

“CONVERSATION: OUR ONLY HOPE”

DAVID TRACY’S RESPONSE TO THE PRESENCE OF OTHERNESS

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Abstract: This article examines the manner in which the theologian, David Tracy has engaged the postmodern challenge of heterology, with its implication of social and political uncertainty, particularly through a method that is offered as a paradigm for theological reflection. This paradigm is constructed on the notion of ‘conversation’. The article details Tracy’s understanding of conversation and traces its implications for a postmodern perspective on truth whilst suggesting that the exercise of conversation, as a response to a pluralist and ambiguous context, presents the foundations of a postmodern spirituality.

Amongst a number of ways to define it, postmodernity might be thought fundamentally as resistance to the hegemonic impulse, a strategy of resistance to the impulse that would swallow up difference and otherness. In its heterological consciousness, postmodernity spawns a polycentric ethos. Discovered as radically inter-textual, the self no longer enjoys the illusion of Cartesian autonomy but is now confronted with the presence of ‘the other’ that it can no longer avoid. Michael Theunissen writes about the heterogeneity that appears to have achieved full consideration in postmodern expression:

Few issues have expressed as powerful a hold over the thought of [the 20th] century as that of “The Other.” It is difficult to think of a second theme, even one that might be of more substantial significance, that has provoked as widespread an interest as this one;

it is difficult to think of a second theme that so sharply marks off the present—admittedly a present growing out of the nineteenth century and reaching back into it from its historical roots in the tradition. To be sure, the problem of the other has at times been accorded a prominent place in ethics and anthropology, in legal and political philosophy. But the problem of the other has certainly never penetrated as deeply as today into the foundations of philosophical thought—the question of the other cannot be separated from the most primordial questions raised by modern thought.¹

At worst, the response to such an encounter with otherness might be one of denial or rejection. Alternatively, the response might be of a ‘repressive tolerance’ in which ‘the other’ is acknowledged but not engaged. Then, plurality dissolves into sheer heteronomy and relativism with the possibility of some kind of nihilistic anarchy. At best, however, ‘the other’s’ claim to attention might be respected and engaged. Then, there exists the possibility of a deepened understanding of the person as relational by definition, along with the opportunity to continue to forge a sense of the common good even in the midst of plurality and diversity.

A type of imagination needs to be cultivated in which there can be both sensitivity to sameness of ‘the Other’ and the radical alterity that resists reduction of ‘the Other.’ The instability of alterity must be lived with. Learning to accept and to encounter radical

¹ Michael Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the social ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber*, translated by Christopher Macann, (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1984), 1. Theunissen explores the original transcendental project of social ontology in Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity, its critical development in Heidegger and Sartre, and the philosophy of dialogue of Buber as the counterpoint to transcendental philosophy. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by R. Gregor Smith, 2nd edition. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958) and "Distance and Relation," in *The Knowledge of Man: Selected essays*, edited by M. Friedman, translated by M. Friedman and R. Gregor Smith, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965). Pfiel even goes so far as to depict the total field of postmodernism as a “distilled representation of the whole antagonistic, voracious world of otherness.” See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change*, (Cambridge, MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 49. For a further treatment of the development of the notion of otherness, see Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr., *Theology and the Dialectics of Otherness: On reading Bonhoeffer and Adorno*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988).

plurality that fully acknowledges singularity is always fragile because the ruptures and new sites of alterity can never be fully anticipated. Yet, it will be in the development and exercise of such an imagination those criteria to establish the value of pluralism and heterogeneity might be enunciated.

Particularly in its trinitarian understanding of divinity, Christian theology has already made a contribution in the development of such an imagination. This is because of the way in which Christian theology has struggled to define ‘personhood’ and, particularly, ‘divine personhood.’ Between the two tendencies of modalism and a weak theism, a critical retrieval of Orthodox trinitarian theology and contemporary feminist and liberation theologies enunciate a relational ontology that is helpful in resolving the problem of heterology². According to John Zizoulis, in patristic Greek ontology personhood precedes and is the cause of existence so that “true being comes only from the free person, the person who loves freely, i.e., who freely affirms his being, his identity, by means of an event of communion with other persons.”³ Such ontology focuses on personhood, relationship and communion as the modality of all existence. Patricia Wilson-Kastner, as a feminist theologian, extends this sense in her own retrieval of Damascene’s notion of *perichoresis* - “the dynamic and creative energy, the eternal and perpetual movement, the mutual and reciprocal permeation of each person with and

² For discussion on this retrieval and its current advantage over the traditional Western theological approach to personhood, see Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian life*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1973), 243-317.

³ John Zizoulis, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 18.

in and through and by the other persons.”⁴ Such trinitarian imagination allows for personhood to be both ‘self-possessed and other-oriented,’ and goes a long way to hold both heteronomy and autonomy in an authentic binary fashion.⁵

Though it may be affirmed in offering such a contribution to the resolution of the inherent difficulties in heterological awareness, Christian theology is, nonetheless challenged by this consciousness. If postmodernism “privileges heterogeneity and difference as liberative forces in the redefinition of cultural discourse”⁶ what are the wider implications for theology? How can theology with its own claims to universal truth accept that it is one voice amongst many others in a postmodern milieu which Pfeil depicts as a “distilled representation of the whole antagonistic, voracious world of otherness”⁷ How can theology work creatively with diversity and plurality? How can it maintain its own claim to otherness without requiring the defensive barriers of a ghetto in order to protect its distinctiveness? How can otherness be celebrated within its own enterprise? Not to engage this questioning runs the risk for theology to head self-

⁴ This definition is afforded by Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism and the Christ*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) as quoted in LaCugna, *God for Us*, 271. John Damascene’s notion of *perichoresis* can be found in his *De fide orthodoxa*, 8.

⁵ Leonardo Boff bases his own criticism of the social and political ramifications of Western rationality on this theme of *perichoresis*. See Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988). See also J.L. Segundo, *Our Idea of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1974). LaCugna calls for an integration of these two poles within the perichoretic movement into a third perspective which she calls ‘theonomy’: “The critique of feminism shows that both pure autonomy and pure heteronomy are destructive of persons. The doctrine of the Trinity helps us see that the true person is theonomous: The human person is named with reference to its origin and destiny in God . . . the ‘theanthroponomus’ person [quoting from Stanley Harakas, “Eastern Orthodox Christianity’s Ultimate Reality and Meaning: Triune God and Theosis,” *Ultimate Meaning and Reality* 8 (1985), 209-223] . . . represents the integration and transformation of both autonomy and heteronomy into bona fide communion.” *God for Us*, 290.

⁶ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 9.

⁷ F. Pfeil, “Postmodernism as a ‘structure of feeling,’” quoted in Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 49

defensively into an ahistorical orthodoxy fostering fundamentalist sectarianism or alternatively to adopt a naive and uncritical agnostic pluralism.⁸

David Tracy, of the University of Chicago, is a Roman Catholic theologian who has tried to engage these questions and to weave them within a theological method. Tracy is convinced that, given the cultural milieu, there can be no return to a pre-ecumenical, pre-pluralistic, ahistorical theology. It is his conviction that only by respecting the postmodern drive to face otherness and difference that theology itself will be restored as 'other': transgressive and disturbing. Such an approach, he believes, holds the potential for a liberating imagination.

According to Tracy, the global culture now suggested, "impels everyone-every individual, every group, every culture, every religious and theological tradition to recognize the plurality within each self, among all selves, all traditions, all cultures in the face of the elusive, pervasive whole of reality."⁹ The major price for pluralism is the acceptance of the full significance of the presence of many centres:

A fact seldom admitted by the moderns, the anti-moderns, and the post-moderns alike-even with all the talk of otherness and difference-is that there is no longer *a* center with margins. There are many centers. Pluralism is an honourable but sometimes a too easy way of admitting this fact. Too many forms of modern Western theological pluralism are historicist,

⁸ Fred Lawrence, "The Fragility of Consciousness: Lonergan and the Postmodern Concern for the Other," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993), 79. Lawrence is citing Leslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel and public truth*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1991). Jennifer L. Rike describes the alternatives as "a lapse into repressive monism or a scattering into an anarchic eclectism" See "Introduction," in *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion.*, edited by Werner G. Jeanrond and Jennifer L. Rike, (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xii.

⁹ David Tracy, "Defending the Public Character of Theology: How my mind has changed", *The Christian Century* 98 (1 April, 1981), 355.

but too a-historical as well as curiously a-theological in their visions to allow for the unsettling reality of our polycentric present. There is a price to be paid for any genuine pluralism—that price many pluralists seem finally either unwilling to pay or unable to see. It is that there is no longer a center. There are many. And the conflicts about how to interpret the Western present (modern, anti-modern, post-modern) can often prove to be either blunt or subtle refusals to face the *fascinans et tremendum* actuality of our polycentric present.¹⁰

Enjoying James’ “buzzing, blooming confusion,”¹¹ Tracy insists that the recognition of the plurality of ways within every great religion, themselves, is an ethical and religious responsibility, especially in light of the worldwide neoconservative resurgence. Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that to attack plurality is to “undermine some central religious power in the religion itself.”¹² Plurality is a fact, Tracy claims; diversity is an empirical claim.¹³ The response to the fact, however, can be twofold. Either plurality is welcomed and engaged through an affirmation of pluralism, or it can be disdained by a retreat of theology into increasing privatization. Let us explore at more length both alternatives as Tracy imagines them.

Firstly, embracing pluralism as an evaluation of the fact of plurality, Tracy argues that pluralism suggests a responsible and fruitful option in the face of plurality because it

¹⁰ David Tracy, “On Naming the Present,” in *On the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, edited by The Foundation; English language editor Philip Hillyer, (SCM Press: London/Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 67.

¹¹ David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Interreligious Dialogue*, (Louvain: Eerdmans/Peeters Press, 1990), 28.

¹² David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, religion, hope*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 96.

¹³ David Tracy, “Christianity in the Wider Context: Demands and Transformations,” in *Worldviews and Warrants: Plurality and Authority in Theology*, edited by William Schweiker and Per M. Anderson, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 2.

demands “us to develop better ways as selves, as communities of inquirers, as societies, as cultures, as an inchoately global culture, to discover more possibilities to enrich our personal and communal lives.”¹⁴ Thus, any second-order account and evaluation of plurality itself should itself be pluralistic.¹⁵ As such, Tracy finds pluralism to be, congenially, a faithful mixture of the two bases of his Western culture. It combines the notion of dialogue from the Greek basis and the notion of the priority of the future that is located in the Jewish-Christian basis of Western culture.¹⁶

Nonetheless, Tracy is well aware that genuine pluralism can easily degenerate into the nihilistic relativism, or into what he terms simply a ‘negative pluralism’. This is the “genial confusion in which one tries to enjoy the pleasures of difference without ever committing oneself to any particular vision of resistance and hope.”¹⁷ It connotes a relaxed if not “lazy pluralism contenting itself with sharing private stories while both the authentically public character of every good story and the real needs of the wider society go unremarked.”¹⁸ Still a further manifestation of this relativism, with its ensuing privatization, is a “repressive tolerance” where all conflict can be “patronized into mere difference-of-opinion (or, as the limit, of personal ‘preference’)” to reductionism, to

¹⁴ Tracy, “Christianity in the Wider Context,” 3.

¹⁵ Tracy, “Christianity in the Wider Context,” 3.

¹⁶ Tracy, “Christianity in the Wider Context,” 13.

¹⁷ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 90.

¹⁸ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 6.

'more of the same', giving substance to Simone de Beauvoir's charge that "pluralism is the perfect ideology for the bourgeois mind."¹⁹

In addition to the "repressive tolerance" of a "negative pluralism," there exists in Tracy's opinion, a new hegemony in society that constitutes an even further threat to a constructive pluralism. This is the techno-economic hegemony of positivism. Tracy regards positivism as intellectually a spent force but he acknowledges that it remains significant culturally. In a society marked by such cultural positivism "history is emptied of real time and becomes at best a bad infinity: an infinity of more of the same".²⁰ A 'techno-economic' ethos is spawned in which "reason is reduced to a purely technical function; technology continues with neither direction nor hope as its genuine liberating possibilities are mixed, without reflection, into a dominating and leveling power over all."²¹ To Tracy, the reigning technocracy "makes a desert and calls it peace"- a wasteland in which all memory, all resistance, all difference and all hope become leveled. The present becomes "an empty time" - bereft of memory, free of hope and powerless to resist.²² Inevitably, such a form of reasoning threatens to "destroy any genuine public

¹⁹ See Tracy, "Christianity in the Wider Context," 5, 6.

²⁰ Tracy, "On Naming the Present," 70.

²¹ Tracy, "On Naming the Present," 70. See also David Tracy, "Literary Theory and Return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God in Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74 (1994), 303-304.

²² Tracy, "On Naming the Present," 69.

realm of modernity by destroying the emancipatory and the communicative character of reason itself.”²³

In Tracy’s thinking it is critical, therefore, that any affirmation of pluralism be a responsible one. This affirmation needs to be one that includes a strategy of resistance as well as a non-foundationalist affirmation of truth. The public criteria for that affirmation must also be enunciated, so that the inevitable conflicts of interpretation do not result in a ‘chaotic pluralism’ but rather the ‘responsible and collaborative pluralism’ in which differences need not become dialectical oppositions.²⁴

It is from the midst of this critical celebration of plurality with its concomitant resistance to its alternative that Tracy’s impetus for a fundamental openness to ‘otherness’ emerges. Tracy underlines that postmodernity begins by trying to think the unthought of modernity: the ‘other’ which he agrees has now come forward as the central intellectual category across all the major disciplines, including theology.

The others and the different—both those from other cultures and those others not accounted for by the grand narratives of the dominant culture—return with full ethical force to unmask the secretly social-evolutionary narrative of modernity as ultimately an implausible reading of our human history together.²⁵

²³ David Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” in *Readings in Modern Theology*, edited by Robin Gill, (London: SPCK Press, 1995), 227.

²⁴ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 30.

²⁵ David Tracy, “The Hidden God: The Divine Other of Liberation”, *Cross Currents* 46 (Spring, 1996), 5-6.

To allow such an ‘other’ to stand truly as ‘other’ is, indeed, a difficult project. In our “secret wish to still be centre”²⁶ there is every danger of others being present, “if at all, only as projections of our modern selves, our desires, wants, needs.”²⁷ If this is the case, however, we then project, for example, a Christian consciousness upon the other, which, in Tracy’s mind, has often been the case in Christianity’s encounter with both pagan and Jew.²⁸ Encountering only a ‘projected other’ remains the tendency for those who “may run for security to the increasingly heteronomous privatization in which once proud and enriching traditions harden into ideologies and once daring interpreters of the tradition become bureaucratic personalities.”²⁹

For Tracy, to face otherness, fully and squarely, is to enter a *mysterium fascinans et tremendum* experience. Here, one willingly risks all one’s present self-understanding in the presence of the other. Tracy describes the depth of such an experience by echoing Levinas’ insistence on the “terror of [real] otherness.”³⁰ That terror is well encapsulated as Tracy runs through the list of those others whose voice waits to be heard:

²⁶ Tracy, “On Naming the Present,” 67.

²⁷ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 4, 6.

²⁸ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other* 5, 49.

²⁹ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 100.

³⁰ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 73. See also Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 22. Tracy is drawing from Levinas, “Trace of the Other” in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and philosophy*, edited by Mark C. Taylor, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). The Australian writer, David J. Tacey remarks about this terror of other that “in countless novels and movies, ‘the other’ presents itself as something alien, archaic, weird, and yet that other insists on making its presence felt in running rampant through the safe precincts of our narrowly human world. The power of the alien intruders is all the more awesome and autonomous because we fail to understand our relationship to them . . .” See *Edge of the Sacred Transformation in Australia*, (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1995), 182.

And yet the voices of others multiply: the hysterics and mystics speaking through Lacan; the mad and the criminals allowed to speak by Foucault; the primal peoples, once misnamed the primitives, defended and interpreted by Eliade; the dead whose story the victors still presume to tell; the repressed suffering of peoples cheated of their own experience by modern mass media; the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalised—all those considered “nonpersons” by the powerful but declared by the great prophets of be God’s own privileged ones . . . Their voices can seem strident and uncivil—in a word, other. And they are. We have all just begun to sense the terror of that otherness. But only by beginning to listen to those other voices may we also begin to hear the otherness within our own discourse and within ourselves. What we might then begin to hear, above our own chatter, are possibilities we have never dared to dream.³¹

That terror of otherness emerges for Tracy in several key places through his writings. It emerges as he comes to terms with the end of European domination and centrality, and the implications of this death for theology, particularly the development of interreligious dialogue. It is certainly at the basis of his correlational theological method which as a particular appreciation of the otherness of ‘the situation at its heart. It comes to the fore as he struggles with the full recognition of the reality of the Unconscious, as it does in the claims to attention of feminist theology and the political theologies of the oppressed and marginalised. It is given paradigmatic concern in the encounter with that ‘other,’ the

³¹ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 79. In various places, Tracy gives illustration of ‘otherness.’ See for example, “The Uneasy Alliance Reconceived,” 551; *Dialogue with the Other*, 3; *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 15. In reference to Ferdinand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols., (New York: Harper and Row, 1972-3), Tracy even alludes to how the “*Annales* school, in one sense, can be said to radicalise this archaeology of the other by their accounts of the importance of those ultimate nonhuman others, climate and geography.” See *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 132. Note how the Australian writer, David J. Tacey refers to the Australian landscape as ‘other’. Tacey, too, regards ‘the other’ as complex, awesome, subtle, many sided, and must be entered into relationship with.” Contemporary Australian writing, he asserts, “can virtually be summed up as a literature of the other. ‘Other’, ‘abnormal’, ‘aberrant’ types of people are explored, revealing new resonances, depths and insecurities about ‘normal’ people . . . Otherness has hit us with enormous cultural force; we are awash in the sea of otherness, and that is the best definition I know of the ‘postmodern condition.’” See *Edge of the Sacred*, 113-114.

classic. The classic is assumed, by definition, to be that “which always has the power to transform the horizon of the interpreter and thereby disclose new meaning and experiential possibilities.”³² The force of the classic is

the claim to attention, a vexing, a provocation exerted on the subject by the classic text. The subject may not know why or how that claim exercises its power . . . But that the claim to attention is present—that something like what we have called a realized experience, ranging from a haunting sense of resonance and import to a shock of recognition, that sheer event-like thatness - is what cannot be denied. My *doxai* are suddenly confronted with a *paradoxon* demanding attention.³³

For Tracy, however, it is through careful attentiveness to ‘the other’ and in conversation with the classic expressions of the human spirit that holds the potential “to free us all to the fuller reality of a liberating analogical imagination.”³⁴

What we are freed for in such attentiveness to otherness is, ultimately, the experience of Truth as manifestation. Congruent with his notion of revelation, Tracy is adamant about the essential gift nature of truth in manifestation. “Truth, in its primordial sense, is manifestation,” Tracy asserts.³⁵ “Truth manifests itself, and we recognize its rightness.”³⁶

As he goes on to elucidate

³² David Tracy, “The Particularity and Universality of Christian Revelation,” in *Revelation and Experience*, edited by Edward Schillebeeckx and Bas van Israel, *Concilium* 113, (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 111.

³³ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 119.

³⁴ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 452.

³⁵ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 29.

³⁶ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 28.

The realized experience of the truth-character of the religious classic is an experience of its purely given character, its status as an event, a happening manifested *to* my experience, neither determined by nor produced by my subjectivity. Insofar as I honor experience itself, I may accord this experience the status of a claim to truth as the manifestation of a “letting be seen” of what is, as it shows itself to experience.³⁷

This power of the otherness of the classic, particularly, to disclose is apparent to all those who genuinely risk the encounter. “Anyone,” declares Tracy, “who has experienced even one such moment-in watching a film, in listening to music, in looking at a painting, in participating in a religious ritual, in reading a classic text, in conversation with friends, or in finding oneself in love-knows that truth as manifestation is real.”³⁸

Tracy wishes to focus on an appropriate understanding of truth that is not tied to a discredited foundational ontology. He has tried to recover the aesthetic dimension of truth to prevent an instrumental understanding of it. He thus asserts that, “the truth of religion, is like the truth of its nearest cousin, art.”³⁹ I do not think that Tracy hereby equates religion with art, but

In an analogous fashion, religion, like art, discloses new resources of meaning and truth to anyone willing to risk allowing that disclosure to “happen.” It will happen, the systematic-as-hermeneutical theologians believe, by faithful attendance to, and thereby involvement in and interpretation of, the truth-disclosure of genuinely new possibilities for human life in any classical religious tradition of taste, tact and common (communal) sense.⁴⁰

³⁷ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 198.

³⁸ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 29.

³⁹ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 43.

⁴⁰ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 67.

In the understanding of revelation as primordially manifestation, the subject places him or herself before the claims to a truth of an event-like manifestation of the whole – “that event of self-manifestation by the power of the whole which Christians and Jews name ‘revelation.’”⁴¹ In this I am reminded of Louis Massignon’s commentary on truth:

Truth is a purely spiritual and serene relationship which exists between two partners through understanding (Plato), the stranger becoming host . . . Only in exercising hospitality towards another (instead of colonising him), in sharing the same work, the same bread, as honourable companions, can one understand the Truth that unites us socially . . . One can only find truth through the practice of hospitality.⁴²

Thus, truth manifests itself in a radical hospitality, animated by a receptive and open conversation. Conversation, as a hermeneutical model, of course, does not originate with Tracy. As with other principal insights of Tracy’s, this one, too, is taken from an existing source, in this case the hermeneutical endeavour of Hans-Georg Gadamer.⁴³ It is the application of the model to the theological project, within a broader synthesis of assuming the postmodern challenge that gives Tracy his distinction.

Tracy is convinced that “without genuine conversation, no manifestation.”⁴⁴ Conversation is the *milieu* through which truth manifests itself; the manifestation of truth

⁴¹ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 173. Note also Karl Rahner’s concept of revelation as ‘self-manifestation.’ See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 117-126.

⁴² Louis Massignon, *Opera Minora*, III, 608-9, quoted in Pierre-François Bethune, “Interreligious Hospitality,” *Vatican Bulletin of the Secretariat for Non-Christians* 67 (1988).

⁴³ See in particular Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by William Glen-Doepel, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 330ff, 344ff, 487ff.

⁴⁴ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 28.

is the first fruits of a truly dialogical life. Precisely through our willingness to dialogue, on the one hand, and the power to disclose, particularly inherent in the religious classic, on the other, truth is manifested.

How might conversation achieve this manifestation? As the interaction between the other's 'disclosure-concealment' and the subject's recognition,⁴⁵ conversation is an exploration of possibilities in search of truth.⁴⁶ Following Gadamer's insight, this exploration works like a game for Tracy. The value of games is that they "liberate our ability to understand ourselves by facing something different, other, and sometimes strange."⁴⁷ So in a game "we can free ourselves from ourselves, however briefly."⁴⁸ In the game of conversation we learn to give in to the movement of questioning. "The subject is released by the to-and-fro movement of the question and response of the subject-matter under discussion."⁴⁹ The ability to converse is the ability, therefore, "to become caught up in the to and fro movement of the logic of the question and response with the other."⁵⁰ Only when the subject matter, and not the subject's own self-

⁴⁵ See David Tracy, "Religious Studies and Its Community of Inquiry," *Criterion* 25 (1986):3, 24.

⁴⁶ See Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 20.

⁴⁷ See Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 18.

⁴⁸ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 17.

⁴⁹ David Tracy, "Hermeneutical Reflections in the New Paradigm," in Hans Küng and David Tracy, *Paradigm Change in Theology*, (New York: Crossroad), 41.

⁵⁰ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 64.

consciousness, is allowed to take over can there be authentic conversation. Certainly, when no question other than our own is allowed conversation is impossible.⁵¹

Conversation, as a hermeneutical model - as the model for engagement with 'the other,' respects - that human knowledge is always embodied, that it is communal, finite and discursive. "We human beings must reason discursively, inquire communally, converse and argue with ourselves and one another."⁵² And so the dialogical project is both a mode of human life, according to Tracy, and itself a manifestation of the dialogical reality of all human life.⁵³ It is not as if conversation is "imposed upon our experience of interpretation as some new *de jure* method, norm or rule.

Tracy is clear what a conversation is not. It is not a debate or a confrontation. "It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go. . . We learn to play the game of conversation when we allow questioning to take over."⁵⁴ Tracy admits that genuine conversation is a rare phenomenon. Perhaps this is because it is a game with some hard rules:

say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to

⁵¹ See Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 95; *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 18.

⁵² Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 25.

⁵³ See Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 28.

⁵⁴ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 18.

confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it.⁵⁵

At first, this may sound to the render a contradiction of Tracy's stipulation of what a conversation is not. Tracy certainly does admit that, whilst not primary, argument is a vital moment in conversation that occasionally is required in order to move the conversation forward. Further, even though there is a possibility that they might distance us from our primal sense of participation in the conversation, the role of methods, techniques, explanations and theories should not be abandoned.⁵⁶ They remain, however, at all times subservient to that one goal, unless the demands of argument take over and obscure openness to manifestation in the conversation.⁵⁷

These methods, techniques and explanations, at times involving argument, are important to Tracy since they ensure that the response to the other, particularly when understood as text, will be critical and active and not merely passively receptive.⁵⁸ The encounter with 'the other' cannot occur with simple passivity, with mere aesthetic sensibility.⁵⁹ At worst, we are not merely the television viewer who, in Thomas Merton's words, is marked by "[p]assivity, uncritical absorption, receptivity, inertia."⁶⁰ Rather, we are

⁵⁵ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 19. In many ways, as Tracy himself admits, these rules reformulate Lonergan's principles of "Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change." See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (New York: Seabury, 1972), 231.

⁵⁶ See Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 40-41, 46.

⁵⁷ See Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 26, 29.

⁵⁸ See Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 107.

⁵⁹ See Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 167.

⁶⁰ Thomas Merton, "Inner Experience: Problems of the Contemplative Life (VII)", *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 19 (1984), 269. Merton's description is meant to caricature the experience of contemplation.

required to stand before ‘the other’ fully risking our present self-understanding, open to the possibility of transformation. In other words, both our own self-understanding and the perception of our own tradition may change in the encounter with the otherness of the religious classic, for example. In this light, it would be good to recall Tracy’s striking assertion that the encounter with the religious classic, in particular, was the most dangerous conversation of all.

. . . we enter the conversation with the religious classics at great risk. For we may find that our present mode of being in the world is disclosed as either inauthentic, spent, finished-or disclosed as confirmed beyond any hope for confirmation; we may find some manifestation of another style or ethos of living bearing the redescriptive power of a manifestation that this is what reality itself in its sheer actuality is, along with the prescriptive force of a demand that our present mode of living be changed.⁶¹

Only critical engagement can yield the transformation that is possible in the encounter with this other.

Genuine conversation demands the intellectual, moral, and, at the limit, the religious ability to struggle to hear another and to respond-to respond critically, and even suspiciously when necessary, but to respond nonetheless.⁶² That response must be to a

Authentic contemplation, on the other hand, bears a striking resemblance to what Tracy is suggesting here as the required attitude before the religious classic as ‘other’. It is an interesting note that one of Merton’s own books, his 1965-1965 journals, is aptly entitled, “A vow of conversation”. See Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*, edited by Naomi Burton Stone, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988). Merton’s own attempt to conjoin contemplation and conversation in the pursuit of truth endures as a laudable illustration of Tracy’s own vision.

⁶¹ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 171.

⁶² Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 4. In this Tracy takes Gadamer a step further. Gadamer would argue for the retrieval of the classic text in the hermeneutical endeavour. Yet Tracy adds to this challenge of retrieval, the one of suspicion as well. The factor of ‘suspicion’ is consonant with his idea of argument as a possible moment of vitality in the conversation. See David Tracy, “Hermeneutical Reflections in the New

real other, and not simply a projected other. The partners in conversation must begin, for Tracy, with a “facing of the other as radically other and as critically demanding.”⁶³ This is indeed a ‘place of terror’, because as we turn and face the other in conversation we risking all our present self-understanding in the presence of the other.⁶⁴ Tracy is fully aware of the challenge here. He knows that such an exercise that demands the willingness to risk all in the questioning and inquiry that constitutes conversation will require foundational self-respect.⁶⁵ It is a movement that involves both self-transcendence and critical reflection combined.⁶⁶ It is also a project that risks the possibility of change.

Tracy is supported in his appreciation of conversation as *the* strategy to deal with the problem of otherness from a variety of sources. David Hollenbach, for example, speaks of the need for a solidarity that has both intellectual and social dimensions as the required way to deal with pluralism:

What I propose to call *intellectual solidarity* is a spirit of willingness to take other persons and groups seriously enough to engage them in conversation and debate about how the independent world we share should be shaped and structured.

Paradigm,” in *Paradigm Change in Theology*, edited by Hans Küng and David Tracy, translated by Margaret Köhl, (New York: Crossroad), 43-45.

⁶³ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 95. Tracy closely echoes Gadamer on this point, at least. “Anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. When two people understand each other, this does not mean that one person ‘understands’ the other. Similarly, ‘to hear and obey someone’ does not mean simply that we do blindly what the other desires. We call such a person slavish. Openness to the other, then, involves recognising that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one forces me to do so.” See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 361.

⁶⁴ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 73, 95; *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 93.

⁶⁵ See Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 73.

⁶⁶ See Tracy, “Christianity in the Wider Context,” 10-11.

Thus, it calls for public discourse about diverse versions of the good life. *Such discourse is quite different from the tolerance recommended by Rawls as the best we can do in responding to pluralism.* Tolerance is a strategy of disengagement and avoidance of fundamental questions of value in public life. This disengagement is precisely what we cannot afford if we wish to shape our interdependent existence in humanly worthy ways. In contrast with this, intellectual solidarity calls for engagement with the other through both listening and speaking, in the hope that understanding might replace incomprehension and that perhaps even agreement could result.⁶⁷ [Italics mine]

There appear to be inherent factors that disqualify certain ‘others’ for conversation in Tracy’s model that he has neither alluded to, nor to which he has responded. Paradoxically, his response hitherto has been to the criticism that his conversation is, in fact, too all-inclusive. But, aware that his enthusiasm for plurality can be confused with a liberal notion of openness that never resists the other and the different, Tracy does state that “[c]ertain forms of difference and otherness (sexism, racism, classism, elitism, anti-Semitism) demand resistance, not openness. They demand exclusion from conversation, not inclusion in it.”⁶⁸ Consequent to the charges of liberalism, Tracy has also been keen to point out that the end of conversation, in his thinking, is not some form of reconciliation which would be the elimination of differences, but “hope”⁶⁹ – presumably,

⁶⁷ David Hollenbach, “Virtue, the Common Good, and Democracy,” in *New Communitarian Thinking: Persons, Virtues, Institutions and Communities*, edited by Amitai Etzioni, (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 150. For an example of Rawls’ “common sense sociology” with which Hollenbach is taking issue, see John Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7 (1987):4, 12ff. Robert Gascoigne, offers a useful critique on the Church’s own need to be an active conversation partner in a pluralist society in “Christian Faith and the Public Forum in a Pluralist Society,” *Colloquium* 26 (1994):2, 116-129.

⁶⁸ See Tracy’s response to “Review Symposium: *Plurality and Ambiguity, Hermeneutics, religion, hope*,” *Theology Today* 44 (1988), 512.

⁶⁹ See “Review Symposium: *Plurality and Ambiguity*,” 516.

the hope that society need not dissolve into sheer heteronomy but can continue to forge a common good in and through difference and otherness.

As a strategy by which pluralism can be both affirmed and engaged, conversation presents as a noble path. It is a good idea. But not only is its viability contingent on the kind of considerations raised above, it is also firstly dependent on even ‘the other’s’ basic willingness to enter the conversation. What if ‘the other’ is simply unwilling, or even hostile to enter the conversation? This surely must be considered as a real possibility. What then of the affirmation of pluralism? Tracy can affirm pluralism because he is convinced of the possibilities inherent in the method of conversation. But to a large extent such conviction is illustrative of the Tracian optimism that can also claim, as we have seen, that “all is grace.”⁷⁰ That optimism may well bear with it a certain naivety. Tracy seems to lack an alternative strategy in the (inevitable?) event that conversation is not possible. Is conversation the only strategy available that can avoid dissolution into sheer heteronomy? Tracy is yet to consider viable, and perhaps less idealistic, options.

Nevertheless, when the questions in a true conversation with ‘the other,’ however different, other or even strange, are indeed followed, albeit in optimal conditions, then, a unique result occurs in Tracy’s opinion. Two things emerge: hope and meaning. For Tracy, conversation is *the* hope within the postmodern labyrinth of difference and otherness. Hope itself is grounded in the method and possibility of conversation.⁷¹ “If

⁷⁰ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 386.

⁷¹ See Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 78.

we are to hear one another again, then dialogue and the solidarity amidst the differences and conflicts which dialogue may demand is our best present hope.”⁷² In turn, this hope is “granted by the one Reality, or Ultimate, that must be radically other and different, however that reality is named.”⁷³ Conversation is, at heart, a theological reality. Secondly, in conversation, open to the manifestation of truth that genuine conversation yields, we recognize that we are never the pure creator of meaning. Meaning is fundamentally dialogical and received as gift. “To recognize the other *as* other, the different *as* different is also to acknowledge that other world of meaning as, in some manner, a possible option for myself.”⁷⁴ Otherness and difference become genuine possibility – ‘the other’ *as* other, ‘the other’ *as* different becomes the *as* possible.⁷⁵ Difference and otherness provoke the disclosure of possibility. To acknowledge the claim to attention of ‘the other’, as other, is to acknowledge that other world of meaning in some manner a genuine possibility for myself.⁷⁶ To recognize possibility, however, is to sense some similarity to what has already been experience or understood. This similarity, the basis of the relationship with ‘the other’, is however described by Tracy as similarity-in-difference, that is, analogy.⁷⁷ Whenever possibility enters the conversation Tracy recommends that some similarity-in-difference cannot be far behind.

⁷² Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 5.

⁷³ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 85.

⁷⁴ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 41.

⁷⁵ See Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 21.

⁷⁶ See David Tracy, “The Uneasy Alliance Reconcepted: Catholic Theological Method, Modernity and Postmodernity,” *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), 562.

⁷⁷ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 20.

The major consequence of this possibility is a correlational theological method.⁷⁸ Tracy is the first to indicate that ‘correlation’ does not entail a belief in harmony, convergence or sameness – which critics of such a method are apt to confuse.⁷⁹ “Correlation logically entails only the notion that *some* relationship is involved. This could be one of nonidentity, of identity, of similarity in difference.”⁸⁰

Conversation is a method of resistance. It is resistance to the “transient pleasures of irony . . . or a flight into despair and cynicism . . . a new kind of innocence or a passivity masking apathy.”⁸¹ Conversation with the classic is a method of memory and hope, the two central marks of resistance for Tracy:

Whoever fights for hope, fights on behalf of us all. Whoever acts on that hope, acts in a manner worthy of a human being. And whoever so acts, I believe, acts in a manner faintly suggestive of the reality and power of that God in whose image human beings were formed to resist, to think, and to act. The rest is prayer, observance, discipline, conversation, and actions of solidarity-in-hope. Or the rest is silence.⁸²

The self that enters the conversation with ‘the other’ is thus transformed into an agent of memory and hope.

⁷⁸ See Tracy, “Uneasy Alliance Reconceived,” 556.

⁷⁹ As an example of the criticism of such a method, see Neil Ormerod’s criticism of Roger Haight’s assertion that ‘correlation is *the* method for theology.’ Neil Ormerod, “Quarrels with the Method of Correlation,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996), 707-719; and Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), passim.

⁸⁰ Tracy, “Uneasy Alliance Reconceived,” 562.

⁸¹ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 114.

⁸² Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 114.

Tracy is obviously suggesting that conversation, then, is not optional for the Christian. Rather, conversation is a way of life for the Christian, made in the image of a relational, heterocentric God in whom eternally there is dialogue. Openness to the other in conversation is a way of freedom and, yes, even of identity, for the self. The challenge that emerges from this perspective is surely the retrieval of a genuine theology and spirituality of conversation. It is precisely in the conversation open to the Stranger, paradigmatically expressed in the Emmaus story of Luke 24, that transforms fear into possibility, doubt into courage, and finally, as Tracy has attempted to illustrate, self-enclosure into a generous openness of spirit marked by hospitality - the kingdom of God present in the world.

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