SEMINAR ON THEOLOGICAL METHOD

TRACY ON THE PUBLIC AND AESTHETIC

The text assigned for the seminar was "A Theological Portrait of the Theologian: Fundamental, Systematic and Practical Theologies," and "The Christian Classic I: The Event and Person of Jesus Christ; The Christian Classic II: The Search for a Contemporary Christology," in David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

At the first session, the convener posed two questions to Professor Tracy. 1) Can the public audiences of the theologian be differentiated into academy, church and society without surreptitiously reintroducing a division between public and private languages? What are the rules of coherence among the various claims to truth? Does not the academy (critical thought) have the abstract upper hand, such that the confessional allegiance becomes a private concern ruled by the only legitimate public, the academy? 2) Is the aesthetic category: the "classic" sufficient to establish what has been meant by the divine authority of the Christian Gospel?

Professor Tracy responded at some length by maintaining that it is not the academy which governs the other publics or provides the rules for what is public. Rather, "public" is what is shared by the three audiences (church, world, and academy) in common. It can only be a reductionist notion of public, if church is understood as sect, society as technocracy and academy as a zone of civic non-responsibility. A sufficiently dialectical argument would correct the mistaken notions of what is public in each audience.

The fundamental question, however, (the coherence of the truth claims of the three publics) is crucial. Tracy describes his position as a "hard consensus" model in which the communities of inquiry agree. It is a model in which the abstract or transcendental conditions of the possibility of truth and the concrete disclosure and transformation provide the adequate criteria for determining what is authentic and true in each public.

In response to the second question concerning the "classic," Tracy remarked that *authority* can be defined in two ways: a juridical command to which subjects obediently conform or the transformative and disclosive power of a text, person or event.

Professor Sanks asked whether there is a difference between the authority of the religious text and the aesthetic classic, since in the first, religious people maintain that God is speaking, yet in the other, appreciators claim some lesser speaker's claim to truth? Tracy remarked that the specific difference in the generic act of disclosure should be seen as the manifestation appropriated as power for the individual and community by the power of the classic itself.

Does this mean that the difference between the two is simply the distinction between (for want of better terms, remarked the convener) form and content? The form of the aesthetic and religious disclosures are the same; but *what* is manifested is different? By no means, returned Tracy. The form of the religi-

ous classic is always self-defeating, always already inadequate to the event of religious meaning it discloses. The form is different precisely because of the content.

Professor Tracy specified some of the criteria for hard consensus in an appeal to Gadamer on the hermeneutics of conversation and Habermas on the social conditions for such conversation. All the publics of theology require some criticism of the systematic distortion which affects each.

Professor Manchester found this helpful, but insufficient. Public seems to be defined in the text in primarily epistemological categories—open-ended ones. How is it possible to know concretely which questions emerging from the publics are worth investigation? If all answers must be entertained, how is one not simply captive to fad or utterly skewed questions? Tracy remarked that all epistemological criteria for warrants are already social, and that there can be no "rules" set up as an advance defense. One must enter a conversation in which the subject matter takes over, eliminating superfluous questions, and evidence for or against what is worthwhile as mounted.

Professor Imbelli remarked that if some clear criteria for the logic of "transformation" of the public were offered, then it might be possible to discern just how the interaction of the theological tradition and the publics of theology might look. Tracy responded that although he is somewhat leery of "conversion-language" for this task, it is one option. Moreover, as Walter Benjamin has said: "Every civilization is simultaneously a work of barbarism." The most ambiguous cultural artifacts are the religious classics since they can be seen as true, good and beautiful or used as obfuscatory, demonic and ideological.

Questions turned to the hermeneutics of Christology through Professor Altizer's remarks on the relationships between the historical Jesus and literary criteral hermeneutics. He intimated that in Tracy's work the historical words and acts of Jesus have been annulled as the foundation of Christology and replaced by an open-ended hermeneutics of recovery. Tracy wished to differentiate himself from a radical hermeneutics of de-construction, while maintaining that the "historical Jesus" (as a hermeneutic of suspicion) cannot be the basis of Christology. He believes that this would be to make faith hostage to the fortunes of historical-critical scholarship. Rather the Christ recovered by the hermeneutic tradition of the believing community is the foundation of Christology. The discussion about the differences between fictional and factual narratives can only be determined through hermeneutical inquiry.

Is this metaphysically consistent with the earlier work in *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975)? asked Professor Farrelly. Consistent and coherent, but not identical, responded Tracy. The rules for truth-claims in each of the three-fold disciplines of theology are analogical, not uniform.

Professor Gerhart remarked that Tracy's use of the notion of the "classic" provides a way of recovering an authentic value for aesthetic experience in theology as well as in culture. It overcomes Kierkegaard's notion of aesthetic, Bultmann's idea of myth, or any common sense notion of the literary as merely decorative. Will there be a place for the aesthetic in the pastoral praxis of theology, the final work of Tracy's methodological trilogy?

Most certainly, responded Tracy. In the statement of the whole project which he is writing at present, art's claim to truth should break down the usual notions of the aesthetic as merely manipulated expression. And since all disclo-

sures are also transformative (and vice-versa), the work of such figures as Benjamin, Adorno, Jameson, and Lentricchia or the work of American ethicians will contribute to the role of imagination in authentic religious praxis.

The second meeting of the seminar was convened by Professor T. Howland Sanks, S.J. due to the unavoidable absence of both Professors Happel and Tracy. The two fundamental foci continued. Participants questioned how the meaning of truth in the "hard consensus" model can be more clearly specified, since truth is known differently by members of any one community and even more diversely by members of differing communities (or publics)? What then is the basis or possible basis for some consensus? Is there any grounding (transcendental or otherwise) for this possible consensus? Can we merely assume the *fact* of some consensus without providing an explanation or ground for its possibility? Does it assume a community in theory which in fact does not exist?

The second issue returned in the role of the aesthetic as an adequate category *within* the ecclesial community. Is it a sufficient basis on which to build a systematic theology, e.g. a Christology? The question on the place of historical criticism in Tracy's thought was repeated, and some attempt was made to contextualize this notion through the sacramental performance of the community itself. The performance of sacramental ritual may be necessary to transcend the various ways of knowing in a community or communities. Professor Cooke was particularly helpful on this issue.

The seminar would like to continue during coming conventions. This year's convener will remain primary contact person for suggestions on topics and text for the coming year's discussion. Professors Michael Vertin and Hal Sanks offered their services for the coming year's questions. Any suggestions for discussion should be forwarded to the convener of this year's seminar.

T. HOWLAND SANKS, S.J.
Jesuit School of Theology
Berkeley
STEPHEN HAPPEL
St. Meinrad School of Theology