

A CRITIQUE OF DAVID TRACY'S

BLESSED RAGE FOR ORDER

by Emilio Chavez

for

PROF. GORDON KAUFMAN

The Human Basis of

Christian Theology

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INTRODUCTION

Blessed Rage for Order (1975) is David Tracy's presentation of a model for doing theology, a "fundamental" theology whose task is to develop "the basic criteria and methods for theological argument" (p.15 n.8; all references are to David Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology Seabury Press, New York 1975). In this paper I shall attempt to expound what Tracy is saying in this book about theology, especially about the method of theology, and present a critique of his ideas from my own perspective. I shall also say something about Tracy's anthropological and moral ideas, but these are not discussed in the book at any length. Tracy recognizes the limitations that process theology (a way of thinking which he agrees with) has in regard to anthropology and social ethic (cf. p.188 and p.195n.28), but certain assumptions do appear throughout the book, and these will also be critiqued. In fact, we can say that a certain basic judgment about humanity is fundamental to Tracy's theology, and we shall have to assess the value and limitations of this anthropological judgment. My basic premise will be that Tracy is too sanguine about the human situation and the possibilities of ratiocination. I shall have to evaluate what he says from my own perspective, perhaps closer to "neo-orthodoxy" but correcting it in several ways. Something will also have to be said about the contributions of process thought regarding God.

DAVID TRACY'S "REVISIONIST" MODEL FOR THEOLOGY

Tracy accepts a familiar idea of the task of theology: "philosophical reflection upon the meanings present in common human experience and the meanings present in the Christian tradition" (p.34). The main contribution of the post-liberal age are "new methodological and substantive resources" for fulfilling the liberal theological ideal (p.33). The Christian theologian stands in service to both to the academic community and to his own church tradition, though not exhaustively (p.239). The theologian is a professional who qua theologian is committed ethically fundamentally to the community of pertinent scientific inquiry (p.7). He or she need not be a believer; he only needs to have "some adequate pre-understanding of the subject-matter (religion)" (p.36 n.16); He need not be a believing member of the Christian community (p.57.n.3) qua fundamental theologian; as a Christian theologian his loyalty to his church tradition "can be formulated as his honest resolve to study that tradition critically and thereby aid its self-understanding"; but this is due to the fact that this theologian "has committed himself to a Christian self-understanding". In loyalty to the scientific community, he must not let belief be a warrant for his arguments (p.7).

The theologian shares "the faith of secularity" with his contemporaries: "that fundamental attitude which affirms the ultimate significance and final worth of our lives, our thoughts, and actions, here and now, in nature and in history" (p.8). The Christian theologian

finds himself disenchanted with the mystifications promulgated by too many church officials and the mystifications proclaimed with equal certitude by the secularist self-understanding of the age. He believes he shares the basic Christian faith of the former and the secular faith of the latter. Indeed, he believes that the Christian faith is at heart none other than the most adequate articulation of the basic faith of secularity itself. (p.10).

Tracy believes that the fundamental faith regarding existence of secular man can be raised to full consciousness by religious language (p.154).

If ... the primary existential use of the word "God" is to refer to the objective ground in reality itself for those limit-languages and limit-experiences of an ultimate worth of our existence, our commitment to the good, and our struggle to achieve it; if the primary logical need for explicating this reality is a coherent limit-concept, then, on secular grounds alone, one need not hesitate to articulate that existential faith in explicitly theistic terms. (p.183).

Tracy thinks that the "crisis of belief" is really the crisis of "cognitive terms" (p.5).

The revisionist theologian's fundamental claim is not that he happens to be a Christian or that he personally finds attractive the Christian symbols as imaginative understandings of our common destiny. Rather, his claim is that nothing less than a proper understanding of those central beliefs --in "revelation," in "God," in "Jesus Christ" -- can provide an adequate understanding, a correct "reflective inventory," or an existentially appropriate symbolic representation of the fundamental faith of secularity. (p.9).

Neo-orthodox theology came to grips with aspects of human reality that liberal theology had been deluded about: the depth of sin and estrangement that characterize the human situation. But it had not taken a hard look at the meaning and meaningfulness of the traditional Christian symbols, and recurred prematurely to speech about "scandal" and "mystery" (p.29). The revisionist theologian is committed to the task of

the dramatic confrontation, the mutual illuminations and corrections, the possible basic reconciliation between the principal values, cognitive claims, and existential faiths of both a reinterpreted post-modern consciousness and a reinterpreted Christianity. (p.32).

Tracy presents five theses concerning the revisionist model he proposes for contemporary theology: 1) "The two principal sources for theology are Christian texts and common human experience" (p.43). The Bible constitutes the fundamental expression of Christianity, and its major motifs must be interpreted to show the adequacy of its major categories for the authentic way of understanding our common human experience (p.44). 2) "The theological task will involve a critical correlation of the results of the investigations of the two sources of theology" (p.45). In contrast to Tillich's method of correlation, Tracy maintains that the fundamental questions and answers of both sources must be taken seriously (p.46). 3) "The principal method of investigation of the source 'common human experience' can be described as a phenomenology of the 'religious dimension' present in everyday and scientific experience and language" (p.47). 4) "The princi-

pal method of investigation of the source 'the Christian tradition' can be described as an historical and hermeneutical investigation of classical Christian texts" (p.49). This involves seeking the meaning of the images and metaphors used and the "way of perceiving reality, that mode of being-in-the-world which the text opens up for the intelligent reader" (p.51). 5) "To determine the truth-status of the results of one's investigations into the meaning of both common human experience and Christian texts the theologian should employ an explicitly transcendental or metaphysical mode of reflection" (p.52). There is a religious dimension in our language and experience revealed by phenomenological analysis; there is also a religious meaning in the Christian texts. The referent of both these sources is theistic (p.54). The truth-status of these claims about a theistic referent are explored later on. The investigation of the ground of the theistic referent (God) requires an account of the conditions of possibility of all experience; ordinary criteria of verification will not suffice to judge the cognitive claim involved in religion (p.55). This task is one of metaphysical or transcendental inquiry: "the philosophical validation of the concepts 'religion' and 'God' as necessarily affirmed or necessarily denied by all our basic beliefs and understandings" (p.56). One cannot avoid this, but must settle for a conscious or for an unconscious metaphysics (p.68).

The analysis of human experience and language shows that there are "limit-questions" about life which require "limit-answers"; both of these questions and answers (e.g., "Why should

I be moral?", "Life is worth living") can be described as religious or theological (p.102). "Ogden develops Toulmin's own insistence that we use religious language to 'reassure' ourselves that the 'whole' and the 'future' are trustworthy in order to argue that all religious language thereby bears the linguistic form of re-presentation" (p.103). Religious language is the only kind of language that can articulate and reaffirm our basic trust in the meaningfulness of reality, a trust always threatened (p.103). In a similar manner, "only an explicitly religious experience seems logically to involve either an explicitly total commitment for the participant and a self-conscious belief in the universal significance of the experience itself" (p.132). There are "limit-situations" either of guilt, anxiety and sickness, or ^{of} "ecstatic experiences" in which we experience our own human limits, our radical contingency or lack of control over our own fate (pp.105ff.). This religious dimension to our existence is autonomous (p.108) and not assimilable to any other.

By its limit-character, a religious dimension is more accurately described by some such phrase as ultimate ground to or horizon of all other activities ... (p.108).

It is this ~~dimension~~ dimension of life that religious language represents to us, making present a human reality which had become threatened or forgotten. It also "represents certain imaginative possible modes-of-being-in-the-world that can become actualized by us" (p.215). The referent of "the christological texts is properly described as theological anthropology"; their existen-

tial meaning is "that one can now live as though in the presence of a gracious God" (p.52). The texts disclose "a new, an agapic, a self-sacrificing righteousness willing to risk living at that limit where one seems in the presence of the ... God represented in Jesus the Christ" (p.221). This is at least a real human possibility.

Yet once anyone judges that this possibility is one which appropriately and truly re-presents the fundamental actualities of his or her life --that common faith in the worthwhileness of existence, that fundamental trust whose reflective clarification is a metaphysical affirmation of God's loving reality-- one may find here not merely a project for the imagination, but a project which re-presents in and with truth the truth of our lives. In the confession of Jesus as the Christ, in the further confession of Jesus Christ as Lord, Christians find a true, a limit re-presentation of their lives as lives whose basic faith is grounded in the action of a loving God. They find that they can have faith and trust and love in the belief that even the power of sin can be transformed by the limit-forgiveness, the grace, of a loving God. (p.221).

This is not an exclusivist understanding of the proclamation of Christ as Lord. Other symbols may disclose the meaning of other lives before God. But christological language suffices for Christians; "that Word has all the power of a complete and true manifestation of the fundamental meaning of authentic human existence" (p.223).

In discussing the notion of God, Tracy notes that the process tradition turns to the experiencing self as "the fundamental ex-

* God is the referent of religious language, which alone discloses the limit of our existence. Cf. Tracy's note 94, p.234.

periential and, thereby, metaphysical ground of all their basic concepts" (p.173). The "central categories of this metaphysics --process, becoming, relation, sociality, and temporality-- are articulated in direct dependence upon the metaphysical analysis of the experiencing self as the paradigm case of all reality" (p.174). God, who is love, must be related and intimately affected by what God is in relation with (p.178). In contrast to the classical understanding, "God is both absolute (as the one whose existence depends on no other being) and relative (as the one whose actuality is relative to all other beings" (179). God is a "dipolar reality", alone affecting all and affected by all. God was described by Whitehead as "the fellow sufferer who understands" (Tracy notes the "liberal" tone of this, p.190). God's relation to reality is "analogous to the self's immediate relationship to its own body", but "God alone synthesizes in each new moment all the actuality already achieved with all the ^{true} possibilities as yet unrealized" (p.181; I am always omitting foot- notes).? *Witcher*

The scriptural "acts of God" are mythologically expressed, but "the Judaeo-Christian God really does act in history: God's promises of a radically new world; a raising of prophets to proclaim that newness; acts for and promise of a limit-liberation from social and individual forces whose power, indeed whose evil, bear at least as radical a character today as in biblical times" (p.190).

Tracy cites Marshorne's belief that "the proper concept of the reality of God is demanded by our most basic beliefs"; only

God can account for our trust in the worthwhileness of our existence (p.174). Hartshorne has further challenged

the prevalent notion that the (Anselmian) ontological argument fails because it attempts to make a fallacious inference from an idea (a "meaning") to a reality (a "truth"). ... But not just any idea warrants an inference to a reality Only the coherently conceived idea of the radically monotheistic Judaeo-Christian God -- precisely as the idea of a necessary existent-- warrants that reality. If one can coherently conceive the concept "necessary existent," he must, short of self-contradiction, affirm its reality.(p.185).

David Tracy makes certain important anthropological points. The human person is free; sin is not a metaphysical necessity (p.212). But we are intrinsically fallible and inclined to sin, so that in actuality sin is inevitable. Theology must continue to retrieve neo-orthodox realism about fallen, estranged man in order to combat the residual liberal optimism found in process thought (p.213;p.188). Process thought has the difficult task of developing symbols with wider existential impact (p.189). We need stories, symbols and myths (or at least their reinterpretation) that have the power to transform personal and historical evil, and reveal the power of God's love (p.214,p.189). Christians must rediscover and reappropriate the story of Jesus (p.204), "overhear" it anew. Symbols which have ceased to have positive transformative force should be discarded (p.210).

The basic issue "for human beings is their faith or unfaith, commitment to value or failure to live a human life".(p. 187). The "Christian limit-symbol" is the cross-resurrection of

Jesus Christ. Heard again, this story may strike anew "with its full disclosive power" (p.222). When this takes place,

one may realize that here any human being is asked to decide with an urgency for which that limit-language we call eschatological is an appropriate expression: to decide to risk living a life-at-the-limits, a faithful, hopeful, loving life, which the Christian gospel proclaims as both a true understanding of the actual human situation in its reality and its possibility and an ever-to-be-renewed decision.(p.223).

Process theology must be accompanied by a true praxis, achieved only when a correct theory is united with authentic practice. Appropriate personal and societal symbols need to be developed ("liberation" vs. "development") (p.210). Neo-orthodox theology was not as aware as we are of the full reality of economic exploitation and the real possibilities for evil (p.242). Genuinely critical symbols should be formulated in words that "even the simplest man" can understand (p.248).

... the authentic simplicity, not simple-mindedness, of the kind of life, thought, and commitment proclaimed in the Christian gospel as the true destiny of every human being might find root again; this time, in a humanity whose historical journey seems to have reached a point where we must find values we can all unite to actualize lest we die, each clinging with ever-diminishing dignity to his own mythologies, his own ideologies, his own god. (p.248).

Tracy calls for the collaboration of thinkers in various disciplines employing critical social theory and analysis (pp. 246f.) to overcome revolutionary romanticism and the reappearance

in praxis terms of the premature neo-orthodox appeals to "mystery" and "scandal" (p.245). This will help the theologian of praxis

to resist those siren-calls to "revolution" sung by the more apocalyptic-minded among the eschatologists, but whose precise social, ethical, and political meaning is left as vague as the exact meaning of that eschatological God of the future who will somehow, someday, assure the "revolution's" success. (p.249).

This completes my exposition of David Tracy's basic methodological, anthropological and moral themes. I shall now proceed to make my analytical critique of this work.

A CRITIQUE

There are many definitions of theology, and David Tracy's is commonly accepted. I have a different definition of theology; or better, my way of doing theology is different and perhaps more traditional. I believe that theology is a science (a methodical inquiry) which rests on certain principles, such as: (in Christian theology): God has "spoken" to humanity, has revealed Godself and has presented "messages" to humankind. God has erupted into the world of humanity which tends to close-in upon itself. I do believe in part with Tracy that there is a certain common human or secular faith in the trustworthiness of reality, etc. We can state a quasi-theological or philosophical principle for this: whatever problems the development of human intelligence brought to Homo sapiens (fears, anxieties, etc.), it was not a self-defeating adaptation. It is meant to enable us to carry on

in the world, and emotional or attitudinal adaptation is part of this. Only neurotics (maladapted) and psychotics (out of touch with reality) lack this basic trust. The question is whether this trust must be articulated in religious language, and whether phenomenology in fact reveals an underlying religiosity in our speech. I believe that in fact many people, raised up in a more or less religious world, do have a basically religious trust in the worthwhileness of our existence. But the fact remains that many do not, that many, especially tough, successful enterprisers believe in themselves and rely on their natural talents and efforts to overcome in this world. To say that this "faith" is religious is to attribute some kind of Rahnerian religious anonymity to these people which is going too far and diluting and enervating the meaning of the term "religious". Tracy is on safer though perhaps no less unfounded territory when he says that only religious language can articulate this basic faith and bring it to full consciousness. There are many books and lectures that attempt to articulate precisely this faith in oneself and in the power of positive thinking only in terms of success in this world without reference to God. To believe that only religion brings to full consciousness secular faith is a belief and a preference very difficult to establish rationally; that only religious language articulates it is I think erroneous. This is the first instance only of Tracy's misleading bullshness on what is susceptible of rational argumentation and even proof.

It is precisely the task of theology as I understand and prefer it to look at the world in terms of a vision that consi-

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ders itself as ultimately stemming from a source not of this world, a source which reveals unexpected ideas and even acts of God. Tracy does recognize this "limit-character" of religious experiences, and articulates it well. But it does not fit in well with his statement that the theologian shares the basic secular faith. Of course the sane theologian will also believe that reality is trustworthy, etc. But his faith goes well beyond the secular understanding of the implications of this trustworthiness. It is this feeling of security and reliance on oneself that can lead one to close oneself off to others and to idolize his own little world. Tracy recognizes that there are dogmatic "mystifications" also in secularity, which must be challenged. But I think that (and here the religious "vision" or worldview comes into play) the teaching of the Bible (especially the Gospel of John) is that ultimately --and really, in fact, as we see all around-- the truly religious life of openness to God and neighbor is the exception and the contrast to the ways of the saeculum. "The world received him not." To say, as Tracy does, that the ^{same} faith is common to both the religious person and the secular person is either to state the banal or to use language in a mystifying manner or simply wrong. *Handwritten: same criticism*

This posture is related perhaps to the great need many theologians have of being taken seriously by the scientific community. Tracy in fact says that the theologian's commitment as a professional is to the scientific community of pertinent inquiry, in addition to his own church community, and that he need not be a

believer. But he also says that the theologian has committed himself to a Christian self-understanding (see p. 2 above). There is an obvious tension here as Tracy tries to please everybody. The commonly accepted idea is that religious faith is not necessary to be a theologian. Given certain definitions of theology this is true; one would only need, as Tracy says, an adequate "pre-understanding" of the subject-matter. I explicitly state that the best theology involves the whole person, "the whole heart". Many aspects of the person, including feelings, have cognitive value; one learns not just from ratiocination but from "living it", from experience (Aquinas called it knowledge by connaturality). Many factors enter into a judgement; the most accurate ones are made by persons immersed in the material. If one accepts my opinion that theology involves a whole world-view and manner of thinking about reality, then the most adequate theologian is one who, as Unamuno says, lives in the "mythological" world of religion, employing all the activated and stimulated aspects of his or her being. This is not to say that the theologian is naive (although Tracy speaks often of a "second naiveté"). The theologian's mind-set simply corresponds to the definition of theology I gave: a way of looking at the world distinct from and not assimilable to other ways (scientific, philosophic, etc.) --here Tracy would agree about the nature of religious language-- a way that involves certain categories or themes: the human dependence on God which is always in danger of being denied; our tendency to close ourselves off from others and God in our little worlds; God's intervention in the world to save humanity, our ra-

*Tracy says that
theology is not
just a matter of
reasoning but
of living it
and feeling it
and that's why
it's so important*

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dical limitness (isn't the fundamental scientific belief that we can eventually do anything?).

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Tracy said that belief must not be a warrant for his arguments. But I think his book is full of premises based on belief, and in his desire to make everything appear to be based on reason, he is "mystifying" or obscuring just what he is doing, theology. Intellectual honesty would demand that beliefs be explicitated, but this requires a correct appreciation of the power of reason (limited) and a true appreciation of when one is actually proceeding from faith-suppositions rather than from just logical discourse.

In short, the crisis of belief is not simply a crisis of cognitive terms. More than just the understanding is involved in any human crisis. There is a decisional element which Tracy eschews, an emotive factor, a matter of the "heart" which somehow is not reducible to simple cognition, though it is rational (as are all our aspects; cf. Susanne Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 3rd ed., p.100). It is this factor which is involved in the decision to live in the mythical world of religion, to intimately appropriate and assimilate the "mode-of-being-in-the-world" (as Tracy would say) of the scriptural texts. This does not preclude familiarity with the secular or scientific view of the world; it requires it, especially to distinguish itself from it (and also because we do have confidence in the power of reason and in our ability to know our world).

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The role of reason in human existence is of course extremely important and definitive of who we are as a species. But I believe

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Don't think of faith as...

that ultimately faith is the crowning glory of humans, a faith that necessarily refers to a power outside of themselves, a recognition of limitness, of the finite capacity of reason. Not everything can be logically established (e.g., the truth of the concept of "necessary existent"). The human condition is such that after all is said and done, there remains our faith in a God who surpasses all our powers, ^{about} whom we have many reasons to doubt, but whom we believe to act in disclosive salvific deeds. This act of the whole person, this faith, is, like religion, not reducible to another act, and it brings into play many elements of the psyche. To the believer, it gives access to a world-different from the world of science or business or academia. Just what does commitment to the Christian self-understanding mean for Tracy but considering the Biblical view of humanity before God as determinative of who we really are? And can this be proven to be an intellectually-based, non-faith deduction? To pretend that it can be, to say that it does not create a new type of faith but simply re-presents our already underlying faith in existence is obscurantistic. A radically different kind of faith, precisely in the lack of finality and consistency of this world and in the unique stability of the salvific power of God above all the vicissitudes of our present existence is what the biblical understanding of the world calls for.

Voyne

Voyne

We do need to criticize our biblical symbols. I think Tracy would agree that this is demanded by the very logic of the Bible. We are constantly growing and experiencing new situations from which we must necessarily view what the Bible says. Our articu-

lations change as our ideas change. I think Tracy shows a good understanding of the prototypical character of the biblical view of humanity before God. The basic themes of this view are normative for the Christian (cf. p. 73). To be sure, they need to be interpreted and determined, in many cases, but I would agree with Tracy and most Christian theologians on what the major ones are: God the ground of our existence, God's salvific will and action, our tendency to sin and estrangement, the ultimate invincibility of God's transformative gracious power. I believe that the theologian must accept these biblical categories and their ethical exigencies, and that these will contradict the prevalent ethos and mode-of-being-in-the-world of this age (Tracy would agree with the jarring-character of the parables, but he stresses their limit-but-this-worldly character; if he means the parables are to be somehow applied here, I do not know where else they would be applied; but if he means there is no division between the view of the saeculum and the view of the "Kingdom", a radically sharp division constituting really two worlds or "cities", I, with the whole Christian tradition, would disagree). It is also imperative for ethical reasons to maintain the dialectic between "revelation" (ultimately derived from our creator's Archimedean perspective on who we are and to where we are called, mediated through prophets with a tremendous sense of being totally at the service of another and feeling very unsuited for their imposed task) and the world-view of secular humanity throughout the ages (even if they called themselves Christian while denying in actuality what Christ calls for).

the problem is: how to understand it

Vague

Vague claim to authority

W. J. J.

This brings me to a final point about ethics. Tracy's contribution here is to point out the dangers of uncritical activism. This is important; human action should always be based on accurate knowledge. Critical scientific and social analysis of economic conditions and factors is necessary in order to be able to effect the right kind of social change. Many consequences have to be taken into account, and all the true causes and remedies of economic impoverishment and exploitation have to be ascertained as correctly as possible. But this is only part of the picture. I would stress the insubstitutability of intimate involvement in social situations for providing certain kinds of knowledge about causes and effects, about the total situation, in short, the knowledge that is hard to articulate but which is, again, the "expert" knowledge, the knowledge by experience and deep acquaintance. It will be the critical, probably somewhat removed analyst, who will critique the activist, but it will often be activists (Lech Walesa, Bishop Tutu, Martin Luther King, etc.) who break ground in tactics and in analysis (perhaps makeshift, but no less accurate than those of the theoreticians), who in perhaps a simple but highly communicative manner explain the history and situation of a country. This kind of intimate knowledge is different and complementary to the theoretical analysis, which also has its own corrective role. There are many factors that enter into a deep social change, and we should be aware that not all of them can be changed or articulated by critical thought. Some factors are more or less given, necessary if unhappy concomitants of highly volatile situations. Certainly the task of

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