The impossible God: An interview with David Tracy

by Lois Malcolm in the February 13, 2002 issue

With books like Blessed Rage for Order *(1975) and* The Analogical Imagination *(1981), David Tracy became widely recognized as an important revisionist theologian—one who revised Christian categories in view of modern categories of thought. Tracy, 62, a Roman Catholic theologian who teaches at the University of Chicago, has also been associated with the theological "method of correlation," an approach that, following in the tradition of Paul Tillich, aims to correlate the Christian tradition and the modern situation in a way that is both mutually illuminating and mutually critical.*

Lately, Tracy has taken his work in a new direction, focusing more on mystical and neo-Platonic traditions of thought and drawing heavily on postmodern thinkers. His new work speaks of God as "incomprehensible" (drawing on Dionysius, a sixth-century monastic and mystic) and "hidden" (drawing on Martin Luther). He also stresses in a new way the significance of spiritual exercises and suffering—especially the suffering of the innocent. I spoke with him about his current project and how it differs from his earlier work.

It seems you have taken a significantly different direction from the kind of thinking about God you did in *Blessed Rage for Order.*

I continue to read and learn from the modern debates on God—debates on deism, modern theism, modern atheism, modern agnosticism and modern pantheism. And as I argued in *Blessed Rage*, I think panentheism, the doctrine that all is in God but God's inclusion of the world does not exhaust the reality of God, is the best way to render in modern concepts God's relationship to us as described in the Bible.

But I believe such concepts do not provide the way to approach the question of God now. I am not suggesting one can get to "postmodernity" without learning from "modernity." But the real conversation about God intellectually should be with the category of the impossible. I have in mind the sense in which Søren Kierkegaard

used this term: It is impossible to have a direct communication with God. God cannot be known by way of persuasion and argument; one either believes in or is offended by this God.

For moderns, the debate over God has been about what is actual and possible. Modern God-talk reflects concrete experiences, either actual or possible. When God is linked with concrete experiences, God can be understood by way of persuasion and argument—in an appeal to experience, reason or the imagination. Empirical or process theologies stress what is actual, and hermeneutic theologies deal with the possible.

When you shift to God-centeredness, however, you shift to the mystical and prophetic approaches—and therefore to notions of hiddenness and incomprehensibility. Hence the shift to “impossibility.” It used to be embarrassing to speak of the impossible. For modern thinkers like Weber, Dewey and Habermas, to introduce the category of the impossible was to provoke laughter. But it is a deeply meaningful category.

I want to attend to two namings of God: God as incomprehensible, in which case I am trying to rediscover the mystical tradition, especially from Dionysius, and God as hidden, in which case Luther offers a classic Christian expression.

Would you characterize this shift as a move to the "postmodern"?

I don’t care about the word postmodern. I do care about the shift to the other and not the self. The shift is about undoing the arrogance and limits of modernity, especially reason. In this shift, the category of the impossible is again very important.

What is the major innovation in this approach to God?

I am trying to develop a theory of the religious fragment, the form best suited for the impossible. The fragment is something that sparks into the realm of the infinite yet disallows a totalizing approach, and at the same time opens up material realities—which we have learned from liberation and political and feminist theologies is very important. First forged by Romantics to disclose the “sparks” of the divine, the peculiar form of the fragment became for more and more artists, and then for philosophers and theologians, a form well suited to challenge any totality system, especially that of modernity. It is time for theologians to join this literary and

philosophical discussion of fragments and to reflect on them in uniquely theological ways.

How can you develop a theory of fragmented forms?

I used to emphasize the distinction in religious forms between manifestation and proclamation. This distinction was based on issues of participation and distancing. When one has a radical sense of participation in a religious form, one has a "manifestation," as in a sacrament or ritual. When you have the breaking or the fragmentation of the whole, you have "proclamation" in a word or prophetic witness.

The danger of the manifestation form is that it moves toward becoming a totalized system—it presumes to offer a complete and absolute account of all reality. This is why the prophetic tradition remains so central to Christianity, Judaism and Islam. With proclamation, you have a fragmentation of totality and an emergence of a witness, a word, that the prophet must speak.

The next step is more reflective and yet more explicit in history and experience—this is when the religious form becomes either prophetic or meditative. The prophet always insists that it is not the prophet but God who proclaims. In fact, prophets usually don't want to become prophets. The meditative or contemplative form is found in the wisdom tradition, such as the wisdom books of the Old Testament and the Gospel of John in the New Testament.

Prophecy and wisdom can either be generalized or intensified. If the prophetic tradition is generalized, it becomes primarily an ethical tradition. I have always thought there is an intrinsic connection between modernity and liberal Protestantism, which is why Jews and Catholics tend to be far less troubled by the turn to postmodernism. Following Immanuel Kant, liberal Protestantism, Reformed Judaism and liberal Catholicism generalize the prophetic tradition and tend to collapse the religious and the ethical.

On the other hand, if the wisdom tradition is generalized, it moves toward the aesthetic realm. Iris Murdoch's novels are an example of how for many people art becomes the form of the good—in an almost religious sense. This is not bad, but it is inadequate.

When the wisdom tradition is intensified it becomes apophatic, or mystical. When the prophetic tradition is intensified, it becomes apocalyptic—especially when

prophecy fails.

From its beginnings in Origen and Clement of Alexandria, apophatic theology seeks union with God by moving from physical sensations and concepts to their negation in the divine darkness that lies beyond experience and concepts. Apocalyptic theology, which has roots in Jewish eschatology, hopes for a reign of God on earth that can be established only as a result of a divine irruption into the present order that overthrows its evils.

Christian theology needs to recover its own classical fragmentary forms, especially the highly suggestive fragmentary forms of apocalyptic and apophatic.

If the ethical and aesthetic modes are "modern," would you call apocalyptic and apophatic religion "postmodern"?

These are the two things that matter to me in postmodern thinking: 1) breaking the totality systems, especially triumphalist ones, which Christianity is always tempted to be, and 2) attending, both intellectually and spiritually, not to the self but to the other.

What do apophatic and apocalyptic theologies look like?

The two most radical examples we have are that of Dionysius, who spoke of the incomprehensibility of God, and Luther, who spoke of the hiddenness of God.

Of course, there are great debates over how to read Dionysius. Is he Christian? Is he Platonist? Does Dionysius’s apophatic theology suggest that reality itself is to be understood as a “gift”? These debates aside, Dionysius’s writings not only fragment and negate all positive language for God but also insist that the thinker become a worshiper and enter the language not of predication but of praise and prayer. We move with Dionysius (and this is why the postmoderns read Dionysius) to an excessive language, that is, excessive in relation to all predicative namings of God, positive or negative. We stutter God’s name by oscillating back and forth in praise, in hymn, in prayer, in contemplation between positive and negative namings of God in the ever more fragmentary language Dionysius believes is present in mystical union with the incomprehensible God.

Luther rejected Dionysius and started instead with suffering and sin, and utter fragmentation. He had this extraordinary and profound sense of the cross—that we

understand God through weakness. But he also had this second sense of the hiddenness, this very strange sense of God beyond the word of the cross. When I think of what that must mean, there is no theoretical solution. You must flee back to the cross. If one wants to see this second type of hiddenness beyond the word, look at the great artists. See an early Ingmar Bergman film—like the one in which the minister screams that God is a spider. If you start with this Lutheran theology of the cross, and this apocalyptic sense of history, then your focus is exactly where it should be: you can't have a totality system; you must focus on the other. As Luther would say, you must focus on the neighbor.

Your early work was concerned with how to think about God. How do you think about God in apophatic and apocalyptic terms?

Most of the discussion on God, including my approach in *Blessed Rage*, has concerned panentheism. That is a valuable discussion. But I don't begin there any longer—especially if the spiritual is deeply involved with the theological. I begin with the categories of the "void" and the "open." I am persuaded to think about God not simply in modern terms but in terms of the categories of faith. When you talk about God you are talking about two "impossible" options. Lucretius and Nietzsche talk about the void, but there is no one better on the subject than Luther. History is apocalyptic for him. It is a series of openings into the abyss. Nature is that too. The "void" has to do with experiences of extreme suffering, injustice, terror, despair or alienation.

And there is no one better than the apophatic mystics with respect to regarding God as "open." I first called this category the "gracious void" but realized this was too Christian a term. So I use the term "the open." The experience of the open happens when you "let go." That's why Buddhism is such an attraction to so many contemporary people, including postmodern thinkers. It's the "let-go" aspect of faith. Even Aristotle speaks of the mystery of religion as a genuine experience.

The experience of "the open" either happens or it doesn't—or it can happen suddenly—but spiritual disciplines can prepare you for it. The "open" has to do with experiences of the sheer giftedness of life—the sense of awe and wonder one might have about the beauty of the natural world or the sheer happiness one might find in human relationships.

Are we simply left with fragments—and with the opposition between the "void" and the "open"?

Part of my project involves gathering the fragments. In this effort, I will draw explicitly on biblical and liturgical metaphors. Though you can't have a totality of symbols, you do need to order and gather them—without losing the sense that religious expressions are simply fragments. The three principle "gathering forms" I use to do this are the narratives of the Gospels, doctrines and liturgy.

Narrative is the basic form. Yet there are four basic narratives in the New Testament, and you don't have to choose between them. The narrative in Mark is different from that in Luke. Luke stresses continuity; Mark does not; John's Gospel is a meditation. In the rediscovery of narrative, many people seem to emphasize Luke—as if all the Gospel narratives are a kind of realistic narrative. But there isn't just Luke; there are three other stories as well.

The basic form of Christianity in the New Testament is narrative. But already in Matthew and the Epistles you encounter doctrines. In the reception of the Gospels through history, the most influential Gospel was Matthew, because the community was trying to organize itself and its beliefs. Doctrine is an important form, though to make it a central form, as many theologians have done, is disastrous.

The third form is liturgy. Eastern theology structured its insights around liturgy. And Dionysius's mystical theology must be connected to what he was doing liturgically and with ecclesial structure. Liturgy always has both form and structure, and we don't have to accept Dionysius's ecclesiastical and liturgical hierarchies to see that forms of worship structure our thoughts. This is why liturgical theologies are so valuable.

Where does Christ fit among these "gathered forms"?

We believe in "Jesus the Christ with the apostles." This is not simply a "Christ principle." It has to be related to Jesus. But it's not simply historical reconstruction either. It is the Jesus narrated by these confessing communities. And it's not "in" the apostles but "with" the apostles, beginning with the apostles' writing and the Hebrew Bible as the Christian Old Testament.

How does this Christology differ from the Christology you presented at the end of *The Analogical Imagination?*

In *The Analogical Imagination*, the main symbols were incarnation-cross-resurrection. Now I would add apocalyptic. When I was young, no progressive theologian would dare speak about the apocalyptic. Talk of the apocalyptic was handed over to fundamentalism. Bultmann, Rahner and others preferred to speak of the "eschatological." In *The Analogical Imagination*, I spoke of the apocalyptic as an important "corrective." I no longer say that. For me, the Second Coming is as critical a symbol as incarnation, cross and resurrection. The Bible for Christians ends with "Come, Lord Jesus." We are still messianic. Yes, Christ has come for us as Christians, but in an important sense he still has not come yet. We don't know who or what Christ will be or when his coming will happen.

I fundamentally trust the Christian tradition because as far as I can see the formulations of the Council of Chalcedon about the nature of Christ make perfect sense. The point really is Jesus Christ, the God-Man. The thing that will trouble some people is that I think Chalcedon is a beginning and not an end. We need a new language and new categories. Chalcedon and the other early ecumenical councils, whose work I fundamentally believe and trust, don't refer to the Second Coming. And they don't make much room for the Spirit, which relates to the Second Coming.

Another shift I've made has to do with the Trinity. I used to think Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jürgen Moltmann—and to some extent Eberhard Jüngel—were too speculative for bringing reflection on the narrative of Jesus into rethinking the trinitarian relations. To an extent I still think that. But I have been driven to think that some such speculation is needed if we are to speak of the immanent Trinity. If the narrative of Jesus informs us about how to name God—who is incomprehensible and hidden—as love, then I don't see any way to do that without allowing Christology to encourage some modest speculation on the Trinity.

You have said you are envisioning a three-volume work. Where is it all headed?

If the second volume is accurate about Christology, Trinity and anthropology, and justification and sanctification, then I need also to discuss the Spirit and the question of how Christianity is theologically to be understood in view of the other religions.

Those of us who have been following your work know spiritual exercises play an important role in this three-volume work. Can you say more about that?

Pierre Hadot, who wrote about spiritual exercises and ancient philosophy, gave me the insight that modern Western culture is bizarre when compared to other cultures in the way it splits spiritual practices from theory and even theology and philosophy. If you were a Stoic, you would perform exercises related to your beliefs and theory of life. Theology is about the vision of life and a way of life. We should never have split practices and theology.

In addition to spiritual exercises, experiences of suffering have also become very important for you. Can you say more?

Suffering, and especially innocent suffering, demands attention. The death of the self is not as important as the death of the other, especially those who have been devastated by the history of triumph, including the triumph of Christian churches. Attentiveness to such suffering—and hearing and learning from those who suffer—is crucial.

Spiritual exercises lead, by way of detachment, to an attentiveness to the giftedness of life; and suffering cries out in lament, awe and sometimes terror, exemplified in the lament psalms or the Book of Job. The first is linked with apophatic-mystical theologies, the second with apocalyptic-prophetic theologies.

Can you relate these concerns to the current resurgence of interest in spirituality?

If there is one thing religions all agree on, it’s that the ego is the problem, not the solution. I agree with Nietzsche: our souls are too small. The turn to religion among many distinguished figures—and apparently in the population as a whole—is a very ambiguous sign. It can either be a turn to the self or a turn to the other. In terms of the work of the Spirit among genuine Christian groups, I would point to the fact that when you go into the really terrible neighborhoods, you’ll find Christians serving there. And they’ve always been there. The hope for our culture as a whole—and not only the Christian church—is a recovery of that kind of spirituality.