George Lindbeck is unabashed about the debt he owes to Ludwig Wittgenstein concerning his cultural-linguistic theory of religion and the derivative theological method. He admits that, "Wittgenstein’s influence... has served as a major stimulus to my thinking." Nevertheless, Lindbeck rarely makes clear where this stimulus has been appropriated. It will be the burden of this essay to demonstrate some ways in which Wittgenstein’s influence is evident in Lindbeck’s theory as explained in his book, The Nature of Doctrine. We will begin with a brief sketch of some crucial Wittgensteinian points and then see how Lindbeck has attempted to appropriate them vis-à-vis the question of religious truth. We will then conclude with some remarks on how this relates to Lindbeck’s ecumenical interests.

Language for Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein has argued against theories of language based on referentialism. He opens his Philosophical Investigations with a quotation from St. Augustine’s Confessions in which Augustine describes that he learned what things were called based on the utterances of his elders and their pointing at the corresponding objects. Over time, he came to understand how these utterances were to be strung together into sentences and thereby constitute a language. This way of understanding language as referential (that is, as making reference to things in reality) became the object of Wittgenstein’s critique.

The problem is not that referentialism is outright false but that it fails to account for the variety of functions words serve. This is why he adds, “Augustine does not speak of there being any differences between kinds of words.” To be sure, some aspects of language actually do function this way but certainly not all—or even most—of them. Wittgenstein demonstrated that a purely referential language is quite inconceivable by showing the various functions of words in even a very simple example.
I send someone shopping. I give him a slip marked “five red apples.” He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens a drawer marked “apples”; then he looks up the word “red” in a table and finds a color sample opposite it; then he says a series of cardinal numbers—I assume that he knows them by heart—up to the word “five” and for each number he takes an apple of the same color as the sample out of the drawer.—It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words.¹

So even in this primitive example, it is clear that the three words spoken serve to communicate in three different ways. The word “five” has no actual meaning in this instance aside from how it is used.² The word “red” only has meaning insofar as it is used with reference to the property of an object, apples in this case. The word “apples” is perhaps the only purely referential aspect in this instance and even then, the plural form is only as explainable as the use of the number five. In addition to the meanings of the individual words, saying “five red apples” can function in various ways. It will only be interpreted as a request if it is spoken to a shopkeeper and there are preexistent social conventions governing the ways shoppers speak to shopkeepers and what they hope will happen when they speak.

Wittgenstein goes on to show that the Augustinian picture of language is both inadequate and inaccurate. First, it is inadequate because it represents a limited view of what language is: “Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication; only not everything we call language is this system.”³ This was seen in the way that “five” is too complex simply to be a word corresponding to an object (even five objects, for that matter) in reality. Also, people’s names are “names” in a different sense than are the names of, for example, species. For this reason, pointing at a person and saying “Suzy” names something different from saying “woman” or “human.”⁴

Second, the Augustinian picture is inaccurate on ‘naming’ because it mistakenly assumes that the meaning of an object is the object itself. However, real language use is not like that. Words continue to have meaning even after the corresponding object ceases to exist. A person’s name continues to have meaning even after that person dies. Augustine’s error was “to confound the meaning of a name with the bearer of the name.”⁵ In this way, not only is the Augustinian picture an inadequate model for the various uses of language but it is also an inaccurate way of representing ‘naming.

It is worth pausing over these first few sections of Philosophical Investigations because, as Robert Fogelin has observed, many seeds of Wittgenstein’s thought as he develops them later in the book are found to germinate here. “Much though not all of the Philosophical Investigations can be viewed as an extended elaboration on these themes introduced at the very start of his reflections.”⁶ Let us attempt to unpack some of those themes by turning to the solution he suggests.

**Truth for Wittgenstein**

For Wittgenstein, language only takes on meaning when it is part of a ‘language game.’ The rules of the language game are expressed as its grammar which establishes the parameters of what can and cannot be expressed intelligibly in a language. These rules are set by a given community which uses a language a particular way, which is to say, in ways determined by that community’s practices. From the above example involving a shop-
keeper and a customer, the word “five” takes on meaning only because people engage in the practice of counting things. Hans Zorn notes that the Wittgensteinian example sentence, “This room has length” has meaning simply because people measure things.

Furthermore, for Wittgenstein, the truth of a proposition has to do with how well it correlates with the “forms of life” it is meant to describe. Truth claims are mediated within a language game by the grammar rules involved so that the claims can be said to be true insofar as the rules are followed. So to say, “This room has length” can be said to be true, not because it has been measured and thus shown to be true but simply because there exists such a thing as the practice as measurement. A whole language game then can be judged by how authentic it is, which is to say, how successful it is at sustaining a form of life.

This notion of truth as authenticity holds since all truth claims are made linguistically and are, therefore, governed by rules of grammar which, in turn, are governed by forms of life. According to Wittgenstein, disagreements between people arise not over questions regarding the correct use of rules but over the practices to which they are meant to relate. “Disputes do not break out ... over the question whether a rule has been obeyed or not. ... but in forms of life.” This issue of disputes will be discussed further below with regard to Lindbeck’s ecumenical intentions. We shall now turn to a discussion of how the preceding Wittgensteinian ideas are appropriated by Lindbeck.

From what has been shown of Wittgenstein’s position on truth and its rootedness in language, it should not be surprising that it appears in the work of theologians and ethicists. These are people who deal regularly with questions of truth and ‘forms of life.’ Lindbeck is one of these theologians who may have taken his cue from Wittgenstein’s identification of “Theology as grammar.” In any case, his indebtedness is clear. Here, we shall see that Lindbeck’s idea of “intrasystematic truth” owes to Wittgenstein’s treatment of truth as authenticity. In addition, some comments will be made about the role this plays in the former’s ecumenical interests.

**Truth for Lindbeck**

In his development of the cultural-linguistic theory of religion and doctrine, Lindbeck picks up on the elements in Wittgenstein sketched above. Specifically, he takes religions to be whole language games wherein doctrines are the rules or grammar and religious practices correspond to forms of life. In the same way that Wittgenstein asserted that grammar serves forms of life in languages, so Lindbeck maintains that doctrines serve religious practices. He notes that, “just as a language (or ‘language game,’ to use Wittgenstein’s phrase) is correlated with a form of life ... a religion’s doctrines ... are integrally related to the rituals it practices.” We can summarize the correlations in the following way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locus:</th>
<th>Wittgenstein</th>
<th>Lindbeck</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rules:</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition:</td>
<td>Forms of life</td>
<td>Religious practices</td>
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This relationship goes on to serve Lindbeck’s discussion of truth. Given the Wittgensteinian influence, it is not surprising that he discusses truth primarily in terms of
authenticity. In general, Lindbeck maintains that a proposition is true “to the extent that its objectivities are interiorized and exercised by groups and individuals in such a way as to conform them in some measure in the various dimensions of their existence to the ultimate reality and goodness that lies at the heart of things.”

He then goes on to distinguish between several kinds of truth which comprise this but his most adequate and extensive treatment belongs to so-called “intrasystematic truth.”

As noted above, Lindbeck’s idea of intrasystematic truth coincides with Wittgenstein’s truth as authenticity. Lindbeck also calls this “truth of coherence.” The behavior of the speaker must cohere with what is spoken. Notice the indebtedness to Wittgenstein in Lindbeck’s definition:

Utterances are intrasystematically true when they cohere with the total relevant context, which, in the case of a religion when viewed in cultural-linguistic terms, is not only other utterances but also the correlative forms of life.

Coherence “with the total relevant context” is but another way of making the Wittgensteinian point regarding languages functioning with language games. Lindbeck’s famous example of a statement which is intrasystematically false is a crusader whose battle cry, “Christus est Dominus,” is used to sanction the slaying of infidels. However, the same utterance may be intrasystematically true when used under different circumstances. In other words, insofar as an utterance follows the rules of grammar of the language game, it has this kind of truth.

It is perhaps no great feat to illustrate Lindbeck’s use of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Afterall, the index of The Nature of Doarine has Wittgenstein ranking third among the most referenced people in the book. This is hardly surprising since the book is primarily a work of methodology and not theology. However, the present investigation would be incomplete without a look at how Lindbeck intends his use of Wittgenstein to be useful for theology.

It is worth addressing the issue of relativism at this point because some have questioned the usefulness of Wittgenstein for theologians on these grounds. Does Lindbeck’s appropriation of Wittgenstein’s account of truth suggest that truth is relative? And, if so, what is the nature of that relativism? The easy answer, of course, is that an account of truth which depends on the internal consistency of a language system (however conceived) necessarily must admit to a certain degree of relativism. Indeed, such an account would seem to lead to so-called absolute (or extreme) relativism which, apart from being a self-referentially incoherent concept, would mean that any given language game lacks the resources to adjudicate its claim to truth relative to another language game. That this kind of relativism seems to be inevitable rests on the assumption that the process of adjudication occurs on a theoretical level, that is, abstracted from the embodiment of a particular language. For Wittgenstein, however, adjudication is but another practice whereby a form of life is enfleshed meaning that the idea of neutral ground is illusory.

This may appear to be a great dodge of the question of relativism or at best an approach which allows us to have it both ways, namely, that Wittgenstein’s account leads to relativism but what is typically meant by relativism is an impossibility. However, for
Lindbeck, this is precisely the point where his account of religious truth becomes thickest. The very fact that the truth of a religion is bound up with the practices of those who confess that religion is to begin to say more about the truth of that religion than ostensibly abstract truth-claims ever could.

**LINDBECK ON ECUMENISM**

Lindbeck begins his book by suggesting that what is new about the cultural-linguistic theory he proposes is that "this conceptualization is fruitful for theology and ecumenism." The rest of the book is a variety of arguments for and demonstrations of this claim. He does not actually show that his theory is useful for theology and ecumenism as separate points of contention. Rather, he shows that ecumenism is aided by doing and understanding theology according to his theory.

According to Lindbeck, doctrines as rules are best understood as serving a regulative function rather than a propositional function. It is true that they have some propositional force but only as they express propositions which are based on and condition behavior in a given context. The doctrine itself is not the proposition but the contextually determined expression of it. This means that changing contexts demand that doctrines be reformulated according to the same underlying propositions. If this can be done in a way which produces equivalent results, the new doctrine can be said to be true to the old one. Therefore, "One and the same proposition can be expressed in a variety of sentences employing a variety of conceptualities." Lindbeck notes that Athanasius knew this to be the case: "For him, to accept the doctrine [the Nicean Christologyl meant to agree to speak a certain way."

Notice how this way of understanding doctrine follows from Lindbeck's notion of intrasystematic truth and Wittgenstein's truth as authenticity. If the primary way of understanding a statement's meaning (as both these ideas of truth do) is in terms of its use, then when contention arises between seemingly opposed doctrines, the discussion must include references to the corresponding contexts. We have seen that Wittgenstein understands that, "Disputes do not break out over the question whether a rule has been obeyed or not... but in forms of life."

Lindbeck is right to claim that this approach holds promise for ecumenism. "Thus oppositions between rules [i.e. doctrines] can in some cases be resolved, not by altering one or both of them, but by specifying when or where they apply, or by stipulating which of the competing directives takes precedence." So the idea that intrasystematic truth is partially contingent on the corresponding forms of life not only is fodder for an ethicist ("practice what you preach") but also clarifies the task of the theologian. He or she must distinguish between "doctrine and formulation, between content and form" in order to identify what can be expressed differently in different contexts while still remaining truthful. Lindbeck hopes that along the way, this approach to theology will encourage worthwhile dialogue.

**CONCLUSION**

George Lindbeck's highly influential treatment of what might constitute a "postliberal" method for theology depends significantly on the work of perhaps the first post-modern
philosopher. The preceding discussion has been an attempt to explore the meaning of Wittgenstein’s account of truth as authenticity and its relationship to Lindbeck’s concept of intrasystematic truth in his book, The Nature of Doctrine. In addition, it has been shown how this relationship can be traced directly to Lindbeck’s interest in ecumenicism.

NOTES
2. Wittgenstein and Lindbeck have far more to say regarding truth than is taken up here. I have tried to focus on where they overlap. Furthermore, Wittgenstein’s influence on Lindbeck extends wider than simply to the issue of truth (e.g. on p. 11, Lindbeck attributes the overall structure of his argument to Wittgenstein).
4. Ibid.
5. In Wittgenstein’s words: “But what is the meaning of the word ‘five’? No such thing was in question here, only how the word ‘five’ is used.” Ibid.
6. Ibid., §3.
7. See Wittgenstein’s treatment of the names of people in Ibid., §40.
8. Ibid.
12. The phrase “truth as authenticity” is my way of encapsulating Wittgenstein’s account of truth. I use it with some reservation because it might be mistaken to underwrite the very kind of fitting-with-reality notion that he explicitly rejects. What is authentic is the successful deployment of the language game, not objects or propositions in themselves.
13. Ibid., §240-241.
14. Ibid., §373. This is Wittgenstein’s only reference to theology as such in Philosophical Investigations. For a treatment of this reference, see Fergus Kerr, Theology After Wittgenstein (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), ch. 7.
16. Ibid., 51.
17. Ibid., 64.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 93.
23. Ibid., 94.
26. I do not intend to imply that the separation between theology and ethics is a good one. Indeed, as Lindbeck would have it, such a separation is well-nigh impossible.
27. Ibid., 92.