

A REPLY TO DAVID TRACY

I wish to thank David Tracy for the words of appreciation. I am also grateful for his critical remarks. After listening to him, I have the impression that he agrees with my characterization of American Catholic theology and my attempt to locate this intellectual development in the social and historical conditions proper to the American republic. What David Tracy finds more difficult to accept is the second part of my paper, in which I argue that American theologians must choose between a liberal and a liberationist perspective and that the ecclesiastical magisterium, at least certain trends in it, has already made the preferential option for the powerless.

Allow me to make a few impromptu remarks in reply to David Tracy's presentation. First a brief observation on the relation between the descriptive and prescriptive sections of my paper. I am fully aware of the controversy regarding the objective or value-free status of the social sciences. I have always defended the position that the claim of value-neutrality in social science is based on an illusion. Empirical research is guided by certain paradigms chosen from among several possible paradigms. Implicit in this choice are values. Social science research intends to reply to certain questions and makes use of certain sets of concepts: again, these questions and these concepts imply values and vision. To verify social science proposals more is needed than the so-called scientific method. What is necessary, in addition to this, is that researchers reveal and clarify their presuppositions and examine them in a critical manner—not to demonstrate them but to assume rational responsibility for them. I have been quite conscious that in the purely descriptive parts of my paper, which present elements of a sociology of knowledge for American Catholic theology, I have operated out of an emancipatory perspective, which is called for by the struggles of people for liberation, derived from progressive social science, and both nourished and limited by theological reflection.

Secondly, a brief remark on American pragmatism. David Tracy, my friend and colleague at *Concilium*, is a philosophical theologian for whose work I have enormous admiration. I have learned a great deal from him. Since I am not a philosopher, I am unable to engage in a truly professional conversation with him. Still, my own reading of American pragmatism leads me to believe that it is a kind of left-wing Hegelianism. Action is the primary dimension of the world-creating process: and knowledge must be understood in terms of the contribution it makes to the social construction of the historical reality. After we have acted, we have the possibility of entering into knowledge; and in turn this new knowledge empowers us to engage in further action. It is possible to read American pragmatism as a critique of the university and its monopolistic claims. Social scientists, philosophers and theologians are in need of dialogue with persons outside of the university, persons engaged in action, and in particular persons committed to the

transformation of the given, the inherited structures of domination. The professional conversation of academicians must again and again be interrupted by the voices of people whom society has marginalized. David Tracy himself puts great emphasis on the need for interruption. Truth, including revealed truth, must repeatedly be challenged by the pariahs of history, even if this threatens the peace of the university and the Church. The perspective from which I have written this paper is, I think, quite close to such a philosophy of praxis, even if I did not learn this from the great American pragmatists.

And finally a word on American exceptionalism. If I understand David Tracy correctly he believes that a critical re-reading of the American pragmatist tradition may result in a history-based, action-oriented social theory for the United States that overcomes the fateful and unproductive choice between the liberal and socialist perspectives, proposed in my paper. The social theories derived from nineteenth-century European experience may not apply to the United States. The United States must struggle for its own way into the future, guided by a theory that relies on its own historical experience. Important authors have come to this point of view. David Tracy realizes of course the tenuous character of this theoretical proposal: it does not articulate the historical struggle of a concrete political movement. It does not follow action, but precedes it. David Tracy also realizes that it is possible to appeal to American exceptionalism for ideological reasons in order to withdraw from the challenge which a socialist critique presents to the American empire. Still, I have great respect for David Tracy and other critical American thinkers who try to articulate a transformist social philosophy in continuity with the bolder proposals of the American egalitarian and communitarian traditions.

Because I am so aware of the social foundation of theoretical thought, it is quite clear to me that my own tripartite approach to social theory, conservative, liberal and socialist is related to the three-party political system which Canada shares with Great Britain and other European countries. A three-party system generates a political imagination that differs from the political expectations summoned forth among people in the two-party system of the American republic. It is my impression that a certain despair has gripped the hearts of many of my friends in the United States because the two-party system they have inherited offers them too few choices and because at this time even the party that had the support of labor and the immigrants does not offer them an alternative vision of society. It is in these times of despair when the critique of society no longer translates itself into political action that Christians have a special mission. It is perhaps not so surprising that the churches have been the most consistent critics of the present administration and its domestic and foreign policies. It is my conviction that we who believe in forgiveness and new life have at this time a message for society, a political and theoretical word, of crucial importance.

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