

David Tracy and the absolute infinite

Essays spanning four decades offer a fitting entree into the work of a distinguished scholar.

by [J. Scott Jackson](#) in the [May 19, 2021](#) issue

In Review



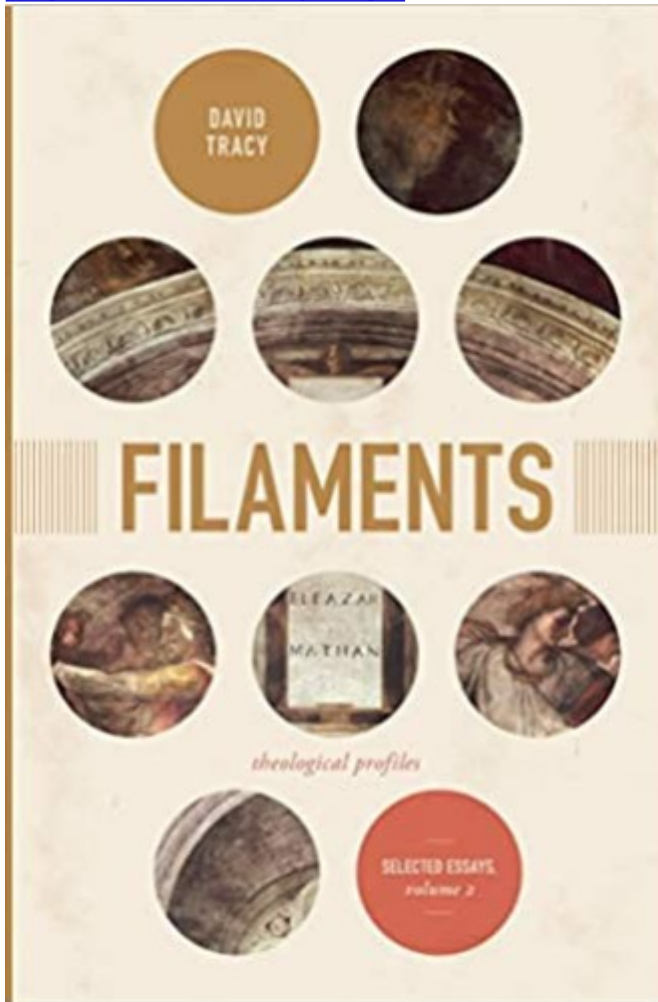
Fragments

The Existential Situation of Our Time Selected Essays, Vol. 1

by David Tracy

University of Chicago

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Filaments

Theological Profiles Selected Essays, Vol. 2

by David Tracy

University of Chicago

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Few images capture High Renaissance humanism as iconically as Michelangelo's masterwork *The Creation of Adam* (completed in 1512), which adorns the Sistine Chapel ceiling in Vatican City. Here, God the Father, be-toga-ed and bearded, stretches his index finger down toward the outstretched hand of his newly minted *imago Dei*, Adam—naked and reclining slightly below the creator as his face beams

with longing and wonder. Theologian David Tracy reads Michelangelo as more than a paragon of painting. The Florentine master, in Tracy's view, expresses, as well as if not better than any Scholastic writer, the incarnational, mystical, sacramental, pluralistic-yet-harmonious catholic vision that Tracy calls the "analogical imagination." This vision persists in affirming hope and defending human dignity even in a world of sin, chaos, dissolution, and natural afflictions.

Still, *The Creation* does not tell the whole story. It must be complemented with the Sistine wall fresco, titled *The Last Judgment* (completed in 1541). Anchoring this apocalyptic panorama is Christ, the incarnate God-man, whose Apollonian figure sits enthroned, sorting out the saved from the lost. Christ's raised right hand reproves a group of reprobate sinners at the bottom left side of the painting—including one wretched figure, head in hand, legs clasped by demons, the visible side of his face exuding terror, despair, and regret. Even with such unflinching realism in the face of evil, the analogical imagination, as Tracy interprets it, asserts the triumph of an ultimate good: the infinite mystery of triune love that transcends thought and image and perhaps even being itself.

Michelangelo joins other prophets, mystics, and thinkers—ranging from ancient Roman Africa to the 20th-century United States—profiled in *Filaments*, the second volume of Tracy's stunning two-volume essay collection. These articles, spanning four decades, offer a fitting and thorough entree into the work of the distinguished theologian, philosopher, and Catholic studies scholar, who has taught at the University of Chicago for more than 50 years.

Tracy's first monograph examined the work of his teacher, the Canadian transcendental Thomist Bernard Lonergan, who sought to recover ancient models of theology and philosophy as ways of life integrating theory and practice, thought and spirituality—a project Tracy has taken to heart. Three major works from the late 1970s and early '80s established Tracy as one of the most creative and original interpreters of theological method.

Building upon Paul Tillich, he developed a conversational model of theology that sought to correlate the questions and answers posed by our existential situation—especially as interpreted through the arts, sciences, and philosophy—with the best insights from Christian tradition. He labeled such privileged sites of meaning "classics." In *Filaments*, Tracy writes: "A classic is a work (an event, a text, a symbol) in art, ethics, science, religion, philosophy, or theology, or even in

everyday life (e.g., falling in love, or the birth of a child) that possesses such an excess of meaning that it resists definitive interpretation.” A classic perpetually generates new insights across time and place as it is creatively and constructively engaged within communities of interpretation.

Tracy grounded this paradigm in an epistemology of truth as encounter, drawn from Hans-Georg Gadamer’s phenomenological philosophy. Tracy has consistently held that the insights gleaned from such encounters, though fleeting and always revisable, may offer glimpses of the ultimate reality that grounds and undergirds all creation.

Yet the classics remain contested sites, often spurring conflicting interpretations, as Paul Ricoeur recognized. Since the 19th century, hermeneuts of suspicion like Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche—and in our day, scholars of feminism, critical race theory, postcolonialism, and queer studies—have exposed, in our privileged cultural artifacts, hidden imperialisms and ideological distortions legitimating all manner of oppression. Gadamer himself faced such criticisms in dialogue with the critical theorists Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, who challenged the hermeneutical tradition as politically and epistemologically naive.

The tension between hermeneutics of retrieval and of suspicion pervades these essays. It also relates to another distinction Tracy draws: the analogical imagination must come to terms with its dialectical counterpart. In one of the most fascinating and provocative essays, Tracy explores—and commends—Martin Luther’s reflections on two forms of divine hiddenness. The first form of hiddenness is found in the scandalous paradox of divine love revealed in Christ crucified. The second, less familiar form stems from Luther’s existential suffering (*Anfechtung*) and his musings on the fundamental inscrutability of divine providence in the suffering and tragedies of history.

In a similar vein, Tracy plumbs the prophetic-mystical writings of the Marxist-turned-Platonist Simone Weil, finding there a singular model for reintegrating the insights of Greek tragedies with Plato’s philosophy. In Sigmund Freud’s theory of the unconscious, Tracy discerns a realm gesturing toward that which cannot be spoken, an echo of the ancient Hebrew prophets. The philosopher-novelist Iris Murdoch, he notes in another essay, objects to notions of a personal God not, primarily, for metaphysical reasons but for the ways it has undergirded escapist individualism in the West. (Notably, a number of the thinkers Tracy profiles share his interdisciplinary

commitments).

Tracy also explores, with the Jewish thinker Arthur Cohen, how the brutality of the Shoah—the “subscending abyss of evil” that Cohen called the *tremendum*—might entail radical reinterpretations of all our notions of God. In other essays, which demonstrate his profound respect for and wide reading in the works of Gustavo Gutiérrez and James H. Cone, as well as other Black, liberationist, and feminist thinkers, Tracy stops short of engaging their concerns with the sort of specificity that might seriously threaten his own theological framework.

Tracy finds the roots of the analogical-dialectical divergence in the New Testament canon, locating it in the contrast between Paul’s theology of the cross and the mystical discourses of the fourth Gospel (although Paul does offer his own mystical teaching on participation in Christ, while John wrestles with the necessity of the cross). But the most paradigmatic examples of both dispositions, for Tracy, are found in Augustine of Hippo.

Augustine’s deeply speculative work *On the Trinity* seeks to “express how intelligence and love become, through God’s grace, analogous to the triune God.” By contrast, Augustine’s profound meditations on sin, beginning with his own personal struggles recounted in the *Confessions*, come to radical (and perhaps extreme) fruition in his trenchant, late anti-Pelagian writings, with their historical-genetic account of inherited original guilt and the odious doctrine of double predestination. According to Tracy, the analogical insight prevails over Augustine’s corpus as a whole, with its affirmation of the principle that grace perfects rather than destroys human nature.

Tracy, sometimes delightfully, transgresses numerous norms in the humanities, religious studies, and theology (without any loss of charity or respect toward his interlocutors). Against confessional fideism, he insistently affirms religious experience and the metaphysical speculation it engenders as foundational for constructive theology. Demurring from George Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic interpretation of religion and postliberal model for theology, he doubles down on Friedrich Schleiermacher’s definition of religion as a “sense and taste of the Infinite.”

Nor does he shy away from suggesting interreligious comparisons. In *Fragments*, he draws connections between apophatic Christian theologies of God and Buddhist notions of the void. Such an intuition or apprehension of the whole permeating the

plurality of experience provides the norm and impetus for his philosophical construction. Tracy echoes Emmanuel Levinas's encomium to metaphysics as the "most noble" of intellectual pursuits. He writes, "Above all, metaphysics is the mode of thinking proper to an understanding of the Infinite—that innate idea 'given' to us by the Infinite itself (Descartes): an interpretive idea that frees us to think more than we think, and allows us, at the limit, to name God the Perfect, Infinite One."

In another essay, which ranges topically from Plotinus and Greek philosophy to contemporary mathematics, Tracy commends the "Absolute Infinite" as perhaps the most apropos naming of God for an age of fragmentation. He insists that such a foundational role for metaphysics is congruent with, and even sheds light upon, the foundational revelation in Jesus Christ of the infinite as triune love, while also helping form a bridge to other namings of the ultimate in Western theistic and Eastern nontheistic traditions. If anything, as the most recently published essays in these volumes show, Tracy has become bolder and more explicit in his embrace of mysticism and metaphysics, postmodern skepticism notwithstanding.