

CHAPTER 10

Christine Helmer

Luther, History, and the Concept of Religion

I. Contested History

Luther scholarship has reached the consensus in recent years that the Reformer's thought is far more indebted to medieval philosophy and Catholic theology than had been imagined. At the same time, Luther remains popularly associated directly with modernity. Much care has been taken among Luther scholars to make sure that Luther is not too quickly identified with the modern temper – he was Catholic, not Protestant, and advocated reform, not the rejection of the late medieval Catholic Church; he was a metaphysician and promoted disputation as a genre of education at the University of Wittenberg, where he recited pages of William of Ockham verbatim from memory. Yet all this historical work – in the name of critical scholarship and ecumenical rapprochement – has not convinced the broader discussion concerning Luther's place in history. No longer a medieval Catholic, Luther remains a Protestant modern, or at least Protestant modernity's inspired prophet, heralding the modern turn to the subject, to freedom, and to the public space.

The contemporary discussion I am referring to is re-telling the story of modernity. The question at stake is what it means to be modern in view of a western development of critical reason, which entails explaining how and when critical reason succeeded in distinguishing between sacred sanctuary and secular public space, between a medieval self surrounded by magic and the supernatural, on the one hand, and modern subjectivity insulated against superstition by a disenchanted ontology, on the other. The overarching narrative is one of secularization, and the current discussion continues to assign responsibility for this development to the Protestant Reformation.

This is not a new position, of course. German Lutheran philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, already at the beginning of the nineteenth century advanced the claim that Luther's gospel of freedom spelled the start of the modern West.¹ While Luther's primary theological concern was to proclaim the freedom of the Christian in an "inner" sense, Hegel's argument went, the self's new in-

ner freedom would also require expression in its external relations. The freedom acquired by the gift of faith and determinative of new subjectivity meant freedom from both self and neighbor in the sense of mutual dependencies, and consequentially freedom for service of the neighbor in love. Inner freedom is spontaneously, necessarily, and inevitably evident in works of love that put the neighbor, not the self, at the center of one's world. Luther's *Freedom of a Christian* (1520) treatise was thus read as the manifesto for the modern autonomous self necessarily correlated with freedom in social and political relations.

The emergence of this popular image of Luther as harbinger of modernity in western consciousness may be traced to a distinct moment of Luther scholarship that dovetailed with the emergence of the question of modernity. This was the early twentieth century *Lutherrenaissance*. Participants in this scholarly discussion included Rudolf Otto and Max Weber, Karl Holl and Ernst Troeltsch, who were concerned with identifying modernity's characteristics in view of criteria of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Engaging with the newly forming academic disciplines of sociology, religious studies, economics, and anthropology, these theologians and philosophers of culture centered their principal concerns on Martin Luther. How did Luther's biography, they asked, capture the essential elements for the construction of the modern self in society? The fascination with Luther's religious biography correlated with the interest in assigning to the Protestant reformation the status of the origin of modernity. With Luther, the argument went, modernity had finally emerged from the Catholic middle ages.² The *Lutherrenaissance's* discussion of the modern narrative was preoccupied with discerning religious novelty to a key moment in western development, a discussion that was not without an ideological interest in promoting a Germanic Luther. The religious freedom of and for modernity, not the freedom from religion, characterized the discussion that took place at this time. Freedom had a religious and ethical orientation; its shaping of the modern temper was not secular, but religious.

The *Lutherrenaissance's* account of modernity offers an alternative to the secularization theory invoked today. It indicates how consideration of Luther's religion might break up facile opposition between sacred and secular that informed later mid-twentieth century claims of secularized modernity. Luther's role in complicating modernity is relevant again today. Luther's concern with the "everyday," as Ronald E. Thiemann points out in his article in this volume, complicates both the description of the spiritual lay reform that flourished prior to the Reformation and the flat reduction of the modern self to the Calvinist ascetic. Luther inherited the spiritual forms of lay piety and mediated them to his contemporaries in his theology of the "ordinary." The divine presence, actively forgiving in sacramental real-

¹ For Hegel on the Protestant reformation as the origin of modernity, see the relevant citations in P.C. Hodgson, "Luther and Freedom," in C. Helmer (ed.), *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2009) 32–48, on pp. 33–4.

² Troeltsch differed from Otto on this assessment of Luther. Troeltsch assigned Luther to the medieval mindset, while Otto considered Luther at the origins of modernity. See Holl's summary of this debate in K. Holl, *What Did Luther Understand by Religion?*, ed. J.L. Adams/W.F. Bense (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977 [= GA I: 1–110]), 109–10 n. 79 (= GA I: 109–10).

ity and the divine ordination of worldly vocation inform an alternate reformation view of divine-human relationship. Grace and vocation characterize the spiritually attuned life of the neighbor-oriented Lutheran, who works for the good of the neighbor because she is already set free from the self through Christ.³

Philosopher Michael Gillespie analyzes the cultural and philosophical nominalism that informed both Luther and the modern temper. Gillespie argues in *The Theological Origins of Modernity* that the unstable tension in nominalist thought between divine and human freedom remains unresolved as the motor driving modernity's history.⁴ The theological issue of human freedom is related to the development of modern reason in divergent strands of empirical, rational, and critical reason, while the emphasis on divine voluntarism leads to an unpredictable divine-world relationship that requires theological work to understand. Modernity, as Gillespie argues, is driven by a unique theological and philosophical problem that emerges before Luther and endures in diverse articulations through European Romanticism.

Gillespie, Thiemann, and others take religion and theological reason as constitutive of, rather than in opposition to, modernity. Their work is noteworthy for situating Luther as their historical point of departure. As in the *Lutherrenaissance*, Luther is again indispensable for periodizing the history of the West, uneasily perched as he was between late-medieval nominalism and early modernism, not at ease in either period, so that his personal biography, religious struggles, and conceptual shifts are taken as an epoch-making phenomenon. Yet one more aspect of this reappropriation requires mentioning before I turn to Luther's theology for the purpose of constructing not a history of the West, but a new concept of religion.

In his recent book, *The Unintended Reformation*, Brad Gregory offers a history of modernity with an explicit twist. Modernity, in contrast to medieval Christendom, Gregory avers, is characterized by pluralism, difference, individuality, and freedom. The old order of a Catholic synthesis between faith and reason is lost in modernity; the church has been called to account before the tribunal of reason and secularism mounts an assault on traditional religious belief and practice.⁵ The villain in Gregory's story is Luther. Although he did not intend the provocative consequences of his reformation of Catholic theology and liturgy nor foresee the splintering of the West into political and ecclesial fragments, Luther irredeemably opened Pandora's box of religious pluralism and social-political secularism.

³ R.F. Thiemann, "Sacramental Realism: Luther at the Dawn of Modernity," ch. 9 in this volume.

⁴ M.A. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 272: "The underlying assumption of the secularization thesis is that god does not exist and that religion is merely a human construction ... Rather than enter into this fruitless debate, I want to explore a different possibility. The argument presented in the first half of this chapter suggests that the apparent rejection or disappearance of religion and theology in fact conceals the continuing relevance of theological issues and commitments for the modern age."

⁵ B.S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

Gregory's book is of interest in this contemporary proliferation of histories of modernity both because it is an example of Catholic neo-romanticism, a longing for a by-gone Catholic medieval synthesis, and because it deploys a historiography that construes and assumes a fundamental disjunction between the medieval period "as a whole" and modernity "as a whole." The power of this vision is striking, especially given the last decades in medieval studies, which have deconstructed the myth of a Catholic harmonious synthesis. We know now that medieval Catholicism was far more plural than had been assumed. A uniform normative Catholicity is more plausibly attributed to Trent at the cusp of modernity rather than read anachronistically back into high scholasticism. Furthermore, historians of early modernism have taken great scholarly pains to show that the medieval to modern development is not one of an Archimedean discovery or a Cartesian novelty. Rather, continuity and discontinuity are inextricably bound together braided in complicated and locally particular ways.

So historiography of Gregory's "unintended" reformation should give some pause for reflecting its underlying question and assumptions. Does Gregory's study offer a history of religious ideas that correlates with historical events and developments in society, culture, and politics? Or is the aim of his study to uncover the error at the foundations of modernity, perhaps with the goal of redirecting the trajectory in a very different direction? Is the aim of Gregory's book to bypass modernity's historical developments and return to a by-gone medieval Catholic period? Gregory's historical survey of modernity is driven by genealogical interest. His account is not a history of ideas, but a prescription that requires the conceptual disjunction between medieval and modern periods for the genealogical (rather than critical) purpose of valorizing the medieval and denigrating modernity. The conceptual force of Gregory's story rests in the prescription of a detour around an "unintended" modernity and the appropriation of the world of medieval Catholicism. Methodologically Gregory's account abdicates the contemporary struggle with the problems of a historically real, albeit contingent, modernity, as it re-writes the history of modernity as a choice between two historical options. This comes with the prescription of the true alternative of a bygone era as a historically viable option for today. Gregory pits prescription against historical development, a choice between a construct of the past and a history of the past. The issue at stake in specifically religious values allegedly constitutive of a historical period is that they can further be simply appropriated in another day and age. The approach to history is selective by flattening the diversity of the past into a single monolithic construction that is informed by values imported into it from the present. Its crux is a concept that makes the confrontation between two historical periods a choice in the present. It also presupposes the concept of religion as worldview.

The religious history characterized by scholars of the *Lutherrenaissance* points to an alternative genealogy of modernity that makes use of a concept of religion not as worldview but as a function of history. The concept of religion is deployed to

unearth the suspicious foundations upon which history has allegedly proceeded. The reality of history as contingent development is pitted against the historical choice to appropriate the past in the present. History cannot be transformed into the construction of a choice that is indifferent to its historical location. The history of religion proceeds in a way that differs in order of kind from the genealogical unmasking of a concept that has erroneously informed the entire series that follows.

Gregory's methodology reflects a common contemporary Christian theological position that I have referred to as the "epistemic advantage model" of theology.⁶ According to this specific theological understanding, religion functions as a worldview, access to which is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Once entrance is gained, adherents gain competence in the specific discourse that has shaped the worldview, learning the rules that govern the production of discourse, and they see their entire world through the discursive lens that they have been given and they have learned. Language, not reality, is primary. The concept, not history, constitutes the real. Religion becomes a matter of competing worldviews.

What has changed since the *Lutherrenaissance's* preoccupation with history and contemporary theology's advocacy of religion as a worldview? Although the tracking of this historical development is beyond the scope of this essay, an analysis of the relation between theology and religion can show just how the development of theology mutually depends on the development of the concept of religion. I now turn to the thought of twentieth-century American theologian George Lindbeck in order to demonstrate that his understanding of theology as it developed with specific ecumenical interests in the 1970s is explicitly informed by a concept of religion that was proposed by cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Lindbeck appropriated Geertz's understanding of religion as the intimate relation between a coherent matrix of religious signs and symbols and the function they exert on human meaning-making capacities.

II. Ecumenical Underpinnings

When George Lindbeck published *The Nature of Doctrine* in 1984 he could not have anticipated the impact his book would have on an entire generation of theologians.⁷ The son of a Lutheran missionary in Shanghai, a Protestant observer to the Second Vatican Council, and a Lutheran historical theologian with training in medieval theology, Lindbeck had been frustrated with the theological paradigm of the ecumenism of his day. The ecumenical model characteristic of the 1950s was

⁶ See my *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

⁷ G. A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984 [reprint as 25th Anniversary Edition; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2009]). Citations in this essay are taken from the 1984 edition.

the search for a doctrinal *Grunddifferenz*, a fundamental difference between Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches that could be isolated, analyzed, and then overcome.⁸ The search for the *Grunddifferenz* was, of course, a legacy of nineteenth-century German typologies of religion that culminated in the evaluation of Protestant Christianity as the apex of religious development. In Schleiermacher's typology of religious development, for example, the distinguishing feature between Protestant and Roman Catholic theological orientations was the relation of believer to Christ. In a Protestant conception, the relation was immediate; in a Roman Catholic conception, the Church was the necessary mediator.⁹ The incipient Protestant bias towards the doctrine of justification and its accompanying Pauline concept of freedom skewed the typology in favor of Protestant superiority.

Lindbeck saw a major difficulty with the *Grunddifferenz* search. The *Grunddifferenz* model assumed that linguistic propositions, or doctrines, referred univocally to objects in the relations stipulated by the proposition. The ecumenical-theological privileging of this model proved to end consistently in an impasse because, as Lindbeck claims, "the problem is not with the reality but with the comprehensibility of this strange combination of constancy and change, unity and diversity."¹⁰ A proposition was deemed to be authoritative transhistorically, regardless of historical, cultural, and linguistic differences. Either full agreement or capitulation to the doctrine in question are the only two options. "Thus, on this view, doctrinal reconciliation without capitulation is impossible because there is no significant sense in which the meaning of doctrine can change while remaining the same."¹¹ The search for a propositional *Grunddifferenz* must necessarily result in claiming truth for one side of the ecumenical discussants and falsity for the other side.

Lindbeck's ecumenical proposal consisted instead of envisioning a theological model that regarded religion as a "cultural-linguistic system." The significance of this proposal for the ecumenical rapprochement between at least Lutherans and Roman Catholics cannot be underestimated. The model permitted Lutherans to understand that Roman Catholic theology was not predicated on a works-righteousness model and that justification along with scriptural authority functioned normatively in Catholic theology. In turn it allowed Roman Catholic theologians to understand that a Lutheran doctrine of justification systematically presupposed an Augustinian doctrine of sin and that it advocated Christological and Trinitar-

⁸ See Robert Jenson's analysis of the "basic flaw" in this search for the *Grunddifferenz* in R. Jenson, *Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1992).

⁹ R. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh/J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), § 24; for a detailed study of Schleiermacher's anti-Catholicism see J. A. Lamm, "Schleiermacher on 'The Roman Church': Anti-Catholic Polemics, Ideology, and the Future of Historical-Empirical Dogmatics," in B. W. Sockness/W. Gräb (eds.), *Schleiermacher, the Study of Religion, and the Future of Theology: A Transatlantic Dialogue* (TBT 148; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2010) 243–56.

¹⁰ Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

ian agency, as well as stipulating ethical norms for believers. The result was the signing of the "Joint Declaration on Justification" between the Lutheran World Federation and Roman Catholic Church, represented by the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in Augsburg in 1999. Both churches deemed justification in Lindbeck's terminology as "doctrinal reconciliation without capitulation," thereby mutually acknowledging that in spite of differences, justification was the central content of the Christian religion and that Christ was the agent of salvation.¹²

While Lindbeck's ecumenical vision was concretely realized in 1999, the impact of his theological model reached far beyond the bounds of ecumenical theology. The "cultural-linguist model," as Lindbeck termed it, was taken up by theologians in North America and Europe concerned with the demise of doctrinal normativity in an age of secularization. The pressing question for which Lindbeck's model served as answer was how Christian identity could be maintained amid a cultural pluralism that was predicated on secular foundations of modernity. The presupposition was a culture that had transformed Christ in the process of translating the goods of Christianity into cultural idioms. Theologians who were committed to scriptural and doctrinal truth saw in Lindbeck's model a way to recover a Christianity that had not relinquished its goods to modern culture. Lindbeck gave an "unapologetic" defense of the Christian tradition and provided the conceptual means to see doctrine in terms of a "rule theory" regulating Christian discourse. The primary source for Lindbeck's "cultural-linguist" model of doctrine was, however, not a sacred text. His inspiration was cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz.

III. Theological Slippages

The relation between theology and religion is as old as Plato's *Republic* at least. Ever since theology came to be regarded as the discipline describing and analyzing religion as its subject matter, theology has taken on the conceptual task of assigning stability to the concept of religion for the purpose of scholarly work. Without a stable concept, the phenomenon of religion cannot be discerned, investigated and compared. From its origins in Greek antiquity, theology as a conceptual discipline has taken on the task of articulating a concept of religion in order that the reality of religion can come more clearly into view.

Theologians had come a long way from their reformation inheritances of distinguishing between true and false religion by a Christological criterion. In the eighteenth century Protestant Orthodoxy set up a distinction between general and special revelation in religion, thereby more carefully and less pejoratively distinguishing between Judaism, Christianity, and other religions. The legacy of Protestant Orthodoxy would then become the backbone of early nineteenth-century

¹² Ibid., 18; The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000).

typologies of religion. Schelling distinguished between philosophies of mythology and philosophies of revelation. Hegel wove a typology of religion into a historical system: world history was the necessary unfolding of *Geist*, as articulated in his concept of religion. It would, however, be the psychological and transcendental concept of religion that Friedrich Schleiermacher developed for his 1820 *Christian Faith* and 1822 *Dialectic* that proved workable for the later orientation of the study of religion to empirical study. Schleiermacher's concept of religion has influenced, as Jörg Dierken has recently shown,¹³ some of the major trends in the early twentieth-century study of religion, among them Durkheim's sociology of religion, Freud and James's psychology of religion, the typology of religious feeling as in Rudolf Otto's work, and the neo-Kantian reception of Schleiermacher's thought in the history of religions school.

Given the legacy of the theologians constructing concepts of religion that would prove viable for theological study and possibly for the comparative study of religion, as is the case with Otto, it should not come as a surprise that George Lindbeck sought to articulate a theological concept of religion that would facilitate ecumenical rapprochement. Again, he found his inspiration in the cultural anthropology of Clifford Geertz. Although Lindbeck's reception of Geertz was additionally influenced by philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle (who himself is given primary citation in Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures* with the famous example about the "wink"¹⁴), it was Geertz's theory of religion that figured prominently in *The Nature of Doctrine*. Lindbeck wrote, in a full Geertzian mode, "Stated more technically, a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought."¹⁵

Yet the move from culture to religion, from Geertz to Lindbeck, is one that requires close analysis. When Geertz adapted his theory of culture to religion, he identified specific concepts that figured significantly in his account of religion. When Lindbeck appropriated Geertz's thoughts, on the other hand, these concepts can be seen to have a distinct "slippage," thereby shaping the way in which Lindbeck orients Geertz's account of religion into a linguistically privileged doctrinal paradigm. I identify three slippages, each contributing to Lindbeck's Lutheran understanding of religion as a worldview.

Geertz's own concept of religion is an adaptation of his overarching theory of culture. In his 1973 collection of articles entitled *The Interpretation of Cultures* that Lindbeck draws upon, Geertz writes that culture is "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life."¹⁶ The key

¹³ See his article "Transcendental Theories of Religion: Then and Now," in Sockness/Gräb, *Schleiermacher*, 165–78.

¹⁴ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books Classics; New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6–7.

¹⁵ Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 33.

¹⁶ Geertz, *Interpretation*, 89.

term "system" that defines culture should not be taken in the sense of a linguistically-articulated series of propositions, as Lindbeck accurately points out, but as an implicit psychological and cosmological framework that functions epistemologically as a coherent conceptuality giving meaning to life and thought. As such, the framework is not private, but shared. Geertz notes that the cultural system precedes the individual; it is inherited, both inchoately as presupposed and as articulated in already available symbolic forms. Geertz here draws on the phenomenological tradition that defines the self in deep connection with one's environment in ways that precede the subject-object distinction of discursive reason. An individual exists in his thrownness (*Geworfenheit*, to use Heidegger's terminology) in a world that precedes him and others together with him. Communication in symbolic form also precedes individuality. Symbolic communication – which is not restricted to language but can include ritual, gesture, and bodily expressions – is likewise a trope Geertz borrowed from phenomenology. For Heidegger and Bultmann, the key distinction between two types of language is instrumental and symbolic. Instrumental language is referential language to items that are used in the world. This is language used as a means to an end. Symbolic expression presupposes a deeper ontological connection between person and environment that is communicated through the subject-object distinction presupposed by discursive forms, but resists participation in this particular distinction. Symbolic communication puts into expression the particular subjective orientation to an environment, to a world, in total to culture.

The central clue exposing Geertz's commitment to symbolic communication that resists the subject-object distinction is his reference to "moods and motivations." Moods and motivations are the primary ways of a self's being-in-the-world. The appeal to moods and motivations as preceding subject-object instrumentality, as the phenomenological tradition would have it, orients subjectivity in a totality of a world. Thus for Geertz, moods and motivations are primary orientations of subjectivity in the world, with the difference being that "moods are 'made meaningful' with reference to the conditions from which they are conceived to spring" and "motivations are 'made meaningful' with reference to the ends towards which they are conceived to conduce."¹⁷ Both moods and motivations are pre-linguistic in the sense that they establish subjectivity in intimate connection with environment and require antecedent and subsequent symbolic articulation and communication. They capture in non-instrumental forms the particular fundamental orientations of subjectivity to one's environment, articulating ontological structures of subjectivity that relate to cosmological views. Moods and motivations, not linguistic constructions, are captured symbolically that in turn function to construct and shape subjectivity in its orientations to the world at its ontological level.

Geertz extends this theory of culture into religion, attuned particularly to both the subjectivity and cosmological aspects of religion. "Religion cannot be treated

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

as a formalizable symbolic system ... by isolating its elements," but is an area of life that has the cultural power to create meaning in the everyday as that meaning is relevant to a social group. Meaning in religion is particularly generated in relation to the metaphysical dimension of religious symbols that "tunes human actions to an envisaged cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experience."¹⁸ Meaning has a transcendent dimension that orients subjectivity to the more than the everyday. One can see this in everyday questions concerning aspects of life that elude explanation. Metaphysics lures in the search to understand that which exhausts the capacity of human rational control. Why is there existence rather than nothing? What is death? Why does evil persist in God's good creation? Subjectivity and metaphysics, self, world and God, are intimately related in Geertz's adaption of his theory of culture to the religious aspect of life.

The first slippage that occurs when Lindbeck adapts Geertz's theory of religion for an ecumenically relevant concept of religion is especially consequential for the "religion as worldview" theory. This significant slippage emerges from Lindbeck's strategy of amplifying Geertz's theory of culture to an all-encompassing religious framework. This is explicit in chapter 6, "Towards a Postliberal Theology." Whereas in earlier chapters of *The Nature of Doctrine* Lindbeck had suggested that religion functions like culture in the way Geertz describes, it was not immediately clear that religion can have an all-encompassing and culturally coherent function. This dimension is made explicit when Lindbeck turns to the discussion of meaning.

Meaning is more fully intratextual in semiotic systems ... than in other forms of ruled human behavior such as carpentry or transportation systems; but among semiotic systems, intertextuality (though still in an extended sense) is greatest in natural languages, cultures, and religions which (unlike mathematics) are potentially all-embracing and possess the property of reflexivity.¹⁹

It is at this point of meaning-making that Lindbeck invokes an extended discussion of system and of how religion can function as a system.

In view of their comprehensiveness, reflexivity, and complexity, religions require what Clifford Geertz, borrowing a term from Gilbert Ryle, has called "thick description," and which he applies to culture, but with the understanding that it also holds for religion.²⁰

In the subsequent paragraph it becomes apparent that for Lindbeck Geertz's theory of culture is appropriated for religion as an all-encompassing system. In quoting Geertz on culture as a context, Lindbeck slips in "[including religion]" in square parentheses, with the upshot in the concluding words, "It is rather the full range of the interpretive medium which needs to be exhibited, and because this range

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁹ Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 114.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

in the case of religion is potentially all-encompassing, description has a creative aspect."²¹ Where in earlier chapters Lindbeck assents to Geertz's more limited understanding of culture in its function of constructing subjectivities, in the later chapters he resorts to equivocating culture and religion, and amplifying religion as an all-encompassing context in which meaning is immanent. Religion has become a worldview.

Yet in Lindbeck's account religion as worldview is characterized by a distinct attribute that would be quite foreign to Geertz. A second slippage occurs at this point. In Geertz's understanding of culture, symbolic communication as constitutive of subjectivity and metaphysics plays primarily with moods and motivations. In Lindbeck's chapters, the terms he chooses to describe language are distinctly cognitive and linguistic – they are, in short, Lutheran.

A religion is above all an external word, a *verbum externum*, that molds and shapes the self and its world ... The *verbum internum* (traditionally equated by Christians with the action of the Holy Spirit) is also crucially important, but it would be understood in a theological use of the model as a capacity for hearing and accepting the true religion, the true external word, rather than (as experiential-expressivism would have it), as a common experience diversely articulated in different religions.²²

The chapter on "Many Religions and One True Faith" (4) explicitly uses the Lutheran phrase *fides ex auditu* in the context of how saving faith is communicated: "that when the *fides ex auditu* is emphasized, then explicit faith is understood, not as expressing or articulating the existential depths, but rather as producing and forming them."²³ The idiosyncratic element that Lindbeck adds to Geertz's understanding of culture is Luther's idea of the *verbum externum*. Lindbeck slips the "external word" into the concept of religion as semiotic system. The implication of this move is that Geertz's symbols are now taken as the preaching of the gospel, specifically Luther's word of the gospel that declares the sinner's justification is now taken as the Christian discourse shaping the religious worldview.

The third slippage that moves Geertz's culture into a Lutheran theological concept of religion is the function Lindbeck assigns to the *verbum externum*. Rather than a kerygma preached in a Sunday sermon, the *verbum* becomes the explicit language that constitutes the all-encompassing system of religion. Meaning is thoroughly immanent within the system. Any articulation of meaning-making occurs within the frame provided by the *verbum externum*.

It is at this juncture that the function of the Christian biblical canon is made explicit as constitutive of the Christian worldview. The account of the transhistorical persistence of religion is made in terms of language of a distinct sort.

This helps explain why purely customary religions and cultures readily dissolve under the pressure of historical, social, and linguistic change, but it also suggests that canonical texts are a condition, not only for the survival of religion but for the very possibility of normative theological description.²⁴

The paradigmatic case of canonical texts with transhistorical capacity to constitute a worldview is privileged as the *verbum externum*. As Lindbeck writes, "We need now to speak in more detail of how to interpret a text in terms of its immanent meanings – that is, in terms of the meanings immanent in the religious language of whose use the text is a paradigmatic instance."²⁵ He then makes another definitive move:

The same considerations apply even more forcefully to the preeminently authoritative texts that are the canonical writings of religious communities. 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.²⁶

We have come a long way from Geertz's understanding of culture and the semiotic system that frames meaning to Lindbeck's understanding of religion as an all-encompassing worldview that is constituted by the linguistic primacy of the *verbum externum*, whose meaning is determined by the scriptural canon. The result of the move from cultural anthropology to theology is that the linguistic level of the Christian canon is equivocated with Christianity as a worldview. All meaning is sought in its immanence within the system, while intertextuality becomes the appropriate hermeneutical method for describing and constructing meaning. "Scripture creates its own domain of meaning and that the task of interpretation is to extend this over the whole of reality."²⁷ Nothing less is offered here than a Lutheran worldview.

IV. Epistemic Primacy

Where Lindbeck allows the Bible to construct Christianity as a worldview, his student, Bruce Marshall, takes the religion as worldview concept in a radical "epistemic" direction. The language of "epistemic primacy" is Marshall's. In his book *Trinity and Truth*, Marshall looks specifically at the "church's narrative identification of Jesus, and with him of the triune God," rather than at biblical texts, in order to argue that the specific creedal documents function to render the Christian worldview. Marshall explicitly appeals to their "primacy" in shaping the entirety of Christian discourse because they adhere to the coherence principle that funds

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 34.

²³ Ibid., 60.

²⁴ Ibid., 116.

²⁵ Ibid., 115.

²⁶ Ibid., 117.

²⁷ Ibid., 117.

their truth: In Jesus "all things [beliefs] ... hold together."²⁸ Creedal claims acquire their coherence because of the single subject matter, "Jesus." Once the Christological coherence principle is in place, then creedal claims that cohere become the ways in which all other beliefs about the world are ordered. Marshall argues that the creeds function to orient all belief and action into a coherent religious worldview. As he writes, "Ordering all of our beliefs around the gospel of Christ requires a massive reversal of our settled epistemic habits and inclinations, of our usual ways of deciding what is true."²⁹

What is intriguing about Marshall's position is that the concept of religion as a worldview is taken as uncontroversial and applied to underline the normativity of Christian creeds as constitutive for the contemporary church. The idea that religion is a worldview has seeped into the discussion about modernity on Luther's own terms of the "external word." Luther's word has been translated into the linguistic practices shaping a worldview. This skews the terms of the modernity discussion into a binary opposition between liberal modernity and medieval/modernity Christendom. When once his theology caused scandal, Luther's theology now nails down the dogmatic coffin.

The epistemic service of a religious worldview is for Marshall a coherent structuring principle for thought and action. A religious practitioner is seen as someone who is well-versed in the particular language that deploys a linguistically coherent worldview. Yet entrance into that particular "world" is ascribed theologically to God, to the third person of the Trinity to be exact. The Holy Spirit is the divine person who facilitates the move from a prior worldview to a Christian worldview. Marshall explicitly appeals to the Spirit as the Trinitarian person responsible for effecting a dramatic conversion. In his words, "Only the Holy Spirit is up to the epistemic effort involved."³⁰ To the Spirit is assigned the epistemic role of conversion from one worldview to another, while the conversion from one linguistic paradigm to another is secured theologically by the fact that the Spirit is the divine person who "speaks." The Spirit, as the Creed records, "has spoken through the prophets." Furthermore, the Spirit also takes on the role of revealing the Christological and Trinitarian claims in such a way that they function epistemically in the new worldview to which the Christian has been converted. The epistemic primacy of revealed dogmatic propositions structures and orients the myriad possibilities in the concrete language of faith toward unifying coherence. Rather than circulating the fresh air of freedom in Christ, the Holy Spirit guarantees doctrinal normativity.

The contemporary North American theological use of Geertz ends up with a theological concept of religion as a Christian worldview, constituted by the canon as is the case with Lindbeck, and structured epistemically by creedal formulations

²⁸ B. D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 117, 118.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

as is the case with Marshall. Marshall's epistemic interest is captured by his invocation of the Spirit as agent of conversion. Once inside, all meaning is immanent within the coherent system. Theology is assigned the task of analyzing the constitutive grammar of the particular worldview on the terms stipulated by the epistemic shift. Intra-mural description of received creedal formulas, not the production of doctrinal knowledge, is theology's role.³¹

The theological translation of Geertz's anthropology is ironic for a number of reasons. Geertz's model is a contribution to ethnographic method. Geertz recommends that the ethnographer acquire a disposition of attunement to the other. The ethnographer tracks back and forth between two cultures in an effort to provide a "thick description" of the relations between symbol and mood, between idea and practice, between individual and community. The epistemic advantage model has translated the bilingual ethnographer into an insular theologian who authorizes the normative claims that he is describing. Even God is rendered a function of the theologian's worldview, determined exclusively by the words of Bible and creeds.

Second, the merging of theology's task with epistemic interests has, in my estimation, led to the increasing marginalization of theology from a plurality of conversation partners. The epistemic advantage model ironically cuts itself off from rich possibilities presented by others and simultaneously denies the possibility of contributing to broader conversations. Only conversion from one model to the Christian worldview secures the coherence required in order to maintain a self in one world. Once cultural and academic idioms are "absorbed" into the Christian worldview, there is no point in conversing with the other as other. Difference must be reduced to sameness in order for a common conversation to occur at all.

Third, the contemporary theological problem with pluralism seems to be a direct consequence of the theological cooption (including slippage) of the concept of religion as a worldview. The problem occurs when this concept of religion is mapped historically onto the West so that different worldviews become periodized throughout Western history. In terms that are predominant among theologians today, the medieval period is constructed as a monolithic worldview pitted against the modern worldview of liberal Enlightenment. When these two concepts are mapped onto narratives of the West, they inform a rupture that divides medieval from modern. The division is then taken to support the "medieval" view that is preferred over the modern liberal view. The criterion for the alleged historical division has to do with the coherence of belief principle invoked by Marshall. Coherence as a function of creeds that have epistemic primacy in a Christian worldview is pitted against modernity's pluralism that threatens coherence, secularization that erodes traditional belief, and translation into cultural idioms that undermine biblical truth. The dominant position in contemporary theology is clear: theology must resist the effects of modernity by reclaiming faithfulness through conversion to the medieval worldview.

³¹ For a detailed treatment of this argument, see my *Theology and the End of Doctrine*.

V. *Lutherrenaissance* Today

The challenge of the *Lutherrenaissance* of the past was the historicist turn. The challenge confronted by the *Lutherrenaissance* of the present is the disparagement of modernity and the erosion of the public space in the name of religion's resurgence. The gods who have been banned have returned with a vengeance.³² The original *Lutherrenaissance* engaged its historical context with a creative interest in Luther's religion, the religion that Luther inherited and changed. Given the contemporary theological context that resists creatively addressing modernity, the *Lutherrenaissance* today should forge a path in this direction and take a critical look at the theology of religion that haunts the theological problematization of modernity. Together with historians of the reformation and scholars of religious studies, Lutheran theologians should be interested in religion today, in order to work out concepts of religion that do justice to subjectivity and cosmology, while also taking into account that religion has many ways of being in the world.

Zusammenfassung

Luther, Geschichte, und der Begriff von Religion

Dieser Aufsatz untersucht, wie die ursprüngliche *Lutherrenaissance* zu einer Kritik an dem heutigen dominanten „Modell des epistemischen Vorteils“ in der Theologie anregen kann. Die Frage ist eine historische; sie betrifft die Periodisierung der westlichen Geschichte in Mittelalter und Moderne, die auf einer Auslegung der Theologie Martin Luthers basiert. Steht Luther am Ursprung der Moderne, wie viele Wissenschaftler der *Lutherrenaissance* behaupten, oder repräsentiert er eine Theologie, die auf dem *verbum externum* aufbaut, wie der zeitgenössische nordamerikanische lutherische Theologe George A. Lindbeck behauptet? Lindbeck schließt sich dabei dem Religionskonzept des Kulturanthropologen Clifford Geertz an. Von daher entwickelt er ein ökumenisch-theologisches Modell, das die Religion als ein diskursiv konstruiertes Weltbild definiert. Die lutherische Trope wird als spezifische „Überschreitung“ zwischen Geertz' Verständnis von Religion und Lindbecks Verständnis der Lehre als „Grammatik“ des religiösen Weltbilds analysiert. Diese spezifische Trope wird dann verwendet, um die angeblichen „historischen“ Ansprüche der modernen Geschichten vom westlichen Christentum als eine konzeptionelle Präferenz für ein katholisches und mittelalterliches Weltbild zu entlarven. Eine solche Vorliebe spiegelt einen ahistorischen Zugang zur christlichen Religion. Der Aufsatz schließt mit einem Appell, die zentrale Erkenntnis der *Lutherrenaissance* wiederzuentdecken, dass Religion als eine Funktion von Geschichte (und Realität) zu verstehen ist.

³² See the subtitle of John Smith's book: *Dialogues Between Faith and Reason: The Death and Return of God in Modern German Thought* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011).

CHAPTER 11

Heinrich Assel

Political Theology After Luther – Contemporary German Perspectives

I. God's Freedom and Sovereignty and the Freedom of the Christian

“Freedom is merely a divine name – it is in this sentence from *De Servo arbitrio* that German Idealism's philosophy of history fails.” This is the opening sentence in Emanuel Hirsch's famous volume of essays, “Idealistic Philosophy and Christianity,” from 1925.¹ This statement is a beacon of Lutheran political theology. Hirsch articulates this claim in the spirit of a *Lutherrenaissance* that inherited the idealistic philosophy of history.

In my first essay in this volume (ch. 2) I discussed the disastrous consequences of political theology for Hirsch's thought in the decade between 1933 and 1945. Yet the following claim can also be correct: Luther's concept of the freedom of God, understood as a concept of divine sovereignty, and the question of human liberation or bondage within both political existence and the worldly regiment of God, is the catalyst for a particular kind of political existence of Christian people in early modern and modern societies. Let us begin with Luther's *Freedom of a Christian*. This text is a good starting-point for us because many Lutheran political theologians after 1945 looked carefully at this text. In my previous essay, I tried to make this point using Hans Joachim Iwand as example.² It is important to take seriously the particular theological tradition that is based on Luther's text on Christian freedom.³

¹ E. Hirsch, *Die idealistische Philosophie und das Christentum: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Gütersloh: Der Ruf, 1926). On Hirsch's political theology from 1926 to 1945, see pp. 36–40 of my chapter two (“Die *Lutherrenaissance* in Deutschland von 1900 bis 1960: Herausforderung und Inspiration”) in this volume.

² On Hans Joachim Iwand's political theology from 1945 to 1960, see pp. 43–7 in this volume.

³ At the conference in Evanston on which the second part of this volume is based, the American journalist Michael Massing fundamentally criticized the anti-Erasmanian stance of Luther's theology. Massing had in mind the political-theological controversies in contemporary US society. Nevertheless we must admit the problematic, even disastrous effects that Luther's theology had on German society in the twentieth century. Both my essays aim to show that from 1900 until today, the *Lutherrenaissance* has contested the legacy and legitimacy of Luther's political theology, taking in particular his *De servo arbitrio* as text to debate.