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RESPONSE TO DAVID TRACY

For the sake of theology, in this demanding and rewarding meditation, David Tracy offers an account of the failure of modern theological responses to massive, protracted evil and suffering in history. Modern attempts at theodicy have failed precisely because they were modern: that is, they sought to replace some inchoate submission to divine will with submission to rationality. In other words, these efforts failed because they separated thought from feeling, content from form, theory from practice. At the same time, modernity itself problematizes theodicy: as Tracy observes so rightly, modernity's very success impoverishes its ability to face evil and suffering squarely. To suggest that these reflections are for the sake of theology, is to call attention to Tracy's relocation of theology in Christian life and experience, including the experience of confronting evil and of suffering as a Christian, as one who stands in memory and hope before the cross of the crucified Jesus. Thus, Tracy proposes that the new starting point for theology is the effort to face up to evil and suffering, while thinking, speaking, and naming the God of genuine hope.

In this brief response, I shall limit my comments to three issues that are broached in the paper—suffering as the new starting point for theology, which insinuates a paradigm change for theology; and the relation of history and theology as well as tragedy and hope given such a change in paradigm.

SUFFERING AS THE STARTING POINT OF THEOLOGY

What might it mean to take suffering as the starting point of theology? To be sure, Tracy does not trivialize personal physical or existential suffering. Rather, his focus is on "horrifying historical evils"—the colonization of Africa, the Americas and parts of Asia and Oceania, the horrors of the Middle Passage, the famines of Ireland and Russia, the Shoah. Yet, horrifying moral and physical evil and suffering greet us each morning in the daily news: muggings and drive-by shootings, terrorist bombings and kidnappings, Bosnia and Chechenya, Liberia and Rwanda. These too are bitter signs of modernity's success; and yet, this suffering is to ground our theological work so that our abstraction is not distanced from experience. Here, Tracy explicitly challenges signatures of modernity—the distancing of thought from feeling, theory from practice. Thus, since theology mediates between religion and the culture in which it is located, to take suffering as the starting point for theology in our time insists that theology come to terms with forms of evil and suffering precisely in the measure that these affect our culture. Second, in this mediation, theology is called to listen genuinely and patiently to those who suffer. Moreover, that listening ought not

to co-opt the hard-won knowledge of the suffering; rather such listening requires of the theologian discipline, passion, and compassion to resist romanticism and nostalgia, condescension, and complaint. Third, this new starting point for reflection on Christian faith and experience will take the form of narrative disclosure of meaning. This renders hermeneutics an ever more complex and necessary task, for the theologian cannot simply adapt Christian faith to categories without analyzing those categories critically.

HISTORY AND THEOLOGY

To take suffering as a point of departure for doing theology adverts to a new paradigm in theology, what Edward Schillebeeckx has termed "theology *after* a Christian history of domination and victors."[1] This new paradigm recognizes that the contemporary context for speaking meaningfully about God is the context of humankind's need for liberation, emancipation, and redemption. Theology in this paradigm risks encounter and engagement with the creative and redemptive powers of God in history "even before we are completely liberated." The new paradigm in today's situation, Schillebeeckx suggests, is "*the paradigm of 'humanity,'* the paradigm of the cry for the humane, open to God's future which transcends history."[2] Thus, the incarnation, that is to say, the concrete, powerful, paradoxical, even scandalous engagement of God in history, changes forever our perception and reception of one another. Jesus forever changes our perception and reception of the human other, of humanity; and humanity is not merely his concern, it is for humanity, for us, that he gives his life. If suffering is the new starting point for theology, then, theology has the historical task of solidarity with those who suffer.

TRAGEDY AND HOPE

In the concluding paragraphs of his paper, David Tracy urges those of us brought up in the West to return to the deep aesthetic and imaginative center of our trembling civilization—Greek drama, and tragedy specifically. Tragedy presents us with a person of superior intelligence or character, a king or queen, an unsurpassed leader of a community, who is overcome by the very obstacle she or he is struggling to remove. Tragedy is a form of storytelling that recounts elemental conflicts in choice regarding human being and human living. Tragedy orients and instructs us not so much in the literal consequences of evil and affliction; rather it directs and sharpens our attention and coaches us to make our own judgment about the judgments made by the drama's tragic characters. The

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[1]Edward Schillebeeckx, "The Role of History in What Is Called the New Paradigm," *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future*, ed. Hans Küng and David Tracy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 317; emphasis mine.

[2]Ibid., 318.

question of tragedy emerges in modernity with particular force because modernity itself is tragic. In struggling to overcome the chaotic and the random, modernity surrendered its spirit to bureaucracy; in struggling to free reason from the crushing weight of religious and philosophical authority, modernity waxes authoritarian; in struggling to enlarge human consciousness, modernity grew closed and ideological. The question of tragedy is just as urgent in the postmodern situation, for we, like Agamemnon and Antigone, must choose.

Tracy's appeal to tragedy immediately brought to mind two works of literary criticism and moral sway—*The Educated Imagination* by Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye, and *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* by novelist and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison.[3] These literary critics prod us to a distinct and compassionate openness in theology.

In *The Educated Imagination*, Frye discusses the value of literature in educating the imagination, in shaping conscience and consciousness. Frye identifies the basic elements in the cultivation of literary understanding in the West—the Christian Bible, Classical (Greek and Roman) mythology, drama (first comedy, then tragedy), and poetry. Literature absorbs and stretches the imagination; it serves up the full range and sweep of experience and feeling. Literature prepares the reader to meet new questions, grasp new experiences, and to present new insights. Tragic literature exposes us, not only to profound suffering and anguish and their consequences, but it also discloses us to ourselves. Tragedy invites us to judge the responses of others to severe and painful circumstance and choice, while challenging us to judge our own responses to those judgments. Tragic literature refines (or brutalizes) the sensibilities, widens (or narrows) the heart, forms (or deforms) the soul. In encounter with new experiences, new emotions, new ideas, the woman or man of educated imagination may (or may not) pose new questions, join familiar and unfamiliar, offer new responses and propose new moral choices. Moreover, the educated imagination raises a wall that protects us from annihilation and devastation by certain powers, forces, and passions. Yet, at the same time, that wall may prevent us from seeing different or more simple or more complex points of view. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison illumines the "other" side of that wall, particularly that side treated as different and so discredited.

Morrison grasps a profound ironic tragedy: "Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities."[4] That creative enrichment came at great price: in treating blackness as a metaphor for decay and death and evil, U.S. writers not only projected these null and negative images into the literature they created, but also projected and fixed those images onto black women and men. Certainly, that

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[3]Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (1964; repr. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974) and Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[4]Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 38.

creative enrichment is ironic insofar as blackness was deemed empty, void of all intelligence, originality, and creativity; yet, it was a rich source for educating imagination. That creative enrichment was tragic insofar as black humanity was deemed inhuman and subjected to unimaginable brutality, which (ironically and tragically) dehumanized those who insisted on abrogating humanity solely to themselves. The impact of these presentations on the 'American imagination' are uncovered in bias, in structured deformations in societal relations between blacks and whites.

Consider Tracy's appeal to tragedy in the context of theology. Here the arts as a theological resource are especially good at generating the complex and multivalent. While it is true that tragedy often is frightening and bleak, it also may constitute what Kathleen Sands calls a heuristic. A tragic heuristic "discern[s] in the moment and for particular historical agents what is within our control and what is not, forming responsible judgments on the one side while holding compassion and desire open to what remains beyond."[5] A tragic heuristic has at least three functions in supporting the vitality of a community's religious life—the mystical, the aesthetic, the moral. The mystical function of tragedy opens us to religious encounter that transcends Kantian notions of moral will and moral idealism, while leading to vivifying ritual. The aesthetic function of tragedy assists theology in articulating painful and bittersweet stories of a community's history in such a way that healing powers are unleashed. The moral function of tragedy opens us to new and transformative possibilities in moral sensitivities and moral judgments.[6]

Finally, we come to hope. Forms of theology sensitive to the tragic seek what is wounded and hidden, and so heal and embrace. These theologies support and challenge the Christian's risk to hope and concretize that hope through a praxis of liberation and solidarity with the suffering. To take suffering as the starting point for theology is to place converted human intelligence in the service of the God of genuine hope who raised Jesus from the dead.

M. SHAWN COPELAND
Marquette University
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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[5]Kathleen M. Sands, *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) 14.

[6]Ibid., 14-15.