

THE DIALECTIC OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: LONERGAN AND BALTHASAR

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[The author develops Lonergan's notion of dialectic in order to clarify the source of conflicting positions often arising in theological reflection in terms of religious identity. The assumption is that there exists a dynamic tension between two basic interpretations of Christian identity, "specific-identity focus" and "general-identity focus." Examples from Balthasar's theological esthetics are used in order to illustrate this dialectic.]

LONERGAN'S FUNCTIONAL SPECIALTY "dialectic" seeks to clarify the source of diverse and/or conflicting theological positions. Dialectic brings to light complementary, genetic, and irreducible differences; it highlights the need for conversion where necessary.¹ Likewise, Robert Doran seeks to establish an integrative complementary theological understanding between the methodological work of Bernard Lonergan and the theological esthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar.² According to Doran, one strength of the former is that he provides the ground for general categories (categories shared generally with other disciplines), while one strength of the latter is that he provides the ground for special categories (categories specific to a discipline such as theology).³ An integration and complementary understanding of these two Catholic thinkers, according to Doran, promises among other things to settle a long-standing dispute that has persisted throughout church history. This conflict was manifest, for example, in the Aristotelian–Augustinian disputes in the Middle Ages.⁴

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¹ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972; latest reprint, Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996) 235.

² Robert M. Doran, S.J., "Lonergan and Balthasar: Methodological Considerations," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 61–84.

³ Ibid. 67; for Lonergan's treatment of general and special categories, see *Method in Theology* 281–93.

⁴ Doran, "Lonergan and Balthasar" 61.

In this article, following up these reflections, I wish to develop the notion of the "dialectic of religious identity." Envisioned as a heuristic tool for use in the functional specialty dialectic, the dialectic of religious identity seeks to understand a recurrent source of conflict throughout Christian history between two basic interpretations of Christian identity. It acknowledges the dynamic tension between two modes of interpretation, i.e. the interpretation focused on specific identity and the interpretation focused on general identity. There exists a dynamic tension between those believers who seek to establish the bounds of Christian identity by emphasizing its distinctness within the cultural matrix (specific-identity focus), and on the other hand, those who seek to integrate their own Christian self-understanding with the larger human community or cultural matrix (general-identity focus).

The unique context of our modern era has produced a plethora of theological positions and methodologies. Likewise, the lack of a comprehensive and systematic viewpoint has led to attempts to organize the vast amounts of literature through the formulation of models and typologies. In a classic study H. Richard Niebuhr sought to organize the diverse approaches to Christology and culture.⁵ Avery Dulles developed a typology in two distinct works.⁶ Likewise, two works from the Yale School have gained popularity especially among Protestant thinkers. George Lindbeck⁷ and Hans Frei⁸ both propose typologies based on the diverse ways in which thinkers construe the relationship between philosophy and theology, and both of them make judgments based on their typologies regarding the most adequate approach for theology. Such typologies are helpful insofar as they help to organize data, clarify differences, and facilitate understanding of the deeper issues involved. There are also obvious limits to such typologies, especially the propensity to pigeonhole what are in fact often complex positions. The latter tendency can display a failure or unwillingness to understand. Often people propose typologies and models without any adherence to the underlying methodological assumptions which is one of a phenomenological method.⁹

⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975); Stephan Bevans acknowledges the influence of Niebuhr in *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992).

⁶ Avery Dulles, S.J., *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1974); and *Models of Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

⁷ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

⁸ Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and W. C. Placher (New Haven: Yale University, 1992).

⁹ Phenomenological method has come to be associated narrowly with description of "what appears." However, as spelled out by Gerardus Van der Leeuw, it begins with describing what appears, proceeds to assigning names, and culminates by

I propose a kind of typology based on two “distinct” modes of interpretation of Christian identity. It is my belief that Lonergan’s method provides a more adequate ground than the descriptive phenomenological method because he posits the possibility of explanatory knowledge. Hence, I hope that the dialectic of religious identity will not only describe but also explain the source of many historic disputes (synchronically and diachronically); I also suggest a solution calling for conversion from inauthenticity and bias where needed.¹⁰ I begin with a discussion of the context in which I find that the dialectic of religious identity becomes clearer. Second, I flesh out the meaning of the terms pertinent to the dialectic of religious identity, presenting some examples from church history and offering further points of clarification. Third, I highlight selected examples from Balthasar’s *Seeing the Form*¹¹ that illustrates this dialectic specifically from the point of view of the specific-identity focus. A similar example could be taken to represent the general-identity focus as well, but that would involve a more detailed study and I trust that the understanding of the general-identity focus will become clearer by its contrast with the specific-identity focus.

LONERGAN’S DIALECTIC IN *METHOD IN THEOLOGY*

Lonergan defines the task of theology as mediating “between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix.”¹² Doran emphasizes that this mediation is a “mutual self-mediation” between the

distinguishing different types which one then uses as a basis for comparison with other phenomena; see his *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 2 vols., trans. J. E. Turner (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1967) 671–78.

¹⁰ Neil Ormerod, using the work of Lonergan and Doran, has attempted to develop a systematic approach to ecclesiology that invokes the notion of dialectical relations and four antitypes (“Church, Anti-types and Ordained Ministry: Systematic Perspectives,” *Pacifica* 10 [October 1997] 331–49). In many ways, his work is closely related to the dialectic of religious identity. There is overlap concerning the explanatory (as opposed to the descriptive) aspect of his “anti-typology” (340) as well as the inauthentic expressions of Christian identity. In some ways, his notion of antitypes, scales of values, and dialectical tensions between limitations and transcendence provide a more precise treatment of the inauthentic expressions than the dialectic of religious identity. However, I believe that the dialectic of religious identity has broader applications. Ormerod’s antitypes differ in that they pertain specifically to ecclesiology and refer solely to inauthentic expressions of Christianity, i.e. irreducible differences. In contrast, the dialectic of religious identity accounts for inauthentic as well as authentic expressions, i.e. complementary and genetic differences.

¹¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. Joseph Fessio, S.J., and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982).

¹² *Method in Theology* ix.

religion and the cultural matrix.¹³ In order to accomplish this task, Lonergan distinguishes an eightfold functional specialization. The sequence of specialties "separates successive stages in the process from data to results."¹⁴ Method in theology proceeds through the tasks of research, interpretation, history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications.¹⁵

What concerns us most with respect to the dialectic of religious identity falls under the rubric of the functional specialty identified as dialectic. As a specialty, dialectic is concerned with the attention to and resolution of conflicts. It takes its material for consideration from the many diverse viewpoints and ultimately seeks a comprehensive viewpoint that will account for all conflicts. "By dialectic . . . is understood a generalized apologetic conducted in an ecumenical spirit, aiming ultimately at a comprehensive viewpoint, and proceeding towards that goal by acknowledging differences, seeking their grounds, real and apparent, and eliminating superfluous oppositions."¹⁶ Often the functional specialty dialectic brings to light certain "irreducible" conflicts that are "serious and profound."¹⁷ Such conflicts are a function of authenticity and inauthenticity. Moreover, Lonergan discusses three ways in which horizons may differ insofar as they may be related in a manner that is genetic, complementary, or irreducible. "Now the study of these viewpoints takes one beyond the fact to the reasons for conflict. Comparing them will bring to light just where differences are irreducible, where they are complementary and could be brought together within a larger whole, where finally they can be regarded as successive stages in a single process of development."¹⁸ Horizons that are related in genetic and complementary fashion do not raise the question of authenticity. Dialectically divergent horizons, horizons that are "irreducible," are contradictory and often reflect the conflict of authenticity and inauthenticity for which an inauthentic horizon encourages intellectual stagnation and/or moral decline. Doran argues that the differences between the thought of Lonergan and Balthasar are genetic and complementary rather than irreducible.¹⁹ Irreducible conflicts that are grounded in the authenticity and inauthenticity of subjects call for conversion in order to heal the bias that is the source of conflict. Moreover, conversion can be intellectual, moral, religious, and/or psychic.²⁰ The extent to which the

¹³ "Lonergan and Balthasar" 65.

¹⁴ *Method in Theology* 126.

¹⁵ For a fuller account of functional specialization, see *Method in Theology* chap. 5; subsequent chapters treat each of the functional specialties.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 130.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 129.

¹⁹ "Lonergan and Balthasar" 62.

²⁰ While Lonergan did not explicitly integrate psychic conversion into his method, it is generally understood that he accepted the notion that was developed by Robert Doran; see Bernard Lonergan, "Reality, Myth, Symbol," in *Myth, Sym-*

fruits of this fourfold conversion are present within the subject determines the horizon of authenticity in the subject and therefore the subsequent integrity of the work as well.²¹ Hence Lonergan's assertion, "Genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity."²²

THE DIALECTIC OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

The dialectic of religious identity constitutes another possible approach to understanding the conflicts that are addressed within the functional specialty dialectic.²³ Specifically, the dialectic of religious identity focuses on the importance that identity plays within the Christian religion. It highlights the dynamic tension between those subjects who seek to establish the bounds of Christian identity, making it distinct within the cultural matrix, and those who seek to integrate an understanding of their own Christian identity in relation to the larger human community (or cultural matrix). I have termed the former tendency "specific-identity focused" and the latter, "general-identity focused." Concerning the general-identity focused, these adherents are seeking an integration of the insights taken from the larger human community (either contemporary or historic) that allow for a deeper mutual self-understanding between their tradition and the culture.²⁴ It is the context as well as the questions arising within a given epoch that provide the seeds for such integration.²⁵

bol, and Reality, ed. Alan M. Olson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1980) 31–37. For a discussion of psychic conversion, see Robert M. Doran, S.J., *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1990) chaps. 2 and 6–10.

²¹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 247.

²² Ibid. 292.

²³ This notion is not to be confused with what Lonergan refers to as the "dialectical character of religious development" (*Method in Theology* 110–112).

²⁴ B. A. Uspenskij et al. make the distinction between the inner sphere of a culture that reflects "the antithesis of inclusion and exclusion" and the outer sphere that represents anything outside the inner sphere and is viewed as chaos. Moreover, within the "semiotic whole" of a culture there exist "two mutually opposed mechanisms" the "tendency toward diversity" and the "tendency toward uniformity" (B. A. Uspenskij, V. V. Ivanov, V. N. Toporov, A. M. Pijatigorskij, and J. M. Lotman, "Theses on the Semiotic Study of Culture," in *Structure of Texts and Semiotics of Culture*, ed. J. Van der Eng and M. Grygar [The Hague: Mouton, 1973] 1–28, at 27). The latter opposition is analogous to the tension between the general-identity and specific-identity focuses; analogously, the two opposing mechanisms would correlate respectively.

²⁵ Pertinent to these distinctions as well is Mary Douglas's analysis of culture in terms of group and grid (*Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* [London: Cresset, 1979]). To what extent the group/grid distinction relates to the dialectic of religious identity remains a point for further reflection.

One may be tempted to confuse these two tendencies with the distinction of special and general theological categories. While I have borrowed those terms in part in order to formulate the concepts, they are not equivalent notions. When I speak of the specific-identity focused and general-identity focused, I am speaking in terms of modes (or preferences) of interpretation rather than "categories." That is, these are modes of interpretation (or preferences) insofar as each constitutes conations with a ground in individual reflecting subjects. Insofar as the respective positions are authentic (i.e., the differences reflected are complementary and/or genetic as opposed to irreducible) we can acknowledge a valid contribution to Christian self-understanding and identity. Secondly, the dialectic of religious identity is not meant to reduce theological issues to human psychic process. Rather, it recognizes that many theological controversies throughout Christian history have often brought the question of Christian identity to the forefront. In other words, with different epochs and changing historical contexts this question arises anew. Likewise, there are two basic modes in which the question is often answered, through a specific-identity focus (establishing boundaries), and a general-identity focus (expanding boundaries).²⁶

A sketch of some historical examples may help illustrate this point. It is no accident that early Egyptian monasticism flourished after Constantine's victory and Christianity's subsequent establishment as the state religion of the Empire. With these events, Christian identity was dramatically transformed. No longer was the Christian an "underdog" fighting for survival; he had become a political power with worldly impulse. The first monks who went into the Egyptian desert sought to reestablish and renew an authentic spirit of Christianity, the spirit of the age of martyrdom. In doing so, they established stern boundaries through rules of asceticism. This reflected their interpretation of what it means to follow Christ (specific-identity focused). The identity of the ascetic Christian contrasted sharply with those of the Empire and so avoided any ambiguity and collusion with the "world." Likewise, in speaking of such reformers throughout the history of the Church, Robert Schreiter reflects: "People steeped in reform are conscious of boundaries and clear identity markers. Their sharp sense of identity [specific-identity focus] is therefore at risk with any new proposal. This could be contrasted with other bodies in Christianity that emphasize com-

²⁶ The issue of boundaries and identity has taken on a heightened significance in theology today. Robert Schreiter speaks of globalization wherein the boundaries of identity have become geographically deterritorialized leading the burden of differentiation between groups to overemphasize cultural differences; he refers to this phenomenon as hyperdifferentiation, a good descriptive term for someone with an intense specific-identity focus (*The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997] 26–27).

prehensiveness as a constituent feature of Christian faith [general-identity focus]."²⁷

The dialectic of religious identity can be operative relative to different contexts. At the same time that the monks went into the desert, the Church in the cities quickly began establishing itself in relation to its surrounding society. Roman halls of congregation were converted into basilicas. This was needed to welcome the large number of new converts. Eventually, Christians would build their own cathedrals whose massive transepts signaled the presence of the Christian in the world yet separate from the world. Hence, Christians of the desert and those of the cathedral represent two different interpretations of Christian identity, yet they are similar in their specific-identity focus and rejection of the world.

The end of persecution signaled a welcome reprieve. Eventually, however, new questions and conflicts arose concerning doctrines and dogmas, e.g., concerning the humanity/divinity of Christ. Indeed, Christians were being educated from within the Hellenistic cultural matrix. Naturally they began to ask questions about the value of philosophical categories in relation to Christian beliefs (i.e., to acquire a general-identity focus). These dynamic tensions persisted as misinterpretations, and doctrinal heresies emerged and councils convened in order to settle the disputes. Arianism, for example, became widespread and threatened the ground of Christian identity, christological doctrine. Doran reminds us of the reluctance that surrounded the adoption of the category *homoousios* (a "common" term of the time meaning literally "of one stuff") in the teaching of Nicea.²⁸ This was a constitutive moment in church history because at that point the boundaries that had previously set the parameters for Christian identity were expanded beyond the scriptural canon to include categories from the culture. "Such changes in the boundaries," states Schreiter, "portend larger transformations taking place in identity in a people."²⁹

The initial reluctance of some believers to accept the term *homoousios* reflects a specific-identity focus in that they are concerned with what constitutes the boundaries of Christian identity as distinct from the cultural matrix.³⁰ To some extent, their reluctance to adopt unscriptural terms reflected a healthy instinct. However, in this case the adoption of a new category was a necessary move on the part of the Church and it resolved,

²⁷ Ibid. 65; I have added the comments in brackets.

²⁸ "Loneragan and Balthasar" 77; see also Bernard Lonergan, "The Dehellenization of Dogma," in *A Second Collection* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996) 23.

²⁹ Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985) 66; see also his view that "to restructure boundaries is to restructure identity" (ibid. 65), and his treatment of boundaries, identity, and social change (ibid. 63–73).

³⁰ Athanasius, the proponent of the term *homoousios*, also composed the biography of St. Anthony of Egypt, a text that popularized the monastic ideal.

for the most part, the more pressing threat to Christian identity at the time arising from Arianism.³¹ Moreover, the adoption of “unscriptural” categories bespeaks a fundamental exigency within the Church to articulate the truths of Christianity across shifting historical contexts and epochs. At the same time, establishing the boundaries of Christian identity is necessary in order to avoid ambiguity, confusion, and doubt among the faithful. Athanasius attempted to solve the tension by arguing that the notion *homoousios*, while not explicit in Scripture, is implicitly present.³²

As a heuristic device for understanding historic conflicts, the dialectic of religious identity is often operative in ecclesiological and/or christological disputes. Specifically, the christological area is a source for recurrent disputes since it concerns the true identity (humanity/divinity) of Jesus Christ. The issue of identity arises *de facto* since much of Christian identity is inextricably intertwined with its understanding of the identity of Jesus Christ (“Who do you say that I am?”).

FIVE APPLICATIONS OF THE DIALECTIC

The Authority of Scripture

Throughout church history, there has been a dynamic tension between the authority of Scripture and additional sources which help Christians understand and elucidate their faith. Specific-identity focused thinkers tend to embrace the New Testament as unambiguously the Christian source of revelation and to interpret the Old Testament primarily in terms of its anticipation of the Christian message. Moreover, they are often suspicious of the use of philosophical categories in theology, and remind us that reason and faith are distinct. These elements become clear not only in the Protestant Reformation, but also in the medieval disputes between monastic theology and the emerging Scholastic “masters.”

Monastic theology insisted that reflection upon the *sacra pagina* was the legitimate form of theological reflection. In contrast, the Scholastic masters emphasized the use of the “pagan” works of Aristotle in their theological reflection. They were attempting to integrate Aristotelian insights into their theological enterprise in order to resolve disputed questions that were

³¹ Some may have viewed the use of the term *homoousios* as a compromise. However, it represented a paradigm shift within the history of the Church. Since Nicea, the Church has not hesitated to make similar moves to resolve such disputes. See T. E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1970) appendix, 320–22; Lonergan apparently took note of Pollard’s work as there is a photocopy of this appendix in his personal files (Archives of the Lonergan Research Institute, Regis College, Toronto, A2101).

³² Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church* 322.

arising from the seemingly “contradictory” scriptural passages. Often their adherence to Aristotle was suspect.

On this ground the claustrales (cloistered monks) asserted in many ways and with vehemence the radical originality of the revealed truth, irreducible to the laws of the human mind, just as any Christian event could not be placed on equal footing with the data that written history provides. . . . The masters risked treating scripture simply as another problem, a major one of course but, like all the rest, subject to their abstract categories: the category of “nature” includes the human nature of Christ; that of “virtue” embraces the spiritual *habitus*; “matter and form” comprehend the sacramental symbol: “essence” subsumes that of God.³³

The crux of the issue from the standpoint of the dialectic of religious identity is that Christian self-understanding must be rethought in light of the philosophical insights of the era. Much of monastic theology desired to maintain the boundaries as to what constituted “Christian theology.” Meanwhile, the Scholastic masters were seeking a deeper understanding of their faith in light of new insights arising within the cultural matrix of their time, especially because of the influence of Aristotle. However, the monastic warning was not to be taken lightly since in their minds these works had come from their chief religious rivals, the Muslims. Moreover, Chenu pointed out that the questioning of the Scholastics was getting out of hand at times and turning people away from the sacred texts.³⁴ A resolution of these disputes was not reached until the next century when Aquinas offered his theological synthesis of Aristotle. However, to what extent he in fact provided an adequate synthesis is another question.

Diverse Religious Orders

The dialectic of religious identity can be illustrated throughout the birth and renewal of diverse religious orders within church history. Specifically, this pertains to the relationship to the world, and the dynamic tension between the contemplative and apostolic charisms. The religious orders with a specific-identity focus maintain a cautious eye to the world and tend to equate their conception of the world with that of culture. For them, one must flee the world and seek God in the wilderness through ascetic practices. However, according to the general-identity focused adherents, it is not some reified conception of the world about which one should be cautious, but rather the human sin and inauthentic values which often permeate it. Hence, goodness and authenticity can exist in culture. This group,

³³ M.-D. Chenu, O.P., *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, trans. J. Taylor and L. K. Little (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968) 306–7.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 294.

does not feel called to flee the world, but rather to embrace it as Christ did and attempt to transform it.

Monastic reform movements of various kinds have appeared in the history of the Church. For example, the Trappists (the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance) are essentially a reform movement twice removed within Benedictine monasticism. Reform movements become necessary as monastic communities sometimes lose sight of their original identity. Indeed, in their desire to renounce the world these communities at times become expressions of it, though this need not be a sign of hypocrisy. For example, during its heyday the famous abbey of Cluny was not only a spiritual center of the medieval world but in many ways a hub of culture as well. Indeed, the "black monks" had come a long way from the Egyptian desert.

Perhaps the issue as far as the dialectic of religious identity is concerned hinges on the meanings attached to "separation from the world." David Knowles, an authority on Western Christian monasticism has stated that "[s]eparation from the world and from the spirit of material gain and self-indulgence are of the essence of monasticism."³⁵ Two examples may illustrate how two distinct communities can interpret the notion of the relationship to the world differently. On the one hand, the Trappist identity is firmly established by their ascetic, remote, and vowed lifestyle in the cloister. In contrast, the Jesuit charism, as Karl Rahner once noted, lies in the "concrete desert," i.e., in the heart of the world. With regard to the dialectic of religious identity, Jesuits view the world from more of a general-identity focus ("finding God in all things"), embracing what is authentic and renouncing the inauthentic values through their apostolic witness. The issue is one of expression of identity through charism. The differences reflect how each group interprets and values both contemplation and apostolic work regarding their relationship to the world. Trappists, with their specific-identity focus, erect physical walls and maintain staunch boundaries against the world but for the sake of the world. Jesuits put up invisible walls in the heart of the "world" and seek an apostolic connection with the larger human community. One charism is not better than the other, but complementary; both have their place in the larger Church. In their authentic forms, they are powerful witnesses to the revelation of Christ. The difference lies rather in the interpretation of identity as Christians related to the world.

The renunciation of the world is a complex theological notion. It is useful to recall Lonergan's distinction between natural and supernatural solu-

³⁵ David Knowles, *Christian Monasticism* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1977) 69; many of my examples have come from reflecting upon this work, an excellent brief survey of the history of contemplative religious orders.

tions. Lonergan posits that the solution to the problem of evil (while always a supernatural solution) can conceptually be construed as natural (via human nature), relatively supernatural (beyond the proportion of human nature), and absolutely supernatural (beyond the proportion of any created nature).³⁶ While the existence of a supernatural solution emerges as a higher integration of the natural order, de facto it transcends natural human limitations. Likewise, a "heightening of tension" occurs within the subject between the lower levels and the transcendence of those levels that the supernatural solution demands.³⁷ The imperfect realization of the supernatural solution is prone to "oscillate between an emphasis on the transcendent and an emphasis on the solution."³⁸ Hence, inauthentic expressions of monasticism can emphasize the transcendent to such an extent that "nature" is denigrated. Manicheism, Waldensianism, and fideism have become historic expressions of this tendency. On the other hand, Christian monastic communities can so emphasize the solution that the transcendent is neglected. Intellectualism, Humanism, and Marxism can result. Again, the operative question in both cases surrounds the meaning of "the world." Likewise, Lonergan cautions that imperfect charity "if it is in the world, it ever risks being of the world; and if it withdraws from the world, the human basis of its ascent to God risks a contraction and an atrophy."³⁹

Finally, the specific-identity and general-identity focuses are not clear-cut distinctions. The relationship of a religion to the cultural matrix is one of mutual self-mediation. In the concrete, the relationship is often more complicated, and at times even paradoxical. In many respects, the differences have their basis in what Lonergan called the polymorphic nature of human consciousness.⁴⁰ Trappists and Jesuits provide two definitive examples. Certainly within these respective orders, the dialectic of religious identity can be operative in the intersubjectivity of individual communities as well. This occurs every time a community assesses and interprets its own identity within its respective context. In fact, this dialectic is probably present at least in part wherever Christians are gathered and interacting.

Authenticity

Additionally, there is the factor of human authenticity and inauthenticity that can affect the dialectic of religious identity. In its authentic forms, the two poles of the dialectic of religious identity are mutually complementary

³⁶ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Collected Works 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992) 746.

³⁷ Ibid. 747.

³⁸ Ibid. 748.

³⁹ Ibid. 749.

⁴⁰ See *Insight* 410–12.

and corrective of each other. The two poles promote painstaking and careful genetic development. However, the infiltration of bias and sin can effect profound irreducible and irreconcilable differences. In the extremes, general-identity focused adherents collapse truth into relativism, which in turn threatens a loss of identity. On the other hand, specific-identity focused adherents run the danger of elevating truth to triumphalistic claims producing a "select" elitist identity.

Especially relevant in this respect are issues concerning Christology. General-identity focused adherents neglect the teachings of their own tradition, and emphasize the insights of the cultural matrix to such an extent that the divinity of Christ is compromised.⁴¹ On the other hand, specific-identity focused adherents, in their attempt to maintain the boundaries of christological doctrines, run the risk of making the boundaries into walls. Likewise, their theology becomes excessively christocentric, Christ's humanity is compromised, and evangelical fervor becomes a membership drive.⁴² However, these are the extremes.

In a similar vein, Doran mentions the dangers of correlationism and revelational positivism in connection with the misappropriation of general and special categories respectively.⁴³ Similarly, the terms "accommodationism" and "fideism" have been applied by others. Indeed, Lonergan anticipated such extremes when he called for "a not numerous center."

There is bound to be formed a solid right that is determined to live in a world that no longer exists. There is bound to be formed a scattered left, captivated by now this, now that new development, exploring now this and now that new possibility. But what will count is a perhaps not numerous center, big enough to be at home in both the old and the new, painstaking enough to work out one by one the transitions to be made, strong enough to refuse half measures and insist on complete solutions even though it has to wait.⁴⁴

The role of this dialectic is not to reveal a preference for either the specific- or the general-identity focus, but rather to sort out what differences are complementary, genetic, and irreducible (resulting from bias). Differences that are constituted by the latter reflect the extremes—the "solid right"⁴⁵ and the "scattered left." Likewise, bias can be fourfold in that dramatic, egoistic, group, and general bias can exist in varying degrees

⁴¹ This overlaps with type 3 of Ormerod's antitypes ("Anti-types" 339).

⁴² This overlaps with type 1 of Ormerod's antitypes (ibid. 337).

⁴³ "Lonergan and Balthasar" 66–67.

⁴⁴ Bernard Lonergan, "Dimensions of Meaning," in *Collection, Collected Works* 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1993) 245.

⁴⁵ This concurs with Schreier's reflections as well: "The speed and pressure of globalization are such that it will likely continue to provoke new fundamentalisms. The destabilizing of identities will be met with resistance and hoped-for reversion to more stable times" (*New Catholicity* 87).

within various subjects.⁴⁶ Human subjects can possess any of these biases to greater or lesser degrees. As stated before, there is the hope of the fourfold conversion: psychic, intellectual, moral, and religious. Perhaps those seeking an authentic painstaking integration of the specific- and general-identity focuses constitute the “not numerous center.”

Theology

It is helpful to clarify two ways in which the dialectic of religious identity manifests itself in theology. First, recall Lonergan’s definition that a “theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of religion in that matrix.” It has been stated that this mediation constitutes a “mutual self mediation,” “a two-way mediation.”⁴⁷ Therefore we can postulate that specific-identity focused adherents gravitate toward establishing the “significance and role of religion” within the cultural matrix, mediating *to* the cultural matrix. In contrast, general-identity focused adherents gravitate toward the mediation between the religion and the cultural matrix but specifically *from* the cultural matrix *to* the religion. That is, they are interested in understanding their identity in relation to the cultural matrix by integrating the insights deemed useful from the culture into their own self-understanding. Likewise, specific-identity focused adherents emphasize the values that the religion has to bring *to* the cultural matrix while general-identity focused adherents emphasize the authentic values already present within the culture and seek an integrative mutual self-understanding. Hence, the specific-identity and general-identity focuses reflect two fundamental strands in theology.

I suggest that Balthasar illustrates the specific-identity focus, insofar as he gravitates toward establishing “the significance and role” of Christianity within the cultural matrix. This does not mean that he does not make use of categories from the cultural matrix; Doran has argued that he does.⁴⁸ Indeed, the primary purpose of Balthasar’s work *Seeing the Form* is to begin an integration using general categories from esthetics (i.e. *form*) into the Christian special category he calls the “Christ Form.” Likewise, he is mediating within the cultural matrix in such a way as to establish the boundary that sets the Christ Form apart from all other forms because it is the measure of all other forms. Hence, he is distinguishing Christian identity because it is inextricably linked to his understanding of Christ. In this sense, he has a specific-identity focus. I attempt to make this argument in greater detail in what follows.

⁴⁶ On bias, see Lonergan, *Insight* 214–15; 244–51; on conversion, see *Method in Theology* 237–47.

⁴⁷ “Lonergan and Balthasar” 65.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 74.

A second point concerns the unique function of the dialectic of religious identity with respect to method in theology. I have already proposed the use of the dialectic of religious identity as a heuristic device in the functional specialty dialectic. The purpose is to bring about deeper understanding of a recurrent source of conflict throughout church history, i.e. Christian identity. Concerning method in theology, the dialectic of religious identity is reflected in the distinct roles of the functional specialties "doctrines" and "systematics." First of all, I assume here, as I believe Robert Doran does, that what Balthasar refers to as fundamental theology and dogmatic theology is, for the most part, what Lonergan in *Method in Theology* calls the functional specialties "foundations" and "doctrines" respectively.⁴⁹ For Lonergan, systematics has the additional task of "promoting an understanding of the realities affirmed in the previous specialty doctrines."⁵⁰ While the understanding of dogmas may increase over time, the essence or truth of the doctrines as affirmed by the Church remains permanent. Theological development occurs as cultural and historical contexts change and bring about new questions for a renewed understanding.⁵¹

One way in which the dialectic of religious identity functions is through the dynamic tension between affirming doctrines, which is essentially the task of dogmatic theology (i.e. functional specialty doctrines), and a communication of the understanding of those doctrines, which is the task of systematic theology. This is not to say that dogmatic theology is not concerned with understanding the doctrines. It accepts the possibility of a limited understanding of the affirmed doctrines through concepts mediated from the cultural matrix as well as from the tradition. An analogous example has already been given, namely, the adoption of the general category *homoousios* into church doctrine. However, the concepts that dogmatic theology takes from the cultural matrix in order to communicate the teaching (e.g. Balthasar's form) are generally used in order to establish the boundaries of the doctrine (e.g. Christ Form as measure) in light of the cultural matrix. In other words, dogmatic theology is concerned with establishing the "significance and role of religion" within that matrix. Systematic theology, on the other hand, makes greater use of mediation from the cultural matrix, as when it often draws on general categories and attempts to integrate them into theology. The goal for systematics is to communicate a deeper understanding of the truths affirmed in doctrines. In sum, one can say that the dialectic of religious identity is manifested in theology through a dynamic tension between the role of the specific-identity focus of doctrines (dogmatic theology) on the one hand, and the role of the general-identity focus of systematic theology on the other. The

⁴⁹ Ibid. 70-71.

⁵¹ Ibid. 352-53.

⁵⁰ *Method in Theology* 335.

source of theological controversy may often stem from the confusion of each one's distinctive function. Likewise, the problem occurs when the respective functional specialties are either devalued or neglected.

Balthasar's program in *Seeing the Form* constitutes a dogmatics that takes its locus of teaching as "God's self-revelation and self-surrender to man in Jesus Christ."⁵² This Balthasar refers to as the "fundamental form of Christian faith." He views theology as reflection on dogma out of which a dogmatic theology develops. The need for it arises

as it is prompted by erroneous historical interpretations and attacks: this buttressing and development must be carried out in the interests of the dogma itself (christologically), of its presuppositions in the image of God (doctrine of the Trinity), and of its consequences (ecclesiologically). Around the dogma there develops "dogmatics," which is to say the numerous affirmations that explain, defend, and illustrate the dogmatic centre always more adequately. All these assertions, however, must at any moment be able to be traced back to *the* dogma—the fundamental form that appears in the Gospel.⁵³

Balthasar's view of the role of dogmatics has a specific-identity focus in that it establishes the boundaries of the dogma in the midst of misinterpretations and "attacks." The need to "defend" dogma falls under the rubrics of a specific-identity focus, especially when the identity or "fundamental form of the Christian faith" is called into question.

Contemporary Cultures

Our modern era is inundated by diverse positions, religions, philosophies, theologies, and cultures. This has given rise to what Robert Schreiter has called "a crucial problem: Christian identity in the manifold cultures of today."⁵⁴ On the one hand, a specific-identity focus is needed more than ever to establish the bounds of Christian identity that threatens to succumb to radical pluralism. On the other hand, a general-identity focus is needed in order to help Christians integrate the plethora of data and insights that arise from such complex cultural matrices.

Historically, the Church was less tolerant of diverse positions. Often one either simply conformed or was cast out, complied or was put to death. Karl Rahner claims that Vatican II inaugurated the formal declaration of the Church as a world Church: the Church that had always been a world Church in potency was freed from being primarily a European export.⁵⁵ The major operative question for Vatican II, from the viewpoint of the

⁵² *Seeing the Form* 591.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Schreiter, *New Catholicity* 63; also pertinent to this discussion is his chap. 4, "Religious Identity: Synthesis and Syncretism."

⁵⁵ Karl Rahner, S.J., "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *TS* 40 (1979) 716–27, at 717.

dialectic of religious identity, addressed the Church's self-understanding within the context of the larger global community. In a sense Vatican II gave formal recognition, unique to our era, of the need to move toward a general-identity focus. But such a dramatic paradigm shift has not occurred without leaving a legacy of doubt, ambiguity, and uncertainty in Catholic identity. Indeed, Lonergan often reminded his pupils that these problems would take years to work themselves out.

One of the strengths of Balthasar's theological program (although he was not present at the Council) is that he brings a specific-identity focus to his christological reflection by emphasizing the uniqueness of the Christ Form. Indeed, he emphasizes the nonambiguity between Christ's identity and the identity of other "savior" figures. In the next section I will illustrate how Balthasar's theological esthetics, specifically with regard to his Christology, represents a concrete example of a specific-identity focus.

BALTHASAR, THE CHRIST FORM, AND SPECIFIC-IDENTITY FOCUS

Balthasar's *Seeing the Form* is the first of a multi-volume work based on an analogy of art. It constitutes part of a larger trilogy incorporating a theodramatics and a theologic. One of the strengths of Balthasar's work is that he acknowledges the need for a theological esthetics and attempts to establish one. Theology has often neglected the transcendental beauty while emphasizing the other transcendentals—the one, the true, and the good. The results have been devastating, compromising the other transcendentals.

In a world without beauty . . . which is perhaps not wholly without beauty, but which can no longer see it or reckon with it: in such a world the *good* also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out. . . . In a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of the *truth* have lost their cogency. . . . And if this is how the transcendentals fare because one of them has been banished, what will happen with Being itself?⁵⁶

A theological esthetics promises to restore the transcendental *beauty* to its proper place as one of the divine attributes. Similarly, Doran has stated the need for an "esthetic-dramatic" complement to Lonergan's work (via Balthasar) that offers the potential for a "renewed theology."⁵⁷ Indeed, Balthasar's theological esthetics and his call for the restoration of the transcendental beauty constitute a major contribution to contemporary theology. My purpose here is not to comment on the esthetic dimensions of Balthasar's thought or to judge whether or not he has succeeded in his project, but to show how *Seeing the Form* illustrates Balthasar's specific-

⁵⁶ *Seeing the Form* 19; emphasis added.

⁵⁷ "Lonergan and Balthasar" 69.

identity focus. This may help to clarify how Balthasar differs from other thinkers.

Seeing the Form is divided into two sections, the first dealing with “subjective evidence” and the second with “objective evidence.” The former outlines Balthasar’s theory of vision that constitutes a fundamental theology (i.e. “foundations” in Lonergan’s terminology). The latter part outlines his theory of rapture and constitutes a dogmatic theology (i.e. “doctrines” for Lonergan). Moreover, these two “phases” are notionally rather than really distinct.⁵⁸ Balthasar takes the general category *formosus* or *Gestalt* as foundational to his theological esthetics. It is the combination of form and splendor (*species* and *lumen* in Aquinas) that constitute the simultaneous event of “beholding” and being “enraptured.” Hence, the beautiful is perceived in “form and splendor.”⁵⁹ The apex of all that is beautiful is found in God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ in history. Balthasar delineates the distinctness of the Christ Form. “These preliminary conclusions bring us straight to the very centre of Christian revelation—the Word of God become flesh, Jesus Christ, God and man—and so we are led unreservedly to affirm that here we have a true form placed before the sight of man.”⁶⁰ Moreover, the Christ Form stands as the measure of all other religious and worldly forms:

By being that historical existent who, in his (human) positivity, makes present the Being of God for the world in an unsurpassable manner, Christ becomes the measure, both in judgment and in redemption, of all other religious forms in mankind. This judgment and this redemption are internal to him, and secured by virtue of his very existence. He himself does not judge, he redeems; but the very fact that he is there means judgment for all worldly forms.⁶¹

These passages reflect Balthasar’s specific-identity focus. First, he invokes the general category of form (mediated from the cultural matrix) and thus begins to establish the significance and role of the Christ Form in relation to all other forms. There is no ambiguity, since the identity and primacy of the Christian revelation is clear for Balthasar. It stands as the measure of all other forms. Second, although he borrows a general category (i.e. form) from the cultural matrix, his focus is not on how “worldly esthetics” can enhance Christian self-understanding. On the contrary, his focus is on how the Christ Form is distinct from all other forms and can lead those forms to the true understanding in light of its measure. Such an assumption bespeaks a specific-identity focus, because it relates to the world in terms of what Christianity has to offer and not what the world has to offer Christianity. The latter would be more the tendency of the general-

⁵⁸ *Seeing the Form* 125–26.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 153.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 171.

identity focus adherents, who often emphasize the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world prior to the explicit presence of Christianity.⁶² Again, the divergent approaches need not be contradictory; they can be complementary.

Balthasar's specific-identity focus becomes very clear in the dogmatic section dealing with the "objective evidence." Specifically in the subsection entitled "Christ the Centre," he emphasizes the qualitative difference of the Christ Form in relation to "all other-worldly religious forms." "The measure which Christ represents and embodies is qualitatively different from every other measure."⁶³ Balthasar concedes that God is free to use any religious forms in order to attract those people who are searching for him. However, one cannot simply classify Jesus in typological categories such as the prophetic and/or mystical traditions. Jesus' identity makes him immune to such categorization, because he fulfills the promise of the Old Testament (i.e., he is anticipated in its prophecies), encapsulates within himself everything in heaven and on earth, and, as the image of all images in creation history, "fulfills the partial truths contained in the religious myths of all peoples."⁶⁴ With these statements, Balthasar is delineating doctrine. In other words, he does not want data from the history of religions to dictate christological doctrines.

Since Jesus lived within an historical epoch, Balthasar admits that to some extent it is possible to view Jesus in light of these "historical systems of categories."⁶⁵ He refers to similar commonalities that the history of Israel shares with other "mythologies." He also concedes that the historical-biblical methods of research are "acceptable" and "necessary" *prima facie*, in that they can enlighten us. However, without the "believing eye," the Christ Form succumbs to reductionism. He cautions that "the uniqueness of the form cannot be ascertained 'scientifically.'"⁶⁶ It is the task of dogmatics to articulate this uniqueness. He summarizes the relationship of the Christ Form to all other religious forms as such:

If Christ is to be *the* Unique One, then, when we look at his form, what must happen is that all other forms, in spite of their qualitative difference and even opposition, come more and more to exhibit related characteristics, while he, who had seemed to be related to them and capable of being classified under the same general

⁶² As regards Balthasar and Lonergan, Doran refers to grace as already present in other religious traditions ("Lonergan and Balthasar" 79); see also Frederick E. Crowe, "Son of God, Holy Spirit, and World Religions," in *Appropriating the Lonergan Idea*, ed. Michael Vertin (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1989) 324-43.

⁶³ *Seeing the Form* 481.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 497.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 496.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 498-99.

categories, now appears in ever greater isolation, incapable of being reduced to anything whatever.⁶⁷

In addition to the “ever greater isolation” that the Christ Form maintains in relation to all other “worldly” religious forms, Balthasar suggests several distinctions that point to the different directions in which this isolation is understood. I mention three of them here. First, he demarcates Jesus from “other founders” or teachers of religious ways of life, such as Lao Tzu. Various teachers may point to a way, whereas Jesus points to himself as the way.⁶⁸ Second, other religious figures often undergo an ordeal, initiation, or a culminating “moment” in which enlightenment or a “revelation” is attained. Indeed many religions even “proclaim life from death.”⁶⁹ The Christ Form may contain aspects of these themes, but Christianity by contrast teaches death as the way to salvation. It does not emphasize, as do many other religious forms, simply a rescuing from death.⁷⁰ While this is an interesting distinction, its validity remains to be tested in light of recent data from the history of religions. Third, he notes that “[t]he myths of bringers of salvation are primarily naturalistic, and are therefore, at best, protological and eschatological.”⁷¹ That is, the Christ Form is distinct from such forms because the Incarnation connotes a historical salvific event.

Once again, the decisive element here is the fact that God’s transforming deed of salvation is, at the same time, the deed of a man who has sacrificed himself out of love for us all, and that this deed makes itself present in the community not only as a sacramental event which hiddenly transforms the world but as an immediate and urgent moral demand. . . . Christ does not return out of compliance with a pre-established cosmological pattern (as is the case with the saviour in Mazdism); he comes, rather, ‘like a thief in the night,’ which means with all the freedom of a love that transcends cosmic laws.⁷²

In terms of the dialectic of religious identity, this passage not only reflects the significance and role of Christianity in the world but also emphasizes its gift to the world, salvation.

The end result of these three approaches illustrates how the Christ Form is qualitatively “set apart from them all,” that it is “absolutely unique,” and that it “relates to itself as the ultimate centre the relative uniqueness of all other forms and images of the world.”⁷³ In terms of the dialectic of religious identity, Balthasar places the theological accent on the uniqueness of Christianity within the cultural matrix. He is not focusing, as a general-

⁶⁷ Ibid. 502.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 502–3.

⁶⁹ Balthasar is quoting Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* 1.112.

⁷⁰ *Seeing the Form* 503–4.

⁷¹ Ibid. 504.

⁷² Ibid. 505.

⁷³ Ibid. 507.

identity adherent might, on integrating the insights from the other religions within Christianity's own self-understanding. General-identity focused adherents may be bothered by this language. They may ask whether the boundaries that he is delineating constitute barriers in dialogue with other religions. Indeed, they may have a valid point. For example, Balthasar contrasts Jesus' use of miracles (in order to illustrate the power of faith) to that of a "yogi who would have worked them without hesitation."⁷⁴ He is undoubtedly trying to make the point that Christ's miracles were not for the purposes of magic. However, his example sounds stereotypical and does not appear *prima facie* to reflect the authentic Hindu tradition. Such cursory references are not helpful when trying to establish complementary and genetic relations with other world religions. However, in terms of the dialectic of religious identity, Balthasar's strong dogmatic emphasis can be understood in light of his specific-identity focus. Indeed, the clear christological lines he draws in the theological sand may provide a needed corrective to the temptation of relativism that sometimes occurs in contemporary theological reflection. Likewise, he cites as an example how Christian art during the Baroque period incorporated non-Christian myths. While he acknowledges the validity of this interaction between Christian art and other mythological forms, he cautions that it is "the task of Christian theological taste to identify and maintain the appropriate measures and limits."⁷⁵ It is safe to conclude from such a statement that he sees the role of his theological esthetics to be primarily to identify and maintain "appropriate measures and limits." Such is a task for dogmatics (doctrines) and not so much for systematics.

These reflections, I would argue, clearly illustrate the specific-identity focus of Balthasar. While there is room for some comparison of the Christ Form with other religious forms, the gap is one of "ever greater isolation." In other words, according to the specific-identity focus, Christian identity in the face of pluralism must become more distinct and increasingly less ambiguous in relation to other religions. Such a position would seem to be at odds with adherents of a general-identity focus that might construe such claims as potentially triumphalistic or, at the very least, a hindrance to interreligious dialogue. Such objections may have some validity, since Balthasar may be excessively christocentric on this point. My intention is not to address that issue but rather to place his comments in the context of the dialectic of religious identity. Within his specific-identity focus, his primary tendency is to establish the distinctness and boundaries of the religious tradition. Balthasar is not pursuing systematics in the terms defined by Lonergan but dogmatic theology ("doctrines").

⁷⁴ Ibid. 668.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 509.

Again, he places the accent not on mediation from the cultural matrix but on the significance and role of religion in the cultural matrix, specifically in terms of what religion can mediate to the matrix. Indeed, Balthasar's warnings about the historical-critical/phenomenological methodologies are valid, given the reductionistic tendencies of some modern scholars. In the language of functional specialization, the results of research can influence a new understanding of doctrines, but it does not dictate the doctrines themselves. Problems arise when the results of research are used to reestablish the doctrines or to abolish them in part or in whole. Insofar as this is the case with modern scholarship, Balthasar provides a corrective to a superabundance of scientific and rationalistic assumptions in theology. The extent to which his thought contributes to a synthetic integrative Christian understanding of interreligious dialogue is a further question.

CONCLUSION

I have not raised the question of the resolution of the dialectic of religious identity. Several points can be suggested concerning a possible synthesis. I note again Lonergan's distinction regarding dialectical, complementary, and genetically related horizons. Insofar as differences are dialectical (irreducible), then the need for conversion is present. Insofar as the conflict reflects complementary and genetically related horizons, the potential for theological integration and development is present. Such is the oscillating movement of the dialectic of religious identity. It is not that one focus is better; they are both necessary. The image of the ebb and flow of the tide is helpful in trying to understand how this dialectic functions historically. Insofar as general-identity focused adherents seek to understand their identity in relation to the larger human community, they represent the flow of the tide, expanding Christian self-understanding upon the shoreline. In contrast, the specific-identity focused adherents function as the ebb of the tide, retracting into the sea and taking what is valuable from the shore into the folds of the sea.

Christian self-understanding develops through this dynamic recurrent dialectic of religious identity. From time to time in Christian history, moreover, "non-systematic divergences" occur; that is to say, a synthesis and/or higher integration emerges.⁷⁶ For example, an Aquinas appears who is able to synthesize Christian self-understanding masterfully through an integration of the general categories of Aristotle and Christian special categories. More recently, the enigmatic figure Thomas Merton embraced the specific-

⁷⁶ For a discussion of "non-systematic divergences," see Lonergan, *Insight* 72–80, 122–32, 463.

identity focused life of a Trappist monk, drank of it deeply, and paradoxically came out as a Zen master on the other side of the world without leaving his own tradition.

To what extent the dialectic of religious identity may be operative in other religious traditions is a question for further reflection. It is my hope that my proposal offers a heuristic for crystallizing an understanding of much religious conflict that arises out of the attempts of communities to come to grips with their own religious identity.

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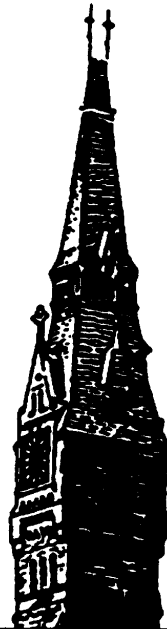
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