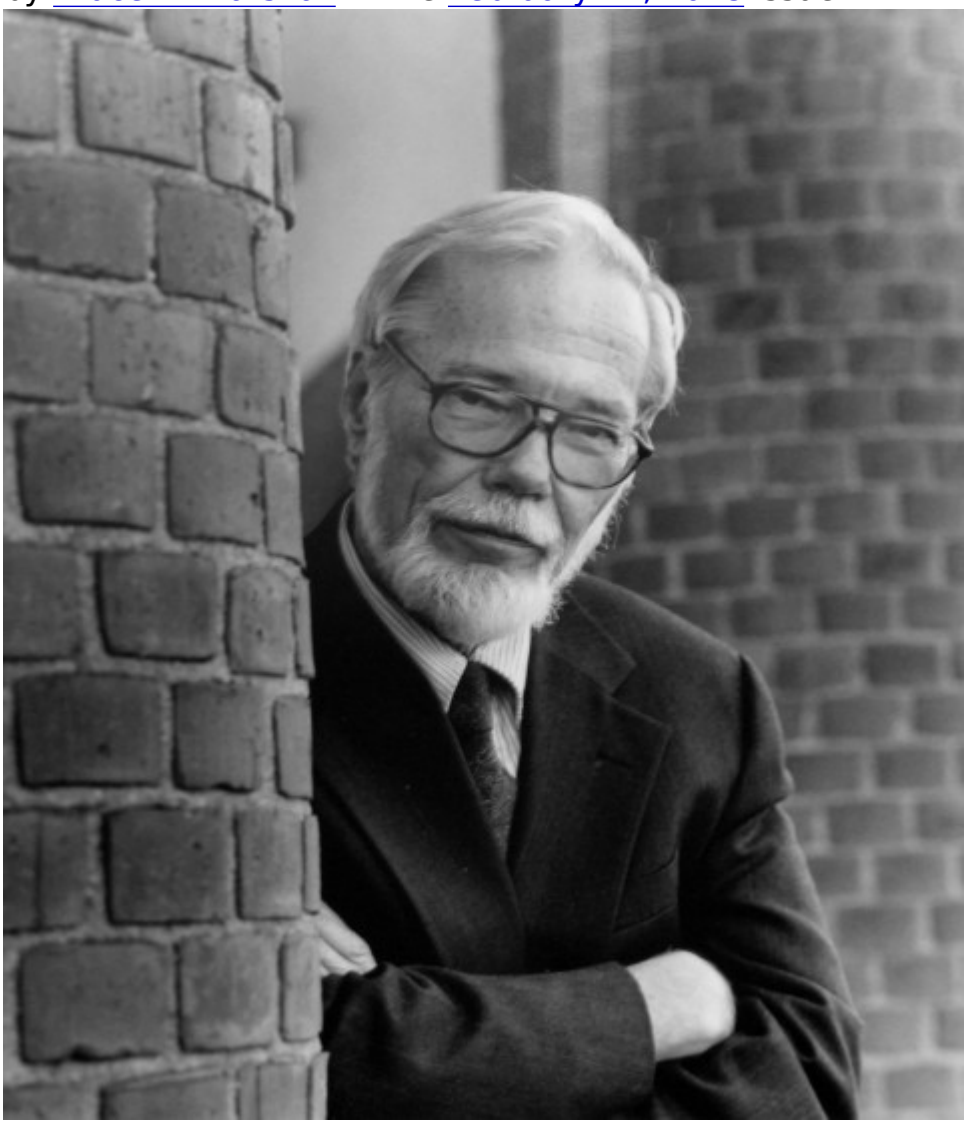
George Lindbeck was the best teacher I ever had

He was known for the intellectual rigor of *The Nature of Doctrine*. But what drove him was a commitment to Christian unity.

by Bruce D. Marshall in the February 14, 2018 issue



George Lindbeck. Photo by Gabe Cooney, courtesy of Yale Divinity School.

In the apt words of one of his students, George Lindbeck had “a life made for ecumenism.” I never heard him speak about his legacy except to say that all such

things are quite out of one's own hands. When news reached me that he had died after a long illness, among my first thoughts was that when people remembered him as a theologian, he would have liked it to be as a servant of Christian unity.

George Lindbeck was born and grew up in China, the youngest child of American Lutheran missionary parents. He was aware from a young age of the toll that division takes on the church and the proclamation of the gospel, especially the division between Protestant and Catholic. As a student in Paris working on a dissertation in medieval philosophy, he first made the acquaintance of a generation of Catholic scholars who shared his growing concern to heal the wounds of the Reformation and who would play a decisive role in the formation of Catholic ecumenism at Vatican II. To his own surprise Lindbeck himself became an official Lutheran observer at Vatican II. It changed his life.

After the council, Lindbeck devoted the best years of his intellectual life not to making a name for himself in academic theology but to attending countless church-sponsored ecumenical meetings, the bulk of them devoted to Lutheran-Catholic dialogue. He wrote one scholarly essay after another, not on the trending theological topics of the day but on the traditional matters of doctrinal conflict between Lutherans and Catholics. He hoped, along with a small group of scholars from both traditions with whom he worked over the years, to show that these entrenched disagreements could be resolved not by having one side give in to the other but by finding a theological path that did justice to the deep concerns of both sides.

This effort produced an epochal result in 1999, with the Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. The Catholic and Lutheran churches together said: "We confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works." Lindbeck had withdrawn from active participation in the dialogues after his retirement from Yale in 1993, but it was he, more than any other single person, who provided the intellectual framework and impetus for this historic agreement.

Among academic theologians Lindbeck is best known, by far, for *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (1984). As he explains at the outset, the book was the fruit of his ecumenical work. It was his attempt to make intellectual sense of the unexpected agreement on divisive doctrinal points that he had experienced as an ecumenist. In order to do that he had to offer more or less

novel accounts of religion, of religious doctrine, and of the nature of Christian theology.

Religions, he argued, are best understood as “cultural-linguistic systems” rather than the expressions of an inward human experience. Religious doctrines are best understood as rules for speech and thought rather than as straightforward truth claims. Christian theology is best understood as the enterprise of “absorbing the world” into the scriptural universe, rather than of accommodating Christian belief to current intellectual trends.

The book became perhaps the most widely read and debated theological treatise of the last fifty years. Lindbeck observed with basically good humor that no one seemed interested in its underlying ecumenical purpose, but everyone was interested in the theoretical work he did as a means to that end—proof, if any were needed, that such things are out of one’s own hands. Some saw in the book a sectarian retreat from the intellectual demands of modernity, others an all-too-modern denial of the truth of Christian beliefs. To anyone who knew Lindbeck, the intellectual demands he placed on himself and others, and the depth of his Christian faith, both interpretations were equally wide of the mark.

For me the impact of *The Nature of Doctrine*, and even more of years spent with Lindbeck, was to make real the possibility of being an intellectually responsible Christian in our own place and time. He showed me how the whole ecumenical Christian tradition was a world in which I could be at home. Each generation of Christians has to find its own way of doing that, and for many of my generation Lindbeck pointed the way.

Lindbeck was a person of great but understated learning and a quietly exacting teacher. He was remarkably free of the vanity that easily besets academics. As a teacher, he had no interest in being agreed with. If you thought you could get ahead by tipping your hat to him or to the Yale School, you were likely to find your hat blown off. His interest was that you think better about whatever you were talking about. That meant seeing the topic at hand from many different points of view, understanding the arguments for positions you didn’t like, and looking sympathetically for the underlying concerns of the people who made them. Only when you had done all that would he let you venture your own views on the matter. In my case it was a hard lesson. He might say I never did learn it as I should have, but to the extent that I did, I owe it to him.

Over the years George Lindbeck gave me a great deal of his time. Only gradually did I come to realize the sacrifice that involved for him, a sacrifice he made for a great many others besides me. He was an intellectual and an academic who evidently valued the good he could do for other people, as teacher and friend, above his own status and career. In the last conversation I had with him, I observed that I liked teaching doctoral students but hadn't realized what a labor-intensive enterprise it is. "Oh," he said. "I suppose that's right. I never really thought of it that way." He was, by a long shot, the best teacher I ever had.

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