

METHOD IN THEOLOGY

- Topic: Method, Dialogue, and Comparative Religions:
Testing Lonergan's "Upper Blade"
- Conveners: Richard M. Liddy, Seton Hall University
J. Michael Stebbins, Gonzaga University
- Presenters: Reid B. Locklin, University of Toronto
Michael T. McLaughlin, Saint Leo University

This panel aimed at exploring the strengths and limitations of Lonergan's theory of consciousness in dialogue with the comparative study of religions. Reid Locklin began by presenting John Dadosky's book, *The Structure of Religious Knowing: Encountering the Sacred in Eliade and Lonergan* (SUNY Press, 2004). In that work Dadosky employs Lonergan's fourfold levels of consciousness as an interpretive framework for a clearer understanding of Mircea Eliade's theories. Specifically, he treats four principle themes: the experience of the sacred; the sacred as expressed in religious symbols; the fundamental reality of the sacred; and life in the sacred as religious transformation, ritual, and mystical personalities. Lonergan's theory of consciousness functions as the "upper blade" of a pair of scissors converging upon the "lower blade" of the religious and cultural data yielding authentic interpretation.

Michael McLaughlin's paper, "Problematizing Religion in Lonergan," related the discussion of religion in chapter four of Lonergan's *Method in Theology* to current understandings of the category of religion by religion scholars such as Daniel Dubuisson, Bruce McCutcheon, Jonathan Z. Smith, and others. Such contemporary study distances itself from theological presuppositions. The detailed analysis of Jonathan Smith of Eliade's work on the morphology of religions was briefly mentioned. The presentation questioned whether Lonergan's category of "the love of God" was a special *sui generis* experience which really could be distinguished from other experiences of reality in the way that Lonergan maintains. The limits of what can be categorized as a religion were also discussed. For example, can Heidegger's work be considered a religious worldview? Can the same be said of Derrida's messianic proposal or "eco-spiritualities"? Some religious formations are at least as much about caste and ritual purity as they are about specific beliefs. Religions transplanted from their indigenous sites shift in their characteristics.

Reid Locklin addressed the specific topic of Lonergan's theory of religious experience as a resource for comparative religious study. Although Lonergan's theory seems particularly suitable for studying *Advaita Vedanta*—a tradition based, according to some interpreters on "intuitive awareness" and/or "experience of reality" rather than on doctrine—several complications arise. First, within the so-called *vivarana* school, prominent *Avaita* teachers have challenged the importance of "higher experience," emphasizing instead the word of scripture. Second, within the so-called *bhamati* school, experience is treated by analogy of musical

appreciation rather than mystical ascent, deemphasizing realization as an extraordinary affective state and/or distinctive quality of consciousness. Locklin concluded by suggesting strategies to improve Lonergan's "upper blade," including a reduced emphasis on mystical experience and greater attention to the specific claims of particular religious traditions.

The presentations of the panelists were well received and in the ensuing discussion the question of a religious *a priori* and "depth" of experience *versus* a "particular affective state" was mentioned several times. Also broached was the question of how Lonergan's Christian convictions shaped his account of religious experience. Finally, the point was made that chapter 4 of Lonergan's *Method in Theology* has to be interpreted in the light of chapter 1 in that book, specifically, his account of self-appropriation as the foundational method in all human studies. The distinction should be made between the various theoretical accounts that Lonergan employs to talk about various dimensions of human subjectivity and his emphasis on the project of self-appropriation itself as the basis for theory in human studies.

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