

THE LANGUAGE OF DOGMA AND THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

It is hardly surprising that a Convention on the linguistic turn would attend to the language of dogma and theological discourse. It is also not surprising that the organizers would think to focus on George A. Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine. Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Westminster, 1984), for this is certainly the most discussed book on the issue of dogma (see the book's title) and theological discourse (see book's subtitle) published over the last few years. The goal of the workshop is for those somewhat familiar with the debate over Lindbeck's book to obtain some clarity over what the outstanding issues are with regard to dogma and theological discourse. Four panelists offered brief thoughts before opening the floor to general discussion.

I. PANELIST REMARKS

A. James J. Buckley
(Loyola College in Maryland)

Lindbeck's stand on the issue of dogma and theological discourse has led to some paradoxes in the reception of the book: some sympathetic to the stand on doctrine dissent from the proposal on theology, others appreciative of the rule theory of doctrine dissent from the cultural-linguistic theology.¹ Why does Lindbeck distinguish and relate dogma and theological discourse the way he does? The key question is: what is the relationship between the intrasystematic truth of doctrines (the coherence of utterances with their title relevant context) and ontological truth (correspondence to the being and will of God)? One possible answer is that where truth is determined by the coherence of utterances with their total relevant context and that context includes correspondence with the mind of Christ, God's free love is the sole bond of the two. In short, a strong *sola gratia* rules the relationship between dogmatic and theological discourses. Is it dogmatically permissible for a Catholic to assert that, no matter how much else needs to be said theologically, the essential thing to be said doctrinally is that dogmatic and theological discourse are normed by God's free love?

¹There are many reviews. See, for example, *The Thomist* 49 (1985) 392-472 (William Placher, Colman O'Neil, O.P., James J. Buckley, and David Tracy); *Religious Studies Review* 11 (1985) 66-72 (Charles M. Wood and Timothy P. Jackson); and *Dialog* 25 (1986) 175-80 (Michael Root).

B. Joseph A. DiNoia, O.P.
(Dominican House of Studies, Washington, D.C.)

How might Thomas speak to the linguistic turn?² The relational or interpersonal character of the Christian life is central for Thomas (in contrast to many scholastic manuals): union with God now, to be fulfilled in vision. Thomas thus deals with persons *qua* knowing, hoping, loving, believing in God. The last notion leads us to ask what believing involves. What is the "inner intelligibility" of knowing God? As frequently noted, according to Thomas, knowledge does not terminate in propositions but in God. Propositions (as the work of David Burrell and others have suggested) are *luminus quo*. From this point of view, Lindbeck's proposals have the benefit of stressing, with realist instincts, the particularity of the Christian life. But Lindbeck's critique of cognitive-propositionalism reaches Cartesianism rather than Aquinas. Further, Lindbeck's use of the *modus significandi/significatum* is inadequate. Ultimately, a Thomas would insist that doctrines *qua* doctrines function both intrasystematically and ontologically. It is crucial to keep in mind that the primary locus of affirmations about God is our life with God, not the academy. Finally, Lindbeck raises a number of interesting issues which were not on Aquinas' agenda (e.g., religious diversity, the historical character of Christian doctrine).

C. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza
(Harvard Divinity School)

There are parallels between Fiorenza's critique of neo-scholasticism/transcendentalism and Lindbeck's critique propositional/experientialism, between Fiorenza's reconstructive hermeneutic and Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory. They differ in the way the one focuses on hermeneutical reconstruction of Christian identity and the other on doctrine and identity. One way to focus the issue is by sorting out the burdens and benefits of four models of the relationships between theory and praxis: hermeneutical (retrieval overcoming the distance between Christian and non-Christian); Marxist (distortions of praxis leading to ideological doctrines); pragmatic (clarifying ideas by tracking their consequences); and Wittgensteinian (understanding as participating in a form of life).³ There is no comprehensive theory to embrace all four, but we can ask how each incorporates the other perspectives. Thus, how does Lindbeck's Wittgensteinian perspective bring in the others (e.g., our distance from and distortions of doctrines)? How do we handle the fact that we stand within several communities of discourse and practice?

D. Robert Masson
(Marquette University)

Lindbeck's characterization of theologies like Rahner's as "hybrids" of cognitive-propositionalism and experiential-expressivism is problematic and fails to adequately interpret and engage a significant alternative to Lindbeck's cultural-

²See especially *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 1; IIa IIae, 1.

³For elaboration see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Theory and Practice: Theological Education as a Reconstructive, Hermeneutical, and Practical Task," *Theological Education* 23 (1987) 113-141; "Foundations of Theology. A Community of Discourse and Practice," *CTSA Proceedings* 41 (1986) 107-34.

linguistic model. It can be called catholic both in sense that it is held by Catholics like Rahner and Lonergan and is more comprehensive and balanced than Lindbeck's proposal.⁴ It is a centrist model which avoid the extremes of foundationalism and fideism, engages in integration rather than reductionism, and promotes centripetal rather than centrifugal movement. Lindbeck's constructive proposal is not necessarily opposed or incompatible with such theologies of the center. It can be read as a Lutheran *sola fide/scriptura/sola gratia* effort to reach the center. It can thus be seen as a characteristically Protestant linguistic turn analogous to but different from the linguistic turn being taken by Catholics. The problem with Lindbeck's approach is not that it is fideistic but that despite all its subtlety it is nevertheless one-dimensional and indeed seeks to make a virtue of one-dimensionality. Such a perspective leads to a misrepresentation of the analogical and multidimensional character of fundamental concepts like experience in a centrist theology such as Rahner's.

II. DISCUSSION

Without pretending to do full justice to the many individual comments, a rough summary can distinguish respects in which individuals disagreed with and supported Lindbeck's proposal and/or the panelists.

Some participants in ecumenical dialogue reported that, in contrast to Lindbeck's experience, ecumenical dialogue moves from disagreement over rules to agreement on the objective realities to which the rules refer (Dulles, McDonnell). Further, could it be that Lindbeck's proposal emphasizes conserving cultural-linguistic systems at the expense of transforming them—or that transformations occur only in the way Barth's tangent periodically transforms the circle of faith (Hollenbach)? Does the notion that God aims to construct a community so that dogma unites by accepting what God has done for us imply serious disagreement with Lindbeck's view of doctrine (Wright)? The panelists were also challenged. Can Buckley's *sola gratia* stand alone? Can Fiorenza's pragmatism yield a doctrine of God (Cessario)? Is not Masson's Catholic centrism, identifying Catholicism with Rahner, worrisome (Porter)?

Buckley suggested that the status of the *sola gratia* would differ, depending on whether it was used doctrinally or theologically. Fiorenza proposed that the identity of God is mediated by the way a religious community lives in the world, and that pragmatism was only one part of the program of "reflective equilibrium." Masson proposed that Rahner was exemplary rather than constitutive of the Catholic center. There were also counter-arguments to the criticisms of Lindbeck. Some critics, it was suggested, were underplaying the "asceticism" of the book. Lindbeck is dealing with a circumscribed but real problem: ecumenical discussions are resolving doctrinal issues—but communities are not uniting because of a fear that more basic confessional decisions always stand in the way (Jenson). Further, perhaps Lindbeck—like the American Lutheran-Catholic dialogues—

⁴See, for example, Karl Rahner, "What is a Dogmatic Statement?" *Theological Investigations* 5 (New York: Crossroad, 1975) 42-66; "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," *Theological Investigations* 16 (New York: Crossroad, 1979) 199-224.

permits without always requiring a transformationist construal of the theological task. Others proposed that there are ways to have intrasystematic truth without giving up on conversations with other groups (Porter), that criticisms of Lindbeck on issues of truth were sometimes rationalistic, underemphasizing how Lindbeck differs from both fideists and voluntarists (Schner). Another suggested that the discussion be advanced by applying Lindbeck to changes within Catholicism over the last forty years on issues like the institution of the sacraments and the indissolubility of marriage (Martus)—or to the Lima statement on baptism, eucharist, and ministry (Jelly).

Not surprisingly, there was no single movement toward or away from *The Nature of Doctrine* or the panelists' analyses. There was no consensus on whether the key problems of *The Nature of Doctrine* were theological, doctrinal, and/or something else. However, the discussion indicated that many agree that there is a cultural-linguistic (hermeneutical) shaping of experience, that a "rulish" theory of doctrine contributes to clarifying ecumenical disputes, and that Lindbeck's book has provided a helpful opportunity for serious discussion of issues surrounding dogmatic and theological discourse.

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