

LONERGAN'S METHOD: AN ALTERNATE VIEW

One reason I was asked to give this presentation on Lonergan's *Method in Theology* was a rather sympathetic review article I wrote in *America* magazine in 1972.¹ The problematic both with an article like that and with a presentation like this is that it's something like describing love. There just "ain't any words" that can substitute for the real thing. Now granted that reading Lonergan is a far cry from falling in love, still the very nature of his work involves the invitation to a personal experience and the experience just cannot be substituted for by vague generalizations from afar.

Nevertheless, there is a place for *haute vulgarization*, a description of the general thrust of a work and an indication of where it might fit into the stream of contemporary movements. And that I intend to do briefly. Certainly, this involves my own tentative historical judgments; others will disagree.

A cursory glance at the articles printed in Catholic theological journals, such as *Theological Studies*, in the 1940's and a comparison with articles in present issues clearly indicates the collapse of a particular Neo-scholastic conceptual framework in which to articulate Christian faith. "Aggiornamento" has involved the positive approval and genuine acceptance of contemporary movements such as the contemporary sciences and various social and cultural movements. This situation entails monumental problems for the Catholic Christian caught in the crossfire between these movements and his Christian faith. Many questions come to the fore: what is Christianity? what is religion? what is reality? what does it mean to know? how are religion and science related? but perhaps the most important question is this: how can all these questions be seen in some kind of integrated whole so that one could at least get some kind of glimmer into the level of one's being appealed to by these streams of contemporary life?

In my opinion no one has contributed more to clarifying

¹Richard Liddy, "Lonergan's Method," *America*, August 5, 1972.

these difficult questions as has Bernard Lonergan. To invoke a respected Protestant theologian, Langdon Gilkey: "Lonergan is one of the greatest minds of Christendom. I used to read Jacques Maritain or Etienne Gilson to find out what Roman Catholic intellectuals were thinking. Now I read Father Lonergan to find out what *I* am thinking."²

In the time that follows I would like to point out three areas where Lonergan's contribution to method in theology can be of use in facing our contemporary problems. The first regards clarifying the nature of living religion which he suggests is rooted in the gift of God's love. The second regards the division of the theological enterprise into functional specializations, thus allowing possibilities for an integrated team approach to theologizing. And finally, the third regards the problem of providing a basic interdisciplinary language, that is, a philosophy, as a bridge between the work of theologians and men in other disciplines.

I. GOD-TALK AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

One of the major issues in contemporary theology is the so-called issue of "God-talk"; and one of the contributions of Lonergan's method is the explicitation of the conditions that make possible various levels of God-talk. There is, for example, the level that as theologians we are now involved in using our expertise to talk about God, to a great extent in dialogue with other theologians talking about God. But certainly there is a more primal God-talk from which theology flows, a level less in the realm of theory and more on the level of communal expression, symbols, beliefs, witness, shared traditions. These symbols, beliefs, traditions in turn all witness to an even more fundamental and basic level of experience and reality. In a word, then, theology is not just a reflection on others' reflections, conceptualizations based on previous conceptualizations, a theologizing on theology; theology involves a reflection on a more primal experience, the experience and

²Quoted in *Current Biography* (1972), p. 280.

beliefs that constitute living religion.

In *Method in Theology* Lonergan invokes the testimony of the history of religions to the effect that all the high religions of the world point to the experience of a fundamental reality, transcendent, wholly other, yet immanent in human hearts; this reality is supreme beauty, goodness, truth, compassion, love; the way to union with this reality is through repentance, self-denial, prayer; the way is love of one's neighbor, even of one's enemies; the way is love of God so that fulfillment is conceived as knowledge of God and even union with him.³ Now one intention of Lonergan's method is to create a systematic language whereby one can both identify this basic level of religious experience and relate it to other levels of human consciousness and human life. The point of such a systematic language, or model of religious language, is to have a set of experientially identified terms and relationships that are mutually defining and that can be used in open-ended and various ways to identify the unfolding processes of reality, meaning and history, among which the various levels of God-talk and the various dimensions of religious experience.

Some of the basic terms in this theoretical construct are: the gift of God's love; the conscious, though not necessarily known, experience of being-in-love with God; faith as the "eye" of this love (Pascal's "the heart has reasons that the reason knows not of"); beliefs as the historically and culturally conditioned reflections of this love (Christian belief adding the further element of being itself the interpersonal expression of God's love);⁴ conversion as the change of heart that flows from the acceptance of God's love; the various levels of human consciousness involved in the human spirit's restless and self-transcending drive toward meaning, truth, reality, goodness, love, God. Other key elements in this language are community and history

³Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 109-10. There Lonergan refers to F. Heiler, "The History of Religions as the Preparation for the Cooperation of Religions," in *The History of Religions*, ed. by M. Eliade and J. Kitagawa. Lonergan also adverts to religious experience as described by R. Otto, P. Tillich and K. Rahner; cf. *Method in Theology*, p. 106.

⁴Christian theology then would focus on that dimension of religious experience constituted by the belief in God's expression of his love for us in Jesus and in him his desire to enter into man's making of man.

and all these elements are defined systematically in terms of the many-leveled character of human consciousness and reality.

Lonergan's point is to set these terms out clearly, articulating their possible mutual relationships. This is done, however, not arbitrarily but, as much as possible, by appealing to the reader to identify these terms and relationships in his own consciousness and experience. A projected subtitle for *Insight* was "An Essay in the Appropriation of Rational Self-Consciousness";⁵ a subtitle for *Method in Theology* might well be "An Essay in the Appropriation of Religious Consciousness."

Theology, then, as reflection on living religion tries to articulate the relation between the specifically religious and all other areas of life. The use of a basic language, not arbitrarily and eclectically arrived at, but theoretically and through self-appropriation, can be of invaluable help in determining the various levels of our God-talk and the relation of such talk to religious experience and all the areas of our lives.

II. THEOLOGY: ITS NATURE AND SPECIALTIES

So far we have been talking about two elements, theology and religion, with the emphasis on religion. For theology is reflection on religion, not religion itself. Nevertheless, theology is the means by which religious persons can come to know their own religious experience and how that is situated among the streams of contemporary life. (St. Theresa of Avila, when given the choice of spiritual director between a very holy man with no theology and a theologian of moderate holiness, said she would choose the theologian.) This is particularly true in a differentiated scientific culture in which discernment of the Spirit often involves an appreciation of the value of science.

Nevertheless, according to Lonergan genuine theologizing demands *intellectual conversion*. Though less essential than moral and religious conversion, and certainly less frequent, nevertheless it is necessary in order to properly understand these latter transformations and, in a way, it's what *Method in Theology* is all about. For achievement in theory in

⁵Cf. F. Crowe, "The Origin and Scope of Bernard Lonergan's *Insight*," *Sciences Ecclesiastiques* (1957), pp. 263-95.

any area requires an asceticism of the mind and a ruthless pruning of pleasant images that might sedate but do not illuminate; and such a development in theology is often neglected in favor of the less rigorous demands of mythology, pietism and moralism. Many useless and prolonged theological discussions could be avoided if there were more of a critique of the imagery and "picture thinking" frequently implied in theological questions (e.g., what happens "after" death).

Thus *Method in Theology* involves bringing to the light the level of our own intellectual conversion as we reflect on the processes of basic religious and moral conversion. For the level of our conversion can and does, often in a subtle and unacknowledged way, influence our reading of the Scriptures, Christian history, contemporary movements and the word we speak to the world in the midst of those movements. The frequent appeal to theologizing or interpreting without any presuppositions Lonergan labels "The theory of the empty head" which, if taken seriously, would make the ideal interpreter the person with the least knowledge of all, the least personal development. Rather, as it becomes clear in *Method in Theology*, the ideal interpreter of Paul is the person who has experienced and knows the reality of religious conversion Paul is talking about and can situate his interpretation in the context of contemporary intellectual discussion.

And that brings us to Lonergan's distinction of the various functional specialties in the theological enterprise. This differentiation of specialties is not so much according to content as according to the levels of consciousness and sets of conscious operations employed in their performance. Thus, looking toward religion in the past theology involves on the level of experience, research; on the level of understanding, interpretation; on the level of judgment, history; and finally, on the level of decision, dialectics which regards the conflicts of historical movements that contribute to the present situation (liberal, conservative, etc.). On the other hand, looking toward the future, on the level of decision there is foundational theology, the articulation of the horizon of one's conversion in the dialectical situation; on the level of judgment, there is doctrinal theology; on the level of understanding, systematics; and on the level of experience, communications, which involves the use of the behavioral sciences and theology's relations *ad extra*. Lonergan analyzes each of these specialties and the presup-

positions involved in each.

The point in distinguishing these functional specialties is to help the theologian know what he is doing when he is doing it. Only in this way can he be aware of his presuppositions and properly integrate his own contribution into the total theological enterprise. As Lonergan notes, such distinctions preserve theology (and theologians) from "totalitarian pretensions," that is, from overestimating the significance of their own contribution and thus de-focusing the total theological witness. For example, the Scripture scholar should know what he is doing when he moves from the world of his specialty to the world of his students or the man in the street. He should know that he is asking different questions, using different operations, moving in different worlds, in not all of which need he be an expert.⁶ The age of the omni-competent theologian is past and only an integrated team approach on the basis of a common methodological language can help Christian theologians to hear the Word of God spoken in the various dimensions of the Christian tradition and to speak that Word and help others to speak it in the midst of the opinions of today.

III. METHOD IN THEOLOGY AND THE CONTEMPORARY SCIENCES

The general collapse of Neo-scholastic philosophy in the Catholic universities and seminaries since Vatican II seems a fact that needs no documentation here. At the same time "aggiornamento" has involved the positive approval and genuine acceptance of the contemporary sciences such as psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, history, etc. No theological area is exempt from the influence of these sciences, for example, the science of history in Scriptural studies, the science of psychology in pastoral studies, the science of sociology in contemporary ecclesiology.

Certainly, one reason for the collapse of Neo-scholastic philosophy was its inability to handle and adequately integrate into theology these

⁶One is reminded of the introductions to K. Rahner's articles: great care is taken to determine the specific question he is treating as distinct from the many related questions beyond the purview of the particular article.

contemporary dynamic sciences. Aristotelian science dealt with certain immutable essences rather than with the *de facto* historical contingencies of the modern sciences.

Nevertheless, an adequate or inadequate philosophy is always implicit in the adequate or inadequate employment of a particular science and the point of any philosophy is to try to articulate the nature of knowledge itself, the relations between the various branches of science, the relations between scientific knowledge and everyday knowledge, and in the case of philosophical theology, the relation between religious experience and other areas of "secular" consciousness. Theology, to the extent that it knows what it is doing in reflecting on religion, has to know its relations to these unfolding areas of consciousness that are the sciences. Without knowing the basic constructs of these sciences it is impossible to speak to the cultivated contemporary mind.⁷ Just as Aquinas took the basic constructs of Aristotelian science and philosophy and baptized them in the understanding of Christian faith, so we have to take the best the contemporary world has to offer in the world of theory so that these areas too may become channels of God's love. Lonergan's transcendental method in philosophy can operate as a bridge between science, Christian theology and the Word of God.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a remark about the difficulty of Lonergan's writings. I must confess that it took me the good part of a year to plow through *Insight*—that was eight years ago—and since then I have spent many hours objecting, confronting, reflecting, exposing, and reconciling as I submitted my insights into *Insight* to as many other drifts of contemporary culture as I could. *Method in Theology* demands a similar effort. But that should not surprise us; Bertrand Russell once

⁷Cf. the interesting quotation from K. Rahner: "In [the] future, theology's key partner-in-dialogue to which it will have to relate its 'philosophising' in the sense we have adumbrated, will no longer be philosophy in the traditional sense at all, but the 'unphilosophical' pluralistic sciences and the kind of understanding of existence which they promote either directly or indirectly." *Theological Investigations IX* (New York, 1972), p. 60.

remarked that it takes a good part of our lives to enter into the thought of any first-rate thinker.

One of the most complimentary remarks concerning Lonergan's work came from a theologian who said to me: "When you understand Lonergan, you can understand all the others." The point of his remark was that Lonergan's work concerns not so much the content and information indigenous to particular areas as the personal appropriation of the dynamic relations that link together the many diverse areas of concern. Lonergan's work is located at the interface of such movements as the contemporary sciences, the dialogue and dialectic between scholastic philosophy and modern philosophies and the various social, cultural and religious movements of our day, including the movement of Christian belief. It could be very useful for bridge-building—between theologians and each other and with all men of good will.

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