

Bernard Lonergan's *The Triune God: Systematics*

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

7. A Consideration of the Historical Movement

After discussing the ways and means of dogmatic theology and the ways and means of systematic theology and after illustrating how these differences are played out in the development of theology with respect to the Christian Trinity, Lonergan shifts into a discussion which acknowledges the fact that this theology is never done in a vacuum. Theological activity occurs always in varying cultural contexts which have shifted over time and which will continue to shift over time. In other words, if theological inquiry is to occur and if the reception of any theological understanding is to have an impact on others, some attention needs to be given to the whole question of reception as this exists as a constitutive in human life. Each of us, as human beings, has been born into a particular culture which, in turn, has acted to condition how each of us lives, thinks, and understands. And then, given how each of us lives and how we each belong to some kind of social order which functions through a self-understanding of itself (a self-understanding which presents itself as a culture), the existence of all these conditions creates a problem or a task for Catholic theology. In other words, how is the meaning of Catholic theology to be communicated in a way which transcends cultural differences? How can a properly Catholic theology exist if and as it tries to meet the needs and demands of a transcultural spiritual community, a community which identifies itself as the universal Catholic Church?

To begin then with this question of reception, a useful starting place presents itself in an understanding which Aquinas had enjoyed. *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*; “whatever is received into something is received according to the condition of the receiver.” Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 75, a. 5; 3a, q. 5. In the *ST*, 1a, q. 12, a. 4; 1, p. 51, a more specific application of this principle is made: “the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower.” *Cogitum...est in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis*. See also *ST* 1a, q. 14, a. 1, ad 3; q. 16, a. 1; q. 19, a. 6, ad 2; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 79, 7; *De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 3. In knowing, a thing is known by a knower according to the mode of a knower’s being where what is understood and known is regulated according to how a thing is known by a knower. Hence, in applying this principle as a heuristic principle of explanation and as an insight which Aquinas had in his own day, the receptivity of human agents, as this receptivity exists within persons within human history, and as this receptivity is conditioned by human history, is a factor which helps to explain why Christ’s incarnation and death occurred when it did. Cf. *SCG*, 4, 55, 12; *ST*, 1a2ae, q. 101, a. 2, ad 1. As Paul’s *Letter to the Galatians* so succinctly puts it, Christ was sent into human history and became a man “when the fullness of time had come.” Cf. Galatians 4:4 (NAB); cited by the *SCG*, 4, 55, 12; cf. *ST*, 3a, q. 35, a. 8. And, as Paul also notes in his *Letter to the Romans*, “for while we were still weak Christ died at the right time for the ungodly.” Cf. Romans 5:6, as cited by Peter Beer, “The Redemptive Vicarious Suffering of Christ: An Inquiry,” *Australian Lonergan Workshop II*, eds. Matthew C. Ogilvie & William J. Danaher (Sydney: Novum Organum Press, 2002), p. 139. Explicitly in the mind of Aquinas and

implicitly in the words of scripture, the temporality or historicity of human life and existence is a factor which is acknowledged in how things have been set up in the order of redemption which God has established. As revelation occurs within human history to change it from within, theological activity also occurs from within the meaning which is constitutive of human history and culture in order to effect a similar change. What before had not been said within a given culture is now said so that a given culture can be transformed *from within*. In the work of theology, supernatural meanings are introduced into the sphere of human meanings as a principle of order which can reveal how the human desire and striving for meaning is an inclination that can only be fulfilled in a context that attends to unrestricted meaning: unrestricted understanding and unrestricted loving. The mediating function of theology (which includes the mediating function of systematics in the theology of the Trinity) requires that some attention be given to the nature of human culture and the conditions which are properly constitutive of every human culture.

In turning then to the nature of human culture, Lonergan very clearly distinguishes between the sciences of nature and the sciences of man (the so-called “human sciences”). From the viewpoint of the human senses in general, the exterior contingent world exhibits a regularity and stability that is not much disputed. Even as the sciences of nature have themselves developed and greatly changed to reveal a greater understanding of natural laws and natural processes, what is known or what is studied by these sciences has itself not much changed. The same sun lights the day and the same planets and stars reveal their heavenly movements and positions. However, this is simply not the case with the human world as it exists and with how this human world is changed as new ideas are entertained about how things should be in terms of how persons should relate to each other. A stable social order soon changes its form and structure as new meanings are grasped about values and beliefs which should be emphasized at the expense of previously accepted views. As changes in motion (whether as accelerations or as decelerations) had become the focus of modern physics since the 17th Century, in the same way and by a kind of analogy, changes in meaning have been identified as the focus of study in the human sciences as its practitioners seek to understand how certain changes have occurred (changes which perhaps were not too well expected or anticipated) and how also it is possible to introduce desired changes in a way that will not destroy the goodness of a currently existing social order. How, for instance, does one solve problems that exist within a given economic order without also destroying the productivity which already exists within a given economic order? In the study of human history, in his *How the Reformation Happened*, Hilaire Belloc begins his work with a question which illustrates how historians are challenged in their study of human affairs. From a Protestant viewpoint, the Reformation does not present itself as a mystery. No explanation needs to be provided for it. But, for the Catholic, how is the repudiation of over a thousand years of religious belief and practice to be properly explained? In other words, what really happened?

In raising a question thus which asks about cultural relativity and about how cultural relativity can be transcended by human acts of understanding, Lonergan begins by making three points which perhaps can be summarized in terms of the need to develop a new differentiation of human consciousness: a scholarly differentiated pattern of human consciousness. Previously, in *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, pp. 204-212, Lonergan had identified four distinct patterns of human consciousness (four distinct patterns of human behavior) which have emerged over the course of human history as human beings have moved from a pragmatic,

undifferentiated mode of human thinking and acting to distinct modes of thinking and acting which are each denominated or formed by a dominant conation or interest of some kind that acts to reshape how human beings sense, think, understand, and act. In the birth of philosophy in the Greek world, for instance, once the appearance of things was clearly distinguished from the reality or truth of things, questions about truth emerged as a new dominant passion and, from this passion, a new species of sensing and thinking that revealed a theoretical mode of consciousness in the lives of philosophers and scientists. In the context of scientific inquiry, everything which is done is done for the sake of reaching an understanding that can withstand any criticisms which anyone might want to make.

Later, in his *Method in Theology*, pp. 273-275, Lonergan distinguishes five patterns of consciousness which have been differentiated from the pragmatism of common sense: religiously differentiated consciousness, artistically differentiated consciousness, theoretically differentiated consciousness, interiorly differentiated consciousness, and scholarly differentiated consciousness. And so, with respect to inquiries that attempt to understand the life, times, and culture of another person or society, an initial bridge is built by someone who begins to live and function as a scholar and who, by scholarly activities, moves and begins to understand the commonsense of another person, place, and time. As, in ordinary life, each of us comes to a commonsense understanding of another's common sense (a personal, characteristic way of behaving), in the same way, through scholarly research and a degree of empathy that is engendered (i.e., through the operations of a scholarly differentiated consciousness), students of human affairs and the genesis of human meaning achieve the same kind of understanding. In a way which recalls the romantic hermeneutics of Friedrich Schliermacher (d. 1834), a person living at a later time in human history enters the mind and heart of somebody who lived years before in a very different cultural context. A scripture scholar attempts to put on the mind of St. Paul, or he or she tries to take on a semitic mentality which is to be clearly distinguished from other species of consciousness. To adapt a phrase that has been popularized by Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (which had identified what conditions are needed if the understanding of another culture, time, and place is to occur), a "fusion of horizons" cuts across linguistic and semantic divides. A common understanding begins to join the mind of a scholar with the mind or mentality of persons who lived in an earlier era and whose writings are no longer immediately understood when they are read in the cultural contexts of later times.

In the context of this differentiation of consciousness, to understand the symbolic consciousness of other persons, one works from a heuristic that is familiar with the different forms of symbolic consciousness. Since all human symbols exist as human products (as human carriers of meaning), in an *a priori* way, one identifies elements of meaning within one's consciousness of self (in the living of one's life) as a basis or touchstone for understanding a wide ranging classification of different symbols. In his "The Analogy of Meaning," *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1958-1964*, eds. Robert C. Croken, Frederick E. Crowe, and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), pp. 189-190, on the basis of Gilbert Durand's work in his *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire: Introduction à l'archétypologie générale*, Lonergan identifies symbols of ascension and symbols of decline and fall which are all related to dominant reflexes in persons as they seek to maintain their physical balance when standing and walking and so avoid experiences of falling and losing their way. As an understanding of human psychology and childhood development works to construct a

valuable and even necessary heuristic for the inquiries that one wishes to undertake, in the same way (i.e., analogously), one works with all the other human sciences to find and adapt any suggestive clues or hints that could prove useful in revealing the fuller significance of a human meaning which, up to now, one only partially understands and knows. Through a commonsense understanding of other persons, places, and times, a beginning is made in terms of finding a means or way that can assist in communicating religious meaning which others will understand and appreciate.

However, as Lonergan goes on to argue, to understand meanings and values that belong to other persons and cultures, a scholarly or commonsense method of approach is not adequate. In understanding and identifying differing sets of material conditions, to some extent, one advances in understanding. The understanding *as understanding* always works to transcend any experiences of relativity that are encountered as one finds meanings which are important for other persons and groups though not important for ourselves. However, the understanding that we have of material conditions is not an understanding that directly understands spiritual or intellectual conditions which are also present in the fabric of human life and which exercise a greater causality in determining how persons live with each other. And so, if the meanings which are relative to other persons are to be adequately understood, an explanatory account of human meaning in general is needed in an *a priori* that, in itself, is totally lacking in relativity. Transcultural problems with respect to differences and even conflicts in human meaning (as these occur over time and as they vary from culture to culture) are to be addressed by transcultural principles. Lonergan speaks here about the need to appeal to “absolute features that can be discovered in the interior life of human beings” (p. 83). But, while an appeal to the principle of self-knowledge is not new in Lonergan’s notion of hermeneutics (attending to one’s self-experiencing as one experiences one’s experiencing, understanding, and judgment one is engaged in knowing things which are other than one’s self), Lonergan’s proposed solution for an explanatory account of human meaning makes far more rigorous demands in terms of how deeply and thoroughly a person should engage in one’s acts of self-experiencing, self-understanding, and self-knowing. In Lonergan’s *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, when speaking of *development* in meaning, two kinds are acknowledged. In genetic development, later meanings emerge from earlier meanings in an evolutionary way. Orders of meaning (or laws) succeed and replace each other according to a higher rational principle. But, in dialectical development, later meanings (or laws) emerge as a result of conflict and experiences of difference that are a source of controversy and dispute. Orders of meaning succeed and replace each other but not necessarily or always in a way which abides by a higher rational principle that is very obvious from a strictly human viewpoint. Admittedly, a higher rational principle could be operative, but in ways that lie outside human calculation and control. For example, Aquinas’s notion of eternal law accounts for the order of God’s providence in a government that, in different ways, directs all things to one goal, one finality. Elsewhere, in other writings, Lonergan speaks of progress, decline, and redemption as three vectors which constitute a comprehensive theory or theology of history (a theory or theology of history that can then be transposed into a comprehensive *a priori* theory of meaning). Cf. Bernard Lonergan, “Healing and Creating in History,” *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe, S.J. (New York/Mahweh: Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 100-109. While, for the sake of his argument, Lonergan juxtaposes philosophical judgment with relativism, the existence of the Catholic Church as a universal society is such that, for the sake of its mission,

defensible philosophical judgments must be made if the Church's message is to penetrate the spheres or orders of meaning which exist in other persons and human societies so that all persons can be brought into a union which transcends cultural differences, a union which manifests itself as God's family or God's Kingdom on earth.

In a series of distinctions that Lonergan goes on to make in speaking about the relation between theology and culture and what transitions occur as shifts of meaning occur both within culture and theology, Lonergan employs an explanatory principle that he takes from Aristotle who had distinguished between "the things that are first in themselves" and "the things that are first in regard to us" (*priora quoad se* versus *priora quoad nos*). Cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Doctrinal Pluralism* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1971), p. 17. What is first for us refers to the world of our private, personal experience. What is first in itself refers to an explanatory principle: a reality of some kind which always holds. It is never relative. It is not relative to us. Its existence does not depend on us; is not conditioned by our existence. For a brief illustration here which is taken from a discussion on the nature of human cognition, it is accordingly said about human cognition that "what absolutely is prior *quoad nos* [in regard to us] is our intellectual light, by which the data of experience are rendered intelligible," but "what absolutely is prior *quoad se* [in regard to itself] is the Light of divine understanding, which causes substances [things] to exist." Cf. J. Michael Stebbins, *The Divine Initiative: Grace, World-Order, and Human Freedom in the Early Writings of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 307, n. 59. God's unrestricted understanding is the cause of all things and is conditioned by nothing. But, our human understanding exists only by way of participating in God's understanding though we only come to some sense or experience of divine understanding if we work from and with the experience which we have of our own understanding.

Turning then to Lonergan's discussion, cultures exist in a purely relative sense. They refer to sets of meaning which vary through time and which are conditioned by the differing experiences that people have had of life and the different interpretations which persons have had in the lives which they lead. Each of us; in fact, all persons are born into a culture that is inherited and regarded as a given. Through it, a world is experienced, understood, and known. And so, Lonergan speaks about an "ancient Semitic or Palestinian mentality." With respect to culture, he distinguishes a "scriptural prior," a "patristic prior," and a "contemporary prior." Each refers to a different species of cultural mind-set which had once been dominant in the life of a people (in the history of western culture). If one wishes, one can also speak of a "medieval prior" which, in itself, refers to a distinct set of meanings that, for certain persons at one time, was regarded as normative for how a given social order was to be understood in terms of its meaning and significance.

In contrast with all this, an act of theological understanding (whether in dogmatics or systematics) *as an act of understanding* is a movement of mind which, as a reception, is to be understood as a transcending phenomenon. Why this is so is explained by the fact that every act of understanding, to the degree that it is always rational and wherever it occurs, is always an act which exists because it participates in a divine act of understanding which is God's existence *qua* unrestricted act of understanding. While, in our world, images or phantasms function as material causes to elicit acts of understanding in human subjects, only God's understanding is fully

complete and actual (and so lacking in potentiality). As a formal cause (as something always in act), it accounts for all acts of understanding which occur among created rational beings, whether one talks about the understanding of angels or the understanding of human beings. The existence of rational life among human beings is explained ultimately by something that is both like and unlike: a rational principle which already always exists and which, as the primary cause of causes, is unrestricted in its range and depth. From a standpoint thus which accordingly recognizes the participative, created nature of acts of understanding as these exist in human beings, one can then begin to understand how theological acts of understanding can effect transcultural movements through developments internal to theology which find ways to reiterate the meaning of believed divinely revealed truths in new cultural contexts. Through acts of understanding in theology, the meaning of received truths is more adequately and clearly distinguished from other possible meanings and significances and, by this distinguishing, the meaning of these truths is more adequately and clearly understood. With respect to this growth in understanding, Lonergan refers to it when he speaks about the operation of a “‘systematic prior’.” And then, lastly, when church authorities take these clarifications which have been laborously developed by theological activity and when they affirm or confirm what has been postulated and understood, one can then speak about a dogmatic movement occurring in the life of the Church. The truths of the faith are more clearly known: through prior theological activity and through a ratification and proclamation which subsequently occurs in the Church’s solemn judgments. As Lonergan speaks about it (p. 85), the same thing is believed by all through the course of time even as the exposition of what is believed varies and differs as one moves from questions and concerns belonging to one cultural context to questions and concerns belonging to another cultural context. As much or as frequently as cultural contexts differ from each other, acts of understanding in theology *as acts of understanding* are always transcending or moving beyond the limitations which are present in any given physical or cultural context.

While, of course, it has always been possible to speak about the existence of so-called “bad theology” in the history of theology and about the baneful influences of “bad theology” on the Church’s life, it has also to be admitted that “bad theology” is explained by a certain lack of intelligibility or rationality which exists within it. But, where or whenever understanding does exist in any act of insight present in theology, a meaning presents itself which always transcends an immediately given, historically conditioned context. One has something that always belongs to God’s own understanding of things. For a brief, well known example here, consider St. Augustine’s notion of sin which exists not as something which exists as a being or reality but which properly exists only as a privation or lack of being or goodness. Cf. Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, 2, 20, 54. As Aquinas would more explicitly aver, sin (moral evil) is to be understood as the absence of some kind of good which a given thing should have but which, in fact, it does not have because an operation of some kind is missing or deficient. In the end, sin (moral evil) is best defined as an absence or privation of meaning or intelligibility. It is a totally irrational thing. Cf. Aquinas, *SCG*, 3, 7, 1-12.

The presence thus of this type of intelligibility and rationality in theology accordingly explains why Catholic theology possesses a stability which is germane to its history and development. Insights and understandings never truly become truly dated or outmoded. For reasons having to do with intrinsic rationality, no advances in understanding can ever be abandoned. They cannot be rejected at will since the nature of the Church’s life and mission is

such that it needs to find a way to live within the sum total of human history (as this proceeds from its origins to its terminus). If the Church is to achieve its salvific purposes in a manner which jives with the created order of things that already exists, it must encourage the posing and asking of difficult philosophical questions so that a more sophisticated order can be established within theological inquiry: an order that more carefully distinguishes different sets of questions and tasks since, by an increasing wise ordering of means to ends in the conduct of theological inquiry, a greater meaningfulness can gradually make itself present in Christian life. A new human culture can be begin to appear as it experiences a transformation which directs all things toward God and the things of God.