

## A RESPONSE (I) TO BERNARD LONERGAN

From the opening lines of his paper, *Theology and Praxis*, the reader has the initial impression that Professor Lonergan is going to bring his considerable acumen to bear upon the relationship between theology and the continued oppression of individuals because of race, sex or ethnicity. Having benefited from his work in the field of systematics and most of all from his pioneering efforts in methodology, the reader is hopeful of learning how Lonergan himself might relate, for example, the functional specialities of Dialectic and Communication or his protean notion of conversion to liberation theology and what criterion he would establish for evaluating this new and important literature. However, he quickly dispels that expectation by stating that liberation theologies are instances of praxis in the sense of practicality. In them theology has been converted into a tool for a praiseworthy end. And it is not that kind of praxis that he wishes to address.

Instead he wishes to retrieve a more ancient notion of the word praxis and to show its relationship to the growth of the theologian. Using praxis to mean the conduct and doing that results from free choices and the personal development of the theologian, he, on one hand, engages Bernhard Welte on the need for intellectual conversion if one is to grasp that the Nicene decree is dynamic and hence not static or an instance of Heidegger's forgetfulness of being, and, on the other hand, he gives a favorable account of Eric Voegelin's use of the question of the meaning of life and death as symbols that thrust one into the world of interiority.

In the course of the paper Lonergan asks rhetorically: are dogmas caught in the forgetfulness of being? and answers that that will depend on the theologian interpreting the dogmas. And he later notes that it is not easy to defend mere repetition of doctrinal formulas that are not understood. It is these comments that I would like to comment upon in the light of the writings of Ewert Cousins. But first please allow me a brief excursus.

### 1. EXCURSUS: PRACTICAL PRAXIS AND MORAL CONVERSION

While I find Lonergan's now familiar distinction between religion and theology to be generally helpful, I find the use of the word theology in the opening paragraph of his paper to be too narrowly applied to the speculative theology of the academy. And such a theology becomes praxis only when quite secondarily it is

used as a tool to advance some worthwhile value. It would, in my opinion, be more helpful to remain aware of what David Tracy has termed the several conversation partners of theology: the academy, the ecclesial tradition, and the sociocultural movements of the day. The theologian in dialogue with the social context does not render his *theoria* into *praxis* by lending his prestige or symbols to humanitarian causes. Theology becomes praxis when the theologian himself is morally converted and he grasps the necessary move from words to deeds. Ricoeur's hermeneutic of suspicion may be employed to uncover failures in moral as well as intellectual conversion in the personal development of the theologian. In a resume of the four levels of consciousness in the existential subject, Lonergan uses the symbolic phrase "inner light." It is the inner light that keeps raising questions of what, why, how, what for, until insight occurs. It is the inner light that demands sufficient reason before consent. It is the deliberation prompted by the inner light that nudges one beyond the self-centered question "What's in it for me?" to the question of the morally-converted subject "Is it really and truly worthwhile?" What is more, the inner light bathes one in the unrest of an uneasy conscience if there is no consistency between one's knowing and doing. I suggest that the inner light or Lonergan's self-assembling structure of human consciousness is an obvious point of departure for theological praxis as practical. For just as the theologian *qua* theologian has need to examine the implications of and evidences for religious and intellectual conversion, so also he examines the implications and evidences for moral conversion, regardless of whether or not he or she is so converted. While Lonergan usually refers to moral conversion as an individual phenomenon, it is certainly hoped for on a collective and communal scale as well. Hence what James Cone, Gustavo Gutierrez and Mary Daly are saying about praxis is not unrelated to Lonergan's moral conversion. Because of its inescapable connection with moral conversion as Lonergan has eloquently described it, liberation theology, for example, becomes praxis both in the sense of one's consciously responsible conduct and in the sense of penetrating the intrinsic relationship between the Christian symbol system and the transformation of human society into a prefiguring of the kingdom.

## 2. DOCTRINE AND MODELS

Now let us return to the question of doctrine. Lonergan clearly does not wish dogmas to be caught in the forgetfulness of being. He suggests that if the theologian interpreting them is not a

perceptualist and habitually dwells in the world mediated by meaning and motivated by values they will not be. Nor does he wish them to be repeated by rote with no real meaning. He states: "Personally I should urge that in each case one inquire whether the old issue still has a real import and, if it has, a suitable expression for that import be found." This suggestion, taken on face value, would seem to imply that doctrines defined in one context may indeed be old issues with no real import in a later context. I suspect that a great many theologians would agree with this general statement. The dispute would center on the question of which doctrines are obsolete.

One way of implementing Lonergan's suggestion would be the notion of models as worked out by Ewert Cousins. Cousins' understanding of model is very different from the somewhat formal and generic ideas of model or ideal type found in *Method in Theology*.<sup>1</sup> In the manner of Ian Ramsey, Cousins argues that in the present multi-dimensional context the introduction of the concept of model into theology will break the illusion that we are actually encompassing the infinite within the limited structures of our language. Hence theological concepts and symbols will not become idols and theology will be able to embrace variety and development in a manner not unlike science, which is often explicit in its use of models. I know that the mere mention of the term model can open up a Pandora's box because the idea itself is open to multiple interpretations.

In my remaining remarks I mean only to explore Cousins' helpful distinction between "experiential" and "expressive" models and to show its relevance to Lonergan's comment about the need to find suitable contemporary expressions for old issues if indeed they are of present importance. In Cousins' view we must deal with two sets of models. The first often neglected set of models explores the structures and forms of originating religious experience with particular sensitivity to the complex subjective element and therefore the necessary variety of these models. These originating experiences are prior to images, symbols, words, narratives or conceptualizations. The second level of models are expressive models. They are the translation of the profound religious experience into words, concepts and symbols. These would include Biblical imagery, the creeds of the early councils as well as speculative theological systems. Cousins uses the word model for both the experiential and the expressive level in

<sup>1</sup> See B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), pp. 284-88.

order to call attention to the reality of pluriformity on both levels. It is not a matter of there having been one uniform religious experience in the encounter with Jesus and that variety has been introduced subsequently in the effort to give expression to the one experience. This idea calls into question Lonergan's recurrent suggestion that because of the diverse differentiation of consciousness the basic pluralism is not one of doctrine but of communication. It also makes it apparent that it is precisely when expressive models are elaborated in complete disengagement from their originating experience that there is the danger of rotteness, static logic and the "forgetfulness of being."

On the whole I would suggest that further development of Cousins' basic idea would be most useful in the re-examination of the "old issues" and the translation of their vital worth into the present context. However, it would not result in a simple Tillichian methodology of correlation. For the investigation would surely yield that some of the classic expressive models of the Christian symbol system seem to enshrine responses to questions that are of no compelling urgency to contemporary humankind. This in turn opens the immense question that Lonergan touches on indirectly when he cites Voegelin's distinction between revelation and information. Was the originating religious experience (experiential model) the disclosure of some information (in a quasi-propositional sense) about ultimate reality that was not in the world prior to the Christ event? And is it this "information" that is enshrined in the "old issues?" And if so, must these interpretations (expressive models) of that foundational revelatory experience be announced anew in every context without regard to their existential meaningfulness because they mediate the broad lines of common meaning that constitutes the Christian community's self-concept? Obviously because of the very different life worlds of the bishops, the parish priests, the people in the pews, the university and the church theologians, this enormous question produces a range of responses that embraces all five of the models for theology (now used in another sense) set forth in Tracy's *Blessed Rage for Order*.

In the light of the above we can see a particular need for a more expanded reflection on theological praxis than Professor Lonergan has given us today. For the praxis that is needed for the present and the future is more than the transformation of theory into a useful tool for a praiseworthy end and more even than intellectual conversion. It will require religious, theistic, Christian, ecclesial and

moral conversion as well.<sup>2</sup> For the theologians who shape the Church to come may well be called upon to be somewhat saintly as well as wise and, as Rahner notes, in the present ferment their holiness will not be measured by orthodoxy but by orthopraxis.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>To Lonergan's religious, intellectual and moral conversion, I would add theistic conversion since religious conversion as I wish to understand it need not be explicitly theistic. I would further add Christian conversion, which explicates Jesus exalted as the Christ as the focal symbol, and ecclesial conversion which locates the community of common meaning.

<sup>3</sup>See K. Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (New York, Seabury Press), pp. 74-5.