

Bernard Lonergan

Bernard Joseph Francis Lonergan (17 December 1904 – 26 November 1984) was a Canadian Jesuit priest, philosopher, and theologian, regarded by many as one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century.^[1]

Lonergan's works include *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (1957) and *Method in Theology* (1972), as well as two studies of Thomas Aquinas, several theological textbooks, and numerous essays, including two posthumously published essays on macroeconomics. A projected 25-volume Collected Works is underway with the University of Toronto Press. He held appointments at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Regis College, Toronto, as Distinguished Visiting Professor at Boston College, and as Stillman Professor of Divinity at Harvard University.

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The Reverend
Bernard Lonergan
SJ CC



Lonergan at Boston College

Born	Bernard Joseph Francis Lonergan
	17 December 1904
	Buckingham, Quebec, Canada
Died	26 November 1984 (aged 79)
	Pickering, Ontario, Canada

Aims

Lonergan set out to do for human thought in our time what Thomas Aquinas had done for his own time. Aquinas had successfully applied Aristotelian thought to the service of a Christian understanding of the universe.^[2] Lonergan's program was to come to terms with modern scientific, historical, and hermeneutical thinking in a comparable way.^[3] He pursued this program in his two most fundamental works,*Insight* and *Method in Theology*.^[4]

The key to Lonergan's project is "self-appropriation", that is, the personal discovery and personal embrace of the dynamic structure of inquiry, insight, judgment, and decision. By self-appropriation, one finds in one's own intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility the foundation of every kind of inquiry and the basic pattern of operations undgirding methodical investigation in every field.^[5]

He is often associated with his fellow Jesuits Karl Rahner, and Joseph Maréchal with "transcendental Thomism", i.e., a philosophy which attempts to combine Thomism with certain views or methods commonly associated with Kant's transcendental idealism.^[6] However, Lonergan did not regard this label as particularly helpful for understanding his intentions.^[7]

Life

Bernard Joseph Francis Lonergan was born on December 17, 1904, in Buckingham, Quebec, Canada. After four years at Loyola College (Montreal), he entered the Upper Canada (English) province of the Society of Jesus in 1922, and made his profession of vows on the Feast of St Ignatius of Loyola, July 31, 1924.^[8] After two further years of formation and education, he was assigned to study scholastic philosophy at Heythrop College, London, in 1926.^[9] Lonergan respected the competence and honesty of his professors at Heythrop, but was deeply dissatisfied with their Suarezian philosophy.^[10] While at Heythrop, Lonergan also took external degrees in mathematics and classics at the University of London.^[11] In 1930 he returned to Canada where he taught for three years at Loyola College, Montreal.^[12]

In 1933, Lonergan was sent for theological studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.^[13] He was ordained to the Catholic priesthood in 1936.^[14] After a year of Jesuit formation ("tertianship") in Amiens, France,^[15] Lonergan returned to the Gregorian University in 1937 to pursue doctoral studies in theology. Due to the Second World War, he was whisked out of Italy and back to Canada in May, 1940, just two days before the scheduled defence of his doctoral dissertation. He began teaching theology at College de l'Immaculee Conception, the Jesuit theology faculty in Montreal in 1940, as well as the Thomas More Institute in 1945-46. In the event, he would not formally defend his dissertation and receive his doctorate until a special board of examiners from the Immaculee Conception was convened in Montreal on December 23, 1946.^[6]

Lonergan taught theology at Regis College from 1947 to 1953, and at the Gregorian University from 1953 to 1964. At the Gregorian, Lonergan taught Trinity and Christology in alternate years, and produced substantial textbooks on these topics. In 1964, he made another hasty return to North America, this time to be treated for lung cancer. He was appointed again to Regis College from 1965 to 1975, was Stillman Professor of Divinity at Harvard University in 1971-72, and Distinguished Visiting Professor at Boston College from 1975 until 1983. He died at the Jesuit infirmary in Pickering, Ontario on 26 November 1984.^[17]

Influences

Lonergan names Augustine and John Henry Newman as major influences upon his early thinking.^[18] J. A. Stewart's study of Plato's doctrine of ideas^[19] was also influential.^[20]

In the epilogue to *Insight*, Lonergan mentions the important personal transformation wrought in him by a decade's apprenticeship to the thought of Thomas Aquinas.^[21] He produced two major exegetical studies of Thomas Aquinas: *Grace and Freedom*, and *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*

Works

The University of Toronto Press is in the process of publishing Lonergan's work in a projected 25-volume series, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*. Archival materials are available at bernardlonergan.com.

Grace and Freedom

Lonergan's doctoral dissertation was an exploration of the theory of operative grace in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. His director, Charles Boyer, S.J., pointed him to a passage in the *Summa theologiae* and suggested that the received interpretations were mistaken.^[22] A study of Thomas Aquinas on divine grace and human freedom was well-suited to his interest in working out a theoretical analysis of history.^[23] The dissertation was completed in 1940; it was rewritten and published as a series of articles in the journal *Theological Studies*.^[24] The articles were edited into a book by J. Patout Burns in 1972, and both the revised and the original version of his study were subsequently published in his *Collected Works* as *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*.^[25]

Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas

After his return from Rome, Lonergan wrote a series of four articles for *Theological Studies* on the inner word in Thomas Aquinas which became highly influential in the study of St. Thomas' accounts of knowledge and cognition. The articles were later collected and published under the title *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*^[26]

Insight: A Study of Human Understanding

In 1945 Lonergan gave a course at the Thomas More Institute in Montreal that extended from September to April 1946 entitled "Thought and Reality," and the success of that course was the inspiration behind his decision to write the book *Insight*. While teaching theology at Collegium Christi Regis, now Regis College federated with the University of Toronto, Lonergan wrote *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, inaugurating the generalized empirical method (GEM). GEM belongs to the movement of "transcendental Thomism" inaugurated by Joseph Maréchal. This method begins with an analysis of human knowing as divided into three levels – experience, understanding, and judgment – and, by stressing the objectivity of judgment more than Kant had done, develops a Thomistic vision of Being as the goal of the dynamic openness of the human spirit.

Method in Theology

In 1973, Lonergan published *Method in Theology*, which divides the discipline into eight "functional specialties." Method is a phenomenon which applies across the board in all disciplines and realms of consciousness. Through his work on method, Lonergan aimed, among other things, to establish a firm basis for agreement and progress in disciplines such as philosophy and theology. Lonergan believed that the lack of an agreed method among scholars in such fields has inhibited substantive agreement from being reached and progress from being made; whereas, in the natural sciences, for example, widespread agreement among scholars on the scientific method has enabled remarkable progress. The chapter on "Religious Commitment" in *Method in Theology* was delivered in a lecture at The Villanova University Symposium and published in: *The Pilgrim People: A Vision with Hope*, Volume IV, edited by Joseph Papin (Villanova University Press, 1970). Karl Rahner, S.J., however, criticized Lonergan's theological method in a short article entitled: "Some Critical Thoughts on 'Functional Specialties in Theology'" where he states: "Lonergan's theological methodology seems to me to be so generic that it really fits every science, and hence is not the methodology of theology as such, but only a very general methodology of science."^[27] Lonergan's thinking in *Method* was, indeed, inspirational in bringing theological and psychology together in a unique way, e.g. Bernard J. Tryrrell, "Christotherapy: A Theology of Christian Healing and Enlightenment Inspired by the Thought of Thomas Hora and Bernard Lonergan" in *The Papin Festschrift: Wisdom and Knowledge, Essays in Honour of Joseph Papin, Volume II*, edited by Joseph Armenti, Villanova University Press, 1976, pp. 293-329.

Trinitarian theology

While at the Gregorian University, Lonergan composed a two-volume Latin textbook, *De Deo Trino* (third edition, 1964). It has recently appeared in the *Collected Works* together with an interleaf English translation under the title *The Triune God: Doctrines* (2009)^[28] and *The Triune God: Systematics* (2007).^[29]

In *The Triune God: Doctrines*, Lonergan begins with an examination of the dialectical process by which the dogma of the Trinity developed in the first four centuries. This section was previously published in English as *The Way to Nicea*.^[30] The second section of the work advances dogmatic theses on (1) the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, (2) the divinity of the Holy Spirit, (3) the distinction of the divine persons by relations of origin, and (4) the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son (the Filioque). The fifth and final thesis is that the Trinity is a theological mystery in the strict sense and can only be understood analogically. A concluding scholion presents New Testament evidence in favor of the "psychological" analogy of the Trinity.

In *The Triune God: Systematics*, Lonergan develops the theory of intelligible (or spiritual) emanations in God as propounded by Thomas Aquinas. The volume begins with a discussion of the method of systematic theology which seeks an imperfect but highly fruitful understanding of the mysteries of faith by means of analogies. The following chapters develop an analogical conception of the divine processions (as intelligible emanations), relations, persons, and the two missions of the Word and Spirit.

Christology

Lonergan produced two textbooks in Christology.^[31] In 1956 he produced a supplemental volume *De Constitutione Christi Ontologica et Psychica* the fourth and final edition of 1964 was presented in the Collected Works with an interleaf translation as *The Ontological and Psychological Constitution of Christ* (2002).^[32] Lonergan clarifies the metaphysical principles of Christ's constitution as one person in two distinct natures, and transposes that framework to address the consciousness of Christ as a single subject of two distinct conscious subjectivities.

Beginning with an edition of 1960, Lonergan introduced his own textbook for his Christology course, *De Verbo Incarnato*. Subsequent editions were published in 1961 and in 1964.^[33] *De Verbo Incarnato* is divided into four parts. The first part is an interpretation of the divinity and humanity of Christ as presented in the New Testament (thesis 1). The second part recapitulates the formation of the dogmatic theological tradition of Christology up through the monothelite controversy in the seventh century (theses 2-5). The third part, which covers much the same material as *The Constitution of Christ* but in a somewhat different manner, formulates what Lonergan calls "theological conclusions" from the hypostatic union regarding the ontological constitution of Christ as one person in two natures (theses 6-9), and his psychological constitution as a single subject of two subjectivities (thesis 10). The fourth part concerns "what belongs to Christ" (*de iis quae christi sunt*), including his grace, knowledge, sinlessness, and freedom (theses 11-14). The fifth and final section regards the redemptive work of Christ, in three theses: redemption in the New Testament (thesis 15), the satisfaction given by Christ (thesis 16), and "Understanding the Mystery: The Law of the Cross," presenting Lonergan's synthetic understanding of Christ's work (thesis 17).

He also produced a separate treatise on the Redemption, of uncertain date and never published.^[34] This treatise treats, in six chapters divided into 45 articles, good and evil, divine justice, the death and resurrection of Christ, the cross of Christ, the satisfaction given by Christ, and the work of Christ.

Among Lonergan's more noteworthy contributions to Christology include his theory about the ontological and psychological constitution of Christ,^[35] his interpretation of Christ's human knowing,^[36] and his interpretation of Christ's redemptive work.^[37]

Both *De Verbo Incarnato* and the supplement on Redemption are in preparation for the Collected Works. The plan is to present two volumes, *The Incarnate Word*,^[38] which would include theses 1-14 in Latin with an interleaf English translation, and *The Redemption*,^[39] which would include theses 15-17 and the supplement on Redemption.

Macroeconomics

In the 1930s and early 40s, Lonergan developed an intense interest in macroeconomic analysis, but never published the manuscript he developed. In later life while teaching at Boston College, Lonergan returned his attention to the economic interests of his younger days. The University of Toronto Press has published his two works on economics: *For a New Political Economy* and *Macroeconomic Dynamics: An Essay in Circulation Analysis*

Philosophy: generalized empirical method

Lonergan described his philosophical program as a generalization of empirical method to investigate not only data given through exterior sensation, but also the internal data of consciousness.^[40] More specifically, objects are known while considering the corresponding operations of the subject and vice versa, experiencing and the subsequent operations of the intellect being components of both knowing and reality.^[41] Method, for Lonergan, is not a technique but a concrete pattern of operations.^[42]

Lonergan maintained what he called critical realism. By realism, he affirmed that we make true judgments of fact and of value, and by critical, he based knowing and valuing in a critique of consciousness. GEM traces to their roots in consciousness the sources of all the meanings and values that make up personality, social orders, and historical developments. A more thorough overview of Lonergan's work is available at the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.^[43]

Loneragan's ideas include [Radical Unintelligibility](#), [GEM](#), and Functional Specialization. Given the fact that no science can today be mastered by a single individual, Lonergan advocated sub-division of the scientific process in all fields. One of the leading voices in the effort to implement functional specialization is [Philip McShane](#).

Hermeneutics

[Frederick G. Lawrence](#) has made the claim that Lonergan's work may be seen as the culmination of the postmodern [hermeneutic](#) revolution begun by [Heidegger](#). Heidegger replaced Husserl's [phenomenology](#) of pure perception with his own linguistic phenomenology. Gadamer worked out this seminal insight into his philosophical hermeneutics. According to Lawrence, however, Heidegger, and in a lesser way Gadamer, remained under the influence of Kant when they refused to take seriously the possibility of grace and redemption. Lawrence makes the observation that Heidegger – influenced also by Augustine's inability to work out a theoretical distinction between grace and freedom – conflated finitude and fallenness in his account of the human being. "Sin" is therefore absorbed into "fallenness," and fallenness is simply part of the human condition. Lonergan builds on the "theorem of the supernatural" achieved in medieval times as well as on the distinction between grace and freedom worked out by Thomas Aquinas, and so is able to remove all the brackets and return to the truly concrete, with his unique synthesis of "Jerusalem and Athens."^[44]

Honours

In 1970 he was made a Companion of the [Order of Canada](#).

In 1971, [Loyola College](#), one of [Concordia University's](#) founding institutions, awarded the Loyola Medal to Lonergan.^[45] Concordia also awarded Lonergan an honorary doctorate in 1977.^[46]

Conferences and journals

An annual Lonergan Workshop is held at Boston College, under the leadership of Frederick G. Lawrence. The proceedings of the Workshop are published under the same name, *Lonergan Workshop*, edited by Frederick G. Lawrence. The Workshop began in Lonergan's lifetime and continued after his death. The West Coast Methods Institute sponsors the annual Fallon Memorial Lonergan Symposium at Loyola Marymount University. The Lonergan Symposium has been meeting for 32 years.

Boston College has a [Lonergan Institute](#), and also publishes the bi-annual *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies*. The journal was founded and edited until 2013 by Mark D. Morelli. The *Lonergan Studies Newsletter* is put out 4 times a year by the Lonergan Research Institute, Toronto; it provides the most up-to-date bibliographical information on the Lonergan movement. Recently, Seton Hall University has put out [The Lonergan Review](#).

Loneragan Centers have been set up in various places (see below, External Links). The Lonergan Research Institute at Toronto holds the Lonergan archives as well as a good collection of secondary material, including a complete collection of dissertations on Lonergan's work. Much of the primary archival material is available online at the [Bernard Lonergan Archive](#) (see below, External Links), and a site for secondary material has also been set up, thanks to the work of Robert M. Doran.

See also

- [John F. X. Knasas](#)

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3. Cf. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "Insight Revisited," in *A Second Collection*, ed. William F.J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), pp. 263-278 at pp. 268, 277; idem, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1972), p. xi.
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19. J. A. Stewart, *Plato's Doctrine of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909).
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37. Cf. Lonergan, "Redemption," in *Collection*, pp. 3-28; Charles Hefling, "A Perhaps Permanently Valid Achievement: Lonergan on Christ's Satisfaction," *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 10 (1992): 51-76
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External links

- "Bernard Lonergan": *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
- Bernard Lonergan Archive A collection of works by Lonergan
- Lonergan Resource A collection of works about Lonergan
- Lonergan Forum Discussion board
- Bernard Lonergan profile and books on Goodreads
- The Lonergan Website - Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

- [Loneragan Research Institute, Toronto](#)
- [Loneragan Institute, Boston College](#)
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- [Bernard Joseph Francis Loneragan](#)[at The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)
- [Commentary and Notes on Insight](#)[\(includes podcast\)](#)
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