

CONVERSION AND SPIRITUALITY

Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984)

Raymond Moloney

IN RECENT YEARS THERE HAS BEEN AN INCREASING INTEREST in the significance of Bernard Lonergan for the study of spirituality. Some important spiritual writers, such as William Johnston, Daniel Helminiak and Bernard McGinn, have indicated their indebtedness to Lonergan's thought. One must admit, however, that Lonergan's own approach to spirituality comes more as a part of the general texture of his philosophy and theology than in any sustained systematic treatment.¹

It is Lonergan's philosophy of the human person² which has been of most help for spirituality. Lonergan focuses on human consciousness, and thereby provides spirituality with a clear and systematic account of how the human mind and heart can operate in an integrated way. Moreover, Lonergan ascribes a high significance to human subjectivity: to our appropriating personally all that we experience, whether externally or internally, and to our drawing what we experience into the processes of understanding, judging and deciding. This stress on the human subject has meant that at key moments of the intellectual process Lonergan turns to the language of spirituality, not as some pious exercise, but as a way of answering needs arising from his philosophy and theology precisely in themselves. For him such notions as religious conversion, the love of God, authenticity and even holiness, are central, not only to the everyday practice of religion, but also to the academic interpretation of religious commitment that we

¹ Lonergan's main works are: *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972)—hereafter *Method*; and *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, second edition (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1958), fifth edition (*Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, volume 3, Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1992).

² I have developed this at more length in my article, 'The Person as Subject of Spirituality in the Writings of Bernard Lonergan', *Milltown Studies*, 45 (Summer 2000), 66-80.

call theology. In this way, Lonergan points towards a narrowing of the gap between theology and spirituality which has been with us for so many centuries.

The Levels of Consciousness

Consciousness is a pivotal notion in Lonergan's idea of the person. Spirituality, Lonergan says in one place, is about the transformation of consciousness. 'There is sought', he writes, 'the transformation of consciousness that makes possible a human life that is a life of prayer'.³ Lonergan presents consciousness in terms of four distinct levels of human activity: experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding, with all four of these coming together into a self-assembling unity. Spirituality occurs in different, though related, ways on each of these four levels of consciousness, or, as he puts it on the page just mentioned, 'in the polyphony of its many levels'.

This language of 'consciousness' indicates a shift in Lonergan away from his earlier, more explicitly metaphysical manner towards a more existential kind of thinking. The former approach, which he called faculty psychology, spoke of the person in terms of intellect, will and emotions. The latter speaks rather of the data of consciousness and of the subject they reveal. 'What is given in consciousness is the subject, his various states and operations, and the various relations consciously linking operations with one another.'⁴ Since this newer approach sees the processes of human consciousness in an existential and dynamic unity, it is far closer to the concrete movement of thought found in spiritual writers than the old abstract faculty psychology ever could be. At the same time, nevertheless, it maintains the benefits of a philosophically grounded system.

Running through these four levels of consciousness is the notion of desire, desire as the power which fuels their movement—a point which he first came to appreciate in his early reading of Augustine. A spirituality based on Lonergan has to be a spirituality of desire. Desire here, however, is not to be understood as one option among others, but

³ 'Lectures on Religious Studies and Theology—First Lecture: Religious Experience', in *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan SJ*, edited by Frederick Crowe (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 113-128, here 119. This book is particularly useful for Lonergan on spirituality.

⁴ 'Religious Commitment', in *The Pilgrim People: A Vision of Hope*, edited by Joseph Papin (Villanova, Pa: Villanova UP), 45-69, here 59.

as a reality built into the very nature of human consciousness and constitutive of its entire movement. In his earlier writings Lonergan speaks of 'the pure desire to know', but from *Method in Theology* onwards he speaks of 'the pure desire for value'.⁵ And since God is the ultimate value, this pure desire for value is tantamount to the pure desire for God, an idea to which we will return. Another way of speaking of this desire is as a movement for self-transcendence.



Bernard J. F. Lonergan

Self-transcendence means going beyond the self. Within us, there is a dynamism to keep going beyond, to be moving from one level of consciousness to another, from one object or set of objects to what lies beyond. Ultimately this dynamism is the human being's reaching for God, whether or not the individual recognises it as such. Indeed this orientation of our conscious intentionality gives us our best definition of God: God as the reality which fulfils that fundamental orientation.⁶ Nevertheless, this definition is negative. 'In this life we can know God, not as He is in Himself, but only by deficient analogy. God Himself remains mystery.'⁷ God is always the one who is *beyond*.

It would be wrong to suppose that the passage from one level to another is always a smooth and unwavering transition. In particular I draw attention to the passage from understanding to judging. The difference here is that between insight and affirmation, between saying what one *thinks* something to be and assessing whether in fact it *is so*. Lonergan explored this distinction of levels particularly in chapters 9-11 of *Insight*. In his system the distinction marks a crucial transition

⁵ *Insight*, ⁵1992, 372-375, ²1958, 348-350; *Method*, 34-36.

⁶ *Method*, 341.

⁷ 'Mission and the Spirit', in *A Third Collection*, 23-34, here 26-27.

from deductivism to existentialist thought, from rationalism to critical thinking, from essence to existence.

A Basis for Discernment

A theme in spirituality for which Lonergan's philosophy is particularly relevant is that of discernment. For many people, experience itself is a form of knowledge; for Lonergan, experience is only an infra-structure of the process of knowledge. Experience is indeed necessary for there to be knowledge, but experience only becomes knowledge in so far as it is illuminated by understanding and validated by judgment.⁸ Experience is not autonomous; we cannot legitimately appeal to experience unless and until it has been discerned.

Feelings are, of course, an important part of discernment, particularly for choices made in what Ignatius calls 'the second time' (Exx 176). Those who know Lonergan only from his early writings, may well regard him as a 'head person'. But Lonergan's abandonment of faculty psychology enabled him to incorporate feelings within his account of human knowledge and consciousness. People writing on discernment are often tempted to divide feeling from thought. Lonergan, while preserving the necessary distinctions, integrates them.

In Lonergan's approach feelings are an aspect of that 'experience' which constitutes the first level of consciousness. Since each higher level in Lonergan's vision retains something of the richness of lower levels while nevertheless going beyond them, feelings thus remain basic to the whole process. Feelings constitute, Lonergan tells us, 'the mass and momentum of our lives'. Without them our conscious operations are only 'paper-thin'.⁹ In particular, the feelings that arise on the first level mesh with the judgments of value occurring on the fourth level. Apprehensions of value, we are told, arise from within feelings. Lonergan likes to quote his version of Pascal's famous dictum: 'the heart has reasons which reason does not know'. For Lonergan, the term 'heart' indicates that the person is operating on the fourth level of consciousness, and is making the discernments of value proper to a

⁸ We should note Lonergan's reluctance to use the expression 'experience of God'. See Moloney, 'The Person as Subject of Spirituality', 75.

⁹ 'Aquinas Today: Tradition and Innovation', in *A Third Collection*, 35-54, here 30; see also *Method*, 30-31.

person in love. There is a knowledge born of love, especially a grasp of values. As St Gregory put it long ago, 'Love itself is a form of knowledge'.¹⁰

In Love with God

Loneran is not merely a philosopher, however; he is also a significant theologian of grace. The point becomes clear when Lonergan tries to interpret what happens on the fourth level of consciousness, where our experiencing, understanding and judging issue in decision and commitment to values, values that shape and guide our lives.

Values may be true or false. In so far as they are true, they are grounded in the truly good, and they draw a person out of self-interest into a process of becoming capable of authentic love. Going beyond self in authentic love is the culmination of self-transcendence, and when that is achieved in a stable fashion one falls in love. We have already seen how the notion of God, the ultimate Mystery, arises from within consciousness, and how that consciousness also strives for the ultimate in value. So it is that, for Lonergan, the summit of the interior life consists in what he calls 'the dynamic state of being in love with God'.

Here Lonergan's philosophy explicitly tips over into theology and spirituality. When a person falls in love, there is a new beginning—a point which applies as much to one falling in love with God as to one falling in love with anyone else. As Lonergan puts it, a 'new principle' is introduced. This 'falling in love with God' is not our initiative but God's. God takes over. God's love floods our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us (Romans 5:5).¹¹

Loneran has different ways of speaking of this central event of the spiritual life: 'being grasped by ultimate concern';¹² 'religious experience at its finest';¹³ most significantly, 'religious conversion'. This last phrase is almost a technical term for this event. Conversion is a change of direction, which,

¹⁰ Gregory the Great, *Forty Homilies on the Gospels*, 27.4 (PL 76:1207A). For apprehensions and values see *Method*, 37-38.

¹¹ *Method*, 105; 'Dialectic of Authority', in *A Third Collection*, 5-12, here 10. Romans 5:5 is probably Lonergan's favourite quotation from Scripture.

¹² *Method*, 240.

¹³ *Philosophy of God and Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), 18.

... transforms the existential subject into a subject in love, a subject held, grasped, possessed, owned through a total and so an other-worldly love.¹⁴

Elsewhere, Lonergan writes:

Where before, an account of the human good related men to one another and to nature, now human concern reaches beyond man's world to God and God's world Human development is not in skills and virtues but in holiness.¹⁵

The Call to Holiness

We can now see how Lonergan's philosophy of the human mind and of God culminate in the sense of a transcendent call to holiness. Holiness here is to be understood as a dynamic state of being in love with God, in which we experience a summons to rise out of our egoism and to become a force for love in the world. Once the summons is heard, it becomes the principle of the person's whole subsequent life, and in particular it sets the pattern for their spirituality:

It is other-worldly falling in love. It is total and permanent self-surrender, not as an act but as a dynamic state that is prior to and principle of subsequent acts. It is revealed in retrospect as an undertow of existential consciousness, as a fated acceptance of a vocation to holiness¹⁶

In responding to this basic call to holiness there is a notable ascetical element in Lonergan. Human self-transcendence and religious conversion are always 'precarious'.¹⁷ There is a constant tension or dialectic between the self as transcending and the self as transcended.¹⁸ Even in his philosophical work, *Insight*, Lonergan spoke of the need for repentance and sorrow for sin.¹⁹ References to prayer are commonly combined with references to self-denial. Lonergan

¹⁴ *Method*, 242. See more generally also 240-244, 101-124.

¹⁵ 'Religious Commitment', 65-66.

¹⁶ *Method*, 240.

¹⁷ *Method*, 110.

¹⁸ Lonergan, 'Religious Commitment', 43.

¹⁹ *Insight*, ¹1992, 722, ²1958, 700.

shares Aquinas' view of humanity's moral impotence when left to its own resources. In *Insight* he gives a striking account of the various biases of human subjectivity, biases which constantly draw us into cycles of decline; in *Method in Theology* he writes of the clash between satisfactions and values. The struggle for authentic living is described with realism and emphasis, and with the overtones of an Ignatian examination of conscience.

Deciding is one thing, doing is another. One has yet to uncover and root out one's individual, group and general bias. One has to keep developing one's knowledge of human reality and potentiality as they are in the existing situation. One has to keep scrutinising one's intentional responses to values and their implicit scales of preference. One has to listen to criticism and to protest. One has to remain ready to learn from others. For moral knowledge is the proper possession only of morally good men, and until one has merited that title, one has still to advance and to learn.²⁰

Loneran's account of this key event of 'falling in love with God' is marked by a paradox. According to the medieval metaphysics and theology in which Lonergan was steeped, there is no desire of the unknown, and nothing is loved without first being known. But Lonergan resolves the issue. The old medieval tags about the priority of knowledge,

... do not oblige God to flood our hearts with His love only if first He has bestowed knowledge of himself on our minds. On the contrary, I should say, God operates not first on the mind but first on the heart.²¹

This is an aspect of Lonergan's teaching with which some, even some normally close to him, are unhappy. It seems to me, however, that it can be reconciled with the rest of his thought once one approaches it theologically. The priority in question is primarily a priority of grace, which can dominate all that lies in the person's intellect and will at the time, and direct it in new paths. There is an apophatic aspect to Lonergan's thought, to which we shall return below.

²⁰ *Method*, 240.

²¹ Lonergan, 'Religious Commitment', 59-60; see also *Method*, 122-123.

Two Movements

Loneragan's account of religious experience, and indeed of human consciousness in general, sees them as dependent on two 'movements': an ascending one from humanity to God, and a descending one from God to the creation. Religious experience clearly depends chiefly on the descending movement, since it is all God's gift working itself out on the various levels of our individual and communal life. Nevertheless, there is also an ascending movement, as each level of conscious intentionality comes into harmony with God's primordial gift, and culminates in the fruits of the Spirit, in love, joy and peace.

But the movement from above remains the more fundamental. What is most striking in Lonergan's account of this movement is the

***A spirituality
of love and
transformation***

way in which the notion of love predominates. Lonergan's is clearly a theology and spirituality of transforming love. Love, Lonergan says more than once, is 'the superior way'. 'The strongest and the best of the relationships between persons is love.'²² This is very far from an abstract gnosticism and from a mystique of being or of self-fulfilment. It is a topic about which Lonergan writes with eloquence and, let it be said, with feeling. For him the existence of love is the unassailable fact at the centre of all religious experience. There is this 'charged field of love and meaning' which pervades the world like a room filled with music; but it is only through ourselves being loving persons that we will be able to perceive it.²³

Man's insertion in community and history includes an invitation for him to accept the transformation of falling in love: the transformation of domestic love between husband and wife; the transformation of human love for one's neighbour; the transformation of divine love when God's love floods our inmost hearts through the Holy Spirit He has given us (Romans 5:5). Such transforming love has its occasions, its conditions, its causes. But once it comes and as long as it lasts it takes over.²⁴

²² *Philosophy of God and Theology*, 59. See also 'A Post-Hegelian Philosophy of Religion', in *A Third Collection*, 202-223, at 217.

²³ *Method*, 290.

²⁴ 'Christology Today: Methodological Reflections', in *A Third Collection*, 74-99, here 77; see also 'Lectures on Religious Studies and Theology—Second Lecture: Religious Knowledge', 129-145, here 133.

This descending movement is met by an answering ascending one. Lonergan speaks of 'cultivating' one's religious experience. This means letting one's religious experience enter into harmony with the rest of one's symbolic system and so into harmony with the culture and civilisation in which one finds oneself.²⁵ In particular it means letting that downward movement mesh with the ascending movements of deliberation and desire towards development and growth. Here we should invoke all that was said above about feeling and affectivity as integral to the whole movement. Indeed he tells us that, once you love God, 'affectivity is of a single piece'.²⁶

When a person has fallen in love with God, basic features of human consciousness enter into the descending movement of love and grace, enabling this latter to attain a certain level of human development as it flows into the various aspects of human life. Two aspects in particular should be underlined, since these bring out how Lonergan is largely free from that tension between the transcendental account of human consciousness and historical revelation which is a problem, for instance, in the work of Rahner.²⁷ Firstly, as the person strives to give the inner impulses of grace their necessary human articulation, there is a movement from the inner word of God's love to the outer word:

When a man and a woman love each other but do not avow their love, they are not yet in love. Their very silence means that their love has not yet reached the point of self-surrender and self-donation. It is the love that each freely and fully reveals to the other that brings about the radically new situation of being in love and that begins the unfolding of its life-long implications.²⁸

Secondly, this movement to the outer word is necessarily communitarian, for human beings are by their very nature orientated to the world of inherited language, tradition and society. For Lonergan, a con-temporary notion of person is essentially social and inter-

²⁵ See 'Lectures on Religious Studies and Theology—First Lecture: Religious Experience', in *A Third Collection*, 113-128, at 127.

²⁶ *Method*, 39. For a fuller treatment of growth in the spiritual life, see my 'The Spiritual Journey in the Writings of Bernard Lonergan', *Milltown Studies*, 46 (Winter 2000), 117-127.

²⁷ I have discussed this point at greater length in my article, 'Rahner and Lonergan on Spirituality', *Lowain Studies*, 28/4 (Winter 2003), 295-310.

²⁸ *Method*, 112-113.

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*Wisdom comes
not from watching a parade
(he said),
but from marching consciously,
feeling the rhythm and movement in me.*

*Theology is not carved lapidary
from the quarry of eternal truth
(he said),
but flashes fresh in each new age,
dancing just beyond the horizon of longing.*

*He made a deft incision in my mind,
as small and as useful as an episiotomy,
midwifing a less painful birth
for the unthinkable,
cutting the umbilical of fixed assumptions,
the tether of unchanged ideas.*

*A birth but also a death
of the great fumbling heresy
that faith is blind repetition.*

*In the end
(he said),
if the Word had not flamed up
and tied himself
to the tree of time and place
there would be no fixed point.*

But now there is.

John Kinsella

subjective. While Providence will decide in what community and tradition one first learns to love God, it is clear that for our author the social dimension of religious experience is central to its human development. It is this which brings the Christian into relationship with Christ, Church and sacrament. In this system these are no optional extras; they are intrinsic to the due development of that original call to holiness which God imparts to every individual.

Thus, for Lonergan, spirituality in its fullest form is both Christocentric and Catholic. Through Christ and the Church, the 'descending' movement of divine life and grace increases within the person, and enters more fully into the various departments of human life. Moreover, this descending movement meshes with an ascending one. Our affective development from above downwards is matched by a cognitive and affective development from below upwards, as we learn to understand, assess and implement our experience. And this latter process can be enriched all the time by influences from the cultural and societal arrangements we have inherited. For a

Christian, Christ has to be the centre of this process. Christian religious experience comes about, Lonergan says, 'in so far as you are related to Christ as God'.²⁹

Nevertheless, what we are saying here about the thrust of Lonergan's vision towards the concrete and the historical needs to be qualified. Lonergan's talk of self-transcendence is marked by a notable tendency towards the apophatic—a tendency which emerges not only when Lonergan writes about mysticism, but also when he speaks of the love of God in a more general way:

By such love one is oriented positively to what is transcendent in loveliness. Such a positive orientation and the consequent self-surrender, as long as they are operative, enable one to dispense with any intellectual analogy or concept; and when they cease to be operative, the memory of them enables one to be content with enumerations of what God is not.³⁰

This apophatic tendency should be seen to lie behind the frequent, if incidental, references to progress in the life of prayer as a simplifying one. Religious experience, he writes, 'is something exceedingly simple and, in time, also exceedingly simplifying'.³¹

The Context of Redemption

Lonergan's focus on Christ is part of his response to the problem of evil and the doctrine of redemption. In Lonergan's approach, the doctrine of redemption is the basic context for all spirituality. It is remarkable how, from *Insight* on, Lonergan's solution to the problem of evil is consistently focused on the challenge of self-sacrificing love.³² This solution is one which ties in with that other basic theme of his writings: the movement of consciousness towards self-transcendence,

²⁹ *Philosophy of God and Theology*, 67. See also 'The Mediation of Christ in Prayer', in *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1958-1964, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, volume 6 (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1996), 160-182.

³⁰ 'Unity and Plurality: The Coherence of Christian Truth', in *A Third Collection*, 239-250, here 244. See also *Method*, 278. On mysticism, see Gordon Rixon, 'Bernard Lonergan and Mysticism', *Theological Studies*, 62 (2002), 479-497.

³¹ *Method*, 290; see also 113.

³² For instance, *Insight*, ¹1992, 721-722, ²1958, 699-700.



reaching its fulfilment in the dynamic state that is self-surrendering love of God.³³

The principle of redemption, Lonergan tells us, is self-sacrificing love. The motive and model is Christ, suffering, dying and rising. In the background here is the considerable work on redemption which Lonergan carried out when teaching the subject in Rome in the early 1960s. Most of Lonergan's writing is presented with all the calm one associates with the philosopher, but occasionally the evil of the world and the corresponding call to redemption and liberation bring an energy and passion to his pen that betray the religious zeal which

is in the background all the time. The human situation, as he sees it, 'seethes with alienation, bitterness, hatred, mounting violence'. 'What will smash', he asks, 'the determinisms—economic, social, cultural, psychological—that egoism has constructed and exploited?'

In answer to such a question, liberation theology speaks of justice; Lonergan speaks of self-sacrificing love. The only answer to our plight lies in the transformation of consciousness brought about by grace, as it gently and quietly touches the human heart. This leads to,

... the experience of a new community, in which faith, hope and charity dissolve the rationalizations, break determinisms and reconcile the estranged and the alienated, and there is reaped the harvest of the Spirit that is '... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control' (Galatians 5:22-23).³⁴

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³³ 'Lectures on Religious Studies and Theology—Second Lecture', at 133.

³⁴ For the matter in the last two paragraphs see three references in *A Third Collection*: 'Dialectic of Authority', at 10; 'Mission and the Spirit', 23-34, at 32-33; and 'Lectures on Religious Studies and Theology—Third Lecture: The Ongoing Genesis of Methods', 146-165, at 158.