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**Lonergan and Shea on Belief and Knowledge: Positions,
Counter-Positions, and Contexts.**

By Dennis M. Doyle

William Shea was my teacher for two academic years at the Catholic University of America, 1978-80. He had a profound influence on me in several ways, one of which was introducing me to the work of Bernard Lonergan. He directed the first major paper I wrote in the field of theology, which later appeared as an article in *The Thomist*.¹ Sometime shortly after my 1984 dissertation became available, a study that focused on the topic of belief and truth in the works of Lonergan and of Wilfred Cantwell Smith,² Shea read it. He gave me a compliment that I still treasure, remarking that it was the best work on Lonergan and belief that he had read to date. (He didn't mention whether or not it was also the only one.)

Shea added, though, that there are some serious problems with Lonergan's positions on belief, problems that I did not fully engage in my work. He told me that Lonergan did not address this issue in his usual clear and helpful matter. This was back in the days when Shea was reporting that he re-read Lonergan's *Insight* once a year. He

¹ Dennis M. Doyle, "The Symbolic Element in Belief: An Alternative to Tillich," *The Thomist* 45 (1981) 449-72.

² Dennis M. Doyle, *The Distinction between Faith and Belief and the Question of Religious Truth: The Contributions of Bernard Lonergan and Wilfred Cantwell Smith*. Ph.D. Dissertation. (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1984). This work was directed by William P. Loewe.

agreed wholeheartedly with the first eighteen chapters (on understanding, knowing, and metaphysics), took very seriously the nineteenth chapter (on general theological categories such as the existence of God), and took issue with some of the positions expressed in chapter twenty (on special theological categories such as belief in doctrines particular to a specific religious tradition).

I have in more recent years written a book on the subject of communion ecclesiology.³ I have promoted the use of communion ecclesiology in Catholic circles insofar as it operates as a broad-ranging, highly inclusive category that serves to integrate and implement various elements of a balanced reading of the vision of Vatican II. Although the word “communion” was used in the preconciliar period in a juridical manner,⁴ the present term “communion ecclesiology” is intended to name the multi-faceted shift away from juridical tendencies toward an appreciation of various types and levels of personal and liturgically-ordered relationships at the heart of the Church. For Catholics, communion ecclesiology names our relationship of love with God and with each other as the primary reality of what the church is. Juridical structures are essential but secondary; they must remain always in the service of loving relationships.

Shea cites my work on communion ecclesiology at the end of the following passage of his 2004 *The Lion and the Lamb*:

. . . American evangelical anti-modernism remained fiercely egalitarian while the Roman Catholic response was just as fiercely authoritarian. Where the Protestant critics of modernism lost control of denominational assemblies and bureaucracies, the Catholic Church became even more Roman than it has been in terms of the

³ Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Vision and Versions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

⁴ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Concepts of Communion: Past and Present,” *Cristianesimo nella storia* 16 (1995) 321-340.

subjection of the local churches to the papal offices and commissions.

“Subsidiarity” as a principle of Catholic life became, and continues to be, an ideologized “communion” with centralized authority.⁵

In a footnote to this passage Shea says that in my book I give an account of the metaphor of “communion” and its role in Catholic ecclesiology from Möhler to John Paul II.⁶

I think it fair to say that Shea takes communion ecclesiology to be a theology at best critically shaping, and at worst supporting, an ideology, one that continues to justify Roman centralism and authoritarianism. That he cites my *Communion Ecclesiology* as support for his own position I interpret not as a misreading of my work but rather as a friendly poke with a wink of the eye from one Irish-American to another. In this earthly realm, we of Irish descent value scholarly accuracy greatly, subordinating it only to the need for wit, sarcasm, and the leveling of the high and mighty.

I do agree and argue clearly in my book that the term “communion ecclesiology” can and sometimes does function somewhat in the way Shea says that it does. In my judgment, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s 1992 document, “Some Aspects of the Church Understood as a Communion,” leans a bit in this direction. It tends to be centralizing, top-heavy, and one-sided, though, in my judgment, nowhere near to the extreme that would justify Shea’s remarks. Communion ecclesiology is used as a label not only by the CDF but also by a wide range of theological voices today. Where Shea sees in communion ecclesiology support for an ideology, I see a theological approach designed, despite its potential for misuse, to move Catholics beyond ideology.

⁵ William M. Shea, *The Lion and the Lamb: Evangelicals and Catholics in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 325 (note 74).

Where Shea sees in communion ecclesiology a continuation of the same old juridicism, I see a path beyond juridicism.

I am inclined to think that the differences between Shea's position and my own are connected not only with practical judgments concerning the present state of the Catholic Church and its hierarchy but also with the ways in which we understand "belief." I think further that the ways in which we understand belief are connected to where we stand concerning Lonergan's positions on the topic, including not only issues that Lonergan attempted to resolve, but also some issues that he left unaddressed.

Shea, Lonergan, and Belief

Shea's differences with Bernard Lonergan on the matter of religious belief are related to Shea's serious concerns about religious dogmatism.

Shea cannot stand dogmatism in any way, shape, or form.⁷ Dogmatists are people who, though they should know better, hold beliefs uncritically. There is a difference between what one knows and what one believes. If one pretends to know what one only believes, one is a dogmatist unfit for serious dialogue with human beings who do not happen to be members of one's own tribe.

There is an equal and opposite intellectual heresy. I do not know if Shea or anyone gives it a precise name, but Shea clearly discusses it. It is a form of reductionism. It arises when a philosopher, sometimes one of naturalist persuasions, pretends to treat religious believers and their religious beliefs respectfully while at the same time declaring

⁷ Shea, *The Naturalists and the Supernatural: Studies in Horizon and an American Philosophy of Religion* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 198; 216; 235.

those beliefs to be meaningful but not true.⁸ So, even as Shea is steadfastly rejecting dogmatism in all of its guises, he is just as steadfastly defending the cognitive and intentional nature of religious beliefs as claims to truth and the existential reality that believers believe their beliefs to be true.

Shea defines his terms in a manner that differs from Lonergan, with reverberations that go beyond the semantic to the conceptual and to the real. For Shea, either one knows or one believes. For Lonergan, there are two kinds of knowledge: immanently generated knowledge and belief. In other words, belief is preeminently a type of knowledge. Immanently generated knowledge is knowledge that one has found out for oneself without relying on the testimony of others. Belief can be distinguished from immanently generated knowledge, but it remains a type of knowledge. This approach is present in *Insight*⁹ and more fully developed in *Method in Theology*.¹⁰

Lonergan's treatment of knowledge of God in chapter nineteen in *Insight* and even more so his treatment of particular beliefs such as the Incarnation and the Trinity as types of knowledge in chapter twenty fly in the face of modern presuppositions that such beliefs decidedly do not constitute a type of knowledge. Regarding religious belief as a type of knowledge is an essential yet controversial dimension of the entire project that *Insight* undertakes.

In *Method in Theology*, a progression from immanently generated knowledge to belief undergirds the entire enterprise. In-between the first four functional specialties and the final four stands conversion. Lonergan discusses conversion in a threefold manner as

⁸Ibid., 163-69; 193-202.

⁹ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study in Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957).

¹⁰ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

religious, moral, and intellectual. Through conversion one achieves the horizon necessary for accepting and understanding religious truths that have been handed down over the centuries. One does so within the context of a community that is constituted by those particular religious meanings and values. As Shea himself brought out so forcefully in response to John Randall, believers hold their beliefs to be not just meaningful but true.¹¹ That religious believers hold their beliefs to be not just meaningful but true is a constitutive part of the act of believing. To reduce religious believing to the holding of the merely meaningful is to do an injustice to the reality of the act.

Shea strongly agrees with Lonergan on this particular point about the cognitive status and intentionality of religious belief. Shea's difference from Lonergan lies in his refusal to call religious belief knowledge, and in his finding the uncritical treatment of religious belief as knowledge to constitute the cardinal sin of dogmatism.

It would be too easy and indeed false to say that Shea must take Lonergan to be a dogmatist because Lonergan claims to know what he only believes. Shea is aware that Lonergan adopts at least somewhat of a critical stance toward belief and that he grounds authentic belief in religious, moral, and intellectual conversion. In a Lonerganian perspective, one's appropriation of religious beliefs into one's present context cannot contradict things that one knows, for example, as immanently generated knowledge. Shea instead finds Lonergan to lack full coherence and consistency on the topic.

Shea is not alone in offering this assessment. In an essay given at a conference in 1970, two years before the publication of *Method in Theology*, David Tracy raised some

¹¹ Shea, *Naturalists*, 195-204.

similar questions.¹² Writing with an awareness of Lonergan's previous works on dogma as well as his developing work on conversion, Tracy expressed concerns over whether Lonergan would be able to use a category such as conversion to ground religious belief in a sufficiently critical manner. In later writings, Tracy came to affirm strongly the critical nature of Lonergan's *method*, though he still retained reservations concerning Lonergan's *content*.¹³

On the one hand, Lonergan's life-long project entailed an embrace of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment insofar as they could be pursued within an intellectual approach that honored traditional religious belief. On the other hand, Lonergan's project entailed an embrace of traditional religious beliefs insofar as they would continue to develop as they were appropriated within the new context that values scientific and historical methods.

In a manner that offers some parallels to Lonergan yet also striking differences, Shea, in a 1992 *Commonweal* piece, opts for dual loyalties to Enlightenment tradition and to Catholic tradition, expressly hoping to avoid the serious dangers that can arise when one attempts to serve two masters.¹⁴ In his vigorous reply to Robert Imbelli's response to his article on this subject, Shea states: "While I regard myself as Christologically orthodox as the next Catholic, I also regard myself as one who believes and therefore does not know, and whose belief is always poised on the edge of unbelief."¹⁵

¹² David W. Tracy, "Lonergan's Foundational Theology: an Interpretation and a Critique," in *Foundations of Theology: Papers from the International Lonergan Congress 1970*, ed. Philip McShane (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), 197-222, esp. 214-222.

¹³ See David W. Tracy, "Theological Models: An Exercise in Dialectics," in *Lonergan Workshop*, v. 2, ed. Fred Lawrence (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981) 83-107, esp. fn. 4 on 106 and fn. 9 on 107.

¹⁴ William M. Shea, "Dual Loyalties in Catholic Theology: Finding Truth in Alien Traditions," *Commonweal*, 31 January 1992, pp. 9-14, at 9.

¹⁵ Robert P. Imbelli and William M. Shea, "Dual Loyalties in Catholic Theology: An Exchange of Views," *Commonweal*, 24 April 1992, pp. 21-23, at 22.

It is precisely this disjunction between knowledge and belief that differentiates Shea from Lonergan. Lonergan holds that, from the perspective of a sociology of knowledge, most human knowledge rests on belief:

Ninety-eight per cent of what a genius knows, he believes. It isn't personally independently acquired knowledge. Human knowledge is an acquisition that goes on over centuries and centuries, and if we want to accept nothing, that we don't find out for ourselves, we revert to the palaeozoic age. At that period they found out for themselves everything they knew.¹⁶

Lonergan's argument against the disjunction between knowledge and belief rests on the claim that the Enlightenment bias in favor of immanently generated knowledge represents an individualistic and rationalistic misreading of the human phenomenon of knowing. Lonergan explains:

Human knowledge results from a vast collaboration of many peoples over uncounted millennia. The necessary condition of that collaboration is belief. What any of us knows, only slightly results from personal experience, personal discovery, personally conducted verification; for the most part it results from believing. But the eighteenth century Enlightenment was not content to attack religious belief. It prided itself on its philosophers. It set up a rationalist individualism that asked people to prove their assumptions or else regard them as

¹⁶ Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, eds. William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 219.

arbitrary. In effect it was out to destroy not only the religious tradition but all traditions. Such rationalist individualism in the twentieth century seems to have infected our educationalists. Students are encouraged to find things out for themselves, to develop originality, to be creative, to criticize, but it does not seem that they are instructed in the enormous role of belief in the acquisition and expansion of knowledge. Many do not seem to be aware that what they know of science is not immanently generated but for the most part simply belief.¹⁷

Lonergan's concern here runs somewhat counter to some of the concerns expressed by Shea in his "dual loyalties" article in *Commonweal*, especially the final two of six points he outlined:

5. All traditions and authorities are subject to the test of experience, and all are subject to criticism, including the Enlightenment values and the Christian tradition and its teachings. That obligation is individual as well as communal. Kant is correct: one must assume responsibility for one's beliefs and questions as well as one's actions.

6. Faith is not only *fides quaerens intellectum*, it is also *intellectus quaerens fidem*. Here I would interpret the first to mean that theology proceeds from faith and is a reflection on its meaning; and the second, to mean that in the modern context, belief is always accompanied by questions about its truth and these questions accompany the act of reflection from beginning to end, questions which are not finally answered. In every instance theology must take account of its

¹⁷Lonergan, *Second Collection*, 185-86.

unbelief as well as its belief. The Enlightenment criticism of traditional theology is correct: ecclesiastical dogmatism makes genuine faith and belief impossible.¹⁸

Although one might argue that Shea fits Lonergan's description of the contemporary educator infected by rationalist individualism, I myself would find such an argument to be more than a little exaggerated. My point in juxtaposing the above quotes is rather to show how Lonergan and Shea appear to have contrasting agendas in their treatments of belief in relation to Enlightenment-style biases.

Lonergan is arguing against any approach to human knowing that shoves belief off to the margins as merely personal and subjective. Shea is arguing against any approach that allows belief to escape critical scrutiny. Lonergan is arguing against rationalists who do not take seriously the cognitive status of beliefs as truth claims. Shea is arguing against dogmatists who refuse to consider legitimate and necessary questions regarding their beliefs. Both Lonergan and Shea know that there is a distinction to be made between immanently generated knowledge and belief. Lonergan pursues his agenda by stressing the continuity between the two. Shea pursues his agenda by stressing the difference.

Even in their agendas there is quite a bit of overlap, however, for we have seen that Shea also argues against rationalists who do not take seriously the cognitive status of beliefs as truth claims. Lonergan himself argues against dogmatists who refuse to consider legitimate and necessary questions regarding their beliefs. Both of them are fighting battles on both of these fronts. Why is it, then, that whereas Lonergan thinks that

¹⁸ Shea, "Dual Loyalties," 12.

identifying belief as a type of knowledge helps in these battles, Shea thinks that only a clear and decisive distinction between belief and knowledge will do?

Such a question can perhaps be addressed by engaging in dialectics and in horizon analysis. These are the Lonerganian tools that Shea himself employed in *The Naturalists and the Supernatural*. Dialectics helps one to determine philosophically what are “positions” and what are “counter-positions.”¹⁹ Horizon analysis helps one to determine at what point further legitimate questions are either being pursued or shut down. Dialectics and horizon analysis are related insofar as ultimately “positions” will lead to pursuing further legitimate questions and “counter-positions” will lead to shutting them down.

Put simply, a “position” will be neither reductive nor uncritical. Skepticism—the claim that one really cannot know anything for certain—is the purest form of reductionism. It is a highly critical posture in its stance that all claims must be thoroughly examined and justified. It is reductionist, however, insofar as it assumes that knowing is something like looking at an “already out there now real”; in realizing correctly that one cannot truly achieve knowledge in that way, skepticism rejects the possibility of human knowing whatsoever. Lonergan’s “position” is that knowing is not only possible but an everyday reality. It issues from a process that involves experience, understanding, and judgment. Objectivity is reached not as some purely abstract ideal but as the fruit of authentic subjectivity. Knowing what knowing is helps one to be critical of what passes for human knowledge. The skeptic shuts down further questions that the knowing subject is free to pursue.

¹⁹ Lonergan’s exposition of “position” and “counter-position” can be found in *Insight*, 387-390.

Cartesian dualism contains a “position” insofar as it builds its epistemology upon a turn to the knowing subject. It contains also a “counter-position” insofar as it identifies the knowable as that segment of the “already out there now real” about which one’s doubts can be overcome. It is a form of rationalism insofar as it bases itself in a posture of radical doubt. Critical reason cut off from faith provides the starting point and ending point for the pursuit of knowledge.

Fideism—based on the claim that one cannot offer any rationale or justification for one’s beliefs for, after all, they are based on faith—is the purest form of being uncritical. Fideism and dogmatism go hand in hand. Lonergan holds the “position” that, whereas believing is indeed based in faith, one can still give an account of one’s faith and of one’s beliefs that is credible and that operates in accordance with legitimate canons of rationality. Legitimate canons of rationality differ from those put forth by skeptics, idealists, and absolutists.

A “position” concerning belief, therefore, must be neither a rationalism nor a fideism. It can be neither reductionist nor insufficiently critical. A believer, at least an educated one, should be able to give an account of why one is neither a rationalist nor a fideist. In the large world of the academy, one could find those who might think that Shea is himself a fideist, and that Lonergan is much worse. In the large world of the church, one could find those who might think that Lonergan is a rationalist, and that Shea is even worse. In a dialectical comparison in which the positions of Shea and Lonergan form the poles, however, it is evident that Lonergan is the one called upon to give an account of why, relative to Shea, he is not a fideist, and Shea is called upon to give an account of why, relative to Lonergan, he is not a rationalist. Is Lonergan being sufficiently critical?

Does Shea's insistence on the need for continual critical scrutiny shut down rather than open up horizons for understanding the nature and grasping the truth of religious beliefs?

Horizon Analysis

It may perhaps strike one as ironic, against the background of everything that has been said previously, that a major difference between Lonergan and Shea can be explained in terms of Lonergan treating religious beliefs in a way that is radically distinct from other forms of knowledge and Shea treating them as if they were basically the same. Such, however, is the case.

For Lonergan, when it comes to the basic human acquisition of knowledge, understanding precedes judgment. The knower must grasp a range of possible understandings prior to making a judgment concerning what is or is not so. Meaning in this case is prior to truth. When it comes to religious belief, however, judgment and truth precede understanding and meaning. Moreover, the believer can legitimately accept as true things which will not be fully understood within one's time upon this earth. Religious believers even anticipate and expect that things that they now see as through a glass, darkly, will appear quite differently when they are able to see face to face.

Some of the differences between Shea and Lonergan can be understood by considering that Shea is operating as a philosopher/historian of religion whereas Lonergan, in *Insight* as well as in *Method in Theology*, is covering a span that does not stop at philosophy of religion but which explicitly lays the groundwork for theology. In *The Naturalists and the Supernatural*, Shea reflected on the apparent convergence between philosophy and theology. On the one hand, a philosopher like Dewey himself

paid serious attention to the type of experience “that especially accompanies significant adjustment or reorientation in life.”²⁰ One could hardly consider his philosophy to be “pre-conversion” in any general sense. On the other hand, as theology was developing as a critical discipline in the academy, it was growing closer in its methods and criteria to its more traditionally academic siblings.²¹ Yet both naturalist philosophers and theologians hold to be true things which, from a philosophical perspective, are assumptions and beliefs rather than what Dewey calls “warrantedly assertible propositions.”²²

And so Shea proposes in his conclusion that both naturalists and theologians swear off any tendencies toward dogmatism, exercise abundant self-criticism, and engage in respectful conversation. Shea encourages both sides to continue to put forth their most basic beliefs as claims to truth; at the same time, he wants both sides to acknowledge that there is a difference between what they believe and what they know. Naturalists should continue to be critically minded, but they should be more open to the intellectual horizon that would permit the question of God as a legitimate and serious one. Theologians need to become more critically minded.

So Shea is raising questions about the distinction between philosophy and theology in two directions. First, are philosophers really limited to something called philosophy? Second, are theologians really operating in some sublime realm that is identifiably post-conversion? Shea’s questions point to the fact that for many reasons and in many ways, any contemporary distinction between philosophy and theology is complex and poses potential ambiguities.

²⁰ Shea, *Naturalists*, 124. In class at Catholic University Shea stressed the biographical angle of the importance of Dewey’s own naturalist conversion experience for the direction and energy it gave to his life’s work.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

²² As quoted in Shea, *Naturalists*, 233.

Lonergan did not limit his *Method in Theology* to Roman Catholic theologians. It has implications for various Christian communions.²³ It may potentially have something to say to thinkers of other religious faiths. Moreover, if one can identify ways in which a philosopher is operating in a post-conversion manner, accepting as basic truths assumptions that cannot be empirically verified but which are grounded in a conversion, then that philosopher can be taken to no longer be engaged in philosophy only on the level that Lonergan labels dialectics but rather to be doing something more parallel to theology. In the other direction, a theologian whose functional specialty may be dogmatics or systematics, if operating within the context of a university, is not exempt from the responsibility of addressing critical questions in the most academically responsible manner possible.

In *The Lion and the Lamb* there is perhaps some degree of change in emphasis evident in Shea's stance regarding the relationship between, on the one hand, philosophy/history of religion and, on the other hand, theology. Most of his underlying concepts and positions remain the same as in his earlier works. Shea will at times speak explicitly as a believer in *The Lion and the Lamb*, but his intellectual analysis of his material and of the groups he studies are expressly not undertaken as the work of a Catholic theologian. Shea is no longer explicitly emphasizing a convergence of philosophy and theology. He finds much of the work on the topic of Christian fundamentalism done by Catholic theologians and church leaders to be lacking in empathetic understanding, riddled with prejudice, and unscholarly.²⁴ He implies that such is what happens when people act as if they know what they really only believe.

²³ Lonergan, *Method*, xii.

²⁴ Shea, *Lion*, 241-78, esp. p. 268 and p. 278.

Shea personally found his move from being a priest-theologian to being a lay Catholic scholar of religion to be liberating. He testifies: “Although I had and still have admiration for the work done by my theologian colleagues at Catholic University of America, I was and remain unable to place myself and my own work as a part of a Christian mission or as in any way representative of the teaching *magisterium* of the Catholic Church.”²⁵ Rather than calling for theology to retain a critical stance at every moment, as he did in the *Commonweal* piece cited above, Shea has backed away from claiming to do Catholic theology.

I recall being on a panel of scholars responding to *The Naturalists and the Supernatural* at a College Theology Society meeting in 1987.²⁶ The panel was given in a session of the Philosophy of Religion section. My own points focused on what Shea wrote about Catholic theology, noting especially the lack of an explicit role for the magisterium. Shea seemed to think that, given the overall thrust of his book, my question was a bit beside the main point. He did, though, support the importance of theology being a critical discipline, which made the role of the magisterium somewhat less relevant than some take it to be. Such are my vague memories. *The Lion and the Lamb* addresses the concerns I expressed way back when in a much more direct way than did Shea’s response to me on that panel.

I want to speak about Shea’s academic horizon in relation to the status of religious belief in two ways. First, if one were to consider Shea’s academic stance as basically pre-conversion and pre-confessional, operating mainly within the functional specialties that Lonergan labels “history” and “dialectics,” then one might see a special

²⁵ Ibid., 282.

²⁶ Dennis M. Doyle, “Response to William M. Shea’s *The Naturalists and the Supernatural*.” College Theology Society annual meeting at Loyola in Baltimore, May 31, 1987.

appropriateness to insisting on a strong distinction between knowledge and belief on those levels. Shea is operating on a level in which understanding precedes judgment and in which meaning precedes truth. The critical function needs to be continually operative on these levels.

I think such an analysis says something, but there is more to be said. A second way to consider Shea's stance is as one that is to some degree confessional and post-conversion. Shea rightfully feels the need to tell his story as an element of what one needs to know in order to understand him and where he is coming from. His movement from being an ecclesiastical theologian to becoming a lay Catholic scholar of religion entailed a type of conversion. A central chunk of the message that Shea hands on has to do with the need to reject religious dogmatism in all its forms. Shea teaches the need to be both scholarly and empathetic toward others and never to surrender the call to be ever critically minded, especially when it comes to taking the intellectual plank out of one's own eye. Maintaining a sharp distinction between belief and knowledge fits well within such a vision. Shea remains a Catholic not only religiously but in all dimensions, even as his own intellectual conversion runs somewhat parallel to rather than within the mainstream of official Catholic theology.

The extent to which a Catholic theologian acts as an official representative of the magisterium, the extent to which a Catholic theologian can operate in a manner that is autonomous without declaring complete independence, the manner in which magisterial teaching functions as a theological source without predetermining theological conclusions, these are all complex matters. Lonergan addresses these questions in a somewhat cursory way in *Method in Theology* in the last few pages of his chapter on

doctrines. He voices there his support for recognizing doctrinal development as well as the autonomy of the theologian. It is in this context that Lonergan himself offers a kind of personal witness: “Though a Roman Catholic with quite conservative views on religious and church doctrines, I have written a chapter on doctrines without subscribing to any but the doctrine about doctrine set forth in the First Vatican Council. I have done so deliberately, and my purpose has been ecumenical. I desire it to be as simple as possible for theologians of different allegiance to adapt my method to their uses.”²⁷

In the paragraph that follows, Lonergan explains how it is that the method he lays out for theology is critical rather than dogmatic:

Finally, a distinction between dogmatic theology and doctrinal theology may serve to bring to focus points that repeatedly we have attempted to make.

Dogmatic theology is classicist. It tends to take it for granted that on each issue there is one and only one true proposition. It is out to determine which of the unique propositions are true. In contrast, doctrinal theology is historically-minded. It knows that the meaning of a proposition becomes determinate only within a context. It knows that contexts vary with the varying brands of common sense, with the evolution of cultures, with the differentiations of human consciousness, and with the presence or absence of intellectual, moral, and religious conversion.²⁸

Lonergan goes on to distinguish between religious apprehension of a doctrine and theological apprehension of that same doctrine. Religious apprehension is in the context of “one’s own brand of commonsense” and in accordance with one’s pursuit of

²⁷ Lonergan, *Method*, 332-33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 333.

intellectual, moral, and religious conversion. Theological apprehension is historical and dialectical. One tries to develop “positions” to reverse any “counter-positions” that one might encounter. Theologians appropriate the truth and meaning of those doctrines which had been in place in one context to a new context.

For Lonergan, one accepts the basic truths of the core doctrines of one’s religion upon achieving the horizon that allows one to belong to that religion. Critical thinking does not end at that point, however. Critical appropriation of the truths of the tradition is in a way just beginning. The theologian is obliged to transpose truths that used to be understood in one historical/cultural frame of reference into a contemporary frame of reference. Though in a basic sense the “truth” of basic doctrines is not in question, the meaning of doctrines, and thus how those doctrines are understood, may shift significantly from one context to another. The meaning of doctrines must be appropriated in accordance with one’s religious, moral, and intellectual conversion. Moreover, even though a particular theologian may operate within the functional specialty of doctrines or of systematics, that theologian is not to work in a manner that becomes cut off from the fruits of the efforts of those working in other functional specialties. Lonergan is promoting doctrinal development to an extent which, when compared to the theological approach used in Catholic seminary education in the first half of the twentieth century, can be appreciated as relatively radical.

Shea knows this and probably for the most part agrees with it. Even if one can show that Lonergan’s method, used properly by one who has a deep grasp of its implications, can function in a thoroughly critical manner, one is still left with the

question of why Lonergan identifies belief as a form of knowledge. Why not fess up that believing and knowing are quite distinct?

In my judgment, in a Lonerganian perspective, to deny in one's first pass that belief is a type of knowledge represents a counter-position. A "position" requires one to affirm the fullest range of reality that there is to be known. Once one establishes that belief is a type of knowledge, one is then not only free but actually obliged to go about the act of believing responsibly. One must be critically minded about it, at least if one is educated or even perhaps a theologian. One must believe in ways that accord with one's religious, moral, and intellectual conversion. One must believe in ways that do not stand in contradiction with other things that one knows. One must believe in ways that are technically open to the possibility of revision, even in some cases on the level not just of meaning but of truth. For if one happens to encounter strong evidence that what one has accepted as true may not be true, one is obliged to pursue the relevant questions as they arise. This is a "position" that is neither reductionist nor uncritical.

To begin with the premise that belief is not a type of knowledge results in a form of reductionism. For belief functions in an everyday manner as a form of knowledge within a community of believers. It is proper to live one's life within the context of such a community without having to critically question the community's core beliefs at every moment. One should not begin and end every prayer or discussion group meeting in a parish with the acknowledgment that after all, we only believe these things, we don't really know them for sure in the way we hold real knowledge. Theologians working in universities need to be much more academically responsible and critical than most believers in a parish setting. Still, much of their work flows from and contributes to such

faith communities. Once it is settled that religious belief is a form of knowledge, the critical questions for the theologian may begin. It is ultimately a form of skepticism to rule out the possibility of knowing anything through faith and belief.

As discussed earlier, Lonergan makes the point that most of what anyone knows is in some sense based on belief. If one has never been to Toronto, in a sense one “believes” that Toronto exists and that it can be found where it is placed on virtually all maps of Canada. Yet everyone trusts that for someone with the means to travel, Toronto could be personally discovered to exist in that place. The existence of Toronto would then become immanently generated knowledge for that person and no longer “belief.”

Yet anyone can also see that it is so reasonable for a person to trust that Toronto does in fact exist in that place, there is really no need to verify it personally. Though technically “belief,” it was already knowledge before the foolish and unnecessary journey. In fact, if someone were to start correcting people every time they acted as if they knew that Toronto exists in that place even though for them it is not immanently generated knowledge, that someone would be extraordinarily annoying. And if that someone were to take this beyond Toronto and start correcting people in each instance that they acted as if they knew something that was not personally immanently generated knowledge, that someone would be absolutely unbearable.

There is an obvious objection to this line of argument. The existence of Toronto in that place is relatively easy to verify empirically. Religious beliefs for the most part are not. The analogy thus appears to break down. One who questions the existence of Toronto is being ridiculous. One who questions the reliability of religious beliefs is swimming in the current of the deepest streams in our culture.

Lonergan is fighting against the cultural assumption that religious belief is fundamentally subjective and personal in a manner that cuts it off from the question of truth. There is plenty of evidence in Lonergan's work that he knew well the basic and obvious distinction between religious belief and most other forms of belief. He goes to great lengths to explain how intellectual verification of the truth of religious beliefs requires both the self-appropriation of one's self as a knower as well as a significant existential component. Lonergan's philosophical and theological agenda leads him to emphasize that religious beliefs function in religious communities as a type of knowledge, and it is not in the interest of truth or goodness to place radical doubt at the core of one's apprehension of such beliefs either religiously or theologically.

With that in place, further questions calling for critical analysis will indeed arise. Religious communities, however, need to be affirmed in their ability to pursue deeper understanding of the core doctrines that they accept as true. For Lonergan, the conversion that underlies the life of a religious community goes far beyond the individual and the present. There is also the conversion that belongs to the group and that has been growing and developing over many centuries.²⁹ Theologians pursue further understanding of beliefs accepted as knowledge not just as individuals but as members of these believing communities. To insist that belief and knowledge are simply two different things inhibits this line of questioning and represents a narrower horizon than that opened up by the insight that belief functions legitimately as a type of knowledge. To point out that belief functions legitimately as a type of knowledge does not shut down any lines of questioning for those who want to make further distinctions. In this regard, it is Lonergan who offers the "position."

²⁹ Ibid., 130-31.

Can These Differences Be Understood as Being Complementary?

So, do I then dismiss Shea as the one who offers merely a “counter-position” on the relationship between belief and knowledge? Although I do think that I have uncovered a serious difference in Lonergan’s favor when it comes to this point of comparison, I find that the relevant questions do not end at this point.

Tracy has pointed out that Lonergan’s work was directed toward “a liberation . . . of theological method from the increasingly dead weight of Neo-scholasticism.”³⁰ He adds that “much of Lonergan’s work is concerned with the challenges posed by modernity from the scientific revolution through the modern turn to the subject and the rise of historical consciousness.”³¹ Yet many of the challenges of more recent years are posed by what is labeled “postmodern.” Tracy notes that Lonergan’s work has been used by some postmodern thinkers. He then explores Lonergan’s emphasis on performing exercises for the self-appropriation of oneself as a knower as a dimension that lends itself fruitfully toward a postmodern approach. Tracy even reconsiders the central role that Lonergan gives to belief as a kind of knowledge. When viewed in conjunction with Lonergan’s engagement with modernity, Tracy sees this central role for belief as reflecting Lonergan’s interest at that time in a sociology of knowledge. In a postmodern perspective, however, Tracy judges the centrality granted to belief to be “exactly the kind of role that true beliefs possessed for the ancients: true beliefs are worthwhile principally because they are expressive of those true judgments of value implied by the fundamental

³⁰ David W. Tracy, “Bernard Lonergan and the Return of Ancient Practice,” in *Lonergan Workshop*, v. 10, ed. Fred Lawrence (Boston: Boston College, 1994), 319-331, at 319.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 320.

orientation of an authentic tradition of values, grounded in a vision of ultimate reality as good.”³²

To some degree Lonergan’s ways of meeting the challenges of modernity spill over into what is today recognized as postmodern. The theological method that he proposed may not directly meet all of the standards championed by the modern mind because it is meant as much to challenge those demands as to meet them.

Shea’s own use of the category “postmodern” in *The Lion and Lamb* differs greatly from the positive way in which Tracy uses it. Shea states:

In its latest phase, post-Enlightenment or postmodernism, the Enlightenment reaches another stage in its development wherein all claims to truth, even its own, are affirmed to be relative to context. All knowing, including science, and moral evaluation are seen to be shaped in traditions and so are subjective, historical, and contextual, and permeated by ideology. The contribution of postmodernism in correcting the Enlightenment-modernist myth is cognitive and moral relativism. Surpassing the vigor of the modernist forms of criticism, postmodernism is doubly opposed to uncritical and obscurantist traditional religions with their claims to unconditioned truth and their service to power.³³

It may prove worthwhile, however, to consider Shea against the background of the category of postmodernity when taken in the positive sense that Tracy gives it. Shea identifies himself as one who struggles to bring together the often contrasting legacies of modernity and the Catholic intellectual tradition. It is now twenty years since my last

³² Ibid., 330.

³³ Shea, *Lion*, 23.

reading of *The Naturalists and the Supernatural*. I found it to be of great personal interest in the last two pages of Shea's first chapter, though it does not use the term "postmodern," briefly raises a series of questions that today are recognizably associated with postmodern thought. He says that his approach may be considered foundationalist in some senses but not all; that he indeed recognizes that he can be interpreted as an apologist for his own intellectual beliefs; and that the moves he makes are not a retreat to the pre-critical but are rather quite contemporary.

Shea's critique of dogmatism has some parallels with the critiques that some postmodern thinkers make of the misuse of meta-narratives. His goal of promoting serious and humble dialogue can be understood as taking the turn toward the "other." His life-long stress on the subjectivity of the theologian can be read as taking seriously the particular and the contextual. Most relevant to this discussion, Shea's pursuit of a "both-and" position on the question of truth and openness finds echoes throughout the postmodern world.

The quest has been long underway among religious thinkers self-consciously responding to the challenges of postmodernism to find a way to talk about simultaneously holding one's community's truths as truths and being radically open to the other. Miroslav Volf, self-described as representing a "free church" perspective, puts it as follows:

Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. As Christians we will assert this as the truth. But we cannot assert it as *absolute knowledge*, we cannot assert it as the *final* truth. Short of becoming God, humans cannot possess the final truth. . . . All Christian beliefs are *our* beliefs, *human* beliefs, and as such always *provisional*

beliefs. We assert that they are true; but we make this assertion provisionally. I call this *provisional certitude*. There is, if you want, an absoluteness about our beliefs: we cannot relinquish our standpoint but rather assert that it is true. So the ground on which we stand as we act and reflect is firm. Yet we assert our standpoint as true in a provisional way: *we believe* our belief to be true. This hinders us from becoming arrogant and oppressive.³⁴

Other examples of contemporary scholars of religion struggling to articulate a both/and position concerning the tension between truth and radical openness include the works of Lieven Boeve (metanarratives open to interruption) and S. Mark Heim (orientational pluralism).³⁵ Shea stands in good company with those who want both to affirm the truth of their beliefs and to avoid any sense of arrogance or dogmatism in regard to others.

I do think that Lonergan's explanation of how belief functions as a kind of knowledge can aid rather than inhibit the continual quest for truth and openness. Shea's characterization of the Church as an ideologized communion with centralized authority, though not lacking completely in veracity, reflects a reductionism that does not appreciate fully how the Church is first of all a communion of love between God and human beings, and how the role of belief, taken as the knowledge of what God has most graciously revealed to us, plays an indispensable role in constituting that community.

³⁴ Miroslav Volf, "The Unique Christ in the Challenge of Modernity," in *The Unique Christ in Our Pluralist World*, ed. Bruce J. Nicholls (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994), 103; as quoted in Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 54.

³⁵ See, for example, Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, trans. Brian Doyle (New York: Continuum, 2007 [Dutch orig. 2006]); S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and difference in Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995) and also *The Depth of Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

It will be a difficult task, but maybe if a few scholars work on it, we can get Shea to believe that he is really a postmodernist. It is less likely, though, that we could get him to admit that if he truly believes it, in a way he kind of knows it.