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David Tracy on God

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

David Gibson, author of *The Coming Catholic Church* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), has written an excellent piece on the American Catholic theologian David Tracy in the Jan. 29 issue of *Commonweal*. It is titled "God Obsessed: David Tracy's Theological Quest." God Obsessed: David Tracy's Theological Quest

Although I have not seen him in several years, I have always regarded David Tracy as a friend, having first met him many years ago when I was doing doctoral studies in Rome during the Second Vatican Council and he was a seminarian (for the diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut) at the North American College.

Given its subject, Gibson's *Commonweal* article is remarkably clear and can serve as a useful introduction to David Tracy for those who are understandably uncertain or even unaware of who he is. I say "understandably" because Tracy hasn't published a major book in some 20 years, and his theological work has, for the most part, not found its way onto the Vatican's radar screen.

Why not? Because as one adviser to the U.S. Catholic bishops put it back in the 1980s, like many others the Vatican cannot fathom what Tracy is saying. His writings have never touched upon such toxic subjects as church authority or sexual morality, and so have not been regarded as controversial or dangerous to the faith.

At the time, the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Doctrine was investigating another U.S. Catholic theologian, who was warned by at least a couple of bishop-members of the committee that his problem was that, unlike Tracy, he wrote too clearly. People could actually understand what he was driving at.

According to David Gibson's article, this frequently mentioned observation about Tracy's dense writing

style elicits a 'wounded' reaction from him. 'I don't think I'm that obscure,' he insists.

But the main point of the *Commonweal* article is to focus on the central issue not only for Tracy's theology but for *all* of theology, namely, the problem of God and of the possibility of belief in God.

Although now retired from his long-time teaching position at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, Tracy is working on his so-called 'Big Book,' a projected multi-volume treatise on God, which Gibson refers to as 'the most celebrated case of delayed publication in theology today.'

Tracy has consistently followed a 'method of critical correlation.' It is a slight modification of the great Protestant theologian Paul Tillich's (d. 1965) 'method of correlation.' Tracy wishes to maintain a dialectical balance between the demands of the Christian tradition and the questions posed by what he calls the postmodern world.

Some of Tracy's critics have erroneously charged that he yields ground on the demands of the Christian tradition in favor of the concerns expressed by the world of science.

But Tracy insists that his yet-unpublished book about the problem of God 'has taken him more deeply into the Christian tradition and more extensively into other religious traditions.'

For him, the 'overwhelming issue' facing us today is 'massive global suffering.' Consequently, he has come to focus less on the 'analogical imagination' (the title of his 1981 book) than on the inaccessibility of God.

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David Gibson describes Tracy as 'riveted by the silence of God.' The problem his fellow theologians have created, Tracy believes, is that too many of them have 'an obsession with content,' with the result that the content 'has drowned out the silence.' Making doctrine central to theology has been 'disastrous,' he declares.

He is convinced that 'theologians must reestablish the connection between spirituality and theology that was severed by medieval Scholasticism.'

Before Vatican II, Tracy points out, 'Spirituality became something you do after you do your theology.' I can testify from personal experience that this was, in fact, the operative assumption of much pre-conciliar seminary theology.

Theology, he continues, 'is not about supplying answers that cannot be questioned,' but rather is judged by 'the questions it asks.' In the final analysis, theology is a work of mysticism rather than of logic.

What, then, is the 'take-away' from David Gibson's article?

That Catholic theology must always pay adequate attention to *both* the Christian tradition *and* the questions posed by the so-called postmodern world.

That Catholic theology must be attentive to massive global suffering, even though it will only deepen our sense of the inaccessibility of God.

That Catholic theology, as Tracy himself insists, must be 'riveted' by the silence of God, and not speak,

write, or act as if we have a direct, static-free pipeline to God and to the divine will.

And that Catholic theology must always ground itself in an authentic spirituality, not its many counterfeits, which are simply expressions of an arid, lifeless devotionism.

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