

# A Beginner's Guide to

**Title:**

*Is Bernard Lonergan's  
'Method in Theology'  
merely relevant within  
the halls of academia?*

Bernard J. F. Lonergan's

# Method in Theology

Who was Bernard Lonergan?

What is the Method?

What impedes the Method?

Why is the Method significant for a local Christian faith community?

How might the Method take shape in a local Christian faith community?

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## Preface

The question is posed: “Is Bernard Lonergan’s *Method in Theology* merely relevant for the halls of academia?” In other words, is the study and application of Lonergan’s method solely the prerogative of theologians? Theologians, who write and publish books which other theologians read, critique and then publish their own findings. Theologians, who lecture student theologians within theological institutions; students who one day hope to become theologians! If, as Lonergan asserts, the Method is actually a universal pattern of human consciousness, why is it imprisoned within the academic institution? Why not bring Lonergan’s Method to life in the local faith community? It is these questions which have prompted the writing of this book.

### Why write another book on Lonergan's Method in Theology?

Surely this simply buys into the premise within the preface? That premise being the incessant circular movement of theologians who publish their own research on the works of Lonergan. So, why write another book? The answer to this question lay in its focus and its expected readership. The focus of this book is predominantly Part One of Lonergan's *Method in Theology*. Part One centres on: *Method*. Whilst Part One of the book is a precursor to Part Two, it does stand alone in its own right. Part One of *Method in Theology* is entitled "Background." Far from being merely background, Part One outlines the dynamic operations of human consciousness (MiT pp4-6) within the light of the revelation of God's love (MiT Religion: pp 101-124).

On the other hand, Part Two of the book does not make sense without Part One. Hence, Part Two cannot stand alone. Why? Because it is a theologian and therefore a human being, who is doing the theology. As a result, a theologian needs to understand the operations of human consciousness before they undertake the practice of theology. Part two is entitled "Foreground." This section centres on: *Theology*. This section names and explores eight functional specialities within the academic field of theology. Logically, Part Two is the typical focus of academic writings. After all, his book is entitled *Method in Theology!* As a consequence, the expected readership of this focus is that of the academic theologian.

As stated earlier, the focus of this book is Part One: Method. The expected readership of this book is the minister of religion; the parish priest; the parish associate; the school chaplain. Why are these people the target audience of this book? Generally they no

longer undertake the formal study of theology. However, they are the 'keepers of the tradition' in the market place. At the same time they are charged with the responsibility of guiding the hearts and minds of the people within their faith community. And within a Western culture, what a challenge this is! We live in a time of unprecedented change. Modern scientific, medical and technological advances cause new ethical dilemmas. The cosmological **Story of Evolution** decentres the primacy of the human species. This can cause confusion with regard to human meaning-making. The internet based information explosion floods the market-place with competing points of view. The news-media is dominated by graphic images of death and destruction. These graphic images incite fear, despair and even compassion fatigue.

Also, our time and place in history is named as post-modern. This era is characterized as a time of transition.<sup>1</sup> Transitional stages in life are full of excitement, possibility, confusion, and fear. Another feature of post-modern culture is its denial of "totalising systems . . . [or] universal truth."<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the feelings associated with transition and this rejection of universal truth has left a restless undercurrent within many people, especially those of a faith community. Within this scenario, how does one decide what is good, true and of value? Furthermore, within these cultural conditions, how does a leader facilitate community which is "grounded in authenticity?"<sup>3</sup>

Many church leaders notice this sense of restlessness within their communities. Yet they are at a loss at what to do. As leaders they are experiencing first-hand the tension between their religious tradition and modern culture; personal authentication and group cohesion. Thus, it is the aim of this book to open up Lonergan's Method to the

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this topic see: Rosemary Haughton, *Transformation of Man: A Study of Conversion and Community*, (Illinois, Templegate Publishers, 1967, 1980) p 126

<sup>2</sup> Gary Ferngren (ed) *Science and Religion*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) p 383

<sup>3</sup> Vernon Gregson (e) *The Desires of the Human Heart: An Introduction to the Theology of Bernard Lonergan*, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988) p vii

leaders of local faith communities. Perhaps the clarity of his Method will offer a framework of understanding from which to re-build community.

*Note:* For those who may be interested, Appendix 1 tables Part Two of Lonergan's book. This table shows how the Method sits within a formal theological framework. There are also some brief explanatory notes attached.

There is one more qualification to make with regard to the expected readership. Whilst both the Method and God's love are universal, the way people experience that Love is named and lived-out through a particular religious/cultural context. Consequently, there are a number of major religions throughout the globe, one being Christianity. Lonergan's religious tradition was that of Christianity. For him, the core of Christian theological understanding is "a person's reflections on the revelation given in and by Christ Jesus" (MiT p 296). As Lonergan speaks specifically from and into the Christian religious tradition, so the expected readership is those people who live-out their faith through that same tradition.

Different types of people will read this book. Some will require the sheer basics; others a deeper understanding. With this in mind and to keep the flow of the text, significant terms be **bolded** in the text. These bolded words will then appear in the glossary. This glossary will assist those who choose to delve a little deeper. Also the predominant resource for this book is Lonergan's *Method in Theology*. When referencing this work in the text, it will be shown by the symbol (MiT). Other authors referenced will appear in the footnotes.

A special note for theologians who happen to pick up this book.

You may think it preposterous that I choose to write in this way. After all, Robert Doran asserts that one needs to “spend years reaching up to the mind of Bernard Lonergan before one sets out on one’s own.”<sup>4</sup> I have studied Lonergan’s *Method in Theology* for barely thirteen weeks! As such, I am a novice. I own this. I also own that for many years I have been engaged in my own conscious interior journey. Lonergan’s Method has now given both name and shape to that which I had already begun.

Furthermore, you may be concerned that this book is a dumbing-down of Lonergan’s work. I hear you cry, “His writing is complex. It cannot be explained in a undersized book!” It is not the intention of this book to dumb-down Lonergan’s insights. It is the intention to help people “understand”<sup>5</sup> the simple profundity of the Method. This simple profundity being the dynamic operations of human consciousness in the light of the revelation of God’s love.

One other concern that a Lonergan theologian might raise is that of ‘a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing?’ If untrained people receive a little knowledge of Lonergan, where will that take them? My response to this concern is that many people in the local faith community have already begun to engage in their interior journey. How often does one hear it said, “I am spiritual, but not religious!” The tide has already turned. As history shows, spiritual awakenings take place regularly. One is taking place right now in our Western culture! William Johnston writes of this in his book *Arise, My love: Mysticism For A New Era*.<sup>6</sup> Who is guiding these people who are experiencing this gift

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<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Doran, ‘Lonergan: An Appreciation’ in *The Desires of the Human Heart: An Introduction to the Theology of Bernard Lonergan* (e) Vernon Gregson (Mahwah, Paulist Press) p 13

<sup>5</sup> Frederick E Crowe SJ, *The Lonergan Enterprise* (USA: Cowley Publications, 1980) p 2

<sup>6</sup> William Johnston, *Arise My love: Mysticism for a New Era* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000) Johnston speaks of the new era of the third millennium as one where “mystical prayer or mysticism assumes an importance it has never had before.” p xvi

which, as Johnston states, “may come suddenly and unpredictably?”<sup>7</sup> Hence, a clear Method with which to guide these people is imperative.

Moreover, the multi-faith nature of the Australian **culture** is raising questions within many people with regard to their own faith tradition. In a mono-faith culture, one either believes in the God of the culture, or not. It can be a decisive choice. In a multi-faith culture, people come face to face with *otherness*: the otherness of people who live-out their faith beliefs in what seems to be a different God. This raises questions of God for all concerned. What do people do if their Christian faith community no longer offers a response to their questions? Where do people go when their Christian faith tradition no longer offers authentic meaning to their religious experience and cultural norms? Likewise, where do religious leaders go when they are experiencing the same dilemma? Again, a clear Method is imperative to discovering a way forward. Therefore, it is my contention that Lonergan’s Method needs to come to life in the local faith community.

## Part One

### Who was Bernard Lonergan SJ?



Lonergan lectures at Boston College in the 1970s.

Picture:  
Seton Hall University website

Bernard Lonergan was born in Canada in 1904. He became a Jesuit in 1922 and was ordained as priest in 1936. Although he had a love for mathematics and the sciences, he was a Professor of Theology at various theological institutions. In 1965 he had a cancerous lung removed. He retired in 1983-84 and died soon after. His life’s work became the exploration and articulation of both the method of human consciousness in the light of God’s love and how this method applies to the practice of theology.

<sup>7</sup> Johnston, *Arise My Love* p xvi

<sup>8</sup> Vernon Gregson, *The Desires of the Human Heart*, (e) by Vernon Gregson, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988) p xiii



Why is it relevant for the reader to know something of the person Bernard Lonergan? Firstly, to demonstrate that this Method did not drop out of the sky, so as to speak. There is a person behind this Method. A person who engaged with his own questions; his own concerns with regard to his time and place in history. It is written that when Lonergan was “faced with cultural upheavals that have shaken the very foundations of philosophy, the church, and economics, he recognized that the cries of modernity call for a thorough and profound recasting of ‘method’.”<sup>9</sup> Lonergan’s major concerns were around the **dialectical** dilemma of relativism/fundamentalism; **empirical/classical** culture; societal progress/decline; history/modern culture; and pluralism. As a response to these issues, he was committed to establishing “how our authenticity is involved in our decisions . . . [and] how one discovers tradition, evaluates it and brings it to meet the circumstances of the present”<sup>10</sup> These topics were so dear to his heart and mind, that they became his life’s work.

The second reason one needs to know something of Bernard Lonergan has to do with how we come to know what we know. For him knowledge is predominantly an act of **belief** (MiT pp 41-47). Let me explain further. As people of a Western culture, we pride ourselves on our individualism and our aptitude for independent learning. Lonergan would dispute this. He writes that human knowledge is not an “individual possession but rather a common fund, from which each may draw by believing.” He continues, “[A person] does not learn without the use of [their] own senses, [their] own mind, [their] own heart, yet not exclusively by these. [They] learn from others . . . by taking their word for the results.” (MiT pp 43-44). If this were not the case, humanity would still be re-creating the wheel! Hence, belief originates predominantly from trust in prior results and the people who communicate those results.

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<sup>9</sup> The Lonergan Institute, Boston College website ‘Biography’

<sup>10</sup> Vernon Gregson, *The Desires of the Human Heart*, pvi

Therefore, it is fitting to write one more paragraph on the person of Bernard Lonergan; authenticating the man. Lonergan wrote the book entitled *Insight* as a precursor to *Method in Theology*. He was a man of eminent standing within the Christian tradition and the halls of academia. He sought to live authentically within his religious tradition and his culture. At the same time he was able to critique both.<sup>11</sup> It is said of him that he was a humble man.<sup>12</sup> It is also emphasized that at “the heart of the matter . . . Lonergan’s work is an invitation to a . . . personal, decisive act.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Lonergan does not ask the reader to accept his Method on blind belief. He does invite them to engage in it by way of understanding and practice. He offers to those who engage an “**existential** invitation”<sup>14</sup> to personal and communal transformation.

### What is the Method?

Written below is an introduction to Lonergan’s Method. As such, it is not a comprehensive review of his work. What has been chosen for outline is, I believe, the heart of the Method. It is hoped that this is enough to facilitate a person’s understanding and an enticement to begin their own intentionally conscious engagement.

Firstly, what is *a* method? Lonergan asserts that a method is “not a set of rules to be followed meticulously by a dolt. It is a framework of collaborative creativity” (MiT p xi). Therefore a method does not specify the exact details of how to achieve a certain goal. A method is a foundation for exploration. Lonergan also writes that a “method is a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results” (MiT p 4). Therefore a method should be able to be repeatable and

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<sup>11</sup> Vernon Gregson, *The Desires of the Human Heart*, p xiii

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen Williams, Lecturer in Method in Theology, Yarra Theological Union, 2007

<sup>13</sup> Frederick E Crowe SJ, *The Lonergan Enterprise* (USA: Cowley Publications, 1980) p 68

<sup>14</sup> Robert M Doran, ‘Lonergan: An Appreciation’ in *The Desires of the Human Heart*, p 2

either replicate or show the error of previous results. Additionally, a method needs to afford space for new insights to arise.

Secondly, how does one begin to establish a method? Here Lonergan suggests that there have been two ways. The first: “more as an art than a science” (MiT p 3). In this way, method was derived by imitating a master in a particular discipline. The second: “a person chooses a scientific field and studies “procedures of a particular science . . . formulate precepts . . . and proposes an analogy of science” (MiT p 3). This scientific model only deals with what can be known through observation. Therefore questions regarding such things as love; beauty; trust; truth; or God, are relegated to the realm of subjective relativism?<sup>15</sup> And yet, do we not know them to be true?

Lonergan was seeking a third way of establishing a method. Why? The first way is merely imitation; the second is limited to that which is observable. And yet, Lonergan proposes that human consciousness actually raises the question of God! (MiT pp101-103). Therefore, Lonergan contends that “the **question of God**, then, lies within [a person’s] **horizon**” (MiT p 103). For him, an authentic method would correlate with the natural scientific approach and leave room for the exploration of that which is not observable, that is, the qualities and relationships that make us fully human.

Thus, Lonergan’s Method revolves around the human as subject. The human as subject revolves around the notion that when one is experiencing an object, they are conscious of both *what* they are experiencing (the object) and *that* they are experiencing (as subject) (MiT p 8). A human subject then has the capacity for a conscious spirit of inquiry. A conscious spirit of inquiry allows one to ask questions and discover

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<sup>15</sup> Vernon Gregson, ‘The Desire to Know: Intellectual Conversion’ *The Desires of the Human Heart*, p 26

responses; ask more questions and again discover further responses. In this way they gain cumulative and progressive results. These cumulative and progressive results reveal that a human subject is capable of **self-transcendence**. It is at this place of self-transcendence where we seem to differ from other species who inhabit the planet earth. Lonergan explains it this way: As empirically conscious, we do not seem to differ from the higher animals (MiT pp 9-10). Where we do differ is that we are “created to wonder, to question, to self-transcend the limit of our horizon.”<sup>16</sup>

What drives a person to ask questions? Lonergan names this drive as transcendental notions (MiT p 36). He writes that “transcendental notions are not a matter of knowing but of intending” (MiT p 24). In this way, **transcendental notions** lie within a transcendental field [which] is not defined by what [a person] knows, not by what [a person] can know, but by what [a person] can ask about” (MiT pp23-24). Gregson writes of transcendental notions as “the internal compass within us which is targeted to the [intelligible], true and the good and we know when we have found it and when we haven’t.”<sup>17</sup> Consequently, it is this drive within the pattern of human consciousness which allows for the possibility of self-transcendence.

And so, with this framework on method in place, it is now time to announce the name of his method. Lonergan called it the **Transcendental Method**. This transcendental Method incorporates four profoundly simple precepts:

*Be Attentive; Be Intelligent; Be Reasonable; Be Responsible* (MiT p 53).

It is his claim that these precepts are the foundational pattern of human consciousness. These precepts are the distinct, though related operations which form a pattern which may be repeated indefinitely and where the results are cumulative and progressive.

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<sup>16</sup>Bernard J F Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, (ed) William Ryan SJ & Bernard Tyrrell SJ, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974) p 80

<sup>17</sup> Vernon Gregson, ‘The Desire to Know: Intellectual Conversion,’ *The Desires of the Human Heart*, p 19

Therefore, we do not have to impose them on our being. They are already taking place within us. What we do need to do, is become intentionally conscious of their activity within us.

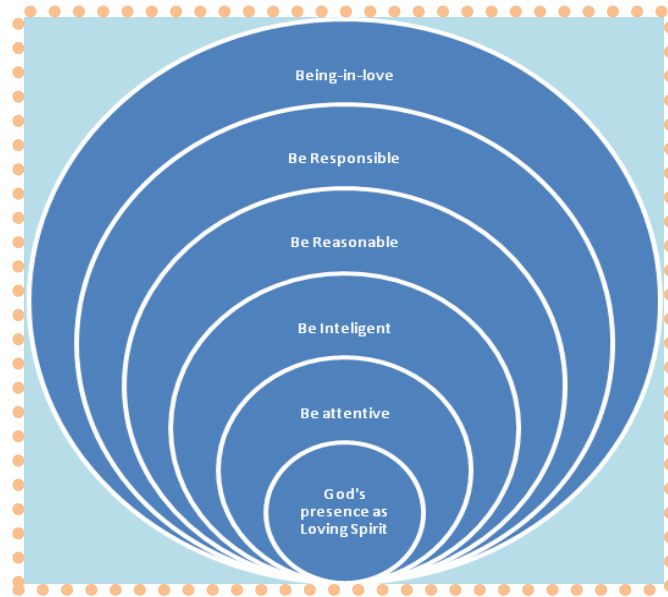
Each of the precepts incorporates a different level of conscious activity and participates with reality in their own unique way. Drawing from Gregson<sup>18</sup> the table below outlines how this works:

<b>Precept</b>	<b>Level of conscious activity</b>	<b>Level as it is open to reality as</b>
<b>Be Attentive</b>	Experience	It is experienced
<b>Be Intelligent</b>	Understanding	It is intelligible
<b>Be Reasonable</b>	Judging	It is True
<b>Be Responsible</b>	Deciding	It is Good

These four precepts of be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable and be responsible do not unfold in a linear fashion; although they are often written in such an ascending order. Lonergan does not presume that one level improves on the other. They all make up part of the human consciousness. Consequently, he states that “On all four levels, we are aware of ourselves, but, as we mount from level to level, it is a fuller self of which we are aware and the awareness itself is different” (MiT p 9). Perhaps the diagram below shows the pattern in a truer light?

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<sup>18</sup> Vernon Gregson, ‘The Desire to Know: Intellectual conversion’ *The Desires of the Human Heart*, pp 17-25



*Diagram 1*

An explanation of diagram 1

### ***The Outer Square:*** Our Horizon

The outer square represents a person's horizon. All people live within a horizon. Simply stated, a horizon is the "sweep of [one's] interests and of [one's] knowledge" (MiT p237). In this way, a horizon both shapes and limits the way one receives knowledge about their world. This then shapes the way they make meaning of their own self within their world. Therefore, it could be said that a horizon is the world as one knows it "mediated through meaning" (MiT p 28). This meaning arises from a familial, societal, religious and cultural context. Also, one's horizon dictates what they choose to do; their actions (MiT p 106). Consequently, one's horizon not only shapes and limits the way one knows their world, it shapes and limits the way they act in that world.

The orange dots surrounding the square represent the nature of one's horizon. The spaces between the dots suggest one's horizon need not be static. A horizon can be expanded through **conversion**. This conversion may take form in the realm of **moral, intellectual and/or religious**. Whilst most people experience pivotal moments of conversion in their life, conversion is the ongoing dynamic within the human consciousness which allows us to be both transcended and self-transcending beings.

### ***The first circle: God's Presence as Loving Spirit***

Why is this here? What has this to do with the human subject? Remember that Lonergan's method is the pattern of human consciousness in the light of the revelation of God's love. Also remember that within that pattern is the drive to ask questions and our questions lead to the question of God. Therefore, God is intrinsic to the Method. This circle represents the "inner gift of God's love" (MiT p 361). This is an **immediate** experience of God's love as both transcendent Mystery and gift. It is this experience of God's love which shapes the orientation of human living towards what is true, good and of value (MiT p 303).

### ***The second circle: Be attentive***

To what are we being attentive? Lonergan states that we need to be attentive to "human affairs" (MiT p 53). Another way of stating this is to be attentive to our experience. That is, to begin to consciously notice what we "sense, perceive, imagine, feel, speak, move" (MiT p 9). Our **feelings** are particularly important in this level. Why? John Shea writes that "Feeling is the way we perceive the dimension of Mystery."<sup>19</sup> Therefore, we cannot think-out mystery; we can only perceive of Mystery through our felt-experience. Also, it is our felt-experience, which demonstrates to us the **authenticity** of our lived-values (MiT p 38). Furthermore, Walter Conn writes of Lonergan that "our feelings – joys and sorrows, fears and desires – give our intentional consciousness its mass and momentum, its drive and power."<sup>20</sup> Again, it is not our thinking that drives the Method, validates authentic living, or perceives mystery. It is our attentiveness to our felt-experience.

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<sup>19</sup> John Shea, *Stories of God* (Texas: Thomas More Publishing, 1978) p 17

<sup>20</sup> Walter E Conn 'The Desire for Authenticity: Conscience and Moral Conversion' *The Desires of the Human Heart*, p 40

### ***The third circle: Be Intelligent***

To what must we be intelligent? It is on this level we that engage in the conscious activity of “inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, formulating” (MiT p 6). We also “come to understand, express what we have understood, work out the presuppositions and implications of our expression”(MiT p 9). It is with a spirit of open, rational curiosity that we engage in this level. In this regard, this level incorporates the “hitherto unnoticed or unrealized possibilities” (MiT p 53).

### ***The fourth circle: Be Reasonable***

How does one be reasonable? Lonergan asserts that “being reasonable includes the rejection of what probably would not work, but also the acknowledgment of what probably would” (MiT p 53). This requires the faculty of rational judgment whereby one continues to “reflect, marshal, weigh the evidence and make a judgement”(MiT p 6).

### ***The fifth circle: Be Responsible***

How does one take responsible action? This includes “basing one’s decisions and choices on unbiased evaluation of short-term and long-term costs and benefits to oneself, to one’s group, to other groups” (MiT p 53). On this level one not only make decisions, they carry them out (MiT p 9). Thus, on this level a person “deliberates, evaluates, decides, speaks and writes (Mit p 6).

### ***The sixth circle: Being-in-love***

“A [person] achieves authenticity in self-transcendence” (MiT p 104). That capacity becomes an actuality when one falls in love. Then one’s being becomes being-in-love (MiT p 105). This is termed as “a dynamic state of being-in-love” (MiT p 106). When one experiences this state “to it one belongs, by it one is possessed (MiT p 106)”. Denise Carmody writes of it this way: “that the grace of God that communicates divine life



becomes the inmost definer of what the religious person is.”<sup>21</sup> Thomas Keating would perhaps name this dynamic state of being-in-love as **transforming union**.<sup>22</sup> It needs also to be recognized at this point, that as “the radical drive for self-transcendence is dynamic, our personal being is becoming . . . [therefore] our very existence is a fundamental process of development.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, although one experiences the dynamic state of being-in-love, self-transcendence is nonetheless an ongoing reality. Returning once again to Lonergan’s writings, he states that “As the question of God is implicit in all our questioning, so being in love with God is the basic fulfilment of our conscious intentionality (MiT p 105). It is for this reason that the Method needs to come to life in the local faith community.

To summarize the method: As one engages in the intentional conscious activity of experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding, they touch into their authentic “**objective truth**.”<sup>24</sup> This objective truth orientates their value system and resultant actions from a place of inner **freedom**. This also means that they experience being loved, for no other reason than God is love. As with individuals, the Method applies equally to communities.

What impedes the Method?

Simply put, a “violation of the transcendental precepts” (MiT p 53). There are many reasons for this. Lonergan lists some as “loyalty to one’s group;” “egoism;” and “concentration on short-term benefit and overlooking long-term costs” (MiT p 53). These

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<sup>21</sup> Denise Lardner Carmody, ‘The Desire for Transcendence: Religious conversion, *The Desires of the Human Heart*, p 63

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: A Way of Christian Contemplation*, (New York: Continuum, 1992) pp 91, 101

<sup>23</sup> Walter Conn, Desire for Authenticity: Conscience and Moral Conversion’ *The Desires of the Human Heart*, p 45

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid* p 70

are reason *for*, not an understanding of *why*, people make these choices? John J. Shea sheds some light on the *why* in his book *Finding God Again: Spirituality for Adults*:-

- “lack of love, nurture, respect and affirmation in the formative years of life.”  
Unlike most species, humans are “born as vulnerable infants.” We are totally dependent on others for our physical, emotional and spiritual needs. If these are not met, and it is highly likely that some are not, then our ability to consciously engage in the Method will be thwarted.
- “addictions” including religiosity
- “dependency on what others may think of us” which sets up a reliance on “someone else for our sense of identity.”
- an experience of “trauma” leaving a person either frozen in “disbelief” or unable to feel “safe enough to be with the pain” so as to be able to be attentive to their experience.<sup>25</sup>

Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun would add:

- The human desire for comfort, happiness and the avoidance of pain.<sup>26</sup>

One could also add to this list:

- an environment where questions are dissuaded.

With regard to the list above, one might well become discouraged. However, remember that God’s love meets us where we are at and continually draws us towards self-transcendence; towards moral, intellectual and religious conversion.

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<sup>25</sup> John J Shea *Finding God Again: Spirituality for Adults* (USA: Rowmann & Littlefield Publishers 2005) pp 132-135

<sup>26</sup> Pema Chodon, *The Wisdom of no Escape and the Path of Loving Kindness* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1991) p 3

## Why is the Method significant for the local faith community?

- This Method is at the heart of authentic living. This method leads individuals and groups towards integrated living rooted in inner freedom: faith with understanding; religious experience with responsible action.
- This Method consciously engages with reality. God's love is at the heart of reality. Therefore when individuals or communities engage with the Method, they become more open and receptive to Love.
- There are so many questions being asked within our post-modern society. This Method recognizes the dynamic value of questions. It does not dissuade them.
- The Method recognizes the pattern of human consciousness that is already in operation within us. Therefore, everyone can utilize it! One starts by being attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible with their own religious/cultural lived-experience, that is, *their* own horizon. Also, no-one can be robbed of their faith/beliefs, as their horizon only lets in what they are ready to receive. All else is discarded as irrelevant.
- It is well-recognized that the Western culture is one where people live for the now. As such, they are in danger of becoming "history-less" and "memory-less."<sup>27</sup> However, both history and memory sustain identity. Consequently the Christian religious tradition is in danger of losing its identity through the loss of its historical foundation. This Method though, promotes both the historicity of the Christian faith tradition, and the human subject of modern culture.
- This Method is a ready-made guide for those people who are amidst the current spiritual revolution.

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<sup>27</sup> For more on this issue read Philip Sheldrake's article 'Spirituality and History' in the *New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, (ed) Philip Sheldrake, (Louisville, KY, Westminster Johns Knox, 2005) p 38 (cf)

In summary, within this Method a person is both transcended and transcending. This means that they live life with a curious and passionate orientation – no matter what their age. In this way, life is experienced as a delightfully ever-new journey.

## Part Two

How might the Method take shape within a local Christian faith community?

This section will focus on a practical response to the dialectical dilemmas of religious tradition vs modern culture and personal authentication vs group cohesion. It will express how Lonergan’s transcendental Method might take shape within the local Christian faith community. There does need to be an entry point into that practical focus. Responsible action requires a meaning-ful base. Therefore, an entry point which lays a foundation for religious community meaning-making will proceed the practical response.

Religious community meaning-making.

What is a person’s natural response to God’s love? Lonergan writes that “[A person’s] response to transcendent mystery [God’s love] is adoration. But adoration does not exclude words” (MiT p 344). What happens when a group of people respond to God’s love together in adoration? They seek a common language and ritual through which they might express their adoration collectively. As the group develops over time, they decide on what doctrines they will hold as truth; what rules they will follow for group cohesion. Why is this necessary? Lonergan writes that “Common meaning calls for a common field of *experience* . . . for common or complementary ways of *understanding* . . . for common *judgements*. . . for common values, goals, policies . . .” (MiT pp356-357)

From this basis of shared common meaning, a group becomes a religion in and of itself. Therefore, a religious group becomes a community, not through individuals gathering together. Rather they become a community through shared common meaning. Let's recap this last paragraph. What is a religion again? A religion is "a people's relationship with the divine, outwardly expressed."<sup>28</sup> Consequently, a religion does not stand outside of society (MiT 344). The Christian church is one such religion. The authentic common ground of meaning within a Christian community is "the outer communication of Christ's message from the inner gift of God's love" (MiT p 361). This is the heart of the Christian faith community.

Lonergan also writes that "As common meaning constitutes community, so divergent meaning divides it" (MiTp 357). No wonder the Christian church is struggling in the post-modern West. We live in a time and place in history where divergent meanings flourish. Consequently, we live in a time of a divided faith community. What is to be done at the local level if the Christian church is no longer to lead people towards "authentically realiz[ing] unauthenticity?" (MiT p 80).

Proposed below are some suggestions for consideration:

- ✓ For the Christian message to be communicated to the people of a post-modern culture, "the preachers and teachers need to enlarge their horizons" (MiT p 362). How does one consciously expand their horizon? They begin by being attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible to their own lived experience. They remain open to their own and their community's possibility of moral, intellectual and religious conversion.

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<sup>28</sup> Kathleen Williams, August 29<sup>th</sup>, Class Lecture 5, Yarra Theological College, 2007.

- ✓ Create space for silence with the worship services; committees; bible studies; prayer meetings. Within silence, listening might be fostered. One can only be attentive if they listen.
- ✓ It is imperative that Christian leaders foster an atmosphere of curiosity and questioning-raising within their community. Of course these questions need some form of response. I hear you lament, "I know I should do more in this area, but I'm on overload now. I can't take on anything else!" Well, here is the good news!!! Get to know the Christian Spirituality Centres located in your area. These centres offer wonderfully diverse programs which respond to the precepts of the transcendental Method. Take for example the Kilbride Centre for Spirituality and Personal Development.<sup>29</sup> This centre offers spiritual direction for the individual person seeking to deepen their relationship with God; the Week of Guided Prayer which is an ecumenical program, which facilitates an experience of contemplative prayer in a local area; group retreat days; meditation using Christian themes; sessions on the Story of the Universe; promotes informed social justice issues; and many other aspects of contemporary spirituality. Church leaders, I implore you, make use of these wonderful resource centres!
- ✓ And now, for when the community comes together in worship. Since our time and place in history is one of transition and disruption, the worship service needs to be a place of sanctuary. What is meant by sanctuary? A place where each person might experience God's love and feel respected for who they are. A place where a person feels emotionally 'safe' in their beliefs. Ironically, when a person feels safe they may drop their defences and be open to transformation. Therefore, it is only in an atmosphere of love where this might happen.

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<sup>29</sup> Kilbride Centre for Spirituality and Personal Development, 52 Beaconsfield Parade, Albert Park, 3206 Tel: 9690 1203/96961076 Website: [www.kilbridecentre.com.au](http://www.kilbridecentre.com.au)

How might this take place practically? Firstly, the ritual needs to be shaped by language which is both open and invitational, promoting Paul Ricoeur's notion of the **rational symbol**.<sup>30</sup> In this way, all people will be able to engage from the place of their own horizon.

Secondly, the teaching needs to focus on a re-telling of the Story.. Which Story? **The Jesus Story**. Within the Gospels lay Jesus' own invitational question: "Who do you say that I am?"<sup>31</sup> This question is as relevant for today as it was two thousand years ago. A re-turn to the Story requires the preaching/teaching to shift from the level of concept or ideology. These both alienate people (MiT p 358). The Story re-engages people. A re-turn to the Story requires a change of tone from the preacher/teacher. The tone becomes one of conversation. The language becomes that of poetry and symbol, tapping into people's imagination.

This approach will also include the opening up of history, whilst remaining connected to modern culture. For example, the culture of the New Testament was one of **collectivism**<sup>32</sup> and ours is one of **individualism**. The teaching could explore how the Gospel Story shapes, and is shaped by, both cultures.

- ✓ Promote a range of social justice issues where the people might work together, as an outward expression of the inner presence of God's love.
- ✓ Lobby the Yarra Theological Union for a unit of study specifically on Bernard Lonergan's transcendental Method. This is one way that church leaders might expand their horizons. Furthermore, once leaders have studied the transcendental Method, they could continue a collaborative learning process by

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essay in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University, Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Northwestern University Press, 1974) p 281

<sup>31</sup> Laurence Freeman, *Jesus: the Teacher Within* (New York: Continuum, 2000) pp 39-54

<sup>32</sup> Bruce J Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) p 62 (cf)

holding forums. At these forums leaders would be able to share their ongoing learnings.

In summary, the way forward for a divided Christian church is complex. It is not impossible though. If you are feeling a little downhearted at this present moment take heart in these final words from Bernard Lonergan's *Method in Theology*:

*“. . . the Christian church is a process of self-constitution occurring within worldwide human society. The substance of that process is the Christian message conjoined with the inner gift of God's love and resulting in Christian witness, Christian fellowship and Christian service to mankind.” (MiT p 363)*

## Glossary

### **Authenticity:**

“The radical dynamism of our spirit which manifested itself cognitively as a search for meaning and a demand for evidence, now reveals itself on the level of moral consciousness as a quest for value and an insistence coming from within us on self-consistency in knowing and doing.” Walter E. Conn, ‘The Desire for Authenticity: Conscience and Moral Conversion’, *The Desires of the Human Heart: An Introduction to the Theology of Bernard Lonergan (e) Vernon Gregson, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988) p 36*

### **Belief:**

What we know by our own resources is a “small fraction of what any civilized [person] considers [themselves] to know” (MiT p 41). Therefore, what we know is what we believe to be true. This truth through belief comes via history and our current cultural context.

### **Classical Culture:**

The classical notion of culture is of culture as normative . . . there was but one culture that was both universal and permanent . . .” (MiT p xi)



## **Collectivist culture:**

Whereby “persons always consider themselves in terms of the group(s) in which they experienced themselves as inextricably embedded. . . . such a group-embedded, collectivistic personality is one who simply needs another continually in order to know who he or she really is.”

Bruce J Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) p 62

## **Conversion:**

- “The gift of God’s love flooding our hearts” to quote one of Lonergan’s favourite texts, is the gracious gift of a conversion.”

Frederick E. Crowe, SJ, *The Lonergan Enterprise* (USA: Cowley Publications, 1980) p xvi

- “. . . a transformation of the subject and [their] world . . . existential, intensely personal, utterly intimate . . . It directs [their] gaze, pervades [their] imagination, releases the symbols that penetrate to the depths of their psyche . . . conversion calls forth a reflection that makes the movement thematic, that explicitly explores its origins, developments, purposes, achievements and failures” (MiT pp 130-131).

- Conversion takes place in the realms of the intellectual, moral and religious.

Intellectual: “Is a radical clarification and, consequently, the elimination of an exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth concerning reality, objectivity and human knowledge. The myth is that knowing is like looking, that objectivity is seeing what is there to be seen and not seeing what is not there and that the real is what is out there now to be looked at.” (MiT p 238)

Moral: “changes the criterion of one’s decisions and choices from satisfactions to values.” (MiT p 240)

Religious: “is being grasped by ultimate concern. It is other-worldly falling in love. It is total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations. But it is such a surrender, not as an act, but as a dynamic state that is prior to and principle of subsequent acts. It is revealed in retrospect as an undertow of existential consciousness . . . ” (MiT p 240)

## **Culture:**

- “A culture is a set of meanings and values informing a common way of life and there are as many cultures as there are distinct sets of such meanings and values” (MiT p 301).

- “It is a function of culture to discover . . . meaning and value.”(MiT p 32)

- “. . . a system of meaning or a world view . . . [denoted by a] historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions . . . ”

Philip Sheldrake, ‘Spirituality and History’ *New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (ed) Philip Sheldrake, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

## **Dialectic:**

- “Dialectic has to do with the concrete, the dynamic, and the contradictory, and so it finds abundant materials in the history of Christian movements ” (MIT p 129).
- One of the eight functional specialities of theology (MIT p 235). In this regard the function of the dialectic is to bring conflicts to light, and “to provide a technique that objectifies subjective differences and promotes conversion. (MIT p 235).

### **Evolutionary Story:**

As theorists learn more about our planet earth, the Evolutionary Story also develops in complexity. At this time and place in history, Diamuid O’Murchu and other theorists have coined the term co-evolution. “In co-evolutionary terms, no one species or system evolves in isolation. Evolution, at every level, from the cosmic to the subatomic is a cooperative, interdependent, unceasing process. Evolution does not take place in the universe; all life co-evolves with the universe.” Diamuid O’Murchu, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004) Note 5, p 220.

### **Empirical Culture:**

An empirical view of culture acknowledges that whilst meanings and values may “remain unchanged for ages” they are actually in the “process of slow development or rapid dissolution” (MIT p xi).

**Existential:** A philosophical term which is involved in or vital to the shaping of a person’s self-chosen mode of existence and moral stance with respect to the rest of the world (Encarta Dictionary).

**Feelings:** Feelings here do not relate to when one feels such “states”as hot, cold, hungry and so forth. Feelings here are our “intentional responses” which “relate us to an object: such as our joys, sorrows, hopes, desires and fears (MIT pp 30-31).

**Freedom:** means not being dictated to by the meeting of our short-term needs, but responding from the place of our values. In this way, an action is only moral if it is made freely.

### **Horizon:**

Lonergan states that a horizon is the limit of our field of vision and our field of knowledge (MIT 236-237). Our horizon is conditioned by our family religious and cultural history. It is also conditioned by our life experiences. Lonergan also writes that “what does not fit, will not be noticed or, if forced on our attention, it will seem irrelevant or unimportant” (MIT p 237). It is conversion, either moral, intellectual or religious, which expands and breaks through our current horizon (MIT p 238).

**Immediate:** not as yet mediated by meaning. When we give expression to the experience, this expression is mediated by meaning.

### **Individualistic culture:**

Malina writes that in our Western culture “we tend to consider a person’s psychological makeup, his or her personality development from infancy on, as well as his or her individuality and uniqueness . . . as perhaps the most important elements in understanding and explaining human behaviour. . . *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) p 61.

### **Jesus Story:**

This term in no way demeans the central figure of the Christian Story, that is, Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew, Anointed of God. The title ‘Christ’ is not employed deliberately. This is to de-centre western-cultural assumptions of conquering, war-lord, triumphal connotations laid on the work and person of Jesus since the time of Emperor Constantine (Fourth century).

### **Objective Truth:**

Objective truth is not the same as belief. Objective truth is what one has found to be true through engaging in the transcendental method. One’s objective truth will orientate their value system from a place of inner freedom. Lonergan SJ, ‘The Subject’ in *A Second Collection* (eds) William Ryan SJ & Bernard Tyrrell SJ, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974) p 80.

### **Post-modernism:**

- As with individuals, cultures move through life passages. The post-modern era could be likened to a mid-life transition, in that it is a culturally tumultuous time. The similarity to a mid-life transition continues in that mid-life is a time of recognizing and reconciling our opposites. As we near the end of the time of post-modernism, one can observe the groups of people who choose to live with black and white opposites, and those who choose to recognize and reconcile societal opposites.
- Whilst post-modern philosophy has its own strengths and limitations, it has helped to decentre both the modern era’s claim to truth through objective rationalism and two thousand years of Western Christian dogma. For this reason, the implications of this philosophy have created fertile ground in which to engage theologically.

### **Rational Symbol:**

“The rational symbol has an excess of meaning . . . [in this way] engaging in doctrine through the lens of a rational symbol, rather than a concept, allows doctrines to regain life in a contemporary context.” Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essay in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University, Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Northwestern University Press, 1974) p 281.

**Self-transcendence:** “[A person] achieves authenticity in self-transcendence” (MIT p 104). Self-transcendence is the movement of expanding our horizons.

### **Story:**

- Story is the narrative around factual events. Therefore, Story is fact, subjectively interpreted through a particular cultural context and time in history. Where does revelation leave revelation? Revelation is mediated through human knowing and experience.
- Story is the “foundational reality” of systematic theology. (Kathleen Williams, Lecture 1 ‘Grace in our Times’, 2006).
- Story is “the critical key to our identity for we all need a story to live by in order to make sense of the otherwise unrelated events of life and to find a sense of dignity.” Philip Sheldrake, ‘Spirituality and history’, *New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, (ed) Philip Sheldrake, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).
- The word is capitalized to show that it is lived-narrative, not make-believe.

### **Transforming Union:**

Thomas Keating names transforming union as: “a way of being in the world that enables us to live daily with the invincible conviction of continuous union with God. It is a new way of being in the world . . . it is a restructuring of the consciousness.” Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: A Way of Christian Contemplation*, (New York: Continuum, 1992) pp 91, 101.

### **Transcendental Method:**

- “These levels then are so foundational to all that we are and all that we do . . . . Because they are so foundational, Lonergan refers to the levels as transcendental method. This transcends all other methods and are operative in all other methods.” Vernon Gregson, ‘Desire to Know: Intellectual conversion’. *The Desires of the Human Heart: An Introduction to the Theology of Bernard Lonergan* (ed) Vernon Gregson, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988) pp 24/25.

### **Transcendental Notions:**

- “The dynamic power of inquiry.” Vernon Gregson, ‘The Desire to Know: Intellectual Conversion’ *The Desires of the Human Heart*, p. 16.
- “They are also called the transcendentals because they transcend any specific content.” Vernon Gregson, ‘The Desire to Know: Intellectual Conversion’, p 25.
- “That is why it is called a transcendental orientation of our consciousness, or as Lonergan calls it, a transcendental notion. This transcendental openness of our consciousness is why we are ultimately open to the question of God. The transcendental notions are our capacity to search for any and everything that might be intelligible or true or good and our capacity to recognize when we have found it.” Vernon Gregson, ‘The Desire to Know: Intellectual Conversion’, p 25.
- “the dynamic questions which embody our drive for self-transcendence” Walter Conn, ‘Desire for Authenticity: Conscience and Moral Conversion’ *The Desires of the Human Heart*, p 37.

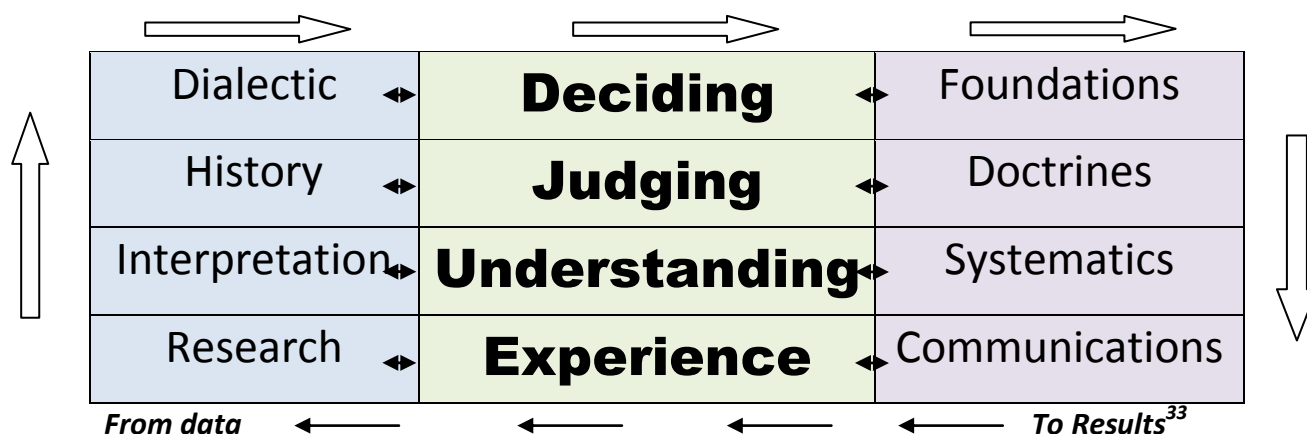
### **Question of God:**

- “The facts of good and evil, of progress and decline, raise questions about the character of our universe . . . We can inquire into the possibility of fruitful inquiry. We can reflect on the nature of reflection. We can deliberate whether our deliberating is worth while. In each case, there arises the question of God.” (MiT p 101 cf).
- “Such is the question of God, It is not a matter of image or feeling, of concept or judgment. They pertain to answers. It is a question. It arises out of our conscious intentionality, out of the a priori structured drive that promotes us from experiencing to the effort to understand, from understanding to the effort to judge truly, from judging to the effort to choose rightly. In the measure that we advert to our own questioning and proceed to question it, there arises the question of God (MiT p 103).

## Appendix A:

### Lonergan’s Eight Functional Specialities of Theology

Allowing the Past to speak authentically into the Present and Future:  
 under the premise of  
 “A theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix” (MiT p xi).



#### Some notes on the table:

- The eight functional specialities are: research; interpretation; history; dialectic; foundations; doctrines; systematic; communications.

<sup>33</sup> As per class handout and lecture: August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Lecturer: Kathleen Williams. Institution: Yarra Theological Union

- Each speciality has a different aim. The specialities in the blue column appropriate the Christian past. Having listened to and sifted out what was 'going forward' in the past, the specialities in the purple column seek to articulate an authentic stance towards the future, held in the now.
- Even though each speciality has a different aim, each of them are intrinsically related to and dependent upon, the rest.
- Each speciality corresponds with a particular stage of intentional consciousness. For example, *experience* relates directly with Research of the past. This research is more in line with listening to the data. *Experience* also corresponds with Communications in the now. At this point, the one speaking is taking responsibility for their own words.
- Even though each speciality corresponds with a level of intentional consciousness; within each speciality, the human subject is engaging the whole of their intentional consciousness as well. Therefore, they are employing experience, understanding, judging, and deciding to their speciality.
- For the specialities in the purple column to be authentic, it is crucial for the theologian to undergo a religious, moral and intellectual conversion. It is the writing on this conversion which constitutes theology. Therefore "without the last the first seven are in vain, for they fail to mature" (MiT p 355)
- The method outlined above is an ongoing process, hence the black arrows leaving 'To Results' heading back to 'From Data'.

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The Lonergan Institute, Boston College website

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**Bring Lonergan's  
method  
to life!**

*If you are someone who is a leader  
of a Christian faith community and  
you find this a place of nurturing and  
authenticity, this book is **not** for you!*

If, on the other hand as a minister of religion; a priest; a pastoral associate and/or a school chaplain:

- ❖ You recognize a sense of restlessness within the people of your faith community.
- ❖ Your church attendance figures are plummeting.
- ❖ You recognize there is a wall of division within your faith community. Sitting on one side of the wall is the historical religious tradition; sitting on the other is modern culture.
- ❖ Your desire is for personal authentication in the people of your faith community; although not at the cost of group cohesion.
- ❖ You fear that if you make radical changes in the faith community's structure, you might rob some people of their faith.
- ❖ People are asking questions that you have no answer for. Questions with regard to scientific theories of evolution, a multi-faith God, post-modern culture and ethical dilemmas arising from modern medical breakthroughs.
- ❖ You recognize that you are becoming disheartened. It is all getting a little too hard!!

***Then this book is for you!***

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