Review- Startling Strangeness: Reading Lonergan's Insight

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thought is presented as the fullness of Christian theology, and church practices are emphasized as if there exists general agreement as to what these are and how they are to be understood. Although she criticizes John Milbank for lacking humility when he pronounces his own position to be “orthodox” and thus representing a “binding authority” (p. 194), Johnson herself essentially presents a normative view of the content of Christianity. In the context of disputes within denominational traditions like the Anglican Communion, it would seem essential to note that the challenge facing contemporary theology is not only dealing with the external diversity of a pluralist society, but also the internal diversity of competing theologies. Perhaps, therefore, Johnson’s vision of Christianity offers a more immediate contribution and challenge to the church’s own self-understanding and praxis than it does to the wider contemporary society’s political life.

Much of the tone of Johnson’s argument is helpful as she emphasizes the recognition of the partiality of all human perspectives, while at the same time being sufficiently confident in the Christian viewpoint to say that “we believe we have identified a truer and more satisfactory outlook than others currently known” (p. 43). Her development of this attitude toward difference out of the theology of Augustine could be clarified in greater depth, and her emphasis on conversation as a model for engaging diversity bears little difference from the concern for dialogue that she challenges. Overall, however, this book represents a useful resource for thinking about the increasing challenges of responding to pluralism.

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Fifty years ago, Bernard Lonergan published Insight: A Study of Human Understanding. A few years later, this “little book,” as he sometimes called it despite its 800 pages, was brought to the attention of a young Roman Catholic priest, Richard Liddy, who had been sent to Rome to study philosophy. Lonergan was teaching there; Liddy became his student, then his friend as well. The result was a conversion, of which this book is the record and result.

Liddy has never stopped reading Insight. More importantly, he has never backed away from the difficulties and consequences of owning what the book is about. For it is a book about Richard Liddy; a book, that is, about concrete, existing subject of the act of understanding it calls “insight,” about
what actually happens when insights occur, about what the fact that they do occur means for the whole intellectual, moral, and religious horizon of anyone who begins to understand what it is to understand. Lonergan thought about calling it “an essay in aid of self-appropriation,” an ongoing process of knowing oneself and knowing that one knows. Since the process varies with the historical circumstances of the self that comes to light, it cannot be generalized beyond a certain point. It can only be narrated as it has in fact unfolded in particular instances. In presenting one instance, his own, Liddy is too modest to draw an analogy with Augustine’s Confessions, but like Augustine he has written a book that is at once personal recollection and philosophical reflection.

The middle of Startling Strangeness provides twelve short chapters that retrace Lonergan’s “moving viewpoint” from Insight’s disarmingly simple opening instruction—“imagine a cartwheel”—to its dizzyingly comprehensive argument for the existence of an unrestricted act of understanding, identical with the idea of being and therefore also identical with God. In these chapters Liddy has to be content with quotation and paraphrase. More interesting, and perhaps more valuable, are the autobiographical chapters before and after this précis. If Lonergan was right about his subject, a reader can take it or leave it; but anyone who takes it seriously will be changed. Liddy did not especially want to take it. He encountered Lonergan in the heady days of what is still called “the Council,” and he had other authors and other philosophies on his mind—Carl Rogers, for example, and Suzanne Langer. Little by little, however, through just such an accumulation of small insights as Insight describes, he found himself being drawn into a startlingly strange horizon of meaning that he could not abjure without denying his own experience of his own mind and heart. The relentlessly theoretical level at which Lonergan formulates this horizon can make it seem abstract in the sense of impoverished and unreal. That it is neither—that, on the contrary, it is concrete and enriching—was Liddy’s discovery. To state what he discovered is easy enough; to portray the discovering as it went forward, over time, in a long, maieutic sequence of specific questions and answers—that is more difficult, and more valuable. The portrayal in Startling Strangeness is honest, winsome, and fascinating.

There are other “introductions” to Lonergan. For the most part they presuppose that the reader already has the questions Lonergan addresses in Insight. But every question has a context, without which no answer can be meaningful. Liddy sets his introduction in a context, and by so doing shows how questions about what it is to understand might arise in the first place, and why answering them is a matter of surpassing importance.

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