

*Theological Method:
The Search For a New Paradigm in a Pluralistic Age*

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Leafing through a manila folder labeled “Theological Methodology” was an exercise in nostalgia. A few of us requested a reading course with Dr. Osterhaven in which we would examine various models of theological method and write a paper for presentation to the group. Perhaps it was there that my interest in theological method was stimulated or, perhaps, the desire to study the subject with Dr. Osterhaven arose from a distinction made by one of his esteemed teachers, Dr. Albertus Pieters, whose *Facts and Mysteries of the Christian Faith* fascinated me as a youth. Dr. Pieters distinguished systematic and biblical theology and gave clear preference to the latter. It was a moment of awakening; I was faced with the fact that the systematician's logical formulations might not always faithfully reflect the biblical witness; indeed, at times they might actually distort biblical truth.

No task places one in the tension between the richness and diversity of the biblical witness and the systematization of the faith more than the task of preaching each Lord's Day. Thus I have continued to be challenged with the need to do theology in such a way that what comes to expression in the sermon is a faithful witness to biblical faith evidencing sensitivity to the contemporary situation. The sermon is the end product of the significant encounter of the Word and the world in the mind and heart of the preacher, and the theological task must be pursued to that end that the truth may find expression within the present horizon. It will be my purpose here to reflect on the substratum on which the sermon rests in the conviction that preaching with integrity demands not only theological understanding, but also self-consciousness of one's theological method.

It is a great privilege to offer the following discussion of theological method in honor of a highly esteemed teacher in whose person the authenticity and integrity of the Christian thinker is modeled out.

A NEW BASIC MODEL OF THEOLOGY?

In May of 1983, seventy professors of theology from around the world gathered at the University of Tübingen in Germany. The international ecumenical symposium was organized by the Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion at the University of Chicago, the International Magazine for Theology, *Concilium*, and the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Tübingen. The leading spirit in organizing the event was Professor Dr. Hans Küng, head of the Tübingen Institute. The key question was, "Is a basic consensus in Christian theology possible today despite all differences?" In his introductory remarks, Hans Küng set the stage for the discussion. He said,

The natural sciences, humanities, democratic plural societies and freedom movements of all kinds all have radical consequences, specifically also for theology, whose outgrowths have not yet even been conceptualized, much less dealt with. But is theology dependent on such multifaceted tensions, such divergent systems, or even fads? Or is a new, changed basic model of theology recognizable? Is there, then, a new "paradigm of theology," which might adequately react to the present changed experience? Are there universal constants despite all the differing theories, methods, and structures in such a "new paradigm" which every Christian theology must advance because, scientifically, they are held accountable by the Christian faith?

The key word in understanding the task of this symposium is "paradigm" which was introduced into this theological discussion from a discussion in the natural sciences by Thomas Kuhn whose book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, became the catalyst for reflection on the history of theological development. Kuhn defined paradigm as,

an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community.¹

On the basis of that understanding of paradigm, Hans Küng charted the history of theology, attempting to locate those points of significant ferment in the Church which led to the evolving of a new model or paradigm. He set forth a tentative periodization beginning with the primitive Christian theology that was shaped by apocalypticism followed by the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Patristic period, the East-West schism of the Eleventh Century, the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, including the Counter-Reformation of the Roman Church, the development of modern philosophy and the natural sciences of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, including the Enlightenment, the French and

American Revolutions and the Twentieth Century theological movements beginning with Barth's Dialectical Theology and including Existentialist, Hermeneutical and the various Liberation Theologies of the present.

From these major shifts in the history of the Church and in theological posture, Küng finds five models or paradigms operational in the present whose roots lie in the major shifts of the past. Stemming from the Ancient Church is the model of Eastern Orthodoxy; from the Medieval period there remains a Roman Catholic traditionalism; from the Reformation era there developed a Protestant orthodoxy which is still embraced; from the Enlightenment classical Liberalism developed and in strong reaction to that Nineteenth Century Liberalism, the revolution whose catalyst was Karl Barth in the early decades of this Century, Dialectical Theology with several variants in the present.

His schematization gives credence to the contention that eruptive events in Church and society often result in new insights, new angles of vision which are the catalyst for the conception of a new paradigm, a new model of theology. The Symposium held at Tübingen in 1983 had as its purpose the endeavor to find a new paradigm that could gather the best insights of the biblical studies of the modern period along with the understanding of the world, history and human existence available to us through all of the academic disciplines. Such a paradigm, Küng contends, must be *truthful*, not conformist or opportunist; *free*, not authoritarian; critical, not fundamentalist or traditionalist; *ecumenical*, not denominationalist or confessionalist. A theology in the horizon of the present world of experience and critically rooted in the biblical tradition would be a theology at the same time both Catholic and evangelical, both traditional and contemporary, both Christocentric and universalist, both theoretical-scholarly and practical-pastoral.

In sum: the quest is for a critical, ecumenical theology.

In a paper read to the Symposium, Küng discussed the process by which these major shifts took place in the history of the Christian tradition. As indicated above, the study by the historian of science, Thomas Kuhn, was the catalyst for surveying shifts in theological understanding. Kuhn's book was a major challenge to the traditional self-understanding of natural science. According to Kuhn, progress in the natural sciences has not come through an orderly acquisition of knowledge which has cumulatively issued in our present body of scientific data. Much rather, progress has come in spurts, through major breakthroughs in understanding which have forced the replacement of a former model of understanding with a new model or paradigm. Küng writes,

Kuhn's heretical main thesis is that radically new theories arise neither by verification nor by falsification but by the replacement - in individual cases, highly complex and protracted - of a hitherto accepted explanatory model (paradigm) by a new one. ²

As an example of this process, Küng cites the shift from a Ptolemaic astronomy to the Copernican view.

... The more the movements of the stars were studied and corrected in the light of the Ptolemaic system, the more material was produced to refute that system. And the same thing happened not only with the Copernican revolution but also with the Newtonian, the chemical and the Einsteinian revolutions.

... The process may be tedious, protracted and complex. And these are transitional periods in which at first only the stereotypes of the old model begin to break up. But the critical state of the traditional theory increasingly comes to light. A period of pronounced insecurity generally precedes the emergence of new theories, which in the end leads to the destruction of the paradigm. In a word, *crisis* is the usual *condition for the rejection of a hitherto accepted paradigm*.³

Scientific progress according to Kuhn comes not through an evolutionary, cumulative process, but through scientific revolution.

Confirming and developing the thesis of Thomas Kuhn in regard to systemological analysis is Stephen Toulmin, who in the preface to his basic work entitled, *Human Understanding*, states his central thesis as follows:

... in science and philosophy alike, an exclusive preoccupation with logical systematicity has been destructive of both historical understanding and rational criticism. Men demonstrate their rationality, not by ordering their concepts and beliefs in tidy formal structures, but by their preparedness to respond to novel situations with open minds - acknowledging the shortcomings of their formal procedures and moving beyond them.⁴

From Kuhn's work in the history of science and Toulmin's study of human understanding we come to the surprising recognition that the respective scientific disciplines and philosophical movements do their model building and systematization in the wake of new insight - some breakthrough in understanding or some intuitive grasp of truth which shatters the prevailing model or paradigm, forcing upon the community (academic or social or ecclesiastical) a new way of looking at Reality.

This development has been especially fruitful in the theological discussions being carried on by the Universities of Tübingen and Chicago, highlighted at the Symposium to which I referred above. Hans Küng's attempt at a periodization of theological development is an attempt to demonstrate that there are fascinating parallels between that development and development in the natural sciences. He lists five parallels:

- A. As in natural sciences, so also in the theological community, there is a “normal science” with its classical authors, textbooks and teachers, which is characterized by a cumulative growth of knowledge, by a solution of remaining problems (“puzzles”) and by resistance to everything that might result in a changing as replacement of the established paradigm.
- B. As in natural science, so also in the theological community, awareness of a growing crisis is the starting position for the advent of a drastic change in certain hitherto prevailing basic assumptions and eventually causes the breakthrough of a new paradigm or model of understanding. When the available rules and methods break down, they lead to a search for new ones.
- C. As in natural science, so also in the theological community, an older paradigm or model of understanding is replaced when a new one is available,
- D. As in natural science, so too in the theological community, in the acceptance or rejection of a new paradigm, not only scientific, but also extra-scientific factors are involved, so that the transition to a new model cannot be purely rationally extorted, but may be described as a conversion.
- E. In the theological community as in natural science, it can be predicted only with difficulty, in the midst of great controversies, whether a new paradigm is absorbed into the old, replaces the old or is shelved for a long period. But if it is accepted, innovation is consolidated as tradition.
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Küng adds a word from Albert Einstein at this point, who said on one occasion, “Smashing prejudices is more difficult than smashing atoms.” But Küng adds, “Once they are smashed, they release forces that can perhaps move mountains.”

These theses set forth by Küng he calls only provisional. They are offered for discussion and he is well aware where the critical question arises. After stating these parallels, he continues,

And yet the question is thrust upon us: Does not theology, even Christian truth itself, faced by nothing but paradigm changes and new conceptions, become a victim of historical relativism which makes it impossible any longer to perceive the Christian reality and makes every paradigm equally true, equally valid? Perhaps the natural scientist is not very much concerned with this problem, but it is of the greatest consequence for the Christian theologian ... Let us therefore pose the question: Does a paradigm change involve a total break? ⁶

Küng's conviction is that in both science and theology there is preserved a continuity when there is a shift in paradigm. In theology he insists,

We have to avoid the choice not only between an absolutist and a relativist view, but also between a radical continuity and a radical discontinuity.

Every paradigm change shows at the same time continuity and discontinuity, rationality and irrationality, conceptual stability and conceptual change, evolutionary and revolutionary elements. ⁷

Further, in theology and the historical sciences much more than in the basically un-historical natural sciences, “... it is therefore *not* a question of a *new invention of a tradition*. It is a question of a *new formulation of tradition*, admittedly in the light of a new paradigm.” The problem of continuity is a more serious problem for theology because theology deals with “truth.” Kuhn as a scientist must leave alone the ultimate questions of the “whence” and the “whither” of the world process and the human drama. Theology addresses those very ultimate questions. Thus there are not only parallels between the development of natural science and theology but there are also some significant differences.

Christian theology lives out of the primordial event which is its source, its norm and to which it must continually return - the event of Israel and of Jesus Christ as set forth in the Scriptures.

This primordial event which has found its preeminent expression in Jesus and is attested to in Scripture is not simply a past datum to be analyzed and interpreted but is a dynamic living force which time and again breaks out - for example, in the personal crisis of a Martin Luther. As Küng expresses it,

The gospel itself then - obviously always in connection with a particular development in contemporary world history - appears here as a direct cause of the theological crisis, as ground of discontinuity in theology, as impetus to the new paradigm. ⁸

Further, because theology is anchored to a past historical event, a new paradigm may emerge and theological upheaval may occur, but there can never be the total replacement or total suppression of the old paradigm. Thus Küng declares a revolution in Christian theology

can never take place except *on the basis of* and ultimately *because of* the gospel, and never against the gospel. ⁹

Another difference from a paradigm shift in the natural sciences is that in theology, because of the existential nature of the “decision of faith,” the academic decision for one paradigm or another is not always distinguished from the “decision of faith;” the person for whom the Christian reality comes to clear expression in a new paradigm causing him to abandon the old paradigm may be seen as choosing against the gospel itself of which the paradigms are but structures for understanding.

Finally, and closely connected to the foregoing observation, is the fact that when the Church and theological community reject a paradigm,

... rejection easily leads to condemnation, discussion to excommunication; gospel and theology, content of faith and outward form of faith, are identified.¹⁰

Because this is such a powerful tendency in the Christian community, when a new model of understanding is accepted, it is soon turned into tradition and tradition in turn becomes a new traditionalism.

With the discussion of how knowledge has advanced in the history of science as the catalyst, Küng has thus surveyed the development of theological understanding to the present, observing both parallels and differences between the history of science and the history of theology. But his purpose is not simply information but, rather, the study is being engaged in in order to determine if there is a base consensus in Christian theology today. Are all the elements of ferment at work today in the Church pointing to a new paradigm in theology and, if so, what would such a paradigm look like? We have noted some of the essential characteristics that must be reflected in a new basic model for theology in our day. Beyond the characteristics listed, the parameters of any new paradigm must be set by two constants which provide the two poles in reference to which the Christian message must come to expression:

The first constant: The present world as horizon.

The second constant: The Christian message as standard.

The “horizon” within which theological reflection must happen and theological formulation must occur is “our own present world of human experience.” Küng asserts:

One thing should now be clear: that the reality of world, humanity, myself, is revealed in depth in its obvious *ambivalence*, its radical *contingency* and its continual *change*: an ongoing history of success and suffering, justice and injustice, happiness and unhappiness, salvation and disaster, sense and nonsense. Nor does this mean making the world evil, so that theologians can more easily get their God involved; it means taking stock without prejudice of what is. Theology does not create any reality, but interprets it.¹¹

The second constant has already been noted in our discussion of the differences between theology and the natural sciences. Küng describes it this way:

If ecumenical theology wants to be Christian theology, its other pole must be the Judeo-Christian tradition and its primary *norm* cannot be anything except the *Christian message* on which this tradition is constructed as on

its ultimate *ground*. That is to say, the Christian primordial and basic testimony, the gospel itself in the sense of the good news in its entirety, as recorded in the Old and New Testament Scriptures, is the basic norm of ecumenical theology.¹²

These two poles or constants then form the context within which theological formulation must come to expression. If we observe the history of theology after the great awakening of the Sixteenth Century, we see how in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions there was a hardening of theological positions. The Seventeenth Century saw the development of an orthodoxy shaped by Rationalism, which froze the new insights of the Reformers into carefully defined doctrinal positions with little regard for the present horizon. In the wake of the Enlightenment of the Eighteenth Century there was an attempt to come to terms with the new understanding of both human reality and the natural world. The classic Liberalism of the Nineteenth Century was an effort to proclaim the gospel within the confines of a *weltanschauung* - that had no room for transcendent Reality; the gospel, the second constant, was dissolved into the first, into the horizon of this world.

In sharp reaction, Karl Barth reversed the whole tide of Nineteenth Century Liberalism, loudly proclaiming a theology of the Word, pointing to the God Who is the "Wholly Other." Because he was in a posture of such sharp reaction, the early Barth nearly obliterated the present horizon, the first constant, although he was too deeply imbued with the culture of his day wholly to lose sight of it.

The present discussion comes at a time when we are able with historical distance to gain some objectivity as we face the task before us. The theology of the future must never again lose sight of either constant. Our task is to find an expression of the Gospel which is faithful to the Word and honest with the world. If such an understanding of theology's task meets with anything like a consensus, then we may be poised for a fruitful period of theological activity.

SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN A PLURALISTIC AGE

Under the auspices of the Program for Studies in Religion at the University of Michigan, Hans Küng led a seminar during the Fall Term of 1983 on the subject of "Paradigm Change in Theology." It was a cross-discipline seminar including students and professors from the schools of the arts and literature, law, and medicine. One of the papers studied was written by Professor David Tracy of the university of Chicago Divinity School, a Catholic scholar who has been a major participant in the discussion of paradigm shift in the symposium discussed above.

Tracy has grappled with the matter of theological methodology. In his first book *Blessed Rage for Order*, published in 1979, he identified five theological models: Orthodox, Liberal, Neo-Orthodox, Radical, and a Revisionist model. These five

models are the result of a different schematization than that followed by Küng, cited above, but there is great similarity of view as to the models operative in the present period. Tracy's Revisionist model, which he will endeavor to build, is his attempt at finding a new paradigm. It is his contention that a Revisionist model must be constructed which will enable the ecumenical Church to proclaim a message that will make the claim of truth recognizable in a pluralistic age. The Revisionist model is a critical correlation of the two principle sources for theology, the two constants mentioned above, cited by Küng: Christian texts and common human experience and language. Tracy sets forth the following theses:

The Principle Method of Investigation of the Source, "Common Human Experience and Language," Can Be Described as a Phenomenology of the "Religious Dimension" Present in Everyday and Scientific Experience and Language." ¹³

The Principle Method of Investigation of the Source "The Christian Tradition" Can Be Described as a Historical and Hermeneutical Investigation of Classical Christian Texts. ¹⁴

Having set the agenda for his endeavor, Tracy moved on in his next work, *The Analogical Imagination*, to set forth the method and execute it in terms of his own commitment to the Catholic Christian Tradition. The Preface announces, "In a culture of pluralism must each religious tradition finally either dissolve into some lowest common denominator or accept a marginal existence as one interesting but purely private option?" Tracy is not willing to accept either option. A theological strategy must be found that can articulate the genuine claims of religion to truth. This is the task he sets for himself: a responsible affirmation of pluralism through the discovery of public criteria by which truth can be affirmed.

Theology must develop public criteria of truth and discourse because it deals with the fundamental questions of existence and because it speaks of God. Recognizing that the theologian addresses three arenas, Society, Academy and Church, Tracy insists that the criteria of publicness applies in all three areas. Theology is the generic name for three disciplines: fundamental, systematic and practical theologies. Publicness is demanded of each. The primary focus of fundamental theology is the Academy, of systematic theology, the Church and of practical theology, Society. They differ not only in their primary reference group, but also in terms of their modes of argument, ethical stance, religious stance and in terms of expressing claims to meaning and truth.

On the way to a responsible pluralism all conversation partners must agree to certain basic rules for the discussion. Two constants are present: the interpretation of a religious tradition and the interpretation of the religious dimension of the contemporary situation from which and to which the theologian speaks. In regard to the first, it is incumbent upon the theologian to make explicit her/his general method of interpretation, to develop "criteria of appropriateness"

whereby specific interpretations of the tradition may be judged by the wider theological community. In regard to the interpretation of the contemporary situation there must be an analysis of the “religious” questions, the question of the meaning of human existence in the present situation.

There are major differences as well. Tracy addresses the question as to what constitutes a public claim to truth in the three sub-disciplines of theology. Fundamental theology's defining characteristic is

... a reasoned insistence on employing the approach and methods of some established academic discipline to explicate and adjudicate the truth claims of the interpreted religious tradition and the truth claims of the contemporary situation.¹⁵

Various models are available, but whichever model is chosen fundamental questions and answers are articulated in such a way that any attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible person can understand and judge them in keeping with fully public criteria for argument. Personal faith may not enter the argument for the truth claims in fundamental theology.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AS A HERMENEUTICAL TASK

The systematic theologian's major task is the reinterpretation of the tradition for the present situation.

Where the fundamental theologian will relate the reality of God to our fundamental trust in existence (our common faith), the confessional systematic theologian will relate that reality to their arguments for a distinctively Christian understanding of faith.

Christian theology ... consists in explicating in public terms and in accordance with the demands of its own primary confessions, the full meaning and truth of the original “illuminating event” ... which occasioned and continues to inform its understanding of all reality.¹⁶

Thus the task of the systematic theologian is a hermeneutical task. The “illuminating event” Tracy calls a religious classic. As in a classic work of art, the religious classic contains the possibility of ever-new “disclosures.” Classics Tracy defines as texts, events, images, persons, rituals and symbols that are assumed to disclose permanent possibilities of meaning and truth. The hermeneutical theologian seeks to articulate the truth-disclosure of the reality of God embedded in the tradition for the contemporary situation.

If the systematic theologian speaks out of a particular tradition, is systematic theology public discourse? Can the claim of Truth be made for theological

statements arising out of a particular tradition? Tracy believes it can if systematic theology is understood as a hermeneutical task.

It is Tracy's contention that systematic theology is hermeneutical. This means that systematic theology's task is to interpret, mediate and translate the meaning and truth of the tradition. Where this is not the case, where the notion of authority shifts from a truth disclosed to mind and heart to an external norm for the obedient will, theologians can no longer interpret and translate the tradition but "only repeat the shop-worn conclusions of the tradition."

Eventually, the central, classical symbols and doctrines of the tradition become mere "fundamentals" to be externally accepted and endlessly repeated.¹⁷

Tracy points to the contrast of a hermeneutical theology:

The heart of any hermeneutical position is the recognition that all interpretation is a mediation of past and present, a translation carried on within the effective history of a tradition to retrieve its sometimes strange, sometimes familiar meanings.¹⁸

How is this done? Recognizing that one begins within a tradition which has shaped one, that one is socialized, acculturated and thus without the possibility of finding some position "above" one's own historicity,

... the route to liberation from the negative realities of a tradition is not to declare the existence of an autonomy that is literally unreal but to enter into a disciplined and responsive conversation with the subject matter - the responses and, above all, the fundamental questions, of the traditions.¹⁹

Tracy refers to Hans-Georg Gadamer's model of conversation as a model for understanding the dialogue with the tradition.

Real conversation occurs only when the participants allow the question, the subject matter, to assume primacy. It occurs only when our usual fears about our own self-image die. ... That fear (dies only because we are carried along, and sometimes away, by the subject matter itself into the rare event or happening named "thinking" and "understanding." For understanding *happens*; it *occurs* not as the pure result of personal achievement but in the back-and-forth movement of the conversation itself.

The word "hermeneutical" best describes this realized experience of understanding in conversation. For every event of understanding, in order to produce a new interpretation, mediates between our past experience

and the understanding embodied in our linguistic tradition and the present event of understanding occasioned by a fidelity to the logic of the question in the back-and-forth movement of the conversation.²⁰

Using the model of conversation Tracy shows how one enters into the history of the illuminating event. When interpreting a classic one recognizes its “excess of meaning” demands constant interpretation and is at the same time timeless –

... a certain kind of timelessness - namely the timeliness of a classic expression radically rooted in its own historical time and calling to my own historicity. That is, the classical text is not in some timeless moment which needs mere repetition. Rather its kind of timelessness as permanent timeliness is the only one proper to any expression of the finite, temporal, historical beings we are. ... The classic text's fate is that only its constant reinterpretation by later finite, historical, temporal beings who will risk asking its questions and listening, critically and tactfully, to its responses can actualize the event of understanding beyond its present fixation in a text.²¹

To be understood, a classic cannot be repeated; it must be interpreted. Thus Tracy claims,

All contemporary systematic theology can be understood as fundamentally hermeneutical. This position implies that systematic theologians, by definition, will understand themselves as radically finite and historical thinkers who have risked a trust in a particular religious tradition. They seek, therefore, to retrieve, interpret, translate, mediate the resources ... of the classic events of understanding of those fundamental religious questions embedded in the classic events, images, persons, rituals, texts and symbols of a tradition.²²

At the heart of Tracy's argument is the conviction that “classics exist;” they exist in all domains of human endeavor. He does not merely assert that they exist but builds a carefully argued case for their existence and *specifically* for the existence of the religious classic. The task of the systematic theologian is to interpret religious classics.

Systematic theology intends to provide an interpretation, a retrieval (including a retrieval through critique and suspicion) and always, therefore, a new application of a *particular* religious tradition's self-understanding for the current horizon of the community.²³

Applying this understanding of systematic theology's task to the specific task of the Christian thinker, Tracy declares,

In Christian systematics, that self-understanding is itself further

grounded in the *particular* events and persons of Jewish and Christian history: decisively grounded, for the Christian, in God's own self-manifestation as my God in this classic event and person, Jesus Christ. ²⁴

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AS PUBLIC DISCOURSE

But now the crux of the matter is reached: how does the systematic theologian address the wider public with discussion characterized by “publicness” thus stopping the retreat of Christian faith into the sphere of privateness and yet remain faithful to

... the radical particularity of the relationship of that gift's disclosure to the particular events of God's action in ancient Israel, in Jesus of Nazareth, in the history of the Christian Church? ²⁵

Acknowledging the dilemma, Tracy believes it can be overcome. The means of overcoming the dilemma is the recognition of the public nature of the classic:

... grounded in some realized experience of a claim to attention, unfolding as cognitively disclosive of both meaning and truth and ethically transformative of personal, social and historical life. ²⁶

Tracy therefore contends,

Whenever any systematic theologian produces a classic interpretation of a particular classic religious tradition (as both Barth and Rahner have,) then that new expression should be accorded a public status in the culture.

Every classic ... is a text, event, image, person or symbol which unites particularity of origin and expression with a disclosure of meaning and truth available, in principle, to all human beings. ²⁷

And again,

Any person's intensification of particularity via a struggle with the fundamental questions of existence in a particular tradition, if that struggle is somehow united to the logos of appropriate expression, will yield a form of authentically sharable public discourse. ²⁸

Thus Tracy argues, classics exist, religious classics exist, and classic status in any field including the religious accords a text, work of art, symbol or other form of expression public status. Religious classics are

... expressions from a *particular* tradition that have found the right mode of expression to become public for all intelligent, reasonable and responsible persons. ²⁹

At the heart of the Christian tradition the classic expression is found in the event of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Tracy claims,

One need not be a believer in Christianity to accord it (and thereby its central, paradigmatic, classic event) authentically religious status: a manifestation from the whole by the power of the whole. ³⁰

Christology is the attempt to respond through some interpretation to the event of Jesus Christ in one's own situation.

... The Christian interpreter of this classic event recognizes *in some present experience* of the event - more precisely, in the claim disclosed in that event (paradigmatically in experiencing that event in manifestation and proclamation) as an event *from* God and by God's power. To speak religiously and theologically of the Christ event is ultimately to speak of an event from God. ³¹

The Jesus remembered by the tradition is experienced in the present mediated through the word of proclamation and sacramental action. Jesus remembered as the Christ is the experience of the presence of God's own self.

The second part of Tracy's work entails the actual execution of the method here described. His is the attempt of a systematic theologian engaging in the hermeneutical task of mediating past and present so that the event of Jesus Christ remembered in the tradition comes to expression again in the present in a manner that affords the possibility of public discussion with all persons of good will who will engage in reasonable conversation.

In Tracy's Revisionist model we find the essential characteristics set forth by Küng for a new paradigm in theology determined by a critical correlation of the present horizon and the biblical texts.

Herein lies the present challenge to Reformed theology. Through the impact of biblical studies and the explosion of knowledge across the whole spectrum of human inquiry we have been alerted to the danger of confessionalism and the imperative to take seriously the horizon of contemporary experience. The opportunity is ours to realize the ideal of the Reformation. The Church of the Sixteenth Century was re-formed according to the Word of God and at its best it recognized that it must always be being re-formed. The Reformed branch of the Protestant Reformation expressed itself in many Confessional statements and refused to reduce them all to one credal formulation. The Lutheran branch sought to bring the various strands of its confessional position into a unifying

statement with the Formula of Concord which then served as the norm of right doctrine. The Reformed churches feared that such a statement of unity might impede the continuing efforts to confess the faith in each new historical situation and thus determined to continue to confess its faith in ever-new credal formulations as the times demanded.

It goes without saying that the ideal was soon abandoned. The high Calvinism of the Seventeenth Century with its rationalism and careful scholastic definitions was a complete break with the best insights of the early Reformers. Not only in the Reformed tradition but Protestantism generally has been plagued with the fossilizing of doctrinal formulation, the absolutizing of historically conditioned creeds and a defensive posture which has ill prepared it to meet the explosion of knowledge in the sciences, natural and social. Failing to act on its own best insight that the Church needs constant reformation of its understanding of the Faith, Reformed Orthodoxy has been severely threatened by the rise of historical thinking which is so characteristic of the modern period.

Of course, the Church can continue to close its mind to the knowledge and insight that streams forth in a mighty torrent as we continue to unlock the secrets of the cosmos and, with a mindset of an earlier Century and a defensive posture, it can ward off the demands for reformation. In so doing it will lock the faithful into a system of ideas and structure of belief that become increasingly out of touch with their experience of the world, and it will continue to offend its brightest and most sensitive spirits who will finally be forced out when they can no longer deny the compelling truth that calls for a new understanding of the Faith.

This is not a new problem for the Church. It is new only in the rapidity of breakthroughs on all frontiers of knowledge and in the rapid spread of that knowledge that is now possible in the Electronic Age which is creating the "Information Society." But a Church confident of the Truth as it has come to expression in Jesus Christ will find the present day an exciting day in which to identify the questions and find the appropriate mode in which to witness to the self-disclosure of the God in the face of Jesus Christ.

ENDNOTES

¹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 175.

² Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1980), p. 107.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁴ Stephen Toulmin, *Human Understanding*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. vii.

⁵ Hans Küng, "Paradigm Change in Theology," unpublished paper read at the Symposium.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹² Ibid., p. 26.

¹³ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage For Order*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 47.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁵ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*. (New York, New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 62.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 65, 66.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 100.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 101.

²¹ Ibid., p. 102.

²² Ibid., p. 104.

²³ Ibid., p. 131.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 132.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 132F, 133.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 134.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 233.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 234.

³¹ Ibid.

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