

Bernard Lonergan's *The Triune God: Systematics*

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Chapter 2 An Analogical Conception of the Divine Processions

The Problem

In this section of chapter 2, Lonergan initiates discussion by first referring to the mysteriousness of the Christian teaching about God, a mysteriousness which reveals a mass of contradictions which seems to inform the Christian doctrine of God and which is best addressed if one first attends to two things: understand the principle of non-contradiction in its exact meaning; and understand the meaning and nature of distinctions (since an understanding which attempts to move into the mystery of the Christian Trinity needs to know something about the nature of distinctions and the different kinds of distinctions which exist if confusions are to be avoided). From lack of understanding comes errant belief.

With respect then to the Christian doctrine of God and all the apparent contradictions that this teaching seems to contain and possess, in his *Grammar of Assent*,¹ Cardinal Newman notes that this teaching can be articulated into nine separate propositions:

1. There are Three who give testimony in heaven, the Father, the Word or Son, and the Holy Spirit.
2. From the Father is, and ever has been, the Son.
3. From the Father and Son is, and ever has been, the Spirit.
4. The Father is the One Eternal Personal God.
5. The Son is the One Eternal Personal God.
6. The Spirit is the One Eternal Personal God.
7. The Father is not the Son.
8. The Son is not the Holy Ghost.
9. The Holy Ghost is not the Father.

Then, as Newman speaks of it in a way which distinguishes a “real assent” from a “notional assent,” from the data of revelation, each separate proposition can be understood and received by a *Areal apprehension*[@] or a *Areal assent*[@] that acknowledges and affirms a reality. However, when all these separate propositions are combined together into a *Asystematized whole*,[@] only a lesser form of apprehension can be given. A notional apprehension or a *Anotional assent*[@] acknowledges a conceptual content (an object of thought) or, in other words, the reality of a conceptual content *as a conceptual content* but no truth or reality which transcends our human knowing even as it is somehow known or attained by our knowing.

As Newman speaks of it, dogmas possess a reality which surpasses what belongs to ideas or concepts—it belongs to real assent. The human mind is so structured that it would violate itself if

¹<http://www.newmanreader.org/works/grammar/chapter5-2.html>.

it tried to affirm that something both is and is not. If, for instance, it is said that Christ is truly God and that there exists only one God, how can one say that Christ also comes from a Father who is also fully God? How can one avoid contradictions which would seem to reveal an inconsistency in Christian teaching? How can one square belief in one God with belief in three divine persons? As Lonergan poses the question, how do we deal with Christ and the Holy Spirit? God the Father is inoriginate. He does not come from anything. But, not so with Christ and the Holy Spirit. Each is as divine as God the Father, but each is said to come from another divine being.² Hence, if polytheistic conclusions are to be avoided, a question which is most appropriate is one which asks about how it is possible to say that the same God comes from the same God (as opposed to a misleading question which asks about how one God comes from another God).³

By identifying the proceeding which occurs within God (as best as one is able to do so), by a more thorough understanding of the nature of this proceeding, it should be possible then to speak about a differentiation in the order of proceeding which does not harm God's unity but which, instead, reveals a distinct proceeding of the Son and a distinct proceeding of the Holy Spirit (given that Son and Spirit differ from each other in the existence that each has). Hence, in moving then toward a possible solution, carefully understanding the principle of non-contradiction presents itself as a first step if initial experiences of contradiction are to be understood and evaluated in a way which can possibly lessen any unwelcome experiences of contradiction that one is having.⁴

²Ott, pp. 61-64.

³Lonergan, *The Triune God*, p. 129.

⁴Please note that the principle of non-contradiction should not be seen as only or as purely a logical principle though it is commonly referred to as such in the English-speaking world. As Aristotle understood it, the principle of non-contradiction is something which is so basic and necessary that it can be viewed as rationally indemonstrable. Cf. *Metaphysics*, 4, 2-3, 1005b11-34. About it, no deception is possible; one cannot err in acknowledging it. Cf. *Metaphysics*, 4, 2, 1005b11. One does not need to argue to it nor to prove it in a manner which moves from what is known to what is unknown since, in trying to do so, one would end up in an infinite regress and it would be impossible for anyone to prove anything. Cf. *Metaphysics*, 4, 4, 1006a6-11. Any attempt to effect a demonstration would only beg the question at hand since any such attempt, in its operations, would necessarily presuppose the principle of non-contradiction.

As previously noted in notes on chapter 1, section 3, the principle of non-contradiction is grounded in the principle of identity. If A equals A, A cannot be equated with what is not-A. And so, from the principle that being and non-being exclude each other ("what is" versus "what is not"), a principle of non-contradiction can be formulated which is to be understood as the most basic axiomatic first principle of human reasoning and thinking.

In this context then, a development in understanding can be adverted to if one compares a metaphysical insight of Parmenides with a cognitional insight that had belonged to Aristotle but which owes a certain debt to the groundbreaking insight of Parmenides. Accordingly, for Parmenides, reality (Being) necessarily is or exists or, necessarily, it does not exist.⁵ One cannot have it both ways. It is impossible for reality (or Being) either to be and not be. AWhat is, is, and cannot not-be.⁶ However, as one shifts to a more exact wording and the analysis that one finds in Aristotle (an analysis which, in cognitional terms, speaks of truth and falsehood), it is said that in making an affirmation and then affirming its negation, Athese two cannot be true together.⁷ As Aristotle more fully elaborates his thesis in the *Metaphysics*, Athere is no affirming and denying the same *simultaneously*.⁸ Italics mine. In Latin, *non est simul affirmare et negare*. Something cannot be and not be *at the same time under the same respect*.⁹ *Simul*

To establish more clearly, however, that the principle of non-contradiction should be understood also as a metaphysical principle, one can refer to a performative contradiction which occurs if one were to say something that is contrary to what in fact is the case in a given situation. A thought experiment comes down to us from antiquity. If one is in room sitting on a chair and someone knocks from without and asks if one is present, to respond by crying out “I am not here” would be a performative contradiction. One’s cry testifies not to not-being but to an elemental being which no words or thought can possibly deny. What is in terms of A cannot be not-A. For a humorous but pointed example of a similar performative contradiction, one cannot forget a story about Voltaire, the famous French philosopher, who was so exasperated by the coming of so many uninvited guests to his home (as a consequence of his fame) that he once cried out to them down from an upstairs staircase landing: “Voltaire is dead!”

⁵*Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 1994 ed., s. v. AParmenides of Elea,@ by Simon Blackburn, p. 278.

⁶W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Presocratic tradition from Parmenides to Democritus*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 16

⁷Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, 7.

⁸Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4, 3, 1005b29, as quoted by Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 94, a. 2; 2a2ae, q. 1, a. 7. See also Aquinas, *On the Eternity of the World against the Grumblers*, cited by *An Aquinas Reader*, ed. Mary T. Clark (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1972), p. 179. A variant translation is supplied by Frederick E. Crowe in AApplying Universals to the Particular: The General Problem,@ *Three Thomist Studies*, supplementary issue of *Loneragan Workshop*, vol. 16, ed. Fred Lawrence (Boston: Loneragan Institute, 2000), p. 7: AOne cannot affirm and at the same time deny.@

⁹Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4, 3, 1005b18: literally, “the same attribute cannot both

introduces a qualification which includes both meanings, a qualification which introduces a circumstantial factor in how the principle of non-contradiction is to be understood and how it is to be applied in judging the truth or falsehood of any given thesis which presents itself for consideration.¹⁰

And so, from this, it follows that, in the judgments which one makes, everything depends on what exactly is being affirmed or negated in a given statement and what exactly is being affirmed or negated in another statement. If certain distinctions are not carefully made, contradictions will all too obviously present themselves. But, if certain distinctions are very carefully drawn, it will be possible to affirm propositions together that only apparently conflict with each other. Real contradictions will not obtain if the issue or subject matter in question differs as one moves from one proposition to another.

The making of distinctions accordingly introduces a second step which recalls the value and necessity of being able to tell one kind of distinction from another and when one should employ one kind of distinction and not another. An undifferentiated notion of distinction simply says that this is not that: Ax@ is not Ay.@¹¹ But, as one wades into the different distinctions that are made, one finds three main groups. Verbal, material distinctions refer to different words that are used to speak about the same thing. Mental, conceptual distinctions refer to different objects of thought (or different ideas) though these objects of thought all refer to the same reality or being.¹² Real, ontological distinctions lastly refer to different beings or different elements that are constitutive of a thing=s being or reality. In this way, respectively speaking, major real distinctions differ from minor real discussions (as has been already discussed).¹³ Mixed distinctions arise when a conceptual being or object of thought is compared to a real being or the real property of such a being. Adequate real distinctions can also be distinguished from inadequate real distinctions. For instance, in an inadequate real distinction, one speaks about the

belong and not belong to the same subject at the same time and in the same respect.”

¹⁰Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 94, a. 2, vol. 28 (London: Blackfriars), p. 80, n. e. As Aquinas notes in *Sententia super Metaphysicam*, 4, 6, 600, without these qualifications, apparent contradictions would be mistakenly viewed as real contradictions when this is not truly or really the case.

¹¹Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 93.

¹²Lonergan, *Insight*, pp. 513-514.

¹³Please see earlier notes on chapter 1, section 8, on AA Further Consideration of the Historical Movement.@

difference between APeter and his hands.¹⁴ In adequate real distinctions, different real beings are distinguished from each other or different properties that are constitutive of an already existing being. By adverting thus to all these different kinds of distinctions, one soon realizes that the solution to the problem of the Trinity in systematic theology is an apprehension of some kind that can adequately express itself through distinctions that are severally and appropriately verbal, conceptual, and real (as circumstances and conditions require). In every given instance, one must know if one is making a verbal distinction, a conceptual distinction, or a real distinction.

In concluding his discussion, Lonergan argues that the distinct proceedings of Son and Holy Spirit must be understood in a way that is neither verbal nor conceptual. Purely verbal distinctions communicate no meaning. One might repeat the words of the Christian creed that speak about the different comings, different proceedings of the Son and Holy Spirit.¹⁵ But, if the profession of these beliefs is to reverberate in the depths of one's soul in a way that wins one's love and commitment, more is needed. However, in terms of meaning, a purely conceptual distinction with regard to the different proceedings would imply that the Son and Holy Spirit only differ from each other only as they are thought, supposed, or even imagined. Son and Holy Spirit would exist only as distinct ideas or concepts and so one would have to say that they refer to the same reality. But, this is a heretical conclusion. Its postulation suggests a species of **modalism** (a heresy dating from the 2nd and 3rd centuries). God would exist as only one person although this person manifests himself in three different ways or modes: as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (or, respectively, as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier).¹⁶ Hence, if this conclusion is to be avoided and if Christian belief is to effect a profound transformation of people's lives, an understanding of things in Trinitarian systematic theology must achieve a level of reality in understanding that is commensurate with the realism of the Church's officially professed belief. As Lonergan notes, the creed speaks of three divine persons who exist and who are really distinct from each other (p. 129). Each person is much more than just an idea.

By way of conclusion then, as one moves toward these divine persons from an explanatory principle that talks about how relations are grounded ultimately in an emanation internal to God, everything which proceeds from emanation in terms first, of proceedings, and then secondly, of relations, must be understood to possess a like degree of reality (as opposed to any verbal or conceptual notions of reality). From an empirical notion of person that is experienced in the economy of salvation and revelation, through an understanding that works from the nature of an emanation internal to God, a critical meaning for person is reached and, on the basis of this new understanding, problems are resolved in the theology of the Trinity. One can begin to speak about God as triune (a threeness in one) and one does so without contradiction.

¹⁴Lonergan, *Insight*, p. 514.

¹⁵Ott, p. 62.

¹⁶*Modern Catholic Dictionary*, 1980 ed., s. v. Amodalism, by John A. Hardon, S.J., p. 355.

