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### ***The Word and the World for an Integral human development in George Lindbeck's Postliberal Theology***

#### Introduction

The development of Western thought, starting from the humanistic period and even more with the emergence of the modern sciences, tended to improve the tools of a critical approach to the word of the Bible. The general trend shifted more and more from the interpretation of the world through the eyes of the Bible to the interpretation of the Bible through the instruments of modern scientific historiography. The highest point of this process has probably been rejoined by the so-called 'liberal theology' in Germany with famous scholars such as Adolf Von Harnack, Ernst Troeltsch, and Rudolf Bultmann. However, in contemporary theology, a new school has come out that calls itself post-liberal and tries to reconsider the validity of the path that has brought the Bible from being a book for the interpretation of the world to be a book interpreted with the canons of the contemporary world.

Today I would like to present to you one of the scholars that promoted such a fascinating perspective. His name is George Lindbeck, he is born in the city of Louyang in 1923 and he lived the early years of his life in China with his parents that were protestant missionaries in the East. He came to America during the last years of the Second World War and there he will study catholic medieval and neo-thomistic theology at the University of Yale. Such studies will then bring him in Europe, particularly in Rome, to be one of the protestant observers at the Second Vatican Council. Starting from the 1980s, the work of Lindbeck turns to be focused on the present crisis of authority of the Sacred Scripture. According to him indeed, the main problem of contemporary crisis of religions in the West lays in the lost of the primacy of Scriptural text in the community of believers. The great damage of such a crisis is that it isn't confined only in a matter of biblical interpretation, but involves also the development of human experience of the world.

The relationship between the Bible and the universe of human experience represents probably one of the most crucial problems in the thought of Lindbeck. In his main work, *The Nature of the Doctrine*, published in 1984, he states that "theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extra-scriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text" and as a consequence "A scriptural world is thus able to absorb the universe"<sup>1</sup>. That is what the American theologian defines with the notion of "intratextuality" intended as unique criterion of faithfulness for the biblical text. However, as Lindbeck considers in his essay *Scripture Consensus and Community*, contemporary times are characterized by a problem of scriptural authority that "is in part a matter of playing the rules of the game" in which "the official rules are uninterpretable" and "the game is change in a midcourse"<sup>2</sup>. In other words, the crisis invest both the plan of the rules of interpretation of the word of the biblical text and the dimension of his applicability in the present world. How is then possible to recompose such a game? And what does intratextuality actually mean? The answer to both these questions is actually what I intend to develop in my research work focusing on 4 main aspects:

1. The cultural linguistic-approach of Lindbeck in the context of contemporary theology and philosophy of religion
2. The anthropological and philosophical sources of Lindbeck's work
3. The category of the game as interpretative key for the cultural-linguistic approach to religious truth

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<sup>1</sup> G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of the Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1984, pp. 117-118.

<sup>2</sup> G. Lindbeck, *Scripture, Consensus and Community*, in G. Lindbeck (edited by J. J. Buckley), *The church in a Postliberal Age*, W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids (Michigan) /Cambridge 2003, p. 216.

#### 4. The deep game of religious truth in dialogue with the world

From the methodological point of view, two aspects will be particularly important. At first, the selection and the interpretation of the sources, within which will be given particular attention to those coming from the philosophical field to highlight their role in the work of the author. The second fundamental aspect will be an attention to interdisciplinarity, essential to deal with an author that has crossed his work at least through the fields of philosophy, theology, anthropology and sociology. The main point of view will however remain a philosophical one, in order to analyze with the tools of philosophical thought the essential concepts of a similar interdisciplinary theory of religion. In the next part of my intervention, I am then going to present the issues and the questions from which is possible to start the development of such a research project, following the four main subjects I have just presented.

##### 1. The cultural linguistic-approach of Lindbeck in the context of contemporary theology and philosophy of religion

To better understand Linbeck's concept of intratextuality it is useful to start with the assumption that for him religiosity is something strictly related to human experience. That is indeed the beginning of every philosophy of religion that tends to consider the religious phenomenon from the human point of view, instead of the divine one, more proper to the theological thought. After the period of Enlightenment, with its maximum expression in the philosophy of Kant, the Romantic season has seen a reborn of religion in its centrality for human life. However, that was not the same religion present in Europe in the medieval and humanistic period: the criticism of the Enlightenment had definitely marked it. This metamorphosis is quite clear from the *Discourses on Religion* of Friedrich Schleiermacher, which constitutes the starting point of such tradition and of the possibility of a philosophy of religion itself in its modern wave. Here the author considers that the essence of religion "ist weder Denken noch Handeln, sondern Anschauung und Gefühl" (Is not thought neither action, but intuition and feeling). "Anschauen will sie das Universum, in seinen eigenen Darstellung und Handlungen will sie es andächtig bekauschen, von seinen unmittelbaren Einflüssen will sie sich in kindlicher Paßivität ergreifen und erfüllen lassen"<sup>3</sup> (She wants to look at the universe, in its own presentation and actions, she wants to devour it devoutly, from its immediate influences, she wants to seize and let itself be fulfilled in childlike ease).

The felling of religion comes from a fundamental need of unity that is not satisfied by the other two human ways of approaching the universe: the metaphysical one and the moralistic one. Schleiermacher considers that a similar division of the sciences, derived especially of the philosophy of Kant, does not give a principle of unification able to fulfil the entire human experience in its relationship with the universe. Religion absolves then the role of such a principle that "sie will im Menschen nicht weniger als in allen anderen Einzelnen un Endlichen das Unendliche, deßen Abdruck, deßen Darstellung"<sup>4</sup> (sees in man as well as in all the other particular and finite beings, the Infinite, ist reproduction and ist manifestation).

From this brief presentation of Schleiermacher's thought, it's easy to understand the importance that the role of personal experience and feel will more and more take in the religious dimension. It is indeed the beginning of what Lindbeck calls an "experiential-expressivist" approach to religion. Such attitude has taken various shapes since the 18<sup>th</sup> century but all are unified, according to the American theologian, at least by the following assumption: "Different religions are diverse expressions or objectification of a common core experience. It is this experience which identifies them as religions"<sup>5</sup>

The first main consequence of a similar point of view is the loss of authority of the Biblical text as a source for the religious experience. The experiential-expressivist theology indeed, begins to look for an experience of religiosity outside the biblical text. A similar attitude has brought also undeniable positive results, first of all, a great openness of Christian European tradition to the dialogue with different cultures. However, according

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<sup>3</sup> Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Berühmten*, Berlin, 1799, in Friedrich Schleiermacher (a cura di Davide Bondi), *Scritti di Filosofia e di Religione 1792-1806. Testo tedesco a fronte*, Bompiani 2021, p. 209.

<sup>4</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 210-11.

<sup>5</sup> G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of the Doctrine*, cit., p. 31.

to Lindbeck, the problem with the dialogue between different forms of religious experience is that it ends up in an impossible task of translating different categories one into the other. That becomes particularly evident in the Christian approach to the problem of the salvation of non-Christian men. The experiential-expressivist theologies of contemporary times, particularly that of Karl Rahner would tend to assume that all human beings are in some sort anonymous Christians that possess a natural aspiration to religiosity and to the search for God and so has the possibility to be saved. The error of a similar idea lays however, according to Lindbeck, on the claim to include different forms of cultures in a dimension like the Christian salvation that does not belong to their way of understanding themselves and the world: "There is something arrogant about supposing that Christians know what nonbelievers experience and believe in the depths of their beings better than they know themselves, and that therefore the task of dialogue or evangelism is to increase their self-awareness"<sup>6</sup>. In order to prevent the risk of a similar "translational theology", Lindbeck finally elaborates a completely new approach to the understanding of religion. That is what he calls a cultural-linguistic approach which starts from the assumption that religions are, "comprehensive interpretive schemes centered on that which is taken to be more important than everything else in the universe"<sup>7</sup>. The most significant evidence here is the return of the confrontation between religious experience and the experience of the universe, but in an exactly reversed way. If in Schleiermacher's work and in liberal or experiential-expressivist theology indeed, religion was the intuition of the common experience of the universe in which the human being is involved, in Lindbeck's terms instead, the universe is the starting point from which religious experience takes his singular shape. That is what he resumes with the concept of intratextuality, according to which the biblical text returns to be able to absorb the experience of the subject and shape it by its own rules. Religion, for Lindbeck, can therefore be compared to a linguistic system in which the grammar is represented by the teachings of the Sacred Scripture and the vocabulary is represented by all the rituals and practices of faith that derives from them.

## 2. The anthropological and philosophical sources of Lindbeck's work.

At this point, once presented the most essential assumptions of Lindbeck's thought, I am going to outline how do I intend to analyze it following an interdisciplinary but philosophically focused point of view and what kind of sources I intend to take into account. The first important thing that I will consider is the great influence that contemporary sciences different from theology have on Lindbeck's theory of religion. That is what he calls the "interdisciplinary advantages"<sup>8</sup> of the Post-liberal theology. In this wide research however the cultural-linguistic dimension of religion remains the focus, as we assume from the following quotation:

"On the non-theological side I gained a new dimension in the 1960s from Wittgensteinians, T. S. Kuhn, Peter Berger, Clifford Geertz and contemporary non-foundationalists. Whatever their differences, they are not bewitched by modern uniqueness: they hold that the basic process of the linguistic, social and cognitive construction of reality and experience are much the same in all time and places, however varied the outcomes"<sup>9</sup>.

But what do all these authors have in common? Following the suggestion of Lindbeck, they seem to share a new way to understand the human experience as socially, linguistically and/or cognitively constructed. Starting from such a variety of extra-theological sources, the American theologian seems then to offer a new, original and contemporary way of understanding the human religious experience of reality through the eyes of the Bible. My research work aims therefore to explore such an interesting point of view, starting from its philosophical and anthropological sources and focusing particularly on the concept of game as a metaphor of human experience. As we've seen indeed, Lindbeck himself uses a similar metaphor in *Scripture, Consensus and Community* comparing the present crisis of authority of the Biblical text to a loss of the rules in a game that continually changes in its applicability. Moreover, even the scholar Michael Root, considers that in the

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<sup>6</sup> G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of the Doctrine*, cit., p. 61

<sup>7</sup> G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of the Doctrine*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of the Doctrine*, cit., p. 130.

<sup>9</sup> G. Lindbeck, *Confession and Community: An Israel Like vision of the Church*, in G. Lindbeck (edited by J. J. Buckley), *The church in a Postliberal Age*, cit., p. 3.

theory of Lindbeck religious doctrines could be confronted “to grammatical rules or the rules of a game”<sup>10</sup>. Finally, considering the sources of his essay *The Nature of the doctrine*, we must note the fundamental role exerted the concepts of “deep play” by Clifford Geertz and of “linguistic game” by Ludwig Wittgenstein. The category of game or play seems therefore to offer a conjunction ring that unites together the ethnography of Geertz and the philosophy of language of Wittgenstein and that could in this perspective illuminate also the thought of Lindbeck itself.

In order to find out a sense in the manuscript of human culture Geertz indeed, elaborates the concept of “deep play”<sup>11</sup>. Such a notion is taken by the ethnographer from the utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham according to which gambling represents a form of “deep play”, where human beings tend not to respect the proportional relationship between happiness and the amount of the winning. Studying the phenomenon of the Cockfight in Bali, Geertz argues that what is involved in gambling is not simply a sum of money, but something deeper: the human life itself with its cultural and religious influences. In order to understand a culture, it is then fundamental, according to Geertz, not to be an external observer, but to grasp its deep dimension that lays behind even the most superficial aspects and behaviors. Moreover, Geertz, together with Lindbeck himself, is in debt with the complex philosophy of language of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his work *Philosophical Investigations*, the philosopher seems finally to consider the possibility of an inner building up of the meaning that derives not from an external clarification, but from an internal ground related to the function and use and the context of use of the language:

11. Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a ruler, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screw.---The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects.<sup>12</sup>

These and other passages suggest that language is to be intended as an activity, also defined as a “linguistic game” or a “form of life” in which the meaning of a verbal expression in the common use of human language is not constituted by its denotative correspondence to reality, but it's made up by contextual elements that mediate the relationship between sense and significance such as the rules in a game.

Could then a much wider examination of the ontology of play in philosophy, intended as a form of mediation of the human experience of reality, represent a valid key of interpretation on our analysis of Lindbeck's notion of intratextuality?

### 3. The category of the game as interpretative key for the cultural-linguistic approach to religious truth

In order to answer to that question, that will represent the core issue of my research work, I will offer here only some suggestion of the path I intend to follow. At this point, it will be necessary to focus on four fundamental aspects of Lindbeck's theory of religion: the issue of linguistic competence in religion, the definition of operational doctrines and the main characteristics he attributes to a post-liberal theology: faithfulness as intratextuality, applicability as futurology and intelligibility as skill.

To summarize some of these crucial subjects, I could say that they are finally linked to the problem of meaning in human experience. The search for the meaning is for him an intratextual operation in the sense that he tries to find out the concrete use of a concept beyond its historical crystallization, into the original source of the text, that is finally the Bible, and also into the concrete practice of the believers. The original meaning that he finds out confronting this two main sources, represents then for him the rule on which to decide the correct sense of any religious truth. These two points of reference are finally what he calls the grammatical rules and the linguistic competence in his metaphor of religion as a linguistic system. Therefore intratextuality seems finally to be an ability or a skill of interpretation of the meaning starting from the biblical text on the one hand and the community of the readers and believer on the other. Such a perspective comes out quite clearly in *The Nature of the Doctrine* as long as in other various works of the American theologian such as in the essay of

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Root, *Identity and Difference: the Ecumenical Problem* in B. D. Marshall (ed.), *Theology in Dialogue: Essays in conversation with George Lindbeck*, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame (Indiana) 1990, pp. 165-190.

<sup>11</sup> C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Book, New York 1973.

<sup>12</sup> L. Wittgenstein (edited by G.E.M. Anscombe), *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1958, p. 6.

1989 on *Scripture, Consensus and Community*<sup>13</sup> where these free elements of the title are presented together as a pattern for biblical interpretation. The kind of hermeneutic that Lindbeck has in mind, when he talks about a Scripture that interprets itself, is traditionally called a typological interpretation. In this perspective, the Ancient Testament, or the writings that belongs to Jewish faith, served to Christianity as an ectype, an original fount of which the words and deeds of Jesus Christ represented the type, the final fulfilment that offered the complete sense. Lindbeck recalls indeed that the Christian communities, before the codification of the Gospels, where readers of the *Torah*, in the Greek translation of the *Septuagint* and they informed their life experience interpreting this Scripture through the memory of the teachings of Jesus Christ.

What Lindbeck proposes isn't however a simple return to the past: as we've said he has quite clear the present condition of religions and specifically the Christian one. That is testified by the variety of contemporary thinker he takes has resources for the elaboration of his theory. Differently from his master and colleague Hans Frei who concentrates his work particularly on the exegetical issue of the return of a premodern typological and narrative hermeneutic, Lindbeck opens the problem of Biblical narrative to theology itself and, as we have seen, puts it in dialogue with philosophy, anthropology and sociology. He is the first one indeed that tries to present a project of Postliberal Theology that must be founded on the two regulative grounds of the Biblical text and the community of the believers. But the point of Lindbeck is that such intratextual experience is to be understood in the double sense according to which at first the Scripture performs the universe of religious community and then, in a subsequent passage, a similar experience becomes the key of interpretation also for the reality outside the community and the text. In his essay *Scripture, Consensus and Community* he refers to this two aspects assuming that the Scripture must be at once followable and construable. In other words, The Bible has to be interpreted in a way that is understandable by the one who follows it and that offers the tools to build up their experience of the world. The postliberal approach to theology seems therefore to be, better than merely a theory or a system, something like an activity that presents a regulative plan, represented by the words of the Scripture, that traces the lines within which human life experience is then able to move in free directions throughout the world.

#### 4. The Deep game of religious truth in dialogue with the world

This final consideration opens up to some further questions concerning what consequences could have a similar understanding of human and religious experience outside the religious field. What effects could it have at first in the relationship between religion and rationality, in the context of a contemporary world marked by secularization and the problem of interfaith dialogue. And secondly, how could it influence the ethical dimension: would it may be the right point of start for the development of a new communitarian ethic?

Hoping that the further improvement of my research work will help to resolve these and other important questions to come, I thank you for your kind attention.

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<sup>13</sup> G. Lindbeck, *Scripture, Consensus and Community*, in G. Lindbeck (edited by J. J. Buckley), *The church in a Postliberal Age*, cit., pp. 201-222.