trust: ‘What can I rely on? I really want to say that a language-game is possible only if one trusts something. (I didn’t say “can trust something.”)’ (Wittgenstein, On Certainty §§508-9, cited in Kerr 1997, 210). For Wittgenstein, trust is ‘not some subjective feeling, but rather a mode of conduct or behaviour…within the flow of life’ (Incandela 1985, 469 n5).

68 I take this to be the burden of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, a work which expresses rather than demonstrates a viewpoint, and therefore relies on aesthetic rather than deductive appeal. Wittgenstein’s basic point is that the problem with philosophy is not so much the solutions it proposes as the problems it considers, and that ‘the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood’ (Wittgenstein 1971, Preface). The misunderstanding that concerns Wittgenstein is the idea that it is possible to express the relation between thought and world. In the Tractatus Wittgenstein ponders this relation through an acute appreciation of the nexus between thought and language—what can be said, can be thought, but not everything can be said. Thus, the work aims to draw a limit to the expression of thoughts. And the sense of this limit, as Wittgenstein gives it in his Preface and in the last proposition of the book, is this: ‘Was sich überhaupt sagen läßt, läßt sich klar sagen; und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muß man schweigen’ (‘What can be said at all can be said clearly, and one must be quiet about that whereof one cannot speak’, Tractatus, Preface and §7). This does not mean that beyond speech lies nothing, only that philosophy (as it has usually understood itself) lacks access to what lies beyond speech. So what lies beyond speech? The mystery that the world exists, the feeling for the world as a limited whole, the feeling for life itself. These are mysteries that cannot really be expressed, but they nevertheless make themselves manifest (Tractatus §§6.44-6.522).
Thus, neither Schleiermacher nor Wittgenstein saw their philosophical convictions as amenable to proof or demonstration. As Thandeka explains it, Schleiermacher learned from Plato that the chief goal of philosophy was to bring the reader to self-consciousness, and that this goal was achieved only when the reader was ‘driven to an inward and self-originating creation of the thought…or [submitted] to surrender himself more decisively to the feeling of not having discovered or understood anything.’\(^{69}\) Schleiermacher believed that the self he described in his \textit{Dialektik} can be disclosed only in an actual act of self-consciousness. But this ‘actual act’ is beyond the purview of thinking. That is, it lies beyond what is available to philosophy, and philosophy itself cannot lead to it, but can only proceed from it.\(^{70}\)

The second notable aspect of Schleiermacher’s argument is the indeterminacy of the self in the state of transition, which is important for understanding such statements as that in \textit{CF} §3.5: ‘piety is just the determination of self-consciousness which comes between the two [i.e., between knowing and doing]’.\(^{71}\) Just as thinking is not its own ground, but is grounded in the self, so the self has its ground, not in itself, but in the transcendent ground of determination. It is this, and not the self, that is the agent of the self’s continuity from one determinate moment of consciousness to the next, since, at the border between such moments, the self and all determinate beings as agents of activity are cancelled. Consciousness of this state of self-cancellation\(^{72}\) is ‘the feeling of universal dependence’ on the transcendent ground of determination.\(^{73}\) Theologically, it seems that for Schleiermacher the self is received anew in

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\(^{70}\) Thandeka 1992, 450-2. A brief perusal of Wittgenstein’s Preface and concluding remarks (say from §6.4 to the end) in the \textit{Tractatus}, together with Thandeka’s presentation of Schleiermacher’s argument in the \textit{Dialektik}, indicates a considerable congruence in perspective and conclusions.

\(^{71}\) Referred to on p. 113 above.

\(^{72}\) ‘This term refers to a cancellation of the self in which the self is passive (as it must be in relation to its own ground). The self is not cancelling itself, but being cancelled.’

\(^{73}\) Compare \textit{CF} §8.2, in connection with the superiority of monotheism to polytheism and idolatry:
each new moment of consciousness as a new offering of divine grace. The direct link between this continually renewed grace and the feeling of absolute dependence is reflected in the importance of preservation, and the relative unimportance of creation, in Schleiermacher’s account of the God-world relation.\textsuperscript{74} The indeterminacy and unboundedness of the self-between-the-moments, in consciousness of which we ‘take up the whole world along with ourselves into the unity of our self-consciousness’ (\textit{CF} §§8.2), appeared to some to posit the totality of finitude as an Absolute, and therefore as indistinguishable from God.\textsuperscript{75} Hence the charges of pantheism and ‘Spinozism’ from some theologians.\textsuperscript{76} Such misunderstandings can distract from the crucial

But when the higher self-consciousness…has been fully developed, then, in so far as we are open in general to sensible stimulation, \textit{i.e.} in so far as we are constituent parts of the world, and therefore in so far as we take up the world into our self-consciousness and expand the latter into a general consciousness of finitude, we are conscious of ourselves as absolutely dependent. [This amounts to Monotheism because] if we are conscious of ourselves, as such and in our finitude, as absolutely dependent, the same holds true of all finite existence, and in this connexion we take up the whole world along with ourselves into the unity of our self-consciousness.

See also \textit{CF} §34 and the discussion of creation and preservation in §36.

\textsuperscript{74} See the whole development of the doctrines of creation and preservation in \textit{CF} §§36-49. Creation, being a discontinuity that is not strictly part of the present feeling of absolute dependence, is only an indirect corollary of the doctrine of preservation: ‘…the question of the origin of all finite being is raised not in the interest of piety but in that of curiosity, hence it can only be answered by such means as curiosity offers’ (§39.1). The doctrine of creation is developed negatively, so as ‘to prevent anything alien from slipping in from the field of knowledge’ and so as to maintain non-contradiction with scientific principles of research in the sphere of nature or history. On this part of \textit{CF}, and especially on the fundamental link between the feeling of absolute dependence and the awareness of ourselves as part of (and one with) the universal nature-system, see Behrens 1996.

\textsuperscript{75} In a variation on this idea, Hans-Richard Reuter suggests that for Schleiermacher the totality of finite being is an Absolute, but is nevertheless distinguishable from God: the ‘Absolute wherein the self sinks is not the \textit{one God}; but the \textit{total world}’ (Reuter 1979, 245 cited by Thandeka 1992, 451, original italics). Building on this, Thandeka suggests that the feeling of absolute dependence is not the experience of merging with God, but the experience of ‘the self at one with the totality of being’ (\textit{in loc.}). Reuter’s suggestion implies that for Schleiermacher either (a) both world and God function as Absolutes, or (b) God is not an Absolute, and drops out of the picture, leaving the world as the sole Absolute. Both alternatives are expressly repudiated in \textit{CF}, as is the idea that the feeling of absolute dependence is in any sense a merging with God. That the feeling of absolute dependence includes an experience of ‘the self at one with the totality of being’ is clear from \textit{CF} §§4 and 8, but it is also clear that this feeling is not to be \textit{equated} with that experience. Schleiermacher always carefully maintains the otherness of God; for him, only God, and not any part or even the whole of finite being, could possibly be an Absolute. At \textit{CF} §32.2 Schleiermacher considers the possibility of explaining the sense of absolute dependence in terms of a referent other than God, as Reuter and Thandeka apparently wish to do. He calls such explanations ‘non-religious’ and sees them as a ‘misunderstanding’, since ‘to be one with the world in self-consciousness…cannot possibly be a consciousness of absolute dependence’.

\textsuperscript{76} The second edition of \textit{CF} indicates the care with which Schleiermacher distinguishes his position from pantheism. See §§8.p2, 46.2. See also §49.2, where Schleiermacher considers the possibility of expressing the relation between God, natural causes, and our free causality in terms of cooperation: ‘this expression requires at least to be treated very cautiously if the differences of finite being are not to be placed within the Supreme Being and thus God Himself appear as the totality, a view which can scarcely be differentiated from that of Pantheism.’ See also \textit{LL} 47-51. The charge of pantheism had dogged Schleiermacher since the first edition of the \textit{Speeches}, in which he referred to Spinoza’s ‘piety’.
role played by this doctrine of the indeterminacy of the self-between-the-moments in Schleiermacher’s understanding of the God-world relation, divine causation, and providence.

The third and last aspect of note brings us back to considering the means by which Schleiermacher sought to keep dogmatics free of philosophy. Schleiermacher clearly understood the philosophical goal of truly transcendental knowledge to be unattainable, and saw epistemological confidence as arising not from the objective consciousness but from Gefühl, the immediate awareness of unity, identity and relation to the world from moment to moment. That the ground of Gefühl is the transcendent ground of determination of the self and of all finite entities is not susceptible to demonstrative (which would place it in the sphere of the objective consciousness), but is available only to ‘immediate intuition’ (Anschauung). Consciousness of this ground therefore manifests itself not as objective knowledge but as felt conviction, and thus it is conviction that undergirds and guides the quest for knowledge.\(^77\) The significance of this in the present discussion is that the entire argument of the Dialektik leading to this point is a philosophical one, in that religious self-consciousness never appears as a datum but only as a conclusion, as the coming-to-consciousness of Gefühl. Earlier, we noted Schleiermacher’s view that an argument proceeding from Gefühl is not a philosophical argument. Now it appears that this view is based on reasoning that is, even in Schleiermacher’s terms, entirely philosophical.\(^78\)

Thus, Schleiermacher’s argument in the Dialektik shows that Gefühl itself, the strict demarcation between Gefühl and philosophy, and indeed Schleiermacher’s whole analytic psychology, are philosophical concepts. This psychology is not dogmatic in origin, since it was developed entirely in the speculative context of reflection on the psychological crux in Kantian philosophy. It is not ‘borrowed’ in the sense of being cut off from its philosophical roots and infused with new meaning in the Christian linguistic field—the theory is never ‘clarified’ by being subjected to dogmatic critique that might lead to modification or redefinition. Yet it provides the methodological framework and governing criterion for Schleiermacher’s entire dogmatics. Schleiermacher thought his psychology provided a way of protecting the sanctuary of dogmatics from philosophy’s encroachment. Not only was the protection illusory, but the illusion disguised the fact that the same psychology both enabled and enacted the very encroachment Schleiermacher wanted to repulse.

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\(^77\) Thandeka 1992, 452. The argument in the second paragraph of CF §3.4 considers the relation between piety, knowledge, and ‘conviction’, but not in quite this sense.

\(^78\) Moreover, although Schleiermacher indicates (LL 82) that Gefühl, as the basis of the religious disposition in the subjective consciousness, is the given that distinguishes the sphere of dogmatics from that of philosophy, it seems to me that the outcome of his argument in the Dialektik is that Gefühl, as the locus of identity linking successive moments of objective consciousness, is ultimately the basis also of the disposition to the pursuit of knowledge, i.e., of philosophy. But if this is the case, as Thandeka (1992, 450-2) indicates it is, then the fact that one may be starting from Gefühl as a given cannot provide a criterion by which one’s dogmatics may be decisively distinguished from philosophy. Nor does it allow philosophy to be excluded from dogmatics, or from any sphere of inquiry for that matter.
4.3 LIBERALS, POSTLIBERALS AND SCHLEIERMACHER

4.3.1 The Relation Between Theology and Philosophy as a Philosophical Question

Although, by his own lights, Schleiermacher did not philosophise in dogmatics, his philosophy was such as to shed almost no light on the fact that he did philosophise, and did so extensively. It is no surprise, then, that in the survey of formulations of the relation between philosophy and Christian theology to which we now turn, Schleiermacher represents more than one of the options. But there is more here than a divergence between Schleiermacher’s intention and achievement in CF; for the previous discussion has mentioned at least five views of the relation between philosophy and theology that can claim some support from Schleiermacher, depending on which texts are read, and how one reads them. These views are: (1) that philosophy and theology have similar status as scholarly disciplines but are completely independent by virtue of their distinct objects of inquiry—a view explicitly stated in LL and some passages of the Introduction to CF; (2) that theology holds its own ground inviolate, but with the boundaries and nature of that ground already set by philosophy—a view implicit in the logic of the Introduction; (3) that philosophy prescribes the method and criteria by which theology may proceed, thus intruding intimately into theology without itself being modified by the encounter—the view actually implemented in CF; (4) that philosophy’s quest, like the clarification of religious knowledge in theology, rests on conviction, and there is therefore no reason why either philosophy or theology should be excluded from any field of inquiry—a view implicit in the argument of the Dialektik;79 and (5) that theology is open to philosophy, but neither has nor seeks any particular relation to it, and philosophy for its part may take its own view of the matter—a view suggested late in Schleiermacher’s second letter to Lücke. We have already surveyed texts in which the first view is represented. Most significantly for the present study, the second and third positions identified above are the opposing positions in the postliberal-liberal debate.

The first view (that theology and philosophy are completely independent in view of their distinct objects of inquiry) might be called ‘objective independence’. Schleiermacher’s formulation of this view failed because his distinction between the objects of inquiry was already a philosophical distinction. But if this distinction cannot justify a strict separation between theology and philosophy, it can still serve as a reminder that the present discussion is not about the relation between theology and philosophy as these disciplines are nowadays commonly defined. Rather, we are concerned with the relation between theology and non-theology, where ‘theology’ refers to knowledge that proceeds from a relation to God in which everything is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth, and ‘non-theology’ refers to all other kinds of knowledge.80 Schleiermacher would not be happy with my use of ‘knowledge’ in relation to both theology and

79 See n78 above.
80 Schleiermacher’s tripartite division of human psychology amounted to a division of reality into distinct fields, some belonging exclusively to philosophy, some exclusively to dogmatics, some to other intellectual activities. The idea that such knowledges (a now-fashionable term that reflects the degree of distinction with which Schleiermacher operated) can remain, in the end, mutually exclusive is in tension with the experience of the unity of the self as the source of a particular perspective on the world, and with the experience of the world-system as a single whole of which human beings are living parts. Schleiermacher refers to the latter at CF §34.
non-theology, but he was quite familiar with the use of ‘philosophy’ as a general term for all ‘objective’ inquiry in the natural and social sciences.

However, if theology’s distinctness is secured on philosophical grounds (as in Schleiermacher’s case) and philosophy then refrains from intruding on the ground it has cleared, we have the second view listed above, in which theology appears to be encapsulated within philosophy. Here, philosophy preserves theology’s freedom from philosophy, and defends the right of Christianity’s reflective disciplines to exist and to draw water from their own wells. This view is implied in those strands of argument in Schleiermacher’s Introduction where dogmatics appears as disciplined reflection on the common faith of a particular religious communion whose faith draws on sources acknowledged by, but not accessible to, philosophy. Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory is an encapsulation of this sort, in that it defines Christian particularity in social-anthropological terms and sees dogmatics as grammatical explication of Christianity’s semiotic system.\footnote{In both cases, dogmatics acquiesces in its encapsulation by accepting philosophy’s definitions of Christian particularity and Christian theology without engaging them theologically. But encapsulation is inherently unstable. Like other religions, Christianity involves an ultimate commitment and offers an all-encompassing way of life, so encapsulation is already an intrusion and theological acquiescence is already an acknowledgement that philosophy still controls the ground apparently ceded to theology.\footnote{Therefore, encapsulation is stable only so long as it remains hidden. When an unacknowledged encapsulation (such as Schleiermacher’s or Lindbeck’s) is brought to light, theology must either face the challenge of critically engaging the encapsulating philosophy, or frankly acknowledge philosophy’s right to rule (as Brown does).\footnote{But if Schleiermacher’s Introduction indicated encapsulation as a possibility, the body of CF showed his philosophical psychology intruding deeply into his dogmatics without being challenged or changed by it. The matters decided in the psychology were never reopened for discussion in the dogmatics, but appeared there as criteria, as boundary markers, and as constant reminders of the focus of discussion. Thus Schleiermacher’s philosophy remained independent of his dogmatics, while his dogmatics was deeply conditioned and shaped by his philosophy. In its outworking, then, Schleiermacher’s dogmatics illustrated (and even epitomised) the third view listed above—a rationalist or ‘classic liberal’ approach in which philosophy not only defines the}}

But encapsulation is inherently unstable. Like other religions, Christianity involves an ultimate commitment and offers an all-encompassing way of life, so encapsulation is already an intrusion and theological acquiescence is already an acknowledgement that philosophy still controls the ground apparently ceded to theology.\footnote{This difficulty was noted earlier in respect of both Lindbeck and Delwin Brown.\footnote{A third alternative would be to avoid such engagement and simply assume theology’s self-sufficiency without philosophy. But such a stance would have avoided using philosophy explicitly from the start, thus avoiding an encapsulation situation. As I have defined it, encapsulation involves the knowing use of philosophy. It is not the philosophy, but theology’s encapsulation by it, that may go unrecognised. This lack of recognition is what allows Schleiermacher and Lindbeck to imagine that they are promoting theology’s self-sufficiency.}} Therefore, encapsulation is stable only so long as it remains hidden. When an unacknowledged encapsulation (such as Schleiermacher’s or Lindbeck’s) is brought to light, theology must either face the challenge of critically engaging the encapsulating philosophy, or frankly acknowledge philosophy’s right to rule (as Brown does).\footnote{At first glance, it may appear that Schleiermacher’s encapsulation differs from Lindbeck’s insofar as the final propositions of the Introduction and the main body of CF display the pervasive intrusion of his philosophical psychology into the development of dogmatics proper. That is, Schleiermacher’s overall approach may have been more like Lindbeck’s encapsulation if he had continually returned to, say, Jesus’ self-proclamation and/or ‘the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth’ without systematically conditioning such criteria in terms of his psychology. This comparison should be tempered by a recognition that encapsulation is already a philosophical intrusion (as I am about to argue), and that Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory also insinuates philosophical conditioning into the heart of dogmatics (as I will argue in the next chapter).}
ground on which theology may build but also provides the tools and supervises construction. I indicated above that encapsulation, as offered by Lindbeck and Brown, leads to, or is already a form of, this approach. In addition, although neither of these authors has produced a full dogmatics, they illustrate the penetration of philosophy into dogmatics in that each provides a non-theological account of the Christian community and its relation to the Christian scriptures. Brown’s attitude to non-theological scholarship is at least consistent (as noted earlier), while Schleiermacher and Lindbeck illustrate the very tendency they believe they are resisting.

These three views of the relation between theology and philosophy all decide that relation on philosophical grounds, and on this basis may be distinguished from the last two views in our list. Since the second and third views are essentially those ranged on opposite sides of the liberal-postliberal debate, we can break off our survey here for a reassessment of Schleiermacher’s relation to that debate. We will then return to the relation between theology and philosophy, not precisely in terms of the fourth and fifth views in our list, but covering similar ground through a survey of some themes in the early work of Karl Barth.

4.3.2 Liberals and Postliberals as Schleiermacher’s Children

Our inquiry into Schleiermacher’s understanding of theology arose from a question about the origins of the approach shared by Lindbeck and Brown of encapsulating theology in a social-scientific understanding of religion. From this inquiry, we can now draw some conclusions about the relation between liberal theology and Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory, and also assess Lindbeck’s claim that Schleiermacher was an ‘undoubted experiential-expressivist’.

To begin with Lindbeck’s claim, one’s assessment of the experiential aspects of Schleiermacher’s theology will vary depending on whether one pays most attention to methodological intent or to theological practice. Schleiermacher held the existence and identity of the self to be a universal grace, a relation of absolute dependence of all being(s) on the transcendental ground of being. But he expressly rejected the notion that such an idea could ever provide a transcendental ground for Christian theology. For him, even though his transcendental anthropology entirely replaced ‘all the so-called proofs of the existence of God’, the function of such proofs was strictly limited, and in fact they had no place within Christian doctrine as such. Rather, Christian doctrine was for those who are aware of being in a relation with God which is at every point related to the redemption accomplished in Jesus of Nazareth. This immediate relation is, in itself, the only true ground of doctrine. Thus, Schleiermacher’s

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84 As Schleiermacher saw it, the reverse situation applied during the Middle Ages. ‘Have not the philosophers complained long enough that in the Scholastic period philosophy was both in the service of our church’s faith and under its control? Be that as it may, at least philosophy has now become free enough. The faith that returns to its original source no longer has any need of its service, even for the dogmatic formulation of church doctrine. Moreover, a church better informed of its own interest would not want to exert any pressure on philosophy.’ (LL 86, compare CF §16.ps)

85 Lindbeck’s use of philosophical tools in areas of dogmatic interest will be further examined in the next chapter.

86 CF §33. More detailed discussion of this proposition was given in n65 on p. 116 above.

87 For (yet another) reference in CF see §28 passim, but especially §28.2: ‘In Dogmatics…the arrangement of material can have no resemblance to that employed in those sciences which are built upon some fundamental principle or can be developed from within themselves, or in those either which comprise a definite field of external
intention was certainly not experiential-expressivist in Lindbeck’s sense—he rejected the idea of using a putatively universal prereflective religious experience as a transcendental ground for theology, and argued against those who sought any such ground. Moreover, he both acknowledged and insisted that the concept ‘religious experience’ was merely an abstraction, a creation of human convenience, and that no such thing existed apart from the concrete forms of particular religious communions. For him, Christian dogmatics proceeded from the experience of faith in Jesus, and had no basis apart from that experience.  

Yet Schleiermacher’s identification of the feeling of absolute dependence as a universal element of (human) life played an important part in his dogmatics. To describe that part, we must again carefully distinguish between intention and execution. Schleiermacher believed that the Introduction to _CF_ was neither dogmatics nor part of dogmatics, but rather philosophical theology in that it borrowed terms from the social sciences (ethics), philosophy of religion and apologetics in order to set out the ground, to clarify just what it was that was being attempted in the dogmatics proper, the _Glaubenslehre_ that begins at §32. Prominent among the many delimitations and demarcations in the Introduction is that introduced in §3 between knowing, doing and feeling. This distinction has various functions, the most immediate being the part it plays in the concept of a church developed in §§3-6. A church is a community of ‘feeling’ (or, we might say, of personal or existential orientation). But we have seen that the same distinction is also the basis of Schleiermacher’s radical separation of theology and philosophy, and of his insistence that ‘we do not philosophise’. Closely related to this is another, and perhaps the most important function, namely that of apologetics.

Recall Schleiermacher’s definition of apologetics: it contributes to the ‘clerical practice’ of evangelism by presenting the distinctive nature of Christianity so as to ‘ward off hostility towards the community’ (_BO_ §39). In Schleiermacher’s day there was in Enlightenment circles a deep suspicion of traditional authority, especially of any presumption on the part of religion to pronounce on matters beyond its sphere. But what, exactly, is the ‘sphere’ of religion? How can its definitive pronouncements be formulated so as to avoid unnecessary encroachments that might give offence and create hostility? Schleiermacher’s tripartite psychology functions very powerfully in this regard. It provides a means by which religion and theology, which relate to feeling, can be distinguished from philosophy and science, which are concerned with knowing, and also (though less crucially) from ‘the science of morals’, which relates to doing. If theology perception and in this sense are historical. Instead of a fundamental law, Dogmatics has simply the fundamental inner fact of Christian piety which it postulates; and what it has to arrange consists simply in the different modifications of this fact which emerge, according to its differing relations with the other facts of consciousness’ (Schleiermacher provides a cross-reference to §10.3). Continuing in §28.3, Schleiermacher is unable to resist the temptation to put this argument to the service of his understanding of the division between dogmatics and philosophy. Interestingly, this section appeals to the unity of human nature (in theologians) as necessarily providing non-contradiction between the ‘speculative consciousness’ and the ‘religious self-consciousness’ (as being respectively the highest objective and subjective functions of the human spirit). Any perceived conflict is therefore a misunderstanding. But guarding against such misunderstandings ‘is not the business of Dogmatics, which has nothing whatever to do with those who do not admit the fundamental fact. It is rather the business of Apologetics.’

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88 See the passage quoted in n41 above.
continually checks to make sure that its considerations and conclusions relate to the sphere of feeling, and do not stray into the field of knowing then it will not give offence.\textsuperscript{89}

So although, strictly speaking, we may allow Schleiermacher’s claim that he has not founded his \textit{Glaubenslehre} on a transcendental anthropology, it is unquestionably the case that both the boundaries of his dogmatics and the method by which it proceeds have been apologetically determined, being conducted (if not actually founded) on terms set by his transcendental anthropology. That is, using Schleiermacher’s definitions of the relevant terms, \textit{The Christian Faith} as a whole, and not only the Introduction, is a work of apologetics (as well as of dogmatics).

The apologetic determination of boundaries and methods is an important part of Schleiermacher’s legacy to the liberal theological tradition, though that tradition took the further step of eschewing his pietistic foundation and replacing it with transcendental anthropology, a step that Schleiermacher vigorously opposed in his lifetime, and would never have countenanced, since it amounts to treating as secondary and derivative what he regarded as the fundamental fact of Christianity. Although Lindbeck’s identification of Schleiermacher as an experiential-expressivist is debatable, there can be no doubt that Schleiermacher provided the intellectual tools and actual theological method that became characteristic of those more deserving of that label.

The phrase ‘actual theological method’ reminds us of the distinction that is so vital to a proper appreciation of Schleiermacher’s theology: that the method actually deployed in \textit{CF} does not and cannot achieve the aim espoused and so trenchantly defended in the Introduction and in \textit{LL}.

Schleiermacher passionately believed that Jerusalem had nothing to do with Athens, that theology had nothing to do with philosophy, and thus that dogmatics, speaking as it did from faith to faith, was quite distinct from apologetics.\textsuperscript{90} It seems to me that those who see themselves as Schleiermacher’s heirs have paid too little attention to his avowed intentions for theology. Are these now something of a pietistic embarrassment? I suggest that there is more to be learned from

\textsuperscript{89} We have seen that the same argument also provides apparently reasonable grounds for maintaining the integrity of theology’s sphere against encroachments from philosophy. Of course, philosophy has not been inclined to accept such distinctions, and simply does not recognise that there is anything in heaven or earth of which it may not dream. For example, the prospect of Schleiermacher’s argument (see especially \textit{CF} §30) being taken seriously by early 21\textsuperscript{st} century psychology is simply ludicrous.

\textsuperscript{90} Schleiermacher believed he had remained faithful to the dictum \textit{timeo Danaos et dona ferentes} (‘I fear the Greeks even when they bear gifts’) and to his own ‘philosophical dilettantism’:

Even if I had referred more often to the domain of philosophy, I would still follow the rule of not allowing philosophy to influence the content of the \textit{Glaubenslehre}. Of course, how faithful I have been to my resolution is another matter, but, for the time being, the signs are fairly good….All things considered, then, it would seem, that very little of philosophy or of philosophers is to be encountered in my work. And in this matter I am far from wanting anything else. Were I to find that the content of even one proposition was speculative or could justly be considered so, I would remove this inappropriate garment from it or strike it out (\textit{LL} 87).
the deep incoherence of Schleiermacher’s thought than that his theological intentions should be jettisoned in favour of his theological execution, as liberal theology has often done.

These reflections support a view of Schleiermacher as the father of liberal theology, but not in the usual sense. Strictly speaking, liberal theology is the child of Schleiermacher’s theological practice rather than his theological intent. A liberal theology that continues to identify with Schleiermacher should perhaps consider whether the great man might not see it as a wayward child that has gone against his wishes. Of course, this possibility arises only because of the contradiction between intention and execution in Schleiermacher’s work. Had he seen this difficulty, I doubt he would have sacrificed his intention on philosophy’s altar.

Schleiermacher’s intentions are of particular interest in this study due to their strong resonance with Lindbeck’s methodological prescription. Indeed, it would not be going too far to say the two theologians share much the same theological vision, as evidenced by similarities in theoretical tools, methodological approach, conception of the theology/philosophy relation, and even some of the internal tension between intention and practice. The congruences are extensive. Methodologically, both maintain that religion and theology are independent of philosophy, but nevertheless lay out that independence, and describe the scope and sources of theology, using a kind of philosophical social anthropology. Both maintain, on the basis of this framework rather than on theological grounds, that theology is an ecclesial discipline, a task undertaken by and for the sake of the community whose lived faith comprises theology’s whole source material. Both maintain, on the same grounds, that theology, and especially dogmatics, must live from the witness to Jesus Christ in creed and scripture, and is under no obligation to justify itself in terms of any putatively transcendental philosophy.

Polemically, both position themselves, on the one hand, against rationalists who admit (or worse, insist on) philosophy’s right to decide what can reasonably be believed, and, on the other hand, against conservative literalists who profess to take (or to demonstrate) the Bible to be absolutely true, minimising the role of faith. Technically, there is a similar idea of religions as discrete linguistic communities and dogmatics as the discipline devoted to clarifying Christian religious language; and a similar insistence that the evaluative aspect of dogmatics is not concerned with the truth of Christianity, but only with the extent to which the Christian quality is expressed in the language and action arising within the Christian community.

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91 It is probably best to put the similarity in this way, rather than as the mutual independence of theology and philosophy. As we have seen, Schleiermacher does regard philosophy and theology as mutually independent, but his real concern is with theology’s independence, and he expresses some concern that theologians refrain from trespassing on philosophy by telling it what its attitude should be. Lindbeck sees transcendental philosophy as grounded in modernity’s myths of universality, and therefore as no more or less particular than theology. But the point for Lindbeck is that there are therefore good philosophical grounds for respecting religious particularity, that is, the argument is really aimed at advancing theology’s identity as a religious activity independent of methodological agnosticism.

92 Admittedly, the social aspect is less important methodologically for Schleiermacher than for Lindbeck. Schleiermacher’s Christian communion appears as more of a collection of like-minded (or rather, like-feeling) individuals (CF §6.2), and the essence of the communion then emerges as that which is common in the shared feeling. The nature of communities as forming and producing individuals-in-relation, though affirmed, receives rather less methodological prominence than is the case in Lindbeck’s work.
Thus, the liberal-postliberal debate may be seen as a dispute among Schleiermacher’s heirs. The conventional description of Schleiermacher as the father of liberal theology may be affirmed with the proviso that this inheritance is by way of his theological execution. To this we must add that Schleiermacher is also the father of postliberal theology (or at least of Lindbeck’s version of it) by way of his theological vision. Indeed, it could be said that Lindbeck is a more faithful child than his liberal opponents, in that his proposal is subject to contradictions similar to those present in Schleiermacher, whose paternal responsibilities appear to be wider and more complex than his children realise. In short, however much liberal and postliberal thinkers may view each other as theological opponents, both streams of thought are strongly represented in Schleiermacher, whose thought is just as important for understanding Lindbeck’s work as it has always been for understanding liberal theology.

4.3.3 Lindbeck as Schleiermacherian Theologian

Schleiermacher’s intention and vision, largely occluded in the liberal tradition that followed his actual method rather than the one he espoused, have found a new champion in Lindbeck’s postliberalism. Both approaches begin with religion as a socio-linguistic phenomenon, a fact of human culture to be taken seriously in its own peculiar integrity. In their view, theology is a reflective discipline by means of which religious communities clarify their beliefs and support their actions. As such, its proper subject is the shared piety of particular religious communities. Hence, although theology is an ecclesial (churchly) discipline, it can reasonably claim a place in the academy among the social sciences, and ministerial training can claim a place as a professional discipline alongside medicine, law, commerce, politics, education, etc. Thus far, Lindbeck and Schleiermacher may agree.93

But if communal piety is strictly a beginning, and theology is content simply to go on from there without looking behind as well as in front, who has defined the nature of piety? This is the point at which encapsulation is most apparent in both Schleiermacher and Lindbeck—each encloses theology within a non-theological framework that is never theologically engaged. It is also the point at which their approaches diverge, by virtue of differences in their encapsulating frameworks. We have seen that Schleiermacher identified the common piety of the Christian community as a feeling of absolute dependence, or relation to God, in which everything is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth. We have also seen that, in practice, Schleiermacher’s ‘everything’ meant ‘everything except the philosophical psychology used to define “feeling” and distinguish it from “knowing” and “doing”‘, that is, ‘everything except whatever is available to philosophical inquiry’. This unrecognised exception directly contradicted Schleiermacher’s intention and rendered his theological project incoherent.

But to what extent is Lindbeck’s approach an advance? A disciple of Schleiermacher would note that Lindbeck also takes communal piety as primary, and indeed extends this approach by recognising that the community does not orient itself simply by its own common faith in Jesus as Redeemer, but continually and intentionally reorients itself by reading a canon of texts, and

93 Though Lindbeck might begin to demur at the start of the previous sentence, which to some extent pre-empts the critical observations below.
incorporates the practice of this reading at the core its life and worship. We may ask Lindbeck, as we did Schleiermacher, ‘If that is your starting point, who has defined it for you?’ Lindbeck is clear that he has passed on to the church what he received from the social anthropologists as of the first importance: that religion, communal piety, is a cultural-linguistic phenomenon in which a textual canon becomes the lens through which a community views and interprets the world. Lindbeck makes no attempt to absorb this cultural-linguistic framework into ‘the biblical world’, but insists that it is a ‘pre-theological’ framework, not realising that, as such, it cannot be available to the church, for whom ‘the biblical world’ is theological through and through.

At this point, Schleiermacher’s disciple would not know whether to laugh or to cry. Lindbeck’s self-positioning with respect to Schleiermacher has turned out to be massively misconceived: not only are his intentions largely consistent with Schleiermacher’s; not only are his criticisms directed against opponents similar to those Schleiermacher faced; but Lindbeck’s attention to communal reading practice has brought into still sharper focus the contradiction between vision and practice that he shares with Schleiermacher. Tragically, Lindbeck has neither corrected this problem nor avoided it. He has made the same procedural error, and made it more clearly and emphatically, but seems just as unaware of it as was Schleiermacher.

What then has Lindbeck achieved? Unfortunately, his cultural-linguistic framework, borrowed from the academy and made ‘available’ to the church, must be returned unopened, since, according to that pre-theological theory, the church has no use for a pre-theological theory.\(^{94}\) However, such a theory could serve the function of defining, on the academy’s terms, a place in the academy for the church’s reflective disciplines. It would have the virtue of preserving theology’s freedom from domination by other disciplines, though the independence thus granted and guarded by the academy would be the same as that graciously accorded any other specimen of socio-anthropological interest whose integrity the anthropologist is obliged to respect. It seems then, that if Lindbeck were to win his argument with liberal theology, the victory would be

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\(^{94}\) This is highly reminiscent of the paradox of the (possibly mythical) commercial computer software package that contained, inside the box, a list of terms and conditions including the condition that if the purchaser found the terms and conditions unacceptable the box should be returned, unopened, for a full refund.
Pyrrhic: he would obtain recognition of theology’s integrity at the cost of rendering it harmless.\textsuperscript{95} This is hardly an improvement on Schleiermacher’s vision of theology as a practical, professional discipline serving the reflective needs of church leadership.\textsuperscript{96} In such a vision, theology may be expected to sit somewhat loosely to other disciplines that do not share its particular practical interest. Unfortunately, the incoherence of Schleiermacher’s and Lindbeck’s theologies render them incapable of supporting, let alone embodying, their authors’ visions of the theological task.

4.4  \textbf{TOWARDS A COHERENT CHRISTIAN PARTICULARITY}

4.4.1  \textit{On the Particularity of Particularity}

Recasting the liberal-postliberal debate as a dispute over Schleiermacher’s legacy contributes more to an appreciation of the protagonists’ common shortcomings than to an assessment of their relative merits and demerits. The basic problem remains: the Christian confession of Jesus Christ is a particular confession made with universal intent, and other religions, too, make declarations with universal intent. Can we formulate a general account of particularity in which universal claims are taken seriously?

Basic religious claims do not say ‘this is true for us’, but ‘this is true’. While the relation between divergent universal claims is a significant theological and philosophical issue, the present point is the sheer fact of the universal intent with which such claims are made, a fact against which both liberal and postliberal approaches stumble insofar as they assume viewpoints that remain outside the religious views they describe. The difference between the two approaches in this respect is one of self-awareness—liberal views being aware, and Lindbeck’s

\textsuperscript{95} Or, changing the classical allusion, Lindbeck’s argument could perhaps be a Trojan horse, along these lines: The cultural-linguistic theory could give universities a reason for welcoming theology into their halls and libraries, even if our reasons for wanting to be there are quite different. We do not acknowledge or accept theology’s eclipse by social anthropology. Theology has its own sources and standards of reason and its own warrants for its conclusions. As rational discourse about God, it necessarily includes the whole of existence, including the university, in its purview. Yet, because theology is reasoned discourse, and because the university is, in its own way, devoted to fostering reasoned discourses and has substantial resources to support them, it is advantageous for theology to live in that environment. Creation of such an arrangement requires, not that church and university agree on the rational grounds for its adoption, but merely that each has reasons sufficient for its own purposes.

Unfortunately Lindbeck’s argument, as he states it, is not an argument that the church can use. Nor is there any sign of it being a Trojan horse: he presents it to the church, and especially to theologians, not for tactical use in the academy, but for their own serious consideration.

\textsuperscript{96} Of course, we have seen that Schleiermacher’s philosophical psychology operates to ensure that theology will not trespass on philosophy’s hallowed ground. Thus, he too can be read as rendering theology harmless. On his view, theology is harmless to philosophy because it addresses a different region of the human psyche. On Lindbeck’s account, theology is harmless because it addresses a carefully circumscribed region of objective reality.
postliberalism unaware, of their externality. The shared difficulty is that, as external viewpoints, neither can be adopted coherently by those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord, for the Christian confession does not acknowledge any limit to that Lordship.\textsuperscript{97} In more philosophical language, a general theory of particularity may be viable for a tradition’s adherents only if it is their particular theory of particularity-in-general. Uncritical adoption of a general theory that assumes an external viewpoint both implies and enacts the subsumption of the tradition into the external tradition from which the general theory comes.

Related to this is the necessarily reflexive nature of general theories that touch on anthropology. Since a general theory of particularity is an ideational construct about how humans construct ideas, such a theory must include its own construction within its purview. If it does not do so, it is incomplete; and if it cannot do so, it is either incoherent or lacking in generality, and hence unviable as a general theory. Had Lindbeck attended to the cultural-linguistic system within which his cultural-linguistic theory was implicitly embedded, he might have avoided incoherence. Brown, for all his awareness of tradition, did not reflect on the fact that ‘our common discourse’ and his own proposal are embedded in tradition. Thus, where theories of particularity lack reflexive awareness, they may be unviable in their own terms, whether or not they appear to provide a viable option for Christian theology.

What would a viable account look like? The discussion in the previous and current chapters points to a viable Christian account of particularity being one that locates itself within the community that confesses Jesus Christ and that acknowledges its own particularity, its own limitations as human construction, and the formative and evaluative significance of human embodiment and sociality. But this specification derives from investigations of extra-Christian viewpoints—the confessional location and the acknowledgements of particularity, vulnerability and embodiment were not derived from internal Christian sources, but from immanent critiques of proposals whose roots were identified as lying elsewhere.\textsuperscript{98} That is, the specification assumes a standpoint among the discourses we have been exploring and identifies characteristics that, if recognised in a Christian account of particularity viewed from that standpoint, would give that account the appearance of coherence and viability.

\textsuperscript{97} In speaking of Christ’s ‘Lordship’ I draw on the complex of meanings associated with the earliest Christian confession of Jesus as Lord. Recognition of Jesus as Lord is particularly associated with the resurrection (Rom 1:4, 10:9), which marks the beginning of Jesus’ rule in power. The application to Jesus of Old Testament passages in which κύριος appears as a divine title indicates that Jesus’ Lordship is absolute in the sense once ascribed (and still ascribed) to YHWH. The church confesses Jesus as Lord in anticipation of his universal acknowledgement (Phil 2:11). The phrase ‘Jesus [Christ] our Lord’ indicates personal allegiance deriving from Jesus’ role as redeemer. Yet Jesus’ Lordship is not like that of other lords. The exalted one is the crucified one. His Lordship is expressed in suffering love, in dying for the ungodly, in washing disciples’ feet, in healing the sick, in bringing good news to the poor, in table fellowship with sinners. Phil 2:1-11 indicates that both humiliation and exaltation are of the essence of this strange Lordship.

\textsuperscript{98} Use of immanent rather than dogmatic critique follows from acknowledgement of particularity and the need for methodological humility. The critical question is not ‘How does it look from here?’ but ‘How would it look if I stood within it?’, and the main critical criterion is coherence: ‘Does that viewpoint make sense on its own terms?’
4.4.2 The Shape Of Christian Particularity

It seems that, according to our externally-derived specification, an account of particularity formulated on the basis of that specification would not be a Christian account. The question is then whether a truly Christian account would, for its own reasons, include elements that could be recognised under the headings set out in the externally-derived specification. For its part, Christian theology can answer this question with a strong ‘Yes’.99 Acknowledgements of human particularity, vulnerability and embodiment do not need to be imposed upon the basic confession of Christ, but flow from it as anthropological corollaries of the Christian doctrines of creation and fall. That is, there happens to be an area of overlapping discourse in which the insights of philosophers critical of the Enlightenment’s apotheosis of reason may cohere with or contribute to Christian theological anthropology. These thinkers especially, but not only these, may remind Christian theology of things it ought to remember, or prompt it to give attention to matters it has overlooked. If a self-critical philosophy reminds us that those who speak of God do not thereby cease to be human and that their speech remains human speech, then exploration of the consequences of that recollection should be gratefully and humbly pursued just because and insofar as it may serve a more faithful Christian confession of Jesus Christ.100

I am suggesting, then, that a Christian account of particularity will stem from the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord, i.e., it will acknowledge the universal Lordship of the particular Jesus Christ. Precisely because it stands within this confession, it will acknowledge that that confession is a human construction and as such vulnerable to critique in view of its provisionality, socio-historical location, and implication in complex networks of human desire and power. Precisely because it stands within this confession, it will acknowledge its own nature and vulnerability as human construction, and will serve the formation, explication and demonstration of Christian confession in the daily living of Christian communities.101 It will make these acknowledgements just because and insofar as they belong to the service of the Lord, Jesus Christ—a service which at this point consists in speaking truthfully of the One who is the truth.

In modern theological writing, the pre-eminent example of such a view of Christian particularity is Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics. Barth famously asserted theology’s independence from

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99 This affirmation concerns recognition that Christian theology provides substantial accounts of its own particularity, of the importance of human finitude and embodiment, and of its own human vulnerability. It does not require or presuppose detailed agreement between these accounts and those held on the basis of extra-Christian standpoints. Recalling Delwin Brown’s theoretical advocacy (and practical abandonment) of ‘intersystematic reason-giving’ (see BH 5-6 and p. 85 above), I am asserting the possibility of genuine intersystematic reason-giving between Christian theology and critical philosophy on the theorisation of particularity. The foregoing argument functions as an example of such reason-giving.

100 The point here is that aspects of non-theological wisdom may display a coherence and cogency that spurs theological reflection on the same matters. If Christ is truly Lord, as Christians confess, will not all truth find a place in his service? An acknowledged truth that had no place under Christ’s Lordship would directly threaten the confession of Jesus as Lord.

101 Being aware of its own confessional basis and accepting particularity as a basic feature of the grace of human existence, such an account may be inclined to treat an immanent critique more seriously than an external critique that does not acknowledge its confessional basis; and for the same reasons its engagement with other views may be more by means of immanent than dogmatic critique. That is, the manner of argument I have adopted in this thesis is meant to be broadly consistent with a Christian theology of particularity. See n98 above.
philosophy on confessional grounds, though he recast the issue theologically in terms of the independence of revelation. Precisely by consistently pursuing this assertion, he substantially realised Schleiermacher’s vision: a dogmatics conceived as a scientific examination of the church’s distinctive talk about God, a discipline in which “everything is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth”, and in which borrowed elements are in fact, and not merely by assumption, loosened from their original discursive contexts through explicit interrogation concerning their relation to that centre. For Barth, theology is the vulnerable human work of questioning church proclamation as to the truthfulness of its human representation of revelation. As human work, theology is as vulnerable as any human work; but as critical enquiry, theology is independent by virtue of the independence of its sole criterion, namely, revelation. With its dual emphasis on independence and vulnerability Barth’s view of theology seems well able to support a Christian account of particularity along the lines suggested above.

For Barth, theology’s independence, though derived from the independence of revelation, is expressed in and through the vulnerable practice of linguistic borrowing—-theology cannot say anything at all without using terms and concepts that lie ready at hand. That is, it must press into service terms and concepts that in themselves know nothing of Christ’s Lordship. Earlier, we noted Schleiermacher’s assumption that linguistic borrowing would, in itself, sever borrowed terms from their former meaning and give them new meaning in the field of Christian language. Fries saw that without explicit criticism such borrowing would result in the philosophy of the day

103 Allowing for Barth’s redescription of the issue, such independence seems to be compatible with both the fourth and fifth views ascribed to Schleiermacher on p. 121 above. I suggest that, for Barth, the distinction between these views would have been unimportant.

104 CF §11. Admittedly, Barth would not be happy with this statement just as it stands, no doubt preferring to replace the mention of redemption with something more like ‘the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth’. Also, the word ‘related’ would be far too weak. But the point remains, I think, that Barth was far more successful than Schleiermacher in implementing the thrust of the latter’s vehement statements of theology’s self-sufficiency in relation to philosophy.

105 Schleiermacher would have said ‘cut free’ rather than ‘loosened’. Unlike Schleiermacher, Barth did not see Christian discourse as radically distinct from other discourses. After all, it is only through their existing meanings that terms from other discourses suggest themselves as useful to Christian God-talk. Their responsible appropriation then requires careful delimitation of the particular sense in which they are pressed into theology’s service of Christ. Yet some of Barth’s comments, when taken in isolation, seem to suggest that he shared Schleiermacher’s desire to completely exclude philosophy from dogmatics. For example, writing to Bultmann, Barth called Bultmann’s work ‘a new form of the old neo-Protestantism from which I am separated not only by a different theology but…a different faith’. He continued: I can only repeat that with your well known attachment to Heidegger (not because he is Heidegger but because he is philosopher, who as such has nothing to say to and in theology) you have done something you ought not to do as an evangelical theologian. And if you ask: Why not? I can only answer you, not with an argument, but with a recitation of the creed.

(Both passages appear in Barth and Bultmann 1982, 65). As I will shortly discuss, what Barth wanted to exclude was not philosophy as such, but philosophical foundations independent of Christian confession.

106 In the early theses of CD I.1, Barth usually puts the criterion in terms of ‘the being of the church’ a phrase that is then exegeted as ‘Jesus Christ, God in his gracious revealing and reconciling address to humankind’. The significance of ‘the being of the church’ in this context will be considered further below.

107 See p. 111 above.
being carried over into theology; hence he advocated explicitly working out one's philosophy before embarking on theology. As we shall see in the following discussion, Barth agreed that criticism was needed, but not philosophical criticism, and not before theology. Rather, all terms, whether strange or familiar to Christian discourse, must be interrogated concerning their serviceability for responsible speech about Jesus Christ. With this caveat, Barth readily borrowed and pressed into use whatever was at hand that would help him to speak responsibly of Jesus Christ. For him, only revelation itself is necessarily independent. Theology's independence, insofar as it reflects the independence of the revelation to which theology is accountable, is expressed precisely in theology's critical engagement with the church's language, including its own language and borrowed language, a vulnerable engagement in which the single ultimate criterion is Jesus Christ, God's revealing and reconciling address to humankind.

But the approach Barth set out and followed in the Church Dogmatics was developed only after considerable struggle and a number of false starts (as Barth later saw them). In the following sub-sections I will consider one of Barth's earlier formulations of Christian particularity, and then two aspects of his later approach in the Church Dogmatics. As in the earlier engagement with Schleiermacher, the aim of the discussion is to identify some pitfalls on the way towards a theology that speaks faithfully of Jesus Christ, and speaks coherently of Christian particularity on that basis. The difference here is that, rather than working from the outside in, as we did in following Schleiermacher's argument, we will follow Barth by working from the inside out, trusting that the centre itself will illuminate our standpoint. After reflecting on Barth I conclude the chapter by reviewing Lindbeck's proposal in the light of the theological accounts of particularity we have considered.

4.4.3 Philosophy in Karl Barth's Early Theology

Bruce McCormack has traced the development of Barth's theological epistemology from his earliest position as a follower of Herrmann's neo-Kantian idealism, to the new direction indicated in the second Römerbrief (Romans II), and then the position reached in the Göttingen Dogmatics of the mid-1920s. In response to 'the ease with which German theologians confused war hysteria with religious experience at the outset of the First World War', Barth wanted to move theology's starting point away from religious experience towards something less prone to ideological manipulation and distortion. McCormack argues that throughout this

108 McCormack 1998. McCormack’s article traces the developments in the idea of the independence of religion from Schleiermacher, through Herrmann, to the early Barth. Herrmann, working against the background of the wholly constructivist ‘neo-Kantian’ epistemology of Cohen and Natorp at Marburg, sought to secure the knowledge of God from being treated as purely a human construction, and therefore set out to drive a wedge between knowledge of the world (which was, admittedly, a human construction) and knowledge of God (which must not be). Herrmann radicalised Schleiermacher’s approach to the independence of religion by (1) positing the ground of faith, not as a human universal such as Gefühl, but as something given by God in individual encounter; and (2) almost completely removing any confirmatory role for theoretical knowledge in the life of faith, since, after all, such knowledge is merely human construction. Against this background the later Barth and Bultmann represent respectively the contradiction and continuation of Herrmann’s position, even as both, in their different ways, sought to carry into the twentieth century the standard of theology’s independence which Herrmann had taken up from Schleiermacher.

development Barth was addressing a problem described in Kantian terms—the limitation of theoretical knowing to the intuitable. If God is transcendent spirit as Christian tradition maintains, then God is unintuitable and therefore (if Kant’s limitation holds) unknowable. Rather than avoiding the problem by locating God’s access to us in the subjective consciousness as Schleiermacher and Herrmann had done, Barth boldly located revelation in the realm of theoretical knowing available to the objective consciousness.

The most basic feature of this move was the replacement of the idea of the independence of religion based on a transcendental philosophical psychology with the idea of the independence of revelation based on the sovereign freedom of God. McCormack puts the structure of the problem and of Barth’s solution as follows: ‘If the unintuitable God is truly to be known, God must make Godself intuitable. But God must do so in such a way that the unintuitability proper to God is not set aside.’

In Romans II, the unintuitable divine power at work in the punctiliar event of Jesus’ resurrection sheds light on the intuitable event of the cross, identifying it as the work of God. This account falls short of Barth’s goal in that God has not really become intuitable. However, in the Göttingen Dogmatics Barth’s theological epistemology is worked out by means of the doctrine of the incarnation, in particular an anhypostatic-enhypostatic christology in which God becomes intuitable by assuming a human nature without surrendering the unintuitability proper to God. But, in itself, Jesus’ life remains a riddle, a mystery, a veiling, and does not impart the knowledge of God. Only the Holy Spirit can make the veil transparent by giving us the eyes of faith.

Although the Göttingen formulation still appeals to God’s power in order to overcome the Kantian impasse, the presence of the unintuitable God in history is no longer restricted to a single mathematical point (as in Romans II) but has historical extension as Jesus’ life. Therefore, appeals to the Holy Spirit are not made in a vacuum, but refer to an historical reality that is equally accessible to faith and non-faith, namely, the veil of the divine self-revelation.

Although, as I believe McCormack has demonstrated, the early Barth’s theological epistemology, like Schleiermacher’s, was developed in response to a problem seen in Kantian terms, Barth was more successful than Schleiermacher in developing his response from resources internal to the Christian faith. As McCormack notes—

That Barth was not absolutely wedded to his Kantianism, that it was, in the final analysis, his christology which determined both his doctrine of revelation and his use of Kantian categories in explicating it—the proof of that lies in the fact that his christology could be elaborated and defended without resort to Kantianism at all. So however true it may be that, from a genetic standpoint, Barth’s Kantianism played a sizable role in helping him to conceptualize the christology he finally advocated, from a systematic standpoint, his Kantianism could conceivably be revised without serious loss to his christology.

113 McCormack 1998, 33. He then continues: ‘But all of this is to say that the appeal made by theologians to philosophical foundations, if made in an a posteriori manner in an effort to explicate the subject matter of theology, is
McCormack concludes his account of the development of Barth’s early theological epistemology with the critical question, ‘has Kant really been overcome by means of Kant?’114 For both Barth and Schleiermacher the more important methodological question would have been whether they had addressed the Kantian problem by means of Christ. Although both would have wanted to be able to answer this question affirmatively, only Barth could have done so. For Schleiermacher, the answer must be ‘No’ insofar as the means he employed was not Christ but an independent philosophical psychology. But neither overcame Kant. As we saw, Schleiermacher avoided the Kantian problem. The early Barth set forth a realistically conceived divine act that transcended the problem without negating it.115

In the Göttingen Dogmatics Barth deployed a quite traditional Reformed christology to show how the Kantian limitation appears from a theological standpoint, and how it relates to, but does not limit, divine revelation. The fact that the Kantian account of the epistemological problem is not directly challenged or negated supports McCormack’s suggestion that this formulation is a ‘correlation’ of modern epistemological concerns with traditional christology and a ‘mediation’ of tradition by means of a modern theological epistemology.116 Granted, Barth’s approach privileged God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, unlike the many liberal correlations and mediations that privilege philosophy over theology. But as Barth himself soon realised, the Göttingen formulation was not yet a fully Christian response, in that it did not theologically engage the description of the problem before attempting an answer, but accepted the terms of the problem as already defined by philosophy.117

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114 McCormack 1998, 31, original emphasis.
115 McCormack 1998, 33, original emphasis.
116 McCormack (1998, 28) notes that ‘the requirements of Barth’s theological epistemology controlled to a considerable degree his appropriation of the classically Reformed model of christology even as that christology forced him to significantly revise his theological epistemology.’ When he suggests that ‘Barth might justly be located within the Schleiermacherian tradition of “mediating theology,”’ McCormack indicates that this suggestion requires that the term ‘mediating theology’ not be treated as ‘largely synonymous with the foundationalist enterprise in theology’ (p. 34).
117 In the preface to CD I.1, Barth reflected on the changes made between the ‘first edition’ (the first volume of a projected Christian Dogmatics in Outline, published in 1927, i.e., after the Göttingen Dogmatics, and hence incorporating further critical development) and the ‘second edition’ (the new beginning made in CD I.1, published in 1932). Part of the work of revision involved the exclusion of ‘anything that might appear to find for theology a foundation, support, or justification in philosophical existentiaslism’. He now saw in the earlier edition ‘only a resumption of the line which leads from Schleiermacher by way of Ritschl to Herrmann’, continuation of which
4.4.4 Observations on Barth’s Later Theology: The Criterion of Dogmatics

Later, in his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth insisted that it is only from and in relation to Jesus Christ, and not from any prior knowledge of what reality is apart from him, that we know who God is, what time is, what time it now is, who human beings are, what the church is, etc. No human question intrinsically deserves an answer in the terms in which it is asked. The important questions are those asked of us by Christ, and every question of ours must first be interrogated from his standpoint. In this sub-section and the next I discuss two areas of Barth’s exposition in the *Church Dogmatics* in which his subjection of every thought to Christ’s Lordship may be problematic. I say ‘may be’ because I cannot here devote to the matter the detailed attention that would be required to support stronger conclusions. In any case, my intent is not so much to establish critical points against Barth as to shed light on the problems of formulating and using a Christian account of particularity. The areas in question concern Barth’s understanding of the relation between christology and ecclesiology as it affects, firstly, his description of the criterion of dogmatics in *CD I* and, secondly, his account of the church in *CD IV*.

The understanding of this relation marks the point at which Barth’s introductory comments in *CD I* diverge from those of Schleiermacher in *CF*. Let us leave aside for a moment what Barth would insist we certainly cannot leave aside (even for a moment), namely, his disagreement with Schleiermacher over the relation of prolegomena to dogmatics.\(^{118}\) Barth begins *CD I* with a definition that takes up all of Schleiermacher’s main concerns: ‘As a theological discipline dogmatics is the scientific self-examination of the Christian church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God’ (§1, *CD I.1 3*). Here are Schleiermacher’s combination of ecclesial and scientific interests; an indication that dogmatics is concerned with what the church, not anybody else, says about God; an emphasis on the distinctiveness of the church’s God-talk; and an acknowledgment that dogmatics is formulated by the faithful, to the faithful, concerning their faith.

Of course, Barth’s explanation of this opening thesis is distinctively his own. The church’s self-examination, he maintains, consists in putting to itself ‘the question of truth, with which theology is concerned throughout’ (I.1 4). Knowing the care taken by Schleiermacher to avoid straying onto the field of ‘knowledge’, we might expect this to mark a decisive break. But Barth immediately explains that this ‘question of truth…is the question as to the agreement of the Church’s distinctive talk about God with the being of the Church’. ‘The criterion of…Christian utterance is thus the being of the church (das Sein der Kirche)…’.\(^{119}\) As is clear from *CF* §17.2, Schleiermacher would have little cause to disagree.\(^{120}\) For both Barth and Schleiermacher,

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\(^{118}\) This is actually no great distortion, since Barth maintains that the assertion of the possibility of pre-theological prolegomena is nevertheless a dogmatic assertion originating from within ‘Modernistic dogmatics’ (*CD I.1 38*). Thus Barth should really have no problem with my approach on this point, since I am (I hope) taking the opening theses of his *CD* as they were meant, while treating those of Schleiermacher’s *CF* as if they were properly dogmatics. If apologies are owed, they are owed to Schleiermacher.

\(^{119}\) By ‘being’ Barth means roughly ‘essential nature’, something like a person’s ‘self’.

\(^{120}\) That is, if what Barth meant by ‘truth’ was simply the agreement of the church’s God-talk with the church’s essential nature, this would be reasonably compatible with Schleiermacher’s dogmatic focus on the extent to which
dogmatics is the church’s explanation of itself, an explanation conducted by itself, for purposes peculiar to itself, and addressed to itself.

But what is the church’s ‘self’? It is in the answers to this question that the crucial break really occurs. Not unreasonably, Barth’s contention with Schleiermacher is often cast in terms of christology versus anthropology, but it is less often remembered that the point of divergence in their respective prolegomena is ecclesiology, as Barth provides a christological, against Schleiermacher’s anthropological, answer to the question of the church’s identity.\(^{121}\) What is the nature of the church, in which, as both agree, theology lives and moves and has its being? For Schleiermacher, the church is a religious communion, and the identity of a religious communion consists in the shared piety of its members. For Barth, the church’s being is ‘Jesus Christ, God in his gracious revealing and reconciling address to humankind’ (I.1 4).

The different answers are buttressed by different structural contexts. Schleiermacher felt that his initial definition of dogmatics as a churchly activity immediately required a definition of the church, after which he could go on to complete the definition of dogmatics, before venturing into the territory of dogmatics itself. The importance of his definition of the church arises from the linearity of his argument: first a definition of the church, then a definition of dogmatics, then dogmatics itself. By defining ‘churches’ in general in terms of their members’ shared piety (both ‘piety’ and ‘church’ being defined without reference to theology) Schleiermacher cleared a space within which the Christian church’s God-talk might be heard as arising from its own peculiar piety, in which everything is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth. For Schleiermacher, the being of the church is this piety, and this piety is the criterion of dogmatics.

Barth, too, acknowledges that everything is related to Jesus Christ, but there is no question of circumscribing the extent of these relations in any way, or of describing them without recourse to terms such as ‘lordship’ and ‘service’. Barth, too, identifies a space within which Christian God-talk occurs, but this space neither contains nor constrains Jesus Christ, for it is his creation, i.e., it is the church, which in its proclamation conveys and represents him to the world he addresses as God’s revealing and reconciling Word. In view of the human vulnerability of that proclamation, dogmatics is necessary as a critical discipline that, as part of the church’s God-talk, accepts responsibility for seeing that that God-talk conforms with Jesus Christ the Word of God. The logical structure here is less linear than circular. Because the Word of God is a self-authenticating event, dogmatics can do no other than patiently circle around its witnesses in the expectation of hearing it anew. Only in this way can dogmatics hope to continually clarify its talk, including its own basic concepts and its talk about the church, according to the Word of God. Thus, for Barth, the criterion of dogmatics is not the church’s piety, but Jesus Christ the Word of God, whose address to humankind in the church is the event of his own free and gracious act.

But isn’t identification of the church’s being as the criterion of dogmatics rather more at home in Schleiermacher’s Introduction than in Barth’s doctrine of the Word of God? For Barth, the

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\(^{121}\) That the ecclesiological dimension of the divergence is often overlooked is probably related to the general under-appreciation of the ecclesial and confessional aspect of Schleiermacher’s theological vision.
criterion of dogmatics is not the church’s piety but the object of that piety, not the church’s proclamation but the one proclaimed, not even the church’s confession but the one confessed. Why then does he insist that the dogmatic criterion is ‘the being of the church’, even if he exeges this phrase by means of the name ‘Jesus Christ’?  

*Prima facie*, Barth makes this assertion in obedience to the witness of Scripture:

> As the Church accepts from Scripture, and with divine authority from Scripture alone, the attestation of its own being as the measure of its utterance, it finds itself challenged to know itself, and therefore even and precisely in face of this foundation of all Christian utterance to ask, with all the seriousness of one who does not yet know, what Christian utterance can and should say today (CD I.1 16).

The strength of this statement amplifies a strange silence: no scriptural warrant is given. Since Barth merely asserts the existence of a scriptural basis without displaying it, we cannot engage his argument on that point. We can, however, observe how ‘the being of the church’ contributes to his dogmatic criteriology. Its function is essentially polemical, in that it serves to identify Roman Catholicism and Protestant Modernism as heresies. In the face of these heresies, Evangelical theology must purify itself in respect of its basis and source of knowledge, which, as all three positions agree, is the being of the church (CD I.1 34-6). Modernism defines the being of the church on the basis of a prior independent anthropology. Roman Catholicism presupposes ‘that the being of the church, Jesus Christ, is no longer the free Lord of its existence, but…is incorporated into the existence of the Church,’ with the result that ‘the personal act of divine address becomes a constantly available relationship’ (40-1). Against these heresies Barth insists that ‘the being of the Church is *actus purus*, i.e., a free and self-

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122 This parallels Barth’s rejection of anthropological reductions as being precisely reductions of humanity. The scriptures, and the Christians that read them, are not trying to say anything about ‘human states’. They are trying to say something about God. To speak only of human states in the face of this clear intention is to fail to take seriously the scriptural writers and Christians as human beings that mean to say something.

123 In his Introduction to *CD I* Barth provides an initial description of the nature and task of dogmatics (§1) and of prolegomena to dogmatics (§2). In these sections ‘the being of the church’ is frequently mentioned as the dogmatic criterion. Barth’s basic description of the theological task is ‘measuring the Church’s talk about God by its being as the Church’ (pp. 4, 5, 16, 18, 34, 35). The basic formulation may be amplified by exegeting ‘the being of the church’ as ‘Jesus Christ’ (pp. 4, 6, 12, 15, 17, 32, 41, 42) or as ‘divine revelation’ (p. 28). Occasionally, the criterion is mentioned without reference to the being of the church (e.g., ‘conformity to Christ’, p. 13; ‘the Word of God’, pp. 27, 43).

124 The warrant that eventually appears in *CD IV* is the subject of the next sub-section.

125 *CD I.1* 32: Because in dogmatics ‘we ask about the being of the Church, about Jesus Christ, as the norm of Church action’, we find that the understanding of this presupposition distinguishes between those with whom we can, and those against whom we must, pursue the dogmatic task. ‘We have to state quite definitely that our own understanding of the being of the Church is in no sense the only one, that alongside it other and quite different understandings are also present…. The paradoxical fact to which we refer is that of heresy.’

126 *CD I.1* 36-40. Compare the earlier comment on p. 6: Rather than criticising and correcting the church’s God-talk ‘in the light of the being of the Church, of Jesus Christ as its basis, goal and content’, non-theological (and especially philosophical) accounts ‘always miss the real problem by setting it within the sphere of their own sciences, judging the utterance of the Church about God in accordance with alien principles rather than its own principle…. The result is even worse when this is done in the name of “theology.”’
originating divine action. As such, it can be understood neither in terms of a constantly available creatureliness (because it is a divine act), nor in terms of a constantly available divine connection with the Church (because it is a divine act). ‘On both sides we can only ask how it may be otherwise if the being of the Church is identical with Jesus Christ’.  

How indeed, if that identity really holds? We have now noted two important propositions advanced by Barth without argument or evidence that would raise them above the level of axioms or assumptions, and thus make of the above question something more than a merely hypothetical exercise. Firstly, if the criterion of dogmatics is the being of the church, as all parties agree, then the identification of that being has implications for the nature of dogmatics—but at this stage the premise remains untested. Secondly, identification of the church’s being as Jesus Christ, on the basis of which Barth denies the Modernist and Roman Catholic identifications, is also asserted without argument—it, too, operates as an untested presupposition. We will now examine the role of the first of these propositions in Barth’s argument. The role of the second is taken up in the following sub-section.

Neither presupposition is substantiated in the course of Barth’s positive identification of the criterion of dogmatics (CD I.1 42-4), but then, apart from a brief initial mention of ‘the being of the church’, neither presupposition actually figures in his discussion. Rather, emphasising that dogmatic prolegomena are always already within dogmatics, Barth takes his point of departure in the fact that the church ventures to talk of God. The criterion by which such talk may be rightly criticised and corrected can only be the Word of God itself as and when it is spoken by God to the church. The concept of the being of the church makes no contribution to this statement.

In Barth’s first chapter, as he develops his definition of the criterion of dogmatics, the phrase ‘the being of the church’ is rare, and when it does appear it serves not to identify or specify the dogmatic criterion but to locate it within the life of the church, so as to emphasise that the church must not listen to any alien voice as authoritative, but only to the voice of Jesus Christ whom it already worships and confesses as Lord, and whose servant it knows itself to be. But it is not in virtue of being ‘the being of the church’ that the dogmatic criterion serves as criterion. The idea of ‘the being of the church as the criterion of dogmatics’ strains against

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127 CD I.1 41. Barth continues: ‘If this is true, then the place from which the way of dogmatic knowledge is to be seen and understood can be neither a prior anthropological possibility nor a subsequent ecclesiastical reality, but only the present moment of the speaking and hearing of Jesus Christ Himself, the divine creation of light in our hearts.’

128 We saw above that Barth accepts this presupposition on the basis of scripture. But he asserts the existence of scriptural warrant without displaying that warrant, and thus the assertion remains a bare assertion.

129 The initial passing remark concerns the nature of the dogmatic criterion as actus purus, a nature that depends, not on the being of the church as such, but on the nature of Jesus Christ the Word of God.


131 This is apparent at §3.2 (CD I.1 72-3). Like all human action, church proclamation is exposed to the question of its responsibility. But the church cannot allow itself to be held responsible in terms of anything other than the centre of its own life ‘…it is precisely in terms of its origin and basis, of the being of the Church, that church proclamation, and with it the Church itself, is assailed and called into question’. This question is the question of the authenticity of the church’s existence as the church.

132 This is nicely illustrated when, introducing ‘The Word of God Written’ (§4.2), Barth notes the decisive fact that
Barth’s observation that a dogmatic criterion can act as such only because of its otherness, just because it is distinct from the church in its work of proclamation. The critical task of dogmatics requires that the church distinguish God’s Word from its own word, and the concrete form in which the church may ‘see the Word of God as an entity distinct from Church proclamation so as to compare the latter with it and measure it by it’ is Holy Scripture (CD I.1 250). The criterion of dogmatics, then, is the Word of God in the concrete form of its attestation in the Bible, and Barth reviews the whole argument on the dogmatic criterion (§7.3, pp. 287-91) without once referring to ‘the being of the Church’.

After this, the idea of the church’s being does not reappear in Barth’s argument until the final chapter of the Doctrine of the Word of God, ‘The Proclamation of the Church’, where it occurs three times. The second occurrence is in a summary statement at the beginning of an exposition of ‘The Material Task of Dogmatics’ (§24.1, CD I.2 844). Having just spoken in §23 of dogmatics as a function of the hearing church, Barth goes on in §24 to speak of it as a function of the teaching church. Because the church hears the Word of God which calls it to teach, the Church must be at one and the same time both hearing and teaching. Therefore dogmatics has not only a critical and formal task in respect of the norm which is heard, but at the same time a material and positive task in respect of the object set forth. But the Word of God is both the norm of proclamation and the object proclaimed, and so as dogmatics calls the church to hear and to teach, this is not two calls but ‘the one reminder that the Church has its being in Jesus Christ’. Thus, ‘being’ serves here to unify the recollection that Christ is not only the church’s source and basis but also its telos and purpose.

God did not leave the Church grounded only in itself as the Church:
The return to its own being on the basis of which alone it may actually venture its proclamation does indeed mean for it a return to its own being, but to its self-transcendent being, to Jesus Christ as the heavenly Head to whom it, the earthly body, is attached as such, but in relation to whom it is also distinct as such, who has the Church within Himself, but whom the Church does not have within itself, between whom and it there is no reversible or alternating relation, just as the relation between master and servant is not reversible (p. 100).

That is, the possibility of a criterion exists precisely in that aspect of the church’s being in which it is differentiated from itself, i.e., ‘its self-transcendent being’, the heavenly head from which the church is distinguished as earthly body, the Lord in relation to whom the church is a servant.

133 According to §7, ‘Dogmatics is the critical question about dogma, i.e., about the Word of God in Church proclamation, or, concretely, about the agreement of…Church proclamation…with the revelation attested in Holy Scripture’ (p. 248). The scientificty of dogmatics, its objectivity, consists precisely in its responsiveness to its object: the Word of God attested in scripture.

134 Nor should it have reappeared any earlier. At the conclusion of chapter I Barth indicated that he would expound the content of the criterion of dogmatics, namely, the Word of God, in its threefold form. Thus chapter II dealt with the Word of God as Godself in self-revelation, chapter III with the Word of God in its attestation in scripture, and now chapter IV addresses the Word of God in the church’s proclamation. The three occurrences of ‘the being of the church’ in chapter IV are at CD I.2 806-7, 844 and 852.
On either side of this summary, the first case indicates that dogmatics, precisely as the church and in solidarity with it, summons the church to hear its own Lord. Speaking for the sake of Jesus Christ as Lord of the Church, dogmatics ‘does not demand anything but what from the depths of its own being and basis the Church necessarily demands of itself’ (§23.1, CD I.2 805-6). In the third case, dogmatics will serve the church’s teaching by unfolding and presenting the Word of God as life-giving gospel.

The Law which slays can be made effective only on the basis and in the content of the Gospel which makes alive. For this reason and in this way dogmatics will be able to speak comfortably to the Church itself. Unfolding and presenting the Word of God, it will speak to the Church from no other standpoint than the Church’s own being and essence. It will say to it only what it already is and has, because Jesus Christ is already present in it (§24.1, CD I.2 852).

These passages reinforce the impression gained from Barth’s first chapter: the phrase ‘the being of the church’ serves to locate rather than to specify the criterion of dogmatics. The location of the criterion has important consequences for the way in which the church goes about the dogmatic task as part of its work of proclamation, and for the way in which it receives the fruits of that task. Criticism in terms of the criterion of dogmatics can shake the church and must be taken with utter seriousness, and advice on the basis of the criterion of dogmatics can build the church and can be received joyfully, because that criterion is nothing other than the centre of the church’s life, its basis and its Lord. Yet, as Barth himself argues cogently, the criterion operates as such only in its distinction from and transcendence of the church, and without this distinction and transcendence it could not be a criterion.

In summary, Barth offers no scriptural or theological warrant for asserting that the being of the church is the dogmatic criterion. Nor does the church’s being contribute to his specification of the criterion’s content. Rather, the assertion functions entirely as polemic—as a point of contact with both Modernist and Roman Catholic dogmatics, it provides a single fulcrum for leveraging arguments against both. Despite the rhetorical strength with which Barth affirmed the assertion’s biblical foundations, apparently setting it up as the basis for the following argument, it has no dogmatic significance for him. His dogmatic criterion is in fact Jesus Christ the Word of God, and this identification is the real basis of his critique of Modernist and Roman Catholic dogmatics. In substance, if not in rhetoric, the argument is this: if the being of the church is taken to be the criterion of dogmatics (as Modernists and Roman Catholics affirm), then that being can only be Jesus Christ, the centre of the church’s life. But in fact the criterion is not the church’s being, but Jesus Christ the Lord, source and goal of the church’s life. This is the basis on which Barth’s Doctrine of the Word of God ( §§3-24) actually proceeds.

Thus, despite its strong rhetoric, Barth’s identification of the church’s being as the dogmatic criterion is not the real basis of his argument, but a polemically-motivated distraction of merely hypothetical force. Although, as the discussion has indicated, Barth’s argumentative error had little overall effect on his Doctrine of the Word of God, it necessitated another identification—that of Jesus Christ as the being of the church—which is also problematic, as we will now see.
4.4.5 Observations on Barth’s Later Theology: The Being of the Church

Since, for Barth, the real criterion of dogmatics is the Word of God attested in scripture, this is the basis on which to question Barth’s claim that ‘the Church accepts from Scripture, and with divine authority from Scripture alone, the attestation of its own being as the measure of its utterance’. In fact, scripture does not make this attestation. That the church’s own being is the measure of its utterance is very much a theological construction. In terms of materials in Barth’s dogmatics it appears to synthesise two propositions: that Jesus Christ is the criterion of dogmatics, and that Jesus Christ is the church’s being. The first of these I accept as biblical and as fully congruent with the Christian confession of Christ’s Lordship. I take issue with the second.

Is Jesus Christ the church’s ‘being’ (Sein)? In a short aside in §67.2 Barth acknowledges the axiomatic nature of the starting point adopted in §1.1—‘that the being of Jesus Christ is the being of the church’—and this is the only place I have found where Barth indicates that his initial axiom should not remain an axiom, but must, like all else, answer to the Word of God attested in scripture. The aside occurs as Barth expounds the church as Christ’s earthly-historical form of existence, i.e., as Christ’s body, and it may be (though he does not say so directly) that this Pauline image is what he has in mind as scriptural warrant for the assertion that the being of the church is Jesus Christ (and hence also the criterion of dogmatics).

Barth’s concept of the church as Christ’s earthly-historical Existenzform operates in a carefully structured context. Christ’s earthly-historical Existenzform as the church is the earthly counterpart to his heavenly-historical Existenzform as Lord of history and Lord of the church from the resurrection to his final coming (CD IV.1 661). Between these two direct and definitive manifestations of the future of humanity in Christ, the church exists as a provisional representation of all humanity redeemed in his finished work. Thus, ecclesiology is an aspect of the work of Christ, and Barth’s core ecclesiological material appears within his three-part exposition of Christ’s finished work in the doctrine of reconciliation. In this exposition, the first part, ‘Jesus Christ, the Lord as Servant’ (§§59-63), treats God’s judgement of humankind in Christ. The second part, ‘Jesus Christ, the Servant as Lord’ (§§64-68), speaks of God’s conversion of humankind to himself in Christ. The third part, ‘Jesus Christ, the True Witness’ (§§69-73), deals with God’s calling of humankind in Christ. The three parts correspond to the traditional division of Christ’s work according to his priestly, kingly, and prophetic ministries; or to the doctrinal loci of justification, sanctification, and witness.

\[^{135}\text{CD I.1 16, and see p. 138 above.}\]

\[^{136}\text{Appears to be}. \text{But the statement that ‘the criterion of dogmatics is the being of the church’ cannot be logically deduced from these two propositions. This is because in ‘Jesus Christ is the being of the Church’ Barth does not mean ‘is’ in the sense of mathematical identity. The priority is always with Jesus Christ. ‘The being of the community is a predicate of his being’ (CD IV.2 655). The ‘is’ relation is not reversible. Hence, ‘A is B’ and ‘A is C’, taken together, do not imply ‘B is C’. The nature of Barth’s ‘is’ makes the question of scriptural attestation even more acute.}\]

\[^{137}\text{Here Barth misquotes the earlier expression at CD I.1 3, which speaks of ‘Jesus Christ’ rather than ‘the being of Jesus Christ’. The difference appears not to be significant, suggesting that perhaps there is no real difference between ‘the church’ and its ‘being’. Yet Barth’s argument suggests otherwise.}\]

\[^{138}\text{§62.3 ‘The Time of the Community’, CD IV.1 725-39.}\]
Each of the three parts of Barth’s doctrine of reconciliation comprises five sections which follow a consistent pattern. The first expounds the history of Jesus Christ in relation to the aspect of his work being considered. The second section describes the aspect of the human situation specifically addressed by the aspect of Christ’s work just expounded. The third section focuses on the new situation of humanity in view of this aspect of Christ’s finished work and the fourth speaks of the Holy Spirit’s work in the Christian community as a provisional representation of that new human situation. The fifth section reflects on the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individual Christians. Thus, Barth’s core ecclesiological material appears as the fourth of five sections in each of the three parts of his doctrine of reconciliation (§§62, 67, 72). The consistent pattern is that the church, as Jesus Christ’s earthly-historical form of existence, is the provisional representation of all humanity definitively and completely justified, sanctified and called in him.

This pattern first emerges in Barth’s discussion of ‘The Being of the Community’ (§62.2) where, as in his earlier critique of Protestant Modernist and Roman Catholic misconceptions, he maintains that the church cannot be simply identified with its human members. Rather, the church is a divine work which occurs among human beings in the form of human activity. The church is when it takes place under God’s grace that the justification, sanctification and calling of all humanity in Christ is actual among certain human beings (CD IV.1 650-1). As a divine event among human beings, the church can be understood neither in purely divine terms (in its invisibility) nor in purely human terms (in its visibility). Such one-sided views are equally abstractions. Certainly, the church exists in the visible dimensions of space and time, but as a divine work it exists also in an invisible third dimension of spiritual reality. The three dimensions taken together comprise the church’s self-understanding and self-confession (652-60).

My reservation regarding Barth’s assertion that ‘Jesus Christ is the church’s being’ is that, in the context of his basic definition of church as event, the church’s ‘being’ becomes too much identified with the third dimension of its existence, the so-called ‘invisible’ dimension visible only to faith. I recognise that for Barth what faith perceives in the church is not simply the mathematical sum of its invisible spiritual reality and the spatio-temporal reality apparent to faith and non-faith alike, but rather the whole three-dimensional spiritual-spatio-temporal reality of the church as ‘the earthly-historical form of existence of Jesus Christ Himself’ (661). It is not that the church’s spiritual dimension alone is its true being, with the spatio-temporal manifestations as mere epiphenomena, but that perception of the church’s spiritual dimension enables its spatio-temporal dimensions to be seen in their relation to Jesus Christ. Yet I will argue in this sub-section that, despite advocating a fully ‘three-dimensional’ understanding of the church and criticising those who transgress this requirement (652-8), Barth’s key conceptual tools pull away from this goal in a spiritualising or docetic direction. This distortion, like that noted in his treatment of the dogmatic criterion, may be attributed to polemical aspects of his argument.

Consider Barth’s treatment of the church’s limitations, especially its sin.139 He is fully aware that the church’s visible history is not only a creaturely history, but a fleshly and fallen history.

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139 The importance of the connection between the visibility-invisibility tension and the sinfulness-obedience tension is also noted by Kimlyn Bender (2005, 272-77). Bender suggests speaking of the Church as in ‘imperfect and varying correspondence’ to its Lord (p. 273). My suggestion, which follows, can be described in these terms, but it is more
It is always sinful history—just as the individual believer is not only a creature but a sinful man. Woe to [the church] if what it is is directly identical with what it is as generally visible, or if it accepts as its being its concrete historical form, equating itself with it and trying to exist in it abstractly! (CD IV.1 657)

Woe indeed if the church is merely what it is visibly! Yet visibility is as much of the essence of the church as its invisible relation to Christ as the centre of God’s reconciling work. Therefore, I suggest that Barth’s ecclesiological goal may have been better served had he identified the church’s being in terms of another of his programmatic definitions, namely, as a provisional representation of all humanity reconciled to God in Jesus Christ. After all, as Barth insists, this provisional representation is a saving necessity and intrinsic (‘internal and material and decisive’) to the church (CD IV.2 621-2). Surely, then, it belongs to the church’s ‘being’.

But if, as I suggest, the church’s visibility as a provisional representation of reconciled humanity belongs to its essence, what of the sinfulness of the people who are visibly its members? The passage quoted above shows that Barth has no illusions in this regard. If the glory of reconciled humanity is made manifest, it is in and through such sinners that the representation occurs: ‘The glory of the community…can appear only where there appears the glory of Jesus Christ and the sinner justified by Him’ (CD IV.1 658).

Yet Barth’s characterisation of church as event and his identification of Jesus Christ as the church’s being strain against the attribution of sin to the church. In Barth’s basic conception of church as event, the church is when it takes place under God’s grace that the justification, sanctification and calling of all humanity in Christ is actual among certain human beings (CD IV.1 650-1). But the church which is in this event is the true or real church, the church in its being as Jesus Christ. When Barth refers to the church as a sinful church, this is a shorthand way of referring to the people in and among whom Church becomes event. In Barth’s definition, theologically specific about the nature of the imperfection and variation.

140 Always remembering that the provisional representation ‘never takes place in virtue of the qualities of this people itself. Jesus the Lord, in the quickening power of His Holy Spirit, is the One who acts where this provisional representation takes place, and therefore where the true Church is an event’ (CD IV.2 623). I am not yet engaging Barth’s idea of church as event, but suggesting that the idea of provisional representation, so prominent in Barth’s programmatic ecclesiological statements, properly belongs to the church’s being. Such an identification of the church’s being might have prevented misunderstandings such as those of Nicholas Healy (1994), who reads Barth as having ‘bifurcated’ the church ‘into two separate entities, the human church and its spiritual counterpart’, and Joseph Mangina (1999, 278), who, concurring with Healy, says that what Barth ‘finds important about the church is not its empirical or historical dimensions, but rather its essential identity with Jesus Christ’. In their defence, passages in which Barth explicitly denies such views (e.g., CD IV.3.2 726-8) may be followed by talk of the church’s being as invisible, or of the church’s ‘invisible essence’, or by an assertion that ‘what it is invisibly is its being by grace and not by nature’ (CD IV.3.2 728-9). Healy (2004, 295 n13) has since reconsidered his criticisms, though without providing details of how his views have changed.

141 E.g., see CD IV.2 622-3. Much of my difficulty with Barth’s ecclesiology lies in the tension between church-as people and church-as-event. Consider Barth’s insistence on the intrinsic visibility of the church as Christ’s body at CD I.2 219-20. The context here concerns ‘The Holy Spirit the Subjective Reality of Revelation’ (§16.1). As the work of the Holy Spirit, the Church is ‘the area by which the subjective reality of revelation is invariably enveloped’, and as such it is ‘the reality of God’s revelation for us’ (221). Barth insists that in and through Christ the church has not only its invisible spiritual reality, but:
the church is not so much sinners justified, sanctified and called in Christ, i.e., people set in relation to Christ, as the event of relation between Christ and people. For him, insofar as the people are sinful, they are not really, but only apparently, the church.142

Building on my suggestion that the church’s being be understood as a provisional representation of humanity reconciled to God in Christ, I now suggest that the church’s sinfulness be understood as an aspect of the provisionality of that representation.143 If the church is a provisional representation in this sense, then its relation to Christ will include judgement as well as blessing. If the household of God is judged on account of its sin, then, in that sin and that judgement, it is still the household of God. (But if it rejected the judgement, that would be another matter.) A church conceived along these lines may better represent the theological concreteness of the church in the Bible.144

These reservations and briefly-outlined suggestions concerning Barth’s identification of the ‘being of the Church’ should not be taken as indicating that I think Barth’s ecclesiology is

In Him and through Him there is also its bodily life, without which it could not be a gathering of real [human beings] and the permanent setting of witness to Him amid human history. In Him and through Him the Church is the wholly concrete area of the subjective reality of revelation. Within this area the justification and sanctification of [humans] may become an event (CD I.2 220).

I find two definitions of church at work here: church as the event of (the provisional representation of) the justification and sanctification of human beings in Christ; and church as the area of reality (or gathering of human beings) within which this event takes place. Of these, church as event is clearly more basic in CD.

142 The eschatological aspect is important as well. For Barth, the church as event is the true church, and an event in which it is only the apparent church is not the event of the church. The true church, in its occurrence, has a future, namely, its telos in Christ. Its sinful alter ego has no future (or rather, its only future is that already revealed in the cross) and will pass away.

143 Here I am doing considerable violence to Barth’s formulation. For Barth, the church’s representation is provisional for the same reason that Jesus Christ’s own work was provisional: it takes place prior to its final fulfilment at Christ’s return. Thus the present time of the church is the time ‘between the provisional and transitory and particular revelation of [the world’s] reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ and the perfect and definitive and universal revelation of it in His final coming’ (CD IV.1 734). But although the representation is provisional, nevertheless ‘it is a true and effective, genuine and invincible representation of the elevation and establishment of all men as it has been fulfilled in the exaltation of the man Jesus, and therefore of the divine work of sanctification in its totality’ (CD IV.2 622). So also in the case of the church, where the provisional representation takes place in the form of human action: the provisionality of the representation is due not to its form, but to its location in time.

144 The best-known NT passage is probably 1 Peter 4:17 which speaks of judgement beginning with the household of God, reflecting a number of prophetic references to judgement falling first, or especially, on God’s people (Mal 3:1-5, Jer 25:29, Ezek 9:6, Isa 10:12, Zech 13:7-9, Amos 3:2). Of course, significant hurdles remain, even after careful biblical exegesis. The church’s spatio-temporal reality in fallen creatureliness and its organic reality as Christ’s body must be worked out in relation to each other and in their eschatological relation to Christ’s first and second comings. The fact that Christ came in the form of our sinful flesh (Rom 8:3, see Barth’s comments at CD I.2 147-59) would also be relevant. I am not sure whether the attribution of sin to the church necessarily leads away from Barth’s conception of church as event. It may be that human personhood is itself better understood as event (Schleiermacher, and process theology, may offer helpful insights in this regard).
seriously wrong. On the contrary, I would be quite dissatisfied with my suggestions if it turned out that they could not accommodate many of the results of Barth’s exposition, including especially the church’s existence on a continual knife-edge of possibility: the continually open decision concerning its obedience or disobedience to the Word of God, and hence its agreement with or contradiction of its calling. The main effect of my suggestions would be to reconfigure some aspects of the exposition: firstly, by acknowledging in the basic formulation what Barth clearly acknowledges in the details, namely, that the particularity of Christians as God’s creatures is not subsumed in the particularity of Jesus Christ, but is given its true and rightful form as particularity-in-relation to him; and secondly, by acknowledging not only the possibility but also the reality of disobedience within the church’s being.

As in the earlier case of the dogmatic criterion, the distortion I see in Barth’s ecclesiology may be over-reaction against the distortions of others. Barth opposes views of the church that assume its continuing visible existence to be its true reality (Modernist Protestantism), or that suppose its true reality to be enduringly bound to its continuing visible existence (Roman Catholicism). The former misses the church’s theological reality, and the latter mistakes it. Against sociological accounts like Schleiermacher’s, Barth may have over-emphasised the spiritual reality. Against continually available essence, as in Roman Catholic accounts of the church, Barth insisted that the church’s being was *actus purus*, divine event, and therefore not at our disposal. He rightly says that the church perceived without its third dimension is not the church of which the New Testament speaks. But, in opposing both Roman Catholicism and Modernist Protestantism, I think he tended to say what he himself did not believe, namely, that the theological reality is (simply) the invisible reality.

4.4.6 Reflections on a Christian View of Particularity

As indicated when introducing my observations on Barth’s particularism, my concern is less with Barth’s theology as such than with describing a particularity appropriate to Christian theology. In this regard four points emerge from the foregoing discussion.

Firstly, a Christian theology, i.e., a theology that stands with the church in confessing ‘Jesus is Lord’, cannot be content to answer a question from the standpoint of Jesus’ Lordship without engaging from that standpoint the terms in which the question is asked. Theology’s discontent with giving ‘straight answers’ follows from its recognition of two facts intrinsic to its situation. Most basically, Jesus’ Lordship means *inter alia* that the extent to which an assertion can be acknowledged as true is limited by the extent to which the assertion can be located in relation to Jesus, i.e., under and within his Lordship. Further, a theological anthropology answerable to the scriptures that attest Jesus’ Lordship includes the understanding that every question presupposes answers to other questions. Therefore, since Christian theology accepts Jesus as Lord and therefore as criterion, it will satisfy itself, so far as it can, that it is not implicitly assuming the truth of assertions formulated without reference to him.

Secondly, as a limited and vulnerable human activity theology takes place as an ongoing argument over the meaning of following Jesus.¹⁴⁵ That is, theology necessarily has a polemical aspect. The

¹⁴⁵ This is the basic description of theology offered by Kathryn Tanner (1997).
polemical context in which theology develops has its positive side as a provocation for the venture of faithful theological construction, but it also necessarily creates opportunities for the intrusion of untested assertions, as real disagreement on an issue implies agreement on the terms in which the issue is stated. We saw this in the case of the clear and direct contrast between Barth, Roman Catholicism and Modernist Protestantism over the criterion of dogmatics. Barth agreed with his opponents that the criterion of dogmatics was the church’s own being, though his own basis for this statement was a scriptural attestation which he did not display. However, even if Barth was wrong in this (as I maintain), the error had little effect on his doctrine of the Word, since the church’s being played no role in explicating the criterion’s content.

Thirdly, in a situation where one’s perception of theological reality indicates that truth lies in balancing several aspects under which a particular presents itself, reaction to the polemical context may lead to an unbalanced description. I believe this is the situation in Barth’s ecclesiology. In his critical comments and programmatic prescriptions Barth insisted on a three-dimensional account of the church (spatio-temporal-spiritual): the Christian community ‘is totally and properly both visible and invisible’. But his polemic against Modernist Protestantism, especially, contributed to an under-emphasis on the church’s humanity.

Lastly, particularity itself can be a temptation. If a certain particular is fundamental, as the confession ‘Jesus is Lord’ implies, we must be careful not to presuppose how it is so. In the inevitable circularity of the confessional situation, we must hear from the Word of God itself the manner in which it is the ground of everything else.

Although Barth would most likely agree with that statement, it identifies one of the difficulties in his identification of Jesus Christ as the church’s being. As an illustration, consider the following passage in CD II, ‘The Doctrine of God’.

Anthropological and ecclesiological assertions arise only as they are borrowed from Christology. That is to say, no anthropological or ecclesiological assertion is true in itself and as such. Its truth subsists in the assertion of Christology, or rather in the reality of Jesus Christ alone (CD II.1 149).

Against the idea that an assertion can be ‘true in itself and as such’, Barth insists that ‘its truth subsists…in the reality of Jesus Christ alone’. But does the truth of that assertion also subsist in the reality of Jesus Christ alone, i.e., is it received from the Word of God as attested in scripture? Some of Barth’s formulations, such as this one, suggest the subsumption of all truth

146 This point is not in the least diluted by the fact that Barth’s disagreement with Modernist Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in CD is, inevitably, his construction of the disagreement. Their constructions of it may well differ from his. My point is that construction of a relation as a genuine disagreement implies some single specific construction of what the disagreement is about.

147 That is, although in my view the idea that the church’s being is the criterion of dogmatics is an alien intrusion, and although I find this idea clearly stated in Barth’s introduction, I do not find that his argument in CD I is seriously compromised by it. This is because, in §§3-7, he moved away from this idea, specifying the dogmatic criterion as the Word of God attested in scripture, a criterion always already present in the church.

148 ‘Balanced’ here does not mean ‘equally balanced’ but ‘appropriately balanced according to the Word of God attested in scripture’. Barth was well aware of the danger of polemical over-reaction, and pleads guilty in his own case over his early exposition of God as ‘wholly other’ vis-à-vis man (1960, 42).

149 That is, this last point is a subtle corollary of the first.
into ‘the reality of Jesus Christ alone’, as if God were already all in all (1 Cor 15:28), or as if the perspective of God’s eternal decree or that of the final consummation were already available to us. But here, too, Barth’s rhetoric is shaped by polemic (the ‘anthropological and ecclesiological assertions’ he has in mind are those of Modernist Protestantism and Roman Catholicism respectively). The thrust of his exposition may have been better served by a formulation that was at once more biblical, more relational, and better attuned to our eschatological situation.

Since Jesus Christ is the one through whom and for whom all things were created, and since created things, though inconceivable without him, are nevertheless presently distinct from him, we should say rather that the truth of anything subsists in its God-given reality in its God-given relation to Godself. What is God-given in the present eschatological situation is that truth subsists in the relation of all things to the present Lordship of Jesus Christ. Hence, the truth of an assertion subsists neither in and of itself nor ‘in the reality of Jesus Christ alone’, but in its capacity to acknowledge that Jesus’ name is above every name, i.e., in the extent to which it can join with the church, in advance of all creation, in swearing fealty to Jesus and confessing him Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:11). Such a formulation both reflects the manner and content of Barth’s exposition, and is consistent with a faithful assertion of Christian particularity.

4.5 LINDBECK AS MODERN THEOLOGIAN

I have already compared and contrasted Lindbeck’s postliberal prescription with the methodological aspects of Schleiermacher’s theology.150 Lindbeck and Schleiermacher both stand against the universalising rationalism of the Enlightenment as represented in classic liberal theology, and both pursue the self-contradictory strategy of securing theology’s integrity and independence by means of the very rationality that threatens it. Seeing this as a blind alley, I have critically surveyed certain aspects of Barth’s theology so as to highlight some of the consequences and difficulties of abandoning the self-contradiction of Lindbeck’s and Schleiermacher’s particularism for the circularity of a consistently confessional particularism.

This concluding section of the chapter compares and contrasts Lindbeck’s approach with that of Barth (while not entirely forgetting Schleiermacher). The main point of contact, and hence the most important disagreement, lies in their accounts of the particularity of Christian theology as knowledge. Along the way, we will be able to evaluate the not uncommon characterisation of Lindbeck’s stance as ‘Barthian’.

4.5.1 The Independence of Christian Theology as Knowledge

The story of modern theology can be told as a story of encounter between two traditions of human knowing: modernity and Christianity. Modernity pursued knowledge through ‘philosophy’, i.e., the unconstrained critical inquiry of the sciences. Christianity pursued knowledge through theology, i.e., the seeking of understanding in and through faith. Philosophy took as its slogan ‘Dare to know!’ and told itself the story of autonomous reason. Theology knew a story in which the daring of pure knowledge was mere presumption, and the prospect of autonomous reason the

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150 In section 4.3 Liberals, Postliberals and Schleiermacher, commencing on p. 121 above.
oldest of temptations. That is, it always had the resources to understand autonomous reason as both seduction and sedition, though it was not always inclined to draw upon them.

Against an autonomous reason that claims universal validity and threatens to dissolve all particularities (and especially religious ones) into itself, Schleiermacher, Barth and Lindbeck all assert that Christian theology as knowledge of God subsists in and follows from faith in Jesus Christ. In order to make this assertion Schleiermacher denied that Christian theology was knowledge at all, from a philosophical viewpoint, in that its object of inquiry lay in the subjective consciousness, while the objects into which philosophy inquired were those perceived by the objective consciousness. That is, he could allow that Christian theology was knowledge only in the sense that it was knowledge of the content of the peculiarly Christian feeling of absolute dependence in which everything is related to Jesus Christ as Redeemer. Thus, as the scientific clarification of Christianity’s descriptions of its own piety, theology had nothing to do with philosophy, and could coexist with it quite well on this basis.

Barth rejected the idea that anthropology, sociology or psychology could be allowed to define theology’s object. God is not an object like any other object of human inquiry. If God has in fact spoken, then we must reckon with the fact that it is God who has spoken. That is, God’s speech itself must be the basis of human response to the divine word, and theology can only be the responsible description of the content of that word. Thus, for Barth, Christianity is nothing if not the confession of Jesus Christ as Word of God; and apart from that Word and that confession, Christianity and its theology are nothing. Hence, Christian theology is knowledge as much as anything is knowledge (if not more so), but it is knowledge of an object unlike any other, namely, the Word of God.

We have seen that Lindbeck shares with Schleiermacher the view that Christianity is a member of that class of entities known as religions, each of which is particular to itself, and they both seek a general understanding of religious particularity on the basis of social anthropology. But Lindbeck differs from Schleiermacher in maintaining that religion is concerned with knowledge, and is not distinguished from other human behaviours and discourses by its relation to the human psyche. Rather, religion is distinctive in its comprehensiveness—it offers an ultimate framework, a way of viewing all of reality. Christian religious knowledge is distinctive because its comprehensive categorial framework is drawn from a distinctive source: the Christian scriptures. The Christian view of reality is the biblical view, the Christian world the biblical

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151 The most obvious texts to appeal to here are the final speeches in Job, and the temptation story in Gen 3.
152 Barth strongly emphasises the event of God’s word as fact. Only in the light of this fact can we say anything about the conditions under which it is possible. Only knowledge of the reality of the Word of God enables knowledge of the conditions of its possibility. Conversely, if God has not spoken, then no human possibilities are of any avail, and our idea of God can only be an idol, a mere projection of the human psyche. That is, Feuerbach was right, if God has not spoken. Apart from one fact, the situation really is how Feuerbach describes it. But that fact, the fact that God has spoken, is crucial. See CD I.1 343; I.2 6, 41-2, 290. Of course, the fact of God’s speech does not invalidate Feuerbach’s insight that the organ and essence (Organ und Wesen) of religion is imagination. Christian theology accepts the vulnerability of its own imagination as it seeks to ground that imagination in the fact of God’s speech. Garrett Green offers a helpful treatment of Feuerbach and of Barth’s positive appropriation of him (Green 2000, 83-107), though perhaps he pays insufficient attention to the vulnerability of Christian imagination.
world. Thus, in their different ways, Lindbeck and Barth both maintain that theology is concerned with knowledge. They also agree that theology is not distinctive in its manner of knowing, though they assert that generally accepted notions of epistemology and the nature of knowledge are often inadequate, and that a conceptuality that allows us to treat theological knowledge as being properly knowledge (and not only in some conceded or attenuated sense) will also be more adequate as an account of knowledge in general.\textsuperscript{153}

Schleiermacher, Barth and Lindbeck all want to maintain theology’s independence, but they have quite different ways of doing so. Schleiermacher grounded theology’s independence in a philosophical distinction between knowing and feeling in the human psyche, so that, for him, theology was not knowledge in the strict (i.e., philosophical) sense. For Barth, theology as human God-talk could be ‘independent’ only in a relative and vulnerable way, and yet such independence as it had was grounded in the absolute independence of revelation. Since God has spoken, theology as responsible human God-talk is ventured in obedience to God’s talk, and where it is not thus obedient, neither is it independent. For Lindbeck, theology is the explication of knowledge framed by the Christian cultural-linguistic system, and therefore develops independently of discourses that do not share its ultimate frame of reference. So then, for Schleiermacher theology is independent of knowledge discourses because its object of inquiry is not an object of knowledge, while for Barth and Lindbeck theology is a knowledge discourse, though it is independent of other such discourses in view of its distinct object.

4.5.2 The Idea of Particularity in Christian Theology

Lindbeck’s idea of a cultural-linguistic system comes from his understanding of social anthropology. As such it is avowedly ‘pre-theological’, like Schleiermacher’s Introduction, and therefore both untenable from a confessional viewpoint and incoherent as an account of particularity.\textsuperscript{154} In their outworking, if not in their intent, Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory and Schleiermacher’s philosophical psychology operate as attempts to secure theology’s freedom before embarking on theology, as if to say, ‘This is our freedom, and in this freedom we will know the truth’. In terms of the logic of particularity, and the logic of serving the living God, this is not freedom, but captivity renamed.

However, as we saw in Barth, while acknowledgement of particularity may offer the possibility of coherence, and even the possibility of truth, it does not render the idea of particularity unproblematic. Although this idea may help us to recognise and resist the myths of autonomous reason, it is, after all, another idea, and as such it may do multiple service: it may help us deal with reality; it may seduce us into comfortable worlds of our own making; it may tempt us to betray our proper allegiance; it may do any or all of these together. But whatever else it may do, the idea of human particularity, as a human idea, necessarily includes itself within its own purview, and so cannot remain a prior idea. Not particularity, but Jesus Christ, is Lord in the Christian confession. That is, particularity, too, is answerable to Christ and must find its truth in relation to him. It is clear, then, that while Lindbeck defends the integrity of Christian confession, and may to that

\textsuperscript{153} Lindbeck’s argument in this regard may be found at ND 38-9 (see also p. 25 above), Barth’s at CD I.2 471-2.

\textsuperscript{154} See especially 4.4.1 On the Particularity of Particularity commencing on p. 129 above.
extent be called a ‘confessional theologian’, the means by which he does so are those of Schleiermacher rather than Barth. Therefore, to describe Lindbeck as ‘Barthian’ is misleading. Those who do so should recall that Schleiermacher, too, saw himself as a confessional theologian.

Confession of Jesus Christ as Lord is not only a confession of personal allegiance but an acknowledgment of truth. He is not only our lord by virtue of being our redeemer, he is Lord absolutely by virtue of his resurrection and exaltation. As such he sets us in relation to himself as Lord and in relation to the world with which and in which he has graced us. In this situation, Christian theology is the activity in which the Christian community questions itself concerning the faithfulness, truth and vitality of its confession of Christ. In its primary concern with truth, dogmatic theological reflection proceeds by relating existing concepts to Jesus Christ, and this encounter will have an impact on both sides of the relation. On the one hand, in view of the Christian confession of Christ’s Lordship, the concepts employed should not go unchallenged or remain unaltered in the encounter. On the other hand, in view of the vulnerability of that confession, we should not imagine that our idea of Jesus Christ will somehow remain self-identical and unchanged. If this is the case even in relation to our idea of Jesus Christ, it is also the case in relation to our ideas of particularity, whether we have in mind the historical particularities of the incarnation of the Word of God and the original witnesses thereto, the particularities of later generations that received, interpreted and handed on the Christian faith, or our own particularities as we receive and interpret these witnesses and venture to speak of the Word of God in our own places and times.

In chapter 2 above we noted that the first part of Lindbeck’s argument sought to dismiss liberal theology from the field of serious ecumenical engagement over doctrine. In chapter 3 we saw that while this argument may work against older liberal theologies of the experiential-expressive type, its success against hermeneutically-aware contemporary liberal theologies is doubtful. In the present chapter, this mixed achievement has been overshadowed by a strong theological and philosophical case that any understanding of Christian particularity, whether originating in contemporary liberal theologies or in Lindbeck’s ‘postliberal’ proposal, can be received in Christian theology only to the extent that it contributes to theology’s service of its Lord, Jesus Christ. I argued that a ‘non-theological’ understanding of particularity (or of anything else) implies a limitation of Christ’s Lordship and hence a qualification of allegiance to Christ and of Christian identity. That is, liberal and postliberal approaches are similarly mistaken to the extent that they adopt, import or ‘make available’ to theology any anthropological, hermeneutical, or other theory without critically engaging it from the standpoint of the gospel. Just to the same extent, they show themselves to be joint heirs of F. D. E. Schleiermacher.

But if Lindbeck’s account of Christian particularity, like those of Schleiermacher and of some liberal theologians, cannot succeed as Christian theology, that does not mean that he is wrong about the comprehensiveness of religious claims, nor does it mean that the rest of his proposal may be simply discarded. Granted, Christian theology requires, and in fact offers, its own accounts of Christian particularity and of human particularity in general, and therefore cannot agree with the bases on which Schleiermacher and Lindbeck sought to provide it with such accounts; nevertheless it can agree with Schleiermacher that faith-doctrine is only for those who
have faith, and with Lindbeck that the biblical witness to Christ implies a truly comprehensive world-view. That is, while Lindbeck’s externally-based account of comprehensiveness contradicts the comprehensiveness he claims for Christianity, this contradiction need not necessarily invalidate his account of the internal elucidation of Christian identity. The next two chapters seek an ‘inside’ account of Christian identity, firstly in Lindbeck’s theory of doctrine, and then in conversation with others who, in their different ways, agree with him that Christianity must drink from its own wells.
LINDBECK’S RULE THEORY OF DOCTRINE, ITS RIVAL, AND ITS PROBLEMS

If Christianity must drink from its own wells, what does this mean, how is that drinking done, and how should it be done? This is the question addressed in the fourth and fifth chapters of ND. In laying out his answers, Lindbeck now engages those who fully accept their position within the Christian confession and understand theology as proceeding only on that basis. In the previous two chapters the vague term ‘liberal’ referred to diverse theologies in which the mode of argument implicitly limits Christ’s Lordship and allows only a qualified allegiance to him. Now another vague term, ‘conservative’, will denote another diverse range of theologies, namely, those in which Christ’s Lordship is claimed to be determinative for all aspects of theological construction.¹

Conservative responses to ND have been both like and unlike liberal ones. Like liberal theologians, conservatives quickly recognised that Lindbeck had them in mind in one of his descriptions of unsatisfactory theories of religion. At the same time they insisted that, however valid Lindbeck’s critique might have been in relation to theologies that match his description of ‘propositionalism’, his assumption that propositionalist understandings of doctrine relied on a crude realism was invalid. Like liberals, conservatives generally felt that Lindbeck’s criticism of them was simplistic and misdirected.

However, unlike liberal respondents, conservatives have enthusiastically supported Lindbeck’s critique of his other opponent and welcomed his emphasis on the Bible as the semiotic lexicon of the Christian community, while expressing concern over his apparently relaxed attitude towards the relations between scripture, doctrine and reality.² That these themes are only faintly echoed in liberal responses reflects the different tensions between the respondents’ underlying commitments and Lindbeck’s understanding of religious knowledge as being properly knowledge and hence, unavoidably, both particular and indirect.³ Liberal theology generally agreed with Lindbeck that religious knowledge is properly knowledge, and they embraced its particularity. However, Lindbeck’s attack on liberal theology while liberals have largely ignored Lindbeck’s criticism of conservatives may be partly due to liberalism’s tendency to be dismissive of conservative theology and conservative theology’s tendency to define itself over against liberal theology.

¹ I emphasise that I use these labels because they seem to me to be reasonably appropriate to the distinction I am making between various theologies’ attitudes to particularity. This attitude is, of course, merely one aspect of a theology, and there is much more to any theology than its ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal’ disposition. While these labels can be used dismissively as a way of avoiding engagement, I hope it is clear that I am using them precisely to facilitate engagement.

² See for example Olson 1996, McGrath 1996, and Callahan 1997. Questions about truth were by no means entirely lacking in liberal reviews, e.g., see Tracy 1985a.

³ There are also other contributing factors. For example, that conservatives have applauded Lindbeck’s attack on liberal theology while liberals have largely ignored Lindbeck’s criticism of conservatives may be partly due to liberalism’s tendency to be dismissive of conservative theology and conservative theology’s tendency to define itself over against liberal theology.
Hence they welcome an argument that helps to unmask and disarm liberal scholarship’s striving for universality and objectivity. But the indirectness and equivocality of truth claims in Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory seem to them to undermine the idea that biblical affirmations and biblically-based doctrinal affirmations are straightforwardly ‘true’.

This chapter, then, engages Lindbeck’s view of the nature of truth, and how scripture and doctrine deal with or convey truth. The theoretical basis of this view is given in the ‘Excursus on Religion and Truth’ examined in chapter 2 above. I begin by placing this material in the context of the overall argument in ND, reviewing its content in the light of a later clarification, and summarising the ‘rule theory’ of doctrine Lindbeck presents in his fourth chapter. The second section studies Lindbeck’s fifth chapter, in which he argues that his rule theory is superior to propositionalist accounts of doctrine. The discussion highlights some philosophical problems in Lindbeck’s theory, and notes that the propositionalism with which he engages is a simple one that knows nothing of its own historical relativity. The third section takes up the philosophical issues noted in section two, addressing in particular Lindbeck’s use of Wittgenstein and his attachment to the possibility of doctrinal constancy. The problems and possibilities of a historicising propositionalism are left to the following chapter.

5.1 DOCTRINE AS THE PATTERN OF TRUTH

The conclusion of the third chapter of ND marks the end of the first part of Lindbeck’s argument, and opens the way to the second. To this point he has described the problem of interest, briefly stated three alternative approaches to it, dismissed one of those from further consideration, and, in the Excursus, set out the theoretical basis on which his presentation of the nature of doctrine will proceed. Thus, in a way, the entire first half of ND is an introduction which clears the way for the real substance of the argument: Lindbeck’s epistemological schema and his view of scripture and doctrine in their relation to truth. Only now can real engagement begin, an engagement with those who believe that doctrines deal in truth, and therefore that doctrinal disagreement and doctrinal development should not be explained away, but really explained. Only now do we come to the heart of the matter, as we directly engage the question that motivated Lindbeck’s inquiry: if doctrinal reconciliation can occur without doctrinal change, what then is the nature of doctrine?

5.1.1 The Nature of Truth

The epistemological principles that lie at the heart of Lindbeck’s proposal are introduced in his discussion of ‘unsurpassability’ in the third chapter of ND, developed in more detail in the Excursus at the end of that chapter, and deployed in the theorisation of doctrine in the second

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4 See pp. 37-43 above. It may be helpful to review that section before continuing with this chapter. In what follows I will generally refer to the relevant part of ND as ‘the Excursus’.

5 Compare Bruce Marshall’s (2009, xxiii) similar view of the relation between the two halves of ND.

6 At ND 48-52, Lindbeck proposes that an ‘unsurpassably true’ religion is one in which the conceptual categories maximally enable the making of true religious assertions. See pp. 30-33 above.

7 ND 63-9, see pp. 37-43 above.
section of the fourth chapter (ND 79-84). Although these principles have been vigorously debated, Lindbeck has not felt obliged to modify his views in the light of the discussion. Since 1984 it has been his practice, when referring to matters touching on theories of religion and doctrine, to refer the reader to ND for an account of the position he is assuming in his current work. As far as I am aware, Lindbeck’s only acknowledgment of any need for qualification appears in his grateful response to Bruce Marshall’s sympathetic parallel exegesis of ND and Aquinas on the question of truth, and the qualification involved is less a correction than a clarification.

The clarification concerns the nature of truth (what Lindbeck calls ‘alethiology’) and especially the terms ‘intrasytematic truth’ and ‘categorial truth’. Earlier, we saw that ‘categorial truth’ concerns the appropriateness of the conceptual categories in terms of which propositions may be formulated. True categories are categories that correspond to reality. Lindbeck is aware of the problems of assessing the extent of such correspondence, but he is primarily concerned with drawing to our attention the fact that the truth value of a proposition depends upon the truth value of the categories in terms of which it is expressed, and of the tacit assumptions, and especially the formative and performative contexts, that contribute to its sense.

Marshall pointed out, and Lindbeck accepted, that using the word ‘truth’ in these terms is potentially misleading. For Lindbeck, categories do not affirm or assert anything, and so are not properly considered ‘true’ or ‘false’. They merely create or frustrate the possibility of stating ontological truth or falsehood. Moreover, acceptance of a proposition as being, from some particular point of view, ‘true’, means, in the first instance, that it coheres with other beliefs already held by those who share that point of view. But it does not, without considerably expanding the scope of justification, adequately evaluate the ‘truth’ of the point of view from which coherence is being assessed. Therefore, rather than speaking of ‘categorial truth’ and

8 See Lindbeck 1987, 176 n4; 1988, 6 n2; 1993, 100 n1; 1996b, 145 n4 = 1996a, 222 n2 (p. 294-5); 1997, 423 n2 (p. 448-9).

9 See Marshall 1989, and Lindbeck’s reply (Lindbeck 1989b). The only other reference I have found to any change of mind on Lindbeck’s part is in an article by Mike Higton (1997, 94), who claims that Lindbeck ‘has acknowledged that his treatment of truth claims was seriously confused’. Unfortunately, Higton does not cite any evidence in support of this claim. If it is meant to reflect a reading of the articles by Marshall and Lindbeck to which I refer, then the allegation of ‘serious confusion’ is overstated. Lindbeck’s response to Marshall is certainly not an admission of conceptual confusion. Rather, Lindbeck (1989b, 406) welcomes Marshall as one who ‘has explained the view of truth which I had in mind better than I explained it myself’. Lindbeck and Marshall both see Marshall’s article as clarifying some of the language in Lindbeck’s proposal rather than offering any substantive modification of the proposal itself. The confusion they are prepared to acknowledge is that of readers who may have been misled or confused by Lindbeck’s less than clear terminology.

10 Strictly, epistemology concerns theories of the justification of knowledge. Lindbeck’s proposals in relation to truth have at least as much to do with the nature of truth as with the nature of the justification of statements as true, a point emphasised by Marshall (1989, 354-5) and acknowledged by Lindbeck in his response (1989b, 403-4). Lindbeck (in loc) distinguishes epistemology in the strict sense from ‘alethiology’, the study of the nature of truth, and goes on to note that these are, ‘at least in some contexts, partially independent variables. There is no one-to-one relation between different meanings or theories of truth and the various views as to how we know such and such is true.’ I will generally use ‘epistemology’ to refer to both ‘variables’ unless the argument requires that they be distinguished. Postliberal concern with the ‘structure of knowledge’ is noted by Lints 1993, 664-5.

11 See above, pp. 30 and 38.
‘intrasytematic truth’, it would be more appropriate to speak of categorial adequacy and intrasystematic coherence as criteria relevant to the evaluation of the (ontological) truth status of propositions. Lindbeck’s alethiology may then be re-expressed as follows:

An intrasystematically coherent proposition will be (ontologically) true only to the extent that the system within which it is affirmed is categorically adequate. To the extent that a system’s categories are inadequate, propositions affirmed within that system are neither true nor false but meaningless. Thus, individually, categorial adequacy and intrasystematic coherence are each necessary but insufficient conditions for truth. Together, categorial adequacy and intrasystematic coherence are the necessary and sufficient conditions for (ontological) truth.\(^{12}\)

With this clarification, the basic principles of Lindbeck’s epistemological schema may be summarised as follows: (a) categorial adequacy and intrasystematic coherence, taken together, are the necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of a statement; (b) the relevant context with respect to which the intrasystematic coherence of religious utterances should be assessed is not only other such utterances, but the entire religion as a way of life, ‘a total pattern of speaking, thinking, feeling and acting’ (\(ND\) 64); and (c) propositions are not merely words, but intentional acts of affirmation, expressed in particular contexts and using particular conceptual categories.

Earlier, in dialogue with Delwin Brown, I criticised Lindbeck’s view of religions as static unitary meaning-systems,\(^{13}\) so we can expect that his alethiology will be similarly vulnerable to the extent that it presupposes static categorial systems. This matter is addressed in this chapter’s last section, which explores the viability, sources and consequences of Lindbeck’s attachment to stasis. Here, having heard Lindbeck on the nature of truth, we turn to his account of the nature of doctrine.

5.1.2 Doctrine as Grammar: Lindbeck’s Rule Theory

The crux of Lindbeck’s theory of doctrine is the role of doctrine within his epistemological schema, which in turn clarifies one aspect of the cultural-linguistic theory of religion. According to this theory, a religion is –

a comprehensive interpretive medium or categorial framework within which one has certain kinds of experiences and makes certain kinds of affirmations. In the case of Christianity, the framework is supplied by the biblical narratives interrelated in certain specified ways (e.g., by Christ as center). (\(ND\) 80)

A religion’s categorial framework thus comprises content and pattern, or, by analogy with language, vocabulary and grammar. ‘The vocabulary of symbols, concepts, rites, injunctions and stories is in part highly variable, even though there is a relatively fixed core of lexical

\(^{12}\) This is my adaptation of \(ND\) 64-5 and Marshall 1989, 365-6. Despite Marshall’s \(Trinity and Truth\) (2000) having its genesis in his reading of draft chapters of \(ND\), and although it mentions \(ND\) in several contexts, it does not engage Lindbeck on the nature of truth. At the outset, Marshall notes Lindbeck’s ‘correct and important claims’ that Christians ‘have their own ways of thinking about truth’, and have more options than either servitude to, or isolation from, other epistemic discourses. Given such acknowledgement, it is strange that, without further comment or engagement, ‘little of Lindbeck’s own idiom for making these claims remains’ in Marshall’s work (op. cit. xi).

\(^{13}\) See above, pp. 67 and 88.
elements’. The lexical core is essentially the canonical scriptures, though in practice some parts are omitted or emphasised, and the lexical status of postbiblical confessions is disputed. A religion’s grammar, the interrelations or patterns in which its vocabulary may be combined, is reflected in its doctrines. In essence, the linguistic analogy identifies scripture as the lexicon, and doctrine as the grammar, of the Christian religion. Together, these comprise ‘the abiding and doctrinally significant aspect’ of Christianity (ND 80).

Doctrine conceived as grammar exhibits several characteristics that facilitate theorisation of ecumenical doctrinal agreement: it is constant rather than variable, it eludes complete specification, and it refers to language rather than extra-linguistic reality. If doctrine is the unchanging grammar (and scripture the unchanging vocabulary) of Christianity, then what are commonly perceived as doctrinal changes are really changes in first-order truth claims arising from the application of the Christian interpretive scheme to the shifting worlds that human beings inhabit. Similarly, the variability of religious experience is seen as ‘a function of the interaction of changing selves in changing circumstances with the selfsame story’ (ND 83).

Another metaphor Lindbeck employs to emphasise the constancy of the interpretive scheme is that of the lens. Religions are ‘the lenses through which human beings see and respond to their changing worlds.’ The world may vary enormously while the lens remains the same. These powerful metaphors not only carry the burden of the argument at this point; they also indicate that there is nothing unique or supernatural about the constancy Lindbeck postulates for the Christian interpretive scheme: ‘This is simply the kind of stability that languages, religions, and to a lesser extent cultures, observably have’. The basic grammars of cultures, languages, and religions remain, while the products (such as propositions and experiences) change.

But constancy by itself does not imply availability. ‘Even more than the grammar in grammar books, church doctrine is an inevitably imperfect and often misleading guide to the fundamental interconnections within a religion’ (ND 81). This is because the primary thing is the language itself, rather than the grammar abstracted from it. Grammarians and theologians will not be aware of all the exceptions to every formulated rule. Some rules may reflect transient or superficial features lacking deep roots in the language, and ‘the deep grammar of the language

14 ND 81. Compare this list with the variety of material Delwin Brown included in ‘canon’. Lindbeck acknowledges a similar diversity of identity-forming materials, but, unlike Brown, he is acutely aware that it is a structured diversity. Indeed, his whole argument concerns this structure, the name of which is doctrine.

15 ‘Theological and religious transformations that lead to relativistic denials of an abiding identity (when one assumes constancy must be propositional, or symbolic, or experiential) can be seen, if one adopts rule theory, as the fusion of a self-identical story with the new worlds within which it is told and retold’ (ND 83).

16 ND 83. I still cannot read this statement of Lindbeck’s without a sense of amazement. Although the field of language study to which he had access was less permeated by cultural and literary theory than it is today, there was certainly an awareness of the history of languages, and not only among specialists in language and philology. Did Lindbeck never use an etymological dictionary? However, there is little to be gained from contesting this patently erroneous statement, since Lindbeck is deploying culture and language as explanatory metaphors. He does not say that the constancy of cultures and languages implies that of religions. The former merely provide a useful parallel, and if they did not, the constancy of the lens might have been sufficient illustration. The question of the source of Lindbeck’s commitment to the possibility of doctrinal constancy is examined later in this chapter (see section 5.3.2 The Possibility of Permanence commencing on p. 187 below).
may escape detection’ (82). For all these reasons, there will be occasions when competent
speakers will know that a usage is right or wrong in spite of, rather than because of, the
specified rules. For the same reasons, the competence of such speakers can only be
acknowledged rather than defined (81-2).

Consistent with their grammatical character, doctrines as such, i.e., in their function as norms of
communal belief or practice, are not religious affirmations but rules according to which such
affirmations may be made. Of course, as rules, doctrines are also propositions, but they are
propositions about how religious affirmations work—they affirm nothing about the objects of
such affirmations;17 and the same sentences in which rules are stated may also be used
propositionally or expressively. However, doctrines qua doctrines are second-order propositions
about the formulation of first-order propositions.18 In terms of Lindbeck’s alethiology, doctrines
have a purely intrasystematic function. They reflect the exploration of a religion’s interpretive
framework, not the exploration of the world by means of that framework (ND 80, 84).

These three features—constancy, incomplete availability, and strictly ‘second-order’ function—
provide the combination of continuity and flexibility Lindbeck requires. He can accommodate
Roman Catholic claims for the permanence of church doctrines. Apparently divergent positions
may be reconciled by uncovering the invariant framework applied in different circumstances.
Doctrinal development is viewed as the partial and piecemeal specification of the unchanging
grammar of the gospel. The abstraction of rules from the circumstantial formulations in which
they are instantiated means that the ‘truth’ of doctrines is not erroneously identified with the
‘truth’ of the intellectual and social contexts that informed their construction.

Having presented his theory of doctrine in non-theological terms in the fourth chapter of ND, in
the fifth chapter Lindbeck turns to theological evaluation. Here, the question is whether, in
relation to specific doctrine-theoretical problems, his regulative approach can show itself
superior to a propositional one (experiential-expressive approaches being already discounted).

5.2 LINDBECK’S ENGAGEMENT WITH ‘PROPOSITIONALISM’

This section offers a close reading of Lindbeck’s major engagement with propositional views of
document (ND chapter five), an engagement in which the main lines of argument elaborate hints
given in earlier comments on propositionalism. Since the earlier comments raise important
questions concerning the nature of the propositionalism engaged in Lindbeck’s later argument,
and the means by which he conducts that engagement, the first sub-section below collects and
interprets the relevant comments so as to set the scene for the succeeding sub-sections that
follow Lindbeck’s argument in detail.

17 ‘The rules formulated by the linguist or the logician…express propositional convictions about how language or
thought actually work. These are, however, second-order rather than first-order propositions and affirm nothing about
extra-linguistic or extra-human reality’ (ND 80).
18 On the first-order/second-order distinction, see pp. 40-42 above.
5.2.1 Propositionalism and the ‘Third Approach’

As noted earlier, among the alternatives to his own proposal Lindbeck initially identified not only the two main candidates, but also other approaches in which he saw modified or hybrid forms of the first two. While his response to such approaches made little or no contribution to his argument with experiential-expressivism, his reasoning at that point anticipated an important feature of the later engagement with propositionalism, and thus will repay further attention.

When Lindbeck divides ‘the currently most familiar theological theories of religion and doctrine’ into three types, the ‘third approach’, after the cognitive and experiential-expressive views with which we are now familiar, is one that finds both these approaches religiously significant and valid, and tries to combine them (ND 16). Lindbeck allows that such ‘two-dimensional outlooks’ have been influential, but he finds little reason to give them separate consideration: ‘like many hybrids, this outlook has advantages over one-dimensional alternatives, but for our purposes it will generally be subsumed under the earlier approaches’ (ND 16).

Despite repeatedly acknowledging its advantages, Lindbeck does not treat this outlook as a genuine third alternative, for two reasons. Firstly, approaches of this type have difficulty in coherently combining propositional and experiential-expressive perspectives without resorting to ‘complicated intellectual gymnastics’. The resulting explanations of the phenomena of ecumenical doctrinal agreement ‘tend to be too awkward and complex to be easily intelligible or convincing.’ Secondly, these approaches are ‘weak in criteria for determining when a given doctrinal development is consistent with the sources of the faith’, and hence rely on the magisterium for such decisions to a greater extent than many Catholics, and all Protestants, find desirable (ND 17).

In essence, Lindbeck finds these approaches too complex and tendentious, with complexity being the greater flaw. He concludes that ‘there would be less skepticism about ecumenical claims if it were possible to find an alternative approach that made the intertwining of variability and invariability in matters of faith easier to understand’ (ND 17).

Thus, Lindbeck’s comments on the apparently comprehensive accounts of doctrine offered by Rahner and Lonergan are more concerned with form than substance. He finds them lacking in purity. They are ‘hybrids’, neither one thing nor another, and do not really offer anything that is not already present for refutation in their simpler relatives. Since they lack simplicity they are neither aesthetically pleasing nor ‘easily intelligible’, in contrast to Lindbeck’s own offering. A

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19 See p. 20 above.
20 E.g., ‘theories of the third type…are equipped to account more fully than can the first two types for both variable and invariable aspects of religious traditions’ (ND 17) and ‘two-dimensional views are superior for ecumenical purposes in that they do not a priori exclude doctrinal reconciliation without capitulation as do simple propositionalism and simple symbolism’ (ibid.).
21 Near the end of his first chapter, Lindbeck observes that the ‘major current alternative to one-dimensional experiential-expressive views of doctrine is provided by Roman Catholics such as Rahner and Lonergan’ (ND 24). This turn of phrase flags Lindbeck’s opinion that the ‘hybrid’ does not equally combine the cognitive and experiential-expressive emphases, but rather seeks to find room for cognitive doctrinal affirmations within an experiential-expressive framework. That is, it is less an even-handedly ‘two-dimensional approach’ than a ‘two-dimensional experiential-expressive approach’, which is what he later calls it (ND 56).
LINDBECK’S RULE THEORY OF DOCTRINE

substantive issue (ecumenical non-neutrality) is mentioned, but the emphasis lies on the formal aspects. Lindbeck’s preference for clear and distinct ideas, rather than complexity and difficulty, will emerge as an important theme in his main engagement with propositionalism.

If, in the first half of ND, Lindbeck treats Rahner and Lonergan as relatively enlightened experiential-expressivists, he does not ignore the propositional strand in their theologies. Indeed, his appreciation of this aspect of their work is such that they also appear in the second half of ND as representatives of historicised propositionalism, which is identified as the most viable contemporary alternative to Lindbeck’s own proposal.22 This is the other guise in which a ‘third approach’ appears in Lindbeck’s text.

Acknowledgment of the existence of a more sophisticated propositionalism comes relatively late in ND. Even near the end of his introduction to ‘Doctrines and their Problems’ in chapter 4 (ND 78), the propositionalism Lindbeck describes is the same simple propositionalism introduced in his first chapter and referred to as ‘cognitivism’ or ‘propositionalism’. Here, however, he begins to use a qualifying adjective, as in his summarised critical assessment of ‘traditional propositional notions of authoritative teaching’ (78). This makes the following reference to ‘modified propositional’ theories of doctrine (79) a little less sudden, but it is the first indication in ND that not only experiential-expressivism, but propositionalism too, might exist in more and less worthy formulations.

At this point Lindbeck is leading up to the account of ‘doctrine as grammar’ summarised above. He indicates that the argument will concern the abilities of various theories of doctrine to explain how doctrines ‘can be both firm and flexible, both abiding and adaptable’ (ND 79). On this question, the field of possibilities comprises just two protagonists. Lindbeck’s own cultural-linguistic proposal, with its regulative theory of doctrine is, of course, included. We have already seen (and Lindbeck repeats here) that experiential-expressivism is excluded. The rigidities of traditional propositionalism (‘once true, wholly true, always true’) not only render it incapable of providing an adequate account of both continuity and change in doctrine, but ‘contributed to discrediting the whole doctrinal enterprise’ (ND 78). Hence, for Lindbeck, the only theories that can rival his own as explanations of the phenomena of doctrine are ‘modified propositional’ ones. He also refers to these as ‘modern’ (ND 80), ‘contemporary’ (ND 104) and ‘historicized’ (ND 105), of which I will generally use the last, since, for Lindbeck, the crucial modification of these theories is precisely their historical awareness.

When introducing his rule theory, Lindbeck describes ‘some modern forms of propositionalism’ that seek to overcome the defects of ‘classical’ propositionalism –

22 Lindbeck’s economy with opponents may have contributed to two shortcomings in his argument. Firstly, some of his criticisms of Rahner and Lonergan as propositionalists apply rather to the experiential-expressive aspect of their positions, as will be noted later. Secondly, other significant alternatives have been overlooked. In particular, Lindbeck never addresses propositionalists who entirely eschew experiential-expressive views while including among their propositions the implication of all propositions in human finitude and frailty.
by distinguishing between what a doctrine affirms ontologically and the diverse conceptualities or formulations in which the affirmation can be expressed. They thus allow for the possibility that doctrines have both unchanging and changing aspects (ND 80).

Lindbeck does not, at this stage, compare such theories with his own regulative theory. Rather, the remainder of chapter 4 explores the possibility of treating doctrines as rules, proceeding by way of an exposition of the double metaphor of ‘religion as language, doctrine as grammar’ (Section II, 80-4), and a discussion of the ways in which a regulative theory can account for the phenomena of doctrinal change, firstly in practical (ethical) doctrines and then in theological dogmas (Section III, 85-7). Much of the fifth chapter is taken up with the application of rule theory to ‘the hard cases’—the unconditionality of the Trinitarian and Christological creeds, the irreversibility of Marian dogma, and the infallibility of the church’s teaching office. Only then, near the end of his fifth chapter, does Lindbeck argue that his rule theory is superior to its remaining rival.

It is while discussing the test cases, and not before, that Lindbeck begins to critically compare rule theory with historicised propositionalism. Since, by this point, both of Lindbeck’s original opponents—not only experiential-expressivism but also ‘traditional propositionalism’—have been excluded from consideration, the precise identity of the new protagonist is of considerable interest. We will keep this question in mind as we follow the argument of Lindbeck’s fifth chapter.

5.2.2 Rule Theory and Historicised Propositionalism: Three Test Cases

In his test cases, Lindbeck’s main concern is not with comparisons, but with showing how a rule theory of doctrine works. However, such comparative comments as he offers in the course of this discussion are relevant to the arguments he employs in the last section of the chapter, where comparison with propositionalism becomes the focus of attention.23

In his treatment of the unconditionality of the Nicene creed (ND 92-6), Lindbeck remarks that, to a considerable extent, propositional theories share with the regulative theory an ability lacking in experiential-expressive theories—the ability to separate form from content. The problem for experiential-expressive theories is that

form, when taken in conjunction with context, is inseparable from content (i.e., experience) in the case of nondiscursive symbols, with the result that when the form or context alters, so does the content or substance of the symbol (or of the doctrine insofar as it is construed as a symbol). Thus…those who argue that calling God ‘he’ or ‘she’ changes the very substance of the doctrine are quite right from some experiential-expressive perspectives.24

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23 The following survey of Lindbeck’s test case discussion should not be treated as a balanced summary, since it seeks out the comparative aspects and to that extent does not reflect the main concern of Lindbeck’s text.

24 ND 93. In the same place, Lindbeck also cites the case of those who attack the classical doctrine of the incarnation as a picture of God descending and taking on human flesh. ‘They sometimes object to the hierarchical and authoritarian attitudes which they think this myth evokes and reinforces. One reply to this objection is that context also helps determine the evocative import of a symbol. The myth of the incarnation may function in some cultural or psychological settings to strengthen the self-respect of the downtrodden and oppressed, rather than, as happens in other contexts, to legitimate the condescension of superiors.’ Lindbeck’s argument regarding the ‘separability’ of form and content in non-symbolic theories of doctrines could also have benefited from similar attention to the importance of context (see below).
In contrast to this, it is self-evident that both first-order and second-order propositions (e.g., rules) are separable from the forms in which they are articulated. One and the same proposition can be expressed in a variety of sentences employing a variety of conceptualities (ND 93).

Perhaps the ‘self-evidence’ of this assertion is debatable, but Lindbeck intends only a practical judgement, not a mathematical proof, of the equivalence of different forms (and hence of the separability of form and content). Acknowledging the impossibility of separating content from form as such (content without any form is simply nonexistent), he observes that relative independence between particular contents and particular forms may be demonstrated by restating those contents in another form that is judged to be equivalent. But although propositional and regulative accounts of doctrine both allow for it, such a restatement is ‘easier to do if the doctrines are taken as expressing second-order guidelines for Christian discourse rather than first-order affirmations about the inner being of God or of Jesus Christ’ (94). This is the sole comparative comment in this section of Lindbeck’s text, and it is completely devoid of supporting argument. The remainder of the section discusses and illustrates a regulative approach to the Nicene creed.

Lindbeck finds it ‘beyond the scope of this essay to examine the historical evidence for a regulative rather than propositional interpretation of the origins of the ancient creeds’ (94).

Lindbeck’s discussion of the Marian dogmas (ND 96-8) focuses on the capacity of rule theory to accommodate irreversibility as well as reversibility in relation to these doctrines. The doctrines of Mary’s immaculate conception and bodily assumption reflect the grammar of a faith that affirms Mary’s sinlessness. Their emergence can be viewed as the application of ‘permanently essential rules’ in the context of particular views of sin and human freedom. That is, the rules underlying the Marian dogmas are permanent but conditional: affirmations should be considered reversible when they draw on rules (e.g., concerning sin and human freedom) that appear to be temporary.

In this discussion Lindbeck is concerned with the flexibility and neutrality of rule theory. The theory itself does not prejudge the issues, and is therefore ‘available’ to assist debate. Yet, since one finds propositionalists aplenty both supporting and denying the doctrines of immaculate conception and bodily assumption, propositionalism would appear to be equally flexible and ‘neutral’. But Lindbeck does not make this point, and indeed does not mention propositionalism at all in this context.

Turning to the doctrine of infallibility (ND 98-104), Lindbeck notes that it has more to do with the nature of the church than with the nature of doctrine.

25 ND 93. Presumably, equivalence will be judged by those fully conversant with the various forms and contents involved. The crucial question of competent or authorised judgement is taken up in Lindbeck’s consideration of the church’s teaching office (infallibility). See p. 164 below.

26 The particular illustrations are (1) Athanasius’ dictum that whatever is said of the Father is said of the Son, except that the Son is not the Father; and (2) three rules that Lindbeck believes were operative during the four centuries of Trinitarian and Christological development. He concludes that ‘these creeds can be understood by Christian and non-Christian alike as paradigmatically instantiating doctrinal rules that have been abidingly important from the beginning in forming mainstream Christian identity’ (ND 95). But this remains at the level of possibility. There is no normative argument here, nor indeed anything that could function as a criterion for preferring a regulative theory to an historicised propositional theory.
It is not doctrines but the doctrinal decisions of a community or of teachers within the community which are said to be infallible. Doctrines, in contrast, are not infallible but ‘irreformable’ (though not in the sense that the formulations cannot be changed, but in the sense that they were correct in their original contexts and thus always hold whenever the contexts are in relevant respects sufficiently similar) (ND 98).

He also notes contemporary Roman Catholic views to the effect that infallibility means immunity ‘not from every conceivable defect (for this is true only of God), but from a particular kind of defect. Infallibility…is immunity from ultimately serious error, an error that divides the church definitively from Jesus Christ.’

Lindbeck finds a regulative presentation of this view of infallibility to be relatively straightforward:

Doctrinal definitions are thought of as comparable to grammatical decisions about the correctness or incorrectness of particular usages. They need not involve any grand generalizations about the structure of a religion’s language, much less about ontological realities. To affirm infallibility is simply to claim that the church and/or its magisterium does not mortally violate the grammar of the faith in its solemn decisions on particular issues that are essential to the church’s identity or welfare (ND 98).

Here at last Lindbeck provides some warrant for his assertion that a regulative view of doctrine is superior to a propositional one. Admittedly, he does not explicitly mention propositionalism, but apparently has it in mind as a view that makes ‘grand generalizations about…ontological realities’. It seems that a regulative interpretation has the advantage of a greater economy of assumptions: it refrains from generalising about the structure of a religion’s language or its ontology. It is difficult to take this ‘advantage’ with any seriousness. Lindbeck explains ‘the grammar of the faith’ in terms of his rule theory (and cultural-linguistic theory) according to which, in view of its grammatical function, doctrine as such does not refer to extra-linguistic reality. But the cultural-linguistic theory is, precisely, a grand generalisation about the nature and structure of religious language, and the rule theory is, precisely, a grand generalisation about the relation between doctrine and ontological realities. Perhaps these generalisations are less ‘grand’ than those made under propositionalism, but there is no argument to this effect.

Another advantage Lindbeck attributes to a regulative formulation of the doctrine of infallibility is that it enables the doctrine to be given a ‘partly empirical’ meaning, in that it suggests explanations for how the Holy Spirit operates to preserve the church from error. Thus ‘regulative versions of the doctrine cannot as easily be accused of vacuity as propositional ones’. Lindbeck supports this assertion with an account of the empirical dimension of the regulative understanding of the doctrine of infallibility.

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27 ND 98. Lindbeck cites Rahner as an example. Hans Küng’s view of infallibility as ‘indefectibility’ is similar.
28 ND 99. The ‘thus’ is an interpolation. Lindbeck himself does not supply a connective here, but I think it is clear that he sees the relative non-vacuity of regulative versions of infallibility as following from or being a corollary of the empirical dimension of the regulative formulation. Lindbeck also notes that ‘non-Roman Catholic Christians need not entirely dissent from infallibility when it is thus understood (although the attribution by Vatican I of an infallibility not derived from the consent of the church [non ex consensu ecclesiae] to papal definitions may be irreconcilable with what they could accept)’ (original brackets and italics). However, it seems to me (and Lindbeck’s parenthetic
The empirical meaning given to infallibility under a rule theory of doctrine (but not, apparently, under a propositional theory) arises from consideration of the question noted earlier in relation to the Nicene creed: who are the competent judges of the meaning of the faith? Lindbeck’s answer to this question relies on a grammatical interpretation of the concept of the *consensus fidelium* or *consensus ecclesiae*.

Just as the contemporary linguist tests technical grammatical formulations by seeing whether their ordinary-language consequences are acceptable or unacceptable to competent speakers of the language being investigated, so the student of a religion submits the consequences of doctrinal formulations to the judgement of competent practitioners of that religion: ‘Are they offensive to pious ears?’ to quote a familiar adage (ND 99).

As Lindbeck immediately notes, there are special difficulties in applying such a procedure to pluralistic religions such as Christianity. ‘Who are the competent practitioners? Who have the pious ears? Are they Arians or Athanasians, Catholics or Protestants, the masses of conventional churchgoers or an elite of saints or theologians?’ The identification of competent practitioners would seem to be rather more difficult in religions viewed as cultural-linguistic systems than is the case in natural languages, but Lindbeck notes several tests that may be employed in trying to answer this admittedly difficult question.

Firstly, the investigator will wish to draw upon as wide a consensus as possible, and to that end can reasonably refer ‘to tradition, to magisterial pronouncements (as voices of the tradition and of consensus), and to the canonical writings’. These criteria will allow delimitation of the mainstream of the religion in question (ND 99-100).

But, secondly, membership in the mainstream is no guarantee of competence. ‘Most Christians through most of Christian history have spoken their own official tongue very poorly. It has not become a native language, the primary medium in which they think, feel, act, and dream.’ Linguistic competence is to be sought among those who display an interest in communicating widely. In other words, they must be ‘what in the first centuries was meant by “catholic” or “orthodox”, and what we now generally call “ecumenical”’ (ND 100).

Thirdly, their competence ‘must to some extent be empirically recognizable.’ Like native speakers of natural languages, they will not be tied to fixed formulae but will be able to use their religious vocabulary with grammatical deftness, both faithfully and flexibly.

One might, perhaps, call them flexibly devout: they have so interiorized the grammar of their religion that they are reliable judges, not directly of the doctrinal formulations (for these may be too technical for them to understand), but of the acceptability or unacceptability of the consequences of these formulations in ordinary religious life and language (ND 100).

Lindbeck acknowledges that the application of these tests and the verification of consensus may present insuperable difficulties, yet ‘a kind of unshakable empirical certitude is theoretically comment also indicates) that greater ecumenical acceptance is more likely to be related to his ecclesial understanding of the doctrine than to his grammatical reconstruction of it.

29 See n25 on p. 162 above.
available and asymptotically approachable’ by this means. Indeed, we are already familiar with this kind of certitude: ‘common knowledge’ of mechanics, gravitation, astronomy, and so on, rests on the consensus of those acknowledged as competent in these areas. So with religious doctrines:

They also, given a cultural-linguistic approach, are matters of empirical knowledge. They can be infallibly known as ‘Christian’, as ‘intrasystematically’ even if not ‘ontologically’ true. (The latter kind of certainty is of a logically different kind, for it is faith in the Christian message, not knowledge about it.)

Such is the ‘empirical dimension’ of a regulative understanding of infallibility. Does it support his assertion that ‘regulative versions of the doctrine [of infallibility] cannot as easily be accused of vacuity as propositional ones’? It seems reasonable to claim that, since even in its more moderate formulations the doctrine of infallibility concerns the divine preservation of the church in its relation to Jesus Christ (as in Rahner and Küng), Lindbeck’s separation of the doctrine from ontological realities operates precisely to empty it of meaning. Moreover, Lindbeck has not indicated what exactly he means by the (relative) vacuity of propositional versions of the doctrine of infallibility. If he has in mind a ‘traditional’ propositionalism that ignores the finitude and fallenness of those proposing the propositions, then such a view is indeed vacuous insofar as it ignores the proposers’ humanity. But if he means to refer to an historically aware propositionalism that knows its own vulnerability, then it must be objected that he has not provided any indication that such a view cannot also take into account the empirical dimension he describes. The ideas that a regulative understanding of infallibility is less vacuous than a propositional one, and that an ‘empirical approach’ to consensus supports this assertion, appear, on this analysis, to be vacuous.

Among possible objections to Lindbeck’s account of infallibility, the one that has aroused most concern among the propositionally inclined concerns the adequacy of the certitude that Lindbeck claims for doctrine. Lindbeck himself sums up this objection: ‘Do not believers depend on the infallible testimony of the Holy Spirit, or of Scripture, or of the magisterium, rather than on an empirically based confidence that the consensus fidelium cannot mortally err?’ (ND 101). But for Lindbeck this objection is misguided, in that it depends for its cogency on a mixture of misunderstanding, modernist prejudice and theological error. The misunderstanding is a failure to appreciate the significance of the distinction between intrasystematic consistency and ontological truth. The proper question in relation to infallibility is not the apologetic or ontological question ‘Is Christianity true?’ but the exegetical or grammatical question ‘What is Christian?’. An answer to the first requires ‘what is now fashionably called existential commitment and what was traditionally termed supernatural faith’. The modernist prejudice is the Cartesian presumption that only complete certainty will do in the quest to overcome

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30 ND 101. The distinction here between (on the one hand) what is known to be ‘Christian’, and (on the other hand) what is known to be, parallels Schleiermacher’s distinction between doctrine as description of Christian self-consciousness and knowledge as description of what is objectively the case.

31 ND 99. See also on p. 163 above.

32 It is worth noting that even Lindbeck’s grammatical formulation of the doctrine retains an ontological reference in its concern that the grammar of the faith not be ‘mortalily violated’ on issues ‘essential to the church’s identity or welfare’ (ND 98). Surely the ideas of ‘mortality’ and ‘welfare’ have some contact with the realities of death and well-being?
universal doubt. But this presumption has now long been criticised. As a matter of anthropological fact, conventional certitude always comes first. To doubt without reason what is generally accepted is a pathology. Since all truth is socially constructed and mediated, atheists can easily share with Christians a common criterion for deciding whether the affirmations of the Apostle’s creed are authentically Christian. The theological error to which Lindbeck refers is an inadequate supernaturalism which assumes clear distinctions between reason and nature, empirical certitude and the assurance of faith (ND 101-2).

The other objection considered by Lindbeck relates to the locus of infallibility: where do infallibility, and the teaching authority associated with it, reside (ND 102-4)? Lindbeck canvasses the different kinds of answers given in the Orthodox (infallibility belongs to the church as a whole and is not localised), Roman Catholic (it resides in the magisterium) and Protestant (it resides in Scripture) traditions. In an informative and insightful discussion, his main concern is to show that rule theory is sufficiently flexible to accommodate and make sense of each of these positions, as well as providing a means by which they might (perhaps) be reconciled. However, he again draws a comparison with propositionalism that is not supported by his analysis.

The comparison follows an explanation of how, on a regulative interpretation, the three theories of infallibility ‘become diverse formulations of the same rule, or at least compatible rules of action’ (ND 103). Lindbeck then remarks, ‘if doctrines are rules, then it follows that they will often be reconcilable in circumstances where propositional truths remain adamantly opposed’ (ibid.). But this argument relies on (1) Lindbeck’s view that the doctrine of infallibility belongs more properly in the sphere of ecclesiology than in that of revelation (‘it has more to do with the nature of the church than with that of doctrine’, ND 98); and (2) his awareness that doctrinal formulations are social constructions that reflect particular situations, and are therefore provisional. He has not given any reason why historicised propositionalism could not proceed from the same premises and reach the same conclusion. Moreover, the remark noted above implies that ‘propositionalism’ is unable to take into account the circumstances in which doctrines are formulated. This might be so for the simplistic views that Lindbeck earlier referred to as ‘traditional’ or ‘classical’ propositionalism, but it does not touch the historically-aware forms of propositionalism that (he says) are the main rival to his proposal.

We have now noted all the comparative comments Lindbeck makes in the course of presenting a regulative approach to the ancient creeds, the Marian dogmas and infallibility. He says that, in comparison with propositionalism, rule theory makes it easier to state the same doctrine in different but equivalent terms (ND 93-4), refrains from grand linguistic and ontological generalisations (98), and protects the doctrine of infallibility from accusations of vacuity by way of an empirical understanding of the consensus fidelium (99-101). The first claim is completely unsupported, and the second and third do not distinguish the competing views—rule theory most certainly makes grand generalisations, and there is no reason why a propositional approach could not appropriate an empirical approach to the consensus fidelium. While comparison of regulative and propositional approaches was not Lindbeck’s main goal in this material, such comparative comments as he offers lack any cogency.
Two other features of the discussion call for comment. Firstly, although Lindbeck ruled out ‘classic’ propositionalism as an alternative and apparently intended to engage with historicised propositionalism, he has for the most part continued to refer to ‘propositionalism’ without any qualifying adjective, and some of his comments raise the question as to whether he is really addressing a modified or historicising propositionalism, or merely assimilating it to the simple propositionalism he has already dismissed. That is, the rival position remains ill-defined. Secondly, the discussion unfolded as an exercise in theological imagination: this is how one may go about imagining doctrines as rules. There is little to justify the validity of such a view. Justification is needed even if Lindbeck’s concern is only with the availability, rather than the superiority, of his proposal.33 The necessity is still greater if, as we have seen, Lindbeck wants us to consider treating doctrines as rules rather than as first-order propositions. In the end, he is not content to offer his rule theory as a useful perspective on the doctrinal function of sentences. For him, the essence of a doctrine (or, strictly, of the doctrinal function of a sentence) is that it functions as a rule rather than as a first-order proposition. That is, regulative function is, and propositional function is not, the proper function of doctrine qua doctrine.34 But the negative part of this assertion remains unsupported.

Lindbeck’s main aim in this material was more to display the possibilities of his theory than make comparisons, and he is content to claim in conclusion that a regulative theory is compatible with the dogmas of the major historic traditions and thus provides ‘a framework within which ecumenical agreements and disagreements can be meaningfully discussed’ (ND 104). On this basis he turns in the final section of the chapter to specifically address ‘a comparison of regulative and modern propositional views.’ Having described rule theory in chapter 4, and having argued for its ‘availability’ for ecumenical discussion in the first three sections of chapter 5, Lindbeck will now make a case for its superiority over the only viable alternative.

5.2.3 The Theoretical Superiority of Rule Theory: Ockham’s Razor

Lindbeck begins his argument for ‘The Superiority of a Regulative View’ (ND 104-8) with the observation that there are several points on which regulative and ‘contemporary propositional’ views of doctrine agree. Firstly, a propositional interpretation does not deny that doctrines are rules. Practical doctrines (such as the ‘law of love’) can hardly be taken otherwise.35 Secondly,
both approaches allow that what is essential to the church in one situation may not be essential in another, and thus what is doctrinally significant varies from age to age. Thirdly, Lonergan and other propositionalists now generally insist in opposition to classical propositionalists that, although a doctrinal proposition is permanent, its formulation may vary greatly from period to period and from culture to culture. Lindbeck’s summation of the extent of agreement is of particular interest: ‘Because of these considerations, modified or historicized propositional theories seem no less capable of admitting historical change and diversity than is a rule theory (although, as we shall note, they do so in peculiarly complicated ways)’ (ND 103).

This comment may be at odds with Lindbeck’s earlier remark about the separability of form and content under the two approaches (i.e., that, while both allow for it, it is ‘easier’ under a regulative approach). However, in view of my negative evaluation of his earlier comments I am content that he begins here from an assumption of relative parity. The parenthetical comment indicates that the complexity of historicised propositional theories will feature in the ensuing argument. This echoes Lindbeck’s earlier disdain for the complexity of ‘two-dimensional experiential-expressive’ approaches.

Lindbeck’s argument for the superiority of a regulative view consists of a theoretical strand, examined below, and a practical strand, examined in the following sub-section. The basic question is this: if, as Lindbeck argues, rule theory is available as a genuine option, and if, as he now concedes, historicised propositional theories are ‘no less capable of admitting historical change and diversity than is a rule theory’, why should rule theory be preferred to its rival? The ‘major theoretical dispute’, as Lindbeck puts it, ‘turns on the proper application of Ockham’s razor’ (ND 105). That is, the regulative view of doctrine is to be preferred because it is more economical with hypotheses: ‘From the regulative perspective, propositional interpretations are superfluous. If doctrines such as that of Nicaea can be enduringly normative as rules, there is no reason to proceed further and insist on an ontological reference’ (ND 105-6).

This programmatic statement nicely captures the logic of the argument. Lindbeck is arguing from, rather than for, a regulative view. He is continuing the imaginative exercise used for the test cases, and will now describe how the propositional approach to doctrine appears from a regulative perspective. From that perspective, propositional interpretations will of course appear to require an ‘extra’ hypothesis. But a description of how things look from a particular standpoint cannot by itself constitute a reason for standing at that point. Such a description is necessary to an argument for superiority, but it is by no means sufficient. The fact that ‘in debates between fundamentally different outlooks, there is no neutral point of view from which to adjudicate differences’ (ND 73) does not mean that a comparative conclusion can be sustained without a real comparison. Rather, it calls for a different kind of comparison, in which

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36 Lindbeck has here ‘Second’, but I did not find a ‘First’ to which it attaches. This point appears to be a third item of agreement between the regularative and historicised propositional views of doctrine.

37 See ND 16-7 and pp. 20 and 159 above. In view of Lindbeck’s resort to Rahner and Lonergan as examples of both historicised propositionalism and two-dimensional experiential-expressivism, we should be alert to the possibility that he is merely seeing the same ‘complexity’ from different perspectives, rather than finding complexity in different kinds of approaches to doctrine.
both standpoints are taken up and each is described from the viewpoint of the other. The accuracy of the descriptions can be debated, but a comparative conclusion will always involve some assessment of the viewpoints’ relative cogency and comprehensiveness, and their relative economy with hypotheses. After all, propositionalists might argue from their standpoint that a regulative approach requires ‘extra’ hypotheses about the appropriateness of applying a linguistic metaphor to religion, the nature and function of grammar, and the distinction between first- and second-order propositions. Thus, with as much (and as little) justification as Lindbeck, they might say that an ‘Ockhamist’ argument indicates the ‘superiority’ of their own view. Lindbeck does not consider this or attempt the necessary comparison.

But even Lindbeck’s account of how things look from a regulative standpoint is not without its difficulties, and we will note these before directly addressing his ‘Ockhamist’ argument. After his introductory statement, Lindbeck continues the example of the Nicene creed:

Rule theory does not prohibit speculations on the possible correspondence of the Trinitarian pattern of Christian language to the metaphysical structure of the Godhead, but simply says that these are not doctrinally necessary and cannot be binding. They are like discussions of whether there is a substance-attribute structure of finite entities corresponding to the subject-predicate structure of sentences. Some philosophers...hold that there is..., but this is irrelevant to the linguist. [It] makes no difference for most purposes to the subject-predicate way in which we must speak in order to make sense of the world; and similarly, ontological interpretations of the Trinity do not, or should not, be made communally normative for the way Christians live and think (ND 106).

The linguistic metaphor seems to control Lindbeck’s argument here: questions of the relation of doctrines to reality are like questions of the relation to reality of the subject-predicate structure of sentences. Such questions may be important for some purposes, but, in view of the nature of language (or doctrine), they are of no interest to linguists (or theologians). Just as questions of ontological correspondence are ‘irrelevant to the linguist’, they are also irrelevant to the theologian constituted as grammarian of the Christian language.

However, the same passage shows that ontology is not so easily dismissed. Lindbeck says that one’s answer to the question of whether the structure of reality corresponds in some way to the grammatical structure of sentences ‘makes no difference for most purposes to the subject-predicate way in which we must speak in order to make sense of the world.’ Surely, if humans use language ‘in order to make sense of the world’, this implies some kind of ontological relation? Or, if Lindbeck really wants to keep ontology at arm’s length as a dispensable hypothesis, then the phrase ‘of the world’ is an unfortunate slip; it should have been omitted or

38 A similar problem is evident in Lindbeck’s use of Ockham’s razor to indicate the dispensability of the expressivist hypothesis of pre-linguistic (or ‘unthematised’) purely private experiences (ND 38). He argues that because religious experience can be accounted for without resorting to the expressivist hypothesis, the hypothesis is not needed and can be dispensed with. But he is not so much removing an unnecessary hypothesis from an otherwise coherent group of hypotheses, as replacing one group of hypotheses (which includes experiential-expressivism) with another (which doesn’t). As in the present case, a more extensive argument would be required to deal with alternative groups of hypotheses in an Ockhamist fashion.
replaced with ‘to each other’. Then ‘making sense (to each other)’ would be a matter of the proper (i.e., ruled) use of the various elements of the shared language.

In any case, the element of necessity (‘the way in which we must speak’) reflects the givenness of language. And language is given in the fact that each human being is born into a pre-existing particular linguistic community. This pre-existence determines how we must speak if we are to make sense to those who already speak this way, and we do speak because language is a primary means by which they engage with us and enable us to engage with them as, together with them, we engage the world. That is, the world is also given, and, for humans, never given without language. Nor is language given without world: each is received in and with the other—we never have them as separable entities. Separation of language and world may be possible for beings that can separate themselves from the world, but such a being is a pure Cartesian res cogitans and not a human. To the extent that Lindbeck’s rule theory entails or assumes the possibility of such separation, it is unavailable for human use.

To illustrate the point that ontological reference is both unnecessary and irrelevant to doctrine qua doctrine, Lindbeck invokes a comparison with scientific theories.

These, like Trinitarian and Christological theories, need not be given a metaphysical interpretation, although in both cases it might be legitimate for certain purposes to give such an interpretation. Aristotelian, Newtonian, and Einsteinian theories of space and time, for example, are evaluated scientifically quite independently of the metaphysical question of which is closer to the way things really are.

This is simply false. It may be that philosophers of science such as Polanyi, Kuhn and Lakatos have made us aware that scientific theories are accepted or rejected, not simply on the basis of experimental data, but for a whole complex of explicit and tacit reasons. However, acceptance of their insights by no means entails the conclusion that scientific evaluation of theories is ‘quite independent of the metaphysical question of which is closer’ to reality. Granted, scientific theories should not be taken as direct metaphysical descriptions of reality, but they do describe the kind of reality that might respond in the ways in which reality actually responds when we interrogate it in certain ways. Perhaps we cannot be as confident of the veracity of scientific theories as we can of the veracity of empirical data, but it is only our theories, creatively inferred from the data and complex traditions of inquiry, that give data meaning.

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39 This is one of Wittgenstein’s basic insights, well brought out in Kerr 1997, and in Patterson 1991.
40 ND 106. Lindbeck considers alternative evaluations of these three theories: evaluated ontologically (assuming ‘relativity is ontologically true’), Aristotle and Einstein are superior to Newton; but evaluated scientifically (‘e.g., for predictive purposes’) each is superior to the theories that preceded it historically. But this entirely misses the point. Ontological evaluation is simply unavailable other than through some combination of predictive power, comprehensiveness, fruitfulness, simplicity, elegance, and other ‘scientific virtues’ mentioned in the literature of the philosophy of science. But while direct ontological evaluation is unavailable, it is nevertheless ontological curiosity (together with commercial, military and political ambition) that drives scientific endeavour. The fact that all ontological conclusions are creative inferences and provisional hypotheses should not be allowed to obscure their function as working hypotheses concerning what reality is and how we may deal with it.
41 For this reason I would not want to overstress the distinction between the kind of veracity we impute respectively to scientific theories and to empirical data. Theories are (hopefully) supported by data, albeit it in complex and subtle
Lindbeck suggests that ontological reference is ‘similarly’ dispensable in theology as he thinks it is in science. In the debate over the distinction between the economic and immanent trinities, some theories ‘may or may not correspond better to the triune reality of God’ than others, but this question is ‘unanswerable’ this side of the Eschaton’ and is in any case ‘irrelevant to theological assessment’ (ND 106). Let us take these objections in order. Since Lindbeck notes that Rahner and Lonergan, at least, find the question answerable (even if their answers differ), his own view that the question is ‘unanswerable’ shows only that he has not (yet) found decisive arguments on either side. If the reference to the Eschaton is more than rhetorical, it is puzzling: the provisionality of any conclusions does not make the trinitarian question at all unusual—all knowledge is provisional to some degree. Lindbeck’s unequivocal language here may indicate that, by ‘unanswerable’, he means ‘cannot be answered with absolute certainty’. Taking definitive ontological reference to be impossible, he opts to make ontological reference dispensable. But definitive ontological reference and dispensable ontological reference have this in common: they are possible for Cartesian egos, not for human beings. A better alternative is not to make reference dispensable, but to dispense with the desire for Cartesian certainty.42

Turning to the assertion that ontological reference is ‘irrelevant to theological assessment’, Lindbeck proposes the following theological criterion:

Which theory is theologically best depends on how well it organizes the data of Scripture and tradition with a view to their use in Christian worship and life. In terms of these specifically theological criteria, there may be good or bad theories on both sides of the ontological dispute regarding the economic and immanent aspects of the Trinity. The question of the ontological reference of the theories may often be unimportant for theological evaluation (ND 106).

Here I sympathise with Alister McGrath’s frustration over Lindbeck’s relaxed attitude towards the origin of theological ‘data’.43 Lindbeck distinguishes sharply between the data of scripture and tradition on the one hand, and ontology and metaphysics on the other, in that he wants theological evaluation to be based only on the former and not on the latter. For him, scripture and tradition seem to be simply there, without provenance or historical connection to a wider reality. But I question whether Christians can use these data in worship and life while leaving aside the question of their relation to reality.44 Lindbeck might object that he is not speaking of the use of Scripture and tradition in Christian worship and life, but calling for the theological assessment of doctrinal proposals to be conducted having regard to those sources used in that way. This distinction,
between Christian life and worship as ‘first-order’ activities and the formulation and evaluation of doctrine as ‘second-order’ activities, is crucial to Lindbeck’s whole discussion of doctrine, and is examined it later in this chapter. Here I merely highlight a tension within Lindbeck’s theory between the Christian ‘language’ and its theological/doctrinal ‘grammar’.

Lindbeck wants technical theology to set aside the question of truth as it sets about discerning, formulating and evaluating the ‘grammatical’ patterns of Christian life and worship. But it can do so only if it also sets aside any claim to be really dealing with Christian life and worship. For it is basic to that life and worship that they are vitally concerned with the living God; Christians do not worship their own tradition and its scriptures, but rather the living God to whom the tradition and scriptures bear witness. This being so, Lindbeck’s bracketing of the question of truth prejudges the issue. In a significant respect, he has predefined what the grammar of Christian language must be, and has determined that any elements falling outside that definition will be ignored. That is, even a ‘pure’ rule theory cannot escape ‘the problem of reference’: if doctrine and technical theology refer only to the grammar (and not to the truth) of the Christian ‘cultural-linguistic system’, they should nevertheless refer to that system (or that complex of systems), not to an idealised system that is in conspicuous ways predetermined so as to be more amenable to scholarly grammarians who prefer not to be surprised.

Earlier, we noted Lindbeck’s criticism of the cognitive and experiential-expressive approaches for their indebtedness to modernity (ND 51). We have now seen that his own proposal is similarly indebted. His disdain for ‘hybrid’ hypotheses reflects a strong preference for simplicity, and for clear and distinct ideas, and his separation of language from world (implied in the dispensability of ontological reference) requires a disembodied Cartesian self. Related to this, Lindbeck’s rule theory requires a separation between, on the one hand, scripture and tradition as these form and inform Christian life and worship, and, on the other hand, ontology, so that doctrinal proposals may be assessed in terms of the former and not the latter. I have argued (briefly, at this stage) that such separation is at odds with the ‘grammar’ of Christian faith as evidenced in scripture, tradition and Christian life and worship.

Now, in maintaining that Lindbeck’s rule theory does not adequately account for the realities of human existence generally, and of Christian life in particular, I am assuming the priority of reality over theory, and this is precisely the point at which Lindbeck’s argument is not a ‘proper application of Ockham’s razor’. Ockham’s razor—‘universals should not be multiplied beyond necessity’—is two-edged, involving both economy with hypotheses and attention to necessity, which Lindbeck understands differently to Ockham. We have seen that Lindbeck assumes a regulative viewpoint and discards hypotheses that are ‘unnecessary’ to that viewpoint. That is, his ‘necessity’ is formal: it reflects the requirements of logic and coherence. Ockham’s necessity, however, was very much a material one reflecting the contingency of creation. For him, God’s

45 See p. 191 below.
46 The terminology of ‘systems’ reflects Lindbeck. It will be clear from earlier sections (especially 3.2 A ‘Cultural-Linguistic’ Liberal Theology commencing on p. 63) that I find the idea of religions as unitary systems unsatisfactory. That the tension identified here is such that Lindbeck’s proposal is seen to be not merely wrong, but internally incoherent on the matter of reference, is neatly indicated by Francis Watson (see n140 on p. 257 below).
omnipotence meant that all things were contingent (i.e., manifestations of divine grace) and, in this sense, nothing was necessary. Thus the great necessity for hypotheses is that they take into account and explain what actually (contingently) is. Perhaps the usual English expression of the razor, given above, emphasises the principle of parsimony, whereas Ockham sought to combine parsimony and particularism, with the former serving the latter: ‘evidence and meaning for universals must be derived from the knowledge of individuals.’\(^{47}\) Granted, hypotheses should be multiplied only so far as the data require, but equally, they should be removed only so far as the data allow, which may not be so far as allowed by one’s preferred theory. In that he allows the cultural-linguistic metaphor to lead him into unrealistic separations (language from world, doctrine and scripture from reality), Lindbeck’s argument is less Ockhamist than reductionist.\(^{48}\)

The theoretical strand of Lindbeck’s argument for the superiority of rule theory does no more than describe what might follow if a certain premise were granted. His discussion arrives at rule theory because it proceeds from it, and always sees the nature of doctrine from a regulative standpoint. There were no substantive reasons (real comparisons) or successful formal reasons (Ockham’s razor) to justify adopting this position, and examination of Lindbeck’s examples provided reasons to the contrary. The view he describes can hardly be available to human beings.

5.2.4 The Practical Superiority of Rule Theory: Doctrinal Theology and Christian Life

Although the theoretical strand of Lindbeck’s argument does not succeed, consideration of the practical application of rule theory might indicate the possibility of desirable outcomes. If so, this would warrant further consideration of the theory, if in a modified form. Lindbeck suggests that the application of rule theory would result in two positive outcomes that a propositional approach would not achieve. Firstly, rule theory would be more inclusive of divergent points of view than a propositional approach. The trinitarian example continues:

If the doctrine is a rule or conjunction of rules for, among other things, the construction of Trinitarian theories, then both types of theory we have mentioned [i.e., those that distinguish between the immanent and economic trinities, and those that don’t] can be doctrinally correct, providing they conform to the same rules. If, however, the doctrine is a proposition with ontological reference, only one of type of theory has a chance of being true because the theories disagree on what the ontological reference is.

This is not simply a technical divergence: the practical disadvantages of the propositional view are considerable. The propositional view suggests that one of the two main streams of Christian theological thinking about the Trinity is unwittingly heretical, even though the church has not yet made up its mind which one. Given this grave implication, there must be

\(^{47}\) Cunliffe-Jones and Drewery 1978, 286 (editorial note appended to the essay by Dom David Knowles).

\(^{48}\) Compare McGrath: ‘A necessary prelude to any theory of doctrine is a precise understanding of the genesis of doctrine, of the factors which stimulate and govern doctrinal formulation, in all their historical and systematic complexity. Lindbeck’s theory of doctrine ultimately rests upon his perception that ‘cultural-linguistic’ insights already finding application within the social sciences ought to find their way into theological reflection: the phenomenon of doctrine is then effectively reduced to this model, with history being treated in an atomistic manner as a convenient quarry for illustrative material for the model’ (GD 33-4, original italics).
very good reasons indeed for saying that the doctrine of the Trinity is propositional as well as regulative, but it is not at all apparent that either party to the dispute has even attempted to supply them (ND 106-7).

On a regulative view, then, theories that conform to the same rules will have the same status vis-à-vis orthodoxy. But if doctrines are rules or conjunctions of rules, it follows that the differences between the trinitarian theories reflect differences between underlying sets of rules. It seems, then, that we must distinguish between two classes of rules: those that, in the church’s judgement, define the limits of orthodoxy and are therefore essential; and those that don’t, and are therefore optional. If a theory is considered orthodox, this reflects a judgement that it does not transgress any of the rules currently considered essential. But perceptions of rules are just as much subject to human construction and judgement as are perceptions of reality. Unless doctrinal development is ruled out, we must allow that the church might decide in future to acknowledge as essential a new rule or one previously considered optional. Unless fallibility is ruled out, we must allow that the church might decide that a rule previously considered essential should really be made optional. Either possibility might result in at least one of the trinitarian theories being ruled unorthodox. That is, rule theory can be exclusive as well as inclusive.

On the other side, propositionalism’s alleged disadvantage arises not from the problems of ontological reference but from Lindbeck’s tendentious description, in which propositionalism’s metaphysical inclinations cannot rest short of an ultimate clarity in which one theory alone remains orthodox and all others are shown to be heretical. An approach so totally ignorant of its own vulnerability and provisionality as human knowledge is hardly responsible Christian theology, but rather an extreme form of the simplistic propositionalism mentioned early in ND, with the addition here of an inability to appreciate the difference between truth and orthodoxy. An historically-aware propositionalism could avoid such errors by proposing that human intellectual and moral capacities are finite and time-bound; that reality may be absolute, but human access to it is not; that truth may be one, but human perceptions of it are legion. Lindbeck’s claim that ‘only one type of theory has a chance of being true’ is beside the point. It may be that neither, or one, or both of the theories reliably intimates some aspect (or different aspects) of the divine reality. To the extent that the theories’ truth status can be assessed at all, this can be done only by examining the same evidence available under a regulative approach, though without a priori ruling out reference to reality. The church in its wisdom or otherwise might find such assessments inconclusive, so that neither theory could be definitively judged superior. And even if a definitive judgement were thought possible on certain questions, it has always been the case (and would that it had been more the case!) that the church has

49 Doctrinal development or fallibility would be ‘ruled out’ if their affirmation transgressed one of the essential rules.

50 Perhaps some of the Protestant scholastics come close to such ignorance. But even in the post-Reformation controversies, when disputants commonly agreed (if only implicitly) that ‘truth is one and error legion’ and thus felt duty bound to consign each other to hell, there was a general acknowledgment that human knowledge was at best partial, a matter of ‘seeing in a glass darkly’. Human knowledge of the disputed matters was seen as incomplete in the manner of all human thought, but not any less truly knowledge on that account. For an informative discussion, see Soskice 1993.

51 It is not clear from Lindbeck’s text whether this misunderstanding should be attributed to Lindbeck’s ‘propositionalist’, or to Lindbeck himself.
acknowledged a diversity of opinions within orthodoxy. The question of truth is not precisely the same as the question of orthodoxy. If the church ‘has not yet made up its mind’, that does not mean that it must do so eventually, nor even that it should desire to do so. That is, historicised propositionalism can be inclusive as well as exclusive.

I suggest that neither view of doctrine is intrinsically advantaged or disadvantaged with respect to inclusivity. The first ‘practical advantage’ of rule theory over propositionalism owes less to the theories themselves than to the respectively inclusive and exclusive attitudes imputed to their exponents. Moreover, Lindbeck has once again miscast his opponent. The propositionalism he finds wanting is clearly of the Cartesian variety. He finds grave difficulties with this propositionalism, as well he might, for it implies an anthropology that has no place in Christian thinking. This propositionalism does indeed have ‘considerable practical disadvantages’ in comparison with rule theory, and even more so in comparison with the historicised propositionalism that is meant to be, but in fact is not, the alternative view in the comparison.

The second ‘practical advantage’ that Lindbeck identifies is that under a regulative approach ‘theological reflection on doctrine becomes directly relevant to the praxis of the church’ as ‘attention is focused on the concrete life and language of the community’. In contrast, under a propositional approach doctrinal theology becomes mere word-play, an ‘endless process of speculative reinterpretation’ (ND 107). Lindbeck supports this claim with a contrast ‘between interpreting a truth and obeying a rule’, beginning with propositionalism’s disadvantage.

Perhaps the best way to sum up the practical difference between propositional and regulative approaches is by considering the contrast between interpreting a truth and obeying a rule. If, to shift examples, the immortality of the soul is a first-order proposition, then those who stand in a tradition for which this has been doctrine, but find its mind-body dualism unacceptable, are obligated to discover what truth it enunciates, however improbable this truth may seem from the dualistic viewpoint of the original formulators. They are virtually forced into that

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52 I would argue that, in relation to doctrine, inclusivity and exclusivity have more to do with the church’s attitude to diversity and its understanding of the ecclesial function of declarations of orthodoxy. They have less to do with whether diversity and orthodoxy are understood grammatically or ontologically.

53 In view of the earlier careful distinction between doctrines and assertions about reality, the claim that rule theory results in doctrinal theology of greater concreteness and communal relevance is surprising to say the least. Indeed, reduction of theology to mere word-play would seem to be particularly likely in a proposal that (a) likens doctrine to formal grammar, and (b) dismisses the question of ontological reference as irrelevant.

54 ND 107. Lindbeck illustrates the contrast with quotes from Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations: ‘there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call “obeying a rule” and “going against it” in actual cases’ (§201); and ‘Any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning’ (§198). Lindbeck has mistaken the topic here. Wittgenstein is considering rules and their meaning, i.e., what we mean by ‘following a rule’, and his point is that the meaning of rules remains indeterminate in the absence of concrete actions to which they are taken to be relevant. He is not distinguishing between ‘rule’ and ‘truth’, nor between ‘following a rule’ and ‘interpreting a truth’. Rather, the distinction he makes is that between interpreting a rule and following it. Interpretation of truth may not be entirely irrelevant, but it is not part of Wittgenstein’s comparison. In view of later argument (see below, 5.3.1 Learning from Wittgenstein beginning on p. 181) it is worth noting that Wittgenstein’s remarks on rules appear within a discussion of the nature of language as a patterned technique enmeshed in a wider context of customary actions.
endless process of speculative reinterpretation which is the main stock-in-trade of much contemporary theology, both Protestant and Catholic (ND 107).

It seems that, as background presuppositions change, propositionalists are forced into an ‘endless process of speculative reinterpretation’. Lindbeck clearly presupposes that the end result of propositionalist reflections must be the preservation, in however tenuous a form, of the doctrine in question, as though propositionalists had no other option than ‘reinterpretation’. But to the extent that a doctrine is bound up with concepts or ways of thinking that are now judged inadequate, the doctrine itself must be questioned as to its adequacy. One would hope that the original formulators of the doctrine were genuinely seeking to respond to their intellectual and cultural milieux in ways that authentically reflected the dynamic of the gospel and its witness to Jesus Christ. But there are other possibilities: the possibility that the intellectual and cultural tools available to them were inadequate to the task; the possibility (or likelihood) that they remained unaware of some their most basic presuppositions and hence (or otherwise) failed to consider that these might conflict with the gospel (let alone with later knowledge); and also the possibility of flaws in their theological reasoning. And the same possibilities are ever-present also for us. But that neither excuses a propositionalist from responsibly putting the question of truth, nor invalidates the exercise of that responsibility. Lindbeck’s criticism once again addresses a ‘classical’ (once true, exactly true, always true) propositionalism, but hardly touches one that knows the difference between human knowledge and that of angels.

As to the ‘speculative’ nature of reinterpretation, this criticism may be better applied elsewhere. Lindbeck is presumably contrasting a ‘speculative’ theology with one that fulfils his own vision for a theology that draws on one source only, namely, Christian scripture and tradition.55 Leaving aside the fact that this is precisely what Lindbeck himself has not done, it seems to me that those most engaged in ‘speculative reinterpretation’ of doctrine are not propositionalists but modernist and revisionist theologians (process theologians might be a good example) who reinterpret doctrine in terms of contemporary philosophy. Although such interpreters are propositionalists in their own way, in Lindbeck’s typology they belong to the ‘experiential-expressivist’ group.

Lindbeck’s ‘propositionalists’, who exalt scripture and tradition (with some professing to draw on these sources only), are among those least likely to indulge in ‘speculation’. If they are what Lindbeck calls ‘traditional’ or ‘classical’ propositionalists, who do not recognise the humanity and therefore the vulnerability of doctrine and of their own reflections on it, then they can be charged with failing to recognise and correct their tacit adoption of modernity’s infamous ‘view from nowhere’. But this is less an act than an omission: they are not so much guilty of ‘speculation’ as innocent of proper critical and biblical reflection. Historicized propositionalists, asking ‘what must we now say, based on scripture (and tradition)?’, know that theology’s work is intrinsically endless, not because of a speculative method or basis, but because the church constantly engages a changing ‘now’. Thus Lindbeck’s criticism of ‘propositionalism’ once again misses its mark.

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55 The preferred source may be qualified in terms of use, e.g., the theological evaluation of a doctrinal proposal turns on ‘how well it organizes the data of Scripture and tradition with a view to their use in Christian worship and life’ (ND 106).
From the ‘practical disadvantage’ of propositionalism’s endless reinterpretations, Lindbeck turns to the practical advantage which accrues to rule theory because it focuses attention on the concrete life and language of the community.

Because the doctrine is to be followed rather than interpreted, the theologian’s task is to specify the circumstances, whether temporary or enduring, in which it applies. In the first [i.e., the propositional] case, as Wittgenstein might say, language idles without doing any work, while in the second case, the gears mesh with reality and theological reflection on doctrine becomes directly relevant to the praxis of the church. The question raised in reference to Nicaea and Chalcedon is not how they can be interpreted in modern categories, but rather how contemporary Christians can do as well or better in maximizing the Jesus Christ of the biblical narratives as the way to the one God of whom the Bible speaks (ND 107).

This completes the contrast: if doctrine is ‘followed rather than interpreted’ not only is endless reinterpretation avoided but theological reflection becomes directly relevant to praxis. It does so because, in a regulative approach, the theologian’s work is not ‘reinterpreting’ doctrine-as-truth but ‘specifying the circumstances’ in which doctrine-as-rule applies. This argument relies on at least three presuppositions: that the doctrine to be followed is already definitively known, so that doctrinal criticism is unnecessary; that ‘specification of circumstances’ is distinct from interpretation (‘doctrine is to be followed rather than interpreted’); and that such specification engages reality while reinterpretation does not. Let us consider each of these in turn.

Regarding the first presupposition, recall that for Lindbeck doctrine is not available directly or completely, but must be inferred from scripture as it is used in Christian life and worship. Yet here theological reflection on doctrine bypasses this limitation and the inferential work imposed by it, focussing instead on ‘specifying the circumstances’ in which a given doctrine should apply. But how is a given doctrine ‘given’? And how could it be given so clearly and unequivocally that inquiry into its origins or warrantability would be unnecessary? Since, as Lindbeck acknowledges, every formulation of doctrine reflects the circumstances of its time and place, and since humans receive doctrine only in historically conditioned formulations, doctrinal criticism is essential to theological reflection even under rule theory. Indeed, rule theory requires that an attempt be made to distinguish changeless rule from transient circumstance in every doctrinal formulation, since what is to be followed is the abiding rule rather than its circumstantial trappings.

The second presupposition underlying rule theory’s ‘practical advantage’ is the distinction between interpretation of truth and specification of circumstances. This distinction is spurious, for three reasons. Firstly, as Lindbeck insists, meaning is bound up with context. If, as he also insists, the contexts relevant to doctrines are the forms of life in which they are used and in which they acquire truth value when appropriately followed as rules, then ‘specification of circumstances’

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56 See p. 157 above.
57 In relation to the Nicene creed and Chalcedonian definition, ND 96: ‘though the ancient formulations may have continuing value, they do not on the basis of rule theory have doctrinal authority. That authority belongs rather to the rules they instantiate. …it is at least plausible to claim that Nicaea and Chalcedon represent historically conditioned formulations of doctrines that are unconditionally and permanently necessary to mainstream Christian identity. …they are permanently authoritative paradigms, not formulas to be slavishly repeated.’
would seem to be just as much concerned with questions of meaning as are propositional ‘reinterpretations’. Secondly, as Lindbeck’s Christological example reminds us, what is to be followed is not the credal formulation itself but the unchanging rules it instantiates. But whether or not such unchanging rules exist, our knowledge of them cannot be unchanging, and the process of discerning them (and specifying the relevant circumstances) will necessarily be an interpretive one. Nor, unless Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic regulators are somehow less human than his propositionalist reinterpreters, is there any reason to think that the interpretations by the former will be any less endless than those of the latter. Thirdly, Lindbeck has not noted Wittgenstein’s careful distinction between actually following a rule and only talking about doing so. For Wittgenstein, such talk is always interpretation. In PI §202 he says: ‘And hence also “obeying a rule” is a practice. And to think one is obeying (folgen) a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule “privately”: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same as obeying it.’ The first ‘hence’ follows on from §201 which distinguished between interpreting and following rules. Although one can think one is obeying a rule when one actually is obeying it (though in such an action the rule itself would not usually be the focus of one’s attention), merely to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Lindbeck’s ‘specification of circumstances’ seems to me to be at least as abstract as the ‘thinking of obeying’ remarked on by Wittgenstein. The specification of circumstances surely requires, at the very least, consideration of what ought and ought not to be involved in following such-and-such a rule, that is, it is interpretation. In sum, the presence or absence of (re)interpretation is not a criterion that allows the regulative and propositional approaches to be distinguished.

The third presupposition required for rule theory’s ‘practical advantage’ is that specification of circumstances engages reality while reinterpretation does not. This, too, is mistaken. Lindbeck suggests that in propositionalism’s reinterpretations ‘language idles without doing any work’, but the identity of his opponent remains problematic. The metaphor of idling language might be applied to a liberal/revisionist theologian seeking to reinterpret traditional beliefs so as not to offend sophisticated (post)modern ears. It might also be applied to a traditionalist theologian

58 Wittgenstein makes much the same point. Having indicated that an interpretation of a rule does not exhaust its meaning, and that a rule can be grasped in a way that is not interpretation but can nevertheless be exhibited, he concludes §201 of the Philosophical Investigations with the following observation: ‘Hence, there is an inclination to say: every action according to the rule is an interpretation. But we ought to restrict the term “interpretation” to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another.’ Wittgenstein does not want to say that each following of a rule is (or even displays) an interpretation, but this is because ‘interpretation’ (Deuten) in common usage refers to verbal re-expression rather than practical demonstration. There is no question that both following (folgen) and interpreting (deuten) deal in meaning, but meaning is a matter, not of words only, nor of dumb action only, but of an engagement with and participation in the world using the techniques of action (including the action of speech). Compare the remark in On Certainty §65: ‘When language-games change, then there is a change in concept, and with the concepts the meanings of words change’ (cited in Lash 1984, 26).

59 Of course, I believe Lindbeck’s regulators are ‘somehow less human’. It has been my intention in the preceding discussion to indicate various ways in which Lindbeck’s proposal subtly assumes the existence of regulators who, while appearing in human form, are members rather of the Cartesian race.

60 See n54 and n58 above.

61 I discuss Lindbeck’s use of Wittgenstein more fully below (see 5.3.1 Learning from Wittgenstein, p.181).
glorifying in the preservation and repetition of yesteryear’s formularies. Such theologies, where they exist, provide more comfort than engagement. They tell soothing bed-time stories that let the hearers relax in the illusion that the tale is familiar and the end already known. They do not tell open stories into which the hearers are invited, and in which the hearers participate in the outworking of events. It seems to me that theologies, whether propositionalist or expressivist, that genuinely embrace and support the church’s engagement with the world cannot really be said to produce language that ‘idles without doing any work’. In particular, such a criticism does not touch the historicised propositional approach with which Lindbeck is supposedly engaging.

On a regulative view, ‘the gears mesh with reality and theological reflection becomes directly relevant to…praxis’ because it focuses on ‘specifying the circumstances’ in which a doctrine applies. What Lindbeck means by ‘circumstances’ is indicated in his earlier classification of doctrines according to their applicability (ND 84-8).62 Introducing this discussion, he noted that ‘the disagreement [between regulative and propositional approaches] centers on beliefs about what is ontologically true, rather than on practical doctrines (which are by definition rules rather than truth claims)’.63 The impression of separation between belief and ethics is reinforced by a distinction between ‘practical doctrines’ and those that ‘propose’ or ‘concern’ beliefs (ND 85, 86).64 Consistent with this distinction, the circumstances Lindbeck finds relevant to the applicability of practical doctrines concern the practical environment (the possibilities of nuclear war, reproductive technology, etc, ND 85-6), while the circumstances relevant to ‘doctrines that propose beliefs’ are largely conceptual (ND 86-7). That is, the circumstances relevant to the doctrines at the centre of the disagreement between regulative and propositional approaches are not very ‘concrete’ after all. ‘Circumstances’ such as mind-body dualism or the cultural relativism of late modern capitalism are scarcely more concrete than the changing worldviews that provoke the allegedly ‘idle language’ of propositionalism’s reinterpretations.65 Lindbeck’s distinction between ‘practical doctrines’ and ‘doctrines that concern beliefs’ suggests that the degree of concreteness in theological reflection mostly reflects the content of the doctrine being reflected on.

To summarise, the claims of ‘practical advantage’—that a regulative view of doctrine provides greater inclusivity of outcomes and greater concreteness of reflection than a propositional approach—are not warranted by the arguments Lindbeck provides. Church councils’ inclusion

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62 I have already briefly mentioned this section of ND. See p. 167 above, especially n35.
63 ND 85. By ‘practical doctrines’ Lindbeck means ethical prescriptions (e.g., ‘the law of love’, pacifism, feeding the poor, sexual ethics, slavery) and customs (e.g., Sunday and Christmas celebrations, driving on the right (or the left)).
64 This distinction can be disputed (e.g., while actions that are merely customary could be described as rules rather than truth claims, this is not so for ethical prescriptions, because beliefs are always intimately involved in ethics). However, the point here concerns what follows from this distinction in Lindbeck’s argument.
65 Lindbeck’s text hints at the possibility that his assertion of greater concreteness has simply been carried over from the earlier discussion of ‘practical doctrines’. Having set out his ‘taxonomy of doctrines’ using examples drawn from practical doctrines (which are undoubtedly rules), he asserts that ‘if doctrines that propose beliefs are treated as rules, the same scheme can be applied to them’ (ND 86). Admittedly, Lindbeck explicitly applies the ‘this is really the same as that’ argument only in respect of his taxonomical scheme, but the question of the relative concreteness of the relevant circumstances is otherwise absent from the text until it resurfaces in the passage we have been considering, on p. 107. Whether or not Lindbeck’s claim of greater concreteness for regulative theology actually arises in this way, I have not found any other support for it in his text.
or exclusion of proposed doctrines probably has more to do with delegates’ attitudes to doctrinal diversity than the theories of doctrine to which they subscribe. Under rule theory and propositionalism alike, theological reflection on doctrine is an ongoing critical and interpretive process. The level of concreteness achieved in theological reflection is likely to be similar under both approaches, being determined mainly by the content of the doctrine being considered. Not only does each argument fall short of demonstrating the practical superiority claimed for rule theory, but the case as a whole displays faults observed in earlier material: as noted in relation to the three test cases, Lindbeck engages simple propositionalism rather than its historicising relative; and, as in his theoretical case for rule theory, he assumes a Cartesian viewpoint that is unavailable to humans who are essentially, and not optionally, bodily embedded in the world.

5.2.5 Engagement Unfulfilled

I have found Lindbeck’s whole engagement with propositionalism to be dogged by misdirection and misconception: having identified historicised propositionalism as an approach that might rival his own proposal, he never actually engaged this rival, and his arguments would not have succeeded against it. The rival he actually engaged was always the simplistic propositionalism he had previously dismissed—an approach that is unaware of its own human vulnerability and that of its doctrinal and scriptural raw materials. To the extent that some of Lindbeck’s arguments succeeded against this opponent, they did so by exposing its lack of reflexive awareness—a lack that reflects insufficient appreciation of one’s own human reality rather than any ‘unnecessary’ preoccupation with reality as such. Such arguments do not challenge a propositionalism that knows its own humanity and historicity.

Lindbeck’s preference for clarity and simplicity, noted in the earlier part of *ND*, reappeared when he misconstrued the logic of Ockham’s razor by emphasising economy with hypotheses at the expense of attention to reality. The ‘practical’ arguments were unconvincing. Neither accommodation of diversity nor avoidance of re-interpretation provided grounds for declaring an advantage in favour of either rule theory or propositionalism. The claim that theological reflection becomes more concrete under a regulative approach had little to commend it, and was in any case rendered problematic by other aspects of Lindbeck’s argument.

At no stage did Lindbeck offer a genuine comparison of the competing approaches, but always portrayed doctrine and theology, and propositionalism too, from the perspective of rule theory. In the course of this exercise in theological imagination the Cartesian dualism of Lindbeck’s position became increasingly evident as, implicitly or explicitly, he assumed the possibility of freedom from ontological reference, the separability of language from world, doctrine from Christian life.

Of the issues raised in the course of this critique, two in particular merit further attention. Firstly, since Lindbeck has not critically engaged historicised propositionalism, I will offer such an engagement in the next chapter, not from a cultural-linguistic viewpoint, but rather on the basis of the confessional and critical stance developed in the enquiry so far. Secondly, the Cartesian character of Lindbeck’s argument has been noted at various points without being substantially addressed. This is rectified in the following section, which critically examines the sources and logic of Lindbeck’s rule theory.
5.3 **THE PATTERN OF SOUND TEACHING**

Our inquiry into the sources and logic of Lindbeck’s rule theory begins with a contradiction. On the one hand, the Cartesian cast of rule theory is most evident where Lindbeck insists that doctrine-as-grammar refers not to the realities affirmed by religious adherents but to the timeless pattern instantiated in their affirmations. In such contexts Lindbeck makes much of phrases borrowed indirectly from Ludwig Wittgenstein. On the other hand, the Cartesian distinction between language and world was for Wittgenstein one of the greatest blind alleys of Western philosophy. How then do Lindbeck’s ideas relate to those of Wittgenstein? While Lindbeck’s use of Wittgenstein contributed to a perception in some circles that Wittgenstein provides philosophical support for Lindbeck’s regulative account of doctrine, I argue that the reality is otherwise, to the extent that Wittgenstein’s insights do not lend support to Lindbeck’s rule theory, but rather expose its frailty. This material was foreshadowed earlier, as the second part of an argument aimed at destabilising conventional perceptions which align Schleiermacher with liberals against Lindbeck, and align Wittgenstein with Lindbeck.

Although some of the conceptual tools deployed in Lindbeck’s rule theory came from a misunderstanding of Wittgenstein, those tools did not determine the nature of the theory Lindbeck was trying to build. A second line of critique examines the practical and conceptual context that constrained Lindbeck’s thinking, focussing on his *a priori* commitment to the possibility of doctrinal permanence, and concluding that this commitment, and with it the rule theory itself, is theologically and philosophically untenable. The chapter closes with some reflections on the nature of scripture under rule theory before taking leave of doctrine as timeless pattern.

### 5.3.1 Learning from Wittgenstein

In this study we have repeatedly noted the importance of the metaphors of religion-as-language and doctrine-as-grammar in Lindbeck’s argument. Religion-considered-as-language is *sui generis*, a semiotic system complete in itself that does not require external support and may not be fully translatable. This metaphor challenges experiential-expressive views of religion by recasting the

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66 Lindbeck says that his knowledge of Wittgenstein is largely indirect, and he acknowledges a debt to Paul Holmer ‘for his understanding of what is theologically important about Wittgenstein’ (*ND* 28 n28). Not being acquainted with Holmer’s work, I have not tried to trace Lindbeck’s appropriation of Wittgenstein through him, though this may well provide an informative study. Some comments made by others (e.g., McGrath 1996, 28) give the impression that Lindbeck’s view of Wittgenstein is indeed largely that of Holmer. Whatever Holmer’s role in this genealogy, it will be quite clear by now from the foregoing text and notes that Lindbeck and I understand Wittgenstein differently, and that I find Lindbeck still deeply entrenched in just those ways of thinking that Wittgenstein sought to expose as illusions. Lindbeck acknowledges that, while Wittgenstein’s strong influence in some theological circles served as a major stimulus to his thinking, that stimulus may be ‘in ways that those more knowledgeable in Wittgenstein might not approve’ (*ND* 24). There is no other indication in *ND* that Wittgenstein’s legacy might be contested.

67 See p. 116 above. The first part of the argument takes up sections 4.2 and 4.3 above. Perception that Lindbeck draws heavily on Wittgenstein is illustrated by David Tracy (1985a, 465) and James Miller (1989, 19n)

68 Lindbeck’s own short description of his overarching metaphor was ‘religions resemble languages’, but I have often called it ‘religion-as-culture’ in view of Lindbeck’s emphasis on the concrete context of language and in order to facilitate comparison with other accounts of culture in chapter 3 above. For the purposes of this subsection, however, I will revert to Lindbeck’s terminology while retaining his emphasis.
notions of translatability and intelligibility. By analogy with grammar, doctrine describes the implicit rules of Christian language, and is not concerned with grounding language in reality. On this view ontological reference is unnecessary to doctrine and should not be imposed on it. When expounding these metaphors and engaging alternative views Lindbeck employs terms borrowed from Wittgenstein: ‘language game’ (ND 33), ‘form of life’ (ND 18, 64), and ‘deep grammar’ (ND 82).69 But, as we shall now see, Lindbeck’s use of these terms is very different to Wittgenstein’s.

As Lindbeck explains at the outset, the point of his general linguistic metaphor is not simply that ‘religions resemble languages’, but that

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 construing of reality and the living of life).70

As Lindbeck uses them in his first three chapters, and especially in his discussion of ‘intrasystematic truth’ (ND 64-8), the phrases ‘form of life’ and ‘language game’ reflect the view that words acquire meaning as they are used in determinate contexts, with ‘form of life’ indicating the concreteness of context and ‘language game’ its boundedness. Taking ‘form of life’ first, Lindbeck sees here a key difference between his cultural-linguistic proposal and its major rivals. In contrast to their ‘intellectualist’ view of context, which remains linguistic and conceptual, a cultural-linguistic view of context includes ‘not only other utterances but also the correlative forms of life’.71 With this relatively concrete view of language use and language users Lindbeck approaches Wittgenstein’s insight that neither language nor its users may be radically distinguished from the world, for they are the world, just as much as rocks, trees and houses are the world. A distinguishing feature of language is that it is a socially-mediated and socially-modulated technique of engagement with the world, a means of participation.72 A distinguishing feature of its users is that they use it. These features do not in the least separate either language or its users from the world, though they do unfortunately allow the possibility that language users might assume, imagine, or desire this to be the case.

Another aspect of concreteness is specificity, and in this regard Lindbeck employs the phrase ‘language-game’, along with ‘form of life’, to support his case for the intrasystematic derivation of religious meaning, arguing that religious meaning is determined only through (real or imagined) participation in a specific religious ‘language-game’ (i.e., a religion).73 Hence,

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69 Even the idea of treating doctrine as grammar may derive from a parenthetical remark of Wittgenstein’s concerning ‘theology as grammar’. See the references and discussion in Kerr 1997, 145-8.
70 ND 18, emphasis added.
71 ND 64. Lindbeck illustrates by contrasting Christianity with Euclidean geometry. ‘The difference is that in the Christian case the system 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’ (in loc).
72 ‘Socially mediated’ refers to the way in which we learn language by means of particular social practices. ‘Socially modulated’ refers to the fact that the meanings of language are bound up with complex and continually-evolving social customs. The first half (or so) of Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations is much occupied with the investigation of (or rather, a disciplined wonderment concerning) these matters.
73 The right use of religion-as-language ‘cannot be detached from a particular way of behaving’ (ND 64). That is, the essential context is both concrete and particular. See also the discussion at ND 68: one must be ‘inside the relevant
interpretation and translation cannot establish what the meaning ‘really’ is, though they may provide some insight for non-participants. In this way, an appreciation of the specificity of concrete forms of life and the boundedness of language-games undergird Lindbeck’s view of the limited translatability of religious meaning and the consequent occurrence of apologetics in ad hoc, rather than systematic, encounters or pronouncements.74

Lindbeck’s understanding of the relation between ‘language-games’ and ‘forms of life’ broadly reflects Wittgenstein, as does his use of these terms to indicate the concreteness of the contexts in which language is used; but when he refers to whole languages, cultures and religions as ‘language-games’,75 he quite decidedly differs from Wittgenstein, who was speaking of very elementary practices. For example, the meaning of the word ‘hallo’ when people shake hands differs from its meaning when one encounters something unexpected. Wittgenstein’s point was that linguistic meaning becomes determinate only in the context of (real or imagined) participation in small concrete activities. What ‘hallo’ means depends on the form of life of which it is part. A language-game is a form of life considered from the aspect of language use.76

A properly Wittgensteinian argument, then, would not focus on the large-scale phenomena of whole religions but on small-scale interactions in which people engage with each other, with language, and with the world in ways that might or might not be considered ‘religious’: singing, prayer, cooperative work, hospitality, discussion, recital, argument, meals, sharing a beer, etc.

The idea of language-games as small concrete engagements between people and world, mediated by language and world, allows that translation and interpretation may be difficult, but this is not its emphasis, which is rather on the fact, and therefore the possibility, of such engagements and the (relatively) determinate meanings they enable. The concept highlights not context’ in order to use religious affirmations meaningfully, i.e., to achieve the possibility of either truth or falsity rather than mere meaninglessness.

74 Lindbeck mentions ‘ad hoc apologetics’ only in his last chapter, at ND 129, 131 and 135. The first two occasions clearly indicate the link with limited translatability.

75 For example, at ND 33: ‘[J]ust 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.’ Fergus Kerr 1997, 28-31 briefly describes the genealogy of this error and notes its contribution to Kai Nielsen’s article ‘Wittgensteinian fideism’ published in Philosophy in 1967. What Nielsen describes is certain fideism, but just as certainly not Wittgensteinian.

76 Lash 1984 provides a generally helpful treatment of the scope of Wittgenstein’s ‘language games’ and ‘forms of life’, and his conclusions, though they focus on inter-religious dialogue rather than apologetics, are quite compatible with these comments. I would, however, offer a correction in one respect. Although Lash rightly takes issue with Norman Malcolm’s remark that ‘religion is a form of life’, Malcolm’s definition of a language-game (‘language embedded in action’, as cited by Lash pp. 20, 22) is preferable to Lash’s (‘the linguistic component of a form of life’, Lash pp. 23-4). Lash can refer to the possibility that this or that discourse might be a language game, the only difficulty being that an entire discourse is far too large in scope to be what Wittgenstein had in mind. But it is also too purely linguistic to be what Wittgenstein intended. For documentation of this claim, one need look no further than the copious examples supplied by Lash. A language game is indeed ‘language embedded in action’—not the notionally separable ‘linguistic component’ of a form of life, but a form of life considered from the viewpoint of the language employed in it. Lash appreciates that the term ‘form of life’ refers to specific behaviours, ‘micro-practices’, including the language embedded in them. The difference between ‘language game’ and ‘form of life’ has less to do with distinctions between components than with the aspect from which one views a unitary micro-practice.
only the concrete particularity but also the ubiquity of the people-language-world nexus in myriad small encounters. Thus, while Lindbeck correctly suggests that the idea of language-games points to an ad hoc rather than a systematic apologetic, the emphasis should not be on the limitation of apologetics to ad hoc encounters, but on the proliferation of such encounters in daily life. That is, the small scale of Wittgenstein’s language-games strongly counters any idea of a religion as a self-contained system. Rather, it indicates that, in pluralist societies, the ‘boundary’ of a religion is constantly being formed and tested in every concrete context in which adherents and non-adherents meet. In each such encounter, the language-game (buying, selling, ordering, following, learning, serving, hiring, caring, etc) is an occasion of shared meaning that might, or might not, develop in other directions (such as an apologetic direction). Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘forms of life’ and ‘language-games’ can help us appreciate the fluidity and porosity of the ‘boundaries’ of religions, and may lead us to ask whether ‘boundary’ is not too settled and systemic a concept for describing such phenomena.

The other Wittgensteinian theme in ND lies near the centre of Lindbeck’s argument: the metaphor of doctrine-as-grammar, and the related ideas of ‘surface grammar’ and ‘deep grammar’. Using this metaphor Lindbeck argues that, just like formal grammar, doctrine affirms nothing about reality, but only about religious affirmations. We have noted that this view of grammar presupposes a radical distinction between language and world, a distinction that is clearly in tension with the concreteness of context Lindbeck emphasises in relation to his general religion-as-language metaphor. Whereas in the first part of ND Lindbeck emphasised that religion, like language, is embedded in particular concrete contexts (and hence is not fully translatable), in the second part he argues that doctrine, as the grammar of the Christian ‘language’, is completely disengaged from the realities to which Christian affirmations refer. As such, it is unchanging, unlike the continually changing concrete contexts in which it is implicitly used. We have also noted that Lindbeck does not regard discernment of the grammar of Christianity as a trivial matter. Doctrines are instantiated in historically situated formulations that include transitory ‘surface grammar’, i.e., temporary rules relevant to specific circumstances. Reflection on these may yield insight into the abiding ‘deep grammar’ that is invariant across all times and places.

Wittgenstein’s ideas of ‘grammar’ and ‘depth’ may be illustrated from a passage in his Philosophical Investigations. In the vicinity of §664 he is considering the verb ‘to mean’, proceeding, as usual, by presenting and pondering over numerous examples of use (i.e., language games). Then he invites a more theoretical kind of wonder:

§664. In the use of words one might distinguish ‘surface grammar’ (Oberflächen-grammatik) from ‘depth grammar’ (Tiefengrammatik). What immediately impresses itself upon us about the use of a word is the way it is used in the construction of the sentence, the part of its use—one might say—that can be taken in by the ear. —— And now compare the depth grammar, say of the word “to mean”, with what its surface grammar would lead us to suspect. No wonder we find it difficult to know our way about.

Wittgenstein’s ‘surface grammar’ is what we usually call ‘grammar’. That is, it is ‘formal’ grammar—it deals with parts of speech; it analyses language insofar as it may be spoken and heard. But there is more to the use of language than a pattern of aural and/or written symbols.
What can be 'taken in by the ear' is merely part, or an aspect, of its use. Language is a technique of engagement with the world. As such, its basic units are not sentences (as in formal or 'surface' grammar), but actual uses (language games). 'Depth grammar' is concerned with the use of words in forms of life; it explores the function or contribution of words in concrete engagements. Thus, depth grammar is concerned with language games as surface grammar is concerned with formal language. Although, on this reading, depth grammar would include surface grammar within its scope (as a surface might be 'the surface of the deep'), its focus is on use as engagement. The difficulty with this, and the basic reason for Wittgenstein's method of disciplined wonder that has been a source of frustration for so many (myself included), is that such a 'grammar' cannot be fully described in words, but only in the implicit patterns of myriad Lebensformen. Here, we probe the limits of language: Wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muß man schweigen.77 Because of its engagement with the world, Wittgenstein's 'depth grammar' passes beyond words and their generality, and into the flux of life.

Lindbeck's 'depth' and 'surface' are the reverse of Wittgenstein's. Lindbeck's 'deep grammar' is the unchanging doctrinal core that lies hidden beneath the changing circumstances reflected in temporary rules and historically-situated doctrinal formulations. He probes the shifting surface in order to fathom the unchanging deep. The surface is the realm of worldly engagement; the deep is a realm of detachment where constancy is possible. For Wittgenstein, surface grammar was the formal grammar of words-in-themselves, words which may be engaged or non-engaged, idle or fruitful; the dimension of 'depth' was precisely the dimension of engagement or language-at-work. Thus, although Lindbeck nods towards Wittgenstein when he speaks of 'deep grammar', his insistence that doctrine does not engage the world ensures that his doctrine-as-grammar never goes beyond what Wittgenstein called 'surface grammar'.78

Lindbeck's reversal of Wittgenstein's 'depth' and 'surface' highlights the different views of language in his two main metaphors. We have noted the relative concreteness of 'language' in his overarching religion-as-language metaphor, where the Christian 'language' (or semiotic system) includes and presupposes particular ways of relating to the world, and even is a way of engaging the world. Moving from this general metaphor to the more specific doctrine-as-grammar metaphor, the analogy is to a grammar that refers only to language and not to the world. The language referred to is neither part of the world, nor fundamentally a way of engaging the world, but only a way of speaking which may be considered in itself, without reference to the world.

In summary, Wittgenstein's insight that language use is a social behaviour embedded in concrete actions is reflected in Lindbeck's exposition of religion-as-language but not carried through into his account of doctrine-as-grammar. Other Wittgensteinian elements are grossly distorted: Lindbeck has mistaken the scale of language-games, and his understanding of depth in relation to the grammatical analysis of language use is the opposite of Wittgenstein's. These conclusions tell strongly against any perception that Lindbeck's rule theory of grammar can be supported by

77 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereon one must be silent.'
78 In this light, Lindbeck's view of doctrine has a distinctively Platonic hue. What is more real, form or matter? Lindbeck wants the dimension of 'depth' to be one in which doctrine can be unchanging, like Plato's forms. But Wittgenstein's 'depth' is precisely engagement with the world, a dimension of particularity and change, immersion in the forms of life.
reference to Wittgenstein. I do not, however, draw further conclusions as to the theory’s validity on this basis. Such conclusions would presuppose a theological engagement with Wittgenstein, a task that I have not attempted, and which in any case lies well beyond the scope of this enquiry. The following paragraphs briefly ponder the likely shape of a more truly Wittgensteinian cultural-linguistic proposal and what such a proposal has to offer Christian theology.

What might the cultural-linguistic proposal look like if the elements borrowed from Wittgenstein remained true to their source? I argued earlier that Lindbeck’s view of religions as language-world systems (i.e., complete semiotic systems with their own fields of meaning which are at best only partially translatable) might be serviceable if idealised notions of culture and language were discarded and the dynamic, open and permeable nature of language were recognised. The small scale and concrete simplicity of Wittgenstein’s language-games support this modification, and indicate that languages and cultures are not best described as ‘systems’. It is not that these aspects of human society lack structure, but such structure as they have is an emergent feature of countless concrete situations to which verbal signs contributed. The doctrine-as-grammar metaphor could be fruitful if it embraced the concreteness of language use and a truly Wittgensteinian understanding of ‘depth’. But it would then be quite impossible to think of doctrines as unchanging rules that say nothing about the world, for language would be world, and doctrine-as-grammar would be a grammar of religious engagement with the world by means of world. Worldliness would be utterly unavoidable.

Such a view of doctrine may help us to probe the limits of the analogy with grammar and also the limits of doctrine itself, as I will briefly illustrate by outlining a concrete view of language and indicating some consequences for the doctrine-as-grammar metaphor. In view of Wittgenstein’s exposure of the illusion of Cartesian dualism, we will be on guard against the temptation to separate language from reality, for language is as real as anything else. It is the reality of vocal and textual signs generated in human communities through myriad customary agreements made in, and in response to, the encounters of daily life. Grammar is an emergent structure arising from language use itself, i.e., it does not arise from anything outside language use. This is as true for depth grammar in relation to forms of life as it is for surface grammar in relation to forms of words. Depth grammar, then, is the emergent structure of language understood as the vocal and textual tool by means of which humans engage reality (including the reality of each other, and that of language itself). On this view, the study of depth grammar will attend to linguistic and non-linguistic reality in order to discern the structure of linguistic engagement with it, but its concern will be to elucidate the nature of the engagement rather than the reality engaged.

Christianity acknowledges Jesus Christ as the decisive revelation of God, and hence aims to pattern itself not on itself but on Christ, and to engage the world on the basis of faith in him as living Lord of church and world. It is of the essence of Christianity that the pattern of its engagement with the world arises outside itself in the action of the living God in history. Unlike language, Christianity is not simply the product of ‘myriad customary agreements made in, and in response to, the encounters of daily life’, even if it describes such encounters in terms of a

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79 Kerr 1997, 31 draws attention to Wittgenstein’s ‘famous and beautiful comparison between our language and a medieval city’, and in a note contrasts this to Descartes’ admiration for planned towns.
particular set of stories or scriptures. Nor is it simply an inherited communal tool that is quasi-
transcendent in relation to its present users. But if Christianity is not simply these things, nevertheless it is these things by virtue of being a language-drenched, historically extended,
reasonably cohesive way of engaging the world, i.e., by virtue of its nature as tradition. Herein lie both the limitation and the value of seeing doctrine as a depth grammar. The difference between true transcendence and quasi-transcendence distinguishes true worship from idolatry,
thus identifying a crucial limitation of the metaphor. Yet, if human beings offer any worship at all, they do so in and through engagement with quasi-transcendent and transient reality; and so depth grammar, as an aid to disciplined reflection on this engagement, may yield useful insights into the nature of doctrine and doctrinal development.

Christian doctrine cannot be fully comprehended through an analogy with grammar, even a properly conceived depth grammar. Yet awareness of the limits of analogies may lead to their better use. An understanding of culture and language can be helpful for understanding Christianity and other religions, and Christian doctrine can be compared fruitfully with a depth grammar. I suggest that there are two main areas in which Christian theology can benefit from critical engagement with cultural studies and the philosophy of language. Firstly, these disciplines aid the construction of robust theological anthropologies. Secondly, they provide salutary commentary on the human vulnerability of doctrine and the practices through which it is constructed, debated, adopted and communicated. Taken together, these contributions indicate that real progress in ecumenical discussions may depend less on a common belief that doctrine is an ahistorical changeless grammar, than on a common belief that one’s self and one’s own tradition share fully in human vulnerability and are therefore implicated in patterns that reflect not only the grammar of the gospel but also the grammars of personal and institutional self-legitimation.

5.3.2 The Possibility of Permanence

If Lindbeck’s misunderstanding of Wittgenstein contributed to his view of doctrine as an ahistorical grammar, it does not explain the direction of his argument. Curiosity regarding such an explanation is heightened by the foregoing critique, which used Wittgenstein to expose problems in Lindbeck’s argument and point it toward a different conclusion. Something like a hermeneutic of suspicion is called for: why does Lindbeck judge the success of his (or any) theory of doctrine by its ability to allow for ‘the possibility of doctrinal normativeness and permanence’ (ND 107)? I approach this question by engaging firstly with the background commitments that made doctrinal permanence important to Lindbeck, and secondly with the means by which he accommodated it in his rule theory. We will then be well-placed to address the question directly.

In his Foreword to ND Lindbeck emphasises the meta-analytical nature of his inquiry. He does not wish to decide any doctrinal issues, but to provide a conceptuality that is more adequate to the phenomena of doctrine (ND 7). Under existing theories, some of these phenomena seem anomalous—permanence and change, conflict and compatibility, unity and disarray, variety and uniformity. Lindbeck’s theory will coherently allow for all of these possibilities, dissolving the anomalies by rendering them intelligible (ND 9). Because of the ‘embarrassingly wide’ range of topics involved in developing such a theory, he restricts his inquiry to ‘strictly theoretical’
matters. This restriction is not a matter of practical convenience only, for it serves one of Lindbeck’s requirements for an ecumenically useful theory of doctrine: ecumenical neutrality.

As is appropriate in a theoretical inquiry more concerned with how to think than with what to assert about matters of fact, the proposals advanced in this book are intended to be acceptable to all religious traditions that fall within its purview. They are, in other words, meant to be ecumenically and religiously neutral. They do not in themselves imply decisions either for or against the communally authoritative teachings of particular religious bodies.

Lindbeck intends a comprehensive and inclusive neutrality. His proposal will show no partiality between Christian traditions (ecumenical neutrality), or between Christians and adherents of other religions or none (religious neutrality). It will be inclusive by accommodating the ‘possible truth’ of the doctrinal claims of the various religious traditions. This acritical inclusivity operates as the major premise of a syllogism in which the minor premise is the fact that at least one Christian tradition holds to the permanence of doctrine, the conclusion being Lindbeck’s criterion for success: a viable theory of doctrine must be able to accommodate the permanence of doctrine. Lindbeck repeatedly assures his readers that his idea of the nature of doctrine is of this kind.

Thus, Lindbeck’s requirement that a theory of doctrine be open to the possibility of permanence follows logically from his prior commitment to an acritical ecumenical neutrality. However, there are strong theological and philosophical reasons for challenging this commitment. The basic concern with neutrality and the distinction between ‘how to think’ and ‘what to assert about matters of fact’ reflect the Enlightenment’s epistemological preoccupations, notwithstanding Lindbeck’s disavowal of foundationalism and the quest for certainty. He is less concerned with foundations than with how to build, and so he speaks of categories and methods, suggesting that if we can agree on a framework then meaningful discussion can take place; if we can agree on a method then we can move towards agreement on substantive issues. But categories and methods always already imply assertions about matters of fact, and Lindbeck’s ‘theoretical inquiry’ is

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80 ND 9. The ‘purview’ Lindbeck has in mind is primarily that of Christian religious traditions, but he admits of wider hopes for the applicability of his argument in the nontheological study of religion and perhaps also for non-Christian ecumenical and theological purposes (see ND 7-8).

81 This accommodation underlies the ‘availability’ of Lindbeck’s proposal to adherents of various traditions.

82 Apart from explicit statements in which Lindbeck is at pains to show that his proposal ‘does not in any way contradict the official Roman Catholic view that all church doctrines are permanent’ (ND 87), various passing references indicate a presupposition that constancy is intrinsic to doctrine. For example, when Lindbeck says that his rule theory of doctrine ‘does not locate the abiding and doctrinally significant aspect of religion in propositionally formulated truths…’ (ND 80), it appears that the phrase ‘abiding and doctrinally significant’ should be taken as a hendiadys, or as if the word ‘therefore’ appeared after the ‘and’. For Lindbeck, constancy or permanence is one of the defining ‘traditional characteristics’ of doctrine (ND 79). See also ND 84: ‘the difficulty with locating the constant element in a religion on the level of either objective description or inner experience is that this tends to result in the identification of the normative form of the religion with either the truth claims or the experiences appropriate to a particular world’ (emphasis added). Apparently, normativity requires constancy; constancy cannot be found in any ‘particular world’; and so neither can normativity. Thus whatever is normative must also be beyond history.

83 That is, this is a modern, liberal approach shorn only of what can no longer be retained, namely, a belief in the availability of indubitable foundations.

84 At one level, Lindbeck is well aware of this. His discussion of ‘categorial adequacy’ refers to the extent to which
precisely an assertion of what to think in relation to social anthropology and the nature of language. How can a proposal that asserts a definite anthropology be non-prejudicial towards the doctrines of many traditions (Lindbeck’s notion of ‘neutrality’) when, insofar as they mean to be relevant to human beings, those traditions and their doctrines are vitally interested in anthropology? In particular, since the formulation of doctrine is a human and ecclesial activity, doctrines concerning doctrine are necessarily connected to anthropology and ecclesiology. A theory of doctrine that relies on a definite social anthropology could be neutral or non-prejudicial in Lindbeck’s sense only as a strictly pretheological theory. Such ‘neutrality’ presupposes the circumscription of Christ’s Lordship, hardly a non-prejudicial idea for Christian traditions.85

But such objections may be unnecessary in view of Lindbeck’s recognition that ‘what is taken to be reality is in large part socially constructed’ (ND 82), and that ‘there is no neutral point of view’ for adjudicating ‘debates between fundamentally different outlooks’ (ND 73). Such affirmations contradict the claim of neutrality: to deny the possibility of neutral vantage points while offering a neutral vantage point is a direct self-contradiction.86 Moreover, although Lindbeck’s hopes for the nature of doctrine are much the same as the Enlightenment’s hopes for the nature of knowledge, he develops his proposal using the very tools that have shown such hopes to be illusory for human beings.

The inclusiveness of Lindbeck’s neutrality requires a simultaneous enabling and withholding of judgement. His proposal will treat the ‘communally authoritative teachings of particular religious bodies’ as meaningful (i.e., as possibly true or false rather than merely meaningless) without prejudging their truth or falsity. But for Lindbeck, affirmations are meaningful only to the extent that the categories they employ are adequate to the reality being described,87 and his ‘test cases’ indicate that the affirmations for which he requires meaningfulness are not so much traditional doctrines as the traditional claims that doctrines are unconditional, irreversible and infallible.88 That is, these claims about doctrine, more than doctrine itself, are the primary data

the conceptual categories of an interpretive framework are adequate to reality (ND 48). Yet he regards ‘grammar’ and ‘rules of the game’ as equivalent terms for ‘categories’ (ND 48) and later employs the grammatical analogy precisely because grammar asserts nothing about extra-linguistic reality (ND 69).

85 See the conclusions offered above in 4.5.2 The Idea of Particularity in Christian Theology beginning on p. 150.

86 Lindbeck might object that he has denied the existence of neutral vantage points only for adjudicating between ‘fundamentally different outlooks’ such as experiential-expressivism, propositionalism, and his own cultural-linguistic theory. But if neutrality is impossible only in relation to ‘fundamentally different outlooks’, then an intention to be neutral ecumenically and religiously but not theologically (ND 9-10) implies that differences between theological perspectives (intra-textual, propositional, liberal) are seen as fundamental, but differences between religious denominations or between whole religions are not. And this, in turn, implies that a theological perspective reflects an ultimate commitment while religious faith does not—which is nonsensical. In anthropological perspective, the impossibility of neutrality is a corollary of embodiment. Neutrality as espoused by the Enlightenment and intended by Lindbeck is not available to embodied, and therefore situated, beings, regardless of their judgements as to what constitutes a ‘fundamental’ difference.

87 See 5.1.1 The Nature of Truth commencing on p. 154 above.

88 Recall that the test cases are not simply doctrinal affirmations, but characteristics of doctrinal affirmations. What his theory must accommodate are ‘the unconditionality of the classic Christological (and Trinitarian) affirmations, the irreversibility of the Marian developments, and the infallibility of the teaching office’ (ND 91). Only the last case is both a characteristic of doctrine and (in the Roman Catholic tradition) a doctrinal affirmation.
for rule theory. Lindbeck does not ask whether the claims and/or their underlying conceptual categories are adequate to the reality of doctrine as human construction. Rather, taking the ‘possible truth’ of the claims as a given, he seeks conceptual categories that are adequate to this ‘reality’, assuming that such categories will also be adequate to the reality of doctrine itself. In this way, rule theory conforms to Lindbeck’s idea of a grammar: just as rule theory presents doctrine as the grammar of the gospel, the theory itself is a grammar of doctrinal claims. Neither grammar is interested in the truth or the humanity of its object.

Given the finitude and moral frailty of human understanding, the humanity of doctrinal construction suggests that there are more ways of ‘making sense of’ traditional claims for doctrine than accommodating their ‘possible truth’. One can also make sense of beliefs in terms of historical pressures for self-legitimation, the projection of power, and the delusions of the human ego. But Lindbeck gives no indication in ND that a hermeneutic of suspicion might be relevant in ecumenical discussions in view of the implication of communally agreed norms in historical processes of communal self-definition and self-legitimation, not to mention religious geo-politics, the interests of nation-states, and clerical ambition. To use a crude analogy, pluralistic western societies may be said to operate on the basis that all religions are equally true in public, equally false in the academy, and equally useful to the state. Lindbeck may prefer the neutrality of the people to that of the philosophers, but he can ill afford to ignore the neutrality of the politicians, who are rather more cynical (though perhaps more realistic) concerning human motivations and the human capacity for self-deception.

In summary, the requirement that a theory of doctrine be able to accommodate doctrinal constancy follows from Lindbeck’s commitment to ‘ecumenical neutrality’. The standpoint implicit in this neutrality is inimical to the confession of Christ as Lord, but perhaps this observation should be a mere footnote: after all, the standpoint cannot be inhabited by human beings, but only by disembodied Cartesian egos. Moreover, Lindbeck’s ecumenical neutrality takes form as an acritical inclusivity in which traditional claims about doctrine are treated implausibly as simple data that need not be questioned concerning their vulnerability as human constructions. There is no hint in ND that the claim of neutrality and the acritical attitude to traditional claims may be questionable, let alone untenable.

Despite the impression that may be given by his determination to be acritically inclusive, Lindbeck is not ignorant of the critical methods of the sociology of knowledge. He does, however, apply them selectively. We have seen that he did not apply, or even consider applying, 89 apologies to Edward Gibbon (1737-94), who actually wrote:

The policy of the emperors and the senate, as far as it concerned religion, was happily seconded by the reflections of the enlightened, and by the habits of the superstitious, part of their subjects. The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord (Gibbon 1887).
such a critique to his own claim to neutrality; yet he was very much aware that historicism and the social construction of knowledge severely limited the possibilities for the accommodation of doctrinal constancy. Since human existence and understanding are thoroughly historical, he could not impute constancy to any human construct; and doctrine could be constant only insofar as it was free of historical influences and was not a human construct. That is, in providing for doctrinal constancy Lindbeck does not so much forget the historicity and humanity of doctrine as carefully define doctrine to be something that does not originate in human activity. Thus, given the possibility of doctrinal permanence, the ahistoricity of doctrine arises not in the absence of, or in spite of, but precisely because of an appreciation of human historicity. The problem is one of distinction in relation. Since permanence is incompatible with historicity, Christian doctrine must be radically distinct from Christian knowledge. Yet, as Christian doctrine, it must be essentially related to Christian knowledge. Lindbeck resolves the puzzle with a concept from his alethiology: conceptual categories do not affirm anything about reality, but merely provide an idiom in which affirmations may be made.

This idea enables Lindbeck’s distinctions between intrasystematic utterances and their implicit categorial scheme, between affirmations and their enabling interpretive frameworks, and the related distinction between first-order and second-order discourses. Affirmations and intrasystematic utterances belong to first-order discourse and as such are thoroughly historical, situated, plural, mutable, and prone to error. In contrast, Christian doctrine is the normative pattern of first-order Christian discourse. As such, it is ahistorical and unitary, and is what it is unconditionally, irreversibly and infallibly. Together with scripture it defines the conceptual categories, the interpretive framework, of the Christian cultural-linguistic system. Doctrinal theology is a second-order discourse concerned with elucidating the content of doctrine.

For these distinctions to be viable, conceptual categories must be not only non-affirmatory, but also enduringly distinct from affirmations or knowledge. Unfortunately, neither requirement can be met, since use of a category is always an implicit affirmation which may become explicit at any time. Consider Lindbeck’s example concerning the category ‘size’.

It is...meaningless to say that one thing is larger than another if one lacks the...[property] of size. ...(C)ategorial adequacy does not guarantee propositional truth, but only makes meaningful statements possible: if something is quantifiable, statements about its size have meaning, but not necessarily truth.

To make the example more specific: if someone said ‘topology is smaller than a size 10 shoe’, I could not make sense of this as an affirmation, because I do not regard the mathematical

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90 Note that doctrine itself is neither a discourse nor the product of a discourse (for then it would be a mutable human construct). Rather, it is simply there as the normative pattern of first-order discourse. Doctrine is the object into which second-order discourse enquires.

91 ND 48, modified. The original text around the second ellipsis reads ‘if one lacks the categorial concept of size’. But what is the ‘one’ which lacks this concept? It would not be one of the things being compared, since ‘things’ do not have concepts. Yet it would not be the general personal pronoun, either, since without a concept of size one could not have said that one thing was larger than another. I think Lindbeck meant to refer to one of the things being compared, hence my emendation.
discipline of topology as having the property of size.\footnote{One could perhaps blur the boundaries here by saying that topology has ‘size’ in relation to other mathematical disciplines (though ‘scope’ might be a more appropriate term), and that shoe size remains an equivocal measure without specifying the size standard (e.g., U.S., European, etc). At the very least, however, topology does not have size in the same way that shoes have size.} However, the statement could ‘make sense’ if topology did have that property, if a metaphor was intended and recognised, or if, rather than affirming anything about topology and size 10 shoes, the speaker was making a joke or providing an example contrived to illustrate a point of grammar or logic.\footnote{Recognition of jokes, metaphors, contrived examples, affirmations, irony and other verbal genres depends on the practical skills of speakers in exploiting, and of hearers in interpreting, the verbal and non-verbal contextual cues that are conventional in their linguistic community.} What is meant by ‘making sense’ differs between affirmations, metaphors, jokes, and illustrative examples. The sense of an affirmation is evaluated by reference to the objects it mentions. A speaker intending affirmation will intend to make this kind of sense; and a hearer recognising the speaker’s intention will expect and look for this kind of sense. Hence, ‘topology is smaller than a size 10 shoe’, when intended as an affirmation and taken as such, implicitly affirms that topology has the property of size. The general point is that, when making affirmations, speakers implicitly affirm the adequacy of the categories they employ, and, as Lindbeck himself notes, this adequacy is adequacy to reality.\footnote{ND 63, where Lindbeck speaks of categorial adequacy in terms of whether or not a cultural-linguistic system has (or lacks) ‘the concepts or categories to refer to the relevant realities’ (compare ND 50). He thinks that categories can enable reference to reality without themselves referring to it. The enabling of reference is emphasised early in the third chapter of ND, while from the Excursus onwards the emphasis moves to the alleged non-referentiality of categories. The present argument takes up Lindbeck’s view that adequate categories enable (and inadequate categories frustrate) the making of meaningful affirmations. Since, by definition, affirmations are meant to be meaningful, they necessarily (if implicitly) affirm the adequacy of the categories on which they rely. But that is to say that categories enable reference only insofar as they themselves refer.} In other words, when used in affirmations, conceptual categories are implicit affirmations about reality.

But implicit affirmations may become explicit at any time, usually when misunderstanding or resistance occurs. If someone says ‘What did you mean by “topology is smaller than a size 10 shoe”?’, or ‘Is it valid to speak of topology as if it had the property of size?’, then the ‘category’ immediately becomes subject to direct inquiry concerning its status as knowledge, i.e., it is no longer an implicit but an explicit affirmation. Thus, the distinction between explicit and implicit affirmations, though real, is transient, being reconstituted as each affirmation or question is uttered. There are no bounded self-identical sets of conceptual entities such as ‘knowledge’ (or ‘affirmations’) and ‘categories’. Rather, every use of a word or concept is informed by a dynamic web of intersignifications and socio-cultural assumptions, as well as by the concrete context of the particular use. These observations indicate that conceptual categories are neither non-affirmatory nor enduringly distinct from explicit affirmations. Lindbeck’s view of conceptual categories, by means of which he asserted the possibility of doctrinal permanence, is just as untenable as the acritical standpoint from which he found that possibility to be necessary.

Having described and criticised the origin and implementation of the possibility of doctrinal permanence in Lindbeck’s argument, it is worth noting that the discussion has accounted for the
major features of his proposal without once invoking its well-known linguistic and grammatical metaphors. It seems that these metaphors do not so much control Lindbeck’s argument as illustrate it, and this impression is reinforced by the different levels of concreteness achieved in the two metaphors: religion-as-language is enmeshed in concrete contexts, while doctrine-as-grammar is a detached and timeless pattern.\(^{95}\) The source of this shift from engagement with the world to detachment from it is not the metaphors themselves, but the requirement that the possibility of doctrinal permanence be accommodated.

Without its major metaphors, the argument of ND may be narrated as follows. The goal was a theory of doctrine that met two major requirements: it had to explain the phenomenon of ecumenical discussions in which doctrinal reconciliation was achieved without changing established doctrinal positions; and it had to be ‘available to’ (i.e., able to be adopted without prejudice by) diverse religious traditions, and hence able to facilitate future agreements. With a view to securing this availability, Lindbeck proceeded from a position of acritical ecumenical neutrality, a corollary of which was the adoption of the possibility of doctrinal permanence as overarching criterion. The key to his argument was an account of particularity gleaned from mid-twentieth century philosophy and cultural theory, an account that emphasised the comprehensiveness and ultimacy of culturally-embedded interpretive frameworks, as well as their stability and internal coherence. Lindbeck found that experiential-expressivist approaches did not take doctrines seriously as attempts to describe reality, but subsumed them under the ultimacy of modern philosophy, and explained them (away) as expressions of human psychological states. Accordingly, serious ecumenists, who do acknowledge the comprehensiveness and ultimacy of religious commitments, have little use for experiential-expressivist reductions. Among approaches that engage seriously with doctrine, traditional propositionalism becomes unconvincingly unwieldy as it faces the challenge of historical relativity, but a cultural-linguistic approach finds a fruitful analogy between doctrine and the interpretive frameworks of cultures. For Lindbeck, these stable and internally coherent frameworks provide conceptual categories that are non-affirmatory, enduringly distinct from knowledge, and unaffected by the flux of history. He accommodates doctrinal constancy in his rule theory by identifying doctrine proper with such a framework: it is the invariant pattern or ‘grammar’ of Christianity; what are commonly referred to as ‘doctrines’ are really historically-conditioned instantiations of that unchanging grammar.

The foregoing critical narration of the argument has brought its difficulties into sharp relief. Lindbeck’s acritical inclusivity defined a space in which past communal decisions could be received without interrogation concerning their implication in human finitude and moral vulnerability, a space inimical not only to Christian confession, but also to human existence. His idea of conceptual categories overlooked the dynamic interpenetration of language and world and the fact that humans use language with the intention of ‘making sense’ in concrete contexts. The limitations of his static and monolithic understanding of culture were noted earlier.\(^{96}\) In

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\(^{95}\) As noted in the previous subsection. See p. 185 above.

\(^{96}\) See, for example, pp. 67 and 88.
short, two of the three conceptual pillars of Lindbeck’s argument cannot bear any weight, while the third (his understanding of culture) requires substantial renovation.

In the previous subsection I argued that, while linguistic and grammatical metaphors could be fruitful for inquiry into religion, tradition and theology, realisation of that potential would rule out the possibility of doctrinal permanence. Here we have seen that Lindbeck’s commitment to this possibility damages both the Christian identity of his proposal and its philosophical and anthropological cogency. That this commitment crucially constrained his entire argument suggests that rehabilitation of the argument without that basic commitment would be a work of wholesale reconstruction—no mere modification could suffice.

We can now address the question which is the goal of this discussion: why was the possibility of doctrinal permanence so important to Lindbeck? We saw that the logical roots of this possibility lay in Lindbeck’s stance of acritical ecumenical neutrality, which in turn served his aim of offering a theory of doctrine that could be accepted by diverse religious traditions actually or potentially engaged in ecumenical dialogue. Or, looking forwards from this origin, we may say that Lindbeck wanted his theory to be acceptable to a certain audience, and that this desire predisposed him towards accommodation of his audience’s presuppositions, notably those of the Roman Catholic Church, which was the main dialogue partner in the test cases of his fifth chapter, as through much of his ecumenical career.

There is more than a faint echo here of liberal theology’s concern for credibility in the academy and its adoption of some of the academy’s presuppositions concerning scientificity. Earlier, I criticised Lindbeck (and the liberal tradition) for employing supposedly ‘neutral’ or ‘pretheological’ notions of particularity without critically engaging such ideas from the standpoint of the gospel. I argued that this way of proceeding amounted to a circumscription of Christ’s Lordship and a qualification of allegiance to him. It is now clear that Lindbeck’s ecumenical ‘neutrality’ and his commitment to the possibility of doctrinal permanence are vulnerable to a similar critique. Indeed, the vulnerability is greater, since we are speaking here of an avowedly intra-Christian argument. Within the Christian church, of all places, should not the question of responsible Christian confession be raised with greatest urgency? ‘Jesus is Lord’ means that even the academy’s ‘common discourse’ lies, however uneasily, under Christ’s Lordship. A fortiori, Christian traditions, which embrace this confession, owe him whole-hearted allegiance.

However, the present form of Christ’s Lordship, under which Christian confession is yet a frail and vulnerable thing, does not allow the assumption that Christian traditions’ allegiance to Christ is not problematic simply because they confess his name. On the contrary, those in Christ’s service should be especially aware of human frailty and their own relation to it. That is, the church

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97 See p. 186 above.
98 ‘What kind of meaning can [cultural-linguistic approaches to religion] give to the notion that doctrines are not only normative but permanent? Most Christian traditions have held that their doctrines have this character, and Roman Catholicism in addition maintains that its teaching office when making de fide pronouncements is infallible. If the regulative or rule theory appropriate to cultural and linguistic models excludes these claims of normativeness, permanence, and infallibility, it is theologically useless for many theologians and ecumenically useless for all.’ (ND 73)
99 See p. 151 above.
knows that it constantly depends on divine grace as it discharges its commission to bear witness to Christ in and through its own human frailty for the sake of all the other frail humans for whom, also, Christ died and was raised. This being so, it is intrinsic to the church’s task that it be open to (though not uncritically accepting of) external criticism, and that it critically engage its own traditions, and not only those of others, for the sake of the Lord it confesses.195

5.3.3 Leaving Lindbeck’s Theory

We have found that, at its core and in its execution, Lindbeck’s argument has a decidedly Cartesian character, but it is not alone in this. Lindbeck’s basic and most telling charge against cognitivists and expressivists lay in the same area. Recall his point that genuine disagreement exists only where there is prior agreement concerning the categories in terms of which an argument is conducted. In the argument between cognitivists and expressivists, Lindbeck identified that tacit agreement as an intellectualist bias, a common failure to recognise the epistemological importance of human bodiliness and the social mediation of knowledge and meaning. While cognitivists and expressivists disagree on the intellectual basis of religion (scripture and tradition on the one hand, science and philosophy on the other), and on the intellectual tools through which religion should be represented in the public realm (dogma and evangelism on the one hand, apologetic or mediating theology on the other), Lindbeck drew attention to their implicit agreement concerning the nature and sources of religion, namely, that that nature and those sources are amenable to appropriation by a disembodied Cartesian reasoner. One located the norm of reasoning outside religion, and the other located it within, but the nature of the presupposed reasoner was the same in each case.

Lindbeck sided with propositionalists against expressivists in locating the norm of reasoning within a faith tradition, and in taking seriously the comprehensiveness and ultimacy of religious claims.101 He further agreed with propositionalists that religious norms are fixed, but parted with them over the historicity of these norms and their relation to human interpretation. Propositionalists find Christianity’s fixed norm in the tradition and/or its scriptures, and, in focusing on that norm, give insufficient attention to the frailty and finitude of human interpretation. Lindbeck saw that a truly fixed norm must be ahistorical, and that, whether religious norms be fixed or fluid, inferences based on them are fluid, since religious reasoners are human and therefore immersed in the flux of history. For Lindbeck, the propositionalists were right about the fixity of doctrine, but wrong in thinking that this fixity could be maintained in time—they did not face up to the ineluctable historicity of every human proposition.

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100 In his essay ‘Postmodern Theology and the Judgement of the World’ (1989), Rowan Williams nicely uses the ambiguity of his title to make a similar point. While the church is called to judge the world (and must therefore be critically and therapeutically engaged with it), it must also be open to hear God’s judgement on itself in the judgement passed upon it by the world (op. cit. 106).

101 We have seen that the location of the norm of religion explains the pattern of Lindbeck’s engagement with his rivals. Because expressivists locate the norm of reasoning outside religion, he argues with them over the nature of religion (and, indeed, of reason itself), but finds that they cannot even enter the debate over the nature of doctrine. But since propositionalists locate the norm of reasoning within religion, he can engage them over the nature of doctrine.
Lindbeck’s insistence on the historicity of the human reasoner distinguishes him from both sets of opponents. Humans are bodied beings, and therefore necessarily placed—physically, temporally, socially and culturally located. A human cannot be without being somewhere in particular, and nowhere else. Hence, on the one hand, doctrines cannot be simply explained away on the basis of a supposedly objective knowledge that presumes to place others while ignoring its own historicity. On the other hand, doctrinal formulations cannot be simply, objectively, and eternally true, for they are always conditioned by the location of the bodies doing the formulating.

Yet Lindbeck, too, succumbed to a form of Cartesian distortion by placing his bodied, socio-historically located humans in interpretive frameworks that are invariant through time. I have argued that this position is both theologically untenable and, in the end, inconsistent with a recognition of human embodiment. My critique focused on some dualisms implicit in Lindbeck’s rule theory—especially those of language and world, and grammar and assertion. Further dualisms then appeared as corollaries of the notion of invariant frameworks, as some aspects of the making of meaning were associated with the framework and therefore regarded as invariant (doctrine, scripture, tradition), while others were located in the flux of history and hence regarded as fluid (religion, worship, Christian life).

The nature and role of scripture must be counted among the most intractable difficulties arising from the distinction between invariant frameworks and their fluid historical expressions. How do ahistorical frameworks come to be expressed in history? How do humans, as bodied and therefore socio-historically located beings, access an invariant, ahistorical interpretive framework? Lindbeck suggests that they do so by reading scripture and receiving early tradition. Thus, he associates scripture with the interpretive framework, a move that pulls towards treating scripture ahistorically. Yet he also speaks of scripture and the creeds as historically conditioned paradigmatic instantiations of unchanging ahistorical rules, thus distinguishing between historical scripture and ahistorical framework. The difficulties surrounding the nature and role of scripture in Lindbeck’s proposal are clearly substantial, but I will not pursue them further, having already concluded that Lindbeck’s account of interpretive frameworks is untenable.

102 Recall that the Christian categorial framework consists, not of doctrine alone, but of ‘the biblical narratives interrelated in certain specified ways (e.g., by Christ as center)’ (ND 80), and that, by analogy with language, scripture functions as the lexicon, and doctrine as the grammar, of Christianity. See the earlier discussion of Doctrine as Grammar: Lindbeck’s Rule Theory commencing on p. 156 above.

103 See my comments on the Lindbeck–Tracy debate, under Theologies of Distinction commencing on p. 60.

104 On the creeds, see ND 96. Lindbeck speaks similarly of scripture when describing intratextual theology: scriptural religions treat their scriptures ‘as exemplary or normative instantiations of their semiotic codes’ (ND 116); faithful theological descriptions correspond to the ‘semiotic universe paradigmatically encoded in holy writ’ (ibid.); the immanent meanings of scripture are ‘the meanings immanent in the religious language of whose use the text is a paradigmatic instance’ (ibid.); the normative or literal meaning of the text must be ‘what the text says in terms of the communal language of which the text is an instantiation’ (120).

105 It appears that, to the extent that he views scripture historically, Lindbeck subordinates it to the ahistorical framework. Recall the close association between permanence (or constancy) and authority (or normativity) in Lindbeck’s argument. See n82, on p. 188 above.
Abandonment of the notion of ahistorical interpretive frameworks frees us to consider the implications of pervasive historicity for a theological understanding of scripture and doctrine. What is the significance for Christian theology of the fact that everything that actually informs, or might inform, the making of meaning comes to us in the flux of time and space? Not only Jesus Christ himself, but also our confession of him; not only the scriptures that bear witness to Christ, but also the doctrines that guide, and to some extent misguide, our reading of scripture—all share in the vulnerability of historical existence. All are susceptible to (mis)appropriation by human understanding. All are implicated in human networks of desire and power. What becomes of Christian confession, doctrine, and scripture when Lindbeck’s ahistorical constancy is set aside? These are among the questions examined in the next chapter as we take up the inquiry Lindbeck foreshadowed but never quite embarked upon: a critical engagement with historicised propositionalism.
DOCTRINE, SCRIPTURE AND HISTORICITY: A VIABLE PROPOSITIONALISM?

Although the term ‘historicised propositionalism’ is Lindbeck’s coinage, and may be thought to suffer by association with his problematic argument in the later part of *ND*, it is reasonably apt as a label for theological approaches that look to the authority of traditional sources with a measure of awareness that the sources themselves, and all their past and present interpreters, exist in particular historical contexts. In this chapter I explore such an approach by following a course parallel to that adopted in Chapter 3. There, I presented and engaged with a liberal account of the culture-theoretical terrain traversed by Lindbeck. Here, I present and engage a ‘conservative’ treatment of the same terrain.

Generally, conservatives welcomed Lindbeck’s advocacy of the primacy of scripture for Christian existence and his understanding that doctrine-as-rule must be ruled by scripture, but they were concerned that his metaphors of language and lens appeared to distance scripture and doctrine from historical reality. After all, the lexicon and grammatical rules of a natural language make assertions only about the language—in and of themselves they say nothing about extra-linguistic reality; and even the best lens provides only clarity—it is not itself a vision of anything. Such misgivings reflect underlying concern for the truth of the gospel. For traditionalist and biblicist Christians, the gospel cannot be good news unless it is true news; and it cannot be true news unless it conforms to divine revelation in Holy Scripture. Yet, short of merely reading out the Scriptures in public, contemporary expression of the gospel requires doctrinal reflection on Scripture. Consequently, conservative thinkers are uneasy with Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory, in which Scripture and doctrine differ in their truth status, and neither can be directly affirmed as ‘true’.

In what follows, as we review a conservative critique of Lindbeck’s proposal, the intention is not to reinforce the negative conclusions of the previous chapter. Rather, the question now before us is whether a consistently confessional approach to theology can offer an account of truth, doctrine and scripture that is more robust than those offered by Lindbeck and his liberal critics. In particular, we must test the self-consistency of the confessional and critical stance that emerged in the course of the preceding chapters, a stance that clearly has some affinity with the ‘historicised propositionalism’ misunderstood by Lindbeck. The ‘conversation’ in this chapter is constructed so as to illuminate this line of inquiry.

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1 On the question of how the Bible is to be interpreted so as to facilitate a true understanding of divine revelation, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican traditions are more inclined to acknowledge the role of tradition, while Protestant non-conformist traditions are more inclined to *sola scriptura* formulations. In the present context, the broad label of theological ‘conservatism’ is meant to include all approaches of traditionalist and/or biblicist tendency.
The foremost conservative respondent to Lindbeck is Alister McGrath, principally in *The Genesis of Doctrine*. McGrath is a valuable conversation partner because he not only offers a substantial evaluation of ND, but goes on to develop an account of the nature of doctrine that is both propositional and historically aware. As in the Lindbeck-liberal exchange, parallel reading of Lindbeck and McGrath uncovers some mutual misunderstandings, and these indicate possible improvements in McGrath’s account of doctrine. Once again, immanent critique yields important insights into the coherence of the view under investigation, though in McGrath’s case it is not so much the basic standpoint as its outworking that stands in need of review. The first two sections below present McGrath’s response to Lindbeck and survey his account of the nature of doctrine.

The third section moves to critical engagement, drawing attention to the relation between theology and ideology as an area in which McGrath’s work is incomplete, and pointing to the need for a theological rationale for addressing ideological distortions in biblical texts. The fourth and fifth sections explore this theme in conversation with Karl Barth and Francis Watson respectively.

6.1 **ALISTER McGRATH’S RESPONSE TO LINDBECK**

Among responses to Lindbeck from theologians of propositionalist inclination, the most substantial is that of Alister McGrath, who has cautiously explored common ground while insisting that Lindbeck’s proposal displays major shortcomings. In particular, McGrath’s *The Genesis of Doctrine* is ‘a study of how the phenomenon of doctrine arose, how it has been understood, and how the past has been restructured and reappropriated by Christian theologians, especially in the modern period.’ Based on this descriptive material, the work offers theological and prescriptive claims informed by a keen awareness of the ‘delicate interplay…between the historically descriptive and the theologically normative’ (*GD* ix). Such prefatory comments promise a thoroughly historical treatment of the origin and development of doctrines, tempered by a responsible self-consciousness of McGrath’s own historical locatedness.

*GD* focuses on the origin of doctrine, what it actually is, how it develops, and what authority ought to be ascribed to the past in Christian doctrinal reflection. Thus, McGrath’s inquiry

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2 McGrath 1990, abbreviated hereafter as *GD*.
3 The following summary of McGrath’s response to Lindbeck is based on the first and second chapters of *GD* and McGrath’s contributions to a postliberal-evangelical symposium held in 1995 (McGrath 1996). The latter repeats large sections from *GD* and contains little new material relating to Lindbeck. Apart from changes reflecting the audience and occasion for the paper, McGrath reworked the material critical of liberal theology (pp. 24-5 are new), gave some attention to Paul Holmer’s *The Grammar of Faith* (an important influence on Lindbeck, pp. 28-9), and extended his comments to cover Stanley Hauerwas and Hans Frei (pp. 39-43). New material on Lindbeck consists of about a page of text on Lindbeck’s account of truth.
4 *GD* viii. There is a clear similarity between this description of the development of doctrine as a particular (re)construction of the past, and some of Delwin Brown’s descriptions of the nature of tradition.
5 In his introductory first chapter, McGrath states and discusses these questions more fully. His fuller summary of the issues is given in the following paragraph.
overlaps those of Lindbeck and Brown, while giving greater attention to the historicity of doctrine’s origin and development. His introductory comments foreshadow a view that, while Lindbeck may be asking some of the right questions and attacking some of the right adversaries, a different assessment may be order in respect of his constructive proposal.  

6.1.1 On Recognising Propositionalism

McGrath begins his discussion of ND by noting the book’s general content and Lindbeck’s motivations for writing it. He then considers each term of Lindbeck’s three-fold taxonomy of doctrine before offering a preliminary evaluation. Concerning the cognitive-propositional theory (GD 16-20), McGrath immediately notes that Lindbeck’s criticism of it appears to be based upon a questionable understanding of the ‘cognitive-propositional’ position, apparently grounded upon the belief that those inclined towards this position hold that it is possible to state the objective truth about God definitively, exhaustively and timelessly in propositional form.  

McGrath argues that it is a misrepresentation to say (or to assume) that all who might admit to the appellation ‘propositionalist’ must think in this way, for this is demonstrably not true of either the contemporary post-critical forms of propositionalism or their earlier classical counterparts. He

In the first place, we are obliged to consider the manner in which the past may be in any sense authoritative for the present articulation of Christian doctrine. In what sense are our options limited, our horizons defined, our mental worlds already shaped, by what has happened in the past? To what extent are we free to break away from the heritage of the past? In the second place, we are obliged to give an account of the genesis of doctrine. Why did doctrinal formulations evolve, and what is their significance? What significant pressures—whether religious or social—may be detected as having precipitated doctrinal affirmations? And in the third place, the theme of doctrinal criticism emerges as significant. How does a doctrinal statement relate to its historical context? The suggestion, still occasionally encountered, that theological attitudes in general or doctrinal statements in particular may be totally abstracted from their historical situation is seriously deficient, given the conceded insights of the sociology of knowledge (GD 7, correcting ‘in any be’ with ‘be in any’ in the first line).

6 GD viii, 13. The latter reference is to the comments with which McGrath concludes his first chapter and looks forward to the treatment of Lindbeck’s work that follows in chapter 2. He offers the preliminary opinion that ‘although it is my conviction that Lindbeck’s categorization of the history of doctrine is perhaps seductive and misleading, his criticism of certain experientially orientated theories of doctrine appears timely and persuasive.’

7 GD 15-6. This is similar to my earlier observation that Lindbeck did not manage to engage an historically-aware propositionalism (see Engagement Unfulfilled on p. 180 above).

8 McGrath’s accusation here may involve a slight misunderstanding. Lindbeck sees the propositional approach as non-classical, and in various writings (not just ND) makes clear that he sees his objective as a recovery of pre-modern ways of reading the Bible. For him, the approaches he calls ‘propositionalist’ and ‘experiential-expressivist’ are equally children of the Enlightenment. The authors McGrath cites as ‘classical’ propositionalists would quite likely be claimed by Lindbeck as classic pre-modern ‘world-absorbers’ and thus fore-runners of the postliberal approach. Yet Lindbeck
finds Lindbeck’s description to be a caricature in that it imputes to propositionalism an all-or-nothing inflexibility in which a statement is either simply true or erroneous. This caricature ignores the idea of ‘relative adequacy’, in which adequacy ‘can be assessed both in terms of the original historical context of a doctrinal formulation and [in terms of] whatever referent it is alleged to represent’ (GD 16). He shows that most medieval theologians understood dogma as a dynamic concept, ‘a perception of divine truth, tending towards this truth.’

The point is not that doctrines define reality, much less capture it. Rather, they seek to convey a perception of it. By and large, the medieval theologians understood that ‘doctrines are reliable, yet incomplete, descriptions of reality’ (GD 17). The point of challenge for a doctrine is not whether it is absolutely and completely true, but whether and to what extent it is adequate as a representation of the independent reality it means to describe, always recognising that the extent to which such assessment is possible may be strictly limited. If it conveys, does it do so reliably?

McGrath maintains that the notion of relative adequacy is not peculiar to doctrinal language, but arises from an appreciation of the nature and operation of language in general. If some propositionalists fail to appreciate this, so much the worse for them. But this does not at all constitute an argument against propositionalism as such. He remarks:

The impatience of many modern theological writers with ‘cognitive’ theories of doctrine seems at times to represent little more than impatience with the vexatious nature of human language, and a reluctance to engage with its ambivalence and polysemy (GD 19).

This appears to be aimed at those who see the language-world relation as an intractable problem and are impatient with cognitivist claims because they believe they cannot be made plausible. For McGrath, such impatience reflects a refusal of engagement, the ‘peace in our time’ of appeasement, rather than the fruit of serious grappling with the issues. But this does not touch Lindbeck, who set out with the problems of language firmly in his sights and did not reach his conclusions without struggle, even if he did partly mistake his opponents. Moreover, precisely on the basis of his own engagement with these issues, he criticised propositionalist approaches to doctrine for being far too careless in their assumption of access to reality.10

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10 Lindbeck’s criticism of propositionalists bears comparison with McGrath’s complaint against liberal theologians (clearly the intended referent of ‘many modern theological writers’). Both authors allege a lack of engagement with the problems of language. For Lindbeck, propositionalists’ non-engagement with these problems reflects ignorance of their importance or presumption of their tractability. For McGrath, moderns’ non-engagement reflects a judgement or presumption that these problems are overwhelmingly difficult. On the one side, the problems of language do not exist or can be dismissed or easily avoided. On the other side, the problems are insuperable and defeat has been conceded. Of course, the charges are rebutted in each case. McGrath argues that the truth of Lindbeck’s charge in relation to some propositionalists does not make it valid in respect of propositionalism as such. Liberal theologians can object to McGrath’s criticism in much the same terms: if some liberals are impatient with the problems of language, many
As to specific criticisms, McGrath notes that Lindbeck finds propositionalism ‘voluntarist, intellectualist, and literalist, even making the suggestion that those who “perceive or experience religion in cognitivist fashion” are those who “combine unusual insecurity with naiveté”. McGrath takes particular exception to the charge of ‘literalism’, apostrophising it several times though it is really his own coinage. Lindbeck hardly mentions ‘literalism’, addressing it only to defend and advocate the ‘literal’ reading of scripture as a literary reading that takes scripture seriously as a literary rendition of the identity and character of God, Jesus, humanity, etc. In this sense, he promotes ‘literalism’ as a reading practice and maintains that we must deal with the Bible as a literary work, as a whole and in the form in which we find it. He does not use the terms ‘literal’ or ‘literalism’ to describe a more-or-less direct relation between doctrines or words and reality, which appears to be the sense in which McGrath takes such a charge to have been made.

If McGrath overemphasises the importance of ‘literalism’ among Lindbeck’s criticisms, he nevertheless accepts that the charge is not entirely misplaced. He allows that ‘Lindbeck has provided a valuable corrective to deficient cognitive models of doctrine’ (for example, neoscholastic understandings of revelation), even if ‘not all cognitive theories of doctrine are vulnerable in this respect.’ In conclusion, while maintaining that ‘there is a genuinely cognitive dimension, component or element to doctrinal statements’, McGrath wants propositionalists to acknowledge that ‘doctrinal statements need not be—and…should not be—treated as purely cognitive statements’.

McGrath’s response to Lindbeck’s account of propositionalism may be summarised as follows: after identifying the shortcomings of Lindbeck’s account (GD 15-6), he describes and promotes

liberal scholars are very much aware of these problems and engage with them constantly. Despite their allegations, it seems that neither Lindbeck nor McGrath could have much objection to theologians of whatever persuasion who, seeing ‘the vexatious nature of human language,’ find in it an invitation to critically constructive engagement.

11 GD 15. McGrath does not document the voluntarist and intellectualist charges, but these may be found at ND 35, where the focus of the discussion is on the ability of a cultural-linguistic approach to accommodate the characteristic emphases of the other two approaches (ND 34-6). Here, Lindbeck argues that his proposal accommodates both the experiential and the expressive aspects of ‘experiential-expressivism’ rather better than does a cognitive approach, which, by contrast, is ‘intellectualist’ and ‘voluntarist’. The (somewhat oblique) reference to ‘insecurity with naiveté’ is at ND 21. The status of the alleged charge of ‘literalism’ is more problematic, as I argue in the current paragraph (and see n12 below). McGrath does not address Lindbeck’s more substantial critical comments on propositionalism, which may be found in his ‘Excursus on Religion and Truth’ (ND 63-9).

12 See GD 18-9. Lindbeck’s only reference to ‘literalism’ is a passing mention in which he asserts that ‘fundamentalist literalism, like experiential-expressivism, is a product of modernity’ (ND 51). But ‘literalism’, as a charge laid against propositionalists, is not the focus of the argument here. More substantially, Lindbeck’s ‘Excursus on Religion and Truth’ (ND 63-9) contains material in which one finds (his construction of) propositionalism charged with (a) ignoring the concrete (bodily) context within which statements are made (64); (b) ignoring the importance of speakers’ intentions and actions (65-6); (c) locating the truth value of a statement in the sentence uttered rather than in the act of utterance taken in the context of the life of the utterer (65-6); (d) neglecting the epistemological humility proper to human assertions (66-7); and (e) ignoring the speaker’s existential relation to the semiotic context in which the utterance is made (68). These are Lindbeck’s major charges against propositionalism, and ‘literalism’ is not among them. Even if, by ‘literalism’, McGrath means to refer to objection (c) above, this use of the word remains his, rather than Lindbeck’s.

13 See the section headed ‘Faithfulness as Intratextuality’ (pp. 113-24, especially pp. 119-22).

14 GD 20, original emphasis.
a sophisticated and appropriately humble propositionalism that is not ‘crudely literalist’ \((GD\ 16-20)\); against Lindbeck, and supporting his fellow propositionalists, he finds that propositionalists need not fear the charge of ‘literalism’, provided they realise what a viable propositionalism entails, and, perhaps more importantly, what it excludes.

The chief problem with McGrath’s response is that Lindbeck does not charge propositionalists with ‘literalism’. He does not deny that doctrines may have cognitive import, or rather, that doctrinal statements may function cognitively, as in propositional assertions. He does, however, hold that the specifically doctrinal function of such statements is to express the communal understanding of the rules governing the construction of propositional assertions. The locus of Lindbeck’s distinction is not the content of a sentence, but the use to which it is put. McGrath, however, refers to the cognitive or propositional as a ‘dimension’ or ‘element’ of doctrinal statements themselves, along with other aspects such the evocative, the semiotic, and the rhetorical.\(^{15}\) The contrast lies less in the descriptions than in the referents: where Lindbeck speaks of the function for which a speaker uses a sentence, McGrath speaks of the sentence itself. Lindbeck’s point is that words are used by people in order to do things. To the extent that McGrath has continued to speak of words-in-themselves, without addressing their function in the context of human engagement with the world, his response nicely illustrates Lindbeck’s primary charge against propositionalism: it fails to discern the body, that is, it is ‘intellectualist’.

A less serious difficulty is that McGrath appears to have mistaken the role of absolutes in Lindbeck’s critique. Where Lindbeck’s ‘propositionalists’ hold a view that could be called ‘absolute propositionalism’, McGrath portrays a propositionalism that is not absolute, but contents itself with relative adequacy. Where Lindbeck criticises propositionalists for taking the import of doctrinal sentences to be purely cognitive,\(^{16}\) McGrath objects that, while doctrinal sentences are cognitive, they are also more than cognitive—there is more to be said about them than that they have cognitive content. Such defences address the degree of guilt more than the substance of the charge, as if McGrath were content to plead: ‘Guilty, but not absolutely!’\(^{17}\) However, it is not for its alleged absoluteness that Lindbeck attacks propositionalism—after all, his own regulative theory presupposes the absoluteness of doctrine. Rather, his main objection has to do with the location of absoluteness (it lies beyond history and its availability within history is only ever implicit), and with the indirectness of our linguistic dealings with the world (our grasp of the world is limited by the adequacy of our conceptual categories). These aspects of historicity and

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\(^{15}\) McGrath’s expressions at this point \((GD\ 18-20)\) seem to indicate an understanding of the cognitive, the evocative, the semiotic, the rhetorical, etc, as aspects or components of statements. The language of perspective (aspect, ‘dimension’) is perhaps less problematic in this regard than the language of componentry (‘component’, ‘element’), which may carry an implication of notionally separable parts. But this is not the point at issue here.

\(^{16}\) That is, they treat doctrines as little other than ‘informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities’ \((ND\ 16,\ cited\ in\ GD\ 15-6)\).

\(^{17}\) The logic of McGrath’s response seems to be as follows: propositionalists, charged (as he thinks) with ‘literalism’, are guilty, but not entirely so. For they have been charged with an absolute literalism, whereas in fact they espouse (or ought to espouse) a moderate literalism. The falsity in the charge is thus less in its substance than in its degree. Thus, if propositionalists are charged with absolute literalism (as McGrath thinks Lindbeck has done) then they are innocent, insofar as the literalism they espouse (and McGrath thinks they should espouse) is not absolute, but moderate.
hermeneutics are the main locus of Lindbeck’s ‘intellectualist’ charge against propositionalism. McGrath’s non-engagement with these issues is probably related to his preoccupation with correcting what he sees as an absolutist (and ‘literalist’) caricature of propositionalist approaches.

Although Lindbeck’s account of propositionalism is indeed a caricature, McGrath’s attempt to correct the picture does little to engage the real thrust of Lindbeck’s critique, which has more to do with ‘intellectualism’ than ‘literalism’. McGrath shows awareness of issues relevant to the ‘intellectualist’ charge when he ‘concedes’ the insights of the sociology of knowledge (GD 7), but he makes this concession without acknowledging that some major themes of the sociology of knowledge resonate deeply with major themes of Christian theological anthropology, and that, to the extent of this resonance, sociological insights should be not so much ‘conceded’ as embraced. In that embrace McGrath’s modest propositionalists might re-encounter their own humanity, more fully appreciate the hermeneutic significance of the fact that humans exist as bodies, and so work towards a ‘propositionalism’ that truly engages Lindbeck’s objections. By mistaking the nature of the challenge, McGrath largely bypasses this field of engagement.

6.1.2 On Experiential-Expressivism: Joining the Attack

Whereas McGrath found much to criticise in Lindbeck’s account of propositionalism, he is very positive towards Lindbeck’s account of experiential-expressivist theories of doctrine (GD 20-6), finding little to criticise and much to affirm. He thinks Lindbeck’s account of such theories is ‘fair and accurate’, and that his critique is ‘persuasive and effective, and may well be judged to be the most significant long-term contribution he has made to the contemporary discussion of the nature of doctrine’ (GD 20).

McGrath accepts without demur Lindbeck’s description of experiential-expressivist theories of doctrine as those in which doctrine refers to ‘ubiquitous private prereflective experience underlying all religions’. He documents this view in Schubert Ogden’s work of the 1960s and David Tracy’s Blessed Rage for Order (1975) (GD 21), but gives no attention to liberal objections that Lindbeck’s description ignores liberal theology’s critical engagement with its own roots. In this material, McGrath expresses reservation only in relation to Lindbeck’s quite conventional identification of Schleiermacher as an expressivist.

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18 This is particularly unfortunate in view of McGrath’s extensive deployment of sociology-of-knowledge techniques (such as ideological critique) in his attack on liberal theology. A major part of my response to McGrath is taken up with exploring the nature of a propositionalism that is able to see and engage its own ideological weaknesses (including ‘intellectualism’) from the standpoint of the gospel.

19 GD 20, 22. McGrath does not provide a reference for this paraphrase of Lindbeck, but a number of passages would serve equally well. For example, see ND 21.

20 Some of these objections were canvassed in chapter 3 above, beginning from p. 55.

21 McGrath has an appreciative understanding of Schleiermacher (see, for example, GD 66-7, 70-1, 77-8). He regards Lindbeck’s description of Schleiermacher as an ‘experiential-expressivist’ as inaccurate (GD 25-6), and notes similarities between Lindbeck’s proposal and the approach taken by Schleiermacher in The Christian Faith (GD 26, 28). McGrath observes that the rise of experience-orientated religious theories has occurred ‘since the time of Schleiermacher’ (GD 20), but does not directly implicate Schleiermacher in their origin. Although Schleiermacher ‘might be taken as the archetype of...an experientially grounded approach to theology’, such an identification should be carefully qualified by
McGrath identifies the principal objections to the experiential-expressive approach as ‘its obvious phenomenological inaccuracy,’ and ‘its inherent resistance to verification or falsification.’ Having reorganised some of Lindbeck’s objections under these headings, McGrath amplifies the critique with three further objections. He maintains, firstly, that doctrine is not necessarily an expression or reflection of experience, but may in fact be opposed to it, and sometimes radically so, as in Luther’s theology of the cross. Thus, doctrine often confronts our understanding of experience, and challenges us to re-imagine our experience in another way. Secondly, McGrath argues that the assumption that the present experience of an individual is the primary datum of religion leaves the experiential approach unable to give an adequate account of religious conversion, or of apostasy, or of loss of faith. Are not the experiences on either side of such events really quite different? And if they are taken as not really different, how does this differ from a refusal to take them seriously as human experiences? Finally, McGrath objects that the experiential model of religion and doctrine leaves us without any grounds on which we can say that the experience we are attempting to express or symbolise is an experience of God, rather than a Feuerbachian projection—a fond (or terrible) thing vainly invented. ‘Experience may indeed seek expression—but it also demands a criterion by which it may be judged.’

I will not engage McGrath’s additional objections to experiential-expressivism, other than to point out that, like Lindbeck, he is mostly criticising nineteenth century positions from the vantage point of a later critical orthodoxy. To the extent that such objections are valid, they are so in relation to positions and people already subject to similar criticism from liberal writers. Contemporary liberal theologians are by no means uncritical of the earlier hypothesis of a ‘ubiquitous private prereflective experience underlying all religions’, and, as we have seen in
this study, the works of David Tracy and Delwin Brown (to name but two) show the fruit of substantial critical engagement with such assumptions. These theologians offer accounts of religion and doctrine in which the classic liberal hypothesis is seen as problematic and in need of further development, and substantial attention is given to precisely the objections mounted by Lindbeck and McGrath (though perhaps without answers that they would find satisfying).26

Earlier, we saw that the real challenges for contemporary liberal theologies emerge from a double-edged anthropological critique of classic liberal universalism.27 One of these challenges is reflected in the charge of ‘intellectualism’ that Lindbeck levels against both propositionalists and expressivists. Contemporary liberal thought acknowledges that the Enlightenment’s *a priori* universalism must be abandoned, but struggles to cease longing for it. In this light, the lingering liberal propensity for viewing the academy as a privileged evaluative forum is a kind of acquiescence, a settling for second best when one’s first and best hope is admittedly out of reach, but remains a cherished ideal. A not-quite-universal rationality will have to do. Lindbeck’s charge (largely ignored by McGrath) is that by lingering on this course liberal theology shows that it has not grasped the epistemological significance of human embodiment and sociality. In his view, neither propositionalists nor experiential-expressivists discern the body. This charge remains far more relevant than those of ‘literalism’ on the one hand, and ‘universalism’ on the other.

The other challenge follows from the recognition that, although appreciation of human particularity is native to Christian theology, the Christian confession ‘Jesus is Lord’ remains stubbornly universal—it affirms Jesus’ ultimate importance and universal significance. That is, Jesus is Lord of all locations, including those locations in which we find ourselves theorising about particularity. In academies, no less than in offices, homes, factories, parliaments, hospitals, schools and armies, Christians are called to live as those who, in advance of all creation, acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as Lord. This is not to claim that multiple allegiances (e.g., to Christ and to academic culture or institutions) are impossible. It is to say that allegiance to Christ is primary, and other allegiances, be they many or few, may find their true and rightful places just to the extent that they cohere with and support Christians’ anticipation of the coming universal acknowledgement of Jesus’ Lordship. Granted, our understanding of that Lordship, our awareness of our other allegiances, and our understanding of their proper relations to Jesus’ Lordship, are as vulnerable as any other human pursuit, since they are forged through critical engagements that are necessarily finite, ongoing and provisional. But what cannot be allowed to Christian theology, because it is simply not a Christian possibility, is that Jesus’ Lordship be supplanted or limited by any other. This, then, the question of allegiance, is the second challenge for liberal theology. I argued above that Christian allegiance is compromised implicitly whenever questions are settled, or even accepted on their own terms, without being critically engaged from the standpoint of Christ’s Lordship. In view of its quest for credibility in

26 Brown’s proposal is vulnerable in relation to McGrath’s third objection (in *Boundaries of our Habitations* he does not in fact speak of God much at all), but provides material that addresses the first two. Tracy’s various works, especially from 1985 onwards, address all the points that McGrath raises.

the academies of Western culture, we must ask liberal theology, as it must ask itself, whether it understands the radical difference of standpoint between speaking with the voice of Christ’s academy and speaking with the voice of the academy’s Christ.

In this chapter we are trying to clarify the promise and the pitfalls of propositional approaches to doctrine. We have seen that Lindbeck levels the charge of intellectualism as much against propositionalists (conservatives) as against experiential-expressivists (liberals), and that this charge is also relevant to his own proposal. What is the situation in relation to the question of allegiance? Conservative theologians have often felt that liberal theology, as a whole or at various times and places, transferred its primary allegiance from Jesus Christ to the modern academy in whose eyes it hoped to find credibility. Lindbeck concurs in this judgment insofar as he sees liberal theology as a native of an alien discourse in terms of which it explains doctrine away rather than really explaining it on its own terms (i.e., in terms of its witness to Jesus Christ). In the previous chapter, I argued that Lindbeck’s proposal, too, is vulnerable on the question of allegiance, because it explains religion in terms of a theory that is never critically engaged from the standpoint of the gospel, and because it explains doctrine on the basis of a ‘neutrality’ that excludes certain historically contingent human judgements from the sphere of Christ’s Lordship. What of conservative theologies? Lindbeck does not challenge his ‘propositionalists’ on the question of allegiance. Are their theologies also vulnerable on this question? Later in this chapter I argue that they are, though in different ways to the theologies of Lindbeck and (at least some) liberals. The nature of the conservative compromise will emerge more clearly from critical engagement with McGrath’s account of doctrine in section 6.3 below.

6.1.3 On Lindbeck’s Cultural-Linguistic Theory: A Question of Origins

McGrath provides a sound overview of Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory (GD 26-8) before offering a critical appraisal (GD 28-34). His various lines of critique presuppose the historicality of Christianity and explore the ways in which Lindbeck’s proposal quarantines doctrine from historical inquiry. For McGrath, Christian faith requires an acknowledgment that the definitive action of God in history has occurred in Jesus of Nazareth. He finds that, in treating cultural-linguistic frameworks as static systems, Lindbeck bypasses the question of their historical origins, thus also bypassing questions of revelation and truth. McGrath agrees that doctrine has a regulative function, but insists that regulation cannot be any more valid than its underlying ontology, and that doctrinal discussion is concerned with arriving at formulations that provide a reliable guide to ontology. For him, the essence of Christian doctrine is not grammatical analysis, but an attempt to speak truly in the light of the history of Jesus of Nazareth.

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28 This suspicion remains a potent factor in contemporary debates over Christian ethics, especially in relation to homosexuality, human reproduction and euthanasia.

29 A minor blemish appears in McGrath’s summary when he notes Lindbeck’s tentative suggestion that language can shape areas of human existence and action that are pre-experiential (GD 27, referring to ND 37, on which see also p. 24 above). Lindbeck might not entirely welcome McGrath’s comment that this suggestion provides ‘an important qualification to, and extension of, the experiential-expressive theory.’ We have seen that Lindbeck prefers an oppositional, rather than developmental, stance in relation to experiential-expressive approaches.
Consistent with this, McGrath does not object to the cultural-linguistic metaphor as such, but firmly rejects Lindbeck’s ahistorical approach to language. Not only Jesus, but Christian language about him, has a history:

The Christian idiom is not a perennial feature of the intellectual landscape: it came into being, and developed within history. What pressures brought it into being? What factors governed its development?…The history of the evolution of the Christian language is the essential prelude to the evaluation of that language and its grammatical regulators. For that language is not just ‘given’ in scripture or tradition: it was developed in a process of evolution which is partly susceptible to historical analysis and theological evaluation (GD 31).

Thus, McGrath raises the question of the genesis of doctrine, and the fact that this question is the overall theme of his investigation indicates the extent to which his book arose as a response to Lindbeck’s proposal. In addition, McGrath notes the weakness of the models Lindbeck set up as alternatives to his own (GD 32); Lindbeck’s reluctance to allow that all three models may be needed as complementary witnesses to ‘the polymorphic and polyvalent character of doctrine’ (33); and the fact that Lindbeck exploits history to selectively illustrate a theory derived from one corner of the social sciences ‘without any serious attempt to engage with the total historical phenomenon of doctrine’ (33). McGrath finds Lindbeck’s proposal strongly reductionist, and he ventures to develop a more nuanced account that will allow ‘the complexity of doctrine as an historical phenomenon to be more fully appreciated’ (34).

McGrath’s response to Lindbeck thus indicates that his own approach will be recognisably ‘propositional’ while giving full weight to the historicity of doctrine and all its sources.

6.2 DOCTRINE AND HISTORICITY ACCORDING TO MCGRATH

6.2.1 McGrath’s Theses on Doctrine

McGrath began his first chapter with programmatic statements that identified Jesus of Nazareth as ‘the precipitating cause of Christian faith and Christian doctrine’, and the history of Jesus as the overriding criterion of doctrinal development.\(^{30}\) The historical cast of these statements foreshadowed the central theme of his response to Lindbeck in chapter 2. Turning now to his own account of doctrine, McGrath does not advance a theoretical or theological justification of his opening statements, but rather offers ‘a descriptive account of the essential elements of doctrine as an historical phenomenon, which any theory of doctrine must be capable of accommodating’ (GD 37). These elements, presented in four interrelated theses, operate ‘both as the historical starting point of any future theory of doctrine, and as an implicit criticism of past theories’ (GD 37). Detailed exposition of the theses occupies the third chapter of GD (The Nature of Doctrine: Four Theses). Briefly stated, the theses are as follows:

1. Doctrine functions as a social demarcator.

\(^{30}\) ‘The precipitating cause of Christian faith and Christian doctrine was and is a man named Jesus…’ (GD 1) and ‘The history of Jesus of Nazareth was and is the crucible of Christian doctrinal possibilities, the controlling paradigm of conceptual potentialities (ibid.)’
Doctrine is generated by, and subsequently interprets the Christian narrative.

Doctrine interprets experience.

Doctrine makes truth claims (GD 37).

Superficially, the first three theses appear to agree with Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory, and only the last clearly diverges from it. However, McGrath’s whole approach contrasts strongly with Lindbeck’s. Firstly, McGrath insists that he is not proposing a different theory, because he is not proposing a theory at all, but offering a descriptive account of what doctrine has in fact been, rather than a normative account of what it ought to be. Secondly, he provides a wealth of historical examples while minimizing (at this point) overt theoretical argument. Thirdly, he avoids the clear distinctions characteristic of Lindbeck’s treatment, insisting that the various aspects of doctrine ‘cannot be isolated as non-interactive and independent entities, but are rather to be viewed as mutually interacting constituents of a greater whole’ (GD 37).

Beginning with doctrine’s social aspect, and ranging well beyond the function of demarcation, McGrath finds that the development and deployment of doctrine is thoroughly implicated in socio-historical processes, pressures for communal self-definition, and political aspirations within and without the church (GD 37-52). Turning to his second thesis, McGrath observes that the character of the Christian community derives from the narrative of Jesus Christ with which it is historically and theologically continuous. Scripture is primarily (though not exclusively) narrative because it purports to tell of God’s dealings with humanity, climaxing in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, and it is the uniquely privileged source for doctrine on account of the historicity of its formulating communities. Doctrine provides a conceptual framework for interpreting scripture, but is valid only insofar as it may be discerned within scripture. ‘The narrative is primary, and the interpretative framework secondary’, and there is an ongoing and necessary oscillation between the generative narrative and the interpretative framework.32

31 This is somewhat self-contradictory. McGrath is familiar with the major themes of sociology and the philosophy of science in the twentieth century. Indeed, he devotes a chapter and various smaller sections of text to these issues. Yet, notwithstanding his awareness of the theory-ladenness of observation (see GD 70-1), he (a) claims to completely avoid ‘prejudging the question of what doctrine ought to be’; (b) suggests that, ‘as a matter of historical fact, doctrine has been understood to possess four major dimensions’ as he describes them; and (c) stresses that he is ‘not concerned with presenting a theory of doctrine, but rather a descriptive account of the essential elements of doctrine as an historical phenomenon, which any theory of doctrine must be capable of accommodating’ (GD 37, original emphasis). I do not believe what (a) implies, namely, that McGrath thinks his ‘factual’ description will not be prejudiced towards theoretical accounts that make use of the philosophers and theorists that have informed his understanding of social history. Further, while (c) implies an historical account of doctrine, (b) implies an historical account of understandings of doctrine. These accounts are of different (albeit related) things. It will not do to equate them by saying (as McGrath seems to do) ‘my account is a factual description of doctrine because it describes the ways in which doctrine has actually been understood’. This begs the question of the adequacy of those understandings, a question that cannot be answered without recourse to theory.

32 GD 53-66. In this discussion, McGrath always speaks of ‘the Christian community’ and ‘the scriptural narrative’. For example, ‘The sola scriptura principle is ultimately an assertion of the primacy of the foundational scriptural narrative over any framework of conceptualities which it may generate’ (p. 64). Community and scriptural narrative appear as unitary givens, and we may ask whether McGrath includes the idea of ‘the foundational scriptural narrative’ among the conceptualities that could possibly be modified as a result of reading scripture. This issue is considered further below.
Discussing thesis three, McGrath finds a ‘delicate interplay of cognitive and experiential elements in doctrinal formulations’ (70). Every experience includes and is modified by interpretation. ‘The cognitive dimension of Christian doctrine is the framework upon which Christian experience is supported, the channel through which it is conveyed.’ It is also a critical apparatus by which our intimations of reality may be interpreted and evaluated, or occasionally contradicted. ‘Experience is…an inadequate foundation for theological affirmation; nevertheless, on being interpreted, experience affords central insights into the existential dimension of the Christian faith’ (66-72).

The last thesis concerns truth, which McGrath sees as an unavoidable, if difficult, aspect of doctrine. Christian doctrine ‘pursuits to be a representation, however inadequate or provisional, of the way things really are, in response to the questions arising from the history of Jesus of Nazareth.’ As such it includes an ‘inerradicable cognitive element’. In that doctrine is derived from ‘the formative transmitted narratives of the Christian tradition’, ‘the question of the veridical character of these narratives is…of central importance’. Doctrine is also ‘concerned with the internal consistency of Christian truth-affirmations’, and Lindbeck’s insights on this point are to be welcomed. Further, doctrine is oriented towards faith; the task is not merely objective explanation but is carried on so that believers may relate to God in faith. That is, doctrine not only has to do with ‘veridicality, rationality and comprehensive elucidation’ but it is also directed towards enabling encounter with the truth in and of Jesus Christ. McGrath concludes his exposition by stressing that the social function of doctrines depends on acceptance of their claims to truth, rather than vice versa; they are not simply invented to serve social functions.

This summary of McGrath’s four theses is too brief to convey adequately either the nuances of his description or the strong socio-historical cast of the entire account. McGrath is acutely aware that full acknowledgment of human historicity appears to be in tension (to say the least) with some of the accounts of doctrine that have been advanced in the past. However, unlike Lindbeck, he understands historicity to be of the essence of the gospel, and he rules out any attempt to quarantine doctrine or the identity of Christianity from the flux of history. It is appropriate, then, that the remainder of McGrath’s book (three-fifths of the text) addresses the implications of the historicity of both doctrine and its critics.

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33 *GD* 72-80. McGrath is careful to set his discussion of truth claims in the context of a discussion of the nature of truth. His concluding summary indicates the care with which he proceeds in this regard. ‘To speak of doctrine as making truth-claims is thus to note the significant affinities, points of contact and parallels between ‘doctrine’ and ‘truth’, as the latter term is employed in human discourse and reflection. It is most emphatically not to commit oneself exclusively to a ‘correspondence theory of truth’, or any other theory of truth; rather, it is to observe the significant degree of isomorphism that exists between the inherently polyvalent concepts of doctrine and truth, and to register an historically-informed unwillingness to reduce either concept to univocity. The concepts of doctrine and truth each cover a broad spectrum of meaning; our concern is to suggest that there exists such a degree of overlap between those spectra that it is meaningful and legitimate to continue to speak of doctrine making ‘truth-claims’ (*GD* 79-80).

34 McGrath observes ‘Doctrines are not invented to serve social functions;…rather, their claims to truth are foundational for their social function.’ The either/or tone of this sentence contrasts with his general appreciation of the interpenetration of power and truth claims. He could perhaps have been more careful to distinguish between social function and the intent of the formulators of a doctrine.
6.2.2 Doctrine and Historicity

In his fourth chapter, On Being Condemned to History, McGrath considers the consequences of historical awareness and the insights and inadequacies of various kinds of cultural relativism. He notes the intrinsic self-reference of historical and cultural relativism—it, too, is relativised or, where it lacks self-reference, lacks credibility also (GD 89)—and outlines a ‘defensible’ historicism in three principles: (1) all thought is historically located; (2) historical insight is essential to self-understanding; and (3) flight from history is improper and impossible (GD 92). For McGrath, sociology of knowledge contributes to doctrinal criticism by applying such principles to investigating the origins and persistence of beliefs, i.e., through ideological analysis. By ‘ideology’ McGrath means, essentially, a network of ideas reflecting the needs and interests of a social group or movement. He sees ideology as commonly, but not necessarily, implicated in relations of domination, and distances his concept of it both from Marx’s ‘false consciousness’ and from Mannheim’s ‘unrealised situationally transcendent ideas’. Sociology of knowledge quickly disarms modernist critiques of Christianity (GD 90-1), but indicates that Christianity is fully exposed to historicity and investigations into the ‘causes of its credibility’.

Any belief is open to the question ‘not merely why anyone should believe that, but how that belief came to be expressed, articulated or conceptualized in the specific form which it assumes’. The belief of particular interest to McGrath in this regard is the attitude to the past displayed in various modern approaches to Christian doctrine, investigation of which comprises his fifth chapter, The Authority of the Past in Modern Christian Thought, easily the largest in GD. Here, amid much historical detail, McGrath surveys the attitudes to the past exhibited in the Italian Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation (magisterial and radical), the German Enlightenment and the historians of dogma. The Renaissance (GD 104-17) was marked by a new historical consciousness that saw the past as disclosing possibilities for refashioning the present so as to recover the standards and values of the New Testament and classical Rome. The ‘Middle Ages’—an ideological construct of the Italian Renaissance—was seen as a period of ‘ineloquence’ that produced poor translations of classical and biblical texts and unwelcome accretions to their contents, thereby hindering rather than enabling creative reappropriation of classical culture and early Christianity (GD 111).

The early Swiss Reformation under Zwingli sought to reform the life and morals of a city on Renaissance humanist principles, though direct recourse to the New Testament was justified less on humanist grounds of antiquity and eloquence than on the basis that the New Testament is the

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35 McGrath deconstructs the definite article in ‘the sociology of knowledge’ (GD 93) and surveys the historical development of the discipline (pp. 93-101), noting with approval that more recent sociology has recognised the problematic nature of the earlier ‘assumption of privileged status on the part of the sociologist as an observer’ (p. 94). That is, sociology has realised that it, too, is historically conditioned.

36 He first defines ‘ideology’ at GD 89, later accepting Davis’s definition of it as ‘an integrated system of beliefs, assumptions and values, not necessarily true or false, which reflects the needs and interests of a group or class at a particular time in history’ (GD 103, citing Davis 1975, 14). See also GD 223 n1.

37 This phrase is from Barnes and Bloor, in a lengthy passage which McGrath quotes in full twice (pp. 100-1, 157).

38 GD 101, original italics.

39 Notwithstanding the obvious divergence between these exemplars, discussed at GD 113.
Word of God (118-21). In contrast, because of its subject matter, curriculum reform in the theological faculty at Wittenberg focussed on theological criteria from the outset, despite humanism’s pervasive influence. Luther, too, with all Christendom, accepted scripture as self-evidently the Word of God and therefore authoritative, but he also developed a Christological criterion: since God can be fully known only through Jesus of Nazareth, the proper subject of theology is ‘God’ as defined in the saving event of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ Thus the New Testament took priority in virtue of its witness to Christ and its role in communicating Christ to the believer; for hermeneutical guidance, Christians were referred, not to humanist criteria, but to the witness of the Holy Spirit and the interpretations offered by the present and past Christian community (129-30).

The radical reformers aimed less at reformation than revolution, and their motivations lay less in theology than in social alienation and the perception of oppression. They found theological legitimation for social revolution in an emphasis on apocalyptic imagery and the right of every believer to interpret scripture without reference to traditions or communities. The ‘authority of the past’ was a burden perpetuating present social injustice. The past, with its representative institutions, was due for destruction (GD 131-2).

The German Enlightenment saw the past as a corrupt and dead thing that served the interests of outdated structures of political, moral and intellectual authority. McGrath locates the fertile soil that nurtured this perception in a crisis of social dislocation, fragmentation and loss of cultural legitimacy among the German professional classes in the late eighteenth century. The opportunities for political action being very limited, the ensuing social alienation found expression mainly in intellectual forms, with the universities becoming arenas of radical challenge to the intellectual ancien regime. Since German universities enabled social mobility and bureaucratic advancement, ‘the Aufklärung was seen [at the time] as a general programme of modernization, centring upon academic institutions but extending from there to influence those in positions of social and political authority’ (GD 135). To us, it appears to be ‘the expression of…an ideology, firmly grounded in and directed towards the prevailing social and political situation’ (136).

McGrath emphasises the axiomatic status of Enlightenment attitudes to doctrine and history. It was not that rigorous critical scrutiny had shown the intellectual legacy of the past to be worthless; rather, the past was known a priori to be ‘an irrelevance which could be, and generally was, ignored’ (GD 137-8). He notes that the history of dogma was ab initio written by those who sought dogma’s elimination. Doctrine was seen as historically conditioned, and hence susceptible to historical criticism. Historical events were incapable of universal significance (though they could perhaps illustrate a truth established through reasoned reflection on current experience). Moreover, so-called ‘knowledge’ of the past was fragmentary, corrigible and dependent on the testimony of the dead (GD 138-45). Notwithstanding the obvious ideological commitments in the work of Harnack, McGrath appreciates Harnack’s insistence on historical criticism:

¹⁰ GD 121-5. McGrath also explores the Wittenberg preference for Augustine among the fathers, finding its basis partly in a belief that Augustine’s doctrine of grace provided a reliable guide to the New Testament, and partly in perceived parallels between Augustine’s struggle with Pelagius and the Reformers’ struggle with Rome (GD 125-9).
the assertion that history must be permitted to criticize doctrine remains valid, to the point of being of crucial importance in the contemporary task of evaluating and reappropriating the doctrinal heritage of the Christian tradition….Theology needs its Harnacks…(GD 151)

Reflecting on his historical survey, McGrath suggests that ideological factors strongly influence a theologian’s attitude to the past.41 As illustration, he considers the relation between the attitudes to the past found among the Lutheran, Reformed and Radical strands of the Reformation and that already prevalent in the Renaissance. He concludes that the divergent strands of the Reformation ‘represent a fundamental clash of ideologies, rather than mere differences of theological method or substance’ (GD 153). It is less a matter of choosing an attitude to the past than of absorbing the attitude presupposed among the group to which a theologian belongs. Thus, while exceptions exist, conservative and progressive ideologies tend to find cognate theological expression, so that “tensions which might be represented as a quest for “truth” might more properly be described as the inevitable outcome of conflicting foundational ideologies’ (GD 154).

Amid further historical examples, McGrath notes that conservative and progressive ideologies are equally susceptible to sociological explanation. His insistence that the Enlightenment attitude to the past is ideologically conditioned is not intended to dismiss it from consideration, but to challenge its alleged objectivity (GD 157-8) and make it clear that criticism of a position for being ‘conservative’ is not an argument but expresses a preference for progressive values. McGrath sees ideology as a large, though largely unacknowledged, aspect of many recent debates in North Atlantic theology, the sterility of which derives in part from ‘the failure to recognise that they cannot be isolated from the much broader debate concerning the contemporary cultural attitude towards the past’ (164).

McGrath predicts that attitudes to the doctrinal legacy of the past within the Christian church will continue to reflect to varying degrees the ideology dominant in society. In particular, the decline in “liberal ideology” since the 1960s means that attitudes towards doctrine within the Christian community are likely to become more positive.

The theologian may be reduced to despair by the fact that is ideological considerations, rather than a precise theoretical analysis, which tend to govern attitudes to the past, in however pre-theoretical a manner; nevertheless, the importance of ideology in shaping attitudes and conditioning outlooks can hardly be ignored, especially by those committed to the notion of religion as a cultural system (GD 164).

Notwithstanding this situation, one’s attitude to the past cannot be maintained without engaging the critical questions raised against it, whatever the ideology of the questioner.

McGrath rounds off this long chapter with a theoretical counter to the Enlightenment claim that the past is, as a matter of fact, dead (GD 165-71). Seeking a model that makes sense of ‘the obvious cultural tendency to remember’, he finds it in Walter Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Concept of History’, in which historical development is entirely consistent with the recollection and

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41 A new section, The Authority of the Past: The Covert Influence of Ideology (GD 152-65) begins at this point.
creative and critical reappropriation of the past. The processes of Christian doctrine illustrate a general tendency of human historical and cultural reflection described in Benjamin’s model.\(^{42}\)

6.2.3 *The History of Jesus as Source and Criterion of Doctrine*

McGrath’s final chapter addresses the function of the past in Christianity with particular reference to theology as the conceptual, and doctrine as the socio-conceptual, expression of that function. The chapter’s title—*Tradition: Access to the Identity-Giving Past*—indicates that McGrath’s view of tradition has much in common with that of Brown: tradition is the living mediation of its own sources of identity to those who in some measure share its central commitments. However, unlike Brown, who relies on the academy to resolve canonical inadequacies,\(^{43}\) McGrath accepts the logic of faith in Christ as faith in Christ’s *ultimate* adequacy. ‘If the generative event, the primary *explicandum* of Christian theology is Jesus of Nazareth, it follows that we are invited to reshape our mental horizons and reconsider any prior understandings of God and human nature in the light of the story of Jesus of Nazareth’ (174).

Therefore, an appeal to history is intrinsic to Christianity; an appeal directed not only to the New Testament itself but also, implicitly or explicitly, to the community that through history read the New Testament and ordered its life around the worship of Jesus (176-9). McGrath, like Brown (and Tracy, and Tanner\(^{44}\)), gratefully receives Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment’s prejudice against tradition (179-83), adding his own remarks on the manifest ideological conditioning of that prejudice (184-5). Yet he notes that this argument merely disarms a certain line of critique; it does nothing to justify Christianity’s reliance on its own textual and living traditions. ‘The Enlightenment criticism of tradition is valid to the extent that it reminds us of the need to interrogate this tradition closely concerning its authenticity and reliability’ (185).

McGrath then turns to ‘the psychology of human memory’ to defend the historical reliability of the textual traditions of the New Testament (185-7). He concludes that while such considerations ‘do not allow extravagant conclusions concerning the historical reliability of the traditions

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\(^{42}\) I will not rehearse either Benjamin’s work (with which I am not familiar) or McGrath’s comments on it, since the details are not important to our discussion. Suffice to say that McGrath, like Lindbeck, Brown, and Schleiermacher, utilises a general theory in which (an aspect of) Christianity appears as a perfectly ordinary socio-historical example. In this case, Benjamin’s theory allows the conclusion that ‘the phenomenon of reappropriation of the doctrinal heritage of the past involves no special claims for Christian theology; rather, it illustrates a general tendency of human historical and cultural reflection’ (GD 169, original italics). When Benjamin’s model is ‘reworked Christologically, with the history of Jesus of Nazareth assuming the function which Benjamin assigns to Paradise’, it becomes clear that ‘there are no fundamental difficulties raised by the suggestion that the memory of Jesus is a fundamental impulse to contemporary doctrinal reflection’ (GD 170).

\(^{43}\) See above, pp. 81–88.

\(^{44}\) Kathryn Tanner’s *Theories of Culture* (Tanner 1997) is another work that sets religion and theology in a culture-theoretical context. Her approach is perhaps the most irenic and robust among those who have engaged with culture and theology after Lindbeck, though she, too, *first* expounds a view of culture and *then* applies it to religion and theology, without considering the need for critical engagement between Christian theology and the cultural analysis through which she views it.
concerning Jesus to be drawn’, they ‘point to such traditions being generated and remembered under the optimum conditions available to human memorization processes at the time’.  

For McGrath, the Jesus traditions recorded in the New Testament now function in ongoing communities that, in historical continuity with the earliest Christian communities, continue to draw on those traditions for access to and understanding of the identity and significance of Jesus (GD 191). Since these communities continually receive and reappropriate the history of Jesus as central to their worshipping life, they also constitute the sphere within which the discipline of doctrinal criticism is properly conducted (192). In making this assertion, McGrath is not trying to render Christian doctrine impervious to external critique and evaluation, but he hopes that we are now beyond the stage when critics can presume to look condescendingly on tradition-bound Christianity while assuming the transhistorical objectivity of their own standpoint and criteria. His substantive argument concludes in the following paragraph:

All criteria have a history; for Christianity, however, history itself is a criterion. As has been argued throughout this work, Christian doctrine is a response to the history of Jesus of Nazareth. Its achievements and successes, its failures and weaknesses, are all to be judged with reference to that history. That history is mediated through a tradition, and socially embodied in a tradition-orientated community, whose anamnesis of its foundational and legitimizing event shapes its sense of identity, commitment and purpose. Doctrinal criticism finds its natural context within that community. Outside the community of faith, Jesus of Nazareth will continue to be interpreted according to rival theories of truth and reason; within the community of faith, however, Jesus of Nazareth remains the central object of worship, adoration and wonder. And in that sense of wonder lies the genesis of doctrine (GD 193).

Two further sections of text function as a denouement. In ‘The Future of Doctrine’ (193-8) McGrath describes two socio-historical trends that now favour the continuing importance and development of doctrine, namely, aggressively secular cultures that force Christian self-definition as a survival strategy, and a growing acceptance of religious particularity combined with an increasing (if not yet general) scepticism of hegemonic rationality. 46 In ‘Conclusion’ (198-200, more of a postscript than a telos for the foregoing argument) McGrath finds that liberal theology’s impatience with doctrine reflects an underlying impatience with Christianity itself. Further—

The analysis presented in this study suggests that evangelism is of major future importance for the survival and well-being of the Christian church, in that it is only through individuals coming to stand within the Christian tradition that they will fully understand its values, aspirations – and its doctrines. …The liberal suggestion that we defend Christianity by making its ideas acceptable to the secular world has been tried, and found wanting; we must

45 GD 187. McGrath moves on from this topic with a somewhat dismissive comment: the generation of the formative Christian traditions may well be an interesting subject, but he is less interested in the origin of those traditions than in their function (original italics). This side-step is a little strange in view of his earlier assertion of the importance of historical reliability, and of the appropriateness of questioning tradition in this regard

46 The rise of aggressive secularism was also noted by Lindbeck, who saw his postliberal proposal, coupled with ‘sociological sectarianism’, as offering a viable path to Christian communal self-definition. See the final chapter of ND.
now commend the Christian proclamation of judgement and conversion through Christ, with the invitation to stand within the Christian tradition, as an alternative strategy (198-9).

McGrath further suggests that, while apologetics may play a part in this strategy insofar as it facilitates evangelism, it cannot have a dominant role. Apologetics may build a bridge, but should not be allowed to define the territory into which travellers are invited to cross (199).

6.3 THE GENESIS OF DOCTRINE: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

The standpoint from which McGrath responds to Lindbeck and advances his own proposals is similar to that developed in the present study. Not only are both standpoints of ‘historicised propositionalist’ type (as Lindbeck might say), but they are ‘confessional and critical’ (in the terms I prefer). It may serve clarity, then, if I state my own position more fully before engaging McGrath’s argument. In so doing I am foreshadowing conclusions that will gain in depth and definition through the remainder of the chapter.

The confessional aspect is the affirmation that Jesus is Lord, from which two main corollaries follow: firstly, Christian theology must hold itself accountable to Christ at every point of theological construction; and secondly, in view of the universality of Christ’s Lordship, Christian theology cannot accept that there are any ‘pretheological’ or ‘neutral’ matters that may be settled without reference to Christ. The critical aspect is the affirmation that Christian theology, together with Christian doctrine as its communally agreed expression, is a responsible human activity undertaken in obedience to Christ. Hence, in view of the finitude and fallenness of the humans who undertake every point of theological construction, Christian theology and doctrine are vulnerable to questioning as to the quality of the obedience expressed in them. Similar questioning is appropriate in relation to the sources on which theological construction relies, insofar as those sources arose or were preserved and passed on through human activity.

The two aspects are not independent. It might be better to say that my standpoint is confessional and therefore critical: the confessional aspect is primary, and the critical aspect follows certain implications of acknowledging an anthropology that can stand under the confession of Christ’s Lordship. But if the critical aspect is secondary, it nonetheless reflexively informs the confession, recognising that confessing Christ as Lord, understanding the words ‘Christ’ and ‘Lord’, and describing basic standpoints, are human activities and therefore vulnerable and provisional. Yet the confession is ventured: insofar as such human activities can stand, the standing that really matters is found in the service of Christ.

McGrath’s basic stance in GD has much in common with this position. He locates the genesis and development of doctrine in a community in which ‘Jesus of Nazareth remains the central object of worship, adoration and wonder.’ For this community, Jesus forces ‘the redrawing of conceptual boundaries and mental horizons, demanding that we rethink and refashion our understanding of such matters as God, and human nature and destiny’ (GD 174). McGrath’s account of the origin,

47 For earlier statements see section 4.4.2 The Shape Of Christian Particularity (p. 131) and section 4.5.2 The Idea of Particularity in Christian Theology (p. 150).
48 GD 193. The fuller context is given above on p. 215.
transmission, and development of Christian doctrine is thoroughly historical, being permeated with an awareness that the processes of tradition are susceptible to distortion, and that a valuable commentary on such distortions is provided by the critical techniques of the sociology of knowledge. Indeed, allowing for differences of emphasis, the opening pages of his final chapter (GD 172-79) may be read as a statement of the confessional and critical standpoint just outlined.

Far from precluding critique, such accord on basic issues not only provides a well-defined ground on which meaningful engagement may occur (as Lindbeck might say), but also provides the possibility that engagement may expose unresolved issues in my own position. I take issue with McGrath on four main points. Firstly, I allow Lindbeck a brief rejoinder, recalling his charge that modern theologies, both conservative and liberal, tend to ‘intellectualism’. Secondly, I query McGrath’s use of ‘attitude to the past’ as an explanatory category, and his related attack on the Enlightenment as a proxy for theological liberalism. Thirdly, and of greater import, his view of the relation between theology and ideology does not cohere with his (our) confessional stance. Finally, although McGrath acknowledges that socio-historical critique requires a double hermeneutic addressing the ideologies of both observed and observer, he does not attempt to identify (let alone engage) ideological aspects of his own position. These last two points set the agenda for the remainder of the chapter.

6.3.1 A Lindbeckian Rejoinder

A kind of Lindbeckian rejoinder to GD is provided by drawing attention to passages that illustrate the ‘intellectualism’ Lindbeck saw as problematic in propositionalist approaches to doctrine. We have already noted one example in McGrath’s misunderstanding of Lindbeck’s comments on propositionalism. Further instances include McGrath’s view that humans are ‘condemned to history’, and, perhaps, his promotion of ‘evangelism’ as an alternative to the failed liberal strategy for commending Christianity to western culture.

McGrath repeatedly uses the striking phrase ‘condemned to history’ to describe the relation of humans to their historical existence. The fact that the Enlightenment attitude to the past (which he attacks relentlessly) was often expressed in similar language seems not to have troubled him, even when he notes that more recent acknowledgment of univer
cal condemnation to history (an acknowledgment he shares) is merely the Enlightenment attitude reflexively extended to include the thinker. Later, speaking of tradition’s hermeneutical significance, McGrath cheeringly

49 See p. 203 above.
50 The main locus for this language is McGrath’s fourth chapter, which bears the title ‘On Being Condemned to History’. The phrase ‘condemned…to history’ appears twice in that chapter’s first paragraph together with an amplifying simile that likens historicity to ‘an intellectual prison’.
51 The confident and restless culture of the Enlightenment experienced the past as a burden, an intellectual manacle which inhibited freedom and stifled creativity. To ascribe authority to the past, or even to particular features of the past, was seen as becoming incarcerated – needlessly – in a prison of one’s own making (GD 81). This passage occurs immediately after McGrath’s introductory affirmation that ‘we are all condemned to live and speak in history and historical forms’. Later, in relation to cultural relativism, he notes that ‘the relativity of the past is paralleled by the relativity of the present, reminding us that we are all condemned to speak and think in history and in historical forms, which threaten to distort as much as to convey our ideas’ (99). McGrath sees the Enlightenment’s mistake in its presumption that incarceration in history was someone else’s problem, i.e., that it was a problem only for those
observes that, although we are condemned to live in history, ‘that imprisonment does not take the form of solitary confinement. We exist within communal traditions…’ (GD 190). That is, McGrath agrees with Enlightenment thinkers that the past is a prison, but insists that the thinker cannot claim an external vantage point. Yet, if we cannot escape our prison through critical thinking, we can at least find comfort in the company of one or other group of fellow inmates.

How significant is this language for McGrath? Can we ask what the transgression was that led to our ‘condemnation’? How might McGrath’s argument be modified if he understood human historicity, not as condemnation, but as a manifestation of divine grace? I cannot answer these questions on his behalf, but I wonder whether an understanding of finitude as condemnation implies that what could have been available to us, but for some unspecified misdemeanour, is just what the Enlightenment sought, namely, the disembodied knowledge of an ahistorical ego.

An ‘intellectualist’ tendency is also evident in McGrath’s concluding advocacy of evangelism. Here, while the polemic against liberal theology follows reasonably well from earlier argument, McGrath ventures onto softer ground in claiming that, with the failure of the apologetically-motivated liberal strategy, evangelism now ‘commends itself as of strategic importance in the present situation within western culture.’ Unfortunately, since ‘evangelism’ was seldom mentioned in GD, its prominence in the conclusion is inappropriate—its content is not well-defined, and it is not clear that it can ‘succeed’ where the liberal strategy has ‘failed’.

What McGrath means by ‘evangelism’ must be taken from the immediate context, where he describes it as ‘the deployment of strategies…by which individuals are brought within the community of faith’, or, more concretely, as ‘the Christian proclamation of judgement and conversion through Christ, with the invitation to stand within the Christian tradition’. He allows that, within a broad evangelistic strategy, apologetics may be useful as a bridge providing those outside the Christian community with a glimpse of Christian values and aspirations, and of what Christian commitment might mean, but ‘historicist and sociological insights…[have] rendered traditional apologetics highly questionable’ insofar as it presupposes universally valid patterns who granted authority to tradition. But now, he says, contemporary theorists realise that incarceration in history is everyone’s problem, and rightly so. Thus he implicitly accepts the evaluative baggage attached to the language of ‘incarceration in’, or ‘condemnation to’, history.

For an interesting discussion of finitude as grace, see Allik 1993b.

See GD 198-200, from which all the quotations in this paragraph are taken, and p. 215 above.

GD 199, and see the passage quoted on p. 215 above.

It appears at pp. 69-71 in McGrath’s account of ‘Doctrine as Interpretation of Experience’, where the evangelistic importance of doctrine is in view. Here, ‘doctrine is able to address, interpret and transform human experience, correlating it with the parameters of the Christian proclamation.’ That is, doctrine supports the apologetic-cum-evangelistic practice of displaying the way in which human experience makes sense and takes on ‘new and hitherto unexpected depths of meaning’ when seen from a Christian point of view. It appears again, though more in the guise of catechesis, in relation to ‘the hermeneutical importance of a community tradition’ (189). It is also the subtext of McGrath’s comments on doctrine being ‘orientated towards faith, representing a demand for personal involvement, rather than passive assent’, and thus possessing ‘an emotional impact and life-changing power rarely, if ever, associated with scientific discovery’ (on ‘Doctrine as Truth Claim’, p. 78).

McGrath’s logic here invites the observation that ‘failure of Plan A does not by itself mean that Plan B is any better’.
of reason and thought. For McGrath, evangelism ‘combine[s] the merits of epistemological rigour, cultural realism, and social pragmatism.’

Now, we must bear in mind that McGrath intended GD to serve as a prolegomenon to later work on doctrinal criticism (GD viii, 198), and so what seems clouded here may be clarified in later works. Still, apart from the brief comments just outlined, GD offers neither an account of the nature of Christian evangelism nor warrant for the claim that evangelism is the (only?) alternative to the liberal strategy. The comments McGrath offers in these pages could be interpreted so that evangelism is taken to be more than preaching, but such an interpretation is not encouraged by use of the words ‘proclamation’ and ‘invitation’, and his view of apologetics as ‘explanation’. Quite apart from the inadequacy of turning to evangelism by default, McGrath does not indicate that awareness of human historicity and the hermeneutic importance of faith communities might have considerable implications for one’s view of what evangelism is. He rightly says that the sociology of knowledge calls into question any apologetics that assumes common modes of rationality, but it also encourages us to see apologetics as more than ‘explanation’ and evangelism as more than ‘proclamation’. It seems, then, that if liberal apologetic theology were to be dismissed in favour of McGrath’s evangelism, this could be described, at least to some extent, as the exchange of one intellectualism for another. Thus McGrath’s idea of evangelism is open to Lindbeck’s charge.57

Yet, neither McGrath’s misconstrual of Lindbeck’s critique, nor his negative view of human historicity, nor even his somewhat facile advocacy of evangelism, can rank as a substantial flaw, for none of these matters is crucial to his main point concerning the genesis of doctrine. One can imagine a revised argument making the same point while avoiding such lapses. That is, this ‘Lindbeckian rejoinder’ does not so much weaken McGrath’s account of doctrine as indicate how some parts of it could be made more robust.

6.3.2 Attitudes to the Past

Issues of greater moment arise from an immanent critique that asks how well some aspects of McGrath’s argument cohere with the basic standpoint that we share, beginning with his use of ‘attitude to the past’ as a key criterion. McGrath began GD by asserting that ‘the precipitating cause of Christian faith and Christian doctrine was and is a man named Jesus’, and that the history of Jesus of Nazareth was and is the overriding criterion of Christian doctrine.58 On the basis of these observational statements, he found Lindbeck to be insufficiently attentive to the essential historicity of Jesus and the doctrinal traditions that try to express his significance (GD chapter 2). In response, McGrath described how doctrine actually functions in the communities

57 McGrath resists intellectualism elsewhere when he criticises the usual manner of writing historical theology as a history of academic theology, and especially of that academic theology that reflects a progressive ideology (GD 159-61). He foreshadows a theory of doctrinal development (to be addressed in a later work) that would give ‘a fully nuanced account of the relation of doctrinal developments at every level of Christian articulation to ideological shifts’ (original italics), that is, it would range across ‘the entire spectrum of Christian opinion, from popular religion on the one hand to academic theology on the other’ (161).

58 GD 1. In McGrath’s words, the second assertion is ‘The history of Jesus of Nazareth was and is the crucible of Christian doctrinal possibilities, the controlling paradigm of conceptual potentialities.’
that construct it (chapter 3), and explored the implications of the historical specificity of both doctrine and its critics (chapter 4). He applied this descriptive and theoretical material in socio-historical analyses of the attitudes to the past found in various movements from the Renaissance onwards, with special critical attention directed towards the progressive ideology of the German Enlightenment and its offspring (chapter 5). His conclusion reformulated the initial assertions in the light of the intervening discussion, that is, in terms that acknowledge the role of faith communities and the function of tradition in mediating access to the past (chapter 6).

In the context of an historical survey of modern approaches to doctrinal criticism, itself situated in a work that displays strong historical sensibilities, it is quite reasonable that McGrath should discuss ‘attitudes to (the authority of) the past’; yet, as the various movements in which McGrath is interested are successively viewed through this lens, the variations in explanatory power are notable. On McGrath’s account, the radical Reformation and the Enlightenment operated with conceptual schemes in which a dismissive ‘attitude to the past’ is both readily discernible and largely explicable as a response to social alienation. In contrast, the Italian Renaissance and early Swiss Reformation did not have an attitude to ‘the past’ as such, but quite distinct attitudes to the classical and biblical period (in which they found inspiration) and the Middle Ages (in which they found ineloquent barbarism). A further contrast is found in the German and later Swiss magisterial Reformations, for which authority resides neither in ‘the past’ as such, nor in any particular periods within it, nor indeed in the present; rather, authority resides in scripture because it is the Word of God, and because it bears witness to Christ who is the content of salvation. Granted, insofar as divine revelation has occurred and is reported and interpreted in scripture, scripture deals with past events; but this is less a matter of an attitude to (the authority of) the past, than of an attitude to (the authority of) God in Christ.

From its lack of purchase on the criteriology of the magisterial Reformers and its particular suitability to, and extended deployment in, socio-historical critique of the Enlightenment, it appears that, as an explanatory category, ‘attitude to the past’ is not native to McGrath’s constructive proposal, but belongs rather to a polemical sub-text, namely, an attempt to delegitimise theological liberalism within Christian thought. In outline, his argument is this:

1 Since Christian doctrine seeks to express the significance of Jesus of Nazareth, an appeal to the past is intrinsic to Christianity.

2 The Enlightenment was pervaded by a progressive ideology which *a priori* disparaged the

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59 The conclusion cited above on p. 215 displays these elements. McGrath’s initial comments in chapter 1 already referred to community and tradition, but the emphasis at that stage was on the historicity of the origin of doctrine and of the criteria applied in doctrinal development. The intervening chapters discussed the historicity of the *people* who developed doctrine, and of the *processes* by which they did so.

60 McGrath notes (*GD* 124): ‘The basis of Luther’s theological criteriology…has virtually nothing to do with such matters as antiquity or eloquence.’ Rather, the basis is that ‘scripture mediates, in a specific literary and historical form, the experience of Christ, the recovery of which appropriate literary and historical techniques may permit.’ A criteriology that has ‘nothing to do with…antiquity’ can hardly display an ‘attitude to the past.’

61 The magisterial Reformers display something like an ‘attitude to the past’ in their engagement with the Christian tradition of scriptural interpretation, but in McGrath’s account this ‘attitude’ appears mainly as a willingness to listen to other interpreters of scripture; ‘pastness’ as such confers neither advantage nor disadvantage to an interpretation.
Therefore theological liberalism, as contemporary heir to the Enlightenment and sharing its ideology, is fundamentally in tension with Christianity. That is, McGrath finds within Christianity a preferential option for conservatism, and hence an ideological incompatibility with liberalism. This argument raises several issues.

Firstly, McGrath’s criticism of the Enlightenment as such is that its refusal to allow the past any authority was an *a priori* stance assumed in, and not resulting from, reasoned reflection. Granting that McGrath has made his case in this regard, we may ask to what extent he has *thereby* made a case against theological liberalism. The answer would be ‘just to extent that theological liberalism still maintains an *a priori* disparagement of the past’. Clearly, McGrath commits a genetic fallacy here. For all that the Enlightenment’s progressive ideology is undoubtedly *one* of the roots of theological liberalism, it does not follow that contemporary theological liberalism stands or falls by that root alone. It may be that other roots provide sufficient nourishment, or that liberalism’s relation to its Enlightenment roots has changed over time and is no longer as simple, or as unreflective, as McGrath takes it to be.62

Secondly, there was in fact much more to the Enlightenment than a progressive ideology. Some proponents of liberalism find their core values in the principles of unconstrained critique and acknowledgement of the intrinsic limits of human reason which stem from Kant.63 McGrath’s high regard for these values is evident in his insistence on historical criticism and his expertise in socio-historical analysis, techniques for which we join with McGrath in thanking the Enlightenment tradition. A different, and I suspect more effective, critique may have emerged had McGrath engaged the Enlightenment’s contemporary heirs within and without theology on the basis of these shared values. The discussion in chapters 3 and 4 above suggests that the real issues have less to do with attitude to (the authority of) the past than attitude to authority as such,64 and may be explored productively in terms of the relation between tradition and critique.65

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62 At *GD* 162 McGrath indicates awareness of movement and diversity within the liberal tradition, but this does not appear to have affected his basic argument.

63 E.g., Chapman 1998 and Chapman 2002. Chapman acknowledges that the Enlightenment made some excessive claims, but the persistence of a progressive ideology is apparent as, following Kant’s identification of enlightenment with maturity, he presents his own position as ‘theology for grown-ups’. In my experience, ongoing concern with being treated as grown-up is more characteristic of adolescence than of genuine maturity.

64 This is illustrated by Chapman (1998), who concludes from his reading of Kant that ‘Enlightenment is thus to be understood as an attack on supernatural authority and a recognition that whatever authority there might be is ultimately located in human reason’ (384-5). At the same time, recognition of the limits of human reason requires the invention of a ‘highest reality’ that Chapman proceeds to call ‘God’ (385) and describe as ‘wholly other’ (though as our own invention it cannot address us from its own subjectivity and thus is no ‘other’ at all). Again, he claims that ‘God in Christ has shared this very human condition of lack of certainty, of doubt and criticism’, thereby affirming us in a stance that always ‘points beyond the use of power and towards the denial of final authority, even divine authority’ (389). One is entitled to wonder on what authority he makes this claim.

65 This is close to Daniel Hardy’s formulation: ‘The alternative which liberalism provides is that of a dialectical relation between a contemplative traditionality and a liberal and critical modernity’ Hardy 1991, 303. In Hardy’s view (*in loc.*), the core intra-liberal argument concerns the manner in which responsible ‘tradition-recreating
Not only is McGrath’s focus on ‘attitude to the past’ polemically motivated, and its deployment in polemic unsuccessful, but, thirdly, it strains towards incoherence with his basic standpoint, in which, as he says, ‘we are invited to reshape our mental horizons and reconsider any prior understandings of God and human nature in the light of the story of Jesus of Nazareth’ (GD 174). This becomes clear when we consider the characterisation of ‘the past’ in the New Testament.

For the earliest Christian communities the important thing was not an ‘attitude to the past’ but an attitude to Jesus. This attitude naturally included an appreciation of the significance of his history for all our histories, but we should also note that for the earliest Christians Jesus was a contemporary, part of their leaders’ living memory, and hence identified less with the past than with the present, the eschatological now (Rom 3:21; 8:1). For them, the past was the time of Moses and the prophets; the new revelation in Jesus marked the inauguration of ‘these last days.’ There is a new situation for the Gentile world, too, through Jesus’ resurrection: ‘Now he commands all people everywhere to repent.’ A person’s past could be described as futile or worthless insofar as it was not fruitfully related to Christ, who was now the criterion of present action and attitude and forerunner of the future. Although a historical sense, with its distinctions of past, present and future, pervades the New Testament, Messiah Jesus is the criterion by which the past is judged and the perspective from which the meaning of the past, and indeed of world history (Eph 1:10, 1 Cor 10:11), may be perceived.

Thus, insofar as the New Testament writers display an ‘attitude to the past’, they do so in a way that, in McGrath’s terms, reshapes mental horizons and reconsiders prior understandings…in the light of (the story of) Jesus of Nazareth. Precisely because of this, their ‘attitude to the past’ can hardly be characterised as ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’ since at every point the clear intent is to render the past Christologically. In that McGrath’s focus on ‘attitude to the past’ is a response to the Enlightenment rather than to Christ, it acts against the stance he wants to affirm.

6.3.3 Ideology and Theology

The fact that McGrath provides a purely ideological treatment of ‘attitude to the past’, and never reconsiders it in the manner suggested by his programmatic statements about the centrality of Jesus, invites further attention to his account of ideology and its relation to theology. In his review of historicism and the techniques of sociological analysis, McGrath welcomes the

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interpretation’ is to be carried on, precisely the question addressed by Delwin Brown.

McGrath notes Barth’s insistence that revelation demands historical predicates (GD 176).

Heb 1:1-2; cf Rom 16:25f, Eph 3:9f. We must remember, of course, that New Testament writers’ emphasis on the now and the new of Jesus co-exists with their conviction that his life, death and resurrection were, in a deep sense, ‘according to the Scriptures,’ i.e., consistent with the overarching historical purposes of the one God.

Acts 17:30 (cf Col 1:21f, 26; 1 Pet 2:10 ). See also Paul’s early synagogue preaching (Acts 13:16-41), Stephen’s speech to the Sanhedrin (Acts 7, esp 7:52), Peter’s Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14-36) and his speech after healing the lame man at the Beautiful gate (Acts 3:11-26) and subsequent speech to the temple leaders (Acts 4:8-12,19-20).

1 Pet 1:18, Eph 4:20-4; Col 2:8, Phil 3:7-8, 1 Pet 4:1-3.

As present criterion, see Phil 2:1-11, 1 Pet 2:21-5. As forerunner, 1 Cor 15:20, 45; Heb 12:1-3.

For the general point made in this paragraph, see also Cullmann 1964.
emergence of a ‘more mature perspective’ within late twentieth-century sociology according to which ‘all belief or value systems – whether religious, secular or agnostic – are recognized as being equally open to sociological investigation’ (GD 96, original italics). In particular, he lays considerable emphasis on Giddens’ argument that sociology has the structure of a double hermeneutic, the essential point of which is that ‘the frameworks of rationality of both the observed and the observer are socially conditioned, requiring social explanation’. Against this background, McGrath criticises the Enlightenment for lack of reflexive self-awareness in its criticism of tradition, but the same background also brings into sharp relief the one-sided nature of his own critique. While he admits to an ideology that some may call ‘conservative’ (GD 162), he makes no attempt to elucidate it or examine it in the light of his core commitments. Rather than attempting self-critique, McGrath is content to allow that his own conservatism, though moderate and chastened, is just as much ideologically conditioned as the progressivism he opposes. But if there is no neutral way of choosing between the two attitudes (GD 152), each of which is as value-laden, tradition-bound and precommitted as the other (163), how does choice, insofar as there is a choice, occur? We have already noted McGrath’s view that ‘history itself provides a criterion’, in that Christianity, by virtue of its intrinsic appeal to the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, is incompatible with a progressive ideology. There is another sense in which ‘history provides a criterion’: ideologies experience fluctuating fortunes in human societies, and the balance between progressive and conservative attitudes in Christian churches will broadly follow the prevalence of these ideologies in the wider society. McGrath suggests that ‘a growing trend towards a conservative ideology lends added weight’ to his observation that Christian doctrine inevitably appeals to the past (164-5). This suggestion appears to confuse the prevalence of an ideology with its justification (unless the ‘weight’ referred to is merely the weight of numbers in a popularity contest). Fortunately, McGrath does not develop further argument on this basis, and he is in any case well aware that the dominance of any ideology is transient. Thus McGrath offers history as a criterion for ‘choosing’ between ideologies; and the most striking feature of this is not that the arguments are unconvincing, but that he offers no other criterion by which such choices may be made. In particular, he does not attempt any theological engagement, despite depicting Christianity as a tradition in which everything is reconsidered in the light of Jesus of Nazareth. He acknowledges ideology as a crucial aspect of the specific contexts in which theologians’ views are formed, and thus as a strong influence on their

72 GD 97-8. McGrath refers to Giddens’ double hermeneutic twice more. On p. 149, he notes the vulnerability of Harnack’s Dogmengeschichte in this regard, in that Harnack ‘appears to fall victim to the naïve tendency of individuals to regard their specific historical location, including its associated modes of discourse and frameworks of rationality, as providing a privileged standpoint from which others may be evaluated.’ Against this, he maintains, the double hermeneutic recognises both the interpreted and the interpreter ‘as being equally open to covert cultural conditioning’. On p. 163, reviewing the preceding socio-historical analysis of modern Christian attitudes to the past, he notes that ‘criticism and evaluation of these theological attitudes cannot…realistically be undertaken in isolation from the cultural systems which they reflect, nor that of the culture to which the critic belongs. A “double hermeneutic”…is implicated, in which the respective ideologies of proponent and opponent alike condition the resulting debate.’

73 GD 152. McGrath indicates a little later that it is less a matter of choosing or deciding than of presupposing the ideology of the peer group to which one belongs (153).
theologies, but does not mention—and indeed appears to rule out—the possibility of influence from theology to ideology. Thus, the three divergent strands within the reformation movement (Lutheran, Reformed and radical) ‘represent a fundamental clash of ideologies, rather than mere differences of theological method or substance’. ‘Attitudes to the past appear to function as theological premises, rather than conclusions, reflecting the extent to which modern theology is subject to ideological conditioning’ (GD 154). Tensions between conservative and progressive theologies ‘which might be represented as a quest for “truth” might more properly be described as the inevitable outcome of conflicting foundational ideologies’.

It appears, then, that the lack of theological engagement with ideology in McGrath’s discussion is no mere oversight. He seems to think that ideological conflicts cannot be decided on theoretical (and hence on theological) grounds, because ideology is ‘pre-theoretical’ (and therefore, presumably, pretheological). Faced with conflicting ideologies, he is at an analytical impasse. It is then indeed fortunate that theology can follow what he takes to be the ideological choice implicit in Christianity’s intrinsic appeal to history.

It is not clear from McGrath’s discussion just why he thinks ideology is inaccessible to theology. Potential grounds for an argument are present in his text, but are not developed. These grounds, together with my own brief indications of how they might have been deployed, include the following: (1) ideology’s existential priority—since it is unavoidable, critique cannot free us from it; (2) ideology’s analytical priority—we can never ‘get behind’ our ideologies in order to decide between them; (3) there is no neutral vantage point from which ideology can be criticised—hence we are obliged to refrain from critique. Since McGrath does not explicitly deploy these (or any other) reasons to justify theological non-engagement with ideology, I cannot engage his argument at this point, but these grounds, at least, do not bear much weight.

Grounds 1 and 2 reflect the fact that, as human beings, we are always already immersed in complex networks of customary practices, plausibility structures, ideologies, and institutions. But ‘always already immersed’ does not imply that critique must be abandoned; it means that it must be reflexively self-aware. Even granting that full specification of our own ideologies is necessarily elusive, engagement on the basis of partial specification, perhaps leading to partial insights, may be valid and fruitful. To deny this would be to deny the worth of any critical engagement with any aspect of a tradition. Yet, in large measure, a tradition’s vitality consists in the multiplicity and energy of precisely these kinds of engagements. As for ground 3, the lack of a neutral vantage point for critique must be frankly admitted and reflected in the manner of argument—perhaps by

74 The history of Christian theology suggests to McGrath that ‘ideological factors are a major consideration in shaping a theologian’s attitude to the past’, so that ‘questions of “truth” concerning attitudes to the past may…ultimately reduce, at least in part, to the question of whether a conservative or progressive ideology happens to be dominant in a given situation’ (GD 152). Moreover, ideological neutrality or non-commitment is impossible: one inevitably has some ideology, though all are equally open to challenge (GD 152). Thus, ideology is, inevitably, pervasive in theology.

75 GD 153. Although McGrath began his discussion of ideology with the disclaimer that he did not wish to ‘reduce Christian theology to an ideological epiphenomenon, an ideational superstructure erected upon a socio-economic base’ (GD 152), his qualification of ‘theological method or substance’ as ‘mere’ in relation to ‘fundamental’ ideology hints at a view that ideology is somehow deeper than, or prior to, theology.

76 GD 154. The phrase ‘foundational ideologies’ reinforces the point made in the previous note.
favouring immanent rather than external critique, or by employing the double hermeneutic suggested by Giddens and welcomed (and ignored) by McGrath. However, the implicit suggestion that neutrality is a precondition for critique is highly questionable, and may be taken as an indication that the one making the suggestion is to some extent unaware of their own ideological precommitments. We have already seen that, from the standpoint of the Christian confession, ‘neutrality’ appears as either an encapsulation of Christian theology or an alien intrusion into it.\textsuperscript{77} In sum, any and all features of our immersive environment may be critically engaged if and to the extent that they are recognised. Critique is impossible only if and to the extent that its object is invisible. But where, through socio-historical analysis such as McGrath provides, implicit ideologies are at least partially unmasked, they become available to critical reflection. Granted, we can never presume our reflections to be free of ideology, but the fact that a concept or belief belongs to a category called ‘ideology’ does not confer immunity from critique.\textsuperscript{78}

The point is nicely illustrated in McGrath’s account of the attitudes to the Middle Ages displayed by Zwingli and Luther (\textit{GD} 153). McGrath notes that the Italian Renaissance’s ideological aversion to the Middle Ages is reflected in the writings of early Reformed theologians ‘who assume – as a self-evident truth – that there is nothing to be gained by entering into dialogue with theologians of the period.’ In contrast, ‘Luther – who declined to adopt the ideology of the Italian Renaissance and its theological implications – insisted on entering into a dialogue (however critical) with the representatives of late medieval theology.’ Both approaches are further contrasted with that of the radical reformers who advocated a total break with the past. McGrath offers two interpretive comments:

1. The contrasting approaches ‘represent a fundamental clash of ideologies, rather than mere differences of theological method or substance’ (\textit{GD} 153);

2. It is not so much that criteria for evaluating the authority of the past are ‘selected’, as that ‘a certain outlook on the authority of the past is (possibly unconsciously) presupposed within the group to which the theologian belongs,’ and thus is ‘received and assumed as self-evidently correct’ (\textit{ibid.}).

The first of these was noted earlier, and the second refers mainly to Zwingli’s strong humanist background. But what of Luther? If he ‘declined’ to adopt the humanist ideology, he was surely making a choice, and, on McGrath’s analysis, the basis on which he did so appears to have been theological and, in particular, Christological (\textit{GD} 123-5).

Christian theology is not helpless before ideology, but is called to serve Christ and to enlist every thought in his service in the belief that each and every idea can be criticised christologically.\textsuperscript{79} To

\textsuperscript{77} See above 4.5.2 \textit{The Idea of Particularity in Christian Theology} commencing on p. 150, and 5.3.2 \textit{The Possibility of Permanence} commencing on p. 187.

\textsuperscript{78} McGrath’s ‘ideology’ parallels Lindbeck’s ‘categorial frameworks’ at this point—both appear to be immune to critique from their inhabitants. Ideology’s ‘importance…in shaping attitudes and conditioning outlooks can hardly be ignored, especially by those committed to the notion of religion as a cultural system’ (\textit{GD} 164).

\textsuperscript{79} The exception to this is the idea of the ultimacy of Jesus Christ, i.e., the confession of Jesus as Lord. Not that Christ’s ultimacy is \textit{a priori} unquestionable, but where it does come into question one must face the possibility of answers that imply the inadequacy of the Christian confession, and hence the inappropriateness of Christological questioning.
say that presuppositions remain uncriticisable even when identified is to grant them an ultimacy that is extremely problematic in a theology predicated upon the ultimacy of Christ. It is not ideology as such, but rather its subtle and hidden operation, that confers on it any degree of immunity from criticism. Recognition of ideology enables critical engagement. Indeed, making the implicit explicit is vital to McGrath’s project of doctrinal criticism: only what is explicit can be examined concerning its faithfulness to Christ, and anything that is explicit may be so examined, ideologies not excepted. The view that ideology is necessarily prior to theology implies that Christ’s Lordship over theology is limited, or even circumscribed, by it. Or perhaps the implied limitation is anthropological: our nature may be such that we are helpless in the face of ideology, and are unable to act in a way that fully acknowledges Christ’s Lordship over our theological constructions. The former could not be a Christian position, while the latter may be questioned on philosophical and theological grounds—it is hardly consistent with a Christian anthropology.

Insofar as what is at stake here is Christ’s Lordship over theology, the presence of progressivism, conservatism or any other ideology in theological reflection raises the question of theologians’ allegiance. That is, the question is not only ideological, but also political—its political nature coming to light when implicit ideologies are unmasked, perhaps through socio-historical analysis. To the extent of their unmasking, ideologies may be interrogated concerning their relation to Christ. Lack of such interrogation, whether intentional or not, limits the extent to which a proposal can claim to stand in Christ’s service, however much or however explicitly it may affirm it. McGrath’s acceptance that ideology is essentially prior to theology parallels the priority of transcendental anthropology in Schleiermacher and of social anthropology in Lindbeck. McGrath rightly sees that a priori progressivism is incompatible with the priority of Christ, but wrongly attributes the incompatibility to ‘fundamental’ ideological conflict between progressivism and Christianity’s allegedly intrinsic conservatism. Nevertheless, the unmasking of ideologies is valuable, as it allows the basic political question to be asked. And the answers to that question indicate not only that an a priori progressivism cannot stand under Christ’s Lordship (as McGrath saw), but also that the bringing of all things into theological subjection to Christ may be as relevant to conservative ideologies as to progressive.

6.3.4 Ideology and the Word of God

Reflection on McGrath’s hermeneutic of suspicion has illuminated the ideological aspect of ‘pretheological’ or ‘nontheological’ arguments, whether those arguments be serving liberal, postliberal, conservative or any other interests. Further, it has indicated that an ideology that is not engaged theologically necessarily has a destabilising effect on a theology that claims a Christological focus. It is a matter of some importance, then, that theology be conducted with ideological awareness, and that ideology, where it is brought to light, be questioned as to its relation to Christ. Due to the structure of the discussion so far, I have noted mainly liberal and postliberal examples in this regard. As attention now turns to conservative viewpoints, it is not enough to provide merely equal treatment in the interests of ‘fair play’. Rather, this study should be more sensitive to ideology in conservative arguments than elsewhere, for two reasons: the
obvious conservative affinities of the confessional aspect of my own standpoint; and the fact that ‘unmasking arbitrariness in others may always be a defence against uncovering it in ourselves.’

McGrath points the way in this regard when he notes that, for Luther and Zwingli, scripture was ‘self-evidently’ the Word of God, and that, because of ‘the presuppositions of his age, Calvin has little to say on the problem of how belief in scripture and faith in Christ were related’. But it is precisely in the case of ‘self-evident’ truths reflecting ‘the presuppositions of the age’ that ideological analysis is most relevant (as McGrath found with the German Enlightenment’s attitude to the past), and it is especially such ‘truths’ that theology is called to critically engage from the standpoint of Christ’s Lordship. In the previous subsection we saw that McGrath did not seek out and engage his own precommitments or those of the magisterial reformers (of whom he clearly approves), a fact highlighted by his own ideological critique and his promotion of a method of ‘double hermeneutic’. Having now identified ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ as a precommitment in the reformers’ thinking, we are in a position to partly redress the one-sidedness of McGrath’s discussion by holding this ‘conservative’ religious ideology answerable to Jesus Christ.

Earlier, I foreshadowed an argument that the question of allegiance is relevant, not only to some liberal theologies and to Lindbeck’s proposal, but also to theologies of a more conservative character. The basic direction of this argument now emerges. While liberal theology compromises Christ’s Lordship insofar as it allies itself to autonomous reason or its lightly-chastened surrogates, and Lindbeck does so via an independent anthropology and an a priori doctrinal ‘neutrality’, conservative theology compromises Christ’s Lordship insofar as it allies itself to principles that have not been interrogated (or are excluded from interrogation) concerning their place within that dominion, most notably the presupposition that the Bible (and/or tradition) is the Word of God. That this presupposition is commonly used to defend or to promote Christ’s Lordship shows worthy intent but is not a sufficient answer. Much liberal theology, and no doubt Lindbeck’s, too, is done out of reverence for Christ. In that conservatives understand themselves to be promoting Christ’s Lordship, the argument may be more subtle in some respects, but it is also more direct in that the principal ground of engagement is already agreed. The question is not whether a divine Bible is ‘necessary’ in order to secure Christ’s Lordship, but to what extent and in what manner Christ’s Lordship is in fact exercised through the Bible.

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80 Noted by Alasdair MacIntyre (1984, 72) as a discovery of Freud.
81 Zwingli’s assumption that the New Testament is the Word of God ‘is treated as axiomatic, requiring no demonstration’ (GD 120). At Wittenberg ‘the authority of scripture resided…in its being the Word of God. Luther and Karlstadt, like Zwingli, regarded this identification as self-evident, requiring no further demonstration….Some such identification…was the common heritage of medieval theology.’ (GD 123)
82 GD 227 n100. In his note McGrath refers to E.A. Dowey’s classic study of The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology, which reaches one of its key insights in demonstrating the lack of integration between Calvin’s doctrine of scripture and his ‘exclusively Christocentric doctrine of faith’ (Dowey 1994, 160-161). Dowey also helpfully describes Calvin’s ‘principle of correlation, by which we learn the intimate connection that exists between the knowledge of God and of ourselves’ (ibid. 18). This ‘correlation’ is not like that of David Tracy, but lays out very similar conceptual territory to the ‘confessional and critical’ orientation described in this study.
83 See p. 207 above.
84 This provides an echo of the different ways in which Lindbeck engages with liberals and conservatives.
Discussion of this question, which takes up the next two sections, contributes to this study on several levels: as a theological engagement with ideology it lends substance to my criticism of McGrath for discounting this possibility; as an investigation of the relation between divine Word and human word in the Bible it further addresses the question posed at the end of the previous chapter concerning a fully historical view of Christian confession, doctrine and scripture; and by setting the Bible’s vulnerability within a theological framework it further clarifies the confessional and therefore critical hermeneutic that comprises my counter-proposal to Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic account of religion and doctrine. The final section of the chapter will review the argument in terms of these contributions.

6.4 WORD AND SCRIPTURE IN KARL BARTH’S CHURCH DOGMATICS

With this issue, we have reached the intersection of two strands of argument, one mainly historical, and the other mainly theological. On the one hand, having absorbed Delwin Brown’s account of the historicity of tradition and Alister McGrath’s description of the historicity of doctrine, we are facing the question of the historicity of scripture, in respect of which neither those authors nor Lindbeck provided satisfactory answers. On the other hand, in view of the Christian confession of Christ as Lord, and recognising that Christ’s Lordship does not allow for independent, ‘neutral’ or pretheological principles, we are asking in what manner this Lordship is exercised through scripture. We are thus at the point where the idea of scripture’s historicity intersects with its ecclesial role in relation to revelation.

I will not pursue this inquiry through a socio-historical hermeneutic of suspicion, though that may well have been illuminating in its own way. Rather, from the confessional and critical standpoint of this study, the important questions are those arising in a theological critique that interrogates the assertion ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ concerning its service to Christ as Lord and in view of its vulnerability as a human statement. Such a critique exists in the first volume of Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics, and I survey the relevant material below. Barth’s structuring of the issues addresses the question of how to attend to the humanity of biblical texts for the sake of hearing God’s Word. I find the main principles of his approach to be quite satisfactory, and suggest that aspects of his treatment of the Bible’s unity and vulnerability are in tension with those principles and should be modified. The resulting modified Barthian view of scripture is, I believe, a more robust theological account of the relation between human word and divine word in the Bible. On this basis section 6.5 goes on to clarify the appropriate trust and suspicion involved in reading faithfully while identifying and dealing with scripture’s vulnerability to ideological distortion.

85 Such inquiry lies beyond both my competence and the scope of this study. I am not assuming any particular results from it, other than that, as a human belief, a view of scripture as the Word of God will be found to be implicated in institutional legitimation, the projection of power and political aspirations. Such findings might provide a salutary commentary on human nature and moral frailty, but would achieve little in the way of justifying or destabilising the underlying truth claims in a doctrine of scripture.
6.4.1 ‘The Bible is the Word of God’

Barth set his doctrine of scripture in the context of an overarching doctrine of the Word of God, which comprises the first volume (in two parts) of his *Church Dogmatics*. Essentially, by ‘Word of God’ Barth means the triune God’s gracious revealing and reconciling address to humankind in Jesus Christ. Importantly, the Word of God is always the event of God’s address to humankind, notwithstanding that, in scripture and in proclamation, it takes place in the form of human words. Consistent with this, Barth explains quite early in *CD* that when he says ‘the Bible is the Word of God’, the ontological verb is not meant in the sense of direct identity.  

The detailed argument is set out in Barth’s first thesis on Holy Scripture, §19 (*CD I.2 457*) which concludes: ‘Scripture is holy and the Word of God, because by the Holy Spirit it became and will become to the Church a witness to divine revelation’. That scripture is ‘(human) witness to divine revelation’ is the basic concept from which the whole exposition unfolds. In §19.1 *Scripture as a Witness to Divine Revelation* Barth distinguishes between witness and revelation as follows:

If we want to think of the Bible as a real witness of divine revelation, then clearly we have to keep two things constantly before us and give them their due weight: the limitation and the positive element, its distinctiveness from revelation, in so far as it is only a human word about it, and its unity with it, in so far as revelation is the basis, object and content of this word. (*CD I.2 463*)

The humanity of scripture must not be ignored for the sake of its divinity. Rather, it must be studied, ‘for it is here or nowhere that we shall find its divinity.’  

Paying attention to the human words of scripture means attending to each writer’s situation in all its human specificity so that we may hear what it is they intended to say.  

Barth wants us to hear the message, and receive it as meant—as witness to divine revelation.

In §19.2 *Scripture as the Word of God* (*CD I.2 473-537*), Barth further unfolds his basic principle (that scripture is a witness to divine revelation) in six clarifications. (1) Scripture as we have it reflects the Church’s historical, and therefore provisional, judgement concerning the canon (*473*-81). (2) The various parts of the canon are all scripture in the same sense, namely, that they attest the Messiah. Only in its totality is the biblical witness the witness of divine revelation. The unity of this witness follows from the unity of God in his revelation. (3) The self-attestation of scripture consists ‘generally and indirectly’ in the fact that it is witness to

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87 *Ibid.* Here, and elsewhere, Barth draws a parallel with the humanity and divinity of Christ.

88 *CD I.2 463-4*. Barth insists that scripture, like any other human word, points away from itself, and indeed away from the speaking self; that is to say, the writers intended to bear witness to something. They did not intend to give an account of their religious emotions, or their religious genius, or their spiritual values. To treat the exegesis of scripture as the exegesis of the witnesses is thus to completely mistake the nature of scripture as witness, as human address about something. Barth’s target here is the classic liberal exegetical practice that exeged the messenger’s humanity and thus failed to respect him or her as messenger.

89 *CD I.2 481-5*, especially 482. On this ground Barth maintains that the Church must hear the scriptural canon in its entirety, without any exclusions, preferences or devaluations. He does not note any tension between this insistence on the canon’s unity and its provisionality, stressed in the first clarification.
Jesus Christ, but also ‘specifically and explicitly’ in the fact that it attests the historical existence of the biblical witnesses (485-92). Hence, (4) in regard to revelation we are tied to the biblical texts, and hence biblical criticism may contribute greatly to our understanding of their witness, if it is indeed their witness that it seeks to elucidate. (5) The priority accorded scripture as human witness to revelation neither absolutises a relative, nor compromises the priority of God over creation, nor derogates from the proper dignity of other words that speak of the one God. Rather, as human witness to the Word of God scripture speaks from the divine priority, not as another priority. Yet direct identity between the Word of God and the human words of scripture is impossible. Though real, the identity is indirect, being conditioned neither by the nature of God nor by human nature but by the decision and act of God—in this decision and act, scripture is the Word of God in the sign of the human word (495-502). (6) Scripture has this priority, and, as the witness of divine revelation, is the Word of God—but this does not mean that the Word of God is present as an object for us to seize and control. The ‘has’ and the ‘is’ are to be read as recollection (‘had’ and ‘was’) and expectation (‘will have’ and ‘will be’) of the event of the Word of God as ‘what God himself decides and wills and does in divine freedom and superiority and power’ in the divine present (502-6).

In view of these clarifications, the assertion that ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ faces difficulties on both on the human side and the divine. Facing the Bible’s all-too-evident humanity, how can we believe that we hear a divine word in it? And how can we equate the sovereign freedom of the Word of God with the creaturely reality of written texts?

Addressing the first question (CD I.2 506-12), Barth gives a frank account of scripture’s humanity: it is genuine witness by ‘fallible, erring men like ourselves’; there are ‘lacunæ, inconsistencies and over-emphases’ (507); the biblical writers share our capacity for errors (508-9); the Bible’s capacity for error extends to its religious or theological content; ‘Not only part but all that [the biblical writers] say is historically related and conditioned’ (509). Moreover, there is no sense in which the Bible as a whole constitutes a system, nor any way in which evident contradictions can be evaded (509). These problems seem insurmountable, and Barth finds no way of choosing between or even reconciling conflicting biblical texts. There is no ‘single rule by which to make a common order’, no way of choosing sides, no standpoint from which we can pronounce that any biblical author has ‘erred’, ‘for within certain limits and therefore relatively they are all vulnerable and therefore capable of error even in respect of

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90 This is much the same point as McGrath noted in the magisterial reformers—that the essence of Christian faith is relationship with Jesus Christ, and the Bible is Holy Scripture because it conveys Christ to believers.

91 492-5. Barth concludes this point with a reference to Calvin’s commentary on 2 Cor 5:7 (in which Calvin links it with 1 Cor 13:12)—‘For we see, indeed, but it is through a glass darkly; that is, in place of the reality we rest upon the word.’ (495) He comments: ‘Biblical theology can be as critical as it will and must—but if it carries out the programme outlined in this statement, it will always do good work as ecclesiastical scholarship…’.

92 On p. 503 Barth speaks of the event of the Word of God in Holy Scripture as something we can only ever circle around, hoping that it will graciously come and take place ‘within our own circling exposition’. ‘We cannot attain to it of ourselves any more than we can—as we saw earlier—to the unity of Scripture.’ The link with the discussion of the unity of scripture will be explored further below. The point is that recognition of the Word of God in Holy Scripture means a recognition of the unity of the scriptural witness and of its priority and sovereignty over us. There is no going behind this recognition; it is a statement of faith.
The humanity of scripture, its nature as genuine witness, means that belief in scripture as the Word of God faces ‘barriers which can be broken down only by miracle (Wunder)’ (507). That is, faith that the Bible is the Word of God is a work of the Word of God itself, and presupposes that the Word of God has already spoken in the Bible, thus grounding the hope that it will be heard in it again.94

However, it is the second question that poses the ‘real difficulty’, the problem not of our belief but of the fact: how can the equation ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ be made in respect of a (relatively) static collection of human words on the one hand and the potent, ineffable and majestic Word of God on the other (526-36)? The reality of the equation is another miracle, in this case ‘the miracle of the divine Majesty in its condescension and mercy’. ‘If we take this equation on our lips,’ says Barth, ‘it can only be as an appeal to the promise in virtue of which this miracle was real in Jesus Christ and will again be real in the word of His witnesses’; it cannot mean that the Word of God is predicated of the Bible as an attribute, for God is not an attribute of anything else; nor can it mean that the Word of God is tied to the Bible, rather, the reverse is the case, the Bible is tied to the Word of God. That is, ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ does not concern the intrinsic nature of the biblical text, but the free decision of God.

Having surveyed ‘ways to be taken and avoided’, Barth offers his positive propositions on Scripture as Word of God (CD I.2 527-37). (1) The Word of God is a divine word, and hence not under human control and foresight. Therefore, ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ is not a statement about the Bible as such, but speaks of God’s freedom and rule in and through the Bible. (2) The Word of God is not a state or fact but an event, an act of God that rests on God’s free decision. In faith we approach the Bible in expectation of this event. (3) The Word of God is the miracle of God’s gracious self-communication in the human word of the Bible. (4) The fact of this miracle must not in any way compromise the humanity of the biblical witness.

To the bold postulate, that if their word is to be the Word of God they must be inerrant in every word, we oppose the even bolder assertion, that according to the scriptural witness about man, which applies to them too, they can be at fault in any word, and have been at fault in every word, and yet according to the same scriptural witness, being justified and sanctified by grace alone, they have still spoken the Word of God in their fallible and erring human word (CD I.2 529-30).

(5) Since the miracle of the Word of God is an event, the presence of God’s Word in the Bible cannot be an attribute of the Bible in itself. With the church we recollect that we have heard God’s Word in it, and therefore we expect that when we read the Bible in faith we shall, by God’s grace,

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93 This may recall the ‘featureless diversity’ noted in Delwin Brown’s account of the canon (see section 3.3.4 A Diverse Canon, commencing on p. 79 above). Although he notes that there are ‘distinctions of higher and lower, of utterances which are more central and peripheral’ (CD I.2 509), Barth does not suggest that a synthetic viewpoint (e.g., an overall narrative framework) might be inferred from scripture itself and used to discern priorities and decide conflicts. Yet his own exegetical practice appears to take the Bible as a single, large narrative focussed on Jesus Christ in anticipation (OT) and recollection (NT).

94 Ibid. At the same time, the humanity of scripture means that all manner of critical questions and tools may aid the task of listening to the witness of the biblical writers. This point is dealt with in the fourth clarification (CD I.2 492-5).
hear God’s Word in it again. (6) Because the Word of God is the event of God’s free decision to address us, its occurrence is not in our power, but only in God’s. We cannot attain to God’s Word in the Bible by any particular technique or by discriminating between fallible and infallible elements in it. (7) ‘The Bible is the Word of God’ points to a dual reality—of the text in its human vulnerability, and of the event of the Word of God in its divine majesty. The church’s acknowledgement of this reality, i.e., its faith in the inspiration of the Bible, is known in the extent to which its concrete life, and that of its members, ‘is a life really dominated by exegesis of the Bible’. (8) The inspiration of the Bible, as a divine decision continually made in the life of the Church and of its members, is an objective reality that cannot be reduced to our faith in it.

Barth’s exposition continues through two further theses that deal with the church’s authority and freedom (i.e., its responsibilities) in view of its relation to the Word of God in scripture. Since this material adds little to the basic principles of Barth’s doctrine of scripture (it mainly illustrates their outworking in the life of the church), we can halt our survey at this point and consider the place of ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ in Barth’s doctrine of the Word.

Barth affirms not only that the Bible is a collection of texts, and hence as vulnerable to criticism as any other human writings, but also that ‘the Bible is the Word of God’. Clearly, the word ‘is’ operates differently in these two affirmations. The statement ‘the Bible is a collection of texts’ predicates of the Bible an attribute that is characteristic of the Bible as such. The statement ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ precisely does not make such a predication. Rather, it refers to the event of God’s free decision to speak to those who read the Bible in faithful anticipation that God will address them through it. Barth’s discussion makes it plain enough that, in the sense of predicking an attribute, and with suitable qualifications, it is at least as valid to say ‘the Bible is not the Word of God’ as to say that it is.

That the ‘is’ has different meanings in the two affirmations arises from the fact that the nouns which it links are both creaturely in the one case, but creaturely and divine in the other. When we affirm the Bible’s humanity, both parts of the statement refer to creaturely realities in relation to which we, as creatures, may take (and are called to take) responsible action. The attribution of characteristics to the Bible helps us to identify the kind of object it is, and hence the kind of action that is appropriate when dealing with it. Thus, affirmation of the Bible’s humanity has implications for hermeneutics, in which we are obliged to treat the text according to what it is. In contrast, when we affirm the Bible’s divinity we affirm that God, acting in sovereign freedom and always as Subject, addresses us in and through the biblical texts. God’s address to us in the words of scripture is never an object at our disposal or in the sphere of our responsibility. Thus, ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ is not a hermeneutic principle, because it says nothing about the nature of an object with which we have to deal. Rather, it says something about the Subject that we hope will deal with us. On this basis, it calls the reader to a particular attitude: acknowledgement that

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95 In §19 Barth concludes ‘Scripture is Holy and the Word of God, because by the Holy Spirit it became and will become to the Church a witness to divine revelation.’ Yet ‘became’ and ‘will become’ do not justify ‘is’, i.e., one cannot say ‘is’ because ‘became’ and ‘will become’ are true. The statement becomes cogent if we read ‘in the sense that’ in place of ‘because’, or if ‘and the Word of God’ is removed.
God spoke through the Bible in the past, anticipation that God will again speak through the Bible in the future, and therefore hope that God will now speak through the Bible in the present.

While Barth’s basic formula (‘scripture is human witness to divine revelation’) accommodates the more traditional statement (‘the Bible is the Word of God’) in a carefully qualified form, the qualifications negate the sense in which that statement is meant by many traditionalists who hold to it, and I could therefore wish that Barth had substituted some other statement that more clearly displayed the principles of his exposition. His primary reason for retaining ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ appears to be his conviction that the reality (i.e., the ‘is’) of the event of the Word of God is the centre around which the whole doctrine of scripture must unceasingly circle. At the same time, he warns that we can only circle round this event—we cannot attain to it; we cannot produce it; we certainly cannot seize and control it. The event of the Word of God is God’s present, not ours. It is God’s work and God’s action. Doesn’t Barth’s warning at this point, and the conceptual structure of his doctrine of the Word of God, require that ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ be affirmed, if at all, only with considerable reticence? Is it not curious that, despite the pervasive dynamism and actualism of his theology, Barth strives to retain an expression couched in the language of equivalence or attribution commonly applied to objects that are present to us and for us, and with which we can engage, or not, as we choose? I emphasise that what I am querying is not the substance of Barth’s theology of scripture, but rather his retention of a particular verbal formula that strains against that substance. Precisely in view of the deeper principles in Barth’s exposition, I would have expected a formula that clearly expressed the dynamic of divine action in and through fallen creaturely reality, rather than one that, because of its static essentialist language, must be surrounded with qualifications.

Since in my view Barth retains ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ despite and in the face of basic characteristics of his argument, I am inclined towards a hermeneutic of (theological) suspicion. How does Barth use this statement elsewhere in his argument? What benefit flows from it? In that it supports an appropriate attitude in the faithful and expectant reader of scripture, it might be suggested that Barth retains it out of respect for traditional piety. But he was certainly not trying to forestall criticism from that quarter—his qualifications of the statement are clear, and indeed led many traditionalists to view his theology with suspicion, and even to write him off as unorthodox. Perhaps he wanted to maintain solidarity with his Reformation heritage? But this suggestion is like the first and fails on similar grounds.

Within his doctrine of scripture, the only point at which Barth takes identity between the Bible and revelation as a premise, thus deriving some ‘benefit’ from it, is the discussion of scripture’s unity (CD I.2 481-5). Engagement with this discussion turns out to have dual relevance for the

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96 This paragraph engages Barth’s sixth clarification (CD I.2 502-6), referred to on p. 230 above.

97 In his excursus on 2 Tim 3:14-17 and 2 Pet 1:19-21, Barth finds that the centre from which we have to look backwards and forwards can be understood only as a disposing act and decision of God (CD I.2 504). After speaking of the sense in which both the Holy Spirit and the biblical writers are genuinely authors of scripture, he returns to ‘the mystery of the centre’ in which the voice of the biblical writers reproduced God’s voice, and ‘the biblical concept of theopneustia’ which describes ‘what God does in the humanity of his witnesses’ (ibid., 506). From this discussion one might expect a conclusion couched in terms of divine action (e.g., ‘God speaks through scripture’), but Barth’s destination turns out to be a statement about what the Bible ‘is’.
concerns of this chapter: not only does it help to resolve my theological suspicion of Barth’s affirmation of identity between scripture and revelation; it also opens a way to addressing a key aspect of scripture’s historicity, namely, its vulnerability to the distortions of ideology.

6.4.2 Scripture, Revelation, and Unity

Barth specifically addresses the unity of scripture in his second clarification, in which the core affirmations are, firstly, that the unity of scripture really means the unity of God in revelation ‘as revealed and confirmed first of all in the founding of the Church and then again and again in the human variety of [the biblical] witness’ (CD I.2 482-3), and, secondly, that perception of this unity is also a God-given event, in recollection of which the Church expects the unity of God in revelation as it reads scripture (483). These statements cohere with the basic principles of Barth’s doctrine of scripture, in that as they reflect the distinction between scripture as witness and revelation as such, allow room for the plurivocity of the witness as a aspect of its human vulnerability, and indicate that talk of the unity of scripture properly refers to the reading church’s expectation of the unity of revelation, i.e., unity is properly attributed to the Word of God rather than to scripture as such.

To these principles we may add the ‘secularity’ of God’s speech. At §5.4 The Speech of God as the Mystery of God, Barth locates the mystery of God’s speech to humankind ‘supremely in its secularity’ (or worldliness, Welthaftigkeit)—the fact that God’s Word comes to us ‘in a form which as such is not the Word of God and which as such does not even give evidence that it is the form of the Word of God’. There is a contradiction between its form and its content, i.e., the creaturely form in which God’s Word must come to us if it really is to come to us, and the divine content of the Word itself. Moreover, this is a double contradiction—God’s Word comes to us not only in creaturely reality, but in fallen creaturely reality which, as such, is opposed to God. Barth does not suggest that in the event of revelation God’s Word communicates any of its attributes to the creaturely reality in, through, and in spite of which it reveals itself. Nor does the event of the Word of God change the intrinsic nature of that creaturely reality. Rather, as we saw earlier, the contrast between the human vulnerability of the biblical witness and the divine majesty of the Word highlights the fact that the event of the Word of God is God’s work.

Barth occasionally makes statements that strain against these principles by attributing unity to the witness because of the unity of the revelation (thus communicating a divine attribute to a creaturely reality). For example, as he approaches the decisive point regarding scripture’s unity, Barth says that the ‘irreversible distinction’ between the Testaments is ‘completely relativised (völlig relativiert) by the unity of its object’, i.e., by the unity of revelation (CD I.2 482). This could be taken to mean that the greater fact (unity of revelation) forms the context within which

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98 CD I.2 481-5, briefly referred to on p. 229 above.

99 CD I.1 165-74. It is worth noting that Barth applies this analysis to ‘all applications of the proposition that proclamation, Scripture or revelation is God’s Word’ (ibid., 168), i.e., it applies just as much to Jesus Christ himself as to proclamation and Scripture.

100 See Barth’s discussion of the human and divine aspects of scripture in his fifth clarification (CD I.1 499-501), briefly summarised on p. 230 above.
the lesser fact (diversity of witness) must be interpreted, and such a reading would have the
virtue of alluding to the interpreting community that reads scripture in faithful expectation of
hearing the one Word of God. Still, it is hard to know what to make of the absolutising adverb
*völlig* (fully, completely), and although Barth brings in the reading Church as the exposition unfolds, it is not part of this assertion.\(^{101}\)

A similar sentiment appears earlier, in the initial exposition of *The Word of God in its Threefold Form* (§4). Here, having identified revelation proper with Jesus Christ, Barth says that to understand the Bible is to understand how everything in it relates to him as its centre, and that to hear the Bible as God’s Word means to hear the human words of the Bible as the bearers of this word, based on this centre and having it in view in everything they say. He continues –

The unity of revelation guarantees (*gewährleistet*) the unity of the biblical witness in and in spite of all its multiplicity and even contradictoriness. The unity of the Bible guarantees the unity of the Church in and in spite of the difference in the proportion of faith in which the Bible becomes revelation to this man and that man and to this man and that man to-day and to-morrow (*CD I.1 117*).

The first sentence would appear to be self-contradictory if read as attributing both unity and ‘multiplicity and even contradictoriness’ to the biblical witness as such, notwithstanding that the unity in view is guaranteed or ensured by the unity of revelation.\(^{102}\) We are obliged, then, to read it according to the principles set out later at §19, so that unity is not attributed to the biblical witness itself, and the ‘guarantee’ is realised in the expectant and faithful reading of the Church. Unfortunately, this leads to further problems in view of the chain of guarantee operating in this passage as the unity of revelation guarantees the unity of the Bible, which in turn guarantees the unity of the church. The words appear to speak of the Bible’s unity as a thing in itself rather than an event in God’s address to the church, notwithstanding the preceding context (‘to hear…as’).

Again, in the excursus to the discussion of scripture’s unity (*CD I.2 483-5*), Barth sets out the ‘conclusion and demand’ to which we are led by a right understanding of the matter. It does *not* mean that we can abstract from the Bible an otherwise concealed historical or conceptual system. Nor can we, in the manner of 17\(^{th}\) century Protestant orthodoxy, treat revelation as a presupposition and aspire to describe it as a totality. Rather, the unity of scripture is the unity of *a single witness*:

This, then, is the conclusion and demand to which we are led by a right understanding of the unity of Holy Scripture. And the Church must see to it that we never forget that by

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\(^{101}\) In a parallel case just after this example, Barth says that the irreversible distinction between the various biblical writers is relativised by ‘the unity of what is said by all these individuals’, i.e., by a unity of the witness itself (*CD I.2 482*). This may be only a passing comment or illustration, but it does appear to attribute unity to the biblical witness itself without referring it either to revelation proper or to the reading church’s expectation in view of the unity of revelation.

\(^{102}\) Of course, there is a substantial body of theological opinion that makes precisely this move, i.e., it holds that scripture necessarily shares in certain properties of the revelation it attests, especially the properties of unity and inerrancy. On this view, any multiplicity or error apparent in scripture is *merely* apparent and not a *real* multiplicity or error, though there may be difficulties that are, as yet, unresolved. Barth rules out this argument with respect to inerrancy, and I suggest that the principles of his doctrine of scripture also rule it out in relation to unity.
Here Barth speaks of the Bible as a ‘single witness’ the unity of which derives from (the unity of) its ‘content and object’, namely, revelation. The tension with the principles described earlier is clear, notwithstanding that the ensuing sentence refers to the reading church, and hence, implicitly if not explicitly, to its faith in the unity of God in revelation.

Besides tension between these passages and Barth’s view of the worldliness of God’s speech, we may also note the difference between Barth’s treatments of diversity and fallibility in the biblical witness. On the one hand, he robustly acknowledges the biblical witnesses’ fallibility while insisting that God nevertheless speaks his infallible Word through their fallible human word (CD I.2 529-30). On the other hand, while he grants that the diversity of the biblical witness is such as to render synthesis impossible, he can claim that the Bible presents a single witness because its object is the Word of God. If the Bible’s diversity were treated similarly to other aspects of its human vulnerability, we might have expected Barth to say that, notwithstanding the diversity of the witnesses, God nevertheless speaks his one Word through their variety and that perception of the unity of God in revelation is given in the event of God speaking through them (compare CD I.2 483). Of course, he does say this, but then, as we have seen, he can also say that the biblical witness is a unity because it attests God’s revelation. I suggest that these latter statements sit oddly within Barth’s doctrine of scripture and contrast with his approach to the fallibility of witness.

I took this turn into Barth’s view of the unity of scripture because it is the only part of his doctrine of scripture where identity between scripture and revelation appears as a premise, and I wanted to find what ‘benefit’ he derived from asserting this identity. While Barth does not say ‘scripture is a unity because the Bible is the Word of God’, we have noted that he sometimes assimilates scripture’s witness to its object, or asserts the unity of the biblical witness on the basis of the unity of revelation. Insofar as they do not refer the unity of scripture to the unity of God in revelation, as recollected and expected by the reading Church, such statements strain against the basic principles of Barth’s doctrine of scripture. Thus, far from conferring a benefit, the tendency to assimilate scripture to revelation on the question of unity has the detrimental effect of making Barth’s doctrine of scripture less coherent.

The suspicion piqued by Barth’s retention of ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ in the face of his own strong counter-arguments has yielded a meagre result. Having already considered and discarded the possibility that Barth might have retained this affirmation for the sake of traditional piety or out of respect for the Reformation, it now appears that its use as a premise is problematic, rather than beneficial, for his doctrine of scripture. Then why did he retain it? Barth would very likely have said that he affirmed ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ because it is true. Because it is true only in the event of the Word of God, and needs careful qualification if it is to convey its truth, I suggest that it is not really serviceable as a theological statement and should be discarded for a formulation that better reflects the more robust underlying principles of Barth’s doctrine of scripture.
Following those principles, I will now revisit Barth’s discussion of the unity of scripture with two reservations firmly in view. Firstly, I will rely on basic principles such as ‘scripture bears witness to revelation’ and ‘God speaks through scripture’, and avoid treating identity between revelation and scripture as either a premise or an affirmation to be guarded (except in the strictly circumscribed sense in which it is true). Secondly, for the sake of really attending to the biblical witness in all its vulnerability, and thereby patiently and responsibly waiting upon the Word of God, I will distinguish between the unity of revelation and that of scripture.

This is not a matter of rewriting what I take to be Barth’s core affirmations, which proceed from the fact that those who first confessed Jesus as Lord recognised that his coming, his ministry, his death and his resurrection took place ‘according to the scriptures’, and hence according to the God of Israel of whom they speak. Acknowledging the one Word of the one God embodied in Jesus, the church read scripture as pointing to him, and interpreted him as fulfilling scripture even while transcending it. Hence, as Barth says, the unity of scripture means the unity of God in revelation as revealed and confirmed in the founding of the church, and as therefore expected by the church as it reads the Bible (CD I.2 482-3). By revisiting Barth’s discussion in the light of these principles, I hope to clarify the unity that is proper to the biblical witness itself, and to better understand the nature of that patient circling in which we attend to scripture hoping to hear the Word of God.

As noted early in this sub-section, Barth speaks of the distinction between the testaments being relativised by the unity of the object of the (one) biblical witness, and of the distinction between the individualities of the biblical writers being relativised ‘by the unity of what is said by all these individuals’ (CD I.2 482). He goes on to emphasise that by ‘biblical witness’ he means this witness in its entirety (in seiner Ganzheit), and asserts that the Church arose when this witness in this entirety appeared. The basis for the assertion is the fact that the church’s preaching of Jesus and the apostolic testimony were at every step an exposition of the Law and the Prophets (ibid.). He continues:

The one necessarily belongs to the other. We cannot separate either the Law and the prophets, or the Gospels and apostolic writings, or the Old and New Testaments as a whole, without at each point emptying and destroying both. If the Church had not from the very first heard this whole, it could not have heard what it did hear. It would not have arisen as the Church. It is only in this unity that the biblical witness is the witness of divine revelation. And remembering this unity, the Church holds fast to this witness (CD I.2 482).

Here, Barth mistakes the necessity that is really at work. That the church arose in the conviction that Jesus’ ministry and resurrection took place ‘according to the scriptures’, and hence that the God Jesus called ‘father’ is the God attested in the Jewish Scriptures, is a historical fact which as such is in itself contingent rather than necessary. This contingent fact did indeed create a necessity for those subsequently confessing the church’s faith in Jesus, but the created necessity is that of acknowledging Jesus’ person and work to be continuous with, and indeed the decisive revelation of, the person and work of Israel’s God. This necessity does not entail the idea that

106 The emphasis is original: ‘indem dieses Zeugnis in dieser seiner Ganzheit auf den Plan trat’ (KD I.2 534).
the Old and New Testaments form a ‘whole’ (Ganz), a ‘totality’ (Ganzheit), or a ‘unity’ (Zusammenklang). Nor does it justify ascribing a unity to law and prophets, to gospels and epistles, and to Old and New Testaments, such that each is rendered meaningless if separated from its partner. Yet when Barth speaks of ‘this whole’, ‘this unity’, he is apparently referring to the unity of witness contained in these texts, rather than the strictly necessary continuity between Israel’s God and Jesus, a continuity which accords well with the principle of the unity of God in revelation to which he is leading.

Barth’s statements in this passage face historical and theological difficulties. In a historically diverse canon, a later work will refer to earlier works, relying on readers’ familiarity with them in order to communicate its own message. Conversely, while earlier works do not refer to later works, and did not originally rely on them for meaning, later works inevitably become part of the context within which earlier works are interpreted. That is, textual meaning is modified by intertextual associations (among other things), and hence meaning is indeed changed if a text is deprived of part of the context in which it was traditionally read; but to say that the meaning of both parts is ‘emptied and destroyed’ is to claim too much. We may also question Barth’s view of the relation between the completion of the biblical witness and the birth of the church. He says that the Church arose when the witness as a whole became available, but the New Testament shows that in fact this was not the case. Barth’s assertion cannot apply to the Acts of the Apostles (which narrates the birth of the church), or to Paul’s epistles (unless they say nothing that did not come from the Jerusalem apostles). The development apparent in apostolic preaching from the early sermons in Acts to the letters of Peter and John (quite apart from Paul) indicates that the apostolic witness was not a fixed deposit whose completion accompanied the founding of the church, but rather a dynamic unfolding of the significance of Jesus in and through the life of the fledgling church. Further, the supposed ‘wholeness’ of the apostolic witness is problematic in itself. Our only access to the earliest apostolic witness (i.e., immediately after Pentecost) is indirect, by way of Luke’s reporting some decades later; and whatever position one takes on detailed questions of provenance, the canonical gospels appear to have been written in places that are diverse not only geographically, but also culturally and politically. We must acknowledge, then, not only the individual viewpoints of the first apostles, of the collectors of their testimonies, and of the gospel writers themselves, but also the fact that, having reached their final form some thirty to seventy years after the narrated events, the greater part of the transmission of the gospel materials occurred in circumstances all but guaranteed to generate further diversity in both perspective and factual recollection. In sum, the New Testament itself shows that completion of the apostolic (and with it the biblical) witness was not a precondition for the beginning of the church; the New Testament writings were not devoid of meaning prior to their collection into the canon (i.e., they were not written to make sense only as parts of that ‘whole’); we have very good

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107 Zusammenklang could have been translated with more regard for its musical roots, as ‘concord’ or ‘harmony’, but the context suggests that an overliteral rendition such as ‘sounding together’ may not be far from Barth’s intention. More attention is given to this word below.

108 Allowing that the apostolic witness existed first in oral form, and took written form later (CD I.2 482).

109 The debate over the Gentile mission and the basis on which Gentiles should be included in the church is the outstanding example in this regard.
reason to expect real diversity in the New Testament; and it is doubtful (to say the least) that the New Testament comprises, or even contains, the ‘whole’ of the original apostolic witness.

The history of the Old Testament canon poses further problems. We can leave aside for the moment the diversity of viewpoints within the Old Testament (a diversity arguably greater than that found in the New Testament), because the contents of the Torah and Nevi’im were well settled by the time of Jesus, and so they, whatever their diversity, provided the acknowledged core witness to the God of Israel, whose mission became Jesus’ mission. In contrast, the scope of the Ketuvim had been fluid for a long time and remained so into the second century. Thus, when the church began, the core of the canon was well-defined but its boundaries were not. That Christianity emerged during this period of fluidity and adopted the LXX with its relatively broad collection of Ketuvim is a fact whose historical echoes still reverberate two millennia later in the differing Old Testament canons of modern Christianity. Thus, talk of a ‘whole’ biblical witness as precondition for, or even as midwife to, the birth of the church, begs the question as to what this ‘whole’ was, and how it relates to the different biblical canons of modern Christianity.

Depending on exactly what Barth means by ‘this unity’ in the above passage, there is also a serious theological objection to be considered. If he is referring, not to the necessary unity I described above, but to the groups of texts of which he has just spoken, then, having regard to his exposition in §19.1, his insistence on scripture’s human vulnerability, and his account of the mystery of God’s speech in its worldliness, we must object when he says: ‘It is only in this Zusammenklang that the biblical witness is the witness of divine revelation,’ albeit with the reservation that Barth’s intention may not have been well served by the translator’s rendering of Zusammenklang as ‘unity’. The nature of the objection varies with the translation.

On the one hand, if we read Zusammenklang as ‘unity’ (with the standard ET) then we read Barth as attributing to witness what is properly attributed only to revelation as such. But while revelation in itself is always a unity, human witness will always take place in and through limited perspectives, vulnerable recollection and ideological distortion. That is, Barth’s anthropology of scripture constrains us to say that only in its vulnerability (including plurivocity) can the biblical witness be genuine witness of divine revelation. The possibility of plurivocity cannot be excluded a priori on grounds of ‘necessity’. The scope of the necessity arising from the apostolic witness has been delineated above: it concerns the object attested rather than the testimony itself.

110 The following comments on the history of the Old Testament canon are meant to reflect contemporary scholarly consensus such as may be found in standard reference works. For example, see Trebolle 2006 and Sarna 1993. Some further comments on Old Testament canon appear on p. 241 below.

111 The imperatives of sectarian self-definition play a significant role in this history. The final definition of the Hebrew Ketuvim during the second century was driven at least in part by reaction against Christian use of some works. Protestant depreciation of the ‘Apocrypha’ was driven in part by Roman Catholic use of these works to establish doctrines that Protestants found objectionable; while in response the Council of Trent affirmed the equal canonical status of the entire Vulgate (i.e., including works rejected by Protestants).

112 Note Barth’s references to ‘the Old and New Testaments as a whole (im Ganzen)’, and in the succeeding sentences to ‘this whole’ (dieses Ganze), and ‘this unity’ (diesem Zusammenklang).
On the other hand, if we read Zusammenklang as ‘harmony’ or ‘sounding together’ or ‘complex whole,’ then we read Barth as saying that it is only the biblical witness as a whole (i.e., the canon) that is the witness of divine revelation. But we have already seen that insistence on such a whole is neither necessary nor tenable. On the contrary, for good historical reasons we should guard against treating canonical ‘wholeness’ as necessary to the witness. Granted, if we receive with due (but not with undue) respect the decision of the early church regarding the limits of the canon (and perhaps the decision of the rabbis and/or the Reformers in respect of the Old Testament), then it is in reading this collection of acknowledged authentic witness that we have reason to expect the event of God’s Word. But the biblical canon as we have it is a contingent, and not a necessary, outworking of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. It may ‘sound together’ for us, but it once did so in different ways and to different degrees for its writers and their first readers, and as we now hear together what once was heard solo or in smaller ensembles, it is hardly surprising if in some respects it sounds unlike ‘harmony’.

Neither objection rules out the possibility that scripture has a unity of its own. However, if the church expects the unity of God in revelation, it must also expect of scripture that it is genuine human witness through which God will speak. Thus, as Barth says, the church will busy itself with reading and expounding scripture in expectation of the one Word of God. We may hope that perception of scripture’s unity will emerge from this preoccupation balanced appropriately with perception of its diversity, and that these perceptions will together bear witness to the unity of revelation without being confused with it. One source of such confusion is misattribution of the nature and necessity of unity. The unity of revelation is a personal unity, the tri-unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in outreach to humanity. In that it is grounded in (or rather, is an aspect of) the divine unity, this is indeed a necessary unity. In contrast, scripture is witness, and therefore its unity is the unity of witness, and its diversity is the diversity of witness. In faith the church receives scripture as witness to the one God, Israel’s God, revealed anew and decisively in Jesus. Thus it believes, necessarily, in the unity of the attested revelation, and it recalls that this unity has already disclosed itself in and through its witnesses, and therefore expects that it will do so again. At the same time, it will neither a priori require unity of the witnesses themselves, nor impose it upon them, but, acknowledging their priority and intention as original witnesses, it will grant their freedom and frailty as particular human beings offering their particular testimonies in service to God’s Word.

6.4.3 The Unity and Uniformity of Witness

In view of its importance to the next section of this chapter, it will be helpful to explore this point further through engagement with Barth’s discussions, firstly of hermeneutical principles that in his view transgress the unity of scripture, and secondly of hermeneutical implications of scripture’s human vulnerability.

Towards the end of his excursus on the unity of scripture Barth provides examples of interpretive schemes that violate this unity: Luther’s doctrine of Law and Gospel, ‘the later

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113 This seems more likely from the immediate context and avoids the foregoing theological objection. A further indication is the clearly related use of Klang nearby (which also appears as ‘unity’ in the ET). See also n107 above.
doctrine of a redemptive history working itself out in many different and ascending stages’, ‘the idea of a development of revelation, which can...so easily become that of a development of biblical religion’, and the elevation of one part of scripture over others.\footnote{CD I.2 484-5/537. Barth mentions the exaltation of the synoptic gospels over John, of the gospels over the apostolic writings, and of the prophets over the rest of the Old Testament. Barth says that such preferences ‘correspond to Luther’s onesidedness’, a strange comment, since Luther’s view is, if anything, twosided rather than onesided, and Barth can hardly have been unaware that ‘Law and Gospel’ in Luther was not simply a preference for some parts of scripture over others. We might also refer to Barth’s own view that ‘onesidedness’ is intrinsic to the mystery of divine self-communication (see CD I.1 174-81), such that we experience God’s word as either veiling or unveiling and never as both; and he extends this to other pairs of concepts such as Law and Gospel, letter and spirit, God’s wrath and God’s grace (ibid. 179), before going on in an excursus to discuss other ‘great one-sidednesses of the Bible written and received as God’s Word’ (ibid. 181).}

In all these cases the failure to recognise the unity of Scripture involved sooner or later, and inevitably, a failure to recognise that it is Holy Scripture. For when we have such arbitrary preferences, we do not read even the parts we prefer as Holy Scripture. The same is true of any preference, even the most detailed.\footnote{CD I.2 485/537. Since reaching his main point, namely, that the unity of scripture means the unity of God in revelation, and throughout the excursus, Barth uses Einheit for the ‘unity’ of scripture.}

That is, Barth finds that these interpretive schemes breach scripture’s unity by following ‘arbitrary’ (eignmächtig) preferences for certain parts of scripture. The further charge of failing to treat Scripture as holy arises from his view that scripture’s unity follows necessarily from its holiness. He finds the same reasoning valid for any preference for certain parts of scripture.

This argument fails for several reasons. Firstly, it is a serious thing to charge Luther (to take just one case) with not recognising scripture as Holy Scripture, or to describe his hermeneutic of Law and Gospel as ‘arbitrary’. Luther would say (and Lutherans do say) that this hermeneutic arises from scripture itself. It may be appropriate to argue that this hermeneutic is in fact a misreading of scripture, but that is quite different from dismissing it as ‘arbitrary’.

Secondly, rejection of any preference within a scriptural hermeneutic is problematic. At the broadest level, Barth’s own hermeneutic enacts a preference for the New Testament over the Old, in that he treats the New Testament witness to Christ as decisive for the interpretation of the Old Testament.\footnote{This is pervasive in Barth’s theology, but most simply demonstrated in his summary description of the content of scripture as ‘Immanuel, God with us sinners’ (I.1 108).} We should not forget, either, that the idea of a canon in which all texts are equally canonical is a post-apostolic innovation. The Judaism from which the church arose regarded Torah as the most revered core of scripture, the Nevi’im as scripture but less revered, while the Ketuvim, though well-regarded, were still sufficiently peripheral that their collection then lacked a name.\footnote{See n110 on p. 239 above.} The church quickly lost the Jewish sense of layered authority within scripture, but the idea of degrees of canonicity has a long history, most obviously in respect of the Old Testament, but also for the New Testament—the fourth century and the Reformation were especially active periods in this regard. Barth acknowledges this in his discussion of the provisionality of the canon, when he notes, without showing any disapproval, that even when
the canon is not disputed, the church generally treats scripture’s constituent parts with differing
degrees of emphasis (CD I.2 478). Hence, Barth’s opposition to the idea of any part of scripture
being preferred over others is not only questionable in view of the history of the canon, but
incongruous in view of his own comments on that history.

Thirdly, and perhaps most basically, there is the nexus that Barth maintains between scripture’s
holiness and its unity, affirmed in the words, ‘This is what the Church means when it teaches the
holiness and therefore the unity of Scripture’ (I.2 482/534). A complication here is that ‘this’
refers both backwards and forwards. In the backward reference Barth emphasises that the church
has no control over the Zusammenklang of the biblical witness, nor any control over the fact that
the biblical witness in its totality becomes the witness of divine revelation. By scripture’s holiness,
Barth means that God speaks through it. I have already argued that Barth’s notion of the Bible’s
Zusammenklang (however translated) mistakes the unity (or totality) that is proper to Christian
scripture. The specific problem here concerns the link between scripture’s holiness and its unity.
In fact, the backward reference provides no link between them other than that the Church has no
control over either. That is, there is no substance to the ‘therefore’ in Barth’s affirmation.

The forward reference of the affirmation linking scripture’s unity to its holiness arises from the
following sentence, which begins Barth’s core affirmation: ‘It means the holiness and unity of
God in His revelation, as revealed…’.118 The repetition of ‘it means’ indicates further exposition
of the same idea. In that scripture is holy because God speaks through it, it is clear that
scripture’s holiness derives from God’s holiness. However, as shown earlier, Barth’s
understanding of the worldliness of God’s speech means that the unity of revelation need not
imply the unity of scripture. Hence, even if it were contemplated, we cannot argue from
scripture’s holiness to God’s holiness, from God’s holiness to God’s unity, and so finally from
God’s unity to scripture’s unity. The chain is broken, and the forward reference, like the
backward, provides no substance for Barth’s link between the holiness and unity of scripture.119

Rejection of any preference for parts of scripture implies that the witness of scripture is uniform
in some sense, or that the same witness is to be found in all its parts. This is true if ‘same
witness’ is taken as shorthand for ‘attestation of the same reality’, which is the main point Barth
makes in this connection: all the biblical witnesses are Holy Scripture in the same sense,
namely, that they attest the Messiah (I.2 481/533); the lines of Old Testament and New
Testament witness ‘always intersect at a single point.’ (ibid.); ‘we have to do with…a witness
which points in a single direction and attests a single truth’ (I.2 484/536). Because of my
concern for the distinction between the witness and the reality it attests, I prefer not to speak of

118 For an earlier account of this affirmation, see p. 234 above.
119 Barth’s exposition (I.2 482-3/534-5) does in fact follow something like this chain. Beginning from ‘the holiness
and therefore the unity of Scripture’, he explains this as ‘the holiness and unity of God in his revelation’, which the
church has known in its founding and in the human variety of the biblical witness, and which, as holder of this
witness, the church is therefore entitled to expect of God. So far, so good. But he continues: Therefore the church’s
present ‘can be only…[an] assent to this witness, and therefore to the fulness of this witness in its unity (Einheit.’
Once again, the ‘therefore’ does not follow. Strictly, the church gives its ‘yes’, not to the attesting witness, but to the
attested revelation. A valid conclusion would be that the church is to give unqualified assent to God’s revelation in its
fullness and unity as it reveals itself in and through the biblical witness.
'a single witness’ or ‘the same witness’, but I agree with Barth that from the outset the church read the biblical witnesses as attesting, however indirectly, the one object, and that the church is still constrained by this understanding.

Barth further explains his antipathy towards preferences for parts of scripture:

[F]undamentally, whenever anything which is “written” is overlooked in the exposition of Scripture, whenever for the sake of the exposition we are forced to weaken or even omit what is written, there is always the possibility that the exposition has really missed the one thing which Scripture as a whole attests, even when it thinks that it has found it. An exposition is trustworthy to the extent that it not only expounds the text in front of it, but implicitly at least expounds all other texts, to the extent that it at any rate clears the way for the exposition of all other texts (I.2 485/537).

Respect for the church’s witness to the canon implies that all canonical texts should be listened to in expectation that God will speak through them, so it is true that no relevant text should be simply omitted in theological exegesis. It may also be true that exegesis which omits or weakens a particular canonical text risks missing ‘the one thing attested by scripture as a whole’, yet the same risk attends all exegesis, whether of preferred texts, of marginalised texts, or (if it were possible) of all texts without preference. That is, this risk is intrinsic to interpretation, so it is not the mere presence of the risk, but rather the extent of its realisation, that may inform assessment of exegeses or hermeneutical schemes. However, the reference to scripture ‘as a whole’ already implies that its witness is not homogeneous, which in turn means that the content of the whole cannot be stated without emphasising some parts and themes more than others, as is clear in Barth’s own theology, and in most disagreements over scriptural interpretation such as those attending contemporary debates on the status of women and diverse sexual practices. A major challenge in such debates is to show that one’s construal of scripture as a whole is in fact a valid reading of scripture in its witness to Jesus Christ, that the texts taken as crucial do in fact express the intrinsic dynamic of that witness rather than a preference imported from elsewhere, and that texts that are deprecated or reinterpreted in the light of other texts are treated that way for reasons that are likewise intrinsic, rather than alien, to the dynamic of scripture. The question is not whether textual preferences are present in a particular reading—they will be present, and both the interpretation and its reception will benefit if the preferences are openly declared and considered. Rather, the question is the extent to which the preferences inevitably involved in a particular reading of scripture are intrinsic to scripture as a whole, or alien to it.120

Continuing the previous passage, Barth goes still further, referring to a view held by some ‘older Protestant theologians’ to the effect that the prophets did not add anything to the Law, ‘but as the expounding and confirming of the first witness by a second they made it clearer’ (I.2 485/537). He extends this to the adding of the New Testament to the Old. He allows that this

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120 Preferences judged to be alien to ‘scripture as a whole’ need not invalidate a particular reading. To the extent that such preferences arise outside scripture, the reading is alien to scripture and therefore invalid as theological exegesis. But to the extent that such preferences arise from the particular text(s) being read, there is an intra-scriptural tension, an alienation of the part from the whole. That is, both interpreter and text are vulnerable.
view may be too bold, and is in any case unnecessary since in fact we have the whole canon and not only one part of it, but he does not think it is wrong. Thus the excursus concludes:

If all Scripture does in fact attest one thing, it cannot be denied that if we only know one part of it, it attests it perfectly (vollkommen) even in that part. It does not consist only of such a part, but of the whole. Therefore this consideration does not absolve us from taking it seriously as a whole. But it is a constant reminder that, instructed and restrained by the whole, we have in fact to seek the one thing in the individual part as well. (ibid.)

Thus, in this excursus, Barth’s curious advocacy of hermeneutics without preferences for parts of scripture extends to the idea of uniformity in the biblical witness itself, such that every part of scripture perfectly attests the one thing attested by scripture as a whole. This goes beyond using ‘same witness’ as shorthand for ‘witness to the same object’, and beyond the basic statement that ‘the unity of scripture’ means ‘the unity of God in revelation’. It seems, rather, that the sameness and unity proper to the attested revelation are here attributed to the attestation itself. In this way, the excursus illustrates my contention that Barth tends to assimilate witness to revelation on the question of unity.

To take one of Barth’s metaphors a little further, lines which intersect at a single point do not in fact point in the same direction. Rather, given their different starting points, they can point to the same object only by pointing in different directions. Though wary of pressing a metaphor too far, I find this one rather apt in one respect: it suggests that, if we read scripture as pointing to a single object, then, given the personal and socio-historical diversity of the biblical witnesses, we must allow that our appreciation of the one attested object should be guided by careful attention to the diversity of the witness itself, i.e., to the different directions in which the witnesses must point if indeed they attest the one object. The metaphor is limited in that it ignores the human vulnerability of the both the biblical writers and their readers, but this means that the intrinsic diversity of biblical interpretation has more dimensions than the metaphor can accommodate.

In Barth’s discussion of the unity of scripture we have noted a tendency to assimilate witness to its object, and hence to move from the unity of revelation to the unity of witness, even to the extent of ruling out preferences for parts of scripture and allowing that scripture’s witness is uniform. This tendency meant that Barth did not, in this discussion, really acknowledge the biblical witnesses as genuine witnesses in the varied particularities of their individual circumstances, a fact that is especially clear, and thus incongruous, in the light of the underlying principles of Barth’s own doctrine of the Word of God. We turn now to consider the other major aspect of the biblical writers’ humanity, the fact that they are not merely creaturely and therefore finite and particular, but also fallen and therefore sinful. Inevitably, this has further implications for the nature of the diversity to be expected within the biblical witness.

121 Note the tension with his earlier declaration that the parts of scripture cannot be separated from each other without ‘emptying and destroying’ them (I.2 482/534).

122 This is the other part of the ‘double contradiction’ involved in what Barth calls the Welthaftigkeit (worldliness) intrinsic to God’s speech.
6.4.4 The Frailty of Witness

Barth first describes scripture’s human vulnerability as an aspect of the Bible’s ‘offence,’ in view of which belief that the Bible is God’s Word is possible only through the miracle of the Word of God in which faith believes. I have already noted the extent and nature of the vulnerability that Barth sees here. We are now concerned with passages relevant to the hermeneutical implications of this vulnerability. Barth’s excursus addresses in turn the offences of the biblical writers’ susceptibility to errors of fact, their ignorance of our modern distinction between fact and value, their fallibility in religious and theological matters, and their thorough Jewishness. The biblical writers had no ‘compendium of solomonic or even divine knowledge’. Rather, the contrast between their socio-historical particularities and our own means that in scripture we constantly encounter presuppositions, statements and judgements that we cannot accept. However –

Instead of talking about the “errors” of the biblical authors in this sphere, if we want to go to the heart of things it is better to speak about their “capacity for errors.” For in the last resort even in relation to the general view of the world and man the insight and knowledge of our age can be neither divine nor even solomonic. But fundamentally we certainly have to face the objection and believe in spite of it! (I.2 508-9).

In preferring to speak of the biblical writers’ ‘capacity for error,’ rather than of actual errors of fact, Barth is not retreating from acknowledgement of their humanity, but reminding us that we ourselves share fully in their vulnerability. He acknowledges that we will find fault with them at many points, but wants us to do so seriously and humbly in view of our own finitude and frailty. On the one hand, then, Barth acknowledges that judgement of texts and their writers is intrinsic to the task of interpretation. On the other hand, he appears to be calling for a suspension (or at least a restraint) of judgement on account of the interpreter’s inescapable solidarity with the writers’ humanity. At this stage, Barth does not explore this tension (e.g., by considering how hermeneutical judgement should be exercised), but calls us to acknowledge the biblical writers’ capacity for error, and believe (that the Bible is the Word of God) in spite of it.

From matters of fact, by way of the distinction between fact and value, Barth comes to the vulnerability of the Bible’s religious or theological content. Here he describes just the kinds of diversity of viewpoint, and tensions and even contradictions in witness, that were ‘completely relativised’ by the unity of revelation in the discussion noted earlier.

[N]owhere are we given a single rule by which to make a common order, perhaps an order of precedence, but at any rate a synthesis, of what is in itself such a varied whole. Nowhere do we find a rule which enables us to grasp it in such a way that we can make organic parts

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123 I.2 506-12, and see the earlier summary at p. 230 above.
124 The last and longest paragraph contains a powerful theological attack on anti-Semitism, indicating this issue’s importance for Barth. Our concern, however, is with his comments on the biblical writers human fallibility.
125 Barth offers a similar response to the Bible’s ignorance of the distinction between history and legend. ‘We have to face up to [the doubts arising from our use of this distinction] and to be clear that in the Bible it may be a matter of simply believing the Word of God, even though it meets us, not in the form of what we call history, but in the form of what we think must be called saga or legend’ (I.2 509).
of the distinctions and evade the contradictions as such. We are led now one way, now another—each of the biblical authors obviously speaking only *quod potuit homo*—and in both ways, and whoever is the author, we are always confronted with the question of faith. Again, we must be careful not to be betrayed into taking sides, into playing off the one biblical [writer] against the other, into pronouncing that this one or that has “erred.” From what standpoint can we make any such pronouncement? For within certain limits and therefore relatively they are all vulnerable and therefore capable of error even in respect of religion and theology. …How can they be witnesses, if this is not the case? But if it is, even from this angle we come up against the stumbling-block which cannot be avoided or can be avoided only in faith (I.2 509-10).

Although Barth is here considering not hermeneutics but the obstacle to faith posed by the Bible’s all-too-obvious humanity, the description nevertheless has hermeneutic implications. In contrast to his earlier assertion of the unity, and even uniformity, of the biblical witness, he now sees no way of drawing the disparate and contrary parts into an organic whole. He still rules out having preferences for parts of scripture (speaking now more of individual writers than larger scriptural units), but on the basis of the witnesses’ shared fallibility rather than their unity.

The features of biblical witness that Barth describes here, and which he insists are intrinsic to genuine witness, are basic to my critique of his earlier comments on the unity of witness. If it was really unity of *witness* that he meant earlier, then he is ascribing both unity and impossibility of unity to the same object at the same time, and I confess that I cannot reconcile the two passages. If it is pointed out that Barth reconciles them ‘only in faith’, that is itself problematised by principles he expounds elsewhere. The ‘offence’ or ‘stumbling-block’ of the Bible’s fallibility is not intrinsic to the Bible, but arises *in us* in view of the claim that the Bible is the Word of God (I.2 506-7). That is, we are ‘offended’ at finding ourselves faced with apparently inconsistent assertions. How can the Bible be fallible if it is God’s Word? How can it be God’s Word if it is fallible? How indeed? If, with Barth, we accept the Bible’s fallibility (or rather, do not require infallibility of it because of our understanding of ‘the Bible is God’s Word’), then we also accept that, if the Bible is God’s Word, it is not God’s Word in the way that we thought it was. Barth retains ‘the Bible is God’s Word’ in carefully qualified form. I discard this statement because, being true only in this form, and more usually having a life of its own in isolation from the necessary qualifications, it is in large measure responsible for the confusion and ‘offence’ surrounding this very issue. With Barth, I maintain that God’s speech is always God’s work and in that sense a ‘miracle’, that God must speak through fallen creaturely reality if he really is to speak to us, and that God has in fact spoken thus in the past and may be expected to do so again.126 But if we really do understand God’s speech in this way, then it should be no surprise—and certainly no ‘offence’—that God should speak through fallible human words in the Bible. The real offence is that we find it so much easier to take offence at the Bible’s humanity than to face, and repent of, our propensity for forging false notions of God.127 Without derogating from the miracle that is God’s address to

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126 Referring to the ‘worldliness’ (*Welthaftigkeit*) of God’s speech, discussed earlier. I am less inclined than Barth to use the language of necessity in this connection. The *fact* that God acts in this way is quite sufficient.

127 A propensity famously noted by Calvin (*Institutes* I.XI.8).
human beings through the words of the biblical writers, prevention or avoidance of the offence of which Barth speaks involves not only this miracle, but also faith’s understanding (i.e., knowledge of God) formed in response to God’s self-revelation.

In this light, talk of ‘avoiding’ the offence, even if ‘only in faith,’ may be less than helpful. Since God in sovereign condescension comes to us and addresses us in, with, under and in spite of fallen creaturely reality, we must talk of God’s grace rather than our offence, and of embrace rather than avoidance. As Barth himself says, it is precisely in the humanity that divinity manifests itself. Hence, our waiting upon the Word of God in scripture takes place as we gratefully embrace the concrete form in which God graciously addresses us, i.e., as we patiently attend to the finite and fallen scriptural word in hope of hearing the Word of God.

Returning to hermeneutical questions, this passage, too, proposes a suspension of judgement; not because of our essential solidarity with those being judged (as in the earlier paragraph), but because the biblical writers’ common vulnerability leaves us unable to choose between them or to weigh and evaluate their testimony as we listen to them in hope of encountering God’s Word. Once again, Barth says nothing about engaging the vulnerability of the biblical witness, but calls us to face it, and believe in spite of it. In other words, Barth here ignores the implication of his earlier affirmation of scripture’s unity. For if Christian scripture does indeed have an intrinsic unity grounded in the unity of God in revelation, then that unity, and the sense of the message of ‘scripture as a whole’ that derives from it, can function as a ‘rule by which to make a common order,’ as a rule by which we can ‘make organic parts of the distinctions’, and as a standpoint from which judgement of the writers’ vulnerability (and our own) may and must be attempted.128 We saw earlier that Barth himself sees the common order of scripture, its organic whole, in its witness to Jesus Christ, though we shall see below that he does not advocate using this ‘rule’ as a criterion for judging the witness of particular texts.

Barth comments further on scripture’s vulnerability in his exposition of the positive meaning of ‘the Bible is the Word of God.’ Here he warns that, however much we accept the miracle in which the Bible becomes the Word of God, and indeed precisely because we accept it, ‘we must not compromise either directly or indirectly the humanity of its form and the possibility of the offence which can be taken at it’ (I.2 528). Such compromise would deny the reality of the miracle in which the biblical witnesses have spoken the Word of God in their fallible and erring human word (ibid. 530). The fact of this miracle means that the event of God’s Word arises in, but not because of, our engagement with the Bible, and is solely the Word’s free and sovereign decision. We cannot make it happen, but only pray that it will graciously do so. The responsible action of biblical interpretation, which such prayer attends and informs, is shaped by this reality.

We are completely absolved from differentiating in the Bible between the divine and the human, the content and the form, the spirit and the letter, and then cautiously choosing the former and scornfully rejecting the latter. Always in the Bible as in all other human words we shall meet with both. And we may differentiate between them as we do in the

128 However, I agree with Barth that we may not be able to ‘evade the contradictions.’ Some contradictions may prove to be more apparent than real, but real witness always carries the possibility of real contradiction.
understanding of a human word. But the event in which the [human] word proves itself the Word of God is one which we cannot bring about by this differentiation. … We are absolved from differentiating the Word of God in the Bible from other contents, infallible portions and expressions from the erroneous ones, the infallible from the fallible, and from imagining that by means of such discoveries we can create for ourselves encounters with the genuine Word of God in the Bible. (I.2 531)

Barth does not reject any and all differentiation between divine and human in scripture, but warns against thinking that such differentiation can produce God’s Word from the Bible, as if refining mineral ore and discarding the dross. In this regard, differentiation between divine and human is like every other method of interpretation: since the initiative lies with God, we can only wait prayerfully upon God’s address. The concrete form of this waiting is attention to the biblical witnesses, and any interpretative method is valid to the extent that it helps us to really hear their witness. That Barth does not rule out differentiation between divine and human in scripture follows from his appreciation that, in view of scripture’s humanity, it is appropriate to use the tools of critical biblical scholarship to help us attend to what the biblical witnesses are saying. Knowledge of a writer’s world will help the interpreter to discern what the writer was trying to say in the words and concepts that were available. The writers’ finitude and fallibility means that we cannot expect that each and every concept they express will have been fully reconsidered from the standpoint of the witness they wish to bear, and this applies a fortiori to concepts that are not so much expressed as tacitly assumed. Inevitably, then, and properly, attention to the biblical witnesses will include discernment of divine and human in their testimony. The question is not whether such discernment can and should occur (it can and it should), but rather how it will occur, what criteria should be applied, and in what spirit it is conducted.

Finally, Barth again addresses the biblical writers’ humanity in a hermeneutic context as he expounds the Church’s freedom under the Word (§21.2, I.2 695-740), a freedom which consists in Christians’ willingness to assume responsibility for the interpretation and application of scripture. For Barth, the basic form of responsible exegesis ‘must consist in all circumstances in the freely performed act of subordinating all human concepts, ideas and convictions to the witness of revelation supplied to us in Scripture’ (I.2 715). Coming to us as it does in the form of human words, God’s Word in scripture is enmeshed in conventional forms of human (mis)understanding, in which the preconceptions of biblical writers and interpreters enable and frustrate communication. Notably, Barth treats the two sets of preconceptions differently. The fact that the biblical writers express not only God’s thoughts but also their own means that, as genuine human testimony, it can be interpreted by human hearers and readers (I.2 716). Since interpreters come to this testimony with their own preconceptions, misunderstanding is always near at hand, and they must take care to subordinate their preconceptions to the Word of God (I.2 716-7). Thus, on the one hand, Barth sees the biblical writers’ preconceptions as enabling understanding, but he does not suggest that the presence of preconceptions in the biblical witness calls for any modification of the interpretive task. On the other hand, he sees interpreters’ preconceptions as leading to misunderstanding, and attaches such importance to this that response to it determines the basic principle of the interpretive task as subordination to the Word of God—interpreters are to criticise their own (and each other’s) preconceptions from
the standpoint of the Word. But how is it that only the interpreters’, and not the writers’,
preconceptions are to be criticised? If in the Bible we are dealing with genuine human witness
then interpreters have a responsibility to criticise the witness in the light of its object, rather than
assuming it to be thoroughly trustworthy in all respects. Indeed, not to criticise the witness in
this way is to fail to recognise its real humanity, and to acquiesce to a docetic view of scripture.

This is what Barth appears to do, despite his insistence on the real humanity of the biblical writers,
when he conflates Scripture with the Word of God as the object which calls forth the interpreter’s
freely offered subordination. After the initial statement, quoted above, which identifies this object
as ‘the witness of revelation…in Scripture’, he justifies the call for subordination by identifying
the object as the Word of God (I.2 716). Then, the fact that God’s Word comes to us in the
concrete form of the human word of prophets and apostles, means, firstly, that it is susceptible to
explanation by human interpreters (as already noted), and secondly, that we must subordinate
ourselves to the word of the prophets and apostles (I.2 717). Although Barth immediately
distinguishes between subordination to God and subordination to God’s witnesses for God’s sake,
this proves to be a distinction without a difference, so far as interpretation is concerned. The ensuing
discussion concerns our human frailty as interpreters, in view of which –

Scripture itself as a witness to revelation must have unconditional precedence of all the
evidence of our own being and becoming, our own thoughts and endeavours, hope and
suffering, of all the evidence of intellect and senses, of all axioms and theorems, which we
inherit and as such bear with us (I.2 719).

Believing, with Barth, in the real humanity of the biblical witnesses, we must do what Barth did
not: we must ask the witnesses themselves whether in their witness revelation in fact had
unconditional precedence over all the evidence of their own being and becoming, their own
thoughts and endeavours, etc, which they inherited and as such bore with them. If they could
answer, they might say that, while that was their intent in obedience to God, and while it may by
God’s grace have been partially realised, they would not presume to claim that it was fully
realised. Knowing that their own subordination was not fully realised, they might ask us to
direct our subordination to its proper object, and receive their witness in the spirit in which it
was given, namely, in subordination to the Word of God.

Although Barth did not suggest that the biblical witnesses be critically engaged in the sense just
described, his account of the basis of the principle of subordination leads to a hermeneutic in
which such criticism takes place in a hidden, and therefore unsatisfactory, form. The basis of
Barth’s principle of subordination is the content of the Bible and the object of its witness,
namely, Jesus Christ as the name of the God who deals graciously with sinful humanity.

To hear this [name] is to hear the Bible—both as a whole and in each one of its separate
parts. Not to hear this means *eo ipso* not to hear the Bible, neither as a whole, nor therefore
in its parts. The Bible says all sorts of things, certainly; but in all this multiplicity and
variety, it says in truth only one thing—just this: the name of Jesus Christ…The Bible
becomes clear when it is clear that it says this one thing… Interpretation stands in the
service of the clarity which the Bible as God’s Word makes for itself; and we can properly
interpret the Bible, in whole or part, only when we perceive and show that what it says is said from the point of view of that concealed and revealed name of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{129}

For Barth, Jesus Christ is the one content of the Bible and the measure of its clarity, and biblical interpretation is the service of hearing this name in the Bible as a whole and in each of its parts. Exegesis of any biblical text will be valid and clear just to the extent that it hears Christ in the text, and it will be invalid and confused to the extent that it does not hear Christ in the text. But if this were really carried through, the frailty of the writer’s human word would be either ignored (because we are listening for this name, and only for this name) or mistaken for God’s Word (because the Bible speaks only this name). Barth infers the principle of subordinating from the fact that the content of scripture is Jesus Christ as the name of the God who deals graciously with sinful humanity, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Yet to take this name as the overriding criterion for reading each and every biblical text is to be subordinate, not to the biblical witness, but to certain understandings of Jesus Christ and of the unity and clarity of scripture. What is needed here is Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic circle, in which interpretation of the parts is dialectically related to that of the whole, but Barth does not take that path. Rather, having identified Christ as the content of the Bible in whole and in part, thereby subordinating the Bible to certain understandings of Christ and scripture, he infers from this the principle of subordinating ‘our ideas thoughts and convictions to the testimony of Scripture itself’ (I.2 721).

This is not to criticise Barth for characterising biblical interpretation as subordination, or for identifying Christ as the content of scripture. Nor is it to imply that he gained his understanding of the content and unity of scripture through an inadequate hermeneutic. It is to say, rather, that in view of the common human frailty of the biblical witnesses and their interpreters, the basic orientation of biblical interpretation is not subordination ‘to the testimony of Scripture itself,’ but subordination to the Word of God attested in scripture. At the same time, in view of our frailty as interpreters, we can never assume a sufficient apprehension of the divine Word that we grant our understanding priority over the concrete reality of the text before us. It will always be a matter of accepting that God speaks to our frail and finite understanding through the frail and finite witness of the biblical authors, yet venturing our interpretation in obedience to the God who speaks.

6.4.5 Human Witness and Divine Word

Barth’s doctrine of the Word of God has provided conceptual tools for interrogating the ideology represented in the sixteenth-century presupposition that ‘the Bible is the Word of God.’ This statement turned out to be in tension with two facts—the sovereign freedom of God and the human vulnerability of biblical texts—to the extent that Barth was obliged to surround it with careful qualifications. But why retain it at all? Seeking reasons for Barth’s attachment to identity between revelation and scripture, I surveyed his use of this identity in CD I. I found that its constructive contribution was limited to discussions of the Bible’s unity, and that this contribution was in tension not only with Barth’s principle of the worldliness of God’s speech,\textsuperscript{129} I.2 720. This passage contrasts starkly with the one quoted on p. 245 above, to the effect that there is no ‘single rule’ by means of which the Bible can be read as a organic whole and its contradictions evaded.
but also with the distinction between human witness and divine Word maintained in his discussion of the Bible’s fallibility.

In short, Barth shows well enough that the idea of identity between revelation and scripture strains against logic and language. Moreover, it is in tension with important principles in his doctrine of the Word of God, and is inconsistent with some closely related theological argument. For these reasons I see it as more of a hindrance than a help to faithful understanding. But if I discard ‘the Bible is the Word of God’, can I still address the historicity of scripture—and especially the relation between ideology and Word of God in the Bible—while still accepting scripture as witness to revelation, affirming with the church that God speaks through scripture, and distinguishing appropriately between witness and revelation?

Relevant conceptual tools for this emerged from reconsideration of Barth’s discussion of scripture’s unity and his comments on the human frailty of its witness. The unity of scripture is, as Barth says, the unity of God in revelation, and arises necessarily from the historical origin of Christianity in the conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is the decisive revelation of the God of Israel. This faith is reflected in the New Testament documents and is the faith in which the church reads the Old and New Testaments as a biblical canon bearing witness to Christ. But alongside this unity that reflects the unity of revelation, we must acknowledge the diversity that reflects the human variety of the witnesses: their individual freedom, their socio-historical particularity, and their moral frailty. Because of this diversity, which attended every stage of the Bible’s history, what may be called the ‘necessary unity’ of Christian scripture may not extend beyond the unity of God in revelation just described. Any fuller or more detailed conceptions of biblical unity arise from a Schleiermacherian hermeneutic—an ongoing dialectic between textual exegesis and discernment of the overall witness of the canon (insofar as we think there is such a thing). In this hermeneutic we ascribe primacy to the Word attested in scripture, and acknowledge that we inevitably conduct our exegesis in and through our overall ideas of what the Bible is ‘about’.

We have noted two contexts in which Barth ruled out the holding of preferences for parts of scripture. In the discussion of scripture’s unity, this was related to a supposed uniformity of witness in which scripture’s witness to Christ is the same in all of its parts. In the discussion of scripture’s fallibility, the proscription was based on a supposed uniformity of fallibility among the biblical witnesses, a fallibility which could be overcome in faith by reading scripture as bearing witness to Christ. Barth’s uniformity of witness arose because he did not distinguish appropriately between the diversity of witness and the unity of revelation. In contrast, the common human vulnerability of the biblical witnesses led him to an interpretative impasse reminiscent of Delwin Brown’s predicament amid the formless diversity of canon. All these uniformities—of witness, fallibility and diversity—served to justify a lack of theological engagement with aspects of the biblical witness: uniformity of witness obscures real diversity; uniformity of fallibility obviates the need for critical engagement with that fallibility; and featureless diversity occludes perception of intrinsic structure.

130 See subsections 3.3.4 and 3.3.5 (pp. 79-85) above.
In two of these cases—the common fallibility of the witnesses (Barth) and the allegedly formless diversity of the canon (Brown)—an aspect of scripture’s irreducible humanity is seen as an obstacle to be overcome, and the possibility of an intrinsic structure that could guide interpretation is disregarded, obliging the faithful reader to look beyond the text for guiding principles. Brown’s external source is the ‘common discourse’ of the academy, while Barth’s is a concept of Christ as the content, and therefore the unity and clarity, of scripture.131 As explained earlier, to the extent that Brown’s solution to the perceived problem cedes authority to the secular academy rather than working within the Lordship of Christ, it is not an option for Christian theology. Barth’s solution, though explicitly oriented towards Christian faith, does not fully deploy the resources his theology offers. I offer the following observations as a development and corrective.

Firstly, if we respect the worldliness of God’s speech we will see scripture’s human vulnerability not as an offence to be overcome in faith, but as a grace to be embraced in faith. We will attend to its vulnerability, as much as to its majesty, in hope of hearing the Word of God. Secondly, that all the biblical witnesses are human and therefore vulnerable does not invalidate interpretive judgement of their texts, nor does it eliminate, or even reduce, the need for such judgement. After all, what distinguishes biblical authors from other authors, and their texts from other texts, is not their fallibility but rather the object they attest, in view of which the question of how interpretive judgement is to be guided becomes important.132 Thirdly, that the biblical authors are all human and therefore fallible does not mean that their actual errors are the same in nature and degree. Concretely, we are faced, not with a uniform ‘capacity for error,’ but with the varied testimonies actually offered by particular individuals and communities, with their particular perspectives and insights and distortions. Attending to such testimony requires engagement through an inevitably complex historically-informed process of discernment. Fourthly, scripture itself, especially when viewed in the light of its own history, does in fact provide a rule that points to a synthesis of its diversity, namely, the unity of God in revelation through the history of Israel culminating decisively in Jesus of Nazareth. Although, in view of scripture’s humanity, such a synthesis will include internal tensions and contradictions, and although, in view of our own humanity, it will be provisional, incomplete and contested, yet its reality follows from the historical origins of the church. Fifthly, as human witnesses to divine revelation, what the biblical authors require of us is not subordination to their own word, but subordination to the revelation they serve and attest.133 That is, the biblical witnesses call us to hold their own witness accountable to the Word of God, even as, by their witness, they call us to obedience to that same Word.

131 As noted earlier, Barth is paradoxical on this point. While scripture bears a single witness to Jesus as Messiah (I.2 481-5), and the rule of subordination to scripture derives from Jesus Christ as its content, unity and clarity (I.2 720), yet Barth he sees no way of making an organic whole out of scripture’s disparities and contradictions (I.2 509).

132 Barth’s rhetorical question ‘From what standpoint can we make any such pronouncement [that this one or that one has “erred”]?’ (I.2 510) expects the answer that there is no such standpoint. My contention is that there is such a standpoint, namely, the standpoint of the Word of God to which the biblical authors bear witness.

133 In identifying witness with revelation as the object to which the exegete must be subordinate, Barth transgresses the point of his argument in §19.1, that exegesis must respect the intent of the witness. The biblical witnesses claim authority not for themselves but for God. Their own authority is derivative, and conditioned by the faithfulness of their service.
6.5 RESISTING THE TEXT FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL

Although I have discarded ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ and criticised Barth’s (lack of) engagement with scripture’s humanity, the basis on which I have done so is very much a Barthian one. That is, I have not so much criticised what I take to be the basic principles of Barth’s theology of scripture in CD I, as attempted by means of those principles to develop a more robust theology that can address the relation between ideology and Word of God not only in doctrine but in the Bible itself. The extent to which this remains a Barthian perspective is indicated by its substantial agreement with Barth’s later Evangelical Theology: An Introduction, especially the first four lectures presented therein. For example, the third lecture concludes thus:

The question about the Word and this question alone fulfills and does justice to the intention of the biblical authors and their writings. ...“What stands there,” in the pages of the Bible, is the witness to the Word of God, the Word of God in this testimony of the Bible. Just how far it stands there, however, is a fact that demands unceasing discovery, interpretation, and recognition. It demands untiring effort—effort, moreover, which is not unaccompanied by blood and tears. The biblical witnesses and the Holy Scriptures confront theology as the object of this effort.135

As demonstrated above, such a view of witness and Word derives from the core Christological affirmation that Jesus is Lord, and therefore the decisive Word of the one God, the God of Israel. This belief, identified as the historic foundation and ongoing lifeblood of the church, provided a relatively minimal, yet critically powerful, standpoint from which I interrogated not only a traditional doctrinal affirmation such as ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ but also various aspects of Barth’s doctrine of scripture. In this way the argument not only asserted but also illustrated Christ’s Lordship over theology, and the primacy of theology over ideology. Granted, I did not demonstrate that ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ functioned as ideology, in Barth’s theology or elsewhere, in the sense of serving vested interests, but its lack of warrant at the Reformation and in Barth, and its clear potential to serve the projection of power, justified treating it as if it were ideology. While identification of an idea or a complex of beliefs as actual or potential ideology may mark it for critical attention, and ideological analysis may bring to light its sources and its effects, none of this engages the question of truth, the substance of the idea itself. Confession of Christ as Lord implies that this question, however valuably informed by ideological awareness, can be answered only with reference to Christ, and hence the fundamental critique is not ideological but theological.

In essence, then, consideration of the historicity of doctrine and scripture points to a theological hermeneutic which acknowledges Christ as Lord and Word of God, and therefore asks how his

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134 Barth 1965, first published 1963. In this work Barth never identifies the Word of God with the Bible, or even assimilates the two, and the earlier stress on the unity and clarity of scripture gives way to some emphasis on its polyphony and lack of perspicuity (see pp. 33-5). Of course, it would have been helpful had Barth specifically commented on his earlier doctrine of scripture, to show how the change in perspective evident in this work and in his 1956 essay ‘The Humanity of God’ (Barth 1960) would have affected the details in CD I.

135 Barth 1965, 36, original italics. Reflecting the content of the lecture (and book) as a whole, ‘object’ in the last sentence should be read in the sense of ‘concrete task’ rather than ‘ultimate goal’.
Lordship is exercised in and through scripture, in and through doctrine, and indeed in and through anything else. There is no reason to regard scripture as being exempt from the vulnerability common to all human testimony, but the church, in its historical origins and in its ongoing testimony to hearing God’s address in scripture, calls us to join with it in acknowledging scripture’s priority as witness to Christ. As human witness to divine revelation, scripture demands to be read according to two things: its intent to bear that witness, and its vulnerability as human testimony that is itself accountable to the Word it attests.

Holding scripture accountable to the Word implies a theological hermeneutic that will be prepared to resist particular texts for the sake of some conception of the divine Word, always bearing in mind the dialectics between text and canon, and between exegesis and the history of interpretation, through which such conceptions are formed. The issue with which I close the chapter concerns the characterisation of this intra-scriptural tension: given that the intrinsic logic of Christian faith calls us to hold Christian scripture accountable to the Word, or to Christ, or to the gospel (the terms are interchangeable for this purpose), how are the opposing forces within scripture best described in general terms, and what forms of resistance are most appropriate? In particular, is it sufficient to describe the opponent as ideology, and to offer resistance through theological critique like that used above?

One approach to these questions is that of Francis Watson, who in his Text, Church and World suggested that the biblical text must sometimes be resisted for the sake of the gospel. I will briefly outline Watson’s overall proposal before engaging two aspects of it that are germane to the concerns of the previous section, namely, his preference for grounding exegesis in the ‘final form’ of the biblical text, and his suggestion that resistive reading involves distinguishing between liberating gospel and oppressive law in biblical texts. In response I offer my own proposal for a hermeneutic that reads the biblical witness in subordination to the divine Word.

6.5.1 Watson’s Text, Church and World in Outline

In his introduction, Watson summarises the discussion of his title as follows:

…the biblical story itself refuses to permit its own enclosure and confinement within the walls of the church, but requires the community of faith to look outwards into the conflict-ridden sociopolitical sphere in which it is of course already located and implicated. It is crucially important to emphasise not only the hermeneutical significance of the Christian community as the primary location of the biblical texts, but also the world as the primary location of the Christian community.

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136 Watson 1994, hereafter abbreviated as TCW. Later, in his contribution to The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth (2000, 67-8), Watson briefly alluded to the possibility of identifying and resisting oppression in biblical texts, though without relating it explicitly to Barthian principles. A literature search suggested, and correspondence with Professor Watson confirmed, that he had not otherwise published on this theme. His Text and Truth (1997) took up various themes set out in TCW, but, apart from general discussion of the relation of (especially Old Testament) texts to the canonical centre (see pp. 119-24), resistive reading was not among them.
Text, church and world are thus related to one another as three concentric circles. The text, the innermost circle, is located within the church, and the church is located within the world, the outermost circle (TCW 11).

These comments hint at Watson’s rejection of Lindbeck’s notion of intratextual reading in an enclosed biblical world, and indicate (especially in the concentric circles image) some continuity with Barth’s approach. TCW is essentially an extended essay, with extended exegetical examples, on how the church in the world of the late twentieth century may best read the biblical texts for the sake of that world. The first part (chapters 1 to 4) presents a strong plea for an ecclesial reading of the ‘final form’ of the text and the rescue of the biblical text from its Babylonish captivity to historical criticism. Part 2 (chapters 5 to 8) follows with a theological-exegetical engagement with postmodern literary theory and its theological fellow-travellers, focusing on the motifs of particularity, (intra)textuality and the construction of truth. The third part (chapters 9 to 12) engages with feminist critiques of the Bible by attempting to identify and participate in an ideological struggle within the biblical text itself, taking the side of the ‘liberating gospel’ against the ‘oppressive law’ (in this case, patriarchy) with which it is textually entangled. Part 4 (chapters 13 to 16) offers theological reflection on and justification for the canonical approach taken in part 1 and the exegetical strategies employed in parts 2 and 3.

I turn now to the two matters mentioned above: Watson’s preference for the final form of the text as the subject for exegesis, and his proposal for a theological hermeneutic that distinguishes between law and gospel in biblical texts.137

6.5.2 Textual Integrity and the ‘Final Form’

Watson offers three reasons for preferring the ‘final form’ of the text. These are, firstly, that the influence of perspectives derived from literary studies leads to renewed appreciation of the biblical texts as literary works of art possessed of an integrity that is violated by historical-critical reconstructions that distract attention from the texts; and secondly, that ‘it is only in their final, canonical form that the biblical texts have functioned as communally authoritative within synagogue and church’. But the ‘third and most compelling reason for working with the final form [is] that this is the form of the text most suitable for theological use.’ This suitability arises from (i) ‘the fact that theology is an ecclesial discipline and must therefore take seriously the ecclesial form of the text’, and also from (ii) ‘the theological judgement that the subject-matter or content of the biblical texts is inseparable from their form’ (TCW 16-7).138

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137 These are the substance of two of the three theses Watson offers as a basis for theological reflection on biblical hermeneutics in his 13th chapter. The third thesis uncontroversially acknowledges that the church can draw on, and indeed cannot avoid drawing on, insights originating outside itself as it develops its understanding of holy scripture.

138 Thus Watson offers, after Lindbeck and Barth, a third rationale for taking the biblical text as a whole. Lindbeck treats the Bible as a unitary whole because, in anthropological perspective, religions are unitary cultural-linguistic systems and the Bible is the core text of the Christian cultural-linguistic system. Barth asserts the unity of the Bible on theological grounds—the Bible is a unity because it is (witness to) the one Word of God. Watson’s argument is ecclesial: we must exegete the biblical text in its canonical form because that is the form in which the church uses it, and theology is an ecclesial discipline.
The grounds Watson gives for the theological suitability of the final form of the text are closely related to his other reasons for preferring it. Ground (i) follows from the second reason (communal usage), combined with a view of theology as a practice of the reading community. Ground (ii) transposes the first reason into a theological key: historical-critical reconstructions violate not only the literary-artistic integrity of the biblical texts, but also the integrity of their theological witness. This, too, is closely related to the role of the biblical texts in communities which acknowledge their authority and seek conformity to their witness. In sum, Watson’s reasons for preferring the canonical form of the text are variations on a single theme: theology is an ecclesial practice that serves the church’s reception of the Bible as holy scripture.

The earlier argument of this chapter suggests four lines of critique that question Watson’s preference for the ‘final form’ of the text. Firstly, he treats the community’s reading practice as self-authenticating—for him, this practice implies and therefore legitimates a certain view of the text. Yet the reading community ascribes authority, not to its own practice, but to God who speaks through scripture. Hence, knowing from scripture that its practices are subject to judgement according to the Word of God, the reading community holds itself accountable to that Word and will resist any move to treat its own practices as authoritative in their own right.

Secondly, Watson thinks that the church’s reading of a canon points towards a canonical mode of exegesis, and in particular a synchronic, rather than a diachronic, approach to the biblical texts. Unfortunately, he offers no argument that supports this assumption. The mere fact that the church reads a canon of authoritative texts tells us nothing about the validity or otherwise of historically-oriented exegesis. What does inform us in this regard is the texts’ own testimony to the historical reality of Jesus Christ as the decisive revelation (and in that sense the ‘final form’) of the Word of God, to the humanity of their authors, and to the finitude and frailty of the ongoing community that takes that witness to the world. That is, the canon read by the church points to the thorough historicity of God’s speech to humankind, and the church reading this canon will therefore welcome critical enquiry that helps it to clarify and correct its witness to God’s Word. In that the church reads a canon, it will naturally take account of the whole canon as it has it, and will therefore tend to read synchronically. At the same time, in view of the biblical witnesses’ historical orientation and the obvious relevance of their historical situations to interpretation of their witness, the church will not by any means deprecate historical enquiry.

Thirdly, Watson’s argument on this point is strongly influenced by a misdirected polemic against historical-critical exegesis. In various places (see especially the summary at TCW 58) Watson takes historical criticism to task for the irreducible multiplicity of solutions that masquerades as progress, and he welcomes the way in which

contemporary emphasis on the final form of the biblical text...breaks out of the vicious circles that revolve perpetually around the various so-called ‘problems’ acknowledged and licensed by the interpretative community (TCW 58-9).

It is unclear here (and elsewhere in Watson’s text) whether this is anything more than the passing of judgement on one hermeneutical paradigm from the vantage point of another. A practitioner of ‘literary’ readings may well find historical problems uninteresting, but bypassing or de-emphasising this class of problems is unlikely to reduce the diversity of exegetical results.
Literary theorists have reminded us that texts and their interpretations are inherently plurivocal; the ‘combination of acute observation with speculative hypothesis’ that Watson implicates in the production of diverse historical-critical ‘solutions’ (TCW 58) is characteristic of critical study as such, rather than a distinguishing feature of any particular critical approach; and critical study in general is fostered in an institutional ambience that encourages novelty in research. Thus, it is by no means clear that the diversity of literary readings will be any less ‘irreducible’ than that of historical-critical readings. If there are grounds for preferring one kind of plurality to the other, the sheer extent of the diversity is not among them.  

In theological reflection on this matter (TCW 223-31), Watson approaches a more robust critique in dialogue with Barth, noting that the real issue is whether ‘the interpreter is at odds with the orientation of the texts’ (226), and referring to Barth’s assertion of ‘the inseparability of form and content in the biblical texts’ (227). For Watson, such phrases indicate the inadequacy of a hermeneutic that ignores the self-representation of the biblical texts as witness to the Word of God; but they also point to the intrinsic relevance of historical and literary criticism to the service of that witness, inasmuch as the biblical authors report and interpret what God has done (i.e., historically) in the form of testimony that arose in particular historical circumstances and which, through particular historical processes, became texts, i.e., literary works that convey their witness by means of various literary devices. Unlike Watson, I do not see that a Barthian framework privileges literary over historical critique. Granted, because of its particular focus historical analysis may be less constructive than literary analysis in its contribution to the basic exegetical task of attending to the biblical witness for the sake of the Word of God; yet both approaches are valid ways of engaging the witnesses’ humanity, and, by virtue of the biblical witnesses’ accountability to the divine Word, historical criticism is no less intrinsic to exegesis than its literary cousin. The crucial question is not whether one critical approach is preferable to another, but whether, in and through its focus on one aspect of the witnesses’ humanity, each approach respects, and even takes upon itself, the orientation of the texts as witness to the divine Word.

Fourthly, Watson’s view of the status of unhistorical elements in biblical texts is unsatisfactory, in that he insists, against Lindbeck and Frei, that extratextual reference is essential to the nature of the biblical text, but turns to intratextuality to explain non-historical elements:

\[\text{139 This echoes my comments on Lindbeck’s assertion that a regulative understanding of doctrine avoids the ‘endless speculations’ characteristic of modern theology (p. 176 above). See also John Reumann’s comments on the diverse results of both historical and literary approaches (Reumann 1991, 283-8).}\]

\[\text{140 Watson’s attack on Lindbeck’s intratextuality is quite trenchant: The God who may be said, intrasystematically, to have created the world becomes, without remainder, the product of human linguistic practices. It is intrasystematically false but extrasystematically true that the creator conforms to the intrasystematic definition of an idol. This means that a purely intrasystematic reading of the creation story, which carefully denies that ‘propositional’ claims are within its remit and claims to be speaking wholly from within the text, is impossible without doing violence to that text’ (TCW 152).}\]
The believer is able to agree with the unbeliever about the presence of non-historical elements in the narrative, although they disagree sharply about the significance of this fact. For the unbeliever, these elements disclose the untruthfulness of the whole. For the believer, they are irreducible, indispensable ways of speaking about the divine-human history, and since interpretation is oriented towards the text in its canonical form, it is often unnecessary to decide whether and how far events occurred as narrated (TCW 230-1).

The difference between Lindbeck and Watson on this point appears to be that, while Lindbeck is consistently intratextual and referentially vague, Watson is selectively intratextual, preserving extratextual reference as far as possible, but resorting to intratextuality for non-historical features which occur ‘often’ in the texts. The historical reference of the text’s historical features is important to him, but that of its non-historical features is not. This selectivity is unconvincing, and I believe the principles developed earlier in this chapter point towards a more robust solution. The church’s reading practice cannot be treated as self-authenticating but must, like all else, be held accountable to the Word of God attested in scripture. As human witness, scripture is vulnerable to criticism, and therefore its unhistorical elements are in principle corrigible and not ‘irreducible’ or ‘indispensable’. However, in view of scripture’s witness to human finitude and frailty, and the scarcity of alternative historical sources for the events it reports, we should observe a proper reticence in identifying unhistorical elements and in suggesting corrections. The practical difference between my suggestion and Watson’s may be slight in terms of exegetical results (we will both read the text for its witness to the Word despite what we think is its wayward approach to historical fact) but I prefer to remain troubled by unhistorical elements because the biblical witnesses themselves attest that historicity is crucial to their witness.

Watson’s position on the historicity of biblical witness is made more difficult by his advocacy for ideological critique. If in the Bible we find liberating gospel entangled in oppressive law, requiring us to distinguish them in order to bear our own contemporary witness to the gospel (TCW 155), how is it that the presence of unhistorical elements in the biblical text does not call for historical discernment? Why are unhistorical elements ‘irreducible, indispensable ways of speaking about the divine-human history’ while oppressive law must be resisted so that it does not distort our proclamation of the gospel? There is no basis for this distinction. Unhistorical reporting and ideological bias are both aspects of the human vulnerability of a biblical witness that calls its interpreters to hold it, and themselves, accountable to the Word of God. Interpreters who are thus accountable, and to that extent adopt the confessional and therefore critical stance I advocate, will not only respect and follow the orientation of the witness, and criticise it on the basis of that orientation, but will venture upon such following and criticism in an attitude of humility, mindful of their own frailty and their need of the grace in which they stand.

6.5.3 Distinguishing ‘Liberating Gospel’ from ‘Oppressive Law’

Watson develops his proposal for an ideological critique of scripture in conversation with feminist critiques of biblical patriarchy, a point at which Lindbeck’s notion of a unitary ‘biblical

141 Compare this with the situation in New Testament textual criticism, where alternative sources are plentiful (though reticence in offering emendations is still appropriate).
world' has been challenged.\textsuperscript{142} Having surveyed feminist biblical hermeneutics at some length (chapters 9 and 10), and having acknowledged that ‘what is at issue is not just one or two stories…but the representation of women across a very wide range of biblical material’ (\textit{TCW} 188), Watson remains dissatisfied with feminist scholars’ constructive proposals. What then can be done to save the Bible as ‘holy scripture’? Watson’s strategy is to search the biblical texts for elements that resist patriarchal oppression:

> If these resistant elements are construed merely as scattered fragments, then one is acknowledging that, in their native context, their power of resistance is low; they are usable in themselves, but they cannot restore the concept of the Old Testament as holy scripture. If, on the other hand, they belong to the fundamental structure of Old Testament narrative, then an \textit{internally} grounded critique becomes a possibility. Criticism would then be not an extraneous imposition but an interpretation of the text’s own capacity for \textit{self}-criticism.\textsuperscript{143}

That is, rather than maintaining that the Bible is holy scripture and the Word of God and therefore a unity (as Barth does), Watson seeks ideological plurality in the Bible in order to save it as holy scripture. But an unstructured plurality, from which we might choose the ideologically acceptable elements according to extra-biblical criteria, will not be sufficient. Watson seeks an ideological plurality that is structured \textit{by the biblical text itself} to the extent of resisting the

\textsuperscript{142} For examples, see Graeme Garrett (1997), who argues that Lindbeck’s three regulative principles (alluded to above on p. 162 n.26, see \textit{ND} 94) need to be supplemented by a fourth rule concerning gender equity, because ‘any attempt to talk about God which hopes to be taken seriously today must confront the challenge of [feminist] theology’. Others question the biblical warrant for such suggestions, and are therefore more sceptical about the possibility of developing an intrinsically biblical response in which ‘there is no male and female’ (Gal 3:28). Sandra Schneiders (1989), asks whether the undeniably patriarchal Bible can continue to claim Christians’ allegiance. ‘On this question the jury is still out’ (p. 60). Her concluding comments bear quoting at length:

> It is not certain that the text can be saved; but it is certain that it cannot be saved as a simple container of revelation or literal transmitter of divine truth. Furthermore, feminist hermeneutics has made it clear that revelation cannot be equated with history in the sense of what actually happened, nor can the Bible be considered, without further ado, as a normative archetype for contemporary Christian life. In short, the questions that are being raised by liberation theology in general and feminist criticism in particular are not merely concerned with how the oppressed can relate to a patriarchal text but, more fundamentally, how the Christian community can appropriate its sacred literature in a postmodern world. Unless I held out some hope that we would find an answer to this question, I would long ago have abandoned the field of biblical scholarship (pp. 70-1).

\textsuperscript{143} \textit{TCW} 190, original italics. The focus on Old Testament texts follows on from Watson’s rejection of approaches that assert the superiority of the New Testament over the Old Testament and attribute the famously troublesome New Testament passages to residual Jewish attitudes within the early church. Watson finds such ‘solutions’ unacceptably Marcionite and anti-Semitic (189). He is not content to reinterpret the Old Testament by means of the New, but wants to show how the Old Testament itself enables the pervasive patriarchy of its texts to be resisted.
imposition of other structures. Without such an immanent textually-structured plurality, Watson doubts that the feminist challenge can be met and the Old Testament saved as holy scripture. He explains his approach to ideological critique as follows:

In the Christian canon, the paradigmatic expression of this biblical self-criticism is the Pauline law/gospel antithesis, which asserts that ‘gospel’ (that which points towards liberation) and ‘law’ (that which oppresses) are both to be found in holy scripture, but that the former is somehow more fundamental than the latter. Thus in Gal. 3 the law which brings a curse is enclosed within the prior promise of blessing and the fulfilment of that promise in Christ, to indicate that ‘law’, despite its formidable presence in holy scripture, does not have either the first or the last word.144

Whether or not the Old Testament actually offers an immanent ideological critique of its own pervasive patriarchy must be established exegetically, and to this end Watson offers substantial exegetical argument in chapter 11 before exploring the somewhat different problems presented by patriarchy in the New Testament in chapter 12. While I find little to criticise in Watson’s exegesis, his use of ‘the Pauline law/gospel antithesis’ as a paradigm for ideological critique raises a substantial theological problem and distorts an important theme in biblical theology.

Paul’s theology of νόμος/Torah is not straightforward, and the exegesis of Galatians and Romans, not to mention other letters in which law is less prominent, must take into account their quite different rhetorical and pastoral strategies. Watson’s use of ‘law’ and ‘gospel’ is also somewhat fluid. In some passages he places the terms in quotes, apparently using them as ciphers for ‘that which oppresses’ and ‘that which liberates’. The suggestion appears to be, not that Paul’s approach to law and gospel should be applied in the present as an ideologically conscious reading strategy, but that the relation between oppression and liberation in biblical texts may be analogous to the relation between law and gospel in Paul.145 In other places

144 TCW 190-1. Watson continues, ‘Whatever the difficulties posed by Pauline elaborations of this theme, the framework seems worth preserving over against both the biblicism which will always seek to mute any protest that is raised against the texts, and the hardening of that protest into a comprehensive rejection which permits the salvaging only of a few fragments.’ But dissatisfaction with such biblicism on the one hand and wholesale rejection on the other indicates only that some kind of resistive reading strategy is needed. It does not point to any particular approach.

145 This impression (viz., that Watson is more concerned to describe the nature of the relation between liberation and oppression in the biblical text than to identify oppression with law and liberation with gospel) is strengthened by the fact that his first reference to oppression and liberation in biblical texts makes no mention of law and gospel at all (TCW 74). This reference occurs near the end of his ideological reading of the Joseph narratives. Here, Watson raises the question whether there is after all any point in identifying ‘the ideological deficiencies of a three-thousand year old narrative’, but he goes on to point out that—
Watson speaks straightforwardly (without quotes) of ‘liberating gospel’ and ‘oppressive law’. For example, introducing Part 3, ‘Holy Scripture and Feminist Critique’, he indicates the path he will take, distancing his use of the term ‘holy scripture’ from ‘neo-conservative’ approaches:

The concept of holy scripture does not inevitably lead to a neo-conservative hermeneutic which denies the legitimacy of the exposure and critique of inner-biblical ideological constructions. It calls instead for an attempt, never completed and always provisional, to distinguish the biblical witness to the liberating gospel from its entanglement in the oppressive law, resisting the latter not for the sake of the satisfactions of negation but as a contribution to the appropriate contemporary expression of the gospel.146

What exactly does Watson mean by ‘law’ in the phrase ‘oppressive law’? The question becomes acute when we remember that, for all Paul’s relativisation of law (as both Torah and as legal code) with respect to Christ, the biblical law (in whatever sense) remained God’s law. Does Watson’s proposal implicitly cast God as oppressor? Or does he actually mean by ‘law’ something quite different to what Paul meant? The answer to both questions appears to be ‘Yes’:

[Through feminist critique] there has gradually come to light a new dimension of the oppressive law whose presence within these texts and the interpretative traditions they have generated is such a crucially important hermeneutical factor. The oppressive law is, in one of its aspects, the law of patriarchy, the law of the Father, which defines the human place in God’s world in terms which privilege men and marginalize women. If ‘holy scripture’ does not also offer the theological basis for resisting the law of the Father, then this concept should be rejected as an irredeemable ideological construct…(155-6).

The text in question is…communally acknowledged as canonical, and it is at least arguable that the entire history of biblical interpretation should be read as a history in which oppressive and liberating uses of the texts are ambiguously intertwined. If that is the case, and if this situation persists into the present, then an analysis of the texts in the light of this broader context is a theological imperative…. [T]he rhetoric of the canonical text of a dominant religious community should not be abstracted from the contemporary context in which it still operates, but should be brought to light in such a way as also to disclose, indirectly, certain of the realities of this context….Thus, although criticism has necessarily been directed against the telling of the story…, the ultimate intention is not to criticize the text but to use it as an indirect means of exposing the workings of the rhetoric of oppression. In this sense, a ‘positive’ role is assigned to the text (TCW 74).

What Watson is still seeking at this point is a theological basis on which to conduct his ideological critique. Later, he finds this basis in the relation between law and gospel in Paul (especially Galatians).

146 TCW 155. A similar identification is evident in a later summary where Watson describes his approach as ‘an application of the law/gospel antithesis to Old Testament androcentrism’ (221).
As in much of Watson’s work, there is an element of rhetorical self-consciousness here (should ‘Father’ appear in quotes? 147). Nevertheless, ‘the law of patriarchy’ appears in apposition to ‘the law of the Father’, and we are offered the prospect that, in order to be recoverable as ‘holy scripture’, the Bible must provide the means by which the Father’s law, and hence by implication the Father himself, can be resisted. Now, I do not think that Watson intends to assert the Bible as holy scripture over against God the Father, and he does not in fact do so in his exegesis. Yet, if ‘law’ stands for ‘that which oppresses’ then resistance of that which oppresses implies resistance of the law, and hence resistance of lawgiver. Implication of God in textual oppression indicates a significant theological problem in Watson’s use of the term ‘law’. 148

On more exegetical matters, Watson’s description of the relation between law and gospel as ‘antithesis’ is problematic, for in Gal 3:21 Paul anticipates that such a conclusion might be drawn from his argument, and pre-empts it with an emphatic repudiation. For Paul, the idea that the law is opposed to God’s promises is theologically untenable. It seems, then, that whatever the relation between liberation and oppression in biblical texts may be, it is not ‘the Pauline law/gospel antithesis’. 149

In broader perspective, Watson’s view of the relation between liberation and oppression ignores important dynamics of biblical theology. For example, he rightly takes Paul’s references to the enslaving powers in Gal 3:28 and 4:1-8 as aligning the significance of Christ with the paradigmatic saving event of the exodus. That is, Christ liberates from slavery to the στοιχεῖα, of which law is one. Well and good. But Watson concludes that ‘the exodus is therefore the prototype of the divine act that liberates from the oppressive law and that fulfils the promise given in the beginning’ (199). However, Torah (especially in Exodus and Deuteronomy) makes...

147 That ‘Father’ should be in quotes is suggested by Watson’s later exegesis of the story of the prodigal son. It transpires that the ‘Father’ who is the author of the law of patriarchy is emphatically not the Father of Jesus the Son. The father revealed by Jesus the son in this story is not a patriarch but ‘a father who hardly even understands patriarchy’ (212). But this does not remove the problem with which I am concerned. For who then is the ‘Father’ who authored the ‘oppressive law’? Perhaps the author was not the Father at all. At several points Watson refers to ‘the oppressive, non-divine law’ (195), the ‘non-divine law of patriarchy’ (195, 199), ‘the non-divine powers that divide Jew from Greek, slave from free, male from female’, slavery to which ‘entails slavery to their law of patriarchy’ (195, referring to Gal 3:28; 4:1-8). Watson has already argued for the secondary nature of patriarchy as neither primal nor ultimate but as consequent on and symptomatic of the rift between God and humankind narrated in Gen 3. But this is too easy. An exegetical argument for the secondary nature of patriarchy may be granted, but the problem of divine origin remains: the text of Gen 3 represents the consequence as a consequence decreed by God. Watson’s assertion of the non-divinity of the ‘law of patriarchy’ derives analogically from Paul’s description of the law as ‘administered through angels’ (δια τῶν ἀγγέλων, Gal 3:19) and therefore inferior to the promise which was given directly by God. Even if one does not make allowances for the extremity of Paul’s rhetoric here, it is claiming too much to say, as Watson does, that Paul sees the law as ‘deriving from non-divine powers’ (194, italics added). Rather, ‘even in Galatians the law is ultimately God’s law (if only by implication)’ (Bruce 1982, 175, original italics). If Watson wants to categorise law as ‘non-divine,’ Paul cannot help him.

148 The problem can be magnified christologically, in that, although he does not emphasise the theological derivation of his notions of liberation and oppression, Watson is taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to be a gospel of liberation, and this gospel might then be taken as being antithetical to ‘the law of the Father’. Is Watson asserting Christ over against God the Father? No, but his characterisations of ‘law’ and ‘gospel’ point in this direction.

149 That the ‘law/gospel antithesis’ is in fact not Paul’s but Luther’s will be addressed shortly.
it clear that the exodus established Yahweh’s credentials as ‘a righteous God and a saviour’ and thus his claim to Israel as his people. That is, liberation in the Old Testament is not only liberation from slavery, but liberation for service to Yahweh, and any ‘liberation’ that is not directed towards the service of Yahweh is simply not liberation in the Old Testament sense. The legal code in Torah sets out the concrete form and content of that service. That is, a strong strand of Old Testament tradition sees law, even as legal code, standing firmly on the side of liberation over against the oppression constituted by the service of lords other than Yahweh. For Paul, the law is ‘holy and just and good’ but nevertheless exists in the realm of the στοιχεία by virtue of its nature as letter, that is, its potential to function as mere code independent of, and even over against, the grace of God, and especially the grace of God as now definitively revealed in Jesus Christ. For the form and content of the service of God is now given not in a code but in a person, the person of Jesus Christ. The form of our service is now identified with, and inseparable from, the person of the redeemer.

I do not claim that this sketch of the relation between law, liberation and Christ is wholly adequate in contrast to Watson’s insufficiently nuanced account, but it indicates something of the biblical dynamic of liberation, and the role of law within it, that is apparent in the better-known texts, and thereby points to what is lacking in Watson’s proposal: the terms ‘oppression’ and ‘liberation’ need to be critically engaged and given content based on biblical theology; and the pairing of ‘law’ with ‘oppression’ and ‘gospel’ with ‘liberation’ must be brought into dialogue with theological exegesis of the role of law in the Bible, and especially in Paul. My brief exegetical observations indicate a likely result of such investigations: that the use of ‘law’ as a foil for ‘gospel’ is an inappropriate, and even misleading, way of characterising ideological deficiencies in biblical texts.

These criticisms should not detract from the considerable extent to which Watson succeeds in taking textual oppression seriously while seeking out and displaying the text’s ability to transcend itself by pointing to a quite different end, an end that fulfils what was promised in the beginning and is ‘already making its presence felt, in fragmentary and anticipatory form, in those inner-historical events and actions to which the future belongs’ (199). My concern, rather, is with the theological framework and terminology in which he clothes his proposal. In the following subsections I suggest that ‘gospel and tradition’ is preferable to ‘gospel and law’ for this purpose because it better characterises the relation between human word and divine Word in scripture, including especially the accountability of the human word to the divine Word it attests.

6.5.4 Towards a Theological Critique of Scripture

Watson’s theological reflections on the theme of law and gospel in biblical texts appear in the thirteenth chapter of TCW, in the discussion following his second hermeneutical thesis:

2. Since theological interpretation must distinguish the law from the gospel within the biblical text, the decision to work with the canonical form does not render the text immune from criticism.150

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150 TCW 231, italics removed (the entire statement is printed in italics). This second thesis also illustrates the way in
Watson’s discussion of this thesis pursues the issue of ‘whether a critique of aspects of the biblical text can be justified on inner-biblical, theological grounds’ by developing his earlier suggestion regarding the Pauline law/gospel antithesis with reference to Luther’s comments on this matter in his 1535 commentary on Galatians. He notes Luther’s transcription of Paul’s understanding of the law in Israel’s redemptive history culminating in Christ into a continual cycle or dialectic of fear and faith in the lives of Christian believers.\footnote{151} Recognising this transcription as a distortion of Paul, Watson nevertheless retains it, offering two reasons in support. Firstly, he takes it to be a truthful description of Christian existence —

The duality in Christian experience represented by the law/gospel distinction becomes hermeneutically significant when interpreted as a twofold relation to the biblical text: for the twofold relation to God as the harsh judge to be feared and as the merciful redeemer to be loved is textually mediated. It is holy scripture that both repels and attracts…. The conflict of law and gospel represents an irreducibly dual response to the text which occurs in reading and which may therefore underlie formal interpretation (232).

Secondly, it provides ‘theological justification’ for Watson’s hermeneutic:

Luther’s distinction between the true and the false Christ of holy scripture is of genuine hermeneutical significance, for it provides theological justification for the interpreter who wishes to resist the plain, literal meaning of scriptural texts where that meaning is oppressive and tyrannical, where a demand is addressed to will or intellect which cannot and perhaps should not be fulfilled….the theological hermeneutic outlined here by Luther enables us to recognize the oppressive text and to resist its literal meaning, not because the latter is a simple misunderstanding but because the authority of the gospel is greater than the authority of the text (234).

Unfortunately, although Watson is seeking an ‘inner-biblical, theological’ basis for resisting oppressive biblical texts, his proposal lacks coherence insofar as he has not provided ‘inner-biblical, theological’ reasons for adopting a law/gospel antithesis as his resistive hermeneutic. To begin with, the law/gospel antithesis is clearly a Lutheran reading of Paul, and Watson’s persistence with it despite his awareness of this fact immediately weakens his claim to a genuinely biblical resistive hermeneutic. His reasons serve only to beg the question. Recalling one of Lindbeck’s helpful insights, we are entitled to wonder whether the alleged existential warrant owes less to an ‘irreducibly dual response to the text’ than to the Western (and

\footnote{151} ‘What for Paul is an irreversible linear movement (the time of the law is superseded by the time of the gospel) has become for Luther a circular movement from law to gospel and (by implication) from gospel back to law’ (\textit{TCW} 232). In Watson’s n15 near this passage he cites G. Ebeling with approval: ‘When we turn from the Reformers’ doctrine of law and Gospel to Paul, the most striking difference is that the successive elements in a unique transition which can never again be reversed are turned by the Reformers’ schema into a peculiarly simultaneous conjunction, so to speak a permanently occurring transition…’ (\textit{TCW} 327 n15, citing Ebeling 1963, 260).
especially Lutheran) understanding of sin and grace that inevitably informs our responses but nevertheless stands in need of ongoing biblical critique. The ‘theological justification’ is utilitarian—Watson wants a resistive reading strategy, and here is one ready to hand—whereas a theological justification calls for theological engagement. Watson is aware that for Luther the law/gospel distinction was not a property of the text as such but of our relation to the text as that relation is formed, informed and deformed by the discourses we inhabit.

Hence, law and gospel are not fixed entities, inherent within the texts and therefore easily identifiable and subject to our control. It would be mistaken to regard Luther’s difficulty with certain of the sayings of Jesus as a timeless theological problematic with which we must struggle in essentially the same way as he did.

Quite so. Luther’s law/gospel antithesis arises from the meeting of an oppressive theology with the reading of holy scripture in an intense and spiritually sensitive young man living in a time of cultural, political and intellectual ferment. It is not a ‘timeless theological problematic.’ And yet, on this basis, Watson goes on to speak of the contemporary theological-exegetical task of distinguishing the law from the gospel in biblical texts. To the extent that he has not subjected to historical and theological critique the terms in which that task is set, he is, precisely, treating it as if it were a timeless theological problematic, for all that he wants our engagement in it to be ‘genuinely contemporary, originating in the role of the scriptural texts in the religious and theological discourse of our own time’.

Watson’s law/gospel proposal lacks both biblical warrant and logical coherence, yet his references to ‘resisting the text for the sake of the gospel’ resonate with themes developed earlier in this study. Recall the last clause of a passage cited on the previous page: ‘the authority of the gospel is greater than the authority of the text’; or Watson’s final reflections on the hermeneutics of resistive reading:

The criterion by which the ‘plain meaning’ of certain texts must be resisted and rejected is the gospel itself; but since the gospel is not accessible to us in transparent, uninterpreted form, the process of discrimination will not be a mechanical one but a constant struggle for discernment, taking place above all in dialogue with others.

The text is to be criticised by means of the gospel discerned in the text, because the authority of the textually-mediated gospel is greater than the authority of the text. This, without any mention of ‘law’, is much closer to a viable statement, though Watson’s partiality to Luther’s law/gospel antithesis suggests that ‘gospel’ here remains Luther’s gospel-as-opposed-to-law. Still, if the

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152 Concerning Luther’s agonised dilemmas over the false Christ who torments and accuses, Watson finds that Luther is aware that the temptation to see Christ in this way ‘lies not in the texts which speak of Christ as lawgiver and judge considered in isolation, but in these texts insofar as they entered the discourse surrounding the young Luther and were internalized by him. These texts are law for Luther because of their role in a religious discourse which he now repudiates as oppressive and contrary to the gospel, and it is this contemporary situation that give[s] his resistance its critical hermeneutical significance’ (235).

153 Though it should now be read in the light of later scholarly criticism (to which Lindbeck contributed), Erik H. Erikson’s Young Man Luther (1958) indicates something of the historical and psychological specificity of the cross-currents that intersected in Luther.
content of ‘the gospel’ is taken to be ‘Jesus Christ,’ or ‘the Word of God’ as those terms were discussed in section 6.4 above, such statements agree well enough with a framework in which witness and Word are distinguished, and the former subordinated to the latter.

But what of that which must be resisted in the text? What is it, if not ‘law’? I suggest that we call it ‘unredeemed tradition’. Several of the writers we have heard in this ‘conversation’ take a positive view of tradition, asserting its value and seeking its rehabilitation in the face of Enlightenment prejudice. The name of Hans-Georg Gadamer is frequently heard in this connection. But such treatments of tradition rarely escape the Enlightenment’s preoccupation with knowledge, whereas, if we learn anything from Nietzsche and his heirs as commentators on human finitude and fallenness, it is that in tradition we also have to deal with the human will to power (for which the pursuit of knowledge is a common mask). Tradition is always tempted to justify itself, and claims of divine origin are one means of doing so, whereas tradition is always already implicated in fallen creatureliness, and is indeed, if only in part, the socio-historical trace of particular entanglements of knowledge and power. As such, tradition constantly threatens to nullify the grace of God, just as patriarchy threatens to nullify the gospel, as feminist critics have noted. Consequently, the mediation of truthful witness through tradition requires the constant but judicious and humble practice of suspicion by those who have ‘taken on’ the tradition. In view of the Christian tradition’s anthropology, such suspicion will begin reflexively with the interpreter, continue with the tradition and extend to scripture itself, seeking at each point to hold witness accountable to the divine Word that scripture attests.

A gospel/tradition tension avoids the theological problem of attributing oppression to God’s law and hence to God, which Watson sought to resolve by saying that the law was not God’s. Although speaking of ‘tradition’ rather than ‘law’ does not avoid the problem that some aspects (and some large sections) of the Old Testament legal code are in tension with the gospel, at least this is an intrinsic biblical problem, and does not require unbiblical statements (Watson’s ‘non-divine law’) or cast God as oppressor. Thus, identifying the antagonist as ‘tradition’ rather than ‘law’ avoids the problems of Watson’s proposal while still providing a rationale for resistance where the text is seen as opposed to the gospel. Moreover, one can revisit Watson’s exegetical examples and find that speaking of ‘gospel and tradition’ rather than ‘gospel and law’ makes more sense of the conclusions.

154 By ‘unredeemed’ I mean ‘still in bondage to powers opposed to God.’
155 I have in mind Tracy, Brown, and McGrath. Lindbeck speaks less of tradition than of cultural systems.
157 Recalling Delwin Brown’s usefully ambiguous employment of this expression (see n68 on p. 73 above).
158 For example, in the parable of the prodigal son (TCW chapter 12), Watson sees Jesus’ picture of the fatherhood of God undermining traditional patriarchy as the wisdom tradition, specifically the ‘wisdom’ of a dominant patriarchal status quo, is subjected to the withering critique of the father’s extravagant love. Watson’s point is, in part, that although the New Testament writings bear the marks of patriarchal tradition, their theological assertions nevertheless provide an incisive critique of this ideology, and this critique lies close to the inner-theological heart of the gospel.
6.5.5 Scripture, Tradition and Word

Describing scripture’s fallen creatureliness as ‘unredeemed tradition’ resonates with several aspects of this long enquiry. Firstly, it acknowledges that scripture came about in and through processes of human cultural production and is fully susceptible to analysis as a cultural artefact. In this respect scripture is like the ongoing tradition that reads it and tries to live by it; it is a collection of writings from diverse strands and periods within what is, with all its diversity and inner conflicts, ‘a’ tradition. The insights into tradition and canon that arose in conversation with Brown and McGrath are fully relevant here, perhaps emphasising Brown on tradition’s intrinsic diversity and conflict (though not its structure), and McGrath on tradition’s identity. Scripture may have the relative fixity of text; it may be received in the church with the authority of divine address; and it may therefore function as the basic authority of Christian tradition; but for all that it is no less a product of tradition than are the countless lives and events shaped by it through the community that reads it in expectation of hearing the Word of God.

Secondly, ‘unredeemed tradition’ in scripture arises in the context of, and despite the fact of, scripture’s fundamental orientation to redemption. Undeniably, Christian scripture and tradition have a particular orientation. They bear witness to the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord and that in him God was reconciling and renewing the world. This is an all-embracing claim: Jesus is the one true Lord to the glory of the one true God and there is nothing that lies beyond his rule. The fact that Jesus reveals a God who undertakes sacrificial service, faces humiliation for humanity’s sake, and calls those who follow him to a similar service and humility, means that his Lordship is not what humans usually call lordship, but this in no way reduces the universal scope and absolute nature of the claim. The universal Lordship of this Jesus who reveals this God is the gospel to which scripture, tradition and church are oriented. Theology, as an activity of the church, serves the church by continually reminding the church (and therewith itself) of this orientation, and by challenging the church’s (and therewith its own) beliefs and activities on the basis of this orientation. In view of this particular orientation to a universal claim, there can be no question of allowing Christ’s Lordship to be compromised by other claims or circumscribed by ‘autonomous’ discourses, such as those of science or social anthropology. Nor can there be any question of theology harbouring principles whose standing in Christ’s service is either unclear or resistant to interrogation, and here I have in mind supposedly ‘neutral’ frameworks aimed at fostering dialogue, ideologies of any kind (e.g., conservative, progressive, patriarchal), and well-meant statements of faith, such as ‘the Bible is the Word of God’. The presence of such principles, whether in theology, in tradition, or in scripture, does not bear witness to Christ, but rather attests the witnesses’ vulnerability and inevitably compromises the integrity of the witness they mean to offer. By interrogating theology, tradition and scripture from the standpoint of Christ’s Lordship, we serve not only Christ, but scripture’s fundamental orientation.

Scripture and tradition, in their witness to the divine Word, speak of God reaching out in love to finite and fallen humanity. In this witness, they participate in God’s outreach to humanity (so that God is reaching out through them). In this witness, because they exclude themselves neither from human finitude nor from the human waywardness that God comes to redeem, they remain accountable to the Word they attest. Thus, and this is the third point, vulnerability to critique
and accountability to the Word are intrinsic to this witness: scripture and tradition, precisely because of their orientation to redemption, attest that their own redemption is as yet incomplete. Hence, while the presence of unchallenged principles inevitably compromises the integrity of witness, such principles are inevitably present.

Christian scripture, then, is a collection of artefacts from the history of a tradition, a collection that calls the ongoing tradition to a fundamental orientation to redemption in Jesus Christ and, within and because of that orientation, acknowledges that its own redemption is not yet complete. Several consequences flow from this. Firstly, insight into the vulnerability of witness makes an important contribution to the truthfulness of witness. Such insight can be gained from the anthropology attested in scripture and tradition, and from any critical discourse that addresses the human condition. No insight can be dismissed out of hand if it genuinely engages the humanity of the witnesses, for in doing so it may aid interpretation of their witness. Yet all potential insights will be critically engaged from the standpoint of the divine Word, and will be accepted just to the extent that they enable a more truthful witness to that Word.

Secondly, vulnerability is as much of the essence of biblical witness as is accountability to the Word of God, and the two are closely entwined. Where vulnerability is denied, then, to the extent of the denial, accountability to the Word is avoided. For scripture and tradition alike, there can be no retreat from historical vulnerability—no infallible text, no unchanging grammar of the gospel, no static biblical world, no monolithic unanimity, and no self-constituting ecclesial reading practice. Text, doctrine, world-view, unity, reading—all are vulnerable, and therefore accountable to the Word; equally, all are accountable, and therefore vulnerable to critique. Moreover, witness is vulnerable in its fallenness as well as in its finitude: there is not only simple error, but also ideological distortion; the witness of redemption is not itself fully redeemed.

Thirdly, scripture calls its interpreters to share in both its orientation to redemption and its confession of vulnerability. It calls them to trust in the divine Word, to whom both witnesses and interpreters are accountable. It calls them to insight into the finitude and frailty in which human witnesses and interpreters share. Interpretation of the witness of scripture and tradition requires an attitude of compassionate humility: compassion in view of the solidarity of interpreter and interpreted in human vulnerability; humility in view of their solidarity in subordination to the Word. As for the witnesses, so, we may hope, for us who interpret: the treasure of the gospel in jars of clay.

A view of scripture and tradition in which orientation and vulnerability are basic properties coheres with, and indeed corresponds to, the confessional and therefore critical stance developed in the course of this enquiry. The orientation and confession acknowledge the priority of gracious divine action in outreach to humanity; the vulnerability and critical reflection acknowledge that human witness is finite and frail, and hence accountable to the divine Word. A subtext of my engagement with Barth was that we serve scripture best by speaking of both what God does and what scripture is, and that it is potentially (and often actually) confusing to equate what scripture is with what God does through it. For while ‘the Bible is the Word of God’ and ‘the Bible is holy scripture’ are true in a sense, so too, in another sense, are ‘the Bible is not the Word of God’ and ‘the Bible is unholy scripture’. If we want a simple and robust formula that reflects the orientation
and vulnerability discussed above, without assimilating divine action to creaturely reality, it is
difficult to improve on Barth’s suggestion: ‘the Bible is human witness to divine revelation’.

6.6 DOCTRINE, SCRIPTURE AND HISTORICITY

I began this chapter having already found that Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory did not
provide viable accounts of Christian particularity or the nature of doctrine. This was by no
means a wholly negative result, as the discussion to that point had highlighted particularity and
historicity as crucial issues to be addressed by any proposal offered as an advance on that of
Lindbeck. Moreover, the discussion had suggested the basic outlines of such a proposal in terms
of a confessional and therefore critical theological hermeneutic.

Lindbeck’s critiques of liberal and conservative approaches to religion and doctrine are well-
known as controversial aspects of his proposal. In earlier chapters, I too found problems in these
critiques, though I also found elements of enduring value. In my view, the main problem with
Lindbeck’s critique of conservative approaches is the curious and extended non-engagement
with historicised propositionalism that winds through the second half of ND.

In this chapter I have taken up these threads, asking whether a confessional and therefore critical
hermeneutic can adequately address the issues of particularity and historicity, and wondering
whether such a hermeneutic really amounts to the same thing as historicised propositionalism. It
will be evident that my answer to both questions is ‘Yes’, although the main terms of these
questions have acquired subtly different, and sharper, definitions in the course of this chapter.

I will not add to the conclusions already offered at the end of sections 6.3, 6.4 and 6.5, other than
to draw out some overarching themes. My confessional and therefore critical hermeneutic has
emerged from this chapter with greater clarity and robustness in each of its three parts. Confession
of Christ as Lord corresponds to the christological focus of Christian doctrine and to scripture’s
orientation to the Word of God. Criticism corresponds to the intrinsic vulnerability of all human
activity (including understanding, speech and writing). The ‘therefore’ indicates that critical
reflection, including self-reflection, is intrinsic to Christian theology because theology is a
vulnerable human activity, and that the criterion of critique and locus of accountability is the
Word whom theology serves.

Both confession and criticism have a universal aspect. The confession of Christ as Lord is meant
absolutely and without reserve. It cannot be otherwise if Jesus of Nazareth is the decisive
revelation of the one God. I asserted and sought to show in operation that this claim is itself a
hermeneutical principle that theology must apply in developing doctrine, in borrowing ideas
from other discourses, and in reflecting on its own identity and methods. Criticism is also
universal in that all the raw material of theology comes to it in vulnerable form. Not only
contemporary discourses, not only doctrines of lesser or greater pedigree in Christian tradition,
but also scripture itself, are vulnerable as products of human activity.

This chapter has answered the question with which the previous chapter concluded, concerning
the implications of pervasive historicity for a theological understanding of scripture and
tradition. I found it appropriate to understand scripture not only as tradition’s canonical text, but
as itself an artefact of tradition. In this sense, historicity goes ‘all the way down’, encompassing not only what is usually considered ‘tradition’, but also tradition’s authoritative sources. However, Christian theology reminds us that ‘historicity’ is insufficient as a description of tradition’s vulnerability unless it is taken to include not only finitude but also moral frailty—it is *fallen* creatureliness that goes ‘all the way down.’

Fallen creatureliness permeates not only the past, but also the present, including ourselves. Interpreters, tradition and scripture exist in inescapable solidarity, in view of which the necessary and appropriate critique, while learning much from the hermeneutics of finitude and suspicion, and not retreating at all from their genuine insights, will see itself rather as a hermeneutic of compassion. There is no question of assuming a superior position as critic of scripture and tradition. However, there is a position, or rather an orientation, to which witnesses and interpreters alike are accountable, namely, the reconciling and renewing Word of God.
We have now surveyed Lindbeck’s argument in *ND* and listened to two main streams of response, trying to identify, engage and develop the substantive issues underlying the conversation. It is tempting to say that these issues were comprehensiveness/particularity in the conversation with liberal theology, and historical/ideological vulnerability in the conversation with conservative theology, but this would be too simplistic—both issues are relevant to both streams, albeit in different ways. My aim in this concluding chapter is to take stock of the conversation as a whole by reflecting further on the inter-relationships between the protagonists, the underlying issues, and my proposed theological response. Firstly, having in the previous chapter presumed to specify the theological core of Christianity, I increase the number of protagonists from three to four: not only Lindbeck, liberal theology and conservative theology as before, but now in addition Christianity itself. Perhaps surprisingly, this rather presumptuous move helps to focus attention on the issues rather than on competing theological traditions. Secondly and thirdly, I address each of the major issues in turn—the comprehensiveness of religious claims and the vulnerability of human discourse—describing how they relate to the protagonists, the challenges they bring, and the responses they might elicit. Lastly, I suggest that the confessional and therefore critical theological hermeneutic that emerged from engagement with these issues offers a better way of addressing not only the problems that concerned Lindbeck, but also persistent ideological divisions within Christianity.

7.1 Issues and Protagonists

Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic proposal arose within, and was offered as a contribution to, the practice of ecumenical theology. It was shaped by his perception that, in order to achieve wide acceptance in this field, his proposal needed to be, and be seen to be, both religiously neutral and hospitable to traditional claims about doctrine (and in that sense doctrinally neutral).

Although formulated in ‘pretheological’ terms, Lindbeck’s proposal was theologically partisan at the level of religion because acceptance of the particularity and comprehensiveness of religious claims served to marginalise ‘experiential-expressivist’ approaches. Turning to doctrine, Lindbeck suggested that it describes, not reality, but the language with which Christians describe reality, and is in that sense analogous to grammar. He criticised ‘propositionalist’ theologies for ignoring the complex semiotic systems through which people engage the world. They tried to grasp directly at reality, whereas engagement is mediated through practices and implicit categories that may or may not be adequate to the encountered

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1 See section 6.4.2 *Scripture, Revelation, and Unity* especially pp. 237 and following.
reality. He charged both sets of opponents with viewing religion and theology in intellectualist terms that overlooked the hermeneutic significance of embodiment.

Although Lindbeck formulated his cultural-linguistic proposal in response to observations made during a substantial career in ecumenical theology, and offered it mainly for the consideration of others engaged in this field, it reverberated through the broad stream of late twentieth-century Christian theology. In large measure, these echoes arose from the polemical strands of his argument, and especially from his construction of the views he opposed, which were rightly taken to (mis)represent the broad ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ options in Christian theology. Lindbeck’s polemics reflected more than challenged these polemical alignments, and thus contributed to the ensuing debate being less constructive than it might have been, as those criticised often responded by defending their precommitments against his misrepresentations, and then, not unreasonably, felt justified in challenging his proposal on the basis of their own positions. Although this study, too, reflects the structure of Lindbeck’s polemic, I have tried to engage his critique, the responses, and the customary polemical alignments, so as to identify and engage substantive issues.

In broad terms, the substantive issues are the comprehensiveness of religious claims and the vulnerability of human discourse (including religious discourse). By ‘comprehensiveness’ is meant the universal intent with which religious claims are made, and which gives them their ‘religious’ character. ‘Vulnerability’ indicates that human discourse, whether or not it includes religious claims, is conducted by finite beings whose understanding is certainly not universal, but rather finite and fallible. In the course of this study we have addressed vulnerability in terms of particularity, embodiment, historicity, finitude and moral frailty. Not surprisingly, the scope of these issues reflects the basically anthropological nature of Lindbeck’s argument, and is in turn reflected in the confessional and therefore critical hermeneutic I proposed. The content of these issues and the relations between them is the main theme of this chapter.

In the foregoing brief summary of key issues, I have avoided explicit reference to Christian faith because I want this summary to serve as a basis for engagement between four overlapping discourses, of which Christianity is one.2 The other discourses are those of Lindbeck, liberal theology and conservative theology. Immediately, this list of ‘discourses’ raises several problems: it implies that Lindbeck, liberal theology and conservative theology are, to some extent, not Christian; it treats complex traditions (Christianity, liberal theology and conservative theology) in the same terms as the work of an individual scholar; and the reader may well suspect that what I mean by ‘Christianity’ is in fact my own position. I plead guilty on all counts, and offer the following comments in the hope of placating the reader.

Firstly, as Kathryn Tanner has put it, Christianity is a community of argument about following Jesus.3 Part of that argument involves asserting that the real meaning of following Jesus lies here rather than there, and hence that some varieties of Christian thought are ‘off-centre.’ In this chapter I am concerned with the core commitments of certain ‘discourses’, and the implications of those commitments. I am not concerned with drawing boundaries. The ‘discourses’ I am

2 That is, I am attempting what Delwin Brown called ‘intersystematic reason-giving.’ See p. 85 above.

3 Tanner 1997, 154, and see n34 on p. 62 above.
engaging undoubtedly overlap, and the boundaries of Christianity may well completely encompass those of the other three. Certainly, all four have enough in common that this study has been able to identify genuine disagreements, or in Tanner’s terms, a ‘community of argument’, underlying the misunderstandings. I suggest, then, that these discourses are distinguished less by their boundaries than by their core commitments, or perhaps by the standpoints from which they relate themselves to the same centre.

Secondly, while Lindbeck and the three complex traditions are in many ways different kinds of entity, this is unlikely to be misleading in view of the fact that their content and their interrelations have been recurring themes of this study. However, while Lindbeck’s proposal has already been sufficiently defined, his descriptions of the three traditions have been contested, so I will now summarise what I take their content to be. I take Christianity to be centred on Jesus Christ as the decisive revelation of the one God, the redeeming God of Israel. I have also spoken of this centre as ‘the Word of God’ (emphasising divine communication) and as ‘the gospel’ (emphasising announcement of Jesus’ Lordship). This study began, and will soon end, with this understanding of the centre of Christianity, and we have seen it asserted, though variously implemented, by Lindbeck, Schleiermacher, Barth and McGrath. In dialogue with McGrath and then Barth I indicated why I believe it to be not only the centre of Christianity, but the originating affirmation of the Christian church and the unifying principle of Christian scripture. In asserting that Christianity has this centre, I have said little about its boundaries. It is not that boundaries are unimportant, but that, where boundaries are needed, their discernment and definition must be guided by this centre.

We have seen that the labels ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ are problematic when applied to Christian theologies. Insofar as they reflect entrenched alignments in contemporary Christianity, their continued use may hinder the emergence of fresh insight. Yet this very entrenchment, together with socio-historical inquiry of the kind employed by McGrath, indicates the ideological character of certain commitments within these broad movements, and hence the importance of questioning them concerning the extent to which their ideological commitments help or hinder their following of Christ. The terms ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ are not only more convenient and more general than Lindbeck’s ‘experiential-expressivist’ and ‘propositionalist’, they are also less tendentious. Objections to Lindbeck’s polemics arose in part from perceptions of argumentative sleight of hand—that he treated limited and already outdated positions as proxies for the complex traditions within which they occurred, and assumed that by engaging these parts he thereby engaged the larger wholes from which they emerged.

By the terms ‘liberal theology’ and ‘conservative theology’ I mean complex intellectual traditions that through a combination of religious interest and ideology produce different accounts of the significance of Jesus. By ‘ideology’ I do not mean the conventional left/right dichotomy between progressives and conservatives. These categories are used by social and political movements, especially by those identifying themselves as ‘progressive’. I mean, rather, complexes of ideas that include positions taken or assumed in respect of the issues identified in this study and summarised above in terms of the comprehensiveness of religious claims and the vulnerability of human discourse. Admittedly, these categories are no more neutral than those used in politics. They have
been derived in dialogue with Lindbeck and his respondents and assume a standpoint oriented to seeing everything in terms of its place within the universal Lordship of Jesus. This is already a claim that Jesus’ Lordship is fundamental, and that other ideological commitments are not. Am I, then, like Lindbeck, offering explanatory categories that prejudge the issue so far as liberal theologies are concerned? I point out that, unlike Lindbeck, I find that conservative theologies can also be challenged by the comprehensiveness of their own religious claims, and to this we must add that they often give insufficient attention to the vulnerability of those claims. In short, I find weaknesses and strengths in both these approaches, as well as in Lindbeck, when viewed from what I take to be the central commitments of Christian faith.

As to the content assumed under these labels, I agree with Lindbeck’s respondents that the liberal tradition is not defined by ‘experiential-expressivism’, and conservative theology is not defined by ‘propositionalism’ and/or ‘cognitivism’. In each case, what Lindbeck criticised is but one possible manifestation of an ethos whose underlying commitments must be described otherwise. Each manifestation once seemed viable, but has since been criticised and modified (or even abandoned) by those who identify with its originating ethos. I suggested earlier that the ethos of liberal theology lies in its affirmation of the critical discourses of western secular societies and its sense that religious claims must be criticised by these discourses. Much of the rich variation among liberal religious thinkers arises from differing views of the balance of authority between secular and religious discourses and of the extent to which religious claims must be questioned and reinterpreted. The ethos of conservative theology is its orientation to religious tradition, represented especially in the authority ascribed to the tradition’s sources. This, too, is a broad stream that includes various views of the relation between authorities within the religious tradition, and of the relation between religious and non-religious authorities. In general, conservatives see contemporary societies as vulnerable to critique to the extent that those societies have not yet heeded the witness of the religious tradition. I am, then, describing conservatives and liberals in terms of their acknowledgement of authorities and the relations they see between various authorities. By itself, this theme cannot unfold into a full account of these two broad approaches, but it is at least a major discriminant between them, and a key element in arguments between them. I suggest, further, that both approaches tend to be insufficiently reflexive, in the sense of not reflecting on the consequences of their assertions for the viability of their presupposed standpoints, and I argue below that where such reflection occurs it may produce a measure of convergence between them.

Returning to my list of ‘discourses’, it may be objected, lastly, that I regard my own position as the ‘Christian’ one and therefore superior to the others. This is partly true. I have defined the adjective ‘Christian’ to mean, in essence, ‘affirming that Jesus is Lord’, or ‘acknowledging Jesus of Nazareth as the decisive revelation of God’. I do think that my position has this orientation, and follows through some of its implications. Yet this has come about through engagement with Lindbeck and certain liberal and conservative Christian thinkers, and so, despite my avowed orientation, some polemical distortion is all but inevitable. Besides, in view

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4 See above, section 3.4.1 Liberal Virtues and the ‘Religion-as-Culture’ Metaphor commencing on p. 90.

5 On polemical distortion, see above, p. 146.
of my discussions of reflexivity and human vulnerability, I can hardly assume that my position is intrinsically less vulnerable than other positions. I have, however, indicated what I believe to be the identity and nature of Christian criteriology. I hold myself and others accountable to Jesus Christ, and hope that others will respond in kind.

The issues and discourses just described can be used as a matrix covering the ground traversed in this thesis. In one direction (say, the rows), we can view the ground in terms of the discourses—Lindbeck, conservative and liberal theologies, and Christianity; in the other direction (the columns), we see it in terms of issues—the comprehensiveness of religious claims and the vulnerability of discourse. Having spent nearly the whole of the inquiry to this point investigating the discourses and the relationships between them, I will structure my concluding remarks in terms of the issues. This approach will emphasise the constructive results of the discussion, not so much retreating from the earlier polemics as drawing out the lessons to be learned from them. I hope, too, that it will reduce the likelihood of a problem that was notable in the post-Lindbeck debate, namely, the perception that the author thinks s/he is critically engaging a whole tradition when in fact s/he is not. I have engaged with Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic proposal; I do not think that I have engaged liberal and conservative theologies as whole traditions. In reflecting on what I think are the ‘real issues’ underlying the debate over Lindbeck’s proposal, I will indicate that certain challenges are particularly relevant to this or that approach. It is entirely possible that liberals and conservatives will think that they can answer these challenges using resources they regard as their own. Indeed, one function of the immanent critiques I have attempted in both main parts of this thesis is to draw attention to resources within each tradition that could support such answers. If deployment of these resources pulls against some other commitments that are held dear, then there may be decisions to be made, or perhaps life-giving tensions to be recognised. I hope to show that, where such resources are deployed to meet the challenges I will raise, the result is convergence around the confession of Christ.

7.2 COMPREHENSIVENESS

By emphasising the comprehensiveness of religious life, Lindbeck problematised his own proposal, which had its basis not in Christian theology but in secular social anthropology. Any comprehensive semiotic system that accepted his proposal without challenging it from the standpoint of its own intrinsic claims would thereby surrender its claim to comprehensiveness. For its part, Christianity, to which Lindbeck’s proposal is mainly addressed, most basically expresses its comprehensive claim and particular identity in the gospel proclamation, ‘Jesus is Lord!’ While this proclamation has many ramifications and can be explained only in the light of the historical context in which it originated, it certainly announces that Jesus of Nazareth is of ultimate significance for human existence. The extent to which Lindbeck’s proposal joins in the service of Jesus is the extent to which Christianity can welcome it. Thus, Christian faith can affirm Lindbeck’s assertions regarding comprehensiveness and particularity but must highlight the self-contradiction inherent in basing such assertions on an anthropology that frames the entire discussion including the supposedly comprehensive religious claims. On these issues, and with these internal contradictions, Lindbeck stands closer to Schleiermacher than do the ‘experiential-expressivists’ he sees as Schleiermacher’s heirs.
Dialogue with Delwin Brown suggested, and reading of Schleiermacher confirmed, that Lindbeck misconstrued the relation between his own approach and that of liberal theology. Like Schleiermacher, and indeed more like him than many liberals, Lindbeck’s mode of argument contradicted his orientation to piety. For Lindbeck and Schleiermacher, everything in Christian faith is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ, or, in conventional Christian language, Christian faith affirms that Jesus is Lord. Yet Lindbeck and Schleiermacher both defined the sphere encompassed by ‘everything in Christian faith’ in terms that owed nothing to Christian faith, thereby encapsulating ‘Christian faith’ within whatever discourse provided their respective definitions, and denying the possibility that Christian faith could be truly comprehensive. If liberal theology has less to do with ‘experiential-expressivism’ than with granting some measure of authority to ‘contemporary discourse’ (however defined), such that Christian faith is taken to be less than truly comprehensive, then Lindbeck’s mode of argument is very much ‘liberal’. Divergence occurs when, although still arguing in a way that implicitly denies the comprehensiveness of religious claims, Lindbeck nevertheless asserts their comprehensiveness. Liberal theology avoids such incoherence by trying to be clear about its sources of authority, but this also raises more sharply the issue of comprehensiveness.

Is Christianity a comprehensive faith? If ‘Jesus is Lord’ means that Jesus of Nazareth is the decisive revelation of the one God, the God of Israel, and if this confession is and has always been the Church’s raison d’être as I argued above, then Christianity is indeed a comprehensive faith in which everything whatsoever is believed to find its true place under Jesus’ Lordship. That is, the universal scope of Christian claims for Jesus is intrinsic and fundamental to Christian faith, and Christian theology will therefore critically engage all discourses, and especially its own, on the basis that Jesus is the decisive revelation of God. There is, then, a challenge for liberal theology concerning its identity and allegiance. Does it, like Delwin Brown’s proposal, offer a liberal Christianity in which the comprehensiveness of Christian faith is contained within and interpreted by a super-comprehensive ‘common discourse’ whose overriding allegiance is to liberal society? Or does it offer a Christian liberalism whose overriding allegiance is to Jesus and which therefore critically engages contemporary discourse from the standpoint of the divine liberality displayed in him? I have argued that the comprehensiveness of Christian claims for Jesus makes this challenge unavoidable, that acceptance of Jesus’ Lordship has important implications for theological method, and hence that only the second option can claim a Christian identity. I hasten to add that this challenge is not faced by liberal theology as a whole (if there is such a thing). Nor is it faced by liberal theology alone. It is, however, a challenge for those of liberal inclination in view of the history of the tradition of which they feel themselves to be a part. Each can answer only for her- or himself, or show that the terms in which I have posed the challenge are false.

Because Christianity is a comprehensive faith, those who stand within it face the challenge of understanding everything, including their own understanding, from the standpoint of its central claims. Thus, on the basis of his own claim for the centrality of Jesus, I queried McGrath’s use of ‘attitude to the past’ as key criterion, and his theological non-engagement with ideology. Beyond

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6 See 6.4.2 Scripture, Revelation, and Unity commencing on p. 234.

7 See 6.3.2 Attitudes to the Past commencing on p. 219, and 6.3.3 Ideology and Theology commencing on p. 222.
this, two substantial challenges emerged which are relevant to tradition-oriented theologies: the need to query their own privileged sources from the standpoint attested in those sources, and the need to relate the tradition and their interpretation of it to the anthropology attested in the tradition. I illustrated the first of these challenges with a theological critique of ‘the Bible is the Word of God’, a presupposition of sixteenth-century Christianity and of modern conservative theologies. If conservatives object to my conclusions, I hope they will agree with the basis of the critique, and then go on to show how the confession ‘Jesus is Lord’ should lead to a different result. The second challenge arises through Christian tradition’s native awareness of its own vulnerability. That is, in its comprehensiveness Christianity comprehends the vulnerability of human discourse and recognises scripture, tradition and their interpretation as examples of such discourse. The content and consequences of this vulnerability will be addressed in the following section. The point here is that Christian confessionalism points towards, not away from, its own vulnerability.

My confessional and therefore critical hermeneutic confesses that Jesus is Lord, and therefore seeks to understand everything, including the content and vulnerability of this confession, in relation to him. This study provides some examples of how this can work in theology, that is, in relation to themes and ideas usually thought of as residing within Christian discourse. I now offer some brief comments on the relation between Christian discourse and other discourses.

The validity of a confessional standpoint may be defensible, but it is not demonstrable. It can hardly be otherwise with the ultimate and comprehensive commitments that are commonly called ‘religious’. If the validity of such a standpoint could be demonstrated, then the standpoint from which the demonstration was provided would have proved itself to be at least as ultimate and at least as comprehensive as the one whose validity was in question. That is, any such demonstration would be self-refuting. Moreover, for any tradition that is able to see itself as a tradition, the ultimate standpoint is not in fact available to humans, but lies beyond them. This is certainly the case for Christianity, which confesses not its own lordship, but that of Jesus. A confessional standpoint, then, is necessarily taken in trust, one aspect of which is trust that this standpoint provides a way of living in the world, including a way of making sense of it.

Since Christianity understands humans to be fallen creatures, it does not expect their living and understanding to be always and everywhere successful, and therefore some unknown but finite measure of failure can be tolerated by adherents before they are led to question the object of their faith. Because the allowable measure of failure is finite, Christianity must continually engage with other discourses, especially those seen as being ‘successful’, in order to provide the faithful with sufficient confidence that their faith is ‘true’, i.e., that it continues to offer a truly comprehensive way of living in the world and making sense of it. Provocation to such engagement arises in myriad encounters between believers and non-believers in the conduct of daily life as well as in larger scale and more intentional meetings over matters of common concern. The task of Christian reflection on these encounters is, in part, to show how these other discourses, other ways of life, unexpected discoveries or common concerns find their true sense under Jesus’ Lordship. This will include showing how Christianity recognises and rejoices in the truth that they bear, how it recognises and heals their distortions, how it recognises and repents of its own distortions disclosed by their witness, and how, in all of this recognition and
response, Jesus the redeeming and reconciling Word of God remains the criterion of discernment. As Christian reflection, this will not be simply an exercise in self-justification, but a limited example and enactment of Jesus’ loving and redeeming embrace of all creation.

It is no accident that this somewhat lyrical description of how Christianity can engage other viewpoints carries more than a faint echo of Delwin Brown’s description of the way in which ‘our common discourse’ takes care of religious traditions and their canons. The parallel highlights the religious nature of Brown’s commitment to liberal society. There are dissimilarities, too. For Brown, the academy has, or should have, authority over the conceptual and affective content of religious traditions. For its part, Christianity has authority just to the extent that it bears faithful witness to Jesus Christ. It wants to be free to bear this witness and wants people to be free to respond. It is not concerned with shaping other traditions by deciding on the scope and content of their resources. Now, it may be that liberal societies need not relate to religions in the way that Brown suggests, and it is certainly the case that Christianity has often acted coercively and so betrayed its commitment to Jesus’ servant Lordship. Nevertheless, because it confesses Jesus as Lord, Christianity is obliged to see any discourse that claims greater comprehensiveness as making a competing claim to ultimacy, and hence as following another confession, whether or not that discourse understands itself to be ‘religious’.

We have seen that the comprehensiveness of Christian faith poses a logical problem for Lindbeck, challenges conservative theologies to deeper reflection on their commitment to Jesus, and offers a particularly sharp challenge for some liberal approaches. Lindbeck asserts this comprehensiveness through an argument that stands outside it, thus undermining the coherence of his assertion. Conservative theologies, in their orientation to Christian tradition, accept the comprehensiveness of Christian claims for Jesus, and precisely on this basis may be called to greater thoroughness in their acceptance, to reconsider subsidiary doctrinal claims (making sure that they are subsidiary) and to embrace the critical reflection more usually associated with liberal approaches. Liberal theologies, to the extent that they rely on authorities seen as independent of Christian tradition, are obliged to relativise, and thus deny, its comprehensiveness. But if comprehensiveness is essential to Christian claims for Jesus, as I have argued it is, then reliance on independent authorities contradicts the basis of Christian faith and compromises either the coherence or the Christian identity of theologies that take this path. This is not to say that independent authorities are not useful, or are not often truthful. Nor is it to say that they should never be relied upon. It is to say that if Jesus is Lord then no truth is ultimately independent of him. Christian theology may well rely on authorities that see themselves as independent of Christian confession, but it cannot treat them as both independent and authoritative for its own purposes without compromising its basic confession. Thus it is always challenged to display, to itself and to others, the greater comprehensiveness of Christ, and thus the truth of its confession, in something like the manner suggested above.

In speaking of the comprehensiveness of Christian claims for Jesus we have not been able to go very far without facing the fact that the claimed comprehensiveness is properly that of Jesus rather than that of the claims themselves. Those making such claims for Jesus place themselves within his comprehensiveness. He comprehends us. He is truly comprehensive; we are not. We
confess him as Lord, and in that confession discover our fallen creatureliness. We cannot, then, speak properly of the comprehensiveness of Christian claims without also addressing the non-comprehensive nature of the claimants—their vulnerability as human beings.

7.3 Vulnerability

Compared to the situation in the discussion of comprehensiveness, the vulnerability of human discourse provides, or should provide, common ground among the four discourses. Lindbeck and liberal theology with their anthropological interests, Christianity with its doctrines of creation and fall, and conservative theology with its commitment to Christian tradition, all have reasons for holding a robust appreciation of the vulnerability of human discourse. And they all do, to some extent, though there is an understandable tendency to note the vulnerability of positions other than their own.

Lindbeck’s offering is both insightful and contradictory on this issue. Speaking mainly of embodiment and sociality, he emphasised the quasi-transcendental nature of the linguistic and cultural contexts in which humans are formed as persons, and through which they engage the world. The cultural-linguistic proposal thus recognises that humans are situated in and formed by a priori contexts of language and practice. While religions are distinguished by their claims to true rather than merely quasi-transcendence, they clearly provide a priori contexts of language and practice by means of which their adherents engage the world. Appreciation of embodiment and sociality is evident in several aspects of Lindbeck’s proposal. Firstly, religious affirmations are not sentences that exist independently of persons; they are affirmations made by particular persons in determinate contexts concerning the alignment of persons with ultimate reality. Secondly, the extent of such alignment cannot exceed the extent to which the affirming person’s cultural-linguistic context is adequate to reality. Thirdly, as bodied beings humans are always located—spatially, temporally, historically, culturally, socially; they do not have, and cannot have, a non-contextual view of reality. Therefore the adequation to reality of cultural-linguistic contexts cannot be demonstrated fully and finally, but only partially and provisionally in participants’ success in living, that ‘success’ being itself judged in a contextual manner.

Lindbeck thus appreciates that, whatever claims may be made for the ultimacy of a religious (or any other) frame of reference, humans cannot simply adopt an ultimate frame and henceforth see reality in its terms. Rather, humans always begin ‘in the middle’—in some particular, proximate, non-ultimate context—and remain ‘in the middle’ so long as they are bodied. In this sense, religious life expresses an orientation that seeks, in and through proximate reality, alignment of one’s self and one’s context with ultimate reality. Lindbeck’s charge that modern theologies, both conservative and liberal, insufficiently appreciate the bodiliness of human knowledge is one that those approaches will do well to heed. Yet his own proposal has its ‘intellectualist’ weaknesses: it treats language and world as optionally separable rather than

8 See p. 23 above.
9 See p. 187 above.
essentially enmeshed, transposes doctrine into an ahistorical ‘grammar’ of faith, and claims ecumenical neutrality by presupposing the meaningfulness of certain ideas.

In contrast to its attention to finitude, Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic proposal says little about humanity’s moral frailty. He presents the example of the crusader, whose violence falsifies his confession of Christ, to illustrate the importance of intrasystematic coherence; he makes no comment on the danger that faith may be coopted for the purposes of power. His ecumenical and religious neutrality relied on acritical acceptance of the possible truth of traditional claims for doctrine, rather than an appreciation of traditions’ susceptibility to ideological distortion. While there is much to be said for listening charitably to one’s conversation partners, who may at any time speak the divine word we most need to hear, a shared confession of Christ always implies a shared life in which worship of the triune God, prayer, the study of scripture, the confession of sins and table fellowship with Jesus ground our solidarity as redeemed sinners and our consequent responsibility to serve one another by offering encouragement, accountability, forgiveness, and healing for our shared witness to Christ.

Liberal theology, with its embrace of critical enquiry, has always appreciated the vulnerability of religious discourse, and indeed some who value the ‘liberal’ name see openness to enquiry as the principal feature of a liberal ethos. My contention, however, is that, in view of Jesus’ Lordship and an anthropology indicated by the doctrines of creation and fall, openness to critical enquiry belongs to Christianity’s ‘core business’ and there is no need whatsoever for it to be imported on the basis of some ‘independent’ authority. I emphasise that the issue here is not the importation itself but the basis on which it occurs. There is great need to attend to non-Christian discourses for their insights into the implications of human finitude and frailty. Indeed, Christian theology has learned much from other discourses regarding the implications of what it sees as our fallen creatureliness, and will continue to do so. Yet, so far as I am aware, there is nothing so learned, nor anything offered to be learned, that cannot be understood within the classic doctrinal loci of creation and fall. However much Christian theology may need to be reminded occasionally of things it should never have forgotten, or however much it may need to have its attention drawn to matters it had not considered, embrace of critical enquiry does not, of itself, imply or require assertion of an authority independent of Christ or even external to Christian tradition. Reliance on independent authority implies critique, but the implication is not reversible.

10 See ND 64 and p. 38 above.
11 Compare Steven Sykes’ view (1989, 82-3) that the ecumenical movement of the time (i.e., contemporaneous with Lindbeck) could be challenged, on the basis of Karl Barth’s theology, ‘to conceive of a genuine authority in the Church speaking the prophetic “Thus saith the Lord”, which is at the same time, on its own admission, a human voice, open to question and to the future’. He amplifies this in two questions, the first of which concerns ‘ecumenical spirituality’: ‘does the ascesis of deprivation and hope predominate over possession and self-sufficiency?’ The second question is: ‘how is the innovatory Word of God to be “managed” in everyday, sociological reality?’ In formulating these questions Sykes does not integrate spirituality (confession) and sociology (critique). Rather, he sees theology (on the one hand) and psychology and sociology (on the other) as ‘parallel languages’ that are ‘inevitably and dangerously mixed’. In part, my aim has been to show that theological integration of spirituality and sociology is not only possible but intrinsic to the Christian confession and essential to its integrity.
If openness to critical enquiry belongs to Christianity’s ‘core business’, then it should be ‘core business’ for all who hold themselves accountable to the divine Word. That is, as mentioned briefly above, conservatives are obliged to embrace critical enquiry precisely because they confess Jesus as Lord. They are obliged to acknowledge their own human fallibility and attend to its implications and consequences. They are obliged to acknowledge the vulnerability of Christian tradition. I argued above that, in view of scripture’s self-attestation as witness to Christ, they are also obliged to acknowledge scripture’s vulnerability as witness. In short, for reasons that are deeply embedded in the Christian confession of faith, openness to critical enquiry should not provide any basis for distinguishing between liberal and conservative theological traditions, and this should extend to a considerable level of detail in view of a broadly shared appreciation of human finitude and frailty. Hence, to the extent that critical enquiry appears to be a distinctive feature of liberal thought, the immediate implication is that tradition-oriented theologies have not been as critical as their tradition calls them to be. It is for this reason that, while granting the importance of critical enquiry for the liberal tradition, I do not regard it as distinguishing feature.

Christian tradition is vulnerable not because it is Christian, or because it is religious, but because it is tradition, i.e., because it is human. But any critique of it is also human activity, and therefore tradition-situated. All four ‘discourses’ can agree on this, but they do not all meet the challenge of reflexivity that is intrinsic to any theorising about anthropological concerns. We have noted this several times in relation to Lindbeck’s proposal, but he is not alone in being insufficiently aware of the need to bring his own standpoint within the argument. Lindbeck and McGrath rightly noted the inadequacy of conservative theologies that presume to state timeless truth while remaining blissfully unaware of the temporality of their statements. I have tried to show that a reflexively aware ‘conservative’ theology can be far more robust (admittedly, at the cost of looking rather less conservative). Liberal theology, too, can benefit from greater reflexive awareness. Religious traditions are not peculiarly vulnerable because they are religious; they are vulnerable because they are human. Therefore liberals, like conservatives, need to embrace their own humanity and realise that no authority is available to them that is not mediated by tradition. Criticising Christianity from the standpoint of contemporary critical discourse is not challenging tradition by means of reason, but challenging one tradition of reasoning from the vantage point of another. Like Christianity, contemporary critical discourse is embedded in particular forms of social interaction, buttressed by plausibility structures and institutional power. As it acknowledges and clarifies its own faith commitments and reflects on its own vulnerabilities its engagement with the tradition that gave it birth can only become more productive.

7.4 CONFESSION AND CRITICISM

It may seem that, unlike Lindbeck, I have little to offer as a constructive proposal—that, having found that Lindbeck’s proposal does not offer a way ‘beyond’ conservatism and liberalism, I am suggesting merely that Christianity necessarily combines conservative (confessional) and liberal (critical) elements. There is some truth in this, but it is also a misinterpretation. Christianity, by virtue of its intrinsic comprehensive claim, has no interest in combining or balancing the claims or

12 Not forgetting that Modernity arose in Christian Europe, and that these traditions continue to interpenetrate.
inclinations of other ideologies. It is interested, rather, in learning from their insights, healing their wounds, and showing how they find their true glory in serving Jesus to the glory of the triune God. Granted, the confession of Jesus as Lord exists historically as tradition, and so the granting of over-riding priority to that confession can be seen as ‘conservative’. But the priority of this confession subverts conservatism as it is commonly understood, to the point where ‘conservative’ ceases to be useful as a descriptor. Hence my view that Christianity does not have a preferential option for conservatism. Similarly, and again because of the priority of Christian confession, there is nothing especially ‘liberal’ about a critical approach to theology (or, if critical thought is what one means by ‘liberal,’ then Christianity is already intrinsically liberal), and this label, too, loses relevance. Hence my view that the distinguishing feature of liberal theology is not criticism, but the basis of its critique: the criterion or authority under which it operates.

Thus, in a sense, Lindbeck’s insight into the priority of confession has structured the whole discussion, and it has become clear that not only his proposal, but also the broad streams of conservative and liberal theology, face challenges in this regard. Since Lindbeck’s proposal is the work of one scholar, it has been possible to show that this aspect of it is incoherent, but such firm conclusions are impossible in relation to entire theological traditions. Rather, I have indicated that conservative and liberal approaches each have grounds for acknowledging the priority of Christian confession, and each faces challenges in this regard depending on individual scholars’ alternate or subsidiary commitments, and the ways in which they implement those commitments.

I suggest that a confessional and therefore critical theological hermeneutic provides a consistent and appropriately reflexive approach to the issues raised by Lindbeck and underlying the subsequent debates, namely, the comprehensiveness of religious claims and the vulnerability of human discourse. To the extent that this hermeneutic is both thoroughly Christian and able to share in broad areas of contemporary non-Christian discourse it can serve, and in this thesis has served, as a means of ‘intersystematic reason-giving’. In so doing, it engages the inner commitments of both conservative and liberal approaches and suggests that, by following those commitments through the logic of comprehensiveness and vulnerability, and responding with confession and criticism, those approaches may better engage each other, and so draw closer together around the gospel.
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