

ETHICS AND THE BIBLE

Insights from Lonergan, McEvenue, and Meyer

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article explore certains travaux de Bernard Lonergan, Sean McEvenue et Ben Meyer, en vue de proposer des pistes de recherche en rapport avec la thématique "Bible et éthique". Se concentrant d'abord sur la notion de sens religieux, il développe ensuite deux idées majeures enracinées dans une certaine compréhension de ce dernier : celles d' « expérience transformante » et de « dépassement » (*sublation*). Une discussion autour de textes de McEvenue et de Meyer permet d'illustrer cette approche de deux façons.

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ETHICS AND THE BIBLE

Insights from Lonergan, McEvenue, and Meyer

KENNETH R. MELCHIN

I am grateful for the invitation to contribute to this volume. Readers will know the papers were presented originally at a conference at Concordia University, Montréal, celebrating the 100th Anniversary of Loyola College and the Lonergan heritage at Concordia. The event was a special pleasure for me because I began my studies in theology at Concordia in 1975 and discovered Lonergan during those years. My friend and mentor, Sean McEvenue launched Lonergan University College, the project that continues to this day as the Lonergan Centre for Ethical Reflection in the Department of Theological Studies.¹

Our theme is “Ethics and the Bible.” I am not a scripture scholar and so cannot provide a critical analysis of the state of the question in scripture studies. I have been interested in the topic since my student days, and some of my insights arose from reading works of scripture scholars who draw on Lonergan, notably Sean McEvenue and Ben Meyer.² My aim is to provide a sketch of a possible research approach to the topic.

The paper is organized in three parts: the first is on religious meaning; the second is a sketch of a research project on the topic of Bible and ethics; and the third offers two illustrations of this project at work with discussions of texts by Sean McEvenue and Ben Meyer. In the second and third parts, I propose two ideas as central components of the research project, and offer them as

1. This paper is dedicated to the memory of my friend and mentor, Sean McEvenue.

2. For some relevant works see Sean E. McEVENUE, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer* (Analecta Biblica 50), Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 1971; ID., *Interpreting the Pentateuch: An Exegetical Handbook*, Collegeville MN, The Liturgical Press, 1990; ID., *Interpretation and Bible: Essays in Truth in Literature* (thereafter McEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*), Collegeville MN, The Liturgical Press, 1994; Ben F. MEYER, *The Aims of Jesus*, London, SCM Press, 1979; ID., *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship: A Primer in Critical Realist Hermeneutics*, Collegeville MN, The Liturgical Press, 1994; ID., *Five Speeches that Changed the World* (thereafter MEYER, *Five Speeches*), Collegeville MN, The Liturgical Press, 1994; Sean E. McEVENUE and Ben F. MEYER (eds), *Lonergan's Hermeneutics: Its Development and Application*, Washington D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1989.

hypotheses to guide further study on the topic. The two ideas are: *transformative experience*,³ and *sublation*.⁴ I will say more about these as we go.⁵

1. Religious Meaning

In choosing the theme, “Ethics and the Bible,” the conference organizers presented contributors with quite a challenge. During my Concordia days in theology, I recall being told you simply cannot find a consistent ethic in the bible. In preparing this paper, I looked back over one of the texts we were reading in those years, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, by Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen.⁶ The starting point for the book was the fact that Catholic ethics had been based on a natural law approach that included little explicit grounding in scripture and Protestant ethics had made much use of scripture but without sound methodological guidance. In the intervening years, Catholics have joined Protestants in making much use of scripture. But the need for today’s conference, forty years later, arises because the methodological problems remain far from resolved. They continue to hamper our efforts to deal with difficult challenges.

A memorable moment from my student days was a conversation I had with Sean McEvenue. After studying with him for a few years I asked whether some sort of ethic could be found in the bible, and his response restated the message I’d been getting in my other classes; you cannot find a consistent ethic in the bible. So then, I reformulated my question, targeting his own Hebrew bible

3. I use the term “transformative experience” to refer to what Lonergan calls “religious conversion.” See Bernard J.F. LONERGAN, *Method in Theology* (hereafter LONERGAN, *Method*), John D. DADOSKI and Robert M. DORAN (eds), Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2017 [orig. 1972], pp. 226-230. I am aware that religious conversion involves more than merely “experience” in Lonergan’s technical understanding of the term. It requires some measure of understanding as well as a decision to appropriate the fruits of the transformation. Still, I opt for the alternative language because of the problems in communication that often accompany the term “conversion.” In *Method*, p. 125, Lonergan speaks of conversion as a “transformation of the subject and his world.” In earlier works, Lonergan speaks of religious transformation using the language of “charity.” See Bernard J. F. LONERGAN, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Collected Works 3) (hereafter LONERGAN, *Insight*), Frederick E. CROWE and Robert M. DORAN (eds.), Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992 [orig. 1957], pp. 715-725.

4. On “sublation,” see LONERGAN, *Method*, pp. 227, 294-295, 314-15. Religious experience, when appropriated, transforms our habits of caring and willing in directions towards unrestricted love. This sublates our operations on the levels of experiencing, understanding, and judgement by setting up a new principle for them and orienting them towards a new goal.

5. Patrick Byrne, a contributor to this volume, has written a wonderful book that draws on Lonergan to deal with a range of important ideas related to this topic from the perspective of ethics. See Patrick BYRNE, *The Ethics of Discernment; Lonergan’s Foundations for Ethics*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2016. I believe it is one of the most important contributions to ethics of our time.

6. Bruce C. BIRCH, Jacqueline E. LAPSLEY, Cynthia D. MOE-LOBEDA and Larry L. RASMUSSEN, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life: A New Conversation*, Minneapolis MN, Augsburg, 1976, p. 16.

scholarship, and asked whether any single consistent message could be found in Scripture. His answer, after a moment's pause, was that the consistent message he found significant was that God's nature cannot be known. At the time I found this deeply unsatisfying. So I went back to looking for a consistent ethic in the bible. And if you're thinking I haven't found one, you're right.

What I did find was that Sean's answer, *God's nature cannot be known*, stuck in my mind. I returned to it frequently over the years, wondering what he meant. And I started gaining some answers when, years later, I revisited a book I'd first encountered at Concordia, Eric Voegelin's, *A New Science of Politics*.⁷

Voegelin's argument is that politics gets to be a very difficult affair, not simply because the issues are difficult, but because there is something in the very structure of our consciousness that always wants to make politics into something it can never be. Our consciousness is oriented towards transcendent mystery. But politics must remain forever finite, a limited, this-worldly affair. This means that the values and meanings we use in politics must never be confused with ultimate or transcendent values and meanings. Getting these confused, he shows abundantly, has catastrophic consequences.

For Voegelin, politics is not simply about forms of governance, it is about the values and meanings that gather people together to articulate a common identity and mobilize them for common action in history. The challenge of political values and meanings is that they always want to expand to reflect or mirror claims about the entire cosmos, the entire order of being and reality. Political symbols express big ideas about social order, big values about how we must treat each other, big truths about the meaning of life for all. They evoke big feelings, and invariably they inflate to make claims on matters of ultimate meaning and truth.

This inflation to ultimacy is where political values and symbols become destructive. Politics is profoundly finite, historical, situated, and flawed. Saint Augustine knew this intimately.⁸ When the values of politics become ultimate, its flaws become magnified to cataclysmic proportion. Because they command feelings of allegiance of citizens, ultimate political symbols mobilize large numbers in service of flawed ideas. When emperors claim to be divine, their half-baked ideas command the support of the empire. And Voegelin's

7. ERIC VOEGELIN, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, Chicago IL, University of Chicago Press, 1974 [orig. 1952]. This text launched his multi-volume work, *Order in History*, 5 vols., Baton Rouge LA, Louisiana State University Press, 1956-1987. See also ERIC VOEGELIN, *Anamnesis*, Gerhart NIEMEYER (ed. and transl.), Notre Dame IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1978 [orig. 1966]. Glenn Hughes offers a wonderful analysis of Voegelin on politics and transcendence in *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin*, Columbia MO, University of Missouri Press, 1993; and *Transcendence and History: The Search for Ultimacy from Ancient Societies to Postmodernity*, Columbia MO, University of Missouri Press, 2003.

8. See the discussion of the relationship between politics and theology in St. Augustine by Robert A. MARKUS, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988 [orig. 1970], pp. 72-104.

historical analyses reveal the awesome destruction that this has wrought throughout history.

To counter the destructive effects of this movement of politics towards ultimacy, Greek and Jewish civilizations became differentiated. They gave birth to prophets and philosophers whose job it would be to discern truly open-ended or transcendent reference frames as well as standards of ultimacy for guiding and critically evaluating politics; keeping it from stepping beyond its realm of finite competence. When politics oversteps its bounds, it becomes gnostic and destructive. Voegelin's analysis reveals how this problem is not because religion itself is destructive, but because properly religious symbols need to be sufficiently differentiated and open-ended to avoid attributing ultimacy to finite claims. Religion must be forever vigilant against idolatry because the ultimate meaning of history is not to be located within history.

The other interesting feature of Voegelin's analysis is that political symbols need not be explicitly religious to function religiously as destructive gnostic ideologies.⁹ His study of some modern forms of secular political Gnosticism, notably Naziism and Stalinist Communism, serve as poignant reminders of how secular ideologies can function as religiously and as destructively as history's worst religious ideologies.

What I realized in revisiting Voegelin was that McEvenue's statement, God's nature cannot be known, is about precisely this. In order to keep from making this catastrophic mistake in politics, we have to find a way of keeping attention focused on "transcendent mystery" and differentiating this from the finite work of politics. We have to develop habits of thinking and feeling about ultimates that keeps them perpetually disengaged from the proximate human or this-worldly values of ethics and politics. We cannot make natural ethical and political values into God. When we do so, we cross a line that harms us terribly.

I would like to step back for a moment and reflect on the implications of this insight for our conference topic. For decades, I have been aware of McEvenue's statement and Voegelin's analysis, and during this time I was also aware that this insight is reflected clearly in Lonergan's own work. But it has taken me until recently to discover what this implies for our topic. To put it bluntly, it implies that the bible's meaning, first and foremost, is not about ethics, it is about God as transcendent mystery. Moreover, the principal meaning the bible communicates about God is that God's nature cannot be known.

Now this seems to be quite a drastic claim. Indeed, on the face of it, it seems to put a rather abrupt end to our discussions. If the bible is not about ethics, if it is about God, and if the bible's primary message about God is that

9. See Eric VOEGELIN, *The New Science*, pp. 104-189; Glenn HUGHES, *Transcendence and History*, chap. 4.

we cannot know what God is, then it may seem there remains little to be said on the topic of “bible and ethics.”

This insight left me with a rather troubled mind. Like all of us, I knew the bible is filled with texts that have always been presented as carrying some sort of ethical message. And I knew that Christians and church authorities through the ages have always drawn on the bible to make statements about God’s actions and attributes. Reading the bible invariably leads to insights about ethics and ideas about God. Have all of these claims been wrong? I doubted that. Yet, I also knew that McEvenue and Voegelin were right; the bible’s primary meaning is not about ethics, it is about God, and the bible’s primary message about God is that God’s nature cannot be known.

It was in struggling through this apparent contradiction that I arrived at two working hypotheses that, I suggest, provide a sketch of an approach for engaging research on the topic of bible and ethics. To give you a bit of an idea where I am heading, let me say a few words about this proposal.

2. A Sketch of a Research Project

It is true that the bible’s central message about God is that God’s nature cannot be known. But the bible has another message about God and this is the message that humans can and do experience encounters with God that transform them. Transformative experiences of God happen in life. And when they do, we are shifted from one state of being to another. To be sure, we are not merely passive receivers of these transformative experiences. We also have an active role to play in receiving them, appropriating them, and integrating them into our lives. And so, for example, we have used the term “faith” to describe Abraham’s act of receiving, affirming, and appropriating his own transformative experience of God. But the significance of this transformative experience is that the change that occurs in us is not a change that humans have authored or earned by their own actions, understandings, image projections, or moral merit, or their own programs of ethical or spiritual development. The change in us is quite simply God’s doing. It is the doing of the God whose nature remains unknown.¹⁰ For this reason, the form and meaning of this change will never be complete in us, and so we can expect it to happen time and again through our lives and throughout history.

When this sort of transformative experience happens in our lives, and indeed it seems to happen to one degree or another in the lives of many of us, likely all of us, what emerges in us is a new framework or horizon and new feelings for valuing. And so I use Lonergan’s term “sublation” to speak

10. See note 3, above, for references and a brief explanation related to my use of the expression “transformative experience.”

about the way that transformative experience sets in motion a path that can and should lead towards changing our ways of valuing. The result is we begin wondering, thinking, feeling, and doing things differently. Biblical authors speak of women and men taking new names, launching new journeys, valuing war and wealth differently, inviting new attitudes towards people we detest or enemies we fear, even accepting death differently. If I am correct, all of these are instances of new ways of ethical valuing that involve sublation.¹¹ In each instance, the change that happens in us because of our transformative experience of God has the effect of establishing new frameworks, new criteria, and new feelings that we carry into the operations of understanding, judgment, and decision regarding the values that guide our living.

There is a further ingredient to the idea of sublation; it usually involves some considerable work on our part, often intellectual work. This takes time, and it needs to be done again and again. This is because new forms of valuing require the effort and creativity that can only be supplied by following through with the operations of insight, judgement, and decision. This work will be evident in biblical texts, sometimes in accounts of biblical actors' responses to God, sometimes in the successive redactions that are discernible in texts, sometimes in later texts' reinterpretation of earlier texts. But it will also be required for the task of biblical interpretation. Indeed, it would seem that transformative experience and sublation will be relevant both as objects of investigation and as required traits of investigators in a research project on bible and ethics.

If I am correct, then the bible's messages and meanings will relate to some extent to the substance or content of particular values, but it will relate more directly and profoundly to the methodology or operations of valuing that arise in us when we respond appropriately to transformative experience. Throughout history, biblical narratives about transformative experience have been interpreted as saying something important about the substance of ethical values like homosexuality, war and peace, money and commerce, life and death. But in the Catholic tradition at least, this legacy has also been coupled with a work of considerable ethical and intellectual creativity and transposition that seems in line with what I have called "sublation." Since the middle ages, this work has been done using a philosophical framework called the natural law. If I am correct, the biblical message is not that we should adhere mechanically or slavishly to ethical statements found in biblical texts. Rather, the message is to follow the lead of biblical actors and speakers and be open to appropriating transformative encounters with God and engaging both existentially and intellectually in sublating our ethical valuing in light of this

11. See note 4, above, for references and a brief explanation related to my use of the term "sublation."

encounter. If the natural law tradition has migrated too far from its source in biblically transformative experience, our task is not to discard it but to renew it.

My proposal, then, is for a research approach to bible and ethics that is both existential and intellectual. It is existential as transformative experience of God and its personal appropriation by ourselves as researchers. And it is intellectual as the work of sublation that progressively explores how this foundationally transformed self – a self we are always becoming – engages in research to mediate both a deeper understanding of scripture and novel resources for both challenge and renewal on all levels of the scale of values. Transformative experience and sublation will be relevant both as objects of investigation and as required traits of investigators in research on the topic of bible and ethics.

I would like to provide two illustrations of how this sort of research project might be understood and undertaken. Both illustrate the role of the two research hypotheses at work in the texts of scripture scholars and ethicists. The first illustration focuses mainly on transformative experience but also shows how sublation begins to arise from it and how it is shaped and directed by this experience. The second illustrates how sublation follows and builds on transformative experience, carrying it forward into ethics, but also returning continually to ensure it never loses its proper foundational grounding.

3. Two Illustrations

The first illustration draws on an essay by Sean McEvenue, “The Spiritual Authority of the Bible.” The paper was delivered originally at a conference we attended together in 1984. I will refer to the 1994 version that was published as the second chapter of his book, *Interpretation and Bible*.¹² He poses his question in a way that connects with our conference theme: how are we to discern the spiritual or religious normativity or authority of biblical texts?¹³ I have known about this paper for a long time, but some of these insights are rather recent.

McEvenue begins by situating “The Problem” with respect to extant scholarship in scripture studies¹⁴ and then develops a response that focuses on what he calls “The Subliminal Effects of the Speaker in Literature.” His argument and illustration aim at showing that “... what the text does to us is determined by an unnamed, unarticulated, and very elusive ‘*speaker*’ who addresses us from the text, and controls our response, and in effect exercises subliminal authority.”¹⁵ Furthermore his analysis aims at a type of meaning or

12. MCEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*, pp. 23-39.

13. MCEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*, pp. 23-24.

14. MCEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*, pp. 24-27.

15. MCEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*, p. 27.

message he qualifies as distinctively religious: “This kind of message we shall call ‘*spirituality*.’”¹⁶ He examines various “phases” of the speaker in the biblical text and develops an argument about how and why both literary textual and historical factors remain critical for gaining a correct understanding of this religious meaning.

In his third section he provides an illustration that focuses on Ex 15:1-21, a text that is a song of celebration of God’s victory in war on behalf of Moses and the Israelites over Pharaoh’s Egyptian army at the Reed Sea. He draws on the work of Frank Cross, Jr. to develop a textual-historical analysis of the four phases of the speaker in the text. And he concludes by asking three questions: “*in what realm of experience does God reveal himself?*”¹⁷ “*what spirituality is carried by the text?*”¹⁸ and “*what asceticism will be demanded by this spirituality?*”¹⁹ To further qualify his inquiry and link the three questions together into a coherent research program, McEvenue offers the following understanding of “spirituality” and “asceticism”: “We may define spirituality as a *foundational stance of expectancy regarding divine revelation or divine intervention*. Asceticism then will be understood to mean the self-discipline, or a set of practices, which are adopted because of one’s spirituality.”²⁰

I believe we can understand McEvenue’s work to involve the two working hypotheses that I have outlined, transformative experience and sublation.²¹ Transformative experience is discernible throughout his treatment of the text. Contrary to typical portraits of religious war, the actor in the text is not the Israelites, it is God and God alone. It is God who transforms historical experience. It is God who defeats the Egyptians. It is God whose protection of Israel is celebrated in the song of cultic celebration. It is God who is leading them into the Promised Land and gathering them on a holy mountain.²² McEvenue’s approach to divine revelation does not focus on the communication of information either by God or about God. Rather, he focuses on an encounter with God that transforms people and events in the biblical text. This transformative encounter exercises its effect on readers because it has transformed the speaker that is operative in the various literary, redactional, and historical phases of the text. Most of all, the transformation is properly spiritual because it concerns ultimate and comprehensive horizons – the things that must matter most to both textual actors and readers – and because its author is the God whose nature is not known, the God of Transcendent Mystery. Spirituality will be *foundational* in that it relates to ultimate value and proceeds from the deepest

16. MCEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*, p. 27.

17. MCEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*, p. 32.

18. MCEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*, p. 35.

19. MCEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*, p. 36.

20. MCEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*, p. 33.

21. MCEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*, pp. 33-36.

22. MCEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*, pp. 34-35.

foundation of one's potentially conscious self. Being foundational it will govern all dependent operations.²³ It will be a *stance* rather than a doctrine or truth, in that it may or may not become the object of explicit intellectual appropriation, even though it will always command intellectual activities. It is a stance of *expectancy* in that its object is finally transcendent, never definitively possessed, and always in this life to be readdressed in ongoing experience.²⁴

The second working hypothesis, sublation, is discernible in McEvenue's treatment of asceticism. His focus is on the meanings and actions that get worked out from a proper appropriation of this transformative encounter. Once again, his analysis is developed as a contrast with traditional interpretations of religious war. We have been transformed by our encounter with God. He begins with an image, not of the triumph of military might, but of humble submission to God. At first glance this seems at odds with the god of war depicted in Ex 15: as though Ex 15 asked the reader to be warlike as our heavenly protector is warlike! The fact is, however, that Ex 15 asks no such thing. Rather it portrays God's people as passive in the war, as exulting in God's power without having or needing any of their own. What is demanded of the reader is trust in God's power, a practice of cultic celebration, fidelity to the community which God has formed on his mountain. This is the asceticism of the lamb, or the trusting and pious faithful. And it is interesting to see how the later Christian tradition, while rearranging the original images, retains the normative subliminal meaning, i.e. the original spirituality and asceticism.²⁵

There can be no doubt that the transformative experience of God in this text changes the way we engage in thinking, feeling, and acting with respect to war. McEvenue's treatment does not provide the detailed ethical analysis we see developed, for example, in the Catholic Just War tradition, and I discuss this sort of thing in the second illustration. But it does show how the self must be transformed in order to begin doing this work. What we observe are foundational insights into how transformative experience, as discernible in the various phases of the speaker in scripture and as experienced by readers of scripture, sets the work of ethics on a new footing in a rather novel and challenging direction.

My second illustration draws on research for a paper on economic ethics I presented at a conference in 2006,²⁶ a classic text by John Noonan published

23. At this point, McEvenue inserts a note referring readers to LONERGAN, *Method*, chap. 11, especially pp. 251-252, 255, for explanations of "foundations," "foundational reality," and "realms of meaning." The page numbers in Lonergan's original 1972 edition of *Method* are 267-269, 272.

24. MCEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*, p. 33.

25. MCEVENUE, *Interpretation and Bible*, p. 36.

26. Kenneth R. MELCHIN, "The Challenge of World Poverty," in James KEENAN (ed.), *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*, New York NY, Continuum, 2007, pp. 152-157.

in 1957,²⁷ a book published by Ben Meyer in 1994,²⁸ and a 1993 essay by Pat Byrne.²⁹ Again, some of the insights I've gained in revisiting these works are more recent. The illustration begins with a question I'd been pondering about continuity and change in theological ethics. This, of course, is one of the divisive issues arising in conversations about bible and ethics. The issue of usury is often cited as an example of the kind of change or revision in Catholic ethics that should be undertaken in other issue areas. I wondered what sort of change had actually happened on the topic and whether an argument could be made for some sort of foundational or methodological continuity, perhaps even a continuity between the older tradition on usury and the newer tradition of Catholic Social Thought. So I began reading John Noonan's famous book, *The Scholastic Analysis of Usury*.

Noonan argues that the two pillars supporting the usury tradition throughout its history were the values of charity and justice.³⁰ The first of these, charity, provided the religious foundation that set the tradition in motion.³¹ The authoritative Old Testament texts situate usury in the context of responsibility to the poor. Noonan argues that lending to the poor was understood as an obligation rooted in religious faith, and usury meant exploiting the vulnerability of the poor for personal gain.³² From the earliest days of the scholastic tradition, usurers were understood as those who profited from the hardship of the poor.³³ When in the twelfth century Pope Urban III cites the text of Lk 6:35, a text from the Beatitudes, in support of the condemnation, usury becomes a violation of the highest obligations of Christian charity.³⁴

I will have more to say on the topic of justice. But for now, it is helpful to notice that Noonan speaks about charity and justice as if they were two ethical principles or ethical values. In revisiting this work, however, I returned to Lonergan's understanding of charity and found that Lonergan does not understand charity in this way at all.³⁵ It is not an ethical principle or ethical value. In fact, it is more like what I've been speaking about here, a transformative experience of God that sets in motion the process of sublation that

27. John T. NOONAN, Jr., *The Scholastic Analysis of Usury* (thereafter NOONAN, *Scholastic Analysis*), Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1957.

28. MEYER, *Five Speeches*. My focus is on chap. 2, "The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:29)," pp. 33-57, but I also draw on pages from chap. 1, "The Gospel of Matthew," pp. 15-32, and chap. 7, "Appropriate Response to the Five Speeches Today," pp. 120-133.

29. Patrick BYRNE, "Ressentiment and the Preferential Option for the Poor," *Theological Studies*, 54 (1993), pp. 213-241 (thereafter BYRNE, "Ressentiment and the Preferential Option").

30. NOONAN, "A Backward Look," *Religious Studies Review*, 18 (1992), p. 111; see also *Scholastic Analysis*, pp. 407-408.

31. NOONAN, *Scholastic Analysis*, pp. 14, 17, 45-47, 49-50, 72.

32. NOONAN, *Scholastic Analysis*, pp. 15-17, 33-35, 42, 45-46, 48-50, 74, 401.

33. NOONAN, *Scholastic Analysis*, pp. 34-35.

34. NOONAN, *Scholastic Analysis*, pp. 19-20.

35. See LONERGAN, *Insight*, pp. 715-725, 744-748.

challenges and reshapes the direction and range of our operations of ethical feeling, understanding, and judgement. Since Urban III was citing a text from the Beatitudes, Lk 6:35, in support of his condemnation of usury, I began wondering how a scripture scholar familiar with Lonergan might engage the text.

What I found was the second chapter of Ben Meyer's book, *Five Speeches that Changed the World*.³⁶ It is a scriptural study of Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, as part of his analysis of the larger text of The Sermon on the Mount. His treatment draws on the work of Jacques Dupont who examines together both Matthew's and Luke's versions.³⁷ For our purposes, I will assume that the salient features of Meyer's analysis of Matthew apply equally to Luke.

In his first chapter, Meyer establishes central features of Matthew's gospel that provide the context for understanding all five texts of his book. He concludes by asking: "What kind of response from the readers of the Gospel does Matthew seek to elicit?"³⁸ His answer is clear: "He seeks, above all, a religious response."³⁹ Then he qualifies his answer: "But he is writing a story, not a tract. What he presents as appealing for a response is not an idea but a drama. [...] By his recounting of the story of Jesus, Matthew aims at creating the conditions for an encounter with Christ."⁴⁰

When we get to the discussion of the Beatitudes in the next chapter, the analysis sharpens further. Meyer organizes the text into an introduction and a main body, and finds three phases in the introduction and four parts in the main body. He treats each of the seven sections individually, formulating what he argues to be the "Main Thrust" of each text, and then concludes with a "Sense of the Speech as a Whole."

Regarding phase two of the introduction, he concludes that the text of the Sermon on the Mount is an appeal to the audience "... to be 'transformed by the newness of your spirit' (Rom 12:2)."⁴¹ Regarding the first part of the main body, Meyer invites his readers to make a compelling observation: "Notice that in every instance Jesus has radicalized the Law of Moses, making it more demanding. But once again there was a vital supposition behind this increase in demand: the disciple of Jesus has been transformed."⁴² His analysis of the third part of the main body concludes with a reflection on a type of personal transformation in attitude he calls "detachment." He then offers a reflection on the relationship between actions and the interiority of persons: "Actions come from the subject of action, whose horizons, perspectives, purposes, and desires determine what the actions will be. If the subject is good, the actions

36. MEYER, *Five Speeches*, chap. 2, "The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:29)," pp. 33-57.

37. MEYER, *Five Speeches*, pp. 33-36.

38. MEYER, *Five Speeches*, p. 31.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

41. MEYER, *Five Speeches*, p. 40.

42. MEYER, *Five Speeches*, pp. 46-47.

will be good.”⁴³ Finally, in his concluding reflections on the “Sense of the Speech as a Whole,” Meyer has this to say: “The concluding warnings accent the *practical* decision called for: a new critique, turned not on one’s neighbor but on one-self; a new discernment of religious values...”⁴⁴

If the salient features of Meyer’s analysis of Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes can be applied equally to Luke’s, then Urban III’s use of Lk 6:35 in support of his condemnation of usury has two components to it. The first is the transformative experience of God whose normative force can be located clearly within the text. This normative force is what the text’s speaker demands of the reader, a focus on the distinctively religious meaning of transcendent mystery that is made present in a personal encounter with Christ. This encounter aims at transforming readers, making their spirits new, increasing their moral capacities, detaching them from distractions, molding their personal subjective horizons, perspectives, purposes, and desires in directions that will discern and determine morally good action, and focusing critique, not on others, but on the religious authenticity of the self. This, I suggest, is a compelling example of my first research hypothesis, transformative experience.

The second component in Urban’s condemnation of usury, then, the specific application to the ethics of lending, belongs not to the biblical text, but to Urban. We can assume Urban was transformed by his own encounter with Christ and his transformation played a defining role in his engagement with the ethical specifics of usury. But if I am correct, then this subsequent engagement belongs to the second moment of our research approach, the methodological task of sublation. And I believe we can observe in Noonan’s treatment of Urban and his followers some good insights into how the methodology of sublation was to be carried out time and again in successive ages.

Let us recall that Noonan’s analysis points to two pillars supporting the tradition, charity and justice. I suggest we find in his treatment of justice methodological insights into how sublation has been done through the ages and how it is to be done again in our age. The challenges presented by diverse commercial transactions required understanding what exactly counted as usury. We can observe that now we have moved from the realm of religious meaning (the realm of Transcendent Mystery) to the realm of humanly knowable ethical values. To meet the challenges presented by understanding and judging these values, the scholastics invoked the second pillar of the tradition, the natural law foundations of justice.⁴⁵ Money has a nature and purpose, and justice requires action in keeping with this purpose.⁴⁶ The strongest formula-

43. MEYER, *Five Speeches*, p. 53.

44. MEYER, *Five Speeches*, p. 57.

45. See the discussion of the natural law tradition by Jean PORTER in *Natural and Divine Law*, Grand Rapids MI, William B. Eerdmans, 1999.

46. NOONAN, *Scholastic Analysis*, pp. 38-39, 41-42, 46-47, 51-57, 80-81.

tion of this purpose was Aquinas's.⁴⁷ He argued that, with consumer goods, ownership cannot be separated from use because goods become the users' when they are used up or consumed. Unlike farms or livestock, consumer goods cannot be used time and again to produce other things. Such is the case with usury. Thus, the price of ownership is repayment of the principal, and there is no moral justification for an additional charge for use.

What Noonan finds, however, is that this task I am calling sublation, needed to be done again and again throughout history, with results that differed progressively from Urban's and Aquinas's. I suggest this task also reveals methodological continuity via consistent application of the tools of the natural law tradition. Aquinas's argument established an ethical tradition of differentiating functions of money and grounding obligations of justice in insights into natural purpose. Through the centuries, church leaders recognized that novel and diverse types of commercial transactions called for diverse ethical judgements on lending, and the result was a growing recognition that many types of transactions could admit and even require the charging of interest. Yet Noonan's analyses also show how each age's ethical justification of new forms of interest was rooted in this methodologically similar work of discerning and differentiating natural purpose in the service of justice.⁴⁸

I argue that this understanding establishes a distinction between ethical obligations attached to consumer and producer transactions that remains valid today. This distinction is reflected in our contemporary understanding of the public responsibilities of business in organizing economic life.⁴⁹ I suggest it grounds a methodological continuity between the older usury tradition and the newer tradition of Catholic Social Thought.⁵⁰ And I believe it is articulated most clearly in Lonergan's own economics, with his distinction between consumer and producer circuits and his analysis of diverse ethical obligations rooted in the various dynamic phases of these circuits.⁵¹

For this methodological work of sublation to be grounded properly, however, we need to return time and again to the transformative experiences of God that renew us as persons, as ethical actors, and researchers. Evidence on the importance of this renewal, I suggest, is offered by Patrick Byrne in his discussion of "the preferential option for the poor."⁵² If we are to engage

47. NOONAN, *Scholastic Analysis*, pp. 51-57, 80-81, 193-195, 358-362, 395-396.

48. NOONAN, *Scholastic Analysis*, pp. 358-362, 377-378.

49. See, e.g., Jean-Yves CALVEZ and Michael NAUGHTON, "Catholic Social Teaching and the Purpose of the Business Organization: A Developing Tradition," in Stephen A. CORTRIGHT and Michael NAUGHTON (eds.), *Rethinking the Purpose of Business*, Notre Dame IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2002, pp. 3-19.

50. See Kenneth R. MELCHIN, "The Challenge of World Poverty," pp. 155-157.

51. Bernard J. F. LONERGAN, *Macroeconomic Dynamics: An Essay in Circulation Analysis* (Collected Works 15), Patrick H. BYRNE, Frederick G. LAWRENCE and Charles C. HEFLING (eds.), Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1999.

52. See BYRNE, "Ressentiment and the Preferential Option."

responsibly in economic ethics on behalf of women and men in poverty, we ourselves must be freed from the resentment and bias that invariably distort our judgments and scales of values. This distortion gets particularly corrosive when it affects our attitudes towards adversaries and oppressors. I believe this is never a once-and-for-all affair, it is demanded of us time and again. Indeed, I suggest it is the point of the Christian liturgy. And of all the resources available to us for facilitating this transformative renewal, scripture remains the most privileged for Christians.

Conclusion

My call, then, is for a research approach to bible and ethics built upon the two research hypotheses, transformative experience and sublation. The first is personal and existential, the second is academic and methodological. The first is to be found both in the scriptural texts and in ourselves as researchers as we engage appropriately with the texts. If our study of scriptural texts reveals substantive ethical claims, I suggest the normative force of these claims will be located in the religious horizon that is opened up to scriptural speakers and some vector of development or transposition that may be discernible in shifts or changes in ethical meaning. The second moment, sublation, is launched by the first. It is the transformed person engaged in the operations of experience, understanding, judgement, and decision with respect to the questions and data of ethics.

To be sure, my insights are preliminary. They signal core features that need to be highlighted in this research approach. It is not clear to me how such a project would be structured or implemented. We can assume that considerable creativity would be needed for designing spiritual practice sessions for researchers. This, perhaps, might be the most novel aspect of the project. We have become used to imagining academic research as distant from spiritual practice. Yet if I have understood Lonergan correctly, this cannot be so.

Regarding resources for the project, it seems to me that Sean McEvenue and Ben Meyer provide textual analyses and methodological discussions that could prove helpful for this project. I have already mentioned Pat Byrne's new book. Those of you familiar with Lonergan's *Functional Specialties* will bring your own precision to the two phases of the work. And judging from papers presented today and titles for tomorrow, many of you have excellent resources of your own. My task has been to highlight key features that need to hold our attention through the project. I hope you find these reflections helpful.

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SUMMARY

This article draws on works by Bernard Lonergan, Sean McEvenue, and Ben Meyer to propose a research approach to the topic of bible and ethics. The article begins with a discussion of religious meaning. Two core ideas, rooted in an understanding of religious meaning, are developed to guide the research: “transformative experience” and “sublation.” Two illustrations of this approach are offered with discussions of texts by McEvenue and Meyer.

SOMMAIRE

Cet article explore certains travaux de Bernard Lonergan, Sean McEvenue et Ben Meyer, en vue de proposer des pistes de recherche en rapport avec la thématique “Bible et éthique”. Se concentrant d’abord sur la notion de sens religieux, il développe ensuite deux idées majeures enracinées dans une certaine compréhension de ce dernier: celles d’ « expérience transformante » et de « dépassement » (*sublation*). Une discussion autour de textes de McEvenue et de Meyer permet d’illustrer cette approche de deux façons.