

THE THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTION AND AFFIRMATION OF A RELATIVE SECULAR  
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*A response to “Lonergan and Integral Development” by Dr. Joseph Ogbonnaya for The Marquette Lonergan Project’s “Doing Catholic Systematic Theology in a Multi-Religious World” Colloquium on Friday, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012.*

Dr. Ogbonnaya’s paper implies (and, we can say, enacts) the expectation that Christian theologians find a seat at the table of a globalized project of integral development. If Lonergan’s scale of values will be the heuristic structure through which integral development is to be conceived, these theologians can not avoid making the claim that religious values sublimate the others. Religious values are, after all, at the “top” of the scale. If we grant that the concrete task of integral development, in the context of globalization, would be an enormous collaboration, then many of the theologian’s conversation partners will find this Lonerganian claim scandalous. After all, each member of this conversation could only participate out of her own concrete historicity. True, the inextricable located-ness of each participant makes sin (personal or cultural) an unavoidable factor in the collaborative process, and so “bad faith” may be at issue. However, the plurality of diverse (but nonetheless authentic) meanings and values would *also* constitute an unavoidable factor. Unlike the aberrations of sin, these meanings and values are consequent merely upon the finitude of participating subjects and communities. If Lonergan’s scale of values is going to be central to the theological role in integral development, it seems that Catholic theologians face a double risk. On the one hand, they risk ungraciously condemning sinful subjects and communities who cannot accept this hierarchy *and/or* inhospitably turning away those who cannot accept it out of polymorphic, but otherwise authentic, difference.

Because I think Lonergan's scale of values is basically correct *and* vital to conceiving integral development correctly, I cannot claim that we should abandon it as a central tenet of theological engagement with globalization. Rather than offering any direct criticisms or questions of Dr. Ogbonnaya's paper, I would like to propose an accompanying theological project. It is as follows: I believe Christian theologians would be well served to develop a theological conception and affirmation of a relative secular in which to encounter the irreligious and the differently religious. To my mind, the most orderly means of expositing this project ("the theological conception and affirmation of a relative secular") is to walk through the terms more or less in order.

### *Theological*

The *theological* aspect of a "theological conception and affirmation" has two components. One consists in transcendent encounter. The other consists in a mediating function. The transcendent component suggests that a religion (and, thereby, a theology) is founded in experiences, meanings, and values incompletely determined by its cultural matrix. In other words, religion is at least partly a response to the irruptions of God in a culture's horizon and history. Religion is a source of novelty and potential discontinuity grounded in God's transcendence. Second, there is a mediating component between a religion and its cultural matrix. This mediation affords a certain autonomy for both the religion and the cultural of which the matrix consists. A religion is not reducible to culture, but neither is a culture reducible to religion. Furthermore, Lonergan's scale of values suggests that this irreducibility is asymmetrical, where religious values sublate cultural values. This irreducibility can call forth efforts at conceptual integration, and such are theologies. But, of course, there is also an inextricable located-ness of any religion, such that the integrity of a culture acts as scaffolding

that supports the well-being of a religion. Religions that neglect the cultures on and in which they rest risk their integrity. If the conception and affirmation of a relative secular is going to be authentically theological, then it must in some way function to mediate this transcendent element to its cultural matrix for the sake of both the religion and the culture.

### *Conception*

The task of conception is implied in the task of mediating “between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix.” Theologies must achieve some understanding, but because this understanding is for the sake of mediation, it cannot be a private and self-satisfied understanding. Theological understanding must be formulated into conceptions that can be communicated both to participants in the religion and those in the culture who do not practice the religion. However, it is tempting for the theologian, so often personally pious, to develop a deep understanding of the religion to the neglect of a concomitant understanding of the culture. Some conception of the autonomously and irreducibly cultural is a part of the theological task. Of course, it is impracticable for theologians to develop on their own an adequate theoretical competence in all the areas relevant to any concrete culture. There would be insufficient time left over to do any good old-fashioned theology. Instead, theologians would generate such knowledge through collaborative conversation.

### *Affirmation*

Such a conversation requires two distinct affirmations: one prior and one subsequent to conversation. The prior affirmation is the “yes” any person must offer to a genuine conversation partner. It is a “yes” both to the person with whom she is conversing and a “yes” to the mutual concern on which the conversation is founded. This prior affirmation is of the originating value that her conversation partner is and of the terminal value of mutual understanding to be realized

through the collaborative conversation. The subsequent affirmation is the dialectical “yes” that seeks to promote the “position” in the conversation’s products and the authenticity in the participating subjects that produced it. This affirmation recognizes the necessity of both conversation partners in the generation of furthered understanding. It also recognizes the stake all partners have in the continued development of a) the products and ends of the collaborative conversation, b) all members of the conversation, and c) the conversation itself.

### *A (Relative) Secular*

I am suggesting that there are certain conditions of discourse that theology ought to understand and affirm to avoid the risks that accompany a concrete role in realizing integral development and I am giving those conditions the name “secular.” I am not proposing a theological sanctioning of *secularism* and I hope I can avoid giving the impression that I am presenting a rehabilitation of *Natura Pura*. Nor am I demanding a secularist affirmation of the theological. Theologies that wait for the by-your-leave of their culture suppress the transcendent component of what it is to be authentically theological.

One of these “secularizing” conditions that I am proposing is accepting that collaboration cannot wait for the mitigation of sinfulness or (more importantly) mere difference in one’s partners or one’s self. To wait around for such mitigation or try to force it would be, in my opinion, profoundly **un-Christian**. We must begin now and we can only begin as we are. This entails the theological recognition that realizing religious values will require the efforts and competences of those who may not acknowledge the importance (or even existence) of religious values. The theologian, by the logic of theologizing, is called to be loyal (to show covenantal love) to her neighbors, even when they happen to be her enemies.

In one respect, this is easy to admit. The biologist, after all, does not demand the chemist learn the details of cellular respiration before employing the insights contained in the periodic table. However, religion operates at the level of existential commitment, and so this condition is more difficult to admit in a theological context. After all, a chemist's misapprehensions about metabolic processes do not, I imagine, significantly affect her work on the stability of molecular structures, but an economist's misapprehension of what humans ultimately desire is likely to have major consequences for her research and theoretical constructions.

We might ask, then, "What kind of relation does this secular have to religions and their theologies?" An important aspect of this relation is the context-bound sufficiency of the cultural, civilizational, and natural fields of knowledge. In other words, urban planning, or the fine arts, or agricultural practices have their own integrity, but not as absolute, separable substances. Instead, they are fluidly stable nexuses of questions, answers, possibilities, and actualities. You can run a postal system, move human hearts with music, or sustainably grow asparagus for a long time before you *need* to advert to the Creator of thoughtful letters, beautiful harmonies, or delicious vegetables. Concomitantly, civilizational schemes can function for a long time after adequate cultural reflection on those civilizations has fallen into decay and disuse. For theology to affirm the secular is to be willing to respect the *integrity* of disciplines and enterprises in the sciences and humanities, economics, politics, and technology that are attempting to realize values distinct (if ultimately inseparable) from religious values. This secular is *relative*, however, insofar as, in the long run, these other values will not be adequate to human being. Human desire expands unrestrictedly and can be adequately met only by what Christians call God. Indeed, the religious person, and the theologian perhaps especially, must be willing to announce the impending wasteland (we echo Nietzsche here unmistakably) threatened by the neglect of religious values,

even when a society seems to be at its apex. To claim that humanity ought to be satisfied by any lower context of value, no matter how coherent it seems or how long it remains dominant in a culture's imagination, is to doom a civilization and culture to inhumanity in the long run.