

## A RESPONSE (II) TO FATHER LONERGAN

As I understand Father Lonergan, he is concerned in this paper with indicating the causes and consequences of the revolution (in the sense of "profound change") which, he says, everyone is aware has occurred in Catholic theology in the present century. As he sees it, the development of scholarly specialization (linguistic, exegetical, and historical) has led to the obsolescence of dogmatic theologians; the adoption of a historicist perspective on culture, to the reconceptualization of the Church as a *Selbstvollzug* with the mission of adjusting to the potentialities of each culture; and the critical reconstruction of metaphysics, to the revision of theology as a process of articulating methodically the meaning of religious conversion. He expects this revolution to result in the restoration of theology to the vitality it enjoyed in the Middle Ages.

That is what Father Lonergan says, but is to so? First, has there really been a profound change in Catholic theology in the present century? Not if the professionalization of theologians through functional specialization is supposed to be the main indication. That was just the latest step in the evolution of the role of theologians from priestly caste to clerical state to professional society—in each case an intellectual élite adapting to changing social conditions to maintain its place in the social structure. But while theologians have been saving their lives by changing their skins, there have been two revolutions which Father Lonergan does not mention, the effect of which has been to make not just dogmatic theologians but all theologians obsolete. The more immediate has been the rejection by Catholic college students of theology as a meaningful part of their education, so that in Catholic colleges today theology survives mainly as a core requirement, and theology departments to adapt have had to become departments of religious studies. But the more basic has been the economic, political, social and cultural revolution of modern times, which has rejected theology as the ideology of the *ancien régime* against which it has directed all its forces. The response to this revolution has come mainly not from professional theo-

logians but from pastors such as Camillo Torres, Dom Helder Camara, the Berrigans, and Bishop Gumbleton who, divining the Christian inspiration behind modern revolution, have initiated a practical revolution in theology when a theoretical revolution was lacking. Therefore I think that Father Lonergan has been as wrong to assume a profound change within Catholic theology as he has been to ignore the modern revolution without it.

But even if theology has not undergone a change profound enough to correspond to modern revolution, has Father Lonergan been correct in analyzing the cultural impact of this revolution as merely the realization that the West is one among many cultures, with the consequence that the Church has had to reconceive of itself in dynamic and relative terms? Far from it. The shift in perspective which opened the West to the historical and global dimensions of culture has been a conscious and deliberate rejection of the adequacy of the Christian culture of medieval Europe. The religious import of modernization has been secularization—the denial of the validity of the theological perspective traditional in Western culture since its origins in Athens and Jerusalem. It was this perspective that prompted the West, nowhere more than in Rome, to regard its culture as normative, and it has been the rejection of this perspective that has allowed the West, apart from Rome, to consider other cultures as meaningful. The consequence of this shift in perspective has been no mere reconceptualization of the role of the Church but rather the death of God in Western culture. In these circumstances the mission of the Church is not to adjust to other cultures but to realize it is an integral part of Western culture, and the reconceptualization of the Church should be undertaken not in a futile attempt to modernize itself but in a realistic effort to adjust itself to being a medieval carryover. Therefore I think Father Lonergan was engaging in wishful thinking when he depicted the Church as a *Selbstvollzug* with a mission to other cultures.

But even if the Church has become outmoded in modern culture, is Father Lonergan correct in thinking that the effect of modern science *via* metaphysics upon theology will be the re-establishment of religious categories on a sound basis in cognitional method? I doubt it. In the first place, the change from the Aristotelian to the

modern conception of science was less a shift from a demand for causal certitude to an acceptance of empirical probability (for Aristotle was well aware of the need for empirical verification in science, and modern science originated from a desire for certitude in empirical knowledge) than a rejection of a theological basis for belief in favor of a human basis, a basis that would justify the mastery and not just the contemplation of nature, that would articulate itself in mathematical postulates and not in metaphysical principles, that would advance toward pragmatic, not speculative goals. The change, therefore, as I see it, has been primarily substantive and only secondarily methodological. Similarly, the effect of the invention of modern science upon philosophy has been only incidentally the reactionary attempt to reconstruct metaphysics on subjective (cognitive, anthropocentric) instead of on objective (essential, cosmocentric) grounds and principally the gradual supplanting of metaphysics with scientific method, formal logic (foundational mathematics), and hermeneutic (positivist, linguistic, phenomenological, historicist, pragmatic, existential, or structural). The consequence has been an efflorescence of the sciences—natural, human, and philosophic—with each grounding itself in the self-critical development of its own appropriate method. Thus the effect of modern philosophy upon theology has not just been the attempt to re-establish classical theology on the basis of transcendental method but even more importantly the displacement of theology by religious studies. This is a field that opened up with the modern assumption of a global and historical perspective on culture, developed apace with the appearance of the human sciences, and began to come into its own with the realization of the need for a method commensurate to its horizon. Like the rest of modern science, religious studies operates without the presupposition of the existence of God, thereby retaining a capacity to evaluate Western culture critically as well as to appreciate other cultures empathetically. Yet since it has developed from a religious perspective, its general categories are religious, its specific categories historical, social, psychological, anthropological, political, phenomenological, and structural. At the same time that theology, the first science ever to emerge, has been atrophying into the ideology of the Church, religious studies has been developing into the science of

the ultimate meaning to human existence. I believe Father Lonergan is wrong, therefore, in predicting a restoration of theology on the basis of scientific method.

My differences with Father Lonergan, then, on the meaning of the revolution in Catholic theology are fundamental. What he regards as a revolution—the restoration of theology on a sound methodological basis—I consider a reaction against the revolution in scientific method which has resulted in the emergence of the science of religious studies. Whereas he bases his conclusion upon the assumption that the Church can assimilate modern culture, I claim that the Church is an integral part of the classical and medieval tradition outmoded in the process of modernization. And while he compares the present revolution in theology to the medieval invention of theology, I think the modern revolution in Western culture is comparable to the beginning of the Christian era. Thus Father Lonergan expects the revolution to result in the restoration of theology within a renewed Christian culture, but I think a new era has begun to create its own appropriate mode of understanding the implications of ultimate meaning.

WILLIAM E. MURNION  
*Ramapo College of New Jersey*