ECUMENICAL THEOLOGY FROM THE EMIC
BIBLICAL LANGUAGE AS A THRESHOLD BETWEEN TRUTH AND COMMUNAL BELIEF IN THE POSTLIBERAL THEOLOGY OF H. FREI AND G. LINDBECK

Pierangelo Bianco

Abstract: In this article I would like to investigate the development, in the post-liberal theology of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, of an idea of ecumenical theology based on a narrative and emic understanding of religious truth. It will be an itinerary into the Bible and its relationship with the community of Christian believers, namely the Church. In this sense, Hans Frei rediscovers, through the thoughts of Erich Auerbach and Ludwig Wittgenstein, the potentialities of a figural interpretation of the Bible, able to maintain the unity of the canon without breaking the realism of the narrative. According to Frei's point of view it is because of the loss, or the eclipse, of such realistic narrative of the biblical text that Christianity lies nowadays more and more in a state of split and crisis. To overcome such a situation, it is mandatory to return to a conception of Christianity as "a religious community called after its founder whose name is Jesus of Nazareth" and Christian theology as "the grammar of the religion, understood as a faith and as an ordered community of life" (Frei 1992, p. 20). That is precisely the starting point for the development of George Lindbeck's work, based on the comparison between the religious and the linguistic system. Considering the Bible as the place where the grammar of Christianity is to be found, Lindbeck aims thus to interpret the Sacred Scripture as an "habitable text" which must be "followable", and even "construable", by the community of believers.

In questo articolo vorrei indagare lo sviluppo, nella teologia postliberale di Hans Frei e George Lindbeck, di un'idea di teologia ecumenica basata su una comprensione narrativa ed emica della verità religiosa. Sarà un itinerario nella Bibbia e la sua relazione con la comunità di credenti cristiani, vale a dire la Chiesa. In questo senso Hans Frei scopre, attraverso i pensieri di Erich Auerbach e Ludwig Wittgenstein, le potenzialità di una interpretazione figurativa della Bibbia, capace di mantenere l'unità del canone senza spezzare il realismo della narrazione. Secondo il punto di vista di Frei è a causa della perdita, o dell'eclissi, di una

narrazione realistica del testo biblico che la cristianità versa oggi sempre più in uno stato di rottura e crisi. Per superare questa situazione, è necessario un ritorno alla concezione del Cristianesimo come "comunità cristiana secondo il suo fondatore il cui nome è Gesù di Nazaret" e alla teologia cristiana come "la grammatica della religione, intesa come fede e come un ordinata comunità di vita" (Frei 1992, p. 20). Questo è esattamente il punto di partenza per lo sviluppo del lavoro di George Lindbeck, basato sul confronto tra il sistema religioso e quello linguistico. Considerando la Bibbia come il posto in cui trovare la grammatica della cristianità, Lindbeck ha come obiettivo quello di interpretare le Sacre Scritture come un "testo abitabile" che deve essere "perseguibile" e perfino "costruibile", dalla comunità dei credenti.

1. Introduction

In a famous preaching addressed to the church of Leutwil on February 1917, on the relationship between the Church and the Bible, Karl Barth started asking to the community: "What is there within the Bible? What sort of house is it to which the Bible is the door?" (Barth 1925, p. 28).

In this essay I would like to understand, following the suggestion of Barth, what does it mean to pass through the doors of the Word of God and what kind of space we'll find there beyond, at the other side of the threshold. Firstly however, I must convene with Barth that it "is a dangerous question", and so, probably a dangerous movement, because from the one side, "the Bible gives to every man and to every era such answers to their questions as they deserve" (*ibid.*, p. 32), but from the other side, "within the Bible there is a strange, new world, the world of God" (*ibid.*, p. 33).

In a more recent speech, addressed to a session of ecumenical studies held in the castle of Bossey in January 1947, Barth talks again about the quite peculiar nature of the Word of God:

Toutes les propositions valables (c'est-à-dire toutes celles qui s'appliquent vraiment, et non seulement en apparence, à leur objet) sur

l'autorité et la signification de la Bible décrivent un fait sur l'existence duquel il ne peut y avoir aucune discussion, parce qu'il a sa motivation en lui-même et qu'il parle de lui-même de sorte que les explications qu'on peut en donner ne son que des répétitions et des confirmations (Barth 1964, p. 207)[1].

Barth concludes that this fact consists in the authority and the meaning of the Bible for the Church of Jesus Christ. The fundamental relationship between the Bible and the Church is indeed, according to the Swiss theologian, an "analytical proposition" that describes something as it is, without aiming to justify it. Here Barth does not present the image of a "new world", but specifies that the subject of the link between the Church and the Bible finally constitutes a "circle of truth" that cannot be open "ni del'intérieur ni de l'extérieur"[2]. Therefore, theology itself "est théologie (et non pseudo–théologie!) dans la mesure où elle est capable de rendre compte à l'Église et au monde de l'autorité de la Bible"[3]. Concluding the intervention held at the castle of Bossey, Barth finally specifies the ecumenical aim of his speech on the Bible and the Church, considering that: "l'unité œcuménique […] peut être vrai ou illusoire"[4]. If the ecumenical discourse wants to be illusory, it can without problems avoid the question of the communal authority of the Bible. However, on the other hand: "si au contraire l'unité œcuménique entre nous est véritable, alors je ne vois qu"une possibilité: nous devons confesser ensemble la même foi chrétienne en ce qui concerne l'autorité de la Bible"[5].

Finally, entering the 'strange new world", or the "circle of truth" traced by these Barth's speeches, we are now bound by three consequential claims on the authority of the Bible

---

(1) "All valid propositions about the authority and meaning of the Bible: "describe a fact about the existence of which there can be no discussion, because it has its own motivation and speaks of itself even so that the explanations that can be given only repetitions and confirmations" (eng. trans. by the author).

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 210: "not from within, nor from without"

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 227: "is theology (and not pseudo-theology) to the extent that it's able to present the authority of the Bible to the Church and the world", (eng. trans. by the author).

(4) *Ibid.*, p. 227: "the ecumenical unity – considers Barth – can be true or illusory", (eng. trans. by the author).

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 228-229: "If the ecumenical unity between us is true, then I see only one possibility: we have to confess together the same Christian faith on the behalf of Biblical authority" (eng. trans. by the author).

- The authority of the Bible is essential to the Church.
- True theology has the duty to affirm the authority of the Bible.
- There can be no ecumenism without affirmation of Bible's authority to the Church.

However, what does it mean to pursue an ecumenism based on the relationship between biblical authority and the community of believers? According to what we can understand from Barth's work, the solution seems to lie in searching for the reasons of a common dialogue from within, in a deepening of common Christian sources, or from without, multiplying the occasions of reciprocal meeting. Referring to a definition of contemporary social studies, started from the work of the linguist Kenneth Pike (Pike 1967), what are here confronted seems to be, in anthropological terms, an emic and an etic form of ecumenism. In other words, as reported by the Cambridge English Dictionary, the etic perspective is "a way of studying or describing a language or culture from the point of view of people who do not use the language or who live outside the culture"[6]. On the contrary, an emic perspective, is the one which takes the internal, deeper point of view "the people who use the language or live in the culture"[7]. In this sense Barth seems, from what we read, to prefer an emic point of view on the unity of the Church, a point of view rooted in the afore mentioned relationship between the Church and the Bible that represents for him a matter of fact without necessity of external motivations. In the following essay, I would like to consider how such a possibility of an "ecumenical theology from the emic" can be developed linking together the theological works of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.

2. The authority of the Bible is essential to the Church

The issue of the loss of a communal biblical authority, takes a crucial place also in the development of the work of the Lutheran American theologian George Lindbeck, as it comes out very clearly in his essay

---

(6) https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/etic.
(7) https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/emic.

of 1989 *Scripture, Consensus and Community*. The main theme that Lindbeck presents here is indeed the relationship between truth and community building: could a truth, rational or religious, exist without a community that bears witness to it? In the case of religion, the problem becomes even more evident: in the Jewish-Christian tradition as well as in most other major religious traditions, the fundamental truths, the dogmas or finally the doctrines, are witnessed by the texts, on the one hand, and the community of believers on the other. Without this union between Sacred Scripture and community, no religious dimension could subsist. However, a tendency that arose in philosophy and then in theology and that today more than ever is pursued in religious studies, seems to claim exactly the opposite. I'm referring to the political-economical and finally even religious liberalism, focused, on the exaltation of the individual and his complicated relationship with the society of belonging and the consequent individualization and subjectification of the truth. Thus, as a result of this liberal shift, even the interpretation of sacred scriptures ended up becoming the task of critical and historiographical analysis of what Lindbeck calls "a separate guild" of expert exegetes, with the result of becoming a message no longer shared, understood and significant for the wider community of believers:

> Modern scholarship can tell us much about what texts did not mean in the past and, with rather less certainty, reconstruct what they did mean; but, insofar as it remains critically historical, it provides no guidance for what they should mean in our present very different situations. It tells us at best what God said, not what God says now. There seems to be no exegetical bridge between past and present. This gap, much more than questions about inerrancy or inspiration, is the heart o the current crisis of scriptural authority (Lindbeck 2002, p. 211).

However, Lindbeck concludes seeing a spark of hope for the future:

> There are, in second place, some developments which suggests that it can be made to work. Biblical scholars are increasingly interested in the literary features, social and communal functioning and canonical

functioning and canonical unity of the scriptural test … I shall simply mention the names of Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar (*ibid.*, p. 219).

Therefore, a postliberal approach to theology, should follow the route of Barth and Von Balthasar, becoming "capable de rendre compte à l'Église et au monde de l'autorité de la Bible" (Barth 1964, p. 227)[8]. However, the work of Lindbeck goes even further: "New directions are needed. […] Clarity grows and honesty increases when each religion considers its relation to others in terms of its emic categories, its native tongue, instead of contorting and distorting its heritage to fit the constraints of a purpotedly universalizable etic idiom of salvation" (Lindbeck 2002, pp. 228–229).

The final challenge that Lindbeck addresses to theology and the Church is to redescribe the world in which we live through the language of the Bible, rather than use contemporary language to redescribe the biblical narrative in a supposedly new universal tongue. However, how is to concretely possible to realize such purpose in a deeply secularized world? And what role does the Christian community assume in a similar process?

In order to answer these questions, it is better at first to consider another author that functions as *trait d'union* between Barthian thought and that of George Lindbeck.

The roots of a postliberal approach to theology are indeed to be found in the work of the German–American Episcopal theologian Hans Frei, colleague of Lindbeck at Yale Divinity school from the period shortly after the Second World War. Frei began his doctoral research on Karl Barth's doctrine of revelation during that period, while Lindbeck was working on Duns Scotus' theology. Together with the Barthian studies, during the years at Yale Hans Frei had been fascinated and influenced also by the ideas of literal critics such as Erich Auerbach and Frank Kermode on the concept of realism in Western literature. Auerbach's special merit has been to rediscover the classical and medieval concept of *Figura* and figural interpretation, with a quite different

---

(8) "[…] able to present the authority of the Bible to the Church and the world" (eng. trans. by the author).

sense respect to what we intend in contemporary times to be an allegorical or metaphorical form of writing. Such a difference consists basically on the fact that, in Auerbach's own terms: "figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time but both, being real events, or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life" (Auerbach 1959, p. 53).

That's the starting point of a quite new understanding of realism in narrative, according to which a narrated event and its meaning owns the same grade of realism, not being on different levels, but in the same narrative level. In this way, considers Hans Frei, paraphrasing Auerbach: "Meaning and narrative shape bear significantly on each other. Even if one was convinced that the history–like or realistic character of the narratives finally bespoke an illusion, so that their true sense explained as allegory or myth, the realistic character was still there" (Frei 1974, p. 11).

Now, if Auerbach uses such idea for the interpretation of the whole Western literature from the Odyssey to James Joyce, for Frei, on the other hand, that becomes a starting point to develop its anthropological idea of theology and exegesis made from an emic point of view. What he denounces indeed, in the work already quoted, is the "eclipse of the biblical narrative", namely the historical process through which the classic figural interpretation of biblical text from itself, from an internal point of view, have been eclipsed by the modern and liberal tendency of understand the sacred scripture using an external, mostly historical or ideal reference.

One of the most important consequences of this kind of figural interpretation, strongly highlighted by Frei, was to maintain the unity of the canon and especially to link together the old and the New Testament, the Jews book of the *Thorah* with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's evident indeed that the Bible is a recollection of quite different books and so of different stories, contexts, narrative styles and so on and so forth. However, according to Frei, the original figural–realistic interpretation has the capacity to maintain the biblical text internally united. The basic reason for that lies finally in the fact that, as we read from Auerbach,

in a realistic narrative, any event or character can at the same time represent something in itself and in relation to another event or character. Such a twofold possibility of meaning is the tool which permits to figural narrative to maintain the unity of the canon without breaking the realism of the narrative. In this way indeed, every single event can be true and meanwhile represents the real meaning of something else. The most essential field of application of such theory is that of the relationship between the history of Moses and that of Jesus Christ, that resumes, in a wider sense, the whole relationship between Christianity and the People of Israel. Thus, the story of the Jewish people and that of Jesus Christ do not lose any realistic force and meaning in being linked together. They just maintain their own meaning and truth, holding at the same time a meaning and truth in their connection. Therefore, that of the unity and continuity of the biblical canon is the first main loss, according to Frei, due to the "eclipse of the biblical narrative". Moreover, there is a second kind of loss, concerning no more the interpretation of the text from inside, but the possibility that the text becomes a source of interpretation of the world outside from an internal point of view. As Frei considers about the biblical hermeneutic of John Calvin indeed: "it was in the first place a proper (literal or figurative) rather than allegorical depiction of the world or reality it narrated. But in the second place it rendered that reality itself to the reader, making the reality accessible to him through its narrative web" (*ibid.*, p. 24).

In other words, the Scriptures were, in the past of Christianity as well as in Reformers" time, not only something that founded its own sense, but that gave also to the believer, and mostly to the community of believers, a key of interpretation of everyday life in the external world: "Finally, realistic narrative, if it is really seriously undertaken and not merely a pleasurable or hortatory exercise, is a sort in which in style as well as content in the setting forth of didactic materials, and in the depiction of characters and action, the sublime or at least serious effect mingles inextricably with the quality of what is casual, random, ordinary, and everyday" (*ibid.*, p. 14).

Therefore, according to the diagnosis of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck after him, it is because of the loss, or the eclipse, of such authority of the biblical text for the Church that Christianity lies nowadays

more and more in a state of split and crisis. On the other hand, it is then through the rediscovering of that realistic narrative that will be possible a new and ecumenical flourishing within the Christian world.

3. True theology has the duty to affirm the authority of the Bible

Hans Frei died prematurely in 1988, letting such a great project of Christian foundation from an internal, realistic and narrative point of view only at its preliminaries. In a recollection of his later writings, edited posthumous by G. Lindbeck, G. Hunsinger and others of his colleagues under the title of *Types of Christian Theology* emerges the line of such a new hermeneutical and theological setting. The idea seems to be that of an emancipation of theology from historiography and philosophy and, in the main time, the establishment of a methodologic connection between the work of the theologian and that of the anthropologist. For what concerns the emancipation from historical science, most has been already said. The main point lies, according to Frei's work, on the threshold between the history and the story, as stated again in *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative*: "A realistic story is not necessarily history; but the difference between the two is reference or lack of reference, and that of a different kind of account being appropriate in each case. On the contrary, in respect of descriptive or depictive form, history and realistic story are identical" (*ibid.*, p. 27).

In this sense, the American theologian presents the relationship between history and story as a "family resemblance, which permits a kind of extension of literal into figural interpretation"(*ibid.*). To clarify the meaning of such kind of relationship, it must be noted that the main point of reference here is no more Erich Auerbach, but the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Austrian philosopher indeed, introduces the concept of family resemblances in his work *Philosophical Investigations*, trying to develop the concept of description:

24. […] Remember how many different kinds of thing are called "description": description of a body's position by means of its coordinates; description of a facial expression; description of a sensation of touch; of a

mood. Of course it is possible to substitute for the usual form of a question the form of statement or description: "I want to know whether […]" or "I am in doubt whether […]" – but this does not brings the different language–games any closer together (Wittgenstein, 2009, pp. 15e-16e).

Here Wittgenstein points the attention on the multiplicity and variety of the forms of language, and the difficulty to reduce them to a common ground of logical reference:

23. But how many kinds of sentence are there? —Say assertion, question and command? — There are *countless* kinds; countless different kinds of use of what we call '*symbols*", "word", " sentences". And this diversity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language games, as we may say, come into existence and others become obsolete and get forgotten. […] The word "language game" is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life (*ibid.*, p. 14e).

The multiplicity of what the philosopher calls language games or forms of life, or even descriptions represents the variety of meanings that an expression could assume depending on social, environmental or other kind of contextual factors. How is it possible then, to find an order and a logic into a similar mess? That's what he finally gains with the notion of "family resemblances":

66. Consider, for example, the activities that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball games, athletic games, and so on. What is in common to them all? …– For if you look at them you won't see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, affinities and a whole series of them at that […] we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss–crossing: similarities in the large and in the small.

67. I can think of no better expression to characterize this similarities then "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family - build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament and so on and so forth - overlap and criss-cross in the same way. — And I shall say: "games" form a family (ibid., p. 36e).

According to Norman Malcolm, Wittgenstein is here presenting "a radical change in our conception of what philosophy should be doing". If philosophy indeed, had always been centered on explanation of reality, now its task is to describe concepts starting from their use in the language, and, concludes Malcom "the description of the use of a word is called by Wittgenstein describing the "language-game" with that word" (Malcolm 1993, p. 74). The basic difference is that an explanation, in the traditional sense, is always the search for external justifications and reasons. On the other hand, description reports the thing as it is, as it shows itself, as we may derive from the sentence 126 of the *Philosophical Investigation*: "126. Philosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explain nor deduces anything — Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain" (Wittgenstein 2009, p. 55e).

According to Peter Winch, what is basically possible to learn from that thoughts is that human beings have different way on their disposal to understand reality and: "There is just as much point in saying that science, art, religion and philosophy are all concerned with making things intelligible as there is in saying that football, chess, patience and skipping are all games"(Winch 2008, p. 18). Therefore, at one side, the fundamental role of description in philosophy should be an epistemological one, i.e. that of wondering on the intelligibility of reality. However, the fact is that, such as there are different language games, so there are different kind of intelligibility of things on the base of the nature of the thing itself and the context in which it is set. Therefore, concludes Winch: "the whole substance of Wittgenstein's argument is that it is not those practices considered on their own which justify the application of categories like language and meaning, but the social context in which those practices are performed" (*ibid.*, p. 33). In this sense, philosophy itself should tend to be a kind of social science that considers the intelligibility of a thing trying to be as adherent as she can to the thing itself in its specific context.

Now, theology, according to Frei's last writings, should tend to a similar form of socio-anthropological description, or even more radically: "theology becomes an aspect of the self–description of Christianity as a religion" (Frei 1992, p. 20). However a tension becomes thus evident, between a philosophy and theology, on the one hand, intended

as a transcendental science that grasps what all other sciences have in common:

> On this view, theology and philosophy are bound to be closely if perhaps oddly related. Philosophy may be an informative science, which tells you, for example, what being is, and how to get into a position to know it. […] In the lights of its foundational status, philosophy arbitrates what may at any time and anywhere count as meaningful language, genuine thought, and real knowledge. And theology, given its long but also dubious standing in the academy, is a prime candidate for philosophical scrutiny (ibid.).

and a philosophical–theological thought, on the other hand, intended mostly as a social discipline, where the focus is on the understanding of reality starting from its socio-cultural and linguistic dimension:

> On the other hand, Christianity is a specific religion among others, a religious community called after its founder whose name is Jesus of Nazareth. […] In this context, theology is a very different matter […] now theology becomes an aspect of the self–description of Christianity as a religion, rather than an instance in a general class. It is an inquiry on the internal logic of the Christian community of language […]. Theology, in other words, is the grammar of the religion, understood as a faith and as an ordered community of life (ibid., pp. 19–20).

This final paragraph well presents the basis of Hans Frei's attempt to build up Christian Theology, from an emic point of view. In this sense, the duty of the work of the theologian must be at first to affirm the authority of the Bible, and that's from where his colleague George Lindbeck will start, inserting the ecumenical problem into this emic perspective.

4. Ecumenical from the emic

George Lindbeck develops his theological thought precisely starting from the idea of theology as "the grammar of faith". In this sense, he

will follow the path of his colleague Frei, focusing his work on the relationship between the narrative of the biblical text and the building of the community of faith and particularly the whole Christian *oikumene*. Once established a new hermeneutical perspective according to which the Bible contains its own grammar and speaks its own language, remains indeed the necessity to focus on the community in which such a language is spoken. A similar problem becomes even more clear in the mind of Lindbeck at the end of the Second Vatican Council where he took part as an observer for the Lutheran World Federation. As he considered already in an essay of 1963 indeed: "Agreement between exegetes […] does little by itself to create a dogmatic consensus. […] It is no longer possible to find a systematic theology in the Bible, and consequently an element of what might be called free choice enters in whatever we attempt to state *the* biblical (not the Pauline or the Joahnnine) doctrine on this or that point" (Lindbeck 1963, p. 251).

The focus is again on the authority of the Bible. The problem considered by Lindbeck in this passage, concerning the distance between the work of the exegetes and the consensus of the wider churchly community, will represent the focus of his whole subsequent work. According to him indeed, the establishing of a communal biblical authority for the Church is not sufficient if it involves only the experts in theology and exegesis. An ecumenical dialogue, instead, becomes effective only if it involves three elements bounded together: scripture, consensus and community.

The issue of a true biblical authority for the ecumenical church can thus be solved through the interconnection of these three elements presented in the title of the already quoted essay of 1989. In the first place lies, of course, always the Scripture, which must become an "habitable text", interpreted in such a way as to be "followable", and "construable", by the community of the faithful: "What is needed are texts projecting imaginatively and practically habitable worlds. A habitable text need not to have a primarily narrative structure […] but it must in some fashion be construable as a guide to thought and action in the encounter with changing circumstances. It must supply followable direction for coherent patterns of life in new situations" (Lindbeck 2002, p. 219).

Sacred texts must thus be "followable" in the sense of being understood and followed by the members of the community of the faithful and consequently become "construable", that is, a source of construction and elaboration of the common experience. The religious experience thus becomes necessarily intersubjective for Lindbeck in the sense that it takes shape only in the communitarian dimension and in its relationship with the descriptive and non–prescriptive narrative of the sacred text. Furthermore, if the work of Frei was more centered on the way in which the text was interpreted within the community, the work of Lindbeck, on the other side, becomes more focused on how the community can interpret the world through the text. In his main work *The Nature of the Doctrine*, Lindbeck resumes such an hermeneutical approach with the crucial concept of "intratextuality", with a twofold meaning: "This makes it possible for theology to be intratextual, not simply by explicating religion from within but in the stronger sense of describing everything as inside, as interpreted by the religion, and doing this by means of religiously shaped second–order concepts"(Lindbeck 1984, p. 114).

So finally, the task for theology, is not only, as was for Barth, to present the authority of the Bible to the church of the world, but to use such authority in a creative way to shape the world and perhaps make a new world, the "strange new world within the Bible". This Barthian expression, however, assumes now quite a different meaning. If indeed in Barth's own terms the strange new world was to be found into the Bible, passing through the door of the word of God, now, on the other hand, the strange new world of the Bible is the one that the community can build up creatively putting the word of God into practice. "The Bible" indeed, concludes Lindbeck, "exists for the sake of the church. […] The purpose of the Old and new Testaments is the formation of peoples who live in accordance with God's commands and promises and embody his will for the world" (Lindbeck 1996, p. 227).

All this discourse should finally be linked to the idea about the future of Christianity that Lindbeck presented already in a public intervention in 1968 on *Ecumenism and the future of Belief.*

In the first part of the text, starting from Karl Rahner's statement on the possibility of a *diaspora* in the future of the Christian Church,

together with the statistics on world religiosity, is analyzed the very likely condition of minority that awaits Christianity in the future. This situation will lead to a strengthening of the beliefs and habits of the faithful who will gather in small communities thus probably tending to sectarianism. At this point, in a society destined to a radical change in the role that still have today religions in general, and Christianity in particular, the Christian community will be faced with the twofold possibility of compromising accommodation to secularized society, on the one hand, or of a strong claim to its own identity and role on the other.

Subsequently, Lindbeck clearly suggests to the Church to pursue the choice of a strengthening of herself within society, so as to become a "creative minority". In this way, despite a socially peripheral role, it can constitute a decisive force against the totalitarian drift in which, as the twentieth century taught, every secularized society risks falling. The prospect of a banishing of religion, in fact, Lindbeck argues, would inevitably lead to the loss of forms of ethical legitimacy that have always been supported by the pursuit of a supreme good. Contemporary society has, moreover, been able to demonstrate a great ability in the field of pragmatic-rational manipulation of the means, but not in the field of respect for and defense of ultimate values and ends.

In this very field, Lindbeck concludes, Christianity of the future could and indeed should play its role, constituting itself as an ecumenical as well as sectarian reality. Here emerges a critique of contemporary ecumenism as the result of an ecclesiastical bureaucracy oriented towards increasing the accommodation to the pluralism of secularized society: "The contemporary ecumenical movement is largely the product of an accommodation to secularization […] the official ecumenism of the ecclesiastical bureaucracies is in part the product of pressure similar to which produce price-fixing, mergers and monopolies in the business world" (Lindbeck 2002, p. 100).

In this sense, the adjective "sectarian" assumes, in Lindbeck's own terms, a positive connotation. The ecumenical sectarianism proposed by the American theologian should indeed, be built around a renewed consensus on a narrative, intratextual interpretation of the Bible. In this way, the Church of the future could rediscover the message of Christ, both

in the sense of service to humanity, especially the poorest and the weakest, also through suffering and sacrifice. On the basis of this Christian worldview, Lindbeck concludes the text with the proposal to establish a "Christian *Internationale*", an international of Christianity that gathers all believers in Christ and makes them passionate and committed servants of humanity, reunited around the common faith in God: "The faith of the sectarian Christian such as we have described is centered on God, not on the Church's success or failure, or even its faithfulness or un faithfulness […] the human usefulness of religion must be rooted in the conviction, nourished by active participation in the community of faith, that God is God and his will is to be done no matter what the outcome" (*ibid.*, p. 105).

5. Conclusions

This final Lindbeck's statement, can be considered also the last provisory destination of that path in the search for ecumenical theology from an emic point of view. I hope to have shown how such a perspective can be found on the postliberal approach to theology offered by Lindbeck and Frei. Following the spirit of Barth's ecclesiology indeed, they both try to build a stronger bond between the Church and the Bible, overcoming the modern liberal tendency to privatize the religious dimension and recovering the importance of Christian doctrinal tradition from a Protestant point of view. That becomes particularly evident in Lindbeck's work, focused on the relationship between Scripture, the community of believers and the consensus that must link them both. However, this would not have been possible without Frei's concentration on Biblical narrative as a sort of "language game" whose truth and meaning must be grasped from an internal, rather than an external point of view.

In this way, the potentially dangerous itinerary within the strange new world of the Bible from which we began, ends up with the opening of the possibility of an ecumenical Christian community that brings the witness of the Bible to the world. Finally, in such a witness, the emic and etic dimensions can be reconciled into a common language,

the language of faith that as we read in the Letter to Romans, grows up in the intimate hearing of the Word of God, and then ends to be spread all around world:

> So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.
> But I say, Have the they not heard? Yes, verily,
> Their sound went into all the earth and their
> words unto the ends of the world[9].

Bibliographic references

Auerbach E. (1929) "Figura", in E. Auerbach, *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt*, De Greuyter, Berlin (eng. trans. by R. Manheim, "Figura" in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, Meridian Books, New York 1959).

Barth K. (1925) "Die Neue Welt in der Bibel" in K. Barth, *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie. Gesammelte Vorträge*, Chr. Kaiser, München (eng. trans. by D. Horton, "The strange new world within the Bible", in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Peter Smith, Gloucester, MA 1978).

——. (1947) *Die Autorität und Bedeutung der Bibel*, "Theologische Studien", 22 (french trans. by A Goy, "La Bible et l'Église" in *L'Église*, Labor et Fides, Genève 1964).

Frei H. (1974) *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: a Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics,* Yale University Press, New Haven-London.

——. (1992) *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. by G. Hunsinger and W. Placher, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Lindbeck G. (1963) *The Future of Roman Catholic Theology in the Light of the First Session of the Second Vatican Council*, "Dialog", 2: 245–253.

____. (1968) "Ecumenism and the Future of Belief", in G. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. by J.J. Buckley, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids/Cambridge, 2002, 91–105.

——. (1984) *The Nature of Doctrine. Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia.

---

(9) Paul, *Letter to the Romans*, 10, 17-18, in *The Bible. Authorized version*, John Stirling, London, 1954.

____. (1989) "Scripture, Consensus and Community", in G. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. by J.J. Buckley, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 2002, 201–222.

____. (1996) "Atonement & the Hermeneutics of Intratextual Social Embodiment", in T.R. Phillips and D.L. Okholm (eds.), *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberal in Conversation*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove (IL), 221–238.

——. (1997) "The Gospel's Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability", in G. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. by J.J. Buckley, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 2002, 223–252.

Malcolm N. (1993) *Wittgenstein from a Religious Point of View*, Routledge, London.

Pike K. (1967) *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of Structure of Human Behavior*, The Hague, Paris – Mouton.

Winch P. (1958) *The Idea of Social Science and its Relation with Philosophy*, Routledge, London.

Wittgenstein L. (2009) *Philosphical Investigations*, ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte, Blackwell Publishing, Chichester.