

Consciousness in Christian Community

Tad Dunne

[Originally appeared as "Consciousness in Christian Community," in M. Lamb, ed, *Creativity and Method: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lonergan* (Marquette University Press, 1980) pp 291-303.]

I. Catholicity in Religious Experience

One of the most important contributions of historical criticism has been the insight that no significant event exists prior to people's interpretation of what the event means. Human events are occurrences in a world mediated by acts of meaning, and so we can properly say that the first historians are the participants themselves. We can discover this wrinkle in the nature of human events also in the resurrection of Christ. From a fully historical point of view, that event included the interpretations of it suggested by Jesus and proclaimed by his disciples—interpretations which sprung from conscious acts of faith. It is an illusion to think of the resurrection as the "real" event and then ask whether anybody had any faith in it. We can plausibly imagine that when the earliest disciples proclaimed that God had fulfilled his promises from of old, they included their own acts of faith within this act of God in their time. In fact, what seems highly implausible is that the disciples would have regarded their acts of faith as not part of that act of God. God, then, not only raised Jesus up and made him Lord, but, as part of the same salvific act, also raised up the faith of Christians over the centuries.¹

This raising up of faith is a significant experience. As experience, it begs interpretation. But as significant, it must include not only sense data (the voices of witnesses, the texts of evangelists) but something in the data of consciousness too, otherwise no one would find that faith significant in their lives. What is it in consciousness that makes Christian faith something that can be held in common? If we can answer this, we will understand (in, I hope, a transcultural way) what the common experience is that makes Christian community possible.

Let me approach the question again, this time from the angle of hermeneutics. Do we all agree on what the various formulas for resurrection mean? We have to understand their meaning in our lives if we are to judge in faith that they are true. For example, what does it mean to say "Jesus is Lord" or Jesus "is risen" or Jesus "was raised" or that we are "saved" or that our "sins are forgiven"? I once tried to express the truth behind these formulas in a basic formula that I thought might be more intelligible to our times: *Through Christ, God is now giving himself on our behalf.* Still, this

formula has its limitations. It suggests a view that God did not always act on our behalf; it neglects to mention sin; and there are certainly other valid difficulties with it.

But how do you and I recognize such difficulties? Do we not test it against our living faith? And in what does that testing consist? We appeal, I believe, not to another formula, but to truths we know, in spite of the fact that all formulations of truths are revisable. In stating that through Christ, God is now giving himself on our behalf, I can only hope that persons with faith know what I'm talking about. This presumes that all genuine Christians enjoy a knowing which correctly understands the meaning of a certain relevant set of data. Without the possibility of such common and correct judgments, of course, Christian community would be impossible. But there also has to be a common set of data too; otherwise the judgments would not be about the same reality. So there seems to be some base in experience which is properly universal or "catholic." The catholicity of faith, we might say, is the appearance in knowledge of a prior catholicity in experience. In terms of my own limping formulation, God "now giving himself on our behalf" refers to an understood set of experiences—both of sense data and of my own operations as a subject—which I presume to be commonly recognizable. With the word "is" I judge my understanding of those experiences to be the same understanding of the same experiences which all genuine Christians have, beginning with Jesus and his disciples.

Furthermore, Jesus himself must have had this same universal element in experience as well as its verified understanding in judgment, not only because he too is human but also because otherwise his disciples would have nothing meaningful in common with him. When I say "verified understanding in judgment" I do not mean the further objectifications which follow upon judgment, be they artistic, dogmatic, evangelical, confessing, dreamt, theological, scholarly, or dramatic. I mean rather the act of knowing the real meaning of a set of experiences--the act against which one measures the validity of all its objectifications.

There seems to be, then, a reality in conscious experience which Christians have in common with Christ and with one another and whose meaning can be correctly grasped through faith. I am speaking not of all the experiences which faith affects, but of those experiences through which faith reaches its proper object. One might think of such experiences as reading Scripture, or being encouraged by the witness of a Christian, or feeling some awe at the thought that God is on the move in one's life. In these examples, the objects as experienced are different complexes of data, and they differ somewhat in meaning. However, in the subject who experiences, there is one experience that is common to them all. It is the experience of a self-in-relation, with the relation being to God, to Christ, to Love, to other Christians. All experience is intrinsically ambiguous; otherwise it would not stand in need of correct understanding. The same is true of one's self-experience. Is the self I am conscious of in all my activities a self in relation to God

or not? Is this self really part of a we with Jesus, with his love, and with the community of his disciples or not? Did not even Jesus experience a self in union with God, prescinding from the various human understandings of that union by Paul, John, and Jesus himself? Whatever other experiences may be relevant to a Christian faith, certainly the experience of a self-in-relation to God is worth investigation.

II. We-consciousness

With these experiences in mind, I would like to pursue an answer to the following question: What, in terms of human consciousness, is the ontological structure of Christian community? Bernard Lonergan offers the only basic clarity I know of on this subject.² For my part in this tribute to him on his seventy-fifth birthday, I intend to begin with his notion of consciousness and develop its social dimensions within the larger framework of his thought. More specifically, I want to investigate the idea of a “we-consciousness,” to understand how it develops and what sort of knowledge it is. Along the way, I will touch briefly on how the category can be used for expressing such doctrines as the actual presence of Christ in the consciousness of Christians, the classical spiritual category of a Unitive Way, and the intrinsic meaning of doing God’s will.

First, then, I will review Lonergan’s understanding of consciousness to clear up a chronic ambiguity that afflicts the majority of discussions one comes across on the topics of Christ’s consciousness and of human experience. Lonergan distinguishes between consciousness-as-perception and consciousness-as-experience. Consciousness-as-perception is the non-technical and ordinary meaning of the term found in such expressions as “I was quite conscious of the fact that you felt uneasy” or “I became conscious of a deep feeling of peace.” It simply means known or perceived. The “con-” in this use of “conscious” has become an etymologically useless appendage. Consciousness-as-experience, on the other hand, means the awareness of oneself and one’s act which accompanies one’s knowing or perceiving any object whatsoever. In this technical usage, the prefix “con-” is justified because it specifies an awareness of self simultaneous with thoughts, feelings, and actions directed towards objects, including the times when that object happens to be oneself. I want to use “consciousness” in this technical sense.

The notion of a common consciousness--that is, of an unreflective awareness of a “we” to which the self belongs--first occurred to me while reading Lonergan’s early work “Finality, Love, Marriage” (1943).³ There he wrote, “the compenetrating consciousness of lives shared by marriage is dynamic and reaches forth to will and to realize in common the advance in Christian perfection that leads from the consummation of two-in-one-flesh to the consummation of the beatific vision.”⁴ And earlier in the same article, following Aristotle, “a man is to himself in consciousness of his being, and he is

conscious of his being through activity; hence to be to his friend as he is to himself, the common consciousness of mutual other selves has to find a common activity.”⁵

Readers familiar with Lonergan’s thought may justifiably wince at the meaning of the term “consciousness” in this early work. It is questionable whether he means precisely the self-awareness which accompanies acts that intend objects, as he will define it in later works. He identifies “common consciousness” here with the “*totius vitae communio, consuetudo, societas*” of a marriage.⁶ On the other hand, Lonergan does say that a person “is conscious of his being through activity.” This indicates that at least he does not merely mean consciousness-as-perception, since the activities through which the person or the group are “conscious” of themselves are obviously not strictly activities of mutual perception or self-reflection but may be any common activities whatsoever. It seems, then, that by “common consciousness” Lonergan here means not only a wide range of shared views and purposes but also the sheer awareness which accompanies common operations.

Whatever Lonergan meant by “common consciousness” in these passages, we can ask about its reality. Is there such a thing as a consciousness, defined as a subject’s self-awareness which accompanies the subject’s intending of objects, which can properly be called common? I believe it is easy to demonstrate that there is. Take a poker game. Because the acts of dealing and deploying the cards are conscious acts, I am certainly aware of myself, even though I am thinking only about trouncing my opponents. But as an act which is common, I am also aware of the “we” who make up the compound subject who plays. Should someone ask me what *I* was doing, I spontaneously answer that *we* were playing cards.

To say that several persons have a common consciousness does not imply that each lacks the self-awareness that accompanies his or her participation. Nor does it imply a Hegelian supra-subject whose self-transcendence makes the authenticity of individuals merely a means to a larger end. Nor am I thinking here of what liberation theology’ calls “conscientization” or “consciousness-raising,” since these seem to deal mainly with consciousness-as-perception. I am simply adverting to the verifiable phenomenon that when people engage in a common activity, each one is aware of themselves as part of a “we” even though no one may be thinking about it.

Besides this common consciousness given in common activities, there may also be given a common intention to form a “we.” Of course, this is not always the case. Martin Buber has discerned three distinct types of dialog, two of which seem to bear no intention at all of forming a “we”:

There is genuine dialog—no matter whether spoken or silent—where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular

being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.

There is technical dialog, which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding.

And there is monologue disguised as dialog, in which two or more men, meeting in space, speak each with himself in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways and yet imagine that they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their own resources.⁷

In what Buber calls “genuine dialog,” the purpose of establishing a community accompanies other purposes held in common. This seems essential to any self-constituting community. In “technical dialog,” persons may reach a common understanding and a common judgment about the state of things, so common meanings may be reached cognitively, and a “we-consciousness” would certainly be present. Still, as long as the will-to-community is lacking, no full community can be realized. In “monologue-disguised-as-dialog,” a mere formal common understanding is not even desired, and so the possibilities for community are quite low.

Prior to any thought about it, the difference between genuine dialog and the other two types is experienced in one’s feelings. In a genuine dialog, besides the feelings which respond to the qualitative values in the purposes pursued together, there are feelings which respond to the ontic values involved.⁸ Experience tells us that this response to the ontic values of other persons occurs in two modes. In the first, each responds to the ontic value of the other. In the second, each responds to the ontic value of the “we” they become. Marian the Librarian, in the musical “Music Man,” sang about both of these in her pining for her “White Knight”:

And I would like him to be
More interested in me
Than he is in himself
And more interested in us
Than in me.

A genuine dialog, then, seems to have two distinguishable modes. The first I would like to call “personal address.” In this mode, two persons welcome one another for the unique value that the other is, prescind from the other’s talents or beauty or possibilities. It is the mode of I- Thou. The second mode I would like to call “togetherness.” This is the mode in which each welcomes the unique union being formed, again prescind from the qualities of that union. (I have been speaking of a relationship between two persons. The two modes, however, are present in larger

groups: One person can “dialog” with either one other member or the entire group; and any number of persons can be consciously together in a common activity.) In the early stages of a developing relationship, each participant may welcome both the others and the union without, however, knowing whether the other participants do too. A genuine dialog does not blossom into togetherness until the point is reached where everyone not only welcomes the others and the union, but everyone knows that everyone does.

I do not mean to ignore the fact that a developing relationship intends and welcomes objects outside of it. To respond to the ontic values of others has to include an appreciation of the others’ self-transcending openness to the real world and to the enduring values of concrete realities. It would be difficult to imagine a growing “we” between persons who have closed themselves against reality and against the inner questions that may prove to be “we-transcending.” I would like, however, to focus on the kinds of common consciousness that accompany the shared activities of persons in a genuine dialog—the persons, that is, who intend community. In particular, I want to propose an explanation, in terms of consciousness, of how communities develop over time. Anybody who attempts to understand the constituents of community without examining development runs the risk of overlooking the permanently self-transcending nature of its members and implying by default that an ideal community is an unchanging one.

III. Development

Lonergan has shown that to understand developments genetically, we should specify operators and integrators—operators being the routines that instigate change and integrators being the routines that consolidate change.⁹ To determine what the operators and integrators are in consciousness that generate a developing personal relationship, let us look at what kinds of interpersonal activities are intrinsically common: activities that have no meaning unless two or more persons are involved – activities, therefore, that give a common consciousness.

We have already seen that there appears to be two main modes of genuine dialog, a personal address mode and a togetherness mode. Included in personal address are any activities whose structure involves two or more persons acting at different poles of a single activity and responding to the others’ ontic values. For example, in activities such as greeting, talking, waiting for someone, caring or being cared for, any giving or receiving, one is conscious of “we” but one’s consciousness of the polarity of I and Thou dominates the structure of the experience because one is conscious of oneself as responding to the ontic value of someone else, and of being a subject who is similarly being responded to. On the other side, there is togetherness—activities whose structure involves two or more persons at the same pole of the activity, yet carry with them a

response to the ontic value of the “we.” For example: singing together, being part of an audience, acclamation, commiserating, believing together. In all of these, the felt response to the ontic value of the “we” usually dominates each one’s response to the ontic value of the others. (Besides these examples, there are many activities which, although they might be done alone, are in fact part of a shared effort.)

A genetic outline of the ascent of “we” through the levels of a blossoming friendship follows straightaway. Personal address acts as an operator and togetherness acts as an integrator. When a person who intends community with others either addresses them or is addressed, some portion of the common meaning which constitutes that community is being questioned for the sake of development, and simultaneously that person is aware of being a “we” in the mode of personal address. And when several persons find agreement or cooperation with one another, and achieve some common meaning, they are each and together aware of being a “we” in the mode of togetherness.

Now the forms of togetherness are simply: common experience, common understanding, common judgment, and common decision. But we recognize this as Lonergan’s heuristic of community,¹⁰ and so we have already come full circle. If community is “an achievement of common meaning,” we have merely called that common meaning togetherness,” regarded it as a genetic integrator in consciousness, and clarified what “achievement” means in terms of the genetic operator “personal address.”

Further, while it is true that a community which is continually self-transcending provides its members with an ambiance of tested values, it is also true that the origin of each of those values is not the already achieved common meanings that constitute the community but the originating value which some member or another happens to be. In genetic terms, while togetherness is an integrator and personal address is an operator in community, within that operator are the two poles of I and Thou. Of these two poles, the role of operator generally falls to one self-transcending subject who, while engaging in genuine dialog, shares experiences, ideas, judgments, or decisions and leaves them open to question by the other. Otherwise it is monologue disguised as dialog. The point is that a self-transcending community is not automatic. It is a direct function of self-transcending individuals.¹¹

IV. The Ambiguity of Consciousness

But there’s a gremlin in the operator. Persons in community can raise questions that divide as well as unite. In free countries, both the biased and the unbiased enjoy equal freedom to speak their minds. So we try to fashion a dialogic forum for resolving

differences in opinions and proposals, in stages of development, and in basic horizons. Still, the gremlin does his mischief in consciousness too, because the data of consciousness alone are insufficient grounds for knowing oneself to be a “we” with others. Experience, as we have said, is intrinsically ambiguous: it begs correct understanding. Consciousness as inner experience also begs a correct understanding. Among the common activities which mediate a common consciousness, some may be as immediate as sawing together with a two-handled buck-saw, but others are mediated almost entirely by mental and emotional acts—such as being a Democrat or sitting on a committee. The “we-consciousness” which accompanies common activities of understanding, judging, and deciding is itself a component of understanding, judging, and deciding. One can ask “Do you know what I mean?” or “Isn’t that right?” or “Are we together on this project?” and never lose the intention of community. But one can also ask “Do you really want anything to do with me?” And no matter whether the other persons answer Yes or No, one still must make a judgment about what the others’ intentions really are and whether it is worthwhile believing them. In the data of consciousness, then, the experience of thinking and deliberating together is not enough to justify the judgment that all parties have chosen to form and consolidate a “we.”

I don’t intend to untangle the slew of projections and recriminations found in relationships that break down. Rather I want to examine the dynamism of consciousness found when the new relationship blossoms with God through Christian faith. The most fundamental experience of ourselves in all our self-transcending operations is the experience of an oriented self. We are oriented to intelligibilities, realities, and values—particularly to the ontic values of a loving community—in an open-ended manner. But an oriented self will forever be an ambiguous self without the judgment in faith that the term of that orientation is being given in one’s here and now. After all, it is one thing to be consciously oriented and quite another to be knowingly a “we” with the term of that orientation. If orthodox doctrine states that through Christ and the Holy Spirit we are “divinized” or “elevated” as well as forgiven and healed, then to judge this proposition to be true would seem to have this effect in consciousness: It resolves the radical ambiguity of whether the self I experience in all my self-transcending operations is part of a “we” with God or not. More specifically, I know that I am not the autonomous origin and manager of my own self-transcendence. For even my very experiences of having questions, as well as reaching answers, can be known in faith to be experiences, respectively, of God’s personal address upon me and of his togetherness with me. Such experiences may well have been, at least in part, what Augustine drew upon when he formulated his doctrines of prevenient and cooperative grace.

V. Assurance

This judgment—that one is a we with the absolutely transcendent—is a special form of knowledge. It is not like the judgments of fact which reach a reality that has no dependence on the judgment in order to be real. Nor is it like the judgment of value that sees the worth of believing the good news. I would like to name this form of knowledge “assurance.” It is based on the transcendental notions that give both the drive and the criteria for transcending ourselves. Its general anthropological effect is to assure a person that intelligent inquiry, reasoned judgment, and responsible action are worthwhile, despite piecemeal insights, limited certainties, and halting convictions. Its special religious effect is to assure a person that all experience is experience of God, that the world as one finds it is an instance of divine personal address, that the ultimate significance of world process derives from the historical significance of divine action in Christ Jesus, and that one’s spirit of welcoming the Good News an act of togetherness with God. Those who live on this assurance achieve what classical spiritual writers call the “Unitive Way.”

Before elaborating further on its special religious effect, I want to point out how at least some form of assurance is absolutely necessary for the achievement of any community. There is already an assurance which underpins the contemporary philosophy of empirical science. From physics on up to the human sciences, investigators work with the assurance that there are reasons behind the way things work, even though no one investigator is assured of discovering them. Still, this assurance of intelligibility is not enough to generate the criteria needed to create community. For besides scientific understanding of how things generally work, there is also scholarly understanding of how specific things actually worked. Science and scholarship together help sociologists shape policy, help family psychologists suggest therapies, and help philosophers of history speak not only of history’s pattern but also of history’s purpose. What assurance have they that these goals are worthwhile? No doubt, people achieve common purposes; it’s the one achievement that makes a community fully alive. And no doubt, people act with at least implicit criteria for agreeing on purposes, criteria beyond sheer consensus. But there must also be some assurance that the very effort to define one’s purpose is itself worthwhile. Few people speak with absolute conviction about their decisions. Rather than saying “I did *the* best,” one says “I did *my* best.” Yet those who have achieved the common meanings of a stable community speak with an assurance that *the* best is reached by people doing *their* best. Such an assurance is given in moral consciousness, in the self-awareness of persons whose minds and hearts are set on doing good. Without it, there could be no human community at all, because there would be no properly moral base for developing criteria on how to choose the good. We would be left—indeed, Western liberal thought has been left¹²—with only the cognitive criteria suited for understanding how things work. In the

end, the only criteria for choosing between equally workable proposals would be the will of the more powerful.

The religious form of the question of common purpose is whether we share a common purpose with God. The knowledge that we do is an assurance in consciousness of being “we” with God in all that we do, save sin. It is this element in consciousness that I believe all Christians have in common with one another and with Christ Jesus. This assurance—that one’s oriented self is also a self-in-relation which will not be ultimately frustrated in its most self-transcending desires—forms the *basso continuo* in the human consciousness of Christ. It seems to underpin the changes in strategy Jesus made as he went from teaching and healing, to gathering a small group of disciples, and finally, to facing a death which all the world would deem a failure. Even from an ordinary historian’s point of view, Jesus seems to have acted with an assurance, unprecedented in the history of Israel, that his acts were the acts of God.

As for Christians, there is the belief that communion with Christ in his Church is enough for our salvation and that there is no need to look for some second divine mediator in order to be in communion with him. Translated into terms of consciousness, Christians believe that the gospel of Christ is his personal address on humanity—a standing invitation to continual conversion. They believe that when they preach the gospel to the world, it is in togetherness with Christ that they preach—with an eloquence and wisdom which he promised he would give (Lk 21:15). It is no coincidence, I believe, that the Christian liturgy comprises a *Word* and a *Eucharist*. With these two rites believers express the two ways in which we act in genuine dialog with God. In the Liturgy of the Word worshipers are addressed by God, and in the Liturgy of the Eucharist they act in togetherness with Christ offering their lives to God and neighbor in communion with him.

One of the most consoling scenes in all the New Testament is the first scene Luke portrays after Jesus’ ascension into heaven (Acts 1: 12-26). About one hundred and twenty believers were gathered together, and Peter asked them to choose a successor to Judas. So they prayed, asking God to “show us which of these two you have chosen,” and then they quite simply “gave lots.” Whether “giving lots” meant a vote or drawing straws, they seemed to have used a rather ordinary decision-making process and trusted that the outcome was indeed God’s own choice. If that isn’t acting with assurance, I don’t know what is. Such assurance is the effect in the consciousness of Christians of belief in the guarantee of God’s Spirit to the Church. And this reassuring scene of the very first of the “Acts of the Apostles” represents the archetypical finding of God’s will—conceived not as a plan to be discovered through a judgment of fact, but as a judgment of value of persons in togetherness with God.

¹ I do not mean to propose any new doctrine here. And while, like Pannenberg, I want to recognize a historical universality in the Christ-event, I do not conceive of history primarily in terms of revelation (for there are also redemptive acts), nor do I think that the historian qua historian can legitimately state dogma. My purpose is to understand the elements in consciousness which make Christian faith something that can be held in common.

² For clear statements on what “consciousness” means for Lonergan, follow the leads given in the index of *Insight* and see “Christ as Subject: A Reply,” in *Collection*, ed. F.E. Crowe, S.J. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), p. 175 and *passim*. For evidence that Lonergan had not formulated this view much before *Insight*, see David Burrell’s index to his edition of the *Verbum* articles: the entry “consciousness” refers to passages in which the idea is present but the term is absent.

³ *Collection*, pp. 16-53. I believe I am also indebted to Alfred Schutz for directing my attention to the importance of understanding how the structure of social relations are founded on the structures of relations in consciousnesses. His “The Dimensions of the Social World,” (*Collected Papers II*, ed. Arvid Brodersen [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1964], pp. 20-63) is a phenomenology of the experiences in which another person’s consciousness becomes accessible.

⁴ p. 37

⁵ p. 35

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Fontana Library, Pb., 1961), p. 37

⁸ See Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 31. Lonergan refers the reader to Dietrich von Hildebrand’s *Christian Ethics*; what Lonergan calls “ontic” value von Hildebrand calls “ontological” value. The faculty psychology that von Hildebrand uses there, while much more systematic than Buber’s phenomenology, still fails to get at a dynamic account of the process of responding to the person of another. And although Lonergan sets von Hildebrand’s general account of value within a dynamic account of feelings, he does not develop the ontic/ontological aspect. See *Christian Ethics* (New York: David McKay, 1953), pp. 129-139 and *Method in Theology*, pp. 31, 38-50.

⁹ *Insight*, pp. 465-467, and especially p. 546.

¹⁰ *Method in Theology*, p. 79.

¹¹ I have been talking about what Lonergan calls the “fifth level.” [In the published article, I mistakenly referred to this as the “fifth level of consciousness.” Further research led me to believe that Lonergan meant not a distinct level of consciousness but a distinct level of vertical finality—the level at which the “I” defined by internal operators is simultaneously a “we” with others in community through

affective engagements. See "Being in Love," *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 13/2 (Fall 1995) 161-175.]

¹² See Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Knowledge and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), pp. 38-41, 51-55, 76-81, 88-100.