SJT 66(4): 448–465 (2013)
doi:10.1017/S0036930613000252
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Reading and Revelation in Hans Frei and David Tracy

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Abstract

Most maps of theology in the twentieth century, particularly theology in North America, would include the delineation of revisionist theology and postliberal theology as mutually exclusive, opposed options in theological method. This article begins to challenge the contours of this received map through a comparison of David Tracy and Hans Frei, pre-eminent figures in revisionist and postliberal theology, respectively. I show that, for all their differences, both Tracy and Frei posit the reader–text relationship as the site and even in some sense the source of revelation. Their turn to reading is motivated by the perception of a certain loss or estrangement characterising contemporary religiosity. Though the scope and details of their description of the problem differ, there is a similarity in the vision of Christian life which stands in contrast to the contemporary situation. For both, their visions of Christian life can be articulated through the notion of orthodoxy, understood in its full sense as referring to a coherent, vibrant and all-encompassing immersion in Christian doctrine and practice. Engagement in proper reading practice becomes for each the entrance into and sign of full participation in religious life, analogous to the role of belief in traditional notions of orthodoxy. I suggest that Tracy and Frei represent two forms of 'theology of ortholexis' or 'right reading'. The turn to reading is most obvious in Frei, who explicitly links the modern difficulty in attaining a sense of the coherence of Christian history, doctrine and lived life to a misconstrual of the nature of the biblical text which leads to a misguided reading practice. Yet Tracy also places the model of reading as conversation at the centre of his revisionist account of the possibility of a contemporary experience of the authority of the Bible and the power of the Christian tradition more generally. In these 'theologies of ortholexis', a constellation of modern anxieties concerning the limits and possibilities of our knowledge and experience of the divine are addressed through positing the reader–text relationship forged through proper reading practice as the place of and way to authentic revelation.

Keywords: Hans Frei, hermeneutics, orthodoxy, reading, revelation, David Tracy.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000252 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Most maps of theology in the twentieth century, particularly theology in North America, would include the delineation of revisionist theology and postliberal theology as mutually exclusive, opposed options in theological method.[1] This article begins to challenge the contours of this received map through a comparison of David Tracy and Hans Frei, pre-eminent figures in revisionist and postliberal theology, respectively. I show that, for all their differences, both Tracy and Frei posit the reader–text relationship as the site and even, in some sense, the source of revelation. Engagement in proper reading practice becomes for each the entrance into and sign of full participation in religious life, analogous to the role of right belief in traditional notions of orthodoxy. I suggest that Tracy and Frei represent two forms of theology of 'ortholexis' or 'right reading'.

Champions of the Embattled Tradition

In an essay which comes to stand as one of the foundational texts of postliberal theology, Hans Frei himself points to a similarity-in-difference connecting his thought to that of David Tracy and Paul Ricoeur. He identifies Tracy and Ricoeur as fellow 'champions of the embattled tradition', by which he means they advocate, against mounting dissent, the practice of reading narratives as normative guides.[2] Yet this is a precursor to the charge that Tracy and Ricoeur fail as champions of the specifically Christian tradition. For Frei, the normativity of the biblical narratives is tied to the *sensus literalis*, the closest thing to 'a consensus reading of the Bible as the sacred text in the Christian church'.[3] Though they seek to defend at least a revised form of the *sensus literalis*, the philosophical hermeneutics of Ricoeur and Tracy, Frei argues, leads to a kind of reading of biblical narrative which is closer to traditional allegory than to literal reading, and thus their attempt at defence is a failure. Underlying Frei's identification of the shared task and his charge of failure is a picture of the discipline of theology which puts the question of how to

[1] For example, the widely used introduction to theology, David Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Blackwell, 1989), juxtaposes and contrasts 'the Revisionists and Liberals' to 'Postliberal theology' in the original 1989 edn, but then repeats this mapping virtually unchanged in the 1997 edn.

[2] This essay was given as a paper at a conference on 'the Bible and the Narrative Tradition' held at the University of California, Santa Barbara. It was first published under the title 'The "Literal Reading" of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?' in Frank McConnell (ed.), *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition* (New York: OUP, 1986). The citations here are from a later collection of Frei's writing, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York: OUP, 1996), pp. 117–52, 118.

[3] 'Literal Reading', p. 118.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000252 Published online by Cambridge University Press

read the Bible at its centre.[4] When Ricoeur and Tracy 'break' the literal sense, they fail, Frei implies, at a central task of theology.[5] My analysis takes its cue from Frei's argument in this article. I am struck by Frei's definition of the task of theology in terms of a mode of interpretation, as the defence of the *sensus literalis*. Furthermore, his depiction of David Tracy as an 'allegorist' serves to highlight the importance of the question of how to read the Bible in Tracy's work. Frei's essay helpfully identifies himself and Tracy, along with Ricoeur, as key figures in the search for a post-critical, theological recuperation of the Bible. The suggestion I want to pursue in this article is that the activity of reading and the reader–text relationship take on an unprecedented role in the accounts of Christian religiosity which form the foundation of this effort at recuperation.

The Role of Reading in Frei's Work

Frei's influence on what might be termed 'the return to the Bible' in recent theology has its foundation in his work in the 1970s: *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, published in 1974, and the series of articles written in the sixties and published in 1975 as *The Identity of Jesus Christ*. In *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei posits the 'realistic reading' of biblical narrative as the source of the coherent religious life he argues was possible before the effects of 'empirical philosophy, Deism and historical criticism'.[6] Frei tells the story of the passing of the pre-critical world in terms of the loss of this way of reading and suggests, finally, that it might be possible, through a new mode of literal

[4] Gary Comstock, an early commentator on the so-called Yale/Chicago debate through which the postliberal/revisionist opposition solidified, also identifies, in slightly different terms, the similarity-in-difference connecting Frei and Tracy. Each instantiates a type of narrative theology, he argues. Frei, along with George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas and David Kelsey, is a pure narrative theologian, while Tracy, along with Ricoeur, Julian Hartt, and Sally McFague, is an 'impure' one: 'Two Types of Narrative Theology', *JAAR* 55/4 (Winter 1987), pp. 687–717.

[5] Frei argues explicitly for the primacy of the literal sense for Christian interpretation and furthermore suggests that this primacy is 'unique to Christianity' (p. 122). He also ties the literality ascribed to sacred narratives to the continuity and autonomous validity of religious traditions, through his discussion of the fate of Jewish scriptures in Christian hands and the threat posed to Christianity by the possibility that 'the literal sense of the New Testament only prefigures a newer reading that displaces it in turn' (p. 123). The centrality for theology of 'defending' the literal sense is implied in Frei's discussions of the aims and warrants of hermeneutical theory and that theory's failure to deliver (pp. 118–19 and 129–30) and his own aims in the essay, to comment on theories 'pertinent to the past as well as present and future *conditions* for the literal reading as a religious enterprise' (p. 119).

[6] *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000252 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reading, to grasp the realistic character of biblical narrative and thereby to enter the full religious life ostensibly available to practitioners of the past. This is possible because of the power Frei ascribes to what might be called 'the textual Jesus'. In *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, Frei argues that when the text – the gospel portrayal of Jesus – is read right, this textual Jesus becomes, for the ideal reader, not only the utterly unsubstitutable presence of God but also, through a new mode of figural reading which accompanies the literal reading, the Lord of history.[7]

Frei's theory of the sacred text in *Identity*, if we can speak this way given his resistance to theorising, centres on the realistic character of the gospel narratives, the passion and resurrection accounts in particular. The literal reading of the realistic narrative rendering of Jesus of Nazareth reveals a person whose identity is given in his public actions and interactions. This identity grows in specificity as the narrative continues: thus, within the narrative Jesus moves from being the one interpreted according to the prophecies of Israel to the one who embodies the salvation of the people in a completely unique, unsubstitutable personhood.[8] The ideal reader, by following the story in its literal development, comes to an understanding of the unsubstitutable identity of Jesus. As this ideal reader continues to follow the story, the very logic of its climax, the resurrection narratives, a logic by which God acts and Jesus of Nazareth appears, push her to the conclusion that the identity of Jesus of Nazareth necessarily includes being raised from the dead and living a specific and somehow embodied yet eternal life as God's presence to us. Giving Anselm's ontological argument a literary twist, Frei argues that we cannot not think of Jesus as the living, specific, active presence of God and still be thinking of the Jesus met in the gospel narratives.[9] The structure of the story, when properly read, insists that the identity of the risen one is continuous with the identity given in the actions and interactions described in the realistic narrative. This textual Jesus, when we are able to read in line with the realistic character of the gospel narrative, is God's presence to humanity, and the realistic narrative of the Bible is sacred

[7] Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence, History: Hans W. Frei's Public Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), pp. 85–7. It should be noted that this formulation of Frei's basic point reproduces his characteristic lack of engagement with the differences and relationship between the four separate portrayals of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament.

[8] Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Basis of Dogmatic Theology* with *Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997), pp. 164–73. Frei originally published the essay as 'The Mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ', in *Crossroads: An Adult Education Magazine of the Presbyterian Church* in 1967 and it was first published in book form in 1975.

[9] *Identity*, p. 182.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000252 Published online by Cambridge University Press

text because of its ability to render, in both senses of the word, this divine presence.

A complex web of lines of influence converge to inform this presentation of how the gospel narratives work as scripture. Most broadly, as Mike Higton has argued, Frei is concerned to address one of the persistent and characteristic problems of Christianity in the modern era, the problem posed for modern historical consciousness by an event in the public world manifesting divine life. There are several important iterations of this problem within the history of modern theology, but the salient one for Frei is the nineteenth-century debate between Friedrich Schleiermacher and D. F. Strauss focused on the person of Jesus and the nature of the New Testament texts.[10] Briefly, Strauss rejected Schleiermacher's attempt to reconcile christocentric faith and historical inquiry into the reliability of the narrative accounts in the gospels primarily because Schleiermacher asserts the existence of an inner, personal history of Jesus as the meeting place of the historical and the divine. Against this, Strauss insists that Jesus' outward, historical manifestation is the only true measure of dogmatic christological assertions. Strauss concludes that the reconciliation Schleiermacher attempted is impossible. Frei agrees with Strauss against Schleiermacher that our assertions about Jesus Christ must be tied to the outward, historical manifestation of 'the man from Nazareth'. Yet he, unlike Strauss (and Ernst Troelstch and Van Harvey after him), and drawing on Karl Barth's later exegetical procedure, continues to assert the truth of traditional incarnational christology.[11]

The coherence of this position depends on the equation of the gospel portrayals with the outward, historical manifestation of Jesus of Nazareth, an equation which is precisely called into question by historical criticism. Particularly in *Identity*, Frei draws on Gilbert Ryle's theory of personhood to help effect this equation and found his post-critical approach to the Bible.[12] The key idea Frei draws from Ryle is that of a unity between intention and action such that intention is understood as implicit action and action as

[10] The 'debate' was in fact all on the side of Strauss, whose *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, was published in 1835, the year of Schleiermacher's death, and reflects Strauss' reaction to Schleiermacher's lectures on the life of Jesus (*Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (Berlin: Franz Duncker, 1835)). Strauss also published a book-length review of the posthumously published volume of Schleiermacher's lectures (Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Das Leben Jesu* (Berlin: K. A. Ruetenik, 1864); D. F. Strauss, *Der Christus des Glaubens und der Jesus der Geschichte: Eine Kritik des Schleiermacherschen Lebens Jesu* (Berlin: Franz Duncker, 1865)).

[11] Higton, *Christ, Providence, History*, pp. 25–35.

[12] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1949] 1984).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000252 Published online by Cambridge University Press

explicit intention. While some sort of difference is maintained, this unity allows for public action to be the primary indication of who a person is, rather than an internal subjectivity which is then expressed or represented in external action.'[13] Crucially, Frei, as it were, 'hermeneuticises' this theory, deriving from it a procedure for approaching the gospel depictions of Jesus, whereby following the narrative events through literal reading yields a robust acquaintance with the personhood of Jesus. The literal reader is instructed 'to observe the story itself – its structure, the shape of its movement and its crucial transitions'. This kind of reading, guided by an aesthetic formalism, amounts to a studied attention to the surface of the text and a rejection of modes of interpretation which search for implicit levels of meaning. The shape of the story itself, as Frei puts it, tells us about the man.[14] Furthermore, what it tells us about this man means, Frei insists, that when we know who he is, his identity, we experience his presence. This is the ultimate effect of a literal reading of the passion-resurrection narrative. In *Identity*, the logic of the story, by which the literal reader and only the literal reader is guided, yields at least faith in, but also perhaps experience of, the risen Christ. Proper reading procedure – in this case, literal reading – is thus placed at the very centre of Christian faith.

Frei's argument in *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* gives evidence of a similar heightened role for the activity of reading, particularly in his initial articulation of the problem to which his study speaks and in his construction of Calvin as the ideal reader. In his statement of the thesis of *Eclipse*, this emphasis is clearer than anywhere else. Frei's statement of the problem to which is he speaking focuses on a textual feature which he insists characterises 'many of the biblical narratives that went into making Christian belief', a 'realistic or history-like (though not necessarily historical) element'.[15] This feature, he argues, has come to be ignored and even denied because 'the precritical analytical or interpretive procedure for isolating it'

[13] Ibid., pp. 136–7. Frei also discusses Ryle in the introduction to *Eclipse*. For a full discussion of how Frei deploys Ryle, the limits of that deployment and its connection to other philosophical influences, see Jason A. Springs, *Toward a Generous Orthodoxy: Prospects for Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), pp. 34–51.

[14] *Identity*, pp. 133–4. Frei does not provide much discussion of what exactly 'literal reading' is as a procedure. In a later discussion of the *sensus literalis*, Frei defines it as a 'descriptive fit between *verbum* and *res*', in which the signifier and the signified fit together at an 'intralinguistic, semiotic' level rather than an epistemological or referential level. This is the kind of reading he ascribes to the magisterial Reformers and advocates (Hans Frei, 'Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative: Some Hermeneutical Considerations', in *Theology and Narrative*, pp. 103–5).

[15] *Eclipse*, p. 10.

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has broken down. Tracing the process of this 'break down' comprises the task of *Eclipse*. The loss of the reading technique is only important because it leads eventually to the denial of the textual feature in question, the realistic or history-like element in biblical narrative.[16] But why is this textual feature of such importance that its eclipse should be traced or, as is the aim elsewhere in Frei's work, a new reading technique capable of unveiling it need be invented?[17] Though never explicitly the focus of Frei's attention, the answer to this question emerges in his discussion of Calvin's exegetical method as the primary example of the pre-critical technique now lost, the effect of which he wants to achieve through a new reading technique.

As presented by Frei, Calvin's exegetical procedure specifies that 'the proper explication of the text is at the same time reference to its subject matter and instruction in its religious application'.[18] The 'subject matter' of the biblical text is understood by Calvin to consist in not only 'its historical reference', but also 'its doctrinal content and its meaningfulness as life description and prescription'.[19] This rich understanding of 'subject matter', it is argued by Frei, is available only through a reading technique capable of isolating the realistic element of biblical narrative: 'history, doctrine, and life description cohere [to form the rich notion of subject matter] *by virtue of* the common or joint *depiction* they receive in the biblical text' (my emphasis).[20] It is not immediately clear how strict a causality this 'by virtue of' expresses. Is this coherence actually constituted by the particular 'realistic element' of the biblical text, but unseen when this element is ignored? Or does the text mirror 'by virtue of' a certain mode of depiction a coherence established elsewhere? What is at stake here is the relative priority of Calvin's reading procedure with respect to what might be called a doctrinal structure. Frei is at pains to explain the coherence as the result of a certain relation

[16] This flexibility about actual procedure is somewhat unusual in those who bemoan the effects of modern criticism. See e.g. the excellent discussion of medieval hermeneutics in David Steinmetz, 'The Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis', reprint of the original 1980 article in Stephan E. Fowl (ed.), *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 26–38.

[17] There is a sense in which Frei's construal of the problem allows him to avoid this question because it appeals to a kind of scientific conscience: there is an element of the object of inquiry which is going unnoticed because we don't have the right method of inquiry. It sort of goes without saying that we have to come up with the right method.

[18] *Eclipse*, p. 23.

[19] Ibid., p. 24. Whether Calvin does indeed understand the doctrinal content as belonging as essentially to the text as its historical reference or moral lesson is questionable, as will be discussed below.

[20] Ibid., p. 23.

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to the text, a certain way of reading. That things are more complicated is suggested by David Steinmetz's discussion of the relationship between Calvin's exegetical work and his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. According to Steinmetz, Calvin understood the *Institutes* as an introduction for beginners which articulated the 'architectonic structure' of the scriptures. The biblical text and the *Institutes* have, Steinmetz suggests by quoting Alexandre Ganoczy, a reciprocal relationship which can be described as a 'hermeneutic circle'.[21] What this relationship looks like in practice is illustrated by Steinmetz's discussion of Calvin's exegesis of Isaiah 6:9–10. Though he is reluctant to talk about predestination in his commentary on Isaiah, he is not at all hesitant to quote Isaiah 6:9–10 in support of predestination in the context of dogmatic theology in the *Institutes*, leading Steinmetz to suggest that the exegetical traditions may even be more conservative than the dogmatic traditions.[22] What interests me here is the sense of a difference between Calvin's attitude towards reading scripture, on the one hand, and speaking of the reality of God's governance in doctrinal terms, on the other. It is not that the doctrine of predestination is *not* biblical for Calvin, but that it is not exactly the result of reading the Bible word-by-word, line-by-line. Rather, the doctrine of predestination is as much if not more a hermeneutical key guiding Calvin's reading. Calvin's reading procedure, while certainly closely related to any coherence he finds in the Bible among history, doctrine and life description and prescription, is not the *source* of that coherence. When Calvin sees the 'cumulative pattern constituting biblical narrative' as the depiction of God's dealing with the world (accepting for the sake of argument that a category like 'biblical narrative', with all its connotations of the twentieth-century literary study of the Bible by Robert Alter, James Kugel and Frank Kermode, to name a few – not to mention the rise of the novel as a genre – would be possible for Calvin), his access to this specific God-directed world would not have to be and furthermore cannot really be shown to be the result of *how* he reads. Yet this is precisely the way Frei casts things. The promise Frei seems to be holding out is that the enactment of a version of Calvin's reading will bring with it a rich, fully formed religious life.

A set of assumptions about the activity of reading emerge when we examine Frei's argument about the nature of the New Testament depiction of Jesus in *Identity of Jesus Christ* and his historical analysis of the problem posed by the Bible in modernity in *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. The activity of reading is taken to be something both malleable and powerful. Reading technique is shown to be easily isolatable from its context, and easy to

[21] David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), p. 64.
[22] Ibid., p. 106.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000252 Published online by Cambridge University Press

re-enact or emulate. Yet it also holds rich soteriological promise, delivering Jesus' presence and a full religious life. Furthermore, how we read, unlike, for example, what we believe or feel, appears to be our own choice, shaped perhaps but not ever fully determined by historical context. Thus, in speaking about the contemporary attempt 'to preserve Luther's fine, tense balance between Scripture as witness and as literal sense', Frei can counsel that one side of this balance should be given up: 'In modernity, or as they like to say in Chicago, "postmodernity," the temporary condition of the balance is to stress the sufficiency of the literal sense, without, of course, the fundamentalist correspondence between the literal sense and its ostensive reference.'[23] The assumption here seems to be that the person who desires to preserve Luther's 'balance' or Calvin's 'naturalness' can indeed get what she wants, if she just follows Frei's directions on how to read. Frei's historical consciousness insists on a distance between the reading situation of Luther and Calvin and that of readers today, so that he feels the need to specify the 'temporary condition' for achieving a 'fine, tense balance between witness and literal sense' in 'modernity', and bemoans the loss of 'naturalness' in the relationship between literal sense and historical reference. But this historical consciousness is accompanied by, is, in fact, in the service of, a programme of reading *technique* which promises to overcome historical distance. In his later work, Frei shifted from making claims about the kind of reading that realistic narrative demands by its very nature to making claims about the kind of reading practices developed contingently within the church.[24] In either case, though, the reader–text relationship remains the centre of his account of the relationship between God and the world generally and the role of scripture in that relationship.

The Role of Reading in Tracy's Work

The question of systematic theology as public discourse – as able to speak across publics – is what animates David Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination*. The initial question for Tracy is how systematic theology, which interprets a tradition mediated by the church, speaks to the extra-ecclesial world of society and academy. Furthermore, the problematic status of systematic theology is mirrored by the state of the theologian as belonging to various

[23] Hans Frei, 'Conflicts in Interpretation: Resolution, Armistice, or Co-existence?', in *Theology and Narrative*, p. 164. The essay is a transcript of a lecture given in 1986 at Princeton.

[24] The watershed piece signalling this change in direction is 'The "Literal Reading" of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?', the essay with which my discussion began.

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publics with various and conflicting canons of plausibility, as needing to speak not only across publics external to the self but also from and to several internalised publics.[25] Through this isomorphism between the situation of theology as social discourse and the internal state of the theologian as socially formed human being, the methodological question of how to do systematic theology is also the existential question of how to be in the right relationship to the Christian tradition.[26] Tracy contrasts the pluralist present with past ages when 'the individual theologian unquestionably belonged to the tradition'.[27] The problem Tracy's presentation of systematic theology ultimately addresses is a lack of felt belonging – an experience of alienation – which characterises the contemporary relationship to the inherited tradition.[28]

Tracy's proposal for a truly public systematic theology, and his solution to the problem of belonging as articulated in relation to the task of systematic theology, centres on a development of the paradigm of conversation with the religious classic. He draws on a wide array of sources in his development and presentation of the nature, production and reception of the religious classic, and tracing all the various lines of influence is beyond the scope of the present discussion. Rather, my analysis will focus on two of his main sources, the hermeneutical theories of Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. My contention is that an explicitly theological exigency, under which the theory of the religious classic is formed, leads Tracy to claim for the process of interpretation effects which exceed those ascribed to interpretation by both Gadamer and Ricoeur and which remain under-theorised by Tracy himself.

Tracy turns to the category of the classic in the context of a discussion of the problem posed by the idea of theology as a normative discipline. He admits that there are theologies in which authority is 'a matter of obedience

[25] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 4–5 (henceforth, *AI*).

[26] Tracy refers to this as a dilemma at once intellectual and existential. The isomorphism is the basis of the function of the theologian as a kind of exemplar of the believer: to live with the ambiguity of multiple loyalties and conflicting canons of plausibility is incumbent upon every Christian, to try to think honestly, critically and clearly in relation to it is incumbent upon every theologian. *AI*, p. 51.

[27] *AI*, p. 105.

[28] Tracy is aware, following Andrew Greeley and others, that some caution needs to be exercised in the generalisation to the average Christian practitioner of problems encountered by religious intellectuals. But he is not willing to relegate the situation he is describing to the ivory tower. The 'porousness' of ostensibly distinct traditions and publics in the situation as described in *The Analogical Imagination* suggests still that the kind of estrangement he is talking about, though certainly raised to a level of heightened consciousness in the theologian, is felt in some form by all contemporary religious practitioners.

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to an external norm rather than acceptance based on risk and a personal recognition of the living tradition' and refers to these as heteronomous.[29] His response to the problem is to call for a non-authoritarian notion of authority and norm. The development of the category of the classic is a specific strategy in the service of this goal. The seeds of Tracy's theory of the classic can be found in Gadamer's discussion of the example of the classical. Gadamer too introduces the example of the classical in the context of discussing the Enlightenment opposition of authority to reason and freedom and the Romantic backlash which ended up reasserting that opposition by valorising tradition over reason.[30] Also influential on Tracy's notion of the classic is Ricoeur's account of the productive character of distanciation.[31] Gadamer's discussion of the classical, with his model of interpretation as conversation as its background, and Ricoeur's analysis of the nature and function of productive distanciation in the written text each offers a view into something like the engine powering the aliveness of tradition, the possibility of a live connection to the intellectual life of the past. Gadamer's emphasis is on the process of historical transmission as a process in which truth emerges and as a process to which text and reader fundamentally belong. Ricoeur's is on the transformation of linguistic communication in the transition from speech to writing and the new actualisations of meaning which it allows. Where Gadamer stresses participation which abolishes distance as the enabling condition of belonging, Ricoeur stresses that very distance as the enabling condition of new, living relationships to the written text. Tracy's discussion of the production of the classic can be read as offering yet another account, combining elements of Gadamer's and Ricoeur's, an account which ends up more centred on the act of reading than either of theirs.

The primary way Tracy's alternative diverges from Gadamer's and Ricoeur's accounts of the possibility of a living tradition is through his attention to the process of the classic's production. He begins with a portrait of the producer of the classic as someone who has undertaken a journey which yields an experience of 'the fundamental questions that impel us all' and who has a 'rare response in thought and feeling' to those questions. The producer then turns this personal 'rare response' into public meaning through what Tracy describes, borrowing and yet diverging from Ricoeur,

[29] *AI*, pp. 99–100.

[30] Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. edn, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989 [1975]), pp. 277–82.

[31] See Paul Ricoeur, 'The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation', *Philosophy Today* 17/2 (1973) and *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas University Christian Press, 1976).

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as a process of 'distanciation of the self from itself'.[32] Whereas Ricoeur discusses distanciation as an effect of the written text, Tracy's 'distanciation' is a productive strategy taken up by the 'artist, hero, thinker, saint' behind the text. This conceptual shift is in the service of setting up symmetrical relationship between both the experiences and technical procedures of the producer and the interpreter of the classic. The producer uses the compositional tools of genre, style, structure and voice to produce public meaning out of private experience. The interpreter in turn actualises, through the process of interpretation, the experience now fixed in the classic text. It is this symmetry which enables a living connection between the past and the present and stands at the centre of Tracy's alternate account of the aliveness of tradition. The symmetry emphasises processes internal to subjects, either the producing or the interpreting subject, and one effect of this symmetry is to increase the importance of the reading subject in the account of how tradition 'lives': 'Every classic lives as a classic only if it finds readers willing to be provoked by its claim to attention'.[33]

The symmetrical relationship between producer and reader of the classic becomes problematic, I suggest, when the classic in question is a religious classic. The religious classic as cultural classic assures entry of the Christian religious tradition and systematic theology, the discipline which interprets it, into the public realm alongside art, philosophy and literature. This is the core of Tracy's argument for the public-as-hermeneutical character of systematic theology. Yet the Christian textual tradition and systematic theology are required to be different from, and somehow more than, the classics of culture and their interpretative disciplines. There is in the case of systematic theology the question of the '*theological admissibility* of the claims to public truth as disclosure',[34] a question which simply would not arise with respect to the claims to truth as disclosure of art, philosophy or literature.[35] The religious classic is therefore to be differentiated from the cultural classic and Tracy does this through a description of the type of experience which stands at its origin. While the producer of the cultural classic experiences an essential aspect of lived existence, the producer of the religious classic experiences and then fixes through compositional strategies 'an event of the disclosure-concealment of the whole by the power of the whole'.[36]

[32] *AI*, p. 126.
[33] *AI*, p. 102.
[34] *AI*, p. 68.
[35] Tracy is on new ground here in terms of his foundations in philosophical hermeneutics – the distinction is not made by either Gadamer or Ricoeur.
[36] *AI*, p. 163.

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The concept of the whole should be understood to be functioning in two ways here so as to hold together the simultaneous identity and difference between the cultural and the religious classic within Tracy's argument. First, the whole as disclosed maintains continuity with the disclosure available in cultural classics, which might be understood as 'partial' but of the same sort as that of the religious classic. Thus, while cultural classics may disclose aspects of existential reality, religious classics disclose that reality in its totality. Second, the whole as disclosing *agent* ('by the power of the whole') marks a total separation between the cultural and the religious classic. Tracy relies on Clifford Geertz to characterise this qualitative difference, arguing that the religious classic has 'an aura of factuality, and thereby an authority that is distinctive to *religious* classics' because it is experienced as from the power of the whole.[37] This final aspect of the experience disclosed by the religious classic is of particular interest in the present inquiry because Tracy identifies it with what Christians and Jews name 'revelation'. When religious people talk of an *experience* of revelation, Tracy argues, 'they mean that something has happened to them that they cannot count as their own achievement'. It is an experience of the whole *as* the self-manifestation of an undeniable power and they find themselves 'compelled to honor that experience as an eruption of a power become self-manifestation from and by the whole in which, by which, and to which they live'.[38]

The central concern of my analysis is the relationship between this experience of revelation, of the self-manifesting power of the whole, on the part of the producer of the religious classic and the experience of the interpreter of the religious classic. For all the difference in scope and character that distinguishes it from the cultural classic, the religious classic, no less than the cultural classic, is the product of a fixation of experience in form through strategies of distanciation which are in a symmetrical relationship to strategies of interpretation, which in turn actualise that fixed experience. The problem with this symmetry arises when it begins to seem that reading the religious classic properly, through Tracy's Gadamerian model of interpretation as conversation, yields an experience of 'that event of the self-manifestation of the whole by the power of the whole that Jews and Christians name "revelation"'. If this is the case, is the event of revelation, at least in some secondary, derivative form of re-experience, explained and perhaps even guaranteed by the account of the isomorphism between the processes of production and interpretation which make the classic text work? The intervention of the supernatural in the sphere of

[37] *AI*, p. 163.
[38] *AI*, p. 173.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000252 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the natural implied in the concept of revelation has been seen as deeply problematic since the Enlightenment. Though the rationalistic assumptions behind this categorisation are to be rejected, the categories help articulate my concern: the question with respect to Tracy's argument in *Analogical Imagination* is, to what extent does it end up positing wholly 'natural' processes of reading as yielding 'supernatural' effects associated with traditional notions of revelation, thereby creating a sort of natural-supernatural concept of divine accessibility. Some sort of blurring of the lines between the experience of the producer of the religious classic and that of the interpreter, yielding something like this natural-supernatural concept of divine accessibility, appears to be the case when Tracy describes in passing the interaction between interpreter and text: 'The dialectic of freedom and receptivity characteristic of all authentic conversation demands the highest use of critical freedom by the empowered, enabled, elicited self in the conversation *with the God disclosed in the event expressed in these texts.*'[39]

Since the rationalist theologies of the seventeenth and eighteenth century at least, theologians have been concerned with the question of the relationship of the God depicted in the biblical text to what is often referred to as God in Godself, a question which undergirds further questioning of the authority and revelatory character of the Bible.[40] The furthest advance of this line of questioning would insist that the Bible is able to give access only to human ideas about the divine – that it is nothing other than a record of the history of religion.[41] While post-critical theology such as that represented by Frei and Tracy in no way denies that the Bible has this character, it tries, in the different modes of liberal and neo-orthodox theologies to give an account of the Bible and the biblical God which takes the 'gap' between text and reality into consideration. Indeed, Tracy's use of process thought in *Blessed Rage for*

[39] *AI*, p. 255, italics added.

[40] The roots of nineteenth-century biblical criticism, with its thorough-going critique of the divinity of the biblical text, in these rationalist theologies is clearly laid out in Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, trans. John Bowdon (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). Reventlow also traces various earlier developments in late medieval spiritualism and the 'left wing' of the Reformation which anticipate in certain ways rationalist critiques. The 'space' between the text and God can be argued to be acknowledged by the earliest allegorists such as Origen. My specific interest is in the understanding of this gap as one that calls the authoritative and revelatory character of the Bible into question rather than simply legitimating supplemental access to God.

[41] I state this position more as a logical outcome than as the actual stance taken up by any major figure. In general, the practitioners of the higher criticism continue to be informed by an awareness of the Bible as the book of the church.

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Order is an excellent example of such an account.[42] I have drawn attention to the above quoted description, though it is made in passing and does not have the status of an explicit claim within Tracy's argument, because it affords a glimpse of what I consider to be an underlying and tacit tendency in Tracy's argument in *Analogical Imagination*, in distinction to *Blessed Rage for Order*: the ascription of revelatory power to the well-read text *insofar as and because it is read properly*. The interpreter of the religious classic is described in the passage as a being 'in conversation with God'. Clearly, Tracy does not have in mind an actual theophany – the god in question is a textually mediated one, explicitly. Nevertheless, the implication is that the self-manifesting whole experienced in an event then fixed as generically produced text is in some sense present and accessible to the interpreter through the actualising power of conversational reading.

The tendency dramatised in the image of the interpreter in conversation with God finds less dramatic expression in Tracy's account of the functioning of the religious classic as textual form. Though he is clear that religious experience cannot find *fully* adequate formal expression, it is nevertheless a guiding principle of his development of the category of the religious classic that the production of the *relatively* adequate form of the religious classic is able to 'evoke' or 'elicit' for others 'the giftedness of the event of manifestation'.[43] To 'enter the conversation of the religious classics through real interpretation' – that is, to read the religious classic well – is 'to enter a disclosure of a world of meaning and truth'. This would be so with any classic, according to the analysis of the interpretative situation by Ricoeur and Tracy. But in the case of the religious classic, the disclosed world 'releases the self to the uncontrollable incomprehensibility of an experience of radical mystery'.[44] The sense of mystery 'reexperienced as from the whole' takes the reader beyond all alternative realised experiences of classic works of art.[45] The proper reading of any classic involves 'a realized experience of response and recognition', but with the religious classic, the 'experience of radical mystery' accessed by right reading 'liberates' the respondent to believe 'through suspension of the usual disbeliefs' that 'here the power of the whole discloses itself'.[46] Tracy acknowledges in notes that the disclosive power of the religious text he describes is recognisably like the self-manifestation of

[42] David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).
[43] *AI*, p. 175.
[44] *AI*, p. 177.
[45] *AI*, p. 176.
[46] *AI*, pp. 163–4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000252 Published online by Cambridge University Press

God in theology from Hegel to Rahner.[47] Analogously, Tracy defines faith in terms of the situation of interpretation, as the moment of encounter-response, when the respondent, through 'suspension of usual disbeliefs', has a response of trust in the reality of the whole disclosed in the religious classic.[48] It is worth noting the conflation here of the notion of suspended disbelief with the belief referred to by the theological notion of faith. The suspension of disbelief, a phrase coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, originally refers to the attitude necessary for the reader of literature which contains supernatural elements and extends to cover the attitude necessary in the face of artistic artifice, like that required by the audience of a play. In both cases, the 'belief' which results from the suspension of disbelief is a temporary measure to facilitate appreciation of the artistic production. This readerly virtue is asked to lead to much more than that in the case of the religious classic.

When we look at Tracy's account of the present experience of the classic Christian event, the role of reading once again comes to the fore: 'The reality of that event is experienced in the present Christian community when these texts and what they disclose become proclamation and sacrament.'[49] The process by which the text becomes proclamation and sacrament is the hermeneutical process of conversational reading. The criteria for the interpretation of the New Testament follow the criteria for the classic and the religious classic. Thus the interpreter has to be open to the possibility of a realised experience of a disclosure of existential truth, must allow her pre-understanding to 'operate in relationship to that strictly existential subject matter' and must engage in reading modelled on authentic conversation, by disallowing any aesthetic distancing from the text's 'claim to attention as nonviolent appeal' and by allowing the subject matter to take over in the back and forth movement.[50] As discussed above, in the case of the religious classic, the claim concerns a manifestation of the whole by the power of the whole. The agentive character of this formulation becomes explicit with respect to the Christian classic, as well as the classic texts of Judaism and Islam: 'the whole is like a who, involved in a self-manifestation in the event or events to which these texts bear witness'.[51] Conversation with this 'who' is the most dramatic effect Tracy ascribes to right reading.

[47] *AI*, p. 185, n. 34.
[48] *AI*, p. 164.
[49] *AI*, pp. 248–9.
[50] *AI*, p. 255.
[51] Ibid.

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In a more sober passage, Tracy describes faith as the effect of the conversational reading procedure shared by readers of all classics: 'If [the appropriate] existential religious question is brought to a conversation with these texts, if the event-character of the happening of God's self-manifestation in Jesus Christ grounding the witness explicated in these texts is allowed to take hold as the subject matter of these texts, then the sense become a shock of recognition, which for the Christian is called radical "faith", may occur.'[52] Though the model of conversation is not dramatised here as in the first passage treated, it nevertheless provides the conceptual structure for this account of faith. Faith becomes possible when the interpreter follows the procedure for conversational reading, by first bringing the right pre-understanding in the form of the appropriate existential question to the text and, most important, by allowing specifically the 'event-character' of the claim about God's self-manifestation to become the shared subject matter of the interpretative conversation. It is not entirely clear what Tracy means by this description of the subject matter, but it is clear that the effect is to make the self-manifestation of God in Jesus Christ present and real for the interpreter. Insofar as Tracy is offering an account of faith, it is faith born of reading well.

Conclusion

Amidst the well-rehearsed differences in their understanding of the task and method of theology, certain intriguing similarities link Hans Frei and David Tracy. The most general similarity is their perception of a certain loss or estrangement characterising contemporary religiosity. Though the scope and details of their description of the problem differ, there is a similarity in the vision of Christian life which stands in contrast to the contemporary situation. For Tracy, the situation of the contemporary theologian and practitioner, formed in and by a situation of plurality, is contrasted to a past when one could feel oneself unquestionably to belong to the tradition one inherits. There is a sense of a loss of an experience of the power and richness of tradition. According to Frei, we contemporary practitioners stand in need of recovering the coherence of doctrine and lived Christian life which is evident particularly in the magisterial Reformers, Luther and Calvin. For both, their visions of Christian life can be articulated through the notion of orthodoxy, understood in its full sense as referring to a coherent, vibrant and all-encompassing immersion in Christian doctrine and practice. For both too, as I have sought to highlight, the practice of reading has a central role in their

[52] *AI*, p. 258.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000252 Published online by Cambridge University Press

proposals for addressing the lack in contemporary Christianity. Perceiving orthodoxy to be difficult or impossible, they offer ortholexis.

The turn to reading is most obvious in Frei, who explicitly links the modern difficulty in attaining a sense of the coherence of Christian history, doctrine and lived life to a misconstrual of the nature of the biblical text which leads to a misguided reading practice, which can only be corrected by the literal reading he advocates. Indeed, through George Lindbeck's notion of 'faithfulness as intratextuality', the turn to reading inaugurated by Frei is a central characteristic of postliberal theology.[53] Yet Tracy also places reading as conversation at the centre of his revisionist account of the possibility of a contemporary experience of the (non-authoritarian) authority of the Bible and the power of the Christian tradition more generally. In these 'theologies of ortholexis', a constellation of modern anxieties concerning the limits and possibilities of our knowledge and experience of the divine are addressed by positing the reader–text relationship forged through proper reading practice as the place of and way to authentic revelation.

[53] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 114–20.

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