George Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine* (1984) is widely regarded as a manifesto of postliberalism. The work sets out a "cultural-linguistic" approach to Christian doctrine, which argues that doctrine regulates the language of the Christian tradition. After considering approaches to doctrine which treat it as making cognitive truth claims or expressing human experience, Lindbeck turns to set out his own position, as follows.

The description of the cultural-linguistic alternative that I shall now sketch is shaped by the ultimately theological concerns of the present inquiry, but it is consonant, I believe, with the anthropological, sociological, and philosophical studies by which it has been for the most part inspired. In the account that I shall give, religions are seen as comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world. Not every telling of one of these cosmic stories is religious, however. It must be told with a particular purpose or interest. It must be used, to adopt a suggestion of William Christian, with a view to identifying and describing what is taken to be "more important than everything else in the universe," and to organizing all of life, including both behavior and beliefs, in relation to this. If the interpretive scheme is used or the story is told without this interest in the maximally important, it ceases to function religiously. To be sure, it may continue to shape in various ways the attitudes, sentiments, and conduct of individuals and of groups. A religion, in other words, may continue to exercise immense influence on the way people experience themselves and their world even when it is no longer explicitly adhered to.

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. It functions somewhat like a Kantian *a priori* although in this case the *a priori* is a set of acquired skills that could be different. It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (though it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments (though these will be generated). 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. It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully.
deployed. Lastly, just 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. Its doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical directives are integrally related to the rituals it practices, the sentiments or experiences it evokes, the actions it recommends, and the institutional forms it develops. All this is involved in comparing a religion to a cultural-linguistic system . . .

Thus the linguistic-cultural model is part of an outlook that stresses the degree to which human experience is shaped, molded, and in a sense constituted by cultural and linguistic forms. There are numberless thoughts we cannot think, sentiments we cannot have, and realities we cannot perceive unless we learn to use the appropriate symbol systems. It seems, as the cases of Helen Keller and of supposed wolf children vividly illustrate, that unless we acquire language of some kind, we cannot actualize our specifically human capacities for thought, action, and feeling. Similarly, so the argument goes, to become religious involves becoming skilled in the language, the symbol system of a given religion. To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one’s world in its terms. A religion is above all an external word, a *verbum extemum,* that molds and shapes the self and its world, rather than an expression or thematicization of a preexisting self or of preconceptual experience. 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 . . .

In thus inverting the relation of the internal and external dimensions of religion, linguistic and cultural approaches resemble cognitivist theories for which external (i.e., propositionally storable) beliefs are primary, but without the intellectualism of the latter. A comprehensive scheme or story used to structure all dimensions of existence is not primarily a set of propositions to be believed, but is rather the medium in which one moves, a set of skills that one employs in living one’s life. Its vocabulary of symbols and its syntax may be used for many purposes, only one of which is the formulation of statements about reality. Thus while a religion’s truth claims are often of the utmost importance to it (as in the case of Christianity), it is, nevertheless, the conceptual vocabulary and the syntax or inner logic which determine the kinds of truth claims the religion can make. The cognitive aspect, while often important, is not primary.

This stress on the code, rather than the (e.g., propositionally) encoded, enables a cultural-linguistic approach to accommodate the experiential-expressive concern for the unrelective dimensions of human existence far better than is possible on a cognitivist outlook. Religion cannot be pictured in the cognitivist (and voluntarist) manner as primarily a matter of deliberate choosing to believe or follow explicitly known propositions or directives. Rather, to become religious – no less than to become culturally or linguistically competent – is to interiorize a set of skills by
practice and training. One learns how to feel, act, and think in conformity with a religious tradition that is, in its inner structure, far richer and more subtle than can be explicitly articulated. The primary knowledge is not about the religion, nor that the religion teaches such and such, but rather how to be religious in such and such ways. Sometimes explicitly formulated statements of the beliefs or behavioral norms of a religion may be helpful in the learning process, but by no means always. Ritual, prayer, and example are normally much more important. Thus—insofar as the experiential-expressive contrast between experience and knowledge is comparable to that between “knowing how” and “knowing that”—cultural-linguistic models, no less than expressive ones, emphasize the experiential or existential side of religion, though in a different way.

Comment

The emergence of postliberalism is widely regarded as one of the most important aspects of western theology since 1980. The movement had its origins in the United States, and was initially associated with Yale Divinity School, and particularly with theologians such as Hans Frei, Paul Holmer, David Kelsey, and George Lindbeck. While it is not strictly correct to speak of a “Yale school” of theology, there are nevertheless clear “family resemblances” between a number of the approaches to theology to emerge from Yale during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Since then, postliberal trends have become well established within North American and British academic theology. Its central foundations are narrative approaches to theology, such as those developed by Hans Frei, and the schools of social interpretation which stress the importance of culture and language in the generation and interpretation of experience and thought.

The “cultural-linguistic” approach set out by Lindbeck denies that there is some universal unmediated human experience which exists apart from human language and culture. Rather, it stresses that the heart of religion lies in living within a specific historical religious tradition, and interiorizing its ideas and values. This tradition rests upon a historically mediated set of ideas, for which the narrative is an especially suitable means of transmission.

Lindbeck’s *Nature of Doctrine* is widely seen as the most important work to set out the position of the “postliberal” camp.

Questions for Study

1. In what way can doctrine be seen as the grammar of the Christian language? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?
2. “Thus the linguistic-cultural model is part of an outlook that stresses the degree
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to which human experience is shaped, molded, and in a sense constituted by cultural and linguistic forms." Locate this citation within the text. What does Lindbeck mean by this? And how does this illustrate the importance of tradition and social structures for Lindbeck's approach?

3. The use of the word "postliberal" suggests that Lindbeck and his colleagues regard liberalism as being superseded. On the basis of the passage, what reasons may be given for this belief?