

In Defence of Lonergan's Critics

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Our editor has learned much about torture in recent years. Had he not done so, I doubt whether he would have had the ingenuity to think of inviting me to reply to Bill Mathews's defence of Bernard Lonergan¹ in the light of Fergus Kerr's review² of thirteen other people's reflections on Lonergan's *Method*!

When we mounted that symposium at Maynooth from which *Looking at Lonergan's Method* emerged we had a quite specific purpose in view. On the one hand, we believed that *Method in Theology* was far too important to be ignored. On the other hand, we knew that it would receive plenty of adulatory attention from those who have been so profoundly influenced by Lonergan's work that they seem incapable of doing more than uncritically restating Lonergan's position in Lonergan's categories. We felt that there was room for a collection of essays which did Lonergan the honour of taking him sufficiently seriously to attempt critically to come to grips with some of the fundamental issues raised by *Method* (a similar attempt, by a group of Texan theologians, can be found in the Spring 1975 number of the *Perkins Journal*). It is, I think, a measure both of the importance of the issues, and of the perceived power of Lonergan's contribution, that scholars as internationally distinguished, and from such varied cultural, philosophical and confessional backgrounds, as Hesse, Jossua, Pannenberg and Torrance, should have agreed to take part in this enterprise. One shows respect neither for the issues, nor for Lonergan's contribution to their clarification, if one simply leaps to his defence, as Bill Mathews tends to do, without—apparently—attempting first to *understand* the standpoints from which other scholars offer a critical response to his achievement.

Thus, for example, right at the outset Mathews says that 'all the essays are concerned with details, none with grasping the significance of *Method* as a whole'. The implication is that we had failed to grasp the significance of *Method* as a whole and that, as a result, our treatment was superficial. This implication may, of course, be correct. But what we thought we were doing was something of which both Lonergan and Mathews warmly approve: namely, 'having recourse to teamwork'. We intended the papers to deal, not with 'details' but with particular aspects of Lonergan's contribution.

¹'Lonergan's Awake', *New Blackfriars*, January 1976.

²'Lonergan's Wake', *New Blackfriars*, July 1975.

What I miss in Mathews's article is any similar attempt to come to grips with particular issues. He prefers to make broad assertions, and to make them in such a manner as to suggest that, if one disagrees with him, one has necessarily misunderstood both Lonergan and theology (I am reminded, in contrast, of Lonergan's far more modest assessment of his achievement in the discussions at the Texan seminar referred to above). Thus he says that 'The methodologist . . . is not concerned with resolving any specifically theological problem but with understanding the nature of the total theological enterprise. It follows that he must be extremely careful not to appear to violate the autonomy of the theologian in matters theological'. Such an assertion (of which less crude forms may be found in *Method*) at least invites the following questions. Firstly, if one takes the facts of cultural and philosophical pluralism as seriously as Lonergan undoubtedly intends to do, in what sense is it *possible* for any one man to grasp 'the nature of the total theological enterprise'? Secondly, is the Christian response to truth such that so sharp a distinction between method and content in Christian theology is legitimate (let us call this 'Rahner's question to Florida')? Thirdly, does Lonergan himself, in *Method*, in fact succeed in keeping issues of method and issues of theological substance as sharply distinct as he would intend and claim to do? The point is, quite simply, that these questions have been asked; that they have been asked by several of the contributors to *Looking at Lonergan's Method*; and that they seem to be reasonably intelligent questions. The form of Mathews's defence of Lonergan, which consists of writing as if such questions had not been, and should not be asked, seems less than wholly satisfactory.

Mathews says of *Method* that 'the individual theologian can read it in order to see if it can help him in the performance of his own strictly individualistic tasks and this seems to be how Lash reads it'. This is puzzling, on two counts. Firstly, I would not have thought that any theologian had, *as* a theologian, 'strictly individualistic' tasks to perform. He is trying to do a job in and for a community. Secondly, and more seriously, Mathews seems here to obscure a distinction which I had (obviously unsuccessfully) sought to clarify. I had suggested that Lonergan was, in fact, more preoccupied with improving the quality of the performance of the individual academic specialist than is apparent from a hasty reading of *Method*, and that this praiseworthy pastoral or pedagogical preoccupation sheds some light on why it is that, as I see it, Lonergan tends to marginalise certain crucial problems generated by the element of discontinuity between different social, cultural and linguistic meaning-contexts. Lonergan undoubtedly *intends* to take the problem of cultural pluralism very seriously; the question concerns the extent to which he succeeds in doing so. Bill Mathews, instead of replying in any detail either to my analysis of what I believe to be a serious weakness of *Method*, or to that offered by Professor Mary Hesse (which points in the same direction) simply repeats, in summary form, some features of Lonergan's own highly

formalised account of the development of what we might call 'the European Mind'.

(Hugo Meynell [*New Blackfriars*, September 1975], in an amiable footnote, accuses me of 'flirting' with 'relativism'. The metaphor is interesting. A sane man does not flirt with a chimera. Whether or not flirting is reprehensible presumably depends upon whether it endangers an existing commitment. I do not think that I have been seduced by relativism or unreasoned by its charms, but I do plead guilty of infidelity where my relationship with a sociologically and hermeneutically naive comparative epistemology is concerned. Any reader who wishes to observe the flirtation more closely might care to glance at a paper which I published in the *Irish Theological Quarterly* in 1974, entitled 'Understanding the Stranger'.)

Mathews concludes by saying that *Method* 'will help promote the inner coherence and unity of the theological enterprise whilst at the same time restoring its cultural role in relation to the religious community'. I hope he is right. But I would beg him seriously to consider the possibility that *Method* will only have this sort of beneficent influence if Lonergan's more enthusiastic disciples are prepared seriously to come to grips with questions raised by those whose respect for Lonergan's achievement does not lead them to suppose that he has, single-handed, produced a definitive set of solutions to a fundamental, and fundamentally intractable, set of problems. Mathews speaks of 'the arguments of the prosecution'. But surely neither Lonergan, nor Mathews, nor Lash, nor Paul, nor Apollo, are of any importance. It is the truth that matters. The 'unity of the theological enterprise' is to be sought by increasing shared experience, common understanding, common judgement and common action—not by rallying round the flag (or uncritically adopting the role of 'prisoner's friend'!).