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# Contextualization and the Non-obvious Meaning of Religious Symbols: New Dimensions to the Problem of Truth

**Robert C. Neville**

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## Contextualization and the Non-obvious Meaning of Religious Symbols:

### New Dimensions to the Problem of Truth

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#### I.

George Lindbeck's landmark book, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, has taught many lessons, some perhaps not anticipated by its author.<sup>1</sup> The one that I take most to heart is that religious doctrines, and many other religious symbols, often are not descriptive in ordinary senses and that they are seriously misinterpreted if taken to be descriptive. The doctrine of the ascension of Christ, for instance, is not really about Jesus rising into the stratosphere. Another lesson is that Lindbeck's cultural/linguistic analysis of doctrine as the grammar underlying the practice of a community of faith, to summarize his complex position roughly, leads many to believe that doctrines so interpreted are therefore neither true nor false. Indeed, some go so far as to hold that Lindbeck's position legitimates any doctrinal affirmations whatsoever because doctrines are merely descriptive of the underlying grammar of some actual community's practice. Theology, on this interpretation of Lindbeck, is transformed to church history or congregational studies.<sup>2</sup> The conclusion that any community's doctrines are valid for that community comes from the negative implication that theology can have no normative thrust other than discerning when a community is being faithful to its basic grammar. That is, Lindbeck's rejection of conservative propositional theology and also of liberal experiential/expressivist theology leaves no normative context for criticizing a "post-liberal community" and its doctrines. This is surely not what Lindbeck intended with his theory of doctrine.<sup>3</sup> What went wrong with his theory, or the reception of it, to allow theology to be reduced to social science?

<sup>1</sup> George A. LINDBECK, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> He and his colleague Hans Frei sometimes characterize theology as self-description of the Christian community and therefore closer to cultural anthropology than to philosophy. See FREI's *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. by George HUNSTON and William C. PLACHER (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> In fact, it is close to what Frei characterizes as the "fifth" kind of Christian theology epitomized by D. Z. PHILLIPS, *op. cit.*, 46-55.

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