

**PLURALITY AND
 AMBIGUITY:
 Hermeneutics, Religion,
 and Hope**

by David Tracy
 Harper, 1987
 148 pp. \$15.95

It is said that the Vatican never changes its mind. In fact, the Rev. John Courtney Murray (1904–67), an American seminary professor, managed to change it. For the first two decades after World War II, he silently suffered the enmity of official Vatican theologians because of his “radical” theory of church and state. Freedom of religion was a natural right, he argued, not, as the Catholic Church had long insisted, an unmitigated

evil. In 1965 his ideas provided American bishops with the arguments they needed to convince the second Vatican Council to approve its document on the liberty of religious conscience.

Murray was probably the best theologian the American Catholic Church produced before the arrival of David Tracy. Any comparison of the two, however, would show Murray to be more of an ecclesiastical thinker, more of a churchman. Tracy, by contrast, is a secular theologian, working in the manner of Murray’s three well-known contemporaries, Jewish theologian Paul Tillich and Protestants Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr. Indeed, Tracy is so thoroughly engaged with secular thought that one almost forgets he is a Catholic priest—at least until he addresses his own religious convictions, as he does in a very personal way at the end of this book.

Tracy’s aims and approach reflect the influence of his teacher, Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan. In such books as *Method in Theology* (1972), Lonergan argued that the business of theology was to mediate between the church and the wider public culture, not, as the Vatican once held, between the bishop and his flock. Since the 1960s, a goodly number of Catholic theologians have followed Lonergan’s path, turning from “confessional” to “public” theology. But among them, Tracy stands out. Not only is his work distinctive in its range and quality (even though it is not yet equal to Lonergan’s in originality), but he himself has become something of a public figure. His appearance on the cover of a recent *New York Times Magazine* is only one sign of growing interest in his thought.

•

Tracy directly acknowledged his debts to his mentor in *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan* (1970), but his subsequent books pay tribute to Lonergan in subtler ways. In *Blessed Rage for Order* (1979), for instance, he took up the task of justifying theology’s voice in the American university. (Tracy himself is a professor on the Committee on the Analysis of Ideas and Methods at the University of Chicago.) In *The Analogical Imagination* (1980), Tracy spelled out the role of theologian as interpreter of religious classics, a role analogous to that of the interpreter of literary classics. To perform his task correctly, Tracy explained, the theologian must immerse himself in the classics of political theory, history, literary criticism, and philosophy, as well as in those of other religious traditions. Tracy’s argument was, in effect, an elaboration of Max Weber’s assertion that an interpreter who understands only one classic understands none.

Tracy's *Plurality and Ambiguity* is uncharacteristically short, clear, and accessible to laymen. It is a book on how to interpret classics, why it is so important to read them, and why they are so difficult to interpret correctly. It is also a portrait of humanity painted under the spell of Plato and Aristotle (and Lonergan): To be human, Tracy argues, is to interpret "texts," and that is done in communities, through discourse. In conversation, Tracy writes, "we learn to give in to the movement required by questions worth exploring. The movement in conversation is questioning itself. Neither my present opinions on the question nor the text's original response to the question, but the question itself must control every conversation . . . It is not a confrontation. It is not a debate. It is not an exam. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go. It is dialogue."

If to converse is to be human, the model for conversation is Plato's symposium, where opposing ideas are presented, questioned, and worked through. To bring this ideal into the present, Tracy takes his reader over some bumpy terrain: contemporary language theory. As rough going as some of this is, however, it is necessary to those who hope to participate in the contemporary symposium. After all, most intellectual discussion today focuses on the question of language—how it is used, how it works (or does not work) as a structure or system, whether it leads to meanings or only the illusion of such. Tracy ends up arguing that interpretation is possible, that meanings can be located amid the ambiguity of linguistic signs, and that meanings are not simply what the powerful deem them to be. "We can continue to give ourselves over to the great hope of Western reason," Tracy says. "But that hope is now a more modest one as a result of the discovery of the plurality of both language and knowledge and the ambiguities of all histories including the history of reason itself."

This optimism about the possibilities of communication is where Tracy's faith comes in. At the end of his book, he makes a direct plea for religion as a legitimate force for hope in spite of its ambiguities, and for theology as one of the many voices engaged in the conversation that makes up our culture: "As I suspect is obvious by now, my own hope is grounded in a Christian faith that revelations from God have occurred and that there are ways to authentic liberation." I find Tracy's plea in this last chapter both moving and persuasive, and its formulation gratifyingly personal.

—William M. Shea '87
