GEORGE LINDBECK AS A POTENTIAL RELIGIOUS PLURALIST

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Interreligious dialogue and conversion are two contentious foci for understanding how religion operates. An interpretation of George Lindbeck serves as a starting point for discussion in this paper. The dominant reading is that Lindbeck claims that traditions absorb the world. Religious traditions are isolated, and the one with a greater capacity to assimilate others' concerns emerges the strongest – implying what is called *exclusivism*. My proposal is that a different reading of Lindbeck is possible; I am not so much questioning Lindbeck as highlighting another aspect of his *oeuvre*. If grammar, framework and structure – and *not* propositional first-order ontological contents – are given first place, dialogue and conversion appear differently. Questions must be raised, however; isn't it true that there is *always* some content and substance – even if hidden or disguised?

I. INTRODUCTION

'How to judge a religion other than one's own?'[1] is an important question. It requires reflection not only about 'the other', but also about one's own position: What precisely do I believe, after all? In what *way* do I believe?[2] Such questions surface whenever strong convictions of any sort are discussed, but they are particularly pressing in religious matters.[3]

Reflection on relations with other religions touches on interreligious dialogue and conversion: What are the appropriate conditions for being in dialogue with people of another religious tradition? What should the dialogue look like? What are good reasons for a dialogue?[4] On the other hand, are there situations where it is legitimate to try to *convert* another? Which situations?[5] Thus: What is the role of apologetics? And the role of proselytism?[6] The American theologian George A. Lindbeck offers answers in this area. Or perhaps it is more correct to say that Lindbeck points a way that leads to answers.

Whichever reading is favoured and whatever conclusions are reached, it has to be admitted that Lindbeck articulates ideas about dialogue and conversion not in a simplistic fashion but through a refined and yet accessible theory of religion. One could say that Lindbeck's theory makes explicit aspects that remain unstated in other theologies, and in particular in other theologies of religion.[7] Many appreciate the confidence in religious traditions his theory exudes; Lindbeck argues that religious traditions are not accountable to anything outside themselves. He discusses the Christian tradition, but wants his theory to be neutral, and therefore useful for a non-theological study of religion.[8] I believe many of the ideas about religion Lindbeck formulates are relevant in contexts outside theology as well.[9]

Though the clarity and accessibility of Lindbeck's theory are appreciated by all, it must be said that his theory of religion is still problematic, primarily for two related reasons. First,

empirical objections can be raised; it can be argued that there is little or no room for real adherents or actual practice in Lindbeck's system. Furthermore, he seems to presuppose a substantial unity to tradition, whereas for most religions this claim appears weak. Second, these empirical difficulties are connected to theoretical or conceptual concerns. There have been objections to his centre-to-periphery structuring of a given religious tradition, presupposing a clear, stable and uncontested core that would be decisive for that tradition.

Lindbeck is an interesting thinker, for he brings to the surface commonly held ideas about religion. His clear and comprehensive theory is attractive on several fronts. But Lindbeck is also intriguing for a different reason. The aforementioned problematic sides of Lindbeck are troublesome on one particular reading of his work. I believe there are other elements in his writings that push reflection in another direction. The argument of this paper is that Lindbeck can be read in different ways, at times pointing in opposing directions with regard to dialogue and conversion. In theological jargon, he can be seen as having an *exclusivist* inclination, which is a well-known and well-established reading.[10] There are also *fissures* in his texts, however, and when these are made visible, the exclusivism is less obvious and begins to break down. If there remains any exclusivism, it must be contextualised, for there are also openings for reflection on religious pluralism. I suggest that Lindbeck can even be viewed as *advocating* a pluralist position, which appears a new reading. The terms *exclusivist* and *pluralist* are of course simplifications and not entirely adequate; my thesis, nonetheless, is that there are different strands in Lindbeck's texts, different tendencies, going in opposed directions.

My intention here is to present Lindbeck's thinking on the issues of dialogue and conversion, show that this thinking can accommodate a form of religious pluralism, and briefly discuss problems that might emerge from such a reading.

II. LINDBECK ON TRADITION AS ABSORBING THE WORLD

Lindbeck holds each religious tradition to be a particular form of life with a specific vocabulary and distinctive grammar. Taking part in such a form of life, with its distinctive vocabulary and grammar, is essential for the formulation of certain beliefs, and for many experiences. It is necessary to take part in a particular form of life in order to articulate what Lindbeck calls 'descriptions of realities'.[11] He states:

> [a religion] 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. [—] It comprises a vocabulary […] together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed. […] [J]ust as a language […] is correlated with a form of life […] so it is also in the case of a religious tradition.[12]

Lindbeck maintains, according to theologian Jeannine Hill Fletcher, that without language as a structuring device, the universe would be confused; language provides the possibility of identifying elements within the world, and culture helps to put them into a structural order. Accordingly, the only path to 'reality' passes through language, culture, and tradition.[13] In other words, tradition functions like powerful and comprehensive lens or pair of spectacles.[14] Moreover, a religious tradition is an all-embracing framework, that is to say, a context 'within which everything can be properly construed and outside of which nothing can be equally well understood.'[15] A religious tradition is a structure within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality as a whole. Using other spectacles would entail an entirely different vision of the world.[16]

On this approach religions are interpretative schemes with universal and exhaustive scope; they concentrate on what is considered more important than anything else, and they aim at organising life in its totality, constituting a cultural and linguistic frame that decides and shapes life in its totality. The religious tradition in which one lives shapes one's perception in a powerful way. In the case of the Christian tradition, there are stories told about Jesus, nurturing the memory of his life and ministry, that form 'the "objective constant" that persists as the unifying feature of Christian group identity.'[17] According to Fletcher, Lindbeck sees 'this story [...] as the singular, comprehensive framework Christians employ for encountering and understanding the world.'[18]

A consequence of this is Lindbeck's talk of religious traditions that 'absorb the world'[19], with implications for how interreligious dialogue should be understood, and regarding what place proselytising and conversion may have. A basis for Lindbeck's view is what he calls the 'double claim of comprehensiveness [that] constitutes [a] general form of untranslatability;'[20] religions are separate, untranslatable, unified structures forming interpretive contexts, each representing a different thought world, and giving different answers to different questions. However paradoxical this may appear, Lindbeck claims it can serve as the basis for a dialogue in which differences are respected.[21] As radically different forms of life, each religious tradition sees the world through its own lens, there is thus no external factor that can be used to compare or measure, but also for this reason there is no 'competition'. A friendly and respectful dialogue may therefore take place.

This said, it should be added that Lindbeck also says that comparison and evaluation are possible; 'there is enough communality to make possible open-ended arguments over which forms of life have the most assimilative power.'[22] A given religious tradition derives its strength from how successful it is in assimilating ideas, thoughts, perceptions of the world; if it can make understandable interpretations of what is seen, felt, and experienced, and does so on its own premises, then it is a reasonable alternative to other worldviews, and to other religions.[23] If two religious traditions are put side by side, they can be compared in terms of which of them has the capacity to assimilate other religious ideas – or deal with the main concerns of rival traditions, or else convincingly show they are irrelevant – without losing its proper identity and without dissolving, without ceasing to exist; it is all about being able to absorb the rivals.[24] Moreover, Lindbeck advances the claim that 'of all the religious and professedly non-religious *Weltanschauungen*, which aspire to embrace without being embraced, only one, if that, can be ultimately successful'[25] – one that manages this better than other religions. In sum, according to Fletcher, Lindbeck makes a double claim. First, he claims that each religious tradition constitutes a framework different from other frameworks and covering all the vital aspects of life. Second, only one such outlook can be true, or completely comprehensive.[26]

The traits that many find attractive in Lindbeck's thinking can be found here: religions are distinct forms of life, each forming a particular view of the world; each one shaping the understanding in a particular way. The notion of an objective reality that could correct religious teachings therefore becomes obsolete. Dialogue between religions and cultures also becomes possible, because none is more 'correct' than the others. Yet, Lindbeck claims that each tradition, in its strong perspective-forming character, absorbs, or aims to absorb the entire world. To that extent there *is* competition, as the tradition that has the strongest assimilative potential absorbs more than the others. This could also explain conversion, and it could supply a basis for proselytism. The attraction of this theory is strengthened by parallels with Thomas Kuhn's seminal work on scientific paradigms (*Structures of Scientific Revolutions*).[27] Of course, it would be naïve and counterproductive to simply identify or reduce religious traditions to

scientific paradigms; nevertheless, there are a number of parallels. In both, differences are respected and dialogue is encouraged. In both, some explanation is given for a phenomenon that could be called conversion, transformation, or simply 'change'. This is compatible with exclusivist views – either strong (Harold Netland)[28] or weak (Mark Heim)[29]. There are complications, however: perhaps a religious tradition does *not* absorb the world in the same way. The claim for the 'strong role of tradition' in Lindbeck is double-edged.

III. LINDBECK'S COUNTER-MOVEMENT

Lindbeck seems to oscillate between two positions: traditions as shaping, forming, and deciding reality *and* traditions containing resources for interpreting reality. On the one hand Lindbeck is eager to talk about the comprehensive character of a tradition; the lense offered by a tradition makes some things – and not others – possible, and they are possible only within *this* tradition, not any other. For instance Lindbeck pushes the comparison between the use of Arabic numbers (contrasted with Roman numerals), and having a biblical background or not. He holds that introducing Arabic numbers – in particular the 'zero' – transformed mathematics fundamentally, such that children in early school years can now do things that before demanded complicated procedures mastered only by a few.[30] Analogously, Biblical doctrines – or perhaps the Bible read through the lense of Christian belief – made possible religious experiences and thoughts otherwise unavailable.[31] Participating in a tradition is indispensable; a tradition provides lenses through which to see, experience and understand. Moreover, different lenses or traditions shape contexts variously and may lead to radically different perceptions and interpretations of the world.

On other occasions, Lindbeck plays down religious traditions as merely *shaping* reality. He writes: 'What has been seen through these lenses has varied widely, for they have been used to gaze on very different landscapes […]'[32] Such variation is thus due to the varied landscapes; here it is *not* the tool – the lenses of Christian doctrine – that shapes the landscapes. Lindbeck returns to similar views in his account of how the Bible functions. For instance, he praises Shakespeare not because he was more knowledgable about the Biblical world than some theologians, but because he was able to make more out of the Biblical narrative in virtue of being such an extraordinary observer of human nature.[33] It is notworthy that Lindbeck does not praise Shakespeare because he was able to see the world through the Biblical lens; no, Lindbeck stresses instead Shakespeare's skill at *employing* the Biblical narrative – the stories, images, and texts found in the Bible. Here, it is *not* that the Bible, as a powerful master narrative, a strong interpretative text, *shapes* Shakespeare's vision of the world. Thus, when Lindbeck claims that '[t]hrough most of Christian history, the Bible has been construed as a typologically unified narrative'[34] that forms reality, his prime illustration, Shakespeare, does not conform to this pattern, understood in a strong sense.

Elsewhere, indeed, Lindbeck defends the view that it is *not* the tradition that shapes the reading of particular texts; rather, the reverse: it is how various texts are brought to the fore, or not, that constructs the tradition. As one part of a religious tradition is placed at the centre rather than another, the sense of what is happening, of what is central – for example, a sense of God's actions and God's purpose – changes: '[…] the material or doctrinal consequences of this self-evidently depend in part on what canon is appealed to.'[35] Here a religious tradition is more like a basket containing elements that may be used – or *not* – read, seen, understood and of course combined in various ways. In Lindbeck's view, such shifting is what Shakespeare did so ingeniously.

IV. A DOUBLE READING

As B. D. Marshall comments on Lindbeck's theory, when Christians identify the meaning-giving core of their religion, they do not regard it as entirely fixed. 'It is always possible that external […] arguments may arise which lead the community to reconsider its understanding of the core.'[36] What we are seeking is thus a stability in the tradition that is still negotiable and subject to modification. What this implies says Marshall is that 'one does not take Scripture to be false, although what we identify as its plain sense may at any given point be false.'[37] There is thus something holding a community together, and this something has a sense; yet, this sense is not and cannot be fixed. If there are rules governing the reading practiced within a community, these rules are changeable and subject to negotiation. Lindbeck indeed affirms that agreement on certain explicitly formulated doctrines may have its roots in diverse interpretations and divergent notions about how to justify or defend these theses. In this way, consensus on theological matters may 'cross confessional divides'.[38]

   If this is true, a religious tradition does not simply shape reality; it does not simply furnish the lens through which the world is seen, and it does not straightforwardly absorb the world. Rather, any religious tradition is like a container with a large number of elements that can be read in different sorts of ways. A particular emphasis is open for advocacy.[39] If one deals with Christianity, for example, one must realise there are many faces to Christianity. What is claimed has undergone many changes, and will be altered in the future. What are seen as key features change from era to era.[40] This assemblage of usages, readings, and combinations do indeed frame and shape reality; the direction, however, is not one way. There is interaction in both directions. What is picked up and inserted, what is chosen and combined, is always in principle open to dispute. The implication is that central portions of Lindbeck's theory of religion must be interrogated – in particular his notion of religions absorbing the world. This questioning has consequences for the role he accords to interreligious dialogue and to proselytising towards conversion. The important point, however, is that this questioning arises only from a certain way of reading Lindbeck. There are *other* traits that could be emphasised – namely, *framework*, *structure*, and *grammar* – that make criticising him and pointing out flaws in his argument less pertinent. One is not forced to accept a picture of Lindbeck undercutting Lindbeck, but rather only to concede that other aspects of his writings would give a different picture of his theory. Still, this is relevant for reflection on dialogue and conversion.

V. LINDBECK, AND TRADITION AS STRUCTURE

It seems that Lindbeck's emphasis on religious traditions such as structure and grammar, fitted out with a specific vocabulary and closely attached to a specific form of life, as well as his stress on tradition forming lenses or spectacles through which everything is seen and without which nothing can be perceived – his claim that a tradition forms, moulds, and shapes the world – all have their place, although perhps not as presented thus far. Instead of starting from the idea that religions are 'windowless monads' – undivided and untranslatable idioms that form and shape our vision of the world, one could begin from Lindbeck's claim that conflict between doctrines does not necessarily mean opposition at the level of propositions. He writes:

> Religion cannot be pictured [—] as primarily a matter of deliberately choosing to believe or follow explicitly known propositions or directives. [—] 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.[41]

One can read Lindbeck as holding that different religious traditions do not primarily (if at all) aim at saying anything in particular about how things *are*; their claims are not ontological, not on a first-order level. Hence, if two traditions are incompatible, this is not necessarily a conflict at the level of content; it could be read from another angle. If religions function like languages, they should rather be described at the level of *grammar*, how they function to provide regulative *frameworks*. It is not helpful to ask if the framework a tradition establishes is good and valid in relation to how things *are*, just as there is little point in asking whether English grammar corresponds better to how the world is than Chinese grammar. Lindbeck writes:

> […] on peut interpréter les oppositions entre les doctrines ecclésiales comme étant […] régulatrices plutôt que propostionnelles; autrement dit, comme des règles d'ordre indirect contextuellement valides d'un discours d'ordre direct, plutôt que comme des prétentions à la vérité ontologiques d'ordre direct.[42]

The elements of *grammar*, of *structure* and thus of *categories* are important. A given utterance may, for example, be read and understood in different ways by different communities, due to their different frameworks rather than to different attributions of first-order contents. To Christians the utterance 'Jesus died on the Cross' may signify that Jesus died out of love for the world, that Jesus was sacrificed with the aim of restoring the world, or something similar. Muslims would typically disagree with such interpretations, but the disagreement is not necessarily at the propositional level. Generally, to Muslims the very idea that Jesus died on a cross is a repugnant and impossible thought. What is disputed, then, is not whether Jesus actually died on the cross; Muslims cannot accept that idea simply because Jesus is held in such high esteem that the notion is inconceivable. After all, Muslims would say, all agree that Jesus is the son of a virgin, which shows his extraordinary status. In other words, on the surface it seems that Christians and Muslims are in deep conflict on the point of Jesus' death on the cross. In reality, however, it appears to be a non-contradiction. On this point, Christians and Muslims ordinarily do not speak about the same thing and emphasise different potential aspects of the same phrase.[43]

In this example, the two religious traditions function, in Lindbeck's fashion, as sets of regulative rules.[44] Talking about religious traditions as sets of regulative rules is based on an analogy with language. Pursuing this analogy may have interesting consequences. Those who are 'native speakers' of a given language agree to a significant degree in the use of the language as an instrument; that is, they agree on what forms are correct, on grammatical rules, and on appropriate vocabulary. Obviously, they do not necessarily agree on content. Transposed to religions, what is at stake is rather *how* to talk about certain topics, rather than *what* to say about them. One can widen the picture a bit. It is perhaps a question about what subject-matters or topics can be dealt with, but *not precisely* about the contents of one's statements. In this direction Lindbeck perhaps intends his comment that the primary question is '[…] *how* to be religious in such and such ways.'[45]

VI. APOLOGETICS AND CONVERSION

I have been arguing that Lindbeck can be read in different ways, pointing in opposing directions with regard to dialogue and conversion. Still, the contrast between the two ways is perhaps not as neat as that. Still, the difference is radical: both readings allow for an open interreligious dialogue, both allow for conversion. The difference is about attitude and approach. In particular, the two readings point towards different *types* of conversion. I suggest that when one starts

examining certain aspects and pushing various parts of Lindbeck's discourse, a surprising variety of possibilities emerges. One path follows Lindbeck's emphasis on framework and grammar, and consequently his diffidence with regard to ontological claims. If this path is pursued, an alternative picture of dialogue and conversion comes forth. In other words, I suggest there are more resources in Lindbeck than one might suspect in a first reading.

Of particular interest is the reflection one may engage in about conversion. In the account on Lindbeck given above, his ideas about assimilative power would seem to encourage conversion efforts in a *prima facie*, unqualified, mainstream understanding. If, however, Lindbeck's references to *structure*, *framework*, and *grammar* are emphasised, it is indeed possible to combine these with arguments that proselytising is legitimate; yet this shift in focus entails a shift on other points as well. My suggestion is that the question is not whether efforts to convert are legitimate, but rather *how* and *when* they are legitimate. Theologian Paul J. Griffiths offers ways to deepen the discussion on this point. He introduces a principle, which he calls the principle of the necessity of interreligious apologetics (NOIA):

> [I]f representative intellectuals belonging to some specific religious community come to judge at a particular time that some or all of their own doctrine-expressing sentences are incompatible with some alien religious claim(s), then they should feel obliged to engage in both positive and negative apologetics vis-à-vis these alien religious claim(s) [...][46]

A point to notice here is that Griffiths' principle has several unspoken assumptions. For instance, if there are doctrine-expressing sentences that are incompatible with other sentences, one might ask: *on what point*, *where*, *how*, and *why* are these sentences incompatible? Griffiths does not address this issue directly, but he gives a clue about what proselytism, conversion and apologetics mean for him when he argues that

> [...] apologetics should not be any attempt to systematically show that the doctrine-expressing sentences have to be accepted as conceptually or epistemologically superior; apologetics is occasional and has to be sensitive to the political dimensions, and aware of the possibilities of exploitation and oppression.[47]

It seems to me that Griffiths' argument reinforces Lindbeck's stress on structure and grammar *versus* specific ontological claims. Together they push the discourse on conversion in a new direction. If a religious system can be compared to a grammatical system, then the aspect of *how* to talk should be emphasised. If so, religious traditions are perhaps not primarily about ontological first-order propositions. Furthermore, if apologetics always takes place at a particular level – concerning specific aspects – as Griffiths suggests, then *some* conversion is legitimate and necessary, but not necessarily other types.

Of course, interpretations that stress *how* over *what*, or emphasize framework to such a degree that it has priority over content, are not necessarily Lindbeck's intention. Sometimes he seems inclined not to want to talk about the *how* in general; he would rather discuss it only in a precise context. When he talks about framework, grammar, structure and so on, he seems to be thinking about a discourse nourished by images, metaphors, and stories taken from the Bible and read in the light of the Christian tradition. The aim of playing this particular game would be to build up the Church. This is already visible in the title 'Scripture, Consensus, and Community'[48] in his contribution to the volume *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*. Moreover Lindbeck says: 'This essay is concerned with the consensus-and-community-building potential of the "classic" pattern of biblical interpretation.'[49] He adds: 'Not all the problems of how to reshape the church in this age of transition would be solved by such a development,'[50] which indicates that his focus is the Church.[51]

Yet, his theory should be applicable outside the Christian context if it is indeed a theory of religion. Lindbeck declares that the theory of religion outlined in *The Nature of Doctrine* is neutral with regard to different confessions. And so it has to be, if it is to have anything to say about religious tradition in general.[52] 'A theory of religion and doctrine cannot be ecumenically useful unless it is nonecumenically plausible.'[53] Lindbeck's intent to elaborate a general theory is solidified when he gives other examples:

> Much contemporary intellectual life can be understood as a search for such texts. Contemporary Marxists and Freudians, for example, now rarely seek to ground their favourite author's writings scientifically or philosophically. They simply ask that they be followable, that they be construable in such a way as to provide guidance […][54]

This twofold character of Lindbeck's theory is related to the fact that he is playing on two levels at the same time. On the one hand the important thing is that people, as they did during the Middle Ages – the Middle Ages seems to have the status of a Golden Age for Lindbeck – all have the same language, use the same images, share the same basic vision of the world, a vision informed by the Biblical imagery; what people *believe*, what they *understand*, by this is secondary or less interesting; the important thing is that they *share* a vocabulary (*how* to be religious). This suits well a theory that aims to describe the *functioning* of any religion. On the other hand during this Golden Age everything was clearly framed by *Christian* doctrine, read through the one lens – the story of Jesus Christ.[55] That is to specify the 'what', or kind of content. Lindbeck claims that the religious interpretation accepts a particular meta-narrative (God acting in history, through Jesus Christ etc.) that decides *how* each part of the Scripture is read.[56] His interest here seems to be the best interest of the Church. The overarching aim is to see what is *Christian*. In another text Lindbeck writes:

> Nor was this absorption of ordinary life by the Bible simply an imaginative matter. Charlemagne's typological identification of himself as a Christian King David set over God's people, for example, was not an empty metaphor but a history-transforming trope. The extraordinary unity of Western culture in the Middle Ages […] above all the result of the reality-defining power of a single pre-eminent text, the Bible, classically interpreted.[57]

and further on:

> Scripture […] could serve as the spectacles, […] through which faith views all reality.[58]

Yet once again, the *content* of this story is left open. This vacillation in Lindbeck leaves it possible to read him in two different ways. On the one hand there is Lindbeck emphasising *doctrine* in the interest of the *Church*, and thus unavoidably oriented towards the *content* of the discourse. Reading Lindbeck in this fashion implies what is traditionally labelled *exclusivism* in the theology of religions. Exclusivism prioritizes apologetics, conversion efforts, evangelisation, and proselytism. On the other hand the side of Lindbeck that talks about *framework* and *grammar* could be stressed; in this case content becomes a secondary issue. If this is pushed far enough, not even the content of the framework can be fixed, which means that what is held to be central to Christianity, for example, must remain an open question. Specifically, whatever is central to Christian life cannot be limited to doctrine. Important elements of a framing structure could be as well about attitudes and approaches. An interesting and difficult aspect to this reading is how tradition seems to dissolve. Let's say that such things as dialogue and nonviolence, a non-authoritarian attitude and liberation are held to be central to Christian teachings. One could then ask: what is specifically Christian about this? A framework and grammar, of

course, but a grammar that does not appear specifically Christian to many. On the other hand, if a particular content were specified, some might find it unacceptable. This is apparent in exclusivist Christian theology of religion. For example, if we claim that one is saved only through Jesus Christ, one could then ask whether this is a disinterested ontological fact, or whether it is necessary that one *know* and *accept* this fact as well. The latter seems reasonable from an exclusivist point of view, but at the same time bizarre; how can all who lived and died before the Christian era be considered? Or those who have never heard of Jesus? Or those who have not understood what they heard? Etc.[59] A clearly *Christian* identity, yes; but to many an absurd idea.

I cannot go into all the theological, philosophical, or psychological aspects of this; I limit myself to the issue of framework. The point of stressing framework and grammar is that a structuring framework consists of a shared vocabulary – and perhaps how this vocabulary shapes the world – but the entire discourse is pitched at the level of framework and structure, not of first-order ontology, with its 'propositional content'. This is a difficult path, for identity can seem to vanish. On the other hand, holding on to identity through ontological claims is also not easy, but for different reasons.

VII. CONVERSION: A SIMPLE AND A COMPLEX ISSUE

The two readings of Lindbeck seem to be opposed regarding *conversion*. Prima facie, *conversion* is simple enough; at least following one established meaning of the term, it consists in exchanging one religion for another.[60] Even if *conversion* is perceived as an inner process (for instance related to *metanoia* – 'a dynamic and lifelong process by which a person changes his or her ways in order to become more devoted to the good news of Jesus of Nazareth, more involved in doing Christian charity, and more centred on a prayerful and growing relationship with the living God revealed in the gospel' etc.),[61] *the effort to convert others* has been described as a 'conscious effort to recruit new adherents even though it ruins other religious communities?' ('effort conscient […] de recruter de nouveaux adeptes, au détriment des autres communautés.').[62] Such efforts to convert others could also be called proselytism, which means wanting to turn the other towards one's own convictions.[63]

Against Lindbeck's view of religious traditions as *structures* and *frameworks* concerned with *how* to be religious, I suggest this latter focus is misplaced. We should think less of conversion as discarding one detailed view of religious matters in favor of another detailed view; it perhaps consists rather in a process of changing categories, or going from one way of asking questions and finding answers to another way of doing so.

I believe that Lindbeck does in fact touch on these questions, although in a different context:

> […] meaningless to say that one thing is larger than another if one lacks the categorical concept of size. [—] Similarly a categorically true religion would be one in which it is possible to speak meaningfully of that which is, e.g., most important.[64]

If this is correct, one could imagine converting to a new and different *categorical framework*, not necessarily to particular propositions. According to Lindbeck, religious doctrine is less concerned with particular utterances or – to follow the language analogy – 'the lexicon'. It is rather concerned with how or in what way they are made, and how they are meaningful; it is about 'the grammar of the religion'.[65] Acquiring a new vocabulary and new categories does not necessarily require replacing older categories; addition is possible, not only substitution. This seems to be different from content – truth claims regarding ontology, etc.

If structuring questions and issues of framework are brought to the foreground, thinking about dialogue and conversion may take another form, which may, perhaps, more easily accommodate both dialogue and conversion. There would be a novel and exciting variation of perspectives, as it were, and less harsh conflict regarding truth claims. This does not entail disappearance of disagreement and conflict, however, and certainly not of conversion. Still, if categories, framework and grammar are central, the type of conversion and the style of the effort to convert others may shift, as compared with the established view of how the conversion operates. To me, this comes through clearly when we look at the thinking of two 'classical' pluralists, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter.

John Hick argues that all world religions share a basic approach: human beings tend to be centred on themselves and religious teachings are exhorting us to become Real-centred instead.[66] This would encourage every effort to convert us and others to a religious outlook. On the contrary, conversion *from*, let's say, Islam *to*, let's say, Buddhism, or *from* Hinduism *to* Christianity, would be futile, misleading, disrespectful etc. within this perspective.[67] Paul Knitter approaches the issue from another angle, with a different language; yet there are similarities. Knitter sees Liberation and the Kingdom of God as being the heart of the Gospel, instead of propositional truths regarding Jesus.[68] Hence conversion to openness, liberation, commitment to well-being etc. is necessary, and everyone must perhaps also contribute to making other people move in this direction. Conversion as changing religious *belonging* is not an issue, however.[69] Both in Hick and Knitter it is evident that human talk about religious matters cannot be separated from ethical concerns.[70] On this point conversion is sometimes called for, and an obligation to convert others exists.[71]

Such discourses, either with a philosophical bent as in Hick, or more overtly theological as in Knitter, follow a line where *ethics* is central. In this sense issues of *how*, or in other words of framework and structure, are prominent – at the expense of doctrine and a concern for orthodoxy. Curiously enough, these philosophical and theological considerations are strongly reinforced by observations about how religion is actually lived and practised.

Lived and practised religion is typically complex, variegated, diversified, and by no means identical with how it is presented in doctrinal treatises; it does not necessarily conform to orthodox theological norms. For example, even if someone is a Buddhist, this does not mean that this person follows only and exclusively the path of Siddharta Gautama; other elements may be included as part of his/her particular religious identity. What is more, it goes without saying that not all Buddhists 'follow the path of the Buddha in the same way,' Fletcher claims, quoting Francis Schüssler-Fiorenza.[72] Accordingly, variations of a given religious tradition cannot be axiomatically excluded. An historical religious tradition can always be read differently; the particular content can always be re-negotiated.[73] Another consequence is, as Fletcher points out, that what 'Buddhist thought' or 'Christian doctrine' means is not as straightforward as one might assume if one listens to 'actual conversations between particular Buddhists and particular Christians whose own understanding and interpretations of the thought and doctrine of their tradition vary widely.'[74] Put differently, religious traditions must be seen as something else and more variegated than what has traditionally been maintained. If such variation is taken into account, this gives more room to *how* and less room to *what*, and the whole issue of dialogue and conversion becomes variegated.

My suggestion here is that one way of reading Lindbeck is that he underlines structure and grammar as central parts of religion. An implication would be that religious traditions should not be concerned primarily with propositional content, but rather with *how* to be religious, *how* to live religion, *how* to talk about religion. At stake would be framework and categories, manners and attitudes – for instance, having a *religious* outlook as Hick would have it, or

self-expenditure for liberation in Knitter's vision. What exactly Hick and Knitter may mean by these, and problems they may encounter when spelling it out, is another matter.[75] The leading notion here is that if the gaze is turned to structures and *how*, rather than to propositions on a first-order ontological level, this may open up religion and culture. In this case, it would be inappropriate to place A *versus* B, Buddhism *contra* Islam, or Christianity *versus* Hinduism. Perhaps it is rather an issue of a particular style or approach x, contrasted with another style or approach z. In such a context, the burning questions regarding conversion, or where efforts should be made to convert others, would shift to issues like readiness for dialogue, hermeneutics, to what types of inquiry are interesting, necessary and useful, and so forth.

VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Understanding religion includes understanding features of religion like dialogue and conversion. In this paper I have discussed these issues through an interpretation of George A. Lindbeck and his theory of religion. A suggestion of this paper is that Lindbeck's theory can be read in two ways. The dominant reading is that Lindbeck claims that traditions absorb the world: religious traditions are basically isolated, and the one with the best capacity to assimilate others' concerns is the strongest. This implies what is sometimes called *exclusivism* (with apologies for the inadequacy of the term in this context). Another way of reading Lindbeck leads towards a type of *pluralism* (also with apologies for the inadequacy of the term here). The second path is unexpected and unexplored; in this interpretation framework and structure, *not* propositional first-order ontological content, take first place. Conversion in particular may then be seen in a new light.

In what could be labelled an exclusivist reading of Lindbeck, conversion entails a shift from one all-embracing view to another similarly all-embracing worldview or paradigm: from one religion (for example Christianity) to another religion (for example Islam). On the other hand, if conversion, like dialogue, is limited in scope, and if the target is as much a question of style, grammar and framing structures as anything else, conversion becomes less dramatic. Of course, conversion may still be powerful and profound, without implying that one departs from one set of propositions about how everything is, to another set of propositions of this same type. To me this seems attractive; it reflects the variation in how people live their religion, and creates room for nuanced and multifaceted dialogue and possible conversion. Questions must be raised, of course; there are problematic aspects here as well. I throw out a couple.

It seems to me that being concerned primarily with rules, not content, and formal aspects, not substance, is possible and perhaps even praiseworthy. Yet even in this case one must also be aware of the potential outcome of choices. For instance, promoting certain things without giving a clear indication of the solution can have substantial consequences.[76] Further, the framework chosen always has implications.[77] Even if the emphasis is on structural issues and not particular content, there is likely a vision in the background of how certain things are.[78] So when Michael Root, for instance, claims that a special grammar regarding certain religious matters, with its particular rules 'does not commit us to any particular Christology,'[79] I think one must ask whether such is possible. And plausible? Lindbeck for one does not seem to be aiming at a too 'emptied' framework. David Tracy, for instance, has pointed out that Lindbeck's theory of religion is not neutral; and although Lindbeck claims it is based on studies in philosophy (Wittgenstein) and anthropology (Geertz), the voice in the ideology behind is Karl Barth's and confessionalism.[80]

Agreeing or not with Tracy on this point is of secondary interest. His underlying questions are relevant: *What* structures are brought up? *What* models are invoked? *What* schemes are highlighted? *What* keys are used? To me it seems important to be vigilant towards Lindbeck, as his discourse frequently revolves around the Church and its pre-modern hermeneutics.[81] He seems to view the Middle Ages as an ideal, because the culture was homogenous thanks to the Holy Roman Empire and the papacy, but also because of a common text that defined reality – the Bible as authoritatively interpreted by the Church without external sources, and without outside criteria.[82]

So when the question of 'how to be religious' (rather than questions regarding 'what to believe') in Lindbeck is coupled with images from the Middle Ages – a unity of culture, authority, patriarchy, hierarchy and other similar things[83] – this is problematic. Whether Lindbeck has a clear agenda or not, whether he is conscious of this or not, is a different matter. As a reader I will have to ask myself: How much follows automatically from Lindbeck's discourse? What is an unavoidable import, and what can be eliminated? How much of this is desirable?

To conclude: Much can be learnt from reading Lindbeck. Much inspiration is to be found in his texts, with abundant and rich resources that can be used in a variety of ways. I think that most will agree on this, even if different aspects may be highlighted. Lindbeck may be read in order to give (back) power, force and legitimacy to the Church, to form a worldview that 'absorbs the world,' allowing for dialogue but also clearly in favour of proselytism in a 'classic' sense; 'May the *Weltanschauung* with the strongest assimilative power win!' could be the a slogan here. Or Lindbeck may be read so as to see religious discourses as structure and grammar, and less concerned with propositional content. In the latter case, interreligious dialogue is of course welcome, and so is conversion, albeit more with regard to style and approach, with less impact on specific claims. So, why not read Lindbeck? There is much to be learnt, but one will also have to decide *how* to read him. This paper is a contribution to that discussion.

IX. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Notes

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