

REFLECTIONS ON GRACE, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

1) In what way is consciousness the connection or the pivot from grace to conversion for Lonergan?

As I understand it, the question is asking about theological method—about consciousness or self-consciousness as the methodological ground for a transposition of theological meaning.

A) The Relevance of Scholastic Metaphysical Categories for a Contemporary Theology

To what extent can the metaphysical language of ‘grace’ be expressed in the phenomenological language of ‘conversion?’ To what degree can metaphysical categories have explanatory potential or heuristic value for a theology that derives its terms and relations from conscious intentionality? Can we retain all the distinctions of an older theoretical theology or do they require radical revision if they are to function as valid terms within a methodical or contemporary theology? In what way can we distinguish, for example, entitative from operative infused habits in a theology that does not affirm the very faculty psychology on which this scholastic distinction depends?¹ If ‘will’ and ‘intellect’ are not relevant categories in a methodical theology, what is the explanatory value of special categories that rely on these faculties as their metaphysical basis? Charles Hefling puts it this way:

Constructing a systematic-theological hypothesis is not a matter of quoting or even interpreting authorities. The criterion...must finally be methodological. Lonergan’s Latin theology...is undoubtedly a quarry from which there are permanently valid insights to be mined; but the warrant for their validity is that they can be transposed into a framework of terms and relations reciprocally defined and derived from an analysis of conscious intentionality.²

On this point, I am inclined to agree with Hefling. In my opinion, while some terms and relations will survive the transposition, others may not. The scholastic theology of grace and Lonergan’s Latin theology are not revealed truths to be preserved but rather models in Lonergan’s sense of the term³—*possibly* relevant sets of terms and relations—to be verified by adverting to the data of consciousness. While the categories of the scholastic theology of grace are relevant in the sense that they can offer an initial

¹ Hefling calls the distinction between the entitative habit of sanctifying grace and the operative habit of charity into question. See ‘On the Trinity: an Argument in Conversation with Robert Doran,’ *Theological Studies* 68 (2007) 648.

² Hefling, “On the Trinity: an Argument in Conversation with Robert Doran,” *Theological Studies* 68 (2007) 647.

³ See Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 288

orientation that directs attention, the theologian, operating within the third stage of meaning, must be open to the data of consciousness that would render such categories irrelevant. The question is not ‘*which* elements in consciousness directly correspond to all the terms and relations of scholastic theology,’ assuming there must be evidence in consciousness for every term and relation; rather, the question is, ‘*whether or not and to what extent* one can verify, in the data of consciousness, the terms and relations of scholastic theology.’ The verdict should not be out before the trial begins. Although he does not put it this way, I think Lonergan would agree that we have to raise real questions about scholastic theological categories. In other words, the questions we raise about the validity of scholastic categories for a contemporary theology of grace, if I may borrow a distinction from Heidegger, cannot be mere interrogative statements but must be genuine questions; they must be driven, not by bias, but by a wonder that pursues answers openly and honestly.

B) Theology and the Hermeneutical Priority of Mystery

But the exercise of verifying scholastic categories in the data of consciousness or using the data of consciousness to ground a new set of categories is, because of the nature of the data, an exponentially more complicated task than the exercise of appealing to empirical data to verify a hypothesis or confirm a result. When we experience supernatural love and its transformation of ourselves, we become conscious of a ‘more’—an excess—that, unlike the data on intelligent and rational consciousness, cannot be as fully grasped and known in this life. So it is a mistake to suppose that because we can attend to ‘an experience’ of divine love—because we have ‘data’ on divine love—we have no need to formulate analogies. An awareness of divine love does not remove the mystery but heightens it. Attending to our awareness of the love of God or becoming religiously self-conscious, does not eliminate but rather amplifies, in our theology, the need to proceed by means of analogies. Becoming attentive to our experience of what Lonergan calls other-worldly love does not offer a set of data to be completely explained; it does not grant an experience in which metaphysical terms can be verified once and for all; it does not gather evidence that would settle questions in a definitive manner. To the contrary, expanding the scope of our attentive awareness to the other-worldly love that penetrates our lives brings to light, within the data of

consciousness, the inexhaustible and incomprehensible mystery of transcendence at the center of our being⁴—a mystery that is, at least in the present life, ever beyond our grasp.

As an unstructured encounter with transcendence in the immediacy of consciousness, religious experience defies our efforts to apprehend its meaning in any discursive manner. Descriptions such as ‘the dynamic state of being-in-love unrestrictedly,’ ‘actuation of our capacity for self-transcendence,’ or ‘religious conversion’ only approximate the experience to which they refer. According to Frederick Crowe, “in using language we are on the level of superstructure, and are merely pointing to an infrastructure that ceases, as soon as it is named, to be pure religious experience.”⁵ Because it is a preliminary and unstructured experience of transcendence, the language derived from either metaphysical or intentionality analysis offers mere intimations and will provide no detailed map of the silent and wordless interior terrain of religious self-consciousness; what we apprehend in religious consciousness is, as Crowe so beautifully puts it, “a global view, a sense of rightness that we cannot easily put into words...”⁶ Since the experience is ineffable, all theological language, even in its most pure phenomenologically reduced form, remains inadequate. In *Mission and the Spirit*, Lonergan writes,

since potency is known by its act and relation by its term, it follows that vertical finality to God himself can be known only in the measure that God is known, that it can be revealed only in the measure that God himself has been revealed, that it can be intimated perhaps but hardly in a manner that is unambiguous since vertical finality is multivalent and obscure, and intimations are not apt to make clear which of many possibilities lies in store.⁷

Since what Lonergan calls ‘other-worldly love’ dynamically relates us to God in a supernaturally transformed finality, what applies to vertical finality, in the natural order, seems to apply in greater measure to ‘the dynamic state of being-in-love in an unrestricted fashion.’

So even if there are conscious elements that correspond to sanctifying grace and charity, still insights that emerge on the basis of this conscious data cannot enjoy an invulnerable status in the present

⁴ See Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 115.

⁵ Crowe, *Method Journal* 12:2 “Lonergan’s Universalist View of Religion” 149.

⁶ Crowe, *Appropriating the Lonergan Idea*, “Eschaton and Worldly Mission” 209.

⁷ Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, “Mission and the Spirit,” 26-27.

life. Even if there are elements in the data of religious consciousness that correspond to what scholastic theology called sanctifying grace and charity, all of our insights regarding these supernatural realities remain incomplete and provisional, not only unverified but unverifiable possibilities that await their final verification in the data of eschatological consciousness. We might say that sanctifying grace, charity and, in a comparatively greater way, the light of glory and the secondary act of existence in Christ are, to use Lonergan's turn of phrase, 'shrouded in mystery.' Even with a methodically grounded theology that brings to light the data of religious consciousness, we still lack data on the light of glory and have only very imperfect data on grace and charity; and so we are still dealing with realities affirmed in faith that must be understood initially and primarily through analogies.

As Lonergan indicates in his discussion of heuristic methods in *Insight*, investigation requires one to "Name the unknown. Work out its properties. Use the properties to direct, order, and guide the inquiry." 'Being-in-love unrestrictedly' is the name for the unknown reality of grace to be discovered more fully. Working out its properties, will require us to formulate a controlling analogy on the basis of intentionality analysis. The analogical conception of properties will be the 'upper blade' that directs and guides the investigation, bringing to light the relevant data of religious consciousness; the relevant data of religious consciousness will be the 'lower blade' that, in a modest way, adds further determinations to the analogy and serves as an experiential basis for its correction, modification, and development.

2) Building on your answer to #1, what, in your opinion, are the major strengths and deficiencies of Lonergan's position on the connections among grace, consciousness, and conversion?

My response to this question follows my response to the first. The strengths of Lonergan's position speak for themselves; and while this may be perceived as somewhat of a cop out, the deficiency that interests me most and the one about which I feel most competent to speak is not Lonergan's but my own. Whether this deficiency that plagued my own theological thinking about grace and consciousness was fostered by Lonergan's use of language, the writings of Lonergan scholars, or my own biases is beyond the scope of the present reflection. This deficiency, a misappropriation of Lonergan to be sure, has come to light primarily through my engagement with the thought of Fredrick Crowe and Karl Rahner and can be summarized as a tendency to over-estimate the explanatory value of Lonergan's transcendental method—a propensity to place too much confidence in Lonergan's method as a means of understanding the data of

religious consciousness. In more negative terms, it was a failure to recognize the disparity between divine love and the human word; it was a failure to pay sufficient attention to the mystery of the Spirit and its implications for theology. This disparity between divine love and the human word may not be as evident or explicit in the writings of Lonergan that are concerned with method in theology. In those texts that focus on theological method, Lonergan naturally emphasizes religious consciousness as the basis from which to derive special theological categories; and so, in comparison with other texts, discussions of religious consciousness as the nameless mystery that cannot be objectified are less numerous.

Gadamer speaks of a hermeneutical priority of the question. As theologians, we need to adopt a hermeneutical priority of mystery. We need to counter our predilection for naming and defining with an emphasis on the other-worldly mystery that suffuses our consciousness and brings to light a dimension of transcendent meaning over which we have no intellectual mastery and for which there is no adequate language. As theologians, we need to develop spiritual practices that will allow, as Lonergan puts it, a “[withdrawal]...from the realm of common sense, theory, and other interiority into a ‘cloud of unknowing...’”⁸ in which “image and symbol, thought and word, lose their relevance and even disappear.”⁹ We need to assume a posture of humility and realize that insights born from a reflection on the data of religious consciousness must, in the salutary words of Charles Hefling: “necessarily remain hypothetical [and] can never put other intelligible hypotheses utterly beyond the pale.”¹⁰ A hermeneutic priority on mystery means realizing that what Lonergan calls ‘the dynamic state of being-in-love unrestrictedly’ does not refer to a set of data that we can explain, but to a set of data *by which we are* explained. Becoming aware of the gap between the gift of divine love and the human word about the gift nourishes our theology, as it keeps us dissatisfied with all of our objectifications and drives us relentlessly to attend more carefully, to raise further questions, and to formulate our answers with ever greater subtlety and sophistication.

3) Building on your answer to #2, and given the current state of Lonergan studies on questions #1 and #2, please discuss any further developments on the interrelationships among grace, consciousness, and conversion that you see as necessary and/or natural innovations of Lonergan’s work on this topic.

⁸ Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 266.

⁹ Ibid. 112

¹⁰ Charles Hefling, “On the Trinity: an Argument in Conversation with Robert Doran,” *Theological Studies* 68 (2007) 643.

Fred Crowe was beginning to work out a theology of religions on the basis of Lonergan's writings on grace, conversion, and consciousness. In his 1984 article "Son of God, Holy Spirit, and World Religions," with which I presume most of us are familiar, Crowe proposes a model or theology of religions that situates non-Christian religious traditions within the context of the Spirit's mission. Crowe writes, "the corollary to this thesis will define a consequent approach to the world religions from the Christian side. It supposes that their positive moment is the fruit of the Spirit present among them..."¹¹ According to Lonergan, we are not left groping around in the dark, attempting to express the fruit of the Spirit with the dim light of human words; God has revealed his own word to us so that he can, in Lonergan's own words, "announce in signs and symbols what is congruent with the gift of love."¹² While Crowe, in his 1984 article on world religions, conceives the positive moment of other religious traditions to be the fruit of the Spirit, he remains silent about the presence of a divine word in those traditions. But ten years later in a 1994 article entitled "Lonergan's Universalist View of Religion," Crowe addresses the possibility of "revelation" outside the boundaries of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Expounding on the 'outer word,' Crowe says,

So it is that a divine revelation is God's entry and his taking part in man's making of man.' Does this...aspect likewise apply to all religions? It seems that Lonergan is open to understanding it that way... "God's gift of his love has its proper counterpart in the revelation events in which God discloses to a particular people or to all mankind the completeness of his love for them."(Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 283) A 'particular people' could be the people of any religion and 'all mankind' could be reached either through particular revelations to each religion, or through one revelation made to one religion but meant for the whole human race. As far as these statements go we might conclude either to one word of God spoken for everyone, or to various words of God spoken, one for Judaism, another for Islam, another for Hinduism, and so on.¹³

On the topic of "revelation" in other religious traditions, Crowe does not, at least in this text, develop a model or formulate a hypothesis; what he does do is raise a question.

¹¹ Crowe, *Appropriating the Lonergan Idea*, "Son of God, Holy Spirit, and World Religions" 326.

¹² Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 113.

¹³ Crowe, *Method Journal* 12:2, "Lonergan's Universalist View of Religion" 159.

As a means of pursuing an answer to this question, I would like to offer a proposal that presupposes and expands the model that Crowe articulated in “Son of God, Holy Spirit, and World Religions.” As Crowe implies by raising the question, God is not limited to speaking one word that is intended for the entire human population. So let us suppose that God does not limit himself to one word for everyone but speaks various words—one for Judaism, another for Islam, another for Hinduism, and so on. But let us go further. God is not limited to speaking a single word; but God is also not limited to disclosing his love in a single way to a given community or person.

Lonergan’s theology of divine missions, in distinguishing the gift of divine love from the word of revelation that expresses it, opens up possibilities for thinking about a God who discloses his love to a single person or community in a variety of ways. In the model I am proposing, what comparative theologians refer to as ‘dual religious belonging’ or ‘complex religious identities’ is the consequence of a divine self-disclosure to a single person in two distinct religious languages. In his extraordinary book *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, Frank Clooney envisions a different model. For Clooney, if, through our own human freedom and agency, we happen to find ourselves imagining and thinking in the language of a religious tradition other than our own, in his own words, “God will meet us there.” The idea of an accommodating God who meets us where we are is quite beautiful and certainly true; but what I am suggesting is that if we happen to find ourselves thinking and imagining in the signs and symbols of a religious tradition other than our own—if we happen to find ourselves becoming fluent in two religious languages, it is because of a divine initiative—it is because our God has chosen to speak to us in both. Perhaps, we are approaching a special time in salvation history, a *kairos* if you will, where God’s children, on a more global scale, are learning two languages of praise and prayer. Perhaps globalization is a step in the implementation of a divine plan—a way of exposing us to other religious traditions—a way of fulfilling certain external conditions—so that, for reasons hidden within his providential wisdom, God can raise his children bilingually.

While Fred Crowe, following Lonergan, has offered an image of a man and a woman in love as an analogy for the divine missions, there is another possibly relevant image that may offer us analogical understanding of what is happening at this point in our history. It is the image of two parents calling their child in two distinct languages. My brother and his wife are raising their daughter bilingually. (My niece

Aleitha). My brother speaks to her only in English and my sister-in-law only in Spanish. They call to her lovingly in two languages and, at the age of one and a half, she is learning to hear and respond to their love in two languages. Is this an image that gives us insight into what God is doing with us? Could it be that those who claim dual religious belonging are learning, in two languages, to hear and respond to the mysterious love that beckons them on the basis of a divine initiative to raise them bilingually?

Perhaps. But it is only an image, a model that would need to be worked out further and verified if it is to be taken seriously within a methodical theology. What exactly dual religious belonging means concretely is yet to be determined; what it most likely does *not* mean is full immersion in two religious communities or embracing every aspect of teaching and practice in both religions. About the experience of dual religious belonging and the theological model I am proposing to explain it, there are further relevant questions to be asked and answered; but such questions must be asked and answered by a Christian theologian who experiences his own religious identity as complex—by a theologian who hears that “fateful call to a dreaded holiness” in more than one religious tradition—by a theologian who has found, in more than one religious community, a language by which to express her love to the one who loved her first. Perhaps it is through dialogue with such theologians that we will find clues for figuring out what God is doing in the other great religions of the world and how those religions relate to the Judeo-Christian tradition within the economy of salvation.

