

## My Own Modest Exercise in Dialectic

Cyril Orji

Lonergan acknowledges that dialectic, the technical name for his fourth functional specialty, is a term that has "been employed in many ways" by different thinkers in the history of ideas.<sup>1</sup> His own modest use is to designate only "the concrete, the dynamic, and the contradictory" of Christian movements and traditions.<sup>2</sup> This means that Lonergan's use of the term is not for any abstract philosophical idea, but rather historical and contextual. In many of my works, I have followed Lonergan's lead, applying dialectic to the American and the African cultural and historical contexts. My aversion to ahistorical dogmatic theology is as strong as Lonergan's aversion to classicist Christian cultural mentality. I have been inspired by Lonergan to be attentive in a way that suggests reasonableness and responsibility. This has helped me to distinguish, as Lonergan intends it, between dogmatic and doctrinal theology when applying the Christian theological teachings to both the American and African cultural contexts. Dogmatic theology is classicist. It is presumptive in that it assumes that on each issue there is one and only one true proposition.

It is out to determine which are the unique propositions that are true. In contrast, doctrinal theology is historically-minded. It knows that the meaning of a proposition becomes determinate only within a context. It knows that contexts vary with the varying brand of common sense, with the evolution of cultures, with the differentiation of human consciousness, and with the presence or absence of intellectual, moral, and religions conversion.<sup>3</sup>

Where Lonergan's own focus was on the internal and external conflicts that have marked Christian movements and church communion as a whole,<sup>4</sup> my own focus has essentially been on the internal and external conflicts that have marked a particular subset of this Christian movement, i.e., the

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 14, *Method in Theology*, edited by Robert M. Doran and John D. Didosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 124.

<sup>2</sup> CWL 14, 124.

<sup>3</sup> CWL 14, 309.

<sup>4</sup> CWL 14, 124.

American and the African church communions. I see my task as a kind of heightening of consciousness that Lonergan suggested in the chapter on Dialectic is needed if one is to set up a new realm of meaning and “construct the scaffolding for an entry into the world of interiority.”<sup>5</sup> If the Greeks needed an artistic development of language to set up their metaphysical account of the mind, and if the likes of Augustine, Descartes, Pascal, and Newman needed the Greek achievement to expand the capacities of commonsense knowledge and language,<sup>6</sup> then all the more reason our own cultural contexts need Lonergan’s achievements for entry into a new realm of meaning in a world cultural context. However, communicating this essential idea to my colleagues and interlocutors has not been without its own challenge.

My own challenge about entry into a new realm of meaning began during my doctoral studies at Marquette University. This was before I studied Lonergan in depth and before I knew about the differentiation of consciousness he effected so well. Truth be told, I found my doctoral studies in theology at the time to be tasteless and breathless. It was annoyingly frustrating because I could not find a home in any of the theologies or theological schools that were paraded at the time. I enjoyed reading Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar but did not find a home in either of them. My earlier theological education was Thomistic in orientation. So I loved Aquinas whom I had studied and have quoted all my life. But I also knew that the achievement of Aquinas cannot be rote memorized and superimposed into the new context of World Church. From my experience on World Christianity, I knew that contemporary theology was disengaging itself from the Aristotelianism that Aquinas relied on. World Christianity, which is my domain, needs new categories to be effective. I knew Thomism needed to be transposed and that to insist a rote memorization of Aquinas is to be stuck in what Lonergan, I would later learn, calls a second stage of meaning. Then I discovered Lonergan shortly before my Doctoral Qualifying Examination (DQE). That was the Eureka moment of my intellectual journey. The unexpected discovery, in human terms, happened by accident, but in spiritual terms was divinely ordained. I needed to take a systematic theology examination with Dr. Shawn Copeland who was the Lonergan scholar on the faculty of Marquette at the time. She told me to read Bernard Lonergan’s *Method in Theology* and that I would find it useful. About the same time, one of my professors, Paul Misner, who was a professor of historical theology at

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<sup>5</sup> CWL 14, 245.

<sup>6</sup> CWL 14, 245,

Marquette, by sheer accident, handed me a copy of Lonergan's *Insight* (the 1954 edition). Perhaps he was clearing his office and was updating his library. Whatever was the motivation, reading *Method* and *Insight* was an eye-opening experience. Theology all of a sudden became delightful. What was hitherto tasteless and sour became sweet. My discovery of Lonergan became the beginning of my own self-discovery and intellectual conversion. In Lonergan I found answers to many of the questions I had on many subjects, especially on the emerging new religious consciousness that the old-style abstract and non-contextual theology neither addressed nor was aware of.<sup>7</sup> To use Lonergan's own spatial metaphors of two complementary vectors, I knew two vectors were needed in the new religious consciousness: development from below upwards and development from above downwards. As a contextual-minded person with an awareness of two theological contexts, i.e., the theological context of the received theology we have been trained and reared in and the theological context I would be teaching moving forward, the discovery of Lonergan helped my appreciation of the two complementary vectors: development from below upwards (which, as Lonergan explains, begins from experience, is enriched by sound judgment, and ends, not in satisfaction, but values) and development from above downwards (which begins in affectivity and culminates in apprehension of values). Lonergan validated for me so many of my earlier concerns. For example, he validated my concerns about contemporary use of Aquinas. As he succinctly puts it,

to follow Aquinas today is not to repeat Aquinas today, but to do for the twentieth century what Aquinas did for the thirteenth. As Aquinas baptized key elements in Greek and Arabic culture, so the contemporary philosopher and/or theologian has to effect a baptism of key elements in modern culture.<sup>8</sup>

My objectification of dialectic is in line with Lonergan's vision that the emergence of world consciousness and historical consciousness should guide a person's application of the functional specialties. This is not to say that the new vigor generated by my reading of Lonergan has not been without

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<sup>7</sup> See Bernard Lonergan, "Emerging Religious Consciousness of Our Time," in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol.16, *A Third Collection*, edited by Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Lonergan, "Theology and Man's Future," in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 13, *A Second Collection*, edited by Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 114-26, 117.

oppositions. There is opposition on the one hand from those whose world view ever remains classicist in one way shape or form. Trying to change them is like trying to move Mount Kilimanjaro. Then there is opposition of those who are still stuck in the second stage of meaning. They are like the “weekend celebrities” Lonergan references in the Cincinnati Lectures. That said, I am also aware that not all oppositions are antithetical. Legitimate disagreements are in order. In fact, dialectic suggests and need legitimate oppositions so that conversion can be reached. I understand Lonergan as suggesting that the emergence of world consciousness makes incumbent on all to be attentive to the differences that separate the present Church cultures from the past Church culture.<sup>9</sup> My foray into Lonergan helped me to understand how and why earlier theology was deductivist. Many have been fed with this Denzinger or Conclusion theology. Denzinger theology tends to present a logically ordered set of propositions that admit no conclusions that do not derive from the premises.<sup>10</sup> The problem stems from Aristotelian science, which deals with the “necessary we think we understand when we know the cause, know that it is the cause, and know that the effect cannot be other than it is.”<sup>11</sup> It is the insufficiency of this style of theology, which Lonergan sometimes refers to as Christian positivism,<sup>12</sup> that needs to be laid bare and transcended. This style of theology thinks the essential task of the theologian is to be a propagandist for church doctrines and that all the theologian has to do is repeat, explain, and defend “just what had been in church documents. He had no contributions of his own to make.”<sup>13</sup>

When I read ecclesial documents, including some more recent encyclicals, it is hard not to notice that the prevailing worldview is Western and that the dominant culture undergirding them is that of the west. While this might be understandable in some regard, since we still have very much with us vestiges of Christendom, disappointingly, the western culture is often spoken synonymously as the “Christian culture.” I get an annoying feeling when I see theologians of African extraction parrot and repeat what has been said in these documents without attempting to make a contribution of their own. It is this deductivist style that Lonergan has taught me to move away from. Its corrective is methodical theology. The methodic style “aims at

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<sup>9</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 147.

<sup>10</sup> CWL 14, 253.

<sup>11</sup> Lonergan, “Theology and Man’s Future,” CWL 13, 118.

<sup>12</sup> CWL 14, 307.

<sup>13</sup> CWL 14, 307.

decreasing darkness and increasing light and keeps adding discovery to discovery."<sup>14</sup>

I do not say these to fault ecclesial documents or the style of theology our forebearers were trained in. We are all, after all, products of our age. Rather, I bring these things up to emphasize the need to be historically-minded and affirm Lonergan's demand for "the normative pattern of related and recurrent operations by which we advance in knowledge."<sup>15</sup> The horizon of, say, church documents or old-style theology, is in many ways different from, say the African horizon, and even in some cases opposed to it. Lonergan refers to opposed horizons as "conflict" arising from opposed philosophies or methods.<sup>16</sup> The task of dealing with this conflict is precisely the task of dialectic.

For me as a black theologian, because of the reality of opposed horizons, while some ecclesial documents may answer the gnoseological question, they often do not answer the epistemological and metaphysical questions needed for the attainment of meaning in a world cultural matrix. My application of dialectic to such conflicting situation follows Lonergan's strategy, which is, not to prove my own position, "not to refute counterpositions, but to exhibit diversity and to point to evidence for its roots."<sup>17</sup>

The common tendency, even among some African theologians, to accept uncritically received theology, as exemplified in the deductive logic of Ludwig Ott and Heinrich Denzinger, is unhelpful. Circular reasoning passes for theological analysis. In terms of what is moving forward, dialectics exposes the unauthenticity of this tendency. What they omit "are the meaning and value that inform human living and acting."<sup>18</sup> There are still many who confuse the task of the theologian. They think of the theologian as a parrot for ecclesiastical authorities. This warped understanding is what Lonergan's dialectic has also helped me to avoid. As Lonergan cautioned, "theologians have minds and use them, and they had best know what they are doing when they use them."<sup>19</sup> The parroters of ecclesial documents mistake naïve realism for objectivity. They think the real is *the world out there*. The field of theological investigation, unlike the fields of mathematics and science, is not a place where investigators commonly agree, for the reason, as already pointed out,

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<sup>14</sup> CWL 14, 253.

<sup>15</sup> CWL 14, 245.

<sup>16</sup> CWL 14, 238.

<sup>17</sup> CWL 14, 238.

<sup>18</sup> Lonergan, "Theology and Man's Future," CWL 13, 121.

<sup>19</sup> CWL 13, 117.

that there are legitimate different viewpoints. Lonergan's dialectic has helped me to understand that though a person's view may be different from that of others, the differences should be an occasion for reflection and self-scrutiny, which in turn can lead to a new or deeper understanding.<sup>20</sup> This is what Lonergan means by conversion—finding out for oneself what it means to be intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and being in love—is a slow process and requires time for maturation.<sup>21</sup>

Lonergan distinguishes between two meanings of the word objectivity: the objectivity of the world of immediacy and the objectivity of the world mediated by meaning. The objectivity one has in the world of immediacy is different from the objectivity one has in the world mediated by meaning. "In the world of immediacy the necessary and sufficient condition of objectivity is to be a successfully functioning animal."<sup>22</sup> To be content with being a functional animal is the kind of "objectivity" one reaches when one's reception of church documents is uncritical. But the objectivity of the world mediated by meaning is different. Here objectivity is "constituted by the exigencies of intelligence and reasonableness."<sup>23</sup> Regarding why agreement is frequently lacking in theological matters, Lonergan says it can be explained by an appeal to a person's subjectivity. The subjectivity of a person in the world of immediacy is different from the subjectivity of a person in a world mediated by meaning and motivated by values. "In the world mediated by meaning and motivated by value, objectivity is simply the consequence of authentic subjectivity, of genuine attention, genuine intelligence, genuine reasonableness, genuine responsibility."<sup>24</sup>

Thus, theological propositions and church documents and papal encyclicals are, for me, "the materials of dialectic."<sup>25</sup> While they are "a logical first"<sup>26</sup> in the sense of being like mental acts that answer the gnoseological question, they do not necessarily answer the epistemological and metaphysical questions. Although it is not always apparent, a careful reading of church documents at times reveal some of the same "unnoticed assumptions and oversights"<sup>27</sup> that one is won't to find in the writings of

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<sup>20</sup> CWL 14, 238

<sup>21</sup> CWL 14, 238.

<sup>22</sup> CWL 14, 246-47.

<sup>23</sup> CWL 14, 247.

<sup>24</sup> CWL 14, 248.

<sup>25</sup> CWL 14, 124.

<sup>26</sup> CWL 14, 245.

<sup>27</sup> CWL 14, 125.

some well-meaning men and women of western orientation who have yet to effect a shift to empirical or modern culture. I came to discover this through the exercise of self-appropriation that Lonergan says occurs through a heightening of consciousness and which “proceeds to an objectification of the subject to an intelligent and reasonable affirmation” of judgment.<sup>28</sup> My understanding of dialectic has made me aware that “not every viewpoint is coherent” and that “not every reason is a sound reason.”<sup>29</sup> Dialectic helps me to understand the difference between the world of immediacy and the world mediated by meaning. To accept theological propositions without questions is to inhabit a world of immediacy, a world apart from questions and questions in which one erroneously views church teachings as the *already out there real now real*. “It is *already*: it is given prior to any questions about it. It is *out*: for it is the object of extraverted consciousness. It is *there*, as sense organs, so too sensed objects are spatial. It is *now* for the time of sensing runs along with the time of what is sensed. It is *real* for it is bound up with one’s living and acting and so must be just as real as they are.”<sup>30</sup>

In a nutshell, dialectic has helped me transpose and see beyond the commonsense world of theological data. It has propelled my foray into new stages of meaning. Lonergan’s admonition remains ever true” “If one insists on remaining in the world of common sense and ordinary language or if one insists on not going beyond the worlds of common sense and of theory, one’s decisions preclude the possibility of entering into the world of interiority.”<sup>31</sup> Anyone who makes a decision not to go beyond the worlds of common sense and theory, while they are exercising their vertical liberty to do so also ought to know that their decisions are not to be considered binding on the rest of humanity.<sup>32</sup> The materials of dialectic can be used as a means of reaching a fuller understanding of Christian teaching) as well as a tool to reveal oppositions and different viewpoints in a world cultural Church community. “Christianity has nothing to lose from a purge of unsound reasons, of ad hoc explanations, of the stereotypes that body forth suspicions, resentments, hatred, malice.”<sup>33</sup> I have come to appreciate that while there are some legitimate differences between the African cultural contexts and other cultural matrices, like the western and Asian, the differences are irreducible.

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<sup>28</sup> CWL 14, 246.

<sup>29</sup> CWL 14, 125.

<sup>30</sup> CWL 14, 246.

<sup>31</sup> CWL 14, 245.

<sup>32</sup> CWL 14, 245.

<sup>33</sup> CWL 14, 125.

“Not every irreducible difference is a serious difference.”<sup>34</sup> This is how dialectic has helped me to achieve what Lonergan intends as the aim of dialectic—a comprehensive viewpoint.<sup>35</sup> For Lonergan’s understanding of dialectic is “a generalized apologetic conducted in an ecumenical spirit, aiming ultimately at a comprehensive viewpoint, and proceeding towards that goal by acknowledging differences, seeking their grounds real and apparent, and eliminating superfluous oppositions.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> CWL 14, 125.

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