

## LONERGAN'S METHOD IN THEOLOGY AND TODAY'S PROBLEMS: ONE VIEW

The first thing to be said about Father Lonergan's *Method in Theology* is that it is an enormous work of systematizing that has brought a vast amount of material together in his customary orderly fashion and this makes it a great blessing to theologians. The second thing I have to say is that it is a gold-mine of insights, which many of us will be working for a long time. The third is that it is an effort at synthesis in an area that hasn't been treated well in our theology before, and this gives it a special attractiveness all its own.

But my role on this program is more that of a devil's advocate—to raise some questions that puzzle me after reading Lonergan's book. I approach the task with a certain amount of reserve, for the writing is dense at times, as many of you know, and the book itself warns us to re-examine *our own* thinking for mistakes when we think we have found something unintelligible in the work of another theologian; besides that, I've never seen a work attempting to do exactly what he does here, so there is nothing to which to compare it. But I will raise a number of questions or problems and comment on each of them briefly.

First of all the book frequently draws a distinction between methodology and theology; in this book, the author says that he is working as a methodologist, not a theologian—but it is hard for me to see how this distinction between method and (presumably) content of theology can be maintained. In the chapter dealing with development of doctrine in particular, the data used to establish a method are almost all theological rather than psychological. The author is functioning as a theologian, and it could hardly be otherwise, but what has become of the distinction?

Secondly, a related question is whether it is possible to construct a valid theological method for a Catholic theologian while abstracting from the Christian nature of revelation. Father Lonergan seems to me to have tried to do this. His descriptions of the intellectual, moral and religious conversions that are critical for the operation of his method

are in terms that he feels apply well beyond Christianity. He lays emphasis on seven features that are common to all the world's great religions. He has provided an anthropological or psychological (rather than theological) explanation of what is involved in conversion. But Rahner has raised for us the questions of whether we can have a genuine anthropology without Christology, and whether the tract on God can rightly be studied by a Christian except through the doctrine of the Trinity. This book seems to be proceeding as if we can do both, and I am not sure this is the proper approach. Can you put together a sound theological method—for men living in this world—on an a-Christian or a pre-Christian basis?

My third problem is less important. Father Lonergan lays great stress on the need for a new method in theology that will be psychological rather than directly metaphysical, because the classicist theology of the past will no longer work. I am not sure whether he is saying that the older theology is invalid or that it is simply irrelevant, but at least he is saying that its day has passed. I have one objection and one question.

Even though it may be regarded as axiomatic in our day that the so-called classicist theology of the past was closed to development, except in a very narrow sense, the point is anything but clear to me. Many, including Lonergan, find it easy to follow Rahner in describing a *Denzinger theologie* that was an uncritical rattling off of texts, but this is not my memory of how these texts were used by the theologians of a generation ago. It is easy to write off the medieval notion of sanctifying grace as static and not dynamic, but is this really true when the question of whether man could love God above all things loomed so large in that period, and when St. Thomas said there was no growth in grace without a corresponding act of love? There was and is more flexibility in the classicist system than would be suspected from current descriptions of it.

So much for the objection. My question is this: is Lonergan's method historically conditioned? Is it a response to the needs of our own day, or rather the embodiment of new insights that will be of perennial value? He never makes this clear. If it is historically conditioned, how long is it likely to last, in an age of almost unbelievably rapid changes? Five years? Twenty-five? One hundred? Is

the swing away from metaphysics to a stress on experience that looms so important in his work here to stay—and if it is not, might we expect the system he has described here to survive a swing back or a swing in another direction?

My fourth problem is more important. Father Lonergan deals with the historical nature of doctrine and the possibilities of pluralism and of development in Chapter 12, and he describes the elements in these questions well. My difficulty is that his method seems to become obscure at the very point where these matters become a real problem: i.e. what are we to retain as permanent and necessary if we are to maintain unity in faith? He speaks of a transcultural element in doctrine, of a permanence of meaning rather than of formulas, of a history that will assess the legitimacy of developments—but he leaves me wondering what the transcultural element is (is it a process?—a person?—a message?—a life?—a combination of these?). He leaves me wondering how the permanent meaning is related to concepts and formulas. He leaves me wondering what the makeup or methods of an evaluational history that would do the job he lines up for it here really are. It may be unfair to blame him for not answering questions that others have not succeeded in answering—but I would have been happier if either the reality of these problems and their unsolved nature or else the answers to them had been made clearer in the text.

There is a fifth and related problem for me. At times, Father Lonergan seems to propose that a theologian use the touchstone of his own authenticity as the criterion for whether a theological position is to be accepted or not. (He makes a distinction between theological doctrines and Church doctrines, and apparently intends to apply this criterion to the former and not the latter, although he doesn't say this in so many words.) I have two objections. First, I find the distinction between theological doctrines and Church doctrines obscure unless it refers to defined doctrines and those which are not defined, and I do not believe that this is what Lonergan intends here. It is also a distinction that has to be treated cautiously, if we are not to wind up with an exaggerated cleavage between faith and theology, as well as between theologians and a teaching role in the Church. Second, the touchstone of an individual's authenticity doesn't seem to me to be the criterion for accepting a theological doctrine unless this authenticity is

more clearly related to the belief of the rest of the Christian community than it seems to be here. An individual's sincere faith may be a good guiding norm for his own conscience, but it isn't a sound way to provide a guarantee of truth to the rest of us. Unless I misunderstand Lonergan badly, this stress on individual witness as contrasted to community witness is a critical weak spot in the whole presentation.

My last and greatest difficulty with Father Lonergan's method is that several things which seem to me to be important to theological method in our day are left out, or else I have missed them: (a) The relationship of Catholic theology to the plan of salvation and to the service of the Church. The functional role of theology has a profound effect on its nature, its history, its content and its methodology; if this is not seriously considered, we wind up dealing with an abstraction. (b) The role of the life of the Church in development of doctrine. The influence that changes and events on the level of what Lonergan would describe as "undifferentiated consciousness" have on development of doctrine has been ignored in the past and it is still not well understood, but it is often of greater significance than theological speculation—and it is often something we must react to rather than plan and control. (c) The nature and the extent of the Catholic theologian's dependence on the work of others and on the faith-experience of the Catholic community. Lonergan may have decided that these matters fell beyond the scope of his work here, but it seems to me that they should have been included to enrich a work that is a valuable source for theologians.

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