

A RESPONSE (II) TO BERNARD LONERGAN

In reading Bernard Lonergan's reflections on theology and praxis, a passage written 134 years ago came to mind. It is very apropos, not only of this essay, but of Lonergan's continuing spirit of inquiry:

The reform of consciousness consists only in making the world knowingly aware of its own consciousness, in awakening it out of its dream about itself, in explaining to it the meaning of its own actions. Our whole object can only be . . . to give religious and philosophical questions the form corresponding to man's own emergent self-consciousness. . . . It will become evident that it is not a question of drawing a great mental dividing line between past and future, but of realizing the thoughts of the past. It will then ultimately be discovered that mankind does not set out about a new task, but realizes in a knowingly conscious way its age-old task.¹

These words of Karl Marx, written in 1843, have a much deeper meaning when related to the work of Bernard Lonergan in 1977 than the young Marx himself intended. Too much has happened in the intervening years. We know now—in a way Marx or others could not know—the terrible ambiguities of waking mankind from its dreams, of embarking on an emancipatory "turn to the subject" in order to realize in a knowingly conscious way mankind's age-old task. Such a massive project of liberation is fraught with all the risks so vividly symbolized in the Greek and biblical narratives of pull and counter-pull. The ascent from the caverns of the psyche, from the immaturity of unknowing consciousness, can be half-hearted and truncated. Then, with all the hubris of a Prometheus unbound, a half-enlightened humankind can put the products (*poiēsis*, *technē*) of its new knowledge at the service of its old unconverted and unrepentant conduct (*praxis*). The nightmares of a truncated enlightenment can be terrifying indeed. Has any other seventy-seven year period in human history witnessed a more

¹K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 144. The above is my own translation of the original in Marx/Engels, *Werke* (Berlin, 1956), vol. I, p. 346. To distinguish what Marx refers to as the "consciousness of consciousness" from immediate consciousness, I have translated the former as "knowingly conscious." In the above passage Marx follows Feuerbach in advocating a reform of consciousness that would reduce dogmas to a materialistic infrastructure. In the context of the present discussion, Marx is a transitional thinker between the second and third enlightenment. Similar to Freud, Marx tended to articulate his breakthrough into a new enlightenment in terms of a second enlightenment trust in technique; cf. D. Böhler, *Metakritik der Marx'schen Ideologiekritik: Prolegomenon zu einer reflektierten Ideologiekritik und 'Theorie-Praxis-Vermittlung'* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971).

sweeping destruction of human life by human beings than that occurring in our "enlightened and modern" twentieth century?²

Faced with these ambiguities of life and death, more timid minds have recoiled from the exigencies of an enlightening turn toward the subject, retreating from its critical tasks back into the uneasy security of what Ricoeur calls first naiveté. The merit of Lonergan's work is its uncompromising dedication to thinking through enlightenment by elaborating criteria of meaning, value and action in terms of the praxis of human self-appropriation. Only a thorough turn to the subject enlightens those depths of human selfhood where mystery beckons us towards ultimate transcendence. In this context I should like briefly to discuss Lonergan's notion of theology as praxis, and then offer some comments on the final questions of his essay.

THEOLOGY AS PRAXIS

In order to situate the import of Lonergan's essay I have found it helpful to distinguish three reforms of consciousness or enlightenments which have successively given priority first to theory, then to technique, and finally to praxis. Omitting a detailed analysis of these three enlightenments, I shall sketch their different understandings of church doctrine.

1. *The Classical Theoretic Enlightenment* occurred in the Greek philosophical and Medieval theological shifts toward theory. The meaning and value of technical production (*poiēsis*, *technē*) and human conduct (*praxis*) were subordinated to theory. Lonergan mentions how Aristotle's notion of epistemic science influenced the Schoolmen's ideal of theory. Of at least equal importance was the patristic reception of Middle and Neoplatonic notions of a hierarchy of being attained preeminently through the *theoria* of contemplative wisdom.³ This provided a paradigm theoretically projecting and reflecting the hierarchical order in the material universe, society, and the Church.⁴ Theology as a

²An adequate answer to this question awaits large scale empirical and statistical research. Meanwhile, cf. G. Eliot, *Twentieth Century Book of the Dead* (New York: Scribner, 1972); M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972); and R. Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

³Cf. L.-B. Geiger, *La participation dans la philosophie de S. Thomas d' Aquin* (Paris: Cerf, 1953); C. V. Heris, *Le Gouvernement divin* (Paris: Cerf, 1959); J. Friedrichs, *Die Theologie als spekulative und praktische Wissenschaft nach Bonaventura und Thomas v. Aquin* (Bonn: Ludwig, 1940).

⁴Cf. H. B. Parkes, *The Divine Order* (New York: Knopf, 1969); and J. H. Wright, *The Order of the Universe in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1957).

speculative and practical science, subaltern to the vision of God as First Truth, hierarchically ordered the multiplicity of nature and human conduct within the framework of a creative *exitus* and redemptive *reditus* to that Truth.

Church doctrines were understood as hierarchically revealed truths. Thus, for Aquinas, the central Trinitarian and Christological mysteries found in Scripture and church dogmas were known by all the major figures in pre-Judaic and Old Testament times, while they had to veil those mysteries in figurative language for the less wise people (*minores*) of the time.⁵ Their superior knowledge was due to their hierarchical preeminence in the redemptive return of all things to God. Similarly with *prudencia* or the right order of human conduct; although as a virtue prudence was needed by every rational human being, since that rationality had hierarchical connotations, prudence was actively present in the prince as ruler and passively present in his subjects as ruled.⁶

As Lonergan has indicated, a static decadence set in once the perceptualism and logical pedantry of fourteenth-century scholasticism lost sight of the negative and heuristic elements in the medieval notion of ontological participation. Nominalism, the Reformation, and succeeding crises, set the stage for an authoritarian practice of the hierarchical magisterium scarcely attentive to the *sensus fidelium*. Catholic manual theology was, in the limit, to become subaltern more to papal pronouncements than to God as First Truth.⁷

2. *The Modern Technical Enlightenment* goes back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when revolutions in the methods of the natural sciences replaced the primacy of classical theory. Theory and human conduct increasingly came under the egis of technique as the methods of the natural sciences were extended into the human and historical sciences. This scientific revolution (along with a variety of political revolutions) were absorbed by an industrial revolution during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸ Empirical methods of research immensely in-

⁵Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 2, 6-8.

⁶*Ibid.*, II-II, 47, 12.

⁷Cf. Max Seckler, "Die Theologie als kirchliche Wissenschaft nach Pius XII und Paul VI," in *Tübinger Theologische Quartalschrift* 149 (1969), 209-34. Also, T. Howland Sanks, *Authority in the Church: A Study in Changing Paradigms* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974) and Avery Dulles, "Presidential Address: The Theologian and the Magisterium," in *CTSA Proceedings* 31 (1976), 235-46.

⁸Cf. J. Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Knopf, 1964); B. Barnes (ed.), *Sociology of Science* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1972); and D. F. Noble, *America by Design* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

creased our knowledge of the historical background and composition of biblical narratives and church doctrines.

But these methods were techniques that studied such narratives or doctrines as *products*, as complexes of information, that could be decoded irrespective of any religious stance of the interpreter. The gap between intelligence and religious assent widened as a succession of psychological, sociological, and historical-critical interpretations dissected church doctrines as merely human, culturally conditioned products, abstracted from any living relationship with converted religious conduct or praxis. To be sure, there wasn't much of the latter visible in theological or hierarchical circles, as spirituality retreated into a private pietism. Secularism spread and, coupled with the industrial revolution, has challenged a whole series of religious traditions besides Christianity. A beleaguered Catholicism condemned all this as modernism, even though its own trusted theologians were treating church doctrines as products (albeit divinely revealed products) applying to revelation the logical techniques of formal, virtual, explicit, and implicit predication or deduction.⁹ Little by little the positive gains of the modern technical enlightenment are being assimilated into all aspects of Catholic thought and practice. Perhaps Vatican II is the outstanding example of how enriching that assimilation can be.¹⁰

3. *The Contemporary Praxis Enlightenment* has its origins in the nineteenth-century attempts to elaborate methods for the human sciences distinct from those of the natural sciences. These efforts criticized the value-free pretensions of the modern technical enlightenment. The ultimate arbiter amid conflicting theories and techniques can only be found in praxis as specifically human, conscious conduct. Far from belittling the empirical methods of the previous enlightenment, or the classical achievements of the first enlightenment, it attempts to ground them in the related and recurrent operations of social, intellectual, moral, and religious performance or praxis. It seeks to discern their positive and negative elements in terms of norms inherent in that praxis.

Church doctrines are not seen as only hierarchically revealed truths, nor simply as sociocultural products, but primarily as, in

⁹Cf. W. Schulz, *Dogmenentwicklung als Problem der Geschichtlichkeit der Wahrheitserkenntnis* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1969), pp. 71-124.

¹⁰On the limits of Vatican II and how it calls for a new praxis enlightenment, cf. Andrew Greeley, *The New Agenda* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), and Gregory Baum, "The Impact of Sociology on Catholic Theology," in *CTSA Proceedings* 30 (1975), 1-29.

Lonergan's words, expressing "the set of meanings and values that inform individual and collective Christian living."¹¹ Theology ceases being a queen in an ivory tower and becomes a critical co-worker with other sciences, scholarly disciplines, pastoral reflections, and spiritual ministries. Together they seek to disclose and transform the concrete personal, communal, social, political, and cultural life-forms within which Christians live out, or fail to live out, the meanings and values of their traditions. The objectivity of the truth of church doctrine is conditioned by the self-transcending response of genuine Christian praxis.¹²

Lonergan's essay is a masterful, if short, example of the dialectical and foundational significance of this contemporary theologizing. He takes up the somewhat divergent views on church doctrine, and specifically Nicea, held by Professors Welte and Voegelin. He indicates the similarities of their interests in the event languages of biblical narrative and classical Greek texts. These he interprets as dynamic descriptions of the praxis of conversion and repentance. Their criticisms of the supposedly static quality of doctrine, Lonergan sees as somewhat misplaced. Rather than treating Nicea as a product, Lonergan adverts to differentiations of consciousness, which are of central interest to Welte and Voegelin. Certainly the conduct of any council is not a static, but a dynamic event. Moreover, as Lonergan intimates, the liturgical and spiritual receptions of Nicea were often dynamically related to ongoing processes of religious and intellectual conversion. The static counterpositions Lonergan finds in the naive perceptualism and logicism of decadent scholasticism. As theologians, Lonergan reminds us, we cannot skirt the crucial issues of our own personal development or lack thereof.

My only criticism here is the compliment that I would have liked Lonergan to go on and relate that personal praxis to social and political praxis. Aristotle mentions how practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) not only should guide personal conduct (*praxis*), but also communal economy (*oikonomia*) and politics.¹³ Lonergan's own analysis of the dynamic structure of the human good correlates social, communal, and personal development.¹⁴ And in outlining the collaboration of theology with other sciences and disci-

¹¹Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), p. 311.

¹²On the notion of contingent predication where the truth of any statement is conditioned by historical events, cf. Lonergan, *De Constitutione Christi Ontologica et Psychologica* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1961), pp. 61-6.

¹³Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 8, 1142^a.

¹⁴*Method in Theology*, pp. 27-55.

plines, Lonergan indicates how a method, paralleling the method of functional specialization, can be worked out. Corresponding to doctrines there is policy making, and to systematics, planning. The overall

aim of such integration is to generate well-informed and continuously revised policies and plans for promoting good and undoing evil both in the church and in human society generally. Needless to say, such integrated studies will have to occur on many levels, local, regional, national, international.¹⁵

Such a vision intimates how the contemporary praxis enlightenment has scarcely begun.

But many theologians today are developing the implications and categories of this new enlightenment. Relevant to Lonergan's discussion of Nicea, there are Professor Peterson's studies on how the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines expressed a Christian spirituality at odds with the centralizing ambitions of Roman imperial political authority.¹⁶ Much more work needs to be done. We have to know if, and how, church doctrines of the past brought Christian living critically to bear on the economic, social, and political conditions of their times. Unlike the historical analyses under the egis of second enlightenment techniques, such studies would not simply reduce those doctrines to the plausibility structures of their historical context. Instead they would indicate if, and how, the doctrines expressed and promoted a praxis critical of such structures in so far as these hindered human intellectual, moral, or religious development.

Regarding the present, there are numerous theologians and many institutes or research centers engaged in interdisciplinary collaboration with a wide spectrum of sciences and social movements. At the beginning of his essay, Lonergan referred to conspicuous examples of some of these developments in terms of Latin American, black, and feminine liberation theologies. Sexism, racism, and economic exploitation cannot be adequately counteracted within the Church and society at large by pious or indignant moralisms, nor by cleverly conceived techniques; they require profound conversions of personal, social, economic and political conduct. As the manifold dialectics within churches and societies continue, theologians would do well to collaborate in an

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 365ff.

¹⁶Cf. E. Peterson, "Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem," and "Christus als Imperator" in his *Theologische Traktate* (Munich: Kösel, 1951), pp. 45-147, 150-64; also F. Fiorenza, "Critical Social Theory and Christology," in *CTSA Proceedings* 30 (1975), 63-110.

interdisciplinary way to "generate well-informed and continuously revised policies and plans" to guide the transformative actions which will bring about the institutional and systemic changes such conversions demand. Theology as praxis, like creativity, is always more of a challenge than an achievement.

SALVATION AND LIBERATION

At the end of his essay, Lonergan asked if the Nicean affirmations that we are saved by God become man in Christ makes any difference to our praxis today. I would not presume to give an adequate answer in so short a time. Indeed, the real answer will be given by those profoundly living such mysteries in their transformative action in our world. In the context of the above distinctions between the second and third enlightenments, I would call your attention to Lonergan's own studies on the law of the Cross, and Johann B. Metz's study on redemption and emancipation.¹⁷ If the first enlightenment interacted with hierarchically-structured sacral cultures, the second enlightenment has led to bureaucratically-structured secularist cultures. Any Christology or Soteriology today must *not* be elaborated in an uncritical conformity with either.

Ever since the second enlightenment removed the presence of God as *Deus Salvator* and placed the world squarely on the shoulders of humankind as *Homo Emancipator*, human identity has been built on the success stories of deeds well done, of economic expansion, of scientific and technological progress, of political victories. Human history became a success story—as it always becomes when religious repentance is absent or minimal. The success of mathematics and the natural sciences meant their methods became the canon of all exact knowledge for the human sciences—what could not be quantified somehow lacked meaning. The success of technology meant that the machine became the model of rational order and process—what could not be programmed somehow should not exist. Human sciences began to see humanity as made in the image of its own mechanized creations. Organic and psychic processes were no more than highly complex physico-mechanical events. The mind and consciousness were dismissed as illusory, sooner rather than later to be mapped out in

¹⁷Cf. W. Loewe, "Lonergan and the Law of the Cross," in *Anglican Theological Review* 59 (April, 1977), 162-74; also J. B. Metz, "Erlösung und Emanzipation," in L. Scheffczyk (ed.), *Erlösung und Emanzipation* (Freiburg: Herder, 1973), pp. 122-40.

cybernetic, bio-computer input-output schemata. Work was reduced to assembly line regulated productivity. Interpersonal relations became techniques of successful role playing. Neighborhood values took a back seat to the demands of mobility. The natural environment became a resource reservoir, and junk yard, for an expanding industrial megamachine. In short, success oriented human identity has increasingly demanded the absorption of human subjectivity into a mechanistic objectivity.

Yet, this modern secularist identity has had its dark side. The irrelevance of God for secularist autonomy meant that God was no longer around to blame for failure and suffering. The fragile identity of success had to be protected against negative forces such as finitude, illness, suffering, destruction, failure, guilt, and death. Humans alone were responsible for the world. They could no longer experience their identity in a gifted, redeeming love. So they set about unknowingly constructing elaborate defense mechanisms to exonerate themselves from the concrete history of suffering. Conservatives would try to atrophy past successful histories, immunizing the status quo against its critics by the judicious use of legal, economic, humanitarian, and armed force. Liberals would make "nature" the scapegoat for the history of suffering: human failures are ascribed to an unenlightened past, and will be absolved by the advance of science, technology, education, and therapy. Marxists would have no difficulty in attributing the history of suffering to those enemies of the proletariat who still have power, and so impede the successful march towards a party-planned utopia. Finally, such defense mechanisms find their apotheosis in those advocates of technocracy, who see in a mechanistic human identity an exonerating escape from human responsibility. Just as some second enlightenment theodicies found the final solution to the problem of God's existence in the face of human suffering by denying that God exists, so a contemporary "anthropodicy," faced with suffering, proclaims the "end of man" in the advent of a post-historic era beyond freedom and dignity. Technique, as Jacques Ellul argues, becomes supreme, only to be confronted with Walter Benjamin's question: "Is it progress when cannibals use knives and forks?"

A Christology or Soteriology, attentive to the exigencies of the third enlightenment, must not attempt a facile concordism between the second enlightenment's notion of emancipation and a theology of redemptive liberation in Christ. As suffering cannot be reduced to pain, nor to the concept of suffering, so human subjectivity cannot be reduced to objectivity, nor praxis to technique.

The defense mechanisms of modernity exemplify a sociocultural surd, a reign of sin that threatens to turn Nietzsche's *Requiem aeternam Deo* into a *Requiem aeternam homini*. Quite simply, we cannot justify ourselves. The pride that imagines we can, only underestimates the seductive counter-pull of evil. If the scales of human justice are *all* that we have, then the cycles of violence and reprisal will not be broken until there are no more eyes and teeth left.

As theologians we must collaborate with other human and social sciences in disclosing the transformative values of Christian praxis in offsetting the cycles of decline and in promoting really human progress. To discern one from the other, to collaborate "in removing the tumor of the flight from understanding without destroying the organs of intelligence," requires, in my opinion, an uncompromising turn to the subject, to human conduct or praxis in all its dimensions. This praxis is the infrastructure underlying all cultural matrices, including those of the first and second enlightenments. To become knowingly conscious of that infrastructure, as human sciences and theology are now becoming, provides critical norms for unmasking the alienations in "modernity" as a truncated enlightenment.¹⁸ Only through a commitment to the praxis enlightenment can we discern, with Karl Rahner, how anthropocentrism is profoundly theocentric. Only then can we appreciate what Ricoeur calls a post-critical second naiveté, Metz the narrative structure of Christian memory, and Tracy the analogical imagination. Only then can we discern the far-reaching implications of Lonergan's appeals to intellectual, moral, and religious conversions. Only "then will it be ultimately discovered," in ways Marx could hardly dream of, "that mankind does not set about a new task, but realizes in a knowingly conscious way its age-old task."

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¹⁸Examples of how second enlightenment fascination with technique and bureaucracy "blinded" social scientists and theologians to perduring communal structures of human conduct (praxis) and their values are given in Andrew Greeley's paper in this present volume, *infra*, "Sociology and Theology: Some Methodological Questions." For a brilliant exposé of how second enlightenment techniques have wrought havoc on global food production, cf. F. Lappé and J. Collins, *Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).