

Between the Postliberal and the Postmodern

“True Discipleship” as Cultural Style

Throughout this chapter and the next two, I show that contemporary accounts of Christian identity need to be supplemented by accounts of Christian formation. Thinking about Christianity in cultural-linguistic terms fits nicely into theological reflection after the “linguistic turn” and in conversation with moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. *The Nature of Doctrine* is a landmark in this theological landscape. George Lindbeck began a fruitful conversation about what makes Christianity *Christian*, and how doctrine in particular functions in the process of evaluating and reproducing Christian beliefs and practices. But in this chapter I will call attention to a lacuna that Lindbeck himself observed: that his description of Christianity immediately raises a question about formation. Learning a new “language” to the level of adequacy Lindbeck imagined would require a thoroughgoing catechesis.¹ I will show that lack of attention to this problem neglects the problem of sin and opens the door to a misreading of the function of doctrine in the lives of individual Christians. Christian identity, as the cultural-linguistic model describes it, involves speaking *and* living according to a different set of cultural rules. I argue in this chapter that accounts of Christian identity that take Lindbeck’s as a starting place need to address the reality of Christians’ failure to speak and live by the

¹ *The Nature of Doctrine*, 132–134.

“rules” that comprise Christian doctrine. I take Kathryn Tanner’s account of Christian identity as paradigmatic and examine the cultural-linguistic model as she renders it.

Following the logic of that model, Tanner begins from the assumption that Christianity does function like a culture; she simply chooses different conversation partners with whom to explore the contours of that culture. The description of Christianity that emerges from her engagement with postmodern cultural anthropology draws porous boundaries around a set of materials whose identification as “Christian” depends more on arrangement than essence. Tanner insists that – in keeping with the postmodern flavor of her argument – that the continuity of Christian identity requires an “empty” center, which allows God the freedom to act in new ways in each successive generation of Christians. Thus she describes the performance of Christian identity as consisting at least partly in participation in the conversation about how to construe beliefs and practices as Christian.

Tanner’s “new agenda for theology” also employs postmodern culture theory in an attempt to liberate our understanding of Christian identity from the taint of injustice she perceives in churches’ hierarchical structures. I will show that, in so doing, she inadvertently links discipleship to a certain sort of moral and intellectual agency that is ultimately accountable solely to God. Moreover, I will show that Tanner’s undue emphasis on the intellectual aspect of discipleship leads to a failure to account for the need for Christian formation or the corruption of both intellectual and moral agency by sin. Our failure consistently to practice “true discipleship” suggests that there is more to Christian identity than the honing of our intellectual and moral skills.

Postliberal or Postmodern? George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*

I discuss George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine* here as a point of comparison, suggesting that, while Tanner does not identify herself as postliberal, she shares with Lindbeck (and others) certain postliberal theological instincts. Discussing Lindbeck here will also provide a point of departure for the next two chapters, as Williams and Milbank also criticize Lindbeck in the course of making their

constructive proposals. Their respective criticisms of Lindbeck reflect similarities and differences in the three accounts of Christian identity. While each is critical of the way Lindbeck uses culture theory, both Williams' and Milbank's critiques focus on the problems with Lindbeck's understanding of the history of Christian doctrine, whereas Tanner criticizes Lindbeck's choice of sources of culture theory. Milbank in particular goes on to criticize Lindbeck for failing to articulate a properly postmodern theology. My discussion of Lindbeck thus locates *Theories of Culture* in the context of theology in the United States, and helps to sketch the common ground the three share, without conflating their accounts.

Although Tanner draws upon both Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau, I suggest that the kind of agent implied in her account of Christian action is at odds with postmodern theories of culture. Tanner sees the Christian as a kind of *bricoleur* who works with the materials she has to hand, but portrays the *bricoleur* with the perspective of the architect rather than the builder. The difference in perspective is significant for Tanner's implicit account of agency, of which I am critical in this chapter. Drawing on aspects of Bourdieu's theory that Tanner does not discuss, I raise questions about her conception of Christian action, especially the activity that constitutes the task she identifies as the core of Christian identity. Tanner's implied account of agency is inseparable from her understanding of tradition.² There is an implied objectivity to the relationship between the Christian (especially the theologian) and Christian tradition, which at times seems to give the individual priority over tradition. I bring Tanner into conversation with the work of Alasdair MacIntyre to reveal the difficulties with her account of tradition. With respect to agency and tradition, I suggest that Tanner has not examined postliberalism – especially Lindbeck's – carefully enough, nor learned all she might have from the postmodern theorists whose work she esteems so highly.

In Tanner's case, attending to the question regarding agency and tradition would press her to pay closer attention to the process

² I have not attempted to synthesize Tanner's account of individual agency from her many partial and often implicit discussions. For the purposes of my argument, it is necessary only to draw attention to her persistent tactic of claiming the importance of individual judgment over acquiescence to any traditioned authority.

of Christian formation. I suggest that the lack of an account of formation is especially noticeable in *Theories of Culture* because the postmodern theorists to whom Tanner appeals thematize the construction of subjectivities and attest to the importance of the formation of desire. One has only to read Bourdieu's account of formation in education to realize (even if we do not grant Bourdieu every point he wishes to make) that the construction of Christian identity involves far more than learning the catechism (or equivalent) and reading some Bible. And this *more* is a crucial consideration in the articulation of Christian identity. Asking questions about the role of desire in the articulation and reproduction of Christian identity points directly to the need for an account of formation. Christians are not shaped only by the church, but are socialized by the broader culture – as Tanner herself points out. We can take it that the desires inscribed by social formations and the power relations in which the Christian subject is implicated are constitutive elements of the self.³

In what follows, I do not intend to show that Tanner *is* a post-liberal. Such a claim would raise a number of questions I cannot consider here.⁴ My aim is rather to argue that although Tanner criticizes postliberal theology and distances herself from what she sees as its basic ideas, she does not move beyond Lindbeck's turn to culture theory, even though she replaces the modern culture theory Lindbeck uses with a variety of postmodern resources.⁵ Tanner sees engagement with the broader (non-Christian) culture as central to

³ While Tanner does not thematize power as such, a critique of certain types of power relations within the church throughout its history is implicit in her theology. Her rejection of ecclesiastical authority as having virtually no redeeming qualities is one aspect of this criticism. Tanner is very suspicious of any theology that gives significant weight to tradition as received. See her reviews of Terrence Tilley's *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) and John Thiel's *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), *Horizons* 29 (2002), 303–311.

⁴ See Paul DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). I *do* think that there is such a thing as post-liberalism, but I do not have the space or need to discuss it here. See my review of DeHart's book in *Modern Theology* 24/3 (2008), 525–528.

⁵ For example, she remarks in “How I Changed My Mind,” in *Shaping a Theological Mind*, ed. Darren C. Marks (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 120, that the core distinction of her approach is “taking seriously what disciplines such as sociology and anthropology reveal.”

Christian identity and its development, and her account of this engagement is grounded in a sustained discussion of culture theory, which she regards as an essential tool for constructive theology. Tanner's methodological similarities with Lindbeck are central to the difference between her reading of Lindbeck and that of Rowan Williams or John Milbank.

Before beginning my discussion of Lindbeck, I should note that Lindbeck's goal was to foster ecumenical dialogue. Its focal point is thus his theory of religion, and his account of Christian identity is implicit in that theory.⁶ Lindbeck believed that some common ways of thinking about doctrines misconstrued the function of doctrine in relation to Christian faith and practice. Thus Lindbeck saw what he called the cognitivist approach – which invested propositions with the power to determine the meaning of Christian doctrines – as mistaken. In his view, such an approach created a too-rigid system in which varieties in practice and belief, or in the explanation of what doctrines meant, could not be accommodated. Nor did Lindbeck accept what he presented as an opposing view: an experiential-expressivist model, in which doctrines (as symbols) “are not crucial for religious agreement or disagreement.”⁷ Lindbeck's main objection to this approach was that it abolished any necessary connection between a doctrine and its meaning. For Lindbeck, this is a type of foundationalism whose base is experience rather than reason or proposition.⁸

⁶ That Lindbeck offers a theory of religion creates problems for his constructive proposal. Assuming the notion of “religion” as a genus of which “Christianity” is a species sets the project off on the wrong foot; I will discuss this in more detail on pp. 21–23 below.

⁷ *The Nature of Doctrine*, 17.

⁸ Lindbeck cites Schleiermacher as the father of this approach to Christian doctrine (see *The Nature of Doctrine*, 16), but he does not go unchallenged on this point. Whether or not we can claim Schleiermacher as the originator of this account of doctrine, we can certainly view it as a post-Enlightenment phenomenon. We find a perfect example of what Lindbeck describes in Schleiermacher's predecessor, Immanuel Kant. Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Pure Reason* interprets a variety of Christian doctrines as having universal and general meaning. See, for example, *Religion within the Boundaries of Pure Reason* in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 103–105.

Lindbeck therefore attempted to create an alternative model for understanding and expressing differences without forsaking fundamental Christian unity or the doctrines themselves. Drawing on the work of Clifford Geertz and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Lindbeck devised a cultural-linguistic model for understanding Christian doctrine and its relation to belief and practice. This model, Lindbeck suggested, could account for diversity in practice without compromising the meaning of doctrine. Lindbeck's model of the structure of religions is based on the notion that

a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought . . . it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings or sentiments.⁹

On Lindbeck's view, moreover,

To become religious involves becoming skilled in the language, the symbol system of a given religion. To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one's world in its terms . . . to become religious – no less than to become culturally or linguistically competent – is to interiorize a set of skills by practice and training. One learns how to feel, act, and think in conformity with a religious tradition that is, in its inner structure, far richer and more subtle than can be explicitly articulated. The primary knowledge is not *about* the religion, nor *that* the religion teaches such and such, but rather *how* to be religious in such and such ways.¹⁰

Lindbeck suggests that his model makes space for the cognitive and expressive aspects of religion while granting priority to neither of them. His insistence on the importance of practices in Christian life emphasizes the experiential dimension but without giving experience primacy over the language of the story.

⁹ *The Nature of Doctrine*, 35.

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Lindbeck himself realized that the model he was proposing required some account of Christian formation (although he did not refer to it in those exact terms). Because he saw Christian practice as skill- and language-based, the process of learning to practice meant acquiring the skills and vocabulary (not to mention the grammar!) of Christian culture. Lindbeck's reading of the cultural context in which he was writing, however, was that the requisite instruction would be difficult, if not impossible, to implement. It would, he suggests, resemble "ancient catechesis."

Instead of redescribing the faith in new concepts, it seeks to teach the language and practices of the religion to potential adherents . . . [catechumens in late antiquity] submitted themselves to prolonged catechetical instruction in which they practiced new modes of behavior and learned the stories of Israel and their fulfillment in Christ. Only after they had acquired proficiency in the alien Christian language and form of life were they deemed able intelligently and responsibly to profess the faith, to be baptized.¹¹

Although Lindbeck saw this as impractical in the contemporary church, he nevertheless viewed it as an important model for Christian formation in a postliberal scheme.¹² Lindbeck's theory of religion implies that Christian identity is functionally a *habitus*.¹³ For Lindbeck, the development of a Christian way of living in the world involves the acquisition of skills appropriate to the task: skills in imagination and narration. As we will see in subsequent chapters,

¹¹ *The Nature of Doctrine*, 132.

¹² Lindbeck saw premodern catechesis as able to produce a Christian imagination of the world, "an intimate and imaginatively vivid familiarity with the world of biblical narrative . . . that made it possible to experience the whole of life in religious terms. The popular versions of the biblical world may often have been gravely distorted, but they functioned intratextually" (132–133). In the contemporary situation, however, he believed that catechesis could not function to produce such a rich imaginative landscape. The key problem, in Lindbeck's view, is "the implicit assumption that knowledge of a few tag ends of religious language is knowledge of the religion" (133).

¹³ That is, insofar as learning "how to feel, act and think in conformity with a religious tradition" amounts to learning habits of being in the world, what Lindbeck describes as becoming religious is habituation.

a central feature of Christian imagination is the orientation of desire. Put into Lindbeck's terms, the organizing principle of Christian culture is its attention to God as the author of its narrative, to Jesus as its founder and pioneer. Central to the practice of life in a Christian idiom is the imitation of its "pioneer and perfecter," which includes at its very heart the joy in God's love and God's saving will that characterized Jesus' self-giving life and death. Unity of desire with the Father and the Holy Spirit funds Christ's actions in the world, and Christian practice is no less than an embodiment of this union with God. Cultures inculcate desires and shape the imaginations of those who operate within them.¹⁴ Likewise, Christianity conceived on a cultural-linguistic model does not simply ask for adherence to a charter, but shapes the imaginations of those who would be followers of Christ. Yet Lindbeck does not mention the character and structure of desire in his description of either contemporary Christian practice or ancient catechesis. Without attending to the importance of desire in the construction of Christian subjectivity, Lindbeck misses one of the central features of the catechesis he admires.

Moreover, the acquisition of language or vocabulary and skills Lindbeck describes as central to catechesis are not sufficient to produce a Christian *habitus*. Lindbeck's proposal lacks an account of the soul, which was the "object" to be transformed by the intensive religious instruction he describes. As a result, in Lindbeck's model the practices and skills to be interiorized appear to occupy an otherwise blank or non-existent space in the individual being catechized. But for ancient catechists and catechumens this was not the case. The model for catechesis Lindbeck describes presupposes an account of the soul as ontologically subject to the condition of sin as a result of the Fall. The sinful state reveals itself in the disordered desires common to human beings. As we will see in chapter 2, this disorder consists in desiring created things rather than the creator. Although humans were created for relationship with God and ought to desire God as a function of having been

¹⁴ This theme is one Tanner takes up in *Theories of Culture*, and owes much to a reading of the work of Pierre Bourdieu, especially his *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1990).

created *imago Dei*, this desire no longer orders the soul as it should. Thus a central part of catechesis involved the restructuring of the soul's desire.¹⁵ Without an account of the soul or a sense of the centrality of the structure of desire to the practice of Christianity, Lindbeck is bound to overlook this indispensable aspect of late ancient catechetical instruction, and so are many of his followers.

Postliberalism as Theological Style

My aim in this section is to argue that postliberalism may be understood as a theological style, and that hence, despite Tanner's critical stance toward postliberal theology, she continues to share some of its basic features.

Postliberal theology centers on the understanding of the culture-like account of Christianity, and, like Lindbeck's proposal, responds to questions regarding the relationship between doctrine and Scripture and the role of each in shaping and articulating Christian identity. Lindbeck's effort to produce an inclusive account of Christian identity rests on two assumptions regarding the key elements of any description of Christian belief and practice, which in turn suggest two central concerns of postliberal theology.¹⁶ First, Lindbeck begins from the premise that determining principles of internal coherence is an essential theological task. Moreover, these principles must encompass the broad range of Christian beliefs and practices without becoming meaningless. Tanner criticizes Lindbeck's prin-

¹⁵ This is especially clear in Rowan Williams' *The Wound of Knowledge* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990); see especially pp. 54–123.

¹⁶ The themes I mention here differ from the themes of postliberalism as James Fodor describes it in *The Modern Theologians*, 3rd edition, ed. David Ford with Rachel Muers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 230–231; I also owe much to William Placher's earlier discussion of postliberalism in the second edition of *The Modern Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 343–356. I am considering postliberalism specifically as Tanner both criticizes and continues it. I therefore focus my attention on the relationship between Lindbeck's theology and Tanner's, and so do not discuss a variety of other theologians Fodor includes in his discussion of postliberals.

ciples and the boundaries they imply in *Theories of Culture*.¹⁷ Second, postliberals generally attempt to produce theology in continuity with Christian orthodoxy throughout history. The variety of ways in which theologians pursue this task raises questions about the style of retrieval of that tradition. The attention to historical Christian tradition is necessitated by the belief that discerning Christian identity in the present involves seeing contemporary beliefs and practices in relation to older iterations of what constituted Christian belief and practice. The articulation of Christian identity thus involves offering a reading of the Christian past. These readings of the past reflect a desire to understand the nature and function of Christian doctrine, and to grasp the role of Scripture in shaping Christian identity.

The structure of postliberal theology is also influenced by Hans Frei's reading of Karl Barth's theology. For Barth, the culture-likeness of Christianity only goes so far: while Christianity may resemble a culture in certain ways, the church is constituted by the Word speaking. The idea of church as particular and as constituted by the presence of God implies an understanding of Christianity not as one religion among many, operating according to a similar logic or pattern, or united by a common experience, but as the community brought into being by the Word. Thus, those influenced by this view can say that Christianity operates according to its own internal logic, which is not simply a form of "religion." At the same time, the true logic of Christianity is hidden from us, revealed only insofar as God is revealed to us in the incarnation. So Christianity is like a culture, with one key difference: whereas the logic of a culture cannot be defined because of its inherent contestability, the logic of Christian faith cannot be defined because it is the Logos of God who provides the principle of order and unity in Christian practice. The internal logic on the one hand,

¹⁷ The most important treatment of this topic among second-generation postliberals is Bruce Marshall's "Absorbing the World: Christianity and the Universe of Truths," in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 69–102. For discussion of the concept of "second-generation" postliberals, see Gary Dorrien, "The Future of Postliberal Theology," *Christian Century* 118 (2001).

which owes its appearance in postliberalism to Barth,¹⁸ and the cultural logic on the other, whose genesis is Lindbeck's application of Geertz and Wittgenstein to theology, together provide the underlying structure of postliberal theology. It is an understanding of Christianity as connected by a set of cultural rules and as having a particularity that can be traced through history without being reduced to an instance of religion as a general phenomenon.¹⁹ The culture-likeness of Christianity and the narrative at its heart form the basis for an account of Christian identity in which the Christianness of an idea or practice is measured by asking whether it fits in the contemporary arrangement of Christian beliefs and practices, and whether it is compatible with the history of those Christian beliefs and practices.²⁰ One way in which many postliberal theologies display this logic is through the application of the notion of the "plain sense" of Scripture. An idea originally set forth by Hans Frei, it has since been developed in a variety of ways by Tanner and others.²¹ For these theologians the "plain sense" has a regulative function in theological reflection and Christian practice, and in certain cases it becomes a technical term. The technical flavor of the plain sense offers the basis for making authoritative judgments about Christian beliefs and practices. Part of the problem in articulating Christian identity is the problem of authority: deciding how

¹⁸ Lindbeck's "reading" of Barth was mediated by Frei.

¹⁹ The internal logic of postliberal theology is constructive and not simply a reaction to liberal theology. For an alternative view see Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁰ Tanner provides an interesting variation on this, however, in trying to incorporate what she values in liberalism, especially Chicago-style liberalism, in *Theories of Culture*.

²¹ See Tanner, "Theology and the Plain Sense," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 59–78. Others who develop this theme include, but are not limited to: Eugene Rogers, "How the Virtues of an Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics: The Case of Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996): 64–81; Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); and Bruce Marshall, "Absorbing the World: Christianity and the Universe of Truths," in *Theology in Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 69–102.

to decide is therefore a central methodological question for postliberal theology.²² I will return to this topic below.

I also suggest that postliberalism is a characteristically modern theological style, and that both Lindbeck's and Tanner's accounts of the soul, sin, and Christian formation suffer from postliberalism's debt to modernity.²³ I do not intend to give here a synopsis of modern understandings of religion, but to list three specific ideas common in postliberal theology – especially in Frei and Lindbeck – and which affect the development of Tanner's account of Christian identity in *Theories of Culture*.²⁴ First, there is in much postliberal theology (especially in the earlier generation) a fundamental distrust of religious authority. In Frei and Lindbeck's theology this attitude shows up as hesitation about granting authority to confessions and creeds.²⁵ Tanner appears to resolve the problem of authority in theological judgment by placing it in the hands of individual

²² See Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 147–193.

²³ I do not give a full account of the philosophical conditions of modernity here. What I hope to show with these three basic ideas is how some fundamental assumptions create problems in accounting for the soul or sin, or thinking about Christian formation. And I am not including the search for foundations here. Although it is certainly one of the key features of modernity, it is one that Tanner implicitly criticizes in postliberal theology – that is, in the cultural-linguistic model. Tanner approaches theological method as a non-foundationalist. Thus she criticizes a foundationalist tendency in Lindbeck. What she doesn't do is reject the assumptions about the subject I have described above. Those assumptions persist in her implicit account of human agency.

²⁴ The modern divorce of academic theology from “spirituality” may contribute to this; see Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), especially 1–8.

²⁵ See Frei, “The ‘Literal Sense’ of Scripture: Can It Stretch or Will It Break?” in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 117–152, in which he never considers the way in which the literal or plain sense of Scripture develops together with the creeds of the church. Cf. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 74–88, in which Lindbeck implies that the relationship between doctrine and Scripture does not require creeds – even though most Christians have some form of creed. Tanner parts ways with many continuing postliberals who attribute greater significance to creeds and ecclesiology in theological reflection. Bruce Marshall provides one example of this tendency; see “Absorbing the World.”

Christians. "Being a Christian at all, even in the simplest of circumstances," she writes, "requires theological judgment; one must either take responsibility for that judgment or decide to acquiesce in someone else's judgment."²⁶ The phrasing of her statement clearly shows suspicion, if not outright antagonism, toward those whose religious beliefs and practices consist primarily in following the guidance of church leaders. Deciding "to acquiesce in someone else's judgment" implies shirking one's responsibility to make such judgments, and suggests that there is no way of discerning trustworthy authorities. Second, a characteristically modern epistemology accompanies this attitude. At the heart of Kant's epistemological revolution was the notion that the capacity for knowledge lay in the structure of human understanding. The parallel in Tanner in particular is that faith is primarily a feature of individual Christian lives.

Third, this modern epistemology focuses on rationality and intuition rather than desire. Postmodern theorists call into question the notion of a rationality based freedom that grounds the individual and gives the self its character. The subject is rather less free than Kant supposed, moved not by duty so much as by the habits of thinking and desiring that are inculcated as a matter of course as a person matures within a society. That is, even if there were such a thing as transcendental freedom (which even Kant does not claim with absolute certainty), it would be seriously mitigated by the desires formed in a person by socialization. Modern theological method does not generally involve sustained attention to the way in which desire shapes and is shaped by religious beliefs and practices, and Tanner's work is no exception. Although she turns to some postmodern sources to interrogate certain assumptions basic to postliberal theology, these sources do not lead her to ask questions about the role of desire. This is problematic because such desires are implicated in the social relations by which we are constituted as individuals. The construction of desire is a part of the socialization process to which Tanner refers in *Theories of Culture*, yet she does not offer an account of the way in which Christian desires might be distinguished, much less constructed. In the next two sections, I turn to Tanner's account of Christian identity. Even

²⁶ *Theories of Culture*, 160.

though she suggests some difficulties with aspects of postliberal theology – especially Lindbeck’s version of it – I argue that she does not identify or address its lack of an account of formation.

Theories of Culture I: The Critique of Postliberalism

In *Theories of Culture*, Tanner uses postmodern theory to develop an account of Christian identity that has postliberal theology as a foil. Of course, the modern understanding of culture and its application to theological problems extends throughout the whole range of theological methods, as Tanner is quick to point out.²⁷ Lindbeck’s postliberalism comes in for the sharpest criticism. Tanner argues that the notion of culture on which Lindbeck’s account of Christian engagement with non-Christian culture is based is erroneous – or at least outdated. This dependence on a mistaken view of culture leads to a succession of other problems Tanner identifies with postliberalism, including insularity and rigidity. These criticisms occupy a prominent place in Tanner’s proposal. And yet, as I will show, Tanner herself approaches the whole problem of accounting for the continuity of Christian identity in a manner that bears the marks of postliberal influence. Tanner’s argument in *Theories of Culture* thus places her between modern and postmodern method.²⁸ While she continues to address the problems that drove Lindbeck to write *The Nature of Doctrine*, in a similar fashion, her account of Christian identity proposes a different means of establishing or discerning continuity.²⁹

My first step is to describe the relationship between Tanner’s proposal in *Theories of Culture* and Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*

²⁷ See *Theories of Culture*, 61–63.

²⁸ See, for example, Reinhard Hütter’s review of *Theories of Culture* in *Modern Theology* 15 (1999), 499–501.

²⁹ Her “new agenda for theology” might be taken to supercede Lindbeck’s “religion and theology in a postliberal age.” Lindbeck intended *The Nature of Doctrine* as prolegomena to a systematic theology, which he has not published. See *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. Michael Buckley (London: SCM Press, 2002), 169. So also I would argue that Tanner’s *Theories of Culture* serves that function for her intended systematic theology, of which *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) is a down-payment.

as her primary example of postliberalism. I list four of Tanner's criticisms of postliberal theology, through which she distances herself from some of its basic premises. Although Tanner admits that the basic picture of postliberalism with which she begins is something of a caricature, she suggests that it captures some key features of postliberal theology.³⁰ First, Tanner describes postliberalism as beholden to modern cultural anthropology, with all its shortcomings. So, postliberal theology "projects onto the object studied what its own procedures of investigation require – a coherent whole."³¹ She claims that postliberal theologians mistakenly assume that cultures are holistic, internally coherent units. When they apply this view to Christianity, they tend to look for clear principles of coherence, which might guarantee continuity and unity in Christian practice. Second, she suggests that postliberals try to identify a Christian cultural boundary, which involves exempting "from outside influence whatever ensures Christian identity." This insurance is primarily doctrine.³² But Tanner argues that it is not possible to identify a frontier between the "secular" and "Christian" worlds. Assuming such a boundary begins the process of theological reflection on the wrong foot and leads to an ahistorical view of

³⁰ It must be observed that part of the reason Tanner's picture of postliberalism remains a caricature is that she mentions only one follower of Lindbeck in her critical discussion of postliberalism. Thus also it is not clear what is the relationship between "postliberalism" as a rather broad category with the three approaches to the question of Christian identity she criticizes in chapters 4 and 5 – defining Christian identity in social terms, in view of a cultural boundary, and through commonalities in Christian practice.

³¹ Tanner suggests that postliberals take as the principle of unity of Christian practices "some underlying body of rules or patterned order to which the theology of practice conforms despite its messiness. This body of rules or patterned order is not explicit in the day-to-day practice of Christians; they have the know-how but are incapable of telling academic theology what their know-how is. Its expression is reserved for the specialized theological investigation of clerics or educated elites . . . The theologian is only uncovering a force for coherence that is already a part of practice, but whatever this is is only apparent once the theologian points it out" (*Theories of Culture*, 76).

³² She also suggests that postliberals appeal to "the kind of contextualism typical of a modern understanding of culture . . . any borrowed material takes on a new sense in a Christian context" (*Theories of Culture*, 106).

doctrine.³³ Tanner insists that, far from being exempt from “outside” influence, doctrines “are susceptible to change in the historical course of decisions by the human actors involved.”³⁴ Third, Tanner disagrees with Lindbeck’s construal of the function of doctrines as cultural rules. Part of this difficulty is the difficulty of knowing the rules.³⁵ Tanner suggests that Christian communities, like cultures, can only be seen as having rules in the *application* of those rules, and extrapolation of rules from practice always runs the risk of misjudging. Moreover, even if one could identify them with precision, the imagined consensus on how to apply the rules in a particular situation does not exist.³⁶

The fourth criticism Tanner makes is that postliberals assume an isolated Christian community that socializes its own citizens in distinction from the secular surroundings. She attributes this view to John Milbank. Tanner observes, as a part of her criticism, that “nobody is literally born and raised” in the church. The question

³³ *Theories of Culture*, 131–132. It should also be noted that this is a very common criticism in the reception of *The Nature of Doctrine*. Tanner is not the first to notice it, and the criticism is not dependent on having read any postmodern culture theory. *The Nature of Doctrine* raised the question for many: what is theology about? The criticisms vary widely, but the question about how Lindbeck’s “unchanging” rules are grounded is pervasive. The question takes various forms, but in most cases asks what justification there can be for any particular rule. Why this is problematic differs among reviewers: some (e.g., Stanley Hauerwas and Gregory Jones, in *Books and Religion* 13 [1985], 7) think that there *ought* to be reasons for adopting particular rules and that these reasons should be articulated; others (especially liberals) think that the adoption of particular rules can never be anything but arbitrary and criticize the very suggestion of “permanent” rules.

³⁴ *Theories of Culture*, 141.

³⁵ Tanner is very critical of Lindbeck’s reading of Wittgenstein, whom she rehabilitates for her own proposal. Oddly – or perhaps not so oddly – Tanner does not question Lindbeck’s reading of Geertz, perhaps because she has already rejected Geertz as a mistaken, modern theorist of culture. Both Lindbeck and Tanner seriously misconstrue Geertz, however. The representation of Geertz in *The Nature of Doctrine* is a selective reading, one that takes what is useful for Lindbeck and ignores the possibility that Geertz may not say so strongly what Lindbeck wants him to say. As for Tanner, she takes this representation and others like it without considering the possibility that such portrayals might themselves be caricatures.

³⁶ *Theories of Culture*, 138–143.

she raises is thus not so much whether the boundary is what postliberals consider it to be, but whether the church can form its members in such a complete way and distinguish this formation from the cultural formation of the secular. While it is certainly true, this is not a particularly useful criticism without more clear indication of what is at stake. Tanner suggests that postliberals do theology as though the church had its own set of social institutions alongside the “world.” Whether or not this is true for postliberals, it is not *Milbank’s* view.³⁷ Like Tanner, Milbank leaves the question of formation for Christian faith and practice largely unaddressed. The criticisms Tanner makes of Lindbeck, moreover, would have benefited from a more careful engagement with Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory*, which I will describe in chapter 3.

Tanner presents the postmodern revision of anthropological theory deftly at the beginning of *Theories of Culture*. Her criticism of postliberalism, however, is less adroit. Her criticisms of Lindbeck as the figurehead of postliberal theology focus on the shortcomings of his method deriving from his foundations in modern theory.³⁸ Tanner’s attitude toward postliberalism more generally in turn reflects her reading of Lindbeck. And that evaluation centers on Lindbeck’s modern assumptions and theoretical foundations. In one sense she is correct: in *The Nature of Doctrine* Lindbeck dealt with problems inherent in modern theological method in a modern way. But Lindbeck is not the sum of all things postliberal, nor does he provide the summary statement of what now constitutes postliberal

³⁷ Tanner’s inclusion of Milbank under the heading “postliberal” is a minor but telling feature of her caricature. Not only is Milbank not a postliberal, the view she attributes to Milbank is not in fact his view but one he himself disavows. Tanner’s dismissive attitude toward Milbank and the carelessness with which she engages his work call into question her judgment about the accuracy of the caricature of postliberal theology with which she begins. For an assessment of Tanner’s account of Milbank, see Philip Kenneson’s review of *Theories of Culture* (*Anglican Theological Review* 51/1), 174.

³⁸ I suggested above that Tanner’s criticism of the rule theory Lindbeck presents is not unique. In fact it is one of the most common criticisms found in the reception-response to *The Nature of Doctrine*. Moreover, the observation that Lindbeck’s employment of rule theory is problematic does not require any knowledge of postmodern theories of culture.

theology. Often, then, when Tanner says she is describing postliberalism, she is only talking about Lindbeck.³⁹ And yet she does not mention what Lindbeck himself saw as necessary for his account of Christian identity: an appropriate form of catechesis. Moreover, the postmodern theorists of culture whose work forms the foundation for Tanner's argument would also attest to the importance of considering formation. Attending to the appropriate structure of desire for Christian subjects would strengthen Tanner's proposal and would also call attention to the need for an account of the role of desire in the construction of Christian identity. Her implicit account of agency raises questions about theological anthropology, including the problem of sin and growth in Christian life. In the next section, I turn to Tanner's constructive proposal.

Theories of Culture II: Constructing Christian Identity

In *Theories of Culture* Tanner offers a compelling answer to the question Lindbeck raised in *The Nature of Doctrine*: the "Christianness" of beliefs and practices is to be measured according to their contribution (or failure to contribute) to "true discipleship."⁴⁰ Her use of postmodern culture theorists helps her to devise an account of Christian identity that is flexible enough to include a wide range of beliefs and practices and yet not disconnected from a sense of the importance of tradition sources for the articulation of faith and practice in contemporary Christianity.

Drawing on the anthropological theory she has used to criticize postliberal (and other modern) theology, Tanner offers her own account of Christian practice. Tanner's point of departure is the premise that the postmodern theories of culture she discusses in the first section of *Theories of Culture* displace older understandings such as Geertz's: cultures are characterized by conflict and their boundaries are porous. Tanner suggests, by analogy, that Christianity

³⁹ For a contemporary example, she could also look to Bruce Marshall (with whom she graduated from Yale in 1985), as well as to Gene Rogers. Lindbeck was not the sum total of "postliberalism" even in the late 1980s. See Placher's discussion in *The Modern Theologians*.

⁴⁰ *Theories of Culture*, 123–124.

(or Christian theology) is not defined by agreement about core beliefs and practices and does not have clear boundaries. Christian practice is a form of regulated improvisation, a performance in which the practitioner/believer simultaneously acts upon and acts according to the various beliefs and practices s/he sees as central to Christian faith.

Tanner presents Christian practice as improvisation; as we will see in the next chapter, this is a view she shares with Rowan Williams. The concept of improvisational performance as the mode of Christian practice emerges from an understanding of culture as characterized by conflict and change. Tanner suggests that cultural change is not

primarily externally generated . . . Culture has its own internal principles of change – fluid forms susceptible of varying interpretations, loosely connected elements that can therefore be ordered and reordered to support or contest various social arrangements, perhaps logically incompatible beliefs or values that might be pushed and pulled, one against the other, by politically opposed factions, or the potentially subversive remains and traces of alternatives to now-dominant cultural forms, interpretations, or arrangements. Cultural changes are not, then, the result of a failure to follow culture; they are the product of efforts to conform with a culture that has its own indeterminacies and internal strains and conflicts.⁴¹

Tanner sees such conflict at the heart of Christianity as well. Whereas Lindbeck and other theologians might have attributed differences in belief and practice to cultural difference, Tanner suggests that they are often entirely internal to Christianity.⁴² That is, although different cultural contexts certainly shape Christian practice, there is no reason to believe that differences in practice

⁴¹ *Theories of Culture*, 51–52.

⁴² Tanner sees this as a widespread tendency in modern theology. “Theologians . . . typically account for differences in Christian belief across time and space by attributing those differences to the influence of culture . . . Theological discussion of what people across all such differences in time and place might have in common as Christians often avails itself, too, of ideas that are associated . . . with a modern anthropological understanding of culture: some sort of social transmission of heritage, characteristic spiritual affinity, or ruled patterns of behavior” (*Theories of Culture*, 62).

derive solely from “outside.”⁴³ Another difference that emerges from Tanner’s view of culture is her revised understanding of the functioning of cultural rules. She does not believe that cultural rules operate in the way Lindbeck’s grammar does. Tanner suggests that cultural rules function as a set of possibilities available to a subject at any given moment, in a manner that is much more fluid than Lindbeck’s grammatical rules.⁴⁴ Furthermore, these rules are not enough: “no explicit rule is sufficient to produce good judgment apart from training.”⁴⁵ And good judgment is necessary, since beliefs and practices are not evaluated for “Christianness” with reference to a set standard, but against the backdrop of the set of beliefs and practices that comprise the whole. For Tanner, the faithful practice of Christianity does not include all the same beliefs and practices from one generation to the next, and there is no means by which we might ascertain which of those beliefs and/or practices *ought* to remain the same.⁴⁶ Because the shape and organization of Christianity are subject to change, what marks a belief or practice as “Christian” is fluid.

⁴³ It is not clear, however, that doctrinal development – or changes in Christian belief and practice – occur according to the same pattern as cultural change. Tanner extrapolates from postmodern theories of culture in precisely the same way Lindbeck applied modern anthropological theory. Her account leaves open the question whether Christianity really has developed as a culture would: if it has, one wonders whether the empty center is not open to God but rather closed. To deny the possibility of at least glimpsing the logic that holds Christianity together is to come very close to offering a Kantian postulate in place of a living God.

⁴⁴ See *Theories of Culture*, 144.

⁴⁵ *Theories of Culture*, 141. This is a statement, however, with which Lindbeck would have agreed. See *The Nature of Doctrine*, 82–84.

⁴⁶ Tanner lists the tasks of the theologian as: “(1) elucidating the meaning of cultural elements, (2) forming an order among them by selecting and selectively emphasizing elements out of the available, socially circulating pool of symbolic resources, and (3) determining the way in which social practices are part of those inferential and associative networks, the way certain social practices are to be interwoven with meanings and organization of cultural elements which the theologian produces” (“‘New Social Movements’ and Feminist Theology” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, ed. Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997], 186).

Of course Tanner does not suggest that the whole set of Christian beliefs and practices is completely dismantled and constructed anew in each generation. Tanner's use of the term *bricolage* for the mode of this theological construction indicates certain constraints on the activity of working with the array of beliefs and practices in the pursuit of "true discipleship."⁴⁷ There is a sense in which the material with which the theologian works remains the same, and the changes in the shape of "true discipleship" come from the rearrangement of materials – practices and ideas. Yet the materials themselves have no inherent claim to being (the) "tradition."

Rather than discerning Christianness on the basis of adherence to an unchanging essence of belief and practice, Tanner looks at the practice of Christianity as consisting in disarticulation and rearticulation: taking materials that are not in themselves "Christian" and organizing them Christianly. This definition of the central task of Christian discipleship implies that we cannot measure beliefs and practices by any standard but by how well they fit together. Presumably this standard is more easily applicable than the question whether a belief or practice contributes to "true discipleship"; I will give further attention to this topic later in the chapter. The strength of Tanner's view is that it eliminates the need for any consensus on the core of Christian faith, and allows for practices and/or beliefs accepted in one generation to be rejected in the next (and vice

⁴⁷ *Theories of Culture*, 166. Tanner refers to Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1988) as sources for this concept. Hebdige's work on punk subculture in Britain is fascinating in connection with Tanner's argument, because one of the main points he makes is that punk subculture is parasitic on the mainstream culture it subverts. While the suggestion that Christian cultural style is dependent on the broader culture may be accurate, there is a more interesting implication of Hebdige's work for Tanner's proposal. That is, even as Tanner suggests in *Theories of Culture* that the fluidity of Christian identity means that there are no *de jure* authorities, when she turns to the task of developing her own systematic theology (in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*), she draws upon the sources/authorities for theological reflection about which exactly the sort of consensus she accuses Lindbeck of fabricating *exists*. Without that consensus, the appeals she makes to theologians like Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom would not have the weight they give to her discussion.

versa). Hence the fluidity of Christian identity is a quality of the continuity of common belief and practice over time rather than being primarily a characteristic of individual or personal identity.⁴⁸

It is a fairly short step from these suggestions to the argument that Christian identity is best thought of as a shared task. The point is not to establish consensus on the question about what it really means to be “Christian,” but to persevere in the face of disagreement. Another way of putting the point is to say that faithfulness is about staying in the conversation, even when there seems to be no hope of coming to agreement. Tanner understands Christian identity as “constituted most fundamentally by a community of argument concerning the meaning of true discipleship.”⁴⁹ For Tanner, there is no core set of beliefs and practices that necessarily defines Christianity; therefore the task of identifying the marks of Christian cultural style is highly complex. It is also a task that is as old as Christian practice itself.⁵⁰ Tanner’s revised account of Christian identity thus fits nicely with approaches to questions of tradition and orthodoxy developed over the past three decades. With respect to tradition, for example, Tanner is implicitly in agreement with Alasdair MacIntyre, who has influenced many contemporary theologians.⁵¹ Also, although she may not realize it, she shares some basic ideas with historians of Christian theology, like Rowan Williams, who reject the depiction

⁴⁸ And yet the individual remains the primary agent in Tanner’s discussion. For Tanner, tracing the identity of Christian *community* is the focal point. It follows that the community is also the central figure in the improvisation, although Tanner does not discuss this. Christian practice is marked by the style of its improvisation. This has ecclesiological implications, which I assume Tanner is not interested in following up. In fact, she might well disagree about the community being the important unit. Still, I think her account of community identity is more prominent in *Theories of Culture* than individual identity.

⁴⁹ *Theories of Culture*, 156; cf. Tanner’s “Tradition and Theological Judgment in Light of Postmodern Cultural Criticism,” paper presented at Duke University, 2004.

⁵⁰ See *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, where Tanner suggests that her account of Christian identity is anticipated by many of the late ancient and medieval theologians she discusses.

⁵¹ I will discuss MacIntyre in more detail below; although Tanner generally takes positions that accord with MacIntyre’s work, close attention to what he says helps us to see that much of Tanner’s discussion of questions of tradition is insufficiently nuanced.

of the fourth century as a battle between the “orthodox” and “heretics,” favoring a more nuanced account of an ongoing debate about the identity and significance of Jesus.⁵² In *Theories of Culture* Tanner describes the core concept under discussion at the heart of Christian tradition as the question about what constitutes true discipleship: what does Jesus mean, and how do we live accordingly?

The theme of discipleship, though not always at the forefront of the discussion, links these first three chapters. Each of my modern interlocutors gestures toward the reality of Christian identity as discipleship. The fluidity of their accounts of Christian identity stems from a sense that this identity is more pilgrimage than possession, a lived reality rather than a set of propositions or a means of interpreting experience. What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? Tanner centers her consideration of Christian identity on this question. Principally, her answer concerns the marks of Christian discipleship in a changing world; she asks what it is that identifies Christians as disciples of Jesus. Sometimes the answer seems to be “not much” – not because the Christians concerned are not faithful, but because Christians are not the only people who feed the hungry and care for the poor (for example) in the world today.

In envisioning the forum for discussion of the question concerning true discipleship as a conversation in which each voice has the right to be heard with respect, Tanner implicitly criticizes the typically hierarchical polities of mainline Protestant churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church.⁵³ Her emphasis on the con-

⁵² See Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 233–245.

⁵³ But see her discussion of power in anthropological theory. She argues that the perspective of the anthropologist, who is looking for the principles of cultural unity and coherence, obscures “the power dimension of meaning. How situations and the actors in them are understood makes a difference in what it is those actors can conceive of doing. Power is therefore at stake in the interpretation of beliefs, values, or notions with a cultural currency. Struggles over power come to be enacted in struggles over meaning. In that space that poststructuralism opens up between a cultural form and the multiple possible meanings of it, contests over power are engaged. Culture, like a text, ‘produces meaning through the struggle over the definition of signifying forms – a struggle that conveys the sense people make of history in their desires to preserve, alter, or revolt against the terms in which it appears to them’” (*Theories of Culture*, 47).

testability of Christian norms at the heart of Christian discourse reflects clear suspicion about the ways in which homogeneity, harmony, or consensus as goals for Christian community invite the exercise of a potentially repressive power. Her attitude implies a view of ethical and moral decisions in Christian communities as involving complex judgments as befits a perspective that sees mostly gray, rather than black and white. Tanner shares this approach with some contemporary postliberals who likewise pay close attention to the difficulty of discernment in the context of conflict about social issues. For example, Stephen Fowl and Eugene Rogers explicitly consider the method of discernment in situations of ecclesial conflict, emphasizing the impossibility of asserting permanent standards.⁵⁴

Tanner's criticisms of the postliberal (primarily Lindbeck's) view of culture and construal of doctrine as the "grammar" that guarantees Christian continuity show some of the weaknesses of Lindbeck's model. At the same time, I have suggested that Tanner fails to observe deeper weaknesses in Lindbeck's account, including the lack of an account of Christian formation. Lindbeck saw a consensus of sorts on the central doctrines of Christian faith, and lamented the impossibility of appropriate catechesis through which competent

⁵⁴ In *Engaging Scripture* and *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), respectively. As I suggested above, Fowl and Rogers provide examples of postliberal attention to the complexity of moral judgment and the insufficiency of "the" narrative in that context. In comparison with Bruce Marshall, however, Tanner looks quite different. Marshall takes the concept of "absorbing the world" and develops an account of the way in which the web of beliefs functions in the process of evaluating "alien" truth claims. The description of procedure Marshall provides does suggest an almost technical approach, and thus Tanner's criticism of the step-by-step procedure or mechanical execution of rules might apply. But the complexity of Christian engagement with truth claims not generated by the Christian narrative itself is not lost on Marshall. It is by no means clear, at any rate, that Tanner is really after a more complex process: she is simply more suspicious of any standards that might become authoritative and so jeopardize the role of theological judgment in individual cases. If there are authoritative criteria to be consulted in cases of questionable claims, then the burden of responsibility for theological judgment does not fall so heavily on the shoulders of the individual.

practitioners might be formed.⁵⁵ Tanner takes Lindbeck to task on the existence of such a consensus, but neglects the question of appropriate catechesis. As such, she never appears to consider the need for an account of formation in her own discussion of Christian identity. Her interest in discipleship, however, leads directly into the question of Christian formation. In the next two sections, I turn to the questions of agency and tradition as aspects of an account of formation missing in Tanner's proposal.

***Habitus* and Agency: Tanner and Bourdieu**

I have suggested that Tanner's appeals to postmodern social theory do not sever her from the field of postliberals. Not only is her use of culture theory in continuity with Lindbeck's own method, but also the way in which she uses the work of theorists of culture does not lead her to question certain modern elements of postliberal theology, such as inattention to formation. Tanner might have developed the conceptual framework she draws from Lindbeck by attending to the question he raises regarding catechesis. The theorists to whom she turns in *Theories of Culture* offer resources for reflection on precisely the kind of process Lindbeck described in *The Nature of Doctrine* – a process of habituation. Tanner's reading of Pierre Bourdieu offers a key example of her use of postmodern theorists.

Whereas a modern moral philosophy like Kant's avoids the topic of formation, Bourdieu thematizes formation, paying careful attention to the reproduction of belief and practice. What Bourdieu calls *habitus* includes habits of thought and habits of practice, both of which depend on the structure of desiring: a subject desires according to social formation.⁵⁶ Tanner takes from Bourdieu her understanding

⁵⁵ While it might be inferred from *Theories of Culture* that Tanner does not affirm any positive, historically consistent doctrinal content, one has only to open *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* to find that she nonetheless takes certain dogmas as read. See, for example, her discussion of God (on p. 4), in which she affirms the ancient proposition that "God is not a kind of thing among other kinds of things," which she goes on to explain using the same conceptual apparatus as her patristic and medieval interlocutors.

⁵⁶ See *Reproduction*, 35–39; *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

of how cultural rules work, but seems to have overlooked Bourdieu's lengthy discussion of the way in which those rules are inculcated. To say that Christian cultural rules might function in the same way as such rules do for Bourdieu is to beg the question: how do Christians learn these rules? Bourdieu offers intricate analysis of the role of family, school, and society in training an individual to act, interact, and react according to certain cultural rules. Because Tanner rejects the idea that cultural rules follow a pattern similar to the rules of a game, she misses an important subcultural analogy that directs our attention to the learning process. She suggests that in a culture:

Innovation is a possibility even in cases where determinate cultural forms function as rules directing action. These rules do not resemble the rules of a game or the formulae of mathematics; they do not, like them, require mechanical execution but the tact, dexterity and artfulness to act appropriately in unpredictable and highly complex social circumstances. Following cultural rules may therefore mean "necessary improvisation."⁵⁷

One doubts, on reading this, that Tanner has much experience of sports, in which the interpretation of rules – even on the field – is always a part of the game. In particular, I suspect that a quarterback would bristle at the implication that his maneuvers in the pocket are “mechanical execution.” On the contrary, the post-snap scramble is a fine example of an “unpredictable and highly complex” situation. Players train intensively, but can never predict with certainty what the opposing team will do; thus decisions have to be made in precisely the way Tanner says cultural rules train us to act. The analogy is a useful one because it reminds us of the indispensable role of training (in addition to memorizing the playbook), which Bourdieu emphasized.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ *Theories of Culture*, 52.

⁵⁸ *Reproduction*, 18; cf. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 125–126, 135–139. I owe my understanding of football, insofar as I understand it, to my dad, who probably never dreamt that I would apply it in this way. Thanks, Dad!

The absence of discussion of training is a key problem with Tanner's *Theories of Culture*. Tanner's account of the individual within a tradition of argument (which I will discuss in more detail below) raises questions both about the individual and about tradition. In the first place, Tanner's implicit view of agency is problematic: individual agents collectively provide the vehicle for the transmission of cultural materials, but she offers no account of how they are formed as agents. Behind my criticism of Tanner's account of agency is the connection between agency and desire. While the postmodern account of the subject and the society through which subjects are formed (or socialized) shapes her account of Christian identity significantly, she leaves the question of the construction of desire largely unaddressed. How are the desires that characterize the Christian life to be formed? Why do they frequently fail to take precedence over other desires? In the next chapter, I will examine Rowan Williams' study of the history of Christian spirituality, which indicates that one of the distinctive marks of Christianness is the form and orientation of desire. Attending to the centrality of desire in the formation of subjectivity (Christian or otherwise) implies a rejection of the kind of agency of the individual that lurks in the background in *Theories of Culture*.

Tanner's account of agency is implied in her discussion of the activity of arranging and discerning the nature of Christian discipleship. It appears that each Christian participates in the conversation about what constitutes Christian discipleship, making judgments about the beliefs and practices that constitute Christian faith. The rationale for identifying particular practices as Christian is not intrinsic to the practices themselves, nor is it to be found in materials which are themselves intrinsically "traditional." Such a principle must be construed by "human beings . . . in the messy course of history."⁵⁹ Tradition is a matter of interpretation: each interpreter, she says, "puts [the materials of tradition] in an order" before making any judgment based on the witness of tradition. In this process, a Christian plays the role of the *bricoleur*, arranging the materials at hand and giving them a particular shape. To justify this view of the individual's role in the construal of Christian identity (for that is

⁵⁹ *Theories of Culture*, 132.

precisely what this is), Tanner appeals to Karl Barth: “What holds all these different practices together as a unity is nothing internal to the practices themselves; the center that holds them together should remain, as Barth says, empty.”⁶⁰ Thus each Christian (or would-be Christian, or perhaps even a non-Christian) occupies a place at the great roundtable discussion of what constitutes faithful Christian practice:

one stands at a particular place in the ongoing course of [Christian] history and, looking back and across to what others have understood by Christian discipleship, one forms judgments about the consistency of it all so far, to use in assessing the appropriate shape of Christian discipleship now.

To those others in the conversation one “owes . . . a respectful hearing.”⁶¹ At no point do the claims of others have any specific authority over us: “One remains the disciple of God, and not the disciple of God’s witnesses.”⁶² It seems that, for Tanner, the final authority is one’s own conscience.⁶³

The way Tanner construes discipleship is somewhat problematic. Whereas I have described discipleship in relation to Jesus, she insists that we are “God’s disciples.” This emphasis misses the point of the incarnation: before Jesus, the descendants of Abraham were God’s people; Abraham was called “friend of God”; and the Hebrew Bible is full of imagery depicting the relationship between God and God’s people in a variety of ways. Jesus himself makes the way for us to be restored to friendship with God, to be children of God in a new way, after his own example, by being drawn into the love of God as we are joined to him as members of his body. But in all that the New Testament says, it is clear that our relationship to God is yet imagined in terms that would have been familiar to Jesus’ contemporaries: we may be God’s children, or God’s friends, but we are *Jesus’* disciples.

⁶⁰ *Theories of Culture*, 135.

⁶¹ *Theories of Culture*, 137.

⁶² *Theories of Culture*, 138.

⁶³ I will discuss the role of tradition in more detail below.

Another aspect of Christian agency is connected to what Tanner believes is the place of “God’s witnesses” in the life of the believer. Discipleship is a matter of hearing God through these witnesses – though she admits that those witnesses and we who hear them are tainted by sin, it seems that we have to trust that their hearts and our own are turned toward the free God, whom we freely obey. And, it seems, no one else can fully be trusted: she criticizes Lindbeck’s notion of theological competence as requiring instruction. The idea of Christians as children playing at “a game that one never fully learns to play” reminds one of one’s own fallibility, that one is justified by *faith*, she reasons. This dependence on faith for our salvation should also remind us of our equality before God and in the conversation about what constitutes faithful practice. But she suggests that, in Lindbeck’s (postliberal) iteration, “justification by faith loses its usual function as a great equalizer. Not everyone is a child; good training requires good teachers who somehow avoid the difficulty – either by natural talent (religious virtuosi) or by dint of constant training (the members of an ecclesiastical hierarchy).”⁶⁴ To be fair, it must be admitted that Tanner sees inequality around the table: not everyone’s judgment about what constitutes faithful discipleship is “equally proper.” Her point, however, is that there is no means of discerning in advance what might constitute a “proper” judgment. The question then becomes, how do we adjudicate among differing judgments?

In principle, Tanner’s answer to that question is a good one: arguments must be offered for any given judgment. The interpretation of what constitutes Christian identity is a judgment that must be offered to that community. But this does not provide a complete answer to the question, particularly in light of Tanner’s view of the individual agency of Christian subjects in determining their own course of action. The capacity to render judgments and support them with compelling arguments is a skill: where does one learn

⁶⁴ *Theories of Culture*, 143. Tanner is referring here to Lindbeck’s discussion of competence; she offers no further examples of the way competence might be developed. See Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* (100–101) for his understanding of competence. For other postliberal versions of the development of theological discernment, see, for example, Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 97–127, and Eugene Rogers, “The Virtues of an Interpreter.”

such a skill? And the capacity to listen charitably and evaluate arguments is not a human instinct. It also is a skill we learn – but how? And who is qualified to teach such skills?

These questions point to what I suggest is a serious failing in *Theories of Culture*. I agree with Tanner's judgment about the usefulness of social and cultural theory in rethinking our approach to Christian identity. Such theory reminds us that "the effort to live Christianly" is "often messy, ambiguous and porous."⁶⁵ The main difficulty with her account is that although she describes the central task of Christian life, she offers no discussion of how individuals (or communities, for that matter) might be prepared to undertake it. I argue that the notion of agency Tanner displays in *Theories of Culture* is problematic philosophically and theologically. In the first place, with regard to its philosophical underpinnings, her account depends upon the kind of rational, individual agent one finds in a characteristically modern view of the subject.⁶⁶ Tanner depicts Christian subjects as able to interpret the array of cultural materials available for Christian use and use them as resources in developing a concept of faithful Christian discipleship. Such interpretations might be possible, if we could depend upon a Kantian rationality at the core of every human being, able to judge impartially and determine duty without the interference of self-interest.

But Tanner has not listened well enough to Bourdieu. The fact of the matter is, of course, that human subjects are constructed in and through traditions, and the fact of our constructedness implicates us in social relations that shape our perspectives on all the "others" with whom Tanner expects us to be in conversation. And none of us are without teachers, none of us without heroes.⁶⁷ Although Tanner insists that we are disciples of God only, and there is "no demand to approximate" the judgments of God's witnesses

⁶⁵ "How I Changed My Mind," 120.

⁶⁶ See Reinhard Hütter's review of *Theories of Culture* (*Modern Theology* 15 [1999], 499–501) for further discussion of this problematic aspect of Tanner's proposal.

⁶⁷ Augustine – whom Tanner cites approvingly at the beginning of the chapter I am discussing – knew this very well. See *De doctrina Christiana*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), *Pro*.

as to what constitutes good discipleship, that is not the way we develop an understanding of how to live. As Bourdieu reminds us, we are always already living in a way that is not solely the product of our free choice. That is, there *are* teachers, and we ought to think about what *does* constitute good teaching rather than to pretend that we are not in fact taught from birth upwards. Tanner's insistence that we are disciples of *God* undermines discipleship entirely. As I have indicated above, the idea that we are "disciples" only arrives with *Jesus*. We are disciples of God, yes, disciples of God, the Incarnate Word. It is the master whose example we follow who makes us his disciples. We may consider discipleship at least in part as the task of developing our capacity to reflect properly the God in whose image we are made (as Gregory of Nyssa insists), but as we do so we are always conscious that the perfection of that reflective activity has a face, a human form: Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

Second, Tanner's account of agency is problematic theologically because of sin. Although Tanner clearly believes in the power of sin to interfere with the pursuit of discipleship, the sin she seems most concerned about is that which has the potential to "disrupt the community of argument" by coercive or exclusionary exercise of power. She pays no attention to the "disruptive potential of sin" as it might impinge upon a person's ability to make good judgments about what constitutes faithful discipleship.⁶⁸ Sin does not only "disrupt the community of argument" by predisposing the members of the community *not* to give a respectful hearing to others around the table. The oppression of the weaker members of the community by the powerful is a *symptom* of this predisposition, which is not limited to the powerful. The theological analogue to Bourdieu's point about our being formed before we are conscious of the fact of our formation is that sin disrupts our very ability to perceive God and to heed the promptings of the Spirit. Tanner says that the problem to be avoided above all else is placing judgments based on the witness of others "on the same footing as the Word of God." Unfortunately, there is no immediate access to that Word. We hear the Word in the Bible, in preaching, and in conversation with

⁶⁸ *Theories of Culture*, 125–126.

Christians past and present, and we owe our ability or inability to hear, interpret, and obey the Word to the influences of myriad and often unrecognized others. Thus, we must take into account the way in which our sinfulness and that of others often helps us to form self-serving judgments about what constitutes Christian discipleship. It is not enough to say that sin does not completely block the grace of God – true as that may be. We must consider the possibility that there are good examples of what constitutes faithful Christian discipleship, examples which might help us to discern our own failings with respect to the pursuit of discipleship, and might also offer us grounds on which to argue for the propriety of some judgments about good discipleship and against others.

I have suggested that Tanner's own work shows the absolute indispensability of some process of formation in which a person meets the others at the table: her *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* makes that especially clear. There, Tanner makes choices about which voices to heed and how to put together the judgments of theologians throughout history (from Irenaeus to Barth) about the major tenets of Christian faith. Learning from the judgments of others is indispensable because in even Tanner's model they are the substance of the argument. Take, for example, her engagement with Gregory of Nyssa (to whom I will return in chapters 4 and 5). The way in which Tanner uses Gregory's theology in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* adds important detail to her account of Christian identity. Gregory's ideas are necessary for Tanner's understanding of Christian identity: the aspects of his theology she cites are the building blocks of traditional accounts of Christian faith. She cites Gregory in support of her assertion of the importance of "the essentially historical character of human life" for understanding Jesus' significance for us. But, for Gregory, it is impossible to communicate basic doctrine – of creation, salvation, Trinity – without also providing an account of the soul, of sin, and of Christian formation. The way in which she chooses her interlocutors and represents them in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* is determined by a complex set of priorities and prejudices,⁶⁹ which never appear

⁶⁹ I mean "prejudices" both in the everyday sense of the word and in Gadamer's sense of "prejudice."

on the surface. And although there may not be consensus on the relative merits of historical Christian witnesses, there is a wide agreement about some of the most important among them.⁷⁰ What requires further discussion is the means by which Christians come to be familiar (if they do) with those witnesses, and how the shape of a Christian life might be influenced by familiarity or lack of familiarity with those witnesses in the Bible and throughout history. In the final section of the chapter, I turn to Alasdair MacIntyre, whose own discussion of tradition helps us to see more clearly the shape of the hole in Tanner's account.

On Tradition and the Practice of Christian Doctrine: Tanner and MacIntyre

In this section I ask how, in Tanner's account of tradition, the individual standing in her or his place in Christian history is related to that history. Tanner insists that one cannot make judgments about what constitutes faithful Christian discipleship "in isolation from what Christians have done and said before and elsewhere."⁷¹ But what claim do those other Christians have on us? The voices of professional theologians, clergy, or "the fathers" have no *de jure* authority. The notion of a teaching office – particularly a Magisterium – is inimical to Tanner's approach to the work of construing Christian identity. It appears that the individual's debt to other Christians is discharged once she has listened respectfully to what they have to say. Nothing about the individual's place *vis-à-vis* Christian history *locates* her within that history. How is her story connected to the story of God's witnesses? I suggest here that an adequate account of tradition is necessary, and turn to the

⁷⁰ As I have suggested above, Tanner's theological project, especially in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, depends on a certain degree of consensus about the sources of and authorities for theological reflection. This set of sources, although it is by no means a formal canon, in turn depends upon the continuity of the church's tradition of recognizing the contributions of certain theologians.

⁷¹ *Theories of Culture*, 137.

work of Alasdair MacIntyre to show how an account of tradition helps.⁷²

As Tanner discusses the sense in which the continuity of Christian practice is a matter of “tradition,” she criticizes those who understand tradition as an intrinsic aspect of beliefs or practices. Rather, she suggests that the definition of those beliefs or practices is not final. The flexibility of interpretation “that enables the claims and ritual practices at issue to be of concern to large numbers of very differently situated people prompts an extended argument about how to interpret them in the course of a life lived in their light.”⁷³ For Tanner, the argument about the practices and beliefs that form Christian life is the source of continuity. And it is the argument itself that constitutes tradition – not the individual claims or practices within it.⁷⁴ Yet Tanner’s approach to tradition and practices does not make clear the relationship between the two. In her discussion of tradition, Tanner arrives at the notion of tradition as argument – a position that resembles MacIntyre’s.⁷⁵

MacIntyre defines a “living tradition” as “an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part

⁷² Doctrine features in the relationship between tradition and discipleship by connecting the “historically extended, socially embodied argument” (MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* [London: Duckworth, 1981], 222) to the practice of Christian faith. Doctrine is, in part, an articulation of what makes good discipleship; in its regulative function, doctrine tells us what the goods internal to the practice are, and orients us toward the virtues necessary for pursuing those goods. In the next chapter, we will see more clearly that part of the way that doctrine performs this function is through shaping our living and telling of the story of Jesus.

⁷³ *Theories of Culture*, 137.

⁷⁴ See “Tradition and Theological Judgment.”

⁷⁵ See, for example, *After Virtue*, 221–225. I find it extremely odd that Tanner spends several pages in *Theories of Culture*, as well as in her essay “Tradition and Theological Judgment,” discussing different conceptions of tradition as they are or might be employed in theological reflection without ever mentioning MacIntyre, whose work has been quite influential in the development of recent theological work on the nature of Christian tradition. Reading MacIntyre would have challenged Tanner to be more precise about what constitutes a practice, for example. She uses the language of practices throughout *Theories of Culture*, but never says precisely what she means by it. See, for example, chapter 6, “Commonalities in Christian Practice” (120–155).

about the goods which constitute that tradition.”⁷⁶ The definition of tradition as an argument is inseparable from its context in MacIntyre’s moral theory. In *After Virtue*, in which MacIntyre defines a tradition in this way, the discussion of tradition is necessitated by the account of practices which precedes it and is inseparable from the discussion of the virtues which follows it.⁷⁷ Such an understanding of tradition and our relationship to it suggests that tradition is neither “a store or deposit of treasured materials” nor the “logical explication” of an idea whose transmission allows for incremental change over time – views of which Tanner is critical in *Theories of Culture*. MacIntyre presents a more complex picture. Like Tanner, he rejects the ideological connotations of tradition, which he identifies as the notion that tradition is reason’s opposite, or that it is characterized by stability rather than conflict. Rather, he suggests,

all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition . . . Moreover, when a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose.⁷⁸

MacIntyre thus sees tradition not as the opposite of reason, but as the context within which reason operates, and he sees traditions as dynamic, not static. He goes a step further than Tanner in his discussion of the argument that partially constitutes a vital tradition. For MacIntyre, the argument has a clear subject matter: he does not *end* with the notion of traditions as embodying “continuities of conflict,” but uses this notion to indicate the broader context of the practices and virtues by which individual lives are shaped.

Three features of MacIntyre’s account of tradition are important here. First, MacIntyre conceives of individuals as constituted in part by the traditions of which they are the bearers. Persons are bound to traditions even as they are bound to the others through whom

⁷⁶ *After Virtue*, 222.

⁷⁷ *After Virtue*, 181–225.

⁷⁸ *After Virtue*, 222.

their social roles are defined – by family, by citizenship, by occupation or profession. A person’s moral particularity derives in large part from the history of those associations, whether to family or nation-state. “What I am . . . is in key part what I inherit,” MacIntyre suggests, and that means – among other things – that “whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, [I am] one of the bearers of a tradition.”⁷⁹ MacIntyre’s account of the individual includes both the notion of a moral given (what is inherited) and ongoing accountability. Second, the relationship of the individual to tradition goes both ways. Not only is a person, like it or not, bound by tradition(s); individuals contribute to the flourishing or demise of the traditions of which they are bearers by the exercise or lack of exercise of the virtues. In fact, part of the purpose of the virtues, in MacIntyre’s view, is to sustain “those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context.”⁸⁰ Third, traditions and the virtues which sustain them are inseparable from the practices within which the virtues are developed. MacIntyre defines a practice as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.⁸¹

Practices link the virtues to traditions: “the virtues sustain the relationships required for practices” as well as sustaining the “larger social traditions” in which those practices are located.⁸²

MacIntyre thus develops in much more detail the concept of tradition as constituted by argument. Whereas for Tanner the idea of tradition focuses on the reception of cultural materials which the

⁷⁹ *After Virtue*, 221.

⁸⁰ *After Virtue*, 223.

⁸¹ *After Virtue*, 187.

⁸² *After Virtue*, 221.

individual arranges in conversation with other participants past and present, MacIntyre conceives of tradition as an inheritance, and of individuals as situated by those traditions of which they are bearers. This makes for some important differences in the development of the notion of tradition as argument. For MacIntyre, the idea that traditions “embody continuities of conflict,” which may on its face resemble what Tanner says about tradition, is not the end of the discussion but the beginning. Tanner uses the idea that traditions are constituted by continuity of conflict to argue for the freedom of the individual with respect to a tradition.⁸³ MacIntyre begins with the notion of tradition as argument partly in order to connect the individual with the tradition by way of practices and the associated virtues. Traditions *do* depend upon individuals, but not in the way Tanner claims. For MacIntyre,

an adequate sense of tradition [which is a virtue] manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present. Living traditions, just because they continue a not-yet-completed narrative, confront a future whose determinate and determinable character, so far as it possesses any, derives from the past.

This virtue is displayed “in the kind of capacity for judgment which the agent possesses in knowing how to select among the relevant stack of maxims and how to apply them in particular situations.”⁸⁴

While this notion also may appear similar to Tanner’s understanding of a person working with cultural materials or following cultural rules, MacIntyre has a very clear idea of the way the skill implied in this “capacity for judgment” is developed: by participation in a

⁸³ The freedom Tanner’s position implies is not a complete freedom with regard to the tradition. She makes clear that conversation with tradition at some level is indispensable. What Tanner’s freedom amounts to is the ability to decide for oneself, for example, which practices are essential for developing the virtues necessary to participate in a tradition.

⁸⁴ *After Virtue*, 223.

practice.⁸⁵ The virtues offer a way for us to think about the nature of one's participation in the conversation about what constitutes Christian discipleship, without specifying in advance precisely which activities will or will not qualify. Moreover, the virtues also draw our attention back to the need for an account of formation. The person prepared to participate in the tradition-argument is one who has been formed by participation in practices in which the relevant virtues may be developed. MacIntyre notes that the virtues contribute to the ongoing argument by supporting their "negative precepts": rules.⁸⁶ Although Tanner does not say so explicitly, she also depends on a certain amount of rule-following. The "community of argument" only holds its shape if the participants in that argument are committed to its structure, which Tanner describes as one "in which no one's opinion is exempted from the possibility of salutary admonition and rebuke by one's fellows."⁸⁷

Thus, while Tanner's implicit idea of the forum for the community of argument as a roundtable⁸⁸ is appealing, it also presses the question of formation, because Tanner does not give any indication of the level of commitment to the task that is needed or the sorts of skills that are required for participation in such a conversation.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ MacIntyre does not offer here an explicit account of the reformation of desire as a part of the process. Although one of the hoped-for results of continued participation in a practice is that one come to see the goods internal to that practice as desirable in themselves, he does not explain the development of that sort of desire. What he does offer us, however, is a context in which these goods come to be regarded as desirable: in that cooperative activity he calls a practice. That is, in the ongoing participation with experienced practitioners, the desire for the goods internal to the practice may develop. While this desire may not develop as a result of the participation, without such participation it will certainly not develop.

⁸⁶ *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 139.

⁸⁷ *Theories of Culture*, 126.

⁸⁸ Tanner here seems to employ a standard feminist ecclesiological principle; see Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), especially 24–29.

⁸⁹ These need not be "academic" skills, although these are certainly the skills required for understanding Tanner's answer to the question what Christianity is all about in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*.

Without a theory of practices (as MacIntyre has), the argument (which constitutes tradition) is not necessarily fruitful.⁹⁰ MacIntyre accounts for the role of practices, goods, and virtues, all of which have to do with the formation of persons within a tradition and *for* a tradition. Yet, because God calls Christian tradition into being, the integrity and coherence of the tradition are simultaneously certain and inscrutable – so the account of formation implied in MacIntyre’s moral philosophy will not suffice. Neither MacIntyre nor Bourdieu can account adequately for the corruption of societies and traditions, whereas Christian doctrine names the corruptibility of individuals and institutions “sin” and offers a paradigm for resisting it on both levels. (See, for example, the exchanges between David and Nathan, and those between Israel and the prophets.) Thus even Tanner’s revised version of the cultural-linguistic model is ultimately inadequate as an account of how doctrine functions with relation to Christian identity; although cultures and languages do form us, they lack a teleological component. Christian doctrine (as we will see in chapter 5 especially) ought to mold us into the image of Christ. That it often fails to do so is not a sufficient counterargument: the point is that doctrine *ought* to have that effect; the cultural-linguistic model does not take this fully into account.⁹¹

Conclusion

I have shown that although Tanner is often rightly critical of post-liberal theology, in particular as it is represented by Lindbeck, her revisions of postliberal theological method fail to provide a way out of its modern difficulties in articulating a coherent account of the soul, sin, or Christian formation. These three areas for theological

⁹⁰ See MacIntyre’s discussion of the negotiation of conflict within a tradition in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 1–11 and 360–367. MacIntyre raises the question (for Tanner) as to how the problem of rival interpretations of Christian social practices (with which Tanner is particularly concerned) might be resolved.

⁹¹ MacIntyre’s concept of tradition comes closer, with discussion of the virtues; yet his account of tradition doesn’t necessarily require a full doctrine of sin, and he doesn’t include one.

reflection are important in part because they are fundamental to the patristic and medieval theologies to which Tanner appeals in support of her own systematic theology. The way in which Tanner's inattention to the richness of tradition and the claim a tradition has on its bearers comes more clearly into view in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*. As I have already mentioned, in it Tanner presents "a brief systematic theology" that reads like a conversation with tradition.

Moreover, I have argued that Tanner fails to see the need for an account of Christian formation, even though her account of Christian identity seems to demand it, her use of Bourdieu suggests it, and Lindbeck's proposal pointed directly to the necessity of catechesis. Whereas Lindbeck observed the lack of such an account, Tanner neither mentions this weakness in her criticism of Lindbeck nor makes any attempt to remedy it. Yet her understanding of Christian practice requires discernment and skill equal to or greater than Lindbeck's. Lindbeck saw ancient catechesis as a good model for Christian formation because he believed that the facility with the grammar and vocabulary of Christian faith was a product of intensive instruction. It is not merely a matter of learning the story, but learning how to live in light of that story, coming to understand its significance for us and for the world. Tanner's own understanding of what the practice of Christianity involves requires an equally high degree of facility with the story, and she draws on many of the same premodern theological sources to which Lindbeck gestured in his praise of ancient catechesis. Making the kinds of judgments Tanner sees as indispensable for Christian faith depends on knowing one's place in the story and being able to discern the meaning of the narrative for our thinking and action.

While Tanner rightly draws our attention to the cultural embeddedness of Christian thought and practice, she fails to provide an account of the habits of attention necessary for participation in the "task" she identifies as the heart of Christian identity. Nor does she offer reflection on how such habits might be developed. In the next chapter, I turn to the theology of Rowan Williams. Although Williams does not explicitly offer an account of Christian formation, I suggest that his description of the habits of Christian life points us in the right direction.