

Method in Theology

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A summary of the views of Bernard Lonergan, from his book, *Method in Theology*.¹

Functional Specializations

Lonergan proposes that there are eight distinct tasks in theology. He refers to them as “functional specializations” because he aims to give theologians the big picture of how the various specific tasks work together to move theological reflection forward.



Retrieving the Past

The eight tasks fall into two parts. The first is about retrieving the past: What happened? What did people think and say? What developed historically? What misconceptions and problems appeared?

Functional Specialties	Description
1. Research	Identifies what materials (documents, artifacts, and artworks) are relevant to theological issues. Establishes the reliability of materials.
2. Interpretation	Interprets what their authors meant.
3. History	Identifies historical trends in the development of doctrines and theological schools of thought.
4. Dialectic	What misconceptions and errors have appeared in historical accounts of history? What have appeared in actual history? What underlying commitments about knowledge, morality, and holiness are at work?

Moving into the Future

The second part is about moving into the future: How does conversion in the theologian provide a basis for reflection on faith? What view of human nature does a converted perspective reveal? What are the time-tested truths and values of one’s religion? How do we organize all these truths and values in a coherent perspective? How can we communicate our faith to others?

Functional Specialties	Description
5. Foundations	Identifies what being converted means to one's knowledge, one's morality, one's holiness. Defines key theological categories for theological reflection.
6. Doctrines	Identifies the truths and values held by converted people of faith. Produces creeds, catechisms, narratives of sacred persons and events.
7. Systematics	Organizes the truths and values into a coherent whole based on models in Foundations.
8. Communications	Communicates and promotes the changes indicated by these religious truths and values. Adapts them to the media and mindsets of readers and congregations.

Importance of Each Function

Each of the eight tasks, or functional specializations, is important in its own right. Each has its unique criteria, merits, and limitations. Theologians may focus on only one specialization or on a combination of several. So it's important that they recognize exactly which functions they are carrying out when they "do" theology.

Also, each function is vital to the entire theological enterprise. No matter which functions certain theologians specialize in, they need to be aware of how their particular tasks dovetail with the rest. If they have only fuzzy notions of other specializations, they will tend to "take over" those functions without being aware of what these other functions demand.

Centrality of Conversion in the Theologian

To see what's new about Lonergan's proposal for method in theology, we might first identify eight similar "specialties" that we usually recognize:

Research	Archeology, documents, etc.
Interpretation	Interpretation of the meaning of basic materials. "Scripture Studies." Hermeneutics.
History	Histories of religions and of their doctrines and practices. Historical-critical studies.
Critical Theology	Critiques of socio-economic trends. Reviews of the works of theologians.
Theological Anthropology	Models of being human in history. Development of key terms for expressing theological doctrines.
Dogmatic Theology	Presentation of fundamental truths and moral standards. Sometimes called "Fundamental Theology."

Systematic Theology	Organization of doctrines/dogmas into a philosophically coherent pattern.
Pastoral Theology	Publishing, preaching, catechetics.

Notice that between “Critical Theology” and “Theological Anthropology,” there is a huge leap. The first four (research, interpretation, history, critique) deal with views on the religious practices and beliefs of people in the past. The last four (theological anthropology, dogmatic, systematic, pastoral) deal with the beliefs and principles that emerge from one’s personal religious faith and are meant to shape the future. But it’s one thing to know how other people thought and acted, but quite another to commit oneself to certain truths and ways of acting as revealed in one’s personal faith.

So the “leap” involves actual conversions on the part of the theologian to a fully open horizon. In this light, between “Critical Theology” and “Theological Anthropology,” Lonergan proposes that the “conversion” in the theologian be addressed directly as an integral part of doing theology.

Retrieving the Past

Conversions count when it comes to retrieving the past because there are always conflicts to be resolved—conflicting interpretations of texts, conflicting historical accounts, conflicting teachings, and, ultimately, conflicting views on whether religious developments were actually better or worse. Lonergan assigns to the specialty “dialectics” the task of clarifying and critiquing what commitments underlie these conflicts. Some conflicts arise simply from different perspectives, owing to different life experiences. Other conflicts arise from greater or less degrees of development, owing to more or less thorough education and practice in one’s faith. But the most basic conflicts arise from opposing views about knowledge, morality, and religion. Changes in these three views are matters of conversions:

There is an intellectual conversion in which we overcome naïve realism, idealism, conceptualism, and relativism by understanding what learning and knowledge are in the first place.

There is a moral conversion in which we commit ourselves to pursuing true, objective values, as opposed to what is just conventional practice or our personal preference.

And there is a religious conversion in which we welcome life as God’s gift of love. We draw on that gift to love the world, and everyone in it, with God.

The aim of dialectics is to explore and clarify these conflicts. Lonergan expects that theologians who are in dialog about any sorts of conflicts will discover shortfalls in conversion—sometimes in others and sometimes in

themselves. Undergoing or refining one's conversion is left to the theologian as a personal commitment. Since conversion itself is not a collaborative enterprise, it lies outside the eight functional specializations that Lonergan proposes.

Conversions and Horizons

Theologians may be more or less converted—intellectually, morally, and religiously. To speak generally of the effect of conversion, Lonergan uses the term “horizon.” By this he means the sum total of everything a person knows and cares about. So it includes everything a person knows and values in the present, as well as every *question* about meanings and values a person hopes will be resolved in the future. Note the importance of *question* here. There are many reasons why certain questions do not occur to theologians, but conflicts arise when relevant questions are not given their due. So the goal of an effective method in theology is to identify and resolve all the relevant questions that arise. Hence the importance of attending to the horizons of theologians and of people—the peoples in the past whom they study and the peoples to whom they speak today.

Moving into the Future

Conversions then provide the base for moving into the future. They give a foundation in the theologian for expressing his/her basic commitments. So Lonergan assigns to the specialty “foundations” the task of defining the categories that best express the intellectual, moral, and religious worldviews that stem from conversions. The aim is to produce a model of persons that fully incorporates our social and historical dimensions and that gives a framework for speaking of sin and salvation. Such a model would define terms such as *authenticity, justice, rights, sin, salvation, grace, and, of course, love.*

Lonergan's Contribution

What is unique about Lonergan's contribution to theological inquiry is his insistence that theology resides in minds and hearts. We get at those minds and hearts through books and preachers, but unless we attend seriously to what actually happens in minds and hearts, we tend to resort to metaphors that describe what “doing” theology involves. In contrast to metaphorical descriptions, an analysis of actual events of our minds and hearts leads to explanations that can be tested in experience.

For example, an analysis of the process of gaining insights reveals that it is permanently vulnerable to bias:

Neurotics are biased against learning about their problem.

Egotists are biased against learning about what benefits other persons.

Loyalists are biased against learning what might benefit other groups.

And common sense itself tends to be biased against deep analysis, historical study, and often even the question of God.

Similarly, an analysis of the process of making choices reveals the roles of symbols, feelings, deliberation, value judgments and commitments. It also reveals that we are permanently vulnerable to willfulness—the irrational phenomenon by which we can deliberately act against our better judgment. These kinds of analyses reveal quite exactly what sort of healing should be pursued by people of religious faith.

So Lonergan lays out the two theological specialties, *Dialectic* and *Foundations*. They correspond somewhat to what we called “Critical Theology” and “Theological Anthropology,” respectively, but Lonergan explicitly bases their respective methods on the presence or absence of conversions.

Dialectic aims (1) to clarify the roots of conflicts by exposing underlying intellectual, moral, and religious *horizons* and (2) to invite theologians to widen their *horizons* completely.

Foundations aims to express *horizons* that are intellectually, morally, and religiously converted, so that the subsequent doctrines, systematics, and communications flow ultimately from the converted *horizons* of theologians.

It is through these two specialties that the remaining six specialties become explicitly and functionally related to conversions in the theologian.ⁱⁱ

The Functioning Set of Theological Specialties

To put flesh on these bones, here are examples of the work of theologians in each specialty.

Research

Christian scholars in the 2nd century established which books belong to the Bible. The 1947 discovery of the *Dead Sea Scrolls* gives evidence of religious sects, practices, and teachings that were part of the Jewish culture in the time of Christ.

Interpretation

In his *The Book of Psalms* (Norton, 2007), Robert Alter provides an English translation with copious footnotes regarding a rather large number of corrupt or uncertain passages and possible alternate meanings. In *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Eerdmans, 1997), N.T. Wright explains what Paul really meant by terms like “justification” and “gospel.”

History

In *The Ecclesiastical and Political History of the Popes of Rome, during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1840) Leopold Ranke traces

the intricate involvement of the Roman Catholic church with politics. In *Theology of the Christian Word: A Study in History* (Paulist, 1978), Frederick Crowe traces the historical development of the meaning of "The Word" from Old Testament up through contemporary use.

Dialectic

Frederick Lawrence, in his "Grace and Friendship: Postmodern Political Theology and God as Conversational" (*Gregorianum* 85/4, 795-820), contrasts the horizons of Enlightenment and Postmodern thinkers and reveals shortcomings in their respective views on knowledge, morality, and religion. Matthew Lamb, in his "A Distorted Interpretation of Latin American Liberation Theology" (*Horizons* 8: 352-64 [1981]), gives a critical review of Dennis McCann's *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology: Practical Theologies in Conflict* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

Note here that theologians doing "dialectics" focus explicitly on the horizons of those doing research, interpretation, and history, as well as on the peoples and cultures whose history it happens to be. They also engage in a mutual exposure of horizons among themselves. They aim to identify relevant questions that were overlooked, ignored, or suppressed in ways detrimental to religious belief.

Foundations

In *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) Karl Rahner explores the meanings of death and history as part of a human nature in need of salvation. In his groundbreaking work *Insight* (Philosophical Library, 1953), Bernard Lonergan explores what occurs when we learn anything, which reveals the broad requirements that any redemption from bias and willfulness needs to meet.

Doctrines

Daniel Helminiak's *The Same Jesus: A Contemporary Christology* (Loyola University Press, 1986) and Tad Dunne's "Authentic Feminist Doctrine," *Lonergan and Feminism* (Toronto, 1994, 114-33) express fundamental beliefs in terms directly connected to conversion. Note that works like *The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part I* (Vatican, 1992) identify certain truths and values as revealed by God, but the formulations used are often drawn more from reason and scripture than from any reader's experience of conversion. In this respect, many official church doctrines fall outside the theological specialty Lonergan names "Doctrines."

Systematics

In *Grace & Disgrace: A Theology of Self-esteem, Society and History* (E.J. Dwyer, 1992), Neil Ormerod organizes these notions on the basis of conversions in the person. In "The Redemptive Vicarious Suffering of Christ: An Inquiry," *Australian Lonergan Workshop II*. (Novum Organum Press,

2002, 135-50), Peter Beer links the concept of "satisfaction" to foundational categories rooted in conversion.

Communications

In "Towards a Method of Theological Reflection on Experience in Ministry," (*Pastoral Sciences*, 1983, 2:33-57), Eugene King asks seminar participants to reflect on the roles of conversion, bias, and sin in their ministries. In "Liturgy: An Ecclesial Act of Meaning," (*Worship* 59:482-97 [1985]), Margaret Mary Kelleher links liturgical symbols to inner acts of meaning among participants.

Note here that the last four functional specialties are *not* identical to their more familiar counterparts (theological anthropology, dogmatic theology, systematic theology, and pastoral theology). The difference lies in how clearly these efforts are rooted in conversions that readers/hearers can recognize and verify in themselves.

Note also that there is no requirement that theologians specialize in only one of these eight specialties. Theology is driven by questions, and many questions require various combinations of these tasks. The point is to understand the limits and criteria of each task and its relationship to other tasks.

Lonergan's Theological Accomplishments

Finally, to give some assurance that Lonergan knows what he is talking about, it will help to give a brief overview of his own work in theology.

His doctoral dissertation was on the notions of *grace* and *freedom* in Aquinas. Shortly after he published a work on what Aquinas meant by *word*. This required research, interpretation, a complicated history of these ideas after Aquinas, and a dialectical analysis of where other theologians went wrong. In "Origins of Christian Realism" he clarifies how the presence (and absence) of intellectual conversion accounts for the development of Christian doctrine on the Trinity and Incarnation.

He taught courses (and published lectures) on "The Trinity," on "The Incarnate Word," on "The Ontology and Psychology of Christ," on "The Redemption," and on "The Mediation of Christ in Prayer." In these we can see evidence of his own intellectual and religious conversions helping him to present exactly what Christians hold to be true. These fall under both doctrines and systematics.

He published many works that fall under the specialty, "Foundations." The major works are *Insight* and *Method in Theology*. There are also at least two dozen articles on various issues regarding method and conversion. As "foundational," these works were written not just with theology in mind but all disciplines in human studies. In this respect his two works in economics—*For a New Political Economy* and

Macroeconomic Dynamics —also take their stand on conversion as the ultimate criterion for economic policy decisions.

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ⁱ Lonergan, Bernard. *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972).

ⁱⁱ Many theologians make a distinction between “religious studies” and “theology.” Religious studies looks at the phenomena of religions—their origins, beliefs, developments, errors, and declines. These correspond to the first four functional specialties mentioned above. They do not require any religious commitment in the investigator. “Theology,” in this perspective, aims to express the meaning and impacts of one’s own religious faith. In contrast, Lonergan identifies all eight tasks as “theology,” since the last four cannot be carried out without the first four, but will refer to “religious studies” when speaking of works that regard religion as a social phenomenon and not as expressing one’s personal faith commitments.