

Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope

By David Tracy

(San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987)

Book Review by

Richard A. Rhem

Minister of Preaching and Theological Inquiry

Christ Community Church

Spring Lake, Michigan

Publication of Review Unknown

“At times, interpretations matter. On the whole, such times are times of cultural crisis. The old ways of understanding and practice, even experience itself, no longer seem to work.” (p. 7)

We live in such a time, according to David Tracy, a crisis of tradition, culture, and language so that we can no longer simply move forward by means of the usual ways of experiencing, understanding, acting or interpreting. Tracy names our time “post-modern” - a vague and ambiguous expression he admits; yet “there we are,” he avers.

This being Tracy’s conviction, he continues to pour his energy into the interpretation of interpretation theory.

“A crisis of interpretation within any tradition eventually becomes a demand to interpret this very process of interpretation.”

Tracy stands within the crisis of Western culture.

“... shaped by the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and the nineteenth-century industrial revolution and explosion of historical consciousness. We late twentieth-century Westerners find ourselves in a century where human-made mass death has been practiced, where yet another technological revolution is occurring, where global catastrophe or even extinction could occur. We find ourselves unable to proceed as if all that had not happened, is not happening, or could not happen.” (p. 8)

In such a time, the question of interpretation itself becomes central. Although the discussion of interpretation theory becomes extremely technical and one runs into the technical jargon in Tracy causing the uninitiated to despair; nevertheless the technical discussion is not simply an academic game without practical relevance or application, for, Tracy contends,

“Every time we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or even experience, we are interpreting. To understand at all is to interpret. To act well is to interpret a situation demanding some action and to interpret a correct strategy for that action ... To be human is to act reflectively, to decide deliberately, to understand intelligently, to experience fully. Whether we know it or not, to be human is to be a skilled interpreter.” (p. 9)

The theme of the present work is conversation. Tracy offers conversation as a model for all interpretation. He calls it a “game.”

The movement in conversation is questioning itself. Neither my present opinions on the question nor the texts’ original response to the question, but the question itself, must control every conversation. A conversation ... is not a confrontation. It is not a debate. It is not an exam. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go. It is dialogue. (p. 18)

Understanding will move forward only where conversation exists; where one says what one means as accurately as possible; where one listens to and respects what the other (person, text, or event) says however different or other; where one is willing to correct or defend one’s opinion if challenged by a conversation partner, willing to argue if necessary, to confront if necessary, and to change one’s mind if evidence suggests it.

Any act of interpretation involves at least three realities: a phenomenon to be interpreted, someone interpreting the phenomenon, and the interaction between the first two realities. Understanding these three realities is the problem of interpretation. Tracy suggests it is best to begin with the phenomenon to be interpreted (a law, an action, a ritual, a symbol, a text, a person, an event). For purposes of his discussion, Tracy suggests the classic texts, “Those texts that bear an excess and permanence of meaning, yet always resist definitive interpretation.” Tracy contends,

The classic is important hermeneutically because it represents the best examples of what we seek: an example of both radical stability become permanence and radical instability become excess of meaning through ever-changing receptions. (p. 14)

To understand is to interpret and conversation with a classic text is to find oneself caught up in the questions and answers worthy of a free mind. Conversation is thus an exploration of possibilities in the search for truth. One who enters upon such a conversation does so with the understanding that what is other from one’s pre-understanding may be *possible*. A good interpreter possesses an “analogical imagination” (a concept developed by Tracy in his book by that title) by which the interpreter is able to move from otherness, to possibility, to similarity-in-difference. Persons willing to risk conversation in interpretation are at a disadvantage from those who will not take the risk because

such a person begins with the possibility they may be wrong. But only such openness can advance understanding in the cultural crisis in which we find ourselves, a crisis which has revealed the poverty of both the Enlightenment and the Romantic Movement which was its reaction. As the Enlightenment unfolded, having freed us from the weight of certain oppressive traditions allowing us to dare to think for ourselves, it became trapped in ever-narrower models of what could count as truth until it retreated into a formal and technical rationality.

But we cannot follow the reaction of romanticism thus becoming the latest expressions of the “unhappy consciousness” of the romantic. The “remystification of all reality” is not an option.

It cannot be a pretense that the imagined joys of first naiveté can be ours. It cannot be the disparagement of science and the retreat into privacy. (p. 31)

How do we move forward? Tracy suggests that two contemporary methods offer hope: historical critical methods and literary critical methods. Both affirm the necessity of method and the necessity of rejecting methodism. Tracy discusses the effects of historical critical and literary critical methods on our understanding of the classics of Western culture so that there is no longer such a thing as an unambiguous tradition - no innocent readings of the classics. And where does that leave us? Tracy contends,

The historicity of every text, interpreter, and conversation has been clarified by historical consciousness. Certainty is no more. But relative adequacy for all interpretations remains an ideal worth striving for. (p. 39)

Tracy grounds this contention in the third chapter: “Radical Plurality: The Question of Language,” a discussion of the relationships among language, knowledge and reality and an assertion of the results of critical methods – the radical plurality in language, knowledge and reality alike.

“‘Reality’ is the one word that should always appear within quotation marks.”

That claim of Nabokov, says Tracy, best expresses one major strand of post-modern reflection on language. Both positivism and romanticism held language to be secondary, derivative, coming after the fact of discovery and cognition, peripheral to the real thing. But language analysis has demonstrated its social and historical character. Our understanding comes through particular and public languages and language “shapes” reality - even constitutes reality. The result of this insight has been the dethroning of the autonomous ego from its false pretensions to mastery and certainty. We are inevitably shaped by the history we are born into. We are left with plurality and ambiguity.

Plurality seems an adequate word to suggest the extraordinary variety that any study of language shows, and any study of the variety of receptions of any classic documents. Ambiguity may be too mild a word to describe the strange mixture of great good and frightening evil that our history reveals.

Historical ambiguity means a once seemingly clear historical narrative or progressive Western enlightenment and emancipation has now become a montage of classics and new-speak, of startling beauty and revolting cruelty, of partial emancipation and ever-subtler forms of entrapment. (p. 69F)

Neither optimism nor pessimism will prove fruitful in understanding the plurality and ambiguity of our history. Rather resistance, attention and hope must be exercised. Without resignation or cynicism, Tracy advocates conversation as limited, fragile and necessary exercises in reaching relatively adequate knowledge of language and history.

In the final chapter, "Resistance and Hope: The Question of Religion," Tracy declares that the purely autonomous ego has been mortally wounded, yet not erased; rather there appears a more fragile self - open to epiphanies.

Postmodern coherence, at best, will be a rough coherence: interrupted, obscure, often confused, self-conscious of its own language use and, above all, aware of the ambiguities of all histories and traditions. (p. 83)

Theological interpretation is one way to allow genuine conversation with the religious classics (for example, the Scriptures). A highly tentative, relative adequacy is all that can be hoped for as the same plurality and ambiguity that affects all discourse affects theology. Religions are even more intensely pluralistic and ambiguous than art, morality, philosophy and politics because religions do claim

that Ultimate Reality has revealed itself and that there is a way of liberation for any human being. (p. 86)

Pluralism is the attitude Tracy fundamentally trusts, but such an affirmation is the beginning, not the end for the interpreter of religion.

The great pluralists of religion are those who so affirm plurality that they fundamentally trust it, yet do not shirk their responsibility to develop criteria of assessment for each judgment of relative adequacy. (p. 91)

Reductionism is a real temptation in the interpretation of religion. The problem is one of totalization: only this method or this hermeneutic or this critique can interpret what religion really is.

All methods of reductionism, whether by believers or nonbelievers, are grounded in an unacknowledged confession of their own: the belief that so secure is their present knowledge of truth and possibility that the religious classics can at best be peculiar expressions of more of the same. Anything different, other, alien must clearly be untrue and impossible - that 'goes without saying.' (p. 100)

Thus, declares Tracy, the difference between fundamentalist and secular readings only appear startling; the differences are on the surface, not in fundamental hermeneutical approaches. They are reverse sides of the same coin of certainty, mastery and control. But, writes Tracy,

When it is believable, religious faith manifests a sense of the radical mystery of all reality: the mystery we are to ourselves; the mystery of history, nature, and the cosmos; the mystery, above all, of Ultimate Reality. ... When it is active, religious love frees us from the illusion that to be a human being means to become an ego attempting mastery and control of all others. (p. 107)

Tracy witnesses to his personal belief in belief.

I believe that faith in Ultimate Reality can make all the difference for a life of resistance, hope, and action. I believe in God. It is, I confess, that belief which gives me hope. (p. 110)

In a profile of David Tracy in *The New York Times Magazine* (11-9-86), Tracy is quoted as saying,

The religious event described in the First Letter of John asks the question: What is the nature of the ultimate reality? And the answer is: God. And more explicitly, God is love. That is an extraordinary thought, that ultimate reality is love.

All of his strenuous attention to interpretation theory is in the service of bringing that truth to expression, not just in the Church, but in the public arena. To follow his argument is not easy; it is rewarding. Tracy is a pioneer venturing into the new situation arising out of the cultural crisis of the present in order that the truth claim of God as it comes to manifestation might be understood and acted upon.