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In his Method in Theology (1972) Bernard Lonergan describes what he calls “the theory of the empty head,” that is, the belief that the best way to interpret any text is to abandon all presuppositions. To this he counters that nothing less than the fullest development of our own subjectivity is the best preparation for any interpretation. He quotes Bultmann: “Nothing is sillier than the requirement that an interpreter must silence his subjectivity, extinguish his individuality, if he is to obtain objective knowledge. . . . The requirement overlooks the very essence of genuine understanding. Such understanding presupposes the utmost liveliness of the understanding subject and the richest possible development of his individuality.”

Coelho’s excellent study is an illustration of this truth. Tracing Lonergan’s own thought on hermeneutics from his early writings on Thomas Aquinas, through Insight (1958) to Method, Coelho illustrates the spiraling process of deepening interpretation. Using much unpublished and archival material, he traces what Lonergan himself probably only dimly knew, that is, the gradual development in his own thought and expression on the topic of interpretation. Beginning with the Thomist notion of “wisdom” in Lonergan’s early writings, through the notion of the “universal viewpoint” in Insight, to the fuller and more concrete articulation of the theological functional specialty of interpretation in Method, C. traces in detail the development of Lonergan’s thought. In general, Lonergan moved from a more metaphysical treatment influenced still by a faculty psychology to a more concrete and existential methodological awareness. Throughout there is the crucial concern for self-appropriation. “If one is to understand Lonergan on the universal viewpoint, the pre-understanding required is familiarity with the workings of one’s mind and eventually of one’s heart” (11).

C. describes his own work: “The universal viewpoint is an important but somewhat obscure notion in Lonergan’s Insight. One problem is the name itself, which sounds pretentious to postmodern ears. But the main problem is that this allegedly important notion quite disappears in later works, to surface only in a very marginal way in Method in Theology. The question that frames the present work might therefore be put in terms of the detective metaphor familiar to Lonergan readers: whatever happened to the universal viewpoint?” (xiv) The key to Coelho’s discovery is the notion of “horizon” that replaces the notion of “viewpoint” in Lonergan’s writings in 1963. This shift reflects the influence of existentialist and phenomenological writings on Lonergan’s thought during this time. In addition, with the help of Piaget’s developmental psychology, Lonergan moves from conceiving theology as an individual scholastic habit to understanding it as a communal achievement of differentiation and integration. Lonergan contributes to this process of integration by outlining a theological methodology that is “a framework for
collaborative creativity.” By distinguishing the “functional specialties” involved in theologizing Lonergan provided a framework in which communities of Scripture scholars, historians, ecumenists, religionists, doctrinal, systematic, and pastoral theologians could come to understand their own role in the unfolding theological and religious enterprise. The value of distinguishing interpretation from the other functional specialties—such as history, dialectic, doctrines, and communications—is that it helps one to know what one is doing when one is doing it. Distinguishing interpretation from other functional specialties also prevents the “totalitarian ambitions” of one area of theology pre-empting other areas to the detriment of the total theological enterprise. As Lonergan once put it, “There are those who extend hermeneutics to include the problems of communications, but I think this leads, at least in theology, to a process of telescoping that omits several crucial steps from original texts down to what I tell Ted and Alice what precisely it means in their lives” (165).

Our postmodern age is keenly aware of discontinuity and seemingly incommensurable worlds of discourse. Lonergan describes his own contribution to facing such pluralist historicity: “For if one understands by method . . . a framework for collaboration in creativity and, more particularly, a normative pattern of related and repeated operations with ongoing and cumulative results, then I believe one will find ways to control the present uncontrollable pluralism of theologies, one will cease to work alien, alone, isolated, one will become aware of a common site with an edifice to be erected, not in accord with a static blueprint, but under the leadership of an emergent probability that yields results proportionate to human diligence and intelligence” (196).

As C. puts it, method is “the contemporary stage of the ascent to the universal viewpoint” (196). An Indian theologian himself, he asks: “Are we to think in terms of a global and indistinct entity named ‘Indian culture,’ or should we not recognize further differentiations within this culture? How do such differentiations relate to human history, for presumably India forms part of the evolution of human meaning in general? . . . The notion of the universal viewpoint can, at the very least, help us raise the questions and avoid the creation of vague entities or easy generalizations such as ‘Indian culture’ and ‘Western culture’” (214).

This is a demanding book even for those familiar with Lonergan; but it will be well worth the effort. It sheds light on one of the seminal thinkers of the 20th century and introduces a first-rate theologian from India.