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Parting Company At Last: Lindbeck and McFague in Substantive Theological Dialogue

Terrence Reynolds

The on-going debate between “liberal” and “narrativist” theological strategies continues to generate a constellation of methodological and substantive questions. George Lindbeck’s discussion of the “experiential-expressivist” and “cultural-linguistic” approaches to religion and their contrasting views of doctrine, in particular, has brought into bold relief what appear to be fundamental differences between “liberals” and “narrativists” on matters of meaning, truth, and justification in contemporary theology. David Tracy’s response to Lindbeck, not surprisingly, focuses on the central issues at stake. For Tracy, Lindbeck’s problems with the “liberal” tradition are “less methodological or formal than his paradigm analysis would suggest.”¹ Instead, Lindbeck’s concern is “substantive or material.”² While I think Tracy is correct in identifying Lindbeck’s methodological ties to liberal theology and in focusing on matters of substance, I think he mistakenly concludes that Lindbeck is committed to the position of Karl Barth. He argues that Lindbeck’s substantive theological proposal is a “methodologically sophisticated version of Barthian confessionalism.” “The hands may be the hands of Wittgenstein and Geertz,” Tracy adds, “but the voice is the voice of Karl Barth.”³

This article examines Tracy’s assessment of Lindbeck and the contrasting liberal/narrativist traditions in light of the theological positions developed by Lindbeck and Sallie

¹ David Tracy, “Lindbeck’s New Program for Theology: A Reflection,” *The Thomist* 49 (1985): 467.

² Tracy, “Lindbeck’s New Program,” 467.

³ Tracy, “Lindbeck’s New Program,” 465. As I will argue, I understand Lindbeck to be suggesting that his cultural-linguistic approach is consistent with Barth’s position, but does not “entail” a Barthian confessionalism or even a commitment to narrative as a methodological requirement. Although substance powerfully influences method in this case, I think it important to make the distinction a clear one.

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McFague, and argues briefly that the two have far more in common methodologically than either of them appears to recognize.⁴ It then considers in detail the nature and scope of the substantive differences that divide them. Fundamentally, they disagree over appropriate sources of authority in the making of truth claims; more specifically, they hold radically different positions on the adequacy of Scripture to provide an accurate narrative identification of God, and on the long-term performance of the tradition in promoting human flourishing. Their very dissimilar views on the value of Scripture in theological discourse subsequently give rise to further differences on issues such as the role of God's relationship to the world, the place of the church, and the scope of theological dialogue. My conclusion is that Lindbeck's theological voice is not the voice of Karl Barth rather, drawing on the thought of William James, that what drives their conflict is not principally methodology. Instead, what separates them at the core is their pragmatic assessment of the coherence and performative record of the received tradition. Once this is properly understood, the debate between "narrativists" and "liberals" can more fruitfully proceed.

⁴Although, to my knowledge, neither has critiqued the work of the other by name, Lindbeck and McFague appear to be methodologically at odds with one another. McFague argues that the narrativist attachment to the biblical stories isolates the Christian community, and further believes that the language of Scripture has proven itself a major contributor to conceptions of reality that have fostered patriarchy, hierarchy, dualism, militarism, and triumphalism. Unless the outmoded tradition is overthrown, McFague foresees continuing negative ecological, relational, and perhaps, even nuclear consequences. Refusing radically to adapt or reject this tradition, in her view, "ghettoizes" Christianity. Lindbeck argues that "liberal" re-shaping of the language of Scripture will serve ultimately to undermine the Christian community shaped by the biblical narrative and its claims to truth. Unlike McFague, Lindbeck likens the Christian story to a "masterpiece" for its ability effectively to interpret experienced reality and to foster human flourishing. As I will argue, their contrasting views on the narrative identification of God provided by Scripture and on its performance are at the center of their substantive theological differences.

Lindbeck and McFague in Methodological Agreement

There are many parallels between Lindbeck and McFague on meaning, truth, and justification in constructive theology.⁵ They agree that all claims to truth are shaped by socio-historical perspective, and that there can be no meaningful discussion of direct, a-historical access to the "Real." Both readily acknowledge that web-of-belief related claims, or well-entrenched beliefs, are a necessary point of departure for all theological or ethical discussion. Further, each appears to endorse a type of coherence theory of truth,⁶ in which conceptual and interpretive consistency along with pragmatic, performative criteria are requirements for any discussion of ontological truth.

Both Lindbeck and McFague readily agree that they have been shaped by the linguistic patterns and practices of the Christian faith. McFague enters the theological conversation with the very limited background conviction that God is on the side of all life and its fulfillment and that all persons are bearers of God's image.⁷ Lindbeck retains the broader assumptions that

⁵For a more thorough discussion of the methodological correspondence between Lindbeck and McFague, see my "Walking Apart, Together: Lindbeck and McFague on Theological Method," *Journal of Religion* 77 (January 1997): 44-67.

⁶For the purposes of this essay, I will stipulatively follow Ralph C. S. Walker's definition of coherence in *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2: "The coherence theorist holds that for a proposition to be true is for it to cohere with a certain set of beliefs. It is not just that it is true if and only if it coheres with that system; it is that the coherence, and nothing else, is what its truth consists in. In particular, truth does not consist in the holding of some correspondence between the proposition and some reality which obtains independent of anything that may be believed about it."

⁷Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), x. McFague explains her Christian point of departure as follows: "I begin with the assumption that what we can say with any assurance about the character of Christian faith is very little. . . . Christian faith is. . . . most basically a claim that the universe is neither indifferent nor malevolent but that there is a power (and a personal power at that) which is on the side of life and its fulfillment. Moreover, the Christian believes that we have some clues for fleshing out this claim in the life, death, and appearances of Jesus of Nazareth."

the God of Scripture wills the best for persons, and that the entire biblical narrative serves as a necessary linguistic universe to convey that truth most effectively.⁸ Further, both seem to agree that religious systems of interpretation are most "true" when they are internally consistent, effectively reflect human experience, generate in believers a pattern of living which promotes human well-being, and attract the admiration of others. A "true" religious language will perform well over time in all of these respects.

In spite of their historicist premises, both theologians permit the making of ontological truth claims. These claims are indirect and contingent, by necessity, as they are unavoidably tied to perspective and webs of belief. But they can be made, nonetheless, and assessed pragmatically, based on their shared assumption that the Divine intends the best for the creation. It follows that what appears to enhance the good is more prone to be true than that which impedes it. There is no way beyond history and perspective to check the direct correspondence of one's claims with the "Real," so moral fruits remain the principal avenue for justification, along with the experienced presence of the divine. I think that both Lindbeck and McFague rely here on a version of pragmatism that calls to mind the work of William James.

It is worthwhile to reflect briefly on James' understanding of the process by which religious claims are adopted and tested since it will play an important role in my later analysis of the substantive divergence of the two thinkers.⁹ According to

⁸James Gustafson also focuses on this distinction in his *Ethics From a Theocentric Perspective*, volume 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). He explicitly moves away from the anthropocentrism associated with traditional concepts of flourishing, and opts instead, with McFague, for a notion of the Divine whose interest is in the well-being of *all* things. One may see pages 109-110.

⁹In referring to William James, I do not intend to infer that either Lindbeck or McFague is explicitly (or implicitly) endorsing his work. Nor do I mean to suggest that James offers a better model for interpreting their shared concern with "performance" than might other pragmatist philosophers. I merely want to focus on James's empiricist recognition of our epistemological limitations with respect to questions of ultimacy, and on his

James, there are occasions when matters of import cannot be resolved solely by objective means. At moments like these, James permits the use of the "passions" to move one's will to decide, and to act. But it is extremely important, lest James be misunderstood (as is commonplace), that he places very strict limits on when and how the passional nature may be employed, and does *not* endorse simply willing oneself to believe whatever one's heart desires.¹⁰ Despite the suggestions of some critics, he decidedly does not encourage "wishful thinking."¹¹ Only when one is objectively uncertain and faces what James called a "genuine option" can the passions rightfully direct our wills and convictions.¹² Clearly, for James, the religious hypothesis that "perfection is eternal," along with the message of Christianity, satisfies the three requirements of a genuine option and can be passionately adopted and lived without compromising one's rational nature.

endorsement of pragmatic warrants as an appropriate grounding for one's beliefs. In these limited respects, I think it fair to say that Lindbeck and McFague are Jamesian.

¹⁰For a subtle analysis of James on these matters, see Diane Yeager's "Passion and Suspicion: Affections in 'The Will to Believe,'" *The Journal of Religion* 69 (October 1989): 467-483.

¹¹As an example of what I take to be an ill-conceived critique of James, see John Hick's *Faith and Knowledge* (Glasgow, Scotland: William Collins Sons, 1978), 35-44. Hick mistakenly characterizes James' position as follows (44): "But when we have spelled out James' conception of faith thus far, we cannot help asking whether it is much better — or indeed any better — than an impressive recommendation of 'wishful thinking.' Is he not saying that since the truth is unknown to us we may believe what we like and while we are about it we had better believe what we like most? This is certainly unjust to James' intention; but is it unjust to the logic of his argument? I do not see that it is."

¹²As James explains, a "genuine" option is one that must be living, forced, and momentous. By "living," James means that an option must be a "real possibility" to the one to whom it is proposed. By "forced" he means an option "with no possibility of not choosing," such as "either accept this truth or go without it." Finally, by "momentous" he means an option which offers one a chance at a unique and profoundly significant possibility. One may see William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 2-4.

It is significant that James does not formally rule out the possibility of one choosing the option of atheism in the face of the objective uncertainty of the religious hypothesis. But in *The Sentiment of Rationality*, James indicates why he seems unable to imagine one holding to such a belief. According to James, our rational nature possesses an inherent "need" to have human expectancies fulfilled. At the practical level, this means that all overarching, philosophical systems seeking to win our approval must satisfy two practical requirements. The first is that it will not baffle or disappoint our dearest desire, namely, that uncertainty will be overcome. As rational beings we have an inherent desire that novelty and the unexpected be minimized. A framework conceptual system that fails in this regard will not be accorded widespread acceptance. Secondly, our rational nature desires that our active propensities be satisfied through a "system" that is emotionally pertinent, or that permits us to act on its behalf. As James puts it, a rationally satisfying system will be one in which "the inmost nature of reality is congenial to powers you possess."¹³ With a rational nature so predisposed, it is little wonder that materialist philosophies that direct us to what James called "the eternal Void," "always fail of universal adoption."¹⁴

In short, in the absence of objective or experienced evidences to the contrary, or "defeaters," it is not only justified to act upon one's religious longings, but it may, indeed, be more in accord with our rationality to do so. Further, it is James' view "that truth exists, and that our minds can find it," but our grasp of the truth is always incomplete, and our opinions can "grow more true" as we examine and live them.¹⁵ It is here again where performative criteria come into play, and James' pragmatism serves not only as a justification for believing, but as a basis upon which to assert the truth of one's claims. If one's system performs well as lived out and satisfies the requirements of our rational nature, then it would appear to qualify provisionally as a "true" interpretive schema, at least

¹³James, *Will to Believe*, 86.

¹⁴James, *Will to Believe*, 83.

¹⁵James, *Will to Believe*, 12, 14.

insofar as we can know the truth. The truth of the religious option can be assessed by the extent to which it fosters a way of life that coherently interprets the vast complexity of human experience and generated human flourishing.¹⁶ The determination of the "success" of the religious option would apparently be an on-going process as it is with any hypothesis, and the system would, in theory, be ever open to adjustment as experience deemed necessary.¹⁷

McFague has implicitly adopted a theological realism in harmony with a pragmatism of this sort.¹⁸ Lindbeck has done the same. In short, they essentially agree on the nature of meaning, truth, and justification in constructive theology, and support a version of theological realism grounded in pragmatic considerations.¹⁹

¹⁶I should add that these criteria are more readily determined in the case of a scientific theory than in a moral or theological one. Diane Yeager, in her "Passion and Suspicion" states this difficulty as follows (478): "The 'evidence' of 'experience' is much more ambiguous in the testing of the religious hypothesis than in the testing of some specific hypothesis about the operations of material entities and physical forces. It is also vastly more difficult to figure out what counts decisively and what does not."

¹⁷This process calls to mind Jeffrey Stout's notion of "moral bricolage," in which one's well-entrenched beliefs remain in dialogue with unfolding experience and counter claims. Reminiscent of James' critique of the "absolutists" (*The Will to Believe*, 12), one can never know with certainty if one has arrived at the truth, or claim direct correspondence with the "Real." See Stout's "Lexicon" in *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 294, in which he defines moral bricolage as follows: "The process in which one begins with bits and pieces of received linguistic material, arranges some of them into a structured whole, leaves others to the side, and ends up with a moral language one proposes to use."

¹⁸In a response to Rosemary Ruether, McFague makes her ties to pragmatism quite clear: "What this comes to, I believe, is the importance of pragmatic criteria as the basis for ontological claims. Pragmatic criteria are central to my position as they are to other forms of liberation theology. . . ." One may see McFague's "Response" to reviewers of *Models of God in Religion and Intellectual Life* (Spring 1988): 42. One may also see my "Two McFagues: Meaning, Truth, and Justification in *Models of God*," *Modern Theology* 11 (July 1995): 289-314.

¹⁹One may see Reynolds, "Walking Apart, Together." For the purposes of this paper, I define "realism" as any position that holds that religious or moral claims actually refer, directly or indirectly, to a transcendent reality.

Lindbeck and McFague in Substantive Disagreement

Where McFague and Lindbeck differ is not over these methodological premises, but over their understanding of the role of Scripture in constructive theology and ethics. Lindbeck is convinced that the meaning and truth of the Christian story are tied to the linguistic integrity of the biblical tradition and its narrative identification of God; its "semiotic universe" in all its complexity must serve as the interpretive paradigm for contemporary experience.²⁰ Theologians of the cultural-linguistic persuasion, he says, plot a very different course than their "liberal" counterparts:

it is the religion instantiated in Scripture which *defines* being, truth, goodness, and beauty, and the nonscriptural exemplifications of these realities need to be *transformed* into figures (or types or antitypes) of the scriptural ones. Intratextual theology *re-describes* reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which *absorbs* the world, rather than the world the text. . . .²¹

The Christian narrative retains authoritative status for Lindbeck for a number of reasons. First, the gospel stories mean what they say, and were intended to depict realistically the person of Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of the world. As Garrett Green has correctly indicated, this is not to say that the

A nonrealist would argue that religious or moral language cannot refer to a transcendent reality because such a reality does not exist, or because our epistemic distance from the "Real" renders meaningless any talk of truth or correspondence between it and human linguistic conceptions. I use these terms with some care, well aware of the nuances they entail.

²⁰Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 114, 116. In the "semiotic universe" of a religious system, understood cultural-linguistically, meaning "is constituted by the uses of a specific language rather than being distinguished from it. Thus the proper way to determine what 'God' signifies, for example, is by examining how the Word operates within a religion and thereby shapes reality and experience rather than by first establishing its propositional or experiential meaning and reinterpreting or reformulating its uses accordingly. It is in this sense that theological description in the cultural-linguistic mode is intrasystematic or intratextual."

²¹Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 129, 118, 123, emphasis added.

gospel narratives are historically factual (as opposed to "fictional") accounts of the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.²² But the stories do intend to refer literally to the uniqueness and unsurpassability of Jesus. In this sense, Lindbeck follows the narrativist course of Hans Frei, refusing to permit a "liberal" search for the "real" meaning of the narratives, in their "deeper" moral, ideal, mythical, or existential purpose. Liberalism mistakenly reshapes the narratives into an interpretive framework foreign to their original intention. This, in turn, undermines their purpose of identifying Jesus as a figure like no other, a figure intimately related to God the Father and to all humankind. Faith's commitment to the theological truth of the narrative claims about Jesus is most effectively preserved and transmitted through the tradition in its entirety.

It is also true for Lindbeck that the very survival of the community seems to be at stake in retaining the integrity of the narrative. It is imperative that believers practice their distinctive form of life or risk its dissolution, and the loss of its theological voice. If the "grammar" of the community is diluted or re-structured by the inclusion of alien linguistic patterns, the religious community faces a loss of self-identity and possible extinction. As Lindbeck explains: "the canonical texts are a condition, not only for the survival of a religion but for the very possibility of normative theological description."²³ Both the appropriate narrative identification of the Divine, and the proclaiming community itself are tied to the retention of the narrative texts of Scripture.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Lindbeck seems to suggest that the biblical narrative retains its determinative standing for believers because its interpretive success leaves them virtually no choice but to allow its vision to shape them. For those "steeped" in the canonical writings of a tradition, the

²²Garrett Green, "'The Bible As . . .': Fictional Narrative and Scriptural Truth," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, edited by Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 79-81.

²³Green, "The Bible," 116.

interpretive structure of the narratives offers an irreplaceably effective understanding of the world and of the believer's place within it.²⁴ Reminiscent of Wittgenstein, the suggestion here seems to be that the semiotic universe of the Bible creates a linguistic "form of life" so overarching and interpretively illuminating that it forms the believer's epistemic horizon. Believers experience their story as true, and are unwilling, therefore, to see the world otherwise. Lindbeck's description here calls to mind Clifford Geertz on religion; believers experience the worldview and ethos offered by the biblical narrative as interpretive "masterpieces" generating human flourishing and, in the absence of defeaters, worthy of retention. The narratives are not verifiably "true" to the public; rather, they are true to those who share the imaginative vision of faith fostered in the community of belief. But in a world epistemically unable to rise above the limitations of communal paradigms, this is all that one might reasonably expect.

Lindbeck's understanding of the biblical narrative clearly has theological affinities with neo-Barthianism, as Tracy suggests, but not of the sort Tracy suggests. Lindbeck openly indicates the extent of his indebtedness to Barth: "Barth's exegetical emphasis on narrative has been at second hand a chief source of my notion of intratextuality as an appropriate way of doing theology in a fashion consistent with a cultural-linguistic understanding of religion and a regulative view of doctrine."²⁵

It is noteworthy that Lindbeck does not say here that the cultural-linguistic orientation *entails* a Barthian commitment to the scriptural narrative, only that it is "consistent" with it. Tracy's charge that Lindbeck adopts a cultural-linguistic approach in order to smuggle in a "Barthian confessionism" seems overwrought since the method opens the door to a rather extraordinary variety of substantive possibilities. Lindbeck, for example, offers nothing comparable to a Barthian version of revelation; to do so would be methodologically

²⁴Green, "The Bible," 117.

²⁵Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 135.

incongruous. Further, Lindbeck does not suggest that the biblical narrative runs counter to reason, or that it produces a form of life so unreasonable that conversation and translation are rendered impossible. Instead, he opens the tradition to pragmatic verification, claiming that reasonable persons have been drawn to the believing community's way of life because it is accessible to others at the level of practice. A "No" to all that reason understands is not required to speak the "Yes" of faith. Lindbeck here agrees with Hans Frei's appropriation of Barth insofar as each would insist that theological truth is intratextual rather than open to public accounting. But this is hardly a novel observation. To say that faith commitments exceed reason is not necessarily to say that they violate it. The criteria of faith's distinctive meaningfulness is found in the narrative, and not in some more generalized account of anthropology or experience. But for Lindbeck this fact only view undermines the pretensions of liberalism, not the proper role of reason itself.

If this is so, then McFague and Lindbeck can logically share a cultural-linguistic methodology and not share the same theological attachment to narrative, because it is not required by the method. They can agree on method but disagree thoroughly on what sources best depict the identity of God and work most effectively for the good of the creation. In short, Lindbeck is not wedded methodologically or substantively to "Barthian confessionalism," although he may adopt a view of narrative that Barth might generally support. McFague, in my view, could accept this distinction along with Lindbeck. If this is the case, it supports my contention that McFague and Lindbeck are at odds only substantively, but not methodologically.

Lindbeck's appreciation of Barth, Wittgenstein, and Geertz raise Tracy's fears of sectarianism, that the language of the believing community is incommensurable with the language of the surrounding culture. But, again, Tracy's concern is exaggerated, as evidenced by Lindbeck's reliance on pragmatism. Incommensurability can be understood in two senses. In the first, languages can be said to be incommensurate

when the one employs concepts that do not appear in, or that seem to be in disagreement with, the other. Here, some translation and even agreement across traditions remains possible if the languages in question share common background assumptions or structures of interpretation. In the second sense, incommensurability occurs when languages do not share basic standards of evidence or criteria of adjudication. As John P. Reeder, Jr. has suggested, if divergence on such fundamental criteria exists, then we face an intractable problem which renders translation impossible.²⁶ But if the distance between languages is of the first sort, translation and understanding are more readily achieved, at least in part. Pragmatists, including Lindbeck and McFague, have denied that any basic or foundational criteria exist, and so refuse to accept the second, deeper sense of incommensurability. Instead, they look for overlaps and convergences between traditions to make meaningful conversation possible.

It is true that Lindbeck, at times, appears to speak of both sorts of incommensurability. He describes the conceptual problem as follows: “. . . religions, like languages, can be understood only in their own terms, not by transposing them into an alien speech.”²⁷ He also claims that religious language may, indeed, be impenetrable from without: “. . . each type of theology is embedded in a conceptual framework so comprehensive that it shapes its own criteria for accuracy.”²⁸ In these passages, Lindbeck refers to both types of incommensurability, conceptual and justificatory, and perhaps provokes Tracy’s concerns about sectarianism. Lindbeck anticipates the charge and responds to it:

If there are no universal or foundational structures and standards of judgment by which one can decide between

²⁶One may see John P. Reeder, Jr., “Foundations Without Foundationalism,” in *Prospects for a Common Morality*, edited by Gene Outka and John P. Reeder Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 193. Reed provides an excellent discussion of the neopragmatic understanding of understanding across conceptual schemes.

²⁷Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 129.

²⁸Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 113.

different religious and nonreligious options, the choice of any one of them becomes, it would seem, purely irrational, a matter of arbitrary whim or blind faith, and while this conclusion may fit much of the modern mood, it is antithetical to what most religions, whether interpreted in liberal, preliberal, or postliberal fashion, have affirmed.²⁹

Understood in the light of his ties to pragmatism, however, Lindbeck offers a reasoned defense to the charge of irrationalism. He is well aware that the scriptural story is challenged by the ever-new situations to which it is addressed, and seeks to overcome the problem of sectarianism. He wishes to engage the biblical narrative in a Jamesian, pragmatic dialogue over its coherentist and performative merits and to avoid a thorough-going cultural and theological isolation. The fact of counter-interpretations and experiences that confront and challenge all religious ways of thinking must be faced:

religious change or innovation must be understood . . . as resulting from the interactions of a cultural-linguistic system with changing situations. Religious traditions are . . . abandoned, or replaced because. . . a religious interpretive scheme (embodied, as it always is, in religious practice and belief) develops anomalies in its application in new contexts. This produces . . . negative effects, negative experiences, even by the religion's own norms. Prophetic figures apprehend often with dramatic vividness, how the inherited patterns of belief, practice, and ritual need to be (and can be) reminded.³⁰

Along with McFague, the non-sectarian, pragmatic Lindbeck agrees in principle that the linguistic universe of the Bible is open to conversation. Although his presumption is that the scriptural narrative can absorb all of human experience, he

²⁹Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 120.

³⁰Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 39. As I will indicate, it is precisely McFague's judgment that the Christian tradition has proven itself unable to relate effectively to "new contexts" that propels her metaphorical revisions. She points incessantly to the "negative effects, negative experiences" and "anomalies" that pervade the grammar of the Christian narrative.

seems to appreciate the ways in which the interpretive structure of religious belief remains in dialogue with other ways of construing reality. The dialogue, of course, has limits because the propositions of faith are beyond natural reason, but overlapping notions of human flourishing may fruitfully be shared. Such a dialogue is not truly Barthian in character.

What ultimately forces change upon a religious worldview is not its failure to “apologize” publicly for its interpretive structure, or its inability to demonstrate its ties to rational foundations, for such universal warrants are unavailable. Instead, Lindbeck reiterates that a religion proves or disproves itself via coherence and performance:

the reasonableness of a religion is largely a function of its assimilative powers, of its ability to provide an intelligible interpretation in its own terms of the varied situations and realities its adherents encounter . . . confirmation or disconfirmation occurs through an accumulation of successes or failures in making practical and cognitively coherent sense of relevant data There is no way of testing the merits and demerits of a theological method apart from performance.³¹

For Lindbeck, it seems that Christianity has performed exceedingly well. In fact, to the extent that moral fruits are discernible through reason, the coherence and pragmatic success of Christianity can be argued publicly. As a result, wholesale revisions in the narrative are uncalled for. The tradition has faced the dual tests of coherence and pragmatism and passed them, proving itself capable of effectively shaping human lives. The incommensurable elements of Christianity arise only at the level of propositions of faith that exceed the grasp of natural reason. However, this is as true for McFague as it is for Lindbeck. If Lindbeck is guilty of confessionalism, irrationalism, or fideism, then so, to a lesser degree perhaps, is McFague.

³¹Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 131, 134. Again, for McFague traditional Christianity has lost its capacity to assimilate the sensibilities of the modern age and has become linguistically illegitimate.

Lindbeck agrees that the tradition has been performatively blameworthy, but insists that its failures have been due to faithlessness, or a faulty application of the biblical narrative to life situations. The crusader who cleaves the skull of the "infidel" while shouting "Christ is Lord" serves as an example of a profound grammatical and moral misunderstanding.³² Such blunders, however, do not undermine the linguistic universe of the Scripture or its narrative identification of God. Instead, they merely serve to affirm, albeit negatively, the truthful application of the same words and call believers to a life more harmonious with their convictions. Reading Lindbeck as a non-sectarian convinced of the interpretive success of the biblical narrative is the key to understanding his disagreement with McFague.

As I have suggested, Sallie McFague is also a theological realist guided by the cultural-linguistic view of religion and the principles of pragmatism. But she departs from Lindbeck over his appraisal of the coherence and performative success of the biblical story. Where Lindbeck argues on behalf of the semiotic universe of the tradition and for its identification of the God about whom it speaks, McFague vigorously insists upon its deconstruction. The rationale for this attack is multi-layered. Most importantly, McFague has come to reject the identification of God as it is reflected in the biblical narratives because of its dreadful performative record. The God of tradition no longer satisfies her as the true God because He has failed pragmatically.³³

³²Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 64.

³³For example, McFague rejects the traditional account of creation as "dualistic," and hierarchical. She denies Lindbeck's notion of the church as an "alien" community as "exclusivistic" and separatist, and even regards the redemptive story of Scripture as beyond reclamation. As she puts it (*Models of God*, 54): "The mythology in which the cross and especially the resurrection have been interpreted is not only anachronistic but harmful, for the destabilizing, inclusive, nonhierarchical vision of salvation needed in a holistic, nuclear age is undermined by it. . . . we not only accept a salvation we do not need but weaken if not destroy our ability to understand and accept the salvation we do need."

McFague, therefore, subjects the tradition to broader criteria of justification, relying on warrants outside the narrative itself to support her critique of the propositions of faith. As the well-entrenched beliefs of her faith have become more minimal, her openness to a rational accounting of her metaphors has grown. She adopts this strategy because her own understanding of the God of Christianity has been shaped by feminist, humanistic, and ecological sensitivities, which she believes are overlooked by the tradition. The received language of the tradition, in her view, has become incoherent. It has outgrown its relevance and proven itself detrimental to human flourishing as understood by sources outside of and subjugated by the narrative tradition. Its failures cannot be attributed simply to individual mistakes and misuses of language. On the contrary, the narrative of Scripture is fundamentally flawed. The biblical narrative, she insists, is "patriarchal . . . imperialistic, triumphalist . . . oppressive," "idolatrous and irrelevant."³⁴ As a result, its language harms those shaped by it, and "may also work against the continuation of life on our planet."³⁵

For McFague, a theological unwillingness radically to revise or reject the metaphors of Scripture binds us to harmful relational patterns with one another and with the earth. The metaphors and models handed on to us by the tradition are "hurtful," "outmoded," "anachronistic," "names from a bygone time." Refusing to drop these incoherent metaphors and seek a "truer" religious framework "ghettoizes" Christianity and leaves it speaking a divisive theological language no longer "*commensurate with our times.*"³⁶ The looming threat of the nuclear age makes it imperative that changes be undertaken at once.

The performative breakdown of the biblical narrative requires that it be recast in a fashion which enhances the good of humankind. As expected, improved performance, along with coherence, will serve as long-term justification for the

³⁴McFague, *Models of God*, ix.

³⁵McFague, *Models of God*, ix.

³⁶McFague, *Models of God*, 3.

workability of the proposed metaphorical innovations: "we will consider the implications of these models for the conduct of human existence: the demand for justice for all; participation in healing the divisions among beings; and the offer of companionship to others, especially the outsider."³⁷

In her constructive effort to create a more humane and ecologically sensitive theology, McFague looks to many sources beyond the biblical narrative. Her assumption is that any language that endorses "hierarchical, dualistic, external, unchanging, atomistic, anthropocentric, and deterministic ways of understanding these relationships is not appropriate for our time."³⁸ She acknowledges that Christian theologians are "constrained by the constant of the tradition," and "constrained to return to the paradigmatic story of Jesus for illumination and validation," but she clearly means less by this "constraint" than does Lindbeck.³⁹ For she proceeds to engage in a wholesale, "liberal" rejection of the language of the tradition, replacing it with her new and more promising metaphors. To accomplish this task, she incorporates the "grammar" of contemporary holistic, evolutionary and ecological sensibilities, insights from other religious traditions, the experience of the disenfranchised and alienated, and her own interpretive insights as a woman.

Her openness to reconstruct the metaphors of Christianity derives from her view that "Scripture and the classics of the theological tradition, are 'sedimentations' of interpreted experience."⁴⁰ The relationship between Scripture, tradition, and experience, therefore, is more fluid than is usually appreciated, because Scripture and tradition themselves are products of experience. Echoing James, she argues that since all

³⁷McFague, *Models of God*, xiii. McFague adds "it is the same kind of claim as that presented by the models of God as lord, king, and patriarch, with the world as His realm. . . . The question we must ask is not whether one is true and the other false, but which one is a better portrait of Christian faith for our day."

³⁸McFague, *Models of God*, 13.

³⁹McFague, *Models of God*, 41, 49.

⁴⁰McFague, *Models of God*, 42.

experience is interpreted, we are always involved in a "hermeneutical spiral from which there is no clear entrance or exit."⁴¹ The result is that Scripture is rightly understood as a "classic" or "prototype," which serves "as a model of how theology should be done," but its authority should not exceed these narrow parameters.⁴² McFague refuses to follow Lindbeck and grant to the biblical narrative a more privileged place in the interplay of Scripture, tradition, and experience. Where Lindbeck would insist that the identity of the Christian faith is irrevocably tied to the seamless tradition, McFague rejects that view and seeks to identify God differently. "Unfortunately, others have ascribed to Scripture a loftier, and unjustified, status: it has too often been seen as the authoritative text, the only norm for subsequent theology. As such the language (metaphors, models, and concepts) of two thousand years ago has become sacralized and made normative."⁴³

For McFague the language of two thousand years ago simply cannot be absolutized and expected coherently to express the contemporary experience of God's transformative, salvific love. The biblical narrative reflects the experience of the distant past in wooden metaphors that speak of "dying and rising gods, personal guilt and sacrificial atonement, eternal life and so forth."⁴⁴ These models, whatever their value may once have been, have simply lost their resonance in the late twentieth century and speak inadequately to the contemporary "evolutionary and ecological vision of interdependence with human beings possessing the ability to end life."⁴⁵

⁴¹McFague, *Models of God*, 42.

⁴²McFague, *Models of God*, 43.

⁴³McFague, *Models of God*, 43. McFague adds, "not only has Christian faith been interpreted for most of its history in anachronistic, irrelevant ways, but it has also become a 'book religion'. . . although it is evident in the book Christianity worships that it is the transformative power of God's love, not a text, that is the focus of Christian faith."

⁴⁴McFague, *Models of God*, 45.

⁴⁵McFague, *Models of God*, 45.

In short, McFague grants that Scripture is one resource for theological construction, perhaps even the preeminent source. She grants Scripture a privileged status, but also speaks of other biblically and non-biblically shaped experiences as additional sources for theological insight. Her notion of the “sedimentation” of experience suggests a nuanced understanding of the development of narratives in critical interplay with their forebears and contemporary alternatives. For Lindbeck, the biblical narrative as shaped in the tradition is the resource without which Christian communal and theological identity is lost. He tends, more so than McFague, to close off the narrative tradition to contemporary experience. Those elements of the tradition to which reason has access are open to discussion, but those elements tied to the well-entrenched beliefs of the faith are not. In fairness to Lindbeck, however, this is also the case for McFague.

One could certainly argue that this approach creates some difficulties for Lindbeck, not the least of which is his reliance on what appears to be an “experiential-expressivist” tie to the formation of the narratives of Scripture he upholds. Certainly the biblical narratives to which he clings are themselves a product of experience, shaped by the tradition to which the gospel was initially directed. This “tradition” itself developed as some narratives of believing experience came to be normative at the expense of others. Further, one assumes that Lindbeck would not deny that Scripture is made up of several “narratives” – of Jesus, John, or Paul for example – and that no account of their experience or subsequent experience can occur independent of tradition. If this is so, McFague would ask, why would Lindbeck reify the experience shaped by the dominant or transmitted “tradition” in the Bible at the expense of non-biblically based experience or of subjugated traditions within the community of faith itself? If all experience is given form by cultural-linguistic traditions, then why privilege the orthodox tradition over against the others? Lindbeck’s answer would be that the tradition truthfully identifies God through its narratives as born out by its coherence and stellar performance,

an answer which McFague could debate, but not reject methodologically.⁴⁶

Simply put, for Lindbeck the Christian narrative is sufficiently inclusive and malleable to make sense of the changing world to which it is currently addressed, and can help produce the sort of future he and McFague envision. It has been and remains coherent and effective; its failures in the past have been due to faulty application. Hence, the tradition continues to make justifiable ontological truth claims about the nature and purpose of the divine. For McFague the tradition has shown proven itself outworn and pragmatically anemic, unable to bring out the best in women, in relationships, in care for the environment, and in prospects for the future. Whatever its value may have been in the past, it is now time to drop its central metaphors in order to restore coherence and improve on the tradition's performance. It seems that the experiences of both theologians in the "semiotic universe" of the biblical narrative have been very different, but neither doubts that the linguistic patterns at work in the tradition have formed their perspectives. McFague, one might say, wishes to overhaul the raft as she stands on its edge, while Lindbeck calls only for very minimal repairs. Failures at both the levels of coherence and performance have made such changes necessary.

In short, McFague thinks that the traditional biblical narrative divides the creation, person from person, human from non-human, and persons from the divine, signaling a mistaken account of the pervasive, all-encompassing "reunification of the beloved world with its lover, God."⁴⁷ Guilty of an incompatibility with contemporary extra-biblical

⁴⁶One may see Stephen Sell, "Hermeneutics in Theology and the Theology of Hermeneutics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 61 (Winter 1993): 683 and following. Sell claims that Lindbeck grants tradition an excessive voice in the interplay between tradition and experience. "Liberals," one may argue, are too prone to err in the opposite direction. My point is that this is not a methodological approach as such, but a strategy necessitated by variant readings of the performance of the biblical narratives over time.

⁴⁷McFague, *Models of God*, 135.

beliefs and a demonstrable performative failure, the incoherent metaphors of the tradition cry out for theological rejection.

Conclusions

Unless one characterizes Lindbeck's work as theologically sectarian, fideistic, or irrational,⁴⁸ which, in my view, would entail leveling the same accusations at McFague, can one argue that his theological realism corresponds methodologically to McFague's? Their constructive differences are not tied to method. Instead, Lindbeck's "conservatism" or "Biblicism" derives from his conviction that the stories of Scripture remain pragmatically alive and relevant to the contemporary mind and situation; further, they truly identify the God about whom they speak. In addition, they continue to generate human flourishing when practiced faithfully. Lindbeck clearly assumes a unity, a coherence, and a verifiable pragmatic success in the narrative tradition that McFague denies. According to Lindbeck, the biblical narrative can effectively "absorb" the world because it possesses a truth which the world lacks.

McFague's "liberalism" proceeds from her rejection of these conclusions, and her subsequent desire to jettison the tradition. The narrative is senseless to the critical, contemporary mind, and performs poorly. Its depiction of God is conceptually

⁴⁸These concerns have been raised by a variety of thinkers, including McFague. James Gustafson, for example, lists Lindbeck among the theologians guilty of offering a "sectarian temptation" and argues forcefully against succumbing to it. See Gustafson's, "The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church, and the University," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society* 40 (1985): 83-94. As Gustafson writes, echoing McFague (93): "In Christian sectarian form God becomes a Christian God for Christian people: to put it most pejoratively, God is assumed to be a tribal God of a minority of the earth's population. Or, if God is not a tribal God there is only one community in the world that has access to knowledge of God because God has revealed himself only in the life of that community. Or still another possible assumption, and worse from my perspective than the other two, Christian theology and ethics really are not concerned so much about God as they are about maintaining fidelity to the biblical narratives about Jesus, or about maintaining the 'biblical view' as a historical vocation that demands fidelity without further external justification, or idolatrously maintaining a historic social identity."

inadequate and demonstrably false. McFague believes narrativists are blind to its failures, and unable to acknowledge the damage wrought by its interpretation of reality. Lindbeck sees McFague trading Christian distinctiveness for fleeting "relevance," opting for a theological *esperanto* of dubious current value, and certainly of no lasting worth. As the penetrating voice of the Christian narrative vanishes from the scene, society will lose the clarion call to an interpretive "masterpiece" for living, and the Christian community itself will be threatened with extinction.

With such dissimilar ways of comprehending the world and of construing the faith/reason dialectic, it is not at all surprising that the two thinkers diverge so thoroughly in their substantive proposals. But unless Lindbeck has opted for a sectarian withdrawal from theological dialogue, which he has not, then he and McFague along with others who similarly disagree can at least continue to converse. Their clash is not irreconcilable at the level of method, "experiential-expressivist" vs. "narrativist." Rather, it is a clash over conflicting narratives and their ability to identify accurately the Divine and its purposes, and over pragmatic assessments of the received tradition. Can such a conversation prove fruitful? That, of course, remains to be seen, particularly in the realm of conflicting theological proposals. But at least a conversation would seem possible, if not ruled out for the wrong reasons.⁴⁹

⁴⁹My thanks are extended to John P. Reeder Jr. of Brown University, and to John Haught of Georgetown University, whose careful reading of an earlier draft of this essay helped clarify the argument considerably. Their gracious and discerning attention to my work is deeply appreciated.