Belief and the Function of Doctrine

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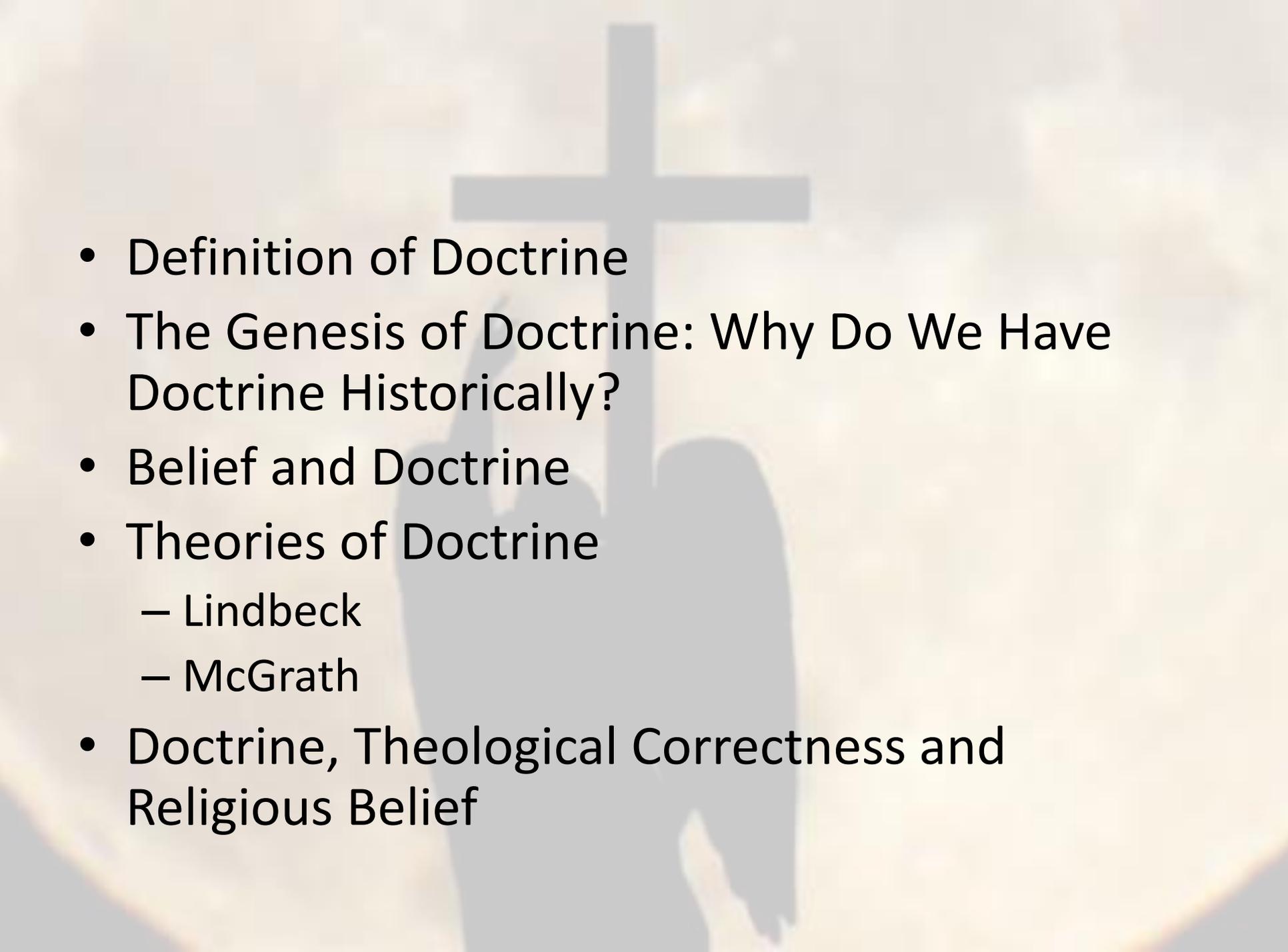
- Definition of Doctrine
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- Doctrine, Theological Correctness and Religious Belief

Definition of Doctrine

- Etymology of Doctrine:
  - Comes from Latin *doctrīna*, meaning 'teaching or instruction'
  - Word is related to 'catechism'
- The 'teaching of the church' or 'Christian proclamation'
- 'Christian doctrine is the response of the Christian church to God, as he revealed himself, especially in scripture and through Jesus Christ. It is an obedient, responsible, and faithful attempt to make sense of the cluster of astonishing and exciting possibilities opened up by the coming of Jesus Christ.' -McGrath, *Studies in Doctrine*, 237
- 'What the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God: this is Christian doctrine.' -Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 1

The Genesis of Doctrine: Why Do We Have Doctrine Historically?

- Bible is predominantly made up of stories
- Not made-up of propositions
- Not a philosophical treatise
- Christ spoke in parables
- Why did doctrine come about in the church given the style of Christian proclamation primarily taking other forms?
  - Engagement with wider culture, Hellenism
  - Translation of Church proclamation in new context, theology of repetition not possible in philosophical/Hellenistic climate
  - Dissenting theological voices meant delineation of orthodoxy important, e.g. Arianism and Athanasius, 4th century

Doctrine and Dogma

- 'Dogma' often interpreted as pejorative, authoritarian and unchangeable
- Mostly used in Roman Catholic settings, although it can be found in certain Lutheran and Reformed writings as well.
- 'designates that which is declared by the church to be revealed truth either as part of the universal teaching, or through solemn doctrinal judgement' – McGrath
- A special set of doctrines in RCC that have been deemed divinely revealed and which the Church has formally defined and declared to be believed as revealed. Doctrine in the RCC is all Church teaching in matters of faith and ethics.
- All dogma may be a doctrine but not all doctrine's are dogma.

Belief and Doctrine

- Being a Christian today means you BELIEVE certain things. Definition is cognitive and intellectual not practical.

- Part of rationalistic interpretation of religion. We are what we believe today. Belief makes you religious rather than certain practices.

- Kinds of basic things we would believe (not a complete list!)
  - (1) There is a single God in three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) who is the creator of all that is.
  - (2) Jesus Christ is the Son of God who came to earth in human flesh and lived a life of ministry to the marginalised and the whole world.
  - (3) Christ died for our sins so that we would be in a right relation with Him.
  - (4) Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

- Most of these things we believe have an associated doctrine. (1) The Doctrine of God and the Trinity (2) Christology (3) Doctrine of Redemption (4) Doctrine of Eschatology

- Doctrine is associated with belief

Belief, Doctrine and Practice

- 'A Christian is someone who believes certain things rather than someone who practices certain things.'
  - Is this correct? Should belief be separate from practice? Faith vs Works
- 'Doctrine is not the only, not even the primary, activity of the church. The church worships God and serves mankind, it works for the transformation of this world and awaits the consummation of its hope in the next.' - Pelikan
- Doxy vs Praxy, lex orandi, lex credendi ("law of praying is the law of believing")
- Should belief be the defining feature of being a Christian?

Belief and Doctrine: What is Doctrine?

- George Lindbeck's Typology of Doctrine from his book *The Nature of Doctrine*

  - Cognitive – Propositional Theory of Doctrine

  - Experiential – Expressivist Theory of Doctrine

  - Cultural – Linguistic Theory of Doctrine

George A. Lindbeck
25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

THE
Nature
OF
Doctrine

Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age

With a New Introduction by Bruce D. Marshall and a New Afterword by the Author
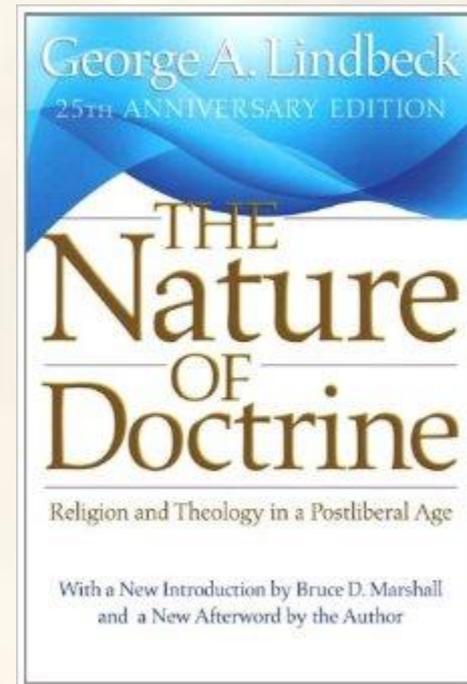
Lindbeck: Cognitive – Propositional Theory of Doctrine

- Doctrines are 'informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities.' (Lindbeck, 16)
- Doctrines are primarily cognitive , intellectual statements of fact
- The doctrines speak truthfully about an objective reality and convey this truth.
- Related to belief as a cognitive practice. Belief in this sense means you intellectually assent to a doctrine and think it is true.
- Doctrine as belief

Lindbeck: Experiential – Expressivist Theory of Doctrine

- Doctrines are interpreted 'as non-informative and non-discursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes or existential orientations.'- Lindbeck, 16.

- Doctrine seeks to encapsulate a prior religious experience. Experience

- Referent of the doctrine is not to some objective reality but instead to a subjective mood or orientation of the individual that is expressing the doctrine.

- Doctrine's are viewed aesthetically. e.g. Impressionism

- Doctrine arises out of a religious anthropological reality
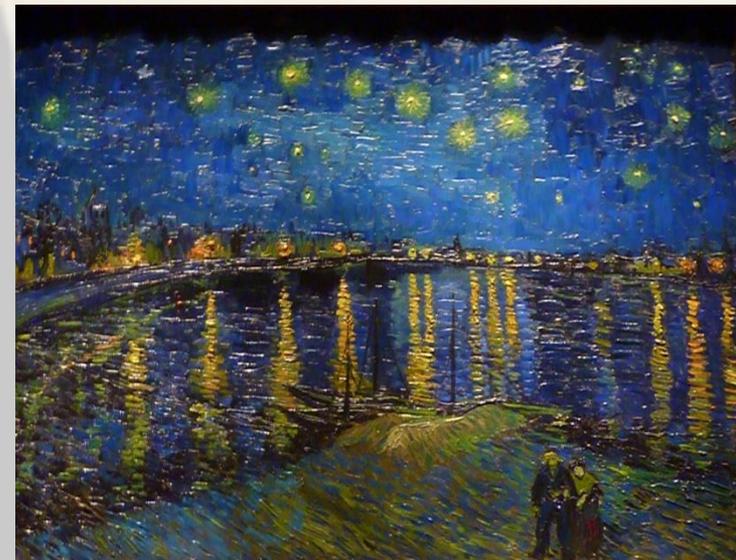
Lindbeck: Cultural – Linguistic Theory of Doctrine

- 'A religion … is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings and sentiments. **Like a culture or language**, it is a **communal phenomenon** that **shapes** the subjectivities of individuals **rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities**. It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed' - Lindbeck, 33.

- Religions ought to be compared to languages where religious doctrines function as grammar.

- Doctrine as *intrasystemic consistency*.

- Doctrine helps to make **meaning** and set boundaries for a religious community.

- 'Doctrine describes the regulatory language of the Christian idiom' – McGrath on Lindbeck

- Doctrine is primarily a social phenomenon. Doctrine helps make meaning.

KEEP CALM AND USE CORRECT GRAMMAR
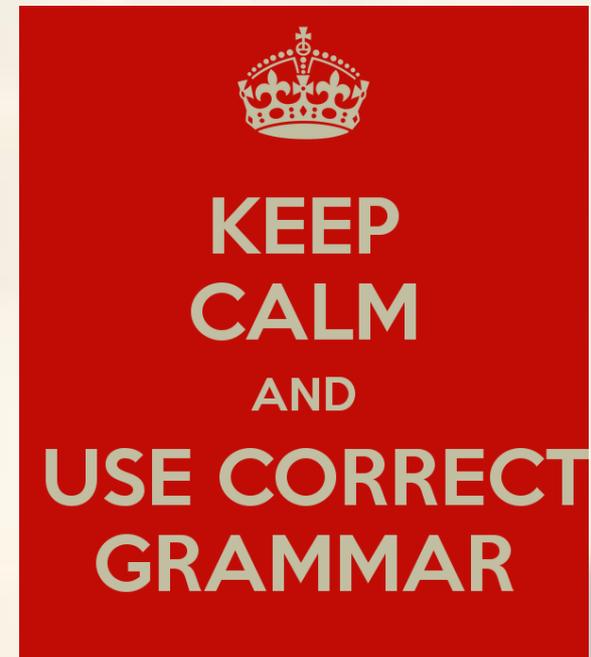
McGrath on the Nature of Doctrine

- Issues with Lindbeck's four views
  - CP: doesn't allow for historical/cultural conditioning of doctrine or how the meaning of propositions change with context.
  - EE: Doctrine is superfluous and aesthetic excess. All faiths have the same core experience, they just express it differently. What about when those expressions do not fit together? How can we assess the truthfulness or adequacy of a doctrine in this case?
  - CL: It is silent on whether doctrine actually refers to the realities it seeks to speak about. It sidesteps the issue whether the content is truthful and real.

McGrath on the Nature of Doctrine

- McGrath provides a synthesis, taking elements from each model:
  - 1. Doctrine functions as a social demarcator.
  - 2. Doctrine is generated by, and subsequently interprets the Christian narrative.
  - 3. Doctrine interprets experience.
  - 4. Doctrine makes truth claims.

Doctrine, Theological Correctness and Religious Belief

- Justin Barrett (Psychologist) Robert McCauley (Philosopher) speak about the discrepancy between *theological correctness* and *natural religious belief*.

- Natural Religious Belief: 'the religious thoughts that are generated by natural cognitive systems, and do not necessitate cultural scaffolding to be entertained and transmitted. Natural religion has to be distinguished from theology.' – Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion and Theology*, 203

- We rely upon our natural religious intuitions about God and the supernatural when under pressure signifying the difficulty people might have with relating to conceptually difficult doctrines or doctrines that diverge from natural religious beliefs.

- Doctrine as *cultural scaffolding* that gets built onto intuitive natural religious beliefs.

- What might this mean for doctrines that do not align with our intuitions?

- 'The more complex that theological ideas are—that is, the more they deviate from the ordinary cognition that undergirds natural religion—the more effort that will be required to teach them and maintain them.' – Barrett, 134

Doctrine, Theological Correctness and Religious Belief

- 1. Elements of the natural world such as rocks, trees, mountains, and animals are purposefully and intentionally designed by someone(s), who must therefore have superhuman power.
- 2. Things happen in the world that unseen agents cause. These agents are not human or animal.
- 3. Humans have internal components (such as a mind, soul, and/or spirit) that are distinguishable from the body.
- 4. Moral norms are unchangeable (even by gods).
- 5. Immoral behavior leads to misfortune; moral behavior to fortune.
- 6. Ritualized behaviors such as marking off special spaces or ritual cleansings can protect from unseen hazards (including those caused by gods).
- 7. Some component(s) of humans that has agency (such as souls or minds) may continue to exist without earthly bodies after death (thereby becoming ancestors or gods).
- 8. Gods exist with thoughts, wants, perspectives, and free will to act.
- 9. Gods may be invisible and immortal, but they are not outside of space and time.
- 10. Gods can and do interact with the natural world and people, perhaps especially those that are ancestors of the living, and hence, have an interest in the living. This interaction with the world accounts for perceived agency and purpose in the world that cannot be accounted for by human o animal activity.
- 11. Gods generally know things that humans do not (they can be superknowing, superperceiving, or both), perhaps particularly things that are important for human social interactions.
- 12. Gods, because of their access to relevant information and special powers, may be responsible for instances of fortune or misfortune; they can reward or punish human actions.
- 13. Because of their superhuman power, when gods act, they act permanently, and so when they act in religious rituals, the religious ritual need not be repeated.

Resources

- Barrett, Justin. *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2011.*

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- Jaroslav Pelikan and Krista Tippett, 'The Need for Creeds', Podcast, http://www.onbeing.org/program/need-creeds/211