THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF GOD

PAPER PRÉCIS

KEYNOTE ADDRESSES

David Tracy
God, the Infinite, the Incomprehensible and Hidden
The lecture will explore the usually ignored and often rejected idea of the Infinite as the needed intellectual entry to the reality of God as Incomprehensible, Hidden and as Infinite Love (i.e., Trinity). The lecture will attempt to clarify the nature of the intense debate on the Infinite in early and medieval, early modern and contemporary philosophy and theology.

John McCarthy
The Challenge of Thinking an Impossible God
David Tracy’s thought has been a roadmap of the transitions and tensions in the turn from more confident, modern theological thought, to more chastened, even mystical thought of the late or post-modern era. The center of David Tracy’s work has always been the little word, “god.” In this paper I want to propose a path for theological thinking that attends to the classical theological concern for “naming God,” but does so, like David Tracy’s work, aware of the difficulties of ontology, and the possibilities of certain opportunities within post-modern thought.

Anthony Godzieba
The Long Strangeness: God Lost, God Found, God Loved
Modernity’s default narrative of the “extrinsic” God is basically “Protestant” (the “rejection of mediation [and of] the mediaeval understanding of the sacred” [C. Taylor]), a one-sided tale of a journey from kataphasis to apophasis eventuating in sheer absence. Postmodern discussions of God are direct reactions to this tale, leaving us with a disembodied extrinsicism no better than its catalyst. I offer an alternative, just as viable but historically more reticent: a “Catholic” incarnational narrative played out more in praxis than in theory, rooted in a tradition extending from Renaissance humanism to Pope Francis washing the feet of adolescent Muslim prisoners on Holy Thursday. This narrative connects two seemingly separate contemporary considerations of God: the apophatic postmodern philosophical emphasis on “impossibility”, and the kataphatic lived experience of everyday theophanies with their mystical and political implications.
CONCURRENT PAPERS

Matthew ANDERSON, Concordia University
**Horror and the Hidden: Luther, Paul, and Tracy on the Hiddleness of God**
As we approach 2017 and the 500th anniversary of the Wittenberg Reformation, monk and theologian Martin Luther remains an evocative dialogue partner for David Tracy. This is especially true of Tracy’s reflections on the hiddleness of God. Like Tracy, Luther’s theology of the cross, and his writings on the *deus absconditus*, show how any modernist, totalizing narrative of history, especially those put forward by Christians, ignores at their peril the mysterious, chaotic, and horrifying stories that ‘cannot be told’ about a God who refuses to be contained, even in the Incarnation.

Adam BEYT, Fordham University
**The Impossibly “Queer” God: Tracy, Althaus-Reid, and Bataille**
This paper argues that Althaus-Reid reads Bataille’s *Madama Edwarda* as if it were, in Tracy’s terms, a “religious classic.” In situating an experience of the divine within a lewd sexual encounter, she presents a “queer” God to resonate with pluralistic understandings of gender and sexuality. This paper suggests that in reading such an unusual text as if it were a religious classic, Althaus-Reid sets a precedent for reading queer texts in a religious light as an act of resistance and of hope.

Carlton CHASE, Fordham University
**Assessing the Return of the Barbarian to the Public Sphere and Its Radical Claim on Dialogue and Solidarity Before the Living God**
Against the confluence of crises (migrant/refugee/terrorist), the ‘figural’ barbarian has returned to the public sphere. This paper considers the forceful identity of the barbarian against David Tracy’s claim for the possibility of the true present—“the present of all historical subjects in all the centers in conversation and solidarity before the living God.” The paper argues that the barbarian, exposed in such unavoidable proximity, calls prophetically into question notions of victor, nonperson, participation, judgment, dialogue, trust in the radically Other, and of resistance to self in all its certainty and triumph.

Jean-Pierre FORTIN, Université de Sherbrooke
**Finding God in the Dark: Teresa of Calcutta and Postmodern Catholic Theology**
This presentation will demonstrate that what David Tracy envisioned as postmodern Catholic theology is embodied in Teresa of Calcutta’s experience of spiritual desolation and lifelong service to the poor. With the help of Simone Weil’s analysis of affliction, the experience of spiritual destitution and forsakenness will be shown to have the power to lead to a personal encounter with and sharing in Jesus Christ’s redeeming suffering and work. Mother Teresa was thus led, in prayer and discipleship, to meet God in darkness and as mystery, so as to reveal and make God physically present in the life of those she assisted, in and as the poorest of the poor.
Sheng-Ping GUO, Emmanuel College, Toronto  
**Hermeneutical and Linguistic Turn: The David Tracy Model and Reconstruction of the Sino-Christian Theology**  
This paper discusses the implication of the David Tracy model to Sino-Christian theology (*Hanyu jidu shenxue*). I argue that Tracy’s model of speaking “public theology” to three publics with hermeneutical and linguistic methodologies can be a critical source to reconstruct the Sino-Christian theology in a postcolonial, post-feudal, and contemporary “socialistic” context in China. I will first demonstrate the Tracy model from two aspects. Then I will review the origin of Sino-Christian theology and its problems in dismissal of church, interpretation of “tradition,” and proposal of a neutral Han language. Finally, I will explain how the Tracy model provides possible resolution for these main issues.

Cole HARTIN, Wycliffe College, Toronto  
**Blaise Pascal’s Christological Response to the Challenge of Modernity**  
Retrieving the theological work of Blaise Pascal, I intend to challenge inherited modern notions of rationality that undergird the increasing secularization of Western culture. Using as a structure for this paper Stephen Toulmin’s argument in *Cosmopolos* that “the account of ‘rationality’ underlying the philosophical program of Modernity thus rested on three pillars – certainty, systematicity, and the clean slate...” (178), I insist that Pascal challenges each of these pillars, especially in relation to knowledge about God. Instead of positing alternative grounds for universal rationality, Pascal points to the centrality of an encounter with Jesus Christ for knowledge of God.

Ryan HEMMER, Marquette University  
**“Reorienting Inquiry: Abstractive Viewpoints and the Question of God in Conversation with David Tracy’s Early Work”**  
The relationship between theological and philosophical ways of speaking of God has been a major question in David Tracy’s work since his first book, *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan* (1970). This paper brings together features of Tracy’s critique of Lonergan’s philosophy of God, and looks to the ways Lonergan modified his analysis to take seriously those critiques. Based on Lonergan’s implicit response to Tracy, this essay gestures toward how theological and philosophical ways of asking the question of God are reoriented by the turn to historical consciousness, and so to a pluralist notion of culture and tradition.

Lisa Radakovich HOLSBERG, Fordham University  
**The “Impossible” Simone Weil: Method, Prayer, and Desire for God**  
Regarding the twentieth-century French philosopher Simone Weil, David Tracy concluded: “In her strange and unnerving thought...[and] life, Weil herself was impossible.” This paper considers the challenges of Weil’s philosophical method of contradiction as well as her religious thought on God, with a view to the “impossible” aspects of her philosophy and her life. Included is an examination of Weil’s distinctive doctrines of creation, necessity, the soul, decreation, and prayer.
Murray JOHNSTON, Champlain College, Sherbrooke

Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Prophetic-Mystical Option: Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Contribution

The paper I am proposing for the conference on “The Impossibility of God...” offers a new interpretation of the twentieth century Jewish philosopher and theologian Joseph B. Soloveitchik's account of the theological significance of inter-religious dialogue. It situates Soloveitchik's contribution in relation to David Tracy's discussion of inter-religious dialogue and the prophetic-mystical option. And it suggests that Soloveitchik's approach to the theme of divine hiddenness can be usefully brought into conversation with Tracy's ongoing reflections on "naming" God as Hidden and as Incomprehensible during our postmodern period.

Travis KROEKER (McMaster University)

Saint Paul at Sea: a Mystical Political Reading of Moby Dick via Stanislaus Breton

It is commonplace to note that, like Plato’s Republic and Hobbes’s Leviathan, Melville’s Moby Dick is a critical vision of the body politic—a political philosophical allegory on so many levels. Less often have its political theological references been explored, though of course the apostle Paul also famously developed the analogy of the body for the church—not least, as de Lubac has shown, as a “corpus mysticum.” The Catholic philosopher Breton emphasizes that Paul “had to go to sea,” in response to the call to the “high seas” that resounds in the “mystery of Christ,” beyond the confines of a tradition. My paper reads Moby Dick as political allegory with reference to Breton’s mystical-apocalyptic Paul.

Stephen OKEY, Saint Leo University

The Necessity and Inadequacy of Fundamental Theology for Naming God

Although many await the conclusion of his “God Book” and its efforts at “naming God,” David Tracy has actually been offering various names for God since the beginning of his career. By looking at the names of God offered in his early constructive works, this paper will argue that the shift that begins in the early 1990’s stems from his realization that fundamental theology is limited in its capacity to offer hope. Only by a systematic turn, entering deeply into the particularities of the Christian tradition, can an authentic name for God be found.

Barnabas PALFREY, Sarum College, UK

‘Two sides of the same fragment: Christian theology and spirituality in relation’

My paper builds on Tracy’s theology and the recent rise of the word ‘spirituality’ to model Christian ‘theology’ and ‘spirituality’ as distinct yet mutually implicated concerns. I propose conceiving these as “two sides of a coin” (or fragment) possessing real thickness. Thus ‘spirituality’ thus grants the material “thickness” of theology, and vice-versa. I then diagnose the language of ‘event’ for God (God as “personal energy event”) and for reason (fragment as “frag-event”) as correlates in Tracy’s thought to a precipitate collapse of theology and spirituality into each other, repeating a historic ambiguity found in Luther and the hermeneutical-as-theological tradition.

Lisa Radakovich HOLSBERG, Fordham University

The “Impossible” Simone Weil: Method, Prayer, and Desire for God

Regarding the twentieth-century French philosopher Simone Weil, David Tracy concluded: “In her strange and unnerving thought...[and] life, Weil herself was impossible.” This paper considers the challenges of Weil’s philosophical method of contradiction as well as her religious thought on God, with a view to the “impossible” aspects of her philosophy and her life. Included is an examination of Weil’s distinctive doctrines of creation, necessity, the soul, decreation, and prayer.
Gordon RIXON, Regis College, Toronto

Religion, Reconciliation and Justice after a Secular Age

In David Tracy’s preface to Jean Luc Marion’s God Without Being, he identifies two distinct, basic strategies that guide theological responses to modernity; correlating the tradition with contemporary concerns or using rigorously developed concepts to elucidate revelation as truly other. This paper elucidates an alternative strategy by returning to the thought of the Canadian Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan— one of the early sources of Tracy’s intellectual development. By exploring Lonergan’s notion of sublation in its relation and contradistinction with Hegel’s concept of Aufhebung, the paper responds to the post-modern, post secular challenge to accompany the other on the journey toward recognition, reconciliation and justice.

Daniel ROBER, Fordham University

David Tracy’s Three Publics Amidst Neo-Liberalism and the “Nones”: How is Public Theology Possible in Today’s Secular Context?

David Tracy’s work on the “three publics” of theology is rightly one of the most famous sections of The Analogical Imagination. This paper analyzes its continued relevance in the light of contemporary secularizing trends by pointing out challenges from each of the “publics” to the kind of public theology that Tracy envisioned. It particularly highlights the narrowing of the available societal public for theology both more broadly and among students; the increasing sectarianism of some within churches, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, in response to secularization; and the continued marginalization of theological truth claims in the academy. It ultimately argues that Tracy’s analyses provide a strong foundation for continuing to address these issues, and proposes ways forward in engaging with and challenging the three publics.

Ligita RYLISTKYTE, Boston College

Analogy vs. Metaphor: What is Lost? What is Gained?

The contemporary split between theology and spirituality and the subordination of spirituality to theology is reflected in a similar dynamic observed in the relationship between analogical and metaphorical language. However, a reverse dynamic plays out in the contemporary world: spirituality is valued over and independently of religion and, by extension, of theology. I propose to bring these divergent currents into conversation through a reconsideration of metaphorical language and its relation to analogy. Specifically, by referring to the Christian mystical tradition, I argue that metaphor can be deployed as a creative modification of the standard triplex via of analogical predication.

Paul SCHUTZ, Fordham University

Finding a Home in a ‘H( )meless’ World: David Tracy’s “Uncanny” G( )d of Love and Derrida’s “Différance”

In his famous essay, “Différance,” Jacques Derrida writes that even the most apophatic traditions of God-talk ultimately devolve into metaphysics of substance and ontotheology, ideas that he finds untenable in light of the “play” of différance. In response to Derrida’s diagnosis of the present, this paper will argue that by emphasizing the need for negation in any human statement about God, David Tracy’s analogical imagination and theology of God offer compelling resources for speaking rightly of God in the midst of the dynamic play of assertion and negation that constitutes différance and offer inroads to speaking rightly of the God who is Love today.
Andreas TELSER, Catholic University of Linz
Doing Theology in Secular/Post-secular Society: A Critical Assessment of David Tracy’s “Three Forms of Publicness” and the Notion of an Impossible God
The very possibility of doing theology depends on given social and cultural settings. Taking the European (and, in particular, the Austrian) situation regarding religion and secularity seriously while also being aware of the impact that public intellectuals have on such discussions, Jürgen Habermas’ current take on religion and theology cannot be bypassed. However, even such intellectuals have been shaped by a secular consciousness that fosters an emancipation from religion as a natural coming-of-age (Casanova). This sets the stage for a critical assessment of what Tracy has put forward under the notion of the impossible God framing it as “Publicness Three”.

Sara TERREAULT, Concordia University
The Impossible Imperative: the Name of God as Idol or Icon
The problem of “naming” God embedded in Christianity from its earliest days but to inquire into the problem is not an archeological task. Rather, the question has emerged as a critical problem in postmodern theology and spirituality, and David Tracy’s most recent work has shown its relevance, even urgency, in our contemporary context. In this paper, I will bring into conversation the thought of pre-modern theologians Pseudo-Dionysius and John of Damascus, and of postmodern theologians David Tracy and Catherine Pickstock in order to investigate the impossible/imperative theo-logic of the naming of the God who is both hidden and incarnate.

PANEL: The Nature of Doctrine: Revisiting the Tracy-Lindbeck Debate Thirty Years Later
John BERKMAN, Regis College, Toronto
Shaun BROWN, Wycliffe College, Toronto
Gill GOULDING, Regis College, Toronto
Murray JOHNSTON, Regis College, Toronto
Joseph MANGINA, Wycliffe College, Toronto
In the late 1980s, there was a flurry of books and articles about two seemingly competitive approaches to theology and theological method. On the one hand, Lindbeck and the post-liberals were apparently advocating a ‘cultural-linguistic’ approach, ‘confessionalism,’ ‘anti-correlationist,’ and ‘Bonaventurian’ approach to theology. On the other hand, Tracy and the liberals/revisionists were apparently advocating an ‘experiential-expressivist,’ ‘political-hermeneutical,’ ‘correlationist,’ and ‘Thomistic’ approach to theology. This panel returns to this debate 20 years later, with the goal of clarifying which of the issues of that debate have been left behind and which continue as substantive disagreements.