DAVID TRACY'S THEOLOGICAL PROJECT: 
AN OVERVIEW AND SOME IMPLICATIONS

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Religious historian Martin E. Marty has called David Tracy “the most original of today’s Catholic theologians, and the one with whom other theologians, Catholic and Protestant, have to reckon.” He went on to say that Tracy “is shaping the future of theological inquiry and of Catholicism because as a thinker of the first order he influences not only the seminary professors who teach tomorrow’s priests but also professors at secular colleges.” Yet, influential as he is, Tracy’s thought is inaccessible to many because he integrates the best of modern theology, philosophy, biblical scholarship, literary criticism, and art in a stunningly creative synthesis that is both dense and complex. Students who work their way through Blessed Rage for Order and The Analogical Imagination, two of his most important books, are often overwhelmed by his detailed knowledge and discussion of many contemporary issues and fail to see the forest for the trees. Hence, I would like to attempt an overview of his theological project as an aid in further disseminating his thought.

Following his own procedure, I will first briefly sketch the social and theological location of David Tracy, then offer an overview of his major concerns with some indication of the development of his thought, and finally summarize some critical evaluations and implications of his theological project.

SOCIAL AND THEOLOGICAL LOCATION

David Tracy was born on January 6, 1939, in Yonkers, New York. After the usual philosophical and theological studies at St. Joseph’s Seminary, Dunwoodie, New York, he was ordained a priest for the diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 1963, then went to the Gregorian University in Rome where he received the Licentiate (1964) and Doctorate in Sacred Theology (1969) with a thesis on Bernard Lonergan. From 1967 to 1969 he taught at the Catholic University of America, and then went to the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, where he is currently the Andrew Thomas Greeley and Grace Mc-

Nichols Greeley Distinguished Service Professor of Roman Catholic Studies and also a member of the Committee on the Analysis of Ideas and Methods. He was President of the Catholic Theological Society in 1977 and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Tracy is both priest and professor and shares the dual commitments and loyalties of those roles. He is deeply committed to the Roman Catholic tradition in all its fullness and to the rigorous disciplined discussion of the academy. He appreciates and shares the "conflict of moralities" induced by these two loyalties. Of the three publics to whom, according to Tracy, the theologian is responsible, Church, academy, and society, his own primary public is the academy. He is in regular conversation, either directly or vicariously, with scholars in other fields such as Stephen Toulmin, Paul Ricoeur, Mircea Eliade, Wayne C. Booth, and Gregory Baum. He continues to exercise his priestly functions by presiding and preaching regularly at the Newman Center at the University of Chicago.

Theologically, Tracy's roots are in the transcendental Thomism of Bernard Lonergan, as his first book, The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan, indicates. After coming to the University of Chicago, he appropriated the tradition of process theology (which had always been at home there) and, to the surprise of some, preferred its metaphysics in clarifying the meaning of God language in Blessed Rage for Order (1975). There he was also influenced by the study of the history of religions in the person of Mircea Eliade and by the cultural theology of Langdon Gilkey. More recently, he has incorporated the hermeneutical insights of Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, while at the same time attending to the language theory of deconstructionists such as Jacques Derrida. In each of these traditions Tracy finds insights which he incorporates, always critically, into his own thought. He listens to a wide variety of voices, always on the lookout for elements of truth. Tracy is a truth-seeker who does not flee complexity, is not satisfied with unnuanced simplicity, and seeks to include as many voices as possible in the conversation that is contemporary theology.

MAJOR CONCERNS

Turning to the primary focus of the article, I will review Tracy's corpus, highlighting the major concerns and themes found throughout his writings: concern with theological method, pluralism within theology, pluralism of cultures and religious traditions, theology as public discourse, the theologian's accountability to the Church, academy, and

society, and his interest in hermeneutics, conversation, and dialogue as the forms of contemporary theology.

Theological Method

Tracy's pursuit of truth in theology has focused on several major issues, but his preoccupation with theological method is evident from the time of his first publication, The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan. That work is an exposition and analysis of Lonergan's thought with the aim of making it better known and understood. After an initial chapter in which Tracy exposes "the method of horizon-analysis employed by Bernard Lonergan," he traces "the slowly evolving development of the contexts, questions, and categories (i.e. the horizons) of Lonergan's own intellectual career." Beginning with Lonergan's doctoral dissertation, Gratia Operans, and the Verbum articles which appeared in Theological Studies in 1941 and 1942, Tracy shows how Lonergan recovered the horizon of the medieval world of Thomas Aquinas, then moved to an analysis of modern consciousness in his famous book, Insight (1957), a philosophical work on human understanding.

Lonergan returned to theology in the systematic treatises De Deo Trino (On the Trinity) and De Verbo Incarnato (On the Word Incarnate) which appeared in the early 1960s. Tracy demonstrates how it is in these works that Lonergan's "historical sense" or historical consciousness emerges along with the "need to differentiate and relate the three principal contemporary theological specializations: positive, dogmatic and systematic theology." Using a series of lectures and articles from 1960 through 1967 and the manuscript for Method in Theology, Tracy outlines the emergence of the "methodical exigence" in Lonergan's thought, culminating in the now-famous eight functional specializations: research, interpretation, history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications.

The roots of Tracy's own concern with theological method are to be found especially in this last chapter. He says that "the question of method in the human sciences, in philosophy, and in theology are, for many of their practitioners, the principal questions on the present horizon." For Lonergan, however, method does not mean new rules or a new system, but rather "a normative pattern of related and recurrent

5 Ibid. 21.
6 Ibid. 193–94.
7 For a list of these, see The Achievement 207–208, n. 2.
8 Ibid. 233.
operations yielding cumulative and progressive results." This is a basic or foundational issue in theology today which, Tracy says, can legitimately be named methodological. In its starkest terms, the theological problem is this: Can the theologian determine a basic pattern for all the patterns of related and recurrent operations involved in the theological task? Can he determine a fundamental theological method which will allow all practitioners to collaborate systematically with one another? Can he ground that pattern in a transcendental method which is not open to fundamental revision?

Tracy then describes the contemporary theological situation as one of "ever further specialization and ever more meagre collaboration." No theologian can master more than a few questions in one of the specializations. Thus the need for Lonergan's functional specializations. Research, interpretation, history, and dialectic represent the phase of encountering the Judaeo-Christian tradition in its fullness; while foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications represent the attempt to speak to the present situation. The four levels proper to each phase correspond to the four levels of consciousness which Lonergan analyzed in *Insight*: experience, understanding, judgment, and deliberation. Tracy describes each of the functional specializations. He does not view this as a new "system" but as a methodically ordered structure which allows theology "to explicate the essentially open and heuristic structure which theology already is." He concludes by suggesting that Lonergan's functional specializations "may allow for a collaborative enterprise which at present is most desperately needed in the certainly creative but somewhat chaotic situation of contemporary theology."

It is clear, I think, that Tracy's concern for theological method is rooted in his study of Lonergan. But his appreciation and appropriation of Lonergan was not uncritical. In a paper delivered at the Lonergan Congress in 1970, Tracy pointed out the "highly problematic" character of Lonergan's formulation of the foundational task for contemporary theology. Lonergan's understanding of the task of foundational theology does provide the basis for the methodological collab-

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9 Ibid. 235.
10 Ibid. 238. My colleague Robert J. Egan, S.J., points out that such language has led critics to charge the early Tracy with "foundationalism."
11 Ibid. 242.
12 Ibid. 261.
13 Ibid. 266-67.
oration of the several disciplines and, in that sense, it is foundational. "It does not, however, provide critical grounds for the enterprise itself—more precisely, for the truth-value of the claims to ultimacy of religious and explicitly theological language."\(^\text{16}\) Tracy suggests that Lonergan assumes the truth claims of the dogmatic tradition without critically grounding them. Yet the contemporary historically conscious context for doing theology demands that such truth claims be critically justified. The foundational theologian today must take up the question: "What, then, are the conditions for the possibility of religious and explicitly theological meanings?"\(^\text{16}\) He argues that Lonergan's own critical thrust would lead one to expect such a critical grounding for the whole theological enterprise rather than a dogmatic articulation of those foundations.

The real issue for the contemporary theologian, Tracy argued in another talk that same year, "is the emergence of historical consciousness into Western consciousness and the resultant problematic status of all classical traditions and authorities," including the Scriptures and the dogmatic formulations of the Christian tradition.\(^\text{17}\) Invoking the authority of the dogmatic tradition will no longer suffice for the critically conscious theologian. Lonergan's position on foundational theology, then, must be judged "'necessary but insufficient' for the full problematic involved in attempting to develop a 'foundational' Christian theology."\(^\text{18}\) Now that Christian theology is conscious of its problematic status, it must uncover and validate the major presuppositions, grounds, or foundations of the entire enterprise.\(^\text{19}\) This is the project Tracy undertakes in his next major work, \textit{Blessed Rage for Order}.

\textit{Pluralism in Theology}

In addition to historical consciousness, the other major factor which makes a foundational Christian theology problematic for Tracy is, as the subtitle of \textit{Blessed Rage for Order} indicates, the new pluralism in theology. This new pluralism provides the opportunity for "each theologian to learn incomparably more about reality by disclosing really different ways of viewing both our common humanity and Christianity," but it can also "mask intellectual chaos." Hence, he argues that

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid. 214.  
\(^\text{16}\) Ibid. 216–17 (quoting Lonergan).  
\(^\text{18}\) David Tracy, "Foundational Theology as Contemporary Possibility," \textit{Dunwoodie Review} 12 (1972) 3 n. 1.  
\(^\text{19}\) Ibid.
each theologian must attempt to articulate and defend an explicit method of inquiry, and use that method to interpret the symbols and texts of our common life and of Christianity."

To do theology authentically today, the theologian must face the dilemma of dual commitments: to faith in the God of Jesus Christ, and to the modern experiment. Dealing with this dual loyalty will require a "basic revision of traditional Christianity and traditional modernity alike," while maintaining the fundamental ethical commitment of the theologian qua theologian "to that community of scientific inquiry whose province logically includes whatever issue is under investigation" (BRO 7). Hence, the theologian will approach both the traditional formulations of the Christian tradition and the modern secular faith in the ultimate significance of our lives in this world critically. The contemporary theologian, as a postmodern intellectual (Tracy's own self-referent), "believes that he [sic] must remain in fundamental fidelity to the critical exigencies of the liberal period" while applying that critique to the liberal self-image itself (BRO 12). Such a commitment has been well articulated by Lonergan's imperatives, "Be attentive, be intelligent, be rational, be responsible, develop and, if necessary, change."

Before developing his own method for achieving this, which he calls "revisionist," Tracy outlines five basic models in contemporary theology: orthodox theology, liberal theology, neo-orthodox theology, radical theology, and the revisionist model. Without describing each model here, suffice it to say that Tracy sees the central task of contemporary Christian theology to be "the dramatic confrontation, the mutual illuminations and corrections, the possible basic reconciliation between the principal values, cognitive claims, and existential faiths of both a reinterpreted post-modern consciousness and a reinterpreted Christianity" (BRO 32). This task is best accomplished by the revisionist method of critical correlation.

Tracy describes the revisionist model as "philosophical reflection upon the meanings present in common human experience and language, and upon the meanings present in the Christian fact" (BRO 43). He unpacks this in five summary theses:

Thesis 1: "The Two Principal Sources for Theology Are Christian Texts and Common Human Experience and Language." Although Tracy limits his analysis here to texts, he really intends the whole of the Christian tradition. Elsewhere he uses the term "the Christian

20 David Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order 3. Further references will be in the text, abbreviated as BRO.
fact” to include not only texts but also symbols, rituals, events, and witnesses (BRO 15, n. 5). Because Christianity is a religion of the word (also of the Word) and because the Scriptures are the fundamental although not exclusive expression of the Christian faith, he feels the limitation is justified in this work. “Common human experience” is Tracy’s term for what Paul Tillich called the “situation,” and the term has a universalist intent.

Thesis 2: “The Theological Task Will Involve a Critical Correlation of the Results of the Investigations of the Two Sources of Theology.” Acknowledging his debt to Paul Tillich’s method of correlation between the “situation” and the “message,” Tracy revises Tillich’s formulation. Whereas Tillich attempted to correlate the questions arising from the situation with the answers provided by the Christian message, Tracy argues that “only by a method which develops critical criteria for correlating the questions and the answers found in both the ‘situation’ and the ‘message’ ” can the task of theology be adequately carried out (BRO 46).

Thesis 3: “The Principal Method of Investigation of the Source ‘Common Human Experience and Language’ Can Be Described as a Phenomenology of the ‘Religious Dimension’ Present in Everyday and Scientific Experience and Language.” In investigating this source of theology, the need is “to explicate a pre-conceptual dimension to our common shared experience that can legitimately be described as religious” and the phenomenological method seems to be relatively more adequate to this task. It is not the only possible method and it needs to be in conversation with other philosophical methods and with “those human sciences which investigate the religious dimension in human existence” (BRO 48). The phrase “religious dimension” or “horizon” is used instead of “religious experience” to indicate that religion is not another human activity like art, morality, or science, but a dimension of all human activities (BRO 59, n. 24).

Thesis 4: “The Principal Method of Investigation of the Source ‘the Christian Tradition’ Can Be Described as an Historical and Hermeneutical Investigation of Classical Christian Texts.” The call for historical method implies that the “theologian as historian pay heed to those historical reconstructions of Christian events and texts which modern historical scholarship has made available” (BRO 49). To determine the meanings of the metaphors, symbols, and images in those texts requires the further disciplines of semantics, literary-critical methods,

21 Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1951) 1.3–11; 2.5–10.
and hermeneutics which, in Tracy's understanding, is the "discipline capable of explicating the referent as distinct from either the sense of the text or the historical reconstruction of the text" (BRO 52).

Thesis 5: "To Determine the Truth-Status of the Results of One's Investigations into the Meaning of Both Common Human Experience and Christian Texts the Theologian Should Employ an Explicitly Transcendental or Metaphysical Mode of Reflection." Admitting that this thesis is the most problematic for many theologians precisely because "historical consciousness has rendered the claims of metaphysics doubtful," Tracy nonetheless argues that to evaluate the truth of the meanings uncovered in common human experience and in the Christian tradition, an explicitly transcendental or metaphysical mode of analysis is required. This is so because we are dealing not with some particular experience but with all experience as such. In other words, "the very nature of the cognitive claim involved in religious and theistic statements demands a metaphysical or transcendental mediation" (BRO 55). Ordinary criteria of verification or falsification will not do.

In summary, then, Tracy's own revisionist theological method can be stated: There are two sources for theology, common human experience and language and the Christian tradition as found primarily in texts; the first source is to be investigated by a hermeneutical phenomenology of the religious dimension in common human experience and language, and the second source is to be investigated by historical and hermeneutical methods; the results of these investigations are to be correlated to determine their significant similarities and differences, and their truth value will be determined by an explicitly transcendental or metaphysical reflection (BRO 53).

Tracy then further clarifies these two sources and their appropriate criteria and modes of analysis. We will comment only on a few salient points. First, by "common human experience" Tracy does not intend merely Humean sense data, but also "that immediate experience of the self-as-self which can be reflectively mediated through such disciplines as art, history, cultural analysis, human scientific analysis, and philosophical analysis" (BRO 69). Second, "all these modes of analysis can be generically labelled 'phenomenological' in the broad sense of mediating the relationship of particular expressions . . . to our immediate lived experience." Third, when these particular expressions (symbols, images, metaphors, myths, or concepts) have disclosive power for our lived experience, they are said to be meaningful. Fourth, for Tracy, the term "philosophical reflection" includes two distinct but integral moments, phenomenological and transcendental, or metaphysical; and
this philosophical reflection will be exercised on both experience and language. This reflection will also determine the "exact logical status" of the experience or language being analyzed. Fifth, in addition to the criterion of meaningfulness (disclosive power), a second criterion, that of internal coherence, is required for this reflection to have meaning; and, finally, if this reflection is to be judged to be true, it must meet the third criterion of "adequacy to experience" (BRO 69–71).

The theologian's responsibility to the second source, the Christian fact, is "to show how his or her present categories are appropriate understandings of the Christian understanding of existence" (BRO 72). The Christian fact refers to "the meanings involved either explicitly or implicitly in the significant texts, actions, gestures, and symbols of the entire Christian tradition," although these will be found primarily in the Christian Scriptures (BRO 72). In order to show the appropriateness of the theologian's categories to the Christian Scriptures, a theory of interpretation is needed, and Tracy spells out his own which is based primarily on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.

It is "precisely a recognition of the historical context of all religious texts and the allied recognition of the historical distance of all such contexts from the contemporary interpreter" that force the problems of interpretation to the center of the theological task. To get at the meaning of a historically distanced text it is not sufficient merely to determine the author's original intention, nor the original discourse situation, nor the first historical addressee. Rather the "meaning refers to a 'world,' a certain mode-of-being which precisely as 'fixed' or codified by means of the particular literary genre employed in the text," represents and proposes an ideal (BRO 75). An adequate interpretation occurs when "the reader overcomes the strangeness of another horizon not by empathizing with the psychic state or cultural situation of the author but rather by understanding the basic vision of the author implied by the text and the mode-of-being-in-the-world referred to by the text" (BRO 78). Such a hermeneutical theory, Tracy believes, avoids the pitfalls of an overly psychologizing tendency, on the one hand, and of expecting hermeneutics to bear the burden of ethical or metaphysical analysis, on the other (BRO 79).

Finally, Tracy argues that the basic criteria and modes of analysis of his revisionist model, which he has developed primarily for fundamental theology, will be the same for dogmatic theology since a central concern of dogmatic theology "is to determine the meaning, meaningfulness, and truth of a given Christian symbol for contemporary experience" (BRO 80–81).
Application of the Method

In Part 2 of Blessed Rage for Order, Tracy applies the revisionist theological method by offering an interpretation of the two sources for theology, common human experience and language and Christian texts. Using the phenomenological method, he tries to show how and in what senses a religious interpretation of common human experience and language is meaningful and true. He uses the concept of "limit" as a "key (but not exhaustive) category for describing certain signal characteristics peculiar to any language or experience with a properly religious dimension," or, put differently, any implicitly religious dimension of our experience will articulate or imply "a limit-experience, a limit-language, or a limit-dimension" (BRO 93). Such limit experiences are similar to what Langdon Gilkey had called the "dimension of ultimacy" in everyday secular experience.22

Tracy presents three areas in which such limit experiences or limit languages can manifest themselves: science, morality, and everyday life. Using Lonergan’s analysis of self-transcendence in science, he suggests that the “scientist may be driven by his own critical intelligence to ask a limit-question” such as: “Is it worthwhile to ask whether our goals, purposes, and ideals are themselves worthwhile?” or, “Can we understand and affirm such a demand for worthwhileness without affirming an intelligent, rational, responsible source and ground for them?” (BRO 98). Such an application of the category of limit-questions to scientific inquiry can mediate a recognition of a “religious dimension” to science. Similarly, in the realm of morality, such limit-questions as “Why ought I to keep my promise anyway?” or “Why ought one to be moral?” emerge. Here, following Stephen Toulmin, the limit-character of such questions may be described as “religious” or “theological” (BRO 102). The logically odd character of such a use of language is precisely what we mean when we use the words “religion” or “religious.”

For limit-situations in everyday life, Tracy points to the existentialist analysis of such negative limit-experiences as “sickness, guilt, anxiety, and the recognition of death as one’s own destiny,” and in a positive mode, such peak experiences (or as he prefers, “ecstatic experiences”) as “love, joy, the creative act, [and] profound reassurance” as “authentically self-transcending moments in our lives” (BRO 105). In such “ecstatic experiences” we “experience a reality simply given, gifted, happened”; they serve as “signals of transcendence” disclosing

a religious dimension to our everyday lives even if they are not explicitly religious experiences. The language most appropriate for such a dimension of our experience is symbolic language, the language of symbol, metaphor, parable, and myth. Such properly religious language is a re-presentation in symbolic form of these limit-experiences and of that basic faith in the meaningfulness of human existence (BRO 103).

By these phenomenological analyses of scientific inquiry, moral argument, and everyday life, Tracy has tried to demonstrate the meaningfulness of a religious dimension to our common human experience. He then turns to the other source, Christian texts, to investigate the possible meaning and meaningfulness of explicitly religious language as correlative to the limit-questions and limit-experiences found in the first source.

Accepting the conclusions of the linguistic analysis of limit-language or religious language as "logically odd," that is as involving odd discernment, total commitment, and universal significance, he argues that certain forms of language in the New Testament, such as proverbs, eschatological sayings, and parables, display similar characteristics (BRO 124-31). They, also, are limit-languages for limit-experiences which, in more traditional Christian language, are called "mysteries." Such New Testament language-forms "redescribe our experience in such manner that the sense of its meaning . . . discloses a limit-referent which projects and promises that one can in fact live a life of wholeness, of total commitment, or radical honesty and agapic love in the presence of the gracious God of Jesus the Christ" (BRO 136). Thus, the New Testament offers a new possible mode-of-being-in-the-world, not a new supernatural world as an escape from the "only world we know or wish to know."

**Need for Metaphysical Analysis**

Christian limit-language or religious language is not only meaningful, however, it also makes cognitive or truth claims, namely, that "the objective ground or referent of all limit-experience and limit-language is that reality Christians name God" (BRO 136). To that claim Tracy turns in the following two chapters.

Recall that Tracy's proposal for a revisionist method for fundamental theology called for both a phenomenological and a transcendental/metaphysical analysis, and he recognized that the need for the latter was problematic to many contemporary theologians. Hence, he spends some time reviewing "certain representative cases for and against the use of metaphysical analysis" which were current in the 1970s and which we will not repeat here. Suffice it to say that to investigate the
theistic claims of Christianity requires more than the symbolic language of the New Testament. One must develop an explicitly conceptual language. "A metaphysical system," for Tracy, "is a construct of concepts designed to provide coherence for all 'the facts' on the basis of a theoretical model drawn from among the facts" (BRO 152). The criteria for determining the truth claims of a metaphysical system are internal coherence and adequacy to experience. On the basis of these criteria, Tracy does not find the conceptual categories of classical Christian theism or transcendental Thomism adequate but opts instead for the process categories of neoclassical theism or "panentheism" (BRO 147, 161, 172 ff.).

Given his background in Lonergan's transcendental Thomism, Tracy's preference for the conceptual categories of process metaphysics surprised many. The influence of his sometime colleague at the Divinity School, Schubert Ogden, may be part of the explanation. In any case, Tracy found classical theism internally incoherent, inadequate to our experience, and inappropriate to the fullness of the Christian tradition: internally incoherent, because it cannot explain how a wholly absolute God can be really (not just nominally) related to the world and affected by it; inadequate to our experience, because "all authentic Christians live and pray and speak as if God were really affected by their action" (BRO 177), and because in our experience change is a genuine perfection and not an imperfection as the Greeks thought; inappropriate to the Christian Scriptures, because it renders the scriptural attributes of God as a loving, caring, and personally related God mere anthropomorphisms (BRO 180). In contrast, the process understanding of God as dipolar, both absolute and related to all reality, eternal but able to change, a God deeply involved "to persuade us to the good," yet allowing humans to make choices which really (not just notionally) do affect God, that is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not the abstract God of Greek thought—all of these persuade Tracy to prefer the categories of process metaphysics as a conceptually clear and coherent account of the meaning of Christian theism.

Even this account, however, is not without its problems. In addition to a lack of consensus on some major issues among process theologians, and an overly optimistic anthropology, Tracy points to the need for a more adequate symbolic expression of the conceptual categories to evoke the full disclosure of the Christian God. For this he turns to the "originating christological and eschatological limit-languages" of the New Testament (BRO 190–91).

Tracy here is following Paul Ricoeur's famous dictum: "The symbol gives rise to [critical] thought; yet thought is informed by and returns to the symbol" (BRO 209). The clear and coherent conceptual analysis
of the basic Christian affirmation of theism is not sufficient to disclose new possible modes-of-being-in-the-world. Our imaginations require story, symbol, metaphor, parable, and myth. Such language is required to redescribe and re-present what reality is and might be; it is required for character formation and for authentic praxis. Such symbolic expressions, "these great representative images, symbols, rituals, stories, and myths of our cultural history, are not mere possibilities. They are the representative facts of a particular culture" (BRO 216).

The story of Jesus as the Christ provides such a symbolic representation. For, without trying historically to reconstruct the consciousness of Jesus, Tracy (relying on the work of New Testament scholars such as Günther Bornkamm and Norman Perrin23) suggests that the conclusion of the historically reconstructed words, deeds, and destiny of Jesus as found in the New Testament may be summarized in this way: "[T]he principal referent disclosed by this limit-language is of a new, an agapic, a self-sacrificing righteousness willing to risk living at that limit where one seems in the presence of the righteous, loving, gracious God re-presented in Jesus the Christ" (BRO 221). When Christians affirm that Jesus is Lord, they are not affirming some "timeless truth of metaphysics." "Rather they find there the factual, symbolic re-presentation of the fundamental existential truth of existence" (BRO 221), namely, "the fact that our lives are, in reality, meaningful; that we really do live in the presence of a loving God; that the final word about our lives is gracious and the final power is love" (BRO 223). Thus, Tracy concludes, Christological language is an appropriate summary, an adequate re-presentation, of a Christian fundamental theology informed by the revisionist model.

In the final chapter of Blessed Rage for Order, Tracy suggests that the revisionist model is applicable not only to fundamental theology, but also to historical, systematic, and practical theology. Concerning the latter, he expresses appreciation for what he calls the "eschatological theologies of praxis," the political and liberation theologies of Moltmann, Metz, Alves, Segundo, Gutiérrez and Soelle, but he criticizes them for failing to be sufficiently critical of "such central Christian symbols as the classical theistic understanding of the Christian God and the classical exclusivist Christian claims for 'special revelation' and christology" (BRO 245). A practical theology in the revisionist mode would be critical of the traditional Christian symbols and be "in interdisciplinary conversation with empirical sociologists and economists, and informed by critical social theory" (BRO 248). With

such tantalizing hints, Tracy left the readers of *Blessed Rage for Order* eagerly awaiting their fulfillment.

The book immediately established Tracy as a theologian to be reckoned with. Critics called it "an amazing piece of work," "the most widely discussed and debated contribution to theology to emerge in the past year," "a piece of creative scholarship," displaying "an awesome mastery of the literature and materials at hand," and "one of the most stimulating books . . . in recent years." But they also raised a number of important questions about Tracy’s espousal of process di-polar the­ism; about the concept of “common human experience” as seemingly confined to white, male, Western, academic experience; about attrib­uting ultimate significance to our lives and actions in history (Is not God the only “Ultimate”?)—about the move from “horizon” or “limit” language to a reality we call God; and about the compatibility of the diverse philosophical systems Tracy appropriates (Can Lonergan’s transcendental Thomism and process philosophy be synthesized?). Per­haps the sharpest critique (and, I think, the worst misunderstanding) was that of the sociologist Peter Berger who accused Tracy (along with his colleagues Langdon Gilkey and Schubert Ogden) of reducing Chris­tianity to the modern secular spirit, when, in fact, the whole book argues for the inadequacy of a purely secularist interpretation of our common human experience. Despite the questions, however, the amount of attention and the seriousness with which the book was received attest to its importance in contemporary theology.

**Pluralism in Culture**

Although Tracy had said that the revisionist method for fundamen­tal theology would be applicable also to systematic and practical the­ology, he admitted as early as 1975 that he was “relatively discov­

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aged" about how to take that next step.\textsuperscript{26} The question for systematic theology, he said then, is:

What systematic model, informed by the criteria determined for fundamental theological discourse, will allow a specific historical community of faith to articulate its particular vision of reality in a manner that makes it available for the wider community without being wrenched from its own historical experience?\textsuperscript{27}

It was not until 1981 in \textit{The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism}, that he attempted an answer, although the basic argument was sketched out in lectures and talks given before that.\textsuperscript{28} The strategy required to do systematic theology in the context of a plurality of religious traditions and cultures involves an "analogical imagination." In his 1977 Presidential Address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, he argues that "prior to any explicit set of beliefs or actions for any religious community, there lies some basic, fundamental vision of the whole of reality informing all the beliefs."\textsuperscript{29} In the case of the Roman Catholic community, he calls this an "analogical imagination." He described it initially by posing a series of questions:

Do you believe, with Albert Camus, that there is more to admire in human beings than to despise? Do you find with Erasmus and Francis of Assisi that in spite of all folly, stupidity, illusion, and even sin, reality at its final moment is trustworthy? Do you find in yourself a belief with Aquinas and Thomas More that reason is to be trusted for finding the order of things; that faith transforms but does not destroy reason? Is your final image of God one like John's gospel of love, not fear; of Christ as fundamentally a community of hope, not a ghetto of escape and fear? Does your image of society include a trust that it can be somehow ordered short of radical disjunction? Does your image of the cosmos itself include a trust that it too is somehow ordered by relationships established by God for all reality; and that reality itself—in spite of all serious,

\textsuperscript{26} David Tracy, "Theology as Public Discourse," \textit{Christian Century} 92/10 (19 March 1975) 283.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. 280.
\textsuperscript{28} David Tracy, "Presidential Address: The Catholic Analogical Imagination," \textit{Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America} 32 (1977) 234–44; the Tuohy Chair public lectures delivered at John Carroll University in May and June, 1977, published later in book form (with John B. Cobb, Jr.) under the title \textit{Talking About God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism} (New York: Seabury, 1983). Some of these earlier formulations are clearer and more succinct and I will cite them where appropriate.
\textsuperscript{29} "Presidential Address," 235.
sometimes overwhelming evidence to the contrary—is finally benign? Then you possess, I believe, a Catholic analogical imagination.\(^{30}\)

The statement that doing systematic theology in a culture of pluralism requires an analogical imagination is, however, the conclusion rather than the beginning of the argument in *The Analogical Imagination*. As was the case with *Blessed Rage for Order*, Part 1 develops a theoretical presentation which is then exemplified in Part 2. Tracy wants to continue to affirm pluralism as a “fundamental enrichment of the human condition,” but not to surrender the pursuit of truth in each particular tradition. In order to continue making truth claims the theologian must develop public criteria for such affirmations. All authentic theology is public discourse, meaning “discourse available (in principle) to all persons and explicated by appeals to one’s experience, intelligence, rationality, and responsibility, and formulated in arguments where claims are stated with appropriate warrants, backings, and rebuttal procedures.”\(^{31}\)

The theologian, however, speaks from and to, not one but three publics or social realities: the academy, the Church, and the society at large. The social location of the theologian will affect which public he or she emphasizes; so, for example, in Tracy’s case, doing theology in a university setting, he will tend to speak primarily from and to the academy. But the particular discipline of theology will also affect the public addressed: fundamental theology will be principally but not exhaustively related to the academy, systematic theology will be principally but not exhaustively related to the Church, and practical theology will be principally but not exhaustively related to the wider society (AI 56–58).\(^{32}\) These three publics or social realities are also part of the theologian’s self-understanding; they are “several internalized selves” which may, from time to time, even compete or conflict with one another (AI 6, 26–31).

Tracy’s concern for the public character of theology is motivated by his perception that religion, like art, has become so privatized in contemporary life as to be merely a matter of taste, *de gustibus*, and that theologians have been confined to or have retreated to some local “reservations of the spirit” (AI 13). But this attempt at publicness is also impelled by the “universal character of the divine reality,” that is the “God as understood by the Jewish, Christian and Muslim believer,

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) *Talking About God* 2; and *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 57. Further references will be in the text, abbreviated as *AI*.

\(^{32}\) *Talking About God* 3.
[who] is either universal in actuality or sheer delusion. . . . Any authenti
c speech on the reality of God which is really private or partic­
ularist is unworthy of that reality" (AI 51). The position that theo­
logical discourse is only available to those within a particular confessional
tradition (the position of George Lindbeck and others which we will
discuss later) is unacceptable to Tracy.33

The Notion of the Classic

The key to this possibility of public theological discourse from a
particular religious tradition (and, indeed, the key to Tracy’s whole
argument) is his theory of the “classic.” Every major religious tradition
produces classics—“understood as those texts, events, images, persons,
rituals and symbols which are assumed to disclose permanent possi­

ties or meaning and truth” (AI 68). The task of the theologian,
especially the systematic theologian, is to interpret these classics of a
particular tradition in such a way that they become disclosive of truth
and transformative of the individual and society. Insofar as theo­

gians do this, “they perform a genuinely public function for both soci­
ety and academy analogous to the philosopher’s interpretation of the

classics of philosophy or the literary critic’s interpretation of the clas­
sics of literature” (AI 68). Religious classics are also cultural classics
and, as such, enter into the public realm and are available to all in­
quirers of whatever religious tradition. Thus, on this understanding,
the Koran and the Bhagavad-Gita can be disclosive of truth and trans­
formative for the Christian or Jew as well as for the Muslim or Hindu.

What does Tracy intend by the term “classic”? He is referring not
only to the classics of Greek and Latin literature or the music of Bach,
Beethoven, and Brahms, but rather more generally to those “certain
expressions of the human spirit [which] so disclose a compelling truth
about our lives that we cannot deny them some kind of normative
status,” or, alternately, “what we mean in naming certain texts,

events, images, rituals, symbols and persons ‘classics’ is that here we
recognize nothing less than the disclosure of a reality we cannot but
name truth” (AI 108). Such disclosures of reality which surprise, pro­
voke, challenge, shock, and eventually transform us are found in every
culture. They are determined by generations of capable and inquiring
readers, viewers, or listeners, over time. They transcend the particular

33 See, e.g., George A. Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a
Postliberal Age (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); Hans W. Frei, The Eclipse of Biblical
Narrative (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ., 1974); William C. Placher, Unapologetic
Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation (Louisville: Westminster/John
Knox, 1989); and Tracy’s comments in The Thomist 49 (July 1985) 392–472.
historical and cultural context in which they originated; for example, think of Shakespeare being performed hundreds of years later in a variety of languages or Beethoven's Ninth Symphony moving millions of Japanese listeners every New Year's Eve! But "the classical text is not in some timeless moment which needs mere repetition. Rather its kind of timelessness as permanent timeliness is the only one proper to any expression of the finite, temporal, historical beings we are" (AI 102).

The primary analogue for the notion of the classic is, then, a work of art. Following Gadamer, Tracy argues that an actual experience of a work of art "can be called a realized experience of an event of truth" (AI 111). Hence, he repudiates those who maintain that art (and by analogy, religion) is merely a matter of taste, of purely subjective emotional reaction, a noncognitive event. Indeed, he argues that beauty "is a signal clue to truth itself" (AI 12). "That science reaches truth," he says, "only an obscurantist would deny. That the work of art discloses an event not merely of taste, genius or beauty, but truth—only a philistine, even an 'aesthetic' one, will finally deny" (AI 115). So it is also with the religious classic.

The task of the systematic theologian, then, is to interpret the classics of her or his particular religious tradition. Like all interpretation, this involves some preunderstanding that the theologian brings to the classic, some recognition of the power exerted by this classic, a willingness to engage in a dialogue with the classic, allowing the subject matter to take over, and, finally, widening the dialogue to include other interpretations in the conversation, hermeneutics both of retrieval and of suspicion. This will result in "a new application of a particular religious tradition's self-understanding for the current horizon of the community"—the method of mutually critical correlation proposed earlier (AI 131).

A religious classic, however, is distinguished from classics in art, morality, science, politics, or economics because it speaks not of those particular areas of human existence, but of the "whole," i.e. "explicitly religious classic expressions will involve a claim to truth as the event of a disclosure-concealment of the whole of reality by the power of the whole—as, in some sense, a radical and finally gracious mystery" (AI 163). Its truth must resonate with those limit-experiences described above. Because the religious classic is experienced as from the power of the whole it will have an authority distinctive to religious classics (AI 163). It is experienced as something that has happened to a person, as a gift, a grace, not as an event of one's own achievement. The positive response to such an experienced religious classic is commonly called "faith." Entering a conversation with a religious classic entails a risk,
however, the risk that it may turn out to be an illusion or a projection of one’s own needs, or, on the other hand, the risk “that religion may prove genuinely disclosive of a reality that cannot be denied” (AI 167), and that calls for a change in one’s life.

The Christian Classic

This method for systematic theology as public discourse Tracy applies to the specifically Christian religious tradition in Part 2 of The Analogical Imagination. For Christianity, “there is one classic event and person which normatively judges and informs all other Christian classics . . . the event and person of Jesus Christ” (AI 233). For the systematic theologian, the relevant Jesus is “the actual Jesus in the event of Jesus Christ—the Jesus remembered by the tradition and community as re-presentative of God’s own presence among us and as mediated to individuals and community in the classic words, sacraments and actions expressing the Christ event in the present community, in conformity with the original apostolic witness” (AI 239).

While the whole tradition in and through the Church is the mediating reality for Christians today, the Scriptures are the more relatively adequate expression of the event and “serve as normative for Christian self-understanding” and as a corrective for all later expressions (AI 249). Within the New Testament itself, Tracy attends to the plurality of genres (proclamation, narrative, symbol, reflective thought, apocalyptic, and doctrine) but finds a unifying content: the confession that “the present reality of Jesus as the exalted one (as Kyrios, Risen Lord, Son of Man, Son of God, Messiah-Christ, etc.) is experienced now as the decisive disclosure of who God is and who we are”; or, in the words of James D. G. Dunn, there is a “unity between the earthly Jesus and the exalted one who is somehow involved in or part of our encounter with God in the here and now” (AI 272). All the rich diversity of the New Testament genres testifies to this one “event of God’s self-manifestation through and in Jesus Christ” (AI 309).

Tracy argues that the systematic theologian needs to use the methods of historical-critical, literary-critical, social-scientific, and ideology critique in the search for an adequate contemporary Christology (AI 237, 328, passim), but Tracy does not actually do this himself. In that sense, he does not really offer a fully developed contemporary Christology; he outlines the method necessary to produce one. Those who do engage in a dialogue with the classic event and person of Jesus Christ and confess “I believe in Jesus Christ” are affirming the “reality of God’s own self-manifestation in the person of Jesus Christ” and thus confirming “that our deepest yearnings for wholeness in ourselves, in history, in nature, in the whole are grounded in the structure of reality
itself" (AI 329). They are, in short, making an act of faith, an act of trust in the vision of life (a mode-of-being-in-the-world) offered in Jesus’ own life, as well as a commitment to and the risk of living out that vision (AI 332).

The Contemporary Situation

Tracy then turns to the other of the two constants in theology, the contemporary situation. He offers a theological analysis of our contemporary culture. In contrast to Tillich’s analysis of his time as dominated by the question of meaninglessness (following the existentialists), Tracy says that “our situation poses no one dominant question” (AI 341). Rather there is “conflictual pluralism” about what the fundamental questions of our time are, if we can ask them at all. After reviewing some of the classic authors of postmodernity (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger), Tracy suggests that the experience which best characterizes the religious dimension of our culture is the experience of the “uncanny,” a term he borrows from Freud (AI 357–63). By this he intends a sense of “not-at-homeness” in our world, a sense of “the not-yet of some future, some Utopia,” of strangeness, of the mystical, or an “overwhelming absence of all meaning” exposed by the events of the Holocaust, the Gulag, Hiroshima. This interpretation of the contemporary situation is, of course, only one among many, and critics have suggested that it reflects Tracy’s own social location among intellectual circles in the first world. The political and liberation theologians offer a quite different interpretation of the situation.

Just as there is a plurality of possible interpretations of the situation, so there is a plurality of Christian responses to it. Tracy suggests that three of these are paradigmatic for Christian theology: the route of manifestation exemplified by the work of Mircea Eliade and the transcendental reflections of Karl Rahner; the route of proclamation as found in the theologies of Karl Barth, H. Richard Niebuhr, Jürgen Moltmann, and Gerhard Ebeling; the route of action or praxis as we see in the political and liberation theologies of Johannes Metz, Dorothee Soelle, Gustavo Gutiérrez, James Cone, and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Within these basic forms of theology there is a plurality of interpretations. This conflict of interpretations is our actual situation, but, as Tracy says, “conversation is our hope” (AI 363).

For a properly theological response to the situation, the systematic theologian develops “second-order, reflective language” to interpret both the contemporary situation and the classic event and person of Jesus Christ. In the history of Christian theology, there have been two major forms of conceptual language, analogical and dialectical (AI 408). The language of analogy “is a language of ordered relationships
articulating similarity-in-difference" building on some prime analogate or focal meaning. Such language is found in the Neoplatonic, Thomist, and idealist systematic theologies, in Schleiermacher and his liberal Protestant followers, and perhaps most clearly in Rahner.

Dialectical language, on the other hand, expresses "the necessity of radical theological negations to constitute all Christian theological language" and is best exemplified in the work of such theologians as Luther, Barth, and the political and liberation theologians. Tracy contends, however, that even in Barth "negative dialectic endures but does not prevail" (AI 417). In the end, the negative dialectic becomes a moment in the larger theological enterprise. For Tracy, the analogical imagination enables that conversation which is necessary in a pluralistic situation to take place. The analogical imagination, however, cannot forget or ignore the negative moment. "Without the ever-renewed power of the negative, all analogical concepts eventually collapse into the false harmony, the brittle sterility, the cheap grace of an all-too-canny univocity..." (AI 421).

In conclusion, Tracy says that "the major aim of all systematic theology is to formulate a theological understanding of the originating religious event into a theological focal meaning" (AI 421). For Tracy himself "the overwhelming reality disclosed in the originating event of Jesus Christ is none other than grace itself," or again, "grace prevails for the Christian as the central clue to the nature of all reality" (AI 430). For other theologians there will be other focal meanings and each must allow exposure to the others. Thus, in our radically pluralistic condition there is need for authentic conversation. This in turn calls for an analogical imagination, for, as Tracy says, "we understand one another, if at all, only through analogy... That analogical imagination seems and is a very small thing. And yet it does suffice" (AI 455).

Critics received The Analogical Imagination with enthusiasm, calling it "an extraordinary achievement" and "one of the truly creative and important pieces of recent theological writing."34 But they also faulted Tracy for defining the situation too narrowly and intellectually, for not allowing "the insights of blacks, women, or Latin Americans to affect the overall structure of theology" (Cobb); for not actually doing systematic theology but once again the method of theology (Shea, Burrell, and O'Brien); for being too concerned with the public-

ness of theology at the expense of the particular community and tradition (Burrell); and for his continued preference for process theology (Burrell). Even considering these issues, however, most would agree that Tracy exemplifies the ideal of civilized conversation on the most important issues in contemporary theology.

Summary

We have spent a fair amount of space summarizing the development of Tracy's thought in his two major works, *Blessed Rage for Order* and *The Analogical Imagination*, because all the themes of his project are found there: (1) the contemporary situation of theology as characterized by historical consciousness and pluralism; (2) which, in turn, calls for a revised method of correlation, namely, the mutually critical correlation between the interpretation of the situation and the interpretation of the Christian fact; (3) the claim for publicness in theology; (4) the theory of the classic (and more explicitly, the religious classic) as the key to publicness; (5) the claim that all theology is necessarily hermeneutical; (6) interpretation understood as the game of conversation; (7) that conversation requires an analogical imagination.

To simplify Tracy's thought, however, is necessarily to distort and misrepresent it, for complexity, comprehensiveness, and nuance are his trademarks. In subsequent books, articles and lectures he develops and nuances these major themes and at times, shifts emphasis. Let us turn briefly to some of these.

Hermeneutics as Conversation

In a 1984 volume Tracy reiterates the usefulness of Gadamer's model of conversation for the interpretation of texts but stresses that the hermeneutics of retrieval or recovery must be complemented by the hermeneutics of suspicion and the use of critical theory, since conversation is subject not only to ambiguity and error but also to systematic distortion. The hermeneutics of suspicion must be exercised both on ourselves and our situation and on the theologian's own tradition. He argues here also that theology always has been, from beginning to end, interpretation, but that the revised method of correlation is "in fact nothing other than a hermeneutically self-conscious

clarification and correction of traditional theology." Expanding the understanding of correlation, Tracy says that correlation does not always mean a one-to-one correspondence between the interpretations of the Christian fact and the interpretations of the contemporary situation but may take a variety of forms, from confrontation, through similarity-in-difference, to identity.

Conversation is the theme of his next major work, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, and Hope* (1987). While repeating that to understand is to interpret and to interpret is to converse and that conversation requires an analogical imagination, Tracy focuses on the problems raised by the plurality and ambiguity within conversation. He analyzes how conversation may necessarily be interrupted by issues of theory, of method, and of explanation; how recent developments in the philosophy of language and semiotics disclose the radical plurality of language "as a disseminating, not a unifying, force"; and how the interruptions of radical evil, the Holocaust, the Gulag, Hiroshima, have made our history radically ambiguous. Because language and the history in which it is always embedded are radically pluralistic and ambiguous, conversation as a model for interpretation is limited and fragile. Still, as Tracy says, "no less than Plato, our hope too is grounded in conversation."

**Widening the Conversation**

Tracy has become increasingly sensitive to the need to include other voices in the conversation, voices of the poor, of women, of blacks, of all the marginalized. "It is no small matter," he says, "that there are now many 'others' who do theology in ways very different, even conflictually other, from my own white, male, middle class, and academic reflections on a hermeneutics of dialogue and a praxis of solidarity."

But he is also increasingly aware of the voices of other religious traditions. He had said in *The Analogical Imagination* (1981) that the "other religions" will have to "enter into the self-understanding of the Christian religion from beginning to end." By 1987, in the last chapter of *Plurality and Ambiguity*, he speaks of religions in the plural and of "Ultimate Reality" variously named "Emptiness, the One, God,

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36 Ibid. 170.
38 Ibid. 78.
40 *The Analogical Imagination* 159.
Suchness, Nature, the Many." He does not think that the religions are reducible to a single essence or that they are all expressions of the same religious position. Rather, they "are different construals of the nature of Ultimate Reality itself." Without assuming that all religions are really the same, nonetheless conversation among the religions is now a necessity: "There are few more important conversations than the dialogues among the great religions, and few more difficult ones."

Tracy's increasing interest in interreligious dialogue arises from three sources: the development of hermeneutics modelled on dialogue and conversation which we have traced above, his own involvement over the last ten years in the Jewish-Christian and Buddhist-Christian dialogues, and the influences of Mircea Eliade and Langdon Gilkey. But his concern with methodology persists. The strategy for interreligious dialogue is the one he has already developed, an analogical imagination. If we understand at all, we understand by analogy. Now the need is to develop criteria of assessment for any judgments of relative adequacy that we make in an interreligious dialogue. For this task he turns to the earlier work of William James. Very briefly he reformulates James's three criteria for evaluation of religious experience as (1) "suggestive possibility" or "openness to mutual transformation," (2) "a rough coherence with what we otherwise know or more likely believe to be the case," and (3) "ethical-social-political criteria" concerning what the religious option will mean for both individual and society.

In addition to the strategy and criteria for interreligious dialogue, Tracy's experience has led him to retrieve the mystical and prophetic traditions in Christianity. Finally, this has led in turn to "continuing work on the central Christian question of God viewed from this prophetic-mystical and inter-religious model"—work currently in progress.

**Continuity and Development**

This overview makes it clear, I trust, that there has been both continuity and development in Tracy's theological project. It has been

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"The Question of Criteria for Inter-Religious Dialogue," chap. 13; and Dialogue with the Other, chap. 2.

Ibid. xi–xii.
dominated by his concern with theological method—how to do theology in an historically conscious and pluralistic context. He focused on pluralism within theology in Blessed Rage for Order, then on cultural pluralism in The Analogical Imagination, and currently on the pluralism of religious traditions in recent articles and Dialogue with the Other. The basic strategy for dealing positively with pluralism while still pursuing the question of truth is the model of dialogue or conversation on the basis of an analogical imagination. He has been consistently concerned that theology be done with responsibility to both the full Christian tradition and to the canons and methods of contemporary scholarship publicly available to all. He has attempted to include as many voices as possible in the conversation that is contemporary theology.

Some developments in Tracy's thought should be noted, however. As he himself mentions, he has continued to revise his form of the method of correlation, adding in the last ten years (but not before) "the important qualifier 'mutually critical' to the word 'correlation' in order to indicate the fuller range of possible correlations between some interpretations of the situation and some interpretations of the tradition."49 Further, he acknowledges that transcendental forms of theological reflection are far more difficult than he had once thought.50 He has given an increasingly important place to praxis in theology, indicating that all theory must give rise to transformative praxis. He has yet to write a volume on practical theology, however. We have already seen the increasing role of dialogue and solidarity with other cultures and other religious traditions as really other, and not merely a projected other.51 Finally, most recently, Tracy has construed the earlier dialectic of manifestation and proclamation in a "mystical-prophetic" way.52 Hence, today, he thinks that theology's central postmodern question is: "How can we find anew the power to name God in a mystical-prophetic way?"

**EVALUATION AND IMPLICATIONS**

While Tracy's theological project has generally been received with admiration and appreciation, it has also occasioned some critical responses as mentioned above. Some of these were relatively minor and pertain to one or other particular point or issue. I would like to discuss

50 Ibid. 902.
51 Ibid. 903.
52 Ibid. 904.
a few which pertain to the overall project. The first concerns Tracy’s claim for publicness in theology.

The issue of whether Christian theology could or should be done in a manner that is in principle available to any interested, intelligent, and responsible inquirer was posed most clearly and sharply by George Lindbeck in his provocative *The Nature of Doctrine*. Lindbeck argues that particular religions are like particular languages which shape or determine our experiential world—“a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought,” or again, “[religion] is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities.”

In this model, church doctrines function “not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.” They are like the rules of grammar and syntax. They are regulative of what can be said but do not have the character of propositional truth. He calls this a “cultural-linguistic” model of religion.

Lindbeck contrasts this model with a “propositionalist” model of religion which emphasizes the cognitive aspects of religion and in which “doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities.” He does not discuss this model further, but rather is more concerned with a second model, called an “experiential-expressive” model, under which rubric he lists David Tracy. He characterizes the experiential-expressive model as assuming that different religions are diverse expressions of a common core experience which is present in all human beings and which may be conscious but untheematized. Particular religions are merely specific expressions of this common experience. Tracy falls into this category apparently because of his appeal to common human experience and to the classic.

For Lindbeck, however, on the cultural-linguistic understanding of religion, religious language can only be meaningful for those within the linguistic system. Christian language functions only intratextually or intrasemiotically. It can only be fully understood by those whose world is shaped by the Christian language system. “The task of descriptive (dogmatic or systematic) theology is to give a normative

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53 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* 33. I have already mentioned others who have challenged Tracy on this issue (see n. 33 above).
54 Ibid. 18.
55 Ibid. 16.
56 Ibid. 114.
explication of the meaning a religion has for its adherents." Theological studies, then, can appeal to warrants available and meaningful only to Christians. Hence, theology is not and cannot be "public" in Tracy's sense of the word.

A more recent and more nuanced proponent of this position is William C. Placher. Admitting that Tracy "does not claim that there is some universally identical religious experience which different religions simply express in different languages" as Lindbeck's construction of experiential-expressivism claimed, Placher still argues that Tracy's appeal to limit-experiences and the religious dimension of ordinary experience seems "to presuppose a universal human something-or-other." Further, Tracy's appeal to the public nature of the great religious classics suggests to Placher "the kind of cultural argument for 'Christendom' Kierkegaard attacked with such fervor." The primary concern of these postliberal theologians is "to preserve the Christian vision free of distortion, and they mistrust systematic efforts to correlate Christian beliefs with more general claims about human experience, which seem to them always to risk constraining and distorting the Christian 'answers' to fit the 'questions' posed by some aspect of contemporary culture." The primary task of theology for them is Christian self-description, not correlation with universal human quests for ultimate meaning.

They are concerned to preserve the particularity of the Christian community and tradition, "arguing that any argument always takes place within some particular community and tradition." For them, "public" means "universal." Placher himself praises Tracy's aim "to get Christian theology involved in the public conversations of our culture," but feels that he risks "appealing to assumptions about universal criteria of rationality or the superiority of one particular cultural conversation." He is concerned lest philosophers or anyone else set the agenda or the rules for doing Christian theology. A legitimate concern, but not something of which Tracy is guilty. For Placher, when Christians engage in conversation with those of other religious traditions (and he thinks they should), they do so not on the basis of some

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57 Ibid. 113.
59 Ibid. 412.
61 Ibid. 19.
62 Ibid. 156.
63 Ibid. 160.
“publicly acceptable” criteria nor according to some universal rules or assumptions but on whatever common ground they might have with each particular conversation partner. He refers to this as “ad hoc apologetics.” Placher believes this approach allows for genuine conversation in a pluralistic world while avoiding the twin errors of philosophical foundationalism and radical relativism.

The real underlying concern of the postliberal theologians is the fear that Enlightenment rationalism and liberalism will silence the distinctive voice of Christianity in any conversation. They seem to feel this happens in academic departments of religion where the methods of the social sciences and a generalized phenomenology of religion prevail. While this concern may be legitimate, they can hardly accuse David Tracy of this.

For his part, Tracy, in response to Lindbeck's proposal of a cultural-linguistic, intratextual understanding of religion and the theological task, said that “Lindbeck's substantive theological position is a methodologically sophisticated version of Barthian confessionalism. The hands may be the hands of Wittgenstein and Geertz but the voice is the voice of Karl Barth.” It needed, he felt, “to manifest far more than the present work [1984] does its ability to handle the question of truth claims in theology to avoid (as he himself sees) the obvious charges of 'relativism,' 'confessionalism,' and even 'fideism.'” It is precisely this concern for the truth claims of each particular religious tradition that led Tracy to his understanding of the public character of all theological claims. Radical pluralism need not lead to radical relativism or narrow sectarianism. Tracy's strategy for doing theology publicly allows us to avoid both.

Let us look somewhat more briefly at two other questions which have been raised about Tracy's overall project. Werner Jeanrond, a former student of Tracy's and a friendly critic, suggests, first of all, that Tracy's hermeneutical theory needs further development. He says that it lacks an “explicit theory of text and reading,” that there is some conceptual confusion in the distinction between sense and referent as derived from Ricoeur, that Tracy is unclear about the ethical problem of interpretation, and unclear about when criticism of the content

65 Ibid. 169.
67 Ibid. 461.
should take place in the process of interpretation. Jeanrond believes that Tracy's hermeneutical theory is open to further developments and he attempts such developments in his own work.

The second question raised by Jeanrond concerns the relationship of hermeneutical theology to praxis. While praising Tracy for taking “account of all of the different approaches to hermeneutics in general and to biblical criticism in particular” and attempting to overcome all dogmatisms lurking in these approaches, he argues that Tracy’s “reflections remain at times within the confines of understanding with the occasional reference to liberating action or political programs.” We can agree with Tracy's hermeneutical project but need to “link it now dialectically to the development of principles and strategies of Christian action in this world.”

Both of these suggestions are intended to further Tracy’s project, not to contradict it. And Tracy himself agrees when he says, “There is no manifestation disclosure that is not also a call to transformation. There is no revelation without salvation. There is no theological theory without praxis. There need be no hermeneutic without pragmatics.”

But the link between these has yet to be forged. Tracy has said that he is not yet ready to write the promised volume on practical theology because he does not yet know his own mind on several major issues and because the focus of his theology has changed.

For myself, I think Tracy has firmly established the need for and possibility of genuine conversation in our pluralistic world, and therefore the need for publicness in theology. From its inception the Christian community has always believed it had Good News not only for itself but for the rest of the world. To speak this word anew in each generation, in each particular time and place, requires the continuing mutually-critical correlation between the full Christian tradition and


72 “God, Dialogue and Solidarity” 901.
the contemporary situation. Tracy has provided us with a sophisticated way of achieving this correlation.

More than that, however, I think Tracy has shown Roman Catholic theologians that, in a world constituted by plurality and ambiguity, it is still possible to articulate the Catholic Christian vision of hope in a way that is clear, simple, and true. We need to do more than reformulate old doctrines or write new catechisms. We need to return to that Catholic analogical imagination which Tracy articulated in his 1977 CTSA Presidential Address, to a trust that the cosmos is ordered by God and "that reality itself—in spite of all serious, sometimes overwhelming evidence to the contrary—is finally benign."

Tracy's theological project is, of course, still in progress, and it would be presumptuous to suggest where his quest for truth will lead him. He did give some indication of his future intent in the Preface to Plurality and Ambiguity, when he wrote: "What the 'essence of Christianity' might be after Christians seriously acknowledge first, the plurality within their own traditions, second, the import of the many other religious traditions for Christian self-understanding, and third, the profound cognitive, moral, and religious ambiguity of Christianity itself is, to put it mildly, a very difficult question—but that is another task for another time. . ." 73

73 Plurality and Ambiguity x.