

George Lindbeck (1923-2018)

A Memorial Note for ATS, by Kendall Soulen, 23 March 2018

It is not easy to put into words quite how George Lindbeck exercised his influence as a teacher. He was the Platonic form of the absent-minded professor, a kind of living proof of Cartesian body/soul dualism, though perhaps without the connecting pituitary gland. His words were few, his pauses long, his grimaces legendary. He was a master at rendering the views of others with care and precision, but he was at times almost appallingly modest in presenting his own constructive theological views. This was not always encouraging to his students. If someone as learned as Lindbeck could think so long and yet finally be so cautious in judgment, what hope was there for the rest of us? But all the while Lindbeck was teaching by example. He was a man gifted with tremendous powers of attentiveness, not just to texts but to people. He respected – no, he revered – the faith and hope embodied in all of the major Christian traditions, and he was utterly conscientious in demonstrating similar respect and care for his students.

George Arthur Lindbeck was born in 1923 in China and lived the first 17 years of his life in that country, the child of American Lutheran missionaries. He later said that knowing people who were formed by both Christianity and Confucianism gave him the convictions “that the communal shapes us more than we shape ourselves” and that “human basics are everywhere and always pretty much the same.”¹ He earned his PhD from Yale in 1955, but while still a student he was appointed to the Yale Divinity School, where he remained until his retirement in 1993.

Lindbeck was a "delegate observer" to the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965, and served prominently in Luther/Roman Catholic dialogue until 1987. His book, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* provides a theoretical framework for understanding how a divided church can achieve greater visible unity without sacrificing the distinctive insights of divided traditions. He also understood it as a contribution to healing the wounds inflicted on the church's relationship to the Jewish people by its history of supersessionism.

George Lindbeck died on January 8 at age 94 in Florida. He is survived by his wife, Dr. Violette Lindbeck, and his daughter, Dr. Kristen Lindbeck, Associate Professor of Jewish Studies at Florida Atlantic University.

May Light Perpetual shine upon him.

¹ George Lindbeck, “Performing the Faith: An Interview with George Lindbeck,” *The Christian Century*, Nov. 28, 2006.