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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Another nature of doctrine: George Lindbeck, Kathryn Tanner and Christian identities

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Abstract

Theorists such as Stuart Hall have problematised the idea that identity is something that remains essentially the same across time. Since doctrine has been cast as that which safeguards Christian identity, this provokes the question: what role can doctrine play if this is the case? Critiquing George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* in light of Kathryn Tanner's work on rules suggests that doctrine cannot regulate, constitute or generate the necessary conditions for Christian identity. Doctrine can, however, still play a role in generating Christian meaning without regulating identity by determining how concepts are formed in Christian community.

Keywords: doctrine; Stuart Hall; George Lindbeck; rules; Kathryn Tanner

> I came to understand that identity is not a set of attributes, the unchanging essence of the inner self, but a constantly shifting process of positioning. We tend to think of identity as taking us back to our roots, the part of us which remains essentially the same across time. In fact, identity is always a never-completed process of becoming – a process of shifting identifications, rather than a singular, complete, finished state of being. (Stuart Hall)

The epigraph is taken from Stuart Hall's posthumously published memoir, *Familiar Stranger*.[1] It is a key moment in Hall's reflection on how he became conscious of himself as Black in light of the realities of colonialism, social discourses such as Marcus Garvey's black nationalism and his encounters with worlds beyond his middle-class Jamaican upbringing. The memoir as a whole is a sustained reflection on how one comes to think one's own conditions of identity – on *how* shifting identifications are formed to enable different articulations of self. Hall writes that he has 'been riveted by the question of how we can understand the chaos of identifications which we assemble in order to navigate the social world, and also how we seek to reach, somehow, ourselves'.[2] Precisely because identity is not a matter of unchanging roots, however, 'this

[1]Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger: A Life between Two Islands* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 16.
[2]Ibid., p. 63.

arrival never occurs: we'll never be ourselves, whatever that means'.[3] As he notes, 'identity, in the singular, is never achieved with any finality. Identities, in the plural, are the means for becoming.'[4]

'Doctrine' has historically been articulated as a way to ascertain and maintain Christian identity. As Reinhard Hütter puts it, doctrines are 'the rules that are decisive for the identity, welfare, and cohesion of a certain group and distinguish that group from others'.[5] Or, as Christine Helmer writes (without necessarily subscribing to this view), 'doctrines secure the identity of the church'.[6] If identity can never be decisively secured, however – if doctrines *cannot* ultimately do what they are described as doing – then the question arises: what kind of role can doctrine play in Christian life?

This question can be asked from several vantage points. Helmer's *Theology and the End of Doctrine,* for example, might be an excellent starting point for similar inquiries. The fact that she focuses on arguing for doctrine's social constructedness rather than extensively interrogating its character as normative for identity renders it less suitable for this specific question, however.[7] I instead approach the question by critiquing George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* from the perspective of Kathryn Tanner's work on rules, so as to lay a groundwork for exploring how doctrine can function if Christian identity is not something that remains essentially the same over time.[8] I begin by arguing that Lindbeck casts doctrine as performing three interlocking functions: regulative, constitutive and generative. I then argue that Tanner shows both that doctrine cannot perform a constitutive function of any kind and that its regulative and generative functions must be rigorously disarticulated. I conclude by gesturing towards how doctrine can be thought of as generating meaning without safeguarding identity.

Lindbeck

George Lindbeck developed his 'regulative' account of doctrine in contrast to propositional and 'experiential expressive' ones, as well as combinations of the two. Propositional accounts emphasise 'the cognitive aspects of religion and [stress] the ways in which church doctrines function as … truth claims about objective realities',[9] whilst experiential-expressive accounts interpret 'doctrines as non-informative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations'.[10] In the

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 57; cited in Christine Helmer, *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014), p. 16.

[6]Helmer, *End of Doctrine*, p. 23.

[7]Cf. Helmer, *End of Doctrine*, pp. 149–50.

[8]For recent critical analyses of Lindbeck, see Mike Higton, 'Reconstructing *The Nature of Doctrine*', *Modern Theology* 30/1 (2014), pp. 1–31; and Simeon Zahl, 'On the Affective Salience of Doctrines', *Modern Theology* 31/3 (2015), pp. 428–44. Hugh Nicholson also stages an encounter between Lindbeck and Tanner in 'The Political Nature of Doctrine: A Critique of Lindbeck in Light of Recent Scholarship', *Heythrop Journal* 48/6 (2007), pp. 858–77. Nicholson focuses on what doctrine should be used for in the political sphere, rather than what doctrine is in its own terms. Even though this latter question is related to questions of use, this is an importantly different question to the one pursued here.

[9]George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 16.

[10]Ibid.

former, doctrines assert and communicate truths about God and creation; in the latter, they express essentially religious experiences. Under Lindbeck's 'regulative' account, by contrast, 'the function of church doctrines that becomes most prominent … is their use … as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action'.[11] Though 'rule' is not explicitly defined, it is deployed throughout in terms of permission and prohibition, as Lindbeck writes, for example, that 'doctrines regulate truth claims by excluding some and permitting others'.[12] Doctrines thus perform the role of determining (among other things) which claims are allowed and which are not. This is their regulative function.

Doctrines do not just regulate truth and falsity. They also determine whether or not claims are meaningful at all. Lindbeck articulates this by distinguishing first- from second-order statements, then asserting that doctrines function as second-order claims which render first-order claims meaningful. Drawing an analogy between religions and mathematical systems, he notes that it is 'meaningless to say that one thing is larger than another if one lacks the categorical concept of size'.[13] One can likewise say that Christianity makes certain claims possible by providing concepts that make them meaningful. Just as mathematical systems 'constitute the only idioms in which first-order … truths and falsehoods can be stated regarding the quantitative aspects of reality',[14] so religions constitute the only idioms in which truths and falsehoods can be stated regarding the divine aspects of reality. Doctrines thus make religious meaning possible; they generate new conditions of possibility for significance. This is their 'generative' function.

In performing regulative and generative functions, doctrines also instantiate what is essential to the community they regulate; doctrines are the rules 'considered essential to the identity … of the group in question'.[15] Committing to a doctrine as regulating one's world of meaning is thus a necessary condition of being part of the Christian community,[16] whilst doctrines judged to be both permanent and unconditional are 'permanently and unconditionally necessary to mainstream Christian identity'.[17] Precisely as they are used to generate conditions of meaning insofar as they are used to regulate licit and illicit speech, that is, doctrines mark aspects essential to Christianity, such that one must avow certain doctrines to be properly Christian. Doctrines thus constitute necessary and essential conditions of Christian identity. This is their constitutive function.

[11]Ibid., p. 18.
[12]Ibid., p. 19.
[13]Ibid., p. 48.
[14]Ibid.
[15]Ibid., p. 74. This claim is nuanced by a distinction between 'operative' and 'formal'/'official' doctrines, within which 'operative' doctrines are those in fact 'necessary to communal identity' (Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, p. 74) whilst 'official' doctrines are functionally inoperative in this regard. It is unclear whether or not the 'necessity' here is that of being (a) properly or truly Christian, or (b) Christian at all. There are passages which suggest that Lindbeck holds certain doctrines to be constitutive of Christian identity *per se*, such that if one rejects them, then one is no longer Christian. This is a substantially harder argument to maintain, however, and runs counter to other impulses in his thought. I am therefore going to read Lindbeck as concerned with the conditions of proper or true Christian identity – not what it is to be Christian at all, but what it is to be within the unified bounds of Christianity whilst still allowing for ecumenical variety.
[16]Cf. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, p. 62.
[17]Ibid., p. 96.

This should not be oversimplified. Lindbeck distinguishes 'unconditionally' from 'conditionally' necessary doctrines, further specifying the latter as either 'temporal' or 'permanent'.[18] He also asserts that there can be genuine contestation over what type a given doctrine is (it is only 'plausible' that Nicaea and Chalcedon express permanently unconditional rules, for example[19]). It is also important to note that he is primarily concerned with articulating a Christian identity that can account for ecumenical pluralism. As such, any necessary conditions of Christian identity should not rule out genuine disagreement within and between Christian communities of meaning. Nonetheless, the community in virtue of which these differences are possible must still be unified by a strong abiding identity, and the task of doctrine is to help with 'ascertaining which of the changing forms is faithful to the putatively abiding substance'.[20] Though doctrines may be of different types, moreover, the hard core of doctrine consists of that which is unconditionally permanent, that in virtue of which the 'framework and the medium within which Christians know and experience … retains continuity and unity through the centuries'.[21] There are nuances to Lindbeck's argument, then. All the same, he presents doctrines as constitutive of essential Christian identity across time.

Another nuance is that even though doctrines are used as rules, Lindbeck does not flatly identify particular doctrines with the rules they are 'used as'. As he writes, although 'some doctrines … are explicit statements of general regulative principles … most doctrines illustrate correct usage rather than define it. They are exemplary instantiations or paradigms of the application of rules'.[22] Doctrinal expressions do not in most cases absolutely manifest the rules at stake, but authoritatively illustrate what it is like to follow the rules constitutive of a given identity. Regarding Nicaea, for example, Lindbeck writes that 'the terminology and concepts of "one substance and three persons" … may be absent, but if the same rules that guided the formation of the original paradigms are operative in the construction of the new formulations, they express one and the same doctrine'.[23] There is thus a complex relation between doctrine and rule, in which the rule guides the formulation of doctrine so that the doctrine can be used as that rule. Though doctrines are constitutive of Christian identity, different formulations of doctrine might be used to express the same doctrinal rule.[24]

In Lindbeck's account, then, doctrines are used as communally authoritative rules to regulate whether first order claims are licit or illicit for Christian community. As they perform this function, they both generate the conditions of possibility for the meanings

[18]Ibid., pp. 84–5.
[19]Ibid., p. 96.
[20]Ibid., p. 79.
[21]Ibid., p. 84.
[22]Ibid., p. 81.
[23]Ibid., p. 95.
[24]Though not central to this paper's argument, it worth noting that there seems to be a contradiction between Lindbeck's claims that (a) doctrines are often 'exemplary instantiations or paradigms of the application of rules', and (b) that 'if the same rules that guided the formation of the original paradigms are operative in the construction of the new formulations, they express one and the same doctrine'. In the former, doctrines answer to different identity conditions than the rules whose applications they exemplify (i.e., different doctrines may instantiate the same rule). In the latter, however, the rules determine the identity of the doctrine, such that if two formulations instantiate the same rule they therefore count as expressing the same doctrine. If this is a contradiction, Lindbeck cannot coherently maintain the distinction between 'rule' and 'doctrine' necessary for his account of how doctrines can preserve their identity across diverse formulations.

they regulate and constitute necessary conditions of Christian identity. Doctrine can thus be characterised as performing a threefold function: regulative, generative and constitutive.

Tanner

I am now going to trace Kathryn Tanner's account of rules, highlighting where she undercuts aspects of Lindbeck's argument. Like Lindbeck, Tanner devotes attention to the 'rules for discourse' internal to Christianity,[25] specifically the 'rules of speech that make sense of the variety of statements Christians make'.[26] Since the rules she develops in *God and Creation in Christian Theology* can be used to regulate proper Christian speech, moreover (they 'can help establish conclusively *whether* a particular statement is Christianly authentic or misapplied and *why*'[27]), we can say that Tanner and Lindbeck are both concerned with how rules regulate the sense of Christian utterances. They are both concerned, that is, with the 'ruled relations among traditional forms of theological statements sufficient to provide internal coherence for Christian discourse'.[28]

Instead of grounding other commonalities, however, this shared logical space highlights substantive differences. A first important difference is that Tanner does not identify 'doctrines' with 'rules of discourse', whether in *God and Creation* or the rest of her corpus; and though she nowhere focuses much attention to this question (to the best of my knowledge), there is good reason to think that this identification should not be made in the context of her arguments. While critiquing post-liberal approaches to Christian identity in *Theories of Culture*, for example, she writes that 'doctrines do not seem to function as rules in the way post-liberals would like'.[29] And none of the rules that she articulates in *God and Creation* (e.g. 'avoid both a simple and univocal attribution of predicates to God and world and a simple contrast of divine and non-divine predicates'; 'avoid in talk about God's creative agency all suggestions of limitation in scope and manner'[30]) corresponds to doctrinal utterances in any obvious sense, even given Lindbeck's distinction between doctrine and rules.

Tanner does, of course, assert that it is 'statements about God and world [that] become rules for discourse'.[31] But unless every statement about God and world has doctrinal status, it does not follow from this that her rules should be cast as doctrines, nor that functioning as a rule *makes* something a doctrine. The claim that Tanner does not identify rules with doctrines might also be challenged on the basis of her assertion that 'statements in a first-order mode that work as rules are often instantiations or applications of rules for discourse; they work as rules by becoming paradigmatic instances of a rule's use'.[32] Indeed, she goes on to illustrate this claim by citing Lindbeck's argument that 'the trinitarian and Christological creedal formulas of the early church function in

[25]Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 12.
[26]Ibid., p. 15.
[27]Ibid., p. 17.
[28]Ibid., p. 5.
[29]Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 139. 'Post-liberals' here includes Lindbeck.
[30]Tanner, *God and Creation*, p. 41.
[31]Ibid., p. 12.
[32]Ibid., p. 50.

this fashion'.[33] Though these passages connect rules and doctrine, however, Tanner does not identify them with each other. 'Doctrines' are instead first-order statements, whilst 'rules' are meta-level statements governing how these first-order statements are used.[34] Even if it is still possible to use first-order statements as if they are meta-level, in her rendering of this Tanner undercuts any neat identification between doctrine and 'rules of discourse' by more consistently upholding Lindbeck's distinction between 'rule' and 'doctrine', within which doctrines can *at most instantiate* a specific application of a rule, not the rule itself.

A second difference can now be traced in terms of what the rules of Christian discourse *do*. As described above, Lindbeck casts rules as determining whether words can be meaningful in Christian community: they are conditions of possibility for meaningful Christian speech, just as the categorical concept of size is a condition of possibility for certain judgements. For Tanner, however, the aspect of Christian language at stake is its coherence, not its meaningfulness *per se*. Her rules are concerned with 'how [Christian utterances] are consistent with one another',[35] not with whether or not they are meaningful or nonsensical in an absolute sense. Whereas Lindbeck casts doctrine as the condition of possibility for meaningful Christian speech, that is, Tanner casts the rules of Christian discourse as making already meaningful Christian statements fit together. They are 'transformation rules', to be used 'for working over [rules] in use elsewhere'.[36] The terms worked over by Christians in this sense already have their own significances – the 'linguistic habits' that Christians borrow to express their beliefs have already 'formed a sediment of sense. Language has begun to run along certain well-worn tracks that direct expectations of use.'[37] These well-worn tracks can then be inconsistent with the uses Christians wish to make of this language. Pre-existing senses of 'humanity' and 'divinity', for example, can carry implications rendering the assertion that Jesus Christ is very God and very human incoherent. Tanner's rules are thus articulated as ways to 'break up those habits',[38] thereby allowing the terms to be redeployed without rendering them something else entirely. And the fact that these habits are there to be broken up entails that the meaning of Christian speech cannot be contingent on already articulated Christian rules of discourse. Indeed, the question of coherence that motivates Tanner can only arise in this sense if it is assumed that the utterances in question already have meanings in virtue of which they can be inconsistent with one another. Not only are her rules not doctrines, then; they also do not generate meaning *ex nihilo*, but bend existing meanings to allow for coherent usage.[39]

Against this, it could be argued that bending meaning to allow coherence nonetheless produces new meanings, such that Tanner's rules do still serve as conditions of possibility for meaningful Christian speech (if in a more minimal sense). The claims that

[33]Ibid., p. 12.
[34]Cf. ibid., pp. 29, 49.
[35]Ibid., p. 18.
[36]Ibid., p. 27.
[37]Ibid., p. 26.
[38]Ibid.
[39]Ibid., In Tanner's extended words, 'Christians do not construct … from the bottom up what they say about God and Jesus or the nature of things in relation to God; instead, they use in odd ways whatever language-games they already happen to speak' (Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, p. 113). Perhaps the easiest way of articulating this is by noting that the terms used in scripture are not, and almost by definition cannot be, distinctively Christian – they are terms used by other cultures, Jewish and Gentile, through which Christians begin to reach certain strange beliefs.

God governs all things and that human beings are free can be made in *Christianly meaningful ways*, however, whilst remaining incoherent. This is precisely the problem. Tanner's rules just shift the frameworks within which these claims are made so that they can fit together with more ease. New meanings can then be generated in the space of this new coherence, of course – indeed, the importance of this innovative creativity is a central plank of Tanner's argument in *Theories of Culture*. But this is not the same as saying that her rules make meaningful Christian speech possible; only that they make it possible for Christians to speak new meanings in virtue of how they have cohered old ones together.[40]

Lindbeck's doctrines are not 'rules' in Tanner's sense, then, whilst the 'communally authoritative rules of Christian discourse' that doctrines might be used as cannot generate the conditions of possibility for Christian meaning. It is still possible that doctrines could generate conditions of meaning in some sense. Nonetheless, Tanner's account suggests that doctrines cannot perform this function in the way Lindbeck presents them as doing. If doctrines do have a generative function, it is not because they function as rules of Christian discourse.

A third difference between Tanner and Lindbeck can now be shown to undercut doctrine's constitutive function. We have seen that Lindbeck casts the rules of Christian discourse as constituting the necessary conditions of proper Christian identity. Tanner, by contrast, blocks them from doing so. Even though she articulates rules as conditions of possibility for coherent Christian speech, her sense of 'conditions of possibility' is antithetical to any sense of 'necessity': she explicitly and unequivocally asserts that the transcendental method she deploys 'cannot prove that the conditions of possibility sufficient for a given are necessary or unique'.[41] Though an utterance requires *some* condition of possibility for its meaningfulness, that is, we cannot assert that any single utterance either necessitates or is necessitated by any single condition: conditions of possibility cannot be transmuted into necessary conditions. Applying this to Lindbeck, it follows that, even if a doctrine does render certain modes of Christian discourse possible, it cannot be said that these modes would be impossible apart from this doctrine. *Even if* a mode of discourse is taken to be essential to Christianity, that is, this mode could not in turn be necessarily tied to any particular set of doctrines. Doctrines thus cannot constitute the necessary conditions of Christian identity. They cannot perform a constitutive function.

This is not to say that the concept of 'necessary conditions' is vacuous – the material world must exist for there to be churches; bodies must eat in order to live, breathe in order to pray. It is just to say that we cannot arrive at necessary conditions through transcendental arguments. The argument '*X* is possible; *X* is possible because of *Y*; therefore *Y* is necessary for *X*' is invalid, because possibility can always be grounded in something different. And so insofar as Lindbeck treats doctrines as constituting the necessary conditions for Christian identity because they make Christian discourse

[40]There is a slight tension here with Tanner's appeal to whether something is 'authentically' Christian. This might represent a contradiction between *God and Creation* and *Theories of Culture*. It is also possible, however, that the concept of being 'authentically' Christian can be disengaged from the notion of necessary conditions for Christianity, insofar as 'authentic' entails a degree of self-coherence that isn't tied to what the 'self' in question necessarily is. This would be consistent with her emphasis in *The Politics of God on* the normative but non-deterministic character of Christian belief. Cf. Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 7, 18.

[41]Tanner, *God and Creation*, p. 22. Tanner is here working on the basis of Stephan Körner's 'The Impossibility of Transcendental Deductions', *The Monist* 51 (1967), pp. 317–31.

possible, he illicitly moves from possibility to necessity. Even if doctrines do make Christian discourse possible as a matter of fact, it would not follow that they constitute necessary conditions for Christian belonging.

It could be the case, however, that doctrines can constitute Christian identity apart from whether they generate the conditions of possibility for Christian speech. Doctrine's most prominent 'nature' for Lindbeck is, after all, its regulative function. Against what has just been argued, it could thus be claimed that doctrines constitute the necessary conditions of Christian identity simply because they are used to regulate that identity, not because they generate possibilities of meaning. To be Christian *just is* to accept this doctrine as a rule of discourse – the fact that new meanings arise in the course of this regulation is a consequence, not a ground of its constitutive function.

This argument is troubled by a final relevant aspect of Tanner's account; namely, the fact that rules cannot ground their own identity over time. The claim that 'rules … retain an invariant meaning' is a crucial aspect of Lindbeck's argument.[42] This is what enables him to say that doctrine can be what is permanently necessary for an unchanging identity. In *The Politics of God*, however, Tanner argues that 'no matter how rule governed a course of action and belief, the application of those rules, their interpretation and use in particular circumstances, cannot be similarly bound'.[43] Insofar as a rule's meaning is a function of its application, it follows that rules cannot guarantee their own significant identity. The fact that rules are 'the production of historical agents',[44] meanwhile (as Lindbeck himself avows), likewise entails that they cannot be 'insulated from the vicissitudes of history'.[45] Rules can change in meaning, since they 'do not have any ahistorical, independent life'.[46] And if this is the case, they cannot function as the self-identical and invariant locus of proper Christian identity.

It could be argued that, if identity can be constituted by mere subscription to a doctrinal claim, rather than particular interpretations, the fact that rules cannot maintain an invariant meaning need not undercut their constitutive function. All that is required is that they retain an invariant form. The fact that Christian communities subscribe to the Nicene Creed, for example, would be sufficient to constitute their Christian identity.[47] This argument, however, depends on the idea that formal identity can be grounded independently of variances in meaning – that sameness of verbal form is sufficient for sameness of credal subscription, and so for constituting Christian identity. Against this, it can be noted that the same words can be used to mean such different things that the sameness of verbally identical confessions is pushed to breaking point. For example, a Christian community might confess the Nicene Creed whilst explicitly denying its literal truth, and so be judged by other communities as insufficiently Christian. Further regulative criteria must be asserted in such instances as governing formally valid and invalid interpretations of doctrinal claims, and so the problem of how doctrines can constitute Christian identity is pushed back to the problem of whether their interpretation remains within the bounds of 'full' Christianity. The mere invariance of doctrinal form is thus insufficient for constituting identity, since this constitutive function would still depend on a rule or set of rules governing its licit

[42]Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, p. 18.
[43]Tanner, *Politics of God*, p. 45.
[44]Tanner, *Theories of Culture,* p. 139.
[45]Ibid.
[46]Ibid.
[47]I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for noting this possibility.

interpretation – and these rules will be subject to Tanner's arguments above regarding the stability of their own significance. Doctrines might regulate Christian truth claims, then; but even and especially as they perform this function, they cannot constitute an 'abiding doctrinal grammar' which serves as the subsistent reference-point against which Christian identity can be ascertained.[48] Their regulative function cannot ground a constitutive one.

Tanner finally rules out the possibility of any constitutive function whatsoever by going on to argue that neither Christianity nor its utterances can be what they are by virtue of an original or abiding unified core of meaning. Christian claims are instead always constructed by 'borrowing language in use elsewhere', in such a way that their meanings are produced by shifting other meanings.[49] The end results of these borrowings are then 'always the practices of others made odd', not practices that Christians can claim as originally their own.[50] Christianity is thus 'essentially parasitic; it has to establish relations with other ways of life … in order to be one itself'.[51] Given the essential depth of this parasitic relation, moreover, one cannot abstract a standard for evaluating whether a given articulation is Christian in such a way that the standard itself is independent of what the articulation is parasitic upon. The essential 'impurity' and mutability of Christian speech entails the essential impossibility of a 'pure' and unchanging Christian identity. Doctrines can therefore neither regulate nor constitute an essential Christian identity, because no such identity can be posited in the first place. Much like in Stuart Hall's experience, that is, Christian identity for Tanner is 'always a never-completed process of becoming – a process of shifting identifications, not a singular, complete, finished state of being'.[52]

It is worth stating explicitly that none of this is to say there is no such thing as Christian identity. It is not to deny that there might be contextual reasons for judging versions of Christianity to be more or less true to themselves (or each other), nor is it to say that doctrines or rules cannot be used to ground such judgements. It is just to say that since 'Christian communal practices are [not] self-contained in the way their identification with the church might suggest',[53] so too Christian identity as a 'general' phenomenon is 'essentially impure and mixed, the identity of a hybrid that always shares cultural forms with its wider host culture and other religions'.[54] As a result, the idea that either doctrine in Lindbeck's sense or rules in Tanner's sense could constitute the necessary conditions for unified Christian identity apart from what is considered non-Christian, rather than contingent and context-bound judgements regarding that identity, is incoherent. 'Christian identity' is grounded in diverse relations and identifications that obtain between diverse entities for different reasons in each case, not in relation to an abiding doctrinal core of 'true' Christianity.[55]

To summarise, both Tanner and Lindbeck deal with rules of Christian discourse. But whereas Lindbeck articulates these rules in terms of doctrines used to regulate, generate

[48]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 113.
[49]Tanner, *God and Creation*, p. 26.
[50]Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, p. 113.
[51]Ibid.
[52]Hall, *Familiar Stranger*, p. 16.
[53]Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, p. 67.
[54]Ibid., p. 114.
[55]For a more thorough overview of identity writ large, see Jorge Larraín Ibañez, 'The Concept of Identity', in Antonio Gomez-Moriana and Mercedes Duran-Cogan (eds), *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1–29.

and constitute the necessary conditions of proper Christian identity, Tanner articulates them as rules for working over borrowed material to render doctrinal claims coherent with each other. Her rules are then formulated in ways that undercut the possibility that doctrine can perform the constitutive function Lindbeck assigns it, and so the possibility that doctrine can regulate necessary conditions for abiding Christian identity as well. Even though Tanner does not claim the mantle of 'doctrine' for her rules, then, her account blocks the idea that doctrine can perform these functions.

Whither doctrine?

Where does this leave us? If Tanner's account is compelling, at least two things hold. On the one hand, doctrine cannot be all of what Lindbeck presents it as being. On the other, what Tanner presents is not 'doctrine'.

At least two possibilities remain, however. The first is that doctrines might still be used to regulate whether or not claims are licit in Christian community, with the key stipulation that this usage cannot institute the necessary conditions for essential Christian identity. This could then be a matter of importance for many reasons. But it is of limited systematic theological interest, insofar as – when divorced from any claim to govern identity – a Christian community's use of doctrines in this way reflects a characteristic and mutable feature of that community, not a systematic fundament of Christian faith or possibility.

A second possibility relates to the generation of meaning. We saw above that Tanner's rules function as conditions of possibility for Christian coherence, not Christian meaning *per se.* This leaves open the possibility, however, that doctrines might generate conditions of possibility for Christian meaning without functioning as rules of discourse. Indeed, Tanner's emphasis on the fact that theologians are provoked into formulating conditions of possibility for coherent Christian speech by the demands made of them by doctrinal claims suggests that doctrines play a fundamental role regarding how these conditions of possibility are framed. And on the basis that bending borrowed material does indeed generate new meanings, this suggests that doctrines condition *how* new meanings are produced when Christians work over material borrowed from elsewhere (without overdetermining this process). It might therefore be possible to articulate doctrine as generating meaning apart from any constitutive or regulative function; an approach that preserves two of Lindbeck's most profound insights – that doctrine is fundamental to the generation of meaning in Christian life, and that meaning is grounded in the relevant community's own practices – without tying them to either the constitution or the regulation of an identity's necessary conditions.

The question thus becomes, how might doctrine generate distinct possibilities of meaning for Christian speech? Christine Helmer suggests one route by inviting theologians to look at how doctrines are produced, 'to see why specific words and texts have come to be articulated in the first place and then regarded as significant for a particular group of persons'.[56] We could explore how doctrines make new meanings possible, that is, by looking at how they have been formed.

Since 'doctrine is shaped by the formation of concepts',[57] however, this means attending to how doctrines work in light of concept formation – and Helmer's account of concept formation is open to potentially insurmountable critiques. Relying on

[56]Helmer, *End of Doctrine,* p. 112.
[57]Ibid., p. 168.

Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutics* and *Dialectic*, she defines concepts as referring 'to a subject, which is characterized by distinct predicates, so that concepts can be identified with and distinguished from other concepts by virtue of the distinct predicates that characterize them'.[58] Once things are set up this way, however, it is impossible to maintain a coherent distinction between 'subject' and 'concept'. It first appears in this definition that the subject – referred to by the concept – is characterised by distinct predicates. Immediately after this, however, it is stated that concepts are characterised by these predicates; again, 'concepts can be identified with and distinguished from other concepts by virtue of the distinct predicates that characterize them'. In order for this to make sense, however, concepts would have to take on the predicates of the subjects they refer to without remainder; otherwise, they will not be distinguished from each other in the same fashion as their referents, whether these referents be abstract or concrete objects. Not only is this untenable in light of Frege's distinction between sense and reference, however (within which any unit of language used to refer can have 'predicates' distinct from what it references[59]), it is also unclear what distinguishes 'concept' from 'subject' here, except that the former 'refers' to the latter. And if a concept is individuated and 'expanded' by the attribution of predicates which must also be attributed to its 'subject', it is likewise unclear how a split between the two could be wide enough to allow enough distance for this reference. Finally, the fact that Helmer's account of concepts is dependent on their referential function leaves it open to Ludwig Wittgenstein's arguments regarding the fact that reference necessarily underdetermines conceptual significance.[60] If concepts are what they are because they are used to refer to subjects, that is, they cannot be determinants of meaning.

Despite this, a different way of thinking concept formation *can* open up significant possibilities for thinking about doctrine. This can first be hinted at by Hall's sense of 'articulation' – namely, as 'the form of a connection or a link that can make a unity of two different elements under certain conditions'.[61] Articulations in this sense are not self-subsistent states of affairs, but connections which must be 'positively sustained by specific processes; [they are] not "eternal" but [have] constantly to be renewed'.[62] Put otherwise, they are identifications – between ourselves and other things, between one thing and another – which must be actively (though not necessarily consciously) maintained. This can then be thought alongside Ludwig Wittgenstein's description of concept-words as denoting the kinships that connect objects like the links of a chain.[63] If we understand these kinships, that is, as formed by articulations in Hall's sense, and if we understand concepts in Wittgenstein's sense as the 'method[s] for

[58]Ibid., p. 126.

[59]Cf. Gottlöb Frege, 'Sense and Reference', *The Philosophical Review*, 57/3 (May 1948), pp. 209–30.

[60]See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* rev. 4th edn (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §§28–32, where Wittgenstein problematises the idea that ostensive definition (defining a term by showing what it refers to) can fix the meaning of a term. 'Concepts' in Helmer's sense could only have their meaning fixed by fixing their referents, which leaves the how and the background of this reference – both of which are essential to meaning – underdetermined. This relates to terms which refer to publicly available phenomena. Cf. also Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§293–304, which problematises the idea that concepts for non-public phenomena, such as faith, can mean what they mean by virtue of their referential usage.

[61]Stuart Hall, *Cultural Theory, 1983* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 121.

[62]Ibid.

[63]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), p. 75.

determining an extension' according to which these links are formed,[64] then concepts can further be cast as the immanent principles of articulation. 'Concepts' are constituted by the logic internal to the 'process of forming the transition … between the links'.[65] They regulate how we form articulations.

This concept of 'concepts' then grounds a different sense of concept formation. Instead of being meaningful because of how they refer to subjects, concepts in this sense generate meaning by conditioning how articulations are formed, and so how the 'process of identifications' named by Hall takes place over the course of a life. The question of concept formation then becomes the question of how we learn to enact these identifications – of *how* different principles of articulation are formed and reformed in light of different experiences and fundamental commitments. Given both (a) that Tanner's rules can be described as concepts in this light, insofar as they regulate how to make an articulated unity of two different elements (claims regarding divine sovereignty and creaturely freedom, for example), and (b) that doctrines condition the formation of these rules, since they constitute the commitments in virtue of which the rules must be developed, doctrines can therefore be investigated in light of how they inflect processes of concept formation in Christian community. In contrast to Helmer, that is, what is of interest is not just how doctrines are shaped by the formation of concepts, but also how concept formation is shaped by doctrine.

We began by asking what role doctrine can play in Christian life if 'Christian identity' is not something that can be decisively secured. In light of the above, we can begin to approach an answer by investigating the role that doctrines play in concept formation. Do beliefs like 'Jesus Christ is very God and very human', for example, influence how Christians form their principles of articulation, and if so how? This is a gesture towards a way of answering the question, of course, not an answer itself. And it is indeed a gesture – the concepts of 'concept' and 'concept formation' traced above need to be fleshed out and substantiated, whilst a number of questions remain unasked (e.g. 'What are we to treat as "doctrine" in this investigation without begging the question?' and 'Is "doctrine" to be defined *by* its role in concept formation, or should it be seen as another type of thing entirely that just happens to play this role?'). Nonetheless, this gesture indicates one way that doctrines can be seen as generating conditions of possibility for meaning in Christian life without either regulating Christian speech or constituting an essential Christian identity. Doctrines can be cast as shaping how the concepts governing our practices of articulation are formed, and thereby conditioning *how* we enact the shifting identifications that weave our fluid identities together. To use Hall's terms, it thus suggests another nature of doctrine – as those beliefs that most fundamentally inflect how we live out our diverse Christian identities as never-completed processes of becoming, for better and for worse.[66]

[64]Ludwig *Wittgenstein, Philosophical Remarks* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 123.

[65]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), p. 39.

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