

TRACY'S NOTION OF DIALOGUE: 'OUR LAST, BEST HOPE'?

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Abstract

This paper discusses David Tracy's contribution to the (South African) 'dialogue on dialogue'. It analyses the development of Tracy's notion of 'dialogue with the other' with special reference to his recent articles. In three subsections it is argued that: 1) Tracy now realizes the ambiguity of both modernity and postmodernity, 2) The notion of the 'other' serves to do justice to the insights of postmodernity, understood as a fully ethical response to the ambiguities of modernity, 3) The notion of 'dialogue' continues, in fact, the hopes of modernity in the liberating possibilities of a dialogical rationality. Is such a modernist (!?) dialogue with a postmodernist other possible? After discussing the debate on Tracy's notion of dialogue, it is argued that one of the dangers of this notion of dialogue is that it tends to become all-inclusive and even assumes quasi-religious characteristics. Conversation is for Tracy indeed 'our last best hope'. The notion of dialogue may become too 'fat'. Dialogue is one possible metaphor and strategy for Christian theology but it should be supplemented by others. Tracy himself has emphasized the importance of solidarity in this respect.

1. Introduction: the notion of dialogue

Notions of 'dialogue' are frequently used to describe a particular way of doing Christian theology. In this paper the contribution of David Tracy to the (South African) 'dialogue on dialogue' will be considered. Before entering into this dialogue with Tracy, a few general observations are important.

a) Notions of dialogue are often used within Christian theology in different contexts, serving different purposes.

- A theologically loaded notion of dialogue is, for example, used in the debates on 'dialogues with people of other living faiths.'
- In the endless methodological and hermeneutical debates in Christian theology notions of dialogue are often used to describe a particular approach to doing theology (e.g. theology as dialogue instead of grammar or rhetorics).¹
- In theological and socio-political ethics (e.g. in the South African context) there are vigorous and ongoing debates on the meaning, characteristics and value of dialogue, negotiations, forums, talks, 'talks about talks', mediation, discussions, disputes, etc. A theology of

1 See Herholdt's (1993:123-197) instructive distinction between three forms of theology based on the classic trivium of grammar, dialogue and rhetorics.

reconciliation is, for example, described by Villa Vicencio (1995) as one of 'telling one another stories'.

What does a call for 'dialogue' imply in each of these contexts? This paper is one possible exercise in conceptual clarification on notions of dialogue used in these debates.

b) Notions of dialogue are, of course, widely used in discourses other than Christian theology and carry a variety of meanings. Elsewhere in this edition of *Scriptura* Smit & Fouché remind us of four major philosophical positions on dialogue.

Tracy's own use of dialogue is perhaps still predominantly influenced by Gadamer (as opposed to Habermas) and ultimately by Plato (as opposed to Aristotle). It will become clear in the discussion below that Tracy accommodates and welcomes the legitimate contributions of Derrida and Habermas (and to a far lesser extent Rorty) by treating them as necessary and important interruptions of a (Gadamerian?) conversation.

c) Conversation is indeed a thoroughly humane way of socializing which yields the fruits of mutual enrichment. This broader context within which conversation often takes place should not, however, obscure the more immediate *Sitz im Leben* of calls and appeals for authentic dialogue. The need for dialogue usually arises from contexts of serious conflict. Dialogue is not the only possible strategy to resolve these conflicts. However, the struggle for democracy between 1990 and 1994 in South Africa serves as a powerful reminder that conversation, dialogue, negotiations and even 'talks about talks' remain, at times the only option to resolve serious conflict. If one forgets this *Sitz im Leben* of dialogue within open political, economic, social or religious conflict, a notion of dialogue will soon dissipate into the all too comfortable luxury of an unthreatened (and therefore 'civilised') conversation between equals.

2. The development of David Tracy's notion of dialogue in his major books

David Tracy is one of the most important recent Christian theologians to develop a particular notion of dialogue systematically. In this section I will trace some of the developments in Tracy's notion of dialogue.²

a) Tracy did his doctoral research on Bernard Lonergan and originally followed the latter's transcendental (Kantian) approach (see *The achievement of Bernard Lonergan*, 1970). For Lonergan (1957, 1972), the task of (fundamental) theology was to analyse the general conditions for the possibility of human understanding. Lonergan's transcendental approach is based on an intensification of self-

2 Since I have discussed various aspects of Tracy's work in other contributions (see Conradie 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1992d, 1993, 1994a), I will concentrate here on Tracy's more recent contributions (since the publication of *Plurality and ambiguity*).

consciousness and proceeds to analyse the process of differentiation in the human consciousness which leads to knowledge, judgement and insight.³

b) In *Blessed rage for order* (1975) Tracy followed a similar approach, giving comparatively little attention to hermeneutics. The task of (fundamental) theology was to uncover (through phenomenological and transcendental analysis⁴) the religious and theological dimensions of what he then called 'our common human experience.' He did, however attempt to broaden Lonergan's somewhat intellectualist notion of 'experience' (see 1975:74f).

Since *Blessed rage for order*, Tracy has gradually moved away from this approach. The language of particularity and interpretation has replaced that of assumed communality and experience.⁵ He developed the Enlightenment 'turn to the subject' (which was followed by Lonergan and other transcendental Thomists), into a hermeneutical one (Rike 1991:xiv). Tracy now followed the move from the phenomenological reflections on self-consciousness of Husserl to the hermeneutical philosophy of Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur. Tracy also followed Ricoeur's so called 'long route to ontology.'⁶ Ricoeur (1980:239f) rejected (*contra* Husserl and Heidegger) the claim that the Cartesian *cogito* can analyse itself through immediate, intuitive introspection. According to Ricoeur, there is no uninterpreted experience. The subject can therefore understand itself only through a longer route, i.e. through the interpretation of concrete signs (especially, for Ricoeur, symbols, metaphors, texts and narratives).

c) In *The analogical imagination* (SCM Press, 1981), Tracy develops a thoroughly *hermeneutical* understanding of Christian theology. Tracy himself refers to this turn as '... my own explicitly hermeneutical turn in *The analogical imagination* in contrast to the hermeneutically informed but underdeveloped position on 'common human experience' in *Blessed rage for order*' (1985a:464).

3 For Tracy's lasting admiration for Lonergan see 1989c:567. For a good overview of Tracy's earlier work, see Sanks (1993).

4 Tracy (1990d:902) has recently reiterated (see already 1975:55f) the need for transcendental analysis (an analysis of language having a transcendent referent and therefore apparently not in the Kantian sense of the word). He immediately adds:

The acknowledgement of the role of language (and therefore history) in all understanding combined with the awareness of the large role unconscious factors play in all conscious rationality have made theologically necessary transcendental forms of reflection not impossible, but far, far more difficult to formulate adequately than modern theology (including my own) once believed.

5 Compare this with Tracy's comment on the interpretive character of 'experience' in *Plurality and ambiguity*:

Interpretation seems a minor matter, but it is not. Every time we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or even experience, we are interpreting. To understand at all is to interpret. To act well is to interpret a situation demanding some action and to interpret a correct strategy for that action. To experience in other than a purely passive sense (a sense less than human) is to interpret; and to be 'experienced' is to have become a good interpreter. Interpretation is thus a question as unavoidable, finally, as experience, understanding, deliberation, judgement, decision, and action' (Tracy 1987a:9).

6 Placher (1987:39) comments on this crucial move of Ricoeur: 'Ricoeur found himself rejecting the whole tradition, running from Descartes to Husserl, which assumed that we have our clearest and most unmediated certainty when we turn to understand ourselves as thinking subjects.'

Theology is now understood as 'a deliberately interpretive enterprise from beginning to end' (Tracy 1985b:52). Tracy argues:

All contemporary systematic theology can be understood as fundamentally hermeneutical. This position implies that systematic theologians, by definition will understand themselves as radically finite and historical thinkers who have risked a trust in a particular religious tradition. They seek, therefore, to retrieve, interpret, translate, mediate the resources - the questions and answers, form and content, the subject matter - of the classic events of understanding of those fundamental religious questions embedded in the classic events, images, persons, rituals, texts and symbols of a tradition (Tracy 1981:104).

In developing this notion of theology as interpretation, Tracy finds the hermeneutical tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer (with the important corrections of Ricoeur) especially helpful. In *The analogical imagination*, Tracy emphasizes both the open-endedness and the analogical character of (theological) interpretation.

Firstly, the open-endedness of the ongoing conversation is illustrated by the Gadamerian metaphor of conversation as a game. Tracy argues:

Conversation is itself another kind of game. It is a game where we learn to give in to the movement required by questions worth exploring. The movement in conversation is questioning itself. Neither my present opinions on the question nor the text's original response to the question, but the question itself, must control every conversation. A conversation is a rare phenomenon, even for Socrates. It is not a confrontation. It is not a debate. It is not an exam. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go. It is dialogue ... We learn to play the game of conversation when we allow the questioning to take over (1987a:18).

Secondly, the analogical form of (theological) interpretation is especially important. Dialogue (a Gadamerian metaphor for interpretation), Tracy argues, necessarily implies a search for similarities-in-differences (i.e. analogies). This emphasis on both similarities and difference is crucial. This distinction also forms the basis of the argument in the further sections of this essay.

i) Dialogue implies, on the one hand, a search for similarities, for an *Einverständnis* or a fusion of horizons (Gadamer). It is true that a general theological consensus is, according to Tracy, neither achievable nor desirable. This does not, however, imply that a certain degree of agreement is not possible. Indeed, this happens every time when communication or conversation takes place. The search for some shared truth is in fact the very hope of modernity itself. It was born from the experience of intellectual emancipation during the Enlightenment and is continued in the search for degrees of consensus in contemporary quests for democracy. Indeed, the search for some form of similarity is no luxury. It is born from the experience of intellectual, religious, cultural and political *conflict*.

ii) On the other hand, it is the very dissimilarity, the unfamiliarity of an interpreted object or a conversation partner which evokes the interest of an interpreter. *Differences* therefore have an extremely important function in *The analogical imagination*.⁷ In his exposition of the role of classics, Tracy stressed the differentness, the transcendence of the classics over the life world of the interpreting subject. What we are trying to understand when we interpret, are differences: 'To converse with the classics is to recognise and appreciate its difference and its difference as possibility for the self and its understanding' (Rike 1991:xxii). The existence of differences introduces the possibility of a *novum*, a new world of meaning for the interpreter. Interpretation as dialogue implies an openness for the challenge of radical difference, otherness, strangeness. Secondly, Tracy argues that difference and conflict could actually be liberating: 'If conversation is a reality, then conflict, confrontation, argument can prove liberating possibilities.' (Tracy 1981:447). Thirdly, the existence of radical differences also serves as a constant warning against harmonising interpretations, an all too easy acquiescence in already established analogical relations (similarities-in-differences) and the illusion that anything more than relative adequacy is possible.

Theological interpretation is therefore possible only in an analogical way and then through the creative abilities of the imagination by which certain similarities-in-differences are identified and expressed in a publicly available form. This is also the *de facto* meaning of the somewhat elusive notion of the 'analogical imagination'.⁸

d) In Tracy's next major book, *Plurality and ambiguity* (1987), he radicalizes this hermeneutical approach to Christian theology. Jeanrond's comment (1989:218) on *Plurality and ambiguity* is appropriate:

... this new book displays yet a further increase in hermeneutical reflection. Once the subject matter of a sub-section (Tracy 1975, 73-79), then the special topic of a chapter (1981, chapter 3), hermeneutics is now the concern of an entire book.

The analogical structure of theological interpretation and dialogue is again evident in *Plurality and ambiguity* but both the emphasis of difference and on similarity is somewhat radicalized:

i) The shift between *The analogical imagination* and *Plurality and ambiguity*⁹ could perhaps be regarded as the product of concrete exercises in an analogical

7 It is exactly this role of differences that was radicalised in *Plurality and ambiguity* and *Dialogue with the Other* (see the further discussion).

8 See Conradie (1992b, 1992d) for a more detailed conceptual analysis of Tracy's notion of an analogical imagination.

9 *Plurality and ambiguity* is also the product of Tracy's dialogue with the postmodern critiques of modernist notions of the self. Tracy agrees that '... the purely, autonomous ego is no more' (1987a:82). He unmasks '... any pretensions to full self-presence, any self-congratulatory Western resting in an untroubled, alinguistic, self-present, reality-founding ego ...' (Tracy 1987a:59). However, for Tracy, these critiques does not imply that the subject has now disappeared completely. In fact, he interprets *Plurality and ambiguity* as '... a meditation on

imagination. This radicalized Tracy's awareness of the role of *differences* and *otherness* in the interpretation event as a search for similarities-in-differences. He says: 'So immune can we all become to otherness that we are tempted to reduce all reality to more of the same or to that curious substitute for the same we too often mean when we say similarity' (1987a:15). In his treatment of the role of plurality and in dialogue with postmodernist thinking, Tracy, referring to categories like *différence*, makes it even clearer that these differences cannot be harmonized, that any discovered similarities remain tentative, preliminary, indetermined. The otherness of the interpreted classics is also emphasized by an increasing awareness of the radical ambiguity of language, history and therefore of all (religious) traditions.

In *Plurality and ambiguity* Tracy also reformulates the notion of an analogical imagination with a distinct emphasis on otherness:

For the phrase 'an analogical imagination' simply reminds us that conversation occurs if, and only if, we will risk ourselves by allowing the questions of the text. We must follow those questions - however initially different, other, or even strange - until the unique result of this kind of interaction occurs: the exploration of possibility as possible and thus similarity-in-difference. In such moments of recognition, what is both disclosed and concealed as other and different becomes appropriated as possibility. When possibility enters, some similarity-in-difference cannot be far behind (Tracy 1987a:20).

The analogical imagination thus functions as a *heuristic strategy* for theological conversation: 'As a heuristic and pluralistic strategy it (the analogical imagination) ... can remind conversation partners that difference and otherness once interpreted *as other* and *as different* are thereby acknowledged as in some way possible and, in the end, analogous' (Tracy 1987a:93).

On a more existential level, Tracy also explained the notion of an analogical imagination as a call for authentic *conversation*. It is a call for openness towards the radically different and a willingness to undergo critical self-evaluation in conversation with others:

On a more existential level, an analogical imagination suggests a willingness to enter in the conversation, that unnerving place where one is willing to risk all one's present self-understanding by facing the claim to attention of the other (Tracy 1987a:93).

ii) How does one keep this emphasis on otherness from exploding into sheer chaos or open conflict? How do you find some form of *similarity* within radical difference? The pervasive critiques of Enlightenment notions of rationality and positivist notions of knowledge have made us fully aware that any consensus, any *Einverständnis* reached through dialogue will remain incomplete, always provisional. Instead of claiming any status for the results reached through

dialogue, it is perhaps the ongoing dialogue itself which may still, Tracy believes, keep everything together.

The notion of dialogue or, perhaps more exactly, conversation,¹⁰ interestingly enough, becomes far more prominent in *Plurality and ambiguity*. Instead of being merely a metaphor for interpretation it actually became Tracy's new root metaphor. In chapter 1 of *Plurality and ambiguity* Tracy reformulated Ricoeur's well-known dialectic of interpretation-explanation-interpretation as a dialectic of conversation-argument-conversation.

Conversation now received an unprecedented priority. Conversation is the primordial mode of human existence. It is the mode in which interpretation takes place in everyday life. In its primary form, it involves an exploration of possibilities in the search for some truth, some disclosure (truth remains for Tracy, in a primordial sense, *manifestation*)¹¹, some recognition of the excess of meaning, the evocative power of the classics (1987a:18-20). It is precisely the otherness of the classics which yields this richness of meaning. The discovery of truth as manifestation is the fruit of any genuine conversation (1987a:28-9).

According to Tracy, this existential conversation could and should, however, sometimes be *interrupted*. Interruptions occur when conversation partners become aware of either a radical, conflicting *plurality* of interpretations or the radically distorting *ambiguities* underlying even our best interpretations. These interruptions alter the mode of conversation to that of *argument* in which any distortion is critically investigated: 'To argue is to engage - to defend and correct - one's assertions publically by providing appropriate evidence, warrants, backings - appropriate to the concrete subject matter under discussion' (Tracy 1983:279).

Tracy argues that this aspect of argumentation plays a secondary and not a primary role. Argumentation is, at its best, a critical phase within the wider conversation (1987a:25).¹² Tracy explains the importance but also the limitations of argumentation in this way: 'Argument, on this reading, is not a replacement for exploratory conversation. Rather, argument is a vital moment within conversation that occasionally is needed if the conversation itself is to move forward' (Tracy 1987a:23). And further: 'Method, theory, and explanation can aid every conversation with every text, but none of them can replace the actual conversation itself' (Tracy 1987a:46). To summarise: 'We converse, and when appropriate, we

10 The concepts of dialogue and conversation are used throughout this essay as rough synonyms. Dialogue is perhaps a more structured form of the broader conversation which is, for Tracy, the primordial mode of human existence. For one attempt to distinguish between the concepts dialogue, dialectic and conversation see the excellent study by Clark (1990).

11 For Tracy, manifestation implies disclosure and concealment. The response evoked by this disclosure is recognition which always involves a call to transformation (see Tracy 1989c:564). Tracy's crucial and lasting indebtedness to the hermeneutical tradition of Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur becomes apparent here.

12 Tracy (1987a:23) says, for example: 'To demand argument is not to disavow the intuitive skill necessary for conversation. To demand argument is not necessarily to think that we can find truth only through argument. Argument has little part to play in experiencing Mozart.'

argue' (1987a:27). In this way Tracy, with the help of Ricoeur, incorporates Habermas' contribution within a somewhat Gadamerian¹³ conversation.

e) With the title of *Dialogue with the Other*, Tracy reiterates the importance of a theory of interpretation (=dialogue) which acknowledges the otherness of the radical, ambiguous, and, at times, terrifying *other*. Again, one may argue that the concrete involvement in the analogical imagination which he pleaded for in *The analogical imagination*, and the conversations which he pleaded for in *Plurality and ambiguity*, increasingly heightened Tracy's awareness of the irreducible otherness of his conversation partners. Tracy himself (1990b:42, 1989c:562) comments on this aspect:

I acknowledge that I and others who are trying to formulate 'an analogical imagination' as one strategy for envisioning religious pluralism must not only be wary but downright suspicious of how easily claims to 'analogy' or 'similarity' can become subtle evasions of the other and the different. Similarity cannot be a cover word for the rule of the same.

The category of the 'Other/other' combines the notions of 'plurality' and 'ambiguity'. Dialogue demands the intellectual, moral and also (at the limit) religious ability to struggle to hear one another again and to respond critically (if necessary) to the real other; not the other as projected by the desires, fears and hopes of the modernist, consumerist self (Tracy 1990b:4). Dialogue with the *other* also implies a turn from the modernist self to the post-modernist other (see Levinas, Derrida) (Tracy 1990b:4). It implies a turn from the Enlightenment illusion that the other does not differ fundamentally from the universalisable structures of the self. It implies a turn to the concrete praxis of dialogue itself.

That dialogue should be understood as dialogue with the *other* and with the radical *Other*, is especially clarified by the inter-religious dialogue. This is well illustrated by Tracy's own concrete engagement in dialogues with, for example, the ambiguous otherness within our own psyches (in discussion with Freud and Lacan - see 1990b:9f), the archaic religious traditions (through the work of Eliade - see 1990b:48f), the various Buddhist traditions (see 1990b:68f) and with the peculiar mystic traditions (especially Eckhardt and van Ruysbroeck) within Christianity (1990b:83f). It is of the utmost importance for Christian theology when engaging in this dialogue with other religious traditions not to project the other as somehow having similar understandings of God or religion (1990b:48).

Tracy emphasizes the necessity of the concrete praxis of inter-religious dialogue - before rushing to theoretical, abstracting reflections. If genuine dialogue is to occur, a respect for the particularity of one's own (Christian) tradition, a respect for the other as other and a willingness to put everything at risk, are crucial (1990b:73, 95). Tracy therefore describes the inter-religious

13 For Tracy a fusion of horizons remains possible through conversation, although not in the relaxed, all too easy way presented by Gadamer (see Jeanrond 1989:219). Tracy (1987a:115-6) also notes the differences between Gadamer's and his own notions of conversation. He says:

The analysis of interpretation-as-conversation, although clearly indebted to Gadamer's pioneering work, is less directed than his to an ontology of understanding and more to developing an empirical (Anglo-American?) model for the interpretation of texts.

dialogue as 'a crucial issue which will transform all Christian theology in the long run' (1990b:xi) and even expresses the belief that 'we are fast approaching the day when it will not be possible to attempt a Christian systematic theology except in serious conversation with the other great ways' (1990b:xi).¹⁴

3. The notion of 'dialogue with the Other' in Tracy's more recent work

In this section I will reflect more systematically on this notion of 'dialogue with the Other' in the light of a variety of Tracy's recent articles. Many of these articles have recently been incorporated and published by *Concilium* in a single volume, *On naming the present, God, hermeneutics, and church* (Orbis Books 1994). In these articles at least three recurring themes can be identified:¹⁵

a) The ambiguity of both modernity and postmodernity

In *Plurality and ambiguity* and *Dialogue with the Other* the influence of postmodernity on Tracy's thinking has become evident. Although he expresses some reservations, he had no hesitation in acknowledging and even embracing the cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity.

In *On Naming the present* (1994b) and in a series of recent articles (1990b, 1990h, 1994d) Tracy has become increasingly aware of the ambiguity of postmodernism: 'If there is a postmodernity it, too, is likely to be deeply ambiguous' (1994d:107). He denounces a relatively untroubled, relaxed postmodernity and its intellectual arrogance and expresses the suspicion that it remains, at best, ethically underdeveloped:

The postmoderns sometimes seem more determined by ennui than by ethics. They are not, in fact, so much repelled by the ethical barbarism of modernity as bored by liberal modernity's 'gray-on-gray' world. This is perhaps an understandable aesthetic response to liberal modernity. But it is only that - a merely aesthetic response without the moral power of the great aesthetic and ethical traditions of the Good and the Beautiful like Platonism or Romanticism (1994d:105).

Tracy argues that we all remain heirs of the modern era insofar as we affirm the classic modern ideals of intellectual emancipation (the power and achievements of critical thinking) as well as political-economic emancipation (the democratic political ideals of liberty and equality, undivorced from economic democracy) (1994b:9, 1994d:104-105). Despite the almost apocalyptic side-effects of a

14 Already in *Plurality and ambiguity* Tracy argued: 'Conversation is not only possible among the religions; conversation is now a necessity. But a conversation that assumes, prior to the conversation itself, that all the religions are really the same can hardly help' (1987a:92).

15 Others recurring themes in Tracy's recent articles (which are mentioned but not discussed in this essay) include the following: 1) reflection on Tracy's own Catholic identity (see 1989c, 1993b, 1994c), 2) several discussions of what Tracy now calls mystic-prophetic forms of religious expression (1990d, 1990h, 1994d), 3) a few highly instructive contributions on 'naming the present' in which Tracy also reflects on European cultural trends (see 1989d, 1990h), 4) specific contributions in the field of dialogues with other religious traditions (1990b, 1990e, 1990f, 1990g).

technocratic society and despite the myth of everlasting development, Tracy does not abandon the modernist hope in reason to a Weberian pessimism (1990h:57, 1994b:7f). The strength of modernism is that it remains committed to what Tracy calls the 'ethical universality of truth and liberating justice' (1992a:95). He even defends the hope which modernity put in human reason:

The hopes of modernity, including modern theology, are noble ones. I have shared these hopes, especially in my book *Blessed rage for order*, and to a large extent I still do ... In both society and church, the need to fight against obscurantism, mystification and outright oppression is as clear now as it was in the 18th century. The need to defend reason, often against its presumed guardians (e.g., positivism and scientism), remains clear to all not tricked into intellectual and moral languor by too-easy assaults on the modern heritage (1990d:901).

Although we should not simply reject modernity, we should, according to Tracy, acknowledge that the famous turn to the subject of modernity¹⁶ is itself deeply ambiguous, both emancipatory and entrapping (1994d:104). The modern faith in the value of human autonomy and reason, and the perceived progressive growth toward greater freedom and justice for all, has been radically undermined by massive 'interruptions' in this century (see Rike 1991:xvi). The ambiguity of modernity has become more than evident through the two World Wars, the Holocaust, the negative technological achievements and the use of a purely technical reason, escalating ecological disasters (see Tracy 1987b), the assumed cultural superiority of Western modernity and democracy, the similar problem of the relationship of Christianity to the other religions, etc (1990d:902). The Enlightenment hope in progress and the older Renaissance faith in humanity has thus been destroyed (Baum 1991:9). There is no longer one political, cultural or religious centre with a wide periphery; there are now many centres (Tracy 1990h:54, 1994b:3f). In this specific sense, the present age is adequately referred to as postmodern.¹⁷

Modernity (together with an Enlightenment notion of rationality - see Tracy 1992b:22) is now becoming part of the problem, not the solution. Modernity has become that which it most opposed and feared - one more tradition (1994b:8). This is the product of a growing awareness of the role that language, history and subconscious factors play in notions of reason and of the self. 'Since Hegel,' Tracy argues (1994b:7), 'it is clear that the fact that reason has a history is a problem for reason.' The turn to the subject has been undermined by the

16 Tracy argues that the turn to the subject in philosophies of consciousness (especially in Kant and Husserl) has undermined that which it tried to defend, i.e. communicative rationality. Tracy (1992b:30) comments:

For, if the only philosophical defense of communicative rationality is one provided by a transcendental philosophy of consciousness, then the problem of the privatization of all the resources of communicative action in the public realm (ethics, politics, aesthetics, and theology) is increased.

17 Tracy (1990:901-2) states clearly that there are good reasons to understand our period and our needs as more postmodern than modern. However, he adds: 'Even 'postmodernity', that ever-elusive word in search of a definition, is more an acknowledgment that we now live in an age that cannot name itself that we would simply reject modernity.'

historical, linguistic and hermeneutical turns and now, and perhaps more radically, by the turn to the other. The result is clear: '... the purely, autonomous ego is no more' (1987a:82). Tracy unmasks '... any pretensions to full self-presence, any self-congratulatory Western resting in an untroubled, alinguistic, self-present, reality-founding ego ...' (1987a:59).¹⁸

Postmodernity is for Tracy, at its best (and against the grain of the postmodern insistence on indeterminacy), a fully ethical response to these ambiguities of modernity. It is an *ethics of resistance*, resistance to the illusion and self-congratulation of self-presence, to alinguistic and ahistoric forms of consciousness, to the modernist belief in universals, and to the notion that everything can be reduced to 'more of the same' (1990h:63). The real face of postmodernity is, for Tracy therefore (with reference to Levinas), the face of the other: 'Do not kill me, ... do not reduce me or anyone else to your grand narrative.' (Tracy 1994d:108). The postmodernity which Tracy embraces is therefore the turn to the other which 'begins not in ennui but in ethical-political resistance' (1994d:108). Through the resistance of postmodernism, Tracy (1994b:16) argues, 'Otherness, difference, and excess become the alternatives to the deadening sameness, the totalizing system, the false security of the modern self-grounding subject.'

This *tension* between modernity and postmodernity is reiterated in two other important themes in Tracy's recent articles, i.e. the notions of 'dialogue' (continuing the legitimate hopes of modernity) and 'the other' (doing justice to the insights of postmodernity). Is such a modernist (!?) dialogue with a postmodernist other possible? In what way does Tracy try to cope with this tension between the notions of 'dialogue' and 'the Other'?

b) The turn to the radical Other: God

Tracy sees the turn to the other as the quintessential turn of postmodernity itself. It radicalizes the early modern turn to the autonomous subject and the more recent turn to hermeneutics and language (the role played by language and interpretation in the subject's search for rationality) (1994d:108).

In the discussion above it has already become evident that Tracy uses the notion of the Other as a hermeneutical category. Interpretation (and dialogue) involves a search for analogies (similarities-in-difference). It is the otherness of the other which introduces the possibility of a *novum*, of truth as manifestation. Otherness at the same time disrupts the all too easy analogies, continuities and similarities, the deadening sameness of modernity.

These interruptions may take many forms. Tracy discusses many examples, e.g. the otherness of other religions (Buddhism, Judaism), of our own psyches (Lacan), of the mystics (Eckhardt, Francis, the love mystics), of cultures other

18 See Tracy's sharp comments on modernist religion and theologies which serve the 'all-consuming modern ego': 'The ego is what finally counts; whatever belief helps to encourage and secure that ego will be embraced as true religion; anything which disorients and threatens the ego, will be rejected (like the God who raised Jesus from the dead and acts in history for the oppressed)' (Tracy 1993a:102).

than your own, of the poor, oppressed and marginalized, of a variety of new mystic and prophetic theologies, etc. As a result of the failure of the modern experiment, the voices of 'others' on the periphery of the white, Western centres of power and privilege (the marginalized, neglected and oppressed) are now receiving attention (Rike 1991:xvii). The subject of modernity now has to allow '... its projects, its possessions, its very being to be touched and transformed by the calls of the other to conversation, liberation, and solidarity, for this is the call of the living God made concrete.' (Rike 1991:xix).

This turn to otherness remarkably also introduces the return of the (almost Barthian) language of *revelation*, of the 'Wholly Other' (Levinas), which Tracy describes as '... the event and gift of the Other's self-manifestation ... Revelation disrupts the continuities, the similarities, the communalities of modern 'religion'' (1994d:109). Throughout his oeuvre Tracy has emphasized the importance of taking the truth claims of art and religion seriously. This implies an openness to address questions on the whole and our existential relationship with the 'whole' (see also 1988a:45). Revelation is, in fact, a manifestation of the whole by the power of the whole (Tracy 1981:181).¹⁹

This also implies for Tracy a renewed interest in the doctrine of God. This is the topic of several of his recent articles (1991b, 1993a, 1994a, 1994d) and of his current work-in-progress, *On Naming God*. Any genuine theology (*theoslogos*), for Tracy, should be theocentric (1991b:134). In modern theology the *logos* of modernity tended to dominate and conceptually imprison any notion of *theos*. The postmodern questioning and fragmentation of the self-assured modern *logos* therefore led to a resurgence in the awareness of the awesome, even terrifying presence of God (1994a:47-51). In postmodern theology God returns in the form of the Other, exemplified in the shattering otherness of Jesus Christ.²⁰ Theology is a dialogue which requires openness for the most radically possible Other: the overwhelming mystery of the Otherness of Godself. In this way the doctrine of God returns to the centre of postmodern theology.

In his more substantive contributions within this field, the following question is of vital interest to Tracy: 'Is it possible to find a contemporary naming of God that renders God's reality in forms that unite excess with elegance, mysticism with both rigorous intellectuality and the ethical-political seriousness of the prophets?' (1990d:904).²¹ The results of his current research on the doctrine of God will clarify Tracy's answers to this question.

19 Tracy's notion of truth as manifestation (= disclosure-concealment) is vital in this respect. He argues that: 'The truth of religion, like the truth of its nearest analogue, art, is primordially a truth of manifestation' (1989c:564). The primary advantage of this notion of truth as manifestation is that it 'more closely fits both notions of revelation as event of God's self-manifestation and the response of faith as gifted recognition' (1989c:564).

20 On the relationship between the Christian doctrine of God and Christ, see especially Tracy 1991b:136f.

21 For Tracy's own contributions in answering this question see 1991b, 1994a, 1994d. Tracy (1993:104) answers the question: 'Who is God?' in the following way: 'God is the one who raised this disgraced Jesus from the dead and vindicated his ministry and message, his life and his person as the Christ and, as Jesus Christ, the very manifestation of who God is and who we

c) Conversation as 'our last best hope'

In the development of his oeuvre, Tracy has laid an increasing emphasis on the notion of dialogue as the central metaphor to describe theological interpretation. It featured as the key (Gadamerian) metaphor for interpretation in *The analogical imagination*²² (the analogical imagination itself provides a strategy for conversation) and played an even more prominent role in *Plurality and ambiguity* and *Dialogue with the Other*.

In chapter one of *Plurality and ambiguity*, and in two further articles on Plato's notion of dialogue (1988a, 1989b), Tracy defended the almost ontological priority of conversation (as opposed to argument). For Tracy the priority of conversation is illustrated in the *dialogues* of Plato, compared to the speeches of the Sophists and the arguments used by Aristotle (and Habermas²³). The sophists, for Plato, give speeches - Socrates engages in conversation (1988a:37, 1989b:95). Conversation demands open-ended inquiry, it forbids dogmatism and it allows a wide range of conversation partners.

At the same time, conversation is a broader category than rational communication (argumentation).²⁴ Conversation rather than argument is the most encompassing category for an analysis of communicative rationality (1992b:22). It is the mode of inquiry within which we explore the claims to meaning and truth in our everyday lives. Tracy comments: 'In dialogue one can show inquiry at work while also relating that inquiry directly to our primordial existential self-understanding: of the self as intrinsically relational: related to itself, to society, nature, and to the whole' (1989b:97). Elsewhere he adds: '... the 'dramatic' character of any face-to-face dialogue allows for both a wider range of probing inquiry and a greater manifestation to all participants of the state of their character, the presence or absence of 'logos' in their souls, their commitment or lack of such for the 'examined life'...' (Tracy 1988a:38).

Despite this strong emphasis on the priority of conversation, Tracy acknowledges that the conversation could and should, at times, be interrupted. In *Plurality and ambiguity* Tracy exhibits a remarkable willingness to allow a wide variety of conversation partners to (rudely?) interrupt the conversation. And in his increasing sensitivity to postmodernity (e.g. in *Dialogue with the Other*) Tracy

are commanded and empowered to become.' For Tracy, the Christian understanding of God is therefore grounded in the self-revelation of God disclosed as kenotic love in the cross of Jesus Christ (1991b:139, 1993a:107f). That God 'is' love (1 John 4:16) also implies for Tracy the use of categories of relationality (in process, Hegelian and dialogical thinking and, especially, in trinitarian theology).

- 22 Shea's (1981:319) comment on *The analogical imagination* is quite valid: '... it embodies better than any theology I know ... the platonian dream of civilized conversation on ultimate meaning.'
- 23 For Tracy, the communication theory of Habermas is important to develop rational forms of communication but it is also too narrow: 'Arguments are a necessary moment in any properly dialectical conversation. But the dialogue form is more comprehensive as a revelation of the state of the 'soul' (or, alternatively, of the existential self-understanding) of the dialectical inquirer.' (see Tracy 1989b:96, the notion of the 'soul' here refers to Plato).
- 24 Tracy refers here to the differences in approach between Plato and Aristotle and between Gadamer and Habermas on the relative importance of dialogue and argumentation (1992b:22).

emphasizes that genuine conversation should acknowledge the otherness of the Other. The radical Other (exemplified by Godself) should be allowed to disrupt any complacent analogies identified in the ongoing conversation.

However, the heuristic value of the model of conversation itself is never radically questioned.²⁵ It is perhaps the one category which should preferably not be discredited. Conversation itself is not negotiable (Cunningham 1991:410). The value of conversation itself is assumed, almost taken for granted. For Tracy the hope of an emancipating theological praxis lies in conversation itself. Tracy himself personifies this remarkable confidence in the liberating possibilities which conversation presents.²⁶ Already in *The analogical imagination* he expressed his almost religious conviction in the liberating possibilities of dialogue itself. He says: 'Conflict is our actuality, conversation is our hope' (1981:363). In a review symposium on *Plurality and ambiguity* he describes the analogical imagination in religious language as a *belief*, a conviction in the powers of conversation itself: '... the 'analogical imagination' is not only a strategy for conversation, but ... also a theological conviction ... that ultimately grounds my own trust and hope in conversation itself' (Tracy 1988:514). In *Dialogue with the Other* he again argues that, 'If we are to hear one another once again, dialogue and the solidarity amidst the differences and conflicts which dialogue may demand, is our best present hope' (1990b:5). The hermeneutical model of conversation remains for Tracy the central hope for recognizing the 'possibilities' (and, therefore, the viable options) which any serious conversation with the 'other' and the different may yield (1989b:562, 1990b:41).

It is important to realise what is at stake in Tracy's emphasis on conversation. He is trying to find a *via media* between what Bernstein (1983) has labelled 'objectivism' and 'relativism'.²⁷ From Tracy's whole oeuvre it is more than clear that he embraces plurality and rejects any form of fundamentalism or foundationalism. However, the opposite, a boundless relativism where 'everything goes' or an epistemological anarchism²⁸ is equally problematic.²⁹ His defense of the emancipating value of reason in modernism, his continuing search for a

25 Some comments by Tracy (e.g. 1990:xi) do seem to allow some room to test the model of dialogue itself.

26 William Shea's (1981:319) admiration for Tracy's work is quite appropriate:

The major contributions of Tracy's book (*The analogical imagination* - EMC) are these ... it embodies better than any theology I know, and he more than any theologian I know, the Platonic dream of civilized conversation on ultimate meanings.

27 See Kearney (1991:179-80) and Guarino's (1990:229) comment: 'Tracy believes he can achieve a *via media* between the 'objectivism of reconstructionist hermeneutics and the 'relativism' of an undifferentiated *lethe*. Theologically, a certain '*présence*', '*identity*' and '*continuity*' has *here been saved*, although without compromising the legitimate insights of post-modern ontology.'

28 See Guarino's (1990:229) justified comment: 'Tracy asks if epistemological anarchism is not inevitable if one accepts the deep lethic consequences of radical historicity and finitude, the deconstruction of a self-same matrix in Dasein, and, in Derridean terms, the decentering of the subject. Do the investigations of post-modernity lead inexorably to relativism?'

29 For a full treatment of Tracy's views on pluralism see Conradie (1992).

common rationality in the public realm,³⁰ and his reservations against a limitless, playful postmodern plurality was discussed above.

Bernstein (1989:87) describes Tracy's deepest intuition accurately:

Tracy, who is sensitive to rhetoric, ... is acutely aware that the dominant rhetoric today is that of incommensurability, fragmentation, rupture, fissure, otherness, and *différence*. Furthermore, a pervasive motif of this rhetoric is to mock, even ridicule, and ironically *question the very idea of conversation and authentic dialogue*; it presumably has the odor of decaying humanism. Indeed Tracy is not only aware of these challenges, he is also most concerned to confront these challenges and disruptions - interruptions that increasingly become more radical and threaten the very appeal to interpretation-as-conversation and discourse (italics - EMC).

Jeanrond (1989:218) adds:

The destruction of the individual ego's glorious pretenses by old and new masters of suspicion, such as Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault, has left us with no other alternative than the hope for a genuine conversation between fellow humans.

Tracy finds an alternative to both fundamentalism and relativism in hermeneutics itself (1992a:92). By taking the historical context and the linguistic turn³¹ seriously, hermeneutics moves beyond foundationalism without yielding to relativism. Tracy adds, however that there is a movement within hermeneutical thinking which replace notions of 'textual interpretation' towards 'conversation' and 'historical context' towards 'social location' (1992a:92). In this sense conversation is indeed a new root metaphor.

Tracy defends the heuristic model of conversation because it allows for communication amidst a vast plurality of voices. It also allows for argument, for the use of reason, to defend any claims for truth in the public sphere, to search for public criteria to adjudicate the inevitable clashes between claims to meaning and truth (1990b:901, 1992b:21). Public life (in all three the publics which Tracy identifies) is therefore closely related to *dialogue* (1989a:202). It not only implies a call to become involved in dialogue on public issues. It also promotes a certain kind of dialogue, having particular *rules*. These rules for public dialogue include at least a willingness to articulate and defend one's point of view as clearly as possible, to listen carefully to the other's arguments, to do justice to these

30 For a discussion of Tracy's notion of public theology and the role of various forms of rationality in this respect, see Conradie (1993).

31 The linguistic turn does not imply an abandoning of communicative reason in the public sphere. Tracy (1992b:23-24) comments:

If language is not a mere instrument of consciousness but the basic medium of all human understanding, then every act of understanding is intrinsically intersubjective, never purely subjective; every communicative action is dialogical, not monological. ... insofar as reason is genuinely dialogical or communicative in any historical context, it is not, in principle, limited to that context. Any act of understanding implicitly puts forward a claim to more than subjective understanding. Any act of understanding addresses all others with a claim to its validity - a validity that, in principle, the inquirer is obliged to redeem if challenged.

arguments in contra-arguments and to be willing to change, if necessary (Tracy 1987a:19).

The goal, the hope of public conversation remains a possible consensus, an *Einverständnis*, even though the presence of the radical other may put such a consensus always already beyond reach. Tracy (1989a:202-203) comments:

Consensus is not a failing, but the hope of the public realm. In its genuine form it prevails as a claim to shared truth, and not as a mere survey of complementary interests. Consensus lives and has its being in an arguing community of inquiry and a conversing community of interpretation.

The strengths of this model of conversation are clear:

- 1) It maintains an open-endedness by rejecting any dogmatism, by insisting on further inquiry, and by denying any claim to absolute truth from any one of the conversations partners (Tracy 1989b:95).³²
- 2) It respects³³ the particularity of one's own tradition³⁴ as one contribution to the ongoing conversation. Conversation therefore allows for an emphasis on one's own identity while maintaining an openness towards others:

stay faithful to your own tradition; go deeper and deeper into its particularities; defend and clarify its identity. At the same time, wander, Ulysses-like, willingly, even eagerly, among other great traditions and ways; try to learn something of their beauty and truth; concentrate on their otherness and difference as the new route to communality (Tracy 1994b:137).

- 3) It appreciates the role of *differences* (in *The analogical imagination*) of a radically conflicting plurality (in *Plurality and ambiguity*) and of the otherness of Others (in *Dialogue with the Other*). Otherness introduces the possibility of a *novum* in theological interpretation and it fights against any complacent acceptance of existing analogies.
- 4) It facilitates the contributions of a wide plurality of possible conversation partners.
- 5) It promotes a civilized approach to conflict.

Sallie McFague (1989:82) expresses the strengths of Tracy's notion of conversation well:

32 See the similar comment by Peters (1987:299): 'For Tracy the concept of conversation denies at the outset the possibility that one conversant begins with absolute or uninterpreted truth. What we find at the outset are competing, if not conflicting truth claims which challenge one another. Our task is to press ourselves into conversation, into dialogue, and watch for growth if not transformation of both conversants. What result is not absolute truth, but a relatively adequate apprehension of reality.'

33 See Tracy's instructive comments on self-respect and self-exposure (1981:452-5). See also Küng's helpful analysis of the (conflict between the) virtues of dialogability and steadfastness in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues (Küng 1991).

34 See Tracy's many recent reflections on the particularity of his own Roman-Catholic tradition (1989c, 1991b, 1993b, 1994c).

One of the values of Tracy's notion of theology as conversation is that it takes seriously the different contributions of many participants while decentering any one contribution as being the absolute or central one.

And further:

The conversation model supports a plurality of voices ... Tracy, therefore calls for a plurality of voices, indeed a radical plurality, which takes with utmost seriousness the otherness and difference of the conversational partners' (McFague 1989:90,80)

To summarise: the 'deceptively simple hermeneutical model of dialogue' is an attempt to remain faithful to both the modernist ideal of rational persuasion in the public sphere *and* to the shift from modern self to postmodern other (Tracy 1990d:903). For Tracy, 'Dialogue demands the intellectual, moral and, at the limit, religious ability to struggle to hear another and to respond - to respond critically, and even suspiciously when necessary, but only in dialogical relationship to a real, not a projected, other' (1990d:903).

The question as to whether this notion of dialogue and Tracy's almost religious belief in the value of conversation can withstand its critics, is discussed in the next section.

4. Various criticisms against this notion of dialogue

a) Conversation as a 'paradoxical umbrella'?

Tracy's approach towards plurality is regarded by some critics (Cobb 1982:284, Kaufman 1982:394, McFague 1988:500, Stout 1988:507) as being too inclusivist. Kaufman (1982:394) says for example: 'The framework for dealing with pluralism with which Tracy seems to be operating implicitly ... is one of comprehensive inclusiveness.'³⁵ Cobb (1982:284) adds to this: 'The organization of theology which he (Tracy) proposes ... is presented too much as *the* organisation of theology.'

Tracy's use of the category 'conversation' may, indeed, be an example of such an all-inclusive approach. For Tracy, conversation is a comprehensive metaphor within which the contributions of almost every conversation partner can be included. He is able to accommodate vastly different philosophical, literary, religious and theological currents within the comprehensive framework provided by the metaphor 'conversation'. Even those who feel uncomfortable to participate in this notion of 'conversation' are incorporated in the conversation by being treated as important 'interruptions' or 'correctives'³⁶ (Baum 1991:3). Tracy's

35 See also the somewhat sharp criticism of Stout (1989:506): 'Everyone is around the table, everyone is acknowledged, everyone is accorded respect and encouraged to speak, but the table is simply too crowded for anyone but the professor's to be heard. In the end we are apt to be impressed by the professor's remarkable erudition, his determination to discover truth in every perspective, his interest in conversation.'

36 See the following comment by Baum (1991:3): 'The category of 'corrective' is the key to his general theological approach. It enables him to offer positive interpretations of theological and philosophical trends with which he otherwise disagrees.'

notion of conversation turns out to be an entirely Catholic notion in which the arguments of Habermas are incorporated in Gadamer's conversation, the difference of Derrida is kept together by the unity of dialogue itself, the Protestant emphasis on dialectic (difference) is incorporated in the Catholic emphasis on analogy (similarity-in-difference), etc.³⁷

The problem of this inclusive maneuver is illustrated by the failure of the so called 'dialogue' which took place between Gadamer and Derrida in Paris in 1981 (see Michelfelder & Palmer 1989). Gadamer went out of his way to enter into 'dialogue' with Derrida, but it is a dialogue which Gadamer analysed in *Truth and method* and for which Gadamer himself has identified a series of rules. Michelfelder & Palmer (1989:8) comment: 'It is almost as though the 'French challenge' represented by Derrida had already been inscribed within the history of German philosophy'. Derrida's more radical strategy of deconstruction is incorporated in advance within Gadamer's and Tracy's conversation (see Winquist 1988:314). Derrida is obviously not keen to engage in such a conversation and, typically, prefers to interrupt this 'conversation'.

It is therefore a question whether Tracy manages to escape what Wayne Booth calls 'paradoxical umbrellas': the tendency to absolutise some or other category such as 'openness', 'inclusiveness', 'tolerance', 'interpretation' or 'conversation'. The language of 'conviction', 'trust' and 'hope' also indicates the quasi religious role that conversation plays in Tracy's thought. It is difficult to escape the impression that conversation is for Tracy no longer simply a metaphor to understand the task of theological reflection; it has become a comprehensive ontology. It forms a 'whole' within which his whole theological work is taking place. Conversation therefore becomes just another form of absolute or 'ism'. Dialogue itself is not negotiable; it is a last anchor amid the sea of plurality and ambiguity.

Tracy rejects the critique of inclusivism by mentioning the role of criteria and thus 'exclusion', 'interruptions' or even 'resistance' in his theology (1988:514).³⁸ It is clear that Tracy is not interested in accommodating all theologies in his own approach. The ideologies of sexism, racism, classism, and anti-Semitism demand resistance, not openness. They even demand exclusion from the conversation itself (1988:514). Tracy's comments, however, tends to reinforce the problem in the sense that he works with a logic of inclusion or exclusion in trying to accommodate radically different theological currents within the framework of the metaphor of 'conversation'. On the other hand it must be added that Tracy does show a sensitivity to the danger of conversation becoming yet another form of inclusive maneuver. He says, for example:

37 Baum (1991:6) comments: 'As a Catholic Tracy gladly listens to Luther, Calvin, and Thomas Muenzer. Yet what he learns from them he wants to introduce to the intra-Catholic theological conversation and thus make fruitful for the dynamic process of Catholic renewal.'

38 In *Dialogue with the Other*, Tracy did recognize the danger of inclusivism although he does not relate it to the category of conversation. Tracy comments:

For some (myself included) one or another liberal version of Christian *inclusivism* and *finality* once seemed adequate to the pluralist situation ... But the liberal inclusivist too, I now realize, must also be put at risk ... (1990b:96).

Only when modern cease to believe that, as heirs to the Western tradition, they alone know what reason, conversation, praxis mean will they be able to converse with and enter into solidarity with the genuine others who also have their own stories, traditions, and modes of reason and practice (Tracy 1994b:21).

b) The value of conversation in combatting ambiguities

Tracy's hermeneutical approach has often been criticized from the point of view of liberation theology. With reference to Tracy's hermeneutical approach in *The analogical imagination*, Gregory Baum (1981: 290) made the following remark: 'In contrast with political theology, Tracy's systematics consider paramount the disclosure dimension of truth, to which the transformative dimension is subordinated'. John Cobb also wonders whether Tracy's distinction between practical theology and systematic theology does not limit the reformulation of the whole theological enterprise by liberation theologies (Cobb, 1981: 283). For Tracy, theology should be done in the form of hermeneutics, i.e. the retrieval of the meaning of Christian classics for the contemporary situation. Cobb does not agree that a retrieval of the truth claims of the Christian classics is necessarily the most adequate way of coming to terms with the existing ambiguities and distortions (Cobb, 1981: 283).

This critique could be regarded as unfair since, for Tracy, ideology criticism and the search for a transformative and emancipating theological praxis are integrated within his understanding of conversation. The notion of conversation (instead of textual interpretation) emphasizes the role of social relations of power. In commenting on Habermas, Tracy (1994b:135-6) argues:

Discourse analysis should not reduce meaning and knowledge to power relations. But discourse analysis also will not allow (as earlier forms of historical consciousness and hermeneutics could allow) an abstraction from the specific realities of power, especially the relationships of gender, class, and race: in all texts, all traditions, all interpretations, and all knowledge - and thereby in all theology.

Furthermore, in all his works Tracy has shown a sensitivity for his own social location (as Catholic, white, middle class male), and for the plight of the poor, oppressed and marginalized.³⁹ He often stresses the dangers of classism, elitism, sexism, racism and Eurocentrism (see again 1992a) and, through the role of argumentation, calls for a hermeneutics of suspicion and also prophetic resistance (1990:64-67) to unmask systematically distorted communication. Through a theory and analysis of conversation, hermeneutical theology becomes even more practical and ethical-political while continuing to be thoroughly hermeneutical

39 See Cunningham's (1991:410) more critical comment: 'Apparently the poor and the oppressed must wait their turn along with all the other voices to be heard (and they are legion) ... competing moral imperatives are never allowed to eclipse the primacy of conversation - which, in Tracy's view, is simply not negotiable.'

(1992a:93). There is no manifestation without a call to transformation.⁴⁰ Tracy therefore insist on the need of ethical-political criteria for theological inquiry (besides criteria of appropriateness and intelligibility) (1989c:569).

However, it remains a question whether the metaphor of theology of *conversation* enables one to come to terms with problems euphemistically called the ambiguities of history. Tracy does take the negativities very seriously, but they are negativities within what can finally be trusted.⁴¹ Sallie McFague (1988:500) expresses the scepticism about the adequacy of the metaphor of 'conversation' in the following way:

Should conversation be the metaphor for understanding interpretation in the closing decades of the twentieth century, a time characterized by mass poverty, genocide, ecological deterioration, political totalitarianism, nuclear escalation? Is 'conversation' adequate to address these horrors? Is it not too polite, too civilized, too Western, too elitist, too leisured, too male?

Bernstein (1989: 87) adds:

The danger of the appeal to interpretation-as-conversation is that, despite Tracy's caveats, it sounds too unproblematic and soothing as if the promise of reconciliation or the fusion of horizons can always be fulfilled.

In a perceptive review on *Plurality and ambiguity*, Welch (1989:510) expressed similar reservations on the metaphor of conversation:

Conversation as Tracy describes it, assumes trust. Trust between those who belong to groups that are oppressed and those who belong to groups that have been, or are still oppressive, is not gained easily, and is rarely obtained through conversation alone. The give and take of genuine conversation assumes respect by the powerful for those who are marginalized and confidence on the part of those who are marginalized. Respect and confidence are borne out of action, not of reflection. Respect and confidence are created in acts of solidarity, in acts of working together for justice.

... In the preface (of *Plurality and ambiguity*), he (Tracy) names the places of conversation central to his work - universities or colleges and an institute working primarily with business leaders. No mention is made of conversation grounded in action with those who are oppressed. Given this primarily

40 Jeanrond (1991:46) argues that Tracy's primary interest remains too much with the problem of understanding with only occasional reference to liberating action and political programmes.

Jeanrond calls for a more dialectical relationship between theories of biblical interpretation and theories of Christian action.

41 McFague (1988:501) argues that Tracy's approach remains inclusivist: 'Tracy's inclusiveness is one that allows for and encourages what is different, other and even alien within an overall framework of acceptance'. And further: 'He takes the negativities very seriously, but they are negativities within what can finally be trusted' (McFague 1988:501). McFague finds the reason for this inclusivism in Tracy's Catholic background, i.e. in '... an understanding that all beings are related to Being-Itself, to God, but each in its own way' (McFague 1988:501). Tracy assumes that '... no serious position on important issues is utterly alien to other serious positions' (McFague 1988:501). It is as if the voice of the Other is caught up and sustained within a somewhat Catholic notion of conversation.

academic location, it is not surprising, though still distressing, that more respect is voiced in this one passage for 'beloved classics' than for the victims of the hidden legacy of oppression carried within those texts. It is through the practise of solidarity that a genuine conversation can occur in which the emphasis remains on people, and not on texts. We interpret for the sake of humanity and its well-being, and not for the sake of the classics (Welsch 1988:511).⁴²

Again, in terms of Tracy's own emphases, these criticisms might perhaps be considered unfair. It does, however, raise the question as to whether a *description* of theology as an act of 'conversation' is in itself *comprehensive* enough⁴³ and whether it is capable to emphasize the quest for an emancipating praxis adequately enough. Conversation, while precious and important, is not enough to ensure an emancipating praxis. 'What is demanded', argues Baum (1991:13) '... is an alternative practise, that is, gestures and acts of solidarity with the movements that wrestle against these unjust structures.' Dermot Lane (1991:35) expresses exactly the same reservation: '... conversation is not enough - even the conversation that includes the voices of the poor among its participants is not enough - because it is a conversation among those who are ultimately unequal and is therefore fraught with mistrust and suspicion.'

In his most recent articles, Tracy has, in fact, taken these criticisms seriously. Conversation is no longer the only strategy for theological reflection. We are reminded by Tracy that, 'We too must recognize that what conversation is to the life of the mind, solidarity is to the life of action' (1990d:904, also 1992b:41). He therefore reformulates his own hope in this way: 'My hope is in genuinely dialogical thought accompanied by solidarity in action' (1990d:904). However, the relationship between the twin foci of conversation and solidarity may need further conceptual clarification.

c) The elitism of the model of conversation

In her recent book, *The body of God*, Sallie McFague again raises some questions regarding the adequacy of the model of conversation for describing the task of theology. She praises the model for its ability to include not only experts but also those on the underside of history. It moves away from an autocratic, authoritarian and hierarchic model and evokes the image of everyone talking about everything of importance on our planet from a multitude of perspectives:

This model underscores that no one field of expertise or effort, let alone any one person or group of people, has the preeminent or only voice. We do not

42 In Tracy's response to this review (1988c:518-9), he does not discuss the crucial question on the adequacy of the metaphor of conversation itself.

43 It may be necessary to complement Tracy's hermeneutical description of theology with other possible descriptions. See my own suggestion (1990:63-4) that a plurality of descriptions of the nature of theological actions might be necessary. A description of theology as a form of interpretation (or conversation) should e.g. be critically correlated to a description of theology as an event of emancipating praxis. This correlation need not take place within the sphere of hermeneutics.

need a monologue or even a dialogue, but a roundtable discussion in which all speakers are equal.

Where Tracy seems to ontologise the metaphor of conversation, McFague regards it as one model amongst others. Like all models the conversation model also have limits. The elitism of the conversation model is identified by McFague as its major drawback. She suggest that it should be supplemented by other metaphors and mentions the example of working on a quilt. McFague's argument is worth quoting at length:

... the chief fault with the conversation model is its elitism. No only are most life-forms on the planet without voice, including many human beings (all human infants, most poor people, and many of the elderly and ill), but voice in our culture, which means primarily access to the media, is controlled by those few with money and education. A more homey metaphor, one that has found favor among feminists, is that of a quilt, especially a crazy quilt, which has a pattern of sorts but one that emerges from the haphazard pieces that are sewn together. No particular expertise is necessary to make a contribution to such a quilt - even a child can do it (though this model also is limited to human beings). Many different hands work on a quilt. The quilting bee takes place inn the round, with each person working on her or his own little square. No agreement or consensus is required, but each person must have some sense of the overall pattern emerging in the quilt in order to sew one's piece in a suitable place. The quilt model emphasizes egalitarianism, the variety of different contributions, and the rather chaotic (complex, diverse) nature of the order that emerges. It suggests that the goal - having a serviceable, warm cover with pleasing variety - is sufficient for sewing one's square (McFague 1993:12-13).

It should, however, at least be noted that Tracy regards the model of conversation precisely as an attempt to move away from elitist presuppositions. The move from a hermeneutics of textual interpretation towards a hermeneutics of 'conversation' counters, for Tracy, the privileged position attributed to literate cultures above oral cultures (1992a:93).

d) Theology as dialogue?

Tracy's notion of theology as dialogue has also been challenged from a postliberal point of view. Since I have discussed this debate elsewhere in more detail (see Conradie 1993, 1994), I will here mention only a few aspects of this critique.

Theologians like George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, Paul Holmer, Stanley Hauerwas, Ronald Thiemann and others (what has become known as the 'Yale-school') have proposed that an 'intratextual' approach to doing theology should be adopted.

According to this 'intratextual' approach the aim of Christian theology should not primarily be to explain or justify Christian truth claims in a public dialogue with groups external to the Christian community. It should rather concentrate on

describing⁴⁴ the way in which Christian truth claims function within a particular faith community. Christian beliefs are to be understood from within the shared convictions of such a community of faith. Lindbeck (1990:493), with theorists like Wittgenstein, Thomas Kuhn, Peter Berger and Clifford Geertz, thus emphasizes the importance of the social, linguistic and cognitive construction of reality and experience. The primary task of theology is to describe the way in which Christian truth claims function within a particular linguistic context (see Wittgenstein's analysis of language games within a particular social form of life) and within a particular cultural context (see Geertz).⁴⁵ Placher (1989:163) formulates the emphasis of this approach appropriately:

A good Lindbeckian, postliberal theologian will therefore operate less like a philosophically orientated apologist and more like a sensitive anthropologist, who tries to describe the language and practise of a tribe in terms of how they function in the life of that community and how they shape the way that community sees the world, rather than trying to defend these people's way of talking by the standards of some universal rationality or experience.

The task of theology is therefore not so much one of 'dialogue with the other' but one of grammar, i.e. a description of the internal rules of the faith of Christian communities. Preserving the purity and integrity of the Christian faith is more important than defending Christian truth claims in the public sphere. From this point of view one may well ask:

It is all very well to worry about the rules and conditions of good conversation - but why have conversation at all? In particular, why should adherents of one tradition feel any need to talk with those who do not stand within their community? (Placher 1989:115-6).

In response, Tracy (1989b:555v) has acknowledged the value of this intratextual approach and a 'thick description' of Christian beliefs because it tends to provide a more exact understanding of the identity of the Christian tradition. He also acknowledges the danger of a situation wherein '... modern theology ... has lost its distinctively theological center by attempting to be correlational at all ... for every tradition is in danger of losing its distinctiveness through the subtle erosions of all particularities by the illusory claims to universality of Western Enlightenment modernity' (Tracy 1989b:556). Worthwhile contributions to dialogues with other traditions can furthermore only be made if the particularity of one's own tradition is respected (Tracy 1981:452-3).

Tracy argues that the value of the intratextual approach is that it provides criteria to assess the appropriateness of any particular theological proposal as being thoroughly *Christian*, that is being in continuity with the Scriptures and the Christian tradition. However, Tracy describes himself as an 'unrepentant correlational theologian' insofar as he also insists on a second set of criteria, i.e.

44 See Comstock's (1987) important distinction between *describing*, *explaining* and *justifying* Christian truth claims.

45 See Lindbeck's (1984) well-known suggestion of a cultural-linguistic model to approach both the study of religion and of doctrine.

that of intelligibility or credibility (1990f:36). In other words: Theology should not be done only in faithfulness to the Christian tradition but also in dialogue with those outside the Christian tradition. The intratextual approach implies a withdrawal from a concern with the public realm (save as witnesses to an alternative community of beliefs and virtues). Theology merely serves to clarify its own narratives, virtues and beliefs while abandoning any claims to a common rationality present in traditional notions of a public realm (1992b:21). For Tracy however, the crucial question remains, namely how the interactions and conflict among language-games are to be adjudicated, if not through conversation in the public sphere (1998c:515).

4. Conclusion

A common aspect in these criticisms on the use of a notion of dialogue to describe Christian theology, is that it tends to become all-inclusive, that it even assumes quasi-religious traits. Conversation is for Tracy indeed 'our last best hope'. Such a notion of dialogue may become somewhat vague and too 'fat'. According to Cunningham (1990:80) such a notion of conversation will satisfy only those readers who ...

... appreciate the citation of a wide variety of academic intellectuals; readers who can be persuaded that the metaphor of *conversation* accurately describes the theological task; and readers who are willing to accept, as 'Christian theology,' a volume that makes only passing reference to traditional theological *loci* such as the Trinity, sin and atonement, and the liturgy.

It is therefore important to realise that conversation is only one possible metaphor to describe theological reflection. Theologians do enter into many concrete conversations with a variety of conversation partners and, in this specific sense, 'conversation' provides an exact description of the task of Christian theology. However, Christian theologians also engage in many other activities, e.g. proclaiming, persuading, writing, lecturing, reading, organising, evaluating, emancipating, praying, witnessing, constructing, praising, conceptualising, playing, etc.

'Conversation' may indeed be used metaphorically to describe any of these theological activities. Like any other adequate metaphor, 'conversation' has certain strengths but also some limitations. The tendency to ontologise conversation unfortunately obscures these limitations. It may therefore be helpful to supplement notions of conversation with a plurality of other metaphors for the task of Christian theology, e.g. acting in solidarity, weaving a quilt, analysing the grammar of the Christian faith, persuading others rhetorically, etc.

At the same time, it is crucial to remember the strengths of the metaphor of conversation. In the introduction it was emphasised that the call for authentic dialogue is born from contexts of open social, cultural, political and religious conflict. Within these contexts the search for communality, for some degree of consensus is no luxury. It is demanded by the conflict itself. Difference, plurality and otherness may yield liberating possibilities, but all too often differences explodes into more brutal forms of conflict. The (modernist) ideals of intellectual

and ethical-political emancipation through conversation should be understood as an attempt to manage this conflict. Conversation may not be the only necessary strategy in this regard but it does promote a relatively 'civilised' approach to these more brutal forms of conflict. In contexts of conflict, conversation indeed often remains the best possible option, if not 'our last, best hope'.

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