

“Given that David Tracy is, without question, one of the most important theologians in the contemporary period, one wonders why there are not more accessible introductions to this ‘theologian’s theologian.’ Stephen Okey’s work wonderfully fills that urgent need! He covers all the major themes of Tracy’s work thus far, pitching them perfectly for the reader to want to plunge into a more careful study of Tracy’s work itself. This is no small feat and an incredible service for all the ‘publics’ of theology. Kudos!”

— Dr. Julius-Kei Kato, SSL, PhD  
King’s College, Western University  
London, Ontario, Canada

“The breadth and depth of David Tracy’s theological scholarship and understanding is breathtaking for those who want to grasp the complexity of contemporary culture and its religious dimensions. Stephen Okey’s *A Theology of Conversation* provides a clear and solidly researched guide through the many developments in Tracy’s work. By focusing both on the prominent themes in Tracy’s theology, as well as the chronological development of those themes throughout the entire corpus of Tracy’s writings, Okey has admirably given all of us a guide to David Tracy’s thinking and introduced his work to the next generation of those who want to understand what theology is all about.”

— John McCarthy  
Loyola University Chicago

“With his deft introduction to David Tracy’s wide-ranging work, Stephen Okey has chosen just the right point of entry. For Tracy is a theological and cultural conversationalist *par excellence*, willing to dialogue with all who share his ‘obsession’ with the hidden, impossible, and loving God. Okey’s insightful analysis of Tracy’s focal concerns provides a clear map to the contributions of one of the most interesting and important theologians of our time.”

— Anthony J. Godzieba  
Professor of Theology and Religious Studies  
Villanova University

“Okey is a sure guide to the complex and demanding work of one of America’s most original theologians. Tracy’s sophisticated project of theological conversation is much needed in our age of shallow, closed thinking and polarization.”

— Vincent J. Miller  
Gudorf Chair in Catholic Theology and Culture  
University of Dayton

“Stephen Okey’s lucid and insightful introduction to David Tracy’s ‘theology as conversation’ is a welcome antidote to what passes for theological discourse in our fractured attempts to speak about God, self, and world in a situation of religious pluralism. His presentation of Tracy’s project in conversation with other interlocutors emulates the very model of theology as ‘conversation’ that Tracy presents. I highly recommend it!”

— Mary Ann Hinsdale, IHM  
Boston College

# A Theology of Conversation

An Introduction to David Tracy

*Stephen Okey*

Foreword by  
*David Tracy*



LITURGICAL PRESS  
ACADEMIC

Collegeville, Minnesota  
[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

Cover design by Monica Bokinskie. Photo courtesy of The University of Chicago Divinity School.

Excerpts from documents of the Second Vatican Council are from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery, OP, © 1996. Used with permission of Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota.

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### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Okey, Stephen, author.

Title: A theology of conversation : an introduction to David Tracy / Stephen Okey.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018022814 (print) | LCCN 2018034325 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814684429 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814684184

Subjects: LCSH: Tracy, David. | Catholic Church—Doctrines.

Classification: LCC BX4705.T73545 (ebook) | LCC BX4705.T73545 O34 2018 (print) | DDC 230/.2092—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018022814>

*For Paige*



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# Foreword

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It is an honor to introduce this fine, thoughtful, critical book by Professor Stephen Okey. Professor Okey not only writes excellently about the nature of a pluralistic theology grounded in conversation or dialogue; he practices his theory.

Since Plato, dialogue or conversation has proved one of the major forms of thinking in Western culture. Conversation includes argument, not the reverse.

It is a misfortune that we lack the dialogues of Plato's most famous student, Aristotle. Both Cicero and Quintilian praised Aristotle's dialogues. We possess only fragments of a few of them. Happily we do possess the arguments in treatise form of Aristotle: some from student notes (as with a good deal of what we have from Hegel). Some of the texts of Aristotle that we do possess were probably edited by his own hand as their more conceptually defined and stylistically refined form shows (for example, Aristotle's splendid *Nicomachean Ethics*).

But Plato with his incomparable dialogues—Cicero and Hume are the only real competitors to Plato—always included arguments and close analysis when clarity or evidence demanded them. Aristotle, famously called by Dante “the master of those who know,” is indeed the master of logical analyses and of evidential scientific reasoning. He was, after all, a marine biologist far less interested in the role of mathematics for philosophy than was Plato but far more given to careful analytical definitions (i.e., propositions that apply to all cases of X—e.g., justice—and only cases of X) than earlier philosophers, including Plato.

My own intellectual instincts, as Professor Okey makes clear and persuasive, have always been more with Plato and with Hans-Georg Gadamer on conversation as the primary intellectual mode. However, I have always tried to be completely open, as Professor Okey

consistently argues, to the need for arguments when necessary (as they so often are). At the same time I have learned from mentors like Bernard Lonergan with his love of modern scientific reasoning and cognitional theory and from Paul Ricoeur with his brilliant corrective of Gadamer by adding explanatory theories to the model of conversation. This brief excursus on conversation and argument may serve, I hope, as praise for Professor Okey's expertise in both.

Besides a theory of conversation, which Professor Okey persuasively finds in my work, he also possesses strong interpretive skills as well as conversational and argumentative skills that he employs to both hermeneutical and conversational-argumentative effect through his calm, considered work of interpretation, analysis, and critique.

Professor Okey employs his considerable hermeneutical skills in his very selection of categories and themes in my work that he chooses as central:

conversation itself;

theology as public;

pluralism (not only plurality);

a lifelong concern (thanks to early study with Bernard Lonergan) with the issue of theological method;

the relationship of the categories, a "classic" and a "fragment," whose intrinsic relationship and difference Professor Okey brilliantly interprets;

a Christology related principally to an "interpretation" of New Testament Christologies and of some contemporary christological controversies (e.g., on the christological role, or lack thereof, in the endless debates on the quest for the "historical Jesus");

above all, on the question of God—as Duns Scotus saw so clearly—the category of the "Infinite" is the first name for God both metaphysically and theologically (i.e., from God as metaphysically Infinite to the trinitarian understanding of God as Infinite Love).

In sum, I remain deeply thankful for all the careful research of Professor Okey on my work as that study has blossomed into this very readable, artful, and valuable book—a book that, on its own, contributes substantially to contemporary theology. As I near the end of my own theological journey, I salute Professor Okey at this welcome beginning of his theological journey.

David Tracy  
September 2, 2018



# Acknowledgments

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Writing is weird, and I am deeply grateful that it is part of my job. At times the experience of writing this book was isolating and my idiosyncrasies were fully on display. At others it was collaborative and lively. Sustaining the project through these alternating phases depended entirely on a wonderful community of family, friends, and scholars, and here I wish to thank them.

I must first of all thank David Tracy himself. I first met him when I was a student at the University of Chicago Divinity School and my roommate Andy asked if we could give Prof. Tracy a ride to his apartment. As he stepped into the used car I had recently bought, I asked if he would bless it, which he obligingly did. I, like so many others, have continued to benefit from his generosity, especially as I was researching and writing this book.

I would also like to thank all the scholars whose conversation has helped bring this book into existence. The research for the book grew out of my doctoral dissertation on Tracy's theological anthropology, and I remain indebted to my director, Mary Ann Hinsdale, and two readers, Roberto Goizueta and Frederick Lawrence, for their guidance, insights, and conversation. Kevin Ahern, Andrew Staron, Julius-Kei Kato, Paul Schutz, Anthony Godzieba, Mark Yenson, and Carolyn Chau all gave feedback on various sections of the book, which helped to strengthen the argument. My understanding of Tracy has been greatly enriched over the years thanks to conversations with William Myatt, Andreas Telser, Barnabas Palfrey, Nichole Flores, Daryn Henry, Daniel Rober, and Timothy Hanchin.

It is a great and increasingly rare gift to have a permanent academic home, and I am doubly blessed to have found a brilliant and charitable group of colleagues at Saint Leo's Department of Philosophy, Theology, and Religion. Moreover, the monastic community of Saint

Leo Abbey has been hospitable to me since I moved here, and has more than once welcomed me into their guest house as I sought a distraction-free refuge in which to write.

The editors and contributors at Daily Theology have helped me to hone my writing over the last eight years, and this book is better because of their work.

The people at Liturgical Press have been stellar, supportive, and above all patient as I worked out the kinks of my first book. Special thanks to Hans Christoffersen, Tara Durham, and Stephanie Lancour for all their work in bringing this book to press.

Finally, my thanks to my family. My older brother John was the first writer in the family, and I probably got some of it from him. My parents, Mike and Susan, at first seemed confused when I decided to study theology, but they've ceaselessly encouraged me ever since. My wife Paige, to whom this book is dedicated, has been integral to my success in this project. She is my best conversation partner, and I look forward to many more years of conversation.

# Abbreviations

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- ABL David Tracy. *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970.
- AI David Tracy. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. New York: Crossroad, 1981.
- BRO David Tracy. *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- DWO David Tracy. *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue*. Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990.
- MT Bernard Lonergan. *Method in Theology*. 2nd ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990.
- ONP David Tracy. *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994.
- ND George Lindbeck. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. 25th ann. ed. Introduction by Bruce D. Marshall. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009.
- PA David Tracy. *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.





# Introduction

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*As a dialogical theologian, Tracy's thinking has evolved and is evolving through continuing conversations.*

—Timoteo Gener<sup>1</sup>

Conversation is risky. At its best, conversation brings partners together who are committed to deepening their understanding. It might be their knowledge of the world around them, of traditions received from the past, of the person on the other side of the table, or even of the self. It is true that conversation is stronger when the participants are knowledgeable about what they speak, and it is even better when one's conversation partner has something distinct to offer. Herein lies the risk, though: entering into conversation puts one's understanding at risk of disillusionment, of ecstatic wonder, of frustration, of joy. Conversation risks *change* that, even when it is for the better, can be frightening. Although the ideal conversation among committed, intelligent, and charitable interlocutors may not be the norm, it remains something to aspire to.

Such conversation is at the heart of David Tracy's theology. To start, simply reading Tracy's work is to enter into conversation with him, to participate in the back-and-forth between the reader and the text. Yet by entering into that conversation, one recognizes the much wider conversation taking place. Throughout his work, one finds Tracy in conversation with theologians, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, artists, and more. Even a simple perusal through the endnotes of *Blessed Rage for Order* and *The Analogical Imagination* reveals the wide breadth of Tracy's conversation. This approach has not gone unnoticed; Tracy's colleague Matthew Lamb wrote in the

<sup>1</sup> Timoteo D. Gener, "With/Beyond Tracy: Re-Visioning Public Theology," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 33, no. 2 (April 2009): 118–38.

early 1980s that “few express as fully as [Tracy] the character of a wide-ranging conversation.”<sup>2</sup> Tracy is the “theologian as host,” who brings an ever-growing party of divergent voices together in conversation oriented toward discerning the truth of the Christian tradition in the contemporary world.<sup>3</sup>

This pursuit reveals a further sense in which conversation is central for Tracy. Not only does his work seek to bring together a wide range of views and insights, but he understands the essential method of theology as being conversation itself. From the beginning stages of his career, he has used what he calls a “correlation” approach that seeks to connect the depths of the Christian tradition to whatever cultural or social context it finds itself in. The specific terms of the correlation have changed (Christian fact became the classics of the tradition while common human experience became the contemporary situation), but the core emphasis on theology as the back-and-forth between a religious tradition and its wider context has remained constant. This conversation too is risky, as Tracy posits that it is possible not only for the religious tradition to offer some insight or answer to questions raised by secular and cultural concerns but also for the secular and cultural to have insights for the religious.

This book aims to be a guide, perhaps an interpreter, for entering into conversation with Tracy. Despite widespread recognition of Tracy’s contributions to theology, he is also considered by many to be a challenging and idiosyncratic thinker whose depths are difficult to explore. That, coupled with his extensive publications, can make him a daunting figure to engage. Many who do engage him tend to focus on narrow topics or particular texts, thus missing the richer sense of the whole of his work and of his conversation. This book takes this more expansive view, seeking to chart the overall develop-

<sup>2</sup> Matthew L. Lamb, “David Tracy,” in *A Handbook of Christian Theologians*, ed. Dean G. Peerman and Martin E. Marty (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 677. See also John P. McCarthy, “David Tracy,” in *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians*, ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 468.

<sup>3</sup> Nathan Crawford has made an intriguing case for comparing Tracy’s conversational approach to theology to the improvisation in music, especially jazz. See Nathan Crawford, “Theology as Improvisation: Seeking the Unstructured Form of Theology with David Tracy,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (August 2010): 300–312, especially 308n41.

ment of his theology throughout his career. As a first step toward doing so, it may be helpful to find out who David Tracy is.

## A Brief Biography of David Tracy

David William Tracy was born in Yonkers, New York, on January 6, 1939, the middle son of John Charles Tracy, a union organizer, and Eileen Marie Tracy (née Rossell). He had an older brother, John Charles Jr., and a younger, Arthur.<sup>4</sup> He describes the strong focus on education in his upbringing, leading him to a deep and early intellectual interest in literature, history, and criticism: “Our home was filled with literary stimulation. My father . . . read to us, writers like Dickens and Henry Adams. My parents were always bringing us to visit places like the Adams home near Boston.”<sup>5</sup>

Less than two weeks after Tracy’s thirteenth birthday, his father died at the age of forty-six.<sup>6</sup> That same year, he felt “a very intense call” to the priesthood and entered the Cathedral College, the minor or high school seminary for the Archdiocese of New York.<sup>7</sup> Initially, he felt called more to the ministry of the parish priest than to the academic life. On finishing at the minor seminary, he went on to study at St. Joseph’s Seminary (1958–1960), colloquially known as Dunwoodie.<sup>8</sup>

Recognizing his intellectual promise, Tracy’s superiors sent him to the Gregorian University in Rome to begin his theological studies in 1960. The Second Vatican Council had been announced already in

<sup>4</sup> He dedicated *Blessed Rage for Order* to his mother and *Plurality and Ambiguity* to his father and older brother *in memoriam*.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene C. Kennedy, “A Dissenting Voice: Catholic Theologian David Tracy,” *New York Times Magazine* 136 (November 9, 1986): 25.

<sup>6</sup> Obituary of John C. Tracy, *The Herald Statesman*, January 18, 1952.

<sup>7</sup> Todd Breyfogle and Thomas Levergood, “Conversation with David Tracy,” *Cross Currents* 44, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 305–6; Wendy Doniger, Franklin I. Gamwell, and Bernard McGinn, “Tributes to David Tracy,” *Criterion* 46, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 7.

<sup>8</sup> Dunwoodie was widely considered to be one of the best Roman Catholic seminaries in North America. Founded in 1896, when the seminary for the Archdiocese of New York was moved to Yonkers, it was home of the well-regarded *Dunwoodie Review* in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to Tracy, notable alumni include Joseph Komonchak, John P. Meier, and Bernard McGinn. For more on the history of Dunwoodie, see Thomas Shelley, *Dunwoodie: The History of St. Joseph’s Seminary, Yonkers, New York* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1993).

1959, and its first session opened as his third year of studies began. Of course, as a young seminarian he had no formal role during the 1962 and 1963 sessions that he was present for, but he attended lectures given by some of the major theologians who had been brought to the council as *periti* (theological advisers to the bishops). Recounting his time as a student during Vatican II, Tracy quoted William Wordsworth:

*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven!*<sup>9</sup>

In 1963, Tracy was ordained to the priesthood in Rome, and in 1964 he completed his licentiate in sacred theology (STL) at the Gregorian University. Pursuing his desire to serve in a parish, he went to work at Saint Mary of Stamford Parish in the Diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut. Although only there for one year, he made an impression on his parishioners. For example, in the midst of liturgical changes coming out of Vatican II, Tracy convinced his parishioner William F. Buckley Jr. to volunteer as a lay lector at the Mass.<sup>10</sup>

One result of his year of parish work was discerning his vocation to the life of academic theology. Tracy returned to the Gregorian for the doctorate of sacred theology (STD) and studied under Canadian Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan. The period from Tracy's return in 1965 to his successful defense of his dissertation in 1969 corresponded with some of Lonergan's work on theological method, later published in 1974 as *Method in Theology*.<sup>11</sup> Tracy's dissertation, *The Development of the Notion of Theological Methodology in the Works of*

<sup>9</sup> Michael Fishbane, Kevin Madigan, and David Tracy, "Tributes to Bernard McGinn," *Criterion* 42, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 42. The poem is "The French Revolution as It Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement" by William Wordsworth.

<sup>10</sup> Buckley, most famous for founding the conservative magazine *National Review* and hosting the TV show *Firing Line*, notes in his spiritual autobiography that despite his initial hope that liturgical reforms might have a positive impact (he "hung on as a lector/commentator doggedly for three years), he eventually grew disillusioned. He noted that this was after Tracy had left the parish and returned to his academic studies. William F. Buckley Jr., *Nearer, My God: An Autobiography of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 95–97.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

Bernard J. Lonergan, S.J., would pick up on this work and would later form the basis for Tracy's first book, *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan*.<sup>12</sup>

He began his teaching career in 1967 as an instructor at The Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, DC. Soon after, in 1968, Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which reaffirmed traditional Catholic teaching against artificial birth control. Tracy's CUA colleague, Fr. Charles Curran, authored a public response arguing that Catholics could, in good conscience, dissent from the encyclical's teaching without calling into question their Catholic faith.<sup>13</sup> Twenty-one other CUA faculty members, including Tracy and Bernard McGinn, signed on to the statement, as did more than six hundred theologians from other universities.<sup>14</sup> Because of CUA's status as a pontifical university, the dissent by so many of its theological faculty was especially striking. All twenty-two faculty were brought to trial by the CUA faculty senate and ultimately fired. Represented by the American Civil Liberties Union, the dismissed faculty brought suit against the university and were ultimately reinstated.<sup>15</sup>

As this controversy went on, both Tracy and McGinn were invited by Jerald Brauer, dean of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, to lecture and give a seminar. Although Brauer was confident they would be successful in the lawsuit and get their jobs back, he hoped that he might be able to poach them for the Divinity School. Brauer was motivated in part by the Second Vatican Council, as he saw many Catholic students coming to the formerly Baptist divinity school and hoped to expand the Catholic presence on the faculty. Tracy and McGinn both formally joined the faculty in 1969, and each remained until their respective retirements.<sup>16</sup> Tracy's arrival at

<sup>12</sup> David Tracy, "The Development of the Notion of Theological Methodology in the Works of Bernard J. Lonergan, S.J.," (STD diss., Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1969); David Tracy, *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> Robert G. Hoyt, ed., *The Birth Control Debate* (Kansas City, MO: National Catholic Reporter, 1968), 179–81.

<sup>14</sup> Including Richard McBrien, Bernard Häring, and Roland Murphy.

<sup>15</sup> David Gibson, "God-Obsessed: David Tracy's Theological Quest," *Commonweal* 137, no. 2 (January 29, 2010): 16.

<sup>16</sup> McGinn retired in 2003 and Tracy in 2006.

# 1

## Public Theology

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*In initially general terms, a public discourse discloses meanings and truths which in principle can transform all human beings in some recognizable personal, social, political, ethical, cultural or religious manner. The key marks of publicness, therefore, will prove to be cognitive disclosure and personal, communal and historical transformation.*

—David Tracy<sup>1</sup>

Tracy's claim that theology is a public discipline might seem strange to many at first glance. For decades, religion has often been thought of as a private affair, one of those controversial things (like politics or sex) that one does not discuss in polite company. In countries like the United States, which prizes its separation of church and state and its rejection of an established religion, some argue not only that religion is private but that it should increasingly become so (if not disappear altogether). Major scholars of secularization, such as José Casanova and Charles Taylor, have noted the variety of ways that the perception of religion as a private phenomenon has permeated Western thought (even as they show that this perception is not always accurate).<sup>2</sup> This sense is sometimes challenged, particularly

<sup>1</sup> AI 55

<sup>2</sup> José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

when the faith of political leaders comes up during election years, but even then the discussion often revolves around depicting these commitments as personal and with limited public relevance.

In Tracy's theology, such an approach to the public-private question misses an important opportunity. He does not think the public can be reduced only to the political but must include the cultural, the artistic, and even the religious. At heart is the question of reason and argument: "public-ness" is intimately tied to the ability to make a case for one's beliefs, convictions, and values. Moreover, this case should be accessible not only to those who share one's traditions and context but to anyone who is smart and interested. He asserts that the sort of questions theology responds to—those timeless, deeply human questions about meaning and existence—are so ubiquitous as to beg for public, intelligent conversation around them.

This chapter looks at the idea of theology as a public discipline in two of Tracy's major books, *Blessed Rage for Order* and *The Analogical Imagination*. These texts focus deeply on the questions of what theologians are doing when they do theology, what makes theology an academic discipline, and what responsibilities that grounds for the theologian. At issue is what it means for theology to be a "public" discipline. While Tracy's notion of the public may contrast in some respects with more "commonsense" views, he envisions public-ness as being tied to the making of arguments that could be accessible to any intelligent, reasonable, responsible person. Discussion about theology is thus an open, public conversation, rather than a privatized or members-only one.

Discerning the meaning of that public conversation depends on tracing the trajectory in Tracy's thought as his idea of public-ness, and particularly of the three publics themselves, shapes his approach to theology more broadly. Initially he describes his theology in "revisionist" terms, emphasizing the possibility that the Christian tradition and common human experience might have mutual influence on one another, rather than the unilateral approaches he sees in other theological models. Tracy therefore emphasizes the revisionist theologian's sense of responsibility for both the academy and the church.

While Tracy maintains that effort to correlate aspects of the tradition with the world in which the tradition finds itself, he comes to revise the revisionist approach in light of a broader sense of the re-

sponsibilities that theologians have for different publics. Theologians speak to the academy and to the church but also to the wider society. These different audiences come with distinct modes of argument and ethical commitments, which in turn lead to a diversity of ways of doing theology (which Tracy calls the subdisciplines of fundamental, systematic, and practical theology).<sup>3</sup>

With an eye toward how public-ness relates to Tracy's theological method, this chapter argues that there is a meaningful yet subtle shift from the "revisionist" to the "public" modes of theology.<sup>4</sup> "Revisionist" is initially largely identical to "correlation" in terms of significance, but it is also tied clearly to the twin theological commitments to the positive aspects of "authentic secularity" and of "authentic Christianity."<sup>5</sup> Yet as Tracy's approach to correlation develops and his notion of the publics expands, the "revisionist" terminology largely disappears and the notion of "public-ness" becomes the organizing principle and foundation of Tracy's theological enterprise.

<sup>3</sup> The subdisciplines themselves are a focus of the following chapter on theological method.

<sup>4</sup> Gaspar Martinez offers a compelling diachronic reading of Tracy's work on public theology from his Lonerganian background to the work preceding his Gifford Lectures. He largely overlooks the methodological structure in BRO, however, and thus misses the sense in which there is a meaningful shift from revisionist to public theology. See Gaspar Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery of God: Political, Liberation, and Public Theologies* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 176–215. Kristin Heyer recognizes that Tracy started out as a revisionist and seems to move away from that term somewhat, or at least to not fall prey to some of the criticisms directed at other revisionist theologians (Kristin E. Heyer, "How Does Theology Go Public? Rethinking the Debate Between David Tracy and George Lindbeck," *Political Theology* 5, no. 3 [July 2004]: 310, 313). Timoteo Gener's reading of the relationship differs slightly from the one offered in this chapter (Timoteo D. Gener, "With/Beyond Tracy: Re-Visioning Public Theology," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 33, no. 2 [April 2009]: 121–23). Gener subsumes the "revisionist" approach as correlation under the larger heading of "public" theology. This is certainly correct in the sense that revision as correlation remains the process for Tracy in *The Analogical Imagination*. It should, however, be qualified by the recognition that Tracy's "revisionist" only meaningfully has commitments to secular reason (e.g., the academy) and to the religious tradition (e.g., the church). The expansion of the publics to include society in a complete and distinct way reframes the correlation approach and the public commitments.

<sup>5</sup> BRO 33.



**Revisionist Theology in *Blessed Rage for Order****Initial Forays into Public-ness*

The public character of theology is a question already in *Blessed Rage for Order*, even as many of the central issues surrounding it are implicit. He opens that text by focusing on the plural context in which contemporary theology is done. This plurality means that there is no singular worldview shared by all; instead, there are a multitude of religious, philosophical, political, and cultural approaches that are all interacting with one another in contemporary discourse.<sup>6</sup> Because of this, theology cannot assume that its place in culture is assured. Rather, it must find ways of arguing for and demonstrating its relevance and its claim to truth. Gaspar Martinez aptly denotes Tracy's move here, claiming, "It is precisely . . . by setting criteria to test the adequacy and truth of theological claims that theology can become public."<sup>7</sup>

For example, consider the question of women's ordination within the Catholic tradition. It is fairly common for theologians, and religious persons more broadly, to appeal to a community's traditions when trying to argue for something. Communities have historically upheld certain texts, believed certain claims, practiced certain rituals, and formed certain habits. Many Catholics will base their argument against the ordination of women on the long-held claim that the apostles called by Jesus were all men, suggesting that had Jesus wanted women to be duly ordained ministers in the church he would have selected women as apostles. If one were an adherent to the Catholic tradition, that claim might be sufficient to find this argument compelling. In the contemporary pluralist context, however, one cannot assume that the conversation partner one speaks with belongs to the same tradition. In the case of the women's ordination conversation, perhaps the conversation partner is Catholic but rejects this specific teaching as unjust toward women when it comes to the role they can play in the church. Or perhaps the person is Muslim and rejects the idea of "ordination" because it introduces a formal and

<sup>6</sup> BRO 92–93. The place of plurality and pluralism in Tracy's theology is dealt with more fully in chapter 4.

<sup>7</sup> Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery of God*, 197.

unnecessary separation within the religious community. Or perhaps the person is a secular humanist, who rejects not only ordination but the entire religious sphere of which ordination is a part. The contemporary plural world means that no one can presume that the claims of one's particular tradition will be compelling in and of themselves when others engage them.

Theology therefore needs to make better arguments, ones that are able to engage seriously with the plural world in which theology finds itself. While Tracy maintains a commitment to uphold and engage with faith traditions, he also wants theological arguments that are reasonable to those outside the tradition. The theologian thus needs to be not only faithful but also persuasive. Given his role as an academic, Tracy interprets these two pulls on the theologian as being between two commitments: the "church-community of which he was a believing member" and "whatever community of inquiry . . . [that] aided him to defend and to reinterpret the tradition's beliefs."<sup>8</sup> The theologian has responsibilities both to the "church" (the "community of religious and moral discourse exemplified but surely not exhausted by his own church tradition") and the "academy" ("community of inquiry exemplified but surely not exhausted by the contemporary academy").<sup>9</sup> These two spaces become key *publics* to which theology is responsible.

### *Five Models of Western Theology*

In order to understand the early significance of these publics for Tracy, it is important to look at the different models of theology he initially investigates. He argues that the two commitments the theologian feels, between the tradition and the contemporary pluralist world, shape the essential sources of all theologies.<sup>10</sup> There is a diverse

<sup>8</sup> BRO 6. It should be noted also that Tracy's primary focus in this part of BRO is on what he will call "fundamental theology," which he tends to see as the more explicitly academic mode of theology. For more on what is meant by "fundamental theology," see chapter 2, pp. 59–64.

<sup>9</sup> BRO 239.

<sup>10</sup> BRO 23, 43–45. More specifically, the two poles for his revisionist correlation method are "Christian texts" or "Christian theological categories," on the one hand, and "common human experience," on the other. For the latter pole, Tracy sees certain

set of options, however, for how one responds to these twin pulls. Tracy offers five possible responses: orthodox, liberal, neo-orthodox, radical, and revisionist.

First, the orthodox approach holds the faith tradition in high esteem while seeing the contemporary world as not necessarily theologically relevant.<sup>11</sup> There tends to be a strong sense of the timelessness of theological claims, which cannot be changed or abrogated by the sciences (neither natural nor social). Instead, theology (or the faith tradition more broadly) “is the best bulwark” against the dangers of the modern world.<sup>12</sup> The *orthodox* theologian, therefore, is a believing, practicing member of the faith community whose work focuses solely on understanding, explaining, and defending the claims of his or her particular faith tradition.

Second, the liberal approach takes contemporary pluralism quite seriously, often (but not always) to the detriment of the faith tradition. Liberal theology desires to uphold Christian claims and recognizes that these claims sometimes conflict with the claims of modern science, history, and politics. It does not outright reject or ignore the tradition but rather tends to adapt and even change longstanding faith claims in order to accommodate modernity. There is surprisingly little challenge given to the modern world from the religious perspective. The *liberal* theologian thus has a “modern consciousness” that is “committed to the basic values of modernity,” and his or her work focuses on restating traditional claims in a more modern way.<sup>13</sup>

Third, the neo-orthodox approach is largely a reaction against the liberal one. The claim here is that liberal theology makes two key errors: it does not really take account of the sinfulness of the world, and it doesn’t uphold the belief that justification comes by faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> More fundamentally, liberal theology does not grasp

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enduring and ubiquitous traits despite the profound and extensive pluralism in which human beings live. Chief among these is the experience of the “limit,” which reveals to the human person a certain religious dimension to one’s existence. See chapter 2 for a more detailed analysis of these two poles.

<sup>11</sup> BRO 24.

<sup>12</sup> BRO 24.

<sup>13</sup> BRO 26. Tracy’s key example of the liberal approach is Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), a German Protestant theologian who is sometimes called the “father of modern liberal theology.”

<sup>14</sup> BRO 28.

the *dialectical* character of reality. For Tracy, this means that there is an essential contrast or difference between the God of Jesus Christ, who is the central focus of Christianity, and the fallen, sinful world in which we live. Thus there is an irresolvable tension between the Christian tradition and the contemporary pluralist world in which we find ourselves. The neo-orthodox approach wishes to bring this authentic Christian witness to bear on the human condition, and it is through a dialectical analysis that the deep suffering, sin, and tragedy of human life in modernity is revealed. Neo-orthodoxy rejects the orthodox model's disinterest in the world and the liberal model's simple optimism, seeking instead to engage both the contemporary pluralist situation and the traditions of the faith in an often tenuous, paradoxical grasp. The neo-orthodox theologian is therefore a person of "authentic Christian faith," meaning that he or she embodies "existential attitudes of Christian faith, trust, and agapic love," and the object on which they focus is "the wholly other God of Jesus Christ."<sup>15</sup>

Fourth, the radical approach picks up on this idea of "dialectic" and irresolvable tension and applies it to the Christian tradition itself. The argument here is that the God represented by the other models above was fundamentally alienating to human beings, and thus true human liberation required the death of that idea of God.<sup>16</sup> This does not remove Jesus entirely from the equation; rather, Jesus is the highest example of either "a life lived for others" or of the fully liberated person.<sup>17</sup> The radical theologian, then, is not really a Christian believer at all, but rather one who provides a postmodern analysis of Christian tradition that emphasizes liberation while rejecting God.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> BRO 29–30. Tracy's key example of the neo-orthodox model is Karl Barth (1886–1968), a Swiss Protestant theologian. While many of his other key examples of neo-orthodoxy are also twentieth-century Protestants (Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Friedrich Gogarten), Tracy also argues that Catholic theologians like Karl Rahner and Gustavo Gutierrez are essentially neo-orthodox.

<sup>16</sup> BRO 31.

<sup>17</sup> BRO 31.

<sup>18</sup> The example of this model is the "death of God" movement, which peaked in the 1960s and 1970s. Here, Tracy mostly mentions Thomas J. J. Altizer (b. 1927), an American theologian, although others are sometimes associated (e.g., William Hamilton, Gabriel Vahanian). This approach is now more commonly called "Christian

The fifth and final option is Tracy's preferred approach, the revisionist model. Like the neo-orthodox, revisionists take both the tradition and contemporary pluralism seriously as places of theological reflection. Revisionists do not, however, see the tension as a paradox. Revisionists focus rather on the method of correlation, whereby both the tradition and human experience each raise questions—of themselves and of each other. Moreover, both of these areas may be able to answer their own questions, or they may be able to answer one another's. What is striking here, for Tracy, is that for the orthodox, the only questions that mattered came from the tradition, and they were answered by the tradition. For the liberals, the modern world answered questions from the tradition and from human experience. The neo-orthodox sought to hold the tradition and modernity together in paradox without any real reciprocity between them. Finally, the radicals thought the tradition offered good moral guidelines, but all other questions would be answered by postmodernity. The revisionist model allows for all of these possibilities, claiming that the tradition may answer some of its own questions and that it may answer some of the questions raised by contemporary pluralism. Similarly, while modern thought may respond to some of its own problems, it might also help to answer questions that come up within a religious tradition. While there may be some significant confrontation between the tradition and the contemporary world, Tracy also holds out hope for "the possible basic reconciliation" between them.<sup>19</sup> This model of correlation, where each source has the potential to be fruitfully critical of one another, is the key insight Tracy sees in this last model.<sup>20</sup> The revisionist theologian, then, maintains commitments to the "beliefs, values, and faith" of both "authentic secularity" and of "authentic Christianity," and their work thus focuses on the ongoing process of critical correlation between these sources.<sup>21</sup>

The question of public-ness may not be immediately apparent in these models.<sup>22</sup> Tracy's interest in outlining them is really about laying the groundwork for the revisionist correlation model and then

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Atheism," where one practices the moral teachings of Christianity while rejecting key faith claims (particularly the existence of God).

<sup>19</sup> BRO 32.

<sup>20</sup> BRO 43–46.

<sup>21</sup> BRO 33.

<sup>22</sup> "Public" does not even rate a spot in the subject index for BRO.

bringing this model to bear on the question of Christology. Nevertheless, these models reveal something profoundly important about the “public” in Tracy’s theology. Each of these models responds to various publics in different ways. His description of the theologian as responsible to both the church and the academy suggests that he sees each of the five theologians listed above as already participating in those two publics, albeit to varying degrees. Each theologian thus has his or her own commitments about what matters most for participating in the church and the academy. For the orthodox theologian, the public of the church is far more significant than the academy, while this dynamic is arguably reversed for many liberal theologians. Moreover, as Tracy is entering into theological questions about modern plurality and what that means for religion, he is implicitly extending the discussion to a public that goes beyond the confines of either church or academy. He hasn’t named it as such yet, but Tracy is interested in how the public of the “society” functions in each of these five different models. Although not framed this way, here at the beginning of his constructive work Tracy is taking the underlying idea of the “public” as the organizing principle of his approach to theological method.

### **Public Theology in *The Analogical Imagination***

In *The Analogical Imagination*, the “public” and “public-ness” become the explicit principle around which Tracy structures his theology. This is most clearly evident in the relationship he forges between the three publics (academy, church, and society) and the subdisciplines of theology (fundamental, systematic, and practical). The parallels between these two triads is intentional, and they become an essential element in his formulation of theological method. Yet this is not the sum total of the effect of public-ness on his theology; two further points must be made. First, Tracy argues that theology must, by its very nature, be public precisely because of its focus on fundamental questions that human beings tend to ask and because of the nature of God as universal. Second, Tracy offers an interpretation of academy, church, and society that goes beyond a common sociology and looks at what theological significance the publics have in and of themselves.

*The Nature of Public-ness*

While much of the wider discussion about “public theology” tends to focus on the role of religion in politics, separation of church and state, and a variety of policy issues, Tracy is interested in a much more basic set of concerns. He argues that there are two essential reasons for why theology is a public discipline. First, theology is a public discourse because it asks and investigates the “fundamental religious questions” that are common among most people, both around the world and throughout time.<sup>23</sup> Standard examples of these questions include: “What is the purpose of life?” “How should we live?” “What happens after we die?” While theology does not specifically focus on economic, political, or scientific questions, it does ask about the significance of those questions and the values implicit in their questions, methods, and answers. Because these fundamental questions are common to human experience, theology’s effort to respond to them contributes to its “public-ness.”

Second, theology is public because of the Christian understanding of the reality of God. The Christian claim that God is *universal* means that God cares for the whole of reality. Tracy ties this into how Christianity has traditionally understood the relationship between itself and the world. He pushes the old affirmation “The Christian is *in* the world but not of it” further, saying “the Christian is *released* . . . *from* the world, *for* the world.”<sup>24</sup> While the world in many ways represents fallenness and temptation, Christians nonetheless have a responsibility to love and care for the world and to participate in its renewal. Tracy brings God’s universality together with humanity’s relationship to the world by arguing that humans are called to have “radical trust and loyalty” in this universal God above all else.<sup>25</sup> Our devotion to God means that we must follow and seek to emulate God’s love for all of reality. Finally, because Christians believe in the radicality and universality of God’s love, the way Christians are called to *speak* about God must be public and open to all reasonable people of goodwill.<sup>26</sup> The universal character of God makes public speech about God necessary.

<sup>23</sup> AI 81.<sup>24</sup> AI 48.<sup>25</sup> AI 51.<sup>26</sup> AI 51.

*The Three Publics: Society, Academy, and Church*

As he did in *Blessed Rage for Order*, in this text Tracy talks about the publics in terms of the responsibilities of the theologian. While he continues his claim that the theologian has a commitment to the academy and to the church, he also offers a more expansive understanding of what the academy and the church are. Alongside these, he makes explicit the society as a public, distinguishing several aspects within it, and then articulating the responsibility the theologian has to society. In fact, Tracy begins his work on these three publics with society, which is in many ways the broadest or most comprehensive of the publics.

*Society*: The public of the society is composed of three different “realms” or domains. The first realm is what Tracy calls the “techno-economic” realm. This is made up of all the different social, economic, and technological structures that exist in order to make goods and services available to people.<sup>27</sup> This includes everything from influential technological developments like the assembly line or the computer chip to economic concepts like markets or supply and demand.<sup>28</sup> Because of the techno-economic realm, society is able to make it possible for most people to meet their basic needs and, in many cases, to thrive. Essential to the functioning of society at this level is “instrumental” reason, which is “the use of reason to determine rational means for a determined end.”<sup>29</sup> Instrumental reason enables us to figure out the best process, technique, or tool in order to achieve our goals. It does not, however, help us determine what those goals *should* be.

<sup>27</sup> AI 7.

<sup>28</sup> It may be helpful at this point to note that Tracy is usually thinking in terms of the global West when he speaks about the techno-economic realm and society more broadly. He references here the “advanced industrial, technological societies with democratic politics and capitalist, socialist, or mixed economies” (AI 6). This does not mean, however, the techno-economic realm is not functional in non-Western societies, but its social, economic, and technological structures may differ. See, for example, Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010); Edward P. Wimberly, “Unnoticed and Unloved: The Indigenous Storyteller and Public Theology in a Postcolonial Age,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>29</sup> AI 8.



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