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David Tracy on fragments, fragmentation, and frag-events: On picking up a conversation

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Abstract

This contribution offers a review of David Tracy's recent collection of essays entitled *Fragments: The Existential Situation of Our Time* (2020). This volume is quite an event since Tracy's last monograph was published in 1994. This review gives an account of the continuity and discontinuity in Tracy's oeuvre with reference to themes such as conversation, fragments, the Infinite, and an analogical imagination. It also mentions some other jewels found in *Fragments* by picking up on a conversation with Tracy that started with the author's doctoral thesis on Tracy, completed in 1992.

Keywords

ambiguity, analogical imagination, conversation, David Tracy, difference, frag-events, fragments, Infinite, otherness, public theology

Introduction

In 2020 two collections of selected essays by David Tracy were published by the University of Chicago Press. The one is entitled *Fragments: The Existential Situation of Our Time* (2020a[1]) and the other *Filaments: Theological Profiles* (2020b). In this review essay I will focus on the first of these only.

The publication of these two volumes is quite an event given the paucity of Tracy's writings over the past two decades. Tracy's monographs include *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan* (1970); *Blessed Rage for Order: The*

1 Further references to this volume in brackets (2020a) will not include Tracy's name.

New Pluralism in Theology (1975); *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (1981); *Plurality and Ambiguity* (1987); *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (1990); and *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics, and Church* (1994). There are also some co-authored books, namely *Talking about God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism*, with John Cobb (1983); *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, with Robert Grant (1979, 1984); and *A Catholic Vision*, with Stephen Happel (1984).

After *Blessed Rage for Order* (on fundamental theology) and *The Analogical Imagination* (on systematic theology) there was some promise of a third volume on practical theology. This never materialised although there were some essays on the theme, including one in *Fragments* entitled "Practical Theology: Its Mystical-Prophetic Character". Tracy delivered the Gifford Lectures in 1999 entitled "This Side of God". Following *On Naming the Present,* these lectures focused on the attempt to "name God in an age that cannot name itself" (see Gibson 2010, also Tracy 1994:3). These Gifford lectures have not been published yet. In the 1999 Palmer lecture at the Centre of Theological Inquiry Tracy indicated that he completed the first volume of a proposed trilogy (Tracy 2000:62). However, "the Big Book", now said to be a multivolume doctrinal treatise on God, has become a famous case of delayed publication. Apparently, Tracy, now aged 81, is still revising, adding, and nuancing the argument. He is apparently notorious for ruminating, rewriting and annotating ad infinitum (Gibson 2010). Gibson recalls that "Tracy himself jokes that he likes to include so many footnotes 'because they're cheaper than Christmas cards'." In *Fragments* Tracy does refer to a future book on the Christian naming of God as Infinite Love, i.e. Infinite Trinity (2020a:13).

The two volumes published in 2020 do not replace the long-awaited "God-book" but certainly help scholars and students to gain a glimpse on Tracy's intellectual journey over the past 25 years.

The first volume contains a set of sixteen selected essays, as he puts it, a collection of fragments. These essays span a period of more than forty years, with the first (on "Metaphor and Religion") published already in 1978, while ten of the essays are based on lectures in the last decade (2010-2019). All the essays have been published previously, except for one that

is forthcoming. Tracy observes that these essays "have been revised with corrections, clarifications and necessary additions but remain substantially the same" (Tracy 2020a:386). To check for such additions, if compared to the original publications, would be an interesting but arduous task.

Fragments is structured in four parts, namely Part 1 on "The Existential Situation of Our Time" (5 essays); Part 2 on "Hermeneutics" (4 essays); Part 3 on "Publicness and Public Theology" (4 essays); and Part 4 on "Religion, Theology, and Dialogue" (3 essays).

In this review I will engage with selected themes from *Fragments*. I will comment on what would be familiar to scholars of Tracy's oeuvre up to *Dialogue with the Other* and on what new insights have emerged.

A sense of immense erudition

Any reader of David Tracy's oeuvre cannot but be impressed by his immense erudition – in numerous fields. Already in 1982 Gordon Kaufman commented about Tracy (then in his early forties): "He seems to have read everything – in contemporary theology and phenomenology of religion, in modern literary and cultural criticism, in sociology of religion, in biblical and historical studies, in hermeneutical theory and contemporary philosophy and so on and so on" (1982:393). On the dust cover John McCarthy (Loyala University Chicago" rightly adds that, "Consistent with Tracy's earlier works, these essays display a breadth and depth of theological, philosophical, cultural, and critical scholarship matched by few, if any contemporary theologian … There are not many authors who share both the breadth of vision and depth of reading and scholarship that Tracy has." Indeed, basically every paragraph of *Fragments* has a sentence where one wonders: How much does one need to have read to be able to write such a sentence?

In reading any one of these essays one readily gains the impression that he has engaged deeply with the primary literature, is cognisant of the available secondary literature, can capture the core questions and the state of the debate in a sentence and is not afraid to offer his own judgement on the interpretation of a very, very wide range of thinkers. Tracy has always been characteristically mild in his views and extremely generous

to insights gained from those he otherwise disagrees with. By exercising an analogical imagination, he is able to spot the similar in the dissimilar. What is somewhat new is his willingness to state clear differences with those that are otherwise close to his own philosophical commitments, including Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, and Jürgen Habermas. The phrase "in my judgement" appears numerous times in the next, each time with reference to scholarly debates on the interpretation of his conversation partners. He does so with clarity and authority that is truly remarkable given the wide range of such conversation partners.

A commitment to conversation

Tracy opted for the metaphor of conversation to understand interpretation in *An Analogical Imagination and in A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* and extended that to inter-religious dialogue in *Dialogue with the Other.* This commitment to conversation remains intact in Fragments. His main source of inspiration is Plato's dialogues, namely an ongoing conversation about things that concern people in public life. He contrasts that with Aristotle's emphasis on logic and argument and suggests that, at times, there is a need to interrupt conversation with argumentation. Tracy sees the tension between Gadamer and Habermas as similar to that between Plato and Aristotle (2020a:153, 273). With Paul Ricoeur he suggests that there is a dialectical movement from interpretation to explanation and back to interpretation. Whenever the suspicion emerges that conversation may be distorted by hidden interests – as suggested by Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, the "masters of suspicion", there is a need to interrupt the conversation but then always with the hope that the conversation may continue. In *Plurality and Ambiguity*, the two terms in the title capture the main reasons for such interruptions. With Ricoeur, Tracy opted for an understanding of language as parole – and not a system of signs (Saussure), or an endless play of signifiers (Derrida). In *Fragments* he appreciates Derrida's ethical motives to interrupt a Gadamerian conversation but still maintains that these are interruptions within a conversation that retains its primacy. Conflict may be our actuality, but conversation is our last best hope (2020a:140, also Conradie 1996). And (with

Gadamer) dialogue is acknowledged to be "the foundational ontological reality" (2020a:200). Such conversation is not aimed at consensus or a fusion of horizons (2020a:151), but at understanding the otherness of the other (person, text, work of art). The outcome of conversation cannot be determined in advance. In principle it can yield dialectical opposition (Hegel), contrasting polarities (Whitehead), analogies (Thomas Aquinas), univocity (Duns Scotus), pure difference (Deleuze), or differences that both differ and defer (Derrida) (Tracy 2020a:200).

To be sure, the interruptions have become more severe and are now described as frag-events (see below). For Tracy the most severe interruption is a confrontation with the Impossible, the Infinite, the Incomprehensible, including the impossibility of justice and of love. At this holy point, he now acknowledges, dialogue reaches and acknowledges its own limits, where dialogue partners find themselves "beyond dialogue" (2020a:183).

Fragments and Frag-events

In an essay published in 2000 Tracy discussed classic "fragmenting forms" such as the theology of the cross (which acknowledges God's horrifying hiddenness in the cross) and apophatic theology (which acknowledges God's incomprehensibility and fragments any intellectual totality system). He recognises the postmodern retrieval of such fragmenting forms in order to resist modernist attempts at totalising systems or closure, reducing reality to "more of the same". He contrasts the category of "fragment" with that of "symbol" where either the Enlightenment or the Romantic hope is maintained to grasp something of the whole, of a lost unity. He argues that fragments fragment, shatter all totalities and oppressive closed systems, opening them for difference and otherness, to "liminal Infinity", to being bearers of infinity (Tracy 2000:68). In this essay he also anticipates that the second volume of the trilogy on "This Side of God" will be entitled "Gathering the Fragments". He identifies three forms of such gathering namely the Orthodox liturgy (which is "both radically negative-apophatic-and-mystical and at the same time Trinitarian", narratives (the gospels) and the emergence of creeds (Tracy 2000:64). Such gathering, Tracy hopes, can be expressed in non-totalizing forms in attempts to name God in Trinitarian terms. Such naming of God can best take place not in predication but (following the apophatic in Dionysius) in the language

of prayer and praise (2000:87). Thus, Christian systematic theology does not need to end with fragments but "should end with the gathering of fragments" (2000:78).

This theme is picked up and radicalised in the introduction and in the leading essay in *Fragments*. For Tracy, a fragment is not "a broken-off bit of a lost but nostalgically longed for whole" (2020a:8). He observes that "strong fragments shatter, fragment, negate any closed totality system" (2020a:1). The most powerful fragments show themselves not as substances but as events (an insight recognised in mathematics, physics, philosophy, and theology alike). Reality is event, not substance (2020a:2). Tracy opts a neologism by referring to these as frag-events, i.e. "fragmentary and fragmenting events". His thesis can be captured in short: "Frag-events … negatively shatter or fragment all totalities even as they are positively open to Infinity" (2020a:1). Totality systems efface the fragment by rendering it part of some larger conceptual architectonic and thus tame its potentially explosive image (2020a:29). This is because frag-events demand attention to the Other, the different, especially the marginal other (2020a:20). Tracy draws on Walter Benjamin for whom a fragment is not an exercise in nostalgia for a lost whole but a future-oriented category that discloses a hope for a new future, one in which the suffering of the oppressed, the untold story of those defeated by history, will be retrieved (2020a:5). Tracy (2020a:177) also recognises the significance of Derrida's notion of différance (both difference and the deferral of meaning) and deconstruction as a fragmenting method. Contra Heidegger who still tried to gather all reality into some totality, Derrida opted for a gathering that would function as a disseminating, not unifying force (2020a:176, almost verbatim).

For Tracy, after the welcome collapse of modern totality systems, "fragments" describe the "existential situation of our time" (the title of Part 1); indeed it characterises "the spiritual situation of our time" (the sub-title of the first essay). Fragments are signs of hope, perhaps even the only hope for redemption because they are saturated bearers of infinity (2020a:23). We should abandon the hope for any totality system and "blast alive" marginalised fragments with the memories of suffering and hope (2020a:31). The essays in this volume may themselves be read as the gathering together of various fragments – rather than the more systematic exposition to be expected in *This Side of God*.

On infinity

As indicated above, Tracy observes that fragments are open to the infinite. He has clearly become increasingly drawn to this category (2020a:10). In *On Naming the Present* there is an essay on the strange return of God in contemporary theology. If theology has the connotations of logos and Theos, the logos of modern theology has constrained the retrieval of God. Thus, talk about God became colonized by the grand narratives of Eurocentric modernity (1994:43). He comments on the "bizarre parade" of "isms" (deism, theism, pantheism, atheism, panentheism) in modern ways of naming God (2020a:21). Thus, God is rendered a conceptual prisoner of a new intellectual system of totality with no real moment of infinity allowing God to be God (1994:41). In the postmodern era Theos has returned to unsettle the dominance of the modern logos (1994:37). Tracy eloquently captures the theological significance of postmodern suspicions:

> But this much is clear: amid all the shouting pf the present, the reality of God has returned to the centre of theology. This is not the time to rush out new propositions on the reality of God. This is rather the time to allow wonder again at the overwhelming mystery of God – as some physicists and cosmologists seem so much more skilled at doing than many theologians are. This is the time for theologians to disallow the logos of modernity to control their thoughts on God as we learn anew to be attentive to God. We must learn somehow, in God's absent presence, to be still and know that God is God (1994:45).

The possibility for the return of God, Tracy surmises, lies in a retrieval of the category of the infinite and the rejection of the modernist *causa sui* (2020a:111). He ranges far and wide to retrieve notions of "the ultimate invisible" (in an essay under that title), including in mathematics and empirical science but also in philosophers such as Rene Descartes, Blaise Pascal (the terrifying silence of infinite space), Søren Kierkegaard and Emmanuel Levinas (1969) with his ethics of the other as an Infinite shattering of all totality systems (2020a:54). In the Hebraic, Greek and African imagination alike, we live more in the world of the invisible and the infinite than in the visible world (see 2020a:55). In theology he draws especially on Gregory of Nyssa's predication of God as Infinite, on the

apophatic in Pseudo-Dionysius, on Nicholas Cusanus' view of God as the only one who is actually infinite while the universe is indefinite, and on Schleiermacher's sense of infinite dependence.

Like Wolfhart Pannenberg (1990), Tracy is especially drawn to Plotinus who was the first philosopher after Anaximander to name the ultimate invisible reality as the infinite (2020a:48). This follows Aristotle's distinction between the absolute infinite and the quantitative infinite in space, time, and number (2020a:10, 47). The universe is indefinite and potentially infinite (ever-expanding) but as far as science can presently show not actually infinite. The absolute infinite is not just negatively incomprehensible (because of our finite intellects), but intrinsically incomprehensible as invisible, unimaginable, ineffable (2020a:48). This yields three common features of ultimate reality: invisibility, infinity and incomprehensibility (2020a:55). All religion includes an intuitive contemplation of Ultimate Reality (2020:368).

Tracy repeatedly recognises numerous possibilities for naming the Infinite: the One/Good beyond being (Plotinus), the Buddhist Void, the Taoist Open, Creativity (Whitehead), the philosophers' Being, but not surprisingly he prefers the radically monotheistic "God" as the most encompassing name (2020a:12, 55, 165), whether the Jewish Yahweh, the Christian Triune God or the Muslim just and merciful Allah (2020a:368). More specifically, he names this One God as "the Infinite Love who is the Trinitarian God revealed in Jesus the Christ" (2020a:15). Either way, the concept of God is best construed as a verb and not a noun (2020a:12), so that "naming" the absolute infinite will always be inadequate. One is left to wonder whether the infinite is a (secondary) way of naming God (or justifying belief in God); or whether God is a way of naming the Infinite – as a generic category open to other disciplines and traditions that requires a public defence of its plausibility before this can be named as "God" and then as "Triune". Tracy does hold to the category of revelation, namely the revelation of God as Infinite Love (2020a:103, also 1994:109-119). Tracy insists (against Von Harnack) that Christianity had not been Hellenized, but that Hellenism was Christianized, "including the transformation of a Platonist metaphysics of transcendence as Infinity into a Trinitarian, theological metaphysics of the Infinite One" (2020a:106). This Infinite One is "constituted as One by the Infinitely Triune communal relations:

Infinitely *Esse* (Father or Mother), Infinitely Intelligence-in-Act (*Logos*), and Infinitely loving (Spirit)" (2020a:113). To adopt philosophical concepts is hermeneutically necessary but this is open to Christian adaptation and transformation. It is therefore not accurate to say that Tracy substitutes a traditional Christian understanding of who God is and what God has done for a merely formal concept about God (see Gibson 2010).

Tracy's argument is based on a double commitment to the particularity of Christianity, notably of Jesus the Christ and the need for a public defence of truth claims (2020a:14). Universality is not possible despite particularity, but precisely on the basis of particularity. This is his argument on the notion of the classic, first articulated in *An Analogical Imagination* (1981) and retrieved in several essays in *Fragments*. Tracy maintains that if theologians only defend the particularity of Christianity, a solely confessional theology necessarily results (as in the case of postliberal theology). Inversely, if theologians only defend the public rationality through argument, then it "may end up misunderstanding the singular heart of Christianity, the substitutable Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ" (2020a:15).

On what remains of an analogical imagination

As indicated above, Tracy's commitment to conversation as our human mode of being in the world allows for interruptions caused by radical plurality (epitomised by Derrida's notion of difference) and moral ambiguity (epitomised by the horrors of the 20th century) (Tracy 1987). Such interruptions are necessary and necessitate argumentation, but such argumentation is integrated, following Paul Ricoeur, in a dialectic of conversation-argumentation-conversation. Put concisely, Plato is interrupted by Aristotle, while Gadamer is interrupted by both Derrida and Habermas. One may detect in Tracy's oeuvre since *An Analogical Imagination* an increasingly radical emphasis on such interruptions – by plurality and ambiguity (1987), by the otherness of the other (1990) and now by frag-events. What, then, is left of the possibility of an analogical imagination?

The notion of an analogical imagination, as I have argued in my doctoral thesis (see 1992a, 1992b), is best understood as the ability to spot the similar

in the dissimilar (Aristotle). Following Paul Ricoeur on symbol, metaphor and narrative, Tracy also emphasises the ability of the imagination to express such similarity-in-difference in a range of forms (images) that make this publicly accessible and open to retrieval, critique and justification. In *An Analogical Imagination* Tracy discussed such form-giving with reference to the New Testament genres, manifestation, proclamation and emancipatory praxis as religious forms and the conceptual tools of (a Catholic emphasis on) analogy and (a Protestant emphasis on) dialectic. In later work, also in *Fragments*, Tracy (e.g. 2020a:289-306) emphasised especially the mystic and the prophetic as forms of religious expression (see also Hansen 2010). The emphasis on the imagination suggests that an analogical imagination is less focused on the conceptual (Thomistic) logic of analogy and more on a certain sensibility, an intuition and an inclination to look for common ground despite difference with the other, including the radical Other. An analogical imagination therefore precedes all analogical logic, grammar, and metaphysics (2020a:373). Tracy in his own person epitomises such a Catholic sensibility and a commitment to dialogue with Protestants, Buddhists, and atheists. The analogical imagination does not thrive on sameness but on difference; the more radical the difference, the more difficult conversation becomes, but the possibility of a novum is given precisely through such difference. Tracy therefore suggests that one must "feed" the imagination, especially through engaging with classics that seem to have the power to challenge received views ever anew in changing contexts. This is epitomised by the figure of Jesus the Christ (Tracy 1981).

David Gibson (2010) identifies a shift in Tracy's oeuvre from the analogical imagination to an emphasis on the silence of mystics and the silence provoked by horrific suffering:

> Through his exploration of suffering Tracy has come to focus less on the "analogical imagination" of his early career than on the inaccessibility of God. From the incomprehensibility of the God of Job and the apophatic moments of mystics like the sixth-century monk Dionysius, to the terror of Martin Luther's Hidden God, Tracy is riveted by the silence of God. More and more, the man famous for complex theological formulations is exploring the mystical limit at which words fail.

My sense is that Tracy has not completely abandoned the notion of an analogical imagination but has allowed his hope for that to be chastened. The image of the fragment shatters any Hegelian sense of totality. Tracy's engagements with Emmanuel Levinas and Walter Benjamin convinced him that "History may not yield to the continuity of narrative, nor to the intellectual hope of either an analogical or a dialectical imagination" (2020a:29). History breaks up in images, best understood as fragments. For Tracy it is especially the marginal fragment that "recalls forgotten, even repressed, memories of the suffering of the victims of history" while any conception of historical totality is written by the victors (2020a:29). If it is not possible to reconstruct a single narrative (salvation history), or even to gather the fragments, conversation between the fragments remains possible and then requires a chastened analogical imagination. This is what enables a retrieval of fragments and therefore an openness to infinity. The hope cannot be for some unity (univocal language). At the same time there is no need to accept equivocal language because opposites need not become exclusionary or hierarchical. A "coincidence of opposites" (Cusanus) allows for analogy, that is, at best, for similarity-in-difference (2020a:180). Through frag-events the Protestant protest of saying "No!" (difference, argumentation)) resounds but this is still within a Catholic "Yes!" (the hope to find convergence, conversation).

On a few other jewels

On a personal note, it was for me a remarkable experience to return to Tracy's writings after 30 years since I was working on my doctoral thesis. Given that the essays included in this volume cover forty years, there is a lot that is familiar. What created a feeling of déjà vu was to see how Tracy addresses themes, sometimes in passing that I have worked on over the past 30 years. Let me mention, in the format of catena and commentary, a few such jewels that I have found in *Fragments*:

> "The tragic new fact is that contemporary human beings, for the first time in history, have the ability to end it all by either nuclear or chemical powers, or perhaps by the partly already unstoppable fatal results of climate change – the major cause of which is our

> apparently equally unstoppable greed and our cruel lack of care for future generations" (2020a:72).

In this remarkable single sentence Tracy's uncanny ability to capture the heart of an entire discourse is evident. In my own work on climate change its anthropogenic causes are, likewise, mainly related to consumerist greed leading to the "great acceleration" (see Conradie 2008, SACC 2009, Conradie & Koster 2019).

> "[T]he Christian response to suffering is not a philosophical or theological theodicy (all collapse in the face of radical suffering) … Rather, it is a turn to face attentively the reality of the cross of Jesus Christ who, as a human being like us in all save sin and as the compassionate God, suffered for us to give us hope for the final Alleluia that his resurrection and sending of the Spirit among us promise: crux Christi, sola spes" (2020a:84).

For Tracy evil is a category best confined to the evil acts of humankind. Nature is not evil because matter itself is not evil (2020a:87). Not all suffering is somehow caused by human sin. Natural disasters are mostly unrelated to any human evil although climate change resulting in increased suffering is a clear exception (2020a:85). I could not agree more with Tracy here (see Conradie 2020b). The African intuition is that natural suffering is overshadowed by suffering induced by the history of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery. However, I do not follow him in calling for a rethinking of original sin (a misnomer since the main focus should be on the inescapability of sin). Tracy is clearly drawn to a retrieval of Greek tragedy to come to terms with natural causes of suffering (including sickness, ageing and death). He insists that Christianity, especially the Christianity of oppressed peoples (2020a:64), cannot be understood without tragic elements even though he acknowledges that Christianity, given resurrection joy, is not ultimately a tragedy (2020a:10). In seeking to redeem the category of sin (Conradie 2017), I prefer to stay closer to the Augustinian tradition and affirm natural suffering as part of God's good creation.

> "Western secular thinkers … have unconsciously lived now for two centuries on the interest of the ethics of justice and love of the

> Jewish and Christian tradition. Now … we are in danger of spending the capital itself" (2020a:159).

In teaching ethics at UWC since 2000 (see Conradie et al 2006) we have often invoked the so-called Böckenförde principle, named after the German constitutional judge Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde. It holds that the moral fibre of modern (Western) societies rely on moral sources that such societies cannot themselves guarantee or sustain. The moral fibre may be explained in generic categories (values, virtues, visions, duties) but the sources of inspiration behind them are particular. They are typically embedded in the archetypes, symbols and belief systems of religious traditions and cannot be captured through a generic sense of religiosity. To sustain such moral sources, the particularity of such traditions therefore has to be taken seriously.

> "In Christian understanding, sin is not properly understood as conscious moral errors or mistakes. For the Christian sin is rightly understood *as sin (note the hermeneutic as), as a fundamental, egotistic disorientation of the self. Sin like the secular ideology of consumerism, is an unconscious but systematically functioning disorientation of the self. 'Sin' describes the self as trapped in its own ego" (2020a:157, see also 61).*

In my recent work on *Redeeming Sin?* (Conradie 2017, also 2020a, 2020c) I clustered together notions of sin as pride (anthropocentrism), consumerist greed, alienation (privation of the good), domination in the name of difference, moral failure (sloth), folly and systemic corruption. This resonates well with Tracy's formulation, notably the emphasis on sin as power and not individual sins.

> "Admirable as Gadamer's retrievals of classical reason and classical humanism were, he seemed not to attend to the outstanding fact of his own century: the twentieth century was largely defied not by humanism but by extreme historical situations of radical evil that ruptured not only progressive optimism but also any lingering human complacency" (2020a:175).

Tracy recognises the dangers of anthropocentrism and the possibility that various forms of humanism remains trapped in such anthropocentrism.

The challenge then, is to guard against both a reductionist denial of human distinctiveness and a dualist separation of humanity from the rest of nature, understood as God's creation (see Conradie 2019, 2020a).

> "Derrida's description of 'Justice to Come' as the Impossible is for Derrida the condition for the possibility of our spotting injustices at all. 'Justice to Come' as the Impossible, Derrida insists, cannot be deconstructed" (2020a:181).

In *Om Reg te Stel (2018)* I tried to explain why full justice is impossible, namely in terms of the notion of a deficit that can never be given back and the way in which the impact of unresolved past injustices become over time both more amorphous and aggravated. Tracy speaks of the "wonder of a seemingly impossible 'forgiveness' or reconciliation" in post-apartheid South Africa (2020a:295). Given how contested the notion of reconciliation is (see Conradie 2013, Solomons 2018), the emphasis may be more on the "impossible" than on the "seemingly" than Tracy may have intimated.

> "Positivism, materialism, and consumerism can disempower a genuine public realm in any society, which, more and more, can seem determined solely by the techno-economic realm that provide more and more information but less and less dialogical wisdom. … Where armies once conquered, rapid-fire communication now rules" (2020a:202).

> "At times it does seem that religion has been so privatized that it is merely anther consumer item for personal preference. The public realm is in danger of becoming commercialized (or colonized?) by the juggernaut of the techno-economic and technological powers if late capitalism that is crushing every alternative reality – religion, art, ethics, and, eventually, public reason itself" (2020a:274).

Indeed, consumerism has become pervasive and requires a multifaceted critique – as ecologically unsustainable, as exacerbating economic inequality, as undermining virtue, as corrupting social values, as commodifying everything including spirituality and as thriving on distortive heresies (see Conradie 2009).

> "Without vision the people perish" (2020:287).

Tracy identifies three forms of publicness in order to reopen a discussion on religion in the public realm. Publicness one defends the role of rational inquiry through dialectics and argument. Publicness two entails dialogue with classics that demand attention through conversation. Classics disclose some truth about the human condition that can resist the reign of information technology in late-capitalist economies (2020a:275). Publicness three offers disruptive resources beyond the usual limits of reason. To recognise the limits of reason is, following Kant, one of the greatest achievements of reason (2020a:282). Tracy emphasises the mystic and prophetic traditions that allow for excess in terms of contemplative wisdom and ethical-political demands (see also Hansen 2010). Truth as the manifestation of possibility (contra Habermas – 2020a:263) helps to recognise the limits of reason because it challenges what is deemed possible through an emerging (moral) vision of the Impossible. In this way it becomes possible to retrieve the resources of art and religion in the battered public realm. The role of an emerging moral vision, alongside, virtues, values, and obligations, has been crucial in courses on ethics at UWC (see Conradie et al. 2006). Tracy still maintains the three publics of theology (academy, church, and society) but now describes more clearly what this means for a non-sectarian role of theology in the public realm (2020:287). This is especially important in the South African context where this distinction between the three publics is widely used, for example by David Bosch (1991), Bernard Lategan (2015), Dirkie Smit (e.g. 2007), Ignatius Swart (2004), the whole oeuvre of Wentzel van Huyssteen, and more indirectly also by Nico Koopman (e.g. 2010) and Piet Naudé (2014, see also Conradie 1993).

> "There is, to be sure, always a danger in our consumerist and individualistic modern Western societies that 'spiritualities' can become new consumer goods, new divertissements without ethical demands towards other and the Other" (2020a:301).

I could not agree more but would maintain that this applies (almost) just as much to South Africa and other African countries despite its vehement decolonial critique of Western imperialism and its much-praised emphasis on ubuntu.

> "Not satisfied with polluting the Earth, humans have already begun to litter cosmic space itself. Therefore, the ecological crisis is clearly

> severe, as the majority of scientists have demonstrated. That crisis needs every intellectual, moral, and theological resource humans can amass to lend help to a situation affecting everyone on the planet (presently more than seven billion persons" (2020a:378).

Tracy's hope here is that Orthodox theology can aid all public Christian theologies in addressing ecological issues (2020a:379). Elsewhere he notes that Buddhism seems as promising on ecological justice as the prophetic tradition in Judaism and Christianity is on social justice (2020a:275). My own hope and life's work is that both an ecological critique of the reformed tradition and a reformed critique of ecological destruction can contribute to this ecumenical task. I now see how this twofold task (or fourfold task if the constructive dimension is factored in) has been influenced all along by Tracy's notion of "mutually critical correlation" (see Conradie 2020b).

Speaking of hope, Tracy realises the need to give an account of why he has hope, namely "because of that belief in God, through Christ, and in Christ through Jesus" (quoted in Gibson 2010). My intuition is that such hope, including a hope for the earth itself, is crucial in order to sustain an environmental ethos, praxis and spirituality (Conradie 2000/2005).

In each of these areas I see myself as a dwarf standing on the shoulders of a giant. I just did not quite realise to what extent that intellectual giant is none other than David Tracy.

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