Performing the faith

An interview with George Lindbeck in the November 28, 2006 issue

*George Lindbeck is one of the most influential Protestant theologians of recent decades. He taught at Yale from 1955 until his retirement in 1993. He was a Lutheran "delegated observer" at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), and since that time his work has been a crucial part of ecumenical discussions, especially those between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. His 1984 book,* The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age *(Westminster), has been enormously influential for its account of the nature of theological language, and it is widely seen as helping to launch the postliberal movement in theology. His 2002 book,* The Church in a Postliberal Age *(Eerdmans), edited by James Buckley, spells out his vision of an "Israel-like" church, which among other things is a church that rejects the notion that the church has replaced Israel. The* Century *talked with him about the development of his thought and the phenomenon of postliberalism.*

**How do you think growing up as the son of missionaries to China affected your vocation as a theologian?**

It wasn't until I was 17, the year before Pearl Harbor, that I left China for college in the States, but the most vivid of my exposures to Chinese thought and culture took place before the age of 12. I was a sickly child, so cut off from the outside world that my Chinese remained infantile (as it still is). Alone in an invalid's bubble, I was free to construct from whatever materials were available the picture of China that appealed to me. The materials were considerable: conversations with and between my parents and their visitors and, more important, all the relevant literature I could lay my hands on, almost all for grownups and only partly comprehensible to a preadolescent.

What captivated my imagination were the largely buried ruins, tombs and walls of the gigantic, vanished city that was ancient Luoyang. It had been China's imperial capital ten times in a span of 1,400 years ending before 700 AD. With a population of perhaps a million at its height, it had rivaled Rome in size in the first two centuries after Christ. What first got me hooked on China's history and through that on history in general were the contrasts between Luoyang's depressing present and its glorious

past. In time I became even more interested in the astonishing continuities of thought and culture stressed by both my father and the books I read.

Seeing these continuities in action, however, made the deepest impression, and it was my parents' close friends of whom I also was fond, the local pastor and his wife, who most memorably exemplified this: warmly Christian and yet, in their manners, Confucian to the core.

This exposure implanted ways of thinking that are still with me, now consciously rather than subliminally. One is the conviction that the communal shapes us more than we shape ourselves. Second, that human basics are everywhere and always pretty much the same. Third, that despite these similarities, cultural in combination with linguistic differences sometimes make communication almost though not entirely impossible. And fourth and most important, book-sustained continuities of community-creating thought and practice can survive thousands of years of political, social, economic and even linguistic upheaval. Certainty in such matters is impossible, but I am inclined to think that without these China-implanted modes of thought, I would not have been attracted to the thinkers from whose ideas I have cobbled together the outlook for which I seem to be chiefly known: a cultural-linguistic view of religion in combination with a scripture-centered understanding of Christianity and a grammatical-rule theory of doctrine.

**Since you've mentioned the "cultural-linguistic" view of religion and a "grammatical-rule theory of doctrine," major topics in *The Nature of Doctrine*, perhaps you could say a bit about how learning theology is like learning a language.**

Learning theology, as I understand it, is not like learning to speak a language but is instead analogous to the study of its grammar and the dictionary definitions of the verbal and nonverbal items in its vocabulary. Speaking, in contrast, is a matter of knowing *how* to use the right words and actions (such as gestures) grammatically, that is, rightly. This knowing is independent of the knowledge *that* there is grammar and *what* its rules are.

To borrow a familiar example: the master of Greek that was Homer had unsurpassed "how" knowledge of the grammar of his mother tongue but no "what" or "that" knowledge whatsoever.

In the case of religions, where the nonverbal vocabulary (i.e., the ritual, moral and other forms of behavior that constitute a distinctive form of life) is a more essential part of the communicative system than in the case of mother tongues, the failure to attend to this distinction is truly disastrous. Confusing linguistics or the study of grammar with learning to speak a language is merely comic, whereas for those who take a religion such as Christianity seriously, to confuse learning theology with learning to speak and act in the language of faith can erase the difference between death and life.

**Some people see this notion of religion as a cultural-linguistic enterprise as a formula for relativism. What do you say to that criticism?**

The short answer is that those who fear the relativism of a cultural-linguistic approach are mistaken about the facts. They generally argue as if the theological "that" and "what" articulations of a religion's grammar in theology and doctrine are more stable and enduring than is the "how" knowledge of the skilled practitioners who spontaneously follow the rules even when they don't know how to articulate them. On this they are wrong. As Stanley Hauerwas points out in his Gifford lectures, Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa have done far more to sustain continuity with Jesus and the apostles than have theologians with their ever-changing explications of the faith.

This means not that theology, creeds and doctrines are unimportant, but that they, like the inevitably imperfect rules formulated by the grammarians of a natural language, have a secondary, even if at times vital, role in the learning and transmission of a religion. (I am indebted, some readers will recognize, to what Aquinas says on the difference between implicit and explicit faith, especially as illustrated by the superiority of the saints' "connatural" knowledge of the virtues to what theologians acquire by study.)

**While we are on the topic of relativism, how do you interpret John 14:6: "No one comes to the Father except through me"?**

I don't know how or even whether it will happen, but in agreement with Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, I hope and pray—indeed, expect—that in the consummation God will see to it that everyone will learn the Christian language well enough to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is indeed Lord and ultimately the only way. As for penultimate ways, anyone who takes the Old Testament seriously will grant

that they exist.

**You have stated that you have an “Israel-like” view of the church. Can you explain what you mean?**

Yes, “Israel-like” is one expression I use. It can refer to so many different kinds of likeness and to such superficial similarities that it has no clear sense when considered by itself. “Seeing the church *as* Israel” is better because it suggests that there is a sense in which it really is Israel and not merely similar.

It cannot be too much emphasized, however, that there are two conflicting understandings of what that sense is: supersessionist versus antisupersessionist. The first prevailed from the second century until other forms of anti-Judaism became dominant in modern times, but it was not widely challenged until the middle of the last century, and then perhaps only because of the Holocaust.

According to this historically dominant version of supersessionism, it will be recalled, the church is genuinely Israel (one could also say Israel-like), but it is this as the New Israel, the new chosen people, that has totally replaced the Israel of old in God’s favor despite Jewish protestations to the contrary.

An antisupersessionist understanding, in contrast, holds that the church is Israel as a part, an enlargement, of the one and only Israel to which contemporary Jews, including non-Christian ones, also belong.

This antisupersessionist version of the church as Israel is as unfamiliar as the supersessionist variety is familiar. It was rediscovered mostly after World War II as an interpretation of what Paul says in, for example, Romans 9-11, but this has not led to retrieval. Even advocates of *ressourcement*, the return to the sources, tend to agree that circumstances have changed so much since Paul’s day that despite the continuing importance of his rejection of supersessionism, his nonsupersessionist understanding of the church as Israel is no longer applicable now that the church is overwhelmingly gentile. One corollary of this dismissal is the overlooking of the positive importance for the church of the emphasis on the Old Testament even in some supersessionist versions of church-as-Israel thinking, such as are to be found in pre-Constantinian catholicism and, later on, in Calvinism.

My main preoccupation at this stage of my life is with the possibility that, stripped of anti-Judaism in its supersessionist and other varieties, a church-as-Israel approach,

with its emphasis on the Old Testament, is much needed by Christian communities in especially, but not only, their ecumenical dimensions.

**You've written a good deal about figural biblical interpretation as a key to a nonsupersessionist theology. Normally we worry that figural or allegorical exegesis of the Old Testament leads in the other direction.**

Figural interpretation of the Old Testament (in which the major abuses occur) is supersessionist only when the church itself is understood supersessionistically, that is, as replacing Israel. When that happens, the temptation is to follow at least to some degree Rupert of Deutz's medieval hermeneutical rule: "All good elements in the [O.T.] texts (e.g., consolations, etc.) should be referred to Christ and his Church, while all bad elements (e.g., sufferings and punishments) should be referred to the Jews and human sin in general."

In contrast to this, when Christians and their communities are seen nonsupersessionistically, as part of Israel rather than as replacing it, prophetic denunciations as well as promises apply to them no less than to the Jews.

**What stands out most sharply in your memory of your experience as an observer at Vatican II?**

The event in the official sessions of the council that most stands out is the speech in St. Peter's given by Archbishop Léon-Arthur Elchinger of Strasbourg on what Catholics owe to non-Catholics. His climactic example was justification by faith. He pointed out that if Catholics were now rediscovering this dogma of the church, first "defined," as he put it, by the Jerusalem council referred to in Acts and Galatians, it was largely because it had at times been better maintained outside rather than within Roman Catholicism by the ecclesial communities issuing from the 16th-century Reformation.

I knew that some Catholics entertained such ideas, but had never expected to hear them publicly proclaimed by, of all people, an archbishop in good standing speaking from the podium in St. Peter's to an apparently receptive audience of the world's 2,000 Roman bishops gathered in solemn assembly to seek the Spirit's guidance in renewing the church in accordance with the *Veni Creator Spiritus* they together prayed each day before starting their working sessions.

Tears filled my eyes, and I couldn't but think of Abbot Christopher Butler's eyewitness account of what happpened to Bishop Josip Strossmeyer when he spoke from much the same spot at the First Vatican Council some nine decades earlier. Trying to make less one-sided the blame previous speakers had heaped on the Reformers for all the ills of the modern world—atheism, anarchism, the repudiation of Christian morality—Strossmeyer had asked them to remember "that there are millions of Protestants who truly love the Lord Jesus." As he spoke, shouts of "heresy," "blasphemy," "another Luther" and "come down, come down" drowned him out and he was forced to descend from the podium. The contrast between then and now was enough to make a born-and-bred Lutheran weep with joy.

**You've noted that the proponents of *ressourcement* and of *aggiornamento* at the council were "two dimensions of the same reality." What do you make of their since having broken into opposing camps?**

It sometimes happens that allies who are inseparable in their fight against a common foe separate after their victory and move so far apart that one of them, while remaining in fundamental disagreement with the former opponent, joins it in opposition to its ex-ally. This account is grossly oversimplified, but I can't think of a better summary of what happened at Vatican II and in its aftermath.

The leading party in the movement of reform, *ressourcement*, sought renewal by returning to the scriptural and patristic sources of the faith with the help of modern scholarship utilized in doctrinally acceptable ways. It beat the opposition at its own game, for it appealed to traditions more ancient and authoritative than the medieval and Tridentine ones on which the traditionalists depended. This cleared the way for its partner, *aggiornamento*, the updating and opening of the church to the modern world.

In the conciliar setting, these two overlapping waves or dimensions of reform were inseparable, as is illustrated, for example, by the replacement of Latin by the vernacular in the liturgy. Bishops from Western countries, including almost all North American ones, saw no need for change in the language of the mass; and yet, persuaded by *ressourcement* that the canonization of Latin in the West was a historically understandable but not permanently preferable practice, they yielded to *aggiornamento*-motivated pleas from other lands that linguistic updating was imperative for the sake of better communication of the gospel in their situations.

After Vatican II, however, the task was no longer one of bringing bishops to consensus (the majorities were always huge), but one of getting the people to accept the now official reforms with no debate and scarcely any discussion. *Aggiornamento* monopolized this effort. Updating was easy to understand and widely appealing to the masses who already lived in the world rather than in the ghettoes of the traditionalists or the enclaves of scholarly supporters of *ressourcement*.

Yet in this case—as often happens—the reach of those who thought they were riding the wave of the future exceeded their grasp. They tended to push the conciliar reforms beyond, sometimes far beyond, what the bishops had had in mind; they increasingly alienated many of those who had at first followed them; and they made supporters of *ressourcement* and traditionalists allies in resisting, often for opposing reasons, what they regarded as threats to doctrine, magisterial authority, sound scholarship and the peace and unity of the church. For the media and most of the public, however, these differently motivated opponents of *aggiornamento* are both simply conservative, with the odd result that surviving members of what was the progressive avant-garde at the council are often deemed reactionary even when their basic convictions remain unchanged (as is sometimes though not always the case).

**Did you have contact at the council or afterward with Joseph Ratzinger?**

As a young *peritus* (expert adviser) at Vatican II, Ratzinger was seen as one of the most advanced members of the progressive vanguard. Later, as head of the Congregation for the Defense of Faith (CDF), as everyone knows, he came to be widely classified as a reactionary. The question for me is whether his basic *ressourcement* convictions remain intact.

While I have no memory of meeting him at the council, he became a vivid figure when his first book was published, a series of lectures to university students titled *Introduction to Christianity*. The late Danish theologian Kristen Skydsgaard, the senior and most influential of the three delegated observers from the Lutheran World Federation, told his junior colleagues, of whom I was one, that if there were ever a pope who thought as did the author of this book, the Reformation schism could be healed. While changes in the ecumenical situation later made this prediction seem absurd even to Skydsgaard, I saw no reason to challenge the high regard for Ratzinger it expressed during my only personal encounter with him.

We were together for several days in the late 1980s in a confessionally mixed group of 12 participants brought together to discuss papers later collected in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis* (Eerdmans, 1989). Ratzinger was by then already known in some circles as “The Grand Inquisitor,” but he behaved in that group as an equal among equals and impressed everyone, including Catholics (such as Raymond Brown) who in some respects disagreed with him, as an insightful, fair-minded, highly intelligent and well-informed scholar who is also personally likable.

As for the role of Ratzinger at the CDF, I know no more than other outside observers, and from this perspective his record is mixed. For those advocates of *aggiornamento* for whom the spirit rather than the letter of the council is normative, he helped (or perhaps led) John Paul II to move the clock backward, whereas strict constructionists (the currently common disguise of those with traditionalist inclinations) complain that he did not go far enough in that direction. Even some erstwhile *ressourcement* progressives disagree with his support of the ecumenical high-water mark that is the Lutheran–Roman Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* and with his understanding of Christianity’s relation to Judaism (about which Jews with more inside information than I have are enthusiastic).

Some actions of the CDF under Ratzinger I, as a non-Catholic, deeply regret, most notably those relating to the ordination of women, but even here it is important for those like myself who are opposed to Western ecclesiastical colonialism and in favor of indigenization to remember that the Catholic majority, now increasingly located in the global South, sides with Ratzinger rather than with the progressives, who are concentrated in the North. We need also to recall that although the postconciliar confusion in Roman Catholicism is less than what has developed in mainline Protestant denominations, it nevertheless greatly increases the difficulties of leadership in a body whose very identity depends on its maintaining worldwide unity. My view on the basis of his writings and my own observations is that Ratzinger at the CDF struggled consistently (only God knows how successfully) to sustain his youthful commitments to the renewal of the church universal through return to the sources of the faith, and I hope and expect that Benedict XVI will do the same. Yet it is important if this is to happen that not only Catholics but we who are not Catholics pray for and support him as best we can. The papal governance of the Roman Church is an awkward business no less now, though in very different ways, than when St. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote an entire book, *On Consideration*, to counsel Pope Eugenius III.

**You've spoken both of the remarkable achievements of convergence in your lifetime between Protestant churches and the Catholic Church, for example, and of the disarray of the church in the West, which you have "gotten used to." What do you make of the convergence and disarray having coincided?**

I don't remember saying I have "gotten used to" the disarray, but I might have been counseling patience when I said it. The relative strength of unifying and disunifying forces fluctuates, and the present predominance of disunifying ones won't last forever.

As I indicated earlier, ecumenical convergence and disarray have not, in my view, coincided but have rather been successive (though overlapping) phases of developments since the mid-century achievements. To be sure, disarray can in a sense prepare for unity by eroding divisive differences, but on the other hand the greater the internal disunity of separated churches, the less meaningful their purportedly unifying agreements with each other.

**You've shown signs of taking a more positive view of Christendom than you did previously in you career. Why?**

It is true that in my younger days I, like most of my theological contemporaries, saw only good in the post-Enlightenment demise of Christendom. It was good not only for the church (which for the most part I still continue to think) but also for society. What we noticed was the liberation (usually in secular guises) of long-repressed gospel-motivated strivings for religious freedom, abolitionism, social equality, economic justice and democracy.

We overlooked, however, that the loss of Christendom's constraints also liberated evil forces, especially in the last century: nationalism, fascism, Nazism, and Leninist and Stalinist Marxism, together with what is now most threatening, the normless voids that have long been widening in the wake of the increasingly unlimited neoliberal free-market production and consumption of material goods and moral and cultural "values" (I wish there were another word).

Secularisms of either the scientistic or romantic kinds seem unable to strengthen crumbling communal cohesiveness, and it is hard to see how non-Christian religions can do so in the case of Western societies, which continue to depend for their survival, their very identity, on the hidden and diminishing reservoirs of social and

individual conscientiousness remaining from the Christian past. Christians as individuals do something to replenish these resources, but as communities, as churches, they seem clueless as to how they can do this without falling into errors of past Christendoms. This is not only a Western problem. As Philip Jenkins reminds us, the great surge in the numbers of Christians in the global South and East (e.g., China) may be the beginnings of what he calls the Next Christendom.

**You maintain a hope in the possibility of pre-Constantinian forms of church life, a hope that we might see a "reconstituting of the Christian community and unity from, so to speak, the bottom up." Can you point to examples that you take to be hopeful?**

The construction of Christian community and catholic/ecumenical unity from the bottom up has taken place only in the three pre-Constantinian centuries and then, by antisupersessionist biblical standards, inadequately. My own attempt to imagine how this could be better done is part and parcel of the church-as-Israel project. I'm told by people who should know that postliberal theology, though not always under that name, is making progress especially in evangelical circles (in the American sense of term), and I know of no reasons why it will not continue to do so. What chiefly counts as far as I am concerned, however, is church-as-Israel ecclesiology. I doubt that this will make much practical difference before the next great time of troubles, if then. What will happen, God only knows.

**If you were beginning now as a theologian, what course do you imagine that your career would take? What issues would you like to explore?"**

"A life less planned is better" is the gist of what I remember John XXIII saying when he met with the delegated observers during Vatican II's first session. The Lord's mercies "are new every morning" (Lam. 3:22) was a verse he repeated every day when he got up, for without that assurance, the unpredictability of the future would paralyze him. Every major event in his life had been unimaginable beforehand—something he would have been totally unable to prepare for even if he had wanted to—yet the preparation had taken place. What he said to me, even if not *viva voce*, was that this unimaginability was for him one of the Lord's mercies, not because it saves time—though it does that too—but because it adds to the joy of life.

I find myself thinking in similar ways of my theological career, and that makes it doubly silly, especially for someone my age, to try to answer this question.