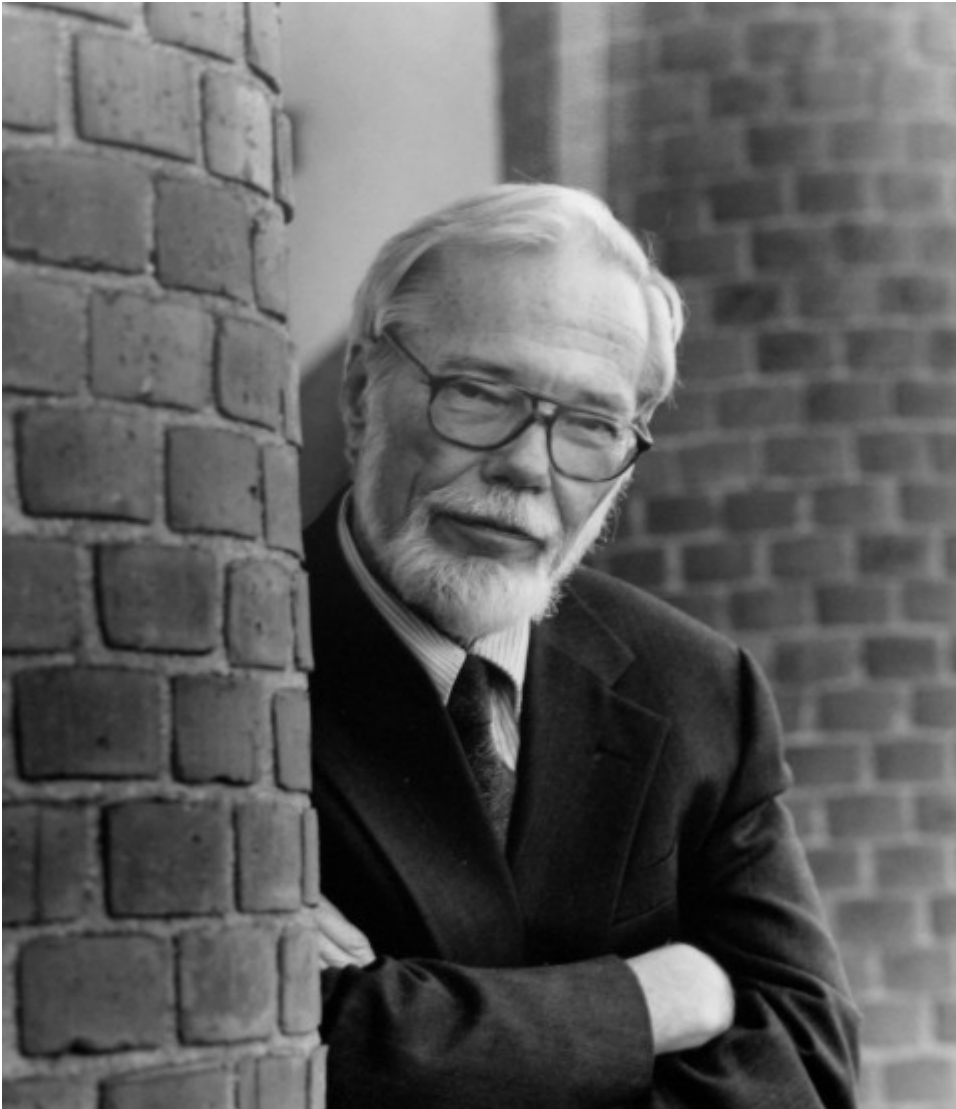


George Lindbeck saved my Christianity

I read *The Nature of Doctrine* in college—and finally understood why God had seemed so vague to me.

by [Matt Fitzgerald](#)

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

Although I never met the man, [the news of George Lindbeck's death](#) hit me hard. He changed my life.

In my last year of college I was vaguely unitarian. God felt like a distant grandparent, living in some part of Florida I had no desire to visit. Like many people raised within liberal Protestantism, I knew God loved me and I suspected I was smarter than Christianity. Years before I heard the term "scandal of particularity," Jesus embarrassed me.

Then, in my last semester, I was assigned *The Nature of Doctrine*. The force of Lindbeck's argument overwhelmed me.

The book explained to me why God felt close when I slept on Noah's Ark sheets, but utterly vague when I tried to be religious without the story I was raised on. If you learn a particular religion's vocabulary—its strange, unique way of ordering existence—the Divine will become clear (or at least clearer). It is not possible to take a superior stance to a faith tradition and also experience the power it holds. In Lindbeck's words: "One can no more hope to be religious in general than one can hope to speak language in general."

I could not argue with him. My lame faith was support for his argument! Once I understood Christianity as the producer of my religious experience, rather than the odd expression of some frustratingly ineffable truth I couldn't grasp, I had to return to church. Lindbeck saved my Christianity.

He also got me in a good deal of trouble. In 2015 I wrote a short piece against the "Coexist" bumper sticker. [It was published as part of my liberal denomination's online devotional](#). I figured it would ruffle some feathers:

The "C" is a crescent moon, symbolizing Islam. The "x" is the Star of David representing Judaism, and the "t" is a cross representing Christianity.

When I see the cross I see my faith in an ordered universe shot to hell. The world I thought I lived in, and the God I thought I lived with are exposed as an illusion. We live in a senseless, treacherous world. That's what the cross says.

And then I blink and I see the cross again and it says Easter; it sings God's victory over all despair, including my own. And then I blink again and I see the Word through which all that is came into being.

That's what I see when I see the cross. I don't see a consonant letter.

I assume Muslims and Jews have similarly wonderful feelings when they behold the symbols of their religions.

Of course we ought to coexist, but employing the symbols of different religions to spell out a bland appeal for tolerance does damage to the religions themselves. You can't subsume the funky particularities of different faiths into a larger whole without silencing them. I wish I could fit this onto a bumper sticker: "Stop playing with the cross. Stop assuming you can get on top of all these different religions. Quit moralizing from the sidelines. Either get in the game or get out."

The blowback was ferocious. More than a year later, I was still getting emails that called me "arrogant and narrow." One writer told me she felt sorry for my children! It was all Lindbeck's fault. You can't read him without wincing at the assumption that all religions can be easily synthesized into a grand whole.

The world certainly would be a simpler place if a Protestant Christian were able to sit across the table from a devout Hindu and the two of us could scrape away the contradictory claims our respective religions make, to find that underneath all the pious jargon we're saying the same thing. If I could set aside the distinctively Protestant claim that God accepts people into eternity through faith, not good works, and she could set aside the distinctively Hindu belief that through the law of karma each individual's behavior determines his or her own eternal destiny, we could really get along.

Or imagine a Buddhist monk and an Orthodox rabbi. If the monk would set aside Buddhism's explicit rejection of an almighty God whose hand controls the universe, and the rabbi would put away Judaism's insistence that Yahweh created the world out of nothing and steers its course today, perhaps they'd find some common ground.

But of course Buddhism with an omnipotent deity lording over its adherents is no longer Buddhism. Judaism without Yahweh becomes something else. Protestant

Christianity without the doctrine of justification by faith alone has no reason to exist. And Hinduism without karma is like English without vowels.

I once worried that if I followed Lindbeck's thought too far, I would become intolerant. After abandoning the liberal desire to subsume Christ into a universal religiosity that transcends him, is the only other option a narrow faith that says that Christian beliefs aren't just different, they're superior?

The conundrum is real. Lindbeck taught me to oppose those who insist different religions are simply "different paths up the same mountain." Because it ignores the specifics that make religions vital in the first place, their approach carries mudslides and avalanches, imperiling every path it wants to swallow. I worry that the mainline church's drastic decline is spurred by our willingness to set aside what makes us unique in the first place.

But the insistence on Christian particularity seems to require its adherents to buttonhole strangers on airplanes and insult their Jewish friends. In 2002 I sent George Lindbeck an email sharing this anxiety. He wrote me back immediately, suggesting a humility that doesn't always come with brilliance.

He said, "Much of what other religions teach, for instance, the importance of compassion in Buddhism, may well be truth God gives to them, and through them to us. Christians don't have all of God's truth. What we have is the criterion of all truth, Jesus Christ."

I love that idea. Christians don't know everything. Indeed, what we don't know is immense! But we do know God in Jesus Christ. He isn't the only way God speaks, but he's the way God speaks to us. This means we ought to listen to the world's great religions for the voice of God. Of course it also means we can judge them, but why start there? In my life, Islam and Hinduism don't put me in conflict with Christ. It's secular "religions" like capitalism, fatalism, and nationalism that contradict him. I long for a church with the courage to wrestle those lies to the ground. Let's do that before we worry about religions that comfort and inspire more than half the world.

Lindbeck's ideas keep putting me in danger. He won't let me alone. More than 25 years after I first read it, his slim book radiates power from my bookshelf. Other theologians are easier to read; many are more famous. None of them has shaped me so profoundly. I thank God for George Lindbeck. May he rest in peace. May his work live on.