

Review of *Method in Theology*,

[Bernard J. F. Lonergan, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, 405)]

By Greg Bahnsen

A two-fold importance attaches to this timely volume. In the first place it comes from the pen of the most philosophically sophisticated writer within the Roman Catholic communion today, Bernard Lonergan. Lonergan, a Canadian by birth, has taught Dogmatic Theology at the Gregorian University in Rome, Regis College in Toronto, and is currently Stillman Professor in the Harvard Divinity School; nearing retirement, Lonergan has recently become a widely acclaimed scholar both within and without Romanist circles. *Method of Theology* is the theological culmination of Lonergan's prodigious literary history, the *magnum opus* of which is undoubtedly *Insight, A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970, 1958). In the second place, *Method in Theology* is significant because of its subject matter. In recent years the theological world has come to realize the need for rethinking and deeper analysis in the area of metatheology, the study of the nature of theology and its proper methods. Because a competent discussion and critique of Lonergan has yet to be produced within the Reformed community, and because the subject of metatheology has not received treatment by a Reformed scholar since Abraham Kuyper's *Principles of Sacred Theology*, there is a dual reason for interest in the latest volume written by Lonergan.

The key chapter of *Method in Theology* is chapter 5, "Functional Specialties." There Lonergan explains that because contemporary theology is specialized it must be seen as a series of interdependent operations; thus the question of theological method is raised. Of the three types of specialization that are possible, he favors a functional specialization which can be the link between field specialization (subdividing the data) and subject specialization (classifying the results of investigation). Under a functional specialization Lonergan would isolate eight distinct stages in the process of doing theology; each separate process pursues different ends and employs different means. Yet the entire process is unified by the cognitional dynamic of the subject who is performing the theological task. At this point it becomes essential to understand the epistemology of Lonergan as he presents it in *Insight*; the theory of cognitional structure which he develops in *Insight* is the key to understanding both the diversity and unity of the theological method he presents in *Method in Theology*. Throughout his book on *Method* Lonergan continually expects *insight* to supply the background for ideas which he introduces.

Necessarily digressing into *Insight* for a moment, then, I would judge that Lonergan's epistemology is best characterized by a psychologism which he purports to defend as isomorphic to the proportionate structure of being (metaphysics). In this psychologism there are two key notions: the unrestricted, driving desire to understand, and the theory of cognitional structure. Lonergan holds that a disinterested epistemological desire is central to human nature; this desire initiates inquiry and wonder in man, and then it drives him on to ask increasingly intelligent questions until he arrives at the metaphysical theology of Thomism. The learning process which man is taken through by his driving desire to understand is characterized, according to Lonergan, by a basic and common cognitional structure. This structure has three successive levels, each higher level presupposing the lower: presentations (raw data) of experience, intelligence (acts of understanding by means of insights), and reflection (judgments as to truth and probability status). The knower is presented with certain empirical situations which raise questions of intelligence; having formulated an initial answer by means of an insight (the supervening act of organizing intelligence which is facilitated by heuristic devices), the knower reflects and then passes judgment upon the certitude of his formulation. Having arrived at this point, the knower goes through a process of deliberation which ends in his decision to act in a certain manner upon the knowledge obtained. Thus the structure of consciousness can be schematized:

Experience —>Understanding —> Judgment—> Decision

And each individual is carried from stage to stage by the driving desire to understand. (Certain aberrations result should that driving desire be stifled by individual, group, or general bias.) Lonergan holds that this cognitional structure isomorphic to the structure of reality, and further that it proves the existence of God (two interesting elements of *Insight* which I cannot discuss here).

Returning to *Method of Theology*, we find out that the eight functional specialties into which Lonergan divides the theological task correspond to the cognitional structure outlined in *Insight*. Theology, says Lonergan, divides into two different phases. *Mediating* theology encounters the past and challenges one to a decision; *mediated* theology begins with that decision (i.e., conversion) and confronts the present. The first phase introduces us, while the second phase *is* the knowledge of God. Now each of these theological phases further subdivides into four functional specialties (eight in all, then) which operate on all four levels of the cognitional structure, but achieve the end proper to *one particular level* of it. Hence in the mediating phase of theology we advance from research to interpretation to history to dialectic (apologetically dealing with conflicting tendencies); in the mediated phase of theology we descend from foundations (that which objectifies the process of conversion that took place in dialectics) to doctrines to systematics (which conceptualizes, clarifies, and removes inconsistencies) to communications (i.e., practical theology). The ascending and descending movements of theology are accounted for by the fact that we begin with data which lead toward personal encounter, and then reflecting upon this conversion experience we use it as a horizon within which to move through doctrinal formulations to practical expressions on the pastoral level. Schematizing Lonergan's epistemology and metatheology, we derive:

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| EPISTEMOLOGY: | | Experience | Understanding | Judgment | Decision |
| THEOLOGY: | MEDIATING: | Research | Interpretation | History | Dialectics |
| | MEDIATED: | Communications | Systematics | Doctrines | Foundations |

Such is the heart of Lonergan's metatheology. Because it is based upon the intentional operations of the cognitional structure, he considers it to be a transcendental method which is dependent upon the unrestricted epistemological dynamism inherent in human nature.

The chapters leading up to chapter 5 present the presuppositions of Lonergan's metatheological scheme; the chapters following chapter 5 go into more extensive analysis of each of the functional specialties of theology. Each is a challenge in itself to Reformed thinkers, but cannot be expositoryly summarized in a review of abbreviated scope. However, a highly selective exposition of the presupposition (in particular) can be indirectly derived from the critique provided below.

Because Lonergan's view of the theological process is dependent upon his epistemological position as presented in *Insight*, a discussion of the weaknesses of his metatheology can appropriately begin with a criticism, albeit short, of *Insight*. Lonergan's epistemology is vulnerable since it is staked on a psychologism which could only be proved by one having privileged access to the mental operations of a significant majority of all men; otherwise he is arguing from the similarity of *outward* acts between human beings engaged in intelligent thought – in which case his theory of cognitional structure is based upon an argument from silence at best or the fallacy of false cause at worst. Moreover, the idea of a structure of cognitional process is a metaphor built up from a misleading view of *mental substance*

which has no support in the Biblical view of the soul or in modern philosophy. Lonergan's notion of a cognitional structure is merely a "way of seeing" things; therefore, it cannot bear the weight of proving the elaborate metaphysic (of *Insight*) or the metatheological process (of *Method in Theology*) which Lonergan thrusts upon it. In *Insight* Lonergan develops his epistemology under the pretense of neutrality, claiming to have no commitment to Thomism and its theism until they are proved in due course. However, the epistemological and methodological stance assumed by a philosopher is assumed for some reason, and in order best to arrive at true conclusions about the states of affairs; these reasons, as well as the ability to compare the success of competing positions for engendering true conclusions, depend upon some metaphysical understanding (though unrefined) of the world already. Being unable to ground a successful interaction of synthetic facts and analytic laws in man's thinking, autonomous epistemology such as utilized by Lonergan amounts either to arbitrariness or to a denial of a theoretically justified doctrine of knowledge (an epistemology which is antiepistemic I). Further, Lonergan's philosophy calls for the complete intelligibility of the world as the fulfillment of the driving desire to understand, but this has all the characteristics of wishful thinking – especially when Lonergan admits that there is mystery in the natural world! Scripture says that no man seeks to understand God, and almost anyone can find individuals in his community who are not at all interested in understanding anything at all; Lonergan's epistemology simply embodies an erroneous psychology of man, the intellect's primacy, and the noetic effects of the fall.

It appears that *Insight* does not have the resources to support Lonergan's viewpoint in *Method in Theology*. The latter has its own peculiar problems as well. Foremost among them is the fact that Lonergan's division makes conversion (the transition from dialectics to foundations) irrelevant to historical investigation and hermeneutics (interpretation); yet the beginning of understanding is the fear of the Lord, not research and autonomous science. Beyond this, Lonergan's scheme comes off looking terribly arbitrary once we reflect upon it. Why should foundations correlate with decision, or history with judgment, or communications with experience? There appears to be no inner correspondence to me, and thus I fear that their respective placements have been made merely to meet the needs of Lonergan's own system of thought. The whole idea of splitting up these functions in the way Lonergan does is beset with difficulties: e.g., is it possible to divorce systematics from doctrine (*i.e.*, understanding from judgment)?

Finally, the presuppositions Lonergan brings to his metatheological scheme must be questioned. First, Lonergan claims that he is *not* doing theology *but* metatheology (xii); however, his views of God, revelation, and authority are inextricably involved in his ideas about theology and its proper method. He assumes that ethical matters are based upon rational matters (e.g., p. 9); however, it should be noted that one's state of morality easily influences his use of reason and evaluation of data. By basing the transcendental precepts (e.g., "Be intelligent") upon the analysis of the dynamism of human consciousness (p. 20), Lonergan commits a naturalistic fallacy. He gives evidence of believing that the work of scientists is detached from, and unaffected by, matters of "ultimate concern" (*i.e.*, religion – p. 23). Moreover, the transcendental method is basically a-religious (cf. p. 25). Dr. C. Van Til's writings can be consulted for a refutation of this chimera of neutrality. In addition to these problems in Lonergan's discussion of *method*, he has a tendency toward mere categorizing or arranging of material instead of arguing for a point of view (e.g., pp. 73ff.).

Lonergan's view of *meaning* wrongly categorizes linguistic meaning so that it cannot express intersubjectivity, as does a smile (p. 60), puts common sense and ordinary language in a water-tight compartment separated from theoretical thought and language (pp. 71f, 83ff.), and strangely posits the priority of poetry in the development of language in history (p. 73). It is little wonder that, on his own views of language, translation accuracy is a formidable problem (p. 71).

Lonergan's presuppositions on *religion* are especially dubious. Human authenticity amounts to love according to his viewpoint (cf. pp. 104-106), and love is a different dimension from rational knowledge since love is a conscious, yet unknown, *experience* on the level of mystery and moralism (pp. 106-107). Such an outlook and dichotomy (essentially Kantian) is sufficiently criticized in current Reformed literature so as to need no further elaboration in this review. Lonergan goes on to say that love pertains to a world not mediated by meaning, and thus it receives outward verbal expression only in a historically conditioned medium (p. 112); this ploy becomes his explanation for the diversity of religious utterances (p. 114) and the salvation of the non-Christian (P. 123). Faith is taken to be love-knowledge (cf. p. 115) and distinguished from belief, which is verbally and rationally qualified (p. 119); this allows for Lonergan's strong support of ecumenism, which looks for a deeper unity (p. 119) among differing creedal expressions, a unity to be found in the realm of interiority (p. 115). And then, in good contemporary style (yet lacking any cogency), Lonergan affirms that he is really expressing the same thing as the orthodox statements of the magisterium – though not being restricted to classical ways of expression (pp. 123f.). It is in just *this sort* of overwhelming drive toward *unity* and ecumenism that the Reformed theologian can see his own *discontinuity* with Lonergan's current-day Catholicism and theological method.