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### **Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: The Achievement of David Tracy**

I invite you to close your eyes and imagine with me for a moment. Imagine that you are in a quiet room, sitting at table with your favorite warm beverage...sitting face-to-face with someone. This someone is entirely different than you, for this someone is from a land far removed from yours, this someone comes from a culture completely other than yours, this someone bears a shade of skin and ethnicity that contrasts with yours, this someone's 'ultimate concern,' or 'God' if you like, is not that of yours. For this person adheres to a religious tradition that is not that of your own...a tradition that you know virtually nothing about. You sit at table, across from this person who looks intently at you. You have nowhere to go, no business to tend to other than talking with this person here...this person who sits across from you. Your task is to engage in conversation about your respective religious beliefs, with their respective and divergent claims to meaning and truth. How do you begin? Is your first instinct to steer the conversation – to have the first and last word? Or are you uneasily confronted with the prospect of listening, and perhaps even being changed?

I now invite you to open your eyes and think along with me on the scene we just imagined together. The purpose in beginning with such a scene is to draw our attention to the challenge of interreligious dialogue for our contemporary times, without letting this challenge fall by the wayside as just another platitude of lip-service, blending in with the fashionable names of 'diversity, multiculturalism and otherness' that are evident in every college mission statement throughout the land. Rather, this opening scene seeks to take seriously the vocation to

dialogue with ‘the other,’ better put, dialogue with *her*, with *him*, with *Thou*, with *you*, with *me*. I find myself challenged by this prospect – challenged by the *possibility* of conversing with the stranger, with *you* who are my neighbor. Yet this possibility of conversation is itself made possible by certain *criteria* that set the stage for the drama of dialogue to unfold. Obvious enough is the necessary identity of *persons* who themselves come to the table to converse and who are accosted by one another, summoned to the responsibility of one-for-the-other. How I am moved at this juncture to enter into a reflection on a theology of disability when considering potential conversation partners – how even without the capacity for speaking in coherent sentences, nonetheless a profound coherence and intelligibility may obtain, *viz.* the intelligibility of love between persons. However, it is enough for now to simply mention this clarion call to include a robust theology of disability inside a reflection on human intersubjectivity. Pressing on through an implicit, yet nevertheless intentional, theology of disability, let it suffice to say that the vocation to authentic conversation – one in which both speaking, and (more importantly) *listening*, take place, is the ultimate task of our times.

To the chagrin of this conference, this paper is not as much about Bernard Lonergan as it is about David Tracy, one of Lonergan’s pupils and disciples. As the title of this presentation suggests, the theological achievement and prowess of David Tracy has been made possible because of that of his forebearer, Bernard Lonergan. You may have noticed that the title of this paper is also a play on the title of Tracy’s first book, *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan*. As Lonergan writes in the preface of Tracy’s book, “if I have lived to see the day when laborers in the theological vineyard are not without honor, I must bear witness that later fruits were made possible only by earlier planting, and watering, and God-given growth.”<sup>1</sup> And so it is with

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<sup>1</sup> David Tracy, *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. xi.

Tracy: he stands on the shoulders of his predecessor and mentor. The point of my presentation will be to reveal just a handful of the strands of Lonerganian thought that run through the theological approach of Tracy, especially pertaining to the task of interreligious dialogue. My hope is that at the conclusion of my paper, you will have gained at least one new insight into the question on how to begin interreligious conversation.

In recalling our opening imaginative setting – the face-to-face setting of interreligious dialogue, I would like to propose that David Tracy provides key methodological tools for conducting fruitful conversation between others. When sat down, face-to-face with a person who subscribes to, and lives in, a faith tradition different than your own, you are met by the formidable task of conversation. At the outset, you may think that you know what conversation is all about, for you do it all the time and seem to exhibit high levels of tolerance and altruism. Yet, for Tracy, it is precisely this self-confidence and hubristic impulse, reassuring yourself that you completely understand the customary course of conversation, that needs to be subverted. Again, this may sound *cliché* as just another strain from the throng of postmodern de-centering-of-subjectivity narratives proclaimed at every academic conference from L.A. to Toronto. However, it is precisely at the threshold of banality that this call to authentic conversation must not go overlooked or be taken for granted. For as we shall see, conversation bears within itself the promise of ‘a future filled with hope.’

### *The Liminality of Vision Limited*

Like his teacher, Bernard Lonergan, David Tracy shares the attentiveness to personal horizons: those ‘maximum fields of vision from determined viewpoints.’<sup>2</sup> That all persons can be characterized as ‘limited’ and ‘conditioned’ is an essential point to be recognized at the outset.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Tracy, *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan*, p. 14.

Further, Tracy develops a general ‘rubrics of limits’ that identifies both the limits-to human experience (*e.g.* finitude, radical transience, contingency, the limited capacities of reason), as well as the limit-of human experience, *i.e.* those fundamental structures that are beyond our experiences themselves, but nevertheless ground all our experiences.<sup>3</sup> The latter term, ‘limit-of human experience,’ refers to the transcendental conditions of possibility for any and all experience. The classic quip, ‘how do you know that you know?,’ comes into play here. To raise the question of transcendental limits is to raise the question of ‘the questioning that questions questioning itself.’<sup>4</sup> Tracy agrees with Lonergan that “one can live in a world, have a horizon, just in the measure that one is not locked up in oneself.”<sup>5</sup> To admit a horizon for human experience is to admit the unrestricted power of the human person to raise questions in spite of a limited perspective, and likewise to admit the capacity for human self-transcendence – an ecstatic stepping beyond one’s self through exploring the questions for intelligibility, for reflection, and for deliberation that can only be raised *vis-à-vis* an-other.<sup>6</sup> For Tracy, this is the precise crossroad for the emergence of the religious experience: a limit-experience characterized by a limit-situation, limit-language and limit-symbols. In Kantian fashion, the notion of ‘God’ itself can be construed as a limit-concept, invoked at the limen of one’s cognitive and experiential limits. Given such a predicament of thoroughgoing limitations, the notion of epistemological certainty is deemed suspect and replaced by notions of ‘knowledge-as-understanding’ and ‘understanding-as-interpretation.’ Knowledge is acknowledged as an ongoing process of raising and answering questions; knowledge never arrives at a point of

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 92-94.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 104.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

inertia, but is constantly on the move from answered questions to unanswered questions, all unfolding before the agnostic questions without name or face that will never be raised on the back-side of the infinite.<sup>7</sup> Certainty becomes a passing illusion that gives way to the criterion of relative adequacy for all claims to knowledge and truth, where one knows when one knows enough for now.<sup>8</sup> In this manner is knowledge not absolute, solipsistic assurance, but rather, knowledge is understanding-as-interpretation, where understanding happens through the back-and-forth movement of conversation itself. This notion of knowledge is reminiscent of Lonergan's notion of the 'intersubjectivity of meaning' as expounded in Chapter three of his book, *Method in Theology*. It is here that "reality is what we name our best interpretation" and "truth is the reality we know through our best interpretations."<sup>9</sup> According to this humiliating realization of the fragmentariness of existence and all interpretation, all pretensions to a monadic construal of truth-as-certainty must be relinquished. Truth and certainty are not realized in autonomous fashion, as Descartes and other moderns would have it. Rather, when face-to-face with that which transcendently encircles the possibility of human experience, revealed in the encounter with an-other, one can only surrender and say with the highest levels of ambiguity and ignorance, "all I really know is that I do not know."<sup>10</sup> In the end, for Tracy, "one lives authentically insofar as one continues to allow oneself an expanding horizon," and horizons can be expanded to the measure that they are submitted to the impelling sway of an-other in the context of open, give-and-take conversation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Tracy, *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. David Tracy, *Pluralism and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 23-29.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990), p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, p. 96.

### *Criteria for Conversation*

For conversation to effectively do the work of horizon-expansion, it cannot be left to arbitrary happenstance or unrestrained caprice. For Tracy, conversation must adhere to specific rules and criteria in order to generate new insights, understandings and attitudes. Before setting out what could be called ‘Tracy’s criteria for conversation,’ a necessary proviso must be indicated: “dialogue itself is first a practice (and a difficult one) before theories on dialogue or conclusions on the results of dialogue are forthcoming.”<sup>12</sup> This is to say that, in the case of conversation, theory cannot precede praxis; rather praxis itself constructs the theory. This being said, let us now turn to the criteria Tracy develops with the goal of authentic conversation in mind.

- (1) First, conversation “demands the intellectual, moral, and, at the limit, religious ability to struggle to hear another and to respond.”<sup>13</sup> This preliminary trait could be described as an attitude of openness and an ability to first *listen*. If one cannot enter conversation with this listening and attentive disposition, one cannot engage in authentic conversation with an-other. Upon first hearing, this may seem to be stating the obvious, but how often do we find ourselves in ‘conversation’ even with close friends or family where our interlocutor is not truly listening to us, becoming obsessed with what they have to say and hearing themselves speak! What violence is done to personal dignity when one dominates conversation with the hope of making some miserable point, when one refuses to listen or perhaps has never begun to learn the fine art of listening. So, step one cannot be stressed enough: listen, listen, listen...listen.

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<sup>12</sup> Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

- (2) Second, along with a ‘disposition of openness,’ I, as a conversation partner, must “recognize the other *as* other, the different *as* different” and so “acknowledge that other world of meaning as, in some manner, a possible option for myself.”<sup>14</sup> Here is where Lonergan’s notion of self-transcendence is supremely evident. In order to maintain a ‘disposition of openness’ in conversation, and to view conversation as a worthwhile expenditure of time and energy, one must maintain the possibility of having one’s mind change, in a word, *meta-noia*. The possibility of further personal conversion is part and parcel of the possibility of having one’s horizons expanded through a fruitful and unpredictable encounter with an-other.
- (3) Third, in order for conversation to be genuine, the *question* must assume the place of primacy, itself controlling the conversation according to the willingness of the interlocutors to follow the question wherever it may lead: “we learn to play the game of conversation when we allow questioning to take over. We learn when we allow the question to impose its logic, its demands, and ultimately its own rhythm upon us.”<sup>15</sup>
- (4) Fourth, Lonergan’s transcendental precepts come to the fore as Tracy’s criteria for conversation progress in their specificity, *viz.* that conversation must abide by general criteria of rationality and intelligibility in order to proffer a common ground whereby interlocutors can have any hope of making sense to, and of, one another. In particular, conversation must adhere to “the demands of reason, including the proper demands of metaphysical and transcendental reflection” in order to clear an open space marked by the

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, p. 18.

intelligible coordinates of language, itself comprised of the meaning-making components of sense and referent.<sup>16</sup> For conversation to be coherent, intelligible and meaningful, it must be tethered to a consistent logic, or better, *logos*. If there is no central logical anchor to conversation – even that beyond the medium of a common language – then there would be no hope of mutual sense-making.

Above all, for Tracy, “dialogue demands the intellectual, moral, and, at the limit, religious ability to struggle to hear another and to respond” insofar as one is willing to put everything at risk.<sup>17</sup> To hazard oneself is to enter into the gauntlet we call conversation.

#### *Analogical Imagination and Sustained Conversation*

Practically speaking, the way in which one ‘puts everything at risk’ in conversation, Tracy calls, the analogical imagination. An analogical imagination “suggests a willingness to enter the conversation, that unveiling place where one is willing to risk all of one’s present self-understanding by facing the claims to attention of the other.”<sup>18</sup> With such a brave outlook, “differences need not become dialectical oppositions but can become analogies, that is, similarities-in-difference.”<sup>19</sup> To recognize ‘similarities-in-difference’ through the course of conversation, one identifies those commonalities between interlocutors that in turn unmask unwarranted biases and presuppositions on the part of both parties. An example of such a basic similarity-in-difference that people in general share would be Lonergan’s five stages

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<sup>16</sup> Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, p. 46; cf. Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, p. 19, and David Tracy and John B. Cobb, Jr., *Talking About God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1983), pp. 3, 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 95.

<sup>18</sup> Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, p. 30.



distinguishable in belief which he identifies in his book, *Insight*: a movement from preliminary judgments to the actual assent that is the act of believing. By naming such processes that underlie any claim to truth whatsoever, conversation partners are better able to put their personal claims at arm's reach in order to open greater space for the possibility of being transformed by the other. It is paramount that conversation partners first acknowledge the roles of ambiguity, language, unconscious factors, and the ambiguous otherness even within themselves in order to realize the importance of exercising an analogical imagination.<sup>20</sup> Tracy insists that the road to mutual understanding is traversed only through the employment of analogies – analogies that allow one to relate the narratives of an-other to one's own personal experiences, without reducing the other to the same. An example of a strategy which employs an analogical imagination in interreligious dialogue is the suspension of the question of the specificity of the God-referent in order to analyze the necessary emergence of 'god-terms' in all rhetorics.<sup>21</sup> Employing such a strategy would, again, set the God-referent at arm's reach and open space for assessing the similarities-in-difference between interlocutors. It is an analogical imagination that does not evade conflicting interpretations in conversation, but boldly maintains the hope that, through resistance and conversion, conversation may bear lasting fruit.

### *The Sweet Fruits of Conversation*

In conclusion, David Tracy's pedagogy on the art of conversation offers a valuable 'hermeneutic toolbox' from which to draw. In suggesting that in every I-thou encounter, we are introduced to some new dimension of reality, Tracy demonstrates the great potential within the prospect of interreligious dialogue – a dialogue that has the power for turning war into, not

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

peace, but the labor of conversation.<sup>22</sup> Conversation entails conflict, no doubt, but by maintaining criteria of adequacy one likewise maintains the hope of progress, enrichment and transformation. In the spirit of William James, Tracy recommends that when “life feels like a fight...why not be the Happy Warrior willing to listen to all, struggle with and for all, help all to hear other voices than the self?”<sup>23</sup> After all, as Tracy insists, “if any human discourse gives true testimony to Ultimate Reality, it must necessarily prove uncontrollable and unmasterable.”<sup>24</sup> Such is the nature of the interreligious dialogue: a kind of contest of non-competition wherein interlocutors give themselves over to conversation, itself led by the priority of the question. In following such insights to their fulfillment, one is able to achieve the slogan of Marquette University: ‘be the difference.’

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, p. 112, and Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, p. 109.