

Bernard Lonergan's *The Triune God: Systematics*

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Chapter 1 The Goal, the Order, and the Manner of Speaking

1. The Goal

Lonergan begins his study on a methodological note. He first clearly distinguishes between systematic and dogmatic theology in a distinction whose roots can be traced to a differentiation which was achieved by Aquinas who, in his day, clearly distinguished between these two basic kinds of theology. On the one hand, dogmatic theology has to do with affirming truths of the faith and with providing arguments which serve to demonstrate that an alleged dogmatic fact is, in fact, true. Corollary, subsidiary arguments can also be elaborated to show that contrary claims are not true but false. Every well rounded discussion about a particular issue in dogmatic theology would present both kinds of arguments: arguments which show why it is reasonable to believe a particular truth and arguments which show why it is unreasonable to adhere to any contrary thesis. On the other hand, systematic theology attends to a kind of analysis which attends to the intelligibility or the meaning of believed truths. Recall the Augustinian maxim that "I believe in order to understand." A different kind of question is being asked: not "why is this true?" or "how can this be true?" but "what is the meaning of this particular truth?" or "how does the meaning of this truth relate to the meaning of this other truth?" "How do these things fit together?" The object is a grasp of a greater whole of some kind which can reveal a greater significance to the faith that one professes, a significance which raises one's understanding and which allows us to live one's faith more devotedly and more authentically.

Recall a decree issued by the First Vatican Council on the relation between faith and reason: *Dei Filius*. As Lonergan, for instance, quotes from *De Filius*, from the 4th paragraph of chapter 4 "On faith and reason," (cf. "Doctrinal Pluralism," *Philosophical and Theological Papers*, p. 90), with respect to the kind of understanding which is the object of systematic theology:

Reason illuminated by faith, when it inquires diligently, piously, soberly, reaches with God's help some extremely fruitful understanding of the mysteries both in virtue of the analogy of things it knows naturally and in virtue of the interconnection of the mysteries with one another and with man's last end.

See also Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 321, where this same issue is discussed. As Lonergan notes and as he refers to *De Filius*, while an exhaustive understanding of divine things is never given to us in this life (to our created human understanding), the slightest advance in our human understanding of divine things is of the greatest importance and value for us as we are changed by our understanding in a way which can help us live better lives.

As Lonergan argues in his exegesis of Aquinas, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, 4, q. 9, a. 3, one type of theological inquiry which seeks to remove doubts is to be distinguished from a second kind of theological inquiry which seeks understanding. In trying to remove doubts about disputed questions

and issues, one wants to have a knowledge of things that is characterized by a total lack of doubt and this lack of doubt is known as certitude. Something can no longer be doubted since one has shown how its truth can be regarded as self-evident because of a grounding that can be traced back to some kind of basic, first principle which cannot be doubted without risk of contradiction. With respect to matters of faith, one shows that a particular teaching is grounded in scripture or in apostolic tradition. Something has been revealed as a truth of faith. A proposed article is shown to belong within the deposit of faith because of a chain of reasoning that has reached back to a set of primary sources, or which can move from a set of primary sources to a proposition which states a belief or dogma. However, and on the other hand, if the object of one's theological inquiry is a grasp of relations which can reveal how different things are joined with each other in a previously unknown inward unity, instead of lack of doubt, the object is less obscurity. One desires experiences of meaning which reveal a new, larger world within which one can now believe and live. Instead of confusion and disorder, new distinctions, as they are apprehended, introduce clarifications or reveal nuances of meaning. Previously unsuspected depths of meaning present themselves to create a new context for living one's life. Through an uplifting of one's understanding which one has been somehow received, one usually becomes more willing to engage in new possible courses of action that one would not otherwise do. In speculative or systematic theological activity, the object ceases to be an experience of truth but an experience of rationality: reasons which indicate the greater goodness and value of those truths that one has already come to believe but which one has not understood very well.

For a possible understanding of the greater difficulties that attend the asking and answering of systematic questions versus the asking and answering of dogmatic questions, compare a dogmatic question which asks "Is Christ, the Son of God, equal in divinity to God the Father?" with one which asks "Why is God the Son equal in divinity to God the Father?" While the first question initiates a search for evidence by way of a reduction to some basic set of first principles (or primary sources), the second requires a spirit of reflection which is both imaginative and exacting as one seeks to link a greater number of variables through acts of understanding which are more sophisticated if they join a larger number of variables with each other. If questions about fact elicit a form of investigation which resembles a judicial inquiry, questions about meaning require a form of investigation that calls for creativity in the human minds of theologians.

2. The Act Whereby the Goal Is Attained

In engaging now in an analysis which attempts to explain the nature of systematic theological understanding (as distinct from the nature of dogmatic theological understanding), Lonergan makes two closely related points. First, systematic, speculative theological understanding is not unrelated to truth; or, to put this in another way, it is not unrelated to the kind of understanding which is peculiarly characteristic of dogmatic apprehension as this occurs typically in dogmatic theological activity. Before one engages in systematic theological activity, one must know that one is working with a mystery of faith which is true, a belief which one has accepted as true and which one has come to know through some kind of faith instruction that one has received and whose words one has correctly understood. Truth exists prior to systematic theological activity and after systematic theological activity and also within systematic theological activity since questions are asked about theological truth with respect to the speculations that one has about the

meaning of the faith that one is professing and seeking to understand more deeply. Second, the distinction which is drawn between systematic and dogmatic theological activity is grounded in a human cognitional fact which acknowledges two basic operations of the human mind: a thesis which was first postulated by Aristotle and which was taken up and developed by Aquinas in a context which effected a development in the methodology of Catholic theology.

Tersely stated, when Aristotle investigated the nature of the scientific question in the *Posterior Analytics*, he first postulated that all questions can be reduced to four basic types: whether there is an *X*; what is an *X*; whether *X* is *Y*; and why *X* is *Y*. But then, if one examines these questions one finds that they reduce to two basic types: the first basic type groups together “What is an *X*” and “why *X* is *Y*” since these can only be answered by an hypothesis which can relate a number of elements or parts into a relation; the second basic type groups together “whether there is an *X*” and “whether *X* is *Y*” since these can be answered by only saying either “yes” or “no.” See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 2, 2, 89b36-90a6 and Aquinas, *In Aristotelis libros Posteriorum analyticorum*, 2, 1. Two distinct kinds of questions having two distinct objects ground two distinct kinds of mental operation. In both Aquinas and Lonergan, a position on the nature of human cognition grounds a position on the nature of understanding in theology. But, this critical distinction is never to be understood as a separation since, as already noted, each operation of the human mind interacts and conditions the other. Apprehensions of understanding or meaning which occur in the first operation of the human intellect lead to the reflective understanding of judgment in the second while, at the same time, apprehensions of truth which occur in second operations of the mind lead to new questions about meaning and significance which trigger new instances of first operations. A mutual priority or mutual causality perhaps best explains how these two basic operations interact with each other in an ongoing way: not only in theology but in every other field of human activity. This same mutual or reciprocal priority also explains why questions of truth are not absent from the context of any speculation as this occurs within systematic theological inquiry, thinking.

In speaking about these cognitional operations, Lonergan speaks here about four kinds of object in connection with human knowing: agent objects, terminal objects, proper objects, and final or formal objects. Agent objects act as movers or catalysts; they elicit or trigger acts of understanding and judgment in human beings. First operations of the human mind are triggered by images or phantasms that are grounded in acts of sense. An intellectual nature suggests itself through how it presents itself in a material, incarnate way. Second operations are triggered by evidence which presents itself as a basis or sufficient reason for making an affirmative or negative judgment. Terminal objects refer to what proceeds as a kind of product either in first or second operations of the mind. With understanding in terms of what or why, an inner word refers to the apprehension of an idea; with judgment in terms of yes or no, a second kind of inner word refers to a truth that is now apprehended (wherein, through truth, something of reality is known). Proper objects refer to a connatural, proportional relation which exists between the embodied character of human knowing (the soul informing a body) and the embedded existence of forms within matter which is then to be properly understood as the proper object of human knowing. Final or formal objects refer to being or reality itself as the formal object of the intellect in its understanding (whether the intellect is human, angelic, or divine). Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 79, a. 7. It is in order to know being that human beings engage in a distinct set of cognitional activities which points to a recurrent normative structure that is constitutive of all

human knowing. A desire for truth as a goodness worth seeking in its own right gives a finality to human knowing; it imparts a direction or orientation.

All these things being said, since systematic theological inquiry is primarily interested in asking questions about the meaning of dogmas (rather than the truth of dogmas), systematic theology is to be primarily identified with the first operation of the human intellect which asks “what/why” questions and which falls into a form or structure that is governed by this basic interest. In the context of his trinitarian theology, Lonergan identifies ten attributes or properties that properly belong to the act of understanding which exists in systematic theology.

First, the agent object of theological understanding is a truth of faith that has come to us in a mediated way through words, signs, and symbols. To some extent, the agent object is definitely related to receptive acts of sense. Truths of faith do not come to us immediately directly from God but from God because they have been revealed by God to us within a context informed by spatial and temporal coordinates.

Second, since theological understanding on our part is always a created thing which exists by way of a created participation in God’s understanding of himself, our understanding of divine things will always remain imperfect. One can even argue that, even within the beatific vision, our understanding of divine things will always be limited since no created intellect is able to have an exhaustive understanding of something that is not created or is not limited in any way.

Third, since the proper object of human understanding is always a form or an intelligibility that exists within matter, it is only indirectly, by analogy, that our human understanding can come to some kind of understanding about the meaning of divine things. As Aquinas notes, for instance, in the *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 93, a. 2, ad 1:

We cannot know the things that are of God, as they are in themselves; but they are made known to us in their effects, according to Romans I, 20: *The invisible things of God...are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.*

Fourth, with every advance in our limited understanding of divine things comes a growing realization that the unrestricted intelligibility and goodness of divine things is not to be compared with the intelligibility and goodness of created things. As one moves analogically from created to uncreated things, the transcendence of divine things presents itself with increasing effect. The mysterious of God’s mysteries becomes more patent, awesome, and wonderful. As Aquinas argues in the *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, q. 8, a. 7: “in this life, the better we understand God to transcend whatever is grasped by intellect, the more perfectly also do we know him.”

Fifth, as theological understanding moves from one issue to another and as the discovery of one set of distinctions occasions the apprehension of other sets, a progress in theological understanding is something which can be possibly postulated, a progress which has a history and which begins to acknowledge that some theological problems have already been solved.

Sixth, with every advance in our limited understanding of divine things comes an understanding

that wants to understand how an increasing number of things can be related to each other in a greater unity that has yet to be discovered but which beckons its discovery.

Seventh, with the growth of understanding that understands many different things together comes the need to understand these many things in a more comprehensive way. The limitedness of our understanding as it is compared to the unrestrictedness of divine understanding does not preclude making progress toward a better understanding of all things together in one, overarching scheme which would refer to some kind of universal order.

Eighth, deepening widening theological understanding confers highly fruitful benefits in all areas of life as one's understanding and knowing conditions one's willing and doing in all things which are inherently and naturally connected with each other and which are ordered to transcendent ends.

Ninth, the effort itself to try to move toward theological understanding is of no slight benefit since an intrinsic goodness exists in the orientation that such an effort imparts to our lives. The effort changes us in many good ways, in ways that lead ultimately to God since God would here naturally exist as the goal of one's seeking and striving. Aquinas speaks of a natural desire for God which can only be properly fulfilled in a supernatural way. Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 12, a. 1; a. 4.

Tenth, the possibility and also the reality of systematic theological understanding is authoritatively affirmed by the First Vatican Council and, as authoritatively affirmed, it is also encouraged by Church authority. As taught by the Church, it can be regarded as part and parcel of the Church's faith which comes to us all ultimately from Christ.