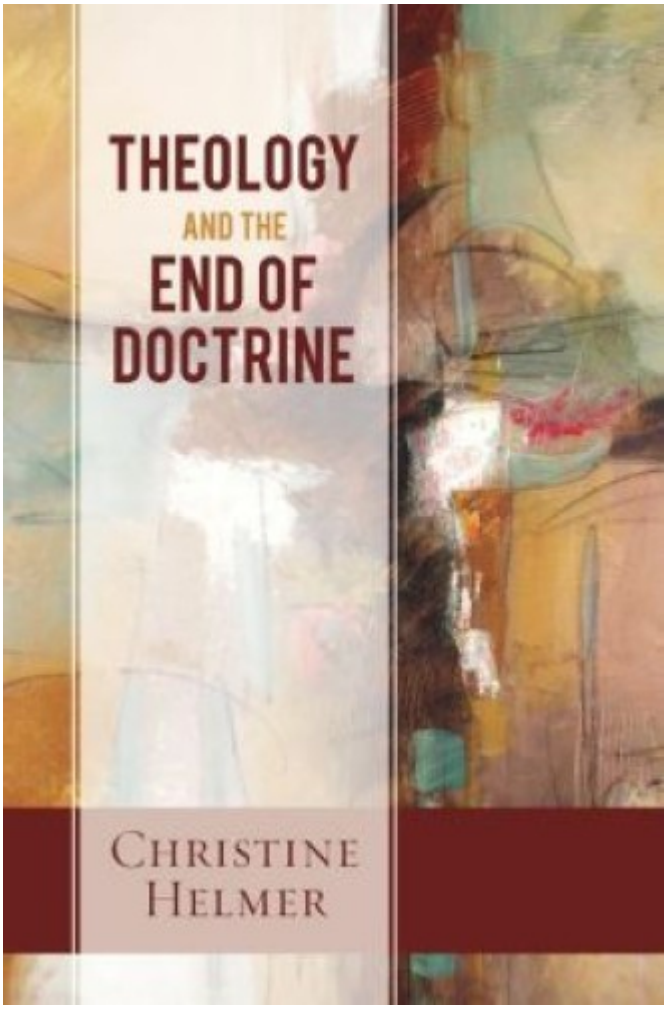
Doctrine’s many lives

by Sarah Morice Brubaker in the November 26, 2014 issue

In Review



Theology and the End of Doctrine

By Christine Helmer
Westminster John Knox

Christine Helmer’s important book has an unusual literary feature. Its titular character, Christian doctrine, is killed off not once, but twice. Or at least the death of doctrine is “twice pronounced,” with each supposed death attracting a different set

of coroners who ascribe its demise to very different causes.

Helmer chronicles two historical moments when it was declared that a theological strategy had sold Christian faith down the river and made doctrine impossible. But Helmer also argues persuasively for a different end to doctrine—end in the sense of "purpose." As long as its proper end is kept in sight, Helmer maintains, Christian doctrine will turn out to be resuscitatable, even vital.

The discussion of doctrine's purpose occupies the second part of the book. Prior to that, Helmer chronicles the two moments in Christian theology when doctrine's death was declared. The first time it was said to be Friedrich Schleiermacher's fault, and anyone who has spent time in Barthian or postliberal theology will be familiar with that particular postmortem account. Schleiermacher, we are meant to believe, put an end to Christian doctrine by turning it into a function of the individual's prelinguistic interiority, rather than of the biblical text. Theologians like Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, and George Lindbeck signed the arrest warrant and have duly held Schleiermacher's work in maximum-security confinement ever since.

Helmer, thankfully, is not content simply to rehearse the charges. With precision and charity, she questions the evidence against Schleiermacher, in the process relating a fascinating backstory about how so many theologians came to blame him for doctrine's demise. The situation turns out to have been far more complex than Schleiermacher single-handedly selling the Christian faith down the river.

To give a far too brief account of a complicated story that is better told by Helmer herself, it begins with Martin Luther's understanding of righteousness, which was repositioned by 17th- and 18th-century Lutheran theologians in a way that weakened Luther's own connection between righteousness and justification. That development, in turn, facilitated Immanuel Kant's grounding of religion in ethics, which in turn sparked Albrecht Ritschl's insistence that, to the contrary, Christian ethics must be grounded in justification. Ritschl's disparaging use of the word *mysticism*—intended as a foil for his own account of justification—then was taken up by Brunner, who turned it into a category with which to discredit Schleiermacher. But Brunner's aspersions were based on a misreading: he mistakenly understood Schleiermacher's theory of consciousness as flat subjectivism—an attempt to ground religion in the individual subject's prelinguistic experience of his or her own interiority. In reality, Helmer reminds us, Schleiermacher made specific ontological claims, about which she has much to say in the second portion of the book.

Unfortunately, Brunner's reductive reading of Schleiermacher was so successfully established that Schleiermacher became the fall guy for subsequent generations of theologians who yearned for a God who stood unassailably outside all human constructs and cultures. Over time this outsideness came to be identified with the divine word—with God having spoken in a way that is prior to and unconditioned by any human speech, even as it also makes such speech possible. One sees this in Barth, certainly, and in Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*, which Helmer's title *Theology and the End of Doctrine* is meant to evoke.

One can have sympathy, as Helmer does, for 20th-century theologians' desire for a God whose divine word cuts clean through any historical and cultural context. The problem, Helmer argues, is that this set of theological maneuvers caused doctrine to come to another bad end.

Taking cues from Barth and Lindbeck, many Western theologians have so insisted on doctrine's absolute priority that doctrine has lost any ability to refer to anything. The doctrinal claim that "God is triune," for example, is said to be an epistemic category that normatively organizes Christian thought and speech. But this normativity "is secured," Helmer points out, by its assignment to the "church-creed analytic that has been cut off from any divine transcendent reality. Doctrine has lost its witnessing capacity to the God who might call doctrine into question." Systematic theology winds up having little to say about God's transforming activity in the world, and far too much to say about the conditions of possibility for systematic theology.

In the final part of the book, Helmer suggests that we can revive doctrine by employing insights from the much- maligned Schleiermacher, of all people. Of course, such recuperation will require us to toss out the reductive readings of the German theologian and look instead at what he was really saying. If we do so, Helmer argues, we will find ways of making theological claims about God and Christ that are understood properly as acclamation: statements of identity ("You are the Christ!") that have a clear external referent but also reflect an individual's experience of a transforming encounter. Theology as acclamation can do more than explain how theological speech is possible. It can say things about a transcendent God—a God who may decry the ways in which some ostensibly normative doctrine has been produced. Yet such a theology manages not to lose historical grounding, for it expects that individuals and communities will have unique responses to a transforming encounter with God.

This is a challenging book that contains many lines of thought I have not been able to mention here, and it is a marvelously worthwhile challenge. (To give but one teaser: the discussion of the relationship between theology and religious studies should be required reading for anyone with a vested interest in either guild.) The writing is blessedly lucid and interesting. Making one's way through the conceptual sophistication is a pleasure rather than a chore.

Those who are not extremely well versed in Schleiermacher will need to read the first part of the book slowly, ideally with Schleiermacher's writings in hand and a highlighter at the ready. That said, one could do worse than encounter Schleiermacher for the first time via *Theology and the End of Doctrine*, for one would not come away with the sort of cheap misreading that tends to abound.

Schleiermacher scholar or no, those who deal in theological method would do well to spend some time with *Theology and the End of Doctrine* and to be reminded why doctrine can be life-giving after all.