

# Discernment of Stories

TAD DUNNE

*Siena Heights University*

*This article is a professional courtesy copy provided for colleagues. Please do not distribute further.*

Stories have recently been recognized as playing major roles in how people understand themselves and their worlds. Since the 1960s historians and journalists increasingly employ stories in their writings.<sup>1</sup> Psychologists following the lead of Ira Progoff expanded their horizons beyond pathological analyses of dysfunctions to include stories that guide the unfolding drama of one's journey toward wholeness.<sup>2</sup> Postmodern views began to shape the imaginations of architects, playwrights, and fiction writers in ways that discount grand theories in favor of the lived stories of unique local cultures. Politicians and social activists speak of "changing the narrative" as a strategy for achieving peace and justice. Cultural anthropologists and theologians find radically different views on an afterlife that affect the entire drama of this life.<sup>3</sup> Johannes Metz proposed that theology must take seriously the various narratives of salvation.<sup>4</sup> Not that stories are anything new. Plato's Myth of the Cave is a story. John's Gospel is a story of God that invites readers to welcome God's saving work in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.<sup>5</sup> The acts in *Acts* are principally the acts of God in an unfinished story of salvation.<sup>6</sup>

What is new is that stories are now recognized as distinct and influential media with characteristics all their own, and that Bernard Lonergan has contributed key insights into the role stories play in the human pursuit of wholeness. He includes stories we tell others and stories we tell only ourselves. Yet some stories reveal, and others distort what a fully wholesome life is all about. It seems timely then, even urgent, to recognize that a *discernment of stories* is a

---

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the emergence of narratives among historians and journalists, see Jill Lapore, "Historical Writing and the Revival of Narrative," *Nieman Reports* 56/1 (2002), 51-52. Currently viewable at [http://niemanreports.org/articles/historical-writing-and-the-revival-of-narrative/.](http://niemanreports.org/articles/historical-writing-and-the-revival-of-narrative/)

<sup>2</sup> William Mathews, "Self-Appropriation in Ira Progoff and Bernard Lonergan," *Divyaddan Journal of Philosophy and Education* 25/1 (2014), 1-18.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Gerhard Lohfink, *Is This All There Is?* (Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 1017), Part I, "The Question of Questions," 3-56.

<sup>4</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, "A Short Apology of Narrative," in *The Crisis of Religious Language*, eds. Johann Baptist Metz and Jean-Pierre Jossua (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), 84-96. Cited by Robert Doran in *Psychic Conversion and Theological Foundations: Toward a Reorientation of the Human Sciences* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1981), 169. Hereafter *Psychic Conversion*.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Maloney, "Johannine Theology," in *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1420-21 (chap. 83, secs. 18-21).

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Dillon, "Acts of the Apostles," *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 722-24 (chap. 44, sec. 2.5). Acts 13: 17-52 clearly presents the acts in *Acts* as acts of God.

foundational category in any human studies. I mean *foundational* in Lonergan's sense, namely, categories based on personal conversions.<sup>7</sup>

### *Symbols and Stories*

Stories are a higher order of the symbols by which individuals and entire cultures envision their lives. First, then, a few words about symbols. Lonergan defines a symbol as “an image of a real or imaginary object that evokes a feeling or is evoked by a feeling.”<sup>8</sup> The “image” here is primarily an element in one’s imagination by which one recalls certain memories, envisions future possibilities, and creates external symbols for others to see, hear, or touch. Although the meanings of such images can shift and oppose one another, symbols also function to energize and direct one’s pursuit of wholeness by maintaining an internal communication between one’s body, mind, and heart.<sup>9</sup> While Lonergan frequently names experience, understanding, judging, and deciding as rising levels of horizontal finalities in an individual consciousness, he also describes how inner symbols integrate the levels into a functioning whole. He envisions their rise as part of an all-encompassing *passionateness of being*, which “underpins and accompanies and reaches beyond the subject as experientially, intelligently, rationally, morally conscious.” It reaches fulfilment in the topmost level of vertical finality where individual consciousness is made more fully whole by being part of a shared consciousness that constitutes families, friendships, communities, human solidarity, and being in love with God and with everything and everyone God loves.<sup>10</sup> The topmost level of being in love, in turn, reaches down to make the potential vertical finality toward wholeness a reality. Being in love, Lonergan says, “...reveals values. At once it commands commitment and joyfully carries it out. . . .Where hatred reinforces bias, love dissolves it . . . love breaks the bonds of psychological and social determinisms with the conviction of faith and the power of hope.”<sup>11</sup>

Lonergan further recognizes that symbols can engage a person in what remains an awesome mystery. Symbols “express the spirit of man, yet at the same time commonly they purport to refer to what is beyond man, what is beyond anything in this world that man can observe and thereby come to study and know.”<sup>12</sup> In an intimate (and rare) revelation of Lonergan's own self-awareness, he describes being in love with God as an awe-evoking mystery:

---

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive account of key categories in human studies as proposed by Bernard Lonergan, see Robert Doran, *Psychic Conversion and Theological Foundations*.

<sup>8</sup> *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 64; [projected CWL 14, chap. 3, sec. 4]. Hereafter, citations of chapters and sections refer either to works projected for publication in *The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press) or in editions of works previously published. References shown as CWL <vol> refer a volume of the *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*.

<sup>9</sup> *Method in Theology* (1972), 66-67 [projected CWL 14, chap. 3, sec. 4]

<sup>10</sup> Lonergan, "Mission and the Spirit," in *A Third Collection*, CWL 16 (2017), eds. Robert Doran and John Damosky, 28–30 [chap. 3, sec. 4].

<sup>11</sup> *A Third Collection*, CWL 16, 101 [chap. 7].

<sup>12</sup> Lonergan, “First Lecture: Religious Experience” in *A Third Collection*, 111 [CWL 16, chap. 8, Introduction].

Ordinarily the experience of the mystery of love and awe is not objectified. It remains within subjectivity as a vector, an undertow, a fateful call to a dreaded holiness. Perhaps after years of sustained prayerfulness and self-denial, immersion in the world mediated by meaning will become less total and experience of the mystery become clear and distinct enough to awaken attention, wonder, inquiry.<sup>13</sup>

Yet because symbols can also express a feeble faith or distorted views of human life, specialists in any human studies would rightly ask a prior, foundational question: How to assess the validity of the symbols in our lives? Lonergan credits Robert Doran for proposing a *psychic conversion* as foundational for a critical-minded understanding of symbols. Doran regards the psyche as the affective-imaginal realm of consciousness comprising “the flow of sensations, memories, images, affects, conations, spontaneous intersubjective responses, and so on, that accompany our intellectual and moral activities.”<sup>14</sup> Under a psychic conversion, one recognizes how massively inner symbols dominate everyday consciousness, and how easily the psyche can misfire by repressing relevant questions that would arise from the images in one’s psyche and by uncritically accepting views distorted by biases in the intelligence of others.<sup>15</sup> In human studies generally, experts wishing to explore connections among aesthetic, theoretical, philosophical, scholarly, or commonsense expressions of knowledge would attend also to the affective-imaginal events in their own consciousness. They would guide their investigations by a personal appropriation of what occurs, or fails to occur, when anyone not only experiences, understands, judges and decides but also imagines, feels, and loves.<sup>16</sup>

What, then, about stories? In Lonergan’s view, stories are about people’s destinies and freedom. Their destinies are determined by the decisions they make as they adapt to changes arising from natural causes and from the decisions of others. As Lonergan observed, “Through the drama, man can apprehend concretely his freedom, his capacity to decide, and the limitations upon his freedom.”<sup>17</sup>

A few years before his 1972 publication of *Method in Theology* Lonergan set symbols within the fuller dramatic context of story.<sup>18</sup> He described how an *élan vital* “takes the lead in human

---

<sup>13</sup> *Method in Theology* (1972), 113 [projected CWL 14, chap. 4, sec. 6].

<sup>14</sup> Robert Doran, “What Does Lonergan Mean by ‘Conversion’?” Currently viewable at <http://www.lonerganresource.com/pdf/lectures/What%20Does%20Bernard%20Lonergan%20Mean%20by%20Conversion.pdf> (2011), 5. For Lonergan on the dynamics of the psyche, see *Insight*, CWL 3 (1992), eds. Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran, 210–214 [chap. 6, secs 2.5 and 2.6].

<sup>15</sup> Doran, *What Does Lonergan Mean by Conversion*, 20. See also Doran, “Two Ways of Being Conscious: The Notion of Psychic Conversion,” *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* n.s. 3 (Spring 2012), 1–17 at 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Method in Theology* (1972), 93–96 [projected CWL 14, chap. 10, sec. 3].

<sup>17</sup> See *Topics in Education*, CWL 10 (1993), eds. Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran, 232 [chap. 9, sec. 5.2].

<sup>18</sup> In 1970 Lonergan noted how dreams of the night are “obscure, fragmentary, symbolic” while in dreams of the morning the dreamer “is beginning to adopt a stance in that world, . . . has got beyond himself; he is concerned with what is distinct from himself; he is anticipating his self-transcendence.” (In this respect, morning dreams are commonly recognized as stories.) See “The Response of the Jesuit,” in *A Second Collection*, CWL 13, 141, eds. Robert Doran and John Dadosky, 141 [chap. 12, sec. 1.]

development and expresses its intimations through the stories it inspires.” He adds, “Symbols, finally, are a more elementary type of story: they are inner or outer events, or a combination of both, that intimate to us at once the kind of being that we are to be and the kind of world in which we become our true selves.”<sup>19</sup> Stories, then, sublimate symbols. I mean sublimate in Lonergan's sense of operations at a higher level of consciousness that preserve the lower levels while directing them to more wholesome goals.<sup>20</sup> In this manner, stories retain the vertical dynamism of the passionateness of being to integrate neural-bodily, cognitive, and moral-affective realms of consciousness, while transposing them from an abstract-operational context of symbols into a concrete-dramatic context of people who intimate the kind of persons they want to be and the kind of world in which they find their true selves.<sup>21</sup>

### *World Dramas*

Many adults envision the various stories in their personal lives as scenes within a certain kind of world—a single world drama of events in the many times of many lifetimes. In Morgan Llywelyn's *1916: A Novel of the Irish Rebellion*, the young rebel Ned Halloran becomes aware of such a world drama:

War and death and babies being born. Ned tried to stretch the horizons of his mind to encompass them all in one world vision. It was the babies, he decided, who made the rest of it bearable, who redeemed the horror adults could perpetrate. A child . . . was created by the same species that manufactured guns and submarines—but with one added element: the Divine Spark, an immortal soul.<sup>22</sup>

Today, we are aware that different cultures view life differently. Eric Voegelin proposed that societies maintain their identities through symbols that represent the sort of work involved in

---

<sup>19</sup> "Reality, Myth, Symbol," in *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1965-1980, CWL 17*, eds. Robert Croken and Robert Doran, 384-390, at 387. On page 390 he clarifies how stories retain the function of symbols to communicate between body, mind, and heart. He remarks that the "spontaneity that has been observed in the hummingbird for the first time building a nest also has its counterpart in us. But in us that counterpart is complemented, transposed, extended by the symbols and stories that mediate between our vital energies and our intelligent, reasonable, and responsible lives."

<sup>20</sup> For example, Lonergan describes the stacked levels of spontaneity, reason, and grace as successive sublations in which, "as the higher perfects the lower, so the lower disposes to the higher." See "Finality, Love, Marriage," *Collection, CWL 4*, eds. Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran, 30, [chap. 2, sec. 3.2]. See also, *Method in Theology* (1972), 316 [projected *CWL* chap. 12, sec.7] and "The Subject," *A Second Collection*, 69-70 [chap. 6, sec. 4].

<sup>21</sup> "Reality, Myth, Symbol," 390. Also, Lonergan regards the familiar transcendental notions of intelligibility, truth, and goodness as horizontal finalities recognizable by their abstract nature. He regards vertical finality as recognizable in concrete experience of how higher levels give an order and a purpose to otherwise mere pluralities in lower levels. See "Finality, Love, Marriage" *CWL 4*, 19-23 [sec. 1].

<sup>22</sup> Morgan Llywelyn, *1916: A Novel of the Irish Rebellion* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates/Forge, 2010), chap. 30.

living a self-transcending life in a certain kind of world.<sup>23</sup> In his account of the establishment of the Roman Empire, he identified three distinct "symbols by which political societies interpret themselves as representatives of a transcendent truth."<sup>24</sup> Each such truth represents life as an unfolding story. (1) A *cosmological* truth is represented in a story of life as completely governed by the workings of the cosmos, including the workings of whatever divine forces may govern it. (2) An *anthropological* truth is represented in a humanistic story—a drama of human life as just human. Its workings rely on human intelligence, creativity, and good will. Despite the shadow of tragedy that falls on every human endeavor, humanity has no alternative but to be self-sufficient. (3) A *saving* truth is represented in a story of human life as insufficient in itself yet open to salvation by God.

There is more to say about Voegelin's anthropological truth. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor speaks of two "social imaginaries"<sup>25</sup> that would fall within Voegelin's anthropological/humanist story: An *exclusive* humanism is the atheistic form of secularism; it rejects beliefs in God's existence. An *inclusive* humanism accepts God's existence but replaces doctrines about God's rapturous involvement in human affairs with doctrines about God's stern expectations of humanity: God expects us to live morally upright lives and will dole out the appropriate rewards and punishments in a next life.

Besides the world dramas evident in history there is also a world drama evident in the social dynamics of groups. To be human is to feel connected to a group whose cohesion is secured by social structures, interpersonal relationships, and a symbolic vision of itself. Group members are prone to find other groups strange, unpredictable, threatening. To the degree that members dedicate themselves more to group cohesion and less to being personally responsible for their lives and critical-minded about the values that define their group, they are biased against recognizing what is disordered in their own group and well-ordered in other groups. Lonergan calls this phenomenon "group bias."<sup>26</sup> We may call the corresponding world drama "groupism"—a story of the world as islands of self-securing, mutually estranged groups.

Combining, then, the views of Voegelin, Taylor, and Lonergan, we can distinguish five highly influential world dramas: dramas of fate, reason, groupism, morality, and grace. A drama of fate tells of a world dominated by mysterious divine forces, the stars, ghostly ancestors, the government, inevitable patterns of history, or dumb luck. It omits the scenes of people taking responsibility for their collective lives, for changing the course of history, and for living in love with a creator who remains passionately engaged in their daily lives.

---

<sup>23</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 53, 76–77. Also, *Order and History*, vol. 1: *Israel and Revelation*, in *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* 14, ed. Maurice P. Hogan (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 95.

<sup>24</sup> Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 1, 76–77.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). The category *social imaginary* appears throughout this work; the quotation appears on page 25.

<sup>26</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 247-250 [chap. 7, sec. 7].

A drama of reason regards the human mind as the highest achievement of evolution. Life has no mystery, only problems; and science has made unprecedented strides in solving them. Mathematical probability explains good and bad luck. Evolution explains the emergence of humans on earth. Movements in the psyche formerly attributed to angels and devils are attributed to the subconscious. Reason regards religions as neither true nor false but as “belief systems” whose value depends on their outcomes for life on earth. Everyday hopes require reasonable controls. A healthy psyche requires control over one's environment and a type of reasonable self-management under the puzzling ideal of autonomy as self-help.

A drama of groupism envisions the world as a patchwork of self-interest groups. A self-interest bias is evident not only in small, self-contained communities; its appearance in large communities became evident in the 15th century with the rise of nation-states and theories of political self-determination. Groupism might appear to have been offset by the recent globalization of economies and by more readily available information about other cultures. Yet the offset is hardly conclusive. Global economies remain biased in favor of the well-being of the well-off. Despite cross-cultural education, group animosities continue as major factors in ethnic hatred and international terrorism.

A drama of morality imagines the world as not controllable by human reason alone. Although reason opens vast possibilities for what we can do, morality clarifies what we should do. While reason explains how technologies and economies actually function, morality proposes how they ought to function. Historically, the world drama of morality strongly influenced the faiths of major religions. Ancient Israelite faith has been named an “ethical monotheism,”<sup>27</sup> founded on a covenant in which God promised that Israel would thrive as a community provided that Israelites worshipped no other gods and treated one another with compassion and justice. Many modern Jews, Christians, and Muslims combine the theme of morality with a belief in an afterlife with God. Love Thy Neighbor is a moral requirement. The world drama is a morality play whose finale reveals who is rewarded and who is punished.

A drama of grace imagines the dramas of fate, reason, groupism, and morality as failing to present the full scope of human self-transcendence. Trust in fate displaces personal responsibility. Justifications of our misdeeds distort our reason. To confine our relationships to our group and to secure our confinement by a resolute suspicion of other groups, undermine our natural inclinations to widen our affective relationships. To regard “good” as just good for me or us nullifies the criterion of human conscience that “good” means something objectively worthwhile. On the other hand, a drama of grace evokes an acute awareness of human insufficiency and an abiding awe about the mystery of God's ongoing love. The drama is engaging not because of cognitive or moral credibility but because it touches the mind's intimations of mystery at the center of human living, the heart's deepest need for love, and unaided humanity's inability to permanently avoid wrongdoing. God does not leave us to work things out by ourselves. The drama of grace reveals ourselves as already in loving engagement

---

<sup>27</sup> Valentin Nikiprowetzky, “Ethical Monotheism.” *Daedalus* 104, no. 2 (1975), 69–89.

with the giver of our selves, of our gifts, of the company of our friends in the struggles and heartaches of life, and of the final, mysterious destiny of all humankind. We see the world with the eyes of the one who created humanity with hearts made for love, who provides us with whatever is lacking for living life to the full, and whose love carries no exclusions for preexisting faults or offenses. Love of neighbor is not reduced to a moral requirement; it is elevated to a share in the very life of God—a life spent in a shared care for the marginalized and in shared labors to build communities on love. Religious ideals of heavenly reward and hellish punishment are standards of moral living that make sense to the young, whether in age or in religious maturity. But these standards are not fundamental. In good families and among good friends, as one matures, one tends to realize that it has always been the love of parents and friends that make sustained moral living not only possible but also preferable. Those who sink roots into the fertile ground of love reasonably expect that moral insight and courage will sprout naturally. This is preeminently true of the drama of God's unconditional love. God's love germinates, energizes and directs moral living. Although many do not follow through on their intimations of God's love, Lonergan proposes that at least an openness to the question of God is within human yearning: "There lies within his horizon a region for the divine, a shrine for ultimate holiness. It cannot be ignored."<sup>28</sup>

Surely other world dramas have affected history, some in cultures long gone, others in various cultures today.<sup>29</sup> What they have in common is the expectation that there is an overarching drama to everything. At the same time, it would be shortsighted to categorize any particular community by a particular world drama: communities can blossom or wither; their members may have achieved more or less complete conversions of their psychic, intellectual, moral, and religious horizons. Daily pressures from society, entertainment, family, and personal memories can convey now this, now that, world drama. But because one can abide in a certain world drama for long periods or short, there is an ongoing need to discern which world drama has been shaping how one imagines the part one has been playing that day and whether or not the drama is fully true to life. Moreover, being attentive to the world dramas that affect one's personal symbolic world provides parents with relevant questions about how well or poorly their children are maturing. It prompts teachers and preachers to wonder, "In what sort of world do I imagine myself helping others to live?" It enables psychologists to uncover dysfunctional world dramas in the imaginations of people with troubled psyches. It gives voters criteria for assessing the worldviews of candidates for public office. It empowers all people of faith to call forth the world drama of grace in one another. It encourages Christians to invite others to discern whether,

---

<sup>28</sup> *Method in Theology* (1972), 101–103, at 103 [projected *CWL* 14, chap. 4, sec 1]. It should be noted that if the question of God is part of being human, it has a central place in all human studies, including those that seek to understand religion as a phenomenon or as their personal faith.

<sup>29</sup> David Korten, in his *Change the Story, Change the Future: A Living Economy for a Living Earth* (Oakland, CA, Barrett-Koehler Publishers, 2015) proposes that a "Sacred Money and Sacred Market" story is an influential but corrupt world drama today. Postmodern rejection of grand theories is itself a grand world drama of Compassion over Reason. Autocrats throughout history cast themselves in the role of Powerful Leader of the Powerless.



among many world dramas, the Christian world drama may be the full story of human history.

### *Lonergan the Jesuit*

As a Jesuit, Lonergan surely experienced the story element of Ignatian spirituality. He twice underwent 30-day retreats following St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*: first as a Jesuit novice and years later as a priest upon his completion of theological studies. Even though Ignatius did not explicitly make "story" a theme in his *Spiritual Exercises*, he directs those doing these exercises to focus mainly on the Gospel stories. He presents 56 contemplations of scenes in the life of Christ and often advises repetitions. One is to "be present to the words and deeds recorded as if you hear with your ears and see with your eyes"<sup>30</sup> and to enter into conversation with the persons in the scene as friend to friend.<sup>31</sup> The overall effort is not to deepen one's understanding but to enter affectively into the story with Christ, sharing his desires and his agonies as he brings God's Kingdom to where he is. This is why, among the many biblical passages, Ignatius includes none of the NT letters, only one teaching (Sermon on the Mount) and only five miracles. In 40 passages, one walks and talks with Jesus in actual events: before his birth, during his life and crucifixion, and after his resurrection.

Ignatius also drew up rules for "discerning the spirits" to ensure that any motivations for making life choices come from God. As it happened, Ignatius' wisdom on a discernment of spirits grew from reading stories. In his knight-errant days, while convalescing from a battle wound, he spent many hours reading books of worldly fiction and knightly escapades, and many other hours reading about the life of Christ and the lives of saints. Referring to himself in the third person, he recalls that "step by step, he came to recognize the difference between two spirits that moved him, the one being from the evil spirit, the other from God." Stories of worldly achievement left him sad, dry, and dissatisfied, while stories of Christ and the saints left him cheerful and fulfilled.<sup>32</sup> In this respect, the importance of discernment among motivations (spirits) would equally apply to stories about particular events in one's life. One would avoid replaying subconsciously sanitized versions of memories as if they were the full story and avoid rehearsing stories that could never happen. One would attend to what kind of world drama has represented the kind of person one wants to be and the kind of world in which one might become such a person. With Ignatius, one would pay special attention to the feelings a story evokes. Doran proposes that besides asking questions for understanding, for judgement, and for

---

<sup>30</sup> This passage appears in *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, a popular anonymous work published during Ignatius' youth. See Emmanuel von Severus and Aimé Solignac, "Méditation, §I. De l'écriture aux auteurs médiévaux" in M. Viller et al. *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, tome 10 (Paris: Bouchesne, 1980), 913. Similar sensate engagements with biblical scenes appear in Ludolph of Saxony's *Life of Christ*, which Ignatius acknowledged as influencing him. See Michel Sauvage, "Méditation, §2. dans les écoles de spiritualité," in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, 920.

<sup>31</sup> *Spiritual Exercises*, para. 54, 224, in *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. George E. Ganss (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992).

<sup>32</sup> *St. Ignatius' Own Story*, trans. William J. Young (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1998), 9–10.



deliberation, to also ask "How do I feel?" is to pose an existential question arising from the realm of symbols and stories.<sup>33</sup>

Although Ignatius did not propose rules for discerning world dramas, he was clearly aware of how thoroughly they shape how one lives in faith. In his *Spiritual Exercises* he presents a contemplation of the "Call of a Temporal King as a Help to Contemplate the Life of the Eternal King." Both the Temporal King and the Eternal King muster forces to engage enemies in battle for supremacy over the entire world. But where the Temporal King envisions military battles over lands, the Eternal King envisions spiritual battles over loves: "Christ our Lord, the Eternal King, before whom the entire world is assembled" calls everyone to join him in conquering all his enemies and to follow him into the glory of his Father. "Those who desire to demonstrate . . . their love for their Eternal King" will reject alien desires by battling against their "sensuality and carnal and worldly love."<sup>34</sup> Ignatius places this world drama as the setting for the dozens of contemplations of different scenes in Christ's life that follow.

### *The Christian World Drama*

Anyone can grasp a certain plausibility in the world dramas of fate, reason, groupism, and morality. But in the Christian drama of grace one is grasped. God opens a person to the awesome mystery of divine love laboring to share divine life with individuals as part of a world community being redeemed. According to Paul and Pauline authors, the *mystery* of redemption is God's plan—a plan long kept secret and now revealed through Christ. It is not a collection of plans for many individuals. Nor is it a single plan for the ideal community. It is a history. It is a plan for the actual, unfolding story of individuals in communities. God's plan is to redeem humanity by uniting not only Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, male and female, but all people in Christ.<sup>35</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, in his *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted and Who He Was*,<sup>36</sup> mounts convincing evidence that Jesus' own world drama envisioned God's redemptive work as an ever-maturing historical community. In heartfelt accord with God's promises in the Old Testament, Jesus wanted Israel to be a saving light to the entire world. To Jesus, God's kingdom is a world drama of God's ongoing redemption of humankind through human self-giving love—a love in union with the self-giving life and Spirit of Jesus himself. Moved from within by the

---

<sup>33</sup> "Reality, Myth, Symbol," 390. While Ignatius first noticed a difference between spiritual desolation and a spiritual consolation, he later noticed that not all feelings of spiritual consolation come from God. See his *Spiritual Exercises*, para. 331-333.

<sup>34</sup> *Spiritual Exercises*, para. 91-98.

<sup>35</sup> For scriptural evidence of the historical character of the redemption, Lonergan cites Eph, 1 Cor, 2 Cor, Rom 16; and 1 Tim 3:16. For references to the mysterious wisdom of God, he cites Eph 3:10 and Col 2:3. See "The Redemption," in *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1958-1964, CWL 6* (1996), eds. Robert Croken, Frederick Crowe, and Robert Doran, 3-28, especially the section "Redemption as Mystery," at 24-28. For Lonergan's earlier anticipation that redemption must be a history, see *Insight*, 745 [chap. 20, sec. 5].

<sup>36</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), esp. chaps. 2-4.

Father's life-giving love for all humans, and obedient to the Father's desires, Jesus gives his life for others. Bound to his followers, he missions them to carry forward his work of love in history. He gives them the very Spirit of Love that binds the Father and himself. Those who receive the Spirit are God's offspring and heirs with Christ, with whom they cry "Abba, Father." God's own Spirit abides with and in them.<sup>37</sup> They extend God's own forgiveness to others. They carry forward God's redemption by efforts that are arduous, liable to unintended consequences, wounded by bias and willfulness, yet healed by the forbearance, forgiveness, and creativity that are the fruits of God's self-communication in Jesus in history and the Spirit in hearts.

### *Theological Tasks*

In any religion that accepts that God moves in a person's consciousness and that there is a world drama that adequately expresses God's work in redeeming the world, the theme of discernment of stories would enrich every dimension of theological reflection. In Lonergan's account of functional specializations in theology, he proposes that theologians retrieve the past via the specializations of *research*, *interpretation*, and *history*. They move to the future via the specializations of *doctrines*, *systematics*, and *communications*. Between retrieving the past and moving to the future, he places the specializations of *dialectic* and *foundations*, in which the categories theologians use to express what they can learn or have learned are developed in accord with four conversions of their own horizons: psychic, intellectual, moral, and religious.<sup>38</sup> Under each conversion one repudiates partial views and opens oneself to views about the whole of reality—views whose modes of expression include symbols and stories.

Under a psychic conversion, one repudiates the assumption that humans are defined chiefly by intelligence. One discovers how symbols and stories enable anyone to remember and anticipate daily experiences, transcendent hopes, threats to their well-being, and how they energize and direct their pursuits of understanding, truth, goodness, and commitments of love. Under an intellectual conversion, one repudiates the assumption that knowing is like sensory perceiving. One discovers that first-hand knowledge gained through stories is not a simple matter of looking at writings or hearing words. In a combination of psychic and intellectual conversions, one discovers how faith-prompted symbols and stories regarding the mystery of God and God's engagement with humanity can be accepted as revelations of reality, even though they are grasped principally through a surrender to being in love with God.<sup>39</sup> In that surrender, the truths of the symbols and stories that express that love are affirmed to the degree that doubts about the full meaning of life are laid to rest.<sup>40</sup> Under a moral conversion, one repudiates the assumption

---

<sup>37</sup> In the preceding sentences, biblical citations are included as evidence of the world views of the early Christians. The respective sources of are Rom 8:15-16; Jn 20:22-23; and Jn 14:17.

<sup>38</sup> "Reality, Myth, Symbol," 384-390, at 389-90.

<sup>39</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> century author of the *The Cloud of Unknowing* wrote of an "unknowing" way to God: "By love he may be gotten and holden; by thought never." See *The Study of Spirituality*, eds. Cheslyn Jones et al. (New York: Oxford, 1986), 333.

<sup>40</sup> The criterion for affirming truths based in being in love is the same for affirming any expression as true,

that "good" is mainly represented by stories about the benefits and burdens coming to oneself or one's community; one accepts that "good" refers to what is objectively valuable, regardless of who benefits and who is burdened. Those who are religiously converted repudiate claims of ultimacy in stories that omit God. Their self-stories star persons wholeheartedly in love with God and, with God's own love, love their neighbors as themselves.<sup>41</sup>

Christian theologians present the gospel message as the full story of the world—a story of God's intimate and personal engagement with humans. But as history attests, the message can be distorted or misunderstood. It falls to theologians to correct distortions and clarify the message. Lonergan envisions the specialty *foundations* as expressions of conversions. "Conversion, as lived, affect all of a man's conscious and intentional operations. It directs his gaze, pervades his imagination, releases the symbols that penetrate to the depths of his psyche." In *foundations*, "conversion itself is made thematic and explicitly objectified."<sup>42</sup> Especially relevant to a discernment of stories is a foundational understanding of what makes a story "true." Under an intellectual conversion, one repudiates the Manichaean view that what is good has good causes and what is evil has evil causes. Augustine observed that any attempt to understand the causes of evil is "like trying to see darkness or hear silence."<sup>43</sup> In *Insight*, Lonergan explains why basic sin cannot be regarded as an event with a cause. Rather, it is a contraction of one's consciousness that fails to will what one ought to will.<sup>44</sup> Lonergan later categorized stories either as "true" when they reveal human lives as sometimes more and sometimes less authentic, and hence in need of grace, or as "cover stories" that gloss over failures in authenticity and the need for grace.<sup>45</sup>

---

namely, that any questions that would set conditions on an affirmation have been resolved, rendering the affirmation virtually unconditioned.

<sup>41</sup> Presumably, Christian theologians who have undergone a psychic conversion would root the full significance of the Christian world drama in a deliberate choice to welcome Christ's own world drama of grace as their own: "Let the same mindset be among you that was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5).

<sup>42</sup> *Method in Theology* (1972), 131 [projected CWL 14, chap. 5, sec 2(5)]. Elsewhere, Lonergan asks "whether there are basic theological questions whose solution depends on the personal development of theologians." Following Paul Ricoeur, he supports a hermeneutic of suspicion "that diagnoses failures in personal development" and a hermeneutics of recovery "that generously recognizes a genuine personal development that did occur." See "Theology and Praxis" (1977), in *A Third Collection*, 177-193, at 177-79 [Introduction].

<sup>43</sup> See Robert Solomon and Martin Clancy, *Morality and the Good Life: An Introduction to Ethics through Classical Sources*. 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 148-78, at 175-76. They cite Augustine's *City of God*, 12.7.1.

<sup>44</sup> *Insight*, 690-91 [chap. 19, sec. 9].

<sup>45</sup> Lonergan states, ". . . there are true stories that reveal the life we are really living, and there are cover stories that make out our lives to be somewhat better than in reality they are." I take Lonergan's reference to "cover stories" as narrative expressions of ideology, where ideology is understood as justifications of unauthenticity, and where unauthenticity can affect personal memories, group memories, or entire world dramas. See "Reality, Myth, Symbol," 386 [sec.2]. For the dynamics of ideology and unauthenticity, see *Method in Theology* (1972), 54-55 [projected CWL 14, chap. 2, sec. 7].

The specialty *dialectic* brings shortfalls of conversions to light. Shortfalls would be found in persons who, being halfheartedly committed to living fully wholesome lives, are in part responsible for a decline of their cultures. Shortfalls would also be found in mistaken assumptions of theologians who speak or write about such persons and their cultures. Complete conversions account for the progress of cultures and for the reliability of clarifications of such progress by theologians. Under a psychic conversion, one discovers how massively symbols and stories shaped not only what people actually said and did, but also the subsequent efforts of theologians to account for those words and deeds. Under a religious conversion, one is alert to stories that are dramas of grace. A Christian in any area of human studies engaged in the specialty *dialectic* would speak of a drama of grace, in part to invite conversions in those whose viewpoints are less wholesome, and in part to confirm equivalencies between Christian and non-Christian world dramas.<sup>46</sup>

Expressions of God's gift of redemption in Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit as the full story of humanity are presented in the specialty *doctrines*. Here, it is important to recognize that doctrinal expressions need not be propositional. As Lonergan observes, "doctrinal expressions may be figurative or symbolic." Formulations of a salvation history— such as we find in Luke-Acts, in documents of ecumenical councils, in pastoral letters, and in spiritual writings—belong to the specialty *doctrines*.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, because grace is a mystery, a single doctrinal expression cannot fully present God's redeeming graces. Lonergan also observes that one can affirm fundamental truths of faith by affirming connections between the mysteries.<sup>48</sup> By what we may call heuristic equations, Christians can affirm that whatever may be the reason for our unlikely conception and inevitable death is to be found in God's desire to share the innermost divine life with humans in history; that whatever happened at Jesus' Resurrection is what happens to anyone who lives out the drama of grace; that whatever happened at the first Pentecost is what God desires to be the story of every human; that when the full truth of our lives is finally revealed, we will know that we are like Christ.<sup>49</sup>

To the specialty *systematics* Lonergan assigns the tasks of clarifying the otherwise vague or incomplete expressions typical of stories. The system for clarifying doctrines is an internally coherent account of the dynamics of self-transcending operations expressed in categories based not only on the intellectual, moral, and religious conversions in theologians aiming to clarifying doctrines but also their psychic conversions that open their horizons to how symbols and stories

---

<sup>46</sup> The "interdisciplinary relations" Lonergan envisions between theologians and experts in other human studies are not restricted to discussions of ideas. He noted that "besides the dialectic that is concerned with human subjects as objects, there the dialectic in which human subjects are concerned with themselves and with one another. In that case, dialectic becomes dialog." See "Third Lecture: The Ongoing Genesis of Methods," *A Third Collection*, CWL 16, 153 [chap. 10, sec. 4].

<sup>47</sup> Strangely, Lonergan does not mention salvation history in his *Method in Theology*.

<sup>48</sup> *Method in Theology* (1972), 321, 336 [projected CWL 14, chap. 12, sec.9; chap. 13, sec.1].

<sup>49</sup> "What we will be has not been revealed. What we know is this: When he [Christ] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:1-2).

put flesh on the famously bare bones of doctrines.

To the specialty *communications* Lonergan assigns the various tasks of communicating the gospel message to the world. Among them are the tasks of establishing “interdisciplinary relations with art, language, literature, and other religions, with the natural and human sciences, with philosophy and history.”<sup>50</sup> These tasks present particularly difficult existential challenges to a theology whose scope includes a Christian world drama of grace: How to draw nonbelievers to consider any sort of drama of grace? How might believers develop a personal habit of discerning which of the many stories that shape their personal lives and the lives of various cultures are dramas of grace? How might a religion take a stand against the ever-encroaching dramas of fate, reason, groupism, morality, and other alien world dramas? Underlying all such challenges is the religious question of how to stay awed about the mystery of ordinary living, particularly in light of the uncanny gospel news that the innermost Word of the divine Source of everything comes as a Founder who truly labors in human history and whose innermost Love truly loves in human hearts. A prior awe about life as an abiding mystery is essential in both those who would preach and those who would welcome the good news.

### *The Arts*

Among the several interdisciplinary relations attended to in *communications*, the arts can play the indispensable role of lifting one’s imagination to the level of mystery and awe in ordinary living.<sup>51</sup> By *the arts* I mean music, songs, paintings, photographs, poetry, fiction, dramas, dance, liturgies, architecture, landscaping, apparel, and any combinations of these. Not any arts will do. Artworks that mainly excite or calm our nerves are unequal to the challenge. So are artworks that compel us to buy something. So are artworks that mainly instill pride in our communities. Yet other artworks lift us up to the mystery of life itself. They arouse familiar but unnamable emotions. They symbolize the existential mystery of life by pointing beyond ourselves to something richer in reality. They lift our spirits toward the unknown—what we have yet to learn, yet to value, yet to love.

Ordinary experience is not always practical. It can also be aesthetic and existential.<sup>52</sup> Lonergan observes that experience in the aesthetic pattern “is a withdrawal from practical living

---

<sup>50</sup> *Method in Theology* (1972), 132 [projected CWL 14, chap. 5, sec.6]. See also p. 336 [chap. 15, sec. 4].

<sup>51</sup> Here I aim to explore what Lonergan’s statement, “Art is a fundamental element in the freedom of consciousness itself.” See *Topics in Education*, in eds., Frederick Crowe, and Robert Doran, CWL 10, 232. For an in-depth analysis of the roles of aesthetics and a “recovery of story,” see Robert Doran, *Psychic Conversion*, 155-204, especially “Toward a Transcendental Aesthetic,” at 162-204.

<sup>52</sup> In 1957 Lonergan described an existential pattern of experience (not mentioned in *Insight*). “The significance within existentialism of the flow of consciousness orientated on choosing is enormous. That is the flow of consciousness relevant to being a man.” See “On Being Oneself” in *Phenomenology and Logic: The Boston College Lectures on Mathematical Logic and Existentialism* in CWL 18, ed. Philip McShane, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 234-246, at 235. See also *Method on Theology* (1972), 62 [projected CWL 14, chap. 3, sec. 3].

to explore possibilities of fuller living in a richer world”<sup>53</sup> In this regard, artists whose works uplift will draw from their personal aesthetic experiences of covert riches in life to evoke overt recognition of these riches in the existential lives of their publics.<sup>54</sup> Their works instill hope. And because the drama of ordinary life includes pleasure and pain, exaltation and fear, tension and harmony, the range of the many artworks that symbolize the mystery of life will have the same range of the seasons of human hope. Together they manifest how human life is ever a dialectic of desires and dreads. A springtime hope is optimistic when our desires overshadow our dreads. A summertime hope is serene when fulfilled desires eclipse our dreads. An autumnal hope is apprehensive when our dreads overshadow our desires. A winter hope is resolute when our dreads eclipse our desires.<sup>55</sup> Uplifting artworks need not be enjoyable; they need only be honest. They are honest when together they reveal the full mysterious dimensions of living, including the unprecedented lives of each person and of each community. Their images go beyond neurological, practical, and social ends. They evoke a confident hope to live a life fully alive no matter how our feelings are affected by our desires and dreads.

At the same time, people commonly sense certain fractures in their self-awareness but lack the insights for talking about becoming more wholesome. Lonergan's analysis of levels of consciousness reveals the fault lines: We can (a) fail to pay attention to events around and within us; (b) fail to seek understanding of what we notice; (c.) fail to check that our understanding is true to reality; (d) fail to decide to do something about what we discover to be true; (e) fail to consider our living relationships to others and to God when deciding what to do.

Still, Lonergan never speaks of human woundedness without speaking of healing. Besides the self-awareness of experiencing, understanding, judging, deliberating, and being in love, there is the aesthetic self-awareness when we experience the movements by which symbols keep our bodies, minds and hearts in communication.<sup>56</sup> If, as Lonergan proposed, symbols are elementary stories, then stories too maintain this consciousness-unifying function. Stories that express our aesthetic self-awareness can resonate with our existential need to mend our inner fractures and become more fully wholesome. Aesthetic self-awareness is not experienced at a single level of self-transcendence. Our openness to beauty<sup>57</sup> is a concrete experience of a vertical finality that energizes and maintains a focus of movements across each level: by the allure of the possible;

---

<sup>53</sup> *Topics in Education*, 217 [chap. 9, sec. 2.6].

<sup>54</sup> Artists whose works uplift sometimes remove elements that distract or mask the elemental richness and sometimes by enhancing the richer elements. Photographers edit out distracting elements; composers influenced by Beethoven create rich variations on beguilingly simple melodies.

<sup>55</sup> I propose these four “seasons” of hope to align with the work of Northrup Frye, who identified four basic plots/seasons in myths. See his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 158-239.

<sup>56</sup> Lonergan finds the proper meaning and context of symbols in the communication between body, mind, and heart. See *Method in Theology* (1972), 67 [projected *CWL 14*, chap. 3, sec. 4]

<sup>57</sup> John Dadosky notes that “Lonergan has not thought through the matter of transcendental beauty thoroughly.” He also presents illuminating connections regarding beauty in the works of Lonergan and Hans Urs Von Balthasar. See *The Eclipse and Recovery of Beauty: A Lonergan Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 50-54 (at 53), 181-203.

the harmony of the ordered; the exquisite uniqueness of a particular tree, face, family, or meal; the splendor of goodness; and the liberating invitation to lead our lives by love.

The integrating wholeness of aesthetic-existential movements also symbolizes the entire universe as a beautiful whole.<sup>58</sup> In this respect, the uplifting aesthetic experiences that inspire artists and that artists hope to evoke in their publics nourish the hope that life—our personal lives, the lives of our communities, the lives of people everywhere, the life of our planet and of the entire universe—can be wholesome. The innermost therapeutic value of the arts, then, is to mend our fractured self-awareness and make of ourselves hoping selves. This hope does not guarantee that weakness and sin are permanently avoidable. Yet it sustains our confidence in season and out.

Finally, the self-awareness of people in love with God is also a we-awareness with God, with whom they share the divine confidence that all shall be well. Experiences of artworks that uplift say that there's more to *everything* than meets the eye. A world drama of grace—particularly how Jesus the Nazarene imagined the world—may well be the full story of everything.

---

<sup>58</sup> Lonergan recognizes an isomorphism between the inner levels of self-transcendence and the dimensions of what is to be known. In a critical metaphysics, "For every term and relation there is a corresponding element in intentional consciousness. . . . The importance of such a critical control will be evident to anyone familiar with the vast arid wastes of theological controversy." *Method in Theology* (1972), 343 [projected *CWL* 14, chap. 13, sec. 2].